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Dark Pasts in the Landscape: Statue Wars in Western Australia

Jenny Gregory

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Statues preserve the memory of leaders and heroes and transmit archetypal stories. They represent the past, often so far past that the values represented by the statue hold no meaning for passers-by. At times, however, statues evoke new memories that replace or build on the old.¹ Then they become visible again, particularly in moments of crisis, when ‘they polarise public life by serving as lightning rods of social conflict’.² When statues are removed it is as if they are being excised from history. In Eastern Europe, for example, statues tumbled as regimes collapsed after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. In Iraq the statue of Saddam Hussein in Bagdad was toppled in 2003 during the Iraq War and in Spain statues of the dictator Franco were destroyed in 2005 in an attempt to erase his memory and the memory of his regime.³

The idea of toppling statues has gathered strength around the world. In the largest wave of student activism in democratic South Africa the statue of Rhodes, now seen as a symbol of colonial power and generations of black oppression, was removed from the University of Cape Town in 2014.⁴ A statue of Rhodes in Oxford remains a target of student protest.⁵ In the United States in recent years, an escalating climate of racial tension and the emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, has led to the removal of or threats to Confederate statues.⁶ In Britain, the statue of a slave-trader was thrown into Bristol Harbour.⁷ In Australia, statues of Captain Cook and Governor Macquarie have been graffitied or had paint thrown at them. Statues have become a symbol of an intensifying call for truth telling and reconciliation to address histories of violence, subjugation, trauma and racism.

In this article, I discuss statue wars in Perth in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the statues of a British governor and of a Nyoongar warrior became the focus of social conflict. The responses to these statues reveal a society split in its attitudes towards past conflict between European colonisers and Aboriginal people in Western Australia. Drawing on examples from Australia and North America, I then discuss the difficult question – how should we respond to statues which evoke a dark history?

Two Statues: A Governor and a Warrior

In the lead up to Western Australia's sesquicentenary of its foundation as a British colony in 1829, when commemorative monuments and statues were under consideration, some expressed surprise that no statue of James Stirling, its founding governor, had ever been erected. A statue was duly commissioned.⁸ The statue, sculpted by Clement Somers and donated by Channel 9 and radio station 6KY, was unveiled with due ceremony by HRH Prince Charles on 10 March 1979.

Earlier that day an Aboriginal contingent from the Black Action Group had shouted 'Go home to Pommy-land', when a boat re-enacting Stirling's exploratory expedition of the Swan River in 1827 landed on the city's foreshore. Speaking a few days before the event, an Aboriginal spokesman for the group said that the protest would be aimed at Prince Charles: 'We want him to realise it was his ancestors, with their ideas of expanding their empire, who started all this trouble for Aborigines.' The Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator Fred Chaney – son of Perth's Lord Mayor – said he agreed with Aboriginal campaigns over land rights.⁹ However, a key Aboriginal leader then spoke against the planned protest and only about twenty people were reported to have taken part. Nevertheless, the protest included a headline grabbing, though unsuccessful, attempt by a leader of the Black Action Group to hand a petition calling for land rights, housing and the right to govern themselves to Prince Charles as he walked from the re-enactment to the site where he would unveil the statue of Stirling.

In 1979, Stirling's role in the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples was rarely acknowledged. Nor was his role in the Massacre of Pinjarra, when he led an armed party of 25 police, soldiers and settlers to the Murray River at Pinjarra to retaliate for the deaths of several white settlers and attacks on property. Estimates of the number killed vary. It is likely that 80 or more Bindjareb Nyoongar men, women and children camped on the river banks were slaughtered. Some women and children were taken prisoner. One police superintendent was killed and another speared in the arm. Accounts of the event differ and until recently the event was known as the Battle of Pinjarra. John Septimus Roe, surveyor-general who was a member of the armed party, described the attackers as 'sufficiently exemplary'. But the diary of Joseph Hardey, farmer and Wesleyan preacher, described it as 'a shocking slaughter'.¹⁰

Since its unveiling, the Stirling statue has had a chequered career. Initially located near the Perth Town Hall and the supposed location of the ceremony marking the foundation of Perth, it went into storage for some years during the redevelopment of nearby building sites. It is now located outside the City of Perth Library not far from the original site.

