

Submission to the Yoorrook Commission

Suzannah Henty

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- My name is Suzannah Henty, and I am a sixth-generation patrilineal descendant of James Henty (1800–1882), one of the Henty Brothers and early coloniser of Gunditjmara Country in Southwest Victoria. My family has been celebrated and remembered as establishing the first settlement in Victoria.
- The following submission details my opinion on three matters that will be addressed in the following order: An acknowledgement of the Henty legacy, ongoing land injustice, and colonial memorialisation. In addition, I have attached two articles that I have published relating to these topics and images of Henty memorialisation.

Legacy

Inheriting the Henty legacy has been a process of coming to terms with an ongoing project of colonisation. Growing up, I did not understand the crimes that my family committed. The Henty legacy was rarely discussed, but there were heirlooms in my father's and grandmother's houses. Some old books, a wedding dress, a commemorative cup, taxidermy animals from a shooting trip in Africa — talismans of the family's golden era. Strangers would recognise my name, and I understood my family to be part of the state's history. Only when I went to university did I begin to challenge and question my family's legacy.

As an undergraduate student, a Gunditjmara man gave a lecture in which he explained that his family lived peacefully until my family came along. This experience prompted me to research my family's involvement in massacres that took place during the early years of colonisation. Ian Clark's book *Scars in the Landscape: A Register of Massacre Sites in Western Victoria, 1803-1859* (1995) details massacres that took place on Henty property. The State Library of Victoria also holds a significant amount of archival material relating to the Henty family, including the diaries of James Henty in which he describes hostility between settlers and First Nations peoples.

I was never told while I was growing up that the Henty family were involved in an organised ethnic cleansing of First Nations peoples. Yet, if needed, I was encouraged to distance myself from the Henty legacy. The cognitive dissonance in ignoring historical facts while exercising the privilege and power to deny any involvement in genocide struck me as a particular articulation of settler colonial repression that I would later see reflected in colonial memorialisation.

Land injustice

The Henty family were present at three colonial frontiers on Noongar, 1829; Palawa, 1831; and Gunditjmara, 1834 Country. They first took a land grant in the Swan River Colony, which they abandoned for Launceston, eventually sailing to Portland on their boat, the Thistle.

Without permission from British authorities, the family illegally squatted on the Gunditjmara homelands, where they stole and damaged tens of thousands of acres of land and waterways. For both the British and First Nations peoples, this settlement was a crime.

Edward Henty was the first to arrive, where, in his words, he: “stuck a plough into the ground, struck a she-oak root, and broke the point; cleaned my gun, shot a kangaroo, mended the bellows, blew the forge fire, straightened the plough, and turned the first sod in Victoria” (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/64292478>). He was performing a colonial ritual, like James Cook did, to enact an invasion based on claims of *terra nullius*.

This marks the beginning of the harm that continues to be inflicted on Gunditjmara peoples and their country at the hands of the Henty family, the state of Victoria, and the settler colony of Australia. This harm is especially articulated in the ongoing dispossession of Gunditjmara peoples from their land and the memorialisation of colonial figures.

The Henty’s brought with them sheep, cattle, and machinery. After they arrived, they established a sheep-run called Merino Downs and built a homestead, and outstations, where Aboriginal peoples were enslaved.

The process of establishing Victoria’s first settlement was war.

In June 1838, one Aboriginal man was killed by a hutkeeper on Merino Downs. In October 1838, three Aboriginal men were killed on Merino Downs. In March 1840, one Aboriginal man was killed by a hutkeeper on Merino Downs. In November 1840, “dozens” of Aboriginal people were killed by an overseer for the Henty brothers.

There are hundreds of unmarked sites of conflict in which members of the Henty family were likely involved.

Land justice should be very simple because all it requires is recognising the colonial system for what it is – imported and imposed over an already existing system of law. Indigenous sovereignty is intrinsically linked to land. Gunditjmara peoples continue to care for Budj Bim, an ancient aquaculture system, that includes evidence of stone dwellings dating back 6600 years. I wonder, is the repatriation of Merino Downs to its rightful owners’ land justice? It would be a start.

