

5. Trade, commerce and the service sector

The social constructions of Aboriginal people as workers have often represented them as poor or indifferent. A suite of writers has documented the significance of Aboriginal pastoral workers in northern Australia. However, only a handful of scholars have examined the extent and significance of Victorian Aboriginal people as a labour force in the nineteenth century and these have concentrated primarily on Aboriginal peoples' entry into the frontier economy of the 1830-40s. Yet evidence of Aboriginal entrepreneurship and employment in other less 'visible' yet instrumental occupations abounds during the gold rush period. This is important as it marks what historian Henry Reynolds described as a 'powerful riposte to the generalist historiography' which has relegated Aboriginal work, trade and commerce during the gold rush period to a 'desultory footnote'.

Aboriginal employment in the service sector, common in the squatting period, continued into Victoria's gold era with Aboriginal people acting in roles such as 'postie'. In the Orbost district Jack McLeod, an Aboriginal man carried 'mail for the Orbost and Corringie Stations'. Two unidentified 'Blacks' were employed as postmen in the Yea district and also in the Snowy River district. Alfred Joyce, a pastoralist in the Central Highlands of Victoria noted the employment of Aboriginal people as postmen, an event corroborated by famed gold artist, ST Gill, whose artwork 'The Bush Postman' portrays the scene described in writing by Joyce.

Aboriginal expertise at bark cutting (for building huts and water races) was renowned amongst miners. This type of commercial activity was a specialist activity in both their traditional economy and already established involvement in the pastoral industry. Some idea of how proficient and profitable the bark cutting trade was for Aboriginal people can be gleaned from the correspondence by the Bishop of Sydney, returning from a visit to the diggings around the Ophir region (New South Wales) in June 1851. The Bishop reported on the relative affluence of Aboriginal bark cutters compared to the white miners:

Native blacks straggled in from the hills with their gins and picaninnies and received good pay for fetching firewood as well as bark for hut roofs. "Black fellow rich now" they said as they smoked cigars which many diggers could not afford. Riders gave the blackfellows their mounts to herd "Three shillin and tix pences, mind it horse," was the regular price. Troops of near-naked aborigines from the far outback trudged to look in wonder, display their skill throwing mulga boomerangs, stamp out their rhythmic corroborees, and beg gratuities.

The struggle for miners to earn enough to sustain themselves was often keenly felt on the Victorian goldfields as well. Gold seeking often yielded inconsistent and poor returns as attested by James Nisbet. Nisbet, relating his experiences of encountering Aboriginal people (presumably Wathawurrung) at Ballarat, did not describe them as mining, but (as in the Ophir region) noted their presence on the goldfields and that they were earning some money from gold diggers: ‘met a party of half a dozen at Ballarat’ who were sometimes ‘employed by the diggers in remote gullies to strip trees of their bark for a hut, for a day’s labour at which a little bread or a English shilling is sufficient recompense’. Similarly, Ned Peters’ party at Dunolly employed some (presumably) Djadjawurrung to get ‘some dozen sheets of bark for us’ and who expressed their surprise at how many sheets the miners required, stating ‘What for you so much like ‘um hay? Piccaninnie wheelbarrow no good long with big one bark!’ John Briggs, a Tasmanian Aboriginal attracted to the gold diggings with his wife Louisa, like many gold diggers, turned his back on gold digging and became an employee at Eurrambeen Station as he found it more profitable doing bush work such as cutting bark at 6d a sheet. William Thomas, the Guardian of Aborigines, reported that Aboriginal people were ‘industrious and profitably employed’ in cutting bark. In 1861 he wrote at length about Aboriginal businessmen and women brokering contracts and submitting tenders within an expansive building industry that was heavily dependent on bark:

The Yarra tribe know how to work by contract. A case occurred up the Plenty two years back: a barn was erected, one Wonga was asked what he would charge for roofing it with bark. He went round the building two or three times, consulted the three blacks with him, and finally said “cut bark where we find good trees, *only cut it*, you cart it away, and white man put bark on, pay us black fellows two pounds.” The same black made a contract with a publican in Richmond for the cutting of bark for the first shanty public-house on Anderson Creek Diggings.

Domestics

As Ian Clark and Diane Barwick have shown, many Victorian Aboriginal people throughout the nineteenth century chose to remain in their own country, stating quite categorically their desire to remain in the localities of their birth or their adopted country. In the midst of the intense labour shortages experienced in towns and cities precipitated by the alluvial gold rushes, Aboriginal peoples’ cultural preference to not leave their occupations and home estates ensured the desirability of their labour. Aboriginal people too, it was noted, enjoyed or exploited the law of demand and supply. One white woman in Melbourne

during the gold rush period exclaimed: 'I cannot at any price get a man to chop my wood, and I think myself fortunate if I can prevail on the black gins (natives) to work for half an hour'.

