

7. Off the goldfields

On all appearances the first decade of the gold rush period (1850s) began disastrously for Aboriginal people in Victoria. Following on from the recommendations of the 1849 New South Wales Legislative Council's inquiry into the state of Aborigines, which called for the abolition of the Aboriginal Protectorate and offered no other coherent policy, the largely pauperised Aboriginal population, which had been shunted from their traditional lands, had little alternative other than dependent relationships with non-Indigenous pastoralists. Historian Ian Clark has pointed out that Victorian Aboriginal people's acceptance of temporary wage labour was a double edged sword, as while it afforded Aboriginal people the opportunity to reside on their natal estates, it also afforded an additional opportunity of increasing the rate of their exploitation.

Clark has pointed to the critical importance of acknowledging Aboriginal peoples' kinship system and land attachment as being a prime motivational force in how perceptions of work patterns are discerned. Some evidence for this is found in a report from Police Magistrate Andrew McCrae, to the Colonial Secretary in March 1852, on the condition of Aboriginal people in the Gippsland region. McCrae reported that all the Aboriginal people in his assigned district had served the 'full term of their employment' for a 'large' payment of money. A pastoralist on the Mornington Peninsula, McCrae understood the importance placed by Aboriginal people on employer/ employee relationships, having worked very closely with the local Boonwurrung clan resident on the pastoral station he had taken up in the 1840s.

I would beg that it may be borne in mind that the employers, the persons mainly interested in the labour of the natives, always worked in the field with them, and saw, as it was evidently their interest to see, that the blacks had their rations according to agreement, and that they were not ill-treated by their fellow-labourers the whites.

It would therefore appear ... that in favourable circumstances ... where the employer offers a fair remuneration, *keeps faith* with the black natives and *works with them*, that their labour, not much if at all inferior in reaping to that of the whites, may be available. [original emphasis]

McCrae's wisdom on this matter would prove to be critical for many pastoralists who were forced to employ Aboriginal people following the official discovery of gold at Clunes in 1851. Gold acted like a magnet for the vast majority of the population, including non-Indigenous sheep station workers, who left their jobs in droves. Roger Therry, a large landholder in New South Wales and

Victoria noted how in 1854 'owing to the great immigration in consequence of the gold discoveries ... we were obliged to have recourse to the Chinese and native labourers, or we should never have been able to keep our flocks together'. One pastoralist lamented: 'With every fresh gold find matters became worse for the stockowner ... In fact it became almost impossible to carry on the work of the place as more and more men went off to the diggings'. Sherer, a goldfields writer, opined that Aboriginal people's 'value, in many instances must have been incalculable at a period when nearly all white pastoral labour was suspended from the greater attraction of the goldfields'. As all hands sought to join the throng finding the 'democratic metal', it offered Aboriginal people who remained on their traditional lands, especially those whose estates were not located near auriferous fields, new prospects of increased station employment, increased wages, better working conditions and an appreciably greater estimation and admiration of their skills.

According to the figures submitted in 1852-53 by the Commissioners for Crown Lands on Aboriginal populations in the various districts across Victoria, an estimated 1,500 Aboriginal people were employed on stations and were unanimously considered to be 'of considerable service'. JF Foster wrote effusively 'many display much intelligence, and are frequently of great use to the settlers in shepherding and washing their sheep, or assisting at harvest time'. In one district it was stated 'that the whole of the tribes were employed by settlers'. One 1850s observer noted how the gold discoveries 'seem to have been highly beneficial in their operation to the Australian natives' adding that many employers, who before 'despised them', were now in a position where they had need to 'invite their services, and to deal with them on equitable and liberal terms'. Frank Shellard, a gold digger around Omeo and the Ovens Valley, described how some stations were 'entirely worked by coloured people' and added that almost all the drovers in that region were 'native blacks or halfcasts as they were all bold and daring riders and good bushmen and could pick up any stragglers [cattle] they might fall in with on their journey'. This sentiment was very evident in the 1858-59 Select Committee Report into Aboriginal people. The majority of the respondents from each area of Victoria duly noted the prevalence of good wages being demanded by Aboriginal people.

During the early phases of alluvial gold mining in Victoria, then, Aboriginal people assumed an importance as a labour force which had not been seen since the first period of colonisation almost 20 years prior. From across Victoria came reports of their vital significance as a work force, which enabled the pastoralists to continue in the face of a labour shortage. 'It is a fact I should like to state, well known to me', wrote former Assistant Protector of Aborigines in Victoria, Edward Stone Parker, 'that, at the time when the country was in a state of universal excitement on the outbreak of the gold mining, there were

several stations where no shepherds were left but aboriginal shepherds'. AC Cameron, at 'Terinallum' in the western district of Victoria, wrote in a series of letters between 1851-58 of the severe labour shortage crippling the pastoral industry, only relieved by Aboriginal workers; orders drawn in November 1854 demonstrate that Aboriginal people made up perhaps 75 per cent of Terinallum Station's workforce.