Benefactors of colonialism, those who have accumulated intergeneration wealth on the basis of land theft and genocide, need to engage in truth-telling about their affluence. Descendants of colonial families need to engage, in good faith, with local Indigenous communities to discuss reparation. I would encourage not only descendants of colonial families, but all settlers living on stolen land, to challenge the recent rhetoric of “gratitude” to Indigenous peoples for “letting us” live on their land that we stole and usurped.

To deny the rightful ownership and self-determination of the land that was stolen is to deny First Nations peoples the right to life.

Memorialisation

The Henty legacy is enduring in large part due to their memorialisation. As I have written elsewhere, colonial memorials should not be conceived in terms of a colonial heritage; instead, their function was always to *produce* heritage for the nation to inherit. Settler colonies long for something they lack: a sense of belonging to a land they have stolen. By celebrating the Henty family, the nation produced a figure for the nation. The symbolism behind this figure is invasion and white supremacy. Hence, the ‘heritage’ that is produced by these memorials perpetuates

colonisation by denying the existence of and resistance by First Nations peoples. It also denies the demands of Gunditjmara peoples.

The Henty monuments in Portland were addressed in a formal capacity at a Council Shire during the Stop Black Deaths in Custody and BLM protests in Australia. At the 28 July 2020 meeting, Shea Rotumah, a Gunditjmara man based in the nearby town of Heywood, asked the council: “What is the Shire’s stance on monuments that celebrate or memorialise colonial figures/history, especially in regard to the affect these figures have had on our people? Are there any plans to be proactive in this space?” Then Mayor of Glenelg Shire Council, Anita Rank, responded by stating that the Council “will endeavour to undertake a comprehensive audit to understand the nature and magnitude of monuments and place names across the shire.” One month later, in an article in *The Guardian*, Anita Rank stated that she does not know what the outcome of the audit will be when complete, while Rotumah stated: “We just want them gone ... We entered at the discussions now because we don’t want our kids to have to be talking about this in 20 years’ time.”

In 2021, Gary Younge argued that the notion of memorialising an individual is inherently anachronistic given that “there is no guarantee that any consensus will persist.” Though this also points to their purpose: the persistence of a consensus. To question the moral character or intellectual rigor of colonial heroes is to obscure a more consequential epistemological question that concerns the ongoing “colonial matrix of power”. The Henty’s were not the first. What then do these monuments convey?

Like the memorialisation of Cook celebrates the origin of the nation, the debate about colonial monuments in Victoria is rooted in its origin story — but this origin story is a false start. To preserve monuments in the condition they were intended would be to gesture faith in the colonial fantasy that the state and the nation have purportedly attempted to reverse. Because memorialising the Henty family is central to colonisation, removing these monuments is a start to repairing the injustices committed against Indigenous peoples by settlers.

Ultimately, Indigenous peoples should be responsible for what happens to these monuments. If their purpose is to produce colonial power, handing their fate over to First Nations control is the right choice. My personal belief is that the Henty monuments be removed from their intended site and relocated, i.e., to a museum or park to fallen monuments, or ceremoniously destroyed.

Memorials



TEXT: 'Henty Memorial "Throwing up their hats with a cheer they put their horses to the gallop and set off for the stations across the plains." (Extract from Henty Diary) The view you behold consists of "Muntham" established 1838, the original property of Edward Henty. Area 77,000 acres, carried 55,000 sheep, 8000 cattle and 500 horses, staff 50 employees including 20 shepherds, 12 hutkeepers and blacksmith. Edward (1810-78) Victoria's first permanent settler arrived in Portland Bay 19th November 1834, six months prior to John Batman at Port Phillip. Married Anna Maria Gallie on October 16th 1840. Died without issue. Being pioneers in small communities, their lives were interwoven with events of the day and are part of Australia's history. Erected 1971.'

