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Title: Invasion, retaliation, concealment and silences at Dead Man's Flat, South Australia: A consideration of the historical, archaeological and geophysical evidence of frontier conflict

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This article presents the results of historical research, as well as archaeological and geophysical surveys, in order to explore a number of frontier conflict events at Dead Man's Flat in South Australia (SA). The historical records reveal the cruelty and complexity of the period and expose the concealments, contradictions, euphemistic language, denials and silences that are typical of the Australian frontier. Further disparities are revealed in more recent commemorative efforts. Archaeological investigations in the study area provided an 'absence of evidence'. Whilst the geophysical survey revealed that there are potential graves located on the flat, no interment was located in the area commemorated by local non- Indigenous community members. The combined results of this multi-method approach uncovered new dissonances, raised new questions and provided new exegeses about the frontier in this region. For traditional owners, the sum of the evidence reveals a history of invasion, killings and massacre, theft, deceit and cover-up – Dead Man's Flat is, therefore, a place to be approached with deep respect in order to honour the experiences of their ancestors.

Introduction

In this paper, we explore the frontier conflict period at Dead Man's Flat in South Australia (SA) using a range of methods including historical research, archaeological surveys and geophysical investigations (magnetic gradiometry and ground-penetrating radar [GPR]). This work has been a collaboration between Flinders University and the River Murray and Mallee Aboriginal Corporation (RMMAC) – with the aim of achieving a fuller understanding of the trauma experienced by Aboriginal peoples as a result of invasion and colonisation in order to promote greater community awareness. Whilst we acknowledge that historical reports and archaeological evidence about frontier conflict events can never reveal a comprehensive picture and in fact may fail to generate significant new data, we also argue that frontier killings and massacres should not be allowed to "transcend history" – and that each and every event should be interrogated subject to the wishes of Aboriginal traditional owners. The research presented in this article is just one aspect of a broader project to interrogate the colonial frontier in SA's Riverland region (see also Burke et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2020b).

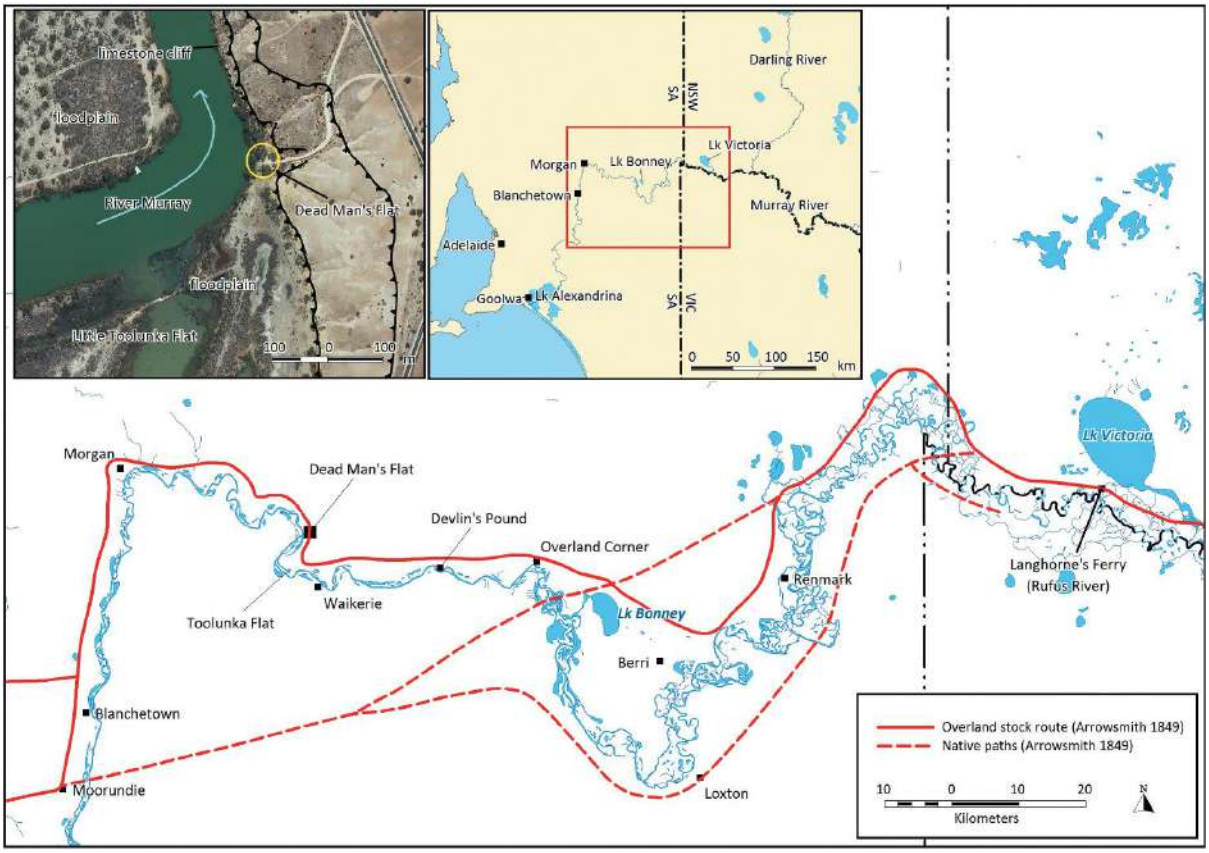

Figure 1. Study area location.

Historical context

In October 1839, Thomas Young, an "overlander" (drover) with a party travelling with sheep on the Overland Stock Route (between Adelaide and Sydney, Australia), was reportedly killed by Aboriginal people at Dead Man's Flat on the Murray River in SA (Figure 1) (*South Australian Register*, 16 November 1839a, p. 45; *South Australian Register*, 30 November 1839c, p. 5). According to Major Thomas O'Halloran (Commissioner of Police, and a punitive expedition leader, see below), Dead Man's Flat was the general locale of a number of frontier conflict events and was a region where "several natives" were "killed upon different occasions" (O'Halloran, 28 April 1841).1

As explored in more detail in Burke et al. (2016), the Overland Stock Route was established to move sheep and cattle between the colonies of New South Wales (NSW) and SA. Joseph Hawdon and Charles Bonney are credited as the first overlanders. Their route, in part, followed traditional Aboriginal pathways, including the section traversing the Riverland region in SA (Burke et al., 2016, p. 151). The overlanding in this region lasted for only a few years (ceased by ca. 1850), although occurred on a significant scale and involved hundreds of Europeans and many thousands of sheep and cattle. This invasion of Aboriginal territories, which impacted significant places and the environment, together with the poor treatment/interactions with Aboriginal peoples, led to numerous instances of conflict and violence (Burke et al., 2016). Both volunteer and police punitive expeditions were formed to quell the conflicts and secure the route, resulting in numerous killings and culminating, finally, in the Rufus River Massacre

(NSW), where over 30 Aboriginal people were killed (see details and original references in Burke et al. [2016]).

