

Pathfinders: A History of Aboriginal Trackers in NSW

by Michael Bennett

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Pursuing criminals across rugged country, hunting cattle duffers, scouring the bush for missing persons; each of these vignettes are well known to an Australian audience, as encounters with the bush are embedded in the nation's culture, history and folklore. While much has changed since the colonial period, when Europeans' assumed mastery over the land was used to justify their possession of it, there remains a sense that men and women who knew the country and could make the bush an ally were Australian pioneers, and should be celebrated as national heroes. Although palatable to a settler Australian audience, this narrative contains a colonial legacy that remains to be overturned: in national consciousness, these 'pathfinding' legends are white.

Michael Bennett's book, *Pathfinders: A History of Aboriginal Trackers in NSW*, undercuts this mythology by showcasing the Aboriginal men and women who traced people, goods and livestock the length and breadth of New South Wales. This is the first history to place Aboriginal trackers centre stage, as protagonists not only in criminal histories of the colonial period but also as active agents in their own lives. Each chapter focuses on the biography of a particular tracker, while also moving forward in time, from the mid-1800s well into the twentieth century. With forensic attention to detail, Bennett charts each tracker's career with the police, including maps of the areas they traversed in search of their quarry. While these maps bring the immense swathes of country Aboriginal trackers navigated into stark relief, the book is also replete with detail about their cases. Readers gain a keen sense of the factors working against each tracker: the delays before each hunt could commence, the misinformation, the evidence eroded by the elements.

The skill involved in tracking is illustrated beyond a doubt in this book, making for a significant intervention in the field of colonial history. Most colonial Australians believed Aboriginal people's tracking skills to be inherent traits; useful, but seldom worthy of praise. Due to trackers' habitual position on the outskirts of colonial histories, this narrative has never been so directly challenged as it is in *Pathfinders*. Bennett pieces together how Aboriginal knowledge of country, law and custom equipped trackers with the skill set to thrive in circumstances that often confounded their European counterparts.

Indeed, it is the embeddedness of each tracker in Aboriginal community and culture that allowed them to succeed, and the strength of this ongoing connection is one of the defining features of the book. Although trackers worked for settler Australians, they did not serve them alone. Aboriginal and European law existed simultaneously, presenting an intricate web of responsibilities and competing loyalties that trackers were forced to navigate. Aboriginal trackers' relationship to kin and country could affect the nature of a search; a tracker might 'lose the trail', for example, if asked to pursue their own people.

The book's ability to piece together Aboriginal biographies and illustrate the endurance of Aboriginal law and culture is exceptional. When the historical archive is a colonial one, saturated in settlers' beliefs about Aboriginal inferiority and often actively working to erase Aboriginal subjecthood, the extent of detail in *Pathfinders* is truly remarkable.

However, the significance of this intervention is obscured by the book's dearth of context. Although *Pathfinders'* introduction and conclusion bookend the piece with the settler colonial context, it is not woven through the narrative. The legacy of frontier violence, the realities of dispossession and the increasing control of institutions (such as the Aboriginal Protection Board) over Aboriginal people's lives are hardly referenced. The book reads as a chronicle of Aboriginal trackers' lives and family histories. It is largely up to the reader to connect these stories to colonial history more broadly.

This may have been a deliberate choice on Bennett's part. By focusing so closely on individual lives, the book pushes back against historical narratives that cast Aboriginal people as passive victims of colonisation. Each chapter highlights a tracker's agency and their talent. Bennett originally conducted his research into Aboriginal trackers through investigating native title claims, and this also appears to have heavily influenced *Pathfinders*. Like native title claims, the book emphasises connection over disconnection; continuity in Aboriginal culture and tradition over the impact of colonisation and change.

Without sufficient attention to context, however, the reader has little sense of how remarkable this connection truly was. Despite dispossession and genocide, most of the Aboriginal trackers featured in this book were able to maintain their relationship with culture and country, as well as navigate and adapt to the settler world. European prejudice and structural inequality were not only features of these trackers' lives, they also illustrate how exceptional, resilient and strong these figures were to be able to carve a space for themselves and their families.

Pathfinders is an important book. It brings to the fore the lives of Aboriginal trackers who had previously been relegated to the sidelines of history, and illustrates how instrumental they were in the success of the colonial police force. However, the book has the potential to do so much more than fill this absence, and readers familiar with settler colonial history will see the deeper significance in this work. Aboriginal trackers were remarkable for their talent and their skill, but also for their relationships, their navigation of Aboriginal and settler colonial worlds, and their modes of survival.

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