

Section One: The Beginnings

1. Yuwibara: The River People

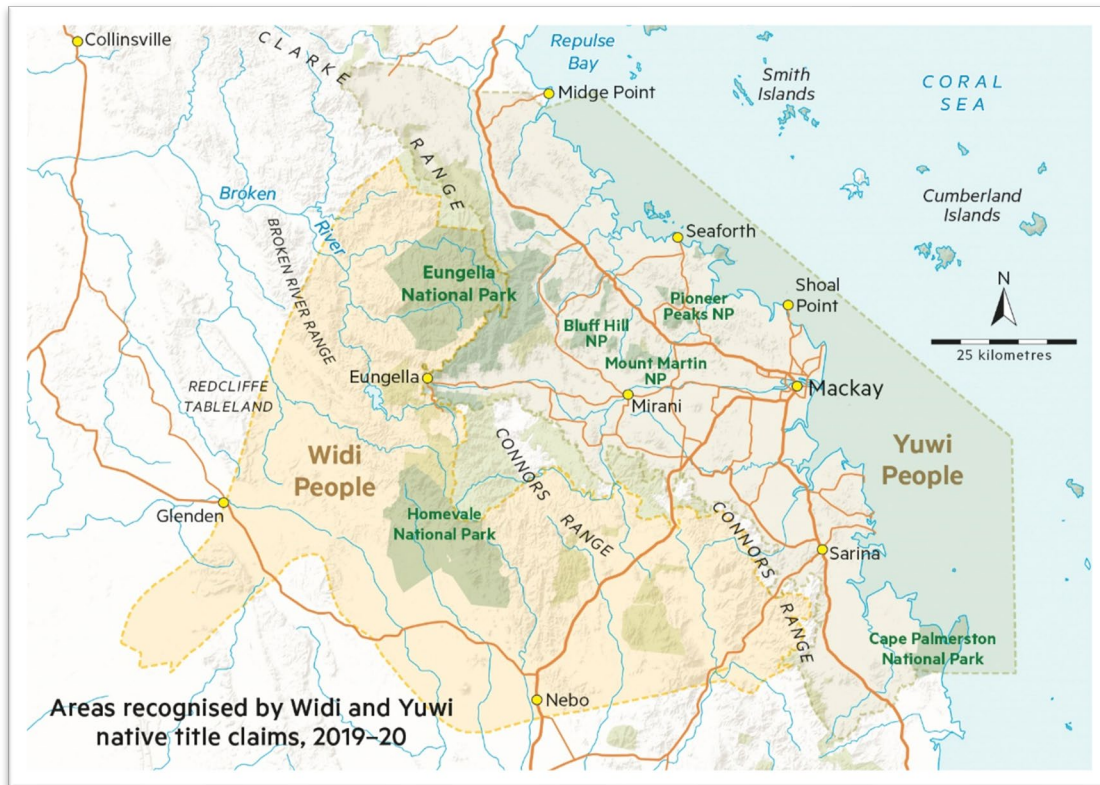


Plate 1.1: Twelve Aboriginal people in the Pioneer Valley, the earliest photograph, ca. 1872. The sugarcane in the background suggests that they might have been working on an early plantation.
Source: Boag & Mills photograph, in Clive Moore Collection.

Introduction

An uninvited British imperial invasion of eastern Australia began in 1788, which declared that the land belonged to the Crown. The original inhabitants were subjugated and displaced. Indigenous land tenure systems were ignored, replaced by laws imported from Britain. It was not until the 1992 Mabo judgement of the High Court that pre-existing Indigenous land titles began to be acknowledged. This legal restoration has now flowed on into the Pioneer Valley and its surrounds where substantial areas have been returned to the Indigenous custodians.

The Yuwibara (also Yuwi) are the ‘First Nations’ (the Indigenous) people of the Pioneer Valley and its coastal surrounds. They lived in the area between the O’Connell River in the north and Cape Palmerston in the south, as well as on the close-by coastal islands. Thousands of years ago when they first arrived, a single land mass existed, which archaeologist have named Sahul, including what is now New Guinea, Australia and Tasmania. The coastline and climate have now changed extensively. The many islands off the Queensland coast were once part of the mainland, and the outer edge of the Great Barrier Reef was the north-eastern edge of the continent. In recent centuries, Indigenous people became known as Aborigines or Aboriginal people, derived from the Latin expression *ab origine*, meaning ‘from the beginning’. The term stresses primacy and is not disrespectful, although is now used less frequently. ‘Indigenous’ remains in use, and the term ‘First Nations peoples’ has become common in recent years. The First Nations peoples prefer to be known by their local names, such as Yuwibara, Widi, Giya, Ngaro, and Barada Barna—all from the region in and around the Pioneer Valley (see Map 1.2). They have also adopted regional names largely based on state boundaries: for instance, Murri in Queensland and north-western New South Wales, and Koori in southern New South Wales and Victoria.



Map 1.1: The Areas Recognised by Widi and Yuwibara (Yuwi) Native Title Claims, 2019–20.

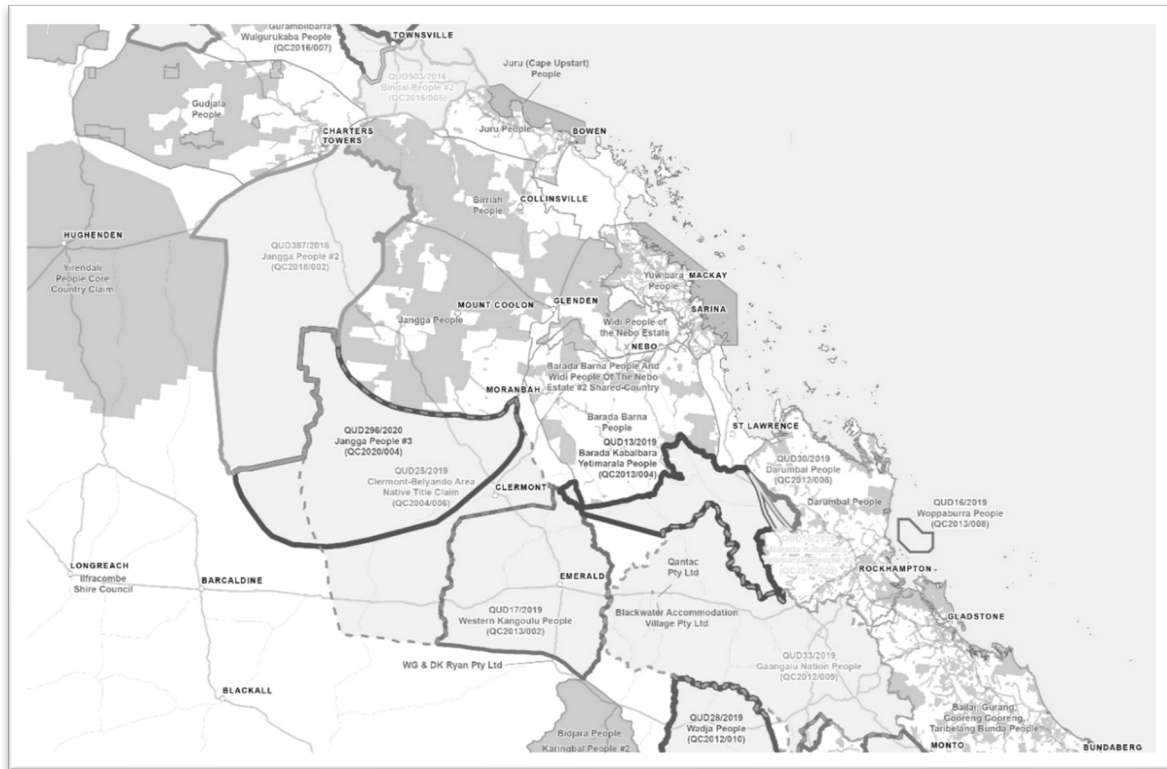
Source: Courtesy of John Frith, www.flatEARTHmapping.com.au.

The source of data for the map was supplied by the Queensland Department of Resources (previously the Department of Natural Resources and Mines). culturalheritage.datsip.qld.gov.au/achris/public/home.

Also refer to Map 1.2.

In 2019 and 2020, the National Native Title Tribunal of the Federal Court of Australia brought down judgements which returned large areas of land to the Yuwibara nation (6,540 square kilometres of land and sea) and the Widi nation (5,400 square kilometres of land). Writing this account of the region's First Nations Australians involves these judgements, discussions with present-day descendants, the knowledge of archaeologists and anthropologists, and forensic archival and library work combing through early European sources. Local archaeological evidence is patchy but useful, and comparisons with similar regions of Australia also assist. Given the disruption which occurred during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conclusions reached in this chapter are often based on reasoned but incomplete evidence. Sacred evidence may have been withheld, and the Aboriginal descendants by no means always agree with each other, or with the picture created here. The chapter is not an expression of the current views of either the Yuwibara or Widi peoples, or their Land Councils or Corporations, although it takes their views into account.

Yuwibara: The River People



Map 1.2: Extract from the Northern Queensland Region Native Title Claimant Applications and Determination Areas, as per Federal Court judgements, 30 June 2021. North to south, the map shows the Jaru, Birriah, Yuwibara, Widi, Jangga, and Barada Barna peoples. The Giya live on the coast, south of the Jaru. The Juwi, on the coast around Proserpine and Cape Conway, and the Ngaro, in the Whitsunday Islands, are not marked on the map as they had no current land claims registered.

Source: [QLD_Northern_NTDA_Schedule.pdf \(mntt.gov.au\)](https://www.mntt.gov.au/QLD_Northern_NTDA_Schedule.pdf).

The Yuwibara nation covers the Pioneer Valley to the base of the Connor and Clarke ranges, the coast from Midge Point (and inland to Cathu State Forest) in the north, to Cape Palmerston and Yarrowonga Point (and inland to Ilbilbie) in the south, including the site of Mackay city at the river's mouth. Yuwibara families identify themselves with particular sub-groups ('skins') within their nation. The Widi nation are their neighbours to the west, living in the mountains and on the western plains, from Cathu in the north, through Eungella Plateau, south to Crediton and Epsom, and inland to south of Nebo. Both the Yuwibara and the Widi are adjoined to the south by the Barada Barna nation, centred on the headwaters of the Isaac River, and running west to the Denham Range, then east towards the coast, including Collaroy. South of the Yuwibara and east of the Barada Barna, the Koinmerbura nation inhabits a narrow band of land along the coast, adjoining the Yuwibara at Cape Palmerston, continuing down to around Broadsound. To the north of the Yuwibara and Widi, the Giya nation is mainly along the coast between Bloomsbury and Cape Conway, as well as inland over the ranges. The Ngaro nation is on the Whitsunday Islands and on the coast, in a close relationship with the Yuwibara and the Giya. To the north of the Giya, the Juru nation lived on both sides of Bowen, extending north to the mouth of the Burdekin River, neighbouring the inland Birriah nation located between Glenden and Charters Towers, and including Collinsville. South of the Juru, the Jangga nation is centred on Mt Coolon, inland from the Widi. Bara' or 'bura' (as in Yuwibara or Koinmerbura) is a standard suffix meaning people, which seems to have been used widely in the past.

The Widi, Yuwibara, Giya, and Barada Barna all had some influence in the mountains

at the back and sides of the Pioneer Valley, although a National Native Title Tribunal judgement confirmed Eungella Plateau as part of the Widi nation. There is also shared territory between the Widi and the Barada Bama in the area between Nebo and Glenden. The adjoining Yuwibara in the Pioneer Valley were probably more coastal in their orientation and not prominent at the western end of the valley, nor in the mountains, although it is likely they considered the eastern fringe of this area to be part of their territory, shared with the Widi. Equally, during the second half of the nineteenth century it is likely that the Yuwibara absorbed some Widi and Barada Bama people, drawn to the safety of the Bakers Creek Aboriginal Reserve south of Mackay and to the Catholic reserves on the Northside.¹

The fertile and well-watered Pioneer Valley and its surrounds was once home to a large Indigenous population. The pre-1860 history of Aboriginal people from the valley and its surrounds is not easy to piece together. Describing the cultures of First Nations people and estimating the size of the original population is difficult, although not impossible. Attempting to describe their lives over millennia is harder still. However, we need to take a *longue durée* (long duration or deep time) approach to appreciate the immense period over which these peoples have lived in the region.

