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On Reading Patrol Reports – 1: South of the Blucher Range

Peter D. Dwyer and Monica Minnegal
University of Melbourne

ABSTRACT

Reports of patrols through remote areas of Papua and New Guinea led by officers of the Australian administration have much to contribute to understandings of the work entailed in rendering both land and people legible to the colonial state. But these must be read with care. Using the text and maps produced by one patrol, led by John McGregor in 1968, we demonstrate how topographic maps, produced well after particular patrols were undertaken, may be used to both refine interpretations provided in such reports and reveal factors that shaped the knowledge patrol officers produced.

Key words: Papua New Guinea, patrol reports, mapping, knowledge production

INTRODUCTION

Through the years that Australia held administrative oversight in Papua and New Guinea much of the work entailed in promoting the participation of diverse native peoples within the ambit of forms of centralized control fell to young men – patrol officers or kiaps – who often spent long periods at remote outposts with outside contact limited to radio or an occasional visiting aeroplane.¹ These men were charged with curbing outbreaks of war where they occurred, imposing a variety of Western laws where these were both unheard of and often irrelevant, enhancing the health of local people, promoting opportunities for Western forms of education and filling all the expected bureaucratic functions of administrators. In little-known areas they acted as explorers, seeking to meet and learn something of people who had not previously been contacted and always alert to the possibility that valuable resources – geological or biological in origin – might be present in areas they traversed. When on patrol – accompanied by Territory police, local men acting as carriers and, where possible, interpreters – they carried whatever maps were, at that time, available. Often they revised those maps. Certainly, for they were the ‘men on the ground’, they recorded the names and locations of villages and hamlets and the affiliations – by clan, tribe or language – of the people who lived there. Their contributions were enormous.²

Acknowledgements: We thank those who established and made available the University of California at San Diego archive of PNG patrol reports and Laurence Goldman for stimulating discussion. Our own recent research in PNG was supported by Australian Research Council Grant DP120102162.

¹ James Sinclair, *Kiap: Australia's Patrol Officers in Papua New Guinea* (Sydney: Pacific Publications, 1981); Hank Nelson, *Taim bilong masta: The Australian Involvement with Papua New Guinea* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1982).

² Schieffelin and Crittenden's collection of essays about the Hides–O'Malley patrol of 1935 and Gammage's account of the Hagen–Sepik patrol of 1938–9 are outstanding studies of single exploratory patrols. Edward L. Schieffelin and Robert Crittenden, eds, *Like People you see in a Dream: First Contact in Six Papuan Societies*

In early 2016 the University of California San Diego Library, with permission from the Papua New Guinea (PNG) National Archives, provided free access to available patrol reports and associated documentation through the library's Digital Collections website (<http://lib.ucsd.edu/png-patrol-reports>). The collection includes nearly 3000 items from the period 1912 to 1976, with most from the post-World War II era. There are many gaps in the record, arising, for example, from lost reports, failures to retain maps or village census records with reports, and, regrettably, subsequent 'borrowings' by administrators, researchers, landowners and other interested persons. Nevertheless, available reports constitute a major source of information on Papua New Guinea's colonial-era history. Written by the patrol officers themselves, they reveal much about both the colonial 'gaze', in all its complexity, and the work entailed in rendering both land and people legible to the colonial state.

Our particular interest is with early contacts in regions of very low population density and with establishing the whereabouts of people of particular language groups in the years of earliest contact by officers of the Australian government. In regions of this sort, terrain and weather were seldom suited to easy travelling, the variety of languages spoken by the people encountered added to uncertainties in recording observations, and available maps lacked detail and were sometimes wrong. In these circumstances, patrol reports and the maps that accompany them are likely to be subject to error, especially so if they purport to provide accounts of people who have not previously been contacted. Those reports should not be taken literally.

In this, and two forthcoming articles, we examine several reports from the late 1960s and early 1970s that concern people and places in the northeast corner of what was then Western District. In these years, Papua New Guinea was moving towards self-government as a step on the way to independence in 1975. In the lead-up to that transition, the Australian colonial government sought to improve the quality of available maps, ensure that all indigenous groups had been contacted, initiate programs that informed remote peoples of the nature of governance and the part they could play in elections, and progressively train young Papua New Guinea men to assume positions as patrol officers. In this context, both the demands upon patrol officers and the political importance of their reports were heightened.

The information about people and places drawn from patrol reports continues to have social and political relevance today. That information, for example, was used to map 'village' locations for purposes of conducting national censuses. As a result, in the past some communities in the northeast corner of Western District were not censused because recorded places could not be found or had been abandoned, and even now the mapped location of some named places is wrong. In addition, information about people and places that is drawn from patrol reports is now a standard component of the social mapping and landowner identification reports required by the PNG state prior to commencement of many large-scale development projects. Our intent, in this series of articles, is to indicate ways that patrol reports might be more effectively employed in preparing historical accounts.

