A Hair Rope for a Silver Watch-Guard—Colonial Encounters on the Richmond in the 1840s

This essay answers the question: what do the colonial encounters brought to light by the Barker brothers' letters of 1844-6 contribute to our understanding of colonial encounters more generally?

Imagine a drama unfolding almost two centuries ago in a fertile and forested river valley marked off by rugged mountains to the north and west. Two groups of people met on this land. They did not know each other or speak each other's language. They both wanted the land for purposes that were beyond each other's comprehension and which became increasingly incompatible. One group had been there since time out of mind, the other group was new, was arriving in great numbers and had better weapons. This essay is an attempt to understand one tiny part of the encounters between these people. It is a snippet from the DNA of our current predicament.

Setting the stage

Let me set the stage for this encounter with three maps.[1]

A very long time ago, the ancestors of the Galibal, came to live in a rich river valley on the east coast of the continent now known as Australia. Figure 1 below shows the upper reaches of this river valley with places of significance for the Galibal.

1. Setting the stage with maps has a certain fragility. It is fragile because maps are a way of knowing place, space and land that belongs to the Europeans. Felix Driver, "In Search of the Imperial Map: Walter Crane and the Image of Empire," *History Workshop Journal* 69 (2010). Figure 1 was created by a European who collected information from the Galibal a long time after our story is set and it is likely the Galibal only told him some things. So this stage built of maps is a little wobbly, temporary even, but that is appropriate to the transitory nature of the performance.

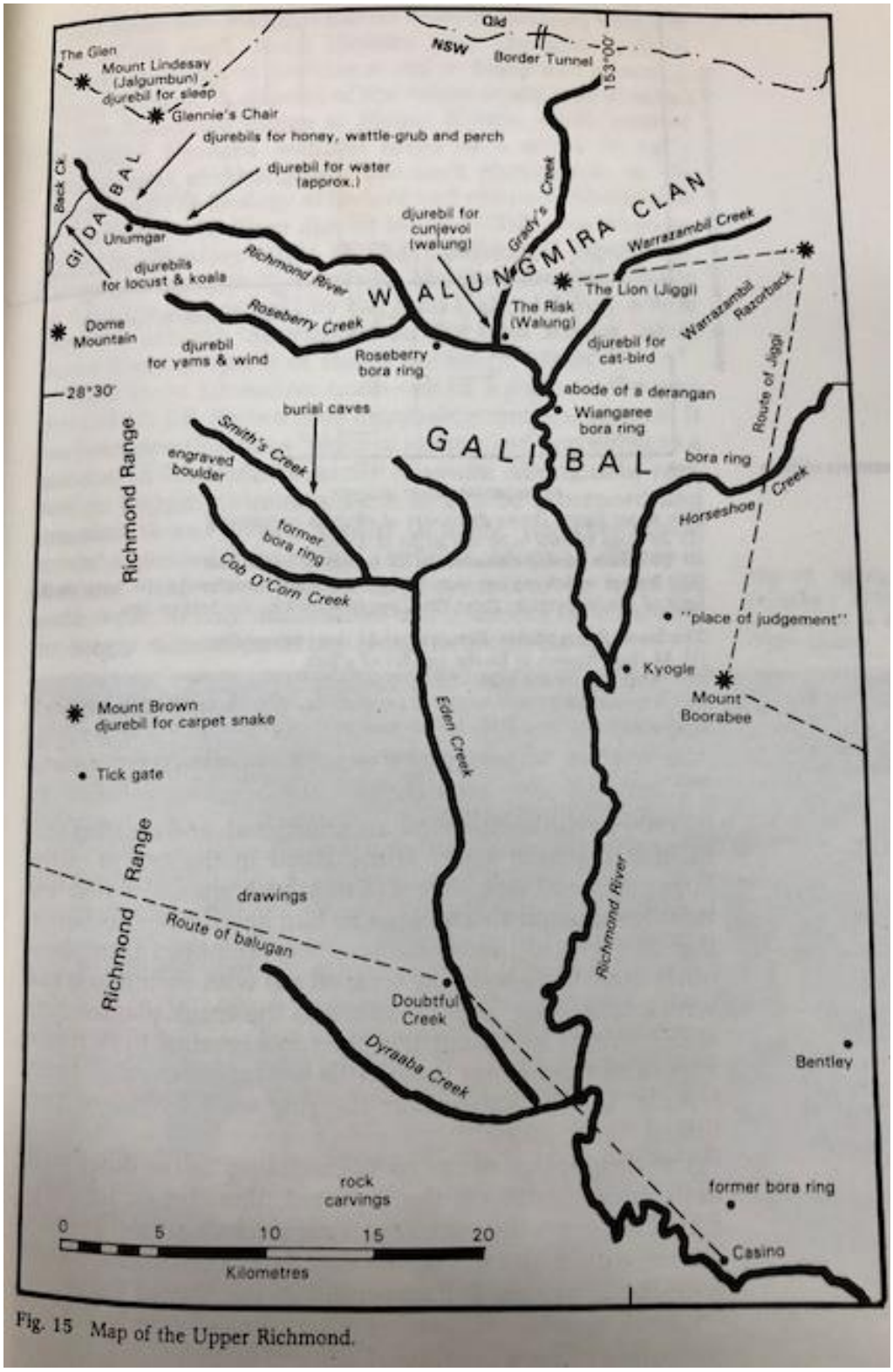

Fig. 15 Map of the Upper Richmond.

Figure 1: Map of the Upper Richmond Valley with the main water courses and places of significance for the Galibal people marked. Source: J.G. Steele, 1983 *Aboriginal pathways in Southeast Queensland and the Richmond River*.[2]

2 Steele, J.G., *Aboriginal Pathways in Southeast Queensland and the Richmond River* (St Luci: University of Queensland Press, 1983).