Thomas Young was employed in an overlanding party led by Lachlan Mackinnon. The reporting of Mackinnon's expedition varied. Mackinnon initially claimed that the "natives were very friendly and peaceable" (*South Australian Register*, 26 October 1839b, p. 5), but later reports provided different versions of events. George McLeod and Robert Flood, who were travelling along the Murray River just after Mackinnon, learned of Young's "murder" and reported:

In Mr. McLeod's letter from the Murray in our paper of the 16th instant, it is mentioned that one of McKinnon's party had been murdered by the blacks. With the particulars of this murder we have now been favoured. It appeared that the deceased, by name Thomas Young, from Renfrew in Scotland, one of the Bonnymuir patriots . . . was proceeding from where the sheep were feeding to the camp, when several of the natives made up to him, and after saying something in their own language, they attacked him with their waddies. Having knocked him down, they thrust their spears through his body in several places. When found there were ten wounds on various parts of his body which apparently had been inflicted with spears and waddies. There was also a cut on his face seemingly inflicted with a knife . . . The man lived two days afterward. It is not known that any offence was given by the party to the natives to incite them to commit such cold-blooded murder.(South Australian Register, 30 November 1839c, p.5)

McLeod and Flood also reported being "attacked" seven miles from Dead Man's Flat (*South Australian Register*, 16 November 1839a, pp. 4–5):

It is with feelings of no little regret that I have to acquaint you with the necessity for my falling back five days' journey from where I had reached on 28th October. On the morning of the 29th, just as we started, Flood and myself in advance, we fell upon an ambush of the blacks, who, rising from the long grass and from behind the trees in considerable numbers, effectually prevented our proceeding, and attacked us in a most determined manner. Unfortunately we had very few fire-arms and these principally ineffective. Those that were serviceable, the men were obliged to fall back with, covering the unarmed portion of the party, and protecting themselves from the spears and waddies which were flying about in every direction. After about half an hour's sharp firing, which the natives stood admirably, we drove them from the drays, and finally into the river; but had it not been, I suspect, for one or two well told shots, the result would have been very different . . .

Dead Man's Flat was a natural stopping place for overlanding parties, since it provided access to the river that elsewhere was cut off by cliffs. Other parties following in Mackinnon's wake certainly camped here. Both James McLaurin and Alexander Buchanan came through in December 1839, McLaurin (1888, pp. 30–31) noting that:

Next morning we arrived at a place where a party who had been ahead of us was killed by the blacks. We saw a good many blacks there on the other side of the river, camped the cattle all night on the top of the grave of one of those killed, so that the blacks couldn't find the spot to take the body up. To show they weren't friendly towards us they took dry bushes and tore them to pieces as an indication of anger.

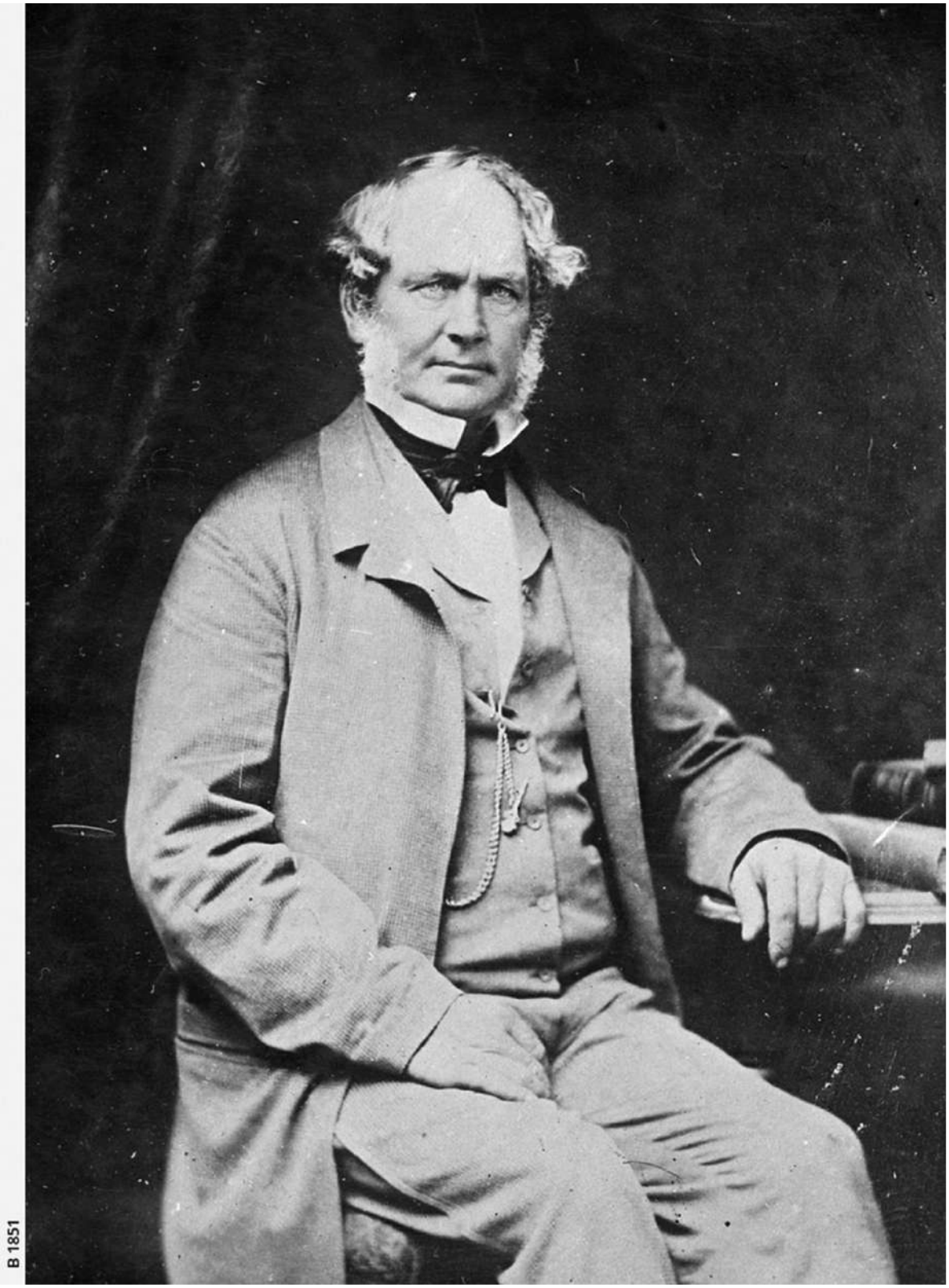

Figure 2. "Alexander Buchanan" B1851. Courtesy of the State Library of South Australia.

McLaurin is the only one who refers to others apart from Thomas Young being killed, but his account was also written as a memoir nearly 50 years later. Buchanan (Figure 2) provided a chilling account of frontier violence at the time and recorded the following in the vicinity of Dead Man's Flat:

Dec. 5 Thursday. Made nine miles to-day and encamped in the flat where the Adelaide drays were burnt by the blacks . . . Dec. 7 Saturday. Halted and fed the sheep. Saw a good many blacks opposite bank of the river, fired upon them and killed one, the rest made off immediately . . . Dec. 9 . . . The first boat [from Governor George Gawler and Captain Charles Sturt's party] came to the side and asked what party we belonged to and asked if the blacks had been troublesome. We told them they had been pretty quiet except at the Darling [River] they had annoyed us a little. Did not say we had shot any . . . (Buchanan 1923)

Edward, John and Ephraim Howe, also overlanders, reported being followed by Aboriginal people in this area later in February 1841 and similarly referenced Young's death (Webster, 1987, p. 210). O'Halloran (1841), upon visiting the location on the 28th of April 1841, summarised his knowledge of this area:

. . . We have made today only 19 miles and are encamped at a spot where several parties have been attacked (Mr Eyre, [Nelson] Tooth & others)2 and where a European was killed by the natives and lies buried between 2 trees with an F upon one, this man belonged to Mr McKinnon's party – I shall therefore distinguish our present encampment as the "Dead Man's flat" – some miles back in the scrub we found in two or 3 places branches of trees and other impediments thrown across the road by the natives – On first coming into the flat we saw a few of them who made off – From what I can gather from some of the men who came overland – several natives have been killed upon different occasions – I understand the latter nearly took the life of Mr Tooth and Eyre was turned back and obliged to get further strength ere he could pass. 2 cows and a calf have been seen hereabouts – double sentrys [sic] have been [posted?] from this night & good positions for encampment taken up.3

O'Halloran's provision of a European name for this place is just one of the many that records the European perspective of a dangerous landscape (Burke et al., 2016, p. 162).

