

# **‘No time for a history lesson’: The contest over memorials to Angus McMillan on Gunaikurnai Country**

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**Abstract:** In Australia, calls for the removal of memorials to white colonists escalated during 2020, as the international Black Lives Matter movement influenced growing demands for a more open reckoning with Australian’s past to be reflected in public history. In June 2020, the Wellington Shire Council in Gippsland, Victoria, rejected a motion supported by Traditional Owners, the Gunaikurnai, to remove monuments built to commemorate the ‘explorer’ and instigator of massacres, Angus McMillan. Those who voted against the removals claimed that the cairns are educative and historically accurate. In this article, we argue that the value and intent of the cairns to McMillan have been contested since their inception, and therefore subject to revision and re-storying. We analyse the campaign behind the erection of the cairns in the 1920s and demonstrate that this public history project was informed by the white supremacist politics of the time, and that the political project of colonial erasure continues to be enacted in more recent public debates over McMillan’s memorialisation. We draw connections between the settler colonial politics of the 1920s and the 2020 contest over the cairns at a community level, highlighting the strength of colonial narratives of possession. This article demonstrates how First Nations–led public pedagogies provide a way forward that allows for collaborative, community-based rescripting of McMillan’s position in public history.



**Figure 1: The cairn to McMillan in Stratford, March 2020.**

Source: Reproduced with permission of Beth Ripper, Wellington Reconciliation Group.

Thindu wurk-wurk githa – This land is mine. Thindu wallung githa – These rocks are mine.<sup>1</sup>

On 16 June 2020, the Wellington Shire Council (WSC), located in Gippsland, Victoria, voted on a proposal to remove two stone cairns built in dedication to Angus McMillan. McMillan, a Scot who migrated to Australia in 1838, was one of the men who paved the way for the European invasion of Gunaikurnai Country. He is known by some as a murderer, leader of massacres and the 'butcher of Gippsland', and by others as an explorer, a pioneer and a 'founding father'. The proposal to the WSC, made by Councillor Carolyn Crossley, was to remove two cairns located on council land, and to begin consultations for the removal of seven other cairns on land owned by government agencies.<sup>2</sup> Dr Aunty Doris Paton, a Gunai Elder and educator, was among the 239 locals who made submissions to the council preceding the vote. Aunty Doris asked the councillors:

to be courageous for our Ancestors, for our Elders, and for our future generations. The impact of colonialism on our lives over the generations has been profound, our stories need to be told. To heal.

For Aunty Doris, the council vote was 'an opportunity for the Wellington Shire Councillors to be on the right side of history'. Most councillors, however, were not courageous and voted five to four against the proposal. This was the same week that the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protestors in Bristol, United Kingdom, dragged a bronze statue of the slave trader Edward Colston into the harbour.<sup>3</sup> Opponents of the proposal claimed that the global context precipitated a rushed proposal, ignoring the long-term community campaign led by Gunaikurnai to address the representation of history on their Country, particularly the dominance of McMillan.<sup>4</sup>

Across Gunaikurnai Country, 18 cairns purportedly chart the route taken by McMillan in 1840.<sup>5</sup> Many are located along pathways and near to cultural places important to Gunaikurnai people long before McMillan arrived.<sup>6</sup> For Gunaikurnai people, the two cairns subject to the WSC vote, located on the highway in Sale and Stratford, are daily reminders of McMillan's violence.<sup>7</sup> They were built in 1926 at the initiative of the Victorian Historical Memorials Committee, a group of men from Melbourne without any connection to McMillan. The political context for the erection of the cairns, some 85 years after McMillan's journey through Gippsland, is often overlooked in contemporary debates. By recontextualising the campaign to

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1 Steaphan Paton, 'Wallung Githa Unsettled', Anna Pappas Gallery, accessed 18 August 2021, [www.annapappasgallery.com/](http://www.annapappasgallery.com/); Paton and Cope, *Wallung Githa Unsettled*.

2 Wellington Shire Council (WSC) Minutes 16 June 2020.

3 Moody, 'Off the Pedestal: The Fall of Edward Colston'.

4 WSC Minutes 16 June 2020.

5 There are also obelisks and plinth monuments to McMillan across the region. See Monument Australia, 'Search', accessed 4 June 2021, [monumentaustralia.org.au/search](http://monumentaustralia.org.au/search). On the erection of the cairns, see Paterson, 'History in Stone'.

6 Aunty Doris Paton, Gunai cultural knowledge.

7 WSC Minutes 16 June 2020.

build the McMillan cairns and considering how they were intended to contribute to narratives of settler legitimacy throughout the twentieth century, we shed light on the contemporary debate, including the WSC vote. Just as the erection of the cairns was a form of history making in the 1920s, we argue that the process of removing the cairns is also a form of making (and reckoning with) history that is already underway, driven by the grassroots efforts of Gunaikurnai people and organisations.

This article is a collaboration between Aunty Doris Paton and settler historians Beth Marsden and Jessica Horton. We came to write on this issue through several intersections: our ongoing research relationships, the gathering community momentum to face Gippsland's history and the continuing campaign to remove the McMillan cairns. Recently, Amangu Yamatji academic Crystal McKinnon argued that historians 'need to listen to community directed articulations of injustice, and of what justice looks like – which means to reorient to the present as our starting point'.<sup>8</sup> The ongoing fight over the cairns is our starting point, and we aim to address the need for history to be told through the present justice objectives of those who are harmed by both the debate and the continuing presence of the cairns on Gunaikurnai Country. Through a collaborative methodology and community engagement, and by centring Gunaikurnai knowledge and authority, settler historians Marsden and Horton are attempting to overcome what Katherine Ellinghaus and Barry Judd refer to as the 'disciplinary decadence' of academic history by using their skills to work for these objectives.<sup>9</sup> We draw attention to the continuities between the historical and contemporary role of the cairns in upholding settler narratives of possession within the landscape. We interrogate the role of the cairns as part of the public history objectives of some in settler society that aimed to bolster settler narratives of pride in pioneers throughout the twentieth century. In the process, we emphasise the continuity of settler investment in celebrating explorers and pioneers, such as McMillan, and draw attention to the long-term counter campaign of Gunaikurnai to remove the cairns as another form of First Nations-directed public history.<sup>10</sup>

## Public history, memorialisation and white possession in Gippsland

Scholarship on the role of racial power in the making of settler colonial space orients our investigation of the historical and contemporary impacts of the cairns. Numerous scholars have examined the inscription of the landscape with names and monuments important to the settler narrative of exploration and settlement. Tony Birch argues that control of the landscape, including toponymy and monuments that privilege

8 McKinnon, 'Unfinished Business – Pursuits'.

9 Judd and Ellinghaus, 'F. W. Albrecht', 178.

10 See Calabro, 'Investing in Knowledge'.

explorers and pioneers, is a way of naturalising settler possession.<sup>11</sup> Tracey Banivanua Mar claims that landscapes can be read as settler scripts, 'physically inscribed with historical narratives that naturalize and legitimize settler sovereignty'.<sup>12</sup> We draw on these insights to examine how memorials to McMillan are not just records of history, or material artefacts from the past, but active scripts that continue to assert settler power, and that embed settler narratives in the landscape in ways that legitimise the dispossession of Aboriginal people and anchor local memories to white identity, belonging and pride.<sup>13</sup>

Scholarship on whiteness in Australia also underpins our analysis. Most monuments in Australia commemorate individual white male 'pioneers' and war heroes.<sup>14</sup> In this paper we chart a range of articulations of white possession that correspond with patterns identified by leading whiteness scholar, Goenpul academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson.<sup>15</sup> Whiteness, Moreton-Robinson argues, is expressed through adaptable 'possessive logics': a mode of rationalisation that continually works to affirm settler legitimacy and settler sovereignty through a 'process of perpetual dispossession'.<sup>16</sup> In historicising the memorialisation of McMillan, and by examining the arguments made by contemporary defenders of the cairns, we identify deployments of possessive logics that naturalise and justify the violence represented by 'monuments to colonialism'.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, settler connections to the cairns, and to the broader narrative of McMillan's colonial project, have been reasserted. In this paper, we explore historical moments when the cairns have been invoked to support settler political imperatives. In doing so, we aim to connect the failed proposal in 2020 with a longer trajectory of changing strategies and narratives of settler possession linked symbolically with the cairns.

