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# Colonial frontier massacres

Professor Lyndall Ryan

## Background

The digital map of colonial frontier massacre site across Australia grew out the debate about frontier massacre in the Aboriginal history wars of 2000–2003. The questions included: What is a frontier massacre? Where is the evidence? Where did they take place? Were they widespread? Who were the perpetrators? How can we know?

At the time the only Australia wide study of frontier massacre was Bruce Elder's *Blood on the Wattle*. First published in 1988, it contained information about 25 incidents of frontier massacres across Australia. He noted that military massacres were the dominant feature of first settlements in each of the colonies.<sup>1</sup> When the 3rd edition appeared in 2003, more than 100 massacres were chronicled right across Australia and drew on research by regional historians like Andrew Gil for the Kimberley region, Geoffrey Blomfield for the Three Rivers Region of the mid north coast of New South Wales, Peter Gardner for Gippsland in Victoria and Noel Loos for far north Queensland, and the detailed studies of individual massacres by scholars like Luise Hercus, Gordon Reid, and by Roma Kelly and Nicolas Evans.<sup>2</sup> While there was some understanding of the pre-conditions for massacre, these works did not include a clear definition of massacre.

Since then important new regional studies by Ian D. Clark for Western Victoria, Patrick Collins for south west Queensland, Tony Roberts for the Gulf Country, Amanda Nettelbeck and Robert Foster for South Australia, Lyndall Ryan for Tasmania, Darrell Lewis for Victoria River District in the Northern Territory, and Timothy Bottoms for Queensland, have further advanced the field.<sup>3</sup> Clark and Ryan each offered a definition of frontier massacre as the indiscriminate killing of five or six undefended people in one operation and began to query the reliability of evidence of massacre provided in the immediate aftermath. What was missing was a coherent methodology to interrogate the wide array of sources.

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<sup>1</sup> B Elder, *Blood on the wattle: massacres and maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians since 1788*, New Holland Publishers, Sydney, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Elder, *Blood on the wattle*, 3rd edition, 2003; A Gill, 'Aborigines, settlers and police in the Kimberleys 1887–1905', *Studies in Western Australian history*, 1977, pp. 1–28; G Blomfield, *Baal Belbora the end of the dreaming*, Alternative Publishing Co-operative Ltd., Sydney, 1986; PD Gardner, *Our founding murdering father*, Ngarak Press, Ensay, 1990; N Loos, *Invasion and resistance: Aboriginal-European relations on the North Queensland frontier, 1861–1897*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1982; L Hercus, 'Tales of Nadu-Dagali (Rib-Bone Billy)', *Aboriginal History*, 1(1), 1977, pp. 53–62; G Reid, *A nest of hornets: the massacre of the Fraser Family at Hornet Bank Station, Central Queensland, 1857, and related events*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1982; G Reid, *A picnic with the natives: Aboriginal-European relations in the Northern Territory to 1910*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1990; R Kelly and N Evans, 'The McKenzie Massacre on Bentinck Island', *Aboriginal History*, 9(1), 1985, pp.44–52.

<sup>3</sup> ID Clark, *Scars in the landscape: a register of massacre sites in western Victoria, 1803–1859*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, 1995; P Collins, *Goodbye Bussamarai: the Mandandanji Land War, Southern Queensland 1842–1852*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld, 2002.; T Roberts, *Frontier justice: a history of the Gulf Country to 1900*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Qld, 2005; A Nettelbeck and R Foster, *In the name of the law: William Willshire and the policing of the Australian Frontier*, Wakefield Press, Adelaide, 2007; L Ryan, *Tasmanian Aborigines: a history since 1803*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2012; D Lewis, *A wild history: life and death on the Victoria River Frontier*, Monash University Publishing, Melbourne, 2012; T Bottoms, *Conspiracy of silence: Queensland's frontier killing-times*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2013.

In the meantime, the new field of digital technology was emerging. New mapping techniques were enabling the general public to access information that was usually the preserve of specialist researchers. From the new fields of massacres studies and digital technology, the massacre map project was born.

## **Aim and Purpose**

1. Identify and record sites of frontier massacre of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people across Australia 1788–1930.
2. Establish a coherent methodology to interrogate the wide array of sources.
3. Provide a reliable resource for researchers.
4. Inform public debate about colonial frontier violence.
5. Provide open access knowledge to the public and invite contributions.

