

# 3

## Memory-lines: Ethnographies of colonial violence in Central Australia

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It is often while driving with people in Central Australia that stories are shared. The engine hums, the chassis shakes and people begin to talk. Traversing long distances means passing by and crossing over ancestral, historical and personal stories of kin and Country, sometimes in rapid succession. On one occasion, two Anmatyerr Elders, Huckitta Lynch and Ronnie McNamara, called out over the din of the Toyota engine to recount the story of an attack in the ‘olden’ times. Ronnie bent over into the cabin where Jason Gibson was driving and, speaking loudly into his ear, remarked that during the time of ‘the war’ Anmatyerr men had used fire as their primary weapon. He continued: ‘They made *rwa* (fires) everywhere around the station at Angkwerl (Annas Reservoir). Killed whitefellas too. We made trouble everywhere.’<sup>1</sup> The archive, too, records these events, noting that the thatched roof of the Annas Reservoir homestead was set alight by a large group of Aboriginal men who waited outside with their spears at the ready. The exact reasons for the attack on Annas Reservoir are not known, but there is evidence to suggest that access to resources, or perhaps the rape of a young Anmatyerr girl, had sparked the hostility (Kimber, 1991, p. 11).

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<sup>1</sup> The spellings of words in Indigenous languages in this chapter follow conventions used in published dictionaries of these languages. Where appropriate, alternative spellings in different languages, for example in Warlpiri and in Kaytetye, are given.

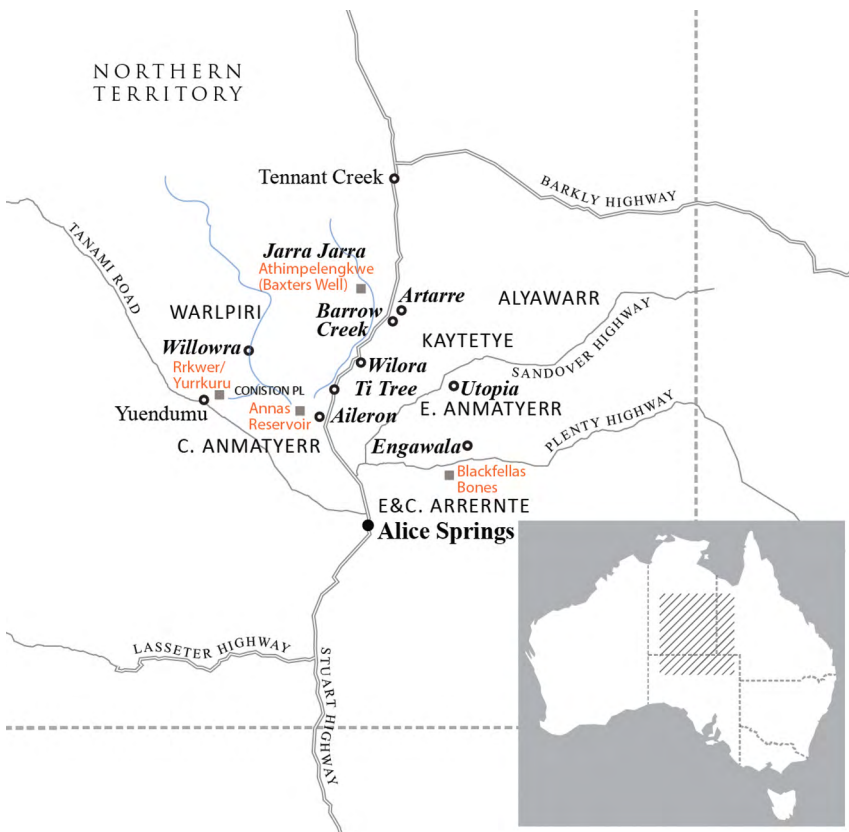
Whatever the cause, the 1884 Annas Reservoir attack was followed by a brutal response from the authorities, whereby the notoriously violent Mounted Constable William Willshire (see Griffiths, this volume), other police and Aboriginal native police pursued and shot dead a number of Anmatyerr people ('The late outrage', 1884, p. 5).

Indigenous people retain memories of these events and other examples of frontier violence through modes of historical and cultural practice involving the recounting of oral narratives, visits to Country (Gibson, 2020, pp. 183–209) and, more recently, through the construction of monuments and the hosting of large-scale memorial events. The spectre of colonial violence looms large over parts of Central Australia, and some placenames imposed by settler-colonists are a continual reminder of the role of violence in the annexation of Indigenous lands. Skull Creek, for example, is said to take its name from the bleached bones left there after a punitive party shot numerous Indigenous people in response to an attack on the Barrow Creek Telegraph Station in 1874. Blackfellows Bones Bore (Itarlentye), a place roughly 100 kilometres north-east of Alice Springs and discussed at length below, similarly marks the site of police shootings in the late nineteenth century. In Anmatyerr Country, Wurmbrandt Rock (traditionally known as Mwetyek), on the edge of Lake Lewis, is named on colonial maps after Constable Erwein Wurmbrand, a man remembered by local people as *tyerrenherrenhe nthurre*, an excessive or 'quick shooter' (Strehlow, 1960, p. 73).<sup>2</sup> A street in Alice Springs retains the name of the notorious Mounted Constable Willshire, despite decades of community protests and recent lobbying to the Alice Springs Town Council for its name to be changed.

