

George Dunderdale and the Kurnai

By Peter Gardner

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Introduction

The two short essays following were based on George Dunderdale's *Book of the Bush* and written about 2004. (1) They were written firstly to examine the veracity of the Dunderdale record and secondly to look at all the records in the book that directly referred to the Kurnai of Gippsland. These essays confirm both Dunderdale as a reliable, if not primary, source and the general frontier conflict in Gippsland. They are published for the first time online with minor changes and additions.

1.

I have recently come back to a detailed examination of Dunderdale's *Book of the Bush* after thirty years. I was compelled to do so when following up Ray Scott's folk account of the Hollands Landing massacre to see how and when and if the story would fit into the scheme of things. (2) In particular I was after details of the McMillan boat exploration on the Gippsland Lakes in 1842/3 and references to the Clonmel cannon. When I had re-read the whole section on Gippsland (the last third of the book) I began to look on Dunderdale's frequent comments on local Aborigines with renewed interest. Of the large number of comments and observations he made on the Kurnai a number I have selectively used previously in my work but with little or no analysis. Others I have previously ignored. What follows is a listing of all the references to Aborigines in the Gippsland section of the book with comments.

p.197-8 reference to the white woman and 'wild natives', 'savages'

p.199 first attack on McMillan

p. 200 a)"the country was too good to be occupied solely by savages" b) reference to 'Friday' a member of the Jaitmathang or Omeo tribe.

p.201 a reference to the "nine pounder on wheels" at the Port Albert store and other defences against the "blacks". This was one of the Clonmel's cannon.

p.203 Brodribb and Hobson party with "four Port Phillip blacks" were attacked by "Western Port blacks near River Tarwin". It is possible that this attacking party was Kurnai as it would have occurred in the extreme west of the then Kurnai occupied lands. The "Port Phillip blacks" were either Bunurong or Wurundjeri and spoke the same language - eastern Kulin. Because of this it seems unlikely that the attackers were Bunurong or "Western Port blacks". The location of the tribal boundary and of a so-called 'debatable land' remains in dispute.

p.205 "The wild blacks were very troublesome; they killed three whitemen at Murdering Creek.." There are other references on this page to Aborigines outside Gippsland. With regards the location of Murdering Creek I used this source in a table in *Gippsland Massacres* p.32 but this is incorrect as it refers to a stream in the Ararat district.

p.206-8 an account of an attack on fisherman by Aborigines near Port Albert with no casualties on either side.

p.212 three Aborigines sighted at Sealers Cove by the Clonmel rescue party. An account in the Port Phillip Guardian stated the "boat left the wreck on Sunday morning, and the same night put in to Sealers Cove, where they fell in with a strong party of blacks, whose threatening motions speedily convinced them..." to continue in the boat. (3) A Mr. Simpson, who was in the boat "observed the natives coming down upon us." (4)

pp.213-8 an account of an attack on the camp of the Clonmel salvage party on Snake Island (5) where 2 Europeans and a negro cook were assaulted and clothes and other items stolen. The attackers were tracked by three armed men who then shot 3 Aborigines dead from their ambush. "Next day there was a sudden alarm in the camp at the Old Port". About 40 natives in ochre demonstrated at the Port and the cannon, loaded with "broken glass and a handful of nails", was fired "over their heads" to disperse them. I have not used this account before.

p.221 "each man carrying his double barrelled gun, ready loaded, in his hand. By this time the sight of a gun was sufficient warning to the blackfellows to keep at a safe distance". Not used before. This is evidence of the general strife and conflict.

p.224 an account of the murder of Donald (Ronald) Macalister. Note the minor variation in name which was possibly deliberate. I have written about this murder and the subsequent massacre at Warrigal Creek extensively elsewhere.

p.225 an account of the retaliation at Gammon Creek resulting in the deaths of sixty 'natives'. This is most likely a reference to the Warrigal Creek massacre. However it is possible that it is a reference confusing Warrigal Creek with a smaller affray afterwards that occurred at this location.

p.230 "The blacks at this time were very troublesome about the new stations." There follows a detailed account of John Campbell of Glencoe using a deerhound to keep the 'natives' off his run. After lending his dog to neighbour John Curlewis the potatoes from his own garden were "bandicooted".

p.231 Long account of the boat journey on the Lakes probably in 1842 made up of a party of Squatters including McMillan, McLennan and Sheridan Odell Raymond's overseer. Davy Fermaner was sailor amongst them. "Whenever they approached either shore they saw natives or traces of them." Interestingly wood was hard to get around the lakes edge as it was used in the native fires and this is indicative of a large Kurnai population around the lakes. Also this page has a long and detailed account of how Aboriginal women "captured ducks".

