

Conflict in the Valley: The Triumph of the Wonnarua
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In the following paper, Koori author and historian, James Wilson-Miller, examines the conflict and the subsequent history of his people, his ancestors, his Gringai Clan and his Nation, the Wonnarua. Wilson-Miller is a direct descendant of those Wonnarua people who experienced the armed force of the British Empire as European frontiers pushed into Wonnarua lands, later known as the Hunter Valley. His view is a unique interpretation of Koori History. For the first time the story of Black Australia does not end when the battle between the gun and spear, was won by the gun. Rather this is the beginning of a story of triumph for the survivors of those frontier days, who resisted every attempt to destroy them as a separate race and culture. That triumph forms the basis of Wilson-Miller's book, *Koori: A Will To Win*, published in 1985. A book recognised by many, as the first full Black History of an Australian Indigenous family. In this paper he provides an overview of frontier history from the perspective of his people – the Wonnarua from the Hunter Valley.

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About the Author

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Dedication

I dedicate this paper to my late son Adrian James Miller who passed away age 36 on the 26th November, 2005.

The history of my people has as captured the imaginations of Australian writers in relatively recent times, more specifically from the 1970s. It is hard to remember that only forty-three years ago Professor J.A. La Nauze declared that Australian historians only noticed Aborigines as a melancholy footnote. Since then Australia has been flooded with Koori histories. Most writers have confined their attention to the frontier days. They have written rattling good yarns of how the gun defeated the Koori spear. Other more analytical historians have shown how the British depicted the Kooris as inferior beings deserving of the strong action taken against them in the struggle for control of their tribal lands. Very few writers' recognised Koori heroes and the role they played in trying to defend their lands against the invaders. Kooris were treated as the helpless victims of the white invasion, and heart-rending tragedies were the most common interpretations of culture contact and conflict. Even writers who have highlighted incidents of barbaric treatment meted out to Kooris by settlers and soldiers have given yet another Anglo-oriented perspective. This is inevitable, if the story ends with the pacification of the frontier. Most writers have ignored the post-frontier history where the modern spirit of the Koori survivors was forged. There are lessons to be learned in frontier histories, but only in the context of what happened after. In this paper I provide an overview of frontier history from the perspective of my people – the Wonnarua from the Hunter Valley.

The Beginnings of War on the Frontier

A Wonnarua uprising in the Valley in 1826 highlighted the dilemma that colonial administrators found themselves in when faced with a hostile Indigenous people. Theoretically the Kooris had been British subjects after the British flag was raised on Possession Island by Captain Cook in 1770. However, earlier governors such as Phillip and Macquarie merely treated Kooris as hostile aliens outside the pale of British law, even though they admitted that Koori violence was provoked by barbarous conducts of convicts and settlers. Their solution to a frontier uprising was a swift military reprisal. There was no thought ever given to the fact that Kooris were British subjects.

Governor Brisbane in 1824 did pay lip-service to the niceties of British law in dealing with the Wiradjuri uprising in the Bathurst district, in 1824. Martial law was declared before the troops were sent in, but the result was the worst example of indiscriminate slaughter by soldiers and settlers alike up to that time. Roger Milliss, in

his work Waterloo Creek, has shown that the same ruthless treatment was meted out to the Wonnarua of the Hunter Valley in 1826. The governor gave his blessing to vigilante action on the part of the settlers even though he acknowledged settler culpability in provoking the uprising.

The Status of Kooris Under British Law

The whole question of the status of Kooris under British law was raised in the trial of Lieutenant Lowe, the military officer in command of the British troops in the Hunter Valley in 1826. Lowe was the first officer to be put on trial for the killing of a Koori. Lowe's defence counsel, Dr Wardell, said that the Kooris were outside the pale of British law, stating that "A member of a savage tribe, having taken the life of a British subject, according to the laws of nature his life is justly forfeit". However according to the Chief Justice Francis Forbes, Dr Wardell was wrong, and Kooris were in fact British subjects. Even so, the rights of Koori people under British law were circumscribed and Koori evidence would not be accepted in a British court of law for most of the nineteenth century. In Low's case the result was that the white witnesses gave such a confused account what happened that Lowe was set free. This was one of many examples of white settlers acting outside their own laws and getting away with it. Another example occurred when twelve Wonnarua Kooris were murdered for supposedly killing a sheep. This happened only six weeks before Lowe's trial. The shepherds who committed this atrocity said they were acting in self-defence but it was found out later that not one shepherd had been harmed and not one sheep killed. Twelve Kooris, supposedly British subjects had been killed and not the slightest effort was made to bring their assailants to justice. Not even an inquiry was held. Such was the fate of so-called British subjects.

