

Robert Foster and Amanda Nettelbeck, *Out of the Silence: The History and Memory of South Australia's Frontier Wars*, Kent Town, Wakefield Press, 2012. Reviewed by Stephanie James.

As a descendant of Irish immigrants reading *Out of the Silence: The History and Memory of South Australia's Frontier Wars*, led me to reflect on relationships between these families and the Aboriginal inhabitants of their regions. A locally produced 1988 publication states that in 1879 when my Wicklow forbear died in the South East, ‘Small groups of aborigines (sic) followed [the cortege], and many stood along the way because they sincerely mourned the man, who had always been a good friend to them. It is reported that they were inconsolable for days.’¹ But in the fairly extensive family records of the Clare Valley family, the silence in relation to any surviving Aboriginal residents or to interaction is deafening. Inheriting this mixed record of knowledge and understanding about the role played by previous generations towards Aboriginal peoples, places me and those of my era, interested in making sense of family history and the past, in potentially uncomfortable positions. A local history of the Clare Valley, written in the 1970s, refers to ‘the natives (sic) becoming ‘troublesome’ by 1841, but that ‘[i]n time [they] were brought under control.’ No mention was made of ‘control’ measures, but Noye reports that ‘it was stated that the white settlers ‘always went about well armed’’.² So what had happened by 1862? Does the absence of Aboriginal people sanction relief that forbears were not involved in violence? Or does absence implicate the earlier generations in the very act of

dispossession – they could only acquire their land because the Ngadjuri people had been driven away?³

The title of Foster and Nettelbeck's book deliberately resonates with WEH Stanner's powerful 1968 characterisation of 'the great Australian silence' to describe this nation's capacity to obliterate memory, mention or marking of its Aboriginal past or present. In presenting a detailed and accessible account of both the actual record of frontier violence between 1840 and 1878, and the ways it has been documented over time, the authors present contemporary South Australians, ordinary citizens and those in positions of power, with a series of discomfiting challenges.

The book has a two part structure, the first part titled 'The war between the races.' Here the seven chapters detail the chronology of violent episodes as Europeans strengthened their occupation of the colony in the nineteenth century. Alongside the narrative, the playing out of the complex legal, administrative and operational issues about what constituted British citizenship and protection, and how anomalies were resolved (or ignored), about how the legal system responded to known crimes where suspects or witnesses vanished, where witnesses were subject to equal compulsion with suspects, and where the declaration of martial law ensured that legalities were bypassed. Some of the violent incidents are widely known – the Maria Massacre of 1839, the Rufus River events of 1841 and perhaps those of the Port Lincoln region in the 1840s – but many others are acknowledged only within their region. The 1841 introduction of the Mounted Police to the troubled Port Lincoln area (after a brief military intervention), led to some protection for settlers, but expectations that the latter would also

use their firearms when necessary against Aboriginals, underlined the fact that all three groups were combatants in frontier wars.’ (p.120). That the colony had Native Police will possibly surprise many readers who may be cognisant of the violent reputation of such groups in Far North Queensland, but ignorant of South Australian versions operating firstly during the early 1850s, and then on the Central Australian Frontier from the mid 1880s. This final policing episode, according to the authors, shows ‘it was only possible to fulfil the rule of law when Aboriginal resistance had been effectively suppressed, and Aboriginal people themselves effectively subjugated.’ (p.124).

Within the second section, headed ‘Negotiating the Past,’ the three chapters show how these dimensions of the state’s past have been dealt with at significant points since Federation, the times when any Aboriginal connection was minimised, when features of Aboriginal occupation were idealised and their post-1836 ‘adjustments’ romanticised, through to the challenges which followed the 1967 Referendum, and the dismantling of layers of controlling legislation through to semblances of greater equality, and perhaps acceptance. The authors ensure the text’s immediacy is emphasised by focusing on the changing nature of Proclamation Day. The official annual repository from 1857 of the pious restatement of the original declaration of the colony’s intentions towards the original inhabitants – more than half of the Proclamation of South Australia read first by Governor Hindmarsh on 28 December 1836 was devoted to Aboriginal rights and welfare - functioned more of a celebration of hypocrisy than anything else. As Foster and Nettelbeck make clear, the recycled oratory from 1836 meant little or nothing until very recently, perhaps supporting the truism about the

paving of the good intentions road as far as South Australia's Aboriginal population has been concerned.

Within the text, a number of paradoxes emerge: The founding of the colony at the point of Westminster's intense preoccupation with Indigenous rights in the Empire, questions of Aboriginals as British subjects, and conflict between the roles of Protectors of Aboriginals and Police Commissioners. By 1836 Colonial Office recognition of violence towards Aboriginals was reflected in its resolve that the extension of British legal rights would prevent 'the kind of settler excesses' seen in earlier colonies. (p.2) Foster and Nettelbeck pinpoint the continuing administrative debate about whether the Aboriginal population was amenable to the rule of law – and the subsequent role confusion between their 'protectors' and those whose overt role was the support of the settler population.

In conjunction with the text's recurrent theme - that the South Australian has cherished its 'sense of difference,' having a 'reputation for the humanitarian treatment of Aboriginal people,' and a 'better' history of interaction than elsewhere on the continent, but that this position is more than 'fatally flawed' – the writers construct a careful, layered argument. The colonial story of race relations has dimensions identical to other colonies. And while the national story, especially in pre 1970s texts might encompass more of Stanner's silence, Foster and Nettelbeck demonstrate the ways that local histories always included dimensions of Aboriginal and European conflict. They argue strongly that these events and their recording and remembering are 'inexorably linked.' (p.9). Their goal is enlightenment, locating and understanding the past in the present, where aspects

of its stories are remembered locally, but somehow limited beyond that level.

Perhaps the text's ultimate sting for the many South Australians with a past like mine comes briefly within the Conclusion's section, 'Reconciling history and memory.' Here in half a page, Mike Brown's story is presented. Brother of a former premier, Mike's unexpected recognition of his family's participation in Flinders Ranges violence of 1852 provoked not only further research, but also public acknowledgement of his forbear's actions. As Foster and Nettelbeck comment, this 'foregrounds some of the unresolved questions that face the descendants of pioneers.' (p.183).

¹ See Pam and Brian O'Connor, *Second to None: A Story of the Rural Pioneers of Mount Gambier*, Millicent: District Council of Mount Gambier, 1988, p.93. The book cites JH Sheppard, *History of Mount Gambier and the SE District*, (nd), p.187.

² Robert J Noye, *Clare: A District History*, Adelaide: Investigator Press, 1980, p.10. The text contains no reference details to source this quote.

³ Fred Warrior, Fran Knight, Sue Anderson and Adele Pring, *Ngadjuri: Aboriginal People of the Mid North Region of South Australia*, Adelaide: SASOSE Council, 2005.