The employment of Aboriginal people as domestics or servants was commonly but briefly noted, predominantly off the goldfields. In Geelong, one correspondent wailed about all his servants leaving for the goldfields except 'a native black [Wathawurrung] to cook, and a native boy to wait at table & c ... one flock of 5,000 sheep under charge of a native black'. Christina Cunninghame, at Wanregarwan Station, near present day Molesworth, grumbled about having to 'do all the kitchen work with the help of a Black woman the only useful one of her tribe who is fortunately here at present'. Charles Panton recalled that during his stay at Mangalore he obtained the services of several Aboriginal people multi-tasking as guides, shepherds and rouseabouts and had also employed the 'chief as butler and his wife as char'. The relationships forged between non-Indigenous women such as Annie Fraser in the back country of Victoria and Aboriginal women were often vividly recounted as warm and memorable. Pastoralists in the Charlton district recalled that 'the lubras had kind hearts and helped the station women with housework and the children'. Squatters at 'Tandarooke', near Camperdown in western Victoria considered it was God's providence that the 'children of the desert' (Aboriginal domestics) had chosen to stay on their own country (and work for the colonisers) by comparing themselves to God's prophet Elijah being 'fed by the ravens in the wilderness when abandoned by your own countrymen and women'.

Sue Wesson has identified two Gippsland Aboriginal sisters from the Metung region, Elizabeth Thorpe and Emma Booth, who went to the goldfields, probably at Delegate, where they worked as cooks and laundry workers. It is highly probable that this was a scenario often played out on the goldfields as it had been in the pastoral era. After the alluvial gold rush period there is also evidence that a number of Aboriginal women were employed as domestics. Historian Kathleen Gannan discerned from newspaper reports and journals that Aboriginal people were predominantly employed as 'odd job boys, housemaids, guides and stock hands' in the Swan Hill region. In 1873, John Green, in correspondence to the Board for the Protection of Aborigines reported that two unidentified Aboriginal women were working for Mr C Reid at Reidsdale 'One of them is nurse in Mr. Reid's family, the other does all Mrs. Reid's washing'.

Babysitting

A feature of Aboriginal culture was the intense care of their children. Their attentiveness towards babies was reportedly also directed towards non-

Indigenous children. Women such as Katherine Kirkland in the Trawalla district of central Victoria recorded the Wathawurrung's adoring attitudes towards her infant daughter in the early pastoral period. The loneliness and isolation of non-Indigenous women on the goldfields was at times crippling, only obviated by the presence of Aboriginal women. This is exemplified by an observation made by a miner on the Omeo goldfields who noted: 'Tom Shehan had a young wife and child, she was the only white woman among hundreds of diggers and aboriginals'. There is an unverified suggestion that Wathawurrung people took care of the Eureka rebels' children at Black Hill in 1854 whilst they were at the stockade, but in any case there was certainly a great deal of such activity on and off the goldfields. At the Dunolly goldfield, Charles and Sarah Belcher received visits from Djadjawurrung people who gave much attention to their baby. When Charles Belcher went to Castlemaine for supplies, these Djadjawurrung people took care of his wife and child; they also cut wood and brought water. At Ballan, in central Victoria, vivid memories of Wathawurrung women crowding around Mrs Denholm's baby were recalled:

Mrs Denholm was attracted by chattering human voices outside, and on going out, much to her surprise and alarm, found her baby, which she had left in its cradle, in the arms of a lubra, with several of the lubra's dusky companions crowding around it. The white "pickaninny" was the object of the greatest wonder to them; they kept touching and gently pinching its skin, as if they doubted its reality, and though Mrs Denholm was not satisfied until she had the child in her own arms, she realized that the lubra's intentions were kindly, and that there was nothing further from their thoughts than any desire to do the infant harm. As long as they remained about the place the baby was the object of their solicitude. They took advantage of every opportunity to see it, and the wonder it at first inspired never seemed to decrease.

An Aboriginal couple, Jimmy and Sally, in the Mitta Mitta district were known to 'be very fond of white children and often nursed Lucy Greaves [born 1862] when she was a little girl'. The Martin family too was very fortunate in having enjoyed baby-sitting of their children from the Wergaia and the Wathawurrung/Djabwurrung.

Mr. Martin was in business distributing groceries and he was away from home [Nhill] when his daughter was born. The Aboriginal women befriended Mrs. Martin and were very helpful at the time of the birth [March 1866]. They were particularly taken with the white baby and were very attentive towards her. Soon after Elizabeth was born the Martin family took up land at Lexton between the Langi Kal Kal Road and the main road to Springs. There was an Aboriginal camp near

the Toll Gate and one day Mrs. Martin discovered that Elizabeth was missing. A search was begun and some time later Elizabeth was found safe and well in the Aboriginal camp sucking a possum bone.

