



## DEFENDERS OF THE QUEEN IMPERIAL AND COLONIAL DEFENCE 1850 -1901

KEYNOTE - DR CRAIG WILCOX

ONE-DAY CONFERENCE SUNDAY 5 NOVEMBER 2023  
WAVERLEY RSL

161 COLEMAN PARADE, GLEN WAVERLEY, MELBOURNE.



### Maritime frontier conflict, and other items from the colonial military history to-do list

Craig Wilcox

It's an honour to open this conference. I'll do it by talking about my recent book, *Australia's Tasman Wars*, a history of the Australian part in early frontier conflict in New Zealand.<sup>1</sup> Not to summarise the book, especially because it focuses on the years 1800 to 1850, the wrong half-century from the point of view of this conference. Instead, I'll describe how I got from an initial idea to the eventual product. The path takes us through some interesting writing on Australian military history of the second part of the nineteenth century, and points to some gaps in our knowledge in the area. In particular I'll describe the possibilities I hope the book opens up for new research and writing. To my mind, a vista that we might categorise as maritime frontier conflict extends before us, plus a way to reconsider inland frontier conflict.

The story starts more than a decade ago, when Craig Stockings and John Connor at the Australian Defence Force Academy assembled three collections of deceptively easy-to-read essays on aspects of Australian military history.<sup>2</sup> Some people here today were contributors to these books—Andrew Kilsby on rifle clubs, Greg Blake on Eureka. I wrote on Breaker Morant, expeditionary wars, the nineteenth century, and the buildup to the first world war.

A lot was left out, including from the decades we're focusing on today. Where were the Volunteers of the 1850s and 1860s? Where was the occupation of Beijing in 1900? But the books packed a punch. One idea in them stuck in my mind—the artificiality of separating the military histories of

<sup>1</sup> Craig Wilcox, *Australia's Tasman Wars: Colonial Australia and Conflict in New Zealand 1800-1850*, Melbourne 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Stockings ed., *Zombie Myths of Australian Military History*, Sydney 2010; Craig Stockings ed., *Anzac's Dirty Dozen: 12 Myths of Australian Military History*, Sydney 2012; Craig Stockings and John Connor eds, *Before the Anzac Dawn: a Military History of Australia to 1915*, Sydney 2013.

colonial Australia and colonial New Zealand. These lands were intricately linked as British colonies. Troops left eastern Australia to fight against Māori in the 1840s and 1860s. New Zealand kept out of the federation in 1901, but that was a surprise. Anyway, there were joint preparations for the first world war.

So I decided to write something that would further erode the artificial barrier formed by the Tasman Sea and by decades of insular history writing from both sides of it.

At first I dug into the mid nineteenth century military force variously known as enrolled pensioners or fencibles—British army veterans who were enticed into part-time garrison duty around the empire in return for cottages and land. Their New Zealand service is well known. We have the bones of their West Australian service thanks to Frank Broomhall's massive compendium titled *The Veterans*, and also to archaeological work on pensioner cottages in that state.<sup>3</sup> But we lack an Australasian overview of what was an important migrant group as well as military force.

I eventually gave the pensioners away. What was really needed wasn't an Australasian history of them but a global history, tackling them in Britain as well as the dozen or so colonies they went to, from the Falkland Islands to the Cape of Good Hope. I found that too hard to get my greying head around, and too expensive to research.

In any case, by 2016 I'd discovered Jeff Hopkins-Weise's thesis and book on the Australian angle to the New Zealand Wars.<sup>4</sup> These two monographs formed the first scholarly study of Australian involvement in those wars, in which the British garrison crossed the Tasman to fight, arms, supplies and thousands of militiamen/settlers followed them, and Australian colonists emotionally mobilised for and against conflict. Here was real drama, laid out by Hopkins-Weise in clear prose based on careful research. Here, also, was a way to link our narratives of expeditionary war and frontier war.

For obvious reasons, the focus of Australian military history since the 1920s has been expeditionary war. A second focus came in the 1970s, when clashes between indigenous Australians and settlers began to be re-conceptualised as frontier war. The two narratives have barrelled on largely separately for the past fifty years, usually written by historians with very

---

<sup>3</sup> F. H. Broomhall, *The Veterans: a History of the Enrolled Pensioner Force in Western Australia 1850-1880*, Perth 1989; for an example of archaeological work see Shane Burke, *A Report on an Archaeological Excavation of the Former Enrolled pensioner Cottage 1 Surrey Street Bassendean*, Bassendean Town Council 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Hopkins-Weise, *Australian Involvement in the New Zealand wars of the 1840s and 1860s*. MPhil, University of Queensland 2004, and *Blood Brothers*, Adelaide 2009.

different backgrounds, interests and agendas. Can the narratives be mingled? At least, can expeditionary war and frontier war be shown to have influenced each other?

