

Myths and Non-Myths: Frontier ‘Massacres’ in Australian History — The Woppaburra of the Keppel Islands

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the laughter and yabber of the Island blacks was not there it had gone never to return I was speaking to one of the Tourist who came from South I told her this was one of the liveliest place on the Australian Coast and was done by the natives of the Island she said the Island was lovely but too lonely I wished the natives would come again.¹

In writing of conflicts between colonists and Indigenous people on the Australian frontier, Keith Windschuttle and others² have through media attention focused much of the debate on issues of definition and numbers of people killed. In this paper I refer to the Woppaburra, who originally inhabited Ganumi Bara (the Keppel Islands) of the central Queensland coast and who were reduced as a population by about 75–80 per cent in the period 1865 to 1903. Some were shot, some poisoned, and others removed. Those left on the island (mainly women) were worked as slaves, poorly fed and clothed; on occasions punished and sexually assaulted. Most of the women contacted venereal diseases. The few survivors suffered further through indecision as a result of a clash of personalities between two white government officers, Walter Roth and Archibald Meston. This is the story of the lengthy suffering and degradation of a small Indigenous group at the hands of British colonists, rather than documentation focused on numbers and semantics. Numbers do matter historically, and they are examined here, but it is important to be aware of the human tragedy behind the numbers.

The historian Keith Windschuttle, in the journal *Quadrant* and in his recent book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (2002) has generated considerable controversy with respect to the reporting of Indigenous and European massacres in Australian history. The genesis of Windschuttle’s ideas can be found in an earlier book, *The Killing of History* (1996), although in this particular book massacres *per se* receive only passing treatment.³ Windschuttle’s first *Quadrant* contribution sets out to ‘demonstrate just how flimsy is the case that the massacre of Aborigines was a defining feature of the European settlement of Australia’.⁴ He argues that:

Historians should only accept evidence of violent deaths, Aboriginal or otherwise, where there is a minimum amount of direct evidence. This means that, at the very least, they need some reports by people who were either genuine eyewitnesses or who at least saw the bodies afterwards. Preferably, these reports should be independently corroborated by others who saw the same thing. Admissions of guilt by those concerned, provided they are recorded first-hand and are not hearsay, should also count as credible evidence.⁵

In his second *Quadrant* instalment, Windschuttle argues:

There is one good, general reason why we should expect the eventual compilation of regional studies to reproduce a very much smaller tally of violent Aboriginal deaths than the 20,000 now claimed. Ever since they were founded in 1788, the British colonies in Australia were civilised societies governed by morality and laws that forbade the killing of the innocent. The notion that the frontier was a place where white men could kill blacks with impunity ignores the powerful cultural and legal prohibitions on such action. For a start, most colonists were Christians to whom such actions were abhorrent. But even those whose consciences would not have been troubled knew it was against the law to murder human beings, Aborigines included, and the penalty was death.⁶

In his final *Quadrant* article Windschuttle argues that ‘the principal reason massacre stories have been invented and exaggerated over the past two hundred years was to justify the policy of separating Aboriginal people from the European population’, particularly by missionaries.⁷

This article challenges a number of points made by Windschuttle and argues that his approach has obscured a broader pattern of human suffering — first, that he sets the standards of proof too high. There is no denying that it would be desirable in the interests of good scholarship and historical accuracy to present evidence that could be tested in a modern court of law, but it is an unrealistic expectation. Windschuttle has rightly disclosed some poor scholarship in discussions of frontier conflict; nevertheless, in considering the nature of the frontier, some concessions to estimations must be allowed. I have worked with archival and written material from the Keppel Islands and with Woppaburra people for a period of over twenty years and find the totality of the material leads to a view that is reliable. Where this is not the case the discrepancies are noted and discussed. Second, the idea that colonists were civilised Christians who might have high moral standards sounds reasonable in principle but world history demonstrates this did not prevent killings and massacres. Finally, while massacre stories on both sides of the frontier were exaggerated for various reasons, this was not always the case. Further, attempts to define what is or what is not a ‘massacre’ or ‘genocide’ tends to distract from the complex range of suffering experienced by both Aborigines and colonists on the frontier.

This article surveys the complex history of colonial contact with the Keppel Islands, which demonstrates a long period of killing, abuse and degradation. Ironically, this level of suffering might not be truly conveyed by such terms as ‘massacre’ or ‘genocide’. In essence, while Windschuttle and others focus on numbers and semantics, this article attempts to present with as little rhetoric as possible a case that demonstrates the extensive suffering endured by one small group of Indigenous people.

The Keppel Islands

The Keppel Group of islands comprises North and South Keppel Islands and a group of smaller surrounding islands off the central Queensland coast near Rockhampton. The islands have been studied archaeologically⁸ and the history of Indigenous colonial contact and subsequent development of the islands as a tourist resort has been documented by Ganter.⁹

The Keppel Islands first became known to the outside world on Sunday 27 May 1770, when Captain James Cook named Keppel Bay and the surrounding

islands and observed people on them. Subsequently, several other coastal explorers observed people on the islands but provided no detailed descriptions of them or estimates of numbers.¹⁰ Colonial contact at this time was infrequent, and it might be inferred that impacts on the Woppaburra may have been limited. Recorded contact was either friendly or cautious, suggesting that competition for land or resources may not have been substantive. It is impossible to know what other contacts may have occurred throughout the period, but the insularity of the islands may have enabled the Woppaburra to avoid major contact with others. This could be inferred from the still-hesitant contacts with Europeans in the immediately following years. However, the 1850s marked a turning point in colonial activity on the mainland, and this was gradually to have significant repercussions for the Woppaburra.