Such intimate encounters between families, though probably infrequent, would inevitably involve cross-cultural dialogues very significant for those mining families. Other family reminiscences also recall the warm solace received by non-Indigenous women from Aboriginal people. James McCann recounted how 'one old [Wathawurrung] lubra used to nurse me when I was a little fellow'. Solitary references such as 'many times Mrs. Baxter was left with only the blacks and her young family' may belie an intricate dependency forged between mining families, especially women separated from their miner husbands, and Aboriginal people.

Farming

During the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate period (1838-1850), a protectorate station had been established on Djadjawurrung land near Mt Franklin in central Victoria. In 1855, demand for farming land led to a subdivision and sale of much of the Aboriginal reserve. Only 640 acres close to Mt Franklin were reserved for use by four Djadjawurrung families who wished to 'cultivate and sow the land which is indeed their own'. ES Parker, former Assistant Protector of the Aborigines, reported to a Government Select Committee in 1858: 'They hold twenty-one acres of land co-jointly ... on their own account ... They have erected decent residences for themselves; have cultivated the soil; have taken several crops [since 1852]'. Many miners and travellers passing through to the nearby diggings acknowledged that the Djadjawurrung farmers had moved quickly to grasp the economic opportunities and capitalised on the nearby goldfields by 'cultivating and selling produce' to miners at the local diggings. Some observers thought it notable that these Aboriginal farmers were 'in no respect different from ordinary European peasants in the habits and associations of their lives'. Illness, the accidental deaths of several of the Djadjawurrung farmers, encroaching non-Indigenous farmers, theft of stock by non-Indigenous miners and lack of land tenure security afforded by the government all spelled an end to the Djadjawurrung initiative.

Possum skin rugs

Similarly, the Aboriginal skills of possum skin rug making were readily employed by miners. Whilst many 'diggers were very fond' of hunting possums and 'making beautiful rugs of them, by sewing their skins together', miners

and others more commonly accepted that Aboriginal people were more adept at the trade and thus engaged in what Edward Tame described as a 'good item of commerce'. Samuel Clutterbuck, a miner at Mount Alexander, described in some detail his trade in 'opossum skins for a rug' stressing that 'The present of skins was accompanied by the usual application of 'Give it flour, "Bit bacci" powder, lead, shot &c. &c.'. AB Pierce also extolled Aboriginal peoples' manufacturing skills, noting 'they are very adept in curing skins perfectly' which are 'taken into the townships for sale'. A number of miners were tutored by Aboriginal people in the method of possum skin rug manufacture. A Batey acquired his knowledge from another miner who had been taught by Aboriginal people:

I learnt the art of curing skins from Gardner at least simply drying them after a fashion he had learnt from the blacks. Small wooden pegs are cut and the skin is stretched with them on the back of a tree and left a couple of days in the sun after which they are ready for use most frequently they are sewn together for rugs 50 or 60 making a covering more durable and much warmer than a blanket.

Owen Davies, a miner in the Ovens Valley, noted that the 'natives make a great use of their skin' whilst William Howitt observed that their trade and commerce extended past inter-tribal lines: 'they fish and hunt, make baskets and opossum rugs, and sell their produce to the white men'. Artist and miner on the goldfields, George Rowe, wrote that the 'opossum fur is beautifully soft and makes a warm covering to sleep under and is what most diggers have as it is very light a good one costs four pounds'.

Aboriginal people moved quickly to grasp the economic opportunities presented to them. F Hughes, a Castlemaine pioneer, recalled that possum skin and kangaroo skin rugs were 'sold to settlers and lucky gold diggers at five pounds a-piece'. Miner James Arnot bought a possum rug in Melbourne made of 72 skins sewn together with sinews, also for five pounds. Aboriginal people from the Mitta Mitta and Little River districts, to the east of the Ovens goldfield, paid regular visits with possum rugs for sale. 'Neddy Wheeler', an Aboriginal man from the Yackandandah region in the 1850s was widely known to trade extensively in 'valuable' possum skins and lyre bird tails for the millinery industry. The Indigenous manufacture of possum skin rugs, baskets and mats enabled many people at missions and reserves such as Coranderrk, Lake Condah (Western district of Victoria) in December 1870 to gain an eagerly sought-after economic independence. Reports from a number of Aboriginal Station managers across Victoria describe the lucrative trade being conducted. John Green, the manager of Coranderrk, wrote: 'In the course of one week or so they will all be living in huts instead of "willams" [traditional bark housing]; they have also during that time [four months] made as many rugs, which has enabled them to buy boots, hats, coats etc., and some of them has [sic] even bought horses'.

Green and other mission managers reiterated the ready sale 'at high prices of baskets ... rugs with the skins of the opossum, kangaroo and wallaby, for each of which they get from 1 pound to 1 pound 15s'. Kulin people at Coranderrk increased their production of 'rugs and baskets' to such an extent that by 1868 the sales of their Indigenous manufactured goods represented over 20 per cent (100 pounds) of the annual value of production of the station.

