

# FORGOTTEN WAR

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## Introduction

My interest in frontier conflict goes back a long way. It featured in my first two publications, a book of documents called *Aborigines and Settlers* published in 1972, and *The Other Side of the Frontier*, which came out ten years later. But my long engagement began by chance.

While living in London I quite unexpectedly received the offer of a lectureship at the Townsville University College. I had never heard of the institution and knew nothing about the town. But it was a ticket back to Australia and within a few months I was teaching Australian history to two small classes from a prescribed textbook that, typical of the time, didn't mention the Aborigines. It was an absence that I did not immediately notice.

I initially became interested in the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and only later began exploring the past. What was immediately apparent was the amount of everyday public violence. Racial abuse was commonplace. So were fights, sometimes involving brawling groups of men spilling out of the pubs onto the nearby footpaths and roads. There was an unmistakable undercurrent of anger and animosity.

It was shocking and unanticipated. I had not experienced anything like it while growing up in Tasmania and nothing I had learnt about Australian history might have prepared me for it. But it pushed me into a crusade to learn more about the past, both to help with contemporary understanding and to make my teaching more relevant to my local students, most of whom had grown up in the north and in many cases had not travelled further south than Brisbane. I became convinced that everyday violence, and the casual acceptance of it, must have deep historical roots. And I knew nothing about them.

But the planned exploration was a more difficult task than I had at first realised. There was little enough in the library about Indigenous history in Australia and a whole and even less about Queensland. The only way forward was to plunge straight into the historical documents. My first ever postgraduate student, Noel Loos, was able to use the files of the *Port Denison Times*, dating from the 1860's, which were still held in the newspaper office in Bowen. What both of us found almost immediately was abundant evidence of frontier violence. It was not a case of seeking it out –

the evidence spilled unbidden from the contemporary record like blood from an open wound. It was unavoidable, incontrovertible. To ignore it was out of the question.

By the time I had pursued my project in libraries and archives all over the country, many other researchers, too numerous to mention, had begun to map out the broader history of European-Aboriginal relations. The field became of the busiest and most creative areas of a rapidly maturing Australian historiography. Scholars moved in many directions but few called into question the original perception we had developed in Townsville about the central importance of frontier conflict to an understanding of both the past and the present. There was also broad consensus that it was a major, albeit long-overlooked, theme of the national story. At the same time prehistorians were revolutionising our understanding of the great antiquity of Aboriginal occupation of the continent. Linguists and anthropologists were recording the precious memories of old tribal men and women who had experienced the dramatic impact of the first white men entering their traditional homelands when they were children.

**But why return now to an old project and retrace already well-trodden paths? There seem to be several good reasons for so doing. The long and often bitter controversies about Aboriginal history were central to the history wars that raged during the late 1990s and the early years of the new millennium. There were many combatants, including the three prime ministers – Keating, Howard and Rudd. At the same time the decade-long process of reconciliation attracted widespread curiosity and debate about the past, greatly stimulated by the High Court’s historic Mabo judgment and the report of the Human Rights Commission of 1997 about the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. And running parallel with these developments, while quite independent of them, was the extraordinary revival of interest in the history of war and what has been persuasively described as the militarisation of Australian history, driven by government funding and directed by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs and the Australian War Memorial.**

Since 1994 there has been a continuous program to commemorate the men and women who have served in Australia’s overseas wars from 1885 to the present. It will certainly continue and then be swept up into what will be an even more overwhelming carnival of commemoration to mark in 2015 the centenary of the landing on Gallipoli. This extraordinary flowering of military history has taken many older Australians by surprise because it is unprecedented. The generation that grew up between the 1950s and the 1980s has no experience to compare with the relentless, lavishly funded

public campaign to make war the central, defining experience of national life. Whether by design or chance, the campaigns inevitably elbow aside all other competing interpretations of our history. Bravery on the battlefield outshines all the achievements of civil society. The soldier, not the statesman, has become the paragon of national achievement.

All this has a direct impact on the way the nation deals with frontier conflict. This has had its own distinctive history. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was recurrent debate about violence on the ever-moving frontiers of settlement. The questions that mattered at the time were not ones about the existence of conflict but whether it was morally justified and to what extent it was an inevitable and unavoidable concomitant of successful pioneering. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Aborigines were written out of Australian history. This had the convenient effect of hiding much of the domestic bloodshed, allowing the celebration of what came to be viewed as a uniquely peaceful history of settlement. It was frequently applauded as an inimitable virtue of the nation's story. For generations weaned on this soothing syrup the new history of the frontier came as an unwelcome revelation and one often stoutly resisted.

For those promoting the ongoing carnival of military commemoration, the option of talking of the settlement of Australia as uniquely peaceful is no longer available. Too many people know about frontier violence. As will be discussed in this book, conflict accompanied the pioneer settlers into almost every district on the continent. It persisted for well over a hundred years. But today's military parade can simply pass it by with eyes straight ahead while the band plays patriotic airs. The tribal warrior with spears and clubs is not welcome. Frontier conflict is not included in the swelling project of military history, which is diminished by the single-minded focus on wars fought far away.

On the other hand, the contribution of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders to the armed forces in the many wars since Federation has been increasingly recognised and commemorated. Between now and the centenary of Gallipoli, large well-funded research projects will exhaustively document the distinctive Indigenous contribution to official military history. While this is to be welcomed, it draws attention away from the armed conflict that was the central feature of the relationship between settlers and the Indigenous nations. Aborigines who fought for the white man are remembered with reverence. The many more who fought against him are forgotten.

This book is my response to that partisan and discriminatory history. It is written in the belief that it will be unconscionable to indulge in a crescendo of commemoration and ignore the fundamental importance of the war between settlers and Indigenous nations within Australia. This is the forgotten war of conquest that saw the expropriation of the most productive land over vast continental distances, and the transfer of sovereignty from the Aborigines to the British government

and its successor colonial administrations. This is the war that made the nation, not the fateful invasion of Turkey at the direction of the imperial government. If we assess tangible, measurable developments of lasting significance, how can the two be compared?

This book is written, too, with the conviction that there is much unfinished business between settler and Indigenous Australia left over from the decade of incomplete reconciliation. There is currently a renewed push for constitutional recognition of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. If that is achieved, it must be accompanied by a public acceptance of the importance of frontier conflict and the devastation it left in its wake.

As we advance further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the relative importance of our involvement in the two world wars and the following Cold War will diminish as they lose their pre-eminent place in global history. The central story in the new century will increasingly be seen to have been the linked histories of imperialism and decolonisation, which were preparing the way for the great shifts in power and wealth currently underway. And in that story the relationship between European settlers and Indigenous Australians will become increasingly important. This is the subject that will be of most interest to the many people in the world who have no reason to be particularly impressed by all those ventures where we marched in step to the tunes played in London and Washington.