

**Anna Clark**

*The Black War: Fear, Sex and Resistance in Tasmania*

Nicholas Clements

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*Forgotten War*

Henry Reynolds

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There has been an extraordinary resurgence in the commemoration of Australians at war in recent decades. An estimated 50 000 people attended Anzac Day marches around the nation in 1984; a generation later, in 2014, more than that number attended the dawn service at Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance alone. As backpackers undertake the rite of passage to Gallipoli, record numbers swell Anzac marches at home, and the news fills with emotive, resonant images of war, past and present. Yet there is a [blind-spot](#) in this clamour to commemorate, as Henry Reynolds insists in his latest book, *Forgotten War*. 'Since 1994 there has been a continuous program to commemorate the men and women who have served in Australia's overseas wars from 1885 to the present,' he writes; and yet conflict also 'accompanied the pioneer settlers into almost every district on the continent'. It is *this* war 'between settlers and Indigenous nations' that 'made the nation', Reynolds argues, 'not the fateful invasion of Turkey'.

Admittedly, there is a growing body of critical scholarship into the popular interest in Australia's Anzac legacy. Historians Joan Beaumont, Carolyn Holbrook and Peter Stanley have pondered the political and cultural resurgence of military memorialisation and the 'Anzackery' explosion. Scholars such as Marilyn Lake, Mark McKenna and Joy Damousi have catalogued the array of support that goes to promoting the Anzac legacy — funded through the Department of Veteran's Affairs, school curricula, and public institutions such as the Australian War Memorial — at the expense of critical historical engagement. And the military analyst and former soldier James Brown has described the extraordinary commercialisation of all things Anzac as an 'orgy' that ignores the needs of contemporary soldiering and military policy.

Given the timing — [in the lead-up to](#) the centenary of Anzac — Reynolds' latest contribution is just as critical. Unlike that [critique of the Anzac revival](#), *Forgotten War* focuses not on the cult of commemoration but a grand, epic forgetting. Reynolds argues for the extension of historical recognition to the combatants of the frontier wars, which he does in his inimitable and persuasive style. This is no theoretical academic treatise, but an insistent and accessible work that sets out to prove that frontier conflict in Australia constituted an ongoing war — a war that killed tens of thousands of people across the continent over more than a century.

*Forgotten War* describes how Indigenous people died in ongoing, violent clashes; how their lands were usurped and their food sources (particularly game) were removed. Drawing on his extensive extant research and knowledge, covering both sides of the Australian frontier, Reynolds [details](#) an array of encounters and clashes across many decades of Australian history, from retaliatory attacks in the early years of settlement at Sydney Cove, to Tasmania's 'Black War', to the unregulated northern frontiers in the second half of the nineteenth century.

By choosing [historical](#) breadth, some of the local complexities and contexts are inevitably lost in this vast catalogue of frontier conflict. Successive [community](#) histories have powerfully addressed the historical challenges of colonisation, race politics and conflict by locating them in a specific time and place, and by populating them with the everyday lives of frontier communities. Yet there [are benefits](#) in

Reynolds' sweeping approach: his decision to pursue a wider narrative paints a compelling picture of violence repeated and compounded across an ever-expanding colonial frontier. European settlement, and the inevitable conflict that came with it, radiated out from Sydney Cove like cartographic arrows.

He cites one 1886 contribution to the *Wild River Times* newspaper in North Queensland, for example, where the correspondent complained of constant Aboriginal raids on miners' camps and warned that they 'will have to take the law into their own hands and slaughter them in self-defence'. A chilling contribution to the *Cairns Post* in 1887 described the possibility of 'selectors ... out skirmishing when "long pig" will probably be plentiful'. And Reynolds includes another settler's account from Central Australia, originally shared with archaeologist John Mulvaney:

there must have been between 150 and 170 of 'em on that hill and I reckon that few ... got away ... But what could we do? We had to live here.

