



## **VOLUME 1 - 2019**

These stories appeared in the “Waranga News”, a fortnightly community newspaper based in Rushworth, Victoria, Australia, during 2019. The series of stories will continue in 2020.

While every effort has been made to be historically accurate, there may be some errors in the content, and if so, the author accepts full responsibility for them.

The stories have been researched and written to share information about the lives and country of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people. The author wishes to sincerely acknowledge the people and their Elders, past, present and future.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This series of stories will examine aspects of the lives of the Aboriginal people who formerly lived in Rushworth and district. The kernel of the idea for the series comes from a brief article which appeared in the “Rushworth Chronicle” and “Murchison Advertiser” in 1917.

“King Billy, an old aboriginal who was born in the main street of Rushworth 62 years ago, paid a visit to his native place during the week. The old fellow is suffering from double cataract of the eyes, and is almost blind. He claims to be the last of the Rushworth tribe of aborigines.” No further information was proffered in subsequent papers.

The article raises all sorts of questions about this man, and the lives of the Aboriginal people of the area, both before and after European colonisation. Waranga Dreaming will try to answer some of those questions, hopefully in a non-political way that builds general knowledge, understanding and a capacity for reconciliation.

### WHAT’S IN A NAME?

The title for these articles was deliberately chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, Waranga refers to the geographic area that will be the focus of much of the content – the former Shire of Waranga. It will centre around Rushworth, which is fairly central to the country of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people.

Secondly, Waranga (or “warranga”) is reputedly an aboriginal word meaning “sing”. Aboriginal ‘songlines’ are an important concept in oral history. David Wroth defines songlines as *“one of the many aspects of Aboriginal culture that artists draw on for inspiration. They are the long Creation story lines that cross the country and put all geographical and sacred sites into place in Aboriginal culture. For Aboriginal contemporary artists they are both inspiration and important cultural knowledge.”*

Finally, ‘The Dreaming’ is a concept that most people understand. It is a time when stories of Creation emerged, linked to places, flora, fauna and people. The stories were then passed on in an oral tradition. And, this series of stories will require some dreaming, to imagine Rushworth before and during colonisation.

### LAST OF THE RUSHWORTH TRIBE?

The article in the local papers in 1917 needs some clarification. There was no such thing as a “Rushworth tribe”. What the author of the article was referring to was Aboriginal people who frequented what later became known as the Rushworth area i.e. the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people. Much more about them will appear in later stories.

King Billy would not have been the old gentleman’s birth name, but one bestowed by the European inhabitants. Aboriginal people do not, and did not, have kings, but Elders. If he was indeed 62 in 1917, that places his year of birth around 1855. Imagine Rushworth at the time, radically changed by the influx of thousands of gold seekers from 1853. There are recorded stories of Aboriginal people camping at what is now the centre of town, at the north end of High Street. The European centre of town was then up the hill, south of Murchison and Nine Mile Roads.

The quoted claim suggests that he was “the last” of the Aboriginal people from his “tribe”. Attending a recent seminar on history writing, it was suggested that one should be wary of stating absolutes e.g. the biggest, the oldest, the first, the last. Nevertheless, what a story this man would have been able to tell.

References: Murchison Advertiser 13.7.1917; Wroth, David, Article in Japingka Aboriginal Art, “Why Songlines are Important in Aboriginal Art” 2015

## 2 BORN ON THE GOLDFIELDS

The man who was the inspiration for these stories was apparently born in High Street Rushworth in 1856. There are contemporary reports of groups of Aboriginal people camping at the bottom end of High Street, and at least one reference to a corroboree being held there.

To put his birth into context, this would make the man (later known as “King John”) one of the first children to have been born in the new town. The vast majority of Rushworth residents at the time were single men, intent on pursuing their dream of striking it rich on the goldfields. Families, and the birth of children, would have been quite rare at the time.

Many Aboriginal people had been displaced since squatting began in the 1830s, and by 1856, the Aboriginal Protectorate at Murchison had already been disbanded. Moving to the vicinity of a new mining settlement provided a range of opportunities for the Aboriginal people who remained in the area.

### ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND THE GOLD RUSH

In the histories written about the Victorian goldfields, Aboriginal people are generally given scant recognition. Fred Cahir rectified this to a degree with his 2012 publication, *Black Gold – Aboriginal People on the Goldfields 1850-1870*.

The book shows that one of many roles that Aboriginal people fulfilled was to provide a reliable labour force for the by-then well-established pastoral industry, when many of the existing workers had gone off to the gold rushes. Our King John “spent some strenuous years in the Avenel district, breaking in horses and shearing.” Perhaps his entrée to this type of work was that he was following in his father’s footsteps?

### ROLES IN GOLD MINING

Apart from working in the pastoral industry, Fred Cahir cites many examples of Aboriginal people seizing the opportunities provided by the gold rushes to make a living. Certainly, there is evidence to suggest that Aboriginal men engaged in mining. The value of the precious metal to the new arrivals was recognised, even though it was not necessarily valued by the original custodians of the country.

The story that is usually told about the start of the Rushworth gold rush revolves around an aboriginal woman showing travellers where gold could be found in what became Main Gully, just south of the town. These travellers were camping, while on their way from Bendigo to Beechworth goldfields, when they noticed the countryside looked similar to that around Bendigo i.e. ironbark forest, gravelly hills. After showing the local Aboriginal people some gold, the party was directed to places where alluvial gold could be found nearby.

### OTHER ROLES

Aboriginal people around Rushworth in the 1850s were also able to compensate to some extent for the loss of access to country by providing goods and services to the new arrivals. Fred Cahir concludes in his study that “many Aboriginal people sought to find their niche in the new society, via predominantly economic channels, through trading in their manufactured goods, farming and cultural performances, or in employment roles such as bark cutting, tracking, guiding and police work, which did not inordinately compromise their cultural integrity and took advantage of their superior traditional work skills”.

Later in life, our “King John” certainly followed in this tradition, making a living by manufacturing and selling boomerangs, and giving exhibitions of boomerang throwing.

An article in the Melbourne “Herald”, which resulted from an interview with King John in 1913, states that he was a member of the “Woorung” tribe. Perhaps this was an abbreviation of the name of the Aboriginal people who for millennia had frequented what became the Rushworth area – the Ngurai-illum Wurrung.

References: Melbourne Herald 3.10.1913; Cahir, Fred, *Black Gold – Aboriginal People on the Goldfields of Victoria 1850-1870* (ANU E Press 2012)

### **3 AN EXPERT WITH THE BOOMERANG**

During his life “King John”, the Aboriginal man born in the new town of Rushworth in 1856, developed his skills in boomerang manufacture and throwing to help provide him with an income. When he was interviewed for a front-page article in the Melbourne “Herald” in 1913, he explained that the “tribe’s weapon of war and defence was much larger and longer, and did not return to the thrower like the one known nowadays.”

He considered the returning boomerang was “merely a toy with the young bloods of the tribe”, rather than a weapon that was useful for hunting or fighting. Nevertheless, he perfected the art of constructing returning boomerangs, which were sold and used in public displays.

#### **DISPLAYING TRADITIONAL SKILLS**

Around the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when King John was in his 40s, it was not uncommon for Aboriginal people to display some of their traditional skills in public. These skills often included spear and boomerang throwing and fire lighting, and would be performed as a novelty at agricultural shows, sports carnivals, football matches and so on.

Healesville Athletic Club, which ran sports carnivals on Boxing Day and at Easter, even included such events in their regular program, largely because of the close proximity to the Coranderrk Aboriginal settlement. Some of the people from Coranderrk (which began in 1863) had their origins in the Goulburn Valley and Waranga areas.

King John was prominent in participating in displays of traditional skills, which supplemented his income. He had given numerous exhibitions at city and bush events, and “his exhibitions always draw a crowd.”

#### **A MISCALCULATION**

On one occasion, King John was giving a boomerang throwing exhibition at half-time at a city football match. It is not hard to imagine the scene at one of the old suburban VFL grounds. As a special new trick to impress the crowd, King John thought he would attempt to catch the returning boomerang in his mouth.

However, he miscalculated the speed of the returning boomerang, which struck him across the nose and mouth, led to a few days in hospital and left some prominent scars as a permanent reminder.

#### **FOOTBALL MATCHES**

Around the same time, social footy games between Aboriginal teams and local teams were not uncommon, and drew large crowds. For instance, a 1900 game at Coburg pitted an Aboriginal team from Healesville/Coranderrk against a local team drawn from Coburg and Moreland. A staggering 2000 people attended the game, in which the Aboriginal team was captained by E McDougall, also known as “King Billy”. It is no surprise that the crowd were thrilled by the speed and skills displayed the Aboriginal men, as we are today.

