

4. Trackers and Native Police

The ability to track or to 'read' the landscape, a highly developed knowledge and skill refined by Aboriginal people, was immediately transferable to the needs of the colonists. Tracking had immediate applications which soon were utilised in many non-Indigenous situations, both before and during (and after) the gold rush period. Gary Presland, in his study *For God's Sake Send the Trackers* evaluated the relationships between members of the Victorian Police and Aboriginal men from Queensland. The Aboriginal trackers:

exercised skills which were outside the ambit of most Europeans, and the use of which was the major reason for their association with the police. The abilities and knowledge they shared made them a valuable asset to their police employers, and a source of wonder to a wider public. Use of the art of tracking in a context of European law and order is a comparatively recent innovation, but it is only the context which is new; in Aboriginal societies the skills are time-honoured and traditional ones. The expertise displayed by blacktrackers, which has often been described as 'uncanny', 'eerie' and even 'magical', has been developed as an integral part of the complex web of interconnections between people and land which is the fundamental characteristic of Aboriginal society. The use of this craft in a European setting is an example of the way in which Aborigines have successfully adapted the elements of their traditional lifeways to a new world order.

The extraordinary successes of the blacktrackers must have ensured they were loathed and feared by criminals. One of the first instances of the Victorian Police Force calling on the services of Aboriginal trackers from Victoria was during the pursuit of two escaped convicts from Van Diemen's Land in 1853. The two bushrangers had landed in Victoria, committed a series of hold-ups and were successfully tracked to a hold-out in the Gisborne area.

Even after alluvial mining had petered out, the usefulness of blacktrackers proved to be indisputable. Bushrangers such as Harry Powers, one of the most notorious bushrangers in Victoria's colonial history, were traced and captured with the aid of the blacktracker Donald who identified Powers' hide-out when the white officers could not. 'It was then just daylight, and the mist was rolling up the hills, rendering it almost impossible in some places to distinguish it from smoke; but Donald, after one look, pointed straight up the gully, and with dilated eyes and nostrils, uttered in a suppressed tone "[s]Moke! Moke!'"'. With the presence of Powers' campfire traced by Donald, Powers was readily apprehended. The murderers of a gold buyer at Omeo in 1860 were likewise tracked and handed over to the police by several unidentified 'natives'. Not

just gold thieves were traced by blacktrackers however. On the pastoral stations their tracking expertise was regarded with mystical awe and solemn respect. It was during the gold period that their skills of tracking cattle or sheep were particularly invaluable as a result of the dearth of non-Indigenous workers, due to them deserting to the goldfields. Lawrence Struilby's observations of non-Indigenous people's awed reactions to blacktrackers' 'wonderful power' are typical. It is noteworthy that Struilby recalls that the experienced tracker had his terms of employment brokered by an elder, as per customary law.

The blacks began to be very useful to us, some of them at least. Some of them had powers of tracking cattle, more surely than a hound would fox or hare; though they did it all by eye. It was amusing to see the chief, after a stiff bargain, hire out a tracker to follow a stray mob of cattle or horses. You would take him to the spot where they were last seen; where he would go deliberately to work to see and measure the track. You must not hurry him ... Through scrub and stream, and river and forest, and over sand or rock, he will go, till he brings you to your object, whether it is alive or dead. When he discovers dropping of the cattle, or a blade of grass cut by them, he can tell within a few hours or miles of their whereabouts. Many a fine bullock or heifer they saved for us then; and more for myself afterwards. The kangaroo, opossum, emu, kangaroo-rat, or even the grub, they trace with equal precision. It is as if they could concentrate all their power in the sense of sight.

However, it was the tracing of individuals or parties of people who were lost in the bush which was the most publicly celebrated task which trackers were predominantly called upon to perform throughout the gold period. Francis Lancelott described the pitiful story of a 14 year old girl who had been missing in the bush for ten days before it was 'deemed indispensable' to call for the assistance of black trackers, but it was too late.

They however, did their part very well. On being told where the girl was last seen to enter the scrub, they went down instantly on their hands and knees, and with their large, sooty eyes, scanned every blade of grass, fallen leaf, and twig, with as much care and delicacy as if they had been objects of infinite worth ... it was tedious work for the blacks, but they seemed proud of the great consideration in which their services were held ... and, as the blacks had conjectured, her dead body was found on the summit of the rock.

