

## Howitt's "Line of Blood" and the Introduction to *Kamilaroi and Kurnai*

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### I

In a recent review<sup>i</sup> of Cal Flynn's *Thicker than Water* (Harper Collins, Sydney, 2016) Dr Peter Crowley concluded:

"For all the polemic about which squatter did what, the 1840s were years of bloody catastrophe for the Gunaikurnai, whose numbers were massively reduced by disease and violence. *Thicker than Water* is an important contribution to public understanding about this period, and Flynn's compassion for Indigenous Australians is manifest throughout. But if I could recommend one text for all Australians to read about the fall of Ancient Gippsland, it wouldn't be this book, or Peter Gardner's writings, or even Don Watson's masterpiece, *Caledonia Australis*. It would be Alfred Howitt's introduction (pages 181–88) to his contribution to *Kamilaroi and Kurnai*, published in 1880, where the tragedy of the Gunaikurnai is captured in a few pages of deeply humane prose, leaving little else significant to say."

Crowley's conclusion has led me to re-examine Howitt's introduction to *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* and the validity of whether there was "little else significant to say" on this aspect of Gippsland history. I freely admit to being a follower of Howitt in almost every instance. But his studies over most of his lifetime were largely based on two false premises. The first was that of Social Darwinism which implied the inevitable extinction of the Kurnai people. This meant that he had to collect as much information as possible from them about their lives, customs, habits etc. as quickly as possible before the inevitable occurred. The other was based on proving the now discredited theory of Lewis Morgan in the new field of anthropology – that the family evolved from a state of sexual promiscuity or 'primitive communism'. Because of this (or perhaps in spite of it) an amazing and voluminous amount of information was collected and has been preserved for posterity – Howitt's grand achievement and a truly amazing legacy.

On the first page of the introduction Howitt estimates the original population of the Kurnai at between 1000 and 1500.<sup>ii</sup> These figures are now generally considered substantial underestimates and the true figure was probably between 2,500 and 3000.<sup>iii</sup> He then states that the total number of Kurnai in 1877 was exactly 140 and that the "diminution from 1000 or 1500 to 140 during a period of 32 years cannot be said to be surprising."<sup>iv</sup> However the larger the original population estimate the more difficult it becomes to explain the 'diminution'.

The introduction to the Kurnai section of *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* fails to live up to Crowley's promise. In particular there are just two sentences that refer to Crowley's "bloody catastrophe for the Gunaikurnai". The first is the general conclusion that "the advance of settlement has, upon the frontier at least, been marked by a line of blood".<sup>v</sup> The other was: "Numbers were killed in conflicts with the settlers; and these aborigines were mostly, though not all, fighting men of the tribe".<sup>vi</sup> In Gippsland it can be argued that the frontier conditions lasted at least four years until the arrival of law enforcement in the person of Crown Lands Commissioner CJ Tyers, and probably longer, as he was ineffective in his relations with the Kurnai until the 1850s. One of Tyers main tasks during the 1840s was defending squatter's stock and property

against the ‘depredations of the blacks’. The ‘line of blood’ in Gippsland was not one of brief conflict and skirmishes but rather one of long duration. The works of Pepper, Watson and my own, as well as the vivid portrayal of the Warrigal Creek massacre by Flyn, fill in many of the gaps.

By contrast Howitt examines in some detail the result of the Kurnai adopting the ‘vicious habits of the new comers’ which resulted in intoxication and death by hyperthermia and the spread of venereal disease. He observed that “colds, rheumatism, pneumonia and phthisis have been frightfully and fatally common”<sup>vii</sup> and adds a lengthy paragraph on the infestations of hydatids amongst the Kurnai at Sale. A page and a half of the introduction is devoted to disease as part of the “cumulative influence of the many and varied causes” of the dramatic population decline. Howitt admits readily that much of this evidence is personal observation and anecdotal accounts. Also he is observing the period between 1860 when the maximum Kurnai population was about 300<sup>viii</sup> and by 1877 was 140 – the count of the Royal Commission.

Thus Howitt by force of circumstances appears to have vastly underestimated the casualties of the ‘line of blood’ and placed more emphasis on disease and the ‘vicious habits’ of the Europeans adopted by the Kurnai. This is to a large extent understandable as his own observations, and those of Doctors Forbes and Reid of Sale, were far more concrete than any snippets and rumours of a violent past.



