

THE GREAT “DARKEY FLAT MASSACRE” MYSTERY

Oral Tradition, Popular History, and Empirical Evidence

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The regional or local historian is confronted with a multiplicity of problems involving themes, boundaries, perspective, and, above all, sources where oral tradition (what people remember or believe) and popular history (what has been recorded or published by old residents or early historians) is not — or cannot be — borne out by the empirical evidence. In such a case which version of an event do we accept? This problem is well illustrated by the presumed massacre of Aborigines by early squatters at Darkey Flat (near Pratten) on the Darling Downs in the 1840s. The problem is this: if the massacre actually occurred, then when, where, why, and by whom was it perpetrated?

There is no doubt that the older residents of the southern Darling Downs from Warwick to Leyburn believed from childhood that a significant massacre — more than the usual violent conflict between black and white on the frontier — did occur. Thomas Hall (1850s-1860s), Donald Gunn (1860s-1870s), William Lambley (1870s-1880s), Charlie Fraser (1900s), and Allan Dickson (1910s) each acknowledge the tradition. More recently Toowoomba writer, Lucy Bainbridge, who spent her childhood in the district in the 1920s and 1930s stated: ‘I had grown up with the knowledge that there had been a battle on Tummaville Plain’.

The first published account of the massacre was by Thomas Hall, *The Early History of Warwick*, c.1925: two renegade Aborigines, in order to avoid tribal punishment, informed the local squatters (the Gammies of Talgai) that the local blacks were preparing to attack the homestead; naturally the squatters pre-empted this by attacking the unsuspecting tribe. The massacre occurred at Pratten between 1845 and 1853. (Donald Gunn later added that the date was 1848).

The second published account appeared in the *Warwick Daily News*, 29 October 1928 as part of the “Back to Pratten” celebrations:

W. Lambley believed the massacre, prompted by the theft of stock from distant Maryvale station, occurred at Hazeldene, a few kilometres south of Pratten, where he had seen ‘numerous skulls and bones’; no date was given. The location of the skeletal remains at Hazeldene was later confirmed by Charlie Fraser.

In 1977 Father Joseph McKey tried to reconcile the conflicting accounts of Hall, on the one hand, and Lambley/Fraser, on the other, by suggesting there were either two separate massacres which had been fused into one over time or that the facts of a single event had become distorted as the story was passed on from mouth to mouth.

The most recent account is given by Jan Ward-Brown in her *Rosenthal-Historic Shire* (Warwick, 1989). Evincing evidence that the Gammies of Talgai seemed to behave secretively, furtively, and suspiciously, she accepts Allan Dickson’s view that the massacre was prompted by the Aboriginal murder of a Gammie wife and children. She concludes that it must have occurred between the arrival of the Gammies in March 1841 and the arrival of the commissioner of Crown Lands in September 1843, and that a conspiracy of silence was observed afterwards because of the judicial retribution which followed the massacre at Myall Creek in New England in 1838.

Hence, from the oral and popular accounts we might conclude that a massacre of Aborigines by squatters occurred on Talgai run but there are major contradictions concerning place, time, and motive. What can we make of this?

Firstly, as the exact site has not been determined, and the number and disposition of the skeletons unknown, there is no archaeological evidence to determine whether Darkey Flat was a battle field or a traditional burying ground.

Secondly, there is no eyewitness, first-hand, or clear documentary evidence relating to the presumed massacre. Indeed, the publication of Hall’s version in the mid-1920s seems both to have contributed to the survival of the oral tradition and initiated the popular history of the event.

Thirdly, the Darling Downs had a resident magistrate from mid-1841, came under the control of Moreton Bay officials from mid-1842, and had its own Commissioner from mid-1843: all these are known to be diligent officials who almost certainly would not have “overlooked” the death of a white family at the hands of hostile blacks; moreover, an examination of birth, death and marriage records before 1856 shows that the Gammies did not marry until the late 1840s and that wives and children were still alive in 1856.

Fourthly, from official records we know that two shepherds were killed on Talgai in January 1842. This may have been the pretext for massive retaliation but the magisterial enquiry into the deaths does not hint at such, although the “Myall Creek syndrome” may apply here.

Fifthly, it is also known that throughout the winter, spring and early summer of 1843, the Aborigines of south east Queensland mounted a concerted resistance to the squatters and that, after the famous Battle of One Tree Hill (in the Lockyer Valley, near Toowoomba) in September 1843, parties of vigilantes roamed the Downs hunting down hostile blacks. From squatters' private correspondence a "Darkey Flat" incident could have occurred about Christmas 1843; again the "Myall Creek syndrome" could have hushed it up or more likely, in the general attitude of the period, it was simply not worth reporting.

Sixthly, the official records show that in December 1848 a party of seven white men did kill three black women and a child in front of eyewitnesses on a station about 50-60 kms from Darkey Flat: the eyewitnesses could not — or would not — identify the perpetrators. Is it possible that this incident has been transferred to another place in popular memory?

Seventhly, the version of the Darkey Flat Massacre concerning the death of a white family echoes massacres elsewhere. The Crampton Corner Massacre near Goondiwindi reputedly followed the Aboriginal murder of a station manager's family but Donald Gunn, in *Links with the Past*, has shown that, while the "massacre" may have occurred, certainly no white family was murdered; indeed, this massacre seems to have had little impact on the public consciousness. On the other hand the massacres of the Fraser family at Hornet Bank (1858) and the Wills family at Cullin-la-ringo (1861) — and the subsequent European vengeance — are well established both in oral tradition, popular history, and empirical evidence.

Lastly, it is known that the Gammies changed the name of their station from the Scottish "Stornaway" in 1841 to the Aboriginal "Tarrayarra" — meaning "flooded gums" — in 1845 and "Talgai" — meaning 'dead trees' — in 1847. It seems unlikely that squatters who had been involved in a major conflict with hostile Aborigines, and had no reason to regard them highly, would have honoured them by adopting a native rather than English name for their property. On the contrary, the change in toponomy suggests friendly contact between the two races.

On the empirical evidence it is impossible to establish the facts of the Darkey Flat Massacre. A number of incidents point to the possibility but not the certainty of large number of Aborigines being killed on the southern Darling Downs in the 1840s. There are, however, strong parallels with massacres elsewhere, raising the possibilities that the Darkey Flat Massacre is substantially a myth manufactured from 'imported' ideas and events and that the oral tradition and popular history thus created have been mutually reinforcing. Still, "where there's smoke, there's fire" and in every myth there is a kernel of historical fact!