

**A Grampians Massacre?**  
**An analysis of the Participant's account of an early Whyte Brothers massacre in  
the Portland district**

by PD Gardner

(written with assistance from the Search Foundation. This is an unpublished essay  
completed about 2010)

The account of this massacre - which I consider a primary source and not as well known as it should be - went as follows:

“ ‘Why’ said one of them, the elder of the two, ‘I can remember when they used to shoot down the blacks in this colony as you would do kangaroos, all because they sometimes killed a few sheep. I remember down in the Port District, when the four Parks and three other men, I was one of them, shot sixty-nine in one afternoon. The devils had stolen about 100 sheep and driven them away to the ranges. When they got them there they broke their legs to prevent them escaping, and were killing them and eating them at their leisure ... We all mounted horses, and armed with rifles set off in hot pursuit. It was early morning when we started, and about the middle of the day we came up with the black rascals, and a rare chase we had of it. They set off like mad, about one hundred and fifty of them, never showing fight in the least. The ranges were so rocky that we had to dismount and follow them on foot, and after two or three hours chase we got them beautiful - right between a crossfire, a steep rock on one side they could not climb, and rifles on each of the other. Well, we peppered them pretty, they stood up firm and stiff to be shot and we dropped them one by one. We were expecting to cook the lot of them, when Mr. George, ... fired a shot too high and sent a bullet through one of his brothers face, ... we all knocked off firing and ran to him. In an instant the blacks were off, and we were too much engaged over Tom Park to think of following them ... We counted sixty-nine victims, including some half a dozen or so that were not quite dead, but these we put out of their misery with the butt-end. The blacks carried off a few wounded ones but as we fired at the body we pretty well spoilt all them as we hit. My word! but they were rascals among the sheep in them days, they aint so bad now; a few goes like that soon thin'd em. Why they even killed a shepherd on Tompkins station only because he wanted one of their lubras; but the two Tompkins were even with them for that matter, for they shot down every blackfellow they met for three years after.’”<sup>1</sup>

I have known about this massacre since 1980 and originally published this quotation in my *Gippsland Massacres* (1983). There I used the account as a primary source - none of which exist for Gippsland - to measure the circumstances of possible Gippsland massacres and make a judgement as to the likelihood of each event having occurred. The quotation was in turn used by Ian D. Clark in his book *Scars in the Landscape*<sup>2</sup> as one of a number of different accounts of the Fighting Hills massacre. Since I had not visited the Fighting Hills massacre site at the Hummocks, Wando Vale it was difficult for me to dispute Clark's judgement on this matter. I felt however that the circumstances described by the participant were at variance with those of the Fighting Hills massacre. After visiting relatives in the Harrow district about five years ago I contacted Ian Clark and he assured me that the account was one of 'Fighting Hills'.<sup>3</sup> After a more recent visit to the district in 2009 (though still not visiting Wando Vale) I became convinced that the massacre in the participant's account was not that of Fighting Hills, nor located at Wando Vale. It would seem that Clark has attributed at

least two accounts of different massacres to the single event at Fighting Hills. In this paper I propose firstly to re-examine the participant's account in more detail and put forward arguments to support my contentions and in another paper put this event in the context of the Whyte brothers' massacres and other frontier conflict in the Portland district in the period 1838-1845.

A closer look at the Participant's account is necessary. It is possible that the account is exaggerated in a number of ways to make it more gruesome and thus more interesting to the newspaper reporter who recorded the story. Likewise the participant may have taken the opportunity to boast. Thus some of the numbers like those killed, the number of Aboriginals pursued and the number of sheep stolen may be exaggerated whilst the number of Europeans involved may have been reduced. Also the details of several massacres may have become mixed in this account as the participant obviously was involved in a number of them. On the other hand the matter of fact way in which the account is told and the awful detail it provides indicate a number of unusual features about this account. They are as follows:-

