

Peeling back the layers of the city

by Claire G. Coleman

A city grows like a living thing. And perhaps that is what a city is, a great big living creature, almost monstrous, affixed in place like coral or a tree. A city grows history in layers, like the coral polyps growing atop one another, the layers below smothered and dying – or like the rings of the tree, the good years thicker than the bad. If you cut down the tree you can count the rings to know its age; you can see the good years and the bad years. You can see the dead layers in coral, too, though you need a microscope they are so fine.

A city is like that. The City of Melbourne Art and Heritage Collection is a record of those layers. Diving into the collection, starting with the foundation of the city and climbing out through the years, can tell us how the city and its citizens have changed.

Naarm (known by whitefellas as Melbourne) is young, even by Australia's standards, but her history is rich. The history of the place, before the city was born, is far longer and more powerful than that of the city, and it is deserving of a respect it has rarely, if ever, received.

We must acknowledge the gaps in the collection – what is missing from the skin and the soul of the city – what treasures, what priceless knowledge has been forgotten and lost because nobody bothered to collect it. There could have been more scar trees left in the landscape. They were there, where the city became, before the white men came in boats, but nobody considered them worth keeping, worth cataloguing. I imagine those campfires, those birthing trees, those bark canoes floating upon the wetlands, pools and freshwater river that Melbourne was built upon and alongside. None of those things from before the city was a city, before it was born on the banks of the river, are in the collection and the reasons for this are doubtlessly historical.

The history of what was collected in the beginning is worth unpacking.

The history of the Birrarung (called the Yarra by whitefellas) and the land around it, the story of the people who lived here, extends back into endless time then runs forward with layers of belonging and history. There have always been people along the river. The Wurundjeri and Boonwurung people have lived here longer than history has existed, and they and everybody since have left their mark on the land and culture. Traces have been collected and catalogued: they are the traces of whitefella history, the marks of colonisation, and it was the colonisers who chose what was worth protecting, worth saving.

When the colony appeared on the banks of the river it obliterated everything it could. It swept the land clean, to declare it terra nullius, and there is much less Aboriginal archaeological heritage near the older cities than there is elsewhere on this continent. The hammer of colonisation fell harder in the places where cities grew, on their people and on the land. The more suitable the land was for Western agriculture the more violent the colonisation that descended, and greater was the coloniser's desire to erase Indigenous history.

Archiving and collecting has never been neutral because the people who choose what to collect are not neutral and cannot be. You can read the touch of hands, can feel the minds, can see the attitudes of the collectors upon it. So, it is important to understand what the layers of collection, the layers of collecting, say to us about the collectors.

The city remembers itself into being. It is everything that has happened here: it is campfires, bark canoes and scar trees; it is colonisation, with the arrival of the white men and the building of a city on stolen land; it is the hanging of Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner. These men were not from here, they were brought here from Van Diemen's Land, now known as Tasmania, by George Augustus Robinson to help him 'civilise' the natives of what was to become Victoria.

They never returned home. They left the fledgling city of Melbourne and fought a guerrilla war against the colonisers until they were caught and tried for murder. Tunnerminnerwait reportedly said, upon his conviction,

after his death he would join his father in Van Diemen's Land and hunt kangaroo.¹ I would argue that it is not a stretch to consider that their violent rebellion was propagated by the knowledge they might never be allowed to return home alive.

They were hung on 20 January 1842, a scant seven years after Batman founded the settlement and a full five years before letters patent from Queen Victoria gazetted the city. It could be argued that their death was not within the city, as the city did not legally exist, but they will be under the city forever. Their bones became, perhaps, part of the foundations of the city itself, one of the first changes the white men made to the land. The men – their bones and their flesh – are part of the land, now and forever, because the exact place of their burial is unknown, although we do know it is under what is now Queen Victoria Market, where many other bodies lie. The exact place of their execution, the first public execution in Melbourne's history, is known, or near enough.

