

## 6. Co-habitation

Historical records relating to the alluvial gold mining period, predominantly from the 1850s, implicitly convey a degree of co-habitation between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people. In his reminiscences, DJ Ross provides a representative example of influential early bush life on a squatting station (the first wave of dispossessors): ‘Born on a sheep station my earliest recollections are in connection with blackfellows, bushrangers and shearers’. All across Victoria’s gold mining districts Aboriginal men, women and children came into contact with non-Indigenous men and a few women and children. The degree of close contact between the races was variable, and differed in nature from friendliness to outright hostility. Relationships were complex, varying not only geographically but rapidly changing over time as one rush was superseded by another rush and extremely large heterogeneous and transient populations waxed and waned across the region.

### Aboriginal voices

A belief amongst Victorian Aboriginal people in claiming certain non-Indigenous people as resuscitated clanspeople continued during the gold rush period. Samuel Clutterbuck recounted being instructed on this subject: ‘I told him of poor Wight’s death. Aha! Said he [Murray, an Aboriginal] “Mr Wight, quamby [stay or sleep] alonga this, (pointing to ground) come up black fellow, bye and bye.” This is their tradition of the final state of white men and vice versa of their own people’. Clutterbuck further related another instance of a very dark skinned squatter ‘who was suddenly embraced on one occasion by a black, who in great glee exclaimed “Brother belonging to mine, I believe quamby a long time ago on Murray”’.

Often the newly appointed ‘brother’ or ‘child’ did not understand the relationship and commitments that were being invoked but treated it as a friendly nicety to be humoured. Lawrence Struilby, a goldfields traveller, related a story of an unidentified Aboriginal clan who believed a whiteman who arrived in the vicinity with the same peculiar bent arm was one of their deceased – ‘a blackfellow jumped up white fellow’. The clan subsequently ‘would do anything for him and ... carried tons of split timber and bark to build his huts, &c’. This understated response from the new wave of colonisers in the gold period is particularly evident in Hubert De Castilla’s conversation with an unidentified Aboriginal man: “‘You are my brother long time dead”, one of the old men used to say to me with a sort of respectful friendliness’. In seeking to explain why Victorian Aboriginal people continued to hold this belief

after many decades of contact with non-Indigenous people, it seems apparent that a type of synergy between Aboriginal spiritual beliefs and elements of adopted Christian beliefs might have been occurring amongst some Aboriginal people which in fact strengthened the traditional belief in reincarnation. Robert Hamilton, a Presbyterian evangelist who had had a long association with Coranderrk (Aboriginal Mission north-east of Melbourne) wrote of Wildgung (Old Jemmy Webster), a Taungurong Elder who had to all appearances accepted many Christian teachings because he believed the superintendent of Coranderrk, John Green, was his deceased brother reincarnated.

Most non-Indigenous people did not discern the full implications of the resuscitated kin relationship but assumed that Aboriginal people were 'honouring' them. Typical of this response is an entry in the diary of a son of a clergyman in Gippsland in the 1850s. He recalled how an Aboriginal youth 'elected to stay with us' and 'took to himself the name of Billy Login, in honour of my father'. The kinship association was continuously affirmed by 'Billy Login' in later years as he 'always recognized our family whenever met as "sister belonging to me," or "brother belonging to me"'. A small number of white miners recognised the level of importance that Aboriginal people placed on forming relationships with individuals, maintaining links with their land and subsequently reaping the benefits. One goldfields writer noted:

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 ... Old Bill Cowpers never seemed to move from the place where he first commenced. Perhaps it was very inconvenient for him to shift, as he had an aboriginal woman living with him, which might be a potent reason for his always remaining at one place ... washing with the assistance of the aboriginal woman ... when he came upon a rich spot he had got six hundred pounds' worth, [which] would keep him and his gin a long time.

When Aboriginal voices are articulated in goldfields historical documents (usually through the filter of the colonisers' writings) they are seldom ones of diffidence, especially in relation to their individual and collective rights. In both the pictorial and written records there are exemplars of Indigenous resistance to unfair governmental controls on and off the goldfields. The written records reveal Aboriginal people linking their grievances with the wider demand for civil rights and entitlements:

A group of Aboriginal diggers at Forest creek in 1852 when asked to show their licenses replied to the mounted police that 'the gold and land were theirs by right so why should they pay money to the Queen?

Aboriginal people also attempted to invoke the traditional democratic practices of sharing their country and resources with visitors. Joe Banks, a Kurnai man from the Brodribb district, expressed his indignation to Constable Hall, a non-Indigenous Police Officer, after the Constable had failed to come to the aid of Banks and perform his duty:

At one time Joe and his gin were camped out at Bete Bolong. A big flood came down. The old gin died. Joe sent word in to Orbost by John Johnston to tell Const. Hall to come out. Because of the flood, he did not come out for three days. Joe was very angry. "I will report you Mr. Hall, you should have been here three days ago." Mr. Hall said the flood had held him up and he would not be able to take the body to Orbost. The policeman suggested that she should be buried there. Joe agreed after a lot of protesting but he made Const. Hall dig the grave. "No that's your job."

