8. ‘The native is a child’

Through his notable career as a senior public servant, Edward M. Curr recovered some of the social status he had lost following the disastrous drought at Uabba. Importantly, his career successes highlight his commitment to the settler colonial project in Australia; his working life was dedicated to ensuring the productive and profitable use of land by the pastoral industry. In the 1870s Curr also became deeply interested in the Aboriginal people whose lands had been appropriated to sustain the pastoral industry. His alternative career as an Aboriginal administrator and ethnologist sits uncomfortably alongside his principal life purpose, which was to profit from the pastoral opportunities accorded by British Imperialism in Australia. Significantly, Curr’s career in Aboriginal administration has been largely overlooked until quite recently. In this context, the problematic nature of Curr’s account of traditional Yorta Yorta or Bangerang custom becomes starkly apparent.

For Curr, it was his long experience of Australian bush life, and particularly his status as a pioneering squatter of the 1840s, which underlined his claim to authoritative knowledge and justified his emergence as an expert on ‘the Blacks’. In 1881 he asserted his credentials as an Aboriginal administrator when he told a parliamentary inquiry: ‘They are an easy people to manage. I managed four times as many as there are at Coranderrk when I was nineteen years old.’\(^1\) Furthermore, Curr regularly asserted his ‘wide experience’ to bolster his ethnological credibility in his major work *The Australian Race* (1886).

In 1875 Curr had joined the Colony of Victoria’s Board for the Protection of the Aborigines (BPA). He was one of three new members appointed during a board shake-up probably orchestrated by the vice chairman, R. Brough Smyth, who, like Curr, was a senior public servant with an interest in ethnology.\(^2\) Curr served on the BPA during a period of great controversy regarding the future of the Coranderrk Aboriginal station, near Healesville. Coranderrk lay within the traditional territory of the Kulin nation. The troubles at Coranderrk were sparked by the dismissal of the general inspector John Green in 1874. Green had managed Victoria’s six Aboriginal reserves since the re-establishment of the protectorate system in 1861 and had taken a particular interest in Coranderrk. He was a sympathetic manager, as he explained to the board in 1863: ‘My method


\(^2\) Barwick 1998: 111.
of managing the blacks is to allow them to rule themselves as much as possible.’\(^3\) He also rejected the view that Aborigines were ‘incapable of instruction’ and argued that ‘blacks’ and ‘half-castes’ were equally quick to learn.\(^4\) Green had the support of the board until 1872 and his work at Coranderrk was widely praised.

![Figure 17: The Aboriginal Settlement at Coranderrk (1865). Charles Walter.](image)

Engraving. State Library of Victoria, H4082.

In the 1870s the economic potential of the Coranderrk land began to influence the decision making of the BPA. Initially the board resolved to make Coranderrk profitable by growing hops under the direction of agriculturalist Frederick Search. In 1874, however, changes in legislation dictated that any profit from the farm at Coranderrk should be returned to the government’s consolidated revenue; the under-funded BPA thus lost a financial incentive to persevere with Coranderrk. Meanwhile, Aboriginal residents protested against the hiring of European labour on the hops farm. John Green increasingly supported the Coranderrk residents and soon found himself at odds with Frederick Search. Consequently, the board dismissed Green in 1874, prompting the Coranderrk residents to submit a petition in protest.

\(^3\) John Green to Central Board Appointed to Watch over the Interests of the Aborigines, 28 July 1863, quoted in Barwick 1998: 67.

\(^4\) Barwick 1998: 79.
R. Brough Smyth, vice chairman of the BPA, was a key figure in the campaign against John Green. Other members of the board, who had known of Green’s work for more than a decade, were concerned he had been mistreated. In 1875 Smyth consolidated his power by the appointment of three new members sympathetic to his views on Coranderrk; they were Edward M. Curr, Albert Le Souëf and Frederick Godfrey. Le Souëf had an early connection with Aboriginal administration (his father had managed the Goulburn River protectorate station in the early 1840s) and had spent many years on pastoral stations in north-east Victoria. He was later associated with the development of the Melbourne
Edward M. Curr and the Tide of History

