

6 May, 2024

Dear Commissioners,

We are a group of staff and students from La Trobe University. We are making this submission to the Yoorrook Justice Commission in order to suggest that the name of La Trobe University is inappropriate, due to the role played by the institution's namesake, Charles La Trobe, in the colonization of Victoria. We note the remarks of Chairperson Eleanor Bourke and Premier Jacinta Allan at the Land, Sky and Water Hearings on 29 April 2024 about the importance of mainstream Victorians understanding the history of this state from a First Nations perspective. We suggest that changing who is honoured in the names of state-funded institutions such as La Trobe University is a crucial way that this might be achieved. Below, we outline Charles La Trobe's involvement with the colonization of the Countries in what is today Victoria.

Charles Joseph La Trobe was first Superintendent of Port Phillip District from 1839 to 1850 and first Lieutenant-Governor of the new colony of Victoria from 1851 to 1854. He was raised in a Moravian family, was active in the British anti-slavery movement, worked as a teacher in England, a tutor and mountaineer in Switzerland, and was sent by the British government in 1837 to report on future educational initiatives for emancipated slaves in the West Indies. He arrived in Melbourne in September 1839 with his wife and daughter, two servants and a prefabricated house which still stands today.

Charles La Trobe played an integral role in the dispossession of the Aboriginal peoples of south-eastern Australia from their lands. As Nathan Sentance argues, when we uncomplicatedly 'celebrate particular colonisers and colonial events they often do not tell the full story of history and in many cases, they tell a lie.'¹ In that spirit, it must be acknowledged that La Trobe was the chief government official in Victoria during a period of genocidal violence.²

¹ Nathan mudyi Sentance, 'Whose History: The Role of Statues and Monuments in Australia', <https://australian.museum/learn/first-nations/statues>, accessed 25 September 2023.

² The United Nations definition of genocide codified in 1948 includes any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: a. Killing members of the group; b. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; c. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; d. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; e. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml> On the genocidal nature of violence against Indigenous people in Australia, see: Moses, Dirk. An antipodean genocide? The

Between 1836 and 1853, the Indigenous population of Victoria ‘declined’ by 80%, with the “most intense attrition” taking place “in the decade following White colonization in the mid-1830s”.³ From 1840 until the end of 1851, there were a total of 54 massacres (with six or more victims), in which a total of 919 people were murdered.⁴ La Trobe’s period as Superintendent and then Lieutenant-Governor included the Eumeralla Wars, as well as the 1843 Warrigal Creek Massacre in which up to 180 people were killed.

La Trobe also oversaw a massive, rapid invasion of settlers into the un-ceded lands of the Kulin nations, and other Aboriginal Countries in what became Victoria. In 1836, the Aboriginal population of the Melbourne area was estimated to be 700 people. By 1841, the settler population of Melbourne was approximately 5,500, and by 1851 it was around 25,000.⁵ “Let them come out in shoals, we are very glad to see them,” wrote La Trobe of these settlers in one letter in 1837.⁶ He also undertook practical initiatives to ensure that settlers could and would come. This is seen, for example, in his efforts to build a lighthouse on Cape Otway in 1848, in order to ensure the safe passage of ships bringing settlers from Britain; this endeavour was associated with massacres of the Gadubanoot people, on whose Country the lighthouse was built.⁷

origins of the genocidal moment in the colonization of Australia. *Journal of Genocide Research* 2.1 (2000): 89-106. Balint, Jennifer. Stating genocide in law: The Aboriginal Embassy and the ACT Supreme Court, in Gary Foley, Andrew Schaap and Edqina Howell (eds) *The Aboriginal Tent Embassy: Sovereignty, Black Power, Land Rights and the State*. (London: Routledge, 2014), 235-250. Tatz, Colin. Genocide in Australia. *Journal of Genocide Research*. 1.3 (1999): 315-352. Short, Damien. Australia: A continuing genocide? *Journal of Genocide Research*. 12.1 (2010): 45-68. Ghattas, Sally. Black Power, Aboriginal Genocide, and the Politics of Identity. *Journal of Genocide Research* 25.1 (2023): 1-23. Behrendt, Larissa. Genocide: The distance between law and life. *Aboriginal History* 25 (2001): 132-147. Ellinghaus, Katherine. Biological absorption and genocide: A comparison of Indigenous assimilation policies in the United States and Australia. *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 4.1 (2009): 59-79.

³ Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History Since 1800* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2006); Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso, 2016), 44.

