

Mapping Colonial Massacre sites in NSW – a spatial truth telling

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Key Words: First-Nations, reconciliation, massacre, mapping, cadastre

I acknowledge and pay respect to the traditional owners and custodians of lands throughout Australia and through my research, am committed to supporting truth-telling to advance reconciliation.

Using air photo interpretation techniques, I compare the mapping on the University of Newcastle colonial massacres website (*University of Newcastle Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia 1788 - 1930*) with the NSW *Spatial Information Exchange (SIX)* mapping website to identify significant massacre sites in NSW and position them on the cadastre.

My objective is not to embarrass or antagonise those who might own or live near these sites - after all, the current owners should not be blamed for past wrongs - but to highlight the truth behind our colonial history. We need to encourage truth telling by highlighting the issue of colonial massacres of First Nations people in NSW between 1800 and 1850 in particular.

Of the approximately 70 massacre sites in NSW only a couple have been accurately mapped and only one (to my knowledge) has been fully memorialised with details of the tragic event.

One site in particular is of relevance to surveyors. Surveyor General Major Thomas Mitchell, a prominent government bureaucrat, killed a group of First Nations people in 1836 on the site he called 'Mt Dispersion' on the NSW side of the Murray River in far south west NSW. His use of the euphemism 'dispersion' was widely copied by others during the tragic slaughter of First Nations people during the 'frontier wars' from the 1820s to the early 20th century. Mitchell received only a mild rebuke from the authorities and never apologised for the wrong he committed.

It is important to tell these stories as part of the truth-telling that is required if reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is to be achieved.

We place memorials or plaques on heritage buildings and convict sites. I propose that we mark some of these tragic colonial massacre sites in a similar way, to acknowledge the darker aspects of Australia's colonial history as a step towards reconciliation.

Sommaire

En utilisant des techniques d'interprétation de photographies aériennes, je compare la cartographie sur le site Web des massacres coloniaux de l'Université de Newcastle (*University of Newcastle Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia 1788–1930*) avec le site Web de cartographie de Nouvelle-Galles du Sud *Spatial Information Exchange (SIX)*, pour identifier les sites de massacres importants en Nouvelle-Galles du Sud et les positionner sur le cadastre.

Mon objectif n'est pas d'embarrasser ou de contrarier ceux qui pourraient posséder ou vivre à proximité de ces sites. En effet, les propriétaires actuels ne devraient pas être tenus pour responsables des torts passés. Je veux mettre en lumière la vérité qui se cache derrière notre histoire coloniale. Nous devons encourager la révélation de la vérité en mettant en lumière la question des massacres coloniaux des aborigènes en Nouvelle-Galles du Sud entre 1800 et 1850 en particulier.

Parmi les quelque 70 sites de massacres en Nouvelle-Galles du Sud, seuls quelques-uns ont été cartographiés avec précision, et un seul (à ma connaissance) a été entièrement commémoré avec les détails de l'événement tragique.

Il est important de raconter ces histoires dans le cadre de la révélation de la vérité qui est nécessaire si l'on veut parvenir à une réconciliation entre les Australiens aborigènes et non aborigènes.

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Acknowledgment

I acknowledge and pay respect to the traditional owners and custodians of lands throughout Australia, particularly those of the Awabakal people, where I live and undertook this research. Through my research, I am committed to supporting truth-telling to advance reconciliation in Australia. As a non-Indigenous Australian, I encourage readers to consider my research in the context of the First Nations voices, organisations and research in their own communities and Australia more broadly.

Background

The University of Newcastle Massacre map (*University of Newcastle Colonial Frontier Massacres 1788 to 1930*) (<https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php>) details approximately 400 massacre sites in Australia including the associated historical and archival sources, with approximately 70 sites in NSW alone. Each massacre site is identified on a broad scale air photo map by a yellow dot. The map shows some towns but does not include any cadastral details, road names, mountain or river names or other identifying spatial data.

Clicking the relevant yellow dot immediately takes the reader to the associated background data, i.e. the source archival documents which detail the massacre.

My objective is to identify a pathway to the identification of these sites so that they can be easily located and, possibly in the future, have a memorial or plaque erected on, or close to, each site to record the tragedy for all Australians, as part of truth-telling and a step to reconciliation.

In reality most Australians are unaware of the colonial wars that took place during the European settlement of Australia. It is important to recognise that massacres were part of the frontier wars which began in 1788 with the arrival of the British and spread gradually throughout the continent until the early 20th century. The last recorded massacre was in the 1930s in the Northern Territory.

