





ABORIGINAL BURIALS AND CEMETERIES OF THE LAST 200 YEARS IN NSW



IN SAD BUT LOVING. MEMORY

ABORIGINAL BURIALS AND CEMETERIES OF THE LAST 200 YEARS IN NSW



The headstone of Eiza Ruttley who died at Burra Bee Dee in 1919 at the age of 29. Her epitaph has become the title of this booklet.

contents

IN THE SPIRIT OF reconciliation
GRIEVING AND attachment
200 YEARS OF change and innovation11
FRONTIER MASSACRES and the wall of silence
OUT OF bounds
THE GRAVES OF Aboriginal farming families
THE FATE OF mission cemeteries
GRAVES OF urban Koories
NON-INDIGENOUS carers
desecration
THE GLASS GRAVES OF Collarenebri
REMEMBERING THE place
THE HEADSTONES OF Burra Bee Dee
and the law
RECORDING cemeteries41
fencing42
notes45
credits47



Frank Wellington, Mervyn Connelly, and Jack Campbell (left to right), all now deceased, at the old Orient Point cemetery in 1974. Jack Campbell is pointing out the location of unmarked graves [52-5-99]. Photograph by Ray Kelly.

TECONCILLISTION

One measure of the gap in understanding between the indigenous and non-indigenous citizens of NSW may be the difference in the awareness each has of the Aboriginal cemeteries which belong to the period of the last 200 years. Few non-Aboriginal people are likely to know these places even exist in the landscape of NSW and yet they mean more to Aboriginal people than almost any other places. For Aboriginal people they are sites of memory and emotion which have no equal.

In the spirit of Reconciliation this booklet attempts to bridge this gap in understanding. Not so that non-Aboriginal people will come to feel or think the same way about the graves and cemeteries as Aboriginal people do, rather, that in better appreciating the attachment Aboriginal people have to these places we will have gone some way towards understanding those events of the last 200 years which makes the objective of Reconciliation a priority.

The Department of Environment & Climate Change NSW is charged with protecting Aboriginal heritage places in this State but its mission also is to communicate the significance of these places. The booklet attempts to do that for one category of place—the post-1788 Aboriginal graves and cemeteries.

Much of the information in the pages which follow comes from the Aboriginal Sites Register of NSW. We thank the Aboriginal people who have given their consent for us to reproduce their words and pictures here.

grieving and tachment

Aboriginal people have strong emotional attachment to the graves of their relatives, an attachment which few white people have been witness to. An exception was the government surveyor, W.R. Govett, who in the 1830s near Mt Wayo in the Goulburn area came upon three Aboriginal women grieving over a grave which was situated among trees on a valley floor.

Another exception were the settlers in the Lachlan Valley in the early 1900s who used to see an old Aboriginal man sitting near the mounded grave of his father. The grave had originally been secluded in a woodland but now was exposed on land cleared for farming. For a few days every year this man would come to camp near the grave and sit beside it, alone.

The image of this man sitting beside his father's grave in a cleared field, exposed to the gaze of the settlers, gives us a sense of the suddenness with which dispossession occurred. The carved tree which stood beside the grave was eventually cut down and put on display at the local school—we do not know the fate of the grave.





2000 YEAR OF Change & innovation

Non-indigenous Australians have often maintained that the only real Aboriginal culture is that of the past. They maintain that the last 200 years of contact with white culture has eroded or degraded Aboriginal culture. A deeper understanding, however, shows that both settler and Aboriginal culture have influenced and enriched each other. Aboriginal culture, like all human cultures, has combined tradition with change and every generation has had an active role in shaping the culture, inventing, borrowing, and innovating.

Aboriginal funerals are a good example of this. We see a great many changes in Aboriginal funerals over the time, for instance since the body of a young woman was cremated on the shores of Lake Mungo in south-western NSW 25,000 years ago.

At the time of first European settlement Aboriginal graves in large parts of NSW were marked by the presence of trees whose trunks had been carved with designs which identified or commemorated the person buried. In this way they were like headstones. In some areas trees were still being carved at grave sites in the late 19th century, but as Aboriginal people increasingly moved to fringe camps and reserves other ways were found to commemorate those who had died. An example of this are the sea shells that people used to decorate graves in cemeteries along the coast.

As large numbers of Aboriginal people took up Christianity church funerals became common and white wooden crosses were placed on graves.





