3. ‘A Station Formed at Tongala’

In July 1841 Edward M. Curr arrived at his new 50-square-mile squatting run, which he named ‘Tongala’. He later recalled the derivation of his station name: ‘The name was not by any means an apt one, as it is the Bangerang name for the River Murray.’ Tongala in fact straddled the Goulburn River; Curr set up his station headquarters on the river’s southern bank, about eight miles from its confluence with the Murray. He did not record the reason for his inappropriate usage of the name; it might have been the result of a misunderstanding, or perhaps Curr chose it for its aesthetic value, as he later opined that Aboriginal words were ‘frequently very euphonious’. When researching Aboriginal vocabularies several decades later, Curr noticed that many Aboriginal names had been ‘retained by the whites’, but noted their generally ‘mutilated condition’.  

At Tongala Curr encountered for the first time the Indigenous people who are the ancestors of the Yorta Yorta claimant group. According to Curr’s classification, his squatting run encompassed the traditional land of at least two clans: the Towroonban lived predominantly on the sandhills between the Goulburn and Murray rivers, while the more numerous Wongatpan congregated further north in the region known as the Moira. As Curr described it, these two clans constituted the true ‘Bangerang’ tribe, although they belonged to a wider tribal federation linked by language. Curr described various other related clans in surrounding areas, with which he was less familiar, including the Wollithiga, Kailtheban, Boongatpan, Pikkolatpan, Angootheraban, Ngarrimowro, Moitheriban and Toolinyagan. He noted that the linguistically distinct Ngooraialum tribe, which occupied country to the south, commonly referred to all these clans as ‘Bangerang’. Based on information from other squatters Curr surmised that in 1841 ‘the whole Bangerang race numbered not less than twelve hundred souls’.  

In most cases, however, when Curr referred to the Bangerang, he meant the two principal clans that resided on his own pastoral runs: the opossum-hunting Towroonban and the fish-loving Wongatpan, who numbered 50 and 150 respectively when Curr arrived.

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1 Curr 1883: 68, 83, 220–221; see also Furphy 2002: 23–38.
2 Curr 1883: 234.
3 My usage of the names of clans and tribes reflects Curr’s usage and is not intended to imply that these designations were or are necessarily accurate.
Figure 8: Edward M. Curr’s Map of Bangerang territory.

Curr’s first encounter with Bangerang people occurred soon after he arrived with his sheep in July 1841. As his memoir relates, he set his men to work building yards for the sheep, but his arrival was soon noticed:

Whilst engaged at this work, my attention was attracted by a cooey, and … we saw three Blacks on the opposite side of the stream. Their appearance on the scene caused some little trepidation in my old Tasmanians, whose idea, as I heard one of them express it, was ‘to kid (entice) them over and shoot the lot.’

Curr described the violent attitude of his shepherds with typical frankness; importantly, however, the episode enabled him to establish his own apparent benevolence. Curr explained that one of his men, who was ‘accustomed to the Blacks’, greeted the Bangerang men with a more friendly manner and they were soon invited to cross the river and join Curr’s party. Describing the visitors in some detail, Curr noted the ‘not ungraceful folds’ of their decorated opossum skin cloaks. He also recalled the reaction of the three men to his party’s invasion of their territory:

The crash of the trees falling on the edge of the little plain which had so long been their property, and of which we were unceremoniously taking possession, and the general devastation which accompanies the white man, naturally attracted their attention. Their eyes seemed to take in what was being done, and every strange object around them, but neither word nor gesture of curiosity or surprise escaped them.

The reserved and non-committal mood of the three men apparently required some tact on Curr’s part. Forty years later, Curr constructed for himself a role as a calm and rational negotiator:

After they had come to comprehend that I was going to remain permanently at Tongala, and heard what I had to say about the heinousness of sheep-stealing and shepherd-spearng, the power of firearms, and the beauty of my kangaroo dogs – which they much admired – I thought it best to address myself to the better feelings of my guests by directing the cook to give each of them as much meat, tea and damper as would serve two ordinary whites for a meal.

This passage in Curr’s *Recollections* reveals not only his belief in the righteousness of colonial acquisition, but also his paternalistic approach to Aboriginal management – a firm show of authority accompanied by a simple but generous gesture. Curr argued that Aborigines were well suited to the type of discipline

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4 Curr 1883: 84.
5 Curr 1883: 86.
6 Curr 1883: 86.
that he practiced at Tongala: ‘the Black very easily accommodated himself to the routine of stations; discipline, if not too severe, rather meeting with his approval’.7

The three Bangerang men provided useful assistance to Curr, helping ferry his sheep across the river in a specially made canoe and stripping bark for the roof of his hut. During the fortnight that Curr and his men spent building the requisites of a station, the utilisation of Indigenous labour served a dual purpose:

> Of the Blacks … considerable numbers gradually made their appearance and camped at the station, which I encouraged them to do, both because I found their services useful, and thought them far less likely under such circumstances to attack the shepherds, or steal my sheep, than if I drove them away and placed myself in a hostile attitude towards them.

