

Inside the killing fields of Queensland

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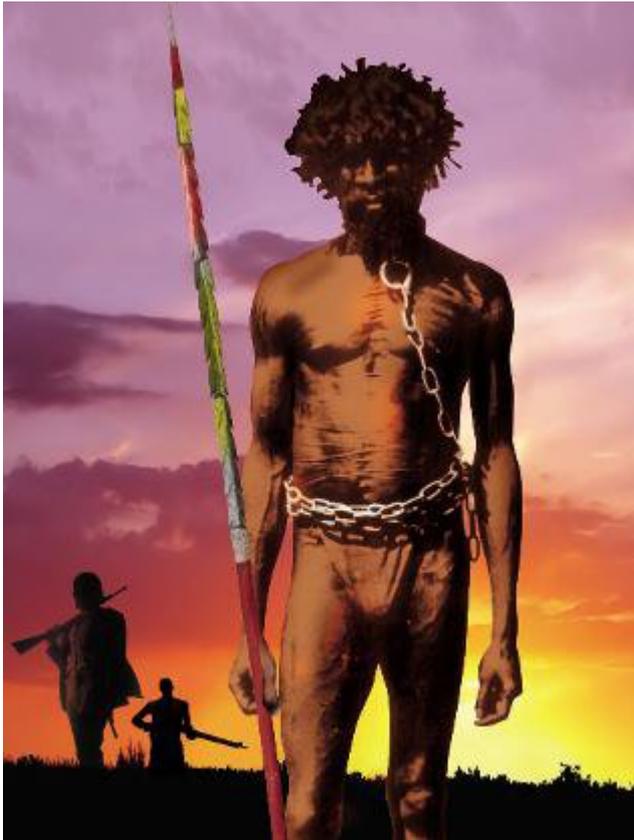


Illustration: Michael Perkins Source: The Australian

The discovery of a memoir by Steele Rudd's father sheds new light on the murderous collision between settlers and Aborigines on the Darling Downs

At one time we had a blackfellow skull decorating the veranda, and not until it was removed would a black approach the place.

-- Recollections of Thomas Davis

EUROPEAN settlement of southern Queensland was brutal. The idea that on small or imagined provocation you had to kill Aborigines indiscriminately was tacitly acknowledged throughout the immigrant rural communities: how else could the land be made safe for settlers and their families? Yet the historical record of Queensland's race war is patchy at best

and an uncomfortable silence still hangs over the most controversial issue in Australian colonial history.

The recent discovery of a memoir of the 1850s frontier offering graphic accounts of the slaughter of Queensland Aborigines casts a fresh and confronting light on settler history. It makes, at times, for painful reading. The recollections are those of Thomas Davis, a former convict who worked on the Darling Downs and farther west around the town of Surat in the 1850s. His memoir was preserved, and no doubt polished, by his son Arthur Hoey Davis who, under the pen-name Steele Rudd, created the popular characters Dad and Dave in the stories published in 1899 as *On Our Selection*.

As the biographer of Rudd I was recently given access to Davis's manuscript, which has been in the possession of a Queensland pastoral family for more than a century. It is an important new addition to our understanding of European and Aboriginal encounters as the frontier was rolled from east to west.

Davis's memoir covers the decade from his arrival in Sydney in 1849 to the celebration in December 1859 of Queensland's separation from NSW. His first remarks about such encounters, though muted, make an emphatic statement about the burden of guilt:

The blacks, even this far back, were quiet on the Darling Downs. Hodgson, the Leslies and many others by many conflicts had taken the go out of them. To this day the bones of many an aboriginal still lie bleaching on well-known parts of some Downs stations. [But] I can recall two occasions only when a white man was murdered by blacks on the Downs.

Farther west, near Maranoa, the race war was ablaze. Davis offers many accounts of Aboriginal-settler violence leading to indiscriminate slaughter. In early 1854 stations were "being rapidly formed" in the district, Davis observes. He is offered the job of postmaster at Surat and accepts, leaving within a week with his young wife for what he describes as a "perilous journey" into the west. "Along with the couple there was a party of four black troopers, black off-sider and another blackfellow and gin. The bullock driver was a fiery tempered fellow and in consequence went by the name of Hell-fire George." The Aboriginal "off-sider" was named Tommy:

All went well until nearing Chinchilla. Here Hell-fire George quarrelled with the off-sider, and from words they came to blows. It was a good fight; but seeing the driver overpowered by the black I stepped in and separated them. No sooner had I done so than Hell-fire ran to the dray, took out his gun which was loaded with shot, and fired point blank at the black's head. There wasn't a move out of him though his face and forehead were one mass of shot wounds. His head was as hard as a maul.

