

A PAW MEDIA AND REBEL FILMS PRODUCTION

# CONISTON

"ONE OF THE GREATEST INJUSTICES OF CONTACT HISTORY"



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A **STUDY GUIDE** BY ROBERT LEWIS



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MASSACRE SCENE

## OVERVIEW

In 1928 dingo trapper Fred Brooks was killed by an Aboriginal man, Japanangka (known as 'Bullfrog') near the Coniston pastoral station, about 240 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. A month later, a local pastoralist, 'Nugget' Morton, was attacked, but managed to beat off his attackers. Two police patrols, both led by Mounted Constable George Murray, were sent out to bring back the offenders in these two crimes. Murray admitted killing 31 Aboriginal people who he claimed had resisted arrest, and arrested two – who were later acquitted at their trial for the murder of the trapper.

These events became known as the Coniston Massacre, and is the last known mass killing of Aboriginal people on the frontier. Aboriginal people of the area and others say that far more than 31 people were actually killed.

A Commonwealth Government enquiry was established to look into the killing of the 31 Aboriginal people during the two arrest expeditions. It reported its findings in early 1929. It found that all the killings by the police parties were justified – they were in self-defence while under attack as the party was trying to identify and arrest suspects. Many people at the time challenged the findings as a 'whitewash'. They said the killings were to teach the

Aborigines a lesson, to terrorise them, and force them to leave white pastoralists and their animals alone.

**How could these terrible events have occurred? Who was responsible for them? What impacts did the killings have on the people who lived in that area at that time? How do these events continue to impact on the families of the Aboriginal victims today?**

The 'docu-drama' *Coniston* (David Batty and Francis Jupurrurla Kelly, 2012, 57 minutes) explores the impact of the massacres from the Aboriginal people's view. It shows that the events of that period are still fresh in the minds of the Warlpiri, Anmatyerr, and Kaytete people today. The devastating impact of these killing times would see the owners of the land move away, and some of them too terrified and grief stricken to move back. Despite their lasting impact, these horrific memories are not the sole legacy of these times. There are also stories of survival and resilience. The strong underlying theme is of pride in the ongoing strength of their culture and traditions.

In *Coniston* we see Indigenous people speaking with authority about their own recent history and the deep shadow it has cast over their country.



1: CARSON BROWN, DAVID FIELD, ELIJAH JONES 2: CAMERA CREW 3: DOP HUGH MILLER 4: CAMERA CREW

## Curriculum Applicability

*Coniston* is a useful resource for middle and senior secondary classes in:

- History
- English
- SOSE/HSIE
- Civics and Citizenship
- Film Studies.

The main aim of this Study Guide is to help students explore this event as history – to gain knowledge, understanding and empathy – and in doing so to critically examine how we know about the past, and how it is represented to us in popular media.

There are three main aspects investigated through this film:

- 1 What happened during the Coniston Massacre, and why?
- 2 Is the film *Coniston* a good representation of this history?
- 3 Is *Coniston* a good documentary?

## BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

Imagine that ...

You woke up this morning, not feeling well. 'Sorry mum, I really can't go to school today.'

So, you are at home, just taking it easy, when you see a news flash: there has been a shooting at *your* school, in *your* classroom, and three of *your* friends have been shot!

- 1 What do you think your feelings might be?
- 2 List and discuss what questions you would want answered about the event.

Your main response would probably be a sense of disbelief and unreality – how could such a terrible event occur in my normal little world? How can you explain and understand such a tragedy?

That's really what this film is about – understanding and explaining an event in Australian history that seems inconceivable to us today: the killing of a local man near a place called Coniston station, near Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, which led to the killing of at least thirty-one other people, and almost certainly a much larger number.

(Activity taken from Australian History Mysteries website <<http://www.australianhistorymysteries.info>>)



WARLPIRI WARRIORS AT  
YURRKURU CONISTON SCENE

## Background Briefing

**This information will help you better understand the story told in *Coniston*.**

By 1928 there were only a few hundred non-Indigenous people living at Alice Springs, and a small number living on large pastoral holdings or stations in the larger area, which included Coniston Station. These stations were developed where permanent water was available in arterial springs or soaks. The pastoralists grazed sheep, goats and cattle. The stock needed large areas to forage for food, and were free to wander – there were no fences on properties.

Three traditional Aboriginal groups, the Warlpiri, Anmatyerr and Kaytete, lived near the area.

Non-Aboriginal people had started settling the period from the 1860s. By 1928 these pastoralists and town people characterised Aboriginal people as one of four groups:

- those living in traditional ways (often

referred to by non-Aboriginal people as ‘myalls’ or ‘bush blacks’) who had limited and casual contacts with cattle stations adjoining their tribal territory. This enabled them to obtain occasional food, without having to give up their independence;

- a few young men who were beginning to work regularly on stations;
- Aboriginal people who were starting to gather on mission stations, or around missionaries who would provide them with food and medicine; and
- a few older people camped near stations who were supplied with food by the station owners.

In 1911, the Northern Territory was separated from South Australia, and became a Commonwealth Territory. It was governed by an administrator in Darwin. However, Central Australia was a separate jurisdiction within this, and was under the direct control of Canberra, whose representative was JC Cawood, the government representative.

There were only six policemen to cover the whole area – with one sergeant in Alice

Springs, and five mounted constables based in different areas. There were few cars, few roads, and few telephones – yet people were scattered over huge distances, and most travelled by horse or camel. Aboriginal people travelled on foot.

Randal Stafford’s Coniston Station was on the edge of the frontier. To the west lay the Tanami desert, to the north the Lander River country – both areas described by Randal Stafford as still ‘myall country’. Coniston station was considered to be ‘the last outpost on the edge of the desert.’ (See map on page 5)

The area was in one of its periodical droughts in 1928.

The events that became known as the Coniston Massacre, are summarised in this timeline. Remember that there are two separate events:

- the killing of Brooks, and the killings of Aboriginal people that followed; and
- the attack on Morton, and the killings of Aboriginal people that followed that event.

# Map of the area of the Coniston Massacre



MAP: NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA

The names in **RED** are the places recognised by the official Board as places where killings occurred. The names in **BLUE** are places identified more recently by Aboriginal people as places where killings occurred.

