

Parish plans as a source of evidence of Aboriginal land use in the Mallee back country

'Parish plans as a source of evidence of Aboriginal land use in the Mallee back country', *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 18, 2020. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © John Burch.

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Abstract

The nature of Aboriginal people's use, indeed occupation, of the Victorian Mallee 'back country' warrants detailed investigation. Probably arising out of the paucity of observations of Aboriginal people on the land before it was pastorally occupied, an historical analysis from the 1870s suggesting Aboriginal people were not occupiers but mere 'seasonal visitors' to the 'back country' was unquestionably accepted for the next century. Growing understanding of the fundamentally sophisticated ways in which Aboriginal people managed their land has led to some recent historical works with a revised understanding of land use in the 'back country', but there is no agreement to move away from the orthodox historical paradigm.

Parish plans from the Mallee, part of PROV's 'Parish and township plans' collection, were investigated to determine whether they contain evidence of former Aboriginal land use that could inform this question. It was found that these plans can potentially reveal the presence of pre-colonial Aboriginal water management, pathways, quarries, land management, cemeteries and placenames. Thus, parish plans were shown to be a potentially valuable resource that might have the capacity to support a reinvestigation of Aboriginal land use in the 'back country'. Approaches for a more detailed investigation of the value of these plans are suggested.

Aboriginal land use in the Mallee back country—that part of north-western Victoria set back from the Murray River and without immediate access to its water (Figure 1)—has been little studied and is poorly understood. This article begins by describing the very limited documentary evidence of Aboriginal land use available from the period of colonial settlement, paying particular attention to its geographical scope. It then reviews the conclusions about Aboriginal land use that have been drawn from these sources, before describing more recent challenges to this historiography. The article then explores the potential of the parish plans contained in VPRS 16306 as a new source of information about Aboriginal land use. It examines their dates of creation and geographical scope to determine their possible capacity to contain useful information, and identifies examples in which historical Aboriginal land use is either explicitly recorded or can be inferred with confidence. Finally, focusing on one plan, a case study is presented that demonstrates the kind of information that potentially can be drawn from this collection when the plans are placed in their correct historical and environmental context. The article suggests a methodology for a comprehensive investigation of these plans, and in particular show that VPRS 16306 can be used as a source of information about Aboriginal land use.

these communities.[1] In 1990, Ian Clark examined the spatial organisation of the Wergaia people and concluded that their lands extend further north than Tindale had believed, crossing into the southern fringe of the study area.[2] Subsequently, Clark and Ted Ryan undertook a further reconstruction of the spatial organisation of Aboriginal people along the Murray River between the South Australian border and Mildura, correcting an error that Tindale had inherited from Robert Brough Smyth. [3] These revisions by Clark and Ryan did not, however, change the understood owners of the land.

The Victorian Government has recognised two organisations as Registered Aboriginal Parties and the formal custodians of land within the study area. The First Peoples of the Millewa–Mallee Aboriginal Corporation are the custodians of the north-west corner of the Mallee, managing a section of land that stretches south from the Murray into the back country. The Barenji Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation is responsible for land that crosses the southern fringe of the study area. The land that lies between these sections has no formal custodian and is subject to dispute. There is also no formally recognised custodian of large parts of the eastern half of the study area in 2020.

While ownership of the land has been investigated, limited information has led to poor knowledge of how it was used. The Mallee back country intimidated the first colonial settlers to visit the area in the 1830s and 1840s. The denseness of its mallee scrub, the seeming lack of reliable access to water and the harshness of its weather discouraged investigations of the area. Consequently, few observations were made of the land and its use by Aboriginal people at the point at which pastoral settlement dispossessed those Aboriginal people. Both Thomas Mitchell and Charles Sturt dismissed the area as valueless and did not investigate it further; Mitchell deliberately skirted around the southern fringes of the Mallee back country. Edward John Eyre attempted to cross the area but was driven back after a few days by lack of water; he made no mention of Aboriginal people. [4] Likewise, the records of the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate contain almost no information. The responsible assistant protector, Edward Stone Parker, did not visit the area and appears to have known very little about it, apart from making references to the Malleegoondeet people.[5] Nor did Chief Protector George Augustus Robinson enter the back country; however, he came closer than Parker, making a fleeting visit to Lake Hindmarsh in the southern Mallee in 1845[6] and visiting Tyntynder Station in the riverine corridor near Swan Hill in 1846,[7] before following the Murray River to Adelaide.

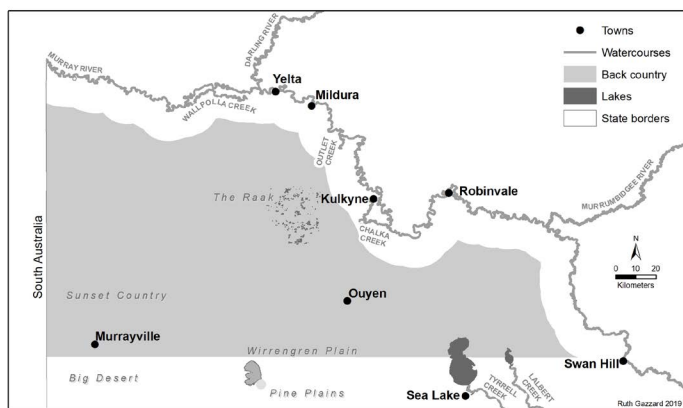


Figure 1: The Mallee back country. Commissioned by John Burch.

