5. An Early, Short-term Settler—Katherine Kirkland: Valuable Insights Through the Silences

‘I put him in a basket and hung him at my side, as I had seen the native women do’.


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Just as Indigenous authority shone through in the literary representation of Emily Cowl, so too did Wathaurong curiosity and humour, pride in country and authority over their land find their way into the work of the short-term settler Katherine Kirkland.

Like Eliza Davies, whose five-week exploratory tour took her through Indigenous lands, Katherine Kirkland entered the country of the Wathaurong (also known as Watha wurrung or Wada warrung) in 1839. For a little over two years, she lived among the Moner balug clan at Trawalla, now in the Western District of present day Victoria. Unlike Davies, who waited for 40 years before publishing her memoir, Katherine’s story appeared soon after her return to Britain in September 1841. Her memoir ‘Life in the Bush’ appeared anonymously as five serialised articles in volume XI of William and Robert Chambers’ penny weekly magazine, *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, from 18 June to 16 July 1842. In 1845 the complete text was published in the popular *Chambers’s Miscellany of Useful and Entertaining Tracts*.

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2 Correspondence to Professor Pike from John Kirkland Wilson, great-grandson of Katherine Kirkland, 7 December 1965, ‘Katherine Kirkland Biographical File’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography* files, ANU Archives, Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Canberra.

3 *Chambers’s Miscellany*, Vol. 1, No. 8. The date of the edition in which Katherine Kirkland’s ‘Life in the Bush’ appeared is usually cited as 1845.
Because Katherine was an early female chronicler of Australian colonial life, she lacked precedents that might guide her own representation of interracial experiences. Publishing her work in Britain for a local readership, she was careful to project herself as a respectable, middle-class lady, amazed and sometimes disgusted at the ‘wild’ and ‘strange’ life she encountered in the colony. Her authorial identity of ‘A Lady’ (the accepted nom de plume for nineteenth-century women writers), protected her anonymity in her references to connections with Aborigines—a subject that might compromise her respectability. It also distinguished her from her readership, a large percentage of the targeted audience being the British working class. She further guarded her privacy by adopting the surname, ‘Thomson’, before discarding the third-person voice for the immediacy of a first-person narration. While hiding her own and her husband’s identity throughout her story, she nevertheless divulged the names of her daughter, brothers, neighbours and friends.

Without the passing of time to qualify or adjust her impressions, or to incorporate religious dogma or scientific theories of race that might give her text strength and purpose for eager readers, Katherine offered fresh images of Aboriginal people—although often couched in cautious terms to preserve her image. Somewhat episodic, her commentary is believed to have been based on the letters sent to her mother.\(^4\) This first-hand, snapshot account of settler-Indigenous relationship holds valuable historical insights of the time before the rapid decline in the population of the Wathaurong by the mid-1840s. Instances of Indigenous reaction and adaptation to white incursion emerge distinctly from Katherine’s restrained prose.

### From bustling Glasgow

Born Catherine Hamilton in Glasgow, Scotland, on 23 February 1808,\(^5\) Katherine was the second child of her family, a twin sister of Gilbert, and second eldest daughter of 14 children. Her childhood and early adulthood were spent in Glasgow where, as the daughter of a merchant, her life was tied to the activities of a city that, during the first decades of the nineteenth century, exemplified the mercantile energy of the flourishing, progressive, industrial British economy. Civil service and civic enterprise were part of Katherine’s family heritage, her paternal grandfather, Gilbert Hamilton, having been provost of Glasgow and a

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founder of the Glasgow Chamber of Commerce—a first in the British Isles. When thrust onto a colonial frontier, Katherine showed the corresponding family traits of enterprise, energy and enhanced organisational skills.

On 14 April 1835, Katherine married Kenneth William Kirkland, two years her junior, the youngest son of a family that owned a large Glasgow sugar refinery. Established by Kenneth’s grandfather, John Kirkland, it was reputed to be the first sugar refinery in the British Isles. Before emigrating, Kenneth worked in the family business under the management of his eldest brother, Alexander, 12 years his senior. Family testimony suggests that Alexander’s overbearing and autocratic attitude towards Kenneth motivated his decision to emigrate.

Katherine and Kenneth Kirkland, their two-year-old daughter, Agnes, Katherine’s brothers, James and 18-year-old Robert, set sail from Greenock on the barque, Renown, on 8 June 1838, bound for Van Diemen’s Land. Accompanying the family were fellow Scots, Sandy and Mary Forrester. The group travelled north to Launceston, the four men, including Forrester (who was later employed as a shepherd), sailing to the mainland in October 1838 in order to ‘secure a sheep-farm’. The Eurocentric attitude to sheep-farming is reflected in Katherine’s comment that people simply ‘planted themselves as sheep farmers’. Katherine, Agnes, and Mary Forrester, who later (reluctantly) became Mary’s servant, stayed at a farm near Launceston, where Katherine ‘gained some insight into dairy management and other branches of rural economy’ in preparation for her future role as economic helpmate to her farming husband.6

Kirkland and the Hamilton brothers were among the earliest seekers of land in the Western District of Port Phillip. The first prospective settlers had pushed inland in 1836 to take up their runs on Wathaurong land. The earliest in the Geelong area were Dr Alexander Thomson, George Russell, and David Fisher—later manager of the Derwent Company, previously the Port Phillip Association. Russell was the founder and manager of the Clyde Company, set up to organise finance for the establishment of pastoral properties in the hinterland of Port Phillip.7 In December 1838, Kirkland and James Hamilton purchased 200 ewes and 20 wethers in preparation for settlement at Trawalla, situated on Mt Emu Creek, 40 kilometres west of Ballarat. Over time, their stock numbers grew to 20,000 sheep and 200 cattle. Young Robert Hamilton went to work as overseer at nearby Burrenbeet station.8 While both the Kirklands and James Hamilton later returned to Britain, Robert remained and was to become a notable pioneer of the district.

