

The Firearm and Massacre Statistics in Frontier Gippsland

Peter Gardner (October 2016)

'I met murder on my way / he had a mask like LBJ' (slogan of Vietnam anti-war demonstrators of the mid 1960s paraphrasing Shelley.)

Introduction

Some historians have tended to underestimate the firearm power of the earliest Europeans intruders on the frontier. It has enabled them to conclude that the number of Aboriginals killed on the frontier, especially in Gippsland, was grossly exaggerated. Lyndall Ryan in her 2010 paper on frontier conflict stated: "Although Broome and I had readily conceded that some settler massacres took place, we considered that they had played only a minor role in Aboriginal population decline and that, **because of inferior European weapons in use at the time**, the Aboriginals were more likely to have been killed in ones and twos than in mass killings." ⁱ (my emphasis) It should be noted that despite this quotation Ryan's paper generally accepts the thesis of both massacres and large fatality numbers and uses the phrase 'settler activism' to describe them.

Richard Broome summarised the problem: "Violence was the hallmark of the Australian Frontier, but we will never know how many people died in conflicts between Europeans and Aboriginals. The historical record is always fragmentary, and records of the frontier doubly so. The evidence of violence is scarcer still, owing to a natural secrecy..." ⁱⁱ He then noted that "Gun technology on this pre-1850 frontier comprised single shot and muzzle-loading weapons." ⁱⁱⁱ He claimed Christie in his *Aborigines in Colonial Victoria 1835-1886* (Sydney Uni. Press, Sydney 1979) had "overemphasised the power of the muzzle loading rifle" ^{iv} and that his estimate of 2000 frontier casualties for Victoria was 'clearly too high'. Broome, perhaps unintentionally, is in effect down playing the importance of weaponry in frontier conflict.

This has meant that he accepts estimates that the frontier casualties in Gippsland were as low as 250. ^v He dismisses my estimate of 600 fatalities and consequently generally discounts the estimate of Henry Meyrick on which my account is based. Meyrick estimated that 'no less than' 450 had been killed up to 1846 and is the only primary source on this matter. He must be given far more weight than recent or academic estimates. For the Warrigal Creek massacres Broome offers a conclusion of 'perhaps 60 killed'.

I hope to demonstrate that the opposite of this is true – that a combination of overwhelming firepower, strategy and circumstance employed by the invaders was disastrous for the Kurnai people and death by gunshot wounds almost certainly the major factor in the calamitous decline of their population. The aim here is not to re-examine the evidence of massacres most of which can be found in my early publications ^{vi} but rather it is to examine the arguments offered by Broome and others that these events, and the numbers of fatalities in them, have

been exaggerated. In particular it is to look at the firearms carried by the invaders and understand, in conjunction with other factors, how devastating their use was.

General Evidence

Firearms of various ages and of different makes and models were common in 1840 when the first Europeans ventured into Gippsland. All of these European parties in Gippsland were armed although we only have scant details of the weaponry of a small number of these parties - McMillan-Macalister, Strzelecki-Macarthur and Brodribb. Contrary to Broome's summary double barrelled shotguns, as well as 'old muskets', were fairly common. The latter, often in poor condition, were given to friendly Aborigines in the Port Phillip district and the Monaro. Kenneth Cox reported that Angus McMillan gave an 'old fowling piece' to Jemmy Gibber to entice him to act as his guide on the first of his Gippsland forays.^{vii} In and around Melbourne Aborigines were given these weapons to hunt for the prized Lyrebird feathers and they were used on at least one occasion for an armed foray deep into Gippsland about 1840.^{viii} The implication is that, rather than being 'inferior' the armoury of the squatters and early settlers was relatively modern. Also many had 'sporting' guns which appear to have been more technically advanced, lighter and easier to use than military weapons.

