

6

The South Australian frontier and its legacies: Remembering and representing the Mount Bryan murders

Skye Krichauff

In July 1844, according to written records, a group of Ngadjuri people separated around 200 sheep from a flock belonging to John Hallett, whose shepherds had recently occupied land in the Mount Bryan district, approximately 100 miles (160 km) north of Adelaide. Two days later, at daybreak, five armed Europeans led by Hallett's overseer, William Moore Carter, made a surprise attack upon the group, wounding four Aboriginal people, two of whom subsequently died.

I grew up in Booborowie Valley, which neighbours the Mount Bryan district. Our nearest town was Hallett, named after John Hallett. I was the fifth generation of my family to live on land my maternal family purchased in the 1870s. During my childhood and adolescence in the 1970s and 1980s, I never heard any mention of the Mount Bryan murders, or of other violent encounters with Aboriginal people. Nor did my friends and I ever hear stories of cross-cultural friendship or accommodation. Throughout my youth, I did not hear or know the word Ngadjuri. To my knowledge, no Aboriginal people lived in the district, and the current imperative to acknowledge Country and pay respects to Traditional Owners was

unimaginable. Since learning the history of European occupation and Aboriginal dispossession as a young adult, understanding this ‘not knowing’ in the region in which I grew up has been a major impetus for my research.

This chapter draws on archival records, published histories, interviews with Aboriginal and settler descendants, and personal experience to trace community memory and oral histories of the Mount Bryan murders at the local level – the Mount Bryan district of South Australia’s mid-north. I am currently employed as a research fellow for the Australian Research Council linkage project ‘Reconciling with the Frontier’. Ongoing research for this project and research conducted between 2010 and 2013 for my doctoral thesis indicates that a myriad of colonial injustices are overlooked when the focus is primarily on physical conflict between Aboriginal people and colonists. While research that focuses on physical confrontations and deaths may serve the purpose of both drawing attention to the brutal realities of Aboriginal dispossession and shaking colonial foundation narratives of peaceful and unproblematic settlement, such a focus should not come at the expense of understanding other, enduring aspects of colonial violence. A narrow understanding of frontier violence can not only inhibit deeper understanding of enduring – and more pressing – legacies of colonialism, but also unintentionally work to distance non-Aboriginal people from their implication in the colonial process.

The Mount Bryan murders and their remembrance – or, more pertinently, lack of remembrance – in community memory is a worthy case study for several reasons. First, the case was significant in its day. From a rich archival record held by State Records of South Australia and court reports published in Adelaide newspapers, it is possible to hear Aboriginal witnesses’ accounts, to provide a nuanced and relatively detailed account of events and, consequently, to expand knowledge of frontier life. Second, the case is mentioned in several published histories produced from 1985 onwards. Thus it is possible to both analyse historians’ representations and local residents’ remembrances of the Mount Bryan murders, raising broader questions regarding the influence of publicly available accounts of frontier violence on Australians’ historical consciousness. In addition, one of my interviewees was the author of a local history and had a family connection to the Mount Bryan killings. Her observations regarding her own and her family members’ acknowledgement of this connection demonstrate a range of positions taken by settler descendants when learning of frontier violence.

The Mount Bryan murders in the historical record

An empirically based, forensic analysis of the historical evidence is not the purpose of this chapter. Nonetheless, a brief summary of information contained in the historical record lays a foundation from which to analyse if – and how – the Mount Bryan murders have been remembered and represented over the generations.

On 21 August 1844, the South Australian police commissioner Boyle Travers Finniss informed Governor Grey that he had been notified by stockholder John Hallett of an ‘affray’ at Hallett’s Mount Bryan Station. Finniss was concerned that some Aboriginal people may have been injured and asked the governor if the relevant local magistrates had forwarded a report (Finniss, 1844). Grey had received no such report and ordered Finniss to make enquiries (Grey, 1844a, 1844e). Protector Moorhouse subsequently proceeded to Mount Bryan with an Aboriginal interpreter and a police party (Grey, 1844b).

On his return, Moorhouse provided a detailed report dated 7 October. It is worth noting that European occupation of the mid-north had only recently commenced and was confined to a few scattered pastoralists and their employees and stock, whose huts and head stations were isolated and distant from each other. Moorhouse had been serving as the protector of Aborigines since mid-1839 and was conscientious about his role in ensuring Aboriginal people’s accounts of events were conveyed to the relevant authorities. Through an interpreter, Moorhouse spoke with Aboriginal people at various stations on his way to Mount Bryan.

Fourteen miles distant from Mount Bryan (at Dr Browne’s Booborowie Station, the closest station to Hallett’s Mount Bryan Station), Aboriginal people – who had heard firsthand from those present at the attack – told Moorhouse that one man and one woman had been killed (Moorhouse, 1844a). At Mount Bryan, Hallett’s employees showed Moorhouse sheep skins and bones and Aboriginal ovens at the site where Aboriginal people had camped with sheep, all of which indicated sheep had been taken. Moorhouse was unable to meet with any Aboriginal witnesses at Mount Bryan: the Aboriginal people he met with at Browne’s station informed him that those present at the affray had left the district and gone to the Murray

River (112 km distant). On his return to Adelaide, Moorhouse travelled via George Hawker's station, where Hawker and fellow magistrate Henry Price had commenced hearing the case.

