

FATAL COLLISIONS



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*The South Australian frontier
and the violence of memory*

Robert Foster, Rick Hosking
and Amanda Nettelbeck



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PREFACE



The idea for this book originated in the discovery that the three of us – scholars in the fields of History, English and Cultural Studies – had been working independently on the same body of material and exploring similar themes. We decided to combine our individual projects in the belief that, together, they told a fascinating and important story, and one that would be enriched by our different disciplinary approaches. This is a story which takes place in that fluid zone where history, memory and myth meet in popular consciousness, and its subject is the way in which European accounts of frontier violence have been mythologised over time.

While each chapter in this book tells a unique story, collectively they form a narrative sequence: events examined in early chapters have a bearing upon the way events examined in subsequent ones were played out. However, this book is not intended to be a history of violence on the South Australia frontier, but rather an exploration of the ways in which the violence has been remembered.

Robert Foster, Rick Hosking and Amanda Nettelback,
Adelaide, 2001



Map of South Australia showing main locations referred to in this book.

INTRODUCTION: THE VIOLENCE OF MEMORY



The characters sketched in this story were . . . far from the settlements, surrounded by some of the fiercest of the native tribes of Australia, and entirely dependent upon themselves. It is not to be wondered at if, under these circumstances, deeds were committed at which humanity shudders. It is generally assumed that the blacks were the aggressors. No doubt they were so, by stealing sheep and cattle; but that was in retaliation for their country having previously been taken possession of, and in this respect it cannot be disputed that the white man was the aggressor.

Simpson Newland, *Paving the Way*, 1893

In 1849 James Brown, a pastoralist in the lower south-east of South Australia, was charged with shooting dead nine Aboriginal people: an old man, five women and three children. Unable to find witnesses, the crown dropped the case and Brown was released without trial, but few doubted his guilt. According to a local district magistrate, there was 'little question of the butchery or of the butcher'. Brown went on to become a wealthy landowner in the district, eventually entering the pantheon of South Australia's pastoral pioneers. A biography of Brown written in the mid-1920s made a brief reference to the events of 1849, noting that he was 'involved in a charge of poisoning a black-fellow, but emerged from the trial with a clean escutcheon'.¹ Why had the story changed so much: from shooting to poisoning, from nine victims to one, from never facing trial, to being found not guilty?

What forces were at play re-shaping the communal memory of this event?

This book is about the violence of the Australian frontier and the way it has been remembered in Anglo-Australian accounts of the past. In our study of six different frontier episodes, we explore how the memory of those events has been transformed over time. Our primary aim is not so much to uncover the ‘truth’ of the historical events – although what actually happened, as far as can be established, is important to our analysis – but rather to examine how the events have been mythologised. While these stories of frontier violence may have been mythologised, the violence of the frontier was no myth.

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN SETTLEMENT AND FRONTIER VIOLENCE

South Australians have long thought of their state as one that has been different in its treatment of Indigenous people. On the eve of settlement the colonisation commissioners in England wrote that ‘far from being an invasion of the rights of the Aborigines’, the new colony would be settled by ‘industrious and virtuous settlers’ who would protect them from the pirates, squatters and runaway convicts who infested the coast.² Yet the Act establishing the colony, passed two years before the commissioners wrote their report, made no mention of the Indigenous inhabitants and declared the region ‘waste and unoccupied’.³ What had changed was not the sentiments of the prospective colonists, but those of the British government. Shortly after the passage of the South Australia Act in 1834, a Whig government under Lord Melbourne came to power and the colonial office was now dominated by humanitarians. Men such as Lord Glenelg, Sir George Grey and James Stephens, who had been active campaigners against slavery, now expressed their concerns about the rights of Indigenous people. It was through their efforts that South Australia’s colonisation commissioners were made to take the rights and interests of Indigenous people into account.⁴ It is debatable whether the exertions of the colonial office had much effect – it was a long way, both literally and metaphorically, from the enlightened rhetoric of Exeter Hall to the realities of the Australian frontier.