That “King Billy” (not directly connected to the one from the Rushworth area) was reputed to be the oldest Aboriginal man in Victoria at the time, although his age was not reported. He and W Abbott put on a boomerang throwing display at half-time.

Another match, between the men from Cumeragunja and South Bendigo, took place in Bendigo in 1901, with the Cumeragunja men playing barefoot. Again, there was a boomerang throwing exhibition at half time. So, our “King John” seems to have been part of a group of men who kept part of their culture alive by putting on these displays.

## THE TITLE “KING BILLY”

In the “Herald” article, King John did not want his European name used, perhaps out of modesty. However, he did say that he could be referred to as “King John” because that was his grandfather’s name. He also indicated that he was entitled to be referred to as “King Billy” because he was “the last of the tribe”. The name “King Billy” comes up regularly in Aboriginal history post European colonisation. Maybe it was a generic term which was applied to the men who fell into that category.

Reference: Melbourne “Herald” 3.10.1913; Healesville and Yarra Glen Guardian 15.7.1900

## 4 OUT OF AFRICA

Let’s go back in time a little, and briefly reflect on when Homo Sapiens (i.e. the modern human family) first appeared in the Waranga area. A whole range of scientists, from archaeologists to molecular biologists, have been pondering this question for a long time. Recent developments in the study of our DNA have come up with new information that confirms results previously suggested by other branches of science.

There is now little doubt that Homo Sapiens had their origins in East Africa. We all can be traced back “from a single genetic line in Africa within the last 200,000 years.” Expansion to other parts of the world tended to follow coastlines. Initial forays into Arabia and India happened 50-60,000 years ago, with their descendants reaching the north of Australia and New Guinea around 50,000 years ago. There are some fairly recent claims that the arrival date was some 15,000 years before this, but the present consensus still considers around 50,000 years ago as the most likely.

### THE FIRST EXPLORERS

When we think about explorers of the Waranga area, we usually tend to look no further back than Major Mitchell coming through “Australia Felix” in 1836, followed in quick succession by overlanders and squatters.

However, on the basis of what we now know, the true first explorers spread relatively quickly around the coasts of Australia, in both clockwise and anti-clockwise directions. In the process, some people moved inland, with the vanguard of this movement reaching our area around 45,000 years ago. Others crossed the land bridge onto country that is now Tasmania, with at least one archaeological site in the south of that state dated at 40,000 years old.

### WHAT WAS IT LIKE?

In the period when the first explorers were coming to this area, it was a time of extreme glaciation in the world. Because so much of the earth’s water was in a frozen state, ocean levels were much lower. Consequently, there were land bridges between what is now Australia and the islands around us e.g. Kangaroo Island, Tasmania, Papua New Guinea.

Despite this, there is general agreement that the first arrivals still had to make a substantial part of the journey by crossing the sea, probably by “island-hopping”, then a sea journey of at least 80 kilometres. They didn’t just walk here. Imagine setting off on a small, flimsy craft, without knowing if you would ever reach land.

Australia, and perhaps our area, was then inhabited by so-called “mega-fauna”, who shared the terrain with the first human arrivals. Many scientists believe that humans played a role in the extinction of mega-fauna, through hunting and the use of fire. The climate was much cooler and drier than we experience now.

### GLOBAL WARMING

After a period of peak glaciation 15-18,000 years ago, there was global warming which melted ice and caused sea levels to rise substantially. Tasmania and New Guinea became islands as sea levels rose by as much as 100 metres. You can appreciate why people in low-lying Pacific islands, for instance, are concerned about further global warming now.

Over the past 5000 years or so, climate has become more temperate in our area, with warmer temperatures and higher rainfall. These conditions helped to make the area more suitable for human habitation, contributing to a growth in population.

It was also a period of technical and cultural innovation, as indicated by the use of advanced stone tools, collection and use of ochre, the development of trading patterns and land use. The social structure of communities became more complex, as did their spiritual beliefs and practices.

## OUR STORY

So our story, the story of human habitation of the Waranga area, goes back a very long way. It did not just begin in the 1830s. It is useful to quote a native American who said "What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night..." (Crowfoot). We are insignificant in the overall scheme of things, but should all be proud of being part of an ancient history of our area which goes back longer than most of us can imagine.

Reference: Meredith, Martin, *Born in Africa – The Quest for the Origins of Human Life* (Simon & Schuster, 2011); Website - the conversation.com (7.8.18) - *When did Aboriginal people first arrive in Australia?*

## 5 ANCIENT HISTORY

Much of the history that has been written about the Aboriginal people of the local Waranga area relates to the last 180 years. This is understandable, in that academic historians are always concerned with written documentation and verification. However, that is all but impossible when a culture has relied on an oral tradition, as Aboriginal people had done before European colonisation.

Although we might think of it as a long time, the last 180 years represents a drop in the ocean (<1%) of time during which the local area has been in the custodianship of human beings. Without getting into a debate about exactly how long we are talking about, we can say with certainty that it is tens of thousands of years.

Of necessity, what follows requires some dreaming of what might have been in the millennia that preceded European colonisation of the area. It is not supposed to represent a documented history of the lives of the Aboriginal people who inhabited the Waranga area, or to do so in any chronological way. Instead, it will try to provide some understanding of what Aboriginal lives may have been like in the years before European colonisation.

### CONNECTION TO COUNTRY

One of the most obvious themes in the history of Aboriginal people has been their connection to country. Taking land selection in the late nineteenth century as a starting point, present day farming families in the area can point to perhaps 150 years of continuous connection to a parcel of land. Those people no doubt feel a very strong family affinity with that land. Imagine how strong that connection would be if your ancestors had been on that land a hundred times longer than that.

Central to the idea of connection to country is the special significance that certain places within that country have to long-term inhabitants and custodians. This could apply equally to Aboriginal people and more recent arrivals. From an Aboriginal point of view, these special places are linked by song lines. As defined in the first article in this series "*They are the long Creation story lines that cross the country and put all geographical and sacred sites into place in Aboriginal culture.*"

This begs the question – what were the sites that were important to the Ngurai-illum Wurrung and what were the stories about them that were handed down from generation to generation?

### DREAMING SITES

These days we can really only speculate about where those special places were for the Ngurai-illum Wurrung. They could include communal meeting places, areas where separate men's and women's business was carried

out, places where historic events occurred e.g. a famous battle, the birth or death place of a significant individual, geographically significant features e.g. swamps, creeks and rivers, hills, water-holes, the Mt Camel range and much more.

Sadly, we seem to have very little in the way of information about significant sites in our area and the stories that are attached to them. This is probably unsurprising in view of the speed with which the culture virtually disappeared in the tiny window of time between 1840 and 1850. The Aboriginal population went into rapid decline, people were spread far and wide, and connection to country was dramatically severed, particularly by the expansion of the pastoral industry and then the gold rush.

## **6 THE NGURAI-ILLUM WURRUNG PEOPLE**

The Aboriginal people whose country included the Rushworth area were known as the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people. Over the years since European colonisation, nearly 50 variations of this name have been used, such as Ngooraialum, Orilim, Woralim and Noorilim. However, Ngurai-illum Wurrung is the generally accepted name in use at the moment, and the one that will be used in these stories.

Wurrung means language (or lip, tongue, speech), so Ngurai-illum Wurrung means the language spoken by the Ngurai-illum people. Elements of the language were recorded over the years, or European interpretations of what those parts of the language meant. Language will be the subject of a later article in this series.

### **LINKS TO THE KULIN NATION**

The Ngurai-illum Wurrung people were closely linked to, although not necessarily part of, what has been termed the Kulin Nation. The term "nation" refers to the fact that all of the Aboriginal people in the nation shared many similarities in language and culture, with regional variations. For instance, the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people shared a common language with the Daung Wurrung (or Taungurung) to their south, and it has been estimated that 75% of their vocabulary was shared with the Djadja Wurrung people to their south-west.

There were five language groups generally recognised within the Kulin Nation, which apart from sharing common language, also shared kinship ties, religious beliefs and rituals for some of the main events in people's lives such as initiation and burial practices.

The specific groups in the Kulin Nation included the Bun Wurrung (Bunorong), the Djadja Wurrung, the Wada Wurrung, the Daung Wurrung (Taungurung) and the Woi Wurrung people. Together, the lands for which they were the custodians for covered roughly a third of Victoria – south to Port Phillip and Western Port Bays and to the west, well beyond the Loddon River.