Moorhouse enclosed the sworn depositions of Hallett's overseer, William Carter, and shepherd Charles Spratt in his report to the governor. In Carter's sworn statement he claimed that, on learning sheep had been taken, he organised a surprise dawn attack on the Aboriginal group, and that during the recovery of the sheep, he 'slightly' wounded an Aboriginal man named Williamy with a sword (Grey, 1844d). Moorhouse reported that this statement differed greatly from a verbal account Henry Price had overheard six weeks earlier, in which Carter claimed to have:

fought the blacks, killed a man and a woman, the woman was with child, and he had set a bulldog upon her, which tore open the belly and womb – he took the child out of the womb and gave it to the dog to eat. (Moorhouse, 1844a)

This brutal remark, attributed to Carter, shocked government officials and was an impetus for the governor's, advocate general's, police commissioner's and protector's determination to learn the truth of events at Mount Bryan (see Grey, 1844c, 1884d, 1884f; Price, 1844; Smillie, 1844a; 'Supreme Court criminal side: Tuesday, 26 November', 1844, p. 3). Moorhouse also reported the unlawful manner in which 'Kangaroo Jack' (Pinpa Ngalyta) had been arrested on suspicion of stealing Hallett's sheep (Moorhouse, 1844a). Having reviewed Moorhouse's report, Advocate General George Smillie was scathing of Hawker and Price's enquiry. Smillie was not impressed that the magistrates' primary concern was the loss of Hallett's sheep and not injuries done to Aboriginal people, or that only Carter and Spratt had been examined. He recommended that all five Europeans present at the conflict be examined before the Grand Jury (Smillie, 1844a). On Smillie's recommendation, the colonial secretary wrote to Edward Eyre, resident magistrate and sub-protector at Moorunde, asking him to enquire among the 'natives of the Murray' who was to blame and how many people were killed (Grey, 1844c, 1884f). Price and Hawker were reprimanded by the governor and compelled to explain their poorly conducted enquiry (Grey, 1844c, 1844f; Hawker & Price, 1844). Price was asked to provide a sworn affidavit verifying Carter's brutal statement. He responded that it was Mr Stein whom Carter told, and that he (Price) took no action because he believed Carter's shocking claim was an 'unblushing falsehood' – 'a detail of imaginary slaughter or at least ... a gross exaggeration' typical of Carter's

social status and dubious character (Price, 1844). If Price's deduction was correct, and Carter thought such a claim would impress those with whom he was speaking, this nevertheless tells us much about Carter's character, the sentiments of the people with whom Carter socialised, and the morals and attitudes of the earliest Europeans with whom the Ngadjuri were in sustained contact.

In November 1844, Pinpa Ngaltya (Kangaroo Jack) was tried in the Supreme Court for stealing Hallett's sheep and acquitted, with the court reporter noting that the main purpose of the trial was not to try Kangaroo Jack, but to ascertain whether 'a great cruelty had been exercised towards the blacks' ('Supreme Court criminal side: Friday, 29 November', 1844, 3CD). In early December, Moorhouse met a man named Pari Kudnutya who had witnessed the Mount Bryan affray; he informed Moorhouse that 'Mr Hallett's men wounded four natives, three men and one woman. One man and one woman died ... The Natives buried the dead bodies' (Moorhouse, 1844b).

Moorhouse, Pari Kudnutya and three policemen (one of whom was a native constable) travelled to Mount Bryan, where Pari Kudnutya led the group to the place where the man and woman were buried. However, on searching the graves, they found them empty. Further searching revealed the remains of a fire containing human teeth and hand and feet bones (Moorhouse, 1844c). By this time, Carter had left the district. The men present on Hallett's station – namely Charles Spratt, William Smith and Charles Pritt – were brought to Adelaide, tried at the Police Commissioner's Court and committed on the charge of feloniously killing Ngunnirri Burka and Mary-Ann ('Police commissioner's court', 1845, p. 3C).

In early February 1845, three other Aboriginal witnesses – Parnkari Waritya, Wimma Warrintpinna and Pulpurra Munarta – confirmed Pari Kudnutya's evidence (Smillie, 1845a). Unfortunately, in court, Pari Kudnutya made no mention of Carter who, by his own account and the evidence of other shepherds, was known to have taken a leading part in the attack (Smillie, 1845a). Pari Kudnutya's lack of reference to Carter in court may reflect Aboriginal law, whereby friends and relatives of the perpetrator can be punished in lieu of the perpetrator if the perpetrator is not present. Or it may be that Pari Kudnutya was overwhelmed by the unfamiliar experience of being in a courtroom filled with Europeans, compelled to answer questions he may or may not have understood. Regardless, the outcome shows that the British legal system did not recognise or accommodate

cultural incompatibilities between Aboriginal and British law, and that the applicability of British law and procedures in such cases was not challenged – even by government officials sympathetic to Aboriginal people.

There is no reference to a dog or an unborn baby in any evidence provided by Aboriginal or European witnesses in court or in the multitude of private correspondence between relevant (and sympathetic) government officials. Because Carter's shocking comments were an impetus for sustained government investigations, and because determining their veracity was at the forefront of government officials' and the presiding judge's minds, this suggests that Price's opinion (i.e. that Carter's claim was a 'blushing falsehood') was likely correct.¹

When Hallett was questioned, he refused to answer one of the questions put to him, causing the advocate general and governor to question Hallett's position as a 'gentleman' and commissioner of the peace (Finniss, 1845a; Smillie, 1845a). Spratt, Smith and Pritt were tried at the Supreme Court on 12 March. The case stalled when the Aboriginal witness mistook Spratt for Carter. Spratt, Smith and Pritt were bound over until the upcoming sessions in June with the hope that, by then, Carter would have been captured and charged (Smillie, 1845b). A police party was dispatched to the Mt Gambier district in South Australia's south-east to secure Carter and the governor requested 'every assistance' from relevant authorities in Port Phillip (Grey, 1845a, 1845b, 1845c, 1845d). Carter, aided by a stockowner named Leake, absconded to Van Diemen's Land. Despite reducing government expenditure across a range of areas, Governor Grey authorised the exorbitant sum of £20 to continue the police search for Carter and requested assistance from the governor of Van Diemen's Land (Grey, 1845e, 1845f, 1845g). Despite all efforts, Carter could not be located, and the case was eventually dropped (Finniss, 1845b).