The role of monuments as markers of settler colonial possession is fundamental to why they are, as Jane Lydon observes, 'the most contested and enduring forms of public history'.<sup>18</sup> The revision of Australian settler histories to acknowledge frontier violence has led to the amendment of some monuments and the creation of 'counter-monuments' to recognise Aboriginal peoples and histories.<sup>19</sup> Monuments have become

11 Birch, 'Nothing Has Changed', 107.

12 Banivanua Mar, 'Settler-Colonial Landscapes and Narratives of Possession', 173.

13 Birch, 'Nothing Has Changed', 107, 114; Banivanua Mar, 'Settler-Colonial Landscapes and Narratives of Possession', 173.

14 Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*; Pinto, 'Unsettling the Settler City'.

15 Moreton-Robinson argues that there was a shift from the early twentieth-century use of whiteness to mask 'ethnic heterogeneity of British immigrants' to the contemporary 'multicultural' context where 'the egalitarian myth that Australia is a "tolerant society" is deployed to mask the persistently privileged position of whiteness and its possession of the nation that simultaneously disavows Indigenous sovereignty'. Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, 24.

16 Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, xiii.

17 Frank and Ristic, 'Urban Fallism'.

18 Lydon, 'Driving By', 4.

19 See Bulbeck, 'Australian History Set in Concrete?'; Read, "'The Truth That Will Set Us All Free'"; Scates and Frances, 'Honouring the Aboriginal Dead'; Ashton and Hamilton, 'Places of the Heart'. For counter-monuments see Pinto, 'Unsettling the Settler City'; Land, *Forms of Monuments to Complex Histories*; Land, Balla and Golding, *BlaK Cook Book*.



intensely politically contested in the broader global context of movements for justice, with the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall and the BLM campaign beginning in the United States in 2013 and peaking again in 2020.<sup>20</sup> These movements have added a groundswell of support to protests in Australian major cities that targeted statues and memorials, yet there have been few monuments removed in Australia and, until recently, little scholarly recognition of the generative potential of removing monuments.<sup>21</sup>

Some settler historians and heritage scholars have engaged in the ‘Statue Wars’, yet this debate has focused less on the impact of memorials on First Nations communities, and more on questions of heritage and of making amendments to memorials.<sup>22</sup> This has included questions of ownership over the narratives told through, and upheld by, monuments. First Nations and other scholars have taken more critical perspectives that focus on the impacts of colonial memorials on First Nations peoples, including Nathan ‘Mudyi’ Sentance, Mariko Smith, Stephen Gapps and Tony Birch, all of whom advocate monument removal.<sup>23</sup> Birch’s argument that memorials to colonisers ‘inhibit the potential for truth-telling and the ability to produce the more honest and mature story that this country desperately needs’ echoes the words of Aunty Doris Paton about the impact of the cairns on her community.<sup>24</sup> As these scholars highlight, challenges to monuments in Australia are part of broader efforts of First Nations people to re-educate the settler population with the aim to address ignorance of colonisation and First Nations histories – an ignorance perpetuated by public histories.<sup>25</sup> As we argue in this article, the broader settler colonial project of public education has been

20 In 2013, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi launched the Black Lives Matter campaign in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his murderer, ‘A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement’. See Timmerman, ‘A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments’; Chaudhuri, ‘The Real Meaning of Rhodes Must Fall after the Nation’s Long Retreat from Multiculturalism and the Return of a Rose-Tinted Memory of Empire, It Is No Accident That the Rhodes Must Fall Movement Has Come to Britain’, *Guardian*, 16 March 2016; Rahul Rao, ‘On Statues’, *The Disorder of Things* (blog), 2 April 2016, [thedisorderofthings.com/2016/04/02/on-statues/](http://thedisorderofthings.com/2016/04/02/on-statues/); Shepherd, ‘After the #fall’. See Samayeen, Wong and McCarthy, ‘Space to Breathe’; Perhamus and Joldersma, ‘What Might Sustain the Activism of This Moment?’; Evans and Lees, ‘Introduction to the Special Issue on Reframing Confederate Monuments’.

21 Frank Bongiorno has argued that ‘the question of whether an inscription on a statue should be altered seems ultimately to depend on whose story is at stake’. Bongiorno, ‘The Statue Wars’, *Inside Story*, 4 September 2017, [insidestory.org.au/the-statue-wars/](http://insidestory.org.au/the-statue-wars/). Jenny Gregory stated that, as ‘an historian of Anglo-Celtic heritage’, she believes the removal of monuments would ‘distort history’ and that it is ‘more reasonable’ to leave them ‘with amendments’ or to remove them to parks or museums. Gregory, ‘Statue Wars’.

22 For example, Royal Historical Society of Victoria, ‘What to Do with Our Statues and Monuments’, 23 June 2020, accessed 8 July 2021, [www.historyvictoria.org.au/what-to-do-with-our-statues-and-monuments/](http://www.historyvictoria.org.au/what-to-do-with-our-statues-and-monuments/).

23 Lindsey and Smith, ‘Statue Wars’; Birch, ‘Do Monuments Hold Any Value?’; Gapps, ‘Keep Them, Counter Them or Tear Them Down?’; Sentance, ‘A Matter of History’.

24 Tony Birch, ‘Do Monuments Hold Any Value?’ *Indigenous X*, 14 January 2021, accessed 7 April 2021, [indigenoux.com.au/do-monuments-hold-any-value/](http://indigenoux.com.au/do-monuments-hold-any-value/).

25 This has taken numerous forms. Recently, Megan Davis has pointed out that the Uluru Statement from the Heart was directed to a settler audience first, and politicians second, Davis, ‘The Long Road to Uluru’. There are many historicised examples, including Maynard’s examination of the centrality of media attention and settler support to the Freedom Rides, the Gurundji Walk-Off and the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, in ‘Tracking Back’. The concept of ‘re-storying’ is also being applied in other fields, see, for example, Thalia Anthony, Andreea Lachsz and Nerita Waight, ‘The Role of “Re-storying” in Addressing Over-Incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’, *Conversation*, 17 August 2021, accessed 19 August 2021, [theconversation.com/the-role-of-re-storying-in-addressing-over-incarceration-of-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-163577](http://theconversation.com/the-role-of-re-storying-in-addressing-over-incarceration-of-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-163577).