It is almost certain that many gold miners' accounts of Aboriginal peoples' insistent *begging* were not desperate ploys to extract food and goods from white colonisers; rather, viewed as part of a relationship of exchange, were probably an expectation of being recompensed for use of land; or rent. The miner James Madden and his wife remarked on the ire of Aboriginal people, presumably enraged by the invasion of their homelands by hordes of immigrant miners in 1852. En route to the goldfields of Ballarat they met up with 'a big fellow who proudly assumed his kingship by stepping out to threaten us if we did not leave his terrain'. Bulmer, a missionary in the Gippsland region during the latter half of the nineteenth century, reported that he had 'great difficulty in persuading them [Aboriginal people] to work for what they get. They have an idea that I have no right to ask them to do anything in return for the food I issue; and many of them have gone away from the station'. In a like manner Wathawurrung workers berated Mr Young, the Honorary Correspondent for the Bacchus Marsh district, about the Aboriginal Protection Board's lack of deference to what was the right behaviour. He reported 'They have assisted this year in digging potatoes, and have been paid in cash and butcher's meat; the latter, they often remind me, should be furnished by the Board'. On the goldfields too Aboriginal disquiet about the perceived lack of sensitivities was voiced. A miner and his companions at the Bendigo diggings in 1854, who had camped near a newly made Djadjawurrung grave, were curtly told to make other arrangements as they had impinged on sensitive mortuary arrangements.

At times Aboriginal people tried to educate their non-Indigenous neighbours of their obligations and responsibilities. A Welsh farm worker noted in his diary that he had been given a scathing lecture by a Djadjawurrung man about the sub-standard etiquette and morals of white people:

A dark native, that is an Aborigine, paid me a visit. He was looking for bees. He mentioned that when a native discovers a hive, he invites the neighbours to partake of the honey, but when a white Christian discovers it, he keeps the produce for himself.

Richmond Henty recounted a Justice of the Peace being sharply rebuked by an unidentified Aboriginal who when sentenced to be put in the lock-up for theft remonstrated: 'what for you say I steal? What for you steal my country? *You* big one thief! What for you quamby [camp] along o' here? Geego along o' your country, and let blackfellow alone'.

## **'I am the owner of the land about here'**

Aboriginal people across Victorian goldfields continued to declare their title and insist upon formal acknowledgement of what was rightfully theirs. At an inquest held in 1870 a Djabwurrung Elder affirmed: 'I am the owner of the land about here. I was born near here. I am Chief of my Tribe – Chief of Buangor'. Others such as King Billy, 'the last of the Loddon [probably Djadjawurrung] tribe proposed in 1872 to erect a toll gate on the new bridge over the Loddon by "the right which his progenitors enjoyed in the ages of antiquity"'. Similarly, the churning of the Murray River which interfered with their supply of fish prompted local Aboriginal people to ask Philip Chauncy, a surveyor in the Goulburn district in the 1860s, to appeal to the government for a bounty to be placed on river vessels payable to the Aborigines. Chauncy wrote:

A native of the Moira tribe informed me of the intention of himself and five other aborigines to proceed as a deputation to His Excellency the Governor, to request him to impose a tax of 10 pounds on each steamer passing up and down the Murray, to be expended in supplying food to the natives in lieu of the fish which had been driven away.

Many accounts attest to Victorian Aboriginal people assuming their traditional cultural entitlements. Charles Fead, a miner in the Buchan area, remembered a 'brawny aboriginal walking into the hut and helping himself to a drink of water'. JF Hughes at the junction of the Devil's river with the Goulburn described a similar scenario whereby two female aboriginals 'entered the "mia mia" [hut], minutely examining the contents, and after satisfying their curiosity and their wants, departed as mysteriously as they came'. The *Geelong Advertiser* reported that the Wathawurrung elder 'King Jerry proclaimed "his intention of demanding restitution [from Geelong City Councillors] of all provinces of which he has been illegally deprived, after having held them by indefeasible title from time immemorial, together with all improvements thereon, and revenues

accruing from all sources'''. Some Aboriginal people, such as Equinehup, a Djadjawurrung man, formally petitioned colonial authorities (Railway Commissioners) expressing his claim to original land title:

Gentlemen and brothers too, I am the last of the Aborigine tribe in these parts. I do Humbly wish you to compare two lots of title deeds. I received mine from the author of nature While the land occupied by all the railways Is titled by the white mans lawyers.

Andrew Porteous, the Honorary Correspondent at Carngham (near Ballarat), advised the Board of the local Wathawurrung clans' keen intentions to obtain some land for themselves on their traditional lands, stating that 'A number of the tribe have requested me to apply to the Government to reserve a block of land near Chepstowe for their use, where they might make a paddock, and grow wheat and potatoes, and erect permanent residences'.

