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Acheron Aboriginal Station: Land that ‘ever should be theirs’

Uncle Roy’s Taungurung ancestors were among the first Aboriginal people in southern Australia to negotiate the opening of a government station on their own land. Established in 1859, Acheron Aboriginal Station was named after the nearby waterway then known as the Nyaggeron, now Acheron River. Uncle Roy recalls the ancient associations between Taungurung people and this land:

Back in the early days when the Europeans first came up here, my great-great-uncle Bandowick made a settlement down on the river opposite Cathedral Lane. The white people put them on a campsite there and said, ‘you will be right here’. My ancestors had walked in this valley years ago, when the ground started to shake and rumble, and Nunnunthum started to come up out of Mother Earth to where it is today. When Europeans come into the valley, they saw this majestic peak and they said, ‘that looks just like the spire of a Cathedral’, so they called it Mount Cathedral. Its name is Nunnunthum.¹

Uncle Roy’s generational perspective highlights Taungurung peoples’ deep knowledge of the land, including its true name. Spurred by this relationship, a deputation of Taungurung men approached Guardian of the Aborigines William Thomas on 28 February 1859 to secure this special

1 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300142.

site. According to Thomas, Beaning, Murrin Murrin, Parugean, Baruppin and Koo-gurrin, and Wurundjeri translators Wonga and Munnarin, sought ‘a particular part of the upper Goulburn, on the Acheron River to be set apart for them ... to cultivate’.² Taungurung leaders, accompanied by Guardian Thomas and Assistant Surveyor Percy Bloomfield, then identified and marked out the desired site, south of the junction of the Acheron and Little rivers at the western foot of the Cathedral Range. Thomas recalled the jubilation of the Taungurung representatives upon their selection of a permanent refuge:

The blacks chopped boundary trees, I sketched a chart of the country ... 4500 acres more or less were surveyed with unlimited range to the NE, the blacks were perfectly satisfied in fact elated, [overjoyed at their success] as I passed thro’ one and other group on my return wandering their way to the Promised Land. The blacks in these ranges are still a fine race wholesome in appearance, well accustomed to European labour, and ready to work and settle.³

Taungurung men marked boundary trees with the expectation that they had successfully claimed a place where they could work and settle. Although Taungurung people had been effectively ‘removed from their country’ by the end of 1839, they retained connections to Country by working for pastoralists.⁴ Aboriginal people performed essential tasks that were ‘unpopular with the white station hands’ on Upper Goulburn Valley stations, including sheep washing, and were well acquainted with the demands of European farming.⁵

Of the two white men who witnessed the Taungurung mark out their chosen plot, only William Thomas appreciated that they deliberately claimed land suitable for agriculture, ‘assuring me that “they would cultivate and set down on that land like white men”’.⁶ Percy Bloomfield thought that Taungurung were not agriculturalists and would not select land with European crops in mind. He believed that Aboriginal land use was oriented towards hunting. Any reserve should, therefore, ‘be acceptable

2 Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA), B312, Item 2, Folio 7.

3 ‘Annual Report on Aborigines 1 January–31 December 1859’, in Thomas, *Journal of William Thomas*, 248; journal entry, 18 March 1859, in Thomas, *Journal of William Thomas*, 196.

4 Kenny, ‘Broken Treaty’, 215.

5 Noble, *The Red Gate*, 6.

6 William Thomas, ‘A History of the Settlement of the Blacks on the Upper Goulburn’, 26 July 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 2, Folio 7.

to the Aborigines [if] neither squatter or flocks [are] intervening between them and their hunting grounds'.⁷ Bloomfield understood that most pastoral lands in Port Phillip had been claimed and occupied for decades, even in this isolated mountainous district. Local pastoralist Peter Snodgrass MLA recalled that, within two or three years of him 'taking up a station on the Muddy Creek [Yea River] and Goulburn River' in 1837–38, he was joined in the district by five additional squatters.⁸ By 1840, 'there were runs all along the Goulburn ... til the country became too mountainous for pastoralists'.⁹ The proposed Acheron Aboriginal Station was not in unclaimed territory; it would excise 4,500 acres from two pastoral runs, the 16,000 acre Niagaroon and 50,000 acre Taggerty stations, respectively.¹⁰

The squatters who held these leases considered the country to be rightfully theirs and they responded decisively to the threat of Aboriginal repossession. Their actions drew upon mechanisms already developed to combat land reform legislation, using 'an elaborate machinery of deception involving highly skilled land sharks, agents and squatters'.¹¹ Squatters used these tactics to undermine and eventually preclude Aboriginal settlement in the Upper Goulburn district. Uncle Roy reflected on the efforts of his Taungurung ancestors and their dignified response when local squatters attempted to deprive them of their land at Acheron:

So I'm proud of my great-great-great-uncle and the people working there, working with the white people and not letting them walk all over them. I'm not goin' to let them walk all over me neither. It is a beautiful thing to have pride and respect.¹²

As made evident below, the squatters who sought to dislodge Taungurung farmers from Acheron Station included men who had employed the same Aboriginal workers on their runs during the 1840s and 1850s. These squatters held respectable leadership positions in colonial society and purported to hold a benevolent interest in the fate of Taungurung people.

