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There are few memorials to Australia's bloody history but that's changing

In the last two decades some community-driven memorials to Aboriginal resistance leaders have appeared

By Jack Latimore
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A sign at the Bathurst bowling club in NSW, built at a site where a number of Aboriginal people are said to have been killed and buried in colonial times. Photograph: Carly Earl/The Guardian

Growing up Aboriginal is to grow up acutely aware that at some point in the not-so-distant past your forebears survived at least one form of attempted massacre. For some Aboriginal people the reminders are a daily occurrence as we travel across our country: a painful past embodied in a sheer cliff face, a peninsula, a riverbank or an open plain where countrymen, women and children were slain.

I learned of the Myall Creek massacre in early high school and the graphic details of that atrocity nightly coiled in my mind. Around the same time I was made aware of a book titled Baal Belbora by a local white historian named Geoffrey Blomfield that revealed a multitude of massacres across my own country.

Blomfield's book provides an account of the systematic attempt by white colonisers to eliminate Birpai and Dunghutti from the landscape via a series of "dispersals" in the 1820s and 1830s. One map illustrates the military manoeuvres used to drive the old people away from their coastal estates and into the harsh "falls country" that forms the natural western borders of these nations.

The intent of those manoeuvres was unquestionably, undeniably, the annihilation of the blacks: to terrorise them, to force the resistance into the precipitous hills, into impending starvation, where they would submit or perish.

Knowledge not contained within Blomfield's book, but known by our great-grandfather who was born and raised in the first half of the 1900s, was a local massacre where violence more akin to the savagery of Myall Creek was perpetrated. In the early 1990s my great-grandfather even spoke at length to white anthropologists and historians about it. The records remain somewhere in government archives, filed away, disregarded.

Our family's native title claim on the area did not succeed and, to this day, the site is not recognised as an Aboriginal place, let alone for the brutality that occurred there.

Warfare was the main form of contact between the colonial invaders and the Birpai and Dunghutti in those early decades, driven by colonial occupation and its exploitative resource extraction. The locals resisted an empire, yet no reference of their heroism is found in Australia's national war memorial. Nor is the inclusion of this dark narrative likely in that institution's future $500m "expansion".

The same scenario is repeated in all the "frontier" wars that occurred across the continent as Australia's colonies expanded. To paraphrase the national war memorial's director, Brendan Nelson, this is the symbol of the price paid by First Nations lives for the freedoms white Australia enjoys and too often takes for granted.

Also little known is how these bloody confrontations continued to occur well into the 1930s, roughly 100 years after Myall Creek and three decades after federation.

But First Nations people are and have always been acutely aware of these atrocities.

In Fingal, a beachside village on the New South Wales north coast, there is a massacre site at the end of the spit. But visiting surfers and fishers could never suspect that Indigenous men, women and children were murdered on a slender plain visitors now traverse to access the beach.

Drive up the Bruce Highway from Mackay in north Queensland to a township known as The Leap and you will find a lanky wooden memorial beside a roadside pub representing a tragedy in 1867.

Local lore recalls that an Aboriginal woman, distressed, clutching her baby, leapt off the ledge of a nearby cliff. Her infant survived the fall and was taken into the care of a white family.

But a second version of events, not as widely recounted, says the woman and a number of her countrymen were driven off the cliff by white men and their agents.

Until mid-2017 you could find installed on the cliff's edge a giant photo frame with "I took the leap Mackay" painted on it.

In inner-city Melbourne, where several massacres of local Kulin people occurred, you may roam the streets and discover plaques fixed to just about every single Victorian and Edwardian landmark, but not so easily find in memorial form or even at visitor information kiosks information about the city's bloody history.

A 1914 letter to the editor of the Northern Star, a newspaper circulated in the "big scrub" area of the NSW north coast, provides a conscientious witness account of the character our aspiring commonwealth issued from:

> *Besides the Myall Creek massacre there were other and greater massacres perpetrated … for trivial offences, and sometimes for no substantial reason at all. The whites had a method of seeking retribution that was a disgrace to Christianity – that of punishing a tribe, probably an innocent one, for the crime of an individual. The whites, far from showing any regard for the lives of the original owners of the country, ignored all their rights as to property, and yet were most brutal when their own rights were transgressed.*

In the last two decades some community-driven memorials to Aboriginal resistance leaders have appeared.

There is the memorial to Yagan in the Swan Valley, Western Australia, to honour the Nyoongar warrior and diplomat who was hunted down and shot, partially flayed for the trophy of the tribal markings on his back, and then had his head removed for the bounty.

The head was later posted to England as a "curiosity" from the colony. It was only repatriated to his people and country in 2010.

Aboriginal elder Ken Colbung with the bronze statue of the 19th century Aboriginal warrior Yagan after it was discovered that its head had been severed and stolen from where it stands on Heirisson Island near Perth. The vandalism came five days after Yagan's skull was returned to Perth from the UK. Photograph: Greg Wood/EPA

Last month in Buderim on Queensland's Sunshine Coast, a community action group unveiled a memorial to Dundalli, a local resistance leader and senior lawman

executed at the current site of the Brisbane general post office in a public hanging on 5 January 1855.

The relentless persecution of Dundalli over the latter half of his life is considered a strategic attempt by the colonial authorities to extirpate tribal law and traditional culture from south-eastern Queensland, after earlier attempts in the form of gifts of strychnine-laced flour to mob failed to effect the desired outcome in the 1840s.

In 2005 a Badtjala artist, Fiona Foley, installed a memorial to 94 massacre sites – inadvertently commissioned by the Queensland government – in front of the Brisbane magistrates court, though she had to work covertly to do it.

Witnessing to Silence outside the Brisbane magistrates court. Fiona Foley's installation commemorates 94 massacres in Queensland

Witnessing to Silence consists of two white granite rings: one encircling a tall stand of lotus flowers, the other, glass and steel columns containing ash and water. These represent the common methods used to dispose of black bodies after a massacre: they were either burned or dumped into a nearby river or ocean.

Explaining her motive for not revealing the true meaning of the work until after its official unveiling, Foley simply says: “There is a psychological denial. I knew people would find it difficult to accept the truth.”