

# The difficult, divisive and disruptive heritage of the Queensland Native Mounted Police

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## Abstract

The colonial history of nineteenth-century Queensland was arguably dominated by the actions of the Native Mounted Police, Australia's most punitive native policing force. The centrality of the Native Mounted Police to the sustained economic success of Queensland for over half a century, and their widespread, devastating effects on Aboriginal societies across the colony, have left a complex legacy. For non-Indigenous Queenslanders, a process of obscuring the Native Mounted Police began perhaps as soon as a detachment was removed from an area, reflected today in the minimisation of the Native Mounted Police in official histories and their omission from non-Indigenous heritage lists. In contrast, the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Database preserves several elements of frontier conflict and Native Mounted Police presence, giving rise to parallel state-level narratives, neither of which map directly onto local and regional memory. This highlights potential

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issues for formal processes of truth-telling relating to frontier conflict that have recently been initiated by the Queensland and Federal Governments. Of particular concern is the form that such a process might adopt. Drawing on a 4-year project to document the workings of the Queensland Native Mounted Police through archival, archaeological and oral historical sources, we suggest that this conflicted and conflictual heritage can best be bridged through empathetic truth-telling, using Rothberg's notion of the implicated subject to consider contemporary contexts of responsibility and connect present-day Queenslanders with this difficult, divisive and disruptive past.

## Keywords

artefacts, frontier conflict, heritage, Native Mounted Police, truth-telling

*The use, therefore, of such awful instruments in our dealings with this people is certainly a serious consideration. Those who consent to such things, and those who approve of them, must look well as to how they will stand in future times with posterity, when the early history of this country comes to be written.*

*Sydney Morning Herald, August 5, 1880, 2.*

## Introduction

Fashioned as the 'awful instruments' of colonial expansion, Indigenous police troopers sit outside narratives of both patriotic combat associated with war and 'honourable' Indigenous resistance (Rowse and Waterton, 2018). As principal actors in the 'Frontier Wars', troopers straddle an uncomfortable line that can neither be neatly drawn nor cleanly erased:

To acknowledge the central role of the . . . [Native Police] . . . in colonial conquest [acknowledges] that the Indigenous response to invasion was not unified: the colonising force deployed Aboriginal fighters against Aboriginal fighters . . . Indigenous Australians, loyal to 'country', could position themselves not only as resisters but also as instruments of invasion. (Rowse and Waterton, 2018: 8)

Drawing from a small number of non-Indigenous researchers and heritage specialists, Rowse and Waterton (2018: 12) constructed a carefully considered argument to acknowledge and memorialise Native Police forces, while also recognising that such a shift could 'significantly disturb the political identity of Indigenous Australians and have a negative bearing on the negotiation of reconciliation'. This article broadens this discussion by canvassing in more detail the convoluted heritage legacy of one particular native policing force: the Queensland Native Mounted Police (NMP). The 80-year span of operation (1848–1928) of the NMP led to more than 440 non-Indigenous officers and 1000 Indigenous troopers located at over 150 camps carrying out a sustained campaign to prevent and punish resistance and forcibly displace Indigenous people from their traditional lands. Once described as 'the most violent of its kind in Australian history' (Reynolds, 1987: 27), historians Henry Reynolds (2001: 130) and Dirk Moses (2000) have both argued that the NMP's systematic campaign was genocidal in intent. Their legacy is therefore profoundly and intimately connected with the history of Queensland, inseparable from the colony's economic achievements and dominant state narratives of pastoral and mining success. The NMP's longevity, widespread geographical extent and the scale of its labour force mean that its legacy continues to underpin many aspects of contemporary social relations today and its heritage highlights the complex interplay between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Queenslanders in both the past and the present.

Present-day Queenslanders have no direct experience of the NMP, although many (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) are descended from NMP officers or troopers, while many more Indigenous Queenslanders are descended from those who survived NMP reprisals or 'dispersals'.<sup>1</sup>

During the course of a 4-year historical archaeological project to document the lives and legacies of the NMP through primary sources, objects, sites and collective memory, we found many ordinary Queenslanders who were completely unaware of the NMP's existence. Others, usually members of families with multi-generational occupancy in an area, were aware of them, and not all were welcoming to us or our project. A core aspect of our project was to understand the nature, forms and purposes of remembrance of the NMP, both institutionally and at the grassroots level, as well as the nature, sources and consequences of its ignorance. As a result, we contend that the heritage of the NMP is more difficult than even Rowse and Waterton (2018) suggested.

The difficulties of acknowledging NMP heritage in Queensland are threefold. First, the NMP were responsible for much (although by no means all) of the violence that facilitated European expansion. In one light, the actions of this force can be, and have been, understood as 'necessary' to protect non-Indigenous lives and industry, but in another, they were one of the main weapons of colonial domination and extermination. Although the extent to which the Queensland Colonial Government was complicit in the acts of the NMP is beyond the scope of this article, it is certainly the case that large parts of the NMP story are now absent from orthodox state representation and that this follows from a long history of institutionally minimising, overlooking or obscuring the realities of the NMP's acts. Government resistance to the notion of frontier war has long been a common stance in Australia, especially at the Federal level, and has begun to shift only recently following a change of government in May 2022.