7 Mohican/Acheron Station 1859, NAA, B312, Item 1, Folio 16.

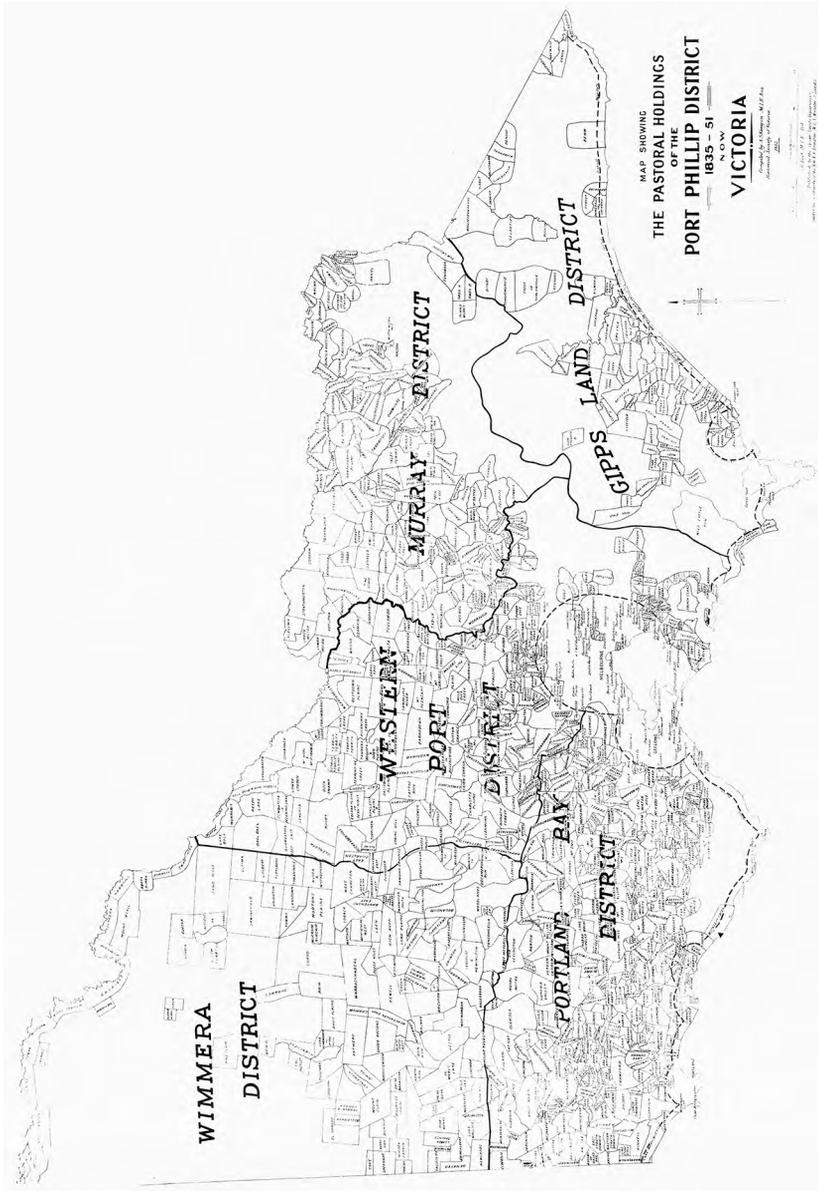
8 Bride, *Letters from Victorian Pioneers*, 215.

9 Bride, *Letters from Victorian Pioneers*, 216; Long, 'A History of Alexandra', 53.

10 See Billis and Kenyon, *Pastoral Pioneers*, 233, 256.

11 Legislation passed in September 1860. Powell, *The Public Lands of Australia Felix*, 76, 105.

12 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS3001141.



'Map showing the pastoral holdings of the Port Phillip District 1835–51, now Victoria'

Source: Billis and Keyon, *Pastoral Pioneers*, insert, back cover. Courtesy National Library of Australia, nla.gov.au/nla.obj-234157525/view.

Squatters disapprove of Acheron Aboriginal Station: Peter Snodgrass and the ‘Goulburn Mob’

After the initial land rush in the Port Phillip District, squatters secured and expanded their holdings by working together as a self-interested bloc.¹³ ‘Old colonists’ cooperated to control ‘water sources, stock routes and information’, making it difficult for newcomers to move into settled districts.¹⁴ In the Upper Goulburn, a group of ‘boisterous ... hard riding, strong-headed young men, reckless horsemen, and gay sparks of young Melbourne’, known collectively as the ‘Goulburn Mob’, cooperated to protect the prospects of their set. Together they took action to deter ‘conscientious officials’ like William Thomas who were working in the interests of Traditional Owners.¹⁵

The land selected by Taungurung leaders fell within the ‘pre-emptive right’ of Henry Johnson, who held Taggerty Station from 1849 to 1864.¹⁶ Under regulations gazetted in 1848, a pre-emptive right allowed squatters to purchase a homestead block of 640 acres within their leasehold, before the ‘land in their locality was made available to the general public’.¹⁷ Given these entitlements, and the widely held view that the pre-emptive section of Taggerty would be ‘depreciated in value by the establishment of the proposed Aboriginal Reserve’, officials expected that Henry Johnson would object to the Taungurung selection.¹⁸ This was the case. In January 1860, District Surveyor F. Pinnifer reported to the commissioner of lands that ‘the present owner of Taggerty does object to being surrounded by an Aboriginal reserve and seems to consider the present survey a hardship upon him’.¹⁹ Pinnifer further reported a ‘general feeling amongst the squatters averse to the proximity to an Aboriginal reserve’, reasoning that ‘the Aborigines keeping to and fro and hunting about with their dogs must

13 Boyce, *1835*, 155.

14 Boyce, *1835*, 155.

15 Bride, *Letters from Victorian Pioneers*, 215; Boyce, *1835*, 154.

16 Mohican/Acheron Station 1859, NAA, B312, Item 1, Folio 16.

17 ‘Pre-Emptive Rights (1852–1873)’ in *VPRS 8168 Historic Plan Collection*, accessed 16 January 2018, wiki.prov.vic.gov.au/index.php/VPRS_8168_Historic_Plan_Collection#PR_PRE-EMPTIVE_RIGHTS_281852_-1873.29; Billis and Kenyon, *Pastoral Pioneers*, 256.

18 Mohican/Acheron Station 1859, NAA, B312, Item 1, Folio 16.

19 F. Pinnifer to the Hon Commissioner of Lands and Survey, 12 January 1860, Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 2, Folios 3–1A (original emphasis).

be an annoyance to the owners of either cattle or sheep running at large'.²⁰ Vehement squatter disapproval was communicated to the Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of Aborigines via a campaign of letters from June 1859. These letters included objections from influential pastoral entrepreneur Hugh Glass, a leaseholder of Niagaroon Station since 1850.²¹ Claiming serious loss and inconvenience, Glass wrote to the honorary secretary, Central Board, requesting:

Will you be good enough to inform me if it is the intention of the Board to retain possession for an Aboriginal reserve of the portion of my licenced run known as the Niagaroon ... which is at present so used. The Superintendent [of Acheron Aboriginal Station] informs me he has no orders to remove and is at present planting potatoes on the ground—the want of this portion of my run is a very serious loss and inconvenience to me at the present time.²²

