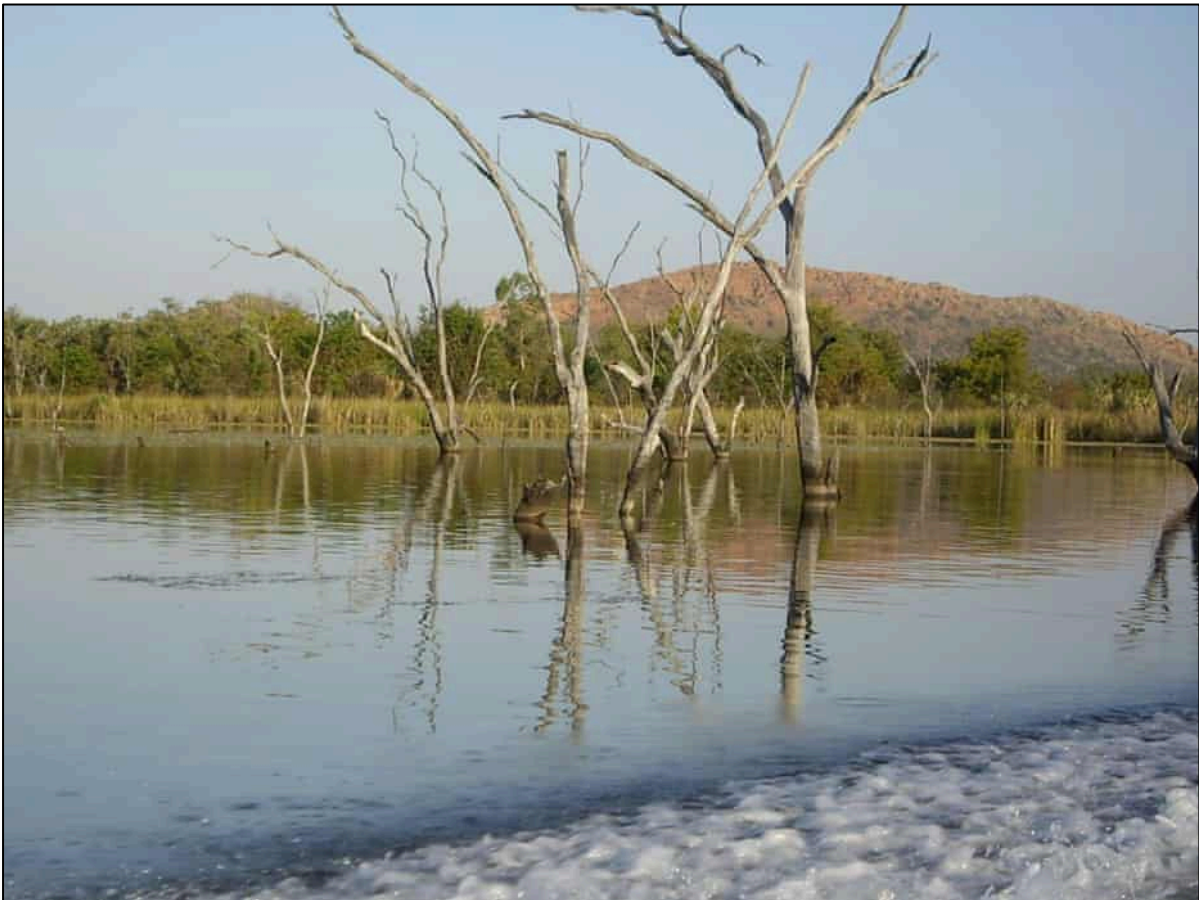


‘Unrestrained slaughter’: extent of historical revenge killings in WA and the NT revealed

Documentary evidence and oral histories indicate about 220 Aboriginal men, women and children were massacred in retaliation for death of pastoralist



The fatal spearing of ‘Big Johnny’ Durack from a pastoral station along the Ord River (pictured here) led to the deaths of hundreds of Indigenous people in retaliation.

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About 220 Aboriginal men, women and children were killed in reprisal for the spearing of a prominent pastoralist in Western Australia in 1886, in possibly the biggest and most enduring massacre in WA and Northern Territory history.

New research done as part of the University of Newcastle’s Colonial Frontier Massacres digital map project reveals that these reprisals were more widespread than previously thought.

Massacres of Aboriginal people in the Kimberley region of WA were often shrouded in secrecy and silence. But some have been boldly documented by the pioneering families of the perpetrators in celebrated Australian books about their adventures “overcoming” the country.

On 17 November 1886, two of the first white pastoralists in the east Kimberley district, “Big Johnny” Durack and his cousin John Wallace Durack of the Ord River pastoral station, were allegedly ambushed by a group of Gija or Djaru people. “Big Johnny” was fatally speared.



Indigenous people viewed their country as under attack, a profoundly different attitude to that of the colonisers who documented the conflict.

A group of police and Aboriginal assistants were dispatched from Wyndham to “try and arrest the natives for the murder”. They were joined by 20 men from Durack’s pastoral stations.

Three days in, the group found and attacked a camp they estimated to include 100 people. The Aboriginal men retaliated by throwing their spears and, according to one police report, two men “who appeared to be the ringleaders” were shot and killed.

