

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE TEACHING OF FRONTIER CONFLICT IN AUSTRALIA

Lynley A. Wallis¹, Heather Burke², Noelene Cole³ and Bryce Barker⁴

As archaeologists working in Australia for the past thirty years, we have had the privilege of recording, documenting and excavating hundreds of Aboriginal heritage places. Mostly, these are ‘conventional’ archaeological sites: places where the detritus of peoples’ lives has been left, sometimes for thousands of years, allowing us an insight into what it was like to live in this country in times gone by. While the scope of our work is often focused on ‘ancient’ time periods, when working with our Aboriginal colleagues on such sites, what inevitably emerges during the course of discussions are stories about ‘the killing times’, or the ‘war’, as many Aboriginal people remember frontier conflict of the 19th (and in places the early 20th) century. For our Aboriginal colleagues the past and present are intertwined, and they consider that in order to understand the far distant past it is equally important for us to acknowledge and understand what happened in more recent times.

It was out of such repeated discussions with different Aboriginal communities over many years that our latest research project emerged. The Archaeology of the Queensland Native Mounted Police (NMP) project sets out to document the history and material remains of the NMP, a paramilitary Government force that operated during the second half of the 19th century in newly ‘settled’¹ districts on the ‘frontier’² of ‘European’³ ‘civilisation’⁴. While the NMP sometimes undertook tasks such as escorting gold shipments, assisting exploration parties, establishing new travel routes and searching for missing persons, their main role was to respond to European requests for police assistance to ‘disperse’ (a euphemism for ‘kill’) Aboriginal people

and destroy their resistance to the process of European expansion. As attested by historian Jonathan Richards, the NMP, as the major instrument of Queensland’s colonial authority, ‘lies close to the heart of European Australia’s dark nation-making origins’⁵.

Background

The establishment of the NMP followed a long tradition in Australia. Its antecedents can be found in the ‘Native Police Corps’ established in 1837 in the Port Phillip District of Victoria⁶, an institution which itself mirrored a long British tradition of using Indigenous ‘outsiders’ to police other Indigenous populations across the Empire⁷.



Fig 1: A photograph from approximately 1882 showing the buildings of the Lower Herbert River NMP camp. Reproduced with permission of Queensland State Library (negative no 156880)

The first detachment of NMP arrived on the Darling Downs in May 1849, when Queensland was still part of New South Wales. It was under the command of the newly appointed Commandant Frederick Walker⁸ and comprised fourteen Aboriginal men who had been recruited by Walker from the Murrumbidgee and Murray River districts. From these humble beginnings the NMP eventually grew to nearly 200 troopers at any one time, with a total of just over 450 Europeans serving through the half-century history of the Force. Thus far we've documented at least 800 Aboriginal troopers who served in the force, though often all we know about them is a single name, sometimes in association with a particular place, year or officer. Detachments typically operated with between four and eight troopers under the command of a European officer, stationed in often remotely located base camps. The Force was officially disbanded in 1904, and relatively little was known about it until about forty years ago, when historians such as Henry Reynolds, Noel Loos, Ray Evans and, more recently, Jonathan Richards, Tony Roberts, Timothy Bottoms and Stephen Gapps, began to shed light on their activities⁹. This was part of the breaking of the 'Great Australian Silence' and the dismantling of the 'cult of forgetfulness' described so eloquently by William E.H. Stanner in his Boyer Lecture of 1968¹⁰.

An array of historical sources held in the Queensland State Archives, including police staff and police station files, inquest files, and general correspondence to and from the Colonial Secretary, coupled with newspaper reports and first-hand accounts in letters and diaries, unequivocally provide evidence that Aboriginal people were subject to violent attack and reprisal, assault, incursion, conquest, dispossession and subjugation at the hands of the NMP. It is perhaps not surprising though that this documentary record is inherently—and perhaps consciously—silent on many of the details of the actions of the NMP, even in the rare cases when officers were disciplined or arrested for potential crimes against Aboriginal people. Historical archaeology has the potential to contribute new perspectives on this conflict by focusing on the material remains of the historic past. In approaching historical silences through a different lens, it illuminates a different path by which teachers might choose to deal with elements of frontier conflict in the newly revamped History curriculum.