British Racism

The frontier period also demonstrates how conflict sharpened British racism. British racism stemmed largely from the earliest days of slave trade. It was used as a crude justification for the brutal treatment of Negro slaves. Negroes in particular and black people in general were denigrated in traditional British racial philosophy. This racism was imported to Australia as part of the invisible luggage of the early colonists. Such racism could range from mild cultural chauvinism to the language of vile hatred. The worst examples occurred on the frontiers. For instance, one of the first white settlers to be given a grant of land in the Hunter Valley was Peter Cunningham. Goaded by the events of 1826, he put forward the view that Kooris were

not far removed from the ape. “How is it”, he wrote”, that the abject animal state in which the (Aborigines) live should place them at the very zero of civilisation, constituting in a measure the connecting link between man and the monkey tribe – for really some of the old women only seem to require a tail to complete the identity”. Such foul racist statements from a supposedly civilised people who prided themselves in Christian brotherhood, show that my people not only had to deal with the alien culture and land-grabbing habits of the invader, but also the invisible forces of racist thinking.

Another example, the most racist piece of writing I have ever come across, was written in 1838 when frontier violence in New South Wales was at its height. It came from the pen of a bigoted squatter who had taken up land around the Murrumbidgee. He described the Kooris in his area as, “these hordes of Aboriginal cannibals, to whom the veriest reptile that crawls holds out matter for emulation, and who are far, very far below the meanest brute in rationality and very feeling pertaining thereto.” His hatred continued with the following words, “the Aborigines of my native country are the most degenerate, despicable and brutal race of beings in existence, and stand as it were to scorn and shame creation – a scoff and a jest upon humanity – they are insensible to every tie which binds man to his friend – husband to his wife – parent to its child – creation to its God”. It is ironic to think that at the time these letters were published not a Koori in the whole of the colony knew of their existence. The racism they experienced was the physical kind, from the barrel of a gun.

The Post-Frontier Period

Military Defeat

Where did this situation leave the survivors of the Wonnarua in the Hunter Valley? First of all the Wonnarua had been militarily defeated by the British Army. This defeat was inevitable. The Wonnarua were faced by the most militaristic race of people on earth. The one hundred years prior to 1826 show up Britain’s extremely poor record of peaceful co-existence. Britain was at war on no fewer than seven occasions and had to suppress one major civil uprising in 1745. Britain began its lamentable war record in the period with the incredibly stupid War of Jones’s Ear (1739-1742), followed by the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), The Seven Years War (1756-1763), the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783), with war with France (1779-1783), the Napoleonic War (1793-1815) and the War of 1812 (1812-1815). This is not to mention a host of minor wars fought by the British Army

in the Empire's colonies in India and North America. On top of this the British were engaged in the notorious slave trade throughout the eighteenth century. All told Britain was at war for 47 of those 100 years prior to 1826. The Wonnarua were simply no match for a military-minded, war-experienced people as the British.