central to attempts to legitimise settler possession.<sup>26</sup> Aunty Doris grew up knowing the truth that McMillan was a murderer, and, as she pointed out in her submission to the WSC, the cairns repress that truth by instead celebrating his 'explorations'. The responsibility and imperative for First Nations people to re-educate settlers about settler colonialism is an oft-noted exhausting form of intellectual labour, hence Aunty Doris's refusal to provide the WSC with a 'history lesson' regarding McMillan.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, with this paper, we are not contributing to debates about McMillan's actions, or the veracity of the colonial record.<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting, however, that there is limited archival material regarding McMillan's crimes. Aware of the hanging of white perpetrators of the Myall Creek massacre in 1838, McMillan's Highlander Brigade (which operated until 1844 without legal scrutiny), recorded little of their 'clashes' with locals.<sup>29</sup> The brevity of written evidence has been used to justify the ongoing debate, including questions about whether McMillan was the leader of the brigade, and in attempts to discredit other forms of evidence including survivors' oral histories and archaeological evidence.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, since the 1980s, through the work of Peter Gardner, Phillip Pepper and Don Watson, it has become more widely acknowledged that McMillan was responsible for the deaths of Aboriginal people.<sup>31</sup>

What has received less attention is how the ideological legacy of McMillan's memorialisation in the 1920s continues to influence the contemporary situation on Gunaikurnai Country. To address this, we build on scholarship that historicises memorialisation as part of the wider nationalist project in Australia by drawing links between the memorialisation of McMillan to the political landscape of Victoria at two key points: the 1920s and 1960s.<sup>32</sup> We examine how McMillan's actions have

26 Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández, 'Curriculum, Replacement, and Settler Futurity'; Seixas, 'National History and Beyond'; Carretero, 'Imagining the National Throughout School History Master Narratives'; Carretero, *Constructing Patriotism*; Keynes, 'History Education, Citizenship, and State Formation'; Mycock, 'After Empire'; Keynes and Marsden, 'Ontology, Sovereignty, Legitimacy'.

27 For example, see Luke Pearson, 'This Reconciliation Week, Take Some Time to Learn about Whiteness', *Indigenous X*, 29 May 2018, accessed 14 June 2021, [indigenoux.com.au/luke-pearson-this-reconciliation-week-take-some-time-to-learn-about-whiteness/](http://indigenoux.com.au/luke-pearson-this-reconciliation-week-take-some-time-to-learn-about-whiteness/); Kerry Klimm (@flashblak), 'Wake Me When Reconciliation Week Is Over', Twitter, 30 September 2020, accessed 14 June 2021, [twitter.com/flashblak](https://twitter.com/flashblak). Hudson and Woodcock's *Self-Determined First Nations Museums and Colonial Contestations* explores the complexity and care of this work through the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place in Bairnsdale.

28 For written accounts of Gunaikurnai dispossession see Pepper and de Araujo, *What Did Happen to the Aborigines of Victoria*; Gardner, *Through Foreign Eyes*; Gardner, *Our Founding Murdering Father*; Gardner, *Gippsland Massacres*; Watson, *Caledonia Australis*. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry on McMillan was changed in 2017 to include accounts of his violence, Cheryl Glowrey, 'McMillan, Angus (1810–1865)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, [adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcmillan-angus-2416/text34996](http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcmillan-angus-2416/text34996), published online 2017, accessed online 5 December 2022.

29 Gardner, 'The Bones of the Warrigal Creek Massacre'.

30 Debates involving local historians recommenced after the 2020 council vote. For example, Wayne Caldwell, 'The Warrigal Creek Massacre: True Story or Apocryphal?', *Quadrant*, 30 December 2020, accessed 20 June 2021, [quadrant.org.au/magazine/2020/12/the-warrigal-creek-massacre-true-story-or-apocryphal/](http://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2020/12/the-warrigal-creek-massacre-true-story-or-apocryphal/); Gardner, 'The Warrigal Creek Massacre – a Reply to Wayne Caldwell', self-published online 2020.

31 Pepper and de Araujo, *What Did Happen to the Aborigines of Victoria*; Gardner, *Through Foreign Eyes*; *Our Founding Murdering Father*; Gardner, *Gippsland Massacres*; Watson, *Caledonia Australis*.

32 Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*; Paterson, 'History in Stone'; Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*.

been both memorialised and inscribed into the landscape via public history practices during these key periods. We then turn to the 2020 debate over the WSC vote to remove the cairns and situate this within the continuity of the settler colonial project. Throughout both sections of this paper, we also draw attention to the community-led, grassroots rescripting of the McMillan narrative.

## The Victorian Historical Memorials Committee and public histories

The vast region spanning the south-east of Victoria, now called Gippsland, comprises the traditional lands of the Gunaikurnai who represent five language groups: the Brataulooong, Briakaulooong, Krautungaloong, Tatungaloong and Brabroloong.<sup>33</sup> The Gunaikurnai defended their Country against Angus McMillan when he first arrived. He responded with violence.<sup>34</sup> In 1843, in response to the killing of a fellow Scottish squatter, McMillan helped form the Highlander Brigade, which launched a series of reprisal attacks killing approximately 150 Gunaikurnai in what is known as the Warrigal Creek massacre.<sup>35</sup> Between 1840 and 1850, McMillan was further involved in attacks on Gunaikurnai people at Nuntin, Boney Point, Butchers Creek, Skull Creek, Maffra, Slaughterhouse Gully and Brodribb River.<sup>36</sup> Despite his crimes, McMillan remained prominent in the pastoralist society of Gippsland, where he died in 1865.

More than 60 years after McMillan's death, the Victorian Historical Memorials Committee launched a campaign to memorialise his 'exploration' of Gippsland. The campaign coincided with a tumultuous year in Victorian politics in which debates over memorialisation were a key issue. After coming to power in April 1924, George Michael Prendergast's short-lived Labor government sought to redirect public history narratives glorifying war that had been so important to the Nationalist government of Alexander Peacock. Prendergast's minister of public instruction decreed 'all articles adulatory of war and war heroes be expunged from Education Department literature, especially its weekly *School Paper*, and that, instead, school children be imbued with peace and internationalism'.<sup>37</sup> Backlash against this attempted redirection of public history narratives away from a militarised nationalism likely contributed to the quick fall of Prendergast's government in November that year by the combined efforts of

33 Ramahyuck District Aboriginal Corporation, 'Gunai/Kurnai People', 2017, accessed 11 August 2021, [www.ramahyuck.org/about/gunaikurnai-people/](http://www.ramahyuck.org/about/gunaikurnai-people/).

34 Gardner, *European Exploration and Occupation of the Victorian Alps*; Flynn, *Thicker than Water*, 22.

35 Ryan, et al., 'Colonial Frontier Massacre Groups', *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia, 1788–1930*, 2017–22, accessed 10 August 2021, [c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/groups.php](http://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/groups.php).