This chapter examines contrasting forms of commemoration of colonial violence in Central Australia and addresses the different ways that the violence of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been remembered. Conceptualised as 'memory-lines', we visualise these stories as moving through time and space, shaped by social context and relationships. Their passage is enabled and marked in diverse and dynamic ways, such as memorials in place, social and oral memory, published texts derived from oral recordings and, increasingly, new media such as film and other creative artworks or online resources. The passage of remembrance through time raises questions about the nature of 'living memory' and of the impacts of a past known through 'memory, through family stories, through lived

2 Strehlow's spelling, as it appeared in his field diary entry, has been transposed to a modern Arandic orthography (see David Moore in Kenny, 2018, pp. 101–140).

experience and being in place’ and a past learned through ‘history’, including written texts and commemorative plaques (Krichauff, this volume). To tease out these differences, we adopt a spatial/geographic approach to observe how acts of memorialisation might differ across associated cultural/linguistic regions and show how distinctive historical relationships with settler-colonial society have produced different ways and means of remembering violent encounters. Our general focus is on an area of Central Australia to the north of Alice Springs, bifurcated by the Stuart Highway, where the land is associated with Arrernte, Anmatyerr, Kaytetye and Warlpiri peoples (Figure 3.1).



**Figure 3.1. Map of the Central Australian region, showing key places mentioned in text.**

Map: Jennifer Green.

Notwithstanding complex cultural and ceremonial links between these Indigenous peoples and the interpenetration of social relationships across the broader region, we first consider the country and peoples residing to the west of the Stuart Highway, then those to the east. As is the case with other arbitrary lines that delineate borders and boundaries, to differing degrees their geographic significance may be retrofitted to match underlying Indigenous ontologies. For example, across the Anmatyerr region, the notion of *altwerl-thayt* ‘west side’ and *ingerr-thayt* ‘east side’ is a common point of regional differentiation in the Anmatyerr vernacular, and the highway itself provides a convenient, if imprecise, point of reference (Green, 2010, pp. vii, viii).

Growing global debates about the removal of monuments of known perpetrators of colonial violence (Levinson, 2018; Mitchell, 2003) and processes of ‘truth-telling’ have reverberated across Australia (McKenna, 2018). In the Australian context, ‘truth-telling’ has been proposed as a means of ‘clarifying historical truths’ and paying respect to previously unrecognised victims and/or their descendants (Appleby & Davis, 2018, p. 504). Inspired by the release of the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* in 2017, which outlines processes for treaty-making and truth-telling, community debate about how to remember complex, shared colonial histories and acknowledge violent conflict has intensified. This chapter thus advances an ethnographic and historical consideration of this process from a Central Australian context. We ask how memories and stories of frontier violence, which may contain narratives that do not necessarily fall into conventional invader/resistor distinctions, are recognised according to the varying social-political positions of different Aboriginal communities. Moreover, we argue for a deeper understanding of past events and the ways they have been remembered, which permits a full consideration of Aboriginal agencies and interpretations. Drawing upon oral histories, we examine how memories of such events mark junctures of historical periodisation (between precolonial, colonial and postcolonial lifeways), emphasise feelings of immense loss and tragedy, and invite readers to consider themes of coexistence involving both settler-colonist and Aboriginal experience.

## Early interactions

The spatial/geographic analysis also has historical context. The colonial frontier swept across Central Australia at an uneven pace and utilised different tools to subordinate the original occupants. No doubt ecological factors also played a role, as riverine country and water sources were prized by all, and

mountain ranges presented a challenge for some forms of transportation. The first recorded European incursion into Arrernte and Anmatyerr Country was in 1860, when John McDouall Stuart reached Central Australia after several thwarted attempts. The expedition was instrumental to the establishment of the Overland Telegraph Line linking the north and south of the continent; by 1872, the line was operational and had almost bisected Anmatyerr lands (Devitt & Urapuntja Health Service Council, 1994, p. 25). Along this central corridor and to the east of it, pastoral entrepreneurs petitioned for greater police presence to protect their livelihoods and check against Aboriginal spearing of cattle and horses (Gillen, 1968).

In contrast, the lands to the west of the telegraph line, which progressively became less watered, were left largely unexplored. Some people in this area, often bilingual speakers of Warlpiri and Anmatyerr, lived on pastoral leases, while others grew up on gazetted Aboriginal reserves that had not been widely utilised for pastoralism; these people later moved to missions and other government settlements and have since received far greater attention from a range of scholars and Aboriginal advocacy groups than other Aboriginal people (Rowse, 1990).<sup>3</sup> As is explained below, this attention and support has assisted with the establishment of counter-monuments (offering alternative histories to those monuments erected to the dominant group) and with the communication of histories of violence.

To the east, however, people came to know settler-colonists via the distinctive experience of living on a remote and largely unruly pastoral frontier. Some Arrernte and Alyawarr people were dispersed and moved east into western Queensland and north towards Lake Nash and elsewhere (Lyon & Parsons, 1989). Frontier brutality and killings undoubtedly contributed significantly to their dislocation and exile from traditional Country. Arthur Groom's account of Indigenous people fleeing north in the 1920s is powerfully illustrative of how these dispersals played out: 'It appeared they were not wanted somewhere, and had been warned off. They had come through an area new and strange to them, tired, dispirited, and lethargic' (Groom, 1963, p. 10). Accounts of the past on the eastern side are rarely published and thus little-known, and memories of frontier violence are maintained principally

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3 Although a very rough and ready metric, a search by language name of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) print collection shows that the number of Warlpiri catalogue items far exceeds the totals for their easterly and south-easterly neighbours (Anmatyerr, Alyawarr and Kaytetye). While a search for Arrernte yields results on a par with Warlpiri, these records are predominately associated with Alice Springs and with Hermannsburg ([aiatsis.gov.au/collection/search-collection](http://aiatsis.gov.au/collection/search-collection)).

in oral form (but see Bowman & Central Land Council, 2015). The archival record is also quite patchy, and although more recent oral historical material has been generated through land claim and then native title research, these records are seldom known beyond the local context and may be subject to access conditions. Here colonial violence has been largely forgotten by the wider public. There are no public observances or monuments to act as mnemonics for darker histories. As such, the way the region either remembers or forgets these difficult pasts has been somewhat shaped by institutional, political and legal determinants. Improved communication technologies and changing public attitudes have also combined to lift the veil on cultures of collective secrecy around such atrocities in some regions, but less so in others. The sympathetic public gaze is unevenly distributed.