Aboriginal land use in the Mallee back country

The Mallee back country being studied is Aboriginal land and the details of its ownership have been investigated in a number of studies. These investigations have concluded that this area is primarily the country of Aboriginal communities living along the Murray River—the Ngindai, Jari Jari, Ladji Ladji, Tati Tati, Weki Weki and Wadi Wadi peoples—and the Ngargad people who occupy similar back-country land in South Australia. Norman Tindale's work in 1974 divided ownership of the study area between

The missionaries that came later also avoided the back country. Those working at the Anglican mission at Yelta remained in the riverine corridor, while those from Ebenezer, the Moravian mission south of Lake Hindmarsh, also ignored the area.[8] This catalogue of those who stayed out of the Mallee back country also includes most of the German scientific expeditions of the 1850s and 1860s to north-western Victoria.[9] Of these, only Georg Neumayer visited the area.

In light of this, the list of non-Aboriginal visitors to the Mallee back country during the mid-nineteenth century is short. Apart from Eyre and Neumayer, we are almost entirely dependent on the accounts of two surveyors and a handful of pastoralists. The two surveyors, Osgood Pritchard and Edward Riggs White, drew a number of plans,[10] and White made brief reports to the surveyor general,[11] but none of these mention meeting Aboriginal people. The pastoralists who made observations included two run seekers, John Wood Beilby[12] and William Morton,[13] three squatters, James Clow,[14] Peter Beveridge[15] and William Stanbridge,[16] and two pastoral employees, George Everard[17] and Charlie Thompson.[18] Of these, only Everard made reference to observing Aboriginal people in the back country; however, the encounter he described occurred a decade after colonial settlement and the family he met may have only been displaced to this location for a brief period. Nevertheless, although most colonists did not directly observe Aboriginal people in the Mallee back country (or leave records of their observations if they did), evidence of the presence of Aboriginal people is variously recorded. For example, White and Beilby reported seeing Aboriginal wells, Beilby saw evidence of Aboriginal burning, and Beveridge and Thompson described Aboriginal seasonal journeys into the back country.

The information contained in these few sources has limited usefulness as it covers a very limited area—a few small parts of the back country. Beilby, Morton, Clow, Everard and Neumayer wrote about the same narrow strip of land heading west from Ouyen towards the South Australian border. Pritchard, Stanbridge, Neumayer and, to a lesser degree, Beveridge, reported on the area around Lake Tyrell. White, Neumayer and Everard documented their knowledge of an Aboriginal pathway from Wirrengren Plain to the Kulkyne, and Thompson described another Aboriginal pathway from the Kulkyne to Ouyen.[19] Vast expanses of the back country, over 75 per cent of the area, were not described by Europeans at the time the land was occupied by colonists.

Based on this limited information, Robert Brough Smyth concluded in 1878 that the Mallee back country was

‘used only at certain times during each season, when the productions which it affords might tempt ... the Aboriginals to penetrate several parts of it’.[20] A poorly defined notion of ‘seasonal visiting’ was created. While seasonal visiting could be interpreted to mean visiting an area for an entire season, just as current cattle graziers take their cattle into mountain pastures for the summer and have a clearly defined relationship to the land, here it appears to be used to describe short visits to limited parts of the land with perhaps no sense of land ownership.

This view of minimal Aboriginal land use went unchallenged, and was the historical orthodoxy, for over a century. The Mallee’s reputation as a howling wilderness discouraged visits to the area during the second half of the nineteenth century and severely constrained any further information coming forward.[21] In the early twentieth century, Alfred Kenyon reinforced Brough Smyth’s conclusion in his very influential regional history, *The story of the Mallee*, by presenting the agricultural settlement of the Mallee as the story of the occupation of a previously empty and unproductive land.[22] Following Brough Smyth, Kenyon believed that Aboriginal people only had a cursory visiting relationship with the Mallee back country:

Owing to the absence of reliable water supplies, there was no tribe of natives belonging to the Mallee; one or two families or small coteries only made it their home. The Mallegundeet, the people of the Mallee, belonged to the Wimmera, Richardson, and Avoca blacks, who in favorable years made incursions in large numbers.[23]

This view was then perpetuated in the 1960s by Aldo Massola. Despite Massola’s commitment to re-establishing the place of Aboriginal people on the land, his *Journey to Aboriginal Victoria*, which documented physical evidence of Aboriginal people in the state, did not include a single reference to the Mallee back country,[24] and his view of Aboriginal land use was almost a simple paraphrase of Brough Smyth:

The Mallee can be said to have been ‘back country’ to the tribes bordering on it, and it was only visited by groups from these tribes at various times of the year for the purpose of obtaining seasonal foods. It is certain that eventually some groups did settle on it.[25]

