

The Nightingale: Australia's brutal colonial past exposed

Jason Quill
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Australian writer-director Jennifer Kent's second feature film, *The Nightingale*, now available on streaming services, follows Irish convict Clare Carroll through the Tasmanian wilderness in 1825, as she seeks revenge for a terrible act of violence committed against her family by some British soldiers.

Britain settled Australia in 1788 with the stated purpose of using the continent as a prison, for military strategic purposes and for profit. It followed the American war for independence in 1776—which brought to an abrupt end the transportation of British convicts to the US—and was also aimed at counteracting French influence in the South Pacific. New South Wales and Tasmania were to become the country's two major penal colonies, with transportation continuing until 1868.

In the early part of the 19th century, both England and Ireland had witnessed the final culmination of the centuries long “enclosure movements,” a process in which the nobility and rising bourgeoisie violently seized church and communal lands, converting them into large privately-owned farms. Millions of small farmers and agricultural labourers, driven from land where they had lived and worked for generations, became transformed into a new poverty-stricken proletariat, flooding into metropolitan areas, and mercilessly exploited in slaughterhouses, mills and workshops.

Under these conditions “crimes of survival,” such as stealing a loaf of bread, were common, leaving the gaols appallingly overcrowded. One means of reducing the prison population was to send these “convicts” to Australia. Around 10 percent of those sent were also convicted for “political crimes,” including organising trade unions. Thus the system served the dual purpose of controlling and dispensing with the surplus “criminal class” at home, while dispatching cheap convict labour to far-flung new settlements. In the whole period of convict transportation, the Crown shipped more than 160,000 men, women and children.

Tasmania, an island off the southern tip of the Australian mainland, was used as a particularly harsh penal colony from 1803 until (officially) 1853. The English initially had trouble convincing free settlers to move to such an isolated area, and never saw the local Aboriginal population as a viable source of labour, since it was small and hard to control. So cheap convict labour had to fill the gap.

By the time the story begins, over 12,000 convicts have been transported to the island, making up over 60 percent of the population. The economy revolved around wheat, wool and shipbuilding from its earliest years, with convicts treated so ruthlessly that Tasmania gained the reputation of being an “earthly hell.”

The film opens with Clare (Aisling Franciosi) who has served a seven-year sentence for a petty crime. She works as a convict-servant for a British Colonial Forces detachment, commanded by the brutal Lieutenant Hawkins (Sam Claflin). Nicknamed the “Nightingale” for her beautiful singing voice, Clare sings and serves alcohol to Hawkins, his regiment, and a visiting inspecting officer.

Tensions mount in the cramped conditions and eventually explode, with Hawkins sexually assaulting Clare, and violently attacking her husband Aiden, (Michael Sheasby).

Clare's “ticket to leave” (a letter requesting that she be released) is overdue, her sentence having officially ended three months earlier. Aiden confronts Hawkins the next day, but is unable to persuade him to send Clare's request to Hobart. That night, Aiden confronts Hawkins once again, this time drunk. The inspecting officer witnesses the resulting violent brawl between the two men.

Hawkins is reprimanded for his and his regiment's behaviour and deemed unfit for promotion and relocation. He is nevertheless offered the chance to plead his case, if he can make it to Launceston in a matter of days. This would require a four-day trek, through the tough and treacherous terrain, and amidst increasingly violent clashes between the Aborigines and the colonial settlers.

Enraged by this setback, Hawkins, his second-in-command Sergeant Ruse (Damon Herriman), and Ensign Jago (Harry Greenwood), visit the Carroll family hut just as the family is attempting to flee. The ensuing scene is heartbreaking and harrowing.

When Clare regains consciousness the next morning, she decides to take revenge on her own terms. This means she must track the officers, who have recruited an elder aborigine named “Black Charlie” to lead them and three other convicts, to Launceston. Under the pretext of merely looking for her husband, Clare enlists the help of a young Aboriginal tracker,

Billy (Baykali Ganambarr) real name Mangana, which, in the Aboriginal dialect of the Palawa Kani tribe, means “Blackbird.” Through Billy’s eyes we gain another perspective on the horrors of colonial oppression.

