

### 3. Guiding

For the most part, non-Indigenous miners' accounts of directly employing Aboriginal people revolve on the profession of guiding. A guide's role in both the pastoral and gold periods encompassed the most direct and easily traversable route (often along traditional pathways), and locating food, medicine and water to sustain their non-Indigenous companions. John Calvert, 'veteran gold finder of the southern hemisphere', was the recipient of Aboriginal guides' knowledge on many occasions and adamantly avowed that without the aid of his 'blackfellow' guides at Turtle Bay, Western Australia in 1847 'he could never have returned alive'. Indigenous guides also assisted in fording rivers safely, preparing temporary shelters, acting as diplomats and interpreters through the country of resident clans and locating waterholes. There are many instances of Aboriginal people initiating and keenly brokering their work relationships within what could be aptly described as the guiding industry for non-Indigenous gold seekers during the Victorian alluvial gold period (1850-60s). Some guides appear to have taken on the role spontaneously in showing new goldfields, rescuing, providing food, liaising, warning, trading and naming features in the landscape. Although widely praised at the time, they have earned very little recognition by historians.

Historian Les Blake discerned that the early route to the central Victorian goldfields was one blazed by Aboriginals as it had been their traditional pathway.

The track [to central Victoria] gained clearer definition in October 1851, when a group of intrepid diggers, eager to save time and miles, struck east from Wellington on the Murray. They took aboriginal pads from native well to well and tracks between the few lonely stations in the Long Desert of South Australia to make a fairly straight route to the border. On the Victorian side the Little Desert could be similarly crossed by ways already trodden by both Aboriginals and white men.

Blake's summation is corroborated by miner's accounts such as Oliver Ragless whose party travelled to Mount Alexander from Adelaide only by procuring water from 'native wells'. It is almost certain that in the early period of gold mining, non-Indigenous prospectors were at times following the trading routes/ song-lines of Aboriginal people in the same way that the earlier frontier explorers and squatters had. Franz Micha contends that 'in many cases the modern traffic routes of Whites match the Aborigines' paths of communication, which are thousands of years old'. It is also likely that, as in the pastoral period, in attempting to 'stay on one's country', a number of Aboriginal people attached themselves to groups of miners and at times led them to rich gold bearing sites just as many rich pastoral runs had been opened up initially by Aboriginal guides.

## Unwillingness to guide

Sometimes Aboriginal people were unwilling to guide the non-Indigenous travellers. A range of reasons can be discerned. First among these concerned tribal boundaries and protocols. Some guides exhibited a distinct uneasiness when out of their own country. AAC Le Souef wrote of his ('My Nangatta boys') Aboriginal guides 'Tommy and Toby', who were escorting cattle to the Ovens River goldfields, being attacked by 'strange Goulburn blacks'. WT Dawson, the District Surveyor in the Baw Baw and Walhalla region in 1855, discerned in his Aboriginal informants/ guides another reason for their uneasiness. Travelling into certain regions was believed to be life threatening, Dawson explained:

Although the country is occupied on both sides up to the very base, and in some instances, on a number of the spurs and a portion of the mountains themselves, yet there are peaks and ravines which as yet have never been trodden by a white man. Even the Aborigines recoil with horror-stricken countenances if asked to undertake a journey to the summit of some of them ... Another place which no "blackfellow" will venture is described by them as a boiling chasm which if they approach they get drawn into and are never seen or heard of more.

Similarly, R Brough Smyth recorded how Wathawurrung people reputedly avoided the dark forests west of Mount Blackwood for it was believed that evil spirits dwelt there. An anonymous goldfields' writer in central Victoria explained to colonial readers that Aboriginal people had spiritual and cultural protocols about respecting their dead kinsfolk which meant they could not travel to certain areas.

Presently I remarked that I had seen no natives about [north of Station Peak, possibly Wathawurrung country]. "No," answered Gower, "their chief, old Warrego died in yonder valley some years ago, and since then no black will spend a night in it. They pass through occasionally, but never stay."

Second, Aboriginal cultural responsibilities took priority over non-Indigenous economic considerations. A party of gold miners who had secured a pact with some Djadjawurrung guides to escort them to Forest Creek gold diggings was disconcerted when their guides informed them that ceremonial rites took precedence over guiding: 'Eager as we were to get away, we were delayed for another evening, in order that a visit from some other friendly tribe might be signaled by a dance. This was their celebrated corroborry'.