p.232-3 the boat journey. A party of Aborigines was observed, one had lost an eye, another was a "white-fellow": "from this the rumour spread through the country that the blacks had a white woman living with them, the result being that for a long time the blackfellows were hunted and harassed continually by parties of armed men." Sheridan played his flute to this group who at first ran away and then listened from a distance.

p.233 boat journey. a) 2-3 miles westward of the above incident they put ashore again where 7-8 men were seen. Then "several of them were seized and held by the white men, who gave them some sugar and let them go." b) at McLennan's Straits, hundreds of blackfellows were observed shouting and shaking their spears. This was obviously a hostile encounter with a large group. c) the boat party camped at Boney Point whose "name (was) given to it on account of the large quantity of human bones found there." This is almost certainly the site of the first massacre to occur in Gippsland.

p.237 A general account of Aborigines killing stock. Also contains the account of Sandy McBean and the 'age of whitewash', a statement I have used previously in *Gippsland Massacres*. The true identity of this individual is unknown but he was almost certainly of Scottish origins. b) An account by J.P. Fawcner of the military (native police?) killing 'blacks' in the Port Phillip district.

p.237-8 Has the account of the census taken by Latrobe on numbers of Europeans and Aborigines killed in the Port Phillip district since settlement - 40 Europeans and 113 Aborigines. Latrobe added " '...but the return must not be looked upon as correct with respect to the number of Aborigines killed.' The reason is plain. When a white man murdered a few blacks it was not likely that he would put his head in the hangmans noose by making a formal report of his exploit to Mr. Latrobe. All the surviving blackfellow could say was: 'Quamby dead - long time - white fellow-plenty-shoot 'em.'" The returns were taken in 1844 and most likely do not include Gippsland.

p.244-6 Contains an account of the trial of Aborigines who killed a Port Fairy Aborigine at Fyansford

p.261 Notes the arrival of C.J. Tyers at Port Albert with black police

p.265-6 "The blacks were still troublesome, and I heard Mr Tyers relate the measures taken by himself and his native police to suppress their irregularities. He was informed that some cattle had been speared, and he rode away with his force to investigate." On this occasion two Aborigines were mortally wounded by the native police.

p.266 A general account of the killing: "This manner of dealing with the native difficulty was adopted in the early days, and is still used under the name of 'punitive expeditions'... The mercy accorded them was less than Jedburgh justice: they were shot first, and not even tried afterwards." (6)

p.267 contains a) an account of the black police who "considered themselves living amongst hostile tribes in respect of whom they had a double duty to perform, viz. to track cattle spears at the order of their chief, and on their own account to shoot as many of their

enemies as they could conveniently approach." b) an account of a boat trip with Tyers. Whilst searching the shore for firewood they observed a pile of brushwood. "But when it (the boat) neared the land the air was filled with a stench so horrible that Mr. Tyers at once put the boat about, and went away in another direction. Next day he visited the spot with his police, and he found the dead wood covered a large pile of the corpses of the natives shot by his own black troopers, and he directed then to make it a holocaust."

p.267-8 contains the general statement about the whitemans' gift to the black of "rum, bullets and blankets"

p.268. contains a) comment on the journey of George Augustus Robinson who was at Alberton in April 1844. Generally the role of the protectors was not approved of by the populace. b) the general comment that "When a race of men is exterminated somebody ought to bear the blame, and the easiest way is to lay the fault at the door of the dead: they never reply."

p.268-9 A general story of blanket hand-outs - how they were not waterproof like possum skin rugs and the people contracted colds, pneumonia etc. "When every blackfellow in South Gippsland, except old Darriman, was dead, Mr Tyers explained his experience with the Government blankets" and "Mr Tyers was of the opinion that more blacks were killed by blankets than by rum or bullets." Note specifically the demise of the South Gippsland people, the Brataulung recorded in detail by me and others elsewhere. Tyers' role as a vacillator can be seen elsewhere.

p.271-2 an account of an Aboriginal raid on Rabbit Island where the sealers hut was burned down and their potatoes stolen. It is notable for an open sea journey of about two kilometres each way from the nearest land on Wilsons Promontory.

