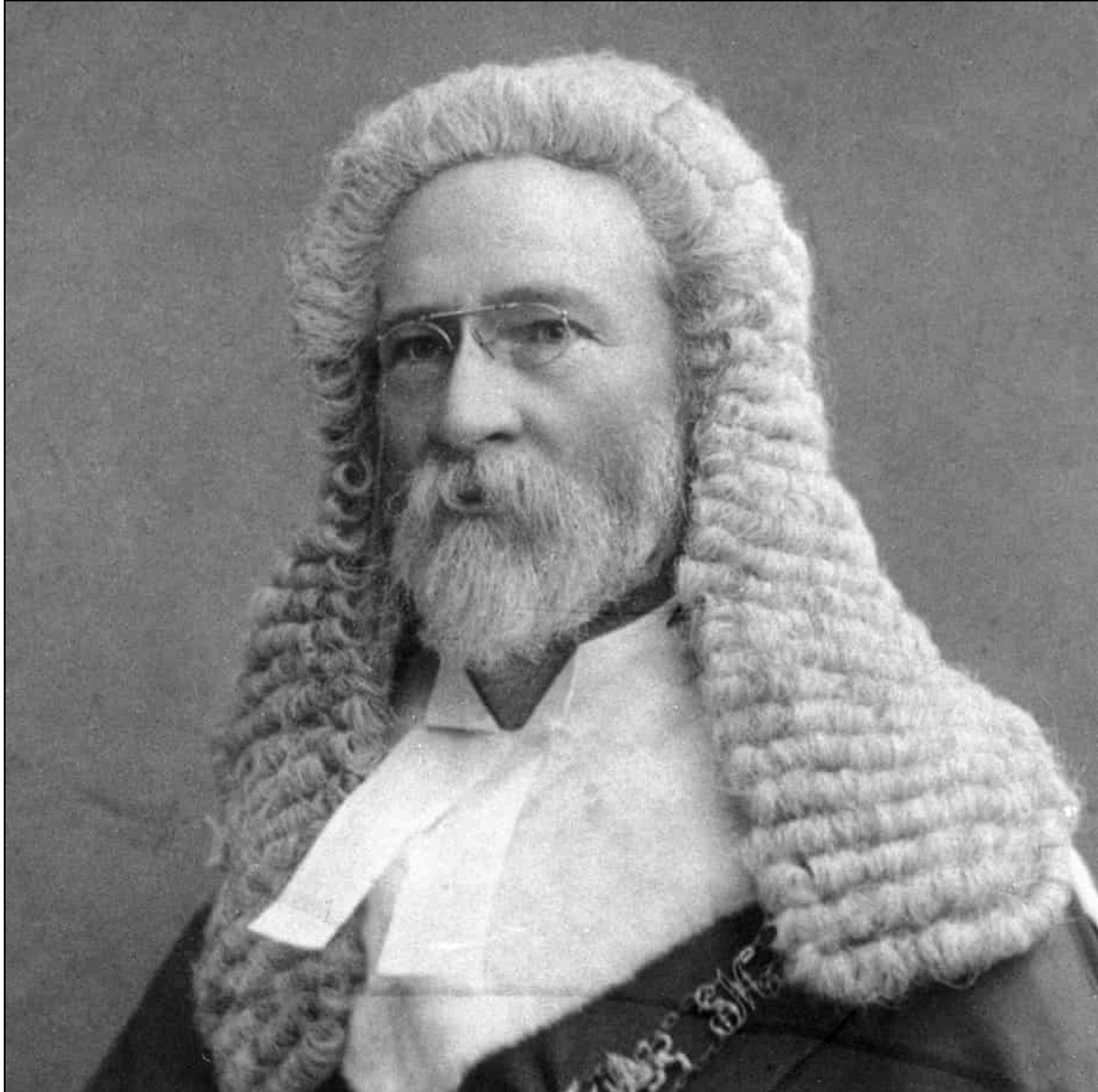


'Enabler' of massacres: the push to reexamine the legacy of founding father Samuel Griffith

A university, electorate and suburb bear his name. But Griffith's leadership came amid large-scale bloodshed



Sir Samuel Walker Griffith was a Queensland premier, Australia's first high justice and a key author of the constitution. Widespread violence and death occurred on his watch.

Joe Hinchliffe

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Fiona Foley will offer a suggestion to her colleagues at Griffith University in Brisbane on Friday when she leads discussions as to whether the institution should change its name.

The distinguished artist, academic and Badtjala woman will proffer Dundalli, the Dalla warrior who led resistance to the European invasion of south-east Queensland.

“I’ll say: ‘it could change to Dundalli University’ – and watch them have a conniption over that,” Foley says with a chuckle.