The colonial office, concerned that previous colonial policy had been capricious and had given licence to the inhumane treatment of

Aboriginal people, insisted that they be regarded as British subjects.⁵ Captain Hindmarsh, the first governor of South Australia, made this theme the centrepiece of his Proclamation speech in 1836. He told the colonists of his intention

to take every lawful means for extending the same protection to the Native Populations as to the rest of His Majesty's Subjects, and of my firm determination to punish with exemplary severity, all acts of violence and injustice which may in any manner be practised or attempted against the Natives, who are to be considered as much under the safeguard of the law as the Colonists themselves, and equally entitled to the privileges of British subjects. I trust therefore, with confidence to the exercise of moderation and forbearance by all classes, in their intercourse with the Native Inhabitants, and that they will admit no opportunity of assisting me to Fulfill His Majesty's most gracious and benevolent intentions towards them, by promoting their advancement in civilization, and ultimately, under the blessing of Divine Providence, their conversion to the Christian faith.⁶

Hindmarsh's declaration that Aboriginal people were to be considered British subjects did not alter the realities of settler violence and Aboriginal resistance to invasion. A war was being fought which could not officially be acknowledged. How could a violent frontier exist between British subjects? This contradiction would lead to a frontier culture in which violence tended to be covert, and its representation clothed in euphemism.

At first, the colony that 'was to be different' did indeed appear to be so, with very few clashes between settlers and Aboriginal people in the first 18 months of settlement. The colonists proudly boasted of their good relations with the Aborigines, which they explained by reference to the 'good character' of the settlers and the alleged acquiescence of the original owners of the land.⁷ In truth it was neither government policy nor the 'good character' of the settlers that accounted for South Australia's relatively peaceful early years; the Kaurna of the Adelaide plains were simply overwhelmed by the sheer weight and concentration of European settlement. The slow progress of surveys meant that it was not until the early months of 1839 that the settlers began radiating outwards from Adelaide.⁸

A series of dramatic events shocked the colonists out of their

complacency. In 1839 shepherds Duffield and Thompson were killed on the outskirts of Adelaide. In 1840, the Brig *Maria* was shipwrecked on the southern end of the Coorong, near the present-day town of Kingston, and 26 survivors were killed by Aboriginal people. Attacks on overlanding parties bringing sheep and cattle into the new colony culminated in a series of bloody clashes on the River Murray in 1841. By the following year the isolated settlement of Port Lincoln was in a state of siege as Aboriginal owners of the country attacked most of the newly established pastoral stations.⁹ At this early stage of settlement, when the population was still small and the economy struggling, the government responded to these challenges with large-scale punitive expeditions, convinced that displays of force were necessary to demonstrate European authority.

In this climate of crisis, the morality of dispossession finally became a topic of public debate. Writing in the *Southern Australian*, editor Charles Mann put forth the standard justification for dispossession:

In our opinion, we have exactly the same right to be here, that the older inhabitants have. They at a remote, as we at a later period, were guided here by enterprise or accident. From the moment they arrived, until the present, they have not sought, and therefore not acquired as tribes a property in the soil – nor, as individuals, the ownership of things which grow or roam upon its surface. They have neither erected habitations upon it, nor pierced its bosom to make it minister to their support and comfort. Generation after generation, their thinly scattered tribes have wandered homeless over its fertile districts, unconscious or heedless of the treasures within them. The earth was made for man. We found the country in the state in which ages before the black people had found it – its resources undeveloped, unappropriated!¹⁰

Responding to Charles Mann's appeals to legal and political theory to justify dispossession, a correspondent to the same newspaper put the claims of the settlers more bluntly:

It is now in vain to talk about the injustice of dispossessing the natives of part of their territories, though it were granted that they ever possessed them; every one of us, by coming here, has, in reality, said that we either had such a right – or, not having the right, that we, at least, had the might, and resolved to exercise it.¹¹

The writer invited any of those who believed they were unjustly taking possession of the country to leave on the next boat home. He rejected as hypocritical the claim that they were acting toward the Indigenous people according to 'higher motives', suggesting that 'our conduct toward them, will be, and has been, regulated upon the principle of expediency and self-interest'.¹²

By the mid-1840s the pastoral frontier began to advance rapidly into the interior, and as it did so the clever words of newspaper editors and the ethical dilemmas of evangelists became increasingly irrelevant. For settlers, who were a long way from Adelaide and often well beyond the range of police and other government officials, utilitarian concerns prevailed. Not only were they unconcerned about any rights to the land Aboriginal people might have had, they quickly came to view them as trespassers on European land. James Hawker, who established Bungaree station north of Adelaide, describes the attitude of the settlers as they were establishing their runs:

The manners and customs of the natives were not known, and no attempt at friendly overtures were considered necessary towards them in the earlier settlement of the northern districts; in fact, they were looked upon as equally detrimental with wild dogs on a run. All means short of extermination were used to drive them away from the runs . . .¹³

Faced with Aboriginal resistance, those on the frontiers of settlement employed common strategies to secure the land. In the early phase of settlement, many agreed that it was good policy to keep Aboriginal people 'at a distance'. In his epitome of race relations on the frontier, explorer and sub-protector Edward Eyre encapsulates the attitude of a typical colonist setting up his station. Feeling isolated from help, his men dispersed over the countryside, and having heard dire accounts about the 'treachery of the savage' the settler:

comes to the conclusion, that it will be less trouble, and annoyance, and risk, to keep the natives away from his station altogether; and as soon as they make their appearance, they are roughly waved away from their own possessions: should they hesitate, or appear unwilling to depart, threats are made use of, weapons perhaps produced, and a show, at least, is made of an offensive character, even if no stronger measures be resorted to.¹⁴

As long as Aboriginal people held the Europeans in dread, so the argument went, they would not be tempted to approach.

Some observers explained the high level of violence in the Port Lincoln district in the early 1840s as a consequence of the timidity of the settlers. The editor of the *Adelaide Examiner*, Dr Richard Penney, ascribed the behaviour of the Aborigines in the district to 'the lamentable negligence of the former settlers in allowing robberies to take place almost every week with impunity, and the want of courage displayed by others . . .'¹⁵ The pastoralist John Bull, in reflecting on the violence in Port Lincoln and other districts, distilled the moral:

where the blacks, having taken advantage of a few individuals venturing to occupy lonely places, have killed them, safety for succeeding parties has not been secured until a dread has been created in the minds of the offending tribe by speedy and severe punishment inflicted on the offenders and accomplices, and on those who sheltered them. It is a fact that cannot be denied that there has been no safety for the lives and properties of the whites until such a dread has been established.¹⁶

J.F. Hayward's account of his experiences as a pastoralist in the northern districts of the colony in the 1850s reflect most of these ideas. He claimed that his 'campaigns' against the Aborigines were a necessary and ordinary part of frontier life:

In every case that I missed sheep I at once followed them, camping when no longer their traces were visible, and at dawn again at them, till I rescued my sheep or punished the thieves.¹⁷

In Hayward's words, Aboriginal people had to be 'chastised' or 'terrified'; otherwise there would be no end to the attacks on his stock and property. Eliza Mahoney, in her memoirs of the 1840s, uses the same euphemism of punishment to express the ordinariness of vigilante violence: 'a few of the energetic young men . . . gave the blacks such a punishment' after the disappearance of sheep 'that they never attacked in any force again'. 'We supplied a horse,' she adds, willingly confessing collusion in what was clearly considered to be a common and acceptable response to 'troublesome blacks'.¹⁸

In modern critiques of the frontier, Indigenous violence against the settlers is rightly described in political terms. Historians now recognise Indigenous violence as 'resistance' and portray their methods

as 'guerilla tactics' against an invading force.¹⁹ This was not usually the contemporary portrayal. Aboriginal people on the frontier were commonly described as 'annoying' or 'troublesome', and their attacks those of 'depredators', 'marauders' or 'plunderers'. Alternatively, their actions were dismissively interpreted as indicative of their 'savage' character. In other words the vocabulary used in accounts of frontier violence classed Indigenous actions as criminal or malicious rather than as political in character.²⁰ More serious violence in frontier districts was sometimes described as 'warfare', but this was the exception rather than the rule.²¹ For the settlers to view Aboriginal attacks on life and property as resistance against invasion would have been to ascribe a level of social organisation and political organisation to Indigenous society that they were rarely willing to concede.

