Sweet Country: Bitter truths about Aboriginal dispossession in Australia

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Samson and Delilah (2009), Warwick Thornton's first dramatic feature, announced the arrival of a talented filmmaker, committed to exposing some of the realities of the lives of Aboriginal Australians. The critically acclaimed work about two indigenous teenagers revealed to global audiences the unemployment, poverty and substance abuse facing thousands of young Aborigines.

Sweet Country, Thornton's follow-up feature, is an equally important film. This one uncovers ugly truths about the country's colonial past that the establishment has sought to sweep under the carpet. As Thornton told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "A lot of our history was written by colonisers who wanted to … put themselves in a favourable light. A lot of it is a lie. Now we're starting to write down our history with our version of events."

Sweet Country is set in central Australia in 1929, and loosely based on a true story. It takes its title from a description given by a local police officer, Sergeant Fletcher (Bryan Brown) to then unsettled Aboriginal tribal lands: "Some sweet country out there. Cattle country."

The brief reference hints at the driving force of the dispossession—the drive for property and capitalist profits—the underlying cause of all the horrors imposed on the indigenous population over the past two centuries.

Occupation and colonisation of Australia by Britain were part of the spread of capitalism across the globe. Private ownership of land and its exclusive use for profit are the product of capitalism; these concepts are entirely alien to Aboriginal society.

The expansion of the pastoral industry throughout the continent required the forced removal of the indigenous population from tribal land, so it could be used exclusively for sheep, beef, wheat and other agricultural products. The Aboriginal people, who had inhabited the continent for tens of thousands of years, were cleared from the land, like trees or wild animals, and by any means available.

This is the context of *Sweet Country*, a place where most of the indigenous population has been forced from their land and compelled to work in virtual slave-like conditions for the new settlers.

The principal landowner in *Sweet Country* is Mick Kennedy (Thomas M. Wright), a sadistic man who submits his Aboriginal workers to a barrage of verbal and physical abuse. Kennedy is no anomaly. His undisguised contempt for his workers is typical of the cruel treatment unleashed by most of the settlers in the film against the indigenous population.

The one exception is Christian missionary Fred Smith (Sam Neill), who believes "We are all equal in the eyes of the Lord" and behaves accordingly toward Aboriginal stockman Sam Kelly (Hamilton Morris) and wife Lizzie (Natassia Gorey-Furber), who live and work on his property. The missionary even encourages Sam to call him by his first name rather than "boss," which does not go down well with the other landowners.

World War I veteran Harry March (Ewen Leslie) arrives in the district and runs a nearby cattle property. March is so mentally broken by three years on the Western Front that he drinks himself into oblivion every night. He prevails upon Smith, against his better judgement, to do the "Christian" thing and allow him to borrow Sam for a day or two to help with some work on his property.

Sam takes Lizzie with him to the veteran's homestead but is soon sent far away to muster cattle. While he is gone March rapes Lizzie and threatens to kill her if she tells her husband. Sam and Lizzie return to the missionary's farm.

March subsequently persuades Kennedy to lend him two of his workers—Archie (Gibson John) and 14-year-old boy Philomac (a role shared by twins Tremayne and Trevon Doolan). Philomac notices the former soldier's watch during the trip to March's homestead and when they arrive he tries to steal it. March catches and beats the child, and then chains him up like a dog.

That night Philomac frees himself and runs away. The next morning March orders Archie to find the boy and they track him to the missionary's homestead. The still raging March thinks Philomac is hiding inside, fixes a bayonet to his gun and demands he be handed over. The missionary, however, is away and Sam's attempts to defuse the situation only inflame March, who opens fire on the house. Sam kills March in self-defence and with Lizzie they flee the scene.

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Police Sergeant Fletcher, also a WWI veteran, leads a posse in pursuit. Aware that Fletcher is hell bent on avenging March's death. Missionary Fred Smith tags along, hoping to prevent another murder.