Nevertheless, Curr added that he kept his party armed to ensure there was ‘no temptation to violence’ among the Aborigines he dispossessed: ‘In this course I persisted for several years – in fact, until danger was at an end.’8

Curr’s conception of Aborigines as childlike was firmly established by the 1880s when he penned his memoir and likely shaped his memory of his first encounter with the Bangerang:

> What struck me, on first acquaintance, was their freedom from all the business cares and responsibilities of the white man. They constantly reminded me of children, whose anxieties were about matters to which the average white man is not called on to pay much attention. Besides, they had but little care for the future, their existence being literally from hand to mouth.9

Crucially, by portraying the Bangerang as childlike, Curr created for himself a paternalistic role. In the settler colonial relationship, the childlike Aborigine is quickly placed in a subordinate role to the white man, whose ‘business cares and responsibilities’ mark him out as racially superior. This paternalism is expressed in a variety of ways, not least by Curr’s recollection that he ‘christened’ the entire Bangerang tribe:

> It was not long after our arrival at Tongala until the Bangerang began to find the want of names very inconvenient in their intercourse with

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7 Curr 1883: 264.
8 Curr 1883: 92.
us. They were, of course, aware that their Ngooraialum neighbours had all got white names, so they took the matter up, and several came to me daily to be named.¹⁰

Curr subsequently found it ‘very amusing’ to hear his Bangerang neighbours rehearsing their names and ‘returning several times in the day to hear it repeated’. He also recalled with mirth the names he gave to some men, such as ‘Plato’, ‘Jolly-chops’ and ‘Tallyho’. After observing the customs surrounding an exchange of women between the Bangerang and the Ngooraialum, Curr even considered the idea of ‘giving away’ Aboriginal brides: ‘[I] should probably have moved in that matter had not my very imperfect knowledge of aboriginal tongues prevented me’.¹¹

Shortly after Curr established Tongala, his brother Richard arrived to assist him. The following year his parents resettled in Melbourne, where Edward Curr senior became a prominent businessman and politician. Curr senior purchased a second pastoral station called Steele’s Creek, which was located closer to Melbourne near the recently gazetted town of Kilmore. Edward M. Curr managed this station for several months while Richard oversaw activities at Tongala. Meanwhile, a number of Curr’s younger brothers joined the family’s pastoral empire: by 1843 there were five Currs involved, including Edward (22), William (21), Richard (20), Charles (16) and Walter (15). With rapidly expanding sheep flocks the Curr brothers quickly acquired pastoral leases over vast areas of land in northern Victoria.

¹⁰ Curr 1883: 270–271.
Edward M. Curr and the Tide of History

Figure 9: Map of the Runs of the Late Edward Curr, of St Heliers.

In *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria*, Curr gives a detailed account of the rapid growth of his pastoral enterprise. A prominent character is the Commissioner of Crown Lands, whose authority in the remote squatting districts was supreme. The commissioner for the Western Port District (which included Tongala) was F.A. Powlett, whom Curr described as ‘a pleasant, chatty person’ who was ‘popular and highly respected’. The commissioner had the power to grant pastoral leases throughout his district and, according to Curr, often did so in a casual or summary manner. Curr recalled a ride he took with Powlett in early 1842, during which Curr took a fancy to some pastures north of the Murray River:

> I applied on the spot for a block of five miles’ frontage to the river by eight miles back, which was granted without difficulty, the Commissioner and myself both forgetting that we were actually in a district to which his authority did not extend.  

While the Currs never officially leased the portion of their squatting run north of the Murray River, they soon obtained leasehold title to ample pastures in the Port Phillip District. In December 1842 Edward M. Curr moved 2,000 sheep from the overstocked station at Steele’s Creek to Tongala, where he and Richard sought to expand their territory. The Currs applied for the massive Moira lease, which was north of Tongala between the Murray and Goulburn rivers. The lush summer pastures of the flood-prone Moira greatly appealed to Edward M. Curr, but the land was also highly valued by the local Aborigines: ‘its extensive reed-beds were the great stronghold of the Bangerang Blacks’. Despite concerted resistance from the Bangerang (downplayed by Curr but examined more fully in the next chapter of this book) the Currs subsequently leased 100 square miles of the Moira country.