Little is known of Thomas Young's life and only two biographical details are claimed in relation to his death: that he was one of the "Bonnymuir patriots" and that he came from Renfrew, in Scotland (*South Australian Register*, 30 November 1839c, p. 5). The "Bonnymuir patriots" – a group of weavers who went on strike against poor pay and working conditions, as well as other political inequities – became part of a small-scale armed rebellion in 1820. In total, some 37 people were arrested and tried for treason in connection with several linked uprisings at Bonnymuir, Balfron, St Ninian's and Camelon (Green, 1825, pp. 30, 36), three of whom were executed and 19 transported to Australia in 1821 on the ship, *Speke*.4 There is no evidence that Thomas Young was one of these. He is not mentioned in any of the lists of prisoners or amongst any of the transportees.5

An association between him and the events at Bonnymuir, however, suggests that he may have been a former convict at the time of his death. Several men named Thomas Young were transported to Australia, including one from Renfrewshire who came via the ship *Asia* in 1820 and subsequently worked as a stockman in and around Sydney before gaining a Ticket of Leave in 1825 in the County of Argyle. This Thomas Young was a butcher born in Greenock in 1797 and sentenced in Glasgow in 1820 (Register of Tickets of Leave, 1824–1827). He was subsequently granted a Certificate of Freedom in 1827 (Certificate of Freedom, 24 July 1827), but details of his life after this date are currently unknown. It may be that this was the same man who overlanded with Lachlan Mackinnon, since both Young and Mackinnon were working for Robert Campbell, who owned the stock being taken to Adelaide in 1839. Mackinnon and Young were employed on Campbell's property at Queanbeyan in the County of Argyle, later named Duntroon (Deposition Book for Assigned Persons March 1839; *Sydney*

Mail, 4 April 1928, p. 17). At present, no firmer link can be drawn between the two Thomas Youngs.

As there is no Aboriginal testimony about Thomas Young's death, there is no counter to the European versions of events. Indeed, assuming that it is true that he was killed by Aboriginal people, it is important to consider a wider context for this act. At a most basic level, Europeans were invading and trespassing on traditional territories. It could be, therefore, that Thomas Young's death was in relation to the breaking of rules of trespass or in retaliation for earlier violence. Eyre (1845, p. 219), for example, recorded that there were strict rules about crossing group boundaries in the region. However, as argued by Reynolds (2006, p. 91), in many instances of Aboriginal violence towards Europeans, the "action was penal in objective" and related to attempts to "impose on the newcomers the moral standards and social obligations of traditional society". We may never know the reason/s for Thomas Young's death, but to simply consider it a random attack is most clearly at variance with what we know of traditional Aboriginal laws and customs. Reynolds (2006, p. 68) has argued that nineteenth century commentators routinely dismissed Aboriginal resistance as "[c]ompulsions of savagery" as a means to avoid facing the realities of the frontier. The fact that Mackinnon initially reported that Aboriginal people were "friendly" is also clearly at odds with later accounts and was perhaps an attempt to conceal the full version of events. The fact that frontier violence was concealed by those who took part in it is unequivocally evidenced in Buchanan's diary. What would motivate him to withhold the truth from Gawler and Sturt? Foster (2009, p. 68.4) has argued that the imperative lay in Buchanan's desire to hide incriminating evidence. South Australia's founding Proclamation in 1836 explicitly stated that the "Native Population" were to have the same protection as any of "His Majesty's Subjects", but the reality was far from this and it became a "pretence that bedevilled settlers, police and governments as the frontier wars were waged" (Foster, 2009, p. 68.2). One unnamed "colonist of 1836" recounted that overlanding men would boast in private about "butchering", "shooting" or "peppering" the "natives in their route" but would "promptly recant" their tales "when it was ascertained that they were affording grounds for a dangerous enquiry into their own conduct" (*South Australian Register*, 3 October 1840, p. 2).

Beyond Buchanan's overt records other accounts surrounding conflict in the Dead Man's Flat region contain euphemistic language and probable omissions. For example, as noted above, O'Halloran (1841) reports that Eyre was attacked, yet Eyre himself makes no mention of this. Other language, such as McLeod and Flood's "well told shots", likely conceals a more sinister reality that is left to the reader to interpret.

Figure 3. Gully entrance to Dead Man's Flat. Photograph by Amy Roberts, 18 September 2018, facing south.

The study area

Local non-Indigenous community members have designated Dead Man's Flat as the area "at the lower end of Toolunka Flat" at Broken Cliffs (Arnold, 1989, p. 21) (Figure 1). It can be accessed via a gully, a natural break in the cliffs of the Norwest Bend Formation sediments (Figure 3). As noted above, it was no doubt this ease of access that made it an important place for Aboriginal peoples and overlanders alike. Furthermore, the adjacent "broken cliffs" would have afforded Aboriginal people the ability to hide, watch and potentially ambush the European stockmen bringing their sheep and cattle to water and feed (Figure 4). Indeed, archaeological research, which advocates the use of landscape perspectives and provides a focus on the tangible human experience, brings to light such aspects in a way not afforded by historical research alone (Barker, 2007:12; Burke et al., 2016, p. 146).

The study area is located on a sharp bend in the River Murray, at the northern extent of the Little Toolunka Flat floodplain immediately downstream of where an anabranch creek and associated lagoon re-join the main river channel. Taylorville Road, to the east of the location, approximates the former Overland Stock Route (Figure 5). The location is situated on a narrow terrace extending between the eastern bank of the River Murray and a steep, dissected cliff line developed in a fossiliferous Pliocene limestone of the Norwest Bend Formation (Firman, 1972; Miranda et al., 2008; Stephenson & Brown, 1989). The formation is characterised by a dense-packed coquina of oyster shell interbedded with sand (Figure 5). A short scree slope of coarse boulder rubble extends from the base of the cliff line and dips under, and interbeds with, alluvial sediments (Coonambidgal Formation) deposited across the active floodplain of the River Murray. This sequence has been truncated by the outer cut-bank of the river (Figure 5).
Sometime ca. 1990, the Waikerie Branch of the National Trust, using information from older members of the district and newspaper accounts, placed a plaque at the location in proximity to two old black box trees (*Eucalyptus largiflorens*) (see also sections below) (Figure 6). This placement appears to relate to the historical accounts of Young's burial being located near two trees (Figure 7), but, as the people who were involved in the installation of the plaque have now passed away, this cannot be conclusively corroborated (Amy Roberts pers. comm. National Trust, August 2018).

The text of the plaque largely concords with the historical evidence above, although the line "in retaliation, the party reportedly killed eleven Aborigines that day" does not specifically appear in any of the historical texts of which we are aware. Although, as noted above there are references to other killings in the area. We explore the implications of this finding in later sections of this paper.

The area of Dead Man's Flat surveyed in this study is currently used for multiple purposes, including the following:

(1) As an access point to the Murray River;

(2) As a car park; and

(3) As a camping/picnicking place.