Death by Disease

After 1826, the Wonnarua were left to come to terms with the British occupation of their country. This was when the real holocaust began. Firstly, diseases swept through the remaining population. Deaths were common from introduced diseases such as measles and pulmonary complaints. Syphilis spread at an alarming rate causing death or infertility among the Wonnarua remnants who had no resistance to the disease. I am well aware that the spreading of syphilis to the Koori population after the initial contact with the whites has always been a contentious and sensitive issue. Later writers claimed that syphilis was already known in Australia long before the coming of the white people. But the facts are otherwise. Governor Darling and the editor of the *Sydney Gazette* both claimed in 1825 that it was the settlers who had introduced syphilis. The *Gazette* went to describe the disease and its spread throughout the native population. It is clear from these descriptions that the Kooris had no natural resistance to the disease and hence it must have been unknown in Australia prior to 1788. This is supported by the fact that the Wonnarua quickly gave the disease a name, calling it *Wamboosh*. It is interesting to note that the "sh" digraph did not exist in traditional Koori languages and so the word must have been coined after the European contact to describe the Wonnarua readily recognised as emanating from their white antagonists.

There is another piece of nonsense about syphilis that I would like to lay to rest, and that is the contention that Koori women gave themselves willingly to white settlers and therefore were to blame for spreading the disease. I have already discussed the fact that Kooris, either male or female had few rights under British law, although their position was theoretically one of equality. In a situation where Koori evidence was not accepted in a court of law, the Koori woman had no one to turn to when she became the object of a white man's lust. Rape was the alternative to compliance and the white man was thoroughly protected. When the services of the Koori woman were no longer required, she was sent back to her people and any disease she had acquired from her forced liaison with the white man was spread to the rest of her people.

The death figures in this post-frontier period were horrendous. One Hunter Valley magistrate wrote in 1845 about the rapidly decreasing population of three kinship groups of the Wonnarua. “Of the first there are 14 men and 10 women, two male children and one little girl. The Elalong people, 18 men, eight women, one boy eleven years and one girl 5 years old. The Macdonald River people, 12 old men, three women aged 40, 35 and 25 years old, two boys about 11 years old and no children. This latter tribe in my memory exceeded 300.”

Death by Starvation

Another main cause of death was starvation due to the total disruption of the Koori traditional economy. One sometimes hears the disruption of the Koori traditional economy. One sometimes hears the claim that European settlement did not disrupt the numbers of native food plants and game in Australia. This nonsense should be put to rest once and for all. Let us look at what some European observers in the Hunter Valley in the 1830’s wrote of the impact of white settlement on the native ecology.

The explorer, Major Thomas Mitchell, while travelling near Falbrook just north of present-day Singleton in 1831, stated that, “the Kangaroos and wallabies had become very scarce.” In 1845, the Dungog magistrate, E.M. McKinley claimed that, “the ordinary means of subsistence had diminished on account of the brushes having been cleared, which native game and vegetables formerly abounded in and were easily obtained.” In the same year, David Dunlop, the magistrate at Wollombi, south of Singleton, wrote that, “the black swan, the wild duck, the wonga-wonga pigeon and the kangaroo were daily decreasing.”

The invasion of the Wonnarua tribal lands by the British was a total disaster not only in the physical sense but also in the social sense. Traditional methods of hunting and gathering were no longer viable and the tight social and religious fabric of the Wonnarua began to fall apart under the appalling death rate. There are mountains of primary source evidence to attest that this pattern was repeated right across Australia.

Counter-Claims

Nonetheless we have had spokesmen for vested interests. For example, Mr Hugh Morgan, claimed that European settlement of Australia did not really adversely affect the original inhabitants. Incredibly he argued that, “it is relevant to note that vengeance killing, a religious duty, exacted a far greater toll on the Aboriginal people in the nineteenth century than any depredations by Europeans. Charges of genocide of

the Aborigines by our nineteenth century forebears are nonsense.” Perhaps Mr Morgan should have stuck to digging holes in the desert for the Western Mining Corporation. I am sure he was much better at that than he was as an interpreter of Australian history.

But where did Hugh Morgan get his information for such incredible conclusions? – none other than Professor Geoffrey Blainey. Now to be fair to Professor Blainey, Morgan’s interpretations of the information he got from Blainey’s book are his own. However, we have seen Professor Blainey over the years hastening to defend himself against supposed misinterpretations of his work. Is this the sort of conclusion one is supposed to draw from reading *The Triumph of the Nomad*?