The colonial frontier reached the Fitzroy River region in 1853, when William and Charles Archer marked out Gracemere Station southeast of the present city of Rockhampton. Growth in the area was initially slow, with Rockhampton comprising only two buildings in 1857, though outlying stations were established from 1853 onward. In July 1858, gold was discovered at Canoona, 56 kilometres from Rockhampton, and brought 16,000 men and women on to the Canoona field, although by 1859 most had gone again. To the north, Bowen and Townsville were settled in the early 1860s and from this time on, a steamer ran regularly from Rockhampton to these northern ports and back again.

Such developments brought the Indigenous groups of the Fitzroy River region into rapid contact with the colonists. The extent to which these impacted on the Woppaburra is, however, largely unknown. They may have been protected by their island location and may themselves have used this to avoid contact.¹¹ Although it is unclear what period of time he was referring to, a Woppaburra by the name of 'Jim' was to recall that they 'had to keep someone on watch all the time' and used to hide 'in the caves on the weather side of the islands until the white men left'.¹² Any protection offered by their island location, however, was soon lost: on the adjacent mainland Yeppoon was established in 1865 and Emu Park in 1867.

The first recorded visit to the Keppel Islands occurred in 1865 by a group from the mainland that consisted of:

Mr R. Ross, Mr R. Spence, Dr. Callaghan, Lieutenant Compigne of the Native Police, two black trackers and four aborigines, named Jack, Dundally, Tom and Paddle-nosed Peter. The party were all armed ... No one had ever been to the islands [North Keppel] before ... the party landed at the southern end. No blacks were seen anywhere, and the party began to stroll about the island. At length, they reached the northern end. In peering about among the rocks, a little cave was discovered, in which were huddled a number of naked black gins. Away out on the rocks were seen some blackfellows, who had evidently gone out on the rocks to avoid the approaching whites. When the gins saw they were discovered they raised an alarm, and bolted out of the cave, running off towards the sea.¹³

One of the women was injured when she fell from the rocks and one of the men swam to her aid:

The troopers wanted to shoot them both, but, of course, they were not permitted to do so. The pluck in the incident was in the blackfellow coming back to what he must have thought was almost certain death, for the troopers usually fired at the wild blacks on sight.¹⁴



Map of the Keppel Islands drawn by Walter Roth 1898.

Source: W E Roth, *The Aborigines of the Rockhampton and Surrounding Coast Districts. A Report to the Commissioner of Police, Queensland*, Mitchell Library CY Reel 208, Uncat ML, MSS, 216, 1898, p 9–10.

It appears, however, that both Bird and his informant, Dr Callaghan, may have been providing a ‘diplomatic’ account of these events, since R McClelland was later to note:

I was over on North Keppel some five years ago, and the blacks showed me a line of bones over a hundred yards long, and told me they belonged to a tribe of blacks who were shot by a boarding party of whites many years before ... [and] an old black named ‘Jamie’ told me all about the brutality of the shooting. He mentioned about an old gin who was trying to escape carrying a cripple on her back, and how both were mercilessly shot down.¹⁵

Roth also noted that on North Keppel there was:

still to be seen the actual camping ground where at least 7 or 8 males were shot down one night in cold blood, the father of one of the surviving gins (who described to me the scene that took place) being butchered while his little girl was clinging round his neck.¹⁶

At least one of the skulls from the Keppel Islands, at the time held at the Queensland Museum (No 67), contained entry and exit holes possibly caused by a low-velocity bullet.¹⁷ The descriptions and observations outlined above may not satisfy Windschuttle’s strict criteria of proof. Nevertheless, there seems good reason to believe colonists from the mainland shot some people on North Keppel at the time of the first visit. Dr Callaghan had reason to mislead Bird, but there is no apparent reason why McClelland or Roth would have made up their observations. The bullet-hole in the skull from North Keppel suggests that at least one person met a violent death. The total killed on this occasion may never be known, but the general reliability of Roth’s work would suggest that seven or eight males were shot.

In August 1866, Robert Ross obtained a lease over South Keppel Island in partnership with C E Beddome and Sir Arthur Palmer, and North Keppel Island was granted to J H Young.¹⁸ In April 1867, Robert Ross visited South Keppel Island with a view to establishing a cattle station and for the first time offers a glimpse of the Woppaburra:

A diminutive race of blacks inhabit the island. They subsist chiefly on fish and roots; they are quite wild, and their ‘yabbering’ is altogether unintelligible to the blacks of the mainland. They are as active as monkeys, and will probably, on further acquaintance, prove quite as mischievous.¹⁹

A short time later the *Rockhampton Bulletin* reported:

There are, on the Island about sixty blacks, who live amongst the rocks and in small caves; there is no game, and they subsist entirely of fish, roots and grass; their bodies are covered with a sort of downy hair, and their head ‘wool’ is of a reddish brown. The males are fine large fat shiny fellows, whose mode of living seems to agree with them, while the gins and children are poor and miserable, both in stature and appearance. They do not understand the language of tribes on the opposite mainland and have neither canoes or weapons in their possession.²⁰