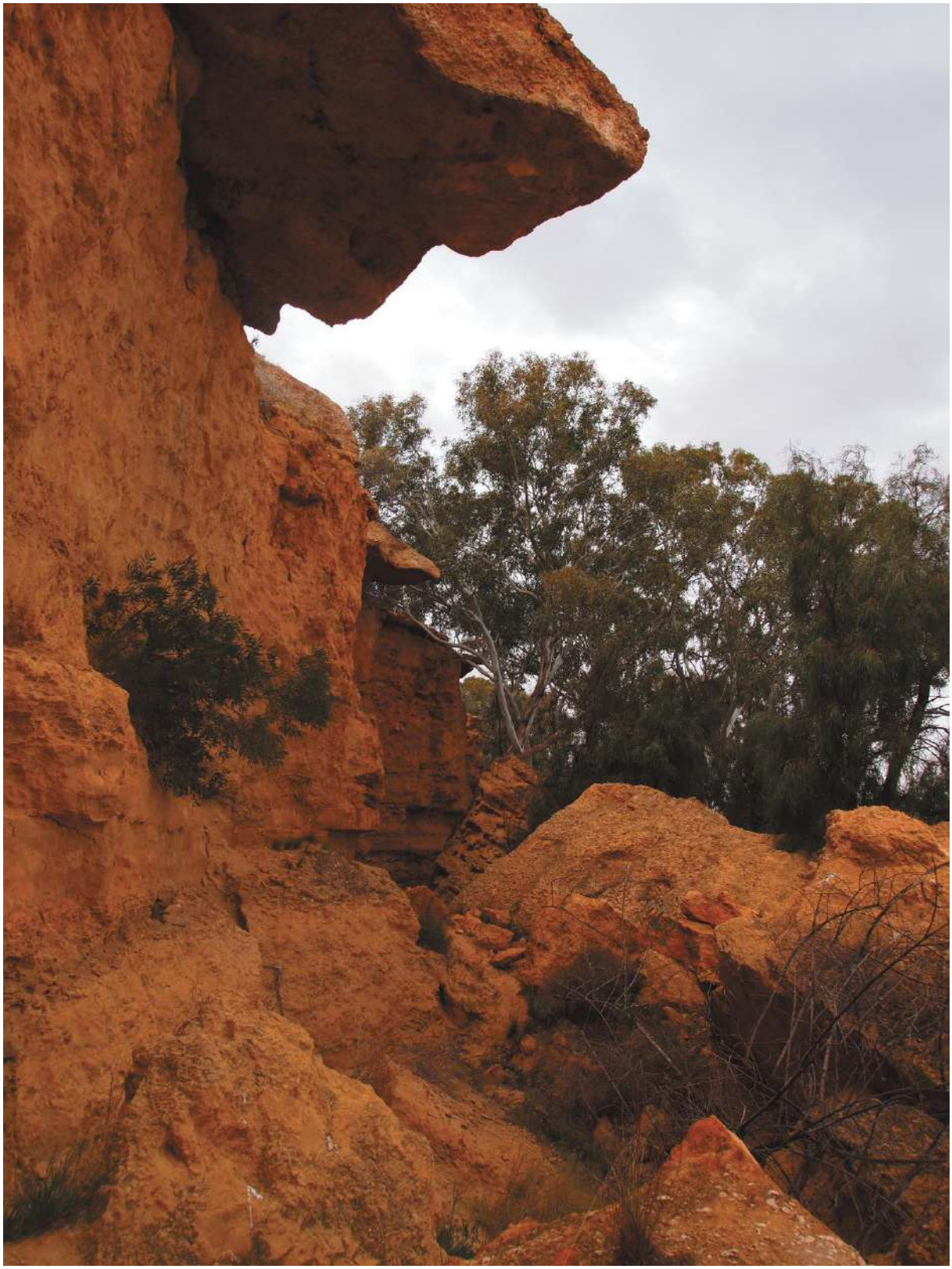

Figure 4. The “broken cliffs” adjacent and north of Dead Man’s Flat. Photograph by Amy Roberts, 18 September 2018, facing south.

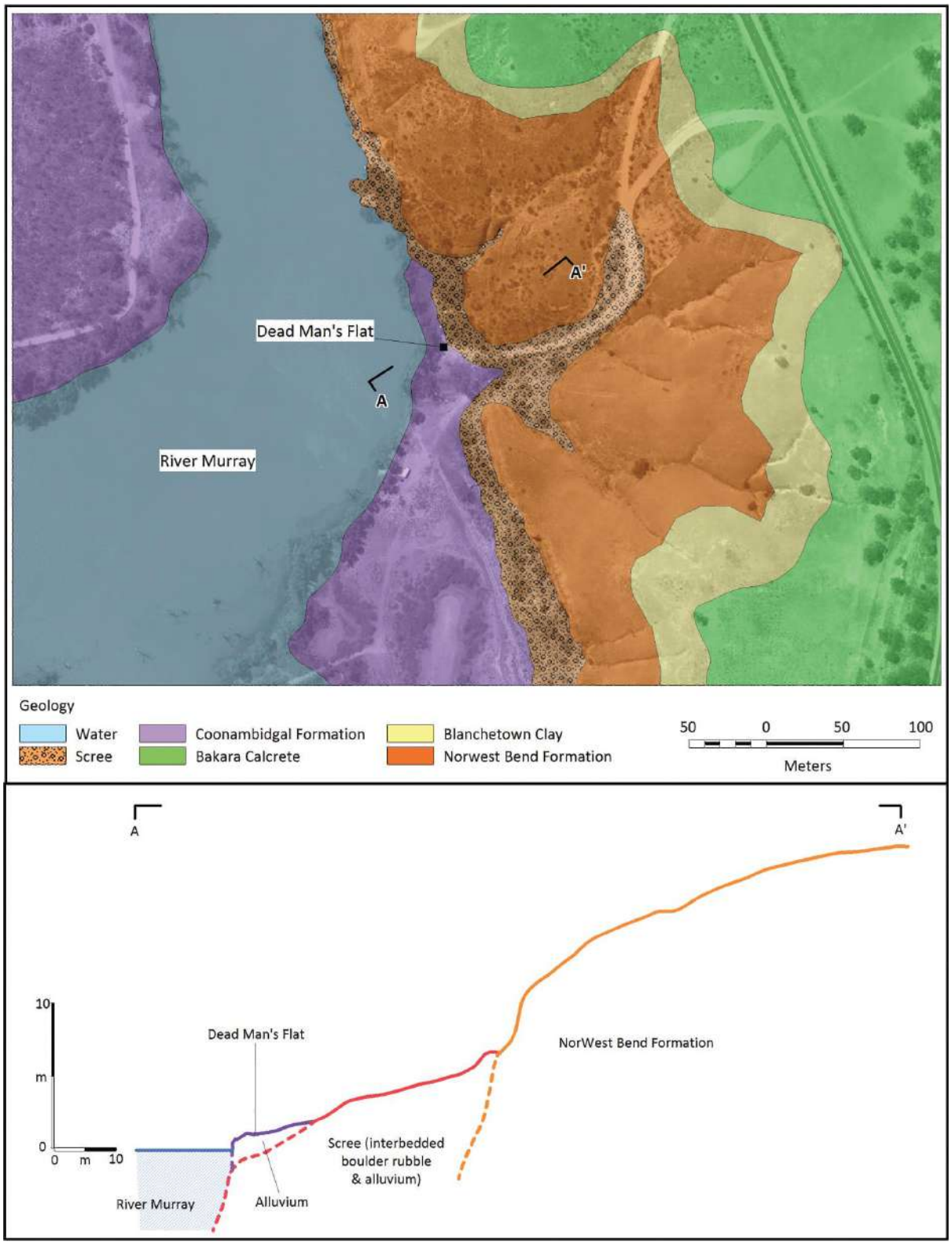

Figure 5. The geological setting.