## **Methodology**

### ***Definition***

In this project, a colonial frontier massacre is defined as the deliberate and unlawful killing of six or more defenceless people in one operation.

Although there is no legal definition of massacre, international scholars of the subject appear to agree that the collective killing of between three and ten undefended people in one operation constitutes a minimum number to make up a massacre.<sup>4</sup> Native American scholar Barbara A. Mann, considers that the killing of six undefended Indigenous people from a hearth group of twenty, is known as a ‘fractal massacre’.<sup>5</sup> Having lost thirty per cent of the hearth group in one blow, the survivors are unable to continue their lives as members of a cohesive unit. They are not only vulnerable to further attack, they are also left with a greatly diminished ability to gather food, or reproduce the next generation or fulfil ceremonial obligations to totem, kin and country. In their diminished state they are also vulnerable to exotic disease.

### ***Characteristics***

- A frontier massacre of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people usually takes place in reprisal for the Aboriginal killing of a colonist, usually a male, in response to the abduction and sexual abuse of an Aboriginal woman, or for the alleged Aboriginal theft of colonial property such as livestock which have occupied Aboriginal hunting grounds.
- The act of massacre is usually a planned rather than a spontaneous event.
- It takes place in secret. No witnesses are intended to be present.
- The assassins and victims often know each other.
- It is a one sided event in that the victims lack self-defence.
- Its purpose is to eradicate the victims or force them into submission.

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<sup>4</sup> PG Dwyer and L Ryan (Eds), 2012, *Theatres of violence massacre, mass killing and atrocity throughout history*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2012, pp. xiii–xxv.

<sup>5</sup> BA Mann, ‘Fractal massacres in the Old Northwest: the example of the Miamis’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 15(2), 2013, p.172.

- It is generally confined in geographical space and takes place over a limited time period such as hours and days, rather than weeks and months.
- Mass killings that take place over a wide area over several weeks, such as the massacres of Warlpiri at Coniston Station in the Northern Territory that took place over several weeks in 1928, are known as a genocidal massacres.
- A code of silence in the immediate aftermath makes detection extremely difficult.
- Witnesses, assassins and survivors sometimes acknowledge the massacre long after the event when fear of arrest or reprisal from the assassins has long passed.
- The most reliable evidence of frontier massacre is often provided by the witnesses, perpetrators and survivors long after the event.

### ***Data collection***

The evidence for colonial frontier massacres in Australia is usually found in a wide range of sources. They include print, archival, oral and visual sources. The list below identifies the kinds of sources that were consulted for the project. The bibliography identifies each source in detail, many of which are now available online.

### ***Sources***

- Australian Newspapers on Trove
- British Parliamentary Papers
- Colonial Parliaments: Select Committee Reports, Votes and Proceedings
- Commonwealth, State and Territory Parliaments: Select Committee Reports
- Commonwealth State and Territory Parliaments: Royal Commission Reports
- Historical Records of Australia
- Historical Records of New South Wales
- Historical Records of Victoria
- Explorers' and surveyors' journals
- Shipping logs
- Settler diaries, correspondence, memoirs, biographies
- Papers from agricultural and pastoral companies
- Missionary correspondence, diaries and reports
- Visual accounts in paintings and drawings
- Travel books and guides
- Published Aboriginal accounts, oral and visual
- Anthropology and Archaeology reports
- Articles in scholarly and local history journals
- Local, community, regional, state and national histories

- Judgements by Aboriginal Land Commissioners under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act*
- Native title submissions
- Government Archival sources: they include unpublished governors' despatches, correspondence from settlers, reports from magistrates, leaders of military and police parties, native police, Crown Lands Commissioners, Protectors of Aborigines and Surveyors
- Court reports

### ***Interrogation of Sources***

Frontier massacres are usually identified in several ways.

