A Nation Founded on Genocide?

Critical Discussion of Tony Barta's Claim in Australian History

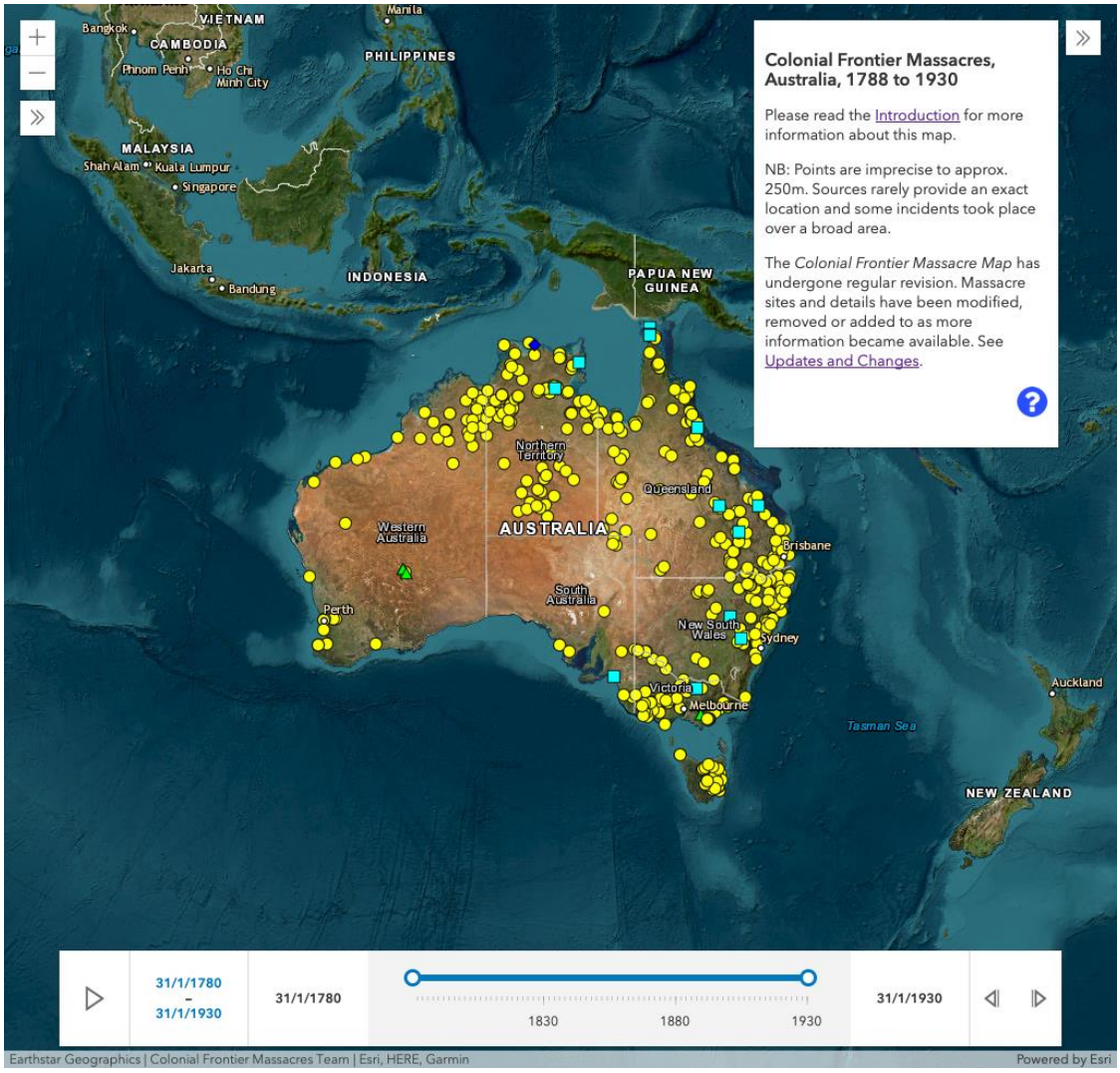

Figure 1*. Colonial Frontier Massacres, Australia, 1788 to 1930*

https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php

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Australian historian Barta has argued that Australia can be described as "a nation founded on genocide." His formulation challenges celebratory settler narratives and directs attention to the structural relationship between colonisation and Indigenous dispossession. What in question here is not merely whether specific massacres