p.277-8 account of 'No-good damper swamp' near Caulfield where Aborigines were fed poisoned damper

p.281 "...she conquered all the blackfellows around her land with her own right arm. At first she was kind to them, but they soon became troublesome, wanted too much flour, sugar and beef, and refused to go away when she ordered them to do so. Without another word she took down her stockwhip, went to the stable, and saddled her horse. Then she rounded up the blackfellows like a mob of cattle and started them. If they tried to break away, or to hide themselves among the scrub, or behind tussocks, she cut pieces out of their hides with her whip. Then she headed them for the Ninety-mile Beach, and landed them in the Pacific without the loss of a man. In that way she settled the native difficulty." This quote is about Mrs Buntine who was a very early resident in Gippsland and reputedly gave birth to the first European child in the district. When such an event took place is hard to determine but just possibly very early before all the hostilities over the Macalister murder and Warrigal Creek. Alternatively it could have been late 1840s when the numbers of Kurnai in south Gippsland had been subjugated and substantially reduced. There is a similar incident in the diary of Patrick Coady Buckley.

The total number of references to Aborigines in the Gippsland section is 34. Of these 28 refer to the Kurnai and only 6 refer to Aborigines outside the district. Of those referring to Gippsland 22 clearly state, or imply, a condition of hostility. Whilst the chronology for some of this is not always accurate it is precise on many occasions. There also may be some doubt of the reliability with regards some locations mentioned and the events that occurred at them but others as for instance McLennan's Straits are very specific. A brief account of the reliability and accuracy of Dunderdale follows.

2. The Reliability of Dunderdale

In an article entitled "The Two Shepherds: the reliability of George Dunderdale, Senior" (7) J.R. Carroll examined in detail the credibility and accuracy of George Dunderdale's *Book of the Bush*. Prior to this pioneering essay Dunderdale had been considered at best unreliable, and at worst fictitious. A.W. Greig had noted:

"Unfortunately his aims were literary rather than historical, and a critical examination of his statements proves that many of them are unreliable and misleading. I am therefore reluctantly compelled to warn students against accepting his readable and interesting narratives as serious contributions to the history of Gippsland."(8)

Carroll discovered the article by Greig after he had done his work on Dunderdale and then included it in his footnotes. He noted that "It is fortunate that this footnote was not indexed. Without the knowledge of the other facts, Greig's conclusions might have caused me to treat Dunderdale less seriously."(9)

It is difficult to do justice to Carroll's meticulous research and I refer interested readers to the full article. Amongst other things Carroll took what appeared to be an entirely fictitious account about the fantastic story of the 'two shepherds' and proceeded to establish that the story was not only based on a true story but with seven exceptions 'of relative unimportance' out of one hundred and twenty verifiable 'facts' the story complied exactly with the trial evidence. Moreover Carroll noted "important portions of the conversations - which could well have been wholly supplied by Dunderdale - are in fact verbatim reporting..." (10) In summary Carroll noted that Dunderdale's story of the two shepherds was "Altogether, a faithful account of a true crime and its consequences." (11) In this instance Carroll notes that Dunderdale is reporting on events of his own time.

Here I briefly follow Carroll and examine another event in Dunderdale which I have been familiar with for many years, as the events described occurred in the neighbourhood of my home. A conflict arose between local squatters over land that may or may not have been within the boundary of the extensive Ensay Station. The story as recorded by Dunderdale is as follows:

"...Leonard Mason... lived with Coady Buckley at Prospect (Seaspray), near the Ninety-mile, and became a good bushman. In 1844 Leonard took up a station in North Gippsland adjoining McLeod's [Ensay] run, but the Highlanders tried to drive him away by taking his cattle a long distance to the pound, which had been established at Stratford. The McLeods and their men were too many for Leonard. He went to Melbourne to try if the law or the government would give him any redress, but he could obtain no satisfaction. The continued impounding of his cattle meant ruin to him, and when he returned to Gippsland he found his hut burned down and his cattle gone on the way to the pound. He took a double-barrelled gun and went after them. He found them at Providence Ponds, which was a stopping place for drovers. Next morning he rose early, went to the stockyard with his gun, and waited till McDougall, who was manager for the McLeods, came out with his stockmen. When they approached the yard he said: 'I shall shoot the first man who touches those rails to take my cattle out.'

