

Prologue: A dispersal

In 1872, an Aboriginal camp on Milton station, near Gladstone in Central Queensland, was attacked at sunset by a detachment of Native Police troopers led by Acting Sub-Inspector Alexander Douglas. They were trying to catch an Aboriginal man known as Barmundoo Billy, accused of attempted murder and robbery. Settlers did not usually talk publicly about Native Police actions in colonial Queensland; few records were kept. Details of killings were gradually forgotten, but some evidence given at coronial inquiries into frontier deaths has survived. This is the story of one such episode.

Douglas, aged twenty-nine and appointed three months earlier, was, in 1872, stationed at Marlborough, sixty miles north of Rockhampton. The son of a British Army officer, he had previously served with the Royal Navy in China. Douglas would eventually become one of the highest ranking policemen in Queensland, but in 1872 he was still being trained by one of the longest-serving officers in the Native Police, Inspector Frederick Wheeler.

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An eyewitness to the attack, who said he had known Douglas for three years, saw Aboriginal troopers 'followed by Mr Douglas' crossing a river, 'firing at a camp' as they went.¹ The body of a man, called Harry by the Whites, but known to Aboriginal people as Carry, was discovered soon afterwards. Two others were killed and at least one other person was wounded. The Native Police, a body of armed and mounted Aboriginal men led by European officers, were on the job, busy crushing the slightest sign of resistance to colonisation. Killing was their business.

Station manager Alexander Hetherington reported the deaths to the authorities, who told him Harry was shot while trying to escape. Hetherington testified at a subsequent inquest that Harry, whom he had employed for the last three years, was 'a trustworthy quiet boy'. Other witnesses agreed, including Sergeant Richard Ware, who said he had known Harry for sixteen years. Ware considered Harry 'a quiet harmless black'. Nevertheless, Douglas claimed the killing was lawful because he had warrants for the arrest of Harry, Barmundoo Billy and others for attempted murder and robbery. So far as he was concerned, the man was shot because he attempted to escape from the troopers, and might have warned others about them.

Stockman John Daley also gave evidence at the inquest. According to Daley, Douglas had approached him and two Aboriginal men, Harry and Rankin, at the Prospect Hotel on the Calliope goldfield two days earlier. He recalled their conversation, saying Douglas spoke first:

'Daley, I can't allow those boys to go to Milton tonight.'

Daley replied, 'What have you to do with them?'

Douglas answered, 'I have heard that Barmundoo Billy is camped near Milton station and I want to catch him. If I allow those boys to go to Milton tonight they will tell him the police are coming tomorrow.'

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Douglas knew that Aboriginal people watched and shared news of Native Police movements. Daley stood his ground, saying, 'I don't think you have any right to take the boys from me'. His argument failed to move Douglas, who replied, 'I have. I am not going to tell you all my business'.

Daley protested that Hetherington would be annoyed with him 'as he sent them home in my charge', but Douglas overruled his objection. 'That is alright. I know what I am doing'. Thinking 'no harm would happen' to the two Aboriginal men, Daley left Harry and Rankin, complete with horses, saddles and bridles, in police hands. Before he left, Douglas probed Daley for information about Harry, asking if he was 'one of Barmundoo Billy's mob'. Daley said, 'He had mixed with him at times, the same as other blacks'.

Next day, Douglas asked Daley if Barmundoo Billy was camped near the station.

'I believe he is, but what about Harry?' said Daley.

Douglas then told him what had happened to Harry: 'When we came to the scrub down the river today, I saw tracks going down the river. We took Harry to run the track of those blacks and cooeey for them. The troopers were looking about when Harry tried to bolt. The troopers then followed him and knocked him over'.

'Knocked him over' meant, on the Queensland frontier, that they shot him dead. Daley reproached Douglas for his actions, asking, 'What charge had you against him?' Douglas said he held a warrant for Harry's arrest: 'When I got to Howe last night and examined my papers, I found I had three charges of robbery against him. A Chinaman pointed Harry out to me as the one who had robbed him. I suppose Hetherington won't care.'

Daley knew his employer better: 'I don't know, but I expect he won't like it'.

