

## Some Notes on a Review of Cal Flynn's *Thicker than Water* (Harper Collins, Sydney, 2016) by Dr. Peter Crowley

**Peter Gardner**

About a month ago (June 2016) a friend sent me a copy of this online review<sup>i</sup> by Peter Crowley which contained some direct and indirect criticisms of my work on Angus McMillan<sup>ii</sup>. Cal Flynn, McMillan's great great great niece, used my work as one of her sources in her book described as "part family memoir, part travelogue, part history, and an intimate, revealing and fascinating journey into our Australian heritage..." It is the historical aspects of the review that interest me here, as it is the main preoccupation with Crowley. Prior to writing this I have had brief correspondence with both Crowley, an exceptionally well-informed medical practitioner of Gippsland origins, and Patrick Morgan, well known historian on Gippsland literature and other matters. Much of what Crowley writes I agree with. What follows are explanatory notes, a few bits of extra information, some argument and opinion - the latter based on a long term study of Gippsland regional history.

1. Crowley writes that McMillan "has become a polarizing figure in Gippsland" which I think no longer is so. Perhaps in the late 1980s and 1990s this description was accurate. Any polarization followed the publication of my *Our Founding Murdering Father* which put the case clearly for McMillan's involvement in early atrocities against the local Aborigines – the Kurnai. In the 27 years since it was first published this argument has never been refuted and is now, with one or two exceptions, generally accepted by historians and the informed general public. The Maffra Historical Society persons who spoke to Cal Flynn when she visited Maffra<sup>iii</sup> may have been one of those exceptions.
2. Crowley then claims "Flynn's account of McMillan draws heavily on Gardner, and is just as tendentious". The online definitions of tendentious are as follows: "i) expressing or intending to promote a particular cause or point of view, especially a controversial one ii) is one of several words English speakers can choose when they want to suggest that someone has made up his or her mind in advance." My immediate reaction was this implied the evidence against McMillan was inaccurate or faulty but Crowley advised me by email that this was not necessarily so. The term 'tendentious' could hardly be applied to Flynn's book since she started out with the opposite hypothesis – that of McMillan as hero – to that which she eventually arrived at. With my own work it is not so clear since the title of my McMillan work was quite clearly provocative, and deliberately so. On the other hand my book is fairly obviously the negative part of a debate, in fact a reply to K. Cox's *Angus McMillan, Pathfinder* (1973)<sup>iv</sup>. It made no claims to being a balanced or fair biography. As well, since I first wrote of McMillan in 1973 and *Our Founding Murdering Father* was not published until 1989, perhaps my mind had been made up in advance, and I saw nothing in the intervening 15 years to make me change it. If so it was a long time in the making. I intend to re-examine my McMillan book, including this aspect and the circumstances surrounding the selection of this title, in further detail in another essay.

3. It is then suggested that Flynn “simplifies the evidence against McMillan” but this is surely the author’s choice since nowhere does she claim her book to be an exhaustive or comprehensive history.
4. This also applies to what Crowley claims are “curious omissions” where he claims Flynn neglected the “one primary source tending to confirm speculation about McMillan’s participation in the frontier violence.” He is referring to a brief paragraph in *Folie a Deux* (1999)<sup>v</sup> Patrick Morgan’s biography of Caroline Dexter. Here Crowley repeats Morgan’s claim of ‘recent speculation’ and endorses his claim that Dexter was a ‘primary source’. About 15 years ago I wrote:

“The statement in the last sentence [by Morgan] that Caroline Dexter is the "only known primary source" to confirm McMillan's participation in the massacres is certainly open to dispute. It is questionable whether Dexter is a "primary source" at all since she is only repeating a rough summary of events that happened some time - ten to fifteen years - before she came to Gippsland. Further there is no evidence that her unnamed source of information was Angus McMillan as is implied, and though the Dexters were certainly friendly with him they could just as easily have obtained this information from a wide variety of other sources including Dr. Arbuckle. A number of much later reports such as those of "Bushman" (Rowland Bell) and Judge Box on the Butchers Creek massacre have more veracity than Dexters' since the "lineage" of information, and especially the original source, is clearly documented. None however implicates McMillan in these affairs.<sup>vi</sup>

I also noted then that “to call my work (and also that of Phillip Pepper, Don Watson and others) 'recent speculation' is unfair for it is neither recent nor speculation.” The Dexter evidence does, however, support the general thesis of a ‘black war’ in the 1840s.