The Galibal were part of a larger language group called the Bundjalung who were part of a civilisation of First Nations people which traversed the whole continent. Figure 2 shows the Bundjalung land in context.[3]

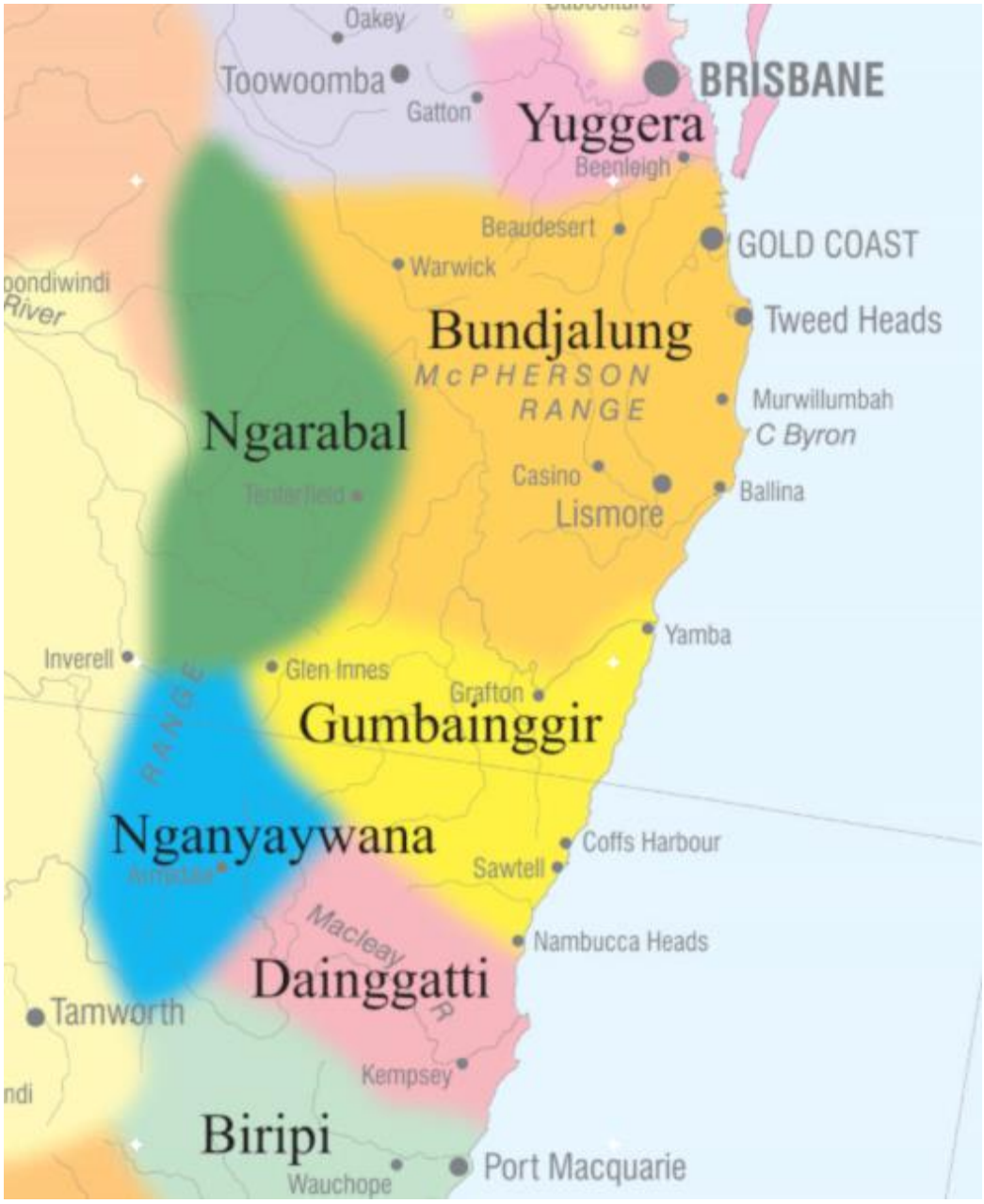

Figure 2. Detail from David Horton, the AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia. 1996. Source: *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Studies: aiatsis.gov.au*.

Between 1840 and 1855, the lands of the Bundjalung were invaded by Europeans who came to farm cattle and sheep. Within fifteen years, the land carried new names, many more

3. A point of orientation for the two maps is the town of Casino. It is on the bottom right of Figure 1 and close to the middle of Figure 2.

people, and the animals and plants they brought with them.[4] Figure 3 below illustrates this invasion. The invaders did not displace everything that was there before. Imagine the new map sitting uncomfortable on top of the old. These new people were a small part of the British colonisation of Australia which in turn was part of 'the white deluge' of Europeans invading the lands of indigenous peoples between 1840 and 1890 across Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the Unites States and South Africa.[5] This story is about just four of these settlers/invaders and the Galibal they encountered on this land.[6]

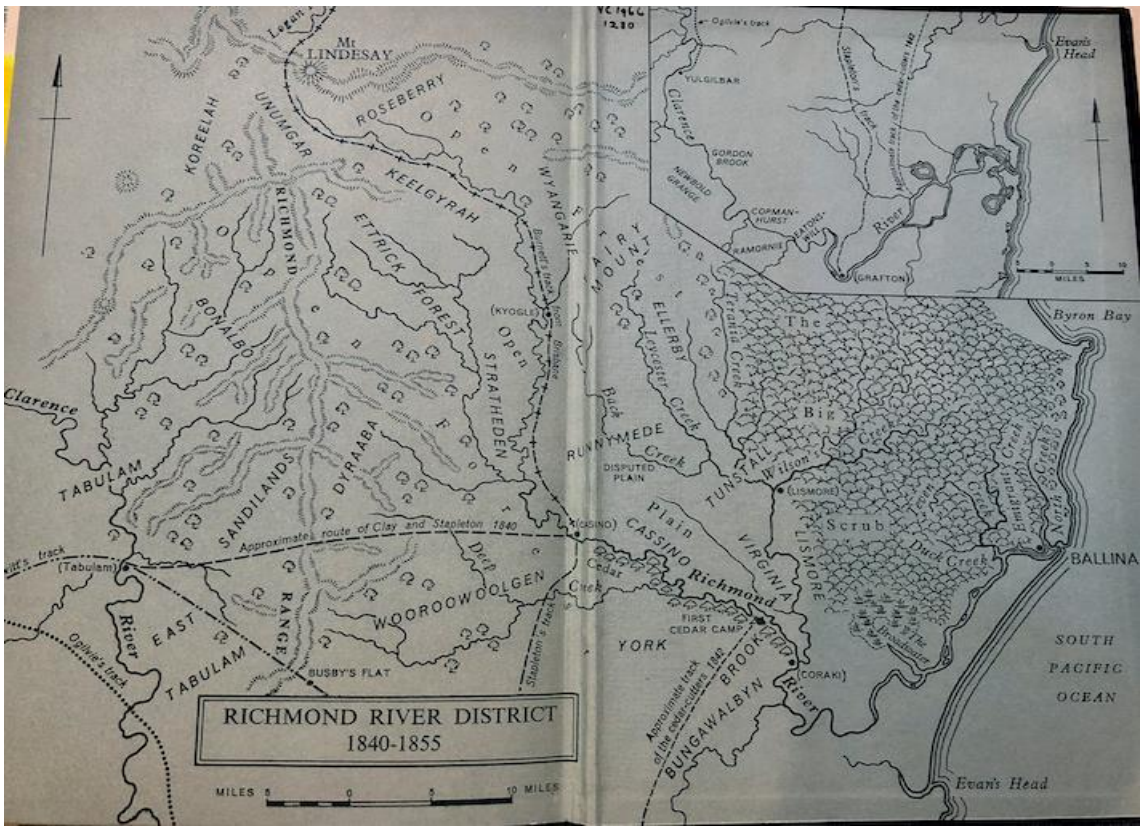

Figure 3. Richmond River District 1840 - 1855. Source: Daley, *Men and a River*, endpapers.[7] The place names in large upper case refer to the stations from the period. Ettrick Forrest station is in the upper left quadrant.[8]

