



ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF VICTORIA INC.

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What to do with our statues and monuments?

A Policy Statement from the Royal Historical Society of Victoria

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The Black Lives Matter protests have highlighted the ways the past impacts heavily on us today. Our predecessors' values were in many respects appalling. Attitudes we would describe as racist, misogynist or anti-Semitic were embedded in past cultures. We are beginning to question them but we have a long way to go.

History has often been created by winners. The First Fleet landed in Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788. That much is undisputed. But was this an act of settlement or of invasion? Should it be celebrated or mourned - or both? The meaning of the past is in the eye of the beholder, but it is the winners who build memorials. What are we to do when some of these memorials offend, often in dramatic ways?

The most obvious and painful reminders of past slave-holding and massacres, racism and sexism are the monuments to those who embodied that past, like the statue of the seventeenth-century Bristol slave-trader Edward Colston recently thrown into the River Avon. Taking such a statue out of public view may reduce the pain caused by reminders of the past, but it also erases a reminder of the colonial offence. We don't want to forget that past; we need to repair the injustices left from it.

Destroying symbols of the past doesn't repair the wrongs of today. The weight of our past will continue to press upon us until we acknowledge and correct the present injustices it has brought upon us. Until we prevent deaths in custody and police brutality; until we give our First Nations peoples a fair say in our society; until Indigenous children have just as realistic a hope for a decent life as other Australians; we are all diminished.

For 111 years, the RHSV has stood for preserving our history and heritage in order to face it and improve upon it. We have stood for and stand today for the preservation of historic sites of all kinds because heritage keeps us in touch with our past, both positive and negative, and because destruction of heritage causes pain, as so spectacularly in the appalling present destruction of the Juukan Gorge caves, which was perhaps Australia's most ancient heritage site.

In the years since the RHSV was founded, however, much has changed. Women having recently gained the vote entered the public sphere, nearly all nations signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, civil rights movements challenged racism, and the United Nations forged many other rights, including those of Indigenous peoples, refugees and children. These new rights have emerged because we have changed. Those in the past may have looked like us, but they thought very differently from us.

We at the RHSV are painfully aware that our organisation has in the past supported monuments which commemorate events or persons which we would now condemn. Preservation does not mean glorification. The RHSV will now research what monuments its members might have helped to create in the past and consider, after consultation, what appropriate actions might be needed. Such actions might include new or additional plaques giving alternate interpretation(s) of the memorial. This has been done in the past and it can be a positive and creative act of public and civic education.

Whether or not the RHSV has past involvement, we acknowledge that in some cases interpretation may not be sufficient to avoid apparent glorification. In cases (like that of Edward Colston) where a monument causes such pain and in effect commemorates only past wrongs and no other value, removal (preferably to a museum, especially if the monument has aesthetic merit or heritage value) may well be appropriate, after genuine discussion. Removal be commemorated by an historical marker, so we do not forget our sometime grim past.

In other cases, where a monument represents an historical figure who shared the world view of his or her epoch but who also stood for or accomplished something transcending that world view, it may be appropriate to add inscriptions that explain the different aspects of their career and/or the problems we see in their legacy to maintain the conversation and help build an informed consensus about what to avoid, change or keep from the past.

How should we proceed to make decisions in such cases? We advocate public processes to ensure that. We support what the Mayor of Bristol called a 'citywide conversation' 'informed by good history', with fair representation of First Nations peoples and other concerned minorities, proceeding through agreed channels. Many of Victoria's statues and monuments are registered heritage sites and in that case the channels of conversation must include Heritage Victoria.

In general, we call for a campaign to erect appropriate monuments and memorials to those whose past has been overshadowed. Local councils and historical societies, in consultation with First Nations peoples and other affected communities, would be well placed to organise such monuments. Clearly First Nations and other concerned communities should take the lead in creating such monuments. The RHSV will seek to support such action wherever it can. By the erection of a monument, we increase awareness of history and help to right imbalances of our history. Thus, to understand our history better is preferable to attempting to erase it.

We ask all Victorians to join this conversation. By discussing and better understanding our past, together we can forge a better future.