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5. Crowley accepts Morgan’s argument and appears influenced by it. He states, like Morgan, that “in his view, Dexter’s source was McMillan himself.” Possibly so, but as pointed out above just as possibly several others, and since there is no evidence either way, completely irrelevant.
6. He then states that Flynn “presents McMillan’s leadership of the attack at Warrigal Creek as a fact...” which she does. He also accepts that I did not do so when I noted “Due to problems of secrecy and the almost complete absence of primary records it is impossible to state with complete certainty that McMillan led the ‘Highland Brigade’ in its trail of retaliation.”<sup>vii</sup> I concluded that it was possible the retaliation was led by

one of the Macalisters but that even if this was the case McMillan was almost certainly involved. It is often forgotten that in 1840-1 when there were at least 2 and possibly 3 massacres (Boney Point, Butchers Creek and possibly Maffra) of the Kurnai, McMillan and his small party were the only Europeans in Gippsland proper (as opposed to Port Albert).

7. Crowley correctly claims that “no firsthand account of the Warrigal Creek massacre exists...” This statement can be extended to cover Gippsland and eventually most of Australia. Primary sources on these violent frontier events, especially after the punishment of the Myall Creek massacre perpetrators, are as ‘scarce as hen’s teeth’. It can be even argued that Meyrick’s evidence is not ‘primary’ since he was not present at Warrigal Creek. The only truly primary account I have found of a massacre in Victoria I call the ‘Participant’s Account’ which referred to a massacre most likely in the Grampians, which was only repeated and recorded 20 years after the event<sup>viii</sup>.
8. He then examines some of the Warrigal Creek sources in some detail but the same argument as in 3 above still applies. Somewhere, at some time, an author has to make a decision about how closely the sources are examined. Obviously in a work such as Flynn’s the examination of primary sources must have been highly selective. She then has to rely on others, historians such as myself and Don Watson<sup>ix</sup>, who have examined the sources in detail.
9. Meyrick’s evidence I agree is as close to primary evidence as you are going to get in Gippsland. But there is an implied criticism in Crowley’s review that Flynn failed to examine these sources. As I have dealt with them all in detail and at length in *Gippsland Massacres* (1983) *Through Foreign Eyes* (1988) as well as *Our Founding Murdering Father* (1989) Flynn has had access indirectly to all these sources. *Through Foreign Eyes* for instance has a chapter on Henry Meyrick<sup>x</sup>.
10. Crowley then offers another scot Frederick Taylor as an alternative ‘butcher of Gippsland’ to McMillan. However, whilst Taylor’s reputation in the Western District was dire, there is no evidence of him being involved in any conflict in Gippsland. I referred Crowley to my short essay on a possible Hollands Landing massacre<sup>xi</sup> carried out by Frederick Taylor but pointed out that this work is based entirely on folk history and circumstantial evidence. The difference between McMillan and Taylor as competitors for this infamous title is that as a continuous and persistent claimant to be the ‘discoverer’ of Gippsland there has been a substantial amount written about McMillan, whereas of Taylor’s sojourn in Gippsland, as far as I am aware, there is virtually nothing.
11. He concludes that his preferred source for early Gippsland history and the ‘troubled times’ is that by AW Howitt. I have examined this elsewhere.<sup>xii</sup>

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- <sup>i</sup> Review in Inside Story <http://insidestory.org.au/is-this-such-a-man>
- <sup>ii</sup> Gardner, P.D. *Our Founding Murdering Father*, Ngarak Press, Ensay, 1990
- <sup>iii</sup> Flynn, C. *Thicker than Water* pp.134-5
- <sup>iv</sup> Cox, K. *Angus McMillan Pathfinder*, Olinda Public Relations, Olinda, 1973
- <sup>v</sup> Morgan, P. *Folie a deux William and Caroline Dexter in colonial Australia*, Quaker Hill Press, Quakers Hill, 1999
- <sup>vi</sup> Gardner, Peter. Notes on Massacres <http://petergardner.info/publications/notes-on-massacres-rev-ed/>
- <sup>vii</sup> Gardner, P.D. *Our Founding Murdering Father* p.41
- <sup>viii</sup> Gardner, P.D. A Grampians Massacre <http://petergardner.info/publications/a-grampians-massacre/>
- <sup>ix</sup> Watson, Don. *Caledonia Australis*, Collins, Sydney, 1984
- <sup>x</sup> See Chapter 2 Gardner, PD. *Through Foreign Eyes*, Centre for Gippsland Studies, Churchill, 1988
- <sup>xi</sup> Gardner, Peter. A Hollands Landing Massacre <http://petergardner.info/publications/hollands-landing-massacrerev-edpdf/>
- <sup>xii</sup> Gardner, Peter. Howitt's 'Line of Blood' in Gippsland <http://petergardner.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Howitts-Line-of-Blood.pdf>