

A COLONIAL SURFACE SCATTER

Deepening Histories at Jiigurru/Walmbaar (Lizard Island)

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► **Fig 1.** (top) The view towards Lizard Island Research Station

► **Fig 1a.** (bottom) Ghost Beach, Lizard Island

BOTH IMAGES:
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WE RACE THE TIDE on our return to the Lizard Island Research Station, on the northern edge of the Great Barrier Reef. Nathan Woolford, a Gooreng Gooreng man and archaeologist, and I have spent the day recording stone arrangements that line a peninsula in the island's south. We move through choppy waters along the island edge; three eagles clash in the air above us. Nathan pulls in beside One Tree Coconut beach and holds the boat against the mounting wind. I make my dash ashore, trowel and GPS in hand, to collect a sediment sample in a neat plastic bag.

Lizard Island is made of granite. The stone arrangements that line the ridge were constructed with granite, the ridge itself is granite, even the beaches are made up of fine granitic sand. Yet there are a few spots here where you can find clay. When it rains these areas become sticky, as the deep red bleeds out into the dusty sands. We are sampling one such spot, hoping to find the source of the fired clay that keeps turning up in the intertidal zones.¹

Were these ceramic sherds brought in by multicultural fishing crews during the nineteenth century? Or were they made locally? Are they part of the vast cultural networks connecting people across the Coral Sea in recent millennia?² These are the questions that drove archaeologists Sean Ulm and Ian McNiven to begin excavations



Background: Detail,
fig. 4, p. 35.



in the Lizard Island group in partnership with Dingaal traditional owners.

It has taken three field seasons for the archaeological team to carefully dig the main site: a small hole, 1 × 1 metres wide, 242 cm deep, sunk into a headland surrounded by water on three sides. As the team spent more time at the site, Ian and Sean had a gradual realisation. The immense conglomeration of shell, ash, stone, coral and soil that they were digging into had been built by people over millennia by stacking shells up against the giant boulders, filling the gaps, terraforming. The headland itself is a human artefact.

At low tide the reef flat in front is exposed. I wander across it, startling some eels, admiring a cluster of cowrie shells and spreadeagled starfish, gawking at a giant clam (*Tridacna*) that is far too sentient for my liking and watching a sea cucumber (trepang or *bêche-de-mer*) gently groping its way through the shallows. One hundred and fifty years ago this island was part of the trepang industry, their bodies dried and sold as culinary delicacies and erotic remedies. But for many millennia earlier this reef flat was harvested by Dingaal people. It was their ‘supermarket’, and you can see the remains of their meals in the main site.

Most of the shells have been bleached white by the sun, but there are a few, even some near the bottom of the pit, that have retained their colour: luminous greens, pinks and yellows. They were collected from the reef some 6,000 years ago and then buried by hundreds of other shells. While shell builds up quickly, Ariana Lambrides explains to me, it is not all or even most of what the Dingaal were eating here. Their diet was rich and varied.³ Ariana, an ichthyoarchaeologist, is studying the fish bones, identifying species, using these ancient kitchens as a window onto past reef populations. This baseline data helps document the losses that climate change is wreaking on the reef.

Lizard Island is one of the most exposed parts of the reef, apart from the deep sea edge, and it has become a trap for flotsam and jetsam, accumulating debris from across the oceans: ropes, golfballs, TVs, plastic containers and thongs, lots and lots of thongs. But it is the driftwood that causes an archaeological headache. Most sites are dated using radiocarbon samples taken from ancient hearths. But out here, the firewood might have been floating for years or centuries before being collected and burnt on the headland.

▲ Fig 2. Ian McNiven draws an archaeological section during the 2018 Lizard Island field season.

IMAGE:
BILLY GRIFFITHS



▲ **Fig 3.** The view to Cooks Look

IMAGE:
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This is why pandanus nuts are among the most important and exciting finds to emerge from the excavation. They grow on the island and are harvested while young, so when a charred nut turns up in the pit, we can be confident that it would have been collected, cooked and deposited within just a few months. It then offers a date, even several millennia later, with an accuracy of within eleven years.

