

Prelude to the Warrigal Creek massacre: the account of HB Morris in the Launceston Examiner <sup>1</sup>

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y than his grace. Some choice sayings in this way when reading of the copy too much occupy our pages; but I other things to reform Bill, was said, quoting from death, had been

them fight at the yeasty waves of agitation upon our heads, to slope down.

form Bill might name of reform: aimed its proper republicanism, and played havoc of rhetoric. "It of republicanism is the habit and nation. The devil its hideousness, all! He trusted repose in that d in a Red Sea the isle from its amazingly fond is speeches; but ible, palms off its own. In the between him and sion of 1834. he

gravely assigned the reason of his not being able to give his grace's speech, to the extreme loudness of the tone in which he spoke. His action is correspondingly violent, and has, owing to the unwieldy character of his person, a very awkward effect. One wonders at seeing so much zeal and energy of manner displayed in a man who has reached the sixtieth year of his age.

**A TRIP TO GIPPS' LAND IN APRIL, 1843.**

BY H. B. MORRIS.

"CATCH your hare before you cook it," is an old saying; I shall, therefore, before hashing up Gipps' Land, state, that it is the low tract of country lying at the foot of the hills which rise gradually from the sea at Corner Inlet, and become as they run north, the Australian Alps—Count Strelski gave it the name it now bears. This tract of country is about ten miles wide at its beginning near Port Albert, and gradually increases in width to seventy miles at the north-eastern termination by the rocky district of Omio, which separates it from Moneroo Plains. Its length may be about one hundred and twenty miles.

It is a singular fact, that this fine district should have remained unexplored, until about three years ago,—but it is easily explained. The Alpine ranges which form the boundary of Gipps' Land on the north-west, are in most parts an impassable

tered from all winds, and is the most scene of the kind I ever saw. Masses of granite rock project boldly into the sea, and the hills, covered with trees, rise abruptly from the beach. A small bay on the shore invites you to land, over which a trickling stream of fresh water falls into the sea. Wilson's Promontory is a narrow strip of granite from 1000 to 1500 feet high, rising abruptly from the sea. Part of it, where there is some soil, is covered with trees, but mostly it is bare, and gives the idea of Scotch scenery, covered with heather. Clouds hover on the hills, and you might easily fancy yourself on the part of the Western Highlands. At a distance beyond Lady's Bay, and on the north shore is a rocky islet, almost bare of vegetation, which is tenanted by quantities of rabbits which run about most obligingly for the amusement of sportsmen, and soon killed forty. It is to be regretted that goats and rabbits have not been introduced upon the promontory. The goats soon become wild, and require no attention. The promontory is not in any way available for culture, and the open spaces are too limited and the herbage too scanty to render it probable that it will be cultivated as a run. We sailed along the coast into Corner Inlet, but this is not the entrance into this fine harbour. The channel leading to it runs N. W., and forms a great seal island.

Under Mount Singapore the bold nation of the promontory, there is a

Linda Barraclough, Gippsland historian and publisher,<sup>2</sup> recently sent me an account of an early journey in Gippsland which mentioned a small group of Kurnai people. She noted: "I was rather stunned to find this account of Gippsland in 1843, published in Launceston, and then Hobart. It is particularly chilling, as it was just before the murder of Ronald Macalister, but shows at least some of the tribe/s were developing a harmonious relationship with at least some of the settlers."<sup>3</sup>

The article - nearly 5000 words in length - was spread over two editions of the Examiner. What follows is comment and analysis with regards Morris's notes on the Kurnai and in particular the close proximity of the account to both the murder of Ronald Macalister and the Warrigal Creek massacre as Linda Barraclough has so clearly identified. It should be noted

from the outset that Morris had all prejudices of the early Europeans against the original occupants of the land. He stated: "I confess few persons could have had greater dislike to the natives of Australia than myself" and that "treachery and revenge form a large part of their character". Morris' position and attitudes towards the Kurnai was similar to the European 'settlers' in almost every regard. <sup>4</sup>

Morris records the general situation of mistrust in Gippsland – almost certainly an indicator of previous conflict – between the Kurnai and the Europeans and stated: "I have been informed that ill blood existed between the blacks and settlers, and that four or five shepherds and stockmen had been murdered, that it was unsafe to travel alone and unarmed in Gipps' Land. I slept soundly nevertheless..." And again: "I will here incidentally mention that owing to the settlers **having hitherto had no communication with the natives**, the original names for places and rivers have not been adopted, which is to be regretted; the Tarra creek, for example, is so named after a Goulburn black who accompanied the party in the Singapore (my emphasis)." He also noted that no one could understand the Kurnai language stating "we did not understand one word, as the dialect spoken in Gipps' Land is peculiar" again indicating that communications between the groups was severely limited and of a relatively recent occurrence.