The heavily race and class-driven expectations of some non-Indigenous travellers about their Aboriginal guide's role and social standing was also problematic in

retaining Aboriginal guides, as work relationships built on a sense of mutual affiliation were commonly considered a critical ingredient for success. Colonial writers such as Francis Lancelott provided advice on the desirability of hiring Aboriginal guides and how to retain them in service. Rules of thumb included:

Those who have had long experience in the bush are always careful to avail themselves of the services of one or two trusty black attendants ... As their services are given more from goodwill than from hope of reward, it is only from attachment to persons with whom they are well acquainted that they are ever prevailed upon to lend themselves as parties in an exploring expedition.

AB Pierce, travelling along the Murray in the early 1860s, forsook this advice and nonchalantly 'hired a black boy for the heavy and dirty work' during the hot and dry season when the 'extreme heat was almost unbearable'. Pierce noted with some indignation (and self-righteous bigotry) that the 'black boy deserted and returned to his tribe, some of whom he met in that neighbourhood – not quite unexpectedly, for desertion is wholly characteristic of the aborigines'.

The perceived usefulness of Aboriginal guides on the goldfields was occasionally limited because they took non-Indigenous people only as far as the borders of their own country. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in Clarke's survey of the Alps in 1858, when three guides left him at or between Muriong and Mowamba and another two left at the junction of the Thredbo and Wallendibby River. Robert Gow gives an account of similar difficulties. Having been left behind for a while, Gow's guide, 'Captain Cadell', confessed to a high level of anxiety in country which he saw as 'too much wild'.

## Getting to the goldfields

Edward Snell, a miner trekking from South Australia to Victoria, observed a 'Commissioner under the Pilotage of a Blackfellow going to some newly discovered diggings on the Wimmera'. Sherer, a gold miner in the Omeo district of Victoria also noted a Commissioner of Police and party accompanied by an 'intelligent native' who led them to water, hunted for the party and demonstrated his bush knowledge on numerous occasions during the journey. A tradition of employing Aboriginal guides by Surveyors-General, which had begun with colonisation, was thus continued in the gold mining period to great effect.

It was not solely official surveying parties that were reliant on Aboriginal guides when overlanding to the Victorian goldfields. Members of prospecting parties,

such as George Baker, recalled being totally dependent on Aboriginal guides when overlanding from Adelaide to the diggings at Castlemaine in central Victoria.

We started to go through the “short desert” [probably the Little Desert in north-western Victoria], taking with us two blackfellows with their lubras and picanninies to show us where the water was. It was a very hot and windy day, and we had forgotten to take water with us. It was towards evening when the blackfellows found water, and we were in a very exhausted condition.

John Chapple, on his journey from Adelaide to the Avoca goldfields, also employed a number of Aboriginal guides including ‘Black Solomon’, ‘King Tom’ and an unidentified ‘black boy’, upon whom judging from the repeated references to bush foods, it can be inferred that Chapple’s party became reliant.

## Reliance on guides

A number of miners were accompanied by Aboriginal guides who on occasion were the actual discoverers of new gold deposits. Historian Barry Collett learned from both oral and archival evidence that small groups of anonymous Kurnai were ‘often’ members of prospecting parties in South Gippsland, and were at times instrumental in their survival and viability. In 1867, a party made up of three unidentified Kurnai and two non-Indigenous prospectors came close to finding fortune at what was to become the Stockyard Creek diggings. Autumn rains and a lack of supplies forced them to abandon the diggings, reporting they were only able to survive by relying on the meat from koalas and other animals caught by the Kurnai. Fairweather provides a further allusion to the possible influence Aboriginal people played, especially in their role as guides on the more inhospitable goldfields of Victoria, recounting that on one journey to the goldfields ‘we escaped Tongio Hill by coming up Swift’s Creek (now so called), and had a blackfellow for a guide. Blacks were numerous in Omeo then’.

Despite their importance, Aboriginal guides were often not named, and sometimes not even mentioned. A revealing example of this historical oversight appears in reports relating to the discovery of one of the richest reefs on the Ballarat field. In a letter to the *Geelong Advertiser*, Paul Gootch, a miner in the Canadian and Prince Regent gullies near Ballarat, reported in September 1852 ‘that the way in which the Eureka diggings were discovered was on the occasion of my sending out a blackfellow to search for a horse who picked up a nugget on the surface. Afterwards I sent out a party to explore who proved that gold was really to be found in abundance’. The lack of recognition given to the unnamed ‘blackfellow’ was repeated in the case of the Ararat diggings. At the

Linton diggings, south of Ballarat, American miner Charles Ferguson met a large number of the 'Wardy yallock' (Wathawurrung) Aboriginal people in 1851. He reported that:

There was one black fellow of this tribe who told me he knew where there was plenty of gold, about sixty miles away, and offered to take me or Walter there. We made arrangements to go with him and take one other person also ... They were gone about two weeks. They got gold, but the boys said it was the last place ever made and they would not stop there if they could make a pound weight of gold a day. The same place, but a short time after, turned out to be a good gold district and a great quartz region, known as the Ararat diggings.