Very occasionally it is possible to hear some semblance of Aboriginal voices or opinions about the gold rush and their appraisal of what was occurring on their clan estates. Some Aboriginal people were reported as expressing their disdain for the 'new' influx of outsiders on their land. John Moore, a miner at Bendigo, relayed how Djadjawurrung people expressed their distaste, not necessarily at the practice of mining itself as they were familiar with resource extraction, but at the fevered frenzy and psychologically disturbed character of the 'whitefellow all gone mad digging holes and washing stones'. A Djadjawurrung farmer at Franklindon in central Victoria frankly confessed in 1856 that 'for a time, at first, he did not like either Europeans or European customs'. Unfortunately, he did not divulge details of why he disliked Europeans, but it would not be difficult to hazard a guess considering what devastations had been visited upon the Djadjawurrung and their country. The disdain which Aboriginal people held for certain non-Indigenous classes of people was also occasionally aired. Anne Meredith at Mt Elephant in the Western district of Victoria (circa 1850s) made mention of how 'an aboriginal native who had for some time installed himself among the hangers on at our station, looking with an air of lofty contempt upon some of the new-comers, inquired of their master what he would possibly want with those [non-Indigenous] "wildfellows"'. Being spoken down to was particularly resented as JC Hamilton recalled.

I remember meeting a young black woman in the early fifties, who was with the tribe in our district, but who had been for a short time at a mission station in South Australia. I spoke to her in pidgin English, and her answer was, "You need not speak to me like that; I understand English as well as you."

In answer to questions posed by the Victorian Government's 1858 Select Committee into the Present Condition of the Aborigines, Mr Hull, a District Magistrate, related a conversation he had had with Derrimut, a Boonwurrung elder, in what is now present day Melbourne which dramatically depicts the disempowerment and disenfranchisement that was keenly felt by Aboriginal people especially during the gold rush period:

The last time I saw him [Derrimut] was nearly opposite the Bank of Victoria, he stopped me and said "You give me shilling, Mr. Hull". "No", I said, "I will not give you shilling. I will go and give you some bread", and he held his hand out to me and he said "Me plenty sulky with you long time ago, you plenty sulky me; no sulky now, Derrimut soon die", and then he pointed with a plaintive manner, which they can affect, to the Bank of Victoria, "All this mine, all along here Derrimut's once; no matter now, me soon tumble down". I said, "Have you no children?" and he flew into a passion immediately. "Why me have lubra? Why me have piccaniny? You have all this place, no good have children, no good have lubra, me tumble down and die very soon now".

Aboriginal voices occasionally not only decried the loss of their land to the white people but also demonstrate their incredulousness and poor opinion of non-Indigenous people's bush skills. Seweryn Korzelinski, a Polish miner at Bendigo, related how one of the Djadjawurrung women who often visited that neighbourhood

suddenly turned her head to one side and seemed to be listening to something. After a while she jumped to a solid tree nearby and with a tomahawk split the bark and pulled out a white grub about four inches long which she ate on the spot. Asked how she knew the worm was there, she answered surprised: 'But I heard it. It was only a few steps away'.

Many goldfields writers noted what had been chronicled in an earlier period of Victorian history, that scathing humour at white people's expense was a strong element of Victorian Aboriginal culture. Oscar Comettant, a French journalist and visitor in the 1880s, perceived that 'they have that sense of the ridiculous which can be so devastating in France. They will laugh for days over some mistake they have seen committed by a white man'. Humour, Comettant observed of Aboriginal people, was a stratagem used to great effect against Englishmen who were critical and condescending towards them, adding that 'not even Voltaire himself could have replied with such droll ingenuity' as an Aboriginal man had done in response to being told "'You are an idiot ... you can do none of the things we whites can": "Excuse me," replied the Aborigine, hiding a mocking smile, as well as he could, "We blacks can imitate you whites when it comes

to drinking, smoking, lying, stealing, or doing nothing at all.'" Gerard Krefft recorded a disparaging opinion held by Aboriginal informants on the Lower Murray River towards the white man's propensity to work unceasingly: 'There are only two things which appear great fools in their eyes, namely a white man and a working bullock'.

Lawrence Struilby's recollections include references to corroboree songs which 'mimicked the white man's ignorance of bush life, and his peculiar habits and vices', and also espied in their camps the great entertainment and humour they gained at the expense of 'any white man who was halt or lame, or in any way awkward or stupid, their mimicry of such was perfect'. The subject of non-Indigenous people breaking their promises of payment for work performed also was the subject of a corroboree song, as was a song of 'joy for the release of convicts at a squatter's establishment, on expiration of their time'.

The Bamraman [unidentified location on the Murray River near Swan Hill] clan satirized a white man called Marsh, who employed them; but broke his word and did not pay. He always put them off by saying that the great rain (cobon walleen) had made his wagon (wheelbarrow) break down on the way. They tax him with lies (yamble), and threaten to no more wash his sheep (jumbuck) or track his horses (yarraman).

## 'Borrowing from the blacks'

Appropriation, adaptation or some accommodation of elements of Aboriginal material and cultural items into the dominant non-Indigenous culture was certainly occurring in the earlier frontier period. Colonists adapted to the new physical and political geography by partial synthesis and at times directly adopting rudiments of Aboriginal traditions whether it was place names, language or manufactured items, and it is evident that this continued in the gold period. Pockmarked throughout the goldfield's literature are miner's observations of how they adopted and adapted a montage of Aboriginal culture.

