

# Resistance and reprisals: The Ewamian Frontier Wars 1863–98

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## Abstract

First Nations perspectives on the Frontier Wars are gaining increasing interest in historical, academic, political and social spheres. The arrival of squatters and miners brought momentous change to Ewamian people in Queensland's Gulf savannah. Aboriginal resistance was followed by European reprisals, a pattern seen across Australia. A key aim of our paper is to address the dominant view of how Ewamian contact history is presented – Ewamian people did not passively accept the arrival of Europeans; the historic sources describe a resistance that continued over 35 years in three distinct phases. This paper has two aims. First, we challenge the colonial narrative that describes Ewamian as passive respondents to European colonialism. Second, we reinterpret the colonial narratives to identify three phases of resistance in the Ewamian estate in response to the changing nature of the colonial frontier in Queensland's Gulf savannah.

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## Introduction

When the British Colony of Queensland became independent of New South Wales in 1859 it had a census population of 28,000, with only 6,000 people in Brisbane.<sup>3</sup> Violence accompanied the small numbers of squatters who moved steadily north and west, sometimes defended by the Native Mounted Police. After the massacres of Europeans at Hornet Bank in 1857,<sup>4</sup> and Cullin-la-Ringo in 1861,<sup>5</sup> a pattern of resistance and reprisals was established across the Queensland frontier. The Aboriginal 'Protection Acts', starting in 1898, further cemented the social, economic and geographic dispossession and control of Aboriginal people's lives. Through reinterpretation of the historical sources, we identify three phases of resistance and reprisals on the Ewamian estate. First, the resistance to the arrival of the first European squatters, 1863–70. Second, the battle against Gilberton and the Native Mounted Police, 1867–80s. And the third fought on remote outposts like Abingdon Downs, from 1879.

Growing research interest in the Frontier Wars includes mapping massacre sites,<sup>6</sup> understanding the activities and impacts of the Native Mounted Police<sup>7</sup> and analysing methods of warfare employed by Aboriginal people in Queensland<sup>8</sup> to reveal patterns of Aboriginal resistance and colonial reprisal across the frontier.<sup>9</sup> Reynolds describes the resistance of colonial settlements as the 'forgotten wars', fought far from the eyes of civilised society. Local Aboriginal people learnt quickly that attacks by small, mobile bands were more effective than larger parties for two reasons. Aboriginal weapons were no match against firearms and the squatters, and later the Native Mounted Police (NMP), did not appear to follow recognisable rules of engagement.<sup>10</sup>

Like other parts of Australia, oral histories of the resistance are rare, but there are numerous squatters accounts.<sup>11</sup> Although extensive colonial interpretations of the Ewamian Frontier Wars exist in newspaper reports, interpretive signage and local folklore, the Ewamian story is poorly represented in current research. None of the Ewamian massacres are mapped on the Colonial Frontier Massacre Database<sup>12</sup> nor have the NMP camps on the Ewamian estate been investigated as part of the Frontier Conflict and the Native Mounted Police in Queensland Database.<sup>13</sup> The history of the Ewamian estate remains dominated by white voices.

3 Bottoms, *Conspiracy of Silence*, 13.

4 Elder, *Blood on the Wattle*, 113.

5 Elder, *Blood on the Wattle*, 129.

6 Ryan, *Colonial Frontier Massacre Map*; Richards, *Secret War*.

7 Burke and Wallis, *Frontier Conflict and the Native Mounted Police in Queensland Database*.

8 Kerkhove, *How They Fought*.

9 Ryan, *Colonial Frontier Massacre Map*.

10 Reynolds, *Forgotten War*. See also White and Kerkhove, 'Laws of War', 959–79.

11 White and Kerkhove, 'Laws of War', 959–78.

12 Ryan, *Colonial Frontier Massacre Map*.

13 Burke and Wallis, *Frontier Conflict and the Native Mounted Police in Queensland Database*.

In this paper, we reinterpret historical sources with an Ewamian lens. Our aim here is not to document details of the Ewamian oral histories of the resistance, as few details have survived. Rather, we reassess the European reports from a Ewamian perspective, as that is the main record we have. Our sources are largely based on newspaper records, squatters' diaries and other historical documents. These sources can provide critical evidence of frontier violence,<sup>14</sup> although they must be read with caution as newspapers in particular were used by colonial powers to shape the narrative around frontier violence.<sup>15</sup>

The inspiration for this paper has been the concept of developing a 'Truth-Telling' space by Ewamian Limited as part of the Talaroo Hot Springs Tourism Project. The authors include Ewamian people impacted in different ways by the Ewamian contact histories. Lewis Richards, Jimmy Richards and Brian Bing worked as stockmen on the Ewamian estate and were born under the *Aboriginal Preservation and Protection Act 1939* (Qld). Tania Casey and Megan Mosquito grew up on the Georgetown Reserve, mostly with their grandparents while their parents were working on the stations, and Sharon Prior and Jenny Lacey's families lived on the Georgetown Reserve. Alice Buhrich has worked as Ewamian Limited's archaeologist for over 10 years. During this period, the key concepts contained in this paper were developed in conversations between the authors.

