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War on the frontier

Mario Draper
University of Kent

Martin Kerby
University of Southern Queensland

Margaret Baguley
University of Southern Queensland

ABSTRACT

This article explores current historical thinking regarding the ‘small wars’ fought on the frontiers of European empires during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By drawing on a variety of examples ranging from South Africa to Bolivia and Australia to the Congo, the authors identify three major themes - the expansionist aims of imperial governments often being shrouded in a veneer of benevolence, the brutal fighting that occurred when Indigenous populations challenged the loss of traditional lands, and the speed with which the ostensibly ‘civilised’ European colonists discarded battlefield norms when they waged what were in effect wars of annihilation. In a challenge to the thematic or narrow temporal boundaries that have traditionally dominated scholarship, the authors avoid characterising these wars in discrete national terms. For though every frontier conflict possessed its own unique character, there are broad similarities that can be explored through an analysis of European thinking regarding these ‘small wars’ and the violence and destruction that accompanied them.

KEYWORDS

European empires, Frontier Wars, Genocide, Small Wars

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Introduction

Science fiction fans may well have been premature in celebrating the much-anticipated return of the *Star Trek* American science fiction media franchise in 2009. The series was created by Gene Roddenberry and began with the iconic 1960s television series which followed the voyages of the crew of the starship USS *Enterprise*. *Star Trek* became a global pop-culture phenomenon resulting in films, television series, video games, novels, and comic books. However, it was not until the third modern movie in the series, *Star Trek Beyond* (2016) that viewers were exposed to something more than a big budget space opera. Nevertheless, its engagement with some deeper themes is only peripheral and is primarily confined to the film's antagonist, Krall, "a reptilian Che Guevara-type" played by Idris Elba (Seitz, 2016, para. 7). His plan is as grandiose as any of the cinematographic villains who have graced our film screens. In his case, there are serious political undertones in his desire to lead the peoples inhabiting the frontiers of the universe in an armed challenge to the Federation of Planet's expansionist agenda. It is this agenda which various incarnations of the USS *Enterprise* have served during their five-year mission which first began in 1965 and ended in 1968, the year during which the limits of American imperialism were laid bare in Vietnam. Although the "fake brand of benevolence" (Seitz, 2016, para. 10) that pervades the Federation's actions bear more than a passing resemblance to the ideological imperatives underpinning centuries of Imperial expansion, the legitimacy of Krall's actions is an issue left to the individual viewer. Of course, this clash between Indigenous societies and an Empire intent on expansion is not confined to Gene Roddenberry's creation. It is now a dominant theme in contemporary science fiction, whether it be the New Order and the Empire in *Star Wars* another eponymous science fiction media franchise created by George Lucas in 1977, the more benign though no less determined Alliance in *Firefly* an American space Western television series created by Josh Whedon in 2005 and later movie *Serenity* (2005), or a host of other fictional conflicts fought "where no man (sic) has gone before."

The Indigenous populations faced with annihilation in the 'real world' would not have characterised themselves as living where no man has gone before, nor would they have concurred with the pejorative view that they were engaged in 'small wars'. To European militaries, however, this description reflected deeply entrenched views about warfare generally and the pitched battle specifically.

Despite its horror and savagery, a pitched battle [is] a contained and economical way of resolving a dispute between two warring groups or countries ... a blessing, an institution that by its very nature contains the violence of war. Indeed, in its classic form, as it existed before the late nineteenth century, a pitched battle was supposed to be a beautifully contained event. (Whitman, 2012, p. 4)

From the 1860s, however, it is clear, at least in retrospect, that warfare could no longer be contained to the battlefield; the era of decisive battle was over (Keegan, 2009). Despite some anomalies, for European powers such as Great Britain and France, the nineteenth century was an age dominated by small wars fought on the frontier of Empire. Ian Beckett's article *Indigenous Resistance in the Anglo-Zulu War*, which opens this special theme issue, owes at least some of its resonance to the fact that the Zulus were in fact keen to fight a pitched battle. At Isandlwana on 22 January 1879 they inflicted the worst single day's loss of life suffered by British troops between the battle of Waterloo in June 1815 and the opening campaigns of the Great War in August 1914. In passing this great military test, they won the respect of the very Empire which would ultimately defeat them in a seven-month conflict that cost a mere £5.2 million. In terms of the human and financial treasure of the European Empires, the cost of conflicts such as the Anglo-Zulu War fall far short of that demanded by the total wars of the twentieth century. However, as this special theme issue will show, they were nevertheless often violent and brutal affairs that usually ended in the dispossession and destruction of Indigenous societies.

