The Frontier Wars and Colonial Massacres

Resistance, the evidence, and why truth-telling matters

A note before you read. This read refers to events and policies that may be distressing, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers. Please take care as you read, and stop or take a break whenever you need to. If you would like to yarn with someone, support is available through 13YARN on 13 92 76, Lifeline on 13 11 14, and your local Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service.

Defence of Country

From the arrival of the British in 1788, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples defended their Country in a long series of conflicts now known as the Frontier Wars. These conflicts continued across the continent well into the 1920s and 1930s as the frontier of settlement moved.

The belief that the land was unoccupied, later expressed in law as terra nullius, denied the sovereignty of peoples who had cared for Country for tens of thousands of years. As settlers spread, First Nations peoples resisted the taking of their lands, waters and resources. The Frontier Wars are best understood not only as a history of violence done to communities, but as a history of resistance and defence led by them.

How researchers define and document a massacre

For a long time, much of this history was left out of the national story. In recent decades, researchers have worked to document it carefully. Researchers at the University of Newcastle define a colonial frontier massacre as the deliberate and unlawful killing of six or more defenceless people in a single operation.

Using this definition and a rigorous review of sources, the Colonial Frontier Massacres project has mapped hundreds of events across the country. Careful definition and evidence matter, because they allow this history to be told with accuracy and to withstand scrutiny.

Some of the documented events

These are a small number of the events the evidence records. Behind each one are families, communities and Countries.

1816	Appin, New South Wales. Soldiers killed Dharawal people during a punitive expedition.
1820s to 1830s	The Black War in Tasmania, a sustained period of violence against Palawa people.
1834	Pinjarra, Western Australia. A large attack on Binjareb Noongar people.
1838	Myall Creek, New South Wales. One of the very few massacres for which perpetrators were tried and hanged.
1928	Coniston, Northern Territory. Among the last known frontier massacres in Australia.

Honouring resistance and its leaders

The Frontier Wars produced leaders whose names deserve to be known and honoured as part of a living story of strength and survival. Pemulwuy led resistance around Sydney, Windradyne led Wiradjuri resistance in the west of New South Wales, Yagan is remembered by Noongar people in the south west, and Jandamarra led Bunuba resistance in the Kimberley.

Honouring these leaders is not about reopening old wounds. It is about recognising that First Nations peoples defended their Country with courage and skill, and that their descendants carry that strength today.

Why truth-telling matters

The Colonial Frontier Massacres record documents more than 400 massacres and at least 10,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths between 1788 and 1930, and this is considered only part of the full story. The true figures are almost certainly higher, because many events went unrecorded.

Truth-telling is not about assigning blame to people living today. It is about acknowledging honestly what happened, so that healing and respect can grow. Recognising this history is a foundation for reconciliation, and it supports respectful Acknowledgement of Country, commemoration and remembrance.

Questions to reflect on

- How does understanding the Frontier Wars as resistance change the way the story is usually told?
- Why does careful definition and evidence matter when documenting this history?
- How could your organisation support respectful truth-telling and commemoration?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ The Frontier Wars were a long history of First Nations resistance and defence of Country from 1788.
- ✓ Researchers define a frontier massacre as the deliberate killing of six or more defenceless people in one operation.
- ✓ The evidence records more than 400 massacres and at least 10,000 deaths, considered only part of the story.
- ✓ Truth-telling acknowledges what happened so that healing and reconciliation can grow.

Reference material

- **Colonial Frontier Massacres map, University of Newcastle**
  c21ch.newcastle.edu.au
- **AIATSIS, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies**
  aiatsis.gov.au
- **Reconciliation Australia**
  reconciliation.org.au
- **National Museum of Australia, Defining Moments**
  nma.gov.au

How Emus Talking can help

Emus Talking is a proudly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owned business. We help organisations build culturally safe workplaces and strong partnerships, delivered remotely and virtually right across Australia, or in person by arrangement.

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