1. The circumstances of the chase compare with none of the other accounts of Fighting Hills. All the men were mounted, as opposed to a mixed group on horse and on foot, and took approximately half a day on horseback plus two to three hours on foot to reach the massacre site. It is possible that the first part - depending on the pursuers starting from Konongwootong - was compatible with a chase to Fighting Hills. However it is hard to accommodate the two to three hours on foot with this site. Unfortunately the 'participant's account' mentions neither a date for the affair nor the location of the base camp from which the pursuit commenced. This is part of the geographic problem.
2. The 'participant's account' clearly states the stolen sheep were driven away to 'the ranges'. We are left with the question of what can be defined as 'ranges' and what 'hilly sheep country.' Graeme McGaffin noted the squatters' preference for hill country for their sheep: "At this time a strong prejudice existed against plains for sheep runs. It was greatly supposed that the want of shelter, both from rays of sun in the summer and the biting winds in winter would soon break down their constitutions..."<sup>4</sup> Having lived most of my life in the foothills of the Australian Alps in hilly sheep country and visited the Casterton-Coleraine-Harrow district a number of times I have no doubt that most of the latter country could be described as hilly sheep country and that 'the ranges' could only mean the Grampians or the Black Range. Reinforcing this - and allied with the question of geography - is the fact that the Aboriginals were pursued for a considerable time on foot through country 'so rocky' that it was inaccessible to horses.
3. Another unique aspect of this account is that Aboriginals quickly fled 'never showing fight in the least' unlike other accounts of Fighting Hills where large numbers of spears were purportedly thrown in either defence or attack.<sup>5</sup> The group of Aboriginals fled into the ranges - most likely the Victoria Range in the south west of the Grampians National Park - probably hoping they would not be followed and as a group congregated at a site that they probably considered safe from pursuit.
4. When the Aboriginals were trapped they stood up and were easily shot down. This would indicate that they did not understand how guns could harm them. I examined this aspect briefly in *Gippsland Massacres* with comment from Gippsland Aboriginal Phillip Pepper on how in the 'early days' the Aboriginals 'didn't wake up about bullets. They'd just stand there and get shot...' <sup>6</sup> the 'participant' clearly stated what easy targets

the Aborigines presented to them and noted that ‘as we fired at the body we pretty well spoilt all them as we hit’. This response of the Aborigines to firearms indicates that this was most likely the first time this particular group had clashed with Europeans and that this event therefore took place much earlier than March 1840 - the date of the Fighting Hills massacre.

5. The record of someone on the attacking side of a massacre being wounded is rare and no instance exists for this in Gippsland.<sup>7</sup> When one of the Whytes fired a shot too high and sent a bullet through one of his brother’s face the attack stopped immediately. The wound was almost certainly received by George Whyte, who appears to have lost the sight in one eye soon afterwards.<sup>8</sup> This is complicated by the Fighting Hills accounts which have two of the attackers receiving wounds; the first being an attacker speared through the calve and in the second one of the brothers receiving a light facial wound or graze from a ricochet.<sup>9,10</sup> The latter wound being a facial wound only vaguely approximates the participant’s account and it is possible that this is an example of source mixing or confusing the details of different massacres.

6. Finally the detailed description of the participant included that they were “armed with rifles” rather than shotguns or muskets. Muzzle loading rifles, as opposed to the much older muskets, had been in use in the Napoleonic wars and could be reloaded in less than two minutes by a competent handler. If the participant’s account is reliable the Whyte brothers had at least seven rifles in their armoury and in the space of half an hour (the participant does not say how long they were firing) could have fired more than 100 bullets at their prey. The rifle - as opposed to the musket - was a far more accurate piece of ordinance and could fire a much greater distance.<sup>11</sup> At least one of the brothers had military experience<sup>12</sup> and there appears to have been a certain military precision in the way this pursuit and massacre was carried out.

