

# 1. Aboriginal people and mining

It is important to note from the outset that whilst the widespread and bloody inter-racial frontier violence in Victoria had reportedly ceased by 1853, inter-generational violent attitudes had not. In Victoria's post-massacre times many Aboriginal people sought (or were forced) to adapt to the colonial hegemony by adopting conciliatory attitudes towards the colonists in a bid to either remain on their ancestral estates or country which they had come to see as their own, such as mission or government stations. An unidentified Aboriginal (Woiwurrung) man provides much needed insight into these troubled and changing times:

Bad white men have nearly killed all our men and women ... Before the white people came to our country we were all very happy together; but when they came they gave us grog, and it made us mad. Then we became unhealthy, and began to die off.

At that time there were a great many men, women and children, but now there are but few of us. But since we began to settle and live in our own houses, we have improved much. We are now happier, and glad to see so many children about us. Some are coming home; they are now tired of the bush.

The gold rushes were the precursor for 'a world turned upside down' not just for the immigrant colonists but for Aboriginal people as well. The gold rushes were not uniform or ordered events that can be categorised easily. Non-Indigenous commentators at the time of the rushes testify to the higgledy-piggledy nature of people's movements. Streams of people from socially and racially diverse backgrounds sojourned from one goldfield or gully to another, the search for the precious metal being the only tangible glue in their communal make-up. The only predisposition to shifting to one location or another (and this was a frequent occurrence) was a more favourable report of gold being found. The focus of non-Indigenous commentary about Aboriginal people became, for a time, almost solely concentrated on perceptions of Aboriginal peoples' responses to the work of finding gold.

It is a truism to say that the gold rushes took place on Aboriginal land, yet it is a truth that is not often articulated. There are many colonial testimonies that auriferous areas were an Aboriginal cultural landscape; that indeed an Indigenous landscape is the fundament that underlies the numerous cultural landscapes laid down after first European settlement in the late 1830s. The evidence for this Indigenous spatial organisation is found in nation or tribal groups with distinct languages, associations with key sites, burial sites found in gold mining areas and conferred place names on the landscape. Auriferous

areas did not cease to be Aboriginal cultural landscapes. William Howitt, a visitor to the goldfields, recognised abundant evidence of Aboriginal people's long association with sites near waterways that were also coveted by gold miners. He wrote that he saw 'heaps of wood ashes, partly overgrown with grass, and resembling the barrows of the ancient Britons. They are called native ovens ... They contain many wagon-loads of ashes and are found all about this neighbourhood, especially near the creeks'. Burial sites were frequently found in proximity to mine shafts; occasionally bodies were found in the hollow of a tree.

The physical presence of Aboriginal people on the goldfields of Victoria was noted by both writers and artists of the period. John Dunlop, one of the earliest miners on the Ballarat diggings (August 1851), observed that 'there was no sign of any one, only a few huts belonging to the natives'. Miner George Sutherland affirmed Dunlop's account when he conceded that miners had infringed on an Aboriginal landscape:

This was Poverty Flat, about three quarters of a mile from the spot now occupied by Ballarat; and the hut erected by Dunlop may therefore be considered as the first miner's residence in Ballarat. But, solitary as the place was, they soon found on examination that theirs were not the only habitations erected in this region. Several natives' huts were visible in various places.

Other miners put it more prosaically, such as Emily Skinner who thought 'how many centuries they have in their quiet majesty, or perhaps have looked down on the Aboriginal nation, always fills one with a solemn wonder and brings those words "the everlasting hills" to mind'. Not all encounters of Aboriginal funerary rites were so benign: An *Argus* correspondent on the Omeo diggings (20 January 1857) described non-Indigenous miners reacting to Aboriginal mortuary ceremonies, which they found foreign and harrowing:

The quiet inhabitants of Flooding Creek have been afflicted with the 'blues' for three whole days the result of the melancholy howlings of a few of the Gippsland blacks and their gins, who are lamenting the loss of a number of their tribe slaughtered by the Omeo tribes, at a place called Tongie. It is painful in the extreme to witness the uncontrollable grief of the poor creatures, more especially the gins, who are seen beating their skulls and tearing their faces with their nails frightfully.

Some non-Indigenous prospectors chanced upon Aboriginal people occupying their traditional camping sites near mining areas. In a compilation of old Ballan (central Victorian town) residents' memoirs are numerous references to 'several tribes [probably Wathawurrung and Djadjawurrung] passing backwards and

forwards' and to their 'favourite camping places' such as Doctor's Creek where 'Mr Densley saw several of their corroborees ... and also witnessed a tribal fight' whereby two Aboriginal people were mortally injured and interred in their traditional manner.

