

The Sydney Wars: Conflict in the Early Colony 1788–1817

by Stephen Gapps

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Review by Kristyn Harman
University of Tasmania

The Sydney Wars portrays in graphic detail a series of violent encounters between Aboriginal people and the British in New South Wales that did not conclude until almost 30 years after the colony's establishment. Beginning with the petty warfare evident in the first years of the colony (1788–89) and ending in the aftermath of Governor Lachlan Macquarie's punitive expedition of 1816, Stephen Gapps provides compelling evidence to demonstrate how the British military and paramilitary (settlers and convicts) regularly engaged in officially sanctioned operations against Aboriginal people and adapted their military practices to suit colonial New South Wales. At the same time, Aboriginal people engaged in highly organised operations against the British and occasionally succeeded in driving the newcomers off contested lands.

Rather than perpetuating a myth of relatively peaceful 'settlement', Gapps highlights how Aboriginal people resisted the British incursion onto their lands from the outset. He utilises extensive primary source material to leave no doubt in readers' minds that there were many violent incidents between locals and the newcomers from first encounters through until 1817. Surviving records indicate that violence peaked during the 1790s, and again from 1804 to 1805 and between 1814 and 1816. Warfare was almost continuous, being interrupted in the early period only by an outbreak of a disease – thought to have been smallpox – that resulted in widespread deaths among Aboriginal people, thus greatly diminishing their capacity to repel the invaders.

There are a number of strengths apparent in Gapps's work. One of these is his standpoint as a military historian. This has enabled him to reinterpret some of the primary source material with which others have already worked, and to provide a more accurate reading of recorded incidents based on his knowledge of, for example, the rates at which muskets could be reloaded, the different types of ammunition used by the colonists, and the impacts of such factors in situations of violence. He also demonstrates insights into Aboriginal uses of weaponry.

Gapps pays careful attention to evidence pointing to the complex strategies utilised by Aboriginal people in fighting to protect their country, their resources, themselves and their families. As others have done before him (notably James Belich), he has highlighted how Victorian attitudes towards 'race' prevented colonists from truly seeing and acknowledging their opponents' capacity to make and enact elaborate plans. The success of some Aboriginal strategies is highlighted by Gapps's careful reconstruction of acts that can only be read as economic sabotage with farms being abandoned by colonists who suffered losses resulting from actions taken against them. He also provides ample evidence of Aboriginal people forming a fighting force sometimes numbering in the hundreds, clearly indicating strategic alliances being formed that stretched well beyond the fighters' immediate localities.

Another of the strengths evident in this work is the way in which Gapps does not force his primary source material to reveal facets of history that cannot accurately be discerned. He clearly states where, for example, the numbers of casualties resulting from a violent encounter simply cannot be determined. He also writes in a way that does not necessarily presuppose the outcome of the 'Sydney Wars'. This approach enables Gapps to work with the source material on its own terms, interpreting Aboriginal victories where and when they occurred, and watching carefully for shifts in the balance of power, without assuming the inevitability of a colonial victory. He has revealed how, at certain moments, things actually could have gone either way.

Gapps also demonstrates keen insights into key events in the 'Sydney Wars' that derive from his intimate knowledge of the geography. For example, he argues convincingly in relation to the Appin massacre that the Aboriginal casualties probably did not result from people rushing off the edge of a cliff. Rather, Gapps points out that the 'area is not one of sheer cliffs, as many historians and others imagine from the comfort of their libraries' (p. 235), but instead consists of steep terrain that would have provided a planned escape route for the Aboriginal group camped there. Unfortunately the cries of a child alerted the soldiers to the Aboriginal presence and upset the timing of their escape, inadvertently turning their planned escape route into a death trap.

While he acknowledges the usefulness of the descriptor 'frontier wars' at the time this phrase was coined, Gapps questions its ongoing utility. He argues persuasively that 'the "frontier" is always the edge of the expanding colonial centre rather than warfare conducted inside Aboriginal lands' (p. 272). In addition, Gapps argues, 'frontier wars' was a label penned by historians rather than by Aboriginal people. He suggests that it may be time to rethink the terminology used to describe such conflicts.

With its emphasis on the officially sanctioned nature of many of the British sorties against Aboriginal people and its acknowledgement of the Aboriginal alliances formed and strategies enacted, Gapps' work reconfigures the historiography relating to the 'Sydney Wars'. He demonstrates how, at certain times and places, the British victory hung in the balance and was not necessarily a foregone conclusion.

This book will prove illuminating to scholars and students of Australian colonial history and ought also to be of some interest to others whose areas of research extend to Britain's various other colonies. While scholars may be familiar with some or perhaps many of the sources cited by Gapps, they will likely benefit from his critical engagement with the existing historiography and his masterful use of extant primary sources.

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