7 Croll 1937: 19; Brownhill 1955: 9.
On 21 January 1839, Katherine joined the menfolk.\(^9\) Arriving with her husband at Point Henry, on the southern coast of Port Phillip Bay, she landed from the brig *Henry*—moored 400 metres offshore because of a sandbank—first by way of a boat and then carried ashore by her husband. There was no pier. The stock, horses and small animals (goats, pigs, geese, ducks, hens and rabbits) landed in similar fashion: the bullocks were hoisted in the air with a belt and pulley and pulled along beside a boat; the sheep were thrown overboard to make their own way to shore. Ten kilometres away, the nascent settlement of Geelong consisted of three stores, the inhabitants of the village living in tents and rough shacks.

The Kirklands joined a wave of Scottish immigrants who were arriving during the later years of the 1830s, many of them, like the Kirklands, via Van Diemen’s Land. In 1839, there were 1,664 such arrivals. Ballarat resident, Nathan Spielvogel, termed the influx, ‘the Glasgow Invasion’.\(^10\) This established network of west-coast Scots gathered at Point Henry to help the Kirklands disembark, load their own drays with the Kirklands’ farming equipment and provisions and act as their guides during the seven-day trek inland. By 1839, land had been settled so far to the north and west that the run at Trawalla was 130 kilometres inland. Katherine could legitimately claim that, at the time of their settlement, she was the ‘first white woman who had ever been so far up the country’.\(^11\)

**First impressions**

Katherine’s narrative deals with first contact experiences. Recognition of difference is the theme of the early part of her narrative, which begins with the sentence, ‘The wilds of Australia present at this time some strange scenes’. The idea of uncivilised wilderness around the shores of Port Phillip Bay evoked for her a ‘primeval solitude’, where settlers lived a ‘strange kind of life’ and (compared with genteel Glasgow) a ‘wild kind of existence’. Aborigines enter her

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\(^11\) Kirkland, *Life in the Bush*, c. 1995: 9. This claim is supported by a contributor in 1853 to Thomas Francis Bride’s edition, *Letters from Victorian Pioneers: A Series of Papers on the Early Occupation of the Colony, the Aborigines, Etc*, Lloyd O’Neil Pty Ltd, South Yarra, Victoria, 1983 [1898]: 182, that ‘[i]n 1839 the squatters in Portland Bay District were very limited in number, not exceeding a dozen’. Though not signed, Bride noted (p. 197) that the letter had ‘evidently been written by Captain Foster Fyans’; and by Isaac Hebb, who lived in the Western District from the time of his arrival as a one-year-old in 1853 until his death in 1939. Hebb’s research found that, in 1839, there were only three squatters’ wives residing in the area between Port Fairy and Colac, south of Trawalla: Mrs Alexander Dennis, Mrs Hugh Murray and Mrs Thomas Manifold, Hebb 1970 [1888]: 60.
narrative as surreal beings like characters in a novel. She wrote that, ‘Occasional
adventures with the savage aborigines streak the loneliness of the picture with
something like the hues of romance’.\footnote{Kirkland, \textit{Life in the Bush}, c. 1995: 1–2.}

Katherine fell back onto the literary record to describe a landscape lacking the
structures and visual cues of a developed Western society. Well educated—
believed to have attended boarding school until at least the age of 19\footnote{Correspondence to Pike from Wilson, 7 December 1965, ‘Kirkland Biog. File’, ANU Archives. The length
of her school attendance may have been because she attended a kind of ‘Finishing School’ to complete her
education.}—she alluded in her text to the words in the English classics. In this case, it was
the concepts of barrenness, emptiness and loneliness in \textit{Robinson Crusoe} that
provided the literary construct on which to evoke the strangeness of her
surroundings:

When landed, we looked like a party thrown on a desert island, the
shore was so barren, and not a trace of human habitation to be seen, or
any of the works of man. All was in a state of nature.\footnote{Kirkland, \textit{Life in the Bush}, c. 1995: 3.}

On arrival Katherine was dismayed at the uncouth appearance and habits of
some of her fellow Scots. She described George Yuille, a recent immigrant, whom
she had known in Glasgow, as:

such a strange figure. He had allowed his beard to grow to a great
length; he wore very rough-looking clothes, and a broad black leather
belt round his waist, with a brace of pistols stuck in it.\footnote{Kirkland, \textit{Life in the Bush}, c. 1995: 3. George Yuille was the brother of William who had arrived in
Port Phillip in February 1837 and taken up the Ballarat run in March 1838, Billis and Kenyon 1974 [1932]:
164, 170.}

Though understated, this is her first textual reference to male violence.

Katherine was also disgusted by the Aborigines’ appearance. She first saw them
while staying at David and Charlotte Fisher’s farmhouse, situated on a hill near
the Barwon River—a site now close to central Geelong.\footnote{David and Charlotte Fisher’s house was later referred to as ‘the first house in Geelong worthy of the
name’, Brownhill 1955: 69.} Here the Wathaurong were curious, friendly and unafraid. Katherine wrote that, ‘They kept peeping
in at the windows to see us, and were always hanging about the huts’. Charlotte
Fisher explained that these people were ‘\textit{civilised} natives’ and that they were
‘always about the place’. Katherine’s opinion was that:
they are very ugly and dirty. Some of them wore skins sewed together, and thrown over their shoulders; a few of them had some old clothes given them by the settlers; and some were naked.\footnote{Kirkland, \textit{Life in the Bush}, c. 1995: 4 (italics in original).}

Her first description of an encounter with a Wathaurong man revealed him to be good-humoured and innocuous. Talking a walk in the bush with Agnes, she reported that:

I was keeping a good look-out for snakes, and was just stepping over what I fancied, by a slight glance, to be a burnt log of wood, but a second look showed me my mistake; it was a native lying on the grass, grinning in my face with his large white teeth. I was rather afraid, but he looked rather good-tempered, and laughed. He seemed to [sic] lazy to move, so I gave him a nod, and walked on, well pleased he did not think it necessary to accompany me home.\footnote{Kirkland, \textit{Life in the Bush}, c. 1995: 4.}

