
Reconstructing the Battle of 'Narawai (Moongalba)

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Abstract

The Battle of 'Narawai on North Stradbroke Island, and skirmishes that culminated in this event (c. 1827–32) have been sidelined in recent decades, based on the assumption that the event was more likely a massacre, and that sources are too conflicted to build a workable narrative. Here we utilise known and unexamined sources, and the untapped oral tradition and environmental knowledge of Stradbroke Island Aboriginal peoples, to reconstruct both the build-up and phases of the confrontation. We find that our primary sources for this incident ultimately derive from Aboriginal informants; together with current Aboriginal perspectives, these allow a more nuanced and Aboriginal-driven narrative than is normally possible for a frontier wars skirmish. It is argued that the Battle of 'Narawai was not a one-sided massacre but rather a well-planned operation by Aboriginal combatants, orchestrated to provide tactical advantages. We contend that the battle merged tactics of traditional *pullen-pullen* (inter-tribal tournaments) with strategies more suited to the demands of the frontier wars, and that it was perceived as a victory by Aboriginal Stradbroke Islanders.

Introduction

Twenty years ago, Chilla Bullbeck called for the violent incidents within Australia's frontier wars to be better memorialized.¹ More recently, Raynald Lemelin has urged historians to develop Indigenous-based narratives concerning these events, to atone for the relative absence of this perspective.² Subsequently, there have been cooperative studies with Aboriginal families, aimed at providing more nuanced detail. A good example is Heather Burke's spatial reconstruction of the Rufus River incidents (1841). She conducted this in collaboration with the River Murray and Mallee Aboriginal Corporation.³

This article follows these precedents by examining skirmishes on Stradbroke and Moreton Islands in South-East Queensland, from c. 1827 to 1832 in cooperation with the local Aboriginal community. Stradbroke Island Aboriginal people today prefer to call the central incident 'the *Battle* of 'Narawai' (Ananarawai Creek);⁴ they view it as part of the undeclared war against their people and abide by



Figure 1
Dale Ruska sketching the 'Narawai battle area, 25 August 2018. Photo Ray Kerkhove.

descriptions given by their ancestors to Fred Campbell, who titled the incident 'the Battle of Moongalba' (Figure 1).⁵

George Watkins — one of our earliest sources — described a 'genuine stand-up fight'.⁶ Thomas Welsby, who provided another early account, called it a 'regular pitched battle'⁷ or 'famous battle'.⁸ Well into the 1950s, the battle was mentioned sporadically in Brisbane newspapers.⁹ In fact, during World War II — the same month that the Allied forces' South West Pacific Area Headquarters opened in Brisbane — the *Telegraph* hailed 'the Battle of Moongalba' as 'the only battle in Moreton Bay's history'.¹⁰

Massacres or battles?

There is debate over whether such confrontations were battles.¹¹ Although in 2013 frontier wars historian Lyndall Ryan spoke of 'pitched battles' along the Hawkesbury River,¹² lately she is inclined to view such incidents as massacres.¹³ Likewise, in 2000 the Nyungar peoples of Perth pushed to have the 'Battle of Pinjarra' reclassified as a massacre,¹⁴ culminating in a court case over signage.¹⁵

The problem with the term 'battle' is that modern weaponry generally turns confrontations with Indigenous peoples into slaughter. Moreover, some argue that Aboriginal Australians did not practise organised warfare.¹⁶ In 1975, Malcolm Prentis declared Aboriginal groups capable of only small, local hostilities.¹⁷ More

recently, Peter Dennis has argued that 'the egalitarian, non-cohesive nature' of Aboriginal society precluded complex military strategy,¹⁸ while military historian Jeffrey Grey concludes that Aboriginal peoples could not organise anything akin to a 'battle'.¹⁹ Such perspectives are built on 1970s notions of hunter-gatherers as pacifists practising only small-scale fighting.²⁰

On the other hand, the same early sources that derided Aboriginal military capacity also admit that Aboriginal groups traditionally had 'confederations' and 'associations' solely for the purpose of war.²¹ Early accounts from South-East Queensland describe 'powerful tribes' teaming up²² to organise attacks at inter-tribal gatherings.²³ Between 200 and 700 warriors were recorded at both traditional and frontier-period fights.²⁴ As recently as 1932, Darwin witnessed a battle of 1000 warriors.²⁵ Tom Petrie's *Reminiscences* (1904) and interviews with Jinnaburra elder Willie MacKenzie (Gaiarbau) — our most reliable sources on South-east Queensland culture — openly detail the protocols of *pullen-pullen* - large inter-tribal battles.²⁶

Furthermore, tactical advantages can undermine advanced weaponry. Guerrilla fighting is essentially 'the war of the flea': poorer-armed, less-resourced forces inflicting loss on a powerful enemy.²⁷ Both Nicholas Clements' *The Black War* (2014) and Stephen Gapps' *The Sydney Wars* (2018) demonstrate the efficiency of Aboriginal resistance against the British army. Gapps in particular did not shy away from using the term 'battle' to designate specific confrontations.²⁸

Our main source concerning the 'Narawai battle', Thomas Welsby, states that, 'The [A]boriginals treated the affair exactly as if it was a regular *jooloong*, or fight with a hostile tribe of their own colour.'²⁹ In this article, we consider whether this battle is best understood as a *jooloong/pullen-pullen* adapted with guerrilla strategies to the new context of frontier warfare.

A disappearing battle: Previous studies

Today, the Battle of 'Narawai is absent from many Stradbroke Island histories.³⁰ Scepticism emerged in the 1960s, with John Keats' comment that, 'There are conflicting opinions on how much *actual violence* occurred on the island ... Watkins ... states ... there were massacres on the island, *this is probably doubtful*' (italics mine).³¹

By 1975, archivist Mamie O'Keefe had taken this further: 'the battle would be ... *distorted memory*' (italics mine).³² Adding to her angle was John Steele's *Brisbane in Convict Days* (1975). Steele provided the first collection of documents concerning the incident — significantly calling it an *affray* rather than a 'battle'. He added concerns about the key texts, which he viewed as challenging to 'historical criticism':

[They] differ so wildly that one might be forgiven for thinking they were unconnected ... The prisoner's version bears the marks of a propaganda story ... should be treated with special caution, if not scepticism ... The third account ... had been added to the natives' repertoire of entertaining legends ... Like the stories of the dreamtime that explained how things began.³³

Steele nevertheless found points of convergence between the documents, although he avoided detailed analysis.