Zoological Gardens, where he was secretary and then director from 1870 to 1902. Like Curr, Le Souëf displayed a nostalgic interest in Aboriginal culture; for the Melbourne Intercolonial Exhibition of 1866 he and his wife Caroline had produced ‘The Le Souëf Box’, a collection of miniaturised Aboriginal weapons contained in a wooden box, which was decorated with idyllic pre-contact scenes in the life of the Taungurong people. Godfrey was a squatter, businessman and member of the Legislative Assembly; he apparently used his parliamentary connections to solicit membership for himself, Curr and Le Souëf. The three men had strong personal connections dating back to their time as pastoralists in the 1840s. Le Souëf and Godfrey were also closely linked through the Zoological and Acclimatisation Society. Victoria’s chief secretary was the ex officio chairman of the BPA but rarely (if ever) attended meetings; so leadership of the board essentially resided with the vice chairman, and Godfrey, Curr and Le Souëf all occupied this position over subsequent years.

Figure 19: Albert Le Souëf (1872). Thomas Foster Chuck.

Photograph. State Library of Victoria, H5056/567.

At Curr’s first BPA meeting on 7 July 1875 an unprecedented deputation of Kulin men arrived to register their protests regarding the situation at Coranderrk. These Indigenous men were soon encouraged, however, to ignore the largely intransigent board, preferring to lobby parliamentarians, journalists and other sympathetic Victorians. Poor attendance at BPA meetings in this period essentially enabled Smyth and his three new colleagues to determine board policy. On 4 August 1875 Curr, Godfrey and Le Souëf formed a subcommittee to examine the future management of Coranderrk and visited it three days later. Curr later described his first visit to the troubled station:

We all thought the place exceedingly undesirable; that it was impossible to do any good there. We reported that to the Board, and recommended that the station should be removed. We did this on the very first visit. We were all accustomed to blacks; we had no doubt about what we recommended. I knew nothing about the antecedents of the place or even the name of the manager.

Curr believed that because he was ‘accustomed to blacks’ he was qualified to judge the situation at Coranderrk after only one visit and from a position of ignorance regarding its history. He and the other board newcomers stressed health concerns as a key motivation for their decision, but they were certainly also concerned about the potential for political agitation, as Coranderrk was only 67 kilometres from Melbourne.

Curr, in particular, believed that the problems at Coranderrk were essentially a matter of discipline, which was undermined by contact between the Indigenous residents and white sympathisers. His concerns about ‘outside interference’ were highlighted by the actions of Moravian missionary Brother Johann Stähle, who had been appointed acting manager of Coranderrk after John Green’s suspension. Like his predecessor, Stähle showed considerable sympathy towards the Coranderrk residents. On the very day Curr and his companions visited Coranderrk, Victoria’s newly elected premier and chief secretary, Graham Berry, received a letter from Stähle, who, on behalf of the Coranderrk residents, requested the dismissal of the hops farm master Robert Burgess. Stähle sent the letter by registered mail to the chief secretary because earlier complaints sent to Smyth had been ignored. Smyth and Curr were both furious that a subordinate public servant had bypassed the authority of the board, while Godfrey was embarrassed at having to provide an explanation to Berry, his political adversary.

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7 Central Board for the Protection of the Aborigines [BPA], ‘Minutes of meetings’, National Archives of Australia [NAA], Series B314, 4 August 1875.  
8 Coranderrk Inquiry (1881), 120.  
On 25 August 1875 the BPA voted to abandon the Coranderrk station. The board hoped to convince the chief secretary that proceeds from the sale of the Coranderrk land would be more than adequate to meet the cost of setting up a new station. At the same meeting the BPA resolved to employ for two months a pastoral station manager, Christian Ogilvie, who was instructed to inspect all six Aboriginal stations in company with Curr. Only three weeks later, Curr successfully proposed a motion to dismiss Stähle and permanently appoint Ogilvie. Momentum for change continued and on 21 September 1875 the board voted to send Ogilvie and Curr to search for a new remote location for Coranderrk on the Murray River. The two men subsequently became key proponents in the campaign to close down Coranderrk. Curr later described Ogilvie as ‘one of the few friends I had’. Moreover, Ogilvie was a very close friend of Le Souëf; the pair had managed pastoral stations together in the early 1850s and Ogilvie had served as best man at Le Souëf’s wedding.