## CONISTON MASSACRE TIMELINE – KEY EVENTS

### 1928

<b>2 Aug</b>	Dingo trapper Frederick Brooks, aged 61, is a friend of the owner of Coniston pastoral station, Randal Stafford. He sets off with two camels and two Aboriginal assistants, Skipper and Dodger, for a soak 22 kms away, to trap dingoes.
<b>6 Aug</b>	When Brooks arrives, an Aboriginal group is already camped nearby. Japanangka (Bullfrog) demanded that his wife get tobacco from Brooks and that in exchange Brooks had the wife perform domestic duties.
<b>7 Aug</b>	Japanangka took offense when he came to get his wife back and found that his wife and Brooks were behaving inappropriately according to Aboriginal law. Brooks is killed at the soak – later called Brooks Soak (Yurrkuru). He is half-buried in an enlarged rabbit burrow. His camp is ransacked. An Aboriginal tracker, Alex Wilson discovers the body and goes to Coniston station to report the death.
<b>10 Aug</b>	The resident Barrow Creek policeman, George Murray is sent coincidentally to Pine Hill and Coniston stations to investigate complaints of cattle killing by Aborigines. He has two Aboriginal trackers, Paddy and Major, with him.
<b>11 Aug</b>	Stafford, owner of Coniston Station, phones from Ti Tree to Alice Springs to report the killing of Brooks. Murray is told of the killing. Murray's superior, Cawood, tells him to investigate and arrest the culprits.
<b>12 Aug – 1 Sept</b>	Murray gathers a small party to find and arrest the killers of Brooks. During his search ( <b>see map page 5</b> ) he acknowledges killing 17 people, for 'resisting arrest'. He brings in two prisoners, who are sent to Darwin for trial.
<b>28 Aug</b>	Pastoralist John 'Nugget' Morton is attacked by fifteen Aboriginal men. He shoots one and escapes, though badly beaten. Aboriginal oral history says he was attacked because of his ill-treatment of Aboriginal women.
<b>19 Sept</b>	Morton reports the attack. Cawood orders Murray to go to Morton's Broadmeadows Station and find and arrest the attackers.
<b>24 Sept – 18 Oct</b>	Murray arrives and gathers a small party to find and arrest the men who attacked Morton. During his search he the party kills a number of people who were 'resisting arrest'. ( <b>see map page 5</b> )
<b>18 Oct</b>	Murray returns to Alice Springs.
<b>19 Oct</b>	Murray writes his report, but does not say how many people were killed. He later nominates fourteen deaths.
<b>20 Oct</b>	Murray takes the two men accused of killing Brooks to Darwin for trial.
<b>7–8 Nov</b>	The men are tried but the charges are dismissed. At the trial, Murray admits killing seventeen people during the 'hunt' for those responsible for Brooks' murder.
<b>28 Nov</b>	The Commonwealth Government announces a Board of Enquiry into the thirty-one deaths from the two expeditions.
<b>30 Dec</b>	The board starts hearing evidence from thirty witnesses. All are locals. One is a female missionary who has helped local Aboriginal people. There are no Aboriginal people interviewed.

### 1929

<b>18 Jan</b>	<p>The board makes its findings. The key findings are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was not the slightest evidence that the two police parties were a reprisal or punitive expedition. If it was a reprisal, why were wounded treated, and nearly thirty people allowed to go free after various encounters?</li> <li>• In all cases, the shootings were justified in self-defence.</li> <li>• There was no provocation which could have led to the killing of Brooks and the attempted killing of Morton.</li> <li>• The drought was not causing pressure on water and food resources.</li> <li>• The reasons for the Aboriginal unrest at the time were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- the advance of the Walmulla tribe from Western Australia intent on killing white settlers and their Aboriginal workers,</li> <li>- the influence of individual missionaries preaching a doctrine of equality,</li> <li>- inexperienced white settlers 'making free with the natives' and treating them as equals,</li> <li>- 'semi-civilised natives' migrating and influencing 'myalls',</li> <li>- a woman missionary living with naked blacks, and lowering their respect for whites,</li> <li>- insufficient police to apply the laws quickly, imprisonment not being an effective deterrent to crime,</li> <li>- escaped prisoners from Darwin wandering the area without being arrested.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
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1: BULLFROG (ELIJAH JONES) 2: FRED BROOKS (DAVID FIELD) WITH BOYS 3: ARMED POSSE LED BY MOUNTED CONSTABLE GEORGE MURRAY (JIM WILLOUGHBY) 4: FRED BROOKS (DAVID FIELD)

## AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

Now watch *Coniston* and explore these events further. **Please note all Tables mentioned are at the end of this study guide.**

### Exploring Ideas And Issues In The Film

*Coniston* is telling us about a part of our history that most people know little or nothing about.

It is a shocking story – the killing of at least 31, and maybe many more Aboriginal people less than 100 years ago – and well into the twentieth century.

When we study history we are trying to:

- **know**,
- **understand**, and
- achieve **empathy** with people in the past – to know what it was like to be there.

We can then also make judgements about what we have learned – applying both the standards of the day, as well as our own standards today.

This knowledge, understanding, empathy and judgement are achieved through critical evaluation and analysis of the available information/evidence.

The things we hope to discover in history can be set out in **Table 1 (see page 19)**

The three key investigations that we need to answer from these aspects are:

- 1 What happened during the Coniston Massacre, and why?
- 2 Is the film *Coniston* a good representation of this history?
- 3 Is it a good documentary?

### Investigation 1

#### What happened during the Coniston Massacre, and why?

You have seen some information on the Coniston Massacre in the Background Briefing and Timeline.

What aspects of the events does *Coniston* show? Watch the film and discuss what it tells us about these aspects of the Coniston Massacre:

#### A The killing of Brooks

- 3 What do we learn about Japanangka's (Bullfrog's) character?
- 4 Why did he do it? (Consider the role of tobacco, Bullfrog's wife, Bullfrog's companions in the killing.)



GEORGE MURRAY (JIM WILLOUGHBY)

## Testing this version of what happened at Coniston

Are you satisfied that you know what happened, and why?

Here is more evidence/information. There is a lot, so we suggest that you divide it among members of your class. Each person or small group can study one or several pieces of evidence, understand what it says, and critically evaluate its reliability. For example, is evidence given to an inquiry automatically the truth? Report back to the whole class on your findings and thoughts.

20 Add information to **Table 1** (see page 19), using column C.

### SOURCE A

#### EXTRACTS FROM EVIDENCE OF MOUNTED CONSTABLE WILLIAM GEORGE MURRAY, 16 JANUARY 1929 ABOUT THE SEARCH FOR BROOKS' KILLERS

##### A1

As the result of the Murder of Brooks ... I arrived at Coniston Station. I organised a party of eight including myself, and three aboriginals. The other four white men were Randal Stafford, John Saxby, William Briscoe and Alex Wilson (Half-caste). I then obtained ... 14 horses and necessary equipment.