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Daley then gave Douglas directions on 'the best way to get round Barmundoo Billy's camp without being seen'. Half an hour later, Daley heard shots at the river and saw Douglas' troopers 'running across the river', shooting as they went. He was witnessing the Native Police 'dispersing' Aboriginal people.

Hetherington reported Harry's death; records of the incident were created. These include a letter, dated 8 January 1873, sent to the attorney-general requesting an investigation into the 'atrocities said to have been committed by the Native Police in the district, including the death of Harry or Carry', and the deaths shortly after of two prisoners in Douglas' custody.

While the records for this case have survived, those for many others have not. We will never know exactly how many dispersals took place in Queensland, nor the number of Indigenous people who died during them. We can, however, gain a deeper understanding of what happened when we learn a little about the Native Police, the infamous force created to kill Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Queensland. The force operated as part of a widespread campaign of frontier racial violence in colonial Australia in general, and in Queensland in particular. In this sense, the Native Police lie close to the heart of European Australia's dark nation-making origins. Others acknowledged this, including British public servant Arthur Gordon, who wrote to the British prime minister in 1882 saying, 'The habit of regarding natives as vermin, to be cleared off the face of the earth, has given to the average Queenslander a tone of brutality and cruelty in dealing with blacks which is very difficult for anyone who does not *know* it, as I do, to realise'.²

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In Queensland, the Native Police played a major role in the dispossession of Aboriginal people from their land, the almost complete destruction of Aboriginal law, and the disintegration of Aboriginal families. As a major instrument of colonial authority and order, the Native Police of Queensland were, for Aboriginal peoples, the symbol of Native policy, invasion and dispossession throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.

Some people have claimed that a history of the Native Police could not be written because the records of the force were thought to be destroyed years ago. Despite such assertions and assumptions, historical accounts of the force have been published, though public knowledge and misinformation about the Native Police has changed over time. In other words, there have been debates based on shallow research. For example, during the early decades of the twentieth century there was little mention of the force's activities, but during the 1930s journalists and amateur historians began submitting frontier stories and letters on the Native

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Police to magazines and newspapers. Hearsay became accepted as fact, and myths assumed importance as writers largely ignored Australia's record of racial violence during the colonial era. Even the name of the force is potentially confusing: at various times it was referred to as the Native Mounted Police, while for most of its history it was known simply as the Native Police. It was never called the Queensland Native Police.

A careful cross-indexing of official records and other archival material reveals much about the activities of the force, despite the lack of specific records. By collating the police staff files, and the inquest files, with general correspondence and newspaper items, a reasonably good idea of how the Native Police operated in Queensland can be formed. The omission of frontier violence in published histories is inextricably linked to the denial of prior Aboriginal occupancy and ownership of the land. Much of the frontier history written relies too heavily on the work of a small group of men with an interest in perpetuating the stereotyped perceptions of the force. The main writers on the Native Police until 1960 were journalists, novelists and popular historians. Many later historians quote their works as if they were accurate accounts based on official records and reliable witnesses. They were not.

Most contemporary understandings of police forces focus on their provision of internal security, but colonial formations operated in a more shadowy world, where the distinction between internal and external threats was blurred. Indeed, in colonial situations there was genuine confusion between internal and external threats. The agents of European expansion and settlement tended to see Indigenous peoples, who became 'the colonised' with the stroke of a pen, as potential law-breakers and outlaws unless they immediately and convincingly embraced European culture. Even then, they were not always safe. In examining the activities of a force like the Native Police, we can see how colonialism operates

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as the clash of two law systems. Indigenous law, based on principle and respect for elders, insists that individuals must defend their traditional country and their right to survival. Settler law, based on precedent and respect for authority, regards such self-preservation as an affront to 'civilised' beliefs and values.

The practices used by the force need to be considered within the context of the policies and the groups in colonial society that made the force feasible. In other words, the context of lawful racial violence that pervaded the Australian colonies at that time must be considered so we can gain a better understanding of what the force actually did. Given the variety of attitudes to, and opinions about, the Native Police, we need to first pose a fundamental question: was it the only force of its kind, or were there other formations with similar roles?

