

Killing for Country: A Family History—a harrowing but distorted view of the massacres of Australian Aboriginal people

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25 January 2024

David Marr's recently published *Killing for Country: A Family History* has been generally acclaimed by reviewers as an important and timely book, laying bare some of the systematic mass killings of Aboriginal people after the violent British colonisation of the Australian continent began in 1788.

Written by a prominent liberal journalist and author, it certainly records numerous massacres throughout the 19th century, often in harrowing detail. By one reviewer's count, Marr provides newspaper accounts, diary entries and official reports of over 70 such killings. In these atrocities, where he provides figures, Marr estimates that a total of 2,141 Aboriginal people were murdered, mostly in the colony of Queensland.

This was part of a wider process. While no reliable statistics exist, Marr states that research by numbers of scholars and archivists indicates that over a period of 50 years, para-military Native Police units slaughtered more than 40,000 Aboriginal people.

So far, these researchers have assessed that the 442 officers and 927 troopers who served in the Queensland Native Police between 1859 and 1897 were collectively responsible for the deaths of 41,040 Indigenous people, and approximately 3,500 in the decade before Queensland became a separate colony.

That is not the whole picture. If the 20,640 Aboriginal people estimated to have been murdered by private sorties, using guns and poison, a tally of over 65,000 is reached in Queensland alone. This does not count the massacres in the other Australian colonies, and which continued after the formation of the federal state in 1901. The last officially recorded mass killing occurred as late as 1923.

These terrible figures may be underestimates. In northern parts of Australia, perpetrators learned to cover their actions by burning bodies or throwing them into watercourses. Nor do these estimates cover Aboriginal deaths from all causes, including disease and starvation.

One shocking account of many in Marr's book is from June 1849 in the Darling Downs in what is now southern Queensland, some 150 kilometres west of Brisbane. That was when the Native Police were first sent into the region following reports of 12 settlers being killed by Aborigines, sheep and cattle being lost and some sheep stations being abandoned.

Twenty squatters, their sheep shepherds and the Native Police raided a camp of 300 Aboriginal people, who were described as "warriors." In the rough words of a local correspondent:

Just at daybreak they made an attack on the sleeping camp some of them fled hearing the horses coming. making for the scrub but were met by the native police who drew their swords cutting and slashing the fugitives a great number were slain also a lot shot dead... the old chief fought on his knees using his spear bayonet

fashion trying to stab their horses until he was shot dead... thus was broken up this large tribe nearly one hundred perished under the sword and bullet of the white man.

The book's focus is primarily on the mass murders perpetrated across rural areas of New South Wales and Queensland, and later in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. These were committed mainly by Native Police forces, which employed Aboriginal men from other parts of the country to act as armed killers. These units conducted wholesale collective punishment—wiping out tribal groups in retribution for any of their members fighting back against the seizure of their territories.

Marr wrote the book after discovering that one of his great-great-grandfathers, Reginald Charles Uhr (1844?1888), and Reginald's younger brother, Wentworth D'Arcy Uhr (1845?1907) had served as Native Police officers, commanding many of the operations to hunt down and kill Aboriginal people that Marr examines.

But Marr studiously avoids any analysis of how this violence, orchestrated by wealthy land-grabbing pastoralists, laid the foundations for the development of today's ruthless Australian capitalism. While he records some details of the vast landholdings granted to the largest financially-backed squatters, he draws no conclusions about the class dynamics involved in this accumulation of capital through the extermination of indigenous people.

Instead, Marr attributes the carnage to the "colonial settler" population as a whole, with few exceptions. He ignores the emergence of the urban, largely working-class population that formed the majority of the people in the Australian colonies by the second half of the century.

Transported convicts and ex-convicts provided the initial labour force of the new colonies. But, by the mid-19th century, the population had considerably expanded, fuelled by employers' demands for workers to be recruited from Britain, followed by the influx of the gold rushes in the 1850s. That led to the growth of the working class in the towns, as well as on the large shearing properties.

By the 1890s, the sheep shearers, maritime workers and others were engaged in tumultuous struggles against the squattocracy and the ruling elite as a whole, and were subjected to violence and repression by the government authorities as well.

A global recession in 1890, resulting in a plunge in the price of wool, produced an explosion of class conflict as the Queensland squatters and other employers moved, under the slogan of "freedom of contract," to bust newly-formed trade unions. What began as a maritime strike in August 1890 extended into an industrial conflict involving more than 50,000 workers over a period of two months.