Readers of this special theme issue might well be interested by the fact that the earliest use of *Star Trek's* iconic opening was by Captain James Cook who wished to go "farther than any man has been before me, but as far as I think it is possible for a man to go" (Glyn, 2011, para. 3). It is also worth noting that statues to Cook, long regarded as one of history's greatest explorers, have regularly been vandalised in Australia for his perceived links to colonial expansion and Indigenous genocide. Modern attitudes to a nation's imperial past have undergone a seismic change. This re-evaluation has as its most visible expression the vandalising of statues raised to honour 'Heroes of Empire' or their removal by governments now embarrassed by the history they commemorate. This special theme issue of *Historical Encounters* bears testament to the extent of the problem, with articles exploring conflicts in places ranging from South Africa to Bolivia and Australia to the Congo. Across the different contexts various themes emerge, with three being particularly prominent – the expansionist aims of imperial governments often being shrouded in a veneer of benevolence, the brutal fighting that occurred when Indigenous populations challenged the loss of traditional lands, and the speed with which the ostensibly 'civilised' European colonists discarded battlefield norms when they waged what were in effect wars of annihilation.

Small wars and the destruction of Indigenous societies

In 1887 a little-known artillery captain by the name of Charles E. Callwell published a prize-winning article in the *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute* (RUSI) entitled 'Lessons to be Learnt from the Campaigns in which British Forces have been Employed since the Year 1865'. In it, he reflected upon the British experience of 'minor' imperial campaigning which, except for the Crimean War (1854-56), had dominated the practice of soldiering since 1815 (Callwell, 1877). These 'small wars', as Callwell would come to describe them in his seminal 1896 publication of the same name, provided the army with first-hand experience of combat that could not be replicated in the classroom, on the parade ground, or during annual manoeuvres (Callwell, 1898). Its value lay in its frequency, which contrasted sharply with the established conception of 'real' war, characterised by conventional, inter-state conflicts fought between regular armies. In a European setting, only the German Wars of Unification (1864-1871) had truly afforded the Great Powers an opportunity to test and hone their fighting capabilities against one another, leading to an inexorable race to imitate the victorious Prussians who had practically converted the art of war into a science overnight.

Yet, as Callwell's publications demonstrated, the lessons to be learned were as varied as the nature of the wars themselves. From causes to conclusions, tactics to strategy, not to mention the primacy of intelligence and aggression, *Small Wars* offered much to ponder and even more in terms of practical experience to an army that, otherwise, had few opportunities to test itself. In France, Hubert Lyautey's *Du rôle colonial de l'armée*, published in the *Revue des deux mondes* in early 1900, similarly reflected upon principles which might influence French fighting methods – albeit in an army more recently digesting the reasons for its defeat in Europe in 1870 (Lyautey, 1900). Collectively, works like these began the process of synthesising past and current experiences into a meaningful sub-field of military inquiry which, as Ian Beckett noted in the opening issue of the much-celebrated journal *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (1990), helped to establish the roots of modern counter-insurgency theory which would later be refined in the period 1900-1945 (Beckett, 1990, pp. 47-48).

Efforts to absorb the lessons of these 'small wars' were, at best, intermittent. As Mario Draper observes in his article *The Force Publique and Frontier Warfare in the Late 19th Century Congo Free State*, frontier conflicts that extended beyond the British and French context were under-theorised despite providing tactical lessons. In the case of Belgium, they served to contribute to the establishment of a colonial military tradition independent of its larger colonial neighbours. His exploration of the *Force Publique* of the Congo Free State is particularly valuable because modern scholarship has only rarely sought to situate it within the wider sphere of colonial conflict. This absence of scholarship has been particularly surprising given that the *Force Publique's* campaigns were anything other than one dimensional, ranging as they did from limited actions

against enemies as varied as Indigenous tribes to African empires, and from wars of conquest to counter-insurgency operations.

