

The legacy reverberates: how a repulsive image reminds us of our ugly past

Photographs of Indigenous men and boys in chains give testament to a system of brutal slavery in the early 1900s. They are yet another symbol of continued oppression



'The pastoralists might've had their euphemisms - such as "dispersal", when what they really meant was killing.' Photograph: State Library of Western Australia

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When you've ventured into Australia's dark historical corners for long enough it's possible to become inured to the discomfiting truths lurking there.

But the cover photograph of *Every Mother's Son is Guilty: Policing the Kimberley Frontier of Western Australia 1882-1905*, by historian Chris Owen, rocked me.

The photo depicts 100 or so Aboriginal prisoners, men and boys, chained by their necks, in Wyndham, the small port town of the late 19th century established to serve the pastoral and mining industries of the Kimberley. The picture was taken between 1898 and 1906.

It's a repulsive but compelling image for those inclined to flip the smoothed rocks of official colonial-pioneering history in the deep north in order to discover what's really

underneath. And it impels you to ask ever more questions about a frontier in which so many famous, long dead, white pioneering figures are still eulogised as rugged egalitarian heroes when they might more appropriately be remembered as complicit in extrajudicial killings of Indigenous people, who amassed fortunes off proceeds of what often amounted to slavery.

Owen – a former history teacher, one-time guitarist in heavy metal outfit Cremator, and now an honorary research fellow at the University of Western Australia and Indigenous family history researcher at WA's Department of Aboriginal Affairs – advised me to read Mary Durack.

I'd heard of the writer Durack, a daughter of "MP" Durack – one of the earliest colonists, in 1882, of the Kimberley – for her rugged accounts of her Irish family's imposition of what became a vast pastoral empire on stolen Aboriginal land. And I knew of her sister Elizabeth, a duly acclaimed artist, thinker and writer who, in an extraordinary, irreversible, late-life act of self-harm, painted and entered art shows as the pseudonymous Aboriginal stockman/bush artist Eddie Burrup.

I'd not previously read Mary Durack's *Kings in Grass Castles* (1959) or its 1983 sequel *Sons In the Saddle*.

Family biography is fraught. Of this Durack was, clearly, acutely mindful.

The omissions in her books about the appalling, intensely violent, inhumane treatment of Aboriginal custodians (by her antecedents; by what passed for a remote judicial system; by an evidentiary protocol that invariably absolved the invaders of culpability; by a brutal, corrupt policing system that bolstered the profits of those families in Durack's grass castles) have been left to Owen and others to fill.

As Owen pointed out, Durack's stylised narratives "celebrated European exploration, pioneering, colonisation and conquest".

"Aboriginal people were part and parcel of the environment: an element to be overcome by force if necessary, along with drought, wild animals, hunger and thirst. Unspoken in these accounts is the extreme violence between colonists, police and Aboriginal people ... the 'difficult aspects' of colonisation. Durack makes many references to violent interactions involving the killing of Aboriginal people ... though events are spoken of in euphemisms (the term 'dispersal' being the most obvious) or clouded under a veil of allusion."



*Aboriginal men in chains at Wyndham prison in Australia c 1901. This full-frame photo, published in the book *Nyibayarri: Kimberley tracker* (1995), shows boys on the left.*

Historian Mark Finnane has pointed out that while Durack's books were "distinguished by their recognition of Aboriginal lives and (occasionally) perspectives" this "cannot displace her unapologetic approach to recording her family's history, and a forgetfulness when it came to dealing with one of the darkest moments of the family's saga".

