At the Intersection of History and Memory: Monuments in Queensland

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Statues, monuments, fountains, mosaics, murals and other outdoor cultural objects are enduring elements of Australian cultural landscapes. As part of the domain of public history, these outdoor cultural objects make claims for certain physical and social interpretations and renditions of historical events. They exist at the intersection of history and memory – these ubiquitous objects in the public spaces of Australian cities and towns reflect who and what communities choose to remember, how historical events are understood at particular moments in time and a collective desire to influence how that event will be remembered in the future. Importantly, monuments also show how national events and stories are understood and interpreted at a local level. This paper discusses the representation of frontier and settler histories in outdoor cultural objects erected in Queensland during the twentieth century. A brief historical survey operates as a backdrop to a questioning of the strategies of representation used in contemporary examples of commemoration, such as at Reconciliation Place in Canberra.

In writing about Australian memorials to Captain Cook, Chris Healy remarked that monuments are ‘spaces where the possibilities between history and memory can be acted out, spaces that denote sites of history and can connote environments of memory’. Healy here is borrowing from Pierre Nora’s influential claim that sites of memory – lieux de memoire – such as commemorative monuments, are now necessary because there are no longer milieux de memoire, ‘real environments of memory’. Healy, however, is referring to the layers of meanings that imbue memorial spaces, hinting that monuments can operate at the intersection of history and memory rather than belonging to just one of these realms. Rather than contrasting and opposing history and memory as Nora does, I want instead to look at monuments as sites of memory that attempt to negotiate the meaning of ‘the national’ in the realm of the local. Many of the monuments to be found throughout Australia are significant largely on a local level. They are parochial creations, erected in the main by groups of volunteers or historical societies and often utilise and resurrect local stories to claim a place in the monumental construction of national history.

In this paper, I will be focussing on outdoor cultural objects erected in Queensland to mark the earliest – or frontier – phase of European occupation of Australia; objects erected to both Indigenous people and non-Indigenous pioneers. All of these objects were erected by non-Indigenous Australians and are distinctly European ways of marking the land such as statues, plaques, cairns and so on. While acknowledging the importance of Henry Reynolds’ call for Australian scholars to explore what was happening on ‘the far side of the frontier’, this paper focuses instead on how non-Indigenous communities have sought to claim both history and memory through erecting monuments and, as such, is a contribution to the debate about remembering and forgetting in Australian history.

The desire for monuments is part of the colonialist impulse. Like cartography, the erection of outdoor cultural objects is a European way of marking the landscape. In the Western tradition of commemoration, material objects such as plaques, statues and cairns are made to stand for memory. In physically taking the place of the mental form of memory, these objects endeavour to safeguard,
prolong or preserve social memory into the future. Adrian Forty traces this tradition to Aristotle, who described memory as 'like the imprint or drawing in us of things felt'. By erecting commemorative objects to explorers, pioneers and settlers, successions of Australian communities have sought in the first instance to ‘make history’ in a country that was believed to be ‘without history’, and also to make particular versions of Australian history the most solid and tangible.

It is perhaps a hopeless quest. As Robert Musil wrote in 1936, reflecting on a Europe crowded with monuments:

> the most striking feature of monuments is that you do not notice them. There is nothing in the world as invisible as monuments. Doubtless they have been erected to be seen – even to attract attention; yet at the same time something has impregnated them against attention. Like a drop of water on an oilskin, attention runs down them without stopping for a moment.

How many cairns with plaques located on the sides of roads or in Apex parks are never even given a cursory glance by passing motorists or visiting travellers and languish in beds of weeds? Does the ubiquity of monuments render them meaningless or even irrelevant? In his study of holocaust memorials in Europe, North America and Israel, James Young notes this dilemma of the simultaneous invisibility and solidity of monuments. He argues that it is through the telling and remembering of their own stories that monuments become more than immovable objects in the cultural landscape, are re-invigorated and can become actively connected with broader discourses and debate in the public realm. He calls this process recording the ‘biographies’ of monuments, explaining that it ‘expand(s) the texts of these memorials to include not only their conception and execution among historical realities, but also their current and changing lives, even their eventual destruction’. Borrowing Young’s terminology, I offer in this paper the biographies of several outdoor cultural objects in Queensland – some well known, others neglected – to demonstrate how these objects uncover the historical consciousness of Queensland communities and reveal how national identity is claimed and asserted on a local level. These biographies also highlight enduring forms of representation in local monuments, in particular the tendency for assimilationist strategies of representation that attempt to create or reinforce a national narrative that dissolves difference and promotes hegemonic versions of history. The representation of history in monuments has political and cultural consequences, not least in negating the possibility of a plurality of social memories.