There are many more. Taken together, they constitute an extraordinary catalogue of deadly intent. They also provide a window into colonial attitudes towards Indigenous occupation and resistance.

And there *was* considerable resistance, as Reynolds notes. Many Indigenous people retaliated against colonisation with considerable violence of their own, including insurrection, civil disobedience and campaigns of terror. *Forgotten War* includes harrowing accounts of colonial victims who were tortured, injured and murdered, who had stock butchered, horses and bullocks speared, crops and huts burned, and goods stolen. Reynolds is at his heartfelt and persuasive best here, as he explains the shared horrors of the frontier. He does so patiently and methodically, asking: Was it violent? (Yes.) Was it political and territorial? (Yes.) Was it war? (Yes.) But it was also *forgotten*, he insists. These accounts were slowly omitted from Australia's foundation narrative: 'As the bushman emerged as a heroic nationalist icon, no one ever wanted to notice his bloodied hand or the notches on his rifle butt.'

Reading this book, it seems unreal that there could have been a debate — a whole 'history war', no less — over colonial frontier violence in Australia. Keith

Windschuttle's assertion in the early 2000s that academics had exaggerated accounts of violence and Indigenous casualties to suit their own political agendas was an appeal to the veracity of the historical record. In doing so, however, it failed to engage with the obligation of contemporary historians to 'read between the lines' of much colonial history, because there was simply no incentive to advertise the violence being committed. Over time, there 'developed a strong tradition of reticence when speaking of the terrible realities of the wars', insists Reynolds. 'They were not stories settlers wanted to remember.'

It is painfully ironic that the so-called 'history wars' were described using metaphors of violence and conflict, while the *real* clashes they describe — those 'dispersals', 'lessons', 'remedies' and 'skirmishings' — were frequently characterised by euphemism and subtle elision, rather than linguistic honesty. Windschuttle's claims that there was no war (guerrilla or otherwise), that settlers were motivated by Christian goodwill, and that Indigenous society was riven by dysfunction and distress, seem almost absurd in light of the terrifying sources that Reynolds has compiled.

Reynolds shows, critically and clinically, that there were many on the frontier who *did* see these confrontations as part of an ongoing war over Australia. Despite the subsequent silencing, a language of war — of 'battlefields', 'warfare', 'arsenal', 'border warfare', 'open war' — appears again and again in many the contemporaneous historical sources assembled in *Forgotten War*. And the fact that these frontier wars have been accepted by a number of Australian military historians for some time makes their exclusion from official historical narratives and commemorations such as the National War Memorial deeply troubling.

Part of the impact of Reynolds' thesis is that it enables us (historians and general readers alike) to better understand the context of colonisation in Australia. Understanding the frontier as a site of war helps explain the ghastly dehumanisation of Indigenous people, who were derided variously as 'troublesome' and 'murderous' *animals*. It helps us to understand the fact that no-one was ever tried and convicted for crimes against Aboriginal people in Tasmania, for example, as well as the mobilisation of fighters, on both sides, to carry out sorties and retributive attacks.

Reynolds insists that, over time, this ‘war’ was sublimated in the wider community and in the received national narrative. Despite determined Indigenous resistance, the ‘burden’ of colonisation ‘pressed down with disproportionate force’ and that process of intergenerational historical ‘occlusion’ of Australia’s frontier wars began. In *Forgotten War*, Reynolds is determined to redress that historical amnesia: ‘the dead do matter,’ he insists. ‘They intimidate us.’ I hope this book will intimidate some of the received orthodoxy of Australian military history and public commemoration.