### **CLANS OF THE NGURAI-ILLUM WURRUNG**

Within the Ngurai-illum language group, it is generally recognised that there were three specific groups that we will refer to as clans. Put simply, a clan is a group of people linked by kinship and descent. Think successive generations on the family tree.

Although each of the three clans of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people tended to be associated with a particular area, movement in response to seasonal food supplies, and for cultural reasons, would have meant that all three travelled widely.

In briefly introducing the clans, it needs to be noted that, like the name for the overall group (Ngurai-illum Wurrung), a host of different names have been used over the last 180+ years. This story will just refer to the name used in Ian Clark's 1990 work on languages and clans. In that work, he also lists all the variations in name that he came across in his research.

The three clans, and what Ian designates as their "approximate location", are the Bendebora balug (Elmore), Gunung willam (Campaspe River) and Ngurai-illum balug (Murchison). "Balug" means people, and "gunung willum" means "creek dwellers".

At the same time as stating an approximate location, Ian cites all the locations where the clans were seen and mentioned in contemporary accounts. The clans obviously covered vast distances in their travels.

References: Clark, Ian D, *Aboriginal Languages and Clans: An Historical Atlas of Western and Central Victoria 1800-1900* (Monash Uni, 1990); Ecology and Heritage Partners, *Wallan Structure Plan and Infrastructure Co-ordination Plan* (2014)

## 7 LANDS OF THE NGURAI-ILLUM WURRUNG

By the early 1800s, prior to colonisation, the "borders" of the lands for which different groups of Aboriginal people in Victoria were custodians were quite clearly defined and respected. This was a process that had been going on for thousands of years.

Victoria was divided up into lands of around 30 Aboriginal language groups. Within those areas, there were smaller areas mainly frequented by the various clans belonging to each group.

While there is ongoing debate about the specific boundaries of the land cared for by various groups, the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people had pretty clearly defined territory. The northern boundary abutted what is now known as Yorta Yorta land, to the south – Taungurung, and to the west, beyond the Campaspe River – Baraba Baraba.

The area extended in a wedge roughly from the Campaspe River in the west, to the creeks between present-day Murchison and Violet Town to the east. The southern limit ran below present-day Murchison on an east-west axis, while the northern limits extended from near Echuca in the north-west, on a south-easterly axis, crossing the Goulburn north of Murchison. So, a massive area (500 square kilometres in round figures), with a relatively small population.

### CLAN BASES

As previously noted, there were three clans of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung which spoke the same language and shared common culture and customs. Most contemporary maps of aboriginal groups have the Gunung Willum clan based along the Campaspe River, from around Elmore and north towards Echuca. "King" Charles Tattambo, who is buried in the Murchison cemetery, was a member of this clan and a ngurungaeta (elder, head man).

The Bendebora people also frequented the northern reaches of the Campaspe, and across the plains south east of Echuca. Ngurai-illum people were more often found along the Goulburn River and the creeks to the east.

Later stories will focus on movement of the clans within the broader Ngurai-illum Wurrung lands, although there is a dearth of published information about this. Of necessity, much of the published information that is available is speculative, and often contradictory, so it is very hard to get a clear picture.

Suffice it to say at this stage that water was vitally important, so rivers, creeks, swamps, lakes (e.g. Reedy Lake) and other wetlands were central to the Aboriginal way of life in this area.

### RELATIONSHIPS WITH NEIGHBOURS

Most present-day writing suggests that the Ngurai-illum occupied land between more aggressive neighbours – Yorta Yorta to the north and Daung Wurrung (Taungurung) to the south. There is some evidence to suggest that the Ngurai-illum were not as warlike as their neighbours, and indeed feared them.



However, this is not to suggest that contact was always avoided. There was regular contact for trade, cultural events and to allow for inter-marriage between members of different clans and language groups.

What it does seem to suggest though, is that territorial boundaries were known and generally respected. Invasion with the intention of taking over land, in the sense that we know it, did not occur between aboriginal groups. This may be partly because boundaries had been established since time immemorial, and particular clans were inextricably linked to their own country where they spent most of their time.

## **8 CUSTODIANSHIP OF THE LAND TODAY**

In the last Waranga Dreaming story, we looked at the traditional lands of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people. It was noted that much of their country became the old Shire of Waranga after European settlement, and included the sites of the present-day towns of Colbinabbin, Rushworth, Stanhope and Murchison. That raises some questions when you are moving around Ngurai-illum Wurrung today.

For instance, if you drive along the Midland Highway between Corop and Stanhope, a sign welcomes you to Yorta Yorta country. If you look at the signs at various sites around the area, like Stockyard Plain near Waranga Basin and the Police Paddocks at Murchison, they refer to the fact that you are on Yorta Yorta land. A similar situation exists to the south, where there are signs indicating that you are on Taungurung land. So where do our Ngurai-illum Wurrung people fit into all this?

### **REGISTERED ABORIGINAL PARTIES**

Much of Victoria is covered by agreements between the State government and what are known as Registered Aboriginal Parties (RAPs). Broadly, what the RAPs do is involve Aboriginal people in managing and protecting Aboriginal cultural heritage in Victoria, as well as providing a range of services to the wider community. They administer the Aboriginal Heritage Act of 2006.

You can find out more about RAPs by using the following link –

<https://w.www.vic.gov.au/aboriginalvictoria/heritage/registered-aboriginal-parties.html>

The RAPs are incorporated bodies that are each responsible for a specific geographic area. In the absence of such a body representing the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people, the lands for which they were the original custodians have come under the care of two RAPs – the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation and the Taungurung Land and Waters Council Aboriginal Corporation.

This explains the apparently contradictory signage mentioned above. The places were once on Ngurai-illum Wurrung land, but they are currently cared for by the descendants of people who were originally neighbours of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung.

### **A FLUID SITUATION**

Currently there are 12 RAPs in Victoria which cover about two-thirds of the state's geographic area. This number is not restrictive in that other organisations can apply to become a RAP. Eventually, the whole of Victoria might be under the custodianship of RAPs. The main areas not covered at present are in the north-west of the state around Swan Hill, the Victorian Alps and East Gippsland. There is also a relatively small triangle of Ngurai-illum Wurrung land around Corop that has not been claimed.

It is possible for a certain geographic area to have two RAPs responsible for it. In future it could be conceivable that if the descendants of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung became a RAP, they could share responsibility for our area with the two groups mentioned above.

## A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

If an issue were to arise in relation to, say, the Aboriginal water-hole at Whroo, the relevant RAP (currently Taungurung L&WCAC) would be consulted as the “primary guardians, keepers and knowledge holders of Aboriginal cultural heritage.” One example might be a situation where DELPW was thinking about improving the very inadequate infrastructure and total lack of interpretive data at the site of the water-hole. They would need to liaise with the RAP first, even though they are a government department with responsibility for the area.

In the future, if there was a Ngurai-illum Wurrung group which went through the process to become a RAP, with responsibility for the former lands of the Ngurai-illum, then they would also need to be consulted.

Reference: Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council website

## 9 HOW MANY PEOPLE?

Over the years since colonisation, there has been endless speculation about what the Victorian Aboriginal population would have been pre-1830. Starting from what we know with some certainty, the last census (2016) indicated that there were nearly 50,000 people in Victoria who identified as having Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origins.

This is a remarkable comeback from the mid-1800s, when the population was critically low. Then, many pundits suggested it was just a matter of time before the Aboriginal people “died out”. In 1845, there was a census of sorts, which probably had severe limitations. However, the surviving people in the local Ngurai-illum Wurrung clans were enumerated as follows – Bendebora (27), Gunung-illum (27) and Ngurai-illum (53). So, a recorded total of only 107 individuals across an extensive area. Ten years earlier, there may have been several hundred, but we are certainly not talking about thousands.

### POPULATION DECLINE

Estimates of the numbers of Aboriginal people in Australia pre-colonisation range from about 300,000 to one million. There is evidence to suggest that these numbers had already been drastically reduced by disease, particularly smallpox.

Smallpox may have been introduced to the country by Macassan seamen, who traded with Aboriginal people along the northern Australian coastline, and through the Torres Strait. A second smallpox epidemic is thought to have spread as a result of European colonisation of what are now the eastern states of Australia. Smallpox and other introduced diseases took a huge toll on the Aboriginal people, who had little or no immunity.

A whole range of factors contributed to further dramatic population decline in this area in the ten years after Major Mitchell passed through in 1836. In his wake came the first squatters, who took up land at an astonishing rate, displacing the original inhabitants. There was, at the same time, a significant drop in the birth rate within Aboriginal communities.

