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# The Queensland Native Police and Strategies of Recruitment on the Queensland Frontier, 1849–1901

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## Abstract

Although historians have provided substantial insights into the structure, development and activities of the Queensland Native Mounted Police (NMP), they have rarely focused on the complex and sensitive issue of Aboriginal recruitment. A careful reading of historical records, however, identifies several methods, including coercion, intimidation, kidnapping and inducement, as well as “voluntary” enlistment. It is difficult to identify Aboriginal agency in recruitment processes as the records are entirely one-sided—the voices of the troopers themselves are absent from the archival sources. In this article, we examine the cultural and historical contexts of Aboriginal recruitment—for example, the dire social situations of Aboriginal survivors of the frontier war and the absence of future survival options for the potential recruits. We explore, through the framework of historical trauma, the impacts on vulnerable victims of violence and other devastating effects of colonisation. We conclude that the recruitment of Aboriginal troopers was far from a homogeneous or transparent process and

that the concept of agency with regard to those who can be considered war victims themselves is extremely complex. Unravelling the diverse, conflicting and often controversial meanings of this particular colonial activity remains a challenge to the historical process.

## Introduction

“I have the honour to inform you that I had no difficulty in getting volunteers for the police.”<sup>1</sup>

In his oration delivered to Marist Youth Care in Brisbane in November 2015, Indigenous leader and lawyer Noel Pearson controversially compared the actions of Aboriginal traditional owners seeking government assistance to oppose “One Cape York”—a blanket native title claim over a large swathe of land on Cape York Peninsula—with those of the troopers of the Native Mounted Police (NMP): “The role which black trackers played in the destruction of Aboriginal tribes in Queensland is an unspoken about business. Led by the white sergeants all of these constables played a very destructive role in leading them to the camps, deceiving them”.<sup>2</sup> The participation of Aboriginal people in the NMP in colonial Queensland remains an issue of immense sensitivity and Pearson’s analogy drew an angry response.<sup>3</sup> Although it is usual for

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Walker to Colonial Secretary, *Moreton Bay Courier*, 29 June 1850, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Noel Pearson, Marist Youth Care Oration delivered in Brisbane, 23 November 2015. [http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2015/11/bst\\_20151124\\_0825.mp3](http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2015/11/bst_20151124_0825.mp3).

<sup>3</sup> Shannon Power, “Cape York Traditional Owners Hit Back After Noel Pearson Labels Them White Puppets,” *New Matilda*, 25 November 2015. <https://newmatilda.com/2015/11/25/cape-york-traditional-owners-hit-back-after-noel-pearson-labels-them-white-puppets/>; Jack Wilkie-Jans, “Noel Pearson Taken To Task over Criticism of Elders,” *First Nations Telegraph*, 25 November 2015.

[https://issuu.com/first\\_nations\\_telegraph/docs/noel\\_pearson\\_taken\\_to\\_task\\_over\\_cri](https://issuu.com/first_nations_telegraph/docs/noel_pearson_taken_to_task_over_cri).

historians to skirt the topic, Jonathan Richards, an authority on the history of the Queensland NMP, observed that “the issue of collaboration with the colonisers, and the implications of this for frontier violence, are important topics that need further careful research”.<sup>4</sup>

Such research, however, is difficult to pursue. While much effort has been devoted over the last four decades to illuminating the structure and development of the NMP, as well as the backgrounds and careers of many of its white officers, much less emphasis has been paid to those who constituted the numerical bulk of the force: the Aboriginal men whose role as troopers became the subjugation of other Aboriginal peoples across Queensland.<sup>5</sup> In part, this is because so little of their lives can be known through documentary sources and those fragments that are preserved are partial, particular and often biased. Established in 1849, before the separation of Queensland from NSW, the NMP was a government-financed paramilitary force tasked with protecting “settlers” and subduing Aboriginal resistance, moving continuously north and west as settlement and industry shifted into new niches. Operating until the turn of the twentieth century, the NMP, like other law-enforcement agencies in British colonies, was closely modelled on the Royal Irish Constabulary, which depended on armed detachments drawn from distant areas and quartered in isolation in fortified barracks to police local populations.<sup>6</sup> As a paramilitary unit, however, the NMP’s main focus was the border warfare caused by the sustained Aboriginal

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Richards, *The Secret War: A True History of Queensland’s Native Police* (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 2008), 125.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Richards, “A Question of Necessity: The Native Police in Queensland” (PhD thesis, Griffith University, 2005); Richards, *The Secret War*; Lesley E. Skinner, *Police of the Pastoral Frontier: Native Police 1849–59* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Richards, “A Question of Necessity,” 20, 30, 43, 116–17.

resistance that threatened the lives and livelihoods of settlers, associated infrastructure and other forms of capital investment.<sup>7</sup>

One of the intractable questions surrounding the operation of the NMP—characterised by Henry Reynolds as “the most violent organisation in Australian history”—is why Aboriginal men would join it and become the perpetrators of violence against other Aboriginal people.<sup>8</sup> As one component of an ARC-funded project on the “Archaeology of the Queensland NMP”, this article looks for the first time at Aboriginal recruitment practices within the force. We then explore some of the possible causes and ongoing effects of such events through the framework of historical trauma.

