Fix for statue politics in our hands

Rather than remove antagonistic sculptures of historic NZ figures we can add others which tell rest of story

The tensions that cause so much anxiety in Donald Trump’s America pertaining to statues of civil war figures are starting to echo in New Zealand. This is not a surprise, as we are like the United States, and almost at exactly the same time in the 19th century, also created difficult legacies which we have to deal with in the 21st century.

The particular difficulty at question is a statue of John Hamilton, which was gifted in 2013 to the city named after him. Hamilton was an English naval Commander. He was a man of action who served in the Crimea and China before Britain sent him, his vessel, and his men, to New Zealand to help in the conflicts raging in Taranaki and the Waikato.

Commander Hamilton was not present at the beginning of the Waikato Campaign when Governor George Grey in April 1863 ordered his military forces, who had just finished building the Great South Road, to cross the Mangatawhiri stream, a tributary of the Waikato River. This waterway marked the line that divided the European settlement of Auckland and the territory under the man of Tawhiao Te Wherowhero, commonly known as the Maori King. This man represented a collection of groupings and tribes known as the Kingitanga. Collectively, they were deemed rebels for being unwilling to accept the full and absolute sovereignty of the Crown. Their crime was sincerely believing that the Treaty of Waitangi promised them much greater autonomy and respect than the Government was prepared to give them. Although missing most of the Waikato battles, Commander Hamilton was present when the final engagements spilled into the Bay of Plenty in an attempt to stop the “neutral” tribes who were providing men and materials to the Kingitanga war effort. Matters culminated on April 28, 1865 when General Cameron, with 1650 troops, attacked Horo Ngalio of Tauranga, who was a Kingite supporter, at Pukehinahina/Gate Pa. This Pa was garrisoned by 230 of his people as well as those from Raukawa and Ngati Rangiwewehi. Masterfully, the defenders soaked up the bombardment, waited, and then mauled the British who attempted to storm the Pa, killing 35 of them and injuring 75.

Commander Hamilton, having bravely led his men from the front, was among the dead. Despite their comprehensive victory, the Maori defenders at Gate Pa were gracious and treated the British dead with respect (they were not desecrated) and the wounded with humanity (they were given assistance and water). Despite these chivalrous acts, when General Cameron caught up with the defenders two months later at an unfinished pa at Te Ranga, his foes were defeated, and this time, over 400 of the opposition were killed. In the process of pursuing their enemy, Cameron’s forces implemented a scorched earth policy (destroying houses, crops and livestock), forcing many Maori, whether involved in the fight or not, to flee their settlements, to which they were unable to return for many years. The laws then swung into action, and vast areas of land were confiscated from those deemed to have been in rebellion. These confiscations included, initially, nearly 500,000 hectares of land in the Waikato and nearly 300,000 acres around Tauranga. Without a doubt, these were terrible acts, in which atrocities, indiscriminate warfare, unjustified confiscations and brave deaths from soldiers loyal to the Crown are all part of the same story.

The good news is that unlike in many other parts of the world, subsequent generations in New Zealand have realised the mistakes that were made, and through a sequence of governments since the 1990s, have apologised and offered recompense for the injustices of the past. From such acts, reconciliation between the peoples who once fought each other has been made possible.

Despite these tidies of history, as the solitary statue of John Hamilton remains, the question becomes what should we do with it? The answer is not to remove it because this lump of metal creates offence to some people, but rather to supplement it with more art.

In addition to having a large amount of text explaining the context of John Hamilton and his death, his statue should be supplemented with at least one, if not three, others. The goal should be to balance, not delete, history.

First, Tawhiao Te Wherowhero or some similarly appropriate symbol: second, Heni Te Kiri Karamu, the Te Arawa warrior woman displaying humanity and giving water to the wounded British at Gate Pa; and/or third, two hands shaking or two pens signing, the Waikato-Tainui Deed of Settlement, that would apologise, and provide the core of the compensation that would allow Tainui to grow to hold over a billion dollars in assets. It is time to give the sculptors, not the wreckers, more work.

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