



Raymond Evans

**Samuel Griffith
and Queensland's
'War of
Extermination'**

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Foreword

I first came to Griffith, the University that bears Sir Samuel's name, interested in the story of this land, the island continent of Australia and the nation bearing that name. In turn, the formation of the federation fascinated me, and thence Sir Samuel himself.

The story of our federating - the formation of the *modern* Australian nation - is a much neglected period of our modern history. The *who*, the *how* and the *why* are worthy of much greater scholarship. Within any consideration of *why* Australia federated, questions of *where* - questions of place, and of land - must be answered before any proper understanding can be formed. A fulsome comprehending of ancient matters, of the land's original, indigenous inhabitants must precede and inform any modern comprehension of events in the late 19th century, and beyond, to today.

Thus, to answer any question about Griffith, the person, requires an understanding of Australia as a federation, and quite separately Australia as a place, an ancient land.

Questions of patriotism must sit beside questions of nationalism, and big questions about humanity require our reckoning.

Raymond Evans is a distinguished historian, and this scholarly work is an important contribution to some of the questions above and to more particular questions recently raised. Evans warns against a hero/villain dichotomy and we might all be wise to heed this warning when it comes to Griffith.

What of Griffith's role in the shameful period of our nation's history, of mass killings and violence, that formed the context to our federating? This well researched, evidentiary piece is worthy of wide dissemination, and is an advance on the body of scholarship that must develop, a piece towards a much larger history that must be told. It puts forward more explanation, if not exculpation. How could it?

To answer the question in the singular we must answer larger, broader, more fundamental questions as a citizenry. We must reckon with questions about this land, Australia. These are questions which seem in late 2023 harder to confront, but ever more necessary. The truth will out, even if it is not yet able to set us - all of us - free.

The Hon Andrew Fraser

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Rigorous truth-telling will be of critical importance here ... Truth-telling allows us to weave new stories and to make older ones richer while, at the same time, more complex.

—Henry Reynolds¹

We decide what we think we know, he said. From such evidence as we have. In the absence of more evidence, we can do no other. But we must be humble. You know, to question the evidence and know it to be partial. Most particularly to be humble about the conclusions we draw. Not to be too sure.

—Kate Grenville²

You see, I've just learned from ... history as a whole, that one should not overestimate the impact or power of the individual.

—Rosa Luxemburg³

SIR SAMUEL WALKER GRIFFITH—savant, statesman, jurist, constitutionalist and more—has of late been subjected to a considerable critical drubbing. A very tall Australian historical poppy appears in the process of being lopped or, at least, substantially pruned. His individual part is woven into what emerges more and more to modern eyes as a shocking, unconscionable record of dispossession-mayhem, erupting across the entire continent; but particularly intense and unrelenting as it manifested itself in serial genocidal episodes along the entire Queensland frontier over the best part of a century. With recent historical research now pointing to the conclusion that tens of thousands of Aboriginal people died violently during this inexorable

¹ H. Reynolds, *Truth-Telling. History, Sovereignty and the Uluru Statement* (Sydney, NewSouth, 2021), 196, 199.

² K. Grenville, *A Room Made of Leaves* (Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2020), 205.

³ K. Evans, *Red Rosa. A Graphic Biography of Rosa Luxemburg* (London, Verso, 2015), 212–13.

process,⁴ it is certainly no small matter to begin identifying potential culprits or apportioning accurate responsibility or even blame.

The case against Samuel Griffith, as developed by seasoned race relations historian Henry Reynolds, is predicated on the claim that this astute, learned scholar, steeped in British common law and holding responsible political positions for more than a dozen years did ‘little’—indeed, next to ‘nothing’, in Reynolds’ considered estimation—to assuage the land-grabbing carnage unfolding in central and northern Queensland during his political career. Scrutiny is particularly intense around the role played by successive colonial governments from the 1870s to the 1890s in organising, financing, managing and sustaining the Queensland Native Police, an official body probably responsible for more frontier deaths than the vigilante activism of private settler sorties or profligate individual murders of First Nation peoples by white incomers.⁵ Basically, no one was ever punished to the full extent of the law for these tens of thousands of deaths—a most remarkable criminogenic feature in any society’s composite origin story.

Griffith as ‘premier’ may have expressed some rhetorical distaste for the Native Police, Reynolds allows (though the former’s actual words are not provided), but he essentially *did* nothing about it, ‘realising it simply wasn’t politically possible’. ‘[N]othing changed until he had left the Parliament’ is the imprecating conclusion.⁶

Reynolds begins his overall critique by sheeting home blame to entire colonial legislatures—of hundreds and possibly thousands of politicians and bureaucrats across the colonies - but soon the censure narrows to ‘cabinet ministers’ as the ‘only place to look’. Yet the lens then contracts even further to focus on three ‘fathers of Federation’: Sir John Forrest (Western Australia), Sir John Downer (South Australia/Northern Territory) and Sir Samuel Griffith (Queensland). The first two are efficiently and adroitly despatched; the ultimate indictment comes to rest more comprehensively on Griffith.⁷

⁴ R. Evans and R. Ørsted-Jensen, “‘Pale Death ... Around Our Footprints Springs’”: Assessing Violent Mortality on the Queensland Frontier for State and Private Exterminatory Practices’, in *Civilian-driven Violence and the Genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Settler Societies*, ed. M. Adhikiri, (Milton Park, Routledge, 2023), 139–64.

⁵ Reynolds, *Truth-Telling*, 224.

⁶ H. Reynolds, ‘On the Queensland Frontier. Tragedy in the Tropics’, *Griffith Review: Acts of Reckoning* 76 (2022): 149; *Truth-Telling*, 228.

⁷ Reynolds, *Truth-Telling*, 216–34; ‘Queensland Frontier’, 149–50.

Across a dozen or so pages of his 2021 book *Truth-Telling*, Reynolds advances the case for the prosecution against Griffith. He follows this with a similar-length essay in *Griffith Review* 76 *Acts of Reckoning*, entitled ‘On the Queensland Frontier. Tragedy in the Tropics’, half of which is devoted to Griffith’s apparent leading role in the colonial tragedy. In this way, the much-celebrated politician is transformed into major national culprit. All three Federation fathers, Reynolds avers, have ‘blood on their hands’ and must somehow posthumously atone, at least reputationally. Yet Griffith in particular must ‘bear an extra burden’ in the Queensland context, apparently because of his outstanding intellectual brilliance and capability; he, of all people, should have known better. Yet instead, to quote Reynolds in his most expansively rhetorical flourish, ‘His neatly manicured lawyers’ [sic] hands were deeply stained with the blood of murdered men, women and children’.⁸

Setting Griffith’s personal grooming to one side, these ‘deeply stained’ extremities do require our serious attention, because Griffith, Reynolds maintains, was ‘ultimately responsible and *therefore guilty* of what, after 1945, came to be known as crimes against humanity. Is any other conclusion possible?’ (my emphasis). One wonders if there still might be, for Reynolds goes on to suggest that the Criminology Institute at Griffith University would be an ideal place to ‘organise a mock trial to *prosecute* Griffith’ for such crimes (my emphasis)—hopefully with no presumptive outcome already attached to the exercise. Furthermore, Reynolds suggests, a prestigious university lecture, named after Griffith, should be renamed the Feilberg Lecture, after the crusading frontier journalist Carl Feilberg.⁹

Construing Griffith within the global context of the iconoclastic fall of imperialist and slave-trader statues, as well as the rebranding of university schools and federal electorates, formerly named after historical uber-racists and frontier killers, Reynolds then makes a further series of suggestions, posed more as questions than as framed demands: ‘Should anything be done about Griffith? Or should we discreetly avert our eyes from the blood on the great man’s hands?’ Should Griffith’s name perhaps be stripped from a Brisbane federal electorate? ‘What should Griffith University do?’ Should *Griffith Review* then follow suit or at least substantially amend or else drop altogether its flagship biographical sketch of Sir Samuel?¹⁰

⁸ Reynolds, *Truth-Telling*, 178, 231, 244; ‘Queensland Frontier’, 149.

⁹ Reynolds, *Truth-Telling*, 228 (my emphasis), 231.

¹⁰ Reynolds, *Truth-Telling*, 230–31.

Although Reynolds calls for a Griffith law lecture to be re-christened and *Griffith Review* to look to its interpretive laurels, he does not directly advocate for a name change for Griffith University, suggesting this is ‘pre-eminently a matter for Queensland to consider’. In a ‘question open to debate’, he would prefer that the university promote and partly fund a ‘museum that will tell the story of the frontier wars’ (an eminently sensible suggestion in my opinion). Nevertheless, enough of a coded dog-whistle—intentional or otherwise—is implanted in the tone of Reynolds’s concentrated denunciation for other activists, particularly First Nation ones, to begin calling for the campus to recast itself as Dundalli University, in homage to the executed—some would argue martyred—Dalla/Djindubari warrior.¹¹

Thus, Reynolds’s interfacing of frontier wars with Griffith’s paramount culpability as perpetrator of ‘crimes against humanity’ does call for further scrutiny. And here, a curious anomaly immediately emerges; that is, in the now considerable historiography of Queensland frontier studies, one discovers that Griffith hardly rates a mention, let alone a negative one. Indeed, Griffith’s frontier imprint is almost impossible to find. There is, for instance, no index entry for ‘Griffith, Samuel’ in the latest, highly detailed and biographically rich overviews of Queensland frontier history: Timothy Bottoms’s diligently referenced *Conspiracy of Silence. Queensland’s Frontier Killing Times* (2013) and Jack Drake’s equally encyclopaedic *Queensland’s Frontier Wars* (2021). Surprisingly, across some 800 pages of text dealing with frontier violence, there is not a single reference to the ‘great man’ with ‘blood on his hands’. Tony Roberts’s intensely narrated *Frontier Justice—Colonial Queensland and the Frontier Wars* (2011), replete with accounts of more than fifty frontier massacres, also fails to feature him.¹²

¹¹ Reynolds, *Truth-Telling*, 232; J. Hinchliffe, ““Enabler” of Massacres: the Push to Re-examine the Legacy of Founding Father, Samuel Griffith’, *The Guardian*, 5 June 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/australianews/jun>; X. Boffa, ‘Griffith University takes cancel culture too far’, *Spectator Australia*, 27 June 2022; N. Gnuven, ‘Cancelling Australia’s Founding Father Weakens the Constitution’, *The Epoch Times*, 29 June 2022; F. Foley, D. Bargallie, B. Carlson and F. Nicholl, ‘Reason and Reckoning. Provocations and Conversations about Re-imagining Samuel Griffith’s University’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Rethinking Colonial Commemorations*, ed. B. Carlson and T. Farelly, June 2022, <https://doi.org/10-1007/973-3-031-25609-4-15>. The chapter reiterates and endorses Reynolds’s charge of ‘crimes against humanity’ (268) and adds a further indictment for ‘war crimes’, calling for the distribution of ‘mock trial kits’ to ‘audiences all over the continent’ to ‘bring justice’ in jury trials of Griffith in absentia (288–89).

