

*Conspiracy of Silence: Queensland's Frontier Killing-Times* by Timothy Bottoms, 258 pp, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2013, ISBN 9781743313824 (pbk), \$32.99.

Bladensburg National Park is one of Queensland's more remote national parks, located in the north-west of the state near Winton. It is promoted as having 'spectacular views from flat-topped mesas and plateaus, residual sandstone ranges and vast grassland plains'. It is indeed spectacular as any visitor would attest. But this Park also has a dark history and one that does not feature prominently in the tourist literature of the region. In the late 1870s, it was the site of a major massacre of the Koa people. How many died is unknown but a contemporary report said 'nearly the whole tribe was killed'. The site is now called Skull Hole and its remoteness and tranquility belies its bloody past.

*Conspiracy of Silence: Queensland's Frontier Killing-Times* by Cairns historian Timothy Bottoms convincingly demonstrates that the massacre at Skull Hole was not an isolated event or aberration in colonial Queensland. Bottoms set himself the task of systematically documenting all known or recorded massacres of Aboriginal people in colonial Queensland. Since Ray Evans' pioneering work *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination* was published in 1975 (Australia and New Zealand Book Co), extensive research has been undertaken on frontier relations in colonial Queensland. In particular, detailed accounts and analysis have exposed numerous massacres showing how violent early encounters were between Europeans and Aboriginal groups. Invaluable though this body of work has been, it has generally focused on certain regions (for example Noel Loos on north Queensland) or specific incidents such as the mass poisonings at Kilcoy Station, or the clashes at Hornet Bank or Cullin-la-go-Ringo. What has been lacking is a detailed overview of all documented encounters that resulted in the multiple deaths of Aboriginal people. Not anymore.

Bottoms' work admirably fills this gap. He has exhaustively researched published works, primary sources, oral records as well as interviewing informants and visiting sites to systematically document massacres on the frontier. Bottoms defines a massacre as killings of at least five or six and does not extend his analysis to the deaths of smaller numbers.

This book is not pleasant reading. Bottoms does not let up. It is a relentless narrative of massacre after massacre throughout the length and breadth of colonial Queensland. Bottoms explores the events region by region as the frontier moved west and north. He first examines south-east Queensland and then moves on to southern Queensland and then to central Queensland. South-west Queensland and the Channel Country are the focus of Chapter 4. Chapter 5 explores poisonings and sexual exploitation on the frontier. The following chapters document massacres in central Queensland, north Queensland and Cape York Peninsula, the rainforest areas in north Queensland, and lastly the gulf country and western Queensland. One of the key players in the attacks on Aboriginal groups was the Native Police which was established in 1848 and

operated until the end of the century. By the end, the evidence is beyond doubt that the frontier in Queensland was characterised by a succession of violent encounters. It is not, as earlier accounts of Queensland's history attempted to demonstrate, that while some massacres did occur, they were merely isolated incidents.

While *Conspiracy of Silence* presents an extensive catalogue, Bottoms is well aware that he may not have documented every massacre. Other killings could have occurred and easily gone undetected. Many pastoral properties had outstations situated in very remote and inaccessible locations. Clashes could easily have occurred without the knowledge of the outside world.

Apart from exposing the extent of major killings on the frontier, *Conspiracy of Silence* constantly reminds us how relatively recent these events were. They did not occur in the distant past but within two or three generations. Many stories are embedded in local oral traditions. For example, Cecil Ngaka Ebsworth was a Wangkumara man from the Channel Country who was born in 1919. When interviewed in 1981, he related how he had seen skulls and bullets from a massacre in 1872 at Mt Leonard Station. His great-grandmother who had been told about the incident was alive at the time. Hazel McKellar, the author of *Matya-Mundu: A History of Aboriginal People in South West Queensland* (Cunnamulla Australian Native Welfare Association, c1984) and the source of information about a massacre in the early 1880s at Monjarree waterhole in south-west Queensland, was born in 1930 and died in 2003. She learnt about the incident directly from her mother-in-law, Granny McKellar. Granny McKellar, who died in 1971 aged 101 years, was a young child when this massacre occurred. Ernie Grant, a Jirrbal/Girrimay Elder from north Queensland, was a young man in 1954 when told graphic stories of a massacre of his people by his grandfather. But stories about massacres and violence also have been transmitted in the families and descendants of the perpetrators, although these families are less forthcoming.

Because the *Conspiracy of Silence* is singularly focused on events on the Queensland frontier, it could be argued that its value is limited to Queensland history. It might be tempting to conclude that Queensland was clearly different from the rest of Australia and that the responsibility for the violence rested with Queenslanders. However, it was not just the pastoralists and the workers on the runs that were responsible but also investors and absent landlords. The Queensland pastoral industry was heavily dependent on southern investment, particularly from Victoria. While Victorian pastoralists might have tut-tutted over their gin and tonics in the Melbourne Club at the bad behaviour of their northern counterparts, a number would indeed reap rich rewards from the violence that enabled their runs to be cleared of 'troublesome blacks'. The Queensland frontier was part of the Australian frontier and these events cannot be considered in isolation. Indeed, as Norwegian naturalist Carl Lumholtz commented in 1889 about the Native Police in Queensland: 'their cruelties constitute the black page in the annals of Australian colonisation'. The Queensland frontier was inextricably part of the Australian story. Events on the Queensland frontier, however, had a even wider impact. They were also part of the grand British colonial enterprise.

Like the re-writing of the Queensland frontier, so too has the broader imperial narrative been rewritten to reveal that bloodshed, violence, coercion, slavery were commonplace as the empire expanded across the globe.

The extent of the deaths documented in *Conspiracy of Silence* had a catastrophic impact on Aboriginal groups throughout Queensland. Few escaped the loss of at least some members. It was not just the loss of life as the result of massacres and sporadic killings that was devastating, but the impact on the economic and social cohesion of each group. Take away for example, a few men who were critical in the food and resource gathering process and suddenly the clan could be facing an acute shortage of resources (to say nothing of how the incursion of sheep and cattle was also disrupting resources).

*Conspiracy of Silence* makes an important contribution to understanding Australia's part, in particular the complex relationships between Europeans and Aboriginal people on the frontier. It provides a synthesis of scholarship from the last 30 years and dispels beyond doubt the myths that the 'settlement' of Australia was a peaceful process.

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