

8. Social and environmental change

Notwithstanding the evidence of cohabitation documented in chapter seven, the goldfields were an inherently violent and dangerous landscape, especially for Aboriginal people. Acts of violation such as sexual abuse, poisoning and shooting of dogs, desecration of graves and interference in Aboriginal affairs were frequent. Whilst the majority of commentators enthusiastically extolled the Victorian goldfields as relatively free of the violence common on the Californian goldfields, historians such as David Goodman have peered into the historical records and now insist upon an 'edgier interpretation' of Victoria's goldfields.

An examination of newspaper reports and court records of the early gold rush period bears out Goodman's argument. By the 1850s, several generations of Australian colonial society had either lived alongside the brutalised convict class or were closely aligned with them as family, friends or fellow workers. Testimony of how 'nasty, brutish and short' life at the goldfields could be is underscored by how inured miners and other commentators became to what would now be termed horrific murders and, equally, to industrial accidents. One miner expressed his dismay at the goldfields violence thus: 'Society is in an awful state at these diggings; four murders within the last month. On the night before I left the diggings a man was shot at in an adjoining tent'. Others were more nonchalant about the deaths and accidents.

The records of violence and murder against Aboriginal people by non-Indigenous people during the gold rush period are very extensive. PC Chauncy reported two extremely violent sexual assaults by non-Indigenous miners upon Aboriginal women at Whroo and Rushworth diggings.

A fortnight ago, when I was at Rushworth, a white man had just been sentenced to 3 months imprisonment for abusing an *old* native woman. She had been made helplessly drunk and then five men abused her so as to nearly cause her death; she could scarcely crawl into court the next day; this is no uncommon case. I was informed that a native woman lately died at Whroo, from the abuse she received from a number of white men.

Retribution for minor incidents by Aborigines was swift. Surveyor, John Wilkinson recalled:

Here [Nicholson River crossing near present day Bairnsdale] in 1856 Charles Marshall erected a hotel and store ... The store was popular with the diggers but it met a sad end. Two Aborigines stole groceries and

spirits from the wattle and daub building attached to the hotel. Marshall caught them and shot them, and in retaliation, a number of Aborigines burnt the store down, so that it had to be rebuilt.

A report in the *Ararat Advertiser* entitled 'An affray with the Aborigines at Cathcart' (10 August 1858) demonstrates that inter-cultural relations in the hub of goldfields towns were often volatile. The newspaper's account implies some revengeful attack being enacted on the Ballarat Medical Hall by Djabwurrung people and a subsequent quarrel with a Police Inspector. The reporter contended that 'but for the timely arrival of [Police Inspector] Mr. Smith that some serious damage would have been done'. In 1862, Buckley, an Aboriginal man, was violently murdered by two miners at Mia Mia Flat. Numerous newspaper reports revealed that Buckley was a 'familiar figure' to the diggers. The *Mount Alexander Mail* provided a précised account of the murder:

An aborigine named Sampson found Buckley in a waterhole – inquest conducted "The general impression as to how the murder was committed appears to be that on Saturday night Buckley proceeded to Simm's tent to persuade the lubras to return to their encampment; that his importunities to this effect excited the wrath of Simms, who struck him several times with a piece of wood taken from his stretcher, and then pushed him outside to the waterhole. Such at all events is the substance of a statement made by an aboriginal boy who alleges that he slept the night in Simm's tent, and saw all that occurred. Of the two lubras we have not yet heard anything, nor do we know whether they will be called upon to give evidence.

Occasional newspaper reports of thefts or assaults by Aboriginal people upon non-Indigenous people were at times reported with a comical tinge, explicitly implying Aboriginal peoples' harmless 'child' like propensities. A report in the *Argus* exemplifies this genre of reporting about Aboriginal people:

On Monday night three of these children of Ham "stuck up" a resident in Sale in the street, and would not part hold of his garments until he had given them "white money" ... shortly after a police constable appeared and took the aborigine in charge. The constable, however, not being thoroughly up to the subtlety of the predatory tribes, took hold of the offender by the blanket, and proposed to give him a night in the lock up. His sable prisoner, however, thought different, and quietly withdrawing the pin which held his blanket, left the garment in the hands of the guardian of the peace, whilst he slipped quietly away.

