

The
by Gurrnoong
Lettsom
Jasper
Raid
Cohen-Hunter,
must
Wurundjeri
not be
Woiwurrung Gulinj
forgotten

This year [2025] marks the 185th anniversary of the Lettsom Raid, a horrific act of genocide on the confluence of the Birrarung and Merri Merri.

Content warning: the following article contains mentions of graphic violence for truth-telling and ensuring that acts of genocide are not forgotten.

Introduction

This year marks the 185th anniversary of the Lettsom Raid, a horrific act of genocide on the confluence of the Birrarung and Merri Merri. This event, which saw brutal violence inflicted upon the elderly, women and children of the Woiwurrung, Taungurung and Boonwurrung communities, has not been forgotten, but intentionally buried beneath the concrete of the Melbourne colonial project.

Throughout my coalition work of building solidarity between migrant communities and the Indigenous struggle, I have referenced the Lettsom Raid from time to time, in speeches, meetings and dialogues as an egregious act of genocide that has occurred on the streets of the Melbourne colonial project, where many activists hold their ground against police violence and disrupt the systems of the capitalist war machine. I bring this event up not as a point of contention, but as a linkage between your history and mine.

The story of displacement, violation and destruction is one we know all too well. We are witnessing the devastation of the Palestinian communities in Gaza perpetrated by the Zionist entity and Western-supported militias. We are seeing the vanguard of frontier resistance against colonialism in the refugee camps of Gaza. Through these struggles, we learn that it is not the violence inflicted upon us that defines our communities, but how we fight back. One story is of the young martyr, named Winberri, who resisted the shackles and was murdered by the colonists amidst the Lettsom Raid.

For the purpose of documenting the structures of dispossession, I am referencing sources produced by colonists. This is not to create an article based on a Eurocentric point of view, but to break down the process that

led to this act of genocide, and not to frame it in simple terms. This did not happen out of nowhere. The Lettsom Raid was the cataclysmic event perpetrated by the structures of colonialism, with individuals and institutions responsible. These events were written in newspapers, court proceedings and journals. They are not lost to time—they are also not myth or legend.

War for Country

The year is 1840, and the region is illegally occupied as part of the Port Phillip District of the Colony of New South Wales. The Colony of Victoria is yet to be established upon this occupation for another eleven years, and the command, held by the military to squash frontier resistance, is calling the shots from occupied Darug Country. Governor of New South Wales, George Gipps, heard news of armed resistance against sheep and cattle stations further north of Woiwurrung Country, and dispatched Major Samuel Lettsom, of the 80th Regiment of the British Army, with a contingent of New South Wales Mounted Police. The Taungurung and Waywurru, who bravely fought the British occupation of their land, fought against the occupation in the Battle of Broken River, where they achieved victory. I refuse to label this battle as the Faithfull Massacre, which it has long been referred to; this steadfast battle was one of the few where the Aboriginal people achieved victory, and I do not mourn the lives of colonists. The party continued to raid cattle and sheep stations, in particular raiding the property of Peter Snodgrass and holding the stockmen at gunpoint to steal their sheep and flour. This scratches the surface of resistance; many campaigns led by numerous parties who defended their Country from possession.

The news of blackfellas with guns reached the ears of Captain Charles La Trobe, who was superintendent of the Port Phillip District. At the same time, an act was passed into law that all Indigenous people within the Colony of New South Wales could not possess firearms or ammunition without the permission of a magistrate. This law was one of the stepping stones that paved the way for the Lettsom Raid to occur. It is a common belief that Indigenous resistance of the Southeast Nations was purely with pre-colonial weaponry, such as spears. But until 1840, it was common for groups raiding stations to possess firearms and shoot back with the very same weapons that were used against them.

Captain La Trobe disarmed the Woiwurrung and expelled them to the boundaries of the Melbourne colonial project. In protest, Ngurungaeta [leader] of the Wurundjeri-balluk, Billibillary responded, “white man take away black fellows’ Country, now gun”. The Woiwurrung had made camp on the outskirts of the Melbourne colonial project. Mounted Police patrolled the outskirts of town as two hundred of the Woiwurrung and refugees stayed put against the orders to be moved on to the proposed Nerre Nerre Warren Protectorate Station. The Woiwurrung had sent word to neighbouring communities to join them here. Four hundred gathered on the confluence of the Birrarung and Merri Merri for tanderrum ngarrga [ceremony for safe passage through Country], as Major Lettsom and the Mounted Police arrived.

“The earth shook under them”

It was early in the morning when the regiment shook the ground on horseback down along the old Songline, known to them as Heidelberg Road. They lay dormant as the people slept, ready to wake up for the morning, and dingo companions wandered the camp as the sun rose. At morning break, the party stormed into the camp. Vastly outnumbered but displaying power with their weapons, the Mounted Police made swift acts of violence against the camp. Major Lettsom arrived with a wanted list of ‘objectionable characters’, who had led the armed resistance further north. Lettsom argued that if he could not find the list of individuals he had been tasked with finding, he would take hostages, also known as collective punishment.

