

9. Governments and missions

The 1850s have generally been described as a decade wherein Aboriginal people were overlooked by the new Victorian Government (separation from New South Wales occurred in 1850). Judging from the almost universally negative response about the level of government assistance afforded to Victorian Aboriginal people during the 1850s it is hard not to agree. In answer to the question (asked by the 1858-59 Victorian Select Committee of the Legislative Council on Aborigines) 'Has assistance in the form of clothing, food or medical attendance, been bestowed on the aborigines of your district by the Government' the answer was a resounding 'No assistance of any kind has been given them by the Government'. This fact is borne out by the amount of expenditure for the Aborigines of the Colony of Victoria in the seven year period from 1851-58; 12,000 pounds, of which over half was expended on the salaries of non-Indigenous people, and only a little over ten pounds was expended on 'Medicines and Medical Attendance'. Some writers, such as EJ Foxcroft almost a century later, considered that 'Euthanasia in fact, has been the aim of native policy in Victoria after 1850 ... The policy adopted between 1850 and 1860 was, as can be seen, a half hearted one'. More recently, historians such as Ian Clark and Michael Christie have argued that 'This decade may be characterized as one of Government neglect of the Aborigines'.

Many commentators in the 1850s were highly critical of government's treatment of Aboriginal people. 'You have taken possession of a country that is not yours', RL Milne insisted, 'Ye have disinherited and slain its owners'. A lengthy editorial in the *Argus* (17 March 1856), frequently punctuated with 'bitter indignation' at the government's 'basest meanness and dishonesty in our treatment of this unhappy race', insisted that the 'wretched pittance' allocated to Aboriginal affairs be replaced 'for fair and even liberal treatment'. The editor was adamant that no expense should be spared and contended that:

We mean what we say, literally. We would feed and clothe every black in Victoria, and would do this regardless of expense. If it cost ten thousand – well! If twenty thousand – well! If a hundred thousand – still well! Were they able to strike a bargain for the land, we should gladly purchase it at hundreds of thousands of pounds. It is dishonest to withhold it, because they are ignorant and helpless. We would feed them and clothe them as long as a black was left amongst us, and when the last was gathered to that Creator of whom he at present knows so little, we should rejoice to think that at the last great day, he could not arraign us for having behaved towards him here below, like a tyrant, a coward, and a swindler.

There were, however, also correspondents who considered that institutions established for Aboriginal people such as the school and refuge at Mt Franklin in central Victoria were a ‘complete and sufficiently transparent failure’, with the implicit judgment that it should be abolished. Questions were asked in Parliament about why the Goulburn and Loddon Aboriginal stations, given their proximity to the gold diggings, were not ‘parcelled out and put up to auction in suitable lots, for the benefit of the revenue and encouragement of an agricultural class on that part of this very rich gold country’.

Increasingly, any discussion during the 1850s in relation to supplying Aboriginal people’s physical and spiritual needs (for the two were usually viewed as inseparable), polarised into two camps or viewpoints. Some writers believed that as they were dying out and their ‘barbaric tendencies’ had not diminished, nothing should be done, bar providing for their immediate physical wants and recording as much as possible about this ‘interesting branch of the human family’ before they became extinct. Most favoured saving the youths by supporting the philanthropic works of concerned individuals, rather than government initiatives involving capital expenditure.

Honorary correspondents in the goldfields regions such as Andrew Porteous at Carngham, near Ballarat, certainly ascribed to this view, and considered both reactive and proactive measures were necessary to stem the abuse of alcohol consumption among Aboriginal people near the goldfields and towns:

A few of the young men are generally employed on stations, and receive a small remuneration, but all they receive, both for labour and opossum rugs, is spent on intoxicating liquors, and I fear they will not leave off this evil habit unless prohibited from visiting the goldfields and are allowed to settle on some portion of land where they would take an interest in improving it.