Euphemisms used to hide the massacres

While some massacres were widely publicised (The Myall Creek massacres being the best known) in most cases a code of silence was imposed in colonial communities in the immediate aftermath of a massacre. Frontier massacres were only referred to indirectly. According to *The Queenslander* 1st May 1880, the bush slang word ‘dispersal’ was often used as a convenient euphemism for ‘wholesale massacre’. Other euphemisms such as ‘clear the area’, ‘pacify’, ‘teach a lesson’ or ‘fell upon’ were also used.

While there are approximately 70 massacre sites in NSW, only 6 are described below. Three are in the Hunter Valley near Newcastle, an area I know well, while the other three are spread across the state.

The three Hunter Valley sites are helpful in illustrating the value of the UoN massacre map while the remaining three are particularly significant for the stories they tell.

Methodology

I compare the UoN massacre map with the NSW Government Spatial Information eXchange mapping website known as SIX maps (www.sixmaps.gov.au).

Using air photo interpretation including vegetation, roads, water ways and other features, one can identify and position the massacres sites on the cadastre. It is important to understand the limitations of the UoN massacre maps. Whilst the source documentation is accessible, on the public record and beyond reasonable doubt, the exact location of the massacre is usually imprecise. Care must be exercised when using this information, as the exact location of the massacre may never be known. It is known that some massacres occurred over a wide area, sometimes over an extended period of time and were not confined to one specific location.

My intention is not to embarrass or identify the owners of these sites or those who live nearby – they are not to blame for the massacre – but it is important to tell these stories as part of the necessary truth telling required, if we are to achieve genuine reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Case studies

1. Wonnarua Country: Glennies Creek, Hunter Valley - 1826

The massacre of approximately 18 members of the Wonnarua people on 1st September 1826. The attackers were a group of Government officials, mounted police and Aboriginal guides as a reprisal for the killing of two convict workers a few days previously by a group of Wonnarua people.

The site is on the north side of Castle Rock Road approximately 12 kms west of Aberdeen on the New England Hwy, approximately 120kms west of Newcastle.

2. Wonnarua Country: Paterson River, Hunter Valley - 1827

The massacre of approximately 12 members of the Wonnarua people over three days in February 1827. The attack by a group colonists was in reprisal for the killing of a shepherd by a member of the Wonnarua people, who had killed a Wonnarua dog.

This site is on the north side of McClymonds Swamp Road, approximately 12kms north east of Maitland. This site is particularly interesting for me on a personal level as some years before I began my research into this matter I was involved in a development proposal on this site. Little did I know.

3. Worimi Country: Black Camp Creek (Spring Gully Ck), Hunter Valley - 1841

The massacre of approximately 20 members of the Worimi people over a 12 month period in 1841. The massacre was led by a group of mounted police in reprisal for the killing of two stockman from the Walleroba Station on the Williams River.

The site is 500m east of the intersection of Coxs Creek Road and Wallaringa Road, approximately 8 kms south west of Dungog and about 50kms north of Newcastle.

4. Wirayaraay Country: Myall Creek, New England district - 1838

The massacre of approximately 28 members of the Wirayaraay people on 10th June 1838. The attackers were 12 colonial horsemen who returned the next day and burned the bodies.

This massacre is unique because it is the only massacre where the perpetrators were tried and brought to justice. Seven of the attackers were hanged in December 1838.

The site is very well memorialised and, beginning in 2000, the massacre is acknowledged every June in a public ceremony, in a gesture of reconciliation.

The site is 40kms south west of Inverell, approximately 350kms from Newcastle.

5. Kureinji Country: Mount Dispersion, Riverina - 1836

This massacre site is of particular interest to surveyors. At least 7 and possibly up to 30 members of the Kureinji people were murdered by Surveyor General Major Thomas Mitchell who was leading an expedition of exploration along the Murray River in 1836. Mitchell claimed the Aborigines were planning an attack so he laid an ambush and attacked first. Mitchell called the site Mt Dispersion, establishing a euphemism to play down the tragedy. He received only a minor reprimand for his actions. He was later knighted by the Queen.

In 1963 a rock cairn was erected close to the site. The plaque refers to an 'encounter with Aborigines' but no mention of a massacre.

The site is on Tapalin Mail Road about 16 kms south of the Sturt Hwy about 30kms west of Euston, on the NSW side of the Murray River and about 900kms south west of Newcastle.

On the 150th anniversary of the slaughter an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (David Porter, 1986) noted the following:

Mitchell had organised the killings and while many Australians knew about Major Mitchell's journey most would be surprised to hear about the massacre. The SMH article goes on to say:

Against orders from the NSW Government that he was to avoid using firearms against Aboriginal inhabitants, Mitchell armed and organised his men like a military force. Mitchell never expressed regret about the massacre writing years later 'I still look back on the eventful day with entire satisfaction'

It is interesting to note that two years later in 1838, seven of the Myall Creek murderers were executed but Mitchell was never brought to account.