Here we draw on an excellent report by John McGregor who, from 26 July to 31 August 1968, led a patrol from Olsobip, in the northern mountains of Western District, with

(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Bill Gammage, *The Sky Travellers: Journeys in New Guinea 1938–1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998). Schieffelin's analysis of early contact in the Mount Bosavi area of the Southern Highlands provides valuable perspective on the part local people played in shaping changes that were seemingly initiated by government officers. 'Early Contact as Drama and Manipulation in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea: Pacification as the Structure of the Conjuncture', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37 (1995): 555–80. His analysis has resonances with ours in noting the important role of official interpreters.

the aim of contacting little known groups of people who lived south of the Blucher Range both west and east of the Murray River.³ We show how topographic maps, produced well after that patrol was undertaken, may be used to both refine interpretations provided in McGregor's report and reveal factors that shaped the knowledge the patrol produced.

MCGREGOR'S PATROL

When McGregor left Olsobip on 26 July he was accompanied by four police, a 'Hospital Orderly', a cook, the very experienced and knowledgeable interpreter Imbum Tiape⁴ and, for the first three weeks, the anthropologist Fredrik Barth.⁵ As many as 40 men were employed as carriers, with numbers varying through the course of the patrol, and with a few local men serving as guides and interpreters for parts of the time.⁶

The base map used by McGregor was the 1:250,000 'Blucher Range' sheet published in 1966 by the Royal Australian Survey Corp (RASC).⁷ The map he provided with his report added much detail (Figure 1). The quality of the archived image, however, is low and Figure 2 traces McGregor's route, as he recorded it, on the Blucher Range sheet. From Olsobip, his party travelled south to Kiangabip on the 'Wai Feneng' (Fly River), turned southeast to reach Surprise Creek and, on 3 August, after passing through Sangenanemana, established a camp site at Bou in the watershed of Black River.⁸ Moving north, McGregor's party crossed Black River at the site of Australasian Petroleum Company survey work in 1955,⁹ continued through 'mud flats and thick bush', bridged Minge River and after a 12-hour day made camp near Atemogim in the Donaldson Range, close to the Palmer River.

³ John K. McGregor, Olsobip Patrol no. 1 of 1968/69, 26 Jul.–31 Aug. 1968, National Archives and Public Records Services of Papua New Guinea, Patrol Reports, Western District, Olsobip Station, 1968–69, vol. 5, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb3756281s>

⁴ Imbum Tiape was employed as an interpreter in the Olsobip region for more than 20 years, commencing in 1955 and becoming a permanent public servant in 1965. He contributed greatly to the work and understanding of many patrol officers. In 1988 the officer in charge of the Olsobip station recommended that Imbum be awarded the 'long service medal'.

⁵ Fredrik Barth died in 2016. A year later, after hearing that news, McGregor added a comment to a video that memorialized Barth (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V-hrmGvMZAs>): 'Prof Barth was instrumental in shaping the way I approached things in later life. I was the Government Patrol Officer in PNG when he started studying the Baktomin people. [...] We did a one month initial contact patrol together. [...] I was gently introduced to the study of mankind over the 12 months he was in the area. A fearless investigator and a wonderful mentor for a very immature 22 year old'.

⁶ McGregor took his dog on this patrol but, at one point, it chased a cassowary 'into swamp and disappeared'. Much time was spent searching, but without success. Six weeks later, long after the patrol had been completed, 'who should come trotting back, up the Olsobip airstrip, much to my joy, the dog – a skeleton but nevertheless, alive and fit!'

⁷ Papua New Guinea, Blucher Range, AMS T504, SB 54-7, 1966, 250 000, 1:250,000 (RASC, 1966). <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/115406> (accessed 1 September 2017). Until the late 1970s, representations of the course of the Strickland River north of about 5°45'S were inaccurate. Peter D. Dwyer and Monica Minnegal, 'Captain Everill's Error: Mapping the Upper Strickland River in Papua and New Guinea, 1885–1979', *Journal of Pacific History* 53 (2018): 310–29.

⁸ We have spelled place names as they were spelled by quoted authors.

⁹ J.C. Baker, Kiunga Special Report – A.P.C. Palmer Survey, 23 Mar.–17 Apr. 1955, National Archives and Public Records Services of Papua New Guinea, Patrol Reports, Western District, Kiunga Station, 1953–56, vol. 4, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb8978166s>. The pages of this report are interleaved with those of Kiunga Patrol no. 5 of 1953/54, by G. R. Grey.