### **Recruitment of Troopers**

One of the infamous euphemisms researchers encounter when reviewing primary sources relating to the activities of the NMP is “dispersal”, which has been shown to refer to the shooting and killing of groups of Aboriginal people.<sup>9</sup> We suggest here that another probable euphemism is the term “recruitment”. This innocuous phrase suggests an orderly process of enlisting willing

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<sup>7</sup> Richards, “A Question of Necessity,” 21–25, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Reynolds, *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 27.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Craven, “Introduction,” in *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right*, ed. Robert Manne (Melbourne: Australian Quarterly Essay, 2001); Ray Evans, Kay Saunders, and Kathryn Cronin, eds., *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination: Race Relations in Colonial Queensland* (Sydney: Australia and New Zealand Book Company, 1975); Robert Ørsted-Jensen, *Frontier History Revisited: Colonial Queensland and the ‘History War’* (Coorparoo: Lux Mundi Publishing, 2011).

people, but deeper investigation suggests that the process was almost certainly not as innocent, straightforward or homogeneous as the term implies.

Although likely to be incomplete, a survey of known recruitment events in the nineteenth century (see table 1) reveals a range of locations from where men were recruited. The emphasis in these data on NSW/Victoria, Wide Bay and southern Queensland recruits reflects the early interest from contemporary newspapers in the workings of the NMP and the location of the “frontier” through the 1850s and 1860s. In total, this amounts to a minimum of 352 men. There are no known descriptions of what took place during any of these recruiting drives and no known accounts from Aboriginal men of how they were recruited. A careful reading between the lines of historical records, however, suggests several possible methods, including coercion, kidnapping, inducement and even highly qualified “voluntary” enlistment.

**[Insert Table 1: Known instances of recruitment from historical records]**

*Coercion, Compulsion and Desertion*

Forcible recruitment into the NMP was probably common. Certainly, several sources point to recruits being entrapped. “Tommy”,<sup>10</sup> from Tchanning Station on the Condamine, was seized for NMP service while on his way back to Ferrett’s station after attending a bora in 1861, probably in line with the system described by the 1861 Select Committee that was taking “black

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<sup>10</sup> Troopers’ names are referred to in this article in quotation marks to indicate this was a name they were known by while in the NMP. Many of these names could be considered derogatory and were often interchangeable. Only some troopers appear to have retained Aboriginal names.

boys by force from the inland stations”.<sup>11</sup> Eighteen years later another “Tommy” was seized from the Lower Herbert for service at Oak Park near Georgetown: “Tommy ... was recruited here [Lower Herbert] about the end of November last [1879], taken away against his will from his wife; I might safely say a prisoner, as the sub-inspector here told me they would have to keep him in irons at night on his way to the Oak Park detachment.”<sup>12</sup> Constable Daniel Whelan was accused of forcible recruiting on the Mitchell River as late as 1903.<sup>13</sup>

The numerous accounts in official records of desertions by individual troopers, and in some cases entire detachments (e.g. see table 1), lend further weight to suggestions that individuals had not joined willingly.<sup>14</sup> Of the 181 troopers named by Skinner, 59 deserted or were discharged, representing 32 per cent of recruits.<sup>15</sup> Describing Aboriginal departures from the NMP as desertion implies both that the force was regarded by the writers as military and that there was some degree of coercion associated with employment. Extra-judicial executions were often recorded; Richards lists ten troopers who were shot for desertion, including “Jacky” and

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<sup>11</sup> John Ferrett to Frederick Wheeler, undated, Records of the Colonial and Home Secretary’s Office 1859–1896, Queensland State Archives (QSA) ID846747, M/film 5602; Report of the Select Committee on the Native Police Force, Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, Queensland, 1861, 87.

<sup>12</sup> James Cassady, “Letter to the Editor,” *Queenslander*, 23 October 1880, 530.

<sup>13</sup> Richards, “A Question of Necessity,” 154.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Richards, “Frederick Wheeler and the Sandgate Native Police Camp,” *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland* 20, no. 3 (2007): 107–22; Richards, *The Secret War*, 161.

<sup>15</sup> Skinner, *Police of the Pastoral Frontier*, 386–95.

“Wallace” in 1863 and “Sam” in 1880.<sup>16</sup> A petition to Governor Bowen prepared by a Brisbane solicitor on behalf of an NMP trooper (known as “Macbeth” while in the force, but also as “Georgey”<sup>17</sup>), provides one of the few accounts in a trooper’s own words:

I entered the native police about two years and a half ago, and continued a trooper until about December last, when the camp sergeant, a white man, having taken from me my gin, and, on my speaking to him about it, having cruelly ill-treated me, I left the force without leave of my officer. ... I ran away because I knew that the Native Police had shot Boys who left the force without leave and I knew a Boy had been shot in the Camp under arrest for desertion and that I was threatened to be shot too.<sup>18</sup>

**[Insert Figure 1: Desertions from the NMP]**

The brutal treatment of troopers is well recorded and conceivably contributed to the high desertion rate.<sup>19</sup> During an 1876 inquiry into the deaths of two troopers, Constable Thomas testified that:

Sub-Inspector Carroll directed me to bring trooper Echo from the dray to which he was handcuffed ... the boy was then handcuffed to a tree ... Mr Carroll ...

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<sup>16</sup> Richards, “A Question of Necessity,” 185.

<sup>17</sup> George P. M. Murray to Frederick W. Carr, undated, QSA ID846768, M/film 5631.

<sup>18</sup> “The Native Police,” *Courier*, 7 May 1863, 3.