New beliefs merged into Aboriginal culture, they did not replace it: smoking ceremonies were often carried out in conjunction with Christian rites and often people were buried in a crouched or sitting position rather than in the extended, horizontal Christian position. After 1788 the objects that relatives placed in the grave with the deceased reflected the new things which had become valuable in people's lives. Alongside a stone hatchet there might be pieces of bottle glass flaked into shapes useful for cutting meat and working wood; coins and crockery were sometimes placed in graves as well as clay pipes for smoking tobacco.

For a long time after 1788 Aboriginal people still wrapped the body of the deceased in bark before burial. Later, the government blanket which had kept a person warm in life was wrapped around their body in death.

Local traditions have developed in the commemoration of those who have passed on. In the central northwest of the state the graves in Aboriginal cemeteries at Collarenebri and Angledool are covered with fragments of glass; on the central north coast there has been a tradition of planting rambling rose bushes on graves.







WATERLOO CREEK JANUARY 26, 1838:

200-300 ABORIGINAL PEOPLE MASSACRED AT

SNODGRASS LAGOON SLAUGHTERHOUSE CREEK MAY 1838:

300 PEOPLE MURDERED BY WHITE STOCKMEN



RUFUS CREEK 185

40-50 PEOPLE SHOT AT LAKE VICTORIA

HOSPITAL CREEK 1850S OR 60S:

400 PEOPLE SHOT NEAR ENNGONIA

ges disco

FRONTIER MASSACRES & THE OI SILENCE

We do not know where the remains of the Aboriginal victims of the frontier massacres in NSW lie. We do not even have more than a rough idea of where most of the actual massacre sites are.

In frontier settler communities a code of silence ensured that only scraps of information leaked out about incidents where tens or even hundreds of Aboriginal people were murdered, or 'dispersed', as these massacres were described among settlers at the time. This 'silencing' was particularly evident after the Myall Creek massacre of 1838 when a number of stockmen were put on trial in Sydney and hung for the murder of 28 Aboriginal men, women, and children on the New England Tablelands.

Care was usually taken to remove evidence of the killings, generally by burning the bodies of the victims in bonfires or by 'souveniring' the skulls or other body parts. As the years passed, a semi-secret knowledge of the massacres survived in white society in the form of rumours that it was along a certain creek, or at a certain waterhole or headland that a particular massacre occurred.

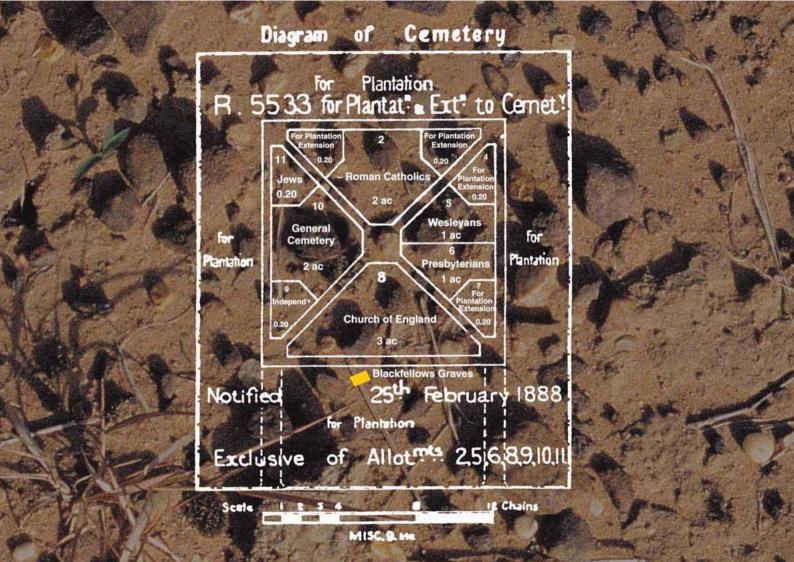
Even at Myall Creek, the best documented case, we know only the approximate location of the stockyard where the killings took place—what is now a pasture covered hillside. In the 1970s the only tangible artefacts of the event were some old hardwood posts and two gate hinges reputed to be from the notorious stockyard.