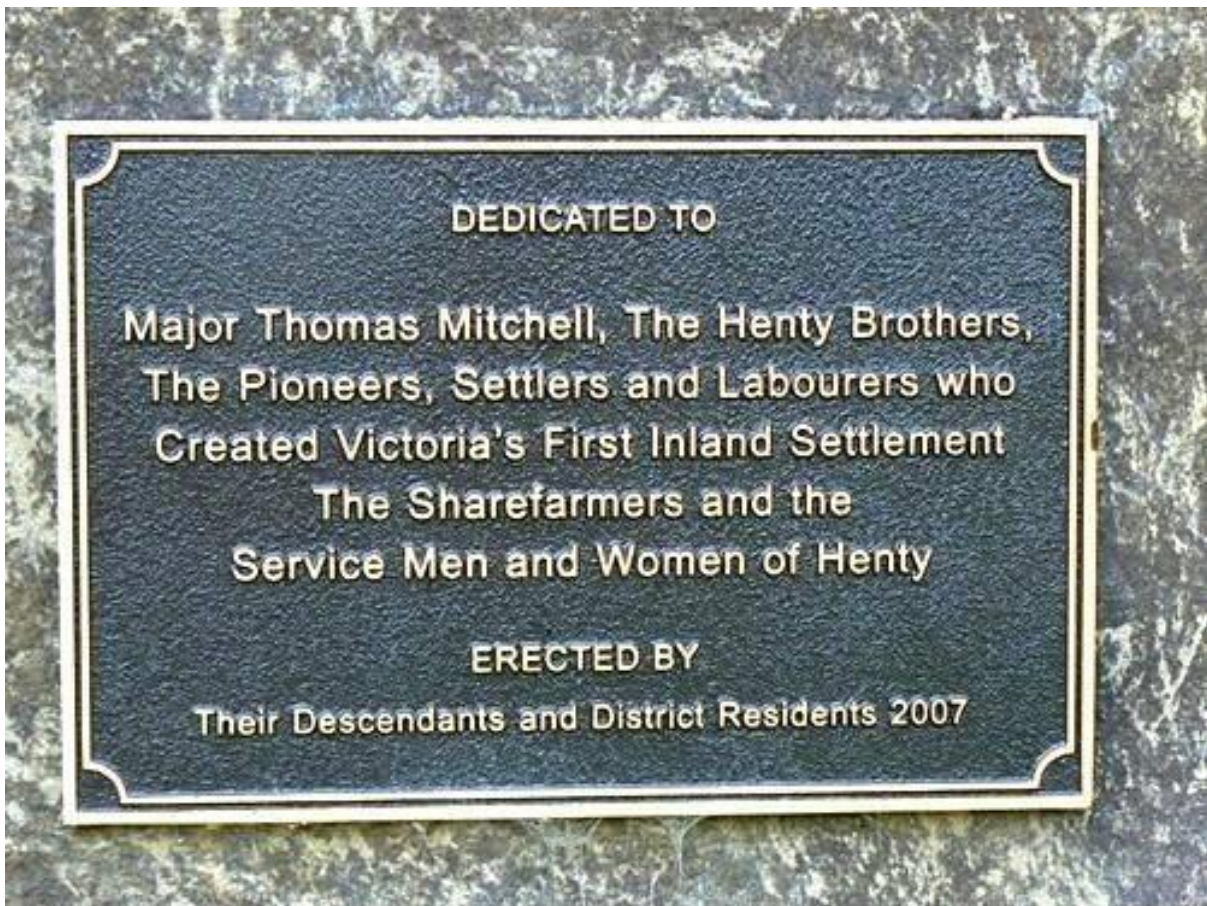


Edward Henty Monument
 Glenelg Highway, Muntham Hill, Muntham
<https://monumentaustralia.org.au/display/30874-edward-henty>