Subsequently, historians Raymond Evans, John MacKenzie-Smith and Timothy Bottoms have dedicated some of their respective works to the Stradbroke incidents — They cast the conflict as a series of escalating ‘clashes’.³⁴ Evans demonstrates that the battle was the most intense episode of violence of Brisbane’s convict period.³⁵

Re-examining the sources

To initiate fuller analysis of the ‘battle’, I will begin by detailing primary sources, including materials not previously considered. Our only contemporary sources are letters of Commander Captain James Clunie, written to his superior between 1830 and 1833. Clunie ran Moreton Bay settlement from 1830 to 1835. His letters confirm the historicity of the Stradbroke skirmishes. However, his reporting covered a number of years, at times referring to incidents long past. Clunie’s eagerness to prove ‘we have been on friendly terms with all the tribes’, always acting in ‘self defence’, also taints his reliability.

‘JW’ — possibly the Moreton Bay surgeon’s brother — wrote accounts of Moreton Bay leaders during the 1830s that provide some side details, but do not cover the actual event. Another early, very brief reference comes from Henry Stobart’s 1853 journal.³⁶

Our chief accounts were compiled mainly during the 1890s. The most extensive record consists of chapters and articles written by Queensland politician and sportsman Thomas Welsby (1858–1941). He published these from 1901 to 1922, with variations.³⁷ Welsby was very familiar with Stradbroke Island’s Aboriginal population; nevertheless, he did not research his story but rather borrowed the account of Fred Campbell, though he never credited him as the author. As these stories are better known as Welsby’s, I will henceforth refer to this as the ‘Campbell/Welsby’ source.

The original author, Fred Campbell, was a fisherman, the son of the early Darling Downs settler ‘Tinker’ Campbell. Fred lived at Amity Point since the 1870s. His family married into the Aboriginal population and members are still present on Stradbroke. He was fluent in the local language.³⁸ In 1894, he died suddenly while out at sea. To honour him, *The Queenslander* published his manuscript about the Stradbroke battle and other incidents.³⁹ Campbell stated that his rendition was

handed down from father and mother to son and daughter, it being in the early eighties (1880s) when I heard it from many (Stradbroke Islanders). In those days I put myself in the habit and way of jotting down anything regarded by me as historically interesting and it has been from these journals that I have been assisted in now chronicling this famous battle.⁴⁰

This was the account Welsby replicated, word for word, in his works.

George Watkins (1846–1916) provides a source not covered by Steele. Watkins heard the battle story long before Campbell, some 35 years after it occurred. His rendition is brief, and sits within a scientific paper.⁴¹ Watkins had ethnographic interests, respected by the academic circles of his time.⁴² He was Assistant Superintendent and Dispenser at Dunwich Benevolent Asylum after 1868, a position that placed him in continual contact with Stradbroke’s Aboriginal families. Like Campbell, he learnt the local language and relied on personal interviews, chiefly

from an unnamed survivor of the Moreton Island massacre and other eyewitness Aboriginal stories 'well remembered . . . having happened when they were lads'.⁴³

A rather different report comes from Brisbane journalist John James Knight (1862–1927). It first appeared in newspapers in 1892⁴⁴ and featured in *In the Early Days* (1895). Knight's story was based on interviews with convicts and early settlers, who were then old men. Gathering such information was Knight's main task when he first arrived in Brisbane. His main source was 'Old Hand'— an anonymous figure described as a Dunwich convict⁴⁵ or an official,⁴⁶ presumably a short-term convict overseer. Steele was sceptical of this source, but notes that it provides a uniquely anti-authoritarian perspective. This source will henceforth be referred to as Old Hand.

Aside from these five documents, there are comments and insights in other reports. Convict-born James Hexton was prone to misinformation, but is relevant because his father was a pilot at Amity during the battle. James Porter (1835–1912) offers some comments from a survivor of the Moreton Island massacre. Aboriginal Protector Archibald Meston provides brief notes, reflecting information he heard during the 1870s to 1910s. Paul Tripcony (1900–75), whose family are descendants of the Ngugi people of Mulgumpin, Moreton Island, makes a few observations too.

Finally, there is *Moreton Bay* (1931), an historical novel by Frederick William Mole (1865–1946). The novel is useful for providing a background to the earlier skirmishes, drawing on documents and informants no longer extant. During the period from the 1880s to the 1920s, the author, Frederick Mole, was Queensland's senior public servant.⁴⁷ He worked in the head office of the Department of Public Instruction after 1884⁴⁸ and was Queensland's Public Curator (Public Trustee) during the 1910s and 1920s. Mole was privy to all the state's records, and was familiar with many early settlers and their descendants.

Compared with many frontier wars events, this assemblage of sources is diverse and steeped in Aboriginal perspectives. It was Aboriginal Stradbroke Islanders who provided the core stories, from the 1860s to the 1880s. This provides us with an Aboriginal narrative such as Lemelin envisaged. It also shows that 'battle' and 'war' were how Stradbroke Islanders themselves envisaged this event:

To hear the story from those to whom it has been passed, and who are still on the island, for some will speak of it with pleasure, for being connections of those who took part in their 'Great War,' they are in themselves heroes indeed.⁴⁹

Adding modern Aboriginal perspectives

To enrich our understanding of the 'Narawai/Moongalba battle, this article draws on current Stradbroke Islander oral traditions, especially from Uncle Bob Anderson and Dale Ruska. Archivist Lynette Russell has shown that Aboriginal oral traditions contribute much local, culture-specific data not obtainable through other means.⁵⁰ Historian Maria Nugent even considers oral sources superior in supplying spatial specifics — sometimes radically shifting historical analysis.⁵¹ As we are dealing with *locations*, a battleground and associated skirmish sites, this type of data is extremely relevant.

