

# The archaeology of Queensland's 'Secret War'

RESEARCHING THE QUEENSLAND NATIVE MOUNTED POLICE, 1849 TO 1904

A collaborative project between university researchers and local Aboriginal communities is investigating archaeological evidence relating to the Native Mounted Police, a force in colonial Queensland that employed Aboriginal people to track and kill other Aboriginal people. By **Lynley Wallis, Heather Burke, Bryce Barker, Noelene Cole, Leanne Bateman, Uschi Artym, Tony Pagels and Elizabeth Hatte.**

01 Members of the Native Mounted Police photographed on 1 December 1864 at Rockhampton, Queensland. In the back row from left to right are Carbine, George Murray, an unknown second lieutenant, an unknown camp sergeant and Corporal Michael. In the front row from left to right are Troopers Barney, Hector, Goondallie, Balantyne and Patrick. Reproduced with permission of Queensland State Library (negative no 10686)



*Always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.*

Elie Wiesel, Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor

THE QUEENSLAND Native Mounted Police (NMP) was a paramilitary government force that operated during the mid- to late 19th century, particularly in newly 'settled' districts. On occasion they undertook tasks such as escorting gold shipments, assisting exploration parties, establishing new travel routes and searching for missing persons. However, their main role was to respond to European requests for police assistance to 'disperse' (a euphemism for 'kill') Aboriginal people to facilitate European expansion.

The first detachment of NMP arrived on the Darling Downs in May 1849 (when Queensland was still part of New South Wales), under the command of the newly appointed Commandant of the NMP, Frederick Walker. This detachment comprised 14 Aboriginal men who had been recruited by Walker from the Murrumbidgee River district, and with whom Walker had worked previously. We do not know exactly how Walker, or subsequent recruiting officers, managed to convince Aboriginal men to join the NMP, given the hard life the job entailed. A careful reading between the lines of fragmentary mentions in historical records, and from the oral histories handed down among troopers' descendants, however, suggests several possible methods,

including coercion through forcible or other means, kidnapping, various forms of inducement and sometimes, perhaps, voluntary enlistment.<sup>1</sup> Given everything else we know about Aboriginal labour on the colonial frontier, it seems reasonable to assume that forcible recruitment into the NMP was probably common. And in rare cases we don't have to assume this, since written sources tell us as much: for instance, the boy 'Tommy', from Tchanning Station on the Condamine River, was 'seized for Native Police service while on his way back to Ferret's station after attending a bora'.<sup>2</sup> The high rates of desertion by Aboriginal troopers, even when they knew that such behaviour could be severely punished, further suggests that many troopers had not in fact been willing recruits.

From its humble beginnings the NMP eventually grew to nearly 200 troopers at any one time, and more than 450 Europeans served through the half-century history of the force. Detachments typically operated with between four and eight Aboriginal troopers under the command of a European officer. They were stationed in remotely located and unassuming base camps that were sometimes staffed with an additional European constable who served in the roles of camp-keeper and/or blacksmith.

The NMP was officially disbanded in 1904, although after that date some troopers went on to become trackers in the regular Queensland Police Force. The NMP was the longest-lasting force of its kind in Australia,

following a long tradition employed elsewhere in the British Empire of using local indigenous people in policing roles. Relegated to the realm of memory after 1904, relatively little was known about its functions until about 40 years ago, when historians such as Leslie Skinner, Henry Reynolds, Noel Loos, Ray Evans and, more recently, Jonathan Richards, began to shed light on its activities. Despite this attention, even today the role and effects of the NMP are not well known outside academic circles and the Aboriginal communities whose ancestors bore the brunt of their manner of policing.

As has been shown to be the case around the world, the victors of conflict write history and the voices of victims are often marginalised, silenced or ignored. It is not surprising, then, to find that, despite the meticulous research carried out by historians, the documentary record is inherently – and perhaps consciously – silent on many issues about the nature of the frontier wars and the actions of the NMP. Yet police staff and station files, inquest files and general correspondence to and from the Colonial Secretary's Office held in the Queensland State Archives, coupled with newspaper reports and first-hand accounts in private sources, such as letters and diaries, unequivocally support the idea that Aboriginal people were subject to attack, assault, incursion, conquest and subjugation at the hands of the NMP.