##### A2

On the afternoon of 15th August, excited voices were heard in the native camp [near Coniston Station] ... I found my two trackers endeavouring to arrest

- 5 Does the film suggest that the killing of Brooks was justified?

### B The first massacre

- 6 What do we learn about Murray's character?  
7 What are we told about the official group?  
8 Why did the group kill so many people?

### C The second massacre

- 9 What do we learn about Morton's character?  
10 What are we told about the official group?  
11 Why did the group kill so many people?  
12 Some Aboriginal people were involved in the killings. How does the film explain their involvement?  
13 Why, according to *Coniston*, were so many Aboriginal people killed?  
14 What impacts did this have on the various Aboriginal people in the area?

## Investigating the evidence

The key historical element of the film is the perspective and evidence of Aboriginal people.

The film bases the story on the oral history evidence of several people. Some of them offer eye-witness evidence, others base their evidence on what they have been told from people who were there at the time.

Like any historical evidence, we must subject this to critical evaluation.

- 15 Describe what each of these has to say, and the source of their special knowledge (see Table 2 on page 20).  
16 Is this evidence reliable? Consider the factors that influence whether eyewitness evidence is reliable, and whether oral stories passed on are reliable.  
17 Several of the stories report 'magic' elements. Do they lessen the believability of the evidence of what happened?  
18 Look back at Table 1 (see page 19) and complete column B.  
19 Write your summary of what happened at Coniston in 1928 based on this.

Now that you have watched the film it is time to think about what you have seen, and how it has helped developed your knowledge, understanding and ability to 'be there' of this aspect of our history.



BULLFROG'S RELATIVES (HARRY JONES, CARSON BROWN)



murderers were at the 6 mile soak ...

We covered about 10 miles in two hours, came up to a natives camp in the scrub. My party was then riding in extended order. Immediately the natives sighted us six adult male natives were seen to assemble in the scrub. As my party was closing around them the natives threatened to fight and kill us if we did not go away. They were cautioned by my trackers to put down their weapons. They refused to do so but commenced throwing boomerangs. Several of my party narrowly escaped being struck. I again dismounted and the six natives immediately rushed me. I received several blows from boomerangs and yamsticks and was compelled to use my revolver. I fired four shots also heard shots from other directions.

two natives ... On nearing the trackers, I could see that they were becoming overpowered. When I arrived on the scene, one native got free with the chain hanging in his hand and struck me over the shoulders with it. At this moment I noticed that the second prisoner was free from the tracker and had turned his attention to me. Realising that the position was dangerous, I drew my revolver and fired at one native. The bullet struck him over the left eye and he fell to the ground ... The wounded native remained unconscious for about two hours. When he recovered he was secured and in chains. The two prisoners were tied to a tree for the night.

### A3

On the morning of the 16th August 1928 ... I set out with horses and the aforementioned party also the two prisoners accompanied me – they having volunteered to show where the alleged murderers were camped ... I also instructed them that there was to be no shooting unless absolutely necessary; that I would endeavour to arrest the lot. I also instructed them that women and children were not to be harmed ... I sighted the camp first and increased my pace to a gallop. I noticed the natives were assembling and coming towards me. They took up their position in the grass amongst some low bushes. On riding up to them, I noticed that they were all in a sitting or kneeling position. Only one native appeared to be armed. I dismounted with a view to disarming the native. Immediately I stepped to the ground, the whole of the native party rushed me

with weapons in their hands – they having had them concealed in the grass. I seized one native and threw him. The others then commenced to strike me with their weapons. As the position appeared serious and I could not see any of my party in sight I drew my revolver and fired two shots. The reports attracted other members of the party who were quickly on the scene. I heard several shots fired. When other members of the party arrived the natives ceased to attack ... When order was restored, it was found that four natives including one lubra [woman] were dead. The fifth one – a lubra – was found to be badly wounded ... The natives were instructed by myself to sit down and remain quiet ... We collected 23 spears which were concealed in the grass and bushes, apparently in readiness for an attack; also a number of boomerangs, nulla nullas [clubs] and yamsticks [short sharp digging sticks] ... A quantity of property was recovered and identified by Stafford as the property of Fred Brooks deceased – consisting of coat, shirt, singlets, quart pot, blanket, calico, knives, tobacco. The natives were then instructed to move down to the creek about 200 yards distant and remain there for the night. Myself and Stafford prepared two graves and buried the four natives. I then went to see the wounded lubra and found that she was dead. She was buried and we camped near the scene for the night.

### A4

We then proceeded down the Lander, camped at Boundary Soak, ascertained from some natives there that the alleged

When order was restored, it was found that three male natives were dead and three male natives wounded. The three wounded did not appear to be seriously wounded in my opinion. They together with a number of women and children were taken back to the creek arriving there about midnight. They were instructed to sit down and remain until morning. They had in their possession a quantity of native food which they had brought with them from their camp. The three wounded prisoners were identified as the alleged murderers of Brooks. A guard was put over the camp throughout the night.

### A5

Shortly after daylight several natives were noticed up on the ranges probably two miles distant ... The trackers overtook the natives before I could reach them. When I arrived on the scene, I found that Paddy had two male natives handcuffed together with the one handcuff. Two



TOP: BULLFROG (ELIJAH JONES) ABOVE: BULLFROG AND FAMILY (ELIJAH JONES AND FAMILY)

lubras and one old blackfellow were sitting down. A number of boomerangs and yamsticks were lying close handy.

I questioned the two prisoners. They admitted having been at Stafford Spring and had assisted to kill Brooks ... I noticed that the prisoners had slipped the handcuff and were making off down the hill. They were called on to stop several times but it had no effect. I drew my revolver and fired several shots over their heads. It had no effect. I then fired at the native closest to me who was then at least 150 yards distant. He fell. I considered the second one out of the revolver range and called on my tracker to get the rifle. Two shots were fired and the fleeing native fell having been hit through the head. Both natives were dead. They were buried ... I questioned to the blackfellow and lubras and as satisfied that they were not implicated in the matter. They were allowed to go free having been given a few crusts of bread and a bit of meat.

We then proceeded further west, picked up natives tracks and followed them for about 36 miles. We sighted a number of blacks ... Immediately they sighted us they took up their position amongst some boulders and in caves ... They were instructed by the trackers but they replied that they would fight us if we came near them ...