Colonial contact with the Keppel Islands developed on a more systematic basis from the early 1870s, though the evidence is piecemeal. For example, an Easter excursion by steamer to Emu Park and the Keppel Islands resulted in ‘large numbers’ turning up for the trip.²¹ At Christmas 1871, R L Dibdin chartered the

Mary, which took forty-five people to the Keppels.²² Emu Park, which had been established in 1867, developed as a popular seaside resort for the residents of Rockhampton who undertook organised fishing trips to the Keppels.²³

In sum, North Keppel Island was visited in 1865 by a group from the mainland that included Robert Ross, and contact was made with the inhabitants of the island. A number (possibly seven or eight) of North Keppel Islanders may have been shot at this time. Newspaper reports of this visit indicate that at the time there were sixty people with ‘reddish-brown hair’ on the island who apparently did not understand the language of mainland Indigenous peoples, nor did they have canoes or weapons. What happened after the initial contact of 1867 is not well documented, but it is evident that by the 1870s Europeans from the mainland were visiting the Keppel Islands on a regular basis in organised tours and smaller fishing groups. The nature and impact of these contacts during the 1870s and 1880s is not clear, and it is not until 1883 that a retrospective view of what happened on the Keppels after 1865–67 is obtained.

The Keppel Islands 1883–1897 — A retrospective account

From 1883 onward, colonial reports and observations begin to reveal more details about the Woppaburra and impacts on their lifestyles, culture and survival. Most of this information is secondhand and debated twenty years after the events, so would not satisfy Windschuttle’s criteria of reliability. However, consistency between many of the observations would tend to support a more general understanding of these events.

Robert Ross developed South Keppel Island as a sheep station, although exactly when this occurred is unclear. Robert Lyons acquired the lease in October 1883, though the run was already in operation and stocked with sheep by Robert Ross.²⁴ W T Wyndham claimed to have been the first white man to reside permanently on the Keppel Islands, in 1883 or 1884.²⁵ Wyndham informed Roth that at the time of his residence there were fifty-four Aborigines on Great Keppel Island, one group in the north and one in the south, who spoke different dialects.²⁶

At this time Robert Ross had three to four thousand sheep on the island,²⁷ and on 27 October 1883 the *Queensland Figaro* reported that a well-known Rockhampton man had kidnapped seven Aborigines from Keppel Island because they were interfering with his sheep.²⁸ The paper alleged they were taken to Yeppoon, while the women and children were left behind on the island. It was also claimed that those brought across were without weapons to hunt and that the Yeppoon blacks were hostile to them. Wyndham, who prided himself on his relationships with the Woppaburra, appears to have left the island at this point, providing the *Figaro* with its story.

In response to the claims by the *Figaro*, the lessee of Keppel Island, Robert Lyons of Rockhampton, replied in a letter to the *Observer* (which was then cited by the *Figaro*) that thirty Keppel Islanders had been landed on the mainland, while only two were left behind on the island:

They frequently requested to be taken to the mainland, and on the previous departure of the cutter they actually rushed on board to get away from the island, but they were refused a passage. The next trip, seven men, eleven women, and twelve children were removed at their request from the island, and were supplied

with food and rations on landing by Mr. Ross, of Taranga, where they were kept for a few days, and on the 19th September they were removed, at their own desire, to the north of Water Park Creek, where there is a reserve for blacks, and where they can obtain a good supply of fish. Messrs. Lyons and Ross left them on the 20th October with a guide named Charles Barwell, a native of the creek, who speaks the same language, and who showed them the land they had to occupy. They went away supplied with fishing lines and food, although they did not actually want either, there being plenty of fish, kangaroo, and opossums. On Keppel Island they could not catch fish except in calm weather, and there were no kangaroos, opossums and wallabies there. Only two gins were left on the island. The wife of Pero, a native of the mainland, was acting as a shepherd, and the gins wished to stay there. The blacks on the mainland are not hostile to the Keppel Island blacks, but they speak the same language and are of the same tribe.²⁹

The editor of the *Figaro* found the various figures and events in the letter ‘inexplicable’ and sought further clarification. George Mosman, who had accompanied the boat that brought the Islanders across, insisted that no coercion had been used and added that ‘they brought nets for fishing and were presented by Mr R Ross with several good fishing lines etc’.³⁰

On 24 November 1883 a Yeppoon correspondent of the *Rockhampton Bulletin* indicated that:

Some years ago these blacks by some means got on to South Keppel Island from the main land, and have been living there ever since. However, they reduced the sheep on the island by more than 100 head so that the owners of the sheep asked them to go on the cutter under the pretext of ‘catch ’em plenty fish’.

They were landed at Water Park Point, about ten miles south of Cape Manifold, but were discontented and returned to Yeppoon.³¹

On 4 December the *Rockhampton Bulletin* reported:

we are told by a gentleman, recently returned from Yeppoon that the Aboriginals brought over from Great Keppel Island some time ago by Mr Robert Ross are dying off very rapidly. On Thursday last his wife was strolling the beach, in the direction of Ross’ Creek, and with the intention of finding a shady place to picnic went up the creek a little. To her surprise, at the edge of the scrub she came on the body of a black fellow and a little further on, half the carcass of a gin. She passed on, thinking she had passed out of the presence of the dead, but this proved not to be the case, as on coming to the blacks camp there lay the bodies of two piccaninnies. The four who were found dead were seen about the beginning of the week, camping where the piccaninnies were found. Our informant says one of the residents of Yeppoon avers three gins and one black fellow of the Keppel Island lot died the previous week, on account of their being unable to eat the food given them. We state these facts without note or comment, and leave the public to form their own conclusion upon them.³²

