

DAVID STEPHENS. Hidden in plain sight: Aboriginal massacre map should be no surprise

Posted on 7 July 2017 by [John Menadue](#)

Lyndall Ryan's work on mapping the massacres of Aboriginal Australians builds on earlier work which has been ignored or glossed over by settler Australians. Perhaps this time, finally, we can make the link between Indigenous dispossession and the position of Aboriginal people today.

The painstaking work of Professor Lyndall Ryan of the University of Newcastle has produced [an online map of massacres](#) of Aboriginal people in Australia over the years 1788-1872 (with more years to come). Ryan's work has provoked considerable interest from the ABC, NITV, Fairfax and the *Guardian* – though not, so far, the Murdoch press. Some of the coverage, notably [Calla Wahlquist in the Guardian](#), refers to overall estimates of the number of deaths, which may be as high as 65 000 in Queensland alone (according to [research by Raymond Evans and Robert Ørsted-Jensen](#)).

This level of interest may be partly because this is NAIDOC week, partly because Ryan is an articulate spokesperson, partly because her map is interactive, and partly because some of this history is so recent. Those who work in the field mostly mention Coniston, Northern Territory, 1928, as the most recent massacre, but Ryan hints that others may have occurred as late as the 1960s.

We can anticipate mixed reactions to Ryan's excellent work. Some people will say 'the massacres were not our fault, we weren't there, we need to move on'. This was the approach of then Prime Minister John Howard, who complained about 'the black armband view of history'. It is, of course, ironic that many of the people who take this approach are also likely to utter the words 'Lest We Forget' about deaths of soldiers in uniform decades ago. Deaths overseas are fine to remember and regret, it seems, even where the connection to the safety of Australia is tenuous; deaths at home, including those of warriors defending

their country *on* their country, can be glossed over.

A second group might say of Ryan's research 'this is horrible, why weren't we told?' Yet, we *have* been told by many authors for at least 50 years, and they all drew upon 19th and 20th century accounts in newspapers, private papers, diaries, or the reports of officials and anthropologists. Much of the evidence has been 'hidden in plain sight', but there has been discomfort – and shame, for settler Australians who were prepared to feel it – in getting our heads around the stories.

In 1968, the anthropologist WEH Stanner referred to the 'great Australian silence', including the failure of books, like the standard school text, Gordon Greenwood's *Australia: a Social and Political History* (1955) to even refer to conflict on the frontier. 'What may well have begun', said Stanner, 'as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale'.

The silence began to be filled, though. In 1973, [the radical historian, Humphrey McQueen, found a card index trove of information about massacres](#) and wrote it up for his lectures at ANU. In 1981, Henry Reynolds, encouraged by McQueen, published *The Other Side of the Frontier*, the first of his books on the Frontier Wars, culminating in [Forgotten War](#) (2013). (One of Reynolds' books, published in 2000, was called [Why Weren't We Told?](#)) John Connor wrote [The Australian Frontier Wars, 1788-1838](#) (2002). Lyndall Ryan herself [explored the Tasmanian stories](#). Tim Bottoms [trenchantly chronicled massacres in Queensland](#) – his major book was called *Conspiracy of Silence*. Mark Tedeschi just last year [forensically examined the Myall Creek massacre trial](#).

Paul Daley returned to the subject regularly in his *Guardian* column and in his chapter of [The Honest History Book](#), published earlier this year. There have been massacre maps before Ryan's, such as Judith Monticone's in *Healing the Land* in 1999 ([here at page 37](#)) and even *Wikipedia* has [a list of massacres](#), with copious references.

Why then did this work not sink in? Maybe because the discipline of history, being evidence-based, is cautious and its practitioners are often polite and easily resisted by the peddlers of myths. Here the myth said ‘empty country’, ‘not many of them in the first place’, ‘lacked resistance to white man’s diseases’, ‘lazy and couldn’t help themselves’, ‘primitive culture’, ‘died out’, and, contradicting all of the previous clichés, ‘benefitted from white civilisation’. That myth, plus the embarrassment and shame of having to admit that our ancestors did these things to other members of the human race, was more than enough to keep whitefellers from confronting the evidence

A third group of readers, though, might point to efforts to restore Indigenous Australian servicemen to the historical record. They would cite the work at ANU and elsewhere uncovering the stories of Indigenous men who served in our overseas wars from the Boer War on. There is even [an exhibition at the Australian War Memorial, *For country, For Nation*](#), which admits that Indigenous warriors fought for country *before* Federation but fudges who they fought against. Recognition of Indigenous warriors in uniform misses the more important point of recognising Indigenous warriors *not* in uniform (and the deaths of non-combatants) and might well work against it. But it is great for [recruitment of Indigenous Australians to the Australian Defence Force](#).

Yet, there are signs of progress. Just outside the *For country, For Nation* gallery, there is a wall panel acknowledging the deaths of 20 000 Indigenous Australians in ‘violent, tragic confrontations in the course of Indigenous dispossession’. Next to the panel is a painting by Kukatja-Wangkajunga artist Rover Thomas (Joolama). The painting, *Ruby Plains Massacre 1*, depicts a massacre in the Kimberley in the early 20th century. The painting cost \$366 000.

