

Myall Creek: here, in 1838, a crime that would not be forgotten took place

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Myall Creek in Australia, the site of the massacre on 10 June 1838. Photograph: Reconciliation Australia

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Remembering is central to healing the pain of injustice and atrocity.

[Indigenous Australians](#) have a way of remembering, the good and the bad, through oral history and art that passes memories down through the generations.

I know of parts of central west New South Wales where the Indigenous women still talk in vivid detail about their ancestors who died after eating the bread, carefully laced with strychnine, that some of the settlers left outside the kitchens for them. They still talk also about [the Wiradjuri warrior Wyndradyne](#), and his

battles around Bathurst with the colonial soldiers and settlers, as if his death happened yesterday rather than 190 years ago. Closer to my home in Canberra the Indigenous people of the district – the Walgalu-speaking Ngambri and Ngurmal, the Wallabalooa and the Cookmai of the Ngunnawal language group – can still tell you all about the pioneering families whose properties are stained with Indigenous blood and stories of violent reprisal and murder.

Abbott's homogeneous approach to Indigenous affairs will not erase the stain on Australia's soul.

A wound can't properly heal unless its cause is properly identified. To know our history – ancient and recent – is to know who walked before us and made our country what it is. It is to know ourselves.

This weekend people from all over Australia, black and white, will converge on Myall Creek – a tiny place with two overgrown tennis courts and a memorial hall – that you'd hardly call a town in a small part of north-west NSW known evocatively, given its violent history, as New England. Here in 1838 a group of stockmen killed 28 unarmed Wirrayaraay old men, women and children.

The Myall Creek Massacre, as it came to be known, was not the first of the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of such crimes that unfolded across the colonial frontier between the first inhabitants, soldiers, settlers, vigilante groups and Indigenous “black police”.

The last is commonly regarded to have been at [Coniston, Northern Territory, in 1928](#) – notwithstanding the countless other acts of extreme violence (including custodial deaths) inextricably linked to colonialism, that have since been perpetrated against Indigenous Australians.

But Myall Creek is unique: it is the only massacre on the colonial or post-colonial frontier where non-Indigenous murderers of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people have

been convicted. Seven of the killers hung. Myall Creek was also instrumental for killers of blacks – a lesson that spread across the continent like a Mallee wildfire: **cover your tracks by properly disposing of the bodies; leave no witnesses.**

In 2000, when the first of what are now annual June long-weekend commemorations at Myall Creek took place, descendants of victims and killers united in an act of mutual apology and forgiveness.

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Every year at Myall Creek since 2000 it's been the same: sorrow and forgiveness.

In 2008 the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered an apology to the “stolen generation”. Freightened in legality, it stopped well short of the far wider, general, national apology that the colonial violence against this continent's Indigenous people demands from both contemporary British and Australian governments.

The Myall Creek apology stands as an evocative metaphor for that unfulfilled national need.

As [NSW Labor politician Paul Lynch](#) has said: “There was some discussion at the [2013] event of the concept of Myall Creek being developed nationally in the form of an apology for all the massacres. One would have thought that that would be a necessary preliminary to constitutional recognition of Aboriginal people.”

Indeed.

Graeme Cordiner, a member of the national committee of Friends of Myall Creek, which promotes the yearly commemoration, says: “At Myall Creek there's been an apology – and a national apology of that sort is, of course, the unfinished ‘sorry’ business of this country. Amid the talk of constitutional

recognition and even treaty, we as a nation should apologise for the way the continent was taken.”



An illustration of the Myall Creek Massacre made 40 years after the event.
Illustration: Mitchell Library

Unfortunately, plenty of Australians might prefer to advocate moving on from the past.

Noel Pearson, Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s foremost seer on most Indigenous matters, recently challenged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians to get over their traumatic history much, as he claimed, that Holocaust survivors had.

[Reactionaries, predictably, applauded.](#)

Pearson’s critics – and I’m happy to back them on this – naturally stress that commemorations and apologies for the great crime of the Holocaust are, appropriately, perpetual. There have been legal reparations, insufficient of course, but symbolically incisive.

[John Maynard, an Indigenous history professor](#) who is currently researching Aboriginal servicemen, will give a guest speech at Sunday’s Myall Creek commemoration.

I asked Maynard, grandson of the early Indigenous activist Fred Maynard, what importance he attached to commemorating events like Myall Creek.

He says: “It seems a strange and hypocritical contradiction that some black and white politicians tell us we need to ‘move on’ and not dwell upon the frontier wars of the past whilst at the same time we are saturated with ‘Lest We Forget’ Gallipoli – a failed (allied, including Australian) invasion of another peoples’ country. Myall Creek and Coniston are two of the more prominent Aboriginal massacre sites and as such stand as markers not just for the horrific crimes that took place at these locations but reflect additionally the multitude of silences that remain across the wider continent.

“I think for me having the honour to speak at the Myall Creek Memorial this year I will certainly reflect not just on those who lost their lives at that site but use the location and day to remember all of those who lost their lives in places forgotten, missed and purposefully erased from both memory and the record.”

And that’s why remembering matters.