

Limina: a Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies

Volume 27, Issue 2: Adaptations

September 2022

ISSN 1833-3419

Submissions Editor

Caitlan Smith

Book Reviews Editors

Erica Steiner, Jo Penney

Web Editor

Chris Arnold

Editorial Collective

Chris Arnold

Kerry Bonnie

Grace Brooks

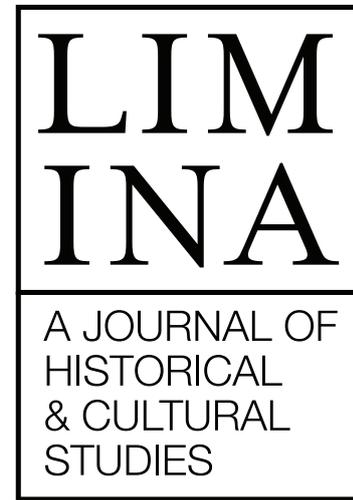
Srishti Guha

WhiteFeather Hunter

Jo Penney

Edward Ross

Caitlan Smith



Erica Steiner

Valentina Utari

Sarah Yeung

Advisory Board

Jane Lydon, University of Western Australia

Ned Curthoys, University of Western Australia

David Konstan, New York University

Carolyne Larrington, St. John's College, Oxford

Sue Broomhall, Australian Catholic University

Andrew Lynch, University of Western Australia

Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, University of Western Australia

Andrew Erskine, University of Edinburgh

Marina Gerzic, University of Western Australia

Paula Duffy, University of St Andrews

Lyn Parker, University of Western Australia

Lachlan Umers, University of Western Australia

Copyright

All work published by *Limina: a Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies* is subject to the Creative Commons (BY-NC-ND) licensing arrangement. Authors retain copyright of their articles and may republish them anywhere provided that *Limina* is acknowledged as the original place of publication, and that the work is not published again within the first twelve (12) months of the article's initial publication in *Limina*.

Submitting to Limina

Information regarding the journal and how to submit can be found at <https://www.limina.arts.uwa.edu.au/future>.

Cover Image

In Dreames. Digital image by Brook Guidry

Price, David, *Dark Tales from the Long River: A Bloody History of Australia's North-West Frontier*, Fremantle, Fremantle Press, 2021; paperback, pp. 208; RRP \$32.99, ISBN: 9781925816631.

David Price, a Western Australian educator who was born and raised in 1960s Carnarvon, has, as noted on the publisher's website, 'long been intrigued by the hidden history of his hometown and its wilful amnesia about the treatment of Aboriginal people and Asian migrants' by early white colonisers. Price's concept of Australia's 'willful amnesia' is one that I returned to throughout reading his non-fiction work, *Dark Tales*.

In *When Silence Falls: An Introduction* (2015), Cara Pinchbeck, senior curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, writes that, as an Aboriginal person she is acutely aware of gaps in Australian history,

and the role power plays in the construction of knowledge and narratives of the past. All too often the complexities of history are not captured, for there is little benefit for those constructing those histories to acknowledge anything that operates in opposition to their overarching narrative.' (3)

Dark Tales is Price's clear attempt to unearth and explore these previously hidden complexities. Reminiscent of *The Killing Times*, the University of Newcastle's *Colonial Frontier Massacres, 1788-1930* project, which has developed a map that provides evidence of mass killings from 1788 until 1928, *Dark Tales* is carefully constructed around court cases that occurred in the north-west of Western Australia in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Each case strategically reveals the background and context of a violent death with stories that peel back layers of intersectional injustice and often abhorrent abuse.

Each of the cases are also linked in some capacity to Charles Denroche Vaughan Foss, the Irish-born former pastoralist who in 1882 was appointed as an 'itinerate magistrate' for the Gascoyne (9). Operating from his home in Carnarvon, Magistrate Foss held his position for over 33 years (retiring in 1915) and throughout his tenure was a man who wielded 'justice like a weapon' (51). It is the judgements of Foss and the interpretation and implementation of 'justice' that Price unpicks in this work.

Dark Tales took time for me to complete. This is not in any way a reflection on the quality of this meticulously researched and highly accessible work. It is more an observation of the importance of Price's historical witnessing and the brutality of the content. The book is structured around nine true stories and as I finished each chapter, I found that I needed space to sit with the material and reflect on the lives lost and violence perpetrated.

Two chapters in particular have stayed with me. In the first, 'The Lonesome Death of Thackabiddy', Price recounts the death of an Aboriginal man named Thackabiddy in 1883 and the trial of his accused killer a white man called Charles 'Charlie' Clifford. Thackabiddy was suspected of sheep stealing but, despite no evidence, he was shot in the neck, chin, and arm (40), repeatedly beaten, and forced to walk for four days (over 160kms) while chained by the neck to a horse. When, on the fourth day, Thackabiddy tried to escape, he was shot again, this time through the ankle:

It was now clear that Thackabiddy could no longer walk, and Carnarvon was still some sixty kilometres away. The deeply shaken Clifford was in a quandary, but he was also in no mood for niceties. He decided to take matters into his own hands and, attaching the prisoner's chain to his horse,

dragged the wounded man by his neck through the scrub for more than a kilometer. Thackabiddy somehow got a hand on the chain and fought desperately, sometimes on his back at other times on his stomach or side, to keep from choking.

Clifford stopped and tied the naked and bloodied man's arms behind his back and chained him to a tree. (41)

After days chained to the tree without food or water, Thackabiddy died and his body was left chained to the tree for two days (42). 'Charlie' Clifford, although charged with manslaughter, before Magistrate Foss at Carnarvan was found not guilty at the supreme court in Perth in 1884.

'How Topsy Died', recounts the shooting of a little girl named Topsy and her mother Clara in 1912 by a shearer called John (Jack) Sheehan. Sheehan had been angry at Topsy's father Margoo, and in attempting to shoot Margoo, had hit Clara instead. The bullet went through Clara's arm, breaking her bone then exiting to shoot Topsy in the stomach. Topsy died a short time later and Sheehan, although also charged with manslaughter, was similarly found not guilty by the jury. The ruthless destruction of this family and the disrespect shown to both them and the witnesses throughout the investigations into Topsy's death are heartbreaking and extremely difficult to read. 'How Topsy Died' also crystallizes the themes of sexual abuse and exploitation that seep throughout *Dark Tales*. Key witness testimony states that Sheehan and another man had sought to 'get a woman' for sex the night before, but had been escorted from camp by Margoo.

In both of these sections, Price's use of primary material (particularly newspaper articles) as a literary approach is particularly persuasive. In an interview provided in the Teaching Notes for *Dark Tales*, Price notes that

the language ...[newspapers] used [during the period] gives us a powerful insight into prevailing attitudes and beliefs about law, order, punishment, migration and Aboriginal rights. It is telling and confronting for the modern reader to see, for example, racist language routinely appearing in the newspapers of the time.

The effectiveness of this technique shines, particularly in the descriptions of Topsy's death.

Suppressing or ignoring the difficult and violent aspects of our Australian history prevents a full understanding of our culture and the echoes of that suppressed trauma continue into the present. The impressive research in *Dark Tales* handles shocking content with a deft touch and emerges as an invitation for contemporary audiences to address the willful amnesia underpinning our foundational myths. It is an important and accessible book that should be widely read and discussed.

Amanda Gardiner

Edith Cowan University