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# The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Apology for Myall Creek and the Culture War over Colonialism

Alan Lester

In 2023 on the 185th anniversary of the Myall Creek massacre, the *Sydney Morning Herald* printed an apology for the role that it had played during the ensuing trial.<sup>1</sup> The editor explained why his predecessor at the *Sydney Herald* (as the newspaper was called in 1838) had got it so wrong:

In several editorials published before, during and after two Sydney trials in late 1838 relating to the massacre, the *Herald* essentially campaigned for the 11 accused mass murderers to escape prosecution. It also opposed the death sentence eventually handed to seven of the men. This was not due to a lack of evidence or genuine doubts over the integrity of any legal process, but because the perpetrators were white and the dead black.<sup>2</sup>

The apology included specific quotes, taken from the paper at the time, which indicated its racism: 'The whole gang of black animals are not worth the money the colonists will have to pay for printing the silly documents on which we have already wasted too much time', and 'We have far too many of the murderous wretches about us already'. Brooke Boney, a descendant of one of the survivors of the Myall Creek massacre, noted that the apology followed those of other institutions in the wake of the Black Lives Matter Movement. 'The *Guardian* in Britain also recently apologised for its founders' links to transatlantic slavery, while several mastheads in the United States such as the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Baltimore Sun* have publicly apologised for past failings on race reporting'.<sup>3</sup>

The *Herald's* admission was based in part on an article on its coverage of the trial published by Rebecca Wood in *History Australia* and first drafted as her Masters thesis at the University of Sussex, UK, in 2008.<sup>4</sup> Wood's argument was that, in defending the culprits of the Myall Creek massacre, the *Herald* was helping to define a settler community in New South Wales that was both British and Australian. The 'right' to clear the land of Aboriginal people, asserted against criticism from British humanitarians, was a key part of this new identity.

Wood's analysis ranged more widely than the role of the *Herald* itself though. The newspaper's apology

states that its 'position was still something of an outlier', which 'cannot be dismissed merely as an "of its time" reflection of the era'.

However, the significance of its intervention in 1838 lay precisely in the fact that it was representative of a much wider phenomenon characteristic of settler colonialism. This wider phenomenon was a debate waged across the expanding Empire about emigrant Britons' interactions with the Indigenous peoples whose lands they were taking.<sup>5</sup> Although the *Herald* lost the battle over the Myall Creek trial, it won the war over the nature of those interactions. Its 'outlier' stance proved actually to be the dominant one, and not just in New South Wales.<sup>6</sup>

## The Settler Press Network

The *Herald* was part of an informal network of newspapers established by British settlers on colonial frontiers in Australia, North America, southern Africa and New Zealand from the early 1830s. It was no coincidence that this was a moment in which hundreds of thousands of free emigrants from Britain felt that their interests were not being articulated back 'home'. The newspaper founders tended to define two roles for themselves in their first editions. The first was helping to bind disparate settlers into new communities by articulating common interests. The second, as New Zealand's *Nelson Examiner* put it, was appealing to those in Britain 'who never took an interest in [us] before'.<sup>7</sup>

Bundles of settler papers like the *Herald*, the *Nelson Examiner* and the Cape Colony's *Graham's Town Journal*, were continually sent to subscribers in Britain. From 1834, newspapers could be sent by packet boat from colonies to Britain or to other colonies free of postage duty. The purchasers in Britain were not just private individuals with financial interests or kin in the colonies, but also newspapers such as *The Times*. Lacking correspondents in most parts of the world, the British press's reporting of colonial news was extracted, often without any attribution, from this settler press network. By the mid-1830s, newspapers in different settler colonies were also extracting extensively from



*The Myall Creek Massacre Memorial, 2014, photograph by Richard White.*

each other, as well as taking their ‘home’ news from the main metropolitan papers in turn.

