

# MacCabe Maps the Murray-Darling

Landscape and Language: Dubliner F.P MacCabe's 1848-52 Surveys and Placenames on the Murray and Darling Rivers, Australia

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Murray-Darling Basin Map: MDB Commission



## Surveyor F.P. MacCabe

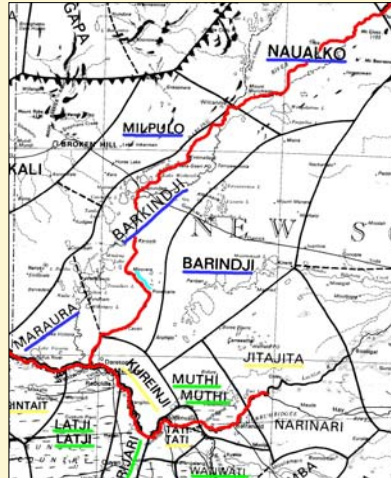
Francis Peter MacCabe was born in Dublin in 1817 and recruited by NSW Surveyor General Thomas Mitchell in 1841. He carried out the first surveys of the Murrumbidgee, Murray and Darling Rivers in western New South Wales between 1848-52. This was within five years of the arrival of the earliest pastoral squatters in the west, following Sturt's exploration of the Murray in 1830.

Photo: Michael MacCabe

## Aboriginal Languages

MacCabe's surveys transect the country of three major language groups, where there is a rich archaeological record ranging from the 45-50,000 year old heritage at the Willandra Lakes World Heritage, through the late Pleistocene and Holocene to places of historic contact in the 19C. MacCabe's records are especially valuable because of the loss of traditional languages in this area, compared with northern Australia.

Red - MacCabe's surveys  
 Dark Blue - Paakantyi (Barkindji) languages  
 Yellow - Murray River languages  
 Green - Kulin languages  
 Light Blue - survey below  
 Map: Tindale 1974



Surveyors by S.T. Gill (State Library of Victoria). A survey party at work using a circumferenter and chain and blazing a tree to mark a line. This was the method used by MacCabe on the river surveys.

## MacCabe Corner

March 2008: NSW Minister for Lands announces that the border corner between NSW, SA and Victoria will be named in honour of F.P. MacCabe.



NSW State Records

## MacCabe and Aborigines

In NSW MacCabe employed Aboriginal informants and recorded up to 6-8 placenames per river mile. On the strength of his 'acquaintance with the habits of the natives' he was sent to survey Port Curtis, Qld. There, in 1854, MacCabe had to defend himself for *not* shooting Aborigines.

..When out on duty one day, fully armed, [the survey party] espied some blacks, hunting. Panic-struck at the sight... the surveyor fled, followed by his party, who threw away their carbines in order to make the best use of their legs, and arrived in camp without any serious injury, beyond a broken shin or two in falling over logs.

The natives, not having the slightest hostile intention, brought the firearms into the settlement next day, and delivered them over to Mr Wilmott, the storekeeper, remarking with much laughter, how frightened the white fellows were and how they did run.

Having discovered the weakness of the surveyor's party (about a score strong), the blacks in a few days came down in force, and proceeded to plunder the tent. The gallant surveyor with his party at once retired behind a big tree, where twenty stand of arms were piled, and with a Colt's revolving rifle in his hand, observed with the greatest complacency the plunder of his tent, remarking that he was paid to measure and not to fight. (Letter to *Morton Bay Courier*)



## Landscape

We are digitally mapping the surveys and placenames onto aerial imagery. The example on the left shows a section of the lower Darling River where MacCabe recorded a 'Native burial ground'. He also recorded rock bars in the river and described the vegetation. His survey line here followed the original road which skirted the edge of the floodplain. The modern road can be seen cutting across the lower right hand side. (Hope: archaeologist/historian).

## Language

MacCabe's surveys provide an opportunity to map languages at a fine level. Many of the names recorded by MacCabe are words for landscape features, while others hint at places on Dreaming Tracks. (Hercus: linguist)

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