



**HAL**  
open science

## ”This Day is not for you”: The Commemorative Displacement of Black Wars in White Australia.

Matthew Graves, Elizabeth Rechniewski

### ► To cite this version:

Matthew Graves, Elizabeth Rechniewski. ”This Day is not for you”: The Commemorative Displacement of Black Wars in White Australia.. War and Remembrance: Recollecting and Representing War, McGill-Queen’s University Press, pp. 57-75, 2022, Human Dimensions in Foreign Policy, Military Studies, and Security Studies, 978-0-2280-1068-5. hal-03966746

**HAL Id: hal-03966746**

**<https://amu.hal.science/hal-03966746v1>**

Submitted on 31 Jan 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## **“This Day is not for you”. The Commemorative Displacement of Black Wars in White Australia.**

*Elizabeth Rechniewski, The University of Sydney, and Matthew Graves, Aix Marseille Univ, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France*

### **Introduction**

It can be argued that all forms of commemoration involve displacement, since they seek to impose a simplified and oriented interpretation of an event that necessarily excludes or displaces other narratives. Certain actors are foregrounded; certain actions highlighted; a certain public is invoked, indeed interpellated, by being addressed as members of a group or a nation. In the case of monuments and memorials this orientation may be achieved through material representation (the statues of the Australian Digger in repose; the horsemen on the new Boer War memorial in Canberra); through the inscriptions and the nomination of events, such as lists of battles, names of the fallen, and dates to be remembered; and through the placement in the landscape. The ceremonies associated with the memorials contribute to “filling out” the narrative through the panoply of symbols, such as flags, that can be deployed, the selection of attendees and special guests and speakers, and the speeches that are made. Owen Dwyer proposes that we understand this creation of commemorative meaning through the concept of “symbolic accretion”:

“commemoration can be understood as an attempt to impose a partial (in both senses of the word) interpretation of past events on the memorial landscape, in effect, trying to condense and harden – to accrete – a layer of meaning above all others.”<sup>1</sup>

Commemorative displacement can have at least two further meanings: the original intention of a monument can be “displaced” when the memorial is appropriated to serve another function.

Matthew Graves illustrates this phenomenon in his article on the controversy surrounding the construction of the monument in Marseilles to commemorate the assassination of Alexander I of Yugoslavia in 1934, noting that the memorial briefly became the focus for popular resistance to

the Vichy regime and to the German occupation of France during World War Two.<sup>2</sup> Such appropriation can have a greater or lesser intentional political purpose. In Australia, in the early years after World War One, the existing Boer War memorials were sometimes used to commemorate the fallen of the later war, until new monuments were built.

Commemorative displacement can also be said to occur through the decisions that are made (usually at an official level) as to the events that are deemed “worthy of remembering” in the nation’s memorial agenda. How and why are decisions made as to which events are central to the life of the nation? By a kind of “sleight of hand” that conceals as much as it reveals, the decision to commemorate, amongst the plethora of possible events, those that correspond to the dominant narrative contributes to telling an officially sanctioned story about the nation, its significant events, populations and personalities. Commemoration as the mobilisation of affect in the interests of national unity and the manufacture of patriotism supposes the exclusion of other social groups’ commemoration. Such commemorative choices become more evident when a formerly excluded or repressed minority campaigns for recognition of events and people significant to its own history. In a further twist, however, the response to such campaigns may be to offer a form of inclusion and recognition within the dominant narrative that does not challenge nor fundamentally change this narrative, but simply extends or modifies it, a form of recuperation of the counter-memories.<sup>3</sup>

Commemorative displacement is a form of symbolic violence, the imposition of categories of thought and perception on dominated social agents.<sup>4</sup> If in general terms symbolic violence refers to everyday practices of discrimination against a particular group, infringing on their rights to live equally with others, Göçek proposes expanding this definition to cover “the violence inherent in the production of knowledge, especially in relation to one social group’s contribution to the cultural and social fabric”.<sup>5</sup> The right to “live equally” should include the right to record and commemorate their own history, but typically minorities are displaced from the national story and the repression that has been exercised against them by dominant populations and elites is

excluded from the narrative. This is particularly true of the founding stories of colonial nations, where the foundational violence perpetrated against the original Indigenous populations cannot be acknowledged: “among all acts of violence committed directly or indirectly by states and their governments, those that are temporally closest to the nation’s creation myth are silenced and denied the most and the longest because they constitute a foundational violence.”<sup>6</sup>

In colonial settler societies, argues Ann Curthoys, national identity is built on “the exclusion of Indigenous peoples from foundational historical narratives.”<sup>7</sup> Representations of the “struggle to tame the land,” of the hardships and sacrifice of the early settlers, serve to obscure the sufferings of the displaced Indigenous peoples. In the case of Australia, the myth of the ANZACS at Gallipoli, extolling the wartime sacrifice of the “Diggers”, the Australian soldiers, (a legend to which the journalists Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and Charles Bean contributed heavily), laid the foundation of post-Federation national identity. The commemoration of Gallipoli and the associated Anzac legend, Ann Curthoys argues, replaces and displaces the Black Wars or Frontier Wars from the national narrative: the foundational violence on which the nation was built is thereby identified as that deployed against an external enemy.