¹² T. Bottoms, *Conspiracy of Silence., Queensland’s Frontier Killing Times* (Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 2013); J. Drake, *Queensland’s Frontier Wars* (Tingalpa, Boolarong Press, 2021); T. Roberts, *Frontier Justice. A History of the Gulf Country to 1900* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 2005); J. Richards, *The Secret War. A True History of Queensland’s Native Police* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 2008) carries one passing reference of little consequence here.

In my own slew of racial and frontier studies, beginning in 1971, Griffith is effectively absent. Until my recent essay in *Griffith Review: Acts of Reckoning*, he leaves no frontier imprint whatsoever. Perhaps this can mean only that all these astute researchers have not been quite astute enough to spot the connection, until Reynolds's bombshell expose of 2020. The corroborative consistency of oversight is nevertheless notable—even more so when Reynolds's own publications are considered. In over a score of racial texts, commencing in 1972, one again fails to find Griffith, save in *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (1998), there he is confusingly cast as a 'young Brisbane lawyer', uttering a single enigmatic sentence in a parliamentary debate in 1880. (see below, page 22) Griffith will repeat these identical words in *Truth-Telling*, the only instance in which he verbally represents himself in that account.¹³

There is, however, a handful of texts dealing forensically with colonial Aboriginal policy that do significantly feature Griffith's role. These are Noel Loos's remarkable *Invasion and Resistance. Aboriginal-European Relations on the North Queensland Frontier* (1982) and Gordon Reid's under-rated '*The Unhappy Race: Queensland and the Aboriginal Problem* (2006). Both, for the most part, as we shall see, construct an image of Griffith the administrator, antithetical to the scorching critique of him delivered in *Truth-Telling*. Finally, Robert Ørsted-Jensen's policy-oriented *Frontier History Revisited—Colonial Queensland and the History War* (2011) paints Griffith as the doughty defender of the legal principle that skin colour should not determine the outcome of murder trials in the case of both Melanesian and Aboriginal homicides by whites and native troopers. This treatment again hardly seems to fit the profile of someone guilty of 'crimes against humanity'.¹⁴

Much of Reynolds's case against Griffith appears to rest on his longevity of political influence: the time he spent in office while only rarely making a pertinent comment about the parlous state of frontier relations—'the line of blood'—and apparently doing nothing consequential to reform it. While in *Truth-Telling*, he is located 'at the centre of Queensland politics for twenty

¹³ Beginning with R. Evans, 'Queensland's First Aboriginal Reserve. Part One: The Promise of Reform' *Queensland Review* 2, no. 4 (May 1971): 26–37, and R. Evans, 'Queensland's First Aboriginal Reserve. Part Two: The Failure of Reform', *Queensland Review* 2, no. 4 (November 1971): 3–15, through to R. Evans, 'Griffith's Welsh Odyssey. Mining New Perspectives', *Griffith Review. Acts of Reckoning* 76 (2022): 127–41; H. Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1998), 122; Reynolds, *Truth-Telling*, 227–28 .

¹⁴ N. Loos, *Invasion and Resistance. Aboriginal-European Relations on the North Queensland Frontier 1861–1897* (Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1982) with eleven page references; G. Reid, '*That Unhappy Race: Queensland and the Aboriginal Problem 1838–1901* (Melbourne, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2006) with ten page references; R. Ørsted-Jensen, *Frontier History Revisited—Colonial Queensland and the 'History War'* (Brisbane, Lux Mundi Publishing, 2011) with six page references.

years from 1874 until 1893’, in *Griffith Review*, this is pared back to ‘the twelve years that Griffith sat around the cabinet table’. Here, his roles as attorney-general (1874–78) and premier (1883–88, 1890–94) are frequently alluded to. Yet, curiously, his crucial positioning as colonial secretary (1883–86) is never mentioned; crucial because, if we wish to grasp the dynamics of colonial office-holding and principal policy formation in the administration of Queensland native policy, it is to the Colonial Secretary’s Office that we must primarily turn. For this was the entity ‘immediately responsible’ for the full deployment of the Native Police Force.¹⁵

THE COLONIAL SECRETARY’S OFFICE was ‘by far the most important department’ in every colonial government—an omnibus department that seemed ‘to combine all the duties not specifically allocated’ to the attorney-general or the Treasurer’s Office. It was ‘the centre of government and principal records office’. By the time Griffith assumed control in mid-November 1883, it oversaw 26 sub-departments and some 1,900–2,000 public servants. The fastidiously interventionist Griffith typically worked more than 80 hours a week on political and legal matters, writing thousands of minutes in ‘his thin, spidery handwriting, usually in mauve ink’. Harried with overwork ‘from daylight till late at night’, he complained in 1884: ‘It is not possible to give the necessary thought to public matters ... [without] the leisure for thinking’.¹⁶

Officially, the various colonial secretaries controlled the Native Police by overseeing the entire Police Department, but the person mostly in the driving seat here was Police Commissioner David Seymour, an ex-military man who remained continually in that office from 1864 until 1895. It was thus Seymour—at the centre of command, gradually increasing his administrative hold as all others deferred to him in matters of detail—and his recommendations for funding, promotions and dismissals, and for the general deployment of the force, to which the Executive Council (or Cabinet) bowed with little apparent demur, year after year. Seymour was probably

¹⁵ Reynolds, *Truth-Telling*, 220, 224; ‘Queensland Frontier’, 149; R.G.W. Herbert, Colonial Secretary memorandum, 20 June 1866 quoted in B. Knox (ed), *The Queensland Years of Robert Herbert, Premier: Letters and Papers* (St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1977), 234. See especially M. Finnane and J. Richards, ‘S.W. Griffith: A Suitable Case for Indictment?’ *Australian Historical Studies* 54, 2023, unpaginated online publication, for thoughtful commentary on the importance of ‘office’ in determining colonial policy responsibility. <https://dio.org/10.1080/10311461/X.20232208585>

¹⁶ J. Scott et. al., *The Engine Room of Government. The Queensland Premier’s Department 1859–2001* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 2001), 11, 14–15, 53; R. Joyce, *Samuel Walker Griffith* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1984), 90–92.

the force's 'greatest apologist' during over thirty years in office, playing his part consistently and well. In mid-1874, for instance, he informed Secretary of State for the Colonies Lord Carnarvon that, in fourteen years residence, he had never encountered a single instance 'of the wholesale slaughter of the blacks ... officially or privately'.¹⁷ (Seymour is memorialised in the names of a North Queensland mountain range and river.)

During the colonial period there were 18 colonial secretaries serving some 22 terms of office, varying from several weeks' duration (in two cases) to almost nine years. Before examining Griffith's record in this role, therefore, it is instructive to review the frontier performance contextually of his principal forebears to establish a comparative perspective.¹⁸

The longest continual incumbency was that of Robert Herbert, from December 1859 until February 1866—a period of six years and three months. Herbert, a cousin and close associate of Carnarvon, was key in establishing the Native Police in Queensland after its control by New South Wales since 1849. He was reputed to be the organisation's most staunch and steadfast 'friend', even while admitting it to be 'a wholly irregular force'. In June 1866, Herbert depicted Aborigines in an official despatch as 'dark skinned cannibals', 'criminals' and 'very dangerous savages' with 'deficient intellect and incapacity for civilisation'. The 'difficulty' of their presence would only terminate with 'the gradual disappearance of this unimprovable race'.

Along with explorer and first Commissioner of Crown Lands George Dalrymple—a very active frontier killer—and the Scott brothers, Arthur and Walter, Herbert had been party to a colonial syndicate that seized (with Native Police violence) Gugu Badhun lands at the Valley of Lagoons, inland from Cardwell, during 1862–65. After returning to England, he became in 1871 permanent under-secretary of state for the colonies, holding the position for 21 years. In inspecting Queensland colonial affairs, he would continue to minute fatally on the impossibility of saving Aborigines from extinction or of even ameliorating their condition. Frontier collisions were 'inevitable', he commented in 1880: 'nothing more could be done' for 'this interesting but hopeless race'. Thus, the very suggestion of frontier reform was constantly confounded by

¹⁷ R. Evans, *A History of Queensland* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007), 79, 97; A. Hillier, *If You Leave Me Alone, I'll Leave You Alone. Biographical sketches, Reports and Incidents of the Queensland Native Mounted Police 1860–1885* (Brisbane, self-published, n.d.), 259–76; Reid, 'That Unhappy Race', 96.

¹⁸ See D.B. Waterson, *A Biographical Register of the Queensland Parliament 1860–1929* (Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1972).

