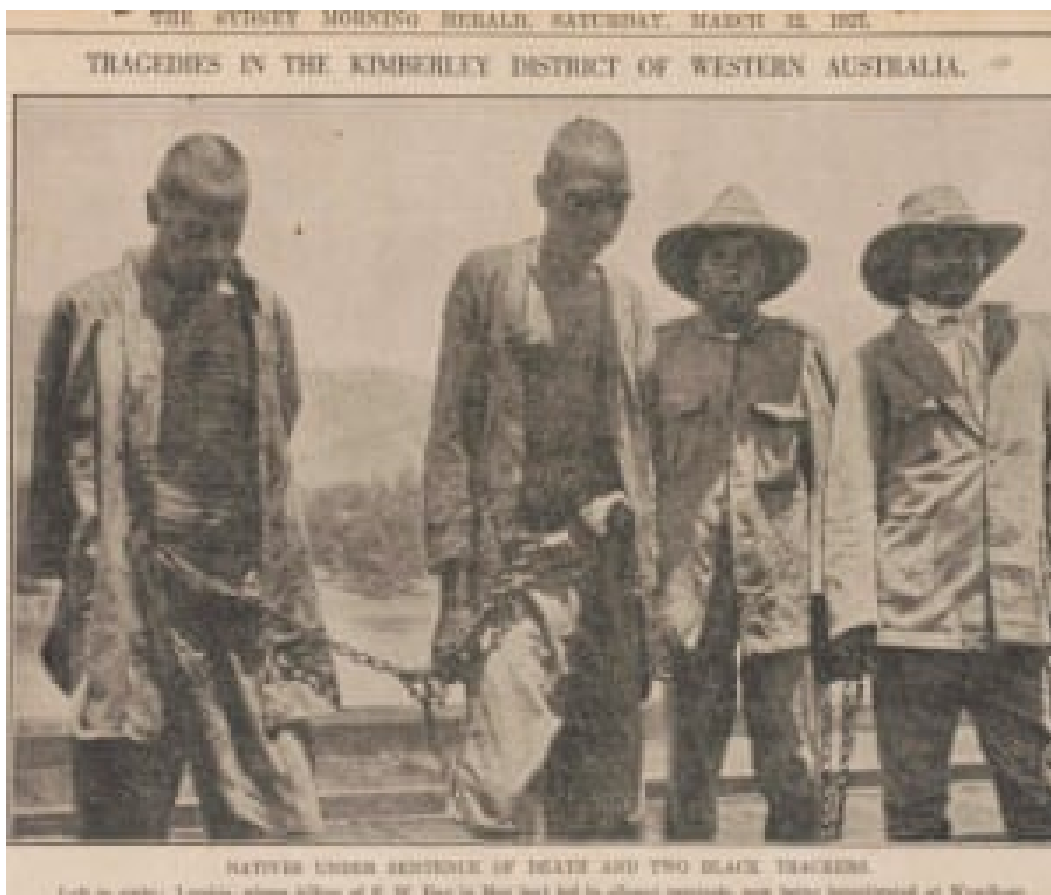


'Conspiracy of silence': how sabotaged inquiries fed massacre denials

Witnesses vanished, killers went free and there is reluctance – even today – to acknowledge that the slaughter of Aboriginal people took place

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6 Mar 2019



A report in the Sydney Morning Herald shows a man purported to be Lumbia, left, under arrest for the murder of pastoralist Fred Hay, which provoked the 1926 Forrest River massacre of Oombulgurri people

It's hard to believe that in 1927 – between one world war and the other – Western Australia held a royal commission with such a gruesome name.

The “Royal Commission of Inquiry into Alleged Killing and Burning of Bodies of Aborigines in East Kimberley and into Police Methods When Effecting Arrests” was set up to find out how many Aboriginal people died at the hands of police and

It was one of two official investigations in the Kimberley into some of the later mass killings of Australia's violent frontier history.

Tension had existed between Nulla Nulla station and the Oombulgurri people at Forrest River mission since the station was given to two returning soldiers – Leonard Overheu and Frederick Hay. Oombulgurri people had previously occupied the area and, to Overheu and Hay's anger, hunted cattle on it.

In 1926 Hay was murdered by an Aboriginal man named Lumbia, for the rape of his wife, Anguloo. In reprisal, police constables Graham St Jack and Denis Regan led a posse of 13 police and local white people armed with Winchester rifles, 500 to 600 rounds of ammunition, 42 horses and shotguns.

The 1927 royal commission concluded that the police party had killed and burned the bodies of at least 11 people. In his report the commissioner, GT Wood, said a "conspiracy of silence" in the entire Kimberley district had thwarted attempts to find out what really happened.