Even if Blainey does disown Morgan’s conclusions, let’s look at the so-called facts on which Morgan based his arguments. Blainey’s controversial contention was as follows: “Violent death by spearing or clubbing was a restraint on the growth of population. Occasionally there were pitched battles or raids in which many men took part. The casualties might not at first seem large; but the death of two men in a battle involving forty meant that casualties were approaching the scale of the Battle of the Somme.” Surely Blainey cannot be serious. The Battle of the Somme lasted for five months and resulted in 1.5 million casualties on all sides. How can this slaughter be compared to a skirmish involving forty people and lasting perhaps half an hour? The vast difference in the size of the samples must be taken into account. I remember a few years back a group of teenagers in a small country town took a car out into the bush for a drag, slammed the car into a tree and killed all eight occupants. Would Professor Blainey conclude that the people in that town were slaughtering themselves on the road at the rate of the antagonists in the Battle of Somme? More importantly, would he conclude that Australians as a whole were killing themselves on the roads at this rate. Common sense would say that no society could withstand a slaughter rate like that on the Somme for any length of time. And yet Blainey would claim that such death rates were typical of an entire twenty-year period in Arnhem Land. Blainey’s source was an American anthropologist named Lloyd Warner. Blainey admits that neither Warner, nor any other pre-historian has attempted to convert raw death figures into a death rate for a hunter-gatherer society. Perhaps they realised the risks in trying to come up with such a statistic for a very small population. Certainly they would not claim that such “statistics” were typical of the whole of Australia. Professor Blainey is

an eminent historian but I would humbly suggest that he enrol himself in a first year University course in Statistics and strengthen what is obviously his great weakness.

The Wonnarua's New Reality

But let me move back to my own people – the Wonnarua. I am not going to be involved in death rate statistics but it is clear from the records that many Wonnarua died in the early years of European settlement in the Hunter Valley. What is important is that many more Kooris died in the post frontier years from disease and starvation than were killed in actual fighting with whites. But this is the very period that has largely been ignored by historians. It is undoubtedly one of the most important periods in Koori history.

Inevitably, there was a period of adjustment. The Wonnarua had to come to terms with the new reality. They clung to the old ways as much as they could, no doubt believing that their old ways, were best. But most Wonnarua Kooris adopted those white ways that were necessary for survival in a new world, which they were losing control of.

As with every people who find their lands occupied by foreign invaders, there was an element in Wonnarua society that tried to keep up violent resistance. Their efforts were futile, but were to last for almost twenty years. As late as 1843 two Wonnarua Kooris named Harry and Melville went on a killing rampage north of Singleton. Their act was political, not psychopathic. At one stage they raided a farm near Glendon and bailed up a white hut-keeper. They then asked if the hut-keeper was a convict or a free settler. The hut-keeper replied that he was a former convict and his life was spared. Harry and Melville said that it was fortunate for him that he was forced to come to their lands and was not like the free settler who came and took over the land and gave the Kooris nothing in return. Land rights have always been in Koori consciousness. Some weeks later, Harry and Melville were caught and hanged.

Most Wonnarua Kooris came to more peaceful terms with the dominant culture. But the expectation of compensation for land loss was widespread. One old Koori man near Singleton knew he would not get much out of the white people but he at least expected a blanket a year from the government as compensation for the loss of his land. When the blankets did not arrive on time in 1845 the old man uttered a pathetic lament to the local white court official. "What we do bad, not fight like New Zealand Fellow, No! I gave land and have cold, and very hunger. No, did no bad, we get no blanket! What for?"

In the light of Koori history, Land Rights is not a recent Communist inspired plot as the right wingers would have us believe. It has been the most consistent demand of Koori people ever since the days of the frontier. Not only was the land no longer theirs but Wonnarua Kooris of the post-contact period soon found that their own tribal laws had been circumscribed. In 1835 a Koori named Charlie killed a white man near Dungog. He was arrested and stood trial for the offence. The trial was of course conducted in the foreign language and format of the English but there was on this rare occasion an interpreter present to record Charlie's point of view. It seems that the dead white man had been living with a Koori woman of Charlie's clan. The white man had stolen a sacred stone from the Kooris and had committed the capital offence of showing that stone to the woman. Charlie, who was responsible for the safe-keeping of the stone, had the duty of killing the white lawbreaker. Of course, Charlie's evidence was not admissible in the English court and he was hanged in front of a forced gathering of his people just outside of Dungog. Koori law was no longer viable. It had been superseded by the "superior" laws of the British. After all, Kooris were British subjects with the full protection of British law, even though their evidence was not admissible either as defendants or prosecutors.

