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Descended from both sides of Queensland's bloody massacres

Kal Ellwood's great-great-grandfather Jack Noble belonged to the lethally efficient native police. But that's only half his story …

Lorena Allam
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Kal Ellwood at home in Whiterock, south of Cairns: 'People did what they had to do to survive.' Photograph: Brian Cassey

Nothing about the history of Queensland is black and white to Kal Ellwood.

The Batjala-Quandamooka-Kalkadoon historian is descended from both sides of the state's bloody massacres: the native police and the survivors.

The native police were a state-sanctioned paramilitary organisation with groups of Aboriginal troopers under the leadership of a white officer, who operated with lethal efficiency on the frontier for more than 50 years.

Ellwood's great-great-grandfather Jack Noble was part of a unit who "did the rounds" outside of Rockhampton, along the upper Dawson and Fitzroy rivers.

"In the 21st century morality that we have today, I can't put judgment on them back there," Ellwood says. "Yeah, it happened. I know that my great-great-grandfather Jack was a part of it.

“How he became a part of it – well, there’s a whole story to that.”

Native police officer Jack Noble with his wife Alberta

Noble, who was also known as “Moran”, came from Fraser Island and his real name was Wannamatta.

“He was coerced,” Ellwood says. “He was brutalised. They flogged him, burnt him, made all the troopers mistreat him until he hated his black skin, and he hated blacks full stop.

“Jack was made to be tough. And he passed that down the generations.”

Ellwood is also descended from the Quandamooka of Moreton Island, and the Kalkadoon people, who were massacred in their hundreds by native police in at least two places in 1879 and 1884.

Yet he is adamant that the native police “were not collaborators”.

Rather they were survivors of massacres on their own lands in other parts of the country, recruited by coercion, intimidation, kidnapping and inducement, as well as voluntary enlistment.

Since 2016 archaeologists from six universities have identified 196 distinct sites where native troops would camp while they ranged out to “disperse” Aboriginal people and escort surveyors, pastoralists and prospectors further inland and further north.

“What we’re finding on the ground is the day-to-day material, the detritus of daily life: ceramics, buttons, cartridges. Really ordinary prosaic things,” Heather Burke, an associate professor from Flinders University, tells Guardian Australia.

A bullet from a Snider-Enfield rifle found at Peak Downs native police camp in central western Queensland

“But you have to look at what that ordinariness obscures. The reason they’re there is to support this broad, statewide system of removing any kind of Aboriginal resistance to European expansion.”

Frontier killings across Queensland were systematic but were predominantly of small groups at scattered locations. Firsthand accounts from the troopers themselves are absent from the historical record, but the stories told by their descendants form a “complex emotional mosaic”.

“It gets really human and fraught and I never expected that,” Burke says. “The knowledge of family involvement in this history can split a family.

“Some are OK to say they’re descended from that man, other parts refuse to acknowledge. It can cause ongoing issues.”

Ellwood knows that too.

“It was the killing times, then the mission times, so lots of things didn’t get told. Our families were all split up in the mission times and sent away to different places, so some of them just didn’t know.

“People did what they had to do to survive.”

In Queensland the native police were more organised and longer lasting than elsewhere, and their skills were sought after interstate.

Noble was one of five Queensland native police officers sent to track Ned Kelly, at the request of the Victorian government.

Jack Noble, centre, with the mounted police sent to apprehend Ned Kelly

The troopers were at the Kelly gang’s final shootout at Glenrowan but were never given their fair share of the reward.

A court case mounted by descendants of the troopers failed in the early 2000s.

“We’re supposed to suffer the sins of the father but whitefellas get off,” Ellwood says.

“Telling us to get over it. It’s that classic knee-jerk reaction because it’s confronted them and they’ve not really thought about it, whereas we’ve had plenty of time to think about this and wonder how do we tell our kids.”

The archaeological project is due to finish in 2020. “There’s a long history of the state not wanting to acknowledge that it was a state-sponsored act,” Burke says.

“The history of the native police is so complex. It’s not just a black-and-white thing. People need to put together the parts of the story themselves, to figure out what they feel about it.”