4. The European invasion of the Richmond Valley commenced in 1841 when the first squatters claimed a run at Casino and cedar-cutters entered the lower reaches of the river in 1842. Louise Tiffany Daley, *Men and a River: Richmond River District 1828-1895* (London and New York: Melbourne University Press, 1966). Chapter3 and 4. 'By 1845 the squatters had taken up all the good grazing land on the Richmond. Their twenty-one stations extended to the mountains in the north and the west and included the flat eucalyptus forest country stretching to the Clarence River in the south.' ibid. 43
5. C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons*, The Blackwell History of the World (Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2004). 439
6 I use the double-barrel 'settlers/invaders' to capture the dual nature of the Europeans in a colonial encounter. 'Settler' captures how they saw themselves, 'invader' captures the Aboriginal perspective on the newcomers.
7. Daley, *Men and a River: Richmond River District 1828-1895*.
8. Casino is found slightly below and to the right of the middle of the map.

In 1843, two Scottish brothers by the name of Barker established a squatting run on the Richmond River which they called Ettrick Forest.[9] One was called John, the other is only known by his first initial, A. In 1844, their two younger brothers Robert and Bryce followed them. Robert, John and Bryce Barker wrote sixteen letters to relatives in Scotland which were published in 'a United Kingdom journal'. These were collected and brought back to Australia and given to the *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser* which published the letters between September and October 1931. There were sixteen letters published in the United Kingdom but only fourteen survived for republication in Australia.[10]

Prologue

The words 'colonial encounter' are not ones that the Barkers or the Galibal would have used. The words are fraught with connotations that are worth identifying lest we rob the actors in this drama of their present by unwittingly imposing our prejudices onto their actions.[11] Let me do this by juxtaposing three possible images for the 'colonial encounter'. The first is of "Columbus Coming Ashore"[12] which portrays Christopher Columbus stepping ashore in the 'New World'. It is a representation of religious, political and military power over the Indigenous people. The second is the cover of Chelsea Watego's *Another Day in the Colony* which features the painting 'Broken Dreams' by Michael Cook. This image

9. 'Ettrick Forest was taken up in 1842 by Messrs Thomson, Wilkin and [John] Barker per Thomson and Barker, 30,000 acres estimated grazing capability for 2,000 cattle. The Barker family built a homestead at Eden Creek and purchased freehold land as money became available.' William J. Olley, *Squatters on the Richmond: Runs, Owners and Boundaries from Settlement to Dissolution 1840-1900* (Self published, 1995). 82 The station is likely to have been named after Ettrick Forest in the Scottish Borders area in Scotland, perhaps the origin of the Barker brothers.
10. I refer to the letters by their place in the published sequence: 'the first letter', 'the second letter' etc. Robert wrote eight of the letters, John four, and Bryce two. I have not been able to establish the provenance of the letters for this research project. There are unanswered questions about who published them in the United Kingdom and why, who collected them and why, and who brought them back to their point of origin and why.
11. This is a methodologically difficult exercise. I have chosen to present this essay as a drama in five acts as a way of inviting the reader to suspend disbelief and allow the Barkers and the Galibal to be seen afresh without the burden of thinking we know what should come next. I am mindful of Greg Denning's aphorism, as reported by Tom Griffiths, that historians should endeavour to 'give back to the past its present.' Tom Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel* (Carlton, Victoria.: Black Inc, 2016). 120. Clendinnen reminds us of Milan Kundera's observation 'that we humans proceed in a fog. By coming to see the fogs through which people in other times battled in the direction they hoped was forward, we may be better able to recognise and penetrate our own.' Inga Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2003). 286 I use the term 'prejudice' in this sentence not in its usual pejorative sense but, following Gadamer, in the sense that 'our prejudices are themselves what open us up to what is to be understood.' Jeff Malpas, "Hans-Georg Gadamer," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (2022).
12. https://www.loc.gov/item/2013650754/

represents resistance to colonial power and reclaiming Indigenous tradition. It is of a young Aboriginal woman shedding her European clothes so that she can 'return to her roots and find freedom—the connection back to her land.'[13] The book and the artwork might be characterised as belonging to a moment of 'Indigenous resurgence'.[14] The third image is from the cover of Inga Clendinnen's *Dancing with Strangers*.[15] The title and image come from an event occurring in January 1788 where British and Aboriginal men danced with each other. It represents a creative human response to something shared between people who otherwise have nothing in common.

These three images provide a kind of three cornered dialectic of the power dynamics of colonial encounters: the assertion of power by a colonising power and its consequences in terms of dispossession, violence and continuing marginalisation of the colonised; the resistance and subversion of that power by the colonised using the tools of the coloniser as well as those of traditional culture; and creative encounter through dance where a sense of shared humanity overcomes what otherwise seems like cultural incommensurability.[16] The currency at work in all three is power and how it is asserted, denied or shared. These preoccupations form the prejudices I bring to this interpretation.[17]

