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Although Glen contributed to the main narratives for chapters one to six, responsibility for the final editing, validating and adding of material rests with the editors.

Catherine Potter, Sarah Moles, Libby Connors, Pam Postle.

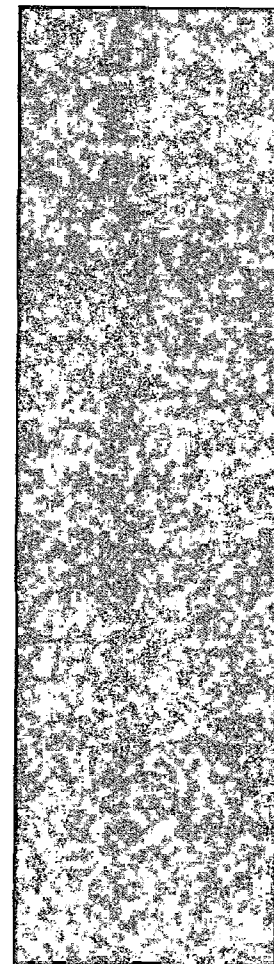
introducing the condamine and its oral history

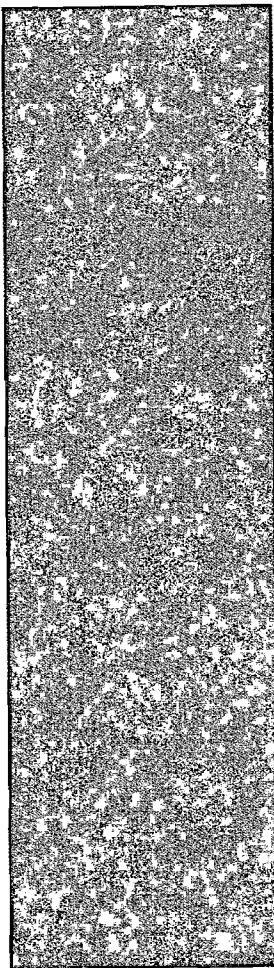
The Condamine – a river system not just a channel

If you have lived in coastal Australia, the geography of Toowoomba is a bit of an enigma when you first arrive. There is no visible water. All of Australia's major cities are located on bodies of water which first drew the European colonisers together. They grew around strong and swift coastal rivers or deep and scenic harbours and bays; even Canberra, although inland, has its artificial Lake Burleigh Griffin at its centre. Yet Toowoomba spreads itself across the escarpment, a town of over 90,000 people without any apparent body of water to unite its people in common need.

Toowoomba is the first sign that the inland hydrology of Australia operates quite differently to its coastal streams. Toowoomba's fresh water lies underground. When Europeans first arrived they found a number of small creeks and large wetlands which were fed and recharged by underground freshwater aquifers. The Europeans soon disturbed and resented "the Swamps" and they were drained and covered over in the nineteenth century.

Toowoomba sits on Gowrie Creek, one small sub-catchment of the Condamine River, but one which behaves in a very similar pattern to the entire river system. Despite its reputation, the Condamine often disappoints coastal visitors. For much of its length it appears as a small creek dwarfed by its vast plains. Other than where it rises in the eastern escarpment, it seeps as much as it flows, through aquifers and wetlands, through myriad small creeks and brooks and soaks, until it reaches its main





channel. Much of its power thus lies hidden to a superficial eye until a sudden downpour reinvigorates it; then the river reclaims its floodplain irrespective of human wishes and plans. Its full power is briefly apparent before it soaks back into the ground or is flushed downstream many hundreds of kilometres to the Balonne and the Darling River systems.

In the last two decades the impacts on the river have increased dramatically and the availability of water has been one of the most contentious issues facing the local economy. Pressures on local water users have been compounded by national concern about the Murray-Darling Basin. Despite its remoteness from the Murray's river mouth in South Australia, the Condamine is one of this national river system's most important northern headwaters.

Although the debate over the Condamine's waters has been a very public one, it has been expressed in the language of economic demands and modern resource management terms. Those unfamiliar with WAMPs, or *E.coli* and turbidity readings¹ have few reference points to appreciate the changes that the river is currently facing.