At the time of the Myall Creek trial, this entire network was engaging in a ‘propaganda war’ to defend British settlers’ reputation and prospects throughout the settler colonial world from liberal-minded humanitarians.<sup>8</sup> Having accomplished the emancipation of enslaved people in the British colonies in the Caribbean, the Cape and Mauritius in 1833, humanitarians led by Thomas Fowell Buxton and the reforming Clapham Sect of Anglican evangelicals had turned their attention to a critique of the violence that British emigrants were inflicting on indigenous peoples trying to defend their lands. On the one hand the ending of slavery was intricately connected to the surge of settler colonial expansion, as former slave owners reinvested some of the compensation money they had been paid for the loss of their human ‘property’ in new ventures such as the South Australia Association and the Swan River colony.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, having accomplished one imperial reform with the abolition of slavery, Buxton and his circle were intent on achieving another. They formed a select committee known as the Aborigines Committee to enquire into concerns that missionaries and other ‘liberal’ correspondents had voiced about the destructive impact of this new colonising surge.<sup>10</sup>

In the same way that those invested in slavery had been forced to defend the practice explicitly only once it was challenged by anti-slavery activists, settlers were now obliged to rationalise their ‘clearance’ of their land. In the Cape, the self-appointed settler spokesman Thomas Holden Bowker complained that ‘with the assiduity of purpose that Satan himself might envy’, colonial philanthropists ‘have gained their object in persuading our countrymen, to whom we looked for sympathy and succour, that we are monsters’. He continued, ‘England, instead of protecting us, accuses us, who were born and bred in her bosom, and have the like feelings as the rest of her sons, of cruelty and oppression’.<sup>11</sup> From New Zealand, the *Nelson Examiner* reinforced ‘the importance of [establishing] a right opinion on this point [in Britain]’.<sup>12</sup>

### **Race and Violence**

Newspaper editors and contributors responded to the humanitarian challenge by echoing arguments about the intrinsic nature of racial difference that slave-owners like Edward Long had promoted.<sup>13</sup> They began more coherently to represent Indigenous peoples as ‘irreclaimable’ savages who simply *had* to be removed if civilisation was to spread.

Editors were acutely aware that if they failed to present

that argument forcefully enough across British and colonial networks, they risked losing any entitlement to 'sail under the broad banner of British freedom, protection and law'. As the *Nelson Examiner* pleaded:

we feel it is our boast, our best claim to notice as a community, that we are part and parcel of the great British empire ... our sympathy with its glory, our interest in the splendour of its name, is not to be extinguished or dimmed by a change of hemisphere or oceans intervening.<sup>14</sup>

Even before the Myall Creek trials, the *Herald's* editor was writing that 'the sympathies of our statesmen, particularly those of the Colonial Office, have long been awake to the evils inflicted by white men upon savages, whether Caffres of South Africa, Negroes in the West Indies, or Red Indians in North America. But they do not seem to have much compassion for the suffering of their own countrymen, whose occupations unavoidably expose them to the outrages of these various barbarians'.<sup>15</sup> Making common cause with the settlers on the eastern Cape frontier, whose *Graham's Town Journal* was fighting the same struggle against humanitarian 'interference', its editor opined: 'the only question at issue was the extermination (should it be found necessary) of murderous savages, and the protection of British subjects, to whom inducements to settle had been held out'.<sup>16</sup>

The immediate issue for the *Herald* in the months

leading up to the Myall Creek trials was a new manifestation of British humanitarian influence on its doorstep. A group of colonial officials had just arrived in Sydney on their way to Melbourne – the Protectors of Aborigines. Their appointment to the Port Phillip District of the colony (which would later become the separate colony of Victoria) was one of the Aborigines Committee's recommendations. Five Protectors were to attach themselves to specific Aboriginal groups in the district and 'protect them as far as they could ... from any encroachments on their property, and from acts of cruelty, oppression, or injustice, and faithfully represent their wants, wishes, and grievances' to the colonial government'.<sup>17</sup> The prospect of their government being infiltrated by such officials appalled squatters busily concerned with securing title to land across the colony and 'clearing' it of Aboriginal people.