---

13. Chelsea Watego, *Another Day in the Colony* (University of Queenslad Press, 2021). Australian First Nations artwork which challenges colonisation in the present is evident in the National Gallery of Australia's *3rd National Indigenous Art Triennial: Defying Empire*. The exhibition opened the same day that the 'Uluru Statement from the Heart' was presented to the Australian Government by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders. The reassertion of Aboriginal sovereignty is powerfully present in both the statement and the exhibition. Sarah Scott, "Defying Empire: 3rd National Indigenous Triennial," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 17, no. 2 (2017).
14. Michael Elliott, "Indigenous Resurgence: The Drive for Renewed Engagement and Reciprocity in the Turn Away from the State," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2018).
15. Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*.
16 By proposing a dialectical relationship, I am suggesting that an adequate account of the dynamics of colonial encounters needs to capture change over time as well as the recurrence of particular types of moments—moments of aggression, resistance and accommodation keep recurring with none of them being a permanent or fixed state of affairs. It is beyond the scope of this essay to review the relevant literature thoroughly but two works can be mentioned. Peter Read argues that there was a cyclical form to the relationship between Europeans (missionaries and government officials) and the Wiradjuri in New South Wales. He argues that the Europeans went through 'a thirty-year oscillation between enthusiasm and disillusionment' in their attempts to 'turn the blacks into whites.' Peter Read, *A Hundred Years War: The Wiradjuri People and the State* (Australian National University Press, 1988). xiii-xiv. In her Epilogue to *People of the River,* Grace Karskens describes a different kind of instability in colonial encounters. She tells of Aboriginal cultural resurgence in places near Dyarubbin/Hawkesbury that are being given back their Aboriginal names. She describes an 'obsolete' 'memorial to the Aborigines of the Hawkesbury' erected by the Australian Historical Society in 1952 to mark the passing of Governor Phillip's exploratory party in 1791 and, by implication, the start of the end of Aboriginal history in the place. Beside the obelisk is an ancient fig clinging tenaciously to a large rock, symbolizing the continuity of Aboriginal people and culture. Grace Karskens, *People of the River: Lost Worlds of Early Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2020). 521-525
17 My understanding of colonial encounters is informed by Mota-Lopes's analysis of shifts over time in the historiography of colonial encounters. He argues that there was a pre-1970s view of colonial encounters being the 'single, active initiative' of Europeans being received by 'passive natives' ready

Act I — Coming Ashore

On Monday 28 October 1844, Robert and Bryce Barker 'set foot on the shores of the promised land'[18] at Port Phillip.[19] Bryce was seventeen years old and Robert, judging by the content of the letters, was a little older.[20] While laying over in Melbourne for a week, the Barker brothers stayed at a hotel run by a Scot and made journeys by horseback into the bush. Robert Barker's first letter home gives detailed information on the beauty of the scenery and the fat cattle as well as the state of the cattle and sheep markets.[21] Robert did not mention their first meeting with Aboriginal people.

This encounter was described by Andrew Murray, another passenger on the *Clarendon*, who described it occurring in the company of the Barker brothers. Murray wrote of how he and the Barkers

> wandered over the country for a few hours and met several natives. They are frightful-looking creatures, a dark copper colour. The women have their eyes painted, and nothing but a skin (generally kangaroo or opossum) wrapped around their bodies. They are noted beggars. The men are stately and better dressed than the women. We spoke to one native who had a spear with him, made of wood, pointed with sharp bone. He asked us for some pence. We gave him sixpence, and asked him what he was to do with it. He said, "Bread." Then he showed us how he threw his spear at a tree about 20 yards distant, and he cleverly hit the mark, and said that it was for killing the opossum and kangaroo.'[22]

Even though this encounter was the first for Murray and the Barkers, it seems that their encounter was guided by tacitly accepted roles for the settlers/invaders and the Aborigines.[23] For Murray, he was responding to 'begging', and for the Aboriginal man, there was an expectation that his request for 'pence' would be met. Perhaps the spear-throwing was part of an accepted exchange, a performance. Perhaps it was also a show of strength and skill that

---

to be exploited and converted. More recently, he argues that the colonial encounter has been seen as 'the long-term process of mutual knowledge and influence between European and other peoples contacted by them in the global expansion of an evolving world-economy.' This shift includes a rejection of Eurocentric conception of colonialism being 'mere submission' and 'destruction'. José da Mota-Lopes, "The Colonial Encounter and Its Legacy," in *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, ed. Robert A Denemark and Renée Marlin-Bennett (Online: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017).

18. Robert Barker, "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond. Experiences of 90 Years Ago. (Letters 1 & 2)," *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*, no. 26 September (1931).
19. They had spent twenty weeks at sea aboard the *Clarendon* which had sailed from Leith in Edinburgh. Alexander Romanov-Hughes, "Port Phillip District," Self-published, https://www.portphillipdistrict.info/.
20. I have estimated Bryce's age from a death notice that appeared in 1862 which contains enough information for me to be reasonably confident it is for this Bryce Barker and that he died at Manly at 35 years of age. Anonymous, "Births, Marriages, Deaths," *Sydney Mail*, no. Saturday 8 February (1862).
21. Barker, "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond. Experiences of 90 Years Ago. (Letters 1 & 2)."
22. Andrew Murray, "A Voyage with a Pioneer - with the "Clarendon" in 1844 - a Hitherto Unpublished Diary," *Age*, no. Saturday 20 November 1937 (1844 (1937)).
23. settler/invader terminology

could be deployed against the settlers/invaders. Murray's perception of the encounter as 'begging' places the Aborigines in an inferior and desperate position in relation to his position of power. His opening description as 'frightful-looking creatures' indicates that he does not see the natives as equal or fellow humans. Murray's ability to slip comfortably into the role as the superior white man also suggests that he was prepared to adopt this superior disposition well before he set foot in Australia or met an Aboriginal person.

This small encounter speaks to an uneasy accommodation between the settlers/invaders and the Aborigines. For the settlers/invaders, the Aborigines were 'noted beggars' which suggests that they were a topic of discussion and distasteful to the Europeans' sensibilities. However, they were not being driven away, at least not in this encounter. The giving of alms serves to reinforce the feelings of superiority and power for the giver and may also have been a salve for a conscience suffering a twinge of guilt over the plight of the Aborigines.[24]

For the Aborigines part, they are in a liminal space. Some of their food came in the form of settlers/invaders food and was obtained by asking for 'pence', but they still carried spears. While the Aboriginal man's spear was aimed at a tree, the other possible uses for the weapon are left unstated. This encounter suggests a *modus vivendi* rather than a lasting settlement.[25]

Act II—An Eden in the shadow of massacre

Robert and Bryce Barker travelled on the *Clarendon* to Sydney and then by coastal steamer to the Clarence River. They then rode overland by horse for one-hundred-and-forty kilometres to Ettrick Forest station to join their older brothers. The station was built on Eden Creek, a tributary of the Upper Richmond River. The first mention of the Galibal comes in the third letter written by Robert Barker on 27 December 1844. He wrote

> The blacks visit us very often, sometimes to the number of a dozen or more; but they are very quiet now, and come into the huts, where they generally get something to eat, and sometimes a shirt or other useless pieces of dress. They are seldom allowed to come into the dwelling hut, where they might easily carry off something. They are disagreeable-looking beings, and

24. Henry Reynolds has analysed the impact on the consciences of settlers/invaders of humanitarians who argued the rights of the Aborigines in the face of the theft of their land by Europeans. He notes that the Port Phillip district had had a Protector of Aborigines in the form of George Robinson since 1839. He records a young British immigrant writing home in 1844 seeking guidance from his family on 'the moral right to take forcible possession of a Country inhabited by savages.' Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts Revisited* (St Leonards, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2018).