In June 2020, on the eve of a Black Lives Matter rally, a protestor painted the hands and neck of the statue with red paint and spray painted the Aboriginal flag over the inscription on the plinth below. He was arrested, charged with criminal damage and ordered to carry out 50 hours of community service. Over the next few days, a wide range of comments, ranging from 'Pathetic nothing but vandalism' to 'Do what America is doing – damage, harm or vandalize and go direct to jail' to 'So genocide isn't offensive? Good on him!!', appeared on the *West Australian* newspaper's Facebook site. But overall, few supported his action.¹¹

When the erection of the Stirling statue was under discussion fifty years earlier, in the mid-1970s, some suggested that Aboriginal people should be acknowledged during the sesquicentenary. But many held negative attitudes toward Aborigines or simply ignored them and their place as Western Australia's first peoples. Typical of this view was a government pamphlet 'The Way West' released for the sesquicentenary. It read: 'it was only 150 years ago that man came to stay... The land that lay dormant for a million years has changed. The men of 1829 changed it.'¹² Premier Sir Charles Court, when pushed, had announced that the government intended to find 'ways of recognising Aborigines and their role in the State's history over the past 150 years'.¹³ But when plans to send an Aboriginal group to Plymouth in the UK to perform at the start of the commemorative Parmelia Yacht Race were mooted the Premier was advised that 'we should try and nip this in the bud'. Aborigines had been

clashing with AMAX over drilling programme at Noonkanbah Station claiming company wants to drill on sacred sites. AMAX are not aware of the plans to have aborigines at start functions and I am sure would not be happy at the prospect.¹⁴

When archaeologist Sylvia Hallam suggested that a statue of Yagan be commissioned, sesquicentenary funds were said to be 'almost fully committed'.¹⁵

Yagan was a renowned Whadjuk Nyoongar warrior who led resistance against settlers after several years of relatively peaceful co-existence following British colonisation in 1829. This was the result of increasing settler numbers, land grants to new settlers, the government's edict forbidding Nyoongar people to 'trespass' on their traditional hunting and fishing lands and floggings meted out to Aboriginals who raided flour mills and vegetable gardens. In 1831, after a Whadjuk man was shot and killed by a white settler during a raid on a potato patch, retaliatory killings led by Yagan followed. He was outlawed and eventually captured with two kinsmen. They were imprisoned on an offshore island but escaped.

In April 1833, Yagan, with his father Midgegooroo, led the first significant Aboriginal resistance to white settlement, just after his brother had been shot and killed raiding a storehouse. Up to 40 Aboriginal men were reported as having ambushed and killed two men driving a cartload of stores. Yagan was again declared an outlaw, with a bounty of £30 offered for his capture – dead or alive.¹⁶ Midgegooroo was later captured and executed by firing squad.¹⁷ In July that year, Yagan was killed by two young men he had befriended. At the time, the *Perth Gazette* referred to Yagan's killing as 'a wild and treacherous act... it is revolting to hear this lauded as a meritorious deed.'¹⁸ Yagan's head and the skin of his back with its tribal markings were sent to Britain where the head was exhibited in the Liverpool City Museum until 1964 when it was buried.¹⁹ After a long campaign, beginning in the 1980s, his remains were returned to Western Australia in 1997 and were buried in a memorial park by Nyoongar elders in 2010.²⁰

The City of Perth Council agreed to make a site available for a statue to Yagan on Heirisson Island at the eastern entry to the city in 1978 despite the 150th Anniversary Board's rejection of the idea of commissioning a statue of him.²¹ Ronald Berndt, Professor of Anthropology, wrote to the *West Australian* newspaper:

Not to honour Yagan as a present-day symbol is to lose sight of our own history, and to ignore the immense and painful struggle of Aborigines over 150 years to regain their self-respect and identity as significant citizens of this State.

