



Closing my medals gallery relegates 'bravest of the brave' Michael Ashcroft

Iworry for the future of the Imperial War Museum (IWM) in London, or the "Imperial Woke Museum" as some tabloid papers now refer to it, with justification.

On its website the IWM bills itself as the "world's leading museum of war and conflict" yet under the current management it seems to want to highlight politically correct issues rather than championing the real-life stories of some of the world's bravest men and women.

I know this from personal experience because earlier this year I learnt, from a third party rather than the IWM itself, that the gallery bearing my name is to close because the museum wants "to share more stories of conflicts that are within many of our visitors' living memory". The IWM did not go so far as to say it was "cancelling" the First and Second World Wars, but the shift in its priorities rang loud and clear.

The Lord Ashcroft Gallery was made possible following a donation by me of £5 million, and was opened by HRH The Princess Royal in 2010. It has housed my collection of well over 200 Victoria Crosses (VCs) — the largest in the world — and my smaller collection of George Crosses (GCs) which I have loaned to the IWM. It has also been the home to more than 80 VCs and GCs either gifted or loaned to the museum.

The VC and the GC are Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious gallantry medals and the gallery's "Extraordinary Heroes" exhibition sought to "intrigue, inspire and amaze" by telling the stories behind the decorations.

I built my VC and GC collection over a period of four decades and it is estimated to be worth £70 million. Until the IWM decided this medal collection was no longer wanted, I had intended to leave it to the museum in my will. Unsurprisingly, that is no longer going to happen: it is galling enough that the gallery I paid for will now be used for purposes over which I have no control.

This sorry episode has, however, had some silver linings. I have been overwhelmed by the messages of support from so many people who think this decision by the IWM is plain wrong. I am also grateful that other museums are trying to find ways to display my VC and GC medal groups in future so that this unique collection does not simply gather dust in a vault.

Now my sincere hope is that, buoyed by the school summer holidays, a record number of visitors will come to the gallery before it closes at the end of September. In doing so, they will honour men and women I like to describe as "the bravest of the brave" but whom the IWM does not appear to value as much as it should.

Lord Ashcroft is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster