

Statue of Robert Towns



Australia



Statue of Robert Towns Townsville, Australia

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Abstract

This case study investigates a statue of Robert Towns in Townsville, Australia, the installment of which was announced by Townsville Council in 2004. Concerns were raised over Towns' involvement in 'Blackbirding'—the kidnapping of Pacific Islander labourers to work in Queensland's agricultural industries as well as his associations with a legal, though exploitative labour trade. In solidarity with the global Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, political activists link contemporary injustices to Australia's history of colonisation and exploitation of indigenous and other non-white minority groups. In protest, the hands of Towns' statue were painted red. This act comes amid broader calls for the removal or re-curation of monuments and memorials dedicated to colonial era figures and those associated with other controversial elements of the nation's history. This case study pays particular attention to responses to such calls in Townsville.

Introduction

On the morning of 22 June 2020, the people of Townsville in Queensland, Australia woke to find a statue in the Central Business District (CBD) of the city's founder Robert Towns vandalised.¹ Towns' hands had been painted blood red. This act of vandalism comes amidst more general calls for Australia to reckon with its colonial past. Statues of other colonial era figures such as Captain James Cook, the first European mariner to reach Australia's eastern coast, and Captain James Stirling, the first Governor of Western Australia, were vandalised in June 2020.² Following the police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed African-American, in Minneapolis in late May, tens of thousands of Australians joined in protests organized in solidarity with the global Black Lives Matter movement.³ Organisers took the opportunity to remind participants of Australia's mistreatment of indigenous peoples and other ethnic minority groups, drawing attention to high rates of police brutality, deaths in custody and mass incarceration. Political activists link contemporary injustices to Australia's history of colonisation and exploitation of indigenous and other non-white minority groups. As in other high-profile international cases such as those regarding the statues of Cecil Rhodes in Oxford, England and Confederate figures in the USA, protestors in Australia have called for the removal or re-curation of monuments and memorials dedicated to colonial era figures and those associated with other controversial elements of the nation's history.

This study will review the historical background surrounding Townsville's statue of Robert Towns, consider the history of contestation that has attended to the object, and examine the approach taken by decision makers to the commissioning of the issue and addressing of public concerns associated with it.

Background

Robert Towns and Townsville

Born in Northumberland, England in 1794, the mariner Robert Towns saw significant economic opportunities in Britain's Australian colonies which he had visited as a trader from the late 1820s onwards.⁴ Settling in Sydney in the 1840s, Towns would become a successful merchant and ship-

¹ Sofie Wainwright and Chloe Chomicki, 'Townsville Statue of Robert Towns Vandalised with Red Paint', *ABC North Queensland*, June 22, 2020.

² Kate Hedley and Marta Pascual Juanola, 'Perth's Captain James Stirling Statue Vandalised, One in Custody', *WA Today*, June 12, 2020.

³ Guardian, 'Australia Protests: Thousands Take Part in Black Lives Matter and Pro-Refugee Events Amid Covid-19', *The Guardian Australia*, June 13, 2020.

⁴ Dorothy Shineberg, 'Towns, Robert (1794-1873)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol. 6, 1851-1890* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1976).

owner, benefiting from the expansion of colonial trade in sandalwood, beche-de-mer, and the pelagic whaling industry. By the late 1850s, Towns had moved into an incipient sector of economic activity- the cultivation of cotton in the new colony of Queensland.

Towns argued that making the cotton industry viable in Queensland would require the establishment of a port in the state's North, proximate to centres of agricultural activity. A suitable site was found at Cleveland Bay in October 1865. In Towns' honour, the new port would come to be known as Townsville.⁵

The Pacific Island Labour Trade and 'Blackbirding'

The controversy surrounding Towns stems from his involvement in the 'Blackbirding' trade of the 19th century. From 1863 onwards, around 60,000 men, women and children from the islands of the South West Pacific labored for bonded periods of at least three years in tropical agricultural industries in the colony of Queensland.⁶ White European labour proved scarce and expensive in the Australian colonies in the mid-19th century, following the end of convict transportation and the gold rushes of the 1850s and 1860s, which drew many away from agriculture and industry in search of fortunes.⁷ In search of cheap labour and swayed by 'scientific' racial theory on the ineffectiveness of white labour in the tropics, many businessmen, particularly in the agricultural sector, turned to the importation of workers from the Pacific Islands.⁸ Robert Towns' name is indelibly linked to this trade.

From the early 1850s, Towns had employed Pacific Island labourers to work on sandalwood and whaling vessels and enthusiastically lobbied both the NSW and Queensland governments to lift restrictions on the use of Pacific Islander labour. In an 1863 letter to the Colonial Secretary of Queensland, Towns noted that the mass importation of labour from the Pacific would 'save us from the inhumanity of driving to the exposed labour of field work, the less tropically hardy European' workers.⁹ Towns arranged the first shipment of Pacific Islander labourers from the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) to the Colony of Queensland in August 1863 aboard the schooner *Don Juan*. This first group of labourers was to work on Towns' Townsvale Plantation, South of Brisbane.

⁵ Townsville City Council, 'A Chronological History of Townsville', *Townsville City Council*, <https://www.townsville.qld.gov.au/about-townsville/history-and-heritage/townsville-history/townsville-1770-to-1900>

⁶ Tracey Banivanua-Mar, *Violence, Language and Colonial Dialogue* (Honolulu, 2007), 1.

⁷ Shineberg, "Towns, Robert".

⁸ Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Melbourne University Press, 2002), 85-86.

⁹ Robert Towns, *South Sea Island Immigration for Cotton Culture: a Letter to the Honourable Colonial Secretary of Queensland* (Sydney, 1863), 3.

A number of controversies surround the Pacific Island Labour trade in early colonial Queensland. By far the most significant concerns the issue of 'Blackbirding'. Both historians and contemporary observers noted that whilst the majority of Pacific Islanders volunteered to travel to Australia, a significant minority were 'Blackbirded'- kidnapped or deceived into indentured service. Though estimates vary on the number of Islanders kidnapped, most historians suggest that between 10-15% of those who arrived in Queensland came involuntarily. Though Towns argued that "the question of any species of Slavery or Kidnapping of these natives" was 'confuted by the instructions' given to vessel Captains and interpreters,¹⁰ Henry Ross Lewin, perhaps the most notorious of Queensland's blackbirders, was in the regular employ of Towns.¹¹ Further, while evidence for the use of overt kidnapping tactics in the labour trade is mixed, many concur with the judgement of the historian Clive Moore that islanders were 'culturally kidnapped'- communication and cultural barriers were exploited, islanders were lured in with cheap goods and bound to legal contacts they did not understand, and taken to far off territories where they worked in dangerous conditions with little means to legal recourse or protection.¹²

In addition to accusations of kidnapping and forced recruitment, historians and political activists point to the appalling conditions faced by Pacific Island workers during and after their terms of service. As Clive Moore notes, 'once indentured in Queensland, they were servile bonded labour, paid poorly, often held in circumstances that can only be described as slave-like'.¹³ Pacific Islander labourers suffered the highest death rate of any immigrant group to Australia, a staggering 30% and those who died in the term of their service often had their wages appropriated by the state government which failed to pass them on to relatives of the deceased.¹⁴

As racial anxieties rose in the lead up to the Federation of the Australian colonies, calls grew for the mass deportation of Pacific Islander people resident in Australia culminating in the passage of the *Pacific Island Labourers Act* (1901) which legislated the removal of almost all island labourers to their territories of origin.¹⁵ A number of Islanders were granted exemption from the act. However, varied industrial legislation and race-based union bans prevented them from gaining most forms of employment, and denied them access to social benefits, forcing them

¹⁰ Towns, *South Sea Island Immigration*, 3.

¹¹ Doug Hunt, "Hunting the Blackbirder: Ross Lewin and the Royal Navy", *The Journal of Pacific History*, 42:1 (2007), 37-53.

¹² Clive Moore, "Australian South Sea Islanders' Narratives of Belonging", in Farzana Gounder (ed.), *Narrative and Identity Construction in the Pacific Islands* (Amsterdam, 2015), 155.

¹³ Clive Moore, "The Pacific Islanders' Fund and the Misappropriation of the Wages of Deceased Pacific Islanders by the Queensland Government", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 61:1 (2015), 15.

¹⁴ Moore, "The Pacific Islanders' Fund," 1-18.

¹⁵ Banivanua-Mar, *Colonial Dialogue*, 176.

into extreme poverty.¹⁶ The descendants of this group form the basis of the Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) community, which has long campaigned for its history to be appropriately acknowledged and the unique forms of disadvantage ASSI people face to be recognized.¹⁷

History of the Contestation

Announcing the Towns' Statue

Unlike many statues erected to colonial era politicians and civic leaders, the statue of Robert Towns in Townsville's CBD is a recent piece of public sculpture, having only been erected in 2004. Townsville CBD Promotions, a company tasked with revitalizing the city's centre, sponsored research into the activities of John Melton Black and Robert Towns, Townsville's founding fathers. This research was pursued by local historian Jim Manion and provided the basis for an approach by the Townsville City Image Committee and Perc Tucker Gallery to erect a life-sized statue of Robert Towns.¹⁸ Funds were passed over to the Council which approved the project and assumed responsibility for the monument's commissioning. The council announced its intentions in May 2004, and stated that Towns' statue would be the first part of a 'Pioneers Walk' in the town centre.¹⁹ A local artist, Jane Hawkins, was tasked with preparing an impression and carrying out the work.²⁰ The cost of the project was estimated at \$40,000.²¹ The council's decision to erect the statue met with almost immediate backlash. Local traders conducted a survey on the issue and found almost unanimous rejection of the proposal. The organisers of the survey, Ian and Joelle Fleming argued that the statue would create dissension and do 'nothing for reconciliation'.²² Townsville Mayor Tony Mooney welcomed the debate catalysed by the announcement of the statue, noting 'it's getting people interested in the history of the place', but refused to countenance any suggestion of abandoning the project.²³

Letters streamed in to the local newspaper, *The Townsville Bulletin* criticising the choice of subject.²⁴ Jim Manion wrote a defence of Towns in the newspaper, noting 'I can understand the feelings of the Islanders who have heard the suffering of their ancestors, but I do question the

¹⁶ Clive Moore and Patricia Mercer, "The Forgotten People: Australia's Immigrant Melanesians", *Meanjin* 37:1 (1978), 98-108.

¹⁷ Banivanua-Mar, *Colonial Dialogue*, 176.

¹⁸ Kett Kennedy, *Robert Towns' Townsville and the 'Blackbirding' Controversy* (Townsville, 2004), iv.

¹⁹ Tony Raggatt, "Statue to Honour a Pioneer", *Townsville Bulletin*, May 21, 2004, 9.

²⁰ Michael Madigan, 'Statues of "Blackbirders" in Mackay and Townsville Targeted by Islanders Keen to Correct History', *The Courier Mail*, August 23, 2017.

²¹ Raggatt, "Statue to Honour a Pioneer", 9.

²² Tony Raggatt, "Mayor Rejects Statue Survey", *Townsville Bulletin*, July 29, 2004, 7.

²³ Raggatt, "Mayor Rejects Statue Survey", 7.

²⁴ Moore, "Narratives of Belonging", 168.

validity of the instances of abuse specifically levelled against Robert Towns.²⁵ In response, Cecilia Gillman, a Townsville resident, suggested that whilst 'the city's noted historians are going to remain divided over historical accuracy', 'others in the wider community will be insulted by the statue's perceived mix of symbolism and an even greater number offended by it. Why build a monument to disharmony?'.²⁶

The decision was seen as especially provocative given the growth of South Sea Islander activism in North Queensland since the 1970s and the charged political environment during the era of the so-called 'History Wars' over the nature of settlement and colonial governance in Australia.²⁷

Protests and Publicity

On 18 May 2005, a small group of South Sea Islanders protested the unveiling of the life-sized sculpture of Towns. The group disrupted official speeches with shouts of 'blackbirder', 'slave labour', and 'he was a slave trader'.²⁸ Joe Leo, the President of the Australian South Sea Islander United Council argued that regardless of the extent of Towns' involvement in Blackbirding, the statue was a 'provocative, unwarranted insult'.²⁹ Jane Hawkins, the statue's sculptor, told the *Townsville Bulletin* that she expected the statue to be vandalised given the outcry of community sentiment. Hawkins, in defence of Towns, argued 'It's a bit of a shame really because you can't change history and he did a lot of good for the place'.³⁰ The controversy generated national media attention. The Australian Broadcasting Commission's (ABC) current affairs television program *George Negus Tonight* devoted an episode to the issue in 2004 and the statue's erection was discussed extensively on ABC radio's *Late Night Live*.

Though protest activity dissipated soon after the statue's unveiling, it remained a significant grievance for the ASSI community over the following years. In 2009, Townsville's State Legislative Representative Mike Reynolds noted, 'The very bitter times that South Sea Islanders went through in terms of being forcefully removed from the South Sea Islands and brought to sugar fields for free labour- that really does go back a long, long time, and I think in many ways putting the Robert Towns statue there is really opening a festering sore'.³¹ In 2013, the 150th anniversary of the arrival of Islander labourers in Queensland aboard the *Don Juan*, scores of protestors held

²⁵ Manion, "Towns blackbirding claims warrant reply", *Townsville Bulletin*, June 4, 2004, 4.

²⁶ Cecilia Gillman, "Why a Monument to Disharmony", *Townsville Bulletin*, August 21, 2004, 9.

²⁷ Jamie Smyth, "Captain Cook Statue Looms Over Australian Colonial History Furore", *Financial Times*, June 21, 2020.

²⁸ Doug Hunt and Kett Kennedy, "Bye Bye Blackbirder: The Death of Ross Lewin", *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, 19:5 (2006), 805.

²⁹ Hunt and Kennedy, "Bye Bye Blackbirder", 805.

³⁰ "Sculptor Expects Vandalism", *Townsville Bulletin*, May 19, 2005, 3.

³¹ "Australian Slavery Buried in Queensland Mass Grave", *Indy Media*, 15 December 2012.

an event at the Towns' statue and called on the local government to instigate its removal.³² The protest coincided with a press release by Vanuatu's government, which suggested that islanders were taken to Queensland 'to work as slaves and indentured labourers' and a re-enactment at Port Vila depicting people in chains, stolen away and callously returned to strange islands.³³

As Americans moved to take down statues of Confederate leaders in 2017, political activists in Australia again raised awareness of Towns' involvement in Blackbirding. Protests were held in August 2017, with Emelda Davis, the Chairwoman of Australian South Sea Islanders- Port Jackson, an ASSI national body, calling for the erection of statues in remembrance of those impacted by the labour trade: "We want a cane cutter right there opposite Towns and we want the cane cutters family depicted and we would like to see the wording on the statue changed to reflect the fact that thousands of islanders were forcibly taken from their homes to create the Queensland sugar cane industry".³⁴ The statue was targeted by vandals in January 2019.³⁵ The most recent round of controversy was instigated primarily by the demands of Black Lives Matter protest organisers in Australia to dismantle vestiges of racism and colonialism at home. An article published by *Crikey*, an Australian media outlet, on June 11 called for the removal of the statue.³⁶ While ASSI community leaders did not condone the vandalism of the statue on June 22, they did acknowledge the need for the history of Blackbirding and Robert Towns' legacy to be properly examined. Emelda Davis called for greater commemoration of South Sea Islanders and Aboriginal and South Sea Islander academic called for statues to be put up 'of a man, woman and child with chains around their necks looking up to Towns and their ancestors'.³⁷

Decision-Making Processes

Although the idea for erecting a statue of Robert Towns did not originate with Townsville's Council, the Council was tasked with its commissioning, erection and maintenance. Decisions on the fate of the statue and its curation thus lie with the Council. The Council did not consult with local community members or ASSI bodies before proceeding with its decision to erect the statue. Councilor Jack Wilson noted that Towns was 'a huge figure in the development of this city and deserves appropriate civic recognition'.³⁸ Pre-empting negative responses, Councilor David Crisafulli called for an end 'to an era of political correctness gone mad where there was a

³² Alf Wilson, "60% of Torres Strait People of South Sea Island Descent", *Torres News*, September 23, 2013.

³³ Moore, "Narratives of Belonging", 168.

³⁴ Michael Madigan, "Statues of Alleged Slave Trader in Line of Fire", *Daily Mercury*, August 23, 2017.

³⁵ Jacob Miley, "Vandals Target the Statue of Robert Towns, Townsville's Founder", January 25, 2020.

³⁶ Michael Bradley, "No Statue Should Last Forever, No Matter How Tall", *Crikey*, June 11, 2020.

³⁷ Wainwright and Chomicki, "Statue of Robert Towns Vandalised".

³⁸ Raggatt, "Statue to Honour a Pioneer", 9.

tendency not to recognize our forefathers out of fear of upsetting indigenous communities'.³⁹

In reply to the cool responses of the ASSI community to the announcement of the statue, Townsville Council commissioned a historian, Kett Kennedy, to evaluate Towns' involvement in the Blackbirding trade. Kennedy concluded that 'from the written documents, and given the character of Robert Towns, undesirable as some aspects may appear to a contemporary citizenry, there is no evidence that Towns personally condoned or was involved in Blackbirding'.⁴⁰ Townsville's ASSI community and much of the public remained dissatisfied with the report's conclusion, some disputing the impartiality of the historian⁴¹ and the evidence used, and many more arguing that even if Towns had not been directly implicated, his associations with Blackbirders and the general suffering caused by the Pacific labour trade should caution against the erection of a statue. Indeed, as the report noted, Towns' 'name will remain ignominious as the man who commenced the recruitment of Islanders on a systematic scale for Queensland agriculture'.⁴²

Council representative Jack Wilson noted at the unveiling ceremony for the sculpture in 2005, 'We must remember that in acknowledging and featuring the efforts of our early pioneers we are dealing with people from another place in history where cultural, social and political thinking didn't necessarily mirror those of today's more open and egalitarian society'.⁴³ Wilson pointed to the findings of Kennedy's report, suggested that the city honoured a range of 'men and women who played important roles in the development of Townsville', and called on South Sea Islanders to forgive the crimes of the past 'so that we can work together to build a harmonious nation'.⁴⁴

The Council has relied on similar arguments to deflect criticism during periodic outbursts of anger about the statue's existence. In May 2017, Townsville Mayor Jenny Hill argued that the debate around the statue was a distraction from more important issues: 'It's easy for people in Sydney to talk about statues, but when you live in North Queensland there are far more important social issues than just statues'.⁴⁵ Queensland Labor MP Cathy O'Toole noted that 'We need to acknowledge that atrocities were committed... but defacing statues already in existence isn't helpful'.⁴⁶ During the most recent round of controversy, Mayor Hill again pointed to Kennedy's 2004 research and argued that 'people need to view the statue in the context of the

³⁹ Raggatt, "Statue to Honour a Pioneer", 9.

⁴⁰ Kennedy, *'Blackbirding' Controversy*, 59.

⁴¹ Emelda Davis of Australian South Sea Islanders referred to Kennedy as a 'mining historian' with a lack of knowledge of South Sea Islander history, Personal Interview with Author.

⁴² Kennedy, *'Blackbirding' Controversy*, 59.

⁴³ Danny Mortison, "Protestors go to Town over Statue", *Townsville Bulletin*, May 19, 2005, 3.

⁴⁴ Mortison, "Protestors go to Town over Statue", 3.

⁴⁵ Matthew Killoran, "Jobs Matter More Than Statues: Hill", *Townsville Bulletin*, September 1, 2017, 4.

⁴⁶ Killoran, "Jobs Matter More", 4.

Pioneers Walk' which also acknowledged the contribution of Indigenous land rights activist Eddie Mabo and pioneering social worker Joan Innes Reid to Townsville's history.⁴⁷ Hill ruled out removing the statue, citing a lack of evidence he participated in Blackbirding.⁴⁸ Following the statue's vandalism on June 22, 2020, a council spokesman said 'It is very disappointing that the statue of Robert Towns on our Pioneers Walk has been vandalised' and cautioned that acts of vandalism would attract the interest of the Queensland Police Service.⁴⁹

In June 2020, the controversy surrounding Towns' statue remains ongoing. Townsville Council has proven steadfast in its opposition to removing or amending the statue, and ASSI leaders are divided on whether the statue should be removed altogether or re-curated to more accurately and appropriately represent the historical controversy which surrounds its subject.

While Townsville Council has sought to respond to demands of protesters and took a pro-active approach in commissioning research into the activities of Robert Towns, it has failed to engage in appropriate consultation with the local community, and, in particular with ASSI organisations. Community members and ASSI leaders have shown themselves receptive to engage in consultation but so far such gestures have been ignored by the Council. As Indigenous and South Sea Islander academic Gracelyn Smallwood has noted, 'We want to work alongside the council. But they need to come to the partnership with us.'⁵⁰ Emelda Davis suggests that the lack of consultation has proven especially disappointing given the large number of South Sea Islander organisations in area and the large proportion of Townsville's population which claims ASSI descent.⁵¹ Engagement in more formal consultation by Townsville Council over the statue is the primary recommendation of this case study.

As the local council seeks to expand its 'Pioneers Walk' to include more statues of figures of historical interest to the Townsville community, it would secondarily be recommended that consultation is pro-active rather than retrospective. Much of the controversy surrounding Towns' statue could have been avoided had the Council chosen to consult with the local community before announcing the statue's commissioning in 2004.

Finally, where historical studies are commissioned to clarify controversial issues, it is recommended that a wider range of expertise is drawn upon. Whilst Kett Kennedy, the historian commissioned to carry out the 2004 study, is a respected authority in the field of Queensland

⁴⁷ Tess Ikonomou, "Towns Will Stay Put", *Townsville Bulletin*, June 16, 2020, 3.

⁴⁸ Ikonomou, "Towns Will Stay Put", 3.

⁴⁹ Caitlan Charles, "Vandals Hit Statue", *Townsville Bulletin*, June 23, 2020, 6.

⁵⁰ "Townsville Indigenous Community Call for Second Statue to Be Built Next to Robert Towns", *Seven News Townsville*, June 15, 2020.

⁵¹ Personal Interview with Author.

colonial history, ASSI groups regard him as a partisan figure who has failed to engage with research produced by their community and its historians. Emelda Davis notes that ‘communities need to be consulted on how the truth is told’, and suggests consultation which respects ‘cultural protocols’ and builds trust with marginalized communities is required to avoid mistakes being repeated.⁵² Additionally, representative historical consultation in such controversies may be better carried out in a group setting and involve multiple researchers rather than a delegation of authority to one individual to avoid accusations of partiality and bias.

Summary and Conclusions

Townsville Council’s decision to erect a statue of town founder Robert Towns has been disputed since its announcement in 2004. Concerns were raised over Towns’ involvement in ‘Blackbirding’—the kidnapping of Pacific Islander labourers to work in Queensland’s agricultural industries as well as his associations with a legal, though exploitative labour trade. The case of Towns’ statue raises questions about how Australian cities and towns should examine and represent their past. More importantly, it raises awareness of the pitfalls of decision making over commemoration in public spaces which lacks representative consultation. This case study has suggested that appropriate curation of public space in this instance would benefit from community consultation, particularly involving ASSI organisations; that future decision making ought to involve a more sustained, pro-active approach to community dialogue; and that the commissioning of historical research to clarify the issues at stake in such controversies should also aim towards the inclusion of a range of civic and academic voices to reduce accusations of partisanship and lack of representation.

About the Author

Sebasitan Rees is a recent Global History graduate of the University of Oxford. His research focuses on the history of empire and decolonisation with a particular focus on the Pacific.

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⁵² Personal Interview with Author.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom.

Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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