36 See Ryan et al., *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia, 1788–1930*.

37 Prendergast refused a £50,000 grant to the National War Memorial Committee for the building of the Shrine of Remembrance and an Anzac Day public holiday. Deery and Bongiorno, 'Two Anzac Controversies of the 1920s', 208–9.



the National and Country parties, who, after taking power, emphasised conservative projects to prompt public history that memorialised imperialism, nationalism, explorers and pioneers. One example is the series of cairns built marking out the 1824 route taken by explorers Hamilton Hume and William Hovell from Albury to Geelong that were the subject of a series of celebratory unveilings throughout December 1924.<sup>38</sup> The success of this venture inspired a group of administrators connected with the Victorian Historical Society to form the Victorian Historical Memorials Committee who turned their attention to erecting more cairns memorialising the routes of other 'explorers' in Victoria.<sup>39</sup>

The cairns served as a tangible demonstration of settler claims of ownership over the landscape. As Tom Griffiths has argued, the memorial craze, driven in part at least by the desire of white settlers to 'inscribe' possession onto the land, was also a form of symbolic dispossession of Aboriginal people.<sup>40</sup> At the same time that contests over white settler national identity and memory were playing out in the political sphere in the 1920s, the Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines implemented its plan to close down Aboriginal reserves across Victoria.<sup>41</sup> The Coranderrk Aboriginal Station was closed in 1924, leaving Lake Tyers Aboriginal Reserve, in the far east of Gippsland, the last piece of land designated for Aboriginal peoples' occupation in the state. It was to Gippsland that, in 1926, the Memorials Committee turned their focus, through a project to erect a series of cairns across the region to mark out the route purportedly taken by McMillan in the 1840s.<sup>42</sup> This choice to build memorials to McMillan, who had both 'settled' Gippsland and been responsible for the massacre of Gunaikurnai people (so close to Lake Tyers), seems to have served a dual purpose: to emphasise dispossession and to reinforce white possession.

After the Memorials Committee fixed on the idea of building memorials to McMillan, some members travelled to Gippsland to launch their campaign and encourage local settler community support.<sup>43</sup> Not everyone liked the idea. The city of Sale initially declined to be involved. There was also resistance in nearby Maffra, where Sir James Barrett, chairman of the committee, tried to convince the local settlers, the *Gippsland Times* reported, by exhorting 'Gippsland to rise to the occasion, and erect cairns along

38 Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*; 'Explorers' Commemorated: The Hume-Hovell Ceremony', *Age* (Melbourne), 16 August 1924, 17; 'Honouring Hume and Hovell', *Herald* (Melbourne), 5 December 1924, 6. On the closure of reserves in Victoria, see Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 208–9; Pepper and de Araujo, *What Did Happen to the Aborigines of Victoria*.

39 Deery and Bongiorno, 'Two Anzac Controversies of the 1920s', 208–9. The string of cairns was in keeping with the trend to move away from the single monuments that had been common prior to the First World War.

40 Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*, 148–53.

41 Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*, 151.

42 'Gippsland Explorers', *Gippsland Times*, 6 December 1926, 3. While not a concern of this paper, the explorations of Polish Count Strzelecki were also part of this project in Gippsland. Paterson argues that Strzelecki was harder for the committee to incorporate into their imperialistic narratives of white possession. Paterson, 'History in Stone', 82. The committee also decided to erect memorials to Charles Sturt and Thomas Mitchell at this time.

43 Paterson, 'History in Stone', 75.

the route taken by the explorers'.<sup>44</sup> Barrett's appeals failed, however, and no cairn was built at Maffra. Elsewhere, as Rula Paterson has shown, exactly how McMillan was to be remembered, and the meaning of the cairns, was also contested, with some towns modifying the memorials to more accurately reflect what the local settler community valued.<sup>45</sup> At Benambra, for example, the cairn was modified to include dedications to James McFarlane and John Prendergast; at Swift's Creek, the cairn was used to mark the place where a local man had been killed by bushrangers in the 1850s.<sup>46</sup> These variations show that, even at their inception, the purpose of the cairns was contested and malleable, and responsive to different local priorities.

Yet while there was some contestation over what and who the cairns should memorialise, many other settler communities in Gippsland enthusiastically took up the project.<sup>47</sup> The cairns were cheap, quick and easy to build, due in part to the fact that most were made of local stone. This choice of material was likely used to suggest antiquity, and to symbolically connect McMillan to the landscape.<sup>48</sup> While the contest over who should be memorialised depended on local context, it was also unclear where exactly to place the cairns, as the route supposedly taken by McMillan through Gippsland remained uncharted in 1926. The committee took this as an opportunity to record the path McMillan had taken. The Melbourne press reported that this meant 'the chronicling of much previously unrecorded history gathered from the fast-disappearing Gippsland pioneers'.<sup>49</sup> McMillan had died some 60 years earlier (and his explorations took place in the 1840s) and the 'pioneers' who not yet 'disappeared' would have been in their 80s in 1926. This recovery of McMillan's route from settler memory prompted some further public debate, including proposed toponymical changes like the suggestion that the Thompson River be renamed after McMillan.<sup>50</sup>

The monuments to McMillan, like those to Hume and Hovell, were part of broader political and educative goals. The committee saw the cairns as an opportunity to instruct and involve settler communities in their view of a grand patriotic narrative – to instil pride and a strong sense of both Australian nationalism and commitment

44 *Gippsland Times*, 6 December 1926, 3.

45 At Heyfield the township decided they would dedicate the cairn to Strzelecki, not McMillan. Paterson, 'History in Stone', 76–77.

46 Paterson, 'History in Stone', 76–77.

47 Griffith, *Hunters and Collectors*, 158.

48 Griffith, *Hunters and Collectors*, 158–59; Paterson, 'History in Stone', 67. As Andrea Lynn Smith and Randy John Nédhőwes have shown, using stone to build memorials to explorers in the United States during the same period similarly aimed to suggest a 'false sense of pre-ordination', 'Monuments, Legitimization Ceremonies', 343–44. Scholars examining role of politicians, local businessmen and civic leaders in creating national parks in the United States demonstrate the importance of these local influences. See, for example, Huntley, *The Making of Yosemite*.

49 *Bulletin*, 47, no. 2442, 2 December 1926, 46.

50 'State Teacher's Association', *Gippsland Times*, 17 February 1927, 5; The *Gippsland Times* recognised that this proposed change was controversial but supported the move regardless, stating that the 'importance of requiring to alter records should not be permitted to outweigh the necessity of placing geographically on record the daring exploits of a brave man'. 'Re-naming the Thomson River', *Gippsland Times*, 24 February 1927, 4.

to remaining on the land.<sup>51</sup> The memorialisation of 'explorers' (much like support for and memorialisation of war), was also pushed through Victorian state schools during this period.<sup>52</sup> Given that the director of education, Frank Tate, and his right-hand-man, Charles Long, were influential members of the Memorials Committee, it is hardly surprising that these aims were aligned.<sup>53</sup> Tate and Long used their positions to encourage the participation of teachers and schoolchildren to raise funds for and promote the cairns.<sup>54</sup> Tate was particularly interested in promoting a program of rural reform due to urban drift and the declining population of the area. He hoped a greater sense of pride would encourage young Gippslanders to remain on the land.<sup>55</sup> The involvement of the Victorian Tourism Board, and the promotion of Gippsland's industries and landscape during the unveiling of the cairns in 1927, suggest that there were other economic purposes too, an echo of the commercial interests that spurred McMillan's initial exploration in 1843.<sup>56</sup> In this way, the idea of the cairns was a means of anchoring the Gippsland settler population to place, an overt form of settlement and possession, by tying local mythology to the greater national story and purpose of race unity.

By the beginning of 1927, the cairns were completed and a procession comprising committee members travelled through Gippsland for a series of ceremonial unveilings.<sup>57</sup> Members of the committee addressed the crowds, as did Lord Somers, the governor of Victoria, who, the *Age* reported, declared '[h]e hoped they would keep Australia white, and not allow coloured races to take control'. At another ceremony, the *Age* reported Somers's comments that 'Victoria was greatly indebted to its pioneers for what they had done in opening up the country for settlement'.<sup>58</sup> The reports also referenced Somers on the educative role of the memorials in promoting awareness and pride in explorers, such as his suggestion that 'young Victorians, if they studied the history of their country, would get an inspiration to emulate the deeds of the pioneers'.<sup>59</sup>

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51 As historians of public history have noted, social psychology scholars have established the centrality of historical perception to the development of national identity. Carretero, 'Imagining the Nation Throughout School History Master Narratives', 103.

