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JOHN MCKINLAY AND THE MARY RIVER MUD

by

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INTRODUCTION

This is the text of a talk given by Lloyd Browne in April 1992 in the State Library's 'Under the Banyan Tree' lunchtime entertainment series.

Lloyd is a private researcher who has been concentrating on the Escape Cliffs segment of Territory history. In addition to his considerable research in libraries and archives, he has undertaken a number of field trips, and believes he has found most of McKinlay's camp sites. By following in McKinlay's footsteps Lloyd has added a most interesting chapter to our history of Territory exploration.

JOHN MCKINLAY AND THE MARY RIVER MUD

by

L.F.S. Browne

THE MAROONING

At 9.35 on the morning of Monday February 12, 1866, three weeks after leaving the Escape Cliffs settlement of Palmerston to explore the country between the Liverpool and Roper Rivers, the overland expedition under the command of the renowned bushman John McKinlay, found its easterly progress blocked by a *'fine stream, 60 yards wide, with clumps of bamboo on its banks, (which was) too deep and running too strongly to ford.'*(1)

This was the river which now bears McKinlay's name, and which joins the Mary (of which it is the main tributary) a few kilometres south of the Arnhem Highway. Together, these two rivers, the Mary and the McKinlay, drain a vast area of coastal wetlands and alluvial flood plains extending some 150 kms inland to the foot of the Escarpment near Pine Creek. By guess or by God, the McKinlay expedition had chanced upon the river close to the only location where the black soil plains can be expeditiously crossed in the wet season. In the general vicinity of the present Mary River bridge and the Annaburro Station homestead, low spurs of the opposing ranges push out onto the alluvium, constricting the flood plains into a narrow waist which is less than three kilometres across. It is through this gap that the wet season waters of the Mary and the McKinlay debouch onto the coastal plains.

Had John McKinlay followed his river northwards to its junction with the Mary the story of his overland expedition (and the location of the Territory's capital city) might well have been different. Instead, the expedition turned south, searching for a safe crossing place for the heavily laden pack horses and the 70 odd sheep. Almost immediately, bogs and tributaries forced them back to the west – away from the newly discovered river; it would be two months to the day before any member of the expedition would even sight the McKinlay River again, let alone cross it.

About noon on the same day, (February 12, 1866) the expedition again found its way blocked; this time by an unusual topographical feature – a creek, with steep high banks on one side, and banks only a foot or two above water level on the other, *'forming quite a (distinct) step in the country'*. (2) By the time they had learnt the significance of this phenomenon, which marks the transition to the finely textured silts and loams of the flood plains, it was too late to retrace their steps; two nights of torrential rain had transformed the alluvium into a bottomless slush into which the pack horses sank to their bellies and across which the expedition could barely manage three kilometres in a full day's march.

There was nothing to forewarn the McKinlay expedition of the formidable Mary River mud. The country beyond the 'jump up' (as it would be called today) did not seem to differ markedly from that which they had just traversed. On their march eastwards from the fork of the Adelaide River there had been bogs aplenty, but there had always been a ridge or a patch of firmer ground to get them through. On the Mary River flood plains there are precious few ridges, and in the Wet, even fewer patches of firm ground.

At the place where McKinlay was about to strike out across the plains, the country is almost completely flat with a thick growth of low scrubby timber, a combination which limits visibility to less than one hundred metres. The terrain is one of extremes. In the middle of the Dry, the ground is like iron – hard enough to bounce a crowbar off; in the middle of the Wet, it will, as the saying goes, 'bog a duck.' The transition

between these two extremities can happen almost overnight, as indeed it did in John McKinlay's case. Moderate rainfall will create bogs only where the water ponds and saturates the hard crust. Elsewhere, the crust will generally remain intact, drying and hardening in the sun. But as rain continues to fall, the point is eventually reached where the crust, although seemingly firm and intact, is soft and easily broken. Beneath are layers of liquid alluvium metres deep. Such was the formidable obstacle McKinlay's men were about to encounter. The Uwuiymil, the Aboriginal tribal group whose lands they had now entered, could have told them of the danger, but contact with the Uwuiymil – as indeed with any of the Aboriginal tribal groups of the region – was shunned by the Escape Cliffs colonists. In any case the Uwuiymil were nowhere in evidence, having presumably departed for higher ground at the onset of the rains.