The first questioning of ‘seasonal visiting’ in the Mallee came from archaeologists. In 1949, Stan Mitchell had only been able to identify two sites in the Mallee where Aboriginal stone tools had been found, but archaeologists working in the 1970s and early 1980s identified dozens of sites, prompting the nature of Aboriginal land use and occupation to be questioned.[26] In 1980, P May and

RLK Fullagar[27] argued that the key factor determining occupation of the Mallee back country was the availability of water and speculated that occupation could have been more sustained, lasting for months in wet periods or even years after floods. Anne Ross went further, arguing on the basis of historical (not archaeological) material that it was 'almost certain that the Aborigines of the Mallee were not simply using the dune tract as "back country" in suitable seasons'.[28] Despite these revised views, at the very end of the twentieth century the authoritative DJ Mulvaney and J Kamminga effectively reasserted Brough Smyth's judgement, claiming that Aboriginal people of the Murray River 'did not venture far from the riverine corridor, which is about twenty kilometres wide'.[29]

This continuing narrative of seasonal visiting in the Mallee back country was eventually challenged again in the wake of a fundamental reconceptualisation of the nature of Aboriginal people's relationship to land and land management. Initiated by Rhys Jones's seminal work in 1969 on 'fire stick farming',[30] new research progressively revealed the extent to which Aboriginal people were active and sophisticated land managers. [31] This reconceptualisation was informed by, and dependent on, cultural knowledge retained in Aboriginal communities. In *Aboriginal Dreaming paths and trading routes*, the Worimi historian Dale Kerwin gave what he called an 'Aboriginal perspective' and identified three myths that needed to be discarded: that 'Aboriginal societies are nomadic and non-sedentary', that 'Aboriginal society does not produce specialists' and that 'Aboriginal society were food collectors not food producers'.[32] Acknowledgement of the sophistication of Aboriginal land management was eventually brought into the public sphere and public consciousness by Bill Gammage and Bruce Pascoe.[33] Both worked from colonial records, believing that unrecognised information about Aboriginal land use was contained within them, as well as cultural knowledge. Gammage emphasised the role that fire played in shaping the land and how cleared lands were misinterpreted by early colonists as 'natural parks', leading to the view that 'parks chequered Australia'.[34] Pascoe placed more emphasis on the role of Aboriginal people as agriculturalists.

Reaction to the notion of Aboriginal people as sophisticated land managers has taken various forms. For example, some scientists and environmentalists have expressed concern that the use of fire by Aboriginal people is not properly understood, resulting in some areas of land currently being inappropriately burnt on

the assumption that Aboriginal people would have burnt it previously. This burning represents a risk to native species and biodiversity. In 2010, Ron Hateley argued that 'Victorian Aborigines did not have such a major effect on our forests, compared with the plains and woodlands, which undoubtedly bore deeply numerous signs'.[35] Another response has been to refute the very notion of sophisticated land management. Tom Griffiths has described such criticism as a reprise of the culture wars: 'Agriculture is at the front line of the ideological war about the British colonisation of Australia'.[36] Peter O'Brien proposed in a *Quadrant* article that 'there is nothing shameful in a nomadic hunter-gatherer history for Aborigines', and this would be the understanding of Aboriginal land use (and ownership) that such critics wish to return to.[37]

This dialogue about land management appears to have fostered new understandings about Aboriginal land use in the Mallee back country. In 2006, in a history prepared for the Native Title Tribunal, Raine Quinn examined evidence of Aboriginal peoples' presence in Buloke Shire in the southern Mallee and reached the conclusion: 'there were people *living* in the mallee country and not that it was an area where Aboriginal people just visited'.[38] Similarly, a 2012 publication on heritage issues in the Rural City of Mildura adopted this understanding, noting that the 'archaeological record challenges the idea that the resources of the Mallee were only accessed by Aboriginal people during periods of plentiful food and water'.[39] Without citing the source of the archaeological evidence, it continued:

By the time Europeans arrived, the landscape was thus significantly marked by well trodden pathways, excavated wells, scar trees, crops of cultivated yams, large earthen mounds and middens, the creation of grasslands through fire stick burning, engineered channels to catch fish, and burial sites.[40]

A new imagining of Aboriginal people in the Mallee back country emerged alongside the historical orthodoxy of seasonal visiting. These conflicting narratives were examined in a recent publication, *Mallee country: land, people, history*. [41] The first authoritative history of the Victorian Mallee (within its broader theme of all mallee country) since Kenyon, *Mallee country* makes the same distinction as this article and treats the Victorian Mallee as two areas—the riverine corridor and the back country, which it calls 'dry scrub country'. [42] The book provides rich and vivid images of Aboriginal people in the riverine corridor, but it has very little to say about the dry scrub

country. Its judgement is that the back country 'was not permanently occupied, but Aboriginal people travelled through it and used it on a seasonal, temporary basis'.^[43] *Mallee country* agrees that Aboriginal people shaped the land, often with fire, yet finds the evidence of this in the Victorian Mallee slim. According to Hateley, the reported use of fire by Aboriginal people in the Mallee is a post-colonial phenomena. *Mallee country* is also influenced by the work of Michael F Clarke, which has shown that some mallee bird species, particularly the iconic Mallee Fowl, require an environment of old (unburned) mallee, suggesting that fire was not widely used.^[44]