The river and valley which dominate this book are situated in an optimum tropical climate and environment. The Indigenous population in the valley and its surrounds would have been as large as any in similar tropical areas of Australia. This adds to the poignancy of their recent history, once we realise the extreme damage done to the original inhabitants during the last four decades of the nineteenth century.

The chapter is an acknowledgement that the region's human time depth begins tens of thousands of years ago, not in 1860, with a focus on events which have occurred nearly imperceptibly over a long period of time. The aim is to establish deep time and to illustrate the way in which relationships between the human inhabitants and their surroundings have changed. To do this, I have blended archaeological knowledge with more recent history. The further we get from the present, the more the path meanders.

The Yuwibara and Widi Nations

As an entry point to the Yuwibara and Widi, this chapter begins by describing the environment in which they lived before European colonisation occurred. I have used pictorial evidence onwards from the 1860s. If the reader can forgive the occasional European figures seated decoratively in the photographs, and the post-1860 geographic terminology, the images provide a window through which the First Nations pre-1860 scene emerges. Let us begin with Eungella Plateau.

Eungella (meaning 'Land of Clouds') is the Indigenous name of the high plateau at the western end of the valley wall. The isolated Eungella Plateau and massif rises to 4,085 feet (1,245 m) at Mt William and 4,025 feet (1,227 m) at Mt Dalrymple, two of the highest mountains in Queensland. The area contains one of the most isolated rainforests in Australia, bordered by eucalypt forests and woodlands. Just as occurs today, the Wiri view down the valley on a fine day extended to the ocean, spreading out to coastal infinity. The V shape of the valley conducts moist air into the narrow western end, forcing it to rise abruptly, leading to much higher rainfall than in surrounding areas. Today, Eungella Plateau is one of the Pioneer Valley's scenic tourist gems. Access is from the valley by a steep winding road. The best place to view the valley is from the Chalet Hotel at Eungella. Many times, I have stood and admired the grand vista down the valley from Eungella. Broken River, nearby in the 147,929 acre (59,865 ha) National Park, is a beautiful place to swim, even if rather chilly. Early risers can almost be sure of seeing a platypus or two nosing around in the creeks.



Plate 1.2: The Pioneer Valley viewed from the Eungella Range, *ca.* 1937, looking towards the coast. Once heavily forested, the cleared land on the floor of the valley was used for sugarcane farms.
Source: State Library of Queensland.



Plate 1.3: The view from Peases' Lookout on Dalrymple Road, north of Eungella township, on Eungella Plateau, looking down into the Pioneer Valley, 2020. The light green areas show land cleared for sugarcane farms.

Source: (c.) Queensland Museum, Gary Cranitch.

Eungella Plateau contains temperate and subtropical rainforest, and divides into three regions. The upper waters of the Broken River are surrounded by vast rainforests, gorges, and waterfalls. On the eastern face of the ranges a high escarpment covered in rainforest and eucalypt forests descend to the coastal valley and plains. To the west beyond the plateau and the ranges, the land extends out through valleys onto the brigalow plains—acacia-wooded grasslands. The plateau is the largest area of continuous rainforest between the Wet Tropics further north and the subtropical forests of the Queensland/New South Wales Border Ranges. Eungella is part of Clarke Range, which continues north, becoming less distinct, degenerating into more isolated peaks and hills behind the coastal corridor as far as Calen and Bloomsbury. The southern valley wall is formed by Connors and Downs ranges, extending east to a narrower coastal plain between Sandy Creek and Sarina, backed by low coastal ranges. Beyond the ranges, an area of plains begins, monotonous as they proceed south to Broadsound and beyond. The western slopes of the escarpment at the back of the Pioneer Valley form catchment basins for two major rivers, the Isaac flowing south, and the Burdekin heading north. The Pioneer River rises in The Pinnacle Ranges below Mt McBryde near Pinevale, and is fed by Cattle, Black Waterhole, Black, and Stockyard creeks. The upper parts of the catchment are too steep for agriculture and remain covered by rainforest and open woodland. The Pioneer becomes tidal towards its mouth, sandy, with rapids and scoured rock in its course, spilling out over alluvial plains when in flood. The islands of the coast add to the pleasant environment. Perhaps this description contains an element of parochial pride from an ex-Mackay boy, but by my estimation it is the best environment in Australia, with the most beautiful scenery.

Annual climatic cycles are mainly marked by ‘dry’ and ‘wet’ seasons. Wet seasons occur between November and April. Cyclones—periods of intense destructive heavy rain and wind—usually originate in the Coral and Solomon seas during the ‘wet’. They vary in strength, degenerating into rain depressions, unpredictably hitting the coast, then travelling inland to the ranges. The most recent cyclones to affect the valley were Ului in 2010, Anthony in 2011, and Debbie in 2017.

The dry season, between May and October, produces some storms, but usually days are fine and nights cool. The Pioneer Valley’s climate is pleasant, and frosts are rare, although not unknown on the edges of the valley, and very occasionally at Mackay. The mean temperature varies between 14° and 30° Celsius. Mackay’s average annual rainfall is 63.5 inches (1,613 mm) falling over 98 days, then not far inland the rainfall decreases to around 40 inches (1,016 mm). The peaks rise high in Clarke’s Range and the temperature up there can be quite cold. Older valley residents remember a day in the 1960s when it snowed at Eungella, rating a mention on the BBC World News. The highest annual rainfall occurs at Dalrymple Heights, around 89 inches (2,260 mm) per annum. During the wet season, humidity is usually high and quite oppressive; there is a feeling of living in the moist tropics. Thunderstorms occur in the monsoon months, although rain falls in most months, predominately in December, January, and February.



Plate 1.4: A view inland on Eungella Plateau in 2020, looking west out along Bee Creek Road, showing cleared farmland in the bottom right.

Source: (c.) Queensland Museum, Gary Cranitch.

The Mackay region is hemmed in by mountains to the south, west and north. At Carmilla, south of Mackay, the ranges are only 13 kilometres from the coast, then curve inland approximately 80 kilometres at Eungella, forming the back wall of the Pioneer Valley. Steep Connors Range is to the south, and rugged Clarke Range dominates as far north as between Collinsville and Proserpine. Then the main spur veers away from the coast again.

Like many Queensland rivers and creeks flowing east to the coast, there is a rapid descent from the catchment to rich alluvial plains. Abnormal weather events can drop enormous loads of rain and cause physical changes to the landscape. Rain depressions in 1863, 1864 and 1867 caused extensive flooding in the valley, leaving the early colonists wondering if floods were a regular climatic pattern. In the 1870s, huge floods carried away several metres of the southern bank of the river, and excessive rain in 1874–75 was the cause of a ‘rust’ disease outbreak in the cane. Regular rainfall statistics began in the 1880s. For instance, during March 1882, Mackay received 50 inches (1,270 mm). Up to 23.6 inches (600 mm) in 24 hours, or less, have been recorded on more than one occasion. In flood, the Pioneer River is an awesome sight.

Floods usually accompany cyclones but can also be caused by rain depressions. Cyclones bring high winds up to 260 kilometres an hour, sometimes causing utter devastation. Cyclone Eline in 1898 was so severe that it straightened the mouth of the Pioneer River by cutting a new 270 metre-wide channel through 3.2 kilometre-long East Point Spit, which had previously forced the river to meander south past Town Beach and exit to the sea at Far Beach.² A legendry (unnamed) cyclone on 20 January 1918 was so large that it created an almost 12 feet (3.65 m) storm surge through some urban areas, parts of which are only a metre or two above sea level. Fortunately, high water was not as extreme as predicted, but

even so parts of East Mackay were flooded by the sea to a depth of over 17 feet (5.35 m). Rain poured down for many days, delivering 80 inches (2,032 mm), and the river remained flooded for weeks. In a February 1958 post-cyclonic flood, the river peaked at 38 feet (11.64 m) at the Hospital Bridge, and 30 feet (9.14 m) at Mackay, the highest levels ever recorded. The settlement at Foulden on the riverbank opposite the hospital was washed away. The actual amount of rain that fell is unknown as all rain gauges overflowed. In 1970, Cyclone Ada passed through the region, causing damage and floods. There were flash floods in 2000, and in February 2008, when excessive amounts of rain fell in the lower Pioneer River catchment, with 23.6 inches (600 mm) at Goosepond Creek in North Mackay in six hours. The 2008 peak river height in urban Mackay was (23 feet (7 m). Not all cyclones are of high intensity, and often they only strike glancing blows if they make landfall further north.

The current weather system is also heavily influenced by the La Nina-El Nino Southern Oscillation. Rainfall is higher during the El Nino years, with significant summer rains. Dalrymple Heights in Clarke Range received 145 inches (3,673 mm) of rain between November 1973 and April 1974, while during 1982–83 the area recorded only 27 inches (696 mm) over the same months. The nineteenth century Yuwibara would not have been surprised by any of this. They knew the capabilities of cyclones, rain depressions, frost, droughts, and bushfires. They could read the signs through changing weather patterns, and also through the behaviour of animals and birds.

Vegetation

The Pioneer Valley is on the southern limits of the Australian biogeographic boundary generally known as North Queensland, marked by a quite different tropical climate, and some differences in flora and fauna from regions further south. The moist North Queensland coast fits better into the south-east New Guinea sub-division of the Asian biogeographic region than it does with the rest of Australia, although continental influences are also strong.

The region carried four main types of vegetation in the nineteenth century. First, there was rainforest, confined mainly to the ranges in the west, as well as at the far end of the valley, and at Cape Hillsborough and nearby mountains—typically, giant red cedars, white beech, tulip oaks, and crow's foot elms with their buttress roots, red stringy bark eucalyptus, and hoop pines. Many of them were between 30 and 45 metres high, forming a tight canopy over the understorey—vine-entangled scrub, ground and tree ferns, and splendid orchids. Harold Finch-Hatton described his view of the thick forest he saw at Mt Spencer pastoral station in the mountains, as he approached the homestead for the first time in 1875:

After about fifteen miles of low ridges and flats, we came to the foot of the main coast range. ... The top of the range was covered with spotted or scented gum, the perfume of which is very strong, and rather like that of a lemon-scented verbena. ... As we emerged from the timber in the paddock onto the large open space in which the station lay, it struck me as one of the most beautiful places I had ever seen. As a rule, on the coastal country the timber is so thick that the lookout is necessarily very limited, and although here and there are very pretty spots, it is very seldom that there is a panorama of any extent worth looking at.³

The second type was tropical woodlands, found throughout the more fertile parts of the region, forming a transition from the upland areas into other sections where the rainfall and soil types are too poor to maintain heavy forests. This area is filled with larger eucalypt species such as bloodwoods, and forest blue or red gums, poplar gums, and swamp mahogany. Stands of tropical woodlands trees still occur along ridges in Cattle Creek Valley

and along hills bordering the lower Pioneer River. The third type was the dominant form in the valley before clearing began: undulating open woodlands occupying the less fertile areas, dominated by bloodwoods, yellow stringy barks, and narrow-leaved iron barks, pandanus (screw) palms, and melaleucas, stands of which remain along the foreshore, along with blue paperbarks in poorly drained coastal areas. Palms and lush vegetation grew along rivers, creeks and billabongs (Plates 1.6, 18–19). In between the trees on the valley floor was low scrub and broad-leaved blady-grass growing up to 6 feet (1.8 m) high, maintained by the Aboriginal people through deliberate annual burning. The fourth type was found on the coastal fringe and in tidal areas where there are many species of mangroves, casuarina or ti-tree forests, Melaleuca paperbarks, and pandanus palms. The river and its tributaries, along with the valley and the ranges and mountains, were an idyllic environment.



Plate 1.5: This is the earliest photograph of the vegetation in the Pioneer Valley. Labelled ‘View of Scrub at Alexandra Plantation’, it was taken in 1866. The area is now an outer suburb of Mackay. The large trees are the red silk cotton tree (*Bombax ceiba*), also known as red kapok. The trees grew around 80 to 100 feet (25 to 30 m) in height and had buttress roots from which the Yuwibara made shields. The palms seen on the left are varieties of the *Seaforthia elegans*, and the Alexandra palm (*Archontophoenix alexandrae*).

Source: Roth 1908, Fig. 6, 22.



Plate 1.6: The original vegetation at Reliance Creek on the north side of the Pioneer River, 1887. Edward M. Long, owner of Habana plantation, is in the foreground.
Source: Roth 1908, Frontispiece.



Plate 1.7: Wiston Hill, Habana, in 1887, showing the original vegetation.
Source: Roth 1908, Fig. 3, 17.