The military dimension of Native Police history has to be stressed for several reasons. Native Police camps were opened, closed and shifted as the frontier of settlement moved northwards and westwards – just as army posts were in other colonial wars. An understanding of colonial military practices and history is useful – firstly, because Aboriginal resistance was deemed by some to require a military action; and secondly, there was a network of military connections in Australian colonial society. Through the old boy networks, some gained prestigious appointments while others made fortunes from land speculation. A number of officers in the Native Police were former members of British armed forces, and fought in other parts of the Empire. Officers in the Native Police with military experience included Henry Browne (1863–1875), William Armit (1872–1882), Alexander Douglas (1872–1905), Robert Little (1875–1889), Walter Jones (1880–1884), and Robert Barson (1891–1912). Others, including the Morisset brothers, Stanhope O'Connor (1875–1880), Henry Kaye (1876–1881), and Frederick Urquhart (1882–1921), were the sons of army officers.

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At least one correspondent to the Brisbane papers wrote that recruiting soldiers for public service was a mistake. 'Military men are the very worst to select', said one correspondent, implying military men were favoured for the police force.¹ As historian Bill Thorpe argues, the process of European colonisation in Australia was partly based on the artificial community of the regiment, which replaced the 'lost homes' of soldiers from England, Ireland, and Scotland.² The British army, as a collection of military tribes or warrior guilds, influenced European expansion in Australia because officers especially assumed they belonged to a fraternity. They could expect hospitality, the sharing of information, and protection by brother officers. An editorial in the *Brisbane Courier* of 26 June 1865 suggested that former officers living in the colony could supervise the Native Police.

The connection between the military and colonial society is an important factor in the history of the force. Details found during research strongly suggest that the Native Police should be regarded as a military force, albeit an odd or irregular one. Just as it was an exceptional police force, it was an exceptional military force, yet linked to the social world of officers adrift in the colonies. The appointment of former military officers alerts us both to the special operational requirements of the force and to its connection to other armed units in different parts of the empire.

The Native Police were certainly not a police force in the ordinary sense of the word; today, they would be called Special Forces. Their specific purpose was to suppress Indigenous resistance to colonisation. This emerges clearly from the instructions from the Governor of New South Wales when he sought the formation of a Corps of Native Police in 1848:

Circumstances having been recently brought under the Governor's notice, in respect of certain collisions which have taken place, in parts

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beyond the Settled Districts, between the white inhabitants and the Aborigines, which appear to him to require that immediate steps should be taken for their repression, he transmits to the Council an Estimate for the formation of a small Corps of Native Police, to be employed on this service.³

It is worth noting that the new force was to be used beyond the settled districts, which immediately suggests something other than a regular Constabulary; and it was described as a Corps – a word which commonly meant, at the time, a military unit (in later years it was widened to include other groups such as the diplomatic corps and the press corps).

Police today are sworn to uphold the law without fear or favour, but that was not the case with the Native Police. Aboriginal people were never offered the same protection as European citizens. Indeed, no evidence has been found of any Aboriginal trooper throughout the force's history ever swearing an oath to uphold justice. Of course, discrimination against the Aboriginal population was also common among other agents of colonial law and order, such as justices of the peace, stipendiary magistrates, and commissioners of Crown land. Technically, killing Indigenous people was unlawful, but the police, the courts and the government did not act.

The problems of colonisers in Queensland and the solutions they employed in connection with the dispossession of Aboriginal people were not unique. In other parts of Australia, in other British colonies and in other European empires, armed Indigenous forces performed similar functions to the Native Police of Queensland, using almost identical tactics. The beginnings of the Native Police are connected with the expansion of British control in Australia and the division of the continent into separate self-governing colonies of the Empire. As historian Libby Connors

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notes, colonial police forces developed from rough convict patrols to professional bodies in the 1840s and 1850s.⁴ Queensland inherited the force, along with all the other assets and prerogatives of colonial government, upon Separation from New South Wales in 1859. By this time, the reputation of the Native Police as a violent, punitive institution was already well established.

