

# **‘Paper talk,’ Testimony and Forgetting in South-West Western Australia**

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*Readers are cautioned that this paper contains the names of deceased Wardandi Nyungars, and that some of the historical accounts are offensive and distressing in their terminology and descriptions.*

## **Smoothing Over**

In 2001 I travelled to south-west Western Australia to research my first novel, the springboard for which was nineteenth-century botanist Georgiana Molloy who had emigrated from England to Augusta with her husband John Molloy in 1829. My friend and I pulled up at Wonnerup House, the homestead of the Laymans, who had lived with the Molloys at Augusta before moving to Wonnerup. We wandered through cold, square rooms, then out into the sunshine. This was the place, a small placard read, where George Layman was speared by Gayware, a Wardandi Nyungar. Our reconnaissance complete, we sat on the grass before the house, unpacked some baguettes and smeared them with cheese. We were impervious to the violence that once arose from those smooth, glossy lawns.

Fifteen years later, I was approached by a colleague who was aware of my research on Georgiana Molloy, which had broadened into the scholarly. He asked, ‘Did you know that Georgiana’s husband was responsible for one of the worst massacres in that area?’ I stepped back in surprise. ‘No way!’ I had been researching Georgiana Molloy for nearly two decades and, while I knew colonists had frequently killed Nyungars, I hadn’t been aware that John Molloy had led an attack.

My colleague learned of the information through an article by playwright Angela Campbell, who had written a play on Georgiana Molloy. Campbell had been contacted by historian Howard Pederson, who collaborated with Bunuba man Banjo Woorunmurra to write the story of Jandamarra, a fighter who led a resistance against colonists in the Kimberley. Pedersen described John Molloy as a ‘mass-murderer’ and Campbell, too, was taken aback. In none of the contexts of her research had she ‘heard about any incident of large-scale, orchestrated, systematic killing of Indigenous people by Georgiana’s husband’ (62).

Concerned that I had missed something, I consulted the three biographies on Georgiana Molloy: Alexandra Hasluck’s *Portrait With Background* (1955), William Lines’ *An All Consuming Passion* (1994) and Bernice Barry’s *Georgiana Molloy: The Mind that Shines* (2015). Each described the spearing of George Layman at Wonnerup but none named John Molloy as a perpetrator of the ensuing reprisal. I decided to dig deeper. In the Colonial Records Office in Perth, I located the original documents relating to the event: accounts written by John Molloy, then resident magistrate, to the Colonial Secretary; depositions by witnesses sworn before John Molloy and his neighbour John Bussell, a justice of the peace; and responses to Molloy’s letters from the governor, John Hutt. I sourced a newspaper article in the *Western Australian Journal* published not long after the massacre and consulted Edward Shann’s *Cattle Chosen* (1927), an account of the Bussell family’s efforts to establish themselves in the district. This work included a transcription of diary entries by Frances Bussell, sister to John, Charles

and Vernon. I also located oral histories from Wardandi Nyungars recorded by Whadjuk/Barladong scholar Len Collard in *A Nyungar Interpretation of Ellensbrook and Wonnerup Homesteads* (1994).

As I pieced together these documents and attended to their language, I realised that the massacre had been depicted in such a way as to obfuscate John Molloy's role. I also came to understand that this role had been covered, uncovered and contested over the ensuing years. By tracing the history and narration of this event in the archive and in subsequent histories and biographies, this essay indicates the ways in which accounts written by colonists constructed a particular view of the massacre, while denying a substantial voice to Wardandi Nyungars who were also involved. It also articulates how literary scholars have a role to play in the analysis of historical documents through their attention to the usage and associations of language, especially how this contributes to the creation of unbalanced versions of history.