Nevertheless, the analysis of small wars that occurred contemporaneously to events did not constitute the first modern studies of 'small wars.' Military theorists as celebrated as Carl von Clausewitz had considered the nature of irregular warfare almost a century earlier, as applied to the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Yet his was primarily a preoccupation with the partisan of Europe rather than the Indigenous warrior of empire (Heuser, 2010; Rink, 2010). In time this character would evolve into the *guerrilla* and the *franc tireur* within the broader conceptualisation of a 'people's war' (Förster & Nagler, 1997, pp. 5-6). The disinclination to fully embrace the lessons of frontier conflict or to frame them within European modes of thinking have continued into the modern day. Samuel Duckett White's *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels: A Modern Military Interpretation Economic Warfare* is a particularly opportune example of this limitation in thinking. Despite some growing scholarly interest in the wars fought on the Australian frontier, many contemporary works that challenge a 'massacre' narrative remain incomplete:

... for the most part, we are still telling an invaders' story from an invaders' perspectives. The motives, strategies, and manoeuvres of First Nations peoples remain poorly understood. We are supposed to believe that, although their world was being rapidly destroyed, they could not find it in themselves to mobilise a meaningful resistance. (Kerkhove, 2023, pp. 1 – 2)

White posits that the Indigenous understanding of European settlement's 'centre of gravity' made it particularly vulnerable to a well-orchestrated waging of economic warfare. Though it is not widely acknowledged, as it was practiced along multiple frontiers in Australia by First Nations groups, it was a sophisticated and remarkably effective assault on the fragile economies of colonial Australia. Notably, White also makes a compelling case for its value in any study of modern military operations, an assessment which is, if anything, even less widely shared.

By contrast, small wars, as Daniel Whittingham has noted, became an inherently Eurocentric term suggestive of the irregular or Indigenous fighter on the periphery; something and somewhere diametrically opposed to the established and accepted norms of European war and against whom the written or unwritten rules of engagement did not apply (Whittingham, 2020, p. 39). Consequently, small wars, as Dierk Walter remarked, were often "hallmarked by an apparently indiscriminate brutality which was only remotely matched within the core territory of the Western world between the Thirty Years' War and the Second World War by a few exceptional situations" (Walter, 2017, p. 150). The desire to force a quick decision against an ephemeral foe, who blended into the topography and local population lent itself to greater aggression against combatants and non-combatants alike. Often, it proved difficult to distinguish between them, resulting in increasingly population-centric strategies that legitimized violence through casting Indigenous peoples as ruthless 'savages' or 'infidels' who opposed the spread of civilization.

Modern historiography often refuses to recognise thematic or narrow temporal boundaries, as Jay Winter and Antoine Prost (2004) so notably observed of the Great War. For decades, the war was imagined in discrete national terms, with historiography committed to the belief that every nation had its own Great War. The same has traditionally been true of research into frontier conflict. Draper challenges this understanding in his study of the *Force Publique* and Janne Lahti does the same in his article *Settler Colonial Violence in the American Southwest and German Southwest Africa*. Lahti argues that colonial violence in the American Southwest and in German Southwest Africa have seldom been compared by historians. Presumably, in many cases, societies likewise had their own unique experience of frontier conflict. Nevertheless, the racialisation that "further widened the divide between conventional and small wars" (Porch, 2013, p. 26) was, as Lahti shows, typically a major feature of frontier conflicts. The violence in the American southwest was, for example, never simply a response to Indigenous raids or a fear of savage tribes descending on white settlements. It was a war of annihilation waged by state and state-sanctioned forces, Indigenous polities, corporate mercenaries, and private people and ranged

from individual acts of murder to mob lynching and ultimately, to genocide. The very existence of the Native American Apaches and Yavapais peoples appeared to justify their extermination, which until the Holocaust was not usually a feature of war as it was fought in a European context. On the frontier, however, it was widely embraced as a justifiable means to an end.