It is hard to determine exactly why Aboriginal entrepreneurs participated in the fur, feather and skins trade with the colonists, but presumably the acquisition of guns, exotic foods, tobacco, alcohol and other western goods were a strong incentive. In John Zwar's boyhood reminiscences of the 'Puckapunyal tribe' in the 1860s, he recalls their business-like adroitness when selling their artisan products to non-Indigenous townsfolk:

The Puckapunyal tribe, about twenty in number, made baskets out of rushes ... The blacks made very fine baskets out of the rushes and sold them to the people. I do not remember the price charged but I know they refused brown money; it had to be white [silver or gold].

It is not difficult to determine why non-Indigenous miners sought to purchase the Aboriginal-made rugs. Miners considered that one rug imparted as much warmth as a dozen blankets. The importance of possum skin rugs for the miners is exemplified when in 1865 a miner in the Carngham district, Henry Davies, sought to get the local Guardian of Aborigines to 'get an opossum rug made for him, to take home to the old country, to show what the pioneers of the goldfields frequently used to sleep in. An Aboriginal couple was engaged to make a rug that they completed in four days, and were paid 30 shillings'.

The sale of possum skin rugs, baskets and artefacts to non-Indigenous miners, as with the commodification of corroborees for non-Indigenous audiences, had commenced from the first days of colonisation in Victoria, 15 years prior to the gold rush. During the squatting period, inter-cultural economic activity between Victorian Aboriginal people and non-Indigenous people was enacted for social, political and monetary purposes. But increasingly during the gold rush period the emphasis in inter-cultural trade focused on financial gain. Aboriginal peoples' 'commercial instinct' was noted by miners to be highly developed, meaning they knew the monetary value of their manufactured products and asked a good price for it, yet embedded within such commercial transactions were probably the systemic values of reciprocity and kinship. Samuel Clutterbuck noted with some displeasure how money had clearly displaced barter in Aboriginal dealings with non-Indigenous people:

The blacks took their departure, Simon promising on his next passing, to bring me a new opossum rug and one each of their different implements

of war and hunting. I asked him if I should give him a fine shirt in return. He replied “Borag [Borak: No] shirt, give it plenty white money”. I may here state, that the “amor munnii” [love of money] is as strong with the aborigines as their paler faced brethren.

R Brough Smyth, a noted nineteenth century ethnologist, also considered that Victorian Aboriginal people ‘barter with their neighbours; and it would seem that as regards the articles in which they deal, barter is as satisfactory to them as sale would be. They are astute in dealing with the whites, and it may be supposed they exercise reasonable forethought and care when bargaining with their neighbours’. Walter Bridges, a miner at Buninyong near Ballarat in 1855, described how a local clan of Wathawurrung people carrying possum skin rugs approached his wife and made a request, framed within the ties of reciprocity of neighbours, for some steel needles and thread:

So up they come yabbering good day Missie you my countary [sic] woman now. My mother had to be the spokesman the Blacks said You gottum [sic] needle Missie you gottum thread ... Then the Luberes [women] come jabbering along behind carr[y]ing the swag in nets some with pups that could not walk, others possum skin rugs the Blackfellows make.

It is probable that the demand for non-Indigenous sewing implements stemmed from the high volume of possum skin rugs being sold on the goldfields.

The volume of trade in possum skins increased exponentially. Edward Tame, a traveller on the goldfields, noted that the skins of possums ‘form good articles of commerce’ for the ‘Aborigines’. Newspaper reports from home and abroad also reveal a strong interest in Indigenous manufactured goods, particularly in possum skin rugs. In 1861 the *Ballarat Star* carried a satirical article attributed to ‘A Blackfellow’ which beseeched the colonial government to provide market protection for the Indigenous trade in possum skin rugs:

You write gov’nor and ask him why protection on the wallaby track looking for grubs ‘mong whitefellow? You say whitefellow no make um blankets this colony, blackfellow make ‘possum rug, which whitefellow ought to buy ‘stead of blanket; possum rug all along same as whitefellow’s blankets;- why not give blackfellow monopoly of making and selling ‘em and protect real native industry.

Eugene von Guérard, artist on the Victorian goldfields, documented such a trading transaction in 1854. His oil painting, ‘Aborigines on the road to diggings’ or ‘The Barter’, now in the Geelong Fine Art Gallery, depicts Wathawurrung people offering possum rugs for sale to white miners on their way to the goldfields. Of particular interest is the centrality of the Wathawurrung men and women. Unlike many depictions of Aboriginal people during the nineteenth

century, peripheral players cast off to the background or figures relegated to the sidelines, Von Guérard has focused the activity around confident Aboriginal salespeople who are clearly directing the business deal. The white 'consumer' desiring to purchase the possum rugs is painted in a subservient pose, kneeling down, whilst the Aboriginal 'manufacturer' assumes an upright, dominant demeanour.