The traditional custodians of south-west Western Australia are the Nyungar (or Noongar) people. Their *boodja* (country) extends from north of Jurien Bay, inland to north of Moora and down to the southern coast between Bremer Bay and east of Esperance. It is defined by fourteen different areas with varied geography and fourteen dialectal groups ('Noongar Culture'). In 1829 the Swan River Colony (now Perth) was established by James Stirling, but by the time the Molloy's arrived in 1830 the fertile farming country had been taken. Stirling recommended that a new colony be formed in the south-west, and the Molloy's, George Layman and the Bussells, among others, sailed to Augusta. They struggled to survive there because the soil was too poor to sustain European crops, and began accessing land grants further north in the Vasse. The Bussell brothers established a cattle station named 'Cattle Chosen' in 1834 at Yoonberup, or Busselton. George Layman moved nearby to Wonnerup that same year and the Molloy's established themselves near the Bussells in 1839.

The place George Layman chose for his farm was the property of a Nyungar family, possibly Gayware's, while the surrounding tuart forest was accessed by many Nyungar groups for social and economic activities and festivals (Collard, *A Nyungar Interpretation* 25). Despite this, Layman ploughed the soil and planted wheat. On Monday 22 February 1841, eight or ten Wardandi Nyungars were employed to carry away straw after threshing Layman's wheat. For this they were 'to receive a certain portion of damper' (Molloy, 27 Feb. 1841), but at the end of the day a Wardandi Nyungar named Milligan complained to Layman that Gayware (also known as Gaywal or Quibean), had taken his damper. Cobbett, a Wardandi Nyungar who had been hunting opossums, stated in his deposition following the event that Layman 'took Gaware [sic] by the beard saying why have you stolen Milligan's damper give it up. Gaware replied no Milligan has done little work I will give him a little. Layman again took him by the beard.' The *Western Australian Journal* newspaper article, dated 13 March 1841, states that according to Wardandi Nyungars' 'usage and habits, no greater violation of the person can be inflicted.'

Whadjuk/Barladong Nyungar scholar Len Collard collected Nyungars' oral histories of this event, one of which states, 'They said it was over tea and flour. Our great great grandmother who saw this happening said Gayware went to get his women back from the Laymans who was working in their house' (61). John Molloy does not mention this. In his account to the Colonial Secretary,

Layman stood by the fire and told Gayware that he Layman was not sulky advising him to come and take his own damper Gayware however spoke something to another native who stood by the fire and who moved off he then

shouted the word George in an angry tone and threw a spear which entered Layman's left side. Woberdung threw another which passed between his legs. (27 Feb. 1841, emphasis Molloy's)

Layman pulled the spear out, went inside his house and died.

John Molloy was appointed resident magistrate in August 1830, a few months after arriving at Augusta. Magistrates, as historian Amanda Nettelbeck writes, 'held a critical role in the regulation of social and economic order in Australia as it was colonised, and particularly in rural districts where they carried considerable power as representatives of government' (20). They, along with justices of the peace, were tasked with providing justice to settlers and Indigenous people alike, but 'in practice their primary role – like that of police – was to protect settler investments' (21). When Molloy and Bussell received word of Layman's death, they 'proceeded instantly to Wonnerup in the hope of securing a native as an assistant in the investigation of this nefarious business' (Molloy, 27 Feb. 1841). Bunny, a native constable, appeared to offer his assistance. Molloy writes, 'He was taken to Mr Bussell's house and secured until a conviction that was true and zealous induced us to liberate him' (27 Feb. 1841). The words 'secured,' then 'liberated' suggest that some force was involved in procuring Bunny's services. The next day, Molloy and Bussell arrived at Wonnerup to make enquiries and bury Layman's body. The following day, two Nyungar boys arrived with the information that Gayware had been speared in the thigh at Mallokup, some twenty kilometres north of Wonnerup. Molloy and Bussell, having prepared warrants, set off in that direction (Molloy, 27 Feb. 1841).

On Thursday 25 February, an armed party of thirteen colonists bivouacked on the banks of the Capel River about ten kilometres from Mallokup. An hour before daybreak they set off with a native constable, presumably Bunny. He led the party to what Molloy described as an 'ambush' where they remained until nightfall. Before sunrise the next morning they listened to 'the clamour of numerous voices [that] proceeded from an almost inaccessible spot' (Molloy, 27 Feb. 1841). These voices were speaking Nyungar, which John Bussell knew and interpreted for Molloy. The party of whites, moving closer,

heard distinctly the conversation and recognised the voices we thought of Gayware, Wingate and Cauncet they were conversing of the recent murder and the probable annihilation of the whites amongst them they named Mr John, Mr Vernon and Mr Alfred Bussell, they also recounted their exploits in stealing rice from Mrs Bryan. One imitated Layman and their laughter was so loud they seemed most incredibly slow in detecting our approach. (Molloy, 27 Feb. 1841)