Heart breaking stories such as the one rendered by a Mr Garratt at Little River (near Werribee, south-west of Melbourne) in September 1866 abounded in this period. Garratt reported on the 'assistance of the blacks [Wathawurrung]' being sought by a disconsolate father whose two year old child was lost. Several

Wathawurrung trackers were deployed 'for several days who intelligently and diligently engaged in the search'. Sadly, the child was never found. The most celebrated story of their prowess involved a group of children lost for nine days in the Mallee, successfully tracked by three Victorian Aboriginal men, King Richard, Jerry or Red-cap, and Fred.

It was not just the living whom the blacktrackers were employed to trace but also the dead. The finding of the remains of a lost one brought closure for the parents, family or friends, who otherwise would have cause to 'drink deeply of the cup of sorrow'. Lancelott explained that on the goldfields and elsewhere there was 'always great satisfaction when the remains of the lost are found. Uncertainty is the most calamitous state which the mind can be thrown into. The heart is choked, and there is an unutterable anguish in the pent up and conflicting emotions of hope and fear'. William Thomas noted the valuable service of three Aboriginal people who successfully tracked the body of a murder victim after being called in by the Victorian Police in March 1867:

You are aware that I was applied to by Mr. Inspector Nicholson of the Detective Force in our [?] On the Subject of Blacks to track Bullarook forest – to find the Body of a Man supposed to have been Murder'd – I furnished Mr. Nicholson with every information – and recommended 3 Blacks [Poker Tommy – Avoca Tribe, Jacky – Ballarat, Billy – Upper Loddon] who were acquainted with that part of Victoria – they succeeded in finding the remains – 20£ was offered reward by Col Secy.

Victorian Aboriginal trackers were commonly called 'police trackers' or 'Native Constables' long after the Victorian Native Police Corps was officially disbanded in 1853. The distinction between tracking work under the guise of the Native Police Corps and tracking work performed on an as need basis was blurred during the gold rush period by writers, and the authorities.

Native Police

One of the major benefits of the Port Phillip (Victorian) Native Police Corps, having ostensibly begun in 1837, was to have at the government's disposal a policing force superbly equipped at tracking criminals in the bush. Some indication of the high esteem that they were held in can be seen in William Strutt's description of them as 'a useful set of men as could be found for special service; particularly tracking in the wild bush carrying dispatches, and they seemed to lend themselves wonderfully to military discipline, and as to their riding and capital seat, you could literally say that man and horse were one'. Beginning in 1849 this role began to shift with the advent of gold discoveries, toward patrolling the new gold finds, guarding the sites, providing order and

initially enabling the Port Phillip Government to attempt to keep the gold discoveries a secret. Moreover, it was also in this period that the force began to take part in public celebrations such as the opening of the new Princes Bridge, perform guard duties at Pentridge Gaol and act as official escort to dignitaries. Later members of the corps acted as the first gold escort. They had to ensure the safe passage of large amounts of gold from the goldfields that were both in the possession of private individuals and the government officials who were paid in gold for license fees, a source of revenue for the new Victorian Government.

The Native Police were the first police on the goldfields of Ballarat, (arriving on 20 September 1851) and collected the new goldfield licenses. This new measure (gold licensing) helped to bring in revenue to the new Victorian Government. Stephen Shelmerdine, in his study of the Port Phillip Native Police, considered that by 1851 the Native Police Force was 'operating at its highest level with demands for its services being stimulated by the riot of bushrangers scouring the whole district and the excited fervour of the early goldrush discoveries'. On duty, they accompanied the commissioners on their rounds, and like so much police work their presence alone was important, along with their readiness to intervene in the event of any disorder. Thus it can be seen that the Native Police Corps were briefly at the epicentre of the Victorian gold epoch.