Archaeology and the Material Evidence of Frontier Conflict

Archaeologists have suggested elsewhere that the main material evidence for conflict on the Australian frontier will not necessarily be found in the form of 'massacre sites'¹¹. Relatively low Aboriginal population densities and highly dispersed groups of people meant that massacres such as those recorded elsewhere in the New World, in which large concentrations of bodies

in a single location were recorded, are unlikely to be a feature in Australia, so much so that any such search has been likened to looking for a needle in a haystack.



Figure 2: Bryce Barker using the total station to record details of the excavations at the Boulia Native Mounted Police camp (photo by Andrew Schaefer)

This is not because there were relatively few deaths on the frontier – historians have proven without doubt that many thousands of Aboriginal people were killed. Rather, the physical, archaeological evidence associated with such killings will be limited. The majority of such events were punitive expeditions and often involved killing relatively small numbers of people in discrete locations, sometimes across large distances over multiple days. Afterwards the bodies were often burnt, or treated in other ways that reduce their chances of being preserved. Even if skeletal remains are found it can be challenging to prove that they were the victims of frontier violence, as many causes of death are due to soft tissue injuries that leave no marks on surviving bones.

Instead of focusing on massacres, archaeologist Bryce Barker suggested employing a social landscape approach to the frontier wars, in which all the elements of frontier interaction are examined to contextualise conflict in a more holistic way¹². Adopting this recommendation, and working in partnership with Aboriginal communities, the Archaeology of the Queensland NMP project is geared towards identifying the most visible archaeological manifestations of the frontier wars: the camps from which the NMP led their patrols to 'disperse' the Aboriginal peoples of Queensland, coupled with recording oral testimony from descendants of NMP troopers and officers, as well as the survivors of massacre events.

The project is particularly interested in exploring the evidence for the lives of troopers, who still remain largely anonymous. While we know much about many of the white officers of the NMP, the troopers are an enigma: taken from one part of Australia (often, but not always, forcibly) to subdue Aboriginal people in another, paid a pittance, given rations and a uniform, severely disciplined and rarely returned to their own country¹³. Given repetitive and often derogatory European names, little is known of their experiences in the NMP, their

relationships with their European officers or what life was like for them in hostile, alien country. The project also delves into the experiences of the white officers and their families, the organisation of domestic, workforce and disciplinary matters in the Force and the roles played by Indigenous women.

Building on the seminal work of Richards¹⁴, our research has shown the existence of at least 196 NMP camps, forty-one of which have been visited and documented archaeologically. This is more difficult than it sounds, since some camps were occupied for only very short periods, many of their locations are only generally known and most were never plotted on any map. Even at those sites that were occupied for decades and that can be located through detailed historical research, surviving physical evidence is routinely challenging to find, since almost all camps were pragmatically constructed from readily available and highly perishable local materials, such as bark and bush timber. When present, the above-ground evidence of such places might be no more than yard posts, fence-lines, fireplaces or stone pathways that are typically obscured by vegetation and partially buried by decades of sedimentation.



Figure 3: Archaeologists and Laura Rangers discussing the excavations at the Boralga Native Mounted Police camp in Rinyurru National Park, Cape York Peninsula (photo by Lynley Wallis).

To establish what remains beneath the ground at these places requires a sequence of carefully planned fieldwork, beginning with geophysical survey using equipment such as ground penetrating radar and a magnetometer, careful and detailed walking surveys of the entire area, and robust archaeological assessment of landscape processes (where erosion or sedimentation is occurring) in order to decide where it might be most profitable to excavate. When we do excavate, the deposit is typically shallow, usually only about 10–20 cm deep, but – somewhat surprisingly – what is present is often extremely rich, with huge quantities of glass, metal and ceramics, as well as lesser quantities of bone and other organic remains.



