

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA
REVIEW OF EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS
SUBMISSION

from

Dr Cathie Clement, MPHA, Historian and heritage consultant, Perth

The submission

This submission relates to the controversy attached to the Museum's exhibition of material relevant to massacres of Indigenous people. It looks at that controversy within the broader framework of attempts that have been made to deny the occurrence of massacres and widespread frontier violence in Australia. It also raises points that Museum staff might consider if current exhibits are altered or new exhibits created.

The source material cited in the submission was collected and pooled by people who are interested in Australian history and its interpretation. The footnotes acknowledge the contributions made by others in that regard.

The Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference for the review include the issue of whether the Government's vision in approving funding for the development of the Museum has been realised. The information released in connection with the review contains the following statement:

In 1980, when introducing the legislation that would become the *National Museum of Australia Act 1980* (the Act), the Minister of the day, the Hon RJ Ellicott QC, said that the national museum would, as recommended by the Pigott Committee, have as its themes, 'the history of Aboriginal man, the history of non-Aboriginal man and the interaction of man with his environment'. At that time, Minister Ellicott also stated that the three themes must be inter-related and complement each other, giving visitors 'the opportunity of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of life in Australia'.¹

I cannot comment on whether the Museum has realised the Government's vision because, in the time that it has been open, I have not visited Canberra. I have, however, taken an interest in what has been said about the exhibits. In particular, I have been interested in people's reaction to the Museum's interpretation of frontier conflict.²

¹ http://www.dcita.gov.au/Article/0,,0_1-2_1-4_113144,00.html.

² Examples of articles on this subject include Keith Windschuttle, 'How Not to Run a Museum: People's history at the postmodern museum', *Quadrant*, September 2001, copy viewed at <http://www.sydneyline.com/National%20Museum.htm>; and Graeme Davison, *Museums and national identity*, Museums Association National Conference, Adelaide, 20 March 2002, copy viewed at <http://www.museumsaustralia.org.au/conf02/Papers/davisong.htm>.

In the published comments, a lot has been said about the credibility, or lack of credibility, of some of the information presented in the “First Australians” gallery. That subject, with particular reference to oral history (testimony provided by Indigenous knowledge custodians), is the subject of this submission. It is hoped that the submission, by commenting on such matters, will contribute to the panel’s understanding of some of the many issues involved in reaching valid conclusions about the imposition of a non-indigenous society on Australia’s indigenous population.

The silence of the Act on oral history

The *National Museum of Australia Act 1980* calls for the establishment of a ‘Gallery of Aboriginal Australia’ that consists, in part, of ‘a collection of historical material owned by the Museum that relates to Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders’. The Act defines *historical material* as ‘material (whether in written form or in any other form) relating to Australian history’. It uses the term frequently and it tends to do so with regard to the acquisition, use and disposal of *historical material*.

It is significant that the Act makes no reference to oral history. A person who values oral history might assume that it constitutes historical material in a form other than the written form and is therefore a component of *historical material* (as defined by the Act). Another person who places little or no value on oral history might assume the opposite.

Whilst accepting that it may be inappropriate for the Act to mention oral history, I believe that its silence on this point contributes to the risks that museum staff face when they use oral history to inform exhibits. The risks can be summed up as follows:

- The credibility of oral history (both indigenous and non-indigenous) is open to challenge;
- Few people have sufficient knowledge of specific incidents in history to evaluate the credibility of oral history about those incidents; and,
- People who object to an interpretation of history can, if oral history has been used to inform that interpretation, denounce it by arguing that oral history lacks credibility.

Contested history

The issue of whether massacres of Indigenous people occurred during phases of frontier conflict is particularly contentious. Keith Windschuttle, for example, has accused the Museum of presenting false information about killings at Bells Falls Gorge (NSW) and the Forrest River (WA).³ David Andrew Roberts has offered a response to the Bells Falls Gorge

³ Windschuttle, ‘How Not to Run a Museum’, pp. 12–13. For examples of comments on the accusation, see Dawn Casey, ‘The New Museum’, a paper delivered as the Keynote Address by Dawn Casey, Director, National Museum of Australia, at the MAQ State Conference, 15-16 September 2001, Cairns, copy viewed at <http://www.maq.org.au/programs/conf01/proceedings/dawn.html>; and Richard Yallop, ‘Museum operation “no place for politics”’, *Weekend Australian*, 28–29 December 2002, p. 3, copy provided by Kevin Kenneally.

accusation elsewhere,⁴ and I would challenge Windschuttle's assertion that Rod Moran proved that allegations of killings by police and others at Forrest River were untrue. Moran's research led him to believe that the allegations were fabricated.⁵ Neville Green, whose doctoral research and book on Forrest River preceded Moran's research, believes that the allegations were true.⁶ I have not seen the Museum reference to Forrest River but I would hope that any mention of a massacre having occurred there acknowledges the controversy that continues to surround it.

