

EMU LINK MIGRATION & INTERCULTURAL CONSULTANCIES

Principal: Dr Timothy K Haines JP FAAS MMIA

BA, LittB(Hons), PhD, GCertAustMigLaw&Prac

ABN 85 235 670 565; M.A. Rego # 0321355

242 Grote St Adelaide SA 5000

PO Box 10364 Adelaide BC SA 5000

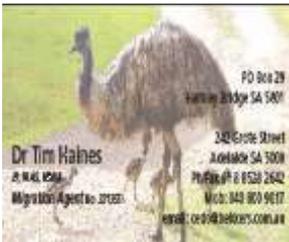
Tel: +61 8 8528 2642/8231 1423

Mob: +61 40 800 9017

Fax: +61 8 8312 4993

Website: <https://www.emulink.com>

Email: contact@emulink.com.au



European Settler-Indigenous Relations:

A Short History of Massacres in South Australia

Timothy K Haines

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In 19th century South Australia, there were many recorded massacres of Aboriginal people by white police and settlers, and of settlers by Aboriginals (although somewhat less of these). Some of these massacres are recorded in police journals of the time, some in the diaries of pastoralists. Yet others have been passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, particularly among Aboriginal people, who have a strong oral tradition.

Significant Incidents in South Australia

According to Elder's account¹, in the 1880s between 200 and 500 people from a wide range of tribes (the Bugadji, Ngamani, Yandruwantha and Yawarawarrka) were shot by police in a single incident at Koonchera point in the State's far north.

Koonchera Point

This was the site of a major ceremony every year, with hundreds of people from these tribes gathering for ceremonial dances, starting at Lake Howitt, and moving the next day to Mindiri Hole, where the massacre took place. It was not clear where the police party had come from, but they were responding to a killing of a bullock by one of the 500 or so tribal people present at the *inma*. Shooting was quite indiscriminate, according to the five people or so who apparently escaped. The police did not file a report on the incident, which was described by Arabana elder Mick Mclean as "the end of the Mindiri people". (Elder, 1988: 157; Hercus², 1977: 56).

Similar killings occurred, according to Elder, at Poeppel's corner and Clifton Hills. Such killings were frequently in response to the theft of a buffalo or to more serious offences such as an isolated rape or murder of a white settler. These incidents went unrecorded by the police parties (ibid, 158-159).

Poeppel's Corner

The Poeppel's Corner incident was in response to a series of one-off events, starting with the kidnapping and rape of a Wardamba woman by a white settler, probably a station hand, from Nappamanna Station. She was eventually released by her attacker back to her family, who then hunted down the white man and killed him. For this crime, a police party again was assembled to seek retribution. By the time that they arrived at Poeppel's Corner, however, the Wardamba had been joined for an *inma* by hundreds of people from local tribes: Midaga, Wankanguru, Nyulubulu, Wangumadia and Yarluyandi. As with the Koonchera Point incident, the members of the police-led party opened fire indiscriminately, no doubt killing hundreds – although there can be no certainty regarding the numbers, due to the absence of any police reporting. (see Elder, 1988: 158, 159)

¹ Bruce Elder is an Australian journalist and author, whose 1988 book, *Blood on the Wattle*, received universal acclaim as "arguably the best book ever written about Aborigines by a white writer" and "one of the ten most influential Australian works of non-fiction in the twentieth century" (SMH).

² Luise Hercus is an Australian Linguist from ANU, who has specialised in Aboriginal languages, particularly in South Australia, since 1963.

Clifton Hills

Clifton Hills was a small settlement on The Birdsville Track, between Sturt's Stony Desert and the Simpson Desert. It was here in the 1890s that a group of local Aborigines, probably mostly Wanganguru, caught and speared a bullock and, though cunningly disguising the cooking place, were nonetheless tracked and indiscriminately shot and killed by the stockmen searching for the missing bull. The only man who escaped, Ngadu-dagali, was able to relate the story, and described the shooting of twenty or so of his tribesmen, in retribution for the theft of the bullock (see Elder, 1988: 159, Hercus, 1977: 56-62)

One of the reasons for the sheer number of Aboriginal people present at the time of two of these massacres was the coincidental occurrence of ceremonies at the location and time when the police responded to whatever offence had occasioned their arrival. (ibid)

In July, 1840, the survivors of the *Maria*, wrecked in the Coorong area, were massacred by the local Milmenrura tribe who had actually rescued and assisted them in travelling as far north as the Milmenrura could go (Elder, 195-7; Reynolds, 2006: 84).

The Maria

When the *Maria* survivors failed to acknowledge the assistance that they had received from their Milmenrura saviours³, in the form of reciprocal gifts of clothes and blankets, the tribal people killed the entire survivor party. In response to this, Governor Gawler commissioned summary, reprisal executions, administered by Major Thomas O'Halloran, then Commissioner of Police. These events served as a major turning point in the justice system, with the media questioning closely the legal bases on which Gawler and O'Halloran had acted, and even the Aborigines' Protection Society in London becoming involved. Gawler himself apparently attributed his early recall, in part, to the reaction occasioned by his response to the Milmenrura affair. (see Foster & al, 2001, 58).

