Timothy Bottoms

Conspiracy of Silence: Queensland’s Frontier Killing Time
(Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2013)
ISBN 9781743313824 (PBK) $32.99

With Conspiracy of Silence, Timothy Bottoms makes a valuable addition to a growing body of research into the violent frontier history of northern Australia. Recent books on the subject include Tony Roberts’ Frontier Justice (2005), on the Gulf Country between Queensland and the Northern Territory; Jonathan Richards’ The Secret War (2008), on colonial Queensland’s fearsome Native Police; and Robert Ørsted-Jensen’s Frontier History Revisited (2011), which sought to approximate a death toll for the Queensland frontier, and to show the links that existed between the roving, murderous Native Police and the highest officials in colonial society. Building on impressive archival research, as well as working in the insights of these earlier books, Bottoms presents a region-by-region study of the entire Queensland frontier.

Queensland was quite possibly Australia’s bloodiest frontier. Bottoms follows noted Queensland historian Raymond Evans in stating that probably fifty thousand Indigenous people died in frontier violence in the colony between its separation from New South Wales in 1859 and 1897, when Native Police patrols ended (181). This astounding figure represents perhaps one quarter of the estimated Indigenous population prior to invasion. Since this book went to print, it has been revised upwards to more than sixty thousand by Evans and Ørsted-Jensen. For Bottoms, however, determining a death toll is not the main object; rather, he shows that colonial Queensland was a landscape of deep trauma that persists to this day.

This history does not make for easy reading. Bottoms does not shy away from descriptions of massacre, and some of the stories are haunting. Seventy-two-year-old Cairns settler Jack Kane, for example, told the anthropologist Norman Tindale in 1938 how he had participated in a Native Police raid back in 1884. That place outside Cairns became known as Skull Pocket. Kane told Tindale matter-of-factly, ‘I didn’t mind the killing of the “bucks” [men] but I didn’t quite like them [Native Police troopers] braining the kids’ (148). This example shows many of the recurring aspects of Bottoms’ history—the white man distancing himself from the killing, blaming it on the purported savagery of the black troopers, the use of knives and clubs to kill children and thus save bullets, the dehumanising racism, and the cooperation of white settlers and their employees with the Native Police. Throughout the book, it is a story that becomes depressingly familiar.
Conspiracy of Silence shows how the Queensland frontier period saw the consolidation of several global historical trends of the later nineteenth century. These included improvements in firearm technology and the development of scientific racism, which sought (among other things) to rank humans in a hierarchy based on physical attributes. This only increased the horror of the story. Some years after the raid in which Kane participated, a scientifically inclined settler arrived and collected the skulls and bones of the dead (148). Considering that Indigenous communities in Australia are still seeking the return of artefacts and human remains from international institutions, such as the British Museum, this is one way in which Bottoms links the past with the present.

In fact, showing how echoes of the past persist into the present is one of the book’s triumphs. One of the main ways Bottoms does this is by drawing on a range of Aboriginal oral testimony. In some cases, these are interviews he carried out himself, but he also draws on earlier interviews dating back to the 1940s. In some of these cases, the informants are people who survived Native Police raids as children, and Bottoms notes that this story is also one of Indigenous survival. The past is also present in Bottoms’ discussion of how Queensland’s history is remembered and taught today.

The discussion of frontier conflict death tolls will alert anyone familiar with Australian history that the spectre of the ‘history wars’ is not far away. Bottoms, rightly, does not give denialists of frontier violence any airtime, dismissing their claims early in the book. He is more interested in the way history is taught. It is done now better than it was when he was at school, when Australian history classes avoided frontier violence altogether. Now, though, he is concerned that discussions of frontier violence are compartmentalised, safely quarantined in the past. We allow ourselves to believe that the bad things that happened do not form a central part of the story. This book is an eloquent refutation of that conception of our past. Using detailed regional case studies, Bottoms shows that violence was foundational to Queensland’s success as a commercially viable colony. Conspiracy of Silence is a powerful and much-needed presentation of this approach to frontier violence.

Bottoms cautions against cordonning off the frontier period safely in the past, and it is worth warning against regional quarantining too. We southerners should not assume that this is purely a northern story. These dark deeds cannot simply be stored away in Queensland. If
it was a bloodier frontier, that was only because its settlers had honed their killing methods in the southern colonies of New South Wales, Van Diemen’s Land, and especially Victoria. Bottoms shows how many of the pastoralists came to Queensland after experience in Victoria, but armed with the new guns and the ideology of scientific racism.

In *Conspiracy of Silence*, Bottoms uses the kind of historical detective work that is the trademark of a local historian, and successfully applies it to a colony-wide study. This is a gruesome and disturbing history, but it is our history, and it demands to be read.

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**Shane Ewen**

*What is Urban History?*

*(Cambridge: Polity, 2016)*

ISBN 9780745652689 (PBK) $33.95

‘[I]n this country, it’s an almost inevitable choice, if one is a historian interested in social change, in local politics, or in the built form of the environment in one way or another, it is natural to be drawn into, or become committed to the study of urban life and its institution.’—H.J. Dyos, 1979.

In Shane Ewen’s *What is Urban History?*, H.J. Dyos looms large as a key figure in the field of urban history. Along with many other historical actors and scholars embroiled in the history of cities, Dyos’ voice comes through in this volume. There are few accessible introductory texts available to students and urbanists with an interest in the history of cities. What makes *What is Urban History?* not only useful but also engaging is Ewen’s ability to synthesise the international urban historiography whilst also telling compelling urban stories.

Ewen’s text is a recent addition to respected British publishing house Polity’s ‘What is … History?’ series. Each volume is written by an eminent scholar, and offers a whirlwind introduction to a particular historical sub-field, suited to the latter-year undergraduate or graduate scholar. No volume thus far exceeds about two hundred pages and each boasts extensive endnotes and an annotated bibliography of further readings.

*What is Urban History?* demands special attention by scholars because there are few accessible texts that offer an introduction to this increasingly relevant field. As Ewen highlights, the city is where the majority of people in the Western world have lived for the past century or so, and rates of urbanisation in the developing world are rapid. Suffice to say, Ewen’s temporal and geographic coverage is extensive. A detailed index reveals that over one hundred cities across every inhabited continent are visited in this volume.