These conflicting narratives of how the Victorian Mallee back country was used arise, it can be argued, because of the extremely limited observations by early colonists in the area. Indeed, and following on from this, it could be argued that there is a weighted assumption that if it was not observed by early colonists it did not happen. This article explores whether there are new sources of evidence that can be brought to the question of Aboriginal land use. Specifically, it examines the utility of parish plans in VPRS 16306 held at Public Record Office Victoria (PROV). Parish plans have previously proved useful as sources of pre-colonial vegetation patterns, but their utility as a source of Aboriginal land use has not been explored, though investigation is progressing in this area.^[45] In *Decolonising historical maps*, Beth Moylan undertakes a very brief analysis of the utility of colonial maps and suggests that:

Historical maps can be useful when researching Aboriginal cultural landscapes and they can help researchers develop family histories, trace trading paths and Songlines, investigate traditional fire management regimes, reconstruct land use patterns, and explore local languages.^[46]

VPRS 16306 Record plans ('put away' and 'current')

VPRS 16306 consists of cadastral maps that define land boundaries. PROV describes these as 'the definitive legal documents that determine the status of land in Victoria that has been sold by the Crown (alienation) or reserved for public purposes', and explains that these form 'the basis of the current land titles system'.^[47] VPRS 16306 consists of two consignments: P1 or the 'put away' plans, and P2 or those that were 'current' in 2001 when the use of hard copy plans was replaced by digital record keeping. This article focuses on plans in the P1 consignment. These are described by PROV as covering the period 1837 to 2001 and, while a number of possible uses are suggested, Aboriginal land use is not included.

The record plans do not automatically recommend themselves as sources of information about Aboriginal land use in the Mallee. They appear to have two significant limitations, namely contemporaneity and geographical scope. Land ownership, and the consequential making of cadastral parish plans in the Mallee, is primarily associated with the agricultural settlement that commenced decades after the original colonial occupation of the land. Pastoral squatters moved onto the Mallee in the 1840s and 1850s, but agricultural settlement only commenced in the southern Mallee in the early 1890s and continued until the 1920s.^[48] The passage of that amount of time between the arrival and agricultural settlement of Europeans could reasonably be presumed to have removed evidence of Aboriginal land use. The second apparent limitation is geographical scope. Large parts of the Mallee, such as the Sunset Country and the Big Desert, have never been settled and, hence, have never needed cadastral mapping. The area involved is extensive. The Murray–Sunset National Park alone is over 600,000 hectares (1.5 million acres). The expectation would be that record plans would add little to our knowledge of those areas.

Initial inspection

An initial inspection of VPRS 16306 was undertaken to assess its potential value as a source of Aboriginal land use. The P1 consignment contains over 1,600 parish plans of north-western Victoria and each of these was briefly examined to determine the type of information it contained. The microfiche copies that were initially used made detailed investigation difficult, some maps were too small to read and some microfiche were missing; nevertheless, it was possible to conceptualise the series into six distinct categories.

1. Land purchases by squatters

When squatters occupied the Mallee, they had the option to purchase up to 640 acres of the land on which their station buildings stood under what was called a 'Presumptive Right'. Land Acts in the 1870s extended these rights and the squatters bought up further land. VPRS 16306 contains the plans of some of the land purchases made from the mid-1870s onwards.^[49] These plans, while accurately describing an allotment's dimensions, can be vague about its relative location. Though listed as being located in a specific parish, there is sometimes no sense that the surveyor knew the relationship of the land purchased to the parish boundary, or indeed where the parish boundary was. However, these purchases, and the plans of them, are important because

they reveal the land that squatters valued—often water sources that they hoped to monopolise. Overall, the extent of these land purchases was very minor—probably less than 10,000 acres over the entire Mallee.

2. Grazing blocks under the 1883 Mallee Pastoral Leases Act

Government had little interest, and played little part, in mapping pastoral occupation of the Mallee. After White and Pritchard had mapped the state boundaries, it was left to squatters to map their personal holdings. This changed in 1883 when the *Mallee Pastoral Leases Act* introduced new leasehold arrangements and government needed to map and mark the boundaries of the leaseholds it was offering. The surveying was carried out in 1885 and 1886 by contract surveyors Tom H Turner and EJ Nankivell. Kenyon was confident that this process left little about the Mallee unknown; yet, Turner's plans leave large areas of the Sunset Country blank.[50] Some of Turner's and Nankivell's plans—of whole counties with no mention of parishes—are only remotely cadastral in nature and are stored in VPRS 16306 under titles such as 'Mallee' or simply the name of one parish in the area so mapped.[51]

3. Pre-agricultural settlement land assessments

Agricultural settlement of the Mallee began as a private initiative. Holders of grazing blocks in the south-east of the Mallee started subdividing their blocks in the 1890s and bringing agricultural settlers onto the land. Agricultural settlement was dependent on, and went hand in hand with, the expansion of the railway network. As government became progressively more involved in agricultural settlement through initiatives such as closer settlement, it became more interested in the viability of land for settlement and its capacity to repay the costs of railway development. Plans associated with the assessment of the suitability of land for agricultural settlement are filed in VPRS 16306. These plans usually cover large areas, equivalent to a number of parishes, and record the features that may make the land suitable for settlement. Many plans were made of the Sunset Country when settlement of that area was being considered in the 1920s.[52]