But a petition to the government with 312 signatories requesting the erection of the statue had no impact.²²

Mrs Elizabeth Hansen, a well-known Aboriginal campaigner, approached the state government in 1980 for funding on behalf of the Aboriginal Rights League which had set up a Yagan Trust Fund. The government again refused. But the League gained approval from the City Council to erect the statue and received funding from the Lotteries Commission of WA to add to Trust funds. By then a Labor Government, which supported the project, had come to power. On 11 September 1984, at a ceremony opened by Mrs Hansen, the statue, sculpted by Robert Hitchcock, was unveiled by the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Clive Holding on Heirisson Island where it was believed that Yagan had first sighted Captain Stirling and his men rowing up the Swan River.²³

The story does not end there. The statue was vandalised three times between 1984 and 1997. First, paint was splashed on it and the spear stolen. Then, in September 1997, when an Aboriginal delegation was in London applying for the repatriation of Yagan's head, vandals removed the head from the statue with an angle grinder. It was replaced. But two months later the statue was again decapitated, this time by a self-proclaimed 'British loyalist' on the day of Lady Diana Spencer's funeral. This is thought to have been in reaction to Nyoongar elder Ken Colbung's alleged comment that her death was 'Nature's Revenge' for Yagan's killing by the 'English'. It was replaced again shortly after.²⁴

The statue of Stirling evokes memories of the earliest years of colonisation. Ostensibly, for many it celebrates the foundation of Western Australia as an outpost of empire. But for others it conjures the memory of invasion. The statue of Yagan evokes memories of colonisation from the other side of the frontier. Well before the more recent attacks on statues in Australian cities, these statues acted as lightning rods for both demands for Aboriginal rights and action by white supremacists. These statues laid bare the continuing legacy of colonisation and conflict in Western Australia. The sesquicentenary had encouraged the community to reflect on their state's past. A new history was emerging – one that reflected a more diverse society and engendered a new understanding of the past. But it would be some decades before this was more widely accepted.²⁵

What to do with Statues with a Dark History?

Many of us, without sufficient knowledge of the past, have walked past statues barely giving them a second glance. We have assumed that they are of their time, obsolete survivors from the past. But, for many Indigenous people, they are instead reminders of invasion and colonisation and of subjugation and racism for African-American people. As historical knowledge advances, collective understanding of these spatial and temporal landmarks has been reconstructed. So what can we do when we uncover pasts that no longer seem heroic, but instead tell of invasion, colonisation, frontier warfare, subjugation and dispossession?

What to do about difficult statues remains a vexed question. The range of opinions recently discussed in a debate by US anthropologists provides a glimpse of the dilemma. One observed that the presence of monuments representing racist ideologies has had a mental, emotional and physical toll on people of colour. Another that white working-class Americans have been alienated because the removal of statues cannot undo structural inequalities. One result of this alienation in some southern states of the US has been the enactment of legislation to prevent changes to public monuments. An additional suggestion was that statues could be moved into museums, as museums are the right places for intellectual dialogue that enables people to confront uncomfortable truths. The alternative position was that this was unlikely because museums were already imbued with their own politics and ideologies. The impasse was summed up by one of the participants who admitted: 'I am both professionally and personally exhausted with discussions over monuments and whether they should be removed from public spaces in United States cities.'²⁶

Media coverage by journalists, commentators and others has been extensive and, in many cases, has provided careful consideration of the issues. It has focussed on five main options: pull statues down, place them in museums or public parks, make them portals to honest history, build new statues or amend existing statues.