## Attitudes of the guides and the guided

Some measure of the diversity of interface between Aboriginal people who worked as guides and non-Indigenous miners is portrayed in the following account of a party of miners trekking to new goldfields in the Ovens River area. The extract vividly illustrates the changing relationships and attitudes from both sides of the cultural divide.

Went to Ovens with Martin Tully, Jimmy Lyons, Andy Clair and Patsy Porker. We had not enough money to buy much tucker. Started on a new track and had no tucker with us. It was raining heavily and we had nothing to eat. Pushed on till we came to a sheep station by chance. Owned by a man named Clarke. He was very good to us. Told us that where we were going there was no tracks. We should take a black guide and got us two from the run on the way. These blacks had a gun each and fearful lot of dogs. We had only one old muzzler loader. Before we went very far they demanded grog. We would not give it, they wanted to walk behind. We were told by Mr. Clarke to keep them in front always. Pestered us for the grog, we gave them some. Then they said they were hungry and set out at a great pace for a tank we could see across the plain. We heard shots and thought that they were shooting at someone. When we got there it was ducks and their dogs were bringing them out. They had a fire lit and cooking the ducks feathers and all, eating them before they were quite cooked. Made Martin Tully sick. We were very anxious to get on and they wanted to camp. One nigger jibbed. King Billy came with us, it was nearly dark, we saw a fire and thinking it might be friends, wanted to go to it but King Billy said "No fear, wild blackfellows kill me all same you" so we cut through the bush. We could not quite feel we could trust him and thought he might be leading us

to these wild blacks. It was very dark and we marveled at him knowing the way he was going. Every now and then someone would ask him "How far?" till at last he said in an impatient voice "Long way yet". About midnight through the thick bush he brought us to a shepherd's hut ... Paid old King Billy, who was a good old black. Lyons knocked up and had to go to bed. We went on the next day and old Billy did not notice that Lyons was not with us. He saw his swag on the verandah and thought he had forgotten it and walked three miles after us with it.

Notwithstanding the sometimes difficult cross-cultural negotiations required to recruit Aboriginal guides and the negative attitudes of many miners towards Aboriginal cultural matters, a discernible need was filled by Aboriginal guides thus rendering them indispensable. Sherer acknowledged the considerable effort his party expended in procuring two Djadjawurrung guides: 'For this piece of service we would almost have given all the gold we had'. Cultural misunderstandings were predictable given the preconceived ideas each party often had of each other. HE Haustorfer similarly recounted his great relief at being rescued whilst in the dark bush by unidentified 'blacks' who beckoned him to lie down near their fires. After spending a night under considerable apprehension as he 'felt all sorts of misgivings, thinking they might be longing for a White Roast', in the morning he was relieved when 'the oldest black told his lubra to show me the track'.

The usefulness of Aboriginal guides was not limited to finding a particular place, locating and preparing food, procuring water and carrying supplies. Some miners such as Samuel Lazarus considered the advice of Aboriginal guides to have been of utmost importance to their safe travel in the bush. Bush travellers were often the recipients of Aboriginal bush lore which improved their quality of stay. A story by Katherine McKay about her father indicates how the bush was smoothed for non-Indigenous travellers.

Once Father told us of how, after a long waterless journey, he and his native guide came on a waterhole in an almost dry creek. Father, being very thirsty, took his pannikin to dip a draught out of the film-covered water; but the black guide restrained him warningly, and gathered a bunch of coarse grass that was growing about the creek and placed it on the surface of the water, first dexterously removing a patch of the film or scum, and slowly pressed the pannikin on the filter of dried grass until it was filled with clear water.

Near Bet Bet in central Victoria, Patrick Costello, a shepherd on a pastoral property keen to utilise an Aboriginal guide's expertise and thus save himself unwarranted exertion, asked 'if he would guide me across the hills ... To go across country the distance was only about seven miles, whereas if we took the

road the distance was 15 miles. The blackfellow agreed to do so, and we started off and reached the station safely'. In the Orbost district, an Aboriginal named Joe Banks rescued a sick non-Indigenous man during the floods by 'making a canoe out of a sheet of bark from the roof and placing the sick man in it, swam through the turbulent waters, towing the canoe and its helpless occupant to safety'.