<sup>19</sup> On being asked by the 1861 Select Committee why troopers deserted, Frederick Carr cited harsh treatment as the main grounds, claiming “Many desert from disliking their officers.” Report of the Select Committee on the Native Police Force, Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, Queensland, 1861, 133.

brought out two stockwhips ... I struck the trooper twice on the back with the whip. Mr Carroll then flogged him ... until the boy fainted ... I do not know the number of lashes but it was over thirty ... his head was hanging back and his eyes set. Mr Carroll struck him three more times with the whip. I took the key ... to release the boy when Mr Carroll told me to leave him there for two or three hours it would do him good ... about a quarter of an hour afterwards I missed the boy from the tree and never saw him again ... I did not report this matter ... [as I was told] that it was a general occurrence in every Native Police Camp and not to mention the subject anywhere as people would call us tyrants ... I have seen troopers on a former occasion flogged quite as much by Mr Carroll with wire.<sup>20</sup>

### *Inducements*

A relatively common inducement for joining the NMP was offering enlistment as an alternative to criminal prosecution and punishment, although, when set against a prison sentence or worse, such options ran perilously close to coercion. Lieutenant Francis Nicoll, after the Hornet Bank massacre and reprisals, for example, “held out an inducement for the committal of further crimes by recruiting for the Native Police from among the murderers.”<sup>21</sup> This idea had older antecedents connected to recruiting practices among colonial militias, and the system became formalised to some extent in 1878 when the Executive Council approved remission for prison sentences if Aboriginal men joined the NMP.<sup>22</sup> This practice continued throughout the 1880s, although the extent to which it could be regarded as voluntary is problematic, given that

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<sup>20</sup> Evans, Saunders, and Cronin, ed., *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination*, 57.

<sup>21</sup> Skinner, *Police of the Pastoral Frontier*, 302.

<sup>22</sup> Richards, “A Question of Necessity,” 171.

some of the sentences themselves were no doubt highly questionable: “A blackfellow, named Dickey, out in the Mitchell district, was arrested on a charge of murdering his gin. As there was no evidence against him except his admission to the constable who took him, he was discharged. It is stated by the M. and G. Mail, that this amiable aboriginal has been induced to join the Native Police, and will be sent to one of the detachments in the Townsville district.”<sup>23</sup>

John Wilkie, the manager at Daardine Station in 1852, provided an alternative assessment of what he perceived to be the incentives of life in the NMP: “The gay dress—the constant itinerancy—the lazy life—the independence of the elders of the tribe—and last tho’ not least, the ability to make love to a choice of lubras in every tribe they visit, with perfect impunity.”<sup>24</sup>

Such a European gloss was intimately bound up with racialised notions of Aboriginal society, as well as ignorance of complex Aboriginal values and social, territorial and economic structures. In claiming that Aboriginal recruits wished to be part of the NMP, the Europeans claimed no higher motivation than a childish desire for European accoutrements, encoded in various observations that it was the uniforms, guns, boots, horses and buttons that most attracted Aboriginal men.<sup>25</sup> In other contexts in which Aboriginal people preferentially adopted certain elements of European material culture, such as clothing, the argument is usually presented in light of the social standing that such highly visible symbols of European reciprocity brought

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<sup>23</sup> “A Useful Policeman,” *Darling Downs Gazette*, 8 January 1883, 2.

<sup>24</sup> John Wilkie to Henry Hughes, 25 October 1852, State Library of New South Wales, Dixson Library, DOC14.

<sup>25</sup> For example, *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser*, 15 February 1872, 2; *Western Star and Roma Advertiser*, 21 January 1882, 4.

within Aboriginal social networks.<sup>26</sup> In the context of the NMP, however, these signals were not intra-community messages, but overt symbols of European power, influence and control in the identity they projected to others.<sup>27</sup> A connection was certainly noted between clothing and money and continued service in the NMP.<sup>28</sup> For example, the *Moreton Bay Courier* attributed the desertion of three recruits to the fact “they had been for six months kept at drill, without uniforms, saddlery, or arms, and consequently without anything to gratify their feelings of pride, or self respect.”<sup>29</sup> Rather than viewing the accoutrements of the NMP as a shallow indicator of personal satisfaction or appearance it is more likely that such elements functioned as physical expressions of a reciprocal obligation, something that underlaid Aboriginal people’s agreements to labour for Europeans on many frontiers.<sup>30</sup>

### *Voluntary Enlistment*

By far the most difficult category of recruitment to contend with is that of voluntary enlistment. In 1848, Frederick Walker, the first commandant of the NMP before the separation of Queensland from NSW, travelled as far afield as Victoria to find suitable troopers. He

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<sup>26</sup> Grace Karskens, “Red Coat, Blue Jacket, Black Skin: Aboriginal Men and Clothing in Early New South Wales,” *Aboriginal History* 35 (2011): 1–36.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Mackay, “Captors or Captives? The Australian Mounted Police,” in *Body Trade: Captivity, Cannibalism and Colonialism in the Pacific*, ed. Barbara Creed and Jeanette Hoorn (New York: Routledge, 2001), 47–65.

<sup>28</sup> John O’Connell Bligh to Colonial Secretary, 8 October 1862, QSA ID846764, M/film 2512.

<sup>29</sup> “Native Police,” *Moreton Bay Courier*, 29 January 1853, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Broome, “Aboriginal Workers on South-Eastern Frontiers,” *Australian Historical Studies* 26, no. 103 (1994): 209.

intimated that men from these southern regions signed up so willingly that there was in fact an abundance of choice: “I have the honour to inform you that I had no difficulty in getting volunteers for the police; on the contrary, I could have obtained ten times the number, the pick out of eight tribes. In the present force of fourteen, there are men from four tribes, each speaking a different language.”<sup>31</sup> Walker may have been aided in his endeavours by the fact that he had lived and worked in the Murrumbidgee district before being appointed to form the NMP and that at least one, if not more, of his first intake of troopers were men he had known and worked with for many years. Walker, in fact, claimed past personal relationships as a main organising tactic of his original force “having picked my experimental party from among men who for five years had known me well.”<sup>32</sup>

Some level of willingness to join the NMP is also suggested by those cases in which potential recruits were available but not accepted. Francis Nicoll at the Wandai Gumbal NMP camp in 1854 noted, “there is a very nice lad in this neighbourhood who is extremely ambitious of joining the N.P. He is a well-knit, well set up, smart and very intelligent boy; his age about seventeen. He speaks English well, and has applied four or five times to be enlisted. He is at present with Coxon, who gives him a good character. He has a good open countenance, which is a great thing, and, I have no doubt, would make a very active policeman.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Lieutenant Robert Walker claimed to have encountered many potential recruits on the Darling in 1861 but would not accept those whom he considered to be of greater value to European employers: “In obtaining these recruits the rule I invariably followed, was to take men who came voluntarily

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<sup>31</sup> Frederick Walker to Colonial Secretary, *Moreton Bay Courier*, 29 June 1850, 4.

