

Time

to tell

The Truth

Remembering the Coniston Massacre

1928 - 2018



“ At Pilykirrparla, the white man came upon Yinirrpi’s father (Japaljarri). He had one boomerang with him. They shot him, they shot him, they shot him. He was singing a spell on them and with that he was waving one boomerang. They were shooting until they ran out of bullets but none of the bullets could hit him.”

(Jakamarra Ross interviewed by Teresa Ross Napurrula.)

The story of the Coniston killings is well known to many Central Australian Aboriginal people. It has been told and re-told to generations of Aboriginal children by their parents and grandparents but most Australians are still unaware that such a brutal event happened in our recent past.

For many years Aboriginal people in the region had asked the Central Land Council for a memorial to those who were killed. In 2003, the CLC marked the 75th anniversary of the Coniston killings with a ceremony and the unveiling of a plaque at Yurrkuru (Brooks Soak) on Mount Denison Station. Five years later, it commemorated the 80th anniversary by erecting a memorial at Baxters Well (Athimpelengkwe) on Stirling Station.

What is now known as the Coniston Massacre was in fact a series of raids following two key events. The first began after the murder of Frederick Brooks on 7 August 1928 at Yurrkuru (Brooks Soak). Brooks, a friend of Randall Stafford who ran Coniston, had set out with camels from Coniston in the hope of trapping a few dingos to get him over hard times. He set up camp at the soakage and was, by some accounts, well liked by the local Aboriginal people.



The memorial put at Brooks Soak by Frederick Brooks' mate Randall Stafford.

The old Coniston homestead owned by Randall Stafford. Fred Brooks set out from here to go to Brooks Soak to trap dingos.

There are many stories told about Bullfrog (Japanangka), the man who killed Brooks - some say he had one wife staying with Brooks, some say he had two. Most agree that Bullfrog was angry about his wife staying with Brooks and that perhaps Brooks didn't pay him enough in rations. Early one morning Bullfrog crept down and killed Brooks. Again accounts differ, with some people saying Bullfrog and another man killed Brooks.

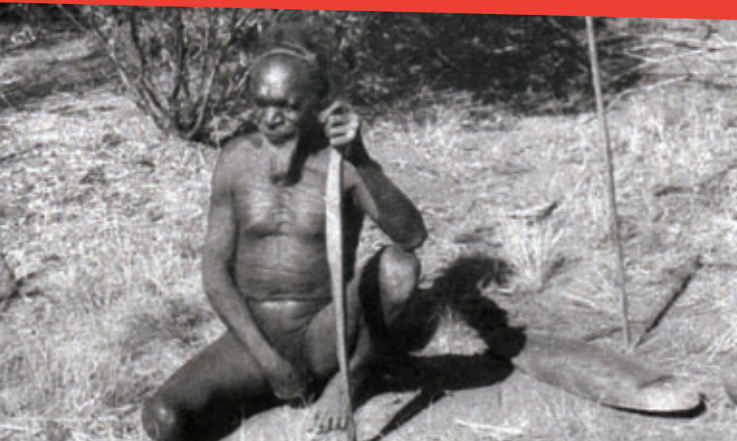
People still visit the cave where Bullfrog hid from the revenge party with his little dog. Bullfrog blocked the entrance of the cave with a stone or spinifex to hide himself from Murray's party. He managed to escape and lived to an old age at Yuendumu.

Many innocent Aboriginal people were caught up in the violence that followed.

A reprisal party led by Constable George Murray, who was already on his way to investigate cattle killings at Pine Hill and Coniston, set out from Coniston Station on the 16 August and killed five people that day. By the time they returned to Coniston Station on the 30 August at least 17 people were dead.

Meanwhile, at Boomerang Waterhole, up on the Lander River, settler Nugget Morton was attacked by a group of Aboriginal men. He was a very strong man and fought them off and killed one man. He then went for help and eventually sent off a letter from Ti Tree to the police at Alice Springs. Constable Murray arrived in late September, got a party together and the killings continued around the Lander and Hanson Rivers until mid-October.

Bullfrog (Japanangka)



Jeannie Herbert Nungarrayi and Teresa Ross Napurrula at the cave where Bullfrog hid with his little dog.