A concerted and extensive official policy of commemoration has over the last century highlighted the Anzac legend to the quasi exclusion of the foundational wars of Australia: the Frontier Wars against the Aborigines. The memorial agenda of Australia was colonised by a militaristic interpretation of its history centred on the exploits of white soldiers in the service of the British Empire, including the Boer War (1899-1902) and World War One. The deeds of these men were commemorated on thousands of war memorials in towns large and small, memorialised in a dedicated institution: the Australian War Memorial, that is both museum and shrine, and promoted by extensive government funding of education programmes.

This article explores how analysis through the prism of these overlapping forms of commemorative displacement contributes to an understanding of the interrelationship between demands for recognition of the Frontier Wars, including at the Australian War Memorial (AWM)

and that institution's refusal to meet those demands; the recent steep rise in commemoration of Black Diggers – Aboriginal servicemen – in many fora and at the AWM; and the ongoing search for ever more Australian overseas wars to commemorate, highlighting the example of the recent campaign to ramp up commemoration of the Boer War. The contested question of the recognition of the Frontier Wars offers a particularly striking illustration of the struggle over the Australian commemorative calendar, as demands to recognise the previously marginalised history of Aboriginal martial response to invasion and colonisation have begun to challenge the prevailing, hegemonic narratives of white Australia.

### **Black Wars and Boer War**

The existence of “Black Wars” between the British military and white settlers, and the Aborigines, has long been the object of intense academic debate and political acrimony – was there a concerted military offensive against the Aborigines as white settlement progressed across the continent? In the early 2000s, historians who decried the “black armband” view of history, led by Keith Windschuttle, denied that there had been systematic or indeed even widespread killing of Aborigines.<sup>8</sup> This claim has since been fairly comprehensively debunked by many authors including Bain Attwood,<sup>9</sup> but still occupies a largely unchallenged place amongst the tenets of the right. A more technical question concerns the nature of the engagements between white and black: were they on the scale or of the nature of a “war” as Europeans understood it? Certainly they lacked the battlefield confrontations of grouped forces typical of conventional warfare, the Aborigines generally resorting for sound tactical reasons to guerrilla strategies of ambush and surprise attacks.<sup>10</sup> And yet the phrase “Black War” was already being used in the nineteenth century to describe the rounding up and removal of the Aborigines of Tasmania.<sup>11</sup> A recent paper by two Queensland researchers estimates the numbers of Aborigines killed in Queensland alone across a 40 year period as over 40,000 on the most conservative estimates, and suggest that the total death toll may be over 60,000 which would bring Aboriginal deaths close to those of

Australian troops in World War One.<sup>12</sup> A volume of articles and letters from *The Queenslander*, collected and published by Carl Feilberg in 1880, illustrates in harrowing detail the depredations inflicted on the Aborigines by the whites, and also by the native police the latter employed.<sup>13</sup>

Terms such as “war of extermination” and “massacres” are regularly used by the letter-writers to describe the “nameless deeds of horror” they have witnessed or heard openly discussed by whites.<sup>14</sup>

It will be readily understood, given the controversy that has surrounded and still surrounds the very existence of Black Wars, and the long history of their concealment and denial that characterised colonial society, that the question of their place in the commemorative practices of Australia was and still is a contested one. Memory of the Black Wars was displaced and overlaid, at the time and since, by commemoration of the military engagements undertaken by the new Federation of Australia (1901), notably in the Boer War (1899-1902) and in World War One. These engagements, although fought at the behest of the imperial master in far-flung countries, allowed the young nation to assert its military prowess, the legitimacy of its claim to join the community of nations, and the superiority of the white and particularly the British race to which they consciously belonged.

Although it is rare to discuss side by side the Boer War and the war against Aborigines, the latter was at the time of the Boer War still being fought in the North and the central desert regions of Australia. The press articles of the time reveal, writes Henry Reynolds, that parallels were drawn between the fight against the Boers and the fight against the Aborigines, for both involved extending the imperial frontier in the interests of the British Empire. “It was common in the late nineteenth century to relate this domestic conflict to Britain’s many other colonial wars. The Australian frontier, it was often thought, was one part of the much larger, more widespread imperial frontier ... And the leaders of the time were convinced that force was legitimate both to secure the continent and then to hold it as the exclusive domain of the “white race”. This was their implicit foreign policy, their own imperial project.”<sup>15</sup>

Reynolds recounts the public enthusiasm that greeted the decision by the Australian colonies to send soldiers to the Boer War, to aid the mother country. While in the parliaments some dissenting voices were raised and radical nationalists such as *The Bulletin* writers were vehemently opposed to the war, once it was well under way these voices tended to be drowned out, or even attacked as treasonous. The myth-making and the commemoration began in earnest before the Boer War was over; many monuments survive in country towns and capital cities, and, as we will see, a renewed campaign to commemorate the war has been conducted in recent years, including fund-raising to construct a monument on the iconic Anzac Parade in Canberra. The myth of the Diggers as troops who manifested “peculiarly Australian characteristics”, as “natural horsemen, inured to hard outdoor living, capable of living off the land and able to find their way across country” was already under construction during the Boer War, despite the predominantly urban origin of the soldiers.<sup>16</sup>

