

2. The Context

The Port Phillip Protectorate lasted from 1839 to 1849, one of a number of European policy initiatives directed towards the traditional owners of the land: these included the Yarra Mission (1837–1839) on the site of the present botanical gardens on the south bank of the Yarra River; the Native Police Corps (1837–1853) at what is now Police Paddocks, Stud Road Dandenong, subsequently re-located to Merri Creek in what is now Yarra Bend Park; and the Baptist Aboriginal School (1845–1850), also at Merri Creek.

The Protectorate was a British idea, an earnest attempt to prevent in the Port Phillip District of New South Wales a repeat of what happened in Van Diemen's Land – the virtual destruction of the original inhabitants. Only 59 or so Tasmanian Aborigines were still alive in 1839, most of them confined at Wybelena on Flinders Island and expected then to die out as a people.

The man who rounded up these Van Diemen's Land (VDL) people in his so-called Friendly Mission in the 1830s, and subsequently became their Commandant at Wybelena, was George Augustus Robinson, now appointed by London to be the Chief Protector of the Aborigines of Port Phillip on the grounds of his prior experience in VDL. He was an unsuitable appointment for Port Phillip being vain and mean and more concerned with increasing his fortune¹ than with his charges: he was appointed just before his fraud at Wybelena was recognised by the authorities in VDL. He lived off his reputation as the sole instrument of black co-operation in VDL and was a poor manager of his staff in Port Phillip, in fact a bully.² It is alleged that he used Trucaninni as his mistress;³ he brought a group of eight Aborigines to Port Phillip at government expense, and more came later with his wife,⁴ but in the end, he turned them loose when the

1 He speculated in land from shortly after his arrival in Melbourne, and later, he speculated in gold, purchasing in small lots, building them up to 1000 oz lots and consigning them to an agent in London, see Appendix 1: 31 'Gold purchased by G.A. Robinson in Victoria' in Clark 2000, vol 6: 133. Shortly after La Trobe's arrival, Robinson requested that Langhorne's mission be turned over to the Protectorate allegedly for an infants school. La Trobe made a marginal note in his journal 'Set up a *stock yard* for his son's *cattle* in the mean time!' (La Trobe's exclamation mark), *HRV*, vol 7: 282.

2 Though there has been some recent revision of Robinson's VDL activities (Johnston and Rolls 2008), his actions in Port Phillip merit in my view, a harsher summary even than that given above. Thomas' son, himself undeniably a partisan reporter, is on record as saying that Robinson was a proven liar. According to WJ Thomas, Robinson gave the four assistant protectors a lecture on his arrival in Port Phillip about the VDL Aborigines at Wybelena – that they were civilised and sincere Christians, whereas the truth was, according to Thomas, he had trapped them into coming in by wholesale lying and was afraid of them, needing a body of police on Wybelena where he ruled them with a rod of iron and that they 'held him no good will' (CY 3106, frames 43–54, ML).

3 Rae-Ellis 1988.

4 *HRV*, vol 2B: 393.

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government refused to keep them on rations.⁵ One of these ten was a 12 year old boy named Ben Lomand, cast out to fend for himself; two of them were hanged, while Trucaninni escaped conviction and was sent back to VDL.⁶

Though there is no doubting Robinson's altruistic motives in attempting his Friendly Mission to the VDL Aborigines in the first place, by the end of 1836 he was soured by the failure of the authorities to reward him financially for the job he had done. The following lengthy quotation indicates his feelings, and goes some way to explain why he was out to feather his nest in Port Phillip:

After near nine years service in one of the greatest enterprises ever achieved of its kind, after the most signal advantages gained by my successful endeavours in the security of life and property, in the increased value of land consequent upon the removal of the aborigines by my exertions and that of my family, after being the instrument of restoring peace and tranquillity to the colony at large, in being the means of saving the lives of numbers both black and white, after having thereby ameliorated the condition of the original occupants of the soil, after all these and numerous other and great advantages, myself to be refused land and refused a pension, and my sons also to have nothing, although they and I were unanimously recommended by a board of officers and by the Council, and not only not reward us but heap insult upon ingratitude by telling us it is enough to be employed, to tell me that had I fallen a sacrifice my family would have been abandoned without provision, what I would ask is all this but insult added to the basest ingratitude, ingratitude of the worst kind.⁷

To help Robinson the British government appointed four assistants, of whom three were Methodist schoolteachers, James Dredge, William Parker and William Thomas, while the fourth, Charles Sievwright, was an ex Army officer who arrived with serious problems.⁸ These four arrived in Port Phillip in January 1839, from England via Sydney: they all had wives and they had 22 children between them. They arrived with expectations⁹ but found no accommodation

5 The governor in Sydney retrospectively absolved Robinson from responsibility authorising La Trobe 'to release Mr Robinson from any further necessity of maintaining these persons, and at the same time to request that you will report whether they cannot in some advantageous manner be disposed of at Port Phillip, as there will be probably considerable difficulty in returning the Blacks to Flinders Island as proposed by Mr Robinson', (Col Sec to Superintendent, 2 October 1840, VPRS 10, unit 2/1069, PROV).

6 Two of these people Smallboy and Tunnerminnerwate, known in Port Phillip as Bob and Jack, were hanged in the first public execution in Port Phillip in 1842, after killing two whalers at Westernport. Trucaninni, Matilda and Fanny who were with them, were found not guilty and sent back to Van Diemen's Land; see *HRV*, vol 2B: 393; Macfarlane 1984.