## Coniston monuments

We begin to the west of the Stuart Highway, with the Coniston killings of 1928. As the last large-scale atrocity committed against Aboriginal people by settler-colonists, and one of the better-known Australian ‘massacres’, the story of Coniston looms large in the national consciousness. Numerous books have been published, and documentary films made, about the shootings, and the details of these terrible events have been scrutinised by historians, lawyers and anthropologists. Aboriginal oral histories and eyewitness accounts were gathered during the late twentieth century when survivors were still alive to share their stories (Batty & Kelly, 2012; Bowman & Central Land Council, 2015, pp. 88–94; Bradley, 2019; Cataldi, 1996; Cribbin, 1984; Kimber, 2003; Koch, 1993; Read & Read, 1993; Rubuntja & Green, 2002, pp. 29–34; Vaarzon-Morel, 1995). Even Keith Windschuttle, the chief conservative protagonist in the divisive ‘History Wars’ debates of the 1990s, has acknowledged the extent of the atrocities (Windschuttle, 2000, p. 9). Former conservative senator for the Northern Territory and minister for Indigenous affairs Nigel Scullion also supported annual moves for a ‘solemn commemoration’ of the event so that it is ‘never forgotten’ (Parliament of Australia, 2018). Given the attention that these events have received in recent decades, we provide only a very brief synopsis of their history and instead focus on the forms of remembrance and memorialisation that have emerged.

Towards the end of the 1920s, after years of prolonged drought, opportunistic and hungry Anmatyerr, Warlpiri and Kaytetye people came into closer contact with the small number of settler-colonists. These predominantly male frontiersmen had spread out across the vast arid terrain, eking out

a marginal life under the watchful eye of the country's traditional custodians. Angered by the sight of cattle spoiling scarce food and water resources and encroaching upon rich cultural sites, and outraged by witnessing the abuse of Aboriginal women, Indigenous people along the Lander and Hanson rivers began confronting the new arrivals. In 2006, Anmatyerr/Warlpiri Elder Paddy Willis Kemarr recounted a story told to him as a boy about the disreputably cruel pastoralist Nugget Morton, who had been attacked following his harsh treatment of Aboriginal women. The 'old people', he explained, 'gathered together into a fighting group and attacked Morton just before daybreak, while he was sleeping ... They smashed him about with boomerangs' (Kemarr, 2006). Morton apparently recognised some of his attackers and shot one of them dead with his revolver (Bowman & Central Land Council, 2015, p. 92; Wilson & O'Brien, 2003, p. 137). Almost a month earlier, a dingo trapper named Fred Brooks – who had similarly 'taken' an Aboriginal woman – was killed by an aggrieved Warlpiri man called Kamalyarrpa Japanangka or 'Bullfrog'. This incident took place at Brooks Soak (called Rrkwer in Anmatyerr and Yurrkuru in Warlpiri) on Mount Denison Station (see Figure 3.1). The response from the police, joined by a small group of pastoralists, was brutal, and between August and October 1928, a group led by Mounted Constable William George Murray terrorised the region.

The number of dead officially tallied as 31, however, other accounts suggest the number could possibly have been as high as 150 (Central Land Council, 2018; Cribbin, 1984; Kimber, 1991). News of the killings captured international attention, with British humanitarian groups joining with their Australian counterparts to successfully call for a full federal government inquiry. As with all the previous enquiries into earlier acts of frontier violence in Central Australia, the inquiry exonerated the perpetrators, finding that the shootings were 'justified'.

Some Aboriginal people had long been asking for memorials to those who were killed, and there are now two monuments to the Coniston massacres, both erected in the past 20 years. The first was unveiled in September 2003 at Rrkwer/Yurrkuru (Brooks Soak) on the 75th anniversary of the murders (see Figure 3.2). A plaque attached to the memorial rock states that the murder of Brooks led to the killing of many innocent Aboriginal people across the region and includes the text, 'We will remember them always', translated into Warlpiri, Anmatyerr and Kaytetye (Central Land Council, 2018; Monuments Australia, n.d.). With support from the Central Land Council, large numbers of people gathered for the unveiling of the monument,

women performed traditional dances, and the descendants of victims and perpetrators met for the first time. The great-niece of Constable Murray, Liza Dale-Hallett, read a personal statement of sorrow and reconciliation. Speaking of a 'shared history' of colonial encounter characterised by 'difficult and painful pasts', she appealed for a future of 'diversity and equal rights' (McCarthy, 2009, p. 8). Outside the Aileron Roadhouse, on the journey back to Alice Springs after the event, Dale-Hallett and Napaljarri, a Warlpiri descendant of the man who killed Brooks, stood for a photo opportunity holding the gifts they had exchanged. Napaljarri repeated a line that had featured in the formal proceedings of the event several days before: 'Ah, two murderers' daughters together!' (see also Vaarzon-Morel, 2016b).<sup>4</sup> A difficult moment met with dark humour and fellowship. The exchange was not meant to lessen the gravity of the Coniston tragedy, but rather could be read as an attempt to afford a level of generosity between people and begin to erode presumed barriers between them.



**Figure 3.2. At the Coniston memorial site: Lesley Stafford, Jason Gibson and Huckitta Lynch, 2008.**

Photograph: Mick Ngai Turner.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Green was present when this exchange occurred at Aileron. Although the term 'daughter' was used, a Napaljarri would be a great-grandchild of a Japanangka.