The outpouring of imperial jingoism that greeted the initial engagements of the war was tempered postwar by renewed doubts as to its legitimacy. The news in 1904 that the imperial authorities had decided to import 60,000 Chinese labourers to work in the goldmines of the Rand undermined one of the major arguments that had been put forward in favour of the war: to secure the role and status of British workers and miners in the Transvaal. Such was the sense of outrage and betrayal that: “after 1904, few Australians continued to defend the decision to become involved in the war.”<sup>17</sup> The comments of the British Prime Minister Campbell–Bannerman who in 1906 condemned the war as “infamous and criminal, and wholly unnecessary” were widely reported, though usually without elaboration, in Australian newspapers in early September 1906.<sup>18</sup> Yet despite the shadow cast over imperial loyalties by the “ineptitude” with which the Boer War had been conducted,<sup>19</sup> despite the loss of 600 men, only a few years later enthusiasm for another imperial war would again reach its peak on the outbreak of World War One. Australia sent some 60,000 men – all volunteers – to fight on many fronts of the war, including the landing

at Gallipoli in April 1915 that would come to define Australian nationhood and national character.

Commemoration of the Boer War, which had been modest and sometimes belated in the immediate postwar period, perhaps reflecting the doubts that had come to surround it,<sup>20</sup> was eclipsed by the increasingly central place that Anzac Day 25 April came to occupy in Australian national life. Charles Bean argued in 1918 that the sacrifice of the Diggers at Gallipoli justified the young Australian nation's claim to occupy the continent.<sup>21</sup> The actual battle for Australia – won against the Aborigines by means that included murder, poison and the use of far superior arms, a battle that brought little credit to the “fighters” – was concealed behind the growing mythology of the Diggers. For the former was not a fight that could be commemorated, nor even in many cases admitted.

### **The Australian War Memorial: Guardian of the Nation's Memory**

Originally planned by Charles Bean to house the relics of World War One, the Australian War Memorial was only opened in 1941 in the midst of another world war, and, after some debate, its collections were extended to encompass this one too, and gradually to include the many other wars in which Australia fought. The Memorial has played a “unique role among the world's war memorials” writes Michael McKernan, official historian and one-time Associate Director, because of its dual purpose of “commemoration and understanding or more accurately commemoration through understanding”.<sup>22</sup> This dual function was the inspiration of Charles Bean, for whom there was no contradiction between honouring the memory of the soldiers and the museological preservation of the relics, records, diaries and official archives of the war, since the relics were themselves sacred.<sup>23</sup> In his review of Ken Inglis's *Sacred Places* in the *Australian Humanities Review* of December 1998, Martin Ball refers to the “innate schizophrenia” of the Australian War Memorial<sup>24</sup> – schizophrenia which at its simplest might be described as the



question: Is it a Museum or a Memorial? – a dilemma that gives rise to a series of complex questions about the scope, nature and functions of the institution today.

What room, if any, is there in the Australian War Memorial (AWM) for an exhibition about the early wars between Aborigines and white settlers? Should there be a gallery of “colonial warfare”, recognising the skirmishes, massacres and battles that took place following the British invasion of the continent? The arguments that have taken place around this issue, and the virulent opposition that such proposals have encountered, are revelatory of the centrality of the Memorial in the promotion of the official narrative of nationhood. There is little doubt that the AWM offered throughout the twentieth century a perspective on Australian national identity that was closely aligned with a British heritage, offering a field for what Ghassan Hage calls the “rituals of White empowerment”<sup>25</sup> – a perspective that excluded the martial role of Aborigines in defence of their land, and for a long time their service as soldiers in the regular forces. For many years, the only presence of Aborigines at the Memorial was to be found in the courtyard, where an Aboriginal man and woman are represented amongst a series of stone sculptures depicting Australian fauna. Despite controversy and protests, the sculptures are still in place.

According to Michael McKernan, the historian Geoffrey Blainey, when he was asked to provide ideas in 1979 for a “better organisation of the Memorial’s displays, based on historical principles” suggested that, in his view, the memorial should include a section on Aboriginal-European warfare “within the next decade”, and added further that it could be included in an exhibition on the theme of “home ground advantage” in war.<sup>26</sup> It was an interesting suggestion from one who would later be accused of conservatism, even racism, but his idea was ahead of its time for the AWM. Advice sought by the Board from the military historian Alec Hill argued – foreshadowing later debates – that it was inappropriate to use the term “war” to describe conflicts between white and Aboriginal Australians.<sup>27</sup> Macintyre and Clark argue that Blainey’s proposal did not, however, provoke the heated debate either on the Council or in the media that might have been

expected, because it predated the “History Wars” and the crystallisation of attitudes that occurred then.<sup>28</sup>

The publication of Ken Inglis’s *Sacred Places* nearly two decades later, in 1998, brought the issue to the fore again. At the launch of the book at the AWM by the Governor General Sir William Deane, Inglis proposed some future directions for the Memorial including “the representations of warlike encounters between black and white”.<sup>29</sup> The official reply from the Memorial was that “the story did not belong in the Memorial”, but could be told elsewhere, for example in the new National Museum where indeed there is a gallery on the “First Australians”, which features various forms of Aboriginal resistance to occupation, though little on direct black/white armed confrontation.<sup>30</sup> This time the debate became caught up in the burgeoning “History Wars” of the turn of the century, the very notion of a “war” between black and white being described by conservatives such as Keith Windschuttle as a “left-liberal fiction”.

