

Attempted Aboriginal massacres took place as recently as 1981, historian says

Alice Springs mass poisoning claimed two lives and left many in hospital but remains unsolved, showing challenges of verifying frontier killings



Dr Robyn Smith, a historian from the University of Newcastle, has verified more than 100 massacre sites in the Northern Territory as part of the colonial Frontier Massacres project.

Supported by

Lorena Allam

Wed 16 Mar 2022

Attempts at the mass killing of Aboriginal people were still being made as recently as 1981, according to a historian who has spent the past four years researching colonial violence in the Northern Territory.

Dr Robyn Smith, who has worked on the University of Newcastle's *colonial frontier massacres map* project, says she has also found attempts at massacres in the 1930s and 40s.

These horrors are not on the map because fewer than six people died – the research team's strict criterion for inclusion. But Smith says it shows the violence of the frontier did not abate over time.

"It says that the NT was still the frontier. Even though they might not have been successful, in a sense, the intention was to kill people," Smith says.

“I think people were under a bit more police scrutiny, so arbitrary shooting expeditions would have been easier to detect, whereas poisoning is far more underhanded.”

The 1981 mass poisoning was reported at the time, but remains unsolved.

An Aboriginal man and an Aboriginal woman died and 14 others were admitted to hospital, six of them seriously ill, after unwittingly sharing a poisoned bottle of sherry that had been deliberately left on the grounds of the John Flynn memorial church in Alice Springs.

Nabbutta Abbott Nabarula, 50, and David Charlie Jagamara, 28, died on 29 March after drinking the wine, which had been poisoned with strychnine. A team of eight police detectives investigated the incident and offered a \$20,000 reward, but no one was ever charged. The NT coroner, Denis Barritt, later found the two people had been “murdered by person or persons unknown”.

The lack of detailed information about such recent crimes exemplifies the challenges of verifying frontier killings, Smith says.

“It’s really, really difficult,” she says. “Unless, as often happens, someone writes about it 20, 30 or 40 years later, when either most of the perpetrators have died or moved away, or they think that the time for arrest and being held accountable has passed.”

‘He poisoned the salt, he poisoned the sugar’

Smith says she has also identified massacre attempts in the 1930s and 40s. In 1940, Rembarrnga and Ngalkpon men, women and children were deliberately poisoned by a white overseer at Mainoru station, 250km north-east of Katherine, on the Roper River.

It was “an act of spite” by the manager, Tom Boddington, for being sacked by his business partners, Smith says.

“He poisoned rations and gave them to the Aboriginal stockman and their families. Essentially, he was trying to kill the workforce.”

The story that appears in police records and oral histories is that Boddington took over after Mainoru’s manager, Billy Farrer, became ill. Boddington mismanaged the property, the partners fell into dispute and Boddington was sacked.

The anthropologist Gillian Cowlshaw recorded an oral history with a Rembarrnga stockman, Bandicoot Robinson, in 1996. “Tom Boddington and I work, work, work there. He was a bad bloke too. He used to shoot, frighten the hell out of all those people,” Robinson told Cowlshaw.

“That Tom Boddington had everybody all cleared out. He was hunting everybody out, black fellows and old Billy Farrer too. He didn’t hit me, but he just hate anybody.

“Then we went to Katherine, me and Tom Boddington. Before we left, he put all that arsenic, poison. He poisoned the salt, he poisoned the sugar, he poisoned that box full of tea leaf.

“Next morning ... they boiled up the tea and when they drank the tea, everyone started vomiting. Everyone vomiting, all that thing, tucker, all had poison, sugar, tea leaf and salt. When we got to Katherine, Tom Boddington told me, ‘You know that Mainoru mob, Billy Farrer went back there? I sang them that song. They’re all here at the hospital. Or might be they all dead now’.”



Smith says there was ‘tacit approval and certainly police participation’ for Aboriginal massacres in the NT.

Robinson is saying that Boddington claimed he had been “singing” people, a traditional practice used by powerful law men to enact fatal punishment on wrongdoers.

Robinson said he later helped police “lay a trap” to arrest Boddington, and was a police witness.

