

Australian Wars and Resistance

Mapping colonial and Indigenous conflict across the continent from 1788 to the 1930s.

<https://australianwars.net>

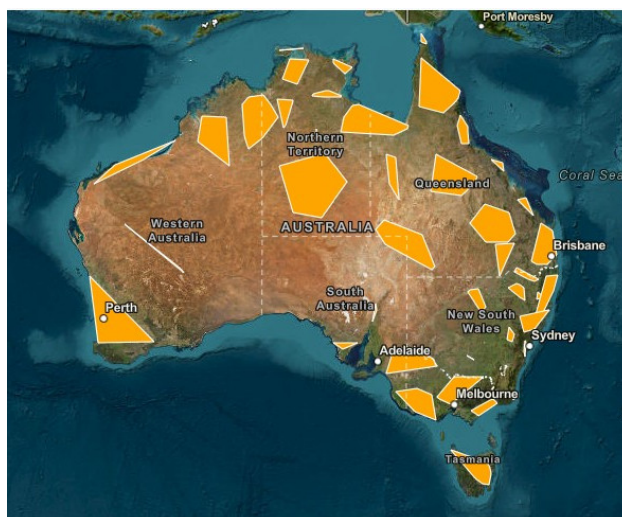
Calls for recognition and acknowledgement of Australian wars and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resistance grow louder with every decade, yet most Australians know little about these conflicts.

While some wars, resistance movements and leaders are well researched and relatively widely known, there is no clear distinction of every war across the continent and nobody can identify and name all of them. This history is important to everyone in Australia. The full story of all these wars need to be told.

To acknowledge these wars work needs to be done to identify, map and name them, to identify the people involved, and to make these stories common knowledge.

This must be done in a way that has a sound theoretical basis, that provides robust evidence and that is ethical. This requires a combination of archival research; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people telling their own stories from their own perspective, and; IT methods which make such a large project feasible, and to provide easy, interactive access to the information.

Any donation helps to commit people to this work, providing appropriate remuneration for research, knowledge and expertise. All funds will have an equivalent amount dedicated to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities autonomously controlling their own information, representations and story telling as goes towards archival research.



Initial results indicate there were 39 wars and 2 maritime conflicts within 12 regions and 4 periods. This is just a beginning. An estimated 125 to 500 incidents need to be researched for each war, or roughly 10,000 in total.

“Aboriginal children have a right to be proud
of the part their ancestors played in the Australian Wars.”

– Gomeroi school teacher

Summary

From the first British settlement in 1788 to the 1930s wars and resistance occurred across the continent of Australia. These were mortal conflicts between colonists and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over land, water, resources and the ability to exist as a people. These were undeclared guerilla wars, waged through raids, killings and massacres. Yet it remains difficult for most Australians to even to name more than a few of these wars. What wars? Where and when did they happen? Who was involved? While some have made great efforts to bring this history to light there are countless more stories of strategy, politics, bravery, skill and sacrifice waiting to be told.

The Australian Wars and Resistance website and collective builds on more than a 100 years of work by knowledge holders, historians and activists calling for the truth about colonial violence. With the conclusion of the *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia, 1788-1930* project, lead by Lyndall Ryan, members of the project team are responding to the call for more information and context, joining with approximately 50 leading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, historians, archaeologists and authors to take the next steps.

Being able to list and name each Australian war or resistance movement, where and when it occurred and listing the people involved would be a major contribution to truth telling and history.

Our aims

1. Distinguish, identify and map Australian wars and resistance movements prior to the 'mission phase' across the whole of Australia, based on theory, reason, evidence and ethics.
2. Collaboratively research, gather sources, and produce text and media by combining Indigenous knowledge, historical sources, and IT methods to provide access to the full story in a way that is feasible.
3. Establish a consistent and coherent framework for researching and accessing information about all regions, that is flexible enough for people to represent the stories of their own country in their own way.
4. Catalogue and map incidents that comprise the wars; the people named and unnamed involved; and the sources these details were obtained from.
5. Reliably inform public and political debate about Australian Wars and Resistance in plain language.