In December Curr successfully proposed that Christian Ogilvie be appointed general superintendent of Victoria’s six Aboriginal stations. Curr’s motion, which was seconded by Le Souëf, gave considerable power to Ogilvie, even over those stations run by missionaries. In January 1876 the board also received Curr and Ogilvie’s report, which recommended closing Coranderrk and moving its Indigenous residents to a new station at Kulkynye, which was situated hundreds of miles away on the Murray River. Curr was quite honest about the advantages of the proposed location, which he later described as ‘a strip of country which is never likely to be thickly settled, which has good climate, plenty of fish, and is removed from disturbing causes’. Yet Curr and Ogilvie’s plans were stalled by a parallel controversy that embroiled R. Brough Smyth. In 1876 a parliamentary inquiry upheld complaints against Smyth of ‘tyrannical and overbearing conduct’ towards his subordinates in the Mines Department; he resigned from all his public offices in May. The BPA had been transformed by the appointment of Curr, Le Souëf and Godfrey in 1875, so the closure of Coranderrk remained official policy even after the resignation of Smyth. Nevertheless, the sensational case of ‘the half-mad Bureaucrat’ drew attention to the situation at Coranderrk.

11 BPA, ‘Minutes of meetings’, NAA, Series B314, 14 September 1875.
12 BPA, ‘Minutes of meetings’, NAA, Series B314, 21 September 1875.
13 Edward M. Curr to E.M.V. Curr, 19 December 1883, Murrumbogie Papers.
14 A.A.C. Le Souëf, ‘Personal Recollections of Early Victoria’ (c.1895), Typescript, South Australian Museum, 40, 42, 75.
16 BPA, ‘Minutes of meetings’, NAA, Series B314, 12 January 1876.
17 Coranderrk Inquiry (1881), 120, emphasis added.
In the midst of the inquiry into Smyth’s conduct, pro-Coranderrk articles appeared in the *Age* and *Leader* newspapers, one of which was titled ‘Coranderrk Hop Farm: Mr Green and Mr R. Brough Smyth’. They were written by agricultural editor John Lamont Dow, a radical liberal with ambitions to enter the Victorian Parliament. Dow praised the efforts of Green and the residents of Coranderrk and criticised the board’s expenditure on European labour for the hops farm. The flames of controversy were fanned by the concurrent frenzy surrounding Smyth; Dow’s articles connected the two controversies in the public imagination. David Syme was the proprietor of both newspapers and his brother George edited the *Leader*. Crucially, George Syme had recently resigned his membership of the BPA in protest against Green’s dismissal and the plans to close Coranderrk. Both the *Age* and the *Leader* newspapers, whose readership far exceeded that of the conservative *Argus*, lent considerable support to the Coranderrk cause over subsequent years.

Meanwhile, attendance at BPA meetings improved as long-serving members became concerned about the situation at Coranderrk. The free rein enjoyed by Curr, Le Souëf and Godfrey was tightened and the board became more cautious. In January 1876 a former board vice chairman and parliamentarian, James MacBain, attempted to limit the substantial powers recently granted to Christian Ogilvie. Although MacBain’s motion was unsuccessful, it represented a clear challenge to the authority of Curr, who had championed Ogilvie’s rapid elevation. On 17 February 1876 the board reached a compromise and resolved to reappoint John Green to a subordinate role under Christian Ogilvie, but Green declined the offer. Curr was the sole member of the board who opposed the reappointment of Green on any terms; he was surely motivated by Green’s opposition to the planned closure of Coranderrk. The board met again the next day and three long serving members (led by MacBain) proposed an unconditional offer of re-employment to Green; they were voted down by Curr, Le Souëf, Godfrey and new member Sherbourne Sheppard, a former squatter and old acquaintance of both Curr and Le Souëf. Sheppard had owned the Tallygaroopna run, located on the Goulburn River not far from Curr’s Tongala, and had invited his friend Le Souëf into partnership there in the 1850s. Several months later MacBain complained in parliament about the influence of Curr and his companions: ‘they formed a little family as it were’ and appointed a new inspector (Ogilvie) ‘for doing what he did not know’.