“I went to Katherine court. Then we went to Darwin. War was still on. And I told them about everything, that judge in Darwin. And he shot my uncle too, that Tom Boddington. We went to Alice Springs. I met the Supreme Court there too, and I told them straight. They put Tom Boddington straight in the army. He went to New Guinea fighting, that old Tom Boddington. Just disappeared there now, finish. Might be he got shot now!”

Katherine police journals of June 1940 record “investigations re sick natives from Mainoru”, the matter of “Farrer v Boddington” and feeding “Witness Bandicoot” over an extended period. Boddington did enlist in the army, but was discharged in 1942.

In another case identified by Smith, the Adelaide Chronicle in 1936 recorded the deaths of five Aboriginal people near Port Keats, who had been deliberately poisoned by a white dingo trapper. No charges were laid.

“Poison was used a lot. I’ve come across examples of cooks on stations in the VRD [Victoria River district] steeping tobacco in cyanide and then giving it to Aboriginal workers. Also, distributing poisoned damper.”

Scale of massacres ‘depressing’

Smith has been able to verify more than a hundred sites in the Northern Territory from 1827 to the 1920s. There is “so much evidence” of massacres, she says, but it has been “disparate”. To see it all in one place on the map is “seriously depressing, when you realise the scale of it”.

Smith says Roper River and the VRD were “very violent places”, where she found the most confronting information.

“It was so far from the seat of power and authority – and for the NT, that was Adelaide; the vast majority of our massacres happened on the South Australians’ watch – that it was just lawless.

“Pastoralists and overland telegraph officers regularly took the law into their own hands.

“I’ve got Paddy Cahill’s own hand, in a letter to the South Australian Register, saying that he engaged in a massacre and saying ‘I don’t know how many I shot, I didn’t stop to count them’,” Smith says. “He was made a Protector of Aborigines.

“Technically, massacres were not sanctioned but there was tacit approval and certainly police participation. The Northern Territory was a large place, sparsely populated and governed from distant Adelaide. Later, it was governed from more distant Canberra. There were very few police on the ground to protect the nervous settlers and the land they were progressively plundering.”

The research team received a vital piece of original evidence, a letter from a pastoralist on Calvert Downs station in the Gulf country, Bob McCracken, to his sister in Melbourne.

~~Unsuccessful~~
New Zealand -
1 Sept 1885

My dear Mattie.

It seems such an awful long time since your letter to me was written (25 Oct + 26 Nov 84) that you will long ere this realize you had given up all hope of an answer but the fact was that the postmen reached me both at the same time, about the end of June, & as the Madman started on his return journey in twenty-four hours there was no time to write more than answer one from the Peter & as that contained the news of poor Jimmie's death I could not get off replying to it. The mail we got before that was some time in January & when we will get the next the Lord only knows - We can only hope that it will be before Queen's Birthday news of the Capt.

A very pleasant surprise, so whenever I think of a relative or friend of mine getting married I at once and mentally score out that persons' name from my very small list of possible or probable correspondents, raised my surprise at receiving yours but I hope you will continue to favor me with one occasionally when time & the humor suit you - I had a letter also from the Major after Uncle's decease, mostly filled with particulars of his death, funeral, etc & which I answered shortly at the time - Collicott need to write occasionally at occasional intervals has given up altogether & then others I never did correspond with so yourself the Major & a chance outside are all I have to depend on for letters - If we got anything like a fair supply of newspapers it would not be so bad, but the Mail collects for so long a time in Brabantown that when there is any chance of a Mail coming out the accumulation of papers is

Bob McCracken's 1885 letter to his sister, which details the Calvert Downs massacre.

This letter says to her: 'You have no idea what it's like here, we have to throw the lead around' and then he goes into details of an 1885 massacre in which he participated. That's a first-hand account," Smith says.

In the letter, McCracken wrote: "Killing odd ones or even two or three is no good, they are never missed and nothing but wholesale slaughter will do any good."

"So people did put it in personal correspondence," Smith says. "But of course, you know what happens? Someone dies, there's an old shoebox full of letters, and it gets burnt or thrown out, and that evidence is lost.

"But in this case, the family historians held on to it and wanted to make sure that the truth was told."