It is incorrect to maintain that Aboriginal people had no concept of mineral value or that 'for the miners, Aboriginal people were invisible, silent and nameless'. Goldfield writers such as JS Prout observed Aboriginal people (presumably Djadjawurrung) *in situ* at the Mount Alexander goldfield in 1852 but not their active participation in the search for gold. Nor did any goldfields writer note Aboriginal people identifying it as a precious metal that they utilised prior to the onset of the gold rush in 1851, but Prout's assumption that they had no prior knowledge of the metal's existence is not corroborated. Prout recorded in his artwork a scene of mild bewilderment:

The little group of aborigines at our right, carelessly looking on the busy scene before them, causes one to reflect on the singularity of the circumstance, that, although fond to an extreme of possessing as an ornament any glittering substance, the aborigines as far as we know, have never in their wanderings discovered the precious and most beautiful metal.

While there is no evidence that Aboriginal people attached any great economic or spiritual significance to the heavy yellow metal, it makes sense to assume that they 'must have stumbled over gold nuggets prior to European settlement'. This is supported by anecdotal stories such as that provided by Forster who noted the local clan's immediate prior knowledge of where gold was to be found in great abundance: 'They dug it up amongst the yams on Yam Holes Hill – today a part of Beaufort town'. There are instances of gold nuggets being found associated with old Aboriginal sites, well away from auriferous reefs. The Watchem Nugget from near Maryborough (1904) and the Bunyip nugget from near Bridgewater, east of Bendigo, may both have been carried to their recorded place of discovery by Djadjawurrung people. Notwithstanding, white pipe clay was quarried by Aboriginal people across Victoria prior to colonisation for ceremonial purposes and miners commonly reported the presence of 'splendid nuggets thickly scattered over the white pipe-clay bottom'.

Moreover, much evidence shows Aboriginal people quarrying for crystal, greenstone, sandstone, obsidian, kaolin, ochres and basalt across Victoria. In September 1854 three Aboriginal men assisted William Blandowski, a naturalist, to obtain specimens of a number of fauna including a wombat. Blandowski recorded the traditional method of procurement involved digging shafts to a 'depth of twenty two feet' and a Polish miner on the goldfields of central Victoria, Seweryn Korzelinski, wrote that 'Natives pay respect to talismans

which consist of small, very clear crystals often found deep in the diggings'. In the Mt William region William Blandowski observed a 'phonolite (tadijem) quarry, upwards of 100 acres' and a quartzose sandstone quarry at Mt Murchison which 'the natives within a radius of 600 miles [1000km] obtain their supply [of millstones]'. WH Gill considered that the Aboriginal quarry

is not one large mass of stone, as we know a quarry from which material is blasted, but at Mt William it consists of a whole series of small outcrops of diorite, perhaps in number about 150, within an area of about 25 acres ... Nearly all of these outcrops show evidences of having been worked upon, and some of the extensive workings are of very great age ... The labour of production was immense.

Snippets of Aboriginal's 'testimonies' testify to their knowledge of minerals on their lands. William Little, wrote of how northern Wathawurrung clans traded gold to shepherds prior to the gold rushes of 1851: 'When erst the shepherds saw the virgin gold A-lying shimmering on fair Nature's breast, And how the ignorant aborigines For trifles gave the precious ore away'.

Records also exist of extensive quarrying and commercial-style transactions for quarried stone being carried out by Victorian Aboriginal people prior to and after British colonisation. WE Stanbridge wrote that Temamet Javolich, a Djadjawurrung clan head, was 'no less than a commercial traveler for the sale of suitable stone for axeheads. His blood relationship with numerous tribes gave him access, and he visited the councils of the tribes arranging barter ... his stone quarry was on the Charlotte Plains'. Archaeologist-historian Isabel McBryde has written at length on exchange and trade in south-eastern Australia and has identified several first hand sources which cite the pre-colonialist Aboriginal exchange rate for greenstone hatchet heads, quarried from Mt William.