One of the richest men in Australia in the late 1850s, and the wealthiest man in Victoria in 1862, Hugh Glass had a voracious appetite for land. He acquired and traded 49 runs in Victoria from 1840 to 1869, and was understood to have 'dummied, cheated and bribed to gain his own ends'.²³ Glass was also known as a charming, generous and humane man—except when his intentions were thwarted. To protect his interests, Glass and his associates manipulated public officials and influenced politicians in the Legislative Assembly.²⁴ One of these politicians was Peter Snodgrass, a member of the 'Goulburn Mob'. The son of a soldier and colonial administrator, Peter Snodgrass was 21 when he began squatting in the Upper Goulburn Valley.²⁵ He soon gained a reputation for 'dissipating all the money that his father had supplied him with', but he was also known to be 'shrewd, steady and well loved by all'.²⁶ To win over his prospective father-in-law, John Cotton, in 1846, Snodgrass promised to 'reform his habits and become more steady'.²⁷ Cotton accepted Snodgrass's remorse as genuine and noted:

20 F. Pinnifer to the Hon Commissioner of Lands and Survey, 12 January 1860, Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 2, Folios 3–1A.

21 Billis and Kenyon, *Pastoral Pioneers*, 58, 233; Kiddle, *Men of Yesterday*.

22 Hugh Glass to R. Brough Smythe Honorary Secretary to Central Aboriginal Board, 12 September 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 2, Folio 24.

23 Kiddle, *Men of Yesterday*, 262.

24 de Serville, *Pounds and Pedigrees*, 99.

25 Lea-Scarlett, 'Snodgrass, Kenneth (1784–1853)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed online 15 January 2019, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/snodgrass-kenneth-2675/text3737.

26 John Cotton to William Cotton, 6 March 1846, in Mackaness, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 33.

27 John Cotton to William Cotton, 6 March 1846, in Mackaness, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 33.

Mr Snodgrass has been a spendthrift, and is now, I am sorry to say, obliged to live with me, having no property of his own. He is, however, hardworking and remarkably good tempered, kind to Agnes, and disposed to act the part of overseer for me.²⁸

Acting as station manager at Doogallook, Snodgrass proved his worth by controlling an outbreak of catarrh, a virulent respiratory infection that devastated Cotton's flocks in 1848.²⁹ Although 5,000 sheep died and Cotton sustained a loss 'equal to £1300', he noted that the business would 'have been in a mess' without the 'valuable assistance' of his son-in-law. Cotton later apprenticed his eldest son William to Snodgrass, noting his 'good head [and] foresight'.³⁰ This management role at Doogallook continued after John Cotton's sudden death in December 1849. Snodgrass became co-owner of Doogallook after the death of his mother-in-law, Susannah Cotton, in 1852. By this time, Snodgrass was also an elected political representative for the district. He therefore had significant personal financial interests and political influence in the Upper Goulburn when his neighbours objected to the creation of an Aboriginal reserve in the vicinity, including, later, sole ownership of Doogallook Station (1860–65).³¹

A liberal by political persuasion, Snodgrass was elected to the first Victorian Legislative Council in 1851. Here he was soon known as a supporter of squatter interests.³² He later represented two electorates encompassing the Upper Goulburn in the Victorian Legislative Assembly, from 1856 to 1867. At this time, the parliament was polarised between the conservative right and democratic left, which, according to Geoffrey Serle, enabled 'liberals, opportunists and eccentrics' like Snodgrass to occupy the centre ground. Here, 'their whims and prejudices were to rule governments'.³³

Unfortunately for Snodgrass, such popularity and privilege did not guarantee financial success. Economic difficulties may have opened him to the suite of corrupt practices that were aired after his death in 1867.³⁴ It was his renown as an upstanding local squatter, however, that

28 John Cotton to William Cotton, June 1848, in Mackaness, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 17.
29 Mylrea, 'Catarrh in Sheep', 298. The outbreak was compounded by low prices, high wages and footrot.

30 John Cotton to William Cotton, February 1849 in Mackaness, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 37.

31 Billis and Kenyon, *Pastoral Pioneers*, 137.

32 Serle, *The Golden Age*, 259.

33 Serle, *The Golden Age*, 259.

34 Glass named Snodgrass as his corrupt agent to a select committee in 1869, see Kiddle, *Men of Yesterday*, 251; de Serville, *Pounds and Pedigrees*, 99.

prompted Guardian of Aborigines William Thomas to recommend Snodgrass as trustee for Acheron Aboriginal Station.³⁵ Thomas wrote to the Central Board on 12 April 1859 recommending Snodgrass to oversee the Aboriginal settlement, along with John Maxwell of Cathkin.³⁶ Fellow trustees included John Christie Aitken of Thornton and Acheron, runs that adjoined the Aboriginal station,³⁷ and Donald Mackenzie of Mt Pleasant.³⁸ Thomas commented that ‘the neighbouring gentlemen are highly respectable and for years have been ... much interested in the blacks’.³⁹ Thomas also recommended that Robert Hickson ‘have charge of the Aboriginal establishment’ and, on 15 April 1859, Hickson was appointed superintendent.⁴⁰ Like the new trustees, Hickson also claimed an association with, and interest in, Aboriginal people. This regard was apparently reciprocated as ‘two of the Goulburn Blacks’ hearing that ‘Mr Hickson will have charge over the Station’ were reportedly ‘pleased [and] say he is a good man they know him long time’.⁴¹ As discussed below (and in further detail in Chapter 3), Hickson and Snodgrass were both drawn from the small circle of elite Upper Goulburn settler society. These gentlemen, however, held competing aims for the new Aboriginal reserve. Their opposing views led to their public estrangement and, eventually, to the forced removal of Taungurung people from their own Country.

Peter Snodgrass agreed to act as a local trustee for Acheron Aboriginal Station, a position of trust and responsibility for the benefit of Taungurung people, on 1 June 1859. His loyalties, however, seem never to have focused on Aboriginal interests or perspectives. Snodgrass was instead acting with fellow pastoralists to remove Taungurung people from their selected land as quickly as possible. Snodgrass first campaigned for relocation of the settlement to the less desirable and more remote Mohican Station in alliance with owner and fellow parliamentarian James Stewart MLC

35 Thomas received this letter of acceptance on 1 June 1859 and the position was approved 13 June 1860. ‘Annual Report to the Central Board January 1861’, in Thomas, *Journal of William Thomas*, 213, 319–21; Mohican/Acheron Station 1859, NAA, B312, Item 1, Folio 16.