It was for this reason that Sarah Moles, co-ordinator of the Toowoomba and Region Environment Council, first proposed that we talk to older people who had lived along the river all their life. We needed to find out what these changes really meant in terms of people's actual interaction with and appreciation of the river. In the midst of conflicting scientific and user evidence, she urged us to listen to what older residents knew about the river and its processes.

Origins of the project

Sarah and Kym Witney, the then co-ordinator of the Condamine Catchment Management Association, developed the project. In 1997 an

application for Natural Heritage Trust funding succeeded and a sub-committee comprising Kym and Condamine Catchment Management Association members, Sarah Moles, Pam Postle, and Beth Searle, plus a history specialist from the University of Southern Queensland, was formed. All shared an enthusiastic interest in the river and its history and agreed to form what became known as the 'Listening to our Elders' oral history project.

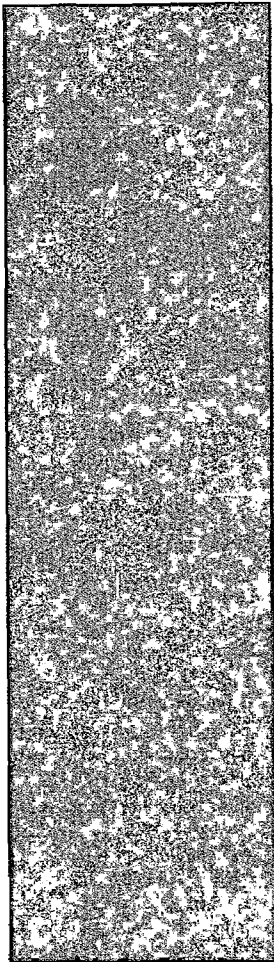
Interviewing began in 1998 but the research did not get underway in earnest until Dr Glen Ross was employed to conduct the interviews in 1999. In that year a new co-ordinator of the Condamine Catchment Management Association was appointed, Catherine Potter, who replaced Kym on the sub-committee and carried the administrative burden and much of the technical knowledge required to bring the project to fruition.

Project method

Owing to the controversy surrounding water pricing and allocation in the late 1990s, there was some debate as to how the project should proceed. The committee decided against a public appeal for interviewees based on a quantitative approach to gathering oral evidence. Instead it was decided to contact a small number of potential interviewees who were known to have a close knowledge of the river. The people who were approached had either lived or worked on the river most of their life, although in retirement some now lived outside the catchment.

Another important qualification was the decision to give priority to the main channel and to use data from the many sub-catchments only to supplement this material. The goal was to seek out locals who could provide evidence about sections of the main river from its source near Killarney to where it ends at the Balonne River near Surat. Again this was

condamine catchment statistics	
Area:	29,150 km ²
Length of river:	approx. 500 km
Population:	approx. 151,000
No. of Local Government Areas:	14
Mean Annual Discharge:	430,000 megalitres
Variability: (measured at Cecil Weir)	
• Maximum discharge:	
1956:	1,700,536 megalitres
• Minimum discharge:	
1986:	5,372 megalitres



largely decided upon to manage the material effectively and to provide the best overview of the basin.

Retirees tended to be much more obliging about giving up their time to speak to us and reminisce. There were those who declined to be interviewed and sometimes family members still working properties along the river were suspicious of a project that wanted to question family members about the river. In the end though it meant we had qualitative evidence about the river from those who had intimate and lifelong knowledge of it.

The nature of oral evidence

Australian historians have debated the usefulness of oral history since the first academic oral histories began to be published in the mid-1970s. It is generally accepted that the strength of oral testimony lies in its personal and emotional immediacy. It is less reliable as a chronological narrative. For the most part people remember dates and events only where they had an immediate impact on their own life. Not surprisingly, World War Two featured as a landmark in the memories of the women interviewed for this project, because it affected either their family arrangements or family contingency plans very directly. For male interviewees either already working the land or looking to a future on the land it was of less significance to their personal memories.

