

CONNECTING MYALL CREEK AND THE WONOMO

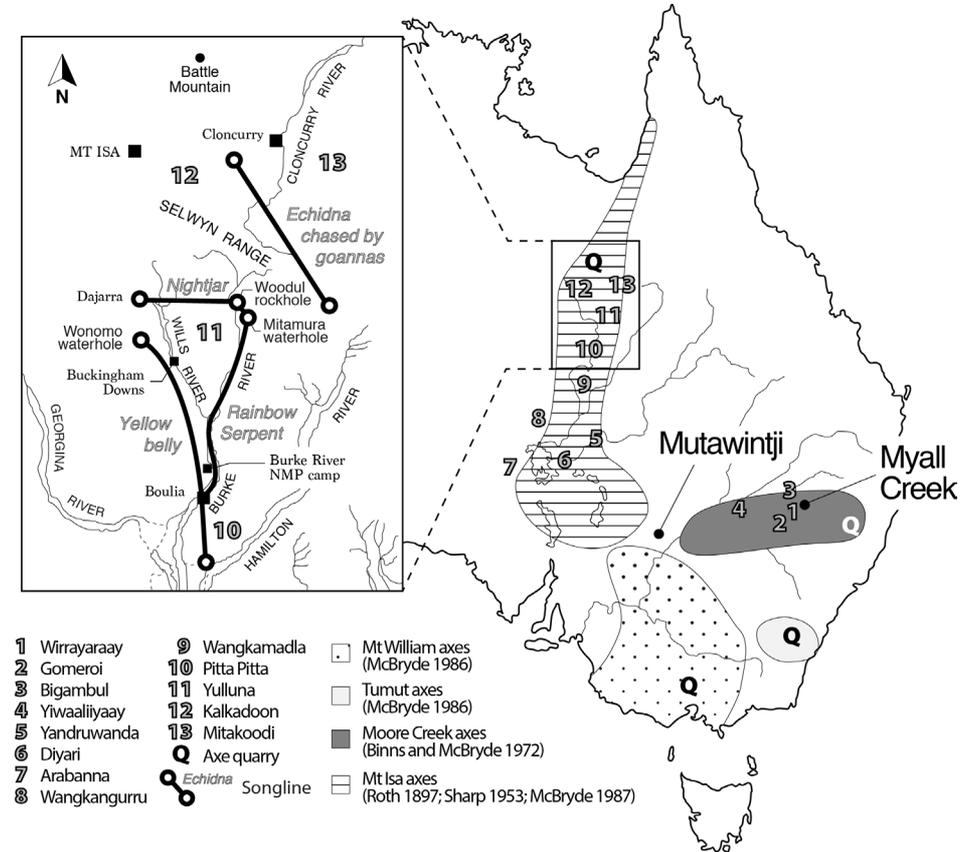
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*'Owing to the opening up of the country with the advent of the Europeans, ... what with privation, disease, alcohol, and lead, the whole community has been annihilated.'*¹

Walter E Roth, anthropologist, 1897

The Myall Creek Massacre of 28 Wirrayaraay people on 10 June 1838 (Figure 1) was one of the key events in the ongoing frontier war between settlers or intruders and the various Aboriginal peoples of Australia.² It was an act of brutal murder, for which 11 non-Aboriginal perpetrators were tried and seven were hanged. As Lyndall Ryan points out in chapter 5, there had been a number of mass killings of Gamilaraay³ and Wirrayaraay people in the region over the previous year, in which many hundreds of lives were lost. The Myall Creek Massacre and subsequent trial had a direct impact on policing in the colony, and affected the lives of people from different Aboriginal nations across eastern Australia. Its aftermath in the region then known as Northern New South Wales, where a Native Police force was formed a decade

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Map of eastern Australia showing location of Myall Creek in relation to Mutawintji, the Burke River Native Mounted Police Camp near Boulia and Wonomo waterhole. Also shown are distributions of tribal groups mentioned in the chapter and some of the lines of connection between them documented by songlines and axe distributions.