Nonetheless, the Wardandi Nyungars heard the crackling of the bush as the party approached. Molloy continued:

[T]he rushing out of the armed natives and their hostile appearance with the prevailing conviction that Gayware was of the party led to several shots being fired the result was that thirteen women and children were captured four men and one woman in spite of every effort to the contrary were killed (27 Feb. 1841).

Francis Bussell, a sister of the Bussell brothers, wrote in her diary that when the party reached Busselton that evening, 'Captain Molloy drank tea here. 7 natives killed' (cited in Shann 118). Among this casual collocation of tea and murder, no mention is made of the fate of those

captured nor, as one Nyungar informant described in an oral history, how ‘the river was red with blood’ (cited in Collard 61).

The next day, Saturday 27 February 1841, Molloy wrote his version of what had happened and conveyed it to the Colonial Secretary. John Bussell, as justice of the peace, appended his signature. Vernon, John’s brother, returned at ten o’clock in the evening. Gayware had not been among those killed in the ambush, for his wife told Vernon Bussell that Gayware had gone south. The next day Charles, the third Bussell brother, rode in that direction. Their native constable was ‘fatigued,’ however, and the party realised ‘that nothing was to be done without zeal on his part’ (Molloy, 10 March 1841). They returned to Busselton and Wardandi Nyungars were ‘given to understand that the white men meant to give them an opportunity of bringing in the offenders before they undertook another expedition’ (Molloy, 10 March 1841). These offenders included Woberdung who had thrown the second spear at George Layman.

Three days after this amnesty was announced, on the evening of Sunday 7 March 1841, a Wardandi Nyungar named Crocodile informed Charles Bussell that he had seen Gayware’s tracks. He was too afraid to come to the Bussells’ house, so Molloy, Vernon Bussell and Mr Northey, an acquaintance staying with the Molloys, went to his camp (Molloy, 10 March 1841). Vernon Bussell ‘proposed terms to Crocodile who advised our immediate expedition’ and at eleven o’clock a party set out (Molloy, 10 March 1841). A little after sunrise they encountered Gayware and ‘in an attempt to seize his spears he was shot by one of the party some distance’ (Molloy, 10 March 1841). John Molloy did not stop when Gayware was murdered, however. On Wednesday 10 March 1841 he wrote his next account of events for the Colonial Secretary and concluded, ‘In advance of the next – Woberdung is still at large but we have clues for his apprehension.’ Via letter he requested Captain Plaskett, the captain of an American whaler whose ship was anchored in Geographe Bay, to apprehend Woberdung and his brother Kenny and Mungo for a reward. The three Wardandi Nyungars agreed to the captain’s offer of dinner on board his ship and were captured.

Magistrates and justices of the peace ‘were always subject to the supervisory eye of the central government’ (Nettelbeck 21), hence John Molloy’s report and depositions to the Colonial Secretary. In response to these accounts, he was admonished by Governor Hutt for involving a foreigner, the American captain, in the capture of Woberdung, Kenny and Mungo. He was also cautioned against further expeditions, for they carried a danger ‘of involving the innocent with the guilty’ (Governor Hutt, 1 April 1841). In this reprimand one can envisage why, as Nettelbeck writes, magistrates ‘routinely avoided or subverted legal procedures in cases relative to Aboriginal people’ (21). One can also hazard why Molloy did not say everything he could have in his reports.

### Reading Silence

Wiradjuri writer and scholar Jeanine Leane writes in ‘Tracking our Country in Settler Literature’:

Tracking is about reading: reading land and people before and after whitefellas. It is about entering into the consciousness of the person or people of interest. Tracking is not just about reading the physical signs; it is about reading the mind. It is not just about seeing and hearing what *is* there; it is as much about what is *not* there. (1)

In piecing together the accounts of what happened following the spearing of George Laymen, it becomes apparent that elisions speak as loudly as the records themselves.