7 Robinson Journal, 7 October 1836, in Plomley 1987: 386.

8 His financial troubles are discussed by Cannon in Chapter 14 of *HRV*, vol 2B: 365; he became unduly attached to Mrs Parker on the voyage out to New South Wales; Robinson told Dredge in an interview on 2 September 1842 that Sievwright was dismissed on the grounds of 'general immorality', (Dredge Diary, 1839-1843, Ms 5244: 264, SLV).

9 James Dredge, the assistant protector for the Goulburn, had a delicate wife, and he wrote that 'one object of my removal to this country was the benefit of my family', *HRV*, vol 2B: 433. Elsewhere he wrote that to relieve her of even the necessity of

(they had to live in tents), no organisation of their duties, no knowledge of their charges or their languages, and a penny-pinching government in Sydney which was almost bankrupt, and, as a consequence, failed to grant them what they needed for their jobs. One example will suffice; they were supposed to be given four bullocks each to cart to their districts all their supplies for the Aborigines, as well as all their tents and personal baggage and families, prior to commencing their duties. Though Governor Gipps directed from Sydney that they be supplied with four bullocks, Captain Lonsdale in Melbourne interpreted the direction as meaning one bullock each:¹⁰ one bullock could not pull a loaded dray. So they remained in Melbourne for months.

William Thomas was given the 'Westernport or Melbourne District' defined as 'Bounded on the south by the coast; on the north by the Australian Alps; on the west by Port Phillip; the eastern boundary undefined': the Yarra and Port Phillip and Western Port blacks became his responsibility.¹¹ The Yarra blacks, the Warworong, owned the Yarra drainage basin – all that country from the dividing ranges south to the Bolin swamp,¹² that flows into the Yarra or Paarran. The Port Phillip and Western Port blacks, the Bonurong, owned all the coastal drainage basin, all the land from Werribee to Wilson's Promontory which was drained by the waterways that flow into Port Phillip and Western Port, including the lower reaches of the Yarra. The Yarra River is the exception to the principle of watercourses falling into the sea, according to Thomas.¹³

William Thomas was the standout assistant protector, in terms of intimacy with his people. He was a man of religious conviction who sacrificed himself and his family life in order to do his job. He led a deeply spiritual interior life, undoubtedly the source of his concern for the injustice of government policy:

to infringe on which [their land] without remuneration is an injustice not consonant to humanity and repugnant to Christian feelings.¹⁴

Actually, the injustice was consonant not with British policy, but with the way that policy was interpreted in New South Wales.

Once Thomas almost put a curse on the land: he was speaking about Gippsland, but it is a measure of how much he identified with Aboriginal thinking that he used Aboriginal language as well as his own:

superintending servants doing the domestic work was one object he sought in coming to Port Phillip, see *HRV*, vol 2B: 428.

10 William Jackson Thomas, CY 3106, frame 57, ML.

11 *HRV*, vol 2B: 452.

12 Thomas Journal, Boundary South of the Yarra Blacks Country, CY 2984: 535, ML.

13 Thomas Miscellaneous Papers, CY 2984: 92, ML.

14 Thomas First Periodical Report, *HRV*, vol 2B: 622.

and what has the poor creatures for their country—not a *sou* ... can heavenly father look down with any degree of pleasure on a country located on such terms. Such injustice is of itself enough to prompt God from his place to visit with Murrain Mildew, catter pillar and pestilence.¹⁵

His religious conviction is probably too, the bedrock of his courage in standing up to the Chief Protector, and pressing the case for justice to the Superintendent of the Port Phillip District, Charles Joseph La Trobe, and to the Governor of New South Wales, Sir George Gipps.

Thomas asked first in 1839 that the proceeds from the sale of the 895 acres which is now South Yarra and Toorak, including the site of the Botanical Gardens, be given to the Port Phillip and Western Port blacks so that they could purchase cattle for themselves. This old 1837 mission site was their former reserve, granted by Sir Richard Bourke, and it was being measured for sale in ten acre allotments. Thomas respectfully requested Sir George Gipps to give them another reserve more in the interior, and with the cattle purchased from the sale proceeds, they could form their own agricultural and cattle station.¹⁶ But his petition fell on deaf ears: the authorities did not see it as Thomas did, as a justice issue. They saw revenue.

Thomas' second petition to Gipps requests a whole raft of changes to what he considered to be unjust government policy:

- let them have firearms
- do not let settlers take them out of their own country because they are assassinated in the new country
- do not sell any more Special Surveys because the three that have been sold – Dendy's at Brighton, Unwin's at Bulleen and Jamieson's at Mt Martha – were all favoured fishing places of the natives
- do not make them work for their rations but feed them at the same generous scale as Robinson's VDL blacks receive without having to work¹⁷
- allow Aboriginal evidence to be given in court
- finally, as the Bonurong refuse to settle at Nerre Nerre Warren with the Warworong or Yarra blacks, give them what they want – a reserve for themselves between Sandy Point and Cape Schanck 'with the grand object likely to be attained of keeping the Aborigines in one place and securing the rising generation'.¹⁸

15 Thomas Journal, Monday 24 February 1845, CY 2606, item 3, frame 263, ML.

16 Thomas to Gipps, 20 December 1839, VPRS 10, unit 1, 1839/336, PROV.

17 Daily, 1 lb of meat fresh or salt, one and a half lbs of flour, 3 oz sugar, one quarter of an ounce of tea, 1 oz soap, half an ounce of salt.

18 Thomas' petition to Gipps, 23 June 1841, enc with VPRS 10, unit 3, 1841/909, PROV.

Thomas discussed this petition with La Trobe on 28 July 1841: La Trobe objected to some clauses and had not yet sent it to Sydney, a month after receiving it. Thomas learned that it was rejected by Gipps on 11 October 1841.

