
For many years, Jonathan Richards was a fixture at the Queensland State Archives, and if one wanted to find him, one phoned there first. Eventually, the archivists referred newcomers to him for useful introductions into inquests, correspondence and police staff files. This book, pregnantly subtitled ‘a true history’ of Queensland’s Native Police, is the result of his assiduous research on the Queensland Native Police. Pieced together from a process he calls ‘sustained digging’ among the QSA records, it is supplemented with newspapers and a wide range of other primary and secondary material through laborious cross-referencing: compared to the elaborate documentation of Aboriginal administration, where extensive regular reports were required from all subsidised missions and government settlements, the native police records are succinct, minimalist and patchy. Throughout the book, we see how tantalising, detailed documentation emerges relating to a particular case, then the paper trail disappears, and the outcome is unknowable.

Richards concludes that a secret war was being conducted. Frontier conflict in Queensland was widely understood as a ‘war of extermination’, condoned by settlers and governments, a ‘cruel necessity’. The native police provided a standard colonial instrument to pacify Indigenous resistance, tried and tested in the British Empire with the Kaffir Corps and Malay Corps in Sri Lanka, Sepoys in India, and various corps comprised of former slaves in the West Indies and Africa. These were violent and feared, terrible and terrifying. They were an essential instrument for the expansion of settlement and applied terror strategically. The corps had a military character, decamping in army style camps, and highly mobile — a special forces unit.

And because the native police were engaged in a secret war, the documentation of their activities is patchy. Richards therefore does not enter into speculation about the numbers of violent deaths in this secret war. He supports previous estimates of a death rate of about one European to ten Aborigines in Queensland. The extant documents refer to only 327 European deaths, but Richards believes the number to be much higher, between 500 and 750 (p. 73). But he does turn up some interesting figures: only two European women were killed in North Queensland by Aborigines (not counting Mrs Watson from Lizard Island, who died while escaping), and only five out of about 200 officers in the Native Police died from Aboriginal attacks (pp. 28, 116). This says something about how the force operated.

The book gives a substantial insight into the organisational structure, efficacy and failures of this force. They were not the ‘Good Men and True’ of Marie Hansen Fels’ 1988 history of the Victorian Native Police corps. There are accounts of prisoners killed in police custody, as well as those simply ‘disappearing’ from custody, and the accounts of a Native Police trade in stolen children are rendered more atrocious by the refusal of the bureaucracy to act on reports of such misconduct — the cardinal sin. The reputation of the force was such that some squatters sheltered Aborigines from attack by the Native Police.
One particularly disturbing story, also reminiscent of a recent debate, concerns a ten-year-old girl kidnapped together with others from Moreton Island by a white man, handed over to a hotelkeeper in Cooktown five years later, and from there ‘decoyed’ by Native Police. She managed to return to the hotelkeeper and asked to be sent home, but was taken again by Native Police troopers, and later found at the house of the sub-inspector, who claimed that one of the troopers wanted her as his wife. This paper trail ends with the notation ‘no action necessary’.

The Native Police corps was formed in 1848 to patrol the northern parts of New South Wales (later Queensland), and was devolved on to Queensland when it became a separate colony in 1859. It was not legally constituted in Queensland until 1863. The first and only written Regulations were issued in 1866, although senior officers claimed long afterwards that there were ‘no written regulations’. The directions to officers were carefully worded — discretion, efficacy and a lack of witnesses were the key to success. The operations did not generate any more paperwork than absolutely necessary. The history of this force is punctuated with failures to prosecute and the concealment of evidence, making it all the more difficult to reconstruct. But there are ample accounts of the burning of the bodies of those killed by native police.

Another interesting fact turned up by Richards is that no disciplinary charges regarding sexual misbehaviour were ever laid against members of the Native Police Force (p. 158), who were known to take female prisoners as hostages and sexual companions. Although Queensland had strict laws against cross-racial cohabitation, Sub-inspector Morrison cohabited with an Aboriginal woman for over ten years, while Sub-inspector Poingdestre lived with three Aboriginal women in 1897 (he had been dismissed in 1868 and later reinstated in the force, like a number of others). Sub-inspector Frederick Wheeler’s illegitimate Aboriginal daughter was born in 1860, and when he was later convicted of murder and dismissed from service, an observer placed this into the context of jealousy over an Aboriginal woman (p. 159).

Many of the white officers had long-serving careers. At the apex was the Commissioner of (Native and European) Police, a position held by David Seymour for 30 years. Of some 200 whites in the force from 1859 to 1914, there were 21 inspectors, 90 sub-inspectors with an average eleven years of service, and twenty constables with an average sixteen years of service. Many, especially in the early years of the force, had prior military experience in other parts of the empire, and fourteen became police magistrates. Richards observes that the entry of former native police officers into the judiciary, who then sat in judgement of native police actions, fostered corruption at the highest level (p. 150).