Herbert from Whitehall. The electorate of Herbert, the Herbert River and the township of Herberton are named after him.¹⁹

THE LONGEST OVERALL SERVICE as colonial secretary, however, was that of Belyando squatter Arthur Hunter Palmer, former general manager of Myall Creek station from 1838 and one of the most powerful colonial politicians, holding the post on three occasions (1867–68; 1870–74 and 1879–81) for a total of eight years and ten months—all occasions when Native Police patrolling and private vigilantism appear to be at a height of virulence in Queensland. Like Seymour, Palmer was an unrelenting public defender of the force, always excusing its excesses and refusing to accept any press exposes of its atrocities. In parliament, he stated that Aboriginal peoples were essentially ‘treacherous animal[s]’. He testified to the physical impossibility of raping any indigenous female: ‘There was no occasion to capture or take them forcibly as they were only too willing to come’, usually for ‘a stick of tobacco’.²⁰

Palmer’s extensive service between 1867 and 1881 set the fundamental tone for official policy procedures. A quick examination of pertinent incidents during his three incumbencies reveals the nature of that tone. In October 1867, Palmer stoutly defended the Native Police after Wide Bay squatter William Walsh accused a squad of ‘an atrocious massacre’ at Morinish Diggings, inland from Rockhampton. Between six and twelve fringe-dwelling Aborigines had been slaughtered and injured by native troopers in sight of the small mining township. Palmer branded Walsh a ‘monomaniac’ and riposted that there had really been no massacre; merely ‘an error of judgment’ on the part of a white officer, Myrtill Aubin in conducting a ‘dispersal’ in the hearing of white witnesses. Young Aubin had merely been too precipitate, ‘acting with want of judgment but not cruelty’.²¹

During his second term as colonial secretary, Palmer went a step further. In 1870, he encouraged the white colonial population, ‘with arms in their hands’, to conduct their own defences against ‘very troublesome’ indigenous resistance, to save spending state money on

¹⁹ *Brisbane Courier*, 21 August 1863 in D. Marr, *Killing for Country. A Family Story* (Collingwood: Black Ink, 2023), 262, 279–89; Knox, *Queensland Years*, 234–37; Evans, *History of Queensland*, 97, 283.

²⁰ Waterson, *Biographical Register*, 144; Queensland Parliamentary Debates (QBD), XXXII., 1880, 1137–38 and XLII, 1884, 108; Queensland Legislative Assembly, 4 October 1867, 331–41; *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 25 June 1867.

²¹ Queensland Legislative Assembly, 4 October 1867, 331–41; *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 25 June 1867.

additional Native Police stations. As barrister Henry King responded to this open advocacy for violent public reprisal, a leading government minister was actually ‘casting a slur’ on settler society for not being more trigger-happy. For, as pastoralist John Ferrett added—having ‘done much’ himself in this direction—‘The only way they could protect themselves was by following up the blacks and killing them’.

Brisbane Courier proprietor T.B. Stephens, who had preceded Palmer as colonial secretary (1868–69), capped off this startling debate by asserting that if the Native Police could not legally do ‘wholesale what was now being done in detail’—that is, by becoming ‘avowedly’ an open ‘force of extermination’ rather than a covert one—then, in agreement with Palmer, he believed ‘the best plan’ was ‘to let the *squatters protect themselves*’; in short to countenance an official policy of ‘killing no murder’ along the racial frontier—or, in essence, a cloaked social genocide. For, as Palmer concluded in 1878, ‘Experienced men knew the blacks could only be ruled by the rod of terror’.²²

Then, during his final term in this office, less than a month after re-assuming it in January 1879, Palmer was confronted by a highly detailed press account of an extensive Aboriginal massacre at Cape Bedford, north of Cooktown, written for the Rockhampton *Daily Bulletin* by a former *Argus* journalist and interpreter in the Māori Wars, W. H. Campbell. Two Cooktown residents—one being the brother-in-law of powerful press magnate and parliamentarian Charles Hardie Buzacott—had been injured by Guugu Yimithirr people during an altercation over a large cedar log. In reprisal, some forty Guugu Yimithirr had been trapped in a coastal ravine by Sub-Inspector Stanhope O’Connor (a nephew of then Queensland Governor Arthur Kennedy) and his six Fraser Island troopers: Echo, Johnny, Jimmy, Jack Noble, Barney and Sambo. All twenty-eight males were shot or drowned and many of the surviving fourteen females apparently ravaged. O’Connor and his squad had just been chosen by Palmer to hunt the Kelly Gang in Victoria—for transgressions, it should be noted, that were far more modest than their own—and were awaiting trans-shipment south when the events occurred.²³

When Palmer was informed by Anglican Bishop Matthew Hale of Campbell’s massacre report, he lashed out in angry sarcasm that he had no desire to be ‘catechised’ by the bishop regarding ‘absurd paragraphs in newspapers.’ Hale had been appointed head of the Aboriginal

²² Queensland Legislative Assembly, 1 December 1870, 155–57; QBD, XXII, 1878, 758–59 (my emphasis).

²³ R. Evans, “Queensland’s First Aboriginal Reserve, The Failure of Reform”, *Queensland Review*, 2, 5, November 1971, 8; *Brisbane Courier*, 1 March 1879.

Commission, conceived under the liberal Macalister Ministry, in which Griffith was attorney-general. Within a fortnight, the Hale commission was disbanded by the McIlwraith Government, and its various reform attempts to introduce Aboriginal reserves and labour holding bays at Mackay, Caboolture, Bribie Island, Townsville and Bowen abruptly terminated.²⁴

Between them, these two militantly stone-walling colonial secretaries—Herbert and Palmer—abetted by the iron determination of Police Commissioner Seymour to admit to no error or illegality in the force’s frontier activities, embedded its tarnished performance across more than fifteen years of frontier advance. Other colonial secretaries, such as solicitor Arthur Macalister (1866–67), barrister and later Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Sir Charles Lilley (1868–69), mega-pastoralist and baronet Robert Ramsey Mackenzie (1866 who had directly engaged in frontier atrocities and organised the white-washing 1861 Select Committee into the Native Police, and merchant and manufacturer Robert Muter Stewart (1876–77), as well as squatters William Miles (1877) and Sir Arthur Hodgson (1869) were all of a similar mindset in pushing forward the ongoing dispossession programme at whatever bespattered cost was required—a steadily dedicated pursuit, it would seem, from reading much of the literature, of ‘cannibals’ and ‘animals’.

Only Macalister (under whom a young Sam Griffith served as articled clerk in 1863–65) spoke out in parliament against ‘Aboriginal inhabitants’ being ‘exterminated by a savage force ... brought out to shoot ... them like beasts of the field’ in 1868. Yet he had done nothing practical to stop it while in office the previous year, beyond issuing a memo to Seymour in February, calling for cessation of ‘all *unnecessary* harshness and cruelty’ (my emphasis) by the force. There appears to have been no practical follow up. ‘Only tall talk!’ Colonial Secretary Palmer responded to his outburst. Palmer’s remembrance is enshrined in the North Queensland District of Palmer, the town of Palmerville and the Palmer River.²⁵

²⁴ Evans, *Failure of Reform*, 8–11.

²⁵ Waterson, *Biographical Register*; Queensland Legislative Assembly, 30 January 1868, 955; Colonial Secretary to Commissioner of Police, 26 February 1867, Col. Sec. Letterbook COL/Q4, letter 160 of 1867 (my emphasis). For R.R. Mackenzie, see W. Walker, *The Squatters’ Grab. Where It All Went Wrong* (self-published, 2023), 309.

THIS BRINGS US TO a comparative gloss of Sir Samuel Griffith's spell as colonial secretary—a period of two years and four months from mid-November 1883 until the start of April 1886. Griffith was only the sixth longest serving minister in this role, holding, during this time, three other posts: secretary of public instruction, postmaster general and vice-president of the executive council (or, as later designated, premier). Although the Queensland frontier was steadily contracting during this period, severe and scrappy racial warfare was continuing in Cape York, especially the Cairns hinterland, including the Atherton Tablelands and along the northern telegraph line as well as across the Gulf Country—involving a combination of determined though increasingly desperate Aboriginal resistance, bloody reprisal and dispersal. Griffith, as colonial secretary, must bear direct responsibility for his official part during this time, as must the fifteen colonial secretaries who preceded him and the two who were to follow, in their varying—but usually weighty—degrees of culpability.²⁶

Yet, whereas those before him do not seem, from the official record, to have attempted anything in any way reformist to staunch the frontier bloodshed, on Griffith's watch the cupboard of remedial response is not quite so bare. Not long after he assumed office, a series of official representations were made to him in November 1883, regarding irregularities and atrocities attached to Indigenous labour recruitment in frontier maritime industries in such places as Cardwell, Cooktown, Dunk, Fitzroy, Hornibrook and Palm Islands. The pearl shell and beche-de-mer trade was notorious as an 'abominable' industry, harming the welfare of up to 1,000 Aboriginal recruits. Griffith was informed that it was rife with murder, rapine, kidnapping and the drafting of workers (many of whom were minors) 'after the manner of so many sheep'.

In February 1884, therefore, he oversaw the prosecution of beche-de-mer fisherman Frank Lee of Cape Flattery for the capture in chains of three mainland Aborigines and the attempted massacre of seven more. Despite the 'enthusiastic determination' of Griffith and the other officials, however, the legislation was such that Lee escaped with only a light fine. Then, in May–June, Griffith ordered a Townsville Board of Inquiry to investigate the captain and crew of the *Ceara*, a labour recruiting vessel, charged with the gross irregularities of rape, flogging and murder. The captain, who was said to treat his Aboriginal indents even worse than his

²⁶ Waterson, *Biographical Register*, 74, 203–04; Bottoms, *Conspiracy*, 123–4, 138–41, 147–52, 157–61, 164–66; Drake, *Frontier Wars*, 258–62, 292–98, 322, 340, 342–44, 356.