Oral evidence is also regarded as reliable where it can be corroborated by other sources or where many oral testimonies affirm one another and their evidence appears to be internally logical. Many of the issues that emerged from the interviews for this project – the impact of the prickly pear, the spread of the European carp and the removal of willows in the 1970s – are supported in published histories and official documents.

Oral history can contain elements of folklore. One colourful quote was Jim Asbett's recollection of the decline of the death adders in chapter five. Jim's memory and authoritative evidence agree that the eradication of the prickly pear also contributed to declining numbers of death adders. Published research suggests that the death adders suffered from the loss of habitat that the cactus had provided;² this loss was compounded by the cropping and grazing which followed the reclaiming of pear country. Jim's memory was of finding snakes that had devoured cactoblastis larvae and died as a result. It is a good example of an environmental change in the catchment that had a strong personal impact; snakes and an environmental menace combined to produce a new folk element to the prickly pear story.

There were some inconsistencies. Clear examples are the recollections of two women who were both school teachers at Cecil Plains School in the 1950s. Edith Gaggin (nee Houston) was a teacher at the school in the years 1955 to 1957. She was there for the huge flood of 1956 when

Cecil Plains experienced severe flooding ... so for the only time in my life, I was in charge of the school. Numbers were down, as the school bus ... could not go on its usual run.

The new bridge was under water; an army plane dropped some essential items; some homes had floodwaters through them, then when the floods went down, hordes of 'beasties' came out of the mud. Huge sandflies set upon us and part of the daily programme was to dab ointment on the children's sores.³

Edith's recollections are in stark contrast to those of the teacher who

measurements conversion

For the most part the text has retained the imperial measures wherever they were used by informants and documents. The metric equivalents are given below.

Currency

20 shillings = £1 = \$2

Weight

1 pound = 0.453 kilograms

112 pounds = 1

hundredweight

20 hundredweight = 1 ton

= 1.02 tonnes

Distance

39.37 inches = 1 metre

1 mile = 1.61 kilometres

Area

1 acre = 0.405 hectares

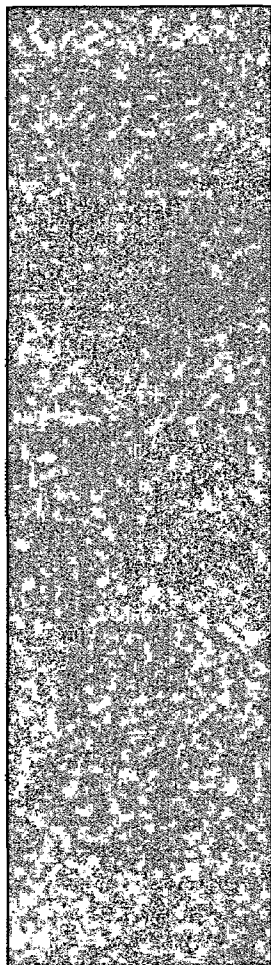
Capacity

1 pint = 0.568 litres

1,000 litres = 1 kilolitre

1,000 kilolitres = 1

megalitre



came after her. Nancy Andrews (nee Hall) was appointed to the school in 1957 and stayed until 1959. She recalled that

It was an education in itself being posted to a country school... I hoped for a place of mountain greenness, of creeklets giggling among ferns. I had never before seen plains duplicated in mirage or haphazard whirlwinds spiralling or kestrels hovering. The Condamine disappointed with spasmodic holes of despondent green slime. The grey inertia of the winter dry of '57 permeated my spirit.

...I stayed long enough to see the river in angry flood or babbling shallows after spring showers... I saw mains power and reticulated water connected to the town and a way of life changed.⁴

Of course these very different descriptions of the Condamine at Cecil Plains are easily explained by the seasonal variations between the flood year of 1956 and later years in that decade.

