

Introduction: Meeting and working with Uncle Roy

In mid-2015 a friend of Uncle Roy's, who was an acquaintance of a colleague of mine, approached me to co-author this book. At the time I was on study leave and visiting the National Library of Scotland. I was reading letters written by a Scottish widow left destitute and far from home when her husband died of mining-related chest disease on the central Victorian goldfields in 1869. I was fully immersed in that project, and the widow's plight seemed a world away from Taggerty and this stranger named Roy Patterson. I was to discover, however, that the crimson cords of Empire did connect these apparently disparate people, as they also linked Uncle Roy to me.

This Scottish family had made their home at Bendigo during the gold rush and were living on the traditional lands of Uncle Roy's great-grandmother, Dja Dja Wurrung woman Emma Kerr. Emma was about 16 years old when she gave birth to Uncle Roy's grandfather, John Patterson, to the north of Bendigo, also in 1869. Emma Kerr's childhood had been shaped by the dramatic population boom fostered by gold. The end of the rush would similarly dictate her adult choices. As the masses of enriched and disappointed diggers sought new occupations, the colony of Victoria was under pressure to open pastoral land for closer settlement. Vast squatting runs were carved into smaller farmsteads and these settlers called for the segregation and control of Aboriginal people. Voluntary Aboriginal protectorates and missions had already failed to satisfy such demands. So, in 1869, the colony of Victoria became the first Australian government to design coercive legislation for the management of Aboriginal people. Passed on 11 November 1869, it shaped the lives of Emma Kerr's newborn son, her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The *Aboriginal Protection Act 1869 (Vic)*, also known as an *Act for the Protection and Management of the Aboriginal Natives of Victoria*, delivered powers to regulate every

aspect of the lives of Aboriginal people in the colony.¹ In subsequent years, this Act was amended to enable extraordinary levels of control over Emma Kerr's place of residence, her employment and income, her marriage and her social life. This legislation would eventually force her children into a dormitory at Coranderrk Aboriginal Station and curtail their education. The amendments of 1886, colloquially known as the 'Half-Caste Act', split Aboriginal families apart. Those with mixed racial heritage were forced to merge into mainstream society and local reserves were closed, concentrating Aboriginal residents on the remaining faraway Aboriginal stations. These government measures made it difficult for Aboriginal Elders to pass on traditional knowledge. Uncle Roy Patterson's retention of Taungurung cultural knowledge is, therefore, a notable achievement, given this challenging experience of nearly 150 years duration.

Meeting Uncle Roy

When I drove down the Maroondah Highway to meet Uncle Roy at Taggerty for the first time, I intended to decline his request to help write this book. I was focused on the goldfields project and thought I was already overcommitted. Somehow, to my surprise, it only took Uncle Roy 10 minutes to change my thinking. Uncle Roy described his ambition for this book and made a simple pitch:

I've had a full life, a good life, but now I want to get the knowledge that my grandmother and grandfather taught me, and what I've learnt over the years from Aboriginal people, to other people so that they can learn it, including Daunarung people and my family all around here. This is the reason I want to write this book, to get that knowledge out there. They have got to learn it and get some of their history and culture back. Without culture, you've got nothing. This is why I want to write this book. Any information you want, I'll give it gladly, if you write it for me.²

1 *Aboriginal Protection Act 1869 (Vic)*, accessed 7 February 2019, www.foundingdocs.gov.au/item-sdid-22.html.

2 Spelt Taungurung by the Taungurung Land and Waters Council (Aboriginal Corporation), the Registered Aboriginal Party, but also spelt Taunerong, Daunarung and Daun Wurrung. Uncle Roy preferred 'Daunarung', so I use this spelling in his direct speech. Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 3 March 2016, DS3001137.

Then 75 years old, Uncle Roy wanted to secure his cultural knowledge for future generations. He had already outlived most Aboriginal men by nearly a decade.³ I felt my resolve weaken, and my cup of tea wasn't even tepid by the time I'd agreed to his proposal.