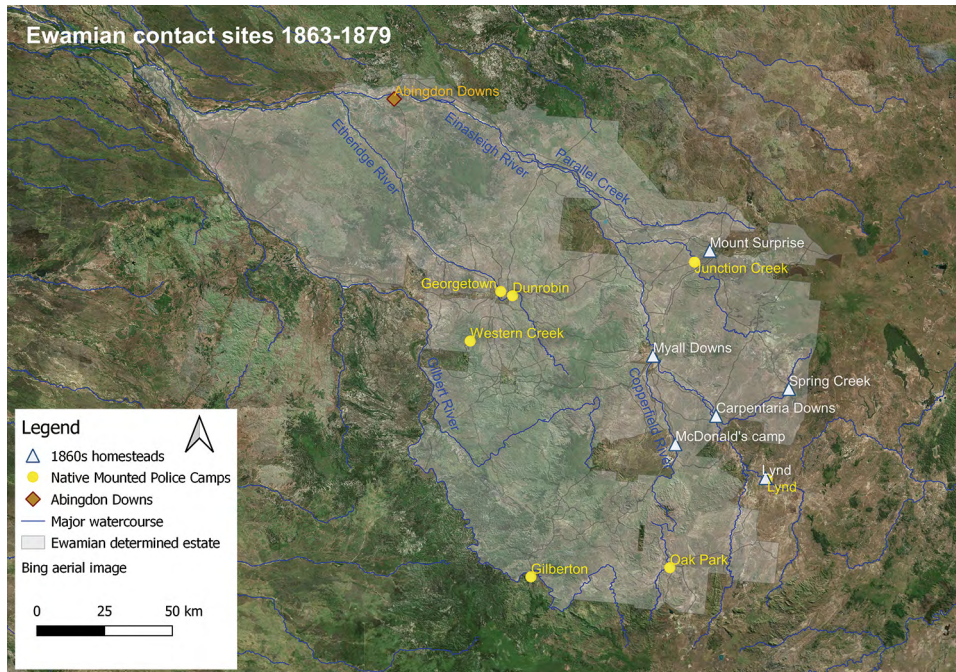
Ewamian people are Wamin speakers whose totem is the wedge-tailed eagle. Ewamian people lived in clan or family groups in what is now known as Australia's tropical Gulf savannah (Figure 1). The Ewamian estate<sup>16</sup> includes the headwaters of the Gilbert, Einasleigh, Etheridge and Copperfield Rivers that flow north-west into the Gulf of Carpentaria with diverse landscapes including basalt plains and lava tubes, grasslands, sandstone ranges and thermal springs. The river systems and lagoons were the primary focus for living prior to the arrival of European settlers; the major river systems were the 'roads and highways' of Ewamian people. The riverine environment provided major food resources including fish, shellfish, crocodiles, water birds and water plants, captured with spears, fine woven nets and stone fish traps.<sup>17</sup> In the dry season, people camped on the waterholes in the large rivers, which provided bountiful fish and bush foods. In the summer months, people moved to the higher ground, to follow the game, and to avoid the flooding rains and mosquitoes.

14 For example, see Burke et al., 'Nervous Nation', 27.

15 Ryan, *Newspaper Evidence*, 826.

16 An area of 28,671 km<sup>2</sup> is determined under the *Native Title Act*.

17 Wegner, *The Etheridge*, 3–4.



**Figure 1: Map of Ewamian estate showing locations from 1863 to 1879.**

Source: QGIS.org (2023). QGIS Geographic Information System, Open Source Geospatial Foundation Project, qgis.org.

## The First Frontier War: The squatters arrive 1863–70

When the North Kennedy district was settled in the early 1860s, it was the northern edge of the Queensland frontier. The closest town at the time was Port Denison (Bowen), established in 1861. The first stations were settled on the Ewamian estate in 1863, J. G. McDonald established Carpentaria Downs on the Copperfield River and Henry Smith set up on what he thought was the Lynd River, following Ludwig Leichhardt's 1841 maps.<sup>18</sup> Years later the squatters discovered the Lynd was in fact nearly 100 miles to the north and the river was renamed Einasleigh.<sup>19</sup> The confusion with the Lynd is a reminder of the difficulties the first squatters had in navigating newly opened districts when very few maps existed and large portions of Queensland remained unexplored.

More squatters arrived on the Ewamian lands in 1864. John MacKinnon set up the 'Lynd' on MacKinnon Creek. Donald McDonald had a camp 16 miles west of the Lynd on the Copperfield River where he ran sheep.<sup>20</sup> The Collins brothers, Charles

18 *Courier* (Brisbane), 'Myall Downs, Lynd River', 30 March 1864, 3.

19 *Northern Herald*, 'From Wilderness to Wealth', 24 September 1938, 37.

20 Yeates, 'Early Settlement', 138.

and Thomas, ran cattle east of the Einasleigh at Spring Creek Station<sup>21</sup> while Joseph Hann had settled at Bluff Downs with his sons, William and Frank.<sup>22</sup> Richardson and his nephew, Yeates, ran sheep and cattle at Myall Downs, the junction of the Copperfield and Lynd/Einasleigh, after taking over a year to walk from Port Jackson (Sydney) to the Gulf watershed with 6,000 sheep.<sup>23</sup> The arrival of the Europeans, with their goods, horses and large flocks of sheep, was the first contact between Ewamian and non-Aboriginal people.

Conditions for the squatters were challenging and the threat of Aboriginal attack was a constant fear. The first squatter to arrive at what became known as Kidston illustrates the dangers of establishing remote pastoral outposts. Donald McDonald set up camp on the Copperfield River with his three children and a flock of sheep in early 1864. A few weeks after arriving, McDonald did not return to camp after tending his sheep. His children, alone in the camp at night, heard cries and shouting nearby and found the dog speared. They raced to MacKinnon's on horseback, 20 miles away, with no tracks to guide them. The few squatters in the district quickly took action. A party was formed, including 'black boy', Davy, who, after inspecting the scene, identified that seven people had chased McDonald along the riverbank before spearing him within 300 yards of his camp.<sup>24</sup> They found McDonald's body with portions of two spears still in the body, in the heart and the hip. Three other spears had been removed. McDonald was buried where they found him. William McDonald's obituary included a description of the events that led to McDonald's death and that the spear that killed him was available to view at the Port Denison Times office<sup>25</sup> before it was taken to Adelaide to become part of the South Australian Museum collection.