Sam Hutchinson's interesting study, *Settlers, War and Empire in the Press*, published in 2018, argued for influence.<sup>5</sup> Hutchinson dug up plenty of comment from Australian newspapers from the second half of the nineteenth century saying that if Australians failed to support British wars in New Zealand and South Africa, it would cast doubt, as the Hobart *Mercury* put it in 1863, on "our aptitude for reclaiming and settling the waste places of the earth."<sup>6</sup> In other words, some colonial Australians sensed their hold on Australia was morally tenuous and challengeable in some way, and felt that supporting the British colonial project elsewhere, by barracking from a distance or sending expeditionary forces when asked to, was a way to affirm the British colonial project within Australia. I don't necessarily buy this argument. But Hutchinson found plenty of evidence that Australian colonists reflected on their occupation of a continent when aiding colonists during wars in other British lands.

Jeff Hopkins-Weise's approach to bringing the two narratives of expeditionary war and frontier war closer was different, more direct, and I think more successful. By showcasing troops and militia leaving Australia to fight a neighbouring indigenous people in New Zealand in the 1840s and 1860s, Hopkins-Weise brought the strands close together. And, by focussing on the 1860s, he left room for more work in the half-century before that. A chance for me, I decided, to explore the gradual transition from small-scale scuffles of early NZ frontier conflict to the full-scale, stand-up combats of formal war between regulars and Māori.

Most of which was an Australian story. From around 1800 there were one-off, two-bit clashes between Māori and civilians usually based in Australia—traders, whalers, sealers, missionaries—that were similar in nature and scale to frontier conflict in Australia. By the mid the 1840s, British troops from Australia were going into battle against Māori stockades. On one day in 1845 at Ōhaeawai pā, thirty four soldiers were killed and sixty three wounded. Here, then, was a continuum between the kind of war focussed on by frontier conflict historians, and the kind of war focussed on by expeditionary war historians. All that remained was to look into all the nooks and crannies, all the twists and turns, and write a detailed history of Australian participation in early New Zealand frontier conflict.

A lot of sources were digitised by the time I began my research. But there were also fat bundles of documents in the New South Wales archives that almost no one had ever trawled through. I found files on New Zealand kept year by year during the 1830s and 1840s by the colonial secretary, also

---

<sup>5</sup> Sam Hutchinson, *Settlers, War, and Empire in the Press: Unsettling News in Australia and Britain, 1863–1902*, London 2018.

<sup>6</sup> *Mercury* (Hobart), 29 May 1863.

yearly files labelled military that focused on the mounted police. There were also colonial secretary letter books to military and naval officers.<sup>7</sup> That so many records of what was happening in New Zealand were held in Sydney was an indicator that Sydney was the British regional capital not only for eastern Australia but for across the Tasman as well.

One thing that struck me as I got into my research was the importance of arms dealing, weapons trading, legal gun-running if you like. As readers or writers of Australian military history, we don't much think about trading weapons, because it wasn't a thing on the inland frontier. But it was quite a thing in New Zealand, New Guinea and the Pacific. During the first half of the nineteenth century, specially manufactured trade muskets were shipped from Birmingham to Sydney in their thousands for exchange with Polynesian and Melanesian chiefs. Then, in the second half of the century, came rifles. I was struck by the scale of this trade, by its use to cement commercial alliances between Australian traders and local chiefs, by the way that weapons fuelled fighting between indigenous peoples that dragged in traders, missionaries, and sometimes even governments. We badly need a history of Australian gun-running, legal and otherwise.