According to James Nisbet, a gold miner at Ballarat in 1853, the non-Indigenous miners had appropriated the Aboriginal method of communicating to one another, noting that 'Many of the diggers had learned their strange coo-ee and made the woods sing with it, as signals to their mates'. The Reverend Arthur Polehampton, a miner also at Ballarat, confirmed Nisbet's opinion of the universality of the *coo-ee* amongst miners, noting 'I had not been very long settled indoors when I heard a coo-ee, a peculiar call of the blacks imitated by the colonists to which I replied in like manner'. Miners such as JF Hughes (reminiscing almost 40 years after the rushes) offer some insight into why Indigenous language does not pepper non-Indigenous goldfields literature, confiding that while 'it would

be interesting to learn their language [for ‘amusement and instruction’], in the absence of writing materials, it was difficult to retain anything but a few words of their [Djadjawurrung?] vocabulary, such as “baan,” water; “ween,” fire; “narrong,” bread; “na narrong,” no bread’.

## Bush food

It was food that provided the most potent motivation for non-Indigenous miners to explore, adapt and adopt parts of Aboriginal culture. The exorbitantly high prices of food during the initial alluvial gold rush period prompted many miners to try Aboriginal foods. The subsequent adoption of bush foods into the non-Indigenous diet led to great depletion in fauna, a subject that naturally preoccupied goldfields writers. Often miners depended on receiving tutelage in Aboriginal foods and craft. Katherine McK wrote of her childhood experiences gathering ‘bushtuckers’ (native cherries and wildflower nectar) commenting that in ‘earlier times than ours [we] learned from the blacks what to taste and what to leave untouched in the bush wilds’. Lord Robert Cecil, who made a visit to the Kyneton diggings in 1852, recalled how the diggers at Specimen Gully ‘showed me what the natives call “blackfellows sugar.” It is a species of manna falling plentifully from the white gum. It tastes very much like the second layer in a wedding cake’. Some miners of course were not at all adventurous, such as JJ Bond, who was the recipient of a bush food sampling offer at Benalla in 1854:

They are very fond of a very large grub that they discover in the rough bark of the honeysuckle tree, a Lubra brought me some one day as a rare delicacy they had been slightly roasted. I politely declined the treat and begged her to eat them for me which she did forthwith one after the other with great relish.

A substantial number of people on the goldfields, however, eagerly exploited the bush food bounty that they witnessed the Aboriginal people utilising. John Chandler, for example, noted ‘great heaps of land mussel shells, which the natives had been getting out of the lagoons for years. We got some and boiled them in a bucket. They were very good with some salt’. A resident of Ballan likewise recalled that he ‘often watched [Wathawurrung] lubras catching them [eels]’ and also described the method of procuring the ‘large and luscious white grubs [from white gums], which were a delicacy’. John Chapple and his party at the Avoca goldfields had splendid repasts of ‘stewed turkey and native apples for dinner’ and on another occasion ‘2 baskets of cockles’. One visitor to Ballarat noted the prolific amount of fauna consumed by Aboriginal [Wathawurrung] and non-Indigenous alike.

The country for many miles around on all sides was one vast forest, with many open glades ... one bird [Bustard] now very scarce in Europe are of gigantic size and of most delicate flesh may be found in large flocks [and are] frequently shot by the natives ... miniature kangaroos abound in the ferns but are fast disappearing in the face of civilization ... a native cat with pointed nose resembling a ferret, opossums, eels...

The repertoire of bush food included the perennial favourite duo of parrots and cockatoos (often baked into pies), kangaroo, wallaby, wombat, ant eggs, pigeon, parakeets, magpies, bandicoot, wattlebirds, quail, eels, native fish, dingo and possum. Occasionally echidna, 'jackass pie' (kookaburra) and other wild fowl were placed in the billy. James Peverell, a miner at Forrest Creek, secured a bandicoot and considered it not 'too bad for hungry men'. James Selby, a miner also on Djadjawurrung land, 'amused himself in the evening fishing for crayfish and killed several possums which we consumed'.

Aboriginal people soon realised the monetary potential of bush food. William Howitt reported that at a little distance away from the goldfields was ample opportunity to 'enjoy the pleasures of hunting and fishing' and being plied with bush foods by Aboriginal people. Writer Henry Giles Turner was informed by an Aboriginal man near Benalla that he 'made his living as a fisherman, spearing the fish, with which the [Broken] river abounds, at night and selling them to the hotel keepers in the morning'. Howitt likewise observed that on the banks of the Campaspe River there were: 'a number of natives fishing here, who had caught a good quantity of the river cod, and had learned to ask a good price for it'. This, he added with a note of annoyance, was yet 'another consequence of the diggings'. A number of correspondents to newspapers confirmed Howitt's observation about Aboriginal people not merely trading bush foods for trifles, but actively striking up money transactions for the goods they sold to non-Indigenous miners and storekeepers. Another example of such commerce can be found in the *Inglewood Advertiser* (November 1861): 'Mr. Roff the greengrocer had 40 brace of wild ducks, which he sold at two shillings per brace. He had also a mallee hen and several of the eggs of that remarkable bird ... They were got from the natives, about forty miles from this place'. AB Pierce felt fortunate that his party 'purchased from them [a party of blacks] a large fish of some seven pounds, of a species which resembles the American hornpout and tastes like an eel'.