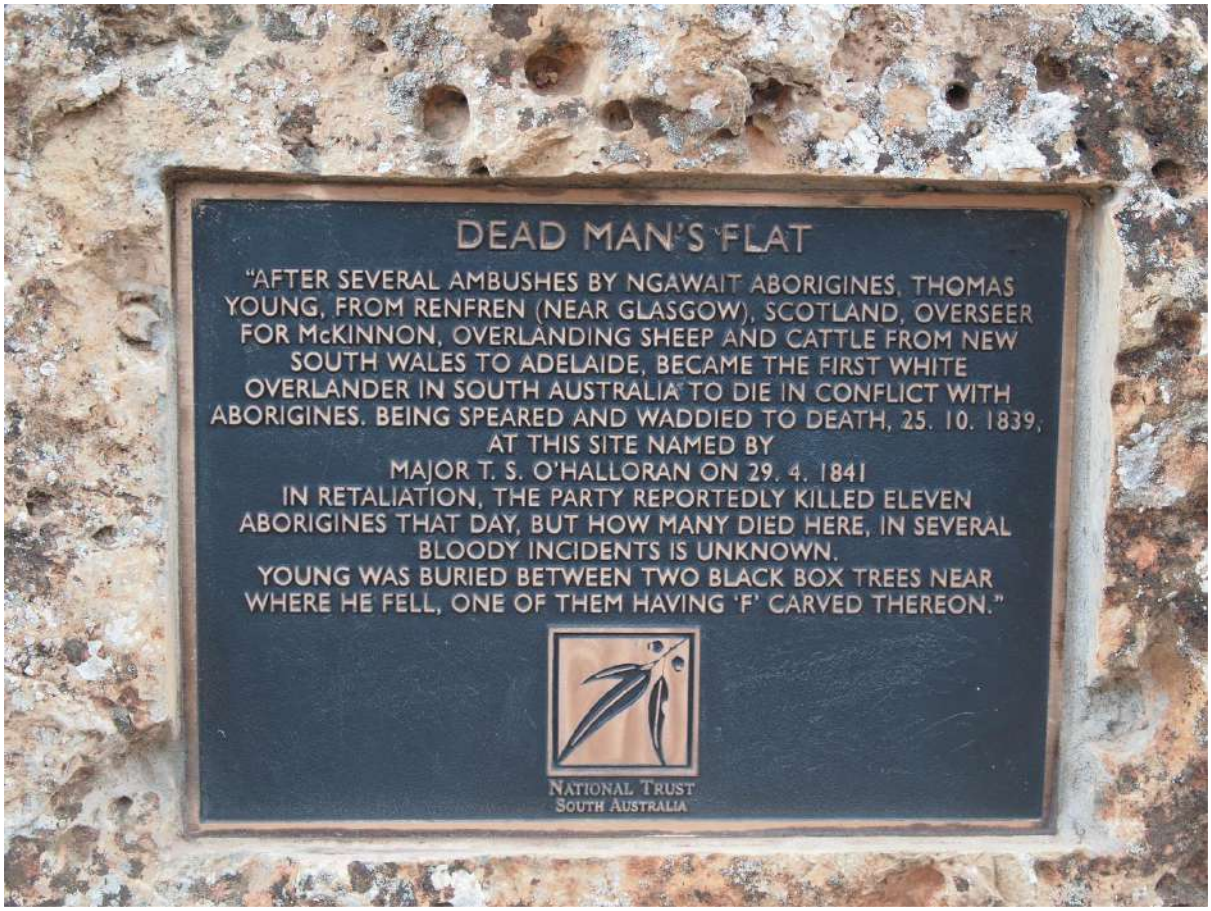

Figure 6. Plaque erected by the Waikerie Branch of the National Trust. Photograph by Amy Roberts, 18 September 2018.

Methods

In addition to the historical research already presented, archaeological and geophysical surveys (magnetic gradiometry and ground-penetrating radar [GPR]) were undertaken to physically investigate the implied location (and surrounds) of the grave of Thomas Young at Dead Man's Flat. No invasive methods were used at the request of RMMAC members, given the confronting nature of the history attached to the area. The results of each method are further triangulated in the concluding sections of this article (Denzin, 1973).

Archaeological Survey

The block of land surrounding the Dead Man's Flat commemorative plaque, and adjacent cliffs and gullies, were surveyed in pedestrian transects at a spacing of 2 m between survey walkers on 18 September 2018 and 10 October 2019. The area was thoroughly explored for any signs of Aboriginal occupation and for any features that might corroborate the historical record (e.g. engraved trees and historical artefacts from the period). The cliff faces (north of the flat) were also investigated for engravings (both pre- and post- European contact).

Figure 7. Photograph showing the context of the location of the plaque (in background). Photograph by Ian Moffat, 10 October 2019, facing north.

Figure 8. Drone image of Dead Man's Flat study area. Photograph by Ian Moffat, 10 October 2019, facing north.

Magnetic Gradiometer Survey

Magnetic gradiometry was used as a means to explore the area for historical remains related to the period (e.g. buttons, weaponry or other metal objects that could be associated with a conflict site and/or a European burial) and/or for determining the location of subsurface ferrous material, which can complicate the interpretation of the GPR data.
The Dead Man's Flat study area was surveyed with a Bartington Grad601 with two sensors. Data were collected over a survey grid of 60 × 20 m with a line spacing of 0.5 m and a sample rate of 8 samples/m. Data were processed in Snuffler using the despike and interpolated filters. These data range from −663 to +991.2 nT and were plotted using a ± 50 nT scale range, as shown in Figure 12. All unprocessed magnetic gradiometer data are available in Roberts et al. (2020a).

Ground-Penetrating Radar Survey

GPR was employed as a reliable non-invasive method of detecting subsurface stratigraphic disturbances, which potentially indicate a grave (Moffat, 2015). The disturbance locatable with GPR is caused by the digging and refilling of graves, which leads to the destruction of any sedimentary structures and the intermingling of soil layers within the area of the vertical grave shaft (shown in Conyers, 2006, p. 67). Most investigations of unmarked graves using GPR include some evaluation of the likelihood of each identified feature representing a grave, which is usually based on the spatial properties of these anomalies (Moffat et al., 2016, 2020). This is a much more robust methodology for the detection of unmarked graves than the widely used method of attempting to locate skeletal material or coffins directly using hyperbola picking, as summarised in more detail by Moffat (2015). GPR has been frequently used for the detection of unmarked graves within Australian archaeology, particularly as part of the investigation of historic cemeteries (Bladon et al., 2011; Lowe et al., 2014; Marshallsay et al., 2012; Moffat et al., 2010, 2016, 2020; Powell, 2004; Stanger & Roe, 2007; Sutton & Conyers, 2013; Wallis et al., 2008; see also summary in Lowe, 2012) and has also been used (in combination with magnetic gradiometry) on a number of frontier conflict sites (Barker et al., 2020; Lowe et al., 2018).

Dead Man's Flat was surveyed with a Malå X3M GPR with a shielded 500 MHz antenna. In total, 131 lines were collected in a grid formation. Four additional opportunistic lines (GPR Lines 1–4) were placed between surface obstructions nearby the plaque (Figure 7). The data were collected using a sampling frequency of 10,755 MHz, a time window of 66 ns, 712 samples, a trace increment of 0.020 m and 2 stacks per trace. The grid was 60 × 20 m, with data collection starting in the southeast corner and the lines running parallel with 0.5 m spacing between adjacent lines, alternating in an E-W direction. The start and end locations of each line were recorded with the Emlid Reach RS+ RTK GNSS (Real-time Kinematic Global Navigation Satellite System) rover communicating with a stationary base throughout the survey. The positions were post processed using the online CSRS-PPP system and RTK-LIB software. During the survey, the position of any obstructions to the GPR along the survey line, such as trees and fire pits, was noted. All unprocessed GPR data are available in Roberts et al. (2020a).