In newspaper articles, reminiscences, letters and diaries are many inferences to Aboriginal miners on Australian goldfields. For example, some gullies, leads or mines are believed to be named after their Indigenous discoverers or at least attributed to Aboriginal people because of their proximity or some fact connected with them. 'Black Protector's Creek', an obvious reference to the Aboriginal Protectorate Station near the goldfields of Franklinford, in central Victoria is an example. Barry Collett's history of South Gippsland recounts how non-Indigenous gold miners named a creek thus: 'one [unidentified Kurnai] man lived by a creek between the Tarwin and Franklin rivers, lamenting his fate with the refrain "poor-fellow-me", by which the creek is named'. Similarly the Queen Mary Diggings were 'named no doubt after the dusky queen [Djadjawurrung elder] of that area'. According to Fairweather a man named 'Nukong was the headman of the "Ya-itma-thang" during the gold rush days, and it is likely that both Mount Nugong, and the mining township of Nugong were named

after him'. Since Aboriginal names were commonly 'subject to corruption by whites' it is possible that the unusual names of some leads and mines may have Indigenous origins. Miner JF Hughes affords us an example where his 'black companions corrected me [about the pronunciation of "Barnawartha"]', by saying it was "Barra-na-tha"'.

## Employment

Meanwhile the pastoral industry was highly dependent on Aboriginal labour. As Edward Bell, Commissioner of Crown Lands in the Wimmera district observed in 1853, conditions for Aboriginal workers were generally good and a degree of flexibility was built into the pastoral industry to accommodate Aboriginal cultural customs.

Their usefulness to the white population has been very much increased during the present dearth of labour, produced by the attractions of the Goldfields. There is scarcely a station which the natives are in the habit of frequenting, where they have not been more or less employed ... They appear to be gradually acquiring a knowledge of the value of money, and have been temporarily engaged at rates of wages which in ordinary times, would be considered high for emigrant labour. Their migratory propensities are not, however diminished, and even those who have been longest employed on stations, and appear to have acquired a degree of European civilization in dress and habits of living, are not to be debarred the luxury of occasionally throwing off the restraints of civilized life and visiting their accustomed haunts, and joining in the sports and savage (though generally harmless) warfare of their respective tribes. Very few of them have engaged in the search for Gold.

Aboriginal people mostly continued to have access to foodstuffs through hunting and gathering in the traditional manner which explains 'why they regard with indifference their employment by the settlers' in the Goulburn River district because of the abundance of easily procurable foods from the riverine ecosystem. It also explains why some of these people at least did not seek employment on the goldfields. Bain Attwood, in his study on the Djadjawurrung people of central Victoria, argues there is evidence that in response to the shocking conditions wrought by the proximity of the diggings to their estates, that 'many moved north in the wake of the gold rushes in order to avoid these conditions and to join their kin on the lower Loddon'. Yet the miner John Erskine, writing of Indigenous peoples on the Mudgee goldfields in New South Wales, noted on two occasions their invaluable contribution towards building shelters for the

whites and also their seeming lack of willingness to labour at mining. Erskine struggled to explain their aversion, more especially in light of the fact that the people were clearly adept at participating in the monetary system:

A few Australian blacks had been attracted to the spot and were very useful in assisting the white men to build their bark gunyahs but the labour of digging and washing was not of a nature to suit their habits.

1 or 2 Australian blacks were lounging about and were said to have been very useful in assisting the diggers to put up their temporary bark huts. None of them seemed tempted to dig for gold on their own account, although they perfectly understood its value and one readily sold me a “boomerang” for a couple of shillings.

Non-Indigenous miners' poor treatment of Aboriginal people on the goldfields, the availability of traditional food in some areas, and the environmental destruction caused by gold mining (discussed in following chapters), also partly explains Aboriginal apparent disinterest in some gold mining fields.

Statements by miners who emphasised Aboriginal people's lazy and unwilling attitude to work at anything requiring exertion were, by their own words, contradictory, as writers often acknowledged that many had been employed washing sheep, riding horses etc. One miner's explanation for Aboriginal peoples' unwillingness to clean or wash for gold – that it was not in their nature, and that only advanced societies toiled at mining – was exploded a little later in his book:

At Lawson's Creek 16 miles NNE from Mudgee, a Mr. Bayley had come one day on a party of Australian blacks prospecting on the river on his estate (probably the first who had ever made the attempt) and had encouraged them to proceed.

This observation of industrious Aboriginal people directly involving themselves in gold mining and motivated by personal profit, either in parties independent of non-Indigenous people or as members of 'mixed prospecting parties', is by no means an isolated example. Mossman and Bannister deduce that for some, the 'road shared' was just as much a motive as personal wealth. Other explanations abound. Aboriginal peoples' 'great predilection for white money to spend on rum' was often quoted as their sole reason for occasionally being involved on the goldfields in any capacity. Some gold rush period writers such as Robert Caldwell noted, almost reluctantly, that 'a few of them have tried the diggings' and added 'I am not aware that any of them have ever succeeded as diggers'.