A report from Richardson provides detail on the retributions immediately following McDonald's death:

Next day the same party again followed the tracks, and came on three camps, about 50 in all. They took possession of one of the camps, where they found pieces of the great coat and gloves worn by Mr. McDonald at the time of the murder. They burnt about 100 spears, stone tomahawks, and other native weapons found in the camp. The blackfellows saluted the whites with several flights of spears, but without doing any harm. They were dispersed and driven back to Gilbert Range. The blacks appear to have taken advantage of an unlucky omission on the part of the unfortunate gentleman to supply himself with horse and arms on this particular day, contrary to his usual custom.<sup>26</sup>

21 Spring Creek Station was 'sister station' to Rosella Plains Station described by Manning and Babidge in the previous article. Manning and Babidge, 'Undocumented'.

22 *Courier* (Brisbane), Myall Downs Lynd River, 30 March 1864, 3.

23 Yeates, 'Early Settlement', 138.

24 *South Australian Advertiser* (Adelaide), 'Murder of Mr Donald McDonald' by the Blacks, 4 April 1874, 3.

25 William McDonald's obituary, in Hooper, *Angor to Zillmanton*, 63.

26 *South Australian Advertiser* (Adelaide), 'Murder of Mr Donald McDonald by the Blacks', 4 April 1874, 3.

It is likely that Ewamian people had been watching McDonald, as in other parts of Australia, where the locals kept European squatters under quiet surveillance.<sup>27</sup> The sheep had not been taken and nothing in the camp had been touched. They would have known that McDonald was unarmed and that the children were alone at the camp. We assume the main motive for spearing McDonald was to send a message to the other squatters that their presence was not welcome. Leaving the body with spears appears to be a tactic to dissuade the other squatters from settling in their Country.

In 1864, Ezra Firth, rumoured to have taken part in the Cullin-la-Ringo reprisals,<sup>28</sup> brought the first pioneers to Mount Surprise. A plaque with words from Ezra's son, Cook, describes the European version of the first contact between the Firth's and Ewamian people:

Father and others caught horses and went on up to the flat, and here were over 100 (Aborigines) naked and wild. When they saw the horsemen ride up, many of them dropped everything they had in their hands and cleared for the scrub quite close by, others crawled up trees and some hid in the grass. From that day on Father named the place Mount Surprise, and it is known so today. This was about 1864 and father took up about 300 hundred square miles of country and settled here ...<sup>29</sup>

After the Firths 'surprised' the Ewamian camp in 1874, Ezra saw Aboriginal 'campfires' lit up the mountain, which he interpreted as Ewamian people retreating to their camps. But the Ewamian camps were along the river, not on the mountain. Aboriginal tribes across Australia were proficient long-distance communicators and used smoke signals sent from dedicated 'signal sites' to coordinate the resistance against Europeans.<sup>30</sup> If Ewamian people were *hiding* on the mountain, Firth would not have seen the fires, as the Aboriginal people could easily control the visibility of the firelight. More likely, they were sending messages to their neighbours and clansmen, advising them of the arrival, size and behaviour of Firth's party. Kerkhove describes the use of signal sites as an Indigenous communications defence mechanism that could travel hundreds of kilometres to call for alliances in battles, to signal the movement of Native Mounted Police and to report on 'skirmishes'.<sup>31</sup> Being the tallest and largest geographic feature in the area, Mount Surprise provided an excellent signal site that would have a clear line of sight to campsites on the rivers below.

Ewamian people fought back against Firth's takeover of land and the Firths were well prepared for the violence. As was common on the Queensland frontier,<sup>32</sup> the Firths' homestead design included defence fortifications, barred doors and shutters with apertures for rifles.<sup>33</sup> The homestead door was speared more than once when

27 Charola and Meakins, *Yijarni*, 49.

28 Wegner, *Etheridge*.

29 Heritage Park, Georgetown

30 Kerkhove, 'Smoke Signalling Resistance', 3.

31 Kerkhove, 'Smoke Signalling Resistance', 5–6.

32 Burke et al., 'Nervous Nation'.

33 Pike, *Queensland Frontier*, 147.

Ezra was away, and shepherds were often attacked; horses, the most vulnerable of the squatters' animals to spears, had to be watched at all times.<sup>34</sup> Ewamian people used fire to terrorise the Firths. On one occasion, 700 sheep were burnt to death and Ezra Firth reportedly had a very narrow escape himself.<sup>35</sup> Pike reports that the Firths' first homestead was 'burnt down by Aboriginals'.<sup>36</sup>

Across Australia, fire was an important part of the Aboriginal resistance toolkit.<sup>37</sup> Ewamian people and their neighbours used fire to intimidate European explorers, to threaten homesteads and to reduce the feed available for cattle, sheep and horses. In the early years of European occupation, an Ewamian camp at White Springs Creek, on Firth's sheep run, later Talaroo Station, was attacked by a group of pastoralists, probably in retaliation for the constant use of fire against the Firths and their sheep.<sup>38</sup> Many years later, around the 1950s, Aboriginal ringers working on Talaroo would be reminded of this event. The (white) manager of Talaroo would lead a single line of (Aboriginal) workers on horseback, pointing silently with his stockwhip at the skull(s) that had been placed in the branches of the trees.<sup>39</sup> The area became known as Skull Camp but was renamed Memorial Park by the Ewamian community as a way to reclaim the past.