Corroborees

Ceremonies performed by Victorian Aboriginal people, described under the banner of 'corroborees', were performed for non-Indigenous people from the very outset of non-Indigenous contact. The Melbourne-based magazine *Table Talk* commented on 21 January 1887: 'Ever since British rule was established in Australia, an aboriginal "corroboree" has always been considered an amusing, if not a particularly edifying spectacle for distinguished visitors'. The popularity of the corroboree as a piece of theatrical entertainment was immense in both the pastoral and gold period. Though not often articulated by historians, the nineteenth century corroboree performed for non-Indigenous colonial audiences was Australia's pre-eminent prototypical Indigenous cultural tourism product. The development of the corroboree event by Aboriginal (and non-Indigenous) entrepreneurs gave witness to some very innovative and successful transformations during the gold period. There is a considerable corpus of evidence demonstrating the gold period was a catalyst for corroboree performances. JD Mereweather, for example, was informed that the corroboree he witnessed in central New South Wales 'had come from the coast of South Australia'. Similarly, Lawrence Struilly witnessed corroborees that had been passed on with greater rapidity since the gold period had opened up communications in the interior. One respondent to the 1858-59 Select Committee on Aborigines related how he had once 'traced a song which I knew to have been composed at a particular time near Port Stephens, and found that in the course of about three years it had been brought down through Bathurst, Yass, the Murrumbidgee, and the Murray, to Melbourne'.

Many residents in the Ballan and Bacchus Marsh district of central Victoria recalled corroborees being held by the Wathawurrung close to the townships and other locations during the gold mining period. There were also writers who penned their perceived notions of corroborees into their reminiscences to afford some savage exotica to their tale of the goldfields.

In their description of corroborees, miners such as Edwin Middleton emphasised the vigour, dramatics and nudity of the performance. Both impressed and repulsed, Middleton wrote:

At night they had a big Corroboree on a grand scale: 4 women sitting by a fire beating time with sticks and 8 or 9 men dancing the Corroboree. With the exception of a small apron made of grass, they were entirely naked. As they danced they kept up a humming noise, every now and again breaking out with their cry of Coohooee. The men were daubed all over with coloured clays and looked most hideous. To see them every time their Gins put fresh leaves on the fire, you might fancy you were on the borders of some of the [] regions.

Charles Panton, a Commissioner on the goldfields, appreciatively described several different corroborees performed by hundreds of Aboriginal people 'night after night' at Mangalore Station in Central Victoria. Samuel Clutterbuck told of being 'summoned' to see a corroboree and during a break in the festivities, being asked for 'bacca' which signified an exchange had occurred. George Admans recollected that Wathawurrung people, after receiving supplies on behalf of the government from the lighthouse keeper at Queenscliff, Victoria, were 'accustomed to remain for a few days and before leaving to entertain us by giving a corroboree' in the 1860s. Other observers such as William Simkin recalled similar events also at Queenscliff in the 1860s: 'These blacks used to entertain the visitors in the day by throwing their spears and boomerangs, and in the evenings, by what they called a Corroboree'. Simkin also alluded that there was an element of conscious ritual exchange occurring between the respected non-Indigenous 'elders' and the Wathawurrung head clans man: 'Some of the gentlemen visitors would give the king of the tribe a part cast off dress suit of clothes namely a swallow tail coat and belltopper hat, and after the performers had sung and danced, the king would go around collecting with his hat ... they were liberally supported'.

Michael Parsons, writing on the tourist corroboree in nineteenth century South Australia, has argued that corroborees staged for a non-Indigenous audience emerged as a 'cultural product jointly negotiated between two cultures'. Furthermore, he posits that during the process of negotiation, four major framings of corroboree can be identified. First was the 'peace corroboree', marking a new state of cooperative relations between Aboriginal people and the Crown, or representations of the Crown such as 'gentlemen squatters'. Thus RG Jameson (1852) related how a recently arrived family to the Colony had received an invitation from 'King Jack, the chief and his wife' who 'conveyed to us the information that a large native gathering and corroboree, or dance was to take place with "plenty of noise" that evening; but that no harm need be apprehended by his white friends'. Second, the 'command performance' corroboree, was orchestrated by the new occupiers as a joint act of homage to the Crown or other significant notables. This was itself a re-framing of the corroboree as a traditional act of welcome, but also functioned for settlers as a

handy piece of ready-made, uniquely local, pageantry that could be included on the program for notable official visitors. Thus, in 1867, Buninyong Council wrote to Andrew Porteous the local Guardian of Aborigines in the Ballarat district informing him 'the Council has determined on getting up a grand corroboree of the Natives on the occasion [his Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh's visit to Buninyong]. I have therefore to beg that you will be pleased to secure as many of the aboriginals as possible for that purpose; every care will be taken of the Blacks whilst in the locality'. Third, the 'gala' corroboree, marked significant social occasions. The intermingling from one framing to another allowed any significant colonial or Aboriginal occasion – anything from the opening of a railway line to the separation of Victoria from New South Wales – to be accorded a vice-regal relish.

