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Toppling the Past?: Statues, Public Memory and the Afterlife of Empire in Contemporary New Zealand

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The spectacular toppling of the statue of Edward Colston, a Bristol merchant and politician who built his wealth through the Atlantic slave trade, in June 2020 spurred a number of protests focused on memorials to explorers, imperial rulers, colonial officials and slave-owners across the globe. Monuments in stone, marble and metal were decapitated, defaced, toppled and smashed. In some cases memorials were swiftly taken down, removed to museums or sealed in protective coverings in the face of protesters who drew on both the energy of the Black Lives Matter movement and long-standing local frustrations at these memorials to slavery and empire. In many cases, these protests have elicited anxious responses. Some commentators worried that the removal of statues would reduce historical understanding. Others believed that important parts of the past were being erased. The British Prime Minister Boris Johnson wove those arguments together when he suggested 'those statues teach us about our past, with all its faults. To tear them down would be to lie about our history, and impoverish the education of generations to come.'[1]

In New Zealand, these global currents reignited debates about statues that have periodically erupted over the last few decades. There were renewed calls to remove the statue memorialising Colonel Marmaduke George Nixon in Ōtāhuhu, in south Auckland. Nixon was wounded at Rangiaowhia in 1864, when he led British forces in an engagement that killed Māori women and children. There was an earlier extended debate about this statue in 2017 when the former member of Parliament Shane Te Pou called for the statue to be removed, describing Nixon as a 'thug'.[2] In the wake of the toppling of Colston, the statue in Albert Park in central Auckland that commemorates the colonial governor and prime minister Sir George Grey was splashed with red paint and it was inscribed with graffiti labelling Grey a 'racist'.[3] A few days later, the statue was attacked again, with Grey's nose and right thumb being removed.[4] Further south, the statue of the British naval officer John Fane Charles Hamilton, who had served in the Crimea, China and South America before commanding the HMS *Esk* during the New Zealand wars, was swiftly taken down by the Hamilton City Council in response to calls from Waikato-Tainui leaders.[5]

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These statue wars can be read as part of a long-standing New Zealand tradition, which has seen many attacks on statues of royalty, colonial rulers and military leaders as well as heated debates over whether various statues remain appropriate memorials giving shifting cultural values. In a recent study, Nick Wilson and his colleagues found that 23% of highly visible New Zealand statues had been subject to some sort of attack since the 1930s.[6] But there is no doubt that the upswing in these attacks in the middle of 2020 were catalysed by the toppling of Colston and the Black Lives Matters protests. This was made clear with the graffiti inscribed on the James Cook statue on the Waikanae beachfront in Tūranga/Gisborne: 'Black Lives Matter and so do Maori' and 'Take this racist headstone of my people down before I do'. This was the latest in a long series of graffiti and paint attacks on Cook-related statues in Tūranga, actions that underline the ongoing anger and pain felt as a result of the use of violence and kidnapping by Cook and his men when the *Endeavour* arrived at Tūranga in 1769, an issue that I will return to again shortly.

The political and cultural commentator Morgan Godfery (Ngāti Awa) suggested that similar statues should all be torn down. Writing in the *Guardian*, Godfery explained why he and his partner spat at the foot of statue of Sir George Grey, who Godfery characterised as a 'British warlord':

> **It's our duty as Waikato-Tainui descendants to disrespect the governor who sent the British empire into our land, pinching and plundering from our ancestors as they went, and it's our responsibility to resist clean commemorations. The statues commemorating Grey – like the stone rendering in Albert Park – the street names honouring his memory, and the towns that take his name ('Greytown') aren't 'history'. They're a tribute to one people's violent victory over another.**

Given the poisonous legacies of colonialism – 'where Māori are on the wrong side of every statistic, from incarceration to joblessness' – Godfery asserted the kind of history created by Grey had to be torn down. [7]

As a professional historian, I am more cautious about the urge to totally strip away these aspects of our built environments. I have a duty to both the people of the past who I study as well as the contemporary audiences I write for. In balancing those responsibilities, I support the removing of statues of figures who propelled colonialism such as Grey and whose values and actions are now fundamentally at odds with those of our contemporary communities. Places and cultures are dynamic, they are constantly made and remade: statues need not be forever. Where local authorities and governments move too slowly or fail to recognise continuing reminders of hurt, it is likely that statues and memorials will be the focus of graffiti, protests and crowbars. The durable materials that statues are fashioned from encourage us to see them as enduring, but in reality public memory is profoundly dependent on the shifting currents of political debate and cultural sentiment.

