


# Historian who put colonial frontier violence on the map dies at 81

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## LYNDALL RYAN: 1943 - 2024

Professor Lyndall Ryan was a leading Australian historian who showed that rather than being rare, massacres were a key tool of colonisation and far more extensive than previously realised.

She died on April 30 at Lake Macquarie Private Hospital in Gateshead, NSW, aged 81.



Lyndall Ryan with her map showing the location of indigenous massacres.

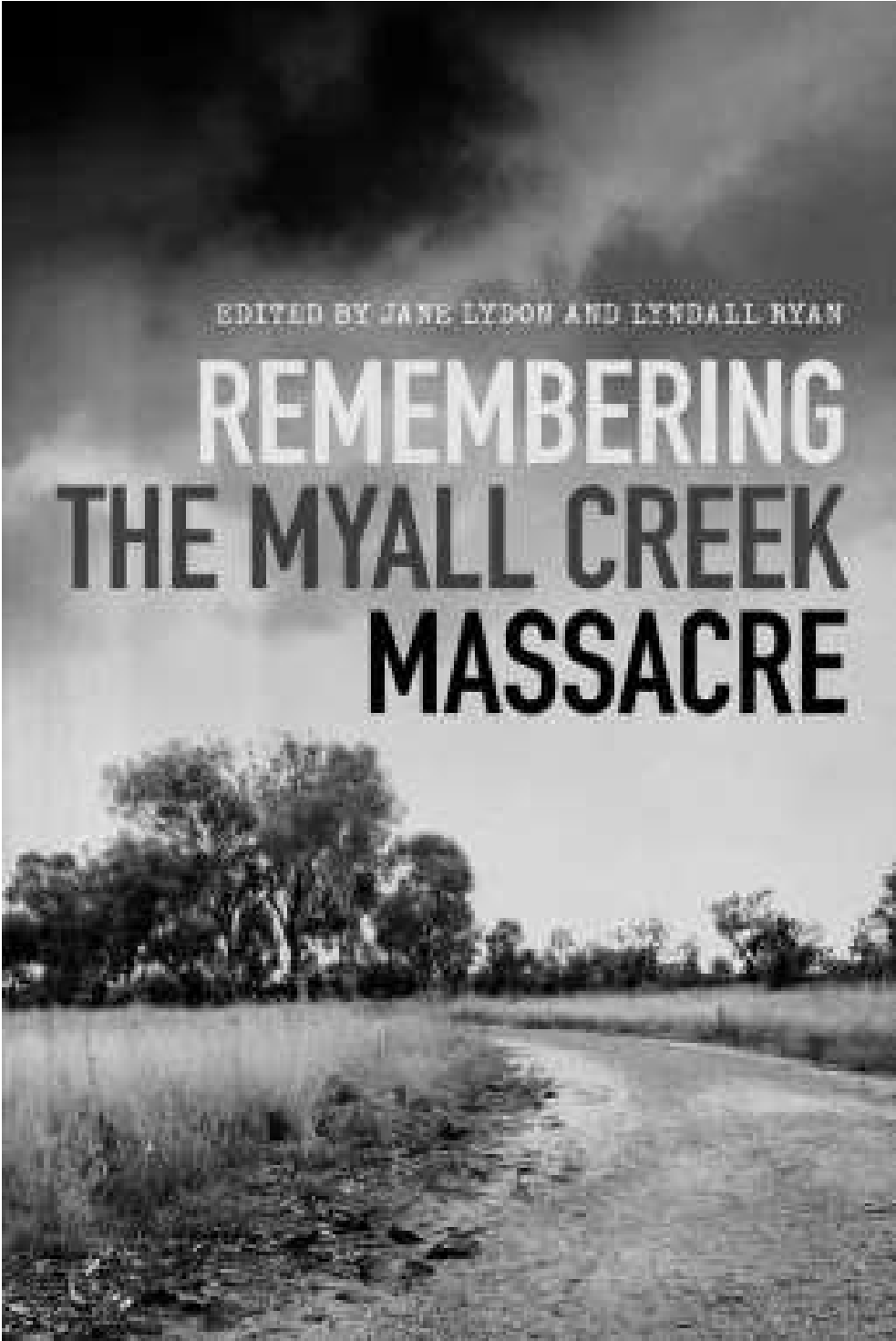
Her PhD thesis on Tasmanian Aboriginal history began to be published in article form in the early 1970s and pushed back on the myth of Tasmanian colonial history that Truganini was the last of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people.

This research ran in parallel with her involvement in second wave feminism. In this arena, Ryan was a founding member of the first Sydney Women’s Liberation Group in 1970 and a contributor to feminist publications. During this period she also became involved in the Leichhardt Women’s Health Centre, an initiative that led to a lifelong interest in women’s reproductive health.

Ryan’s groundbreaking monograph, *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* (1981), based on her 1975 PhD thesis, changed the face of Australian history. A classic, it was expanded into a second edition (1996) that incorporated new research. Subsequent scholarship and controversy shaped an epic new work, *Tasmanian Aborigines: A History Since 1803* (2012), shortlisted for the Ernest Scott Award in 2013.

As her long-term friend and historian Professor Ann Curthoys noted in a recently published tribute, Ryan had a “strong awareness of place and the importance of maps in helping readers connect events to specific places”, evidenced by the 33 detailed maps in her thesis. This emphasis on maps would figure prominently in her later career.