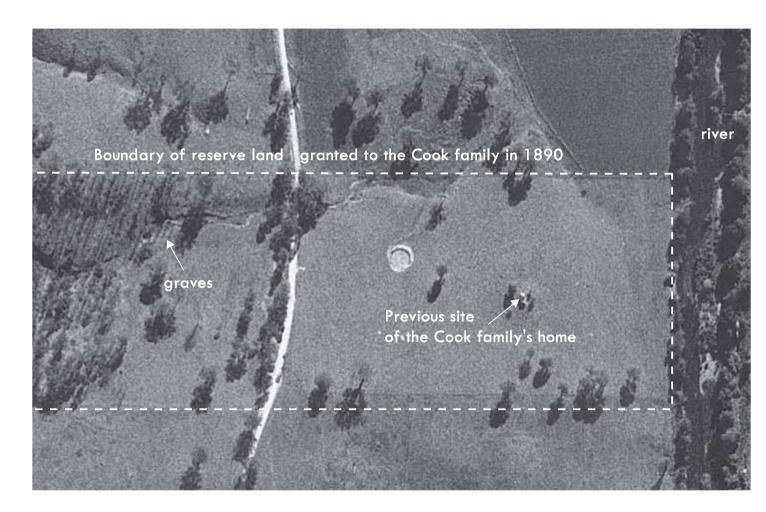
out of bounds

Before the 1950s it was quite common for Aboriginal people in NSW to be refused burial in general cemeteries. On some of the Parish Plans drawn up in the late 1800s Aboriginal graves are shown just outside the bounds of the town cemetery.

European settlement of NSW involved a 'mapping' of the indigenous landscape into rectangles and squares (house blocks, farming properties, paddocks) spaces from which indigenous people were largely excluded. The lines on maps became fences and the fences were similar to the walls which often excluded indigenous people from such settler institutions as schools, hospitals, swimming pools. Often the boundary fences prevented Aboriginal people from visiting sacred sites and initiation grounds. They cut across old pathways. And they cut many people off from the graves of those of their relatives and ancestors buried in traditional burial grounds.

In the early days of pastoral settlement Aboriginal people were encouraged to set up camp on pastoral stations where their knowledge of country and their ability to handle stock made them a valuable workforce. Later, as white farm labour became more plentiful, employment for Aboriginal people dried up and they had to leave behind not just their camps on the pastoral stations but the cemeteries they had established there. Access to these grave sites then became difficult and sometimes impossible. Several pastoral station cemeteries are recorded in the Aboriginal Sites Register of NSW.





THE GRAVES OF ABORIGINAL ISIMILIES

Three graves lie together on a gentle hill slope in a quiet farming valley near the village of Barrington on the midnorth coast. The graves are below a tree and are covered by the same pasture as the rest of the hill slope though the graves themselves are roughly outlined with stones. Down the hill towards the Barrington River a crepe laurel and an orange tree mark the site of the homestead where the Cook family lived on a reserve granted to them in 1890.

When the reserve was revoked in 1957 the Cooks had to leave the land. Now only the graves remain, along with the memories of family members now living in Armidale and Kempsey who sometimes return to Barrington to reminisce and to show their children where they grew up.

Among the many other farming reserves in NSW was that at Stuart's Island on the lower Nambucca River where families of Gumbaynggirr people had farmed the alluvial soil since 1883. When in the 1960s the Aborigines' Welfare Board leased the island to a golf club a fairway was constructed over the graves in the children's cemetery, much to the distress of the surviving family members who had been forced to leave the island.