What comes after the removal of statues is important too. Godfery is not a supporter of removing these statues to museums. He rejects the idea that statues can be recontextualised in such institutions, making the important observation that colonised communities do not need to be introduced to the context of oppression as they experience it routinely. The noted Tūhoe artist and activist Tame Iti offered another way forward, arguing that statues should not be destroyed:

> **Don't destroy the statues!! Put them in a place altogether where people can talk about them... like a racist museum... having them all together in one space as racists and no longer as upstanding citizens is way more useful than having them at the bottom of a river.[8]**

The Māori Party co-leader Debbie Ngarewa-Packer offered yet another perspective. She called for an inquiry into statues, monuments and place names. Such an inquiry would help extend critical reassessments of New Zealand's colonial past and its legacies. This proposal has gained little purchase. If it was to be viable, it would need to be mobile, deeply engaging with a range of perspectives in locations across the islands that make up New Zealand. The voices of mana whenua – the particular Māori communities that exercise

traditional authority in any specific location – would need to be prominent in any potential inquiry. But ultimately, this was always going to be an unlikely initiative.

Much attention has been directed to the importance of the Waitangi Tribunal's role in addressing both contemporary infractions of the provisions of The Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti o Waitangi and historic breaches as well. But it is important to remember that the Tribunal's attention is fixed on the actions of the state and the actions of individuals or communities are beyond its scope. As I have argued elsewhere, this limited focus is one mechanism that makes the function of the Tribunal politically acceptable.[9] Ngarewa-Packer's proposal had the potential to open a whole range of questions that are culturally significant, but politically combustible.

We have already seen that in Tūranga/Gisborne that the image of Cook has been particularly contentious. The first collisions with tangata whenua (the people of the land) were studded with violence, as at least nine were shot by the British and Cook ordered the kidnapping of three Rongowhakaata youths with the intention of taking them onboard the *Endeavour* to establish the 'friendliness' of the British. Despite this violence, which has often been glossed over, Tūranga/Gisborne is prominent in national memory as Cook's first landing site in New Zealand and Cook's visit is pivotal in local understandings of history and identity.

For a very long time, civic authorities and many Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent) in the region took great pride in the locality's connection to Cook. Community leaders were key movers behind the erection of a large monument to mark his landing and his significance on the Kaiti foreshore in 1906. In 1940, a later generation of Pākehā East Coast businessmen and politicians fought hard for Cook to be accorded a prominent place in the Centennial programme, events that were really designed to celebrate nationhood and the progress made in the hundred years since formal colonization was initiated. And in 1969 Tūranga/Gisborne was afforded a special place in the national celebrations of the bicentennial of the *Endeavour*'s arrival. In early October, the city marked 'Cook Week' with a long and complex sequence of events, marked by the visit of many naval vessels from around the world, foreign signatories, and a huge civic parade.

In light of this tradition of Pākehā celebration as well the violent nature of those first meetings, there remains a great deal of pain and anger surrounding the history of colonialism in New Zealand. When the government-sponsored commemorative programme Tuia 250 was announced, Rongowhakaata kaumātua Thelma E. Karaitiana suggested that Cook was in effect a terrorist and identified the *Endeavour* voyage as initiating efforts to undermine Māori sovereignty. Karaitiana rejected the use of the language of 'discovery', framing the *Endeavour*'s arrival as a violent intrusion: 'The violence committed against Turanganui a Kiwa people by Cook was the first act of terrorism in Aotearoa.'[10] The public debate in Tūranga/Gisborne has been fraught and intense, underlining the deeply contested nature of the past in a community that remains scarred by the lingering consequences of colonialism but where many Pākehā still are committed to celebrating Cook.