From August to October 1864, Alexander Jardine based himself at Carpentaria Downs while waiting for his brother to arrive from Port Denison with cattle to overland to Cape York. Alexander travelled the district and mapped a route for the first section of the journey. By the time Frank Jardine arrived, Alexander had mapped 18 miles north and named rivers and other geographical features. The Jardines' diaries contain a few Wamin words, suggesting there was some exchange with the local people. This exchange is not recorded in Ewamian oral history. Alexander observed people camping and fishing on the permanent waterholes of the Einasleigh River and its tributaries. On 6 September 1864, Alexander travelled 20 miles along the bed of Parallel Creek to its junction with the Einasleigh. At the first encounter with Ewamian people on 14 September, Alexander's party 'rounded up' a group of Ewamian and 'had a parley, without hostility on either side, each being on the defensive and observing the other'.<sup>40</sup> After this encounter, Alexander suspected Ewamian people were avoiding them.

When their journey to Cape York started in October, the Jardines described Cawana Swamp as the 'best and prettiest camping place they had yet seen'.<sup>41</sup> They found fresh cooking fires at newly abandoned camps because it was also a favoured Ewamian camp. The Jardines noted that,

34 Pike, *Queensland Frontier*, 146.

35 *North Queensland Register*, 15 May 1905, 27.

36 Pike, *Queensland Frontier*, 147.

37 Clark et al., 'Aboriginal Use of Fire as a Weapon', 110.

38 J. Richards, pers. comm., August 2021.

39 B. Bing, pers. comm., July 2012.

40 Jardine's diary, 14 September 1864.

41 Jardine's diary, 15 October 1864.

about 50 blacks, all men, followed the tracks of the party from Cawana Swamp: they were painted, and fully armed, which indicated a disposition for a ‘brush’ ... on being turned upon, however, they thought better of it, and ran away.<sup>42</sup>

Another Aboriginal camp was found near the confluence of Parallel Creek and the Einasleigh River, next to a wide stretch with fine waterholes holding plenty of fish. Presumably the Jardine team again frightened off the people who had been cooking in the camp as they arrived. The camp fire was still burning and contained ‘roasted’ human remains which the Jardines assumed were being prepared for eating or burial rites.<sup>43</sup> The human remains were indeed in the process of being treated for a traditional burial in the nearby sandstone escarpments. Author and Ewamian Elder J. Richards explains that reinternment in paperbark bundles in nearby sandstone escarpments was standard funerary practice for Ewamian people.<sup>44</sup> This practice was also common elsewhere.<sup>45</sup>

Between 1866 and 1870, Queensland suffered an economic and environmental downturn. The price of wool dropped dramatically, and 78 stations were abandoned in the North Kennedy district. MacKinnon’s Lynd is an example of the effects of the downturn. In its early years, the Lynd was reported to have in excess of 10,000 sheep but by 1870 the Lynd had become an outstation of Lyndhurst and was stocked with only Hereford heifers, after Henry Smith’s unsuccessful attempt at Longhorns.<sup>46</sup> A pastoralist described the economic downturn as a reprieve for Aboriginal people in the Kennedy district: ‘The country was deserted to all extents and purposes, and the (local Aboriginal people) had some ten to twelve years spell to recover himself, to revel in the remains of the whiteman’s goods’.<sup>47</sup> This effectively returned the area to First Nations’ control for a decade and would have been viewed as a victory by the Ewamian people.

## The Second Frontier War: Gilberton and the Native Mounted Police 1867–80s

Government geologist Richard Daintree reported finding gold on the Gilbert in 1867. Perhaps deliberately, Daintree did not report threats from Aboriginal attack to be a problem for mineral development, although he did caution prospectors about the lack of reef gold and lack of infrastructure to support mining operations or sustain a large population.<sup>48</sup> Optimistic prospectors flocked to the ‘new northern El Dorado’.<sup>49</sup>

42 Jardine’s diary, 16 October 1864.

43 Jardine’s diary, 19 October 1864.

44 J. Richards, pers. comm.,

45 For example, Thomas, ‘Because It’s Your Country’.

46 *Northern Herald*, ‘From Wilderness to Wealth’, 24 September 1938, 37.

47 Turnbull, ‘Science of Man’, 40.

48 *Rockhampton Bulletin and Central Queensland Advertiser*, ‘Gilbert Gold-Field’, 15 June 1869.

49 Brown, ‘Desertion of Gilberton’, 84.



According to Loos, the government expectation of the Kennedy and Burke pastoral districts was that squatters would be ‘active partners in dispossessing the Aborigines and protecting property’.<sup>50</sup> Newspapers provided contradictory reports and swung wildly between describing the Gilbert goldfield as ‘the Colonies great hope’ to ‘patchy finds that will not sustain a large population’.<sup>51</sup> In July 1869, a Rockhampton newspaper described Gilberton as ‘anything but a desirable place to come at present’,<sup>52</sup> but in November the *Brisbane Courier* reported ‘the whole district for miles around abounds with reefs very rich specimens have been found on the surface in dozens of different places and it is commonly asserted that there never was on any goldfield such a show’.<sup>53</sup> Aboriginal resistance proved a major problem on the Gilbert goldfield. In April 1873, Goldfield Warden Dalrymple reported that 10 miners and travellers had been killed.<sup>54</sup> Miners were expected to be ‘armed, vigilant, cautious, in company with other miners and willing to shoot’ (Figure 2).<sup>55</sup>



**Figure 2: ‘Lynd Copper Mine, Copperfield River’, glass plate by Richard Daintree 1864–71, coloured by Queensland Museum.**

Note the rifles close to hand.

Source: Queensland Museum (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

<sup>50</sup> Loos, *Invasion and Resistance*, 135.

<sup>51</sup> Brown, ‘History of Gilbert River Gold Field’, 6.

<sup>52</sup> *Rockhampton Bulletin and Central Queensland Advertiser*, ‘Gilbert’, July 1869, 26.

<sup>53</sup> *Brisbane Courier*, ‘Gilbert Goldfield’, 6 November 1869, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Loos, *Invasion and Resistance*, 82, 231.