36 This 20,480-acre station was jointly owned with Hugh Glass from 1851–59, and by Maxwell alone from 1859–64. Billis and Kenyon, *Pastoral Pioneers*, 168.

37 ‘Thornton’, 24,000 acres near Yea, Billis and Kenyon, *Pastoral Pioneers*, 3.

38 ‘Acheron’, 19,200 acres adjoining the Aboriginal station, Billis and Kenyon, *Pastoral Pioneers*, 89.

39 William Thomas to Central Board, 12 April 1859, Mohican/Acheron Station 1859, NAA, B312, Item 1, Folio 12.

40 Journal entry, 30 March and 15 April 1859, in Thomas, *Journal of William Thomas*, 201, 204.

41 Journal entry, 30 March and 15 April 1859, in Thomas, *Journal of William Thomas*, 201, 204.

(member for the Eastern Province 1856–63).⁴² Snodgrass also assisted the former owner of Mohican Station, Stephen Beaver Jones, to claim financial compensation for stock losses attributed to the proximity of the Aboriginal reserve at Acheron. These actions were personally motivated, as Snodgrass needed to recoup monies owed to him by Stephen Beaver Jones. As Guardian William Thomas was to bemoan, Aboriginal ambition at Acheron was ‘defeated ... because [of] a needy broken down squatter’.⁴³ Oral knowledge handed down to Uncle Roy Patterson provides an overview:

The white people got greedy and said, ‘we will put you in a new area’, so they shunted them up to the head of the Rubicon where they thought it was too rocky. They took them up Cathedral Lane, up to the Rubicon and put them on a campsite there.⁴⁴

‘Because [of] a needy broken down squatter’

Although Mohican Station was adjacent to the station Taungurung people had selected to cultivate and settle at Acheron, it was contrasting in terms of amenity. A 16,000-acre tract of land with frontage on the same river, Mohican was ‘much higher and colder’ than Acheron. According to Superintendent Robert Hickson, the country was deficient, as it was ‘full of game’ that competed with the stock. The run had ‘only a small patch of good land’ suitable for agriculture and ‘the Blacks hated it’.⁴⁵

When Mohican Station was first occupied by white settlers in May 1851, the run was reported to have ‘sufficient grazing capabilities for 5000 sheep’.⁴⁶ The executors of John Cotton’s estate (his widow Suzannah and son-in-law Charles Ryan) purchased the licence in 1851 and held it until 1855, with only 80 head of ‘quiet cattle’. When it was advertised for sale in July 1855, the executors claimed that Mohican had a carrying capacity

42 John Cotton’s wife Susannah and his son-in-law Charles Ryan were executors of the estate. Susannah Cotton died in 1852. ‘John COTTON’, Probate and Administration Files, Public Record Office Victoria (hereafter PROV), VPRS 28/P0, Unit 4, Item A/304.

43 ‘For Report June 1863’, William Thomas Papers, 1834–1868, Mitchell Library (hereafter ML), MSS 214/19, Frame 117.

44 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300141.

45 Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Central Board for Aborigines, 3 May 1861, NAA, B314, Roll 1.

46 ‘Government Notices’, *Geelong Advertiser*, 5 May 1851, 3.

of '800–1000 head' of cattle.⁴⁷ Potential buyers were right to be sceptical. Colonial knowledge of the time had it that 'most of the best land was taken up before the end of the [eighteen] thirties, and what remained appeared to offer poorer yields and higher costs, especially for transport'.⁴⁸ Located in a cold and isolated mountain district that early squatters had spurned, Mohican Station was assessed by District Surveyor F. Pinnifer in 1860 as so poor that 'no European person would care to occupy it'; as for the stock, it was 'not worth mustering'.⁴⁹ The owners of such unproductive tracts relied upon the unschooled optimism of inexperienced or monied new arrivals to relieve them of such lands.

Stephen Beaver Jones was apparently such a man. He purchased Mohican Station from the executors of John Cotton's estate with some confidence in 1855. This optimism was reflected in his decision to try sheep, although they were untested on the run. Beaver Jones bought 1,000 sheep for an outlay of £400, presumably on terms that later ruined him.⁵⁰ Securing sheep for new stations was costly in this period, and available sheep were also renowned for their low quality. This was because an established pastoralist who could carry more sheep on his own lands 'would only sell his worst'.⁵¹ As Abbott noted, the 'fortunes of sheep farming were more the product of sales of sheep than wool' and relied upon 'attracting monied immigrants to purchase some of this increase'.⁵² John Cotton had disposed of stock and station in this advantageous manner in 1844, selling his property on the Devils River to a Mr Matson. Cotton noted privately that he resolved to 'sell the station as the sheep have not done well there' but did this advantageously, selling them for 10/- each when he had purchased the same sheep at 4/6 per head.⁵³ It is perhaps unsurprising that, 'having incurred a heavy debt' to buy the sheep, Matson was forced to relinquish 'the station with all the sheep, cattle and everything on the run' to cover the debt in February 1849.⁵⁴ It was then common for settlers to obtain 'necessary advances which [were] from

47 'Stations and Livestock for Sale', *The Argus*, 13 July 1855, 8.

48 Butlin, *Foundations of the Australian Monetary System*, 317.

49 F. Pinnifer to Commissioner of Lands and Survey, 12 January 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 2, Folios 3–1A.

50 F. Pinnifer to Commissioner of Lands and Survey, 12 January 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 2, Folios 3–1A.

51 Butlin, *Foundations of the Australian Monetary System*, 317.

52 Abbott, *The Pastoral Age*, 124–25.

53 John Cotton to William Cotton, 6 March 1846, in Mackaness, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 33.

54 John Cotton to William Cotton, 6 March 1846, in Mackaness, *The Correspondence of John Cotton*, 33.

time to time required' to maintain their pastoral activities. Many found themselves thus ruined: '[in] arrears to pay up on the purchase of their stock, and to meet their engagements they had no alternative but to sell at a ruinous sacrifice'.⁵⁵

Guardian of Aborigines William Thomas understood that Stephen Beaver Jones had become indebted in this manner when he purchased Mohican Station. Thomas noted that Aboriginal hopes for Acheron had been:

Defeated after all because a needy broken down squatter owed £800 to 2 merchants I believe one in upper house and one in the lower transferred. His station was bought by Stewart.⁵⁶

Those merchants, James Stewart and Peter Snodgrass, had direct interests in the Mohican run when they recognised an opportunity to benefit their personal financial positions. They did this by influencing a government agency to acquire the property for the use of Aboriginal people from the hapless Stephen Beaver Jones.

