

## SOME OLD BOOK REVIEWS

### YOU ARE WHAT YOU MAKE YOURSELF TO BE

By PHILLIP PEPPER

Hyland House, 1980

My first impressions of this work were unfavourable. I considered the title cumbersome and a review elsewhere seemed sensational. But these first impressions were completely incorrect. On a thorough examination of the book I became aware of its importance, being the first attempt to record Victorian Aboriginal history by a Victorian Aboriginal. Since Aboriginal history has always been based on oral tradition some may see the appearance of this book as a departure from that tradition. However the book is divided into two parts and is really a synthesis of the historical processes of the two cultures, each chapter being composed mainly of Mr Pepper's recorded conversations with occasional academic historical commentary between. The 'academic' section is the historical substantiation of the folk record where this has been possible. This has been ably done by Mrs De Araugo.

As befitting the oral aboriginal tradition the work follows no specific historical line and is a combination of anecdotes, aboriginal culture and traditions, the aboriginal side of the black-white conflict, family history and autobiography. The book has horror stories, as in the death of Dan, the cook on the Orbost Station, and tragedies such as the story of Charlie Hammond and his family. It has pathos as in the death of Nathaniel Pepper and humour in the form of an anecdote of hunting and eating wombats. It has detailed family accounts of Thorpes, Johnsons, Thomas, Gilberts, Bulls, Fosters, Moffats, Hoods, and others as well as Mr Pepper's own. It even has politics, such as Pepper's clash with Labor's Senator Brown.

The photographs in the book are excellent and well presented. Chapters have useful sub-headings of subject matter. Small improvements to later editions can be made by the provision of an index and by supplying more detail in some of the footnotes. For instance, historians could hardly search the whole of the Bulmer Collection for one specific reference. There also appear to be some areas of historical dispute, such as the Butcher's Ridge massacre or the correct surname of Dan, the murdered cook at Orbost. But such minor debate in no way detracts from the value of the book.

The folk history of Mr Pepper has verified the work of many historians such as Rowley, Blainey\* and Christie in a localised, specific manner. It tells the story of the conflict of the early days and mentions five separate massacres as well as instances of 'gin hunting'. On the reasons why the blacks were so easily killed in the early conflicts, Mr Pepper states: "In the real early days our people didn't wake up about guns. They'd just stand there and get shot. Didn't understand how they got hit with something and fell over from Lohans (whitemen) pointing something at them." (p.48) The book also explains and details some of the tragedy

brought about by the bureaucratic senselessness of the Aboriginal Protection Act of 1886. The division produced by this act helps explain the loyalty and clannishness found in people of Aboriginal descent today.

For this century the book covers the service of Aboriginals in World War One, stories of some of the noted sporting characters, and ends with Mr Pepper's recent endeavours to restore some historical value and dignity to the old Ramahyuck Cemetery. It is to be hoped that the future projected volumes will continue this high standard of oral and academic history; I can only endorse the controversial but accurate historical opinion of Mr Pepper when he discusses racial problems of those of Aboriginal descent. This especially applies to those of mixed ancestry who have for so long been rejected by white society. 'The REAL Australian', according to Mr Pepper, is 'the Aboriginal black... mixed, blue or brindle, the descendants of the old people, the tribal people.'

This book greatly assists in improving the knowledge and understanding of the history of the Aboriginal people in Gippsland and Victoria for both races, but especially those of European descent. And it has contributed greatly to that continuous process of writing the Aboriginal people into our history to obtain a better, more balanced view of our past.

(published in VHJ Vol 52 NO. 2 1981 p.132)

\* I cannot conceive now why I had Blainey in this group

## Book Reviews 2

### ABORIGINES IN COLONIAL VICTORIA 1835-86

By M. F. CHRISTIE

Sydney University Press, 1979.

Recently at a local historical society meeting I was asked by one of the older members what was the point in recounting the stories of violent and brutal frontier conflict in local history. At the same time this member admitted that these 'shocking' events did occur, but that he preferred, as did preceding generations of historians, that the 'dark' and 'unsavoury' aspects of our history should be forgotten. There are many answers to this question but it would seem that the most important is that the historian's prime aim is the pursuit of 'truth'. Such a pursuit is complicated by the racial, cultural and economic differences that existed between white and black people on the frontier. This factor combined with the 'forgetting' of history led to a century of complete distortion in history books that is now being re-assessed.