mission cemeteries

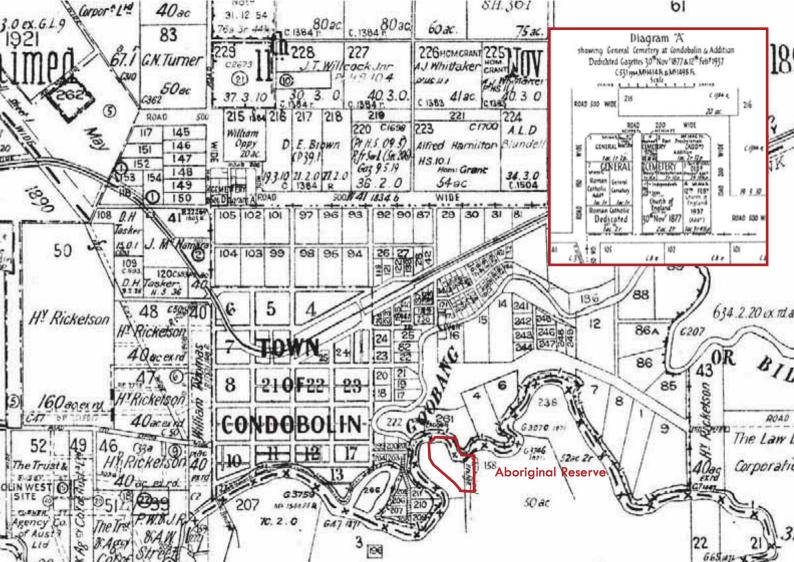
In 1850 the colonial government set aside 35 reserves for Aboriginal people in NSW, most of them one square mile in size. In the decades which followed, numerous and mostly smaller areas were set aside until by 1911 there were 115 Aboriginal reserves in NSW comprising a total of 26,000 acres.

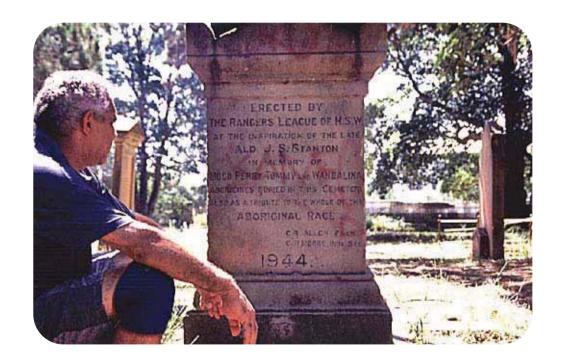
While many of these reserves were held and farmed by Aboriginal families a number of them became home to large communities, often with their own schools and churches. Most of them had their own cemeteries.

When the government revoked Aboriginal reserves and sold or leased the land to non-Aboriginal farmers most of the Aboriginal cemeteries on these lands were not shown on the new title plans because they had never been surveyed or gazetted. It is possible the Aborigines' Protection Board never had them gazetted because of their belief that the Aboriginals were a dying race: they thought that eventually there would be nobody left to care for the cemeteries

Whatever the reason, the result was that farms were frequently established over cemeteries on revoked reserves and the graves were trampled by stock or even subjected to ploughing.

In a minority of cases the reserves were not revoked and resident Aboriginal communities have not only continued to care for the old 'mission' cemeteries but have continued to bury their dead in them. Examples are those at Orient Point and Wallaga Lake on the South Coast.





This page: Alan Madden, Sites Officer for the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council, next to a monument in Camperdown Cemetery commemorating Aboriginal people buried there. Photograph by Denis Byrne 1998.

THE RANGERS LEAGUE OF M.S.W

GRAVES OF LOOPIES

October 5, 1850. Mogo, a Koorie from Towel Creek on the Upper Macleay Valley, was buried in what became known as the Cooee Corner of Camperdown Cemetery (on the Lennox Street side). His grave was originally decorated with shells taken from an Aboriginal midden at Pittwater. During the present century this area of the cemetery was 'cleared' and turned into a park. It is not known what became of Mogo's remains but his sandstone headstone, the inscription blurred by weathering, lies on the ground next to a sandstone obelisk erected in 1944 by the Rangers League of NSW in memory of Mogo and three other Koories buried in the cemetery: William Perry (died 1849 aged 26), Wandelina Caborigirel (died 1860 aged 18), and Tommy.

In the early days, Koories from La Perouse were buried in two small cemeteries associated with the Coast Hospital at Little Bay—the graves are unmarked. Other former grave sites in Sydney include the former garden of First Government House, down by Circular Quay and now covered with office towers, where Governor Philip in the first years of the colony arranged for the burial of Arabanoo and two other Aboriginal people he regarded as friends.

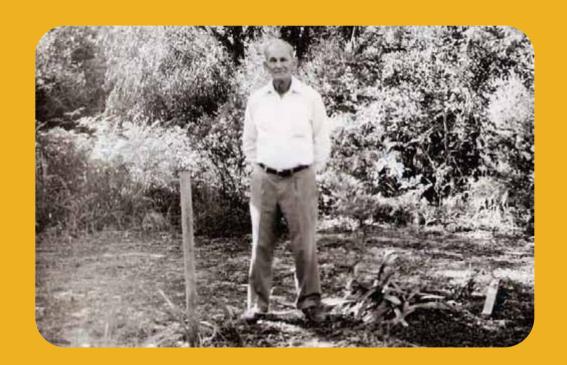
NON INDIGENOUS CAPERS

Byron Bay 1980. Mr Davidson shows NPWS Sites Officer Jolanda Nyutah two graves in his backyard. An Aboriginal 'king' and 'queen' were buried there many years ago when the land was part of an Aboriginal reserve.