Thomas' third petition puts the case bluntly – the settlers' sheep and cattle eat the roots and herbs which were formerly devoured by the kangaroos, emus etc and the result is a scarcity of the means of subsistence for the Aborigines.¹⁹

The account that follows is about the minutiae of daily living for the Bonurong – it is an account of only one year. Perhaps therefore, a broadbrush impression of the wider context will be helpful in placing these daily living records in context – the British government expectations, the character of the squatters on the Mornington Peninsula, and the state of the Bonurong when Thomas arrived in 1839.

The model of the Protectorate

At the highest level of reality, the British government policy guidelines, the following is a fair summation of expectations of the Protectorate:

The duties of the Protectors of the Aborigines in New Holland should consist first, in cultivating a personal knowledge of the natives, and a personal intercourse with them; and with that view these officers should be expected to acquire an adequate familiarity with the native language. To facilitate the growth of confidence, the Protectors should be furnished with some means of making to the tribes occasional presents of articles either of use or ornament, of course abstaining from the gift of liquors. The Protectors should ascertain what is that species of industry which is least foreign to the habits and disposition of the objects of their care, and should be provided with all the necessary means of supplying them with such employment. Especially should they claim for the maintenance of the Aborigines such land as may be necessary for their support. So long as agriculture shall be distasteful to them, they should be provided with the means of pursuing the chase without molestation.²⁰

This is neither a noble nor a realistic set of guidelines, but it does at least presume that the Aborigines can continue to move freely about their land.

The Aborigines were to have the same rights as other British subjects:

¹⁹ Byrt 2004, CD WT 3126P.DOC.

²⁰ Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines, House of Commons, 26 June 1837, *HRV*, vol 2A: 68.

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To regard them as aliens, with whom a war can exist, and against whom Her Majesty's troops may exercise belligerent rights, is to deny that protection to which they derive the highest possible claim from the sovereignty which has been assumed over the whole of their ancient possessions.²¹

There is confusion here – sovereignty is claimed but dispossession is not foreseen.

In passing, it must be said that there was no legal mechanism on the ground, so to speak, by which the Aborigines actually lost their rights to country, to their way of life. *Terra nullius* has nothing to do with what happened on the ground. Under the 'Squatting Act' of 1836, one of the functions of the Commissioners of Crown Land together with their Border Police was to protect the rights of Aborigines in distant parts of the country: half the expense of the Border Police was considered to be incurred on behalf of the Aborigines.²² This Act assumes that Aborigines were free to move about their country.

Even ten years later, when the licence system for squatting was about to be replaced by the lease system, the British government was still insisting that the Aborigines were entitled to their traditional way of living:

The Government must prevent the Aborigines being altogether excluded ... it is essential it be understood that leases granted ... give grantees only an exclusive²³ right of pasturage for their cattle and of cultivating fenced land ... these leases are not intended to deprive the natives of their former right to hunt or ... from the spontaneous produce of the soil.²⁴

The actual mechanics of dispossession – keeping them out of town, off stations, off water supplies, killing their dogs, the replacement of game by flocks and herds – none of these were done by legal means, but rather, by administrative fiat and settlers' will.²⁵ Foxcroft's 1940 summary statement 'that the NSW Protectorate was an example of the application of will without knowledge to native problems' is accurate.²⁶

21 Lord Glenelg to the Governor of NSW, Sir Richard Bourke, 26 July 1837, *HRV*, vol 2A: 69.

22 William Lithgow, Auditor General 'Return of the Expenses defrayed from the Colonial Treasury of NSW... [on] Aborigines', *NSW Legislative Council Votes & Proceedings*, 1843.

23 Exclusive against other squatters, not exclusive against the Aborigines.

24 Earl Grey to Governor Fitzroy, 11 February 1848, *HRA*, series 1, vol 26: 225.

25 In *That's my country belonging to me*, Clark (1998b) devotes Chapter 7 to the mechanics of dispossession, namely squatters who prohibited access, actions aimed to intimidate Aboriginal people, Aborigines kept out of townships, and architectural and locational adjustments.

26 Foxcroft 1940–1941 pt I: 77.

The character of the squatters on the Mornington Peninsula

It was a fact that the Aborigines of the Port Phillip District, the Bonurong and the Warworong were attracted to, and actually cultivated, high status Europeans – gentlemen – and that they despised convicts.²⁷ From the vantage point of a meritocracy such as our own society, it requires a real effort to understand how taken-for-granted were the manners, mores and attitudes of a class-based society. It so happens that most of the names of squatters on the Mornington Peninsula in 1839–40, who feature in Thomas' journals, also appear in Paul de Serville's appendixes of *Gentlemen by Birth* (titled, landed or armigerous families), *Gentlemen in Society* (profession, commission and upbringing) or *Colonists claiming gentle birth and accepted by other gentlemen as gentlemen*.²⁸ Edward Hobson and his brother, Dr Edmund Hobson (Kangerong), the brothers Archibald, Hugh and Thomas Bushby Jamieson²⁹ (Kangerong Special Survey), Robert Jamieson (Cape Schanck), Samuel Rawson (Kunnung with Robert Jamieson), Captain Reid (Tichingurook), Captain Baxter (Carup Carup), Alfred and Maurice Meyrick (Boniong), Henry Howard Meyrick (Coolart), the Barker brothers (Barrabong and Cape Schanck), and George Smith (Turtgoorook) living with a woman believed by Melbourne society to be a niece by marriage of the great Captain William Hobson RN, were all gentlemen in terms of one or other of de Serville's categories.