<sup>55</sup> Loos, *Invasion and Resistance*, 203.



**Figure 3: 'Township of Gilberton from Gold Commissioner's Residence', Richard Daintree's glass plate, 1864–71, coloured by Queensland Museum.**

Source: Queensland Museum (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

In its peak years, Gilberton had 13 pubs servicing 300–700 people with a floating population of around 1,000 (Figure 3).<sup>56</sup> Without government support, the Gilberton residents took to building their own hospital, funded by the more successful miners. Yet, of the 155 deaths recorded between 1869 and 1873, only 69 received any medical care before they died, reflecting the difficulties in providing support and infrastructure on the remote goldfield.<sup>57</sup> While the Chinese established a cemetery, where 39 people were buried, Europeans tended to be buried in shallow graves in rude coffins on the side of the closest ridge.<sup>58</sup> Considering the extensive preparation and funerary rites that Ewamian practised, the rudimentary burials by the residents of Gilberton may have seemed the height of savagery.

Unlike later fields such as the Palmer River, Coen and Silver Valley, Ewamian people did not engage with the miners for employment. In correspondence held at the state archives, Gold Commissioner Howard St George describes how he had the approval to employ an 'Aboriginal boy' to look after his horses but reported 'the blacks up here are wild and I have not yet been able to engage one'.<sup>59</sup> Aboriginal attacks

<sup>56</sup> Brown, 'History of Gilbert River Gold Field', 20.

<sup>57</sup> Brown, 'History of Gilbert River Gold Field', 78.

<sup>58</sup> Brown, 'Desertion of Gilberton', 89.

<sup>59</sup> Queensland State Archives QSA WOR/A/45/331/72, in Brown, 'History of Gilbert River Gold Field', 93.

became increasingly organised on the Gilbert goldfield. In the first two years horses were attacked and timber contractors were chased and their tools stolen. Attacks on undefended economic resources were one of the most effective tactics Aboriginal people had in frontier warfare; raids on homesteads were both a form of resistance and a means to replace traditional food gathering.<sup>60</sup>

In June 1871, John Corbett, a lone traveller from Gilberton, was speared, followed by another lone traveller, Daniel Ryan, in August 1872.<sup>61</sup> Corbett had been found dead at Cave Creek the day after 60–70 Aboriginal people were reportedly seen nearby in the sandstone ranges.<sup>62</sup> Single travellers were easy targets in the remote and wild Kennedy district and chosen for the fear instilled in the squatter population. Chinese were present in large numbers on the Gilbert and were targeted because of their lack of rifles (Figure 4). In November 1872, hundreds of Aboriginal warriors attacked a group of 30 Chinese working 6 miles downstream of Gilberton, killing three.<sup>63</sup>



**Figure 4: ‘Queensland Blacks attacking Chinese diggers on the Gilbert River’.**

Source: Original image from the *Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers*, 30 January 1873, 5.

60 Connor, *The Australian Frontier Wars*, 21.

61 Brown, ‘Desertion of Gilberton’, 95, 96.

62 *Evening News* (Sydney), ‘Murders by the Blacks of North Queensland’, 5 July 1871, 3.

63 Loos, *Invasion and Resistance*, 82.

In response to Corbett's death, the NMP killed 17 Aboriginal people.<sup>64</sup> The following year, in 1872, an NMP detachment was posted to nearby Oak Park.<sup>65</sup> In August 1873, an attack on a group of miners left two dead and two injured,<sup>66</sup> indicating an escalation of violence from Ewamian warriors despite the arrival of the NMP. During the 1870s, Oak Park, Gilbert River Telegraph Station, Junction Creek Telegraph Station, Dunrobin (Georgetown), Western Creek and the Lynd were NMP outposts.<sup>67</sup>

On 21 November 1873, 'hundreds' of Aboriginal people attacked the Gilberton township, terrifying the 110 residents. Hooper reported that the Aborigines went door to door, 'systematically working their way into town, killing two people'.<sup>68</sup> After this, all the Gilberton residents made a hasty retreat from the town. As they left, they abandoned valuable machinery such as crushers and burnt many of their goods to prevent Aboriginal people from getting them.<sup>69</sup> Shutting down the town of Gilberton was a major achievement for the Aboriginal resistance and became part of Queensland's folklore.<sup>70</sup>

There are conflicting reasons given for Gilberton's abandonment. While Dalrymple maintained that most Chinese left Gilbert because of the 'impunity with which the blacks rob and murder them',<sup>71</sup> Brown argued that Gilberton's remoteness, harsh environment, the failing economy and limited technical capacity contributed to its decline.<sup>72</sup> Mulligan's discovery of gold on the Palmer River in September 1873 was certainly a factor. The final attack on the township came only two months after the Palmer goldfield was declared and perhaps the miners were ready to move onto the next big find. However, the attacks on Gilberton illustrates that the Ewamian resistance was far from passive.

The Oak Park and Georgetown Native Mounted Police led at least two retributive attacks after Gilberton was abandoned. The *Croydon Mining News* described that 'thirty-five skeletons (were) found on the upper reaches of the Gilbert River', suggesting an entire camp was killed.<sup>73</sup> Oral history provides evidence of Christmas Hill and Mount Hogan massacres, where Brown claimed up to 500 Aboriginal people could have been killed.<sup>74</sup> Massacres were led by Sub-Inspector Armit (1876) and Urquart (1884). Armit, using his military background, repeatedly disrupted

64 *Queensland Times, Ipswich Herald and General Advertiser*, 'Murder of Mr Corbett', 5 August 1871, 4.