In what became known as the Great Shearers' Strike of 1891, the

pastoralists in Queensland were supported by the colonial government, which sent over 1,000 soldiers and special constables, along with “scab” or strike-breaker labourers who were deployed with military escorts.

A strike camp was established at Barcaldine in central Queensland, in the heart of the squatters’ forcibly-acquired vast land-holdings. Within a few months, approximately 4,500 shearers camped in the area, with regular strike meetings held and tensions running high. The government responded by arresting the strike leaders. In May 1891, 14 men were sentenced to three years’ hard labour for their role in the strike.

The bitter defeats of these strikes of the 1890s propelled a turn to political organisation, which fuelled the formation of a Labor Party, but whose leaders rejected Marxism and socialism, and diverted the unrest into nationalism and parliamentarism.

The exploitation of the Native Police

It was the Native Police units, combined with squatters’ shepherds, who carried out the systematic atrocities against the Aborigines—not the workers in the growing towns, who were largely kept in the dark about the massacres.

Aborigines from areas distant to those being patrolled were lured or coerced into the Native Police. They were considered well suited to the job because, unlike the ex-convicts and labourers brought in from Britain, they were able to operate in the most difficult conditions, including impenetrable scrub.

Aboriginal police also could be paid a pittance. Recruitment was usually based on the offer of a gun, a uniform, a horse and a small amount of money. Where this did not appeal, recruits were kidnapped at gunpoint. Desertions were common, as documented by Jonathon Richards in *The Secret War: A True History of Queensland’s Native Police*.

For urban audiences, newspapers glorified the Native Police. At the time of the 1849 Darling Downs massacres, the *Sydney Morning Herald* hailed them: “Bold, courageous, active, strong, hardy and enduring, they have turned out to be capable of discharging the duties of a Mounted Police force in the most efficient and praiseworthy manner.”

Official reports commended the Native Police too. In a 1849 letter to the colonial secretary, Governor Sir Charles Augustus FitzRoy wrote: “This Report of the Commandant of the Native Police is very satisfactory & the Comm’t should be informed of the approbation of the Government of the zeal & activity he has displayed in effecting so much with so small a force.”

While some newspapers reported killings, they mostly sanitised and justified them. Marr includes a report from the *Brisbane Courier* in 1874, about Native Police assaults at Skull Camp on the Palmer River goldfields in far north Queensland: “A day or so after the murders [of three members of the Straher family] had been committed, Mr Inspector Coward, with Sub Inspectors Townshend and Douglas, came upon the black vagabonds and ‘quietly dispersed’ them.”

“Dispersed” was a cynical euphemism for wiping out an Aboriginal camp.

The colonial authorities camouflaged this process by giving squatters leases that included clauses to enable Aboriginal people to hunt, fish and maintain their traditional ways on their lands. But those provisions, never enforced, were window-dressing.

No one was ever held to account for any of the killings, with the sole exception of the 1838 Myall Creek massacre of up to 50 Aboriginal people in northern New South Wales (NSW). Seven convict and ex-convict stockmen were convicted and executed, but not the squatter who had enlisted 20 of them, armed with swords, guns and pistol, to hunt down

and kill “blacks” threatening his cattle.

Squatters, colonial governments and Native Police commanders covered their tracks more carefully after that. Magistrates and judges ensured acquittals in the rare cases where the evidence was so glaring that it got to court.

Class issues buried

Marr depicts the bloodshed as something that remains ingrained in the entire Australian population. In his concluding chapter, he approvingly quotes an assertion by Australian novelist Patrick White: “What is amazing is that Australians have changed so little; we are the same arrogant plutocrats, larrikins, and Irish rabble as we were then.”

In a publicity interview posted on the website of his publisher Black Inc., Marr went further, insisting: “More important: we never change. Greed and cruelty have been deep in us from the beginning of time.” That notion of original sin is not only a libel on humanity. It covers up the class dynamic that produced the massacres and shaped the development of the Australian capitalist class.

Yet Marr’s book itself notes that the primary organisers and beneficiaries of the killings were the large-scale squatters, who had access to family or business funds. The colonial authorities allocated them vast tracts of land to clear and occupy, on the condition that they stocked it with sheep to supply wool to England to meet the needs of the developing industrial revolution.

