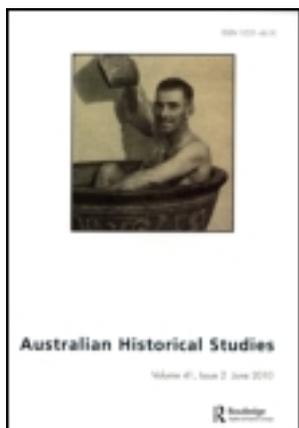


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# Reactions to Australian Colonial Violence in New Guinea: The 1926 Nakanai Massacre in a Global Context\*

PATRICIA O'BRIEN

*On 1 November 1926 an Australian-led force left Rabaul bent on 'justice'. This punitive expedition was in response to the recent killing of four Australian men in the Nakanai district of New Britain seventy miles from Rabaul. Called the 'Nakanai massacre', it was the bloodiest attack on whites in New Guinea for twenty years. This article explores the 'Nakanai massacre' and examines the revealing responses to it. It argues that the Nakanai massacre generated different levels of concern and anxiety about violence on Australian frontiers than contemporary mainland massacres because it occurred within New Guinea and under the intense international scrutiny of the League of Nations. This incident not only brings to the fore public debate about what Australia's rule in New Guinea was or should be. It argues it had consequences extending to retention of this territory and Australia's national prestige in the highly charged international setting in of 1926.*

ON 1 NOVEMBER 1926 a force of nineteen Europeans—including Dr Raphael Cilento and his medical assistants—and fifty-seven Indigenous New Guinean ('native') police journeyed from Rabaul, the capital of Australia's mandated territory of New Guinea, bent on 'justice'. To ensure that an unforgettable lesson was taught, a machine gun was added to the usual armory of rifles and side arms. This punitive expedition was in response to the recent killing of four Australian men in the Nakanai district of New Britain seventy miles from Rabaul. This killing, soon called the 'Nakanai massacre', was the bloodiest attack on whites in New Guinea since the 1904 murders of ten Catholic missionaries during German control.<sup>1</sup>

Over recent decades, Australian historiography has focused squarely upon colonial violence, particularly in the form of collective punishment on Australia's pastoral frontiers. A number of Australia's most respected historians have convincingly demonstrated how endemic collective punishment was on Australia's frontiers and how frontier violence was a critical historical measure of

\* For their invaluable assistance in the production of this article I thank the *Australian Historical Studies* co-editors, Richard Broome and Diane Kirkby, the two anonymous *AHS* readers, Bruce Vaughn and Victoria Haskins for their insights and editorial assistance, Erin Stewart Maudlin and Seth Rotramel for their research assistance funded by Faculty Research Grants from the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University.

<sup>1</sup> Patricia O'Brien, 'Remaking Colonial Culture? White Australia and its Papuan Frontier 1901–1940', *Australian Historical Studies* 40, no. 1 (2009): 101–2. Peter Hempenstall, *Pacific Islanders under German Rule: A Study of the Meaning of Colonial Resistance* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1978), 140–62. The spelling for Sinanga often appears as Silanga.

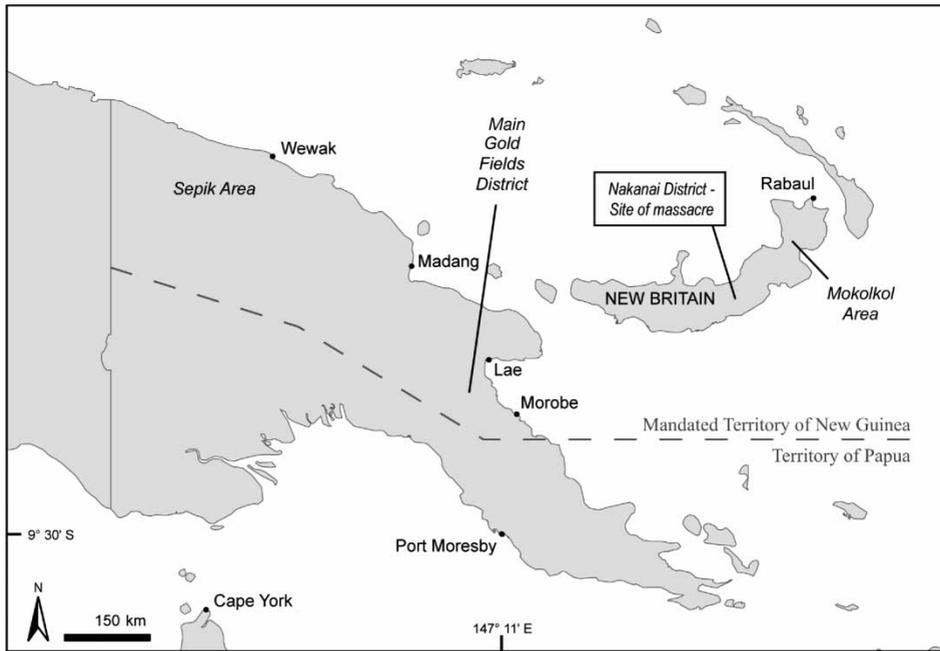


Figure 1. A map of the Mandated Territory of New Guinea with the site of the 'Nakanai Massacre' and other locations of significance to this history.

Australia's political, social and cultural constitution.<sup>2</sup> Yet these studies of violence and collective punishment have largely been confined within Australia's national borders. Pacific historians have also analysed violence in Australia's colonial contact with Pacific peoples providing either a basis for Australia's colonial history in the Pacific generally, or New Guinea in particular. Through investigations of corporeal and capital punishments, labour indenturing and its multiplicity of abuses, sexualised violence and discriminatory juridical practices, these historians have variously shown the centrality of these forms of violence to Australia's colonial history with the Pacific Islands and its inhabitants. However, their analysis has not extended to punitive expeditions.<sup>3</sup> Also, both groups of historians have largely operated in isolation from one another.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of The Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1982); Gordon Reid, *A Nest of Hornets: The Massacre of the Fraser family at Hornet Bank Station* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1982) and *A Picnic with the Natives: Aboriginal-European relations in the Northern Territory to 1910* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1990); Lyndall Ryan, *Aboriginal Tasmanians* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1981); Bain Attwood and S. G. Forster, eds. *Frontier Violence: The Australian Experience* (Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2003); Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: A History Since 1788* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 2010); Tony Roberts, *Frontier Justice: A History of the Gulf Country to 1900* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Mair, *Australia in New Guinea* (London: Christophers, 1948); C. D. Rowley, *The Australians in German New Guinea* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1958); Edward Wolfers, *Race*

This article explores the 'Nakanai massacre' and examines the responses to it; from settler outrage, through humanitarian concern, to much government obfuscation of the punitive responses. In this sense it is part of a longer Australian colonial story, but its part in this story has not been formerly recognised. The historically obscure Nakanai massacre was bookended by the May 1926 massacre at Forrest River and the Coniston massacre of September 1928, both on the Australian mainland and sparked by the killing of one white man. These two massacres have become totemic moments within Australia's recent popular memory and historiography.<sup>4</sup> This historiography has shown the continuity of punitive expeditions throughout Australian colonialism beginning in 1790 on the outskirts of Sydney.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as the Nakanai episode shows, Australian colonialism and violence existed beyond its continental borders and was one and the same thing. This article for the first time connects the two separate and invaluable streams of historiography—violence on Australian and Pacific frontiers—by linking the two frontiers of Australia's colonial space through this study of Nakanai events. It also highlights the incident's importance to Australia's status as a mandatory power.

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The Nakanai massacre of 1926 and Australia's punitive responses to it received considerable notoriety from late October 1926 until July 1930. This event got high visibility over this period, gauged by over ninety major articles in the Australian press. These articles gave an anatomy of events, retold eyewitness accounts, offered anthropological data on the Nakanai people, related biographical information on the victims, and followed the punitive, governmental and judicial outcomes of the massacre. This article argues that the Nakanai massacre generated different levels of concern and anxiety about violence on Australian frontiers than the Forrest River massacre (which generated little) or the

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*Relations and Colonial Rule in Papua New Guinea* (Sydney: Australia and New Zealand Book Company, 1975); Hank Nelson, *Black White and Gold: Goldmining in New Guinea 1878–1930* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1976); Roger Thompson, *Australian Imperialism in the Pacific* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980) and 'Making a Mandate: Australia's New Guinea Policies 1919–1925', *Journal of Pacific History* [JPH] 25, (1990), 1; Bill Gammage, 'The Rabaul Strike 1929', *JPH* 10, (1975), 3; Amirah Inglis, *Not a White Woman Safe: Sexual Anxiety and Politics in Port Moresby* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974); Sione Latekefu, ed. *Papua New Guinea: A Century of Colonial Impact 1884–1984* (Boroko: National Research Institute, 1989); Raymond Evans, Kay Saunders, Kathryn Cronin, *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland: A History of Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination* (St Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1993); Tracey Banivanua-Mar, *Violence and Colonial Dialogue: The Australian-Pacific Indentured Labor Trade* (Honolulu, Hawaii UP, 2007). John Hammond Moore, *Young Errol Before Hollywood* (Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1975), 37–41.

<sup>4</sup> Neville Green, *The Forrest River Massacres* (Freemantle: Freemantle Arts Press, 1995); Peter and Jay Read, eds. *Long Time, Olden Time: Aboriginal Accounts of Northern Territory History* (Alice Springs: Institute for Aboriginal Development, 1991); John Cribbin, *The Killing Times: The Coniston Massacre 1928* (Sydney: Fontana, 1984); Peter Read, 'Murder, Revenge and Reconciliation on the North Eastern Frontier', *History Australia* 4 no. 1 (2007): 9.1–9.15; Bill Wilson and Justin O'Brien, 'To Infuse an Universal Terror': A Reappraisal of the Coniston Killings', *Aboriginal History* 23 (2003): 59–78.

<sup>5</sup> O'Brien, 'Remaking', 100.

Coniston massacre (that generated significant internal debate and inquiries).<sup>6</sup> Because the incident occurred within New Guinea—Australia’s defence rampart to protect White Australia—and under the intense international scrutiny of an innovative protection agency, the Permanent Mandates Commission of the League of Nations, the Nakanai events entailed consequences beyond humanitarian concerns. These consequences extended to Australia’s retention of vital external territories and tests of its national prestige in the face of an international system deemed interfering and disposed against Australia.

Australian politicians had sought control over Papua and New Guinea since Queensland’s aborted attempt at annexation in 1883. Since then, subsequent politicians were unequivocal about the importance of these territories to the strategy of creating and maintaining a white Australia.<sup>7</sup> This translated into the formal control by the Australian government of the Territory of Papua in 1906. New Guinea came under Australian control when the German territory was seized in Australia’s first action of the Great War. From 1914–21, the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF) ruled New Guinea in a notoriously harsh manner.<sup>8</sup> At the Treaty of Versailles Prime Minister Billy Hughes campaigned for the sanctity of White Australia and saw New Guinea’s annexation as part of the doctrine’s protection. Annexation was resisted at Versailles despite Hughes insistence.<sup>9</sup> From 1921, Australia governed New Guinea as a League of Nations class C mandate, subject to the League’s oversight.<sup>10</sup> Only days before the Nakanai massacre, Prime Minister Stanley Bruce emphatically restated how vital New Guinea was to Australia. Addressing the Imperial Conference in London in October 1926, Bruce said, ‘Australia attached the greatest possible importance to the retention of the New Guinea mandate’ to protect Australia from a northern attack.<sup>11</sup> The Australian government quickly realised its punitive reactions to Nakanai jeopardised this most vital strategic interest, sparking damage control strategies concerning Australia’s performance as a colonial power in the Pacific.

The degree of damage control stemmed from the terms of Australia’s mandate over New Guinea. The League of Nations had the power to strip Australia of its New Guinea territory if it was found in breach of its mandatory duties delineated in the League’s Covenant. The Covenant was vaguely worded regarding uses of violence. Articles 22 and 23 stated that mandatory powers had

<sup>6</sup> Trove lists four small articles reporting on the Forrest River killings. Comments reproduced here on Nakanai events from October 1926 to before the 1928 Coniston Massacre, assumed that collective punishment was an historical feature of Australia’s pastoral frontiers. Wilson and O’Brien point to considerable responses to the Coniston massacre from September 1928. ‘To Infuse’, 59.

<sup>7</sup> O’Brien, ‘Remaking’, 96–112.

<sup>8</sup> C. D. Rowley, *The Australians in German New Guinea 1914–1921* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1958).

<sup>9</sup> Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the Question of Racial Equality* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008), chap. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Wayne Hudson, *Billy Hughes in Paris: The Birth of Australian Diplomacy* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson Australia Limited, 1978), 92–6.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Australia’s Mandate: Care of Natives’, *The Argus*, 25 October 1926, in Papers collected by J. G. McLaren relating to Territories NAA CP290/13, folder 7 [MP].

a 'sacred trust' to protect the 'well-being' and secure 'just treatment' for 'native inhabitants in territories under their control'.<sup>12</sup> Mandate countries were bound to report annually to the League and, if requested, appear in Geneva before the Mandates Commission to answer questions. This happened in the aftermath of the Nakanai massacre. Throughout the Nakanai episode, Australia's official position was shaped by a desire to comply with the League's expectations. This was achieved, it is argued, through a combination of obfuscation, misinformation and assertions of Australia's enlightened stance towards its colonial charges that often did not square with attitudes or practices on the ground. This posture is most evident in the government's tally of casualties of the expedition. Initially the death toll was given as two, though this was quietly revised for Australia's appearance before the League of Nations after eyewitness accounts contradicted government figures and government versions of events. Estimates varied, but over time went as high as twenty-six, with unknown numbers of wounded.

Indeed, the official line that Australia had transformed itself into a beneficent coloniser was tested through continued scrutiny on uses of violence against New Guineans after the mandate era commenced in 1921. From this point, the Australian government insisted that the harsh ANMEF era had been replaced by a new and enlightened form of colonial rule which stressed uplift and the extension of modern benefits—education, health, British justice—to New Guinea's people. ANMEF personnel were replaced after 1921. Though this shift supposedly marked a change from military rule to a 'professional public service', First World War veterans predominated in the incoming colonial administration from the top down as well as amongst the white settler population. A militarised population of ex-patriots, therefore, continued to have a deep impact on the territory.<sup>13</sup> Evan Alexander Wisdom, a decorated veteran of the Great War from Gallipoli to its bitter conclusion, assumed the role of administrator from 1921—33.<sup>14</sup> As administrator, Wisdom reported to the responsible minister and department, which was the Department of Home and Territories in 1926. In turn, the Australian government was answerable to the League. The handling of events after the massacre showed that this chain of command was somewhat ineffective, due not only to the inherent communication difficulties on the rugged New Guinea frontier, but also as a result of poor human communication in the command chain.

Despite the shift to a civilian administration from March 1921, Australia's reputation on violence and mistreatment improved little. This handicapped Australia as it faced League scrutiny over the Nakanai events. Initially, corporeal punishment was the issue. Assurances by Prime Minister Billy Hughes in late

<sup>12</sup> 'Nakanai Massacre': Details of Expedition', *Brisbane Courier*, 9 November 1926; *League of Nations Covenant* (Geneva: League of Nations, 1919) articles 22 and 23; Susan Pederson, 'Settler Colonialism at the Bar of the League of Nations' in *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century: Projects, Practices, Legacies*, eds. Caroline Elkins and Susan Pederson (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, 'Making'.

<sup>14</sup> Ronald McNicoll, 'Wisdom, Evan Alexander (1869–1945)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wisdom-ewan-alexander-9160/text16173>, accessed 8 July 2011.

1921 that corporeal punishment had ceased in New Guinea were undermined with caveats that such punishments remained necessary. Hughes raised the spectre of sexual predations against white women as a reason for the continuance of flogging: 'if punishments were administered in these circumstances, I do not know that any honorable member would censure it, if his own wife, or other female relatives, were the victims'.<sup>15</sup>

Australia's international reputation continued to suffer. In 1923 an exposé by journalist and historian Malcolm Ellis in a series of *Daily Telegraph* articles highlighted the continuing abysmal treatment of New Guinean labourers.<sup>16</sup> These reports sparked an inquiry headed by A. S. Canning (a West Australian magistrate). Canning's report, based on interviews made throughout the Mandated Territory, was given to Prime Minister Bruce by mid-1924. Of the thirty-one New Guineans interviewed, most were from the Gazelle Peninsula of New Britain, in the vicinity of Rabaul. They were Tolai people—ethnically distinct from the Nakanai of central New Britain—and had the longest experience of colonial contact.<sup>17</sup> Many of the New Guinean interviewees were government employees and their testimony was taken in the presence of whites, so was heavily compromised.<sup>18</sup> Canning, not surprisingly, found that 'all witnesses I interviewed were emphatic that nothing approaching flogging occurred', that conditions were vastly improved from the time of German rule and the 'natives seemed thoroughly contented'.<sup>19</sup>

However, doubts remained and Australia sought further advice to protect itself from scrutiny. In 1924 Colonel John Ainsworth, formerly the Chief Native Commissioner of Kenya, reported on Australia's administration of the Territory at the Bruce government's behest. On the question of punitive expeditions, Ainsworth matter-of-factly noted that at the time of his inquiry, they were taking place on the Sepik River. Colonel John Walstab led these Sepik patrols, as he would the Nakanai punitive expedition two years later. Walstab is pictured with New Guinean charges during the course of these 1924 duties in an image that is a study of colonial power and its visual expression (Figure 2). The Sepik expedition was sparked by native conflict with reports claiming that 'during the last four years over 800 natives have been killed in inter-tribal fights' so expeditions were sent to 'adjust matters'.<sup>20</sup>

Ainsworth provided a way out for future Australia governments, by recommending Asian migration to aid New Guinea's development, the encouragement of New Guinea agriculture and the elevation of Chinese status.

<sup>15</sup> William Morris Hughes, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates (CPD)*, 22 November 1921.

<sup>16</sup> Thompson, 'Making', 75–6; Fletcher, B. H. 'Ellis, Malcolm Henry (1890–1969)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/ellis-malcolm-henry-10116/text17855>, accessed 16 February 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Klaus Neumann, *Not the Way it Really Was: Constructing the Tolai Past* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Thompson, 'Making', 76.

<sup>19</sup> A. S. Canning, *Report of Inquiry into Allegations of Flogging and Forced Labour of Natives* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1924), 15, 18.

<sup>20</sup> 'Inter-Tribal Fights', *The Brisbane Courier*, 11 April 1924, 8. Ainsworth, 9, 12, 24, 38, 39, 41, 42.



Figure 2. District Officer Colonel Walstab and a raiding patrol of native police—1924, New Guinea, Sepik, Sepik River. Source: National Archives of Australia. NAA: A6510, 1502.

However, these were considered too far-reaching for an Australia unquestioningly wedded to its White Australia policy and its New Guinea and Papua corollary: Black New Guinea, that is, a system of indigenous indentured labour under white planter control. White Australia and a Black New Guinea meant no more Asian migration would be permitted into the Territory, though non-German Europeans could continue to enter after 1921.<sup>21</sup> Even Colonel Ainsworth was not consistently enlightened, as his views regarding New Guinea Chinese contrasted greatly with recommendations that showed little evolution in thinking about ‘primitive people’, as he deemed New Guineans.<sup>22</sup>

The criticism of the administration continued in sections of the Australian press. Pro-government newspapers countered with accusations that detractors were German sympathisers. In 1925, *The Sydney Morning Herald* identified culprits who were ‘slandering Australia’, Britain and South Africa before the international community by accusing them of ill-treating natives in former German colonies. It accused others—often left-wing papers—of being German propagandists by attacking British imperial methods. Above all, Australia ‘has suffered most of all’ from ‘vehement tirades’ when it appeared before the Permanent Mandates Commission which examined Australia’s ‘accounts’ of the mandate’s stewardship.<sup>23</sup> Once Germany joined the League of Nations in

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, ‘Making’, 80.