Figure 4: Archaeology students Tony Pagels and Joy Morrison regarding one of the stone buildings at the Boulia Native Mounted Police Camp in western Queensland (photo by Andrew Schaefer).

At many sites a high proportion of the glass is derived from broken alcohol bottles – typically gin, schnapps, and brandy or other spirits – perhaps reflecting a combination of 19th century medical treatments and the noted tendency of many NMP officers to indulge a little too freely. The bases of many of these very thick bottles have often been ‘knapped’ by Aboriginal people (most likely the troopers and/or their wives), to make sharp cutting tools, using exactly the same techniques that were used by their ancestors for millennia to make stone artefacts.

In line with the primary intent of the NMP, we also find large numbers of bullets and spent cartridges from Government-issued Snider carbines, a weapon that was not often owned by pastoralists or miners. We also find the telltale brass buttons that once adorned NMP uniforms, as well as the shoes from their horses, the buckles from their saddlery, the pipes with which they smoked tobacco and the many other material remains of their meals, houses, activities, and lives.

Most of these artefacts are not what people expect when imagining the ‘archaeology of frontier conflict’ — we have no skeletal remains of victims with evidence of gunshot trauma and no battlefields. However, the archaeological footprint of NMP camps across Queensland provides unequivocal evidence of the scale and enduring nature of the NMP’s operations. That hundreds of camps had to be maintained across the state or over half a century provides clear evidence of the persistent and determined resistance of Aboriginal people to the theft of their land and the violence and bloodshed that resulted.

Conclusion

The history of frontier conflict in Australia is at once all around us, yet at the same time still literally and figuratively hidden from view. Ongoing debates about whether what happened really constituted a ‘war’, how many people might have been affected, and whether

contemporary Australia should recognise or refute such research, complicates the way we look upon the past. For the descendants of massacre survivors, Aboriginal troopers and white NMP officers, these stories are their family histories; they define who they are, where they came from and how they see themselves today. The Australian Curriculum – History gives students new opportunities to understand this, both as a general process and as a fundamental part of the history of their local area. In opening students' eyes to the experiences of Aboriginal people as their world was fundamentally and irrevocably altered, students may come to understand the significance of those events for contemporary society and see the world through the eyes of others.

Information about the 'Archaeology of the Qld NMP' project is highlighted in an ongoing blog that explores different elements of the NMP and life and events on the frontier (<https://archaeologyonthefrontier.com>). In 2020 the team will also be launching a comprehensive database (<https://nmp.essolutions.com.au>) that will make almost all of the information collected during

the course of the project available to the general public, especially teachers and students. There is no single story of the NMP; its history is as broad as the hundreds of officers and troopers who constituted it, and as deep as the personal choices, actions and reactions that generated decades of frontier violence. Through these newly created resources, the team aims to help people remember the NMP and understand their activities and their effects. By allowing people to access and assess the evidence for themselves, everyone will be able to investigate the nature of frontier conflict, critically assess it, and come to their own conclusions about what happened, why and how.

Acknowledgements

The Archaeology of the Queensland NMP project is funded through the Australian Research Council (DP160100307). We pay tribute to all past and present elders and community members with whom we have worked over the years, and thank them for trusting us to share their stories.


 The logo for Booktopia, featuring the word "booktopia" in a green, lowercase, sans-serif font. The "o" in "book" is stylized with a horizontal line through it. A solid green horizontal line is positioned below the text.