John Spiller, the first settler to plant sugarcane at Mackay in 1865, and the first to crush cane in a primitive mill in 1868, waxed lyrical about the valley:

The soil is a rich, sandy loam, very retentive of moisture, particularly after having being cultivated, and, so far as proved, well adapted to the growth of the sugar-cane. The lands near the rivers and creeks are mostly undulating, whilst some of the plains, being level, require draining The country is well watered with running creeks, lagoons, and swamps, consequently the grasses are very fine; they consist of barley and kangaroo grass, wild oats, and an endless variety of herbs, which both horses and cattle are very fond of. The fattening qualities are best proved by the working bullocks that but lately have crossed the arid burnt-up plains over the range, the sudden change in their condition proving that they have all they want here. The timber is mixed Gum, Moreton Bay ash, Leichhardt, bloodwood, tea-tree, mahogany, and cedar. In the ranges there is a still greater variety, amongst which is stringy bark. The rivers and creeks are fringed with scrubs, containing rattan, innumerable vines, white wood, plums, cherry, and white cedar, and, above all, clusters of beautiful palm-trees, giving the country all the appearance of a tropical and sugar growing district. ⁴

William Archer, from Gracemere pastoral station near Rockhampton, entered the valley for the first time in the 1870s. He wrote glowingly about what he saw when he rode in from the west:

The scenery of the Pioneer River is by far the finest I have seen in Queensland. The river flows over a rocky bed and between high rugged banks in many places overgrown with the thick vine scrubs full of palm trees and other tropical vegetation which form one of the redeeming features of Queensland scenery. ⁵

Harold Finch-Hatton went even further, saying that the scenery in the valley was the best he had seen in Australia:

Mile after mile, day after day, you ride on through the forest, with a tree on average every ten yards. If you keep in the valleys you see nothing but trees, and if you climb a mountain you see nothing but more trees. Here and there you come upon a small open plain, a few hundred yards in extent... . The only change is from white gum-trees on the flats, to black iron-barks on the ridges... . ⁶

There can be no doubt that valley's creeks and river, coastal mangroves, fertile grassed plains, and the rainforest at the end, provided bountiful food and shelter for the Aboriginal population. Piecing together evidence from the nineteenth century, we know the First Nations inhabitants of the district spoke several dialects of one language, which were understood between neighbouring nations. The people were inter-related through kinship, totemism, trade and ceremony. They undertook seasonal and ceremonial movements to obtain different resources in the mountains, in rivers, creeks and mangroves, or to hunt for marine life along the coast.

Climate Change and Migrations

The habitation dates for Australia have continually been pushed back, and population estimates have increased. About 80,000 years ago, the earth began to cool in an ice age, which caused sea-levels to fall far below modern levels. The continental shelf, now marked

by the edge of the Great Barrier Reef, was exposed, rainfall was lower and the environment less welcoming. The ancestors of First Nations Australians are usually said to have been part of the group of anatomically modern humans thought to have migrated ‘out of Africa’ 65,000 to 50,000 years ago, although these dates are under review and may be earlier. Unassailable archaeological and DNA evidence suggests humans have lived in Australia for around 50,000 years, arriving when the current Australia, Tasmania and New Guinea were still one piece of land (Sahul) and the gaps between islands in Southeast Asia and Sahul’s northwest coast were smaller. Archaeologists now routinely suggest that there are human sites in Sahul from 65,000 years ago, with some suggesting up to 120,000 years, which challenges the original ‘out of Africa’ migration dates. However, many of these revisions rely on a single line of evidence, when the most trustworthy evidence uses multiple sources and methods. Only DNA and direct dating of carbon in skeletal remains are fully reliable for use in these time calculations.⁷

There seem to have been two points of entry. The southern route was through Timor and at what is today the Sahul shelf under the Timor Sea, or through what are now the Aru Islands in the Arafura Sea. The northern route is thought to have been through islands off north-west New Guinea, including Halmahera and Seram in the Maluku Islands. Genetic change through time and subsequent movements of people in and around New Guinea have largely obscured all but the most remote genetic links between the descendants of the first colonists of what are now the separate land masses of New Guinea and Australia. Yet, recent analysis shows a notable lack of genomic mitochondrial (genetic) lineages between the people of modern New Guinea and those of what is now Australia and Tasmania.

Flooding of the Arafura basin (now part of the shallow Arafura Sea off the Northern Territory) and what is now the Timor and Banda seas between the north-west shelf off Western Australia and south-west New Guinea occurred about 40,000 years ago. This made southern access more difficult and ended the major land-based genetic link with New Guinea. Up until 14,000 years ago Tasmania was joined to the Australian mainland, and up until about 8,000 years ago New Guinea was still joined to Australia by a swampy isthmus—a land bridge—through what is now eastern Torres Strait. Pollen deposit dates from the Atherton Tableland suggest habitation back 45,000 years. A full but sparse peopling of Sahul could have occurred within as few as 150–200 generations (around 4,000 to 5,000 years). Usual estimates suggest that one million people lived in Australia in the eighteenth century, although some sources suggest more.

Twenty-five to 20,000 years ago, Queensland coastal sea-levels were 130 metres lower than today. Warming resumed 18,000 to 15,000 years ago, and the world-wide retreat of glaciers and ice-caps caused sea levels to rise again. There were regional differences which depended on local geological conditions. Thirteen thousand years ago, the sea-level was still 60 metres lower than today. As sea-levels continued to rise, most of the earlier continental islands were submerged or were reduced in size and became platforms for surrounding reefs. About 10,000 years ago sea-levels were about 30 metres lower than today. The Whitsunday Islands once formed part of a mainland peninsular. Whitsunday Passage—a drowned river valley—separated the peninsular from the mainland. Eight thousand years ago, the shoreline between Cape Conway and Cape Hillsborough, and south past the Pioneer River to the Northumberland Islands, extended out a further 10 to 20 kilometres. The last islands formed 7,000 years ago when sea-levels reached their highest point. Today’s mainland coast stabilised about 2,000 years ago.

The climate 10,000 years ago was broadly like that of today. If the coast around Mackay was inhabited when these large changes took place—and we can presume it was—its people were forced over generations to move further inland as the ocean rose. Many of the earliest coastal habitation sites are now under water. But we should not presume that the same

division of Aboriginal languages and groups obvious in the nineteenth century existed 10,000 or even 5,000 years ago. Human settlement and cultural patterns are never fixed, changing over millennia. Today's global warming and climatic and coastal changes, while significant to our present lives, and in part caused by excesses in modern human technology, have happened before.

There are creation stories from North Queensland which include the making of the present-day Great Barrier Reef and the flooding of coastal plains and valleys which created today's islands, bays, and passages. Between 20,000 and 6,000 years ago, coral reefs grew around the new islands. Although based on older reefs, around 14,000 to 10,000 years ago today's Great Barrier Reef began to grow at the edge of the continental shelf, and rising water levels rapidly flooded the land between there and today's coastline. The rivers carried sediments down to the new coast, and today's beaches emerged, shaped into dunes by winds, and mangroves, with mudflats and wetlands completing the picture. There is evidence of a world-wide dry epoch beginning about 4,250 years ago. Presumably this climatic change would have had some effect on life in what is now Queensland, although hunter-gatherers would have been least affected. If the pattern was like what occurred in other areas of Australia, over the last 3,000 to 2,000 years there was probably an increase of occupation of the floor of the valley, with an even more intense human presence 2,000 to 1,000 years ago. Intensification of island use occurred at the same time, and mangroves were then more extensive around the coast. In the valley, the Yuwibara people caused their own changes to the flora, particularly by burning off grass and shrubs on the valley floor each year prior to the wet season, to encourage regrowth and to aid hunting. This created open grassed woodlands of eucalypts, wattles and paperbarks, and assisted germination of some plants. World-wide, there was also a warmer period (known as the Medieval Climate Anomaly) 1,200 to 800 years ago, and a modern cooler period (the Little Ice Age) 600 to 100 years ago, although the effect in Australia is not clear.

Some links are better thought of as from sojourners rather than settlers. There is clear evidence of an Austronesian presence (a group of migrants out of Asia 5,000 to 3,000 years ago, who continued out into the Pacific down to New Zealand and east to Tahiti and Hawaii). We know that Austronesian migrations into the Pacific travelled along the north and south coasts of New Guinea. Some of their descendants remain along New Guinea's coast and in adjacent archipelagos to the east and west. Although there is little evidence that they came south along the east coast of what is now Queensland, they were great long-distance voyagers and the calm passage between the north-east coast and its reef system would have been no impediment to them. However, there is evidence of large double outrigger canoes with sails, typical of Austronesians, which were used in Torres Strait, and single outrigger canoes were once used along the Queensland coast as far south of the Whitsundays and Cape Hillsborough. The single outrigger variation may have come from the Massim area off east New Guinea. New fishhooks and other marine technology probably accompanied the outrigger canoes, although the new canoes augmented but did not replace Aboriginal tied and sewn bark canoes. Pottery from 2,000 to 3,000 years ago has been found in a midden on Lizard (Jiigurru) Island, 544 kilometres south of the tip of Cape York, with links to the Louisiade Archipelago and possibly the New Georgia Group in the Solomon Islands.

A group of travellers from South-East Asia introduced dingoes about 4,000 to 3,500 years ago, probably initially to the western side of the continent. Any of the longer-term migrations, as well as more recent circular seasonal migrations out of island Southeast Asia, could also have introduced epidemic diseases which would have reduced the level of population. Yaws and smallpox may have entered from Sulawesi or Timor, both close to northern Australia.

We can be guided by what we know happened between 1789 and the 1870s. Smallpox

was introduced into central northern Australia, probably first by visiting Macassan fisherman from Sulawesi. They arrived annually for 400 years beginning in the sixteenth century, their visits halted in 1907 by the South Australia Government (which controlled the Northern Territory between 1863 and 1911). They may have travelled as far east as Torres Strait, although this is conjecture based on loan words in the languages of the Strait. Fishermen sailed back and forth on the monsoon winds, landing between Arnhem Land and probably Torres Strait, or at least the west of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Smallpox epidemics reached the south-east of Australia in 1789–90, in the late 1820s and 1830s, and once more in the 1860s and 1870s there is evidence of the disease in what is now the Northern Territory and Queensland. Although Europeans used preserved smallpox scabs for inoculations, there is no evidence of live smallpox among passengers on the First Fleet in 1788 (there were only 48 deaths on the voyages before the 1,332 people landed), the conclusion being that the epidemic seems to have been slowly moving across the continent, reaching the south-east at about the same time as the British. The coincidence has always seemed to me to be unlikely, although the argument suggests that the disease was probably already active in other eastern regions. (Vaccinations using cowpox scabs were substituted onwards from 1796.)

While the origin of the 1789–90 epidemic can be argued about, the two later epidemics are less ambiguously thought to have arrived with Sulawesi fishermen. Estimates suggest that at least half the east coast Indigenous population died horrible deaths during these epidemics. If this also occurred in the Pioneer Valley and Nebo region, the first European explorers and pastoralists in the 1850s and 1860s were viewing a population halved since the eighteenth century. How the Aboriginal population explained the smallpox scourge is difficult to know, although they may have had residual knowledge of earlier similar epidemics. Perhaps they blamed malevolent spirits or saw it as a visitation sent by troublesome neighbours, which would have increased local tensions. In the 1850s and 1860s, there would still have been strong memories of the 1820s and 1830s deaths, and some evidence of scarring amongst survivors. The mid-century outbreaks were contemporary with first European settlement on the north coast.

Languages and Nations

‘Clans’, ‘hordes’ or ‘bands’ are more accurate descriptive terms than ‘tribes’, as the people lived in small family groups. The use of ‘nation’ has now gained popularity over ‘tribe’, although it carries with it connotations of a larger group. ‘Country’ is another useful word as it more easily shows the complexity of the relationship between humans and their natural environment. In ‘country’, territory and the environment and its humans, animals, birds and other wild creatures are only one part of the meaning. The term also includes languages, as well as a philosophical element encompassing memories imbedded in ‘songlines’ which enabled long distance travel across the land. Recording of knowledge, ceremonies and law is said to date back to the Dreaming—the creation period that provides order to the human universe, and knowledge instructing people on how to live and behave. Country is built of connected networks and includes all living things and inanimate objects and the spirits of the past, offering a passage to the future through the present. Country is a source of knowledge, an alliance of networks of trade and people, of animals and plants, the weather, a place of belonging and a way of believing, and ultimately the Dreaming. There were always overlapping ties between neighbouring nations and established protocols for dealing with strangers. Individuals and groups aligned with each other in a variety of linguistic, spiritual, social, economic, and political ways.