Violence by squatters and their men, according to eminent historian A G L Shaw, may have contributed to at least 10% of deaths at this time. Again, estimates vary, but there is no doubt that this was a factor in the Waranga area.

### LIFESTYLE CHANGES

The radical changes in lifestyle which followed colonisation meant that traditional food supplies were diminished, quickly making it hard for Aboriginal people to live comfortably using the available local resources, as they had done for thousands of years. Diminished diet and poor health followed, further increasing susceptibility to disease.

There was intense competition for resources as the early squatters established large flocks of sheep across the northern plains of Victoria. Ironically, grasslands which were particularly attractive to the squatters (because no clearing was required), was the result, in no small part, of firestick farming by Aboriginal people over millennia.

Numbers of native fauna, which had been readily available as a food source, started to become scarcer. The sheep also had a tendency to eat or trample other traditional food sources such as murnong (yam daisies, native dandelion). When aboriginal people started to see sheep as a new source of food, the potential for conflict was obvious.

Water resources, vital for any human habitation of a region, came under increased pressure as the squatters sought reliable water supplies for their flocks. The Ngurai-illum Wurrung spent plenty of time where there was water e.g. creeks, rivers and wetlands which had not only provided water but an extensive range of flora and fauna forming part of their varied diet.

References: Barwick, D, Aboriginal History (1984); The Latrobe Journal (No 61, Autumn 1988);

## 10 MOVING AROUND COUNTRY

During the centenary celebrations of the establishment of Rushworth and Whroo in 1953, former Nagambie resident Harry S Parris wrote a substantial article about what he considered would be the movements of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung around the local area. If Mr Parris was correct in some of his assumptions, some of the places he mentioned may well have been dreaming sites of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung.

Mr Parris entitled his story "Waranga District Abos. Their Customs and Perambulations". The word "Abos" is not one we would use these days because of its perceived derogatory connotations, although in the 1950s it was common parlance. Today the respectful generic term is "Aboriginal people", or the name of the specific clan or language group e.g. Ngurai-illum balug (clan) or Ngurai-illum wurrung (language group).

### CLAN COUNTRY

Mr Parris is referring to the Ngurai-illum balug clan in his story, listing their numbers as about 200 (no date given) and cites their territory as extending from "the Old Crossing Place (Mitchellstown) to Toolamba, and including Whroo and Rushworth to as far as Mt Scobie (Kyabram) on the west, and as far as Violet Town to the east". As cited in an earlier story, along with the Ngurai-illum balug, two other clans to the west of this country made up the Ngurai-illum Wurrung language group.

It is easy to imagine Mt Scobie being a place of significance, being the only eminence over a wide area of plains. Perhaps it was a meeting place for the three Ngurai-illum Wurrung clans to get together on a regular basis. A study first published in 1878 cites the Aboriginal name of Mt Scobie as "Porpanda", meaning "a large sandhill" or "high mountain". Compared to the surrounding seemingly featureless plain, you could appreciate how the latter might apply, even though it is only a little over 100 m high.

### WINTER CAMP

Harry Parris believed that the Ngurai-illum balug had their winter camps at Reedy Lake, near Bailieston. He cites the existence of large middens as evidence of long term use of the wetland, stating that "the size of these ovens indicate that this must have been a favoured camping spot and was probably used by the natives for hundreds of years."

Whether there was enough food in the Reedy Lake area to sustain the clan during the winter is open to discussion. However, it is clear that wetlands were important areas providing food such as fish, mussels, yabbies, water birds and their eggs, marsupials, reptiles and plant materials.

## MASSACRE ON THE GOULBURN

Just east of Reedy Lake, on the banks of the Goulburn River between what is now Kirwan's Bridge and the Goulburn Weir, there was a massacre in November 1837 in which at least six Aboriginal people were killed, including women and children. Others were wounded.

There is some conjecture as to which clan the people were from. One of the possibilities is the Ngurai-illum balug people, given the proximity to Reedy Lake, and the likelihood that the river would have been a good place to seek food in the late spring.

The perpetrators were an overlander called Fitzherbert Mundy and some of his men. Mundy later openly bragged to a fellow squatter (Dredge) that he wouldn't have trouble with the Aboriginal people because "he had given them such a punishing as they would not likely forget." Given the remoteness from colonised areas in 1837, it seems that the actions of Mundy and his men went unpunished. About ten years after the massacre, Mundy, who was by then squatting at Westernport, died from extreme alcohol abuse. Did he have recriminations? Or was his alcoholism related to the death of his wife the year before?

References: Rushworth Chronicle – 1953 articles on the centenary of the town's establishment; Smyth, Robert Brough, *The Aborigines of Victoria (1878)*; Broome, Richard, *Aboriginal Victorians – A History Since 1800 (2005)*

## 11 SPRING ON THE PLAINS

In some previous stories, we looked at an article written by Harry Parris, of Nagambie, in 1953. From what we now call the Rushworth forest, he surmised the Ngurai-illum balug people may have moved to Waranga swamp (now covered by Waranga Basin) and then on towards what is now the Tatura/Toolamba area, where more wetlands abounded with food sources. An alternative suggestion was the lakes complex around the Colbinabbin-Corop area.

Wetlands would have been excellent areas to take advantage of a range of food sources in the spring time, so these are reasonable propositions. As water holes dried up, fish could be caught more easily and plenty of water birds would be nesting. While crossing the plains, reptiles and marsupials would be on the move; new growth would be happening in many of the food plants, while harvest time would be coming for grain crops.

### BURIALS AT SAPLING POINT

Aboriginal burials are an indicator of places frequented by the local clans. Waranga swamp could have been one such spot. In 1938, some local fisherman found a skull and some bones in the vicinity of what is now called Sapling Point. Waranga Basin was at a 12-year low at the time, with the bones being found about 30 metres from the high-water mark. Reminiscent of the lines in the well-known Paul Kelly song, "Jindabyne", the fisherman "stayed up there fishing...reported it when they came back down". The bones weren't going anywhere in the meantime.

Things moved pretty quickly after that. Senior Constable Ashe and a witness went back out to the Basin later that day with one of the fishermen, who had found a portion of a human skull and some bones. They unearthed more bones, and "what appeared to be a portion of another skull." The bones were around 10-20 cm under the ground, apart from the section of skull that had probably been unearthed by wave action. Constable Ashe said "mixed with the soil were what appeared to be pieces of burnt charcoal. I could not find any traces of clothing or buttons."

### MEDICAL REPORT

Homicide detectives arrived from Melbourne the next day, taking the bones back with them for medical examination at the City Morgue. Dr Mollison conducted a full examination of the remains and concluded that the bones were of a young adult female and an older male who had been dead for many years (possibly over

100) “and had been those of Australian aboriginals...there was nothing to show that the deaths were due to any violence.”

The Coroner agreed with the Detective Davis that “there are no suspicious circumstances.” It is unclear what happened to the remains after the Coroner had completed his work.

#### SOME OBSERVATIONS

Perhaps the remains were those of a husband and wife. It was not uncommon for older Aboriginal men to have wives younger than themselves – sometimes much younger. If the deaths were not the result of violence, then perhaps the pair died around the same time as a result of illness or disease. Dr Mollison’s conclusion about the age of the remains could mean that the deaths pre-dated European colonisation of the Waranga area. As noted in an earlier story, diseases such as smallpox had by then spread south from northern Australia, decimating Aboriginal populations well before Major Mitchell traversed the area.

Pre-Waranga Basin days, the location would probably have been well above the level of water in the swamp. Aboriginal burials had all sorts of variations, but some common themes were the likelihood of one or two people being buried there, the presence of ochre and charcoal in the grave, close proximity to water and/or where the people happened to be living at the time.

Reference: Report of Coroner’s Inquest held on 3.5.1938; Aboriginal Burials, Victorian State Government fact sheet (2008)

## 12 SUMMER ON THE RIVER

Logically, you would expect that Aboriginal people would have retreated to the vicinity of the Campaspe and Goulburn Rivers during the summer. Access to a reliable supply of water and food resources would have been vital. This was the conclusion reached by Harry Parris when he was thinking about seasonal movements of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people of the local area.

Parris thought that in summer, the Ngurai-illum Wurrung frequented the river around Dhurringile (an Aboriginal word meaning “crouching emu”) and North Murchison, but not much further north on the river because of their enmity with the Bangerang, a clan of the Yorta Yorta.

#### FISHING METHODS

The Ngurai-illum Wurrung were experts at fishing. Fish formed an important part of the diet at this time of year. Beautifully clean, unpolluted water in the Goulburn River enabled the men to go into “the water with short barbed spears in their hands, with which they dived and speared the fish in its own element.” Implied in this is the fact that Aboriginal people were excellent swimmers, both on the surface and underwater. This also gave them access to a wide range of foodstuffs other than fish, including crustaceans, mussels, tortoises and water birds.

