

Hornet Bank massacre

The **Hornet Bank massacre** of eleven Europeans, including seven members of the Fraser family, took place about one or two o'clock in the morning of the 27 October 1857 at a station on the upper [Dawson River](#) in central [Queensland, Australia](#).^[1] It unfortunately spurred a much greater counter-massacre (led by William Fraser). It is believed that as many as 300 Aborigines may have been shot in retaliation. This retaliation resulted in the extermination of the entire Yeeman tribe and language group by 1858.^{[2][3]}

The first European occupant of Hornet Bank station, Andrew Scott, arrived in the early 1850s. In 1854 he leased the station to Scottish-born John Fraser who took his wife, Martha, and a large family ranging in age from young children to the early twenties, to live in this isolated area near the edge of European settlement. Two years later John Fraser died of dysentery while on a droving trip to [Ipswich](#) and his eldest son, William, then aged 23, took over management of the station in collaboration with the lessee, Andrew Scott.^[4] (1)

The stations on the Dawson River were on the land of the [Yeeman](#) people who bitterly resented the invasion of the European settlers with their flocks of sheep and herds of cattle while, to the Europeans, the Yeeman were an impediment to the expansion of their pastoral empires. Cruelty towards the Yeeman people inflamed their already overwhelming sense of injustice at being forced off the land that had been theirs back to the broken, scrubby gorge country and they made the country dangerous for the European invaders. Shepherds in boundary huts were attacked and killed and settlers feared leaving their wives and children unprotected.^[5] Although contemporary reports of the events stressed the bloodthirsty nature of the Yeeman and highlighted the kindness shown them by the Fraser family, it has been claimed that the killing of the Frasers was in retaliation for the recent deaths of 12 Yeeman shot for spearing some cattle and for the deaths nine months earlier of an unknown number of Yeeman who had been given a [strychnine](#) laced Christmas pudding, allegedly by the Fraser family.^{[3][6]}

The Yeeman attacked the Fraser homestead between one or two o'clock in the morning of the 27 October 1857. Those in the house were Martha Fraser, eight of her nine children, Henry Neagle (their tutor), two white station hands, who lived in a hut 1km from the station and Jimmy, an Aboriginal servant. The evening before the attack, Jimmy, persuaded to collaborate, had killed all the station dogs. By all accounts, the Yeeman initially intended to kidnap one of the Fraser women but things got out of hand after John Fraser confronted them and was killed. The attackers killed the men, castrated Neagle, raped the three oldest women, clubbed them and the remaining children to death and speared to death the two station hands as they arrived to wash up before retiring for the night.^[7]

The only survivor was fourteen-year-old Sylvester "West" Fraser who, after being hit on the head with a [waddy](#) had fallen between the wall and bed. The Aboriginals were distracted by the arrival of the two station hands, allowing Sylvester to crawl under his mattress and he was forgotten. Sylvester later ran "without hat or boots and in a terribly bruised state" 12 miles (19 km) to nearby Cardin Station and raised the alarm. Station hands immediately formed a posse and located a large mob of Aboriginals sleeping some 10 miles (16 km) from the Fraser property. They showed them no mercy, the first of many massacres to occur over succeeding weeks.^[8]

The most ruthless avenger was William Fraser who was away in Ipswich at the time of the massacre. His brother Sylvester rode to Ipswich to inform him of the massacre and the pair returned to Hornet Bank, covering the 320 miles (510 km) in three days with three changes of horses.^[8] Allowed to ride with the Native Police, William Fraser had 'every opportunity to assuage his grief through murder.' He continued killing randomly wherever he found Aborigines. He shot an Aboriginal jockey at the racetrack in [Taroom](#) and after two Aborigines accused of being involved in the massacre were found not guilty he shot both dead as they left the [Rockhampton](#) courthouse. It was reported that after Fraser shot an Aboriginal woman in the

main street of [Toowoomba](#) because he claimed she was wearing his mother's dress, two policemen spoke with him briefly before saluting and walking away. This incident reinforced a local belief that the Government had given him twelve months' immunity from prosecution, during which he was free to avenge the massacre of his family.^[7] In 1905, Fraser was asked if he had an authority, he replied "I never asked and never received such an authority but felt I was justified in doing so (the killings)."^[9]

Fraser later accepted a commission in the Rockhampton native police force but continued his campaign against the Yeeman.^[7] It was later reported that in 1867, ten years after the massacre, lieutenant William Fraser and his troopers were tracking a small group of Yeeman women and children who had taken refuge on Mackenzie Station on the [Fitzroy River](#). Informed that Fraser was approaching, Mrs Mackenzie hid the Aboriginals in her bedroom. Fraser demanded to search the house and did so but Mackenzie stood in front of the bedroom door and refused to allow him to search that room. Fraser left empty handed after Mackenzie gave him "all the contents of her tongue."^[10]

William Fraser almost certainly killed over 100 members of the tribe making him the greatest mass murderer in Australian history. Many more were killed by sympathetic squatters and policemen.^{[11][3]} In an article recounting the massacre, it was reported that the mere mention of Fraser's name by settlers was enough to avoid trouble when they faced "truculent natives."^[7]