Less clear-cut are the divergent views in the oral history as to the conditions under which the Condamine's waters run clear. Interviewees from upstream claimed that water quality was best after a 'fresh' in the river when a storm sent down clear water, while those downstream reported that the Condamine was never clear other than during the still winter months when it stopped flowing and sediments settled. Rather than editing out this difference, it was decided that it could represent a reasonable variation between the upper reaches and downstream and was therefore of interest.

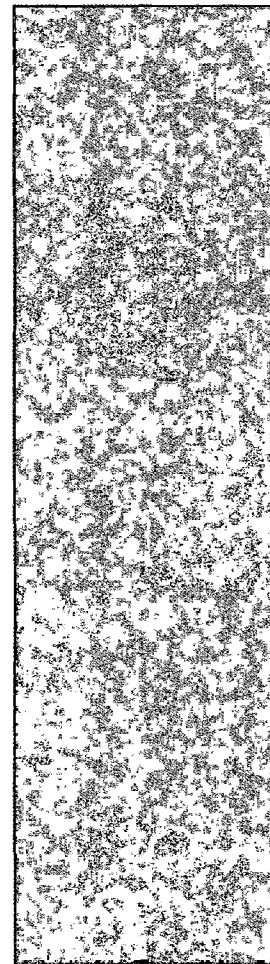
One weakness of the formal interview process is that it relies on a direct question and answer process yet many important reminiscences only surface in communal and informal settings.⁵ An example of this

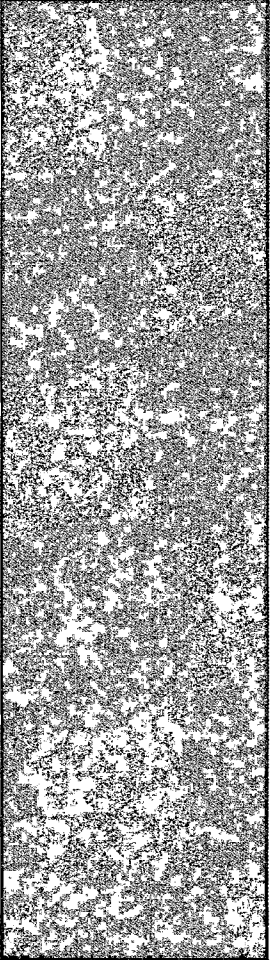


Swimming carnival on Dalrymple Creek, Allora, c.1908. Courtesy: John Oxley Library

took place when interviewing Neil Hutton about his childhood experiences on Charleys Creek. His parents refused to be interviewed insisting that they had nothing to offer. Yet that evening over dinner, after everyone had enjoyed a glass or two of wine, Neil began chatting about his boyhood adventures on the river. Neil's stories triggered memories from his father who added tales about swimming carnivals that had been held in the 1930s at places such as the Round Waterhole and the Green Swamp near Chinchilla. Prompted by these memories other members of the family began recalling picnics and gatherings at these same spots numbering up to 200 people or more. Unfortunately none of this was on tape and the recorded interview was a much briefer and perfunctory account.

For the most part we have let the oral history speak for itself. Details





of family history, personalities and relations that were not directly relevant to the river have been edited but otherwise the concern was to retain the integrity of the interview without editorial interference. Six main interviews were selected as the basis for the chapters. These were augmented with brief excerpts from additional interviews. Where it was felt necessary to explain or add to points made in the oral history, it has been done through the use of documentary and technical information presented in the margins or text boxes. This format was decided on so that there was a clear demarcation between the interview and additional historical material that we hope will be useful.

The bias of the evidence

Although we have selected interviews that we know to be reliable, there are nonetheless biases in the oral evidence that need to be acknowledged. The first is obviously that we selected those who live or have lived on the main reaches of the river. The experiences of other users and townspeople have been incorporated as much as possible through the additional historical material included in each chapter.