An old Aboriginal man had told Mr Davidson's father about the graves and he took care of them till his death. A number of Aboriginal people, including a man called Jimmy Kay, used to come down to visit the graves but 15 or 20 years ago, Mr Davidson says, they stopped coming. He thinks Jimmy Kay must have died.

Lillies grow on the graves. Mr Davidson wants a fence put around them. He tells no one about the graves for fear of vandalism.

Brungle 1966. A non-Aboriginal woman writes to the Aborigines' Welfare Board to let them know that cows and sheep are walking over the old Aboriginal cemetery at Brungle. It would make you cry to see their cemetery, she writes.



A plaque erected in Gunnedah to commemorate the Red Chief. Photograph by Gabrielle Tydd

desecration

An 1891 article in the *Sydney Mail* tells of how a doctor in Gunnedah had long cherished the ambition of discovering the grave of a local tribal leader, Cumbo Gunerah, the Red Chief, who had lived in the period immediately before white settlement. The grave site was well known and revered by local Aboriginal people but they had been careful to keep it secret from Europeans. The article celebrates how the doctor succeeded in extracting the location of the grave from an elderly Aboriginal woman, two days before her death, and promptly dug it up and sent the bones to the Australian Museum in Sydney.

Sadly, this story typifies an attitude to Aboriginal remains which was widespread in white colonial society. Aboriginal people's bones were dug up and collected as if they were rare butterflies or stamps, with total disregard for the anguish this caused the relatives and descendants of the deceased.

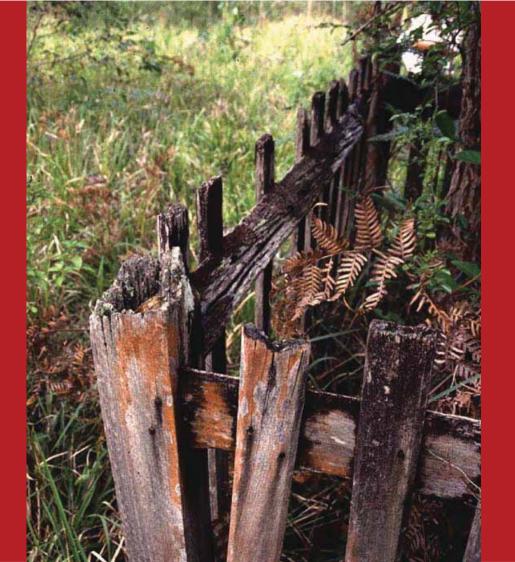
THE GLASS GRAVES OF Collarenebri

In the 1950s an anthropologist, Marie Reay, recorded that in Western NSW Aboriginal people who had passed away commonly returned to speak to their relatives in dreams and sometimes asked for more glass to be put on their graves.

"It happens at least every three years when everyone says, right, and we get out there and make sure that all of these graves are tended in some way... There's a lot of hard work in it. The bottles are mainly what we use, they're placed in hot ashes. We have to have a lot of fire and then we dip them quickly into the water which gives them a crystalised effect. Young people just learn automatically, they see it done once or twice and older people like myself don't have to do that job any more... about 2000 bottles in the last four weeks, nearly every family saves them. It is a big procedure you know. Everything that's put on each grave, some member of the family thinks that's what I'd like to put there. We say this is a real labour of love, I think that's why we have such strong ties with this place."

ISABEL FLICK SPEAKING IN THE 1970s ABOUT THE COLLARENEBRI CEMETERY





place REMEMBERING



Especially over the last 200 years. Aboriginal people in NSW have had to rely on their memory as to the location of graves. Few graves have ever had headstones and the wooden crosses or wooden posts which people put up soon fall and rot away. People have to memorise graveyards and sometimes, as decades and generations pass, they forget.