The percussion cap was invented in 1822 and this improvement was widely adopted in sporting weapons in the 1820s and by the military in 1830. The cumbersome flintlock firing mechanism was easily converted to percussion cap operations. A Rigby flintlock pistol (of which McMillan possessed a brace in 1839) now held in the National Museum of Victoria was supposed to have been converted to percussion about 1825. This mechanism was widely adopted by about 1830^{ix} and it is therefore highly likely that many, even most, of the weapons in Gippsland in the 1840s were of this kind. The percussion cap meant that the weapon was quicker to load and much less likely to misfire.

Another weapon improvement that had been around for some time was the muzzle loading rifle. The Baker rifle was employed by skirmishers during the Napoleonic wars. The rifle was far more accurate than the musket. It also had a far greater range and in the hands of a sharpshooter was accurate at up to 300 metres compared with about 40 metres for the musket. The downside of the rifle was that it was much slower to load because the ball had to be a tight fit although sometimes paper cartridges were employed. Also the barrel rifling tended to get fouled after repeated firing. Examples of rifles being fired on the frontier can be found in the Portland district^x and in Gippsland.

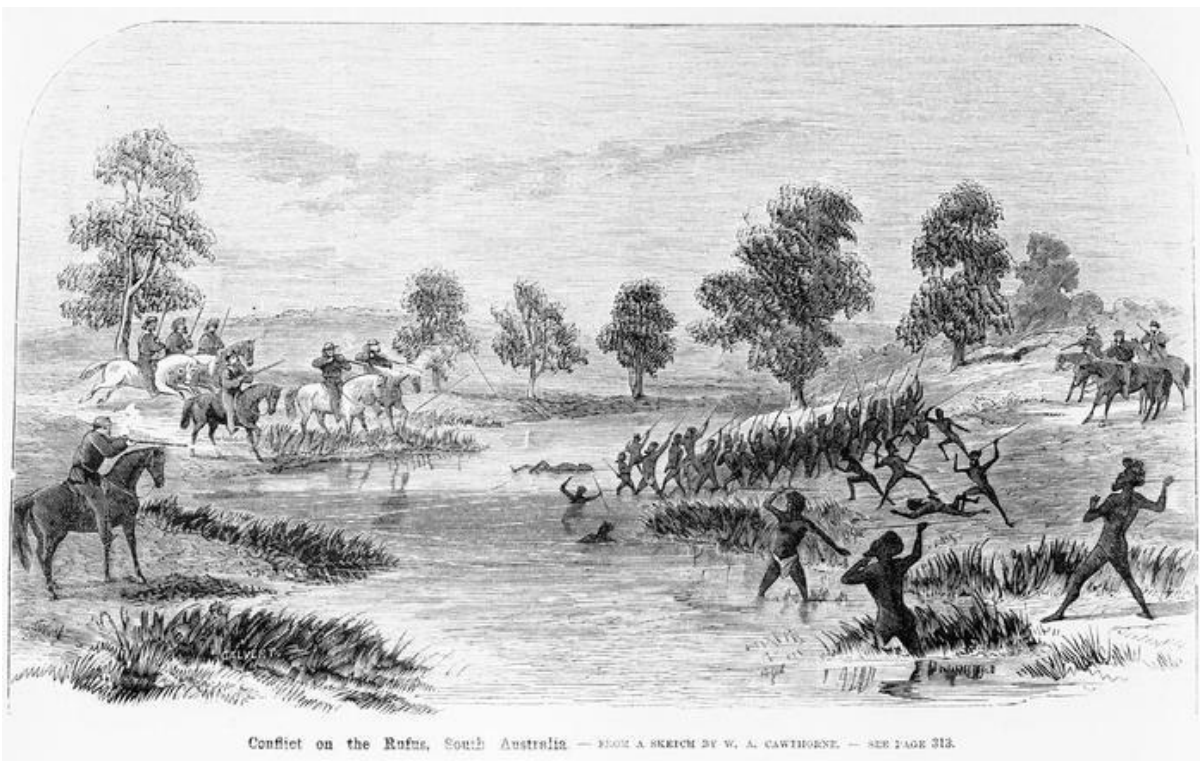
Specific Evidence in Gippsland

As far as we know all of the European parties that ventured into Gippsland were well armed. Aside from Aboriginal guides it seems all the Europeans carried some type of firearm – the assigned servants were possibly armed with inferior weapons such as old muskets. At least three of the six members of the Strzelecki party carried firearms. Macarthur and Riley, who