He then described in detail the early morning visit of six Kurnai male youths – no doubt the most adventurous amongst their group camped nearby on Tarra Creek - who visited the hut of the Irishman in which he was residing. The Irishman, called 'Mr. A.B.' by Morris, then proceeded to go through a number of dance routines which were expertly mimicked by his visitors. At length he sketched a woman on a piece of paper and 'Jackey Jackey' eventually comprehended the request and "returned with a brace of sylvan nymphs, and presented one to me, and one to Mr. A. B." Morris noted "Jackey, no doubt, expected that I should proceed at once to make love to the "lady," but I did not do so..." and amused her instead by producing a mirror. Reading between the lines I suspect that 'Mr. A.B' was merely demonstrating to Morris how easy it was to procure women or alternately showing him how it was done.

This example of communication gives some substance to the folk story that the murder of Macalister was in reprisal for a shepherd throwing hot coals over the feet of Aborigines to get rid of them and that after the murder they – possibly this same small group camped on Tarra Creek – were nowhere to be found near the Port. Previously it had been thought that there had been virtually no amicable contact between the groups and that as a state of hostility existed between them the 'hot coals' story was a myth. But one can easily imagine a scene where, having procured a woman, or perhaps during a drinking session, the shepherd assaulted the Aborigines with the coals to get rid of them. The 'hot coals' story thus is more likely.

After breakfast Morris and 'Mr. A.B.' visited the camp where he intended to purchase "some nets, stone hatchets, &c." and when they arrived "the 'gins' ran away into the bush like so many emus". Their only contact appears to have been with the six youths who had visited them previously before breakfast. As well as trading with Morris the youths demonstrated to the visitors the art of tree climbing, a "sham kangaroo hunt" and a "sham fight."

Unfortunately Morris gives us no idea of the size of the group or its composition but merely mentions the ‘youths’ and ‘gins’. There is no indication of others in the camp – children, the elderly or mature men. Again I suspect that the group was small – as little as 16 or so and a maximum of about 30 – and that this may have been the only group in contact with Europeans in South Gippsland.

This appears to have been Morris’ only contact with the Kurnai during his month long stay. He noted that the “family at Merriman's Creek informed me that although they were the first settlers in Gipps' Land, and had been there nearly two years, yet they had never seen a native.” One wonders what family he was quoting and how truthful his informant was. Merriman’s Creek was part of the Coadyvale Run taken up by PC Buckley fairly early in the piece and the ‘nearly two years residence’ could indicate a family of an employee of Buckley or the squatter himself. The Buckley diary,<sup>5</sup> though only commenced after Warrigal Creek, clearly indicates that this statement made to Morris was false with a number of examples of hunting the Kurnai and of them spearing stock to be found in it.<sup>6</sup> The absence of any sighting of the Kurnai on the other hand supports the general conflict statements made by Morris above. However it is most unlikely that this source was unaware of their presence - in particular with regards the spearing of stock. It is also of note that this location was adjacent to, and not too distant from, the site of the massacre at Warrigal Creek that occurred following Macalister’s murder.

Morris is almost prescient of the Macalister murder and the Warrigal Creek massacre when he stated: “Now it is certain that a settler must sooner or later come into hostile collision with the natives. The blacks probably begin the attack by spearing cattle; the settlers resent this; a shepherd is murdered, and then retaliation ensues. It is therefore obviously the duty of government to protect both parties as far as possible, but alas, both by acts of commission and omission, they have augmented the ill-blood which exists between the settlers and natives...”

