

2. 'Troubles of a Beginner'

The Van Diemen's Land Company did not provide rapid or extensive returns to its shareholders. During its first 15 years of operation, the company spent £250,000 on its antipodean venture, yet no dividend was paid for the first 11 years and the few that were subsequently paid were small.¹ The slow progress increasingly troubled the London-based directors, who also became concerned about Edward Curr senior's 'frequent and acrimonious disputes' with the authorities in Hobart. In the late 1830s these issues reached crisis point due to Curr's 'persistent refusal to pay part of the salary of the police magistrate stationed at Circular Head'. The dispute greatly hindered the progress of land exchange negotiations between the company and the government, so the directors ordered Curr to pay the salary in 1839. When he refused 'on the ground that compliance would injure his dignity' he was given a year's notice to vacate his position.²

There were many in Van Diemen's Land who were not disappointed to see the back of Edward Curr senior, as he had a reputation for poor treatment of those under his charge. He was known to physically assault his indentured servants on the regular occasions that they tried to escape; he also sentenced assigned convicts to floggings at twice the rate of other magistrates in Van Diemen's Land.³ When Curr eventually departed, a local newspaper reported 'unusual joy' in the Circular Head community: 'the result will be no less beneficial to the affairs of the company, we trust, than pleasing to its tenants and servants'.⁴ In contrast, local historians Kerry Pink and Gill Vowles grant Curr considerable credit for his management of the Van Diemen's Land Company, which they suggest was financially doomed from the outset. They argue that a lack of support from the London directors contributed to Curr's 'increasingly autocratic and belligerent dealings with the Hobart bureaucracy'.⁵ For his own part, Curr senior pointed to the 'singular circumstances' of his being most likely 'the sole survivor of the hundreds of chief agents of companies which date from the memorable 1825'. Curr believed this record deserved more respect from the directors, who, he argued, had 'practically for years disregarded every word of [his] advice'.⁶

Interestingly, the acrimonious nature of Edward Curr's departure from the company is not consistent with the version given by his son in 1877. In his 'Memoranda Concerning Our Family', Edward M. Curr wrote of his father:

1 Von Stieglitz 1952: 18.

2 Pike 1966: 271.

3 Duxbury 1989: 49–51.

4 *Cornwall Chronicle*, 19 March 1842, quoted in McFarlane 2003: 296.

5 Pink and Vowles 1998: 18.

6 Edward Curr to Van Diemen's Land Company Board, quoted in Pink and Vowles 1998.

Though much attached to Circular Head, which with its singular bluff, beautiful bays, pleasant beaches, unsurpassed climate, and those green fields which had been as it were his own creation ... he gave up his position there in 1841, and betook himself with his family to Port Phillip ... He parted with the company whose lands he had selected, and whose affairs he had managed for many years on the best terms.⁷

It is possible (if unlikely) that Edward M. Curr was unaware of his father's poor relationship with the company directors; it is more probable that he chose to hide the fact from his descendants when writing his family memoir.

In August 1839 Edward M. Curr accompanied his father on a trip across Bass Strait to the booming Port Phillip District of New South Wales. Curr senior had long been interested in the economic potential of the mainland; he had not only urged the Van Diemen's Land Company to push for land grants at Western Port, but in 1827 had personally applied to Governor Darling for a grant, along with such men as John Batman and Joseph Gellibrand.⁸ Edward M. Curr later observed that his father 'formed a very high opinion of the colony' during his visit in 1839 and made several town allotment purchases.⁹ Clearly he was laying the foundations of a new life for his family.

After his visit to Melbourne, Edward M. Curr spent approximately a year working for the Van Diemen's Land Company at Surrey Hills and Emu Bay. This was the only pastoral apprenticeship he served before his ten years of squatting in Victoria, where his impressive Stonyhurst education would surely have been of limited use. In January 1841 his father bought a small sheep station called Wolfscrag (later Wild Duck Creek), which was situated approximately 70 miles north of Melbourne. Barely 20 years old, Edward M. Curr was sent by his father to manage the station.

