S. Gapps, The Sydney Wars: Conflict in the Early Colony, 1788–1817 (Sydney: NewSouth, 2018), 319pp, AUD34.99, paperback

Reviewed by Padraic Gibson

This is a fascinating, detailed history of the warfare between British forces and Aboriginal people of the Sydney basin (roughly, the area bordered by the Blue Mountains to the west, the Nepean River to the south-west and the Hawkesbury River to the north of Sydney) and hinterlands: the traditional country of the Eora, Dharug, Gandangarra, Tharrawal and Darkinjung peoples. It is an important contribution to the history of settler-colonial violence and genocide in Australia.

The events documented in this book and the impacts of colonial invasion are routinely denied and bitterly contested in public memory: the landing at Sydney Cove in 1788 is celebrated by “Australia Day”, a national holiday, despite more than 80 years of protest led by Aboriginal people. Gapps does not bother to address the arguments from conservative politicians and commentators who still try to deny what took place was an invasion. The position is absurd when you are presented with the writing of the military officers who established the colony. Many had experience fighting guerrilla insurgencies in other parts of the Empire. They knew very well they would need to wage war to secure territory and carefully planned for this war.

Instead, the main foils for Gapps’ arguments are the cultural histories about early Sydney, work sympathetic to Aboriginal people, but often blind to the underlying military dynamic governing the entire pattern of relations:

[Military officers] Watkin Tench and William Dawes recorded how Aboriginal people equated Europeans with muskets. At its simplest level, this reminds us what underpinned all negotiations, all encounters, all attempts at comprehending, surviving and resisting the British invasion of the Sydney region. (273)

While there was far greater firepower in the hands of the British and a willingness to use this without mercy to secure stolen land, Gapps develops a detailed picture of the many advantages also enjoyed by Aboriginal guerrilla fighters, particularly their far superior knowledge of the landscape and superior numbers. Where some historians have struggled to unpack the meaning of seemingly random attacks on convicts outside the settlement in Sydney Cove in 1788 for example, Gapps focuses on the overall strategic picture – Aboriginal warriors had effective control of all territory outside the small military encampment on the harbour. Arthur Phillip, the colony’s first governor, prohibited colonists from leaving the camp unless part of an armed party of more than six men. Aboriginal attacks had a clear logic,
to contain “the threat the colonists posed to the economic resources of the harbour area and [to stop] their expansion out of Sydney Cove” (53).

This military logic also decisively shaped the pattern of geographic expansion across Sydney. The foundation stones for the contemporary city of Sydney were laid down to fight a counter-insurgency war. Early surveyors travelled out under armed guard to map out potential farm land that was not only fertile but also in defensible positions. The first colonial structures built outside Sydney Cove, at the head of the Parramatta river in August 1788, were erected by “a full-blown military expedition into enemy territory” (47). These were fortifications and a military barracks, on top of a hill chosen for strategic reasons. An “Old Government House” still stands on this hill today.

Phillip wrote home to Britain requesting more troops after just a few months in the colony, stressing the urgency of greater firepower if there was to be any hope of securing land for agriculture. This began a pattern repeated by every Governor who followed him for the three decades considered by the book – each faced moments of desperation brought on by the effectiveness of armed resistance and demanded more troops.

In 1789, the colony was given a reprieve by the devastating impact that a smallpox epidemic had on local Aboriginal people. More than half of the Black population was wiped out. Gapps only offers brief commentary on the hotly debated question of whether “galgala”, as Aboriginal people called the sickness, was deliberately introduced by the British military. He argues it was most likely not, and that a focus on the origin of infection has distracted from understanding the decisive impact of galgala on the dynamics of invasion and resistance. Without the mass death of local people, the colony may not have been able to establish agriculture and survive.

Gapps’ dismissal of the terms of the debate over smallpox with a few short lines seems unfair. Warren (2014), for example, has built a detailed case that officers below Phillip most likely deliberately unleashed the disease, precisely because of their precarious military position. Gapps’ criticisms of other historical works are only ever offered in this cursory manner. It would have been useful to see a more explicitly developed critique of the “cultural histories” (8) he takes issue with, such as Karskens (2009) and Clendinnen (2005). However, the advantage of Gapps developing his own narrative rather than focusing on debates with other historians is that The Sydney Wars is easy to read and accessible to a wider audience.

Perhaps, the most original feature of Gapps’ analysis is the way he shows that establishing agricultural settlements across the Sydney basin was a thoroughly militarized process. Before the First Fleet sailed, the British had developed a plan to place soldiers in the vanguard of farming in Sydney, offering generous grants of lands and money to ensure a class of settler with the military training needed to defend crops and homesteads – and go on the offensive against guerrilla fighters.
The majority of settlers on the Cumberland Plain spreading out from Parramatta in the early 1790s had military experience. Soldiers were garrisoned at strategic positions such as Prospect Hill, ready to mobilize. “Constables” were selected from amongst the settler population, to help integrate all settlers into a fighting force alongside the military when required. Even convicts tending to stock were armed.