On the site where Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner were hanged by the neck until dead is now a memorial by Wiradjuri artist Brook Andrew and his collaborator Trent Walter, [Standing by Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner \(2016\)](#). An aluminium and bluestone swing carrying the weight of history – not quite hanging but representing the act with chains – sits right where those men were hanged. The bluestone blocks are less like swings and more like tombs or tombstones, the tombstones those men never received. Newspaper stands in the colour of the Aboriginal and Australian flags watch on from where the crowd of onlookers once might have stood, watching as black men were executed, bearing witness. News, and thus history, are the witnesses; all of Australia watches together. It is the published news that often becomes the history because that which is not written down is too easy to lose.

The city remembers itself into being. The city's collection is huge, a repository of treasures of public art, priceless art and artefacts. It is the city's physical memory and we can walk among it, in the civic buildings, in the streets, in the collection store. The layers of history can be seen if you look hard enough, squint a little to see through or beyond the surface. It takes effort to look below the surface, but not expertise. The layers are there for everybody to see, if only they looked through the lens of history.

Sometimes the layers of history are as thin as Australia's veneer of civility, though each has left its trace. Those traces have been collected and protected, preserved and conserved, but, the traces of the land before, the traces of the people and culture before colonisation, have been all but lost. Yet the earliest traces of the colonisers remain embedded in the archives, in the city's collection, for that is what was considered important. It was that which was thought worth saving by the colonists who built the archive and the collection at its beginning.

Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner have left no trace on the skin of the city. They would have disappeared forever if not for memory – if not for history. The trace we have in the public art installation by Brook Andrew and Trent Walter is recent, four years old at the time of writing; those two men lay in their graves, unmarked and without memorialisation, for more than 170 years. They were men the city had wanted, for years, to forget.

The year before the public installation was unveiled, the City of Melbourne commissioned a painting from Wadawurrung artist Aunty Marlene Gilson. Her [Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner \(2015\)](#) shows the spectacle of those men being executed in a camp that was not even close to being the city it would become. This work, too, is part of the collection: the city before it was a city, those men standing strong and being taken to the gallows.

Every year, every day, every moment since invasion and the beginning of colonisation has left a mark on the skin of the city. The layers will be there for centuries to come, even if we forget how to read them, even if we lose the context for the changes and context in which material was collected. Every generation has left its historical mark on the city, much of it intentional – public art, monuments, buildings. Even changing preferences in architectural style tell a story, and so does the historical detritus and the material culture that is no longer wanted or needed.

There's a hexagonal stone horse-hitching post in Treasury Gardens, moved there in 1971 after being on Spring Street for some 80 years, for decades after its obsolescence. That post was a thing of utility but no longer needed, a discarded piece of the city's history perhaps historically interesting but, I believe, not as interesting as a scar tree. We only know that there would have been scar trees here because they are everywhere in the south of Australia and most the way through the north; they are everywhere there's a river to cross, a cradle or coolamon to make, a birth or death to mark.

There are scar trees in Melbourne that predate colonisation, but they have not been protected, are not part of the collection. Nor are they still-living trees. A photograph in the collection by Zoe Ali, titled [Scar Tree \(2010\)](#), depicts a precolonial scar tree, or the remains of one, a disconnected stump set on a concrete slab. A broken body, a destroyed church, a holy site in disrepair, the tree was caught in arrested collapse; it was frozen in that state of partial destruction by conservators, who have kept it from rotting away completely. The scar tree itself is not part of the City of Melbourne Collection; it is protected by the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register, protected by the state, as it should be.

There are new carved trees and artistic representatives of scar trees in the parks and streets of Melbourne, developed in recent times as works of art. The project [Scar – A Stolen Vision \(2001\)](#), coordinated by Wiradjuri artist Kimba Thompson and featuring scar-tree analogues carved into and painted onto repurposed pier poles from the Docklands redevelopment by a number of Aboriginal artists (Karen Casey, Craig Charles, Glenn Romanis, Maree Clarke, Ray Thomas, Ricardo Idagi and Treahna Hamm) strongly suggests this lost history, this lost material culture.