65 Hillier, 'Native Police under Scrutiny', 280.

66 Brown, 'Desertion of Gilberton', 96.

67 Heather Burke and Lynley Wallis, 'Digital Map Native Police Camps', 2019, accessed 11 January 2023, nmp.essolutions.com.au.

68 Hooper, *Angkor to Zillmanton*, 59.

69 Loos, *Invasion and Resistance*, 76.

70 Wegner, *Etheridge*, 33.

71 Colonial Secretary Correspondence COL/A183, letter 893 of 1873 and *Qld Votes & Proceedings* 2 (1874) in Richards, *Secret War*, 80.

72 Brown, 'Desertion of Gilberton'.

73 *Croydon Mining News*, 27 August 1904, in Bottoms, *Conspiracy of Silence*, 116.

74 T. Michelmore, resident of Gilberton; see Brown, 'History of Gilbert River Gold Field', 100.

gatherings of Aboriginal people and forced people into the mountains and ranges away from settlements.<sup>75</sup> A reporter from the *Maryborough Chronicle* claimed that the damage being inflicted by Armit by 'keeping them out' was leading to 'the reduction of the tribe to utter misery, through starvation and exposure'.<sup>76</sup> In 1884, Urquart's troopers located a camp in the rough country at the head of the Lynd Falls at Fossilbrook Station, after threats made to the homestead. According to newspaper reports, no one survived.<sup>77</sup> These massacre sites have not been mapped and have not been visited by contemporary Ewamian people. There are reasons for this: the sites are on pastoral leases with limited access, but also Ewamian Elders have chosen not to visit these places as they are sensitive places where the Old People should be left to reside in peace.

By 1881, it appears there was some level of cooperation between Aboriginal people and the miners, who slowly resettled Gilberton. In Georgetown, after complaints by the white residents, a curfew was implemented restricting Aboriginal people's movements after sunset.<sup>78</sup> Ewamian and other Aboriginal people camped at Sandy Creek, across the river from Georgetown, this later became the Georgetown Reserve. In the early 1900s, Aboriginal people were removed from Gilberton because of objections by Gilberton residents about the relationships between miners and Aboriginal women.<sup>79</sup> The tone had moved from fear to protection.

By 1881, the Ewamian resistance had been sustained for over 20 years. This required organised camps, refuge areas and hideouts, located in the hills at Gilberton, Copperfield River, Abingdon Downs and 'The Desert'. Such refuges would have had a set of requirements. The camps would need good vantage points near springs and other resources; weapon production and training for warfare would have taken place in these secret camps.<sup>80</sup> Hideouts would need to provide access to weapons, particularly lancewood for spears and ironwood for spear tips. Rough country would be favoured, especially steep, rocky access difficult for horses, to dissuade the NMP. Hideouts would have had lookouts to see anyone approaching and might include 'ambush sites' from which an attack on an incoming group could be launched. The sandstone hills and mountain ranges surrounding the Gilbert provided all these elements.

Ewamian people would have continued their cultural practices from their hideouts during the Second Ewamian Frontier War, but perhaps in different ways. Three rock art sites featuring stencilled weapons were found on recent cultural heritage surveys, one in the Gilberton Ranges, one in 'The Desert' and another on a remote plateau above the Copperfield River. The 'Gilberton site' consists of a series of fighting

75 *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser*, 29 February 1876, 2.

76 *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser*, 29 February 1876, 2.

77 Bottoms, *Conspiracy of Silence*, 116.

78 Wegner, *Etheridge*, 71.

79 Brown, 'History of Gilbert River Gold Field', 100.

80 L. Richards, pers. comm., June 2019.

boomerangs with handles, used for close-up battle or as a ‘killer’ weapon (Figure 5a).<sup>81</sup> Ewamian Elders suspect panels of small, brightly coloured handprints found in a rough, sandstone area known as ‘The Desert’ may represent the preparation of young Ewamian men for Frontier War conflicts (Figure 5b).<sup>82</sup> The remote Copperfield River site is positioned on a plateau from which there are vantage points of the plains settled by the first squatters. Donald McDonald’s camp on the Copperfield River would have been visible from the Copperfield plateau. Recent surveys on the plateau have located artefacts, trees scarred to make bullroarers, food plants, permanent springs and rock art sites. One art site contains stencils of axes, woomera and spear, a handprint and a solid red anthropomorph (Figure 5c). This is unusual for Ewamian rock art, it is the only recorded site with mainly weapons depicted, and no hand stencils. Locating and identifying Ewamian contact rock art and frontier hideouts remains a significant area of potential research, although these frontier sites may be hard to identify.



**Figure 5(a–c): Rock art possibly illustrating Ewamian resistance to European settlement of the Gulf savanna.**

Source: Photographs by Alice Buhrich, enhancement using DStretch.

## The Third Frontier War: Abingdon Downs from 1879

The remote Abingdon Downs represents the final front of Ewamian resistance. Marmaduke Curr and his brother Montague settled Abingdon Downs in 1879, between the Etheridge and Einasleigh Rivers. Abingdon Downs was, and remains, one of the more remote homesteads on the Ewamian estate. Marmaduke, his wife Mary Ann and their six children travelled for 16 days from Charters Towers to settle at Abingdon Downs. They were well armed for the trip as they had been attacked a few years before by the Gugu Badhun tribe who had had attempted to set the Curr family homestead alight. Montague Curr and a terrified Mrs Curr were barricaded inside, injured, with no access to their ammunition. After the raid, Marmaduke tracked the attackers, shot up the camp and retrieved their stolen goods, along with ‘boomerangs, spears, nulla nullas and fishing nets’ from the camp.<sup>83</sup>

81 L. Richards, pers. comm., June 2021.

82 L. Richards, pers. comm., June 2021.

83 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, ‘C.W.A. Pioneers, Mr and Mrs Marmaduke Curr and Family’, 11 March 1931, 9.