Indigenous Australians did not distinguish themselves from their environment; they participated in it. Indigenous Australians articulated their own visions and realities of the

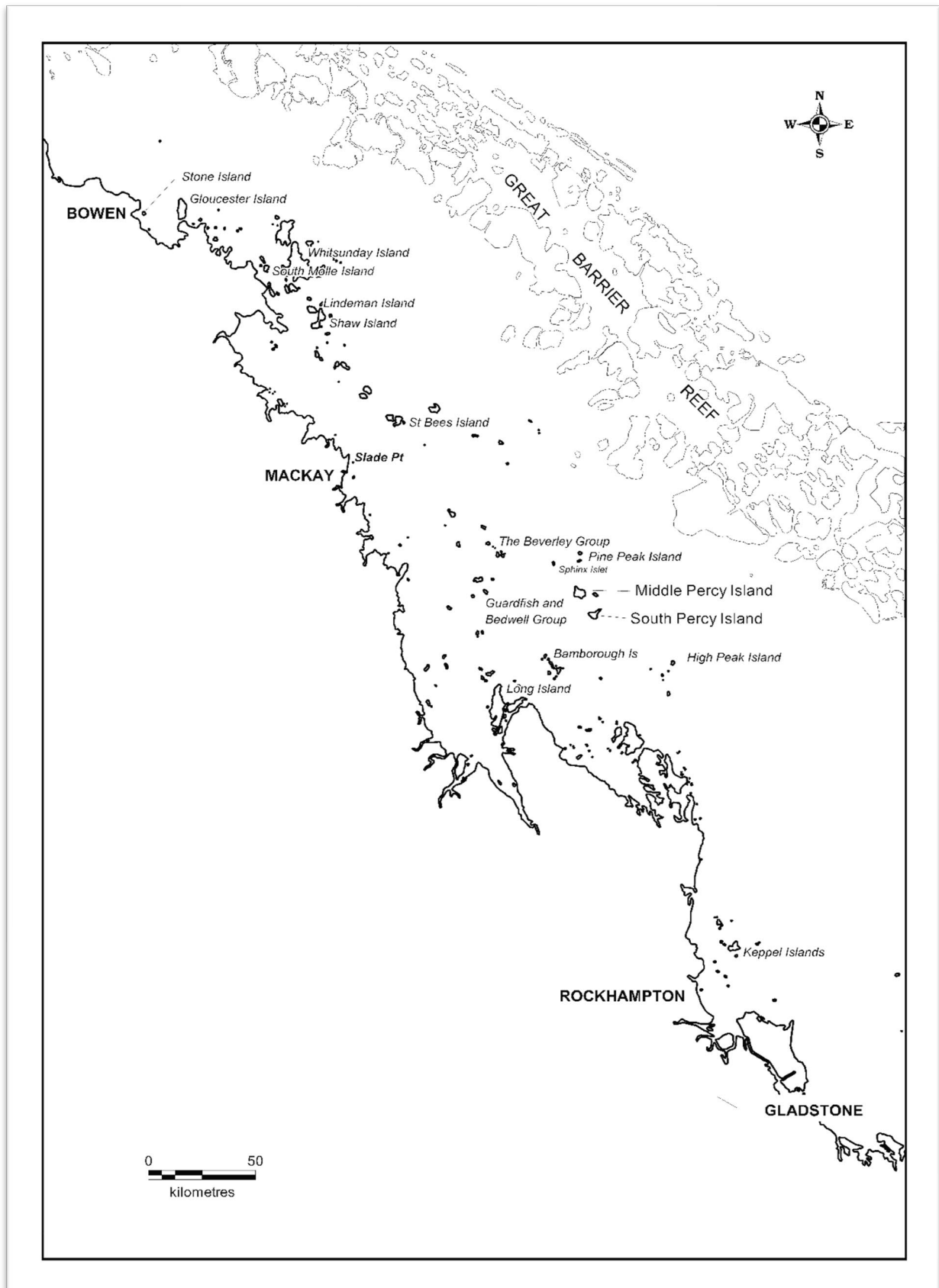
world. The same sense of belonging applies to geographic divisions. With an initial occupation perhaps 65,000 to 50,000 years ago, and a possible 45,000 years of habitation on the north-east coast of Australia, the human presence in the Pioneer Valley and its surrounds is extremely ancient. The long continuous habitation explains the central cultural attachment of First Nations Australians to country. Their cultural Dreaming began long ago and carries through to the present. This sense of belonging is not unique—it also applies to other Pacific peoples whose residence goes back thousands of years—but it always needs to be kept in mind in dealing with First Nations Australians.

Although it is tempting to describe Aboriginal language areas as geographic territories, the speakers of Aboriginal languages and dialects were not physically restricted by clearly defined boundaries. There were about 250 languages, extended by 800 dialects. The names of language/dialect groups vary, depending on which language group describes them. Each clan's name could be expressed a little differently in any of the half dozen languages or dialects in the immediate region. Exact mapping by language names can be misleading as there were also other extensive cultural units. The area surrounding Mackay is within the Birrigubba (also Birri Gubba) region, a larger grouping of nations. The Birrigubba begin at Ross River at Townsville, then extend out to the Great Barrier Reef and south to Gladstone, across to Cherbourg, up to the Galilee Basin, inland north to Charters Towers, and to the coast back at Ross River. There was one large Birrigubba language with dialects covering the area from just south of Charters Towers down to south of Emerald, with a western boundary at the Diving Range from near Pentland to near Eastmere and arching across to near Bedourie. It continued to the coast at Mackay and down to St Lawrence.⁸ The Yuwibara and the Widi spoke dialects of this language. There are many nations and clans within the Birrigubba region with relationships between clans and communities and individuals. They all connected and communicated.

The relationship between the coastal groups and those on the islands is not entirely clear. For instance, the National Native Title Tribunal accepted the claim of the present-day Yuwibara that their water boundary extends out for 20 kilometres. There are more than 120 islands off the coast north and south of Mackay, many of them beyond this 20-kilometre line, some of which were inhabited, and others were visited regularly or irregularly by groups from the mainland. Many of the islands have no permanent water sources and could not have been inhabited permanently. European naming divided the islands into two groups, which does not relate to indigenous patterns of use. Lieutenant James Cook in 1770 gave the name the Cumberland Islands to the 75 islands north of Mackay (down to Keswick, St Bees and Scawfell islands off Cape Hillsborough) and named the 47 islands south of Mackay as the Northumberland Islands. In 1812, Commander Matthew Flinders gave many of the islands alphabetic and number names. Then, between 1868 and 1885, three British naval captains provided all the islands with Cumberland (now Cumbria) and Northumberland (now Northumbria) names, although these were not fully adopted until 1925.

The Ngaro, Giya, Juru, Yuwibara and Koinmerburra nations were marine hunters, gatherers, and skilled navigators, using bark and single-outrigger dugout tree trunk canoes. The Ngaro occupied the Whitsunday Islands between Hayman and Shaw islands, also ranging over the Cumberland Islands down to St Bees and Brampton, on the coast at nearby Cape Conway and into the mountains east of Proserpine. Their relationship with the coastal nations and the people who lived on the Northumberland Islands (the smaller Bedwell, Beverley, Broadsound, Duke, Flat, Guardfish, and Percy Groups) beginning off Hay Point near Sarina and stretching south to Broadsound, needs further clarification. As the islands adjoin the coastal Giya, Yuwibara and Koinmerbura language areas, and those of the Darambal people further south, their inhabitants probably related closely to each of these groups, although it has been argued that there was more frequent movement between island

groups than between the islands and the mainland.



Map 1.3: The Coastal Islands between Bowen and Gladstone.

Source: Rowland 2020, modified.

Archaeologist Michael Rowland's research into the coast and islands allows us to piece together a picture of habitation of the islands north and south of Mackay. The people's canoes were mostly made from three pieces of sewn bark, although occasionally they also used single out-riggers and dugout canoes. Evidence from Bryce Baker's research suggests travel to South Molle Island in the Whitsundays was occurring 9,000 years ago, and evidence from the Percy Islands suggests that 3,000 years ago trips were being made from the mainland 50 kilometres away, probably by island-hopping, with 27 kilometres the largest gap. Hook Island, then still part of the mainland, and Border Island, both in the Whitsunday Group, were inhabited 8,000 years ago. Shore- and island-based targeted hunting of turtles and dugong was occurring 6,000 years ago. Ian McNiven's research at Otterbourne Island, 26 kilometres off Shoalwater Bay, next to Broadsound, suggests occupation there 5,200 years ago, and 4,500 years ago on North Keppel Island near Yeppoon. There may have been more intensive occupation onwards from about 3,500 years ago when growth in coral reefs and mangroves provided a good habitat for green turtles, creating a better resource base. Permanent habitation of some islands is likely to have occurred as recently as the last 1,000 years.

Rowland searched through early European records relating to the Percy Islands. Some early European observers, such as Matthew Flinders in 1812, and Philip Parker King in 1819, noted the presence of Aboriginal people but made few contacts. The next recorded sightings seem to be by the crew of the brig *Percy* in 1847, who noted fires, and by the crew of the HMS *Rattlesnake* in the same year, when old fireplaces were found. Two ship-wrecked men, who spent several weeks there in 1849, mentioned contact in what may have been the Beverley Group opposite Hay Point. In 1854, there was an incident concerning a ketch called the *Vision*, and a subsequent naval visit from HMS *Torch*. There were at least 21 Aboriginal people living in the Percy Islands, including men, women, and young children. There were gunyas (huts made from wood and bark) in the interior, and the crew of the *Torch* destroyed three canoes and stole several boomerangs, clubs, and a tomahawk. Presumably, this incident indicates a permanent or at least long-staying population.

In 1859, George Dalrymple found signs of fireplaces in the Percy Group but no permanent population, suggesting that the islands were only visited during hunting seasons, particularly to obtain turtles. Over seven weeks in the early 1860s (probably about 1861) pastoralist John B. Macartney visited many of the islands. He claimed to have seen 150 Aboriginal people on a beach in the Percy Group.

There is no other area in Australia where the people travelled as far offshore in canoes without island-hopping, for instance, as was possible in Torres Strait. The easiest access is from Cape Palmerston, Broadsound and Shoalwater Bay. Middle Percy Island is 85 kilometres away from the mainland and 40 kilometres from the Guardfish and Bedwell islands, a long way in a bark canoe or on a raft, but not an impossible distance. One nineteenth century source suggests the coastal canoes were substantial enough to venture to the Percy and other Northumberland Islands, and even to the Barrier Reef.⁹ Most of the Whitsunday Islands to the north are closer inshore and to each other. Early European evidence recorded fires all year round, a corroboree site on Whitsunday Island, a ceremonial bora ring (a religious site, usually for initiation), and rock paintings on Hook Island, and shell middens on St Bees, Brampton, and Carlisle (all close to each other and to the Pioneer Valley). Middle Percy Island, Marble Island in the Duke Group, and Wild Duck Island were similarly inhabited, the latter containing sites where stone artefacts had been manufactured. Shell artefacts—scrapers and fish-hooks—were in common use. Several of the islands (for instance Whitsunday, Hazlewood, Hayman, Hamilton, Shaw, Cid, Hook, Dent, and St Bees) have permanent springs of water and there is no doubt that Whitsunday Island, the largest, had a permanent population. The islands had a range of vegetation and animal and bird life,

as well as marine creatures and other resources. Fish, turtles, dugong, crustaceans, shellfish, and birds were in plentiful supply, and, with the mainland close by, other needs could be gathered along the coast. Access to fresh water, the distance offshore, and flimsy watercraft were the limiting factors on permanent habitation.