Second, the heritage of the Queensland NMP is similar in many ways to post-war heritages elsewhere that face the contemporary dilemma of how certain places, events and individuals should be remembered, and whether some parts of that history might best be forgotten (e.g. Burstom and Gelderblom, 2011; Carr, 2014; Macdonald, 2009). Difficult heritage is commonly associated with concepts of shame, apology and unsettledness, and in the context of the NMP, we contend that this extends to both non-Indigenous and Indigenous Queenslanders, albeit in different ways. For non-Indigenous people, it revolves around the extent to which contemporary society can still be held to be a product of an unjustly structured and endemically racist colonial process – itself part of the swing towards reparative politics since the 1990s and, in Australia, since the 'History Wars' of the early 2000s that prompted wide ranging and ongoing debate about the nature, scale and effects of colonial frontier conflict. This is particularly problematic for the descendants of non-Indigenous NMP officers, who must grapple with the actions of their ancestors in creating and perpetuating such injustice. A similar genealogical disquiet exists among the Indigenous descendants of NMP troopers, as well as the descendants of non-Indigenous officers and Indigenous women. This article explores this through some of the personal and family histories of descendants who wrestle with the meanings and consequences of NMP actions today.

Third, none of this reduces the awkwardness or discomfort of NMP heritage in the context of Queensland's current personal, familial, regional and state narratives. In pursuing this project, we examined over 8000 primary documents held in the Queensland State Archives, as well as primary and secondary source material from other repositories, and located and recorded 28 NMP camp sites. Wherever possible we also spoke to property owners and station managers, traditional owners, members of historical societies and other non-Indigenous community groups and descendants of troopers and officers. Some of these conversations took place as unstructured interviews, and others as casual conversations. The many gaps that now shape the limits of recollection of the NMP – the absence of forensically documented massacre sites, a relative dearth of archival records detailing the precise activities of the NMP while on patrol or referring irrefutably to the specifics of killing events, the loss, generations ago, of any first-hand experience of the force or its activities – create a fertile ground for re- and de-imagining them, a situation not challenged by the three-dimensional reality of archaeological material, given that our project focussed on the most

materially abundant indicator of the NMP – the archaeological signature of their camp sites. This archaeology cannot stand in for the whole of the NMP any more than the documents can, and its part-ness (not its partiality, although it may also be this) contributes to the uncertainty, as well as further helping to obscure the NMP by eliding them with the mundanity of the bureaucratic and daily chores reflected by most of the artefacts (Burke et al., 2021).

Overall, our project highlighted a series of disjunctions between broader scale state narratives and the intimate scale of remembering within local communities and families, between how the NMP is acknowledged among Indigenous and non-Indigenous Queenslanders and between members of families descended from NMP officers or troopers. Unearthing this heritage now is both an outcome of, and therefore poses challenges for, the contemporary politics of identity, including any impulse towards remorse over the existence of ‘dark’ pasts on the part of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. This raises a series of questions for the process of truth-telling, initiated recently at both State and Federal Government levels, especially over what form the process might take, and the consequences such a choice may have. In this light, we draw on Michael Rothberg’s (2014, 2019, 2020) notion of the implicated subject – or ‘the indirect responsibility of subjects situated at temporal or geographic distance from the production of social suffering’ (Rothberg, 2014: online) – to scope one potential axis for understanding contemporary responsibility. Although employed by Rothberg in the context of trauma, we consider that the notion applies equally well to the legacy of the NMP, particularly given Rothberg’s (2020) application of it to the ‘routine violence of the colonial and postcolonial worlds’ (p. 209).

## Queensland history and the heritage of the NMP

The ways in which orthodox collectivities can erase or obscure the less benign elements of history are a constant focus of critical attention (e.g. Abu El-Haj, 2001; Walsh, 2018). Between 1849 and 1928, the NMP occupied over 150 camp sites across all of Queensland, beginning in the south and spreading across each newly declared pastoral district north and west, until they reached the tip of Cape York in 1868. The first NMP camp was established on the border of what is now Queensland and New South Wales and operated for a period of 8 years; the last was located at Coen on Cape York Peninsula and lasted for 41 years. In between, the NMP were active in every part of the colony, although some camps lasted mere months, while others functioned for years. Here, we consider the representation of this considerable geographic and chronological span in terms of 16 published histories of Queensland written between 1882 and 2007 and the state’s two officially sanctioned heritage lists.

The histories we consulted represent a mixture of journalistic (earlier) and academic (later) works, ranging from Coote’s 1882 *History of the Colony of Queensland from 1770 to the Close of the Year 1881* to Evan’s 2007 *History of Queensland*. Works such as Morrison’s (1888a, 1888b) *The Aldine History of Queensland*, Knight and Spencer-Browne’s (1900) *Queensland 1900*, Barton’s (1910) *Jubilee History of Queensland* and Cilento and Lack’s (1959) *Triumph in the Tropics* were all written to mark key celebratory milestones. These tend to be the least critical, while later, more academic works post-dating 1975 discuss frontier conflict more explicitly, although, until 1984, still from an overwhelmingly White settler perspective. In earlier volumes, the NMP leave a very light footprint, either being omitted or represented in scant detail, often meriting no more than a handful of words (e.g. Knight and Spencer Browne, 1900; Knight, 1895; Meston, 1895) or sentences (e.g. Barton, 1910; Traill, 1886). Where the NMP do constitute a slightly more robust subject, they are typically represented as part of a narrative of progress (e.g. Fox, 1919, 1921, 1923), even in those volumes that are more critical of frontier violence (e.g. Knight and Spencer-Browne, 1900; Meston, 1895). This only began to change with the centennial

history by Cilento and Lack (1959), which elucidated in somewhat greater detail the extent of violence on the frontier, although their treatment of the NMP remained limited. Unsurprisingly, several of the post-1975 works reflect the increased interest in reconciliation politics that took hold towards the end of the twentieth century, as well as the political leanings of their authors. Yet while recent histories, such as those by Fitzgerald (1984) and Evans (2007), present a more considered and balanced view of frontier conflict, the attention paid to the NMP has remained limited. In effect, these works reflect a collective memory that has narrowed the narrative considerably, minimising, if not erasing, the presence of the NMP from the official history of Queensland for over 100 years.

