

'Wholesale massacre': Carl Feilberg exposed the ugly truth of the Australian frontier

By Paul Daley

The real 'settler' and pioneering stories of Feilberg's Queensland were confronting and frightening

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An 1888 drawing of the massacre of Indigenous people by Queensland's Native Police at Skull Hole, at Mistake Creek on Bladensburg Station near Winton, central Queensland, Australia, by Carl Lumholtz. Photograph: State Library of Queensland

During his short life Danish-born Carl Feilberg risked more than any other Australian journalist or author to expose the brutality against Indigenous people on the ultra-violent Queensland colonial frontier of the late 19th century.

He wrote millions of words provoking the conscience of townspeople, frontiersmen and politicians in Australia and Britain. His writings about colonial violence against Aboriginal people impacted federation and regional geopolitics, and enhanced understanding of frontier war for generations of progressive Australian historians.

Yet because he published without byline as an editor/writer – and occasionally pseudonymously – Feilberg, and the immense personal cost he bore for speaking out, has only recently found the acknowledgment posterity has denied.

Among the long overdue posthumous moments of national recognition of Feilberg was his induction into the Australian Media Hall of Fame with an article by Robert Ørsted-

Jensen, a Queensland-based political historian who has undertaken exhaustive research on his fellow Dane.

Ørsted-Jensen is now writing his biography.

Ørsted-Jensen's short essay is a wonderful summation of Feilberg's life from 1844 to 1887. Nothing short of a book (or perhaps a movie) will do justice to the times of this jackaroo-cum editor who, while eulogised by poets and politicians in death, had so much of his most daring and controversial work swept under a carpet of historical amnesia for several generations.

Feilberg was complex, though not contradictory; he was not opposed to colonial expansion (he saw it as inevitable), but he abhorred the violence and cruelty of its crushing march over the long civilisation of Indigenous people of this continent. So, he thrust the ugly truth into the faces of colonial politicians, who at once feared, loathed and respected him.

He was a humanitarian, perhaps Australia's earliest outspoken environmentalist, a republican federalist and underdog defender, a political player, a journalist of moral force and elegance, and a stylist who also wrote fiction.

Feilberg, a tuberculosis survivor who migrated to Australia on the recommendations of doctors, was effectively exiled to Victoria after anonymously publishing in the *Queenslander*, the paper he edited, an explosive series of 13 editorials, titled with deliberate irony *The Way We Civilise*; *Black and White*; *The Native Police*, between May and July 1880. The editorials, together with 27 letters from contributors about frontier war in Queensland – emphasising the brutal excesses of the native police – were soon published in a stand-alone pamphlet, *The Way We Civilise*.

“This, in plain language, is how we deal with the aborigines [sic]. On occupying new territory the aboriginal [sic] inhabitants are treated in exactly the same way as the wild beasts or birds the settlers may find there. Their lives and their property, the nets, canoes, and weapons which represent as much labor to them as the stock and buildings of the white settler, are held by the Europeans as being at their absolute disposal. Their goods are taken, their children forcibly stolen, their women carried away, entirely at the caprice of the white men,” the pamphlet began before detailing the pattern of disproportionate violence used to “settle” on black land.

Many whites – “perhaps the majority” – had stood by in silent disgust, he said.

“But the protests of the minority have been disregarded by the people of the settled districts; the majority of outsiders who take no part in the outrages have been either apathetic or inclined to shield their companions, and the white brutes who fancied the amusement, have murdered, ravished, and robbed the blacks without let or hindrance. Not only have they been unchecked, but the Government of the colony has been always at hand to save them from the consequences of their crime.”

Feilberg prised at the colonial scab. He exposed the venal folly of language settler society used to conceal and add genial veneer to racially-inspired murder across Queensland, the scene for the most excessive anti-Aboriginal violence which, research

by Ørsted-Jensen and Raymond Evans strongly indicates, claimed 60,000-plus Indigenous lives in that colony alone. “Dispersal” – a term that litters colonial journalism and prose, diaries, correspondence and officialdom – was, when applied to Queensland’s Indigenous, Feilberg pointed out, merely a transparent euphemism for “wholesale massacre”.