As Bain Attwood cautions, the process of including oral traditions requires some adjustment to our understanding of ‘knowledge of the past’, as the Aboriginal perspective is steeped in orality, memory, sense of place and mythic themes.⁵² In an article on Canadian Indigenous knowledge, Marlene Castellano nevertheless demonstrates that stories conveyed by Indigenous elders will tend to be reliable, because these elders have the assigned role of educating and voicing their community’s consensus of history.⁵³ Indeed, ever since the Bunuba people asserted their rights to the story of their resistance leader Jandamarra (‘Pigeon’),⁵⁴ it has become an accepted protocol to consult with elders on frontier histories.

Aboriginal Stradbroke Islanders today variously identify as Quandamooka, Nunukul, Koenpal and so on. They largely live on their homeland. Their sandy islands were not attractive to Europeans for farming or pastoralism, so they remained mostly as bushland. For this reason, skirmish sites have remained virtually unchanged since the 1830s.

During the period from the 1830s to the 1880s, the Aboriginal and European communities on Stradbroke intermarried, forming fishing, oystering, boating, whaling and piloting (lighthouse) concerns.⁵⁵ This helped to prevent some of the drastic relocations suffered by other communities. Stradbroke Islanders were certainly confined to reserves, but on traditional Stradbroke Island camping grounds at Myora and Dunwich or nearby Bribie Island. All this enabled greater continuity of oral traditions than was possible in many parts of Australia.

Uncle Bob Anderson, a Ngugi elder, Quandamooka, is widely acknowledged as the most senior figure on Stradbroke Island. He is a direct descendant of a woman (Winyeeaba Murriaba) who survived the Moreton Island massacre that was part of the prelude to the battle. He has also written on this history in *History, Life and Times of Robert Anderson, Gheebelum, Ngugi, Mulgumpin* (2001). I interviewed Uncle Bob Anderson at his Tarragindi home, on 6 October 2018.

The Moreton family is especially knowledgeable about the history of specific Stradbroke sites, and its members are descendants of another of the massacre survivors, Charlie Moreton. I interviewed Dale Ruska (a Moreton descendant) in the vicinity of the battle site and close to other skirmish sites on 25 August 2018. Brian Coghill also represents the Moretons. His information assisted in understanding the battle site.

Reliability of the Stradbroke oral record

Some 180 years separates current Stradbroke Islander stories from the battle of ‘Narawai’. As Howard Morphy and Frances Morphy observed regarding Ngalakan oral history, time-gaps generate a ‘divergence from actual historical accounts’, which troubles historians.⁵⁶ Moreover, Indigenous oral traditions often ‘upset’ rather than confirm historical narratives.⁵⁷ On the other hand, minimalising oral narrative subordinates Indigenous perspectives, as the latter are perpetuated orally.⁵⁸ The fact that these impressions are passed down through descendants of actual participants empowers them with a ‘subjectivity’ and immediacy not attainable through documentary sources.⁵⁹

Wendy Beck and Margaret Somerville propose that Aboriginal oral traditions be tackled as ‘conversations’ with the written record — intersecting, parallel, complementary and contradictory. They find contradictory conversations ‘yielded the most

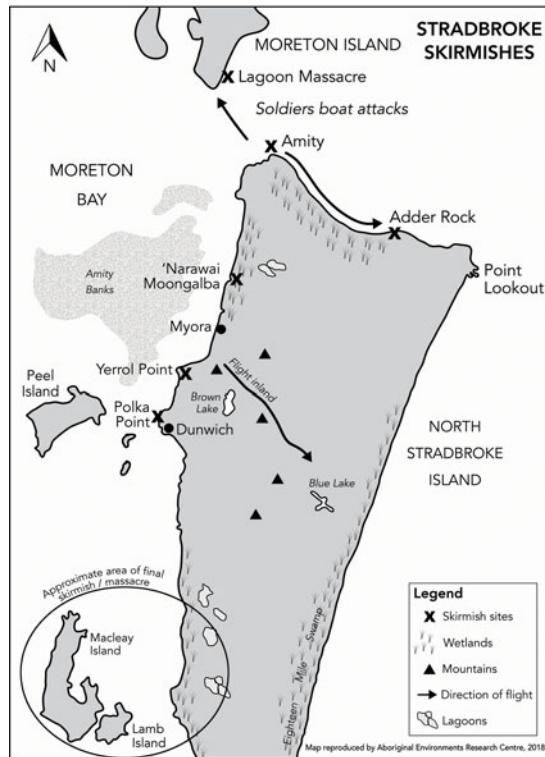


Figure 2

North Stradbroke Island Skirmishes, 1827–32. Map courtesy Aboriginal Environments Research Centre, University of Queensland.

productive analytic understandings', especially regarding specific sites.⁶⁰ Mark McKenna's *From the Edge: Australia's Lost Histories* (2016) is a good example of a parallel 'conversation' productively teasing out a Guugu Yimithirr perspective on the Endeavour River encounters with James Cook (1770). In this case, the 'conversation' yielded a deeper understanding of the Aboriginal protocols and reactions Cook observed, and a fuller appreciation of how the Guugu Yimithirr calendar and land use impacted interactions between the two groups.⁶¹

As our article focuses on places, (Figure 2) oral input will be an intersecting conversation relating to landscape and its resources, and cultural practices that may have undergirded certain events. As far as possible, the statements from informants have been left unaltered.

Reconstructing the Battle Prelude

The Campbell/Welsby account states that 'more than one pitched battle took place, more towards Amity than Dunwich',⁶² and that 'out of these ... incidences arose the first regular pitched battle'.⁶³ Similarly, George Watkins spoke of several 'conflicts'.⁶⁴ For these reasons, it is pertinent to examine the build-up of conflict.