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The recent skirmishes over the meaning of Anzac Day and the implementation of the national history curriculum suggest that *Forgotten War* is unlikely to dampen the flames of historiographical contest. But Reynolds claims that Nicholas Clements’ *Black War: Fear, Sex and Resistance in Tasmania* will do just that. In contrast to Reynolds’ overview of the frontier wars, Clements has chosen just one — Tasmania’s ‘Black War’ — and has reached deep into the archives to produce a painstakingly researched social history of this episodic conflict. The depth of Clements’ research is the great strength of this book, for it pushes us back in time: into the slab huts and shepherd’s quarters, into the Aboriginal bush camps, into Tasmania’s wild landscape. Through those sources we are *there*, on the frontier itself, witnessing the violence, sharing a window into the places and social attitudes of that time.

While Reynolds’ *Forgotten War* is written with deliberate provocation and a powerful sense of righting an injustice, Clements has attempted to produce a rigidly even-handed historical account. Reynolds makes a passionate plea for historical recognition of the Indigenous victims of frontier violence; Clements’ study is about broad historical understanding, rather than casting judgement in particular. In his foreword to the book, Reynolds commends Clements for an approach that, ‘while reflecting on the history wars, has transcended their angry contention and has consequently brought them to an end’.

This is a big call. Reynolds’ proclamation that *The Black Wars* subverts the ideology of the History Wars through its objective research and recounting echoes Windschuttle’s problematic insistence on strict objectivity. And it sits uneasily

alongside Reynolds' and Clements' own research, which I think demonstrates the inherent subjectivity of historical perspectives.

Although, as Clements points out, striving for balance as a historian does not preclude understandings of historical subjectivity more broadly. In an interview with journalist Rosemary Neill, he explains his his process of researching and writing the book:

My whole philosophy is not to judge historical figures, I think that's a pointless exercise. I want to try to understand how and why they did what they did.

Even his forebears, implicated in a terrifying and violent episode against a local tribe, are treated dispassionately:

Obviously I'm not proud of what my ancestors did, but I've gone to a great deal of trouble to try and understand why they did it. I think my book does a pretty good job of explaining that.

That balance does not come at the expense of historical connection or feeling. The episodes mentioned in the book are gripping and emotionally wrenching. How can we *not* empathise with the settler who discovers his bloodied wife resting against the fence, fatally speared, clutching her baby? Or with Aboriginal parents and children, petrified and sprinting into the darkness, as armed and violent roving parties storm their bush camps at night? As Clements notes in his introduction: 'Objectivity and empathy are both indispensable to the historian's craft, and need not be incompatible.'

To try and achieve that even-handedness, Clements uses a device he first saw in a history textbook for Israeli and Palestinian students, which was written by two authors to present the two perspectives in parallel texts. In his preface to *The Black War*, Clements describes coming across this textbook on a motorcycle trip through Europe as his eureka moment. The book's 'format raised my consciousness of the issues, and helped me empathise with both sides', he explained. 'I now saw plainly that moral judgment was unhelpful, and that understanding the conflict meant first understanding the psychology of those involved.'

In employing that same device — of acknowledging distinct parallel perspectives — Clements attempts to recreate what were essentially parallel values and contexts, which confronted each other in clashes and exchanges across Tasmania. In doing so, he importantly extends Reynolds' influential work on frontier history and historical perspective—*The Other Side of the Frontier* (1982) and *Frontier* (1987)—by including both viewpoints in the one volume.

Every chapter is divided into black and white perspectives; every major issue is explored from both sides of the frontier. Even the language of the day is used as much as possible to get us into this colonial past. Critically, as historian Lyndall Ryan noted in a recent review, he is 'the first historian to take this approach'.

Retrieving what he can from the archives, Clements estimates that around 600 Indigenous Tasmanians died in conflicts between 1824 and 1831 (yet only about 260 are documented). He also suggests that over 200 colonists died in the Black War. But this book is not about numbers; it is about the lived experience. And its strength lies in Clements' attempts to take the reader *into* the geography and psychology of the conflict. As in Reynolds' *Forgotten War*, the sources Clements has compiled are at times frightening. The violence he describes is brutally visceral. The constant dehumanisation of the Tasmanians by colonists, who derided them as 'crows' and 'beasts', echoes the Nazis' use of language to dismiss their Jewish victims as mere 'animals'.