A different dynamic is identifiable in the two principal instruments for documenting places held to be of cultural significance to the state of Queensland: the Queensland Heritage Register (QHR) and the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Database (ACHD). The QHR was established in 1992 with the passage of the *Queensland Heritage Act*, a piece of legislation made possible by the removal of a highly conservative, right-wing state government. It currently contains nearly 1800 items; many of which were legacy entries from National Trust lists of historic buildings or places, with subsequent additions via a public nomination process and occasional studies to address perceived or actual thematic gaps. In general, the QHR excludes places of Indigenous cultural heritage, unless the significance of the place overlaps. In contrast, the ACHD was established in 2003 as a result of legislation that sought to emphasise the uniqueness of Indigenous cultural heritage, as well as place decision-making over, and management of, that heritage in the hands of Indigenous people. The ACHD therefore explicitly represents places of value to Indigenous people and was designed to undo an older heritage register that was seen as both assimilationist and racist (O'Neill, 2018). It currently contains more than 50,000 items, most of which are archaeological sites and places of traditional knowledge and cultural expression.

The ways in which the NMP is represented on these two lists indicates some variance in how the force is collectively remembered. The NMP, and the archaeological sites and personal and local histories associated with it, sit clearly in the space between Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage, given that both non-Indigenous officers and Indigenous troopers formed the force; Indigenous people bore the brunt of its negative effects and non-Indigenous people were largely the beneficiaries of those effects. Only one place on the QHR, the Rockhampton Botanic Gardens, can be connected to the NMP as the site of a former camp, although it is listed for its public amenity values rather than its NMP associations. When 'police' are considered more generally, there are 25 police-related sites on the QHR, the majority of which are non-NMP ('ordinary') police stations or residences (n=18), buildings originally built for other purposes that were later occupied by non-NMP police (n=2), a relocated tracker's hut and two sites of conflict between non-NMP police and other parties. In short, the NMP are effectively absent from the QHR, although policing as a theme of law and order is highly visible. In comparison, the ACHD contains 12 entries relating to the location of NMP camps, seven of which are specific sites and five of which are general locales where the precise location of the camp is uncertain. Seven further entries refer to places where killings of Indigenous people by the NMP took place.

This divergence is at least partly instrumental. The QHR, as with other State Heritage Registers, is the product of a long-standing emphasis on places of built heritage, especially those held to be of historical or architectural significance. Non-Indigenous police station buildings are far more enduring, usually architect-designed and hold long-term civic associations that make them places of historical and social value to the dominant state authorities who derive their authority from (ultimately) European values. In contrast, the structures of NMP camps were largely ephemeral, often built from expedient and locally available materials (e.g. bush timber, slabs, bark and grass) and their reusable components routinely disassembled and removed to a new location when a

detachment was shifted. Such places only endure today as archaeological sites, none of which had been the subject of archaeological investigation until the current project.

There are other aspects of this division, however, that reflect and construct a more complicated contemporary heritage for the NMP. A State Heritage Register is a sanctioned list of the places considered important in an endorsed narrative about the history of the state, even though this narrative shifts (at least on the margins and relatively slowly) to accommodate social change. The orthodoxy of any such narrative is predicated on the notion that it is shared (or at least constitutive of shared values) and therefore held to be important to all people in the state. In relation to the NMP, the shared public narrative of policing as reflected in the QHR is little other than benign and progressive. The entries on the ACHD, in contrast, are more likely to be archaeological sites or places of intangible heritage values and therefore are not constrained by a lack of materiality. While still only a small proportion of the total, the ACHD entries suggest an emotional weight to places associated with the NMP and their actions that is actively remembered within Indigenous communities. In this sense, the sites on the ACHD intersect more clearly with historical trauma, animated by cultural memories of distressing events and the accumulation of a variety of oppressive and repressive processes enacted on Indigenous peoples since the nineteenth century. The gap between the two lists in relation to the NMP says much about the contemporary complexities of dealing with an historical past that not only brought the NMP into being but also that can today construct a state narrative of largely benign progress and success precisely because the NMP enabled it.

## **The collective memory of officers and troopers**

In less orthodox forms of collective memory – those practised at the more intimate scale of family or local history – the NMP are an equally problematic presence, especially for those who trace descent from its members. For descendants of both NMP officers and troopers, grappling with an ancestor who may be publicly recognised in historical narratives as a perpetrator of violence represents another facet of the contemporary politics of emotion defined around grief and loss (Damousi, 2002: 112), recognition and justice (Rothberg, 2011). It is a slightly different experience to the recognition of difficult heritage at a larger scale, even if the two mesh, and, rather than being potentially unifying, has the potential to be fragmentary, unless some larger form of solidarity is crafted among descendants. The shifting fault lines between fragmentation and solidarity often form the core of social memory work, since, as Rowse (2018: 3) has argued, understanding the motivations of such an ancestor is an exercise in historical imagination, a search for a ‘plausible perspective on poorly evidenced reality’. To understand this issue, we asked 15 Indigenous and non-Indigenous interviewees a set of questions about their knowledge of, and attitudes towards, the NMP and their opinions about the public discussion of frontier conflict. For those who were descendants of troopers and officers, we also asked them how they felt about their ancestor.