Encounters of the nature of an organised, violent or group attack however, were not widely reported in the gold period, though reports such as one that

appeared in the *Argus* (20 September 1855) amply demonstrate some Aboriginal people's determination to independently enact their laws and if need be use their weapons upon any non-Indigenous people who would seek to divert them from the performance of their lawful duties:

Extract from letter of Surveyor in charge of Gippsland District:-

"Since my last report I have seen other individuals from the Omeo goldfields who corroborate the statements made therein.

"A large party of blacks, numbering between one and two hundred, have come down from the upper part of this and the neighbouring districts to retaliate the onslaught made on the Swan reach Tribe some time back ... and came in a strong body to the neighbourhood of Sale. They named five aboriginals whom they expressed their determination to murder, and intimated to the authorities that if interfered with by the police they would fire on them ... I myself unexpectedly came upon their camp one night, and had a "yabber" with them. I have seldom seen a finer body of blacks. They robbed one shepherd's hut, but aver their intention not to molest the 'whites,' unless interfered with."

Stories were often told by miners of 'murderous attacks made on early squatters' by blacks, but generally the consensus from official commentators was 'The worst that can be charged against the blacks was a predilection for stripping men's shirts and pants off the clotheslines'. There were, however, many on the goldfields whose irrational fears of encountering 'wild' or 'myall' Aboriginal people may have precipitated inter-racial violence. Henry Boyle's memories of coming to Buninyong in central Victoria just prior to the gold rush are perhaps typical of many non-Indigenous people's strongly held, but ill-conceived, perceptions: 'we passed many black camps, being very careful to follow Mr Jamieson's (of Buninyong) advice:- "Do not let a blackfellow follow you; but always keep him ahead of you." They were very treacherous, and would often split a white skull open with a tomahawk without any apparent provocation'. Mistrust and fear of Aboriginal people peppers non-Indigenous family narratives, as can be found in many local history publications.

Reminiscences of the goldfields contain accounts of great trepidation about Aboriginal people, such as in the diary of Thomas Booth: 'The Aboriginals were quite numerous around Buninyong [central Victoria] ... When the tribe was seen approaching we retired to the inside of the house and remained there until they went past'. Oral history from the Coxall family, also of Buninyong, mirrors Booth's: "Uncle Tom used to tell us a story of a tribe of Aborigines that used to come from Burrumbah [Burrumbeet?] for their corroboree, an assembly of

sacred festive, or warlike character, every year, he was a boy of 3 years old and all the kids were frightened of them. There were thirty-six of them, with their own King Billy.”

Alcohol and substance abuse

It was commonly alleged that alcohol abuse was the reason for inter and intra-racial troubles during the pastoral period. In the gold rush period the further breakdown of traditional law increased the level of abuse, and hence the level of conflict. TH Goodwin, a missionary on the Lower Murray argued that:

Many of their best customs and most stringent rules, in regard to the young people, have been weakened and broken by the introduction of the evil habits of vicious white men; and the young men being more intelligent, pay less regard to the old men, and follow their own sexual desires. The young women are even more sensuous, and reckless of future consequences.

Aboriginal informants in court cases and other historical sources testified to the immense internal conflict that occurred within their communities which they attributed squarely at the feet of alcohol abuse. Visitors and travellers to the goldfields such as James Bonwick, were unequivocal that alcohol abuse was exclusively the reason for the demise of Aboriginal people, exclaiming: ‘It is not the want of food, nor is it mere disease, that occasions the evil; the sorrow, the demon, the destroyer is *Strong Drink*, under whose maddening influence murders are committed, and fatal conflicts induced’.