Resistance fighters like Pemulway, Windradyne, Tunnerminnerwait, Dundalli, Yagan and Jandamarra are well known. We estimate hundreds of named and thousands of unnamed individual resistance fighters can be identified and listed in connection with these wars.

Image: Dundalli, sketched by Sylvester Diggles



Background

From the 1938 Day of Mourning, William Stanners' 'great Australian silence', the bicentennial protests to Rachel Perkins' landmark 'Australian Wars' documentary, there has long been a call to acknowledge colonial violence and Australian Wars, also known as Frontier Wars, and to recognise the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resistance. Many have responded to this call, from writers in the 'history wars' such as Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan, to protesters like Ghillar Mike Anderson, and to podcasts such as Bo Spearim's 'Frontier War Stories'. Our work on taking the next step would not have been possible without all the work and awareness raising so far, and we hope to provide for and encourage future generations.

Although books, documentaries and websites now make it clear that the colonial frontier was violent across the whole of Australia it is difficult to answer the simple question 'what wars?' Also, beyond the most prominent Indigenous resistance leaders such as Pemulway, Windradyne, Tunnerminnerwait, Dundalli, Yagan, Jandamarra and others, it is difficult to find comprehensive lists of people who fought. Dr Robyn Smith has compiled a list of 614 people involved in perpetrating massacres (Smith, 2024). We estimate many hundreds of named, and thousands of unnamed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people involved in Australian wars and resistance prior to the mission phase can be identified.

Author John Connor describes 9 wars, but limits his study only to conflicts that military were officially involved in: Sydney, Hawkesbury Nepean, Bathurst (Wiradjuri), Hunter Valley, Northern (Tiwi and Iwaidja), Western (Nyungar), Van Diemen's Land, Liverpool Plains, and Port Phillip District. Some wars are focused on in detail such as in Stephen Gapps 'The Sydney Wars' and 'Gudyarra', while other authors such as Henry Reynolds, Chris Owen, Foster and Nettlebeck, Timothy Bottoms or Ray Kerkhove describe a general flow of conflict across broad areas sometimes focusing on one region or another. Works like *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia, 1788-1930* (Ryan et al), *The South Australian Frontier and its Legacies* (Foster et al) and *The Queensland Native Mounted Police Research Database* (Burke et al) provide researchers and the community with direct access to details on specific sites and incidents with contextualising information. Such websites have demonstrated the effectiveness of digital history and digital humanities in providing reliable information to a wide audience and transforming popular understanding. These IT based projects also provide data that can be built on to answer future research questions.

Although some wars have been identified and discussed as distinct conflicts, most of the conflict across the continent remains a relatively undifferentiated continuum of violence. Yet the conflict in different regions involves different people with different cultures in different environments fighting in different ways in different time periods. On close consideration using IT methods with data from the colonial massacres project checked against Indigenous knowledge and historical records, it becomes clear that there were distinct areas of intensity, in different places at different times.

Massacres aren't the only thing relevant to colonial violence and the history of this conflict but they are a focal point of intense violence. It can't be argued that 3 or more massacres within a region and within a short space of time is not part of a conflict between two peoples over land, water, resources and the ability to exist as a people – in other words 'war'. It may not look like wars in Europe but we would not expect war to look the same in a context that is different in every way. As these wars are undeclared, their extent in time and space and their stories can only be understood through the real events that make them up. Identifying and making sense of these events requires time consuming research combining Indigenous knowledge, historical sources, and information technology.

Following 8 years of research on the Colonial Frontier Massacres project, as part of the Historical Frontier Violence project, Dr Bill Pascoe developed methods for identifying and distinguishing wars across the entire continent. These conflicts are fundamental to our history. Being able to name wars, to research and tell the histories of these wars as distinct events, to list the combatants in them, and for people to have autonomy in the telling of the stories of these conflicts would be a major contribution to truth telling and the acknowledgement and recognition that has for so long been called for.