The location of the Rrkwer/Yurrkuru memorial (Figure 3.2) is close to where Brooks was killed, not at one of the many places where Murray's party rampaged and Aboriginal people were murdered (Read, 2008, p. 33; Vaarzon-Morel, 1995). The stone monument stands out as a Western/European form of memorialisation on a European pastoral lease (although a portion of this land was returned to Traditional Owners in 2014). Travelling within the vicinity of the memorial site in 2008, Anmatyerr men were keen to take Jason Gibson to this monument and recount the story of the Coniston shootings. These elderly men had never received any formal schooling, could not read the plaque and showed no interest in having it read to them. Instead, they encouraged their visitor to learn more about what happened via the inscriptions as a means of augmenting the far more expansive, complex and detailed stories that they shared as the group continued to drive. While the purpose of the trip was to record ancestral 'Dreaming' stories in situ (at the places where these ancestors visited and resided), a detour to the cave where Bullfrog had hidden was added. These men believed that the events that unfolded there upset or jeopardised a provisional, yet deeply unequal, balancing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous interests in the region. Stopping at the old monument to Fred Brooks, erected by his long-time friend Randal Stafford, the men again commented that it was the unjust killing of Brooks that had led to the further deaths of so many of their family members. Indeed, as was stated in evidence in the Brooks Soak land claim, some descendants of those brutally murdered in retaliation for Brook's killing did not bear 'any animosity' towards him (Olney, 1992a, pp. 23–25). The process of site visitation, incorporating Western-style monuments within a distinctively Aboriginal landscape, raised complicated matters of intercultural difference, misunderstandings and asymmetries of power.

A second stone memorial was built in 2008 at Athimpelengkwe (Baxters Well, Figure 3.3), a site less known in the published accounts of the Coniston shootings, but well known to Kaytetye, Anmatyerr and Warlpiri people. Like the monument at Brooks Soak, the Athimpelengkwe structure stands at a site a long way from main roads, townships and communities and is unlikely to receive significant visitation from tourists or non-resident travellers, yet its intention is to generate public recognition of the extent of Murray's murderous rampage. Built by Indigenous Volunteers Australia and the people of Alekarenge (a community to the east of the Stuart Highway) with assistance from the Central Land Council and Newmont Gold Mines,

the memorial stands at one of the many places where people were killed as the reprisal party moved north along the Hanson River. As Kaytetye Elder Tommy Thompson Kngwarraye recalled:

The police went on horseback along the side of the creek, following the people's tracks. They travelled and shot people as they went along. There were two Aboriginal trackers who knew the country. They showed the police where the people were. (Kngwarraye, 2003)

Oral history accounts from senior people connected to this country have explained that people from surrounding areas were attacked at Athimpelengkwe where they had gathered for ceremonies (Koch, 1993, pp. 66–71). According to Thompson, they had gathered for a type of ceremony known as *ltharte* and were unaware of the impending trouble (Kngwarraye, 2003). Others believe that the 'ceremony was staged at Athimpelengkwe at the request of the police as a trick to get people together, and that in the massacre that followed there was an underlying message that ceremonies should no longer be performed' (Turpin, 2005, p. 42).



**Figure 3.3. The memorial at Athimpelengkwe (Baxters Well) in 2008.**

Photograph: Jane Hodson, courtesy Central Land Council.



**Figure 3.4. The late Tommy Thompson Ngwarraye speaking at the Coniston Memorial event, 2003.**

Photograph: Roger Barnes.

Constructed with affordable red brick blocks and concrete, the base of the Athimpelengkwe monument is unassuming (Figure 3.3). The attached plaque recognises two of the landholding groups that hosted these ceremonies – those from Tyarre-tyarre (in Warlpiri Jarrajarra or Jarra Jarra) and those from Errweltye. On top of the monument stand two large stones sourced from these lands (McCarthy, 2009, p. 10). Placing these stones in this way was presumably no small matter. What might, at face value, be understood as a monument to the fallen simultaneously stands as a statement on traditional land tenure and the ongoing importance of local Kaytetye and Warlpiri cultural practices. More than the monument at the site of the Brooks murder, this monument directly addresses those killed by the punitive party and draws in highly local and specific Aboriginal conceptions of place and personal relationships. A banner displayed on the day of the monument's unveiling quoted Thompson (Figure 3.4) as saying:

We old people are thinking and talking about the history at Athimpelengkwe and we want to make it a public place. We want to make it a place where everyone can know what happened. We want to tell people about the place where the blood and bodies of our relatives lie.<sup>5</sup>

## The eastern region

As detailed above, the sequence of reprisals known as the Coniston massacres had an immediate and fatal impact on the lives of Warlpiri, Anmatyerr and Kaytetye peoples. In the eastern region, however, where colonial violence has largely been ‘forgotten’ by the public, and where the archival record is patchy, there are no monuments or public observances to crimes of the past. In some cases Indigenous Elders and their families have retained memories associated with the events, and possess knowledge of the key places where violence occurred. The retelling of these stories nonetheless has been inhibited (Elliot, 2008). Stories associated with the killing of people by settler-colonists in this part of the region mark the juncture of historical periodisation, between precolonial and colonial lifeways. The stories are infused with feelings of loss and tragedy, but also framed within ideas of mutual ignorance or misunderstanding, as both black and white confronted each other, mystified by each other’s presence.

As much as the Annas Reservoir conflict subdued some of the resistance, Alyawarr, Anmatyerr and Arrernte people continued to kill cattle. Reprisals involving groups of stockmen and police often ‘working beyond the law’ were carried out (Kimber, 1991, p. 13). Anmatyerr Elder Eric Penangk has described this period of history as a time when his ancestors would regularly flee to the hills for safety. Stories of hiding in the range country, retreating to caves and using the rough, rocky terrain to avoid punitive parties travelling on horseback were common among his senior family members. In the hills, people’s tracks would be invisible to the unskilled outsider eye. Constable Willshire’s own record of these events, written from the perspective of the pursuer, concur with Anmatyerr memory: ‘We tried very hard to arrest them, but we were almost helpless in the big ranges compared with those savages, as they leap from rock to rock, and then

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5 The text on the banner was sourced from Green’s 2003 recording of Thompson.



suddenly disappear' ('The outrages by natives', 1884, p. 31). Nonetheless, police, settlers and trackers went on bloody forays reaching well beyond the 'settled' region.