Research into monuments in Queensland shows that the majority of them have been erected as a result of community effort rather than government funding. The most popular and persistent type of monument in Queensland, apart from war memorials, are those dedicated to pioneers and obelisks, cairns, rocks, clocks, plaques, gates, fountains and gardens can be found all over the state. The dominance of rocks with plaques in this category of objects rather than sculptures, statues or more ‘aesthetic’ objects, however, alerts us to the fact that for the people who erect these objects, the act of remembering is more important than the qualities of the object itself, in many cases the object simply serves the function of ‘X’ marks the spot, a literal marking of territory. A number of these monuments are explicit that what they are marking is the spread of ‘white civilisation’: a blue granite cairn in Rannes, for example, pays tribute to Mrs Hay as ‘the first white woman being so far north in Australia’ and James Morrill’s grave in Bowen had an extra obelisk added to it in 1964 by the Royal Historical Society of Queensland crediting him as ‘the first known white resident of North Queensland’. In part, these tributes, like the statues of diggers on war memorials, reflect the twentieth century shift towards commemorating ordinary people, not just famous individuals. They are often generic tributes – dedicated simply to ‘the pioneers’ of the district, who are nameless, faceless and anonymous. As a group, these objects reflect the central place occupied by the legend of the pioneer settler in the development of Australian nationalism.

Monuments dedicated to explorers complement pioneer monuments in physically claiming the land. Many Queensland communities have acknowledged the explorers who opened regions to pastoral, mining and agricultural industries. The plaque on a cairn dedicated to explorer Sir William Landsborough in Hughenden, for instance, reads ‘Landsborough’s report of the fine grazing lands of Western Queensland tripled, or even quadrupled, the extent of territory in Australia available
for settlement … the advantages thus secured for pastoral purposes are beyond all calculation’. In contrast, the Mitchell Memorial Clock erected in Blackall in 1946 to mark the centenary of Major Thomas Mitchell’s exploration of the region has no inscription beyond the surveyor’s name. As Graeme Davison explains regarding monuments erected to early Australian heroes: ‘further details were unnecessary, for their lives and characters were firmly inscribed in popular memory’.

The Indigenous guides who assisted these European explorers are also commemorated. A small, privately erected plaque set in concrete on the top of a forty-four gallon drum at Yaranigh Ponds near Isisford is dedicated to Yuranigh, Major Mitchell’s guide. There is also a concrete cairn commemorating Jackey Jackey, Edmund Kennedy’s Indigenous guide at Bamaga airport at the tip of Cape York. Kennedy was in charge of a disastrous exploratory expedition in 1848 to find a possible site for a northern port at the top of Queensland. Local Aborigines killed Kennedy when he was within sight of his goal and only Jackey Jackey eventually reached Port Albany.

Mitchell Memorial Clock, Blackall, erected in 1946. Courtesy of Queensland Museum.

Typical of Aboriginal guides, Jackey Jackey came from a settled district of New South Wales and had both traditional skills and experience with Europeans. Aboriginal guides were essential in the European exploration of the continent, offering knowledge of established pathways, tracks, water and food sources and areas of good country. As the story of Jackey Jackey illustrates, explorers relied heavily on their guides and came to know and trust them, often at the expense of engaging with the people whose country they were passing through. The memorial to Jackey Jackey explicitly honours his loyalty to Kennedy rather than these other skills – the plaque describes him as Kennedy’s ‘faithful companion’.

Erected in 1961 at the instigation of the deputy director of the former Queensland Department of Native Affairs, the cairn was paid for with government funds. The township of Bamaga was established by the Queensland government in 1949 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people relocated from islands and other places on Cape York. Given the town’s isolation, local people must have been perceived as the audience for the monument. The Jackey Jackey monument is typical of those erected to Indigenous people in Queensland in the 1960s following the instigation of the national policy of assimilation in 1957. As Anna Haebich has observed ‘representations of assimilation flooded the public domain’ in Australia during the 1950s and 60s. Alongside representations in official government literature, newsreels, films and the press, monuments offer another insight into
what Haebich calls ‘the formation of public imaginings about assimilation that continue to influence public hopes for the nation to this day’. Such imaginings endure also in aspects of contemporary monuments and memorials such as Reconciliation Place in Canberra.