25 The *Macquarie Dictionary* definition of *modus vivendi* captures the instability of such moments of accommodation—'a temporary arrangement between persons or parties pending a settlement of matters in debate.'

> not much to be depended on, so that when the men go into the bush to any distance they generally carry a musket. It is very ludicrous sometimes to see them dressed. When they do take a fancy that way (which is not often gratified), you will see one with an old shirt, another with an old pair of inexpressionables, and another in a waistcoat alone, which, in conjunction with a pair of thin black legs sticking out below, gives the wearer a very comical appearance. The rest of the set are stark naked.[26]

In this account, the Galibal showed no fear or hesitation in directly engaging with the settlers/invaders. They were curious about the clothing of the newcomers and knew there was food to be had. There was a strong continuity between Andrew Murray's description of the Aborigines of Port Phillip and Robert Barker's description of the Galibal as 'disagreeable-looking beings.' Barker also showed that Europeans were wary of the Galibal because they 'generally carry a musket' when going any distance into the bush.

Barker's statement that the blacks 'are very quiet now' suggests he was also aware of recent times that were not quiet. What Barker was not telling his family back in Scotland was that he was writing in the wake of a spearing death of a hut-keeper on Ettrick Forest Station in 1843,[27] and a massacre of around 100 members of the Bundjalung tribe at Evan's Head also in 1843.[28] The written sources say that the massacre was a reprisal for the killing of Europeans, though the number varies between two and five.[29] The Evan's Head massacre came in the context of frontier violence occurring earlier on the Clarence River and possibly involving the Commissioner for Crown Lands, Oliver Fry.[30]

---

26. Robert Barker and John Barker, "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond. Experiences of 90 Years Ago (Letters 3 & 4)," *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*, no. 30 September (1931).
27. Malcolm Prentis, "Aborigines and Europeans in the Northern Rivers Region of New South Wales 1823 - 1881" (Macquarie University, 1972). 138
28. Lyndall Ryan et al., "Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia, 1788-1930," (Newcastle: University of Newcastle, 2017-2020). The first account of this massacre was published in 1920 in an article in the *Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts* Advertiser Anonymous, "A Richmond River Horror—Tragedy and Massacre of the Early Days—Slaughter of Blacks at Evans Head," *Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser*, no. Tuesday 13 April (1920)..
29. Daley, *Men and a River: Richmond River District 1828-1895*. 45; Rory Medcalf, *Rivers of Blood: Massacres of the Northern Rivers Aborigines and Their Resistance to the White Occupation 1838-1870* (Adapted from a series published in The Northern Star. , 1989). 5; Anonymous, "A Richmond River Horror—Tragedy and Massacre of the Early Days—Slaughter of Blacks at Evans Head." Medcalf reports that there is no mention in the oral tradition among the Bundjalung Elders of the area of the killing of Europeans by Aborigines.
30. Daley, *Men and a River: Richmond River District 1828-1895*. 45 This not a comprehensive account of the frontier violence occurring on the Richmond and Clarence Rivers in the 1840s and 1850s. It is intended to indicate violent events that are very likely to have been known to both the Galibal and the Barkers. More comprehensive accounts of frontier violence in this region are found in the works of Louise Daley, Jennifer Hoff and Rory Medcalf. Ibid. Chapter 4; Medcalf, *Rivers of Blood: Massacres of the Northern Rivers Aborigines and Their Resistance to the White Occupation 1838-1870*; Jennifer Hoff, *Bundjalung Jugun: Bundjalung Country*, Revised ed. (Lismore: Lismore District Historical Society Inc, 2010). Chapter 6

It is highly likely that news of these events would have travelled by word of mouth through the Bundjalung-related Aboriginal groups as well as through the networks of settlers/invaders. It is even possible that men from the Ettrick Forest station were among those who perpetrated the massacre.

Act III—Wrestling with respect

It is likely that both the Galibal and the Barkers knew that it was possible for Aborigines and Europeans to negotiate peaceful coexistence. A well-publicised example of this was the agreement between Edward Ogilvie (1814-1896), a squatter at Yulgilbar on the Upper Clarence River, and Toolbillibam, a Bundjalung leader from the country squatted on by Ogilvie.[31] In 1842, Ogilvie wrote a letter published in the *Sydney Herald* which described his negotiations with Toolbillibam and which made it clear that he treated Aboriginal people as equals and worthy of respect.[32] Ogilvie described how he spoke, in rudimentary terms, the language of Toolbillibam and how they were able to agree on what was, in effect, a shared land-use agreement. Ogilvie wanted the pasture for his sheep and Toolbillibam wanted the possums and kangaroos and the fish and they were able to find agreement.

Ogilvie and Toolbillibam's relationship continued to develop and included competitive bouts of wrestling, swimming and other sports.[33] What set Ogilvie apart among squatters was his willingness and ability to learn Aboriginal languages. He first did this as a boy on the Hunter and then did it again on the Clarence with the aid of Pundoon, an Aboriginal boy Ogilvie kidnapped from Toolbillibam's tribe. As a boy, according to Mary Murray-Prior (née Bundock), Ogilvie used his language skills to avert violence between his

31. What follows is not a comprehensive account of Ogilvie's long-term engagement with the Bundjalung at Yulgilbar. Ogilvie became very wealthy, built a castle at Yulgilbar, and was well connected with the upper crust of New South Wales society. My concern in this essay is the contribution he made to the repertoire of possible outcomes from colonial encounters at a particular time and place.
32. Edward Ogilvie, "Clarence River—the Aborigines," *Sydney Herald*, no. 8 July (1842).
33. These events are recorded in the contemporaneous Tindal papers and are also recounted in detail in a hagiography of Ogilvie and the squattocracy by George Farwell. Thomas Mylne, A. and James A. Mylne, eds., *Tindal Family Letters 1843 to 1865 Letters Written by and to Charles Grant Tindal of Ramornie, near Grafton, New South Wales, to His Father Commander Charles Tindal Rn in England and Other Tindal Family Members on Both Sides of the World. Volume 1 (in Search of a Station (1843 to 1852)* (North Wollongong: Thoms A Mylne, 2022). 29; George Farwell, *Squatter's Castle: The Saga of a Pastoral Dynasty* (London, Sydney, Melbourne: Angus and Robertson, 1973). See chapter 12, 'Toolbillibam Wrestles' 161-177

family and a group of local Aboriginal warriors aggrieved by the unjust arrest of two of their number.[34]