JD Mereweather was 'asked to buy some delicate fishes, which were most artistically arranged in leaves, and bound together with osier twigs'. He believed that Aboriginal people belonged to an 'intelligent fine race' which could 'calculate acutely the value of everything of which they have to dispose'. The Murray Fishing Company, one of the largest fishing companies (established in 1859), benefited greatly from the skills and expertise of their Aboriginal

employees. Joseph Westwood, a visitor to the Company's huts, observed how the 'fishermen reside; surrounded with a number of blacks, from infancy to old age'.

The ability of Victorian Aboriginals to exploit the market was aided by the ineptitude of many non-Indigenous miners in their quest for bush foods, such as John Chapple who 'tried night and morning for some game but could only get a teal'. Howitt also acknowledged, with some reticence, that most non-Indigenous miners and settlers lacked the necessary skills possessed by Aboriginal people to bring down the game they sought.

The plains abound with wild turkeys; but they truly were wild, for a gathering of various tribes had lately been there, and they had been hunting them; and though Alfred and Lignum pursued them with unwearied artifice and diligence, they could not succeed in killing a single one. Emus are sometimes seen in considerable numbers; but they had fled before the natives. The ducks flew in flocks of thousands; but as there was no cover on the banks of the lake, they would not allow you to come within shot of them, and we were obliged to content ourselves with a teal and diver or two.

Others, such as Caleb Collyer, considered that 'the making of damper was a test of skill and the best I have seen made and have made was made and baked by aborigines'. JM Smith, a miner, acknowledged the superior culinary methods Aboriginal people employed when cooking possums.

I skinned and gutted him [possum], toasted him that evening on the ashes and found him very fair feeding but rather gummy. Hunger was a good sauce and he went down slick. The aborigines do not skin them, but get some stiff clay which they carefully roll over the entire possum, then make a hole in the hot ashes and cover him up. When the clay becomes hard they break it; the skin and fur adheres to the clay and the animal comes out as clean, white and tender as a chicken, and with the above mentioned sauce, makes a good meal.

Most observers of Aboriginal culinary skills echoed the colonial writer Hubert De Castella's assessment that, whilst their cooking methods were 'very ugly to look at', they nevertheless produced 'very good eating as long as one does not have too many prejudices'. Samuel Mossman and Thomas Bannister thought very highly of Aboriginal cooking prowess, exclaiming that 'The fact is, the *chef de cuisine* at the Mansion House might add a recipe or two worth knowing to his cookery book from these natural gourmands'.

Embedded within these fusion food experiences were cultural learning experiences which encapsulated a mingling and development of what would now

be described as ‘cross cultural awareness’. Living together arguably influenced both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous language with new perspectives about the physical and social environment. William Dobie stated that he benefited not only from the foods they (his Djadjawurrung aides de camp) brought to his table but also the bush humour and camaraderie they freely showered upon him. Dobie considered that the Djadjawurrung ‘furnished me amusement when amusement was a scarce luxury and so far as honesty and trustworthiness go, were seemingly equal at all events to their white brothers’.

## Indigenising the colonists

Indigenous words such as *mia mia*, *willam* and *gunyah* (various spellings), denoting housing or shelter were frequently used by miners when referring to their own temporary huts. References to *mia mias* frequently punctuate non-Indigenous miner’s documents. For example, a map depicting the Bendigo goldfields includes ‘women’s *mia mia*’ and ‘our *mia*’. Others, such as goldfields artist William Strutt, reflected in his autobiography on how he ‘erected a *mia mia* for shelter’ whilst on his journey to Ballarat. Frances Perry, a visitor to Buangor (central Victoria), in April 1852 described the familiarity which non-Indigenous people had of the name and structure of traditional Aboriginal housing:

We took a walk amongst the wooded hills, and came upon the largest (deserted) native encampment we had ever seen. One of the *Mia Mias* (you know what that is by this time – the *a* is not sounded) ... was as large as an ordinary-sized circular summer-house, and actually had rude seats all round, which is quite unusual.

One visitor to the goldfields explained the economic and functional rationale of copying an Aboriginal mode of constructing shelters at the Ballarat diggings:

We had determined to remain in Ballarat for a few days as we could not afford speculating in deep sinking. We could not afford to remain longer looking for employment in a place where all necessities were so terribly dear. We lived in a sort of hut built of branches and bark, not unlike the *mia mia* of the blacks. The weather being warm and dry it was quite a sufficient shelter.

German miner and artist on the Ballarat diggings Eugene von Guérard, had been in the Antipodes less than a fortnight, but was conversant with the Indigenous name for temporary camp shelters, writing in his journal near the village of Batesford that he passed:

three or four mia-mias, the abode of some eight or ten aborigines. In front of each burned a little fire, and some spears lay at hand. The mia-mias are made of the branches of trees in the form of half an open umbrella of large dimensions. Some were covered with the skins of animals.