Myself dismounted and went on foot searching for the natives amongst boulders and caves. After some little time two natives rushed out of a cave as I was passing. I received several blows from yam sticks. Having my hand in readiness, I fired and shot one native dead. The other native disappeared amongst the rocks. I saw no more of him.

Later in the afternoon, I came in contact with one male native and a number of women and children. This native made off but I overtook him and brought him back to where the packhorses were.

On arriving at the camp I found the remainder of my party with the exception of Wilson had assembled. They had two wounded prisoners. I examined the prisoners and found that they were very seriously wounded ... We then had lunch. The two wounded died during our lunch hour.

We then returned to Cockatoo Spring



NAPURRULLA (FIONA KITSON)

with the one prisoner and later returned to Coniston Station. I then had three prisoners.

#### SOURCE B

#### EXTRACTS FROM EVIDENCE OF MOUNTED CONSTABLE WILLIAM GEORGE MURRAY, 16 JANUARY 1929 ABOUT THE SEARCH FOR MORTON'S ATTACKERS

##### B1

In consequence of a report relative to the attack on Morton by natives I proceeded to Broadmeadow Station ... obtained ... horses from Morton; about 14 in number. Myself and Morton, Alex Wilson and a small native boy proceeded down the Lander to the spot where Morton had been attacked. Judging by the tracks a number of natives had travelled down the river, for about 40 miles

##### B2

On nearing a place known as Tomahawk waterhole ... I came across seven male adult natives. I galloped around and they assembled in one heap ... I dismounted and the natives immediately attacked ... fired several shots wide of the natives ... The position appeared serious and I fired to stop the natives. The shots attracted Morton and he was quickly on the scene. Four natives were shot. The remaining three were questioned and gave a satisfactory explanation as to their movements during the past few weeks. They further stated that the four dead had only arrived there some few days and that they were

the cheeky ones who had tried to kill Morton. The four dead were recognised by Morton as those who had attacked him.

##### B3

We then proceeded to a spot on the Lander known as Boomerang Waterhole. From there we proceeded in a N.E. direction for about 30 miles ... As Morton knew the next water in that direction we decided to make straight for it, and not delay following tracks. This water is shown on the maps as Circle Well ... We sighted a number of male natives. Morton and myself galloped and rounded them up. They were instructed by Morton who speaks the native language fluently to throw down their weapons. Two of them refused although told a number of times to put them down. The remainder of the natives sat down and appeared quite docile ... Morton stated that he knew the two of them personally. They had been casually employed by him recently and that they were the two who first approached him and assisted to hold him whilst the remainder of the attackers used their weapons. I decided to dismount. Immediately I stepped to the ground the two of them jumped on top of me. I threw them aside and got possession of a tomahawk from one of them. He then attacked me with his boomerang. I used a tomahawk to defend myself. The second blow struck him on the head and he fell dead. The second native was in the act of driving a spear through me from about two yards distance. I drew my revolver. Both Morton and I fired at the same instant and the native was

killed. The other natives were questioned and they told us in which direction the remainder of the party were.

#### B4

We then proceeded in an easterly direction about 36 miles and came onto a soakage at the lower end of the Hansen River. There was a large camp of natives there. They were rounded up – around 40 in all including nine adult male natives. We got them rounded up in the bed of the creek which is very wide at that point. All of the male natives were armed. They were instructed to put down their weapons ... I then decided to dismount. As soon as I did so quite a number of the natives rushed me and attacked with their sticks and boomerangs. Two natives rushed to get the one spear that was standing upright in a bush. I noticed their movement and also grabbed for the spear. Myself and a native got hold of the spear together. I wrenched it from him. It broke and left the small end in his hand while I had the strong end. The natives were then so close around me I felt that I could not get my revolver in time so I drove the spear right through a natives chest; then jumped back drew my revolver and fired. At the same time I called to Morton to fire or they would get me. Even after several shots were fired it did not steady them. When order was restored it was found that there were eight killed.

We then returned to Broadmeadow Station.

#### B5

The matter of a reprisal or a punitive expedition in order to massacre all the



DINNY JAMPINJINPA NOLAN

blacks never entered my head or the heads of any of my party that I know of ... If either I or my party desired to massacre the blacks we would not have allowed 20 or 23 of them to get away at Coniston not have allowed others to escape when we interrogated them and found they had nothing to do with the murder. If we had desired to shoot them all we could have done it from some distance. We would not have separated and I would not have taken the risk of going up alone and dismounting to arrest them.

#### B6

When I said at [the trial of the two Aboriginal men in] Darwin in answer to Mr Foster that we shot to kill I meant that the position was too dangerous for us to take any chances ... Mr Foster said to me 'You did not want to be bothered with wounded blackfellows?' I said 'Well what could I do with wounded blackfellows?' meaning I could not render them any medical treatment to save their lives hundreds of miles from civilisation ...



DORA NAPALJARRI KITSON

Evidence of William Murray at the Board of Enquiry

21 All these are evidence from the official inquiry. What are the strengths and weaknesses of such evidence?

No Aboriginal people were questioned by the Commission of Inquiry. We do have some of their evidence, gathered as oral history evidence during the 1960s – 1980s by some historians. Look at this evidence. Relates to various places (See map).

#### KILLINGS AT TIPINPA:

##### SOURCE C

##### EVIDENCE OF JAMPIJINPA

*Jampijinpa would have probably been about four or five years old at this time.*

*His family was camped at Tipinpa (Patirlirri) along the route the police party riding north from Coniston to Morton's place at Mud Hut would have taken. Murray made no mention in his report of going to Tipinpa. But the pastoralist Saxby who joined the exploration party of Michael Terry in 1929, told Terry that Murray had been there the year before.*

They shot your old father?

Yeah ... Down at Tipinpa. That's this Murray bin shottit. When I was little feller ... I seen him. I seen him. Murray, Murray grab me then and he's hold me on the shoulder ... There was big camp there ... They yardem round, bringem to one mob, see, make it one heap. And they shottit. Two or three shotgun is goin', people is goin'. Nugget. Whatsaname was there too, Jack Murray ... Roundem up. Ust

like cattle we roundem up ... Just suddenly. And just shottit there ... [just] man. Woman, they lettem go free ... Shottem all the man. Shottem. The old woman was 'live. And kid.

Peter Read and Jay Read (eds), *Long Time, Olden Time*, Institute for Aboriginal Development Publications Alice Springs 1991, pp. 44-45.