The story unfolds during the ongoing “Black War,” an intense and bloody war of extermination waged by the British colonialists and settlers, from the mid-1820s, against the native Aboriginal population. It was provoked by the increasing encroachment of the new pastoral economy—which relied on breeding livestock on large tracts of land—into land that had previously been occupied by Aboriginal tribes. The free settlers violently drove the Aborigines from areas they had occupied for millennia. The natives, whose society was based on hunting and gathering, and knew nothing of private property, responded with understandable hostility.

At first, the colonial government resiled from waging war on the local population, and even warned farmers not to harm them, as they were technically British subjects and therefore under the protection of the Crown. But the overbearing regime already had a tenuous relationship with the settlers, and the drive for profit dictated further expansion.

As the conflict between the two groups intensified, the new Governor George Arthur belatedly responded by pointing to the need to drive the “black savages” from settled areas. Once that order was communicated from the mainland, the colonial elite launched its offensive.

In 1825 a ruthless strategy was adopted. The Black Line—a line of 2,200 men, stretching 120 miles (193km), or half the length of Tasmania—constituted a massive display of force by the army and the settlers against the Aborigines. For six weeks they pushed from the north end of the island to the south, a move intended to corner the entire Aboriginal population and create a sort of apartheid regime, where none would be allowed to cross back over.

Although this proved unsuccessful, those who remained were eventually transported to nearby Flinders Island, where they subsequently died of disease and other ailments. Overall, between 1820 and 1832, hundreds of settlers and perhaps thousands of aborigines lost their lives in this guerrilla war over land and resources.

Billy had suffered immensely under this brutal process of extermination, living as an orphan in poverty. He agrees to accompany Clare, mostly because he wishes to reunite with his extended family in the north. Clare, who is not without her own prejudices, is trying to deal with her grief and is fighting for her own sanity. Initially she has little patience for Billy, calling him “boy,” while refusing to cease threatening him with her gun.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the two develops into the standout feature of the film.

In a pivotal and touching scene Clare and Billy begin to overcome their prejudices. Sitting by a campfire, the two trade stories. Billy at first claims “You England” and “same as those who took me from my home and family.” Clare is shocked to

find he puts her in the same category as those she is pursuing. She clarifies that she is “Ireland” speaking in Gaelic to prove it, “I hate the English,” she says. “You Ireland!” Billy repeats, a wave of understanding rolling over him.

Billy explains that, abducted as a youth, he was forced to do things the “white person way,” and told that hunting and fishing were bad. His family’s land was stolen, and now he has only Black Charlie. From here on, a deeper understanding develops between Billy and Clare, built on shared suffering and a mutual contempt for the English colonists, but also on growing affection and support for one another, until the film’s moving denouement in Launceston.

Jennifer Kent’s approach to the film is one of empathy towards her characters. “To me,” she said in one interview, “the fact that Billy and Clare can connect from one human being to another, after what they’ve been through, is a beautiful thing. It’s a miracle. So colonialism is there [in the film], but it comes through the characters.” This shines through the entire narrative, which effectively and convincingly brings these two sufferers of colonial oppression together. We are even led to feel a certain sympathy, or pity, for Lieutenant Hawkins, who has suffered, in his own way, for years under brutal conditions.

Kent has courageously discussed and emphasised the need for artists to look at this uncomfortable history in a thorough and objective manner. Indeed, she deserves credit for exploring historical issues that have largely been ignored by the film industry, while approaching the work with rigor and researching the subject for at least five years prior to shooting.

The cast also deserves praise for taking on such weighty material and demanding conditions. Franciosi has said there were weeks when she was physically and emotionally exhausted, and in the last week of shooting even suffered hypothermia. Clafin does a marvellous job of playing the repellent Lieutenant Hawkins, a role that took more than a year to cast, due, in part, to so many actors turning it down. Baykali, a dancer and first time actor, gives a remarkably emotional and proud performance, for which he won the Marcello Mastroianni Award, given to emerging actors at the Venice film festival.

The Nightingale, which deservedly won the special jury prize at the Venice film festival in 2018, is, at times, difficult to watch. But it is well worth the effort. We look forward with anticipation to Jennifer Kent’s next work.



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