In defence of his call for memorialisation of black/white armed conflict at the AWM, Inglis quotes in the third edition of his book (2008) from the *Atlas of Australian Wars*, published in 2001 and on display at the AWM, which refers to the “brutal, bloody and sustained confrontation that took place on every significant piece of land across the continent” until the 1930s, with the characteristics of a civil war.<sup>31</sup> Inglis gives further examples of the use of the term “war” in contemporary accounts of engagements with the Aborigines of Australia, and comments on the differences with the representation of confrontation between Maori and whites in New Zealand as fully-fledged war. By 1915, he writes, there were some thirty memorials in New Zealand to men who fell in battle against the Maori: “They were inscribed to men who *fell*. Nobody was said to have *fallen* in battle against the natives of Australia.”<sup>32</sup> Moreover the New Zealand Army Museum at Waiouru includes part of a gallery devoted to the “New Zealand Wars”.

In March 2008, ACT Labor Senate candidate and former Hawke government adviser, Peter Michael Conway on behalf of the Canberra Institute,<sup>33</sup> wrote to then Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard to request that the Memorial “examine the possibility of nationally recognising military

style conflicts ... with Aboriginal clans, commonly referred to as the ‘Aboriginal Wars’”. His letter asks for a monument to be built at the Southern end of Anzac Parade, on the axis between Parliament House and the AWM, or on the same axis between the High Court and the National Library, and for a section on the wars to be included amongst the Colonial War dioramas.<sup>34</sup> The submission nominates a number of conflicts to be commemorated, including the Pemulwuy-led Hawkesbury and Nepean Wars from 1790, the Black Wars of Tasmania, the Port Phillip District Wars from 1830 to 1850, the Kalkadoon Wars of North West Queensland 1870 to 1890, and the Western Australian Conflict of 1890 to 1898. Some historians date the continuation of armed conflict into the 1920s.<sup>35</sup>

The event which had triggered the request – according to the letter – was the announcement that a monument would be built to commemorate Australian participation in the Boer War: a site was dedicated on Anzac Parade Canberra, an avenue leading up to the memorial lined with monuments to Australia’s battles, on 31 May 2008. This decision, writes Conway, undermines the previous reasons given for refusing to recognise the Aboriginal Wars at the Memorial. For it had been argued that the key word in its mission statement was “Australian wars” and Australia as a united country, with a united military force, had not of course existed before 1901. If only post-Federation conflicts were included at the AWM, then the Aboriginal wars – whether they were wars or not – were excluded. But by accepting to place a monument to the Boer War alongside those to post-Federation battles, this objection no longer held.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Conway points out that certain colonial wars that were being waged at the same time as the Aboriginal wars are recognised in the Hall of Valour, which honours holders of the Victoria Cross, and includes 3 VCs from the Boer War, and in certain of the dioramas, the 3D models of battles. Indeed the “Colonial Conflicts” gallery recounts Australia’s early military history from European settlement to the end of the Boer War. It includes reference to Australian participation in the fight against the Maori in New Zealand but not to the Black Wars.<sup>37</sup>

Peter Conway's letter was reported in several press outlets and it garnered some fairly predictable reactions. Major-General (Ret) Bill Crews of the Returned and Services League (R.S.L.) told the *Sunday Telegraph* that his organisation would oppose the plan. He said there was already a memorial for Aboriginal servicemen and women behind the Australian War Memorial and cited the criteria of external conflict for inclusion: "All of the memorials that have been established generally commemorate the role of Australians in conflicts outside Australia and there is no precedent for a civil-style conflict to be commemorated."<sup>38</sup> This is the current position of the Memorial too. In an address to the National Press club in 2013, the Director Brendan Nelson reiterated that "The Australian War Memorial ... is about Australians going overseas in peace operations and in war in our name as Australians."<sup>39</sup> Moreover a December 2013 posting on its blog states that the Memorial "has found no substantial evidence that home-grown military units, whether state colonial forces or post-Federation Australian military units, ever fought against the Indigenous population of this country."<sup>40</sup>

The determined exclusion of the Black Wars (or even of acknowledgement that armed conflict took place) illustrates the inertia of this institution and the obstacles to recognition of internal conflict posed by its legacy. The nation's war memory, official ceremonies and commemorations are largely governed by an agenda set by this institution, which is in turn subject to government oversight. Its generous budget is the object of a special direct grant, it is answerable to the Department of Veterans' Affairs through annual reports and is subject through the military members of its board to the conservative influence of the R.S.L. and other veterans' associations. The centenary of World War One has, however, seen a flurry of initiatives undertaken by the Memorial to record and highlight the participation of Black Diggers in the regular forces.