⁴ Lyndall Ryan, ‘Settler Massacres on the Port Phillip Frontier, 1836-1851’ *Journal of Australian Studies* 34.3 (2011), 257-273. A more recent estimate suggests that a total of 1,045 Aboriginal people were killed in such massacres up until 1930: <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/statistics.php>. Data from this site shows that the death toll from these massacres peaked during La Trobe’s time in Victoria: the 1840s were the most deadly decade, claiming 830 victims.

⁵ Penelope Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities* (Vancouver: UBC Press 2010), 155.

⁶ <http://www3.slv.vic.gov.au/latrobejournal/issue/latrobe-71/t1-g-t10.html>

⁷ Clark, Ian. *Scars on the landscape: a register of massacre sites in western Victoria, 1803–1859*. (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1995). Pascoe, Bruce. *Convincing ground: Learning to fall in love with your country*. (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007).

La Trobe knew that settlers were violent against Aboriginal people, but did little to prevent it or ensure it was punished. For example, in 1842, in response to complaints from Port Fairy settlers who wrote to him to demand he do something about Gunditjmara resistance to colonization, La Trobe wrote publicly of his knowledge of the murder of “no fewer than three defenceless [A]boriginal women and a child in their sleeping-place” in Port Fairy, “by a party of white inhabitants” and called on the settlers to give up the perpetrators.⁸ Yet when the murderers were finally brought to trial, they were acquitted.⁹ So, although La Trobe never committed or commissioned direct acts of violence against Aboriginal people, he did maintain and exacerbate the conditions that led to this violence, most directly by encouraging continuing settlement of Aboriginal Countries by Europeans.

Charles La Trobe also advocated for the use of ‘coercion’ against Aboriginal people, despite recognizing that it was “not consistent with the spirit of the age.” Specifically, he suggested that “all men of a certain age” should be subjected to “strict Military discipline,” while children should be separated from “their parents and natural associates” and sent to schools “at a distance from the haunts and beyond the influence of the habits and examples of their tribe.”¹⁰ The latter suggestion advocates for actions that are today considered constitutive of genocide: “Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”¹¹

He also gave orders that led to Aboriginal people being attacked, arrested, and incarcerated. In October 1840, Major Samuel Lettsom requested permission to apprehend several Taungurung men, who were attending an initiation on Kulin land. La Trobe advised Lettsom to avoid bloodshed unless in “extreme and imperative necessity.” Lettsom and several troopers rode to the camp and arrested all but a few people who escaped: more than 200 people (Woiwurrung, Boonwurrung, and Taungurung). One man was shot dead later, trying to escape.¹² Historian Heather Le Griffon describes the people being rounded up by “pricking them with bayonets and beating them with the butt end of

⁸ ‘The Settlers and the Blacks of Port Fairy’, *South Australian*, 10 June, 1842, and ‘Port Phillip Extracts’, *Sydney Herald*, 14 April 1842.

⁹ Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians since 1788*. (London: New Holland, 2003), 234.

¹⁰ La Trobe to the Colonial Secretary on 18 November 1848, cited in John Barnes, *La Trobe: Traveller, Writer, Governor* (Braddon: Halstead Press, 2007), 256.

¹¹ See footnote 2, above.

¹² Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 31.

muskets.” Le Griffon also states that all captives were detained overnight in sheds with no food, water, or sanitation.¹³

La Trobe also oversaw miscarriages of justice against Aboriginal people. In June 1841, he oversaw court proceedings against nine Aboriginal men, admitting that they “could not plead or testify in court, and were not defended.” They were nonetheless found guilty of robbery.¹⁴

One of La Trobe’s key initiatives was to expel and exclude Aboriginal people from the city of Melbourne. On 18 Dec 1839, less than three months after arriving in Melbourne, he wrote to Chief Protector of Aborigines, George Augustus Robinson, that “the continued location of such a numerous body of natives in the immediate vicinity of the town cannot be endured much longer”. By April 1840, La Trobe’s patience was apparently wearing thin, and he told Assistant Protector of the Aborigines William Thomas that unless he succeeded in breaking up the Melbourne encampment, he would send Captain Russell of the Mounted Police to do so by force.¹⁵ Then, in September 1840 he issued an order that “no Aboriginal blacks of the district are to visit the township of Melbourne under any pretext whatever”. The Wurundjeri Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung people were ordered to select a campsite beyond Melbourne. After much internal consultation they selected a new place to camp at Narre Narre Warren.¹⁶ To further consolidate his plan to exclude Aboriginal people from Melbourne, in 1859 La Trobe oversaw reform to the rations system so that rations would be delivered to missions, thus removing incentives for Aboriginal people to come to the city.¹⁷