For the non-Indigenous officers, individual motivations, experiences and reactions would have been as varied as the officers themselves, who ranged the full gamut from younger sons of the landed gentry to labourers, farmers, blacksmiths, drovers, sailors and grocers, some of whom had prior military or policing experience, many of whom did not (Burke and Wallis, 2019; Richards, 2008). While a proportion of these officers could only be considered marginal players in many ways, some went on to positions of power within the police force or the wider public service. For at least some of them, as White men, their bureaucratic contributions fall in line with the mainstream story and their lives are more likely to be commemorated as part of the historic fabric of constructing a just and ordered Queensland. While this gives their descendants an alternative

anchor for family histories, it does not negate the events they participated in. Many non-Indigenous descendants we spoke to adopted a cautiously matter-of-fact attitude to the vicissitudes of their ancestor's life, reflecting that 'they had to do what they had to do in those days. I am really sad that there was so much hatred . . . I'm sure there must have been horrible things happen' (Sandra Warren, interview on 3 July 2018).

The conceptual and emotional issues that underlie memories and perceptions of the actions and lives of NMP troopers, however, are less cushioned by existing structures of laudatory meaning: liminal then, poorly recorded at the time if at all, the troopers then and now remain largely anonymous. This makes it more difficult to evaluate the diversity of their backgrounds or experience apart from very coarse indicators. Of 1024 known troopers (by no means either a definitive or complete accurate list), 54 troopers for whom ages can also be deduced were between 10 and 31 years old while serving, although the older men may well have joined when much younger (Burke and Wallis, 2019). Recruitment of these men focussed on settled areas already well disrupted by European presence and some were drawn from missionised or other contexts in which they had already been subject to European value systems (Burke et al., 2018). Although only 15% of known troopers are recorded as having deserted, 27% of NMP camps experienced desertion at some point, indicating that it was a common impulse. Furthermore, the position of troopers at the time of the NMP's existence was alternately admired and abhorred by the non-Indigenous settlers made safe through their labour. When actively employed by the NMP and directed by White officers, troopers provided a 'defence' against 'wild' people. Upon their retirement, desertion or dismissal, however, troopers were equally likely to become objects of intense fear, rightly or wrongly mistrusted and oftentimes charged with using the skills and knowledge they had learned in the NMP, especially familiarity with firearms, to lead Indigenous guerrilla-style forces. The structural and other forms of racism that encouraged their meagre pay, corporal punishment and simplistic naming according to generic, derogatory and self-serving non-Indigenous systems mean that they were given little role to play other than as the 'savage fiends' at whose feet all violent excesses could be conveniently laid. Rowse (2018: 23) has asked,

[H]ow are we to imagine the disposition of those Aboriginal people who violently assisted the colonists? . . . We have no idea whether any troopers were convinced that their violent actions were salutary, making possible a new peace ruled by white settlers. If they did see their work as a measure to curb and limit frontier violence, we have no way of telling how much this effect mattered to them and how it entered into the stories they told themselves and others. However, in our quest to confer agency on all participants in the frontier wars, we must try to imagine what reasoning about self and others became possible when an Aboriginal man was given a horse, a uniform and a gun and, under a white officer's command, was told to face a mob of 'wild' blackfellows.

Anthropological work would similarly suggest that the moral world of the NMP (as with any humans) was complex and that rendering it into a modern, post-World War II (WWII) European schema as collaboration is an oversimplification. The NMP were not the only context in which Indigenous people participated in violence against other Indigenous people. Anthropologists Howard Morphy and Frances Morphy (1984) noted that Ngalakan people on the Roper River in the Northern Territory suppressed accounts of Indigenous participation in conflict by removing themselves from the equation. Violent events were conducted by 'wild blacks', not the ancestors of contemporary people. In contrast, Merlan's anthropological experience around Katherine, also in the Northern Territory, was that Indigenous people spoke about it openly and matter-of-factly:

. . . one cannot too easily assume that Aborigines would necessarily suppress their knowledge of their forebears' participation in killings because of a clear-cut negative moral valuation of this role under all circumstances. It also suggests to me that meaningful assessment of operative moral values at particular periods is a difficult task, demanding enough with respect to the present but perhaps even more so where the evidence must be largely or solely derived from people's representations of the past. (Merlan, 1994: 154)

For Rowse, the positions and perspectives of troopers – precisely because they must be largely imagined – provoke a confrontation with contemporary forms of Indigenous agency in terms of why and how troopers participated in the policing system. This resonates with the more difficult heritage of collaboration, with its potential to 'unsettle existing, identity-affirming representations' because of its disruption of the victim-perpetrator binary. Descendants of troopers with whom we spoke saw it in part as a survival tactic that played into pre-existing enmities between Indigenous groups:

I feel that they had no choice . . . that was a survival. If they didn't do it, Mum said they would have been all killed. They complied to make sure [that] next generation, there were still going to be Aboriginal people here. . . . I don't feel bad because I believe that he did what he had to do to survive, and I wouldn't be here if he didn't be a humble person and accept defeat for our survival. (Sharn Fogarty, interview on 28 April 2019)

It annoys me when people go 'but they were collaborators'. You go, 'if they were really collaborators, then everything that everyone's been told for evermore is a lie'. . . . they're from Butchulla people, these people were sent up to kill Yalinjis, and Wakamans, and Nunkal and Walangai and Mini and all them, different mob, different people . . . . them fellas would . . . have fought their cousins over off the island . . . they'd just as soon as fight their mob there just to the north, as fight themselves and so how can they collaborate when any other Aboriginal group was their enemy? (Galiina Ellwood, interview on 26 May 2017)