### **Filling in Some Details.**

#### **Why the Massacre Occurred**

The least contentious aspect of the massacre is the cause. The theft of stock appears to be a common element in the recognised massacres in the ‘Portland District’.<sup>13</sup> By contrast in Gippsland of the seven massacres I have studied in detail<sup>14</sup> three were in retaliation for the murder of Europeans, three were for the theft of stock and the cause of one is unknown. Trangmar noted that in the Portland district in 1838 alone four shepherds were killed and more than 3000 sheep stolen.<sup>15</sup> He also noted that for every European murder at least five Aborigines were killed in retaliation.<sup>16</sup> This seems an ultra conservative estimate and Aboriginal Protector Robinson suggested a much higher figure - though possibly still a conservative one - of 20 retaliatory killings for each European murder.<sup>17</sup> If the example of Gippsland is followed violent European response was most likely for each European murder and some for each large theft of stock. It therefore follows that there were a substantial number of retaliations or massacres across the Portland district for most of which all detail has been lost. Of the remaining information it is inevitable that there should be some confusion between some accounts and that many of them became mixed, exaggerated or distorted in some way and with many exact locations either obscured or lost. Perhaps crucial to this essay is the understanding that for some years - from 1838 or earlier to about 1845 - a rather one sided war took place in the Portland district with the onset of European ‘settlement’ between the Europeans and the Aborigines which is now commonly referred to as “frontier conflict”. Most accounts generally support this argument and as the participant’s account noted “a few [more] goes like that soon thin'd em”

#### Who was Involved - the Pursuers

This has also been outlined in detail by myself and others.<sup>18</sup> A quick reference to Billis and Kenyon indicates that the 'Park brothers' were in fact the Whyte brothers of the Konongwootong run near present day Coleraine.<sup>19</sup> Coleraine historian Graeme McGaffin has done substantial work on the Whyte brothers who are listed as follows in order of age: Thomas, William, George, Pringle, John and James. In 1840 at Konongwootong there was also a cousin John Whyte present.<sup>20</sup> There is so far no evidence that the eldest brother, Thomas, was ever in the Coleraine district.<sup>21</sup> Likewise it appears Pringle may not have come to Konongwootong, along with his cousin Charles James Whyte, until late 1840.<sup>22</sup> Thus it is most unlikely that either Thomas or Pringle was present at the Eyewitness Massacre or any of the other early massacres that followed. There remains the identities of the servants or shepherds that accompanied the Whyte brothers in this dismal affair. In *Gippsland Massacres* I identified Daniel Turner, Benjamin Wardle and William Gillespie.<sup>23</sup> To this list can be added Henry Shilton and William Fox who also were identified as employees of the Whyte brothers and involved in a later clash with the Aborigines.<sup>24</sup> The identity of 'the participant' was most likely one of these otherwise unknown individuals. The only other employee of the Whytes identified was known as Donaldson who was buried in the cemetery at Konongwootong and was 'speared by blacks'.<sup>25</sup> Clark identified another Whyte brothers shepherd 'speared by the blacks' as Bassett who was supposedly speared in retaliation for the earlier massacres in 1843.<sup>26</sup> It is not known whether these were separate spearing incidents or different names for the same man.

#### Who was Involved - the Pursued

Using Ian D. Clark's clan analysis we can surmise that the Aborigines caught up in this atrocity possibly belonged to the Ngarum Ngarum balug or the Pellerwin balug clans in the Dundas area or of the Takallut balug, the Waitburer gundidj or the Yaninborer balug clans in the Victoria range. Depending on the numbers involved it would seem more than likely that the clash involved at least two of these clans or some combination of two or more of these groups. Clark estimates that the population of each of these clans was roughly between 60-120 men women and children at the advent of the Europeans. Thus it follows that even allowing for substantial exaggeration by 'the participant' of the numbers involved and assuming that there were no women present then the men from at least 3 of these clans were involved.<sup>27</sup>