So, given the numerous accounts of Aboriginal participation in gold prospecting, how do we explain their apparent (or at least recorded) disdain for it? Arguably

it was the incessant toiling they resented, particularly given that similar sentiments had been voiced in the earlier pastoral period about shepherding. It is also the case that there was less incentive to work for miners and pastoralists in situations where traditional foodstuffs were plentiful. Moreover, digging, let alone mining for gold, required tools and equipment, and indeed a licence which many did not possess, or desire to obtain. The degree of Aboriginal participation in gold rush activities was dependent upon where gold was found, Aboriginal desire to remain on country and, not least, their ability to continue traditional lifestyles in the face of a very sudden and large population increase.

## The attraction of mining

Aboriginal people, far from being repelled, were often attracted to the goldfields, motivated by factors such as new wealth, new sights, new sounds and new alliances. At the same time, non-Indigenous people in Victorian gold mining society were captivated by the otherness – the exotica – of experiencing Victorian Aboriginal culture firsthand.

Historian Henry Reynolds, writing of the northern Australian goldfields, suggests that Aboriginal people were attracted to gold mining towns not merely for material goods, or exotica, but out of necessity: 'Many family groups were driven in from the countryside by the violence of the frontier, the difficulty of finding enough to eat in their own country, and because they were literally forced off the land by the squatters and police'. To a very large degree Reynold's summation is most certainly true of the squatting period in Victoria, but not the gold rush. Rarely in the gold rush period were there references to Aboriginal people being explicitly forced onto or off the goldfields due to the violence on the frontier. By 1853 the *Guardian of Aborigines*, William Thomas, affirmed that inter-cultural frontier violence had all but ceased. Thomas confidently reported: 'We may congratulate ourselves that the weapons of opposition between us and our sable fellows are laid aside ... We may safely state that loop holes in huts are no more needed'. Antoine Fauchery, a miner at Ballarat, noted that Victorian Aboriginal people were 'Divided into nomadic tribes [clans] made up of fifteen or twenty individuals, they are seen now in the bush, now in the towns, and still more frequently on the diggings, which they visit by preference'. Others believed that Aboriginal people were attracted to the goldfields for the same reasons as the non-Indigenous miners, that is, to get rich from finding gold and to 'knock it down' at an inn: 'The new [mining] area was situated in the hunting grounds of the Mount Cole tribe of [Djabwurrung] aborigines, who with a view of participating in the prosperity, but more especially in the hope of indulging in cheap liquor, shifted camp to our vicinity'. The attraction of new-

found wealth was so great, miner William Craig wrote, that a neighbouring clan who he observed was at enmity with the resident clan, shifted into the locality amongst the gold diggings near Ararat in the 1860s.

Another [clan] was located some fifteen miles distant, and known as the Mount William clan. By a sort of bush telegraphy the latter soon learned that the Coleites were in clover on the new diggings, and notwithstanding the strange [strained] relations that had existed between the tribes for some years through the abduction of a lubra (woman) from the Williamites, the latter soon put in an appearance.

## Sharing country

The sources indicate that Aboriginal alluvial gold seeking was predominantly carried out by small groups, granting moments of some earnings, much excitement and some camaraderie among the miners, black and white. It is difficult to extrapolate whether gold mining offered vestiges of rites of passage initiation, but certainly there were many shared arduous moments and bush mateship that was not at variance with core traditional Aboriginal values. It was often noted in both the mining period and the earlier squatting period how much Aboriginal people enjoyed the thrill, adventure and obvious sense of supremacy and importance they attained when guiding or otherwise sharing their corpus of bush knowledge with whites.

Another factor which explains Aboriginal people's attraction to goldfields was that the existing gold mining areas such as in the Piggoreet area of central Victoria was overlaid on an extant Wathawurrung greenstone quarry, and as such was a highly valued area for the very reasons it was esteemed by the non-Indigenous gold miners. Moreover, the quarry was an important recreational and ceremonial area for the clans who also mined in the area. A local history writer commented:

For various reasons Piggoreet was a popular camping ground. In the driest of years there was plenty of water and its accompanying animal life. Its prolific vegetation made the marsupials plentiful hence plenty of food for the Blacks. The caves and cliffs gave good shelter from rain and sun. The exposed flints for the making of knives and hatchets must have been a great attraction, as in very few places in Victoria were they so easily exposed as in the exposed cements hereabouts. Most likely Piggoreet, because of its advantages to them, was as popular to the Blacks before the white man's advent as it has been to the said white man, by reason of its romantic scenery and happy days spent in the

height of its mining life. Below Christie's Bridge, though now filled with sand, a very large waterhole, formed by a waterfall over a bar of rock just above it, was a popular camping ground for Blacks.