1. An initial report in a newspaper of a violent incident is often denied or glossed over at the time. Despite the denial, the research team has a date and a location for a possible massacre. Then several decades later, a perpetrator or a survivor might provide details of the massacre to a local historian, a newspaper reporter, an anthropologist, a traveller, or write about it in a memoir. The need to tell is an important factor in massacre research.
2. Perpetrators sometimes tell a third party in confidence immediately after the event and they in turn might record it in their diary which is published several decades later.
3. Police reports of massacres from the Kimberley are notoriously unreliable because they are often prepared by the perpetrators with the purpose of covering them up. Aboriginal survivors have responded by constructing visual stories of the event in paintings and films. In some cases archaeological reports provide further confirmation.
4. Aboriginal accounts of massacre are usually made by survivors or the descendants of the victims as oral testimony which is then published. In the Kimberley some Aboriginal survivors have documented the event with paintings.
5. It can take several weeks or months to track down the evidence of massacre. The researcher needs to immerse themselves in the circumstances surrounding the massacre, the preconditions, the actual event and the aftermath.

### ***Template***

\* Required fields are indicated with an asterisk.

<b>Field</b>	<b>Description</b>
Site Name*	The unique name of the site of the massacre. This is not necessarily the same as the official name of the place or nearby location but often is. This name may be what the event has come to be known as, or may have been arbitrarily assigned. The name may be changed if we become aware of a more appropriate name.
Aboriginal Place Name	The name that Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people give to the place.
Language Group	The language group of the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people involved in the massacre. The names of language groups are from the AIATSIS information at <a href="#">AustLang</a> .
Consulted	Most of this research is based on historical records and available

<b>Field</b>	<b>Description</b>
	information. Consultation has taken place with organisations such as AIATSIS and Wollotuka, the Aboriginal Studies Centre at the University of Newcastle and through researchers' years of field work. This field indicates whether community has been consulted specifically about the site as part of this research project.
Colony*	The name of the colony in which the event occurred at the time of the event (colony boundaries changed over time and may differ from present day state and territory boundaries).
Present State/Territory*	The present day state or territory where the event occurred.
Police District or Pastoral District	The name of the Police District or Pastoral District at the time of the incident. Both are useful regional indicators for historical research.
Coordinates*	The geographical coordinates locating the site. This point is imprecise to around 250 metres and is a best estimate. It may also be inaccurate due to the vagueness of historical records, because the event took place over a large area, or to avoid desecration of the site.
Latitude*	The Latitude of the incident in WGS 84, rounded to 3 decimal places.
Longitude*	The Longitude of the incident in WGS 84, rounded to 3 decimal places.
Well Known Date	The most likely date of the incident, where the date can be established. Some dates are too vague to indicate a specific date, such as 'End of winter'.
Date*	The date when the incident, or series of incidents commenced. If we cannot be accurate to a day, the start and end date are the range within which the event occurred. E.g.: if records indicate 'late May' the date range will be 20 May to 31 May.
Attack Time	The time of day of the attack: Daybreak, Morning, Midday, Afternoon, Evening, Night.
Victims	An identification of the victims as either Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islanders, Colonisers or otherwise. In some cases more specific information about who the victims were is also provided.
Victim Details	More specific information about the victims where available, such as, shepherds, warriors, women or children.
Victims Killed*	The number of victims killed in the incident. Although numbers are often not exact, this is a single number so that it can be used in calculations. Conservative estimates are used. For example, if records indicate 6 to 10 people were killed the map records the lower number, 6.
Victims Killed Notes	If there is qualifying information about the number. For example, to note ranges of estimates, differences among sources, more detail on the amount wounded or whether they were men, women and/or children.
Attackers	An identification of the attackers as either Aboriginal people, Torres Strait

<b>Field</b>	<b>Description</b>
	Islanders, Colonisers or otherwise. In some cases more specific information about who the attackers were is also provided. Note that magistrates, military, mounted police and native police are counted as 'colonisers'.
Attacker Details	More specific information about the attackers where available, such as military, native police, settlers.
Attackers Killed*	The number of attackers killed in the incident. Although numbers are often not exact, this is a single number so that it can be used in calculations. Conservative estimates are used. Usually no attackers are killed despite defensive action.
Attackers Killed Notes	If there is qualifying information about the number. For example, to note ranges of estimates, differences among sources, more detail on the amount wounded or whether they were men, women and/or children.
Motive	Either 'reprisal' or 'opportunity'. This is limited to whether the massacre was in direct 'reprisal' for a specific incident, such as spearing of sheep, theft, burning crops, murder, etc. or the attackers were acting on an 'opportunity' to attack, not in response to a specific incident. Motivations are often detailed, specific to the incident and may include a long series of events. Such details are found in the 'narrative' section.
Weapons Used	Lists the weapons, if known, used in the incident.
Narrative	Where possible, a narrative of the incident describing the location, how the massacre took place, the names and number of attackers, the victims killed, the aftermath, and any other relevant information.
Sources*	Historical sources for this incident. Links are provided to online versions of sources if they are available. For a glossary of acronyms and full bibliographic reference see the Sources page at <a href="https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacre">https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacre</a> .
Corroboration Rating*	This indicates the level of confidence of the project researcher in the source information.  * Reliable source but more corroboration welcome. ** 2 sources but further corroborating evidence welcome. *** High quality corroborating evidence drawn from disparate sources.