Despite suggestions that characterising these events as a 'war' is a recent development popularised by so-called 'black arm-band' historians, anyone who has ever worked with the descendants of survivors of this state-sanctioned violence will know that Aboriginal people have always referred to the events on the 'frontier' as a war. Archaeology has the potential to contribute new perspectives on this conflict, and speak directly to the silences through a different lens.

## The archaeological footprint of NMP camps across Queensland provides unequivocal evidence of the scale and enduring nature of the NMP's operations

Archaeologists Mirani Litster and Lynley Wallis have suggested elsewhere that the main material evidence for conflict on the Australian frontier – in Queensland at least – will not necessarily be found in the form of 'massacre sites'. Relatively low population densities and highly dispersed Aboriginal camps 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 might be akin to looking for a 'needle in a haystack'.

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 archaeological evidence that survives as testimony to these killings will be limited.

The majority of such events were punitive expeditions and often involved killing 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 reduced their chances of being incorporated into the archaeological record. 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 way. Adopting this recommendation, our team of researchers, working in partnership with Aboriginal communities across Queensland, has recently commenced just such a project. Specifically, the 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.

Broadly speaking, the project is exploring what evidence there is for the lives of troopers, the organisation of domestic, workforce and disciplinary matters in the force, the expression of hierarchical relationships between Aboriginal troopers and European officers, the roles played by Indigenous women, and the connections between the NMP, local Aboriginal groups and non-Aboriginal transients and settlers.

Building on the seminal work of historian Jonathan Richards, our research has shown the existence of at least 196 NMP camps, 43 of which we, or someone else, physically visited and has confirmed to contain archaeological materials.

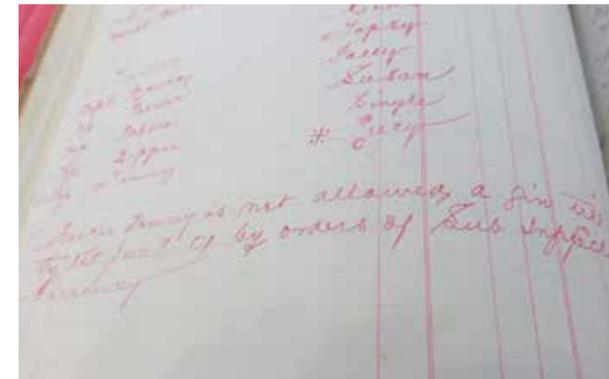
- 01 Materials from the archives listing details of Native Mounted Police troopers. Image Heather Burke
- 02 The remains of one of the stone buildings at the NMP camp on the Burke River, a short distance from Boulia in western Queensland. Image Andrew Schaefer
- 03 A photograph from about 1882 showing the buildings of the Lower Herbert River NMP camp. Reproduced with permission of Queensland State Library (negative no 156880)

An important thing to note from the outset is that the Queensland Police Force was extremely frugal when it came to the NMP. Particularly in the early days of the force, if pastoralists wanted the NMP to patrol their runs, they themselves were required to provide the accommodation or bear the cost of building it. Much administrative correspondence was generated over the haggling that surrounded buying sheeting iron to roof huts to get the NMP through the torrential wet season in the north, and, even when lives were being lost due to illness from the effects of the environment, superiors were reluctant to spend more money than was absolutely necessary.

