

Heart of darkness: Melbourne University's racist professors

Date: November 30, 2015

By Marika Dobbin

They are Melbourne University's founding fathers, but also its biggest racists.

Buildings around campus still carry the names of old professors who wanted Aboriginal people killed, sterilised or their children removed. One even experimented on their stolen corpses and collected hundreds of skulls.

Now a group of staff and students wants to rename up to least five offensive building monikers and for the university to educate others about its disturbing past.

1. The Richard Berry building for maths and statistics



Richard Berry and the building named after him. Photos: University of Melbourne Archives and Lostoncampus.com.au

This building pays tribute to a man who lobbied for "sterilisation, segregation and the lethal chamber" for Aboriginal people, as well as homosexuals, poor people and prostitutes.

Former head of anatomy and influential surgeon, Professor Berry, collected 400 Aboriginal corpses, some stolen from traditional graves, for experiments. They were hidden for decades and only rediscovered in 2003.

Berry was Australia's leading voice in the now discredited pseudoscience of eugenics until his death in 1962.

Eugenics aimed to produce a superior human race by having suitable people breed, while at the same time sterilising those with "rotten heredity". Such thought was reasonably widespread at the time and led to the Nazi Holocaust.

As well as Berry, ten other Melbourne University academics did similar research and experimentation.

2. The Frank Tate Learning Centre



Frank Tate and the student centre named in his honour. Photo: Supplied and Lostoncampus.com.au

Students work late into the night at this centre named after Frank Tate, a reformer who expanded secondary education in Victoria by opening lots of new schools.

Lesser known were Tate's view that up to 15% of Victoria's population should be forcibly sterilised (to stop them breeding), including Aboriginals, homosexuals, slum dwellers, prostitutes, epileptics, criminals, alcoholics, and those with small heads and low IQs. He drove a parliamentary bill in 1926 to do just that and it eventually passed, but was never enacted.

3. The Agar lecture theatre in the Zoology building on Royal Parade



Wilfred Agar and the Agar Lecture Theatre. Photos: University of Melbourne Archives and Lostoncampus.com.au

This theatre was named after zoologist Wilfred Agar who was awarded an OBE for his contribution to science. But his views that Aboriginal people had revolting customs and the mentality of children would not be accepted today.

As Chief Protector of Aborigines in Darwin, Agar built a compound for mixed-race children so they could be forcibly taken from their parents.

4. The Baldwin Spencer Building which has two sections: student services and the Melbourne School of Design



The two sections of the Baldwin Spencer building. Photos: University of Melbourne Archives and Lostoncampus.com.au

This complex was named after professor of biology Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer who is revered for his many talents and was said to have cared about Aboriginal people. His meticulous work on their genealogy are still used in Central Australian land claims.

However, Baldwin Spencer believed the race was doomed to die a slow death to make way for a new super white race. He came up with the ideas of building reserves to isolate Indigenous people from mainstream society and remove children from their families at an early age.

5. The John Medley arts buildings at the Grattan Street entrance



The Medley Building Photo: Lostoncampus.com.au

These landmark buildings are named after Sir John Medley, a former vice-chancellor and member of the Eugenics Society of Victoria.

While Medley's personal views about Aboriginal people are unknown, Eugenics has been credited with justifying the White Australia Policy and the removal of Aboriginal children. It may be that he joined the society for networking reasons.

Indigenous rep at the student union, Tyson Holloway-Clarke, says the university has a deep and toxic history that it has failed to accepted responsibility for.

He likened it to the Federal government's long-time resistance to saying sorry to indigenous people.

"It is confronting and alienating situation for Indigenous students, especially when scheduled classes in these buildings", he says.



Tyson Holloway-Clarke and Odette Kelada outside the Richard Berry building at the University of Melbourne.

Lecturer in Australian Indigenous Studies, Dr Odette Kelada, organised a recent seminar on the topic (encouraged by the faculty) and is in favour of renaming the buildings.

"There is a violence attached to the names of these buildings," Dr Kelada says. "There is a lot of power in naming. How welcoming is that space if you know the stories?"

She suggested that plaques could be fitted to educate and tell the buildings' stories, rather than conceal the past.

Renaming has precedence overseas, where student protests at the University of Hawaii' renamed a hall that paid tribute to anthropologist Stanley Porteus (also a former Melbourne University academic with racist theories).

Melbourne has sought reconciliation recently through initiatives such as naming a postgraduate lounge in September after its first aboriginal graduate, Dr Margaret Williams-Weir.

It also appointed respected indigenous Australian Noel Pearson as a Vice-Chancellor's Fellow.

Pro Vice-Chancellor Engagement, Professor Ian Anderson, said the university was drawing up a new reconciliation plan.

It had been actively encouraging healthy and sometimes uncomfortable conversations about race, he said.

"Whilst we can acknowledge the tragic colonial history of the past, there are different views about how we respond to this," he said. "There is more that we can do in a proactive way."

He said the university was working with the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council on an education campaign for its 5000 academic staff.

A formal proposal on the building name issue and others will be made next year.

Honorary senior fellow at Melbourne, Dr Ross Jones, disagreed with the idea of renaming but favoured installing plaques on each building.

"If you change the name, you forget the history," said Dr Jones, an expert on the influence Australian racial scientists said. "I think the names should stay."

"These discussions are excellent because universities can become complacent if they don't acknowledge their own mistakes."