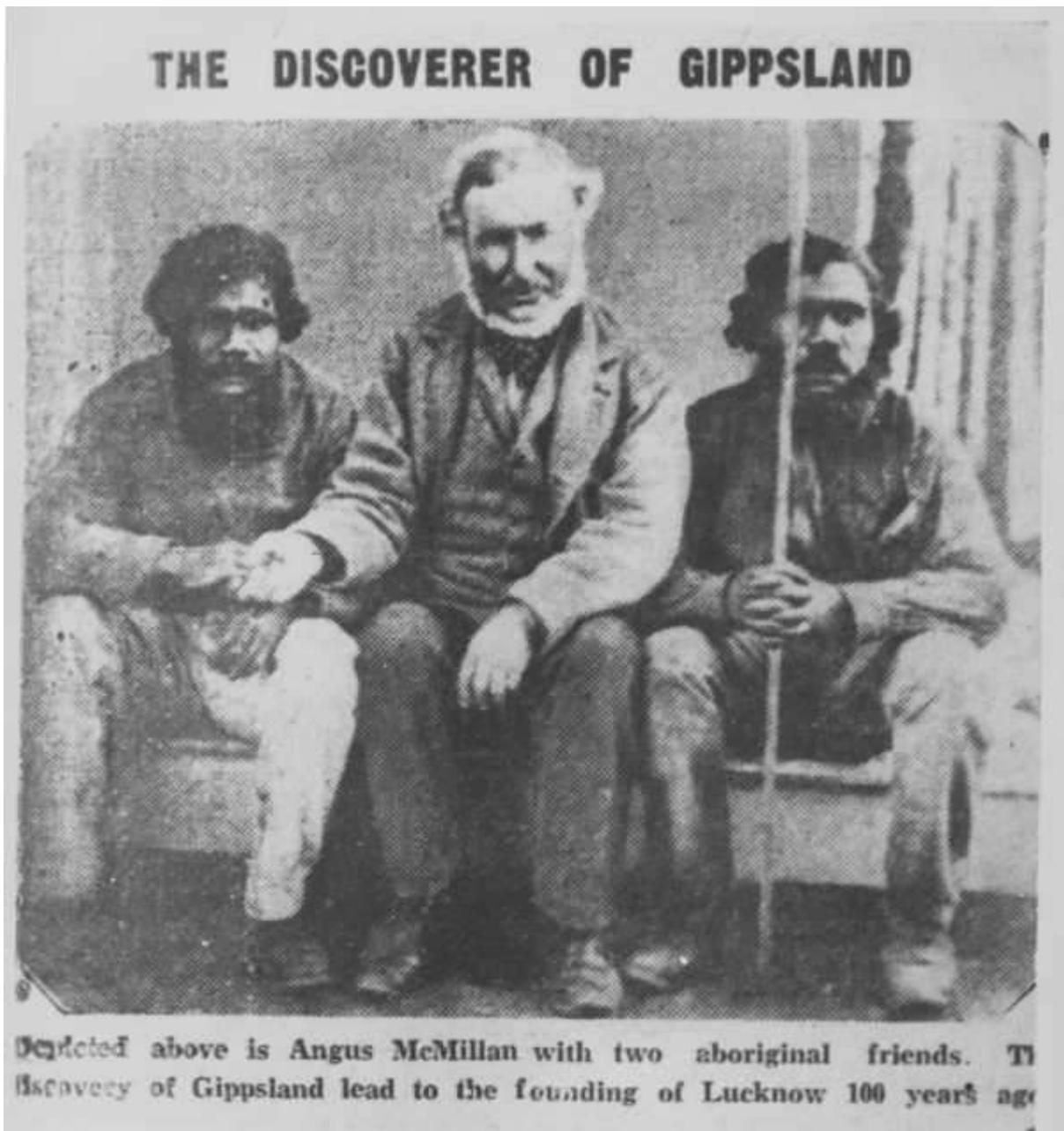


The McMillan Photo: who were the Kurnai with Angus McMillan?

By Peter Gardner *

There is a photograph familiar to the residents of Gippsland that depicts Angus McMillan, the discoverer of the district, between two Aboriginals. Many local historians have made guesses as to the identity of these two but recent research indicates they were William Login - whose release in Melbourne from a murder charge McMillan had just secured - and Jimmy Raymond who later accompanied the explorer on his last bush trip. The discovery of the Aboriginals' identity and the reasons why the photograph were taken remains an intriguing topic.