Some commentators, such as TH Puckle, the Commissioner of Crown Lands based in Hamilton, reported in 1857 that the chief places of resort for the Aboriginal people in his district included the Mt Ararat goldfields, but failed to expand on why the goldfields were frequented by Djabwurrung clans. Likewise, respondents to the 1858 Select Committee on the Condition of Aborigines reported their great attraction to 'frequenting the goldfields'. William Huon, of Wodonga, informed the Committee that in his district, the 'tribes for the last few years have been in the habit of frequenting the various diggings and other townships'. Andrew Porteous, Honorary Correspondent in the Ballarat district, reported in 1866 that 'The Mount Emu tribe still prefer to roam about in small bands, from station to station and the various goldfields'. As late as October 1868 steps were mooted by government officials to induce 'the Aborigines who some time back left Coranderrk [Aboriginal Station formed in 1860-61] and settled on the Alexandra goldfields to return to the station'.

## Exotic attraction

The exotic pull of the goldfields and towns for Aboriginal people seems to have centred on the goldfields' social activities: horse races, fetes, galas, official openings, dances, dress, bazaars, unusual animals and new technologies. Charles Fead, a miner on the Buchan diggings, noted at the first local race meeting just a few miles from the diggings the presence of Meteoka, a Kurnai, who had been 'holding horses all day and was proud of it; his honest cheery voice could be heard during the races urging on his favourites'. A Djabwurrung woman, 'Lady Sutherland', was known to frequent the Chute races and it was noted in 1881 that the 'Aboriginal King of Lal Lal was present' at the Lal Lal races. When the train service commenced at Beaufort the *Riponshire Advertiser* reported that 'Jacky Jacky' and his tribe watched the first train go through. Ludwig Becker, diarist of the Burke and Wills expedition in 1860, recorded Aboriginal people in the Terrick Terrick region's first encounter with camels, describing their reaction as one of terror, and of likening the camels to bunyips. John Hunter Kerr, a pastoralist on the goldfields of central Victoria, considered that 'many of the natives were taken at various times to Melbourne and carried to the circus, theatres, or other places of amusement, which must have been as astounding as they were utterly novel to them'. Kerr also witnessed the appropriation by Aboriginal people of 'solitary articles' from miners for their amusement and 'vanity'. Samuel Carter, a squatter in the Wimmera district, recalled taking an Aboriginal companion to the circus in the 1850s. The man was so 'delighted

with it that he wished to join the company and I had hard work to get him away', Carter wrote. Charles Fead, a miner in the Gippsland region, noted that Aboriginal people were

not without vanity and one might occasionally be seen strutting about in a swallow tailed coat or a tall black hat, without another stitch of clothing of any kind. The women too were not a little proud when they could display a parasol and dress improver or, later on, a crinoline for their sole attire. They were fond of looking glasses, bits of finery and scented hair oil.

Aboriginal peoples' fondness for exotic items to 'adorn their persons with' and their great sense of humour and delight in satirising the non-Indigenous peoples' vanity and pompousness was also commented on by John Hunter Kerr, a squatter in central Victoria.

It used to be no uncommon thing to see some swarthy fellow donning a solitary article of clothing, in comical incongruity with his otherwise perfect nudity. A cravat, a hat, or a discarded crinoline, comprised in some instances the whole of the aboriginal toilet, but was nevertheless sported with great pride and exultation. A gentleman who was subject to frequent attacks of bronchitis one day missed his respirator, without he rarely travelled. After much ineffectual search, it was accidentally discovered in the possession of a black "lubra", who had attached it to her head, and had endeavoured to arrange her dark greasy locks over it in imitation of the "chignons" worn by her white sisters.