4. Pre-agricultural settlement parish plans

When it was decided to offer land for settlement, individual parishes were surveyed and progressively subdivided into townships, farms, water and timber reserves, and proposed roads. The maps of these subdivisions are the first detailed 'parish maps' of the Mallee in VPRS 16306. With a high level of detail, they were designed to help prospective settlers understand

the value of an individual piece of land. They record the presence of water, soil types, vegetation, plains, dunes and tracks. The quality of this category of map increased over time as government became more involved in promoting and supporting agricultural development. Earlier maps could have proposed boundaries and roads that bore little resemblance to the way the land was eventually used.[53]

5. Township plans

As parishes were opened for settlement, land was also set aside for townships to support the settlers. VPRS 16306 contains the plans of township subdivisions; however, inspection of these maps revealed nothing of value to this research.

6. Post-agricultural settlement parish and township plans

Following agricultural settlement, the original parish plans were progressively updated to show the addition of new allotments, alienation of allotments, new reservations and new features added to the land, for example, water channels. At the same time, pre-agricultural features such as tracks disappeared from the land and updated versions of the parish plan. Though fossilised features such as quarries could remain, later plans progressively lost any value for this investigation.

This initial inspection had two clear findings. First, it refuted any concerns that might have been held about the contemporaneity and geographical scope of VPRS 16306. The plans of squatters' purchases, the surveys of the entire Mallee dividing it into grazing blocks and the land assessments made before agricultural settlement each hold material that is earlier and of greater scope than might have been expected. Second, this initial inspection found, particularly in the pre-agricultural settlement parish plans, that VPRS 16306 contains a comprehensive and highly detailed mapping of the Mallee back country before it was disturbed by agricultural use.

This initial inspection also noted evidence of possible Aboriginal infrastructure, which suggested that a more detailed investigation of plans from the period before agricultural settlement might yield useful information.

Detailed investigation

The initial inspection identified 234 plans that contained, or were thought likely to contain, evidence of Aboriginal land use. PROV was extremely supportive of a detailed investigation of these maps and made their original hard copy versions available to overcome the difficulties of interpreting microfiche.

The detailed investigation sought to find evidence of specific land use features. Drawing partly from the assertion of sophisticated Aboriginal land management quoted earlier (i.e., 'well trodden pathways, excavated wells' etc.), it sought to find evidence of Aboriginal campsites, pathways, water management, cleared land (possibly used for agriculture or hunting), quarries, burial sites and placenames.

While it was considered possible that direct evidence of these forms of Aboriginal land use could be found, it was also anticipated that these land uses could have been obscured by colonial settlement. Pastoral squatters had very similar interests to Aboriginal people—water, cleared land and grass—and overwrote existing Aboriginal infrastructure when they usurped it to meet their needs. In the riverine corridor, squatters occupied the sites of Aboriginal villages, no doubt because they were best placed to access water and usable land, and their land purchases in the back country may also mark sites of Aboriginal occupation.[54] Pathways were also appropriated. Kerwin has argued that Aboriginal pathways frequently 'became drover runs and coach ways'.[55] The first overlanders through the Mallee, Hawdon and Bonney, followed 'well beaten native paths' but, by the time their cattle and wagons had passed, the Aboriginal nature of such pathways were very likely already suppressed.[56] Similarly, squatters built log tanks at the same locations as Aboriginal people had had wells, once again obscuring the Aboriginal history of such sites.[57]

Consequently, the investigation also sought evidence of pastoral land use that might have been founded on Aboriginal infrastructure, land purchases, water management and tracks. This approach of seeking evidence of both Aboriginal and pastoral land use treats the plans of VPRS 16306 as akin to palimpsests—artefacts containing a series of stories layered over each other. Each layer tells a discrete and meaningful story, but the earliest stories have often been hidden and need to be recovered through analysis and interpretation that peels away the later layers to reveal the original story.

The detailed investigation revealed some direct evidence of Aboriginal land use, but it was limited in scope. Apart from single references to an 'Aboriginal Burying Ground' and a pile of ironstones (which may indicate Aboriginal resource gathering), all the references directly construable as indicative of Aboriginal land use referred to water management. Nearly all of these were references to crabholes (Figure 2).

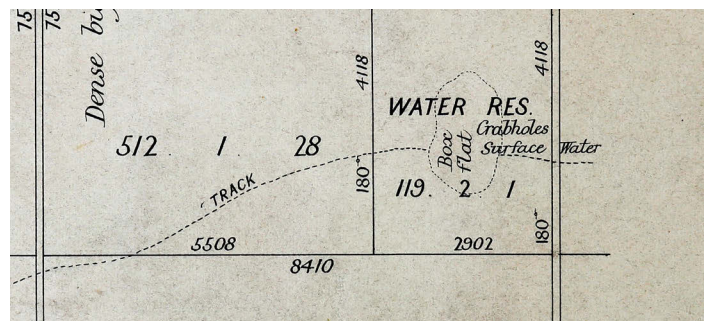


Figure 2: Extract from 'Parish of Pirro' plan, 1893, PROV, VPRS 16306/P1, Unit 12944, M 544, O: Parish of Pirro.

