

Statues are not history. Here are six in Australia that need rethinking

Unless history strives for truth it is nothing more than propaganda. There is nothing intrinsically educational about a statue, memorial or place name



'It's no truer that Macquarie was a "perfect gentleman" as the plaque on his most recent statue in Sydney's Hyde Park purports, than a nearby one insisting Cook "discovered" Australia.' Photograph: Mike Bowers for the Guardian

Paul Daley
25 August 2017

Amid all the reactionary harrumphing and puerile criticism that those who question memorialising men who slaughtered Indigenous people are being somehow Stalinist or, even more ludicrously, Taliban-like, we really ought to think about truth and history.

Unless "history" strives for truth it is nothing more than propaganda. Good history involves constant re-evaluation of the past – of surveying and challenging the interpretation of archival and oral evidence, and the endless search for new material to further enhance truth.

Memorials, statues and the nomenclature afforded to places of public importance in the name of prominent (mostly) men are moments frozen in time. As individual pieces of stone and bronze, or as names on maps, they are fragments of the past that often tell us more about the politics and mores of their era than they do about what actually happened.

Politics is frequently more intrinsic than history to such statues of the famous.

Statues dedicated to Captain James Cook – or to other early killers of Indigenous men, women and children, murderers such as Governor Lachlan Macquarie, the syphilitic John Batman, Thomas Mitchell or Alfred Canning – are not, of themselves, histories of the people they memorialise. Indeed, sometimes, they are the opposite: they are anti-histories.

We do not learn history from monuments and statues, but from interrogating and challenging them

It's no truer that Macquarie was a "perfect gentleman" (I've written reams in the past five years highlighting his violence and use of "terror" against Aboriginal people) as the plaque on his most recent statue in Sydney's Hyde Park purports, than a nearby one insisting Cook "discovered" Australia.



Captain Cook statue in Hyde Park, Sydney. Photograph: Mike Bowers for the Guardian

No. We do not learn history from monuments and statues, but from interrogating and challenging them. We learn our history from forensic archival research, from pushing back against orthodoxies, from arguing and debating what's on the page, said in the classroom and thrown back at us by self-appointed guardians of the status quo, be they

shock jocks, denialist academic “historians” and politicians or “look at me”-style reactionary columnists.

“No, no,” we are told by critics of the current Australian debate (some of us have been having it for years but, testimony to the enduring cultural potency of American imperialism, it’s only gained recent media currency amid arguments about confederate statues in the United States!) “to tear down or change monuments is to mess with or erase history.” It all depends, of course, what is erected in their place and what additional plaques, added to existing statuary, might say.

Indigenous activists Gary Foley and Tony Birch – both esteemed historians – have blazed the trail on the nomenclature issue, successfully taking on major institutions, not least Melbourne University, over dedication of bricks and mortar to eugenicists, radical assimilationists, the thieves of ancestral remains and other assorted bastards.

Stripping the names of pioneers who murdered Indigenous people in their droves, from federal and state electorates, is a no-brainer. We should not be arguing the national interest in their names.

Old statues and monuments should, in my view, be amended to include the details about their subjects – the bad and ugly, too. In that way the argument, the search for truth, will continue and the stories of their crimes and their victims might come to overshadow them.

Most importantly, governments – federal, state and local – ought to think very carefully about who they memorialise with statuary and nomenclature. While the argument rages, here’s a short list (I’m working on a much longer one) to consider. Real history can only benefit.

Lachlan Macquarie

Dedicating the Hyde Park statue to Macquarie in 2013, Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore said she revered the fifth governor of New South Wales as “an early hero”. Was she not aware of his massacring of Aboriginal people to Sydney’s west in April 1816, his insistence that victims be hung from trees to instil the “utmost terror” and his ordering of the theft of Indigenous children from the killing grounds? There’s no mention of this on the statue of this “perfect gentleman”. It stands as a historically pointless monument, its future under reconsideration.



