

## Preface

### Making peace with the past: remembering the Coniston massacre 1928–2003

The events that occurred on Coniston Station in late 1928 are not well known to the broader Australian public. Yet for the Aboriginal peoples of the region and for some other Australians the word 'Coniston' evokes a sense of dread. For Warlpiri especially the legacy of those terrible weeks endures 75 years later. People still talk of uncles, fathers, grandfathers who were killed along with aunts, mothers and grandmothers. The official enquiry found that 31 were killed. That figure is low; how low we don't really know. At the time Mounted Constable George Murray was considered a hero by some. He was exonerated by the later Commission of Enquiry as they said he acted in self defence. In truth he acted like a field commander at war – a general in the saddle who fought hand to hand just as he had done at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. He had willing accomplices, including two Aboriginal trackers. (See the article by Wilson and O'Brien in this volume for a detailed examination of these events).

Traditional Owners have for many years discussed the need for a commemoration, for a ceremony and a service of remembrance of the events at Coniston. The community was not unanimous about this. But on 24 September 2003 senior responsible men and women, with the assistance of the Central Land Council and with the permission of the pastoral lessees of Mt Denison Station, finally conducted such an event. The site chosen was Yurrkuru, or Brooks Soak, named in English for the old dogger and prospector who is buried nearby. It was his murder that brought deadly gunfire upon the culpable and the innocent alike. Men and women, now elderly, who witnessed the events, were at the recent ceremony. Some spoke and some wept. Representatives of the family of George Murray spoke sorrowfully of profound regret and they apologised wholeheartedly. The apology was accepted. The Northern Territory Police were represented and spoke of regret for the harm to all involved. Community members, young and old, spoke in language and in English about the past but mostly about the future.

After the speeches the senior women danced and, by the side of the road, a plaque was unveiled. Then the kids mobbed the stonemason as he tried to get on with his work on the plaque, getting it just right.

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The text reads:

In 1928 near this place the murder of Frederick Brooks led to the killing of many innocent Aboriginal people across the region

We will remember them always.

Nganimparlu kapurnalu-jana manngu-nyanyirni

Tarrnganguku-juku

Nwern inenhenh kweteth iterl-arerlanetyenh

Aynanthe atewanthepe etelarerrantye

James Warden

24 September 2003



Liza Dale Hallett and her husband Martin together with artists from the Willowra community who created the banner they are standing in front of for the 75th anniversary of the Coniston Massacre. Photo: George Serras, National Museum of Australia.

## Introduction

The papers submitted during 2002–3 for volume 27 reflect three strong and overlapping concerns in current research. These spheres of investigation are firstly the processes and outcomes of colonial occupation and control over land; the origins and effects of government policies on Indigenous people's lives and, thirdly, some of the ways in which Indigenous people have represented their perceptions.

Several of these papers are direct responses to Keith Windschuttle's work, or to the call for historiographical papers issued in the last editions of this journal, and most authors have framed their work in terms of the current public debates regarding the interpretation of historical evidence in the 'Aboriginal history' field. But the content of the work stems from a longer-running effort to bring together the detailed archival and oral history materials which illuminate how conflicts over land or identity have been lived out in specific times or places and how they continue to play out now. The cumulative weight of evidence in these detailed empirical studies makes for painful, unsettling histories.

As publishing becomes increasingly commercial and restrictive of space, academic journals such as this one remain a forum where full, detailed and, in Windschuttle's word 'accountable' investigation, reflection and referencing of this type is still not only accommodated but insisted upon.

We are pleased that this collection of papers demonstrates the *Aboriginal History* Board's policy of encouraging contributions from a wide range of writers: established and new scholars, Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, presenting local, national and international perspectives.

Cole presents a consideration of the background and experience of Ella Hiscocks, whose life's work was at the sharp end of assimilationist policies in NSW from 1939–1969, where she was responsible for their delivery as Matron of the Cootamundra Girls Home. Robinson describes the experiences of Aboriginal children in Queensland, outside such official institutions, sent to work as domestic labourers. The anxieties and the concepts which informed assimilationist policies are further illuminated in Ellinghaus' comparative examination of legislation concerning interracial marriage in Australia and in the US.

Owen examines the tensions between the requirements for late 19th century East Kimberley police officers to uphold the law and yet meet settler pastoralists' demands for repression of local Aboriginal cattle killings. He shows the involvement of the Commissioner of Police in shifting this balance in favour of the pastoralists' interests. In the year of the 75th anniversary of the events at Coniston, Northern Territory, Wilson and O'Brien draw on the documentary evidences, recorded oral testimonies and Strehlow's unpublished diaries to refine our understanding of the complexities which surround

the events. Like Owen, they consider the often contradictory relationships between actions of individuals and governmental policies and practices.