The frontier violence inflicted upon Aboriginal people in Queensland was a refinement of practices in southern colonies and a tradition of violence migrated north with landseekers. Colonialism is inherently violent. Moreover, the concept of using Indigenous troops to further colonisation and suppress resistance was not new. Like the British, other conquerors had found that Native forces enjoyed a number of important advantages as imperial soldiers and frontier guards. Indigenous people were familiar with local terrain, customs and languages, and they had an ability to survive off the land without the catastrophic medical problems that affected invading armies and expeditions. British soldiers in the tropics, for example, suffered heavier casualties from ill-health than from conflict. The greatest benefit of all, however, was cost. Native forces expected less, were paid less, and their overall cost to colonial administrators was much less than for European soldiers.

By the time the British colonised Australia, several practices were standard. The Native Police, like other armed colonial formations based on the use of Indigenous recruits, took advantage of the fact that Native people had no loyalties to other Indigenous groups. Indeed, in some cases they were sworn enemies, and fought as much in their own self-interest as for other reasons. It has been argued that the search for a Native power base is an essential step in many colonial annexations.⁵ The concept of divide and rule, implicit in the recruitment and remote deployment of Indigenous troopers, shows how the British had learned to adapt traditional Indigenous enmity to their advantage. Yet,

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with all forces like the Native Police there was always the complicating risk that men taken locally would turn against their officers in sympathy with the people they policed. Consequently, Native troopers were often recruited at great distances from their postings, in order to police Indigenous people without the risk of them becoming partial in their activities. Divide and rule was, therefore, a fundamental means of achieving the annexation of land and the suppression of resistance. Troopers were likely recruited at the point of a gun: 'You are either with us or against us. If you're not with the whiteman, you go [will be] bung [dead]'.

The Native Police are part of the history of policing in Australia, and the history of the force reveals much about the development of lawful violence here. As the colonial frontier moved northwards and westwards from the southeast corner of what became Queensland, the Native Police rode at the vanguard of expansion. Detachments of Aboriginal troopers led by European officers patrolled newly occupied pastoral districts, responded to calls for police protection from settlers, and made districts 'quiet'. The object of colonisation was the acquisition of land, minerals, timber and other resources, and in Queensland the Native Police was an essential instrument of government policy in achieving this aim. 'Aborigines are unnecessary to a capitalist Australia. The land they live upon may be required'.⁶ 'There was a direct link between the legal recognition of the land grab by squatters and the development of specific forms of policing'.⁷

The tactics used by the Native Police were typical under the rules of frontier colonialism. It readily imposed a regime of terror, confusion and suffering on the enemy. Signs of resistance were usually met with immediate and violent punitive measures, although sometimes, in other parts of the British Empire, prudent retreat and negotiation were chosen instead. By using the tools of the colonisers, namely technology, mobility and

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communication, the force enjoyed an enormous advantage when attacking Aboriginal people. The use of horses and firearms gave the detachments a clear advantage in the field, while efficient postal and telegraphic systems allowed the authorities in Brisbane to gather news and send orders. The first telegraph line in Queensland, from Brisbane to Ipswich, opened in 1861, and by the end of the decade had reached northern outposts. The roll-out of Australia's early telegraphic network was a vital part and significant marker of successful colonisation, and of the operations of the Native Police.

Horses (and horse food) always posed problems for police in frontier Queensland, but regular, subsidised steamer services helped the government to deploy the Native Police rapidly and effectively against any Indigenous resistance. These contextual factors remind us that technological developments and systems are integral elements in the force's history.

Officers and troopers of the Native Police force were involved in the deaths of a large number of Aboriginal people in colonial Queensland. First-hand accounts of frontier racial violence are rare, but sometimes surviving records give us insights into the actions of this body of armed and mounted Aboriginal men led by European officers, the Native Police. Their specific task was the immediate and brutal suppression of any Indigenous resistance to European colonisation.

Coronial inquest records are among the few pieces of evidence of these 'genocidal moments' that have survived. Inquests are generally good historical sources, although records from some towns and districts, such as Bundaberg and Mackay, are scanty. However, the realities of frontier record keeping were as imperfect as the difficulties of colonial policing. Records about such 'moments' help us to understand the state-sanctioned

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violence practised against Indigenous people. The force's 'death count' was usually kept secret, but today, these files, held at the Queensland State Archives, allow us rare insights into episodes of frontier violence.