Crossing the creek some two kilometres south of their point of first contact, the expedition's navigator Robert Henry Edmunds and two other men found the going firm enough for their horses. Meanwhile, the main party continued upstream along the edge of the jump up looking for a break in the high banks where the stock could safely enter the water. Eventually, just before sunset, a suitable place was found, and the main party crossed and made camp. It was the expedition's thirteenth camp. The following day was February 13.

It is difficult to decide whether the number 13 was lucky or unlucky for John McKinlay. Had the party not remained in Camp 13 on February 13 they would undoubtedly have been trapped by the torrential rainfall of the next few days far out on the vast black soil plain to the north of the Ringwood Ranges, a predicament which must certainly have resulted in the abandonment of almost every item of gear they carried. Even at this early juncture, the stamina of the expedition was flagging; escape to higher ground across an intervening nine or ten kilometres of Mary River mud with anything but their lives was beyond the physical capacity of either the men or the horses. Had the expedition ended disastrously somewhere in the middle of that plain, McKinlay's men might have been spared the diet of horseflesh and the weeks of unremitting boredom and toil which lay ahead, but not even McKinlay's prodigious reputation could have endured the failure of such a splendidly equipped party at such an early stage.

At 1 a.m. on the morning of the 13th, a violent thunderstorm broke over Camp 13, and some 5 to 6 inches (125 – 150mm) of rain fell in the period to daylight. The bolts of lightning were so close overhead that R. H. Edmunds, who was standing watch, was deafened by the immediate thunder and blinded for a minute or two by the intensity of the flashes. Much of their gear was left in the open, unprotected from the storm, and morning found most of it so saturated and heavy that, for the sake of the ailing horses, McKinlay decided to spend the day in camp attempting to dry everything out.

The following night there was an even heavier downpour. Edmunds who was again on watch noted in his diary: *'I again had the benefit of it. It was intensely dark except during the lightning; flashes lit up the whole country, the intense light of which made one blink to recover sight, and heaven's artillery produced an unpleasant drumming in the ear.'* (3) No one could sleep through it and glimpses of the men awake but lying quietly in the tents engendered a feeling of extreme loneliness in Edmunds as he patrolled the drenched camp. At daylight he saw the horses, which were being driven back to camp, sinking into the wet soft ground up to their knees. Edmunds immediately roused McKinlay and urged him to get the expedition to firmer ground without delay. They had to go on; they could not go back – even if they had wanted to; the creek behind them was up and running a banker.

They were in desperate straits almost immediately; one after another, the heavily

laden pack horses began bogging up to their bellies. Extricating them was no easy task; each horse had to be unpacked before it could be dragged free and then repacked before the expedition could proceed, a process sometimes taking up to 40 minutes. The going was so bad that it took all day to cover just three kilometres. At sundown they found a harder patch and halted. Leaving the men to keep the horses together, McKinlay, Thring and Edmunds rode in different directions looking for higher ground on which to camp. Just on dark, Thring fired a signal shot. (An experienced bushman, Thring had been a member of John McDouall Stuart's 1862 transcontinental expedition.) Thring had ridden a kilometre or so to the south west and had found a node of rising ground on the other side of a creek which was either the same creek they had left that morning, or a branch of it. After much difficulty the party reached the place but the creek bank was so soft that they could not approach within 60 or 70 metres. Eventually, they managed to find a place where the creek bed was rocky and began to cross; the water was waist high and the stream strong, but by removing the packs and leading the horses they managed to cross without further mishap by about 11 p.m. Many of the horses were badly strained and, by the time they had carried the packs over, all the men were pretty well used up.

It rained heavily all that night and most of the next day. As McKinlay noted in his journal several days later:

Had we remained on the opposite side of the creek (that night) ... nothing could have saved our horses from total destruction, and there would have been a failure indeed of the whole expedition. From the constant rains the sheep do not do at all well and the horses are all very thin and getting quite scurfy and losing their hair and looking wretched, although up to their backs in green grass. (4)

When the rain stopped, Edmunds was able to ascertain that they were on what virtually amounted to an island – 'a few gravelly hills between two branches of the creek (they had) crossed on the 12th; the dry land less than a square mile in extent.' (5) Ascending the highest hill, about a kilometre from Camp 14, Edmunds could see no way out; vast sheets of water covered the flood plains in all directions; they were surrounded – 'East, West and North by creeks which are usually about 15 metres wide but are now 400 to 500, and on the South by an immense lagoon and bog, absolutely impassable.' (6) The outlook for the expedition was decidedly bleak; it would be weeks before the flats drained and the crust hardened sufficiently to be able to withstand the weight of the horses. With little prospect of a break in the weather, it was evident that they were going to be marooned on their island for some considerable time.