The Western Port squatters impressed Richard Howitt on a walk to Western Port and return to Melbourne in 1843:

On this occasion as on others, my opinion was strengthened that the squatters, most of them the younger branches of wealthy and respectable English and Scotch families, are on the whole an intelligent and gentlemanly race.³⁰

Two things matter about these gentlemen: as de Serville says, 'gentlemen approached the exotic flora and fauna and the black race with the curiosity of the Romantic amateur'.³¹ Hence the corroborees which all Melbourne polite society attended, the collection of artefacts, the adoption of black children, the name exchanges, the genuine friendships between some gentlemen and high status Aboriginal men, such as that between the young Henry Howard Meyrick of Coolart, and Yal Yal, the young son of Bobbinary, the co-owner of the whole of the Mornington Peninsula including of course Coolart.

27 The evidence for this is to be found in Fels 1988: 90 ff 'Real Black Gentlemen'.

28 de Serville 1980, Appendixes 1, 2 and 3.

29 There was a Bonurong man, Trooper Bushby Jamieson, who served in Commandant Henry Dana's 1842 Native Police Corps.

30 Howitt 1845: 150.

31 de Serville 1980: 36.

If we ever knew it or noticed it, we have lost sight of a second fact – that the Mornington Peninsula squatters from the earliest period were so young – like overgrown schoolboys seems to be Dr Edmond Hobson's view. He was himself only 25 when he came down here to convalesce, and he wrote thus to his wife:

I have not at all fallen in love with the Arthurs Seat society. The young ones are in conversation coarse and beastly; for example Mr Barker arrived here [Kangerong] yesterday from town, on his way called at Major Fraser's station [Mordialloc] where he saw Miss F in the bush, indecently exposed. This was the first topic and I suppose ere this everyone in the district knows he has seen Miss Fraser's naked bottom.³²

Edward Hobson was 22; Henry Howard Meyrick was 17; brother Alfred was 19; cousin Maurice 20 (and Maurice was said to be an initiated man³³); Samuel Rawson was 19; George Desailley was 17; his brother Francis junior 19; the Barker brothers were 22 and 24; the Jamieson brothers were in their twenties; only the two military men, Captain Reid and Captain Baxter, and George Smith were mature adults.³⁴ And contrary to what is commonly believed,³⁵ George Smith came down to the Mornington Peninsula not to Rye initially, but to Buckkermittewarrar and Kangerong, and when he came, it was with a solid three year relationship of reciprocity already built up with Benbow, father of Mary, father also of Yankee Yankee.

The state of the Bonurong

Thomas wrote a thumbnail sketch of their social organisation thus:

Their Government is patriarchal. They have a Chief to each tribe and a few Priests, Doctors, Enchanters, Dreamers etc who form a kind of Privy Council and Aristocracy. Their form of government however, is no burden to the State – the Chief governs, Priests advise, Doctors and Enchanters cure, Warriors fight, but each and all *gratis*, equally plying for their daily food.³⁶

The first fact to be noted is that two of the Western Port clan heads, Budgery Tom and Kollorlock signed Batman's treaty: Thomas lists the signatories thus:

32 Hobson Papers, Ms 8457, Box 865/2, B, undated, SLV; de Serville makes the same point in his statement that 'Until the 1842 depression at least, the atmosphere in the settlement often resembled that of an un-reformed public school [in England] before the tone had been elevated by a middle-class Arnold', de Serville 1980: 37; Gunson makes a similar point, Gunson 1968: 40.

33 Webb 1996: 12.

34 This factor of youth in the squatters appears to be true of the western district as well. George Russell states that the majority were young – he mentions Armytage and Ricketts being not yet 20, and he says that the only mature man was Captain Foster Fyans appointed with judicial authority to prevent collisions with the natives, who was twice the squatters' age (Brown 1941-1971, vol 2: 57).

35 Hollinshed, undated, 'A local History of the Mornington Peninsula to 1900', TS, p. 80.

36 Thomas Miscellaneous Papers, CY 2984: 90, ML.

Billibellary – Chief Yarra

Moone Moonie – Ditto Land [illegible, looks like Marg]

Koolloorlook – Ditto Western Port

Metturandanuk – Ditto Ditto.³⁷

It does not matter at the time, that the authorities subsequently repudiated it. On the ground, in face to face relationships where it did matter, the reciprocal obligation worked much like a rental agreement.³⁸ Batman fed them³⁹ and they expected it, and they were free to congregate in Melbourne. They referred back subsequently to Batman's time as the good times compared with life under the Protectorate. Billibellary made the first recorded protest about Protectorate stinginess and the governor's policy of exclusion from Melbourne at the end of 1839:

**Why you want Black Fellows away? Plenty long time ago
Meregeek⁴⁰ Batman come here. Black Fellows stop long long time.
All Black Fellows plenty bread, plenty sugar, etc etc.⁴¹**

It was definitely not just a whim of La Trobe's that the blacks were to be excluded from congregating in Melbourne – the explicit directive came from Sydney:

I have to acquaint you that His Excellency the Governor and His Honour the Superintendent have directed that no Aboriginal Blacks of this District are to visit the Township of Melbourne under any pretext whatever. You will therefore adopt the requisite measures for their so doing.⁴²

Much later, Hugh McCrae added an editorial insert into that part of Georgiana's narrative in which she records that she crossed the Yarra in a punt, with two natives and a gin. Hugh says that natives on the outward journey from Melbourne were exempt from payment for the crossing.⁴³

37 CY 2606, item 1, ML.

38 Batman called it 'the annual tribute to those who are the real owners of the soil', John Batman to Sir George Arthur, 25 June 1835, *HRV*, vol 1: 9.

