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## Maynard, John --- "Book Review - The True Story of Jimmy Governor" [2001] IndigLawB 51; (2001) 5(9) Indigenous Law Bulletin 19

### The True Story of Jimmy Governor

by Laurie Moore & Stephan Williams  
Allan & Unwin, 2001, p 227, RRP \$24.95.

Reviewed by John Maynard

This is a timely and welcome addition to the Jimmy Governor story. There have been a number of attempts to convey the story including *Jimmy Governor - The true story* by Frank Clune, *The Life of Jimmy Governor* by Brian Davis and of course Thomas Kenneally's fictional adaptation *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. This publication goes a long way to giving the clearest account of the events that led to the tragic and violent actions of Jimmy Governor and the ensuing manhunt for his capture. The first thing that strikes the reader is the strong sense of place and feeling for Governor country. The authors transport the reader both through cleverly written passages and abundant use of relevant maps across Governor terrain.

Born close to Denison Town (Talbragar) NSW in 1875, Jimmy grew into a hard working young Aboriginal man. He had been denied any sense of acceptance despite a ready willingness to work and his attempt to adopt a white working lifestyle. He was without doubt very much in love with his young wife Ethel Page who was subject to taunts and derision. His marriage to the young white woman was the final ingredient in an already lethal cocktail of harsh life experiences. Any hopes of acceptance were completely dashed and Ethel and Jimmy found themselves ostracised and condemned. On 20 July 1900 Jimmy Governor, his brother Joe and a friend Jackie Underwood exploded in a rampage of revenge. At Breelong they killed five people and in the days following the brothers, now separated from Underwood, killed another four people. Without condoning the

horrific response of Jimmy Governor when he struck out at his tormentors, one can only feel compassion for the years of unjust treatment experienced by him and his family.

The Governors were on the run for over three months, covering more than 3000 kilometers and pursued by over 2000 civilians and police. It was undoubtedly the intimate knowledge of country and bush skills of both Jimmy and Joe Governor that enabled them to avoid capture and to make a mockery of their pursuers. Many landmarks of the terrain were named after the Governors including Governor Creek, Governor Hill, Governor Paddock and Governor Knob.

The story of the Governor pursuit highlights both the ingenuity and skill of the pursued whilst clearly demonstrating the ineptitude of the pursuers. The pursuit was marred by the pursuers' large-scale bungling, fear and lack of familiarity with the territory. The majority of civilians and police who flocked to join the manhunt lacked the skills and bush knowledge necessary to survive in it let alone catch the Governor brothers. The inability of the police and pursuers to apprehend the Governors fanned public hysteria and paranoia. The populace seemed to be gripped with the fear that the Governors were close at hand and about to inflict terrible vengeance.

The authors quite rightly highlight that they are unable to convey an appreciation of the story from an Indigenous perspective. That story is yet to be told. However they convey a wonderful sense of place and deliver a balanced and powerful portrayal of the events leading to the tragedy of Jimmy Governor. Some writers have unjustly treated Jimmy Governor in respect of his Aboriginality. There have been assumptions that he wanted to be white and escape his Aboriginal background. Here, he is noted singing songs in Aboriginal lingo and his bush skills and lifestyle convey a powerful sense of pride and knowledge in his black background.

Despite it being one hundred years since the execution of Jimmy Governor, it is abundantly clear from an Aboriginal perspective that racism, prejudice, oppression, contempt and ignorance remain deeply ingrained in the psyche of this country. If we are to reach a point of maturity where both black and white people can walk together to a shared future of equality, opportunity and prosperity then recognition and acceptance of the past is imperative.

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