#### Where were the sheep stolen from?

This locality is crucial to placing the massacre site in the Grampians. If the sheep were stolen in the vicinity of the Konongwootong Creek, near present day Coleraine or anywhere west of there, then the distance that the sheep could be driven in a maximum of about 20 hours, and allowing for a maximum of 10 kilometres per hour for pursuit on horseback to 5 hours puts the Grampians at the extremity of this range.<sup>28</sup> But it is the distance the stolen sheep could be driven and where they were stolen from that is the crucial factor here rather than the speed of the pursuers. If the sheep were stolen from Melville Forest on the eastern area of the Konongwootong run then the Grampians becomes a much more likely destination and the Fighting Hills much less likely. It is quite possible - even likely - that the sheep were stolen from about the current Cavendish area. Billis and Kenyon note that the Whyte Brothers were depasturing their stock 'north of Grange' (ie Hamilton and surrounds) in the winter of 1839.<sup>29</sup> Sheep stolen from this area would make the Grampians (or the Black Range) the certain location of the massacre site and the Fighting Hills location impossibility.

When were the sheep stolen?

Billis & Kenyon state that the date the Whytes were 'north of the grange' between the winter of 1839 and February 1840, when they took up the Konongwootong run. The administrative records that Billis & Kenyon depended on are in fact the latest date possible and the brothers must have been at Koonongwootong at the beginning of 1840, possibly earlier. Likewise they had probably moved into Melville Forest - soon to be taken up as part of Konongwootong - in late 1839. McGaffin notes that when the brothers moved from the Pentland Hills (between Bacchus Marsh and Ballarat) and drove their sheep west: "the whole trek was subjected to savage and continual harassment by the aboriginals who attacked the shepherds, stole sheep and fired grass in an attempt to kill the sheep."<sup>30</sup> The fact that fire was used indicates that the sheep were driven westward in the summer to late summer of 1838/39 probably arriving at the 'north of the grange' about May 1839 and depasturing there for the winter.<sup>31</sup> The flocks were probably held there through the winter and early spring whilst country further west and south west was explored and surveyed preparatory to taking up the new run of Konongwootong. Since the participant's account indicates that this was probably the first conflict between squatter and Aborigine, the sheep were most likely stolen from the Cavendish / Melville Forest district in the winter or spring of 1839 before the Konongwootong run was taken up and possibly soon after the Whyte's arrival in the district.

Where chased: the pursuit and likely Massacre site

The pursuit to 'the ranges' must have been to somewhere in the Grampians and theoretically could have been in a wide arc of country from north of Dunkeld to Buandik. The massacre site should fit most or all of the following specifics. The site should be 2-3 hours travel on foot over rocky ground from where the horses were most likely to have been left. This foot route would involve a fair amount of climbing and was most likely to have been circuitous - definitely not in a straight line. The site should have a rock face that is not climbable and with possibly an amount of flat or slightly sloping land in front of the face where a large number of individuals could congregate. Whilst the number of steep rock faces of this nature is considerable in the western Grampians the other criteria including the shape of the land to roughly fit the description is not so easy to find. The site should either be something approximating a natural amphitheatre or a combination of gentle/ and steep slopes on either side of the rock face so that one attacker could wound the other by firing 'too high' over their targets. This narrows the choice considerably. The most likely possibility I can locate so far is to the south-east of Woohlpooer in the area of the Grampians National Park known as the Chimney Pots. The actual site would be in the east of this group and has the following features a) the escarpment with a relatively flat saddle in front of it and b) the land dropping off on each side.<sup>32</sup> a number of other sites in this immediate vicinity are also possibilities. Other possibilities include the areas to the north of the Chimney Pots around The Fortress and Mt Thackeray.