Parsons described the fourth type of corroboree as 'touristic'. This type of framing of the corroboree is particularly evident in goldfields records. In the Minutes of the Ballarat Mechanic's Institute in February 1879 are references to the hire of a lecture hall for an 'Aboriginal Concert', presumably an instance of non-Indigenous goldfields promoters trading on the sense of exotica which Aboriginal performances provided. A corroboree orchestrated by Wathawurrung clans (probably Carninje balug and Wongerrer balug) amply illustrates that as access to their land and its raw materials – their economic capital – was progressively denied them by pastoralism and then gold mining, Aboriginal people seized upon the opportunity to market their cultural knowledge and skills – their symbolic capital – and convert it, not just into hand-outs of food and tobacco, but hard currency.

A CORROBOREE – During the past few days the town of Smythesdale has been infested by a numerous gang of aborigines-men, women, and children. On Tuesday and Wednesday they went about the town in quest of sixpences, tobacco &c., and announcing a grand "corroboree" to come off on Wednesday night, as it accordingly did, in the presence of a hundred spectators or more. The savages were in their war paint, and looked sufficiently frightful as they danced and shrieked round their fire. The scene of the orgie was in the wood over the creek, near the Carngham road; and the dissonant noises, vocal and instrumental, which formed part of the entertainment, were distinctly heard at the firesides in the township. The thing was kept up till an advanced hour in the morning.

This event and others like it, independently organised and without joint partnership of any kind, were pre-planned. It is plausible that in one sense the gold era ushered in more opportunities to perform corroborees, as more

spectators inevitably ensured more food and rewards for the performers, and the application by non-Indigenous people for more performances may have led to some small degree of reliability of income. Tommy Anthony, for example, would

attend football matches [in the Wangaratta region during the latter half of the nineteenth century] and give demonstrations of boomerang throwing. Afterwards he would go around with his hat. It is said that for the first few throws he would attempt to catch the boomerang when it returned, but purposely missed. A few more pennies would be thrown to the ground in a wager and when he considered that there were enough there, or someone might catch onto his game, he would make the boomerang soar and deftly catch it on its return.

Non-indigenous ceremonial occasions such as Christmas Day may have been taken advantage of, judging by a diary entry by Mrs James Madden, of corroborees in the Ballarat district in 1853 which were well attended by Aboriginal (possibly Wathawurrung) and non-Indigenous miners: 'Ballarat seemed to be on the wane and we set out for Mt Cole for timber for the homestead at St Enochs ... Here we arrived on Christmas day, 1853, and were entertained by about two hundred and fifty blacks at a grand corroboree at night'. Reports such as appeared in the *Corowa Free Press* in 1876 indicate that Aboriginal people were financially supporting themselves through performing corroborees, and were adept at petitioning for pre-booking fees, actively promoting and marketing their cultural heritage product:

The Aborigines had promised for some weeks beforehand that there would be a grand affair on a Saturday evening which was well attended by the townsfolk ... some of them going around town asking for a mug of beer or some food, or some cast-off clothing before the corroborees ... At the conclusion the hat was taken around and the ringmaster stated: 'That he didn't mind if they gave one shilling or six pence Koonong'. Tommy said they would have an ever greater corroboree when the Wangaratta blacks came over.

In addition to Parsons' four major framings of corroborees or dance events staged by Aboriginal people for a non-Indigenous audience could be added the 'solemn and sacred' corroboree encompassing purely Aboriginal matters that was strictly by invitation only. William Thomas, Assistant Protector of Aborigines in the Melbourne and Western Port districts was advised by a Boonwurrung elder in 1839 that some corroborees were off limits to white people, being explained as being too sacred and likened to 'white fellows Sunday'. There is some evidence that during the gold period 'invitation only corroborees' were still practiced. Henry Burchett on the Lower Loddon diggings wrote in 1854 of being privileged to attend a 'native funeral ceremony to which few white men are admitted ...

after asking permission'. A satirical *Argus* report of an impending corroboree by Wathawurrung clans in the Geelong district reprinted below, and in the same year a report of a very large gathering of several language groups at Braidwood, indicates that *Tanderrum* or 'welcoming to country' ceremonies were still being performed, but increasingly under the shadow of the coloniser's gaze. Events such as these were probably viewed by non-Indigenous people who may have been barred from attending such events prior to the gold rush period.