Ogilvie's approach to working with Aboriginal people would have been known to the Barker brothers because of his prominence on the Clarence and because all the Barkers' transactions with the outside world went via the coastal steamer at The Settlement on the Clarence. They may also have been aware of Ogilvie's approach to the Aborigines because of his connection with Wiangaree station, a few kilometres down the river from the Ettrick Forest station. Wiangaree was owned by Wellington Bundock who was married to Edward Ogilvie's sister, Mary Ellen.[35]

Act IV—Trading a hair rope for a silver watch-guard

The sixth letter, written by Robert on 18 February 1845, suggests that the Galibal wished to develop their relationship with the settlers/invaders. He wrote

> The blacks have once more ventured into the station, the first time for more than a month, when they were guilty of some misdemeanours up and down the country. They are quite peaceable, and half-a-dozen of them have been in here for two days. One of them is very anxious to make an exchange with me, offering to give me a hair rope, which they wear around their necks or waists, for my silver watch-guard; he would have thought it a fair exchange. This rope or cord is their only covering.[36]

Barker's use of the term 'misdemeanours' is an interesting euphemism for the types of acts of resistance carried out by the Galibal at the time which included spearing sheep and cattle.[37] Barker was writing for his family in Scotland and perhaps he did not want to alarm them. But when he writes that their manner is 'peaceable' there is the implication that the opposite is also possible otherwise why make the comment at all. And he notes that the Galibal were staying around for days at a time. The next sentences give a hint as to their objective—they were looking to exchange or trade bodily ornaments.

This incident can be interpreted in light of the meaning of bodily adornment for the Galibal at the time. Mary Murray-Prior gave a detailed account of the care with which

34. Mrs Murray-Prior and Mary Bundock, "Memoirs of the Early Days on the Richmond River," (Unpublished: National Library of Australia, No date). 2
35. Wellington and Mary Ellen Bundock were Mary Murray-Prior's (née Bundock's) parents. Ibid. 5
36. John Barker and Robert Barker, "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond Experiences of 90 Years Ago (Letters 5 & 6)," *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*, no. 3 October (1931).
37. Prentis, "Aborigines and Europeans in the Northern Rivers Region of New South Wales 1823 - 1881." 254

Aboriginal men decorated themselves in contrast to the Aboriginal women.[38] Murray-Prior wrote that the men wore

> cane beads… coiled in many folds round the neck and hanging down on the chest as a necklace [that] looked very well contrasting as it did with the dark skin of the wearer… They often wore a piece of Nautilus shell as large as the palm of the hand, ground to an oval shape and hung on the breast by a string.'[39]

It is not clear to me whether Robert Barker is giving a condescending scoff at the Galibal man's understanding of a fair trade or if he has insight into the significance of the hair rope for the Galibal man. I am going to give Barker the benefit of the doubt and say that I think he understood the equivalence that the Galibal man saw when was sought to trade the one body adornment he had for the most striking adornment worn by himself. We do not know if Barker accepted the trade but the context suggests not. I think the Galibal man was seeking a common currency with this European man—a concern for their personal appearance and status. It is possible that the Galibal man knew through Bundjalung communication networks of the relationship between Ogilvie and Toolbillibam and that his attempt to trade with Barker may have been attempt to initiate something similar.

Barker notes in this letter that the Galibal had been absent from the station for more than a month and that this absence had followed the said 'misdemeanours up and down the country.' It is possible to see a pattern of oscillation between aggression/resistance and accommodation. We cannot know from this letter what the European reprisals for the misdemeanours were in this instance but it is possible they were violent. The Galibal's withdrawal for more than a month could have been a time to re-group and reconsider how they were to better resist the Europeans or find an accommodation with them. They may have decided to make another attempt to understand and befriend them, and what better way to do so than to stay around for a few days, show themselves to be peaceable, and try to find something in common.

---

38. Mary Murray-Prior (1845 - 1924) grew up on the Richmond River having moved to Wiangaree station with her parents as an infant. Isabel McBryde affords her a unique place among Australian women ethnographers for her observations of Aboriginal women's lives and technology, her collecting of artefacts, and her deep concern and respect for Aboriginal people. Isabel McBryde, "Miss Mary, Ethnography and the Inheritance of Concern: Mary Ellen Murray-Prior," in *First in Their Field*, ed. Julie Marcus (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993).
39. It is difficult to know from Murray-Prior's notes if the wearing of beads was a regular occurrence or only done when preparing for fighting with other Aboriginal groups. Mrs Murray-Prior and Mary Bundock, "Notes on the Richmond River Blacks by a Lady Born in 1844 and Who Lived Most of Her Life in That District.," (Unpublished: National Library of Australia, No date). 1

Letter seven in the series, written by Robert Barker on 29 April 1845,[40] continues the air of superiority and condescension of earlier letters. However, it shows continuing attempts at friendliness by the Galibal as well as a twist in the evolving colonial encounter. He wrote

> The blacks are quite friendly with us, and come in to our place very often. They are the ugliest and most mindless beings I ever saw, thinking of nothing but eating; and stealing, too, on a pinch; an axe would overthrow the "virtue" of the best of them. They took one a few days ago. They cut a queer figure when they get some old piece of dress given to them; sometimes a round jacket appears with black tights (bare legs), and they are very vain of anything of the kind…[the letter continues on 4 June] B and I have a little pet, a young kangaroo, which the black boy caught one day.[41]

This letter carries a tension between a growing 'friendliness' and Barker's continuing attitude of condescension and repulsion. But then there is a reference to 'the black boy' being involved in the life of the station.[42] What Galibal family does this boy belong to and why did the Galibal allow him to go to work with the settlers/invaders? One explanation for this is that it was a strategy used by the Galibal to gain a deeper understanding of the Europeans and to gather intelligence on their intentions.

The strategy of using young people as 'cultural intermediaries' has some recognition in other colonial contexts. For example, it provides one explanation of the role of Pocahontas in Jamestown in early seventeenth century North America.[43] As noted earlier, Edward Ogilvie kidnapped a Bundjalung boy called Pundoon so that he could learn Bundjalung from him.[44] An alternative interpretation of Pundoon's willingness to stay with Ogilvie and teach him Bundjalung is that it was Toolbillibam's intention that Pundoon stay and act as a cultural intermediary. It is difficult to interpret the presence of the Aboriginal boy among the Barkers with confidence but I think it is reasonable to assume that he was there with the full knowledge of his people and that the arrangement had some purpose within the Galibal's attempts to work out how to live with the Europeans.

