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# FRONTIER JUSTICE

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## A HISTORY OF THE GULF COUNTRY TO 1900

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TONY ROBERTS, UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS, 2005

*review by Greg Marks*

BOOK REVIEW

Tony Roberts begins his monumental study of Aboriginal-white frontier relations by describing the harshness, remoteness and dangers of the Gulf country, a vast region stretching from the Barkley Tablelands to the Roper River in the Northern Territory and from the Stuart Highway to the Queensland border and beyond as far as Burketown. The region is centred on the isolated township of Borroloola.

As Roberts notes, this was Australia's last frontier. Even today the area is remote and little known to most Australians. The strength of Robert's study of frontier relations in this region is evident from the start in the deft and telling way he sets the context. During the pastoral boom of the 1880s thousands of head of cattle were driven along the 'coast track' from Queensland to Roper Bar and Katherine in the Northern Territory to stock the vast stations being established. There followed many hopeful individuals seeking riches in the Kimberley gold rush. Roberts notes this was 'a momentous time in Australian history'.

However, describing the enormity of the dispossession and destruction that overwhelmed the tribes of the area in the short space of two decades, Roberts applies those same words to describe the significance of these events for Aboriginal society. He says it was 'a momentous time in Aboriginal history'. The implication is clear – there are two histories in this country. Roberts sets himself the task of exploring both versions, and in the process throws much light on previously hidden aspects of the interaction of the two societies, settler and Aboriginal, in this remote frontier region.

Roberts' detailed, almost forensic, examination of this relationship reveals a tragic and cruel tale. The damage inflicted, sometimes unwittingly, but all too often with callous intent, on the Aboriginal people of the region, is captured in the words of his title – 'frontier justice' – a title redolent with irony, as the reader becomes only too well aware as the story of the destruction wrought upon Aboriginal society is revealed.

*Frontier Justice* provides a detailed account of the history of the area to 1900 on a chronological and on an area by area

basis. Although this approach leads to some repetition, the result is a comprehensive account. Roberts has spent 30 years researching and writing this book. It is a labour of both love and despair. The story Roberts tells is one of rape, abduction and murder of Aboriginal people by brutal whites (and Roberts makes abundantly clear that not all whites were brutal), of Aboriginal reprisals by way of killing of whites (Roberts uses the term 'murder'), spearing of stock and setting fire to the country. The deadly cycle of reprisal, including 'punitive expeditions', then comes into play. Indiscriminate shooting of Aboriginal men, and sometimes of women and children, became the method of 'controlling the blacks'. Roberts builds a strong case to show that the police were active agents in the punitive expeditions, and in particular raises serious concerns about the role played by Inspector Paul Foelsche who was in charge of policing in the northern half of the Territory from 1870 to 1904.

Roberts explains that essential to the subjugation of the Aboriginal tribes was the conspiracy of silence that prevailed. This kept the metropolitan government in Adelaide at bay as they struggled ineffectively to keep some control of the Northern Territory situation. One needed to know the code to understand what was happening – Aboriginal people were not 'shot', they were 'dispersed'. When reports were written they understated the numbers killed and misrepresented the circumstances. Bushmen were not obliged to join in the hunting of Aborigines, but they were required to keep silent about what they knew. Roberts has managed to penetrate this 'veil of secrecy' only through an enormous research effort. He has uncovered many key documents from archives and personal possessions which have not previously seen the light of day. He has relied on a wide variety of sources, published and unpublished, including extensive Aboriginal oral history. It is a cover-up that almost succeeded.

Such a mass of information could have been overwhelming, and made such an account as this turgid and difficult. However, Roberts writes with an economy of words that repay close attention as they carry much information, directly and by implication. Writing of the

punitive expeditions, Roberts notes: 'In the fledgling Northern Territory they [the punitive expeditions] were commonplace: supported by government officials, applauded by the local press, perpetrated by ordinary men and sometimes led by senior police officials'.<sup>1</sup> The sentence says a lot about the nature of the Australian frontier. Roberts' book is lengthy not because the author is wordy, but because of the mass of information it contains.

As well as punitive expeditions, casual shootings and assorted violence, Roberts describes the forced sexual mistreatment of women and children in the region. Venereal disease became rampant and was untreated. The practice of kidnapping young children left old people to fend for themselves – often destitute and starving.

