

# The History Council of NSW

is pleased to award the



• MAX KELLY MEDAL •

for  
2009  
to

*Isobelle Barrett Meyering*

for her essay

**‘Abolitionism, settler violence and the case against corporal punishment:  
A reassessment of Sir William Molesworth’s contribution  
to the transportation debate’**

Isobelle Barrett Meyering argues that the British parliamentarian Sir William Molesworth, as chairman of the Select Committee on Transportation between 1837 and 1838, was particularly skilful in exploiting language associated with the abolition of slavery in the British Empire to condemn Australia’s convict system. Few previous historians have taken such an approach. The complexities of Molesworth’s arguments have, Barrett Meyering contends, been lost in disputes over the accuracy of his allegations. Molesworth’s claims that convicts were treated like slaves are examined in the context of his view that there was a wider pattern of lawlessness in the British Empire. There was a nexus between his opposition to the flogging of convicts and his anxieties about the character of British colonists. The essay presents a stark contradiction between Molesworth’s commitment to colonial self-governance on the one hand and his dismissal of colonial opinion on the other.

The Molesworth committee’s final report objected to the corporal punishment of convicts through the anti-slavery movement’s rubric. Molesworth appropriated the abolitionists’ language of pain to discredit the flogging of convicts, which he argued was undertaken in an arbitrary manner. Flogging failed, he felt, to deter crime or reform the offender and gratified the colonists’ own violent urges. There was much witness testimony supporting this case but some witnesses, whose statements were ignored, stood out for their pro-flogging sentiments. Far from pointing to the gratuitous nature of flogging, they emphasised what they portrayed as the penal system’s laxity. Barrett Meyering argues that Molesworth’s decision to privilege one set of views over the other in the final report raises interesting questions about the inquiry’s power dynamics.

Molesworth is an unpopular figure amongst most Australian historians, who emphasise his political ambitions as a member of the Parliamentary Radicals. While the assessment of the

report by historians such as John Hirst and John Ritchie as a product of imperial prejudices has some justification, the essay suggests that they fail to acknowledge that witnesses brought their own interests to the inquiry and performed the role of ‘benevolent’ settler while indicting others. The inquiry process is interpreted as much more complex than historians previously conceded.

The essay’s final section explores how Molesworth’s use of the abolitionist rhetoric of settler violence complicated his personal commitment to colonial self-government. His anti-transportation stance and his advocacy of colonial reform were closely connected. He attributed transportation’s difficulties not primarily to colonists but to the Colonial Office’s maladministration, stating that the department’s structure was fundamentally unsound. Repeatedly he made it clear that the problems of penal systems resulted from the distance between colony and metropole. Yet he also had growing doubts about colonists’ reliability. Central to his dilemma was that, never having visited the colonies, his knowledge of them was second-hand. He worried that some witnesses’ views were corrupted by the length of their time in the colonies. Colonists’ support for flogging became a reason for dismissing colonial opinion.

Barrett Meyering’s essay has many admirable characteristics. It is based on wide-ranging research of relevant primary and secondary sources and is clearly organised and written. The logically developed conclusions are well supported with evidence. Its key argument that Molesworth’s abolitionist language forced him to reflect adversely on British colonists in Australia distinguishes Barrett Meyering’s approach from those of other historians. Barrett Meyering’s careful analysis of what he describes as ‘the rhetoric of settler violence’ ensures that this essay is an important and sophisticated contribution to Australian colonial history.

Awarded 4 September 2009

by: .....

Baiba Berzins



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## Judges' Report

Sixteen entries were received for this year's Max Kelly Medal. The authors addressed an interesting range of subjects and the standard of presentation was generally very good.

The judges also highly commend the following entrants:

*'Democratising Consumer Citizenship: Shopping Centre Development in Sydney's Outer Western Suburbs in the 1970s'*

By Matthew Bailey

This thoroughly researched and well-presented essay traces the development of shopping centres in the outer western suburbs of Sydney in the 1970s, focusing in particular on Westfield Liverpool Shoppingtown, Westpoint at Blacktown and Westfield Shoppingtown Parramatta. Making good use of local and trade publications and government and planning reports as well as oral testimony gathered through an innovative community project, the author demonstrates how the development of these centres met some of the basic social, cultural and economic demands of a rapidly expanding metropolis which state and local government were unable to satisfy. This is a sound contribution to the historiography of greater Sydney.

*'Tuckiar v The King: Cross-Cultural Justice in a Kangaroo Court'*

By Christopher James Beshara

This essay revisits the case of *Tuckiar v The King*, the 1934 trial in Darwin of Yolgnu elder Dhakiyarr Wirrpanda for the fatal spearing of Constable Stewart McColl on Woodah Island a year previously. Through a close examination of newspaper reports and archival documents relating to the proposed, but aborted, punitive mission to Arnhem Land and the trial in Darwin, the author looks at the interests, ideologies and complex motives of the various parties involved in the unfolding course of events. The one person the proponents and the opponents of cross-cultural justice all forgot was the defendant himself who came from a world outside the system judging him and who mysteriously and tragically disappeared after gaining his freedom. This is a soundly documented and well-argued essay about events that had a significant impact on the development of Indigenous policy.

*“Let's chuck these ashes 'round while there is nothing doing”:  
the Australian National Memorial and official war memory at Villers Bretonneux.*

By Linda Wade

The Australian National Memorial at Villers Bretonneux celebrates the achievements of the Australian Imperial Force in World War 1 as well as commemorating those who died in France during the struggle against Germany. The memorial, on the site of a significant AIF victory on Anzac Day 1918, was first proposed by Prime Minister Billy Hughes in 1919. He envisaged it as not only as a war memorial but also as a celebration of Australian talent and achievement. Through the careful use of archival and other contemporary sources, the author traces how and why the original vision changed and gives a detailed account of the opening ceremony with its celebration of Empire, the Anglo-French connection and, to the exclusion of other participants including all women, the role of the Anzac soldier. This is a lively and well-presented essay on a topic that has special relevance since the revival of interest in the Western Front, most markedly demonstrated by the 2008 Anzac Day commemoration at Villers Bretonneux.