Cemeteries become overgrown with grass and bush. John Saunders was 17 when he stood at his mother's graveside as she was buried in the cemetery at Purfleet. He is now 64 and he stands in this same cemetery beside the Pacific Highway, surrounded on three sides by forest, looking down through the long grass and bracken fern for some trace of the grave. There seem to be none. He sees the stem of a rambling rose almost hidden in the other vegetation and tells how they used to plant these on the graves. Now the rose is the only clue to where of the graves are.

In some instances these graves have of necessity been removed by settlers, but the spot is always remembered and wept over in the same manner. As proof of this I sometime afterwards saw some women weeping as described by the corner of a garden near a gentleman's house on Mulwaru Plain who informed me that there had been the grave of a native at that spot.

WR GOVETT 1836

Burra Bee Dee Aboriginal cemetery: the graves (left to right) of Gordon Griffith, Phillip Watton, Eliza Ruttley. Photographs by Denis Byrne 1998.

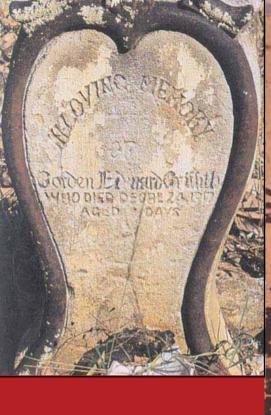
THE BURYA BEE Dee

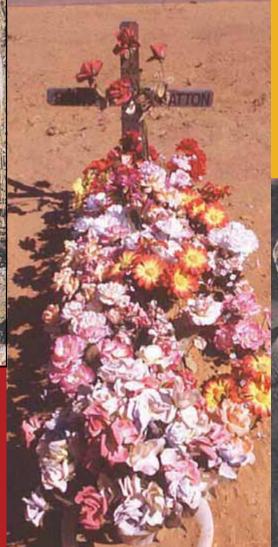
Nobody lives at Burra Bee Dee these days. At the old settlement, 14 kilometres northeast of Coonabarabran, the surrounding bush has grown in over the old vegetable gardens and flower beds. The frame of a child's tricycle lies rusting in the long grass near a frame of weathered wooden poles, all that remains of one of the houses.

And there is the cemetery. It lies at the end of a winding dirt road and it is here that the people of Burra Bee Dee were laid to rest during the years from 1892, when the 600 acre reserve was gazetted, till the 1950s. It is mainly the cemetery which now draws back members of the old Burra Bee Dee families, most of whom have settled in Coonabarabran, to the deserted settlement. The dead are still taken back there for burial.

Burra Bee Dee was a place where people always made their own life: they milked their own cows, played music for outdoor dances, made their own clothes. Laura Hartley recalls that when people died the women sewed the shrouds out of calico. The women and children made the wreaths out of wildflowers.

The oldest headstones in the cemetery are of local sandstone. In the late 1800s one of the residents, Sam Smith, cut the stone from a sandstone outcrop on a nearby hill and carried it down to the settlement where he carved and inscribed the headstones by hand.







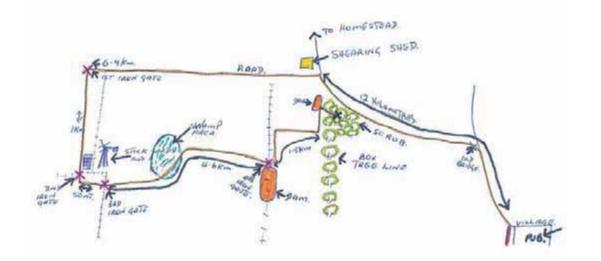




AND THE LAW

Protection for Aboriginal graves and cemeteries can be sought under a number of NSW laws and government procedures. DECC Aboriginal heritage staff can advise on these (see page 44).

- The National Parks & Wildlife Act of 1974 protects all Aboriginal cemeteries and graves except those where non-Aboriginal people are also buried. All Aboriginal graves outside reserve cemeteries are also protected by the Act regardless of whether or not they have been recorded or listed on the Aboriginal Sites Register.
- Aboriginal graves more than 50 years old which are in public ('general') cemeteries are protected under the NSW Heritage Act of 1977. Most such graves do not have headstones or other markers; their location can sometimes be traced by checking the cemetery registers and the grave plot maps available at local government offices.
- In cases where graves or cemeteries are under threat Aboriginal people can appeal to the Federal Minister
 for Aboriginal Affairs under the terms of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection
 Amendment Act 1987.
- Under the Public Health Act of 1991 and the Public Health Regulation of 1991 it is illegal to exhume the remains of a body without the consent of relatives.



