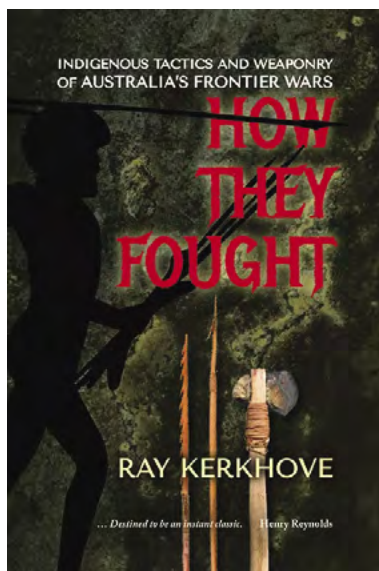


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How They Fought: Indigenous Tactics and Weaponry of Australia's Frontier Wars

By Ray Kerkhove

Boolarong Press, 2023

Paperback, 422 pp.

ISBN: 9781922643582

RRP \$39.99

Reviewed by Nigel Page, Churchie Anglican
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Ray Kerkhove's book on Indigenous tactics and weaponry during Australia's Frontier Wars left me puzzled. It comes with a glittering list of gushing praise from Henry Reynolds, Timothy Bottoms, Nicholas Clemens and several others. These reviews rightfully commend the detailed research, but the targeted praise hints at few issues.

The book is organised thematically and seeks to catalogue Aboriginal warfare, weapons and leadership. However, it overtly categorises these through the lens of Western war-fighting concepts. There is little attempt to go beyond a contemporary Western understanding, describing weaponry and tactics in ways a Western reader would understand but perhaps overlooking the traditional Indigenous patterns of warfare that informed the frontier experience. Kerkhove was alert to this issue and sought Indigenous voices, but too often there were few.

Indigenous attacks on settlers followed traditional practices: small bands ambushed lone adversaries, such as shepherds or travellers. Occasional large-scale show battles were held to appease pride but left few dead. Finally, there were instances of wholesale battles and devastating raids on neighbouring groups that led to substantial casualties, and the frontier experience catalogues a few of these combined efforts.

However, Kerkhove does not explore the ancestral origins of these tactics, nor does he dedicate much time to Indigenous adaptations—aside from briefly noting the use of metal and glass in spear-making. It is interesting that Kerkhove notes there are no recorded use of firearms used against whites by Aboriginal fighters, either by Indigenous resistance

fighters or by disaffected Native Policemen.

Perhaps the book serves well as a reference point to dip in and out of, but its arrangement gives it the allure of an extensive museum exhibit where the past is dryly pinned and categorised in glass cabinets. While the pages spill forth admiration for Aboriginal war-making, a harsh reality flits just beyond the edges of the text: Aboriginal resistance ultimately failed.

Kerkhove points to this with a few salient observations: almost all of Australia was colonised within 45 years—the sheer speed of colonisation overwhelmed Aboriginal capacities to adapt. Furthermore, colonisation was the product of countless localised conflicts, typically conducted by small groups of four to twenty whites. Once an area was 'pacified'—often through disproportionate reprisal killings—most settlers got on with raising sheep or cattle.

The same pattern of conflict played out district-by-district by successive groups of pastoralists and employees and later Native Police. Indeed, there is only a little introductory discussion of the broader patterns of escalating conflict but not much discussion of changing practices. New rifles are mentioned, but not much about the apparent hardening of attitudes in the hearts of the men who used them with increasing callousness in the ever-distant reaches of the frontier.

It is Kerkhove's structure that disappoints. While it may be useful for readers seeking examples of Aboriginal tactics or weapons or leadership, the broader 'so what' implications are missing. More serious students of Aboriginal warfare might turn to Christophe

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Darmangeat's *Justice and Warfare in Aboriginal Australia* (2020)— it is a pity that Kerkhove cites this book only twice even though Kerkhove claims communication with him.

Perhaps this is because Darmangeat attempts to strip Aboriginal warfare of Western presumptions, rejecting the notion that Aboriginal society existed in a Rousseauian prelapsarian Eden. Instead, he explores a pre-existing culture of constant tribal and intergroup warfare. Kerkhove is at pains to always extol Aboriginal ingenuity and skill, and this often gives the text a breathless fawning

feel although the best is kept for the detailed asides that show his sensitivity to local events and their consequences. I would have preferred more history and less cataloguing.

A History teacher can dip into this book and get a few examples of different aspects drawn from anywhere in Australia at any time, making the book feel rather 'listy' and tending to obliterate any sense of temporal or regional variation. This is all the more disappointing given Kerkhove produced a much more readable and engaging local story in *The Battle for One Tree Hill* (2019).

It is a depressing indication of how parlous history writing can be to see *How They Fought* published by a minor outer Brisbane suburban publisher, and how 63-year-old Kerkhove thanks his mother in the foreword for the money to publish the book.

In the end, Kerkhove does well to begin the work of a compendium of the different elements of Aboriginal warfare on the frontier. As a guidebook—Kerkhove's stated aim—this works reasonably well, but let's hope the author returns to histories that go past the what and delve into the how and why.