occurred, but whether the foundation of the Australian nation is inseparable from the destruction of Aboriginal societies. This essay argues that the genocidal foundation of the Australian nation is not a rhetorical claim but a demonstrable historical structure, evident across frontier violence, legal regimes, and assimilation policies. It argues that despite semantic debates over the term, the structural logic of settler colonialism, characterised by a pervasive logic of elimination, means Australia was indeed founded on genocide. The problem, as Curthoys and Docker note, is that in colonies where land was the primary objective, the survival of Indigenous people was incompatible with the ownership and expansion of settlement.[1] The process of dispossession, combined with massacres, disease, and the destruction of cultural systems, cumulatively produced genocidal outcomes. These occurred even in the absence of centrally planned annihilation. As debates over genocide in settler societies highlight the limitations of legalistic definitions, this intends therefore, to be an historiographical evaluation rather than a legalistic inquiry. While the legal definition of genocide rests on provable intent, historians of settler colonial contexts increasingly foreground a structural conception of genocide, one in which elimination is embedded in the machinery of settlement rather than explicit state policy.

The term “genocide” itself remains contested. The United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) defines it as acts intended to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Critics use this narrow requirement of provable intent to dispute the term's application to Australia. However, as many scholars emphasise, settler colonial

[1] Ann Curthoys and John Docker, ‘Introduction – Genocide: Definitions, Questions, Settler-Colonies’, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 25, 2001, pp. 13-14.

violence rarely fits the model of centralised extermination. Instead, it is characterised by dispersed killings, forced removals, starvation, and cultural destruction.[2] Historian Dirk Moses has been central in reframing Australian history within global genocide studies. He argues that genocide should be understood not solely as state-orchestrated extermination but as a "structure of elimination".[3] In this view, frontier killings, child removal, and assimilation policies were not isolated aberrations but components of a broader genocidal logic. Moses emphasises that recognising these processes as genocide is vital for confronting the moral foundations of the Australian state. Comparative scholarship strengthens this case. Adhikari, in his study of settler frontiers in southern Africa, North America, and Australia, demonstrates that genocidal violence commonly occurred when mobile hunter-gatherer groups clashed with commercial stock farmers.[4] For instance, he describes the California genocide by

> "Volunteer companies of Indian hunters of California such as the Eel River Rangers that operated in Mendocino County, northern California. Conflict on pastoral frontiers in many instances radicalised to the extent that settler violence became indiscriminate, and virtually every Indigene a potential victim irrespective of age or gender." [5]

In each case he refers to, including the latter, competition for land and resources created conditions where the settler project required the eradication of Indigenous peoples. Australia, it appears, is not unique but fits a wider global pattern.

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[2] Curthoys and Docker, 'Genocide: Definitions, Questions, Settler-Colonies', pp. 5-6.
[3] A. Dirk Moses, *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2004, pp16-19.
[4] Mohamed Adhikari, 'Invariably Genocide? When Hunter-Gatherers and Commercial Stock Farmers Clash', *Settler Colonial Studies* vol.7, no. 2, 2017, pp. 192-207.
[5] Ibid. p.200.

In Australia, Barta focuses on the Port Phillip district in the 1830s and 1840s, later mythologised as “Australia Felix.” [6] He argues that genocide was not necessarily planned by governments or directed from above but rather was a structural outcome of settlement itself. The settlers’ determination to occupy fertile land ensured that Indigenous peoples were violently displaced and, in many cases, annihilated. Barta notes that Europeans understood Aboriginal people as destined to “vanish,” a belief that justified lethal practices. This belief in their inevitable disappearance concealed the active violence of colonisation, framing Aboriginal deaths as a by-product of progress rather than a deliberate outcome. [7] This interpretation shifts focus away from discrete massacres to the settler project as a whole: genocide was less an event than a foundation. Such a description of genocide aligns with “what Patrick Wolfe has called ‘the elimination of the native.’” [8] Barta’s thesis now posits the colonisation of Australia as a genocidal project from its inception, where Indigenous elimination was essential to the creation of settler society.

