

**‘PLENTY OF OPAL BACK THEN: OPAL
PULKAH’: A HISTORY OF ABORIGINAL
ENGAGEMENT IN THE NORTHERN SOUTH
AUSTRALIAN OPAL INDUSTRY c.1940–1980**

Mike Harding, BA, BA (Hons) (Anthropology), BA (Hons) (History)



Jacqueline Hick: *Opal Miners*, c.1965, oil on composite board, 59.5 cm x 114 cm; University of Adelaide Visual Art Collection; image used with permission from Jacqueline Hick's family; photograph by Peter Hoare.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role of Aboriginal people in the northern South Australian opal industry, in particular the Andamooka and Coober Pedy fields, from 1940 to 1980, and the distinctive nature of their participation. It explores an aspect of Aboriginal engagement in the economy that has not been examined in a scholarly way, making considerable use of oral testimony. This thesis also highlights the agency of Aboriginal people, who participated in the industry while also maintaining cultural continuity in an era when the official government policy of ‘assimilation’ was in full swing. The small-scale and informal nature of the opal industry attracted Aboriginal people because of the level of workplace autonomy it provided, and how it accommodated important economic, social and cultural practices.

The opal industry shared a number of similarities with the northern pastoral industry, a large employer of Aboriginal labour which also accommodated significant cultural practices and so provides a useful comparative framework throughout the thesis. In addition, there was considerable movement of Aboriginal people between both industries. Using the ‘hybrid economy’ model, which demonstrates how Aboriginal people in remote Australia participated in the market, public and traditional customary economies, this thesis argues that Aboriginal people were able to participate actively in the South Australian opal industry in a variety of meaningful and skilled occupations, often in trying conditions that required patience and determination. At the same time Aboriginal opal miners vigorously maintained important aspects of their traditional economic, social and cultural lives, which the industry readily accommodated.

Recognising the significant engagement of Aboriginal people in the opal industry and an emerging Aboriginal opal community, the state government intervened in several ways to assist. These activities included assisting Aboriginal people attain fair prices for their opal, and some basic accommodation and welfare services. The level of this assistance varied considerably on both major opal fields, and this thesis examines the extent of this and longer term implications. The opal industry provided many Aboriginal people with a regular source of income for many years, but by the 1970s, their engagement began to dwindle. A number of factors contributed to this, including declining levels of opal production, new technology driven by increasing fuel prices and the extension of unemployment benefits to Aboriginal people in remote areas.

DECLARATION

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide, and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------------|--|
| AAB | Aboriginal Affairs Board |
| AARD | Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division |
| ABC | Australian Broadcasting Commission |
| ALT | Aboriginal Lands Trust |
| APA | Andamooka Progress Association |
| APB | Aborigines Protection Board |
| APY | Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara |
| CPHS | Coober Pedy Historical Society |
| DAA | Department of Aboriginal Affairs |
| DCW | Department of Community Welfare |
| DME | Department of Mines and Energy |
| <i>DMERB</i> | <i>Department of Mines and Energy Report Book</i> |
| DMGG | Director of Mines and Government Geologist |
| ELCA | Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia |
| EWSD | Engineering and Water Supply Department |
| GRG | Government Record Group |
| GRS | Government Record Series |
| LA | Lutheran Archives |
| LRWE | Long Range Weapons Establishment |
| NAA | National Archives of Australia |
| PSPP | Precious Stones Prospecting Permit |
| RCBNTA | Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia |
| <i>SAGG</i> | <i>South Australian Government Gazette</i> |
| SAM | South Australian Museum |
| SANTS | South Australian Native Title Services |
| SAPD | South Australian Police Department |
| <i>SAPP</i> | <i>South Australian Parliamentary Papers</i> |
| SLSA | State Library of South Australia |
| SRSA | State Records of South Australia |
| WPA | Woomera Prohibited Area |

CONVERSIONS

Before 1966 Australian currency was measured in Australian pounds (£), shillings (s) and pence (d). There were 12 pence in one shilling, and 20 shillings in one pound. When Australia changed to decimal currency in 1966, £1 was equal to 2 dollars (\$).