The publication of C. Turnbull's *Black War* in 1948 can be considered the first major break with the traditional stream of history that stated that the Aborigines gave way peacefully before the white newcomers. More recently, C. D. Rowley's *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* (1972) has provided the structure for the exhaustive examination of theories of frontier conflict on a local basis. This book by Michael Christie must be considered the first

major application of Rowley's theories specifically to the Victorian region. The first section of the book unveils in detail the horrific, violent destruction of Aborigines in the Port Phillip District. Christie estimates that some fifteen to twenty per cent of the total pre-white population died as a result of gunshot wounds and gives substantial evidence to support this. It is established that in almost all areas of Victoria the Aborigines resisted the white newcomers and that protracted 'guerrilla' wars continued in many localities. Instance of attacks on stock and shepherds brought about fierce retaliation by squatters. Christie details some of these events that have hitherto been 'shrouded' from our view.

Later chapters examine the Port Phillip Protectorate and the reasons for its failure, the predestined failure of 'enlightened' government and religious policies and the dealings of the missionaries and government boards with the remnants of the Aborigines from 1860 onwards. The book concludes with the 1886 Aborigines Protection Act, the effect of which was to tragically divide the Aboriginal community.

It is possible for local historians to find occasional errors with regard to specific locations and dates, such as the death of Thomas Bungelene on 30 January 1865; (he died on 4 January 1865). But aside from these minor geographical and chronological errors the book has few bad features. The index is sufficient though it could be improved upon. Also future historical analysis may be appropriately based on anthropological boundaries rather than recent political divisions.

Overall the work is a valuable reference for local historians, ethno-historians and students examining this aspect of our history. The value of this work is further enhanced by the lengthy detailed bibliography. With the field of ethno-history rapidly expanding it is quite likely that this volume will become the basis for more detailed work on a local or tribal area.

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Review No. 3

ABORIGINAL LAND RIGHTS - A HANDBOOK

EDITED BY NICHOLAS PETERSEN

(Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1981)

In 1848 the Chief Protector of the Aborigines in the Port Phillip District, George Augustus Robinson wrote: "The present Position of the Aborigines I am constrained to say is particularly painful; every spot where water and grass is found, without reference to them is being occupied with stock ..."

Today the question of Land Rights for Aborigines has moved beyond the mere possession of land although this simple request remains the most prominent demand of Aboriginal groups in Australia. Extensions to the Land Rights claims, which many observers along with Robinson, thought a moral right, include claims for 'economic and political autonomy, wealth

and well being ...' The question of land use, royalties and mineral rights are the centre of the current controversy in Australia's north. Lands previously thought worthless and thus little developed have suddenly assumed importance with recent mineral discoveries. The people that have lived on the land for countless generations and have correspondingly close spiritual ties with it, are simultaneously making political demands for the title to their traditional lands and royalties for any minerals found on them.

In Victoria the situation is different as little or no ties remain with traditional lands as most aborigines were removed from their ancestral lands before 1860. The author of one of the chapters on Victoria, Philip Felton, explained the historical relevance of land reserved for aborigines, stating that it was important to identify those areas that were once legally set aside and since revoked because such information provides prima facie evidence of a direct historical link between the Aboriginal People and clearly defined areas of land. Felton then gives an historical overview of the reservation and the alienation of these lands. In the appendix that follows this chapter entitled 'Land Reserved for the Benefit of Aborigines' the details of all former Victorian Aboriginal Reserves are provided. Unfortunately the reference list for this chapter has been omitted. One of the interesting reserves Felton documented was the Stud Road Native Police Station. Although much reduced in size the original site is still Crown Land, containing amongst other things an aboriginal cemetery. This site at present cannot be preserved due to inadequacies in existing legislation.

The other chapter on Victoria, by Betty Moore of the Aboriginal Research Centre, gives brief background histories of the Lake Tyers and Framlingham Missions where Land Rights have been granted, and then examines legislation relevant to the 16,000 Victorian Aborigines today. An aspect that the section dealing with Victoria could have mentioned is the economic connections the people have had with land and sea. Long after the traditional ties with the land were broken strong economic ties still remained. An example of this was the battle Reverend Bulmer fought for nearly two decades to retain exclusive fishing rights for the mission occupants in Lake Tyers. Elsewhere, especially in the section on Torres Strait, the question of fishing and sea-bed rights is given prominence.

The politics, history and legislation effecting Land Rights in other States and Territories is dealt with in similar detail to Victoria. The Northern Territory chapter, where, due to Federal Government Legislation, Land Rights campaigns have been so successful, makes interesting reading.