The full story

Understanding the full story of each war requires a combination of Indigenous knowledge and country, Archival research, and Information Technology.

Indigenous knowledge and country

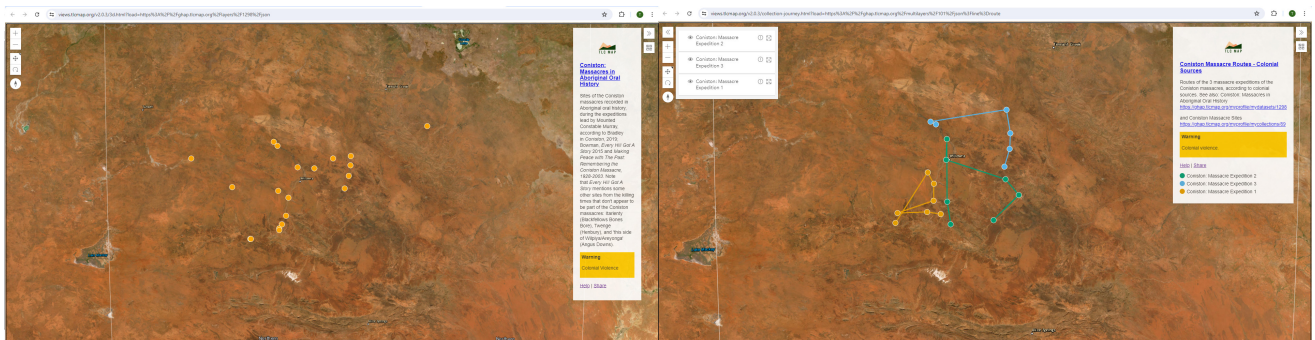
The Indigenous point of view which is often left out of or misunderstood in historical sources. It includes information and details that aren't in or were removed from the colonial narrative, including motivations, strategy and the impact of conflict, as well as knowledge of specific events. The story cannot be complete if only viewed from one side, and when information is known to be missing. In many cases people want these truths to be told, so long as it is done properly. Care must be taken that data follows CARE principles and to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities have control over their information, including what is or isn't made public, and have a say in how they are represented.

Country itself is crucial in several ways. It is sometimes an essential piece of the puzzle when figuring out where an event took place, or understanding how it happened as it did. It can help explain strategy and tactics and why some areas were more intensely fought over than others. Knowing where events happened means that these places then carry these deeper meanings and makes it possible to properly protect places.

The proposed work has been discussed with many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from around the continent, formally and informally and the collective working on this includes prominent Indigenous researchers (see 'Who we are'). Funds for researching each war will be dedicated to community. Because some communities prefer not to use the term 'war' some conflicts will be referred to as 'resistance'.



Stony country, inaccessible on horseback, was used strategically by Gunditjmara people at Budj Bim in the Eumeralla War.



Years after legal hearings colonists admitted they did not report all incidents in the Coniston massacres. Coniston massacre sites in Warlpiri, Anmatjerre and Kaytetye oral history (left) correspond with the colonial record (right) and include sites that colonists did not report. (Maps from *Time Layered Cultural Map* <https://tlcmap.org>)

Historical Sources

Events in colonial frontier conflicts were sometimes purposefully concealed, confessed, boldly stated, uncovered and debated, or investigated by police and government officials. Historical sources from the time, or after the event, often provide key details for locating the event, such as homestead names, and dates, and the people involved on both sides. They also provide information about the motivations, strategy and politics at work, and reading between the lines can provide insights to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander strategies.