Even though these questions are deeply contentious, it is important to recognise that the landscape of memory in Tūranga/Gisborne has been fundamentally reshaped in the last two years through three different dynamics. First, in keeping with the kind of aspiration articulated by Morgan Godfery, a key statue has been removed. This was the so-called 'Crook Cook', which had been erected on Titirangi/Kaitī Hill as part of the Cook bicentennial commemorations in 1969. In 1884 the Captain Cook Brewery of Auckland had imported a marble statue of the navigator from Sydney and this was affixed on top of their Khyber Road premises. An agreement to source a bronze cast of the statue had been concluded with the brewery (by then operating as NZ Breweries Ltd) by the committee established in 1966 to select an appropriate memorial for Gisborne.[11] This bronze Cook was mounted on a small reserve on Titirangi, enjoying a commanding view over the city and across the harbour to Te Kurī-a-Pāoa/Young Nick's Head, the land-form supposedly first

sighted by Nicholas Young on the *Endeavour*, as it approached Te Ika a Māui, New Zealand's North Island in early October 1769.

From the outset the statue was controversial, gaining the nickname 'Crook Cook'. This was not initially because Cook himself was contentious, but because there were concerns that key elements of his uniform as well as the form of the statue's face meant its resemblance to the navigator was questionable.[12] But by the 1990s Cook was a more contested figure and the statue was subject to frequent attacks. In June 2016 it was defaced three times in that single month.[13] These interventions can be read as a response to a strong tradition of pride in Cook in Gisborne and the district, particularly amongst some Pākehā.

In October 2018, during the midst of the planning for Tuia 250, the Gisborne District Council decided on the recommendation of its Future Tairāwhiti Committee, to remove 'Crook Cook'.[14] The report that recommended this move recognized that the removal and rehousing of the statue would be in keeping with the request from Ng[ā]ti Oneone and other T[ū]ranga iwi' and 'would demonstrate support for authentic story-telling'.[15] Locals were split over decision. Fifty-two per cent of respondents to a poll run by the *Gisborne Herald* in the wake of the Council decision opposed the move. One respondent very optimistically suggested that the reserve, which was often overgrown and inscribed with graffiti, was a 'vibrant recent historical site'. Another suggested that the Council had 'sucked up to a pressure group's wishes'. But forty-five per cent of those who took the poll supported the move, making a range of arguments. One supporter of change reflected: 'Titirangi maunga [hill] is a great place to honour the original navigators. Well done council for thinking bi-culturally.' Another observed: 'I would prefer the "crook Cook" was removed. Speaking as a Kiwi of British descent, Maori don't deserve to have him up there.'[16] The statue was removed and is now in the collection of Tairāwhiti Museum, which is currently assessing if the statue might be displayed in the future and if so, what kind of interpretative framings would be most appropriate.

At the foot of Titirangi, a second approach has played out as an old colonial memorial to Cook has been radically recontextualized in a project led by the Ngāti Oneone historian and artist Nick Tupara. This project has profoundly reshaped the memorial reserve which now carries the bilingual name, Puhi Kai Iti/Cook Landing Site National Historic Reserve. The erection of the memorial obelisk in 1906 to mark the site where Cook first landed in New Zealand was part of the marginalisation of Ngāti Oneone and its mana (authority) over the surrounding area. Their presence and historical significance was overwritten as the river was rerouted, land reclaimed and the port was redeveloped. Those processes also meant that the historic reserve was also increasingly hemmed by cargo storage, eventually including shipping containers and piles of logs, cutting the site off from the sea.

In 2019 Puhi Kai Iti/Cook Landing Site National Historic Reserve was significantly redeveloped. While the funding for this was provided though government bodies, Ngāti Oneone played a pivotal role in the project. The surrounds of the Cook memorial were reworked and now feature a complex series of artworks. The site now also acknowledges the landing of the ancestral waka (canoe) Te Ikaroa-a-Rauru and its navigator and tohunga (ritual expert) Maia. The waka is memorialized through a striking statue in the form of a steel freize of Te Ikaroa, framed by representations of the other waka that connect Te Ika a Māui (the North Island of New Zealand) to the Pacific. The statue also marks the whare wānanga (traditional school of learning) Puhi Kai Iti established by Maia, a centre that enabled Pacific knowledge to be transplanted to a new location.[17]