These pandanus nuts, along with other archaeological finds, reinforce the oral histories of the region: they tell us that the rising of the seas at the end of the last Ice Age was a human experience. The ancestors of the Dingaal watched as the tides advanced, as over millennia the sea-level rose by some 125 metres, transforming coastal mountains into the islands we know today.

The Lizard Island group, known as 'Jiigurru' or 'Walmbaar', evokes the ancestral stingray. The main island is the body and the string of surrounding islands is the tail.⁴ Although thirty five kilometers from the mainland, the island group was a significant part of Dingaal social, economic and ceremonial life. Dingaal voyagers regularly hopped from one island to the next in their movements across their Sea Country.⁵ The sea was not a barrier, but a highway.

The peninsula where Nathan and I walked, recording stone arrangements, is said to be a lizard that latched onto the back of the ancestral stingray. But that is not why this place is called Lizard Island. It holds that name because that was what Cook called it when he landed here in 1770 seeking a way through the Great Barrier Reef. 'The only land Animals we saw here were Lizards,' he wrote in his journal, 'and these seem'd to be pretty Plenty, which occasioned my naming the Island Lizard Island.'⁶ Twice Cook hiked up to the tallest peak, and despaired at the seemingly endless reefs surrounding him. That peak now bears the name, Cooks Look. And the weight of his gaze can be felt in other names of the island group: North Direction Island, South Direction Island.

During our stay we worked out of the Lizard Island Research Station, which is run by the Australian Museum. On the other side of the headland is a luxury resort. Most tourists who come here are told two stories about the island. The tale of Cook confronting the maze of the reef and the tragic story of Mary Watson, a 21-year-old woman who lived on the island for just over a year in 1880–81. Indeed, Watson's association with the island is so strong that there have been no less than three books on

the area titled *Lizard Island*, with subtitles 'the journey of Mary Watson', 'the Mary Watson story', and 'a reconstruction of the life of Mrs Watson'.

Many readers may be familiar with her story. It is a well-worn tale. It recounts the arrival of Mary Watson and her husband Captain Robert Watson on Lizard Island in June 1880, with two Chinese workers known as Ah Sam and Ah Leong. Robert and his business partner Percy Fuller used a crew of Aboriginal, Chinese and South Sea Islander labourers to fish for trepang which they boiled in large iron tanks, and then cured and traded across the Coral Sea. One day, while Robert was away fishing and when Mary's baby was four-months old, a group of Aboriginal people came to the island, as they did every season. According to the colonial story, these Aboriginal people attacked Ah Sam and killed Ah Leong.

Mary Watson is said to have frightened off the group with gunfire and then, with Ah Sam and baby Ferrier, put to sea in the iron tank used to boil trepang. They hoped to be picked up by a passing vessel. Instead, the party drifted in their tank for four days, occasionally landing on reefs and islets. Mary recorded the voyage in an impromptu diary. Her final entry on 10 October 1881 ended with 'No water. Nearly dead with thirst.'

Her remains were found in January 1882 among the mangroves of No. 5 Howick Island, still in the iron tank, with her baby in her arms. Ah Sam had died on the beach nearby.

The bodies were returned for a grand public funeral in Cooktown and Mary's name quickly became known throughout the colonies. In 1886 a memorial was erected in the main street of Cooktown to 'Mrs Watson, the heroine of Lizard Island'.

The story fed an appetite for legends of valour in a young settler country, a tale of nobility and courage in the face of danger, death and savagery. The Chinese workers quickly dropped out of the story and Mary Watson emerged alone as the quintessential colonial heroine: a devoted and dutiful mother braving isolation and loneliness in a harsh, unfamiliar place. The emphasis on feminine