Pacific Islander crew, was sentenced to three years in prison, the first of which was served in irons.²⁷

Such cases firmed the colonial secretary's resolve to seek passage of the *Native Labourers Protection Act* in July–August, incorporating stiffer penalties across the board. As historian Noel Loos notes, this was 'the first attempt in Queensland at protectionist legislation' for colonised Aboriginal peoples. Although the bill was subsequently passed into law, it was emasculated during long and trying obstructions by squatter parliamentarians led by Palmer and Walsh, fearful not only that lucrative maritime industries might be assailed but also that similar surveillance of labour practices would be extended to the pastoral industry. Every financial penalty in the various clauses was reduced to a risible, ineffectual amount, rendering the legislation essentially toothless. Postmaster General Charles Mein, Griffith's oldest friend, attempting to steer the legislation through the Legislative Council, noted in exasperation that in his ten years' experience he had never encountered such opposition, 'making themselves ludicrous in the eyes of all intelligent people'. Palmer, in turn, attacked Griffith's protective legislation as 'preposterous claptrap ... truckling to Exeter Hall and nothing else'.²⁸

In tandem with this mutilated measure, Griffith was also steering the *Oaths Act Amendment Act* into law, fulfilling an agenda in a way that had largely evaded him as attorney-general in 1874. This act allowed the admission of Aboriginal testimony into colonial law courts, without the necessity for a Christian oath sworn on the Bible. Such allowance had been in effect in Western Australia and South Australia since the 1840s. Queensland was the last Australian colony to fall tardily into line. This marked a significant move institutionally, allowing Aboriginal witnesses a voice at last, particularly in frontier violence cases that managed the exceptional feat of ever arriving at a court hearing. As Sir Arthur Gordon, high commissioner of the Western Pacific, had recently observed to British Prime Minister William Gladstone in April 1883:

the evidence or statement of a native is, in all circumstances, absolutely excluded from all courts of justice in Queensland. Any set of white ruffians, true to one another, can commit any atrocity on natives with absolute impunity.

²⁷ N. Loos, 'Queensland's Kidnapping Act: the *Native Labourers Protection Act of 1884*', *Aboriginal History* 4, no. 2 (1980): 150–73; Loos, *Invasion and Resistance*, 126–29; QBD, XLII, 1884, 106–07; K. Saunders, 'Sir Samuel Walker Griffith: Radical Liberal Premier 1883–88: A Free White Australia', ms in possession of author.

²⁸ Loos, 'Kidnapping Act', 150; QBD, XLII, 80, 131, 180.

The following day, the *London Times* chimed in: ‘the most ordinary legal security against the penetration of injustice on the weaker race is absent in Queensland ... [as] heathen testimony is excluded’. Griffith’s legislation was calculated to forestall this. Even Native Police troopers could now ostensibly provide testimony, though the intense strictures of white colonial culture continued to hold any sense of balanced justice before the law at arm’s length from Aboriginal peoples.²⁹

In late 1884, Griffith began to turn his attention to Native Police reform. Visiting Cairns and Cooktown in November, he promised enquiry into the force’s operations, commenting surprisingly that these were ‘like a sealed book to the Department’, alluding no doubt to Commissioner Seymour’s tight informational control over process. The *Queensland Figaro* commented:

Of course, Griffith is not to blame for the bad management of the force. The [Police] Department is to blame but Sam might turn his attention to the complaints and try to rectify the mismanagement.³⁰

The prior month, at the mining centre of Irvinebank, inland from Herberton, another ‘injudicious’ massacre had again agitated the colonial press. At least four (but possibly six or seven men and women, and a child) Aborigines living in a small camp adjacent to the township had been wantonly slaughtered by native troopers Corporal Sambo, Sandy, Pituri, Larry, Carlo, Willie and Jimmy, unescorted by their white commanding officer, Sub-Inspector William Nichols. More than fifty locals, the *Brisbane Courier* reported in early November, had witnessed the charred bodies of four of the victims. Griffith moved rapidly to prosecute Nichols and his seven troopers on murder charges. These appear to be among the first Native Police charges to proceed beyond committal. Yet, as was invariably the case, the vagaries of local justice thwarted the initiative. Nichols was suspended and despite angry local pressure for his re-instatement, Griffith refused to budge. Nichols’ role had been terminated, Griffith minuted, ‘for gross neglect of duty which resulted in the murder of several inoffensive blacks’.³¹

²⁹ Reid, ‘*That Unhappy Race*’, 97–98; A. Gordon to W. Gladstone, 20 April 1883 in P. Knapland, *Gladstone and Britain’s Imperial Policy* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1927), 18–19; *London Times*, 21 April 1883.

³⁰ *Queensland Figaro*, 22 November 1884.

³¹ *Brisbane Courier*, 14 November and 10 December 1884; *Queensland Figaro*, 10 December 1884; *Cairns Post*, 20 November 1884; *Regina v. William Nichols*, 19 January 1885, QSA, Col A 414/ in-letter 989 of 1885; Joyce, *Griffith*, 379; Bottoms, *Conspiracy*, 148.

The trial of the Aboriginal troopers was similarly aborted in late October, ostensibly because suitable interpreters could not be found. But enough had been disclosed by these men to suggest that their commanding officer had instructed them ‘to shoot the Aborigines and burn them’, while conveniently absenting himself from the onslaught. Griffith was furious upon learning that another white officer, Sub-Inspector Ernest Carr, had illegally urged the recruits to ‘say nothing’. When further pressure was then exerted by yet another officer, First Class Inspector John Isley, that these ‘boys’ now be re-employed as they were ‘too smart troopers for police to lose’, Griffith reacted angrily: ‘These men will under no circumstances be re-employed in the N.P. Force. I have already directed their dismissal and am surprised at this suggestion being put before me’. As a result, both the ‘Nigger Creek’ Native Police camp and detachment were terminated, inciting even more concerted local outrage.³²

Despite continual demands by northern colonists for increased Native Police protection, by early–mid-1885, Griffith, after repeated communication from Commissioner Seymour, began to move in general against the present organisation of the force. Seymour, by this point, had become increasingly convinced that northern Aboriginal ‘depredations’ were mostly motivated by starvation. Settlers would continue to be robbed ‘no matter how strong the police may be’. Thus, when a member of the Cairns Progress Association (Mr Patience) spoke in Brisbane to Griffith, he found in July 1885 that the colonial secretary was ‘altogether averse to the Native Police Force and anxious to abolish it’. Soon afterwards, Griffith affirmed this in the Legislative Assembly, stating that he ‘should be very glad if the Government could see their way to abolish the Native Police altogether’.³³

IT IS CRUCIAL TO recognise that, in concert with his police commissioner, Griffith was not simply uttering vague phrases, regretting frontier behaviour without any accompanying action. Reynolds is simply mistaken on this. Being tactically astute is not the same as doing ‘nothing’. Given the clearly exterminatory cast of much of Queensland society, especially in the far north and north-west at this time, it would have been politically futile and probably suicidal to have faced colonial electors with the force’s sudden, immediate abolition.

³² *Regina v. Sambo, Sandy, Larry, Wille, Jimmy, Pituri and Carlo, Herberton*, 20 January 1885, QSA, ColA414/in-letter 989 of 1885; Joyce, *Griffith*, 114; Richards, *Secret War*, 226.

³³ *Cairns Post*, 30 July 1885; QBD, XLII, 24 September 1885, 826.

So instead, between them, Griffith and Seymour advanced a more gradual policy of ‘complete substitution’. This evolutionary implementation envisaged that by substituting Native Police encampments with conventional police stations and replacing illegal, quasi-military, armed white officer/native trooper detachments with regular police sergeants, senior constables and one or two unarmed Aboriginal trackers, the original force could be progressively phased out. The process began at Irvinebank, Watsonville and Herberton during 1885. Over the next four years, the thirteen remaining Native Police detachments shrank to five (a 65% reduction), replaced by some nineteen regular bush police stations across much of the north. As Loos observes, Commissioner Seymour, ‘with Griffith’s instructions and no alternative’, carried the policy of gradualism forward. On 24 September 1885, Griffith informed parliament:

The practice of black police making raids through the country as in times past would not be allowed any longer ... It would be intended to assimilate the system as nearly as possible to that of the white police.³⁴

This was a clear instance of major policy change, based in part on the increasing realisation that Native Police forays were now becoming redundant to colonisation policy, save in the remotest regions; but it also built on an increasing realisation that this official force could not be excused as an instrument of law in any capacity. Griffith clearly summarised this untenability in February 1892 when he told parliament:

The Native Police had been engaged in warfare undeclared and unacknowledged by any formal declaration of war. [This] would certainly have to be viewed as unconstitutional and unlawful as per definition.³⁵

Clearly, Griffith did not abolish the Native Police outright—but, then again, neither did anyone else. It simply faded away by gradual attrition and the frayed endings of the long frontier process. The last camp was not terminated until the late 1920s.

Before the close of Griffith’s premiership in June 1888, certain of the bush police stations were also doubling as monthly ration centres, where bullocks were killed for meat distribution to semi-starving Aborigines, and tea, sugar and flour also sometimes provided. Land sequestration and radical environmental transformation had led, as Seymour had suspected, to

³⁴ Reid, ‘*That Unhappy Race*’, 134; Loos, *Invasion*, 106.