Among these squatters was the *Herald's* editor, Ward Stephens, who had arrived in the colony in 1829 and now assumed ownership of large runs in the Hunter and New England. Surely no decent settler would ever assist such 'useless officials' as the Protectors, he wrote.<sup>18</sup> '[I]n every Colony where such vermin have introduced themselves, they have been the wholesale traducers of the settlers – as witness their proceedings at the Cape'.<sup>19</sup> In large part as a result of the *Herald's* campaign of vilification, one of the protectors, James Dredge, reported a 'chilling reception' when he arrived in



Plaque at the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial, 2014, photograph by Richard White.

Sydney, he and his colleagues encountering 'an amount of obloquy which could not well have been exceeded had we been expatriated for notorious offences'.<sup>20</sup>

The *Herald's* defence of the Myall Creek murderers, then, was only the latest episode in a concerted campaign waged by it and colonial newspapers on other settler frontiers, to ward off humanitarian interference in their affairs and establish justification for the violent displacement of indigenous peoples. Although in the Myall Creek case, the culprits were hanged as a result of the late 1830s 'peak' humanitarian concern, it was the *Herald's* and its allies' stance that ultimately proved victorious. Their reaction made it impossible for colonial administrations to pursue equal justice against white and indigenous murderers thereafter. Myall Creek was one of hundreds of massacres enabling the colonisation of Australia, but the only one in which white culprits were ever brought to justice.<sup>21</sup>

This settler victory was accomplished not only through the code of silence that accompanied subsequent mass killings but also by the reluctance of governors to confront the outpouring of settler anger that papers like the *Herald* had mobilised.<sup>22</sup> In both Australia and southern Africa, settler opposition to humanitarian interference, articulated by the settler press, would go on to fuel moves towards self-governance in the ensuing decade.<sup>23</sup> In 1849 the Protectorate of Aborigines was abolished in Port Phillip and the title of Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia was changed to Guardian of Natives and *Protector of Settlers*.<sup>24</sup>

What is more, the racial vilification articulated by the *Herald* took root in Britain. In 1865 and in the context of another imperial scandal, the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica, Commander Bedford Pim presented a paper to the Anthropological Society. He stated that:

The principles on which alien and dissimilar races ought to be governed, is [*sic*] not yet understood by our rulers ... We have dealt with ... natives ... upon a principle radically wrong. We have conceded them rights and privileges which nature has refused to ratify ... and we now experience their hatred of intelligence and order ... The [native] is now known to us as what he is, and not as missionaries and philanthropists were willing to believe him ... a man ignorant and savage, loving darkness and anarchy; hating light and order; a man of fierce, and ungoverned passions, bloodthirsty, cruel, ungrateful, treacherous.

Pim concluded, 'Let us take the negro as we find him, as God designed him, not a white man, or the equal of a white man'.<sup>25</sup>

## About the Author

Alan Lester is Professor of Historical Geography at the University of Sussex and Adjunct Professor of History at La Trobe University. He has written widely on British colonial governance, humanitarianism and settler societies. His latest books are *Ruling the World: Freedom, Civilisation and Liberalism in the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2021, with Kate Bohme and Peter Mitchell) and *Deny and Disavow: The British Empire in the Culture War* (2nd ed., SunRise, 2023).

## References

<sup>1</sup> For the most complete set of accounts of the murders and their aftermath, see Jane Lydon and Lyndall Ryan (eds.), *Remembering the Myall Creek Massacre*, University of New South Wales Press, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/myall-creek-apology-20230608-p5dexz.html>>, accessed 14 August 2023. The letters to the editor that commented on the apology and were published, were generally supportive: <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/never-too-late-to-say-sorry-apology-accentuates-the-positives-of-truth-telling-20230611-p5dfmi.html>>, accessed 14 August 2023.