Figure 1. Map accompanying John McGregor's report of his 1968 patrol from Olsobip to the Blucher Range.

Figure 2. Portion of the RASC 1966 Blucher Range 1:250,000 map showing McGregor's 1968 recorded patrol route (red dashed line) from Olsobip to the Blucher Range area. To enhance clarity, primary rivers have been highlighted and some river and place names have been enlarged. The location of Baktaman people is indicated. The boxes A and B refer to areas mapped in Figures 3 and 4 respectively. The asterisk at the western margin of Box A marks the approximate latitude at which McGregor actually entered this area.

On 7 August, in heavy rain, McGregor's party back-tracked from Atemogim, turned east before reaching Minge River and then, 'travelling on flats', swung northeast to make camp on the track to Davere. It was on this day that the patrol reached the area south of the Blucher Range where it was planned to make contact with little-known groups. On Figure 2 this area is enclosed as a box – dashed outline – split at longitude 142°E with the western section shown as Figure 3 and the eastern section shown as Figure 4. To the north and in the west of this area there was almost no knowledge of terrain, and in the entire area the map features only one local name (Aukopmin).

Figure 3. A: McGregor's map, redrawn, of an area west of longitude 142°E and south of the Blucher Range; B: the same area taken from Sheet 7286 Pare, 1979, of the PNG 1:100,000 RASC Topographic Survey. McGregor's route, as he depicted it, is shown on both maps as a black dotted line. Likely locations of communities mentioned in McGregor's report are indicated by dashed black circles, and part of the route followed by Patrol Officer Bera on a 1972 patrol is shown as a red dotted line (see below). Place names are capitalized; group names are in lower case.

Davere was a 'very small settlement [...] near the limestone foothills of the Bluchers'. The party purchased, and prepared sago from, two large palms. On 10 August, they moved to Konow where Imbum Tiape recognised a camp site that had been used in 1963 by Patrol Officer Henderson when he was returning to Kiunga from the headwaters of Black River (Figure 3A). From Konow, McGregor's party moved northeast, climbing the Tuar Ridge, passing through Fulito and Diumai and making camp at Lekato. In the course of this day McGregor noted that the dress of men had changed from penis sheath and cane loops at the waist, characteristic of Mountain Ok people, to 'sporrion cloth, rear knee length skirt, shell necklace with mother-of-pearl pendant'. This is the style of dress worn by speakers of East Strickland languages (Konai, Febi, Kubo, etc.).

From Lekato, the patrol moved north to Ng'gum where, on 14 August, they received an airdrop of supplies. They continued on a path to the immediate west of the Murray River gorge, reaching Womiam, where people from Iyayen, east of the Murray, visited and were included in the census. From here Barth returned to his research site among Baktaman while

McGregor, with a ‘small mobile group’ of 25 men, returned to Ng’gum and on 19 August, after strengthening a suspension bridge, crossed the Murray River and ‘proceeded east’ (Figure 4A).

Figure 4. A: McGregor’s map, redrawn, of an area east of longitude 142°00'E and south of the Blucher Range; B: the same area taken from Sheet 7386 Karoma, 1979, of the PNG 1:100,000 RASC Topographic Survey. McGregor’s route, as he depicted it, is shown on both maps as a black dotted line. Likely locations of communities mentioned in McGregor’s report are indicated by dashed black circles. The routes followed by patrol officers Bera and Barclay in 1972 are shown as red and yellow dotted lines respectively, with likely locations of communities mentioned in their reports indicated by dashed circles of the same colours (see below). Place names are capitalized; group names are in lower case.

Several hamlets and garden sites were recorded on the southern slopes of the Blucher Range, with those at the headwaters of Fanar River identified as associated with Mirapmin people and those to the east, nearer the Strickland River, identified as associated with Iadibimin.¹⁰ Other paths were seen but not followed; a large track to the north immediately east of the Murray River suspension bridge and a track heading south from the vicinity of Kokombang to a place named as Wusaro. With Mirapmin people, McGregor recorded 50 words, including five pronouns and 11 kin terms. He correctly attributed these to the ‘Kanai’ [Konai] language.

On 24 August the patrol turned back from Iadibimin, spent one night at Kokom Creek and another at Ng’gum, and in six days, travelling north of the Blucher and Kaban Ranges, reached Olsobip (Figure 2).

¹⁰ ‘Mirapmin’ is sometimes reported as an alternative name for speakers of the Konai language. Its referent is probably a Konai ‘clan’ with the ‘min’ denoting ‘people’, indicative of derivation from an Ok language. ‘Iadibimin’ probably refers to people of the ‘clan’ Iodibi that has branches in both Konai and Kubo language groups.