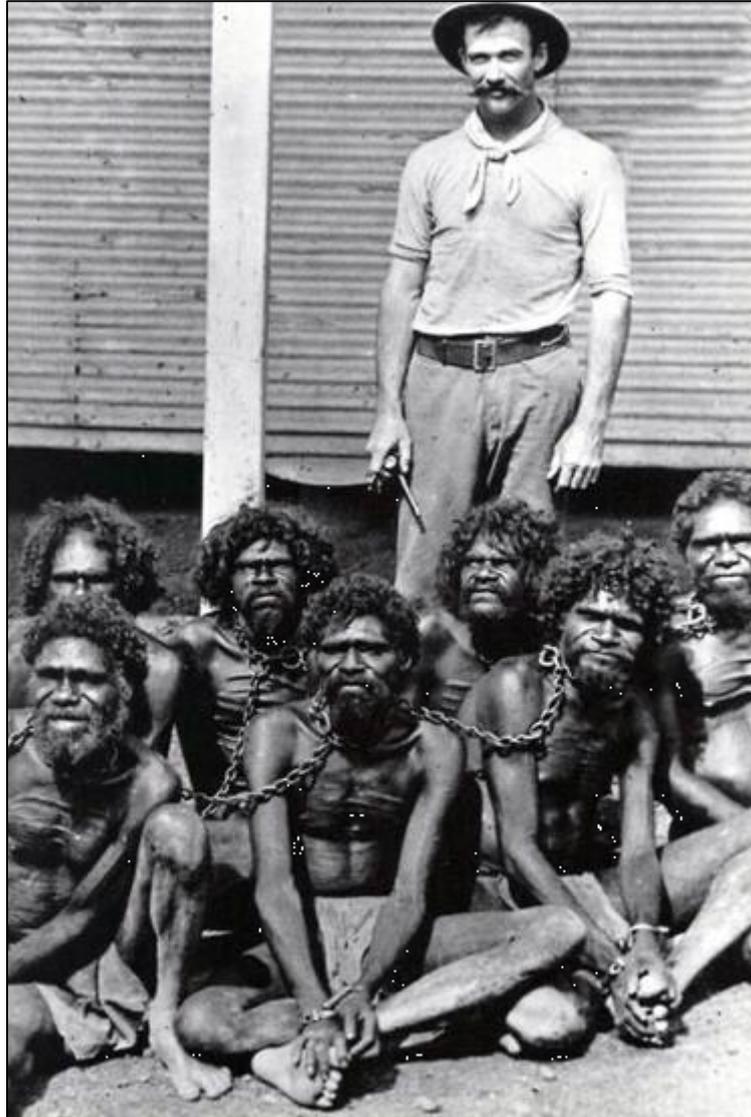
Yes, Durack recounted the murder of her uncle, "Galway" Jerry, at Dunham River for which a black worker was convicted. But she omits how Jerry three years earlier was cleared of complicity in shooting two Aboriginal men, one fatally, at the same place.

There are other curiosities too, one involving a photograph of "Aborigine prisoners, mostly arrested on cattle-spearing charges" taken at Wyndham in 1901, the year of an Australian federation that failed to deliver better outcomes to the frontier's Indigenous.

Again the Aboriginal men are shackled with heavy neck chains before a tin shed prison under the eye of a white keeper. The photograph has been cropped. At least two of the prisoners cut from the original photograph would appear to be boys. Why were they cropped out? To fit the page perhaps. Who knows?

Indeed, one of the uglier truths in Owen's book is the widespread imprisonment of Indigenous boys on the Kimberley frontier. Like the men they were chained to, they were made to build roads and fences and to clear land.

Owen writes: “In Hall’s Creek Aboriginal children as young as 10 were arrested, charged and imprisoned for periods of up to six months, sometimes with hard labour. One 15-year-old boy was sentenced to nine months for killing a goat, and another eight children between 14 and 16 years received two years’ gaol with hard labour for cattle killing.”



Aboriginal men in chains at Wydnham prison in Australia c 1901. This cropped photo, published in Sons In The Saddle (1983) excludes boys who were originally pictured on the left.

Then in WA, as today, the jails overflowed with Indigenous males of all ages.

In 1905 the Roth royal commission into “the condition of the natives” shocked the country and the world with its findings about policing practices, the murder of Aboriginal suspects by police and the marching over hundreds of kilometres of Aboriginal men “on the chain”.

The royal commission heard how confessions for cattle stealing were sometimes extracted from suspects – including boys – on threat of murder at gunpoint; how some police routinely raped Indigenous women and operated on a “rationing system” whereby they were paid a daily allowance for each black prisoner “on the chain”.

It recommended, among other things, the banning of neck chains. But they remained in use, as far as Owen can tell, until 1956.

Most other recommendations would also be ignored – presciently, it would seem, given other inquiries into the treatment of Indigenous people by the justice and prisons system, not least the royal commission into black deaths in custody. Most of its recommendations were ignored 85 years later. And a year ago, after controversies about the treatment of young Indigenous males at the Northern Territory’s Don Dale detention centre, another royal commission was established.

Commissioner Walter Roth said: “In connection with the arrest of Aborigines accused of this crime (cattle theft) your commissioner has received evidence which demonstrates a most brutal and outrageous condition of affairs.”

The Roth royal commission came after allegations in Western Australia’s parliament – and elsewhere internationally – that the Kimberley had a “system of slavery”. Early Indigenous rights campaigner Irishman Walter Malcolmson described a “brutal slavery in full swing in this part of the Empire”, saying WA was “the slave state of the Australian commonwealth” and that the Indigenous of the “north-west and Kimberley were worse off than the Negro in the American slave days”.

Certainly the photographs of black men and boys in chains testify accordingly.

Culpability was widespread, as implied in the title of Owen’s book.

Royal commissioner Roth asked Kimberley police constable Inglis if the informal, possibly unlawful yet widely accepted, arrest and jailing system, where regulations regarding arrest and rules of evidence were so lax, was not a “rather one-sided justice” for Aboriginal people?

Inglis effectively concurred, replying: “It’s a queer country where I am. Every mother’s son is guilty.”

Indeed. The legacy reverberates.

The pastoralists might’ve had their euphemisms –such as “dispersal”, when what they really meant was killing.

But the chain will endure as yet another brutal symbol of continued oppression of this continent’s Indigenous people.