John Hallett sold his Mount Bryan run to Joseph Gilbert in 1850 ('1851 Pastoral lease diagram', 1850). Large portions of it were resumed by the colonial government in the 1870s and subdivided into 640-acre farming blocks.

1 The only hint I can find that Mary-Ann may have been pregnant is that Pari Kudnutya stated that Mary-Ann was shot in the stomach (Moorhouse, 1844b; 'Police commissioner's court', 1844, p. 3A). Carter, being the person he was, may have targeted Mary-Ann's stomach because she was pregnant.

Community memory of Mary-Ann and Ngunnirri Burka's murders

As mentioned above, the Mount Bryan murders were not part of the community memory I absorbed while growing up in the district in the 1970s and 1980s; it was not until conducting archival research in the early 2000s that I became aware of them. This lack of knowledge of frontier conflict – and, more generally, of historical Aboriginal presence – was evident during fieldwork and interviews conducted between 2010 and 2013 when I asked mid-northern settler descendants what they knew about the Aboriginal people of the area, and if any stories dating back to the colonial era had been passed down through their families. There were no stories; Aboriginal people were absent in settler descendants' historical consciousness, and a sense that Aboriginal people's histories were disconnected with the history of their own family – and the history of the district – was evident.

I have sought to understand this disconnect (Krichauff, 2017). For the purpose of this chapter, suffice to say that I found the most powerful way the past is known among settler descendants is through being in place, through family stories and through lived experience – both the lived experience of the interviewees *and* his/her/their forebears. Unsurprisingly, my interviewees were most knowledgeable about their own family, and their sense of the history of the district began with the arrival of their first forebear in the district. As such, when analysing settler descendants' historical consciousness, it is necessary to consider the nature and extent of interviewees' *and* interviewees' forebears' experiences with Aboriginal people. Regarding the latter, it is necessary to distinguish between pastoralists (and their employees) who resided in the mid-north from the early 1840s, and freeholders who arrived from 1870 (after the pastoral runs were subdivided), and to learn when an interviewees' forebear arrived in the district (Krichauff, 2019). It is also important to recognise that very few Ngadjuri have lived in the wider mid-north since the 1870s. Shockingly, within 30 years of European occupation, Aboriginal populations had declined to 10 per cent, largely through introduced diseases. Regarding the extended Mount Bryan district, two Aboriginal people were recorded by census collectors as living near Mount Bryan in the 1871 census ('Aboriginal population of South Australia', 1871). By 1891, the census collectors did not record any Aboriginal people in the entire Burra County – a large area that included the Mount Bryan, Hallett, Booborowie and Burra districts. It was not until the late 1980s that those who now identify as Ngadjuri learned

of their Ngadjuri heritage and began the process of reconnecting with their ancestral Country. The decades-long physical absence of Aboriginal people in the district is not evidence of wishful thinking or denialism on behalf of the colonisers, but a grim reality of the outcome of British colonisation that is openly spoken of by Ngadjuri descendants (Copley & McNerney, 2022; Krichauff, 2020, p. 428; Warrior et al., 2005, p. 6).

The vast majority of mid-northern settler descendants are descended from freeholders who had limited or no contact with nineteenth-century Ngadjuri. Tellingly, freeholder descendants had no stories of Aboriginal people dating back to the colonial era; nor did they have stories of early pastoralists (such as John Hallett or Joseph Gilbert). Very few descendants of pastoralists continue to live in the mid-north; those I spoke with have a sense of history that begins with the arrival of *their* forebears (i.e. in the pastoral era), which, when pressed, includes stories of Aboriginal people.

This widespread lack of acknowledgement of the pastoral era is reflected in the content of information boards and commemorative plaques of mid-northern towns, which present the district's history as beginning with the arrival of 'pioneering' freeholders, and the formation of towns and district councils in the late 1860s and 1870s.²

Published accounts of the Mount Bryan murders (written histories and websites)

Interestingly, the absence of information about early pastoralists is not reflected in local written histories – most of which were published from the late 1960s to the 1980s to celebrate the centenaries of local towns and districts. Although these histories usually include a section on the pastoral years, few refer to Aboriginal people. Of the Hallett/Mount Bryan written histories, one 1968 publication simply notes that several of the early pastoralists 'roamed with the Blacks' to discover their waterholes (Mattey, 1968, p. 24). In *Hallett: A History of Town and District*, published in 1977, author Marlene Richards states that 'the pastoralists' problems included

2 The exception is towns named after pastoralists, such as Hallett and Laura, in which case the origin of the name is explained.

attacks from Aborigines', but that 'the only references to be found to the Aborigines in this district deal mainly with the ways in which they helped the early pastoralists' (Richards, 1977, p. 16).

Ruth Stolte's *Razorback Range Country* (1985) is the first published history to refer to the 1844 conflict at Hallett's station; Stolte covers it in a lengthy paragraph (pp. 17–18). In *Resistance and Retaliation* (1989), Alan Pope devotes a chapter to the Mount Bryan killings (pp. 113–119). Both Stolte and Pope base their description of the affray on their interpretation of Moorhouse's 7 October report.³ *Ngadjuri: Aboriginal People of the Mid-North Region of South Australia*, co-authored by Fred Warrior (a Ngadjuri man), Fran Knight, Adele Pring and Sue Anderson, was published in 2005.⁴ Warrior et al.'s half page account of the Mount Bryan conflict (p. 83) is a condensed summary of Pope's account and includes a full transcript of Moorhouse's 7 October report (pp. 84–85). Stolte, Pope and the authors of *Ngadjuri* overlooked, or were unaware of, numerous relevant records filed in the colonial secretary's outgoing correspondence, the advocate general's correspondence and the police commissioner's correspondence. Problematically, Stolte, Pope and Warrior et al. promulgate Carter's brutal boast, which (as these primary sources indicate) was unsubstantiated and seemingly false.