At Itarlentye, now also known as Blackfellows Bones Bore and named for the human remains left there after the killings, one of these punitive parties shot a large number of Anmatyerr people.<sup>6</sup> Itarlentye is located on the Mount Riddock Pastoral Lease, on the eastern side of Ongeva Creek. Nearby, there are ruins of stone huts and other debris from a mid-twentieth-century mica-mining camp (Figure 3.5). Although within a region that is generally associated with Eastern and Central Arrernte (Henderson & Dobson, 1994, p. 10), Itarlentye is close to communities who may more readily identify with other Arandic languages, such as Akarre, Akityarre, Ikngerrepenhe, Eastern Anmatyerr and Alyawarr (see Figure 3.1).



**Figure 3.5. Ruins at Itarlentye (Blackfellows Bones Bore).**

Photograph: Craig Elliot.

6 Recorded as 'Etalinja' by TGH Strehlow on the *Songs of Central Australia* map. Carl Strehlow glosses *etalinja* as meaning 'continuous' or 'unceasing' (Kenny, 2018, p. 193).

The 1884 reprisals, organised by police and a band of volunteers, spread out across the region in two groups, led by mounted constables Willshire and Daer ('The outrages by natives', 1884, p. 31). Historian Mervyn Hartwig (1965, pp. 397–398) estimated that between 50 and 100 Anmatyerr people were killed during these reprisals (see also Purvis, 1940, p. 176; Young, 1987, p. 160), and while the incident has been referred to in a number of sources (O'Reilly, 1944, p. 117; Olney, 1992b, pp. 8–9; Perkins, 1975, p. 19; Strehlow, 1932, p. 108; Strehlow, 1971, p. 588), precise details of what happened at different localities are difficult to determine from the archival record.

## Memories of Itarlentye

Historical archives contain only the slimmest details of what occurred at Itarlentye, but for the descendants of those shot, the memory is remarkably present. The few known recorded oral histories associated with the killings at Itarlentye are worth recounting in detail. The most significant accounts were recorded in Anmatyerr by linguist Jennifer Green with senior Anmatyerr men Tommy Bird Mpetyan and Ken Tilmouth Penangk (Figure 3.6). The first recording was made in 1983, almost 100 years after the event, and the second in 1995. These are clearly not eyewitness accounts but recollections of events that have been retold over several generations. As Tilmouth states, they are stories that 'the olden time people used to tell us' (Bowman & Central Land Council, 2015, p. 91). The cycle – from the initial recording through to community consultations with the authors of these interviews or their descendants – took place over a timespan of almost four decades. The community consultations at Alcoota and Mulga Bore in 2020 were led by Joel Perrurle Liddle, an Arrernte-speaking Indigenous researcher related to the families affected by the Itarlentye atrocities. Joel's close relation, Charles Perkins, recalls how people from his mother's family, 'including her mother, her mother's sister, and a number of aunts and uncles', were involved in the massacre that took place there (Perkins, 1975, p. 19).<sup>7</sup>

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7 Charles Perkins was the first cousin of Joel's paternal grandmother, Emily Perkins Kngwarraeye/Angale.

Such processes of engagement with troubled and confronting histories, and the return of archival materials, are theoretically and culturally complicated, resource intensive and time-consuming (Barwick et al., 2020). They are, however, of immense value to processes of truth-telling that aim to do justice to local stories, where the potency of history and memory coalesce in particular landscapes, people and places (Dalley & Barnwell, this volume; Griffiths, this volume). As we demonstrate below, in such instances, ‘the mode of storytelling’ (Dalley & Barnwell, this volume) – the nuances of verbal artistry, the words chosen, and their interpretations – adds an important dimension to ongoing understandings of how these traumatic histories are remembered and retold. These are ‘living documents’ (Griffiths, this volume); they add emotional and contextual contours to the sparse facts that can be gleaned from a reading of archival sources alone. It is also significant that in the various stages of the process we describe in this chapter, from the recording of oral histories in the 1980s and 1990s, to the consultations with community members regarding these recordings in 2020, the primary mode of communication has been in Eastern Arrernte and Eastern Anmatyerr (the first languages of the people concerned). While at times discussions switched to Aboriginal English, the medium of communication remained in these languages, enabling researchers to better ascertain the intentions of the individuals involved.



**Figure 3.6. Ken Tilmouth and child at Amwely, Alcoota Station, July 1995.**

Photograph: Jennifer Green.

Speaking with Green in 1995, Tilmouth explained how his ancestors, members of the Atwel and Ilkewartn Country groups in Anmatyerr Country, had been travelling together searching for food. Hungry, dehydrated and tired, they ascended a hill hoping to locate soakages that might assuage their thirst. A decision was made to go to a place known as Itarlentye where they could meet up with others who presumably might be able to share food and water. Tilmouth's recounting of the story from this point is exceptionally detailed and equally emotive:

From there they went on towards the hill, and the man in front looked from the top of the hill and then said, 'Eh, there's lots of whitefellas down there ...' And the whitefellas saw them, the poor things. They saw the man standing on top of the hill ... They loaded their guns and mounted their horses ... It was too late. By the time they met it was too late. The whitefellas started killing, started shooting. Right there.