The Australian frontier was clearly marked by pervasive and often, what appears to be, systematic violence. Ryan and Dwyer emphasise that massacres were not exceptional outbursts but recurring strategies to secure land.[9] Their work on mapping frontier massacres demonstrates the systematic and widespread nature of killings, often involving entire communities targeted at once. Further to this, it documents how, in northern Australia between 1824 and 1928, frontier conflict

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[6] Tony Barta, “They Appear Actually to Vanish from the Face of the Earth”: Aborigines and the European Project in Australia Felix’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2008, p. 523.
[7] Barta, “They Appear Actually to Vanish from the Face of the Earth”, pp. 525-526.
[8] Patrick Wolfe, cited in Barta, ibid., p. 534.
[9] Philip Dwyer and Lyndall Ryan, ‘Reflections on Genocide and Settler-Colonial Violence’, *History Australia*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2016, p. 345-350.

displayed all the attributes of genocide.[10] Quoting Stamer and Lang, Evans cites them respectively, that:

> ‘No device by which a race could be exterminated had been left untried. They had been hunted and shot down like wild beasts– treacherously murdered while sleeping. . . and poisoned wholesale.’ And that “the killing in Queensland had become ‘wholesale and indiscriminate. . . carried on with a coldblooded cruelty. . .quite unparalleled’. Aborigines were being ‘crush[ed]. . . out like so many ants.’”

One primary source of information provides further evidence of contemporaneous settler attitudes. *The Sydney Gazette* (20 December 1838), reported that

> “On Tuesday morning the seven convicted murderers of the blacks, at Liverpool Plains, paid with their lives the last earthly penalty of their crimes, and have now gone to meet the award of an Almighty God.
>
> During the examination of the troops in garrison before Sir Maurice O'Connell, on Tuesday morning, a conversation was overheard between two gentlemen, the one a resident in Sydney, and the other a settler from the interior, of which the following is a literal transcript.
>
> ‘Countryman: Well, have they hanged these men this morning?
>
> Citizen: Yes, I understand they have.
>
> Countryman: It is a d----d shame but we have fallen on a safer game in our part of the country.
>
> Citizen: Indeed, pray what is it?
>
> Countryman: Oh, we poison them.
>
> Citizen: Good God! poison them?
>
> Countryman: Yes, we have done so with a good many already and served them right too.’” [11]

This exchange demonstrates not only the normalisation of killing but also the perceived impunity associated with it. Such testimony underscores that destruction

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[10] Raymond Evans, ‘Genocide in Northern Australia, 1824–1928’, in Benjamin Madley, A. Dirk Moses and others (eds), *The Cambridge World History of Genocide*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023, pp. 517-518.

[11] ‘ADVANCE AUSTRALIA SYDNEY GAZETTE,’ *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser, NSW : 1803-1842*, 20 December 1838, p. 2.

of Aboriginal people was not merely structural but openly discussed, socially accepted, and often celebrated at the frontier.

In Queensland, and further to earlier descriptions of wholesale slaughter, Finnane and Richards state that between 1859 and 1897, frontier violence amounted to a sustained genocidal assault.[12] This "wholesale slaughter" described by Evans is systematically repeated in Queensland, where the Native Police, operating under state authority, conducted repeated killings designed to depopulate regions for pastoral expansion. The findings of Finnane and Richards further endorse this description by suggesting that genocide was not merely incidental but structurally embedded in state practices. Additional to this, Rogers and Bain, conceptualising frontier violence within genocide studies, and citing Wolfe in their argument, once again emphasises that the Australian case demonstrates the gradual yet cumulative elimination of Aboriginal groups.[13] Their analysis highlights the importance of considering long-term demographic impact: even where intent is debated, the destructive outcome is indisputable. From another account regarding the later Aborigines Protection Act (1986) in Victoria, and expressed in a more conciliatory government response to the now, more narrow acceptance of the aboriginal people, and in regard to child removals, it is stated in Section 8:

> For the transfer of any half-caste child being an orphan to the care of the Department for neglected children or any institutions within the said colony for orphan children subject to the provisions of any law now or hereafter to be in force for the transfer of orphan children to the said Department or such institutions as aforesaid.[14]

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[12] Mark Finnane and Jonathan Richards, 'Speculating about Genocide: The Queensland Frontier 1859–1897', *Asia-Pacific Economic History Review*, 2024, pp. 38-41.
[13] Thomas James Rogers and Stephen Bain, 'Genocide and Frontier Violence in Australia', *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2016, p.93.
[14] Victoria, *An Act to amend an Act intituled "An Act to provide for the Protection and Management of the Aboriginal Natives of Victoria"*, No. 912, 1886, assented to 16 December 1886, https://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/hist_act/tapa1886265.pdf [Accessed 23 November 2025].

In essence, this gave tacit approval for the forcible removal of children from their families with the belief that they were better off with “white families or institutions”.[15] This situation created future situations visualised in the following figure[16]:

Figure 2. *Northern Territory Times and Gazette. “Homes Are Sought for These Children.” 24 August 1934.*

Collectively, these studies confirm that frontier massacres and later legislation was, in the former case, widespread, and sustained and in the latter case, symptomatic of cultural erasure. To deny their genocidal character is to misrepresent the nature of colonisation itself.

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[15] Deadly Story, “‘Protection’ legislation introduced in Victoria”, *Deadly Story*, accessed 23 November 2025, https://deadlystory.com/page/culture/history/Protection_legislation_introduced_in_Victoria [Accessed 23 November 2025].

[16] National Archives of Australia (NAA), *Removal of Aboriginal children from the N.T. – Offers of Accommodation: Newspaper photograph of Aboriginal children*, A1, 1934/6800 (1934–35).

Massacres were only one dimension of genocidal practice. Assimilation policies and child removals extended the process into the twentieth century. Moses highlights the “Stolen Generations” as a form of cultural genocide, where Aboriginal children were taken from families to eradicate Indigenous identity.[17] This demonstrated that the genocidal logic of the 19th century frontier had evolved into a bureaucratic form, proving its enduring presence in the nation's foundation and ongoing development. Similarly, Henry Reynolds argues that these practices, combined with frontier killings, left “an indelible stain” on the nation.[18] Curthoys, Genovese, and Reilly observe that Australian law has often avoided using the term genocide, preferring frameworks of “rights” or “redemption.”[19] This semantic downplaying underscores the political sensitivity of acknowledging genocide, as it incriminates the very legitimacy of the Australian state; assimilation policies exemplified the genocidal logic of elimination. By promoting “biological absorption” and cultural erasure, governments sought to eliminate Indigenous identity over time. These practices resonate with Lemkin’s original conception of genocide, which included not only killing but also cultural destruction.[20] This scholarly consensus, has not gone unchallenged. The very classification of Australia's past as genocidal has been the central point of contention in the nation's intensely contested "history wars."

The classification of Australia’s past as genocide has been at the centre of the “history wars” with Windschuttle denying that large-scale massacres occurred and

[17] Moses, *Genocide and Settler Society,* pp. 217–218.
[18] Henry Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain? The Question of Genocide in Australia’s History*, Melbourne, Penguin, 2001, p. 8.
[19] Ann Curthoys, Ann Genovese and Alexander Reilly, *Rights and Redemption: History, Law and Indigenous People*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2008, pp. 15-27.
[20] Raphael Lemkin, cited in Moses, *Genocide and Settler Society*, p. 21.