THE MAN

The announcement in 1865 of John McKinlay's appointment as leader of the expedition to determine an appropriate location for the capital of South Australia's Northern Territory prompted the following tribute in the Gawler '*Bunyip*'.

...the Government have done wisely in sending Mr McKinlay to the Northern Territory. All classes have pointed to him as the man most fitted for the work; and whatever success others may have met with, or what great works they may have performed, Mr McKinlay must, after all, be looked upon as the explorer for the public. His high chivalric bearing and generous sentiments towards others upon all occasions have made him the model man to whom all South Australians point as a type of her representative heroes. (7)

Gawler was McKinlay's home town, but such eulogies were by no means confined to the 'Bunyip'. The 'Advertiser', while bewailing the inordinate amount of space being devoted in its columns to the dismal Escape Cliffs saga, still found room to praise McKinlay.

The appointment of Mr McKinlay as explorer has met with complete and universal approbation, and the only subject of regret is that it was not made eighteen months ago. Even now the effect of this step by the Government has to a great extent restored confidence in the Northern Territory enterprise and without doubt, English proprietors will be reassured by the news that their interests are confided to one so intelligent and able... Mr McKinlay is immensely popular at (Escape Cliffs) as indeed he is wherever his name is known, and the (Escape Cliffs colonists) have often speculated with delight upon the possibility that the great explorer might (go there) to put matters on a better footing. (8)

Born in 1819 in the small Scottish village of Sandbank, on the Clyde, McKinlay emigrated at the age of 17 to join his uncle, a prosperous squatter in the colony of New South Wales. Over the next 20 years he opened up large tracts of pastoral country on the border between New South Wales and South Australia – pioneering a string of pastoral runs but retaining possession of each newly created property only long enough to sell it to the highest bidder. This entrepreneurial practice not only enabled him to capitalize on his discoveries but brought him to the attention of the authorities in both colonies thereby establishing his reputation as an explorer.

McKinlay's elevation to celebrity status came in 1862, when, commanding a Government sponsored expedition despatched from Adelaide to search for the ill-fated Burke and Wills, he made the second South to North crossing of the Australian continent. As the colony's most widely acclaimed bushman, McKinlay had been the obvious choice to lead the search party. Setting out in August 1861 with a bullock team, sheep, horses and camels, his party penetrated to the Coopers Creek Region and found the body of Gray, a member of the Burke and Wills expedition who had perished on the track. On learning that the bodies of Burke and Wills had been found, McKinlay determined to push on northwards, eventually reaching the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria in May 1862, about two months before John McDouall Stuart reached the Arafura Sea. Although subsequently eclipsed by Stuart, his reputation was immeasurably enhanced and he returned to Adelaide to a hero's welcome.

With the annexation of the Northern Territory in 1863 the more influential newspapers began touting McKinlay as the man to lead the Escape Cliffs expedition; but the post eventually went to Boyle Travers Finniss, a former Chief Secretary of the colony. When, in 1865, the entire Northern Territory venture was threatened with collapse by bitter public wrangling over the suitability of the Adelaide River lands surveyed by Finniss and the siting of Palmerston, the proposed capital, at Escape Cliffs, McKinlay was chosen by the Government to settle the matter once and for all. Finniss was to be recalled to face his accusers and detractors at a special commission of enquiry; McKinlay was to assess and report on the relative merits of the Liverpool, Roper and Victoria Rivers – the Adelaide's main competitors. There was to be no repetition of the confusion of roles and overlapping areas of responsibility which had so hamstrung Finniss. McKinlay's sole task was to be exploration; he was to hold himself aloof from the affairs of the colony which were now under the command of J. T. Manton.

McKinlay took his instructions seriously; on his arrival at the Escape Cliffs depot aboard the barque 'Ellen Lewis' on November 5 1865, his first action was to form a separate compound a few hundred metres south of the main settlement for the 9 men, 32 horses, 121 sheep, 17 goats and sundry dogs and fowls comprising his expedition. His 9 men were all hand picked and included F. W. Thring, one of Stuart's 'gallant band', and a contingent of three Gawler men – Thomas Glen, who was McKinlay's

brother in law, Thomas Bagnold Crisp, and David Collier, an ex master mariner.