<sup>32</sup> “Native Police,” *Moreton Bay Courier*, 17 July 1852, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Francis Nicoll to Commandant Native Police, 1 March 1854, Native Police Work Darling Downs, Lower Condamine and Maranoa 1849-1857, QSA ID86141, M/film 2433.

and offered themselves as candidates for the force. As many of those men I doubt now would be a loss to those with whom they then resided, I did not consider it right to induce them in any way to join.”<sup>34</sup> The suggestion that there was an abundance of willing recruits continued to be the case in following decades:

A very different work was accomplished on Sunday also, when Captain Brown, Superintendent of the Native Police, enlisted nine blackfellows as members of the Native Force. On Monday, two additional blacks were admitted, making eleven recruits during the week. The selection was made out of a large number of aboriginals, who presented themselves as candidates.<sup>35</sup>

... the most significant sign of the possibility of establishing friendly relations with the tribes is the desire shown in an unmistakable manner, prevalent among the Cape Bedford blacks to join the Native Police force.<sup>36</sup>

The veracity of these one-sided records and the extent to which such service was truly voluntary is unknown. It is certainly true that some troopers remained members of the NMP for long periods. The average span across the 177 troopers with known ranges of service that we have gathered data on was just over four years.<sup>37</sup> Given that no individual trooper staff files are

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<sup>34</sup> Robert George Walker to Commandant Native Police, 16 April 1861, Colonial and Home Secretary's Office 1859–1896, QSA ID846746, M/film 1492.

<sup>35</sup> “Weekly Summary,” *Rockhampton Bulletin*, 1 February 1873, 2.

<sup>36</sup> “Local News,” *Mackay Mercury and South Kennedy Advertiser*, 30 July 1881, 2.

<sup>37</sup> The data are extremely patchy although, in the 1860s, several troopers had allocated numbers analogous to the white officer's badge numbers, suggesting that at least some rudimentary record was kept of enlistment periods and service, albeit one that has not survived to the present.

known to exist, true periods of service for the vast majority of troopers is not known. The longest known serving trooper was in the NMP for twenty-one years (“Jacky Styles”), with several serving for at least thirteen years (e.g. “Paddy”, “Warbregan”, “Geewar” and “Mowbray”). In addition, there are instances of several members from the same family serving concurrently, for example, “Jimmy McCann”, whose brother and father were also in the NMP, and the brothers “Aladdin” and “Paddy”, and “Jacky” and “Wygatta”.<sup>38</sup>

While this does seem to indicate a willingness on the part of some Aboriginal men to join and remain with the NMP, we would qualify this by pointing to the broader structural violence embedded in colonialism that transformed the Aboriginal workforce into one that was “unfree”, regardless of how it appeared on the surface. Historian Bill Thorpe described this as “colonised labour” and argued that it cannot be understood on the same terms as European labour systems.<sup>39</sup> Some patterns in trooper recruitment that contextualise these decisions are explored further below.

### **Patterns in Trooper Recruitment**

The first and most obvious pattern, initiated by Frederick Walker, was the deliberate employment of men from far distant regions of the country; although, given that the NMP were mostly operating beyond the “settled districts”, it may not be a reasonable expectation that they could have been recruited from locals. Nonetheless, this pattern served two purposes. The first

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<sup>38</sup> Frederick Walker to Colonial Secretary, 22 January 1849, NSW Colonial Secretary’s Office Letters relating to Moreton Bay & Queensland 1822–1860, State Library of Queensland A2 series – Reel A2.28, 366.

<sup>39</sup> Bill Thorpe, *Colonial Queensland: Perspectives on a Frontier Society* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996).

was that troopers would have no kin affiliations with the Aboriginal groups they were to encounter.<sup>40</sup> Many historical and contemporary accounts attribute the willingness of individual Aboriginal troopers to participate in the killings and removal of other Aboriginal people from their land as relating to the idea of a deep-seated antipathy to other tribes. It is possible that traditional views of the “other” may have enabled trooper violence against far-flung groups. Certainly, the idea that these young men may have been aware of any kind of pan-Aboriginal solidarity is unlikely, given that the concept of pan-Aboriginality is largely a contemporary concept.<sup>41</sup> As late as 1889, George Murray argued the following for the Herberton NMP:

A strong detachment of Native Mounted Troopers should be stationed somewhere in the neighbourhood ... the Detachment to be placed under an experienced officer who will recruit the Troopers from a far distant district, and keep them entirely away from the Blacks, to have no intercourse with them whatever, but to constantly patrol the district, the mere fact of seeing and knowing that there was a chance of speedy punishment would act as a preventative of crime. ... This Detachment should be in my opinion kept up in addition to what Constable Hanson is at present doing with his two or three black trackers, recruited from the District in which they are worked, who in the event of a disturbance would be utterly useless without assistance.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Richards, “A Question of Necessity,” 166–69.

<sup>41</sup> Julia Martinez, “Problematizing Aboriginal Nationalism,” *Aboriginal History* 21 (1997): 133–47.

