

# Blood seeps into the pages of Aboriginal history

KATIE HAMPSON

For many years, white settlement in Australia was thought to be a polite, bloodless affair with history recording nothing like the bloody battles in colonial outposts such as New Zealand and North America.

But the red ink has slowly made its way on to the pages of Australia's accounts, with a new wave of historians arguing Aboriginals resisted European settlement, which often resulted in cruel massacres.

In the wake of fresh debate over the historic importance of an Aboriginal wars memorial, Graeme Gower, senior lecturer in Aboriginal Studies at Edith Cowan University, said that for generations most Australian believed what had been written in government records.

Then historians such as Henry Reynolds and Neville Green reminded Australians that many Aboriginals had fought to the death over the possession of their land.

"The truth of our history is what we have ascertained from written records but we know on the frontier there was a culture of silence and things were hushed up," Mr Gower said. "When you read the historical accounts, they say mainly men were killed at Pinjarra but elders say it was women and children.

"Quite often Aboriginal history was taught from a colonial advancement type perspective."

Award-winning WA author

Howard Pedersen said that while the battles in WA did not have the high profile of some in the Eastern States, oral accounts from Aboriginals have shown that they were adamant in defending their land.

He said the establishment of the Swan River Colony in 1829 sparked a long and brutal history between settlers and local Aboriginals in WA.

The loss of significant traditional land and the realisation that the settlers they had welcomed were not simply visitors resulted in Aboriginal resistance led by local tribal chief Midgegooroo and his son Yagan.

In April 1833 Yagan's brother was shot dead while breaking into a store in Fremantle. Aggrieved, the pair and 40 others responded by attacking a supply carriage and fatally spearing two brothers.

Fifteen months later, the skirmishes escalated into an all-out battle in Pinjarra in 1834.

While official records stated 14 Aboriginal men were killed, more recent accounts point to much larger number which also included women and children, Mr Pedersen said.

He said similar disparities were found between official tallies and oral histories of other battles including Halls Creek in 1887 and in the Kimberley from 1890-1920 and later the Forrest River massacre.

One of the worst conflicts was the Flying Foam massacre which either started with the theft of a bag of flour from a pearling boat or the

rape of an Aboriginal woman by a policeman — or both.

Up to 60 men, women and children of the Yaburara people were shot dead by police and settlers on the Burrup Peninsula.

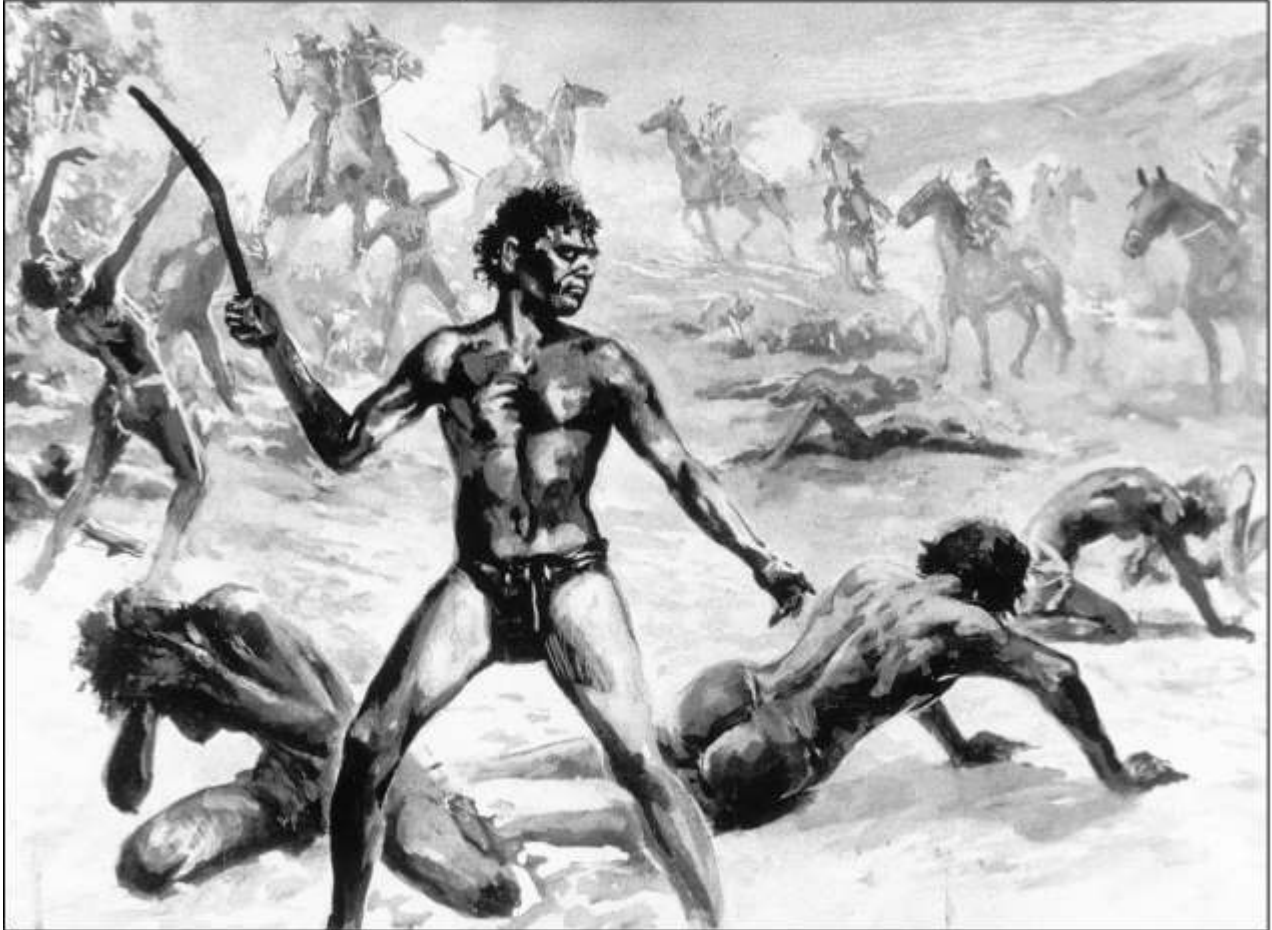
"It was the commencement of the settlement in the Pilbara region which ushered in a long history of conflict that the Aboriginal people in that part of the Pilbara never recovered from," Mr Pedersen said.

"The reason why there was a conspiracy of silence and the figures surrounding Aboriginal deaths were severely understated was because it was illegal to kill Aboriginal people and under colonial law they were meant to be protected. There was also political tension between the British and West Australian authorities over the treatment of Aboriginal people."

He said a lack of forensic evidence for some massacres such as the failure to find human remains or ballistic evidence had fanned a backlash against claims of widespread violence.

But the oral histories of Aboriginal people were remarkably accurate and consistent, which had helped dispel the myths.

"In WA, there is an extraordinary amount of information in the official records which talks about the war in the Kimberley in the 1890s but I don't think people deal with it well that this was a disputed country," Mr Pedersen said.



**White out: Massacres of Aboriginals by European settlers were ignored in official histories for generations.**