did some hunting, both carried weapons and Strzelecki probably did, though the latter's weapon may have been carried by his servant.^{xi} Likewise the Brodribb party, except for Charlie Tarra, were all armed, probably with rifles, although we have no other details of their guns.^{xii} The McMillan party armoury on their various forays into Gippsland is in part listed in Kenneth Cox in his biography of McMillan.

Cox noted that McMillan "carried his guns, a brace of pistols",^{xiii} that their party was generally 'well armed'^{xiv} and 'proceeded with guns loaded...'^{xv} Also "Macalister and Cameron, both good marksman, practised with McMillan's rifle".^{xvi} Besides McMillan's "brace of Rigby's best pistols..." he also carried a rifle and the party armoury included at least two double barrelled guns.^{xvii} The group appears to have frequently used their guns for hunting and on at least two occasions reported firing at the Kurnai. In one incident McMillan fired both barrels^{xviii} and in the other where a warrior reputedly dragged a spear by his toes was shot simultaneously, by five weapons.^{xix}

Dunderdale in his *Book of the Bush* notes that in the early European occupation of Gippsland had "each man carrying his double barrelled gun, ready loaded, in his hand."^{xx} When Ronald Macalister was murdered by the Kurnai in 1843 he had a brace of pistols on his horse.^{xxi} In the retaliatory massacre that followed at Warrigal Creek Dunderdale noted that "the gun used by old Macalister was a double barrelled purdy... which in its time had done great execution."^{xxii} 'Purdy' is a reference to James Purdey and Son, makers of sporting firearms, and the weapon probably a double barrelled shotgun. Squatter Patrick Coady Buckley and his associate Leonard Mason were also firing their 'double barrelled' guns at the Kurnai in south Gippsland in 1844 confirming that these firearms were common.^{xxiii}



Strategy, Practice and Circumstance

This extensive and modern weaponry, along with a number of other factors, gave the newcomers an overwhelming military superiority. Being mounted gave them far greater mobility. They were able at various times to herd, drive, and sometimes trap the Kurnai against a natural feature. Once their quarry was trapped the attackers could dismount enabling them to load and fire their weapons more rapidly.

The practice of loading the musket or shotgun with a single round lead ball and several large shotgun pellets was probably common. This would tend to inflict multiple wounds when fired into a crowd. The musket was only accurate up to a maximum of 40 metres but probably most of the attacks occurred at this distance or closer. The rates at which these weapons could be fired and reloaded varies greatly from source to source with estimates of reloading a musket as little as 15 seconds and a rifle about 30 seconds. Elsewhere I have used the very conservative rate of reloading rifles at 2 minutes.^{xxiv} Considering that the handlers of the weapons were reasonably accomplished and proficient an average reloading time of one minute per shot seems reasonable.

It also seems possible that one or more of the newcomers had military experience although I have yet to identify any such individual. With small heavily armed parties the strategy of individuals firing in succession meant that they could keep up a continuous rate of fire for a lengthy period of time. As well in the early period of first contact the Kurnai did not understand how they could be hurt by a weapon they could not see. Thus they made no effort to hide themselves but stood upright making an easy target. Philip Pepper noted: "In the real early days our people didn't wake up about guns. They'd just stand there and get shot. Didn't understand how they got hit with something and fell over from Lohans (white men) pointing something at them."^{xxv}

The participant's account noted that as they fired at the body, and that they were such easy targets, they 'spoil all them as we hit' and that few, if any, of those wounded who escaped would survive.^{xxvi} A combination of all or most of these factors meant the attacks were truly devastating and their firepower overwhelming, and the casualties very high.