accusing historians of fabrication.[21] His claims brought about a robust response from Grimshaw who criticised his portrayal of "benign colonisation," arguing that it systematically ignored evidence of violence.[22] The forcefulness of Windschuttle's denial highlights that debates about genocide often operate as contests over national legitimacy, not merely as empirical disagreements. Additional to Grimshaw's response, Manne's edited volume of his text *Whitewash* rallied historians to defend the integrity of frontier massacre scholarship.[23] Together, these debates reveal that acknowledging genocide is not a matter of empirical detail alone but of national identity. Stone gives more substance to this argument by averring that genocide historiography globally is shaped by political contexts, with settler societies often resistant to recognising their own foundations as genocidal.[24] The Australian case fits this pattern: debates over the past are simultaneously debates over the present. The national debate surrounding the Voice to Parliament [25] underscores the ongoing relevance of Barta's thesis: if the nation was founded on the elimination of Indigenous sovereignty, then contemporary efforts at recognition represent attempts to confront, rather than obscure, this foundational violence.

Barta's formulation, Australia as "a nation founded on genocide", therefore functions not only as historical description but also as political intervention. To accept his claim requires rethinking national narratives of peaceful settlement and instead confronting the violence at the heart of colonisation. Reynolds insists that genocide must be

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[21] Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Vol. 1: Van Diemen's Land, 1803–1847*, Sydney, Macleay Press, 2002, pp. 21–29.
[22] Patricia Grimshaw, 'Responses: The Fabrication of a Benign Colonisation? Keith Windschuttle on History', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 35, no. 123, 2004, pp.122-129.
[23] Robert Manne, 'Windschuttle's Whitewash', *Eureka Street*, October 2003, pp. 23–27.
[24] Dan Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of Genocide*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp.127-142.
[25] Australian Human Rights Commission, *Indigenous Rights & the Voice*, 2023,<https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/indigenous-rights-voice> [Accessed 23 November 2025].

integrated into Australia's national story, for denial perpetuates mythologies of innocence.[26] Public history projects, such as Ryan's *Colonial Frontier Massacres Map*, make visible the scale of violence, ensuring it cannot be dismissed as marginal.[27] These projects link academic research with public understanding, fostering recognition of genocide as central to Australia's past.

Contemporary debates over reconciliation and the Voice to Parliament echo these historiographical struggles. Acknowledging genocide reframes Indigenous sovereignty, positioning the nation not as a product of peaceful settlement but of violent dispossession. Truth-telling becomes not optional but necessary. Thus, Barta's claim continues to resonate; genocide is not only a historical category but a present challenge for national identity. His assertion that Australia is "a nation founded on genocide" captures the structural reality of settler colonialism. As in Canada and the United States, the Australian settler project relied on the systematic erosion of Indigenous sovereignty. Frontier massacres, forced removals, and assimilation policies combine to produce outcomes that align with the concept of genocide, even if decentralised and protracted. Scholars such as Moses, Curthoys, Ryan, Evans, and Reynolds have shown that elimination of Indigenous peoples was intrinsic to nation-building. Historiographical debates reveal that contesting genocide is not merely academic but political. Even so, the fragmentary nature of frontier records implies that the available evidence probably captures only a portion of the violence enacted. Denial sustains myths of benign colonisation, while recognition

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[26] Bain Attwood, "Myth, History and the Law of the Land – Part 1 of 2", *Australian Financial Review*, 11 June 2004.
[27] Lyndall Ryan, William Pascoe, Jennifer Debenham, Stephanie Gilbert *et al.*, *Colonial Frontier Massacres, Australia (1780–1930)*, 2019, https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php [Accessed 12 October 2025].

demands confronting the moral foundations of the nation. In critically evaluating Barta's claim, this essay concludes that genocide was indeed foundational to Australian nationhood. To acknowledge this truth is not to diminish the nation but to engage honestly with its past, opening pathways to reconciliation and justice. This process of 'truth-telling' demands more than symbolic gestures; it requires the integration of this burdensome history into the national curriculum and public memory, ensuring that the reality of foundational violence displaces the myth of peaceful settlement.

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