“The rest escaped into the nearby mountains and because the terrain was too rough the police party did not follow,” the police report said. Thus the matter officially ends.

But Aboriginal oral history, as well as later news reports, police records and even declarations by Durack family members, describes a conflict that was much more serious.

The evidence for the Durack reprisals is extensive.

In a letter to the *West Australian* on 14 November 1892, the author and solicitor Richard Septimus Haynes wrote: "The incident ... when 100 or 150 natives were slaughtered in cold blood happened within the last six years, some little distance inland from Derby, and was related to me by an eye-witness. So far as I know it never formed the subject of an inquiry of any kind. Nor was this an isolated case."

An 1892 police file identified the eyewitness as William Collins, "a squatter of West Kimberley who informed Mr Haynes that he, with others about the time J. Durack was murdered, rounded about 120 natives up and shot a large number consisting of men, women and children."

In 1932, Michael Patrick Durack, Big Johnny's cousin, wrote in the *Royal Western Australian historical society journal* that "a punitive force of police and volunteers were sent out by the government and a lot of the blacks were shot."

"It should be added that the black-fellow on the whole was never given a chance, and the coming of the whites meant the going of the blacks," Durack wrote.

Recent research undertaken for the University of Newcastle Colonial Frontier Massacres map found the revenge spree crossed state borders. The pastoral stations were so large they stretched from WA into the Northern Territory, where there is evidence that reprisals for the killing of "Big Johnny" were just as severe.

On Christmas Day in 1886, just weeks after Durack's killing, the *NT Times and Gazette* reported that "a party of six troopers has been sent out in search of the murderers of the late John Durack. Another party, including the unfortunate man's brothers and several other Europeans, has also started after the offending tribe. We trust they will find them, and administer a lesson such as will not soon be forgotten."

There are clues to further reprisals at a place called Waterloo, on Rosewood Station, in the Victoria River district of the NT. Officially, little is known about the name's origins, but the historian Dr Darrell Lewis says Waterloo "is said to be a reference to the 'unrestrained slaughter' of local Aborigines by police after the spearing of 'Big Johnny' Durack near Mount Duncan in 1886".

In his *Victoria River District Doomsday Book*, published last year, Lewis cites a 1928 diary entry from Michael Terry who "heard about a fight between a group of white men and 100 Aborigines 'by Waterloo Hill' after the spearing of 'J Larry' Durack".

He also quotes a near-contemporary to the events, a stockman named Doug Moore, as saying: "Waterloo Station was named on account of the battle with natives there years ago. Ammunition ran out so there was wholesale slaughter of natives. This told to me by my boy Jerry who escaped – he hid in an ant-bed then sneaked away in the dark."

MP Durack's daughter was Mary Durack, author of *Kings in Grass Castles* (1959) which documented the family's emerging pastoral empire. Mary described punitive expeditions as "n*gger hunts" but implied they had been overstated:



Massacres of Indigenous people continued even until the late 1920s, with some of the victims of the 1926 Forrest River Massacre buried beneath this cross.

“The conspiracy of silence that sealed the lips of the pioneers added colour to the rumours that spread abroad, so that whereas we know they took much rough justice into their own hands they were no doubt less devastating to the local tribes than was sometimes said,” Mary Durack wrote.

She wrote that punitive expeditions required planning and that “treachery” on the part of the blacks must be met with “strategy” by the whites.

She described the murders in these terms: “After the death of Big Johnny Durack a chain of fires blazed defiance from range to range. Lucanus marshalled his forces and rode the countryside and slowly the fires went out.”

August Lucanus was a civilian who volunteered for reprisals against “the blacks”. His memoirs, which were serialised in 1937 in Western Australia’s Daily News, claim he killed very large numbers of Aboriginal people in different locations and periods. He had been a soldier in the German army and a well-regarded “ex-Territory” trooper of the South Australian mounted police force. He was later invited to join the WA police.

Nyining-Gija man Jack Banggaiyerri Sullivan was born on Argyle station in 1901 and spent most of his life working on Durack pastoral stations as a stockman. Banggaiyerri grew up watching “shooting everywhere” in the Kimberley. Those who “would not come in” and settle down on bush camps on the pastoral stations, the pastoralists “put a bullet in them”, he said.



“Instead of frightening them away he straight away pulled out a gun – bang bang bang bang ... ” – Jack Banggaiyerri Sullivan (left) and his half-brother Bulla at Turkey Creek, Kimberley, in 1982.

In his 1983 biography, Banggaiyerri tells a different story to that of Mary Durack: “When they started forming the stations, Johnnie Durack would ride around from the old station with a pack, round and round to find the good places. One day he was in the lead while another fella drove his pack, and he put down to where he was going to cross a creek. That was where he ran into the blackfellers.

“Instead of frightening them away he straight away pulled out a gun – bang bang bang bang – and chased one feller down to the creek. The blackfeller ducked around and as Johnnie passed him, looking out for him, of course he let drive from the side and got him.”

Kimberley and NT Aboriginal communities continue to memorialise this massacre in their oral histories. But they say the causes and motives were the defence of their country under attack, a profoundly different way to how the colonisers documented it. These massacres told local Aboriginal people a story: interfere with European colonisation and you will pay. Kill a European, and you will pay tenfold.