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For many years it was thought the two Aboriginals were “Cobbone Johnny” and “Boy Friday”, the two guides from the Omeo district who accompanied McMillan when he entered Gippsland in 1840. But as the photo was taken in Sale about 1860 even the younger of McMillan’s two guides would appear older than the two Aboriginals depicted.

D. Kemp - the Maffra Shire historian - thought the two were ‘Big Johnie’ and ‘Jemmy Gibber’. The identity of ‘Big Johnie’ is unknown. ‘Jemmy Gibber’ was the sole person to accompany McMillan on his first attempt to find a route through the mountains to the coastal plains. At Mt. Macleod Jemmy refused to go any further with McMillan and returned to the Monaro where the last record of him is in 1842. It is highly unlikely - due to the exceptionally high mortality rate amongst Aboriginals at that time - that any of the Aboriginals that accompanied McMillan in his early explorations were alive in 1860. For instance in 1859 Alfred Howitt, explorer and anthropologist, noted that there were only five living Omeo Aboriginals.

Previous research had identified the two as ‘Tarra Bobby’ and ‘William Login’. In 1858 they were charged with the murder during a drunken affray of Richard Dothwaite at Sale. They were accompanied in their journey to Melbourne by another Aboriginal Jemmy Scott – a witness – and Angus McMillan. McMillan insisted on the innocence of the two Aboriginals charged and in the company of the Chief Guardian of Aboriginals William Thomas continued to use his influence to obtain their release.

‘Tarra Bobby’ and ‘William Login’ were held in the Collingwood Stockade for more than two months before being released. Jemmy Scott died early in 1859 whilst still in Melbourne. Both ‘Tarra Bobby’ and ‘William Login’ remained in Melbourne and led rather dissolute lives. In February 1860 a European was tried for shooting at Login and Bobby. Bobby was hit in the eye and hospitalised, the eye being removed some years later. Whereas the two Kurnai spent two months in jail for a crime they did not commit, this man was found guilty and fined five pounds. This money was given to the two Aboriginals and was almost certainly spent on alcohol.

‘Tarra Bobby’ does not appear to have returned to Gippsland until after McMillan’s death in 1865. This, along with the fact that his eye was injured, excludes him as a possibility of being in the photo. Almost certainly the man whose hand McMillan can be seen shaking was ‘William Login’, who had returned to Gippsland sometime after the shooting affair in 1860. Ostensibly the photo recorded the Aboriginal thanking the Gippsland squatter for obtaining his release from prison. The Aboriginal on McMillan’s left was most probably Jimmy Raymond, then aged about thirty-four, who was the explorer’s constant companion on his bush journeys and track cutting expeditions during the early 1860s.

The reason why McMillan had the photograph taken remains obscure but was probably publicity of his work on behalf of the Gippsland Aborigines whilst a member of parliament and afterwards. During the last ten years of his life he continued to assert himself in local Aboriginal affairs. Aside from securing the release of the two prisoners, McMillan distributed stores and blankets to the Kurnai, was a local Guardian of them and on the committee to

select a site for a mission station in the Sale Maffra district. Whilst a member of parliament he was on the Select Committee for the Protection of Aborigines but he remained there for less than one year resigning from parliament before the end of 1860.

Thus it seems that the photo was part of a campaign by the McMillan to project himself as a guardian, protector and saviour of the Kurnai. Unfortunately for him there is substantial evidence that in the early years of European settlement there was a state of extreme hostility between the Kurnai and the Europeans, and that he is implicated in at least three massacres of them. Perhaps the photo, and the campaign in later years, was meant to hide these distasteful facts of the past? If so then it has been remarkably successful for the McMillan legend has reached almost heroic proportions amongst Gippslanders today and only a few are aware of the shadier aspects of his career.

Of the two Kurnai in the photo William Login disappears from the history books and died of old age in 1875 at the Ramahyuck Mission Station. His family lived on at the mission which had been established on the Avon River near Stratford in 1863. His descendants grew attached to the place and were the last to leave when the mission finally closed in 1908. Jimmy Raymond was the explorer's continuous companion through the 1860s and was with him when McMillan was fatally injured in an accident in the bush in May 1865. Later he went to live with his people at Ramahyuck. He died there in 1894, aged 68 years, of inflammation of the lungs and was buried in the Mission cemetery. Whilst the wooden cross that marked his grave has long since rotted away, the photograph in which he appeared with William Login and Angus McMillan remains is a more lasting and striking memorial.

* This previously unpublished article was written in the pre personal computer age - about 1980 - and recently rediscovered by the author whilst going through old boxes of notes. Published in the Gippsland Times 23.5.2014 with minor changes.