FASHIONABLE ARRIVALS – His Royal Highness Ko Ko Warrion, King of Colac, arrived at the Barwon Bridge a little after ten o'clock yesterday morning, from whence His Royal Highness was escorted into town by a mottle assembly of young blades, who did everything in their power to make the King's entrance into the ancient city of Geelong a perfect jubilee. His Majesty's suite consisted of nine peers and a countess. We were given to understand by one black fellow that Geelong was honored by the royal visitors for the purpose of dancing "great corroboree" this day, in honour of our most gracious Majesty's birthday.

Some goldfields commentators were aware that corroborees were not purely performed for amusement but also were for religious and martial purposes. Ceremonies were performed for goldfield audiences which had profound spiritual significance and educational importance for Aboriginal people. In May 1860, for example, 'an extraordinary exhibition' was given by the Djadjawurrung at Lamplough mining community. The educated members of the non-Indigenous audience may have recognised that the exhibition was a dramatic re-enactment of the Djadjawurrung's belief in spiritual reincarnation. One scene involved two men decorated with white chalk killing a third man, painted red, and burying him under one of the stage's trapdoors, whereupon he reappeared from another trapdoor smothered with white chalk, having 'jumped up whitefellow'.

The religious or 'peace' corroboree was also recorded as being performed on the goldfields, probably witnessed by uninvited non-Indigenous audiences. George Rowe, writing a letter from the Castlemaine diggings recorded a conversation with a Djadjawurrung woman who had remonstrated with a neighbouring clan and intimated that a peace making 'religious' corroboree was to be held at the McIvor diggings.

The group was the Bendigo tribe two men and a woman came up while I was at there and a young woman addressed them in a rage and threatened them with a stick to drive them away one of them a very fine handsome fellow with a slightly aquiline nose standing erect above 6 feet stood calmly surveying them all the time with his long spear erect – she got tired at last when she told me she spoke a little English "that he Murry river blackfellow he kill Bendigo blackfellow he no here Bendigo he go

away” – after all she gave him a loaf of bread and another party gave him half a damper which they had been eating from and then they walked they together with the Bendigo tribe were on their way to MacIvor to a corroboray on the next evening being new moon it is some sort of religious ceremony when they dance all night and a very large number arrive perhaps 500 or 1000.

It is quite likely that the gold era ushered in, or at the very least, enabled a greater frequency of, the staging of corroborees just for the fun of it. Following the discovery of a ‘four and a half ounce nugget’ by Aboriginal people, a reporter for the *Maryborough Advertiser* noted: ‘The proceeds, amounting to 18 pounds, were soon disposed of, and a grand corroboree has been held ever since, and doubtless will continue till all the money is gone’.

Goldfields newspapers tended to memorialise the corroboree, which often was the subject of some commentary such as an article which appeared in the *Inglewood Advertiser* on 2 May 1865:

Natives. Inglewood is now honored with the presence of a body of natives, male and female, who have come down from their native river, the Murray, to see their white brethren inhabiting this town. It is some time since they paid us a visit and their appearance in the street, with their long spears, opossum cloaks, etc form quite a novel feature. There are about twelve of them, accompanied by some lubras and their King with a few picaninnies. Disdaining the use of the white man’s road, they struck direct from the Murray through the scrub to Thompson’s Gully, where they camped on Saturday night, right upon the spot where, six years ago a lubra was buried. Yesterday they were busy levying contributions, and showed a great predilection for white money. Last night they held a grand corroboree, which was quite a success, and attracted many visitors.

Without the aid of bill posters or newspapers to promote their event, it seems that on many occasions Aboriginal performers put on an ‘appearance’ with all their accoutrements in the streets to elicit interest in their exotic difference and announce their intent to perform, as described in this article from 1866.

Several corroborees have been held during the past week close to Echuca by the blacks, who, to the number of about 200, have assembled there from all quarters within a radius of about a hundred miles.

The Riverina Herald reports ‘that there are a large number of fine, strapping and even handsome, young men among them—one fellow in particular, is notable for his height, standing on his bare soles over six feet. A young lubra, rejoining in the name of Polly, struck everyone

who saw her yesterday as she perambulated High Street with her rather diminutive spouse, from her great height and erect carriage. We understand that she measures over 5ft 8in. There is a good sprinkling of old and very grey-bearded men ... The occasion is considered one of high holiday and festival. No doubt the time is spent idly enough, but as to the feasting, we fear it is not to be compared to what it was in the olden time.'