Finally the presence of some form of law enforcement is often presented as an ameliorating factor. Richard Broome noted: "The Port Phillip District was unique in having a serious (albeit inadequate) protective effort, which meant that settlers were more under the eye of colonial officials, who were in turn influenced by instructions from London to apply British justice to Aboriginal people. Lastly racial ideas hardened after the 1850s..."^{xxvii} In Gippsland it was a different story. Law enforcement, in the person of Crown Lands Commissioner Tyers, did not arrive until 1844 thus leaving a space of 4 years of lawlessness. Meyrick remarked that Gippsland was still 'a most lawless place' in 1846.^{xxviii}

An illustration in Attwood & Foster's *Frontier Conflict* on p.19 done in early Victorian times and not specific to Gippsland nevertheless exhibits many of the features involved in 'settler activism'. The attackers are all armed and mounted; their quarry is herded against a waterhole; they are basically surrounded; they crowd together as a primitive form of defence

and are relatively easy targets for their attackers. A similar illustration where there was a massacre on the Rufus River (near Wentworth NSW) is included here (see above). This event occurred in 1841 and there were estimated to be 30 casualties.

A Theoretical Examination of Two frontier Massacres.

Because of the paucity of statistics on frontier conflict academics have been inclined to use theoretical ratios such as the rate of the murder of Europeans to Aboriginals – anywhere from 1:5 upwards.^{xxix} Another theoretical measure commonly used is to make a percentage estimate of the proportion of the total population that succumbed to gunshot wounds although in almost every instance even the original population numbers are open to debate. These estimates are of such a wide variety as to be almost meaningless. They are at best a general statistic and when applied to a specific localities lose all authority.

I offer here another different, theoretical calculation applied to two large scale events in early Gippsland – the Boney Point and Warrigal Creek massacres. The following are estimates of the possible numbers killed. The parameters also set a physical upper limit, a maximum possible number of fatalities, as well. They show that the weaponry, rather than being a retarding factor could, in theory, have been able to inflict a very large numbers of casualties in a very short period of time.

The theory is based on the following assumptions; that the attacking parties were mounted and well-armed; that the Kurnai were in large mixed groups of all ages and both sexes; that they were trapped up against a natural feature and that, at least at Boney Point, they did not understand how a firearm could hurt them and tended to crowd together. All of these assumptions I think are valid.

Further the practical dimensions or limitations on the attackers for the theory are as follows; that their fire hit only one in three targets; that they aimed at the body; that about 30 minutes was the maximum time that the attack could be sustained; that they were all armed with rifles, muskets or shotguns; at least a third of the weapons were double barrelled thereby increasing the firepower by about 30% and that the firing and reloading of each weapon took about 1 minute per shot. Again I would suggest these limitations are both valid and conservative.

In the case of Boney Point we have an attacking party of about 12 individuals with 4 double barrelled guns being able to fire 16 shots before needing to reload. Spacing the firing would mean a continuous fusillade could be kept up with a shot every 4 to 6 seconds. In the space of 10 minutes the attackers could have fired an estimated 140 shots resulting in 46 casualties. For 15 minutes the casualty total would be 69 and for twenty minutes 92. All these figures are well above the casualty estimates for Boney Point except perhaps the first.

For Warrigal Creek these figures are equally both enlightening and horrifying. The well-armed^{xxx} and mobile party of possibly 30 men with 10 double barrelled guns would have a firepower of 40 shots for the first minute and subsequently 35 shots per minute afterwards.

Thus over a 10 minute period of continuous firing over 350 shots would be fired for a casualty figure of 115. There is no need to lengthen the process beyond the 10 minute period to encompass the casualty estimates for this event. The theoretical upper limits of fatalities in these events, assuming that they lasted the full 30 minutes, are 138 for Boney Point and 345 Warrigal Creek – both clearly far too high.