## Water guides

One of the most under-valued contributions Aboriginal people made to the new colonial economy was that of guiding people and stock across the river systems of Australia. Hubert De Castella's description of Aboriginal people guiding large numbers of people, cattle and supplies across the Murray River in the 1850s was a common one: 'Crossing the Murray, which is half a kilometre wide at that spot [junction of the Murray and Darling], was a large number of savages, [who] were camped on the river banks and had boats ready to help the travelers cross'. De Castella described the aplomb and adroitness with which the risky task of guiding people, stock and supplies across was often accomplished.

The rains had swollen the river so much that Mr. Darchy stayed there camping for a week waiting for a favourable moment to go across. The blacks were particularly useful for transporting men and supplies from the other side of water. They built boats with gum bark, and at spots where roads crossed the river they already had to go a long way to find suitable trees. When the boats were ready the blacks took over a party of men one by one and their horses were sent swimming to them so that they could receive the stock. When the whole herd had crossed the river the men who had stayed behind drove their horses across, and the blacks took them over in turn. It was also the blacks who took across the supplies ... Sometimes when the river was not very wide and the current not very swift, one black put himself at the front of the cart and another at the back, and then slipping their heads between the planks it was made of, they would swim across with this heavy load on their backs.

Aboriginal people on the Murray often rescued non-Indigenous peoples' belongings and according to a report (1862) in the *Illustrated Melbourne Post* would consider 'nothing loath to take a good dive, fetching up anything that may [have?] thus found its way to the bed of the river'. Frederick Burchett wrote admiringly of how during floods 'we had to carry rations to outstations in a bark canoe ... manufactured by the blacks in a very few minutes'. Many miners and travellers such as Alfred Howitt who conducted geological research

in Gippsland (1875) also depended on their Aboriginal guides to construct and pilot vessels for ferrying them across rivers and entrusted them to deliver vital stores and provisions to forward positions.

I wanted to examine a long portion of the Mitchell River which runs through horizontal strata and which are almost unknown, I therefore sent up two blackfellows “Long Harry” and “Charley Boy” under the care of a trustworthy man to Tabberaberra station at the head of the Gorges. Here they made two bark canoes by the time I arrived from Crooked River and the following morning we started on our voyage ... Long Harry [sat] behind with a piece of green wattle bark in each hand about 6 in. by 12 in. which he used as a paddle ... The other canoe contained Charley and the provisions for three days.

Observers noted the functionality of Aboriginal canoes, notwithstanding their less than stately appearance. One reporter noted: ‘As a means of crossing the river [Murray] the bark canoe is generally adopted ... although exceedingly primitive, answers every purpose and is often of considerable dimensions, holding four or five, or even six persons’. Many parties were circumspect about the ‘primitive constructions’ at which they were entrusting their lives but there appears to be no record of them capsizing. One such fear-filled traveller was Edwin Middleton who ‘crossed the Murray in a native canoe, a sheet of bark nearly flat. I did not return in it, for I did not relish it, too many black heads bobbing up and down quite close to us. I fully expected [the canoe] to be upset when they caught hold of the canoe, clamouring after tobacco’. AG Pierce, gold miner turned photographer, noted that the

natives aided us in fording the Serpentine and getting our [photographic] supplies across in their canoes. These boats are of the most primitive construction, being nothing more than a large strip of bark cut to the correct size, with pointed ends, from the eucalyptus tree and dried in the sun, and shaped by a cross stick in each end. The heat of the sun naturally curls the bark and produces a rude boat.

Judging by some accounts, the assistance of Aboriginal guides when fording rivers was not merely time saving. A mother and her child who had slipped into the Campaspe River near Echuca ‘would inevitably have drowned, but for an Aborigine known as Tally Ho who happened to be near and who rescued both mother and child’. Similarly, Mrs Campbell, heading to the goldfields, claimed to being saved, along with her sister from drowning whilst crossing a river near Benalla by an Aboriginal guide named ‘Captain Cook’. Others such as James Dannock also attested to their indispensability when crossing the Murray.



Dannock, suffering badly from dysentery, and not responding to Aboriginal medicines, entrusted his life to some Aboriginal people who got him across the Murray.

I took bad with the dysentery and the black lubras [kindly?] got me wattle gum and when I did not get better they said 2 days that fellow go bung [dead] so I thought I had better clear out and got the blacks to put me over the river in a canoe.