The two officers mentioned in the Milton dispersal of 1872, Alexander Douglas and Frederick Wheeler, were long-serving members of the force. Wheeler, who joined in 1857, before Queensland separated from New South Wales, openly killed Indigenous people for almost twenty years. Complaints about his tactics, made by clergymen, journalists and other respectable citizens, were ignored for years. Finally, even other police officers turned against him after he was dismissed from the force and charged with murdering an Aboriginal man in 1876. (Wheeler disappeared from Queensland and died in Java in 1882.) Despite being linked with the deaths of Aboriginal people on several other occasions, Douglas was promoted, reaching the rank of inspector in 1884 and chief inspector in 1900. After a short term as acting commissioner of police, he retired in 1905 and returned to England, where he died in 1914.

Wheeler's career in the Native Police attracted public controversy from beginning to end. The son of a London merchant and a Sicilian noblewoman, Wheeler was appointed at the age of twenty-seven by the New South Wales government, and he quickly gained a reputation as one of the most efficient officers in the force. In 1858, he pursued Aboriginal people at Mt Larcom near Gladstone. He apparently believed (at one stage at least) that Aboriginal people 'all must suffer, for the innocent must be held responsible for the guilt of others'.⁸ Officials called attention to the language he used in his reports: 'The Government viewed with strong disapproval Wheeler's intention of killing innocent Aborigines as punishment for the crimes of others'.⁹ He was chastised and transferred to Sandgate, under the closer

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supervision of his masters in Brisbane.

Wheeler attracted more controversy in 1861 when his detachment killed several Aboriginal men in the Fassifern district, but again the colonial government decided not to press charges despite clear evidence against him and his troopers. Instead the colony's Executive Council decided to inform him that he 'has acted upon one or two occasions with indiscretion'.¹⁰ For this he was to be reprimanded; it was hoped he would 'for the future use every exertion to perform his duty with circumspection and humanity'.

Wheeler's protégé, Douglas, was born in the Channel Islands, the son of an army officer. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry for Alexander Douglas does not mention violence, preferring to describe him as 'an important explorer' and a 'capable leader'. Frederick Wheeler, on the other hand, is remembered and often written about as a sadist. How did two men in the same colonial force gain such contrasting reputations, especially when one trained the other? This book gives some answers.

The surviving records show that the Native Police in Queensland were part-colonial police force, part-military organisation. This fact is significant because it contributes to our collective understanding of the history of policing in the English-speaking world, including the self-governing colony of Queensland, proclaimed in 1859. At one extreme, London, and later the English counties, accepted police so long as they were not like a military force; at the other, armed and mounted forces – soldier-police – were mobilised without hesitation. The Native Police of Queensland were one such colonial force.

But there were other factors at work here as well. The surviving records in Queensland show that in some cases the Native Police detachments targeted certain groups. Although the records don't tell us everything, sometimes they reveal crucial details such as the

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age and gender of the victims. Inquest witnesses told of children and old people being killed. Young men were potential combatants, and old people, as keepers of traditional law and protectors of tribal culture and sacred country, could sing death on these strangers in police uniforms. Neutralising the young stopped new generations of resistance fighters being born. The killing of old people interrupted the generational transmission of language and knowledge, central to Indigenous culture.

Dispersal was a term that gained special significance in colonial Queensland. It was the rationale – the core business, as it were – of the colony's Native Police. As colonialism washed across Australia, racial violence took place all along the frontier. Violence and terror against Indigenous people were central components of European imperialism everywhere. One hundred years later, historians, writers and politicians, arguing about the extent of the violence, fought their own battles in the History Wars. Despite the evidence, some people in twenty-first century Australia still don't accept that large numbers of Indigenous people were killed in frontier clashes during the British annexation of the continent. Records prove that perception to be wrong.

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Official investigations show that racial violence was largely accepted and widely practised on the Queensland frontier. Many European settlers supported the killing of Aboriginal people, and admitted they had killed out of fear, hatred and distrust. Against this background, the Native Police can be seen as a product of its time, but the European members of the force generally knew they had to hide their actions to escape prosecution or dismissal. As the newspaper extracts and archival records reveal, some settlers did not agree with the violence shown towards the 'original owners of Australia', but most of their contemporaries approved of the Native Police force and its terrible killing ways. The force's continued existence and its secret war was, for them, a 'question of necessity'.¹²