At Abingdon Downs, Marmaduke Curr collected weapons and displayed guns, swords and Aboriginal spears. He deliberately destroyed or stole Aboriginal weapons to gain an advantage in battle. In one encounter, Marmaduke and his son Fred reported,

we spent some hours burning up all their weapons which was the best collection and largest quantity I had ever seen. It must have been a great loss to them.<sup>84</sup>

This suggests that Ewamian were producing weapons specifically for the resistance against the Currs.

The Currs do not report being afraid of Aboriginal attack, even while their cattle, horses and dogs were speared around them. As a teenager, Marmaduke's son Fred would regularly travel for miles on horseback with one 'boy' (Aboriginal station hand) for company.<sup>85</sup> They would be away from home for days, often blocked by or forced to swim the flooded rivers. On one occasion, not able to reach home across the floodwaters, they claimed to have roasted a calf in an Aboriginal earth oven; another time, Fred reportedly found the remains of two horses cooking in earth ovens.<sup>86</sup> Fred took his father back the earth ovens the next day, but, in an example of the theft and economic disruption by resistance fighters, the meat was gone, 'taken into the hideouts in the hills'.<sup>87</sup>

Later in life, Fred Curr recalled his times at Abingdon Downs:

'We thoroughly enjoyed those days of wild and romantic life, with our horses and our gun, swimming flooded rivers, with the danger of being dragged under by undertows or swept under drift wood, and always the danger of being speared by some blackfellow ambushed undercover, so we had to be ready to protect ourselves and keep our powder dry. ... We spent much time making shot and bullets, cleaning up the old muzzle loaders and shooting at marks.'<sup>88</sup>

Another of Marmaduke's sons, Charles, remembered the stealthy warfare tactics Ewamian people employed. He described 'strongholds in the scrub and mountains', warriors who 'were silent in the grass and the water', acting like 'submarines, breathing through straws underwater' and using poisoned spears that caused the horses a long and painful death.<sup>89</sup> These descriptions indicate that the Currs considered themselves in a war with the Ewamian people at Abingdon Downs. Marmaduke's daughter, Alice, calls her brother Fred's historical accounts 'highly romanticised and full of

84 Workers Bush Telegraph, 'The Curr Family in Far North Queensland 1862–1925', accessed 6 September 2022, [workersbushtelegraph.com.au/books/the-curr-family-in-far-north-queensland-1862-1925/](http://workersbushtelegraph.com.au/books/the-curr-family-in-far-north-queensland-1862-1925/).

85 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 'C.W.A. Pioneers', 11 March 1931, 9.

86 Workers Bush Telegraph, 'The Curr Family in Far North Queensland 1862–1925', accessed 12 September 2022, [workersbushtelegraph.com.au/books/the-curr-family-in-far-north-queensland-1862-1925/](http://workersbushtelegraph.com.au/books/the-curr-family-in-far-north-queensland-1862-1925/).

87 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 'C.W.A. Pioneers', 11 March 1931, 9.

88 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 'C.W.A. Pioneers', 11 March 1931, 9.

89 Workers Bush Telegraph, 'The Curr Family in Far North Queensland 1862–1925'.

inaccuracies'.<sup>90</sup> Even if the Currs' reminiscences are not a true record of events, they do provide an important insight into the attitudes of pastoralists on the colonial frontier.

After both Marmaduke and his wife died at Abingdon Downs, the children sold the property and brothers Fred, Charles and Walter spent a year on safari in Africa. On their return, Fred and Charles purchased Rutland Plains on the Mitchell River north of Abingdon Downs. Again the Currs found themselves on the frontier of the expanding Queensland colony. The excerpt below describes one of Fred's methods to prevent Olkola, the local Aboriginal people, from raiding his store at Rutland Plains:

He procured a blackfellows skull from an old grave on a sand ridge (in that locality they bury their dead in sandridges) and placed the skull in a position to grin at any one forcing the store door open. He then prepared a bone from a dead kangaroo, and made it resemble the dreaded small bone taken from a dead black-fellow that is used by them to kill off undesirables. So the imitation bone was wrapped in the orthodox paper bark, and hung up in the store. Then Mr. Curr showed it to them, and explained that if ever they robbed his store again or killed any of his cattle or horses or took wire from his fences he 'would point to the bone,' and surely they would all die, and from then on they went to his neighbours when they wished to do any of these forbidden things.<sup>91</sup>

Later, when a 'wild mob' 'took refuge' on his run, Fred invited them into the store with the skull on display. He had a gramophone playing wild laughter so it appeared the skull was laughing at anyone who entered the store.<sup>92</sup>

## **'Letting in': The Protection Era**

Faced with the terror of Fred Curr and his like on the remote stations, the Ewamian resistance were reconsidering their options for survival. At the same time, squatters running expansive stations were recognising the value of cheap and capable Aboriginal labour. For example, between 1877 and 1900 the longest serving workers of Spring Creek Station and half of Spring Creek's staff were Aboriginal. Some of the Aboriginal staff on Spring Creek were paid.<sup>93</sup> Fair treatment of Aboriginal workers built ongoing trust and respect on some stations.

In 1898, the Queensland *Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* (the Protection Act) was declared. Under the Protection Act, Aboriginal people were forced to work, mostly on stations as domestics or ringers with payment sent to the Protector (usually the local policeman) to control. The Protection Act provided free labour to the squatters. This effectively cemented the position of the Ewamian people on the fringes of the pastoral economy, and the Ewamian people

90 Workers Bush Telegraph, 'The Curr Family in Far North Queensland 1862–1925'.

91 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 'C.W.A. Pioneers', 11 March 1931, 9.

92 *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 'C.W.A. Pioneers', 11 March 1931, 9.

