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REVISING REVISIONIST HISTORY? THE RECURRING MYTHOLOGY OF THE AUSTRALIAN FRONTIER


Reviewed by Lorenzo Veracini, Griffith University.

These are very different books: a sophisticated argument concerning the shaping of an Australian consciousness, and an acutely needed military overview of the first fifty years of British presence on the continent. Both works, however, repropose forcefully the question of the defining role of the 'frontier' in Australian history, and aim to revisit in a similar direction a theme that is strategically located at the heart of Australian debates about the foundations of the national identity. Despite their very different approach and methodology, these books epitomise an important passage in Australia's "Aboriginal history wars".\(^1\) It is interesting to discuss them together.

While for nearly three decades the analysis of the Australian frontiers has focused on race relations, *The Ice and the Inland* shifts emphatically the centre of attention towards the landscapes of the Australian outback and imagination, swinging the historiographical pendulum back to a determining 'tyranny of distance'.\(^2\) At the same time, while scaling down the racial factor in the frontier equation, Hains contributes significantly to what is becoming an Australian speciality: environmental history.\(^3\) More specifically, in *The Ice and the Inland* John Flynn's Inland Mission and Douglas Mawson's Antarctic expeditions, and their impact on Australian frontier mythologies are contextualised in the background of their iconic status.

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and metropolitan reception. The comparison is indeed a fitting one: both men were engaged in the intellectual map-making of imperial landscapes that eluded effective surveillance (although only one was especially unsettling for its racial ambiguity) and both were actively occupied in the idealisation of a 'character building' frontier - a notion that Australian nation builders as constructors of an 'imagined community' interpreted with unwavering enthusiasm.

In Hains' study, rather than a geographic line that will eventually be 'closed', the frontier becomes permanent, takes a spiral-like shape and turns out to be an "imagined liminal zone". Her works ultimately sheds light on the mental landscape of an early twentieth century Australian intellectual milieu, riddled with anxieties about racial vitality and purity, obsessed with the necessities of contrasting urban degeneracy, and deeply convinced of the interdependence of character and environment. However, a stress on 'landscape' rather than, in fact, opposed to, 'race' is not new, and the idea that it is the geographic nature of Australia that has shaped its frontiers, and its ideas about 'the frontier' (which in turn shaped its national character and historical development) is a constitutive paradigm of an Australian historiographical orthodoxy, including Russell Ward's *The Australian Legend*, and, as mentioned, Geoffrey Blainey's *Tyranny of Distance*.

Hains does recognise that racial anxieties were also at the base of Flynn's project of effective British occupation of the inland and that his scheme of an accomplished national community encompassing town and bush was deeply antithetical to Aboriginal interests, yet his eugenistic racism is often downplayed and he is even presented as sometimes culturally sensitive to Aboriginal necessities. The reproposition of a deracialised environmental frontier can be contextualised in the wider campaign of 'sanitation' of Australian history that has been developed in recent years by a wide array of conservative opinionists and scholars. *The Ice and the Inland* constitutes an innovative approach to the study of an Australian settler lifestyle consciousness, yet it may be also indicative of the durability of *terra nullius* in its many different forms, including conservationist discourse.

*The Australian Frontier Wars* finally performs for the Australian scenario what other military histories of indigenous warfare against Europeans have achieved in previous decades.

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and in other contexts. Whereas more than three decades have passed since Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* had rescued American Indian armed contestation from oblivion, almost twenty years have passed since Belich’s *The New Zealand Wars* has placed the 'Maori achievement' on the intellectual map and initiated an historiographical revolution. While the reasons for this historiographical delay may be related to the difficult character of an intermittent guerrilla resistance and to the long term legacy of the 'great Australian silence', two decades ago Henry Reynolds’ *The Other Side of the Frontier* had also postulated frontier conflict as intrinsically problematic and located it beyond the intellectual reach emanating from within the European side of the frontier.

Yet, *The Australian Frontier Wars* also defines an Aboriginal achievement. Despite their inability or unwillingness to access muskets or horses (as a result of a lack of trading opportunities with European agents or powers, and resulting from an established ‘spear tradition’ that prevented radical military innovation), Aboriginal fighters did develop a new form of warfare, characterised especially by a thorough transformation of traditional tactics, and by the adoption of evasive procedures. The Australian frontier warfare as practiced by Aboriginal resisters ultimately emerges as a new form of fighting, directed against crops and property, characterised by surprise ("surely a legitimate tactic of war"), and by superior mobility. Connor is a military historian and provides a military rationale: in his narrative it is horse mobility (and not the advent of automatic rifles post 1850s increased efficiency, as he points out, challenging previous interpretations of military confrontations with indigenous peoples) that is key to the outcome of the land wars. Yet, the main contribution of *The Australian Frontier Wars* is literally a definitive mapping of Australian frontier warfare. The maps that accompany the narrative of the different campaigns the British army had carried out against Aboriginal resisters elucidate and reify for the first time an historical reality that, despite the intellectual shifts of the last three decades, has not yet fully emerged and has not been capable yet of challenging an entrenched mythology of a 'quiet frontier'.

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After 1838 the British army ceased to be involved in frontier warfare, and the frontier became much more violent. Here Connor's narrative ends, yet his almost casual notion that the frontier wars had "swept away Aboriginal sovereignty" should be discussed attentively. It is now a widely entertained opinion that there are important aspects of this sovereignty that were not fully extinguished in 1788, 1838 or later, and that the question of Aboriginal sovereignty still needs to be fully addressed by an Australian polity. Besides, the scope of the territorial advance of the British army in the Australian interior in 1838 was geographically very limited. Connor provides the Canadian prairies as an example of a bloodless transition of sovereignty through a system of treaties that is in stark contrast to the Australian system of warfare and pacification, but does not question the extent of this pacification and does not acknowledge that in many parts of Australia the extension of effective sovereignty happened in a non-confrontational way. The Australian Frontier Wars constitutes an excellent study of the military confrontation between Aboriginal and European forces that may also expound a qualified version of terra nullius.

Although both books are constructively filling significant gaps in the historical scholarship, there is a significant danger associated with these interpretations. Perhaps involuntarily, both books put forward what could be defined as a 'counter-revisionist' argument, challenging the imagery of Australian frontiers that has been constructed by the 'new Australian history' since the 1970s. One substantially deprives the mythologies of 'frontier' of its constituting racial interface, the other insists on an orderly, relatively bloodless, and most of all, intelligible pattern of conflict. Racialism and violence are in this way downsized, and an historiography that has recognised Aboriginality as the constituent feature of an Australian consciousness, comprehensively confronted. The 'frontier' (re)emerges both as a daring struggle against an extreme landscape and/or as a determined yet clearly defined and limited contest. In both cases, the Aboriginal presence fades away, either resituated as one specific component of one of the many real and imagined landscapes that have informed the Australian metropolitan imagination, or erased once and for all by the activities of the British army. In both cases, we may witness subtle variations of the 'great Australian silence' and 'quiet frontier' themes, the basic elements of a re-emerging Australian orthodoxy, as recently

10 For an overview of the debate over casualties on the Australian frontier wars, see the proceedings of a conference on the subject organised by the National Museum of Australia. http://www.nma.gov.au/frontierconflict/
defined by Evans and Thorpe in "The Massacre of Australian History". Concentrating on the very early frontier and, symmetrically, on twentieth century idealisations of the outback (and claiming these passages as foundational moments of an Australian consciousness) may constitute a way to bypass the more demanding issues brought about by frontier atrocities and by a segregationist constituency of the Australian polity.

11 J. Connor, *The Australian Frontier Wars*, op. cit., p. 121