- Because so many Aboriginal graves in NSW are located away from known cemeteries and are unmarked (e.g. by headstones or wooden crosses) the bones of Aboriginal people are sometimes disturbed or exposed by accident or chance. The NSW Police are required to investigate such discoveries. In cases where such bones are thought to be Aboriginal the Police guidelines require that the nearest Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer and also the DECC be contacted before further disturbance takes place.
- The first line of protection is an aware local community which knows where graves in its area are located and keeps a watchful eye on development projects.



Coast Hospital cemetery, La Perouse. Rodney Mason (far left) and Iris Williams (far right) with Steve Free (centre left) and Adrienne Howe-Piening of NPWS. Photograph by Denis Byrne.

recording emeteries

Aboriginal people in NSW tend to be extremely concerned about the well-being of their cemeteries. This was shown in the 1970s when a NPWS team made up of several Aboriginal recorders together with a non-Aboriginal anthropologist travelled through the State recording sites of significance to Aboriginal communities. Virtually everywhere they went the first priority of the communities turned out to be the protection of local Aboriginal cemeteries.

The information collected by this team is contained in the Aboriginal Sites Register of NSW. Often the information includes recollections by Aboriginal elders about the history of the cemeteries. Often there are photographs of the graves and lists of names of those laid to rest. Many of these elders have themselves passed away since the information was recorded. One way of thinking about the Register is as a collection of stories and voices.

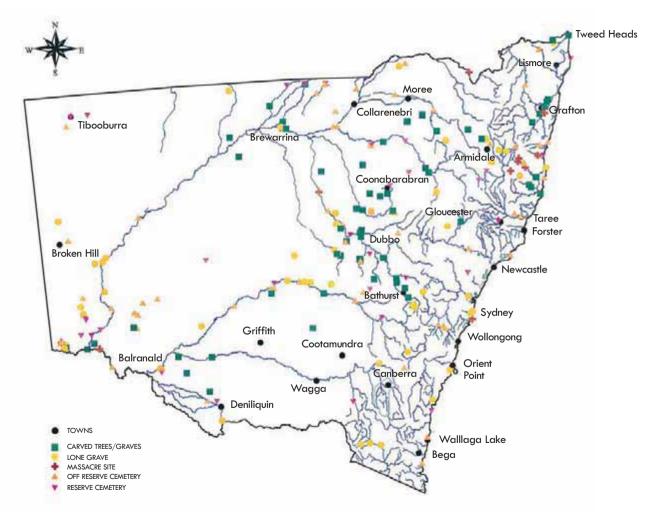
The Register contains files on 43 mission cemeteries on former Aboriginal reserves, 76 off-reserve mission period cemeteries (places with two or more graves), 60 lone graves, and 44 massacre sites.

fencing

"An utter disgrace" were the words used in 1952 by John S Murray, an Aboriginal man from Balranald, to describe the situation of the Aboriginal cemetery in that town. He was writing to the Aborigines' Welfare Board in Sydney about the fence surrounding the cemetery, a fence whose 'deplorable' condition allowed stock grazing on the town common 'to walk all over the graves.'

It may be that Aboriginal people are so concerned about the fencing of cemeteries partly because so often over the last 200 years the graves of their relatives have been dug up by European collectors and scientists. Some Aboriginal people feel that graves are not safe unless they are within the defined space of a cemetery and, since so many Aboriginal cemeteries are ungazetted, the fences become more than just protective boundaries, they are also statements about the specialness of the place.





notes

PAGE 8

Surveyor Govett comes upon Aboriginal women grieving... W.R. Govett, 'Sketches of New South Wales: native women weeping over a grave,' *The Saturday Magazine*, Nov 5, 1836, pp 143-5

An old man sits at the grave of his father... Information on site 43-6-2 in the Aboriginal Sites Register of NSW

PAGF 17

The code of silence... see Henry Reynolds, Frontier (Sydney: Allen & Unwin 1987)

Myall Ck massacre... B. Harrison, 'The Myall Creek massacre,' in I. McBryde (ed), *Records of Times Past* (Canberra: AIAS Press. 1978). Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle* (Sydney: Child & Associates.1988)