Both Moran and Windschuttle reject Aboriginal accounts of massacres at Forrest River and other places in the East Kimberley. Both have made public pronouncements regarding their opinion of Aboriginal oral history. At the *Frontier Conflict* forum hosted by the Museum, a paper delivered by Windschuttle included the following remarks:

Because Aborigines in the colonial period were illiterate and kept no written records, we are urged today to accept the oral history of their descendants as an authentic account of what happened in the past. My view is that Aboriginal oral history, when uncorroborated by original documents, is completely unreliable, just like the oral history of white people. Let me illustrate this with an account of the infamous Mistake Creek Massacre in the Kimberley district.

There are at least four versions of Aboriginal oral history about this incident that have made their way into either print or television, and all of them are different. The former Governor-General, Sir William Deane, used his last days in office to apologise to the Kija people for this incident and for all those that Aborigines had suffered at the hands of white settlers.⁷

Anyone familiar with oral history is aware that, like written history, it does vary from one account to another. Windschuttle, however, has been particularly critical of Aboriginal oral history to which Sir William alluded at a remembering ceremony held at Mistake Creek in June 2001. It is therefore ironic that, in denouncing both Sir William and the oral history, he actually generated misconceptions about what happened there.⁸

It is obvious, if one reads the transcripts of what was said at Mistake Creek, that Windschuttle erred in accusing the former Governor-General

⁴ David Andrew Roberts, 'The Bells Falls massacre and oral tradition' in *Frontier Conflict: The Australian Experience*, ed. by Bain Atwood & S G Foster, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2003, pp. 150–7.

⁵ Rod Moran, *Massacre Myth: An Investigation into Allegations Concerning the Mass Murder of Aborigines at Forrest River, 1926*, Access Press, Bassendean (WA), 1999.

⁶ Neville Green, *The Marndoc Reserve Massacres of 1926*, Ph.D. thesis, UWA, 1989; and Neville Green, *The Forrest River Massacres*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1995.

⁷ Keith Windschuttle, 'Doctored evidence and invented incidents in Aboriginal historiography' in *Frontier Conflict*, p. 106.

⁸ See, for example, Keith Windschuttle, 'Wrong on Mistake Creek', *Australian Financial Review*, 18 June 2001, p. 54, "Opinion", copy provided by Lindsay Peet. See also Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One: Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 2002, pp. 2 and 7–8.

of making an apology and referring to 'white' settlers having participated in massacres there and elsewhere.⁹ It is also obvious, if one looks at relevant written sources, that Windschuttle, despite being told that he was making false claims and using sources selectively, stuck to his version of the events at Mistake Creek. As a result, both Sir William and a Gija elder have been accused repeatedly and unfairly of fabricating history.¹⁰ Details can be provided but one example should suffice in this submission.

The example relates to Windschuttle's efforts to prove his point 'that Aboriginal oral history, when uncorroborated by original documents, is completely unreliable'. With regard to Mistake Creek, he wrote:

The oral history on which Deane based his speech was nothing more than a statement the artist Charlene Carrington tagged to her 1999 painting of the site.

Carrington says her information came from "my granny, Winnie, who was a little girl when this happened".

The fact that Aborigines are now blaming whites for a massacre of Aborigines committed by Aborigines and that the Governor-General gives his imprimatur to the whole charade, is something that a journalist who did his job properly should have questioned, not accepted demurely.

O'Brien's research should have also made him question Peggy Patrick who appeared on his program claiming both her parents, two brothers and two sisters were massacred at the time. If her parents were killed in 1915, Patrick must now be at least 86 years old, yet on television she did not look a day over 50.¹¹

Had Windschuttle examined the police file on the massacre, he might not have portrayed the story of 'white' involvement as some recent invention. He would have known that it dated from the morning of the massacre and that it went on record after an Aboriginal employee told the Turkey Creek postmaster that the telegraph lineman Mick Rhatigan and his 'boys' had killed people at Mistake Creek.¹²

⁹ Address by Sir William Deane Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia on the occasion of the Ceremony of Reconciliation with the Kiji [sic] people, Mistake creek, Thursday, 7 June 2001, copy viewed at <http://www.gg.gov.au/speeches/textonly/speeches/2001/010607.html>; and Transcript, *7.30 Report*, 11/6/2001, 'A look at Sir William Deane's term as Governor-General', copy viewed at <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/s311226.htm>.

¹⁰ See, for example, Rod Moran, 'Mistaken Identity', *West Australian*, 17 November 2001, "big weekend" section, p. 3; Rod Moran, 'Mistaken Identity: The massacre of Aborigines at Mistake Creek', *Quadrant*, May 2002, pp. 14–17; Peter Walsh, 'Chutzpah has no limits', *Adelaide Review*, June 2002, p. 10, copy provided by Bernie O'Neil; and Piers Akerman, 'Reconciliation begins with truth', *Sunday Telegraph*, 1 December 2002, p. 111.