While they are on the run, Lizzie discovers she is pregnant and is forced to reveal that she was raped. Ultimately, for the sake of Lizzie's health, Sam returns to town and gives himself up. His trial, held in a makeshift outdoor courtroom in front of the local pub, is the climax of the film.

The great strength of *Sweet Country* is the historically accurate universe it creates, and the complex situation facing the poverty-stricken, dispossessed indigenous population, who recognise that their society is being destroyed but see no way of dealing with the brutal justice dished out by the new social order. The film is uncomfortable to watch—sickening at times—precisely because it does not shy away from this reality.

In 1929, Aborigines had no basic democratic rights—they were not citizens and had no right to vote. Many lived under curfew and needed written permission to work, marry or travel. Aboriginal workers were ruthlessly exploited. Most were not paid wages, but given tobacco, flour, sugar, tea or other basic items instead.

Central Australia, in fact, was a final frontier of an undeclared war to clear the indigenous population from what the pastoral industry regarded as "sweet country." The bitter conflict continued well into the twentieth century.

The infamous and last officially sanctioned massacres in central Australia occurred in 1928 at Coniston Station, almost 400 kilometres northwest of Alice Springs. For more than two months, shooting parties murdered more than 100 Aboriginal men, women and children. A court of inquiry said the slaughter, which was carried out in revenge for the death of a local white man, was "justified."

The onslaught against Aborigines—via shootings, poisonings and through the ravages of disease—saw the indigenous population, estimated to be somewhere between 315,000 and 750,000 in the late 18th century, shrink to just 31,000 by 1911.

This catastrophe, and even the prospect of total extermination, as had been believed to have happened in Tasmania, was justified with claims that the Aborigines were an inferior race, destined to give way to a superior one, and eventually to die out.

In 1930, J.T. Beckett, former Inspector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory, declared that the "end is in sight, and the next generation will grieve over the extermination of the Australian [Aborigine], as the past generation shed crocodile tears over the annihilation of the Tasmanian."

Most of the settlers in *Sweet Country* treat the indigenous workers little better than animals—Harry March refers to Sam as "black stock." But it is to the filmmakers' credit that these attitudes, which were commonplace at the time, are not attributed to some eternal human failing. They show, particularly through the characters of Fred Smith and Judge Taylor, who presides over Sam's trial, that they are the product of definite social conditions.

It is also important that Thornton portrays something of the traumatic and dehumanising impact of WWI on figures like March, and, to some extent, Sergeant Fletcher. March has been completely shattered by the war.

Thornton is a gifted director of photography with a strong visual aesthetic. Having grown up in the MacDonnell Ranges, where most of the film was shot, he has an intimate knowledge of the region and its stark and arresting beauty.

By restricting the camera to a human point of view—there are no birds-eye view shots—and using the natural sound of this environment as the film's soundtrack, the film immerses the audience in the landscape. As Thornton noted in one interview: "You can listen to the country … when you're in the cinema it feels like you're standing next to that person in the film. That's the connection I'm trying to create."

The performances of the indigenous cast, none of whom had any film acting experience, are commendable. They benefit from Thornton's decision to have them communicate with little or no dialogue. Hamilton Morris, in particular, brings a real sense of dignity and integrity to the enigmatic role of Sam.

The settlers, who are more dependent on the sometimes clunky dialogue to express themselves, are less convincing and often two-dimensional. A number of reasons account for this, not least that the film was made on a shoestring and shot in just 22 days. *Sweet Country* no doubt would have had a better script if the filmmakers had been able to spend more time refining it, rehearsing and shooting.

This is a densely plotted film, which spends the vast majority of screen time driving the narrative forward. What scant time this leaves for character development is spread too thinly across a large ensemble cast. Unfortunately, we have too little opportunity to get to know any of them—Sam included—in any depth. Perhaps the maxim "less is more" should have been applied.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, *Sweet Country* is a sincere and significant work. Hopefully, Thornton's decision to examine the historical foundations of the plight facing indigenous Australians today will encourage other filmmakers to probe and dramatise them.

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