The Rufus River massacres, ironically, took place the year after the *Maria* incident, when the military-style Governor Lieutenant-Colonel George Gawler had been replaced by the less authoritarian, more humanitarian Governor George Grey (later Prime Minister of New Zealand), who had long been one of the Whig supporters in Britain of Indigenous rights in the colonies. From the first, Grey declared himself determined to change the militaristic response to Aboriginal rejection of the colonial settlement of South Australia. The party under Major O'Halloran (of *Maria* fame), which had set out to seek retribution from the Rufus River Maraura tribe, who had attacked the settler pastoralists and their flocks, was recalled on Grey's arrival. Interestingly, although Gawler had deliberately toned down O'Halloran's instructions for his expedition, following the public reaction to the *Maria* incident and its fallout,

³ Some histories go further in suggesting a motivation for the massacre, suggesting that the European sailors had sought sexual favours from the women of the tribe (Jenkin, 1985: p 57)

O'Halloran's diarised entries *en route* clearly indicated his intention to suppress the Maraura by violent means:

"I think that a severe lesson to this fierce tribe would greatly conduce to the preservation of life hereafter." (Foster & al, 30)

Recent histories have tended, while acknowledging these occurrences and their significance to the local populations – Aboriginal and settler – nonetheless to focus on background explanations for these records. In doing so, such histories have often cast doubt – whether or not such doubt is intended – on the veracity at least of the reported scale of these alleged massacres. They talk of the "emergent story of pioneer struggles" as a "framework for early reminiscences of the frontier experiences" (Foster & al, 2012: p134) and of "violence as a reinforcing reminder of pioneer stoicism". (p 153).

Often these narratives of the early days were consciously prefaced by the writer's intention to pay tribute to a pioneer past and the values with which that past had become associated: self-reliance, struggle and perseverance, loyalty to God and to the colonial endeavour" (Foster & al, 2001: p 19)

The clear implication here is that these tales may be embellished and a "legend" created. Such embellishment may, it is said, be for the purposes of demonstrating, from the Aboriginal side, the random cruelty of the white settlers and the consequent need for retribution and compensation. Or from the point of view of the descendants of the white "pioneers", it may be to focus on the enormity of the conditions facing those pioneers in "fighting" the "fierce and treacherous native hordes" and their heroism in doing so. Or it might merely be a matter of regional competitiveness, in claiming harsher, more unforgiving conditions than the neighbouring region, over which the pioneers nonetheless triumphed and emerged victorious.

[The Present Context of Waterloo Bay](#)

South Australia's Eyre Peninsula was itself the region of many killings either way during the period following settlement. Reliable estimates point to over 70 acts of serious reciprocal violence in the mid-1800s (Robertson, 2017: pers comm).

John Hamp

On 23 June 1848, the murder of John Hamp, a settler of some note, was recorded on Stony Point Station, in the area of Lake Newland, but the story of his death seems to have been somewhat expanded over the years to include a gruesome detail about his head's being found in the oven by his sons on returning home from shepherding. This detail has been questioned in recent histories but his murder by local Aboriginal people seems irrefutable. The motivation for his murder is less clear, although one reliable source has

suggested that Hamp himself was a man of questionable morality and that his actions towards Aboriginal children had led to his death (Robertson, G, 2017: pers comm).

There seem to have been several “tit-for-tat” murders around this time in the area of Elliston on the Eyre Peninsula. The police were involved in tracking down murder suspects, without a doubt, and doubtless also there were police officers who were themselves involved in murders and massacres, as described above. But there can be no doubt that the instructions issued to the police officers involved advised

“great care, forbearance and steadfastness in your duties so that other tribes may not have the slightest reason for supposing that you are acting as the avenger, and thereby not only depriving you of their support and cooperation in finding the author of the crime, but could induce them to look upon you as the common enemy.” (Instructions from Commissioner O’Halloran to Inspector Tolmer: quoted in Baillie, 1971).

Captain Beevor and Annie Easton

The 3 May 1849 murder of Captain J R Beevor on Tornto Stn, about 80 km northwest of Port Lincoln, caused unrest and resentment among the white population of the district, where Beevor was seen as something of an old war hero: “a most amicable and gentlemanly man”, according to Somerville’s account (Somerville, 1936)

This was followed within four days by the murder of Anne Easton, on the adjoining property of Lake Hamilton Run – again arousing the ire of settlers at the image of a young wife and mother being murdered and possibly raped, as rumour had it.

Yeelanna Stn: Poisoned Flour

Thus when around the same time, in May 1849, it was discovered that five Aboriginal people had died by eating poisoned flour on Yeelanna Station, in the same area, it was assumed that these deaths were linked to those of Beevor and Easton. Patrick Dwyer, a hutkeeper on the station, was arrested and charged with murder on the basis of sub-protector Clamor Schürmann’s autopsy, but Dwyer was released and fled the district – and indeed the country – before he could be properly investigated.