Little is known about Stephen Beaver Jones prior to his purchase of Mohican Station.⁵⁷ He was born in Yorkshire in 1808, the son of gamekeeper John Beaver and Martha Littlewood. He was resident in Buninyong, a major inland community of pre-gold rush Victoria, and Melbourne for the births of his first three children between 1845 and 1852.⁵⁸ Beaver Jones moved to the Upper Goulburn when he purchased Mohican Station. Just nine months later, he sold the barren run to hoteliers and land speculators John Brown and James Stewart.

Beaver Jones also apparently remained indebted to Snodgrass after the transaction, perhaps relating to the sale of sheep.⁵⁹ Vacating Mohican in 1859, Beaver Jones moved to nearby Upper Thornton and into the hotel trade. His bark-roofed shanty at Upper Thornton was known as the Full Belly Hotel in 1862, metamorphosing into the more decorous Old House at Home and, later, perhaps reflecting long-awaited financial success and respectability, the Harvest Home.⁶⁰ Brown and Stewart

55 Kerr, *Glimpses of Life in Victoria*, 49.

56 'For Report June 1863', William Thomas Papers, 1834–1868, ML, MSS 214/19, Frame 117.

57 Including when or why he chose to adopt the surname Jones.

58 Lloyd, *Alexandra and District*, 279.

59 Billis and Kenyon, *Pastoral Pioneers*, 218.

60 Lloyd *Alexandra and District*, 279.

had apparently known Beaver Jones for ‘many years’, possibly indicating a previous occupation in the liquor trade and a connection between the men in the vicinity of Ballarat.⁶¹

Wine merchant James Stewart diversified into pastoral holdings after the success of his hotel business with partner John ‘Como’ Brown, which included lucrative wayside inns.⁶² James Stewart represented Victoria’s Eastern Province in the Legislative Council from November 1856 to August 1863.⁶³ Soon after Brown and Stewart purchased the valueless Mohican Station, they sought to immediately onsell the run at a profit.

Brown and Stewart tendered Mohican Station as suitable for Aboriginal settlement in early 1859, offering the property to the government for £1,500. As Diane Barwick noted, Brown and Stewart were essentially asking the government to purchase leased Crown Land at considerable cost.⁶⁴ The businessmen nominated Peter Snodgrass as their agent, noting that ‘for locality we beg to refer you to P Snodgrass Esq who is well acquainted with the same and can give you all the necessary information’.⁶⁵ Snodgrass was very well acquainted with the property, as he managed the Cotton family business that had held the lease for four years. It is difficult to ascertain to what extent these parliamentarians influenced the decision of the Central Board to buy the licence but, at their next meeting, the Board recommended ‘the advisableness of purchasing the stock and goodwill of a station in the use of aborigines’.⁶⁶ Guardian William Thomas expected this decision to secure the land that Taungurung leaders had selected at Acheron. He had, therefore, authorised the foundation of the settlement in advance. Trustee Peter Snodgrass and his squatting allies had other ideas.

Recognising that more pressure might help secure the sale of Mohican, Brown and Stewart wrote to the commissioner of lands and survey to make claims of injury caused by Aboriginal farmers. They cited a letter from Stephen Beaver Jones who claimed that his stock had been killed by marauding dogs:

61 Brown and Stewart to C. W. Ligar, Surveyor-General, 16 May 1859, Mohican/Acheron Station 1859, NAA, B312, Item 1, Folio 2.

62 Brown was already a noted builder in 1840s boomtown Melbourne. See ‘HO10 – Rockbank Inn’, *Victorian Heritage Database*, accessed 19 January 2018, vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/162932.

63 James Stewart in ‘Re-Member Database’, *Parliament of Victoria*, accessed 19 January 2018, www.parliament.vic.gov.au/about/people-in-parliament/re-member/details/24/1000.

64 Barwick, *Rebellion at Coranderrk*, 47.

65 Brown and Stewart to C. W. Ligar, Surveyor-General, 16 May 1859, Mohican/Acheron Station 1859, NAA, B312, Item 1, Folio 2.

66 23 May 1859, Mohican/Acheron Station 1859, NAA, B312, Item 1, Folio 4.

We are in receipt of a letter from Mr Jones (who is in charge of the station) ... This person is hard working, industrious and has been known to us many years and should the aborigines continue in the neighbourhood the prosperity of the station will be so much injured as to completely ruin him. It being much apparent that the locality is a most suitable one as an aboriginal reserve, [we] are here respectfully to call your attention to any offer for selling it.⁶⁷

Beever Jones had alerted Brown and Stewart to the perilous 'state of this station owing to the close proximity of the blacks'. He claimed:

I am in a fair way of losing all my sheep their dogs killing them in all directions and driving them into the scrub even destroying them in the yard at night. They have committed such havoc among them that I am scarcely able to muster 300 sheep. I had 9 rams in my paddock 8 of which they have killed by flushing them into the river. There are 66 blackfellows at the protectorate and each one possessing not less than 5 or 6 dogs. So you can imagine gentlemen how delightfully I am situated with my unfortunate sheep.⁶⁸

The misfortunes of Stephen Beever Jones, and the fate of his sheep, were well known in the Upper Goulburn. Reliable local informants told District Surveyor Pinnifer that Jones's failure predated this claimed injury of 26 June 1859. His hardship had nothing to do with the Aboriginal settlement on Acheron:

Stephen Jones' complaint of injury to his sheep by aboriginal dogs ... seems to be much exaggerated. Prior to the establishment of the Aboriginal Station, his sheep were in a very bad and diseased state and his misfortunes are probably due more to the unsuitability of the country and other causes ... I am credibly informed that originally (three or four years ago) when sheep were first tried on the station, Jones purchased one thousand sheep for £400, but nobody seems to know what has become of them.⁶⁹

67 Brown and Stewart to Commissioner of Lands and Survey, 14 July 1859, Mohican/Acheron Station 1859, NAA, B312, Item 1, Folio 4.