Stolte's, Pope's and the *Ngadjuri* authors' representations of the Mount Bryan murders illustrate the influence of revisionist histories that began emerging in the 1970s, best exemplified by Henry Reynolds's popular *The Other Side of the Frontier* (1981). Pope emulates Reynolds in providing ample evidence of South Australia's violent frontier and Aboriginal resistance but, regarding the Mount Bryan murders, overlooks important details, inserts unfounded assumptions, confuses the chronological order of events and does not include relevant contextual information. In 2012, Rob Foster and Amanda Nettelbeck's *Out of the Silence: The History and Memory of South Australia's Frontier Wars* was published. Foster and Nettelbeck provide a more comprehensive and accurate account of the Mount Bryan murders.

3 Stolte does not use footnotes or endnotes, and her references to sources are placed at the end of the chapter and are not specific (see Stolte, 1985, p. 26). The State Records of South Australia Government Record Group (GRG) sources Stolte examined for the Mount Bryan murders are not differentiated, for example, 'Reports, SA Archives, 1842–1844'. Pope's examination of the archival sources is limited to several letters held in the Colonial Secretary's Incoming Correspondence file and a Supreme Court hearing published in the *Southern Australian*, 3 December 1844, p. 3.

4 Significantly, this is the first mid-northern history that focuses on the Ngadjuri.

They recognise variations in settlers' responses to frontier violence and conclude that two Aboriginal people died as a result of the conflict at Mount Bryan (Foster & Nettelbeck, 2012, pp. 82–84).

From 2018, the Mount Bryan murders were included on the University of Newcastle's online map of *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia, 1788–1930* (hereafter 'Massacres Map'; Ryan et al., 2018) and its more widely known duplicate, *The Guardian* newspaper's interactive digital map, 'The Killing Times' (2022). The entry was removed from both online maps in March 2022 after a review of the historical documents found that the case did not fit the Newcastle research team's definition of a 'massacre' – namely, 'the deliberate and unlawful killing of six or more defenceless people in one operation'.⁵

The influence and perceived authority of published histories

Regarding the impact of written histories on mid-northern settler descendants' historical consciousness, I found that although my settler-descendant interviewees generally had a copy of the local history book on their bookshelves, and while they accepted the information contained within it as authoritative and factual, most gave no indication that they had read it and could not remember specific stories or details (Krichauff, 2017, pp. 147–164). This is exemplified by my interviewees' lack of reference to Stolte's account of the Mount Bryan murders; *Razorback Country* had a local readership, but when I conducted interviews between 2010 and 2013, the Mount Bryan murders had not become part of community memory or local residents' historical consciousness. Only one interviewee, Marlene Richards (the author of *Hallett* – to whom I will return), mentioned the murders, and she had not become aware of them through Stolte's book.

In making sense of this, the findings of memory scholars such as Pierre Nora (1996), Dominique LaCapra (1998) and Geoffrey Cubitt (2007) are useful. These scholars point out differences between the past known through memory (which is subjective and emotional and juxtaposes temporalities)

5 The 'Massacres Map' and the 'Killing Times' Mount Bryan entry rested solely on Pope's (mis)interpretation of the records, as outlined above. On communicating my concerns and sending the research team a detailed list of relevant primary sources and a summary of my findings, the team reviewed the entry and removed it from both online maps in March 2022.

and the past known through history (which is objective, detached and distances previous times from the present). Not surprisingly, I found that the past known through memory, through family stories, through lived experience and being in place, impacts more powerfully on settler descendants' historical consciousness than the past learned through 'history' (such as through written texts, history lessons, commemorative plaques and information boards). While the information contained in local histories may be generally considered by mid-northern settler descendants to be 'accurate' and 'true', and, thus, while local histories (and, by implication, wider histories) may have a certain *authority* over oral stories, local histories do not necessarily have greater *influence* on settler descendants' consciousness (Krichauff, 2017, pp. 147–164).

When evaluating the influence of written histories, the interviewees' age, life experiences and connection with the district require consideration. Older interviewees (those in their 80s and 90s) made no reference whatsoever to local written histories when asked about the history of the district, while younger people who were unsure about events or details would suggest that such information may be found in the written history. Outside the private family group or local community, and over the years, published local histories take on an authority and legitimacy, and become an increasingly important (and, for some people, sole) reference about the past. For people with no ties to the district – people with no family stories or community memory to draw on – written histories may be their only source of information, and the information contained in them is uncritically accepted as factual. In such cases, information learned through written sources may become part of that person's memory. These findings are applicable to Ngadjuri descendants. Fred Warrior became aware of the Mount Bryan murders through working with his co-authors, and the wider Ngadjuri community was informed of the murders by Fred and through the publication of *Ngadjuri* (Sue Anderson, personal communication, 5 September 2021; Vince Copley, personal communication, 2018 and 2021; Adele Pring, personal communication, 5 September 2021). This finding – that published information is widely and uncritically perceived as authoritative and is particularly influential among those who have no alternative memory to refer to – is applicable at the wider level.