52 See Triolo, 'Doing All That Is Possible'.

53 Long had retired in 1925; Tate retired in 1928. The extent to which the Department of Education's *School Paper* was used as to convey nationalistic narratives, while at the same time marginalising Aboriginal people, history and culture, has been widely established by historians. See for example, Healy, 'Race, Citizenship and National Identity in *The School Paper*, 1946–1968'; Gibbs, 'Victorian School Books'.

54 Long cited in Griffith, *Hunters and Collectors*, 158–59.

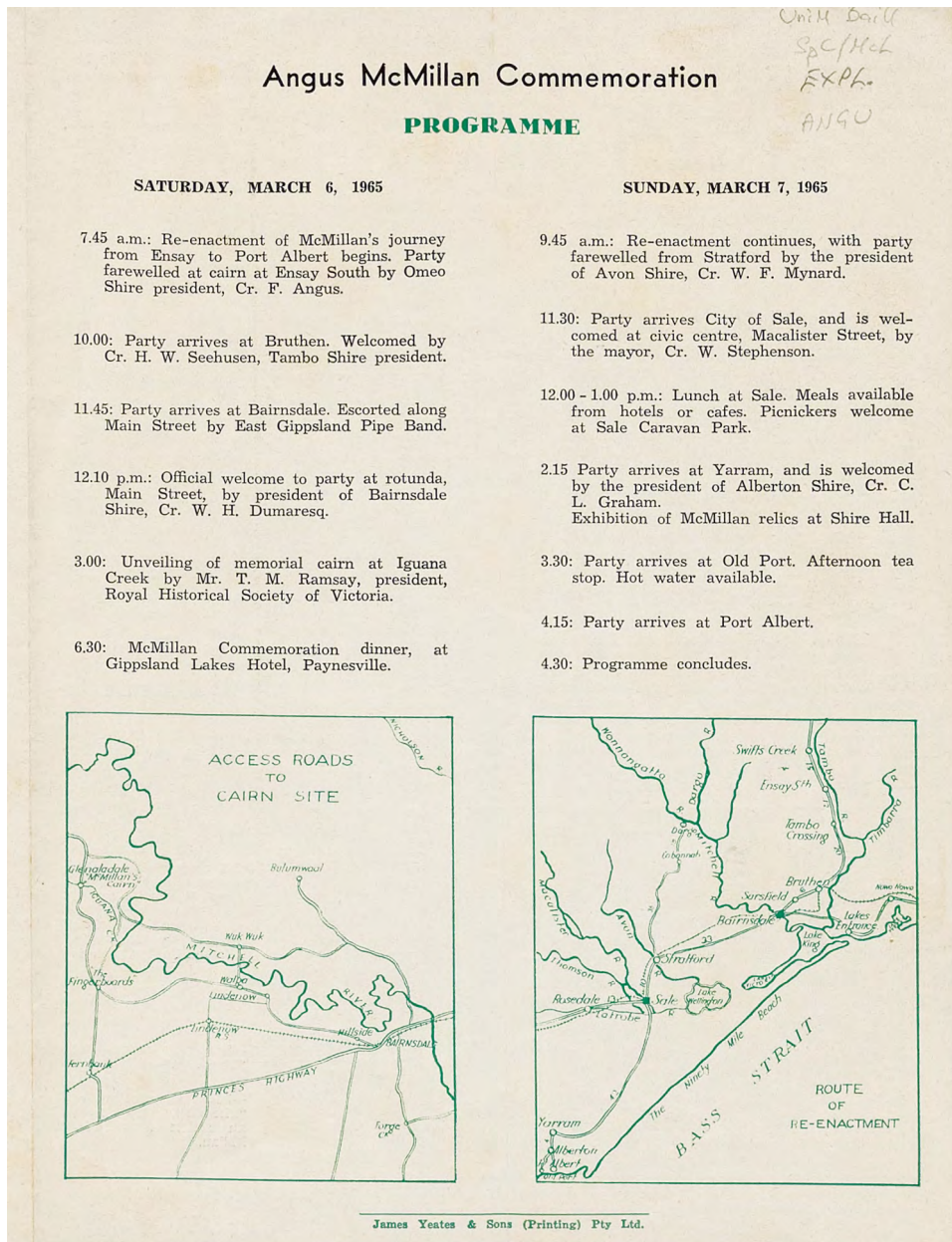
55 Paterson, 'History in Stone'.

56 Paterson, 'History in Stone', 72.

57 Griffith, *Hunters and Collectors*, 150–54.

58 'Governor in Gippsland', *Age* (Melbourne), 9 April 1927, 18.

59 'Governor in Gippsland', *Age*, 9 April 1927, 18.



**Figure 2: An extract from the 1965 promotional pamphlet produced to commemorate the centenary of McMillan's death, mapping the planned re-enactment tour.**

Source: Produced by the Bairnsdale, Omeo, Sale and Yarram historical societies, reproduced with permission of the East Gippsland Historical Society.

McMillan continued to be venerated in Gippsland through the mid-twentieth century. In 1948, his name was given to the federal electorate spanning the west and south of Gippsland.<sup>60</sup> In the 1960s, 40 years after the unveiling of the cairns, the memorialisation of McMillan continued to be enacted by the settler community. This included several events in 1965, the centenary year of McMillan's death. The Bairnsdale Historical Society held a re-enactment of McMillan's route from Ensay to Port Albert as part of their 'Angus McMillan Commemoration Programme', organised by the society at the behest of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria.<sup>61</sup> The program included the 'Angus McMillan Commemoration Dinner', attended by the president of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, who also unveiled a new cairn dedicated to McMillan at Iguana Creek, as well as a display of 'McMillan Relics' at the Yarram Shire Hall. This program was supported by the local historical societies of Yarram, Sale and Omeo, and sponsored by large industries with economic interests in Gippsland – the Australian Paper Manufacturers Limited and Esso Standard Oil Limited.<sup>62</sup> In May, some of the settler community in East Gippsland (including some participants in blackface) staged a re-enactment of McMillan's 'exploration', ending with a celebration in Orbost.<sup>63</sup> While these events commemorated McMillan's death, they also took place during a year in which organised Aboriginal political activity was at a peak, including the fierce contest over the future of the nearby Lake Tyers Aboriginal Reserve – the last Aboriginal reserve in the state – that played out between the Aboriginal community and the Victorian Government.<sup>64</sup>

The mid-century re-enactments – the act of walking across the land in performative claims of possession – reiterated the earlier tradition of 'pilgrimages' undertaken by schoolchildren to McMillan's grave in the 1920s.<sup>65</sup> Other forms of commemoration, and challenges to these narratives, came in published works. In 1973, local historian Kenneth Cox published *Angus McMillan: Pathfinder*. The preface emphasised the idea of personal historical responsibility, suggesting that readers should learn more about the 'pioneers in this country', echoing comments made by Somers in 1927.<sup>66</sup> Cox's account of McMillan's life is based on scant evidence, and includes flourishes

60 Australian Electoral Commission, 'Profile of the Electoral Division of McMillan (Vic)', updated 19 November 2019, accessed 5 August 2021, [www.aec.gov.au/profiles/vic/mcmillan.htm](http://www.aec.gov.au/profiles/vic/mcmillan.htm).

