

## Who was Charles La Trobe?

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La Trobe University received its name in 1964, during a tumultuous period of political contention and radical social change in Australia that targeted the very heart of the nation. The 1963 submission of the Yirrkala bark petitions, the 1965 Freedom Rides, and the 1967 constitutional referendum typify the spirit of the times.

It was in this context that a committee of thirteen men and women was assembled to advise the government on all matters relating to the establishment of a new Victorian university. This committee unanimously decided to name the new university after Charles Joseph La Trobe (1801-1875).

Who was Charles La Trobe and why was he nominated as the university's namesake?

In their own words, the committee selected Charles La Trobe because of 'his great historical significance for Victoria and Australia'. They also noted that his name was recognised internationally, and that although he was not himself a 'university man', he had a 'lively interest in every aspect of life of the community, the will to work for the good of other men [sic], and a sense of responsibility towards posterity.'<sup>1</sup> The committee also considered naming the university after a Kulin word, 'birrarang'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J.R. Archibald Glenn, 'The Planning Phase', in *Building La Trobe University: Reflections on the First 25 Years, 1964-1989*, ed. William J. Breen and John A. Salmond (Melbourne: La Trobe University Press, 1989), 24.

<sup>2</sup> John S. Gregory, 'Qui cherche, trouve: an overview of the first twenty-five years', in *Building La Trobe University*, 6

Since that time, Indigenous activism has brought significant changes in Australia and other settler colonies, including successful campaigns to centre Indigenous voices and perspectives. Furthermore, global protests such as the Black Lives Matter Movement and the Rhodes Must Fall campaign remind us that commemorative statues and naming practices can legitimise narratives of conquest and dispossession. For many people today, these practices no longer reflect an admirable vision of how society should be.

It's time to take a closer look at who Charles La Trobe was, and what his legacy really is.

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.<sup>3</sup>

He arrived in Melbourne in September 1839 with his wife and daughter, two servants and a prefabricated house which still stands today. He established the State Library and the University of Melbourne, chaired the committee which established the Royal Melbourne Hospital, and helped create the Botanical Gardens. He was a major figure in Melbourne's early history, and his name is still commemorated on streets, buildings and businesses in the city and across the state. The C J La Trobe Society was formed in 2001 to 'promote understanding and appreciation of the life, work and times' of Charles La Trobe.<sup>4</sup>

But this isn't the whole story. Charles La Trobe also played an integral role in the dispossession of the Aboriginal peoples of south-eastern Australia from their lands. As Nathan Mudyi 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

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<sup>3</sup> Two biographies of Charles La Trobe discuss his time in Port Phillip/Victoria as part of the larger context of his life and work: Dianne Reilly Drury, *La Trobe: The Making of a Governor* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2006) and John Barnes, *La Trobe: Traveller, Writer, Governor* (Braddon, ACT: Halstead Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.latrobesociety.org.au/>, accessed 7 September 2024.

a lie.<sup>5</sup> In that spirit, it must be acknowledged that La Trobe was the chief government official in Victoria during a period of genocidal violence.<sup>6</sup>

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".<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> La Trobe's period as Superintendent and then Lieutenant-Governor included the Eumerella Wars, as well as the 1843 Warrigal Creek Massacre in which up to 180 people 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

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<sup>5</sup> Nathan mudyi Sentance, 'Whose History: The Role of Statues and Monuments in Australia', <https://australian.museum/learn/first-nations/statues>, accessed 25 September 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Historian Richard Broome notes that the extraordinary level of violence directed at First Peoples in what would become Victoria in the early years of invasion 'is not genocide in formal meaning of the word—that is, of official, intentional, premeditated killing...there was never an official policy of killing Aborigines' (Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History Since 1800* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2006), 84. In making this statement we use the United Nations definition of genocide codified in 1948 which 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> As Nathan mudyi Sentance argues, the brutality of ongoing invasion and colonisation in Australia fits in this definition of genocide in several ways. Nathan mudyi Sentance, 'Genocide in Australia', 12 July 2022, <https://australian.museum/learn/first-nations/genocide-in-australia/> accessed 7 September 2024. For more information about violence during La Trobe's period of governance see the Colonial Frontiers Massacre Map

(<https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php>) which shows documented massacres of First Peoples across Australia. For more information about La Trobe's policies, actions and opinions about the Aboriginal peoples of Victoria see the special issues of *La Trobeana* devoted to the subject: 16, no.1 (March 2017) and 17, no.1 (2018), available from <https://www.latrobesociety.org.au/latrobeana>, accessed 7 September 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 2; Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso, 2016), 44.

<sup>8</sup> Lyndall Ryan, 'Settler Massacres on the Port Phillip Frontier, 1836-1851' *Journal of Australian Studies* 34, no. 3 (2011), 257-273

settler population of Melbourne was approximately 5,500, and by 1851 it was around 25,000.<sup>9</sup>

La Trobe knew about the violence perpetrated by these settlers 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.<sup>10</sup> Yet when the murderers were finally brought to trial, they were acquitted.<sup>11</sup>

While La Trobe never committed violent acts himself, he did advocate for the use of ‘coercion’ against Aboriginal people (including separating children from their families), despite recognizing that it was “not consistent with the spirit of the age.”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> Historian Heather Le Griffon describes the people being rounded up by “pricking them with bayonets and beating them with the butt end of muskets.” Le Griffon also states that all captives were detained overnight in sheds with no food, water, or sanitation.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Penelope Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities* (Vancouver: UBC Press 2010), 155.