Tupara's design not only makes visible the long history of Māori settlement in the region. It also foregrounds a common thread of botanical knowledge that long predated the arrival of Cook and his naturalist Joseph Banks. Te Ikaroa-a-Rauru carried hue (gourd) seeds and traditional knowledge of gardening and these are celebrated in the form of large sculptures on the western side of the redeveloped site. Physically, the site looks radically different with a sequence of striking steel tukutuku panels which are woven together using the kaokao (cheveron) pattern, gesturing towards the importance of cooperation.[18] A

large sculpted installation was also erected featuring twenty-three pou (pillars), nine of which are topped by hoe or paddle-shaped forms. These are inlaid with tiki-figures commemorating the nine tangata whenua (people of the land) who were shot during those initial collisions with the crew of the *Endeavour*. Eight of these tiki are coloured a fiery orange-red, which refers to musket-fire, while the ninth is an intense blue, referring to the trade bead left on the body of Te Maro by the British. The violence of empire and the pain and suffering it caused was now bought into dialogue with the 1906 memorial, a marker of imperial memory. Tupara stresses that the redeveloped site is designed to invite people to reflect and converse as they process the meaning of the forms that surround them and make sense of the juxtaposition of the new Māori elements and the stark imperial obelisk.

Thirdly, the city's memory landscape was not only reshaped by the removal of the 'crook Cook' statue and the transformation of Puhi Kai Iti/Cook Landing National Historic Reserve, but also by the addition of a striking new sculpture produced by Tupara. He led the creation of the new Ruatanuika lookout on the lower slopes of Titirangi, Kaiti Hill. At the heart of the site is a striking new sculpture of Te Maro, a notable Ngāti Oneone tupuna (ancestor), who was also the first to encounter Europeans, and was shot and killed soon after Cook's party landed for the first time. At some 10 metres high, this finely worked nine-ton disc of steel makes Te Maro and the mana of Ngāti Oneone clearly visible cross the landscape of Tūranga/Gisborne. It is a potent reminder of the weight of cultures and histories that long-dated the arrival of the *Endeavour*. This image of Te Maro makes no reference to Cook, but rather rematerialises the mātauranga (knowledge) of the Ngāti Oneone. The circular shape of Tupara's work invokes seasonality and the cycles of time, the rhythms of nature that Te Maro gained a deep understanding of through the wānanga Puhi Kai Iti. Te Maro himself occupies the centre of the disc, grasping a hue (gourd), which gestures towards the utility of his knowledge and the importance of gardening in te ao Māori. He is surrounded by a mix of water and plant motifs, which allude to the crucial connections that lace humans into the natural world within Māori knowledge traditions.[19]

This sculpture is an important part of the local recognition of Ngāti Oneone's mana, restoring their presence to a landscape where colonisation and the drive for regional development had long rendered them marginal in the public imagination. Tupara explains the broad importance of his framing of Te Maro in this work in the following way:

> The story of Te Maro gets a bit lost in the story of the last two seconds of his life, but he was a grower of food and feeder of people; he read the stars and the sun and the wind and advised people about what they needed to do to keep their families fed and well, and we wanted to tell that story. We have an understanding of a Māori chap killed by Cook's crew – now he has a name, a character and a story we can take some lessons from in terms of growing food and keeping people's well-being strong.[20]

Tupara saw the government-sponsored Tuia 250 programme – which used the 250th anniversary of the arrival of the *Endeavour* to reflect on New Zealand's 'dual heritage, shared future' – as opportunity to seek resources and cultural space to help tell Ngāti Oneone stories in a way that enhanced the mana (status, authority) of his ancestors and kin. Against the backdrop of the long-standing celebration of Cook in Tūranga/Gisborne's civic culture, Tupara explained that Tuia 250 was an opportunity to move the focus way from Cook:

> A big part of these commemorations is an opportunity for us to articulate our place and find new strength to live in a Cook town… I come to celebrate Te Maro and that ancestor is my sole purpose for being involved in anything this year. And I'm only involved to the extent that I can successfully assist in putting our tipuna [ancestor] on our maunga [mountain].[21]

Here Tupara is emphasising the ways in which understandings of the past can be remade through positive interventions, through the telling of new stories or the retelling of old stories that are not well known, and

by offering a deeper indigenous perspective that shifts public attention away from Cook, to the prior history and set of beliefs and practices that had developed in a particular location.