A Board of Enquiry, which began in late 1928, found that 31 Aboriginal people had been killed by Constable George Murray and others following the murder of Brooks and the attack on Nugget Morton. However, it seems likely that there were many more. TGH Strehlow, FW Albrecht, MC Hartwig and even Randall Stafford estimate the death toll was likely to be have been at least double that.

Between August and October 1928 there was a minimum of six sites where killings were officially recognised by the Board to have taken place. Aboriginal people of the region mention other places where they say killings took place, but these weren't mentioned in the Board of Enquiry.

“ At Yurrkuru my grandfather killed a whitefella. He hit the whitefella because the whitefella stole his wife. That old lady was my grandmother, a Napurrula. She was frightened when that whitefella took her - that's why the old man hit him. After that the old man ran up to the hills to hide. My grandfather was living in the hills, in a cave. That's what saved his life while the police were out looking for him. He stayed in the hills. They didn't find him because he was sitting in the cave.”

(Rosie Nungarrayi speaking with Petronella Vaarzon Morel, Warlpiri Womens Voices, IAD Press 1995, p36)

KILLING OF ABORIGINES JUSTIFIED

Board of Enquiry Exonerates Police, who
"Acted In Self Defence"

NATIVES NOT PROVOKED

CANBERRA, January 30.—The report of the Board of Enquiry concerning the shooting of aborigines in Central Australia, says that in each case the shooting was justified as an act of self-defence, and that there was no provocation

In co-
there w
of black
contrary
native f

R

CANB
ter for
a confer
tralian
committ
sionarie
recomm
of Abor
whose
wealth
life in



*Willowra ladies looking at the soakage
at Patilirri where people were massacred
during ceremony.*

Headlines : The Observer, Adelaide, February 2, 1929

The Board of Enquiry also found that Murray and his party had acted in self-defence. The Board and its findings were widely criticised for having no Aboriginal witnesses except the tracker Paddy, no counsel for Aboriginal people, and that the evidence was not made public.

The loss of so many people has long been a cause of deep sadness to Aboriginal people in the region. The lack of acknowledgment by the non-Aboriginal community of what occurred during those fateful months of 1928 increased the despair felt by people about this black moment in our history. The 90th Anniversary of the event is a chance for Australians to acknowledge the truth about our shared past and a chance for the communities affected by the killings to find peace.



*Johnny Nelson Jupurrurla and William Brown
Jampijinpa at Baxters Well where Aboriginal people
were shot and then burnt near this tree.*

Liirlpari (Whitestone Well)

As time has passed most of the Aboriginal people who were present have passed away, although there are still some elderly survivors. However, there are still many accounts told by people in land claim evidence in the 1980s and in other publications such as *Every Hill Got A Story, Warlpiri Dreamings and Histories, Warlpiri Women's Voices, Kayteye Country* and *Long Time Olden Time*.

The story still remains vivid and painful to the descendants.

Many people still talk about their uncles, fathers and grandfathers who were gunned down during ceremony or hunting. The effect of the Coniston killings is felt widely in Central Australia, scattering people far to the northwest and northeast. Some never returned to their country.



“She came with a fire, Napaljarri came with a fire. She was painting herself white in sorrow and putting white ashes all over her body. She was crying. I asked her, “Why are you crying?” Well she struck me again and then she said in handsign, I have no son. All the grandfathers (Jupurrurlas) didn’t know what was going on. They didn’t know.”

(Jakamarra Ross, Central Land Council, May 2003. Mr Ross was a teenage boy at the time of the killings and was camped at Watyawarnu country, near Pirdi-Pirdi, not far from Mount Davidson.)

Murray’s prisoners Akirkra and Padygar were taken to Darwin in October 1928 charged with the murder of Fred Brooks but both were discharged, not guilty.



*Painting courtesy of National Museum Australia.
This painting was done by M. Joseph between 1974 and 1977
when she was a student at Yirara College in Central Australia.*



Red dots are places which have been officially recognised as places where massacres occurred. Blue dots are places where Aboriginal people have talked about other killings occurring during the Coniston Massacre. This map is approximate only and there may be other places.

We will remember them always.

Nganimparlu kapurnalu-jana manngu-nyanyirni taarnngangu-juku.

Nwern inenhenh kweteth iterl-arerlanetyenh.

Aynanthe atewanthepe etelarerrantye intemaperte.



© Central Land Council 2018