#### SOURCE D

#### EVIDENCE OF WARLPIRI WITNESSES

In 1971, historian Dr Mervyn Hartwig, one of the recognised authorities on the killings, interviewed a dozen Walbiri who were definite in their declarations that Murray had been there, shooting. Alex Wilson [a part-Aboriginal member of both parties] in 1971 estimated that 'about six' were shot at Tippinba, and he confirmed the Tippinba episode with [this] author in 1983, although suggesting 'a lot' rather than 'about six' had died.

John Cribbin, *The Killing Times*, Fontana/Collins, Sydney, 1984, p. 160.

#### KILLINGS AT DINGO HOLE:

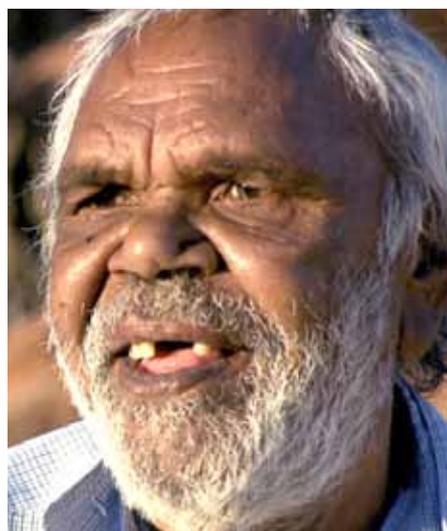
#### SOURCE E

#### WILLOWRA JIMMY JUNGARRAYI

Followem this river, through there.

Now, they bin findem ... two old feller, longa Dingo Hole ... They bin finish them poor bugger.

That man [Murray] bin turn back, come back after shoot two man ... and findem



ALBERT JAKAMARRA WILSON



JOHNNY  
JUPURRULA  
NELSON

[a group] there longa bush. Girl and kid and all. They bin finishem again, whole lot.

Read and Read, *Long Time, Olden Time*, p. 47.

#### SOURCE F

#### EVIDENCE OF WARLPIRI WITNESSES

*Mervyn Hartwig writes:* 'Walbiri interviewed at Willowra in 1971 were adamant that the posse rode further down the Lander to Gunadjera (Dingo Hole) where a corroboree was in full swing and to Djaralygu (where the creek finishes) and that a total of fifteen (four adult males and eleven women and children) were shot. They supplied the full names of only five of these (four men and one woman) indicating the sub-section names only of the others'.



JACK JANGALA COOK

Cribbin, *The Killing Times*, p. 162.

#### KILLINGS AT WAJINPULUNGK:

#### SOURCE G

#### JOHNNY NELSON JUPURRULA

[A large group] bin there tryin' to makem ... corroborees, you know, sacred site ... And [the police party] from Willowra, run into this mob here and givem trouble ... And they prisonem my father ... And they gaolem my father, you know, put a chain on ... They coming there now, chasem round now, some all run away. Right, prisonem whole lot, everyone. Tiem up longa trees. All little boys, oh, lotta tracker, some stockmans too. And shootem whole lot, some feller, shootem, heapem up. Tie 'em up whole lot. And shootem in the morning ... That's where my father got shot there too ... Oh, women and all. Not young girl. No, lettem go. . . Lettum go [some children], some of them.

Read and Read, *Long Time, Olden Time*, pp. 49-50.

#### KILLINGS IN AREAS THAT ARE NOT SPECIFIED IN THE EVIDENCE:

#### SOURCE H

#### NEDDY JAKAMARRA

All our mob been shot. My grandmother Maryanne ... bin die poor bugger. A lot of people bin shot there. Working man, too. All the working man bin shot too. You

know, they bin go to corroboree, working people, Stirling [cattle station on the upper Hanson] men, and from Barrow Creek.

Cribbin, *The Killing Times*, p. 163.

#### SOURCE I

##### GEORGE JANGALA AS RECORDED BY HISTORIAN DICK KIMBER

He [George Jangala] said that he was, he must have been about four or five I reckon, and they shot his father, his big brother then ran over and threw himself down on his father's body, understanding he was likely to be dead and then in just total shock and sorrow, then the people of the patrol – and there were at least two involved at that time – shot his brother and they used an action, a repeater action rifle and then he said that, 'they pointed it at me and one of them there he' – George wouldn't have remembered the exact words because he's a little Warlpiri boy who hadn't really known white people himself – one of them he said lifted the rifle barrel and said – and this is George's reconstruction of it I'm sure – 'don't shoot him he's only a little kid' and that's why he survived. So you have a situation which one might say even had the father shown a likelihood to throw a spear or boomerang or fight, the brother who was shot certainly didn't ... He's a man who's thrown himself on the body in sorrow hoping somehow his father's alive and he just happens to be a big boy so he's shot.

Quoted in Justin O'Brien, *'To infuse an universal terror': The Coniston killings of 1928*

[www.clc.org.au/Media/publications/coniston/coniston2.PDF](http://www.clc.org.au/Media/publications/coniston/coniston2.PDF), p. 23.

#### SOURCE J

##### MISSIONARY ATHOL MCGREGOR ON MURRAY

Missionary Athol McGregor wrote in his journal that when Murray was billeted in police quarters in Darwin for the trial of the two men accused of killing Brooks, another policeman, Mounted Constable Victor Hall, told McGregor: '[Murray] shocked and disgusted many or all of the policemen there with his freely expressed opinions as to what was good enough for a blackfellow, and he said the number



NED JUNGARRAYI KELLY

shot was nearer seventy than seventeen.'

Quoted in Cribbin, *The Killing Times*, Fontana, p. 164.

#### SOURCE K

##### LETTER FROM MISSIONARY ANNIE LOCK

The missionary Annie Lock provided evidence of the massacre in a letter dated 28 September 1929 to the Association for the Protection of Native Races ... She told a terrible tale: 'The natives tell me that they simply shot them down like dogs and that they got the little children and hit them on the back of the neck and killed them and in front of the eyes of those they left they knocked the dogs in the head and threw them in the fire ... They had some prisoners and took the chains off them and told them to run away and as they were running they shot them. This is the natives verdict and we have to be careful and prove it, but, I questioned them in different ways and when they least expected it, even to boys and girls and they all say the same thing and instead of 34 it was over 70.'

Quoted in O'Brien, *'To infuse an universal terror': The Coniston killings of 1928–2002*, p. 31.

[Note that Annie Lock made no reference to the killings in her evidence to the enquiry.]