A significant minority of the non-Indigenous mining community, far from believing they had nothing to learn from Aboriginal people, sought to appropriate other elements of Indigenous knowledge and cultural materials from the Aboriginal people they encountered. This is a dynamic rarely explored by historians or writers examining the formation of the 'Australian legend' yet has significant implications in any discussion about the roots of Victorian goldfields society and of Australian culture. Perhaps most important was learning how to survive and thrive in the bush physically, economically and socially. Here was a degree of sub-conscious acculturation that invoked the linking of Aboriginal material and non-material culture to belonging in a new land and a new society.

Many miners expressed mixed feelings about Aboriginal people on the goldfields. This duality is found in the Faulkner family history chronicles, a tale of positive and negative memories of Aboriginal people on the Ovens goldfields: 'The Aborigines [in the Bright region], who were numerous at that time [1852-53], had not molested Ellen. William [Ellen's husband], however, had been taken by them [in a friendly sense], but become their friend after "saving" the life of one of their important men with a swig of brandy and some food'. Similarly, JG Linton recalled how, in 1854, his recently widowed mother had suffered 'for there were very few white people living in the district [Linton, central Victoria], and blacks [Wathawurrung] were numerous and could not always be trusted'. Yet, he continued, they 'were friendly to mother, who provided any sickly lubra with shelter, clothing, and medicine from the big medicine chest which she had brought with her from Scotland'. Many others, such as George Sugden who had lived in the bush for most of his life prior to the rushes and 'could understand and talk with the blacks', recalled their encounters with fondness: 'Blacks were at that time [ca 1852] plentiful and I met a lot of them [en route to Pleasant Creek Hospital]. I would talk to them and show them my [injured] hand they were kind to me'. JD Mereweather, an itinerant preacher near the Murray River, holed up by flood waters and forced to 'ensconce ourselves' amongst the sleeping Aboriginals, was the recipient of their generosity that reminded him of a New Testament parable: 'The tribe were half starved; the return of the men was looked for with impatience; this poor creature was half famished, and yet she frankly and freely offered me, a stranger, her mite – all that she had, whatever it was, and was very chagrined that I took it not'.

In the more remote districts of Victoria co-dependent relationships were very common, and benefited both peoples in caring for each other's children, mutual caring for the land, exchanging foods, cross-cultural medical advice and sharing

of bush lore. These exchanges sometimes led to long-term relationships being formed and appreciation of each other's cultural perspective passed down via oral history to the present day.

In the northern states of Australia these types of pioneering co-dependant relationships have been enshrined in historical folklore, yet in Victoria they have largely remained the preserve of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous family history, and have not yet pervaded our general social and economic histories. The squatter's journals (though usually couched in paternalistic or even racist language) often contradict this monochromatic memory by giving Aboriginal people a degree of agency. A moving story of reciprocity – considered by many an integral trait of Aboriginal culture – appeared in the *Argus* (6 June 1865). It is one of the few instances I have located within the public realm which explicitly challenges stereotypical images of Aboriginal people and their passive association with the new economy heralded by the discovery of gold.

Few colonists expect gratitude from the aborigines, but that they are not always unmindful of these obligations which go to make up what is called civilization has been proved of late in this district. Our readers will remember the paragraph which appeared in our last issue, notifying that a party of aborigines had found a thirty-ounce nugget at the Emu. This gold realized about 120 pounds for them and shortly after they had patronized the draper's shop, and provided themselves with good winter clothing, they determined to pay a visit to Clunes, where some months since a resident had been very kind to them. According to their version of the affair, he gave them money to purchase extra blankets when the weather was very cold, and they could not forget his kindness. Accordingly, the party, to the number of nine, hired for three pounds two vehicles, on Wednesday, and proceeded in them to Clunes, for the purpose of returning to their benefactor the sum he had placed at their disposal on that occasion. Some amusement was occasioned by the sight of the party when they drove out of Talbot, the women being decked in crinolines, good warm dresses, and bonnets, and the men clothed in wearing apparel of the latest fashions; but when the motive of their errand was known, they certainly rose considerably in the estimation of the bystanders.

## Appraisal changes

For a minority of gold miners, close associations with Aboriginal people provided the opportunity to be schooled in elements of Aboriginal philosophy and culture and from this inculcation grew an appreciation and respect that were

unusual at the time. Richmond Henty, though not a gold miner, understood the debt he owed to 'Black Charlie', being 'one of my instructors in the mysteries of Australian bush life'. A number of writers in the mining period, as in the pastoralism period, found that Aboriginal people were not as 'degraded' nor 'disgusting' as they had believed. Hubert De Castella, a visitor to the goldfields of Victoria, 'had heard so much about their ugliness that I was amazed to find them much better than I had expected' and added with equal amazement that 'their slow, relaxed gait is not without nobility, and they put their feet down with a solemnity which reminded me of the walk of actors on stage'. Robert Gow conceded in his 1861 journal (after droving with a number of Aboriginal people and forging a bush mateship relationship) that 'There are some fine traits in the characters of the blacks – they are not the wild tiger-like bloodthirsty savage generally supposed'. Miners such as JM Smith upon reflection deemed Aboriginal peoples' traditional way of life wiser than what he had at first considered:

They are a curious race, and are said to be very low in the scale of humanity because they live without working and with very little fighting – which in my humble opinion shows their wisdom rather than their stupidity. The European makes a slave of himself for gold – and calls it industry – and then hops off the twig before he is able to enjoy it; he fights and murders his brethren, robs them of his wealth and devastates their country – and calls it honour and glory. The aborigines wander about a fine country, view the beauties of nature as they come fresh from the hand of their Maker and in their hearts they rejoice and glorify Him ... They resist all his [non-Indigenous people's] attempts to make them abandon their habitual ease and independence except when tempted by rum and tobacco, for which they will readily work. It is vain to try to fetter them to houses or towns. They have tasted freedom and prefer God's canopy to man's. And for this they are called barbarians; and for this they are despised. Pshaw! The European has much to learn, although he thinks himself so very wise.