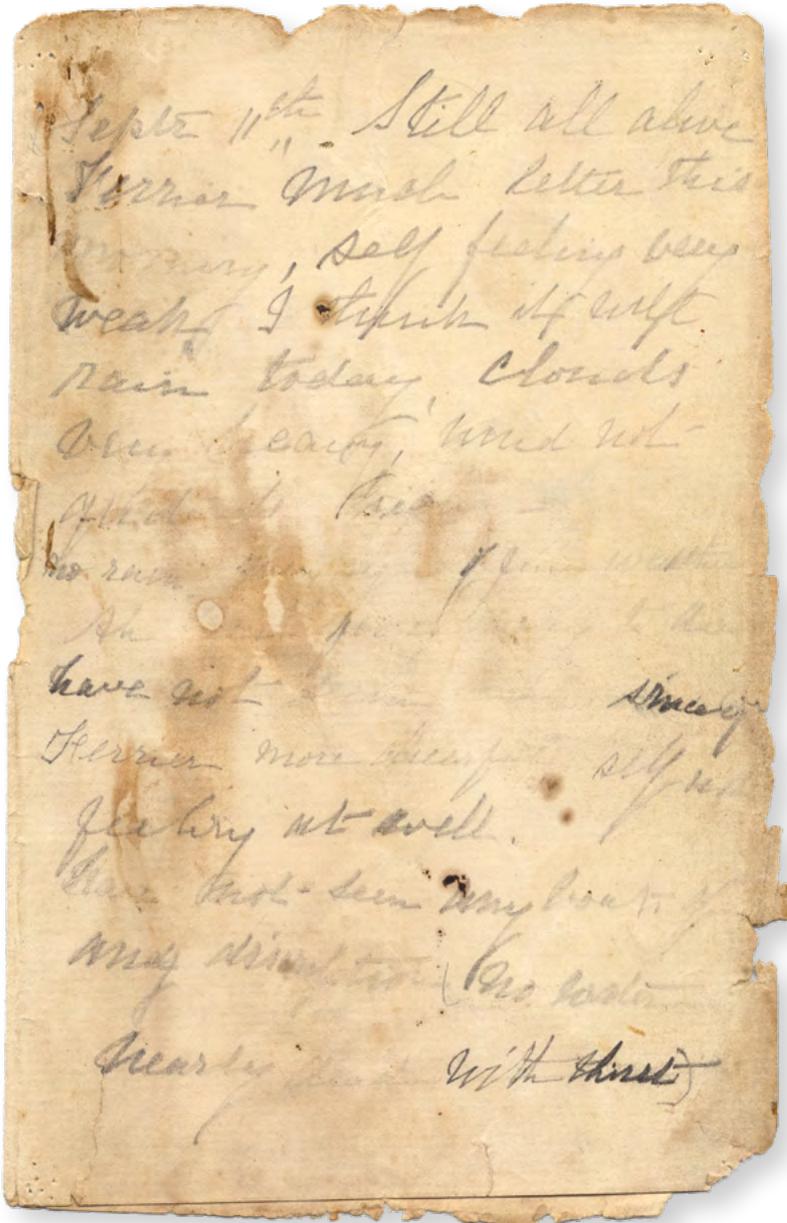
sacrifice in the face of 'treacherous natives' served to reinforce the traditional gender roles for women on the Queensland frontier. She was described as 'a beacon light to guide the steps of those who seek to win the empty, undeveloped North'.⁷ According to Mary Watson's biographer, Jillian Robertson, 'The story of her fight against adversity on Lizard Island made her a symbol of the conflict of the white pioneers against nature.'⁸

The Dingaal have their own account of these events. It is not my story to tell in this article. But it is very different to the folktale I have related.

As the historian in the Lizard Island archaeological team, I felt that my contribution, aside from grunt work, should be to dig down into these colonial narratives that blanket the island today. How is it that Mary Watson's story now usurps all that came before? And what can we learn from the way this colonial

▲ Fig 4. An illustration by Wynne W. Davies in *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 2 December 1933, 17.

IMAGE: NATIONAL LIBRARY AUSTRALIA



▲ Fig 5. Mary Watson's final diary entry on 10 October 1881 (marked Sept 11th)

IMAGE: STATE LIBRARY OF QUEENSLAND, OM81-120/2

story has been constructed? What do the sources tell us?

The archive that remains is like an archaeological surface scatter: it easily presents itself for all to see, yet it is fragmented and incomplete. The main artefact is Mary Watson's 1881 'scribbling journal': a Letts's No. 35 Australasian Rough Diary, which has been neatly annotated in black ink, with alternate blue pages to stop smudging (fig. 5). There are also six tattered and stained sheets of paper, which Mary took with her on the voyage in the iron tank. In pencil, they chronicle her final days. It is remarkable that these documents have survived the vicissitudes of time in

the State Library of Queensland.⁹ The iron trepang tank in which she, Ah Sam and Ferrier famously made their voyage was recovered in 1882 and donated to the Queensland Museum, where it remains on display today. These vivid colonial artefacts have played a significant role in keeping the Mary Watson story alive. The easy intimacy of the written word continues to invite new generations to share in Mary Watson's world.