61 Bairnsdale Historical Society, *A Tribute to Angus McMillan, Discoverer of Gippsland, on the Centenary of His Death*.

62 Bairnsdale Historical Society, 'Angus McMillan Commemoration Dinner'. The involvement of Esso in the commemoration may have been linked to their economic interests in Gippsland during this time: they were undertaking exploratory gas drilling off the coast of Ninety Mile Beach in 1965, 'Second Esso Gas Strike Proves A Winner', *Canberra Times*, 13 July 1965, 16. A new government ministry, the Ministry of Fuel and Power, was established in part in response to the gas finds: 'New Ministry Prompted by Gas Strike', *Canberra Times*, 14 July 1965, 13; 'Victorian Parliament: Gas "as Valuable as Gold Finds"', *Canberra Times*, 15 September 1965, 11.

63 'McMillan's First Journey Exploring Gippsland', *Gippsland Times*, 13 May 1965, 1; 'Friday and McMillan', *Gippsland Times*, 17 May 1965, 1.

64 See Taffe, 'Fighting for Lake Tyers'.

65 Annual pilgrimages to McMillan's grave were held between the early 1920s and the 1940s, as reported in the local Gippsland press. See, for example, 'Annual Pilgrimage to Angus McMillan's Grave', *Gippsland Times*, 8 December 1930, 5; 'Pilgrimage to Angus McMillan's Grave: Tributes Paid', *Gippsland Times*, 18 April 1940, 3.

66 Cox, *Angus McMillan*. This preface was written by the past president of the Traralgon and District Historical Society, Dr McLean.



of creative non-fiction such as imagined dialogue. In 1988, when many Australians celebrated the bicentenary of the First Fleet's arrival, Peter Gardner published his deliberately provocatively titled text *Our Founding Murdering Father: Angus McMillan and the Kurnai Tribe of Gippsland, 1839–1865*. Written in part in response to Cox, Gardner's detailing of McMillan's role in the massacres was a controversial intervention in what was otherwise mostly celebratory memorialisation of McMillan among the settler community. However, changes around this time saw greater acknowledgement of McMillan's violence. In 1988, another publication based on a re-enactment, *Across the Alps: Retracing Angus McMillan's 1864 Alpine Expedition*, included a more measured assessment of McMillan's character, describing him as the 'alleged discoverer of Gippsland', with a 'controversial career' and directly referencing his role as a 'murderer of aborigines [*sic*]'.<sup>67</sup>

The reinscription of McMillan's explorations – via publications, public re-enactments and debates throughout the twentieth century – is a form of reasserting but also revising the colonial metanarrative of exploration and white possession to meet the contemporary objectives and pressures of the moment. Writing of the so-called history wars of the 2000s, Banivanua Mar argued that the public sentiment driving the debate was the result of a 'cognitive environment where settler historical consciousness remain[s] firmly tethered to colonial metanarratives' underpinned, in part, by physical landscapes 'inscribed with the names, practices and material things of a settler-colonial past that actively suppresses Aboriginal inscriptions'.<sup>68</sup> The visibility and materiality of the cairns to McMillan are central to the celebratory ways he has been remembered in Gippsland through the twentieth century, and even in more recent years as awareness of his crimes has become more widespread and acknowledged.<sup>69</sup> They are key markers of the landscape and of the 'cognitive environment' of settler consciousness, simultaneously eliding First Nations sovereignty and justifying white possession through settler violence.

Another way that the settler 'cognitive environment' has been shaped around colonial narratives is through the school curriculum, a form of public history, along with memorials. For Aboriginal children in Gippsland (and around Australia) going to school has often meant recognising that the version of history in the curriculum was very different to that they had learned from their families.<sup>70</sup> Aunt Doris learned about McMillan from her family. She recalls that:

67 Christie, *Across the Alps*.

68 Banivanua Mar, 'Settler-Colonial Landscapes', 180.

69 A walking club was established in 1965 soon after the creation of 'McMillan's Walking Track', a 220 km track from Omeo to Wood's Point. Ben Cruachan Walking Club, 'McMillans Walking Track', accessed 17 July 2021, [bencruachanwalkingclub.com/mcmillan-s-track.html](http://bencruachanwalkingclub.com/mcmillan-s-track.html); McMillan's original homestead, Bushy Park, including some of his possessions, is now on display at the Old Gippsland Heritage Park in Moe: Victorian Collections, 'Building – Bushy Park, late 1840s', accessed 17 July 2021. [victoriancollections.net.au/items/506117c82162ef0848c5d3cc](http://victoriancollections.net.au/items/506117c82162ef0848c5d3cc).

70 There are numerous references to Angus McMillan, and many other men like him, in the Victorian Education Department's *School Paper*, a monthly publication that all students were required to purchase.

my father told us of the history of our people and the massacres that happened on our country. I always got into trouble for telling what my father told us about our history. Even then I knew what they were teaching us about McMillan was not true.

As an adult, Aunty Doris trained as a teacher following in the footsteps of her great grandparents who taught on missions and reserves at Lake Tyers, Ramahyuck and Lake Condah in the Western District.<sup>71</sup> Aunty Doris then became involved in curriculum reform at a local level and went on to work in education reform at a state and national level:

My father also told us another side to history, which I realised, wasn't what schools were teaching in the curriculum ... Re-shaping the curriculum became the opportunity to tell another story. I realised teachers and those before them taught a colonised view of history ... their perspectives on curriculum were informed by historians, anthropologists and archaeologists views of the time.

Aunty Doris's father, respected Gunaikurnai Elder Uncle Albert Mullett, also recognised the repressive weight of public histories, including a school curriculum and memorialisation that positioned men like McMillan as heroic figures. Uncle Albert acted on the need to counter these narratives, not only for Aboriginal children but also for the children of settlers, and in 1980, he gave his attention to the school curriculum, teaching Aboriginal culture at the Bairnsdale State School, later becoming a spokesperson for the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc.<sup>72</sup> Yet while these changes being pushed through by Gunaikurnai people took place at a state government level, changes on a local government level have been slower to occur. The WSC vote against the removal of the McMillan cairns demonstrates the role of local government in protecting and perpetuating narratives that place value in dispossession, and not in sovereignty.

## ‘Enough is enough’ in the Wellington Shire

On 16 June 2020, the vote to remove two of the 18 McMillan cairns was held at the WSC chambers in the regional city of Sale. Introducing the motion, Councillor Carolyn Crossley reminded the audience that, in 2018, historical evidence and community input had convinced the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) to remove McMillan's name from the federal electorate, so named since 1948. Crossley pointed out that the vote on the cairns was ‘not a debate about the research into the history, it is one about reconciliation’.<sup>73</sup> In pointing towards a generative resolution, Crossley attempted to refocus discussion away from historical detail towards ethics,

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71 Mullett with Atkinson, ‘Living as a Koori in Victoria’.

72 Mullett with Atkinson, ‘Living as a Koori in Victoria’; ‘Uncle Albert Mullett’, Deadly Story, accessed 2 July 2021, [web.archive.org/web/20230202074431/https://deadlystory.com/page/aboriginal-country-map/Aboriginal\\_Country\\_Completed/gunaikurnai/Elders\\_Role\\_Models/Albert-Mullett](https://web.archive.org/web/20230202074431/https://deadlystory.com/page/aboriginal-country-map/Aboriginal_Country_Completed/gunaikurnai/Elders_Role_Models/Albert-Mullett).