Summary

None of this is to say that this did happen. But rather that it could quite possibly have been so. The words above are brutal and the analysis to some may appear cold and somewhat clinical. How else is one to examine murder? Not one of the conditions that Broome and others outline that would reduce the numbers killed and justify their conservative statistics is valid for Gippsland. Nor can we escape from the fact that even in warlike conditions these events can clearly be labelled ‘atrocities’ and terrible crimes even if we can never put an exact figure on the number of fatalities. These ‘statistics’ hide the murder of non-combatants - woman, children and the elderly. For the Kurnai who faced the European invaders of the early 1840s the horse and the gun combined were truly weapons of ‘mass destruction’.

ⁱ Ryan, Lyndal . Lyndall Ryan (2010) Settler massacres on the Port Phillip Frontier, 1836–1851, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 34:3, 257-273, DOI: 10.1080/14443058.2010.498091 p.258. Note also the killings in ‘ones and twos’ is probably valid although again there is only a small amount of evidence, seldom specific, to support it. Probably because of their size information on the massacres has been more readily remembered. The use of this statistic is also fairly close to the discredited Windschuttle thesis and a step away from claiming that the conflict did not happen at all.

ⁱⁱ Broome, Richard in Attwood, B. & Foster, S.G. (eds.) *Frontier Conflict*, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2003 p.88. Thanks are due to Broome for his pioneering efforts in estimating the casualties of frontier conflict in Victoria. In a way it is natural that such efforts err on the conservative side. But his criticism of Christie’s estimate of 2000 being far too high does not pass close scrutiny. If the estimates of Nance for the Central Districts of 400, are added to Clark’s for the western district of 430 (which I consider conservative) to my most likely figure for Gippsland of 610 you already have 1440 casualties. To these should be added the North East and North West – most of the Murray Valley – and the Alpine districts (where at least one massacre occurred at Innisfail near Omeo known locally as ‘Death Valley’ and the “Valley of the Dead”) where Broome did not make a calculation or find an authoritative source for him to make even a rough estimate. The ‘best guess’ by Christie may also eventually be considered an underestimate.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid* p.96

^{iv} *Ibid* p.91

^v Attwood, B. See Richard Broome and the Statistics of Frontier Conflict in my ‘Notes on Massacres’ at <http://petergardner.info/publications/notes-on-massacres-rev-ed/>

^{vi} Gardner, P.D. *Gippsland Massacres*, Warragul Education Centre, Warragul, 1983; Gardner, P.D. *Our Founding Murdering Father*, Ngarak Press, Ensay, 1990; Gardner, P.D. *Through Foreign Eyes*, Ngarak Press, Ensay, 1994

^{vii} Cox, K. *Angus McMillan Pathfinder*, Olinda Public Relations, Olinda, 1973 p.46. There may be some criticism of my use of this source when I have generally been highly critical Cox’s scholarship. *Our Founding Murdering Father* was essentially the negative side of debate on McMillan with him. Some aspects of Cox’s work, in particular his use of fictional dialogue and his ‘feather duster’ treatment of McMillan’s relations with

the Kurnai eventually prompted me to write this book. However we both used the available published reports by McMillan and Cox as well had access to some private records. Since his work is not properly documented we cannot be exactly sure where some of his information came from. Here I use Cox along with others to give some idea as to the armoury carried by the McMillan party which I consider, under the circumstances, as valid.

^{viii} Account in my *The Myth of Tribal Warfare* <http://petergardner.info/publications/myth-of-tribal-warfare/>