Monuments erected in the 1960s often represent Aboriginal people as helpers in the process of the white development of the land, honouring them with nation-building achievements. One example is the statue of Jimmy Crow in Centenary Park in Crow’s Nest near Toowoomba. The Crow’s Nest Centenary Committee commissioned the sandstone statue in 1969 as part of the town’s centenary celebrations. Local legend has it that the town was named after an Aboriginal man who lived in a hollow tree at the place that became the town. As the plaque explains:

In the early days when teamsters visited this area, “Jimmy Crow”, an Aboriginal named by the early settlers who used a large hollow tree as his gunyah, was relied on for information and directions. This place was used as a camping place by teamsters and travellers and became known as “Jimmy Crow’s nest” – hence the name Crow’s Nest.

Although a depiction of an individual, the statue is not specifically a tribute to Jimmy Crow’s individual characteristics or skills; rather, he is a historical character used to tell the story of the settlement of the town. This symbolic quality is further emphasised by the portrayal of Jimmy Crow as ‘natural’ – naked, muscular, with an upright bearing and sombre expression, reflecting how Indigenous people were often identified with the Australian landscape as needing to be ‘tamed’ and controlled. Jimmy Crow also had symbolic power because, in the story at least, he conformed to white Australians’ expectations of behaviour; he was settled and lived in a home, he was friendly, and he assisted them in coming to understand the land.

Another example of a tribute to an individual Indigenous person that is used to represent the stories of national and local development is a cairn in Charters Towers erected to commemorate the centenary of the official proclamation of the goldfields. Jupiter Mosman, an Aboriginal boy ‘owned’ by miner Hugh Mosman, is credited with the discovery of gold in the district in 1871. In 1972, the local historical society erected the cairn at the spot where Jupiter picked up the first piece of gold-bearing quartz. While Jupiter is credited with the discovery on the plaque, the physical details of the memorial reveal how Aborigines were excluded from reaping the rewards of mineral discovery. Three miner’s pegs used to stake miners’ claims are located at the corners of the base of the cairn,
each inscribed with the initials of the first three miners on the field, including Jupiter’s master. As the pegs so clearly show, Jupiter himself was unable to capitalise on his find.

A more disturbing category of assimilationist monuments are those dedicated to particular Aboriginal people as ‘the last of their tribe’. These individuals are used to symbolise the passing of Aboriginal culture and its (supposedly non-violent) integration into mainstream Australian society. An example is the memorial to Kal-Ma-Kuta at Wingi near Bribie Island. Kal-Ma-Kuta was also known as Mrs Alma Turner. She was a member of the Undanbi clan who lived along Pumicestone Passage, and was married to local white oyster fisherman Fred Turner. They lived at a place known as Turner’s Camp from 1874. When Kal-Ma-Kuta died in 1897 she was buried opposite her campsite. Much later, in 1962, the Caboolture Historical Society erected a tall cairn of stones next to her grave and planted a native fig and a grove of bunya pines. Just as Kal-Ma-Kuta was being honoured as ‘the last of the Joondooburri tribe’, the unveiling ceremony was attended by the then ‘last of the old ones’, Uncle Willie McKenzie of Kilcoy Station and a Mrs Shakespeare.

Such ways of representing Indigenous people persisted in Queensland until the late 1980s. The major difference in recent portrayals lies in their figurative nature and their funding by governments, as distinct from the simpler cairns and plaques erected earlier by community organisations. The Charters Towers Council for example, commissioned a sculptural version of Jupiter’s discovery for the Bicentenary in 1988. A work of public art was also commissioned to commemorate the Bicentenary in Brisbane. The Petrie Tableau is a naturalistic depiction of Brisbane’s pioneering Petrie family in 1842, showing Andrew Petrie mounted on a horse farewelling his wife and family. His eldest son steadies the horse, while another son plays with Aboriginal children and a Freed convict maid looks on.