73 WSC Minutes 16 June 2020.

morality and responsibility. While reconciliation discourses may be a driver for some revisions of memorials in Australia, considering the low profile of the reconciliation movement within the Gippsland area, this campaign to remove the cairns could be more accurately seen as a reckoning with the past.<sup>74</sup>

Gunaikurnai community organisations, Elders and community leaders such as Aunty Doris had been driving the push for historical reckoning in the WSC well before the 2020 vote. For example, the successful two-year campaign for the VEC to remove McMillan's name from the federal electorate was led by the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC).<sup>75</sup> While the removal of McMillan's name was important, Aunty Doris felt the decision to rename the electorate after Sir John Monash, instead of a Gunaikurnai name, was another slap down for the community. The community has also been involved in raising awareness of frontier violence.<sup>76</sup> In 2018, the East Gippsland Aboriginal Corporation (GEGAC) and GLaWAC were involved in the production of *The Warrigal Creek Massacre* documentary.<sup>77</sup> GLaWAC also extended invitations to WSC councillors for cultural training, which has since been made mandatory by the shire.<sup>78</sup> The cumulative effect of these efforts has resulted in McMillan's name being removed from schools, honour boards, TAFE campuses and sports teams across Gippsland.<sup>79</sup> The cairns, however, remain fixed as physical markers on the landscape, and in settler colonial consciousness.<sup>80</sup>

In 2020, community engagement with the proposed removal of the cairns represented what historian Alexandra Dellios terms a 'maturing public rhetoric' in the region around heritage and history.<sup>81</sup> Yet it also reveals a persistent attachment to the idea that the cairns represent McMillan's legacy. Prior to the vote, the WSC received 239 submissions via emails, phone calls and online forms, leading one councillor to claim it was the largest community response to an issue for some time.<sup>82</sup> Submissions fell into three main categories: 55 per cent supported the motion for removal, 23 per cent supported the retention of the cairns modified to include an acknowledgement

74 See Gunstone, 'Indigenous Rights and the 1991–2000 Australian Reconciliation Process'; Ward, 'Reconciling His History'; Darian-Smith and Edmonds, *Conciliation on Colonial Frontiers*; Edmonds, "'Walking Together" for Reconciliation'. For a survey of attitudes to reconciliation in the neighbouring shire to the WSC, see Gunstone, 'Attitudes towards Reconciliation in East Gippsland, Victoria'. In 2022, the WSC does not currently have a Reconciliation Action Plan and has not made a commitment to reconciliation.

75 'AEC Asked to Consider McMillan Name Change to Remove Association with Aboriginal Massacres', ABC Gippsland, 24 November 2017, accessed 15 July 2021, [www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-24/aec-consider-mcmillan-name-change/9183272](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-24/aec-consider-mcmillan-name-change/9183272); Cal Flynn's *Thicker than Water*, examining her family connection to McMillan, was published in 2016 and drew interest and criticism from the settler community.

76 This has included a range of actions undertaken by community networks based on solidarity, and "collaboration" against colonial contestation'. Hudson and Woodcock, *Self-Determined First Nations Museums and Colonial Contestation*, 86.

77 Dodd and Gye, *The Warrigal Creek Massacre*; see 'The Warrigal Creek Massacre', accessed 15 July 2021, [web.archive.org/web/20201201214310/http://www.thewarrigalcreekmassacre.film/screenings/](http://web.archive.org/web/20201201214310/http://www.thewarrigalcreekmassacre.film/screenings/).

78 Dodd and Gye, *The Warrigal Creek Massacre*; Darren McCubbin, personal communication, 10 August 2020.

79 McCubbin, WSC Minutes 16 June 2020.

80 Lydon, 'Driving By'.

81 Dellios, *Heritage Making and Migrant Subjects in the Deindustrialising Region of the Latrobe Valley*, 37.

82 WSC Minutes 16 June 2020.

of 'true history' and 17 per cent opposed the removal or alteration of the cairns.<sup>83</sup> As Mayor Alan Hall pointed out, 78 per cent of respondents supported either the removal or addition of text from the Gunaikurnai perspective, a message that Hall interpreted as 'one way or another, enough is enough'.<sup>84</sup>

The WSC also heard spoken testimony prior to the vote. This included a statement on behalf of Gunaikurnai by Grattan Mullett, general manager of culture at GLaWAC. Mullett told the WSC that 'the cairns represent a celebration of history where colonists arrived on Gunaikurnai land and committed forms of genocide'.<sup>85</sup> He emphasised the imperative for consultation and change, making clear GLaWAC's good faith intentions to work with the WSC:

The symbolism of these cairns to the First People is significant. It is an issue that has been clearly on the community agenda for quite a while. We are happy to discuss the best way forward with the shire and Government to ensure a more appropriate recognition of Gippsland history including the non-Aboriginal history. We do not propose to pull all of the cairns down, but significant and obvious actions, including pulling down or re-interpreting must be agreed between us.<sup>86</sup>

Many Gunaikurnai people also expressed their support of the motion. Alice Pepper, Gunai community member, collected and submitted over 30 letters calling for the cairns to be removed.<sup>87</sup> Gunaikurnai man and manager of the Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place, Rob Hudson, argued that the cairns' removal would not 'get rid of history but make us a stronger people'.<sup>88</sup> Gunaikurnai community member Ruth Walker told the council 'for us to move forward we need to address our past, and that's not just ours it's yours ... it is very painful to have these monuments up'.<sup>89</sup> While these comments make clear the harm caused by the cairns, they also serve as an invitation to the settler community and the WSC to work collaboratively to create a shared narrative about the past.

Submissions from individuals opposing the motion to remove the cairns show how some settlers see their connection to McMillan, and how this is underpinned by possessive logics. In some submissions, settlers expressly identified themselves as 'rate payers' and, therefore, property owners. Others claimed the motion was a 'rushed' decision to 'erase local history'; some argued for the need to recognise 'both

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83 The remaining 5 per cent of submissions were classified as 'other'. Wellington Shire Council (WSC) Meeting Video Recording, YouTube, 16 June 2020.

84 The WSC heard also heard testimony from 10 constituents, eight of whom spoke in support of the removal motion. WSC Minutes 16 June 2020.

85 WSC Minutes 16 June 2020.

86 Grattan Mullett, 'GLaWAC Media Statement', 27 August 2020. This statement is a slightly modified version of that spoken at the WSC meeting on 16 June 2020, and is reproduced here with permission from Roger Fenwick, CEO of GLaWAC.

87 WSC Meeting Video Recording 16 June 2020.

88 WSC Meeting Video Recording 16 June 2020.

89 WSC Meeting Video Recording 16 June 2020.

sides'; others opposed the erasure of 'our heritage'.<sup>90</sup> Some submissions referred to McMillan's 'achievements' in 'opening up' the Gippsland area, echoing language used by the Memorials Committee in the 1920s.<sup>91</sup> Pauline Hitchins, the chair of the Wellington Shire History Network told the WSC: 'It is not only a case of Black Lives Matter but that all lives matter and so do their stories.' The removal of the cairns, she said, would deny 'today's truth that we are a modern multicultural society'. Hitchins's comments are an example of what Moreton-Robinson calls the 'race-blind and power-evasive discourse' of multiculturalism that masks white supremacy with the language of inclusion.<sup>92</sup> These submissions also illustrate a shift from earlier celebratory assertions of settler connection to McMillan and to claims of belonging to explorers like McMillan. This demonstrates both the centrality of the cairns to local settler memory as well as their potential to be used in ways responsive to needs of the settler community in the contemporary era of truth-telling.