Then Governor Marie Bashir, Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore and NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell unveil a statue of Governor Lachlan Macquarie in Sydney's Hyde Park in 2013. Photograph: Toby Mann/AAP

John Batman

Innumerable monuments in Melbourne testify to the supposed “treaty” (overruled by Britain) between Batman and the Wurundjeri (a few axes and some beads and flour for a city!). One claims he founded a city on a site “then unoccupied”; none I’ve seen make mention of his participation in the brutal mass killings of Tasmanian Indigenous. Nineteenth and 20th century historians were largely kind to Batman. Clarity is required. The federal electorate named after him is likely to be renamed. Good.

Thomas Mitchell

Explorer/surveyor Thomas Mitchell is memorialised in numerous statues and plaques across Australia. He has a town named after him, as well as a Canberra suburb, a highway, an electorate – even a cockatoo. He is regarded as a “larger than life” character whose expeditions are lauded. In 1836 he won mild executive council admonishment (and later a knighthood) after killing seven Indigenous warriors in New South Wales. No official monuments mention this.

Angus McMillan

A Scot, Angus McMillan gets a great rap from establishment Australian history, which portrays him as an adventurer, generous to the blackfella and an all 'round bonny bloke. He was a mass killer of the local First People. McMillan's own family has demythologised him; in 2016, his great, great, great niece, Scottish journalist Cal Flynn

revealed in a book the truth about her forebear's involvement in massacring Gippsland's Indigenous. The name of the electorate honouring him is, not before time, likely to be changed. The locals will never forget him though.

Alfred Canning

The vast Western Australian federal electorate of Canning ought to be renamed. I've written before about the cruelty of Canning who in 1906 surveyed a 1,850km livestock track across the continent's western deserts, linking 54 wells between Halls Creek in the Kimberley and Wiluna on the edge of the Gibson Desert. To find the water, he chained Aboriginal people to trees and force fed them salt. Many were brutally killed.



The Canning Stock Route, near Well 15 in 2008. Photograph: Tim Acker/PR IMAGE

James Cook

He is probably the most memorialised explorer in Australia. His men shot at least one blackfella during the first moments of continental east coast contact in 1770 (the place had already been inhabited for 60,000-plus years and other visitors – Macassans, Dutch, Portuguese – had been coming to this land for centuries) yet he is too often recorded as the bloke who “discovered” the place. There's rarely mention of the British admiralty's secret instructions to Cook, “... with the consent of the natives to take possession of convenient situations in the country in the name of Great Britain”. Which one of those black fellas ever said, “Sure, captain – you can have the lot”?

“Everything that has happened has its roots in this area,” reads a somewhat dissenting plaque near the obelisk dedicated to his arrival in Botany.



Writing on the sidewalk near the Captain Cook obelisk at Kurnell on the shore of Botany Bay where he first stepped ashore on 29th April 1770. The inscription reads “Cook Obelisk 1870 Everything that has happened ... has its roots in this area.” Photograph: Mike Bowers for the Guardian

This includes the renaming of the continental landscape to honour white pioneers, who too often killed droves of Indigenous people. There are unresolved suggestions that Mount Wheeler in Queensland was named after the “cruel and merciless” native police officer **Frederick Wheeler**, who killed many Aboriginal people. It is situated not far from **Mount Jim Crow**, the origins of which nomenclature is unclear even though the racist intent is obvious.

Streets in Darwin and Alice Springs are, respectively, named after **William Willshire** and **Paul Foelsche**, both murdering cops who saw Indigenous people as akin to animals. Willshire wrote books about his killings and abuse of Indigenous women.

Finally, as you drive around this continent, it’s worth stopping to think about some of the names you’ll see on creeks, roads and beaches.

It’s no coincidence there are so many places named Skeleton Creek in Queensland, and Skull Creeks in Gippsland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. There is a Murdering Gully in Victoria, a Skull Hole in Queensland and a Massacre Waterfall in central-west New South Wales.

The continent has been re-named to commemorate the very act of murdering its First People.

Place names and statues have no value at all unless we can appreciate the truth behind and beneath them.

That is history.