AW Howitt c.1865 (SLV)

In January 1860 Howitt and his Alpine Prospecting Party ventured into Gippsland in the company of Angus McMillan. The party travelled with McMillan to his station at Bushy Park and remained there a week. They then all travelled to McMillan’s station on the Dargo called variously Cungmundi and Quackmungee<sup>ix</sup> where they remained again for some time before beginning their search for gold on the upper Mitchell River and its various tributaries. The party returned occasionally to Quackmungee for supplies and visited this station and Bushy Park again on their return to Melbourne. Thus Howitt must have spent considerable time in McMillan’s company. At the very least Howitt must have been aware that McMillan had been an active participant in what he later referred to as the ‘line of blood’ in Gippsland. We are left to wonder how much Howitt inquired of the previous inhabitants of the region at this time. Bushy Park, for instance, still had a large black camp on its periphery and one or two Kurnai – usually Jimmy Raymond or William Login – were McMillan’s constant companions.

Following his success in retrieving the remains of Burke and Wills Howitt was appointed Police Magistrate and Goldfields Warden at Omeo in 1863 and transferred to Bairnsdale in 1866.<sup>x</sup> It is about this time that he commenced his studies of the Kurnai in earnest. By this time McMillan was dead. But Howitt must have associated with other early squatters and at least been given an inkling of the early ‘troubled times’ and the decade of the ‘black war’. Perhaps references to the ‘line of blood’ in Gippsland are buried somewhere in his papers - which I no longer have the time, the urgency, or the stamina to revisit.

Another aspect of Crowley’s comment is that it is only recently that Howitt’s work has been readily available. For a large part of the twentieth century his works remained in obscurity obtainable only at high prices from antiquarian booksellers. Prior to my first tentative essays I can find only one local reference to Howitt’s work and his books and the introduction, as far as I can gather or recall, were little used. At that time there was little interest in Howitt in Gippsland, aside from a few historians such as Marion Le Cheminant. The exception was a short article by M. Webster in the 1966 Gap magazine – a series published by the Bairnsdale School Inspectorate through the 1960s and edited by Linette Treasure. It was this brief article that led me straight to Howitt in 1973.<sup>xi</sup> I probably used the term ‘Kurnai’ (without Howitt’s diacritical marks) for the first time in a popular article published that same year in The Living Daylights and definitely in an article in the Historian in 1975 which later became Chapter 4 in my *Gippsland Massacres*. Both Howitt’s books became easily accessible after their publication by Aboriginal Studies Press about 1990. The use of the name ‘Gunaikurnai’, as by Crowley, is now common and general.

Overall though I am left with a contrary opinion to Crowley’s rather static view of history - that there is always something left to say, and in this instance Howitt left much unsaid. The strong case remains that violence was the major cause of the ‘bloody catastrophe’ in Gippsland and that disease and other causes found in Howitt’s introduction were secondary.

## II

After the above was posted as a brief essay to my website some discussion on the social media alerted me to the fact that there was more to be said. A friend on facebook directed me back to AW Howitt’s entry in the Australian Dictionary of Biography by WEH Stanner<sup>xii</sup>. I have had photocopies of the Stanner entry along with other notes in a fat Howitt file for many years. Likewise this file contained copious notes from Mary Howitt Walker’s *Come Wind Come Weather* (MUP, Melbourne, 1971) and in particular chapter 27 by John Mulvaney on Howitt’s anthropological and ethnographic studies. Unfortunately this file was mostly destroyed in the downsizing process after the sale of our house with only a few bits and pieces being donated to local history societies. Unfortunate because had I had the file to check I would quickly have realised, and refreshed my memory, that both Mulvaney and Stanner have something to say on the ‘line of blood’.

WEH Stanner, in particular, noted that:

“On his expedition to the Barcoo [during the Burke & Wills rescue missions] Howitt had met members of the Yantruwanta, Dieri and other tribes while they were uninfluenced by Europeans. He learned, though inexpertly, something of their ecology, languages, beliefs and customs. The experience confirmed in him a dissociation between the Aboriginals as an object of scientific interest and as a challenge to social policy. Family letters show that he went to central Australia sharing the racial and social prejudices of the day. His attitudes softened later but nothing in his writings suggests that he ever agreed with the condemnation of Europeans for their treatment of native peoples expressed in his father's polemical *Colonization and Christianity* (1838). Even in official roles—he was for a time a local guardian of Aboriginals in Gippsland and in 1877 sat on the royal commission which inquired into their whole situation—his attitude appears always to have been that of the dispassionate scientist.”