<sup>22</sup> John Ainsworth, *Administrative Arrangements and Matters Affecting the Interest of Natives in the Territory of New Guinea* (Melbourne, Government Printer, 1924), 9.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Slandering Australia’, *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH), 19 November 1924, 12.

September 1926 these hostile forces intensified and this was just weeks before the Nakanai events. From this time, Australia and her fellow British holders of mandates denounced a 'formidable' questionnaire regarding imperial methods and policies produced by the League for B and C mandates (that is African and Pacific).<sup>24</sup> Britain and her dominions found this document 'meddlesome' and superfluous. In the British view, 'the mandate system differs little or nothing from those principles of administering backward territories that Britain has practised for many scores of years'.<sup>25</sup> It was feared that the process of the expropriation and auction of German property that was taking place in New Guinea, and other former colonies, would increase German vehemence against Australia's trusteeship. *The Rabaul Times*, the strident mouthpiece of settlers, certainly believed these developments would increase negative attention on Australia.<sup>26</sup> Other reports cautioned that 'the Reich has already intimated that it intends to work' for the recovery of ex-colonies once it becomes a member of the League, and that the return of New Guinea was at the top of their list, heightening Australia's anxieties in 1926.<sup>27</sup>

### The Nakanai Massacre

Increased international attention on Australia's colonial rule coincided with a dramatic shift in the nature of Australia's presence in New Guinea. From January 1926, news of a spectacular gold strike on Edie Creek in the southeast of the mainland Territory, prompted many Australian men to head north to try their luck.<sup>28</sup> Australia's second New Guinea mining frontier was hastily formed (the first was in 1888). With this frontier came all the consistent historical outcomes of conflict sparked by resource competition, labour recruitment and, most contentiously, depredations against women by the influx of men—both whites and their indigenous employees from outside groups—into newly-contacted and remote communities like the Nakanai villages on New Britain.<sup>29</sup> The Nakanai area had been closed to labour recruiters from 1920 and was designated 'uncontrolled' as it did not have an administrative presence.

Tensions escalated between whites and the Nakanai people when government patrols led by Hector Nickols conducted 'pacifying' expeditions in central New Britain in 1926. In the course of this work, Nickols 'discovered an

<sup>24</sup> League of Nations, 'B and C Mandates: List of Questions which the Permanent Mandates Commission desires should be Dealt with in the Annual Reports of the Mandatory Powers', Geneva, 25 June 1926.

<sup>25</sup> 'An Example of Common Action', *The Times*, 22 November 1926, 15.

<sup>26</sup> 'When I was in Berlin recently' *The Rabaul Times* (RT), 29 October 1926, 3; 'Outside Interference', RT, 17 December 1926, 4.

<sup>27</sup> 'League of Nations Mandates Controversy', *Evening Post*, 16 September 1926.

<sup>28</sup> The first rush began on Sudest Island. Hank Nelson further notes that the search for gold 'was why most Australians went to Papua New Guinea and until the invasion by the Japanese in 1942 it was the main reason why most of them went beyond the beaches', *Black White*, vii, 259, 269.

<sup>29</sup> 'New Guinea Murders: Additional Details', *The West Australian*, 9 December 1926, 11.

ore-bearing reef' of gold, assuring a stream of whites would follow close upon his heels.<sup>30</sup> It was during these patrols that Nickols was implicated in the specific incident that triggered the upsurge in Nakanai animus towards whites: the sexual violation of two girls from the Silanga village. This attack was consistently attributed to 'two boys' under Nickols' command.<sup>31</sup> Nickols did not punish these indigenous men: leaving him open to both suspicion that he was more directly involved in the attack than was acknowledged and to retribution from village men.

Patrol Officer Nickols returned to the Nakanai villages again in mid-October 1926 with a prospecting party of four whites accompanied by New Guinean carriers. Nickols and two companions left Captain J. A. Thurston at the coastal depot while they went 'to inspect a promising gold prospect'. When they did not return, Thurston went in search of them. In the village of Iapago, Thurston was attacked by spears, piercing him in three places. Thurston struggled back to the depot.<sup>32</sup> The three other prospectors returned unharmed to find Thurston in need of medical attention. He was returned to Rabaul where the whole chilling account was published, alarming the town's greatly outnumbered whites.<sup>33</sup> In response to this attack an 'official expedition' was organised and it proceeded to the 'trouble zone'. The Australian government learnt of this punitive expedition from newspaper accounts some weeks afterwards.<sup>34</sup> Nickols, meanwhile, was with another prospecting party of five men in the Nakanai region.<sup>35</sup> On 26 October 'a shower of missiles from all quarters' attacked the party in what became known as the Nakanai massacre. Bruce Marley, L. E. Fischer and Noel Tracey Collins were killed. D. Page went missing. Nickols and a man called Britten escaped making it back to the coast to raise the alarm.<sup>36</sup>

Upon hearing this news, white residents of Rabaul were determined to seek vengeance. There had been punitive expeditions in New Guinea before, according to Wisdom, but the killing of four white men 'took it out of the usual tribal warfare category and aroused great public feeling'. Sixty men volunteered to form a private expedition and 'take matters into their own hands' by waging a 'war of revenge' against the Nakanai. Schooners were offered and 'there were meetings and deputations and much wild talk'. Wisdom wrote that he 'stood his guns' and refused to countenance such action. Instead he appointed Walstab to lead a government expedition, a move that 'was considered an indication that we would deal too lightly with the natives',

<sup>30</sup> 'Opening of Nakanai District Statement by H. Nickols – whether case for criminal proceedings for libel', NAA A432, 1929/3872.

<sup>31</sup> 'New Guinea Murders', *The West Australian* 9 December 1926. The spelling for Nickols varies from Nichols to Nicholls.

<sup>32</sup> 'Murderous Attack by Pacified Natives', *RT*, 22 October 1926, 3.

<sup>33</sup> In January 1929 Rabaul's population consisted of '500 whites, 800 Asiatics and 3,000 natives' *The Times*, 5 January 1929, 11.

<sup>34</sup> 'We have had no official advice on this patrol party', Annotation to an *Argus* 13 November 1926 article in NAA, 'Murders of Whites by Natives – Nakanai', A518, AC840/1/3, p. 19/119.

<sup>35</sup> 'Local News', *RT*, 29 October 1926.

