

# Historic statues: Where Indigenous people and women go missing

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When Genevieve Grieves embarked on her doctorate a few years ago, she surveyed the monuments in Melbourne's CBD to pinpoint who was being commemorated and why. Her findings were stark.

Of the 520-odd memorials, statues and monuments Grieves considered, only a dozen were not "dead, white, men".

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"There aren't memorials to frontier conflicts in the 19th century, or Aboriginal heroes and resistance fighters," says Grieves, who is the acting director of the Indigenous Studies Program at the University of Melbourne, and a Worimi woman from NSW.

"Melbourne's memorial landscape only represents colonial landscapes and heroes. Indigenous people are not present. Women aren't represented."



*Genevieve Grieves next to the Captain James Cook statue at Cook's Cottage in Fitzroy Gardens.*

Images of white supremacists and neo-Nazis rallying to defend a Confederate statue in Charlottesville triggered fierce worldwide debate about monuments that valorise perpetrators of colonial violence and theft.

In Victoria, the focus has been on the colonist John Batman. Archibald-prize winning artist Ben Quilty has called for Batman's statue to be pulled down or the inscription changed to "mass murderer", to reflect Batman's brutal role in killing Aboriginal Tasmanians and abducting Indigenous children.

The statue of Batman was erected in 1979 on the former National Mutual Plaza on Collins Street and is currently in storage while Cbus Super redevelops the site.

The company will meet with the state government, Melbourne City Council and traditional owners to nut out what to do with the bronze statue, says Cbus Property head Adrian Pozzo.



*John Batman. Charcoal and pencil on white paper by Charles Nuttall, c.1912.*

Batman's name is writ large across Melbourne, including a station on the Upfield line, a park on the banks of the Yarra, Batman's Hill in the Dockland and more than a dozen street names.

A 1881 bluestone monument to Batman at the Victoria Market has an additional 2004 plaque that apologises to Indigenous people.



Australian artist Ben Quilty wants John Batman's statue out of Melbourne's CBD.

Grievous says simply removing a problematic memorial from the landscape provides no opportunity for historical context. She believes Batman's sculpture doesn't deserve to remain, but shouldn't just disappear either.

"If people have committed atrocious crimes against humanity, we have to consider if they should be commemorated.

"But we absolutely don't want to just cover up what has happened and pretend it didn't occur. Many Australians are ready for the truth."

Public campaigns to rename controversial landmarks have a long history in Australia, with some notable recent wins. Indigenous students at The University of Melbourne lobbied for more than 15 years to have the name of pro-eugenics Professor Richard Berry removed from a prominent building.

Berry called for the "sterilisation, segregation and the lethal chamber" for Aboriginal people.

In May, Darebin Council changed the name of Batman Park in Northcote to Gumbri Park, a move endorsed by the Wurundjeri Council.

Gumbri, who was also known as Jessie Hunter, was the great-niece of William Barak and the last Aboriginal girl to be born on the Coranderrk mission in Healesville.

And the federal Labor Member for Batman, David Feeney, supports a push to rename his electorate.

In Gippsland, a similar campaign is underway to rename the electorate of McMillan (and a number of historical cairns) that commemorate pastoralist Angus McMillan, who led massacres in the 1840s against the Gunaikurnai people.

There is an online petition for Batman Station in Coburg to be renamed, which quotes Batman's own letter from 1829 in which he wrote:

*"On Friday morning we left the place for my farm with the two men, woman and child, but found it quite impossible that the two former could walk, and after trying them by every means in my power, for some time, found I could not get them on. I was obliged therefore to shoot them."*

This week, the Queensland government decided to strike racist place names –Mount Nigger, Nigger Head and seven instances of Nigger Creek – from the record.

The first statue of an Aboriginal person in Melbourne was installed in 2006, a life-size bronze likeness of Sir Douglas Nicholls, a Yorta Yorta campaigner, athlete and pastor, and his wife Lady Gladys Nicholls, a campaigner and charity worker.

Since Grieves surveyed Melbourne, the city's first monument to Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner, two Aboriginal men who were executed in 1842, has been installed.

Historian Bain Attwood wrote a book on Batman called *Possession: Batman's Treaty and the Matter of History*, which examines the rise and decline of the Batman legend. Professor Attwood said it was initially useful for Aboriginal people to refer to Batman's treaty because it suggested colonists realised their claim to ownership.

But in the '70s this narrative changed with the land rights movement, and historians wrote less favourably about the city's "founding father", including his murder of Indigenous people, convict origins and death from syphilis.

Grieves says Melbourne has lagged behind in the national push to challenge colonial monuments.

"I'm surprised a city that's so forward-thinking, diverse and progressive hasn't done the work to better reflect who we are."