39 This is but one piece of evidence – a systematic search would reveal the total amount of expenditure on food for the natives. The financial statements for the period 8 May to 8 July 1835 in the Port Phillip Association Papers list 43 pounds, 18 shillings and 2 pence as the amount spent on goods for the natives of Port Phillip (Ms 11230, SLV).

40 *Meregeek* means very good.

41 Billibellary's quoted words in Thomas to Robinson, 1 January 1840, CY 2946, item 2, ML. Billibellary was the most important clan head of the Warworong. There were 300 blacks in Melbourne including Goulburns who had come down to Melbourne to see La Trobe and participate in the feasting, and who remained at the invitation of the Warworong and Bonurong to fight the Barrabools. Thomas, at La Trobe's instigation was charged with getting them all out of town. Billibellary's argument was that in Batman's time they were allowed to stay in Melbourne and had plenty to eat. For another account of the same argument, see also Thomas Journal, 31 December 1839, CY 2604, item 4, ML.

42 Robinson to Thomas, 12 September 1840, enc to VPRS 10, unit 2, 1840/931, PROV.

43 McCrae 1966: 43.

Secondly, there was an influenza outbreak in Port Phillip in the first three months of 1839, just as the protectors arrived, and it is quite likely that Robinson and his VDL family brought it: he and his VDL family were already ill with it when they arrived at Port Phillip.⁴⁴ There was dysentery as well. So early in the job, the protectors had only a rudimentary understanding of tribes and country, and still less knowledge of the people as individuals. So the records do not enable us to determine how badly the Bonurong suffered as distinct from the other tribes. But Melbourne was their country – they were congregating there – it would be remarkable if they escaped the illness and the deaths. There was also 'the venereal'. Dr Cussen, who was called in by the protectors, said that he had never seen the people in such a distressed state.⁴⁵ Thomas made a list of families whom he was treating in Melbourne in April 1840 for the 'Bad Disorder': it includes some Bonurong.⁴⁶

Thirdly they were hungry when they were in Melbourne.⁴⁷ Their pre-European pattern of living included regular congregating in what is now the city of Melbourne – all five of the Kulin nations – but for a short time only, for business and ceremony: local food resources could cope with large numbers for a short time. The arrival of the protectors with their goods and their promises, followed by the arrival of La Trobe in September 1839 attracted hundreds of the five tribes to Melbourne, expecting largesse. They stayed in the summer of 1839 for months, and came back in the spring, and they were hungry, denied access to European enclosures, forbidden to cut bark for miams for shelter, and with kangaroos scarce around what are now the suburbs of Melbourne: Thomas recorded in this period that he rode for 20 miles on the south of the Yarra and did not see one kangaroo.

By the time the protectors arrived, getting a living around Melbourne was hard – there were already 6000 whites in Port Phillip,⁴⁸ almost the same number as the protectors' estimation of the total native population for the whole of Victoria, and hundreds of thousands of sheep, not to mention the cattle.⁴⁹ In 1839 well over 200 ships arrived in Port Phillip bringing settlers and their livestock. An early Aboriginal response to this influx was given in evidence at the trial of ten Goulburn blacks in 1841: the settler quoted Windberry, a

44 An influenza epidemic raged in Hobart for months at the end of 1838 and the beginning of 1839. Two government vessels, the *Tamar* and the *Vansittart* brought it to Flinders Island in February 1839 and Robinson recorded that 'three parts' of the natives had contracted the illness, some 'very bad'; this happened as the cutter was loading for Port Phillip to bring Robinson and his VDL 'family', Plomley 1987: 616, 617.

45 *HRV*, vol 2B: 523–524.

46 'Families bad dis[order]', Thomas Journal, 12 April 1840, CY 2605, item 1, ML.

47 'Starving' according to *HRV*, vol 2B: 517.

48 Shaw 1989–90: 30.

49 I am not aware of any study of the effects of rotational stock grazing of sheep on *murnong* and the grasslands, nor of set-stock grazing of cattle. There is plenty of evidence that the stock did well in the early years, but I have not seen evidence or research on how the native pastures fared, except for the fact that game became scarce, presumably because of overgrazing.

Yarra black as asking for sheep, and when refused by the settler saying ‘**The sheep eat the grass belonging to his kangaroo, and what for no give him sheep?**’⁵⁰

And it needs to be remembered that 1837–1840 was a major drought episode (a general fast was observed in Port Phillip on 2 November 1838 on account of the long-continued drought).⁵¹ Some of the well known squatters who appear in this narrative were part of a joint stock venture to supply fresh water to Melbourne – Frederick Manton (Manton’s Creek), Andrew McCrae (Arthur’s Seat), Benjamin Baxter (Carup Carup), Alfred and George Langhorne (Dandenong), James Clow (Corhanwarrabul).⁵² As a consequence of this long drought, the *murnong* or daisy yam, a tuberous root and a major vegetable and carbohydrate source, disappeared from the baked and dusty soil – cropped by sheep to the point where it could not be located underground. Though a settler told Thomas that you could actually dig and find *murnong* within enclosed sheep yards, where not a blade of green could be seen on top of the ground, that was not an option generally available to the Bonurong who were not allowed to enter enclosed or fenced land.⁵³

But by far the most important thing to be noted is that they were still free to move about their country when the Protectorate was established. The fact has escaped our notice that it was a full three years, 1835–1838, before there was *any* squatting on the Mornington Peninsula, and when Thomas made his first visit to the Mornington Peninsula in 1839 there were only four European stations – Frazer at Mordialloc, Hobson at Dromana, Meyrick at Boneo and Jamieson at Cape Schanck. There were no boundaries between them, no perimeter fencing.⁵⁴

The original owners of the soil (Batman’s phrase) had made tactful and intelligent accommodations to white sensibilities. Thomas noted that they did not camp in stock paddocks, and they always camped on water a few hundred yards away from the squatters’ huts.⁵⁵ This was partly because of their dogs (one time later in the 1840s the blacks between them had 900 dogs with them in Melbourne), and partly because Europeans thought they smelled.