Figure 3

Site of former military barracks (risen area in background), Dunwich. Photo Ray Kerkhove

Dunwich eviction: Napoleon's captivity

The roots of the hostilities can be traced to the decision to erect a pilot station at Amity Point a few miles north of the eventual battle site. Placing a base here impacted a major Stradbroke ceremonial area for the annual mullet run festival and its associated camping, tournaments, dugonging, fishing, signalling and canoe-crossings.⁶⁵ Many hundreds of Aboriginal people from neighbouring groups gathered at Amity for the festival,⁶⁶ working with the porpoises of Amity Banks, who were considered sacred kin.⁶⁷

We learn that as early as 1825, 'two or three soldiers' were stationed at Amity.⁶⁸ Soon buildings appeared.⁶⁹ It appears that these developments were tolerated reluctantly, but then a 'branch penal settlement' was built at Dunwich, adding a military barracks, (Figure 3) accommodation, stores, warehouse and (sporadically) thirty-nine convicts, labourers and soldiers. Additionally, 30 acres were cleared for cotton.⁷⁰

Such changes meant that *Goompie* (Dunwich) — a *bora*, *yurrie* (resource area) and permanent village⁷¹ — could no longer fulfil its traditional role. Stradbroke Islanders were forced to 'favour' One Mile and Myora.⁷² As the 1922 Campbell/Welsby account concedes, Stradbroke Islanders were effectively 'driven from the then beautiful tree covered slopes of Dunwich'.⁷³

Archibald Meston was informed that the exile of a 'troublesome' Dunwich Aboriginal was central to the eviction:

The name St Helena was given by Captain Logan in 1827. A Stradbroke Island black had stolen an axe, or was accused of stealing it, from the Dunwich penal

settlement, and was taken over and left on St Helena [Island], so named because the native was said to strongly resemble Napoleon.⁷⁴

Logan initially called St Helena 'Napoleon's Island',⁷⁵ but 'St Helena' was in use by 1848.⁷⁶ Paul Tripcony's informants claimed 'shootings' started with this event.⁷⁷ This may have been because 'Napoleon' was no minor felon. 'JW', a resident of Moreton Bay before 1838,⁷⁸ tells us that Napoleon was a Stradbroke leader whose real name was Eulope. He was 'chief of Amity Point tribe'.⁷⁹ Frederick Mole's sources similarly place Napoleon as 'chief in charge of the tribe'.⁸⁰ There is another important detail, provided by 'JW'. It seems that Eulope's nickname derived not just from physical resemblance to Napoleon, but from his similar attitude of defiance:

[He was named for] his daring courage and opposition to the military when they first took possession of Amity Point ... his great muscular power was fully developed; he trod the earth with the air of a conqueror.⁸¹

'JW' does not elaborate on what form Eulope's 'opposition' took, but Frederick Mole's sources mention Eulope challenging 'Morrison' (Chief Constable MacIntosh)⁸² at Dunwich's cotton plantation:

One young buck, more truculent than the others, had a smattering of English ... he was known as 'Boney' (Napoleon) ... He was cunning, elusive, and of superb physique ... Morrison made as if to hit him. Springing back instantly, the black exclaimed '*Baal, megundawarra*' (spear man), and poised his spear with an angry glint in his eyes.⁸³

Assassinating Choorong

Another cause of contention, according to the Campbell/Welsby account, is that soldiers now began to 'intrude on hunting grounds with guns',⁸⁴ wandering as far as Karragarra Island⁸⁵ and frequenting Aboriginal camps — going 'beyond ... respect' with Aboriginal women.⁸⁶ According to Welsby, Stradbroke elders responded by physically threatening Europeans and shunning them.⁸⁷ 'Old Hand' and Uncle Bob Anderson concur that the main *turrwan* (elder) became aloof, refusing food and gifts, which made the soldiery suspicious.⁸⁸

All sources agree that the Amity hutkeeper ('Choorong' — who Timothy Bottoms identifies as William Reardon)⁸⁹ shot this leader. Hostilities followed: Aboriginal parties again pretended indifference, waiting months for the right opportunity to kill 'Choorong' near Moongalba.⁹⁰ This death might be what Clunie referred to as the Islanders 'murder(ing) with impunity'.⁹¹

Moreton massacre

Clunie apparently ordered no retaliation for the killing, though the Islanders expected some, as the Campbell/Welsby account tells us they 'made for the hills' (the Blue Lake area).⁹² According to the Campbell/Welsby account, Clunie was unable to spare enough Dunwich men to 'pursue and wipe out',⁹³ although the reason Clunie gave was that he was 'induced to look over the past, warning them'.⁹⁴



Figure 4
Winyeeaba Murriaba (Sydney Rollands) — survivor of the Moreton massacre. Courtesy Uncle Bob Anderson.

Clunie's report is silent about a massacre which Porter 'Old Hand' and Watkins report occurring soon after. Faith Walker's theory is that Clunie deliberately avoided reporting the incident.⁹⁵

Porter states the Commandant 'got tired of this' [the killings] and ordered a sweep of Moreton Island⁹⁶, whereas in 'Old Hand', the massacre arose from the soldiers' frustration over not locating 'Choorong's killers: 'The soldiers of course were mad, and searched for the niggers, but finding none, they set out one night for Moreton Island and shot every blackfellow . . . between fifteen and twenty.'⁹⁷ Uncle Bob Anderson dubbed this 'the great Mulgumpin (Moreton) massacre' of forty to fifty of his people.⁹⁸ He recalls asking one of the Quandamooka elders, George Costello, around 1940: 'Why are there no Ngugi people at Moreton?' Costello answered, 'There was a lot of fighting in the old days.'⁹⁹ Anderson's family told him that his people largely fled to Stradbroke after this, as there was 'no place to hide' on Moreton.¹⁰⁰ Watkins records only 'a few' escaped by 'hiding in a clump of bushes'.¹⁰¹ We know that these included Uncle Bob Anderson's ancestor Winyeeaba Murriaba (Sydney Rollands)¹⁰² (Figure 4) and an 'old lady' who hid Charlie Moreton.¹⁰³

Watkins placed the massacre site at 'the south end of Moreton Island, near the head of the freshwater lagoon'.¹⁰⁴ This might be Mirapool Lagoon or the lagoon at Reeder's Point (Koorringal).¹⁰⁵ Watkins describes a dawn raid surrounding the camp. This aligns with the description given by 'Old Hand' of soldiers arriving at night — dawn raids being standard practice since the Sydney Wars.¹⁰⁶

Presumably the soldiers crossed to Moreton after having spotted Aboriginal people or perhaps the fires of the camp at the lagoon. Amity Point once extended closer to Moreton.¹⁰⁷ Possibly the soldiers also feared for their navigational beacons. These were crucial to safe entry of supply ships.¹⁰⁸ At this time, supply ships were vital for both Dunwich and Moreton Bay. Weather and Aboriginal raids had destroyed much of the crops at Brisbane, meaning that there was a heavy dependence on food stores brought by ship.

