

## ***Gudyarra: The First Wiradyuri War of Resistance: The Bathurst War, 1822–1824***

by Stephen Gapps

288 pp., NewSouth Publishing, 2021  
ISBN: 9781742236711 (pbk), \$34.99

Review by Carol Liston  
Western Sydney University

In August 1824 the governor of New South Wales, Sir Thomas Brisbane, signed a proclamation declaring martial law west of Mount York in the Blue Mountains. In the 26 years since the British had arrived and established a convict colony with a military presence, this was the first time military rule officially replaced civil authority. The threat that triggered this unique response was violence between black and white in the new country over the mountains.

This incident is not the beginning of Gapps's powerful account. That it falls about two-thirds into the book indicates that much of the work is about how this situation arose. This represents a continuum from the incidents and confrontations in the County of Cumberland on which Gapps's earlier book, *The Sydney Wars*, was based. With the crossing of the Blue Mountains, construction of the road over the mountains and the establishment of Bathurst, European visits intensified. The number of sheep and cattle that grazed there within a few years is astounding. The first invaders were not people but animals. The intensity of European occupation was increased by Governor Brisbane's preference for tickets of occupation over grants. This forerunner to squatting enabled colonists to send large numbers of stock to nominated districts under the supervision of stockmen, often assigned convicts or ticket-of-leave men.

While using historical sources that have been well known for a century in *Historical Records of Australia* as the basis, Gapps has brought to this account new sources that significantly alter the interpretation of the traditional accounts. Official returns from the archives add details, but it is the personal accounts that provide the substance, confirmation of the 'whispered accounts' of violence. The collections of local historical societies are generally under-utilised but Gapps has found among the family memoirs

unambiguous accounts of participation in a frontier war. This was an age of war; many of the colonists had experienced the Napoleonic wars and, though no longer in the military, they recounted battle action without self-censorship.

New sources include the evidence of the Wiradyuri people, past and present. Their Elders and descendants have shared with Gapps their knowledge of Country and customs and enabled him to reinterpret European accounts. This dramatically changes an account of a massacre near the Cudgegong River in September 1824 into a battlefield scenario where a well-armed war party under the Wiradyuri leader known as 'Blucher' engaged the Cox family's convict overseer and stockmen. Understanding topography and custom and questioning the use of weapons in a running battle, Gapps completely revises our perception of this incident.

Windradyne (known as Saturday to the colonists) was the best known of the Wiradyuri leaders but Gapps details how the various bands under a number of leaders were able to surround the Bathurst area and carry out raids on stock outstations. From Mudgee in the north to Blayney in the south-west and Oberon in the south-east, the Wiradyuri conducted so many attacks that the assigned convict servants were unwilling to remain on the isolated outstations and retreated from a number of locations, including abandoning government stock stations. For pastoralists seeking more grazing land, this retreat had to be stopped.

Martial law implies the use of military force. Gapps discusses the military forces available in the colony. Despite requests from both Macquarie and Brisbane, the military were few in number and stretched thin across the colony. Martial law west of the mountains saw the arming of civilians including convict workers at outstations. The absence of official reports of armed actions suggests that many of the incidents from August 1824 until the end of the year were undertaken by the pastoralists and their workforce and were not reported. The authorities in Sydney were seemingly unaware of much that was going on at the frontier. Brisbane's administration was also wracked by internal dissent, further limiting its efficiency.

There are uncomfortable truths to be faced by readers of this work. By using sources from below, family accounts (even those written decades later) provide evidence that has been missing from the official records. While self-interest was undoubtedly dominant in the minds of all colonists, they had differing sympathies and understandings about the Indigenous people with whom they came in contact. In this account, Gapps has moved beyond generic accounts of the anonymous 'colonists' and named people, places and incidents, not only those in authority but those on the ground, including workers. Convict shepherds killed in incidents or fleeing to safety are named, as are the pastoralists who responded to the attacks. His work now demands revision of the activities of well-known colonial families.

Most chapters are introduced with hand-drawn maps. Wiradyuri and European names are included and pictograms indicate the location and character of incidents, whether raids on stock or property, armed skirmishes or killings of either Wiradyuri or colonists. More detailed maps of some of the incidents would be useful for readers, as would illustrations of the country as the action moves from open grazing lands to valleys and rougher terrain, environments in which the Wiradyuri had the advantage.

Despite the numerous actions by the Wiradyuri, Gapps calculates that they lost about 10 per cent of their warriors. Peace was now essential for survival. At a gathering of Aboriginal groups at Parramatta in December 1824, Windradyne led 140 Wiradyuri over the mountains to meet the governor.

Resistance did not end with the lifting of martial law at the end of 1824. Nor did the violence. The weapons remained in the hands of the rural workforce and Gapps suggests that one consequence was the outbreak of bushranging that followed later in the 1820s.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History*, Volume 46, 2022, edited by  
Crystal McKinnon and Ben Silverstein, published 2023 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.