

Remembering the Myall Creek Massacre

edited by Jane Lydon and Lyndall Ryan

248 pp., NewSouth Publishing, 2018,

ISBN: 9781742235752 (pbk), \$34.99

Review by Libby Connors

University of Southern Queensland

Recent public debates on marriage equality, renewable energy and climate change indicate that the majority of Australians are more progressive than their federal government. So there is a good chance that recognising the frontier wars also has more support than the Australian Government realises. While the Australian War Memorial refuses to expressly commemorate the frontier wars, Australians are increasingly acknowledging this violent history at the community level. For the last 6 years, Toowoomba residents have remembered the Battle of One Tree Hill, while St Mark's Anglican church at Buderim, Queensland, has held an annual service to lament the public execution of local man Dundalli; they are of course some 17 years behind the New South Wales community of Myall Creek, which first hosted a commemorative event in 1998.

Jane Lydon and Lyndall Ryan have produced a very readable collection of work on how the horrific events at Myall Creek in 1838 are being commemorated today, how the massacre was perpetrated and prosecuted and how it was publicised and protested in the 1830s and 1840s.

The chapters are arranged chronologically beginning with historical reconstruction of events at Henry Dangar's infamous station in June 1838. The parts played by different members of the Myall Creek staff on the fateful night, its dreadful aftermath and the investigation and trials that followed are explored in a chapter by Ryan while Patsy Withycombe discusses the role of John Fleming who led the attacking party but who, as a free settler rather than a convict or ex-convict, was able to evade capture and prosecution. Lydon then investigates the representation of the massacre in visual art in the 1840s while Anna Johnston analyses it in literature and places it in the transnational humanitarian movement of that decade. Johnston's

illuminating work shows the extent of community opposition to the horrors of the violence wrought by colonialism. The persistence of the humanitarian campaigners puts the lie to the notion that settlers did not know any better, or that historians must not judge frontier murder 'out of historical context' as apologists like to claim. Their struggle for a humane empire was lost to the pastoral industry's insistence on a genocidal one as Ryan's next chapter on the prevalence of other massacres across the region emphasises. It is then followed by a chapter by an archaeological team working on native police camps that discusses how news of the massacre would have followed songlines north and west into remote parts of Queensland. It helpfully brings the reader back to an Aboriginal-centred approach to settler history.

By taking the book in this direction, however, the opportunity to explore the long-term political effects of the humanitarian political campaign is lost. The Introduction too quickly asserts that the massacre was forgotten within a decade, for this was not the case in Queensland where it was raised in personal diaries and more often in courtrooms throughout the 1850s. The very naming of a native police force is part of this legacy, as settler parliaments strove to deny and suppress constant talk of war by both the anti-slavery activists and the settlers.

The next part of the book includes the speech John Maynard gave at the 2015 commemoration at Myall Creek on the Aboriginal military experience and a chapter by Indigenous art historian Andrew Brook and research assistant Jessica Neath, based on interviews with architects and artists from around the world who have sought to construct memorials to genocide and massacre. These discussions include a wonderfully diverse range of reflections on the difficulty of encapsulating trauma in a way that heals and reconciles. Lastly, we have New South Wales legal personality Mark Tedeschi's speech at the Myall Creek Memorial in 2015, which concludes that the massacre was an act of genocide.

So while there are valuable scholarly chapters, the book is clearly designed to appeal to a wide audience and to that end it includes community contributions. A minor disappointment was a reliance on secondary sources for other massacre events. Since the History Wars of a decade ago, Lyndall Ryan has been progressively checking and cross-checking claims relating to massacres, but it is a sign that systematic reassessment by historians remains an enormous task.

Queensland-based history teachers are desperate for fresh scholarly works on the frontier wars now that they are included in the new Queensland history curriculum, so they will particularly value this book. Its other valuable contribution will be to introduce Ryan's scholarship on genocide and massacre to a broader readership beyond the academy. The Australian War Memorial has begun collecting materials on the frontier wars even if acknowledgement of them is not on the government's agenda and this work will undoubtedly be a valued addition to their collection.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 43, 2019*,
edited by Ingereth Macfarlane, published 2020 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.