### **Remembering Black Diggers and White Warriors**

Noticeable in Bill Crews' response outlined above is confusion between commemorating Aboriginal Wars and acknowledging the service of Aborigines in the regular armed services. On

this latter issue, it is indeed true that since 1988 a plaque exists dedicated to Aboriginal servicemen, situated in bushland some distance behind the Memorial, funded with money donated by private individuals. Since 2007 it has acquired greater prominence in the commemorative calendar as an official annual service has taken place there each Anzac Day. This illustrates the increasing attention that has been paid, at the Memorial and elsewhere, to the role of Aboriginal servicemen in the regular army, even while the Black Wars continue to be sidelined. The Australian War Memorial has planned an extensive programme to commemorate Black Diggers over the Anzac Centenary period: their web site lists a suite of projects that includes “providing input into some fifteen documentaries and programs”, compiling a rollcall of Black Diggers and collecting individual stories of Indigenous military personnel that will feature in the redeveloped galleries.

In a dramatic reversal of their previous neglect, authorities at Federal, State and City level that for so long overlooked Indigenous service have, in the last fifteen years or so, begun to promote their memory in a major and sustained way. The monuments dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers that Ken Inglis described in 1998 as “few, modest and late” have greatly increased in number and while those dedicated in the 1990s were often small local memorials or plaques, the more recent ones have been much more ambitious and prominent: in Adelaide, a monument dedicated by the Governor in November 2013 lays claim to being the first national memorial. Another, designed by Aboriginal artist Tony Albert, was inaugurated in April 2015 in central Sydney’s Hyde Park, near the existing war memorial. The R.S.L. has partnered with city authorities including Sydney and the Federal Department of Veterans’ Affairs (under its “Wartime Legends” initiative) since 2007 to hold annual commemorations during Reconciliation week.

Contemporaneous with the rediscovery of the role of Black Diggers and of the debate over recognition of the Black Wars, has been the revitalisation of commemoration of the Boer War. What links if any can be established between these different perspectives on Australia’s military

history? First, in a nation that has militarised its history and its identity, laying claim to military prowess characterises both whites and Aborigines. The constant valorisation of the whites' military exploits inspires both emulation and contestation in Aborigines: on the one hand a desire to be included in the national catalogue of military deeds through recognition of the role of Black Diggers, a desire that is particularly strong among families of the men. But on the other, among the more militant, there are demands to record the exploits of Aborigines in defence of their country and not as part of an imperial force whose violence was turned as much against the Indigenous people at home as against foreign enemies. It is interesting to speculate on whether these latter demands are in part a reaction to the recent "excessive" recognition of Black Diggers<sup>41</sup> that may be seen as an attempt to "recuperate" Aborigines into the hegemonic national story: to portray Aboriginal warriors as soldiers of the Queen, not as defenders of their lands. The recent upsurge in commemoration of the Boer War points up the contrast between the recognition given to the whites' military deeds overseas and the sidelining of the Black Wars. A century-on, the nation's "selective memory"<sup>42</sup> has enabled a return to the uncritical valorisation of the engagement of the colonial troops in South Africa. The Boer War Memorial website records a score of ceremonies held on or around National Boer War Day on 31 May 2016 (date of the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging), in all the capital cities and many small towns.<sup>43</sup> It notes that the ceremony in Canberra was the fifth, the one at Mosman the sixth in recent years, the one in Albany the first – highlighting that this is a recent revival. A public subscription to raise a monument to the Boer War on Anzac Parade, to stand alongside other monuments to Australian forces and battles, was launched in 2012. As of March 2016, the Memorial – part funded by tax-deductible public subscription but also by a substantial Government contribution<sup>44</sup> – had raised almost all the money needed for its completion, due for 2017.<sup>45</sup>

The publicity for the Melbourne Boer War Memorial service in 2016 records that the soldiers were fighting and dying "during the very birth of our Nation", they were the "Fathers of the Anzacs".<sup>46</sup> On the Boer War Memorial website specific reference is made to the pre-Federation

engagement of troops against the Aborigines, but in a way that tends to minimise the fighting (“quite fierce”; “in some areas”; “minor”; “quickly put down”) and leaves the role of Aborigines in defence of their lands unclear: “Up until 1899 for Australians there had been quite fierce fighting in some areas as European settlement expanded across the lands of the Aboriginal peoples, and two minor rebellions on the Australian mainland were quickly put down by British garrison troops.”<sup>47</sup>

Some aspects of the commemorations are designed to involve schoolchildren, for example the annual essay writing competition organised by the Queensland committee of the Boer War Memorial, which in 2016 proposed the topic of “the relevance of the Boer War”. Old monuments have been refurbished and, since interest has been shown in identifying Aborigines who participated in the Boer War,<sup>48</sup> new plaques have been dedicated to Aborigines who served in South Africa, including to Private John Searle in Perth in 2013<sup>49</sup> and to George Madigan at Ingham, North Queensland in 2014.<sup>50</sup> An imposing memorial featuring a mounted Aboriginal horseman was dedicated to the Indigenous Lighthorsemen who served in the Boer War and both World Wars in Springwood Queensland in December 2015.<sup>51</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Liaison Officer at the AWM, Gary Oakley, claims that the role of Indigenous soldiers will be included on the new Boer War Memorial.<sup>52</sup> This is the preferred story that garners official sanction: that in the foreign wars which “made Australia,” Aboriginal soldiers who, like all the Australians who fought abroad, were volunteers, played a subordinate but loyal role.