^{ix} Generally information on firearms from Houston, R. & Stroyan, C. (eds.) *Firearms an Illustrated History*, DK, London, 2014 and Greener, W.W. *The Gun and its Development*, Bonanza Books, New York, 1988 and discussions with a number of 'muzzle loading weapon' enthusiasts and experts. One, who prefers anonymity, has remarked in detail on the first draft of this essay and some selected comments he made are as follows: "Most of the firearms that would have been in use in Gippsland at the time would have been made in England, mostly London and Birmingham, and whether ex-military or civilian were easily as good as and mostly superior to those produced at the same time in Europe and America, both in quality and technology, also due to the standardised mandatory system of 'proofing' firearms in England that ensured that they were safe to fire, validated by distinctive proof marks on the breech. Certainly Rigby and Purdy who you cite as the makers of McMillan's firearms made very high quality firearms, probably better than most of those in use at the time such as medium-quality shotguns made by Hollis....The most common firearms in Gippsland at the time probably would have been single-barrel percussion shotguns of 12 or 10 gauge... cheaper and easier to manufacture than double-barrel shotguns, although there certainly would have been quite a few of those too in Gippsland at the time. Also 'muskets' - probably Brown Bess flintlock muskets of .75 calibre, sometimes cut-down to shorter carbine-style length, that were effectively smoothbore shotguns. Apart from the cost factor, shotguns were useful as they could be loaded with a round lead ball for kangaroos or self-defence/attack, or various sizes of shot for ducks and other wildfowl and smaller game, and were cheaper to purchase and less complex to load and operate than rifles. Whilst there would have been some percussion rifles in use at the time, mostly single barrel, they would most likely have been English-made sporting rifles, similar in external appearance to shotguns, but more expensive and heavier due to the thicker barrels and rifling. Baker rifles were military-issue rifles on very limited issue in the 1820s in some states, but not Victoria... Reference to 'rifles' in diaries etc would almost certainly have referred to rifles produced for the civilian market, or might have merely been a confusion with the general term 'longarms' that includes muskets, rifles and shotguns... Your conclusion that few of those who were wounded would survive is probably correct. Musket balls, although much slower in velocity than modern bullets, were very heavy and carried a lot of energy that would have caused a huge amount of trauma as well as devastating physical damage, and if a bone was hit it would simply disintegrate into many small fragments, with no chance of being able to be re-set to mend/heal up again (hence almost mandatory amputation for wounded arms and legs of soldiers on American civil war battlefields), combined with dirt, bacteria, etc being pushed into the wound resulting in blood poisoning and infection."

^x See the participant's account in <http://petergardner.info/publications/a-grampians-massacre/>

^{xi} Paszkowski, Lech. *Sir Paul Edmund de Strzelecki*, Arcadia, Melb. 1997 p.120

^{xii} Brodribb, WA. *Recollections of an Australian Squatter 1835-1883*, John Ferguson, Sydney, 1978 p.31

^{xiii} Cox, K. *Angus McMillan Pathfinder...* p.48

^{xiv} *Ibid* p.57

^{xv} *Ibid* p.58

^{xvi} *Ibid* p.59

^{xvii} *Ibid* p.60

^{xviii} *Ibid* p.83

^{xix} Gardner, P.D. *Our Founding Murdering Father...* p.32

^{xx} Dunderdale, G. *Book of the Bush*, Penguin Ringwood, 1973 p.221

^{xxi} Gardner, P.D. *Our Founding Murdering Father...* p.40

^{xxii} Quoted in Gardner, P.D. *Gippsland Massacres* (2001) p.54. Note that Dunderdale referred to the massacre as occurring at Gammon Creek rather than Warrigal Creek.

^{xxiii} Gardner, P.D. *Through Foreign Eyes...* p.15

^{xxiv} See the participant's account

^{xxv} Pepper, P. *You Are What You Make Yourself To Be*, Hyland House, 1980 p.48

^{xxvi} See the participant's account

^{xxvii} Broome, Richard in Attwood, B. & Foster, S.G. (eds.) *Frontier Conflict...* p.96

^{xxviii} Shaw, AGL *A History of the Port Phillip District*, MUP, Melbourne, 2003 p.133

^{xxix} These references have been around for a long time. Most refer to a very low ration of about 1:5. Flood noted that in the Kimberleys the figure may have been as high as 1:90 (see Flood, J in my Notes on Massacres...) my own estimate for Gippsland is between 1:75 and 1:100.

^{xxx} The members of the Highland Brigade could quite possibly have carried two or more weapons each.