Aboriginal retaliation and the Yerrol Point skirmish

Old Hand tells us that, after the massacre, Islanders vowed to 'kill every "diamond" [soldier].'¹⁰⁹ There is some evidence of actions against Europeans. Around 1831, Stradbroke Islanders chased whaler Joseph Bradley off their beaches and prevented him from landing anywhere.¹¹⁰ In 1854, Thomas Anderson's mother revealed that his father had died decades before (in the early 1830s) 'at the hands of blacks' while working as a pilot around Moreton Island.¹¹¹

As mentioned before, Clunie does not detail the Moreton Island massacre. However, he does report that after the Amity hutkeeper was killed, 'the tribe ... kept lurking in the neighbouring bushland'.¹¹² He also states that on 15 July 1831,¹¹³ a convict (James Wood) was killed in Dunwich vegetable garden 'about twenty yards from the house' — perhaps a warning to Clunie as he was visiting at the time. Clunie also records that shortly afterwards, the Chief Constable was ambushed, with two European runaways killed.¹¹⁴ 'Old Hand' describes them as overseers.¹¹⁵ Clunie advises that the skirmish resulted in Stradbroke Islander deaths: 'The natives having attacked the party with their spears, they were obliged to fire at them in self-defence, when some of the natives were killed or wounded.'¹¹⁶ According to Mole's informants, both this and the garden killing were engineered by Eulope.¹¹⁷

Old Hand gives the skirmish location as 'along the beach' towards Dunwich.¹¹⁸ Given the geography of Stradbroke, this was probably the beach directly north of Dunwich.

Here oral tradition is helpful. Dale Ruska was told by his family that Yerrol Point (which is along the beach north of Dunwich) was the location of an event involving the soldiers that was 'more like a skirmish ... lasted for a few hours'.¹¹⁹

Adder Rock Battle (Point Lookout)

The Campbell/Welsby sources tell us that 'a short time' after this ambush,¹²⁰ warriors caught and killed 'the mailman from Sydney' near Point Lookout.¹²¹ However, this could not have been a mailman, as mail was shipped direct to Brisbane.¹²²

Archibald Meston tried to unravel the mystery. He recalled a similar story told by a Point Lookout 'half caste named Billy Harper and a blackfellow named Tulla-man'.¹²³ According to these two, the victim was '*Jalwang-booyal* ... long knife, probably referring to a cutlass he carried'.¹²⁴ A cutlass indicates a quasi-military role. Thus the victim may have been from the squad assigned to hunt runaways along the beaches.¹²⁵

Watkins also refers to this incident, which he claims stirred the next skirmish, 'in the neighbourhood of Point Lookout'.¹²⁶ In this respect, his account concurs

with that of Knight's 'Old Hand', who recalled a skirmish at Point Lookout: 'A detachment of military was sent out to Point Lookout, which was the great fishing ground of the Aboriginals, with instructions to shoot every black that was met with.'¹²⁷ Point Lookout had no European presence back then. It was indeed an important 'fishing ground' and a sizeable Aboriginal camp,¹²⁸ central to nautilus dives for making sacred *chuleen* (pendants).¹²⁹

The oral tradition passed down among Stradbroke Islanders is that a group of soldiers came by night in a boat to attack the Point Lookout camp, but were defeated.¹³⁰ This appears to agree with the account of 'Old Hand', which similarly mentions a boat sent to Point Lookout, except that 'croppies' (convicts) were killed in this incident:

The blacks somehow got wind of this (instructions to shoot all at Pt Lookout) and one night some of them came to us at the Pilot Station and told us not to go with the 'diamonds' (soldiers) in the pilot boat, because they intended fighting ... it was a terrible fight, in which the soldiers got the worst, and three of our men were among those killed.¹³¹

These deaths — if they occurred — do not appear to be listed in Clunie's reports.

For the exact location of the Point Lookout skirmish, we have an oral tradition. Dale Ruska was told by his elders that it occurred along Flinders Beach towards Adder Rock. This is 1.5 kilometres west of Point Lookout.¹³² The entire area was simply known as Point Lookout then. The Aboriginal camp was usually near the headland, meaning warriors may have spotted the soldiers and prevented them from reaching the camp. A curious detail in the oral account is that the soldiers were led by a 'commander'.¹³³ This is not mentioned in written accounts, but it could refer to one of the settlement's captains.

The Battle of 'Narawai

Beginnings: Raids and counter-raids

From the above events, we see that the 'battle' at Ananarawai Creek brought the escalating violence to a climax. According to the Campbell/Welsby accounts, the first phase began when soldiers next made an unsuccessful raid on Moongalba camp, in revenge for the above-mentioned Point Lookout skirmish.

Moongalba camp was hosting Aboriginal visitors not directly responsible for the skirmishes. These and other residents fled ahead of the soldiers' arrival, but were furious over being unjustly blamed, and therefore joined the other Stradbroke Islanders in a collective assault.¹³⁴

According to Uncle Bob Anderson's family, the result was 'two attacks on the (Amity) Pilot Station'.¹³⁵ Clunie certainly reports that '[they] wantonly attacked the guard at the [Amity] Pilot's quarters, where they wounded two soldiers, and one prisoner severely',¹³⁶ but it is unclear whether he is referring to the original killing of Choorong or this later incident. However, what we do have is Clunie's confession that soldiers were deployed:

A detachment which happened to be on board ship landed and [came] to their [he Amity pilot station staff's] assistance. No lives being lost on either side ... [But] the first time after when the natives observed the boats were absent, and only the guard remaining, they again attacked them.¹³⁷

