

Remembering the Coniston Massacre

Arrwek (Brooks Soak) 2003



Athimpelengkwe (Baxter Well) 2008

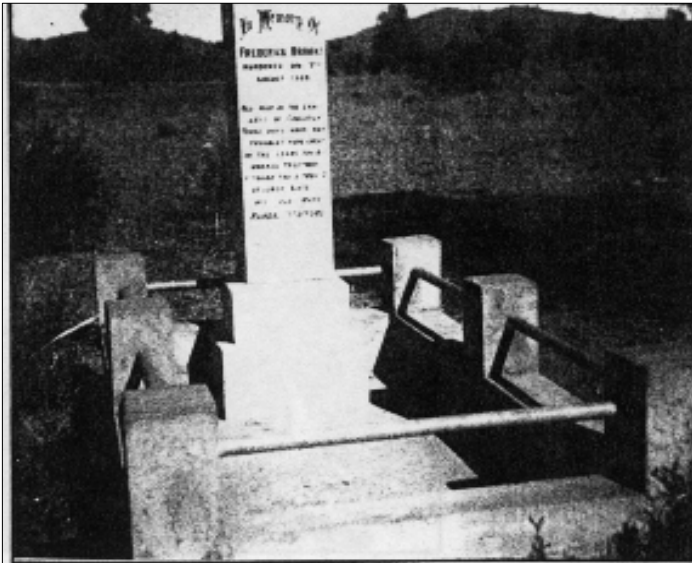


This information was produced by Teresa McCarthy for the Northern Territory Library Anmatyerr community history project 2008.

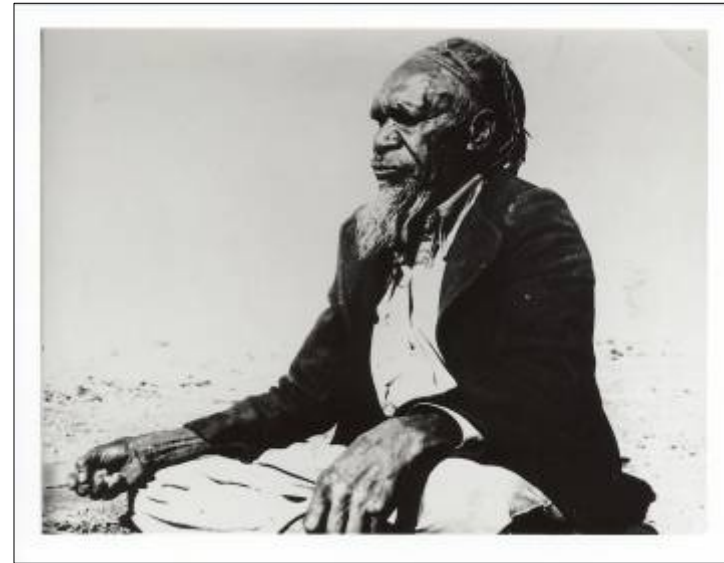
The killing of many Aboriginal people in 1928 during the investigation into the murder of Fredrick Brooks is known as the Coniston Massacre. It is an event that has deeply effected Anmatyerr and other Aboriginal groups in Central Australia. Officially 31 Aboriginal people were killed, however, the oral histories of Aboriginal people in this region indicate that the number killed was a lot higher.

The Killing of Fredrick Brooks at Arrwek (Brooks Soak)

The murder of Fredrick Brooks, a dingo trapper, at Arrwek sparked the killing of numerous Aboriginal people in Anmatyerr country. Accounts differ regarding the reason for his murder. According to oral histories of survivors and their descendents Brooks was killed by Bullfrog Japanangka and possibly another man. The story goes that Bullfrog's wife was living with Brooks which angered Bullfrog and lead to him killing Brooks in a fit of jealousy.



The grave of Fredrick Brooks at Arrwek (Brooks Soak).
Copy of scanned image from Scherer.



Bullfrog Japanangka. Image from the Northern Territory Archive Service.
NTRS 1706 Item No. 3.

The investigation into the murder of Fred Brooks

The murder was investigated by a police party lead by Mounted Constable George Murray. The initial investigating police party also included Aboriginal trackers Alec Wilson, Paddy, and Major, Randall Stafford (owner of Coniston Station), John Saxby (prospector) and Billy Briscoe (itinerant worker). It should be noted that Randall Stafford only was part of the investigation team for the first four days of the investigation, during which time 5 Aboriginal people were killed.