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19 John Lamont Dow, ‘Coranderrk Hop Farm: Mr Green and Mr R. Brough Smyth’, *Age*, 19 February 1876. See also Barwick 1998: 125.
20 Dow 1972: 93–95.
23 A.A.C. Le Souëf, ‘Personal Recollections of Early Victoria’ (c.1895), Typescript, South Australian Museum, 86.
The Coranderrk issue had emerged as a key point of divergence in BPA policy, but the division at board level was only one obstacle that stood in the way of Curr’s plans. In Victoria the late 1870s was a politically tumultuous period, when the radical liberal politician Graham Berry vied for power with his conservative opponents. Coranderrk became one of many issues that characterised the political landscape. John Lamont Dow, a protégé of Berry, took up the Coranderrk cause in the pages of the *Age*; the Aboriginal residents also received considerable support from the philanthropist Ann Bon. The BPA spread counter-propaganda through the *Argus*, but even this newspaper was not uncritical of the board’s management of Coranderrk.25

**The Coranderrk Rebellion**

For almost the entire period of Curr’s membership of the BPA (1875–1883), the future of the Coranderrk station dominated public debate over Aboriginal policy. Diane Barwick’s *Rebellion at Coranderrk* traces in detail the many attempts of the BPA to undermine the increasingly politically mobilised residents of Coranderrk. Barwick justifies her title by referring to the contemporary record: ‘Dismayed officials frequently used the term rebellion to describe Aboriginal tactics in openly resisting and defying lawful authority.’26 The rebellion was directed chiefly at members of the BPA, specifically those like Curr who were stubbornly committed to the closure of Coranderrk. The Indigenous people of Coranderrk played a shrewd political game, using petitions, letters and deputations to government ministers to win support for their cause. In particular, younger Aborigines educated at protectorate and mission schools used the literacy skills they had acquired to advocate for their people. Both Robert Wandin and Thomas Dunolly were authorised to speak on behalf of their leader William Barak and exerted considerable influence through their command of written language.

Michael Christie has noted the irony that a protectorate education was designed to further the assimilation of Aboriginal people, not empower them politically.27 The BPA had previously carried out its duties with very little scrutiny, but the politically mobilised Coranderrk residents ensured this would no longer be the case. Nevertheless, the increased public criticism of the BPA only seemed to strengthen its determination to close Coranderrk. Barwick has shown clearly that through ‘ignorance and profound paternalism’ the newer board members (Curr, Godfrey and Le Souef) dismissed the idea that the Kulin had adapted their traditional culture to accommodate ‘a new kind of political expertise’.28

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27 Christie 1990: 118.
The board was so convinced that various letters and petitions were the result of outside interference that it twice hired detectives to analyse the handwriting on petitions from Coranderrk. The detectives found that Barak’s spokesman Thomas Dunolly had written the relevant documents, which represented the genuinely held views of the Aboriginal signatories.

Figure 20: William Barak (1876).

Photograph. National Archives of Australia, A1200, L22062.

29 Van Toorn 1999: 335; see also Van Toorn 2006: 123–151.
The BPA was unable to contain the Coranderrk Rebellion. In 1877 the former board member and *Leader* editor George Syme encouraged Graham Berry (now on the opposition benches) to push for a Royal Commission on the Aborigines, which commenced its hearings in April.\(^{30}\) Curr was the only board member to give evidence, although Godfrey was one of the commissioners. As a principal architect of the plan to close Coranderrk, Curr’s credibility was significantly challenged during the hearings. When he gave evidence on 1 June 1877, he argued that removal was necessary for reasons of both health and discipline. He explained that the climate at Coranderrk was unsuitable and stressed that even the original owners of the area had only visited it in summer. Curr argued that Coranderrk was not the traditional country of its residents and therefore removal to the Murray River was perfectly justifiable. He had little sympathy for the views of William Barak, who had said in 1876: ‘The Yarra … is my father’s country. There’s no mountains for me on the Murray.’\(^{31}\)

Curr’s concern about the health of Coranderrk residents was genuine, but he was clearly also motivated by his belief that ‘outside interference’ was undermining the discipline of a ‘childlike’ race. He told the commissioners:

> Members of the Board, casual visitors, cricketers, and Members of Parliament have probably little idea of how their visits interfere with discipline. The native is a child, and very little unsettles him and even makes him fractious, and probably the height of pleasure to him would be to get a Member of Parliament to listen to his grievances. To him no doubt the casual suggestion of an alteration even seems like a condemnation of his ordinary superior, and is no doubt very pleasant to him. Hence this influx of visitors to Coranderrk does not seem desirable.\(^{32}\)

When Curr was later asked by the commissioners to make any final suggestions in writing, he committed himself once more to the closure of Coranderrk: ‘With the proceeds of the sale of Coranderrk a fitting station might be set on foot, stocked, and possibly made self-supporting.’\(^{33}\) The commissioners asked if Aborigines should be forced to reside at the proposed new reserve against their wishes, to which Curr responded: ‘the black should, when necessary, be coerced just as we coerce children and lunatics who cannot take care of themselves. If they are not coerced, they cannot be preserved from extinction.’\(^{34}\)

\(^{30}\) Barwick 1998: 114.