¹¹ Keith Windschuttle, 'O'Brien accused of advocating implausible history', *Australian Financial Review*, 21 June 2001, p. 58, "Letters", copy provided by Lindsay Peet.

¹² State Records Office of Western Australia (SROWA), AN 5/2, Police Department, Acc 430, 1854/1915, Aboriginal Native Tracker 'Nipper'. From C. of P.

Had Windschuttle acknowledged the role of phonetics in oral testimony, he might not have been so critical of Patrick. She used the words 'my mum's mother' but, because her first language is Gija, the 's' sound on the word mum was not obvious when she spoke with Kerry O'Brien. Linguist Frances Kofod, who has worked extensively with Gija speakers, advises that the English 's' sound does not occur in their language. As a result, it is sometimes silent in the words of senior Gija people.¹³

The Windschuttle letter quoted above was the third in a series generated by his denouncement of Sir William and the Mistake Creek oral history. In the next letter, O'Brien corrected two of Windschuttle's errors. He pointed out, firstly, that Patrick 'was referring to her grandparents (her mother's parents)', and secondly, that she gave her age as seventy-one.¹⁴ Unfortunately, no one told Windschuttle that he was wrong in assuming that Patrick had been talking about the 1915 massacre. Her brief comments had referred to a massacre that occurred before 1908. Her mother and her mother's sister escaped from that massacre. Patrick, as well as hearing about it from her mother, had also heard about it from one of two uncles who escaped with wounds.¹⁵

It was six months after O'Brien commented on the erroneous assumptions that Windschuttle's spoke at the Museum's *Frontier Conflict* forum. He again denounced Patrick and Sir William and, in acknowledging Patrick's correct age, he used it to reiterate his argument that her parents could not have been killed at Mistake Creek in 1915. Whether he had forgotten or was unwilling to concede that she had been speaking about her grandparents is unknown. He was certainly unwilling to acknowledge that the story of 'white' involvement in the massacre dated from the morning it occurred. On that score, describing the telegraph lineman as a Mistake Creek Station employee, he repeated his assertion that 'Aboriginal oral history later implicated the white overseer of the station' in the 1915 massacre.¹⁶

Windschuttle's assertions about Mistake Creek appear to be objections to what he thinks was said rather than what was said. In that regard, his assertions resemble the ones he makes about the Museum's treatment of the Bells Falls Gorge massacre story. In the latter instance, he asserts that a Museum 'caption says it was white settlers rather than soldiers who did the deed' but Graeme Davison points out that no such statement is made. There are, therefore, two things to be considered: one is the credibility of Windschuttle and the other is the credibility of oral history.¹⁷

¹³ Personal comment, Frances Kofod to Cathie Clement, 25 November 2002.

¹⁴ Kerry O'Brien, 'Wider injustices remembered in massacre debate', *Australian Financial Review*, 26 June 2001, p. 60, "Letters", copy provided by Lindsay Peet.

¹⁵ An account of the earlier Mistake Creek massacre, recorded by Peggy Patrick and Frances Kofod, appears in *blood on the spinifex*, guest curator Tony Oliver, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 2002, pp. 36 and 38. Copy provided by Frances Kofod, courtesy of the museum.

¹⁶ Windschuttle, 'Doctored evidence and invented incidents', pp. 106–7.

¹⁷ Windschuttle, 'How Not to Run a Museum', p. 12; and Graeme Davison, 'Conflict in the museum' in *Frontier Conflict*, pp. 209–10.

Assessing the credibility of oral history

When it comes to establishing whether individual pieces of oral history are corroborated by original documents, that task is far from simple. It can require a person who has well-developed skills in both historical research and critical analysis to undertake weeks, months, or sometimes a year or more of primary source research. In some instances, even a person with those skills will miss critical evidence if he/she is not familiar with both the people and the places mentioned in the oral history.

So where does that leave the museum professional who wishes to use oral history in an exhibit? The short answer has to be "in a most unenviable position". He/she is not likely to be able to dedicate weeks, let alone months, to primary source research. A judgement therefore has to be made regarding the credibility of the oral history and, in some instances, the credibility of secondary sources that mention either the oral history or the events to which it relates.

Given the risks associated with using oral history, it may be useful to look at the processes that can be involved in establishing whether original documents corroborate individual pieces of oral history. The work done by Roberts on the Bells Falls Gorge massacre story, and by Moran and Green on the Forrest River massacre story, has been mentioned already. The following example, being relevant to the Mistake Creek massacre story, supplements what has been said already.