But it was not just Aboriginal people who abused alcohol, as the following portrayal of shared alcohol abuse reveals: ‘I found John Cookey drunk and bleeding from fighting, John Weir bleeding from fighting, John Wearing cut and bleeding from fighting John Weir, Teddy our blackfellow drunk ... John Cookey was so overpowered by liquor that I had to give him large quantities of ammonia to get him sufficiently recovered’. Alcohol abuse and the often deadly immediate effects of an unregulated alcohol industry were widely reported in the colonial press. Samuel Lazarus met a man whose 20-year-old brother had died from the effects of drunkenness at Bendigo: ‘It is painful to contemplate the horrible havoc which drunkenness makes on the diggings’. Visitors to the Victorian goldfields were painfully aware that alcohol abuse was a terrible scourge upon non-Indigenous and Aboriginal people alike. Some, such as James Bonwick, felt a sense of responsibility for Aboriginal people’s alcohol abuse:

The miserable remnant I saw suffering with the Whites, from the effects of wild intemperance; it being then Race week, an awful time of reckless

extravagance and unbridled debauching. The shrieks of drunken women, the cries of reeling natives, and the quarrels of besotted men greeted me upon my first visit to Casterton ... Yet the law pretends to protect the native against him who holds the bottle to him; but who is to enforce the law, or who does enforce it?

Excessive alcohol consumption was observed to impact on Victorian Aboriginal people's mobility, motivation to carry out traditional food gathering practices and ceremonies, and liability to mining camp accidents such as falling down shafts. Objections to and schemes for the abeyance of excessive alcohol consumption were frequently sported in colonial newspapers of the period and by the respondents to the Victorian Government's circular questionnaire on Aborigines in 1858. One correspondent in the *Argus* called for compensation in place of 'maddening poison in the shape of fiery drink' and posited that 'the law, if it will not prevent the white man from brutalizing himself [with alcohol], should prevent him from enabling the ignorant native to become equally brutal'. Miners and correspondents in colonial newspapers such as the *Argus* repeatedly pointed to the 'great annoyance' caused by Aboriginal people who had been plied with alcohol. The cause of their ire was said to be Aboriginal people's 'objectionable habits; their continual drunkenness and the noises they keep up at their camp at the wharf [Echuca] all day and all night'. One observer noted

The blacks are almost all fond of intoxicating drinks ... It is hardly possible to prevent them from obtaining drink, as they have as good a right to spend what they earn as a white man. Their young men get a pound or two occasionally by cutting bark, tailing cattle, and c., this they almost always lay out in drink, and treat all hands at the camp. They are not at all selfish amongst themselves, but they are so as regards the whites.

The gold rush and the concomitant gold towns and diggings shanties were considered to be the harbingers of destruction for Aboriginal people in Victoria, and according to Alfred Joyce, a pastoralist in central Victoria, effectively sounded their death knell. Joyce wrote:

The blacks did not show any signs of serious diminution till the breaking out of the diggings, but their demoralization had been going on all the time previously. Debauchery and drink was doing its work. When bush inns became numerous the blacks congregated about them and took all the drink that was offered them, and purchased it whenever they could get a coin or two by begging or otherwise. All this was bad enough when the white inhabitants were few and far between, but at the outbreak of the diggings, with greater temptations and facilities, swept them off rapidly.

Indigenous temperance

There are, however, a great number of reports which relate to Aboriginal habits of temperance. Notable examples of abstinence were recorded by goldfield newspapers correspondents such as one from the *Daylesford Mercury* which remarked (6 May 1865) that a small party of Aborigines of the Daisy-Hill tribe (presumably Djadjawurrung) had discovered a nugget weighing two ounces on Amherst Flat, and being ‘Wiser than some of their generation, instead of spending the money realized by the sale of the nugget on drink, they purchased a stock of warm winter clothing, and with this on their backs they paraded the streets with the greatest possible dignity’. A month later a correspondent for the *Talbot Leader* informed his readers of another discovery of a large (30 ounces) gold nugget by Aboriginal people at the Emu goldfield which realised about 120 pounds for them. The successful party hired two vehicles to take them to Clunes, with the purpose of fulfilling their kinship obligations to a non-Indigenous storekeeper there. The newspaper correspondent and other observers keenly noted their abstinence from alcohol, stating:

One thing was evident, namely, that they were all quite sober; and on enquiring how this was, since aborigines are expected to get drunk the moment they obtain any money, it transpired that several attempts had been made in certain ‘shanties’ to induce them to drink, and that they had refused point blank to imbibe anything stronger than ginger beer. Indeed one of the party, who appears to be head or chief of the rest, replied to one of the tempters that ‘black fellow could be a gentleman as well as whitefellow,’ – meaning, we presume, that he was not bound to get drunk because he had suddenly acquired a considerable sum of money. In this respect this sensible aborigine is decidedly in advance of some of the whitefellows, to whom the sudden acquisition of fortune is more often the prelude to intoxicated habits than the forerunner of staid and sober conduct.