Approximately a dozen depositions, or testimonies, were taken down and signed by Molloy and Bussell and sent to the Colonial Secretary on 26 March 1841. Eight of these were from colonists. They charted previous threats to the colonists from Wardandi Nyungars, particularly in retaliation for Nugundung, Gayware's son-in-law, having been taken to prison on Rottneet Island. Cobbett, the Wardandi Nyungar who had been hunting opossums, stated 'I have often heard Gaware [sic] and Woberdung say that they would spear a white man for Nugundung.' Through these accounts, one can see Molloy and Bussell making a case for the colonists' hunting of Gayware. Even prior to these depositions, however, Molloy used particular words to erect the architecture of provocation. On 27 February 1841, in his first report to the Colonial Secretary he wrote:

They were at this juncture a strong party of natives lately come in from wallaby hunting all painted in warlike fashion; this deserves to be noted because it appears there was something of premeditation in the affair ... and that this is not without foundation appears from the fact of another native Woberdung seconding the attack.

Molloy's selection of adjectives such as 'strong' and 'warlike,' combined with his reference to 'premeditation' suggest to the reader that he was left with no choice but to attack. Molloy uses this motif of self-defence on a number of other occasions in his account of the massacre. Dick Connor, he writes, 'narrowly escaped with his life a spear having been poised at him however his comrade fired in time to save him,' while Bunny, the native constable, 'was also attacked by a native and was obliged to shoot him in self defence' (27 Feb. 1841). Molloy's language continues to be vague when he describes shooting Gayware from a distance and refers to the shooter only as 'one of the party.' In contrast, on March 7 1841 Frances Bussell wrote in her diary, a less official document, that 'In the afternoon Mr Northey arrived with the intelligence on the death of Gaywal, shot by Kelly, Mr Northey's servant' (cited in Shann 119). The formal, passive language of Molloy's account and his refusal to name, in a public record, specific colonists who perpetrated the violence seems to speak of complicity.

Frances Bussell's diary would be a useful document to consult for further information about the massacre, but the pages from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 1841 have been torn out. Her account of the event begins with the arrival of the Protector of Aborigines Mr Symmons, at the Bussells' on 26 February 1841, the day after the massacre. It is unclear who tore out the pages, or when or why, but their removal, Edward Shann writes in *Cattle Chosen*, 'can hardly have been seriously intended to suppress the story of the affray at Wanerup [sic], for the entries left, and quoted above, are evidence enough of its fatal character' (118). Instead, he reads the torn pages as evidence of a more focused attempt to wipe out the record of an incident between the Bussells and Mr Symmons, with John Bussell later explaining that Symmons' name 'has been looked upon as equivalent to the persecutor of the European' (cited in Shann 118). The torn pages say more than they might otherwise have.

There are other elisions in the collected historical record. Only three depositions from Wardandi Nyungars were recorded by Molloy and Charles Bussell: from Cobbett, the native policeman Bunny, and Wongalyung, who was also captured on board Captain Plaskett's ship. Bunny's account was interpreted by Alfred Bussell and Wongalyung's was presumably translated by Charles Bussell, who acted as interpreter for Mungo, Kenny and Woberdung when they were also imprisoned on the ship. Accounts of one paragraph in length were also taken from these latter three. Molloy justified this dearth of depositions in writing: 'many more

corroborating declarations could be obtained from the natives, but feeling the evidence sufficiently strong to substantiate the fact of Woberdung's being a participant in the murder ... I thought it mindful not to multiply papers' (26 March 1841).

Had John Molloy not been so concerned about multiplying papers, what might the Wardandi Nyungars have said? That Kenny, Woberdung's brother, took colonist Anne Bryan's rice, left on the beach for the boats to take to market, as a collection of rent from 'the *wedjela* [white] farms and flourmills that were illegally occupying our *boodjar* [country]' (*A Nyungar Interpretation* 88)? That Gayware's daughter had been raped by Henry Campbell, a labourer living on the Collie River (Lines 289)? That Nyungars' access to Wonnerup was increasingly restricted (Collard, *A Nyungar Interpretation*, 25)? As it is, these additional facts must be gathered from histories and accounts other than Molloy's, for he did not offer the Wardandi Nyungars an opportunity to commit them to paper. In this he was not alone.

