

Revealing Australia's dark past—*The Secret War: A True History of Queensland's Native Police*

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The Secret War: A True History of Queensland's Native Police by Jonathan Richards is a valuable exposure of the systematic military-style violence employed against Aboriginal people in the Australian state of Queensland during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The Native Police force, which consisted of indigenous men, recruited and led by former British military officers, was used to crush indigenous resistance to the forcible acquisition of communal lands. The unit operated from 1859, when the self-governing colony of Queensland was proclaimed, until the onset of World War I in 1914.

Richards, a research fellow with the Centre for Public Culture and Ideas at Queensland's Griffith University, spent 10 years working on *The Secret War*. He has drawn together information from a variety of sources—including police and public service records, personal letters, newspaper reports and letters to editors. His book, produced with the help of a dedicated team of archivists, librarians and other researchers, meticulously details the systematic terror used by the colonial authorities.

Capitalist development was in full swing when Queensland was proclaimed a colony. Land was being acquired at a rapid rate, sugar cane was being farmed across wide areas of the coastal region to the north of the major centre, Brisbane, and there were gold rushes in the north.

As *The Secret War* notes, the central object of capitalist colonisation was 'the acquisition of land, minerals, timber and other resources'. The Queensland Native Police force was therefore instituted as part of a wider assault on Aboriginal people, a war of dispossession that began soon after British settlement of Australia, first in New South Wales in 1788 and then in Tasmania and Victoria.

The original Queensland unit was initiated under the control of the colony of New South Wales between 1848 and 1859, with Aboriginal troopers recruited from the Murray and Murrumbidgee districts in the south. Like its Victorian equivalent, the ostensible purpose of the Native Police force was the protection of frontier farmers or 'squatters'; its principal role, however, was the suppression of all Aboriginal resistance.

The practice of recruiting Aborigines from areas distant to those being patrolled was in keeping with Britain's divide-and-rule policies. Aborigines, moreover, were considered well suited to the

job because, unlike the European settlers, they were able to operate in the most difficult of conditions, including the tropical swamps and impenetrable scrub of remote Queensland.

Another important consideration was that Aboriginal police could be paid a pittance. Recruitment, in fact, was based on the offer of a gun, a uniform, a horse and a small amount of money, and, where this didn't appeal, at gunpoint. Not surprisingly, mass desertions were common, with many Native Police troopers tracked down after they had fled, and forced to return to their posts.

Recorded atrocities

The Secret War provides numerous examples of the savagery perpetrated against Queensland Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. For this reason, it is a gruelling and at times distressing book to read. On page 32, Richard writes:

In 1890, the naked body of an Aboriginal girl aged 12 to 14 years was found at Albert River near Burketown. She had been 'tied to a bar of iron with a wire rope at ankles, knees, waist, neck and wrists, two iron bullock-bows were through the arms'. According to one source, former Sub-Inspector William Armit 'used crucified captives for target practice...

In a second case, an inquest was held into the death of an Aboriginal woman named Kassey, killed at the Herbert River in 1872. Her partner, Alick, a runaway trooper, unsuccessfully appealed to a local settler for help in surrendering to Sheridan, the police magistrate at Cardwell. Sheridan later conducted an inquiry into her death. The coronial investigation showed that Kassey was shot dead by troopers under the command of Acting Sub-Inspector Charles Shairp. Her body was then burnt. Inspector Thomas Coward, who testified at the inquest that two troopers helped look for the remains, said one commented to him, 'some fellow been roast him poor fellow.' Burning

the evidence was the hallmark of the secret war...

In October 1885, a detachment commanded by Sub-Inspector William Nicholas and Cadet Roland Garraway killed at least six Aboriginal people at Irvinebank, inland from Cairns. A European witness saw 'the blacks scatter in all directions' after the troopers arrived. One 'blackfellow', handcuffed to a fence, 'was screaming out loud' before the troopers 'led him away fastened between two horses'. He and the others were never seen alive again, but their half-burned bodies were seen by many Europeans. According to the Brisbane Courier of 14 November 1884, 'over fifty persons had seen the bodies at a camp near the town. Several residents said the Native Police had burnt the bodies.'