Problems with a narrow understanding of frontier violence as principally physical violence

The Newcastle researchers focused their attention on ‘massacres’ of six or more defenceless people. While other frontier violence scholars do not structure their research around a particular number, most likewise focus on incidents of physical violence between Aboriginal people and colonists that resulted in deaths. And, as evidenced by the ‘Massacres Map’ entries and Pope’s and Stolte’s accounts of the Mount Bryan murders, it is often settler brutality and Aboriginal defencelessness that are highlighted. As demonstrated by the Australian History Wars of two decades ago, a preoccupation with numbers and types of killings can inadvertently induce a perception of, and/or obsession with, a ‘hierarchy’ of violence whereby Aboriginal deaths and colonists’ brutal acts are the focus, rather than expanding understandings of the ubiquitous and multifaceted violence of European occupation and colonialism.

‘The South Australian Frontier and its Legacies’ project team aims to capture as many incidents of settler–Aboriginal violence in colonial South Australia as possible. Rob Foster and I are responsible for the project’s archival research. We apply a broad understanding of violence that includes death, injury, confrontation, theft, the destruction of goods, rape, treatment of Aboriginal prisoners and witnesses, deaths in police custody and, if raised by interviewees, the destruction of Country. To date, we have unearthed hundreds of incidents of conflict, the vast majority of which did not end in fatalities and few of which have been remembered by either Aboriginal or settler communities. This research has illustrated the limitations of conceptualising frontier violence as primarily involving physical confrontation and resulting in deaths.

For decades now, the frontier has been widely understood to have been a place and time of accommodation as well as resistance, of intimacy as well as violence, of dynamic cross-cultural exchange and hybridity (see e.g. Clendinnen, 2003; Jones, 2007; Krichauff, 2011; Rose & Davis, 2005; Shellam, 2009). Twenty-first-century researchers are well placed to provide nuanced, comparative accounts that communicate advances in frontier scholarship and expand understandings of the colonial experience. Aboriginal responses to European occupation, and colonists and government officials’ responses to frontier violence, were diverse and varied from colony to

colony and region to region, depending on numerous factors. For example, primary sources relating to the Mount Bryan murders show that, in South Australia in 1844:

- highly ranked government officials determinedly sought to learn the truth of events in which Aboriginal people were injured or killed
- the protector was readily employed to make enquiries and provide the Aboriginal version of events
- Aboriginal people were typically employed to act as interpreters
- Europeans were imprisoned and tried for their involvement in crimes against Aboriginal people
- the colonial government spared no effort or expense to bring suspected guilty people to trial
- country magistrates could be severely reprimanded for failing to investigate crimes against Aboriginal people
- stockholders' status as gentlemen and holders of government positions could be gravely questioned if suspected of hiding information.

These responses were not unusual in early colonial South Australia. And while they in no way diminish the violence of colonial invasion in South Australia or the biases of the British legal system, they highlight the need to re-examine popularly held assumptions regarding government officials' responses to violence, settlers' treatment of Aboriginal people, Aboriginal responses to the occupation of their land and the role played by influential individuals (both non-Indigenous and Indigenous).

Accounts of frontier violence that focus on physical violence and emphasise the defencelessness of Aboriginal people provide a limited understanding of frontier life. The historical records contain countless examples of the dynamism and adaptability of Aboriginal culture and society, Aboriginal agency and cross-cultural communication. By drawing attention to the abundant and rich information contained in the primary sources describing Aboriginal people's actions, historians (and other frontier violence scholars) can expand knowledge of Aboriginal people's creative and proactive responses to the occupation of their Country, which can be a source of pride for current generations.

Rob Foster and I regularly come across examples of Aboriginal people's ingenuity and assuredness in outwitting the stockowners and settlers. For example, Aboriginal people had elaborate systems for taking sheep:

they tied sheep's legs together and came back for them when they were certain no Europeans were around, they constructed bush yards and moved sheep into inaccessible places (dense scrub or narrow rocky gorges that horses could not traverse). At times they took sheep in full view of the shepherds, taunting the shepherds to come and retrieve them. Their actions seriously impacted the ability of pastoralists to build up their fledgling flocks. Colonists' frustration regarding Aboriginal people's ability to derail the pastoral enterprise was real. I state this not to justify settler reprisals, but to better understand how and why both groups reacted to the other, and to show that there is ample evidence of Aboriginal people challenging Europeans and resisting dispossession.

In addition to containing information about Aboriginal people's responses to European occupation, primary sources describing incidents of frontier conflict often contain Aboriginal names for people and places, many of which have long fallen into disuse. For those groups whose lands were invaded early and intensively, much language and knowledge of precolonial and early colonial culture has been lost. From consultation with the 'South Australian Frontier and its Legacies' project's Aboriginal Reference Group and South Australia's Aboriginal Heritage Committee, and from informal discussions with representatives of diverse Aboriginal heritage and community groups (including Ngadjuri Elders), it is clear that information about Aboriginal nomenclature, personal names and early responses to Europeans is sought after and highly valued by Aboriginal communities, perhaps more so than information about violence and conflict. Such details are an important means through which current generations can deepen their reconnection with Country and ancestors, particularly groups such as the Ngadjuri, whose lengthy displacement led to the loss of language and knowledge of Country. If these details are not alluded to or referenced by those who are most confident and knowledgeable with regard to navigating the archives (historians), it is difficult for non-historians to find and access them.

Distancing current generations from their implication in the colonial process

Chris Healy, in this volume, questions whether the commemoration of colonial violence is, 'like "Aboriginal art", a "white thing"'. This is a pertinent observation. In conversations I have had with Aboriginal interviewees

for the ‘South Australian Frontier and its Legacies’ project, it is clear that more recent episodes of violence are at the forefront of current generations’ minds. The continued damage to Country, the prioritising of profit over the health of the natural environment, the Stolen Generations, the restrictions and injustices suffered on missions and government reserves – these are more readily referred to than the killings that occurred over a century ago. While stories of frontier violence are recognised as important and needing to be known, this is not at the expense of other injustices suffered under colonialism. Of equal significance is the possibility that focusing on physical violence during the frontier era hinders non-Aboriginal Australians’ recognition of their implication in the colonial process.