In keeping with the importance of critical situated scholarship in the wake of empire, what about the location I am writing from, Ōtepoti/Dunedin? In the wake of the toppling of the Colston statue and against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter protests there have been some criticisms of the statue of the poet Robbie Burns that sits in the Octagon in the heart of the city. Banners inscribed 'rapist' and 'complicit in slavery' were attached to the statue, echoing charges that have been made elsewhere against the poet and which had been subject to some debate in New Zealand in 2018.[22] But the evidence for reading him as a rapist is both thin and contested and with regards to slavery, Burns abandoned plans he made when he was at his lowest point to work as a clerk on a Jamaican plantation. Burns was sympathetic to the aspirations for liberty and equality at the heart of the American and French revolutions, was a consistent critic of political tyranny and railed against British imperial aggression, especially towards Scotland. But he also failed to extend his sympathy to enslaved peoples or fully imagine the ways in which they were exploited.[23]

The claims against Burns have gained only limited traction in a city where the bard is not only loved for his songs and verse, but where the idea of Burns as embodying a deep scepticism towards authority as well as a marker of Scottishness continues to have real currency. Moreover Dunedin was shaped by a significant connection to the Burns family, through his nephew Thomas Burns, who was minister to the colony of Otago at its foundation in 1848 and subsequently played a key role in the city's development. Burns remains a prominent part of the city's culture even if Dunedinites may well be sceptical about the Bard's own morality.[24]

Shortly after the placards were attached to the Burns statue, the city's Queen Victoria statue was garlanded with potatoes and a placard denouncing her as a 'Famine Queen'. The Dunedin man responsible for this, Andrew Tait, wanted to draw attention to Britain's exploitation of Ireland and its consequences.[25] The Queen Victoria statue has long been a target of protesters who have seen her as an icon of empire. In 2019 'Uphold Te Tiriti', the Treaty of Waitangi, was graffitied on the statue. In 2015 the statue's tiara was removed and replaced with an orange road cone. And in the 1990s the statue was subject to several graffiti attacks and its nose was broken off. Queen Victoria remains a contentious figure because of the authority she wielded over an empire that disempowered Māori and other indigenous and colonised peoples. But at the same time she remains the sovereign in whose name the Treaty of Waitangi was signed, a key touchstone for Māori politics for over 150 years. It is notable that Edward Ellison, a senior figure from the local Ōtākou rūnaka (tribal committee) and chairman of the New Zealand Conservation Authority criticised the 2019 graffiti attack, stressing that these preparators did not speak for the iwi of Kāi Tahu.[26]

In response to the debates in June 2020 Ellison told the media that while he was highly aware of 'racism and its negative legacy', the focus of his people was 'seeing our stories being seen and told… Our focus is on developing our own narratives and seeing artworks that convey our stories, place names and associations, an area that has been neglected, we would suggest, for a long time.'[27] In this regard, the announcement earlier in June that the Kāi Tahu artist Ayesha Green had been commissioned to create a large piece of public art, *Ko te Tūhono*, for the Octagon was very significant. This work, which will take the form of a large gateway which celebrates both connection to place and movement, was developed through consultation with Ōtākou rūnaka (kin-group committee). This striking large-scale work will explicitly acknowledge the centrality of mana whenua in the city. Ellison's argument is crucial in my view: in weighing up how best to manage these memorials, communities should take their lead from the guidance of their local indigenous leaders.

Empire-building and colonialism produce stark inequalities and deeply-felt pain. Those are the central facts of New Zealand history and they are profoundly troubling. Removing statues to agents of empire will signal an important shift in our values. But we must recognise that we cannot undo the past, nor can it be wished away. There is no easy way of settling our history or coming to terms with it. That is especially

the case when the past is painful, studded with violence, dispossession and marginalisation. History and democracy are both underpinned by the importance of conversation and dialogue. Both are open-ended and argumentative. Even if progress is made in the political sphere, each new generation discovers that bitter past anew and grapples with its very real consequences, developing new arguments and insights. And, of course, we must be prepared for those future generations to criticise our initiatives, and even tear down any monuments we might construct in light of their own priorities and aspirations. Our understanding of the past, like that of those who proceeded us, and those who will follow, is itself a product of historical change, is both contingent and contestable.

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