Though the term crabhole is used in various ways, it most frequently describes small cylindrical wells that are less than a foot in width and only a few feet deep that are dug on clay pans and fill with water draining from surrounding land. The narrow and deep structure of crabholes protected the water from evaporation and use by animals, but also made it difficult to access. Robinson described Aboriginal people sucking up water through reed tubes, and this process may have been applied to crabholes. [58] Massola, without giving his source, referred to grass being tied to the end of a spear and dipped into crabholes (and tree hollows) to sponge water out. [59] Covered with a piece of bark to reduce evaporation, these crabhole wells would become invisible.

Failure to record more extensive Aboriginal infrastructure is probably a simple matter of ignorance on the part of the surveyors, but it may also reflect a desire to deny Aboriginal people's place on the land. N Etherington found that ignoring Aboriginal land ownership and infrastructure, except wells, was frequent on plans, and posited that it may have been common practice not to record the presence of those deemed not capable of land ownership, thereby suppressing their existence and relationship to the land. [60] Being such a valuable commodity, water was always recorded.

In addition to these direct references, the plans occasionally show associations that suggest Aboriginal land uses that probably did not even occur to the surveyors. On at least two occasions, associations are shown between stone sources and Aboriginal water management. Figure 3 shows a crabhole next to 'Limestone Cliffs'. Given that usable stone was uncommon in north-western Victoria, and that Aboriginal people were known to travel into the back country to gather other resources such as ochre, there is a clear suggestion that this might be a quarry site supplied with water. The repetition of the pattern reinforces this interpretation.



Figure 3: Extract from 'Parish of Daalko' plan, 1887, PROV, VPRS 16306/P1, Unit 12779, M 527, S: Parish of Daalko.

The other Aboriginal land use feature that may also have been unwittingly recorded is cleared grassland. As already noted, the pre-agricultural settlement parish maps went to considerable lengths to describe the state of the land, and these descriptions can suggest the presence of cleared land. The Mallee back country is naturally dotted with very small plains, usually places whose poor soil does not support mallee scrub, and the surveyors may simply describe these as a 'plain' or 'bead bush plain' or 'salt bush plain', but, occasionally, they make a point of specifying that a plain is 'grassed' or 'well grassed'. The presence of well-grassed plains (i.e., potentially fertile land that is devoid of trees) may suggest land clearance. The 'Parish of Boulka' plan,[61] made in 1904, shows five such plains, all very small in size. Figure 5 shows a typical representation of these plains.

As well as describing well-defined plains, the surveyors used other terms and phrases that may be construed as suggesting land clearance. Gammage argues that land cleared by Aboriginal people could take on a parklike appearance for Europeans—open grassy areas with clumps of trees—and some of the surveyor's descriptions suggest just this.[62] To the south of Robinvale, in what was otherwise dense mallee scrub, a surveyor noted: 'Small to medium mallee stunted pines and broom bush with clumps of big mallee and open stretches well grassed.'[63] Similarly, to the north of Underbool, another surveyor described a small patch as 'grassy country with occasional small belts of big mallee with some dead pine and belar'.[64] This by no means counts as definitive evidence in support of Gammage's arguments, yet these examples are sufficiently evocative to warrant further investigation.

While this investigation revealed some clear instances and suggestions of Aboriginal land use, the plans appear to predominantly record colonial pastoral land use. The maps show numerous tracks and instances of pastoral

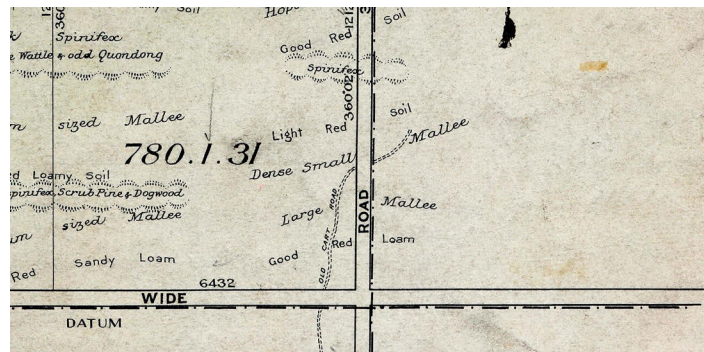


Figure 4: Extract from 'Portion of Parish of Nulkwyne' plan, 1911, PROV, VPRS 16306/P1, Unit 13865, N 120, A: Portion of Parish of Nulkwyne.

water management—for example, log tanks, tanks and dams. A typical example is the survey of the Parish of Chillingollah, undertaken in 1899, which shows four tanks and four tracks.[65] As already discussed, other studies have shown that these 'pastoral' tanks and tracks may have Aboriginal origins. Figure 4, which shows the proposed subdivision of part of Nulkwyne Parish, notes the presence of an 'OLD CART ROAD'. That road is known to overlay an Aboriginal pathway that ran from Wirrengren Plain to Kulkwyne on the Murray River.[66] Similarly, the 'Parish of Boulka' plan, made in 1904,[67] shows sites set aside for the later construction of tanks, and one of these, the 'Blue Mountain Tank Site', shows pre-existing surface water and Aboriginal 'crabholes' where a dam was planned.