Working with Uncle Roy

We agreed that I would come back to Taggerty at regular intervals to help us get to know each other and to record Taungurung generational knowledge. Whenever my work required travel from Wodonga to Melbourne, I detoured via Healesville on the way home. I would stay overnight and spend the next day with Uncle Roy in the Upper Goulburn Valley. We usually met at the Taggerty shop, sharing toasted sandwiches and a cup of tea before I turned on the digital recorder. We would chat about Taungurung culture, Patterson family history, and Uncle Roy's knowledge of bush tucker and bush medicine. After a decade working as a cultural educator with school students, TAFE students and with community groups, Uncle Roy hoped to reach wider audiences with this book. His vision was that traditional ecological knowledge would cultivate respect for Taungurung culture and foster new habits of care for Country. He was ambitious, he wanted to shape Australia's future:

I want this book to get out to people that I don't teach and schools I don't get near, to museums and universities that know nothing about it. It will be something to show about our culture.⁴

Uncle Roy believed that encounters with significant Aboriginal places and place-based knowledge could be transformative for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Recalling numerous trips leading school children to a special site, he noted:

When I take you up there you will experience it too. It is an enormous, beautiful feeling. To tell the honest truth, you won't want to leave there because of the feeling you get, and I love it, it is so bloody beautiful. Every time I take a school up there, I take

³ Life expectancy at birth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males is estimated to be 67.2 years, 11.5 years less than life expectancy at birth for non-Indigenous males (78.7 years). 'The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples', accessed 7 February 2019, www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/lookup/4704.0Chapter218Oct+2010.

⁴ Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, Taggerty, 3 March 2016, DS3001139.

the students to show them and let them experience it. They love it. It might be a little different for non-Aboriginal people, but those kids tell me what they feel, and they love it.⁵

Uncle Roy believed that everyone could appreciate the spiritual significance of Aboriginal land. While this education would obviously be different for non-Aboriginal people, Uncle Roy wanted everyone to ‘learn what I have learnt and how I have learnt it. I am teaching our Old People’s way, not the European way’. This included me. After several meetings talking about his family history and heritage, he said:

We’ve talked about bush tucker and bush medicine, now we’ve got to get out onto the land and do it! We’ve got to get out onto the land where the plants are, to get the feel of it and the knowledge of it. Talking is alright, practise is better! Everything you see, it all belongs to the Aboriginal culture and the Dreamtime.⁶

We took to the road, looking for seasonal bush tucker and bush medicine plants. Every time we met, Uncle Roy would test my comprehension and assimilation of previous lessons. ‘So’, he would say, ‘what else do you want to know?’

Some months into my Taungurung education another pattern emerged in our collaboration. I began to visit archives in Melbourne to read the European historic record, and afterwards I would meet Uncle Roy to discuss the historic characters and incidents I had encountered. Uncle Roy would then test the veracity of these European perspectives against his generational oral knowledge. While agreeing that historic records could be useful, he believed that they had to be adequately contextualised by Taungurung perspectives and the known experience of his ancestors. He explained:

We never wrote nothing down, so I don’t know if it is true or not; if I can’t get any feeling for it, I don’t know whether it is just made up. If it was the truth, I’d get a feeling for it.⁷

5 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 3 March 2016, DS3001139.

6 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300143.

7 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300143.

This ‘feeling’ for historic truth relied upon spiritual communication with the Old People and the consensus foundation of Aboriginal oral history. Uncle Roy’s extension of trust in my skills and experience as a historian also played a role. I returned transcripts for Uncle Roy to check and we clarified details, but otherwise Uncle Roy left the writing and collation of the book to me. He was firm, however, in his decision that the book was not a biography. Uncle Roy was a recovered alcoholic, and he was not proud of all the choices he had made in his lifetime. He was conscious that some of his past actions had hurt other people and that these stories were not his to tell. Uncle Roy wanted to leave a positive legacy, centring on inherited cultural knowledge and the proud history of his ancestors. Therefore, the sections of this book that chart his personal history relate directly to his acquisition of bush skills or his carriage of traditional knowledge. He couldn’t fix past mistakes, but he was taking future-oriented action within his realm of influence. He wanted to foster cultural revitalisation, by teaching:

A way of life that children can grow up with and they do it later on in their lives and teach their children what they learnt, the way they learnt. There is no argument, no fight; it’s beautiful harmony. I want to get it started again, to let the Aboriginal people know that this is our life without alcohol and drugs. If I can do that little bit, I’ve done something in my life.⁸