'Journey to Wolfscrag'

Curr's years as a squatter are documented in great detail in his published memoir. It is important to recognise, however, that *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* is not a contemporary record of Curr's early life, but a nostalgic memoir written 40 years after the events it recalls. The perspective of an older man certainly shapes Curr's engaging narrative of his youthful experiences. Curr recalled that as a young man he had 'little inclination' to be a sheep farmer, but acting under paternal instruction he sailed to the Port Phillip District to take delivery of

7 Edward M. Curr, 'Memoranda Concerning Our Family' (1877), SLV, MS 8998.

8 Shaw 1996: 37–38.

9 Curr 1883: 22.

2,300 sheep and his father's new station. His father had directed him to engage an overseer, 'from whom I should be able to learn sheep-farming, of which I knew nothing'. He employed the existing manager of the station and instructed him to return to Wolfscrag and await his arrival. Conscious of his inexperience, Curr hoped to find friendly company for his own journey north and was glad to encounter two men (one known to his father) who offered to join him. After a few days in Melbourne, Curr and his companions rode out of town on a hot afternoon, making their way towards the 'Bush Inn', 35 miles to the north: 'we rode slowly, and did not reach the inn until a couple of hours or more after sundown, when my experience of Australian bush life began'.¹⁰

After two more days of leisurely riding, Curr and his companions arrived at Wolfscrag shortly before sunset. Curr found his new situation to be 'anything but inviting' and his companions offered no congratulations on his prospects. Wolfscrag consisted of 'a mass of barren quartz ranges, between which were a few long narrow flats, watered by small creeks, and very poorly grassed'. The station headquarters comprised two small slab huts located in a grassless valley. When writing *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria*, Curr undoubtedly emphasised the lack of potential for narrative effect, but his description of the unpromising establishment is worth recounting:

From the huts no grass or herbage could be seen; the dust from the lately yarded flocks slowly drifted in a cloud down the desolate valley, and the whole scene, from a sheep-farmer's point of view, was as disheartening as could well be imagined.¹¹

After dismounting, Curr entered the overseer's hut – his new home – 'the interior of which was scarcely an improvement on its outward appearance'.¹² With barely concealed irony, Curr derived considerable amusement from the pride shown by the overseer as he handed over the hut to its new owner:

[He] formally put me in possession of the premises, with the air of one who was relinquishing what he evidently looked on as a very complete little establishment. Of the correctness of his views on this subject it hardly needed the smile, which I thought I detected on the faces of my friends, to remind me that some diversity of opinion might exist.¹³

Curr's friend assured him the hut was adequate, explaining 'we don't think this bad in the bush'. Recalling his poor first impression, Curr was able to highlight his rite of passage to experienced bushman: '[The hut] was clean in

10 Curr 1883: 23–24.

11 Curr 1883: 29–30.

12 Curr 1883: 30.

13 Curr 1883: 32.

its way, but very comfortless as I thought then; later on I got used to things still rougher'. Curr and his friends were then served a simple meal by the overseer's servant, which became an additional source of amusement in Curr's memoir: "'*Messieurs, vous êtes servis!*'" said one of my friends, laughing, as we began our meal; probably some hotel on the *Boulevards* suggesting itself to his mind as a contrast!'¹⁴

Curr spent only a few days at Wolfscrag before he concluded: 'my father's seemingly cheap purchase was in reality a very bad one'. Apart from the lack of grass, the station was under-resourced, possessing no horses, bullocks or dray; moreover, the sheep were of dubious quality, undernourished, diseased and one in three were worn out. Curr anticipated a loss of at least £800 in his first year as a sheep farmer and concluded that 'very vigorous measures would have to be taken to put matters on a proper footing'.¹⁵ He was quickly convinced that abandoning Wolfscrag in favour of better country was the best possible course. He delayed this plan, however, until he could consult with his father and consider the legality of moving scabby sheep.