Two Aboriginal accounts of the Mistake Creek massacre were published in 1989 after Bob Nyalcas, Paddy Rhatigan and Winnie Budbaria participated in the East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project (EKIAP). Both accounts mentioned Mick Rhatigan but neither dated the massacre.¹⁸ Those points are important because, before the EKIAP published any oral history that linked settlers to massacres, it was considered desirable to find out whether complementary or contradictory evidence existed in documentary sources. The author of this submission was commissioned to do the necessary research.

The most logical place to find documentary evidence for the Mistake Creek massacre was in the archival records of the Western Australian police. The State Records Office of Western Australia holds those records and has each consignment or accession listed in an Archival Note (AN). Any file relevant to a Kimberley massacre was likely to be listed in AN 5 among the thousands of files that comprise Accession 430.

With no date on which to base a search of the file titles in AN 5, the only logical way to approach a search was to identify the range of years in which the massacre might have occurred. Winnie Budbaria had mentioned that the police rode to the massacre site from the police station at Turkey Creek. The annual reports compiled by and for the Commissioner of Police show when police stations were established. It was therefore a comparatively simple matter to locate those records and

¹⁸ Helen Ross (editor) and Eileen Bray (translator), *Impact stories of the East Kimberley*, East Kimberley Working Paper No. 28, CRES, ANU, Canberra, 1989, pp. 73–5.

confirm that the first Turkey Creek police station was built in 1908.¹⁹ It followed that, if the oral reference related to the police station, and not to police camps that preceded its construction, the massacre had probably occurred during or after 1908.

A police journal showed that Rhatigan was in the Mistake Creek locality in June 1908²⁰ but other records showed that he could also have been there at any time from the early 1890s. Before being appointed as the telegraph lineman, he had been responsible for patrolling a section of the Wyndham to Halls Creek telegraph line as a police constable.²¹ After commencing as the lineman in 1897, he had remained in that position, attached to the Turkey Creek post office, until his death in 1920.²²

With the additional information indicating that the massacre could have occurred at any time from the 1890s to 1920, a date had to be selected as a starting point for checking the Accession 430 file titles in AN 5. The date of Rhatigan's death was as good as any so the search began by working backwards from 1920 and looking for file titles that identified either the massacre or anything else that might provide a lead. The first lead appeared in a 1915 file on a search for witnesses who had escaped from the police.²³ Further research then led to earlier 1915 files on the search for witnesses,²⁴ the escort to Wyndham of witnesses and a prisoner,²⁵ and the actual massacre.²⁶

It is of interest that none of the file titles mentioned the massacre, Mistake Creek or Mick Rhatigan. A straightforward search of the AN list, without the associated retrieval of all files that might have provided a lead, would therefore have failed to reveal the documentary evidence for the Mistake Creek massacre.

¹⁹ SROWA, AN 5/2, Police Department, Acc 430, 3832/1908, Derby – Kimberley District. Acting Sub Inspector McCarthy's report for the year ended 30.6.1908.

²⁰ SROWA, AN 5/2, Police Department, Acc 430, 4017/1908, Journal of Constable H A Baker (885) (Hall's Creek) whilst on escort duties to Turkey Creek 28.5.1908 to 20.6.1908.

²¹ See, for example, SROWA, AN 5/1, Acc 430, 998/1893, East Kimberley District. Denham Station. Rhatigan 7/2/1893 to 14/3/1893; and SROWA, AN 5/1, Acc 430, 1568/1893, East Kimberley District. Denham Station. Report of journal on patrol duty by M. Rhatigan from 1/5/1893 to 9/5/1893.

²² *Blue Book*, 1897 to 1901; and *Australian Public Service List*, 1906 to 1922.

²³ SROWA, AN 5/2, Acc 430, 6883/1915, Journal Const. Flinders 943, Turkey Creek, 4 August 1915 to 20 September 1915. Search for escaped native witnesses. From Broome.

²⁴ SROWA, AN 5/2, Acc 430, 3823/1915, Journal of Constable McMillan (988), Turkey Creek 18.4.15 to 23.4.15. Search for native witnesses Monday and Charlie. (File face sheet only); and SROWA, AN 5/2, Acc 430, 3631/1915, Journal Const. McMillan No. 988, 7 April 1915 to 14 May 1915. Search for native witnesses Munday & Charlie.

²⁵ SROWA, AN 5/2, Acc 430, 3629/1915, Journal Const. Cullen No. 1094, 1 May 1915 to 7 May 1915. Escorting Aboriginal native 'Carogbidy' alias Nipper to Wyndham. From Broome.

²⁶ SROWA, AN 5/2, Police Department, Acc 430, 1854/1915, Aboriginal Native Tracker 'Nipper'. From C. of P.