Councillors also spoke on this issue. Carmen Ripper claimed she was deeply conflicted about the issue but opposed the motion on the grounds of bad timing, suggesting that COVID-19 restrictions might have discouraged people from submitting handwritten letters on the proposal.<sup>93</sup> Like Hitchins, she used the term 'All lives matter' while debating the proposal.<sup>94</sup> Ian Bye expressed his opposition to the removal of what he called 'nearly 100-year-old artefacts that are part of history without better explanation from people I call experts'. He continued:

Whether it is the people from the Gunaikurnai or whether it's actually experts like Peter Synan or other historians who've done years of work on what McMillan actually did portrayed and what he actually did.<sup>95</sup>

Bye's gesturing towards the authority of Gunaikurnai here is undermined by his qualification that 'experts' are white male historians. The positioning of historians as experts has been questioned by numerous scholars, including Birch, who has questioned the authority of historians to make decisions about how events are remembered when there are also moral, ethical and legal considerations.<sup>96</sup> As well as the expertise of Gunaikurnai, the WSC might reference examples of communities elsewhere engaged in renegotiating and rescripting forms of memorialisation.<sup>97</sup>

90 WSC Minutes 16 June 2020; WSC Meeting Video Recording 16 June 2020.

91 WSC Meeting Video Recording 16 June 2020.

92 WSC Meeting Video Recording 16 June 2020; Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, 96.

93 Councillor Carmen Ripper, WSC Meeting Video Recording 16 June 2020. See Yancy and Butler, 'What's Wrong with "All Lives Matter"?'; see also Jedda Costa, 'Wellington Shire Council Votes to Keep Angus McMillan Monuments, Despite Explorer's Link to Murders', ABC Gippsland, 17 June 2020, accessed 24 July 2021, [www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-17/wellington-council-votes-down-mcmillan-cairn-removal/12361546](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-17/wellington-council-votes-down-mcmillan-cairn-removal/12361546).

94 WSC Meeting Video Recording 16 June 2020.

95 Councillor Bye, WSC Meeting Video Recording 16 June 2020 (emphasis added).

96 Birch, "'The Invisible Fire'". See also Judd and Ellinghaus, 'F. W. Albrecht'.

97 As Charlotte Ward has shown, in Cooktown, the settler communities' desire to 'complete the story based on fact' has been addressed through engagement with the local Indigenous community that 'allowed space for different perspectives and epistemologies'. Ward, 'Reconciling His History', 13.



While the WSC voted against the proposal to removal the cairns, there was (and continues to be) a rescripting of the narratives of the cairns at a grassroots level. The submissions supporting the removal motion are part of this. Contests over the cairns contribute in other ways too. Ahead of the vote, as the BLM movement played out around the globe and red paint symbolising bloodshed was splashed across statues of explorers and colonisers around Australia, a banner reading 'Black Lives Matter' was hung over the cairn at Sale.<sup>98</sup> The following week, the cairn at Stratford was draped in an Aboriginal flag, emblazoned with the words 'Always Was, Always Will Be'.<sup>99</sup> The cairn at Rosedale was covered with a banner reading '432 Black Deaths in Custody with No Convictions: I Can't Breathe', the latter phrase referencing the words of both George Floyd and Dunghutti man David Dungay Junior who was killed in police custody in Australia in 2015. By rescripting the McMillan cairns in this way, these banners served to collapse the temporal distance between McMillan's role as a murderer in the 1840s and the ongoing violence of settler colonialism. These reinscriptions also underscore the urgency of removing monuments that valorise men known to have committed massacres of Aboriginal people. These statements remind us, as Wiradjuri man and decolonising archivist Nathan 'Mudyi' Sentance has pointed out, that the goal of removing colonial monuments is to create a 'more just society'.<sup>100</sup>

## Conclusion

As Gunaikurnai community members have pointed out, the removal of two of the McMillan cairns will not erase McMillan from public memory. Instead, their removal would, in Aunty Doris's words, provide 'an opportunity to tell the truth about the impact of Gippsland's history for our Gunaikurnai people', and to create space for new understandings and other histories that more accurately reflect the community. For Aunty Doris and her family, fostering greater awareness of the past is part of a broader history of resistance and negotiation by Aboriginal people in Gippsland. Aunty Doris sees the potential for the recently appointed Yoorrook Justice Commission to be a catalyst to provoke deep thinking within the local council and acknowledgement – real acknowledgement – of the role of settler ancestors in the violent history of the region.<sup>101</sup> This process of truth-telling, Aunty Doris suggests, has the potential to again shine light on the WSC's refusal to remove the cairns from Country.

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98 Lindsey and Smith, 'Setting the Scene', 3; Costa, 'Wellington Shire Council Votes to Keep Angus McMillan Monuments'.

99 Aunty Doris Paton, Jessica Horton and Beth Marsden, 'Telling the Truth about Gippsland's History', accessed 28 May 2021, [overland.org.au/2020/10/telling-the-truth-about-gippslands-history/](https://overland.org.au/2020/10/telling-the-truth-about-gippslands-history/).

100 Sentance, "A Matter of History", 4.

101 Victorian Government, 'Truth and Justice in Victoria', 7 April 2022, accessed 26 May 2022, [www.aboriginal.victoria.vic.gov.au/truth-and-justice](https://www.aboriginal.victoria.vic.gov.au/truth-and-justice). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada has applied public history practices in re-storying settler historical narratives, see Corntassel, Cha-win-is and T'lakwadzi, 'Indigenous Storytelling, Truth-Telling, and Community Approaches to Reconciliation'.

The failed motion to remove two cairns dedicated to Angus McMillan shows that different historical narratives are used to serve conflicting priorities held within the Wellington Shire community. As we have shown, in the 1920s different settler communities imbued the cairns with localised meanings that may have been divergent from the agenda of the Memorials Committee. Submissions to the WSC ahead of the vote show some local settlers may continue to see cairns in their own personal ways. Yet what the submissions also reveal is that settler pride in exploration and colonisation, and the desire to maintain memorialisation of a known murderer, remains strong. That many in the settler community feel so keenly that these cairns, built in 1926 and not yet 100 years old, should remain permanent fixtures in the landscape exposes the tenuousness of settler belonging that, as Moreton-Robinson suggests, is ‘unsettled’ by the truths of colonial history.<sup>102</sup> Meanwhile, as we have shown here, contests over the narrative of the McMillan cairns are underway. Taken together, testimonies given to the WSC, letters and petitions, the hanging of Aboriginal flags and graffiti on the cairns, and the public education efforts of Gunaikurnai people constitute ongoing counter-narratives that continue the efforts of those before them, like Uncle Albert Mullett, to challenge metanarratives of colonisation. To conclude we return to the words at the beginning of this article. While some community members of the Wellington Shire continue to express their ownership of the cairns, Aunty Doris sees the irony in this, reflected in the words of her son, Steaphan Paton, featured in his 2014 multimedia art installation ‘Wallung Githa’:

Wallung Githa Unsettled – Nindidana Wallung – our stones. Thindu wurk-wurk githa – This land is mine. Thindu wallung githa – These rocks are mine.<sup>103</sup>

These words move beyond memorialisation and contests over cairns. This declaration of sovereignty of Gunaikurnai Country, and of the stones used to build memorials to McMillan in 1926, lay bare the folly of attempts to make settler colonial spaces legitimate through such methods.

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<sup>102</sup> Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, 4–17.

<sup>103</sup> Paton, ‘Wallung Githa Unsettled’.

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