<sup>36</sup> 'New Guinea Murders: Story of Attack', *The Argus*, 13 November 1926, 38.

though the more moderate elements of Rabaul's residents eventually agreed with Wisdom about his more restrained response.<sup>37</sup>

This punitive expedition set off bearing arms, including a Maxim machine gun, which became the most controversial aspect of the expedition. It later served as a grotesque metaphor for colonial violence: the application of industrial weaponry designed solely for mass killing against a 'stone age' people armed with spears. Conventional firearms were justifiable as necessary for self-defence, but a machine gun appeared excessive and to contravene the League's Covenant.

Damage control began almost immediately. After the expedition was dispatched, Wisdom cabled the new Minister for Home and Territories, Sir William Glasgow. The Minister hastily issued a statement, repeated in several press reports, directing that 'the machine gun ... not ... be used unless some really grave emergency arises that renders its use necessary for the protection of the lives of the members of the expedition. It is on no account to be used for the purpose of aggression'. Glasgow continued that the 'object of the expedition must be confined to the arrest of the murderers and the natives implicated in the murders ... and must not extend to reprisals'.<sup>38</sup> This was a vain attempt to retrieve the situation, as the expedition had departed and was out of contact with Rabaul, let alone Australia. Wisdom wrote that the orders were forwarded once he received them, but Walstab did not get them until 'the first phase had finished', nearly three weeks later.<sup>39</sup>

The Secretary of Home and Territories, J. G. McLaren, also made a statement aimed at shaping public opinion. In an article entitled 'New Guinea Murders: Expedition Not Punitive', the secretary was quoted as saying:

misunderstanding might be created by the use of the word punitive. It was punitive only in the sense that its object was to arrest murderers. It was necessary that the party should be armed for its own safety but he doubted very much if there was a machine gun, and in any case there would be no indiscriminate punishment by rifles meted out on the natives ... [as] it would be absolutely contrary to the spirit which had guided the Commonwealth in its administration of the territory, quite apart from the fact that it would be a breach of the mandate given Australia by the League of Nations.<sup>40</sup>

These government statements were calculated to obfuscate: a machine-gun was indeed taken, and the government knew it. A photograph of the assembled punitive party clearly shows it was the expedition's prized centre-piece (Figure 3).<sup>41</sup>

Wisdom later complained to McLaren that the minister's orders about the machine gun, though dutifully passed on, 'caused much embarrassment'. If the

<sup>37</sup> E. A. Wisdom to J. G. McLaren, 22 November 1926, MP.

<sup>38</sup> 'Nakanai Massacre': Details of Expedition', *Brisbane Courier*, 9 November 1926; 'The Murder of Australians in New Britain', *The Times*, 5 November 1926, 13; 'Murder of White men in New Britain', *The Times*, 6 November 1926, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Wisdom to McLaren, 22 November, 1926. MP.

<sup>40</sup> 'New Guinea Murders: Expedition not Punitive', *The Argus*, 5 November 1926, 11.

<sup>41</sup> The image was published in the *Sydney News*, 8 February 1927.



Figure 3. The Nakanai Expedition, November 1926, Source: Raphael Cilento Collection, Fryer Library, University of Queensland UQFL44, Box 37A, photo #38

minister's orders had arrived 'before the advance' they would 'have seriously altered our plans and rendered our operations ineffectual'. He went on that 'Walstab, who is anything but an alarmist or a 'wild and wooley' plunger and who has a very thorough knowledge of the natives, is very decided on' its use. Walstab believed so strongly about its deployment that he wanted to tender his resignation upon news it was not to be used, though Wisdom persuaded him not to.<sup>42</sup>

Early press reports sparked a public debate about Australia's record as a coloniser. *Smith's Weekly*, the voice of the diggers including those disgruntled returned servicemen who paid high-prices when expropriated German copra plantations in New Guinea were auctioned, took the opportunity to attack the administration.<sup>43</sup> The paper assailed Australia's record, describing the mandate as being 'maladministered' by 'the Department of Scandals', and that 'Australians [were] shamed by [a] record of ferocious lust' and 'atrocities that will shock humanity' even before the punitive expedition occurred.<sup>44</sup> Predictably, *The Rabaul Times* supported what had happened. Not only did it emphasise the attack was unprovoked and that the victims were war veterans, but when criticism of the punitive expedition mounted it thundered, 'outside influence

<sup>42</sup> Wisdom to McLaren, 22 November, 1926, MP.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Broome, 'The Planters' Influence on the Administration of Mandated New Guinea' (BA Hons Thesis UNSW 1969), chap. 1.

<sup>44</sup> 'Grim background to New Guinea Murders', *Smith's Weekly*, 13 November 1926.

and interference! Shades of Anzacs!... Is Germany's entry into the League's Council going to have such far-reaching effects as to allow a massacre like the Nakanai affair to go unpunished!' <sup>45</sup> *The West Australian*, the voice of those on the mainland's western pastoral frontier, considered criticism of Australia's conduct as prodigiously harmful to the nation. It attacked 'propagandists . . . who have been seizing every opportunity to discredit Australian's administration of the mandated territory'. In the wake of Nakanai, these 'propagandists no doubt hoped for an outburst of public feeling followed by punitive measures which would have made a meaty report for the League of Nations. But nothing like that has occurred'. It went on to emphasise the restraint that had been ordered by Minister Glasgow, again focusing upon his order that the machine gun only be used in the direst emergency. It concluded,

in short, there is to be no summary justice in the old fashioned way, which was to wipe out the murderous tribe as a lesson to others. The incident is in every way distressing but it has furnished an opportunity to show the world that the natives of New Guinea are in the hands of a remarkably tolerant people. <sup>46</sup>

Demonising and fantastic descriptions of the Nakanai also appeared, as the Australian press waited for news of the expedition. *The Argus* reported that the Nakanai men had 'powerful physiques' but also were effeminate spending their meagre wages on perfumes, makeup and 'peroxide of hydrogen'. <sup>47</sup> Racially, the report asserted, the Nakanai were a 'mixed lot'. Some were 'blacker than any negro' whilst others resembled Filipinos with bronzed skins and straight hair and (most curious of all) was that 'in some of the tribes the features were of a pronounced Jewish character'. <sup>48</sup> Most reports concluded that the Nakanai were 'treacherous', 'notoriously aggressive', 'sulky' and 'were reported to be addicted to cannibalism'. <sup>49</sup> In a rare defence of the Nakanai, J. R. Atcherley wrote that he and his wife had lived amongst them for two years in perfect harmony and would do so again, without hesitation. <sup>50</sup>

Individuals with territory experience often disagreed. A former government official in the Territory, H. L. Downing, wrote that the administration was pandering too much to League-driven conceptions of the work a colonial power should undertake. Rather than concentrating efforts on 'opening-up work' that 'requires disciplinary measures of a very definite and forceful kind' which would 'bring hostile natives to reason', the inexperienced administration was funneling resources, gained by 'iniquitous taxation on whites', into native education. That the government should commence 'an elaborate system of educating one

<sup>45</sup> *RT*, 17 December 1926, 4.