\(^{31}\) *Leader*, 19 February 1876; quoted in Christie 1990: 118.


\(^{33}\) Royal Commission on the Aborigines (1877), 79.

\(^{34}\) Royal Commission on the Aborigines (1877), 78.
Although the Royal Commission did not recommend the closure of Coranderrk, the BPA’s commitment to that course remained firm. In the wake of the inquiry, Curr’s colleagues elected him vice chairman of the board, so his determination to close Coranderrk continued to shape board policy. By July 1878, however, the board had become concerned by Curr’s intransigence on the issue and elected Henry Jennings as the new vice chairman. Meanwhile, Graham Berry had taken power in Victoria once again after winning the 1877 election. Berry owed much to his protégé John Lamont Dow, who had galvanised support for Berry’s reform agenda and had won a seat of his own in the new parliament. In 1878 Dow submitted a report to Berry on the Coranderrk issue, which recommended John Green be reappointed and the BPA disbanded. Berry cautiously stayed his hand, but it was clear at least that the closure of Coranderrk was not on the new government’s agenda.\footnote{Barwick 1998: 162–163.}

By the end of the decade the influence of the trio of BPA members who had reshaped policy in 1875 was waning. Godfrey resigned in March 1879 before travelling overseas. Meanwhile, Curr and Le Souëf began to disagree on significant issues, notably the treatment of ‘half-castes’ residing on the government reserves. The Royal Commission had not recommended sending ‘half-castes’ out to work, but Le Souëf proposed as much in December 1878. Curr was strongly opposed to such views and became isolated as assimilationist ideology took hold. Curr once again pushed for the abandonment of Coranderrk in May 1879 and was partially supported by Le Souëf, but he was fighting a losing battle.\footnote{Barwick 1998: 167.}

The political situation remained volatile, particularly after Graham Berry narrowly lost the March 1880 election. Berry returned to power a few months later at the head of a shaky coalition, but his policy regarding Coranderrk was far from certain. There were ongoing protests from Coranderrk residents in 1880, mostly against the manager Rev. Frederick Strickland. During this period Curr was acting vice chairman of the BPA and he was unsympathetic to the protests. In October Strickland reported that ‘not a man on the station’ would do anything when ordered.\footnote{Barwick 1998: 174.}
In March 1881 Coranderrk leader William Barak once again walked the 67 kilometres to Melbourne and led a deputation to the premier. He requested the BPA be abolished and that his people be allowed to manage Coranderrk themselves under John Green’s guidance. The philanthropist Ann Bon, who had been lobbying on behalf of the Coranderrk residents, joined Barak for his meeting with Berry. Le Souëf subsequently told members of the BPA that Bon’s role would convince Berry that the abandonment of Coranderrk was unavoidable because of ‘continual interference’.\(^{38}\) In fact, Berry assured Barak that he would not be removed from Coranderrk and promised a parliamentary inquiry.

Political instability continued when Bryan O’Loghlen deposed Graham Berry in July 1881. The BPA once again lobbied for the closure of Coranderrk; meanwhile, John Lamont Dow called for board reform through the pages of the *Age*.\(^{39}\) The new chief secretary, J.M. Grant, honoured Berry’s promise of a parliamentary inquiry, to which he appointed the local member for Healesville E.H. Cameron as chairman. Despite attempts by the BPA to influence the membership of the inquiry, Grant also adopted the recommendations Berry had received on this issue from a young Alfred Deakin. Crucially, Deakin had suggested the

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39 *Age*, 14 July 1881; see Barwick 1998: 183.
appointment of Ann Bon and former BPA member Dr Thomas Embling.\textsuperscript{40} Grant also appointed two local landholders recommended by the BPA, but this did not satisfy board members, who protested against the Deakin-inspired appointments in September.\textsuperscript{41} Grant then added two further members to the inquiry after it began collecting evidence; one was a BPA recommendation but the other was John Lamont Dow, whose presence tipped the balance of opinion against the BPA.