Having grown up in post-WWII Germany, Gabriele Schwab insightfully notes that processes of taking responsibility, and working through guilt and shame, operate across generations. The dynamics of the process change if the acts of perpetration belong to earlier generations because it is easier to face one’s historical legacy if it is not a personal legacy (Schwab, 2010, pp. 80–81). The revisionist Australian histories of the late 1960s onwards can be understood as a collective recognition – a desire and ability to confront non-Aboriginal Australia’s shameful past – which is made possible (or easier) because of the significant length of time that has passed. As amateur historians, Stolte and Pope are to be commended for drawing attention to records contained in South Australian archives that document the colony’s violent past and for raising awareness and beginning the process of coming to terms with the historical injustice of colonialism. Over the past three decades, more nuanced, contextualised and informed readings of the historical records have expanded the focus and, by demonstrating the complexity of the past, deepened successive generations’ understandings of colonialism.

Scholars interested in understanding how Australians come to terms with historical injustices have pointed out that revisionist Australian historiography that has violence and bloodshed as its primary focus can distance current generations of settler descendants from their implication in the colonial process (Attwood, 2005, p. 248). Rather than facilitating a process of working through and taking responsibility, such historiography can be perceived as an act of condemnation – that is, as illustrative of a ‘defensive mechanism’ (Veracini, 2010, p. 89). Anthropologist Gillian Cowlishaw has observed that histories that draw attention to the violence

of colonialism (the atrocities, the brutality, the genocides) work to distance this unpalatable and disturbing past from the present, where the violence of colonialism continues. She warns:

The call to examine the colonial past is in danger of foundering on the complacency of an imagined distance from the spectacle of blood and violence. Continuity with the past is easily severed and the cultural source of these events is lost. Our disgust and horror at the violence and abusive racism means we are absolved. (Cowlshaw, 1992, p. 27)

Cowlshaw queries how it is, in reading these histories, that we ‘position ourselves on the sides of the Aborigines and identify our forebears as the enemy?’ She points out the hypocrisy of this imagined distancing, for our forebears – ‘our grandfathers’ – may well be the violent and racist men depicted in revisionist histories, and subsequent generations were surely left something by these men, ‘if not the land they took or the wealth they made from it, then the culture they were developing’ (p. 27).

In contrast, histories that demonstrate the multiplicity of positions occupied by settlers in the colonial era, the agency of Aboriginal people and the dynamism of Aboriginal culture are more likely to enable current generations of both cultural groups to recognise parallels with the present. Such histories are also more likely to enable settler descendants to recognise their own implication in the colonial process.

Subjective positioning

Regarding historians’ (and other scholars) subjective positioning when researching and writing politically charged histories, it is worth bearing in mind Dominick LaCapra’s point that, for people who were not present at the time and whose position has not been tested, it is easy to occupy a position of moral outrage and superiority, but such a position is not necessarily earned (LaCapra, 1998, p. 41). It is easy to judge others (particularly those long dead, or those far removed from us – physically, socially and in lifestyles and employment) as different from ourselves. For example, just as it is easy to judge Hallett’s shepherds as brutal murderers, it would be easy to judge Marlene Richard’s lack of reference to the Mount Bryan murders in her published history (*Hallett*) as illustrative of settler denial or disavowal. However, the full story is more enlightening.

Marlene was the only settler descendant I interviewed who referred to the conflict at Mount Bryan. Since publishing *Hallett* in 1977, retiring and moving closer to Adelaide and the archives, Marlene learned not only about the murders but also, to her astonishment, that her great-grandfather (Charles Spratt) was one of the shepherds present at Hallett's station in 1844, and that he was imprisoned for his involvement. When I met with Marlene in 2013, she, unprompted, expressed her anguish and regret that she had not known any of this when compiling her history. As Marlene pointed out, when conducting research for *Hallett* in the 1970s, there was no money to travel to Adelaide, and even if there had been, access to the archives was difficult. She had had limited time, and her brief had been to research the centenary of the local council (see Krichauff, 2017, pp. 196–203, for a full account of my interview with Marlene).

The newly learned information profoundly affected Marlene, who told me that if she had known about the murders, and, in particular, Spratt's involvement, writing and researching the history of Hallett would have 'been more meaningful'. Her personal connection brought the ethics of colonialism into the present for Marlene, and alerted her to the different responses settler descendants could display upon learning about historical injustices committed on Aboriginal people. For example, Marlene's cousin, who had authored a family history, whitewashed his account. According to Marlene, he 'anaesthetised, not anaesthetised but sanitised' the story of Spratt's involvement in the murders. Her cousin demonstrated a desire to repress or disavow his great-grandfather's action and to minimise his forebears' (and consequently his own) involvement. In stark contrast, Marlene's older brother saw the murders as very 'black and white'. He did not seek to understand the complexities of his forebear's situation, but instead judged his great-grandfather negatively and had little sympathy – or empathy – for him.