The file on the massacre contained plenty of detail and, among other things, it confirmed the oral history statement that Rhatigan had been arrested and bailed over the Mistake Creek killings.²⁷ The murder charge was later withdrawn but, for EKIAP purposes, the archival research had shown that the oral history was grounded in fact and warranted publication. A second EKIAP paper carried a summary of the archival evidence for readers who might be interested in additional information and/or context for the oral history.²⁸

The Mistake Creek oral history and the associated summary of archival evidence are only small components of the EKIAP papers. The two papers in which they appear also contain a lot of information about other aspects of East Kimberley history. Both have been cited in other accounts over the years and both are listed in a bibliography that records approximately 1300 Kimberley sources.²⁹ It is therefore surprising that people who denounce oral history from that region do so without even checking the readily available sources that relate to it. The example that follows elaborates on this point.

The Bedford Downs massacre

Bob Nyalcas, as well as joining Paddy Rhatigan in speaking about the Mistake Creek massacre for the EKIAP, also spoke about the Bedford Downs massacre. His story was published with another Bedford Downs story told by Dotty Whatebee. Their stories attributed the massacre to Paddy Quilty (from Bedford Downs) and settlers from adjacent stations. The settlers were Scotty Sadler, Scotty Salmond, Jack Carey, Jack Callaghan, Paddy 'Minduruw' and Smith (the cook). An editor's note mentioned that other accounts suggested that one of Paddy Quilty's workers, acting alone, was responsible for the killings, which probably took place in or about 1924.³⁰

A search for documentary evidence relevant to the Bedford Downs massacre stories concentrated on the period around 1924 with a view to ascertaining if and when the named settlers were in the East Kimberley. Land tenure records showed that Quilty family members (Thomas, Thomas John, Patrick James and Reginald Jeremiah) had acquired Bedford Downs leases in 1918.³¹ The Legislative Assembly electoral rolls for the Kimberley District listed Patrick James Quilty, pastoralist, Bedford

²⁷ *ibid.*; and Ross and Bray, *Impact stories of the East Kimberley*, p. 74.

²⁸ Cathie Clement, *Historical notes relevant to impact stories of the East Kimberley*, East Kimberley Working Paper No. 29, CRES, ANU, Canberra, 1989, pp. 16–18.

²⁹ Cathie Clement, *A Guide to Printed Sources for the History of the Kimberley Region of Western Australia*, Centre for Western Australian History, University of WA, Nedlands, 1996.

³⁰ Ross and Bray, *Impact stories of the East Kimberley*, pp. 56–62.

³¹ Department of Land Administration (DOLA), Lease Register, Clause 98 under Land Act 1898, pp. 121 (Lease 788/98), 122 (Lease 803/98), and 154 (Lease 1078/98); and SROWA, WAS 2256, DOLA, Cons 5870, Item 66, Lease Register, Clause 102, Vol. 1, p. 97 (Lease 933/102), and Item 67, Lease Register, Clause 102, Vol. 2, p. 29 (Leases 2074/102 to 2079/102).

Downs Station, via Wyndham, in 1920, 1923, 1925 and 1927, indicating that he was there in at least some of those years. Archival records provided a little more insight with a police constable having noted that J Wilson was in charge at Bedford Downs Station on 21 February 1924 when Mr Quilty was out on the run mustering.³² The constable did not mention John B Smith whose name had been added to the electoral roll, as the Bedford Downs Station cook, the previous week.³³ On another occasion, on 1 August 1924, Constable Archibald saw Jack Carey at Bedford Downs when Quilty was in Halls Creek.³⁴

The scope for obtaining information about people and events on a remote pastoral station is extremely limited. In the 1920s, the only people likely to record such information were the police constables who visited stations on occasional patrols. Nonetheless, it is possible to piece together an impression of who was in a locality at a given time. Constable Archibald, for example, noted seeing A B Sadler at Tableland Station on 3 August 1924 and James Salmond, who was from Karungie Station, on the 7th.³⁵ Ten days later he noted hearing that Bob Beattie was in a bad state after being attacked on Adavale Station by 'one of his stockboys Named Dickie'. Archibald then recorded, after he and two trackers rode to Adavale and captured Dickie, that Dickie had explained the attack by saying that 'Beattie and him been row alonga burn him bone'.³⁶ The meaning of 'burn him bone' is unknown, and it may or may not have a connection with the burning of bodies on Bedford Downs.

The above information would provide a good starting point if a thorough investigation of the Bedford Downs massacre was to be initiated. Such an investigation was not required in the EKIAP work but, for the record, the information gleaned from the documentary research was included in the historical notes published to complement the impact stories.³⁷ It was not suggested that a link existed between the documentary evidence and the allegations made in the stories. Nor was it pointed out a link might exist between the Adavale attack on Beattie and an oral history statement that an Aboriginal 'girl' had precipitated the Bedford Downs massacre by running away from Adavale and the *kartiya* (white man) to whom she was 'married'.

Further research is warranted but a thorough investigation of the massacre would involve months of work, both with the Aboriginal custodians of the oral history and in the archives. A lot of information is

³² SROWA, AN 5/3, Police Department, Acc 430, 1976/1927, Turkey Creek Journals, Vol. 4, pp. 95–6.