Galiina's perspective on her ancestor offers an alternative to the customary centralisation of White colonisers as the agents and reagents of Aboriginal people's actions. By decentring the colonisers, she shifts the focus away from Europeans in a way that foregrounds the troopers' autonomy and agency. One of the principal legacies of frontier conflict is the fragmentation derived from 'a world in which Aborigines, far from being united against a white invasion, were divided in their attachment to country, relatives and white bosses' by the various events, personae, perspectives, loyalties and principles of survival active in any given context (Morphy and Morphy, 1984: 475). Understanding agency in such a context is complex. Much recent scholarship has acknowledged the critical role-played by those Indigenous people – often, but not always, men – who acted as brokers between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds. Whether troopers can be placed in these triangular relationships is a question only beginning to be explored, although there are certainly parallels. Both troopers and intermediaries were highly mobile but often dislocated figures who were both agile and adaptable, occupying an ambivalent position with shifting and complex loyalties that rendered them 'always two-sided, always both enabler and betrayer' (Turnbull, 2009: 388). In such a fractured world, troopers occupy both perpetrator and victim subject positions, just as the positions of their descendants align with histories of both victimisation and perpetration (Rothberg, 2019: 91), locating them 'in contradictory ways in relation to questions of justice and injustice' (Rothberg, cited in Knittel and Forchieri, 2020: 14).

Even more compactly bound and difficult to articulate are the perspectives of those who are descended from non-Indigenous officers and Indigenous women, many of whom escaped massacre events. At least some non-Indigenous officers are known to have had Indigenous children, and there were no doubt many more such children who were not publicly acknowledged. For those



officers who then went on to marry European women, the forgetting began as soon as they left the NMP to construct 'normal' White lives in which their intimacy with Indigenous women was deliberately erased.

## The redemptive power of Ned Kelly

A different way in which descendants have sought to rationalise familial associations with the NMP is through connection to the considerable professional value placed on Queensland 'trackers' sent to other colonies. Nettelbeck and Ryan (2018) have pointed to the schism between the initial settler conceptualisations of Native Policing units as a force for conciliation and civilisation (via their potential for inculcating in young Indigenous men European values and habits, such as discipline, cleanliness and routinisation), and the more entrenched reality of them as forces for opportunistic violence that were not merely tolerated, but sanctioned and assisted. In essence, there is a long history of walking a tightrope between use of the NMP 'for the maintenance of order and peace' versus its deployment 'for the purpose of carrying war into an enemy's country' (Walker, 1849). This tension bleeds through most clearly in relation to the distinction drawn between trackers and troopers.

The ability of Indigenous people to live off the land and to read the landscape became one of the key markers of the value of the NMP to non-Indigenous society, employed most obviously in using troopers to track other Indigenous people for reprisal purposes, but also to locate missing persons, establish new transportation routes or pursue non-Indigenous outlaws. In light of the latter, many Indigenous men from Queensland were sent to southern colonies as trackers (Bennett, 2020; McCullough, 1931: 199), although not all were necessarily NMP troopers. By far the most well-known, however, was a detachment of NMP troopers – 'Hero', 'Johnny', 'Jimmy', 'Jack Noble', 'Barney' and 'Sambo' – who were sent to Victoria under the command of Sub-Inspector Stanhope O'Connor from the Lower Laura NMP camp in far north Queensland in early 1879 to assist in the search for Ned Kelly. As a well-known colonial figure, Kelly's notoriety expanded following his death, transforming him into a rebellious folk hero and somewhat romantic symbol of contemporary Australian identity (Moloney, 1980; Tranter and Donoghue, 2008). Galiina Ellwood, a descendant of Jack Noble, recalled the centrality of the Ned Kelly narrative to her family's story: 'We grew up on them stories from dad. We used to always think, "How come, why would an Aborigine be sent to hunt Ned Kelly?" Dad used to always tell us adventure stories when we were little' (Galiina Ellwood, interview on 26 May 2017).

During our project, other trooper descendants claimed an ancestor who had gone in search of Ned Kelly, although, on dates of service alone, many could not possibly have been involved. One example is Claude Ponto, who was indeed sent to Victoria to serve with the police, but whose period of police service was more than 20 years after Ned Kelly had been captured. In this case, the confusion seems to have derived from an erroneous report to that effect by Yarrabah Mission Superintendent W. W. McCullough (1931), published in a missionary pamphlet handed down among his family. When asked how Ponto's descendants reconciled the problematic dates and the absence of Claude from well-publicised photographs of the NMP detachment involved in the capture of Kelly, it was explained that Claude had been injured and was in the hospital recovering when the photographs were taken, and that, contrary to official accounts, there had been two different NMP detachments sent south. According to his family members, Claude would warn Aboriginal people when the police were after them in order to give them a chance to get away, something he also did with the Kelly gang. Only if people paid no attention to the warning would Claude have to shoot them (Connolly family, interview on 25 March 2018).

Sitting well outside the narrative of frontier conflict and firmly within a widely accepted and highly valorised non-Indigenous foundational story, connections to Ned Kelly are one of the few positive associations that descendants of troopers can marshal in the search for a less ambiguous and more positive perspective on their ancestors. Cast either as adventure or redemptive stories, such threads also resonate within the symbolic meanings attributed to Ned Kelly by other Indigenous Australians, which centre Kelly as a moral being. In these tales he is often Indigenised, so that he is no longer a moral European but a moral *human*, someone who set himself against the police and who therefore embodies ‘resistance against invasion and injustice’ (Bird Rose, 1994: 184). By encouraging an alternative collective memory trace of the NMP, the legend of Ned Kelly enables troopers to be viewed similarly. In this light, Indigenous troopers can be approached from an entirely different perspective precisely because that vantage point obscures their activities elsewhere.