In 2020 the site was declared an 'Aboriginal Place'. The site needs informative signage to explain the tragic events that occurred. The existing plaque is wholly inadequate.

6. Birpai Country: Blackmans Point, Port Macquarie - 1826

As good as it is, not all massacre sites are recorded in the UoN massacre map.

According to Birpai oral history (Blomfield, 1988) about 300 men, woman and children were massacred at Blackmans Point in 1826.

'The evidence is there in Henry Wilson's journal that a massacre took place on the site'

The site is on the Hastings River, at the confluence with the Maria River, about 7kms north west of Port Macquarie.

In 2007 the local Council installed a plaque on the site but there is no mention of the massacre.

In 2022 the site was declared an Aboriginal Place and mapped including 4kms of river foreshore.

The site needs an information sign detailing the massacre. The existing plaque is wholly inadequate.

Conclusion

In his book *Baal Belbora – The end of the dancing* (Blomfield, 2013) the author documents the massacres in the Port Macquarie district on the NSW mid north coast of NSW, writing:

A few of the massacres are widely known, however local people are traditionally silent about the massacres. This is the Great Colonial cover-up.

There is a determination by some, to hide the great evil of the destruction of the Aboriginal people. Unfortunately, this conspiracy of silence is still strongly maintained by many Australians.

In a more recent book *The Forgotten War* (Reynolds, 2022), the author writes:

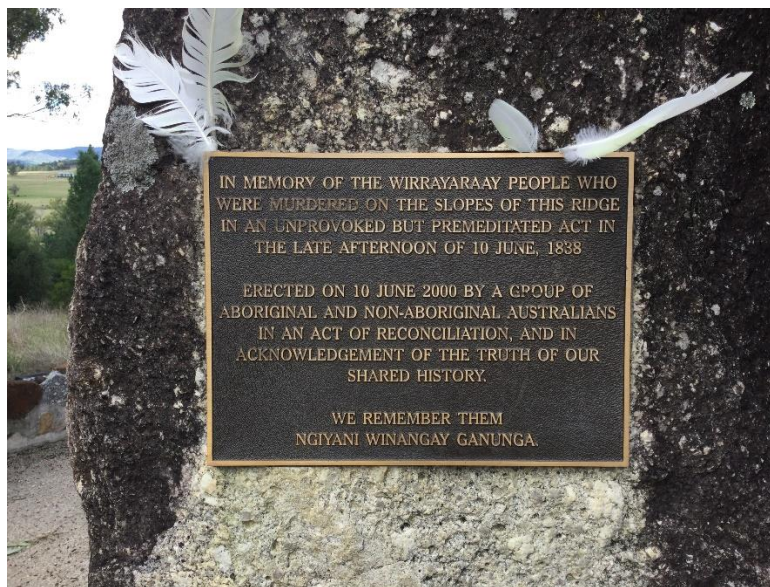
Australia is dotted with memorials to soldiers who fought in wars overseas. Why are there no official memorials or commemorations of the wars that were fought on Australian soil between Aborigines and white colonists?

It is estimated there are about 10,000 war memorials in Australia but very few memorials to colonial massacres. The Myall Creek memorial is the exception. Most Australians are unaware of the colonial massacres or the sites where the tragedies occurred. We need a program of placing memorials on a number of these sites.

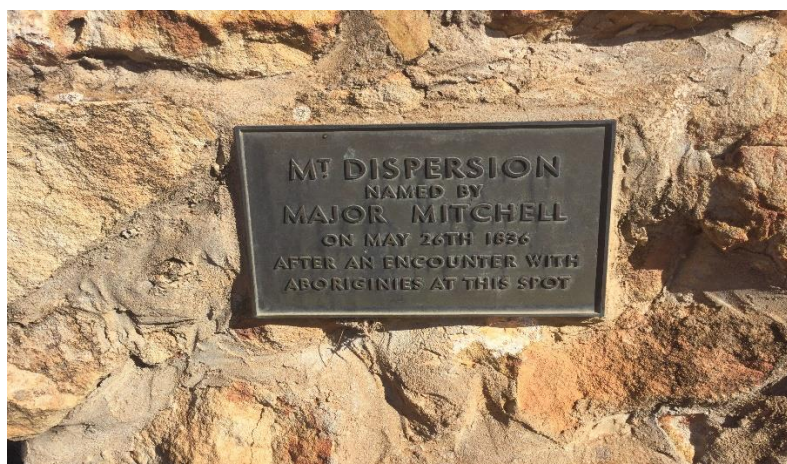
These memorials would be on public land such as road reserves or local parks and reserves. Locating the memorials in a public park in the nearest urban area could be appropriate.