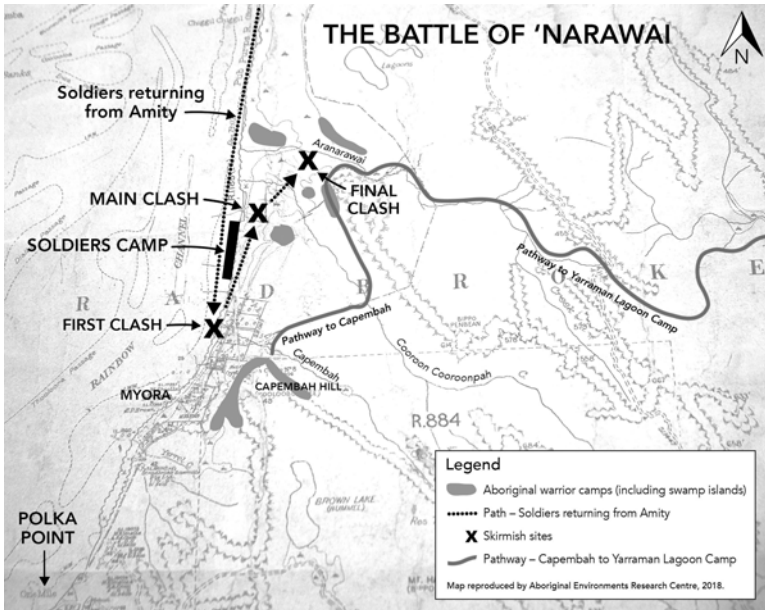


Figure 5

The Battle of 'Narawai. Map courtesy Aboriginal Environments Research Centre, University of Queensland

Until the early twentieth century, boats usually moored at Polka Point (Dunwich) rather than Amity. Hexton recalls that the guard had to change every two or three days between Dunwich and Amity to service both sites,¹³⁸ thus the reference to an 'attacked guard' while boats were absent probably relates to Polka Point.

Polka Point had an important warehouse, which stored goods brought in from around the Bay.¹³⁹ This may have meant it was fortified in some fashion, as was the nearby dock. Plans show the warehouse and barracks protected by a thick brick wall^{140, 141} Certainly Dale Ruska's family maintains that there was once a 'fort' at Polka Point, around which soldiers built a tall brick wall, 'because they were being constantly attacked by our people'.¹⁴² James Hexton's father recalled 1830s Dunwich serving as a 'fort' against 'the blacks' for 'the protection of the (Amity) pilot station'.¹⁴³ Recent archaeological work confirms the barracks just 200 metres away were more substantial than previously suspected.¹⁴⁴

First clash? Capembah Springs

According to the 1922 Welsby account, the soldiers were marching down the beach from Amity towards Dunwich,¹⁴⁵ rather than north to Amity after attacking Moongalba, when they first encountered Aboriginal warriors. If Polka Point's warehouse or the barracks were being attacked, this might explain the sudden return.

The soldiers were on a beach track between Amity and Dunwich.¹⁴⁶ This is an ancient, unchanging walking trail¹⁴⁷ accessible only at low tide (Figure 5).¹⁴⁸ From his knowledge of this landscape, Dale Ruska believes his people decided to attack at this spot because it gave them a considerable advantage. Here the track is so narrow

that it forces walkers to proceed in single file, tight against a belt of impenetrable swamp, where warriors could hide. The shore beyond is very muddy, making walking difficult.¹⁴⁹

The first clash was ‘at that well-known spot ... the present bathing pool’ — Capembah Springs.¹⁵⁰ This may explain why Ellie Durbidge places the entire battle at ‘the Capembah area’¹⁵¹ and why Watkins and Meston similarly put the battle ‘west of the Big Hill’¹⁵² or at Big Hill,¹⁵³ as Big Hill is Capembah Hill, beside Capembah Springs. It is north-west of the main camp, suggesting the warriors were protecting the camp. Certainly, the Welsby account says the warriors met the soldiers before they could reach the camp.¹⁵⁴

Main arena? Cooroign-Cooroign-pa Flat

Although the Campbell/Welsby account specifies Capembah Springs, it also says the soldiers were ‘met by the fighting men ... on a flat near the mouth of Cooroign-Cooroign-Pa Creek’.¹⁵⁵ The latter is 3 kilometres further north. A sandy flat of open woodland and bracken fern lies here, known to the Stradbroke Island families as the main battle site. Brian Coghill has found artefacts here that appear to be musket balls.¹⁵⁶

Why are two locations named as the battle site? One explanation would be that the initial engagement was at the Springs, but the detachment was lured north. Welsby indicates the soldiers were following and sniping at warriors hidden ‘among the mangroves’.¹⁵⁷ The twisted, gnarled trunks prevented them from being injured.¹⁵⁸

If this reconstruction is correct, the luring was a clever tactic, as Cooroign-Cooroign-Pa Creek flat afforded warriors ‘admirable hiding places, and safe ones too’.¹⁵⁹ It appears that terrain was being used strategically, as the flat allowed a proper fight and its edges were

a very deceptive place. It is mostly covered with tall cut-grass, growing in tussocks a few feet apart, and the only way to get across it is to step from one tussock to the other, for if you happen to step between them you will sink to the thigh in a quagmire of black mud, out of which it is difficult to extricate yourself. You will perceive that the blacks had the ground entirely in their favour. (italics mine)¹⁶⁰

Dale Ruska observes that one cannot walk east or west near the flat without being bogged either side¹⁶¹ and, ‘Cut grass will grow to 6 foot or 8 foot tall ... it cuts your hands (Figure 6) ... Next to the foreshore, the cut grass is really dense in that part of the swamp’.¹⁶² This explains why, in the Campbell/Welsby account, the soldiers were unable to march or fight at close quarters.¹⁶³ Welsby records that warriors would wait after each round or two of musket fire, pop up suddenly from behind trees, toss weapons, then quickly retreat to an ambush position.¹⁶⁴ They issued ‘yells of defiance and a shower of spears, boomerangs and waddies’,¹⁶⁵ whereas the soldiers shot blindly: ‘a furious fusilade of musketry’.¹⁶⁶

The Stradbroke Islanders obviously used their environment to create an impasse. Welsby alleges that the soldiers were ‘not too anxious to cold blood the niggers’, but it is more likely that they could not discern the enemy position and feared being picked off. Significantly, the soldiers fired at a long distance¹⁶⁷ — evidently trying to intimidate their invisible foes.



Figure 6
Cut grass at Arananarwai swamp. Photo Ray Kerkhove.