The success of the Currs’ pastoral venture plunged into uncertainty with the widespread financial collapse of 1843. When recalling the circumstances of the economic downturn, Curr described it as the inevitable consequence of past imprudence: ‘the results of the extravagance of the colonists were at hand … the general bottled beer and champagne bill of the community was about to be settled’. The short-term effect was highly detrimental to the Australian pastoral industry: sheep previously worth 40 shillings were sold for one shilling; Curr’s horses, purchased at nearly £40 each, dropped in value to less than the price of a common saddle. Stability returned to the industry with the discovery that boiling down sheep for tallow provided a more lucrative alternative to selling them on the depressed meat market. Curr correctly credited Henry O’Brien of

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12 Curr 1883: 122–123.
13 Curr 1883: 166.
14 Curr 1883: 214.
Yass with inspiring the tallow-led recovery of the Australian pastoral industry: sheep that were virtually unsaleable in April and May were worth up to eight shillings by June 1843. ¹⁵ According to the Port Phillip chronicler ‘Garryowen’ (Edmund Finn), Curr’s father also played a role in the emerging trade in tallow: ‘Edward Curr opened a boiling down establishment at Port Fairy’. ¹⁶

Despite the economic downturn, the Currs further expanded their pastoral holdings in 1843, moving south in search of drier land for winter grazing. Edward M. Curr was not initially aware that both the Tongala and Moira runs were inclined to flood in the wetter months, but a clue was provided when his brother Richard made a startling discovery near the Goulburn River: ‘my brother noticed a large log of wood which hung in the fork of a tree some six feet from the ground. … The log was old and charred by fire, and must have weighed two or three tons.’ ¹⁷ Edward and Richard were sceptical of Bangerang explanations that the log had been floated there by floodwaters, as this would have involved the inundation of large areas of land, which were then arid. Their doubts were shattered by the floods of 1843, when ‘the greater portion of our run (entre rios) became inundated, much of it to the depth of several feet’. Curr described the flood as ‘unpleasant … difficult and inconvenient’, the only solution to which was expanding his lease to include higher ground away from the rivers. ¹⁸

In August 1843 Curr set out on his chestnut mare to scout the land between Wolfsclag and Tongala, through which he had often passed. This 40-mile stretch of ‘undulating and sparsely-timbered country’ was ‘at that time entirely unoccupied’. The land had been ‘waterless … though well grassed and handsome’ on previous visits, but the heavy rains had rendered the country desirable. ¹⁹ Forty years later, Curr recalled vividly the wet night he spent camping on these valuable grasslands: ‘I slept soundly and comfortably until about midnight, when in a gradual sort of a way I became sensible that rain was falling in torrents.’ ²⁰ He described in detail the saturated plains on which he camped: ‘so desolate and dank just then, so handsome and cheery at other times’. Nevertheless, the nostalgic lens of recollection tempered the discomfort: ‘The chops of course were delicious, and champagne now-a-days is not the nectar that quart-pot tea was at twenty’. Curr’s mood was surely further boosted by the fact that he had found a new squatting run of 50 square miles, which he called Coragorog – ‘a sonorous appellation in the mouth of the Pinpandoor’. ²¹

¹⁶ Finn 1888: 116.
¹⁷ Curr 1883: 216.
¹⁸ Curr 1883: 217; entre rios means ‘between rivers’ in Portuguese.
¹⁹ Curr 1883: 220.
²⁰ Curr 1883: 225.
²¹ Curr 1883: 220–222.
Harley Forster has explained that the ‘efficient squatter’ established a seasonal routine for grazing, ‘influenced in his decisions by possibilities of drought on the plains and floods on the rivers and creeks’.\(^2\) Curr certainly introduced such a regime and moved two flocks to Coragorag shortly after his visit. With his flocks still expanding, Curr subsequently looked further south to the plains of Colbinabbin, but on this occasion the environmental effects of fire influenced his movements. In November and December of 1843 a widespread fire had swept the Colbinabbin area and was followed by extensive rains. With the creek full and fresh grasses growing, Curr resolved to lease the Colbinabbin plains, which he had admired since first crossing them in 1841. He later recalled that while in Melbourne for a holiday, he encountered by chance the Commissioner of Crown Lands and made a verbal application for the country. He was frustrated when the commissioner became unusually attentive to legal procedure and insisted Curr must be the first to put stock on the relevant country if any lease were to be granted. Curr recalled that his frustration at these conditions derived principally from the fact that his planned sojourn of several weeks in town was cut short by the immediate need to move sheep to Colbinabbin before any of his neighbours did so. He wrote that he ‘considered himself entitled’ to make the verbal application and surmised the commissioner knew of another (perhaps favoured) pastoralist who was interested in the Colbinabbin country.