Foley’s suggestion will be heard at a symposium at which historians, intellectuals and Indigenous leaders from around the country grapple with the legacy of one of Australia’s founders, a key author of our constitution and first high court chief justice: Sir Samuel Walker Griffith.

But the response to Foley’s suggestion may not only carry implications for the university that bears Griffith’s name, but a suburb in Canberra that does too, and a federal electorate in Brisbane – one of three recently won by the Greens.

The symposium comes in response to Henry Reynolds’ 2021 book *Truth-Telling*, which describes Griffith as an “enabler” of one of the bloodiest chapters in Australian history – the European conquest of the tropical north.

In it, Reynolds – who will give the symposium’s keynote speech – asks: “how should history remember” a man who did little to “stop the killing”?

Those who remember Griffith today belong to a genteel set. Unlike say, James Cook, his is hardly a household name.

But though Cook has become a flashpoint for people Reynolds calls “angry revisionists”, the historian argues Griffith is a far more significant subject for a truth-telling process, which is a central call of the Uluru Statement of the Heart.

“People have been concentrating on Cook, Phillip and Macquarie,” Reynolds says. “But for us this is almost ancient history – and, above all, it is British history.”

From the Australian Colonies Government Act of 1850 onwards, Reynolds argues power shifted from the British capital to these shores. From this point, colonisation was overseen by Australian men. Its frontiers were expanded by free settlers, not convicts.

As Reynolds writes in the most recent Griffith Review, its eponymous patron has more blood of “murdered men, women and children” on his hands than any of Queensland’s colonial leaders.

This is because Griffith was either premier or attorney general for much of the late 19th century – during which some of the country’s most brutal frontier wars raged.

On his watch was widespread violence not only deemed immoral by today’s standards but, Reynolds argues, illegal under the laws of the day for at least two reasons.

Firstly, Indigenous people were considered British subjects. Killing an Aboriginal should have amounted to murder. The second was that much of the “dispersal” of the

First Peoples of the north occurred under pastoral leases, which explicitly forbade forcing Aboriginal people from their land.



Tasmanian historian and author Henry Reynolds' work has focused on the frontier conflict between European settlers and Indigenous people.

And the very reason that Griffith's name graces a university and an intellectual journal – his unquestioned legal brilliance – makes him especially culpable of the unpunished killings in the state he led.

“It was illegal, there is no question about that,” Reynolds says. “Griffith must have known.”

A society established in the 1990s to “defend the constitution” bears Griffith's name.

The Samuel Griffith Society's executive director, Xavier Boffa, says Griffith's was “an integral role” in making Australia “one of the most stable, prosperous and long-lasting liberal democracies” in the world.

“Although there is a tendency to mythologise figures like Sir Samuel for their immense contributions to our nation's history, we should remember that they too were only human,” Boffa says.

“Like all of us, mistakes they may have made do not invalidate their many positive contributions to society. While it is right to reflect critically upon our past as we continue to grow as a society, in having these conversations we should be very hesitant to expunge anyone from history.”

In this last point, Boffa has an unlikely ally, perhaps, in Reynolds himself – at least as far as the university goes.

“Simply wiping his name out takes it out of people’s understanding,” Reynolds says.

Instead, the university could use its name to tell a more complex story.

“Griffith was a significant figure in all sorts of other ways – he was one of the great reforming liberals of the 19th century,” Reynolds says. “I don’t think he should be cancelled for one of the parts of his career. But the complexity has to be dealt with.”

Reynolds will come to Brisbane armed with suggestions to that end.



Badtjala artist, writer and academic Fiona Foley.

The university could lead the creation of a museum to the frontier wars of the north, which could draw inspiration from Alabama’s Legacy Museum.

The annual Griffith Lecture could be renamed in honour of colonial journalist Carl Feilberg, whose crusade against the treatment of the Aboriginal peoples Reynolds describes as “one of the most inspiring events in Queensland history”.

Regardless of how Foley’s colleagues react to her provocative suggestion on Friday, she says the symposium is part of a much bigger picture.

When new prime minister, Anthony Albanese, committed to the Statement From the Heart – in the first words of his acceptance speech – Foley says it marked “a huge psychological shift for this country”.

“These foundational questions about us as a nation, our constitution – which Sir Samuel Griffith helped draft – are important,” Foley says.

“As a mature nation, we need to have these discussions.”

Griffith University says its name was a result of an act of parliament and any decision to change it would have to come from the government.

“Sir Samuel Griffith was in government during a time of horrific violence and dispossession inflicted upon the state’s First Peoples,” the university says.

“The university welcomes a robust exchange of views on his time in government and have been encouraging this to occur.”

Foley is hopeful these kinds of discussions will include people long “written out” of Australian history – and lead to action.

“We’re on the precipice of great change,” she says.