I extracted as much of the shot as I could from him. Next morning his head was a fright -- 'twas like a large plum pudding boiled hard.

Tommy, remarkably, survives. But he does not remain long with the party and slips away one night, only to return with "half a hundred of his tribe, armed to the teeth". The tribe pauses to hold what Davis imagines is a "council of war". But when he approaches hoping to conciliate he is greeted with a few spears and retreats hurriedly: "Then the wild yells of them! And a shower of spears and boomerangs rattled round the dray. We were well supplied with firearms and ammunition, and opened fire on them under cover of the dray. Some fell -- the rest immediately made off, for which we were thankful."

The account shifts gear when one of the troopers is sent to inform the local authorities. He returns the next morning with a sergeant at the head of 18 Aboriginal police (a para-military force overseen by white officers). The sergeant, Davis reports, "followed the blacks and shot down the lot of them. Such fearful slaughter was unnecessary and unjustified."

IN 2000, the historian Keith Windschuttle, in three articles in *Quadrant* magazine, attacked what he claimed was a substantial over-reliance on fragmentary evidence, improbably exaggerated memories and the sloppy use of sources: an ideologically biased "black armband" view of Australia's past that at its worst amounted to a "fabrication" of Aboriginal history. In the increasingly acrimonious debate that followed, his critics, notably in the 2003 volume *Whitewash*, edited by Robert Manne, counter-claimed he was putting a "white blindfold" on the history of race relations, in part because some of the evidence was anecdotal or ultimately unprovable.

There are of course extensive records about some massacres, based on witness reports and occasionally a court case. But part of the problem of trying to establish the true extent of the race wars has been the culture of settler community silence that, in particular, followed the unexpected outcome of the best known massacre of all: in 1838 at Myall Creek west of Inverell in NSW.

Eleven men were tried for the indiscriminate murder of up to 30 Aborigines but a jury acquitted them. Governor George Gipps, determined to bring order to the lawless outback, had seven of the 11 retried on a different charge. They were found guilty and hanged. As many commentators have noted, this didn't stop the killings; rather, it made the police and vigilante groups more careful to cover up their actions, leave no witnesses and not discuss what had happened.

So evidence was concealed and until relatively recently no one recorded the black side of the story and fewer gave it credence. In 1981, Henry Reynolds had to publish his *The Other Side of the Frontier: An Interpretation of the Aboriginal Response to the Invasion and Settlement of Australia* through his history department at James Cook University in Townsville after several rejections by commercial publishers. It was almost immediately republished by Penguin with a foreword by controversial anthropologist C. D. Rowley, but its inadequate sourcing of some evidence made it one of Windschuttle's principal targets.

The debate about colonial Australia's race wars, in many respects, has been a debate about the plausibility of sources and the adequacy of historical records. As recently as 2008, Jonathan Richards, in *The Secret War: A True History of Queensland's Native Police*, lamented: "First-hand accounts of frontier racial violence are few."

The discovery of a substantial historical document -- Davis's memoir runs for 11,500 words, bearing elements of close, on-the-spot reportage -- should be seen in this context. What gives Davis's narrative particular value is that he writes as an ordinary working man, intelligent but with limited education -- a former surveyor's assistant, postman, blacksmith and, later, small farm selector -- rather than as a grazier, policeman or administrator. He writes from inside the action.

Clearly traumatised by experiences that occurred up to 50 years earlier, he describes without guilt or remorse his participation in "necessary" or "defensive" action while deploring the

overreaction of others. One of his long and detailed passages concerns incidents southwest of Roma, and he explains the origins of the disputes as he understood them:

A little later an out-station of Mount Abundance belonging to P. McKinrow was attacked, though not without some justification. 'Twas a custom of the whites to keep a few gins on the stations -- say, one apiece. The gins' husbands permitted them to stay until they should require them to shift to some other part of the country.

