

Monumental ask: historian wonders if graffiti should stay

Andrew Taylor

There was outrage when the words “change the date” and “no pride in genocide” were painted on a statue of Captain Cook in Hyde Park last year. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull called the vandalism a “deeply disturbing” act of Stalinism.

But in a speech delivered at the launch of the Australian Heritage Festival yesterday, historian Lisa Murray questioned whether the words were part of the changing meaning of the statue.

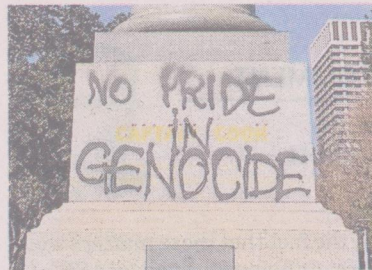
“Is challenging the dominant historical narrative a legitimate part of the monument’s heritage?” she asked. “Should the graffiti have

been removed? Or does the graffiti’s violation of the broader social value of ‘respect’ – respect for the law, respect for cultural expression – invalidate its social message and contribution to heritage?”

Dr Murray also said in her speech that she disagreed with the Prime Minister’s denunciation of the vandalism.

“This act is not obliterating Australia’s history,” she said. “It is part of a growing public consciousness to recognise Australia’s history and to point out the complexity of our past.”

Dr Murray’s comments were made as part of the 2018 Jim Kerr Address to commemorate the International Day for Monu-



The vandalised statue of Captain Cook in Hyde Park last year.

ments and Sites at Sydney Opera House. Dr Murray said she was speaking as a public historian and not in her role as the City of Sydney historian.

She said similar debates about statues had occurred overseas,

noting the removal of monuments of confederacy figures in the US.

Using the Captain Cook statue as a case study, Dr Murray offered a reflection on the changing and conflicting social values associated with public monuments.

The bronze sculpture of Captain Cook, standing on a slab of granite, is dated 1879 but Dr Murray said it took years to fund and build. “Erection of the Captain Cook statue was beset by difficulties, not least a shortfall in subscription funds,” she said.

Dr Murray said the latest debates about public statues and history reflected an evolving understanding of the past that included the voices of Indigenous people.

“James Cook was more than just a navigator,” she said. “In Australian history, the character of Captain Cook has come to symbolise colonisation and dispossession; more so than Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet.”

Before the graffiti attack, the statue had attracted attention following comments by well known Indigenous journalist Stan Grant about the “damaging myth” that Captain Cook discovered Australia – a view Mr Grant said had been discredited by Australia’s courts and the United Nations. “The debunking of the discovery doctrine still makes waves in this country because it challenges the cultural power of white Australia,” Dr Murray said.