In the meantime, the only option available to Curr for limiting his father's financial loss was to hire three new shepherds at a reduced rate of pay (down from £52 per annum to £45). He later recalled that the task of hiring new labour in Melbourne in 1841 'was not by any means an agreeable job'. In fact, his account of visiting a public house to find expiring convict labour was the first of many examples Curr later provided to illustrate the 'Troubles of a Beginner'.¹⁶ Entering a rowdy public house for the first time in his life, Curr encountered 30 patrons in various stages of inebriation: 'from maudlin imbecility to that of a maddened bacchanal, vigorous and rampant, in the first stage of his debauch'. A 'burly ruffian' soon threatened the youthful Curr:

[He] accosted me in a savage and impertinent tone with 'What the --- devil do you want, bloke, eh?' 'A bullock driver,' I replied, looking him in the face, and grasping firmly the hunting-whip which I held in my hand. My answer elicited from the company a roar of laughter, with oaths, yells, and imprecations.¹⁷

Curr was rescued from the threatening mob by the publican, who ushered him into a separate room and presented various candidates for work, 'whose money being spent, were no longer of any use to him'. Curr selected his new and cheaper labour force from among these 'worthies' and returned to Wolfscrag, where he set about trying to be a sheep farmer. He initially had some difficulty convincing

14 Curr 1883: 32–34. *Messieurs, vous êtes servis!* – Gentlemen, you have been served!

15 Curr 1883: 39.

16 Curr 1883: 40.

17 Curr 1883: 41–42.

his new employees to complete their allocated tasks, as they (like Curr) soon took a dislike to the conditions at Wolfscrag: they particularly objected to the difficulties associated with supervising sheep or bullocks which strayed far in their search for decent grass. Curr later noted that his employee's grievances were 'a matter requiring some tact' and that any attempt at '*compelling*' the men to do their work would have been pointless.¹⁸

With the help of his overseer, Curr slowly began to adapt to a new and unfamiliar lifestyle. As he later recalled, these first weeks presented many challenges for an inexperienced young man:

To me a squatter's life was a great change from my previous experiences; my not very delightful occupations at this period being helping to dress the sheep for scab and foot-rot, a little bullock-driving, learning to find my way about the bush (an art which had been sadly neglected in my education), getting used to the ways of my men, and in the evening reading Youatt's book on 'The Sheep.'¹⁹

Curr's poor ability to navigate through the bush was soon exposed when four of his six bullocks 'absconded'. Each day for a fortnight Curr searched the surrounding country and he quickly discovered the challenge of navigation: 'For my part, whilst attempting to find the missing animals, it was only with great difficulty that I managed not to lose myself.'²⁰ In the narrative of *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* the loss of the bullocks becomes a seminal event with two critically important consequences: first, as Curr recorded, 'it was the means of making me a bushman'; and secondly, as we shall see, the search for the truant bovines eventually led Curr to 'the well-grassed plains of Tongala and the ever-flowing Goulburn'.²¹

The search for the bullocks was initially unsuccessful and was abandoned after two weeks. Nevertheless, matters at Wolfscrag improved slightly when Curr's overseer suggested that the increasingly hungry sheep should be moved to a patch of well-grassed country further north, which Curr later found was part of a neighbour's lease. Despite sinister behaviour from his overseer, who apparently knew moving the sheep north would amount to trespass, Curr and his men shifted the starving flock and set up a simple outstation. The shepherds' spirits rose immediately, as they knew the sheep would not stray far from the new pastures.²² Soon afterwards the overseer's three-month contract expired and Curr chose not to renew it, having found his assistance underwhelming.