James Sinclair encountered two Aboriginal men in his travels across Victoria who ‘both expressed what is a rare thing for a blackfellow to do, their thorough disgust of drunkenness and drinking, which caused, as the eldest black rather expressively stated it, both white fellow and black to become “too much --- -- big fool”’. Reports from the honorary correspondents and William Thomas, Guardian of the Aborigines also noted Aboriginal leaders on the goldfields such as Djadjawurrung elder Biebie (Eliza) who exhorted her countrymen and women to ‘leave of that beastly drink’. Some ‘steady’ Wathawurrung elders too chided their people by frequently telling them ‘blackfellow soon all gone if drink much grog’. Barry Collett, in his history of South Gippsland, wrote of initiatives by

Brataulong elders to stem the destructive effects of alcohol abuse amongst his community, which, sadly, non-Indigenous authorities proved unable (and unwilling) to administer. Collett wrote:

In October 1853 Old Darby, a Brataulong elder, possibly from the Corner Inlet Kut-wut, asked Police Magistrate Tyers to order a Sale publican not to sell more than one glass of grog to Aborigines, for he and other elders were worried about the way in which Brataulong youths increasingly neglected their traditional responsibilities.

Kulin elders at Coranderrk, an Aboriginal reserve established in 1863, had also created their own effective stratagems to manage excessive alcohol consumption such as creating their own reserve court which set monetary punishments for drinking and the threat of forfeiting the right to marry.

Laws to prohibit the supply of alcohol to Aboriginal people were enacted and enforced with great regularity by the Victorian police across the Colony, and it was claimed that 'numerous magistrates throughout the colony have expressed their intention to refuse to grant a license to any publican against whom this offence may be proved'. But it proved impossible to stem the sale of alcohol. One report in the *Argus* expressed the frustration of the police and magistrates in Victoria who were 'exerting themselves to put down the sale of intoxicating liquors to the aborigines, and are dealing with such cases summarily, there is not a similar activity on the New South Wales side'.

Cultural interference

On the Victorian goldfields a number of notable instances occurred where non-Indigenous people interfered in Aboriginal cultural affairs. Perhaps the most potent reason why very little discussion has taken place is the derogatory and often erroneous manner in which such interferences were reported. In many gold mining towns, non-Indigenous people witnessed Aboriginal people practicing their customs and laws, and these were generally reported with an air of incomprehensibility and naiveté. The faux pas connected to mortuary ceremonies was particularly disturbing to Aboriginal people's sense of propriety and decency as they witnessed non-Indigenous miners ploughing up the land and desecrating mortuary sites. The miner JC Hamilton noted:

I was at Bendigo, in the year 1854, at the diggings, and, arriving late one evening, our party drew up near a log, which we intended to light for our fire, but discovering a newly made grave just behind the log, we lit our fire away from it, and used the logs for a seat. A party of blacks [Djadjawurrung] came and wanted us to shift from the place, as they had

buried one of their number there late the evening before, and wanted to complete their arrangements. We told them we would not interfere in any way, so they set to work and put up a brush fence round the grave at a distance of about twenty yards, leaving an entrance at the furthest point.

Not all miners were as respectful as Hamilton and his mates. Korzelinski, a miner at Sydney Flat, near Bendigo, whilst digging a shaft came across the grave of a 'native [Djadjawurrung] chief' and considered it would have been 'an excellent find for an archaeologist'. He offered that his only reason for not interfering with the fresh grave site was 'I was too busy sinking my shaft to worry overmuch about scientific problems'. Others such as A Batey in 1856 resolved to 'dig for an aboriginals cobbera (head)' and rifled through an Aboriginal graveyard to achieve his goal.

