

The Bones of the Warrigal Creek Massacre

P.D. Gardner

[This unpublished essay was written about 2003 and in its current form completed about 2007. PDG]

".. much the greater part of these events we can know nothing about, not even that they occurred; many of them we can know only imperfectly; and even the few events we think we know for sure we can never be absolutely certain of, since we can never revive them, never observe them or test them directly. The event itself once occurred, but as an actual event it has disappeared; so that in dealing with it the only objective reality we can observe or test is some material trace which the event has left.." Carl L. Becker in Winks, R.W. (ed) *The Historian as Detective* (Harper & Row, NY, 1968) p.6

My interest in the Warrigal Creek massacre was recently rekindled by the enquiries of a Scottish TV production team. In preparation for a possible Television interview I reread my writing of more than twenty years ago and revisited some of the sites.[1] I reasoned that if the stories about this massacre were essentially true, and especially about the large numbers killed, then there should be a substantial number of bones still to be uncovered.

It is thought that there were a series of massacres in the Woodside region following the murder of Ronald Macalister in August 1843. The main event being at Warrigal Creek where approximately one hundred were killed, and a number of other smaller events at various locations where up to a further fifty were killed. [2] Within a year the Chief Protector of the Aborigines of the Port Phillip district, George Augustus Robinson journeyed through the area and it is thought that his impending visit caused a hasty gathering up of bones "by the wagonload". [3] These were hastily buried, most likely in a large sand scour, or scours, in the nearby sandhills at what is known as Red Hill. [4] A recent visit seems to confirm that the hill was one of the secondary sand dunes near the eastern edge of Jack Smith Lake being the closest of these sand formations to the massacre site.

As far as I can establish there have been five authenticated bone finds in the vicinity of Jack Smith Lake.[5] They are as follows: 1. The mouth of Jack Smith Lake which I have used elsewhere 2. Burnt Waterholes 3. Hoddinott's Sunville Run boundary 4. skulls collected by 'Gaslight' McKenzie 5. those unearthed by Archaeological surveys 1976-1982. [6] The "finds" I have not dealt with elsewhere are the surveys, Burnt Waterholes and those skulls collected by 'Gaslight' McKenzie in the 1930s. The most recent of these reports was a letter from Carol Glover of Sale who wrote:

"Re Red Hill,

My mother's name was Jessie McKenzie (died 1998). She was one of 7 children of Rose and Gaslight (William) McKenzie of Seaview, Seaspray. They lived on a soldier settlement division (Gaslight was a veteran of Gallipoli and Beersheba), the farm on the left, at the top of the hill before descending down

into the avenue of cypress trees and into the town. He and his brothers owned the land on both sides of the road, which I believe included the site of where Coady Buckley's house once stood. After his brothers' farms failed, Gaslight kept farming, at least until the end of the 1940s. When we were children, in the 1950s, my mother often told us the story of Red Hill, about a pile of bones there, of Aboriginal people killed in a massacre many years ago. After my mother's death I spoke to my uncle, Don McKenzie of Sale, who reiterated the story. He said that skulls were found, either on the farm, or nearby, which were at some time handed over to Mr. Bock, a local historian who still lived at Seaspray when I was a child. My grandfather used to stay in huts on the Duncan and McGauran properties, not far from Seaspray, when he was out rabbiting during the depression, so I've wondered whether he may have found the skulls then. [7]

It would seem that 'Gaslight' McKenzie collected these skulls whilst trapping rabbits in the 1930s. He was known to have worked in the vicinity of Jack Smith Lake and probably covered large distances whilst visiting his run of traps from one of these huts. It is assumed that these huts were some distance from his home near Seaspray. It is also assumed, probably with a fair amount of reliability, that the skulls came from this area and possibly from Red Hill itself. I have made some effort to trace the historian Ernest Bock without success and what happened to the skulls after his death in 1962 is not known.

The second account which I have not previously used is the "Burnt Waterholes" account originally in the *Gippsland Times* 28.3.1876 and more recently quoted in Peter Synan's *Gippsland's Lucky City* (City of Sale, Sale, 1994). It goes as follows:

"Mr Webb of this town, who recently was on a pleasuring trip to Prospect, brought home with him quite a collection of human remains from Burnt Waterhole, where he was enjoying a bath. They are those of natives, and bear pretty distinct evidence of having been hastily buried in the sand hummocks. The aborigines in the earlier days of our history were extremely troublesome and the settlers had but little compunction in shooting them down. Two perforations in the skull of one support the assumption that shot was the immediate cause of death".[8]