The camp, dazed and confused, put up a fight against the punishment, but were shackled and forced together as the remains of their camp were destroyed. The Mounted Police rounded up the elderly, women and children and fought against those who resisted capture. Winberri, a prominent young figure who led resistance campaigns to the north, was among the camp. As he was being chained, he broke loose and reached for his boondi to strike against one of the men [Lieutenant Francis Vignolles] who had attacked the camp. He swung towards the lieutenant, and shots were fired. Sergeant Leary of the Mounted Police reached for his weapon and fired at Winberri, shooting him in the neck. The blast, killing Winberri, lacerated a man’s cheek standing beside him. Boronuptune, a leader of the Wurundjeri-willam to the southern side of the Birrarung, was struck on the head. Lettsom wanted to “instil a little

salutary dread” into the community, already ravaged by disease, forced from their home, living on rations and growing older as the children died younger. They shot the dingoes under the excuse that they were trained to kill sheep. They destroyed spears and pulled down homes to the ground.

Major Lettsom ordered the hostages to march towards the Melbourne colonial project towards Collins Street. Women huddled with their children, and the elderly walked slowly as the regiment struck them with rifle butts and bayonets. Hundreds were forced on a death march from the camp to the Melbourne colonial project. Once they arrived, they were forced into stockades at a makeshift prison barracks, today on the corner of King and Collins Street. They sat huddled in fear as ‘objectionable characters’ were pulled from the crowd. Thirty-five men were sectioned off from the group and marked as guilty of frontier violence in an illegal proceeding. That night, a fight broke out in the barracks, and sounds of muskets filled the air, as a number of the imprisoned freedom fighters broke through a small hole in the barracks and escaped into the hills. One man was shot and killed, and another was injured in his escape.

Of the thirty-five, ten of the resistance were remanded in custody to face trial. Their names were Turruk-munnin, Nandermiel, Loger-makoon, Piengingoon, Kowin-yowlett, with four others unnamed [except for Waverong, who was discharged]. The nine men were sentenced to transportation to Wa-rea-mah (Cockatoo Island). In the new year, the nine men were shackled on a vessel to be transported to Darug Country. Rather than be forced off their Country, the men jumped into the water. Many of them were murdered or injured as they swam for their freedom. Young Turruk-munnin was recaptured in his escape, but later re-released.

Conclusion

The story of the Lettsom Raid is not one to be forgotten. It is a horrific act of violence perpetrated against vulnerable people that occurred in the centre of the city of Melbourne. It is a cataclysmic event of the first five years of colonisation on Woiwurrung Country, that subsequently led to further displacement from the Melbourne colonial project, onto Nerre Nerre Warren Aboriginal Protectorate Station, Merri Creek Protectorate Station and Merri Creek Aboriginal School. The consequences of this event are one of the primary reasons for the expansion of the Melbourne

colonial project, as Indigenous people were further pushed onto reserves to disappear, and white possession took over Country without resistance.

The prohibition of firearms and ammunition is an act I had not previously come across until writing this article. I had always been aware from my research of local resistance for the first decade in the region occurred with firearms, such as the stories of Tullamareena or Tunnerminnerwait and Maulboyheenner. But the explicit act of disbanding armed resistance had detrimental consequences to the success of frontier resistance following 1840. The forced removal of weapons only led to the growing vulnerability of communities unable to arm themselves for self-defence. The generations forcibly moved between protectorate stations, as their Old People passed into the dharrangalk biik [star country], had little means of self-defence.

The forced movement of Indigenous people from 1835 onwards was intentionally designed to disrupt the processes that communities had followed for generations, and push them further and further until they were silenced. The Lettsom Raid was the final blow that permanently disfigured Cultural business and traumatised the young generation raised only under occupation. Only a few years after the raid, children were displaced into the Merri Creek Aboriginal School, where they were taught English, sung hymns and were given Christian names. One of the young girls in this system was my fourth great-grandmother, Borate, who was given the name Annie and a Baptist education. Her life was only lived under occupation—she never witnessed a free Country.

I mention Borate to remind us that the transgenerational consequences of mass violence deeply affect the present descendants. The forced movement between the camp on the Birrarung and Merri Merri, towards Nerre Nerre Warren Aboriginal Protectorate Station and back to the Merri Creek Protectorate Station occurred within the space of two years. This event led to the forced movement of children into indoctrination and assimilation that kept them from their communities. It was extremely volatile, as Indigenous people were forced to move en masse from the edges of Country to another as the foundations of the colony were established on sacred swamp land. The generation that was raised under occupation only knew the systems of oppression as the effective norm.

I write this article as my final pitch to set the record straight that this event in history must not be forgotten or pushed aside. I have spent too long over the past few years narrating this story again and again to never really get through. Let's set the record straight and begin carrying this story. Let's remind ourselves of the reality of this place, one story at a time. The Lettsom Raid was not an ahistorical act of violence that was committed out of nowhere. It was a targeted and committed campaign that was the stepping stone for forced displacement and submitting Indigenous people into the reservation system. It is an event that must not be forgotten. The memory of the Lettsom Raid must foster a culture of discomfort that you stroll through the CBD upon black bodies. It is a thorn in the side of the colonial project of Melbourne, which must begin to fester.

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Made on occupied Wurundjeri Woiwurrung country.

Front cover depicts Winberri, drawn by so-called 'Assistant Protector of Aboriginal People' William Thomas.

This text and more of Gurrnoong's writings can be found at
<https://marrnakyulendjik.substack.com>

Solidarity with the resistance fighters of the Blak liberation struggle, those still fighting and those martyred in the fight.

Land back and liberation! Fuck this colonial occupation.