18 Curr 1883: 43–44.

19 Curr 1883: 45.

20 Curr 1883: 45–46.

21 Curr 1883: 69.

22 Curr 1883: 47–51, 73.

The overseer and his servant were paid off and returned to Melbourne with the bullock driver, who was sent for more supplies. As the three shepherds were happily ensconced at their new outstation six miles to the north, Curr found himself alone at Wolfscrag for the first time.

'Alone At My Hut'

When recalling his first visit to Melbourne in 1839, Curr had observed the morbid interest of the town's populace in the expedition of Joseph Hawdon and Alfred Mundy, who sought an overland route between Melbourne and Adelaide:

The uncertainty of whether these explorers would succeed in passing through several hundred miles of unexplored country beset with blacks, or whether they would get their brains knocked out on the way, was, of course, the principal feature of interest in the affair.²³

Eighteen months later, when Curr spent a night at the Bush Inn on his way to Wolfscrag, he heard news of more immediate import to his new situation. He met a man whose brother, an overseer at a station only ten miles from Wolfscrag, had recently died 'from a wound received in an encounter with the Blacks'. Curr learnt that some station employees had been killed in the encounter, and that soldiers had been sent from Melbourne for the protection of those who survived. Given this prior knowledge, not to mention the earlier fatal encounters between his father's employees and the Aborigines at Cape Grim (of which he surely would have been aware), there is little wonder that the departure of Curr's overseer from Wolfscrag represented a major moment in his life to that point (or, as Curr put it, 'one of the little epochs in my reminiscences').²⁴

Forty years later, in accomplished prose, Curr vividly recollected sitting on a log and watching as the overseer, servant, bullock-driver and dray passed first from sight and then from sound:

What appeared to me an unusual stillness and loneliness then seemed to settle around me. Afterwards I got used to being alone, and very indifferent on the subject, but it was not so then; and I don't know whether it will strike the reader that the position in which I was placed was a nervous one, bearing in mind that with very little experience of

²³ Curr 1883: 19.

²⁴ Curr 1883: 28, 52.

the bush I was suddenly left by myself, probably for three weeks, in an unfrequented spot, and in a neighbourhood in which a considerable number of exasperated and hostile Blacks were known to be.²⁵

That Curr later described the local Indigenous people as 'exasperated' (not merely 'hostile') indicates an understanding of their predicament. His narrative suggests he viewed Aboriginal resistance as an inevitable consequence of British invasion, but this belief did not undermine his faith in the righteousness of the colonial endeavour. As a 20-year-old, Curr's attitudes to racial relations were likely less developed than those that motivated him as an author 40 years later. In 1841 his mood was dominated by fear and anxiety, as he readily admitted.

Curr explained his anxiety by identifying his youth and inexperience, the fact that he was 'indifferently armed', that he had 'never seen the Blacks, except in Melbourne' and that he was 'totally ignorant of their ways'. Consequently, his first day of solitude at Wolfscrag 'weighed a good deal on [his] spirits' and heightened his senses in response to unexplained sounds from the bush:

The wind, the noise of a falling bough, the cawing of a crow, or the whistle of a hawk – which yesterday failed to attract attention – made me now look carefully around ... If a flight of cockatoos passed screaming over the valley, I used to wonder whether they had been disturbed by anyone; and if so, by whom – by a White man or Black? and look carefully around to see if I could descry anyone coming.²⁶

His fear was exacerbated when, after a few days of solitude, a passing trooper reported that 'Blacks had been committing depredations' in the neighbourhood of Wolfscrag. The trooper suggested Curr be on his guard, warning him that Aborigines sought revenge for the shooting of some of their people 15 miles away, 'on the banks of the Campaspe'.²⁷ In *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* Curr spends six pages describing the growing sense of foreboding that he felt during his isolation at Wolfscrag. The narrative serves to raise the tension as the seemingly inevitable encounter draws near. The encounter itself occupies a further six pages.²⁸