<sup>42</sup> Extract from Report of G. P. M. Murray re condition of Blacks at Herberton. Enclosure in Under Colonial Secretary to Commissioner of Police, 20 November 1889, Nigger Creek Police Station 1882–1910, QSA ID290286.

The distinction drawn by Murray between trackers and troopers suggests a mixture of local and extra-local recruitment practices, with only the extra-local deliberately intended to perform violent acts.

The second is that the troopers' presence in what was effectively "foreign" territory made it difficult and dangerous for them to desert.<sup>43</sup> Troopers could be killed by other Aboriginal people, either for transgressing territorial boundaries or for their association with the NMP, as was presumed to have been the case with "Binghi" in 1856, "Edwin" in 1857, "Freddy" in 1879 and "Alroy" in 1884.<sup>44</sup> In trooper "Georgey's" words, "I do not wish to remain in the native police any longer, and I would have left the force when my officer asked me if I wanted to leave, whilst in the Rockhampton district, but I was afraid of being turned into the bush naked amongst blacks who hated my people, and so far from my own tribe."<sup>45</sup>

A pattern of far distant recruitment, however, was neither constant nor consistent. Of those troopers recruited in Queensland between 1852 and 1896 for whom both a place of origin and at least one posting are known, some were posted to camps located within the same general region, even in the earliest period of the NMP's operation. For example, in 1852 both "Luke" and "Owen", who came from the Macintyre River on the border of Queensland and NSW, were

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<sup>43</sup> Richards, "A Question of Necessity," 166–69.

<sup>44</sup> John Murray to Government Resident Moreton Bay, 22 March 1856, Native Police Work Port Curtis 1853 to 1858, QSA ID86137; William McDowall to Colonial Secretary, 13 November 1884, Glendhu NMP Camp, QSA ID290322; *Brisbane Courier*, 12 December 1879, 2; Skinner, *Police of the Pastoral Frontier*, 389.

<sup>45</sup> "The Native Police," *Courier*, 7 May 1863, 3.

posted to Callandoon, located on the Barwon River immediately north of the Macintyre.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, “Albyo” from Rockhampton was posted to the Mackenzie River, less than 200 kilometres away, in 1861.<sup>47</sup> By the 1870s, the posting of troopers close to their area of origin became more commonplace (see table 2) such that, by the 1890s, troopers posted in northern Queensland came from the same immediate area. In this context, it is important to note that in more fertile areas such as Cape York Peninsula, where dense populations created smaller group territories, shifting patterns of group allegiance would have created more or less permeable boundaries across relatively small areas. This means that a trooper from one part of the region may well have been regarded as an outsider in another, even though the physical distance between the two locales may have been relatively short.

**[Insert Table 2: Areas of origin for troopers recruited into the NMP]**

Certain geographic patterns are also notable, particularly the repeated recruitment of men from the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers in NSW/Victoria, and Maryborough/Wide Bay in Queensland (see tables 1 and 2). Much of the discourse around these choices carried echoes of nineteenth-century martial race theory, linked to broader British colonial and imperial ideologies

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<sup>46</sup> Francis Nicoll to George Fulford, 15 May 1854, Papers re Work of Native Police in Darling Downs, Lower Condamine and Maranoa Districts, Wondai Gumbal 1849 to 1857, QSA ID86141.

<sup>47</sup> George P. M. Murray to John O’Connell Bligh, 31 March 1862, enclosure in letter 62/2123, Colonial and Home Secretary’s Office 1859–1896, QSA ID846762, M/film 5607.

of masculinity and the racialisation of soldiering that this promoted.<sup>48</sup> In 1869, Robert Walker, for example, reported “that the Darling blacks, although pretty numerous ... are quite unfit for troopers. The residents on that river say that they are the same all the way down; but that when the Murray is reached, a different and very superior race is met with. The latter river (from Swan Hill downwards) I was informed by those who know the country well, could supply a considerable number of fine recruits.”<sup>49</sup> Often based on personal characteristics such as loyalty and perceived “manliness”, certain individual traits became generalised to entire groups.<sup>50</sup> Troopers from the Edward and Murrumbidgee Rivers, for example, were described as follows by the editor of the *Darling Downs Gazette and General Advertiser*:

[They were] in form and gait as fine fellows as would be picked up by a recruiting sergeant in an English county. They are from 5 feet 10 inches to 6 feet in height, with manly intelligent countenance, and like many of their race bear beneath their sable hue singular resemblances to the peculiarities of different European races; one being without difficulty distinguished by his likeness to a Spaniard, another resembling one of a Portuguese, another bearing much resemblance to a British officer well-known in Sydney .... in the readiness with which they learn the English language and acquire habits of discipline, they show capacities which might be developed in a way that would render

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<sup>48</sup> Gavin Rand and Kim A. Wagner, “Recruiting the ‘Martial Races’: Identities and Military Service in Colonial India,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 46 (2012): 232–54.

<sup>49</sup> Robert G. Walker to Commandant Native Police, 16 April 1861, Colonial and Home Secretary’s Office 1859–1896, QSA ID846746, M/film 1492.