### **Victims or Fighters?**

It has been left to local, community initiatives to retrace and reinscribe commemoration of the massacre of Aborigines onto the landscape, often in the context of the Reconciliation movement. The first was to commemorate the massacre of approximately thirty Wirrayaraay people at Myall Creek in 1838. The inaugural ceremony in 2000 brought together descendants of the victims, survivors and perpetrators of the massacre and it has become an annual event. The Coniston

Massacre Memorial Plaque at Arrwek was dedicated in 2003 on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the massacre of 60-70 Aborigines in a series of reprisal raids led by Constable William Murray. Once again, it brought together descendants of the Aboriginal people killed and family members of Constable Murray (Liza Dale-Hallett, Murray's great niece). The Appin Massacre Monument, sponsored by the Winga Myamly Reconciliation Group was dedicated in 2007 at Cataract Dam, Campbelltown.

These memorials were the result of the collaboration of well-meaning local whites and Aborigines in the context of Reconciliation. More recently, the issue has been taken up by Aboriginal activists outside of this context. For the past four years, a "shadow" march has followed the Anzac Day procession in Canberra, to remember the thousands who died in the Frontier Wars. In 2015, they met with police obstruction and were prevented from laying wreaths at the Anzac monument, or from marching with an Aboriginal flag – even in the case of an Aboriginal ex-serviceman.<sup>53</sup>

With Aboriginal organisations becoming involved at a national level, it is no longer just white historians who are demanding recognition for the Frontier Wars as had tended to be the case, but Aborigines taking charge of telling their own history and demanding that recognition be given at the highest, national level, including at the iconic institution that is the Australian War Memorial. The Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra has held a "Frontier Wars Storytelling Camp" during Anzac Week for the past three years, inviting both black and white to tell the stories of the Frontier Wars that marked their communities. In 2016, the Embassy launched a petition to recognise and remember: "... those Sovereign Tribal Original People who were slaughtered during the colonisation of Australia. We also ask for an Official National Day of Remembrance to occur every year for the Frontier Massacre of the Original people in Australia from 1788 onwards. This Day of remembrance is to occur on a significant date during colonisation, not ANZAC day, as this is a separate issue.



We also ask that a proper memorial be constructed on ANZAC Parade in front of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra to honour our Ancestors who were slaughtered during the colonisation of Australia.”<sup>54</sup>

Such demands mirror the practices, the material objects and symbols that white Australia has deployed to substantiate its own history: demands for a monument on Anzac Parade; to be able to join in marches and wreath-laying; and for a National Day. However, in the year since the petition was launched, the focus has shifted to challenging the annual celebration of Australia Day on 26 January, date of the arrival of the ships of the First Fleet. Known as “Invasion Day” by activists, a campaign to “change the date” and a boycott of ceremonies in some of the capital cities gained some publicity in January 2017.

There has also been a recent shift in focus as Aboriginal protestors and activists demand recognition not only for the massacres of which the Aborigines were victims but for the role of Aborigines as warriors in defence of their lands. This movement finds an antecedent in the limited recognition given to indigenous leaders like Red Kangaroo (Gunnedah, NSW) in the 1980s, whose historical significance was restricted to inter-tribal warfare.<sup>55</sup> Increased importance is now attached by Aborigines to the warrior Pemulwuy who kept the British army at bay for years around Parramatta and the Hawkesbury in the late eighteenth century. A two-part documentary on ABC Indigenous Television in May 2010, “Pemulwuy: A Tale of Two Laws,” triggered renewed interest in his story and a campaign for official recognition of his role as a resistance fighter. A plaque to Pemulwuy was unveiled at the National Museum of Australia in 2015, however a campaign for the return of his skull, sent to England in 1802, has so far been unsuccessful since its location is unknown.

## **Conclusion**

The calls for recognition of the Frontier Wars have largely coincided with the decade-long preparations for commemoration of the centenary of Anzac, and particularly the Gallipoli landing

of 1915. There can be little doubt that the officially promoted, extensive and expensive commemorative events that have marked the centenary of World War One in Australia have conspired to overshadow and displace demands to critically revisit the narrative of the wars that “built a nation”. Where Aborigines have attempted to inscribe their own combat in defence of country onto the memorial calendar, they have been rebuffed and reminded that “This Day is not for you” and more broadly that there is no place for the Frontier Wars in the hegemonic narrative of white Australia’s military exploits. The recent campaigns for commemoration of the Boer War add a new layer of “symbolic accretion” to that story, and have pushed it further back, into the nineteenth century, where it is joined by Australian colonial engagements in the Sudan (1885) and the Boxer Rebellion (1900-01). These engagements have been emptied of the controversies that accompanied them at the time, the highly contestable rationale for Australian involvement in them and the way they were conducted, to become mere ciphers in a narrative of white military sacrifice and prowess.