The *Figaro* noted that five of the Woppaburra brought to the mainland had died, and reported on a claim that one of the men had swum back to the island from Emu Park,³³ a feat of which the newspaper was sceptical. On 22 December 1883, the *Figaro* reported on the findings of ‘a searching investigation’ by the *Daily News Argus* on the ‘cause of the recent (and present) great mortality amongst the blacks taken from Keppel Island to Yeppoon’ and came to the conclusion that the major cause was ““coast disease” — a severe cold and a continuous discharge of mucous

matter from the nose'. It further claimed that the numerous deaths could in no way be attributed to insufficient or strange food, and that prior to the recent epidemic the deaths were due to opium and grog.³⁴ While these factors probably played a role, there can be no doubt that more sinister factors were also involved. Roth, on the basis of information supplied to him by Wyndham and based on his own first hand observations noted:

Other males were deported and decoyed, by false promises of food etc, to the mainland: some of them (among them 'Yoolowa') succeeded in swimming back the distance of between 6&7 miles, while others were shark-eaten. But this was not all: for three weeks after the last occurrence, both whites and mainland blacks came over, hunted up as many women and children as they could find, and took them away too. Human lives were sacrificed for sheep!³⁵

Following the events of 1883, Ross employed the remaining Woppaburra, who were forced to live a parasitic existence around the homestead in clearly unpleasant circumstances. A E Hardaker of Rockhampton, who visited the islands in 1886, noted that on North Keppel a white man was in charge, along with one Woppaburra man and nine or ten women who assisted in shepherding and shearing. On South Keppel Island, a German shepherd was in charge of one Woppaburra man and five or six women who wore 'a rough sack with holes cut for the arms'. Hardaker and his party had a meal with the shepherd, and:

After satisfying our wants in this respect, the egg-shells and scraps of bread were thrown to the blacks, who eagerly crunched up and swallowed egg-shells and crusts of bread like so many animals.³⁶

Robert Ross died in 1893, and the Ross family withdrew from sheep farming in 1897 when Colin Ross transferred all Keppel Island holdings to his stock-keeper James Lucas.³⁷ Lucas removed the remaining North Keppel Islanders to South Keppel, where they lived and worked near the homestead. Lucas's treatment of the Woppaburra appears to have been no more sympathetic than that of Robert Ross. Olivier (Ollie) Morris, the son of an Emu Park fisherman, once visited the island during school holidays and recalled:

There I saw the native men and women harnessed to the plough, and an ex bullock driver wielding a stock whip to induce them to greater effort. When I told my father of it, he could not believe it, but later went over with two witnesses and they had the practice exposed.³⁸

Meston also later noted that Lucas 'worked them like slaves, gave them no clothes, the poorest of food and frequently none at all'.³⁹ Alan Morris, a nephew of Ollie Morris, recalled that when the Woppaburra refused to work, they were chained up in a tidal cave to teach them a lesson. That this did occur may be evident in the form of a piece of rusting iron embedded in a coastal shelter at the promontory at Little Svendsen's Beach on South Keppel.⁴⁰

Records of the events that occurred on the Keppel Islands from 1867 onward are largely retrospective and sometimes contradictory. Nevertheless, some general themes emerge. As was the case in previous years, very little is learned about the Woppaburra as people. The *Figaro* had noted there was hostility between the Woppaburra and mainland Indigenous groups, who apparently did not speak the same language. Wyndham's discussion on this matter is equivocal, but he does

suggest some differences, while Lyons claimed to the contrary that there were no differences. It is apparent that many Woppaburra were removed from the Islands (mainly males) during this period, and some may have tried to swim back to the Islands, while others died from starvation or may have been poisoned on the mainland.

There are other more general stories concerning the fate of the Woppaburra and the Aborigines around Yeppoon and Emu Park. One account claims that a number of them were driven into the sea near Securus and that the survivors swam to Corroboree Island.⁴¹ Older residents of Yeppoon and Emu Park tell stories of Aborigines being shot and poisoned both on the islands and the mainland.⁴² Morris also claims that Japanese fishing fleets kidnapped Woppaburra women when they visited the islands during the mid-1880s to scrape and repair their boats at Leekes Beach.⁴³ In the Fitzroy Region generally, McDonald gathered enough evidence to suggest a period of 'frontier warfare' in the area.⁴⁴ These accounts are consistent on a number issues, but there are also a number of contradictions, particularly in respect to the numbers of Woppaburra and the extent of their differences from mainland people.