Many of those "dispersed"—the polite term used in the late nineteenth century to describe the murder of Aboriginal people—were killed while fleeing Native Police troopers. Some of the archival documentation falsely justifies the police violence as 'retaliation' for alleged atrocities against local settlers by Aboriginal people.

Historical cover-up

The Secret War helps correct what has been regarded, at best, as an 'omission' of frontier violence from Australia's early official histories and government records; an absence designed to cover up the real record, while denying Aboriginal occupancy and communal ownership of the land. It also notes a tendency in previous archival material, particularly from journalists, novelists and popular historians, to romanticise 'the gallantry' of the officers of the Native Police force.

Importantly, Richards establishes the global context in which the military-style force was established and its methodology. 'The Native Police,' the book points out, 'were certainly not a police force in the ordinary sense of the word; today, they would be called Special Forces.'

In a chapter entitled 'The Native Police and other colonial forces', Richards assesses colonial policing practices in other parts of Australia and the world—in India, Sri Lanka, the Caribbean, throughout the Cape Colony of South Africa, North America and during the Japanese expansion into Taiwan and other Pacific territories, beginning in the 1890s. The book also touches on the military connections in Australian colonial society—the old boy networks, where sons of British military families who had fought in other parts of the British Empire could gain prestigious appointments and make fortunes from land speculation.

Native Police camps, like other squads deployed in colonial war settings, followed the ever-extending settlement frontier as it moved north and west across Queensland. Young Aboriginal men were specifically targeted by police because they would fight back, as were the old, who were the defenders of language and culture.

The women, called 'gins', and children were either left orphaned or seized as the spoils of war with sexual abuse a regular occurrence.

The book's final chapter considers the question of genocide and carefully assesses this issue within the context of the colonisation of Queensland. Richards explains that in an atmosphere of vengeance, fear, and racial arrogance, many settlers advocated the complete extermination of the Aboriginal people and the actions of the Native Police led to genocidal outcomes with families and tribes massacred in cold blood.

But the colonial parliament and judiciary never advocated the extermination of the Aboriginal people, and killing indigenous people was officially unlawful. The book, moreover, quotes from numerous sources, including letters to newspaper editors from local settlers, public servants, church leaders and others deeply concerned about the violence being directed against Queensland's indigenous population.

Despite this, and the regular discovery of the charred remains of murdered Aborigines, the police, courts and the government turned a blind eye. No police officers were found guilty of any of the crimes perpetrated against Aboriginal people. Officers accused of the most blatant acts were quietly dismissed or others conveniently absconded after being charged. The undeclared war, in fact, remained 'a secret', with legislation preventing witnesses from accompanying the police on their patrols.

In dispassionately exposing many of the crimes committed against Queensland's indigenous people by the Native Police, *The Secret War* provides a partial but nonetheless important answer to the so-called History Warriors—a group of revisionist and right-wing academics led by Keith Windschuttle, author of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*—who have attempted to deny this history and blame Aboriginal people themselves for their dispossession. (See 'What is at Stake in Australia's 'History Wars'').

As Richards explains in the book's prologue: 'We will never know exactly how many dispersals took place in Queensland, or the number of Indigenous people who died during them. We can, however, gain a deeper understanding of what happened when we learn a little about the Native Police, the infamous force created to kill Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland. The force operated as part of a widespread campaign of frontier racial violence in colonial Australia in general, and in Queensland in particular. In this sense, the Native Police lie close to the heart of European Australia's dark nation-making origins.'

The Secret War is another contribution towards unveiling some of the dirty secrets that Australia's ruling elite would prefer to remain hidden—a history whose consequences are still being endured by the country's indigenous population today.



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