As Marr records, in 1829 the “independent” members of the New South Wales Legislative Council, all appointed by Governor Ralph Darling, held between them 140,000 acres. A decade later, under Governor Richard Bourke, they ran sheep and cattle on nearly 600,000 acres. Under Governor Sir George Gipps in the early 1840s, they held a million acres of their own and Captain Phillip Barker King managed another million acres for the Australian Agricultural Company.

This process grew and spread across the continent, requiring greater killings. Even before Queensland’s separation in 1859, 450 squatters had seized an area larger than the colony of Victoria.

The truth is that the clearing of the land of its inhabitants was driven first by the strategic and economic requirements of the British Empire, and then by the profiteering interests of the embryonic Australian capitalists.

The Australian Agricultural Company was formed by an Act of the British Parliament and incorporated by a royal charter in 1824, primarily for the production of fine merino wool for export to Britain. Today, it is a stock exchange-listed company that owns roughly 1 percent of Australia’s land mass. As of 2018, it owned and operated feedlots and cattle stations covering around seven million hectares (17 million acres) of land in Queensland and the Northern Territory.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) explained in its Historical and International Foundations document:

The violence inflicted on the Aboriginal people was not simply a policy. It was rooted in the very nature of the new capitalist property relations that were being established, starting with the private appropriation of land. It was the bloody expression of the organic incompatibility of this new social order, based on private ownership and exclusion, with the social relations of the hunter-gatherer society of the indigenous inhabitants. Like everywhere else, capital emerged in Australia dripping blood from every pore (point 28).

As Marr states at the end of his book, he has an agenda. He had hoped to influence the outcome of last October's referendum to entrench a new institution, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice, in the country's colonial-era 1901 Constitution. The book was published in time for the vote.

Referring to a treaty-style conception contained in the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart, the result of a government-organised consultation with selected indigenous people that adopted the Voice proposal, Marr writes: "At this uncertain moment, I offer a bloody family saga from the frontier in the hope of us one day reaching the ultimate goal set at Uluru: the coming together after struggle, *Makarrata*."

As explained on the Uluru statement website, "*Makarrata* is another word for Treaty or agreement-making." These deals are to be made between such indigenous representatives and the governments that maintain and enforce Australian capitalism, the very system responsible for the savagery inflicted on the indigenous population.

The premise is that the essential divide in society is race, not class. Marr's use of the word "us" denies the fundamental and deepening divide between the billionaire-dominated ruling class and the working class in Australia and globally.

Marr's perspective dovetails with that of the Albanese Labor government, which called the referendum to exploit what is, in reality, widespread sentiment in favour of rectifying indigenous disadvantage.

In fact, the Voice plan sought to put a progressive gloss on Labor's program of pro-US militarism and declining working-class living conditions. Amid mounting war moves, the aim was to project a false "national unity" and give Australian capitalism a new humane image for imperialist purposes, while strengthening the capitalist state apparatus by further incorporating into it a privileged pro-capitalist layer of indigenous CEOs, business operators, senior academics and media personalities.

Opposing this entire operation to bolster Australia's capitalist state, the SEP campaigned for an active boycott of the referendum. We urged workers and youth to reject both the Yes and No camps, which each conducted the referendum on a racially-divisive basis. Both vowed to cut, not increase, spending on indigenous social programs.

The overwhelming defeat of the referendum was not, as Yes proponents poisonously insisted, the result of widespread racism and hostility to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Rather, it was the outcome of the widening class divide, above all between the affluent inner-city areas of the country, where Yes votes were concentrated, and the outer suburban working-class suburbs, where people—including the majority of the indigenous population—are experiencing an insufferable cost-of-living and housing affordability crisis.

In the working-class areas, the claims by the government and the big business Yes23 campaign that the establishment of a Voice assembly inside the parliamentary and governmental apparatus would lead to "better outcomes" for indigenous people were no more believable than the Labor government's now discredited May 2022 election slogan promising a "better future."

There was also widespread scepticism, notably among indigenous working-class people, that the proposed Voice institution would do any more to address their disadvantage than any of the previous such promises—from land rights to official apologies for the "Stolen Generations" of Aboriginal children forcibly separated from their families.

The SEP campaign advanced the fight for an independent road for the whole working class, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, against the root cause of oppression and war, which lies in the capitalist profit system itself, as the bloody history demonstrates. The deepening discontent throughout the working class must be transformed into a conscious movement, as part of the global struggle against capitalism, for socialism, based on human need, not corporate profit. That is the only way to answer

and redress the historic crimes recorded by Marr and others.



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