A more systematic and analytical attempt to determine what became of the Woppaburra during these years has been made by Vivian Voss, who notes that the reason Robert Ross had the Woppaburra shipped across to Taranganba was to provide cheap labour for a proposed coffee and sugar plantation. A number of the Woppaburra fled with some supplies and were followed by Ross and the Native Troopers to Voss Point, where some were shot, while others dived off the point and swam to South Keppel Island. This event was apparently remembered by local Indigenous people, who used to avoid the Point. All but two of the men who attempted to swim to the islands were supposedly drowned or taken by sharks. Voss indicates that old legends put the number of Woppaburra involved in this event at sixty;⁴⁵ later accounts indicate the number may have been thirty-six and that only one man by the name of Lowoo may have been successful in swimming back to South Keppel.⁴⁶ Voss attempted to locate official references to the events that occurred on the Keppel Islands, but could find none in either government records or in newspaper files. A subsequent investigation undertaken by me resulted in the location of a government file and mentions of the Keppel Islands in parliamentary proceedings, which have enabled me to expand on the evidence presented by Voss.⁴⁷

The Keppel Islanders 1897–1902: Removal and displacement

In 1897 Archibald Meston was appointed special commissioner of police to review Queensland's policy toward Aborigines. His report proposed the abolition of the Native Police, the segregation of Aboriginal people on self-supporting reserves and the control of contact between Aborigines and Europeans. These and other recommendations became embodied in the 1897 *Aboriginal Protection Act*. The Native Police were disbanded and two protectors of Aborigines were appointed, Walter Roth as chief and northern protector, and Archibald Meston as southern protector. The relationship between Roth and Meston was never amicable, and this was played out on the Keppel Islands between 1897 and 1902,

where the lives of the Woppaburra became caught up in the crossfire of policy differences between Roth and Meston.

The issue of what happened to the Woppaburra was raised in 1897 in the Queensland Parliament when Callan, MLA Fitzroy, stated:

A case occurred seventeen or eighteen years ago which was a disgrace to the colony. Two gentlemen took up the Keppel Islands and stocked them with sheep. The blacks there, who were a different race from those on the coast, got some mutton at the head station and took to killing the sheep. The result was that they were enticed to a boat and taken to the mainland where the great majority of them died.⁴⁸

Dawson, MLA Charters Towers, asked if they had all been poisoned, but Callan indicated he could not comment on that matter, but did note that ‘one man was said to have swum back to the island, a distance of fourteen or fifteen miles’.⁴⁹

The fate of the Woppaburra was again raised in parliament in 1902. In that year, Dunsford, MLA Charters Towers, noted there had been a number of complaints against the northern protector, Roth, while there were few against the southern protector, Meston, and he was inclined to think therefore, that:

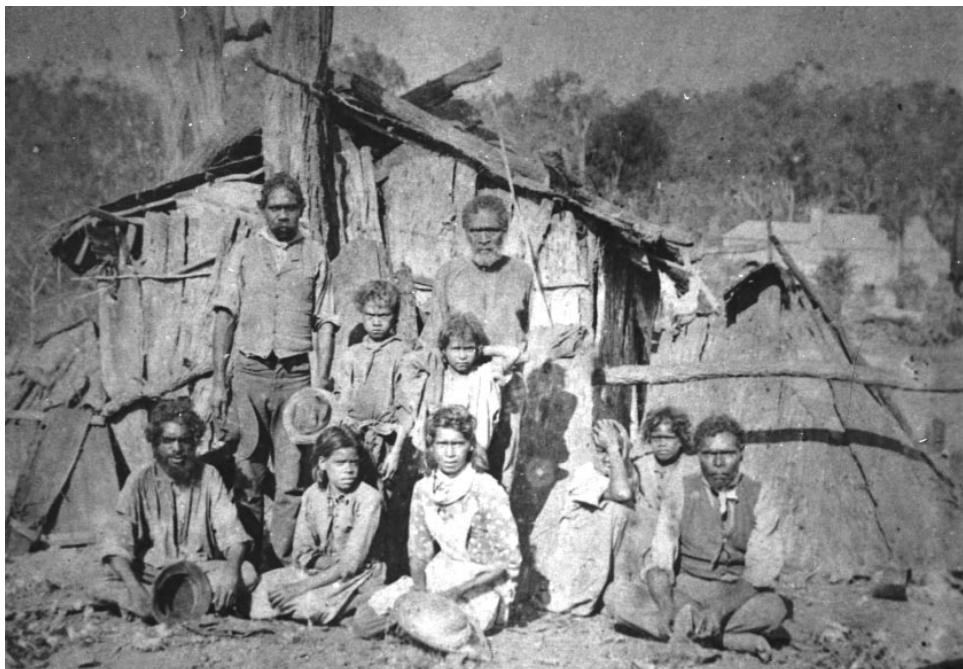
Dr Roth, in pursuit of his ethnological researches, sometimes did things that were very unwise, bearing in mind his administrative capacity, and which, perhaps, brought him into conflict with the aborigines themselves. Some years ago there were seventy or eighty aborigines residing on Keppel Island, and the settler who lived there got a permit to employ them. In 1898 Dr Roth visited the island, and ... Dr Roth procured some blackfellows' skulls and some bones. He was given to understand that hurt the feelings of the aborigines, who objected to the desecration of their graves.⁵⁰

Dunsford indicated that Roth had ‘vouched for the lessee of Keppel Island’ but that:

He supposed the protector did not have a proper opportunity of seeing the condition of the aborigines. In the four following years one-half of those aborigines died through being permitted to remain under the protection of the individual. Fortunately the Southern Protector came along, and seeing the wretched condition of these people, he removed two women from the island and Dr. Roth complained of their removal. Later on the Southern Protector removed the remainder of the aborigines, but in the meantime six women and one man had died through a disease brought about through their civilisation.⁵¹

The home secretary enquired of Dunsford whether the Aboriginals had been improperly removed, to which Dunsford replied they had not and they would all soon have been dead if they had not been removed. Dunsford then explained that:

Dr. Roth visited Keppel Island in 1898, it being then within his jurisdiction ... Dr. Roth and Mrs. Roth stayed on the island at the time and saw the aborigines, and actually took a photograph of them; and from that photograph it was unquestionable that the aborigines were very well cared for. But what occurred four years ago and what existed the other day were very different things, and the difference was to be accounted for by certain changes in the establishment of that settlement. He could not excuse the man for the state in which the aborigines were found by Mr. Meston, for there was no doubt that they were diseased to a very great extent, for which a white man was unquestionably responsible.⁵²



A group of Woppaburra near the Lucas Homestead. Probably taken by Walter Roth in 1898. The teenage girl in the centre is Konomie, immediately behind her is Fred (Mogga), and behind him Yoolowa. Konomie Richards died in Acacia Ridge, Brisbane in 1973 aged ninety years. Konomie's daughter Ethel Richards (the most senior elder) still lives in Brisbane. Konomie Richards has many other descendants throughout Queensland.

J Hamilton, MLA Gympie, in reply to Dunsford, was even less conciliatory noting that:

Mr Meston said he was not surprised at Dr. Roth making a special effort on behalf of a man to whom he was indebted for many favours ... he also added that if Dr. Roth dealt less in photographing naked aborigines he would be held in greater respect by them, as both men and women resented it in a decided manner.⁵³

Walter Roth did in fact make two visits to the Keppel Islands in 1898, and complied a detailed ethnography of the Woppaburra. Roth found on the island:

no less than 19 Aboriginals. Of these, there were 16 full-blooded adults, 2 half-caste children, and a full-blood 6-month old (October '98) piccaninny girl: among the adults, only three are males, the overwhelming preponderance of women being easily explicable when the character of some, especially one, of the previous European visitors to the island is borne in mind.⁵⁴

Roth was referring to local fishermen and presumably also to Robert Ross, but he was himself satisfied with the present condition of the Woppaburra in that they 'thrived well', and therefore he saw no need for any official intervention.

However, Meston became aware of the condition of the Woppaburra from the local police and Emu Park residents, when he was acting as special commissioner of police.⁵⁵ Meston's interest in the Woppaburra, together with local concern, was

Aboriginal Male Adults	Aboriginal Female Adults	Pure-blooded Female Children and ages	Pure-blooded Male Children	Half-caste Male Children and ages	Half-caste Female Children and ages
Ulоро Paddy	Old Woman Mary Ann Nellie Annie Lillie Oyster Maggie Kitty Judy	May (2yr 9mths)	Nil	Abbot (12yr) Fred (8yr)	Canoma (12yr) Lulo (8yr) Jessie Anne (8yr) Rosie (1 yr)

Report By Acting Sergeant Casey on the Number of Keppel Islanders, 7 February 1900
 (NB: Kitty and Judy were in the Lock Hospital).⁵⁷

sufficient in 1900 for Inspector A Meldrum to inform the Home Office that he would be sending Acting Sergeant Casey to the Keppel Islands as soon as possible to report on the number and condition of the Woppaburra and to determine ‘if they are kindly treated by Mr Lucas’.⁵⁶ Casey’s report indicates that he visited South Keppel Island on 4 February 1900 and provided the above details on the Woppaburra.⁵⁷

On 15 February 1900 Meston wrote to the home secretary indicating that the women on Keppel Island had no men residing with them and had therefore become the victims of unscrupulous whites, from whom they were contracting diseases and breeding half-caste children. He therefore sought approval to remove them from Keppel Island to Fraser Island. The home secretary, in an annotation on the letter, instructed Meston to carry out further investigation on the islands before taking any action.⁵⁸

Meston subsequently wrote to the home secretary on 27 March 1900, indicating that he had removed two women, one with a half-caste child aged about six months old and another with a half-caste girl about seven years old, from the Keppels to Fraser Island. He reported that on his arrival on the island there had been eight women, two men, one full-blood child and several half-caste girls in residence; and that the two men were a father and son, aged fifty-six and twenty-two years old. He indicated that the group lived at the Lucas homestead and did all the work on the station, and were kindly treated because they provided cheap labor. He further indicated that Lucas and his daughter departed the island on occasions, leaving the Islanders unprotected and at the mercy of boating parties from the mainland, a situation that, he noted, had resulted in the spread of venereal disease among the women and in the high incidence of half-caste children.⁵⁹ In response, the home secretary noted that the Woppaburra should all be removed from the Island.⁶⁰

For reasons unknown, however, no further action was taken until Meston again (1902) reported the poor condition of the Woppaburra and again sought permission to remove them. He reported that from an original population of about two hundred Woppaburra, their numbers had been reduced to two men, seven women, and three children. He claimed they had been worked like slaves by

Lucas, and reported that he had removed five single women following indignant complaints from private citizens. Meston indicated that he had advised Lucas by letter of his intention to remove people from the island, but alleged that Lucas frightened them off and left the island with his son. Meston now sought permission to remove all the Woppaburra, suggesting this would end what ‘has long been a public scandal’.⁶¹

On the day that Meston wrote his report, Lucas telegraphed the home secretary’s office questioning Meston’s intentions to remove the Woppaburra, and asked that the home secretary contact Roth, who could vouch for his treatment of the Islanders.⁶² Roth responded in Lucas’s favour on 24 July 1902, indicating that he had known Lucas for six years, and had paid him three visits (during 1897).⁶³ Roth informed the home secretary that Lucas came to the island in 1893, following the departure of Wyndham, who had settled there in 1884, at which time there were fifty-four Keppel Islanders. Roth indicated that neither Lucas nor Wyndham (who was acting for Ross ‘but refusing to share in his cruelties to the islanders, left his service’) could be blamed for the condition of the Woppaburra. Roth enclosed some photos taken in 1897 and 1898, given to him by one Mr Cowie, to prove how well fed and clothed the Woppaburra were, and attributed their present condition to the introduction of venereal disease by fishermen, despite Lucas’s attempts to prevent it. He requested that the remaining Woppaburra not be removed from the Island.⁶⁴