³³ *Western Australia, Legislative Assembly, Electoral Roll, Kimberley Electoral District, 16th February, 1924, Supplementary No. 1, p. 3.*

³⁴ SROWA, AN 5/3, Police Department, Acc 430, 1976/1927, Turkey Creek Journals, Vol. 4, pp. 115–16.

³⁵ SROWA, AN 5/3, Police Department, Acc 430, 1976/1927, Turkey Creek Journals, Vol. 4, pp. 115–16.

³⁶ SROWA, AN 5/3, Police Department, Acc 430, 1976/1927, Turkey Creek Journals, Vol. 4, pp. 119–22.

³⁷ Clement, *Historical notes relevant to impact stories*, pp. 3–4.

available but it is neither conclusive nor free of anomalies. The EKIAP stories contain the names of people who either witnessed the massacre, escaped from it or were at the station at the time it occurred. As is customary, however, the names of the dead are not mentioned. The EKIAP stories, and other stories recorded since, simply mention the relationship in which some of the dead stood to people who either survived the massacre or were born to survivors.

Of the other Bedford Downs massacre stories that are known to be available, one was told by Dottie Watby (spelt Dotty Whatebee above) to Sister Veronica Ryan.³⁸ Springvale Paddy Yunguntji, whose father Doctor features in the EKIAP stories, told his story to Elizabeth Tregenza.³⁹ Ben Duncan also spoke of the massacre, telling Stewart Morton that his mother had died after falling behind other family members during the subsequent exodus from the station.⁴⁰

All but one of the accounts mentioned above were in print in 1999 when Kamaliny Palmentarri (Timmy Timms) and his brother-in-law Nyunkuny (Paddy Bedford) did paintings about the massacre for the *blood on the spinifex* exhibition. At that time the artists spoke about a related but secret *Joonba* (corroboree) to Peggy Patrick, Frances Kofod and Tony Oliver and they decided not only to revive it but also to reveal it to the public. They presented the *Joonba* at the Telstra 2000 Art Award in Darwin and, after Timms died in December 2000, Peggy Patrick (his sister) became responsible for touring nationally with it. Presented by the Neminuwarlin Performance Group under the title *Marnem, Marnem Dililb Benuwarrenji (Fire, Fire, Burning Bright)*, it premiered at the Perth International Arts Festival in 2002 and then travelled to other venues.⁴¹

The resulting press attention prompted Rod Moran to look into the story. He was critical of both the massacre story on which the *Joonba* is based and the notes that were distributed when it was presented in Darwin. He was also critical of statements made by Paddy Bedford, Peggy Patrick and Dottie Watby. The last of those people came in for his harshest criticism. What she had passed on to Sister Ryan, Moran wrote, 'was nothing more than bush gossip they were told, now over eighty years old'.⁴²

³⁸ Veronica Ryan (ed.), *From digging sticks to writing sticks: Stories of Kija women*, Catholic Education Office, Perth, 2001, pp. 63 and 65–8.

³⁹ Charlie McAdam, as told to Elizabeth Tregenza, *Boundary Lines: A family's story of winning against the odds*, McPhee Gribble Publishers, Ringwood (Vic), 1995, pp. 47–50.

⁴⁰ Kimberley Language Resource Centre, *Moola Bulla: In the shadow of the mountain*, Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation, Broome, 1996, pp. 101–9.

⁴¹ *fire, fire, burning bright, Marnem, Marnem Dililb Benuwarrenji*, perth international arts festival 2002, booklet; Debra Jopson, 'A big boss is buried in the land he loved', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 February 2001, on line edition, copy viewed at <http://old.smh.com.au/news/0102/05/pageone/pageone6.html>; *West Australian*, 8 February 2002, "Today" section, p. 17; and *Age*, 6 October 2002, on line, copy viewed at <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/10/06/1033538844925.html>.

⁴² Rod Moran, 'Was there a massacre at Bedford Downs?', *Quadrant*, November 2002, pp. 48–51.

Moran's principal objection was that 'the yarn has not preserved the identity of either of the two alleged eyewitnesses to, or the "survivors" of, the supposed killings.' Without apparently having seen any of the other Bedford Downs massacre accounts mentioned above, he wrote:

Both Sister Veronica Ryan and the Neminuwarlin troupe claim to have a good idea about the identity of the station owners behind the alleged massacre at Bedford Downs. Ryan's motive in not naming them appears to be sensitivity to the feelings of their descendents [sic]. But why won't the Aborigines, who are making claims of foul mass murder of their relatives and countrymen, name them if they know who the killers were?⁴³

Had Moran read the other accounts mentioned above, he would have known that eyewitnesses, survivors and killers had all been named. Had he paid more attention to the book in which Dottie Watby's account appears, he might not have written:

A further indicator as to Dottie's reliability concerns another story she tells in *From Digging Sticks to Writing Sticks*. It centres on Violet Valley station. In the yarn she names two police officers, Bill Bunn and Martin Gleeson—but no one by those names has ever been a member of the West Australian police.⁴⁴

Dottie Watby did not tell the story that is supposed to be an indicator of her "reliability". It begins with the words 'My name is Ruby; I was born here at Violet Valley'.⁴⁵ The story is quite credible and the names of the policemen, spelt correctly, would be Bill Bunt and Martin Glasheen. They worked together at Turkey Creek police station,⁴⁶ which was near Violet Valley, and both Dottie and Ruby would have known them. Bill Bunt was particularly well known, having worked at the station from 1930 to 1944.⁴⁷

When one looks at the denouncement of the Bedford Downs and Mistake Creek massacre stories it is obvious that similarities exist. In both cases significant published material was ignored and mistakes were made in citing the small amount of published material that was examined. The relevance of phonetics was also ignored. Linguistic advice offered with regard to the name Bunt reveals that no word final consonant cluster '-nt' is possible in the Gija language. Traditional Gija people would leave off the 't' sound although younger people would be likely to pronounce the cluster. The name Glasheen would present a greater challenge because there are no initial consonant clusters or fricative sounds in the Gija language. The use of the name Gleeson was therefore a very close

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴⁵ Ryan (ed.), *From digging sticks to writing sticks*, p. 71.

⁴⁶ See, for example, SROWA, AN 5/3, Police Department, Acc 430, 4306/1935, Turkey Creek, Journals, Vol. 7, entries dated 19 February 1938, 15 March 1938, 10 June 1938, 19 June 1938 and 3 February 1939.

⁴⁷ Clement, *Historical notes relevant to impact stories*, p. 28.

approximation of the name Glasheen when spoken by a senior person who would not normally use the 'gl', 's' or 'sh' sounds.⁴⁸

The most worrying thing about the denouncement of the storytellers and the oral history connected with the Bedford Downs and Mistake Creek massacres is that few people would be aware that it is unwarranted. The articles, papers and books in which the criticism is published seem to be plausible and, in the absence of the documentary evidence that appears elsewhere, those articles, papers and books malign both the oral history and the storytellers.

I am not in a position to assess the validity of other denouncements of oral history and I would not presume to offer an opinion on any history topic for which I have not undertaken primary source research. I would suggest, however, that the instances discussed above show that anyone responsible for assessing the credibility of denouncements of oral history must be very cautious.

I would also suggest that consideration could be given to whether events like the Bedford Downs Massacre warrant action under Section 6(1)(c) of the Act. That section, for the information of any reader not familiar with the Act, allows the Museum 'to conduct, arrange for or assist in research into matters pertaining to Australian history'. Whether Indigenous people would welcome such research is another matter. The scorn directed at the Gija people is hardly conducive to Indigenous people continuing to share their oral history with outsiders.

Extensive research into episodes of frontier conflict would enhance the scope that Museum staff have for deciding how those episodes should be interpreted. It might also offset or pre-empt some of the criticism that is directed at the Museum with regard to some of its captions.

The wording of captions

One of Keith Windschuttle's criticisms of the Museum involves a 'fictitious account of frontier relations' in which visitors are told about cattle killing by Kimberley Aborigines in the 1890s.⁴⁹ He objects to a caption that apparently states that 'Men who were caught were imprisoned, transported to Rottnest Island in the south or executed'. Davison has suggested that the label be amended⁵⁰ and, whilst endorsing that view, I would also offer some further comments.

Windschuttle claims that the Museum 'has defamed the Western Australian judicial system, without bothering to do proper research.' His grounds for that claim are:

- that cattle killing was not a capital crime in Western Australia;
- that no Aborigine was executed for such a minor offence; and,

⁴⁸ Personal comment, Frances Kofod to Cathie Clement, 25 November 2002.

⁴⁹ Windschuttle, 'How Not to Run a Museum', p. 12.

⁵⁰ Davison, 'Conflict in the museum' in *Frontier Conflict*, p. 209.

- that the vast majority of prisoners sent to Rottnest 'were guilty not of cattle spearing but of serious felonies, often against other Aborigines'.

With regard to the last dot point, analysis of the crimes for which Kimberley prisoners went to Rottnest shows that those crimes were predominantly against property and frequently involved the killing of cattle. Cattle killing was considered serious enough to incur two-year and three-year gaol sentences, with or without the lash.⁵¹

With regard to the other dot points, it is true that Aboriginal people were not, in the legal sense of the word, executed for killing cattle. Whether those who were shot after being found with meat from cattle can be said to have been executed is a matter of interpretation. The following excerpt from a police journal provides insight into such an occurrence.