As I read these scattered documents, I am dogged by questions about my craft. As historians, are we able to look beyond and around these documents? Or must we always view the deeper layers of history through the colonial archive?

Mary, better known as 'Minnie', was born Mary Phillips Oxnam in Newlyn East, Cornwall. Her family migrated to Australia when she was seventeen and changed their last name to 'Oxenham' on the voyage south, probably to lose the debtors her father, Thomas, was escaping. Their ship moored in Maryborough, Queensland, in July 1877. While her family soon moved on to make another fresh start in Rockhampton, Mary travelled to Cooktown via Brisbane to begin work as a governess at the hotel *Mont de Piété*. It was there, in late 1879, that she met Captain Robert Watson—or 'Bob', a Roman Catholic from Aberdeen, with reddish-brown hair and the crust of the sea in his face. At forty-two, he was the same age as Mary's father. They married on 30 May 1880. Four days later they sailed to his recently established *bêche-de-mer* station on Lizard Island.

The ruined walls of what is likely their granite cottage remain today.¹⁰ The corrugated iron roof is gone, along with the nearby boiler house, where trepang was smoked with mangrove-bush fires, and the small cabin of Englishman Percy Fuller, Bob's business partner. This site was also home to many other workers, who are referred to in Mary's diary as 'blackboys', 'kanakas' and 'chinamen'. We only know the names of Ah Sam and Ah Leong, both from Guangdong, a coastal province of southeast China. While Ah Leong

worked mainly on the farm and in preparing trepang, Ah Sam also worked around the house, cooking, 'carting water' and helping Mary make a 'mattress for bed'. Mary's entries document island life: the weather, comings and goings, daily chores. At the back of her diary, under 'Cash Advances', and alongside an account of her chickens, she records her domestic unhappiness: 'a slight disturbance' on 1 January 1881, followed by a 'great row' that left 'self half mad'. And in late February, 'Bob and self row again', 'Both very silent'.

In March, Mary left for Cooktown, where she stayed for the final months of her pregnancy. She gave birth to a baby boy, George Ferrier Watson, on 3 June 1881. Sixteen days later Bob Watson came to meet his son. On 23 June the baby was christened with the (different) name, Thomas Ferrier Watson.

When Bob was around, Mary's diary entries routinely begin with 'Bob to the Barrier', followed by a report of his haul. What quickly became apparent was the crew was exhausting the fisheries in the area. On 25 July, Mary writes 'All hands to the Barrier. Very few fish, ¼ of a pot'. The following days report 'a lack of fish', 'not many fish', 'very few fish indeed'. Watson and Fuller resolved to scout out new fisheries to the north, around Night Island. They departed on 1 September, leaving Ah Sam and Ah Leong behind with Mary and baby Ferrier. They said they would be gone for two months.

On Wednesday 19 October 1881, a group of fisherman on a 'Chinese junk' passed Lizard Island and observed several (eight to ten) large canoes and 'about fifty' Aboriginal people near the Watsons' house. The island was shrouded in smoke. There was no sign of the other residents of the island.¹¹

When the news reached Cooktown, the newly appointed District Inspector of the Queensland Police, Hervey Fitzgerald, acted quickly. Anticipating the worst, he summoned 'all available' native troopers to Cape Flattery. He also sent a search party with native troopers to Lizard Island to investigate. They

left on the ominously named schooner, the *HMS Conflict*.¹²

The party returned on Monday 24 October, with one member reporting scenes of destruction at the bêche-de-mer station: papers, books and furniture broken and scattered, a smashed sewing machine, a bloodied newspaper and three guns.¹³ The nearby Aboriginal camps were deserted, but they found 'underclothing and dresses belonging to Mrs Watson and her infant'. They stopped by Cape Flattery on their return to the mainland, raiding an Aboriginal camp and recovering 'plates, dishes, woman's embroidery, undergarment, and other articles of clothing', supposedly 'pillaged' from Lizard Island. By the time the *HMS Conflict* moored in Cooktown, word of 'a diabolical outrage' was spreading quickly throughout the colony. The *Brisbane Courier's* Cooktown correspondent reported that 'great excitement was manifested when the particulars of the outrage became known'.¹⁴

