

'The Colour of Massacre' by Jeanine Leane | States of Poetry ACT - Series One

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Jeanine Leane is a Wiradjuri scholar from south-west New South Wales. She currently holds a Discovery Indigenous Fellowship at the

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As a new century dawned white Australians were urged
to feel comfortable and relaxed about their history.
'Shake off that irksome black arm band – legacy of radical
lefties who can't leave well enough alone – and their
tiresome chant that white Australia has a Black history and
we all have blood on our hands.
We've got a new song to sing now!'

Right wing historians hummed the new tune
and set about to write Aboriginal massacres out
of the record, out of the history books, out of the classroom.

*There weren't really fifteen thousand Palawa people
in Van Diemen's Land before the arrival of
white Christians. They said.*

*There weren't even five thousand!
Only a few hundred naked savages roamed here
and a meagre hundred or so killed –
in self defence – of course.
Or perhaps they were stealing?
On the darker side – they were cannibals –
weren't they ? Think about it!
What happened to the rest? Who knows?
Nobody wrote it down – no history of
massacres here.
Perhaps they were saved by Christian charity
and blended in with the rest of us – or
maybe they died of natural causes
or just perished because they couldn't adapt.
The rest is mere hearsay – oral history –
words in the air!
Nothing on paper – so who remembers?
The Aborigines didn't count in numbers –
so why bother now?*

Nobody recorded those other syllables in time –
full of sound and fury, punctuated by
blows, blood and screams.

But wasn't their blood red?
And didn't their loved ones cry?

Late in the twentieth century, with a population
of eighteen million the shootings of
thirty-five settlers went down in Australian history
as the Port Arthur Massacre prompting a
Prime Minister who denied Black massacres
to buy back the nation's firearms to minimise
the chance of another white one.

But wasn't their blood red too?
And didn't their loved ones still cry?
What is the colour of massacre?

Jeanine Leane

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