Meston responded to Roth’s report on 26 August 1902, suggesting that Roth had been misled by Lucas, and made an ‘emphatic denial of all Roth’s claims on behalf of Lucas’.⁶⁵ The fate of the Woppaburra had thus become a dispute between the policies and personalities of Roth and Meston, and the under-secretary had clearly become aware of this when he noted that both had gone ‘further than was needed’.⁶⁶

On 27 August 1902, Meston telegraphed the home secretary indicating that all remaining Woppaburra were now camped at Emu Park, awaiting blankets and rations.⁶⁷ On 11 September he sent a report to the home secretary listing the individuals removed (see table overleaf). Three of the women with venereal disease were sent to the Lock Hospital in Rockhampton, and the remaining Aborigines to Durrundur and Fraser Island.⁶⁸ Meston concluded that ‘Considering the whole history and treatment of these Keppel Aboriginals by Lucas and his family I can remember nothing more cruel or disgraceful in the annals of Queensland’. He also suggested that the Woppaburra were happy to leave the island.⁶⁹ However the recollections of others paint a different picture:

The next day [they were] put on the train. Archie Meston the Aboriginal Protector, told them [as] the train was leaving to say goodbye to their home. They waved and cried and screamed never to see their home land again ...⁷⁰

Meston indicated there had been considerable public outcry over the events that had unfolded on the Keppels from 1865 to 1902 and that a good deal of sympathy had been expressed towards the Woppaburra.⁷¹ This was reflected in a letter from R McClelland when he suggested:

I think the least the present generation can do is to make some amends for the sins of the past and proclaim a fishing reserve on North Keppel Island for use of the surviving Keppel Islanders.⁷²

Known as	Woppaburra name	Age
Paddy	Woo-oon-yan full blood	21 years
Ulawa	Weerobilling (father of Paddy)	65 years
Annar-mannam	(Mother of Paddy)	65 years
Kitty	Ooroong-oorann full -blood	24 years
Mary Ann	Yamal-Minyan full -blood	25 years
Nelly	Ooroong-oorann No 2 full -blood	28 years
Judy	Gac-Kiyar full -blood	40 years
Annie	Oo-cooran full -blood	30 years
Sally		27 years
Conomie	Boombilwan half -caste girl	17 years
Rowley	Bonee manamm half -caste girl	10 years
Albert	Mumkwarran half -caste boy	14 years
Fred	Okyabinnie half -caste boy	8 years
	Half-caste girl	9 years
	Half-caste boy	2 ½ years
	Half-caste baby girl	4 months

Keppel Islanders removed from South Keppel Island in 1902.⁶⁸

McClelland's idea for a reserve on Keppel Island almost became a reality. In January, Home Secretary J F G Foxton and Meston inspected Port Clinton and the Keppel Islands to choose a site for a reserve in the central division. Foxton favored Great Keppel Island; however, several delegations in the area objected on the grounds that it was a picnic ground for visitors from Emu Park. With some foresight they predicted that:

In the future the number who availed themselves of the facilities supplied by South Keppel Island would be much larger than it was at present or had at any previous time.⁷³

Meanwhile, professional and recreational fishing excursions to the islands continued to exact a toll on the Woppaburra, particularly the women.⁷⁴

By 1902 all remaining Woppaburra had been removed from the islands, and their descendants were not to return until 1984. The history of the Keppel Islands from 1902 to the present is not of concern here and is discussed fully elsewhere.⁷⁵ The history of the Woppaburra after 1902 is not investigated further but would be a significant study, hopefully to be undertaken by the Woppaburra themselves, with some start already made.⁷⁶ In 1978, prior to undertaking my first archaeological survey on the Keppel Islands, I made a number of attempts to locate descendants of the Woppaburra. These were unsuccessful,⁷⁷ but after the initial surveys and some news media coverage, I was contacted by a number of Woppaburra descendants. This work also generated contact among Woppaburra themselves, and in June 1984, forty Woppaburra held a reunion on Great Keppel Island. At that meeting they also indicated their intention to trace in detail the facts surrounding the removal of the Woppaburra, and to further locate descendants.⁷⁸

None of the early coastal explorers estimated the population of the Keppel Islands. Post-contact, and therefore probably biased, population estimates are

more common, and fall into two general orders of magnitude. The first group of estimates suggest a population of around sixty to eighty people, as in the *Rockhampton Bulletin's* account in 1867 of sixty people on South Keppel Island. This is consistent with Wyndham's estimate of fifty-four persons when he arrived on South Keppel Island in 1883 or 1884.⁷⁹ In 1902, Dunsford claimed that seventy or eighty people resided on Keppel Island, although it is unclear if he was referring to both islands.