The earliest of their activities was their stint beginning on 5 February 1849 guarding the gold discoveries at Daisy Hill (an outstation located 10 miles west of Deep Creek, one of the branches of the Loddon River). FA Powlett, the Commissioner of Crown Lands for the district, reported that he had left a party of Native Police at Daisy Hill Station to prevent any unauthorised occupation of Crown Lands in the neighbourhood. When the major gold finds at Ballarat, Buninyong, Mount Alexander and Bendigo became public knowledge in 1851, the Native Police, representing the government, were the only effective policing unit Superintendent Charles La Trobe had at his disposal to maintain order and represent the government on the goldfields. William Strutt, a miner on the Ballarat diggings, recalled:

Met on our way [to Ballarat] a prisoner and a villainous squint-eyed scoundrel he looked, handcuffed and escorted by two well mounted and smart looking black troopers (of whom I have made a drawing), on the road to Melbourne ... the useful black troopers were for a time made to escort prisoners to town; these fine fellows were at first the only mounted police; and indeed performed all the police duty at the Ballarat diggings.

Captain Dana, the officer in charge of the Corps, spent three months at the Clunes goldfield, and reported that his troopers picked gold from the ground everywhere they looked. A map depicting the discovery of Bendigo goldfields,

holds a small reference to the Corps' presence: 'Black Trooper found spec after 13th Dec [1851]', which demonstrates that they too were caught up in the gold fever. Incidents involving the Corps and miners who resented the licensing fee certainly contributed to their prominence on the central Victorian goldfields. An incident on the Ballarat goldfields on 21 September 1851 illustrates both their success as a force prepared to intervene in cases of disorder and their growing unpopularity in the eyes of miners. Commissioner Doveton and his assistant David Armstrong explained to the diggers the government's decision to introduce licensing fees, which attracted an angry response from the crowd. A public meeting was convened on the spot. The first miners who applied to pay the fee were struck and pelted by 'the mob', as Dana referred to them. Had it not been for the presence of the Native Police, Dana reported, 'those diggers would have been seriously injured'. Following this event a request was made for Native Police then stationed at Goulburn to be redeployed to Ballarat. Cannon argues that the overbearing methods of the Native Police 'so antagonized the diggers that a flame of rebellion was lit, culminating in the Eureka Stockade three years later'. The Native Police Corps Day-Book also demonstrates that in September and October 1852, members of the Native Police were still active, and were accompanying Dana to the diggings at Deep Creek. George Sutherland, a miner at the new goldfield of Ballarat considered them a potent force.

The Commissioners, Armstrong and Doveton, arrived, and built a small hut on the top of the hill opposite Golden Point. There was also a police officer, named Captain Dana, accompanied by a number of black troopers, ready to support the authority of the commissioners. Going around the ground, they inquisitively looked into each of the claims which were being worked by the industrious diggers.

Many miners noted their presence on the goldfields as conspicuous and adding a touch of exotica to the Ballarat scene such as the following extract from the *Illustrated Australian Magazine* of 1852.

His [The Commissioner's] tent has the mounted police on one side, and the Native Police, in an extensive mia mia, on the other. The blackfellows are busy tailoring, and here is one on the broad of his back in the sun feigning sleep; and incessantly chattering some monotonous chant ... Close by the Commissioner's tent you observe the encampment of the native police. They too are enjoying the exhilaration of the moment. How graceful are their agile movements. Yonder black fellow is making a feigned attack on his brother with a frying pan; his brother is about to shoot him with his knife. What admirable attributes in both! What dexterous dodging! Frolic is universal among them.

William Brownhill, who found gold at Brown Hill (Ballarat) in 1851, told of how he was caught without a license, taken to the commissioner's camp, and 'guarded by eight or nine black troopers, who in their uniform and polished boots, looked as proud as possible'. One unidentified digger described the 'bustling and picturesque scene' at Mount Alexander in December 1851 when gold to the amount of £25,000 pounds was got ready to be transported to Melbourne.

The cavalcade consisted of two mounted troopers ahead, then the chaise cart, driven by a officer with an armed guard beside him, and six more troopers on horseback behind, four of them, I think, of the native black police ... on a rising ground the commissioner's establishment is placed, consisting of several tents and two or three gunyahs, or bark huts, made by the native police, after their own fashion. The trooper's horses were standing about ready saddled, and the men themselves, both black and white, and in various costumes, gave life to the picture, while of course some interest was added by the knowledge of the valuable load carried in the cart.