The bibliography, although not claiming to be comprehensive, is impressive in its length and detail, especially with regard to the Northern Territory. Brief notes on each of the contributors are lacking. The book is worthwhile reading for anyone interested in the current political disturbances in our mineral rich north, or anyone interested in Aboriginal Affairs. The reader searching for historical material on Victoria will be disappointed, although Felton's Appendix is an important document and should be read by all those with a specific interest in Victorian Aboriginal History.

The sum total of all lands reserved for Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria was 398 square miles. Apart from Lake Tyers and Framlingham all these reserves have been revoked. In 1877 an impractical suggestion made to the Royal Commission on Aborigines suggested that an area of the Colony such as Gippsland be set aside for the remaining Aborigines of Victoria. No doubt such a hypothetical reserve would have been revoked when the question of land use and mineral rights became important. But the question of Land Rights remains and one can deeply empathize with G. A. Robinson when he wrote in 1848 that 'The Aboriginal Natives have a right to a reasonable share in the soil of their Fatherland ...' In more than one hundred years the situation has hardly changed.

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#### Review 4

Black Sesquicentennial - The demise of the Gippsland Aborigines

THE KURNAI OF GIPPSLAND, by Phillip Pepper in collaboration with Tess De Araugo  
Hyland House, 1985

In October 1840 Angus McMillan and the Macalister squatting party trapped and slaughtered a group of Gippsland Aborigines (the Kurnai) at the confluence of the Perry and Avon rivers. This place became known as Boney Point. Other massacres followed soon afterwards at Butchers Creek, Metung and possibly at Maffra. In each instance the massacre was a reprisal against Kurnai attacks on person or property.

In July 1843, Ronald Macalister was murdered near Port Albert and his corpse disfigured by the removal of his kidney fat. There followed in retaliation a large massacre of Kurnai on the U-shaped waterhole at Warrigal Creek, South Gippsland. This massacre, relatively unknown but possibly one of the largest to have taken place in Australia, was described later by an "old hand", "Gippslander". A handpicked group of men, called the "Highland Brigade" and led by Angus McMillan carried out the revenge. "Gippslander" continued:

The brigade coming up to the blacks camped around the waterhole at Warrigal Creek surrounded them and fired into them, killing a great number. Some escaped into the scrub, others jumped into the waterhole, and as fast as they put their heads up for breath, they were shot until the water ran red with blood.

Survivors of Warrigal Creek were made to lead the "brigade" to other campsites and further retribution took place at Freshwater Creek and at Gammon Creek. Estimates of the numbers murdered at Warrigal Creek run as high as 150.

In late 1846 and 1847 a number of expeditions, both official and private, were sent into Gippsland to recover a white woman rumoured to be held captive by the Kurnai. These expeditions were used, in most cases, as an excuse to harry and kill the Kurnai, and C. J. Tyers later conservatively estimated that at least 50 were killed at the height of the white-woman hysteria.

Also in 1846 Henry Howard Meyrick, a failed squatter from the Mornington Peninsula, journeyed across Gippsland to his new run at Heyfield. He was deeply shocked at "having murder made the topic of everyday conversation" and estimated at least 450 Kurnai had been killed altogether. In January 1847, Meyrick visited William Thomas, Assistant Protector of Aborigines, and informed him of the killings at Warrigal Creek and other places in Gippsland. Thomas noted in his diary the "awful sacrifices" of the Kurnai people but failed or was unable to act on the information Meyrick provided. Before drowning in the Thompson River at the age of 23 Henry Meyrick had written home that "the blacks will shortly be extinct". His dire prediction was not far wrong.

After the "white-woman hunts" two other massacres are known to have occurred in East Gippsland before the rather one-sided "black war" of the region was ended. From 1848 onwards small groups came out of the bush and congregated around the stations, precariously existing by handouts, begging, theft, prostitution and itinerant labor. By 1854 the last of the "wild groups" had come out of the bush in far East Gippsland.

In December 1860, William Thomas, now officially Guardian of Aborigines, visited Gippsland and recorded the name, age, sex and group affiliation of 222 Kurnai individuals. The pre-white population has been estimated at between 2500 and 3000. On the recommendations of William Thomas, two mission stations were established to collect together and look after the welfare of the Kurnai remnants. At Ramahyuck, near Sale, and Lake Tyers in East Gippsland, the reverends Hagenauer and Bulmer supervised a missionary era that was both authoritarian and paternalistic. They impotently observed the declining numbers of the "full bloods" and what they saw as the growing "half-caste problem".