A number of aspects of this quote need to be clarified. Firstly the 'pleasuring trip to Prospect' probably refers to the general Seaspray - Woodside district. The current town of Seaspray was formerly known as Prospect. Secondly the Burnt Waterholes was probably Buntine's Waterholes Inn (also known as the Water Holes Inn) at this time located north of current Woodside and also north of the present highway and on Running Creek. It seems most likely that 'Burnt' as opposed to Buntine's was a reporter's error although both Bruthen Creek and the Bruthen Creek district were also known as the Dirty Water Holes.(9) It is thus assumed that Webb was being accommodated at this Inn. Finally if this is so then the bath he was enjoying, presumably because of hot summer weather, was near the 'sand hummocks' and thus some distance from where he was staying. If he was bathing in Jack Smith Lake at the end of summer then more than likely he had travelled past Warrigal Creek and was in the vicinity of Red Hill. The area suitable for bathing at the end of a dry season (as now March 2004) is quite small and adjacent to this hill. Perhaps he was part of a picnic or bathing party, in which case there would have been a packhorse in attendance as well, something needed to cart Webb's "quite a collection of human remains" back to the Waterholes Inn and thence back to

Sale. The rest of the quote seems self explanatory except that the "collection", if the bones were originally from the Warrigal creek massacre site, may have represented a substantial number of individuals with some possibly being represented by a single bone. From the tone of the article it would seem that a number of skulls were present. One can only guess at the number of individuals represented by Mr. Webb's 'collection' - around the dozen but possibly as high as twenty. Similarly the fate of these bones is not known.

In 1981 and 1982 K. Hotchin and P.J. May made a detailed archaeological survey in the vicinity of, and including, Red Hill.[10] However their grid selection was deliberately "laid to avoid areas where possible human bone was recognised." [11] In spite of this of the twenty-eight separate sites analysed in their Appendix 1 twelve indicated the presence of human remains including an "apparent human bone in section" at site BH4 and the "human burial previously salvaged by VAS" at BH7. [12] The latter being the excavation carried out by Simmons in 1976 at Blue Hole. Both the Red Hill sites (RH1&2) indicated presence of human remains. The general tone of Hotchin and May indicates that human remains were plentiful and the immediate and overriding question is are they normal remains from burials or are they the result of violent conflict? They are probably from both.

At this stage it is pertinent to examine the Kurnai treatment of their dead. According to anthropological opinion the Kurnai did not bury their dead. Alfred Howitt has left lengthy details of their funerary practices in both his major works.[13] A body was wrapped in a bundle of skins, kept in the encampment and a hut was built over it. If the camp moved the body was carried to the next camp in a type of sled. This practice was observed by James Warman in 1846 during the hunts for the white woman. [14] The body was carried, presumably by a close relative, until it was just a bag of bones and then finally deposited in a hollow log or buried in sand or soft soil - whatever was easily accessible at the time. As far as I am aware there is no reference to any kind of cemetery or specific burial ground of these people. At the time of death one or both of the hands of the deceased may have been removed, preserved, and worn by a close relative as a kind of talisman. The Kurnai believed the 'bret', or preserved hand, they carried next to their body would pinch them and warn them of danger.[15] This practice may further confuse an already confused issue, especially when, and if, the time comes to analyse bones that may be the evidence either of normal funerary practices, or of a violent demise, most likely at Warrigal Creek. Are, for instance, the human remains excavated by the VAS in 1976 compatible with the normal Kurnai funerary practice? One can readily assume because of the obviously long and almost continuous Aboriginal occupation in this area that there are many small parcels of bones deposited in the dunes in the traditional manner. The early Europeans may possibly have been aware of these 'natural' bone deposits concluded that it was an Aboriginal 'burial ground' and the possibility of hiding the bones of Warrigal Creek amongst them may have been an additional incentive for moving them.

Any remains transported from Warrigal Creek will probably exhibit at least one of number of features that should clearly differentiate them from any bones of a normal 'burial' described above. First there should obviously be bones from more than one individual. I think it is essential that in any future excavation or examination of human remains in this area that the DNA of each bone found be recorded so as to determine the numbers of individuals represented by each particular bone find. Second the bones should definitely be of a mixed nature rather than that of separate individuals. This is because it is assumed the bones have been laying around on the surface and possibly

strewn around by carrion, before being gathered up hastily and carted in a dray or wagon several miles over bumpy terrain before being dumped. Third these bones should mainly be represented by skulls and other bones of a reasonable size as they are the ones most likely to have been collected in this process. Thus the more or less complete skeletal remains of a single individual including foot and possibly hand bones would indicate a 'natural' burial. Fourth, and for the same reason above, most of the smaller bones were probably left at the massacre site. Thus any bone finds of a single individual at both Warrigal Creek and Red Hill would almost conclusively represent those of a massacre victim. Any detailed survey of the massacre site may eventually uncover some remnant bones and just possibly there may be some remnant bones in the waterhole and with the latter skulls possibly indicating gunshot wounds.(16) Finally, and also obviously, any collection of bones that exhibited signs of violence, as of the 'Burnt Waterholes' collection and those found at the mouth of Jack Smith Lake in 1912, are included. All the above features are indicative of a violent demise.