McDougall laughed, and ordered one of his men to take down the slip-rails, but the man hesitated; he did not like the looks of Mason. Then McDougall dismounted from his horse and went to the slip-rails, but as soon as he touched them Mason shot him. Coady Buckley spared neither trouble nor expense in obtaining the best counsel for Mason's defence at the trial in Melbourne. He was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to nine years imprisonment, but after a time was released on the condition of leaving Victoria, and was last heard of as a drover beyond the Murray." (12)

The historical errors in this account are as follows. The run Mason took up in 1858 was the Chillington run in the headwaters of the Little River adjacent to, or according to the owner's part of, Macleod's Ensay station. The pound was located at Flooding Creek, later Sale. Mason borrowed the gun from the proprietor of the Little River Inn. He overtook MacDougall at the Sir Walter Scott Hotel, Tambo Crossing, also at that time owned by an unrelated MacDougal family. McDougall was shot in the thigh by Mason and died seven or eight days later. (13) With two exceptions most of these errors or distortions are minor and Dunderdale's account is historically accurate. The location of the shooting by Dunderdale at Providence Ponds was in fact at Tambo Crossing, less than a day's ride from Mason's Chillington run. The other major distortion is the date of 1844 instead of 1858. Every other detail is accurate including the names of the participants, with the occasional spelling errors like McLeod for Macleod. Dunderdale had access to all the major law and newspaper reports of the day and therefore had accurate information to hand on this rather sorry affair. It would appear that Dunderdale therefore made the changes to time and place deliberately. Unlike the 'two shepherds' affair the names of the participants here are true. Why Dunderdale had this penchant for altering some of these details of the stories is not known. Carroll suggests that in the case of the 'two shepherds' this was to protect the living. On examination of the Leonard Mason case it can be concluded that Dunderdale leaves the essence of the story intact and clearly captures the flavour and drama of this event.

Dunderdale did not come to Gippsland until 1869. Where then did he get his information on the early days of Gippsland? His source was almost certainly Davy Fermaner who was

resident in Gippsland from the earliest days of the Port Albert settlement. Carroll noted that: "It is clear that George Dunderdale heard Davy Fermaner's reminiscences quite frequently, and from his characteristically faithful recording we may reasonably assume that many of the historical sketches are really the considered personal accounts of Davy Fermaner, as participant or eye-witness, thoroughly cross-examined by his contemporaries." (14) Further he found that Fermaner's accounts were slightly less reliable than that which Dunderdale witnessed himself and that "Discrepancies of a year in some dates are found; a few names misremembered." (15) But as these accounts "refer largely to events when Davy Fermaner was present they have practically the force of primary sources." (16)

Carroll concludes by noting how difficult it is to produce a written work completely free of errors of any kind. Hence "George Dunderdale was a reliable recorder of events" and "as accurate as his sources, which in many cases were persons who had themselves participated in the events described." (17) Carroll's scholarship I admire and with his conclusions I concur.

End Notes

1. Dunderdale, G. *Book of the Bush*, Penguin Ringwood, 1973. This book has been copied by the Gutenberg Project and can be found online in its entirety at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/16349> Unfortunately this copy is unpaginated.

2. see Hollands Landing Massacre <http://petergardner.info/publications/hollands-landing-massacrerev-edpdf/>

3. Cox, Rev. G. *Notes on Gippsland History Vol. 2*, Port Albert Maritime Museum, Port Albert 1990, p.24

4. *ibid* p. 26

5. Correspondence with the secretary of the Port Albert Maritime Museum (6.6.14) indicated the salvage camp was on Clonmel Island. But as this island is a long, narrow, sand barrier island it is most unlikely that the events described occurred there and thus Dunderdale's nomination of Snake Island as the location of the salvage camp is probably the correct one.

6. The Encyclopaedia Britannica entry for Jedburgh states the "proverbial 'Jeddart Justice' according to which a man is hung first and then tried afterwards seems to have been a hasty generalization from the solitary summary execution of a gang of rogues."

7. Carroll, J.R. "The Two Shepherds: the reliability of George Dunderdale, senior" *VHJ* 48:4:1977 p. 260

8. *ibid.* p. 278

9. *ibid.* Historian Bill Cuthill is also quoted in this footnote of Carroll's as referring to other irregularities in Dunderdale's section on Gippsland but these are not listed. As an aside it may be of interest to readers of my other works that Bill Cuthill was the anonymous source I used who had read the Ewing Diaries and indicated (though by implication rather than direct

statement) that McMillan was being treated by Dr Ewing for venereal disease. See *Our Founding Murdering Father*, Ngarak Press, Ensay, 1990 p. 56

10. *ibid.* p. 268

11. *ibid*

12. Dunderdale, G. *op. cit.* pp.227-8

13. this information is partly folk history, partly gleaned from newspapers, notably the Gippsland Guardian, and a variety of other sources. There is still a farm called Chillington in Ensay North.

14. Carroll, J.R. *op. cit.* p. 278

15. *ibid* p. 276

16. *ibid*

17. *ibid* p. 277