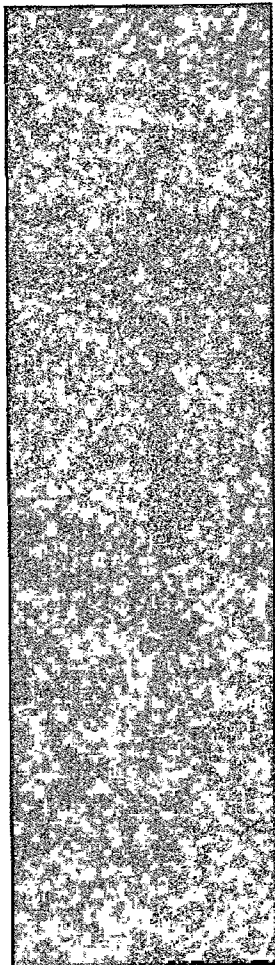
The bias of the main channel and the importance of local histories

There is also the bias of the main channel which we had decided was a priority. We suspect a wealth of additional stories about the many important sub-catchments that make up the Condamine still lie hidden. The sub-catchments are the lifeblood of many localised economies and small towns but could not be covered in this project.

Fortunately there are places such as Lake Broadwater, a large lagoon near Dalby which has a documented history of its community and

recreational function dating back to Aboriginal times. A gathering of 400 to 500 Barunggam, Bigambul, Dalla, Giabal, Jagara and Jarowair people gathered at the lake as late as 1866.⁶ By this time whites had also been using the Broadwater as a camping and water reserve on the stock route heading west for more than twenty years. In 1877, however, the railway was extended from Dalby to Roma. Then, in the drought years of the late nineteenth century the lake went dry and its recreational and public use declined. As with some of the early commons on the southern Darling Downs,⁷ the public lands adjacent to the lake's shores were sold, the reserve was fenced off by its new owners and public access denied.⁸ Although the public had made written objections to the sale in 1901 without success, it was not until 1931 that a community group, the Lake Broadwater Association, was formed and raised enough money to buy a portion of land bordering the lake as a recreation area. For the next forty years the owners refused to sell the blocks adjoining the lake to extend the recreation area. However, in 1978 the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service, under pressure from the Dalby branch of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, was able to purchase the remaining portions surrounding the lake and re-establish the Lake Broadwater Environmental Park as a public space.⁹

How many more waterholes and billabongs of the catchment have such fascinating human histories? How many have been drained and ploughed or silted up and forgotten? The wetlands seem to have lost their significance as recreational space when towns and schools began building public swimming pools in the 1960s, but any thorough investigation was beyond the scope of this book. So, where experiences on the backwaters and streams are pertinent to the story of the catchment as a whole, we have included them in the additional material, rather than weaken the narrative of the main channel.



The bias of the short time frame and the long indigenous past

Perhaps one of the most important biases is the limitation of the short time frame. Our interviewees' recollections go back no earlier than the 1920s although some of the family history derives from the nineteenth century. Yet we know that the unrecorded oral history of the Condamine probably goes back tens of thousands of years.

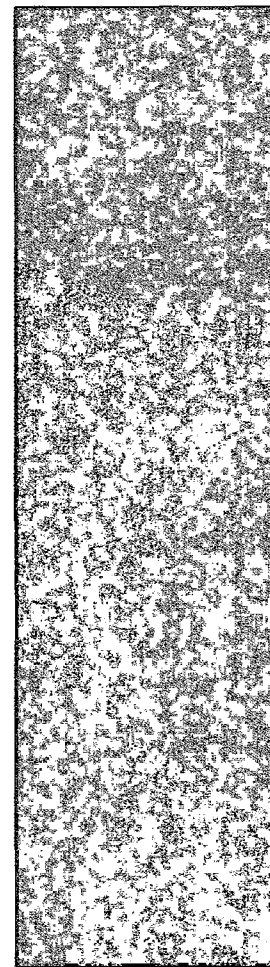
Here too it is fortunate that some fascinating anthropological and local history sources record the depth and richness of the human history of the river. The most important developments for the human relationship with the Condamine River system date to about 10,000 years ago. It was in this period that the indigenous economy of southern Queensland increased in complexity yielding two seasonal surpluses which provided the southern clans with a rich regional economy. The annual winter mullet harvests of Moreton Bay and the triennial bumper crop of bunya nuts in the northern sub-catchments of the Condamine linked the inland residents of the Condamine plains to the coastal residents via trade and, as a result, via marriage and ceremonial networks as well.¹⁰