Conclusion

If the Victoria Range location in the Grampians is taken as the most probable massacre site then other pieces of the jigsaw fall roughly into place. Soon after arriving in the North Grange - Melville Forest District the Whyte brothers were confronted with a substantial theft of their stock. Within 24 to 30 hours<sup>33</sup> a small group of them - up to 10 individuals - set off in mounted pursuit of the Aborigines. They came up with them at mid-day and then set off after their quarry on foot over the rocky ground.<sup>34</sup> After some considerable time the pursuit party came on the Aborigines who were either resting or who had stopped at what they presumed was a safe location. They were covered on

both sides and trapped against a substantial rock face. They did not attempt to flee nor did they try to hide or protect themselves from the firing rifles as they could not comprehend how they could be hurt by something they could not see. The Whytes picked them off one by one keeping up a steady fusillade of shots from their rifles. The time was probably about mid afternoon and the killing went on for about half to three quarters of an hour before the incident described by the participant - of one brother shooting the other in the face - put an end to it. The consternation this caused amongst the attackers allowed the remaining survivors to escape. The numbers killed including those despatched with 'the butt-end' was possibly between forty-nine and sixty-nine individuals. And this was the first of 'the few goes that soon thin'd em' - another three to five substantial massacres taking place between winter 1839 and 1843.<sup>35</sup>

### End Notes

1. Gippsland Guardian 6.7.1860 in Gardner, P.D. *Gippsland Massacres*, Warragul Education Centre, Warragul, 1983 p.92
2. Clark, Ian D. *Scars in the Landscape: a register of Massacre sites in the Western District 1839-1859*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra 1995
3. personal communication from I.D. Clark c. late 2002.
4. As did Coleraine historian Graeme McGaffin in correspondence in 1980.
5. McGaffin, G. *The Whyte Brothers*, Coleraine Historical Society, Coleraine, 1972, quoting Alfred Thomson. The countryside from which the squatters came from may also have influenced their choice; in the Whyte Brothers case - Southern Scotland.
6. This is all based on the Whyte brothers and their employees' testimony and may possibly have been fabricated. As I have outlined in some detail in *Gippsland Massacres* (p.16) following the execution of those responsible for the Myall Creek massacre Europeans involved in atrocities did their best to maintain absolute secrecy about these events. When the secrecy surrounding the Fighting Hills massacre was lost due to the coincidental presence nearby of Assistant Protector Sievwright the circumstances changed drastically. It was then in the Whyte brothers best interests that the a) Aborigines appeared as the aggressors b) that the event was portrayed as an even fight rather than a one sided affair and that c) they appeared to be quite open about it rather be seen as making any attempt to suppress information about the affair. Probably to stress this last point John Whyte made the trip to Melbourne to inform Superintendent La Trobe and later Chief Protector Robinson of their version of the affair.
7. Gardner, P.D. *Gippsland Massacres* p. 97
8. This was not so much that these wounds did not occur but rather that since they were part of an illegal response they could never be recorded.
9. British Parliamentary Papers. Report on the Aborigines in the Australian Colonies, Vol. 34 p.142 Assistant Protector Sievwright noted in his depositions that George Whyte was 'wounded' and, although somewhat ambiguous, that he was not present at the Fighting Hills massacre.
10. In the Fighting Hills instance the depositions were taken by Assistant Protector Sievwright because of his presence nearby at the time of the massacre. See also note 6 above. Clark in his *Scars in the Landscape*, op.cit. suggests that he was 6 miles away when the massacre occurred although his exact location at the time is yet to be definitely established. The wounds add credibility to the Whyte brothers claims that the 'clash' was a fight rather than a one-sided affair. Even though the participant's account provides more detail he still clothes his story in some anonymity despite the event being twenty years in the past.
11. see Greener, W.W. *The Gun and its Development*, Bonanza Books, New York, 1988. I consulted with two local gun experts - Malcolm Smith and Alan Fox, both of Cassilis - who considered these estimates quite reasonable. The latter individual has had considerable experience using muzzle loading weapons.
12. McGaffin, G. *The Whyte Brothers*, op.cit. noted that the eldest brother Thomas was formerly a soldier in the 14th Light Dragoons. It is not known whether any of the other brothers had military experience.
13. McGaffin, G. letter in the Hamilton Spectator 20.8.1988 three only; Trangmar, E. *The Aborigines of Far Western Victoria*, Coleraine Historical Society, Coleraine, nd five; Clark, Ian D. *Scars in the*

*Landscape*, op.cit. about 18 but the definition of what comprises a massacre is problematical as Clark instances all clashes involving one or more killings. For the purposes of this paper an arbitrary figure of five or more dead is considered a massacre. If this figure is used Clark instances about 9 events in the area under discussion.