It is ironic that the memorial inaugurated by the Gaythorne R.S.L. in 2009, to take one recent example, which lists these nineteenth century engagements as well as twentieth century wars, is dedicated to those who died “In defence of their country.”<sup>56</sup> It can be said with certainty that of all the combats undertaken by the inhabitants of Australia, the one fought by the Aborigines was the one that was most clearly in defence of country. Evans and Orsted-Jensen write that the Frontier War was: “... our Great War – a War for both the defence and the conquest of Australia. Though the AWM evades the issue with ideological obduracy, it must eventually be faced. For only then, armed with an encompassing integrity, can we move forward to a process of nation-building that is ethically based rather than ethnically constructed”.<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Owen J. Dwyer, “Symbolic Accretion and Commemoration,” *Social and Cultural Geography* 5: 3 (2004): 422.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Graves, “Memory and Forgetting on the National Periphery: Marseilles and the Regicide of 1934”, *Portal* 7: 1 (2010).

---

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Rechniewski, “Remembering the Black Diggers: from the ‘Great Silence’ to ‘Conspicuous Commemoration?’”, in *War Memories* (McGill University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Fatma M. Göçek, *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence Against the Armenians 1789-2009*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Göçek, *Denial of Violence*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Ann Curthoys, “National Narratives, War Commemoration and Racial Exclusion” in *Becoming Australia*, eds. Richard Nile and Michael Peterson (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1998), 178.

<sup>8</sup> Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of History, Volume One: Van Diemen’s Land 1803-1847* (Sydney: Macleay Press, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History* (Crows Nest/NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> The historian David Day emphasises the limitations that their way of life placed on the ability of Aborigines to sustain armed conflict: guerrilla attacks were more suited both to the terrain (in Tasmania for example) and to their need to gather food daily. *Claiming a Continent, A New History of Australia* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 1996), chs 4-7.

<sup>11</sup> For example, “The Black War”. *The Cornwall Chronicle* (Launceston, Tas.), 8 September, 1860, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond Evans and Robert Orsted-Jensen, “‘I cannot say the numbers that were killed’: Assessing Violent Mortality on the Queensland Frontier” (paper presented at the Australian Historical Association 33<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference, The University of Queensland, 7-11 July, 2014, accessed 28 July, 2016, [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2467836](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2467836)).

<sup>13</sup> Carl Adolph Feilberg, *The Way We Civilise: black and white, the native police* (Brisbane: G. and J. Black, 1880), accessed 28 July, 2016, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-52760287/view#page/n43/mode/1up>.

---

<sup>14</sup> See for example the letters from “Outis”, 30-31; and A.N., 37.

<sup>15</sup> Henry Reynolds, *Unnecessary Wars* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2016), 6-7.

<sup>16</sup> Reynolds, *Unnecessary Wars*, 195.

<sup>17</sup> Reynolds, *Unnecessary Wars*, 199.

<sup>18</sup> For example, in the *Sunday Telegraph* (Sydney), 9 September, 1906, 4.

<sup>19</sup> The War Commission’s highly critical report of 1903 was widely disseminated in the Australian press under headlines such as “The War Scandal”. *The Daily News* (Perth), 28 October, 1903, 4.

<sup>20</sup> When the first commemoration of the Boer War in Brisbane took place in June 1921, the Mayor lamented the long delay. It is noteworthy that he found it necessary to justify the war as a “just one” while another speaker, Brigadier-General Browne, asserted that “The South African War was a gentleman’s fight. Both sides strictly observed the rules of warfare and humanity.” “Heroes Honoured. South African Campaign. First Commemoration,” *Telegraph* (Brisbane, Qld), 1 June, 1921, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Bean, *In Your Hands Australians* (London: Cassell, 1918).

<sup>22</sup> Michael McKernan, *Here Is Their Spirit: A History of the Australian War Memorial, 1917-1990* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1991), xii.

<sup>23</sup> In September 1917, Bean wrote an article: “Australian Records Preserved as Sacred Things” for the *Commonwealth Gazette*, cited in McKernan, *Here is their spirit*, 42.

<sup>24</sup> “Lost in the monumental landscape”, Martin Ball reviews “Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape by Ken Inglis”, *Australian Humanities Review* (December 1998), accessed 12 January 2009, <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-December-1998/home.html>).

<sup>25</sup> Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998), 241.

<sup>26</sup> McKernan, *Here Is Their Spirit*, 293-4.

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 294.

<sup>28</sup> Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 205.

<sup>29</sup> These words were wrongly attributed to the Governor General, creating a minor storm in the press. Inglis recounts this episode in the epilogue to the third edition of *Sacred Places*, 502-3.