The Brisbane City Council chose the design for the Petrie Tableau after significant public debate. Letters to the editor of the Courier Mail show that readers were largely in favour of an equestrian statue of Queen Elizabeth II to balance the existing statue of her grandfather, George V, reflecting public taste for symmetry and affection for the monarchy. Prominent architects called for a ‘world standard’ work of abstract art, while Lord Mayor Sallyanne Atkinson made a bid for ‘people’s
The final choice appears to cater to the desire for history that inevitably accompanies the marking of an anniversary and attempts to be inclusive in its representational scope. However, once again, the work conforms to Anna Haebich’s characterisation of the narrative of assimilation as ‘an imagined, seamless, unproblematic and inevitable passage from a receding Aboriginal past’ and in particular, highlights the way that Aboriginal children were often represented as the course of change. The children are represented as already assimilated and there is no reference to Indigenous culture. In fact, the plaque accompanying the sculpture pays tribute to the son Tom Petrie for ‘recording stories of Aboriginal life’, inferring that it is the non-Indigenous interpretation of Indigenous culture that is historically significant to the progress of the Australian nation.

Much of the scholarship about commemoration stresses its socially integrating aspects in seeking to materialise consensus and resolution in relation to national events and stories. Such arguments are most sustainable in relation to objects such as war memorials that serve nationalistic purposes, as well as the personal and communal need for mourning. However, the selective utilisation of memory and history that is found in many explicitly historic outdoor cultural objects demonstrates expressly political attempts to privilege hegemonic versions of Australian history at the expense of other versions. The examples that I have discussed show how local communities stake claims for themselves and the characters and events of their local history in a nation-building narrative based on what Henry Reynolds describes as ‘the epic of peaceful pioneering, of settlement as a struggle with nature, of hard, clean, bloodless conquest of the land’.

As this brief survey has shown, objects erected in Queensland throughout the twentieth century have utilised strategies of representation and exclusion that reinforce particular formulations of Australian history and support contemporary social policy; they are what Andreas Huyssen has called ‘the tradition of the legitimising, identity-nurturing monument’. However, when many of these objects were erected, the now-familiar shifts in the interpretation of Australian history were yet to occur and there is little point in castigating people in the past for representing history in the way they then understood it. Especially when we have contemporary monuments and works of public art that seem to be underpinned by the same inability to deal with a plurality of pasts and a desire for representations of unity and continuity that inevitably deny other perspectives. An attraction of this kind of approach to the past is that it offers refuge from seemingly intractable conflicts of the present, a tendency clearly illustrated by the creation of Reconciliation Place, which was conceived just as intense public debate was occurring about the representation of national history at the National Museum of Australia.

In July 2002, Prime Minister Howard opened the national reconciliation monument in Canberra known as Reconciliation Place. At the time of its opening, however, Reconciliation Place was incomplete – the memorial was dedicated without one of its key components, the proposed sculptural element dedicated to the Stolen Generations. The anger and protests of Aboriginal and reconciliation groups over the lack of consultation about the design of Reconciliation Place had already delayed its opening by seven months and eventually led the government to announce that it would start again on the design of the ‘separation sliver’ and consult members of the Stolen Generations about how they wanted their story represented. One of the many criticisms made of the original design was that it prominently featured images and sounds of stolen children playing happily. As the chairs of the National Sorry Day Committee stated at the time: ‘we said that if the Government did not consult, then Reconciliation Place would not be a reconciling place but a place of division … only out of consultation could a memorial be created that tells the truth of what happened’.

The original design for Reconciliation Place was the result of a competition organised by the National Capital Authority in 2001. It comprises an open landscape area with a composition of sculptural slivers of varying heights and materials, each representing aspects of the experience of Indigenous Australians and episodes in the reconciliation process. These initial slivers are considered to be the founding framework of Reconciliation Place, with the intention that new slivers will be inserted as the process of reconciliation itself unfolds. There are multiple possible routes through the grouping of slivers, with each route offering a different reading of the material presented. Each...
sliver presents a collage of images and text, interpretive material not unlike an exhibition in a social history museum.