McKinlay lost no time in condemning the entire Adelaide River area. On November 25 he wrote to the South Australian Premier:

To form any estimation of the state of matters found on my arrival here is beyond the power of my pen. A greater scene of desolation and waste could not be pictured. As a seaport and city this place is worthless. Of the surveyed land up the Adelaide River, not one land holder out of a hundred could make a selection upon which he could erect his homestead without the almost positive certainty of being washed off by floods. (9)

Contrary to his instructions, McKinlay did not start his expedition until January 14 1866, a delay of more than two months: aloof in his camp, he remained impervious to the repeated warnings of R. H. Edmunds and other old hands about the dangers of the Wet. 'Urged McKinlay to prepare for a start,' Edmunds wrote in his diary on New Year's Day 1866:

He seems reluctant to go. I tell him we shall be unable (to go) if we do not get away soon. The wet season is late, which is in our favour.

And again, two days later:

I have been urging Manton to hurry McKinlay on. McKinlay is (a great procrastinator) and says, "Well, we will go and arrange the stores and pack" and "I think we could start at the end of the week." (But does nothing.) We shall most assuredly be in a fix if we do not go shortly. If this (wet) season had been similar to the last we should have been unable to go (at all). (10)

It seems almost as if McKinlay deliberately postponed his departure until the onset of the Wet so as to be sure of plenty of water and feed for the stock. On his transcontinental journey of 1861/62 McKinlay had encountered heavy rains and massive flooding in the channel country to the north and east of Lake Eyre, which, although presenting him with some serious problems, actually facilitated his crossing of this vast arid region. In hindsight, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this experience was the basis of his fatal procrastination at Escape Cliffs.

THE DEPARTURE

In any event, the expedition was drenched by heavy rain on the very day of its departure, and from then on, no matter where they went, they were to be continually drenched by heavy rain for the next ten weeks.

Three days out from the Cliffs, the Gawler man Thomas Crisp went missing from the overland party under the command of Edmunds. Crisp has been sent back to the Adelaide River to retrieve one of McKinlay's best dogs which had run off. For the next 12 days the party searched unsuccessfully for Crisp from their base camp at Fred's Pass in the Daly Ranges. Eventually he was given up for dead and the party determined to rejoin the main body of the expedition waiting at the junction of the Adelaide and Margaret Rivers. At sundown on the evening before the overland party was due to leave, the cook was making a pot of tea when a movement on the cliff top overlooking the campsite caught his attention. It was Crisp – but not the Crisp they knew. A victim of heat stress and dehydration, he was hallucinating – imagining himself pursued by an army of Malays led by two chiefs on horseback; had he the strength to do so, he would have fled from his rescuers. By the time the overland party

rejoined the main body at the fork of the Adelaide, Crisp had recovered to such an extent that McKinlay allowed him to retain his place on the expedition. *'I intend taking him on with me'*, he wrote in his diary. *'If the interposition of Providence on this young man's behalf has not a good effect upon him and everyone else that witnessed the deliverance, I cannot imagine what they are composed of.'* (11)

The Adelaide and the Margaret were both running, but not strongly enough to make the crossings hazardous for the animals. Apart from the bogs and the odd running creek there was nothing to impede their easterly progress until they eventually struck the McKinlay.

THE BREAK OUT.

'Our stay here seems as if it was never to end; just as (the ground) is ready to bear our horses, on comes the rain again, the last worse than the first.' (12) The words were McKinlay's: the date was March 26, 1866 – almost six weeks since they were first marooned on the island. They were living on horsemeat and their last bag of gluey ropy flour: but they had been visited by a succession of natives – a sure sign that the country was drying out.