PAGE 18

Aboriginal people in the NSW pastoral industry... See Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin 1996)

PAGE 21

Farming Families... Information from recording by Wayne Cook in ASR 30-4-6 Stuart's Island graves... Recording by Ray Kelly in ASR site 21-6-88; Goodall 1996, pp. 297-8

PAGE 22

Mission Cemeteries... For information on the history of relations between some Aboriginal communities and white settlers in NSW see Peter Read, 'Breaking up the camps entirely': the dispersal policy in Wiradjuri country 1909-1929, Aboriginal History 8 (1984), pp 45-55; 'A rape of the soul so profound': some reflections on the dispersal policy in New South Wales', in Terribly Hard Biscuits, ed. V. Chapman & P. Read (Sydney: Allen & Unwin. 1996), pp. 202-14

PAGE 25

The history of public cemeteries in NSW... Department of Planning, Cemeteries: Guidelines for their Care and Conservation (Sydney 1992); Keith Johnson, The historical grave, in P.Stanbury (ed), 10,000 Years of Sydney Life (The Macleay Museum: Sydney. 1979), pp. 11-19

Camperdown cemetery... Beyond the Boundary Stone: A History of Camperdown Cemetery (Marrickville Council Library Services, n.d.), pp. 16-18 Information from Allan Madden of the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council

PAGE 26

The graves at Byron Bay... Information on site 4-4-36, in the Aboriginal Sites Register of NSW.

It would make you cry to see their cemetery... Letter to the Aborigines' Welfare Board, File 66/534, shelf box 8/2803 at the NSW Archives Office **

PAGE 29

The Red Chief... 'The grave and bones of Cumbo Gunerah, the legend chief of the Kamelroi,' *The Sydney Mail* Aug 8, 1891, p. 292.

PAGE 30

In the 1950s... Marie Reay, 'Native thought in rural New South Wales', *Oceania* Vol 20 (1949), pp. 89-118. P. 104-5

Isobel Flick in the 1970s... in Howard Creamer, 1984, A Gift and a Dreaming (unpublished report to NPWS) p. 8.12

PAGE 00

In some instances these graves have of necessity been removed... Surveyor W.R. Govett, Sketches of New South Wales, *The Saturday Magazine*, Nov 5, 1836, pp. 183-4

PAGE 32

John Saunders at Purfleet cemetery... Adrienne Howe-Piening and Denis Byrne visited the cemetery in February 1998 in the company of John Saunders and Gillian Saunders.

PAGE 34

Burra Bee Dee... Margaret Somerville, *The Sun Dancin'*, (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press. 1994).

PAGE 38

Law... Cemeteries: Guidelines for Their Care and Conservation (Department of Planning: Sydney 1992)

PAGE 41

Recording... See the *Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Standards and Guidlines Kit* (Sydney: NPWS. 1997).

PAGE 42

an utter disgrace... Letter to the Aborigines' Welfare Board, File 4648, shelf box 8/2791 at the NSW Archives Office.*

^{*}ASR of NSW, maintained by NPWS at its Hurstville Head Office

^{**}All references to documents in the NSW Archives Office are from Maria Nugent, A Search of the Archives of the Aborigines' Protection Board and the Aborigines' Welfare Board for Material Relating to Burials and Cemeteries', an unpublished report to NPWS (Jan 1998)

credits

Cultural Heritage Division, Department of Environment & Climate Change NSW

WRITTEN BY
Denis Byrne

RESEARCH ASSISTANT Adrienne Howe-Piening

Contractors

DESIGNERS
Cathy Osborne
Gabrielle Tydd

PRINT
Penrith Art Printing Works
June 2007

Special thanks

Particular thanks to Robert Paulson and Mae Simon of Forster; John Saunders and Gillian Donovan, Purfleet: members of the Cook family (Noma Naylor, Vincent and Wayne Cookl, Allan Madden, Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council; Gordon Wellington and Rodney Wellington, Orient Point; Michael Darcy, Wallaga Lake; Brad Sulter and Barry Cain, Coonabarabran; Isabel Flick, Gunnedah: Deborah Coe. Condobolin; Michael Nolan, Dubbo. The research leading to this publication has benefited from discussions with Heather Goodall and Maria Nugent, University of Technology Sydney.