The need for fine-grained attention to how general policies are enacted in particular places by particular people is clear from these studies. There are revealing ambivalences in Matron Hiscocks' dealings with the Aborigines Welfare Board and with the Indigenous girls in her charge, and at Coniston the character and military experiences of Constable Murray are likely to have contributed to his military campaign style response to the events. Similarly, Owen highlights the lack of training for police officers and the variations in the ways in which they individually enacted policies.

At a broader scale, Taylor, Schmitt and Roy review patterns of effects on Indigenous family structure as a result of colonisation in Victoria. Harris draws on his long-term research to present a critique of Windschuttle's 'massacre myth' arguments, with an informed refutation of his assertions concerning the role of missionaries.

From their different personal perspectives Maynard and McKenna make a series of important comments on the origins, outcomes and public reception of the 'history wars'. It could be seen, in some lights, as a positive sign that historical interpretation was a topic considered worthy of press coverage, were it not that the only mode of debate offered were adversarial binaries set up in the media, as both Maynard and McKenna point out. Carried out as if the debate had no impact on people's lives and self-perceptions, the implications of McKenna's observations on its impact 'at an everyday conversational level' are chilling:

Since the publication of *Looking for Blackfellas' Point*, I have had several people on the south coast and in the ACT make remarks along the following lines. 'Mark, have you heard of the new book on Aboriginal history by Wind someone or other, a lot of these stories about how bad our history was aren't true you know. We didn't kill all the Aborigines. You should read the book.'

The hard-won space that had opened in the 1990s in which it was at least possible for a majority of Australian people to hear unfamiliar and difficult stories of dispossession and assimilation has been covered over with confusions.

[T]he crucial issue of the responsibility of a political community for past wrongs have been reduced to the rather more sterile one of the uses and abuses of history. Whatever possibilities for political reinvention made available by the High Court's refutation of the doctrine of *terra nullius* have now become bogged down in an academic dispute where claims of 'black armband' history square off against claims of 'historical denialism'. Only recently stirred to reflection about the moral underpinnings of the state apparatus, the deliberations of the Australian public have now been effectively suffocated in the name of discovering 'the truth'.<sup>1</sup>

Maynard places this opposition to the telling of Indigenous histories in the context of long-term struggles for recognition from the 1920s on. Veracini provides a recent historical context for the current debates. Referring to selected salient published works in the field, he identifies a framework of sequential waves of tensions which run through the writing of Aboriginal histories in the last 15 years.

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<sup>1</sup> Muldoon 2003: 189.

Self-representation by Aboriginal people is the third rich strand in the papers of this volume. Gibbs shows the personal and political meanings behind an Indigenous whalers' songs about his experiences in the Western Australian whaling industry. Willis sets out the context in which some rare Indigenous Victorian drawings on bark were produced, collected and exhibited, and the reception of these. Peters-Little examines the production of documentary television and film by Indigenous makers and about Indigenous people. As she points out, underlying cultural assumptions continue, often in an unacknowledged way, to not only underlie the ways in which people do represent themselves and others, but the ways in which they can – the tropes are deeply ingrained. To counter this, Peters-Little shows, requires identifying what they are before they can be left behind.

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From this volume 27 on, in addition to a print version, the journal will be available on-line to subscribing libraries. Back issues of volumes 24–26 will also be made available online.

We have reluctantly had to increase the price of the journal for the first time in many years in order to cover its production costs. This will be effective from the release of the next volume 28, 2004.

The journal is the result of the largely voluntary labour of many people. Thanks to the members of the Board, the referees, Trish Boekel, Dick Barwick, Tikka Wilson and Jen Jeffery.

Aboriginal History Inc. and the journal are fortunate to have been invited to join the Australian Centre for Indigenous History, established in the History Program of the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University in 2003. This association will mutually benefit our shared interests. We acknowledge the support of the History Program with thanks.

The Board, the Australian National University and the friends and family of Peter Grimshaw suffered a major loss when he died suddenly earlier this year. A mainstay of the journal from its inception, as Neil Gunson's obituary shows, he is sorely missed.

Ingereth Macfarlane  
ANU, Canberra  
December 2003

## Reference

Muldoon, Paul 2003, 'Reconciliation and political legitimacy: the old Australia and the new South Africa', *Australian journal of politics and history* 49(2): 182–196.