From the outrageous "Half-caste" Legislation of 1886 through most of this century the disastrous attempts of social engineering continued, with such things as pass systems and the amalgamation of the mission stations. Today at Lake Tyers some of the Kurnai descendants own and control a minute fraction of the land that was once the realm of their ancestors. And only today are the descendants of the Kurnai approaching the numbers of their forefathers before the slaughter of the "black war" in Gippsland between 1840 and 1851.

*The Kurnai of Gippsland* is a history of the Aborigines of this region by Gippsland Aborigine Phillip Pepper and his researcher, Tess De Araugo. The first chapter discusses the Kurnai in a pre-white situation and the following chapters show how the people suffered under the white occupation. By far the greater part of the book deals with the missionary and post missionary periods from 1861 onwards. On the title page the authors ask rhetorically "What did happen to the Aborigines of Victoria?" and then manage only partially to answer their own question. Roughly half the chapters (some only two pages long), and a third of the text, are devoted to

the first 20 years of white occupation. But within that section chapters devoted to the exploration of Angus McMillan and the work of Strzelecki's guide, Charlie Tarra, which are irrelevant, or at best peripheral, to the story of the Kurnai demise. The failure of the authors to answer their own question lies in two major areas, that of direction and historical methodology. If it is likely that a large number, possibly a majority, of the Kurnai were murdered up to and including 1851, then they have failed to emphasise the enormity of these crimes or to document them.

The small number of pages devoted to the massacres, plus the collaborative accounts of Meyrick, Tyers, squatter Buckley and Chief Protector Robinson, lack emphasis because they are spread almost randomly through the first half of the book and amount to only a small part of the total discussion. The adherence to chronology at the expense of direction is almost absurd when, for instance, the Boney Point massacre is discussed in the chapter on the founding of the Ramahyuck Mission because the massacre site was nearby and that information on the massacre was found in the Ramahyuck papers. With proper direction Boney Point should have been discussed in the opening chapters of the book. Thus, aside from continually quoting statistics illustrating the rapid decline in population, the book fails to emphasise the where, how and why of the Kurnai demise.

The problems of methodology are complex. First, the authors state their intention in the preface to use mainly original documents. However, such documents on the conflict, massacres and murders, even of a general nature, are hard to find. This narrow base of primary documents makes it exceedingly difficult to verify facts from several sources. Consequently the authors have been forced to base whole chapters on single sources which has led to errors and unconvincing evidence.

For example in the short chapter entitled 'A Mass Murderer from the Western District', Frederick Taylor of Loughnan and Taylor of the Lindenow Run is condemned as a murderer of the Kurnai on the basis of one source, Robinson's statement that he was "notorious for killing natives" in the Western District. A widening of research to local and contemporary sources would have added some substance, albeit circumstantial, to the case against Taylor, where the murder of two shepherds on the Lindenow Run in 1842 provided the classic cause for retaliation and Skull Creek, immediately to the west of present-day Lindenow, the possible site for that retaliation.(1)

Second, although stating their preference for primary sources, the authors managed to neglect some important ones, including the note books of Robinson's Journey through the south-east in 1844 (as opposed to his official report.) and the diaries and reports of William Thomas. Most of the work of Alfred Howitt, which should be considered as a primary source, is also neglected. (2) In neglecting Thomas in particular, the stories of Big Joe (Karn-many according to Pepper, Ton-well-un according to Thomas in 1860) (3), Bungeleen and Tarra Bobby are only partially or inadequately told.

Third, the almost total neglect of local histories and published and unpublished contemporary sources has led to a number of errors in the book. The Butchers Creek massacre would not

have been completely omitted if G. Halstead's *The Story of Metung* had been consulted, nor would Warrigal Creek have been incorrectly placed at the date of Boney Point if John Wilson's Official *History of the Avon Shire* or a variety of other sources been consulted.

With regards to contemporary work, a perusal of Don Watson's *Caledonia Australis* would not have allowed the following statement to be made:

During this year (1840) Angus McMillan found that a white mother and her child were living with the Aborigines in a native camp on the Glengarry (La Trobe) River. Just as he withheld information about the excellent pasturing land in Gippsland he did not disclose his discovery for six years.

Not only is this statement incorrect, it is so misleading as to convey almost the opposite of what actually happened. In fact, McMillan was a force behind the scenes in the white-woman affair and as Watson shows had written a letter to the Sydney Herald on this matter in December 1840. The authors have failed to implicate McMillan. Except for involvement in the Ramahyuck Mission siting controversy they have barely involved him in the massacres whereas available evidence indicates that he deserves the title of "mass murderer" far more than Fred Taylor.