GPR data were processed and interpreted using ReflexW software. Data were processed using a sequence of processing steps including moving the start time and applying Butterworth bandpass, background removal, running average, energy decay and time-cut filters. Interpretation of the GPR lines focused on identifying sharp lateral changes in the amplitude

of horizontal layers that could indicate a break in the soil stratigraphy, as described in more detail in Moffat et al. (2020). Once all the lines had been interpreted, the local grid coordinates, depths and pick codes were saved as ASCII files and then loaded into ArcPro software.
With all the required data loaded into ArcPro, the picks were evaluated on the basis that any stratigraphic breaks of approximately 1.5 m in length that were found consecutively on three adjacent lines were tentatively identified as a burial. Having been identified in this fashion, the individual GPR profiles containing these features were re-evaluated in ReflexW to confirm that stratigraphic breaks were present in these areas. These features were then subdivided into probable graves where stratigraphic disturbance was present on five adjacent lines within a discrete area of ~2 x ~ 1 m and possible graves where stratigraphic disturbance was present on four adjacent lines within a discrete area of ~2 x ~ 1 m. Any picks located adjacent to trees, or that were linear features longer than 2 m, were discarded as probably resulting from tree root disturbance. This process led to an initial 100 stratigraphic breaks being narrowed down to 20 potential graves before being further refined to four probable or possible graves.

Results

No archaeological evidence of pre-contact Aboriginal occupation was identified during the surface and cliff face surveys (although visibility was obscured in some areas due to leaf litter and vegetation [see Figure 9]). A number of trees evidenced anthropogenic modification, but no tree engravings were found, which specifically corroborated the historical record (i.e. marked with a clear "F"), although metal axe marks were found in a natural scar on one of the black box trees (*E. largiflorens*) adjacent to the plaque (Figures 9 and 10). The scar is interpreted as natural as it is uneven in shape and extends to the ground surface (see Long, 2005). This tree has a circumference of 2 m, measured at 1 m from the ground (as per conventions outlined in Dardengo et al., 2019, p. 43). Whilst it is difficult to estimate the age of many Australian trees, particularly "given that after 100 years most trees have acquired the uniform attributes of maturity" (Long, 2005, p. 69), a study by Klaver (1998), conducted at nearby Overland Corner, indicated that living black box trees with a circumference of over 150 cm would likely be old enough to have existed in the 19th century. This tree is therefore probably old enough to relate to the time of frontier conflict. As noted above, another old black box tree of similar circumference, also with a natural scar (but with no axe marks or engravings), is in close proximity, to this marked tree and thus, the two trees appear to have been used to position the plaque (Figure 6).

The magnetic gradiometer data from Dead Man's Flat show a large number of spatially discrete, high amplitude response magnetic anomalies, which are interpreted to relate to the large amount of metal rubbish on or near the surface at the site. This is interpreted to be associated with its use as a camping or picnicking area (Figure 11), particularly as the greatest concentration of material is around the large tree in the centre of the site. As such, whilst it is possible that there could be metal associated with a European burial (e.g. buttons or weaponry), given the volume of metal on the site, none of the magnetic anomalies can be confidently interpreted as being associated with frontier conflict events.

The GPR survey revealed one probable grave and three possible graves, as shown in Figures 12 and 13. These graves were located in the centre of the survey area, approximately 40 m south of the plaque. The additional GPR lines in front of the plaque showed no stratigraphic breaks and demonstrated that this part of the cliff had no soil deeper than one metre. Many parts of the area were covered by trees and therefore not accessible to GPR survey, so there

may have been deeper soil in these areas not accessible to survey. Three of the interpreted graves (the probable and two of the possible graves) have an associated gradiometer anomaly. These are relatively low amplitude (−32.8, −4 and −45.99nT) compared to other magnetic features in the survey area and are associated with shallow (< 20 cm depth) hyperbola in the GPR data.

Figure 9. Natural scar on a black box tree adjacent to the plaque. Photograph by Amy Roberts, 18 September 2018.

Figure 10.
Metal axe marks in a black box tree scar adjacent to the plaque. Photograph by Amy Roberts, 18 September 2018.

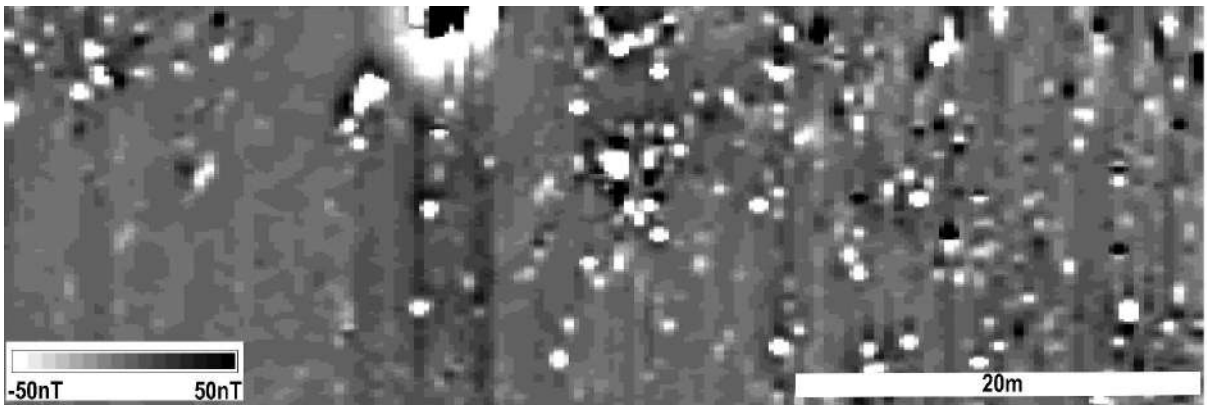

Figure 11. Magnetic gradiometer data from Dead Man's Flat.

Discussion and conclusions

The historical records relating to the Dead Man's Flat area reveal the cruelty and complexity of the period and expose the concealments, contradictions, euphemistic language, denials and silences that are typical of the Australian frontier. Furthermore, our research has revealed that there are also disparities between historical documents and the account on the commemorative plaque at the site. These discrepancies led us to consider the following questions: Were eleven Aboriginal people massacred immediately following the death of Thomas Young? Was this the reason for the apparent initial concealment by Mackinnon? Did local knowledge ultimately preserve what the original colonists refused to concede in official or published accounts? If true, this could make it an early massacre in the region and an additional case of initial concealment. Colonial frontier massacres have been defined as the "deliberate and unlawful killing of six or more defenceless people in one operation".6 Nettelbeck and Foster (2010, p. 53.13) have contrasted the illusion of stability produced by written, state-sanctioned histories – which tend to conceal frontier violence in favour of a progressive narrative – with the more volatile and incomplete situation often evident in local and regional contexts:

Just as Aboriginal people themselves have always engaged in the production of a counter-history to the orthodox narrative, the stories of foundation from within settler-descended communities—from first-generation pioneering reminiscences of the late nineteenth century to local histories and community projects of the late twentieth century—have told and retold of a more discomforting relationship between European settlement and Aboriginal dispossession.