The second group of estimates is considerably higher. A letter to the *Rockhampton Bulletin* in 1968 claims there were two hundred people on North Keppel and two or three hundred on South Keppel,⁸⁰ figures quoted in another undated letter⁸¹ and apparently derived from a letter from Meston to the *Rockhampton Morning Bulletin* in 1923.⁸² Meston's claim of up to five hundred people on the islands is untenable at the high density of around one person per four hectares. Meston does not indicate where he obtained his figures but it is apparent that — whatever the source — it would have been obtained second- or third-hand, since he did not visit the islands in person until the early 1900s. It is most probable that Meston deliberately exaggerated the population of the islands; he was extremely critical of the poor way in which the Woppaburra had been treated and to a large extent blamed the policies of Walter Roth for these incidents.

A population of about sixty would seem more reasonable. However, this figure too is problematic since it seems to refer only to South Keppel Island. Dunsford's estimate of seventy to eighty people would seem reasonable if it applied to both North and South Keppel Islands (though this is not stated); however, his estimate was not made until 1902, when the Woppaburra would already have suffered the impact of colonial contact for some time. Nevertheless, a population of sixty people on South Keppel and twenty-five on North Keppel would not be an unrealistic estimate. These figures would give a density of about one person per twenty-six hectares for the Keppels, which compares favourably with population densities on other islands in the Great Barrier Province and elsewhere.⁸³ Support for an initial Keppel Island population of about sixty to eighty-five people can also be drawn from letters and correspondence indicating what became of the Woppaburra during the period 1867 to 1902.

In 1867 there is a credible claim that there were sixty people on South Keppel Island and in 1883–84 Wyndham claimed there were fifty-four people on the island. Some people may have been shot on North Keppel Island in 1865 (probably seven or eight males). In 1883 it was claimed that 7, 30 or 36 people (different sources) were removed from the islands, thus leaving 47 or 24 or 18. Sergeant Casey visited South Keppel on 4 February 1900 and reported that seventeen men, women and children survived on the island, and Meston confirmed this in the same year. If we accept that thirty-six people were removed in 1883, then only one person is unaccounted for from the 1867 figure for South Keppel Island. However, this does not take into account a possible twenty-five people on North Keppel Island.

Conclusion

Keith Windschuttle might wish to discount much of what is presented in this paper because it does not meet the strict criteria of evidence set by him. He might debate what relevance the Keppel Islands has to Tasmania, the focus of his earlier book.

He may also wish to argue the semantics of whether or not some Woppaburra were ‘massacred’. These and other issues are not the focus of this paper. What is suggested is that there is a high probability that seven or eight males were shot on North Keppel Island in 1865, and in 1883, a number of Woppaburra were forcibly taken from the islands, leaving mainly women and children behind. Many of those taken to the mainland died from starvation or were poisoned. Those left on the island were worked as ‘slaves’ by Ross and subsequently by Lucas. They were poorly fed and clothed, harnessed to ploughs and chained up in a tidal cave for punishment. They were sexually abused by Lucas and others from the mainland, and a number contacted venereal disease. Toward the end of their time on the islands their suffering was prolonged by a personality/policy clash between Meston and Roth. Finally, they were forcibly removed from the islands.

From a population of between sixty and eighty in 1865 the Woppaburra were reduced to a population of seventeen, mainly women and children (many of them sick) by 1900. The story told here then is not concerned with semantics of the word ‘massacre’ or quibbles about how many people died, though it must be noted that between 1865 and 1902 the population of the Keppel Islands suffered a substantial reduction of 75 to 80 per cent. Events on the Keppels might also serve to remind those historians in Windschuttle’s sights that even terms like ‘massacre’ or ‘genocide’ when they reach the level of clichés serve little purpose. The Woppaburra on the Keppels were killed and suffered a host of human indignities over a period of forty years on their country. They were then removed from this country to other strange places where they undoubtedly suffered further indignities. The story I have tried to present here therefore is of one of a long period of degradation and suffering imposed by Europeans, with or without malice, on a small island population. It is not a unique story; similar stories could be told of other island and mainland populations on the Queensland coast. It may serve to tell these stories as individual narratives, since they certainly highlight a level of suffering not disclosed by debates about numbers or words. Another story yet to be told by the Woppaburra themselves is one of the enormous courage, decency and resilience of the descendants of those taken from the islands in 1903.

Windschuttle has a right to take historians and others to task for errors in research and polemical use of data. Windschuttle himself, however, must be taken to task, along with others, for reducing the debate to questions of numbers and semantics and thus hiding, both now and in the past, the enormous and wide-ranging suffering of the people behind the numbers.

Myths and Non-Myths: Frontier ‘Massacres’ in Australian History — The Woppaburra of the Keppel Islands

Michael Rowland

I continue to be indebted in many ways to the descendants of the Woppaburra people of the Keppel Islands. I am particularly grateful to Chris Doherty, her mother Mrs Susie Hansen (Elder) and Bob Muir, who have encouraged me to write and talk about Ganumi Bara (the Keppel Islands) and the Woppaburra. Chris, Susie and Bob are descendants of the last seventeen Woppaburra people removed in 1902. There are over three hundred descendants throughout Australia. I dedicate this paper to Chris, Susie and Bob and to a remarkable lady — Ethel Richards (Senior Elder) — now in her ninth decade, who has risen above the lack of humanity so often portrayed in this paper.

The above descendants and Elders have given their approval for their stories to be told. They recognise their stories of human suffering are similar to many other Indigenous groups. They argue that these stories must be told so that all Australians have an understanding and knowledge of the pain suffered and which continues to be suffered by Indigenous people.

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