A partial glimpse into the Aboriginal outlook on the merits of touristic corroborees being performed in the gold rush period (partial because the Aboriginal discourse is viewed through non-Indigenous reporters' lenses) can be attained from newspaper reports. Glimpses of disappointment can be found in the *Ballarat Times*, where a correspondent, after witnessing a well attended corroboree at Lake Wendouree met with a small party of Wathawurrung people who 'seemed grieved at the revelry and debauch which on hands surrounded them, and was evidently taking no part in the noisy performance'. The disdain which this group held for such an event is juxtaposed with the renewed sense of independence and pride observed of a neighbouring Djabwurrung clan at Back Creek who performed for diggers also, although reported in a mocking manner:

In one communication lately inserted in the *Star*, I stated that a party of Aboriginals had made their appearance histrionically, on the stage at the Royal, and that the audience were highly pleased at witnessing the intelligence of the sable tribe. The warm reception they got has completely transmogrified them from slow motioned bush wanderers to aristocrats, possessing strong self esteem. They were engaged to give a grand performance at the Back Creek Theatre Royal last week. The contractors no doubt expected them to walk the distance of ten miles, but he found to his astonishment that they had grown so aristocratic since their appearance at the Royal that they refused to stir one inch unless their passage was paid by Cobb's coach or a "special" grand conveyance procured for them.

Indigenous entrepreneurship

Aboriginal peoples' business savvy, which developed rapidly in the economic climate of the goldfields, can be seen by examining a number of newspaper articles which charted their economic and social empowerment in colonial society.

On this particular instance the performer, once he had changed his dress, would go round to the visitors and make a strong appeal to each and sundry to give “black fellow a shilling” ... The whole scene was one which, once witnessed, is not easily to be forgotten.

Not surprisingly Aboriginal people also chose to perform for non-Indigenous audiences in a range of goldfield venues including hotels, mechanics institutes and outdoor public meeting places.

A most novel scene I witnessed at the Royal theatre on Thursday evening. The Ararat tribe of Aborigines [Djabwurrung] has been here for some days, and most pleasing it is to see them so far advanced in civilization. The women have their hair neatly combed and oiled and the men are dressed as Europeans. The King wears a white bell topper, of which he seems as proud as if he wore the Crown of England. An offer was made to them to appear and dance at the Royal, which offer was accepted with avidity. Upon the curtain being raised the dance commenced; and the strict time kept, together with their various steps, completely astonished the audience. After the first piece was over, one of them appeared at the footlights and announced a programme of what would be exhibited before us. In his intelligence and manners he was a pattern to hundreds I have seen of Europeans attempting to address an assemblage. One of them has gone up the country for fifty more, and a grand evening’s entertainment is to be given by them at the Royal on Saturday evening next.

There is evidence too of both traditional rivalries between distant language groups being relaxed and of Aboriginal people metamorphising the traditional coming together component of corroborees to include a commercial arm to the proceedings, as evidenced by a report of a gathering at Ballarat in March 1861:

During the last few days a number of aborigines, probably about two hundred, have arrived on Ballarat from Port Fairy, Mount Elephant, Mount Cole, the Hopkins, Warrnambool and the Wimmera, for the purpose as they state of seeing the towns and each other ... During the whole of Monday they infested the principal parts of the town and levied contributions in money or otherwise on the white man. Towards evening they made preparations for a corroboree in the Copenhagen grounds ... and were a considerable time in getting the music to a proper pitch ... Steam however was got up at last, and away they went to the intense delight of some 500 persons, who were present to witness the performance ... While the dancing was going on King Wattie procured a tin can, and fulfilled the not very dignified position of tax-gatherer

in-chief, but up to nine o'clock he did not appear to have been very successful in inducing the invader to acknowledge his right to impose taxes when he liked.

An advertisement (20 February 1865) and subsequent news report of a 'gala' event printed in the *Ballarat Star*, reveals that 'touristic' type corroborees were carefully planned and intended to utilise Aboriginal peoples' heritage as a vehicle for economic self sufficiency.

COPENHAGEN GROUNDS

Grand Corroboree by Fifty natives

THIS EVENING, MONDAY, 20th INST.,

Also, Extra Exhibition of FIREWORKS and Balloon Ascent. For the Benefit of Professor Prescott. Grandest Gala Night of the season

The aboriginal corroboree and display of fireworks at the Copenhagen grounds on Monday evening drew together a large number of persons, and the novel entertainment proved a decided success. Aboriginal habits in their most primitive style were displayed by about thirty-five natives, from various tribes around Ballarat, including about a dozen lubras, who were nearly naked and daubed over with paints of every hue in the most hideous fashion, though no doubt after approved aboriginal style. Without offering any comment upon the propriety or otherwise of the corroboree, it may be stated that it afforded amusement to the number of persons, between five and six hundred, who assembled to witness it. A plentiful supply of coloured fires added to the savage appearance of the scene, and after it was concluded some beautiful fireworks were displayed. Professor Prescott, the lessee of the grounds, purposes on a future evening to allow the natives the use of the grounds for another corroboree, they receiving the proceeds.

These Indigenous theatrical cultural products (corroborees, boomerang throwing, demonstrations of weapons, and so forth), jointly negotiated between two cultures, were increasingly instigated by Aboriginal people for monetary purposes. Adopted and adapted within the cultural parameters of traditional Aboriginal reciprocity and kinship, they reveal a level of cross-cultural convergence along economic lines beyond anything previously documented (or imagined) by historians.