Despite its abstract form, the contemporary language of ‘slivers’ and the potential for multiple readings, Reconciliation Place is not really a contemporary memorial in its representational intention, rather it has many of the features of traditional nationalistic monuments of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the time they commenced their nationwide consultations about Reconciliation Place, the National Sorry Day Committee stated:

If we could have our own way, we would like to change the memorial altogether. In recent years, many of the stolen generations have given their view on an appropriate commemoration, and overwhelmingly they have chosen a natural setting, such as a garden with running water, rocks, plants and shrubs and so on – a place for quiet reflection. But the construction of Reconciliation Place is so far advanced that we cannot do more than change the planned slivers.23

The design that emerged as a result of the consultations comprises two new slivers. One is constructed of red ochre concrete and incorporates a stream of water that spills into a rock pool. Other surfaces of the sliver incorporate a map of Australia formed out of holes made in the surface of the concrete. The holes represent the communities children were taken from and the places they were forced to live and work. These holes are intended as places where visitors to Reconciliation Place can put messages. The second sliver incorporates historic photos of children in the environments they came from, institutionalised children, and an artistic representation of a ‘coolamon’ or traditional cradle. The new text for the slivers only includes direct quotes from those who were taken, their carers and others involved; unlike the other slivers there is no interpretation or mediation of the ‘separation’ experience.

Reconciliation Place highlights many of the issues which are at stake when it comes to processes of commemoration through the erection of outdoor cultural objects. It shows how, in attempting to claim social memory, monuments can limit, or even erase the possibilities of rival and conflicting memories. In their very physical presence and solidity, public monuments work to impose a permanent memory on the landscape within which we order our lives, and in the case of Reconciliation Place, within the formalised landscape of national identity in Canberra. Yet, because of this move to claim memory, monuments can stimulate debate about how history is represented. The fact that the Reconciliation Place project was initiated by the Federal government and the subsequent debate about its design and content demonstrate the continuing potency of monuments as forms of public history.

Plaque, Kalkadoon/Kalkatunga memorial. Courtesy of the Queensland Museum.

Monuments can activate both a personal and public dialogue with viewers; the new sliver at Reconciliation Place, for example, invites visitors to interact with the monument by leaving messages. They can be appropriated and re-appropriated for purposes quite different from their
makers’ intentions, for instance the use of war memorials as sites of protest against war. Monuments can be challenged and questioned by the erection of counter-monuments as in the case of the cairn at Kajabbi in northwest Queensland erected in 1984 by the Kalkadoon/Kalkatunga people that commemorates the deaths of their people in the massacre at nearby Battle Mountain in 1884. New layers of meanings and interpretations can be added to existing memorials as occurred with the monument to Western Australian explorers Panter, Harding and Goldwyer, which can be found in Fremantle. The original inscription recorded that the explorers were ‘attacked at night by treacherous natives and were murdered at Boola Boola’. In 1988 an additional plaque was added to the memorial, offering a different interpretation of the events by recognising Aboriginal people’s right to defend their land.24

Kalkadoon/Kalkatunga memorial, Kajabbi, erected in 1984. The photograph shows (from left to right) James Taylor, John Brody and Mick Calwell at the memorial while site-recording for Native Title research. Courtesy of the Kalkadoon people and Stephen Long.

Issues about the procurement and design of Reconciliation Place demonstrate that the potential for exclusionary representational strategies is as real now as it has always been in traditional commemoration. Reconciliation Place is not yet a memorial space which can facilitate peace and healing. Members of the Stolen Generation still have to fight for a nuanced version of their experiences that acknowledge their pain, and the need for an ongoing dialogue about separation from family and country continues. Rather than disguising the reality that outdoor cultural objects are inevitably selective claims for social memory – not least because of their solid materiality and attempts to capture time and space in the public realm – contemporary memorials need to actively engage with the disputed nature of historical consciousness, so that history and memory can be used to inform the creation of outdoor cultural objects that invite dialogue and debate.

Notes

1This paper was originally presented at the ‘Memory and History’ Symposium with Dipesh Chakrabarty, held by the Centre for Public Culture and Ideas, Griffith University on 15 August 2004.


4A cairn is heap of stones set up as a monument and is usually pyramidal in form.


This is not to say that other ways of analysing memorials are unimportant, an art historical perspective for instance that considers the iconography of memorials would be revealing, likewise a consideration of the role of the memorial as a form of pedagogy. This paper consciously confines itself to issues of representation in terms of national narratives.


ibid.


Graham de Gruchy, ‘Statues: are they Art or are they History?’, *Courier Mail*, 26 January, 1987.

Haebich, p.63.


I am referring here to shifts signalled by works that challenge the idea of national history as a singular, consensual narrative, offering instead alternative versions often influenced by theories of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and the post-colonial condition. The work of Henry Reynolds is a paradigmatic example.