When dressing one morning after sunrise Curr noticed 'some wild ducks alight in a water-hole'. He consequently took one of his two guns and 'sallied out' in the 'drizzling rain' to stalk his prey; the ducks eluded him and he returned to his hut with a damp firearm. When the ducks returned a little later, he ventured out again with his other gun, suspecting the first would misfire due to moist

25 Curr 1883: 51–52.

26 Curr 1883: 52–54.

27 Curr 1883: 54–55.

28 Curr 1883: 55–61.

gunpowder; unsuccessful for a second time, Curr returned to his hut to cook breakfast. Some time later his kangaroo dog alerted him to an intrusion and Curr spotted a small dog, which he assumed in his inexperience to be wild:

I levelled my carbine and was about to fire, when something which moved amongst a clump of bushes a few yards off attracted my attention. Quick as thought, I turned the muzzle of my gun from the dog to the bushes, at which, though I could distinguish nothing for the instant, I nevertheless held it pointed, keeping myself still partly covered by the hut. This proceeding, I have no doubt, saved my life, for the next moment I caught sight of a pair of spears quivering amongst the boughs, from which, after a moment's delay, lowering their weapons, there stepped two Blacks, stark naked, and in all the beauties of war-paint.²⁹

In Curr's account, the stand-off which followed was tense and drawn out – the Indigenous visitors protested benign intentions, while Curr grew more certain of his peril: 'The hatred which their looks could not hide disconcerted me.' Curr apparently remained calm and vigilant, never lowering his weapon as he retreated to the door of his hut: 'I drew a long breath of relief when I reached my strong-hold.' The episode becomes a key moment in Curr's passage to manhood:

My visitors, I fancy, still entertained hopes that being young and evidently unused to their ways, I should sooner or later expose myself, when they would kill me. If so, however, they reckoned without their host, for I had made up my mind to trust myself with them no more, but to fight it out, when the time came, at the doorway, where I should have the assistance of a dog, and where two could not get at me at once.³⁰

Despite a threat from Curr that 'if they came an inch nearer my door I would shoot them', and a corresponding intimation from Curr's visitors that they would spear him, the encounter ended in a stalemate. Curr was not confident of the reliability of his damp firearms and surmised that if they misfired he would be attacked: 'Had it not been for my doubts on this score, I should have shot one of them at once in self-defence, as it seemed to me that blows were inevitable. Ever afterwards I was glad that I had not done so.' The stalemate ended when, according to Curr, 'the prudence of the two worthies got the better of their valour' and they 'disappeared into the scrub'. When danger had passed, Curr tried his guns, which both failed to fire: 'I had had a narrow escape, and took it as a warning which never required repeating, being from that time scrupulously attentive to the state of my fire-arms.'³¹

29 Curr 1883: 56–57.

30 Curr 1883: 58–59.

31 Curr 1883: 59–60.

Curr's recollection of this undoubtedly memorable event provides considerable insight into both his youthful inexperience and the preoccupations of his later life. On the one hand, Curr's account shows how luck (or 'Divine Providence') enabled the young squatter to overcome his early inexperience. The event was also a lesson in vigilance – to keep your guns loaded and well maintained. On the other hand, Curr's account must be read as a product of the 1880s, penned by an older man looking back on his youth. The older Curr's position on the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines is surely relevant when considering how he constructed the narrative of his early inter-racial experiences. Importantly, by emphasising that he did not shoot an Aborigine he affirms his self-professed status as a protector of Aborigines. Nevertheless, Curr did not condemn frontier violence: while he regretted the death of Aborigines by the rifle, he also saw it as occasionally inevitable and unsurprising. Curr believed that Aborigines were bound to resist the invasion of their lands, but was convinced that their dispossession was justified. Consequently, after his close call at Wolfscrag, he prepared himself for possible future conflict: 'When next in Melbourne I also purchased an excellent pair of pistols, which I learnt to use well, and had constantly at hand for several years'.