The same issue had been expressed during the Aboriginal Protectorate period (1838–1850), but reached its zenith during the gold rush. As already explained, gold fossicking, trade in possum skin rugs, baskets, primary produce, and employment on pastoral stations after 1850 afforded Aboriginal people a new degree of economic independence. The damaging social effects of alcohol abuse and the absence of paternal control were a concern re-iterated many times by well-intentioned Correspondents and Guardians. In his June 1871 report, Porteous advocated a pass system, as he found the local Wathawurrung people could not be restricted and regulated sufficiently to keep them from their commercial activities in the goldfields and towns:

The tribe still follow their occupations of fishing, hunting and making of opossum rugs, which they barter for stores, but often for grog. It is

almost impossible to keep them from visiting the towns, and yet they have no business to transact in those towns except begging for grog and making themselves liable to be arrested under the Vagrant Act. They have no hunting field nor fishing river within these towns, and if they have anything to sell let them apply to the local guardian for a pass for that day, to be within a town to be named in that pass. Most of the tribe are old and feeble and unable to do any work. The young men are able and willing to work, and some of them can do work as well as any white man, but they are like any of the white men, and would spend every shilling they earn upon grog, if they can possibly get it done.

The frustration of Honorary Correspondents such as Porteous and others to restrict Aboriginal people from frequenting the goldfields, readily obtaining money and over indulging in alcohol, combined with the Victorian Government's persistent refusals to fund Aboriginal welfare, beyond providing for food, clothing and shelter, greatly contributed to a philosophy of centralising Aboriginal people onto a few reserves. Persistent calls for dictatorial control over Aboriginal people as the only feasible means of caring for them were also heard. In 1863 the Central Board for Aborigines (CBA) identified in excess of 120 Aboriginal people outside of the Honorary Correspondent's influence. In addition it was reported that some Aboriginal people in the central Victorian goldfields were not included in the Board's population estimates. In the CBA's fourth report (1864) the matter of forcibly removing Aboriginal children was officially broached, principally those who lived in proximity to the goldfields: 'it is well known that the blacks were in the habit of visiting the towns and goldfields very frequently, where they readily procured intoxicating liquors. They were ill-clad and ill fed; their children were uncared for'. The CBA made it abundantly clear that they sought much greater power to intervene in Aboriginal peoples' lives by making 'urgent solicitations for some amendment of the laws affecting the blacks'. It plied the government to introduce Bills for the 'protection of the blacks and half-castes' and 'better management of the Aborigines'.

Evangelising the Aborigines

Intervention in Aboriginal peoples' lives was inextricably linked with bringing them out of 'moral degradation'. Religious humanitarianism played a significant role in the development of Aboriginal affairs in Victoria in the latter half of the nineteenth century, despite the significant impact of a static racial hierarchy on popular racial discourse. However, there was a degree of discord in Christian circles about the fate of Aboriginal people. Some pronounced that 'Australian aborigines were mere beasts in human shape ... and that no efforts made to evangelise the aborigines of Victoria could be successful'. Other prominent

Christians considered that ‘the condition of the aborigines is that of dying men’ and as all men are created in God’s own image, they could be ‘saved [from extinction and damnation] only by divine interference’. Aboriginal evangelists in the late 1880s, such as a group of seven men from the Maloga Mission led by Martin Simpson, a Djadjawurrung man, echoed this refrain:

The idea was to go out among the scattered remnants, preach the gospel and endeavour to gather them at the Mission Station. “We thought a great deal about this”, says Martin Simpson, the leader of the little band of Missionaries, “and we looked very long and very earnestly to God that He would open a way for us, and that He might convert us into humble instruments for the salvation of our poor people.”

These Aboriginal evangelists also witnessed to the morally degraded non-Indigenous mining community of Ballarat.

The Aboriginal, Martin Simpson, in addressing a large assemblage at the Alfred hall last night on behalf of the Maloga Mission, stated that since his arrival in the fine City of Ballarat, he felt sorry on finding that there were many white people unconverted to God. During the past few days he was grieved on noticing men staggering about the streets of Ballarat overcome by the effects of intoxicating drink, that firewater which had cut out of existence and sent to a premature grave so many of his (Martin Simpson’s) race.