Curr rode quickly to Tongala and prepared to relocate a ‘flock of scabby sheep’ to Colbinabbin. Richard Curr took charge of the sheep, while Edward packed a dray with supplies for a new station and followed behind. Once again, Curr had a diverting tale to tell: in this case it involved the competing claim for Colbinabbin by a neighbouring squatter, whom Curr managed to outmanoeuvre. When he arrived at Colbinabbin with the dray he was pleased:

I was delighted to find my party in undisturbed occupation, and that the little serpentine creek, embosomed in trees, now full to overflowing, and the green rolling plains and picturesque ranges were indeed possessions of my father. Of course, only squatting possessions, which, however, before the discovery of gold it was generally thought would last our time at least. As for the value of the country thus secured, it could easily have been sold for a thousand pounds even in those times, so that we had every reason to be pleased.\(^2\)

Curr’s contentment was broken a few days later when his neighbour arrived, hoping to scout out the location for his own station at Colbinabbin. He was extremely frustrated to find Curr already there: ‘It rather amused me that my neighbour, having no one else to make a confidant of, in a very complaining

\(^2\) Forster 1965b: 15.
sort of way sought my sympathy in his disappointment.’ After sharing a pot of tea the rival squatter got up to leave, an expression on his face betraying his intention to dispute Curr’s claim by placing a flock of his own sheep on the same country:

Not appearing to notice his words, I said carelessly, ‘How I regret that I cannot, like you, leave this rough work behind me and ride home. However, in another fortnight the sheep-dressing will be over and I shall be at liberty.’ ‘What,’ said he, ‘are your sheep scabby?’ ‘Oh yes,’ I replied, ‘this flock is a little so, and I have brought it here to be out of the way.’ This answer rendered his bringing his sheep near mine, for the purpose of disputing my possession, out of the question, and was, I think, the last drop of bitterness in his cup that day: at all events he turned his horse’s head and rode away without a word in reply.24

The irony that Edward M. Curr, Victoria’s Chief Inspector of Stock, had earlier gained possession of a squatting run worth ‘a thousand pounds’ by stocking it with scabby sheep would certainly not have been lost on his 1880s readership. In fact, Curr honestly confessed to scabby sheep at various points in Recollections of Squatting in Victoria. If nothing else, he showed that his prize-winning essay on scab in sheep, published in 1865, was informed by personal experience.

By the end of 1844 the Curr brothers had successfully occupied four valuable squatting runs: Tongala, the Moira, Coragorag and Colbinabbin. They subsequently added smaller pockets of land to the various leases and all received Indigenous names, including Cócoma, Dirra, Wollenjo, Gargarro, Námerong and Ullumbúbbil. At the full extent of their pastoral empire the Currs held over 300 square miles of land in northern Victoria.25 The pastoral leases were all held in the name of Edward Curr senior, with the exception of the Gágarro run, which was later known as Corop. Edward M. Curr leased the Corop run in partnership with his brother William and they stocked it with 1,500 ewes given to them by their father. When William died in 1846 he left his share of the venture to Edward. Although it was a small part of the Currs’ extensive pastoral holdings, the Corop run gave Edward M. Curr some financial independence from the wider family business. Nevertheless, for most of the 1840s he lived at the head station at Tongala.

‘The Father of Separation’

During the 1840s the Curr family revolved around the prominent, controversial, antagonistic and imposing figure of Edward Curr senior. He was the head of a large family and exerted considerable control over the lives and fortunes of his many children. Apart from directing his sons in their squatting ventures, Curr senior was a prominent businessman and investor, but he is best remembered for his significant public role in the emerging Port Phillip District. Edward M. Curr described his father as a big man, who was over six feet tall and weighed 17 stone: ‘He had a fine head, large and square, a massive jaw, and abstracted looking grey eyes.’ After moving to Melbourne in early 1842, Curr had established a home for his large family on the Yarra River at Abbotsford, which he named St Heliers. His daughter Elizabeth, who was eight-years-old when she arrived in Melbourne, later wrote that St Heliers was a picturesque property, comprising 20 acres of shrubberies, lawns, flower gardens and fruit gardens; she recalled that visitors from the Melbourne township ‘seemed to look at the garden as a sort of promised land, and many a basketful of fruit was sent to them by one of the gardeners’. Elizabeth also recalled that her father acquired two roan horses and a carriage from London, which he used to travel into town for his business and political activities.

Edward M. Curr later explained that his father moved to the Port Phillip District because it ‘offered to his young and numerous family, advantages incomparably greater than any presented by Van Diemen’s Land’. Despite this, Curr senior soon immersed himself in public affairs and, according to his son, neglected his family’s interests: ‘from the day of his arrival in Port Phillip [he] seemed almost to forget that he had any family, as he busied himself heart and soul with politics’. Curr senior’s prominent public role was evident within a year of his arrival in Melbourne. Despite courting controversy in a quarrel with temperamental Judge Willis of the Supreme Court, Curr was soon seen as a potential political leader. In January 1843 he was nominated to represent Melbourne at the first elections for the New South Wales Legislative Council, but his campaign was opposed by the prominent Presbyterian John Dunmore Lang, who backed Mayor Henry Condell as a rival candidate. Lang himself also stood for one of the five places on the council allotted to the Port Phillip District, despite the fact that he was a resident of Sydney. Fuelling the sectarian conflict, Curr announced that he would not sit in the council if Lang also won a seat, but was spared this apparent indignity when Condell won the Melbourne election by 295 votes to 261. The result was immediately followed by riots, as Catholic supporters of