While increasingly unpalatable to a more discerning public back home, commanders on the ground frequently played upon the real and imagined separation between them and the metropole to pursue any means necessary to deliver results, safe in the knowledge that no respectable government would willingly reject another imperial *fait accompli*. Whereas many small wars were conducted with a clear diplomatic or military aim in mind – even if the operational and tactical methods were left to the discretion of its executioners – others suffered terribly from a distinct absence of political oversight. Isabel V. Hull's work into German imperialism has shown how the absence of defined strategic goals created a vacuum in which operational imperatives expanded to fill the void. This produced terrible consequences for the Herero in its Southwest African holdings (present-day Namibia) in the early 20th Century (Hull, 2005, pp. 5-90). Lahti outlines in some detail what these 'terrible consequences' looked like in his analysis of German colonialism in Africa in his article *Settler Colonial Violence in the American Southwest and German Southwest Africa*. Instead of engaging with international parallels, he argues that scholars have often linked German actions in Southwest Africa to the Nazis and the Holocaust. Indeed, the genocide of the African ethnic Herero and Namaqua peoples has now been recognised by both the United Nations and by the Federal Republic of Germany (Zimmerer & Zeller, 2016). In May 2021 the German government accepted responsibility by establishing a \$1.3 billion compensation fund.

The absence of German Southwest Africa from many discussions about colonial genocide emphasises that not all frontier wars are equal in the cultural memory. For example, Marcela Mendoza's article *Bolivian Settlers and Toba Peoples: Appropriation of Indigenous Lands on the Chaco Plains in the 1800s* explores Indigenous dispossession and extermination in the Bolivian Chaco, a development that has made only limited impact on Anglo-Saxon historiography. Aside from being a fascinating example of frontier conflict, it was an important feature of Bolivian nation building, because the Chaco plains extended the national territory to what was then unresolved international borders with the Argentine and Paraguayan Republics. Mark Lawrence's article *Popular violence and 'lay religion' in centre-west Mexico during Mexico's Cristero war (1926-29)* likewise explores a conflict that would struggle to find a place in the Anglo-Saxon cultural memory of frontier warfare comparable to the scramble for Africa or the wars fought in New Zealand and Australia. That said, the gaps in the literature allow this exploration of the ongoing, albeit often unacknowledged, agency of Mexico's Indigenous populations in the Cristero revolt of 1926-29, to make a unique contribution to this special theme issue.

Common amongst many small wars was the policy of forced resettlement or 'reconcentration', as it was sometimes known. The British use of concentration camps during the Second Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 has been well documented, but numerous examples exist elsewhere. President Andrew Jackson's infamous Indian Removal Act in 1830 authorised a systematic displacement of tens of thousands of Native Americans, whose presence on the frontiers of U.S. westward expansion was considered threatening to white settlement and progress. Lahti's article *Colonial Violence in the American Southwest and German Southwest Africa* identifies a similar policy. By 1875 all Yavapais or Western Apaches still alive had been forced into reservations. By 1908, all surviving Hereros were forced into camps, from where they were used as forced labour, or exiled into neighbouring British territories. Further afield, the U.S. established 'zones of protection' in the Philippines, which saw reconcentration policy extend beyond the formal conclusion of the war in 1902 (Twomey, 2022, pp. 25-42). The Spanish experience in Cuba following the arrival in 1896 of Max Weyler (known as 'the Butcher') is equally noteworthy; not least on account of the insurgents' own willingness to involve themselves in a policy of forced removal. This aimed to over-populate Spanish-held territory and place undue strain on Weyler's logistical capacity by creating a veritable refugee crisis (Tone, 2006, pp. 193-224).

