

From the Darling Downs to Don Dale: a litany of monstrous acts against Indigenous children

By Paul Daley

What we witnessed this week is part of a continuum that began with invasion and manifests today in profound disadvantage



'A royal commission in the territory might well go some way toward highlighting what we already know at the core of our dark national heart, but are loth to admit.' Photograph: Marianna Massey/AAP

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Many Australians are aghast at the confronting images of the abuse and torture of Aboriginal children in the Northern Territory that finally hit critical media and political mass this week.

It was mostly politicians (and not all of them non-Indigenous) who expressed “shock” that such abuse of young Aboriginal people could happen in a supposedly civilised place like Australia.

As the writer and Indigenous activist Tony Birch noted in a piece drawing the lines between colonialism, brutality and violence against ecology and country: “That it was a shock to many people is itself a stain on the nation.”

Quite.

It's the stain that runs through the raw material of history – oral and written recollections of the violence enacted against Indigenous people that cannot be defined away merely as colonial transgression. It's the bloodstain on the country in the continent that came to be known as Australia. And it's the stain of Indigenous tears and sweat and blood in hundreds of stinking police cells and paddy wagons that was highlighted a quarter of a century ago and then promptly forgotten.

It's the stain of omission from too much of the non-Indigenous telling of this country's past and present in the history books, in the media, in general cultural conversation.

From the earliest post-invasion times, Indigenous children were more than just the innocent bystanders to the violence afflicted upon their elders. At the massacre sites that dot the Australian landscape, where shattered bones are still, today, laid bare by the elements, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were rarely spared.

When they were, what came next was sometimes a living purgatory, a brief life as a chattel, a wild creature to be tamed, whitened on the inside and, if that proved too difficult, dispensed with or abandoned.

I've recounted how fortunate I felt to be wearing white cotton gloves when handling, a few years ago, the memoir written by Korah Halcomb Wills, an English "settler" on the Queensland frontier where perhaps the worst excesses of violence against Indigenous people happened in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Fortunate, because it meant I didn't have to directly touch the pages that had been in contact with the skin of this man, a former mayor of Bowen, Queensland, who boasted of massacring Aboriginal people and in one case of chopping a male victim into pieces that he could trophy.

He stuffed the body parts into his saddle bags to take back to Bowen.

Of the aftermath of that massacre, he wrote, "... selected a little girl with the intention of civilising and one of my friends thought he would select a boy for the same purpose".

Of the decapitated body of his adult victim, Wills wrote: “I packed them home to Bowen as well as my little protégée of a girl let me who rode on the front of my saddle and crying nearly all the way.

“I took compassion on her and decided to take her home and bring her up with my own children which I did, I even sent her to school with my own [in Melbourne].”

But it didn't work out. The child became ill in the southern chill and died.

Wills seemed far more upset about the death of his favourite horse.

Wills (apparently bemused that an abducted Aboriginal child would cry while riding on a horse with the remnants of a relative, perhaps her father) was a monster, sure enough. But the frontier – and later the federation, from 1901 up and until today – is replete with monstrous acts committed against Indigenous children, from the Darling Downs to Don Dale, through the stolen generations and all the way back to Lachlan Macquarie's “native institution” for children at Parramatta.

Macquarie ordered his troops steal children and take them to be “civilised” at Paramatta.

In his instructions for military operations against the tribes around Appin two centuries ago, in which many Aboriginal men, women and children were murdered, Macquarie ordered his troops: “Select and secure that number [12 Aboriginal boys and six girls, aged between four and six] of fine healthy good-looking children from the whole of the Native Prisoners of war taken in the course of your operations and direct them to be delivered to ... the Native Institution at Parramatta.”

They were among the first of many stolen generations of Indigenous children to follow.

Macquarie has attracted too many hagiographers. They've portrayed him as a renaissance governor who began to “civilise” and internationalise the colony. But they've turned a blind eye to his acute personal failings and, most importantly, his brutality towards the local tribes, not least the children.

I've written before about his use of “terror” (his word) tactics against the local Indigenous people. The full sordid story of his treatment of Aboriginal children at Paramatta is now beginning to emerge.

The Australian archives are filled with stories of the brutal treatment of Indigenous children on the post-invasion frontier, not least in the church-run missions. Meanwhile, remarkable scholarly work has highlighted the widespread abuse of Indigenous children in colonial and post-federation Australian.

One of the most important works to date is Shirleene Robinson's *Something like Slavery? Queensland's Aboriginal Child Workers, 1842-1945*, which highlights the institutional use and abuse of Indigenous young people.

The stories are sickening. But they don't shock those who've bothered to look for the truth about the way young Indigenous people, like their elders, have been treated since James Cook sailed into Botany Bay in 1770 and, at the first moment of east coast contact, shot a couple of blackfellas and stole their shield and spears.

And this, of course, brings us full circle to the Northern Territory (long a national frontrunner in the shameful human rights abuses of Indigenous people) and the notice Australia has now taken because of the Don Dale youth detention centre.

A royal commission in the territory might well go some way toward highlighting what we already know at the core of our dark national heart, but are loth to admit: a non-Indigenous assumption, seeded in the colonies, that black lives are of lesser value, still shamefully thrives in sections of our justice, law and order, and political systems.

The commission may be a balm for the distress and shock purportedly experienced by non-Indigenous politicians. But it will not assuage the understandable cynicism and anger of many Indigenous people who rightly have little faith in the power of the royal commission to change black lives.

The commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody reported a quarter of a century ago. Indigenous incarceration rates have since gone off the chart while far too many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people still die behind bars.

Those who know this will be neither shocked nor surprised at any terrible thing about the abuse of Australian Indigenous human rights the commission might uncover.

Because they know that what we witnessed this week is part of a continuum that began with invasion, land theft and widespread murder. And it manifests today, through generations of reverberating trauma, in the profound social and economic disadvantage that gave us Don Dale.

And, yet, governments will still wonder why it is that perhaps as few as 25% of eligible Indigenous Australians bother to vote.