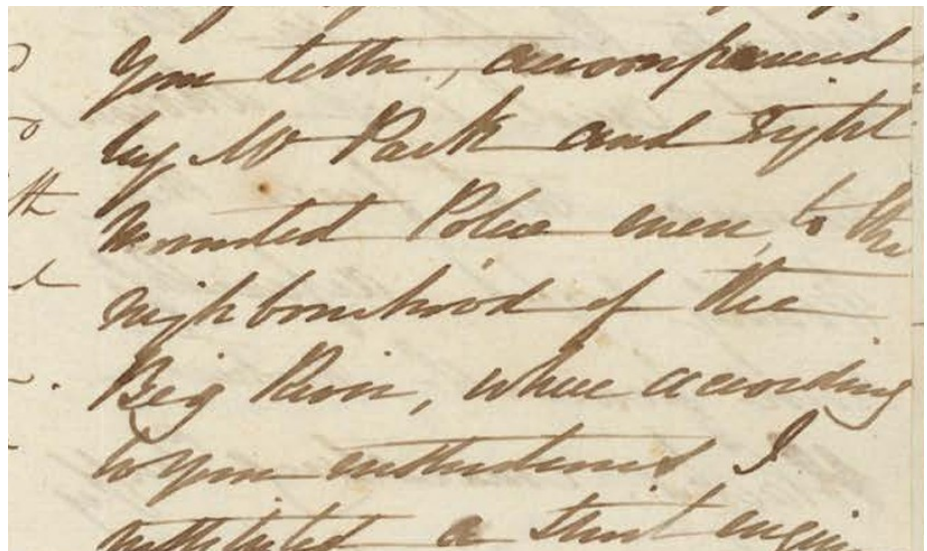
These sources for example can help locate sites by naming homesteads or rivers, and may name resistance fighters who have become well known to colonists. When recording Indigenous forces of 200 or 1000 warriors, they can indicate the formation of a resistance organised, and when describing the scale of raids, or retreats or requesting the government provide more resources to fight they indicate the strength and effectiveness of the resistance.

For example, colonial records describe hand to hand fighting skill. In 1842 Fyan's described a man (probably Gunditjmarra) taking on two men with sabres on horseback, dodging the horses, fighting in spite of sabre wounds, unhorsing Fyans, breaking Fyans's sabre and escaping, leaving his leangle lodged in the head of Fyans's horse (Fyans, 1986). Police reports describe the effectiveness of bands of hundreds of warriors on the Upper Dawson in raiding and evading capture in labyrinthine ranges, forcing colonists into retreat as the police requested more outposts, and more ammunition and reinforcements ('Ghinghindah, Upper Dawson' in Ryan et al, 2025).

Putting these events together can reveal the ebb and flow of the conflict, and indicate where and when the violence intensified, where areas of strategic importance were, and when the area came under close government control.

Police reports record open warfare and a 'shoot (or spear) on sight' attitude between colonists and Gomeri people around the Gwydir River (Big River). Corroborees 1000 strong and groups of 100s of warriors were reported. Attempts to broker a peace and restore Gomeri access to the river failed. Many massacres occurred in this region with lasting impacts, and a sustained resistance, to today.

Image: Day to Colonial Secretary, 10 Sep 1838.

A photograph of a handwritten letter on aged, yellowed paper. The text is written in a cursive script, likely by a colonial official. The visible text includes: "You tell me, accompanied by Mr. Park and eight mounted Police men, to the high bank of the Big River, where according to your instructions I substituted a stout engine".

Information Technology / Digital Humanities

IT is needed to handle the vast scale of this undertaking, in gathering and organising information, both during research, in reasoning about it and in making it available to the public. Without IT the work would not be feasible.

IT methods are needed to organise and make sense of large amounts of information once it has been gathered. The structured organisation of information in the *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia, 1788-1930* project (Ryan et al) made it accessible to millions online, and hundreds still visit every day. The timeline reveals patterns and stories over time. Details and sources about each are available at the click of a button. Now that the project has finished and the information is as robust as we could make it, we have been able to use clustering analysis to distinguish times and places of more intense violence, and to infer where and when distinct wars occurred.