Also, the four or five chapters on the white-woman affair would have been better presented if the authors had consulted boxes of material patiently collected by historian Bill Cuthill and held in the La Trobe Library. They could hardly have ignored the fact that La Trobe, Robinson, William Thomas, and C. J. Tyers when it suited him, all denied the existence of the white woman, and stated that the stories were propagated for the purpose of doing damage to the Kurnai people. Robinson in particular wrote about "The absurd story of the White Lady in captivity among the Savages of Gipps Land ... which led to such extraordinary and fatal results against that unfortunate section of Aborigines. . ." Pepper and De Araugo conclude that no less than three separate white women were held by the Kurnai people.

Fourth, there are a number of historically dubious statements made that are undocumented. Two that refer to the Native Police have them stationed in Gippsland in 1840 and in 1849 having the ranks of the force made up of Bunerong and Kurnai. The former is most unlikely as Gippsland was not settled until 1841 and C. J. Tyers, Crown Lands Commissioner and Law Enforcement Officer, was not in Gippsland before 1844. Further, there was no regular means of land communications between the Native Police Station at Narre Warren and Gippsland until this date and also the Native Police were disbanded between 1839 and 1842. Similarly there is reasonable doubt as to whether the Kurnai were ever recruited in numbers for the Native Police.

Fifth, a number of sources the authors rely heavily upon are accepted uncritically. C. J. Tyers is often quoted as a major source in the early pages and yet a thorough examination of his letters, diaries and public statements shows that he was definitely a vacillator if not an outright liar. For instance, in his 1852 annual report he stated that "I may instance the extinction of the Pawl Pawl Tribe (Boul Boul) the greater part of which... were carried off by influenza three or four years ago". Yet five years later Tyers stated to a parliamentary inquiry

that "I have heard of 150 having been killed in one night at Pawl Pawl Island, by the Melbourne Blacks, headed by the notorious Billy Lonsdale". Yet the authors were ingenuous enough to write that the Boul Boul Tribe was extinct.

Finally, while relying heavily on a narrow range of primary sources the authors, through various errors, exhibit a lack of thorough familiarity with some of them. The papers of John Bulmer are used as the basis for the tribal classification, the story of Lake Tyers and the people that lived there over more than half a century. In the intriguing case of Charley Hammond they imply that he and his family spent most of their lives on the Lake Tyers Station when in fact Bulmer had noted that he had 'known them for over 20 years during which time they have never lived among their people'.

Compared with their earlier book *You are what You make Yourself to be* (Hyland House Melbourne 1980) I find this volume, the first of three to tell us what did happen to the Aborigines of Victoria, disappointing. In their first book, a synthesis of Aboriginal folk history by Philip Pepper, ably backed by the research of Tess De Araugo, broke new and exciting ground. By contrast this book is written in a straight academic fashion whereby the style and words of the author are unrecognisable in all but the last few chapters. This may have been achieved either by Mrs De Araugo contributing far more to the volume than the order and description on the title page would indicate or by the heavy hand of an editor.

But it is the failure of the authors to answer thoroughly the question posed by their own rhetoric, and to examine the available evidence rigorously, that has made the first and most important part of the book, with so many errors, both inadequate and unacceptable. Perhaps the authors, in their desire to retain originality, deliberately chose to neglect all but primary sources. If this is so this has been done at the expense of truth and accuracy. I would suggest that in the field of Aboriginal history there is much work already completed, from unpublished university theses down to local histories that have something to add to works of this kind.

The production of the book is excellent, as are the illustrations, appendices and especially the Index of Aboriginal People mentioned in the text. The latter part of the book commencing with the missionary period up until the present is both informative and accurate and includes chapters on the "1886 Act", "Dissension at Ramahyuck" and the story of the "Two Willies".

Despite the above criticisms the book has added some substance to the history of the Kurnai, especially in the missionary and post-missionary phases. Philip Pepper died recently in Bairnsdale. It is to be hoped that the work already prepared is not lost and that the projected volumes shall eventually be completed by his collaborator.

(The Age Literary Review December 1985)

Notes 2015

1. See Hollands Landing Massacre pdf as an illustration of how this work has helped my own analysis.
2. The Howitt mss was used but sparingly. I could apply the same criticism to my own work in *Through Foreign Eyes*, but I was not claiming to work from primary sources alone.
3. Tankowillum according to Alfred Howitt