#### SOURCE L

##### RANDAL STAFFORD IN A CONVERSATION RECORDED BY TGH STREHLOW



AUDREY NANGALA RANKINE

'Well, four years are gone since it all happened ... I only know of most of their doings by hearsay, of course ... But I can tell you this: most of the things they did were hushed up afterwards at the official enquiry ... I was told that they shot down myalls up and down the Lander River for many miles ... some of the men who went out with Murray told me that the true figure was at least twice as high ... to shoot down whole camps of blacks without leaving any live witnesses behind is not my idea of justice.'

Quoted in O'Brien, *'To infuse an universal terror': The Coniston killings of 1928–2002*, pp. 31–32.

#### SOURCE M

##### LETTER FROM GOVERNMENT RESIDENT CAWOOD ABOUT THE 'RECENT UNFORTUNATE HAPPENINGS':

'In the opinion of old residents of this part, trouble has been brewing for some time, and the safety of the white man could only be assured by drastic action on the part of the authorities. In their opinion the only other alternative was to hand the country back to the blacks. I am firmly of the opinion that the result of the recent action by the police will have the right effect upon the natives.'

Letter, 25 October 1928, National Archives of Australia: A431 1950/2768 Part 2 [Attachment]:50.

#### SOURCE N

##### HISTORIAN DICK KIMBER ON ALEX WILSON



1: ALEX WILSON (LES MCLAUGHLIN) 2: BULLFROG'S WIFE, NAPURRURLA (FIONA KITSON) 3: BULLFROG (ELIJAH JONES) 4: BULLFROG AND FAMILY (ELIJAH JONES AND FAMILY) 5: BULLFROG'S WIFE, NAPURRURLA

When I first met Alex in 1970 ... he had a tendency to boast ... and, while not giving a specific figure, he indicated that many, many more than 31 had been shot. I took it that he meant scores more ... What did emerge, though, was that there were not often calls to surrender ... All of these shootings were, according to Alex, 'in cold blood', with many being shot down while Murray and Morton were still mounted on their horses.

Quoted by Kimber, 4 February 2004.

SOURCE O

RANDAL STAFFORD ON MURRAY'S CHARACTER

During his meeting with T.G.H. Strehlow at Coniston in September 1932, Randal Stafford made what Strehlow described as 'a few pungent remarks on Murray's personal character' ... What real bushman, I ask you, would believe Murray's evidence when he told the court how he

grabbed a spear from one of the attacking blacks and drove it through the chest of the attacker, or how he killed another black with the boomerang he had wrenched out of his own hands? Those silly Wild West yarns may take in the city mugs down South, but I know Murray far too well for that. He may be a killer, but he'd never rush into any real danger all on his own: the man's far too cunning for that.

Quoted in O'Brien, 'To infuse an universal terror': *The Coniston killings of 1928-2002*, pp. 41-42.

SOURCE P

HISTORIAN DICK KIMBER

The account ... of the first attack by Constable Murray's patrol on a group of 20 to 30 Aborigines seems straightforward enough, but it is worth considering from other perspectives. I believe that

the people of the Warlpiri camp, having observed the patrol approaching, had adopted submission-alert positions, recognising that they were facing a superior force ... The possibility for a slow approach, using an interpreter, was there. Mounted Constable Murray['s] ... approach was as a cavalry charge - from walk to canter to full gallop, yelling out arrest commands in English ... His gallop to the edge of the camp, and immediate determination to arrest the standing warrior, meant that the Warlpiri group could only interpret the action and the approach of the other men in one way from their own world view: killing of the men was intended, and capture of the women and children when they were not also killed in the fighting. Their only options were to pick up their weapons to fight, and to flee for their lives. They attempted both.

Kimber, 22 October 2003.



HARRY JAPANGARDI JONES

## SOURCE Q

### SOME CHARACTER SKETCHES BY HISTORIAN DICK KIMBER

**RANDAL STAFFORD:** A well-educated bushman, who openly acknowledged his Anmatyerr wife Alice, a competent shot, best friends with Fred Brooks, able to speak some Aboriginal language.

**JACK SAXBY:** A young man, an expert marksman.

**BILLY BRISCOE:** A frontier cattlemen who lived with an Aboriginal woman, well-armed, with a basic ability in the Anmatyerr language.

**DODGER:** a young man, armed with a revolver, spoke both local Aboriginal languages and 'bush English'.

**NUGGET MORTON:** Known to be very strong and cruel, believed to be a rapist of Aboriginal women and girls as young as 9 and 10.

**TRACKER PADDY:** A Western Australian Aboriginal man, believed to be a killer and a rapist of local women.

**WILLIAM GEORGE MURRAY:** A World War 1 Light Horseman, Gallipoli and

Western Front veteran, twice wounded in action, rose to the rank of sergeant, with no police training.

Based on Kimber, 22 October 2003, and O'Brien, *'To infuse an universal terror': The Coniston killings of 1928–2002.*

22 *Coniston* is a representation of history – that is, it is somebody's version of what happened and why. The film-makers have chosen what to include, what to leave out, and in what order to present their information to the audience.

Here are some criteria that you can use to assess the film. (see Table 3 on page 21)

22 What is your conclusion: Is *Coniston* good history?

### Is *Coniston* a good documentary?

23 A documentary film uses a variety of elements and strategies to have an impact. Consider the way the following elements are used in the film. Comment on their success or failure in creating an effective documentary. Use your own viewing of the film and the two interviews that follow to summarise your ideas. (See Table 4 on page 22)

## Interview 1: David Batty

*Coniston* is a take on the events surrounding one of the worst and most recent massacres of Aboriginal people in Australia. It is based on oral histories and an Aboriginal perspective rather than historians' and academics' accounts.

The dramatic elements are punctuated and driven by interviews with survivors or their direct descendants. The narrative represents a consensus of opinion of what really happened.