Still, Clements does not judge. The Black War was 'an extraordinary event that drove ordinary people to do unimaginable things', he concludes. What's more, he shies away from the nuance and poetic complexity of intercultural contact and exchange explored by ethnographic historians such as Inga Clendinnen and Greg Dening. Instead, he gives concrete examples of contest: over land, livestock and women. This means that the Tasmanian 'contact zone' is not simply a theoretical space but a lived experience in this book. It is a place where Tasmanians are attacked and killed by murderous roving parties; where guerrilla warfare produced untold fear among settler society; and where the colonial population *kept growing*, mysteriously and inexorably, despite mounting violent attacks against them.

But Clements' work still raises that critical question posed by ethnographic histories: can both sides of the frontier really be told? Can we read *through* the historical fragments to bring to light the other side of the frontier? In *The Black War*, Clements acknowledges that challenge. 'You're always coming up against that cultural chasm' in writing this history, he explained to Neill. Moreover, in the case of colonial Tasmanian history, it is not just a cultural chasm, but a historical vacuum: Clements laments that there simply are no Indigenous records of this time, so their voices are inevitably mediated through colonial records and archives. The journals of George Augustus Robinson and local newspapers provide the bulk of *The Black War's* 'Black' perspective.

Despite the best and most rigorous of intentions, then, the effect of this book is to create an inevitably loaded historical imagining. For example, we read extraordinary descriptions of the 'black line' — that disastrously unsuccessful official assault to drive the Tasmanians away from settled areas — during which one settler, wet, bitterly cold, and miles away from his supply chain, was so hungry he was forced to eat the leather straps of his knapsack. Yet there are no Tasmanian perspectives of the line. And this limitation of *actual* Indigenous voices means that Clements' historical readings occasionally jar. When describing the final stages of the war and the increasing fragility of the Indigenous population, for example, he writes: 'It must have been difficult for the Tasmanians to imagine what such a solution would look like' and 'There were surely moments when they paused to envy their fallen comrades'. Yet I am not sure that we can ever know *what* they were thinking. And that, I would argue, is one of the great challenges of much colonial history, and of this book in particular.

I also found that the absence of Indigenous perspectives and accounts weighted my empathy towards the colonial victims of this war, which was deeply unsettling. This is no criticism of Clements' work, of course, but it raises important questions about historical consciousness and the ways we connect to the past. As a historian interested both in colonial history and the processes of historical engagement, the unevenness of my emotional responses to this history was confronting, to say the least. While the settlers' anguish and fear practically jumps off the page, the Indigenous experiences of this war often felt more remote. (In contrast to Indigenous oral testimonies from



northern Australia, for example.) So not only did the Tasmanians lose the Black War, but *our* connection to their past through the historical record has also been lost. Unlike the Israeli-Palestinian textbook, the parallel texts of *The Black War* are never able to reach equilibrium or equality.

It is easy to understand why writers have used poetry and fiction to explore the other side of the frontier. Unlike history, these genres are able to generate empathy with their characters by making imaginative leaps that simply are not there in the records. Mudrooroo, for example, in *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983), playfully recasts G. A. Robinson's journals from an Indigenous perspective. Tony Birch's poem, 'Footnote to a "History War": archive box no. 2' and Kate Grenville's novel, *The Secret River* (2005), similarly play with historical sources and silences without being limited by them.

Critically, however, Clements also demonstrates that the limitations of the discipline need not limit the scope or the achievement of one's research. The sad truths of Tasmania's colonial history, including the significant loss of Indigenous narratives, meant that this was always going to be a fraught exercise of historical reconstruction. Yet in *The Black War*, Clements has written an ambitious, original and compelling account of this history. Like Reynolds, his work is engaging and accessible, and he has produced a work that will go a long way to ensuring the Black War will not only be remembered, but understood. (Lest We Forget.)

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