Marlene's reaction is interesting. On learning of her great-grandfather's crime, she did not repress the information; she did not seek to keep the story to herself or to distance herself from her great-grandfather. Rather, she sought to make sense of what she had learned; she wanted to know more, she wanted to *understand*. As French historian Marc Bloch (shot by Nazis in 1944) has poetically and aptly pointed out:

'Understanding,' in all honesty, is a word pregnant with difficulties, but also with hope. Moreover, it is a friendly word. Even in action we are too prone to judge. It is so easy to denounce. We are never sufficiently understanding. (Bloch, 1954, pp. 143–144)

Bernhard Schlink, who grew up in post-WWII Germany, points out that reconciliation differs from condemnation and forgiveness in that it requires understanding; reconciliation requires a truth that can be understood (Schlink, 2009, p. 81). And, although revisions to Australian history have been around for decades, it was the *personal connection* – to her great-grandfather, and to a place where she has spent much of her life and knows intimately – that made Marlene more deeply connect with the history of colonialism and dispossession.

As previously stated, when conducting interviews with mid-northern settler descendants, I noticed a distinct sense of disconnection between their own histories (and the histories of the places in which they live) and the histories of Aboriginal people. Rather than condemn or judge them for this disconnect, I argue that we need to fully understand this disconnect to genuinely disrupt it. For those who have not experienced growing up in a tight-knit rural community, surrounded by others who have likewise grown up on land occupied by successive generations of their family, in a district in which the Traditional Owners have not been physically present for over a century, this disconnect may appear illustrative of settler denial and repression – a refusal by those who have directly benefited from the occupation of Aboriginal land to recognise their own implication in the colonial process. However, such a judgement does not take into account the concrete workings of memory and the primacy of lived experience that fundamentally affects how the past is known and made sense of. Nor does it allow for the interest many settler-descended interviewees demonstrated on learning about the experiences of the original owners and welcoming Ngadjuri people's reconnection with their ancestral land, and/or the incredulity and regret they expressed at not having previously contemplated how their forebears originally came to 'own' the land in the first place (see Krichauff, 2017, pp. 204–208, 2020).

While it is easy for non-Aboriginal Australians to express disgust – to point the finger – at the brutal actions of nineteenth-century colonialists, it can be difficult to recognise that we all – no matter where we live, where we were born, how long our families have lived here – benefit from living on Aboriginal Country, and that we all live on unceded land for which the Traditional Owners can never be adequately compensated.

Conclusion

If people do not remain in place, if those present are forced or compelled to move away from a district or do not survive, stories of those people in those places can slip from living memory. Districts where no oral histories about Aboriginal people have been passed down through the generations (by either cultural group) signal great loss; the reasons for the physical absence of Aboriginal people in such places need to be understood. In places such as the Mount Bryan district, where there is a dearth of oral stories of historical Aboriginal presence, the experiences of Aboriginal people and the work of historians, linguists, geographers, anthropologists and archaeologists are key means through which hegemonic settler understandings of Aboriginal absence can be disrupted. For this reason, both the research and the information conveyed need to be comprehensive and informative.

For memory scholars who research the relationship between different ways the past is known and depicted, for sociologists and anthropologists looking at how current generations live with and come to terms with the past, and for historians seeking to more deeply understand what happened in the past and why events unfolded as they did, it is crucial to critically and thoroughly analyse a multitude of sources and to recognise the impact of the norms, assumptions and taken-for-granted understandings of the culture and society upon individuals when constructing their narratives – whether verbal, written or digital. In twenty-first-century Australia, a narrow fixation on physical violence in the colonial era can inadvertently distance current and future generations from the actions of their predecessors. Such perceptions do not expand knowledge; they do not facilitate understanding or truth-telling about a broader range of violence, past and present. Nuanced histories that show both the complexity of the past and parallels with the present are more likely to enable non-Aboriginal Australians to recognise the longevity of colonialism and their ongoing implication in the colonial process.

References

Unpublished sources: State Records of South Australia (SRSA)

Colonial Secretary's Office, incoming correspondence, Government Record Group (GRG) 24/6

Finniss, B. T. (1844, 21 August). Police Commissioner to Colonial Secretary, GRG 24/6/1844/932.

Finniss, B. T. (1845a, 20 February). Police Commissioner to Advocate General, enclosed in GRG 24/6/1845/143.

Finniss, B. T. (1845b, 6 October). Commissioner of Police to Colonial Secretary, GRG 24/6/1845/1197.

Grey, G. (1844a, 25 August). Governor's memo to Police Commissioner, GRG 24/6/1844/932.

Grey, G. (1844b, 19 September). Governor's memo to Protector, GRG 24/6/1844/1044.

Grey, G. (1844c, 11 October). Governor's memo to on Advocate General's letter, GRG 24/6/1844/1135.

Grey, G. (1844d, 3 November). Governor's memo, GRG 24/6/1844/1248.

Grey, G. (1845a, 19 March). Governor Grey memo to Police Commissioner, GRG 24/6/1845/256.

Grey, G. (1845b, 20 March). Governor Grey memo to Advocate General, GRG 24/6/1845/256.

Hawker, G. & Price, H. (1844, 26 October). George Hawker JP and Henry Price JP to Colonial Secretary, GRG 24/6/1844/1249.

Moorhouse, M. (1844a, 7 October) Protector to Colonial Secretary, GRG 24/6/1844/1120.

Moorhouse, M. (1844b, 6 December). Protector to Colonial Secretary, GRG 24/6/1844/1446.

Moorhouse, M. (1844c, 24 December). Protector to Colonial Secretary, GRG 24/6/1844/1528.

Price, H. (1844, 25 October). Price to Colonial Secretary, GRG 24/6/1844/1249½.

Smillie, G. (1844a, 9 October). Advocate General to Colonial Secretary, GRG 24/6/1844/1135.

Smillie, G. (1845a, 5 February). Advocate General to Colonial Secretary, GRG 24/6/1845/143.

Smillie, G. (1845b, 18 March). Advocate General report of convictions at the March Criminal Sessions, GRG 24/6/1845/256.