Other fishing methods included the use of sophisticated hand-made nets, weirs and fish-traps. In billabongs and waterholes that had been isolated by receding waters, fish could be caught by “throwing into it (the water) a quantity of fresh gum boughs, as a result of which, in a few hours, the fish died and came up to the surface.”

#### MAKING NETS

Fishing nets were skilfully made from natural fibres – either from rushes or possibly tougher grasses. Parris claims that “This tribe did not use fish hooks, although they were particularly skilful in the manufacture of string...The string was made by twisting the roots of bulrushes by rubbing them between the hands and on the thighs”. Another observer suggests the rushes were first chewed and softened before being rubbed to make the string, which was also used to make nets to trap low-flying water birds.

## OTHER ELEMENTS OF DIET

As well as the bounty from the rivers, Aboriginal women supplemented family diets from a wide range of sources. They would harvest edible root crops, herbs, seeds, fruits and vegetables as well as searching for honey, small animals, reptiles, grubs and insects.

In this way, the Ngurai-illum Wurrung could relatively easily provide enough food and a varied diet, which in turn meant that the people remained in good health. Unfortunately, this later ceased to be the case as access to food resources dramatically diminished from the 1840s. Relying on “rations” that included a much narrower diet, including processed foods like sugar and white flour, led to poorer health and greater susceptibility to disease.

## GENERATIONS OF LEARNING

The relative ease of the life on the river banks was the result of learnings over millennia, as food collection techniques continually advanced. The comprehensive skills passed from generation to generation meant that there was adequate time for other pursuits. This may have included attention to things of a spiritual and ceremonial nature.

It may also have meant that it was a time when people from other clans gathered with the Ngurai-illum Wurrung. If Harry Parris’ proposition is correct, and they were camping on the Goulburn north of Murchison in summer, then this would represent the time of year when they were in the closest proximity to the Yorta Yorta clans. Although they were generally regarded as hostile, there were occasions when the two language groups got together for the purpose of ceremony and inter-marriage.

References: Numurkah Leader 5.1.1943 p.3;

## 13 MURNONG - A STAPLE FOOD

One of the staple foods collected by Aboriginal women of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung was the roots or tubers of murnong (*Microseris lanceolata*), commonly known as the yam daisy. Prior to colonisation, murnong was widespread on the northern plains between the Goulburn and Campaspe Rivers. Within a short space of time in the 1840s, with an influx of sheep and cattle, it became quite scarce. Squatter Edward Curr wrote later that “several thousand sheep not only learnt to root up these vegetables with their noses, but for the most part lived on them for the first year, after which the root gradually began to get scarce”.

The loss of Aboriginal methods of cropping, because of their exclusion from country, was also a factor. Prior to the 1840s, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Aboriginal people deliberately promoted the growth of murnong, partly through a burning regime which “cleared away any dead vegetation, leaving open ground, fertilised by ash, eminently suited for growth. Plants sprouting from underground organs are able to regenerate very rapidly after fire...”

## HARVESTING MURNONG

The process of systematically collecting murnong also had the effect of promoting the growth of a crop for future collection on a sustainable basis. Women used pointed digging sticks to collect the roots, and “the continual digging over of the soils for roots was one of the important factors in maintaining a loose, well-aerated soil.” This in turn provided better conditions for the remaining plants to thrive.

There are currently attempts being made by Bruce Pascoe (author of *Dark Emu*) and friends to grow murnong on a commercial basis. It has the potential to at least supplement potato in our diets, and is apparently infinitely more nutritious than potato.

## EATING THE TUBERS

“The tubers can be eaten raw and have a radish-like texture with a sweet and unique coconutty and grassy flavour. Roasting or frying murnong renders the taste similar to a potato, but with a naturally saltier flavour. Traditionally, they've been cooked in fire pits.” (SBS website – Shane Delia’s Recipe for Life, June 2018)

Storage is similar to other root crops that we use today. Aboriginal people would have harvested only what they needed on a regular basis, so the need for storage was minimal. However, there are records of roots being carried on a journey of 14 days and then used for trading. It is quite conceivable that in areas where there was plenty of murnong, it might have been harvested and then traded to areas where it was less common, in exchange for goods that the Goulburn Valley area lacked.

## TRADE ROUTES

“Today we might understand a ‘trade route’ to be a particular route or passage of travel from one location to another in order to buy and sell commercial goods for monetary profit. For Australian Aborigines a trade route was an ancient and pre-designated passage through the landscape, often ‘mapped’ out in song, for the purpose of meeting at particular locations of great cultural and mythical-historical importance, and ceremonially exchanging, renewing and reinforcing friendship rites with other Aboriginal tribal groups, clans or nations. At these locations goods, objects or Dreaming songs considered valuable for their spiritual, religious, cultural and artistic worth were exchanged or passed from one group to another.” (National Film and Sound Archive website)

It would be interesting to know where these routes were in the Ngurai-illum Wurrung country and what range of goods were traded across them. Murnong could well have been one.

Reference: Gott, Beth, *Murnong...a study of a staple food of Victorian Aborigines* (in Australian Aboriginal Studies, 1983 No 2)

## 14 KANGAROO AS A STAPLE FOOD

Like the yam daisy (or murnong) which was mentioned in the previous story, kangaroo meat was a staple food for the local Aboriginal people in the millennia prior to the 1840s. While the women were principally engaged in the collection of murnong, the men took responsibility for hunting kangaroos. There were similarities with the way their American counterparts hunted buffalo. They only killed what they needed, and nearly all parts of the animal were utilised – meat certainly, but also skins, bones, sinews and so on.

During the 1830s and 1840s, land in the Waranga area was rapidly taken up by squatters. The squatters brought thousands of sheep with them, along with some cattle, which were grazed on land formerly the primary habitat of kangaroos. The squatters had no hesitation in using guns and dogs to kill off the kangaroos, which were seen to be competing for the available pasture and water resources.

## CREATION OF GRAZING LAND

Ironically, a regular burning regime by Aboriginal people, on suitable land, had created ideal conditions for sheep and cattle grazing. Stations could be established for minimal cost, with no time being lost by having to do extensive clearing.

In his seminal 2011 book, *The Biggest Estate on Earth – How Aborigines Made Australia* (Allen and Unwin), respected historian Bill Gammage documents in great detail how these burning regimes worked. Bill based his book on some clear facts. Firstly, 70% of Australian plants need or tolerate fire. Secondly, over millennia Aboriginal people had developed an incredible knowledge of those plants and their particular relationship to fire. Finally, they understood the basic needs of the kangaroos that they were hunting.

This allowed them to do burning, or not do burning as the case may be, in such a way that it would cause grazing animals to move in a predictable way to specific locations where they could find the best food and

shelter. The predictability of movement was aided by the fact that the kangaroos had no predators (other than humans) prior to European colonisation.

#### HUNTER-GATHERERS BUT ALSO FARMERS

In another important recent book, *Dark Emu*, (Magabala Books, 2014) Bruce Pascoe seeks a reconsideration of the role of Aboriginal people as simply hunter-gatherers. And incidentally, if you ever get a chance to hear Bruce speak, seize the opportunity. You will not be disappointed.

The previous story about murnong has already indicated that, as a form of farming, Aboriginal people took very specific steps to maintain a sustainable crop of murnong. Bruce takes that a step further, by documenting numerous examples of Aboriginal people growing grain crops. Major Mitchell, one of the first European men through the area, noted that “the grass is pulled...and piled in hayricks, so that the aspect of the desert (sic) was softened into the agreeable semblance of a hayfield...we found the ricks or haycocks extending for miles.”

Evidence of the “selection of seed, preparation of the soil, harvesting of the crop, (and the) storage of surpluses” by Aboriginal people quickly disappeared with the arrival of the squatters and their flocks. However, they are all activities that we normally associate with farming, and which the custodians of the land prior to the 1840s engaged in.

#### INEVITABLE CLASHES

As early as 1839, a Ngurai-illum Wurrung man, called “Moonin Moonin, complained that Jumbuck and Bulgana (sheep and cattle) were destroying Aboriginal game pastures and staples like yams and mirr-n’yong roots.”

With the loss of access to all of these resources, it was inevitable that there were going to be clashes between the previous custodians of the land and the new ones. This was especially the case when Aboriginal people killed or stole livestock or destroyed property. Retribution tended to be swift and violent, and on a virtually lawless frontier, usually went unpunished.