But at this stage what particulars were known? Did the *HMS Conflict* bring any evidence of an 'outrage'? Although Mary's diary had apparently been seized in the initial search of Lizard Island, it was left unread in the Cooktown Custom House for another 19 days. Aside from clothes and disorder, the only evidence the papers could report was absence. Speculation filled the void, with breathless journalists assuming kidnapping, murder and cannibalism, concocting savage imaginings.¹⁵ Across the country, news reports appeared under the headlines: 'The Outrage and Murders by Blacks in the North', 'The Lizard Island Massacre', and 'The Blacks Must Go'.¹⁶

The disappearance of the Lizard Island residents came at a time when a fragile peace had just formed in the Cooktown area. And while Inspector Fitzgerald did not believe that Mary had been murdered, his instinct was aggression. He ordered at least two 'search parties' of native troopers, led by Sub-Inspectors Marratt and Brooke, to scour the country in search of answers, raiding Aboriginal groups, taking prisoners and extracting confessions. Fitzgerald was working on the theory that three local groups had coordinated an attack on Lizard Island. He used coded language to report

his progress. As he wrote to the Commissioner: 'I have destroyed their canoes, weapons, and camps at Cape Flattery, Points Lookout and Murdoch.' The Cooktown correspondent of the *Brisbane Courier*, who was also sent a copy of Fitzgerald's report, helped fill the silences:

It is to be presumed that his men did not confine themselves to the destruction of camps and canoes, although the absurd pretence of secrecy [sic] which is cast over the action of the native police renders it improbable that the fact would be stated. If they did not make war, as war is usually made on the triumphant blacks, they very grossly neglected their duty.

Their duty, the *Courier* reported, was the 'swift, stern, and decisive punishment' of these tribes: a group of 'savage allies', numbering about '150 men'. 'Making war' apparently consisted of 'shooting as many of the warriors as could be reached, and if possible striking the tribes such a blow that they would never forget it.'¹⁷ As journalist Reginald Spencer Browne, a contemporary of Fitzgerald, reflected of the Native Mounted Police: 'If there is to be a lesson it must be sharp, and, in a sense, ruthless.'¹⁸

It is worth unpacking the idea of 'justice' that fuelled these violent acts. Part of the reason that the *Courier's* Cooktown correspondent was so explicit in his reporting was supposedly to warn against 'private retaliatory raids', whereby 'Volunteers burning with rage would shoot any blacks they saw':

If Inspector Fitzgerald has done his duty, and properly avenged the death of the unhappy Mrs. Watson and the attacks on the camps, [retaliation] is not needed.¹⁹

But it is clear that the idea of justice was negotiated, and the lines between police activities and vigilantism were blurred. On 7 November, for example, a public meeting was convened in Cooktown to 'consider what further steps should be taken to continue the search or to avenge the death of the murdered woman.'²⁰ As Noelene Cole reflects, settlers often took the law into their own hands,

apparently secure in the knowledge that they were immune from prosecution.²¹ It is also clear that there were ulterior motives for the settler outrage. The McIvor River region north of Cooktown was in the middle of a sugar boom, and southern speculators were madly dividing up land that had until 1881 been largely left 'unsettled.'²² There were other reasons, aside from vengeance, that settlers might want to drive Aboriginal peoples off their lands. According to John Haviland and Roger Hart, 'the police "dispersion" of coastal groups following the Lizard Island affair in 1881' led to dramatic shifts in social organisation and caused people from Guugu Yimithirr, Lamalama, Olkola and Kuku Yalanji language groups to 'concentrate in a few camps.'²³

Tragically, it is clear that private punitive expeditions abounded throughout November and into December 1881, feeding off a rumour mill of colonial fantasies and confected confessions. While the activities of private vigilantes were not detailed in the papers, they were openly alluded to—and even rationalised: 'The inhabitants of Cooktown are simply doing what anybody else would do in their place ... it is even for the interest of the natives that justice should be speedy and unerring in its penalties.'²⁴ They were assisted in this end by the actions of the Queensland Native Mounted Police, whose authorised murder held no basis in military or civil law.