### ***Project Stages***

**Stage 1:** Sites in Eastern Australia 1788–1872—released July 2017: 172 sites

**Stage 2:** Sites in Central and Eastern Australia 1788–1930—released July 2018:

**Stage 3:** Sites in Western Australia and across Australia 1788–1930—released November 2019: 311 sites.

**Stage 4:** Sites across Australia 1788–1930: due for release in late 2020: estimated 350–400 sites.

## Data Updates

This is an ongoing project and the information is subject to change. Data is uploaded to the digital map and information on the site adjusted at regular intervals, with a stage number in the footer of each page. The project will conclude with Stage 4 in late 2020. Ongoing maintenance may include corrections and some additions thereafter.

## Cartography

The full collection of sites are stored in the common standard datum of WGS84, but are projected in the online map using WGS 84/Pseudo-Mercator (EPSG:3857).

Points showing massacre sites were located using a variety of sources and tools, cross checking sources against each other, nearby sites, old maps and within GIS systems. Each point has purposefully been made imprecise by rounding to 3 digits, (approx. 250m) for 3 reasons:

- Sources often only roughly identify locations (e.g. 'a few miles north of the river', 'half a day's ride west of town', etc.)
- Incidents often took place over large areas of ground (e.g. an encampment would cover a significant area, and a pursuit is often involved). The area over which massacres took place is generally larger than any margin of error in the accuracy and precision of points and areas marked on the map.
- To protect the sites from desecration, and respect for the wishes of Aboriginal communities to observe the site as a place of mourning.

The map and 3D terrain visualisation is implemented using the ESRI ArcGIS Javascript API.

## Stage 3: Preliminary Statistics

The following statistics relate to massacres of six or more people only and are subject to change as more information becomes available. Other factors affect the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations such as disease, loss of land, abduction of children, control of movement, and combined flow on effects to the community.

The statistics are indicative rather than definitive. They are minimum estimates for out data only, and are not estimates of the full extent of massacre. It is likely that more massacres occurred than were reported and recorded and for which we can find evidence.

### Recorded massacres between 1788 and 1928 in Australia by current States and Territories

	Australia	Tas.	Vic.	NSW	Qld	SA	NT	WA
<b>Est. Total</b>	311	38	54	50	72	15	37	41
<b>Est. ATSI victims</b>	8226	491	1207	1929	2022	255	1447	850
<b>Est. Colonist victims</b>	175	0	8	8	104	26	28	1
<b>Est. Av. ATSI victims</b>	27.79	13.5	22.77	39.37	31.59	18.21	40.19	20.73

### Stage 3: Preliminary findings

As the first Australian wide record of frontier massacres, the map timeline indicates that massacres spread steadily across the Australian colonial frontier with notable peaks in the number of massacres from the 1820s to 1840s in the south east of the continent, the 1860s and 1870s in Queensland and in the 1890s in the Northern Territory and the Kimberley region in Western Australia.

A preliminary analysis of the data indicates that agents of the state were involved in at least 50 per cent of the massacres.

Bodies were disposed of in various ways, usually with the aim of concealing the massacre. The first record of incineration of bodies is the late 1820s in NSW. In the 1830s and 1840s, burning and burying the bodies became widespread, along with putting them into rivers and lagoons. In some cases in the 1920s in the Kimberley, burnt animal bones were buried above burnt human remains to further conceal the evidence.

Preliminary findings for Stage 3 indicate that from the 1880s, more people were likely to be killed in a single massacre, and that greater efforts would be made to hide the evidence.