³⁵ Queensland Legislative Assembly, 4 February 1892; *Queenslander*, 6 February 1892.

younger Aboriginal warriors conducting daring raids in desperate attempts to feed starving elders in the rainforest camps. From late 1882–83, therefore, ration stations had gradually opened at Thornborough, Union Camp, Mitchell River, Northcote and Atherton, eventually spreading to other locales. Frontier violence was progressively eroded, and formerly resistant Aboriginal people eventually became more amenable to bonded labour services for the European land-usurper.³⁶

This tranche of changes—the attrition of Native Police services, more normalised policing, legal prosecution of frontier crimes, introduction of Aboriginal court testimony and an attempted legislative initiative to end frontier ‘blackbirding’ of Aboriginal workers by the maritime industries—heralded novel and piecemeal, though expanding policy measures. Clearly, they add up to something more than merely rhetorical virtue signalling. Furthermore, the establishment of Lutheran mission stations in 1885–87 on Cape York, at Cape Bedford (Elim and Hopevale) and then Bloomfield River and Marie Yamba, ‘facilitated and partly supported by the Queensland Government’, also indicated significant new strategic departures. As architectural historian Jasper Ludewig concludes, these German missions ‘consolidated the authority of the Queensland Government by securing territory and minimising the risk of northern expansion’. Ludewig writes that it was the Griffith regime:

which gazetted Aboriginal reserves and provided basic support to missionary measures, including reserve access, cash subsidies, rations and limited building supplies. The state’s administration of missionary work fell to the Colonial Secretary’s Office which received and processed all missionary correspondence.

Within several years, he calculates, ‘Christian mission stations were fast becoming the solution of choice’ as:

They provided housing, food, tobacco, clothing, medical assistance and education ... trading their goods and services for participation in the Christian life of the mission ... By the early twentieth century, close to thirty mission stations had been opened throughout Cape York and the Torres Strait.³⁷

³⁶ Reid, ‘*That Unhappy Race*’, 134, 136; Evans, *History of Queensland*, 139.

³⁷ J. Ludewig, ‘Securing Territory, Grey Architecture and the German Missions of the Cape York Peninsula 1886–1919’, (PhD thesis, The University of Sydney, 2020), 4, 6, 17, 20–21, 64–65; See also R. Ganter, *The Contest for Aboriginal Souls. European Missionary Agendas in Australia* (Canberra, ANU Press, 2018), 44–45, 50–51, 185.

None of this descended as an unmixed blessing. Burgeoning slave-like colonised labour, reserve segregation and Moravian missionaries ravaging Aboriginal culture as a ‘stronghold of Satan’ contain their own severe problematics; nevertheless, they mark a degree of reformation from outright official exterminatory measures that employed the Snider and Martini–Henry (rifles). It must be appreciated that new procedures, under Griffith’s auspices, confronted an implacable socio-cultural order in northern Queensland where, as was stated in the mid-1870s, ‘Public opinion ... calls for blood and yet more blood’. There was, indeed, blood on so many hands throughout the colony. The Sydney *Bulletin* reported in 1882 how the kidnapping of Aboriginal children was rife and normalised in the north, with the parents repaid ‘not [with] rum from a bottle but lead from a snider’. ‘At any time in the inns of Bowen, Townsville, Cooktown’, London’s *Pall Mall Gazette* observed in late 1880, ‘you may hear people boasting of having killed so many blacks ... they always fire at every black they see’. Native Police Inspector Hervey Fitzgerald, himself mired in three decades of dispersals, commented of his Cooktown ‘neighbours’ in 1885, ‘humanity is unrecognised—their creed, extermination of the natives’.³⁸

Such lurid impressions do not merely apply to a conquering society, where compassion had been subsumed by lust for land and its resources, but also to franchised electorates that could easily displace any non-compliant politicians. Humane approaches to frontier problems garnered few votes in Queensland and Aboriginal peoples themselves had no suffrage. Northern populations had to be slowly cajoled into accepting any redemptive moves. So, reform attempts needed to proceed with extreme caution, in an incremental and almost unobserved fashion. Initiatives during Griffith’s relatively short tenure as colonial secretary were therefore arguably bold ones in the context of their time. What modern hindsight may condemn as doing ‘little’ or ‘nothing’ might equally be conceived as doing rather ‘much’ within what was effectively operating as a genocidal culture where widescale, extrajudicial killing was a permissible norm.

GRIFFITH HAD NOT MERELY been converted to frontier reformism on becoming colonial secretary in 1883. Throughout much of 1880, the colony had been in an upheaval of

³⁸ Ludewig, ‘Securing Territory’, 58, 88; C. Heydon, Parramatta River to *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 January 1874; *Bulletin*, 25 March 1882; *Pall Mall Gazette*, October 1880; Richards, *Secret War*, 234; Bottoms, *Conspiracy*, 188; H. Fitzgerald to Commissioner of Police, 5 March 1885, QSA, Col A 422, 1840 of 1885.

controversy created by one of the longest press campaigns of frontier exposure in Australian history. Headlined 'THE WAY WE CIVILISE' in the influential *Queenslander* weekly, the issue burgeoned from early May 1880 with scorching accusatory editorials composed by skilled Danish journalist Carl Feilberg. His pieces were accompanied by a flood of detailed letters, many written by frontiersmen—some in defence of the 'necessity' of the force for British expansion in the face of determined indigenous resistance, and others condemning its egregiousness, severity, degeneracy, and capacity for ongoing serial atrocity. In September and October, the Legislative Assembly was stung into extended reply after parliamentary opposition members, led by former premier and colonial secretary John Douglas, initiated demands that the new McIlwraith Government institute a full-scale enquiry into the Native Police, in the form of a Royal Commission.³⁹

The furore features prominently in *Truth-Telling*, with Reynolds disclosing how this 'frank admission of brutal reprisal and savage revenge' impacted upon him as a young scholar. 'My understanding of Australian history could never be the same again', he writes. I can attest to its identical effect on me when I first read it in 1965. Reynolds gives due prominence to Douglas's key role in pushing for an enquiry, although he mistakenly states that Douglas was still premier at the time. This is an important slip, for when Douglas was both premier and colonial secretary in 1877–79, he had himself evaded such an enquiry—a fact that elicited governmental jibes during the 1880 debates. Thus, in July 1878, Douglas had headed off Feilberg's earlier calls for a Royal Commission in the *Queensland Patriot*, claiming from office that the Native Police were 'efficient and not needlessly cruel'. The press charges, he had then stated, were 'highly coloured ... camp-fire yarns ... not substantiated by facts'. As leader of the opposition in 1880, he sang quite a different tune.⁴⁰

Yet credit should nevertheless be due to Douglas and his opposition supporters for precipitating two of the most excoriating parliamentary wrangles in Australian colonial history and coming close to instituting a Royal Commission. Reynolds accurately records in *Griffith Review* how 'a group of progressive members of parliament led by John Douglas' had ventured this 'in two long debates', but ultimately failed. Yet Reynolds pertinently fails to mention that Griffith himself was a leading member of this 'progressive' group: so much so that, during the initial

³⁹ *Queenslander*, 20 March 1880–20 December 1880. See QBD, 13 September and 21 October 1880.

⁴⁰ Reynolds, *Truth-Telling*, 168–69, 183; 'premier between 1879 and 1881' cp Reynolds, 'Queensland Frontier', 154; 'premier in 1877 and 1878'. QBD, XXVI, 1878, 757.

debate, Dalby squatter George Simpson queried caustically whether it was Douglas, the Member for Maryborough, or Griffith, the Member for Brisbane, who was ‘leading the opposition’ in the House. As I note in *A History of Queensland* (2007), this 1880 debacle was:

probably the closest colonial politicians ever came to a public admission of official genocide. Both Douglas and Griffith pushed hard for a Royal Commission, but the McIlwraith ministry held firm.

Furthermore, as Ørsted-Jensen concludes of this alliance, ‘The more traditional ... and enlightenment inspired liberals gathered around John Douglas and Samuel Griffith and this was the party to whom [sic] Carl Feilberg was aligned’.⁴¹

A close reading of these debates reveals that it was a question from Griffith about Aboriginal troopers and trackers attached to white police stations that opened proceedings for the opposition. It was also his statement about the procedural form of a Royal Commission, some hours later, that closed it. He spoke four times during this session. When debate resumed in October, Griffith again was strategically the last speaker before the failed vote was taken. In these sessions, Douglas was clearly the driving force, speaking at length and with passion of several frontier atrocities and the illegality of the force.⁴²

In contrast, a more cautious Griffith soberly outlined the legal practicalities of a Royal Commission and how it might proceed. Witnesses, he stated, should be fully indemnified against prosecution for self-incrimination to enable them to come forward confidently. They should then be impelled to provide evidence and answer every question put to them. This would require passage of ‘a special Act ... compelling witnesses and protecting them from the consequences of their evidence’. It might even become, as Feilberg had initially suggested, a travelling commission visiting *key* sites of frontier violence and gathering evidential information there. In this way, it would have been similar to the later Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-Apartheid South Africa (1996), had it gone ahead. The ‘only possible way to get at the whole truth’, Griffith emphasised, was through a Royal Commission, under ‘the

⁴¹ Reynolds, ‘Queensland Frontier’, 144; QBD, XXXII, 13 September 1880, 677; Evans, *History of Queensland*, 138; Ørsted-Jensen, ‘Feilberg’, unpublished ms, 542.