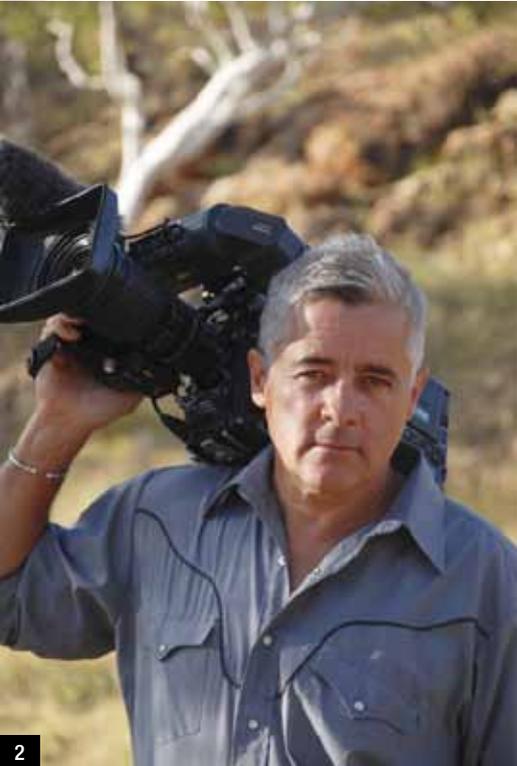
Around three years ago I had a request from my old friend and filmmaking collaborator Francis Jupurrula Kelly. Francis wanted to make a film together about the Coniston Massacre. I was familiar with the story and had indeed interviewed a survivor way back in 1982. I also knew the massacre still loomed large in peoples minds. We had touched upon it in one of our *Bush Mechanics* episodes and there had been various attempts to tell the Yapa (Aboriginal) side of the story, especially by Francis. The senseless waste of human life, family members gunned down, lives changed forever. Then the enormous sense of loss, something I was dealing with myself with the recent death of my eldest son. I thought of the need for mainstream Australia to honour our fallen soldiers on Anzac day and the solemn promise, "lest we forget". So in the hearts and minds of the Warlpiri and neighbouring tribes, this was their war... one they lost to the invaders. A story so pivotal in shaping their lives, they wanted the rest of Australia to know about it and their children to never forget. I was honoured to be involved.

A few months later I set out with Francis Kelly, Adrian Nelson (from the original *Bush Mechanics*) and Gabrielle Brady from PAW Media traversing the countryside. We travelled north as far as Tennant Creek, south to Alice Springs and west to the Granites in the Tanami desert. We spoke to and interviewed anyone who still alive who was there, or had a story to tell.

This continued over the next two years. It was important we cast a wide net to get the best storytellers and the correct informants. Being an oral history, details varied from place to place, person to person but the core elements to the story remained the same.



1



2



3



4



5

1-2: DAVID BATTY 3: CAMERA CREW WITH DIRECTORS 4: HUGH MILLER WITH DAVID BATTY 5: DAVID BATTY

But rather than the traditional... Interview...cut to drama....interview, we present the process of making the film within the film. This has given the film a certain charm and some lighter moments amongst the stories of grief and killing. This style has also brought the story into the world of the Yapa today and in turn highlighting how present the events still are in people's minds.

The task of writing fell on my shoulders, in close consultation with Francis, deferring to his knowledge as well as that of producer Jeni McMahon. After months of discussions, writing and research we eventually settled on a script which involved dramatic elements, interviews and a bit of the old Warlpiri magic. Rather than dealing with the shooting and killing with metaphorical gallahs screeching from trees, shadows and crash zooms we decided on a more realistic approach... guns, horses, blood and sorry business.

The drama shoot was approaching fast and we still needed actors. David Field, a seasoned film and TV actor from Sydney was on board to play the dingo trapper Fred Brooks. But with Yuendumu dealing with serious community issues it soon became apparent we needed to look outside the community for the rest. Francis and his family suggested the Jones's from Cockatoo creek outstation, they were the closest living relatives to the main protagonist and whitefella murderer, Bullfrog. A drive to their little family outstation found Harry Jones and the whole Jones tribe. They agreed on the spot to be the main actors, proud to have the opportunity to tell their family history.

Francis and I had always assumed we would shoot the drama at the very spot where Fred Brooks was murdered at Yurrkuru, now known as Brooks soak. Ironically Yurrkuru is in the midst of a pastoral lease and when the station owners got wind of us wanting to film there

were all kinds of demands and conditions. This upset Francis greatly. So ironic that the Warlpiri were still locked out of a place they were angry about losing to the pastoralists back in 1928.

So far I had shot all the interviews and documentary material myself, but we wanted a different look and feel for the narrative elements. We needed a DOP with drama experience, remote Aboriginal community experience, able to work in difficult terrain, extreme heat, sleep in a tent for two weeks and not complain! The only choice was Hugh Miller. The last time we worked with Hugh was on Bush Mechanics, when he was just out of film school. Back then he was our camera assistant, stills photographer and qualified mechanic. After much to-ing and fro-ing with schedules, we finally locked Hugh in and the last major element of the drama shoot was sorted. Hugh suggested we use a set of old sixties Cooke lenses to distinguish the re-enactments from the



1: DIRECTORS FRANCIS KELLY AND DAVID BATTY 2: LOCATION RECCE WITH PRODUCER JENI MCMAHON, DIRECTORS, DAVID BATTY AND FRANCIS KELLY 3: DIRECTORS FRANCIS KELLY AND DAVID BATTY WITH TOMMY THOMPSON 4: LES MCLAUGHLIN WITH 'CAMEL CAM' 5: DOP HUGH MILLER, SOUND REC BEN BANKS AND DIRECTOR DAVID BATTY 6: CARSON BROWN, ELIJAH JONES (CAST) WITH DIRECTOR FRANCIS KELLY 7: DIRECTORS FRANCIS KELLY (BACK) AND DAVID BATTY

documentary. We did a few camera tests with the old lenses and it was perfect. They gave a soft, flared cinematic look, which really evoked a feel for the desert landscape and the era.

With money being tight we couldn't afford to take the horses, camels and actors 350 km out past Yuendumu, so we pulled together a cast of locals in Alice Springs and shot all the horse and gun scenes just out of town. This meant we shot half the massacre scenes near Alice and the reverse scenes nearly 400km away a week later. Hugh Miller worked within these constraints beautifully.

To shoot the rest of the drama we built a camp about an hour to the west of Yuendumu. A deserted outstation served as the HQ. We erected tarps, shade and dragged out a water tanker. We used solar power for charging batteries and watching rushes. All up there were around thirty to forty campers. As well

as the camera crew we had a make up, props, first A.D., sound recordist, the actors and their families. Meals were rudimentary as was everything else. Our shoot days were punctuated by 45 degree heat, dust storms, bushfires, smoke and stomach bugs. Francis was on hand to direct the Yapa in language and I was glued to a monitor off the camera, watching every shot. In no time it became apparent that Fiona Kitson (Bullfrog's wife) and her real life husband Elijah Jones (Bullfrog) were perfect. Their acting was totally natural. They brought immense power and emotion to every scene.

It was a tough ten-day shoot but thanks to a crack team of absolute professionals we knew we had something pretty special.