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

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians since 1788*. (London: New Holland, 2003), 234.

<sup>12</sup> La Trobe to the Colonial Secretary on 18 November 1848, cited in John Barnes, *La Trobe: Traveller, Writer, Governor* (Braddon: Halstead Press, 2007), 256.

<sup>13</sup> Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> 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.

On the recommendation of the British Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes (British Settlements) of 1837 an 'Aboriginal Protectorate', which consisted of five 'protectors' charged with protecting and 'civilising' (assimilating) the Traditional Owners of Port Phillip was established by Colonial Secretary Lord Glenelg the year before La Trobe arrived. The protectorate received a hostile reception from early settlers and failed to prevent Aboriginal people from being poisoned, shot, raped, and infected with deadly diseases.<sup>15</sup> It was disbanded in 1849.<sup>16</sup> Historian Fred Cahir notes that 'whilst genuinely sympathetic to Aboriginal people's plight, particularly in regard to protecting Aboriginal women and children from sexual predation by settlers, [La Trobe] did not press for measures strongly recommended by appointed officials including Foster Fyans and the Aboriginal Protectors' made in the hopes of preventing violence.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

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

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<sup>15</sup> Michael F. Christie, 'Port Phillip Protectorate', <https://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM01169b.htm#:~:text=From%201842%20funds%20were%20cut,Committee%20on%20Aborigines%2C%20abandoned%20it.>, accessed 7 September 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Gary Presland, 'The Kulin People and the Failure of the Aboriginal Protectorate during the Superintendency of C. J. La Trobe', *La Trobeana*, 16, no.1 (2017), 5-13.

<sup>17</sup> Fred Cahir, 'Charles Joseph La Trobe and his administration of the Wadawurrung, 1839-1853', *La Trobeana*, 17, no.1 (2018), 14.

<sup>18</sup> Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 43. For more on La Trobe's efforts to work through the issues created by the prosecution of Aboriginal people under British law, see Frances Thiele, 'Superintendent La Trobe and the amenability of Aboriginal people to British law 1839-1846', *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria* 8, 2009.

so by force.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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 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.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Margaret Anderson, ‘La Trobe and the Kulin’, *Agora* 57, 3 (2022).

<sup>20</sup> Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 32-33.

<sup>21</sup> Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*, 107. Marguerita Stephens also argues that the ration system overseen by La Trobe led to starvation. She writes that ‘La Trobe’s adherence to ideological and practical rigidity contributed to the deaths of a very large proportion of the Kulin ...La Trobe’s failure to support ... more liberal, discretionary rationing suggests that humane considerations, like Prospero’s visions, often ‘melted into air’ when pitted against political and economic concerns of empire’. Marguerita Stephens, “‘Unless a Portion be given to the Idle’: The Kulin and the New Poor Law at Port Phillip’, *La Trobeana*, 16, no.1 (March 2017), 50.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson, ‘La Trobe and the Kulin’. John Barnes also argues that while Trobe’s ‘strong sense of Christian duty’ led to efforts for him secure for Aboriginal people the basic rights of British subjects, it also worked against his developing ‘any understanding of their culture and beliefs’. John Barnes, ‘A Moravian “Among the Heathen”: La Trobe and the Aboriginal People’, *La Trobeana*, 16, no.1 (March 2017), 18. Frances Thiele argues that ‘La Trobe viewed Aboriginal people not as equals but as lesser human beings because they were, in his view, Godless’. Frances M. Thiele, *La Trobe and the Bureaucrats: how the best of intentions failed to protect the Aboriginal people of Port Phillip* (Macedon, Vic., F. M. Thiele, 2017, [https://www.latrobesociety.org.au/documents/Thiele\\_La%20Trobe%20and%20the%20Bureaucrats\\_contents.pdf](https://www.latrobesociety.org.au/documents/Thiele_La%20Trobe%20and%20the%20Bureaucrats_contents.pdf), accessed 7 September 2024).

As a new university established in the turbulent 1960s, La Trobe University has a proud history of protest and radical thought.<sup>23</sup> Its five campuses have been, and still are, home to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff who have shaped the university into the institution that it is today.

In 2005, a statue of La Trobe, titled *Landmark*, was created by sculptor Charles Robb at his own expense and donated to the university. It looks like many other bronze statues of historical figures from the past, except for one obvious difference— it is standing on its head.

Robb has explained that the statue is a reminder to staff and students that universities should turn ideas on their heads, and an encouragement to challenge the merit of traditional commemorations and to question their relevance and authority.<sup>24</sup> As we work towards making La Trobe University a safe and inclusive space to work and study we need see Charles La Trobe from all angles – to understand why he was commemorated in 1964 while at the same time recognising his role in the invasion and dispossession which shaped the place where we live, work and study.

<https://www.latrobe.edu.au/about/acknowledgement>

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<sup>23</sup> Barry York, *Student Revolt: La Trobe University 1967-73* (Campbell: Nicholas Press, 1989), <https://c21stleft.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/student-revolt-by-barry-york.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Bronwyn Carlson and Terri Farrelly, *Monumental Disruptions : Aboriginal People and Colonial Commemorations in So-Called Australia* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2023), 99-100.