Although I did not recognise it at the time, I can see now that Uncle Roy was preparing for his death. The completion of our oral history yarns and seasonal journeys to see bush tucker came as a huge relief to him. He reflected on our collaboration:

After the first meeting we had, I felt the eagerness come back in here, back into me heart. This is why I am so keen to show you anything you want to learn about and talk about. I am very proud and honoured to be doing it.⁹

Uncle Roy was widely respected for the depth of his cultural knowledge and he carried this inheritance with authority. He was not afraid to ‘have a bit of a barney’ with individuals or institutions who had incorrect information or who had failed, in his estimation, to observe the right

8 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 3 March 2016, DS3001138.

9 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 29 April 2016, DS300145–47.

protocols. He was protective of his cultural heritage and could be belligerent in defence of Taungurung rights. In areas outside his domain of authority, however, Uncle Roy preferred not to venture an opinion. If he was uncertain, he would shrug his shoulders and remain silent. That said, he was generally sceptical about the ‘the university mob’, particularly archaeologists who he believed had exploited Aboriginal cultural heritage. In such cases, he said: ‘university rules go against my grain’. Uncle Roy was suspicious of European systems of government and knowledge production, but he was prepared to extend trust where he observed respect for Aboriginal traditional knowledge, adherence to cultural protocols and willingness to learn. Uncle Roy positioned himself as a lifelong learner:

I’ve got a lot more to learn me self. It is a lifetime of learning; you never stop learning in Aboriginal life. I don’t know about you Europeans, but we Aboriginal people, we learn all the time.¹⁰

But he also wryly observed: ‘If you don’t want to give respect out, you are not likely to get it back. That’s the way of life my grandmother told me about, back in the early 1940s.’¹¹ Uncle Roy was therefore critical of the motives of non-Aboriginal people who sought Indigenous knowledge for personal gain, and he was selective about the extent of knowledge he shared. He told a story about ‘a bloke he took up the mountain’ on a bush tucker walk ‘who was amazed’ by what he saw:

He said, ‘I didn’t know there was so much stuff up ’ere!’ and I said, ‘it is all bush tucker and bush medicine, old fella!’ He is a man who has got a nursery in the Yarra Valley, and he tried to pick my brain, but I won’t let him do it. He wants all the knowledge about native plants, but we get nothing out of it. We don’t want royalties, we want acknowledgement. Royalties is nothing, acknowledgement of [traditional] knowledge is what I am talkin’ about. That is the way I work: do you blame me? I want the knowledge out there in black and white so everybody can read it.¹²

Uncle Roy died before we had decided on a final structure for this book. In subsequent years I have made choices about the shape of the manuscript, first by reflecting on Uncle Roy’s intentions and by consulting his family and members of the Taungurung community. Uncle Roy’s overarching

10 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300143.

11 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300143.

12 Roy Patterson, in conversation with Jennifer Jones, 15 April 2016, DS300143.

desire was to see Taungurung knowledge and experience recognised and preserved. I have, therefore, chosen to present this work in two sections to highlight our distinct cultures and voices. The first section of the book, Chapters 1–5, draws mainly on archival research and is written in my scholarly voice. Here I provide a detailed account of Taungurung history since invasion. My focus is on settler policies of ‘protection’ as they affected Taungurung people and Uncle Roy’s ancestors. I also highlight the decisions of relevant white settlers and officials. My aim is to contextualise the knowledge that Uncle Roy shares by developing a biographical and historical picture of the settlers with whom Taungurung people interacted. Understanding how officials and settlers interpreted and applied government policy assists a full appreciation of Aboriginal survival and adaptation, particularly how Taungurung customs and knowledge were maintained in post-contact society. The second section of the book, Chapters 6–8, focuses on Taungurung cultural knowledge as passed down to Uncle Roy. These chapters are primarily written in Uncle Roy’s voice, and relate his generational knowledge of bush tucker, bush medicine and Taungurung cultural practices.

When Uncle Roy died, people asked me if I could finish the book without him. Perhaps the answer should have been ‘no’. Yet, it was clear when we started the project that Uncle Roy envisaged future audiences reading his book. I decided to persist. I hope that he would have been proud of the final product.

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