An encounter between a (presumably) Wathawurrung man at the Ballarat diggings and a band of wandering musicians highlights the cultural exoticism of the goldfields, as told by Antoine Fauchery, a French miner and photographer:

It was I think, the first time music was heard on the diggings. An agreeable sensation for all, and particularly novel for the natives. Coloured men, women and children were laughing, foaming, twisting in a general fit of epilepsy. [Only one man] kept his dignity, and neglecting the varied ensemble of the orchestra, all his attention was fixed on the trombone ... it was this mechanism [of the trombone] above all that aroused the lively interest of the observer ... The full extension of the instrument did not over-astonish the black man, but when he saw it drawn back by the instrumentalists hand, go up again, diminish and reduce itself to its simplest proportions he completely lost his head; he touched the brass with his black quivering hands then he came back to the Alsatian, on whose person he devoted himself to the most minute researches, opening his coat, thrusting his hands everywhere, but finding nothing.

Suddenly he stopped, enveloped in a fiery gaze the musician and the trombone now all of one piece, then struck his forehead and cried, 'he is swallowing it.' And he ran away, waving his arms in the air, and showing signs of the most dreadful despair.

Others observed Aboriginal responses to non-Aboriginal music: 'They were much interested in Everest's violin and listened to his playing with great pleasure, never having seen or heard such an instrument before. They would approach him with curiosity and examine it carefully, remarking, "Takem box, waddy rub him back, makim noise all same him possum"'. The social etiquette of non-Indigenous people was an exotic experience for some Aboriginal people, one to be savoured as well. Charles Fead, recounted meeting up with 'Metooka, King of the Omeo Blacks' near the diggings, who with great mirth

told me, in his own way, of the changes that had lately taken place in his little world – of the erection of a bakery, a restaurant, and a public house, and with a merry laugh, – what I already knew – that a number of white gin immigrants, candidates for domestic service, having arrived at Port Albert, a party of diggers and others had gone down and secured wives a few minutes or, at most, a few hours, after they had met them for the first time in their lives. Such marriages were, at that time not uncommon nor was it a very rare thing to meet with men and women who, living as single, had wives or husbands living, they knew not how or where.

The exoticism of the goldfields cut both ways. Aboriginal people moved quickly to acquire the wonderful contrivances and share in the plentiful goods of the diggings and the townships. Certainly some Aboriginal people suffered intermittent destitution, but an overwhelming body of evidence strongly points to the motive for Aboriginal people soliciting in this period to be one not primarily driven by poverty alone. There were occasional reports of Aboriginal people being hard up for food, clothing and shelter, but most of the evidence points to the fact that Aboriginal people were still largely self sufficient, and when moments of poverty occurred, implored their white brethren for meaningful paid work and keep, rather than simply begging for food and money. A report in the *Grenville Advocate* (2 September 1862) pointed out the unusual occurrence in Linton (Victorian central highlands) of the local Wathawurrung clan who, having a hard winter, gained employment using their traditional skills for a local arboriculturalist.

The Mount Emu tribe of aboriginals must have been pretty hard pinched for food this winter as they were never before known to be so keen to get employment from Europeans as they have shown themselves this season at Linton. A gentleman of that town ... has engaged the tribe to carve him some light-wood uprights for an alcove, as the timber sheds the

bark. It is intended that the carved designs will represent a serpentine coil, similar to that on the shields that the chiefs of the tribe use in times of warfare.

## Forming kinship links

The insistent claims on miners such as that described by miner Antoine Fauchery were commonly reported. He wrote of a Wathawurrung man and his three wives who 'skilfully defeated me in a relentless and obstinate battle that went on for not less than two hours'. Fauchery was maddened and confounded by their stubborn begging for some food and wondered 'Had I undergone some magnetic influence?' This frequent occurrence on the goldfields, often construed as begging, was more likely an attempt by clans to obligate non-Indigenous people to rightfully share their possessions with their clan folk. This was a practice that had been utilised by Aboriginal people in the pastoral period in an attempt to assimilate the pastoralists into their social organisation. It is difficult, however, to discern how much of this invoking of kinship ties, as described by miner Walter Bridges at Buninyong (central Victoria), had as much to do with opportunism and how much with the cultural rituals of sharing one's goods.

My mother and wife and small boy that come out from England with us was standing at the tent one day all alone, no other tents near when they saw a mob of native Blacks and Lubrias [lubras] and a mob of dogs with them come across the gully so my wife said to Mother what ever will we do now so Mother said we must stand our ground and face them for there is no get away So up they come yabbering good day Missie You my country [country] woman now. My mother had to be spokesman [spokeswoman] the Blacks said You gotum needle missie you gotum thread you Gotum tea you Gotum sugar you Gotum Bacca [tobacco]. So Mother had to say yes to get rid of them and had to give them all they asked for to get rid of them. That was what was called the Bunyong [Buninyong] tribe and when they left they gave their usual salute. Goodbye missie and thankfull enough they was to see them disappear off into the bush.