### **Comprehending the NMP in the future: truth-telling, healing, indictment and the implicated subject**

The various forms of omission, elision, rejection and remaking that characterise the contemporary heritage of the NMP raise questions for how the NMP might be comprehended in the future. For us, this issue has been brought into sharper focus through two recent processes. The first is preparation for a future exhibition on frontier conflict at the Queensland Museum (QM) – an institution founded to support European colonisation (Rowlands, 2017) – based in part on the interpretation of excavated assemblages from NMP camp sites, augmented by Indigenous artefacts collected by NMP officers over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The second is the process begun by the Queensland Government in late 2021 in response to the Uluru Statement from the Heart. The Regional Dialogue Meetings that preceded the Uluru Statement indicated that ‘the need to know more about Australian and Aboriginal history’ was fundamental for national healing (Davis, 2018: 28). Queensland’s recently announced response to this seeks ‘to be courageous and curious, to be open to hearing the truth of our state’s history and to collaborate in readiness for negotiating treaties’ (Queensland Government, 2022). A 3-year truth-telling inquiry will be part of this process.

A preliminary search of the QM’s state collection yields several objects donated by NMP officers, a practice enabled because of the unmediated access to Indigenous camps that NMP violence provided. Primary sources point to many NMP collecting episodes destined for a variety of institutions, although fewer than 20 objects can now be pinpointed in the QM collection from such sources in the nineteenth century. This process changed in 1911 when the Museum Director began to actively collect Indigenous material culture, relying, in part, on NMP officers to assist. This period (1911–1915) resulted in the acquisition of over 320 Indigenous artefacts. No objects within the state collection are specifically attributable to the NMP; rather, the donors are identified solely by name and rank, and their association with the NMP added almost as an afterthought.

These artefacts are wholly Indigenous material, present through a direct connection to individuals known for conducting and supporting violent attacks upon Indigenous people. NMP officers Robert Johnstone and Ferdinand Tompson, for example, collected material during the North East Coast Expedition in 1873, a Government venture to explore and report on uncolonised coastal lands in far north Queensland, as well as to ‘make scientific collections for the public benefit’ (Dalrymple, 1873). On one occasion, when approaching a camp site on the Johnstone River, Tompson (1873) noted that,

. . . a great number of natives were seen camped there but very politely rendered us peaceable possession without being asked. They left a goodly amount of weapons and dilly bags, which we concluded were intended by them for the museum so we took them accordingly.

Any proposal for an exhibition based on this material will need actively to redress the imbalance within the collection by supporting contemporary Indigenous communities to share their stories, feelings and objects. It must acknowledge the loss of life and, in turn, the loss of those who were not allowed to speak and, consequently, who have been excluded from this difficult state-wide narrative. For this reason, the development of the exhibition is being organised in close partnership with an Indigenous advisory committee, and with the understanding that the objects in the Museum's collection will not tell the complete story. The exhibition design therefore will also actively encourage and support Indigenous communities to contribute their perspectives. Even this will be complex to manage, however, since diversity of opinion is not solely a quality belonging to non-Indigenous Queenslanders. The Reconciliation Barometer, created by Reconciliation Australia to gauge Australians' 'historical acceptance' of 'the wrongs of the past' since 2008, for example, highlights the heterogeneous nature of people's relationship to truth-telling. For both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the percentage who responded negatively to a question asking whether they believed that frontier wars had taken place across Australia was remarkably similar: 36% of non-Indigenous people and 33% of Indigenous people signalled they were unsure or did not believe in this statement (Polity Pty Ltd., 2020). Tim Rowse (2021), in his ongoing concern for the moral positions people adopt towards difficult history, has suggested that such results might stem from an unwillingness to take:

. . . a position within a morally and emotionally charged debate about blame, forgiveness and responsibility. The statements tested by the barometer are not merely factual: they are emotional and moral. To affirm a story is to arouse feeling and to engage in moral reasoning, and we may or may not feel good about where 'I' and 'we' stand in that story, and its implication of 'me' and 'us'.

One of the most challenging aspects of any 'truth-telling' process will obviously be how to grasp, understand and parse the nature, scope and legacies of frontier conflict by, with and for a population holding such diverse subject positions. Such an endeavour will clearly not be straightforward, given the political complexity of collective remembering (Wertsch and Roediger, 2008), the ontological, epistemological and axiological problems created by absence (Burke et al., 2021), and the fact that dark and difficult pasts are not easily or readily engaged with, nor necessarily received in constructive ways when they are (Smith, 2011: 300). Inherent in such dilemmas is the way in which contemporary visitors situate themselves in relation to the truth being told.

It is important to point out here that truth-telling and any subsequent reconciliation built upon it are separate processes. For reconciliation to be meaningful people must be able to create a connection, which means understanding not just how present circumstances have arisen, but also how they might think differently about themselves. Success in this, we argue, might depend on the form of truth-telling that is adopted. Tim Rowse (2021) has pointed to two rival models for truth-telling: forgiveness and responsibility. The former emphasises empathy and healing; the latter cleaves to the example set by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in the wake of Apartheid in 1996. Its logic was one of individualised indictments, predicated as it was on being able to name and certify those who could be labelled as either victims or perpetrators and thereby placed into a process of accountability. While this was possible to some degree because of the relatively recent nature of events within living memory, the process also problematised the very

nature of both groups, generating considerable debate about the scale, type, degree and level of perpetration and victimhood (Borer, 2003).