Colonial Secretary's Office, outgoing correspondence, GRG 24/4

Grey, G. (1844e, 25 August). Memo to the Police Commissioner, GRG 24/4/9, p. 164.

Grey, G. (1844f, 11 October). Colonial Secretary to Henry Price, GRG 24/4/9, p. 230.

Grey, G. (1845c, 25 March). Colonial Secretary to Advocate General, GRG 24/4/7, p. 777.

Grey, G. (1845d, 9 April). Colonial Secretary to the Superintendent of Police Port Phillip and to J Blair Esqr. JP, Police Magistrate, Portland, GRG 24/4/7, p. 801.

Grey, G. (1845e, 6 June). Colonial Secretary to Police Commissioner, GRG 24/4/7, p. 887.

Grey, G. (1845f, 11 June). Colonial Secretary to Police Commissioner, GRG 24/4/7, p. 894.

Grey, G. (1845g, 11 June). Colonial Secretary to the Colonial Secretary, Van Diemen's Land, GRG 24/4/7, p. 895.

Miscellaneous

Aboriginal population of South Australia, compiled from census papers taken 2 April 1871. (1871, 4 August). Commissioner of Crown Lands, GRG 52/1/1871/168.

1851 Pastoral lease diagram. (1850, 24 December). Vol. 1, p. 2, GRS 11677.

Published sources

Attwood, B. (2005). Unsettling pasts: Reconciliation and history in settler Australia. *Postcolonial Studies*, 8(3), 243–259. doi.org/10.1080/13688790500231012

- Bloch, M. (1954). *The historian's craft* (Peter Putnam, Trans). Manchester University Press.
- Clendinnen, I. (2003). *Dancing with strangers*. Text Publishing Company.
- Copley, V. & McInerney, L. (2022). *The wonder of little things*. ABC Books.
- Cowlshaw, G. (1992). Studying Aborigines: Changing canons in anthropology and history. In B. Attwood & J. Arnold (Eds.), *Power, knowledge and Aborigines* (pp. 2–31). La Trobe University Press.
- Cubitt, G. (2007). *Memory and history*. Manchester University Press.
- Foster, R. & Nettelbeck, A. (2012). *Out of the silence*. Wakefield Press.
- Jones, P. (2007). *Ochre and rust*. Wakefield Press.
- The killing times. (2022, 16 March). *The Guardian*. [theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2019/mar/04/massacre-map-australia-the-killing-times-frontier-wars](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2019/mar/04/massacre-map-australia-the-killing-times-frontier-wars)
- Krichauff, S. (2011). *Nharrungga Wargunni Bugi-buggillu*. Wakefield Press.
- Krichauff, S. (2017). *Memory, place and Aboriginal–settler history*. Anthem Press. doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1trkkdh
- Krichauff, S. (2019). Squatter-cum-pastoralist or freeholder? Recognising differences in the experiences of nineteenth-century colonists. In P. Payton & A. Varnava (Eds.), *The immigration histories of Britain, Australasia and the empire* (pp. 93–118). Britain and the World series. Palgrave Macmillan. doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22389-2_5
- Krichauff, S. (2020). Recognising Country: Tracing stories of wounded spaces in mid-northern South Australia. *History Australia*, 17(3), 423–447. doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2020.1798793
- LaCapra, D. (1998). *History and memory after Auschwitz*. Cornell University Press. doi.org/10.7591/9781501727450
- Mattey, R. (1968). *Deceptive lands: A history of Terowie and surrounding hundreds in the mid-north of South Australia*. South Australian Country Women's Association, Terowie Branch.
- Police commissioner's court: Tuesday, December 24. (1844, 27 December). *South Australian Register*, 3A.
- Police commissioner's court: Monday, December 30. (1845, 1 January). *South Australian Register*, 3C.

- Pope, A. (1989). *Resistance and retaliation: Aboriginal–European relations in early colonial South Australia*. Heritage Action.
- Richards, M. (1977). *Hallett: A history of town and district*. Lutheran Publishing House.
- Rose, D. B. & Davis, R. (2005). *Dislocating the frontier: Essaying the mystique of the outback*. ANU E Press. doi.org/10.22459/DF.03.2006
- Ryan, L., Debenham, J., Pascoe, B., Smith, R., Owen, C., Richards, J., Gilbert, S., Anders, R. J., Usher, K., Price, D., Newley, J., Brown, M., Le, L. H. & Fairbairn, H. (2018). *Colonial frontiers massacres, Australia, 1788 to 1930* (Vol. 2.1) [Massacres map]. University of Newcastle. c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php
- Schlink, B. (2009). *Guilt about the past*. University of Queensland Press.
- Schwab, G. (2010). *Haunting legacies: Violent histories and transgenerational trauma*. Columbia University Press.
- Shellam, T. (2009). *Shaking hands on the fringe: Negotiating the Aboriginal world at King George's Sound*. UWA Press.
- Stolte, R. (1985). *Razorback Range country: A history of the settlement and development of Mt Bryan District*. Mt Bryan Book Committee.
- Supreme Court criminal side: Tuesday, 26 November. (1844, 29 November). *Southern Australian Register*, 3A.
- Supreme Court criminal side: Friday, 29 November. (1844, 30 November). *South Australian Register*, 3CD.
- Veracini, L. (2010). *Settler colonialism: A theoretical overview*. Palgrave Macmillan. doi.org/10.1057/9780230299191
- Warrior, F., Knight, F., Anderson, S. & Pring, A. (2005). *Ngadjuri: Aboriginal people of the mid north region of South Australia*. SASOSE Council Inc.

This text is taken from *Memory in Place: Locating colonial histories and commemoration*, edited by Cameo Dalley and Ashley Barnwell, published 2023 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/MP.2023.06