I was also struck by how little we still know about the British garrison in Australia. We have Peter Stanley's insightful summary *The Remote Garrison*, and we have some studies of individual regiments, but we lack a hefty volume to match John Bach's volume on the Royal Navy's Australia station.<sup>8</sup> Nor is there a collective, data-driven project like the one in New Zealand called *Soldiers of Empire*, which considers the British garrison as a major population and migrant group—or it did, until it ran out of steam, or maybe funding, a few years ago.<sup>9</sup>

Nor do we know about the garrison's command. Its writ extended from Perth to Auckland. From the 1830s it was headed by a separate commander in chief who was not mainly a governor. The generals who held this position, from Maurice O'Connell in the 1840s to Trevor Chute in the 1860s, all lack biographers. I was so frustrated by this that I sketched out a mini-history of Maurice O'Connell's military command, which was published a few years ago in the *Journal of the Royal*

---

<sup>7</sup> NRS 905 letters received by Colonial Secretary 1826-1882 (see for example bundles 4/2619.1 naval and military 1843, 4/2696.4 New Zealand 1845, 4/2698.2 ordnance 1845, and 4/2718.2 commissariat 1846), and NRS 985 Colonial Secretary letters to naval and military officers 1832-1900, all held by the archives component of Museums of History NSW.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Stanley, *The Remote Garrison*, Sydney 1986; Maurice Austin, *The Army in Australia 1840-50*, Canberra 1979; Clem Sargent, *The Colonial Garrison 1817-1824: the 48th Foot Northamptonshire Regiment in the Colony of New South Wales*, Canberra 1996; John Bach, *The Australia Station*, Sydney 1986.

<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Macdonald and others, *Soldiers of Empire: Garrison & Empire in the 19th Century*, Victoria University Wellington 2015-, [www.soldiersofempire.nz](http://www.soldiersofempire.nz).

*Australian Historical Society*.<sup>10</sup> I hope it will be followed by other, deeper studies of these unknown predecessors of the colonial commandants of the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Looking into the early Australian involvement in violence in New Zealand, with its arms dealing and eventual despatch of some of the British garrison there, seemed to say new things about Australian military history, or so I hoped. But I soon figured that what I was looking into, and others before me, was a new way of understanding Australian frontier war.

It's as far back as 1966 that the journal now titled *Australian Historical Studies* published the historian John Young's observation that the early British lodgements in eastern Australia had two frontiers, a maritime one as well as an inland one.<sup>11</sup> Some of the first Britons in Australia used those lodgements as bases to push cross the sea not just to New Zealand, but to all the islands of Melanesia and Polynesia. It was a long, confused, episodic push by whalers and sealers, traders and missionaries, runaways and blackbirders, followed by the soldiers, sailors and officials who tried to clean up after the intruders, or protect them. The point of the push wasn't at first to grab land. It was to escape authority or, more often, to make money. By selling guns, by whaling and sealing, by fishing for sea cucumber or buying sandalwood, by cornering supplies of timber and flax. There was also an ideological project of conversion by missionaries, preaching not just about a god who comes to earth and dies on a cross, but about the virtues of discipline and work.

Because New Zealand and the Pacific formed a commercial and ideological frontier for colonial Australia, and not a zone of settlement, there was less at stake whenever there was violence.

And of course there was violence. Frontiers by nature are violent, because a single, powerful authority isn't operating there. And the violence, when it happened, could be intense indeed. Melanesian and Polynesian societies valued battle as much as European ones, and the weapons trade ensured that almost every man was well armed. Then there was the use of naval patrols out of Sydney to impose order on both sides. Warships firing broadsides and landing marines were a much heavier instrument of control than the handful of mounted police who habitually rode out on the inland frontier.

Let's consider one small incident from the 1850s, sometimes called the Oliver affair.

---

<sup>10</sup> Craig Wilcox, 'The Military Command of Maurice O'Connell 1838-1847', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 197 2021, pp. 7-30.

<sup>11</sup> J. M. R. Young, 'Australia's Pacific Frontier', *Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 12 1966, pp. 373-89,

In 1852 a trading ship owned by Robert Towns (whom Townsville is named after) anchored off Canala in New Caledonia to buy sandalwood from local chiefs. But collecting sandalwood was apparently under tabu at this time of year. After idling for a couple of months the ship's master, John Oliver, sailed five miles to a nearby native community in conflict with Canala. Chiefs and women were invited on board the ship, as was usual, but this time one of the visitors was shot and the rest were held captive. Oliver then sailed back to Canala and traded the captives for forty or fifty tons of sandalwood. When the ship returned to Sydney, Robert Towns was furious. Yes, he had a rich cargo of sandalwood, which he arranged to sell in China; but the fate of the captives must have been terrible, and taking sides between native peoples restricted future trading opportunities. In Towns's eyes, what John Oliver had done was worse than immoral; it was bad for business.