At the end of their first day’s travel, the Scottish entourage had trekked 40 or 50 kilometres inland, to reach the run of George Russell, near the present town of Meredith. Here some 100 Wathaurong enacted for the Scots a traditional courteous welcome to country, in the form of their corroboree. Katherine’s close observation indicates that she had a ringside view of proceedings:

They had about twenty large fires lighted, around which were seated the women and children. The men had painted themselves, according to their own fancy, with red and white earth. They had bones, and bits of stones, and emu’s feathers, tied on their hair, and branches of trees tied on their ankles, which made a rushing noise when they danced. Their appearance was very wild, and when they danced, their gestures and attitudes were equally so. One old man stood before the dancers, and kept repeating some words very fast in a kind of time, whilst he beat together two sticks. The women never dance; their employment is to keep the fires burning bright; and some of them were beating sticks, and declaiming in concert with the old man.\footnote{Kirkland, \textit{Life in the Bush}, c. 1995: 5.}

As the linguist and anthropologist T G H Strehlow has noted, Aborigines had been ‘trained from childhood to share what they possessed with others, and to co-operate with others in the expectation that others would in turn co-operate with them’. He described a corroboree as a form of expression realised ‘in deeds, not words’.\footnote{Strehlow 1956: 20.} Anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt also identified the importance of reciprocity in Aboriginal life. Their research found
that responsibility for others formed the basis of group existence, and that
reciprocity signified the willingness to cooperate and to extend mutual help.
According to Catherine Berndt, ‘One of the strengths of Aboriginal society
was its emphasis on co-operation in all aspects of living—between persons and
between groups, within a defined area where the intermeshing of rights and
duties made up a rich social fabric’.\(^\text{21}\)

When the Wathaurong ‘were very anxious that we white people would show
them how we coroberied’, George Yuille was nominated to present the white
man’s ritual, performing a Scottish dance and reciting a ‘piece of poetry, using
a great many gestures’. The Wathaurong ‘watched ... most attentively, and
seemed highly pleased’.\(^\text{22}\)

Like Katherine’s first meeting with the Wathaurong man, the corroboree opened
another door to cultural confusion. Totally failing to understand Indigenous
culture or needs, the Scots gave the Wathaurong ‘some white money’ and,
maintaining British courtesy, politely bade them goodnight before returning to
George Russell’s humble hut.

‘First impressions’ were also having an impact on the Wathaurong. On the
morning after the corroboree, curious and friendly Indigenous family groups
came to investigate Katherine and Agnes and, more particularly, their clothing.
Katherine recorded a delightful, perhaps essentially female, interchange:

> Numbers of natives came this forenoon to see us. They examined my
dress very attentively, and asked me the name of everything, which
they tried to repeat after me. They were much amused with my little
Agnes, and she was as much pleased with them. I wondered what her
grandmamma would have thought, could she have seen her in the midst
of a group of savages, and the life of the party. Whenever Agnes spoke,
they all laughed aloud, and tried to imitate her voice; the *pickaninny*
leubra’s dress was well examined. I put a little night-cap on a native
baby, with which its mother was much pleased, and many a little black
head was thrust out for one also.\(^\text{23}\)

As a newly arrived Scottish lady, Katherine would have been careful to maintain
what Penny Russell has described as the ‘display of gentility’. Keeping up
appearances by ‘genteel performance’ was of paramount importance to middle-
class women, and particularly for Katherine, who was in the early stages of

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\(^\text{21}\) Berndt 1980: 35.
Davies) appears to be part of the lingua franca of the British Empire. ‘Piccaninny’ referred to a Negro child in
pregnancy. She was certainly overdressed in the open bullock dray that took her along bumpy tracks in the heat of summer. She admitted that she ‘could scarcely bear’ the heat and nearly ‘died of thirst’.  

Ladies travelling in the 1830s, particularly if they were new arrivals, dressed formally, as deemed by British codes of respectability. When Elizabeth Fenton (born Knox) journeyed in 1830 from Hobart to her new home in New Norfolk, Van Diemen’s Land, she lamented that her fashionable black satin boots were ruined on the rough, muddy roads. Even colonial-born women were expected to dress appropriately in public. Louisa Atkinson, who was born in 1834 near Berrima in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales, wore practical, ‘unfeminine’ clothes in the bush, instead of conventional long skirts, a move from proper dress codes that scandalised the locals.

Female clothing served to maintain a woman’s position within the English class system. A ‘refined’ appearance not only identified her own status but also allowed her to identify other women of her class. It also nominated by implication her possession of the middle-class virtue, ‘morality’. Penelope Selby of the Station on the Yarra Yarra did her best to maintain proper procedure. On 26 January 1841 she confided to her sisters in England that, inside the house on hot days, she wore a shift, cotton gown, stockings and shoes, but seemed to reassure her family that, in the evening when it was cooler, she resumed full dress, with all her petticoats. In 1851, Louisa Meredith’s sister-in-law criticised Louisa’s flouting of society’s dress rules, when she wore a ‘jacket affair’ and a ‘dowdy looking bonnet’ when out riding.

Colonial men, by contrast, had soon adapted their clothing to accommodate the heat and outdoor activities of country life. John Cotton, of Doogalook station, 80 kilometres north of Melbourne, arrived in the colony in 1843 and wrote in January 1844 that:

> We cannot be too lightly clad during this hot weather ... A waistcoat is quite a superfluous vest here and I seldom wear anything over my shirt during the heat of the day. Braces, too, are thrown on one side, and a leather strap round the waist answers the purpose ... [Cabbage-tree] hats ... are generally worn throughout the colony; a handkerchief, tied loosely around the neck, with white or other trousers, socks and shoes ... complete the costume.