Aldoa and Herbert, who witnessed the Forrest River massacre. From the State Library of WA collection, courtesy of Wilma and Harry Venville

A historian and the inaugural magistrate of the Victorian Koori court, Kate Auty, researched the Wood royal commission. "The commission was fundamentally compromised," she says. "It was conducted with half the evidence. People meant to testify just disappeared."

Three Aboriginal trackers who were kept in Wyndham prison waiting to testify vanished. One of them, Sulieman, had guided police to the alleged massacre site where they uncovered skull fragments, improvised ovens, hair and teeth.

St Jack – whom they were waiting to testify against – was sent out to find the trio. “They sent St Jack out to find Sulieman,” Auty says. “Come back, mate, we need you to give evidence against me.”

Tommy Doort, Overheu’s house servant, also disappeared after sharing details about the killings. His wife, Lyddie Doort, alleged he had accompanied Overheu on a search for lost horses and never returned.

Charges against St Jack and Regan were dropped owing to insufficient evidence.

The historian Neville Green, author of *The Forrest River Massacres* and a former primary schoolteacher at the mission in the 1960s, says defence witnesses lied about their qualifications and provided false evidence. An “anthropologist”, Hepburn Tindale, falsely claimed he had a master’s degree from Oxford. Another witness said the ovens were not proof that police had cremated the bodies but instead related to Indigenous mortuary customs.



Oombulgurri – the site of a 1926 massacre – seen from the air in 1993. From the State Library of WA collection, courtesy of Wilma and Harry Venville. Photograph: Richard Woldendorp

Historians have also questioned the investigation into events at another site in the Kimberley, Mowla Bluff. . In 1916 more than a dozen Karajarri, Mangala and Nyikina people were chained together and herded to the bluff where they were shot and their bodies burned.

The Nyikina Mangala elder John Watson recounted in his book, *Raparapa*:

There were no real skeletons, just bits and pieces of bone laying here and there, and there was a patch of soil that had been made black from the fat of all the people who had been burnt there.

Two years later a fisherman reported to Broome police that he had met two Nyikina men, Nanya and Nullagumbia, who claimed to have survived a police-led massacre. A police constable called Melrose went to talk to them.

Melrose telegraphed the police commissioner in Perth:

Regarding the two male Aborigines, doctors extracted automatic pistol bullets from one, and the other has a bullet and knocked out teeth embedded in the roof of his mouth.

The two natives claim that after Aborigines tried to murder George Why, police and Why shot 10 Aborigines connected with the attempt. Remains alleged absolutely destroyed. Am sending to search.

Nanya and Nullagumbia claimed the victims had been tricked into collecting wood for their own pyre by being let off their chains and told to gather sticks to burn a bullock. Melrose “found no evidence to support allegations”.

The police commissioner, Robert Connell, replied that if they had not been killed he “would be glad to know if there is any possibility of locating the natives”.

There is no record that this directive was followed and the investigation was closed.

The Battye historian of the State Library of Western Australia, Dr Chris Owen, says punitive expeditions were common. “It is best to understand that police and settler-colonists were part of the same white community who often saw themselves at war with the entire Aboriginal population,” he says.

As late as 2001, Western Australian police denied that the Mowla Bluff massacre took place. The then-commissioner, Barry Matthews, told the Nyikina film-maker Mitch Torres: “The Mowla Bluff massacre allegations are as false as that of Forrest River.”

WA police has told Guardian Australia that the force now has “no considered position on these matters”. Last year the police commissioner, Chris Dawson, delivered an apology to First Nations people but did not mention massacres.

“I accept that previous laws, practices and policies deeply affected the lives of Aboriginal people, and that police involvement in historical events has led to mistrust in law enforcement and the damaging of our relationship,” Dawson said.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice commissioner, June Oscar, commended his speech.



The Rev James Noble and his wife Angelina, left, with their family at Forrest River mission in 1925, a year before the massacre. From the State Library of WA collection, courtesy of Wilma and Harry Venville

Oscar tells Guardian Australia: “As a child growing up in Bunuba country with the privilege of growing up with a lot of older people, I was told about bad things that had happened. There were moments of witnessing and hearing people’s fear of how white people could respond in terrible ways.”

She says acknowledging massacres is “part of a broader national healing process”.

“This is part of accepting and owning up to the horrors of the massacres and the killings of Aboriginal people in the time of settlement,” she says. “Accepting that truth should be liberating. It should be liberating for the police and white Australia.”

Oscar is still optimistic about the future relationship with WA police.

“Sometimes they’re the first people at the scene and the last people there, helping people pick up the pieces when terrible things happen. That’s even more reason why we need to work together.”