Australia used the imperial system of measurements until 1971 when the process of metrification began. Measurements are given in either imperial measures or metric measures, depending on the time they were made. Conversions are as follows:

Length

1 foot = 30.5 centimetres

1 mile = 1.61 kilometres

Area

1 square mile = 2.59 square kilometres

Weight

1 lb (pound) = 0.45 kilograms

1 oz (ounce) = 28.35 grams

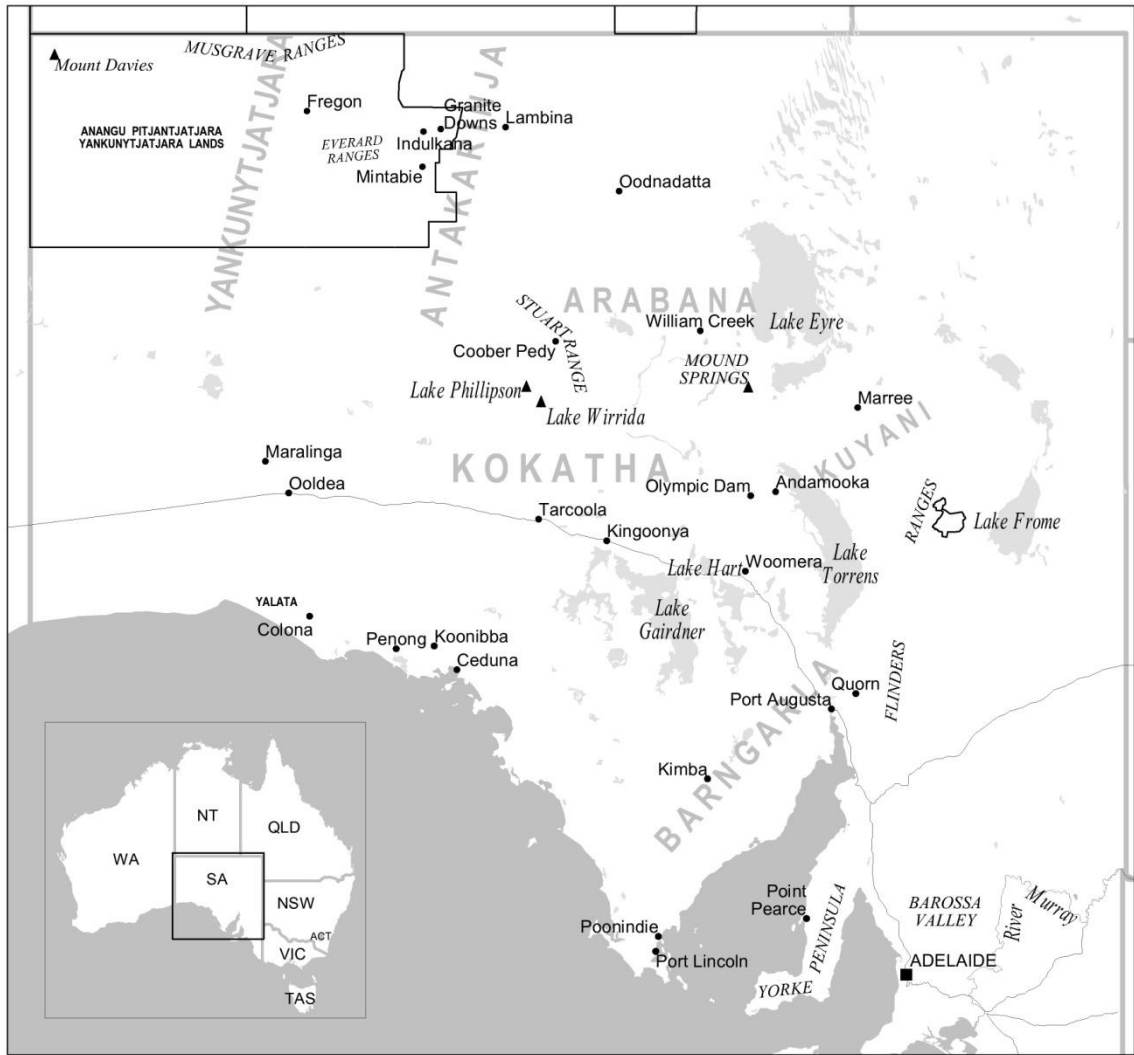
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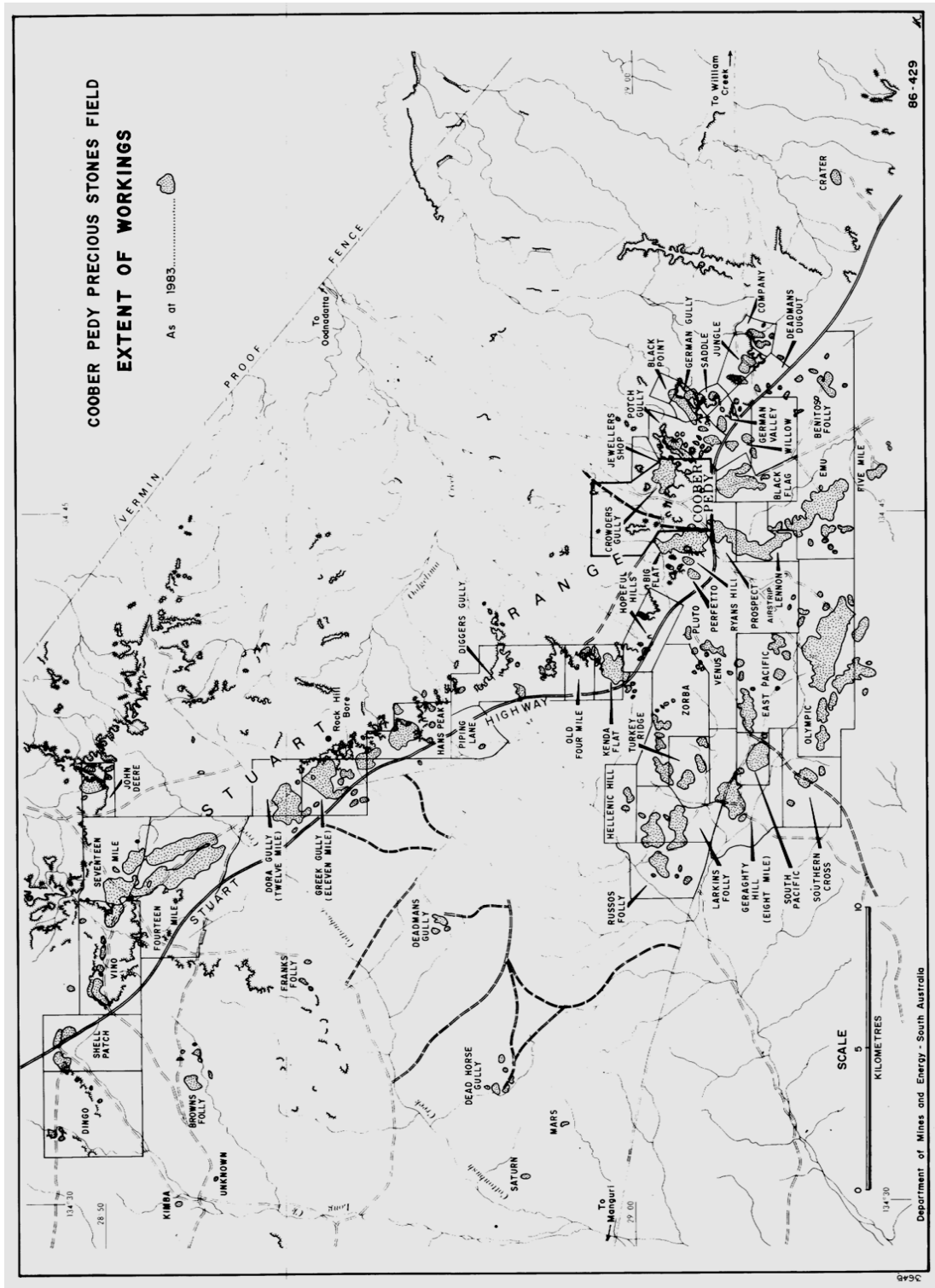
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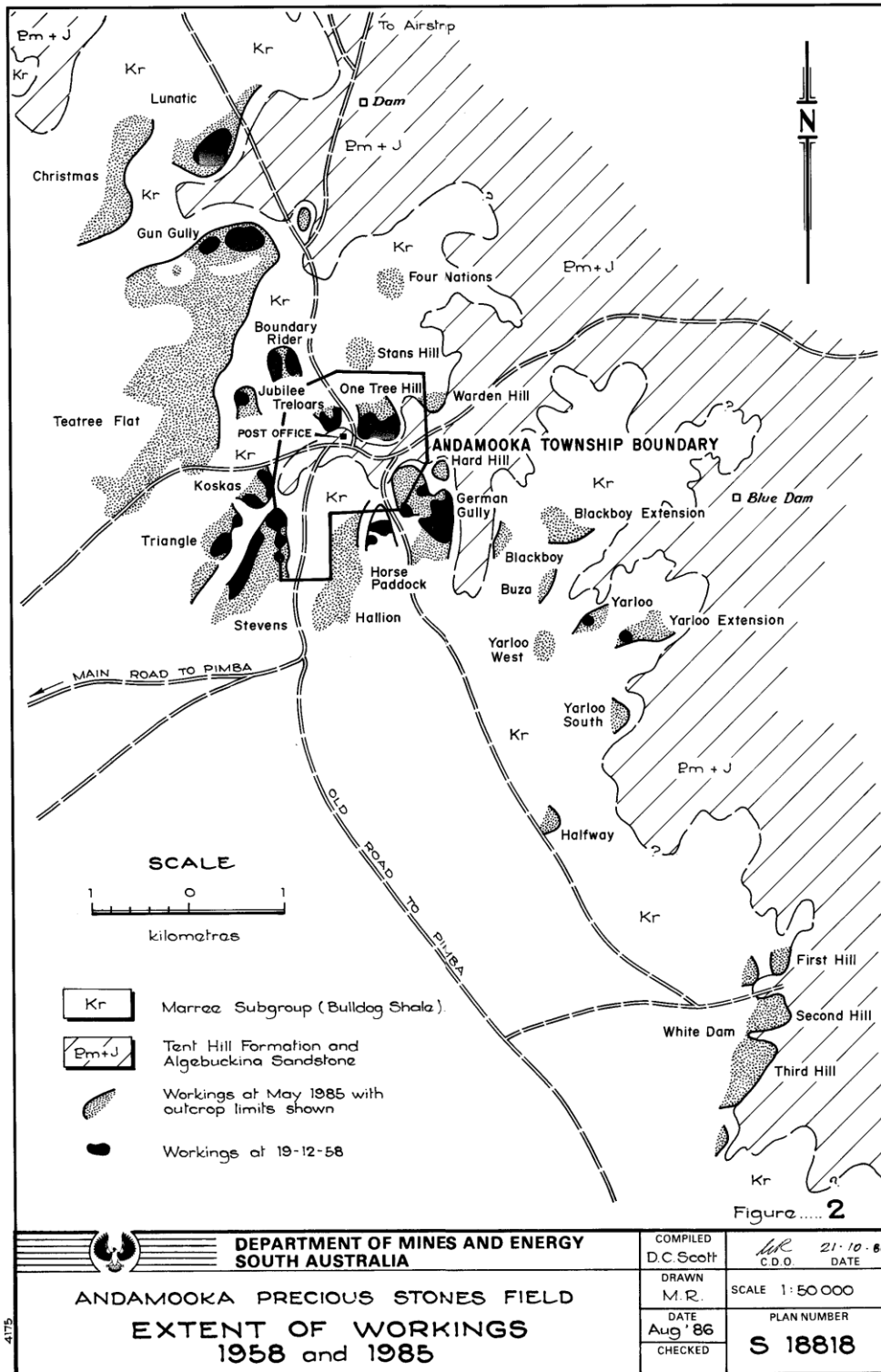
Map One: Principal places referred to in this thesis and location of Aboriginal groups in the Andamooka–Cooper Pedy Region. CartoTech Services.



Map Two: Opal fields in South Australia. Department of State Development, South Australia.



Map Three: Coober Pedy precious stones field. Department of State Development, South Australia.



Map Four: Andamooka precious stones field. Department of State Development, South Australia.



Map Five: Pastoral leases in the Andamooka–Cooper Pedy Region. CartoTech Services.