50 ‘Report of Trial of Aborigines, Mr Barry defending’, *Port Phillip Gazette*, 16 January 1841.

51 Gurner 1978[1876]: 43.

52 Sullivan 1985: 65.

53 Thomas to Robinson, 28 July 1839, *HRV*, vol 7: 332.

54 No map of Pastoral Runs is reproduced in this book, because the period under examination, 1839–1840 pre-dates the formal organisation of pastoral runs, and in the absence of boundaries any image would be misleading, just a guess.

55 Thomas Journal, 17 March 1840, CY 2605, item 1, ML. It is noteworthy though that in his summary retrospective for this March, 1840, he recorded that at Munnup near Dandenong on the trek back from Kunnung, the native dogs begin to give offence, all prepare to shift. Both observations are true, I suspect.

The arrival of La Trobe as Superintendent may be seen with hindsight to be the trigger that caused the collapse of Bonurong and Warworong society. Our local landowners did not die from the gun: on the contrary no Aboriginal person was killed by guns on the Mornington Peninsula. Equally, if not more importantly, because it was one of their own proud boasts, and the source of feelings of ingratitude and injustice, they not only did not kill any Europeans, they defended and helped them. Thomas confirmed it.

Of all the tribes in Australia Felix only the Melbourne tribes have not stained the ground with white man's blood. They have peaceably given way to our intrusion ... but for them, Melbourne might have been a sepulchre instead of a town.⁵⁶

The protest against the white men's injustice and ingratitude, and assertion of ownership of the country, which first appeared in the records with Billibellary's objection quoted above on the last day of 1839, is more firmly expressed a few months later in Melbourne in April 1840, after La Trobe ordered the removal of their guns; their response was the logical rhetorical one of:

'What for white man guns? Big one hungry. Black fellows by & by – no kangaroo – white man take away black Fellows Country, now gun. By & by all dead poor blackfellow'. They were very insolent for the rest of the day, Thomas wrote and he quoted them again as saying **'Yangelly, Yangelly [be off with you]⁵⁷ bloody white man.**⁵⁸

The protest is repeated in September when Benbow and Ben Benger related all their past good services to the white people then concluded with:

Now many white people come and turn Black fellows away – why white man Pilmularly [steal]⁵⁹ ground? And no let good white fellows give poor Black fellows bread.⁶⁰

They were still asserting their claim two days later **'Deny white men's right to the land'**⁶¹ is Thomas' marginal note. Benbow, clanhead of the Werribee River section related the story of how he and other Port Phillip blacks went after the Barabool blacks who had killed Charles Franks⁶² and **booed**⁶³ them; he was

56 Thomas Periodical Report, 1 September 1843 to 1 December 1843, VPRS 4410, unit 3/78, PROV.

57 *Yangelly* means be off, see Thomas 'Leading sentences, vocab', CY 2605, item 1, ML.

58 Thomas Journal, CY 2605, item 1, ML.

59 *Pilmerlarle* means steal see Robinson, GA, Port Phillip vocab, in Plomley 1987: 672.

60 Thomas Journal, Sunday 13 September 1840, CY 2604, item 3, ML.

61 Bain Attwood has named Coranderrk as the first example of sustained protest in Australia, Attwood 2003: 6. Had the evidence presented here been available to him he may well have commenced his history with the Bonurong and Warworong protest from 1839.

62 Charles Franks and his convict servant Flinders were killed at Mt Cotterill north-west of Melbourne in 1836: Franks was killed for not paying the rent, see HRV, vol 2A: 40–41.

63 *Boo* means shoot, Thomas to Robinson, 10 July 1839, in HRV, vol 7: 328. 'Billy Lonsdale, Turnbull, Derrimut, Bangan, Mur re mu ram bin, Mr King and Burrenol [Mr Dredge] with arms and ammunition have

almost crying, Thomas wrote, as he told how he booed his own wife's mother – all for the sake of the whites. **'Now, go away, go away, soldiers say, no good that'**. Thomas explained that they **'make willums on white man's ground, and cut down Trees, & cut off bark, make white man sulky'**. They replied **'Not white man's ground, black mans'**. Thomas found himself unable to refute that logic, and they went further, defied the rules, and scored a point against the soldiers. Immediately following the **'Not white man's ground, black mans'**, he wrote:

I found it a hard lesson to reason. I then showed them that there was a Rail paddock where they were Quomb'd. They (I could not help laughing) said **Marnameek Narlumbannun here no Horse soldiers Kimbarly**.⁶⁴

They were still saying it a year later:

The blacks very dissatisfied this morning and talk much about **no good white man, take away country, no good bush; All white men sit down, gogo kangaroo. Then Black fellows come to Melbourne and white men sulky. No good that. No Black fellows sulky when few white men here and Woodulyul Black**. This is not the first time they have reasoned in this manner.⁶⁵