In effect, war among the people, such as that waged by settlers in the American Southwest and German Southwest Africa, targeted the people often for want of suitable alternatives. While the French interpretation of this evolved from the *razzia* of Thomas Robert Bugeaud's campaigns in Algeria in the 1840s to the *tache d'huile* (or oil stain) of Field Marshals Joseph Galiéni and Hubert Lyautey by the turn of the 20th Century, a true attempt to separate insurgent from civilian through gentler means was always tempered by the realities of war. Indeed, by the 1950s, the French Army's *guerre révolutionnaire* appeared as concerned with exploiting military power as it did with capturing 'hearts and minds' (Finch, 2018, pp. 410-434). Similarly, the British preoccupation with 'minimum force' – supposedly based upon a wealth of experience during the Victorian era's colonial campaigns and its subsequent long-term commitments closer to home in Ireland – proved to be less than robust when faced with the Malayan Emergency and the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya after the Second World War (French, 2012, pp. 752-753).

Such actions on the part of the insurgents reminds us that, they too, possessed agency. The study of small wars can all too often revolve around a Westernised response to the challenges encountered. Yet, the actions of local groups played key roles in the outcomes of campaigns. While many might have been identified as the enemy – and indeed identify colonisers as such in return – others saw great value in collaboration, if only for limited periods of time. Indeed, studies of central Africa have shown how old inter-tribal scores were settled through carefully crafted alliances with white colonisers, benefitting not only from their physical presence but also their access to firearms. Such interactions became a defining feature in militarising African society (Macola, 2016, p. 93; Reid, 2012, pp. 103-145). Elsewhere, this divide and conquer strategy manifested itself in the *Bureaux Arabes* established by the French in Algeria, which raised specifically identified tribes to dominance over others in a bid to pacify the region through self-policing and information networks (Rid, 2010, pp. 739-742).

The most obvious expression of all, though, was the ready participation of some groups in filling the ranks of locally raised forces throughout Asia and Africa. This process of Europeanising native recruits had a dual purpose, in as much as it was more expedient for the colonisers than sending and maintaining white troops around the world, but also in introducing the discipline and firepower that was held up as a critical advantage if only the enemy could be brought to battle. The effects at the battle of Omdurman in 1898 added weight to the harsh reality of Hilaire Belloc's much-repeated assessment that: "Whatever happens, we have got the Maxim gun, and they have not" (Belloc, 1898, p. vi). Indeed, most contemporary writers on small wars agreed that the ultimate aim of any campaign was to aggressively seek out the enemy and bring this technological and organizational superiority to bear. The only real problem was how?

Among the biggest conundrums facing European forces in their myriad small wars was the idea that ground and territory meant virtually nothing to their erstwhile opponents and, as such, could not easily be held (Rid, 2010, p. 733). As General Pierre le Comte de Castellane put it: "In Europe, once [you are] master of two or three large cities, the entire country is yours. But in Africa, how do you act against a population whose only link with the land is the pegs of their tents?" (Vandervoort, 1998, p. 68). In his case, the answer was the *razzia*, which married local methods with the Marshal of France and Governor-General of Algeria Thomas Bugeaud's idea that, to be victorious in Algeria, his forces needed to become "even more Arab than the Arabs" (Porch, 2013, p. 20). Elsewhere, the employment of native auxiliaries to support the more regularised forces in terms of mobility and intelligence gathering, helped to fill the tactical and operational blind spots (Spiers, 1992; Draper 2019).

Consequently, success in small wars depended on flexibility and a willingness to adapt to local conditions. This included working with various groups within an otherwise hostile environment as much as seeking out opponents for destruction. Callwell's writings exemplified the diversity of campaigns that the British Army had fought during the 19th Century and concluded that there was no single way to fight such disparate enemies. However, intelligence, organisation, and preparation were often key principles by which commanders on the ground could gain advantage. Despite establishing a so-called French model that differed from the British, Lyautey's conclusions were not altogether dissimilar. Despite the obvious need to identify what made one

small war distinct from the next, such campaigns often had as many similarities as they did variances. The challenges of terrain, climate, and enemy reflected the somewhat uncomfortable realisation that asymmetric warfare in an extra-European theatre was neither simple nor refined. Small wars did not necessarily possess the same cadence as regular inter-state conflict. Nor, indeed, did it recognise the same rules and mores. Yet, in their own way, small wars became the norm for most armies throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries, filling the gaps between the cataclysms of European or World Wars. Even then, small wars continued to feature, albeit in their traditional space: on the peripheries.