Certain Koori ceremonies did survive this period and the intense Koori belief in a spirit world was to last for many generations despite the efforts of later Christian missionaries. Initiation ceremonies, for instance were still being practised by Wonnarua Kooris as late as the end of the nineteenth century. Corroborees were still held in the early years of last century.

Other forms of tribal behaviour were altered by the presence of the white people. Inter tribal fighting took on a new and savage form. One incident in 1843 near Maitland was well recorded. Kooris of the Wonnarua and Worimi tribes met outside the town to settle an old difference. But local white "sporting gentlemen" had given the Kooris a few guns and some generous quantities of rum and sat back to watch the entertainment. The result was a bloody battle in which two Kooris were left dead and others were seriously wounded. With the coming of the white man inter-tribal fights had changed in violence and intensity. Perhaps Professor Blainey should remember that.

As the years moved on towards the middle of the nineteenth century, Wonnarua Kooris learned, or were forced to adopt certain European ways. European

morality abhorred nakedness and so the Kooris donned the prickly clothes of the dominant society. They were arrested if they did not.

A form of English became necessary for communication. White settlers for reasons best known to themselves, taught the Koori a typical frontier Pidgin. This pidgin became the *lingua franca* in inter-racial communication, and slowly over the years merged into that dialect of English spoken by most Koori people today. As the generations passed the Wonnarua language died out to the extent that only a very few Wonnarua can speak today.

Quite importantly, the Wonnarua Kooris adopted, as much as necessary, the obsessive European attitude to work. Their efforts were occasionally recognised especially when settlers had to rely on Koori labour to get their work done. But rarely was the Koori treated equally. As the *Maitland Mercury* commented in 1848. “There are few who would deem it expedient or proper to give an equivalent for his labour to a blackfellow. A check shirt or two, a pair of duck trousers, and a daily supply of broken victuals are generally deemed satisfaction in full for a twelve months work, although similar services – perhaps less efficiently rendered by a white man would cost an additional fifteen or twenty pounds in hard cash.”

It must be remembered that these enormous adaptations to white society were mastered by that generation of Wonnarua Kooris born in tribal days, who knew the hostility and hatred of the frontier, who had seen the collapse of their traditional society, and had experienced and survived the holocaust of death by disease and starvation. This was a remarkable achievement matched by few other people in the world.

More importantly that same generation geared themselves for the survival of their race. The remnants of the clan groups, which had once been the economic unit of Wonnarua society, were no longer viable as separate groups. Gradually the groups merged for companionship and so that the young could marry. By the middle of the last century the main Wonnarua groups were concentrated around Gresford, Scone and Singleton. By the end of the 19th century these three groups had merged into one, living as a separate community on reserved land called St Clair, 20 kilometres north of present day Singleton in the Hunter Valley. In the 1920's the Aborigines Protection Board destroyed this community, gave the already cleared virgin land to returned white servicemen from World War 1 and dispersed the families. But there are still

many people today, like myself, who can trace their ancestry directly to the Wonnarua and find very few white ancestors in the family tree.

Summary

I dedicate this paper to those past Wonnarua people who made it possible for the continuance of the Gringai Clan of the Wonnarua Nation .It is because of them that the Wonnarua have survived and will be still here for the next 216 hundred years. The aspects of my people's history I have presented here bespeaks of the need for a new understanding of Australian history – a more truthful and inclusive history. A history that is taught to all Australian students, all teachers, and all members of the Australian community. Such an ambitious goal could result in a more socially just Australia for all Australians that we can all be proud of. Australia is better than it once was for her Indigenous people, but not as yet as good as it might become. The truth telling of our history is a key to enhancing the soul and heart of our very nation.

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