**HTANSW members receive an additional 5% discount on Booktopia's already competitive prices when purchasing from HTA's website:
www.htansw.asn.au**

Endnotes

- 1 Nulungu Research Institute, University of Notre Dame
 2 Archaeology, Flinders University
 3 Anthropology, Archaeology and Sociology, James Cook University
 4 School of Humanities and Communication, University of Southern Queensland
 5 The word 'settled' implies that the process was somehow 'peaceful' and well ordered. In fact, it was far from it.
 6 Although the word 'frontier' conjures up a line beyond which was the 'unknown' and the 'wild', in fact the frontier s
 should be more correctly considered a 'zone of interaction'.
 7 While we use the term 'European' here, we acknowledge that many of the people living and working on the frontier
 were in fact born in Australia, or came from other places, such as China.
 8 This term is predicated on the 19th century belief that there are stages of human social and cultural development
 which, after the publication of Darwin's 1859 *On the Origin of Species*, led to the erroneous view that human
 societies were variously placed on a ladder of civilisation, with the British Empire representing the pinnacle of
 achievement and hunter-gatherer-fisher communities, such as the Aboriginal communities of Australia,
 representing the lowest rungs. Such views are now outdated.
 9 Richards, J., *The Secret War: A True History of Queensland's Native Police*. St Lucia: University of Queensland
 Press, 2008, p.4.
 10 Fels, M.H., *Good Men and True: The Aboriginal Police of the Port Phillip District 1837–1853*. Unpublished PhD
 thesis, School of Historical Studies, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 1988.
 11 Nettelbeck, A. and R. Smandych, 'Policing Indigenous peoples on two colonial Frontiers: Australia's mounted
 police and Canada's North-West Mounted Police', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 43(2),
 pp 356–375; Richards 2008, pp 185 – 193.
 12 Skinner, L.E., *Police of the Pastoral Frontier*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1975.
 13 Bottoms, T. and Evans, R., *Conspiracy of Silence: Queensland's Frontier Killing-times*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin,
 2013; Evans, R., K. Saunders and K. Cronin, *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland: A History of Exclusion,
 Exploitation, and Extermination*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1993; Gapps, S., *The Sydney
 Wars: Conflict in the Early Colony, 1788–1817*. NewSouth Press, 2018; Loos, N., *Invasion and resistance:
 Aboriginal European relations on the North Queensland frontier 1861–1897*. Canberra: ANU Press, 1982;
 Loos, N., 'A chapter of contact: Aboriginal-European relations in north Queensland 1606–1992'. In H. Reynolds
 (ed.), *Race Relations in North Queensland*, Townsville: Department of History and Politics, James Cook University,
 1993; Reynolds, H., *The Other Side of the Frontier: Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia*.
 Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1982; Reynolds, H., *The Law of the Land*. Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1987; Reynolds,
 H., *Dispossession: Black Australians and White Invaders*. St Leonards: Allen and Unwin 1989; Reynolds, H.
 (ed.), *Race Relations in North Queensland*. Townsville: Department of History and Politics, James Cook
 University 1993; Reynolds, H., 'The unrecorded battlefields of Queensland'. In H. Reynolds (ed.), *Race Relations
 in North Queensland, Townsville: Department of History and Politics*, James Cook University, 1993; Reynolds, H.,
 Why Weren't We Told? Ringwood: Penguin Australia, 2000; Richards, 2008; Roberts, T., *Frontier Justice: A History
 of the Gulf Country 1900*. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2005.
 14 Stanner, W.E.H., *After the Dreaming: Black and White Australians—An Anthropologist's View*. Australian
 Broadcasting Commission, 1989.
 15 Litster, M. and L.A. Wallis, Looking for the proverbial needle? The archaeology of Australian colonial frontier
 massacres. *Archaeology in Oceania* 46, 2011, pp 105 – 117.
 16 Barker, B., Massacre, frontier conflict and Australian archaeology. *Australian Archaeology*, 64, 2007, pp 9 – 14.
 17 Burke, H., B. Barker, N. Cole, L.A. Wallis, E. Hatte, I. Davidson and K. Lowe, The Queensland Native Police and
 strategies of recruitment on the Queensland frontier 1849–1901. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 2018 DIO:
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14443058.2018.1474942>
 18 Richards, 2008.