68 Letter, Stephen Jones to Brown and Stewart, 26 June 1859, Mohican/Acheron Station 1859, NAA, B312, Item 1, Folio 6.

69 F. Pinnifer to Commissioner of Lands and Survey, 12 January 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station January-June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 2, Folios 3-1A.

Jones was now claiming £1,000 compensation for the loss of sheep that had cost £400—a cost attributed to his poor management and the unsuitability of the location.⁷⁰ As noted earlier, stock diseases associated with wet weather, including catarrh, had caused significant losses across the district, meaning ‘the end of most squatters, since stock represented almost all their assets’.⁷¹

Taungurung disappointment: The Central Board concedes to squatter demands

Whether Jones’s sheep died because of dog attack or disease, it is apparent that Brown, Stewart and Snodgrass went to some effort to ensure that Mohican was purchased for the Upper Goulburn Aboriginal settlement instead of the site selected by Taungurung leaders. This aim was achieved at the first meeting of the Central Board, 8 June 1860, when a resolution was passed:

That the Board affirm the desirability of possessing the Mohican Station improvements and stock and land for the purposes of an Aboriginal reserve and recommend that an arrangement be made with Mr Jones and his agents as to the purchase.⁷²

Brown and Stewart succeeded in selling the station, but not in claiming additional compensation for Stephen Beever Jones.⁷³ On 2 May 1860, Guardian of Aborigines William Thomas protested the claimed compensation of £1,000 as excessive, arguing that the entire station could be secured for that sum, and still represent handsome compensation for any harm.⁷⁴ Thomas, however, had also assumed that the Central Board would purchase Mohican Station in addition to the selected land at Acheron. He did not envisage the relocation of the Aboriginal settlement to this more isolated and less conducive location, or the removal of Taungurung people from culturally meaningful land.

70 Brown and Stewart to E. Hodginson, Deputy Surveyor, 23 June 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 2, Folio 30.

71 Noble, *The Red Gate*, 8. The district was one of the last in Victoria to eradicate scab, in 1876.

72 Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 2, Folio 15.

73 Brown and Stewart to E. Hodginson, Deputy Surveyor, 23 June 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 2, Folio 30.

74 William Thomas to Central Board, 2 May 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 2, Folio 12.

William Thomas had authorised and inaugurated the Aboriginal reserve at Acheron under the expectation that necessary funds would be allocated to support the farming venture. He was, therefore, surprised on Sunday 10 July 1859 when a deputation of three disappointed Taungurung men, Nartal, Bunnemuttera and Burrawein, protested that their agricultural enterprise needed supplies.⁷⁵ The trio had travelled to Melbourne with a bullock team to collect a requisition of agricultural implements, and were ‘very cut up’ when they were denied permission by the colonial storekeeper. Thomas made ‘the best excuse I can’, as he believed the requisition had been approved.⁷⁶ He wrote to the commissioner of lands and surveys noting:

The unfortunate position of the Upper Goulburn Aboriginal Settlement recently formed, (thro’ want of funds) and the lamentable failure likely to result in consequence, the disappointment of a body of intelligent and industrious Aborigines, who have congregated there inured to civilised labor to settle down on their own soil, is a disappointment I never anticipated to have to write upon.⁷⁷

The requisition had not been honoured in early January 1860. Thomas argued that he had ‘made out a requisition consisting of bullocks, dray, agricultural implements &C&C which was at once sanctioned by government’, yet ‘there was no funds to meet the requisition tho approved of’.⁷⁸ Thomas was nevertheless optimistic: ‘notwithstanding the loss of time, I have no doubt but these industrious mountaineer blacks will shortly make a shew upon the station’.⁷⁹ Thomas had overseen ‘a grand opening’ of the settlement on August 1859, with ‘no less than 107 from 4 Mountainous Tribes’ in residence. Despite this ‘promising opening’, provision had not been made to support the settlement.⁸⁰

75 Journal entry, 10 July 1859, in Thomas, *Journal of William Thomas*, 218.

76 ‘Annual Report on Aborigines 1 January–31 December 1859’, in Thomas, *Journal of William Thomas*, 248.

77 Guardian of Aborigines to Honourable Commissioner of Lands and Surveys, ‘Proposing a plan to provide support of the Aborigines throughout the Colony of Victoria’, 20 July 1859, transcribed by Pauline Byrt, in Thomas, *Journal of William Thomas*, 220–21.

78 Thomas, *Journal of William Thomas*, 220–21; William Thomas, ‘A History of the Settlement of the Blacks on the Upper Goulburn’, 26 July 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 2, Folio 7.

79 ‘Annual Report on Aborigines 1 January–31 December 1859’, in Thomas, *Journal of William Thomas*, 248.

80 ‘Annual Report on Aborigines 1 January–31 December 1859’, in Thomas, *Journal of William Thomas*, 248.

Acheron Aboriginal Station had been surveyed and opened in 1859 with much optimism, but prospects for permanent settlement soon deteriorated. The land claimed by Taungurung leaders had not been officially gazetted, and now the treasurer refused to allocate funds based on a supplementary estimate.⁸¹ Attempts by Snodgrass to relocate the settlement were well underway by February 1860, when William Thomas somehow secured money to purchase tools and supplies. Unaware of these undermining efforts, Taungurung farmers prepared for cropping between February and June 1860. William Thomas reported their progress on 29 August 1860:

Work done included cutting logs for and erecting 4-rail cultivation paddock fence, grubbing trees from the 15 acre cultivation paddock ... stripped bark for a store ... grubbing and cleaning ground for wheat, stripping bark and building their own winter mia mia's ... ploughed, sewed and farrowed five acres of wheat, fenced about one and a half acres of land for a garden, ploughed and layed out beds, walks, sewing the vegetable seeds, raking and cleansing the walks of grass.⁸²

Taungurung farmers also prepared 10 acres for potatoes and, taking 'a more lively interest in the progress of the establishment, are well contented with the place and more settled than they have hitherto been'.⁸³ Just 12 days after this high level of Taungurung industry was noted, two community representatives arrived in Melbourne 'much alarmed at being told [they] must leave Acheron station'. Trustee Peter Snodgrass had ordered the removal of staff and stores 'from the Acheron River to the Mohican station'.⁸⁴ Taungurung leaders met Thomas again on 30 August, protesting the order to relocate and 'again plead[ing]' for justice.⁸⁵

The blacks were dissatisfied so much so that they persisted in not [offering] the least assistance in removing the stores—the objection of the natives appears to be dependent on it not being the spot they selected that it will be injurious to their health ... It would appear that on the superintendent and his wife leaving for

81 Christie, *Aborigines in Colonial Victoria*, 158.

82 'Returns of the Acheron Aboriginal Establishment Report for Period 1 January 1860 to 3 June 1860', Mohican/Acheron Station June–December 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folios 21–21A.