26 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
27 Elizabeth Sarah Pennefather (née Curr), ‘In the Early Days’ (1911), Murrumbogie Papers.
28 Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
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Curr complained of irregular voting; a contingent of mounted police arrived and Captain Dana read the riot act. Meanwhile, Edward Curr pleaded with the rioters to disperse. In Sydney, Governor Gipps recognised Curr as the superior candidate but did not regret his defeat; he wrote to Superintendent Charles La Trobe three days after the riot that Curr had ‘showed no unfrequent signs of a bad and bitter spirit’. 30

Curr’s feud with Lang continued, but his focus soon shifted to the campaign for Port Phillip’s independence from New South Wales and its Sydney powerbrokers. As D.H. Pike has noted, Curr ‘threw his energies into the cause with such unmatched zeal that, although the movement had begun in 1840, he was later called “the Father of Separation.”’ 31 Some Port Phillip squatters who favoured the cause of Separation worried that Curr’s quarrelsome and ungovernable temper might prejudice the cause. 32 Nevertheless, Curr guided the campaign to a successful conclusion, news of which reached Melbourne from London only days before he died in November 1850. Meanwhile, he served two terms on the New South Wales Legislative Council and became a prominent spokesman on several important issues affecting the squatters.

In 1844 Governor Gipps had proposed new land regulations, which quickly attracted the opposition of squatters throughout New South Wales. Gipps proposed that no pastoral lease should comprise more than 20 square miles and stations more than seven miles apart should be considered separate, each incurring its own £10 annual lease fee. Furthermore, in order to retain their right of occupation, squatters would periodically be required to purchase 320-acre blocks within their lease for not less than £1 per acre. 33 The proposed regulations were particularly distasteful to the larger landholders, so Edward Curr senior was not surprisingly a prominent spokesman against the proposal. He addressed a meeting of Port Phillip squatters on Batman's Hill on 1 June 1844 and contributed to the campaign that ultimately saw the Gipps plan defeated.

While Curr enjoyed the support of his fellow squatters on the issue of land regulations, his support for the importation of penal labour earned the ire of many. When funding for the assisted immigration of free settlers was exhausted in 1843, Curr and others began to seek alternative sources of labour for their business and pastoral enterprises. Perhaps due to his Van Diemen’s Land experience, Curr senior was not opposed to the use of convict labour and threw his support behind a proposal to import ‘Pentonville Prisoners’ to Port Phillip. The Pentonville Prison was opened in north London in 1842 with a reformist ideology that became a model for the penal system throughout the British

31 Pike 1966.
32 See, for example, Neil Black to T.S. Gladstone, 16 October 1845, quoted in Kiddle 1967: 151.
33 Kiddle 1967: 165.
Empire. The increased focus on prisoner rehabilitation did not assuage the fears of the citizens of Port Phillip, who opposed the introduction of any form of penal labour. Curr justified his support for the scheme with an argument based on pragmatism: he insisted that he would prefer free labour, but that none was available; furthermore, the labour shortage would push up wages, which would in turn encourage ‘shoals of expirees’ to converge on Port Phillip from both Van Diemen’s Land and New South Wales.  

Curr’s economic argument did not win the support of all squatters with many fearing the social cost of penal labour. The issue was extremely divisive: in January 1847 Melbourne’s Argus condemned the plan as ‘the audacious attempt of a few shamelessly mercenary men to sacrifice a whole community for the sake of alleviating a temporary pressure in the labour market’. Despite considerable opposition, however, Curr and his supporters won the debate and 1,727 Pentonville prisoners arrived in Melbourne between 1844 and 1849. During the same period as many as 2,000 ex-convicts arrived from Van Diemen’s Land, ensuring that wages for the Curr family’s shepherds remained low. Edward M. Curr later recorded that the annual salary for his shepherds dropped from £45 when he arrived in 1841 to around £20 for most of the 1840s.  

Edmund Finn described Edward Curr senior as ‘one of the ablest and best known, though not most popular, men of his day’. Although he was unpopular for many reasons, his role in gaining independence for Port Phillip was lauded. This impression must only have gained over time, especially since the new Colony of Victoria was proclaimed shortly before its valuable gold resources were discovered. Finn noted that when Curr died, ‘the event was deplored with an universal regret, which was deepened by the singularly melancholy coincidence of the announcement of the victory, and the loss of the commander of the campaigns’. Edward M. Curr was similarly inclined to credit his father as a leading Port Phillip citizen. In a family memoir penned in 1877 he observed:

> It would I think be difficult to find anyone more respected by those who knew him, or more respectable than my father, for he was a man of marked ability, extended sympathies, unimpeachable character, distinguished presence, the head of the patriotic movement then on foot in the colony, and of what were then large pecuniary resources.