## Giving directions

Yet another aspect of an Aboriginal guide's job was to track both people and stock, a task which was performed with great regularity and efficiency across Victoria's goldfields. Frequently, passing references (often anonymous) to Aboriginal trackers appear in regional histories. As in the pastoral period, and perhaps more so during the mining era, Aboriginal expertise in guiding lost non-Indigenous people to their desired location was often called upon, and answered. A miner lost in the thick bush surrounding Mount Alexander (central Victoria), recalled how he came upon an encampment of presumably Djadjawurrung Aboriginal people who directed him to Forest Creek:

I had not gone far before I felt convinced that I had lost my way ... Just as it was getting dark, I saw smoke ascending from among the trees ... It flashed across my mind that it was the abode of blacks ... On getting near, two men of the same description as the former came out, and I inquired the way. They told me I had been walking away from home the whole day. The sun had now set. They gave me the direction of Forest Creek, and away I went into the bush again.

Bush workers in the gold period also relied on Aboriginal people to guide them safely through the bush. Joe Small became lost near the Ovens River and after 'walking some hours' his 'drooping spirits' were lifted by 'a black fellow who gave me full directions respecting my course'. Failed gold miner, GC Fead, also relayed how he was indebted to an unidentified Aboriginal man and three Aboriginal women who guided him and his valuable stock through a region notorious for the risks it posed to human and animal life.

Down the Jacob's Pinch they [500 head of cattle] went stumbling and sliding much against their will, our horse's feet being almost on a level with their backs. At the foot a blackfellow, with three gins, offered their services to help us through the rocks and we found them very useful.

Once clear of the rocks we camped for the night, the Blacks near us, gladdened with the tobacco and rations which they received as payment for their work.

The surety which Aboriginal guides and trackers afforded non-Indigenous people is vividly illustrated by frequent references in George Sugden's reminiscences of his pioneering experiences both on and off the goldfields in which he relates numerous men and stock being expertly tracked and guided to safety over a period of time.

"Sugden take Sandy the black boy and see if you can find the man [lost in the bush, and subsequently rescued]". I was quite in his hands and knew that as long as I stuck to him I was safe ... a black tracker was employed who can easily pick up your tracks [shepherd rescued] ... I was rescued by Sandy the black tracker ... rescued by black trackers again ... my eyes got so bad that I could not see. I was given a black gin to look after me and lead me about.

Very close personal relationships between Aboriginal guides and non-Indigenous people were established out in the bush. In the letters of drovers and miners there is a palpable bond often born out of being dependent for their lives on their 'sable brethren' in regions where the sourcing of safe drinking water was a matter of life and death. For some non-Indigenous people, as seen in the following account from Robert Gow's journal, the relationship was decidedly a benevolent master-servant relationship, permeated by overtones of 'ownership'.

Had it not been for my own little black boy – Jacky that would have been the last of me – but he saw the black fellow and gave the alarm to my men. About my Black boy Jacky I will tell you more I have him still he is my right hand man – he saved my life then ... he has been with me know [now] 15 years and a more faithful servant no man could have in fact he considers himself as my private property and I can assure you he takes far more interest in my affairs than almost any white man and in many instances he is worth gold to me for he is a splendid tracker ... you at home could not credit the way this boy can follow a lost horse or bullock and fetch it ... out of the many horses and cattle I have owned I never have lost one since I owned the Black boy.

Assertions of 'ownership' by pastoralists and explorers towards Aboriginal guides were not uncommon, particularly in the pastoral and exploratory periods of colonial Victoria. Representative of this view is Charles Lousada's reminiscences of a selector who

had a black boy "Toby" with that bush instinct peculiar to the race who he would take away down south towards Lardner and McDonalds track.

Ham [the land selector] would go into the scrub anywhere, and when he had been in a good way, would say to Toby: "Home Toby" and the black boy would bring him straight out.

During the gold mining period, such overbearingly paternalistic assertions of 'ownership' of guides were rare. This is almost certainly because miners – being predominately interested in short-term economic gain – would have viewed such 'possessions' as an encumbrance. It is also likely that the ephemeral state of the goldfields – the lusting after one rich field after another, and consequent crossing of many Aboriginal boundaries – would have acted as a disincentive for Aboriginal people to 'attach' themselves to non-Indigenous brethren. Yet they were needed in the short term. Several testimonies relate the often tragic outcomes of not employing an Aboriginal guide when attempting to traverse from one field to another. Mereweather noted in 1852 'To lose oneself in this district is a serious matter ... I hear of many accidents and disasters which have occurred in my district during my short absence in Melbourne'. In such instances, Aboriginal people were frequently employed as trackers to find the missing, as the following chapter demonstrates.