. . . found tracks of natives where they had been chasing cattle apparently for the purpose of killing them. These tracks I followed and found where they had Killed a beast. I continued on their tracks and found where they had been Camped and had eaten a beast. ÷ this Camp they had left some days ÷ On July 26th 95 I continued on their tracks up the bed of the Margaret River. When close to the Leopold Range I discovered and surprised their camp numbering in all about 30, 20 of whom were males. As I deemed the camp to be a large one before going on to it I instructed the party, that if the Natives showed such resistance as would endanger their lives they were to use their firearms and try and prevent any escaping – upon the natives sighting the police party they endeavoured to escape on to the adjacent Hills but being cut off by the party they stood and stubbornly resisted making use of their spears, Dowirks and quondis to such an extent that we were compelled to fire upon them with the result that the following natives were shot viz. [?Murjarri], Widali, Wonboni Coolya Mulabia Munger Calapi Mulyalli and Culcul. the remainder of the male natives making their escape. The Nat Assistants being unable to stop them on account of the roughness of the River, and at this point, in this Camp the Natives had between 12 & 13 Cwt of beef from two beasts which had been killed one on the 24.7.95 and one on the 25.7.95 the day before we surprised them.⁵²

Many Aboriginal people were killed in connection with raids on cattle but, if the Museum caption used the word 'executed' to cover such killings, a

⁵¹ For prisoners sentenced for crimes involving Kimberley cattle, see Neville Green and Susan Moon, *Far From Home: Aboriginal Prisoners of Rottnest Island 1838–1931: Dictionary of Western Australians*, vol. X, UWA Press, Nedlands, 1997. Relevant references occur on pages 104 (Ballacardy), 109 (Beelwaring), 110 (Beingarra), 126 (Bungalack Peter and Bungaromer), 130 (Caliadirra Ned), 135 (Carolam Mickey and Caroong), 141 (Colinary and Cololny), 146 (Cooraume), 155–6 (Dangalagah), 160 (Dong), 161 (Doolaja Dicky), 179 (Ginminger), 180 (Gntajoy), 188–9 (Ipples Fred), 192 (Jaloinja), 193 (Jannie), 194 (Jardarrie), 201 (Jonari Charlie), 211 (Limbing, Lingallie Harry and Lingerrri), 239 (Muluminarra), 241 (Munborji), 249 (Nardarork), 261 (Nullakie), 262 (Numburrini), 265 (Ongman and Oomunga), 270 (Pingonah), 282 (Thingee), 283 (Tillbill), 285 (Tombandy), 290 (Uddormugga), 297 (Wannigoo), 298 (Warguey), 310 (Winidowing) and 318 (Wunkling).

⁵² SROWA, AN 5/1, Police Department, Acc 430, 1808/1895, Derby. Wholesale cattle killing by natives on the Margaret River.

better word could be found. Words such as 'shot' or 'killed' may not be as dramatic as 'executed' but nor are they as likely to bring public ridicule. The difficulty, of course, is to find words that are acceptable to both those who believe that Australia's Indigenous inhabitants were slaughtered by invaders and those who believe that colonisation was comparatively benign. It is also difficult, in the space available on labels, to make any valid comment on the range of practices implemented by the police and settlers who dealt with stock killers.

Conclusion

It is unfortunate that controversy has attached itself to an exhibit in the "First Australians" gallery because, as Minister Ellicott stated, visitors to the Museum should have an 'opportunity of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of life in Australia'. Massacres were part of that life and should not be sanitised or hidden because some people object to the provision of information about such events. It is crucial for the violent aspects of the past to be portrayed as part of frontier life, rather than representative of it, and, from what has been written elsewhere, the Museum seems to be doing the right thing in that regard.⁵³

The controversy discussed in this submission seems to be attached only to the "Contested Frontiers" exhibit in the "First Australians" gallery. Much of it seems to have been prompted, like the parallel controversy associated with other matters related to frontier violence, by people's objections to what they think they have seen or heard rather than what has been written or said. The small component of controversy prompted by an injudicious word on a label or an imbalance in emphasis can and should be investigated and remedied. Action should also be taken to ensure that visitors are made aware of contested aspects of history and, if possible, the contribution that oral history makes to our understanding of the past.

With regard to oral history, it might be worth considering whether an exhibit or program devoted to Indigenous oral history might educate the public and tackle criticism voiced by people who place little or no value on that medium. Such an initiative could be used to show how differently Indigenous and non-Indigenous people perceived their involvement not only in frontier conflict but also in such day to day encounters as working for rations or wages. An exhibit or perhaps a video could combine oral history with photographs and excerpts from original documents to demonstrate why different perceptions result from mutual participation. It could also touch on differences in cultural attitudes, eg why the names of the dead are not mentioned in oral history and how that approach can influence non-Indigenous people's perceptions about the credibility of oral history.

⁵³ Davison, 'Conflict in the museum' in *Frontier Conflict*, pp. 204–6 and 208–13.