later, was extensive. Aboriginal responses to the event in both the past and the present provide new insights, including how people from different Aboriginal groups at the time may have heard about Myall Creek and other violent clashes with white

settlers, and how their families remember frontier conflict today. A Mounted Police Force had operated within the 'settled districts' of south-east Australia since 1827 and played a key role in 'clearing' the Gwydir region of Gamilaraay people in 1836 and 1838. In the aftermath of the Myall Creek Massacre however, in response to 'one atrocious deed for which seven unhappy men have suffered death on the scaffold', Governor George Gipps established a Border Police Force to protect squatters (unauthorised settlers beyond the 'Boundaries of Location') and the Aboriginal people of those lands – in principle this force was intended to protect them from each other.⁴ The force was largely unsuccessful and was disbanded in 1846.⁵

In 1847–8 there were several violent interactions that led to a mass killing of Bigumbal people on Umbercollie Station, on the Macintyre River about 200 km north of Myall Creek.⁶ Margaret Young of Umbercollie described the succession of events in her journal: first a Bigambul boy was killed when taking meat to squatter James Marks on Goodar Station; then Marks's son was murdered. Young described Marks's frenzied response, calling him 'a hater of all aboriginals', 'shooting every native in sight', including the people working on the station run by her and her husband.⁷ Margaret reported that 'Jonathon [her husband] flatly refused to take part in this organised massacre, as he considered Mr Marks had brought this tragedy upon himself, by his own ruthless shooting'. Jonathon reported Marks and the other whites to the police, and some of the killers, but not the landholder Marks, were arrested and charged with murder. They were brought to trial in Maitland on 12 February 1849 but were not convicted, due to perjury by one of the hut-keepers.⁸

In the aftermath, the Native Police was formed in 1848 by Governor Charles FitzRoy 'in the hope that it may prove one

of the most efficient means of attempting to introduce more civilized habits among native tribes'.⁹ Frederick Walker was appointed as their first commandant, in what was then northern NSW and, once Queensland became a separate colony in 1859, the Native Police continued in that colony.¹⁰ It is a bizarre paradox that the trials and conviction of non-Aboriginal people for killing Aboriginal people ultimately resulted in this force, which became notorious for 'dispersing' Aboriginal peoples from their own land (most frequently to a land other than that of the living). 'Civilized habits' are so much easier for the dead.

The deadly influences of squatters and of Native Police on Aboriginal peoples are too often presented as isolated incidents. To settlers, Aboriginal people were lumped together as savages or worse. Some of the letters in the press at the time of the Myall Creek Massacre anticipated the worst of today's Internet trolls, referring to Aboriginal people as 'Monkies [sic]', 'despicable', 'brutal' and 'murderous wretches'.¹¹ Language group names were rarely used and individuals were often not identified. This is consistent with the failure to acknowledge the given names of recruits to the Native Police and the denial of their personal histories by ascribing them with names more familiar to European ears.¹² This is also why it is important today to give language group names where possible and to emphasise that Australian Aboriginal people are a continent of nations. And yet, leaving aside the fact that settlers reacted to the Wirrayaraay, the Gamilaraay and the Bigambul with equal hostility as they sought to usurp them from their land, there were connections between people from different groups. Generally they had social contacts and, when they did, they spoke each other's distinct languages. The reach of these connections could be very great and, we argue, they would have made it possible for Aboriginal witnesses to have communicated

knowledge about Myall Creek and other confrontations through the networks to people of the Yulluna, Pitta-Pitta and Kalkadoon, 1300 km to the north-west.

The first non-Aboriginal people to make their way through the country of Yulluna, Pitta-Pitta and Kalkadoon were members of the Burke and Wills expedition. Passing through Yulluna country on 12 January 1861, Wills wrote in his journal, 'We found here numerous indications of the blacks having been here, but we saw nothing of them. It seems remarkable that their tracks are so plentiful'.¹³ The record of violent interactions in this part of the north-west began in 1879 with the killing of four pastoralists, led by a man called Molvo, at Wonomo waterhole on Sulieman Creek (see the third page of the image section), part of Buckingham Downs Station. This led to reprisal massacres of Yulluna people, first by white stockmen from Buckingham Downs and neighbouring stations and, subsequently on their return from further south, by the Native Police from Boulia under Sub-Inspector Ernest Eglinton.