La Trobe was reportedly a particularly evangelical and religious person for his time. He was involved in anti-slavery circles and was a committed member of the Moravian church which during this period was involved in missionary activity. And yet, as Margaret Anderson has argued, this did not translate into advocacy for Aboriginal peoples. As Anderson argues:

On the face of it, La Trobe should have been strongly committed to the care of the First People of Port Phillip. However, like others of his race and class, he also

¹³ Heather Le Griffon, *Campfires at the Cross: An Account of the Bunting Dale Aboriginal Mission at Birregurra, near Colac, Victoria 1839-1851* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly, 2017), 143.

¹⁴ Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 43.

¹⁵ Margaret Anderson, ‘La Trobe and the Kulin’, *Agora* 57, 3 (2022).

¹⁶ Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 32-33.

¹⁷ Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 107.

believed in the inherent superiority of European civilisation and of the Christian faith. His sympathy for the plight of the Kulin was tempered by his conviction that their survival was dependent on Christian conversion and education in the ways of the ‘civilisers’. There is no evidence that La Trobe made any attempt to understand the spiritual world of the Kulin, which he dismissed as ‘heathen’, or that he comprehended the depth of their attachment to Country.¹⁸

Underlying La Trobe’s indifference to Aboriginal people were hostile and derogatory attitudes towards them. He consistently referred to them as ‘savages’ in his writings, and he also on at least one occasion compared Aboriginal people to animals.¹⁹

On the basis of this information, and in the spirit of truth-telling being encouraged by the Commission, we think that it is inappropriate to name a public institution and a place of learning after Charles La Trobe. We note that there are precedents, both global and local, for making such changes.

In August 2021, the board of directors at Ryerson University in Canada, following advice from the institution’s Mash Koh Wee Kah Pooh Win (Standing Strong) Task Force,²⁰ voted to change the university’s name to Toronto Metropolitan University.²¹ This was done in recognition of the role played by the institution’s namesake, Egerton Ryerson, in designing one of the most harmful of Canada’s colonial institutions: the residential school system. At the time of the name-change, university President and Vice-Chancellor Mohamed Lachemi stated that the new name would help make the university “a place where all feel welcome, seen, represented and celebrated.”²² A year later, he declared that, “The new name proved to be a source of unity.”²³

Locally, an example of name change prompted by a reckoning with colonial history is seen in the 2022 decision to rename Moreland Council in Melbourne’s north. The name Moreland had previously been given by a land speculator, Farquhar McCrae, who had

¹⁸ Anderson, ‘La Trobe and the Kulin’.

¹⁹ <http://www3.slv.vic.gov.au/latrobejournal/issue/latrobe-71/t1-g-t10.html>

²⁰ https://www.torontomu.ca/content/dam/next-chapter/Report/SSTF-report-and-recommendations-Aug_24_FINAL.pdf

²¹ <https://www.torontomu.ca/media/releases/2022/04/ryerson-university-changing-its-name-to-toronto-metropolitan-uni/>

²² <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/ryerson-toronto-metropolitan-university-1.6431360>

²³ <https://globalnews.ca/news/9651716/oronto-metropolitan-university-name-change-one-year-later/>

taken the name from a slave plantation run by his family in Jamaica.²⁴ The local council's new name, Merri-bek, was voted on by local residents, and was one of three options provided in the local Woiwurrung language by the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation.²⁵ Wurundjeri elder Bill Nicholson described the change as "a great starting point to move forward."²⁶

These examples show that we do not need to retain names that celebrate harmful colonial ideas, figures, or sites. Although previous efforts in Australia have critically examined the colonial legacies of some university namesakes, no institution has yet taken the step of changing their name.²⁷ We think that time has come. Thus, we hope that the Commission will support our call for a name change as part of your broader commitment to truth-telling and justice, and we invite you to call on relevant university officials to reflect on and justify their stance in relation to the university's name and the colonial history that it currently celebrates.