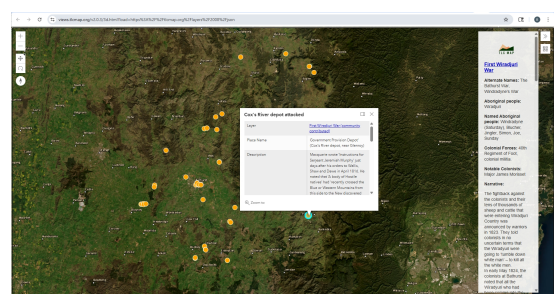
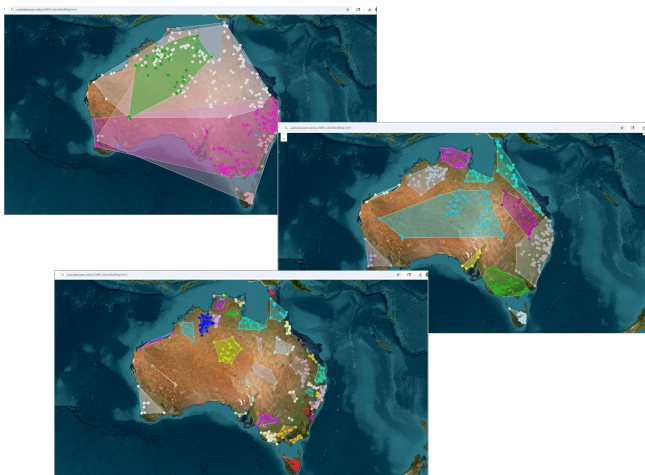
This has also enabled comparison with data from the *The South Australian Frontier and its Legacies* (Foster et al) and *The First Wiradjuri War* map (Gapps, 2025) to estimate that for every massacre 10 to 40 other events may be identified in historical archives and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge. This means, with 438 known massacres, there may be roughly 10,000 (between 4000 and 18,000) incidents to be researched. To handle this scale, computational methods are needed for processing text to identify and connect places, people, and sources and report it in a way that can be checked by humans. The workflow leads to interactive maps, lists of people involved, and narratives. Quantitative analyses and IT methods help reveal patterns in large amounts of information, and help organise and visualise it, but considered alone are not adequate. An analysis based on massacres alone cannot be the full story – it is not complete without Indigenous knowledge and history to validate the results.

Yutalta PERSON also said that the relatives of Tubulta GPE, shot by Hugoninâ€™s party at Port Lincoln Proper FAC, had joined with the Ngannityiddi PERSON tribe to the NW of Coffins Bay in order to revenge Tubultaâ€™s death. SchÄ¼rmann stated that, according to

Auto detection of people and place names in large amounts of text is not perfect but will make it much quicker to identify people, the events they were involved in and the role they played (left).

Cluster analysis has been used to provisionally distinguish 39 wars or resistance movements within 12 regions and 4 broader periods (below left).

TLCMap, with some adaption, can be used to maintain records of events to dynamically update interactive online maps (below).

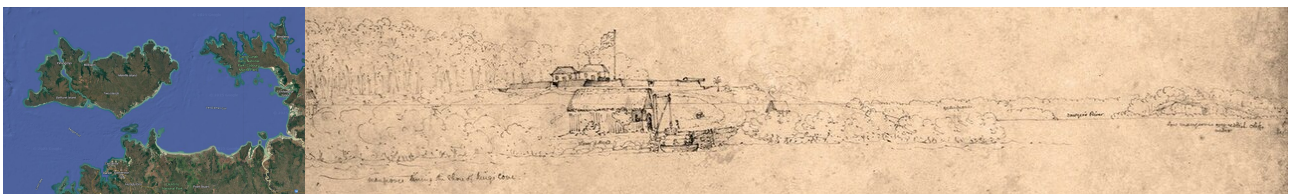


Proposed Work

Our initial work has provisionally identified 39 Australian Wars or resistance movements and 2 maritime conflicts within 12 regions of conflict, within 4 broad periods. This was accomplished by using computational cluster analysis on colonial frontier massacres to differentiate times and places of intense violence separated from other concentrations in time and space. This method successfully identified wars already recognised, such as the First Wiradjuri War (Bathurst War), the Eumeralla War, and other known focal areas of conflict, demonstrating the method's effectiveness. Provisional identification of other wars across the continent make sense based on available historical and Indigenous knowledge.