83 Mohican/Acheron Station June–December 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folios 21–21A.

84 Journal entry, 29 August 1860, Thomas, *Journal of William Thomas*, 277; 'Returns from the Superintendent of the Acheron Aboriginal Reserve for the Quarter Ending the 30 September 1860', Mohican/Acheron Station June–December 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folio 28.

85 Journal entry, 30 August 1860, in Thomas, *Journal of William Thomas*, 278.

good their selected spot on the 19th September that the blacks to the number of forty eight left in a body, leaving [a] few lubras to accompany the superintendent, even refusing to remain to take care of the crops they had sown.⁸⁶

According to Robert Hickson, ‘the belief that Messrs Glass and Nash were to take possession of the portion of the station ... frequented by the blacks’ was enough to prompt the Taungurung to abandon the improvements they had made.⁸⁷ Diane Barwick argued that Hugh Glass was a ruthless man who ‘had cheated Bunurong and Wurundjeri employees’ and that the Kulin were wise to avoid his displeasure.⁸⁸ Oral history handed down to Uncle Roy Patterson suggests that the squatters objected to Aboriginal use of pastoral land for agriculture. Conditions of their own licences restricted the use of land to ‘depasturing purposes only’, and squatters feared agricultural development of the district by land-hungry gold-seekers, as eventuated after 1865.⁸⁹ Uncle Roy recalls:

When more white people came up there and started mining gold, they saw the Aboriginal people growing good food. They had thought it was too rocky up there, but it was obviously good land. Then the squatters got greedy and said ‘we will put you in a new area’, so they shunted the Daunarung up to the head of the Rubicon and took over the Black ground again.⁹⁰

Snodgrass and his colleagues succeeded in evicting Taungurung farmers from their land in September 1860. In the same month, Victorian squatters conceded their first loss in a larger struggle: to prevent the passage of land reform legislation into law. After months of obstruction by squatting interests in the Legislative Council, the *Sale of Crown Lands Act* (known as the Nicholson Act) was finally passed in September 1860. The Bill, which aimed to extend small-scale farming and intensive cultivation into new districts, was strenuously opposed by a ‘clique of mighty squatters’ in the Legislative Council, including James Stewart. Although these men held ‘large portions of this very soil, at less than one farthing per acre’, they worked strenuously to prevent the sale of ‘small lots to industrious men at

86 William Thomas to Central Board, 10 November 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station June–December 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folio 41 (original emphasis).

87 Robert Hickson, report to Peter Snodgrass Esq., 5 Dec 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station June–December 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folios 46A–49.

88 Barwick, *Rebellion at Coranderrk*, 34.

89 Noble, *The Red Gate*, 23.

90 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 3 March 2016, DS3001137.

eighty-fold the price they pay'.⁹¹ Government had particularly targeted areas around the central Victorian goldfields for closer settlement, as the alluvial phase of the gold rush was in decline and miners were seeking new and autonomous occupations.⁹² The success of Aboriginal farmers at Acheron coincided unhappily with the passage of this land reform Bill, and with increased pressure for land selection that accompanied mining activity in the Upper Goulburn. Crown Land in the district had been judged by the surveyor-general to be poor-to-average in quality, and hence more suited to livestock than intense cultivation, but local smallholders were nevertheless increasing cereal cropping to meet market demand.⁹³ Agriculture in the central district rose 9.4 per cent between 1860 and 1862, primarily for food crops wheat, oats and hay.⁹⁴ A successful harvest by Aboriginal people, who were widely assumed to be inferior to white people in almost all realms of activity, would openly demonstrate the agricultural potential of local landholdings. The first actions of squatters Glass and Nash, after the eviction of the Aboriginal farmers, was, therefore, to destroy the four-rail fence erected to protect crops in the cultivation paddock. Guardian William Thomas narrated the destruction:

It would appear that Messrs' Glass and Nash have taken possession of the reserve originally selected by the Aborigines ... and that the superintendent has been ordered by them to remove the government bullock on the 13th ... and by the 17th the cultivation fence on the reserve had been broken down and the crop of wheat and potatoes destroyed. This the fate of Aboriginal industry is enough to deter Aborigines from ever after having confidence in promises held out to them.⁹⁵

Thomas also reported to the Central Board that 'the blackfellows were so disgusted and disappointed leaving the reserve and all they had done' that the superintendent:

Could not get one of the blacks to drive the dray with the stores to the Mohican station that he was forced to drive the dray himself, that the blacks refused to come to live on the Mohican station.⁹⁶

91 John Fawkner to the editor, 'The Obstructive Sixteen', *The Age*, 31 May 1860, 5. Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 2, Folio 15.

92 Attempts to achieve this outcome in the Western District was a controversial failure. Powell, *The Public Lands of Australia Felix*, 86; Serle, *The Golden Age*, 287.

93 This assessment related to Kilmore district. Powell, *The Public Lands of Australia Felix*, 87.

94 Powell, *The Public Lands of Australia Felix*, 87.

95 William Thomas to Central Board, 22 November 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station June–December 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folio 44.

96 William Thomas to Central Board, 8 October 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station June–December 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folio 33.

Superintendent Hickson not only had to drive the bullock himself, but also discovered there was no yard to hold the beast at the new site 'in consequence of the fencing being all decayed'.⁹⁷ The contrasting quality of land is identifiable on surveyor maps, as the soil at Acheron was noted to be 'alluvial flat timbered with gum', while Jones's Mohican Station was dominated by 'sandstone ranges' and 'soil of medium quality very broken and heavily timbered'.⁹⁸ Little wonder the Taungurung farmers were so 'disgusted and disappointed'. In his bitter criticism of the 'sinful' actions of the squatters, Guardian William Thomas noted that he had 'never anticipated the trustees would hand over their reserve to squatters', but declined to judge on one of the four men. He assured himself that Aitkin 'is too honest and feeling a gentleman to be a party to so iniquitous a step'.⁹⁹ Thomas retained no such confidence in the character of the remaining trustees.