Further comprehensive analysis of the 'colonial' land use in these plans is needed to determine how much Aboriginal infrastructure lies concealed in them. A case study was undertaken to demonstrate how the material in VPRS 16306 could be analysed and yield valuable information through a comprehensive analysis.

Case study

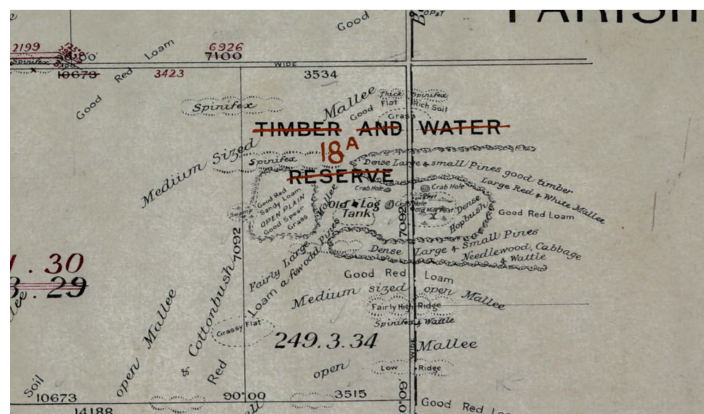


Figure 5: Extract from 'Parish of Kia' plan, 1911, PROV, VPRS 16306/P1, Unit 9887, K 201, A: Parish of Kia.

An analysis of the 'Parish of Kia' plan, made in 1911, highlights the depth of material that individual plans can contain and the opportunities and challenges of interpreting this material. Figure 5 is an extract from that plan measuring about 1 kilometre by 2 kilometres of land about 12 kilometres north-east of Ouyen. The extract shows a relatively large 'U' shaped dune that opens west, within a surrounding area of smaller east-west dunes and swales. The 'U' shaped dune is covered with native pine trees while the surrounding area is covered with mallee eucalypts of various sorts. Spinifex is growing on some of the ridges of the east-west dunes. Within the bowl of the 'U' shaped dune, drainage from the surrounding land has created a small infertile plain and an apparently damp, swampy piece of ground. Another swampy piece of ground lies to the west.

The capacity to understand and interpret this site is enhanced because its early colonial use is well documented.[68] Though squatters moved onto land to the immediate west (Paigie Run) and south-west (Ouyen Run) in about 1849 or 1850, the area was apparently not seen as valuable and was ignored until it was taken up by James Bennett in 1861. Bennett did not immediately occupy the land and, after unsuccessfully attempting to obtain access to water in the Kulkyne Lakes, abandoned the leasehold in 1864. The land then remained officially vacant until it was leased by the Lemprieres in 1876. It is also highly unlikely that the Lemprieres occupied the land, as their lease coincided with a severe drought and the arrival of rabbits in the Mallee; these conditions were so challenging that surrounding areas were abandoned as unusable. The Lemprieres' tenancy ended with the re-division of the Mallee into grazing blocks in 1884 and the land was then acquired by Kulkyne Station. But Kulkyne Station was unable to fence and use all the land that it had leased and also did not occupy the area. Therefore, when the land was subdivided in 1911 and this plan made, wheat farmers moved onto land that had apparently never been used for pastoral purposes.

Yet, the notion that the land had never been used for pastoral purposes is illusory. In the first decades of pastoral settlement of the Mallee, government exercised little control and supervision, and the squatters occupied land illegally and invisibly. The Ouyen Run was illegally occupied by Kulkyne Station from about 1849 to 1860 and that occupation could have extended to this area. Allegations were made in the 1870s that Kulkyne Station was grazing the unoccupied runs surrounding its official holdings. So, it is likely that Kulkyne Station grazed this area in good years until 1860, when it was claimed by Bennett, and may have used it again between Bennett

abandoning it in 1864 and the Lemprieres taking it up in 1876. Still, the land had probably only been used lightly, and not for over 35 years, when this plan was made.

This history of light land use, which is not uncommon in the Mallee back country, increases the theoretical possibility that evidence of Aboriginal land use could have been preserved and recorded when the area was mapped 60 years after its Aboriginal owners were dispossessed. Analysis confirms that possibility, and this plan of an island of tall green trees with associated water in a sea of mallee, preserves evidence of three layers of land use. The first layer, showing clearly the original Aboriginal use of the land, is evidenced by three 'crab holes' surrounding the swamp in the basin of the 'U' shaped dune. These crabholes probably only survived until 1911 because of the limited colonial use of the area. The second layer is the 'Old Log Tank', a colonial artefact probably dating to Kulkyne Station's illegal use of the land. (Incidentally, the post marked 'X' in the middle of the plain is probably from Nankivell's survey of grazing block boundaries in 1883.) The third layer, agricultural settlement, is marked by the new roads, farm boundaries and the declaration of a timber and water reserve to control the use of those valuable resources.