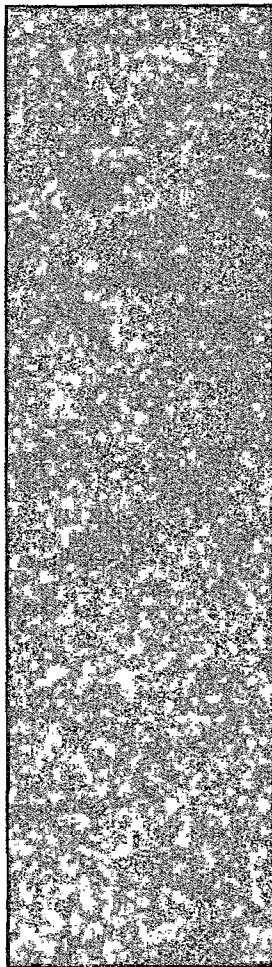
It is the regular gatherings of clans from a radius of many hundreds of kilometers on their way to the Bunya festivals that provide some of the most telling evidence of the fertility and productivity of the Condamine. Hundreds of visitors periodically gathered on the Gowrie Creek wetlands, Myall Creek sub-catchment and near Warwick, en route to the Bunya Mountains to the north.¹¹ The catchment was rich in fish, fresh water turtles, shell fish and waterfowl. The thick heavy bark of the River Red Gums (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) which overhung the stream banks provided materials for fashioning shields and canoes. In the shallow margins of the billabongs, grew the Nardoo (*Marsilea drummondii*) which was ground to

make pancakes. Native millet and seeds of the Weeping Pittosporum (*Pittosporum phylliraeoides*) were pounded to make flour. The bulbs of the Native Leek (*Bulbinopsis bulbosa*) and water lilies (*Nymphoides crenata*) were staple vegetables – one early European described the river rush native to Gowrie Creek as “quite equal to asparagus.”¹² In the margins of creeks and waterholes grew Ruby Saltbush (*Enchylaena tomentosa*), the native Lime Bush (*Eremocitrus glauca*), Amulla (*Myoporum debile*), and Sandalwood (*Santalum lanceolatum*) whose fruits were gathered.¹³

As well as a rich source of food the waters of the catchment provided mat rushes used for basket making and vines and inner bark fibres that were manufactured into twines for fishing-lines and for weaving fish nets and carry bags. The resins of the White Cypress Pine (*Callitris columellaris*) and the Beefwood (*Grevillea striata*) were used to cement weapons.

It is perhaps the pharmacopoeia that the clans developed from the basin's botanical resources that is most impressive for its diversity and multiple resource use. Joan Cribb lists seventeen different plants found near Lake Broadwater known to have been used by the Australians for medicinal purposes. They include lotions for bathing wounds, purges for treating diarrhea and stomach upsets, decoctions that were drunk for colds and headaches, nectar taken for coughs and a latex used for snake bites. At least two plants, Fairy Petticoat (*Evolvulus alsinoides*) and Bunch Speargrass (*Heteropogon contortus*) were chewed as narcotics for pain relief. The Quinine Berry (*Petalostigma pubescens*) was used in one form to treat toothache and in another form as a poison to catch fish – a function it shared with the Native Indigo (*Indigofera australis*.) Similarly, the charcoal from Beefwood was used to dress wounds – a second use for that timber – and among Sandalwood's many advantages was its use as a mosquito repellent, a considerable factor when camping by wetlands.





The river mud was also used medicinally; Harold Hall has related the story of Barunggam women digging deep into the sides of the creek to get clean clay to dress a tomahawk wound which in due course healed.¹⁴ Thomas Hall also related a remarkable story of the river's healing powers in his history published in the early 1920s. In the modesty of the period, Hall refused to name the disease which two young Kitabal (or possibly Keinjan) men in the 1860s were suffering from. However, his moral condemnation and reaction that it 'made me think little of my race' and that 'the tribe had no previous knowledge of the disease or how to treat it,' implies that it was a venereal disease introduced by the Europeans. Hall claims that the two men used to lie in the waters of the 'Coal Hole', a pool on Farm Creek, which he said

was so named because a large seam of coal appeared to form the bottom and walls of the spot and an everlasting stream of water trickled from the coal seam into the pool.