Skin Systems and Spiritual Beliefs

The Widi and Yuwibara regions had a ‘skin system’ made up of two moieties each divided into two ‘skins’ (a total of four). The system included all peoples, plants and animals. Some of the totemic practices were related. Members of particular ‘skins’ were prohibited from killing or eating totemic animals, and ‘skin’ names could be used to address individuals. A person’s skin also determined who they could marry. Anthropologist Daniel Leo described the Widi system:

...a man had to marry a woman from the opposite moiety; and, of that moiety’s two skins, one corresponded to his wife’s generation. whereas the other would be the skin of their children together (and in this way the system repeated down the generations). This highly rule-bound system also provided a framework for intermarriage not only among neighbouring Bara Groupings, but also those located many hundreds of kilometres apart. Observance of such a skin system increasingly diminished over the 1900s, although certain related practices, such as personal and family totems, and the requirement of marry the ‘right way’, continue to this day.¹⁰

According to the late Graham Mooney, a Yuwibara man, there are five ‘skin’ groups among the Yuwibara: the Yuwi (in the Mackay urban area and mainly north of the Pioneer River); the Kungabarara (beginning at Baker’s Creek and south to Sarina); the Toolginbarara (in the Eton and Connor’s Range area); the Gurrabarara (in the upper Pioneer Valley area around Mirani and Netherdale); and the Googabarara or Ngaro (on the Whitsunday and other Cumberland Islands). Googabarara is used in nineteenth century records as an alternative name for the Ngaro. However, the application to the National Native Title Tribunal and the judgement stops at Midge Point, which is the northern Yuwibara boundary in most descriptions, adjoining the Juwi, and where the Yuwibara offshore boundary begins. The coastal Newry Islands just north of Seaforth Beach are part of the Yuwibara Native Title claim.

Population

My calculation is that the Pioneer Valley and its coastal surrounds could easily have carried a population of 2,500 to 3,000 in the 1850s and 1860s. Based on conversations with old-timers during the first half of the twentieth century, local historian Ken Manning came up with a similar estimate.¹¹ The plains and valleys of the vast Nebo-Eungella region were probably home to about the same numbers as in the valley. Calculating the population on the islands is difficult. They are generally more barren than the surrounding coast. Estimates based on the length of coastlines, not the size of the islands, suggest that the Whitsundays carried a reasonably high population, and overall, the islands were an important part of the lives of Aboriginal people of the region, probably more so than in any other area of mainland Australia, except for the islands of Torres Strait.

The size of the population can only be recreated from fragments of information. Based on historical estimates, a useful benchmark is Raymond Evans’ calculation that the 1840s to 1850s population of the similar size greater Brisbane region—north to Kilkooy and

west into the Lockyer Valley beyond Ipswich, and south to the Logan River—was around 5,000. Similarly, it seems reasonable to suggest that 4,500 to 5,000 was the lower bound of the 1850s population in the Nebo and Mackay districts, and along the coast north and south of the Pioneer River between Cape Conway and Cape Palmerston.

Eye-witness reports of the size of individual Aboriginal groups usually suggested numbers of no more than a few hundred, and often much smaller, around 30 to 50 people. A variety of reports give exact numbers. We know from 1863 evidence that 100 Aboriginal males visited the Mackay hamlet, and presumably similar numbers of women and children were close by. In 1865, John E. Davidson came across a camp with 19 gunyahs, which he called ‘lodges of bark’, on the bank on Sandy Creek. In 1867, acting Sub-Inspector Johnstone reported 200 people camped on the north side of the river. Edward Denman at Etowrie (near Habana), also on the Northside, remembered a corroboree at nearby Inverness plantation in 1874, attended by 400 Aboriginal people, although they may have come from a wide distance. In 1880, one Barada Bama (Burton Downs to Moranbah area) group numbered 100: 40 men, 40 women, and 20 children. One of the several 1880s photographs of Aboriginal people from the Pioneer Valley includes 38: 14 men, 13 women, and 12 children (Plate 1.21). There were others living in the less developed western end of the valley, and south of present-day Sarina, with significant numbers to the north of the Pioneer, around Reliance Creek, Bucasia, Shoal Point, Cape Hillsborough, and St Helens Creek (near Calen). Before regular contact with Europeans, hundreds lived on islands off the coast, and large numbers lived on the plains surrounding Nebo, as well as in the mountain ranges and on Eungella Plateau. If numbers had been reduced by earlier disease epidemics before a physical European presence in the region, the population may once have been much higher.

We can also draw conclusions from four colonial institutions: the Native Police, and three Mackay district reserves/missions. There were enough Aboriginal people living around Bloomsbury (on the border between the Yuwibara and the Juwi) to warrant keeping a Native Police barracks operating there from the mid-1860s until 1880, along with the Native Police base near Nebo, which operated between the early 1860s and 1878. Another indication is the formation in 1871 of Queensland’s largest early government-sponsored Aboriginal Reserve on the coast south of Mackay between Bakers and Sandy creeks, as well as the Bucasia Catholic orphanage begun in 1876, and a proposed Catholic mission reserve gazetted in the same year north of Mackay at Cape Hillsborough, designed to be home to 1,000 people. Their size—the Baker’s Creek and Cape Hillsborough reserves each of about 14,000 acres (5,665 ha), and the 3,000-acre Bucasia orphanage—must in part have been decided based on the needs of estimated population numbers. In the mid-1870s, Frank Bridgman had at least 300, and sometimes more, Aboriginal people under his care, either on the Bakers Creek reserve, or on his Homebush pastoral station nearby. In the early 1870s, the figure included another 100 or so, who were working for sugarcane and tobacco planters. Others visited the reserve and Homebush periodically, although they still lived from hunting and gathering in the more isolated areas of the valley, or the mountains close to what is now Sarina.

Historical accounts suggest the population of the Giya and Ngaro coastal and island nations was substantial. Many of the islands were inhabited, at least seasonally, and although they shared a marine economy with their neighbours on the coast, these populations could be differentiated from the mainland populations by their dialects, as well as their cultural practices. In 1949, Ken Manning had the good fortune to talk to Billy Mugeru, an elderly Aboriginal man from Whitsunday Island, who had been a retainer of Captain Angus Nicholson, an early settler on Lindeman Island. Manning asked Mugeru about the Aboriginal people who had lived on the islands and the adjacent coast before Europeans arrived. He said Whitsunday and Hazlewood islands were ‘all plenty full up’ and described Hayman and Hamilton islands populations as ‘not many plenty’. With great enthusiasm he referred to the

mouths of St Helen's Creek, and the O'Connell and Proserpine rivers as 'all more plenty full up'. To some extent this oral testimony equates with archaeological evidence. Rowland estimated there may have been 400 Aboriginal people living on the Cumberland Islands. We know less about the more southerly Northumberland Islands between Mackay and Broadsound, although 1840s to 1860s reports from the Percy Islands note an Aboriginal population of around 20, who used bark canoes. Estimates of the Keppel Islands population further south suggest 85 inhabitants. Evidence from European explorers onwards from Cook in 1770 indicates clan or hoard-sized groups inhabited various islands on a year-round basis and lived on others during seasons covering several months. Root crops and marine resources dominated their diets.

The high fertility of the soils, its well-watered terrain, plus the equally well-watered areas in and directly over the ranges, suggests the Pioneer Valley and the region to the west would have carried a large population. The people around Nebo, in the valley, and on the surrounding coast and island groups, were inter-related through language, kinship, totemism, trade, ceremony, and songlines. Seasonal movements between the inland plains, the mountains and the coast, and kin relationships, would have seen many of these groups moving through the valley on established tracks. Early Europeans also utilised these tracks in their explorations.

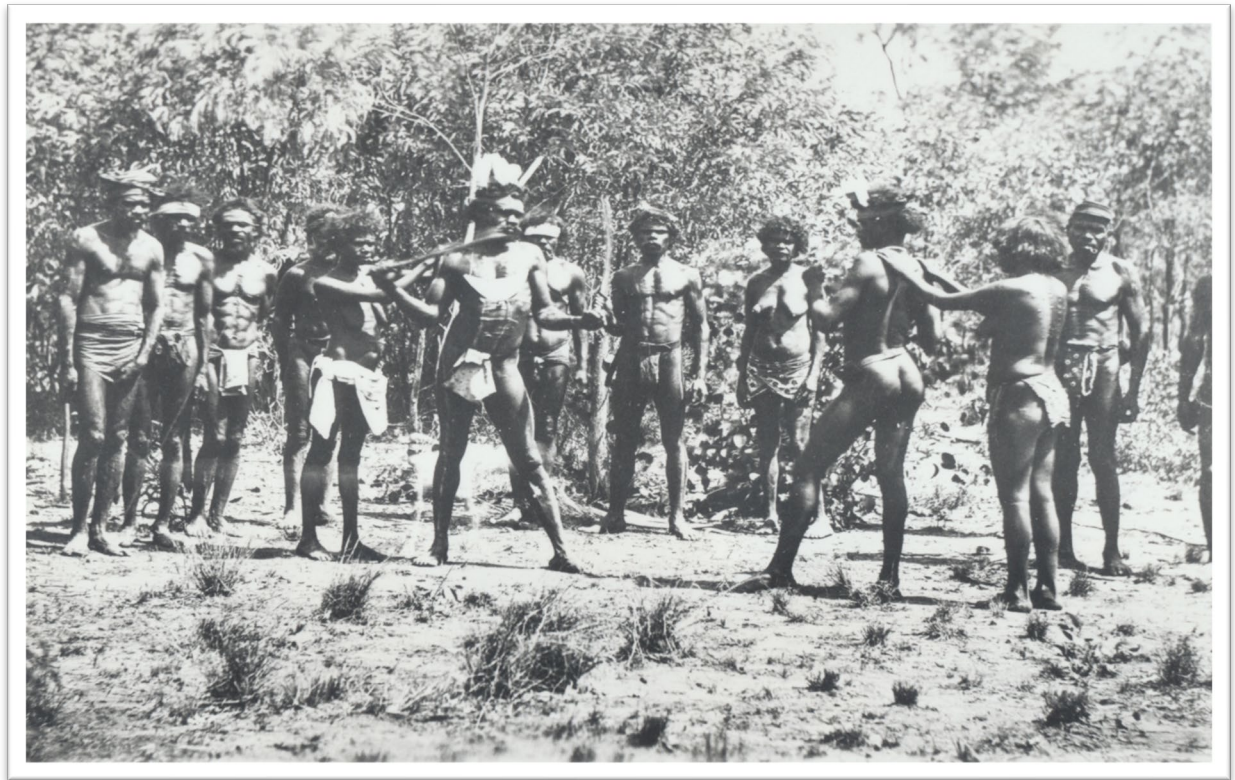


Plate 1.8: Thirteen Aboriginal people at Mackay, ca. 1880. The breast plate worn by the man posed with a club is presumably of European origin and signifies his status as a leader.

Source: Clive Moore Collection; and State Library of Queensland.

Material Culture

The Mackay-Eungella area is on the dividing line between the Aboriginal inhabitants of the northern rainforest and people further south. The material culture of the region shows an

amalgamation of the styles of the rainforest people further north alongside artefacts more typical of southern Queensland. The Nebo area equated more with the southern areas, whereas the mountains, the high plateau, and the west of the Pioneer Valley, had more in common with the rainforest people between Hopevale and Ingham.

Given the high level of destruction of the Aboriginal population between the 1860s and 1880s, much of what is written here only comes from European sources and artefacts in museums. Their artefacts were made from animal skins and bones, ochre, plant fibre, wood, stone, shells, and teeth. The centuries-old grasstrees with their central spear-like spikes were used to manufacture resin-adhesives for canoes, and in spear-making. Beeswax was also used for its binding qualities. Sewn possum or wallaby skin cloaks were used, particularly to combat the cold of the high mountains. In most places cold was not an issue and bodies remained naked, or with scant adornment.

Stone was integral to their material culture, and it survives where other material used have decayed and disappeared. The area north of the Pioneer River and into the St Helens-Calén area was a favourite hunting ground for the Yuwibara and Giya. In the 1970s, Ken Manning, a long-time farmer at Kolijo near Calén, told me of conversations he had had with locals back over 40 years, and his own research for his history of Farleigh mill. The area, some of the richest agricultural land in the district, initially became part of the four St Helen's pastoral runs. Later, when land was being cleared to plant cane around Cameron's Pocket, Barron Pocket, Wewak and Kolijo, Manning saw plentiful evidence of stone axes, rubbing stones, chipped artefacts and residual pieces. There was also evidence of permanent First Nations habitation in the coastal reaches of many creeks. Manning found large amounts of rubbed and chipped hard blue metal stones in concentrated patches on farms around Kolijo, where the naturally occurring stones are of a softer shale type. This suggests stone for tools was transported from elsewhere to have finishing touches added.

