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Lyndall Ryan's impact on Australian history research will be felt for many years to come

Ann Curthoys

Ryan's rigorous, public-facing study of frontier violence and massacres led to the massacre map, which continues to attract international attention. She was also a cherished friend

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Lyndall Ryan was one of Australia's foremost historians, changing the way we do and understand Australian history. She died on Tuesday, aged 81.

Her work on Aboriginal Tasmanian history and on the massacres of Aboriginal people that occurred in the course of colonisation across the country has been

hugely influential. The online Massacre Map, based at the University of Newcastle, which she conceived and created with a team of scholars, continues to attract national and international attention. It was the basis for Guardian Australia's series The Killing Times. The Victorian premier, Jacinta Allan, referred to the Massacre Map recently when speaking at the Yoorrook Justice Commission, the state's current truth-telling process into injustice experienced by Indigenous people, and the map is likely to remain an important source of information and understanding for years to come.

She was also my dear friend. As young adults, we began our careers in an era that saw major changes in Australian political, intellectual, and cultural history. During the tumultuous years from 1969 to 1976 we both wrote our PhD theses engaging with Aboriginal history, and we were both involved in the new women's liberation movement.

It was during this time, when we were postgrads at Macquarie University living in Balmain, drinking at pubs popular with the libertarian Sydney Push, that I really got to know Lyndall well. We read everything we could about women's liberation, devouring international feminist texts like Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, along with endless pamphlets, journals, and newspaper articles. Soon we began writing articles and editing newspapers of our own.

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Lyndall and I worked on the WL newspaper *Mejane*, and later the feminist journal *Refractory Girl*. We wrote a paper together for a conference in January 1971 which emphasised the "cultural oppression based on all the myths and legends that have been created about women" and asserted that "unless we can change the whole cultural orientation of women, no revolution is going to bring us the liberation we are seeking".

Around this time, Lyndall and I - along with my partner, John Docker - shared a house in Annandale. When John and I married in July 1971, Lyndall was present at our wedding, an event much questioned by our libertarian and feminist friends. Lyndall was also involved in the establishment of the Leichhardt Women's Health Centre, a pioneering feminist initiative, and developed an interest in women's reproductive health that would continue through her life.

For her doctoral thesis, Lyndall undertook extensive research in the Tasmanian archives. She began to publish papers from this research in 1972, criticising the then widespread belief that Truganini's death in 1876 had marked the extinction of the Aboriginal people of Tasmania. She emphasised the long decades of resistance by Cape Barren Islanders to attempts to destroy their community structures and Aboriginal identity. Her work ran alongside and supported the rising activism in the 1970s of Aboriginal Tasmanians.

1975 was a tumultuous year for Lyndall, as it was for us all, for it was not only International Women's Year but also a year of crisis for the Whitlam government leading ultimately to its dismissal by the governor general and Labor's loss in the ensuing election. She resigned from the commonwealth public service, submitted her PhD thesis, and began her long and distinguished academic career, first with a tutorship at ANU and then at Griffith University in Brisbane and later Flinders University in Adelaide. Her thesis contained 33 detailed maps showing the movement of Aboriginal groups, the location of frontier conflict, and key sites in subsequent Aboriginal history. Her strong awareness of place and the importance of maps in helping readers connect events to specific places would be important later in her career. She reworked her PhD for publication as a book called *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* and transformed our understanding of Tasmanian history.

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While living and working in different cities through the 1980s and 90s, John and I maintained friendly contact with Lyndall, but saw much more of her when in 1998 she became professor of Australian studies at the Central Coast campus of the University of Newcastle. After what became known as the "Australian History Wars" in the early 2000s, where her book *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* was criticised as overstating the degree of violence accompanying colonisation, Lyndall returned to her earlier work on frontier violence in Tasmania. Her reply to criticism was to be a rigorous, public-facing study of frontier violence and massacres, first in Tasmania and then in Australia as a whole. She decided the best way to display her results for a wider audience was to produce a digital map showing where each known massacre had occurred and providing relevant details. Gradually, the massacre map was born.

Lyndall was an excellent swimmer, and we often swam together at Terrigal beach or later in the wonderful Newcastle ocean baths. One of her heroines was Esther Williams, the famous swimmer in so many Hollywood musicals in the 1940s and early 1950s. She loved the colour red and often wore red shoes, though she wore magnificent gold sneakers at her 80th birthday last year. She had a talent for friendship, making and maintaining strong friendships wherever she lived or worked.

For some years, Lyndall wrote annual circular letters detailing what she had done that year, which were astonishing for the range of activities they described. When her cat, Mishka, died, her circular letter detailed Mishka's idiosyncrasies in hilarious detail. The most recent letters described Lyndall's experience with cancer and its treatments, which managed a mix of troubling information and dark humour; when chastised by her doctor for being late to her first chemotherapy appointment, she lamented on email that she had failed Chemo 101. In the end, she passed Chemo 101 and continued her active life for two more years, until the cancer savagely returned.

Her vast array of friends will miss her deeply. So, too, will the wider world that cares about knowing our history and acting for social change.

Ann Curthoys is a historian who writes about Indigenous history, genocide studies, and domestic and family violence. Her most recent book, co-authored with Alexandra Ludewig and Shino Konishi, is entitled *The Lives and Legacies of a Carceral Island: a Biographical History of Wadjemup/Rottnest Island*. She is completing a book entitled *Meeting the Robesons: Paul Robeson and Eslanda Robeson's Tour of Australia and New Zealand in 1960*