The poor old people tried in vain to defend themselves with spears. Others started to run away in terror. They shot at them and chased them and kept shooting at the poor things. Several of my grandfathers, from my father's and my mother's side, were killed ... There used to be many men in Ilkewartn and Atwel countries. There used to be lots, but they shot them ... The horses rode over them, really shouldered them. You know what shoulder'em means? Put them in the shoulder with the horse. Go alongside them and push them over with the horse's shoulder. The poor things. Others were shot. Some were shot so that their backs broke, and others were shot in the side ... The whitefellas kept on shooting, oh, jinkles.<sup>8</sup> Another went into a cave, and he was shot inside the cave ... The bones of the dead lay all over the place ... They weren't buried, nothing. The poor things just lay in the open, just as if they had been shot like bullocks. The shields and all were lying in the open. (Penangk, 1995)<sup>9</sup>

Ken Tilmouth's father's father, a skilled *ngangkar* or 'traditional healer' named Charlie Penangk, survived the ordeal:

8 'Jinkles' is a local colloquialism probably derived from 'by Jingo' and used as an exclamation of surprise or strong emotion.

9 Other extracts from this recording can be found in Bowman and Central Land Council (2015, pp. 91–92).



He started to breathe, and he opened his eyes. He picked up his spears and then set off, escaped. He cried all the way. The hills dragged him along – and he kept going, mourning all the way. And others who had escaped the terror waited for him at a soakage called Arrkweny.

The survivors, in tears and shaken by the terror, regrouped at Mount Bleechmore (Kwepal or Awerrepwenty) and began covering themselves with white ash as part of their mourning ritual. As Ken stated, his grandfather was ‘a good doctor’. As is sometimes claimed in oral accounts of these atrocities, some who escaped were credited with special powers – to render themselves invisible, protect themselves and divert bullets with song (Campbell et al., 2015). Others, as we describe below, escaped by ‘playing dead’ (see also Martin & Pascoe, this volume).

Knowledge of what had occurred at Itarlentye spread far and wide and was shared across the generations. When Theodor George Henry (TGH) Strehlow arrived at the site in 1932 his Arrernte assistant, Tom Lywenge, knew of the atrocities and referred to the place as *lalbala bon* (the bones of ‘nomads’), meaning the place where the bones of those who had traditionally walked the country lay (Strehlow, 1932, pp. 21a, 126). Rather than using common, generic Arrernte designations for ‘people’ such as *arelhe* or *tyerryte*, the use of *lalbala* makes specific reference to those earlier generations of people who were not yet familiar with white people. Here lay the bones of the ‘old people’ who first confronted white men.<sup>10</sup>

In 1983, 12 years before Tilmouth told this story, Tommy Bird Mpetyan recalled the story of Itarlentye in an oral history interview recorded on reel-to-reel tape. It was part of a project instigated by the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association to record oral histories with senior people in several Central Australian communities. Green covered areas on the Stuart Highway and to the east, where she had skills in local languages and long-term connections. Bird’s account vividly recreates the moments when the two groups became aware of each other’s presence, before the shooting started:

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10 TGH Strehlow glosses *atua lalbala* as ‘nomad men’. The term *lalbala* does not appear in Kenny (2018), and its source is uncertain. It is possible it could be based on a form of the word *urlaylp* ‘kurdaitcha’, which is found in several Arandic languages (see Green, 2010).

Right, then they were close up, and from a hill on the west side a big mob emerged. Well one bastard sang out, 'Hey, look out for the *arrenty* [monsters]!' The monsters were about to drink water ... And when the whitefellas saw the Aboriginal people they said, 'Look out, there's a big mob of animals!' The whitefellas said that there were five hundred animals coming. 'Five hundred animals coming.' Because they didn't know anything about Aboriginal people. They were the same, level in ignorance of each other. And then the horses started galloping. (Mpetyan, 1983)

Bird also noted the lucky survival of Ken Tilmouth's grandfather:

[He] ... had been shot in the thigh ... went into a cave to lay down and when that whitefella saw him, he pretended to be dead. He tricked him. And that whitefella said, 'Oh, he's dead.' But he just had a flesh wound. He pretended. (Mpetyan, 1983)

Part of the power of the spoken narrative derives from the intonation Bird imparts to the phrase 'Oh, he's dead' (spoken in English). Once rendered in written text, some of the vital performative aspects of an oral history, which can be heard in the recording, are lost. Bird's impersonation of the whitefella's summary appraisal of the consequences of his violent actions has a quality that is hard to forget – the way the words were uttered by the perpetrator encapsulates an attitude of shocking indifference. Bird's performance of the oral history, in particular his impersonation of the voice of the shooter, conveyed meaning in a way that a stone monument or plaque could never do.

The drama of the event is also imparted in the terminologies that were used for the unknown other. In Bird's account, Aboriginal people thought the pale strangers were *arrenty* (non-human, monsters), a description noted in other 'first encounter' stories in inland Australia (Charola & Meakins, 2016, p. 31; Gibson, 2015a, p. 45; Strehlow, 1967, p. 8). Conversely, the whitefellas are reported as calling the Indigenous people 'animals' – in Tilmouth's version, his countrymen were 'shot like bullocks' and not even accorded burial rites (Pascoe & Martin, this volume; Vaarzon-Morel, 1995, p. 45). Whatever might be said about the historical asymmetries of these words and their use, each 'side' did not view the other as akin to themselves.