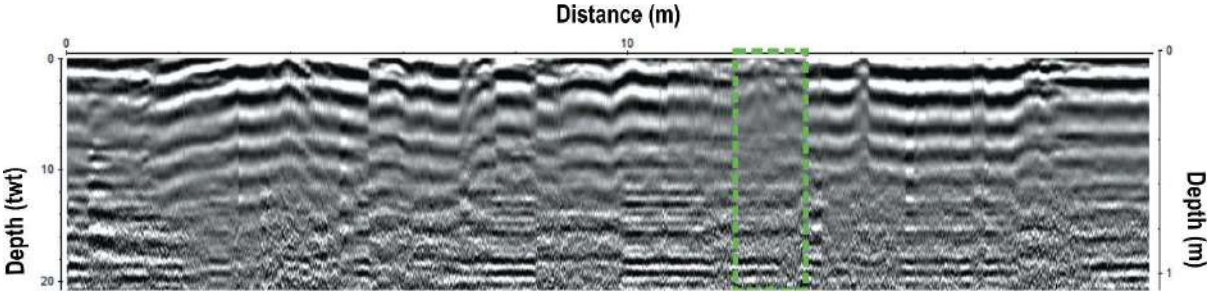

Figure 12. GPR profile 56 (orientated east to the left and west to the right) with the probable grave feature highlighted with a dashed box.

For Nettelbeck and Foster (2010), the potential for frontier conflict events to be preserved faithfully within local and regional oral histories should not be ignored, although there are also sufficient alternative studies questioning the veracity of such narratives, meaning that they cannot automatically be accepted at face value (e.g. Burke et al., 2017; Roberts, 2008; Wiltshire et al., 2018). In light of the lack of any corroborating evidence for a reprisal massacre at Dead Man's Flat in the wake of Young's death, and the unknown genealogy of the claim made on the plaque, this situation cannot be resolved by the written record.7 However, for RMMAC members, the interpretation of these multiple historical versions as a whole serves to reveal a history of invasion, killings and massacre, theft, deceit and cover-up – Dead Man's Flat is, therefore, a place to be approached with deep respect in order to honour the experiences of their ancestors. As such, for RMMAC members, the interpretation of these multiple historical versions is less ambiguous than it may be for a historian. Furthermore, RMMAC members argue that their ancestors were forced to defend themselves, their families, their country, their

laws and customs, as well as their special cultural places. Any retaliation by their ancestors is not considered as violent compulsion but rather an attempt to "impose on the newcomers the moral standards and social obligations of traditional society" (Reynolds, 2006, p. 91).

It is important to also consider the intent of the makers of the memorial. As argued by Graves and Rechniewski (2017, p. 1), the "Australian commemorative landscape has long been dominated by memorials to white settlement of the continent and their historical narratives". The primary purpose of the Dead Man's Flat plaque is seemingly to commemorate the death of the "first white overlander", with Aboriginal deaths being a secondary consideration. No Aboriginal people are known to have been involved in the creation of the plaque. Indeed, we must consider the framing of the event – no comment is offered, for example, on the right of Aboriginal people to defend their territory or that they may have been provoked to retaliate due to other events. Such counter-narratives have been the subject of plaques created by other Aboriginal peoples, such as the Karadjerie, in relation to the La Grange Massacre in Western Australia (Graves & Rechniewski, 2017, p. 6). Nor are the Aboriginal people considered in other terms such as "warriors in defence of their lands" or "fallen soldiers" (Graves & Rechniewski, 2017, p. 19). The contrast between Eurocentric memorialised narratives (and related monuments) and Indigenous perspectives often remains unreconciled, particularly in relation to commemorative installations. RMMAC is embarking on presenting their own narratives of places through endeavours such as the work presented in this paper, as well as other interpretive projects in their country.

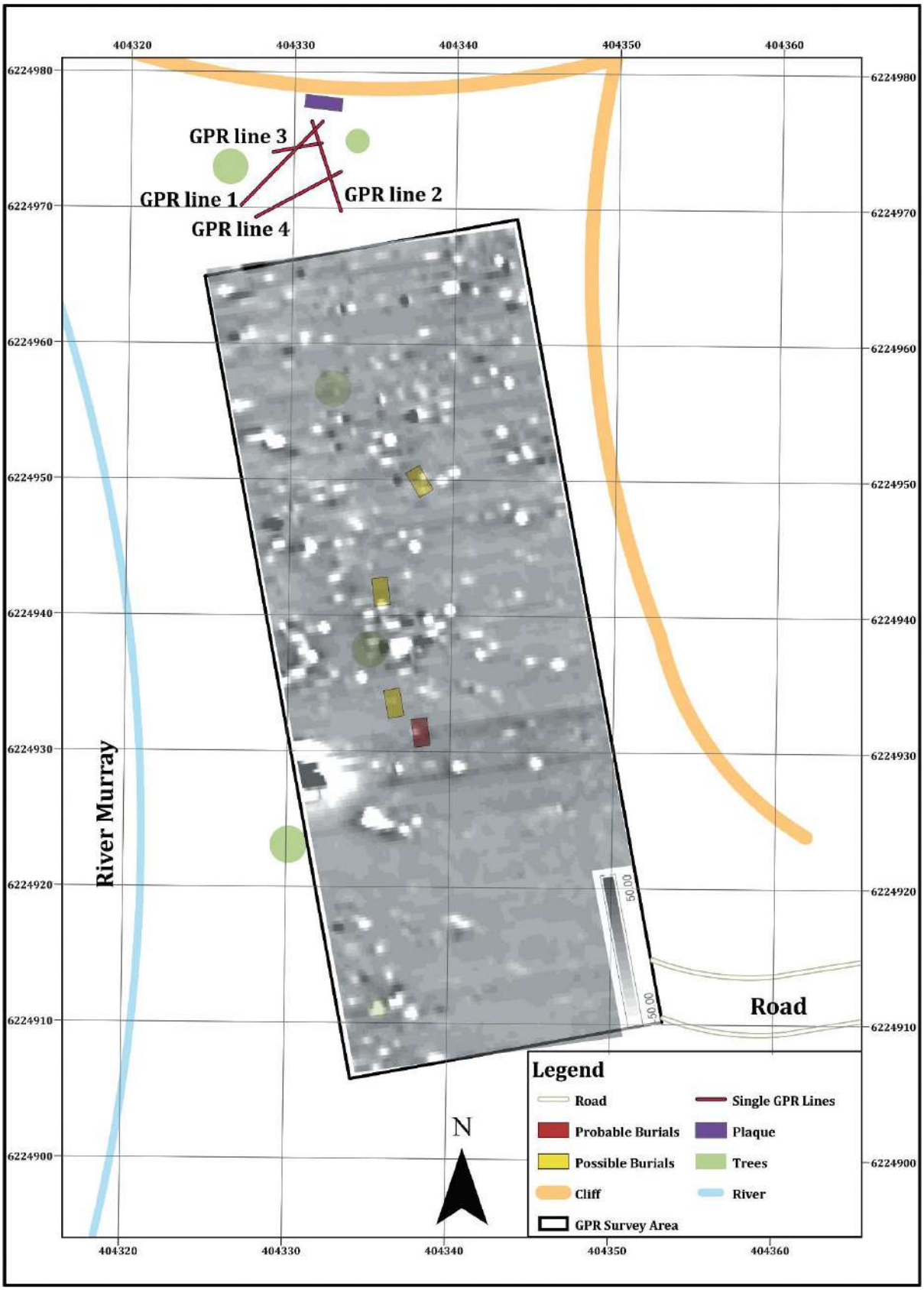

Figure 13. Base map of Dead Man's Flat study area with the locations of the probable and possible burials overlain on magnetic gradiometer data.