More problematic and difficult to explain are the three plains—one to the north (partly obscured by the word 'AND'), one to the west of the Log Tank and one to the south-west of the dune—that surround the 'U' shaped dune. Each is labelled as grassy. The northernmost plain is simply labelled 'Grass', that to the south-west is labelled 'Grassy Flat' and that to the west is labelled 'Good Red Sandy Loam OPEN PLAIN Good Spear Grass'. These plains raise the question, referred to earlier, of whether they are natural or human artefacts, and, if they are human artefacts, of who created them. There is no evidence of these grassy plains in the area today, though the plain in the dune basin remains untouched and apparently agriculturally unusable. The land where the grassy plains were located now seems indistinguishable from that around it, suggesting those plains might not have been the product of different or poorer soil types. The notes on the map reinforce this conclusion and the surveyor seems to have been at pains to point this out. In labelling the western plain 'Good Red Sandy Loam', he made it clear that the soil was the same as the surrounding area, which he described as 'Good Red Loam'. Perhaps the surveyor also pondered how the plains came to be there.

If the plains were not naturally occurring, the inescapable conclusion is that they were of Aboriginal origin. Both the limited colonial occupation of the land and the absence of any evidence of colonists clearing mallee elsewhere in the

back country before this time, stands against them being pastoral artefacts. If these are Aboriginal artefacts, it radically revises the way we might imagine the Aboriginal use of this land. Instead of just being a spot where Aboriginal people might have accessed water as they travelled the Mallee, this location might have been a place regularly visited by Aboriginal people where yams were grown on cleared plains or green 'pick' fostered to attract game. A much more sophisticated image of land management and land use begins to emerge.

This analysis of an extract from the 1911 'Parish of Kia' plan does not establish that Aboriginal people had cleared plains in the Mallee or that they were practising sophisticated forms of land management before colonial settlement. It merely describes a source of evidence that may be brought to an investigation of those questions. More detailed examination of the land on which these plains were located is needed to advance the investigation further, and to have any confidence in judgements that might be made. It should also be noted that suggesting that the plains in the extract may be Aboriginal artefacts is not the same as suggesting that the Mallee was subject to large-scale land clearance by Aboriginal people. The plains in this extract are small, measured in hundreds of metres. There is no suggestion that any more than 5 per cent of the Parish of Kia was managed in this way. This is quite consistent with Michael F. Clarke's finding, referred to earlier, that large parts of the Mallee had to remain unburned to support the species that have been found there.

Conclusion

PROV's collection of plans in VPRS 16306 was investigated to determine whether it contained evidence of Aboriginal land use in the Mallee back country that could supplement the scant resources currently available. An initial inspection of the material found that VPRS 16306 can provide a relatively comprehensive and detailed picture of land use before the land was settled by colonists for agricultural purposes. A more detailed investigation revealed that some direct evidence of Aboriginal land use can be found in plans from VPRS 16306. It was also found that Aboriginal land use is concealed by later colonial land use. This finding follows the dominant presumption that land use is colonial unless demonstrated otherwise. It can be argued that this presumption is both a tool and a relic of a process that has sought to deny Aboriginal peoples' relationship to the land and should be reversed. However, simply reversing that presumption would not, of itself, show how Aboriginal people were using the land.

The opportunity for future work with VPRS 16306 will be to find approaches that will allow a greater amount of the land use recorded before agricultural settlement to be identified as Aboriginal in origin. For this to occur, the material in VPRS 16306 will need to be comprehensively analysed in multiple ways. It is beyond the scope of this article to fully discuss and describe the methods that could be used to locate early Aboriginal layers in the land use palimpsest, but some indications can be given. Further analysis can be done solely with the material already contained in VPRS 16306. 'Tracks' that run to and between known pieces of Aboriginal infrastructure can reasonably be argued to have a presumption of Aboriginal origin. This would apply to a track found to run to a possible quarry site, like that shown in Figure 3. If the track that runs to the crabholes in Figure 2 connected to another example of Aboriginal land management, another presumption of Aboriginal land use would arise.

Further analysis could also be carried out combining the information in VPRS 16306 with other sources, especially knowledge retained by Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people need to be consulted and Aboriginal narratives examined. 'The story of the Coorongendoo Muckie (Great Stone) of Balaarook', recorded by Peter Beveridge,[69] describes an Aboriginal journey from Swan Hill to Lake Hindmarsh. The path of that journey coincides with a later important colonial track and raises a presumption of usurped Aboriginal infrastructure. Plans from other sources and archaeological records may also prove useful in decoding the parish plans and peeling back the layers of the palimpsest.

VPRS 16306 has the potential to provide information about Aboriginal land use in the Mallee back country—an area for which almost no colonial records were made at the time Aboriginal people were dispossessed. This information may, in turn, allow a reassessment of the narratives of Aboriginal land use that have developed since the mid-nineteenth century. A comprehensive examination of this material is fully warranted.

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