Curr was alone at Wolfscrag for about three weeks until his bullock driver returned with the dray full of supplies. The driver was accompanied by a married couple, who joined Curr's workforce as a shepherd and a servant. While Curr was glad to be relieved of his solitude, the apparently lowly status of the new arrivals did little to overcome his sense of social isolation: 'I had still no one to converse with.'³²

'Removal to Tongala'

After his period of solitude, Curr hoped to commence his search for a more productive squatting run, but first returned to the problem of his lost bullocks. The passing trooper, who had warned Curr to beware of 'hostile blacks', had also provided the welcome news that four stray bullocks had been seen on the Goulburn River. Serendipitously, the renewed search for his escaped bullocks eventually led Curr to 'unoccupied country' that suited his purposes nicely. A few days after the return of his dray, Curr set off in search of his bullocks, accompanied by his bullock driver. They followed the 'Major's Line', the route marked by the dray tracks of Major Thomas Mitchell's 'Australia Felix' expedition of 1836, until they reached the Goulburn River at the 'Old Crossing

32 Curr 1883: 61.

Place' north of Seymour. In *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* the description of this journey provided Curr with the perfect opportunity to proffer his views on the inevitability and desirability of European dominance:

The stillness, so common a feature in the Australian woods, I constantly noticed during my ride. Equally characteristic was the sinuous creek, and not a bit like what I had seen in Tasmania. I saw nothing to remind me of the Blacks, and yet they must have wandered along the creek, built their huts on it, killed opossums along its banks and ducks on its waters for who shall say how many ages? whilst the single party of white men who had passed that way had left a road behind them which one might follow unaided.³³

Leaving the Major's Line at the Old Crossing Place, Curr followed the Goulburn River downstream where he encountered an Overlanders' camp, with 5,000 sheep bound for South Australia. He continued north for several days, passing the recently claimed pastoral runs of Baillieston, Toolamba, Ardpatrik and St Germain. He also spent a night at the Goulburn River Aboriginal protectorate station, his first experience of a government institution he would greatly influence later in life. Curr finally recovered his bullocks at the Wyuna cattle station, which, at the time, was the farthest down the Goulburn River that European pastoralists had extended their range of occupation.

Apart from retrieving cattle, the journey was useful to Curr for two additional reasons: first, he met an able (but unemployed) man on the road and hired him as his new overseer; secondly, and more importantly, a station hand showed him the plains west of Wyuna, where 'excellent unoccupied country' adjoined the Goulburn River near its junction with the Murray River. Already predisposed to abandoning Wolfscrag, Curr immediately decided to relocate his sheep and 'take up' a new run, a course that faced 'no hindrances of any sort'.³⁴ Limited only by the quantity of sheep he proposed to graze, Curr applied for a lease over 50 square miles of land on either side of the Goulburn River. To qualify for the lease, he was simply required to be the first to place stock on the relevant country, which he immediately set about achieving. He instructed his new overseer to accompany the bullocks and driver back to Wolfscrag, returning by the same route along the Goulburn River and Major's Line. Curr himself journeyed 'across entirely unexplored country', scouting the most direct route for his proposed northward migration of sheep. Three days later he was back at Wolfscrag: the flocks were assembled in yards near his hut and a letter was

33 Curr 1883: 63.

34 Curr 1883: 68.

sent to Melbourne making a formal application for the new pastoral lease. When the overseer returned with the bullocks the final preparations began; Curr commenced his journey two days later, a little after sunrise.



Figure 7: Port Phillip District.

Map by Peter Johnson.