It is possible that this mixing of the bones has continued naturally with the interference of rabbits, wild dogs and even the erosion of the sands. Also it is possible that the major bone finds in 1876 and 1912 represented far more individuals than their discoverers concluded perhaps assuming that the skulls and bones they collected belonged to each other. Rather than the bones being placed in a single repository it seems probable that these bones were carted to the nearest scour in the dunes, supposedly at Red Hill, but possibly they were deposited at another site nearby or at a number of similar sites in this vicinity. I am aware that much of this is spelling out the obvious but I justify it on the grounds that no one seems to have considered it before. Finally I am also aware that current indigenous opinion is definitely against the disturbance of any human remains. However in the long term these priorities may change, if, for example, these remains were threatened, or it becomes more important to establish beyond any doubt the fate of these people, whose remains can then be re-interred in a safe location with dignity. [17]

A number of questions about the Warrigal Creek massacre and the disposal of the bones remain unanswered. Why were the bones taken to Red Hill? It is not definite that they were. We can only be sure that they were moved because of Meyrick's information in the Thomas papers and that both the folk history and the bone finds indicate that the vicinity of Red Hill was the destination for the bones. Further it is possible that two or more locations were used to dispose of the bones. As indicated above if human bones had previously been visible to early settlers then possibly it was assumed that the place was an Aboriginal burial ground and the obvious place to hide the bones. But just as likely it was the closest site for a quick disposal of otherwise incriminating evidence. Why were the bodies not burnt in a bonfire as Tyers had later seen done elsewhere? Perhaps there were too many corpses to dispose of in this manner. A number of other reasons, just as likely, come to hand. It was late winter and the conditions were possibly not favourable for that method of disposal or perhaps the 'Highland Brigade' just couldn't be bothered and left the corpses where they fell, probably as a dire warning to any survivors.

Why were the bodies not thrown in the waterhole? Some possibly were and at least some were shot in the waterhole till the 'water ran red with their blood', according to 'Gippslander'. Another closely related question is why the bones were not dumped in the waterhole? Bones deposited in the waterhole could surface at any time. They might, for example, be flushed out by the next flood and deposited on the surface for all to see again. Burial was perhaps thought to be a more long term solution for hiding the

evidence and less likely to be revealed. How long do the bones last? I have indicated in a footnote that I have no knowledge in this area whatsoever but can only again state the obvious in that both the processes of natural decay and dispersal are continuous. Any small bones left at Warrigal Creek may be extremely difficult to find and identify. Finally there have been a number of queries, mainly contemporary, about whether the massacre site was on the inside or the outside of the bend. Despite current appearances with the outside of the bend being open and grazed and the inside scrubby, specific sources indicate that the event occurred on the inside. [18] Allowance should be made for substantial environmental change caused by grazing and burning and paradoxically, not burning.

What may we then conclude from this rather theoretical rambling? A serious attempt should be made to establish the facts by scientific excavations at the indicated locations, specifically at the inside of the bend at Warrigal Creek and at Red Hill. Any decision to conduct these excavations will have to be initiated by Kurnai descendants and require their wholehearted support and participation. Sophisticated metal detectors may be of some use in locating musket balls or lead shot. Assuming objects can sink at least one centimetre per year both bones and balls could now be up to one and a half to two metres deep. Any human remains recovered, from the smallest bone upwards, should be identified, described, photographed and have a DNA sample taken before being returned to the Kurnai descendants for proper burial. Whether anyone will ever engage in such extensive, exhaustive, and no doubt expensive, work to prove conclusively the Warrigal Creek massacre occurred remains to be seen. In the meantime, I will continue my task, probably fruitless, of trying to discover the fate of the bones already uncovered.

