

Yoorrook hears from descendent of memorialised British settlers that she wants their statues destroyed

The latest round of truth-telling before the Victorian Indigenous justice body has entered its third day.



Professor Marcia Langton and Professor Henry Reynolds have provided evidence. Credit: YOORROOK JUSTICE COMMISSION/PR IMAGE

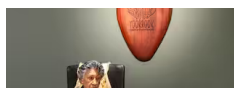
The descendent of one of Victoria's first settlers has called for monuments memorialising her ancestors to be removed or destroyed

Suzannah Henty is a sixth-generation descendent of James Henty, one of the Henty brothers who were early European colonisers of Gunditjmara Country in southwest Victoria.

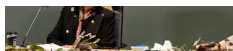
Ms Henty on Thursday faced the Yoorrook Justice Commission, a hearing into injustices against Indigenous Victorians related to land, sky and waters.

"I want to acknowledge the invasion of my forefathers and the war that ensued was a crime that continues to inflict harm," she told the commission.

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The Eumeralla Wars, a series of violent conflicts and massacres that followed the Henty landing in western Victoria, led to the deaths of more than 6000 Gunditjmara and reduced their population to a few hundred.

Settler deaths during the conflict have been estimated at about 80.

"I was never told while I was growing up that the Henty family were involved in an organised ethnic cleansing of First Nations peoples," Ms Henty said.



Suzannah Henty gave evidence at the Yoorrook Justice Commission. Source: AAP Image/Supplied by Yoorrook Justice Commission Credit: SUPPLIED/PR IMAGE

She would like to see memorials to her forebears removed to museums or a park to fallen monuments, or ceremoniously destroyed.

"There have been five generations of family members who have not said anything," Ms Henty told the commission.

"I don't want to be part of the sixth generation."

Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation chief executive Aunty Jill Gallagher, a Gunditjmara woman, spoke about the importance of Indigenous rights to crown land for wellbeing and connection to culture.

"We need places to heal and connect, safe places," Ms Gallagher told the inquiry.

"Owning land and having access to land, it really is that ongoing sustainable approach to self determination ... at a local level."

Ms Gallagher said traditional owner groups must be resourced to be able to care for country as true partners with state governments.

"We have ancient and we also have contemporary Aboriginal people, with our culture and our past, the stories that we can tell and the gifts that we could give to all Victorians is amazing, people just don't realise that," she said.

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'Protection' led to destruction

The commission also heard that attempts by the British government to control convict colonies and prevent violence between Aboriginal people and settlers instead led to the systematic destruction of historic cultures.

On Wednesday, the commission delved into the topics of protection, segregation and assimilation practices, with evidence from University of Tasmania historian Henry Reynolds and University of Melbourne anthropologist Marcia Langton.

The rapid spread into western NSW, down to Victoria and into South Australia was also a concern for the government who saw increasing violence and killings of Indigenous people whose lands were being taken over.

Back home, humanitarians had become the most significant force in British politics which saw the abolition of slavery in 1833 and had turned their attention to the treatment of Indigenous people in the empire.

"This was probably one of the most tragic periods for First Nations people, both because of the speed of the occupation, and undoubtedly the amount of violence and killing that took place," Prof Reynolds said.

To protect Indigenous populations from likely "extermination", the government established 'protectors' in reserves and missions where locals could shelter from the squatters.

The missions however ushered in the beginning of a coercive control of Indigenous people, controlling their place of residence, movement, work contracts, money and children's welfare.

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"It made Aborigines wards of the state," Professor Langton said.

The Aborigines Protection Act that was meant to protect Indigenous people instead sanctioned the assimilation, absorption and disappearance of them.

"They're not allowed off the reserve to hunt or gather," she said.

"They're given substandard rations and this is one of the big killers of Aboriginal people, the inadequate nutrition on these reserves."

Dubbed the "half-caste act", it also prevented mixed-descent Aboriginal people from living in the missions or receiving aid in an effort to destroy the culture at a time when Aboriginal people were thought to have been an inferior race.

"You destroy a culture by stopping people from speaking, by removing their children, by stopping them from having ceremonies, banning their religion and all the rituals used to mark phases of life," Prof Langton said.

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