The transcript of Curr’s evidence to the 1881 Parliamentary Inquiry into Coranderrk displays quite clearly his views regarding the management of Aboriginal people. It also reveals the pressure he was under to justify both his and the board’s policies. On 8 December Curr was asked if he thought it desirable to relocate the Coranderrk residents against their will:

\begin{quote}
Anyone who knows the blacks knows their will is nothing, that they might have a serious objection now which they would not remember three months afterwards. I would suggest that they should be moved for their own benefit … If I saw my child playing on the brink of a well I should remove the child even if he cried. I should remove the blacks from Coranderrk whether they liked it or not. I do not believe they have any strong objection.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

Curr’s evidence provides a valuable insight into his thinking regarding Aboriginal people at precisely the time he was writing his two major written works, which have so influenced historians and native title judges alike. The common twentieth century view that Curr was atypically sympathetic towards Aboriginal people must be carefully qualified by reference to this evidence, which shows that his sympathy was of a repressively paternalistic kind. A further passage from his evidence to the 1881 inquiry displays the internal contradictions of his paternalistic attitude:

\begin{quote}
4833. Has not the Board persistently for years endeavoured to get the people removed from Coranderrk? – Certainly not.

4834. Are you sure that yourself and Mr. Jennings and others have not written letters recommending their removal? – We did, but that is not the question you asked.

4835. Did you ever consult the blacks about the question? – No.

4836. Do you think that is fair? – Most decidedly for their good.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{40} Barwick 1998: 183–184.
\textsuperscript{41} BPA, ‘Minutes of meetings’, NAA, Series B314, 7 September 1881.
\textsuperscript{42} Coranderrk Inquiry (1881), 120.
4837. Are they children? — They are.

4838. Are they not men? — No, they are children. They have no more self-reliance than children.

4839. If they offend against the law are they punished like children? — No, like men.

4840. Is that just? — I did not make the laws.

4841. Should they be judged in our courts of justice as men, and punished as men, if you say they are children? — They are children in some respects; but when they steal they know they are doing wrong.  

Curr maintained his view that the problems at Coranderrk were due to outside interference and he singled out John Green: ‘It has been the impression of the Board that Mr. Green has kept Coranderrk in a state of hot water for the last seven years.’

The nine-member inquiry divided into two factions and was unable to agree on all issues when presenting the final report to parliament. Nevertheless, the members unanimously concluded that Coranderrk should not be closed. They also agreed that the station was ‘not so well managed as could be desired’. The key difference of opinion between the two factions related to the role the BPA had played in the Coranderrk controversy. A majority of five members (including Bon, Embling and Dow) signed ‘Addendum A’, which contained the following damning indictment of the board:

The natives appear to have been chiefly stirred into a state of active discontent by the pertinacity of the Central Board in pressing upon successive Governments the gratuitous advice that the Blacks should be removed from Coranderrk. The natives also bitterly complained of the removal of Mr. Green, who appears to have won their confidence and respect. On these points the evidence is very full.

The signatories of Addendum A also noted that charges of ‘immorality and untruthfulness’ against the natives had not been proven and suggested that the Board ‘should be relieved of the management of Coranderrk’. The other four inquiry members, including the chairman E.H. Cameron, issued their own ‘Addendum B’, which argued that the problems at Coranderrk ‘cannot be so easily laid to the charge of the Central Board’. They drew attention to the board’s

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43 Coranderrk Inquiry (1881), 121.
44 Coranderrk Inquiry (1881), 120.
45 Coranderrk Inquiry (1881), iii–iv.
46 Coranderrk Inquiry (1881), vi.
apparently successful management of the five other Victorian Aboriginal stations and gave some credence to the board’s suggestion of outside interference by noting the access of Coranderrk residents to ‘credulous sympathizers’.