Missionaries, including Daniel, an Aboriginal man from the Lake Hindmarsh region, firmly believed they were acting in the best interests of Aboriginal people, and that to be ‘raised’ in Christianity was compensation for their losses as a result of British colonisation. Daniel and others such as Fred Wowinda who was observed ‘reading the Testament to a black from a neighbouring station’, support Richard Broome’s contention that ‘some Aboriginal people voluntarily embraced cultural enlargement and enrichment’. But not all: in the same period that significant numbers of Aboriginal people chose to express loyalty to ‘their Queen’, for instance, there were also relatively large numbers near the goldfields who ‘distrusted the good intentions of white men’ and insistently chose to live independently of the missions and reserves. The *Bendigo Advertiser*, in 1862 reported on the pitiful condition of a Djadjawurrung widow who preferred to stay in her own country rather than be shifted to a foreign reserve or mission. Other Aboriginal voices indicate that Christian sentiments and piecemeal aid were perceived with a degree of ridicule. An Aboriginal-English ditty recorded during the 1850s vividly illustrates Aboriginal peoples’ disdain at impoverished charity: ‘One blanket ‘twee four of us, No jolly good to us, best fellow rum’.

An anecdotal story related by W Dobie describes how 'Prince Jamie', an Aboriginal person at an unspecified goldfield, would provide a scornful performance about the Aboriginal Protection Establishment (Franklinford, central Victoria) to equally scornful gold diggers:

He [Jamie] would commence with an imitation of the chanting of the service, in a reverent attitude, and with an attempt at grave looks. He would then wind up in solemn accents with these words, "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever s'all be, world without end, amen. No give it grog, no give it flour, cabbage, baccy, b----- the money!"

In the absence of a pro-active Aboriginal policy by successive Victorian governments, a number of Missionary bodies, most notably the Moravians and Presbyterians, attempted to provide refuge and spiritual teaching. Again, while some Aboriginal people chose to incorporate elements of Christianity into their culture, others embraced Christianity as a means of personal salvation and their race's survival; still others utilised the mission as a refuge and as a platform from which to launch a raft of initiatives which would provide them with greater self-determination. The missionaries were able to impart some precepts of Christianity in the face of an overwhelmingly secular gold frontier society and to provide a nexus for involvement with non-Indigenous people. The lure of the goldfields, the proximity of the goldfields shanties, readily available employment opportunities and a laissez faire attitude towards Aboriginal policy ensured the failure of some missionaries' efforts.

The 1860s heralded an era whereby the colonial government sought to 'protect and control' Aboriginal people's lives. The catalyst for this course of action was pressure brought to bear on the government by Aboriginal and non-Indigenous voices throughout the 1850s to improve the social and economic welfare of Aboriginal people in Victoria. The attempts of the CBA to 'protect and settle' the Victorian Aboriginal population were shown to be largely untenable. Now the very concept of 'protection' was approached from different angles. But again, Aboriginal people responded in a range of ways to the presence of CBA appointed Guardians, particularly in auriferous regions. We have seen how traditional lifestyles were able, in the main, to be continued: George Wathen recorded traditional camping grounds, harming practices, physical ornamentation, housing, clothing, language and earth sculptures being maintained by Djabwurrung people at Challicum Station (central Victoria) in November 1854. Aboriginal voices continued to be raised to entreat for land and other rights; physical refuge was sometimes sought; friendships and kinship ties were forged; new paradigms of living were explored; and the resources of the Guardians were exploited to the advantage of the Aboriginal community. Yet the good intentions of missionaries and the CBA were ultimately shattered by a failure of the colonial governments to commit adequate land and resources, and to

implement policy and legislation effectively to fractured Aboriginal communities which they believed were becoming extinct. Adding to the policy discord was the relative absence of consultation with Aboriginal people on matters of policy. The escalation of self-destructive behaviours amongst Aboriginal communities and the increasingly urgent tenor of communication regarding protection from self-abuse floundered in conflicting messages, demands and unreal expectations. Ultimately, what prevailed was confusion as to what to do and a lack of political will to do much at all.