It is generally agreed that a fundamental response by Aboriginal people in nineteenth century Victoria to the British colonisers was to incorporate them into their kinship networks and thus call to mind their right to resources that were being unjustly denied them. Many correspondents in the colonial period such as Foster Fyans, Police Magistrate at Geelong in the 1840s, had had opportunities to observe closely the strict adherence of Aboriginal people in

Victoria to equality amongst themselves and to ritualised gift giving. Fyans, in a letter to the Colonial Secretary, attempted to explain that an incensed crowd of Wathawurrung clans people besieging Fyan's office was not imploring (begging) the colonial government for food and blankets, they were *insisting* upon it as their right. A number of pastoralists and public servants also reported that they were informed by Aboriginal people that by virtue of their ascribed familial ties, they had moral responsibilities to provide materially for their new 'country men and women'. Aborigines Protector GA Robinson noted when visiting pastoral stations many Aboriginal people were present who recognised non-Indigenous people as their own deceased clanspeople and entered into customary reciprocal arrangements with them.

A number of miners reported relationships forming in spite of their prejudices towards Aboriginal people. Abraham Abrahamsohn, a miner who had set up a 'bakery on a high hill' (Bakery Hill?) in July 1853 on the 'Jurika [Eureka] mines near Pallrad [Ballarat]', wrote: 'The negroid aborigines or Papua, visited me and begged for bread' and to a 'hungry, thin, already elderly Papu, I had several times given some of my scanty store of bread and meat and a drink from my bottle of whisky, so necessary in this swamp'. It appears that he was surprised by his own good will adding 'I had even given a chain of glass beads to his young wife. I did this from an unconscious liking for the black man'. Some time later Abrahamsohn had reason to be thankful for his good works towards the 'elderly Papu' as he was visited in an urgent manner by the Aboriginal man who told him

to expect an attack from one of his own people who was bigger than he, and I immediately recalled an unusually big rascal, built only of bone and sinew, whom I had caught the day before stealing a knife, and had thoroughly beaten up. I was not exactly comfortable in my isolation, and I was overcome with horror to think that when dead, I would make a meal for him and his friends.

It is indeed possible that Aboriginal people were emulating the 'hordes' of non-Indigenous beggars euphemistically known as 'sundowners' or 'travellers' who depended on squatters and small land holder's bush hospitality for shelter and sustenance. JH Kerr, a pastoralist on the Loddon River, recalled that 'On my station on the Loddon [circa 1850s], it was no unusual circumstance for twenty, or even thirty of such heterogeneous guests to arrive on one night; while the monthly average rarely fell below 130. Large stations were favoured with greater numbers, all of whom were provided with the staple fare of the Bush – tea, sugar, bread and beef'.

The high number of Aboriginal people during the gold period 'claiming' tribute from non-Indigenous people of rank and position suggests that Aboriginal

people still viewed as integral recompense for (and acknowledgement of) their land being usurped, and that ‘gentlemen’ visitors to the goldfields were an opportunity to seek redress. Many examples exist of Aboriginal people declaring their title to a suite of civil rights such as Equinehup, a Djadjawurrung man, who formally petitioned colonial authorities (Railway Commissioners) expressing his claim to original land title. In 1876 Dicky, a Wathawurrung elder at Lal Lal near Ballarat, complained to some miners that they had ‘robbed him of Lal Lal which was his inheritance’ and collected several shillings compensation.

## Taking advantage

The attractiveness of Aboriginal people to the new immigrant miners centred on their corroborees, weapons, battles, apparel (or lack of), physique, spiritual beliefs, artefacts and athletic prowess. Alexander Finlay, a gold miner on the Bendigo fields in September 1852 marvelled at their ingenuity with a boomerang and skill at ascending trees. At the goldfields near Yackandandah, Aboriginal people were commonly seen exhibiting their boomerang skills to the delight of the miners who paid them cash for these demonstrations. Others were impressed with their ability to ‘hit a penny piece 50 yards off’ and how their boomerangs moved at ‘the speed of lightning, and if aimed true, hitting its victim with an irresistible force’. George Wakefield, a surgeon on the Ballarat diggings, attended ‘their corroborees, and their skill in throwing the spear and boomerang is wonderful. I saw the boomerang thrown yesterday, it went completely out of sight and in about 5 minutes returned at the feet of the thrower’.

