

The truth behind Aboriginal massacres and the laid-back Aussie image

Frances Letters

Down the road when I was growing up in 1950s Armidale there lived a community of Aborigines. In shelters built of corrugated iron scraps and nailed-up potato sacks. At the dump. I barely noticed them. But one thing we were told. They were not warlike. Unlike the Maori, who at least had earned respect as fearsome warriors, Aborigines hadn't fought for their land. They'd just let us take it away. Candy from a baby. Of Aboriginal attacks on early settlers we heard little. Of frontier battles we heard far less. And of massacres of Aborigines we heard nothing at all.

Not one word. I was 19 before I stumbled on the truth. I heard it in a way that shocked me to the bone.

One afternoon in 1964 I was drinking coffee in the University of New England cafeteria with a bunch of young men from well-to-do grazing properties. They were rowdy and effortlessly good-natured. In those days Australia still rode on the sheep's back; they took for granted that they were the natural aristocrats of the campus, and of the nation. We were laughing a lot that day. The conversation had turned to our old family eccentrics; we'd been vying to cap each other's wacky stories.

Then, a wealthy landowner's son took a turn. Sunday afternoons had been the fun time for his family, he announced. Presumably after church, and a good heavy Sunday dinner. His grandfather would go hunting on horseback with dogs and a posse of mates. Whooping. All armed with whips and guns. The

quarry was Aborigines. They would be chased through the bush, cornered, then shot. Or driven over a mighty precipice to their death. Stunned silence fell around the table. The brutal declaration, so breezy and light hearted, so shockingly new to my ears, threw us completely. I stared down into my coffee. Someone guffawed uneasily.



The Myall Creek Massacre as portrayed by an English illustrator 40 years after the event. From *The Chronicles of Time; Or the Newgate Calendar*, London, 1886 in the Mitchell Library's collection.

I've often wondered why the young man blurted out those words. I remember he laughed as he spoke. Was it bravado to cover shame?

The chilling thing was that, despite our shock, in the end the social niceties prevailed. We would ignore the indelicate faux pas. Besides, how many others among those young grandsons of squatters sitting around the table had similar dark secrets walled up behind their homestead facades?

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In the end someone came to the rescue with another jolly tale

about a madcap grandad. Gratefully we joined in the laughter. Then one by one we gathered up our books, excused ourselves, and, polite to the end, slipped away to our classes ...

So at last the unspeakable had been spoken. It is being spoken again this week – more loudly, more widely – as Professor Lyndall Ryan's research documents for us the extent of the massacres of Aboriginal people in the colonial era. Some academics put the death toll from attacks on Aborigines at more than 30,000 from 1788 to the 1940s. Henry Reynolds talks of "the forgotten war of conquest". Aborigines, of course, never forgot. For them the murders, with the dispossession and despair that followed, must have been a daily thundercloud casting its shadow into every corner. A thundercloud that in some silent way has darkened life for the rest of us too.

Like children after an old, long-concealed family tragedy, we've all been left subtly bruised by the history we've repressed. I'm not the only Australian to sense that the brash, cocksure, sun-bronzed Aussie image we love – so easygoing, so delightfully laid-back – also comes with a paradoxical hint of dryness, emptiness, blustering adolescent uncertainty, in our national psyche.

Why the cultural cringe? The tall poppy suspicions? The strange timidity that has us creeping under the wing of one great and powerful friend or another? Our nation was built on a silent quicksand of wrongs. Aborigines; convicts; White Australia. We're yet to crawl completely out; yet to turn into fully mature, proper grown-ups. But things are changing. Despite sneers at the "black armband view of history", most of us now admit that terrible deeds were done, then hidden. Government apologies have elated almost everyone. And where now are those shrill massacre denials?

One truth, though, is still wincingly hard to face: that most Australians owe our comfortable living first and foremost to the fact that Aborigines used to own the precious land, and now we

do. None of us is guilty of those old wrongs: but we have benefited prodigiously from them. Unknowingly – and reluctant to probe too deeply – we've all lived well and thrived on the proceeds of crime. Now, far too late, it really is time to get out those black armbands. And above all, to listen. Frances Letters is an author.