Two of the authors (Iain Davidson and Heather Burke) worked extensively in the 1980s and 1990s with Yulluna man, Tom Sullivan (now deceased), whose Yulluna grandmother, Ruby (see the fourth page of the image section), survived the massacres that followed the death of Molvo.¹⁴ Tom's father, Willie Eglinton (see the fourth page of the image section), received his surname from the man who led at least some of the reprisal massacres. Tom and his siblings regard Ernest as their grandfather, though some in the family suggest that Ruby 'did not go to him willingly'. Tom and his siblings spent much of their lives working on cattle stations, particularly Chatsworth, in their traditional country where they learned songlines including that of the Yellowbelly (fish) that began its travels at Wonomo waterhole.¹⁵

Generally, the nineteenth-century history has taken minimal evidence from oral sources, and this has denied Aboriginal people agency other than as victims of frontier violence. In the case of Tom Sullivan's family from north-west Queensland, the oral histories have lost crucial details with the passage of time, as they have elsewhere. Their agency can be understood better by filling in some of those details where they can be constructed from understandings of Aboriginal societies in those regions.

There is lots of evidence that different Aboriginal groups were connected to each other, particularly through social ties, ceremony, language and trade. This demonstrates that Aboriginal people from Myall Creek and those from north-west Queensland, through actions that were fundamental to their lives, could have maintained knowledge of each other. Social ties included those made possible by the fact that three of the songlines reported by Tom Sullivan (see Figure 1) crossed from Yulluna country into the country of other tribes and, in Australia generally, also involved the cultural rules for exogamy which ensured that people did not only marry within their immediate group; some of the negotiations for kinship relationships took place during ceremony. Roth described one ceremony, the Mudlunga, as being traded in north-west Queensland, meaning that the rights to perform it were passed from one group to another. Language connections were general, although recent work shows how languages in the Karnic family (from Boulia south to Lake Eyre) were related to each other in geographically defined groups; and trade was a widespread feature of Australian Aboriginal societies, which can be shown through archaeological evidence as well as through ethnohistorical documentation.¹⁶

Starting from the archaeological evidence of trade in stone axe heads, it is possible to construct an argument that even the

people of north-west Queensland could have been forewarned of the ruthlessness of white settlers, based on the ways in which information was passed between distinct Aboriginal groups. The Aboriginal trade in greenstone (metabasalt) axes reached from quarries in the country of Kalkadoon people near modern Mt Isa to the Gulf of Carpentaria as well as thousands of kilometres south, through the country of the Karnic languages, to the Great Australian Bight (Figure 1). The axes were transferred through Yulluna, Pitta Pitta and Wangkamadla country on their way south towards Lake Eyre and were also used as they passed through. Inspection of a map showing the distribution of axes from known sources in eastern Australia shows that those from Moore Creek (near Tamworth) were transferred through Gamilaraay country to western NSW. The distribution of those from Moondara (near Mount Isa) and Mt William (near Melbourne) almost overlap with those from Moore Creek.¹⁷

The place where that overlap would have occurred was Mutawintji, a ceremony place where songlines meet, of great importance to Aboriginal peoples in western NSW. If axes from these distant sources were to be found at Mutawintji, it would go a long way to showing that there was a connection from Myall Creek to Wonomo. Some ethnohistorical evidence from George Dutton, a traditional owner of Mutawintji, shows that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, his social world extended to include tribes who lived west of Lake Eyre and his knowledge included peoples as far east as Brewarrina, on the western edge of Yiwaaliyaay country.¹⁸ George Dutton's world, then, connected the country traversed by the trade in axes from Mt Isa north of Wonomo, on one hand, and from Moore Creek, to the east of Myall Creek, on the other.

It is difficult to determine how information was carried on these networks, but there are some indications. First, there is the

evidence about the arrival of the Mudlunga ceremony around Lake Eyre (in Diyari Country). This was a ceremony that was traded from north of Boulia, where it was reported in 1895 after the massacres associated with Wonomo waterhole. Across much of Central Australia, the ceremony was called Tji-tji-ngalla by ethnographer Frank Gillen in Alice Springs and was said to have originated in the 'Saltwater Country'. Linguist Luise Hercus recorded the reminiscences of two old men, Mick Maclean Irinjili, a Wangkangurru man from the Simpson Desert, and Murtee Johnny, a Yandruwanda man from the Strzelecki Track, whose excitement, and account of the large numbers of people attending the ceremony in 1901–2, suggest that there was free flow of information about the impending performance, which included performers from the Pitta Pitta people on the Mulligan River. Other people who spoke to Hercus remembered seeing the ceremony in the Flinders Ranges and in western NSW.¹⁹ Dick Kimber interviewed Walter Smith about the same ceremony and Smith emphasised the ceremony returned north to Boulia and Dajarra.²⁰ The implication is that, despite the various disruptions the massacres caused, information continued to flow through traditional networks, so knowledge of events related to Myall Creek in 1838 could have travelled west to Mutawintji and beyond and then north to Boulia, well before the arrival of the Native Police in north-west Queensland.