Little girls like Agnes, however, were constrained to suffer along with their mothers in similarly elaborate clothes. Katherine’s clothing consisted of a series of layers, both on the outside and underneath. Tightly laced corsets pulled in a tiny waist above a wide skirt. Neck ruffs and frilly sleeves were popular forms of ornamentation. Shawls were an essential part of outdoor attire, as were bonnets. Decorative large veils of lace, embroidered net or figured gauze were often worn draped over the sides and back of the headdresses, particularly when travelling. Girls would usually have a pinafore over the top, sometimes trousers underneath, as well as their petticoat. Like their mothers, they wore frilly caps or fussy bonnets. Short ankle boots with side-buttoning or lacing might also have been worn by girls as young as two-year-old Agnes.²⁹

On her return trip from Melbourne to Trawalla three months after the birth of her son in September 1839, Katherine met the same Aborigines, who came to investigate her baby boy:

One morning I got into a little hut with the roof half off; it was empty, and I thought I could wash and dress my baby more comfortably than in the dray. I had not been long in the hut when we were surrounded by natives, all anxious to see what we were about. One or two of the women came into the hut, and touched the *pickaninny cooley,* as they called it: they seemed much amused at his different pieces of dress, and all the little black pickaninnies tried to cry like him.³⁰

Like his mother and sister, the two-month-old Kenneth Kirkland would have been encased in layers of clothing. A basic layette in the early nineteenth-century, consisted of four little shirts, four little caps, two frocks, two bedgowns, two flannel blankets, two rollers, two pairs of ‘stays’ and flannel coats, two upper petticoats and 24 napkins. In the 1830s, a baby in Britain wore an upper petticoat, wide flannel band wound around its abdomen and hips, a long frock with a low neck, short bodice and short puffed sleeves tied round with a ribbon and bow on the shoulder, flannel pants over the diaper napkins, and socks. Newborn babies were carried around in an extra square of flannel and may also have been draped in a fine knitted shawl. They wore, day and night, plain undercaps and decorative ‘outer’ caps. Over the cap was a silk-lined hood, with a rosette of satin ribbon in the front, for a girl, and on the left, if a boy. Katherine’s observation that little Kenneth was a ‘delicate baby’ but that, in the

³⁰ Kirkland, *Life in the Bush,* c. 1995: 13–14 [italics in original]. Like ‘piccaninny’, ‘cooley’ also appears to have been part of the language of empire. Probably a variant of the western Indian tribal name, ‘koli’, it was the Indian term for an unskilled native labourer and, elsewhere, for a labourer employed for cheap service, and possibly a variation of the Tamil term ‘kuli’ for ‘hire’ or ‘wages’, *Macquarie Dictionary,* 1981.
words of Laurence Sterne, ‘God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb’, reinforced the probability of her attention to warm clothing.\(^{31}\) The Aborigines had good reason to be amused.

Aboriginal babies were simply carried around in the warm cloak of the mother, hanging at her shoulder. William Russell (1830–1914), the Chief Man of the Gundungorra of the Burragarong Valley, west of Sydney, recalled his mother’s ‘carrying me on her back cuddled down in a fold of her ’possum rug folded across her shoulders, I felt quite safe and comfortable, as any young Burru (Kangaroo) in his mother’s pouch’. By the 1870s, in the Braidwood area of New South Wales, a blanket had replaced the animal skin, but the same combination of cloak or blanket and maternal body heat sufficed to keep the baby warm, protected and comforted. Alice Duncan-Kemp noted that, in the warmer climate of Queensland’s Channel Country, newborn babies were carried in the mother’s coolamon or fish net, but still kept close to the maternal body, with the head rubbing against the mother’s side or back.\(^{32}\) Katherine was later to adopt this method for carrying Kenneth.

**Trawalla: A shared home**

An addendum to Katherine’s text by Robert Hamilton tells how sanguinely the settlers took over Indigenous land as their own. Henry Anderson from the nearby Mt Emu run directed Kirkland and the Hamiltons to ‘a pretty spot on the Mt Emu creek’.\(^{33}\) The Moner (Kalkeknerkneet) balug clan\(^{34}\) told the Scots that it was called ‘Trawalla’, meaning ‘flood’, ‘much rain’ and ‘wild water’. Bailliere’s 1865 *Gazetteer* describes it as possessing ‘magnificent sites for reservoirs of an extensive character, the available water being pure and plentiful’. Spring-fed waterholes in the creek, one of which reaches a depth of six metres, were a constant water source. After rainfall, these waterholes join up to form a fast-flowing stream.\(^ {35}\) Here the Kirklands established a 40,000-acre sheep station. The homestead site, on the banks of Mt Emu Creek in its northern reaches, was

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\(^{34}\) Within the Wathaurong territorial name there is thought to have been from between 14 and 25 smaller clans, who traversed a wide area in groups of up to 100 in response to seasonal food sources, ceremonial obligations and trading relationships, Clark 1995: 169.

\(^{35}\) Massola 1968: 48; Banfield 1955: 189; R Brough Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria: with Notes Relating to the Habits of the Natives of other Parts of Australia and Tasmania*, George Robertson, Melbourne, 1878,
also the focal point for the Moner balug. Middens of freshwater shells at the edge of the watercourses attest to its importance as a rich source of food. Other Wathaurong clans used Mt Emu Creek as a north-south route for travelling to and from meetings and ceremonies.36

Illustration 8. Trawalla homestead.

Source: Barbara Dawson, August 2004.