As Koss et al. (2018) found during an audit of American children's picturebooks, the shifting terrain of children's literature parallels social and political developments outside children's literature. Baguley et al.'s article *Australian Children's Picture Books, the Frontier Wars, and Joseph Campbell's Hero with a Thousand Faces*, but more broadly as people seek to make sense of events that continue to resonate across society. As they are often chosen by adults, such as parents, teachers and librarians, picture books offer a valuable insight into contemporary attitudes, more so than the predilections of the readers (Kerby et al: 2022a; Kerby et al: 2022b; Baguley & Kerby, 2023; Flothow: 2007; Avery: 1989). They also reinforce existing beliefs or established stereotypes by the way characters and events are portrayed. Frank Uhr and Debra O'Halloran's *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* (2019) engages with the uncertain place the Frontier Wars occupy in the national imagination by subsuming Indigenous resistance into the nation's broader celebration of its participation in foreign wars.

The evolution in how people understand historical events is evident across entire cultures, transcending children's literature to include everything from academic scholarship to popular culture. Although Ian Beckett's article *Indigenous Resistance in the Anglo-Zulu War* is based on significant research, its appeal to the non-specialist reader owes at least some debt to the 1964 movie *Zulu* and its visually stunning recreation of the Battle of Rorke's Drift. Like *Multuggerah and the Sacred Mountain* it must, however, be understood in terms of contemporary thinking rather than being an accurate representation of the mores of 1879 or 1964, for if the movie was made today:

... more attention would surely be given to dramatizing the Zulu viewpoint, and to providing a sympathetic focus for identification with non-White characters. It is also likely that opposition towards the politics of imperialism and the record of the colonial past would nowadays be expressed more explicitly, less ambiguously. (Hall, 2014, p. 167)

This need to shape a historical narrative to suit modern sensibilities is evident in a documentary film about Multuggerah, an Australian Aboriginal leader who led resistance to white settlement in southeast Queensland. A contemporary audience may well expect a documentary to be 'truthful', but in reality, the question of whether film can convey an objective truth is far from being settled. As is evident in Maddock et al.'s article *The Search for Truth: Filming the Battle of Meewah*, Western modes of film making might be dismissed as a form of cultural imperialism, leading documentary makers to seek more authentic ways to align with Indigenous story telling culture. Rowan Light's article '*Pou maumahara*', '*the memory-place*': *Historical remembrance and colonial conflict at the Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira* also explores how histories of conflict and violence can be authentically presented to a contemporary audience. As each of the authors in this special theme issue would agree, this process requires an engagement with the trauma of colonial conflict in the nineteenth century. In this case, Light analyses how a curatorial team at the Auckland War Memorial Museum has conceptualised a new gallery displaying stories and objects relating to 'the New Zealand Wars'. Their openness to exploring this topic in an institution constructed after the Great War shows a breadth of vision and inclusivity that has not always been a feature of the Australian War Memorial.

Children's literature and documentary film have certainly grappled with how best to explore Australia's frontier wars, but the most sustained controversy has been over its presence in the *Australian Curriculum*, and specifically the discipline area of History. As Bedford, et al. observe in

their article *The very marrow of the national idea: The Frontier Wars and the Australian Curriculum*, prior to the 1970s indigenous issues were rarely explored in any depth in Australian history classrooms. The decision to implement a national curriculum saw political parties from the Left and Right clashing over their competing conceptions of national identity, central to which is the place of foreign wars in the creation of a national foundation story, and the associated but no less keenly felt commitment to characterising white settlement as an essentially benign process.