Violence by settlers against Aboriginal people often went unreported. On those occasions that it was reported, it was typically ascribed to ex-convicts or other unsavoury characters who were said to be drawn to the isolated and lawless boundaries of European settlement. Explorer and colonial bureaucrat Charles Sturt argued that settlers often established their runs with every intention of treating the Aboriginal people fairly, but 'it more frequently happens, that the men who are sent to form out stations beyond the boundaries of location, are men of bold and unscrupulous dispositions, used to crime, accustomed to danger, and reckless as to whether they quarrel, or keep on good terms with the natives who visit them'.²² Writing of his experiences in the northern districts of the colony in the 1850s, J.F. Hayward claimed that his men were the 'offscourings of the colony, old lags or convicts, who had pitched on the farthest out-station to avoid being followed by police'.²³ While the owners of pastoral runs may have found these men objectionable, and expressed disquiet about their actions, they nonetheless employed them, presumably because they did the job that was expected. It is telling that the only European hanged for killing an Aboriginal person in colonial South Australia was an ex-convict, Thomas Donnelly. Donnelly's hanging in 1847 was held out as an example of the legal system's impartiality, yet it did little to alter the essential realities of frontier violence; indeed, it may merely have ensured that Indigenous deaths at settlers' hands became more covert.

While the Australian frontier witnessed large scale battles between Aboriginal people and Europeans, such as the clashes near the Rufus River in 1841, the violence was typically localised and covert. Writing

of Yorke Peninsula in the mid-1840s a settler noted how he always reported the killing of Aboriginal people to the police, but added that many ‘bushmen came to grief by keeping things of this sort quiet’.²⁴ The truth of the matter is that many bushmen did keep ‘things of this sort quiet’, but very few came to grief. While inquiring into the murder of an Indigenous boy in the south-east in 1846, a local magistrate observed:

It is impossible to get at the truth among the rest of the ruffians who infest the neighbourhood and I believe a wholesale system of murder has been carried on, which it is most difficult to obtain any evidence of.²⁵

As historian Tom Griffiths observes, war on the Australian frontier did not fit the colonists’ ‘image of a war’:

Their experience was not of public violence against a respected foe, but more frequently a drama of betrayal, fear and disdain. A proper war would have dignified their violence, brought it out in the open and allowed them the romance of heroes and campaigns.²⁶

The undeclared war of the Australian frontier produced a culture of secrecy, ensuring that much of what happened would be clothed in euphemisms, and the knowledge transmitted with all the accuracy of a Chinese whisper.

It is this very pattern of violence that makes it so difficult to make definitive statements about the number of Aboriginal people who died in South Australia’s frontier wars. The number of European deaths is easier to establish. Henry Reynolds estimates that, Australia-wide, somewhere between 2000 and 2500 Europeans died ‘in the course of invasion and settlement’.²⁷ This estimate is based on a number of detailed regional studies. Loos and Reynolds estimate that 850 Europeans and the allies died ‘by spear and club’ in Queensland between 1840 and 1897, Ryan gives a figure of 200 for Tasmania while Christie offers a comparable figure for Victoria.²⁸ Given the pattern of violence, Reynolds suggests a ratio of between five and ten Aboriginal deaths to every one European death—a total of about 20,000.²⁹ A detailed survey of the South Australian experience has yet to be undertaken, but based on a preliminary survey of colonial

records we would conservatively estimate a minimum of about 80 European deaths,³⁰ which would indicate an Aboriginal death-toll of between 400 and 800 people. These estimates for South Australia are, however, highly speculative and will remain so until a detailed study is undertaken.

MYTHOLOGISING THE FRONTIER

A feature of national histories written in the era of 'White Australia', from the turn of the century to the 1960s, is the almost total exclusion of Indigenous people from the story. In his landmark *Boyer Lectures* of 1968, the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner drew the nation's attention to this fact, which he termed 'the great Australian silence'. It was not something, he said, that could be simply explained by absent-mindedness, but was rather 'a structural matter'. It was as though the window through which we viewed the past had 'been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape'.³¹ Walter Murdoch's school textbook, *The Making of Australia*, first published in 1917, provides us with a typical view from this window. It begins with the statement that when 'people talk about "the history of Australia", they mean the history of the white people who lived in Australia'. The Australian Aborigines, writes Murdoch, might be of interest to scientists, but they are of no concern to the historian:

He is concerned with Australia only as a dwelling place of white men and women, settlers from overseas. It is his business to tell us how these white folk found the land, how they settled in it, how they explored it, and how they gradually made it the Australia we know to-day.³²

In the grand narrative of Australian history, Indigenous people were consigned to the shadowy margins.

This is less true of regional and local histories. In a recent analysis of commemorative local histories written by students in the 1920s, the cultural historian Chris Healy notes that Aboriginal people were generally discussed in their accounts, even when they were excluded from the students' own textbooks. These histories, he writes, were the 'product of informed local historical knowledge' and 'completely at odds with the received wisdom of a twentieth-century white historical silence'.³³ The nature of their inclusion, however, was a selective one,

shaped by the interests and aspirations of those telling the story, and the story they most wanted to tell was that of the 'white folk' who 'found' and 'settled' the land – the pioneer.