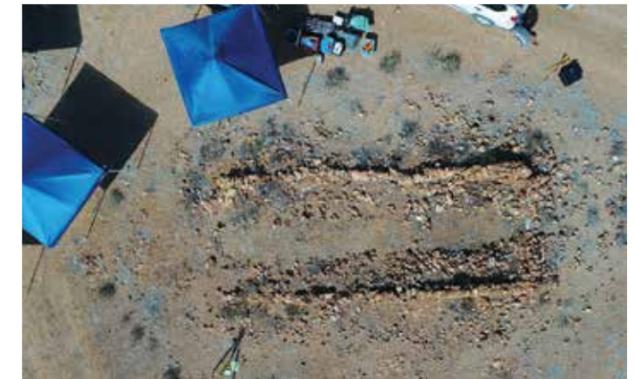
This, and the fact that the NMP camps were almost always anticipated to be short to medium term, meant that little effort was typically put into constructing them. The NMP used locally available building materials wherever possible, often constructing the buildings themselves, and most camps appear to have been substantively dismantled, and the materials reused elsewhere, when they were closed. Most of the buildings at NMP camps were made from timber, iron and bark, although the NMP camp on the Burke River near Boulia features stone buildings.

Taken together, this means that the physical evidence of NMP camps is routinely challenging to find, comprising mainly posts, fences, fireplaces and stone pathways. In fact, many of the sites are distinguished by an absence of any major structural remains, especially in the far north where timber does not survive well. At some of these sites the most obvious indication of a camp is simply the presence of large clearings in otherwise heavily wooded areas. The situation is often exacerbated by the remote, out-of-the-way locations of the sites and the fact that many were reused as stock camps after the NMP left, coupled with decades of vegetation growth that makes the surface difficult to see.

The familiar, banal qualities of these camps bely their nature as the central nodes in a web of violence that stretched across the state



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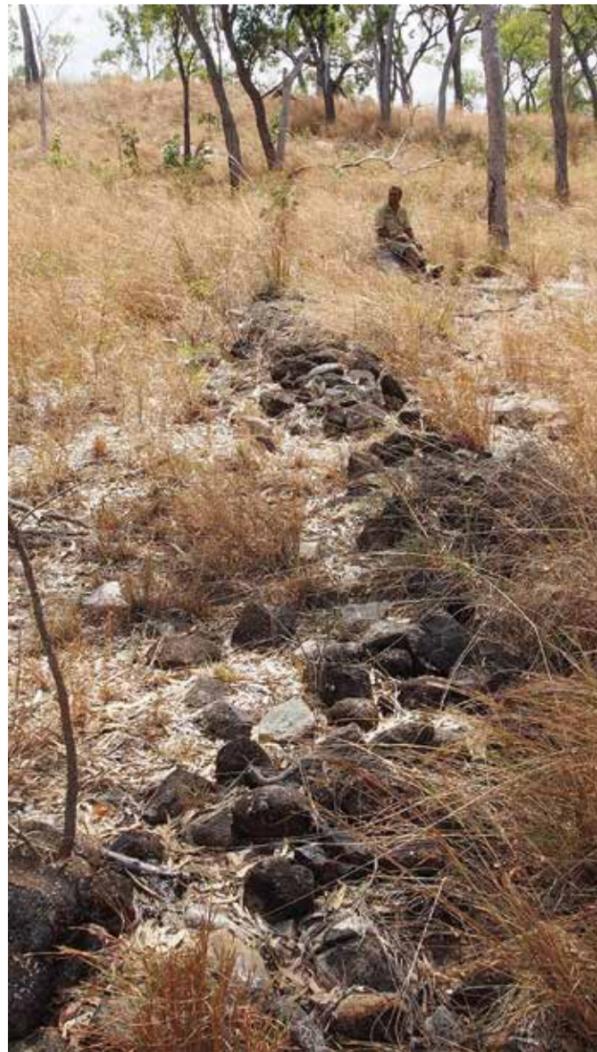
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Relocating these sites requires persistence, excruciating detective work in the archives, and a willingness to sit down and drink a lot of cups of tea with locals to tease out their knowledge ... and even then, without more than a pinch of luck thrown in, it's sometimes an almost impossible task.

## Archaeology has the potential to contribute new perspectives on this conflict, and speak directly to the silences through a different lens

Even when NMP sites were occupied for decades – and some were, such as the camp at Kirtleton, which was occupied for 24 years, and Herberton, which was used for 23 years – the number of artefacts exposed on the surface is typically minimal. Sediment has been building up over some of these sites for more than 100 years, meaning that most of the artefacts are now buried and only become visible if exposed by erosion or other activities that disturb the ground, such as ploughing. With sites spread over several hectares and often covered with thick grass, deciding where to excavate a few small test-pits or trenches requires solid geophysical survey using equipment such as ground-penetrating radar and a magnetometer, and a robust archaeological assessment.