John (Jack) Williams, another Mackay local historian, whose investigations dated back to the 1930s, was a collector of Aboriginal artefacts, some inherited from his father. In the 1970s, he told me there were many imported stone deposits at various sites around the district. Back in 1989 when I first saw it, part of the Mirani Museum's collection was a 44-gallon drum full of stone axes collected by Williams. In her book on Jack Williams' life, his wife Jean mentions a tool-making site they visited on the bank of Frenchman's Springs on Homevale station near Mount Britton. Some of the stone artefacts were highly polished and the stone was not local. On Eungella Plateau, Williams found a wedge-shaped two-kilogram stone tool, and grinding-stones, evidence of use of seeds for flour. Flaked stone axes were located on Eungella station, made from a fine-grained metamorphic rock found there, with similar artefacts at close-by Mount Britton, and at Burton Downs station near Lake Elphinstone. Quartzite boulders all through the area were a source of scrapers and choppers. Jean Williams also confirmed that the coast from Shoal Point to Bucasia Beach, and further north around Cape Hillsborough was a source of waisted hammerstones weighing up to two kilograms, and pounders and scrapers. The beach from Shoal Point to Bucasia was once a heavily used Aboriginal campsite with ready access to fresh water, plentiful wildlife on the surrounding flats, ducks in the swamps, and a bounteous seacoast. There was also local grey-green diorite for stone toolmaking, and evidence of grinding stones. Other similar artefacts have been found inland around Mts Jukes and Blackwood, and at Devereaux Creek at Mt De Moleyns, in the valley of Cattle Creek in the west of the Pioneer Valley (not far from Marian), and at Dundula near Baker's Creek. This would seem to indicate that the rainforest, open forest, and the coast—particularly the lush river and creek environs throughout the district—provided a comfortable environment for Aboriginal people, and that long-distance trade was underway.

Aside from stone items, First Nations people used a range of material objects. There

were spears for fishing and fighting, clubs, swords and shields, boomerangs, digging sticks, nets, canoes, water containers and water-tight baskets, dilly bags, cloaks, and string. Spears and boomerangs were the most common weapons in open areas. Throwing clubs, pointed at both ends, and axes (later replaced by steel tomahawks) were used for close-range fighting and could also be hurled from a distance. Body decorations used scarification, and ochre, feathers, bone, shells, and teeth. Women made mesh dilly bags from bush fibre, also using the sewn inner bark of bottle trees for twine and netting.

Henry Roth's 1908 book *The Discovery and Settlement of Port Mackay* uses Frank Bridgman's 1880s descriptions of weapons, presumably adopting terminology from the valley or around Nebo. Bridgman notes that boomerangs (*wongala*) and spears were in use, as were large wooden swords (*bittergan*) and shields (*goolmarry*), and barbed spears carved out of one piece of wood, more typical of the northern rainforest region. Boomerangs were not suitable for use in heavy scrub or in rainforests.¹² Harpoons were used to catch bigger fish, dugongs, and turtles. Bridgman describes the double-pointed club-like killing sticks, known as *meero*, which could be thrown accurately over about 10 metres. They were also used for digging and loosening ground to find tubers and yams, and for searching for larvae in decayed tree trunks. Hunting weapons were cruder than ceremonial weapons, or those used to fight with other Aboriginal groups. The *bittergan* and *goolmarry* were typically used in close-quarter fighting, although Bridgman's Mackay-Nebo area examples are smaller than those from further north.

The wooden sword described by Bridgman was 2 feet 11 inches (89 cm) in length and 2.6 inches (6.9 cm) broad, coloured with a vivid red pigment and snake-like grey ornamentation in white clay at its end. It weighed 3.5 pounds (1.16 kg) and was wielded with two hands, swung over the back and forward over the shoulders to strike an opponent, either on the upper back to break their neck, or onto their head (Plates 1.1, 1.9 Fig. 48). The shields (Plates 1.1, 1.9, Fig. 50) were engraved on the fronts and backs with shallow incised lines in patterns depicting animals. The spaces at the ends were painted white. The backs were also painted and patterned, nearly flat with the handles cut out of the solid wood. Figures, usually of reptiles, and coloured white, were drawn on each shield. The spaces were marked with incised lines painted red. The sample in Bridgman's possession was 20 inches (51.4 cm) long, 7 inches (17.7 cm) wide and weighed 2.3 pounds (1.02 kg). Four shields from the district, sold at a Southeby's auction in the 2000s, appear to be very similar (Plate 1.10–13),¹³ as are five shields collected near Mackay, held by the Queensland Museum.

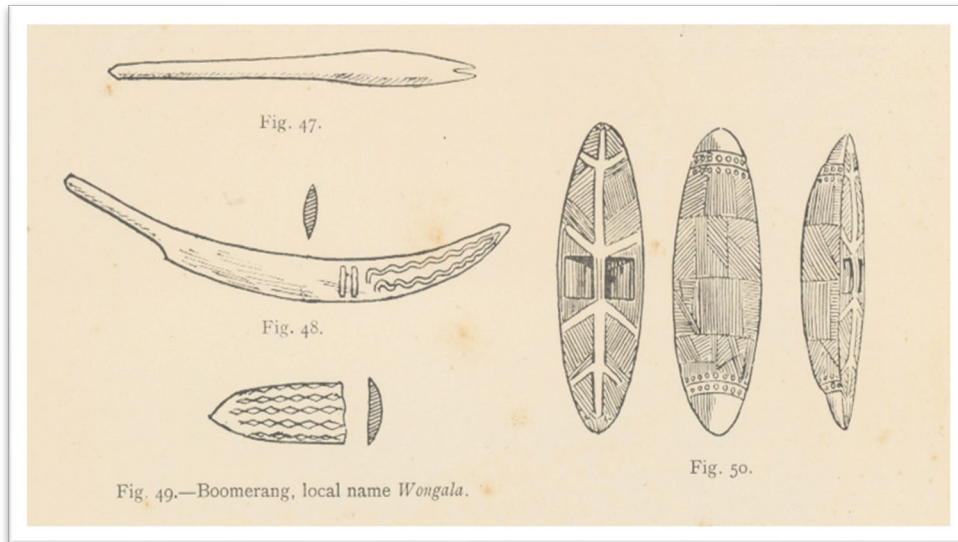


Plate 1.9: Aboriginal artefacts described by Henry L. Roth in his book.
Source: Roth 1908, 79.





Plates 1.10–13: These shields are from the Mackay region. The bottom images are the front and back of the same shield, showing the handgrip.

Source: Courtesy of *Sotheby's Important Aboriginal Art*, Melbourne, 2007.

On the coast, decorated single-piece canoe paddles and fishing and harpoon lines attached to three-pronged barbed spear heads were in constant use, as were nets and stone fish traps. Purse nets were used, formed of two wooden semi-circles hinged at the ends. Shell fishhooks were used all through the islands. Stone was obtained from quarries, and based on Manning's and the Williams' information, worked stone was being traded over long distances. There was a quarry on South Molle Island; stone from there was carried to other islands and along the coast for 170 kilometres. Cape Hillsborough was another coastal source of stone for tool manufacture. Stone axes made from black tuff (hard volcanic rock) and quartz veins were being flaked and shaped. Archaeologists have found a decrease in discards from stone tools over the last 3,000 years which may indicate they were completed in the quarry sites, not removed in a raw state, although this conflicts with Manning's evidence from around Koliyo. Turtle-shell was also used for scrapers, utilising a common coastal resource.

Houses and Camps

House styles depended on the environment and its resources. The people usually lived in temporary light paperbark structures, often called gunyahs, walled with bark over wooden frames, some balanced around small trees used as ridgepoles. There is evidence from other parts of Queensland of two-level gunyahs, constructed so that people did not have to sleep on the ground during the wet season. In other areas of Australia there were permanent substantial structures made from stone and wood daubed with mud baked into place. Evidence from Far North Queensland suggests rainforest communities similar to those at Eungella have existed for around 8,000 years. The rainforest people used more substantial semi-permanent structures with frames and triple layers of cladding topped with palm fronds. Where large heavy nets were in use to trap birds and fish, there were usually more permanent homes, as the nets were difficult to carry far. Aboriginal people understood the wild creatures

of their countries, raising various animals and birds in their camps as pets and travelling with them. These included young dingoes, possums, wallabies, brolga, emu, and cassowary chicks, lizards and snakes, and butcherbirds, or ‘talking’ birds like cockatoos or parrots. Fire was carried around as they travelled or could be begun again using a hand drill twirled onto a lower stick to create an ember.

Canoes and Hafted Axes

There are some mysteries about the material culture of the region; the first relates to the styles of canoes in use. Almost all descriptions are of bark canoes. This 1860 report from Percy Islands south of Mackay is typical:

Dense clouds of smoke rose from the fires of the natives on the W[est], side of the island... Blacks were seen on the beach carrying their canoes out of the water into the thickets. They then ascended the hills and saluted us with wild cries as we proceeded to our anchorage. We landed in the whaleboats on the western islands, the natives awaiting our approach on the beach, but taking again to the hills when we neared the shore. Some very neat bark canoes were found close to the beach, and another was seen paddled by a native at the opposite end of the harbour. They are formed of three sheets of bark taken from a Eucalyptus: are about 8 feet long, 3½ feet broad, and 20 inches deep; are pointed and turned up at both ends, and are neatly and strongly sewn together with a long, tough, cane-like creeper. Two cross sticks between the gunwales keep the whole in form. In each canoe was a very neatly made paddle, ornamented with a cross of red paint, or raddle, on the blade. Several large shells to hold water or to bail out, a piece of *Vanda Ceruliensis* [a terrestrial orchid] of about 6 inches long (purpose unknown), a long coil of fishing line, very neatly made, probably from the Pandanus palm leaf, and to which was attached a spear head about 5 inches in length, neatly barbed and pointed with a very hard and sharp fish bone. These spear heads are fitted into a socket in the end of a long spear, which the blacks throw from their canoes with considerable precision into dugong, turtle, or other large fish.¹⁴

However, there were also occasional sightings of a different style of canoes using single out-riggers—a Pacific innovation and in this case presumably inspired from New Guinea via Torres Strait. Out-riggers were used on Torres Strait canoes and down the coasts of Cape York. Reports from further south are rare. There is an 1840s report of a fleet of what may have been New Guinea canoes travelling inside the reef near Cairns. Lieutenant James Cook and others on the voyage of the *Endeavour* reported seeing one out-rigger canoe in June 1770 in the Whitsundays. Cook recorded that ‘on a sandy beach upon one of the islands we saw two people and a canoe with an out-rigger that appeared to be both larger and differently built to any we have seen on the coast’.¹⁵ Another report comes from the ship’s artist on HMS *Fly* in 1843, who sketched a single out-rigger canoe off Cape Hillsborough, close to Mackay (Plate 1.15). Michael Rowland concluded that changes had probably occurred in watercraft types used along the Queensland coast over the last few thousand years. If the users were residents of the Cumberland Islands and Cape Hillsborough, why did the different technology not spread and appear alongside or replace the single-hull canoes? Based on arguments used by anthropologist Peter Sutton, could it be that these technological changes were not legitimised through established spiritual pathways, and therefore not fully incorporated into local culture? Clearly, they were not necessary for reaching the islands to the north and south of Mackay, which had been accomplished for thousands of years using single-hull bark canoes.

Another mystery from the region is the manufacture of waisted axes (indented around

the middle, for hafting) more typical of New Guinea technology, although this generic name may include artefacts with other uses. The Pioneer Valley waisted axes (Plate 1.14) are thought to be an independent development.



Plate 1.14: Waisted or hafted axe heads from the Pioneer Valley.
Source: Mirani Museum, 1989. Photograph in the Clive Moore Collection.



Plate 1.15: A single out-rigger canoe at Cape Hillsborough, seen by the crew of HMS *Fly* in 1843. A painting by Edwin Augustus Porcher.

Source: Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, Pictorial Collection, R5073.

Food and Water

Plant foods typically accounted for 30 to 50 percent of diets. The recent publication of *Dark Emu* by Bruce Pascoe has created a new myth; that First Nations people were incipient agriculturalists—simple farmers who often lived in large village communities. Pascoe has been rightly criticized by Sutton, Walshe, O'Brien, and others, for shoddy and misleading scholarship. First Nations Australians are still best described as complex hunter-gatherers, although this may give the impression that they did not manage their environments. Actually, there is a beautiful deep symmetry in the way they lived with and shaped their environments. Perhaps a better way is to describe them as managers and shapers of the land and coast over thousands of years. Peter Sutton provides an excellent summary. His stress is on 'positive spiritual propagation': that 'elementary forces of life' come from the Dreaming, 'the spiritual ground of being. They are not created by human ingenuity. Humans can only stimulate the emergence of such latent powers in the cyclical regrowth of plants and animals, and in the supply of rain.'¹⁶

Hunting and gathering in pre-colonial Australia required fine-grained knowledge of hundreds of species and their habitats, annual cycles, names and generic classifications; of methods for processing them and for preparing them as food, as tools, as bodily decoration, and as ritual paraphernalia. It requires what repeatedly seemed to colonial newcomers to be almost supernatural eyesight, seeing things in the far distance or among foliage that no colonial could see.