Striking adornments also punctuated a number of goldfield records: ‘Davy saw the other day at the wurlies a black woman ornamented in a manner that I never heard of before. She had kangaroo teeth driven into the flesh above the nails forming a complete set of claws’. C Brout, a Frenchman, was astounded by coats made from platypus skins and necklaces ‘made of reeds cut into short pieces, through which threads – also taken from kangaroos’ tails – are passed. It is not rare to see necklaces that are eighty to one hundred metres long’. Goldfields newspapers frequently reported on ‘native oddities’ or merely that a clan’s presence in town would occasion a news report of their goings on.

Exoticism was double-edged, that is to say, much fascination and awe was apparent from both non-Indigenous and Aboriginal people about their respective cultures. Walter Bridges at the Buninyong goldfields noted that he

could not help laughing to see the Blackfellows walking in front like a master sweep carrying nothing except a Boomerang or a spear some with a old bell topper on and shirt. Then the Luberries [Aboriginal women]

come jabbering along behind carrying the swag in nets some with pups that could not walk others possom skin rugs the Blackfellows make the Lubere do all the work in carrying the loads or baggage.

Certain Indigenous 'notables' became 'familiar figure[s] to the diggers', a reporter from the *Mount Alexander Mail* claimed in 1862. Aboriginal people were often invited (or summoned) to perform for important visitors such as the Duke of Edinburgh, or for commemorative events such as the opening of railways or regattas, to add an air of 'authenticity' and 'novelty'. James Flett suggests that at the opening of the railway at Dunolly 'King Tommy', a Djadjawurrung elder, served as a 'symbol' of indigenisation as he appeared with a banner on a long pole and danced in front of the engine. The Buninyong Council which, in requesting the Governor to insert Buninyong in the programme of places to be visited by the Duke of Edinburgh in 1867, stated:

That Buninyong is the oldest inland town in the Colony, and the site of the first discovery of gold in Victoria. They have also considered that a corroboree of the Aborigines would be a novelty to his Royal Highness, and have made arrangements for a large gathering of the Natives for that purpose.

On occasions Aboriginal people were enlisted for non-Indigenous celebrations such as that marking the opening of the Geelong to Melbourne railway in 1853. To mark the occasion a 'procession formed in the Market Square [Geelong] consisting of Mounted Troopers, Police, Soldiers, Railway Navvies, Aborigines, Odd fellows, Laborers, Schools, trades, etc'. Even in the world of theatre stage plays, the presence of Aboriginal people was deemed sufficiently important to display on the bill-boards. 'Off to the Diggings!' a play in London theatres in 1857 featured 'Kikogofatto: A Real Native'.

Not all miners or visitors to the goldfields saw the artistic merit of corroborees. Whilst large crowds of enthusiastic spectators thronged to watch corroborees on the goldfields, some gold seekers such as Emily Skinner were disparaging of such events.

We came upon a large party of Aborigines at one place, Longwood I think, and they were holding a corroboree, I was told. Certainly they made noise enough. Their dancing and antics were dreadfully grotesque during the short time I watched them. They kept it up till far into the night ... They seemed a very miserable degraded people.

Korzelineski, a Polish gold miner opined that it was not in the miner's interest to have Aboriginal people as neighbours at nighttime.

It is not very pleasant to have a blackfellows' camp in close vicinity. On a moonlit night there is no rest for they make a lot of noise and scream in a particular way. Possibly it has a religious significance – a worship of the moon perhaps, or it could be that the *cradje* was giving talismans away. It's hard to say. Tired as laws after a hard day's digging, I was not prepared to flit through the bush at night in the hope of learning some of the natives' habits and ceremonies.

William Craig, a miner at Mount Cole, wanting to be away from the noise and revelry that prevailed at the grog shanty, decided to camp some distance from the diggings only to find that the 'blacks squatted down within a few chains of us, and made night hideous with their barbarous orgies'.

It is evident that the goldfields were places frequented by Aboriginal people and that the attractiveness of the goldfields for Aboriginal people could not be said to be uniform from one goldfield to another. It is equally apparent that Aboriginal culture and lifestyles were an integral part of the goldfields' cultural experience for many miners, evidenced by miners' correspondence, artwork and newspaper reports of the day. These perceptions are interpreted through at times extremely ethnocentric lenses, but demonstrate that for Aboriginal people the goldfields proved to be places which intermittently delighted the pocket and the senses.