The work and its title throw into stark relief scar trees, the scars of colonisation on the land, the scars on bodies, and the scars racist practices have left on culture and people. It leads us to interrogate not only why are there so few precolonial artefacts in Melbourne but also to question the land management practices and colonial racism of the invaders. The work's proximity to the river clearly references the tendency of scar trees to be near water, as well as the changes to the river itself, a landscape so changed that its shape is barely recognisable. During the life of the river, the rock-bar was destroyed, letting in the saltwater; streams running into the city were bricked over and built upon; swamps were drained and claimed; the edges of the river were moved and hardened; and the bends in the river straightened. Like most other 'Aboriginal Australia' pieces in the collection, *Scar – A Stolen Vision* is less than 20 years old.

Interestingly, [Fairies Tree \(1934\)](#), a carved tree in Fitzroy Gardens by non-Indigenous artist Ola Cohn, showing mostly creatures of European legend, is still extant. It is protected from the elements by chemical treatments and by being transferred from the soil onto concrete. An artistic gift from Cohn to the children of the city, it is considered culturally significant when Aboriginal material culture was not, back in 1934 at least. Cohn was offered two dead trees for her carving. One of them was an Aboriginal scar tree that she considered sacred and refused to use.² It is possible that 'sacred' tree Cohn was offered is no longer extant; it was unlikely to have received the same protection as a work of art. This is indicative of white Australia's view of culture; a 'gift to the children' by an artist of European descent was valued more than scar trees, more than the life of the river itself, more than the people who had lived here forever. The remaining scar tree in the city, the one on the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register, is conserved and protected. It is too late for the scar trees already gone.

The river mists must wonder who or what these newcomers are. Where does this culture belong that does not respect the river, that carved and reshaped and then hardened the banks, that dredged the river deeper and navigable for a moment of time when they used it as a road? Perhaps the city would now breathe better if the river had been untouched, the stone wall and the rapids left, the banks still mud and reeds, if the old floodplains still flooded with the winter rains.

For decades, for more than a century, it was the colony that was recorded, not the people of the land or their lives, or the life of the land itself. The buildings grew so fast in the city that in a geological timeframe they appeared almost instantly. By the timeframe of human occupation on the river – the city is less than 200 years old and the peoples of the Kulin Nation have lived here 65,000 years – Melbourne has existed for a blink of an eye. Aboriginal people have been here some 300 times as long as the city has.

The city has grown atop the city, there is history under the surface history.

There's a detached brass [plaque](#) in the collection, from 1846, before letters patent gazetted the city of Melbourne, marking the foundation stone of Prince's Bridge over the Yarra River. That plaque is not in situ because the bridge is not either; by 1888 there was a new bridge in the same place, the second bridge, which is still in use and a Melbourne landmark.

Later, protest flags and photographs of protests were collected, showing what the people themselves considered important. It is the people, after all, who are the city. One of my favourite treasures in the collection is a [photograph by Rennie Ellis](#) from the gay pride marches in 1973. In black and white, it depicts Gordon Doak, marching with his placard-flag he had carried on foot, jogging from Sunshine to the currently (perhaps temporarily) erased City Square. Both his run and the opportunity for coming out in spectacular fashion – and the built, rebuilt, redesigned and then erased City Square – are part of this history of the city. City Square is a prime example of how the city has changed and is changing. It was built in 1966, redesigned

twice and is currently, as I write, a huge hole in the ground from which drilling machines dig train tunnels through the bones of Kulin Country. The [Burke and Wills monument](#), also part of the collection, which had been relocated several times before arriving at the corner of City Square, is currently in storage, protected from the ravages of constructing a train tunnel. This, too, is part of the fabric of history. Although we consider stone and bronze to be permanent, these artefacts are regularly transported.

Given the impermanence of monuments, perhaps we should not become attached to them. They are not history; they are the traces of the moment in which they are erected. Like buildings or bridges, they are useful until they are not. Indeed, the decision to remove statues is also historic; the absence of those statues is also the mark of a moment on history.

