

Yoorook Justice Commission Submission

How could First Peoples' history and culture be better taught at school?

'As a professor of history, I have encountered and taught thousands of students, and I remain appalled at how ignorant and disinterested in Australian history the vast majority of them are. More than 90% of my students fresh out of high school have learned little or nothing about it.'
(Foley, 2023)

My name is Gayle Carr and I am a Non Aboriginal PhD student studying at Moondani Balluk Indigenous Academic Unit, Victoria University under the supervision of Professor Gary Foley. For the past four years my research has been tracing how a small group of colonial descendants remember and ultimately come to terms with the family patriarch's participation in the 1842 Mustons Creek massacre.¹ Although acknowledged in family history research conducted by his great granddaughter Diana Halmarick in the 1980s, what is perceived as a lack of evidence implicating this ancestor raises Diana's doubts about his involvement at the time. Forty years later, a need for 'proof' drives Diana's search and together with her second cousin Kathryn Williamson, they attempt to find out the truth.

During the course of this search Diana and Kathryn are astounded by the expanse of the colonial archive not only about this crime and subsequent trial, but numerous documented violent confrontations between the military, colonists and Gunditjmara warriors that take place during the thirty odd years of the Eumerella Wars. Many of the records unknown to Diana in the 80s are now accessible through digitization or have been located within the context of our sustained, concerted effort to find out. This, together with new knowledge offered by descendants has been sufficient to historically reconstruct a colonial account of their ancestor's role in the massacre and provide descendants with answers to long held questions about his involvement. And what has become obvious to all of us through this process is, the reason why the teaching of frontier history continues to be a gaping hole in our National and State education curriculums is *not* for the want of content.

Therefore I make this submission on behalf of myself, Kathryn Williamson and the late Diana Halmarick in line with her last wishes to advocate wherever possible for frontier history to be a mandatory subject of the Victorian school curriculum. This submission covers the following points, the legacy of the gaping hole, reconstructing local histories from the colonial archive and family histories, urgency and recommendations for the First People's Assembly/Victorian Government.

¹ Mustons Creek Massacre refers to murder of four women and a little boy from the Moperer Gundidj (Morpor) clan Gunditjmara Nation, at a tea tree scrub on the banks of Thanampool Thookay a recently renamed tributary of Mustons Creek, located to the west of the Caramut township, South West Victoria.

“I feel hoodwinked” (Williamson, 2020)

1. The legacy of the gaping hole

While Diana had known about her ancestor’s association with the Mustons Creek massacre for decades, this came as a shock to Kathryn. A shock compounded by the self-realization she knew very little about her family’s origin story or Australian history more generally. Feeling particularly let down by her 1960’s public school education she shares her only recollection of Aboriginal people being mentioned during her six years of primary school.

“I was about maybe seven, it was an image of an Aboriginal hut in a history book and I remember thinking this was an image that doesn’t exist anymore. It wasn’t you might come across this when you’re out in the bush, it was not that. We may well have been in Egypt digging up the pyramids.”

While dying race ideology is no longer embedded in public school history curriculums, the reoccurring theme of Non Aboriginal students leaving school ignorant and disinterested in how our Country was colonized and its continuing impacts on First Nations peoples, lingers. And although there may be broad provision for a teacher with a particular interest in frontier history to touch on it within the current [Victorian Foundation-10 History](#) curriculum, Professor Foley’s statistic speaks for itself.

However, when time is dedicated to discussing and reflecting on the devastating impact of the wholesale killing and dispossession of First Nations societies on the frontier it can transform someone’s understanding of colonization as not of a racist past but as something that is ongoing. I have witnessed this first hand working with Kathryn, who recently commented,

“the impact of this history is a conscious way of thinking for me now”, “now days it’s against the law to kill people and take their land but we can take their kids and lock them up’, it’s all the same thing”.

“Teachers need something to teach” (Halmarick, 2024)

2. Reconstructing local histories from the colonial archives and family histories

We are aware the First Peoples’ Assembly will be seeking decision-making powers over how the state’s Indigenous history is taught in schools. To this end, we briefly share our experience of reconstructing a local history with the aim this knowledge may prove useful to incorporate into future curriculum development efforts.

Firstly, we acknowledge the colonial archives are one sided accounts largely written by white privileged men who saw themselves vastly superior to First Nations peoples. That said, in our experience the strength of the Victorian archives is the multiplicity of records which exist on the same subject. And it’s through this multiplicity together with family history we have been able to reconstruct a colonial account of a past event from multiple perspectives, including recorded first-hand accounts by Aboriginal people. A selection of our primary source material includes,

The Public Records Office Victoria, Mitchell Library NSW State Library and NSW State Records Office

- Chief Protector of Aborigines and Assistant Protectors, letters, reports, journals
- Superintendent Port Phillip District, Governor correspondence
- Crown Commissioner of Lands reports
- Commission of Inquiry reports
- Criminal Trial Briefs

The State Library of Victoria

- Family collections, diaries, journals, photographs, reminiscences, realia etc

TROVE the digital collections of the National Library of Australia

- Newspapers dating back to the first edition of the Melbourne Advertiser published by John Pascoe Fawkner in 1838.

Family history

- Private collections
- memories of senior knowledge holders

This selection speaks to the expanse of buried and forgotten knowledge just sitting waiting to be uncovered, however in our experience we must act promptly.

“they will take it to the grave” (Halmarick, 2022)

3. Urgency on two fronts

Although Victorian institutions have made great inroads digitizing our historical collections it is an enormous, expensive and time consuming task many archivists acknowledge may never be complete. In our experience a number of records requested for viewing in connection with this research were unable to be viewed due to their fragile state, others had been lost to time. On numerous occasions we witnessed the fragile nature of these undigitized, original documents that hold the colonized story of Victoria written on faded torn pages almost 200 years ago.

Secondly, it's been our experience it is the senior members of this family who hold the most knowledge about their ancestor's early contact with the Morpor people. Diana's sad passing before the completion of this project is testimony to the need to act with urgency to ensure some of the wealth of knowledge locked away in the memories of the descendants of Victoria's early colonial families is captured before it too, is lost to time.

4. Recommendations for the First Peoples Assembly/Victorian Government

Based on a premise that it is a lack of teaching materials and support driving at least in part, some of the resistance to the teaching of frontier history in Victorian schools we offer the following recommendations based on our experience.

- The teaching of frontier history becomes a mandatory part of the Victorian School Curriculum
- Curriculum, teaching materials and teacher training is developed to support the teaching of frontier history in Victorian schools.
- The teaching of frontier history includes a public accountability framework such as annual reporting to the First Peoples Assembly

Conclusion:

The purpose of this submission has been to share our experience of working with the colonial archives and family history to reconstruct a small part of Victorian frontier history. The untapped potential to transform this knowledge into local histories curriculum so Victorian school kids can learn about what has occurred on the Country in the next suburb or down the road from where they now live is endless. A shared understanding of how Victoria was colonized and its lingering impact on First Nations peoples will make transparent the reason for justice making processes such as Treaty to occur and elicit greater community support for reparative justice efforts in the future.

Gayle Carr

Kathryn Williamson

Kirsten Soding (nee Halmarick) on behalf of Diana Halmarick