Assuming the privileged position of whiteness, the Kirklands exerted their colonial authority over the Wathaurong. They tried to ‘turn away’ the Aborigines, allowing (and encouraging) only ‘Tom’ to remain overnight, as the Kirklands hoped that this ‘big boy’ would be ‘useful in finding stray animals’. They were to be disappointed. Not able or willing to comply with the Kirklands’ Protestant work ethic, Tom was thought to be ‘very lazy, but he was always obliged to chop wood or do some work, else he got nothing to eat; which we found to be the only way to make the natives active’.37

Implicit evidence that the Aborigines resisted the attempted banishment from country is found in Katherine’s observations of Indigenous family life, seen at close range. She wrote that:

Vol. II: 192; Bailliere’s Victorian Gazetteer and Road Guide Containing the Most Recent and Accurate Information as to Every Place in the Colony, Compiled by Robt P Whitworth, F F Bailliere, Melbourne, 1865: 386; Personal communication from Fiona Mackenzie, Trawalla homestead, August 2004.
In the evening they meet at their *mi mi*; the men eat first, and whatever they choose to leave, the leubras and pickaninnies may eat afterward. Sometimes a very affectionate cooley may now and then, while he is eating, throw a bit to his leubra, as we should do to a dog, for which kindness she is very grateful.\(^\text{38}\)

She also witnessed that:

> The natives will eat anything that comes in their way. I saw a woman take a piece of sheep-skin, singe the wool off, and then begin to eat it, giving her baby a piece of it also. Much to my surprise, they actually ate a large piece of the skin.\(^\text{39}\)

The continued presence of the Moner balug at Trawalla is perhaps best demonstrated in the reaction of three-year-old Agnes to the arrival of a white lady at Trawalla, about one year after the Kirklands’ settlement. While Katherine was ‘delighted to have the privilege of talking to a lady again’, Agnes described the woman as a ‘white leubra’ and asked persistently whether there were ‘any more like her in the country’.\(^\text{40}\)

**Interracial female friendship?**

This anecdote featuring Agnes highlighted Katherine’s isolation from other women. While male networks were maintained through farm employees, and constant visits from neighbouring squatters or itinerant workers and travellers, women settlers were left unsustained and, to a large extent, uninitiated into the foreign land. As farms were taken up in the Western District no closer than five kilometres from another\(^\text{41}\) (and separated by often boggy roads), white women were geographically separated from each other, meeting only when travelling between the larger settlements of Melbourne and Geelong and their isolated outposts. During Katherine’s two years’ residence at Trawalla, her contact with white women of her own class—a factor that discounted Mary Forrester’s presence—occurred on only two occasions. After the birth of her son in September 1839, Katherine stayed in Melbourne for two months. Celia Scott accompanied her on her way home, as far as the Scotts’ property, (now) Boninyong, 15 kilometres south-east of Ballarat. Katharine had just acquired a

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\(^{41}\) ‘Thomas Learmonth, writing from Buninyong in 1853, recalls that there was ‘a tacit understanding that no one was to take up a station nearer than three miles to another person’, Croll 1937: 30.
new neighbour, but she was 50 kilometres away. The other instance, referred to above, was when Mrs Gibson visited on her way to establish a farm with her brother further inland.

Early in her commentary, Katherine voiced her abhorrence of the settlers’ staple diet of ‘nothing but mutton, [black] tea, and damper three times a-day’, every day. Before she could establish her vegetable garden, dairy, poultry yard and piggery, Katherine had to find a way to feed her husband, young daughter, her 21-year-old brother, James, and the fellow Scots, Mary and Sandy Forrester. There were also about four other men on Trawalla, working as labourers or shepherds. Travellers might unexpectedly call in, but all expecting to be fed. Nourishment was vital to Katherine, who arrived at Trawalla in the early months of pregnancy, and left when her son was less than 18 months old. She had lost the services of her maid, who was likely to have had at least basic cooking skills, when this servant chose to remain in Hobart. Katherine was soon to learn that Mary Forrester was ‘very ignorant in cooking’.

Katherine’s geographical isolation entailed separation from female sources that may have helped her maintain the healthy survival of herself and her family during the first months of settlement. She could not gain from white women, however, the kind of information she most needed: about types and sources of local bush tucker as it applied specifically to the regional landforms, waterways and vegetation of Trawalla. Only Moner balug women held this knowledge. Hints in the narrative point to their vital and generous assistance.

Katherine had noted, for example how the Moner balug women dived into the fresh-water ponds for mussels. She also knew that they were,

fond of a large grub found generally in the cherry and honeysuckle tree: they can tell, by knocking the tree with a stick, if any grubs are in it. When they knock the tree, they put their ear close to listen, and they open it with a tomahawk at the very spot the grubs are to be found.

Swapping recipes underlies many female friendships. While settlers could trade a piece of dress or a red pocket-handkerchief—which the Aborigines liked
to tie round their necks—for Indigenous possum pelts and flying-fox skins, Katherine’s need for Indigenous ‘recipes’ from Indigenous women’s knowledge of food supplies and preparation was a one-way process.

Katherine divulged Indigenous help indirectly. Without explaining how she knew such details, she informed her readers that the Aboriginal women dug up with long, pointed sticks, their staple food, maranong, from which the Moner balug derived their name. Katherine had been pleased to use this white root for soup, describing it as ‘shaped like a carrot, but the taste is more like a turnip’. She had also tasted ‘manna’ which fell from eucalypts, identifying it as tasting like almond biscuits. Precise understanding that manna was available only at certain seasons of the year and could be gathered only before sunrise before it disappeared soon afterwards implies interracial ‘conversations’ in which the Moner balug explained, pointed out and took Katherine along with them to food sites at appropriate times for gathering.

Although declaring on her arrival at Trawalla that, ‘I did not know much of cooking myself’, Katherine later displayed her enthusiasm for the culinary arts, exemplifying her philosophy that ‘necessity makes one learn many things’. Vegetarian cookery became her speciality. She was later to publish Vegetarian Cookery, the sixth edition of which appeared in the 1860s. Along with vegetarian recipes for soups, pies, cakes and preserves, the book includes a 30-page introductory scientific treatise evaluating the nutritional benefits gained from a vegetable diet as a natural source of ‘the proper Food of Man’. Surely the Moner balug women had helped in this conversion.