One clash near the Goulburn River was briefly recounted in an earlier story. Many other clashes took place along the Campaspe River, particularly south of the areas for which clans of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people had been the custodians. In many cases, attacks on Aboriginal people went unreported. The perpetrators were often men who worked on stations, many of whom were ex-convicts with violent backgrounds.

Reference: Kiernan, Ben, *Blood and Soil: Modern Genocide 1500-2000* (Melb Uni Press, 2008)

## 15 TERRA NULLIUS & EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

We tend to have a romantic vision of hard-working European colonists coming in to the “unpopulated” arable parts of Australia to establish productive rural properties. At the time there was genuine belief in the concept of “terra nullius” or “nobody’s land”. That is, the land was deemed to be unoccupied with no owner, and therefore open to settlement by the new arrivals, with the imprimatur of the colonial government of the day.

As we have seen in earlier stories, this was a long way from the truth. The Aboriginal people of the Waranga area had indeed had a very long tenure of the land, where they were easily able to produce more than enough food to meet their needs. When this history was ignored by the new arrivals, it was inevitable that conflict would occur.

#### CLASH OF CULTURES

One such serious clash of cultures took place on the Campaspe River south of Ngurai-illum Wurrung country in 1838. The Campaspe, from Barnadown south to Kyneton, has a history of extreme frontier violence. Part of the explanation for this is that the men employed by the squatters in the late 1830s and 1840s were often hard cases, ex-convicts with a predilection for extreme violence. In a male-dominated society, they targeted Aboriginal women as partners, which was a source of conflict.



Additionally, Aboriginal people quickly came to the realisation that the newcomers were there to stay, and as a consequence, the resources they were used to harvesting were quickly depleted. Sheep and cattle were a potential alternative new resource, but if they were utilised by Aboriginal people, those people quickly became the targets of retribution.

#### A BEAUTIFUL STRETCH OF RIVER

If you take a little time out when you drive the back way to Bendigo, and go into any access point on the Campaspe you will see that it is a truly beautiful little river in this area. It is hardly surprising that it was revered by the Gunung Willam, the clan of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people who called the river and the country to its east home for millennia. As you sit by the river, you wonder where this place fitted into the Songlines of those people, and what significance it had as part of their Dreaming.

Unfortunately, many of the things that made the river so attractive to the Ngurai-illum Wurrung (and further south to the Taungurung and Dja Dja Wurrung) were also the things that were coveted by the European settlers. In particular, it represented a reliable place to water sheep and cattle, in country that could be very dry.

### 16 A BATTLE ON THE CAMPASPE

In June 1838, a group of Aboriginal people killed two shepherds and took some sheep from a station to the south, and moved them north to a bend on the river where they secured them with a brush fence. A group of around eight European men on horses followed the clearly marked trail along the river until they caught up with the offenders.

A pitched, but ultimately one-sided battle then took place. Men on foot armed with spears and clubs were no match for men on horseback with muskets. The latter could remain out of effective spear-throwing distance while shooting down their opponents. Between 20 and 30 Aboriginal people were killed on the spot; others probably later died as a result of their wounds. The overseer and stockmen from the station were unharmed and retrieved most of their sheep.

It is uncertain which group of Aboriginal people were involved in this incident. They could have included Ngurai-illum Wurrung and/or their southern neighbours, the Taungurung. The Dja Dja Wurrung may also have been there. Regardless of which group(s) were involved, this was just one of hundreds of similar stories from around Australia that fly in the face of our vision of peaceful European settlement of the land.

#### HERO OR VILLAIN?

The man who allegedly oversaw the killing of Aboriginal people on the Campaspe River in 1838 was John Coppock. He was in charge of a station further south on the Campaspe which was leased by the squatter Henry Yaldwin (or Yaldwyn). Coppock had arrived in the area hot on the heels of the Major Mitchell expedition. He had over 20 men to assist him with overlanding 4000 sheep in lamb from Goulburn, New South Wales, before setting up a station at Barfold in the first part of 1837. The men were all “assigned men” i.e. convicts and hard cases.

Writing about his then deceased uncle in the 1880s, Coppock’s nephew John Coppock White describes him as “our hero”. Later in life, Coppock became a squatter in the West Wimmera at Lake Albacutya, where he was regarded as a respected pioneer of the district. It is unlikely that the Aboriginal people who had lived along the Campaspe would have regarded him with any respect.

#### MAKING EXCUSES

John White says that Coppock became aware of the fact that his men were shooting down Aboriginal people on sight – “they did not confine themselves to the men, but destroyed the lubras and piccaninnies as well.” White claims Coppock urged his men to “leave their arms at home and to try to make friends of the blacks.”

In the light of subsequent events, one wonders whether White was just trying to protect his uncle's name from culpability for these deaths.

In 1838, a group of Aboriginal people raided an outstation of the Barfold run, spearing and clubbing a watchman and a shepherd, and stealing the flock of sheep. White claims that Coppock's justification for what followed went like this – "I have always tried to treat the natives with justice; they have been a great annoyance, and have killed a large number of my sheep, wounded three men, and have now murdered two. I have applied to the Government for protection, and received as an answer that I would have to protect myself; these things being so, I must protect myself, and will give them a proper lesson whilst I am about it." In other words, action deemed justifiable on the basis of self-defence.

#### WATERLOO PLAINS

Coppock and his men quickly caught up with the Aboriginal people and the sheep and wreaked a terrible vengeance. White claims Coppock reported 23 Aboriginal deaths, while many others were wounded, at what became known as Waterloo Plains. "One or two of the attacking party received slight wounds", indicating the word massacre was more appropriate than the word battle.

After Waterloo Plains, John Coppock apparently wrote a brief account of the events that took place there, and submitted it to the head of police in Melbourne, who subsequently reported it to his superiors in Sydney. At this point, the State of Victoria had not been designated. Eventually, Coppock and his men were summonsed to appear in Sydney – a rare occurrence for perpetrators of violence against Aboriginal people. The "Sarah", the ship that was to take them to Sydney disappeared without a trace on that trip. However, Coppock, who had been visiting a friend in Williamstown the night before, missed the early morning departure.

#### EVADING JUSTICE

Coppock's absence had gone unnoticed, and he took the opportunity to let friends and relatives believe that he had died or disappeared with the "Sarah". He went underground in rural Victoria until the heat had gone out of the Waterloo Plains massacre, only resurfacing at remote Lake Albacutya run some 10 years later. A guilty conscience perhaps, but ultimately, he did not have to face justice.

It was rare for men like Coppock to be found guilty of a crime. More often than not, such crimes went unreported. In his case, even though it was reported by him, there was a strong likelihood that he would have been exonerated even if he had made it to Sydney. Despite the excessive nature of the response, self-defence would have been claimed, and there were no eye-witnesses apart from him and his men.

Reference: The Australasian (a Melbourne newspaper) 31.10.1885

## 17 MORE BLOODSHED ON THE CAMPASPE

In 1839, more violent incidents occurred along the Campaspe River, this time in the country of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people. The squatter Charles Hutton, a former officer in the British army in India, had a run on Wild Duck Creek, south of present-day Heathcote. In dry conditions, he was looking for more feed for his flocks when he set up an outstation at what is now Barnadown. There were two flocks of sheep there, each under the oversight of a shepherd, as well as a hut maintained by a third man, James Neill. On 22 May, the outstation was attacked by Aboriginal men. Neill and one of the shepherds were killed and one of the flocks of sheep was stolen.

As soon as Hutton and his men became aware of what they referred to as "the outrage", they set off in pursuit. They caught up with the offenders at an area known as Restdown Plains (current day Rochester). In official reports, they simply said that they had retrieved most of the missing 700 sheep. Nothing was reported about what happened to the offenders, although Hutton said they were "from a tribe from the Goulburn River". Hutton and his men returned with the sheep, but the outstation at Barnadown was abandoned.

## RETRIBUTION

As noted in the previous Waranga Dreaming story, there was little in the way of law enforcement in areas that were then remote from the main settlements of Port Phillip. However, on this occasion, Hutton was able to secure a detachment of mounted police. As soon as they arrived at his station, he and his overseer James Cosgrove set off with the troopers on a punitive expedition along the Campaspe to the north.

Because the reprisals were carried out by government officials, official depositions were later taken from some of the troopers, as well as Hutton and Cosgrove. According to one historian, “the depositions are unsatisfactory and tend to contradict one another on several important aspects”. No depositions were taken from any Aboriginal people.