On the goldfields itself, miners such as Carl Lagergren claimed that he and others had often acted as mediators between Djadjawurrung men and women when alcohol abuse occurred in their community:

When they have been fortunate enough to get hold of spirits ... it does not take long before they become trance like and start a so called "corroboree" or dance where both men and women start to make a lot of noise and douse ear piercing noise ... A truthfully scary scene which becomes even more scarier when the men reaches a more trance like behaviour and starts to hit the women with all their powers and these women see themselves as fortunate if there was nearby a tent occupied by white people. This way she could seek protection against the mens loving hand, showing their love ... and many times it happened to me as well as my friends that you had to go out and perform a piece [peace] making act.

A Batey recalled that a party of non-Indigenous people's appearance at the scene of 'an aboriginal beating his lubra' put a 'stop to the proceedings', whereupon the Aboriginal woman cried 'That one always him beat me'. From gold mining areas where internecine fighting and feuding still raged, such as in Gippsland, there were reports of non-Indigenous people and authorities attempting to act as peace brokers or as hosts for those seeking refuge.

William Craig, a miner at Mount Cole, described how a party of non-Indigenous miners formed a 'council' to deliberate on what to do about three Djabwurrung men who they believed had committed a payback punishment on a neighbouring clansman. Though lynching them was seriously contemplated it was considered the best course was to send for a local justice of the peace. A messenger was dispatched, but the magistrate had no police to assist him and was too busy to

attend. Craig duly noted the slender regard afforded internecine legal matters by the authorities: 'As evidence of the slight importance attached to the murder of a native at that time, it is worth noting that, although information of the crime was later on sent to the police, no one ever appeared to make official enquiry regarding it'. There were some occasions when non-Indigenous interference into customary feuds or cultural issues was initiated by Aboriginal people. Korzelinski referred to an instance when feuding Aboriginal groups were to meet together on a friendly basis and that 'To stress the solemnity and importance of the occasion, English neighbours from a nearby settlement were also invited', presumably to perform a role as peace observers.

Meddling in marriage

At times Aboriginal people demonstrated a great deal of resentment and retaliation towards non-Indigenous people for meddling in Aboriginal marriage customs. William Thomas, Aboriginal Guardian, reported in 1851 that a group of Aboriginal people (Djadjawurrung) had surrounded his cottage in Melbourne and had sought out and demanded a 'poor lubra' named Polly, who had sought refuge with Mrs Thomas. It seems that Polly had lived with a non-Indigenous shepherd on JM Sanger's Avoca run and was considered to be 'one of the most modest, well-conducted females, in many respects highly civilized'. While the Guardian's wife hid Polly in the dining-room, Thomas persuaded the angry group of Aboriginal people to leave. Later, Thomas reported that Polly reconciled with her shepherd, married him and returned to Avoca. Another instance was reported by Reverend Mereweather interceding on behalf of an Aboriginal woman named Lucy, of an unidentified 'Murray River tribe', who had been betrothed to Charley, a 'black fellow'. Charley came to Mereweather 'humbly petitioning that I would persuade [Lucy] to give herself up as his wife'. Charley's imploring fell on deaf ears, much to his disgust. A very similar event appears to have transpired at Anderson's Creek Diggings in 1860. A non-Indigenous miner provided evidence which

showed that the blacks [Kurnai clansmen: Tarra Bobby and Billy Logan] had given great provocation to a white woman who had a black lubra in her hut; and that the man, to frighten the blacks away, took up a gun, and when the blacks were about a hundred yards off fired, not knowing it to be loaded ... The white man was fined 5 pounds, as damages to the two blacks.

Environmental degradation

The environmental changes that occurred as a result of both alluvial and deep lead mining were profound. This was the second wave of catastrophic environmental degradation to impact on Victoria since European colonisation. The first phase was the pastoral period, beginning effectively in 1835. The landscape that miners viewed was not, therefore, a pristine one, though it was often portrayed this way in their writings and artwork. They seldom acknowledged that they were, in fact, part of the second wave of dispossession and environmental devastation.

The pastoralists were in no doubt as to the disaster that millions of sheep had wrought upon both the environment and Aboriginal people. The extremely rapid destruction by sheep of plant foods that Aboriginal people had previously subsisted on manifestly altered the ecosystem and had flow on effects on inter-cultural relations. Aboriginal informants complained bitterly to Victorian squatters and others throughout the 1830s and 1840s of the profound changes to vital plant ecology caused by the introduced livestock.