If we can erase history's physical traces from the skin of the land by removing a bridge or demolishing a building, why is removing a statue taboo to some? If we can remove Burke and Wills to dig a train tunnel, why can we not remove them to storage because people consider the historical events they represent offensive? Time is a line, it only travels one way; you cannot reverse history. The removal of statues is merely another layer of history; it is not removing, erasing or deleting the past, it is moving forward.

History continues and always will. Attitudes to collecting and the collection also continue to change. From circa the centenary of Federation, in 2001, onwards there has been a concerted effort to correct the paucity of Aboriginal content in the collection. The city, its curators and collection managers, seeing the gaps in the collection, have commissioned multiple works that interrogate the colonial moment and question who we are and what the city is. Much of the Indigenous collection's material is contemporary art, acquired in the last 20 years. That is not a denial of history or rewriting of history; it does not reverse the racism in the collection or take it away. Rather, this change is making history, recording the moment that things started changing, that curators, collectors and archivists began considering Indigenous material worth collecting.

The addition of Aboriginal Melbourne to the archive, and the active collection of contemporary Indigenous art and material culture, is a new layer of history in the collection and upon the city. That linearity of time, adding to the archive and the collection rather than removing from it, is how history works. Material is added to the collection and new analyses interrogate what's known. This essay is part of that process, yet another layer in the story of the city and the collection. As long as the collection exists, the information will be there. Looking backwards into Aboriginal history can only enhance the archive, enriching both the story of the city and the lives of those who deep-dive into the collection and archives.

Adding to and reshaping the archive is not only truth-telling, it provides content for future historians, who can discover this moment when greater content on Aboriginal Australia was added to the collection – when attitudes to the city's history and the attitudes of its residents are evolving. It is as necessary to interrogate the past as it is to add to it, and the decisions of colonisers can be questioned through the archives, regardless of whether their traces on the skin of the city are removed.

Removal of Cook's cottage, his [statue](#) or the bronze of [Matthew Flinders](#), near the corner of Swanston and Flinders Streets, will not remove their legacy, for good or for bad, just as leaving them there does not enhance their legacy or teach us much about history. History is not recorded on the statues. What statues do, however, is tell people what the city considers important; their presence, if anything, could be considered an insult to the victims of their historical acts. The decision to unpack, question and interrogate the colonial moment that the statues represent can tell marginalised people that they are important.

Time moves forward. It is watched over by the statue of [Pastor Doug and Lady Gladys Nicholls](#), in Parliament Reserve, right near Parliament House. Again, erected in the 21st century, unveiled in 2006, this important statue corrects the imbalance, in which no earlier statues recognised Aboriginal people. Doug Nicholls was a football player and a tent boxer, and later became the secretary of the Aborigines Advancement League and a lay preacher. He earned a knighthood and became the governor of South Australia before ill health forced him to retire.

When I last saw that statue in person there were flowers, most likely picked from the reserve, perhaps from the beds around the plinth, in Pastor Doug's hand. This is not uncommon, as they are there in his hand almost every time I go there. That, too, is a layer of history – a tradition of enhancing Doug and Gladys with flowers, a beautiful ephemeral addition to the art.

I am writing this essay in interesting times, in complicated times when a pandemic has disrupted our lives, the society and structures we live within, and the city itself. I wonder what traces this moment will leave on the fabric of Melbourne, on the minds of the city denizens and on the collection. The most recent layer of history

is, without doubt, one we are living now. However, isn't that always true. In history, every moment, even the most mundane, exists. It is just that not every moment is considered worth recording.

And I wonder, what trace this moment will leave on the city and on the collection. We can be certain of something. People desire to change the traces on the city's skin, perhaps change the collection, particularly through street art, to better represent historical truth and the cultural fabric of the people.

We should not fear change, we should embrace it, for if there is one thing that does not change it is that culture is always changing. Whatever we do now, whoever we are now, we will leave our traces on the city. We will change the skin of the city, and we and our moment will be recorded in the collection.

¹ Michael Roe, 'Eumarrah', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, supplementary vol., Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 2005; online at <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/eumarrah-12905>

² Barbara Lemon, 'Folk of the Fairies' Tree', *City Collection*, <http://citycollection.melbourne.vic.gov.au/essays>