We place such signs or plaques on heritage buildings and convict sites. So why not mark some of these tragic colonial massacre sites, to remind us of our brutal colonial history, as a truth telling and a step to reconciliation?

Myall Creek memorial photo by author



Mt Dispersion plaque photo by author– no mention of massacre



Mt Dispersion Aboriginal Place map



Reference number:(n2020-1063)

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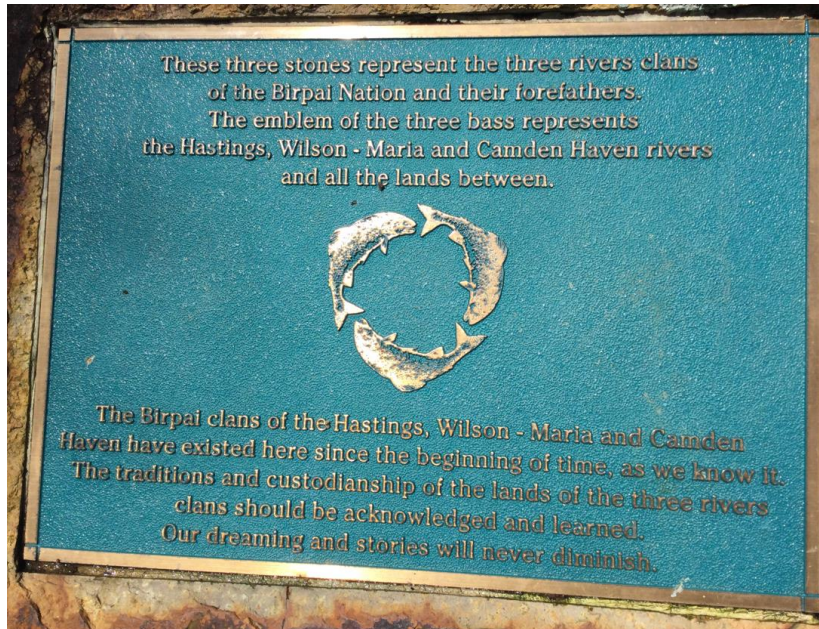
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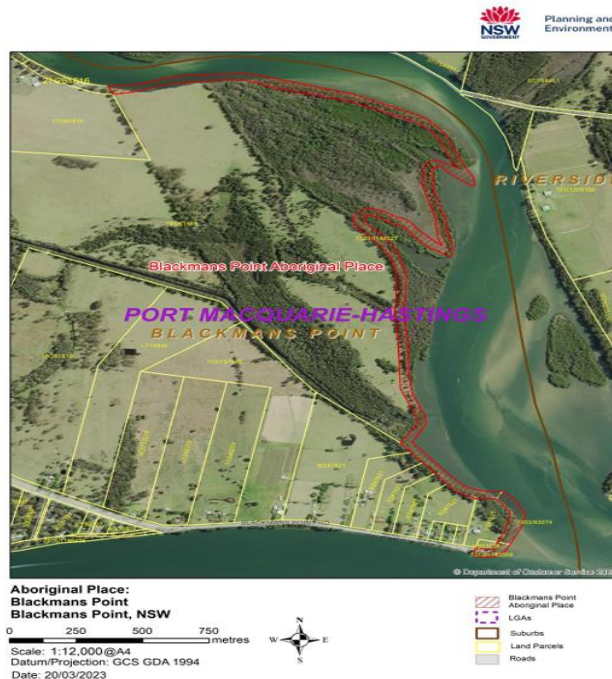
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Blackmans Point plaque photo by author – no mention of massacre



Blackmans Point Aboriginal Place map



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Biographical Notes

40 years experience in land development as a surveyor/planner. Bachelor of Applied Science (Surveying) WAIT 1974 and Diploma in Urban & Regional Planning, UNE 1990.

Registered Surveyor in 1983 in NSW and Meritorious Surveyor since 2017.

Career includes seven years as a surveyor with Hunter Water Board in Newcastle, surveyor/planner in the private sector with Harper Somers O'Sullivan and later RPS Group, and seven years as a town planner with Lake Macquarie City Council.

Fellow of the Institution of Surveyors Australia.

President of the NSW Institution of Surveyors 2017 to 2019.

Now semi retired working as a sole trader.