The expedition's health was breaking down; Thring had been laid up for weeks with a painful eye disease; Edmunds had suffered from malaria and earache; most of the men had dysentery brought on by eating the jerked horse flesh. The animals fared no better; horses were dropping dead for no apparent reason, and the sheep were wasting away. The fate of the dogs is not recorded. When it stopped raining the thermometer soared up towards the century mark. The island was devoid of game but they occasionally caught catfish and small perch. Only once in all that time and in the midst of all that water did they catch barramundi and then undoubtedly only by accident. *'Caught three fine fish this morning,'* Edmunds recorded in his diary. *'They are fine eating but apparently difficult to catch, or our men are unfortunate fishers.'* (13) Twice a week they had a modicum of rice and peas. They had originally provisioned for six weeks and they had already been out for eight or nine. The Government schooner *'Beatrice'* was waiting with more rations at Cape Hawkesbury but that was in the estuary of the Liverpool, over 120 miles away – as the crow flies. Only the pests – the flies and the mosquitos – thrived, and of course, the vegetation. Both Edmunds and McKinlay noted the incredible fecundity of the eucalypts; in just a few weeks, trees that had been cut down had innumerable healthy shoots spreading out from the stumps to the extraordinary length of two feet and more.

The visits by the Uwuiynmil began on March 10. The contact pattern was apparently random and innocent but in reality undoubtedly carefully orchestrated. The first visitors were small parties of men and youths, no more than two or three individuals at a time. Next came larger groups of males – men and boys, and finally when friendly relations were assured, the 'yeecan' and the 'dumbetj-dumbetj' – the women and the children. Approaching the camp from the scrub, their first words were always *'ferry goot, ferry goot'* (very good, very good), a practice undoubtedly acquired from the Woolna, the tribal group on the lower Adelaide River, which had clashed so violently with the colonists under Finnis. The Uwuiyunmil were not in the area out of curiosity. The island was the locale of an important sacred site and the clan was assembling for an initiation ceremony, which was duly held somewhere to the west.

Meanwhile the heavy rain had stopped and the creeks had begun to recede. Following a series of inspections of the rapidly drying flats on the western side of the island it was decided to attempt a breakout on the 15th or 16th. The men began to pack. The escape plan involved doubling back on their original track – a quick dash north west across the narrowest part of the valley floor to the spurs of the Mt Bundy Ranges then

southwards and eastwards in a great arc following the foothills of the jumbled ranges past Mt Douglas to the base of the escarpment, just discernable from the hill behind Camp 14 as a hazy blue wall.

On the 14th there was an inch and a half of rain; the creek rose and inundated the flats again. The rain continued intermittently for the next fortnight, prompting McKinlay's despairing comment, '*our stay here seems as it were never to end.*' But end it eventually did.

On March 27, McKinlay returned from the western side of the island with the welcome news that the valley crossing was at last feasible. On that day too, they had their last contact with the Uwuiymil. A family of 8 visited the camp and stayed for a short time. '*They are terribly afraid of the horses,*' Edmunds noted in his diary: and in an uncharacteristic philosophical outburst, went on to say :

Little do these poor savages imagine as they gaze upon us that they have perhaps seen the harbingers of a revolution in the fortunes of their country. If they did, they would not so easily yield to the advance of civilization, before which their savage and rude existence, name and race may pass into oblivion. (14)

Prophetic words. Today the Uwuiymil have indeed passed into oblivion. Their culture survives only in the memory of one ageing matriarch of the neighbouring Warai tribe.

The next day was spent packing and preparing for a start. Edmunds carved his initials and the date on a tree and buried a bottle with a note in it at the base of another. They left on the morning of 29 March 1866 – having been marooned on their island for 44 days.

Three days later they had skirted the vast black soil plain to the south of the island and were in the Ringwood Ranges. From the top of one of the high peaks there they saw, and made a little excursion to, the upper reaches of the Margaret River.

Still on the western side of the McKinlay River they struggled on to the south and east, staying always on the periphery of the high country, seldom venturing far onto the black soil. A contemporary map shows a scattering of McKinlay's place names on either side of their track – names such as Mt McKinlay, Thring's Peak, Edmunds Peak, Mt Robyn etc, which, with one puzzling exception, have all gone the way of the Uwuiymil into oblivion.

The one exception is Horners Creek. Horner was one of McKinlay's hand picked band. There is no Horners Creek on the original McKinlay map but there is a Horners Creek on modern survey maps. A main tributary of the McKinlay, Horners Creek is an extensive watercourse which lies directly across the expedition's line of march. It seems probable therefore that at some stage there was a more detailed map of McKinlay's route and discoveries in general circulation.

Finally, on 13 April, 1866, exactly two months after first sighting the McKinlay, they reached '*a fine stream with steep banks, on the sides of which, grew the finest gum trees (Edmunds) had ever seen.*' (15) This was the McKinlay River. They were in Latitude 13 degrees 28 min 6 sec South. Several days later they reached and crossed the Mary just above its junction with Francis Creek.