Conclusion

In his creation of the *Star Wars* universe, George Lucas was inspired by his study of Joseph Campbell's conception of the monomyth, discussed in his seminal work *The hero with a thousand faces* (1949/2008). Campbell identified a pattern in story forms, fairy tales, songs, and sonnets, sacred writings, dreamings, and monologue accounts. The canonical narrative arc of the hero's journey has three core elements - a 'call to adventure', engagement in a range of trials and challenges, and the return home. Though Lucas's *Star Wars* galaxy 'far, far away' is the setting for a war on the frontier, it is morally ambiguous. Helpfully, the villain even wears black. Yet in the 'real world' there is ambiguity. European nations seeking to celebrate their histories are confronted by the moral and legal ramifications inherent in the violent destruction of Indigenous peoples and the ongoing, intergenerational trauma that has been, and continues to be caused. The heroes of the Empire were not all villains, but even if they were ethical by the standards of the day, and by no means was this true of all of them, their actions often ended in the destruction of Indigenous peoples in a manner contemporary audiences would consider genocidal.

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About the Authors

Mario Draper is a Senior Lecturer in Modern British and European Military History at the University of Kent. His research interests centre on the intricate relationships between armies and societies, with a particular specialism in the history of Belgium. Dr Draper has published widely in various peer-reviewed academic journals as well as his monograph *The Belgian Army and Society from Independence to the Great War* (Draper, 2018, Palgrave Macmillan). Dr Draper's current research project centres on the role and motivation of the 19th Century European 'mercenary' officer. More broadly, Dr Draper has co-written a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) entitled *From Waterloo to the Rhine: The British Army 1815-1945*, which is hosted in FutureLearn. A second MOOC sponsored by the Western Front Association and entitled *The Imperial Western Front* is in production at the time of writing. Dr Draper is a Research Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and is also a Managing Editor for the *British Journal for Military History*.

Email: m.a.draper@kent.ac.uk
 ORCID: 0000-0001-7240-343X

Martin Kerby is an Associate Professor in Curriculum and Pedagogy at the University of Southern Queensland. His research interests include biography and artistic and cultural responses to conflict. Dr Kerby holds two doctorates in the field of biography. He has received numerous research awards including several ANZAC Centenary grants, both state and national (2014, 2015, 2017). Dr Kerby was a 2018 Q ANZAC 100 Fellow at the State Library of Queensland with his project was titled 'A War Imagined: Queenslanders and the Great War'. He was recently awarded a place on the highly regarded Gandel Holocaust Studies Program for Australian Educators (2020). Dr Kerby has published extensively including *The Palgrave Handbook of Artistic and Cultural Responses to War since 1914* (Kerby, Baguley & McDonald, 2009, Palgrave Macmillan). He is also the Chief Investigator on a USQ Capacity Building Research Grant titled 'Counter Memorials/Monuments and the Australian Commemorative Landscape'. He is also currently the Chief Editor of *Australian Art Education*.

Email: martin.kerby@usq.edu.au
 ORCID: 0000-0003-4073-2559

Margaret Baguley is a Professor in Arts Education, Curriculum and Pedagogy at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia with a specialisation in visual arts. She has received numerous awards recognising the high quality of her teaching and research. She is currently the Associate Head Research for the School of Education. Her research interests encompass the arts, arts education, leadership, group dynamics and creative collaboration. She has an extensive number of publications including *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Arts Education* (Barton & Baguley, 2017, Palgrave MacMillan) and *The Palgrave Handbook of Artistic and Cultural Responses to War since 1914* (Kerby, Baguley & McDonald, 2009, Palgrave Macmillan). Dr Baguley is also a practising artist with 10 solo exhibitions and 47 group exhibitions with forty of these being invitational. Her most recent group exhibition received Australia Council for the Arts funding and

she has been a recipient of grants from the Ian Potter Foundation, Craft Queensland, Arts Queensland and the Australia Council for the Arts. During 2020 Dr Baguley was one of a team awarded a USQ Learning and Teaching Open Educational Practice (OEP) Grant for the project titled 'Exploring social justice, democracy, human rights and citizenship: Engaging tertiary students through an open history textbook initiative'. Dr Baguley was co-awarded a Princeton University Library Research Grant (2020) with Dr Kerby to undertake research on the relationship between the artist and author of the Mary Poppins series of books. Dr Baguley is currently elected Vice-President of Art Education Australia (AEA), the national peak body for visual arts education.

Email: baguley@usq.edu.au

ORCID: 0000-0003-0098-6378