National memory is an invented tradition, as Jane Jacobs observed, with multiple pasts jostling for recognition. Its construction is within our control.²⁷ Hence, in many parts of the world in an attempt to reconstruct history through symbolic decolonisation, statues have been pulled down. This, however, has often been divisive and has set back reconciliation between groups. Historian Madge Dresser has also made the case that pulling down a statue means that an opportunity is lost. 'If we get rid of problematic statues', she argued, 'we foreclose the discussions we can have about those statues, which is important to the evolution of our shared identity.'²⁸

Should we then move statues into museums? In the US context, a number of art historians and critics have suggested that they would be in a controlled environment in a museum. Not only could they be displayed, interpreted and exposed as propaganda. But their presence might encourage encyclopaedic museums to become 'truth-telling institutions'.²⁹ Others point to the Moscow example where, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, hundreds of statues (some damaged but not repaired) honouring Communist leaders were moved into a large open-air sculpture garden within the Muzeon Park of Arts. It is sometimes called the Fallen Monument Park. And each statue has a panel that details the work, its

composition and the history of its display. It has been argued, however, that relocation has decontextualized these statues and that emphasis on their historic and artistic value has depoliticised them.³⁰

Could statues be used as portals to inquiry that leads to honest history, as Paul Daley has argued?³¹ Reflecting this desire to present honest history, Sydney historian Lisa Murray queried whether the graffiti on the statue of Captain Cook should have been removed, suggesting that the words were part of the changing meaning of the statue. ‘This act is not obliterating Australia’s history,’ she said. ‘It is part of a growing public consciousness to recognise Australia’s history and to point out the complexity of our past.’³² Dresser observed of British statues that: ‘As a historian, I love the idea that you have all these different statues from different eras that represent changing value systems – a palimpsest that enriches the urban landscape.’³³

Amin Husain, one of the organisers of a protest in New York that saw a statue of Theodore Roosevelt splattered with red paint, argued: ‘The problem with keeping but modifying statues, is that it’s still the dominant group that sets the terms of the debate. Shouldn’t affected communities have a say?’ This view was echoed by Dresser who, in considering the impact on black students of keeping statues redolent of colonialism, questioned whether they would feel excluded by a ‘white imagination’.³⁴

Maintaining that we need ‘new statues to new heroes’, historian Clare Wright contended that new statues would tell stories and start conversations about the ideas and forces that have made modern Australia, stories of colonialism and postcolonialism, of imperialism and republicanism, of genocide and assimilation, of war and of peace, of exclusion and inclusion, and of alienation and belonging.³⁵

On the other hand, Dresser cautioned that calls for new statues in Britain dedicated to enslaved Africans or new inscriptions on existing statues have been resisted with arguments including you can’t rewrite history or disparaging comments about ‘political correctness’.³⁶

The idea of erecting new statues suggests that public art may have a role to play in reconciliation. After consultation with the La Perouse Aboriginal Land Council and the wider community, the NSW and Federal Government’s Kamay 2020 Project Board commissioned designs for several bronze sculptures to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Cook’s landing. They were installed at the site of his landing at Kurnell on the eve of the anniversary.³⁷ One in particular – ‘Eyes of the Land and Sea’ by Alison Page and Nik Lachaczak – specifically attempts to

bring together different perspectives on our shared history – the bones of a whale and the ribs of a ship – and sits in the tidal zone between the ship and the shore where the identity of modern Australia lies. The first encounter between James Cook and the First Australians was a meeting of two very different knowledge systems, beliefs and cultures. The abstraction of the ribs of the HMB Endeavour and the bones of the Gweagal totem the whale, speaks to the different perspectives of those first encounters, providing a conjoined narrative of two very different world-views.³⁸

This, however, may be an exception. Examples of public art commissioned to provide interpretation of heritage sites by representing aspects of their past are not always successful as their meaning is often opaque.³⁹

