The Appin Massacre of 1816

by

Nick Deane

Historian Grace Karskens has written that, in the period leading up to the massacre, “Although good relations and mutual assistance were common between settlers and Aboriginal people, violence also almost always flared as a result of dispossession, the loss of food sources, the taking of Aboriginal women and children, assaults and shootings.”

Karskens indicates that the incidents that culminated in the Appin massacre began in 1814. They involved violence on both sides, with reprisals and vendettas following isolated acts. However, the records of what was suffered are, unsurprisingly, much more detailed on the settlers’ side.

It was against this background of ongoing unrest that, on April 10th, 1816, Governor Macquarie wrote in his diary about repeated instances of murders, outrages and depredations of all descriptions against the white inhabitants of the remote parts of the colony.

He wrote that he had come to the conclusion that it was necessary to inflict “terrible and exemplary punishment on the perpetrators”. So he ordered three, separate military detachments to march into the so-called interior or remote parts of the colony, for the specific purpose of inflicting this punishment. The intention was to drive the natives over the mountains or take them prisoner.

(I must apologise for my limited understanding of Aboriginal culture.)

Two Aborigine groups have been identified, the Muringong of the area now known as Cowpastures who I believe are alternatively known as the Dharawal) and the Gandangara, who, apparently came down from the mountains to the lower land during autumn. The Gandangara had the reputation of being the fiercer of the two groups.

Macquarie’s orders authorised the officers commanding the three detachments to fire on ‘the natives’ if they did not surrender, or made the smallest show of resistance. His orders continued “hanging up on Trees the Bodies of such Natives as may be killed on such occasions, in order to strike the greater terror into the Survivors.”

So the intentions were two-fold: to clear the country of all aboriginal people showing any signs of resistance and to terrorise those who did not.

One of the three detachments, under the command of a Captain Wallis marched South, reaching Appin on April 12. In the days that followed, Wallis and his men found various abandoned campsites, but had no contact with any group of armed Aborigines. It seems possible that the Aboriginal ‘guides’ appointed to assist him led him on a ‘wild goose chase’.

However, on the 16th, Wallis received information about a group of Aborigines camped at a place called Lachlan Vale. Quoting from Karsken’s account “At one o'clock on the moonlit morning of 17 April, Wallis's troop marched back down to Appin. There was no-one at the campsite when they found it, but the fires were still burning. Someone heard the cry of a child. Wallis immediately 'formed line rank entire' and the soldiers 'pushed through a thick brush' towards that cry. They were also heading directly towards 'precipitous banks of a deep rocky creek', the gorge of the Cataract River, 60 metres deep. The line of men pushed on, the dogs set up a frantic barking.

I invite you to imagine it. The middle of a moonlit night, and a line of men armed with muskets approaching, intent on killing. The victim must have woken up in terror, finding themselves with nowhere to go. It was either face the advancing soldiers or run away when the only place to run led to the Cataract Gorge. As the soldiers opened fire, many fled to their deaths over the cliffs. Others were wounded or shot dead.

Wallis recorded counting 14 bodies, including an old man and some women and children.The bodies of two warriors, Durelle and Cannabayagal were strung up on trees on the hills of Lachlan Vale. But that was not the end of the matter. Another account says that there were three bodies, not two. And it is also reported that they were decapitated, and the heads brought to Sydney and sold to the government.

The evidence bears this out, for in 1991 Edinburgh Museum handed over to the National Museum of Australia in Canberra three skulls. One is identified as belonging to Cannabayagal, the second is thought to have belonged to Durelle, and the third is from an unknown female – but it seems likely that all three were victims of the Appin massacre.

To my way of thinking, it seems fair and accurate to say that this was an act of war, and in today's terms, a war crime. Elsewhere, even Macquarie seems to concede that it was war, because he describes those captured as "prisoners of war".

So much for the massacre. It is a gruesome story and I have told it only to remind us both of the horror of war, and because most people in our nation overlook the frontier wars, when Australia was truly being defended. And I would like to mention one more thing to bring this up to date.

Just a few weeks ago, on April 6th of this year, the Director of the Australian War Memorial, Brendan Nelson, announced plans for a massive redevelopment of the War Memorial at a cost of $500 million. Commenting on this, historian Henry Reynolds has written that the message from the War Memorial's leadership to Aboriginal people today seems to be this: "Your warrior ancestors who fought for their land and way of life against impossible odds do not belong in the memorial which Brendan Nelson repeatedly calls "the soul of the nation". Perhaps the redevelopment will provide an opportunity to remedy this.

I hope that in some small way, through events such as ours today, we move a little closer to acknowledging the truth of the Frontier Wars (of which the Appin Massacre is but one example) and that, eventually, the early defenders of Australia, like Durelle and Cannabayagal, will be recognized for what they were (http://johnmenadue.com/henry-reynolds-brendan-nelson-and -the-war-memorial).

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