After the eviction of Taungurung people from Acheron, Hugh Glass wrote to the Central Board seeking a guarantee that they would relinquish their claim on the run. The secretary of the Central Board, Brough Smythe, responded with a perfunctory and no doubt annoying response: 'It is the intention of the Board to retain possession of all Aboriginal reserves throughout the colony'. Brough Smythe did, however, request that Trustee Snodgrass 'be good enough to report on the subject of this letter and advise the Board as to the proper steps to be taken' regarding Acheron and Mohican.¹⁰⁰ Dissatisfied with Brough Smythe's answer, Glass took the issue to a higher authority to complain of 'very serious loss and inconvenience'. He asked the commissioner of land and survey if the government:

Intended to retain possession of that portion of my licenced run known as Niagaron which had been used as a temporary reserve for the blacks or whether they intended to return it to me having purchased Mr Jones' run as a permanent reserve for them.¹⁰¹

97 Report, Robert Hickson to William Thomas, 18 November 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station June–December 1860, NAA, B312, Folio 43.

98 'Reserve for Aborigines County of Anglesey', Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 2.

99 William Thomas to Central Board, 8 October 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station June–December 1860, NAA, B312, Folio 33.

100 Mohican/Acheron Station June–December 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folios 24–25, 27.

101 Hugh Glass to Honourable Commissioner of Lands and Survey, 20 September 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station June–December 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folios 24, 27.

Responding to this exertion of influence at their next meeting, the Central Board concluded on 24 September 1860 that:

As the proposed reserve has (although occupied by the blacks) been never approved by the Governor in Council, it would be desirable that the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines should decide whether the proposed reserve is required now that the Mohican station has been purchased for the use of the Aborigines. If recommended by the Central Board the reserve can be again submitted for the approval of the Governor in Council.¹⁰²

Once again, the board asked Snodgrass 'to be so good as to furnish a report on the question'.¹⁰³ Aware that the eviction of the Taungurung had already taken place, and that delay would assist the squatters' cause, Snodgrass replied on 4 October 1860 that such a report 'necessitates listing the stock which I cannot conveniently do at present'.¹⁰⁴ With Snodgrass silent on the matter, the Central Board determined to write to Trustee John Maxwell for advice and information 'touching the removal of the blacks to Jones' station'.¹⁰⁵ Maxwell, who had business links with Hugh Glass, argued that no negative impacts were observed following the removal of the Taungurung from Acheron to Mohican. Instead, he championed the proximity and suitability of the Mohican run for Aboriginal occupation:

I have the honour to say that I do not believe that the removal of the blacks from the reserve on the Acheron to Jones' has had the slightest effect on any of the [residents] on the establishment. The distance between the two places does not exceed two miles and ... the latter country is more open and extensive [and] better adapted for their camping ground.¹⁰⁶

Maxwell was aware that the Taungurung had embarked upon a permanent farming venture at Acheron Aboriginal Station, but he perpetuated the belief that Aboriginal land use centred upon itinerant hunting and temporary camping. He also asserted that the small numbers of Taungurung at the new Mohican Station reflected the demands of seasonal work patterns:

102 Mohican/Acheron Station June–December 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folio 28.

103 Mohican/Acheron Station June–December 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folio 28.

104 Transcript of letter, Snodgrass to Central Board, Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folio 31.

105 Minute, 11 December 1860, Board Meeting Minutes 1860–1862, NAA, B335/0, Box 1, Folio 13.

106 John Maxwell, 'Cathkin' Merton to Brough Smyth, 21 December 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folio 52.

At the beginning of the season a few left for the purpose of shearing and washing sheep at the neighbouring stations, the Chief was here with a few others, I heard of no complaint except a shortage of tea and sugar and all expressed their intention of returning in a short time.¹⁰⁷

Trustee John Maxwell suggested that Aboriginal disquiet over Mohican Station was temporary and minor. Generational oral knowledge maintained by Taungurung people presents a very different interpretation of the same historic episode. Taungurung Elders were increasingly upset by the duplicity of the settlers and officials who forced them to move from Acheron to Mohican and then, as revealed in Chapter 3, briefly back to Acheron again. The Elders, as Uncle Roy recalls, refused to relocate voluntarily and were forcibly removed from Acheron, saying ‘No! We take nothing but our own land’.¹⁰⁸ Taungurung perspectives on the importance, function and rightful possession of land were, and are, starkly divergent to the powerful vested interests of squatters and their representatives in government.

Conclusion: ‘It would be well for the Aborigines to themselves select the localities’

Aboriginal people chose to settle on Acheron Station because it was a culturally meaningful site that also promised to fulfil their farming aspirations. Guardian William Thomas understood this and, recalling the failed protectorate experiment, advocated for an extension of the Aboriginal reserve system. He envisaged five Aboriginal settlements on ‘the banks of the Murray, or upper branches of most the out of the way rivers’:

It would be well for the Aborigines to themselves select the localities ... Hitherto white-man have selected the spots. White-man’s taste is widely different to the Aboriginal; that was powerfully exemplified to me in my late accompanying the Upper Goulburn delegates to their ‘Goshen’ ... no white-man, not even

107 John Maxwell, ‘Cathkin’ Merton to Brough Smyth, 21 December 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folio 52.

108 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 3 March 2016, DS3001137.

the most zealous missionary—would have selected such a spot. My impression is, that much of the ill-success attending previous exertions has been through this—drawing them to a locality in which they had no interest, or felt no pleasure in encamping on.¹⁰⁹

Thomas's predominantly Christian readership understood the mobilisation of this well-known biblical story. 'Goshen' is the Hebrew name for a place in ancient Egypt, where the patriarch Joseph established a refuge for his family during drought and famine. Thomas linked the success of Aboriginal settlements to Godly intention and the selection of land by Aboriginal people themselves. This parallel also predicts impending banishment: as the Israelites fled from Egypt, so the Taungurung were evicted from their Goshen.

109 Printed copy of William Thomas's recommendations, 20 July 1860, Mohican/Acheron Station January–June 1860, NAA, B312, Item 3, Folio 5.

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