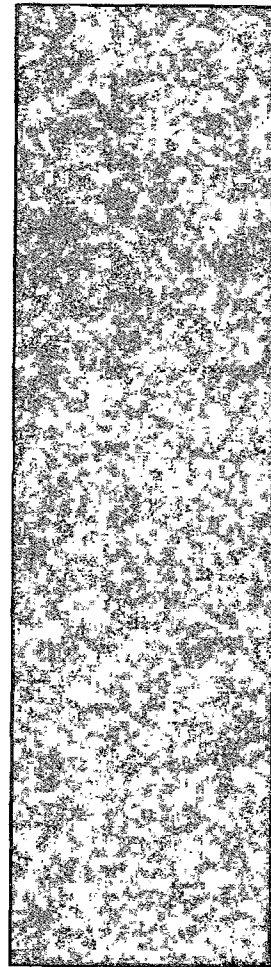
By lying in the waters for hours at a time and with no other treatment, Hall avows that they were eventually cured. The waterhole no longer exists – it became the Tannymorel Coal Mine.¹⁵

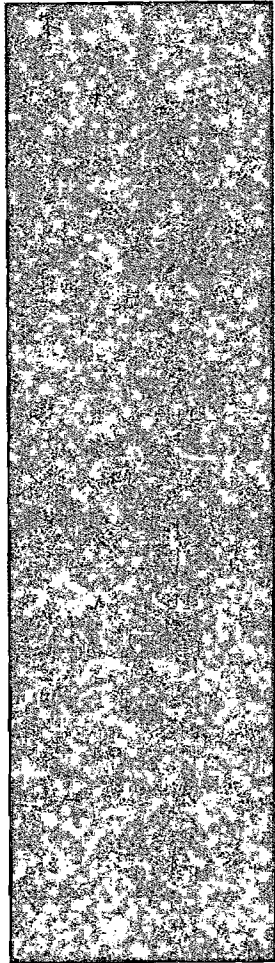
Not surprisingly then, the waters of the Condamine basin had mystical significance for the clans who lived within it. The Barunggam believed that the Great or Rainbow Serpent, or *Gaiwar* in their language, had carved out the rivers, creeks and lakes as it journeyed across the earth in the Dreamtime.¹⁶ According to J.G. Steele the Kitabal called the Rainbow serpent *Mochel Mochel* and believed that it lived in one of the pools of the Condamine River near Warwick.¹⁷ Hall, however, describes the *Mochel Mochel* as a figure of evil and danger to the Kitabal and claims

to have glimpsed it as it passed from one pool to another in the 1860s. He claimed it had fur like a platypus but was larger and had a head like the back of a bald human head. The local clan believed that it dwelt only in deep permanent waterholes where it ate all the fish and could see and hear and scream under water. They refused to swim or camp near *Mochel Mochel* waterholes and Hall tells the story of how a Kitabal hunting party came across him and his brother enjoying a swim in the Condamine near Canning Downs station. The Kitabal elder anxiously ordered them out of the water as it was a haunt of the *Mochel Mochel*.¹⁸

The Kitabal also had strict rules governing bathing in the river – the genders were segregated and allocated separate times. There were also pools used in initiation ceremonies that were out of bounds to the opposite sex. The male initiation rite, which lasted several days, ended with a ceremony based on the immersion of the youths in a waterhole and a final test to determine their worthiness for adulthood. J.G. Steele details several waterholes that were mystical sites for the Kitabal in New South Wales while Hazel Mackellar names lagoons that were sacred to the Mandandanji and Kunja in the western Queensland rivers of the Darling. Further west there is evidence of billabongs and wells which were places of secret knowledge which totem bearers had to protect on pain of death.¹⁹ While this may be an obvious feature of the more arid regions, drought had to be guarded against on the Condamine too. Here the clans constructed wells and also used the roots of the Angophora and the Kurrajong (*Brachychiton populneus*) as sources of water in dry times. Water was also made portable with water bottles manufactured from wallaby skins which were tanned using the leaves of the Berrigan (*Eremophila longifolia*).²⁰