WE Stanbridge, a visitor to the central parts of Victoria, was impressed by the repertoire of information on astronomy learned through his Djadjawurrung and Djabwurrung informants, and was keen to 'produce in others the astonishment that I felt, as I sat by a little camp fire, with a few boughs for shelter, on a large plain, listening for the first time to two aboriginals, speaking of Yurree, wanjel, Larnan-kurrrk, Kulkun-bulla, as they pointed to those beautiful stars'. JF Hughes had lived through both the bush frontier conflict times and the relatively quiet times of gold, and considered 'it fell to the lot of not a few who led a contemplative life and strove, Orpheus-like, to charm the wild denizens of the forest'. He had interacted with Aboriginal people in both periods and

considered it a positive experience. He deemed that his intercourse with the Djadjawurrung had afforded him both 'amusement and instruction'. He admired and found great interest in many aspects of Djadjawurrung culture, and was keen to record for posterity some detail of place names, corroboree proceedings and chants, vocabulary (both pidgin English and Djadjawurrung), shelter constructions, cooking techniques, bush foods, hunting techniques, weapons and bush lore. Hughes, like many who interacted with Aboriginal people for lengthy periods in the bush, particularly enjoyed their narrating skills, sharp wit and *joie de vivre*:

They had a keen sense of humour, and it afforded them great merriment to get me to shout aloud at night some message in their own language to their comrades across the creek, the reply which reverberated through the woods causing them intense amusement. They were also excellent mimics. One of the tribe, more adventurous than his fellows, had visited the capital of the colony, and though he ordinarily spoke in broken English he could excellently imitate the language and gesture of a new chum swell he had met at an hotel, pronouncing distinctly, with an affected air, "Waiter, bring me a glass of brandy."

Some goldfields correspondents, such as Joe Small, wrote of their slowly emerging confidence in Aboriginal people after an initial distrust had dissipated. Small's diary and poetry relates how a close relationship grew between himself and Bushby (an Aboriginal from the Ovens River region) which started off on a very rocky footing due to a difference of opinion on the ownership of a Murray codfish. A fist fight ensued and a certain degree of respect was earned by Bushby as he was considered to be 'certainly a tough customer' because of his boxing prowess. It seems that Bushby's 'being so well up in the noble art of self-defence' was one of the catalysts which enabled some of Small's racial superiority to be dispelled and a degree of respect to be grudgingly accorded. Later on in the narrative Bushby figured once again:

I have almost forgotten to mention a visit which I received during my stay at the outstation from my black friend Bushby ['armed with a gun'] one morning, which I have no hesitation in saying was both unwelcome and unlooked for ... I felt convinced that Bushby had visited the hut with the charitable intention of being revenged on me for the thrashing I had given him on the occasion when he stole my fish.

As it turned out Bushby had come to 'press me to accompany him to shoot ducks for dinner'; and 'We took shot for shot with the gun, and after an absence of two hours returned to the hut loaded with game, of which Bushby took the half'. Horatio Wheelwright, a lawyer cum naturalist, explained that when he camped at Mordialloc, 'he lived on very neighbourly terms' with the Boonwurrung

people, who ‘generally had their miamies close to my hut; and as I never made too free with them, or gave them a promise I did not intend to keep, I was a bit of a favourite with them’.

## Frequent visits

Some non-Indigenous people reported the frequency of visits by Aboriginal people. James Morgan, a miner at Ballarat, was ‘often visited by Aboriginals’. Alfred Joyce, a squatter on Djadjawurrung country in central Victoria noted ‘Often in passing through the diggings township near us, I have seen them squatting about the streets or near the public house’. William McLeish, a ten-year-old boy lost and walking home on the fields of Ballarat (24 December 1856) had a solitary but moving encounter with two Wathawurrung women.

I heard human voices in the soft musical tones of the aboriginal tongue, and almost immediately after I saw a native woman sitting at the foot of a large white gum tree – her eyes were fixed on me with a cautious searching look and I never forgot the glow that burned in those eyes, but with a kindly look in them that reassured me I walked forward and she said something I did not understand and immediately the chopping was resumed over my head, and on looking up I saw another woman engaged in chopping a possum out of a branch ... and gathering the game and blanket up, they walked away swiftly through the forest [Ballarat Common]. I saw no sign of any men or camp near at hand.