DISCUSSION

Figures 3B and 4B are extracts from topographic maps that correspond to the areas shown, respectively, as Figures 3A and 4A.¹¹ In comparing the paired maps, there are some unambiguous problems of geography. McGregor's map places Davere at a locus that on the topographic map is more than 1,000 m above sea level (ASL) though his report states that Davere was near the limestone foothills which, on the topographic map, are at less than 100 m ASL (Figure 3). Again, on McGregor's map the Murray River is crossed at a latitude that, on the topographic map, lies north of the gorge but, from the report, it is clear that the crossing was south of the gorge (Figure 3). And, finally, on McGregor's map the Mirapmin hamlets and gardens are shown at the headwaters of Fanar River which is depicted, on the patrol map (Figure 4A), in the report and on the topographic map (Figure 4B), as flowing southeast before swinging to the south. On the patrol map, however, these localities are placed north of 5°36'S; this, as the topographic map shows, would have placed them across a cavernous limestone range at 1200 m ASL and in a watershed where streams drain westward to the Murray River. McGregor did not cross that limestone range or reach that watershed.

It is apparent, therefore, that McGregor's route through the unknown terrain and peoples east of the Palmer River has been displaced several kilometres to the north on the map accompanying his report. As a result, contacted communities were depicted as being at locations where terrain and drainage systems differed greatly from what was actually the case.

These cartographic errors, we assert, can be traced to misjudgements made on a single day and the challenges of way-finding where few landmarks can be seen and the terrain is unknown. On the day he back-tracked from Atemogim and turned east to move toward Davere, McGregor misjudged his position. Through the afternoon of 7 August, the patrol had travelled for four and a half hours in 'very heavy rain' on a 'nonexistant track'. It was not difficult to be confused in these circumstances.¹² As a result, McGregor placed his party north of their actual position (Figure 2) and failed to correct for this error until he was north of the Blucher Range on his way back to Olsobip. McGregor's party thus entered the boxed area of Figure 2 a few kilometres south of the position plotted by him. Indeed, on 12 August at Lekato, McGregor wrote that he was 'still having difficulty in orienting the position of the Patrol on the map and position of groups contacted previously'.

The topographic maps used in Figures 3 and 4 were based on aerial photography from 1973 that was supplemented by information from patrol reports and other sources to as late as 1977. In densely forested regions occupied by low-density populations of shifting cultivators, the maps generated from aerial photographs show areas where forest has been felled to make gardens or establish houses and areas where forest cover has been lost as the result of landslides. The portions of topographic maps presented as Figures 3B and 4B show areas of forest loss that are smaller than 100 m across and often, especially on Figure 4B, buildings are shown within forest clearings. Many areas of forest loss, particularly areas where people

¹¹ Papua New Guinea 1:100,000 Topographic Survey, (Canberra: RASC): (a) Sheet 7286 Pare, printed 1979; (b) Sheet 7386 Karoma, printed 1979. With the exception of Aukopmin, and despite the efforts of McGregor and others, these maps do not name residential sites within the areas shown in Figures 3 and 4. Presumably the cartographers who produced them were unable to derive unambiguous locations from available patrol reports.

¹² Four years later, a patrol led by Leo Bera, again accompanied by interpreter Imbum, was temporarily lost and circled back on its own path when travelling from Atembip (Atemogim) to Daberebip (Davere). Leo A. Bera, Olsobip Patrol no. 1 of 1972/73, 17 Aug.–18 Sept. 1972, National Archives and Public Records Services of Papua New Guinea, Patrol Reports, Western District, Olsobip Station, 1972–73, vol. 9, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb59064698>.

have made a succession of contiguous gardens or areas subject to extensive landslides, may be visible as secondary growth in photographs for a decade or more.

On Figures 3B and 4B we have circled areas that, in the early 1970s, were then current garden clearings, or former garden areas giving way to regrowth, and which by a careful reading of McGregor's report correspond closely to places that he visited and named. The details recorded in the topographic maps make possible a more accurate appreciation of relations between named groups of people and the places where they were met than can be derived directly from the report and accompanying map. McGregor's initial error, on 7 August, was to place his party too far north so that, on his map, he appeared to be at latitudes that were well into the mountains when his text indicated that he was on the flats. At the same time, for several days, he failed to place his party as far to the east as they had actually travelled and, though later he could orient by reference to the Murray River, the course of that river was not marked correctly on the map he carried (Figure 3).