At this out-station there were four gins, who, when their husbands came for them, were persuaded by the whites to remain. The blacks became infuriated which was only natural, and the only thing left them to do was to use force. They watched their opportunity which came one day when the men went out to muster cattle, leaving the hut-keeper -- a fellow named the Boomer -- and the gins in charge. Rolling up, the blackfellows again demanded their gins, and were answered by a shot from the Boomer's carbine, which accounted for the foremost one. Nothing daunted, the others charged the hut and although a second one dropped when the carbine spoke again, they succeeded in setting the place afire.

Davis does not say whether there were reprisal shootings. On the next occasion, however, he became part of the action:

Subsequently at Bingera Station on the Balonne River, when owned by Fitzgerald, and managed by one B---, there was more trouble. As in the Mount Abundance affair some blackfellows called for their gins and were refused possession. No force was attempted, but the blacks in strong numbers rounded up and drove away every working horse that was on the place and, to an extent, became masters of the situation, the station hands being unable to move out.

Collecting stock returns, I chanced to make Bingera just at this time -- fortunately, perhaps, for B -- and his hands. Learning their position, I wheeled round and rode straight into Surat. There I found the lieutenant in charge of the force sitting down to a meal, having just returned from the Dawson where, also, the blacks had been giving trouble. Tired as the troopers and himself must have been, they were, nevertheless, on the road to Bingera within the next hour.

At Waggor they came upon the blacks numbering between two and three hundred, shepherding the Bingera horses. The police fired a few shots in the air to disperse them, but without effect. Finding no injury done them, the blacks became emboldened and advanced at a run to surround the troops. Spears and boomerangs went flying in every direction. A trooper rolled out of his saddle, another's horse with a spear hanging to it bolted through the trees. The lieutenant gave the word to fire and a fearful conflict began. The blacks stood their ground and fought bravely -- fought until the dead lay thick about them -- and only retreated when darkness set in. When morning broke upon the scene they had all disappeared and nothing but the dead remained.

Four or five of the lieutenant's men were badly wounded, and riding over the scene of battle I counted thirty-seven dead bodies, including that of the trooper. Yet I am confident that more of the poor wretches fell that day, and, lying here and there in the grass as they had dropped, were left to the birds and the wild dogs of the bush to feast upon!

Though such accounts are immediate and shocking, it would be a mistake to regard Davis's recollections as memories unshaped by convention, error or literary revision. Cowboy-and-Indian "yellowback" literature was already well known in Australia by the time Davis's

memories were written down by his son, and that style of writing weaves its way through the reportage.

"Dad's in town first time for 41 years," Rudd wrote from Brisbane to The Bulletin's literary editor, A. G. Stephens, in May 1899. Father and son had reconnected in the last years of Davis's life; he died in 1904. A reference to the 1898 murders in the town of Gatton, west of Brisbane, and opening comments suggesting Davis is looking back from about 1902, make it likely Rudd, who knew shorthand, was on the lookout for fresh material to help his budding literary career and encouraged his father to reminisce and jotted down his stories.

Davis clearly had been irritated by inaccuracies in historical articles he had read in local newspapers. A published letter he wrote to The Queenslander in 1899 correcting an earlier account has been copied verbatim into the recollections; this, at least, is the unedited father's voice. It seems likely, however, that Rudd later connected the fragments into a narrative and added his own values and voice, including an over-fondness for exclamation. As well, sections suddenly and sometimes awkwardly adopt a more elevated tone, combining Davis's knowledge with his son's literary pretensions:

About the hour of sunset one could see the lagoons of the Maranoa fringed with boisterous darkies diving for roots of a water lily, known by its large yellow flower, which in size and shape resembled a potato.

Other times they gallivanted the plains, like school children, gathering tah, the root of a small plant topped with a blue flower, which, like the lily, they usually roasted.

There is also extensive moralising that, while it doubtless expresses the world view Davis and Rudd wished to project publicly and demonstrates well that liberal if not radical opposition to European extermination and exploitation was common enough even at the time, reads more like a well-wrought sermon than a real protest. They accept the belief common at the time that indigenous people were doomed to extinction, thus conveniently passing from consciousness and conscience:

It is sorrowful even to contemplate the wrongs perpetrated on these unfortunate people. The carbine of early days, the rum, European and Mongolian vices and diseases did fatal work amongst them, rapidly diminished their numbers, and soon they will all have disappeared from us forever. It is a humiliating fact that Great Britain, the most civilised and evangelical nation in the world, whose proud boast is that the sun never sets on her dominions, should, with all her pre-eminence, establish her colonies in the destruction of the native inhabitants whom she sweeps before her; and while her sons go forth to multiply, replenish and subdue, the original owners of the land disappear like snow before the sun. . . .