### 'Paper Talk'

Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes in *Decolonising Methodologies* that 'writing has been viewed as the mark of a superior civilisation and other societies have been judged, by this view, to be incapable of thinking critically and objectively, or having distance from ideas and emotions' (72). The flimsiness of this view is evidenced by the intense curiosity which Indigenous Australians expressed about writing. As Penny van Toorn writes in *Writing Never Arrives Naked*, Indigenous Australians have been writing since first contact with Europeans in the eighteenth century. Wirlomin Nyungar writer Kim Scott notes how Nakina, a Nyungar guide, performed an account of an expedition he had led, offering 'a detailed recollection of the various incidents and scenery, arranged in the form of a Diary, where each day was designated by some leading distinctive mark, in place of numerals' (205). And around the same time that John Molloy refused to take up any more paper to record Wardandi Nyungars' voices, other Nyungars were trying to make themselves heard through writing. In December 1839, Munday, a significant figure among Whadjuk Nyungars, was apprehended for threatening to spear Francis Armstrong, an interpreter who knew Indigenous languages and customs. When Munday was arrested, the *Perth Gazette* states, 'we find his friends, of the same tribe, earnestly beseeching the white persons to intercede for him. We received a *deputation* this morning from several good characters amongst the blacks to exercise the influence of "paper talk"' ('A Perth Native,' emphasis in original). Munday was also on familiar terms with the editor of the *Swan River Guardian*, who wrote Munday 'is a frequent visitor at the "Guardian" Office, because he says "paper talk goes far far away"' ('Colonial Warfare'). These references illustrate the speed of Nyungars in understanding and adopting new technologies and their recognition of the power of writing. They also show how, in denying Indigenous people access to the tools of writing and reading, such as newspapers or paper, the archives—the foundations of colonial history—failed to capture their voices. Yet some sixty years after the massacre, another author listened to Wardandi Nyungars and wrote down what he heard. His account brought John Molloy's violence into the open.

In 1897, American Warren Bert Kimberley published his *History of Western Australia: A Narrative Of Her Past Together With Biographies Of Her Leading Men*. Kimberley came to Australia in the 1880s and, having penned commemorative histories of Ballarat and Bendigo, turned his attention to Western Australia (Garrick 111). His entry for 1841 in the *History* opens thus: 'One of the most bloodthirsty deeds ever committed by Englishmen is reported to have taken place' (115). He continues:

Colonel (captain) Molloy ordered his soldiers to prepare to march, and he took command of them and the chief settlers in the south-western districts. He gave special instructions that no woman or child should be killed, but that no mercy should be offered the men. A strong and final lesson must be taught to the blacks. All were well armed. Into the remote places this party went, bent on killing without mercy. Through the woods, among rocky hills and shaded valleys, they searched for the black men. When they saw them they shouldered their muskets, and shot them down. Isolated natives were killed during the first few days, and, so it is said, some women among them, but the main body had hidden from the terrible white men. A few parties fled from the threatened districts to the southern coast, and escaped. The majority hid in the thick bush around Lake Mininup.

Although several natives were killed, the settlers and soldiers were not satisfied. They redoubled their energy, determined to wreak vengeance on the main body. They rode from district to district, from hill to hill, and searched the bush and thickets. At last they traced the terrified fugitives to Lake Mininup. Here and there a native was killed, and the others seeing that their hiding place was discovered fled before the determined force. They rushed to a sand patch beyond Lake Mininup. Colonel Molloy observed a boy forsaken by his parents. He rode up to him, and to save him took him on his saddle. The lad, whose name was Burnin, survived, and lived in the district until a short time ago. The soldiers pushed on, and surrounded the black men on the sand patch. There was now no escape for the fugitives, and their vacuous cries of terror mingled with the reports of the white men's guns. Native after native was shot, and the survivors, knowing that orders had been given not to shoot the women, crouched on their knees, covered their bodies with their bokas, and cried, 'Me yokah' (woman). The white men had no mercy. The black men were killed by dozens, and their corpses lined the route of march of the avengers. Then the latter went back satisfied. (115-116)