These encouraging results are just the beginning. Further collaborative research and consultation is need for each and every war to:

- a) Confirm the provisionally identified wars and resistance movements are the right distinctions to make and adjust accordingly.
- b) Name each war, following appropriate processes.
- c) Identify and add other events to massacres. As these are undeclared wars we cannot determine their extent from declarations and treaties, but must work from the real events that comprise them. Massacres are only part of the story, and show only one aspect of colonial strategy.
- d) Identify and list named and unnamed people involved. This is an important part of any war acknowledgement, memorial or commemoration.
- e) Write a short narrative summary of the flow of the war to provide a basic understanding and encourage further research.
- f) Encourage, include or create autonomous and collaborative productions representing each war, which may include text and/or audio-visual components, art, performance, or other mediums.



Tiwi Islander resistance forced the British into retreat at Fort Dundas in 1828. Images: satellite map of Tiwi Islands and sketch of Fort Dundas by John Septimus Roe, 1 November 1824.

Who We Are

More than 50 leading academics, historians, authors and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have expressed interest in participating in this collective effort to map Australian Wars and Resistance across the continent, and initial meetings and an organising group has been set up in early 2025. The plan to conduct this work has been presented to the Indigenous lead steering committee for the *Historical Frontier Violence: Drivers, legacy and the role of truth-telling* project (Moschion et al) at the *AIATSIS Summit* and the *Australian Historical Association Conference* in 2024 and to the Victorian Indigenous Research Centre with feedback and responses in support.

Dr Bill Pascoe worked for 8 years on the *Colonial Frontier Massacres* project (Ryan et al) and was initially responsible for IT analysis and production of ethical and politically sensitive representation of massacres on the website. This developed into an editorial role coordinating a review of all information and data on the website; confirming, updating and revising content as needed. The *Australian Wars and Resistance* work follows directly on from the massacre project and includes collaborators Robyn Smith, Chris Owen and Jennifer Debenham. His background is in IT, eResearch, digital humanities, philosophy, writing and colonial history. He has 25 years experience in IT and digital humanities with the University of Newcastle and most recently with the *Historical Frontier Violence: Drivers, legacy and the role of truth-telling* at the University of Melbourne. He has a shared Walkley Award for the Guardian's adaption of the work on massacres, and has given numerous invited presentations on these works including the Yoorrook Justice Commission hearings.



Dr Bill Pascoe speaking at the Yoorrook hearings in 2024

Costs

Following the set up work, much of the work can be undertaken concurrently, and so can be completed within a few years. These estimates may be adjusted in future as we learn from early works.

IT Set Up and Maintenance

Cost: \$35,000

Time: 3 months.

This is a necessary set up cost to:

- make research itself much faster
- add and maintain new information generated through collaborative research
- automatically update the website with maps, events, people, narratives and sources as it is contributed
- present the information to the public
- establish a basic level of IT maintenance to attend to outages, bugs and essential enhancements.
- manage IT works, prioritisation and alignment of tasks with the project, ethics and data quality standards.

Deliverables:

- Establish website (completed): ~~\$2000~~
- Cluster analysis to provisionally identify Australian wars and resistance movements (completed): ~~\$10,000~~
- Automated updates of maps and information on the website about wars based on data entered: \$5,000
- Tool for identifying and matching people, places, events and sources (note this provides suggested matches only, and needs human correction): \$10,000
- Maintain and update website over 3 years: \$20,000

Research

Per War or Resistance Movement: \$30,000

Note some wars may require more effort than others, due to different scales, different communities and different levels of prior research.

The research component is comprised of:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Collaboration
- Archival Research
- Project Coordination

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Collaboration: \$10,000

Time: 1 year.