What this raised was a reconsideration of the categories of victim and perpetrator. As a binary, these are neither helpful nor accurate, since they key into what Macdonald (2015) terms the extremes of containment or a binary that focuses ‘only on evil criminals or on one’s own victimhood, or on historical events as relevant only to the past’ (p. 20). While other subject positions are possible, such as bystanders (Hilberg, 1992) and beneficiaries (Mamdani, 1996), highlighting a spectrum of levels of involvement, resistance, agreement and opposition (Borer, 2003; Ehrenreich and Cole, 2005), these too rely to some extent on a direct personal connection with the injustice under examination.

We contend that, rather than adopt a model of individualised indictment, which depends on a forensic accounting of history that is impossible in the Australian case, the truth-telling process would be better served by adopting something closer to the healing and forgiveness model. We find Michael Rothberg’s conceptualisation of the implicated subject a more fruitful way to consider contemporary contexts of responsibility and the role of the viewer in any interpretive endeavour. Rothberg’s implicated subject is a ‘figure . . . who is entangled in histories of violence and exploitation that can be distant in either time or space’ (Rothberg, 2017: 214). The implicated subject,

. . . describes the indirect responsibility of subjects . . . [and] helps direct our attention to the conditions of possibility of violence as well as its lingering impact and suggests new routes of opposition. Like the proximate term *complicity* . . . *implication* draws attention to how we *are entwined with and folded into* . . . histories and situations that surpass our agency as individual subjects. The distinctions between forms of diachronic and synchronic responsibility – between, say, contemporary United States citizens’ responsibility for transatlantic slavery, on the one hand, and contemporary imperial wars, on the other – are significant. But, I venture, we also need a general category to describe modes of responsibility beyond the criminal guilt of the perpetrator. (Rothberg, 2014: online)

Within such a framework, all Queenslanders are implicated subjects, since they remain the main beneficiaries of the NMP’s actions through the ways in which settlement was forcibly effected. Coming to terms with this is the essence of ‘difficult knowledge’, as defined by Lehrer and Milton (2011):

. . . knowledge that does not fit [and that] therefore induces a breakdown in experience, forcing us to confront the possibility that the conditions of our lives and the boundaries of our collective selves may be quite different from how we normally, reassuringly think of them. Such knowledge points to more challenging, nuanced aspects of history and identity, potentially leading us to re-conceive our relationships with those traditionally defined as ‘other’. (p. 8)

Rothberg is more concerned with raising awareness in such circumstances than defining complicity or assigning guilt. It is a difficult thing to attune to implication, however, because, as Snaza argues, most of society’s structural systems – educational, legal, corporate, political – work ‘precisely to render imperceptible our implication’ (Snaza, 2020: 23, italics in original). Rothberg’s work acknowledges the labour required to transform implication into some form of constructive and transformative responsibility, since by definition it brings together that which is otherwise fractured, pluralistic and unaware:

The particular forms of solidarity that interest me are the ones that can never fall back on ideas of ‘natural’ belonging (itself a fiction), but are constructed precisely across boundaries of geographical, experiential, and identitarian difference. I call these forms ‘differentiated’ or ‘long-distance’ solidarity in order to

capture the fact that they do not work via a logic of sameness, identification, or presumed proximity. Rather, the work of solidarity consists precisely in holding together that which is not expected or intended to cohere. (Rothberg, cited in Knittel and Forchieri, 2020: 16)

Lehrer (2010: 283) framed heritage work in this space as ‘conciliatory’, arguing that it can be used to draw estranged groups together. Much recent research into the value of affect in assisting the difficult labour of interpreting contentious heritage in museum spaces bears out the possibility of using emotion as one way to create meaningful connection (e.g. see various papers in Smith et al., 2018). Any such effort in relation to the NMP needs to embrace the ambiguities and discontinuities in the archival and artefactual records to create a range of possible connection points, helping people to understand the historical roots of modern reactions and positions and challenging the perceived limits of inherited views. We agree with Macdonald (2009: 192) that awareness is key, as is opening a space for reflection and disagreement that allows people to decide for themselves.

How contemporary Queenslanders might deal with their positions as implicated subjects through any such process is open to conjecture. The recommendation by the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018) that the truth-telling process take place in non-judicial settings and at a grassroots level through the auspices of ‘local organisations and communities, libraries, historical societies and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander associations’ is clearly situated within a healing model for reconciliation. At the same time, it recognises that, for the truth-telling process to be meaningful, it needs to be built from the ground up through contextualised engagement within each local and/or regional community. The patchwork that will result may well have different outcomes, dimensions and tensions in different places, depending on the particular histories and contemporary social contexts of each locale.

For us, the future NMP exhibition needs to engage with what might constitute an effective context for visitors to address the debates over frontier conflict that currently divide the community and the future process of truth-telling that will create new fault lines, positions and understandings. Given that how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people see themselves and recognise the experiences of each other lies at the heart of much contemporary reflection and debate (Kearney, 2019: 3), there is no point in trying to prevent or avoid controversy. This is a standpoint adopted elsewhere by the Sites of Conscience network, which deliberately situates heritage within a human rights context (Ševcenko, 2011: 115):

Instead of being regarded as a temporary problem to be overcome, contestation might be embraced as an ongoing opportunity to be fostered. This means integrating dialogue into every stage of heritage management, from planning to preservation to interpretation, and allowing for continual evolution. . . . In practical terms, this can mean . . . developing interpretation not around a linear narrative but around open-ended questions on current issues, and giving people the time and space to engage in exchanges with each other about them. (Ševcenko, 2010: 25)

Interpreting the NMP such that both sides of the story can be understood, highlighting past injustices while also recognising contemporary understandings of continuing injustice arising from the former, will require the removal of absolutes and some form of confrontation with the messy reality that is the NMP. Given that effective reconciliation depends on situated understanding – both of the past and the circumstances of the present, including those of each individual engaging with the interpretation – one way to achieve this might be to connect NMP camp sites in Queensland with other sites across Australia, including massacre sites, sites of other colonial Native Policing units, missions and pastoral stations, to begin to build a dialogue on the landscape of frontier conflict.