The topographic maps direct attention to areas of regrowth and to houses in places that were not visited by McGregor. On Figure 4B we have circled one area that is about 3 km south of the Mirapmin communities. We think this is more likely to indicate the location of 'Wusaro' than McGregor's suggestion that 'Wusaro' was much further south toward the junction of the Murray and Strickland rivers. At the time of McGregor's patrol, local people commonly expressed ignorance concerning the whereabouts of more distant people, were seldom forthcoming about the presence of neighbours, and were exceptionally discouraging about the quality of trails and distances separating them from those neighbours. At Ng'gum, for example, people asserted that the Murray River was six days' walk to the east and said they knew nothing of groups who might live across that river. When McGregor insisted on travelling in that direction he was guided to a well-used trail that, after an hour and a half, led to a cane bridge that crossed the Murray.

McGregor's patrol was followed by others who traced different routes through the area south of the Blucher Range. Reading reports of these later patrols too, in light of the 1970s topographic maps, enables a fairly comprehensive picture to be constructed of the identity of primary communities in this area at the time.

In 1972, Robin Barclay and Leo Bera led patrols from, respectively, Nomad and Olsobip that visited places and communities in the wedge of country between the Murray and Strickland rivers.¹³ Both patrols had the specific aim of completing the Western District map. Barclay's archived report does not include a map of his route. His party crossed the Strickland River from east to west at a cane bridge to reach a community named Takadui. From another community, Muluwa, two to three hours northwest of Takadui, Barclay obtained 'a clear view of the giant fissure of the Devil's Race'. Guided by depictions of second growth areas on the topographic map, we have marked likely locations of Takadui and Muluwa on Figure 4B. Bera's report made particular reference to a previously uncontacted community of Konai people at Fuetoe but his text did not pinpoint the location.¹⁴

¹³ Robin I. Barclay, Nomad Patrol no. 3 of 1972/73, 6 Jul.–17 Sept. 1972, National Archives and Public Records Services of Papua New Guinea, Patrol Reports, Western District, Nomad Station, 1972–73, vol. 10, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb7817749q>; Leo Bera, Olsobip Patrol Report no. 1 of 1972/73.

¹⁴ Commenting on Bera's two-month long 1972 patrol, K.A. Brown, then commissioner for Western District, noted that Bera was 'probably the first local officer to lead a patrol of this nature and duration' (see Leo Bera, Olsobip Patrol no. 1 of 1972/73). The patrol received press coverage in Australia and beyond. Robert Trumbull, 'Aides for Papua New Guinea Trained', *The New York Times* 15 Apr. 1973: 21; 'First and Last Men Met Talked', <https://www.pngaa.net/Library/Kiap3.html>, accessed 6 Sept. 2017. The map that should accompany Bera's patrol report has been misfiled; in the UCSD collection it is available as pages 18–23 of Olsobip Patrol Reports

An accompanying report noted that, from Fuetoe, the Murray River was crossed to the east at about the latitude at which the Burnett River joined the Strickland (that is, at about 5°46'S).¹⁵¹⁵ After crossing the Murray, Bera's patrol travelled northeast, passed a Barclay campsite near Fanar River and visited the Iadibimin community reported by McGregor. Again, a likely location for the Fuetoe community may be derived from the topographic map (Figure 4B).

Neither the names of localities nor the affiliations of people met there were always accurately recorded by the patrol officers who documented them. Indeed, at times McGregor, Barclay, Bera and others took the names of places to be the names of groups of people or took the latter to be the names of places. Untangling errors of these sorts is not our particular concern here. But in the course of mapping the distributions of people, patrol officers set in train a series of historical connections that continue to shape identity claims more than 50 years later. Sometimes, for example, when most people from one place – say 'X' – relocated to another place, patrol officers retained the name 'X' or identified the new place as 'X2'. Where this happened, those communities assumed a temporal fixity that they did not have and connections were established between places by virtue of the fact that they now shared a name. The practice continues to the present time, but is now initiated by local people themselves who may retain former place names, despite geographic shifts of residence, with the intention of establishing recognition by government officers or company executives. Thus, understanding how communities were first 'placed' by colonizers matters. It is some of the intricacies entailed in this process that we have traced here.

1971–1972 (National Archives and Public Records Services of Papua New Guinea, Patrol Reports, Western District, Olsobip Station, 1971–72, vol. 8, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb6554940w>).

¹⁵ J.W. Ransley, Olsobip Patrol no. 1A of 1972/73, supplementary, 17–27 Aug., 12–18 Sept. 1972, National Archives and Public Records Services of Papua New Guinea, Patrol Reports, Western District, Olsobip Station, 1972–73, vol. 9, <https://library.ucsd.edu/dc/object/bb59064698>.