Arrests and Killings

The investigation resulted in the arrest of three prisoners, Padygar, Woolingar and Arkirka and the killing of 31 Aboriginal people. Included in the 31 deceased was Woolingar who died on August 31st 1928 16 days after he was arrested.

The Trial

On November 7th 1928 the trial of Padygar and Arkirka for the murder of Fred Brooks commenced in Darwin. The following day they were found not guilty due to inconsistency in the evidence.



Image from the State Library of South Australia (B39114)

Public Outrage at the number of Aboriginals Killed – Board of Enquiry Established

There was public outrage at the 31 people killed by the investigating party. Various groups including Church groups called for an enquiry to investigate these events. The Board of Enquiry was established on 27th of November 1928 and were given the role to investigate whether the 31 killings were justified, whether the shooting of an Aboriginal man by Henry Tilmouth (owner of Napperby station) was justified and whether the killing of Brooks and attacks on Morton and Tillmouth were provoked.

The hearing concluded on January 18th 1929 after 18 days of hearing evidence from 30 witnesses. However, it is interesting to note that Aboriginal trackers Major and Alec Wilson were not called to give evidence. On January 30th 1929 the findings of the Board were made public. It concluded that ‘... in all cases the shootings were justified as self-defence and that no provocation had been given by settlers or police. The blame lay squarely with the ‘Walmulla’ tribe which was advancing into the Coniston country, “to wipe out the settlers”. There was not a “scintilla of evidence”, that the police party was a punitive expedition. In addition, the Board cited other reasons for the Aboriginals’ action, including, “unattached Missionaries wandering from place to place, having no previous knowledge of blacks and their customs and preaching the doctrine of the equality of man”. In conclusion, the Board stated there was no evidence of any starvation of Aborigines in Central Australia’ (O’Brien, 2002: 27).

Criticism of the Board of Enquiry

The findings of the Board drew considerable criticism. Included among the criticisms were the views that the Board did not have counsel to adequately represent Aboriginal people and that the Board did not hear any evidence from Aboriginal people. The Board was criticised further for finding that the tracker Major had identified most of those killed during the investigation even though he was not present at the murder scene and his evidence not used at the trial in Darwin. The Board also ignored creditable evidence including a government report confirming that Central Australia was in severe drought and that Aboriginal people were starving. Discrepancies in Murray’s evidence were also criticised. Murray had had stated in his report that he has obtained (he did not state how) the names of 20 Aboriginal men who were involved in Brooks murder, however, he had failed to write down these names and the Board did not question this. Murray had also stated that on a number of occasions those involved in the murder of Brooks were identified after they were shot by Aboriginal people who had survived, however, non of the survives were called to give evidence.

Aboriginal Oral Histories Tell a Different Story

It is officially accepted that 31 Aboriginal people were killed during the investigation into Brooks' murder and the attack on 'Nugget' Morton and Henry Tilmouth. Oral histories from Aboriginal people in the region account for higher numbers of Aboriginal people killed. These accounts (generally first hand accounts from survivors) have been documented in Land Claims during the 1980s and in publications such as Warlpiri Dreamings and Histories, Warlpiri Women's Voices, Kayteyte Country and Long Time Olden Time. These stories from survivors have been passed down from generation to generation within families and are an important part these peoples history.

'They were from Arnke [Barrow Creek], Jarra Jarra, Alapanpe, Ertwerrpe, Ngkwarnte, Warlekerlange, Errene, Apewempe, Arnerre, lleyarne. They had gathered for an ltharte ceremony. Poor things, they were unaware of what was going on. They were dancing an ltharte ceremony there at Athimpelengkwe. The two Kemarres [Major and Skipper] brought the police to where the old men were. The police saw them. 'Oh here the killers are, those people escaping punishment', the police thought'. 'They got lots of fire and made a bonfire near the ceremony ground'. 'The poor old men got painted up with down [feathers] and everything, unaware [of their intentions]'. 'So the men danced in the [early] daytime. The police came around on horseback with their guns. Then they started shooting everyone. They circled around the ltharte camp, all the people in the middle. They were killed there at Athimpelengkwe'. (interview with Tommy Thompson Kngwarraye commissioned by the CLC for the 75th anniversary of the Coniston massacre in 2003).