Yet new inscriptions on statues can ‘amend and expand’ the meaning of a monument. An example is the Explorers’ Monument in Fremantle sculpted by Pietro Porcelli in 1913. It was erected to honour Maitland Brown and three Western Australian explorers killed by Aborigines in 1864 near La Grange (Bidyadanga) on the west Kimberley coast. When they did not return Brown led a search party which found the bodies. The monument describes how the explorers were murdered ‘after being attacked at night by treacherous (sic) natives’. A plaque shows Aborigines in shackles.⁴⁰ But the events depicted on the monument gave a one-sided account. At least eighteen Aborigines killed in a punitive massacre by the search party are ignored.⁴¹

In 1990, like Yagan's statue later in that decade, the bust of Brown on top of the monument was decapitated, though the head was eventually returned. In 1994, following research and negotiation by historian Bruce Scates, a 'counter-memorial' in the form of a second plaque – acknowledging the right of Indigenous people to defend their country and commemorating 'all those Aboriginal people who died during the invasion of their country' – was added by the local Indigenous community.⁴² This added to the story, not editing it but providing a dual record of frontier history and illustrating the contested nature of history. This approach has been used in Canada. In 2014, Vancouver declared itself a 'city of reconciliation', formally recognising its occupation of unceded territories and, with local First Nations peoples, beginning a long-term plan to decolonise and indigenise the city. Amending existing monuments to tell the whole story was an important aspect of the process.⁴³

A first step, however, is an analysis of the scope of the problem and the establishment of a decision-making process. New York City has established a Mayoral Advisory Commission on City Art, Monuments and Markers to review all 'symbols of hate' on New York City-owned land.⁴⁴ Comprised of museum administrators, historians, archivists and educators with expertise in preservation, cultural heritage and diversity and inclusion, the Commission was given a timeframe for completion within 90 days. Public hearings were held in each city borough at which verbal testimony was given by 200 residents, written testimony was accepted and an online survey for public comment received more than 3000 responses. In its 2018 report, the Commission developed five guiding principles – reckoning with the power associated with representing history in public; historical understanding; inclusion; complexity; and justice. They applied these principles to three controversial statues in New York, as a means of providing examples of an evaluation process.

Competing interpretations of the Christopher Columbus statue led the Commission to recommend that context should be added. But the Commission could not come to a consensus decision on the 1939 equestrian statue of President Theodore Roosevelt, which includes an Indian and a Negro man walking at his stirrups. Some see this as an image of racial hierarchy. The statue stands on the steps on the American Museum of Natural History and, at the time of writing, the museum was holding an exhibition – 'Addressing the Statue' – which presents the history of the statue while acknowledging 'its troubling aspects... to create a foundation for honest, respectful, open dialogue'. Highlights of the exhibition are online together with visitor perspectives on the statue. The statue is to be moved.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Statues are not simply timeless stone or bronze images, obsolete survivals from the past. They are animated by collective memory as it continually reconstructs the past according to the beliefs and needs of the present. In Perth, protests against the statue of Governor Stirling were brushed aside in 1979 and Aboriginal dispossession was rarely acknowledged when the statue of Yagan was under consideration. Today his role as a Nyooongar leader and resistance fighter is well recognised. Stirling's role in the Massacre of Pinjarra, however, is still not widely acknowledged.

In Australia, there are statues of colonial icons in towns and cities throughout the nation. We now know that many of these icons were implicated in Australia's Frontier Wars and this aspect of their history should be revealed. It is clear that there are many options, as canvassed above. From my perspective, as an historian of Anglo-Celtic heritage, to pull these statues down would distort history. The most reasonable response would be to leave them in situ with amendments that reveal previously hidden histories – as in the case of The Explorers' Monument in Fremantle – or to relocate and interpret them in museums or public parks as has occurred overseas. But it is clear that wide consultation will be essential before a consensus position could be reached. A first step could be to audit each town and city's statues and public art in order to determine who is represented and who is left out.

Acknowledgements

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