Curr was not, however, under any illusions as to the controversy his father courted. He wrote in 1877 that his father ‘was decidedly unpopular with

34 Kiddle 1967: 152.
37 Curr 1883: 152.
38 Finn 1888: 28, 858.
39 Curr 1883: 151–152.
the gentry’ and attributed this fact not to his Catholicism but to ‘an imperial manner, which was as natural to him as his skin’. He concluded that his father’s manner ‘was not relished’ and noted that even 25 years after his death it had not been forgiven.\(^{40}\)

Curr’s 1877 memoir gives some insight into what appears to have been a strained father-son relationship. He recalled that his father’s overbearing manner was evident not only in his public role, but in his daily life:

> I never saw him in company or conversation, even on the most trifling occasions, when anything but the first place was given up to him. Habitually and unknown to himself, he imposed his will on others, and I have always thought that people treasured up a resentment against what I may call a state of momentary vassalage to which they habitually found themselves reduced in his company or rather, I should say, in his presence, for to that it amounted.

Like Melbourne’s early population, Edward M. Curr found his father’s manner restrictive and controlling. Furthermore, he formed the opinion that the time-consuming campaign for Separation (‘my father constantly laboured for seven years’) was ultimately detrimental to the Curr family’s best interests:

> The money which he expended keeping house in town with the object of procuring separation which he considered his particular mission, had it been expended in the purchase of property of any kind, would have been worth to his family ten years after his death a quarter of a million of money.\(^{41}\)

These financial calculations were clearly performed with the benefit of hindsight and Curr’s father can hardly be condemned for failing to anticipate the discovery of gold. This is only one of many instances in his 1877 memoir where Edward M. Curr explains how his family might have been richer. Nevertheless, that he wrote as much in a memoir intended for family suggests a degree of filial animosity that should not be discounted.

### A Bush Gentleman

While Edward Curr senior pursued a business and political career in Melbourne, his sons set about establishing their position within the social world of the frontier. In his memoir, Edward M. Curr conveyed his perceived status most prominently through his characterisation of the working class. He delighted in

\(^{40}\) Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.

\(^{41}\) Curr, ‘Memoranda Concerning Our Family’ (1877), SLV, MS 8998.
describing the exploits of his ex-convict employees – an ‘average lot of ruffians’, who, at least initially, appeared to be universally alcoholic. In one passage he explained the extensive demands of his first crew of shearers, which included four glasses of rum per day: ‘I felt myself to be a much abused master, and should, no doubt, have struck employing men entirely, had it been possible to conduct the business of sheep-farming without them.’ Curr created humour through irony, but he also reinforced his superior social position. In order to acquire the crucial keg of rum for his shearers, Curr despatched one of his men who ‘was not so immoderate a drunkard as the generality of my party’ to the nearest publican, 100 miles away. When writing *Recollections of Squatting* Curr clearly enjoyed describing the man’s journey, which involved getting all the shepherds on the road drunk and replacing the missing rum with water. Subsequently, Curr was forced to organise the washing and shearing of his sheep with an inebriated or hung-over workforce, until he watered down the rum still further with desirable results.\(^{42}\)

In *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* Curr rarely named his employees, who were generally ‘a nondescript lot’ fitting a predictable stereotype. A notable exception was his first bullock driver, ‘Dan’, who stood out among Curr’s ‘motley crew’, but whose company involved only ‘a little conversation and a good deal of smoking’. Another servant worthy of particular mention was Jimmy-Jack, a young Bangerang man whose services were welcomed at Tongala: ‘Of a particularly mild disposition, he seemed to take to civilized ways more easily than his fellows’. Jimmy-Jack fulfilled the role of ‘general useful’ around the station ‘in which capacity his obliging disposition made him quite a favourite’. Jimmy-Jack’s tasks included fetching horses, working bullocks and accompanying the dray to town; he would also ‘ride with my brother and myself when we went out kangarooing or duck shooting’. Curr was apparently very fond of Jimmy-Jack, although the principal motive for his inclusion in the narrative of *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* was to describe his death following a ‘disgusting assassination’ by Aborigines at Colbinabbin. Curr insisted that without descriptions of such events ‘the life of an Australian savage would be ill understood’.\(^{43}\)

Curr noted that his shepherds often became quite eccentric through isolation, but some ‘improved their minds a good deal by reading’. Recalling one instance, he explained that he lent a ‘trashy romance’ to a shepherd, who read it over and over until ‘he must have almost known it by heart’. The man subsequently read more widely from Curr’s library, and also purchased books from a hawker who visited Tongala. Years later the shepherd asked to borrow the original novel, which he still fancied was ‘the finest book that ever was written’, but he was

\(^{42}\) Curr 1883: 97–98.