Signed:

1. Katherine Ellinghaus, Associate Professor, Department of History
2. Gerald Roche, Associate Professor, Department of Politics, Media, and Philosophy
3. Carolyn D'Cruz, Senior Lecturer in Gender Sexuality Diversity Studies, Department of Politics, Media and Philosophy
4. Kirsty Duncanson, Senior Lecturer, Department of Social Inquiry
5. Tobias Barkley, Lecturer, Law School
6. Emily Poelina-Hunter, Lecturer in Aboriginal Studies, Department of Social Inquiry
7. Lauren Gawne, Senior Lecturer, Department of Languages and Cultures
8. Tonya Stebbins, Professor, Department of Languages and Cultures
9. Dr Yves Rees, Senior Lecturer in History, Department of Archaeology and History
10. Dr Martin Clark, Lecturer, La Trobe Law School
11. Debbie Hall, Technology Enhanced Learning Officer, Education Services
12. Emma Russell, Senior Research Fellow, Department of Social Inquiry

²⁴ <https://www.vic.gov.au/early-childhood-update-december-2022/hume-moreland-area-name-change>

²⁵ <https://conversations.merri-bek.vic.gov.au/renaming>

²⁶ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-07-03/moreland-council-votes-change-name-merri-bek/101204252>

²⁷ For the case of Macquarie University, see Howitt, Richard, Leanne Holt, and Michelle Lea Locke.

"Challenging the colonial legacy of/at Macquarie." *Geographical Research* 60.1 (2022): 71-85. And for Griffith University, see Reynolds, Henry. *Truth-telling: History, sovereignty and the Uluru Statement*. Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2021.

13. Colleen Holt, Senior Lecturer, Department of Community and Clinical Health
14. Aidan Craney, Research Fellow, Department of Social Inquiry
15. Emma Robertson, Associate Professor, Department of Archaeology and History
16. Lily Leahy, Post-doctoral Researcher, Department of Environment and Genetics
17. Jonathon Newman, Library Operations Officer
18. Deborah J Storz, Coordinator, Collections Librarian
19. Kate Stodart, Graduate Research Student, Department of Social Inquiry
20. Phoebe Hayman, PhD Candidate and Casual Academic, Department of Politics, Media and Philosophy
21. Andrea Distefano, Administration Coordinator, Violet Vines Marshman Centre for Rural Health Research
22. Margaret Lithgow, Graduate Research Officer, Graduate Research School
23. Xavier Dupe, La Trobe student and General Executive Member at National Union of Students
24. Alicia Griffiths, La Trobe Student Union Social Justice Officer
25. Caroline Wallace, Lecturer, Department of Languages and Cultures
26. Shem Macdonald, Lecturer, School of Education
27. Lynda Chapple, Academic Skills Advisor
28. Warren Perkins, Librarian
29. Sue Gilbert, Senior Research Librarian
30. Hayley West, Environments and Collections Logistics Officer at La Trobe University Library
31. Bonnie Cummings, Librarian
32. Susannah Ostojic, PhD Candidate, La Trobe University
33. Marnie Sier, Discovery Specialist, La Trobe University Library
34. Sean Mulcahy, Research Officer, School of Psychology and Public Health
35. Georgina Marks, student of law/arts
36. Zoe Guest, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, The Bouverie Centre
37. Ella Rohde-Condon, Library Collections Specialist, La Trobe University Library
38. Liz Conor, Associate Professor in History, Department of Archaeology and History
39. Keir Strickland, Senior Lecturer, Department of Archaeology and History
40. Timothy Willem Jones, Associate Professor, Department of Archaeology and History
41. Matthew Meredith-Williams, Senior Lecturer, Archaeology
42. Divya Rama Gopalakrishnan, Lecturer, Department of Archeology and History
43. Emily Jane Bieber, Lecturer, Social Work



44. Hannah Stewart, Associate Lecturer, Outdoor and Sustainability Education
45. Maeve M, La Trobe Science student
46. Dr Georgia L Stannard, Lecturer, Department of Archaeology and History
47. Zibet Szacs vay, Counsellor/AccessAbility Advisor, Division of Health, Wellbeing and Inclusion
48. Lachlan Meikle, Senior Grants Advisor, La Trobe University
49. Sally Watt, Reading Lists and Resource Sharing Librarian, La Trobe University Library
50. Laura Griffin, Senior Lecturer, School of Law
51. Chantelle Langdon, Sessional Academic
52. Jeanne Nel, Sessional tutor, School of Law
53. Dr Julia Dehm, Senior Lecturer, School of Law
54. Ozlem Susler, Senior Lecturer, School of Law
55. Louis de Koker, Professor, School of Law
56. Emma Henderson, Senior Lecturer, School of Law
57. Meribah Rose, Lecturer, School of Law