⁴² QBD, 13 September 1880, 665, 673, 674–75, 678; 21 October 1880, 86.

authority of statute'. So, what he was practically delineating here was how a thorough investigation into putative 'crimes against humanity' should be instituted and advanced.⁴³

In his contribution, Griffith applied the technique of carrot and stick to inveigle Legislative Assembly members into supporting the proposal. The carrot was that Feilberg's press assault may have been overblown and that a commission could 'set the stories to rest if they had no foundation', thus helping to redeem Queensland's global reputation. Charges and denials would continue interminably 'until the whole thing was thoroughly enquired into' and truth legally established. The accompanying sharp rap from the stick was that if they, as colonists, did not officially seize the nettle over their own difficulties, a Royal Commission might be embarrassingly imposed on them by Great Britain. This had already happened in the case of Jamaica's Morant Bay scandal of 1865–66, leading to the humiliating dismissal of Governor Edward Eyre, a former Australian explorer. Here, as was his passion, Griffith was following the precepts of institutional justice: only the unfettered processes of British law could establish veracity. Can it be too much of a hasty rush to judgment that has somehow missed all this?⁴⁴

WHEN THE VOTE WAS eventually taken, the motion was lost 24 to 17, with 13 abstaining (one of whom was the later 'southern Aboriginal protector', Archibald Meston, who contributed nothing to the debates). Half of the victors were, unsurprisingly, pastoralists, supported by aligned barristers, a meat processor, publicans and planters. The defeated group, pushing for radical intervention, were mostly urban-based entrepreneurs and professionals. Douglas, Griffith and several others, including Griffith's close friend Arthur Rutledge, had spoken persuasively to manage a 34% minority vote. But the paramount economic and political power, a pastoral industry dependent for profit on the leasing of violently stolen Aboriginal lands, had again won the day. In the aftermath, a dispirited Feilberg would eventually quit Queensland for a berth on the Melbourne *Argus*. At a farewell dinner rapidly organised by

⁴³ QBD, 13 September 1880, 674–75; 21 October 1880, 86; M. Minow, 'Between Vengeance and Forgiveness; South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *Negotiation Journal* 14, no. 4 (2007); Finnane and Richards, 'S.W. Griffith'.

⁴⁴ QBD, 13 September 1880, 674–75, 678; 21 October 1880, 86; G. Dutton, *The Hero as Murdered. The Life of Edward John Eyre* (Sydney, William Collins, 1967).

Douglas with members of the Johnsonian Club, Feilberg sat at his right hand and Griffith at his left.⁴⁵

Let us pause a moment to consider this tableau on a ‘very pleasant evening of song and recitation’: is it not a puzzle why, in Reynolds’s estimation, the apparent paragon, Feilberg and the suspect reprobate, Griffith should now be so surprisingly seated and dining together in places of honour at the head table, before some sixty well-appointed guests? The image certainly disrupts any simple hero–villain dichotomy. We have reviewed above Griffith’s solution to the Native Police issue: a cautious pursuit of the politics of the possible in gradually dismantling the force. Feilberg, in contrast, had certainly composed brave and withering critiques of frontier excesses in his press columns, but what was *his* solution to it all? The answer is surprising.

Ørsted-Jensen’s exhaustive sifting of Feilberg’s press columns shows that he was advocating for a *more* intensely targeted conflict response. The Native Police, Feilberg argued, should be *more* effectively militarised to combat Aboriginal resistance. It should be highly drilled and disciplined and ‘quick to punish’ under a military field commandant rather than a distant police commissioner. Instead of haphazard massacre forays, the organisation could then efficiently pinpoint ‘the right mob of savages’ to assault. ‘Blacks must be shot when they injure and attack the whites’, he reasoned: ‘there is no other way of dealing with them ... even if it were to lead to their complete extermination’. Native Police atrocities occurred, Feilberg believed, not so much because the entire system was suspect, but rather that the Aboriginal troopers, by their racial nature, were ‘black demons who would sulk if deprived of their full smell of blood’. Hopefully, if they were ‘efficiently drilled in military fashion’ this might curb their propensity for ‘hacking the wounded’.⁴⁶

Feilberg’s solution, therefore, was a heightened warfare scenario, backed by ‘military training, drilling and an arms depot’. ‘It is a savage war the Native Police must wage’, he declared, without ever explaining how such a war could be legitimately prosecuted in a British colony against ‘British subjects’ ostensibly under Crown protection. There was, therefore, virtually no ray of hope in anything he advocated as ‘reform’ to assuage the plight of tribal First Nation

⁴⁵ QBD, 13 September 1880, 668; 21 October 1880, 86; *Brisbane Courier*, 3 and 5 June 1882; *Telegraph*, 5 June 1882.

⁴⁶ *Queensland Patriot*, 1 July 1878.

peoples. They ‘must be subdued’, he wrote in June 1880, in his seventh editorial of ‘THE WAY WE CIVILISE’ series. After all, they were just, ‘A few thinly scattered hordes of savages without even the smallest rudiments of civilization ... We assert our mastery over creatures lower in the scale of humanity than ourselves’.

And what were Aboriginal peoples in any case? They were, he summarised, a ‘*provisional* humanity’ (my emphasis) only—beings ‘who preceded us in the occupation of the land’. Whatever his racial prejudices, Griffith never spoke on the public record like this. Griffith University should clearly think long and hard before stripping Griffith’s name from any lecture, abandoning the repute of possibly the greatest jurist in early Australia, for that of—in Reynolds’s estimation—the ‘more appropriate’ journalist, Feilberg.⁴⁷

From this substantial empirical unfolding, should we rightly be charging Samuel Griffith with ‘crimes against humanity’? From Griffith’s longest speech during the 1880 debates, Reynolds chooses to focus on one enigmatic sentence, the only moment in *Truth-Telling* where Griffith is given a say. Griffith’s words read:

Of course he [Griffith] could not say that all cases of reprisals should be treated as murders because there were many cases in which recourse could only be had to the tribal law, and in which it would be absurd to allow the offence to go unrevenged.

This confusing sentence seems to be read by Reynolds to infer that Griffith was disregarding frontier murder as a crime while supporting vengeance as a form of legal recourse. It is certainly a perplexing sentence when plucked from context. But it might equally be read as the speaker juggling with the suggestion that, on the racial frontier, a *de facto* war, rather than a *de jure* one, had evolved—as most Queensland frontier historians would now agree. Several parliamentary speakers had already inferred this. They had also observed that a tribal law of *lex talionis* (retaliation in kind) was in operation, requiring at appropriate times an equal and opposite ‘defensive’ response from incomers. But, whatever our conclusion, it is clear, from examining the entire speech, that Griffith was not sanctioning racial murder, either by Native Police or private colonists, as a general process. For, in a preceding sentence not quoted by Reynolds, Griffith clearly states:

⁴⁷ *Queenslander*, 20 March and 31 July 1880 (my emphasis); Reynolds, *Truth-Telling*, 231.

For his own part... if a man was in the Native Police or out of it, that if a murder was committed, in the interests of common humanity, the offenders should be treated as murderers.

It is puzzling why Griffith is not permitted to present this clarification in Reynolds's account. For, in case the interpretation is still not abundantly clear, Griffith then reiterates helpfully, after uttering that extracted, muddy sentence: 'But otherwise he [Griffith] thought they should be *guided by the dictates of common humanity*; and he believed a Royal Commission would be of great advantage [to that end]'.⁴⁸

THIS SPEECH IS ALSO significant in harking back to prior dramatic developments in Griffith's political career, helping us adjudicate further on matters of crime, humanity and blood. Griffith, in his late twenties, had become the fourth Queenslander to hold the portfolio of attorney-general—a position he maintained under three successive liberal ministries from 1874 until 1878. Of the eleven attorney-generals between 1859 and 1898, he was the second longest serving (six years and eleven months) after barrister and judge Ratcliffe Pring (nine years and seven months). In this portfolio, Griffith was 'only intermittently associated with Aboriginal policy and administration'; however, unlike Pring—who had attempted to obscure the trail of Native Police atrocity—Griffith did try to pursue legal prosecution of frontier crimes. This was an unenviable task in the 1870s, as border violence peaked, and Native Police camps reached their widest spread. As the Queensland legal establishment teetered ineffectively above it all, Griffith found himself thoroughly thwarted at every turn. First, in 1875, he had voiced opposition to 'any special law of evidence applicable to the cases of Aboriginal offenders only', followed by the *Oaths Act Amendment Act of 1876*, allowing non-Christians to provide court testimony—the latter being stultified by the pastoralist-dominated Legislative Council.⁴⁹

Unlike previous attorney-generals—Pring and the barristers Lilley (1865–68), Herbert's companion John Bramston (1865; 1870–74) and Edward McDevitt (1874), who had all done virtually nothing about frontier crimes—Griffith, during most of 1876, attempted to prosecute

⁴⁸ Reynolds, *Truth-Telling*, 227–28; QPD, 13 September 1880, 674–75; QPD, 13 September 1880, 675 (my emphasis); see also Finnane and Richards, 'S.W. Griffith' for an extended, legalistic explanation/defence of Griffith's extracted sentence.

⁴⁹ Waterson, *Biographical Register*, 198–205; Hillier, *If You Leave*, 307–19; Finnane and Richards, 'S.W. Griffith'; Attorney-general to Colonial Secretary, 28 June 1875, QSAA, ID ITM 36952, 1876, 1311; Joyce, *Griffith*, 52–53; For Pring's tarnished record, see Marr, *Killing for Country*, 235, 241, 248, 262.

criminal intent by certain Native Police officers. Four such cases were pursued. First, from December 1875, Sub-Inspector Hervey Fitzgerald was investigated for publicly stripping and flogging an unnamed Aboriginal woman outside a public hotel at Burdekin Crossing. A considerable crowd of white witnesses failed to cooperate with legal proceedings and Fitzgerald escaped with a ‘sufficient’ reprimand, at the insistence of Queensland Governor William Cairns. Fitzgerald was dismissed from the force but soon re-employed in the Gold Escort Service. His superior, Inspector Aulaire Morisset, had blithely reported:

I do not suppose Mr Fitzgerald did anything more than any civilian would have done under similar circumstances ... [but] I cannot think he chose a fitting time and place for such a revolting duty.