And they said it again in 1842. The testimony appears in the government enquiry into the Aborigines of 1858–59 and it came from Derrimut, a Bonurong, via the magistrate William Hull. Hull testified that in 1842, he saw a procession of 20 or 30 blacks walking the boundaries of Melbourne. He joined them – they were bewailing the occupation of this place by the white man, singing low and plaintive songs. He went on to tell the story of how he met Derrimut in Melbourne nearly opposite the Bank of Victoria and Derrimut asked him for a shilling. Hull refused to give him the shilling but said he would buy Derrimut bread:

then he pointed with a plaintive manner which they can effect to the Bank of Victoria. He said **'You see, Mr Hull, Bank of Victoria, all this mine, all along here Derrimut's once; no matter now, me soon tumble down'**. I said **'Have you no children?'** and he flew into a passion immediately, **'Why me have lubra? Why me picanninny?**

left Melbourne for Geelong to boo emus at Bar ra bul.' Thomas wrote that the jealousy if not enmity between the Barrabool tribe and those who have gone *booing* is great, that he fears it is not only emus that they have gone to *boo*. Even so, it needs to be mentioned that *boo* has multiple meanings; the same word covered two other situations – shooting at some thing or someone and not killing, plus the further meaning of shooting up in the air in high spirits.

64 Thomas Journal, CY 2604, item 3, frame 195, ML.

65 Thomas Journal, Friday 17 September 1841, CY 2604, item 3, ML. I do not know as yet what *Woodulyul* means.

'I Succeeded Once'

You have all this place, no good have children, no good have lubra, me tumble down and die very soon now'. They are very sensitive and they are all destroying their children now.⁶⁶

They were acting out their protest by 1843. The following, with no editorial amendments, is from Thomas' Journal of Proceedings which he submitted to Robinson, the official version:

I have a long conversation with Billibellary, Chief of the Yarra tribe, on my belief that the blacks killed their infants he acknowledged that they did so and named who had had children since I had been among them, 8 in number (two only are living) he said they had two ways of doing so one by twisting a cord several times around their necks the other by putting a Koogra (opossum rug) over their heads, he said that the lubras made away with them that Blackfellows all about say, '**that no good have them Pickaninneys now, no country for Blackfellows like long time ago**'.

Thomas pointed out how wicked it was, that God when they died would ask all those lubras where those children were that were killed. Thomas further told Billibellary that there was country enough for black and white people if they would but stop in one place. Billibellary responded that if Yarra Blackfellows had a country on the Yarra they would stop on it and cultivate the ground. He said that there were three lubras who would soon have Pickaninneys and he would see that they did not kill them.⁶⁷

Another version from his field journal for 7 October 1843 is as follows, again presented with no editorial amendments:

I have a long conversation this day with Billi Bellary on the subject of killing there Infants when born, he acknowledged it was so, I named those who had had children since I had been among them 8 in my tribes only, and only his Suzanna alive – he said they done it with a cord Generally – but sometimes by putting a Koogra all round its head – he said that Black Lubra's say now **no good children, Black fellows say no country now for them, very good We kill & no more come up Pickaniny** – I pointed out to him the wickedness of the practice that God would ask all those Lubras when they died where those children

66 Testimony of William Hull Esq. JP, 9 November 1858, in 'Report of the Select Committee on the Aborigines', *Victoria, Legislative Council Votes & Proceedings*, 1859.

67 Thomas Journal of Proceedings for the period 1 September 1843 to 1 December 1843, VPRS 4410, unit 3/78, PROV.

were that they killed – Billybellary promised that he would endeavour to make them let their children live – he said there were 3 who would soon have pickaninys, marry.⁶⁸

Thomas did record though, somewhat more understanding in his marginal comments on the births and deaths list for June to November 1844: noting that infanticide is on the increase, he added ‘their argument has some reason, **no good pickaninnys now no country**’.⁶⁹

It is fundamentally true to say that they died because they lost their land. Official policy from the first was to get them out of Melbourne where up until La Trobe’s arrival they had been camping in their usual spots, South Melbourne by the Yarra falls, Botanical Gardens,⁷⁰ eastern hill, Richmond paddocks near the Melbourne Cricket Ground, Abbotsford, South Yarra, Toorak, Bulleen swamp, Merri Creek, Moonee Ponds, North Melbourne, Port Melbourne, when they needed or wanted to. The meetings of the confederacy of Kulin like the last huge one in 1844 when upwards of 800 were present, including Dana’s Native Police in full uniform, were held at Merri Creek. This particular full and formal meeting concerned the Bonurong and Warworong – two of the leading men and greatest warriors Poleorong/Billy Lonsdale, a Bonurong, and Warwordo/Lively, a Warworong, underwent ritual spearing for killing Mr Manton’s black, a Wooralim, at Tooradin.⁷¹

It seems that only then, when they were refused their rights to live and congregate in Melbourne that they recognised they had lost their rights to country, as compared with the continuing rights they maintained under the reciprocal rental agreement that they had with Batman. It is frightening to read in the records how quickly they moved from the position of freedom to move about their country, to regret and protest, and prediction that they would all die out. This bitter realisation first appears in the records in 1840, and it coincides with not permitting babies born to live. The conclusion seems inescapable, that when they realised that they had lost their country a meaningful future went too. It seems life itself could not be led as ‘real’ Bonurong, could not be imagined, without their country for their future children. This is not merely a matter of dispiritedness, or dejection or depression. It is a positive choice about identity and the essence of being Bonurong – who they were. In the western cultural tradition people who lay down their lives for an idea of the good are seen as martyrs, heroes, saints; they claim our reverence and respect. There is

⁶⁸ Thomas Journal, CY 2606, item 2, ML. Note that the journal for October has been microfilmed backwards (frame 99).

⁶⁹ Thomas Journal, CY 2604, item 5, frame 284, ML.