We can conclude by saying Morris has added a new dimension to the story of the conflict in Gippsland - that there was definitely some contact between Kurnai and Europeans prior to Warrigal Creek. And that a ‘peace’ of sorts had been established between a small group of Kurnai and European shepherds at least in this one location. Morris indicates that the most likely reason for this ‘peace’ was for the Europeans – or even one European “Mr. A.B.” – to procure women, most likely by providing or sharing alcohol. It is quite possible that this was the only contact established at this time and that “Mr. A.B.” was the perpetrator who threw the hot coals on the Kurnai to get rid of them and the youths Morris had met, including ‘Jackey Jackey’, were his victims. And following Ronald Macalister’s demise and their rapid departure from Tarra Creek victims again of the ferocious reprisal by Europeans at Warrigal Creek and other locations.

## **End Notes**

1. Launceston Examiner 10.6.1843 all quotations are from this article unless otherwise stated. There is substantial material online about the Warrigal Creek massacre not all of it correct. Readers are referred to my

first work on this subject "The Warrigal Creek Massacre" published in the Journal of the RAHS 66:1:1980 p.47 and republished as Chapter 6 in *Gippsland Massacres* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ngarak Press, 1993). Additional material on the Warrigal Creek story is found in Chapters 7 and 12 of *Gippsland Massacres* and parts of *Through Foreign Eyes* (Ngarak Press 1994) and *Our Founding Murdering Father* (Ngarak Press 1990). Additional and more recent work can be found online at Warrigal Creek Revisited [http://petergardner.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Warrigal-Ck-Revisited.rev\\_ed.pdf](http://petergardner.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Warrigal-Ck-Revisited.rev_ed.pdf) and parts of Notes on Massacres <http://petergardner.info/publications/notes-on-massacres-rev-ed/> and Recent Notes on Massacres (2017) <http://petergardner.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Recent-Notes-on-Massacres-2017-rev-ed.pdf>

2. Linda Barraclough is an active regional historian, and author of a number of books and articles.

3. Personal correspondence with Linda Barraclough 28.12.17. The article was posted by her in the Gippsland History facebook group at <https://www.facebook.com/notes/gippsland-history/gippsland-in-april-1843/211341265888750/>

4. Much of Morris' article is a rant against the Aboriginal Protectorate in the Port Phillip District. Like most Europeans Morris is generally condemnatory of the Protectorate system noting that it "has been a total failure" citing the expense and that it made the Aboriginal 'lazy' and they "adopt[ed] the bad habits of civilization without its good." This meant: "the settlers of the Port Phillip district [were left] feeling that they do not obtain equal justice, [and] not merely do not co-operate with government, but rather oppose a passive resistance to its wishes." Morris does however have some insight into the absurdities involved with the occupation and the British Legal System. He noted: "let me ask what must be thought of the system...which brings up a native savage from his wilds in custody of a mounted policeman, lodges him in Melbourne gaol, which tries him by the forms of British law for an offence against the person or property of a settler, of which law the savage is totally ignorant, while he is unable to conduct his defence, being from his ignorance of the English language unable even to plead "not guilty," and to close the tragedy, hangs him uselessly as an example to his tribe. What again must be said of the still more iniquitous proceeding, of making the natives amenable to English law for crimes committed among themselves. I wonder how a Melbourne jury could look each other in the face when impanelled a few months ago to try a case of this sort." Morris then rather spoils this insight by suggesting that "For offences committed against whites, a tribunal should be formed of a government officer, say the land commissioner, and a jury of five or six settlers on the spot. This tribunal should be armed with power of summary jurisdiction. In case of a white, having murdered and a black convicted of the crime, immediate punishment should ensue by hanging on the spot..." This is very similar to what Dunderdale described of the actuality in Gippsland as "Jedburgh justice: they were shot first, and not even tried afterwards." <http://petergardner.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/George-Dunderdale-and-the-Kurnai.pdf>

5. See Gardner, P.D. *Through Foreign Eyes...* Chapter 3 on Patrick Coady Buckley

6. Possible identities at this location include Lucas, Buntine and Hoddinott. Linda Barraclough added: "I am indebted to Robert Kerr, who is researching the Scotts of Erin Vale. He believes that they are also there by then, but probably closer to Port Albert".