Editing in an Aboriginal languages always presents its difficulties. Everything must be translated before you can commence the edit. After 9 weeks in the edit room

we arrived at a rough cut, three weeks later a finished film. For me the process is always one of constant deferment back to my collaborators. Piecing things together to get the story right, the mood, creating tensions and making sure everything is clear to the viewer.

Coniston has been made "the proper way". The end result being something shaped from years of crafting and perseverance. A conglomeration of ideas, thoughts and dedication by a core team of people such as producer Jeni McMahon, executive producer Susan Locke, editor Bergen O'Brien and associate producer Gabrielle Brady.

Almost three years after that initial phone call, the story of the shocking events that played out in 1928 has now been told. *Coniston* has given a voice to the forgotten victims of Australia's last known massacre.



1–3: DIRECTOR FRANCIS JUPURRULA KELLY 4: FRANCIS KELLY DIRECTING 5–6: FRANCIS KELLY 7: FRANCIS KELLY WITH CAST

By the end, the audience is shifted into the mindset of those who lost family - and country - to the whiteman. This is a story of injustice. I hope they are moved in some way and gain insight into a lesser known story of frontier injustice. Make some connections with these events and the state of things today.

## Interview 2: Francis Jupurrula Kelly

Making films is about keeping our stories safe. It's also about making films in the proper way culturally. So the stories and the way we make films are all about keeping our culture strong, and they have to go together that way. You can't make strong yapa films without the strength of culture supporting the decisions that need to be made.

And it's really important that those films are owned by us and kept in our own archives. For a long time people came in and made films about us, and took those

films away. We need those films to come back to us and for us to be able to look after the images and voices of the people in those films in the proper way.

The responsibility is to make films through the right channel of land and people. We make films about the old people, and we join with them when we are making the films. This makes our films, and what we are doing, grow the right way.

The responsibility is to have the proper feelings. To feel the country and the people and the spirit of the film that wants to come out. - that's the responsibility. Your responsibility is to make sure that the feelings are true feelings. We made a lot of the Coniston film at Jutarangi (an outstation near Yuendumu). The country let us do that. It helped make the story come out the right way - we held the responsibility for that land the correct way, working together with the families for that place. We yapa didn't get sick because it was done the right way.

A no good film is forgetting that responsibility - the responsibility to make sure that the feelings of land and people are the first things that need to be taken account of in the making of a film.

I hope people will ask "how can this have been allowed to happen". These stories about what has happened to Aboriginal people aren't really known about by kardiya. You think about Maralinga - not many people know about the hundreds of yapa that got sick or died. There are many other stories of terrible things that people don't know about, so that's what I want for people to say also "why didn't we know these things". And I want them to feel and to know that these things weren't a long long time ago, these things are in living memory.

24 Do you think the film achieves its aims?

24 Do you think Coniston is a good film? Explain your views.

**Table 1**

A: Aspect of history	B: WHAT THE FILM <i>CONISTON</i> TELLS US ABOUT THIS	C: WHAT OTHER INFORMATION TELLS US ABOUT THIS
Context		
What happened		
When		
Where		
Who was involved		
How it happened		
Why		
Outcomes		
Impacts		
Significance of the events		

**Table 2**

Name of the person giving information	MAIN EVIDENCE OR INFORMATION ABOUT THE EVENTS THAT THEY PROVIDE	TYPE OF EVIDENCE: THE SOURCE OF THEIR KNOWLEDGE – EYE-WITNESS OR ORAL TRADITION
CORAL NAPANGARDI GALLAGHER		
TOMMY KNGWARRAYE THOMPSON		
DINNY JAMPINJINPA NOLAN		
JACK JANGALA COOK		
HENRY JAKAMARRA COOK		
HARRY JAKAMARRA NELSON		
ALBERT JAKAMARRA WILSON		
FRANCIS JUPURRURLA KELLY		
NED JUNGARRAYI KELLY		
MYRTLE NAPURRURLA DIXON		
GEORGE JAPANGARDI MARSHALL		
DORA NAPALJARRI KITSON		
JOHNNY JUPURRURLA NELSON		
AUDREY NANGALA RANKINE		

Table 3

ASPECT	COMMENTS
Does <i>Coniston</i> present the main facts accurately?	
Does it contribute to your understanding of why events happened?	
Does it help you empathise with people of the past – to see what life must have been like for them?	
Does the film provide a variety of perspectives on events? Is this necessary?	
Does the film explain the outcomes of the events?	
Does the film explain the significance of the issue?	
Are any judgements made by the film fair and supported by the evidence?	

Table 4

ASPECT	COMMENTS
STRUCTURE OF THE FILM	
NARRATION AND SCRIPT	
MUSIC	
HISTORIC STILL AND MOVING IMAGES	
DOCUMENTS FROM THE TIME	
DRAMATIC RECONSTRUCTIONS	
EDITING	
SOUND	
CINEMATOGRAPHY	
USE OF FAMILY AS ACTORS	
SPECIAL EFFECTS	

## OTHER RESOURCES

The most thorough study of the Coniston massacre is John Cribbin, *The Killing Times*, Fontana Collins, Sydney, 1984. Unfortunately it is out of print and no longer readily available.

The best recent study is Bill Wilson and Justin O'Brien, "To infuse an universal terror": a reappraisal of the Coniston killings', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 27, 2003 pp. 59–76.

A thorough account, using plenty of first-hand evidence, is Dick Kimber, 'Real true history: the Coniston Massacre in 18 instalments', *Alice Springs News* 10

September 2003 – 11 February 2004.

There is a good summary in Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coniston\\_massacre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coniston_massacre)

There is a thorough classroom approach in the Coniston case study at the subscription site <http://www.australianhistorymysteries.info>.

The transcript of the findings of the *Board of Enquiry concerning the killing of natives in Central Australia by Police Parties and others, and concerning other matters*, Commonwealth of Australia, 18 January 1929 is at <http://naa12.naa.gov.au/scripts/Imagine>.

[asp?B=66518&I=1&SE=1](http://www.clc.org.au/Media/publications/coniston/7small.pdf).

There is information in the Central Land Council, *Making Peace With the Past: Remembering the Coniston Massacre, 1928–2003*, Alice Springs, 2003, <http://www.clc.org.au/Media/publications/coniston/7small.pdf>.

Many school libraries will have a copy of Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle*. Chapter 12 is about the Coniston Massacre, but is not recommended – Elder imagines much of the information that he has in his chapter, and does not let the reader know what is fact and what is fiction.



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