Yet it is also Bird's reflections on the reasons for this event that make these recordings so significant. Rather than dichotomies of domination and resistance, his framing of the story evokes the more complicated matters of cross-cultural misunderstandings and asymmetries of power. Perhaps people

could only be so cruel, and behave in ways beyond moral codes or notions of law – and kill ‘just for nothing’ – if they did not know each other?<sup>11</sup> Even though the punitive party had shot and killed innocent Anmatyerr people, Bird suspected that each side was equally unaware and perhaps perplexed by the other:

They didn’t know Aboriginal people – they were completely ignorant about Aboriginal people. And Aboriginal people were absolutely *myall* when it came to whitefellas. Well, both were equally ignorant ... They were the same, level in ignorance of each other. (Mpetyan, 1983)

Here the language employed to describe of ‘acts of othering’ (Griffiths, this volume) is used reciprocally. Bird’s use of the term ‘myall’ evokes the perception of a people not yet used to the presence of settler-colonial society. But, he asserts, both sides were as *myall* as each other. The term ‘myall’ is used in Central Australia to mean ‘unaware’, ‘inexperienced’, ‘ignorant’ or even ‘wild’ (Dixon et al., 1990, p. 171), but its origins may be traced back to Indigenous languages of Sydney, where *mayal* is glossed as ‘stranger’ (Troy, 1994). The terminology sets up a distinct historical periodisation, between a time when Aboriginal people and settler-colonists were indeed strangers to each other, and a time when they later became entangled. Speaking from a time when Aboriginal people had endured settler-colonial incursions since the late 1870s, which persisted in distinctive new social and cultural milieus alongside pastoralists for over a century, these Anmatyerr Elders remembered these events as key markers in regional histories that included complex relationships with settlers. The ‘myall’ or ‘nomads’ were regarded by subsequent generations as inexperienced and unable to navigate the new social domain.

However, what is perhaps most remarkable about these comments is the generosity displayed towards the perpetrators of violence. How could men whose family members had been killed and injured by people meting out extreme violence describe the two groups as ‘equally myall’, exhibiting ‘the same level of ignorance of each other’? The generosity of these comments could be explained simply as a type of accommodation offered to the non-Indigenous person conducting the interview. Was this, for example, an instance of James C Scott’s (1990) notion of the ‘public’ and ‘hidden’ transcript, whereby a member of a subjugated class offers

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11 Vaarzon-Morel (2016b) refers to this as ‘incomprehensible moral logic’. See also Vaarzon-Morel (2022, p. 4).

a version of history acceptable to the dominating group, while at the same time maintaining a covert version (the hidden transcript) out of earshot and away from the surveillance of the powerful? Having known both men, and having conducted fieldwork in Anmatyerr communities for decades, we suggest that this is unlikely. Both Bird and Tilmouth possessed a big-heartedness and a willingness to share knowledge within their communities, but also with others, and, like many of their generation, demonstrated a deep commitment to accurate oral historical recollection. Both men wished for people to know the correct version of events and recognise these complexities. Their histories of Itarlentye are intended to bring greater recognition of a largely unknown historical event, but also to emphasise coexistence as a theme.

Bird's notion of 'mutual ignorance', however, is indeed a challenge to conventional thinking about relations on the colonial frontier, and it includes the implication that both black and white are responsible for overcoming their ignorance and learning to understand each other. But rather than exonerating the perpetrators of these atrocities, it highlights the need for more nuanced forms of thinking about the complexities of culture contact. As anthropologist Michael D Jackson (1998, p. 109) argues:

Rather than cementing estrangement, culture contact always entails, in some measure, for each party, stratagems of reconfiguring the horizons of their own humanity ... Though every ... encounter begins in strangeness and separation, that gap is gradually, though seldom utterly, closed.

The need for these 'reconfigurations' was certainly present on the unruly pastoral frontier, and it continues to offer space for both sides of this history to join in finding ways to recollect and comprehend this tragic past.

## The resilience of memory

The 'spatial' aspect of colonisation has resulted in different ways of remembering the past, and these forms of memorialising reflect dynamic practices and shifts in attitude. Roadside memorials to mark the sites where Indigenous lives have been lost in motor vehicle accidents may now be seen, even on remote roads (Vaarzon-Morel, 2016a), and we are witnessing shifts away from taboos that prohibit speaking the names of the dead, even as respectful cautions are now routine. These serve to keep memories salient rather than to efface them. In Central Australia's west, monuments to the

Coniston killings have been permitted entry to the conventional renderings of Australia's 'negative self-history' (Rowse & Waterton, 2018, p. 12). With support and encouragement from representative organisations and others, including successive state and territory governments, these communities (often led by Warlpiri people) have been actively engaged in the work of counter-monuments and annual memorialisation events. As a relatively recent event, the Coniston killings are immediate history, but they are also supported by forms of evidence that are generally acceptable to conventional history-making: they were recorded in official archives, captured global attention, were subject to judicial inquiries and have been the topic of multiple oral history projects. They have also, now, been embraced as part of the Australian nation's difficult heritage.

The silent casualties of Itarlentye, although not locally forgotten, have not been memorialised in the same way as the Coniston killings. One reason for this may be that the killings at Itarlentye and surrounds occurred about 50 years before the Coniston reprisals. Audio recorders had only just been invented and were not used in Central Australia until much later, at the beginning of the twentieth century (Gibson, 2015b). Moreover, eyewitness survivors of the Itarlentye killings did not live to see the arrival of the Aboriginal rights movements of the 1970s and 1980s, when representative bodies such as lands councils, Aboriginal media and other organisations were established and scholarly interest in these oral histories increased. As we have argued above, documentation of these histories from those living east of the highway had also received far less attention. Since writing this chapter, we have noted developing interest in the violence that occurred at Itarlentye. When we started, Itarlentye did not appear on the now influential map of *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia* produced by researchers at the University of Newcastle (Ryan et al., 2018), yet, in the interim, mounting evidence must have passed 'the minimum threshold' for its inclusion (Dalley & Barnwell, this volume). There is also a mood for changing the official name of Blackfellows Bones Bore, although the reasons have nothing to do with the murders that took place there. Rather, the word 'blackfellow' has been identified as being 'discriminatory or derogatory' (NT Place Names Register, n.d.).<sup>12</sup> This judgement is indicative of a cautious and pre-emptive move on the part of local bureaucracy, as it attempts to respond to changing public attitudes towards racially prejudiced language. However,

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12 The term 'blackfella/blackfellow', while a 'stigmatising label' in some contexts, has been repurposed (and sometimes respedled) by some Aboriginal groups and used as a positive marker of identity.

acknowledging the site's dark history – a fact currently embedded in the placename – would require more nuanced approaches. The complex ways in which both Tilmouth and Bird discuss the site demand a less generic response, one open to perhaps unexpected solutions that derive from Aboriginal community perspectives and aspirations.