Such was the brutally entrenched colonial culture against which a young attorney-general strove to make some legal headway.⁵⁰

In a second case, in April 1876, Acting Sub-Inspector Ernest Carr, whom we met earlier, was accused by the *Rockhampton Bulletin* of shooting a chained Aboriginal prisoner, then burning the body at Marlborough. Once more, because of the lack of availability of white witnesses, the intended case could not legally advance. Third, in July, Acting Sub-Inspector John Carroll was arraigned for the killing of two of his troopers, on separate occasions, by bullet and whip. Again, the three white witnesses, seemingly warned off by intimidation, failed to appear and a resigned Griffith minuted, ‘there is not sufficient evidence agst [sic] Carroll to justify me in taking any proceedings’.⁵¹

The most notorious case involved Sub-Inspector Frederick Wheeler, one of the most dedicated frontier killers, active in the Native Police since 1857. An event in March 1876, however, provided a seemingly definite chance to convict him, not for frontier dispersal activity, but for the vicious flogging to death of a young Aboriginal station worker, Jemmy, in the Clermont region. There were credible white eyewitnesses to the entire affair, ready to testify to this crazed assault with stockwhip, saddle girth and boots—inflamed, it would seem, by sexual jealousy over some captured Aboriginal women. Jemmy spent five days in extreme agony before dying, declaring, ‘Me altogether broken inside’. Griffith, intent on securing the death penalty for

⁵⁰ Richards, *Secret War*, 234, 248–49; Governor Cairns to Lord Carnarvon, 18 April 1876, PRO CO234/36 59128QLD 7637 (Public Records Office, United Kingdom).

⁵¹ *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 15 April and 27 July 1876; Hillier, *If You leave*, 62–76; Cairns to Carnarvon, 18 April 1876.

Wheeler, ordered his arrest, stating: 'I direct that Mr Wheeler be prosecuted for the wilful murder of Jemmy ... Inform Colonial Secretary accordingly'. He determined to prosecute the case personally in court.

Wheeler was a devil-may-care, garrulous individual who during trial, it was feared, would candidly tip the bucket on the entire frontier 'dispersal' business across his two decades of frontier service. As Governor Cairns observed, 'the result might ... be to discredit the organisation of the Native Police with many leading Colonists, including some of the most prominent public men'. The political and legal fraternity swung into action.⁵²

Though bail was denied in the Magistrates Court, it was astonishingly granted to the accused murderer by the Queensland Supreme Court. The judge in question was Justice Alfred Lutwyche (after whom a Brisbane suburb is named). Several years later, historian G.W. Rusden claimed to possess evidence that Lutwyche had become engrossed in a plot to facilitate Wheeler's escape. 'Vigorous activity between certain people at Clermont and both Houses of Parliament' over releasing Wheeler was noted in the *Brisbane Courier*. The considerable sum of four hundred pounds bail was raised by local squatter John Stevenson, the recently elected Member for Clermont. Wheeler paid nothing. Two further sureties of two hundred pounds each were given by William Pattison, a prominent Rockhampton businessman and later general manager of the Mount Morgan goldmine, and by a baronet's son, Hugh Miles Milman, later deputy commissioner of Western New Guinea and the Western Pacific. Milman has a small Queensland township named after him.⁵³

Thus, Griffith was thwarted once more and Wheeler vanished from the colony, dying six years later in Batavia, employed as a plantation manager. In 1880, Griffith complained how Wheeler, upon an 'indictment for murder', had been granted unprecedented bail '*by some extraordinary means and got away*' (my emphasis). He clearly understood how he and the legal system had been humiliated in their intentions by a leading judge. Griffith had then proceeded against Wheeler 'with a bench warrant but he was never found'. This was followed in early 1879 by

⁵² Griffith, minute 21 March 1876, QSA Miscellanea, Alan Queale Collection, Griffith University: file 871/1876; Cairns to Carnarvon, 18 April 1876; Hillier, *If You Leave*, 307–18.

⁵³ Notice of Application for Order to admit Prisoner to Bail, before Justice Lutwyche, 8 May 1876; Bail granted 12 May 1876, Queale Collection; *Telegraph*, 10 May 1876; *The Week*, 13 May 1876. The Crown Solicitor drew Lutwyche's attention to *Plunkett's Australian Magistrate* (370) as to the unprecedented nature of the action; *Brisbane Courier*, 23 November 1876; G.W. Rusden, *History of Australia* (London, Chapman and Hall, 1883), Volume 3, 146; *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 29 April 1876; *Capricornian*, 20 May 1876; Ørsted-Jensen, 'Feilberg', 371–72.

Ratcliffe Pring, as attorney-general once more, entering a *nolle prosequi*, closing down the Wheeler case completely. Pring had previously protected Wheeler from prosecution in 1860, following massacres at Fassifern and Dugandan. The killing of Jemmy in 1876, Griffith stated was, ‘from the evidence as clear a case of murder as ever came under his notice ... he thought an indictment of that sort should have stood until the man was caught’.

Whatever one’s opinion of Griffith overall, one must conclude the blood was dripping from other hands in the notorious Wheeler case.⁵⁴

IN MY OWN WRITINGS mentioning Samuel Griffith, I am, at best, equivocal towards him. In *Fighting Words* (1999), I highlight his anti-Chinese activism and in *A History of Queensland* I typify him as, ‘to some, offensively worthy and devious’ but also as, ‘astute, cultured, dogged’. I write that he could be ‘aloof, compulsive, fastidious and vain’, even though ‘politically outstanding, with the charisma and intellectual power of a statesman’. I vacillate on his ‘brittle’ personality—making him a man whom many of his time found hard to love. He appears in my *Griffith Review* essay (2022) as having ‘dangerous powers in the matters of empire, race and class’. I am especially scathing of his 1890 claim that, ‘Few had taken more interest in the welfare of the native population than him’.⁵⁵

Yet research for the present essay has brought me to review the latter statement afresh. I believe now that Griffith was probably right—he *had* done ‘more’ on the side of reform than others before him had attempted. It is not, of course, a broad claim to make, given that virtually all his Queensland political and legal contemporaries had either done nothing positive for Aboriginal welfare on the frontier or had made the situation worse. He appears alone among the many colonial secretaries directly in charge of the Native Police, as well as the eleven attorney-generals responsible for overview of the law, in attempting *anything* even mildly mitigative in the face of chronic frontier ruination and disorder. So, should he fairly be singled out as some alleged criminal, acting ‘against humanity’ for doing so ‘little’?

⁵⁴ Reynolds, *Truth-Telling*, 227–28; Marr, *Killing for Country*, 240–41; QPD, 4 October 1867, 334, and 13 September 1880, 674–75 (my emphasis).

⁵⁵ R. Evans, ‘Night of Broken Glass. The Anatomy of an Anti-Chinese Riot’ in R. Evans, *Fighting Words. Writing about Race* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1999), 79–94; R. Evans, ‘Griffith’s Welsh Odyssey. Mining new perspectives’, *Griffith Review: Acts of Reckoning* 76 (2022): 136–37, 140–41; Evans, *History of Queensland*, 115.

If one sees any interpretive advantage in scouring the political terrain for individual culprits, I suggest that names such as Robert Herbert, Arthur Hunter Palmer, Robert Ramsey Mackenzie, Ratcliffe Pring and David Seymour—not to mention Alfred Lutwyche, Hugh Milman, Frederick Wheeler and many of his upper-class Native Police officer compatriots for a start—might take precedence in any list of indictments. There are many more such names: it had truly been a Queensland free-for-all. A dozen of the 18 colonial secretaries between 1859 and 1896 were also leading pastoralists whose economic interests Native Police sorties were protecting. Griffith, being more anti-pastoralist than pastoralist throughout his career, was not one of these.

Thus, truth-telling, as Reynolds avers, is ‘complex’ and should be incommensurate with tunnel vision, requiring instead a pursuit of the whole truth. No doubt there is something vicarious in pinning the racial sins of an entire colonial order on one targeted individual; interrogating him solely, out of context of his place and time, as a sort of historical scapegoat, sacrificial lamb or, perhaps in Griffith’s case, a severely grilled Welsh rarebit. Granted, in the process, it does claim for any accusers a large historical scalp; but is the trashing of one glowing reputation to assuage the historical wrongs of so many others really a just or productive intellectual tactic?

In today’s retributive ‘woke’ climate of ‘cancel culture’, the suggestion to incriminate some lofty ‘dead white male’, whom even contemporaries never much liked but respected, is likely to gather adherents swiftly. The suggestive positioning of him, however, within the iconoclasm of toppling monuments of genocidists and slavers—such as the statue of Bristol slave trader Edward Colston, which was recently rolled into Bristol Harbour—appears to be misplaced. For Griffith was anything but a slaver; indeed, he was probably the diametric opposite of one. As recent research by historian Kay Saunders shows, his non-conformist, evangelical family were closely aligned, indeed intermarried, with that of Christopher Newman Hall, a congregational scholar and member of the United States anti-slavery crusade. At Sydney University in the early 1860s, as the American Civil War raged, Griffith was influenced by the libertarian lecturer John Wooley, whose study, *The Negro Question* (1850) argued forcefully that ‘no group [was] destined to be servants to another’. Another powerful influence was the radical, utopian scholar Morris Birbeck Pell, of Quaker, anti-slavery background.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ B. Carlson and T. Farrelly, *Monumental Disruptions. Aboriginal People and Colonial Commentators in So-called Australia* (Canberra, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2023), 6; K. Saunders, ‘Sir Samuel Walker Griffith. A Journey from the Dark Satanic Mills to the High Court of Australia in Five Episodes’, *Queensland History Journal* 24, no. 10 (2021): 877–95 .