⁷⁰ The Western Port tribes’ camping place was ‘where the Governor-General’s residence now stands’ according to ‘Reminiscences from 1841 of William Kyle, a Pioneer’, *Victorian Historical Magazine (VHM)* 10(3), June 1925: 164.

⁷¹ Thomas to Robinson, 13 February 1844, VPRS 11, unit 8/469, PROV.

'I Succeeded Once'

a difference, it is true, between laying down one's own life, and taking that of one's child, but there is room for thought as to how great or how small that difference might be.

It is quite clear that both Robinson and Thomas' minds were attuned to the possibility of extinction by 1845. Part of the job description suggested by the House of Commons Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements) specifically urged the collection of accurate statistical information, the reason being:

It is probable that the depopulation and decay of many tribes which, in different parts of the world, have sunk under European encroachments would have been arrested in its course, if the progress of the calamity had from time to time been brought distinctly under the notice of any authority competent to redress the wrong. In many cases, the first distinct apprehension of the reality and magnitude of the evil has not been acquired until it was ascertained that some uncivilized nation had ceased to exist.⁷²

In answer to a request from Robinson for a report on the number of half-caste children, Thomas wrote bluntly 'I beg to state that there are none in either of the tribes in my district'. He went on 'The youngest child in my tribes is near five years old, which will shew the probable speedy extinction of these tribes'.⁷³ This child was Suzannah, Billibellary's daughter, born 7 November 1839 in the encampment by the Yarra.⁷⁴ On Thomas' Family Connections Census of 1846, the youngest Bonurong child is eight, a girl called Borut, the child of Old Doctor and his wife Boorowrook.⁷⁵ The oldest Warworong child is seven years old; little Suzannah's name is absent though Billibellary's six other children are listed. It seems that the Bonurong and the Warworong meant what they said – no child had survived since the beginning of 1840. In 1847 Thomas wrote that it was a strange thing that but one child is in existence of the Melbourne tribes of age since the date of the Colony.

72 *HRV*, vol 2A: 69.

73 Thomas to Robinson, 2 January 1845, CY 2606, item 3.

74 *HRV*, vol 2B: 603.

75 Thomas Papers, CY 3083, ML.



Fig 2. 'Billibellary's Young Lubra with infant on back'

Reproduced from the RB Smyth Papers with the permission of the State Library of Victoria.

Suzannah

20 November 1839, female baby born in encampment by the Yarra, 13 Days old, part of Billibellary's family (VPRS 10, unit 1/242, PROV); Sketch of her in *Historical Records of Victoria (HRV)*, vol 2B: 556, named after Mrs Thomas; 27 July 1842 – rations have been issued for her [allegedly as the wife of a serving Native Police man, but actually daughter of the high status chief, an example of Commandant Henry Dana's cooking the books in order to please Billibellary] since 1 May, on the same scale as the surveyors (Dana to La Trobe, enc to 42/1143, VPRS 19, Box 30, PROV); 31 July 1842 – Little Suzannah (Bergyunuk) female, aged 2, disease Pseudo Syphilis, treatment Licquor Arsenic plus aperients and copper sulphate washes (Medical Report of Henry Jones Dispenser to the Aboriginal Natives, Melbourne or Westernport District, from 1 July 1842 to 31 July 1842, VPRS 4410, unit 2, item 49, PROV); 15 Nov 1845 – Susanna, died at encampment east of Melbourne, aged 8, female, Yarra tribe, single (Thomas Return, Appendix D to Governor's Despatches, April–June 1846, A 1240, vol 51, ML). The *Port Phillip Patriot* of 10 October 1845 notes 'the fearful ravages' of an outbreak of whooping cough in Melbourne – it is possible that little Suzanna succumbed to this disease.

Thomas' retrospective (1857) view on the subject of infanticide⁷⁶

Infanticide has existed among them – I do not think that it owing to want of food, or affection on the mother's part to a certain extent I attribute it more to the releasing them of the trouble in rearing their offspring. When I came among them in 1839 I soon found Infanticide existed, and in very urgent language got the Chief of the Yarra tribe to use his influence in stopping it. The Chief had a large family of his own and was in the strictest sense of the word a kind, good and sensible black. He arraigned the tribes at night upon the subject, and in foreceable language, and I was in hopes that he had succeeded, but a few months after I had reason to believe another had been made away with, and again urged the Chief when he frankly acknowledged that he could not stop it '*that the blacks said they had no country now and no good have em picckaninnies*'. I am fully persuaded that they do not commit infanticide upon any superstitious grounds. My impression is that it is

76 Response to Question 18, CY 2984, frames 48–49, ML.

about the 21st day after the birth that they are put out of the way. The mother's lamentation is affecting during the operation. I never had but one (almost evident) case of infanticide under my observation. I was far away on the track to Gippsland. At daybreak I heard the lamentation of death. I awoke my Government Servant and went direct to the lubra who had had an infant about three weeks.⁷⁷ She was in great (apparent) anguish but no babe. I insisted on seeing it when she pointed to a little fire about 30 yards off, and there sat the old woman who had been the nurse, with the little innocent wrapped over and over again, and corded up for internment. I with my knife cut the cords. The child was still warm but life had gone, smothering, (as no marks of violence was on the body) is in my opinion the way they despatch them. I may here remark that tho' I feel persuaded almost all since I have been among them have been made away with, yet such is their knowledge of my abhorrence, that when the infant is 14 or 15 days old will with a few others leave the encampment & return in about a fortnight invariable without their babe, their faces in deep mourning [mourning].

77 Quondum, see Chapter 3.