These sites rarely contain deep deposits, usually only about 10–20 centimetres, but somewhat surprisingly, what is present is often extremely rich, with huge quantities of glass, rusty metal and ceramics, and lesser quantities of bone and organic remains. Quite a lot of the thick bases of glass bottles have been 'knapped' by Aboriginal people (most likely the troopers and/or their wives), meaning they have been flaked to produce sharp cutting tools, using exactly the same techniques that were used by their ancestors for millennia to produce stone artefacts.

You might be wondering how, given these fairly generic types of archaeological assemblages, we can be so certain that they are NMP camps rather than pastoral or mining camps. Beyond correlations with historical data that describes or shows where camps were located, we find large

numbers of bullets and spent cartridges from government-issued Snider carbines, a weapon that was not often owned by pastoralists or miners. And perhaps even more importantly, we find the characteristic brass buttons that once adorned NMP uniforms. If found in isolation, most of these artefacts would not be singularly indicative of an NMP camp, but collectively they provide a sufficiently high level of evidence to allow us to be confident of what we're dealing with.

Most of these artefacts are not what people expect to hear described when talking about the 'archaeology of war' – we have no skeletal remains of victims with evidence of gunshot trauma, nor ships, planes or battlefields. However, the archaeological footprint of NMP camps across Queensland provides unequivocal evidence of the scale and enduring nature of the NMP's operations. The fact that 196 camps had to be maintained at various locations for a period of 55 years 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.

## Aboriginal people have always referred to the events on the 'frontier' as a war

The vast majority of that violence (though not all) took place beyond the physical borders of the NMP's living quarters. The familiar, banal qualities of these camps – their rubbish dumps, remnant fireplaces, paths and fence-lines – bely their nature as the central nodes in a web of violence that stretched across the state. The everyday, domestic role they served was crucial to the NMP being able to fulfil its duties, making the camps in essence the support structure for over half a century of organised violence against Indigenous people.

One aim of this collaboration is to raise broader community awareness of these places and their associated dark histories and meanings. This dark or 'difficult' heritage is not just in the past – it continues to reverberate in the present and is far more than just a historical legacy; it's one that's current, raw and exceedingly complex.

1 For more information on the complex issue of recruitment into the NMP, see [archaeologyonthefrontier.com/2018/04/13/recruiting\\_part\\_i/](http://archaeologyonthefrontier.com/2018/04/13/recruiting_part_i/)

2 John Ferrett to Frederick Wheeler, undated, Records of the Colonial and Home Secretary's Office 1859–1896, QSA SA846747 61/1712, M/film Z5602.

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To learn more about the NMP or this project, the team has a blog that they post to every few weeks: [archaeologyonthefrontier.com](http://archaeologyonthefrontier.com)

In 2020 the team will also be launching a comprehensive database that will make the information collected from historical and archaeological sources readily available to the general public. 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 their blog and the database, 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 come to their own conclusions about what happened, why and how.

- 01 NMP button from the site of Puckley Creek in Cape York Peninsula; the diameter of the button is 15 millimetres. The button bears the insignia 'VR', for Victoria Regina (Queen Victoria). Image Heather Burke
- 02 Student volunteers from Flinders University carrying out excavations of a living area at the NMP camp on the Burke River, a short distance from Boulia in western Queensland. Image Andrew Schaefer
- 03 A stone feature at the Puckley Creek NMP camp en route to the Palmer River Gold Field in Cape York Peninsula. Image Heather Burke
- 04 The remains of a stone fireplace at the NMP camp at Oak Park Station. Image Lynley Wallis
- 05 Team member Kelsey Lowe carrying out a ground-penetrating radar survey at the Boralga NMP camp site in Rinyirru National Park. Image Heather Burke