<sup>46</sup> 'From the Federal Capital: Review of the Week', *The West Australian*, 13 November 1926, 10.

<sup>47</sup> 'Murder of Prospectors', *The Mercury*, 4 November, 1926; 'New Guinea Murders: Character of Natives', *The Argus*, 16 November 1926.

<sup>48</sup> 'New Guinea Murders: Character of Natives', *The Argus*, 16 November 1926.

<sup>49</sup> Neumann, *Not the Way*; 'Murder of Prospectors', *The Mercury*, 4 November 1926; 'New Guinea Murders: Character of Natives', *The Argus*, 16 November 1926; 'New Britain: The New Guinea Murders', *SMH*, 6 November 1926.

<sup>50</sup> 'Nakanai Blacks Harmless', *Herald*, 13 November 1926.

hundred native children whilst probably 150,000 (it is a modest estimate) remain even untamed seems wrong somewhere'. In Downing's view, such a program should wait 'fifteen years' until the 'opening-up work' was completed, a sentiment resoundingly supported by *The Rabaul Times*.<sup>51</sup>

*The Rabaul Times* scoffed at rare published opinions that conflicted with endorsements of violence as the most beneficial colonial investment. John Bagley's strongly worded rebuke of Australia's violent conduct published in the *Melbourne Post* is a case in point. Bagley wrote that 'I have lived a considerable number of years [in New Guinea] and 'as an Australian' he 'expected ... his Government would at least have given a Christian interpretation of the mandate'. Instead it had 'stooped to many infamous tricks' and 'administrators and high officials have winked the other eye to atrocities of the vilest nature'. Australia's rule continued to be so 'harsh and tyrannical' that it throws 'the mind back to the bloody American days of Uncle Tom's Cabin'. Citing the Nakanai expedition and earlier ones to Baining, Madang and the Sepik River, he claimed that the destruction wreaked upon these villages 'reminds one of the devastated areas of Northern France'. To this *The Rabaul Times* editor retorted that the 'if there are more pampered and spoilt natives of any black race ... [than] the natives of these islands—then lead us to them'.<sup>52</sup>

Nineteen days after the expedition departed Rabaul, reports began to filter back to Australia about what transpired. These reports, based on Wisdom's cable to the Minister, had a government slant suggesting a successful and restrained mission. Once the 'force' had reached one hostile village 'the natives adopted a threatening attitude and overhead fire was used ... the next day the party were attacked. The party opened fire on the natives who dispersed leaving two killed and one wounded'.<sup>53</sup> Minister Glasgow added that Wisdom's message 'indicated that the instructions that the machine gun should not be used had been carried out'.<sup>54</sup> The four white men's bodies were recovered and returned to Rabaul where they were buried in one of the largest funeral processions the town had seen, organised and funded by the Returned Servicemen's League. A procession of the Union Jack-draped coffins was watched by a 'huge' crowd as it made its way to the 'pretty and romantic little cemetery' in Rabaul's Botanic Gardens.<sup>55</sup>

When Raphael Cilento, who would become a towering figure in Australian tropical medicine, arrived in Melbourne in December 1926 to address the Pan Pacific Health Conference, the Australian public gained a first-hand account of what transpired at Nakanai. Most reports of Cilento's remarks focused upon his discussion of the initial incident involving Nickols and the violation of women from the Silanga village. Reports also dwelt at length on the current state of

<sup>51</sup> H. L. Downing, 'New Britain: The New Guinea Murders', *SMH*, 6 November 1926; 'Outside Interference', *RT*, 17 December 1926.

<sup>52</sup> 'This is a good one', *RT*, 14 January 1927.

<sup>53</sup> 'New Guinea Punitive Expedition: Two Natives Killed' *SMH*, 19 November 1926, 11; 'New Guinea Murders: The Punitive Expedition', *The West Australian*, 19 November 1926, 12; 'New Guinea Murders: Expedition Advances', *The Argus*, 19 November 1926.

<sup>54</sup> 'New Guinea Punitive Expedition: Two Natives Killed' *SMH*, 19 November 1926, 11.

<sup>55</sup> 'Military Funeral: Huge Attendance: Widespread Sympathy', *RT*, 26 November 1926.

affairs: an administrative post had been established that would 'carry out all the usual work of peaceful penetration'. Australian officials would wait for the Nakanai to 'voluntarily surrender' the murderers, which Ciento thought would occur before 'the rainy season'.<sup>56</sup> *The Argus*, however, reported Ciento describing how the punitive expedition exhibited far less restraint than the government claimed. His account revealed that the party entered the deserted village of Umu and found it to be 'strongly entrenched and almost impregnable'. So 'with a fusillade of machine-gun bullets the expedition stormed the village and the natives scattered, returning later to attack. They were repelled with only three casualties'.<sup>57</sup> The *Labor Daily* ran a similar report entitled 'Machine Gun was used on New Guinea Natives: Doctor Confutes Minister'.<sup>58</sup>

Two months after the incident, Ciento was back in Nakanai inspecting the villages of Iapago, Umu and Silanga. He noted in his patrol diary that they were 'almost unrecognizable since punitive expedition'. He also made a drastic revision of the casualties, 'total deaths by gun wounds were 22–26 and many more are marked by wounds'. The expedition achieved its purpose in Ciento's view: 'Natives everywhere on roads working well under control. All murderers apprehended and in villages awaiting arrival of boats to be conveyed under arrest to Rabaul'.<sup>59</sup>

The Australian government's assertions that the machine gun was not used were further undermined when accounts by Mr C. Burlington were published from 9 February 1927. Burlington, who was one of the white volunteers on the expedition 'attached to the machine-gun section', contradicted the official version of events, as had Ciento. At the village of Umu, Burlington claimed, the expedition opened fire twice with the machine gun when they were challenged. The natives fled after the second burst that was aimed at their feet'. The next day the expedition was attacked again. In response, 'a bomb was thrown and the natives turned and ran to the edge of the precipice'.<sup>60</sup>

Three days after Burlington's account, a long editorial appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald* entitled 'Our Task in New Guinea'. It opened with a quotation from Rudyard Kipling's *The White Man's Burden*: 'new-caught sullen peoples half devil and half child'. The editorial argued that unlike neighbouring Papua that had been governed by Britain and then Australia, the 'pacification' of hinterland New Guinea had not been carried out by Germany. Instead they 'concentrated upon towns and their immediate vicinity' and left 'the vast majority of the

<sup>56</sup> 'New Guinea Murders: Additional Details', *The West Australian*, 9 December 1926, 11; 'Recent Murders: The New Guinea Tragedy', *Brisbane Courier*, 9 December 1926, 13; 'Attack Upon Gold Seekers', *Western Argus*, 14 December 1926.