<sup>50</sup> Rand and Wagner, “Recruiting the ‘Martial Races,” 243.

them useful to the world, and so give them a place of credit and reward among their civilised brethren.<sup>51</sup>

Skills germane to the requirements of the NMP were particularly valued, especially bushcraft: “The black troopers are ... selected from the semi-civilised tribes most renowned for pluck and tracking prowess—the Brisbane River, Dawson, Burnett, Wide Bay, Frazer Island, and Burdekin supplying the chief proportion. Some of these would track a mosquito over a stone wall.”<sup>52</sup>

In the context of the settlement process, the term “semi-civilised” implies the disruption of traditional lifestyles and a rearrangement in their wake to produce some degree of conformity with European ideals of “appropriate” behaviour and roles for Aboriginal people. In the context of NMP recruitment, this suggests that familiarity and even sympathy with European perspectives and attitudes may have been a key underlying influence. W. R. O. Hill, a sub-inspector in the NMP in the 1860s, claimed that troopers “were picked mostly from young aboriginals, who had been partially educated by the missionaries.”<sup>53</sup> Early German missionaries had certainly been present on the Brisbane River from the late 1830s and the Catholic church on Stradbroke Island in 1843,<sup>54</sup> but a cessation of missionary activity in the 1850s prevented further

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<sup>51</sup> “Prorogation of Parliament,” *Darling Downs Gazette and General Advertiser*, 16 September 1865, 3.

<sup>52</sup> “Reminiscences of the Native Mounted Police of Queensland,” *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 15 March 1879, 31.

<sup>53</sup> William, R. O. Hill, “Escort of Native Troopers,” *Daily Mail*, 12 January 1923, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Catherine Langbridge, Robert Sloan, and Regina Ganter, “Zion Hill Mission (1838–1848),” in *German Missionaries in Australia—a Web-directory of Intercultural Encounters*, ed. Regina

expansion until 1866, when the Bethesda mission was established on the Albert River, followed by Somerset in 1867.<sup>55</sup> It is possible that troopers were drawn from these hybrid environments, although there are no clear matches between known recruitment events and these locations (see table 1). If true, this mirrored the system used by the Victorian NMP, who took young men from government or mission schools.<sup>56</sup>

Longstanding connections with particular settler families were probably a more relevant factor. Both “Robin Hood” (whose period of service in the NMP spanned approximately 1848–1861) and “Tahiti” (1849–1857) had known and worked with Frederick Walker long before either they or Walker joined the NMP,<sup>57</sup> Walker having known Tahiti since the latter was ten years old.<sup>58</sup> Likewise “Sambo” had worked for Wentworth D’Arcy Uhr before enlisting and, as a consequence, Uhr petitioned to have him released when he himself resigned: “as I brought nine troopers in the force with me, may I be allowed to get (Trooper Sambo 100) who I had for years before I joined the Police Force.”<sup>59</sup> William Landsborough noted that two troopers who accompanied him to Burketown in 1866 were, “before they enlisted, servants to my brothers

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Ganter ([www.griffith.edu.au/missionaries](http://www.griffith.edu.au/missionaries), 2016); Regina Ganter, “The Stradbroke Island Mission (1843–1847),” in *German Missionaries in Australia*.

<sup>55</sup> Regina Ganter and Lilia Vassilief, “Bethesda Mission (1866–1881),” in *German Missionaries in Australia*.

<sup>56</sup> Marie Hansen Fels, *Good Men and True: The Aboriginal Police of the Port Phillip District 1837–1853* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988).

<sup>57</sup> Edward, Morey, “Reminiscences of a Pioneer in New South Wales,” *Sydney Mail, New South Wales Advertiser*, 4 December 1907, 1443.

<sup>58</sup> “The Murder of a Black at Hornet Bank,” *Moreton Bay Courier*, 4 August 1858, 2.

<sup>59</sup> Wentworth D’Arcy Uhr to David Thompson Seymour, 29 March 1868.

[James and John, with pastoral interests in Wide Bay and Port Curtis], and have been with them as such from childhood.”<sup>60</sup> Many of these men were young, possibly even boys (Tahiti, for example, was fifteen when he joined the NMP), although the average age of troopers in our database—where this can be known—is twenty-five. Not only were young men the demographic most in need of controlling,<sup>61</sup> but many of those recruited to the NMP may have been raised from childhood within European households, since the kidnapping of Aboriginal children was a standard feature of the Queensland frontier, much of it conducted directly by the NMP.<sup>62</sup> Such children might be captured in the course of NMP attacks or settler reprisals, and after their parents and family had been killed. For example, “Jemmy”, a trooper who accompanied William Landsborough in his search for Burke and Wills in 1861, was noted by George Bourne, second-in-command of the expedition, as being a “native of Deniliquin, New South Wales, his mother and father having been shot by whites, he was taken to Brisbane and placed in the police, to which force he still belongs.”<sup>63</sup> It would have been very difficult for such victims of the frontier war, having been brought up from childhood in captivity and servitude to the police and others, to have resisted developing a reliance on, if not a level of allegiance to, European values and systems.

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<sup>60</sup> “The Gulf Country,” *Brisbane Courier*, 6 November 1866, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Amanda Nettelbeck, “‘On the Side of Law and Order’: Indigenous Aides to the Mounted Police on the Settler Frontiers of Australia and Canada,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 15, no. 2 (2014): np.

<sup>62</sup> Shirleene Robinson, “The Unregulated Employment of Aboriginal Children in Queensland, 1842–1902,” *Labour History* 82 (2002): 1–15.

<sup>63</sup> George Bourne’s journal, 10 February 1862,

[http://www.burkeandwills.net.au/Journals/Bournes\\_Journal/Bourne\\_February\\_1862.htm](http://www.burkeandwills.net.au/Journals/Bournes_Journal/Bourne_February_1862.htm).