This vivid rendition differs starkly from the passivity of Molloy's report to the Colonial Secretary. Molloy is clearly positioned as a leader of the reprisal, while Kimberley's active verbs and the rhythm of his sentences evoke the determination of Molloy's movements. Kimberley focalises his narrative from the points of view of both Wardandi Nyungars (who perceived 'the terrible white men' who 'had no mercy') and the colonists (who declared 'a strong and final lesson must be taught' after which they 'went back satisfied'). This technique invests both parties with a more explicit sense of agency than does John Molloy's account, in which the Wardandi Nyungars' resistance can only be detected by reading between the lines. The trackers employed by Molloy, for example, 'refused to lead pretending fear of the desperate man [Gayware]' (Molloy, 10 March 1841). By dissembling, they impeded the colonists' efforts to apprehend Gayware.

There are some inconsistencies in Kimberley's account. Molloy is described as commanding his soldiers but, although he had been a captain in the war against Napoleon, it was not his role as resident magistrate to command the district's soldiers and in his account of events written to Governor Hutt there is no mention of the military. Kimberley's account also differs from John Molloy's in that it does not include the first ambush against Wardandi Nyungars. It does, however, mention the flight of some parties to the south, mirroring Charles Bussell and his weary tracker's efforts in that direction. The killing at Lake Mininup also resonates with an oral history recorded by Len Collard:

The first mob was caught, was just the other side of the Capel River (Mollakup). When I was a little boy we found some skulls up there. One of them had a bullet in it, it had gone through the forehead and just sticking out the back. There was quite a few with holes knocked in them in the skulls and the next mob they caught was at Muddy Lake (Mininup) that's this side of Bunbury and then they chased the other right through Australind somewhere around Australind area they caught up they killed some more there and the rest got away. (*A Nyungar Interpretation*, 61)

The mention of skulls accords with Kimberley's observation that 'on the sand patch near Mininup, skeletons and skulls of natives reported to have been killed in 1841 are still to be found' (116). These details indicate that there is some credibility to Kimberley's account.

Historian Phyl Garrick, in his comparison of the representations of Western Australian Aborigines in histories written by Kimberley and J. S. Battye (who published his history *Western Australia* in 1924) suggests that Kimberley had a 'more compassionate view of Aborigines as feeling people' (124) that in turn shaped his writing. Kimberley's storytelling, with its use of narrative techniques usually reserved for more creative modes of writing, such as dialogue, rhythm and the evocation of sound through the reference to 'cries of terror,' make a far greater impact on the reader than John Molloy's dry prevarications. Garrick describes this as 'evocative history' (112), and certainly its horror impressed itself fiercely in my mind in a way that John Molloy's writing did not. My initial shock, which echoed playwright Angela Campbell's, and my subsequent shame that I had not thought to consult Nyungars' testimony or the original sources in the archives, points to the way in which the history of south-west Western Australia has been recorded predominantly by non-Indigenous people. This has produced a narrative that 'systematically edited and mediated both events and explanations in light of a European aesthetic' (Collard and Harben 83); that is, a mode guided by a set of principles that privileged European perception. Colonists perceived themselves as civilised and civilising, while Indigenous Australians were cast, as Ann McGrath writes, as 'closer to beasts, with especially thick skulls which made it almost impossible to strike hard enough to kill them' (103). This association with animals also manifested through names given to Wardandi Nyungars such as 'Bunny' and 'Crocodile,' indicating another way in which language furthered a European aesthetic. This aesthetic was not only produced through primary sources; it was also perpetuated through compilations of information from the archive in histories and biographies.