Most miners however were less enamoured by their appearance on the goldfields. George Dunderdale, a miner at Bendigo 'merely glared at them, and let them pass in silence. They were sleek and clean, and we were gaunt as wolves', whilst John Chandler opined that 'They looked enough to frighten anyone; their black faces, big white eyes, long moustache, long swords, carbines, and a pair of pistols in their holsters, was a caution to timid people'. The presence of Aboriginal policemen was condemned by some miners who were already angered with the expensive license system and the overbearing methods rumoured to be used by Dana and some officials including troopers firing upon diggers. Further fuel was added to the hatred towards Dana and the Native Police following an incident reported in the *Argus* in October 1851:

The redoubtable Captain Dana diversified his exploits on Saturday by knocking down a young man named Thomas with the butt of his whip; the young man fell into a pit from the effect of the blow. It is gratifying to record such a gallant military exploit – a repetition of the like of which will render it a matter of necessity to place him under the surveillance of his own satanic battalion of Black Guards – a suitable troop for such a commander.

Attitudes towards the Corps differed widely. One correspondent lampooned the idea of 'blackfellows' guarding the gold from Ballarat: 'What benefit is it to the diggers to have an escort such as this? One blackfellow leading a horse to which 70 pounds weight of gold is strapped, and two white troopers behind him. A couple of men with double barreled guns might take the gold, blackfellow

and horse to boot'. Yet a letter to the *Argus* editor on 26 November 1851 from 'Bucknalook' defended the Corps' efficiency and deplored the crass miserliness of the colonial government towards them.

A great deal has been said about Christianity and civilizing, this is all talk, talk! Talk of equality of rights! ... The ambiguous captain of this very warlike regiment, it will be seen, figures with 300 pounds [per year] attached to his name ... whilst the efficient part of the company, namely the natives themselves have (Oh! Whisper it not in the same breath with the word justice, mercy, Christianity or equality or rights! THREE PENCE PER DAY!!) Many of these blacks have as correct an idea of the component parts of a shilling, that it is composed of 12 pence as their redoubtable captain, and what must their impression be of this gross act of injustice.

Bucknalook's dire projection proved to be accurate, as by early 1852 Commander Dana was finding it difficult to prevent the Aboriginal troopers from 'absconding', and had trouble attracting new members. 'I can only account for [this]', Dana wrote, 'from the facility they now have of making money, by working for the Settlers, and also from their frequenting the Gold Workings'. An example of this was the sudden desertion of four troopers at Buninyong in October 1851. By leaving behind all their gear and equipment, historian Marie Fels argues, the troopers were clearly signalling their desire to leave the Corps. In December 1851 the Victorian Legislative Council conducted a decisive meeting where the function and future prospects of the Corps were discussed. There were calls for its cessation as it was argued that they were 'utterly useless', whilst others argued it was 'absurd to employ constables whose evidence could not be heard in courts of justice'. However, the continuation of the Corps was secured by the support of both the Colonial Secretary and the Attorney General as reported in the *Argus* (5 December 1851).

The Committee's erudite attention was directed to the impressive facts that no cases of improper conduct by the Native Police in executing a warrant had ever been reported and that in carrying out normal duties they were as reliable as white men ... In conclusion the Attorney general put forward a thoroughly Australian reason for their continuation – there was no decisive reason for their disbandment at the present stage after so many years in existence.

By February 1852 however Dana had secured the support of Governor La Trobe to radically reform the Native Police Corps. The most important of these reforms was the decision to reduce the number of native troopers, increase the number of non-Indigenous troopers and recruit only native troopers from areas outside Melbourne or Geelong. Dana was also successful in securing La Trobe's

support for the native troopers to be used for tracking and escorting rather than policing. It seems clear that Dana believed that the use of Aborigines as troopers had diminished as conflict between Aboriginal people and non-Indigenes had effectually ceased. By October 1852 the Victorian Native Police Corps had finished active duties on the goldfields.