A number of researchers have noted the "archaeological silences" in relation to Australian frontier conflict, particularly in relation to finding evidence for massacres of Aboriginal people (e.g. Barker, 2007; Litster & Wallis, 2011, p. 114). They argue that there are multiple reasons why finding archaeological evidence is difficult: ranging from complexities inherent in precisely locating sites, the fact that numbers of people killed in each instance may be low and difficulties in determining cause of death from skeletal remains (Barker, 2007; Litster & Wallis, 2011, p. 114). However, the possibility of finding definitive artefacts (such as Native Mounted Police ordnance [Barker et al., 2020)]) has been noted (Litster & Wallis, 2011, p. 111). Indeed, the research for our broader project also revealed that two uniform buttons and bayonet remains had been reported for the region (from Cobdogla, c. 50 km east of Dead Man's Flat). According to a local man (William Morris), reminiscing on his time in the district (from 1873), these remains were "abandoned by a member of the military expedition to Lake Victoria many years ago to quell a disturbance among the Aborigines" and that in this area, the "natives were caught by the soldier's fire" and buried (Anon., 1915, p. 8; Morris, 1925). Again, this event is not reflected in official accounts. The bayonet was displayed at the Adelaide "Public Library" in 1915 but unfortunately later destroyed with a collection of other arms ca. 1963 due to its poor condition (Anon., 1915:8; Art Gallery Board Report, 1963). The destruction of the remains prevented further research, but highlights at least the potential for finding material remains from this period in the region. Whilst not solely seeking to find a massacre site (as we were also investigating the location of Thomas Young's burial), our research at Dead Man's Flat has, however, provided no exception to revealing the general absence of archaeological evidence (after Litster & Wallis, 2011, p. 114). There were no conclusive corroborating tree markings or engravings in our study area, no surface historical artefacts of the period and no obvious surface evidence of burials (European or Aboriginal). As such, either there is no surface evidence remaining or the study area needs to be expanded to cover a greater zone. Should further research be conducted we would recommend additional survey to the south of our area of focus.

The difficulties in locating archaeological evidence for frontier conflict sites using traditional archaeological techniques provide an opportunity for geophysical techniques to make an important contribution to this field of research. Despite this considerable promise, the use of GPR does not provide comprehensive information about any located graves, such as the chronology or the configuration of the burial. Because our methodology was focused on locating features on the basis of soil disturbance with an approximate size of ~2 x ~ 1 m, we were not able to determine the depth of these burials or whether any possible or potential graves might have contained a coffin. Our methodology would also exclude burials that are not in a prone position or that are not adult-sized. This differs from other GPR methodologies focused on direct detection of skeletal remains (Damiata et al., 2013), coffins (Owsley & Compton, 1997) or associated grave goods (Lowe et al., 2014, p. 155). GPR survey is unable to determine the age of graves, which means that the features located at Dead Man's Flat could be unrelated to frontier conflict t the site. If they are related, it is unclear whether they are graves that contain the remains of Thomas Young and/or Indigenous peoples or other Europeans who were involved in the conflict. The notion that more than one European was killed in 1839 is mentioned in only one historical source (McLaurin, 1888) and the uneven distribution of the potential graves across the flat appears more random than one might expect for four bodies being interred at the same time. The association between three of these burials and magnetic anomalies (shown in Figure 13) could be interpreted as suggesting that these are European burials with ferrous grave goods. However, given the considerable amount of magnetic debris on the site, it is much more likely that modern rubbish is coincidentally located with these features.

In summarising historical accounts of Aboriginal burial practices in the greater Murray-Darling Littleton (1999, p. 2007) noted that the main criteria in selecting a location were soft, easily dug sediment, as well as a preference to conduct the burial soon after death, away from camping areas and in prominent locations or locations with personal or ancestral significance. Burials in the region tend to follow this broader regional pattern with most located in sand dunes on the floodplains, and fewer examples located in levees and terraces (see also Littleton, 1999; Littleton & Allen, 2007). Most burials are also contained within larger site areas and associated with some other occupation material (e.g. hearth material, midden shell and stone artefacts). The Dead Man's Flat study area, being developed on stiff alluvium and interbedded coarse boulder scree, does not accord with this regional pattern. So it is unlikely that any of the potential graves identified by the GPR survey are traditional Aboriginal burials. Indeed, any Aboriginal people killed in this area were likely to have been removed by their relatives for burial in a more culturally appropriate location if the circumstances allowed.

If nothing else, the survey demonstrates conclusively that those areas surrounding the plaque that were accessible to GPR survey were not geomorphically suitable to contain the grave of Thomas Young. The GPR features located on the terrace to the south of the plaque are also unlikely to be the graves of Aboriginal people killed in a reprisal massacre for the reasons outlined above and because such events were far more likely to result in either the expedient destruction of bodies through burning by Europeans (e.g. see Smith et al., 2017) or their abandonment rather than formal (and more labour-intensive) burial (Litster & Wallis, 2011, p. 113). However, as noted above, future research could also explore the area further south from our area of focus.

Naturally, any remote sensing approach is inherently less robust than excavation, so it is likely that some or all of these features are not graves. Clearly, only direct investigation of these features could confirm their nature, although this may not provide any additional information about the frontier conflict history of Dead Man's Flat and would introduce additional cultural heritage concerns. Indeed, given the possibility of Aboriginal deaths and/or massacres in this location, traditional owners are reluctant to explore the area using excavation techniques. By using non-invasive methods, this research has disproved the implied location of Thomas Young's burial, as recorded on the plaque, while still maintaining the integrity of the site, in a similar manner to Bladon et al. (2011). This novel use of geophysics to show where features are not (rather than the conventional approach of finding where they are) has great potential to contribute to investigations of frontier conflict and provides an alternative means to consider this period of conflict and trauma.

The fact that many massacres, including in modern times, "are carried out in secret" and concealed only enhances the need for researchers to explore every possible event, to consider their place within organised processes and to interrogate multiple lines of evidence when deemed appropriate by traditional owners (e.g. such as using historical, archaeological, anthropological, geophysical and forensic techniques). No massacre events should be allowed to "transcend history" (Barker, 2007, p. 12; Dwyer & Ryan, 2012, p. xxii; see also Semelin, 2002, 2009). Aboriginal retaliation also forms part of this story, as has been explored in this paper. We would argue, therefore, that despite the likelihood of a subtle or silent physical record, each and every event is deserving of the application of techniques that archaeology (and other disciplines) may bring to bear. Indeed, for RMMAC members, this research does not represent the "obligation" to prove to "white people" what they believe about the past (after

Barker, 2007, p. 11), but rather an opportunity to explore and create fuller understandings of their frontier histories, places and landscapes and concomitantly to promote more public awareness about Aboriginal experiences.

Notes

1. The frontier conflict relating to the Overland Stock Route traverses a number of Aboriginal territories. Dead Man's Flat is located in the border region for the Ngawait and Ngaiawang groups (e.g. see Tindale, 1974: although it is acknowledged that Tindale's narrower group 'boundaries' are not without issue an interrogation of all relevant sources is beyond the scope of this paper). RMMAC members are the traditional owners of this area and other adjacent territories.

2. Edward John Eyre, also an overlander at the time, does not mention this attack in his accounts of August 1838 or March 1839 (see summary in Burke et al. [2016: pp. 151, 154]).

3. Although note that in the public version of O'Halloran's journal, published 63 years later, he did not name Young, but described the murdered man as 'Mr. McKinnon's brother having been killed here by this very tribe, and in this flat the man lies buried' (O'Halloran, 1904, p. 79).

4. See https://jenwilletts.com/convict_ship_speke_1821.htm.

5. Coincidentally, the executioner in Glasgow who undertook the executions of Andrew Hardie and John Baird, the leaders of Bonnymuir, was himself named Thomas Young. However, he apparently retired to America as an old man (Mackenzie, 1890, pp. 304–305).

6. See https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/introduction.php.

7. It is also possible that the events of the period have been conflated. Issues concerning intergenerational transmission of memories and trauma are the focus of a separate forthcoming article.

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