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Abstract

Book review of: Patrick Collins. Goodbye Bussamarai: The Mandaranji Land War, Southern Queensland 1842-1852. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002. 305 + XV pp. \$34.00

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Reviews

Patrick Collins. *Goodbye Bussamarai: The Mandaranji Land War, Southern Queensland 1842–1852*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002. 305 + xv pp. \$34.00

This is an exceptionally good period for frontier history. After a decade of silence, the debate on the nature of frontier warfare, and especially its casualties, has recently witnessed a marked acceleration following Keith Windshuttle's 'revisionist' thesis originally published by *Quadrant*. Collins' book contributes meaningfully to this debate and epitomises also the longer process of historical recovery and presentation of evidence that has progressively filled the map with the many land wars of the Australian frontiers. More than twenty years after Henry Reynolds' *The Other Side of the Frontier*, this book fills yet another gap in the historiographical landscape and further supports the notion that there is no district in Australia that was not 'pacified' through the repression of Aboriginal insurgency that followed dispossession.

The ongoing process of redescription that has revolutionised Australian historiography originated in Queensland, and although scholarship from the southern states has been relatively slow to recognise the need for a more accurate knowledge of frontier relations, in recent years good quality local histories of Queensland regions have been rare. This successful book could stimulate a renewed interest in local histories dealing with the Aboriginal presence.

The book is extremely localised in its scope and focuses on a very limited period. It recounts the guerrilla insurgency waged by the Mandaranji local people and their allies, and presents a close narrative of the activities of the native police in the Maranoa district at a time in which local settlers were trying to exclude non-'station blacks' from access to their land. Bussamarai, then, joins the gallery of Aboriginal resisters of which Pemulwuy remains the most important literary archetype. He shares many of their characteristics and, even though his struggle is courageous and morally commendable, his fight is doomed and cast romantically against insurmountable odds. Nonetheless, and despite a tendency to present the protagonists of this narrative in a rather simplistic fashion, Collins' depiction of early frontier conditions is forceful.

However, the book is not flawless, and often the historical telling is conflated with its sources. Moreover, while *Goodbye Bussamarai* is somewhat inclined to present a one-sided type of evidence (and fails to interpret Aboriginal agency in terms that are more attuned with the recent historiography on the subject) it relies almost exclusively on official and private documents without evaluating their reliability. The question of the interpretation of Aboriginal strategies is particularly felt in the case of this type of Aboriginal resistance, where resisters had a vested interest in

leaving no trace behind and not being detected. Reading Collins' narrative one has the impression that the Aboriginal resistors were powerless and could only contribute their bravery to their struggle. Yet, in recapping the outcomes of Aboriginal defeat, the author somewhat ambiguously affirms — without explaining how — that, while it would be 'absurd to suggest that the Aborigines did not lose the frontier war, for clearly they did [nonetheless, some stations had been abandoned as a consequence of Aboriginal resistance] it is not true to say the Aborigines lost all subsequent competitions for land, status and determination' (p. 214).

Collins, a trained psychologist, defines reconciliation as an exercise in what he defines as 'historical honesty'. This he sees as an essential part of the recognition process that is a prerequisite to any positive step in building trust between different communities. In his endeavours as an historian he sees himself as practising a sort of relationship counselling, exposing the misdeeds and the illegal practices of the past in order to promote a better approach to Aboriginal issues. Yet, *Goodbye Bussamarai* transcends in other ways the stringent borders of local history, because it appraises an exceptionally well-documented example of guerrilla warfare, and especially because it may provide a model for similar but less approachable confrontations.

In a context in which the very notion of genocidal practices on the Australian frontier is repeatedly brought into question, the fact that the historiography of the Australian frontiers is still insisting on retrieving evidence, dealing with its many conflicts, and estimating with great accuracy the figures of casualties is heartening. Since much of the 'negationism' that has been published in recent years is grounded on the absence of forensic-type evidence of frontier killings, *Goodbye Bussamarai*, by displaying exceptionally organised documentary evidence, undoubtedly constitutes a sobering contribution.

Lorenzo Veracini