Presland has identified how, on a number of occasions, Victorian Aboriginal people continued to play a role in policing, in matters relating to Aboriginal offenders, bushrangers, tracking lost children (and Victorian Police officers) and tracking lost or stolen horses. In the district of Echuca (1858), an Aboriginal man named Tally-Ho was instrumental in the identification and capture of two Aboriginal men, and again in 1867 three Aboriginal trackers were employed by the Police to find the remains of a murderer. In 1870 an Aboriginal (language group unknown) named Willie Buskin had been working as a tracker in the Kilmore district. At the same time a young Aboriginal man named David was assisting police by tracking the bushranger Harry Powers in the Benalla district. Two instances in the Ballarat district illustrate the use made of Aboriginal (Wathawurrung) people in policing matters. On Christmas Eve 1866, Senior Constable James Mansfield from the Black Hills Station near Ballarat was one of a party of searchers which included three trackers. One of the trackers, named Heath, had been leading the group down a slope when they came upon a recently fallen tree against which a fire had been set. Raking over the remains they recovered some tell-tale pieces of evidence which resulted in a conviction, and subsequent hanging of the accused. In 1867, Jemmy (or Jimmy) Millar (Djabwurrung name: Colit) and Davy Smith, a Tooloora Balug (Buninyong area) clansman of the Wathawurrung tribe were called in to assist police stationed at Rokewood and Buninyong in their enquiries regarding the murder of Thomas Ulrick on the Woody Yaloak goldfields. The two Aboriginal trackers, Millar and Smith, proved to be instrumental in the convictions, leading the police to the guns used in the murder and also tracking the culprit's horse's movements.

It was obvious to some members of the Victorian Police Force that it would be of inestimable benefit to employ trackers on a permanent basis. In March 1859 Henry Hill, an Inspector at Livingstone Creek Police Station in the Omeo district of Gippsland, wrote to his superiors strongly imploring them to consider the overwhelming benefits that the outstanding services of Aboriginal trackers could accrue to isolated police stations on the Gippsland goldfields.

I have the honour to inform you that on several recent occasions I have seen the urgent necessity of having an intelligent Aboriginal native permanently attached to the police establishment in this district. When in pursuit of the murderers of the late Mr. Green one accompanied us and was mainly instrumental in their capture having tracked them nearly sixty miles to the spot where they were overtaken. At the moment I am

prevented from want of one from searching for the man 'Simpson' lost from Gibbo's Creek. His services would also be frequently made use of for tracing stolen horses etc. For lack of such a guide I am constantly obliged to call upon civilians here to assist us, frequently having to put myself under obligation to persons I should otherwise hold no communication with, and having to divulge my plan of operations where it should be kept secret.

By the 1870s, however, it was believed that most Victorian Aboriginal 'full bloods' were not fit enough, had not retained enough of their tracking skills, and ironically had become too 'civilised' to be useful as trackers for police work. Inspector Hill, in his correspondence also revealed that a lack of trust in local Aboriginal people was probably the principal reason why Queensland Aboriginal trackers, and not their Victorian counterparts, were to be formed into a permanent contingent of the Victorian Police Force. Shellard, a long term resident in the Omeo district maintained that Aboriginal people were members of gangs, that the 'Native camps' were the bases for some bushrangers, and that many Aboriginal people refused to give up information about known identities operating cattle rustling activities in the region.

Consequently, the occasional recruitment of Murris (Queensland Aboriginal people) who had either arrived in Victoria with droving parties or were directly recruited from contacts in Queensland became more frequent. Presland argues convincingly that the hunt for the Kelly gang in 1878 was a turning point in Aboriginal-Victorian Police employment relations that would last until the 1960s:

There was a significant difference in the way in which the Kelly hunt was handled. In all cases where trackers had been called on prior to 1878, the department had availed itself of local Koori men, who were hired on a short term basis for the purpose in hand. That essentially ad hoc response to investigations was changed forever with the hunt for the Kelly Gang.

It can be seen that, just as the Victorian colonial governments understood the inherent value of employing Aboriginal people as a police force and later as official trackers, so too did non-Indigenous miners clearly perceive the enormous benefits of hiring Aboriginal trackers. The tracking of criminals, lost people and stock was a very highly skilled occupation which, unlike any other, was perceived as the preserve of Aboriginal people, and rarely, if ever, emulated by non-Indigenous people. Hence our historical knowledge of their exploits in this field has been well documented yet, in regional or generalist gold histories, they are rarely accorded the significance that was bestowed upon them during the gold rush period, and remain, to a large degree, outside special exhibitions or publications, as invisible actors on the gold stage.