14. Gardner, P.D. *Gippsland Massacres* op.cit. This work does not include the massacres that occurred at Tambo Crossing (see Gippsland Heritage Journal No.19 March 1996) and at Hollands Landing (as yet unpublished Paper accepted for publication by the Gippsland Heritage Journal)

15. Trangmar, E. *The Aborigines of Far Western Victoria*, op. cit.

16. *ibid*

17. Robinson Journals quoted in Clark Ian D. *Scars in the Landscape* op cit. On pp.26-7 Clark also noted that folklore indicated that 40 Aborigines were killed after a shepherd named Heath was speared on the Wannon River at what became known as Murdering Flat.

18. principally McGaffin, G. *The Whyte Brothers*, op.cit.

19. Billis & Kenyon *Pastoral Pioneers of Port Phillip District*, Stockdale Press 1974

20. British Parliamentary Papers. op.cit. CJ. Whyte and John Whyte were the sons of James Whyte and appear to be either first or second cousins of the 6 Whyte brothers. They appear to have been intricately involved in the Whyte brother's pastoral pursuits until Koroite Station was separated from Konongwootong in 1845

21. McGaffin, G. *The Whyte Brothers*, op cit.

22. *ibid*

23. British Parliamentary Papers. op cit.

24. *ibid* p.143

25. McGaffin, G. *The Whyte Brothers*, op cit.

26. Clark, Ian D. *Scars in the Landscape*, op. cit. p.145

27. Clark, Ian D. *Aboriginal Languages and Clans: a historical atlas of western and central Victoria 1800-1900*, Dept. Geography and Environmental Science Monash University, Clayton, 1990. Although this is a substantial and impressive work I have some small criticisms with a number of Clark's language boundaries. In particular I strongly disagree with the boundary he draws near Wilsons Promontory in South Gippsland which I think is based on slim evidence. This boundary appears to have been drawn on the authority of a single source located in A W. Howitt's papers and yet ignores the boundary published in Howitt's own *Native Tribes of South-east Australia*; (McMillan, New York 1904) Clark also makes no attempt to outline clan boundaries.

28. These figures are based on the assumption that the pursuit commenced within two days of the sheep being stolen and gives a maximum estimate of daylight hours. It is possible that the actual time the sheep were driven was much less than this - for example if stolen in the winter and only driven in daylight hours then this maximum is more like 12 hours.

29. Billis & Kenyon op.cit. p.159. The Grange run, north of present day Hamilton, was previously taken up by the Wedge brothers

30. McGaffin, G. *Wannon Shire Centenary History 1872-1972*, Coleraine Historical Society, Coleraine 1972 p.25

31. It is of note that fire was used as a weapon of defence as well as attack. Thus the use of fire thought by McGaffin and others to have been an attack may have in fact been used by the Aborigines to cover a hasty retreat, for instance of a group containing the elderly, women and children.

32. The specific location can be found on the Chimney Pots Insert on the Southern Grampians Map C30 just above the 890m number

33. This is the maximum period of time for the Aborigines to have driven the sheep away to the ranges. The distance they could have driven stock in this time is complicated and dependant on many factors including terrain (flat to low hills)time of year (a neighbour informs me that in summer sheep can be driven at a much slower pace than in winter) and the weather.

34. Presumably someone was left to look after the horses when the pursuit was continued on foot - possibly the youngest brother James.

35. The Fighting Hills and the Fighting Waterholes are both accepted as definite massacres by the relevant authorities. Murdering Flat is another possible, but disputed event.