



# **THE HON PETER GARRETT AM MP**

MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, HERITAGE AND THE ARTS

## **MYALL CREEK MASSACRE AND MEMORIAL SITE**

### **National Heritage Listing**

June 7, 2008

Thank you very much John and thank you Elizabeth for your welcome to country. This is such an important day for the community and such an important day for Australia. I would like to begin by acknowledging the Gamilaroi people who are the traditional custodians of this land and pay my respects to the elders both past and present of the Gamilaroi Nation and extend that respect to other Aboriginal people present today.

I want to thank the Myall Creek Memorial Committee and the Sydney Friends of Myall Creek for inviting me here to observe the 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Myall Creek Massacre.

I would also like to acknowledge other distinguished guests here:

- the local State Member, the Hon Mr Richard Torbay
- Ms Broun, the Director General of the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs
- Mayor Barry Johnston of the Inverell Shire Council
- Mayor George Sevil of the Narrabri Shire Council
- The Hon Fred Chaney, a member of the board of Reconciliation Australia, and
- Mr Tom Harley, Chair of the Australian Heritage Council.

It is a real honour to be part of these proceedings today and thank you Elizabeth for welcoming us to Gamilaroi country. This allows us to acknowledge the unique relationship that the Gamilaroi people have to this country, and to recognise our obligation to respect your heritage and land.

And it is fitting to be able to do that in a year in which, at the opening of Parliament, for the first time, the Rudd Government held a Welcome to Country ceremony as well. And of course that happened when we received a welcome to country from Matilda House in the Parliament who spoke those generous words of welcome to us – MP's, dignitaries, guests, Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders who had travelled from around Australia – on a day when the Prime Minister moved a motion of apology to the Stolen Generations.

I think it has to be said that 170 years ago the same respect for Aboriginal peoples' attachment to their country sadly did not exist. The relationship, such as it was, was based on misunderstandings, a lack of knowledge and a point of time in history where conflict unfortunately was real.

We know that during the European colonisation of Australia there was widespread frontier conflict and it existed right across the country. There was fighting between early European settlers and Aboriginal people that lived close to squatter's land. We also know that sometimes, tragically, this conflict ended in actions like the rounding up and killing of Aboriginal people.

The history of what happened at Myall Creek on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 1838 is well known. That day was spent pursuing Aboriginal people that a group of settlers had discovered - some 30 Wirrayaraay people from the Gamilaroi Nation. They were rounded up, tied up together and led away to be massacred. Two days later the men responsible for this dreadful act returned to Myall Creek to burn the bodies.

But then events took a unique turn when word of the massacre got out and a number of men of good conscience reported the atrocity to the authorities. The New South Wales Governor assigned a police magistrate to investigate the crime and eleven of the twelve suspected Myall Creek murderers were arrested. But it took two trials before seven of the men were found guilty and hanged.

The trial divided people: some saying that justice was done while others said the condemned had done no wrong.

And the trial fed into a hardening of attitudes that existed in our country for sometime after that period. Those attitudes have changed, and they have changed for the better.

It is historically a really critical time and an immensely critical period of history and immensely significant historical act, because it was the first and last time the Colonial Administration intervened to ensure the laws of the colony were applied equally to Aboriginal people and settlers involved in frontier killings. So the Myall Creek massacre is exceptional. An exceptional historical event in our shared history.

This is the reason I am here today.

It is certainly without question entirely appropriate that just a few days before the 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Myall Creek massacre I am proud to be able to announce the inclusion of the Myall Creek Massacre and Memorial site on Australia's prestigious National Heritage List.

We now have this very significant historical site on the National Heritage List – a recognition of its importance and significance to all of us.

I want to tell you a little bit about the National Heritage List. It recognises outstanding places that tell our national story. It recognises the very special places and events that go to make up our identity - our spirit, our capacity for ingenuity, our historic buildings, our unique, living landscapes. All these things contribute and come onto the National Heritage List.

It is a List that can be valued by all Australians, as we work together to define and protect our nation's greatest heritage.

With the inclusion of Myall Creek, there are now 79 places on our National Heritage List. Indigenous heritage is a central part.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage is particularly important to our nation. It provides an opportunity for all of us to acknowledge, commemorate and protect places that show the achievements and provide pointers to the experience of Australia's first inhabitants during the eons and eons of occupation that they have had on this continent.

Lake Condah in Victoria and Brewarrina in New South Wales which are already on the National Heritage List show Aboriginal ingenuity in the harvesting and sustainable use of fresh water eels and fish.

The Aboriginal ochre mine at Wilgie Mia in Western Australia with its extensive underground galleries is being assessed by the Australian Heritage Council for National Heritage listing this year.

The events of the Myall Creek massacre also make up part of our more recent history. The missions and reserves which were developed by governments after the massacre are associated with other heritage listed sites such as the mission at Hermansburg in the Northern Territory, already on the National Heritage List;

and the Corranderk Aboriginal Reserve in Victoria, which will be assessed for National Heritage listing over the next year.

The Australian Government is committed to recognising and protecting Indigenous heritage for its importance to Indigenous peoples' culture and way of life, but also for the value it holds to the heritage of all Australians. Indigenous heritage is inclusive of many things – it is about people, culture, and country, both land and sea.

As a country we can take inspiration and some comfort, I think, in celebrating our culture and our heritage. And we recognise the important moments in our history that have helped shape who we are today. That is definitely the case here, at this particular important site. It is also a case of not just remembering the good but also the uncomfortable – because all of these events contribute to the character of our nation. Our reflection and response to those events makes us the people we are today, and no where I think is that the case more than it is in relation to the Myall Creek event.

The massacre of 30 Aboriginal people at this place was a sad, tragic and horrific event. But the reconciliation that it represents 170 years on and is evidenced by your participation here today and the activities that have taken place subsequently, particularly in the recent past, are a tale of forgiveness, hope and strength.

I want to say to the community, that you provide an inspiration to Australian's everywhere.

This is a sign of how we continue to grow and mature as a nation. That we come to terms with our past, acknowledge it, identify it and then move forward together, sharing the future.

The fact that the descendants of some of the people massacred on that bleak day and the descendants of those charged with the crime can come together in their own peaceful and personal reconciliation gives me great hope for our country.

Reconciliation surely means putting aside our differences and helping all Australians to better understand Indigenous culture and the lives of Indigenous people today. And certainly, that living history that is in evidence today is a great example of the reconciliation journey that all Australia's are on.

For true reconciliation to occur there needs to be an honest, clear and clear-eyed acknowledgement of our history. This is where the inclusion of Myall Creek in the National Heritage List can play a real part in continuing the journey of reconciliation for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

Today's announcement is a time to acknowledge and share the whole truth of Australia's history and I particularly commend the Myall Creek Memorial Committee, and all the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians who have worked together in the spirit of reconciliation.

I particularly want to commend the Uniting Church who provided initial and important leadership on this issue.

I want to note that this Memorial has received the Judith Wright Reconciliation Award.

And I want to acknowledge that the nomination of this site came from the Myall Creek Memorial Committee itself. This is a nomination, a recognition and a nomination that has come from the community and the Government sees that as being particularly important.

We recognise today, after 170 years, that the events of the past and the massacre are part of our National Heritage.

And today we take the time to remember – the lives tragically lost, the deep insights gained – and commemorate our onward reconciliation journey.

Thank you.