The final ‘Ryan-responder’ group, perhaps the smallest, might say ‘the massacres are at the root of the position of Indigenous Australians today, beneath alcoholism, domestic violence, drug-taking, incarceration and all of the other attributes that some settler Australians regard as inherent in Aboriginal people’. The

dispossession, the trampling of culture, the ripping apart of families, all of that history since 1788 – ‘the invasion moment’, as Larissa Behrendt calls it in *The Honest History Book* – are not easily overcome.

Aboriginal people who rise above this legacy, though, are the heirs of the Indigenous warriors who fought for their country and of their families who died on it. We – settler Australians and, respectfully (too many whitefellers have given gratuitous advice to blackfellers already), Indigenous Australians – need to recognise this and need to ensure that government policy starts from this recognition. Meanwhile, we are in Lyndall Ryan’s debt.

[*David Stephens*](#) is secretary of the *Honest History* coalition, editor of its website, and co-editor of *The Honest History Book*. *The Honest History* website has [a collection of resources on Australia’s First Peoples](#).
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3 Responses to *DAVID STEPHENS. Hidden in plain sight: Aboriginal massacre map should be no surprise*

Bruce Cameron says: 7 July 2017 at 2:07 PM [Hi](#)

David, You may be encouraged, as I was, by the response I recently received to an email I sent to the Assistant Secretary, Defence Corporate Communications Branch

The letter and reply are copied below. I have since congratulated Defence on taking a leadership position which underscores the importance of indigenous heritage in terms of the involvement of all Australians in the defence of our country. The Email:

As the Assistant Secretary Defence Corporate Communications Branch, I believe you have an opportunity to advance the ADF's public image with respect to indigenous affairs.

The latest issue of the Army Newspaper (13 June) includes the following statement "... Sister Fanny Hines, who died of enteritis at Bulawayo, Rhodesia on October 7, 1900 and became the first Australian woman to die on active service". The article concerned relates to the recent

dedication of the Boer War Memorial.

Sister Hines may have been the first Australian woman to die on overseas military service, or the first Australian nurse to die on active service, but she was not the first Australian woman to die on active service. (The term 'Australian' can be taken to refer to inhabitants of Australia after it officially became known as such in 1824.)

One definition of 'active service' is that service rendered in a war as a member of armed forces. Another is that service undertaken to defend a person's country (i.e.. their family, their property and their values), whether it be within the country itself, or overseas in support of an ally. Under these definitions, indigenous Australians, both men and women, were on active service during the Frontier Wars which are generally accepted as having lasted until at least 1928.

Fanny Hines can be regarded as the first non-indigenous Australian woman to die on active service (though non-indigenous women also died during the Frontier Wars). Unfortunately the name of the first indigenous Australian woman to die on active service may never be known.

I realise that the person who was quoted in the Army Newspaper was simply repeating a commonly accepted 'fact'. It is because of this gap in community understanding, that I believe you could play a significant leadership role. Your 'On the Record' page on the Defence website provides a great service in correcting inaccurate media reports about Defence, it could also be used to set the record straight in this matter. Similarly, I do not expect the Army Newspaper to print a long Letter to the Editor, however, a short note in the next edition could demonstrate that Defence is serious in terms of respecting the history of all Australians (both indigenous and non-indigenous). Many thanks for your consideration, The

Response:

My Assistant Secretary has passed your email to me for response.

I apologise for the delay in responding to your email. I was seeking advice from historians at the Australian War Memorial and the Australian Army History Unit. I also sought guidance from military historian Prof Peter Stanley.

After considering this advice I acknowledge that the wording in the article should have been more specific. A better statement would have been: Sister Fanny Hines was the first Australian nurse to die on active operational service overseas. If you agree, I would be keen to publish your email as a Letter to the Editor with the following response: “Thank you for your letter and for raising this important issue. After seeking guidance from historians at the Australian War Memorial and prominent military historian Prof Peter Stanley, I acknowledge your concern that by publishing the statement “Sister Fanny Hines was the first Australian woman to die on active service”, we excluded a number of Indigenous women who died during the Frontier Wars after European settlement in Australia. As you rightly point out, a more accurate statement is that Sister Fanny Hines was the first Australian nurse to die on active operational service overseas. Thank you for taking the time to write to Army News. Managing Editor” Many thanks for taking the time to write to us. Apologies again for the delay in responding. [Reply](#) [L] [SEP]

[David Stephens](#) says: 7 July 2017 at 5:49 PM [L] [SEP] Good stuff, Bruce, and thanks for the heads-up. [Reply](#) [L] [SEP]

Wayne J McMillan says: 7 July 2017 at 10:45 PM [L] [SEP] I have been a fan of McQueen and Reynolds for many years and they were instrumental in telling white audiences some of the stories that had been told many times by indigenous people but were ignored. [Reply](#) [L] [SEP]