The O’Loghlen Government did not formally respond to the Coranderrk Inquiry; it did, however, appoint four new members to the BPA in June 1882. One of these was Alfred Deakin, although he resigned soon afterwards in protest against the government’s inadequate response. For Curr, the findings of the inquiry represented a major repudiation of the policies he had championed as a member of the BPA. He was associated more than any other board member with the campaign to close down the Coranderrk reserve; he was also firmly committed to a paternalistic policy of strict discipline and rejected the emerging assimilationist doctrine of the period.

Protection or Assimilation?

Curr’s membership of the BPA corresponded with a period of significant change in Aboriginal policy, as earlier policies of containment on reserves gave way to a commitment to gradual absorption into the white community. This shift culminated in the Aborigines Protection Act of 1886, which drew an official distinction between ‘full-bloods’ and ‘half-castes’. It was largely framed in response to the Coranderrk Rebellion and it had the direct effect of undermining Indigenous protest, as ‘half-caste’ residents (many of them centrally involved in political activism) were forced to leave the reserve. Penny Van Toorn, who has written extensively on the role of literacy in the Coranderrk rebellion, suggests that the 1886 Act separated the ‘speaking generation from the writing generation, thus cutting a vital line of communication between Aboriginal communities and white government authorities’.

Edward M. Curr was, however, opposed to this new approach. In fact, he was the only significant voice on the BPA to resist a distinction between ‘full-blood’ and ‘half-caste’. He believed that all Aborigines at Coranderrk should be removed to a remote station on the Murray River and he gave little credence to ideas of assimilation or absorption. Curr’s policy was, of course, no less disruptive to Indigenous culture; he placed little value on Kulin attachment to country, nor the desire of William Barak and others to remain at Coranderrk. In a period

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47 Coranderrk Inquiry (1881), vii.
49 Van Toorn 1999: 341.
50 For a similar argument, see Stephens 2003: 237, 243.
when Aboriginal policy was in a state of flux, he remained committed to the *status quo* – a repressively paternalistic approach of incarceration, which was grounded in an explicit ideology of racial superiority.

Unlike the more liberal-minded politicians and activists of the 1880s, Curr believed that Aboriginal decline was inevitable and absorption or assimilation was not a realistic possibility. He subscribed to the popular theory that Australian Aborigines were a dying race. In explaining as much to the 1877 Royal Commission he demonstrated an uncomfortable irony surrounding the Chief Inspector of Stock being involved in Aboriginal administration:

> That they must die out is, I think, a foregone conclusion. Were they as valuable commercially as short-horned cattle, or merino sheep, there would be no fear of their dying out. The fact is we have pretended but never really wished to save them from extermination.\(^51\)

Importantly, Curr’s belief that Aborigines would die out was grounded in his frankly expressed view that Aborigines were inferior to the white invaders:

> The Anglo-Saxon in Australia, as elsewhere, does not foster weakly races. He wants their lands. He is thinking of riches. He tramples them under feet without thinking what he does.\(^52\)

In this way, Curr clearly belongs to an earlier era of Aboriginal policy, which focussed on incarceration rather than assimilation. Although he certainly hoped to slow the gradual process of extinction, he was relatively untroubled by the imminent demise of the Aborigines, which he saw as inevitable. For Curr, the role of the BPA was to protect the Aborigines from eradication at the hands of a superior white race for as long as possible. In a very real sense, Curr viewed the role of the board as the preservation of an ancient and inferior race of people, in the interests of scientific inquiry if nothing else. He saw, no doubt, a similarity between the work of the BPA and the efforts of his board colleague Albert Le Souëf, who was the Director of Melbourne’s Zoological Gardens.\(^53\)

During the 1877 Royal Commission, Curr was questioned about the absorption of the Aboriginal population into the settler community. In particular, the commissioners sought his views on a proposal to board out Aboriginal children. Curr responded sceptically:

> Persons who advocate boarding out do so, I believe, with a view to that measure aiding in the absorption by the whites of this colony of

\(^51\) Royal Commission on the Aborigines (1877), 77.

\(^52\) Royal Commission on the Aborigines (1877), 77.

