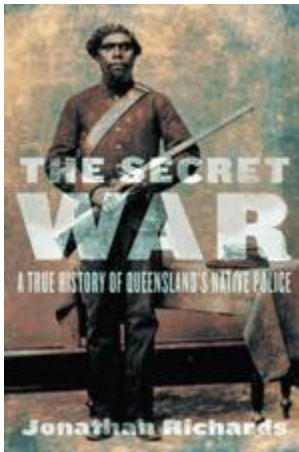


The Secret War, A True History of Queensland's Native Police by Jonathan Richards. St. Lucia: University Of Queensland Press, 2008, pp. 308. AUD \$30.95 Paperback, ISBN: 9780702236396.



Jonathan Richards' history of the Queensland Native Police is a major contribution to Australia's colonial history as well as to British imperial history. After carefully describing his sources and defining his subject and some of the terms he intends to use throughout the book – for example 'dispersal' – he skilfully sets out the milieu in which his story takes place. Extended hunts for Aborigines in the 1860s and 1870s and the massacres that follow were the result of several well-known outrages against white settlers notably at Hornet Creek and Cullin-la-Ringo, and the massacre of the shipwreck victims of the *Maria* near Cardwell, tales that have come down to us in subsequent literature. Using these examples, Richards examines 'the reluctance to admit the truth ... infiltrating accounts of frontier

violence' (p. 25) that becomes the hallmark of the Native Police. One observer remarked, 'it was the duty of the officer and his troops to fill the aborigines with terror' (p. 40).

Their justification for the murder of Aborigines – and they are acknowledged 'as the biggest killer of Aboriginal people in colonial Queensland' (p. 51) – is primarily self-defence, a justification taken up by most settlers and 'expected on the frontier' (p. 62). Sensibly, Richards refuses to engage in the pointless debate about an Aboriginal body count, because in the end the only point that matters is 'that a large number of Aborigines were killed' (p. 72).

Richards examines the connections of European officers with the military tradition, family connections, the way authorities looked the other way at claims of violence, and the reasons why European careers especially were blemished by drunkenness, sexual misconduct with Aboriginal women, and 'monetary embarrassments' (p. 93). European lower ranks included 'a substantial number with problems and/or unconventional behaviour' (p. 98). He is careful to name the names of all those dismissed for unlawful killings. Though efforts were made to expel those guilty of excessive violence, few were ever punished.

Richards found 'ample evidence' that the European officers were 'hopeless' (p. 119) at relating to their black troopers. Desertion was common, forcing patrols 'to operate short-handed' (p. 123). Absconding troopers raised settler fears of their causing mischief 'with the wild blacks' (p. 129).

The comparative study of the Queensland Native Police Force with other colonies shows similarities to the various forces' military backgrounds and composition and in their attitude to Aborigines. Richards looks, too, at various colonial police forces in Ceylon, South Africa and India, pointing out how they all fought in frontier wars, and enabled Queensland authorities, notably Governor Bowen, to justify the Force's existence as contributing to the conduct of irregular 'border warfare' (p. 187).

Richards concludes with a considered discussion of whether the extermination of Indigenous People in Queensland constituted genocide. As he notes, the debate is

‘complex, multidimensional [and] on-going’ (p. 201). There are good black and white photographs of individuals mentioned in the text.

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