Others noted the rationale for the visits. Ray Willis of Buninyong relayed a story told to him that dates back to the 1860s of how the ‘aboriginals used to come to his mother’s house on the other side of the creek towards Mt. Edgerton, for fat. They used the fat not for cooking, but to rub on their bodies to keep themselves warm in winter’. Similarly the Hiscock family house in Buninyong (ca 1850s) was paid ‘frequent visits by royalty in the person of “King Billy”, head of a small tribe of aborigines where they were supplied with food, which they were glad to obtain’. Fear and trepidation were sometimes the initial response to visits by Aboriginal people, often followed by mutual kindness as evidenced in the experiences of a family in East Gippsland (ca 1858–59).

When we children rushed in excitedly to tell our mother that a “whole lot” of blackfellows were coming, there was no doubt about her feelings. She quickly gathered some washing from the clothesline (fearing that a gaudy patchwork quilt would especially excite their cupidity); and then she gathered us all into the house to await developments. There were none; nothing happened. “Blackfellow sit down.” They have a strong hereditary capacity for waiting. They took nothing belonging to us –

hardly a chip of wood – but they made a little fire and when eventually we had to appear, they only asked for a “big billy boil-em egg.” When they were provided with our largest pot – really our washing boiler – they produced swan eggs in scores, and having boiled them, feasted and lay down; to disappear afterwards as quietly as they had come, quite pleased that all their requests for a “lil bit tchuga [sugar],” “a lil bit tea” had been gratified.

For those miners and mining town folk who did interact on a frequent or intermittent basis, it is probable that they enjoyed, and indeed, at times endured, a ‘living together, living apart’ relationship. Historian David Goodman also contends that the written and visual records of the 1850s contain reminders that the non-Indigenous mining fraternity and Victorian Aboriginal people ‘were often in close contact’. Jack Loorham’s reminiscences from the Orbost district reflect both an uncertainty and a remarkable affinity between the Kurnai and the Lohans [whites]:

I was born 23rd October, 1863, at the Station House, Orbost ... There were hundreds of blacks here at that time, and a great many of them came about a few days before I was born. There were so many that my mother was scared. However she soon learned that they had come to do homage to the white child they heard had been born. When my mother was well enough to get up, she sent for them. My mother sat with me in her lap. After that they held a corroboree and the next day they went away.

John Bond, a miner at Benalla, also noted the close associations with a number of non-Indigenous people.

The natives (Blacks) are just as we see them represented. A few are now camped a little in front of this house. Benalla. There are always some in the township – women washing and so on. Men shooting ducks, stripping bark and co. for nobblers of spirit. They all are naturally of a cheerful disposition ... Brandy was our favourite black man he was often in and out of the house in very free and easy fashion. All of us liked him.

Oral history corroborates Goodman’s contention. Non-Indigenous family histories passed down from the mining period speak often of close relationships forged with Aboriginal identities. As a representative example, the Marsden-White family, who took up land in the Haddon-Cardigan region after their arrival on the Ballarat goldfields in 1852, has knowledge of their homestead and run’s relationship to Wathawurrung sites and also to a local Wathawurrung identity called King Billy.

The first homestead site was located on an existing aboriginal spring ... There were a number of dairy farms based on the Bunkers Hill Ridge because of the aboriginal springs. Most of the little creeks draining off the ridge had their source at or near an aboriginal spring or soak. My grandfather told of aborigines in the bush on the Ridge [ca 1855]. He told of corroborees and he also told of aboriginal shelters and of an area where as a child, aboriginal bones could be found.

A number of families in the wider Ballarat district including the Comrie, Marsden-White and Hiscock families are also the holders of rich oral histories which speak of familial relationships with Aboriginal people. Roy Comrie's family history has passed down oral memories of their relationship with a Wathawurrung elder commonly called King Billy or 'Mr. Mulla, as my father used to call King Billy'. According to Comrie family lore, Mr. Mulla often camped at their home on the Ballarat West Common, 'taught them many ways of their culture', visited significant sites, rode horses and sat at the family table with the Comrie family. The bond with Mr Mulla had grown over an extended period of time and it was considered that 'King Billy was like a part of their family when they were growing up'. In the Newstead district too there are accounts such as the one recorded by Thomas Martin, a child on the diggings, which describe his family's anecdotal interactions with Djadjawurrung people, many of whom he knew by name.

They were great cadgers and did well cadging old clothes etc. One big rough old fellow with bushy hair and long whiskers used to come with them ... He lost his old hat at the pub and my father gave him an old Bell-topper which he wore for months. He had a girl with him about 12 years old. She used to do the begging. We gave her an old crinolin and skirt and put them on her and christened her Eliza. She thought she was a queen.

No doubt the presence of thousands of miners was a subject of considerable discussion within Aboriginal society, and although we will never be able to comprehend all the parameters, we are fortunate that we have sufficient sources to chronicle some jigsaw pieces of the living-together story. The importance of the synergism that occurred on the goldfields cannot be overstated. Not only has the traditional story of gold (characterised by a mistaken assumption that the 'Aborigines were swept aside') been shown to be untrue, but there is now a pressing need to consider more closely evidence that the dominant colonial culture acculturated elements of Aboriginal culture to a greater degree than has previously been acknowledged.