One of the widely circulated accounts of the 'outrage' at Lizard Island came from an Aboriginal prisoner whom Inspector Fitzgerald had interrogated. The prisoner said that Mary Watson had been killed in her house on the island while she was having breakfast, with her body then cut into pieces and discarded in deep water. In this account, Ah Sam and Ah Leong were killed and eaten and baby Ferrier was kidnapped and then discarded over the side of a canoe.²⁵ The violent and florid details of these false confessions give us an insight into the settler mindset and the depths of white victimhood required to compel 'making war'.



On 13 November, Bob Watson discovered his young wife’s diary in the Cooktown Custom House.²⁶ It is striking that no one had opened it until then. The details of her final entries were quickly and widely circulated.

On 15 September, Ah Sam and Ah Leong had reported seeing a small group of Aboriginal people at South Direction Island. The smoke from a ‘native camp’ marked the horizon again on 27 September, and then, on 29 September, Mary wrote:

Blowing strong breeze S.E., although not so hard as yesterday. No eggs. Ah Leong killed by the blacks over at the “farm”. Ah Sam found his hat—which is the only proof.

September 30. Natives down on the beach about 7 p.m. Fired off rifle and revolver—they went away.

October 1. Natives 4 speared Ah Sam. 4 places in the right side, and three on

the shoulder. Got three spears from natives. Saw ten men altogether.

This is where this diary ends, and the other, which chronicles her journey in the iron tank, begins.

In biographer Jillian Robertson’s ‘reconstruction’ of Mary Watson’s life, she dramatises Mary’s death and imagines the ‘tribal men’ back on Lizard Island tearing her granite cottage apart, ‘grabbing and wrecking’ her possessions, and then canoeing back to the mainland, until ‘again the island was uninhabited as it had been for thousands of years’. She titles this chapter, ‘The Aborigines Regain Their Island.’²⁷

There is no denying the personal tragedy of Mary Watson’s short life. The greater tragedy is that her diary preserves one of the last accounts of Dingaal peoples visiting their Sea

▲ Fig 6. An eagle’s nest overlooking Dingaal Sea Country

IMAGE:
BILLY GRIFFITHS

Country. The death of Mary Watson stirred such passion in the Cooktown community that it sparked a series of vicious reprisal killings. Some 150 Aboriginal people were murdered in retaliation.²⁸ This sickening chapter of frontier violence devastated the Dingaal population, and ruptured their millennia-long connection with their Sea Country. They did not 'regain their island'. Indeed, it is only through the archaeological work currently underway that many members of the Dingaal community have been able to visit this part of their Sea Country for the first time.

The story I have related is replete with absence. Who else lived with the Watsons on Lizard Island? Who made up Watson and Fuller's fishing crew? There are references to 'black boys', 'kanakas' and 'chinamen' throughout Mary's diary. They cut wood near the house and went with 'Bob to the Barrier'. A contributor to *The Queenslander* in 1880 defined 'black boys' as 'servants who get no wages'.²⁹

Diving on the reef to recover bêche-de-mer was dangerous and debilitating work, and almost always left to Aboriginal and South Sea Islander workers. Few people knowingly and willingly signed up for this work. The infamous 'recruitment' processes for bêche-de-mer boats around Cooktown varied from abduction to subterfuge to outright purchase (at £4 a head).³⁰ In the late 1860s, in an earlier iteration of the Lizard Island bêche-de-mer station, Captain Delargy 'employed' more than forty South Sea Islanders.³¹ His 'recruitment' practices later came under close scrutiny when the *Kidnapping Act 1872* was passed. Delargy faced court in 1873 in Brisbane. The case was dismissed. But the island's probable association with 'blackbirding' continued. In 1889, a marine surveyor reported seeing a 'watchman' on the island using beacon fires to communicate with a labour-brig.³² The voices of these workers and their families are also drowned out by the Mary Watson story.