As Stanner noted Howitt shared the ‘racial and social prejudices of the day’. Mulvaney noted that there were “implicit assumptions [in *Kamilaroi and Kurnai*] of white racial superiority and the perfection of Anglo-Saxon social institutions are manifest in their [Howitt & Fison's] thought...”<sup>xiii</sup> (MHW p.285) Like Stanner he noted Howitt had all the prejudices of the early explorers using such terms as ‘savages’. He also noted that Howitt in a letter to his mother stated “it may seem dreadful to you this hunting blackfellows but they are so treacherous and constantly spearing the cattle...”<sup>xiv</sup> Howitt's progression from his early prejudices to that of ‘dispassionate scientist’ must have taken some years.

But perhaps the most interesting part of Stanner's entry is the reference to Howitt's father's ‘polemic’ on the ‘murder’, ‘massacre’ and mayhem where he recorded in over 500 pages the sad and disastrous history on the effects of colonization on indigenous peoples around the globe. William Howitt<sup>xv</sup> noted:

“We pride ourselves on our superior knowledge, our superior refinement, our higher virtues, our nobler character. We talk of the heathen, the savage, and the cruel, and the wily tribes, that fill the rest of the earth; but how is it that these tribes know us? Chiefly by the very features that we attribute to them. They know us chiefly by our crimes and cruelty. It is we who are, and must appear to them the savages.” (p.7)

and

“The missionaries had Christianity to teach – and their countrymen had been there before them, and called themselves Christians! That was enough: what recommendations could a religion have, to men who had seen its professors for generations in the sole characters of thieves, murderers and oppressors? (p.9)

These brief examples contrast remarkably with his Alfred's recorded work and makes his failure to elaborate on the ‘line of blood’ in Gippsland more puzzling. Howitt was only 8 years old when this history was published but we must assume that at some time Alfred had read his father's ‘polemic’. This work described ‘the line of blood’ as it had appeared around the earth in the previous 200 years. It could as easily have been a description, or more so a grim prediction, of the ‘black war’ that was about to occur in Gippsland the following decade.

When Howitt settled in Gippsland proper at Bairnsdale in 1866 the last events of the ‘line’ were already buried 15 years ago in a secret past. It is unlikely that the murder of those Kurnai at Warrigal Creek and other early massacres would be mentioned to a Police

Magistrate. These events, apart from snippets of ‘gossip’ and later Kurnai folk history, were all hidden from him. Further as law officer, magistrate and public servant Howitt was definitely part of the status quo. Besides his earlier association with McMillan he clearly must have ‘rubbed soldiers’ with, and been part of a society that included, many who had participated in these unmentioned crimes. His collection of Kurnai material in the 1870s made him unpopular with the Reverend Hagenauer of Ramahyuck Mission. Other establishment figures may also have looked askance at the way he collected information, associated with, and employed some of the Kurnai survivors. Whilst we have Alfred Howitt’s work to give us a glimpse of Kurnai life prior to European arrival, it is to his father’s book *Civilization and Christianity* that we must turn to get an idea of the ‘line of blood’ in Gippsland.

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<sup>i</sup> Review in Inside Story <http://insidestory.org.au/is-this-such-a-man>

<sup>ii</sup> Howitt & Fison. *Kamilaroi and Kurnai*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1990 p.181

<sup>iii</sup> See Chapter 2 in my *Gippsland Massacres*, Ngarak Press, Ensay, 1993 for my own early (1978) estimates of population

<sup>iv</sup> Howitt and Fison. Op cit. p.181

<sup>v</sup> Ibid p.182

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid p.183

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid p.184

<sup>viii</sup> I estimate the maximum Kurnai population in 1860 at 300. William Thomas counted 222 in that year.

<sup>ix</sup> The latter meaning place of the Kookaburra. I detail Howitt’s expedition in 1860 in *Our Founding Murdering Father*, Ngarak Press, Ensay, 1990, p.80

<sup>x</sup> See Chapter 9 in my *Through Foreign Eyes*, Ngarak Press, Ensay, 1994 for more detail on Howitt.

<sup>xi</sup> Amazingly this year I first borrowed a copy of Howitt’s *Native Tribes...* through our local mobile library from the State Library of Victoria. This volume was rare even then and I later purchased my own copy for \$200.

<sup>xii</sup> W. E. H. Stanner, 'Howitt, Alfred William (1830–1908)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/howitt-alfred-william-510/text6037>, published first in hardcopy 1972, accessed online 23 July 2016.

<sup>xiii</sup> John Mulvaney in Walker, Mary Howitt. *Come Wind Come Weather*, MUP, Melbourne, 1971 p. 285  
Mulvaney noted Howitt’s “theories often are demonstrably untenable, his methods questionable and his interpretations fallacious.” p.286-7

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid p.287

<sup>xv</sup> Howitt, William. *Colonization and Christianity* Longman, Orme, Brown, Green & Longmans, London, 1838  
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