To the miners, however, pastoralism and Western-style agriculture were largely viewed as benign. A common theme in miners and other commentator's writings and pictorial works is that mining alone was the great despoiler of nature. One result of this was an inability to understand that even in areas where mining had not utterly changed the physical landscape, the essential bio-mass had already been irrevocably transformed by pastoralism. Alluvial gold mining, historian Barry McGowan points out, even in its more primitive forms, 'affected the environment from the outset and was not as benign in its effects as present day landscapes might suggest'. Some goldfields correspondents were in no doubt as to destructiveness of the miners' presence. 'The diggers', William Howitt observed, 'seem to have two especial propensities, those of firing guns and felling trees ... Every tree is felled, ... every feature of Nature is annihilated'. Thomas Woolner considered that the Mount Alexander diggings in 1852-53 was 'what one might suppose the earth would appear after the day of judgment has emptied all the graves', whilst Louise Meredith considered the mining landscape to be 'more irredeemably hideous than the bleakest mining village in any English coal or iron district'.

The Central Board of Aborigines alerted the government to the 'vast quantities of fish destroyed annually by netting and the swivel gun ... Both fish and game are ruthlessly killed in such a manner as to injure, not only the interests of the blacks but those of the colonists generally'. The declining fish stock in Victoria was so serious a matter that specific legislation (Fisheries Bill) was drafted in 1873. Acknowledgement of the catastrophe that had befallen Aboriginal people

in particular, whose traditional and adopted monetarist economy depended very heavily on the availability of good fish stocks, can be gauged by an amendment proposed to the new bill, which was accepted without discussion, 'having for its object the allowing Aboriginal natives to take fish in any way for their own use'.

Even more serious was the damage to the environment and the Aboriginal cultural landscape done by gold mining practices such as hydraulic sluicing and later dredging; eventually regulations came into force which sought to limit the obliteration to water courses and adjacent land. The immense damage to the physical environment caused by gold mining operations was commonly said to be the reason for the absence of Aboriginal people in a region. Typical of this appraisal is Michael Goonan's, whose 'mother's people lived, in 1854, not far from Yackandandah'. Goonan contended that the tribe in this area were 'shy and quite harmless' and that 'By degrees they shifted back to more uncivilized parts until a black fellow was rarely seen'. Similarly, Katherine McK noted that Aboriginal people had caught 'bandicoots, wattlebirds and blackfish from the creek' near the Daylesford diggings until 'men with guns and dogs came from the mining towns and camps, and soon the wild game was exterminated, even on the rough ranges'. In the central Victorian town of Scarsdale it was noted that the 'blacks [Wathawurrung] came in to the diggings looking for water'. A number of correspondents observed that 'their original food is getting more and more scanty' and thus obliquely deduced the connection between their attachment to the goldfields where money and food was available and their shunning of the degraded forests and plains where subsistence was problematic. Undoubtedly, the destruction of the natural environment by gold mining did indeed prompt the 'withdrawal' of Aboriginal people as camping and hunting places were despoiled, yet there is evidence that the breaking up of large pastoral leases also led to environmental degradation which also profoundly impacted on Aboriginal people.

Not all areas suffered equally; for the intensive alluvial goldfields were spread out, both geographically and chronologically. Aboriginal people were reported, by almost all the respondents to the 1858 Select Committee's enquiries, to be eking out an existence amongst the mining towns or residing on pastoral runs. Dislocation from their lands and cultural heritage produced stressed communities who engaged in the internecine violence that observers on the goldfields noted with regularity. But, as time passed, Goodman argues, 'less would be heard of the injustice of a people deprived of their traditional sources of food, and more of the "propensity of the race" to this or that weakness'.

The significance of less visible mechanisms by which Aboriginal people in Victoria were dislocated, such as interference in traditional mortuary ceremonies, food gathering practices and legal matters, cannot be understated. The altering of traditional living patterns was a contributing factor to a community wracked by alcohol abuse and alternately neglected and controlled by colonial governments and Christian missionaries.