---

40. It appears there is a typographical error in the newspaper as this letter is attributed to an RTB but there was no brother with those initials. As the letter also refers to B (Bryce Barker), he cannot be the author. This makes Robert the mostly likely author as his initials were RLB.
41. Robert Barker, "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond. Experiences of 90 Years Ago (Letter 7)," *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*, no. 7 October (1931).
42. The following discussion of the role of the young Galibal is treating its occurrence on this station on its own terms and outside of any long-term pattern of the use of Aboriginal labour in the pastoral industry. The evolution of the exploitation of Aboriginal labour, and of deliberate policies by settler colonial governments to support this, is acknowledged. See, for example Robert Foster, "Rations, Coexistence, and the Colonisation of Aboriginal Labour in the South Australian Pastoral Industry, 1860—1911," *Aboriginal History* 24 (2000).. The point of this analysis is to attempt to understand an evolving set of local relationships.
43. Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *The Jamestown Project* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). 234
44. Ogilvie, "Clarence River—the Aborigines."

In letter nine, written on 14 September 1845, Robert described going shooting flying foxes by moonlight along with 'two little black fellows' who found a carpet snake in a hollow stump.[45] This is a remarkable turnaround for Robert. Just twelve months earlier he wrote about the untrustworthiness of 'the blacks' and the wariness of the men. Now he was shooting in the bush by moonlight with two Aboriginal boys.

There were other significant developments in the lives of the younger Barker brothers, Robert and Bryce, in that first year. They had become so at home in the bush that the pair went off together and lived for six weeks in a bark 'gunyah' they built for themselves eight kilometres distant from Ettrick Forest station.[46] They were there to build a hut that could provide the basis for a new run. Robert wrote that he would rather go and camp in the bush for as long as necessary and 'leave all the comforts and conveniences of this place.'[47] It is possible that one of the attractions of the life in the gunyah for Robert and Bryce was the independence it afforded from their older brothers at the station.

Act V—Cooperative foraging[48]

In the final letter in the series, dated 18 October 1846, the now nineteen-year-old Bryce writes:

> On our station the blacks are always very quiet, even if they are doing mischief on other runs; indeed, they come to ours for shelter from all enemies whether black, white or rainy weather! We have been getting bark for new roofs, and they are very useful then as they are adepts at it; and they get us "sugar bags", as they call the bees' nests, of which there are plenty at this season. We run it through cloth, and it is very pure. We saw it so done first at Mr. E's where J and I were about a month ago, looking for strayed cattle.[49]

There is a marked change in tone and appreciation for the Galibal in this letter compared with the letters written two years earlier. There is now a level of trust that distinguishes the Ettrick

45. Robert Barker, "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond. Experiences of 90 Years Ago. (Letters 9 & 10)," *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*, no. Wednesday 14 October (1931).
46. Ibid.; Robert Barker and Bryce Barker, "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond. Experiences of 90 Years Ago. (Letters 11 & 12)," ibid., no. 17 October.
47. Barker, "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond. Experiences of 90 Years Ago. (Letters 9 & 10)."
48 Karskens argues that foraging was a common practice among British people of rural origin who continued the practice in Australia. It was a point of encounter with Aboriginal people different to commercial pastoralism that was based on the enclosure of common lands. Karskens, *People of the River: Lost Worlds of Early Australia*. 202-5
49. Bryce Barker, "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond. Experiences of 90 Years Ago. (Letter 16)," *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*, no. 24 October (1931).This letter is incomplete because of damage to the scrapbook where the letters had been kept. The initials of the author are missing but judging by the references in the letter to R[obert] being 'a carpenter's mate' and himself (the author) being 'a stockmen's mate', I think the most likely author is the youngest brother, Bryce.

Forest station from the other runs on the river.[50] Bryce and Robert felt confident enough in their relationship with the Galibal to spend weeks at a time living in the bush on their own, eight kilometres from the safety of Ettrick Forest station.

The letter shows that the Galibal were increasingly part of the workforce of the station. The Barkers were now open to learning Galibal skills in using bark and to acknowledging their superior expertise in this regard. The Barkers were also willing to learn about using 'sugar bags' for food. There is no condescending laughter at the Galibal in this letter. It is possible to describe the point reached in the colonial encounter between the Barker brothers (at least the younger two, Robert and Bryce) as an accommodation that has a degree of cooperation and trust.

I have been suggesting in my analysis of the letters so far that there was a degree of strategy and agency in the actions of the Galibal as they attempted to find ways to live with or alongside the settlers/invaders at Ettrick Forest station. I think it is reasonable to interpret the above letter in the same way. How would the Barkers know that the Galibal were adept at cutting bark and were prepared to help them adapt those skills to create roofing for their huts? This scenario requires a high degree of interaction and cooperation. The end result is a European-styled dwelling with roofing sourced using Indigenous know-how and skill. This occurred at a time when Galibal were still able to secure their food and shelter in the spaces around the squatting runs. That is, the Galibal did not need to help the Barkers but came to this interaction with their own purpose.

Epilogue

In a seminal article on settler colonialism, Patrick Wolfe described settler colonialism as 'a structure rather than an event'. That structure is intent on the elimination or assimilation of 'the native'.[51] But colonial encounters are, by definition, events rather than structures. They are events fraught with possibilities. An encounter has elements of the unexpected, the potentially dangerous or delightful.[52] So there is a tension in the term 'colonial encounter'

50 This act of singling out Ettrick Forest station from those around it at times of tension was not unusual. Read's history of the 'war of extermination' against the Wiradjuri in the Bathurst district in 1823 includes an account of how the Wiradjuri leader Windradyne called on the Brucedale station, 'which was known for its good relations with Aborigines', and left it unharmed just a few days before he was involved in attacks on huts in the Sofala district. Read, *A Hundred Years War: The Wiradjuri People and the State*. 10.

51 Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006). 390

52 The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines encounter as: 'Verb: 1. To come upon; meet with, esp. unexpectedly, 2. To meet with or contend against (difficulties, opposition, etc.) 3. To meet (a person, military

between the structures of colonialism that influence the form and outcome of everyday events, and the contingency inherent in any encounter between individuals responding to the situation in which they find themselves.[53]

It is interesting that in the letters from the three Barker brothers, Aboriginal encounters are only mentioned by Robert and Bryce. John, who was the part owner of Ettrick Forest station, wrote letters that were focussed the prospects for sheep and cattle. He refers to his younger brothers as 'the boys' and is concerned to set them up with their own cattle. But apart from one reference to 'the black boy' who will accompany 'they boys' to New England, John makes no mention of the Galibal. For John, the Galibal are invisible in his portrayal of the station to his relatives in Scotland.