Edward Henty Landing Site Memorial
Cliff Street, Foreshore, Portland

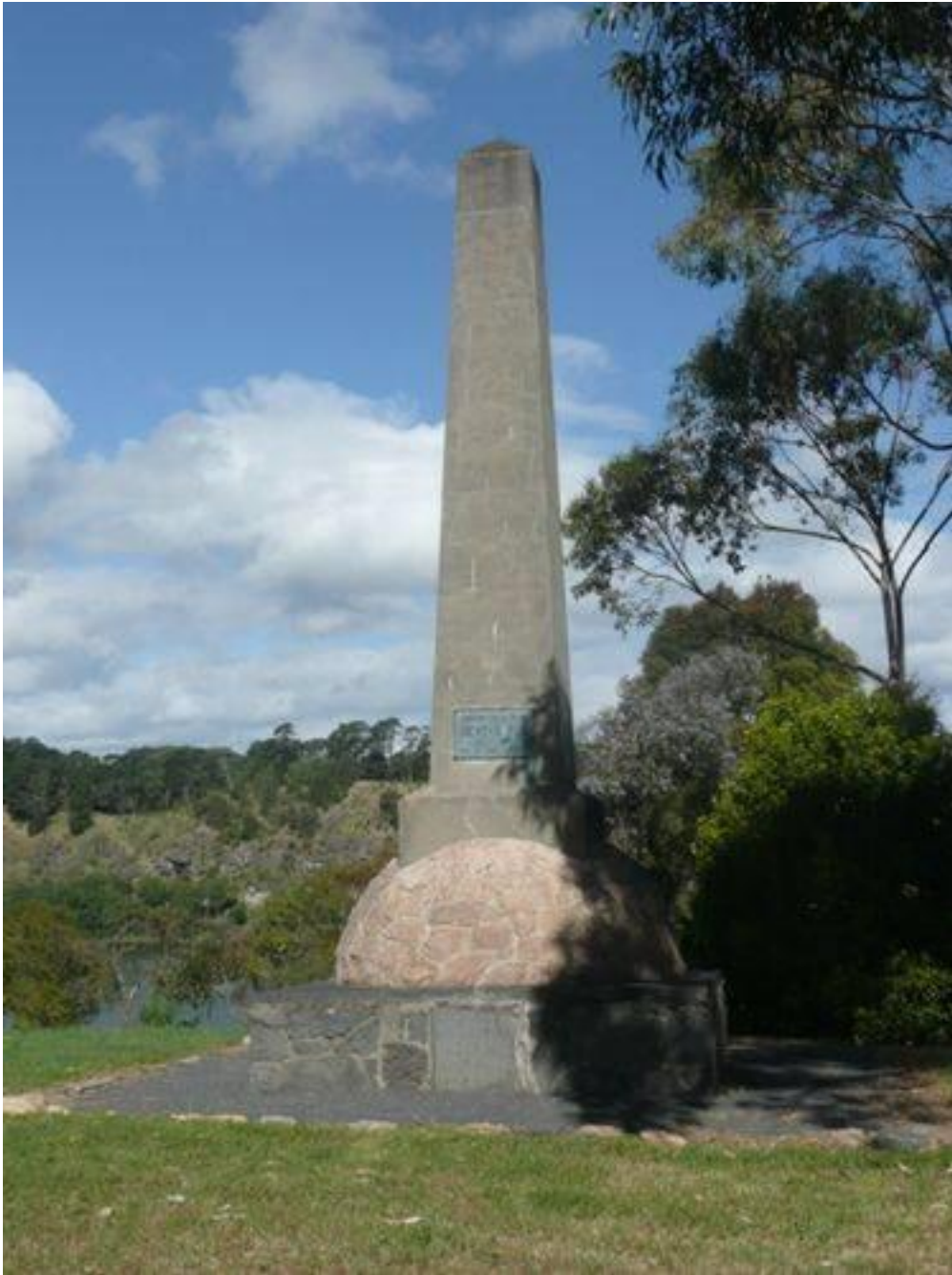
<https://monumentaustralia.org.au/display/33140-edward-henty-landing-site>



Henty Brothers memorial
Portland - Casterton Road, Henty
<https://monumentaustralia.org.au/display/95123-first-inland-settlement>



Henty Memorial
Bentinck Street, Portland
<https://monumentaustralia.org.au/display/33151-henty-memorial>



Henty Memorial
Davison Drive, Valley Lake, Mount Gambier
<https://monumentaustralia.org.au/display/99049-henty%60s-hut>