Black resistance decisively influenced where settlement took place and how the land was used across Sydney. Phillip radically realigned his expansion strategy in the early 1790s in response to intensifying attacks by Aboriginal warriors, ensuring “the originally planned system of land grants, which would have shaped a very different landscape in the Sydney region, was transformed by defensive measures against the Sydney people” (97). In particular, land between settlements, planned as Crown Land reserves, was given over to private settlers, so they could clear forest to deprive warriors of cover and join paramilitary operations when needed. Outlying farms were consistently abandoned at times of intense fighting right up until 1816, and known fertile areas were not settled for two decades due to their vulnerability.

There were some horrific attacks on Aboriginal people in this period by convicts and private settlers. But the book demonstrates clearly how the overall war was decisively directed by a colonial ruling class also wrestling with deep anxiety about potential rebellion from within the colony itself. They took strenuous efforts to suppress any nascent moves towards co-operation between Aboriginal fighters and discontented Whites. Large rewards were placed on the heads of escaped convicts and other Europeans who were living in the bush and joining Aboriginal raiding parties. Perhaps more important were punitive measures put in place from the 1790s onwards to force sympathetic settlers to expel all Aboriginal people residing on their farms at times of heightened conflict. All settlers were also compelled to join paramilitary operations.

In a thought-provoking challenge to almost all the history currently written about armed conflict with Aboriginal people, Gapps concludes his book by rejecting the utility of the term “frontier wars”:

The “frontier” is always the edge of the expanding colonial centre rather than warfare conducted inside Aboriginal lands. The term also fails to highlight guerilla warfare and other forms of resistance that occurred well behind the frontier. (272)

Even in the third decade after the initial invasion, Aboriginal attacks were taking place close to the heartlands of Sydney. As parties of hundreds of Black warriors were launching devastating raids on outlying settlements along the Nepean River south towards the Illawarra during the fierce fighting of 1814–1816, there were raids on farms at Lane Cove (only 10 kilometres north-west of the city) and
travellers on the Parramatta Road (the main artery linking Sydney to Parramatta 20 kilometres west) were still on guard against attacks.

The fighting in 1814–1816 involved large war parties, sometimes hundreds of mostly Gandangarra people, who used their traditional mountain homelands as a base to raid settlements on the fringes of the Cumberland Plane along the Nepean river, forcing many to be abandoned. Gapps argues that Dharrawal people from much further south travelled to join these raids, understanding clearly what was at stake if White settlement was allowed to push beyond the Sydney basin.

Their efforts were greatly enhanced by participation in the raids by Aboriginal people who had grown up in and around the new colony, speaking fluent English and with working knowledge of firearms and farming practices. Working together, these groups developed sophisticated tactics to overcome the superior firepower of British muskets and enjoy some decisive victories. The lists of wanted Black outlaws from this time included English names such as Rachel, Myles and Carbone Jack. In 1815, a 13-year-old Aboriginal girl raised from infancy by a White settler burned down her master’s house in the Hawkesbury in the midst of raids on surrounding properties.

The ultimate victory of Lachlan Macquarie, the fifth governor of the colony, in 1816 against armed Aboriginal resistance coming from the mountains also required punitive measures directed against all Aboriginal people in Sydney. Black people on all farms were banned from gathering in groups of more than six, and carrying spears was prohibited (even for popular sporting contests) within a mile of any farm or township. Foreshadowing the “Protection” system implemented in Australia from the late nineteenth century, which inspired Apartheid in South Africa, Aboriginal people who wanted to live “peaceably” in Sydney were forced to carry a special passport signed by the Governor.

But on the fringes of the Cumberland Plain, and into the mountains, it was the “punitive raid” – the massacre party – that proved decisive in crushing the resistance. This British tactic was used under every Governor at critical moments in the war. It always involved an attack on Aboriginal camps around dawn, allowing troops to fire before anyone knew what was happening. This overcame the main weakness of muskets – the length of time required to reload. Entire families were slaughtered, heads cut off, bodies mutilated and hung from trees to “strike terror” into anyone contemplating further resistance. This tactic, perfected in the Sydney Wars, would be used across the continent in the wars to come.

For a reader such as myself, who grew up and lives on the lands of Dharug people, *The Sydney Wars* allows for a far deeper appreciation of the ways that the landscape we move through has been profoundly shaped by the dynamics of invasion and resistance. Driving across the Blue Mountains from Penrith for example will never be the same, now I know the original road was built under armed guard
and required “search and destroy” attacks on Aboriginal people through the valleys on both sides of the road to ensure safe passage for colonists. The deeply inequitable property system we have in this city today rests on a foundation of genocidal war. The armed resistance to this system may have been defeated 200 years ago in Sydney, but it continues to inspire Aboriginal people, and their supporters, to challenge the legitimacy of the invasion and demand justice.

Padraic Gibson, Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney, Australia.

References