Allied to this, it required the ability to track game using often infinitesimal traces left on the ground or in foliage. It required tremendous spatial and narrative memory, of the kind many of us now have very much lost through reliance on paper maps, written records and Google Maps. It required high skills in lithics (stone tool manufacture) in order to reveal from within the rough stone the elegant tools now found in museums and in the bush. And it required deft and precise skills in using weapons and welding digging stocks, nets, lures and traps. Spearing fish required the ability to calculate instantly how refraction through water needed to be corrected for during the throw...¹⁷

The nineteenth century landscape was rich with foods, and fire was used to stimulate regrowth, regenerate land, create grasslands, and to drive animals for capture. They also had other systems of land and sea management, including construction of large fish traps and weirs on the mainland and islands. There is evidence of plant exploitation and manipulation, ensuring yams, roots and grains were available through maintenance of plants, but not agriculture, which entails larger-scale cultivation of plants as domesticated species. Vegetable, fruit, and seed use was seasonal, and seed germination was provoked by seasonal burning. Often, they left parts of plants to regrow, ensuring availability at a future time. Many colonists, only viewing the Aboriginal people after disruption and decimation, found it easy to believe that they just foraged for food. Partly, it was European lack of observation. Partly, it was the inability (and the lack of need or desire) of Aboriginal people to reshape their philosophical relationship with the environment, which was being rapidly transformed by Europeans. It also became a justification for Europeans as to why First Nations Australians were destined to be replaced as custodians of the land by European immigrants.

Some surplus foods were stored—harvested yams last for several month, some foods were processed, and large gatherings could be catered for with prior planning. What we now call

‘bush tucker’ was everyday food, usually located within their local country, although it is also likely that groups visited neighbours to obtain seasonal items, or during droughts or other emergencies. The Yuwibara in the valley lived in a rich environment and in good seasons food was plentiful. As a general pattern, women and children fished and gathered vegetables, birds, smaller animals, and shellfish. Men dealt with the larger animals, birds, and sea creatures.

We can put together a detailed picture of the prolific wild-life available, using descriptions by early European explorers and settlers. In 1844, Ludwig Leichhardt and his party were the first foreigners we know of to travel inland through what became central and north Queensland. On the Comet River his party disturbed an Aboriginal camp where a meal was being prepared. It included bush turkey eggs, roasted possums, bandicoots and lizards, supplemented by tubers and roots. Based on use of words and what he thought was a European-style structure, Leichhardt concluded there had been some previous contact with Europeans. He believed that a White man or a ‘half-caste’ had lived with them. At another site he found a tomahawk made from the head of an iron hammer, surmising it had been traded in from the coast.

European descriptions of shooting expeditions around Mackay and Nebo give us some idea of the bird life available to the First Nations Australians, and a few early photographs provide images of the 1860s and 1870s environment. John Spiller, resident in the Pioneer Valley from 1865 until the mid-1880s, described a lagoon on his Pioneer plantation on the Northside of the Pioneer River:

The wild fowl shooting in the old days was particularly good, and big bags could have been made, there being hundreds of ducks and other game on this lagoon. At first I used it as a larder, never having more than one shot, and always getting two birds I did not go in for big bags on this water, but always protected the birds, and finally allowed no shooting whatever. Besides ducks and geese, there were numbers of other birds, i.e., Snipe, Plover, Egrets, Spoonbill Cranes, Giant Cranes, Native Companions [Brolgas] and Pelicans, and many of the smaller birds, the Sandpiper in particular.¹⁸



Plate 1.16: Spiller’s Lagoon on Pioneer plantation, 1880. Birds can be seen along the shore and in the water. The mill is shown on the far right.

Source: State Library of Queensland.

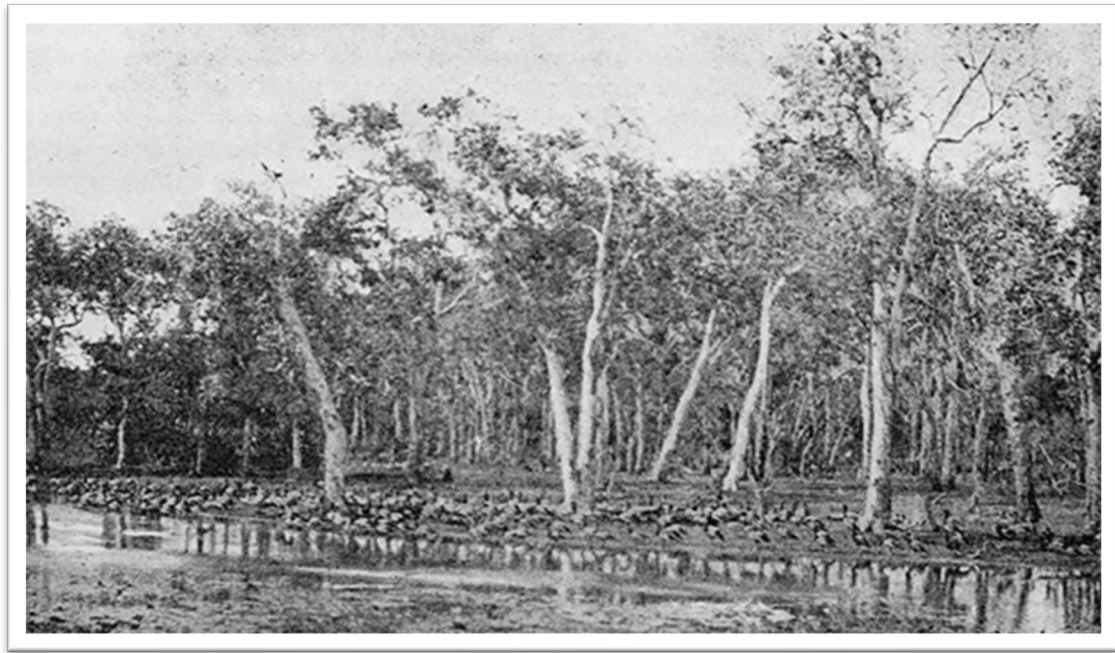


Plate 1.17: A closer image of the shore of Spiller's Lagoon on Pioneer plantation, 1875, showing the prolific bird life.

Source: Roth 1908, 83, photo taken by E.J. Welch.

Another early resident, Harold Finch-Hatton, was co-owner of Mt Spencer pastoral station on flat well-watered land surrounded by mountains on the south-western outskirts of the Pioneer Valley. He provided a long description of his shooting expeditions, claiming that two or three shooters could bag 50 to 120 birds in one day. Here, he describes the bird life on the large lagoon in front of the Mt Spencer homestead:

Hundreds of water-fowl of every description were dotted over the expanse of the lagoon, the ducks now and then rising up in flights, and passing over the station to a swamp at the back. Rows of solemn-looking white egrets were sitting on the fences, running out into the water, or stalking about amongst the reeds; and high overhead a solitary pelican was wheeling round in circles, with wings outstretched and motionless. Now and again a flock of whistlers would rise up with a tremendous clatter and excitement out of the rushes, as if they were frightened out of their wits, and then, after going for a fly round, settle again close to where they started from....

On the far side of the lagoon the smoke of a Black's camp was rising up through the trees...¹⁹

Finch-Hatton also knew the Pioneer River well:

The river itself is a succession of deep black holes of beautifully clear water, some of them nearly a mile in length, with long rock rapids between them.

The track wound along the banks for some miles, and every now and then we pulled up to admire some more than usually beautiful reach, where the water was turned to gold in the evening sunlight, and the dim blue mountains showed up through the forest beyond. Swarms of ducks of every description were paddling about in the pools, and sunning

themselves on the rocks and sandbanks.²⁰

First Nations people used brushwood fences and nets to catch birds around waterholes, bagging large numbers.

There were also fresh water and sea fish, bivalves, crustaceans and eels of all types and sizes, dugongs, turtles, and crocodiles and sharks at the larger end of the scale. Lakes, creeks and rivers and the coast all provided food. Fresh and salt-water crocodiles were plentiful in the Pioneer River and its tributaries, some of the latter type growing to awesome sizes. Catching and eating marine life was relatively effective in terms of the contribution of marine foods to coastal diets (10 to 30 percent) measured against the physical exertion needed (6 to 17 percent) to procure them. Whiting, bream, flathead, snapper, grunter, and cod were available off the coast, along with red emperor and sweet lip, with large barramundi perch, threadfin salmon, and mangrove jack found in the estuaries. Bivalves, including trochus shells, nerites, mussels, and oysters were easily available. Shell middens and rock fish traps existed on many of the islands, coastal beaches and in estuaries, although lack of maintenance during the last century has caused many to erode. There were large middens of fresh-water shells at west Mirani and at Mt Dalrymple, with others known to have been at Habana, Bucasia, and at Noblers Creek on the way to Cape Hillsborough. Evidence from middens excludes soft-skeleton and friable-shell creatures which disintegrate quickly, skewing the sample. The First Nations people used nets, lines, fishhooks, clubs, and spears; the latter often launched from canoes. Guided by seasons, along the coast and on the islands, they fished and captured dugongs and turtles which formed an important part of their diets. Even allowing for tabooing of certain creatures, the marine supply was plentiful.

Women and girls did some hunting and collected edible types of grasses, making flour from the seeds, which were ground between stones and heated, or ground, pounded, and baked. Nardoo fern seeds were available in November and December, followed by kangaroo grass seeds which ripened in March and April. Yams, shoots, and roots were foraged for and baked. Sorrell plant leaves and roots and bulbs were found on creek banks and beside lagoons, and there were bush cucumbers available. First Nations people also ate the base of grass-tree leaves and the hearts of cabbage palms. Some foods were poisonous if eaten raw, requiring pounding to neutralise, or like cycads (evidence for the use of which goes back 4,500 years) required complex processing to remove poisons. Food was baked in ovens dug into the ground and filled with heated stones, or in the embers of fires.

Fruit trees were plentiful, particularly in the wet season, the produce mainly collected by women and children. There were piquant peppermint and lemon flavoured leaves, bush limes, cherries, guava-like fruits, and figs, sweet 'Burdekin' plums, the slightly bitter fruit of the Leichhardt tree, many varieties of berries, and a type of wild grape. Along with the prolific bird life, there were ground and tree animals such as wallabies and kangaroos, emus, turkeys, possums and koalas, wombats and bandicoots, rodents, insects, lizards, goannas and pythons, plus amphibians such as frogs and snails. Delicacies such as supplies of honeycomb from native bees, could be found in hives in flowering ironbarks and boxwoods, acacias, cassias and ti-trees. Aboriginal people were also adept at using trees, bushes and plants for foods, medicines and healing.

The Pioneer Valley and its coast were rich in foods. Although the supply lessened away from the coast, there were always lakes, billabongs (oxbow lakes—sections of rivers cut off from the mainstream), and an abundance of rivers and creeks. The areas over the ranges contained well-watered pockets of land in sheltered valleys. The people moved about, utilising seasons and cycles, and they managed the land to keep it productive. Trading also took place between the people of the inland plains and the valley and coast and out to the islands. Fresh water was plentiful in streams and lakes or found in soaks and filtered by

Yuwibara: The River People

digging small wells in sandy areas. Water was carried in gourds and watertight baskets, although there was a clear advantage in not living too far from water sources. It was an effective food-gathering system, until it was totally disrupted by colonial settlement.



Plate 1.18: The original vegetation around Palmyra Creek on the south side of the Pioneer River. In the picture are Hugh McCready, owner of Palmyra plantation, and some of his South Sea Islander employees, 1880s or 1890s.

Source: Mackay City Council Archives, 1977.



Plate 1.19: Palm tree scrub in the Pioneer Valley, ca. 1882.

Source: State Library of Queensland.