Rather better is where reportage is used to specify moral outrage:

The black police and their officers were quite as inhuman, if not more so. These guardians of the law seemed to have full licence to kidnap and ravish the women of the first tribe they came across after a depredation had taken place.

Frequently I have seen them tie young gins -- yelling and struggling -- to the backs of their horses and carry them off after a dispersal, after the bullets had thinned and weakened the ranks of their protectors.

Wandaigumbil Police Barracks early in the fifties was a perfect harem -- young and old gins ranging from twelve to fifty years could be seen there at any time. The cause of the crimes

originated with the whites. The white man was to blame. Was not the aboriginal robbed of his country? and of his home? Was his hunting grounds -- places held sacred by him -- not taken and turned into cattle camps by the white man? Those happy homes where once could be heard his corrobree and song he dare not now put foot in. Was not this alone enough to drive him to desperate extremes?

Davis's recollections have survived as one of a set of seven manuscripts collected in the first decade of the 20th century by Joshua Thomas ("Joey") Bell of the Jimbour Station, 25km north of Dalby.

The manuscripts are still in the possession of the Bell family and most date from 1908-09. Some report on encounters with indigenous groups and individuals and several mention the murder of Europeans (mostly shepherds) by Aborigines. But none except Davis's make more than passing mention of the response of the Europeans to these provocations. Davis, by contrast, is usually unblinking.

Another glimpse the recollections offer is into the language and culture of the Aborigines of the area. Davis includes a list of more than 100 names and phrases in the dialect of the people of the Balonne, Dawson and Comet rivers. Charmaine Jones, who reviewed for this article the published evidence dating from Edward Curr's 1887 *The Australian Race*, to the more recent work of Maurice French and Neil Reithmuller, has noted a clear historical discrepancy among the various accounts and also a poor correlation between Davis's list and any of the words noted by these authors. While Davis possibly assumed without proof that words he heard in several regions were from a single dialect, most commentators tend to the view that there was one root language, Waccah, with many dialects. The fact groups across a wide area of southeast Queensland met annually for the Bunya festival suggests they had enough shared language for basic communication, and linguist Robert Dixon has identified long dialect chains from central to southern Queensland.

If this is correct, then Davis's extensive list is a significant contribution to reclaiming at least some fragments of a widely used indigenous language.

His memoir also contains a detailed explanation of the kinship system prevalent in Maranoa and Balonne region:

Before they were degraded and confused by the whites, a unique form of society prevailed -- a set of class distinctions regulated and kept pure by strict observance of peculiar marriage laws. This social ladder consisted of eight classes, or four sets, called Males: -"combo", "hippie", "murray" and "cubbie". Females: "martha", "cobbatha", "bootha", and "hippitha". A "combo" could only marry a "martha", "hippie" a "cobbatha", "murray" a "bootha" and "cubbie" a "hippitha". When a man lost his wife, another of his own rank was supplied him; or, if he achieved an act of bravery, he would be rewarded with one, perhaps two, but the class-breed was stringently observed.

There are other observations: on methods of hunting and cooking, the complementary roles of men and women, and on death and totemic rituals. But it is the detailed accounts of atrocities that make Davis's story unique and appallingly powerful. One followed the murder at Hornet's Bank near the Dawson River west of Injune of a white family, the Frasers. However, on this occasion either Davis knew less about what had happened or it had been on a scale that made it impossible even for him to recount:

My occupation frequently took me over the Dawson country, necessitating my travelling via Hornet Bank Booroonda and Mount Hutton. Often have I ridden over the very ground where

the police came up with the murderers of the Fraser family and saw the bleaching bones of the dead blacks strewn here and there -- a gruesome sight! -- full-ribbed bodies, fleshless arms, disjointed leg-bones and ghastly grinning skulls peeping out of the grass. And I have passed the place in the dead of night with yet twenty miles before me, through a wilderness without a soft side -- Nature in, what always seemed to me, her worst aspect -- but never without a shudder . . .