Competent and industrious, Katherine established, within 18 months of pastoral settlement, a vegetable and fruit garden of potatoes, peas, gooseberries, raspberries, strawberries and currants. Except for the milking of her 20 cows, she managed her dairy single-handedly, producing butter and cheese that, together with her poultry, she sold on the Melbourne market. Her skills in economic management encompassed an astute knowledge of the fluctuating Melbourne market prices for food and other commodities.

46 Kirkland, *Life in the Bush*, c. 1995: 19, 14. Murrn’yon was originally classified as *Microseris fosteri*. It is now known as *Microseris scapigera* in Victoria and *Microseris lanceolata* in New South Wales. Other botanical names have been used in the past. B Gott has written widely on this staple indigenous food. Cf., for example, Gott 1983: 2–18. Michael Christie also identifies ‘mirr-n’yon’, or yam, as the Wathaurongs’ staple food, Christie 1979: 9; Clark 2003: 113, 133, 345.

In order to show her readers ‘what good things we had in the bush’, Katherine unashamedly revealed her 1841 New Year’s Day dinner menu that incorporated Indigenous food into traditional British fare:

We had kangaroo-soup, roasted [wild] turkey well stuffed, a boiled leg of mutton, a parrot-pie, potatoes, and green peas; next, a plum pudding and strawberry-tart, with plenty of cream … [and, later] currant-bun, and a large bowl of curds and cream.48

Another indication of a physical closeness between Katherine and the Indigenous women was Katherine’s adoption of Indigenous methods of infant care. Mary Forrester restricted her chores to washing or cooking (and never both together) and refused to help tend the children. Katherine therefore worked alone in her dairy and, if her baby was not asleep, copied the way the Aboriginal women carried their babies, so that her hands were free: ‘I put him in a basket’, she told her readers, ‘and hung him at my side, as I had seen the native women do’.49 She had also drawn close enough to the Moner balug to observe that:

The women carry their children at their backs in a basket or bag; and when they suckle them, they generally put their breast under their arm; and I have seen them put it over their shoulder.50

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Perhaps it was an indication of a form of female friendship that Katherine sympathised with Indigenous concerns about dwindling water sources. By reiterating the Aborigines’ complaints partly in their own dialect, she revealed direct cross-cultural communication through shared dialogue, writing that:

Many lakes, both salt and fresh, have dried up lately. The natives say it is the white people coming that drives away the water: they say, “Plenty mobeek long time, combarley white fellow mobeek gigot – in English, “Plenty water for a long time, but when the white people come, the water goes away.”51

Katherine also told her readers that she very much liked the ‘native names’ for rivers and landforms, declaring that, ‘I think it a great pity to change them for English ones, as is often done’. She also incorporated Indigenous terminology in her text, using for example ‘tuan’ to denote ‘the flying squirrel’, although including both terms on behalf of her British readers.52

**Violence on the frontier**

The Western District, in the years of Katherine’s residence, has become known in historical terms as arguably ‘one of the two worst areas of racial violence’ in New South Wales, during the late 1830s and early 1840s.53 This was another area in which Katherine tried to maintain a textual ‘silence’.

One of the first comments she chose to write down about her arrival at Point Henry was her fear of the Aborigines. She wrote:

I kept looking round, expecting every moment to see some of the dreaded savages rushing upon us. I did not feel comfortable on account of the natives, I had heard such accounts of them in Van Diemen’s Land.54

Mary Forrester was similarly affected. At Geelong,

She would scarcely move out of the hut, and was always crying and wishing herself at home. She said she was determined to make her husband send her home with the first money he made. She wondered

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53 Critchett 2003: 52. The other main area of conflict is cited as the Liverpool Plains, north of Sydney. Although Critchett refers to the Portland Bay District of Port Phillip, this area roughly corresponds to the present Western District of Victoria.
why I did not think as she did. She would take comfort from no one, and was quite sure she would be killed by the wild natives when she got up the country.55

By the time the Scots had reached Trawalla, Mary was apparently no longer afraid of the Aborigines and Katherine’s tone and term of reference signified a return to reason on the part of her servant.

The editor of the Geelong Advertiser, however, summed up the prevailing situation in December 1840:

The interests of the blacks and whites are directly at variance ... It is nonsense to say to the settlers, “Be kind to the poor blacks, we have injured them,” and such-like stuff. You might as well put a dozen cats into a room full of rats, and then tell them not to fight. You make them enemies and then wish them to be friends.

The aborigines require the unrestrained liberty of traversing the whole of their ancient possessions; while the settlers claim the undivided occupation of the richest tracts ... civilisation destroys the hunting fields of the aborigines. How, then, can they ever agree? Neither of them will change their dispositions or interests; they cross each other at every point. Continual animosities and outrages ensue; and hatred and revenge are engendered on both sides.56

Not only Yuille but also the other Scots that accompanied the Kirklands on their 130 kilometre trip inland had ‘either pistols at their sides or a gun in their hands’,57 evidence of their preparedness for the worst.

In 1837, settler fear of Aboriginal ‘attack’ had initiated requests for protection, and resulted in Governor Bourke’s appointment of Captain Foster Fyans (previously the commandant at Moreton Bay, at the time of Eliza Fraser’s ‘rescue’) as Police Magistrate at Geelong. The number of Fyans’ support staff—consisting of a clerk of courts, three constables and 12 convicts—indicates the extent of alarm.58 Also indicative of insecure race relations was the formation in London in 1836 of the Aborigines Protection Society, formed to lobby for legislative protection for Aborigines. Consequent to this action, the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate was created by the Colonial Office in January 1838.59

56 Geelong Advertiser, 12 December 1840: 2.
58 Robinson and York 1977: 30, 36.
59 Abandoned by 1850, the scheme, not only to protect but also to ‘assimilate, convert and civilise’ the Aborigines of Port Phillip, was deemed to have been largely a failure, Shaw 1996: 143; Clark 1995: 3.
George Russell recorded that, until 1838, most settlers chose to remain close to Geelong and Melbourne ‘for security against the outrages of the natives’. From 1837 to 1839, Trawalla was at the frontier of black-white collision. Robert Hamilton noted that, a few months before Katherine’s arrival, ‘The natives were pretty numerous ... and did not seem too pleased’ when William and Ardey Yuille, and Henry Anderson, attempted to settle a little south of Trawalla. A large grass fire, apparently lit by the Aborigines, frightened them and they withdrew with their sheep. Hamilton also reported the ‘troublesome’ behaviour of the Wathaurong, as the ‘mounted and armed’ settlers travelled through their country. The results were what Michael Cannon has called the ‘bloody confrontations’ of the early 1840s.