Dingoes

Another important aspect of Indigenous Australian life was their close interaction with dingoes, the ‘native dogs’ which as mentioned earlier arrived in north-west Australia about 4,000 to 3,500 years ago. The most recent evidence suggests they may have entered via Sulawesi and perhaps also the Aru Islands below west New Guinea, coinciding with intensified Austronesian and maritime activity coming out of the Asian archipelagos and entering the Pacific. There were wild and camp (part-domesticated) dingoes, the latter kept as pets while young, useful for cleaning up food scraps around camp sites. Dingoes had a significant place in spiritual and cultural practices, and ecological knowledge systems. The relationship was beneficial for both the animals and humans. Camp dingoes protected Aboriginal people against wild dingoes, as well as poisonous creatures like snakes, and, so it was believed, against malevolent spirits. Their skins, particularly the tails, were worn as ornaments, and tufts of dingo hair and teeth were worn as necklaces. Dingoes are great hunters and adept at finding water, usually in soaks under dry creek beds. They showed little fear of fire and shared fireplaces in camps with humans. Women sometimes breast-fed dingo puppies. The benefit in this was prolonged lactation, as prolactin was released inhibiting ovulation, creating longer birth intervals. Young dingoes served as pets, affectionate companions which also became living blankets in cold conditions. However, there is also the

possibility that such close contact increased human exposure to parasites carried by the dogs. Once dogs of European origin were introduced by the colonists, the Aboriginal people adopted them as well.

Decoration and Art

Some of the art was body decoration, usually made from ochre or white pastes. Photographs from the 1870s and 1880s (Plates 1.1, 1.8, 1.20–21) show male and female chest scarification. According to Frank Bridgman, one ornament worn on the forehead was called *ngungy-ngungy*, made from fragments of the nautilus shell, suspended on fine twine made from fibre. Large pieces of nautilus shell, called *carr-e-la*, were also strung on twine. In similar style, later European-based authority was exhibited by distribution of manufactured metal quarter-moon shapes to be worn by Aboriginal leaders. Ochre and beeswax were used to decorate rock faces of cliffs and caves, or markings were engraved into the rock. Much of this rock art depicts events from the Dreaming and relationships with country.



Plate 1.20: Twelve Aboriginal people at Mackay, 1870s or 1880s. The man with the European-inspired breast plate is the European-designated leader. Body scarification is obvious on some of the men and women.

Source: Clive Moore Collection.



Plate 1.21: Thirty-eight Aboriginal people from the Pioneer Valley, 1880s. The man with the breast plate is the European-designated leader.

Source: Clive Moore Collection.

Dreaming and Country

Detailed archaeological work in the region has been completed on several of the Cumberland and Northumberland Islands. Aboriginal arrival in the islands has been dated to about 9,000 years ago, even before the falling ocean water levels had stabilised. Before this, Aboriginal people were more confined to the mainland. The general pattern has remained unchanged over the last 3,000 years. It seems possible there was a reorganisation of the population over the landscape at about this time, and an increase in economic productivity.

North-east coast First Nations Australians were not just passive participants in regular contacts with visitors in the north. There are unclear links between the coastal Mackay region people and the far north of the east coast—Cape York and the islands of Torres Strait. These are obvious as far south as the Whitsundays and Cape Hillsborough. Out-rigger canoes have already been mentioned, and turtle-shell tools, and decorated paddles, may all be the material culture indicators of this connection. The coastal passage within the Great Barrier Reef is no barrier to intrepid visitors, although we should not presume it was all a one-way north-south movement.

Neither should we ignore evidence of links from further south that appear to indicate drift voyages from the Western Pacific Islands. Proof is very fragmentary. Rowland's research has identified drift canoes from the Pacific Islands which have ended up on the Queensland coast below the Great Barrier Reef. Three points are clear. First, Aboriginal groups in coastal central Queensland were not entirely isolated from neighbouring areas. Second, there is likely to have been a limited two-way flow of ideas, perhaps created by occasional adventurous migratory individuals or groups reaching the east coast of Australia. Third, the language and dialect divisions present in the nineteenth century were probably a

product of recent millennia. More bounded social systems may have emerged, with less connection between the mainland coast and the island peoples, leading to permanent occupation of the Cumberland Islands.

Indigenous Australians had a complex cultural and spiritual life. Their propagation of their environment was related to spirituality, while the colonists' economy related to human ingenuity and financial gain. They also had established protocols for dealing with people who came from beyond their immediate nation. Songlines or Dreaming tracks marked the routes of creator-beings who made the land, its animals, and the lore. Aboriginal people could navigate across the land by repeating words from songs describing the landscape. Their kinship rules were intricate, as were ceremonies for initiation and other celebrations. There were sacred sites in the Pioneer Valley, rock art, and ceremonial bora rings where youths were initiated into manhood. One sacred area was at Mt Dalrymple on the plateau at the end of the valley. Aboriginal people called this high mountain *Gurraburra*, and claimed that caves there contained burial sites guarded by *cobble-cobble*, a great rock python. Spoonbill, son of local warrior Mungo, acted as a guide for climbing expeditions in 1877, 1878 and 1882, but refused to show the Europeans any sacred sites, leading them only to a shell midden in a cave at the foot of the mountain, where they were shown spears, stone axes, and other artefacts. The explorers found no sign of Aboriginal habitation above 1,968 feet (610 m).²¹ Cape Hillsborough and Mt Blackwood were also ceremonial sites, and Cape Hillsborough was a major marine food resource.

First Nations Australians understood space quite differently from Europeans. They seldom placed firm boundaries around geographical spaces, and they did not separate themselves from their environment. 'Nature' was not a resource to be owned and exploited or separated from humans. Today, Aboriginal people use the term 'country' to describe their special understanding of and place in the environment, the ethics of life and their relationship with the land. Songs, ceremonies, and the Dreaming were just as much part of country as basic needs such as water, food, and shelter. The concept of country encompasses the living, and the dead in the spirit world. Country does not just occur; it is created by conscious actions with a moral purpose, that are based in law.

Relationships between neighbouring nations varied but they were interdependent. Disputes over hunting or resource rights, or women, or because of sorcery, led to fighting between groups. Warfare was usually small-scale 'payback' punitive expeditions. Fighting seems seldom to have been intended to be totally destructive or to decimate their neighbours; or to empty an area of its inhabitants, in the manner Europeans soon achieved. Fighting between neighbouring nations did occur, followed by traditional reconciliation ceremonies including feasting and corroborees. As Ray Kerkhove describes in his website, *Mapping Frontier Conflict in South-East Queensland*, there were also inter-nation tournaments, involving several tribal groups. These spectacular events involved hundreds, and had grievances as their base, perhaps over trespassing or infringement of hunting rights. Large groups gathered in camps and stylised fighting took place at a nearby flat area. Novice warriors had their chance to prove themselves in front of their elders, followed by one-to-one fights by senior warriors. Women were also involved, opposing groups engaging in one-to-one fighting, usually with yam-digging sticks. Sometimes, one group managed to vanquish another. Casualties were few, but did occur, and usually brought a halt to proceedings. Reasons for violence varied considerably and there were noted warriors within each group and nation.

Burial customs varied, depending on the gender and status of the individual. Bridgman recorded that he had attended a funeral oration for a great warrior that lasted for more than one hour. The corpse was carried by two men who stood at the head of the grave, and the orator spoke as if the dead man was still alive and could hear his words. The burial

was for three months, then the bones were disinterred, cleaned, and packed in a roll of pliable bark, the outside painted with ochre and ornamented with strings of beads and other items. This was called *ngobera* and was kept in the camp with the living. Bridgman said that if a visitor arrived who knew the deceased man, the *ngobera* was bought out and the visitor and some of the relatives would wail and cry and cut themselves. Then the *ngobera* was handed to the visitor, who slept beside it for the night. Tree platform and cave burials were also used. Lesser status men, or women and children, were usually placed in shallow graves. According to Bridgman, women and children who died might also be cremated. There were many burial grounds in the valley: one was at Mt Toby, directly north of Mirani, which has now disappeared under cane fields; one was at the south-east foot of Mt Dalrymple; and another was at Brightly near Eton.

Aboriginal and European spatial systems are produced in quite different ways. Europeans wanted empty spaces to place on maps and claim as their own. The colonial Government gave them legal authority to invade: to own, sell, control, and if necessary, defend their land. Prior First Nations custodianship and intimate connection to the environment was not recognised. The Government never formally authorised violence and extermination, but did nothing to stop it occurring, and knew quite well that its own Native Police were a major means used to accomplish 'clearing' the land. Historians of First Nations Australians have called what happened 'double violence'. Not only did deaths from European-inspired violence destroy First Nations society and cheat the people of natural patterns of life, but it also cheated them because the violence was deliberately forgotten in the future telling of history. The Aboriginal voice was muted, until revival in recent decades. Although they fought back, under colonialism, those who survived were institutionalised onto reserves and missions, and often forcefully moved off their land. Therefore truth-telling, as outlined in Chapter 6, is crucial.

The Pioneer Valley and the high mountains at the western end, and the plains over the ranges, are a unique environment. The region combined rain forest, mountain and plateau areas, the fertile alluvial plains, and a coast rich with marine life, all capable of sustaining a large First Nations population. It was the perfect environment for managers and shapers of land, for hunter-gatherers and fishers. The valley enabled access to the coast for inland tribes and *vice versa* for the coastal Yuwibara.

The population declined from a possible 4,500 to 5,000 in the Mackay-Eungella-Nebo region in the early 1850s, to only a few hundred in the 1900s. Given the ravaging epidemics of smallpox between the 1780s and the 1870s, perhaps we should be considering an original population of 9,000 to 10,000? Then, between approximately 1860 and 1880 the traditional way of life of the Aboriginal population was disrupted by the physical arrival of European settlers and their herds, or planters and farmers with their sugarcane. First Nations Australians were dispossessed of their land, and many died from violence and introduced diseases. Early in the twentieth century, most of the small remnant Indigenous population from the Pioneer Valley and around Nebo were removed to Government Reserves like Palm Island off Townsville, Woorabinda west of Rockhampton, and Cherbourg north of Brisbane, or joined kin living beyond the valley. Aboriginal women were also integrated into the immigrant Melanesian population. Chapter 6 will take up the reasons for this decline, while also noting the continued resilience and strength of the present-day First Nations community of the region.

Bibliography

The bibliographies for all chapters are in a separate file.

Endnotes

¹ There are many different preferred spellings and there is disagreement over group and language identities. Other interpretations are possible. The spelling of Aboriginal language names used here comes from the Mackay Whitsunday Isaac Traditional Owner Reference Group and from Federal Court documents and judgements. (<http://reefcatchments.com.au/community/traditional-owners/>)

The geographic descriptions come from the standard language map of Indigenous Australia produced by AIATSIS (<http://www.australiangeographic.com.au/travel/maps/2014/03/aboriginal-languages>). I have also been guided by Horton 1994, and Federal Court land rights judgements.

² Sketch Map by Lieutenant G.P. Heath, December 1862, in Roth 1908, inserted at 33; Cyclone Eline Changed Mouth of River. *The Daily Mercury—City of Mackay Centenary Edition*, 1962, 57.

³ Finch-Hatton 1886, 38, 39.

⁴ John Spiller, in Kennedy 1870, 170–71.

⁵ Stanley 1977, 59.

⁶ Finch-Hatton 1886, 37.

⁷ Recent research has suggested that 80,000 or even 120,000 years of habitation is possible (dated on the shell middens at the Moyjil site, Hopkins River, Warrnambool), although archaeologists are still divided over this. There is evidence of activities which may have been caused by humans, although there may also be other explanations. Carey, *et al.*, 2018; McNiven 2019; Sherwood 2018.

⁸ R.M.W. Dixon to the author, 8 February 1990, commenting on a vocabulary list in the possession of Althea (née Cook) Parsons. The original document is deposited in the papers of Vida Cook in the library archives of James Cook University. The Cook family owned Balnagowan and Greenmount (in the Yuwibara area), and Wandoo (in the Widi area) pastoral stations. The list indicates dialects of a common language, although there is no indication of its origin.

⁹ Bartley 1896, 332–33.

¹⁰ Leo 2021, 196.

¹¹ Letter from Ken Manning, Calen, 1 June 1989.

¹² Leo 2021, 198. The Queensland Museum collection included a ‘club boomerang’ believed to be from Yuwibara country.

¹³ Roth 1908, 79–81.

¹⁴ Roth 1908, 27–28.

¹⁵ Beaglehole 1955, 337.

¹⁶ Sutton and Walshe 2021, 13.

¹⁷ Sutton and Walshe 2021, 9.

¹⁸ Roth 1908, 82.

¹⁹ Finch-Hatton 1886, 40–41.

²⁰ Finch-Hatton 1886, 32.

²¹ The Mt Dalrymple information comes from Robert Ryan of Mt Martin, ‘Memories of Bygone Days’, in *The Daily Mercury*, 2 January 1932; and, Roth 1908, 75–76.