The Memorial at Arrwek (Brooks Soak)

In 2003 Aboriginal people in Central Australia remembered those killed during the Coniston Massacre by erecting a memorial in their memory. This was a very important occasion that brought together Aboriginal people and family members of Constable Murray.

Women from Willowra dancing at the commemorations in 2003



Image from the Central Land Council

The event was attended by Liza Dale – Hallett the great niece of Constable George Murray. At the memorial she read out the statement below.

**Reflections on the 75th anniversary of the
Coniston Massacre**

I would like to thank the Central Lands Council for making it possible for me to be here today for this special occasion. I would also like to thank the Elders of this country for your very warm and generous welcome.

I am here because, like you, I am linked by family to the tragic killings of many of your people 75 years ago. I am here as the great niece of Mounted Constable William George Murray, who played a leading role in these killings. But more importantly, I am here because I care about our shared history.

The 1928 Coniston Massacre involved the killing of between 31 and 100 Aboriginal people. I am deeply sorry that it happened. I know in my heart it was wrong. Sadly, I cannot change what happened.

The Coniston Massacre links my life with yours. We share this past. We also share the future. I hope that being together today will help us to find new meanings from our difficult and painful pasts, and to create a future that gives respect to the diversity and equal rights of all Australians.

I feel very privileged to be here with you, face to face, feeling the unjust, painful and tragic events of the Coniston Massacre. Being involved in this experience helps me to feel the realities of my past, to grow in understanding, and to build positive links between us.

My deepest wish is that non-indigenous Australians will extend the same generosity of spirit to Aboriginal Australians, as you have extended to me and my husband Martin.

These are my hopes... May the spirits of those who were killed find rest. May the pain of those affected by the Massacre be healed. May we all find peace in our hearts.

Thank you for your hospitality. Thank you for the opportunity of being here today.

Liza Dale-Hallett
Great niece of William George Murray

Brooks Soak, 24 September 2003

The Memorial at Athimpelengkwe (Baxter Well)

On the 20th August 2008 the memorial at Athimpelengkwe (Baxter's Well) was unveiled to commemorate those killed at this site in 1928 during the Coniston Massacre. The memorial at this site consists of two large rocks which represents two senior men from Athimpelengkwe who were killed during the massacre. The English name 'Baxter Well' because the well was names after Harry Baxter, who was once in charge of well sinking and maintenance in Central Australia.



Images from Indigenous Community Volunteers



Image from Indigenous Community Volunteers

L – R: Lenny Nelson, Tommy Thompson, Joseph Thompson, Johnny Nelson, Valda Shannon, Amy Hatchees, Peggy Trailen and Ned Kelly.

Athimpelengkewe (Baxter Well) Memorial

This memorial was built by the Kaytetye and Walpiri descendants of people who were shot at this place, Athimpelengkewe, in 1928 by a police party. The police were looking for who attacked Nugget Morton at Boomerang Waterhole on the Lander River.

The people shot here were doing a ceremony for Jarra Jarra country and Errwely country and did not know about the trouble. The rocks on top of this memorial came from Pirlu Yampa in Errwelye and a Yaniningkurlang / Wapaljarri place in Jarra Jarra.

We want to remember them always.

'And my poor fella, they bin make business for Jardiwarnpa. Then Murray ran into them.... bin shot. They didn't know about that trouble'.

Johnny Nelson, February 2007

'They were all windows now who lost their men. They took the group of young kids back from that country, and those kids were raised by stepfathers'.

Peter Horsetailer, April 1991



Images from Indigenous Community Volunteers

The memorial plaque



Senior people standing in front of the memorial. Image from Indigenous Community Volunteers.



Women dancing around the memorial . Image from Indigenous Community Volunteers



Image from Indigenous Community Volunteers



Image from Indigenous Community Volunteers

Central Land Council banner commemorating 80 years (1928 – 2008) since the Coniston Massacre.



Image from Indigenous Community Volunteers

References

O'Brien, J. 'To infuse an universal terror ' The Coniston killings of 1928'. Northern Territory University History Department.

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Central Land Council. 'Making Peace with the Past Remembering the Coniston Massacre 1928 – 2003.

Land Rights News September 2008 '80 Years On Making Peace with the Past 1928 – 2008'.

Central Land Council website - www.clc.org.au

Image of Bullfrog Japanangka
Northern Territory Archive Service
Fleming , T (Rev)
NTRS 1706
Photographic copy prints of mission life at Yuendumu.