### Vapouring

In 1924, historian and librarian James Battye published *Western Australia: A History*. In his account of what had happened in Molloy's jurisdiction eighty years before, he wrote,

In 1841 there occurred an incident which, if true, can only be described as an act of atrocious cruelty and savagery on the part of some of the settlers in the south west ... An avenging party under Captain Molloy set out and, it is said, ultimately succeeded in surrounding the whole body of natives on an open sand patch ... Colour is lent to the story by the fact that there is a sandpatch near Minninup [sic] where skulls and bones are still to be seen, and near which even present-day natives will not go. No records of the encounter exist, and it is more than likely that it has been built up to account for the collection of bones, which in all probability represents an aboriginal burial-ground, which would be *winytch* or

sacred to the *boolyas* or spirits of the departed, and therefore to be avoided by all natives. (161)

Battye shows scepticism in his account with the phrases ‘if true,’ ‘it is said,’ ‘colour is lent,’ and ‘in all probability.’ Despite these caveats, in a series of articles published in the *Western Mail* in 1925 he was taken to task for besmirching John Molloy’s name.

These articles began on Saturday 23 May with a piece by Walter Gale, formerly Registrar General of Western Australia, who described Battye’s rendition as ‘a taradiddle unworthy of repetition by a serious writer, to say nothing of a historian. In all my conversations with the old settlers ... and in all my readings of the old diaries I have not heard of such an occurrence.’ A ‘taradiddle’ is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as ‘a trifling falsehood’ or ‘a petty lie’; now a breathtaking interpretation of the narrative of a massacre. Gale does not consider that the absence of records in the diaries was likely due to the reluctance of colonists such as Molloy to record their culpability. He also surmised that Kimberley’s Nyungar informants had confused the massacre at Wonnerup with the Battle of Pinjarra of 1834.

A week later, Battye’s reply to Walter Gale was published. He pointed out that he was ‘particularly careful to mention that I could not find any evidence in corroboration of a massacre, and that in all probability it grew out of an aboriginal burial custom’ (30 May 1925). A month after this, Edward Shann, the author of *Cattle Chosen* (1926) entered the debate. Shann was appointed foundation professor of history and economics at the University of Western Australia in 1912. He took offence at Battye’s description of the attack as ‘an act of atrocious cruelty and savagery’ and claimed that Battye had no evidence for such a statement (9 July 1925). Battye had already pointed out that in 1835 the Secretary of State had laid out clear legal guidelines for colonists in their interactions with Indigenous Australians, including that ‘Whenever it may be necessary to bring a Native to justice, every form should be observed which would be considered necessary in the case of a white person’ (4 July 1925). He also observed that, ‘where possible, accounts of [the incident] have been suppressed, and where that was not possible that the accounts have been watered down.’ This is a notable impression, and corresponds with historian Bain Attwood’s observation that the ‘legal context in which colonisation took place meant that white violence could seldom be acknowledged officially or openly: this was not a conflict between nations but between British subjects’ (160).

Six weeks later, A.G. Layman, the grandson of the speared George Layman, described Battye’s account as ‘vapouring’ (27 August 1925). This term *vapour*, or steam, suggests that the events had no substance, but A.G. Layman still applied it to an account Battye himself suggested was unsubstantiated. He also sought to discredit Kimberley’s sources, as had Gale. Kimberley wrote that his account was based upon ‘the evanescent memory of pioneers and the statements of several surviving natives of that period, particularly Weela, of the Vasse tribe’ (116). To this Layman replied, ‘I was well acquainted with many of the natives that were at Wonnerup when my grandfather was murdered, and I did not have to go to old Wheela for information. Wheela was too young at the time to know much about it, and at the most he was a most unreliable man.’ Yet even if Wheela was too young to witness a massacre his people would have known about it.

Walter Gale’s and A.G. Layman’s discrediting of Wheela’s oral testimony is in line with a long history of disputing accounts by Indigenous people for a number of reasons, not least because theirs was an oral culture and ‘their perspectives of the events that occurred were never registered when they occurred or shortly afterwards,’ as can be seen in the instance of Molloy’s

depositions (Attwood 159). The events of the massacre showed that colonists did listen to Indigenous people when it served them, however. Molloy and Bussell, for example, launched their attack because they ‘distinctly heard the conversation and recognised the voices we thought of Gayware, Wingate and Cauncet.’ There is a knot in this sentence: Molloy ‘recognised the voices *we thought*.’ Likewise, he only had John Bussell’s interpretation of what those voices were saying in Wardandi. When Molloy listened, he heard and reported what he wanted, as have many other historians and writers.