It is not appropriate to make up front guarantees of deliverables from autonomous Indigenous research, as the work must be directed from the first by people in the community. There will none the less be a requirement that work relate to the scope and aims of the project. Depending on the desires of people in the community we anticipate this may involve:

- community members conducting independent archival research.
- cultural safety protocols.
- yarning.

- site visits on country.
- training in project research methods and IT systems.
- collaboration and communications with Australian Wars and Resistance team.
- combining archival and cultural knowledge.
- autonomous and collaborative community research, narrative and media outputs

Archival Research: \$10,000

Time: 2 months.

Note: this work may be done by historian or other researchers with knowledge of the region, or by a member of the central team.

- Trove research (collecting texts from Trove searches).
- Other archival and text research (other sources, such as reviewing secondary sources for leads; records known to exist in library collections, such as microfiche of police and government records, etc, conversion to text).
- Matching people, places, events and sources (using IT tools).
- Data wrangling and entry into the system.

Total for all Wars and Resistance Movements: \$1,265,000

Time: 3 to 5 years

Supplementary Materials

While a secondary priority to mapping each war there are some related outcomes that are important to the context of Australian Wars.

Topics: \$0

Time: 2 months

There are many questions, often with complex answers, that commonly arise when proposing to map Australian Wars and Resistance. A section of the website will be devoted to addressing these topics in plain language. This includes subjects like the definition of war; genocide; combat prior to colonisation; the role of women; the role of economics; the aftermath; Indigenous use of guns and horses; comparisons with other colonial conflict and Indigenous peoples such as Maori or north American First Nations peoples; etc. We hope most of these overviews will be provided pro bono by respected academics, authors and/or Indigenous authorities.

Songline and Trade Routes map: \$5000

This map would be indicative only, showing major songlines and trade routes. This shows the vast network of connectivity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander across the entire continent, demonstrating capacity to communicate and coordinate resistance across large areas. Along with a map of language groups it provides an indication of 'territory' and relationships prior to colonisation. This map will be an indicative and basic map only, not be accurate enough to locate sacred sites, and will include information that can be public. It will refer to sources which may tell those stories in the appropriate way.

Government Counties map: \$5000

Today we don't think of regions in Australia in terms of counties, but counties are important to this history in showing when and where the colonial and Australian government believed itself capable of effectively exercising control, or governing, a region. Based on Reynold's (1987 & 2013) theorisation of the frontier in Australia, and closely related to the historical transition from open warfare to the close control of the mission phase, counties are an important part of visualising the spread of war, resistance and colonisation. Unlike many other kinds of information, it is feasible to map and date counties (or 'districts' in some colonies) across the whole of the continent.

Missions, Reserves and Institutions: \$2500

Map data is available from prior work on missions, reserves and stations related to the displacement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Benson et al, 2024). Licensing permits this information being incorporated into the Australian Wars and Resistance website. This map layer is one way of visualising the immediate outcome of frontier conflict in the subsequent 'mission phase'.

Project Coordination: \$10,000

Time: 3 years (over the course of the work)

- Travel.
- Communications
- Community liaison.
- Data quality and review.
- Coordination of all work.
- Archiving of work and conclusion of project after 3 to 5 years.

Total

IT Set up and Maintenance	\$35,000
Research	\$1,230,000
Supplementary Materials	\$7,500
Project Coordination	\$10,000
	\$1,282,500

This work can be done in funding blocks of \$30,000 for each war and can commence immediately with that amount. We do not need to wait for the full amount to commence work, and funding may come from multiple sources. It would be possible for individuals or funding bodies to fund specific regions of their interest.

Donate

We are currently fundraising to set up infrastructure and systems that will make this work possible, and to proceed with collaborative work on each war.

Donations are welcome at: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/australian-wars-and-resistance>

Steps

- Scoping and feasibility testing (completed during the Historical Frontier Violence project, with ARC funding) - **Completed**
- Provisional identification of wars - **Completed**
- Set up infrastructure, systems and processes for research and presentation of information - **Fundraising.**
- Collaboratively research each war - Work on 2 wars commenced.



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