The reports indicated that the troopers attacked an Aboriginal encampment near Restdown Plains, a few km north of the place where the sheep had earlier been retrieved, without actually establishing whether the perpetrators of the attack on the Barnadown station were there. Sergeant Dennis Leary, of the Mounted Police, advised that “I charged the camp to apprehend them if possible”. As soon as a couple of spears were thrown, the shooting started. Leary said “to the best of my belief five or six were killed”.

## COVERING HIS BACKSIDE

Hutton’s deposition appears to be deliberately vague, claiming that he had ridden north to cut off any escape by the Aboriginal people and had not really seen what happened. He reckoned he was not directly engaged in the shooting and only saw one dead body, even though he deposed that he and Cosgrove and the troopers had stayed on the site for an hour after the shooting stopped. There was a later uncorroborated story in which Hutton had privately stated that many more people were killed than Leary had deposed.

Some months later, in early 1840, the Chief Protector of Aborigines, George A Robinson, and his Assistant, Edward S Parker, visited Hutton at his station. In a purportedly fiery exchange, Robinson said “Hutton told him that they (the Aboriginal people) must be exterminated or else terrified so that they respected the settlers’ property.”

## REPUTATION MAINTAINED

Like John Coppock in the previous story, Hutton was on the way to becoming very wealthy as a result of his pastoral enterprises, and in his case, subsequent land dealings in Melbourne. He was considered to be the epitome of an English gentleman when he died at Brighton, Victoria, in 1879, leaving an extensive estate.

There was no formal inquiry, and no-one was ever charged over the deaths of the Aboriginal people. With “only” five or six deaths reported by the perpetrators, it seems to have been deemed by the authorities to be unworthy of further investigation.

Reference: Randell, J O, Pastoral Settlement in Northern Victoria Vol 2 – The Campaspe District

## 18 THE LEGACY OF FRONTIER WARS

The incidents described in recent stories in this series were not isolated: they happened all around Australia. Although they are part of Australian history, they were not something that was ever taught in schools, until perhaps recently. No serious study of incidents involving the violent deaths of Aboriginal people in colonial times took place until the 1980s, when Bruce Elder wrote a book called *Blood on the Wattle* (New Holland Publishers). Many other books and studies have followed.

There is also an excellent website that is in the process of being developed by a group at the University of Newcastle (<https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php>). An interactive map is included, which makes sobering viewing.

Now that we are aware of the true extent of the carnage, we have to re-think that part of our history. The spread of European colonisation through Australia was accompanied by what amounted to a war on the previous custodians of the land. Accepting this unpalatable fact is one step that needs to be taken on the long road to reconciliation.

#### HOW MANY PEOPLE DIED?

There has always been plenty of speculation about how many Aboriginal people lived in Australia prior to European colonisation. In an earlier story, after a review of the literature about the subject, it was suggested that the most likely figure would have been in the range of 300,000 to a million.

Another Waranga Dreaming story noted that respected historian A G L Shaw thought around 10% of the Aboriginal population may have died as the result of frontier violence. Apply that to the most conservative population estimate above, and we are talking about a minimum of 30,000 men, women and children killed in the violence. The real figure will never be known, because more often than not, the killing went unreported or under-reported.

On the colonists' side of the equation, there were also deaths. Often these were shepherds or other farm hands who were working in vulnerable, isolated situations. Again, various estimates have been made over time, and these tend to be more accurate than those for Aboriginal people because they were more likely to be reported. The number of deaths is in the order of 2000. This means the ratio of Aboriginal to colonist deaths from violence is at least 15 to 1 – perhaps much more.

#### A ONE-SIDED WAR

More often than not, the conflict was in relation to access to resources e.g. land, water, plants and animals, minerals. Access to horses and modern firearms gave the colonists a significant advantage when conflict arose, which partly accounts for the huge disparity in the number of deaths. Also, when retribution was being meted out, it was often excessive in relation to the original crime, if there had been one.

To put the frontier wars in context, more Australians died in them than in all other wars that Australians have subsequently been engaged in, excluding World War 1. However, they have not received anything like the historical scrutiny of our involvement in overseas wars.

#### WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Some people don't want to discuss the deaths that occurred during the European colonisation of our area and Australia in general. They refer to it as a "black armband view of history" and reckon we don't have anything to gain by bringing up an unsavoury part of our history.

However, most Aboriginal people see a conversation around this part of our history as an essential part of the truth telling that is a necessary step on the road to reconciliation. You can't just bury the history and then expect people to move on as if nothing had happened. Certainly, the true history is being uncovered and is slowly being introduced into schools. One step that older members of the community could take would be to make a conscious effort to re-educate themselves about the true history of European colonisation. Acknowledging that history is a good starting point for the process of reconciliation.

## 19 VISITING THE BOX IRONBARK FOREST

In one of our earlier stories, Harry Parris, an old Nagambie resident writing in the 1950s had surmised that the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people wintered at Reedy Lake. He proposed that with the onset of spring, they would be on the move, heading through the ancient red gum forest that existed in the district now known as Angustown. Parris felt they would have then travelled into the box-ironbark forest and on to what we now know as Whroo.

Cryptically, Mr Parris stated that he thought that “at Whroo the Balaclava Hill seemed to possess some special significance for the natives” without saying why, other than “possibly because it gives an excellent view of the country to the west, and smoke signals from enemy tribes could be observed.” Balaclava Hill could indeed have been used as a vantage point (as well as being culturally significant), although we now know that areas to the west were also part of Ngurai-illum Wurrung territory. They would have been looking for signs of friends from other clans, rather than enemies.

#### RE-DISCOVERING ROCK WELLS

With his keen interest in Aboriginal history, Mr Parris “re-discovered” the rock well at Whroo in 1949. He already knew that the name Whroo was a variation of a local Aboriginal word (woorro) meaning lips/mouth, and in searching the area with Mr A H Perry of Bailieston, he was working on the assumption that there must be a location in that vicinity where Aboriginal people went to get a drink.

In 1956, he took Aldo Massola (then Curator of Anthropology at the oddly-named National Museum of Victoria) to see the well. Earlier that year, Massola had already written a paper about similar wells in the Maryborough area. His theory was that there would be a series of reliable watering places on well-trodden paths through country – especially where things could become very dry, like our box-ironbark forests.

Massola wrote an article for “The Victorian Naturalist” in which he described the well on Spring Hill, pretty much as we know it today. “At this point an outcrop of micaceous sandstone approximately 12 x 8 feet (3.7 x 2.4 metres) emerges from the soil. On this outcrop an oval hole about 15 inches long and 10 inches (38 x 24 cm) wide has been sunk to a depth of about 3 feet (0.98 m).”

#### WHOSE WELL?

Back in the 1950s, the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people were thought by some researchers to be one and the same as the Taungurung, who are now generally recognised as a separate group that lived to the south of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung. Both groups were part of the Kulin nation, and as such, much of their language was shared. If Balaclava Hill was of cultural significance, both groups may have used the well when the Taungurung visited for ceremony. However, it seems certain that it was on Ngurai-illum Wurrung country.

By the time of the gold rush, the Ngurai-illum Wurrung’s link with the well was probably already broken. It was Massola who observed that it was most likely increased in size by the miners so they could get a billy of water by immersion. It is hard to imagine that it would have been a very reliable source of water to service the thousands of diggers who were briefly in the area, but it had formerly comfortably satisfied the needs of the original custodians.

To further support the theory that it was miners who increased the size of the well, Massola noted that “native water-holes almost always have a small aperture so that they could protect them from pollution by animals and debris, and also against loss of water by evaporation.”

References: Massola, Aldo, *The Native Water Well at Whroo, Goulburn Valley* (The Victorian Naturalist, July 1957); Rushworth Chronicle 1953.

## 20 CORROBOREES AT RUSHWORTH

Aboriginal spirituality could be expressed in many ways, including musically and through ceremony. Corroborees were one very obvious way of doing this. There are tantalising snippets of information about corroborees being held in the area that is now the south end of High Street, Rushworth, close to Moora Road. The accounts relate to the time after the start of the gold rush, so it is possible that the Aboriginal people camped on the fringes of the new settlement of Rushworth may have conducted the corroborees as an entertainment for the miners. This often happened on the goldfields, providing a way for the Aboriginal people to earn some income, or get “rations” such as sugar and flour.

There are no clues in the reports about who the Aboriginal people involved may have been. Perhaps they were the local Ngurai-illum Wurrung people, or they could have been another group displaced as a result of European colonisation in the preceding 15 years or so. No other details were provided in the reports, other than the fact that corroborees had taken place.