To have wended one's way through the Dawson scrub leaving the bones of the slaughtered blacks far behind was joy indeed.

This was one of the encounters journalist Bruce Elder documented in his bestselling *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians Since 1788* (1992), in what he claims was the extermination of the Yeeman group, through an initial co-ordinated revenge action and subsequently by a surviving and deranged member of the Frasers who continued to rage across many regions shooting Aborigines at will. More recently, Richards in *The Secret War* also reports on the Hornet's Bank killings and reprisals, including an 1862 account by a member of one of the reprisal gangs who described "killing every grown-up black they found for 100 miles".

Is the survival of close reportage, as here in Davis's memoir, evidence of the typical pattern? Or does it point to the occasional breakdown of otherwise less bloody invasion and settlement? My own views, as fragmentary and inconclusive as anyone's, are informed by experiences I had touring throughout eastern Australia in the 70s with a theatre company staging a documentary play that touched on Myall Creek and other then known massacres.

Attitudes were changing, and several audience members quietly told me about killings they vaguely knew of, while two well-educated brothers even showed me the corner of a paddock on their property near Boggabilla where they claimed one had occurred.

I particularly remember one evening, talking to a young grazier during the post-performance tea and scones.

"That show was a bit close to the bone," he offered.

"I guess many of us have ancestors who were involved in that sort of thing in some way," I replied..

"Not just ancestors," he said with a careful look around to see who was in earshot. "My father."

* * *

Rudd's stories gave faces to bush battlers

STEELE Rudd's stories were collected in in 1899 as *On Our Selection* and became the greatest phenomenon in Australian book publishing in the first half of the 20th century. It was endlessly copied, exploited in other forms of entertainment and plagiarised. It was also translated into many languages and read across the world. Probably no other book until the 1970s influenced international perceptions of Australia more.

Rudd writes as if the stories he tells are raw autobiographical reportage, as if he is one of Dave Rudd's younger brothers and his father is Dad. Measuring formal book sales in Australia alone, an estimated 250,000 readers believed him. Dad Rudd's *Australia* was their popular memory of the era of the pioneers. Dad Rudd was, as historian Manning Clark

describes him, Australia's everyman. He "slaved his guts out to win the status of a landowner" and "did not know why the material reward was not commensurate with all their striving, all their suffering". But "he did not whine, or blame others, or shake his fist at the 'Architect of the Universe' and ask him, 'Why did you do this to me?' He had no metaphysical anguish: he was an Australian."

For poet and critic A.D. Hope, also writing after Bert Bailey had played Dad on stage between 1912 and 1928 and in four early sound films between 1932 and 1940, and after George Edwards had done likewise in the long-running (1937-52) radio serial Dad and Dave, the legends had swamped the source: "If all the Dad and Dave stories now in circulation were laid end to end they would stretch to infinity." Dad had become a tolerant, hardworking, four-square decent Aussie battler with a loyal and independent-minded wife, Mum, and a slow-witted son, Dave, who courted the even dopier Mabel -- a character unknown to Rudd -- all living in Snake Gully on the road to Gundagai, not on the Darling Downs.

The real Thomas Davis was the origin of very little of this. Rudd almost certainly never knew his father was a convict transported in 1849 from south Wales to NSW for two acts of breaking, entering and petty theft, committed while he was homeless and probably starving. One common factor in the stories, plays, films, radio episodes and cartoons featuring the Rudds is that they did not mention in their saga the existence of Aborigines. Rudd's dedication to the first edition of *On Our Selection* changes the history of Australia from invasion and conquest into a Genesis myth, one that since the discovery of Davis's memoir reads very differently:

PIONEERS OF AUSTRALIA! "To you who gave our country birth;" to the memory of you whose names, whose giant enterprise, whose deeds of fortitude and daring were never engraved on tablet or tombstone; to you who strove through the silences of the bush-lands and made them ours; to you who delved and toiled in loneliness through the years that have faded away; to you who have no place in the history of our country so far as it is yet written; to you who have done MOST for this land, to you for whom few, in the march towards settlement, in the turmoil of busy city life, now appear to care; and to you particularly, GOOD OLD DAD, This book is most affectionately dedicated.