Among the documents from this period that should have survived, but haven't, are the records from the Native Mounted Police. Every month, district inspectors and sub-inspectors dispatched reports on their activities to the

Police Commissioner's Office in Brisbane. We do not know what happened to this vast trove of information. It was apparently destroyed, possibly as late as the 1930s. Jonathan Richards' painstaking research helps us read into the silence. His book *The Secret War: A True History of Queensland's Native Police* revealed that some police dispatches survived, trapped like flotsam in the archives of other government departments.³³ Historians Ray Evans and Robert Ørsted-Jensen have approached these surviving documents as a statistical sample, projecting from fragments what the whole archive might have revealed. They estimate that some 41,040 Aboriginal people were killed during 3,420 'official frontier dispersals' across almost forty years of conflict on the Queensland frontier. This is a 'minimum assessment', they note, based on a conservative methodology and applied to reports that were not always explicit about Aboriginal casualties.³⁴ Archaeologists Lynley Wallis, Heather Burke, Bryce Barker and Noelene Cole have recently approached the lost documents from another angle. Their reading of the archaeological signatures and geographic distribution of Native Mounted Police camps sheds even more light on the colonial violence perpetrated by this paramilitary force. They estimate that over 100,000 Aboriginal men, women and children were killed at the hands of the Queensland Native Mounted Police between 1859 and 1897.³⁵

Both estimates are extraordinary, especially given their limited scope. Yet the numbers fail to evoke the horror of their meaning. Nor do they begin to convey the depth of cultural loss and ongoing trauma.

No perpetrator was ever legally punished for killing an Aboriginal person in Queensland frontier conflict. Indeed, until 1887, Aboriginal people were unable to act as witnesses in Queensland law courts.³⁶

In his latest book, *Truth-Telling: History, Sovereignty and the Uluru Statement*, Henry Reynolds revisits his experience researching the northern Queensland frontier in the 1960s. It was reading newspaper accounts

that spurred him to seek to understand and come to terms with the horrors of Australia's frontier. He was shocked by what was publicly discussed in *The Queenslander* in 1880:

Here was the uncensored, unmediated story of the violent frontier, the frank admission of brutal repression and savage revenge. There was no need to 'rake up' stories of atrocity committed by unscrupulous individuals. Here were articulate correspondents who frankly admitted their role in the killing times and who explained with hard-bitten realism that violence was inescapably part of the whole colonising venture.³⁷

Racial violence was perpetrated, normalised and orchestrated by complex individuals like Hervey Fitzgerald, 'a scholarly, cultured man',³⁸ who routinely committed and oversaw great atrocities. After very publicly whipping an Aboriginal woman in 1876, he was ordered by the Executive Council to 'serve in some other branch of the Public Service where his duties will not bring him in contact with Aborigines'.³⁹ The Governor was forced to remind Fitzgerald and his fellow officers of the importance of 'avoiding the very appearance of inhumanity in their dealings with the aborigines'.⁴⁰ But he returned to the Queensland Native Mounted Police and his actions in 1881 constitute the true savagery of the Mary Watson story. They could also be described as the inevitable consequence of a society that sanctioned violence on the frontier: a public whose 'creed', according to Fitzgerald himself, was 'extermination of the natives'.⁴¹

Reynolds' book, and the Uluru Statement from the Heart to which it responds, remind Australians that this legacy is unresolved. He argues that when the British turned their backs on the policy of treaty-making, they created a situation in Australia where tensions could only be relieved by violence. On the Queensland frontier, we see a refinement of the brutal practices and traditions developed in southern colonies. The actions of the Queensland police cannot be explained away

as an inevitable part of the British imperial project; this was an Australian enterprise, with the 'chain of moral responsibility' ending in Brisbane, not London. 'As a nation,' Reynolds writes, 'the conquest of the north is our story from which we cannot avert our gaze, and it is one that reached into the early years of the federation.'⁴²

The 'truthtelling' called for in the Uluru Statement from the Heart is intended to subvert and upend comfortable narratives about Australian history. It demands a reckoning with the brutal acts of the frontier and with the reverberations of colonial violence. It asks for a nation-wide process of listening to the testimony of survivors.

For historians, part of 'truthtelling' is resisting seductive colonial tales and learning to read other, often older, often painful, stories in landscapes and seascapes. It needs language change, so that Cooks Look doesn't overwhelm Jiigurrū or Walmbaar. And it requires broader awareness of the inadequacies of documentary records: always partial, always incomplete, always containing telling silences as well as insight—a scatter on the surface of a deep and layered history. ¶

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