

## What's in a name? A lot when we're admiring murders and murderers

*John Batman, Lachlan Macquarie, Angus McMillan – some of the colonial leaders we eulogise and commemorate despite being deeply unworthy*



*Marie Bashir, Clover Moore and Barry O'Farrell unveil a statue of Lachlan Macquarie in Sydney's Hyde Park on 31 January 2013. Photograph: Toby Mann/AAP*

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12 March 2017

It's well beyond time we rethought who, as a nation, we've eulogised in statuary, bricks, mortar and nomenclature.

History – and many of those who've written it for centuries in Australia – has afforded far too much respect to pioneering (mostly) men who've been responsible for the mass murder of this continent's Indigenous people. Such history has been reflected in the dedication of public buildings, the names of streets, suburbs and electorates, and the erection of statues, to precisely the wrong people.

That's why I was heartened to see moves were finally afoot to strip the name "Batman" from a federal electorate in Melbourne because of the growing cultural acknowledgment (150 years overdue) that namesake John Batman was, to put it none too delicately, one bad bastard when it came to dealing with Indigenous people, especially the Tasmanians.

You wouldn't know that if you read many official histories about him, including the Australian Dictionary of Biography, which portrays him in an overwhelmingly positive tone when it comes to this continent's Aboriginal people.

For a more appropriately nuanced take on Batman, it's worth starting with this piece by the University of Tasmania's Nicholas Clements, author of the incisive 2014 book, *The Black War*.

History has been terribly soft on Batman, portraying him as a munificent soul, not least in relation to Indigenous people. But he was far morally darker, more vainglorious and self-serving than those of us educated in Melbourne in the 1970s and 80s were deceived into believing about the supposed founder of that city.

As Clements notes: "While he was unquestionably a very pragmatic and determined man, Batman was by no means principled. He was often dishonest in both word and deed, and there is little evidence that his humanitarianism was any more than the rhetoric of a self-promoter."

So, time to erase his name from the electorate, and rename the plethora of parks and gardens dedicated in his name that dot Melbourne.

Next, we can move on to the federal electorate of McMillan, situated in southern Gippsland and named after another pioneer – Scot, Angus McMillan. Angus gets a pretty good rap from establishment Oz history, too, which (thanks again ADB and many, many other established, respected sources) portrays him as a great adventurer, generous to the blackfella and an all 'round bonny bloke.

He was, in fact, a mass killer of the local First People, whose stories of his extreme violence endure in today's oral history. Indeed, McMillan's very own family has been at the forefront, recently, of demythologising him; in 2016, his great, great, great niece, Scottish journalist Cal Flynn, published the truth about her forebear's involvement in massacring Gippsland's Indigenous in her book, *Thicker Than Water*.

Angus McMillan's name ought to be stripped from that electorate. Indeed, even the sitting member, the Liberal MP Russell Broadbent, has argued that case forcefully, coherently.

While we're at it, the vast Western Australian seat of Canning is long overdue for a new name too. I've written before about the immense cruelty of Alfred Canning, who in 1906 surveyed a 1,850-kilometre livestock track across the continent's western deserts, linking 54 wells between Halls Creek in the Kimberley and Wiluna on the edge of the Gibson Desert.

To find the water, he chained Aboriginal people to trees and force fed them salt. They led him to the wells. There were many brutal killings as the black people tried to defend their land with spears against the whitefellas with guns.

How readily we believe that which suits us, and makes heroes out of our flawed pioneers, ignoring their evil doings.

I've written previously, too, about Australia's disgraceful eulogisation of Governor Lachlan Macquarie, a man who used the tactics of "terror" (his words) including cutting off and displaying the heads of his Aboriginal victims to discourage the aggression of the Indigenous people protecting their land. He also ordered children stolen from the sites of massacres that he commanded.

There are more public buildings, institutions, thoroughfares and spaces – not to mention monuments including statues – dedicated to Macquarie, the supposed great humanitarian and renaissance governor than, perhaps, any other colonial leader. He is deeply unworthy.

No statue need be permanent. The name of a building or a park, a street or an electorate, meanwhile, is easily changed.

It just takes will.

Then again, Australia has, largely, long inured itself to the extreme violence, the dark truth, that underpins its nationhood. Keep your eyes open as you drive around this, the world's most beautiful continent.

Then take note of the names that sit so starkly at odds with that beauty: Murdering Island, Poison Waterhole Creek, Slaughterhouse Creek, Massacre Bay and Murdering Gully. There are eight Skeleton Creeks in Queensland alone.

Yes, parts of the very Australian landscape have been renamed not to commemorate the dead, but the very act of murdering them.

There's much in a name.