Towns hauled some of the crew before a Sydney magistrate, and appealed to Everard Home, commander of the Royal Navy's ships in Australia, to sail to New Caledonia to obtain evidence for a prosecution. Home had better things to do with his warships, and Oliver fled Sydney. That was the end of the Oliver affair, apart from its briefly becoming another byword for brutal relations on the maritime frontier.<sup>12</sup> It was a typical small clash, typical too in how its consequences were debated in Sydney.

I'm not saying that violence like this on the maritime frontier is unknown to us. There are masterful histories of moments of it, of aspects of it. The Oliver affair was covered by Dorothy Shineberg's *They Came for Sandalwood*, a history of the Pacific sandalwood trade and the violence that accompanied it, published back in 1967.<sup>13</sup> But occurring outside Australian national borders, violence like this has been left to historians of the Pacific like Dorothy Shineberg to interpret, or to New Zealand and PNG historians, and to the people of NZ, New Guinea and Pacific nations to inherit, to ponder, to own. It's time to see it as a part of Australian military history too.

What would it look like if we did?

Looking very broadly, I think we can discern three distinct zones of conflict, which for the moment can be labelled after points of the compass—southeast, near north, and northeast.

Conflict in the southeast zone began beneath Australia, with French navigators and American sealers being nudged out of Bass Strait around 1800. I'm not sure about this, but herding

---

<sup>12</sup> Towns to Oliver, 7 August 1852, Towns to Ross, 19 March 1853, Towns to Lewis, 19 and 28 March and 10 April 1853, and Towns to Cooney, 29 March 1853, ML MSS 307/117 and 307/118, State Library of NSW; *Shipping Gazette* (Sydney), 12 and 26 September 1853.

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Shineberg, *They Came for Sandalwood: a Study of the Sandalwood Trade in the South-West Pacific 1830-1865*, Canberra 1967, pp. 185-6.

Tasmania's indigenous people to extinction from 1830 might be seen as part of this southeast zone of conflict, since it was a consequence of annexing and occupying an island, Tasmania, that was hundreds of miles from Sydney and which, when you think about it, was no more or less naturally part of Australia than New Zealand was.

But the nub of southeast zone conflict was New Zealand. Clashes on ships and on land between Māori and traders and other intruders from Australia into NZ were frequent there from the 1790s to the 1830s, but a massive musket trade also cemented alliances between intruders and indigenous people. When New Zealand was briefly annexed to New South Wales in 1840 conflict in this zone put on uniform. British troops were sent from Sydney as a garrison, and Sydney and Hobart became rear bases in the New Zealand wars of the 1840s and 1860s. But when this happened, when serious wars flared up, the British base and command centre moved to New Zealand itself. Frontier conflict in NZ in the 1860s was no longer part of Australian frontier conflict—though as Jeff has shown, it was very much a part of Australian expeditionary war.

The second, north zone of maritime frontier conflict was at first confined to the waterway between Australia and what's now Indonesia. Military garrisons were posted to Australia's north in the 1820s and 1830s to safeguard the waterway, foster trade, and assert Britain's claim to all of Australia. Wrecked or anchored ships were vulnerable to attack by Torres Strait islanders, prompting a punitive expedition from Sydney in 1836.

But frontier conflict became routine in this zone only in the 1870s, once miners and missionaries trickled out of northern Australia into PNG. In the 1880s, eastern New Guinea was divided between Germany and Britain, or rather Britain's Australian colonies. Not for another thirty years would there be a war between imperial contenders for New Guinea. Until then, the typical clashes were massacres of native people and murders of isolated white men, and police actions in response or simply asserting Australian rule. The conquest of German New Guinea in 1914 was the first formal military clash on Australia's maritime frontier since the 1840s wars against Māori in New Zealand. Far bigger, though, was the defence of New Guinea during the second world war. We don't usually think of this as keeping a rival power out of our frontier. Maybe we should.

The third, northeast zone of maritime frontier conflict was the consequence of traders and missionaries pushing out from Australia into Tahiti and Tonga, Fiji and other Pacific islands during the first half of the nineteenth century, at the same time as they were pushing into New Zealand. Like in New Zealand, conflict in this zone included attacks on ships, alliances with indigenous people, and policing by navy ships based in Sydney. This northeast zone extended across thousands of miles, wherever a ship from Australia ventured—even to Japan, incredibly enough,

when some whalers attacked a fort and burnt a village in Hokkaido in 1831.<sup>14</sup> A rush of settlers from Australia to Fiji in the 1860s brought clashes like those on the inland frontier or in New Zealand, and encouraged talk of annexing Fiji. There was also a new weapons trade linked to coopting Pacific labourers into Queensland.