A reconciliatory perspective of healing is best articulated by the Indigenous people whose honesty, reflection, insight and compassion helped the non-Indigenous authors of this article to navigate the contemporary reverberations of frontier conflict. When asked why non-Indigenous people find it difficult to talk about frontier history, Lance Sullivan suggested:

I think a lot still would be hidden, kept hidden. I think not everything will be told because I think it would be too hard for everyone to understand. . . . But I think we shouldn't forget it, what happened. So writing books and that about it and talking about it, I think that would be a good healing process for Australia, for the Australian people in general, to acknowledge it and to not be ashamed . . . be proud that we survived and that we are all working together to keep going, going forward. (Lance Sullivan, interview on 30 April 2019)

Such perspectives articulate a politics of empathy that invites engagement and suggests options for moving forward. It is often blocked, however, by the coexistence of competing attempts to reclaim memory for different purposes, spaces of silence and absence that lurk stubbornly on the edges of collective memory, mythologisation of the past, overt politicisation and labelling of subject positions, the alternative dynamics of personal, familial and regional histories and deliberate attempts to forget. All of these processes reveal a variety of complementary and contradictory subject positions, only some of which we have articulated here; we have not, for example, engaged directly with those who disavow, disagree or dispute the existence of frontier violence or its effects.

It has also been beyond the scope of this article to consider the nuances of other native policing forces in colonial Australia, not all of which were organised or deployed in quite the same fashion as the Queensland NMP, or to compare the situation in Queensland until the 1880s with the more civilian form of policing using Aboriginal trackers that gradually replaced the NMP after this date. Such comparisons would almost certainly reveal even greater diversity in motivations and experiences.

## Conclusion

Despite Macdonald's (2015) recognition that at least some difficult heritage has increasingly become linked to positive identity effects, the heritage of the NMP remains as difficult as ever, largely because it has not yet risen to the surface to be considered, debated and contended. It is a heritage of material conflict that is itself conflicted. Increasingly obscured from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, archival records were lost or destroyed, camps dismantled and 'savage' troopers transformed into civil police trackers. Even through archaeology, the shape of the NMP can be sketched only lightly and, despite much searching through archives and archaeology, its borders remain indistinct. Fragments of the materiality of the NMP are visible in discontinuous sites and object assemblages, as well as the secondary histories that assemble these into more-or-less continuous narratives. Many elements exist only in the oral histories of Indigenous descendants, and thus stand outside the official narratives of the NMP in Queensland history because they do not correspond with any written record. Other crucial elements are, and will probably forever remain, missing – the massacre sites, detailed first-person accounts by perpetrators, the direct experience of troopers and survivors.

For non-Indigenous Queenslanders, forgetting the NMP has taken place at many levels; for some, it would have begun as soon as a detachment was removed from an area, especially among those settlers who campaigned for just such a transfer once an area had been 'pacified'. At a more general level, it is reflected in the minimisation of the NMP in published histories and their

omission from non-Indigenous heritage lists, decoupling them from the official history of Queensland for much of the twentieth century. As yet, the contemporary ramifications of recognising frontier conflict are still poorly understood and perhaps deliberately so by those with vested interests in the status quo. Many contemporary identity issues associated with Native Title claims, for example, derive from shifts in land custodianship following dramatic population declines connected to frontier violence and attendant waves of disease and starvation. At least some of the complicated identity politics of Indigenous belonging today can be traced back to these events, a perspective that is still largely lost on the majority of non-Indigenous Queenslanders.

Our position lies avowedly at one end of a spectrum of possibilities. We agree with Walsh (2018: 179) that ‘survivors should have the right to choose when to remember, how such remembering is framed, and the terms on which the remembering is done’, including the right to refuse to remember, or the right to refuse to speak for others. In talking through some of the ways in which frontier conflict had affected his family (see also Davidson et al., 2020), Lance Sullivan felt divided by the push to remember and the pull to forget:

[S]howing [my children] places like that [massacre sites], it would really scare them, and I don’t want them to have hatred towards Australians, I want them more to learn and educate themselves and have a future. . . . I think they need to move forward. I think that’s the main reason I haven’t told them . . . because the next generation is our future and they’re the ones who are going to be guiding us, taking after us, they’ll be the next one to live in this world after us, they all have to get on. So I’m a bit worried about that teaching in schools, I’m a bit worried about it because I know they’re going to ask a lot of questions. We can’t answer them all because really we weren’t in that time and period, we don’t know what happened. (Lance Sullivan, interview on 30 April 2019)

What the heritage of the NMP highlights most clearly is uncertainty – of how to proceed, how to navigate implicated subject positions, how to speak to ourselves and each other, what to forget and what to remember. In undermining formerly stable narratives around white settler Australia, any discussion of frontier conflict breaches the status quo. It is increasingly difficult to sustain an older, somewhat nostalgic narrative of cohesion founded on colonial silences (O’Malley and Kidman, 2018), however, opening up a troubling space with the potential to be filled in many ways. None of us can speak for the actions of another, let alone an historical other, so such uncertainty is challenging to deal with, confronting, confusing, uncomfortable, uneasy and messy: the essence of difficult heritage.




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## Note

1. ‘Dispersal’ was a term used widely in connection with the NMP and, even during the nineteenth century, was accepted to mean ‘killed’ (for a contemporary analysis, see Foster (2009)).

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