Griffith's family had migrated to the Queensland region under the auspices of the London Missionary Society, and his highly educated, congregational father was, for a time, local secretary of the British Aborigines Protection Society. He was one of the influential local Christian ministers pressing for the establishment of the first Queensland Aboriginal Commission in 1873. Griffith's own commitment to anti-slavery can be weighed in his relentless pursuit of Melanesian indenture in the 1880s, conducted almost to the point of obsession, and his parallel attempt to regulate what amounted to Aboriginal quasi-slavery in the maritime industries. That the latter attempt failed was despite, not because of, his efforts. Simultaneous with his attempts to enforce the death penalty on two *Hopeful* vessel recruiters in late 1884 for killing Harris Islanders—in the face of an infuriated public outcry that vehemently asserted whites should never be punished for killing blacks—he was pursuing Sub-Inspector Nichols and his seven Aboriginal troopers for indigenous massacre at Irvinebank.⁵⁷

Reynolds's suspected 'Federation fathers'—Forrest, Downer and Griffith—held in common an implacable belief in the virtues of Britishness. They were anglophile imperialists, unshakeably convinced of their own racial supremacy over 'vastly inferior' Aboriginal peoples who were destined to 'die out' before Britain's majestic worldwide advance. Practically every white Australian colonist thought this way: Aborigines would disappear, as decreed by the Western sciences—both physical and social. In this era of high racism, there were almost no dissenters. You did not argue with science; science was always right. Aborigines would disappear and, with their passing, so too would the uncomfortable memory of pioneering transgressions fade. On a grand global scale, everything would fall into place for the 'Master Race'.

Yet Griffith differs from Forrest and Downer in other specific ways. For instance, Forrest, as explorer, had directly—and upon his own admission—killed resistant Aboriginal people. And, as historian Chris Owen shows, Forrest as premier (1890–1901) was ramping up frontier policing intensity in the Kimberley (where his family ran vast pastoral leases) to the point of a 'war of extermination', at the same time as the Griffith governments were diminishing such official intensities. Whereas Downer successfully defended the notorious Native Police officer

⁵⁷ K. Saunders, *Workers in Bondage. The origins and Bases of Unfree Labour in Queensland 1824-1916* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1982), 55–152; R. Evans et al, *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland. a History of Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1993), 150–53, 186; Ørsted-Jensen, *Frontier History*, 27–31, 75, 138; Bottoms, *Conspiracy*, 148.

William Wiltshire, in court for killing station Aborigines in the Northern Territory, Griffith, in diametrically opposite fashion, had unsuccessfully pursued another infamous officer, Frederick Wheeler, for prosecution on a murder charge for a similar crime in Queensland. So, even the founding fathers are not in every respect of a piece with each other on these matters.⁵⁸

CAN THERE BE a more intellectually rewarding way of understanding brutal colonial dispossession and determining historical responsibility with greater precision? Rather than a narrowing path towards individual blame, a broader systems analysis of attached political and economic interests in the land acquisition quest might bring us closer to the heart of this foundational, structural violence. Institutionally, as we have seen, virtually all local politicians, representing largely pastoral interests, attached themselves with little demur to the grim land-usurpation measures at the core of colonialism. As a body, with few complainants, they maintained the process; side-stepping, camouflaging and denying it as the decades passed. No one person can be held singularly responsible for this—although many, arguably, could be comprehensively indicted. In one debate after another, parliamentarians would recognise that the Native Police were an *illegal* arm of the public service, yet they financed and perpetuated it as an essential ingredient of land engrossment and primitive material profit making. Land and resource hunger overlaid moral qualms, leading to, in legal historian Michael Grewcock's resounding phrases, 'a continuum of criminogenic, arguably genocidal state practices ... an egregious form of state criminality'.⁵⁹

Yet such political power was merely the expression of dominant economic power—the elite control not merely of parliaments by the large pastoral landholders, largely composing the colony's ruling class, but over Aboriginal *Country* itself. These 'livestock entrepreneurs'—to employ historian Tony Barta's arresting label—were 'the main beneficiaries of profit from the stolen lands'. It was in their direct material interests that the logic of near elimination was maintained for so long. And, as Raphael Lemkin, creator of the first genocide definition, put it

⁵⁸ C. Owen, 'Every Mother's Son is Guilty'. *Policing the Kimberley Frontier of Western Australia 1882–1905* (Crawley, AWA Publishing, 2016), 11, 98, 295–369; Roberts, *Frontier Justice*, 133–34; R. Evans, 'Genocide in Northern Australia 1824–1928' in *The Cambridge World History of Genocide*, ed. N. Blackhawk et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 523–24.

⁵⁹ For instance, QPD, 4 October 1867, 335, 339; 30 January 1868, 956; 1 December 1870, 156–57; 26 August 1884, 80; M. Grewcock, 'Settler-colonial Violence. Primitive Accumulation and Australia's Genocide', *State Crime* 7, no. 2 (2018) 222, 248.

in 1945, such genocidal processes are ‘largely a function of such interest’. As he asserted, what was fundamentally at play was a process of *facit cui prodest*: ‘He, who in whose interest it was, did it’.⁶⁰

What were the statistical dimensions of this class grouping? As historian Bill Thorpe’s research into Queensland’s colonial class relations shows, by 1876 there were 3,145 pastoral run holders, consisting of individual owners (55%), partnerships (34.5%) and companies (10.5%). Across the ensuing three decades, this contracted to 1,161 holdings as runs were consolidated and further engrossed. By Federation, individual owners had slipped to 38.1% and partnerships to 19.4%, while company holdings had sharply risen to 42.3%. Thus, the early period of land taking was dominated by local, individual squatters with ‘property acquired by conquest’. The intensity of First Nation resistance was a direct threat to such enterprises, calling for prolonged quasi-military responses. It was, thus, in these squatters’ direct economic interests that Native Police patrolled and ‘dispersed’, and more furtive private bands—often pastoral employees—ambushed and slaughtered.⁶¹

Increasingly, however, ownership of these enterprises fell under the control of absentee companies and banks based in Sydney, Melbourne and London. For instance, in 1876, the Bank of New South Wales held 84 Queensland runs, the largest aggregate in the colony. By the early 1900s, writes Thorpe, ‘the largest sheep stockowners, with one exception, were all based outside of Queensland and owned over 90 percent of stock’. These, ultimately, were the ones ‘in whose interest it was’ for ‘an illegal terror warfare against people officially designated as British subjects, yet treated as enemy insurgents’, to be unleashed and continued. Such businessmen and bankers could basically wash their hands of the carnage as they were so far away and, in their own interests, need know nothing much about it. Nevertheless, this was, as Feilberg noted in 1880, a ‘policy of deliberate extermination ... unremittingly pursued’.⁶²

⁶⁰ T. Barta, ‘A Very British Genocide. Acknowledgment of Indigenous Destruction in the Founding of Australia and New Zealand’ in *Genocide of the Indigenous, Early Modern and Imperial Worlds*, ed. N. Blackhawk, B. Kiernan, B. Madley and R. Taylor, Volume 2 of *The Cambridge World History of Genocide* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023), 46–47, 62; Evans and Ørsted-Jensen, “‘Pale Death’”, 143; R. Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe. Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (New York, University of Columbia Press, 1945), xiv.

⁶¹ W.L. Thorpe, ‘A Social History of Colonial Queensland. Towards a Marxist Analysis’ (PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1985), 141–44; *Queenslander*, 20 November 1880.

⁶² Thorpe, ‘Colonial Queensland’, 141, 149–50; see also R. Evans, ‘Genocide in Northern Australia 1824–1928’, in *Cambridge World History of Genocide Vol. II*, ed. N. Blackhawk et al (Cambridge University Press, 2023),

Tracking this composite involvement is probably not as emotionally rewarding as a hue and cry after one prominently named individual, but it does provide a better explanatory grounding for what had so banefully transpired. Queensland grazier George Ranken saw this clearly in his serialised reminiscence of 1878–79. After graphically describing a large Native Police massacre, induced by a call from the pastoral superintendent of an absentee company, he observes how these large enterprises had ‘no knowledge or interest in anything except mere business results’, because:

the proprietors ... being merely business speculators, working for the station with bank money ... consider the questions of policy and humanity in reference to the blacks as the very last matter they have anything to do with.

It was all a question of pursuing ‘pounds, shillings and pence’, fortified by the plausible deniability that distance allows. It was essentially this ‘purity of the profit motive’—as ‘income’ led inexorably on towards ‘outcome’—that was driving the gory narrative forward.⁶³

The frontier, as anthropologist/historian Deborah Bird Rose once noted, is not the nation; but ‘rather a site for the making of the nation’. And, as Grewcock succinctly comments, this relentless unfolding was actualising ‘the establishment and consolidation of capitalism in Australia’, suggesting a nation at least partially forged on the political economy of dispossession or, quite frankly, protracted land theft and killing. Perhaps, therefore, as vigilant historians, it is imperative that we focus our efforts on following that money trail towards the guiltiest and bloodiest of hands, within a more rewarding interpretive matrix of class/communal responsibility, rather than exclusively fixating on the ‘manicured lawyer’s hands’ of a single, outstanding colonial player.⁶⁴

508–33; *Queenslander*, 20 November 1880. Every editorial of ‘The Way We Civilise’ series tends to adopt this theme.

⁶³ G. Ranken, *Windabyne: A Record of Bygone Times in Australia* (London; Remington, 1895), Chapter 5.

⁶⁴ D.B. Rose, *Reports From a Wild Country: Ethics of Decolonisation* (Sydney, University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 58; Grewcock, ‘Settler-Colonial Violence’, 222, 225; Finnane and Richards, ‘S.W. Griffith’, Conclusion.

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Among a substantial range of publications dealing with racial and ethnic themes, landmark studies include the co-authored *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland* (1975, 1988, 1993); *Fighting Words. Writing about Race* (1999) and *A History of Queensland* (2007). His latest contributions to frontier research include the ground-breaking, co-authored “‘Pale Death ... Around Our Footsteps Springs’: Assessing Violent Mortality on the Queensland Frontier from State and Private Exterminatory Practices” in M. Adhikari (ed.) *Civilian Driven Violence and the Genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Settler Societies* for Routledge, London in 2021 and “Genocide in Northern Australia, 1824-1928” in B. Kiernan (ed.) *The Cambridge World History of Genocide*, a milestone three volume study, published by Cambridge University Press in 2023.

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