Their ordeal was by no means over. For the next seven weeks they were to creep north east, along the base of the rugged Arnhem Land escarpment vainly searching for a way through to the Liverpool and the Roper Rivers.

Finally, in early June, in the general vicinity of Obiri Rock, on the East Alligator River, they would be in such desperate straits that they would slaughter and skin the 28 remaining horses, which were little more than walking skeletons anyway, and use the hides to make a punt in which to undertake a perilous voyage back to Escape Cliffs.

FINDING CAMP 14

The fact that during their long sojourn on the island McKinlay's men were high and dry in what must have been one of the worst Wet seasons ever, suggested to me that any metallic objects which had been lost or discarded should still be there. All I had to do was locate the place.

I began searching the map for significant landmarks such as the creek and the jump up in the vicinity of the McKinlay River and the Latitude recorded by Edmunds for Camp 14 (13.3.05 s). The quality of the modern survey maps is so good that I eventually began to distinguish the topography of the island. The contour lines showed three nodes of rising ground abutting a creek on the eastern side of the island and spread over a distance of several kilometres – all possible locations for the camp site. I decided to concentrate on the northernmost location, which was the one nearest the latitude recorded by Edmunds.

To get to the place, which is on what used to be the easternmost portion of Mt Bundy Station, I enlisted the help of Terry Baldwin. Terry used to own the neighbouring Annaburro Station and still lives in the Mt Bundy area. Terry is intensely interested in the history of the Mary River and its environs.

As luck would have it, Terry was familiar with the unnamed billabong which was a key reference in finding the camp site. On reaching this billabong we began to scrub bash, looking for a ridge in much the same way as F. W. Thring had some 120 years before. Terry eventually saw the ridge through the scrub about half a kilometre ahead; I could see nothing but trees until we were almost on top of it. At the foot of the ridge was a creek – now dry, and in the creek, a spine of rocks, undoubtedly the hard bottom McKinlay had crossed on.

After crossing the creek, I began to search the area with a metal detector; but in the several hours we spent at the site I did not get a single contact. Meanwhile Terry was searching for the two trees marked by Edmunds. In a grove of trees about a 100 metres up the hill he found a piece of flat iron. What eyesight! But that was all we found. No marked trees, no bottle, no fireplaces, no horseshoe nails.

I next visited the site in order to establish its position by satellite navigation with a friend and erstwhile colleague from the N.T. Fisheries Division, Colin David Mellon. On arriving at the site, Col parked his vehicle on the small rise just south of the rocky crossing. On the previous visit I had assumed this southern rise was too close to the creek for a campsite so had ignored it. But... I had no sooner stepped out of the vehicle than the metal detector went mad – registering contacts everywhere.

The bulk of the finds were horseshoe nails, not surprising in view of the fact that McKinlay's original plant comprised 48 horses. But there were also tent pegs, trouser buttons, shirt buttons, brads, screws, and in the vicinity of a large rock which was probably used as a fireplace, a fragment of non-ferrous metal. Two good fixes by a G.P.S. satellite navigator established the position of the camp as 13 degrees 3 minutes

16 seconds South – a difference of 11 seconds or about 250 metres from the position calculated by R. H. Edmunds.

The third time I returned, it was to climb the highest hill (called Providence Hill by McKinlay) about a kilometre and a half south west of the campsite to look for possible trigonometrical markers erected by Edmunds as a baseline for his mileage calculations to distant landmarks. My companion this time was Rob Wesley-Smith. Finding no trig markers, Wes suggested we climb a nearby hill which looked as high as the one we were on, in case that was Edmunds' *'highest hill'*. At the top of that hill, concealed in the chest high grass, we discovered a muduk ring – a large circle of stones used by Aborigines for initiation ceremonies – obviously an important sacred site for the Uwuiynmil, and the place where they were taking the dumbetj-dumbetj (the children), the day they visited McKinlay in his camp.

I had initially begun the search for McKinlay's campsites only for the purpose of assessing the accuracy and impartiality of R. H. Edmunds' diary, as part of my research into the history of the Escape Cliffs settlement. It was not long however before I was addicted to the search. I have since located the general area of Camp 17 in the Ringwood Ranges but have yet to find a cache of those elusive horseshoe nails to pinpoint the actual site. Eventually, I hope to track McKinlay all the way to the East Alligator.

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