\(^53\) Marguerita Stephens argues that Le Souëf ‘looked to the colony’s natives with the same scientific eye that he directed towards its curious fauna’; see Stephens 2003: 203.
the remnant of our black population. This absorption to my mind is a mistake – there is no absorption in the case and I think never can be; substitute eradication for absorption, and I think you will be correct. The history of other similar races points to this conclusion. Where are the fifty thousand blacks who inhabited this country forty years ago? Have they been absorbed? Have the Red Indians in America been absorbed? You cannot make the blacks like us. A black can never become one of us; his color will not alter nor his propensities.\textsuperscript{54}

Curr believed that removing ‘half-castes’ from reserves to bring about their absorption was a mistake. He was not entirely convinced that assimilation was impossible, but rather believed it would take a very long time. In explaining as much to the commissioners, he once again drew an analogy with the livestock he routinely encountered in his day-to-day work: ‘To begin, we should remember that as a mob of wild cattle cannot be tamed in a single generation, so we cannot at once civilize these people.’\textsuperscript{55} For Curr, the assimilation of the Aborigines would be a very gradual process, which would take many generations if it were to be achieved at all. He viewed the world according to a racial hierarchy, which placed his own English heritage at the pinnacle. He illustrated this view with reference to his fellow British colonists, arguing that ‘neither the Irishman, the Scot, nor the Welshman has as yet developed into an Englishman, though they have gradually adopted our language’.\textsuperscript{56} For Curr, of course, Aborigines faced a far greater challenge if they were to ‘develop into an Englishman’. This ideology underpinned Curr’s firm resistance to a policy of absorption.

Given Curr’s evidence to the 1877 Royal Commission, it is unsurprising that he rejected the distinction between ‘half-caste’ and ‘full-blood’ when it emerged in the late 1870s. John Lamont Dow, who was so critical of Curr’s plans to abandon Coranderrk, was a key advocate of such a distinction. In 1878 he suggested to his mentor Graham Berry that the troubles at Coranderrk derived partly from tensions between ‘full-blood’ and ‘half-caste’. Barwick has argued that Dow misinterpreted the factionalism at Coranderrk when he drew this distinction.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, it was radical liberals like Dow who influenced the emergence of a truly assimilationist policy. Dow’s views were soon mirrored in official BPA policy, particularly after new members were appointed in 1882. Curr became increasingly isolated and resigned his position on the board in April 1883. Only a few months earlier his colleagues had voted to retain Coranderrk and secured funds from parliament to develop the station. In this context, it was probably clear to him that it was time to move on.

\textsuperscript{54} Royal Commission on the Aborigines (1877), 77.
\textsuperscript{55} Royal Commission on the Aborigines (1877), 77.
\textsuperscript{56} Royal Commission on the Aborigines (1877), 77.
\textsuperscript{57} Barwick 1998: 162–163.
In 1877 the commissioners had asked Curr if he thought patriarchal rule must remain for several generations; he responded, ‘Yes, I do most decidedly.’\(^{58}\) Just as he had advocated extensive powers for the Inspectors of Sheep in the 1860s, Curr urged that the BPA should have unfettered control over Aborigines: the government, he argued, ‘should invest the board with almost entire authority for all time’.\(^{59}\) The board would need to appoint a ‘General Manager’, whose essential qualities Curr described in a final written submission he made to the commissioners:

> He should, I think, be a first-class man, as very early experience convinced me that the blacks (even in their savage state) both clearly discriminated between the educated gentleman and others less fortunate, and that to the former they yielded readily an obedience and confidence (most beneficial to themselves) which the latter never succeeded in obtaining. On the proper choice of a general manager hangs, in my opinion, the fate of the remnant of our black population.\(^{60}\)

When noting his ‘very early experience’ Curr clearly referred to his youthful years as an ‘educated gentleman’ who encountered ‘savage’ Aborigines on the Goulburn and Murray rivers. His superior and authoritative tone is also prevalent in *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria*, where he describes more fully his early experiences. These views, combined with his conviction that Aborigines were akin to ‘children’ or ‘lunatics’, raise legitimate questions as to why Curr later acquired a reputation among historians of sympathy towards Aboriginal people. A pervasive historiographical ignorance regarding Curr’s role in Aboriginal administration seems the only plausible explanation. Although certain passages in *Recollections of Squatting in Victoria* might imply a degree of sympathy towards Curr’s Indigenous neighbours, his controversial membership of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines provides a strong counter narrative, which must be acknowledged when weighing his credibility as an observer of Aboriginal custom.

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58 Royal Commission on the Aborigines (1877), 78.
59 Royal Commission on the Aborigines (1877), 79.
60 Royal Commission on the Aborigines (1877), 90.