Listening to these accounts of colonial violence is confronting – the impact does not lessen over time. And while processes of truth-telling have been likened to the 'talking cure' of some psychological therapies, there is no automatic efficacy in speaking one's mind unless the framework of a community contextualises and recognises the act. Adorno's (2006, p. xv) assertion that 'the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of truth' requires a sympathetic listener and will not necessarily heal the harm that has been done. It may be the case that the Australian nation is ready to come to terms with these complex and nuanced histories, and, as Krichauff (this volume) writes, this may facilitate 'non-Aboriginal Australians' recognition of their implication in the colonial process'.

The way in which Anmatyerr people tell these stories, however, is not intended primarily to address national concerns, but to accommodate local concerns and histories. Younger generations are told these stories not only to illustrate acts of resistance and domination, but also to bring past injustices into the present and inspire personal and collective reflexivity. To use the language of Connerton (2008, p. 63; see also Connerton, 1989), these memories serve 'a practicable purpose in the management of one's current and ongoing purposes'. Arrernte man Shaun Angeles, for example, has suggested that Elders continue to speak of these tragedies, not simply to reiterate the deleterious effects of colonial dispossession, violence and inequity, but to remind the coming generations of their relative freedom:

I remember one time at Napperby and an old *atyemeye* [classificatory mother's father] of mine sat all the young men down and talked about these stories. In particular, he spoke about a specific group of Anmatyerr men (I can't remember where) who were in an *urremepele* ceremony camp but had to flee due to the killings. He explained to us that a group of young men had been forced to run from their bush camp and hide from the reprisal group, and how this happened over a number of days as they kept running and hiding, then running again ... I think old man wanted to make a point to all of us about how easy we have it these days compared to our old men, specifically during the massacres. (Shaun Angeles, personal communication to Jason Gibson, 2 August 2020)

These sentiments are echoed in other accounts of violence that highlight resilience and survival in the face of great odds. Such histories instil in younger generations a sense of optimism grounded in the knowledge of where they have come from (Martin & Pascoe, this volume). As Bradley and Kearney (2009, p. 470) have observed in relation to Yanyuwa people's relationship to a specific place, 'through the act of remembering, people trigger emotional and political engagements'. We add, however, that these people-place-history engagements work as memory-lines to move across generations, draw in specific kin relationships and genealogical lineages, and intersect with larger shared histories.

## Conclusion

The monuments to those killed in the Coniston massacres, and oral histories such as those of Itarlentye, speak to an entangled story of colonial coexistence; they are reminders of recently lived cruelties and privations, as well as the long-term, systematic negation of Aboriginal agency. The accounts that we have outlined in this chapter are rich in detail – of kin relations, the specifics of place, and of the cultural practices that so often form a backdrop for these accounts of colonial crimes and outrage. But they also attend to other aspects of these complex histories – acts of heroism or kindness, humour or rare moments of levity, and also reflections on what must be the most significant question: 'How could this happen?' Although neither Bird nor Tilmouth were born at the time of the tragic events they recall, those that were relayed their experience via an evidently detailed and affective oral retelling. Time will tell what is remembered in future retellings of such histories and which details of such memory-lines are maintained.

As the 'memory-line' of the Itarlentye incident has moved through space and time, it has been remembered through social and oral memory, and now also via archival recordings. In 2020, when family groups at Alcoota and Mulga Bore listened to the recordings of Bird and Tilmouth, many were shocked to learn of the dramatic events that occurred at Itarlentye all that time ago. The vivid and detailed accounts captivated audiences; while many just listened intently, others began to energetically embody and act out the actions of the key protagonists. Gripping imaginary reins, one man enacted the movements of the punitive party riders as they used their horses to knock people down. During another part of the story, he used hand and wrist movements to suggest that people used woomeras and spears in

self-defence. This performative re-imagining, made in response to hearing archival recordings that had been returned to relevant communities and locales, may now play a part in the future trajectory of this memory-line. Such detailed and evocative stories needed to be shared with related families and other Aboriginal people from the region. It was seen as critically important that these historical events be known locally among younger generations of Arrernte and Anmatyerr people, but also that they be shared more widely with a diffuse Indigenous and non-Indigenous public.<sup>13</sup>

As the nation incrementally opens up avenues for the truth to be told about crimes like those that occurred at places such as Itarlentye, there are few remaining senior people who have spoken directly with those personally affected. It is generally acknowledged, however, that the 'affect' of this violence does not stop with those who were eyewitnesses. Consideration of Indigenous perspectives on colonial-era violence provides a crucial counterpoint to one-sided perspectives on the impacts of colonisation. Its absence significantly limits the very possibility of address and the chances of fostering meaningful dialogue with the past in the present (although further archaeological and archival research may offer some scope for this). Aboriginal people are leading the way in terms of readying the nation for more nuanced histories of these interactions. They speak directly to complexities of the past, point out the diversity of regional experiences, and call upon both white and black Australians to move from narratives of estrangement to those that produce greater entanglement.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the descendants of Tommy Bird (particularly Colin Bird) and Ken Tilmouth for granting permission to publish excerpts from these important oral histories. We would also like to thank the following for their vital feedback: Petronella Vaarzon-Morel, Tim Rowse, Skye Krichauff, Myfany Turpin, Michael Cawthorn, Craig Elliott, Sarah Hayes and Yin Paradies.

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13 For example, see Perkins (2022, especially Episode 3).



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This text is taken from *Memory in Place: Locating colonial histories and commemoration*, edited by Cameo Dalley and Ashley Barnwell, published 2023 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/MP.2023.03](https://doi.org/10.22459/MP.2023.03)