#### WITNESSING A CORROBOREE

About ten years before the corroborees mentioned above (i.e. in the early 1840s), the squatter Edward Curr witnessed a corroboree on his run north of present-day Tongala. This was probably a more realistic version of a traditional corroboree than the ones that might have taken place at Rushworth for the benefit of the miners. The corroboree took place on Bangerang (Yorta Yorta) land, but Curr explains that the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people participated, despite their language differences.

He mentions the attendees as including “Ngooraialum” (probably the Ngurai-illum balug clan) and “Pimpandoor...a tribe from the Campaspe, their immediate neighbours” (i.e. the clan we have referred to as the Bendebora balug, and part of the broader Ngurai-illum Wurrung people), who spoke the same language. The purpose of the meeting, which included the corroboree, was ostensibly for trade and the exchange of prospective wives.

#### PREPARATION

After dark, the men retired to an area away from the main camp, lit a couple of large fires, then prepared themselves. This involved painting their bodies with ochre (“a groundwork of rouge made from a sort of clay which is burnt for the purpose”) then overlaying that with designs in “pipe clay” (i.e. white clay). The source of the clay used for the bodily decoration is not mentioned by Curr, but it was a valuable commodity which was sometimes used for trading between different groups of Aboriginal people.

The men either wore either a net over their hair, or a “narrow band of twisted opossum skin, which was tied behind, the ends of the strings hanging down between the shoulders; a plume of emu or cockatoo feathers being frequently inserted in it”. Performers also wore a waist band with possum skin thongs hanging down to their knees, green leaves bound around the ankles and rolls of fur around their biceps.

#### MUSIC AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN

The women’s role in proceedings included being spectators, but also the provision of most of the music. This came in the form of singing, but also drumming by hitting their rolled-up possum skin cloaks with open hands. The singing must have seemed quite alien to Curr, who described it as “wild and peculiar airs sung in chorus”.

Another accompaniment to the music provided by the women was the use of what we now call clapsticks. On this occasion, it was also provided by a man who Curr regarded as the master of ceremonies. He “struck together the two short sticks with which he marked the time” in a way that we are most familiar with these days.

Just before the corroboree was to begin, light fuel was thrown on the fires on each side of the “stage” to illuminate the area, the clapsticks started beating, and the women “burst into song” with their “shrill voices”. The stage was set for the performance to begin.

Reference: Curr, Edward M, *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* pp 134-9

## 21 MEETING OF CLANS

The corroboree witnessed by squatter Edward Curr in the early 1840s, that was mentioned in the previous story, occurred at a meeting between clans of the Ngurai-illum Wurrung people and the Bangerang (now known as Yorta Yorta) people.

One of the main reasons for the gathering “was the delivery of the betrothed girls to their husbands”. On this occasion, two or three women from each group were in this category. Women were betrothed to a man from another clan, and were then expected to go and live with their husbands as part of his clan, even though the Ngurai-illum Wurrung and Yorta Yorta people spoke different languages. One outcome of inter-clan marital relationships was that most Aboriginal people in the Waranga area would have been multi-lingual, in order to communicate in their new clans and be able to maintain kinship relations.

#### A DRAMATIC START

The dancing at the corroboree was performed by the Bangerang men, accompanied by music (singing and percussion) provided by the women. “Preparations being in this advanced stage, the occasional clash of shield and boomerang, snatches of song in female voices, or the wild yell of delight of some warrior...warned the Ngooraialum (sic), who had begun to gather around the point of attraction, and seat themselves on the ground, about ten yards from where the performance was to take place, that all was ready.”

When the spectators were seated, dry eucalypt leaves were thrown on the fires on either side of the area where the performance was to take place. The “fire shot up into a blaze; the master of ceremonies struck together the two short sticks with which he marked the time, and the shrill voices of the ... (women) burst into song.” The men performing, “until now unseen, (were) one by one issuing from the outside gloom” and “took up their position in a row between the fires; each man, as he came into line, extending his arms and legs into that peculiar attitude which makes one of the marked singularities of the corroboree.”

#### A STARTLING PERFORMANCE

Curr and his brother found the dramatic effects to be quite “startling” and were “strongly impressed with the scene”. “The extraordinary energy displayed by the dancers; their singular attitude; the quivering thigh; the poised spear, the whitened shield borne in the left hand; the peculiar thur! thur! thur! which their lips emitted in unison with the treasured tramp of their feet; their ghastly countenances; the sinister manner in which the apparition had noiselessly stolen from the surrounding darkness into the flaming foreground, and executed – now in order, now in a compact body, to the sound of the wild voices, and the clash of savage arms - ...made up a picture thrilling from its novelty, its threatening character, and in its entire strangeness.”

#### STORY TELLING

In the Aboriginal tradition, the corroboree was synonymous with story-telling. Although it is impossible to determine what story this particular corroboree was telling, there was a point where “their savage eyes fixed on my brother and myself, suddenly as one man (they) threw back their right arms and brought their right shoulders forward, as if to plant in our breasts their spears which now converged on us – the display seemed to have passed from the theatrical to the real.”

Perhaps the performers were indicating how they really felt towards their usurpers i.e. two of the men who had been responsible for introducing massive changes to their country in the preceding few years. To the relief of the Currs, moments later “the climax had been reached, and the performers, dropping their spear-points to the ground, burst into a simultaneous yell, which made the old woods ring again, and then hurried at once out of sight, a laughing mob, into the forest’s gloom.”

Reference: Curr, Edward, *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* pp 136-9

## 22 POSSUM SKIN CLOAKS

Squatter Edward Curr’s description of a corroboree on his run in the 1840s, near present-day Tongala, makes two references to the use of possum skin cloaks. In one, he talks about the women rolling up their cloaks, leather-side out, and bashing on them to make a bass percussion accompaniment to the corroboree. In the other, when each man started to prepare himself for the corroboree by painting his body and appending various parts of his costume, “his opossum-rug (was) discarded for the occasion.”

So, it is clear that possum skin cloaks were widely used by the Aboriginal people in the area. They were multi-purpose items – they could be worn, used as a blanket or groundsheet, as a baby carrier or as a burial shroud. They were worn with the fur on the inside or the outside, depending on the circumstances. In the colder months, they were warm and water-proof.

#### PLENTY OF POSSUMS

The widespread use of possum skin cloaks in the local area implies that there were plenty of possums available. Numbers probably dropped rapidly as land was cleared and habitat reduced. The lack of suitable hollows would have become significant. Also, the provision of the more inferior blankets by government officials and lack of access to country meant that the use of possum skin cloaks quickly diminished from the 1840s.

It was often the men who did the possum hunting. The standard method was to climb a tree to a likely looking hollow, then whack the tree trunk around the hollow with a club or axe. If a possum ran out, it would be quickly despatched by the hunter or finished off by other hunters waiting below. The possum meat would be cooked and eaten after the skin was removed, so nothing was wasted.

#### MAKING THE CLOAKS

The skin would be scraped, perhaps with a mussel shell or stone scraper. It would then be pegged out to dry on a piece of bark using wooden or bone pins. When it had dried out, animal fat would be rubbed into the skin to make it supple. Holes would then be made around the edge of the skin with a sharp-pointed bone. Skins were sewn together using sinews from kangaroos, yet another example of using all available resources.

A possum skin cloak was a prized possession, taken through life. It might begin as a small cloak made of just a few skins, being used to carry a baby around, and for the baby to sleep in. As the child grew, their cloak was added to until, as an adult, it might comprise 40-50 possum skins.

#### SIGNIFICANT DECORATION

As with many aspects of Aboriginal life, possum skin cloaks are inextricably linked with story-telling. Designs were incised into the leather with mussel shells or sharp bone awls, then painted with ochre. Each cloak tells a story, “mapping the identity of the owner with stories of clan and country.” As the cloak increased in size over time, so too did the number of stories that were represented. It was a means by which important cultural information could be communicated from one generation to the next.

#### RECENT REVIVAL

In the 1980s and 1990s, there were only a handful of 19<sup>th</sup> century possum skin cloaks remaining in Australia, two of which are held by Museums Victoria. One of these came from our local area, collected in 1853 at Maiden’s Punt, Echuca. Then there was a resurgence of cloak making, largely initiated by two indigenous women artists, Vicki Couzens and Lee Darroch. One of the outcomes of this resurgence was the production of 35 cloaks that were proudly worn by Aboriginal Elders at the opening ceremony of the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne.

Since then, the skills have been well and truly revived. Bendigo library is amongst the local institutions that have examples which are often on display, and are well worth a look.

REFERENCES: Gibbins, Helen, “Possum Skin Cloaks: tradition, continuity and change” in *The Latrobe Journal* No 85 (May 2010)