At a time when colonial Australia was building its international economy (and image) on pastoralism and rooting a pre-federation identity in pioneering bush egalitarianism and legend, Feilberg was confronting power with unpalatable reality.

The real “settler” and pioneering stories of Feilberg’s Queensland were confronting and frightening, evidenced by the hundreds of editorials Ørsted-Jensen has referenced in his own writings, including his book *Frontier History Revisited*.

For example, in an editorial in the Cooktown Courier of January 1877 Feilberg wrote: “There are some people who seem to find it a very funny circumstance that last week, in full daylight, and in a main street of Cooktown, two black troopers, with their clothes in the same condition as those of a clumsy butcher’s apprentice, fresh from the shambles, exhibited a naked black girl, not twelve years old, as their newly caught prize. This young slave, taken by force . . . has since been transferred, either for payment or as a gift, to a citizen in this town, whose property she has now become. What were the circumstances that attended, or immediately followed, her capture we do not know, nor do we very much care to inquire ...”

Ørsted-Jensen points out that in June 1880, during his campaign in the Queenslander, Feilberg was compelled to reveal how troopers had in fact gang raped the girl, saying, “They returned, bringing down the main street a naked black girl captured by them. Her appearance attracted quite a crowd, and a local storekeeper offered her captors a pound for their prize. The bargain was concluded, and the captured girl handed over. Her purchaser took her home to his wife to be trained up as a servant. But in the evening the troopers came for her, and, carrying her to some ridges behind the main street, kept her through the night for the gratification of their passions. In the morning they turned her loose in the vicinity of her purchaser’s house.”

Henry Reynolds, who has, perhaps, done more than any other living Australian historian to expose the truth of the Australian frontier, writes in his book *This Whispering in Our Hearts – Revisited*, “It was tough, challenging journalism. It was very brave and enormously provocative in the circumstances, stripping away euphemism, breaking complicit silences, savaging the romantic image of the white pioneer.”

He calls *The Way We Civilise* pamphlet “one of the most influential political tracts in Australian history”.

Feilberg’s outspokenness took great personal toll. He was effectively forced from his job as editor of the Queenslander in December 1880, and accepted a demotion to a job as a subeditor on the Argus, Melbourne. This, Ørsted-Jensen says, was effectively an acceptance of “political exile”.

In a private letter to Arthur Gordon, confidant to British prime minister William Gladstone and former high commissioner to the western Pacific, Feilberg wrote, “I despair of doing much good for the blacks, and I have incurred enough personal ill will myself by writing on their behalf during my residence in Queensland.”

In April 1883 Queensland, panicked at the arrival of a fleet of German navy boats, unilaterally annexed New Guinea. Gladstone, having read *The Way We Civilise*, on the basis of the colony’s treatment of Indigenous at home, rejected the annexation, writing that Queensland was “untrustworthy” and “unauthorised”. The backlash from the Australian colonies, amid acute anti-German paranoia, was swift, leading to an inter-colonial convention – precursor to the federal council that itself preceded federation in 1901.

When Feilberg’s health deteriorated due to the Melbourne cold, a group of his influential Queensland friends helped secure his return north, this time as editor of the *Brisbane Courier* (later the *Courier Mail*).

He campaigned less frequently and died four years later at just 43. Politicians, diplomats and writers (he’d served as president of Brisbane’s famed literary society, the Johnsonian Club) attended.

In his eulogy Francis Adams, poet and socialist activist, said of Feilberg, “He was a soldier in the army of Letters and of light of whom his comrades can be proud. He fixed his eyes on the abiding truth of human life – on justice and on mercy, on trust and on love – and clung to them.”