Police Inspector – later Commissioner – Alexander Tolmer, who headed the manhunt for the alleged perpetrators of these crimes (including Dwyer), kept detailed records in his diaries which have since been published (Tolmer, 1882). Although these records give systematic accounts of the various manhunts which followed the murders of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, referred to above, no mention is made of the cliffs at Waterloo Bay. If it is true, as some other histories suggest, that it was Thomas Horn from the station adjoining Beevor’s who pursued the party

of Aboriginal “attackers” and shot them at Waterloo Bay, Tolmer’s account in part confirms this, but omits reference to the cliffs, or indeed to a massacre.

“[The Aboriginal ‘robbers’]...were pursued by Mr Horn and his party without loss of time, and overtaken with the stolen property in their possession; but determined apparently not to part with it without resistance, a fight took place, said to have been commenced by the natives, which resulted in the death of one native woman and two men, the capture of five, and the flight of the rest.”
(Tolmer, 1882: vol II, p 110)

Tolmer, the senior officer in charge of the case and of these pursuits, at most of which he was actively present in person, has thus recorded the chase and subsequent shootings of Aboriginal people by the station owner, Thomas Horn. Leaving aside for the moment the question of the cliffs, the timing and approximate location certainly seem to conform to what we can understand of the context of the Waterloo Bay incident. This leaves the question of our understanding of the alleged “massacre”, and how it should be commemorated.

Waterloo Bay Massacre: Yes or no?

Definition

The general understanding of the word “massacre”, and thus perhaps the basis for argument about whether or not the Waterloo Bay incident can be so defined, seems to focus on large numbers of people killed, with the Australian Oxford Dictionary, published in 2002, qualifying its third entry as “murder of people (esp. a large number)”.

However, the Macquarie Dictionary (2009 edition) defines massacre thus:

“the unnecessary, indiscriminate killing of a number of human beings, as in barbarous warfare or persecution, or for revenge or plunder. 2 a general slaughter of human beings. 3. To kill indiscriminately or in a massacre [French, from Old French *macecler* to butcher from *mache-col* butcher from *masher* smash (from *maccare* to strike; of Germanic origin) + *col* neck (from Latin *collum*) also influenced by *masselier* butcher, from Latin *macellarius*”

This most recent, Australian, definition centres – back to its origins in German and Latin – not on the numbers of people killed but rather on the intent behind the killings. Words such as “unnecessary”, “indiscriminate”, “barbarous”, “revenge” and indeed “butcher” would seem to highlight the random nature of such acts rather than large numbers of victims.

The sixth edition of the Shorter Oxford Dictionary (OED) also gives the French origin of the word, including “shambles” in its definition of the noun form. Most interestingly, although the OED offers, under the verb form of the word,

“1 Cruelly or violently kill...in numbers”, its third listed definition appears as

“3. Murder (one person) cruelly or violently”

It seems clear from these three authorities that the meaning of the word “massacre” inheres in the attitude and intention of the perpetrator, rather than the numbers of victims. Perhaps we would be right in concluding that three random people shot at the end of a pursuit responding to a perceived burglary may constitute a “massacre” as much as 230 chased over a cliff.

That people – Aboriginal people – were killed at Waterloo Bay in 1849 seems undeniable. It also seems more than likely that they were killed by police or a police-sanctioned party, perhaps led by Thomas Horn from the neighbouring station. The motivation for the killing is likely to have been a reprisal for a murder of a white settler, or more than one murder. It is always difficult, if not impossible, in such matters to define a point of origin: the “original” crime which set in train a string of “tit-for-tat” killings.

It is highly unlikely that huge numbers were involved, on the model of the Koonchera Point or Poeppel’s Corner massacres described earlier, but there may well have been over twenty, with some evidence of skeletons in the area (pers comm Robertson, G; Barry, G: 2017).

It was Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister, war leader and historian, who observed that history is written by the victors. In this case, however, there is little dispute about the key historical facts. Any residual argument revolves around the wording of a memorial to those facts and the meaning of those words.

The next page includes suggested wording, depending upon the agreement of the Council and the descendants of the Aboriginal inhabitants of the district. These words are recommended on the basis that, while taking account of the sensitivities of all descendants involved, it is desirable for all members of the community to reconcile and move forward, both absorbing the lessons of the past and developing as a stronger, unified society as a result of this shared history.

Suggested Wording of Monument

Waterloo Bay was the setting of a confrontation in May 1849 between a party of settlers, led by police, and a large number of traditional owners who were killed by the settler party.

- This monument commemorates the new spirit of reconciliation between the traditional owners of this land and the more recently arrived settlers

Though ignorance and indifference has led in the past to the destruction of family life, tolerance, understanding and reconciliation will forge a new beginning and a true community

Omnia Mutantur, Nihil interit
(‘All things are changing: Nothing [truly] dies’)
from Ovid, *Metamorphosis*

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