Katherine refers indirectly to instances of racial violence. Her commentary includes her feelings of horror whenever she passed through the ‘Murderer’s Valley’ (where a shepherd had been killed by Aborigines before the Kirklands’ arrival). In relation to her own residence at Trawalla, she wrote enigmatically of ‘the occasional frights ... from natives, with whom it was no easy matter to be on good terms’, before turning to the safer topic of troublesome dingoes. When she chose to elaborate on one of these ‘frights’, she emphasised the elements of danger and excitement that might appeal to a voyeuristic British readership’s interest in nude savages and solitary women and children on an isolated colonial frontier. She wrote that, when she and Mary were alone with the children,

We [saw] seven wild natives run past our hut at a little distance, all naked, which gave us a great fright; I thought Mary was going into a fit. I got my pistol which I had hanging in my room, loaded; Mary then went for hers, and we walked up and down before the hut for about an hour.

The women’s ready recourse to weapons reveals the ever-present threat of violence, with or without actual conflict. Although quiet on the reason, Katherine also chose to confide that ‘old settlers would give an enormous price for good fire-arms’. She nevertheless strove to represent both sides of the...
frontier in her comment that: ‘In many instances the undue severities of the settlers lead to reprisals from the natives, who were apt to inflict vengeance in a very indiscriminate manner’.  

In The Black Resistance, Fergus Robinson and Barry York concluded that ‘by 1845 the Wathaurong had suffered a devastating decimation of their numbers – a decline of more than fifty per cent – as a result of the British colonial aggression’. Thomas Browne, who later wrote under the pseudonym, ‘Rolf Boldrewood’, and who drove cattle in 1842 from Melbourne to Port Fairy, south-west of Trawalla, referred to ‘wrong-doing and violence, of maimed and slaughtered stock, of homicide and murder’. Whilst encompassing other causes, violence is included in George Augustus Robinson’s 1839 list of ‘the evils accruing to the Aborigines by occupancy of their lands by the whites’, namely, ‘Disease of fatal character, hunger and distress, murder and rapine’.  

While reports from early settlers had estimated the Aboriginal population to be between 3,000 and 7,500 for the present State of Victoria, when the first official count was taken by the Board for the Protection of Aborigines in 1877, only 774 ‘natives of pure descent’ had survived or, when including part-Indigenous people, 1,067. Correspondents to Bride’s Letters from Victorian Pioneers affirmed that by the early 1840s, the numbers of Aborigines had been very severely reduced and that by 1853 few remained on the pastoral lands of the Western District. According to G A Robinson, the Moner balug were ‘defunct’ by 1841.  

A prime cause of white aggression was the stealing by Aborigines of stores and animals, or the spearing of livestock. Niel Black, a squatter on Glenormiston station, near present-day Terang, south of Trawalla, wrote that most settlers considered bullets to be the surest deterrent against sheep stealing. While Katherine maintained narrative silence on aggressive action against the Moner balug at Trawalla, pictorial evidence points to her knowledge of violence. Her sketch on the title page of ‘Life in the Bush’ in Chambers’s Miscellany, 1845, depicts in the foreground at Trawalla an armed settler aiming a rifle at a retreating Indigenous family group. One of the Aboriginal men turns towards the two settlers, spear poised for throwing. It seems unlikely that the publisher

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63 Robinson and York 1977: 37; Thomas Browne had arrived with his family in Melbourne in 1840, aged 14. From 1844 to 1858 he ran the property, Squattlesea Mere in the Portland area, Rolf Boldrewood, Old Melbourne Memories, William Heinemann Ltd, Melbourne, 1969 [1884]: 55–55, xii.
66 Christie 1979: 40.
is deploying a cliché because the same drawing forms part of an illustrated map of the Kirklands’ 1838 sea voyage to Australia, reproduced in the entry of Katherine’s family, ‘Hamilton of Polkemmet’, in *Henderson’s Australian Families*, where Katherine’s drawing illustrates a larger picture entitled, ‘Course of the barque “Renown” from Greenock to Hobart Town, V.D.L, 1838’. In ‘Life in the Bush’, mountains have been sketched as background, perhaps as a form of graphic appeal for Scottish readers. In Mackenzie’s 1995 edition of *Life in the Bush*, the threatening foreground figures have been erased from the image on the title page. Although this sort of evidence is difficult to interpret, the details of slab huts, rooflines, fences and farm equipment suggest that the image is not merely conventional, but particular to Trawalla.

Violence at Trawalla is supported by anecdotal evidence attributed to Robert Hamilton, who is said to have told his grandchildren that, ‘Because of his brother-in-law’s treatment of aboriginals, he feared that his sister was exposed to danger’. The dilemma of interpreting undocumented evidence is presented by the sight of round holes in the slab walls of an original outbuilding adjacent to Trawalla homestead. Do they silently attest to frontier conflict? Not large enough to sight a gun, were they auger holes made big enough for a gun barrel? On the other hand, if they are gun or bullet holes, the question remains as to which historical time they apply, and to what purpose.

Katherine is silent on the role that violence played both prior to and possibly during her residence. While naturally reticent to implicate her menfolk in attacks on Aborigines, she chose to convert a potentially violent episode involving sheep stealing to an example of Aboriginal skill and ingenuity. Her account of the theft of sheep from Trawalla presents a confusing message. She omitted any reference to retaliatory action and highlighted Indigenous expertise.