### The Politics of Listening

In his 1968 Boyer Lectures, the anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner used the phrase the ‘great Australian silence’ to describe what he found in a survey of texts that barely refer to Indigenous people and their culture. He continued:

inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absent-mindedness. It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may well have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned into habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale. (135)

Boyer’s image of the window recalls John Molloy’s account of the massacre, which encourages the reader to view him as a reluctant participant. W.B. Kimberley’s graphic account, however, shifts the frame so that Molloy is seen as a perpetrator, while the oral histories of Wardandi Nyungars move it yet again to include that ‘quadrant of the landscape’ previously missing; that is, the provocations that engendered the initial spearing of Layman. Nor was Molloy’s account a ‘simple forgetting’; rather, it was part of a deliberate practice of amnesia, one that continued with the publication of the first biography of his wife Georgiana Molloy in 1955.

Of the three biographies of Georgiana Molloy, Hasluck’s *Portrait with Background* includes the most detailed account of the events surrounding the death of Layman. Hasluck includes an appendix on the Layman murder, which she opens with: ‘A very misleading account of the Layman affair is contained in J.S. Battye’s *History of Western Australia* [sic]’ (328). She notes that this account is based upon W. B. Kimberley’s *History of Western Australia*, and she criticises Kimberley’s rendition of events because they took place ‘on a much larger scale and over a longer period of time than was actually the case’ (328). Kimberley states that it was months, rather than weeks, before Gayware was tricked into revealing himself (116). Hasluck also criticises Kimberley’s statement that ‘no records exist of the affair’ by arguing that ‘plenty of records of the murder of Layman exist in the shape of properly attested depositions of pioneers’ and in dairies and letters of the Bussell family (328). Therein lies the difficulty, for these depositions are unrepresentative of all the parties involved. Hasluck concludes, ‘The author hopes that this book will make it clear that no wholesale massacre of natives was ordered, nor would it have been in the character of Captain Molloy to do so’ (329). Her protestations show how, as Raymond Evans writes, ‘denialism inheres within the very history that is being denied’ (13).

In her analysis of Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*, Jeanine Leane highlights Grenville’s desire to render Australian history less uncomfortable for herself by rewriting dispossession and massacre ‘in a way that is more empathetic and less judgmental of settler perpetrators and their descendants’ (14). In this way Grenville created a version of history that mitigated culpability, rather than admitting it. ‘Owning up to the past,’ Leane continues, ‘could be dangerously like *taking up land*. It might really be *taking it*: stealing it and appropriating it to

write narratives of settler apologetics and to create new foundation myths for the present' (15, emphasis in original). This process of creating foundation myths is evident in white writers' accounts of the massacre of Wardandi Nyungars. Where Len Collard recorded an oral history of a Nyungar that stated 'the white men's guns were too many so some of the Aboriginals got away but they were rounded up and shot north of Capel River (Mallokup)' (61), John Molloy wrote that five Wardandi Nyungars were killed by thirteen armed men 'in spite of every effort to the contrary' (27 February 1841). John Molloy's denial of the magnitude and intent of the massacre reappears in Hasluck's biography. Her appendix shored up the myth of John Molloy as a man beyond reproach.

Historians Attwood and Foster (2003), among others, have charted the manifold ways in which settler history has perpetuated the 'great Australian silence' – (exhibited spectacularly through Keith Windschuttle's contention in 2000 that Henry Reynold's calculation of the numbers of Indigenous Australians killed in massacres was 'unsubstantiated guesswork') and of the ways that many other historians are working to redress the bias against oral histories. Yet literary critics also have an investigative role to play. We can demonstrate how language is used to obscure the facts of historical events, papering them over with versions that privilege the 'European aesthetic' to which Collard referred. We can see how these renditions shape their subjects in positive or negative ways, and how this in turn shapes the subjectivities of readers. We can read silence in the way we read words and become receptive to its sound, even in the air in which one sits on a smooth grassy lawn in the sunshine. In doing so, we can promote more inclusive narratives that listen to and respect Indigenous voices.<sup>1</sup>

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