<sup>30</sup> A section is devoted to the Coniston massacre 1928. A striking memorial to “commemorate the thousands of Aboriginal people who perished in the course of European settlement” is prominently displayed near the entrance to the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Inglis, *Sacred Places*, 504. He points out that the book was commissioned by the Australian Army and its author is Lieutenant-General John Coates.

<sup>32</sup> Inglis, *Sacred Places*, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Conway was the Managing Director of the Institute, a lobby group.

<sup>34</sup> Letter from Peter Conway, Director of the Canberra Institute, to the Hon J. Gillard, Deputy Prime Minister, Acting Chair of the National Capital Memorials Committee, 27 March 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Alan Atkinson, “Conquest,” in *Australia’s Empire*, eds. Deryck Schreuder and Stuart Ward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 34.

<sup>36</sup> The colonial armies were officially united as the Commonwealth Forces only by the Defence Act of 1903.

<sup>37</sup> The website describes the gallery thus: “Late in the century colonial forces became involved in overseas conflicts in support of the British Empire in New Zealand, in the Sudan, in China and South Africa.”

<sup>38</sup> “‘Aboriginal Wars’ Memorial Plan Under Fire”, *Sunday Telegraph*, 8 June, 2008, accessed 2 August, 2016, <http://www.news.com.au/story/0,23599,23826276-2,00.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Brendan Nelson, “National Press Club Address,” 18 September, 2013, accessed 7 July, 2015, <https://www.awm.gov.au/talks-speeches/national-press-club-address/>.

---

<sup>40</sup> Marylou Pooley, “Will the Australian War Memorial Tell the Story of the Colonial Conflicts?”  
17 December, 2013, accessed 2 August 2016,

<https://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2013/12/17/response-question-about-frontier-conflicts/>.

<sup>41</sup> Rechniewski, “Remembering the Black Diggers”.

<sup>42</sup> Reynolds, *Unnecessary Wars*, 201.

<sup>43</sup> Accessed 1 August 2016, [http://bwm.org.au/site/Boer\\_War\\_Day2016.php](http://bwm.org.au/site/Boer_War_Day2016.php).

<sup>44</sup> Total cost \$3.9 million. By the end of March 2016, \$3.6 million had been raised; around a third of the cost has been contributed by the Federal Government.

<sup>45</sup> The monument will represent four mounted horsemen, 150% life size, in a recreation of the South African veldt.

<sup>46</sup> The poster and programme are available for download on the Boer War Memorial website:  
[http://www.bwm.org.au/site/Boer\\_War\\_Day2016.php](http://www.bwm.org.au/site/Boer_War_Day2016.php), accessed 31 March 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Accessed 6 September 2016, [http://bwm.org.au/site/Boer\\_War\\_Day2016.php#Melbourne](http://bwm.org.au/site/Boer_War_Day2016.php#Melbourne).

<sup>48</sup> John Maynard, “‘Let us go ... it’s a ‘Blackfellows’ War’: Aborigines and the Boer War”,  
*Aboriginal History* 39 (2015).

<sup>49</sup> Accessed 7 July 2015, [http://bwm.org.au/site/John\\_Searle.php](http://bwm.org.au/site/John_Searle.php).

<sup>50</sup> “Grave News for Aboriginal Soldier,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 May 2014. accessed 31 March 2017. <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2014/05/08/grave-news-aboriginal-boer-war-soldier>.

<sup>51</sup> Accessed 2 April 2017,

<http://monumentaaustralia.org.au/themes/conflict/multiple/display/107531-indigenous-light-horseman>

<sup>52</sup> Elise Pianegonda, “Aboriginal Soldiers who Fought in the Boer War ‘Deserve Greater Recognition’”, accessed 2 August 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-05-30/calls-to-identify-and-honour-aboriginal-soldiers/5489648>.

<sup>53</sup> “‘This Day Is Not For You’: Police Stop Black Digger From Marching For Frontier Wars,”  
*New Matilda*, 27 April, 2015, <https://newmatilda.com/2015/04/27/day-not-you-police-stop-black-digger-marching-frontier-wars/?utm>.

---

<sup>54</sup> Accessed 3 August 2016, <https://www.change.org/p/australian-war-memorial-acknowledge-the-indigenous-frontier-massacres-during-colonisation>.

<sup>55</sup> “The mighty fighter” was first remembered by a plaque to the “Red Chief” (inspired by the eponymous 1950s novel) unveiled by the Gunnedah Historical Society in the 1960s. In 1984, a new memorial inscription was agreed with local Aborigines which restored “The Red Kangaroo’s” indigenous name: Cumbo Gunnerah. The rededication sees an inflection of commemorative discourse from the earlier stereotype of exclusively white agency, albeit one of limited import: Gunnerah’s battles were fought against other tribes and he died in 1745, four decades before colonisation, accessed 2 September 2016, <http://monumentaustralia.org.au/themes/people/indigenous/display/21470-red-kangaroo-red-chief>.

<sup>56</sup> Accessed 2 August 2016, <http://www.qldwarmemorials.com.au/memorial/?id=553>.

<sup>57</sup> Evans and Orsted-Jensen, “Assessing,” 7.