Ananarawai Creek

Eventually, according to the Campbell/Welsby account,

the soldiers made a charge, whereupon the natives ran in a body towards Nurry Nurry Wy, at which place they knew they could be protected by the swampy grounds, deeply studded with tussocky grass and much reed. The soldiers followed, and shot from time to time singly and in volleys.¹⁶⁸

Nurry Nurry Wy is Ananarawai Creek (Figure 7). It is a vast swampy expanse, marking the northern end of the previously described flat, bounded by irregular hillocks. This final phase was possibly a mock retreat, as it drew the soldiers even deeper into country that was advantageous to the warriors. The ground here is very waterlogged, making movement perilous. Now the warriors could attack 'in a crouching manner',¹⁶⁹ hiding unseen among reeds and tussocks:

They used to crawl through the grass to about twenty yards distance, rise suddenly, discharge a shower of weapons, and disappear as silently and completely as if they had never been there, and the volleys of musketry whistled harmlessly over their heads.¹⁷⁰

Dale Ruska says this was achieved by a technique his people still use: '[Our warriors] could crawl through without being seen ... our people would lay a stick or spear to push down the tussocks and crawl between without getting in the mud.'¹⁷¹



Figure 7
'Narawai Creek near the foreshore. Courtesy Brian Coghill.

A longer battle?

The Welsby account gives the impression the battle lasted only one day, whereas Stradbroke Islanders assert sorties persisted 'for a week or more'.¹⁷² There is some evidence in the literature to support this, as the Welsby-Campbell accounts state more than one pitched battle occurred here.¹⁷³ Moreover, there is reference to warriors running out of spears, forcing them to 'cut ti trees', make 'shift waddies'¹⁷⁴ or 'cut spears from the younger trees'.¹⁷⁵ Fashioning spears within a single day during a battle is problematic. By Dale Ruska's estimate, half an hour's work is required for an expert to make a spear. To fashion just 20 spears, two men would need to be assigned to the task for five hours. Ti-trees are unsuitable for spear-making. According to Dale, the trees were probably 'she-oaks — they grow long, straight and thin with dense, thick wood'. As we witnessed on our site visit, many such saplings grow just out of the swamp (Figure 8).¹⁷⁶

In another departure from the written accounts, Stradbroke Islanders allege that such weaponry was actually manufactured *between* attacks:

Our mob weren't actually there at the creeks. The soldiers were camped [during battle] at the creeks.¹⁷⁷

Our mob through the day would go up to what are referred to as the 'hills'. Across the narrow stretch of swamp there are these swamp islands raised up higher than the swamp and its surrounds ...¹⁷⁸



Figure 8
She-oak on the edge of Ananarawai Swamp. Photo Ray Kerkhove.

The 'shift waddy' described by Welsby was most likely a boomerang-club. Willie MacKenzie, a Jinnaburra elder who lived on Stradbroke, describes boomerang clubs: *gwengee* and *bearbee* with 'nasty sharp points' that could curl left, right, and overhead when thrown.¹⁷⁹ Dale Ruska describes these as being able to skip along the ground.¹⁸⁰ According to the Moreton oral tradition, people attacked repeatedly on dusk, using boomerang-clubs:

They'd stay there (on 'swamp islands' (Figure 9)) through the day, because they were familiar with musket fire and firearms by the redcoats, so they'd only come down then on dark ... They'd retire up and work on the weapons all through the day, and ... just on dark they knew all the soldiers would be sitting around the fire ... The fire would blind their vision, because of the glow. One person would come in with one of these boomerang clubs and he'd just throw that into the soldiers' camps — straight into the fire more or less — and they'd just all jump up panic and unload their muskets, but our people would be hiding behind trees ... while they had to reload, they'd launch a full-on attack on them.¹⁸¹

No documents mention such dusk raids, and it is possible that this account conflates several incidents, but the general scenario is nevertheless feasible. In

1963, Vladimir Ponosov located a trans-island trail linking Ananarawai Creek to Yarraman Lagoon — the main surfside camp.¹⁸² Traditionally, women and elders back at camp would make, repair and supply weapons and food for warriors. Thus combatants at Ananarawai Creek may well have been supplied from Yarraman Lagoon camp, 5 kilometres to the east.

At any rate, we know the final fight continued ‘all day . . . until evening’.¹⁸³ The soldiers were exhausted: ‘the white men called out to the blacks that they were quite satisfied’;¹⁸⁴ ‘[they] made signs of peace, and the blacks accepted’.¹⁸⁵ In Stradbroke Islander eyes, this was a victory: ‘[They] speak of it with pleasure . . . they are in themselves heroes indeed.’¹⁸⁶

Battle logistics

Chronology

The skirmishes described in this article were placed in their probable chronological order, based on which events are said to have sparked the actions that followed. Dating nevertheless remains uncertain. Welsby places the killing of the Amity hutkeeper at ‘around 1830’ placed by Evans at 25 November 1832.^{187,188} Clunie gives us 15 July 1831 as the date of the garden killing,¹⁸⁹ with the beach (Yerrol Point?) skirmish presumably days later. As the Dunwich outpost was removed by November 1831,¹⁹⁰ most of the clashes may have transpired in rapid succession between July and November 1831. O’Keeffe and Evans favour late November 1832 for the battle, with Yerrol Point occurring after 20 December.¹⁹¹

Number of combatants

All accounts mention extra soldiers being sent across: ‘those in charge at Moreton Bay . . . were compelled to take action’,¹⁹² ‘a detachment of the military was sent out’.¹⁹³ Clunie confirms that a detachment was sent out.¹⁹⁴

In the 1830s, twenty soldiers was standard for such a military sortie;¹⁹⁵ however, the number stationed at Stradbroke was less, as the Moreton Bay settlement had few to spare. Rod Pratt estimates six to twelve soldiers may have fought — perhaps twenty if critically required.¹⁹⁶ Raymond Evans notes that 1831 was the year the convict settlement peaked (1,241 residents),¹⁹⁷ thus there may have been more men to draw on. However, even counting ‘croppies’ (convicts) and overseers, it seems unlikely more than fifteen to twenty-five Europeans were involved.