However, a parade of violence, well-researched and documented as it is, would not take us far in understanding the dynamics of the frontier. Roberts shows that lying behind the self-justified and largely unchecked violence was the assumption that the Aboriginal people had no rights in the lands they had occupied for millennia. On the other hand, the whites had, apparently, the right to travel through, or even take possession of, these lands. Any opposition on the part of the Aboriginal people was seen as contrariness, treachery or criminality. This is the true

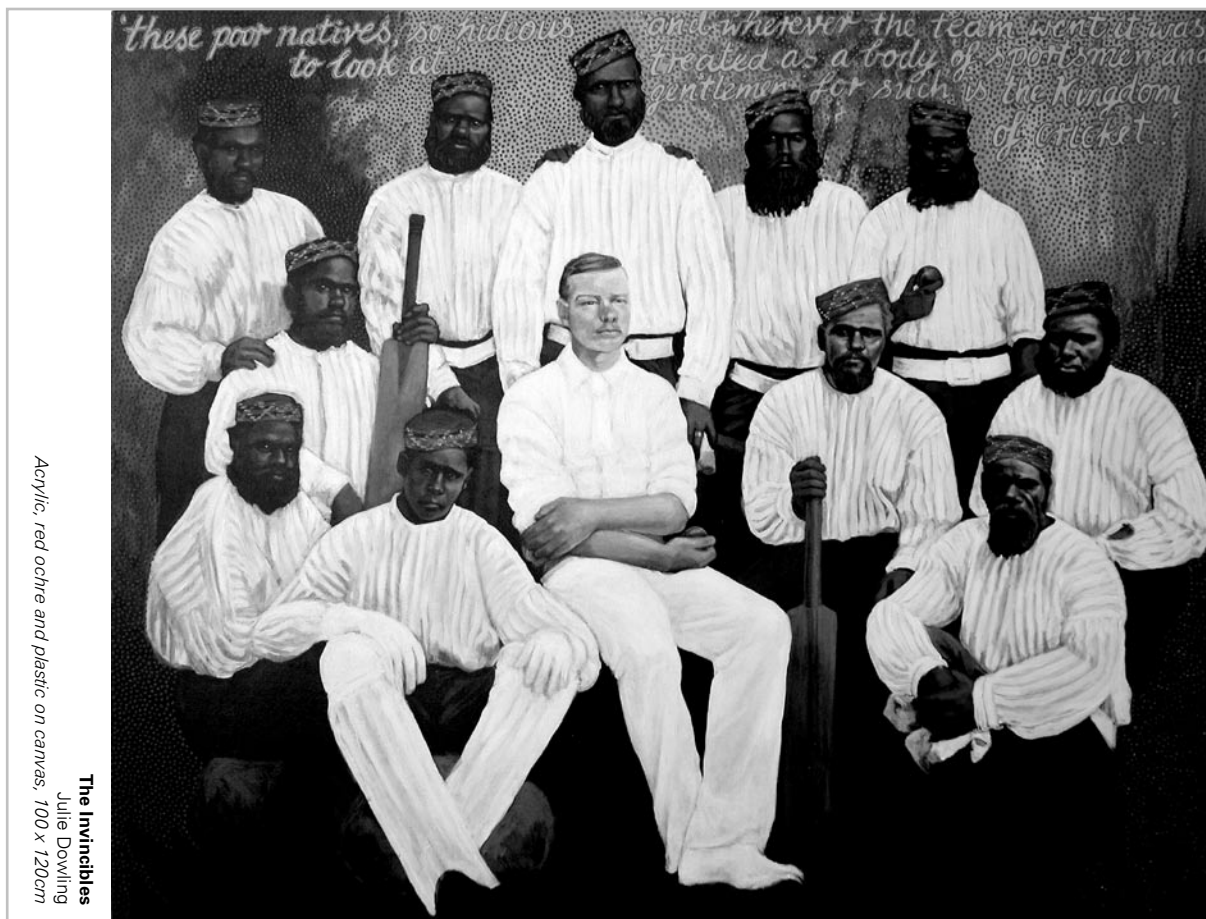
psychology of terra nullius. Roberts himself pinpoints this assumption by the whites: 'The land was simply occupied as if it were terra nullius and severe punishment was meted out to any Aboriginal who resisted'.<sup>2</sup>

*Frontier Justice* is a well-informed, closely researched and absorbing book. It is a work of detailed scholarship which manages to be objective, in the sense of a dispassionate search after historical truth, and morally engaged at the same time. Roberts does not hesitate to name moral bankruptcy. *Frontier Justice* strips away the romanticised view of the pioneering days which has largely served to hide the brutal and difficult realities of our past. These realities have to be faced. *Frontier Justice* makes a significant contribution to this task. It deserves to be in every school, university and public library.

*Greg Marks is a Canberra-based consultant and researcher whose principal areas of interest are international law, Indigenous rights and native title.*

1 Tony Roberts, *Frontier Justice: A History of the Gulf Country to 1900* (2005) 112.

2 Ibid 4.



Acrylic, red ochre and plastic on canvas, 100 x 120cm

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