

Warrior: A Legendary Leader's Dramatic Life and Violent Death on the Colonial Frontier

by Libby Connors

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The executions after the Myall Creek massacre of 1838 seem to have encouraged a collective silence amongst colonists about the continued killing of Aboriginal people. Violence and dispossession persisted, but not all Europeans subscribed to this 'exterminating' view. In *Warrior*, Libby Connors uses important evidence on race relations – specifically Judge Roger Therry's judgement ('A black man's camp is as much his castle as a white man's house', p. 145) – to show how complex and shifting frontier history could be.

As Connors notes, 'these events [in Brisbane, of 1850] are as deserving as the Myall Creek massacre trials. Plunkett was at the centre of both decisions' (pp. 146–147). The court cases were, as she reminds us, the 'highpoints of evangelical humanitarianism influence'. Yet Dundalli was publicly executed in Brisbane in the midst of this Christian 'civilising'. 'The formal processes of the British court had effectively rendered traditional law and authority invisible. Within its walls Dundalli, a traditional lawman, was recast as a criminal, and his enforcement of its customs as ferocious savagery' (p. 190).

The criminalisation of Aboriginal people has led some to deny that violence took place. Yet, as Connors explains, 'The Colonial Office would not define conflict with Aboriginal people as war but the European residents of Brisbane still lived with a sense of siege almost twenty-five years after white settlement' (p. 143). Fear of 'Aboriginal attack' on settlers continued across Queensland for decades.

Aboriginal people resisted invasion, but their efforts only attracted constant and massive reprisals. Connors accurately exposes the colonising violence intended to completely and permanently 'disperse' Aboriginal sovereignty: 'An imperial policy that refused to see Indigenous Australians as a rival power could only criminalise their behaviour once they were defined as British subjects' (p. 191). Furthermore, the criminalisation of Aboriginal people meant that violence could be legitimately used against them, generally without fear of legal retribution. The racial violence on the frontier was, as she clearly shows, systematic, widespread and continuing.

Many colonists believed that Australia was a land with no previous system of law. In particular, the killing of Aboriginal lawmen like Dundalli helped further the fiction of an ownerless and undeveloped land, just 'waiting' for European industry and exploitation. As Connors concludes, 'Applying British law to Australian colonial frontiers undoubtedly saved lives by placing some limitations on settler violence but it also brought a greater injustice with its ideological cloak that smothered, and silenced Aboriginal legality' (p. 191).

Her impressive research supports a thoroughly readable and most informative narrative. As Connors reminds us, Aboriginal people – despite their ordered and determined resistance to European occupation – experienced great violence and loss during the early decades of non-Indigenous settlement. This is an excellent contribution to our knowledge of the history of the south-east Queensland frontier, and to the frontier history of Australia. This will quickly become a standard historical text. I highly recommend *Warrior*.

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