<sup>57</sup> 'New Guinea Tragedy: Health Director's Story', *The Argus*, 9 December 1926.

<sup>58</sup> *Labor Daily*, 9 September 1926.

<sup>59</sup> Raphael Ciento, *Patrol Diary February 1927*, Sir Raphael Ciento Collection, Fryer Library, UQFL44, Box 11, folder 19; See further details from Ciento reported in 'New Guinea: Story of Massacre', *SMH*, 13 January 1928, 10.

<sup>60</sup> 'Thrilling Story: Nakanai Murders, Fight with Natives', *SMH*, 9 February 1927; Similar reports appeared in numerous other papers.

natives in a wild state'. The task had been left to Australia to make the interior safe for white people. The Nakanai expedition had:

taught the natives a lesson ... [though] misguided 'humanitarians' may protest that it is monstrous to employ machine guns and bombs against ill-armed savages, but what is the alternative? Justice must rule, and these, when the natives deliberately challenge the authority of the Government, are its instruments. The white man must be protected.

It reasoned that white men needed to be in New Guinea to harness the territory's resources as the 'natives do not, and cannot, turn to account the riches with which the country is endowed'. The editorial concluded: 'in the Mandated Territory, as in Papua, the condition of the natives has immeasurably improved since the advent of white man'. The 'solicitude for the native has ever been the keynote of our policy' thus aligning with the 'sacred trust' enshrined in the Mandate charter.<sup>61</sup>

A week later a rejoinder to this editorial appeared. The author, 'Fairplay', concurred that Australia had a 'very serious responsibility over New Guinea', but hoped 'that the powers that be see to it that white contact with the natives there shall not have the same possibilities for the perpetration of horrors that the brutal element among whites had [in] ... the early days among the blacks of Australia'.<sup>62</sup>

Fairplay's perception of events remained marginal in the majority of public opinion. When Senator Matthew Reid addressed Australia's conduct in March 1927 he adopted a similar tone to the 'Our Task in New Guinea' editorial. Reid offered his 'compliments' to both the administrator and the Minister for the 'firm stand taken by them in connexion [sic] with the so-called massacre of whites in the Territory'. The 'firm stand' he referred to was the initial check both officials supposedly placed upon Rabaul's white population. In Reid's view the whites had 'lost their heads and many were intent on retaliation' and talked 'of a wholesale shooting of the black population'. Reid thanked both men 'for refusing to countenance such action', adding 'The happenings of that time are now over'. If the Administrator and Minister had not responded in the restraining way they did 'we might have had a repetition of that which, unfortunately, has taken place only too frequently in connexion with trouble between white and coloured peoples, namely, the innocent suffering for the guilty'.<sup>63</sup>

But the Nakanai 'happenings' were not yet over. In the following months, sixteen men were brought to Rabaul for trial. By June 1927 reports were reaching Australia that fourteen had escaped custody, but were recaptured.<sup>64</sup> The first eleven were tried and sentenced to death. The remaining five then

<sup>61</sup> 'Our Task in New Guinea', *SMH*, 12 February 1927, 14.

<sup>62</sup> Fairplay, 'The Nakanai Tragedy: To the Editor of the Herald', *SMH*, 21 February 1927, 12.

<sup>63</sup> Senator Matthew Reid (QLD), *CPD*, 24 March 1927.

<sup>64</sup> 'Sequel to Murder: Natives Escape', *Evening Post*, 29 June 1927, 11; 'Murdered Prospectors: 14 Natives Break Gaol while Awaiting Trial', *Barrier Miner*, 24 June 1927, 4; 'Natives Escape', *The Brisbane Courier*, 30 June 1927, 6.

stood trial. This second trial was held in October and was witnessed by John 'J. K.' McCarthy, a newly arrived patrol officer, who would go on to considerable fame for his New Guinea service. McCarthy recounted that 'the five Nakanai now grinned and . . . did in fact agree with all the evidence . . . There was no jury and the decision was quick. These five, like their eleven fellows, were sentenced to death'.<sup>65</sup> McCarthy also revealed the more brutal truth—or 'the score' as he termed it—'four white men dead, twenty-three Nakanai dead and another sixteen Nakanai with the mark of death upon them'. He reasoned, 'surely this was poor arithmetic'.<sup>66</sup> The judge concurred with McCarthy's reasoning, and commuted all the sentences to fifteen years, a decision that may have been prompted by the Bruce government's wish to appear merciful in international eyes.<sup>67</sup>

The official reluctance to acknowledge the death toll of the punitive expedition continued. In Australia's 1927 *Annual Report to the League of Nations*, the punitive expedition and the aftermath were briefly mentioned.<sup>68</sup> No dates, no figures of New Guineans killed or arrested (though the four white casualties were prominently cited) and no detail of the trials were given. It conveyed the false impression the legal process had concluded. The League of Nations Permanent Commission noted this obfuscation when it met mid-1927 and questioned Australia's High Commissioner to London and former Prime Minister, Joseph Cook, for two days.<sup>69</sup> The opening line of questioning concerned the Nakanai punitive expedition. Cook gave a detailed account of the incident, reiterating the stock government line about the machine gun and the minister's directive on its use. Cook acknowledged the machine gun was used owing to the difficult terrain as 'covering fire' and the next day the expedition had to 'resort to the use of arms to ward off attack'. 'In repulsing the attacks', he acknowledged, 'unfortunately eighteen natives were killed' (a figure not corroborated elsewhere). He also added that the initial cause of the violence had 'not been definitely established but indications are that the murders were indirectly due to the ill treatment of natives by certain native police and carriers'. 'The patrol officer in question' had not punished his men on the spot 'though he was no longer in government service'. (Nickols 'resigned' on 26 November 1926.) Cook deflected blame away from Australia and its frontier culture, arguing a case for self-defence. Before the Commission's line of questioning shifted away from Nakanai to numerous other aspects of Australia's rule, Cook

<sup>65</sup> J. K. McCarthy, *Patrol into Yesterday: My New Guinea Years* (Melbourne: Cheshire Publishing, 1974), 25–6.

<sup>66</sup> McCarthy, 26.

<sup>67</sup> Hank Nelson argues that Australian governments, particularly under Scullin, regularly commuted death sentences in New Guinea, though he did not address this specific case, 'The Swinging Index: Capital Punishment and British and Australian Administrations in Papua and New Guinea 1888–1945', *JPH* 13, (1978) no. 3, 143.

<sup>68</sup> *Report to the Council of the League of Nations on the Administration of the Territory of New Guinea from 1st July, 1926 to 30<sup>th</sup> June 1927* (Canberra: Government Printer Canberra, 1927), 234.