Chain recruitment seems to have been another longstanding tactic by which serving Aboriginal troopers were used to enlist new recruits. White officers often took seasoned troopers with them—both “Orlando” and “Carbine”, for example, were singled out by Charles Hamilton Phibbs and George Murray respectively as being essential to their success in recruiting.<sup>64</sup> As distinct from white coercion through violence, such tactics must have depended on some form of Aboriginal assurance. The promises senior troopers made or the assurances they gave remain unknown, but their role in perpetuating the NMP cannot be underestimated. However, not all such attempts were met with success, suggesting a level of resistance towards their actions and a rejection of their presence.<sup>65</sup>

### **Entrapped, Recruited or Volunteered?**

While distinctive within the context of Australia, the NMP were part of wider international patterns of policing that separated conquest and control from the provision of law and order. In those locales where establishing and maintaining political control were essential (for example, British occupied Ireland and the colonies of the New World), armed paramilitary forces were constituted to subdue local populations, especially Indigenous ones. Within white, settled communities, however, policing did not rely on arms and was largely civilian in nature.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> John O’Connell Bligh to Edric Morisset, 31 May 1861, enclosure in letter 61/1492, QSA ID846746; G. P. M. Murray to John O’Connell Bligh, 31 August 1862, QSA ID846746.

<sup>65</sup> “Domestic Intelligence,” *Moreton Bay Courier*, 21 November 1857, 2.

<sup>66</sup> David M. Anderson and David Killingray, “Consent, Coercion and Colonial Control: Policing the Empire, 1830–1940,” in *Policing the Empire. Government, Authority and Control, 1830–1940*, ed. David M. Anderson and David Killingray (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 3–4.

Paramilitary forms of policing, especially in the colonies (given the extremes of distance over which detachments had to patrol and economic restrictions that constrained the provision of adequate facilities), commonly relied on recruiting cheap Indigenous labour and exploiting internal rivalries, power imbalances and traditional skills and knowledge for the benefit of Empire.<sup>67</sup> In this context, several researchers have pointed to the conundrum represented by the recruitment of Indigenous people by colonial powers for such military policing purposes.<sup>68</sup> A closer consideration of recruitment to the NMP therefore has wider resonance beyond the context of Queensland or, indeed, Australia.

Already devastated, and disenfranchised and disadvantaged by the very power structure that sought to use them to maintain its own further expansion, the motives of those who entered the Queensland NMP are neither homogeneous nor easily explicable. It is clear that the participation of Aboriginal police in frontier conflict in Queensland is complex and cannot comfortably be generalised. While some may have seen opportunity in “volunteering”, it is clear that many others were directly or indirectly coerced. Moreover, recruitment often took place in the settled areas where European incursion had already resulted in the destruction of traditional Aboriginal lifeways, so that, regardless of their personal histories, the Aboriginal troopers who

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<sup>67</sup> Mark Finnane, “The Varieties of Policing: Colonial Queensland, 1860–1900,” in *Policing the Empire. Government, Authority and Control*, 33–51.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Keith L. Camacho, “The Politics of Indigenous Collaboration: The Role of Chamorro Interpreters in Japan’s Pacific Empire, 1914–45,” *The Journal of Pacific History* 43, no. 2 (2008): 207–22; Peter McLaughlin, “Victims as Defenders: African Troops in the Rhodesian Defence System 1890–1980,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 2, no. 2 (1991): 240–75; K. I. Watson, “African Sepoys? The Black Police on the Eastern Cape Frontier: 1835–1850,” *Kleio* 28, no 1 (1996): 62–78.

constituted the NMP were also the victims of the collective trauma resulting from the destruction of traditional societies that the NMP engendered.

One of the few studies that has directly addressed individual motives for enlisting in the NMP is the work of Fels on the Victorian corps formed in Port Phillip Bay in 1837. Fels concluded that individuals were motivated by the desire for mutual cooperation, indicating a positive Aboriginal choice, and that they kept the peace rather than upholding the law: “Joining the Native Police Corps is best seen as a strategy in the direction of sharing power and authority ... Besides the material things that police ... would get, an opportunity was put before them of becoming men of standing within their transformed world.”<sup>69</sup> Nettelbeck has argued similarly that increasing destitution may have been one of the key motivators for Indigenous people to join colonial police forces, and noted the way in which positions within the police could be used by recruits to alter customary roles and relationships and “extend their influence or aspirations within their own cultural and political networks.”<sup>70</sup> In the context of the employment of “Kaffir police” on the eastern Cape frontier in South Africa, Watson pointed to the inadequacy of “policies aimed simply at alienating individuals from their traditional societies ... as instruments for co-opting those persons into the service of white colonial society. For the loyalty of those ‘co-opted’ individuals to be truly dependable, they needed to be assured that colonial society offered them benefits that were not obtainable in their own.”<sup>71</sup>

One way to consider the co-optation of NMP troopers is through the lens of historical trauma—the negative emotional, psychological and social consequences resulting from colonisation and the wider, highly racialised structures of colonialism. Undoubtedly the trauma

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<sup>69</sup> Fels, *Good Men and True*, 87.

<sup>70</sup> Nettelbeck, “‘On the Side of Law and Order’,” np.

<sup>71</sup> Watson, “African Sepoys?,” 77–78.

of the events experienced as Europeans pushed further into traditional Aboriginal lands had a lasting effect on how Aboriginal people viewed the future. It is highly likely that recruitment into the NMP was enhanced by the breakdown of traditional society in parts of Queensland that saw young men in a liminal state, destitute and largely unmoored from their former lives and yet utterly unable to participate on equal terms in white society. Their powerlessness was not only manifested in their dispossession, poverty and enslavement but also through the violent treatment of their mothers, wives and daughters at the hands of Europeans. It is highly likely that the prospect of at least a relative degree of empowerment (including new sociopolitical opportunities that arose to challenge traditional power structures), steady rations, access to horses, guns and European goods, and the safety and protection afforded them as troopers may have been initially attractive to some of these traumatised individuals.