Ryan was born during the Second World War and spent her teenage years on the family poultry farm in the expanding western suburbs. Her mother Edna, a prominent feminist, was a dedicated advocate for equal pay for women and a key influence on her daughter. A keen netball player, Lyndall excelled at Fairfield Girls High School and was awarded a Commonwealth scholarship to the University of Sydney, after which she took up after a year of clerical work in 1961.



Remembering the Myall Creek Massacre by Jane Lydon and Lyndall Ryan.

After time as Manning Clark’s research assistant from 1966-68, she joined the Australian Public Service as a policy analyst in 1974. Here she worked on the children’s commission and in the office of women’s affairs within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, where she could influence policy on childcare, women’s refuges and community health centres. After the fall of the Whitlam government in 1975, Ryan began a distinguished academic career spanning more than four decades.

An emeritus professor at the University of Newcastle, she previously held academic appointments at three Australian universities, beginning in 1977 in the school of humanities at Griffith University, later taking up leadership roles as a professor in women’s studies at Flinders University and foundation professor of Australian studies at the University of Newcastle, where she was also head of school in humanities.



“Whitlam Supergirls” Dany Torsh, Eva Cox, Suzanne Baker, Anne Summers, Elizabeth Reid and Ryan in 1973. CANBERRA TIMES

She was a leader in the developing field of Australian women’s history, taking a position first as reader and then professor of women’s studies at Flinders University between 1986 and 1998. This period was notable for key publications on abortion, women’s magazines and her *Bibliography of Australian Women’s History* (with Susan Magarey, 1990).

Ryan became a target in what were known as the Australian history wars of the early 2000s when her critics downplayed the role of colonial frontier violence in Australian history. Ryan’s own response to the history wars was what Curthoys called “a rigorous, public-facing study of frontier violence and massacres”, initially in Tasmania and then across the continent. She helped to show that rather than being rare, massacre was a key tool of colonisation and far more extensive than historians had previously realised. Ryan felt that cartography provided the best means for a wider audience to read the results of this research, identifying location, context and sources of evidence. By degrees, the digital massacre map emerged.

Based at the University of Newcastle, the interactive online map was created and co-curated by Ryan and a team of scholars. Stage four of the project was completed in 2022, with an updated estimate of more than 400 frontier massacres that took place from the late-18th through to the early-20th centuries. The map attracted international attention and recognition followed.

Described as “nation defining”, and as “a cartographic memorial, a shimmering testimony to a moral truth which is at once overwhelming and undeniable”, the map won a slew of major honours in 2018/19: the Australian & New Zealand Cartographic Society’s GeoCart Award for Best Digital Map; the NSW Premier’s History Award for Digital History, and the Walkley Award for Indigenous Affairs Reporting, shared with the Guardian Australia team that produced *The Killing Times*.

As a historian of violence, Ryan co-edited several ground-breaking anthologies such as *Theatres of Violence* (with Philip Dwyer, 2012), *Remembering the Myall Creek Massacre* (with Jane Lydon, 2018) and *Aftermaths: Colonialism, Violence and Memory in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific* (with Angela Wanhalla and Camille Nurka, 2023).

*Violent Empires: Killing and Colonialism in the Age of Revolution, 1780-1820*, a book co-authored with Philip Dwyer, Barbara Mann and Nigel Penn, is scheduled for publication in 2025. In the final weeks of her life, Ryan was working on a book about her mother’s contributions to feminism and the labour movement.

In recent years, Ryan gained many awards. In 2018, she was elected a fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and in 2019 became a member of the Order of Australia. The award citations recognised her outstanding contribution to higher education, particularly to Indigenous history and women’s studies. A Festschrift in late 2020 at the University of Newcastle featuring presenters from all parts of her academic career testified to the breadth and depth of her intellectual life and its widespread influences. She was a recipient of one of the Australian Academy of the Humanities’ inaugural lifetime achievement awards in 2022.

She was central to the expansion of interdisciplinary approaches to the past and present, which she had first developed through her post at Griffith University. Ryan also played an instrumental role in shaping the University of Newcastle’s frontier campus on the NSW Central Coast at Ourimbah.

As head of school she was visionary, innovative and a champion of interdisciplinarity, envisioning it as a vital tool for colleagues to prepare students for a changing future. Her vision and support were also vital in linking the creative arts with the local community on the Central Coast.

Ryan was also known for her love of fashion, which she reinvented to create her own style: a penchant for the colour red and the occasional quirky accessory, sometimes accompanied by a stylish hat. She was also fond of the odd fancy dress, testifying to her wry sense of humour and her whimsical side as well as her ability not to take herself too seriously.

One of her great talents lay in making and nurturing friendships, as well as in creating networks in both her personal and professional life. A member of a small group of six friends forged in the senior years of high school, these friendships endured for a lifetime notwithstanding geographical distance. Two of those friends, Gabrielle and Jeanette, were at her bedside in the final days.

An outpouring of deep respect for Lyndall Ryan the woman and scholar followed her passing. Professor Alan Lester from the University of Sussex noted: “Her work on the frontier massacres map will always be a vindication of truth telling in history.”



Ryan was visionary, innovative and a champion of interdisciplinarity.

Long-term friend Professor Anne Summers lamented: “Such a loss. Such a brilliant mind. And a good fun friend.” Others did not know her personally but were nevertheless profoundly influenced by her work. “Glad to have the brightness of research, evidence, compassion, justice that Ryan forged and represents to hang onto in these times.”

As the Australian Historical Association perceptively noted: “Few in our profession have had a greater impact on the way Australians understand their collective past.”

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