I had always assumed that, compared with regular policing, the Native Police was a small force. But in fact in 1878 the police commissioner supervised 24 officers in the Native Police and 22 officers in the regular police. Although the number of European officers was small in relation to the number of Aboriginal troopers (in 1864 the ratio was 17:160, and in 1872 it was 30:141), the archives yield much more information about the white officers than about the Aboriginal troopers.
Richards’ research shows that recruiting Aboriginal troopers from the southern states was far less usual than has been assumed, an image possibly based on the representation of the police commissioner in the 1870s that ‘annual’ recruiting drives were taking place. Only three such drives are documented and, at least from 1870, mostly Queensland Aborigines were recruited as native police troopers. Many had been committed for violent crimes, and had their sentences remitted for joining the force (especially from 1873 to the 1880s), so the Queensland Police contained dangerous and violent men armed by the government.

All the more alarming were the frequent desertions of troopers. At Somerset, where Frank Jardine was government resident, the whole detachment deserted in 1871 and again in 1876, and Richards found evidence of mass desertions for almost every year from 1860 to 1884, in 21 incidents involving over 130 troopers (not counting individual deserters). Part of the explanation rests in the fact that troopers were not signed on for a fixed period, and there are practically no records, other than desertions, about the manner in which they left the force. Sometimes it is recorded that the troopers were ‘promised’ to be relieved, and the absconding Somerset troopers argued that they had only ‘signed on’ for six months. Suggestive of the rate of desertions, in 1863 Commandant Bligh (a grandson of Governor William Bligh) requested permission to recruit 80 troopers when only 50 were required. Absconders were often shot, and the fact that they were armed caused great consternation but, as the Attorney-General observed in 1883, there was no law against Aborigines carrying firearms (p. 176).

Among the white officers, drinking was a widespread problem, starting with the first commandant of the native police, Fred Walker, who was dismissed for drunkenness in 1855. Of the dismissals recorded, nine were for drinking, eight for discipline violations, seven for violence, seven due to ‘reduction of the force’, five for incompetence, and four for financial irregularities, such as £500 embezzled by acting Police Commissioner and former Police Magistrate Thomas Barron after whom the Barron River is named. In practice, however, these reasons were often intertwined, such as when violence, discipline violations, and incompetence were a result of excessive alcohol consumption.

Richards found little evidence of affectionate relations between officers and troopers, but much evidence of animosity and distrust, in what was after all a military formation in which officers did not lead their men, but followed behind them to keep an eye on them.

This history of the Native Police shows the history of race relations in Queensland through the prism of ‘genocidal moments’. The two most famous frontier incidents in Queensland are Aboriginal attacks on the Fraser family at Hornet Bank in 1857, and on the Wills family at Cullin-la-Ringo in 1861. Richards contextualises these incidents with the provocations that preceded them — the rape of young Aboriginal women, and abduction of Aboriginal boys — and the large-scale reprisals that followed where it appeared that surviving white victims had a ‘licence to kill’ without reprimand. One of the Wills later boasted his reputation for shooting Aborigines, went on to train ‘the first Aboriginal cricket team’ (p. 75), and finally committed suicide. Richards does not omit to mention
some of those clergymen, journalists and settlers who raised their voice in protest, but argues that on the whole the atrocities were known, and condoned. At the same time that committed Christians and philanthropists passed the hat around to support missions and orphanages, they also financed the army that displaced and decimated Indigenous people.

Like Ros Kidd’s doctoral research at Griffith a decade ago, also under the supervision of Mark Finnane, this work is based on meticulous, close-grained archival work, and was well worth waiting for. The appendixes are a great bonus, with a clear overview of the ranks and structure of the force, and short biographical notes on each of the white officers. Richards exercises some restraint in his portrayal, because archival dipping, let alone ‘sustained digging’ for ten years, must have turned up some gruesome stories. What he does present is eminently readable, lucid and informative, and is well suited to use as a school text. There is plenty of material here for a novel or movie in the vein of Rolf de Heer’s The Tracker (2002), but Richards refrains from entering into an account of that legendary tracking skill which has so engaged creative writers. That, however, is more relevant in relation to Western Australia, which never had a native police force and only engaged Aboriginal people as guides and trackers.

Richards is perhaps attempting to deal a final blow to the history wars, but these were never really about how much of the frontier violence could be proven, but about how much of it could be denied. He does, however, make a readable and solid contribution to Queensland history, peppered with interesting detail.

— Regina Ganter