



# SYMBOLS OF INJUSTICE

SUSAN HEALY explains why we need to have conversations about place names and statues which are symbols of the colonisation of Aotearoa.

I spent a few days in Dublin in 2017. It was a visit I had been looking forward to as having gone through Catholic schools in the 1950s and 60s, I had imbibed

a love of St Patrick and Ireland. This affection was strengthened by knowing that my father was born in Finglas, a suburb called the “dead centre of Dublin” because of the

large cemetery there.

The time in Dublin did not disappoint. But there was one shock: finding that both its cathedrals were Anglican. Here I was in “Catholic Ireland” only to find that in its major city the Catholic community did not have its own cathedral. To me, this spoke powerfully of the long shadow of colonisation and its ongoing impacts in a country. Although Ireland has enjoyed close on a century of independence and has plenty of statues to commemorate its heroes of liberation, its cathedrals are stark reminders of the centuries of religious suppression and seizure of Church properties by the British colonisers.

## We Need Brave Conversations

The events over the past months brought this experience to mind. In our country, there is growing debate about the appropriateness of some statues in our public spaces as well as certain place names. Yet, moves that challenge our colonial identities can generate a violent reaction.

Hamilton Mayor Paula Southgate said she “received more abuse in recent days than in my 20 years of politics” – some of it “vitriolic”. This followed her decision to have the statue of Captain John Fane Charles Hamilton removed from the city’s Civic Square. While she made this decision for safety reasons, she recognised the statue had long been an affront to the Waikato-Tainui iwi. Captain Hamilton led colonial forces in a war that led to the death of many of their people and the loss of vast swathes of their land. Interestingly, there are older Pākehā people who affectionately know the city by its Māori name, Kirikiriroa.

On reflection, Mayor Southgate offered some sage advice in a radio interview: that the city and nation as a whole need to have brave conversations about this topic because it cannot be ignored. She elucidated: “This issue is not going away... because something reminds iwi that the hurt still exists. So we must face this conversation, we can’t ignore it. We have to deal with it. I think the only way to go forward is to go forward together but that

takes some time to lift the levels of acceptance and understanding.”

## Learning about Colonisation

The Race Relations Commissioner Meng Foon has also stressed the importance of dialogue when it comes to statues and place names linked to colonisation.

As Mayor of Gisborne, he supported discussions with iwi that led to the establishment of a co-managed walkway which tells the stories of Māori and Europeans, and the erection on the Kaiti headland of a striking sculpture of Te Maro by local artist Nick Tupara. Te Maro, a leading rangatira, was one of a number of local Māori who were unjustifiably killed by some of Captain Cook's crew. The presence of Cook's statue on the foreshore is still a matter of controversy.

Discussion and negotiation with local hapū and iwi are vital for resolving these tensions and, most importantly, lie at the heart of addressing the fundamental injustice in the colonising process. Cook's men misjudged a situation because they did not think to get advice from local experts. In this they were in sync with a broader colonising culture which put little store on the knowledge, mana and rights of indigenous peoples.

## Damage Done by Imposing New Names

This disregard is exemplified in the way the British colonisers imposed their names on Māori land. Nuki Aldridge, Ngāpuhi kaumātua, alerted me to the harm stemming from this superimposition. When testifying to the Waitangi Tribunal in 2010 about pre-1840 acts of violence to his people, he noted the renaming of land as the first violence.

Often the renaming was based in ignorance as when Cook gave the name Poverty Bay to a large, rich bay on the East Coast, quite simply because he had been unable to obtain food there. Cook reached this conclusion, said Aldridge, without making contact with the people who actually lived at the bay. “By what right did Cook ignore the original names and overlay them with his

own?” asked Aldridge. “And by what right did those who followed him make Cook's names the official ones?” “This,” said Aldridge, “was the beginning of the process of separating us from our whenua.”

That poignant phrase — “separating us from our whenua” — refers not only to the huge physical loss of land but also to the breaking of whole sets of relationships that bind communities to their lands and lands to their communities. In these relationships, names are vital.

**AS SOMEONE RAISED IN AUCKLAND, IT HAS PUZZLED ME THAT WE WERE TOLD NOTHING ABOUT AUCKLAND AND HIS CAREER. IT SUGGESTS THAT COLONISATION IN OUR COUNTRY HAS INVOLVED THE SUPPRESSION OF A GREAT DEAL OF HISTORY, BOTH MAORI AND SETTLER.**

The Te Roroa people, in giving evidence to the Waitangi Tribunal, revealed how their place names and the mapping information contained in the names are conveyed through pepeha (tribal sayings), whaikōrero (oratory), whakataukī (proverbs), waiata (songs) and traditional stories. And this is true for hapū and iwi throughout the country.

## Place Names Carry Vital Relationships

Every corner of the land has a story, a song or a saying connected with it. Thus, place names carry vital connections into a hapū's history, literature, relationships and identity, as well as acknowledging special characteristics of the land itself.

The connections are all diminished when colonial names are planted on top of the indigenous ones and then officially endorsed as the names by which these places are to be recognised.

## Replacement Names Not Connected to Place

Another facet of this situation is the fact that many of our towns are named for people who have a tenuous link, if any at all, with the places bearing their names. And some of these people have shameful histories as colonisers. Simon Wilson pointed to, among others, (Thomas) Picton who was known as “the Tyrant of Trinidad,” (Warren) Hastings “another scoundrel of the empire”, Clive of India who committed many atrocities while accumulating a large personal fortune, and (Lord) Auckland who sent “tens of thousands of people to their deaths in Afghanistan”. As someone raised in Auckland, it has puzzled me that we were told nothing about Auckland and his career. It suggests that colonisation in our country has involved the suppression of a great deal of history, both Māori and Settler.

## Getting Involved with These Issues

In face of these issues, what might acting justly ask of us as individuals, schools, churches, organisations?

We can ask what we know about the mana whenua of our area, that is, the hapū and iwi with long-established relationships into the land on which we stand. Putting “mana whenua” and the name of our particular area into an internet search can be a start.

We can ask what our schools, churches or organisations are doing to strengthen relationships with the mana whenua or local marae.

And we can begin conversations with our families, friends and colleagues about the symbols and effects of colonisation. We can discuss how our communities might establish respectful and mutually beneficial relationships with the mana whenua and the land itself? 🗣️

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