Region	Period of Intensity	Perpetrators	Attack Time
New South Wales	1794–1826	soldiers, police, colonists—on foot	Day and night
New South Wales	1827–1900	police, native police, colonists—horses	Day
Tasmania (Van Diemen’s Land)	1804–1834	soldiers, police, colonists—on foot	Night
Victoria (Port Phillip District)	1836–1859	police, native police, colonists—horses	Day and night
Queensland	1859–1918	native police, colonists—horses	Day and night
South Australia	1836–1911	police, colonists—horses	Day and night
Northern Territory	1861–1930	police, colonists, Ab trackers—horses	Day and night
Western Australia	1830–1930	soldiers, police, Ab trackers, colonists—horses	Day and night

### Weapons used by attackers

#### *a. Colonists and Native Police*

**1794–1860:** In this period the **muzzle loading musket** was the key weapon used for massacre. Most widely used was the **Brown Bess Musket**. Issued to British regiments which served in the Australian colonies from 1788, it was a smooth bore muzzle loading 0.75 calibre flintlock weapon that could fire three shots in 45 seconds over a range of 80 yards. The main drawback was that it was loaded and fired from a standing position. Several versions of the musket were used in carrying out massacre, including the **bayonet** that was fitted to the musket barrel and the **carbine**, which had a shorter barrel and designed for use on horseback. **The horse** became the vehicle of



choice for massacre after 1830. The **carbine was used by the native police in the Port Phillip District in the 1840s and in the Northern District of New South Wales in the 1850s.** The **Baker rifle** which was more accurate than the smooth bore musket and could fire over a longer range was used by some settlers. Other weapons that were recorded in this period include **swords, cutlasses, pistols, swivel guns, carronades and ships' cannons.** Another weapon was **poison—strychnine, arsenic and plaster of paris.** Where large numbers of Aboriginal people were corralled in preparation for massacre, they were tied up at the wrists with long leather straps or rope.

**1860–1900: Breech loading rifles** became widely available after 1860. They fired over a longer range of **300 yards (274 metres)** and could be loaded and fired from a prone position. According to Jonathan Richards, the **Queensland Native Police** were issued with British made **Terry** breech loading rifle in 1861, the single shot **Snider-Enfield rifle** in 1874 and they gradually gained access to the **Martini Henry-Enfield rifle** after 1884.<sup>6</sup> According to Chris Owen firearms used by police in the **Kimberley in Western Australia** 'were initially the single shot **Snider-Enfield** rifles, which fired enormous .577 cartridges, although by the late 1890s they were considered too old, complicated and prone to becoming clogged with sand.' The **Winchester Repeating Rifle** which was available to Australia from the early 1880s could fire many shots before reloading 'and was the weapon of choice [in WA] through the mid-1890s. The side arms used were the **Webbley revolver** until the replaced by **Smith & Wesson colts.**'<sup>7</sup> The **Snider-Enfield** was issued to police in the **Northern Territory** in the 1880s. Other weapons such as swords and cutlasses were phased out, but **poison** continued in use across northern Australia. In the 1890s in the Kimberley, Aboriginal people were tied up with neck and ankle chains in preparation for their massacre. The horse remained the vehicle of choice for massacre across Australia.

**1900–1930:** The **Lee-Enfield bolt action .303 repeating rifle with a firing range of 300 yards (274 metres)** was first used by Australian colonial troops during the Boer War 1900–1902, and then by Australian infantry until the 1950s. The **short barrel Lee-Enfield rifle** and the **Enfield revolver** were widely used by police and settlers to carry out massacres of Aboriginal people in northern Australia from 1918 to 1930. The horse remained the vehicle of choice.

### ***b. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people***

In carrying out the 12 recorded massacres of non-Aboriginal people, Aboriginal warriors were reported wielding spears, nulla nullas, waddies and hatchets. The only known massacre where Aboriginal perpetrators used firearms was the killing of the Mawby family by Jimmy Governor and his brother in New South Wales in 1900.

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<sup>6</sup> J Richards, *The secret war: a true history of Queensland's native police*, UQP, Brisbane, 2008, pp. 55–56.

<sup>7</sup> C Owen, *Every mother's son: policing in the Kimberley 1880–1905*, UWA Press, Perth, 2016, p. 165.