The Aboriginal force was certainly greater, but no exact figures are given. Thomas Welsby says ‘large numbers’ camped before the battle,¹⁹⁸ and Old Hand states that all island clans were involved.¹⁹⁹ This would mean 500 to 800 Stradbroke and Moreton Islanders,²⁰⁰ at least 200 of whom were the right age to be warriors. Note that, around 1835, Eulope brought roughly 100 ‘Amity’ warriors to a mainland inter-tribal fight, as part of an allied force of 500 warriors against 700 ‘mountain warriors’.²⁰¹ If the ‘Narawai battle was during the mullet season (May–July), allied warriors may also have been available. Uncle Bob Anderson made the point that, until the flood-induced breakthroughs, it was possible to travel fairly easily from Southport to Moreton and to this day his people have strong connections to Gold Coast groups.²⁰²

Number of casualties

Accounts are inconsistent regarding European casualties. The Campbell/Welsby source insists that no one was injured,²⁰³ yet also states that 'some of the soldiers were struck with waddies'.²⁰⁴ This same account admits 'damage done was about equal on both sides'.²⁰⁵ Watkins' informant, however, claimed the soldiers 'got off the worst'.²⁰⁶ It is hard to assess what this means. Thus far, deaths amongst the soldiery cannot be identified with certainty,²⁰⁷ though Clunie speaks of 'a soldier and a prisoner killed some years ago'.²⁰⁸ He also lists two convicts killed on 30 November and 20 December 1832 — perhaps the 'croppies' who 'Old Hand' describes slain at Adder Rock or the men slain in the beach skirmish. Historian Raymond Evans estimated a total of five European deaths and four wounded including Corporal Cain and Private Wright.²⁰⁹ Uncle Bob Anderson, however, maintains that zero European casualties is equally possible, given that for his people, it was 'unheard of' to kill a person in battle.²¹⁰

Regarding Islander casualties, estimates range from none to many. The Campbell/Welsby account identifies no fatalities — even the headman who threatened Choorong was 'shot' rather than killed (as Old Hand relates). Similarly, for the battle of 'Narawai, only two woundings are mentioned: 'one black ... wounded by a ball in the side, and another by having a piece shot out of the side of his nose'.²¹¹

This contrasts with Clunie's report that 'one native was killed and one wounded'²¹² and 'some of the natives were killed or wounded'.²¹³ Likewise, Meston identifies killings towards Big Hill (the first clash) and Henry Stobart, who visited Amity in 1853, noticed Aboriginal people stopping to honour the fallen: 'The Amity Point Blacks, as they are called, from their chiefly stopping at (Amity) point ... *from no other reason that I could learn than that a great many of them have been killed there* (italics mine)'.²¹⁴ Stradbroke Islander Donna Ruska asserts that Dunwich Cemetery (not far from Capembah) began with battle casualties.²¹⁵

'Narawai as pullen-pullen

Was the battle, as Campbell alleged, a *pullen-pullen*? *Pullen-pullen* fields were large, flat, thinly wooded areas between ridges. Opposing tribes would camp on the ridges, where headmen directed tactics.²¹⁶ According to Stradbroke Islanders, Amity Point's *pullen-pullen* was on its now-vanished sandbar;²¹⁷ however, the woodland of Coorooign-Coorooign-pa Flat and the open swamps at Ananarawai Creek may also have fitted the requirements, being large open plains with surrounding ridges. Warriors camped on the ridges above, as they would for a *pullen-pullen*.

For traditional battle, warriors filed out according to rank, formed regular lines or arcs, tossed weapons and moved into close-hand duels.²¹⁸ Stradbroke warriors met the soldiers as a barrier, but remained hidden among the trees; indeed, they chose to operate in areas of mud, high grasses and other environmental advantage instead of resorting to open fields. They unleashed projectiles in unison, as was traditional,²¹⁹ but instead of standing 60–100 metres from their foe as they would in a formal *pullen-pullen*,²²⁰ they crawled up to their enemy. Thus it seems the event fused traditional and quasi-guerrilla strategies. Uncle Bob Anderson believes that his people only developed a force 'trained to deal with such intrusions' after the arrival of whites.²²¹ Yet the conflict ended in traditional style. A *pullen-pullen*



Figure 9

View over Ananarawai Swamp plain, showing 'swamp islands' in the distance. Photo Ray Kerkhove.

usually ceased with nightfall,²²² as did the 'Narawai battle.²²³ Traditional fights often concluded with opposing sides feasting and corroboreeing.²²⁴ This certainly occurred after 'Narawai: 'All hands, including old men, women and children, walked up to Dunwich in a crowd, the soldiers giving them biscuits and tobacco, and the natives returning the compliment with fish and oysters.'²²⁵

Aboriginal victory?

Myora — the site of this feast and corroboree — meant 'talk-talk, sit down or palaver place'.²²⁶ The Welsby account states that Stradbroke Islanders created a peace agreement: 'from that time out, there was no more hostility between the tribes of Stradbroke and the whites'.²²⁷ Whether coincidentally or as a consequence, Clunie recommended closure of the Dunwich outpost at around this time.²²⁸

Today, Stradbroke Islanders view the end of the battle as their 'first ever' treaty.²²⁹ Certainly, after this, Stradbroke Islanders secured a great deal of boat-piloting, ferrying and fishing work around the Bay.²³⁰ It may not have been a lasting peace, as Stradbroke Islanders themselves recall that some time afterwards, 'lots of soldiers were sent over here', forcing their people into the southern end of Stradbroke and adjacent islands, where a final conflict and massacre occurred.²³¹ Watkins' account concurs: 'affairs of a similar kind (to the battle) took place ... farther to the south'.²³² Nevertheless, the fact that the soldiers had been fought to exhaustion and that some sort of truce was achieved gives credence to Watkins' and Campbell's reports that the 'soldiers got the worst' and that the Islanders viewed the event as a heroic landmark.

Conclusion

By comparing source documents and informing these with the environmental and oral knowledge of Aboriginal Stradbroke Islanders, this article has established an historical narrative for the Stradbroke skirmishes. The 'knowledge of place' provided by Stradbroke families allowed a tentative reconstruction of the sequence and spatial context of the battle, even if certain aspects such as dating remain obscure. As Uncle Bob Anderson summarised: 'In the threads of different families' stories, there is a consistency that puts it altogether.'²³³

It would appear that the Battle of 'Narawai was not a one-sided massacre but rather a well-planned operation in which Aboriginal combatants orchestrated tactical advantages and merged strategies of traditional *pullen-pullen* with guerrilla tactics more suited to the demands of the time. Skilful use of terrain and vegetation offered Aboriginal combatants considerable advantages over European weaponry. This has major implications for how frontier war confrontations should be viewed. From this perspective, the Battle of 'Narawai constitutes a largely unacknowledged Aboriginal victory.

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