Notes

1. this interview did not eventuate. My first work on this subject "The Warrigal Creek Massacre" was published in the Journal of the RAHS 66:1:1980 p.47
2. I assume the reader is familiar with the Warrigal Creek story. Those after more detail should consult the relevant parts of my books *Gippsland Massacres*, *Through Foreign Eyes* and *Our Founding Murdering Father*. Regarding the numbers killed Mr. J. Irving in his history of the Warrigal Creek station noted that 150 were killed "if accounts can be believed". (Yarram HS Newsletter No. 25 April 1982) This was a substantial increase in his estimate of those killed with that previously given to me at an interview with him about 5 years earlier. Readers may also notice a similar variation in some of my printed works. This can be explained by the fact that they have been written over a period of twenty-five years and that time, re-reading of sources, and possibly other factors, have wrought subtle changes. For instance in the 1970s when Red Hill was thought to be a) a massacre site or b) a repository for the bones of the Warrigal Creek massacre I was sceptical of any involvement of this site. After reading (in the early 1980s) the Meyrick account in the Thomas papers held in the Mitchell Library where he reported that 'the bones were carried away by the cartload' my position changed considerably to that approaching the position now expressed by this paper.
3. As a lesser possibility the motivating force for the removal of the bones may have been the arrival of Crown Lands Commissioner C.J. Tyers in late January 1844
4. Due to a lapse of over twenty years between visiting these sights there was some confusion in my mind over the exact location of this feature. This was partly because the hill is an insignificant landmark and thus I may have confused it with the more substantial but far more distant Hoddinott Hill. A recent visit (February 2004) and a few

leg miles indicates clearly that Red Hill was one of the small sand dunes close to the eastern edge of Jack Smith lake.

5. this does not include the skeletal remains of a single body excavated by Stewart Simmons of VAS at nearby Blue Hole in 1976

6. references as follows: *Gippsland Massacres* pp. 58-9; Synan, P. *Gippsland's Lucky City* (City of Sale, Sale, 1994) p.22; Walpole Mss in *Gippsland Massacres* p.55; pers. comm. Carol Glover; there is a record of a folk account of a skull cap being used as a sugar bowl by Jack Smith in Boddy, D. *Along the Ninety-mile* (The Author, Sale, nd.) p.29. However as the Boddy account is not definite and also as it is describing a single item and therefore not distinguishable from a natural burial it is not included here. The two main finds probably represent about thirty individuals. If it is assumed that the remains of a further thirty have been completely lost then possibly some indication of approximately thirty individuals remain to be discovered. On top of this there have been persistent rumours of bone finds and a shed full of bones in the Yarram-Woodside district. None of these rumours have been verified.

7. Carol Glover email 17.10.2001

8. Gippsland Times 28.3.1876 quoted in Peter Synan op.cit.

9. Possible alternatives for the name include an early name for Jack Smith Lake or even the Warrigal Creek waterhole.

10. Hotchin, K. & May, P.J. *An Archaeological Survey of Jack Smith Lake, South East Gippsland*, Vic. Archaeological Survey, Occasional Paper No. 19, 1984

11. *ibid.* p.11. This was probably because Kurnai descendants preferred, and still prefer, that all human remains are undisturbed.

12. *ibid.* pp. 51-8

13. Howitt, A.W. & Fison, L. *Kamilaroi and Kurnai*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra 1991 p.243; Howitt, A.W. *The Native Tribes of South East Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra 1996 p. 459

14. James Warman quoted in *Gippsland Massacres*, op. cit. p.71

15. Howitt. op. cit p.244

16. I have no idea of how long these bones last or if any can now be uncovered. I have observed that the bones of a large ram left to rot in a paddock completely disappeared from sight over a period of about five years.

17. One such threat is a possible sea-level rise caused by global warming. Recent estimates indicate that there is a slight probability that an abrupt or rapid melting of the Greenland (and/or the West Antarctic) ice shelf could occur, raising sea-levels by as much as five metres as early as 2100. Such an event would almost certainly completely destroy and engulf the Red Hill site, and possibly even affect the Warrigal Creek site. Even a 1m rise may well affect this site which is well within current (2008) estimates of sea level rises by 2100. Pers. comm. from A. Barrie Pittock. For more details see Pittock, A. Barrie. *Climate Change: Turning Up the Heat*, CSIRO Publ. Melb. 2005. Discussing 'abrupt' change and 'uncertainty' on p.212 Pittock noted: "past large-scale climate changes, especially abrupt ones, occurred when some natural change in external forcing was driving gradual climate change, and the climate system hit a threshold where abrupt change occurs. Right now, humans are providing a driving force that is producing gradual, if rather rapid, climate change. This is making it far more likely that the climate system will hit a threshold where abrupt change occurs." The latter reason could become paramount if revisionist historians, currently represented by Keith Windschuttle, claimed these events either did not occur or that they have been grossly exaggerated.

18. Hoddinott mss in *Gippsland Massacres* p.105

