



Kimberley Society

Book Note

***The Original Australians: Story of the Aboriginal people* by Josephine Flood. Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest (NSW), 2006. Soft cover, 306 pages plus xiv, illustrations, maps. ISBN 1 74114 872 3. Recommended retail price \$39.95.**

Written for the general public, and to answer questions posed by the author's family and friends, this book starts with the commencement of contact between Aboriginal people and Europeans. It responds to contentious issues raised during the so-called 'History Wars' and, in doing so, it evaluates the claim that diseases outstripped 'slaughter' in the killing of Aboriginal people. That component constitutes a sizable portion of the book and therefore invites comment.

To assess the extent to which diseases and 'slaughter' took Aboriginal lives throughout Australia, Dr Josephine Flood (an archaeologist) draws on published works that record deaths associated with colonisation and related activities. She leans strongly toward diseases being the greatest killer but she acknowledges that, for many localities, information is in short supply. Like other authors who have gone before her, she also struggles to measure depopulation within a population of unknown size. The reader is therefore presented with sharp cameos set against a rather shadowy background.

In enumerating deaths from 'slaughter', Flood accepts some other authors' estimates of Aboriginal and settler deaths. Richard Broome's recent work, for example, is cited to show that 'about 1000 blacks and 80 whites died in frontier conflict in Victoria between 1835 and 1850'. Similarly, H A Willis (a writer and editor best known for his incisive book reviews) is cited as having 'produced the most reliable tally' of the violent deaths that occurred in Van Diemen's Land between 1803 and 1834. He estimated that 188 Aborigines and the same number of settlers lost their lives in frontier conflict during that time.

When dealing with deaths in the more recently colonised parts of Australia, Flood has fewer reliable printed sources on which to draw. She therefore focuses on highly publicised massacre stories. With regard to the Kimberley region, and the killings that are said to have occurred in the Forrest River (Oombulgurri) area, she writes:

The extent of the violence in this region is uncertain, pending detailed studies, but Moran's research on this and two other alleged massacres shows it may have been exaggerated.

Flood's earlier discussion of Rod Moran's research, which relates to three East Kimberley localities, shows that it reinforced her belief that something was wrong with the Forrest River stories. Research can do that but Flood goes too far in suggesting that Moran's narrowly focused research somehow helps us to gauge the extent of violence within a region larger than many countries. Wider reading would have shown that Kimberley violence was widespread and that, like violence elsewhere, it has been exaggerated in some accounts and played down in others.

Whilst taking issue with Flood's analysis of Kimberley history, I have no argument with her evaluation of violence and diseases in other places. Overall, I admire the tenacity she has shown in ferreting out information, assessing its credibility, and weaving it into an appealing narrative. Few other writers would have the skill necessary to bring together the archaeological, cultural, historical, linguistic, and scientific threads that make up *The Original Australians*. Flood's exploration of indigenous art and technology, traditional life, British colonisation, native title, health, and other topics certainly achieves her aim of providing 'an up-to-date account that answers the most commonly asked questions about the First Australians'.

Cathie Clement