But the Pacific was ceasing to be a frontier for Australians. Britain and rival powers were now annexing its islands, handing the management of conflict to local colonial administrations. We sent two small expeditions to help the New Hebrides administration crush native dissent during the first world war, but that was a throwback to earlier times. Or maybe it was poised half way between the punitive expeditions sent from Sydney to New Zealand and the Torres Strait in the 1830s, and recent peacekeeping efforts in the Solomons.

To repeat, I'm not saying the individual encounters among all this violence are unknown. They just haven't been claimed by Australian military historians as part of their purview too, and understood as a maritime theatre of Australian frontier conflict.

It isn't just maritime frontier conflict that we forget. The only martial activity that some Australians recognise from the nineteenth century was on the inland frontier. Which has its upside. The focus on inland frontier conflict is hugely increasing our understanding of the frontier and of the police forces and random posses of pastoralists and others who dominated it. The Newcastle University website called *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia* is an admirable scholarly venture, and Rachel Perkins' 2022 documentary series will probably rebrand frontier conflict forever as the Australian Wars.<sup>15</sup>

That will mean myth-making. Frontier warfare will get the same patriotic puffery as expeditionary warfare. It will one day become the prologue to our National Military Story, with all the well-meaning, community-building, patriotic pride that goes with the evolution of history into heritage. If we can't help this happening—and some of you might, for political or social reasons, support it happening—historians can at least point out the unique nature of Australian inland frontier conflict that becomes obvious after reflecting on other frontiers, including Australia's maritime frontier.

On the inland frontier, the indigenous realm was quickly and utterly overwhelmed. It was a holocaust with few parallels. Polynesian and Melanesian societies bent before the storm; Aboriginal societies were broken by it. On the other side it was different too. Settlers and the colonial state took and held territory in Australia, and resisted challenge to their possession, with

---

<sup>14</sup> Noreen Jones, *North to Matsumae: Australian Whalers to Japan*, Perth 2008, pp. 69-90.

<sup>15</sup> Lyndall Ryan and others, *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia 1788 to 1930*, University of Newcastle 2022-, [c21ch.newcastle.edu.au](http://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au); Rachel Perkins and others, *The Australian Wars*, SBS 2022.



relative ease, only rarely having to mobilise significant military resources. There were moments of terror and death for some of the occupiers, but violence between black and white was a minor drag on the occupation of a continent. And no wonder. Raids by a dozen Aboriginal men armed with spears and clubs were nowhere near as formidable, and had nothing like the effect, of a long campaign by, say, hundreds of Māori armed with muskets and cannon and supplied by sea. No Australian town was destroyed in an inland frontier conflict as Levuka in Fiji was in 1844, or Kororāreka in New Zealand's north island the year after.

I'm not saying that we're making wars out nothing. Aboriginal societies were partly destroyed by settler violence, and on occasion by official violence. I'm saying it's at best a provincial view, at worst a form of myth-making, to insist that, if other settler societies were founded on evenly-balanced frontier struggles full of heroic battles, then Australia must have been too.

Why was the imbalance so great on the inland frontier? Myriad languages, small populations and soft hierarchies made Aboriginal societies vulnerable. But a glance at other frontiers, including Australia's maritime frontier, suggests an important additional factor at work. Frontiers were usually made by collisions between indigenous people and more than one colonising power. Think about the North American Great Lakes region, where French trappers and British settlers both arrived. Or New Caledonia, where the French eventually ousted British traders operating from Sydney. Or even New Zealand, where French and American activity was routine and ambitious in the 1830s. Inland Australia wasn't like that. There was no rival imperial power here, no colonies planted under a French or Spanish or Russian flag. So there was no need by British settlers and colonial governors to court Australia's indigenous people and to arm them as auxiliaries and allies against the French or whoever. No rivalry, no arms trade, no transformation of Aboriginal men into soldiers.

My book was finally published at the end of 2021. I'll be interested to see what reviewers make of it. I'd like to hear from you as well, not so much thinking about the book itself but what I've tried to draw from the book here. How much do we need more research into the British garrison? Does gathering together all the conflicts caused by intrusion from Australia into New Zealand, PNG and the Pacific make sense? If it does, should we contrast maritime frontier conflict with inland frontier conflict? Let me know what you think.