Indigenous oral history of the river continues to this day. Although





after the frontier period, the colonial government forcibly moved the indigenous peoples of the area to missions and reserves at places such as Taroom and Cherbourg, some families remained in the area and continued to work on stations near Dalby and Condamine. Jarowair and Barunggam people still live in the catchment and many families from the southern clan groups have returned to the area in the 1980s and 1990s.

Outline of the book

The pattern of the book then, is somewhat like the nature of the river itself, with a precise narrative structuring each chapter but brief insights into the many other layers of human and natural history which point to additional channels, byways and anabranches that in this text, unfortunately, remain under-explored.

Chapter One, The Head, explores the reaches of the river where it rises in the mountains near Killarney. Here attempts to modify the river to suit European values and images were most apparent with ambitious trout ponds to introduce exotic fish and birds for sport, logging of the mountain forests and widespread planting of willows. It is based on an interview with the Bloomfield sisters whose lives were closely intertwined with developments in this section of the river.

Chapter Two, Globe Farm, covers the reach near Warwick, the site of the earliest European settlement of the basin. One of the themes which surfaces in this chapter is the connection between ground and surface waters and we see the changes to the river through the eyes of two brothers whose family, the Nicholls, has farmed in the area since the 1870s.

The geographic focus of Chapter Three, Three Oaks, is the river's famous anabranch, the North Branch. It covers the disruptions to the floodplain and to the natural flows of the main channel. It is based on an

interview with Bill Neale whose family also farmed in the region for most of the twentieth century.

Chapter Four, Pine Grove, brings us to the Cecil Plains reach of the river. Cathy Cosgrove's reminiscences recall the love of fishing that many Condamine families enjoyed so this chapter looks at impacts on fish and the riverine environment.

Chapter Five, Apsley Meadow, takes us downstream to the lower Condamine near Chinchilla where Bill Mann recalls the importance of the river for transporting cream and produce during the 1950s. For many years he has operated the boat for emergencies during flooding and he reflects on the clearing of brigalow and its effect on the river's increased silt load since the 1940s.

The recollections of father and son, Leo and Daniel Bishop who graze cattle on their property, Riverlea, is the basis of Chapter Six. Riverlea covers the lowest reach of the Condamine before it becomes the Balonne near the town of Surat. As end users of the system, the Bishops are able to give an account of how the combined practices of all the higher reaches affect them and the changes in water quality that they have noticed over two generations.

The last chapter, Policy and Practice, attempts to put this oral history in a government policy context. It discusses the political idealism that influenced official policy-making for the catchment for over one hundred years and how these policies shaped the environment in which these communities grew and developed.

"How do we love the land?" Dr John Williams, the deputy chief of CSIRO's Land and Water Resources, asked those gathered in Dalby for the Queensland Conservation Group's annual state conference in May 2000. He went on to discuss the inextricable connection of the land to the water

resource. So loving the land is interwoven with loving the river systems that nourish it.

Here are some examples of how Condamine catchment dwellers love their river.

the head

The Great Dividing Range draws a line between the coastal rivers that feed into the Pacific Ocean and the beginning of the Condamine and, ultimately, the longest river system in Australia.

The indigenous inhabitants of the area were the Keinjan and Kitabal people, who were often united under the European designation of 'The Canning Downs' or 'Blucher' tribe. Both the Keinjan and Kitabal people focused on the Condamine River as an important source of water and food and as a site where a range of materials necessary for their existence could be found. They looked to the river for foods such as the river rush, its range of fishes and shellfish, and the large hardwoods lining its banks were used for making canoes and other tools.