<sup>69</sup> The sixth and seventh meetings, held June 23 and 24, were devoted to New Guinea.

assured them that the incident and its aftermath would be reported in full in next year's report.<sup>70</sup>

Australia's next report to the League did not mention the legal aftermath of the expedition, as promised by Cook. It did contain other references to Nakanai, noting that another patrol went into that area 'for the purpose of strengthening the confidence of the natives in the Administration', to make 'a complete census' and investigate reports of tribal fighting.<sup>71</sup> It also contained a letter to Prime Minister Bruce from the newly-appointed Minister for Home and Territories, C. W. C. Marr, who undertook a tour of Papua and New Guinea in August 1927. Marr did not refer to the Nakanai affair, though the legal proceedings were playing out and Rabaul must have been ablaze with talk about it.<sup>72</sup>

Following closely upon the minister's visit, Wisdom also toured the Territory and his account was also appended to the 1927–28 League of Nations report. Reaching Nakanai in September 1927 he wrote 'a surprise awaited us'. Rather than walk up the 'precipitous hills' to reach the villages, 'I found thousands of men and women of the hill tribes lining the beaches to greet me. They had come long journeys bearing food and even carrying their young children on their shoulders'. Wisdom took this gathering as his welcoming party, though the large number of people may have come to the beach after a spectacular fire at the Malutu police post, which destroyed all the buildings including the arsenal of 'thousand rounds of ammunition'. Wisdom concluded that:

the circumstances surrounding this incident and the gathering to meet me may be taken as proof positive that the action taken by the Administration immediately after the Nakanai murders, and subsequently, was justified in every way.<sup>73</sup>

Notwithstanding these gratifying changes, Wisdom thought it prudent not to reopen the area to whites that had been closed since the murders, for another twelve months.

Government obfuscation and justifications continued. Despite the importance of the judicial aftermath of the punitive expedition to Australia's appearance as a responsible mandatory power, the outcome remained unclear, prompting a question in parliament in May 1928. Mr David McGrath asked Sir Neville Howse, the responsible minister, a question about the status of a number of New Guinea issues, including 'what is the position in regard to the Nakanai murderers . . . who were sentenced to death?' To this Howse responded that 'of the six natives sentenced to death in connection with the murder of Europeans

<sup>70</sup> Permanent Mandates Commission, *Minutes of the Eleventh Session*, held at Geneva from June 20 to July 6 (Geneva: League of Nations, 1927), 43–45.

<sup>71</sup> *Report to the Council of the League of Nations on the Administration of the Territory of New Guinea from 1st July, 1927 to 30th June 1928* (Canberra: Government Printer Canberra, 1928), 129.

<sup>72</sup> C. W. C. Marr letter to Prime Minister Bruce, 16 Aug 1927, Appendix A, Report by Minister for Home and Territories on visit made by him to Territories on visit made by him to Territories of New Guinea and Papua during year 1927–1928 in *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Appendix B, 'Description by Administrator of New Guinea of his tours of inspection within the Territory during the year 1927–1928' in *ibid.*

at Nakanai—one died in prison; the sentence of one was commuted to imprisonment for seven years; the sentence of the remaining four were commuted to imprisonment for fifteen years'.<sup>74</sup> These figures do not correlate with McCarthy's version or the press reports that sixteen men were tried, sentenced to death, and their sentences commuted.

While it seems that no New Guineans were hanged for the killings of whites, there was still no government clarity about the judicial process that followed the punitive expedition. By July 1928 the argument justifying the 'stern measures' taken by the expedition were again reinforced by a report based upon intelligence from J. K. McCarthy, who was now the Patrol Officer in the Nakanai area. An article claimed 'the latest reports from Nakanai completely justify the action that was taken'. Even in the village of Umu where the punitive action was meted out, it was reported that the villagers were 'peacefully making their gardens' and did not present any difficulties to the patrol.<sup>75</sup> But claims of a détente proved too premature. On 1 July 1930, another patrol was attacked and two carriers were killed, near the village of Mokolkol to the north of Nakanai. Prime Minister Scullin was adamant that this attack 'was in no way related to the affray which took place in Nakanai about four years ago'.<sup>76</sup> Another punitive expedition consisting of thirty police 'boys' and a district officer was dispatched to Mokolkol on 8 July.<sup>77</sup> This expedition received far less attention than the one of 1926, seemingly for one overwhelmingly reason: the casualties were not white. And from this point, the 'Nakanai massacre' receded from public view.

## Conclusion

This case study of the 'Nakanai massacre' enriches our understanding of Australia's colonial history in New Guinea in several ways. It gives a more focused picture of Australia's colonial relationship with New Guinea and its people and reveals conflicts within Australia over how to enforce the value of white over indigenous life on that frontier. It also shows how Australia operated within the 1926 context of heightened international scrutiny of its record on frontier violence. This study shows that despite calls for unlimited bloodletting by Rabaul's whites, there were elements of restraint demonstrated by some Australian officials. Yet even these 'restrained' measures were distorted. The Australian government and its supporting press tried to mask the continuing tolerance for racialised violence in the national character by downplaying the use of the machine gun and the number of casualties while obfuscating the judicial aftermath and deploying a raft of justifications for teaching a lesson to the New Guinea people.

<sup>74</sup> Mr David McGrath to Sir Neville Howse, *CPD*, 4 May 1928.

<sup>75</sup> 'Controlling New Guinea Natives: 1926 Murders, Natives Now Friendly', *The Mercury*, 18 July 1928.

<sup>76</sup> 'Two Killed: Attack by Natives, New Britain Affray', *Brisbane Courier*, 5 August 1930, 13.

<sup>77</sup> 'New Britain: Nakanai Natives Restless, Patrol Officer Attacked', *SMH*, 2 August 1930.

The 1926 clash between Australian forces and Nakanai people in the hills of New Britain must be seen within a wider history of violence and collective punishment directed at Australian Aborigines and other punitive expeditions in New Guinea and Papua, before and after Australian control commenced. Incidents of violence in other mandated territories and colonies also need to be brought into view. The events in 1926 needs to be seen in a global context that includes the League of Nations and the emerging human rights agenda. The impact of the hyper violence of the First World War, the spirit of peace embedded in the League of Nation's 'sacred trust' and the clash with the colonial powers unable or unwilling to effect an attitudinal change about the expendability of non-white lives, also warrants further examination. This article points to the need for contextualising New Guinea colonial violence in wider Australian and global frames. It argues that Australian government responses to punitive violence in New Guinea were more extended and acute than those on the contemporary Australian frontier, due to concerns over the importance of New Guinea as a defence rampart in the face of international scrutiny.