

Stephen Gapps' *The Sydney Wars: Conflict in the Early Colony, 1788-1817*

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Stephen Gapps' *The Sydney Wars* covers the period of conflict in the Sydney Basin area between 1788 and 1817, detailing the various battles and massacres that took place in the early years of the Sydney colony. The book promotes itself as the first 'detailed account' of these conflicts in the Sydney area, and detailed it is. Gapps weaves together contemporary accounts from diaries, official dispatches to the British Empire, news reports and court testimony to present a thorough reckoning of the destruction dealt to lives and property across the three decades from first European contact. He paints a nuanced picture of the conflict which offers, in some respects, a dissenting voice in the narrative surrounding these frontier wars – a term Gapps himself takes some issue with.

Gapps places constant emphasis on the description of these conflicts as a *war*. He highlights the use of military tactics in the construction of outposts as the colony spread west to Parramatta, of the enlistment of militias in the protection of person and property, and again and again the language of the diarists and journalists of the time, who had no qualms characterising the violence between whites and Aboriginal people as a 'war'. Throughout the accounts provided by the various governors, from Arthur Phillip to Lachlan Macquarie, he points out an insistence that attacks by Aboriginal warriors on colonists were generally a response to ill-treatment of the Aboriginal people by settlers and convicts. Gapps does not suggest this was due to particularly charitable attitudes towards Aboriginal people; instead, he points out a reluctance on the part of colonists to recognise that Aboriginal people were engaging in a military conflict. Instead, various raids, skirmishes, battles and individual killings were characterised as retaliatory attacks, or acts of malice or greed. Theft of food was attributed to Aboriginal people being too lazy to cultivate their own, and destruction of crops was met with bafflement by many colonists, who did not conceive of these attacks as an attempt to push back the frontier or as an economic attack on the colony. Even physical attacks on the colonists were often attributed to the influence of white convicts and rogue settlers who had joined the Aboriginal people, their wayward influence being the instigating factor for attacks, rather than an Aboriginal desire to see off the colonists. Gapps makes these inferences instead, and encourages the reader to interpret these acts as military strategy, not isolated and purely opportunistic attacks. He criticises contemporary historians for, in his view, encouraging the interpretation that Aboriginal peoples were not engaged in a war effort to preserve their territories, and for underestimating the military abilities and expertise of



various tribes. Throughout the book, he questions the assumption that Aboriginal people were afraid of and baffled by firearms – “...thunder that sent down invisible spears,” as Henry Reynolds writes in *The Other Side Of The Frontier*, but not considered nearly so fearsome a threat in the accounts Gapps presents. He contests that they behaved passively or reactively in the face of colonist violence and that they did not engage in military tactics.

Gapps offers fascinating analysis of these assumptions, but unfortunately only in the last few chapters of the book. For the most part, he relies on his primary and secondary sources, with occasional interjection to point out possible areas of bias or to mention something particularly interesting. The effect can be somewhat dry. Where his writing shines is in those last few chapters, where he calls historians to account, acknowledging the shortfalls of Australian military history as it pertains to those first few decades of colonial conflict. It would be more effective, perhaps, to incorporate said analysis more into the descriptive histories provided in the main body of the book. Gapps acknowledges the lacunae in contemporary accounts of the conflict – Aboriginal casualties were rarely counted, colonist recounts of battles were exaggerated or understated depending on political expediency, and a great deal of the Aboriginal perspective at the time is only relayed, second or third hand, through the words of colonists. Gapps attempts to cross reference facts such as the number of casualties through a variety of sources, and where Aboriginal people are named in historical accounts, he provides these names and their stories. He gives accounts of the well-known Aboriginal men of the time, such as Bennelong and Pemulwuy. This kind of history is, by its nature, quite narrowly focused on the ‘great men’ it describes, on both the Aboriginal and colonial sides of the conflict. It is not of the breadth W.E.H. Stanner called for in his Boyer lectures on the topic of Aboriginal Australian history, and it restricts itself to the colonist accounts of these important figures in the history of Aboriginal warfare. This is, perhaps, unavoidable in a book which restricts itself to the military history of the conflict. As Gapps points out, much has been written in the strain of ‘ethno-history’ which Stanner called for, though he does not suggest that what has been written in this style of history is necessarily sufficient – he acknowledges the inadequacies of Australian historians on all fronts.

The Sydney Wars is an old kind of history covering a new topic, relative to the vintage of other topics of military history. It succeeds in providing an exceedingly thorough account of these wars, and a compelling analysis of their history and historiography. While this analysis could afford to be more integrated in the recounts, it nonetheless raises interesting and important questions about the assumptions which underpin much historical writing on Aboriginal resistance to colonialism, and suggests a greater deal of agency on the part of Aboriginal people in these wars than has been previously acknowledged. Gapps presents a shifting and subtle account of the colonial attitudes to the conflict, and rigorous historical recount besides. The book is, overall, an important addition to the history of Aboriginal existence and resistance in this country.

References

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