The 'pioneer legend' emerged in the 1880s and 1890s at a time when the frontier, for most Australians, was becoming increasingly distant in both time and space. It was the pioneer who became the focal point for the nationalist nostalgia of jubilee and centenary celebrations. In the same period, the experiences of the men and women who 'paved the way' were being recorded and their stories, whether contained in local histories, fiction, diaries or personal reminiscence, became very popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Typical of such accounts are the biographical sketches which comprise Rodney Cockburn's *The Pastoral Pioneers of South Australia*, which the author hopes will

serve as an inspiration to the men and women of South Australia who are now engaged in carrying on the pastoral industry under conditions infinitely more safe and felicitous than were faced with varying degrees of triumph and disaster by those who blazed the trail.³⁴

At the heart of 'pioneer legend', writes J.B. Hirst, is the theme of 'subduing the land and battling the elements'.³⁵ The legend 'celebrates courage, enterprise, hard work, and perseverance; it usually applies to the people who first settled the land, whether as pastoralists or farmers, and not those they employed'.³⁶ While Hirst makes no reference to Aboriginal people in the pioneer legend, they are clearly visible in a variety of roles: as faithful servants, guides, workers in the pastoral industry, but perhaps most importantly, as adversaries who had to be battled in the process of 'subduing the land'. A passage from the Cockburn's biography of the west coast pastoralist Thomas Alfred Wilson is typical:

It required the exercise of no little courage as well as determination against heavy odds on the part of the pastoralist to enter into occupation of this isolated region so far away from the homes of the white settlers and where the blacks who had always been very troublesome, were still, even in the sixties, a constant menace to human life and the sheep farmer's flocks.³⁷

While Aboriginal people were often present in accounts of pioneering experience, they were 'put in their place', the stories involving them usually reshaped, in one way or another, to demonstrate the defining virtues of the pioneer.

The pioneer legend played a fundamental role in shaping the way in which Aboriginal people were portrayed in these accounts of frontier violence. It provided a framework which structured the nature of remembrance. Yet it is important to note that other forces were also at work. In thinking about the evolution of these stories, we need to be aware of the varied circumstances in which they were told, and the various forms in which they were recorded. In some accounts, for instance, we see the conventions of romance fiction employed to build tension, add drama or evoke pathos. In others, we see the storyteller overtake the story, the gothic elements of an episode so beguiling that they survive while other more prosaic details are lost. Few of the accounts we examine are 'oral traditions' *per se*, but many are written accounts of oral traditions, dependent upon the authority of 'I was told'. Yet these are oral traditions within a literate culture: the yarn spun by the camp fire may find itself in the memoir or the novel, but just as likely, the yarn-spinner has read the novel or memoir. In tracing the genealogy of these stories, we can observe how they evolve, how new elements are added while others are dropped, until they often bear little resemblance to the events they purport to describe. It is in this sense they can be said to have mythic or legendary qualities.

Each of the chapters in this book traces the way in which a specific event in the history of the South Australian frontier has been transmitted in, and transformed by, the folk-memory of the South Australian community. The six frontier stories explored here took place across the colony during the nineteenth century, from the south-east to the west coast and from the southern Flinders northward to the Queensland border. While by no means covering the extent of the violence that occurred, or is remembered, they are representative of the ways in which the violence of the frontier has been mythologised.

Most importantly, this is a process which depended upon the silencing of other voices, most crucially Indigenous voices. Indigenous accounts of the same events have always existed, but Europeans have rarely listened to them. That perspective – the other side of the frontier – would of course have been antithetical to the pioneer history they were producing. This is not to say, however, that these accounts

were immune from dissent or doubt. Disquiet and unease are apparent in many and suggests two conflicting community preoccupations: on the one hand, a pride in the deeds of those who 'paved the way', and on the other, an enduring anxiety about the implications of the colonial process. Given this contradiction, the process of mythologising the violent frontier has never been, and perhaps never can be, settled.

NOTES



INTRODUCTION: THE VIOLENCE OF MEMORY

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- 29 Ibid., p. 122.
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RECONSTRUCTING THE MARIA MASSACRE

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