<sup>3</sup> <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/as-a-descendant-of-the-myall-creek-massacre-there-is-one-story-i-cling-to-for-hope-20230608-p5df1c.html>>, accessed 14 August 2023. For *The Guardian* see <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/cotton-capital>>, accessed 14 August 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Wood, 'Frontier Violence and the Bush Legend: The *Sydney Herald's* Response to the Myall Creek Massacre Trials and the Creation of Colonial Identity', *History Australia*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2009, pp. 67.1–67.19, <[doi.org/10.2104/ha090067](https://doi.org/10.2104/ha090067)>.

<sup>5</sup> For the nature of this debate in Australia see Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts Revisited*, NewSouth, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Lester, 'British Settler Discourse and the Circuits of Empire', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 54, no. 1, Autumn 2002, pp. 24–48, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/54.1.24>>.

<sup>7</sup> Supplement to the *Nelson Examiner and New Zealand Chronicle*, 23 December 1843.

<sup>8</sup> The term is Catherine Hall's, referring to that waged over slavery: Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867*, Polity, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Lester and Nikita Vanderbyl, 'The Restructuring of the British Empire and the Colonization of



*The Myall Creek Massacre Memorial walk, 2014, photograph by Richard White.*

Australia, 1832–8’, *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 90, Autumn 2020, pp. 165–188, <[doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbaa017](https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbaa017)>.

<sup>10</sup> Zoë Laidlaw, ‘Aunt Anna’s Report’: The Buxton women and the Aborigines Select Committee, 1835–37’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2004, pp. 1–28, <[doi.org/10.1080/03086530410001700381](https://doi.org/10.1080/03086530410001700381)>; Elizabeth Elbourne, ‘The Sin of the Settler: The 1835–36 Select Committee on Aborigines and Debates over Virtue and Conquest in the Early Nineteenth-Century British White Settler Empire’, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2003, <[doi.org/10.1353/cch.2004.0003](https://doi.org/10.1353/cch.2004.0003)>.

<sup>11</sup> John Mitford Bowker, *Speeches, Letters and Selection From Important Papers*, Grahamstown, 1864, pp. 2, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Nelson Examiner*, 16 December 1843.

<sup>13</sup> See Catherine Hall, *Lucky Valley: Edward Long and the History of Racial Capitalism*, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

<sup>14</sup> *Nelson Examiner*, 16 December 1843.

<sup>15</sup> *Sydney Herald*, 4 June 1838.

<sup>16</sup> *Sydney Herald*, 29 January 1838.

<sup>17</sup> GR Mellor, *British Imperial Trusteeship, 1783–1850*, Faber and Faber, 1951, pp. 291–293.

<sup>18</sup> *Sydney Herald*, 14 November 1838.

<sup>19</sup> *Sydney Herald*, 19 November 1838.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Lindsey Arkley, *The Hated Protector: The Story of Charles Wightman Sievwright, Protector of*

*Aborigines, 1839–42*, Orbit Press, 2000, p. 105.

<sup>21</sup> <<https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php>>, accessed 30 August 2023.

<sup>22</sup> Amanda Nettelbeck, ‘“Equals of the White Man”: Prosecution of Settlers for Violence Against Aboriginal Subjects of the Crown, Colonial Western Australia’, *Law and History Review*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2013, pp. 355–390; Lyndall Ryan, ‘A code of silence hid the mass killing of Indigenous people. Now that code has been broken’, <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/a-code-of-silence-hid-the-mass-killing-of-indigenous-people-now-that-code-has-been-broken-20230606-p5deez.html>>, accessed 9 June, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Alan Lester, Kate Boehme and Peter Mitchell, *Ruling the World: Freedom, Civilisation and Liberalism in the Nineteenth-Century British Empire*, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> See Alan Lester and Fae Dussart, *Colonisation and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance: Protecting Aborigines Across the Nineteenth-Century British Empire*, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Catherine Hall, ‘Imperial man: Edward Eyre in Australasia and the West Indies, 1833–66’, in Bill Schwarz (ed.), *The Expansion of England: Race, Ethnicity and Cultural History*, Routledge, 1996, p. 147.

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