Robert and Bryce are, at this point in their lives, less invested than John in the colonial structure—they have no land. They are less guarded in how they observe and interact with the Galibal. I have set out a trajectory in their colonial encounters, from the set-piece 'stepping ashore' encounter, as reported by Andrew Murray, to cooperative foraging in the bush on the Upper Richmond. Robert and Bryce Barker show that there were possibilities present in colonial encounters beyond the elimination or assimilation of the Galibal. Much of the initiative for realising those possibilities came from the Galibal who saw something in the younger Barkers that they did not see on other stations. The Barker brothers' letters show that indeterminacy is a key element in our understanding of colonial encounters.

force, etc.) in conflict. Noun: 4. A meeting with a person or thing, especially casually or unexpectedly. 5. A meeting in conflict or opposition; a battle; a combat.

53 This could be understood as a reframing of the concern in the philosophy of the social sciences about the relationship between structure and agency or between the macro and the micro. James Bohman, *New Philosophy of Social Science: Problems of Indeterminacy* (Cambridge, UK.: Polity Press, 1991). 146

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Anonymous. "Births, Marriages, Deaths." *Sydney Mail*, no. Saturday 8 February (1862): 1.

———. "A Richmond River Horror—Tragedy and Massacre of the Early Days—Slaughter of Blacks at Evans Head." *Richmond River Herald and Northern Districts Advertiser*, no. Tuesday 13 April (1920): 2.

Barker, Bryce. "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond. Experiences of 90 Years Ago. (Letter 16)." *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*, no. 24 October (1931).

Barker, John, and Robert Barker. "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond Experiences of 90 Years Ago (Letters 5 & 6)." *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*, no. 3 October (1931).

Barker, Robert. "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond. Experiences of 90 Years Ago (Letter 7)." *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*, no. 7 October (1931).

———. "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond. Experiences of 90 Years Ago. (Letters 1 & 2)." *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*, no. 26 September (1931).

———. "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond. Experiences of 90 Years Ago. (Letters 9 & 10)." *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*, no. Wednesday 14 October (1931).

Barker, Robert, and Bryce Barker. "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond. Experiences of 90 Years Ago. (Letters 11 & 12)." *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*, no. 17 October (1931).

Barker, Robert, and John Barker. "Early Pioneers of Upper Richmond. Experiences of 90 Years Ago (Letters 3 & 4)." *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*, no. 30 September (1931).

Murray, Andrew. "A Voyage with a Pioneer - with the “Clarendon” in 1844 - a Hitherto Unpublished Diary." *Age*, no. Saturday 20 November 1937 (1844 (1937)): 5.

Murray-Prior, Mrs, and Mary Bundock. "Memoirs of the Early Days on the Richmond River." 19. Unpublished: National Library of Australia, No date.

———. "Notes on the Richmond River Blacks by a Lady Born in 1844 and Who Lived Most of Her Life in That District.", 4. Unpublished: National Library of Australia, No date.

Mylne, Thomas, A., and James A. Mylne, eds. *Tindal Family Letters 1843 to 1865 Letters Written by and to Charles Grant Tindal of Ramornie, near Grafton, New South Wales, to His Father Commander Charles Tindal Rn in England and Other Tindal Family Members on Both Sides of the World. Volume 1 (in Search of a Station (1843 to 1852)*. North Wollongong: Thoms A Mylne, 2022.

Ogilvie, Edward. "Clarence River—the Aborigines." *Sydney Herald*, no. 8 July (1842).

Secondary Sources

Bayly, C. A. *The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons.* The Blackwell History of the World. Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Bohman, James. *New Philosophy of Social Science: Problems of Indeterminacy.* Cambridge, UK.: Polity Press, 1991.

Clendinnen, Inga. *Dancing with Strangers.* Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2003.

Daley, Louise Tiffany. *Men and a River: Richmond River District 1828-1895.* London and New York: Melbourne University Press, 1966.

Driver, Felix. "In Search of the Imperial Map: Walter Crane and the Image of Empire." *History Workshop Journal* 69 (2010): 146-57.
Elliott, Michael. "Indigenous Resurgence: The Drive for Renewed Engagement and Reciprocity in the Turn Away from the State." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2018): 61-81.
Farwell, George. *Squatter's Castle: The Saga of a Pastoral Dynasty.* London, Sydney, Melbourne: Angus and Robertson, 1973.
Foster, Robert. "Rations, Coexistence, and the Colonisation of Aboriginal Labour in the South Australian Pastoral Industry, 1860—1911." *Aboriginal History* 24 (2000): 1-26.
Griffiths, Tom *The Art of Time Travel.* Carlton, Victoria.: Black Inc, 2016.
Hoff, Jennifer. *Bundjalung Jugun: Bundjalung Country.* Revised ed. Lismore: Lismore District Historical Society Inc, 2010.
Karskens, Grace. *People of the River: Lost Worlds of Early Australia.* Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2020.
Kupperman, Karen Ordahl. *The Jamestown Project.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
Malpas, Jeff. "Hans-Georg Gadamer." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, 2022.
McBryde, Isabel. "Miss Mary, Ethnography and the Inheritance of Concern: Mary Ellen Murray-Prior." Chap. 2 In *First in Their Field*, edited by Julie Marcus, 15-46. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993.
Medcalf, Rory. *Rivers of Blood: Massacres of the Northern Rivers Aborigines and Their Resistance to the White Occupation 1838-1870.* Adapted from a series published in The Northern Star. , 1989.
Mota-Lopes, José da. "The Colonial Encounter and Its Legacy." In *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, edited by Robert A Denemark and Renée Marlin-Bennett. Online: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017.
Olley, William J. *Squatters on the Richmond: Runs, Owners and Boundaries from Settlement to Dissolution 1840-1900.* Self published, 1995.
Prentis, Malcolm. "Aborigines and Europeans in the Northern Rivers Region of New South Wales 1823 - 1881." Macquarie University, 1972.
Read, Peter. *A Hundred Years War: The Wiradjuri People and the State.* Australian National University Press, 1988.
Reynolds, Henry. *This Whispering in Our Hearts Revisited.* St Leonards, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2018.
Romanov-Hughes, Alexander. "Port Phillip District." Self-published, https://www.portphillipdistrict.info/.
Ryan, Lyndall, William Pascoe, Jennifer Debenham, Stephanie Gilbert, Jonathan Richards, Robyn Smith, Chris Owen, *et al.* "Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia, 1788-1930." Newcastle: University of Newcastle, 2017-2020.
Scott, Sarah. "Defying Empire: 3rd National Indigenous Triennial." *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 17, no. 2 (2017): 251-55.
Steele, J, G.,. *Aboriginal Pathways in Southeast Queensland and the Richmond River.* St Luci: University of Queensland Press, 1983.
Watego, Chelsea. *Another Day in the Colony.* University of Queenslad Press, 2021.
Wolfe, Patrick. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387-409.