93 Smith, *Cattle in the Blood*, 42.



proved great value to this expanding industry. Staff who had previously been paid could no longer negotiate their own wages, which were now collected by the state and managed through ‘pocket money books’.

For many Ewamian people, life ‘under the Act’ was a continuation or by-product of the earlier conflict. L. Richards, born ‘under the Act’ on Mona Mona Mission, views the Protection Acts as a war of governance against Aboriginal people. In his lifetime, L. Richards has observed that illiterate Aboriginal people were especially vulnerable to losing wages. As a young man, he saw his uncles and other Aboriginal people provide free labour to pastoralists and he saw them being treated differently to non-Indigenous workers. When the police stations in Georgetown, Mount Surprise and Forsayth burnt down not long after the 1967 referendum, the Ewamian people suspected this was a deliberate act to destroy the records describing the poor treatment of Aboriginal people under the Protection Acts.

After the Protection Acts, the effects of dispossession continued to be felt by the Ewamian people. In 1967, a referendum asked Australians if they approved altering the Constitution so laws could be made in respect to Aboriginal people and if Aboriginal people should be counted in the national census. Overall, Australians voted ‘yes’ with a majority of 90.2 per cent; but in the heart of the Ewamian estate nearly two-thirds (62.92 per cent) of Georgetown residents voted ‘no’. This was one of the lowest levels of support for the rights of Aboriginal people in the country.<sup>94</sup> The pattern repeated in the 2023 referendum, when only 9.3 per cent of the Georgetown population voted for First Nations to have a constitutional voice in parliament.<sup>95</sup>

In 2021, the ‘Sandy Creek Mob’ returned to Georgetown Reserve for an oral history project. Two of the authors, part of the Sandy Creek Mob, recalled growing up on Georgetown Reserve with their grandparents and cousins while their parents worked on the surrounding stations. One of their grandmothers had survived the White Springs Creek massacre as a baby and subsequently lived with other survivors at Abingdon Downs before they moved to Sandy Creek. T. Casey describes the Georgetown Reserve as a ‘holding pen for the old people and the young people while the adults worked on the stations as slaves’.<sup>96</sup> M. Mosquito recalls traditional activities, like the grandparents singing in his Olkola language while playing clapsticks. The Mosquito family were the last to leave the Reserve in the 1980s. M. Mosquito remembers the reserve as a place where families could come and go, spend time hunting and fishing and living as part of the Georgetown community. Despite the hardships, the Sandy Creek Mob were inventive and innovative, and today they are important ethnobotanical, genealogical and cultural knowledge-holders. The Sandy Creek Mob remain deeply connected to the reserve and its history.

94 Bennett, ‘1967 Referendum’, 29.

95 Australian Electoral Commission, 2023 Referendum, ‘Divisional Results by Vote Type, Kennedy’, accessed 12 October 2023, [tallyroom.aec.gov.au/ReferendumDivisionResults-29581-167.htm](https://tallyroom.aec.gov.au/ReferendumDivisionResults-29581-167.htm).

96 T. Casey, pers. comm., July 2021.

## Conclusion

Truth-telling requires us to challenge our own perspectives of the past, face injustices and move together towards an equitable future. In August 2022, the Queensland Premier announced plans for a three-year Indigenous Truth Telling and Healing Inquiry as a pathway to a treaty between Queensland First Nations and the Queensland Government,<sup>97</sup> a process already started in Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory. Ewamian people, represented by Ewamian Ltd, are leading their own truth-telling conversations about contact history. They invite visitors to the Talaroo Hot Springs Tourism Project, to hear from Ewamian guides and engage in conversations about Ewamian histories.

Facing the history of the Ewamian Frontier Wars is hard, particularly for the people whose family histories are described here. The contemporary narrative of Ewamian contact history depicts Ewamian people as passive respondents to the arrival of Europeans, but this needed to be challenged. In this paper we have shown that newspaper records, squatter's memoirs and oral histories describe a consistent pattern of Ewamian resistance and European reprisals that lasted over 30 years in different parts of the estate.

Passing on knowledge of historical events, genealogies, plant use and how to read the cultural landscape to younger Ewamian generations is the highest priority for Ewamian Elders. This includes listening to the land for clues about events that have happened in the past, including the conflicts. As L. Richards explained to a group of younger Ewamian people on a cultural heritage survey of the Copperfield plateau in 2023:

The land will always talk to you. Our Old People have been looking after the land for 60,000 years, now it's our turn. Listen to the land, it will tell you.

Sites related to the Frontier Wars are especially sensitive for Ewamian and other First Nations people. While we seek to identify hideouts, rock art and other places related to the Frontier Wars through surveys on country, finding the massacre sites is not a current priority. These places are best left undisturbed, 'that is their last resting place – we should leave it to them'.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Eden Gillespie, 'Queensland to Unveil Indigenous Truth-Telling Inquiry as Part of Path to Treaty', *Guardian* (Australia), 16 August 2022.

<sup>98</sup> L. Richards, June 2022.

## Acknowledgements

AB extends a deep gratitude to her Ewamian friends for their generosity, for teaching her about Ewamian history and heritage and so much more. The authors thank Katie O'Rourke for valuable comments on an early draft and Nikki Winn for information on potential Ewamian contact rock art. Figure 1 was created using the Free and Open Source QGIS. We thank Queensland Museum for use of Figures 2 and 3, used under the Creative Commons licence (the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)). The copyright for Figure 4 has expired. We appreciate the comments from editors Ben Silverstein and Crystal McKinnon, and two anonymous reviewers for improving the manuscript.

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This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 47, 2023*, edited by Crystal McKinnon and Ben Silverstein, published 2024 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/AH.47.2023.05](https://doi.org/10.22459/AH.47.2023.05)