Curr's party totalled eight, including the overseer, four shepherds, the bullock driver and a cook. Being 'in the most hopeful of moods', Curr initially underestimated the effect his plans might have on his employees: 'I had almost forgotten to notice that my servants, from fear of the Blacks, were exceedingly averse to the journey I was beginning.' He recalled that most of his servants were expirée convicts from Van Diemen's Land 'where the Blacks were a very hostile race, and much dreaded'. Interestingly, in his own account of the journey north, Curr appears free from any anxiety: perhaps he comforted himself with the knowledge that 'shepherds ... as a rule are the persons who get speared in new country'. Whatever the case, *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* creates the distinct impression that the 20-year-old Curr had quickly mastered any fear of Aboriginal attack and now faced his next challenge: managing and assuaging the fears of his servants.³⁵

³⁵ Curr 1883: 74–75.

Curr armed each of his men with a carbine and six cartridges: 'as much perhaps to give them confidence as from any likelihood of a collision with the Blacks'. Despite his best efforts, Curr recalled that he only narrowly avoided a mutiny by his shepherds. After four days of driving through the foreboding scrub, the four shepherds formally complained and asked to be paid out and released. Although Curr believed he could manage the immediate task of driving without his shepherds, he also knew that finding new staff would be difficult and that their absence would preclude shearing, building of huts and other important tasks. Tellingly, Curr also considered a reduction in numbers to be detrimental to the safety of his group: 'it was most desirable to meet the Murray and Goulburn Blacks, who bore the reputation of being numerous and troublesome, with a fairly strong party'. In other words, Curr privately recognised that the fears of his shepherds were legitimate.³⁶

According to Curr's account, he managed with poise and tact to master a threatening situation and control his fractious workforce. First, he attempted to reason with them and chided them for their 'groundless timidity'. Later he covertly confiscated the shepherds' firearms and prepared his own for possible use, should the 'gaolbirds' resort to violence. In the morning, Curr issued an ultimatum, instructing his shepherds 'to proceed with me on my journey, or to leave my camp without arms, food, or wages'. Curr then ordered his loyal staff (the overseer, bullock driver and cook) to prepare for the day's driving. According to Curr, 'threatening speeches were made, and there was loud grumbling, but no violence'. As the party moved off the shepherds reluctantly returned to their duties. The following evening Curr 'held out the olive branch' by offering the men release from service as soon as he could hire replacement labour.³⁷

Curr's account of this episode serves, of course, to portray his raw yet effective abilities as a master of men: Curr painted himself as firm but fair – able to exert authority as well as tact. He continued by recording that the fear of his men was shortly alleviated when the party emerged from the 'scrubby country' on to the 'beautiful plains of Colbinabbin and Coragorag'. It seems likely that Curr's own courage was boosted by this welcome change, although he does not say as much in *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria*, where intimations of cowardice are reserved for his expirée convict labour.

While crossing the plains of Colbinabbin, Curr was encouraged by the rising spirits of his men and rode west to the Burramboot ranges to survey the scene:

The features of the landscape were sunshine and stillness; my little party, now and then discernible amongst the lines of trees on the banks of the

³⁶ Curr 1883: 75–78.

³⁷ Curr 1883: 79–81.

creek, was creeping slowly on in a northerly direction; here and there a flock of emus, or a few bustards, were feeding on the green herbage; and on the eastern side of the plain, fifteen or twenty miles away, I could just make out a faint line of smoke, rising, no doubt, from a native encampment on the edge of the forest.³⁸

Here Curr's description conveys a sense of the untapped potential of the land: importantly, the 'stillness' of the scene is not disturbed by the clear signs of an Indigenous presence 'on the edge of the forest'.³⁹ Curr had no difficulty in characterising the land as simultaneously 'unoccupied' and frequented by Aborigines; the Indigenous encampment was simply part of the scenery and did not represent the effective use of productive land by a rival group. Curr explained that, if not for the lack of water, he would happily have ended his journey on the plains of Colbinabbin. Three years later he returned to occupy these fine grasslands with his expanding flocks; but for the time being he drove his sheep northward to the reliable flow of the Goulburn River.

38 Curr 1883: 82.

39 Curr regularly refers to the 'stillness' of the bush. See for example, Curr 1883: 51, 63, 124.