The consequences of this for troopers at the time, let alone their descendants and the descendants of their victims, are both multi-layered and complex. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, troopers have come to be seen as “collaborators”, tying into the emotional layers of the term as it was employed in occupied Europe during World War II.<sup>72</sup> This presupposes both conscious cooperation with a clearly recognised national enemy and an active working against one’s own people, but when applied to the nineteenth century before the modern construction of pan-Aboriginality, such a construction is much less secure. The notion of agency that developed out of the constructivist turn in the humanities and social sciences in the 1980s and 1990s has also played a role in how troopers are conceptualised in the present. Certain perspectives on agency can present it as something that is inherently positive (agency as empowerment) and,

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<sup>72</sup> McLaughlin, “Victims as Defenders”; McLaughlin, “Collaborators, Mercenaries or Patriots? The Problem of African Troops in Southern Rhodesia During the First and Second World War,” *Zimbabwean History* 10 (1979): 240–75.

when considered in terms of unequal power structures, as something tied quite closely to resistance.<sup>73</sup> Agency tied to the active destruction of other people is much more difficult to contemplate. Instead, McLaughlin has argued that, rather than locking debate into the binary opposites of resistance or collaboration, we need to stretch our understanding to encompass at least some grasp of these people as “flesh-and-blood humans adjusting to changing political, social and economic conditions with limited foresight at their disposal.”<sup>74</sup> Camacho urged us to “explore human ambiguities and ambivalences”, since these are the only way to “shed light on the conflicting, multiple and sometimes complementary modes of Indigenous agency.”<sup>75</sup> In this context, the concept of agency is extremely complex; it can be both positive and negative, constructive and destructive, murky and clear. Cole has previously concluded that the NMP was not monolithic, but a flawed, troubled and fragmented organisation wracked by internal conflict, desertion and rebellion.<sup>76</sup> The extent to which individual troopers, either alone or in groups, accepted, accommodated, ignored, resisted or protested their service within the NMP is an indicator of the multiplicity of motivations animating different people’s choices.

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<sup>73</sup> Jennifer Dornan, “Agency and Archaeology: Past, Present and Future Directions,” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 9, no. 4 (2002): 303–29; Laura M. Ahearn, “Language and Agency,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (2001): 109–37.

<sup>74</sup> McLaughlin, “Collaborators, Mercenaries or Patriots?,” 13.

<sup>75</sup> Camacho, “The Politics of Indigenous Collaboration,” 207–8.

<sup>76</sup> Noelene Cole, “Battle Camp to Boralga: A Local Study of Colonial War on Cape York Peninsula 1873–1894,” *Aboriginal History* 28 (2004): 156–89; Noelene Cole, “‘Rock Paintings are Stories’: Rock Art and Ethnography in the Laura (Quinkan) Region, Cape York Peninsula,” *Rock Art Research* 28, no. 1 (2011): 107–16.

We would also argue that any such agency on the part of individuals has to be heavily qualified by the traumatic events of their recent experiences, as well as the limited, and in many ways heavily controlled, range of choices—let alone benefits—they were faced with in their “transformed world”. Survival was, perhaps, the ultimate inducement and is a powerful motivator regarding the decisions individuals make that may defy societal and cultural norms, especially if these have been effectively severed or severely weakened. Captured Aboriginal children may have had little knowledge of their options other than subaltern relations with Europeans and, as orphans of earlier frontier wars, their assumed allegiance to white systems of power is tangled with histories of violent trauma. For others who became part of the NMP, many of the systems created to manage troopers were attempts to stifle any independence by controlling various aspects of their lives. This included their daily activities through the inculcation of military discipline, preventing desertion through either inducement or force, and restricting access to guns and weaponry. More fundamentally, it also included attempts to control their identity via naming practices that were generic, derogatory and often purely for the convenience of European memory and diction. The use of diminutive English names (e.g. Jimmy instead of James, or Johnny instead of John), names commemorating mythical or real historical figures (e.g. Hector, Jupiter, Hannibal, Pompey, Napoleon or Cato) and names such as Sambo and Jim Crow connect European attitudes to troopers directly to older legacies of Afro-American slavery and fostered the practice of thinking of them as inferior.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Trevor Burnhard, “Slave Naming Patterns: Onomastics and the Taxonomy of Race in Eighteenth-century Jamaica,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31, no. 3 (2001): 325–346; Jerome S. Handler and JoAnn Jacoby, “Slave Names and Naming in Barbados, 1659–1839,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (1996): 699.

For ex-troopers, facing the legacy of their choices may have been a lifelong endeavour, particularly given the extent to which a belief in spirits and ghosts impacted upon Aboriginal social lives.<sup>78</sup> How they negotiated their post-NMP lives can only be guessed at, although the personal, social and political consequences of their actions must have been as varied, heterogeneous and complex as their reasons for entering. For example, two weeks before his death in 1883 in Roma, trooper “Tiger”, who hailed from Wide Bay, expressed a desire to “go down to the black’s camp, and remain there.” His wish triggered considerable perplexity on the part of an observer, who noted, “There is something very inexplicable in the desire of Tiger, after a life spent amongst whites, and very often in hounding down his own countrymen, desiring to die amongst them at last. Old associations, traditions, and memories, appear to have come back to him with startling force towards the end.”<sup>79</sup> Despite the claims of white officers that they “had no difficulty in getting volunteers for the police”, the choices and decisions made by troopers, let alone their motivations, remain an enigma for researchers. Unravelling their diverse, conflicting, contentious and often controversial elements is an ongoing challenge for the historical process.

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<sup>78</sup> Philip Clarke, “Indigenous Spirit and Ghost Folklore of ‘Settled’ Australia,” *Folklore* 118, no. 2 (2007): 141–61.

<sup>79</sup> “Strange Death of a Native Trooper,” *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, 27 March 1883, 3.