[F]or it is all Gold in this neighbourhood – every body totally Ignorant about wool ... the shearers are doing their work moderately well, and I have to be pretty civil; the most of my shed men are my faithful darkies ... William, Cocky, Jamie, Billy Downie, Charlie ... I have for sometime been shepherding one flock myself, and have another to be thrown on my hands on Monday; but if two of the Blacks that have promised come tomorrow I will be able to jog on a few weeks longer without doubling the flocks ... do you think you could get me any Bullock drivers for the wool? I see no chance of getting any here ... I wish you would give my Blackfellows a hint if you see them about the Leigh [River] ... I am washing the sheep now. I have got a lot of Blacks engaged for washing, they are doing very well as yet; I have them all under a written agreement for Six Shillings per week.

Aboriginal workers were deemed to be highly proficient in a range of skills including: bark stripping, washing and tracking sheep, bullock drivers, shearers, fire fighters, as guides across unfamiliar country, general hands, wool pressers, scourers, rouses, carters, musterers, timber cutters and fencers. The full employment of Aboriginal people during peak times in the pastoral industry is evidenced by a letter received from the Yelta Aboriginal Station advising that 'we got no blacks they are all gone shearing'. Newspaper correspondents from remote areas in Victoria attested to the fact that 'blacks were employed and they turned out their shorn sheep in a far more satisfactory manner than the majority of the whites so engaged'. At various stations it was noted that Aboriginal workers were sometimes paid the same rate as non-Indigenous workers. William Moodie noted 'I always paid any blackfellows working for me ... The men insisted on being paid for their wood-cutting in white money [gold] – and got it'.

Rural workers accounts such as George Sugden's reminiscences of pioneering life in Victoria are peppered with references to over-employed Aboriginal people being the mainstay of station life whose tasks included providing an essential variety of fresh foods, cooking and being servants, providing sexual services, performing the onerous task of sheep washing, mustering in areas that were dangerously inhospitable, tracking lost non-Indigenous workers and retrieving valuable errant stock. Living on a remote Victorian station, Sugden was 'quite in his [Aboriginal aide's] hands and knew that as long as I stuck to him I was safe'.

He acknowledged, without reservation, the vast superiority of his Aboriginal co-worker and came to the somewhat disconcerting, yet pragmatic conclusion that work and survival in the bush was a great race and class leveller.

I was given a half caste named Davis to help us. He was a splendid stockman, none better. We lived together and slept in the one tent ... Though I did not like cooking for blacks ... [Sugden reluctantly ended up cooking for Davis as] I saw it was the best way ... I never saw a man use a whip like Davis. Within a week Davis had the horses so trained that they would come up to the tent and stand till I had picked out the required horses and then move quietly away to feed.

Though non-Indigenous bush workers and pastoralists clearly perceived Victorian Aboriginal bush workers as the finest workers from a skill and knowledge base, there was a barrier to their entry into the non-Indigenous pantheon of bush worker mythology that Russell Ward wrote of in his seminal work *The Australian Legend*. The barrier was the Aboriginal bush workers' steadfast refusal to behave like English country workers under the auspices of a genial pastoral overlord. Historian Richard Broome persuasively argues that Ward 'celebrates the roving, independent stance of rural workers as the seed bed of Australian egalitarianism, but similar Aboriginal behaviour is never associated with any nationalist mythology of worker independence, as it might well be'.

NA Fenwick, Crown Commissioner of Lands in 1852, commented on the Aboriginal bush workers with a deal of frustration, 'they will work only when they choose', a sentiment echoed by other Crown Land Commissioners in Victoria. Robert Gow, though waxing effusively about Aboriginal workers' legendary bush-work acumen, was typical in adding (with some exasperation): 'But no gifts, no kindness, no education, no comforts, nothing can win them from the chasm of their wild nomadic life'. Gow and many others failed to discern Aboriginal people actively choosing to be two-way people – that is, opting to balance their traditional lifestyles with some participation in the non-Indigenous economic milieu. Other observers of Aboriginal bush workers understood there were legal and cultural imperatives motivating their work patterns. Some pastoralists, through their long associations with Aboriginal people, such as Peter Beveridge near Swan Hill, understood and accommodated such work habits realising to some degree that a great number of Aboriginal people were neither dependent on non-Indigenous people's material goods nor willing to forgo their Aboriginal cultural imperatives for a life of dreary servitude. W Dobie, a farmer on the Richardson River in central Victoria related how 'Doctor Syntax', his Djadjawurrung farmhand, was extremely fond of the

money he earned but Dobie acceded to the knowledge that Djadjawurrung political and social obligations were far more pressing than weeding a white man's vegetable patch.

The prospect of money was the Doctor's most convincing argument for digging up the weeds. "He must have all done by a certain big one Sunday," he would tell me, "as Wimmera black fellow would come *barley* then, and then black fellow all pull away along Avoca, and then big one corrobary." I admitted the propriety of this, and urged him to go a-head.