Regardless of where they occurred, massacres had similar consequences. Many Aboriginal people and some white people died, although the numbers are almost certainly beyond accurate characterisation. Many groups were decimated, but where people survived, they retained their identities, which continue to play out today in Native Title claims. Aboriginal people of the Gamilaraay were dispossessed on the North-west Slopes and

Plains of NSW as a result of such massacres. Aboriginal people of the Yulluna were dispossessed by the violence in north-west Queensland that had, as one of its beginnings, the murder of Molvo and his team at Wonomo Waterhole, and the subsequent actions of Ernest Eglinton and the Native Police based at the Barracks north of Boulia on Mucklandama Waterhole (see the third page of the image section).

All over Australia different Aboriginal peoples went from having full control over all aspects of their own lives to being dependent on non-Aboriginal people for their well-being or even their survival. Margaret Young, of Umbercollie, referred in her 1847–8 diary to some of the victims of Marks's rampage as 'our station Aboriginals' as if, willingly or unwillingly, they had been deprived of their autonomy. In the case of the Gamilaraay in the century that followed, whenever they achieved any status, such as through regular work and the relatively powerful position of running shearing gangs, they (like others in the industry) became powerless once again as the industry changed, such as when farmers switched from sheep to wheat. The cotton industry subsequently took them on as casual labourers chipping (weeding) cotton fields, until the industry developed and made that job unnecessary. There was still some work involved in stick-picking – gathering twigs from recently cleared paddocks – but environmental concerns about clearing woody vegetation similarly made that a rarer occupation. The latest indignity in this story is that temporary overseas workers are hired for very low wages to undertake what little stick-picking is now required.²¹

In north-west Queensland, the surviving members of Aboriginal communities remained living on their own country and with relatively regular access to important places. Tom Sullivan was brought up on the cattle station central to Yulluna Country,

Chatsworth and taken to sacred places while boundary riding with his father. In practice, Aboriginal employment in the pastoral industry was severely reduced when changes to employment conditions occurred in the 1960s. But even on cattle stations where Aboriginal people were employed for many years (Tom Sullivan worked in the pastoral industry for at least 45 years), there are anecdotes, from the period of living memory, of the white pastoralists going 'hunting' for Aboriginal people further out. Most recently, Aboriginal people have been employed in substantial numbers in the mining industry but as the resources boom declined, the work has almost disappeared.²² The circumstances were slightly different, but the implications of the story are the same for people from different Aboriginal groups all over Australia.

One of the consequences of the destruction of these Aboriginal groups was the loss of some of their identity in autonomous groups, such as Gamilaraay or Yulluna. Certainly, nineteenth-century settlers found it difficult to identify the owners of the land as human, let alone as belonging to separate cultural groups – they were all characterised as 'other': savages or worse, or generically Aboriginal. The massacres and other acts of dispossession further reduced settlers' ability to perceive how varied Aboriginal cultural behaviour really was. Once settler power was absolute – and one consequence of applying British justice in defence of Aboriginal people at Myall Creek was a concomitant increase in settler expectation that Aboriginal people should comply with British law – further destructive forces were applied through removal from Country, the denial of language, limitations of rights, the alienation of their labour without equal wages and then the denial of labour if equal wages were mandated.

In both northern NSW and north-west Queensland, the consequences of massacre went far beyond the impact on

individuals and local groups to pervade attitudes among both settlers and the people whose land was being settled. As indicated by a range of evidence for communication routes that could have connected the Wirrayaraay people of Myall Creek with the Yulluna people of Wonomo, as far as the different Aboriginal groups are concerned, it seems likely that they were forewarned by oral testimony of the impending struggle and met it with active and passive resistance.

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