

Lest we forget a leader who fought for his people and Country



The full drama and tragedy of Tongerlongeter is revealed by Henry Reynolds and Nicholas Clement.

By Mark McKenna
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Review: *Tongerlongeter: First Nations Leader and Tasmanian War Hero*, Henry Reynolds and Nicholas Clements, New South Press, \$34.99

Hobart, Van Diemen's Land, January 7, 1832. Twenty-six survivors of the "Black War" that had raged across the island for the previous eight years, marched down Elizabeth Street in "battle order", trailed by a large pack of dogs. Each male carried three spears in his left hand and one in his right. Accompanied by their "conciliator", missionary George Augustus Robinson and 13 of his "Aboriginal associates", they "shrieked their war song" as they advanced towards Government House, where Governor George Arthur waited to meet them.

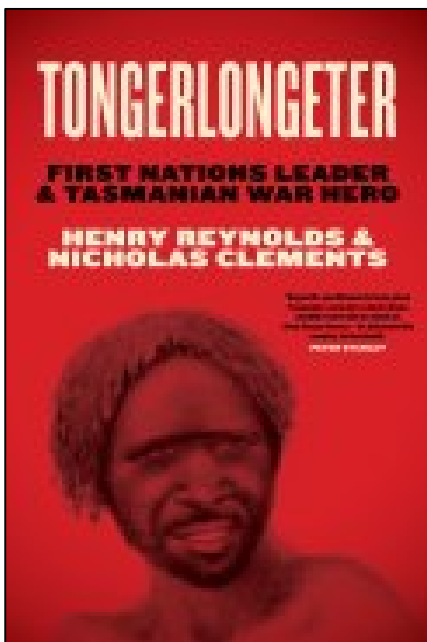
Crowds of curious onlookers rushed to witness the scene. At the head of the march strode the imposing figure of Tongerlongeter, the Poredareme warrior whose country stretched north as far as Oyster Bay, south to the Tasman Peninsula, and inland "almost as far as Oatlands and the Coal Valley". He was one of the most feared leaders of the loose confederation of Oyster

Bay – Big River nations that had launched more than 700 attacks since 1824, killing or wounding more than 350 white settlers and terrorising the colony. It was little surprise that Hobart’s residents saw the marchers’ presence as a hopeful sign that the war was over.

As Henry Reynolds and Nicholas Clements argue in *Tongerlongeter*, their compelling and harrowing account of his troubled life and blood-soaked times, Tongerlongeter led “Australia’s most effective Aboriginal resistance campaign” in its “most significant war”. More people lost their lives in the Black War “than in any other conflict on Australian soil”.

Tongerlongeter – forgotten and unacknowledged like so many Indigenous warriors who resisted the invasion of their Country – also led the first march of war veterans in Australian history. Long before the first Anzac Day on April 25, 1916, Australians died defending their homeland on their own soil. Yet two centuries later, as we eulogise the men and women who died serving Australia in overseas conflicts, we fail to honour our Indigenous patriots in the same field of vision.

In his landmark book *The Other Side of the Frontier* (1981), Henry Reynolds asked when Australians would “make room for the Aboriginal dead on our memorials, cenotaphs, boards of honour and even in the pantheon of national heroes”. In a series of publications over the next 40 years – most notably his history of frontier conflict in Tasmania, *Fate of a Free People* (1995) and more recently in *Forgotten War* (2013) – Reynolds has continued to ask the same question, honing his arguments on the anvil of contemporary politics and memory as he insists that we apply the “sacred, ubiquitous phrase”, “Lest We Forget” to those who “bled on their own soil”.



Both Reynolds and Clements, author of *The Black War: Fear Sex and Resistance in Tasmania* (2014), know this history (and the lie of the land) intimately. Clements, who writes most of *Tongerlongeter*, provides the “finer grained story” while Reynolds, who writes the opening chapters and conclusion, reveals its broader national and international significance. Their decision to reframe a history they’ve both written about before through a biographical lens pays extraordinary dividends.

Now we can see the experience of invasion and war through Tongerlongeter's eyes and the various roles he played throughout his life – father, husband, diplomat and warrior – and we catch glimpses of his character: a “jocular” man who was at once fierce and defiant, clever and kind, brutal and revengeful. By focusing the “horror film” of the Black War's history through the experience of one man, Reynolds and Clements powerfully reveal the personal and collective trauma wrought by war and dispossession.

Tongerlongeter also reflects the greater prominence of biography in the writing of Indigenous history. Historians and writers such as Libby Connors (*Warrior*, 2015), Michael Powell (*Musquito*, 2016), Alexis Wright (*Tracker*, 2017), and Cassandra Pybus (*Truganini*, 2020) have successfully turned to biography to explore the lives of Indigenous warriors, activists and ambassadors.



George Augustus Robinson, the so-called conciliator, said Tongerlongeter had “spread terror and dismay”.

Meanwhile, in Canberra, the ANU's National Centre of Biography recently launched a project to develop an *Indigenous Australian Dictionary of Biography* that will add nearly 200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander biographies to *The Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

At first glance, writing the life of an Aboriginal warrior in the early 19th century would seem to be an almost impossible task. How do you reach the life of a man who appears episodically in the documentary record? How do you overcome the fact that almost everything known about him is mediated through the invaders' eyes? A man whose language and culture inhabited a world so radically different from your own? If such a biography is necessarily speculative, how much can the author really know about their subject's life, one which was so inextricably “bound up with his kinfolk”?

Reynolds and Clements admit that Tongerlongeter “remains as elusive to us as he did to the colonists ... absolute certainty is rare”.

Yet it’s the way they navigate this challenge – through a process of meticulous research, “careful, deductive reasoning”, and painstaking reconstruction – that gives the book its remarkable narrative tension.

Clements’ chapters covering the period of the Black War – in which Tongerlongeter and his fellow warriors respond to the murder of their countrymen by torching huts, plundering farms and ambushing and killing settlers – take us inside Tongerlongeter’s shattered world and reveal the full drama and tragedy of a man who stands on the brink of losing his country forever. Yet all the while, the writing remains restrained and free from embellishment and sentimentality. It never underestimates the moral complexity of events.

Tongerlongeter died in June 1837 at Wybalenna, a bleak, windswept patch of earth on Flinders Island, where he’d been exiled for more than five years. He was in his late forties. Of the nearly 200 Aboriginal people who had been sent to the island by the time of his death, almost half had died.

On the day of his funeral, his coffin of “gum plank” was covered with “a pall of dark blue cloth edged with white” and strewn with flowers. Interred with full Christian rites, he was claimed in death by the very people he’d fought against for decades.

After the burial, George Augustus Robinson reflected that the man who had “spread terror and dismay” throughout the colony was finally gone, and the white man could now “safely revel in luxury on the lands of his primeval existence”.

But in this outstanding work of history and biography, Nicholas Clements and Henry Reynolds have reclaimed Tongerlongeter’s life and revealed the astonishing story of his valiant struggle to defend his Country, whatever the cost.