\(^{43}\) Curr 1883: 322, 64, 321, 325.
puzzled to find that it now appeared to be ‘a poor childish sort of book’. Curr concluded: ‘So I saw the man’s literary taste had grown, unknown to himself, and his endeavour to read the old book was like trying to put on the boots which had fitted him in boyhood.’

The isolation of station life – free as it was from the temptation of drink and ‘anything worth stealing’ – had a reforming role among the expired convicts who almost invariably came into his employ. Moreover, Curr believed that the easing of the labour shortage that plagued the early 1840s led to an improvement in the quality of his employees:

In the case of the working class, the first step towards better things was a great fall in wages, which practically had the effect of transforming them from drunkards and idlers into shepherds and hutkeepers, and, so far as my experience went, eventually into tolerable servants and citizens.

The tight labour market, high wages and predominantly convict labour of the early 1840s required, Curr implied, a tactful approach: he credited his apparently positive relationships with employees to ‘the humility which became a master of those times’. Curr thus portrayed himself as one well able to manage the rough working men who staffed his station, whom he described with both irony and affection: ‘Truly a heterogeneous lot they were – horse stealers, machine-breakers, homicides, disorderly soldiers, drunken marines, house breakers, petty thieves, and so on.’ In keeping with the nostalgic tone of his account, Curr argued that ex-convicts were preferable to free immigrants as employees; the latter, ‘though often sober men … were generally dissatisfied and had a very faint idea of obeying orders’.

Throughout his detailed account of his squatting years, Curr emphasised the charming simplicity of the early days. His memoir suggests that rapid pastoral expansion was achieved with little trouble; there were occasional disputes with rival squatters or disgruntled Aborigines, but none that hindered the success of the venture. Within a very short time, he was able to settle into a pleasantly bucolic existence, which he remembered fondly for the rest of his life. Curr recorded that ‘the hard sort of life we led at first did not last more than two or three years’ after which two brothers returned from England ‘to lessen our labours’. Subsequently, the Curr brothers chose to ‘give up work, in great measure, for supervision’ and divided their vast runs into manageable portions. They established a second head station at Colbinabbin, which Richard oversaw,

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44 Curr 1883: 441–442.
45 Curr 1883: 438.
46 Curr 1883: 438.
another at the Moira for a younger brother, and a small substation at Coragorag: ‘From this time our chief occupation was riding about the run looking after shepherds and hunting wild dogs.’

Curr’s sister Elizabeth later recalled that her brothers adopted pig hunting as an appropriate sport for their leisure time: ‘they turned out a special breed of Pigs, and very soon had any amount of Pig Sticking, trading with the Blacks in spears suitable for the sport’. Curr himself also recorded his love of hunting and described the meetings of squatters at Moama in a chapter titled ‘Hunting with Fox-Hounds’. He regularly noted the prominent role of horses in his squatting exploits. They were crucial to his account of the unmistakable squatter of the 1840s, ‘who strode so gaily up Collins-street in his Hessian boots, with the “action” of one who, even when on foot, could not altogether get rid of the feeling of having a horse between his legs’. Similarly, he described the curious tendency for squatters to acquire a reputation more properly belonging to his horse: ‘with the estimate of the rider the capacity and peculiarities of his horse were often whimsically mixed up’.

As time passed, Curr was able to establish himself in the apparently satisfying role of the gentleman squatter. In *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria*, the social status of the Curr brothers is prominently conveyed by their education and love of reading. The arrival of a new book at Tongala was a source of joy, but if there were only one it also presented a dilemma, as it was hard for one brother to enjoy the new volume while another sat opposite ‘apparently going through “Hamlet” for the hundredth time’. In a typically nostalgic passage, Curr stressed that the squatters of the 1840s were a highly educated lot; though books were hard to come by, their shelves ‘were better provided than at present, and typical of a more educated class’.

Although noting the bookish ways of his family, Curr also described the great pleasure he derived from remote bush life. He confessed to ‘a somewhat vagabond turn of mind’ and described in detail his ‘Rambles in Unoccupied Country’. Each year before lambing in May, Curr habitually passed two or three weeks in the remote country north-west of Tongala. He usually took at least one of his brothers and sometimes ‘a couple of Blacks’. Curr described his vagrant existence at these times as ‘somewhat savage in its tendency’ but nonetheless ‘a relief from the sameness of station life’. He also believed his love of rambling was unusual for the time:

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48 Curr 1883: 358.
49 Elizabeth Pennefather (née Curr), ‘In the Early Days’ (1911), Murrumbogie Papers.
50 Curr 1883: 380.
51 Curr 1883: 100–102.
52 Curr 1883: 369–370.
This custom of ours, I may say, was an exceptional one, as bushmen generally took their holidays in town; ‘the pleasure of the pathless woods,’ of which we have all read, being indulged in no oftener than was absolutely unavoidable. With me the reverse was the case, as I preferred hunting excursions into unoccupied country to visits to the city; hence gradually I came to look on the country of our rambles, which in extent might be a hundred and fifty miles by fifty, as a sort of plaisaunce, or grand park, on which I was free to wander, shoot, hunt, fish, and do as I chose, my only care being to escape getting a spear through me.\textsuperscript{53}

During his squatting years Curr developed a basic interest in Aboriginal custom and language that would mature later in his life. In \textit{Recollections of Squatting in Victoria} he noted that he immediately had ‘a good deal of curiosity about the aborigines’ and observed their ways and picked up ‘a smattering of their language’. A few pages later, however, Curr notes that he did not occupy his leisure hours with scientific or cultural inquiry; he and his brother Richard were ignorant of ‘botany and bird-stuffing’ and ‘neither did it occur to us to take up the Aboriginal languages, or grapple with the traditions of the ancient and singular race with which we had been brought in contact’. Deferring ethnological pursuits until later in life, Curr and his brother took instead to ‘much swimming, throwing spears, [and] climbing trees after the native fashion (by means of tomahawk-notches)’.\textsuperscript{54}

Nevertheless, because Tongala was an out-of-the-way place (an \textit{ultima thule} as Curr put it), white visitors were rare; as a result, ‘novelty … usually came by means of our black neighbours’. Although not a serious ethnologist during the period he lived among the Bangerang people, Curr was captivated by the surprising novelty of the customs he casually observed. He recalled in considerable detail the first time he witnessed a corroboree in 1842, during a meeting of the Bangerang and Ngooraialum tribes. He was ‘strongly impressed’ by the scene, which he described variously as extraordinary, singular, ghastly, sinister, thrilling and strange. Curr revealed that at the climax of the performance he had feared for his life when the dancers made as if to throw their spears at the Curr brothers:

\begin{quote}

The idea that all was over with us, and an intense longing for my pistols, flashed through my brain. But before I could attempt to move, the climax had been reached, and the performers, dropping their spear points to the ground, burst into one simultaneous yell, which made the old woods ring again, and then hurried at once out of sight, a laughing mob, into the forest’s gloom.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{53} Curr 1883: 419–420.
\textsuperscript{54} Curr 1883: 92–92, 126–127.
\textsuperscript{55} Curr 1883: 140.
Certainly, Indigenous custom must have been intriguingly alien to Curr as a young man in the early 1840s. His recollection of the corroboree appears vivid, although it was certainly also shaped by his attempt to produce an engaging narrative for his 1880s readership. This is particularly evident at the conclusion of his description, when he pondered the meaning of the dramatic climax: ‘Was that yell, fancy suggested, the farewell cry to pleasant earth of a rabble-rout of fiends hurrying back to subterranean prisons in obedience to some mysterious power?’ \(^{56}\) This passage suggests, along with many others, that Curr’s ultimate goal in writing \textit{Recollections of Squatting in Victoria} was to entertain his reader with a diverting account of events long past. We can only speculate as to how different Curr’s description of the corroboree might have been had he written it in 1842.

In an engaging literary style, \textit{Recollections of Squatting in Victoria} charts Curr’s journey from a novice grazier to an experienced bushman, and ultimately a gentleman squatter. Along the way, his social status and his apparent skill at managing both Indigenous people and the working class are asserted. The rudiments of a conventional upper-class life are present in the form of reading and hunting, even if Curr’s living conditions were simple and his love for rambling was ‘savage in its tendency’. Certainly, Curr stressed the simplicity of the pre-gold era of Victorian history; nonetheless, his narrative emphasised his role as a pioneer of the squattocracy that became Victoria’s upper class.

Towards the end of \textit{Recollections of Squatting in Victoria} Curr describes the success of his pastoral endeavours, which despite an uncertain beginning proved lucrative. When he left the colony in 1851 the family business was well established and highly profitable:

> remembering that the £1,500 so ill invested in Wolfscrag and the £500 worth of sheep received from Steele’s Creek had been producing, for several years before I left, a net income ranging from £1,000 to £2,500 a year, I think it will be admitted that the undertaking was brought to a successful issue.

Aside from an enviable annual income, the Currs held pastoral leases over 300 square miles of ‘first-class quality’ country with 30,000 sheep on the ground. Furthermore, ‘with the help of a few tanks’ Curr believed the land could support a flock of 100,000 sheep. \(^{57}\) This substantial and lucrative enterprise was built, of course, on the back of Indigenous dispossession, as the next chapter shows.

\(^{56}\) Curr 1883: 140.
\(^{57}\) Curr 1883: 449–450.