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[Wilson, Rohan](#)

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War at home in black and white.

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## War at home in black and white

Unity is perhaps the single most significant feature of Nicholas Clements's *The Black War*: unity of object, of method and of outcome. The book presents a startling, confronting view of the period between 1825 and 1831 when the stalemate that had characterised the early phase of Tasmanian colonisation ended and full-blown conflict engulfed the whole of the settled areas. This period, long called the Black War, has been the subject of a great deal of academic investigation in recent years, but not since Henry Reynolds's 1981 work *The Other Side of the Frontier* have we been presented so lucidly with an Aboriginal perspective on the fighting.

As postmodernist deconstructor Keith Jenkins observed, unity is troublesome in historiography. There is such a dispersal of documents, such a plethora of facts, that to discipline the material into shape requires some kind of strong-arming. The unity that results then "is not, and cannot be, one which has arisen from the dispersed facts themselves" but is instead a "unity which is and can only be logically derived from outside of these things".

In this regard, it is interesting how very openly *Black War* wears its heart on its sleeve. Clements describes in the preface being struck by the unorthodox format of a book on the Palestine-Israeli conflict — half written by an Israeli, half by a Palestinian. Reading competing viewpoints side by side helped him to "empathise with both sides" of the argument more effectively than a conventional treatise would have.

Clements carries this forward into his book. Each chapter alternates between the white and black sides of the frontier, examining the experience of warfare and the impact it had on the men, women and children at the front. It avoids the legal and governmental aspects of the conflict by keeping a tight focus on the reality at ground level. How did the Aboriginal Tasmanians fight so successfully for so long against superior technology and organisation? How did whites deal with guerilla tactics that made settled areas so dangerous they became all but uninhabitable?

We see these questions answered in detail through testimony from settlers, convicts, soldiers and, most important, Aborigines.

This focus on the actuality of the war reveals two things: first, how depraved it was, and second, how unavoidable it soon became.

Clements details the attitudes displayed by whites towards the Tasmanians and the racism here will shock anyone unfamiliar with the island's past. The process of dehumanisation that always precedes a bout of ethnic cleansing is laid bare, as the Tasmanians are denigrated as "beasts", "monsters" and "orang-utans". Blacks are shot without mercy and without reason. They are butchered, their body parts severed, their wives and daughters forced to watch. Charles Darwin noted that "such is the perversion of feeling among a portion of the colonists, that they cannot conceive how anyone can sympathise with the black race as their fellow men". When historians argue that settler Australians are reluctant to face the wrongdoings of the past, no doubt this is the one area we, as a community, have been most ready to ignore.

But the white community also suffered. In October 1828, a settler returning home after an attack on his neighbour's hut found his wife, daughter and servant speared to death. The

father soon abandoned the property and the farm was taken over by another family but the same thing happened: while away from the property, the man's daughters were attacked and one of them killed. This typified life on the frontier. White men, terrified for the lives of their families, formed parties and killed black men and their families. This led to further violent retaliation, and so on, until, through sheer losses, the Tasmanians were forced to surrender to George Robinson in late 1831.

The race-based vitriol that *Black War* details reveals the chicken and egg problem that historians have struggled with when trying to account for what happened in Tasmania, because while such rhetoric certainly helped to justify attacks against Aborigines, black violence also spurred whites to louder and more aggressive displays of hatred. Once the simple retaliatory killings of the early years had developed into something more sustained, the conflict took on a life of its own, fuelled by a discourse of extermination, and a fear of the enemy's capability for bloodshed. Trying to untangle which came first — the race hatred or the violence — is impossible, and this is one thing that *Black War* drives home well. Once the violence began in earnest, the process of war was self-sustaining.

That is not to say that we don't know what caused the war. Without doubt, it was caused by continual encroachment into black territory. This is not at issue in *Black War*, and has not seriously been at issue in historiography for decades. But the question of how the war became a "war for extermination" is an intriguing one, and it takes up much of the first few chapters. The answer lies in the confluence of circumstances presented in Tasmania: the confining geography of the island, the racist attitudes of the whites, and the deep resentment Aborigines felt at their displacement. All these factors contributed to make the conflict extraordinarily violent. From an Aboriginal population of "1000 at the war's outset", the colonists had killed "about 600" of them by 1832. For their part, Aborigines were responsible for 249 killings and 251 woundings, from a white population of as many as 30,000 by the end of the war. Per capita, it was one of Australia's bloodiest encounters, second only to World War I for numbers killed. These casualty figures reflect the nature of the conflict. There were no civilians — everyone was a target.

So while *Black War* adopts an unconventional structure, it is ultimately the structure that helps to reveal so much. In the centenary year of Gallipoli it is time to re-examine the war that really formed Australian identity — that is, the War at Home. It is truly our forgotten war.

*Rohan Wilson's debut novel about frontier conflict in colonial Tasmania, The Roving Party, won The Australian-Vogel Literary Award in 2011.*

### **The Black War: Fear, Sex, and Resistance in Tasmania**

By Nicholas Clements

UQP, 268pp, \$34.95