Some time in 1840 and (as Katherine is perhaps careful to observe) when Kirkland was ‘at the settlement’, 92 sheep went missing. James Hamilton, Trawalla workers and neighbouring landholders went in pursuit of them, Katherine reporting that:

> At last, after fourteen days’ riding, the sheep were found a hundred and forty miles [225 kilometres] from our station. My brother and his friends had almost given up thoughts of looking any longer for them; but they rode on about a mile farther, when they saw them in a hollow, surrounded by about a hundred natives. The men all hid themselves, having seen the party coming, and left the women and children, who ran about chattering, and hiding behind the rocks. The party rode down among them, and a singular scene met their view. The ground

67 Henderson 1941: 339.
68 Anderson 1969: 16.
was strewed with heads of sheep and bits of mutton, and some of the sheep were as well cut up as if done by an English butcher; the skins were pegged out on the ground, and the fat collected in little twine bags, which the women make of the bark of a tree. Fifty live sheep were enclosed within a brush fence (James said it was the best brush fence he had seen in the country), but they were very thin, the natives being too lazy to take them out to feed. They were killing and eating them up as fast as they could.\textsuperscript{69}

The fact that the white men took away with them the spoils of the raid (spears, tomahawks, waddies, and baskets) points to an uneasy undercurrent of unrevealed strife. What Katherine chose to highlight of the return trip, however, was the agility of the young Aboriginal tracker:

The native boy mounted a horse, saying he would not walk a step; but as he mounted he slipped off again, and the horse started on; the little fellow caught hold of the tail, and allowed himself to be dragged on till he got a good firm hold, and then sprung on the horse’s back. James said he never saw a cleverer piece of agility in a circus.\textsuperscript{70}

Whether Katherine reiterated these accounts as told to her by Hamilton and was ignorant of possible violent elements in the encounter, or whether a narrative decision of omission and addition was entirely her own, her account joins the genre of what Tom Griffiths has referred to as ‘veiled’ reports of frontier life.\textsuperscript{71}

\section*{Moner balug authority}

Because Katherine’s text was published in the period before Aborigines had established a position in colonial station life, it pinpoints a time when the emerging dichotomy of ‘wild blacks’ (as in her story of the ‘wild natives ... all naked’) and ‘station Aborigines’ was still being played out at Trawalla. Charlotte Fisher’s term of ‘\textit{civilised} natives’, at Geelong in 1839, demonstrates an early step towards this resolution. Katherine’s narrative encapsulates the confusion in a changing social climate.

Although the Kirklands had tried to remove the Moner balug from their land around the homestead, the Aborigines continued to return and to camp at the site for longer periods. Proximity to the Kirklands can be judged—as well as by

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\textsuperscript{69} Kirkland, \textit{Life in the Bush}, c. 1995: 17. Did Katherine inflate Indigenous ingenuity? Colin Campbell who, with his brother Alexander, Sandy Forrester and the Indigenous boy, Charley, joined the pursuit, wrote that the sheep were found on the afternoon of the second day, Anderson 1969: 16–17.
\end{flushright}
the references to Indigenous women—by the fact that an Aboriginal lad seemed to be on hand to help track the stolen sheep. This ‘little fellow’ seems not to be ‘Tom’ (the only Moner balug individualised by Katherine) because Tom was described as ‘big’. The Aborigines initially reacted to white coercion that would ultimately dissipate and dissolve their cultural and social identity, by ignoring the Kirklands’ commands.

Throughout her text, Katherine projected herself as a genteel British lady of good taste and character, and one who appreciated and respected civilised standards despite her remote colonial location. Her perception of what was respectable focused on the privacy of her home. The spaces within were sacrosanct. While Aborigines could draw close in a dilapidated wayside hut, they were excluded from her own domicile. That cultural boundary was not to be crossed, and she expressed disapproval that a neighbouring (male) settler allowed it.

Although residing in a slab hut, with one-inch gaps between the wooden boards that made up the walls, and initially without doors or windows, she had furnished her home with the refinements of Scottish gentility. One of the three rooms of her home was set aside as a ‘sitting room’, with family portraits decorating the walls.

In a story that supports Henry Reynolds’ theory of the interplay of resistance and attraction at the frontier, some Aboriginal men from a group of about 100 at the homestead entered Katherine’s house when she was alone. They were amused at what they saw, but Katherine was not:

[the Aborigines] examined all they saw very attentively, especially the pictures we had hanging on the walls. They were much taken with a likeness of my mother and laughed heartily at some black profiles; they said they were “black leubras.” I told them to leave the hut, but they would not; and one, a very tall fellow, took the liberty of sitting down beside me on the sofa. I did not much like being alone with these gentry, so I rose to go to the door to call some one, but my tall friend took hold of my arm and made me sit down again; on which I cried out sufficiently loud to alarm my husband, who was building a hut behind. He came in and turned them out.

This show of male Aboriginal authority (and confidence in the absence of the white men) was to be curbed by the white man’s gun. British racial superiority was, in this case, backed by the threat of violence. Because the Moner balug ‘still kept hanging about the station’, Kirkland had taken his gun and shot

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72 Reynolds 1990: 128.
some cockatoos flying overhead. Katherine’s literary resolution of a potentially conflictive situation was to return to the safe subject of food. She elaborated on this theme, recalling that:

Some of the natives ran and picked them up, and thrust them into some hot ashes, where they had lighted a fire, without even taking the feathers off. They were soon cooked in this way, and I believe ate very well.²⁴

**Return to Britain**

The Kirklands’ foray into pastoral pursuits coincided with a growing economic depression and drought. Leaving the farm to James Hamilton,²⁵ the Kirklands moved to a 40-acre agricultural farm on the Darebin Creek, north-west of Melbourne. They moved again soon afterwards when Katherine developed a severe bronchial complaint following her efforts to control a firebreak around their tents during a bushfire. On 19 July 1841, she opened a short-lived ‘Seminary for young ladies ... for a few boarders and a limited number of day scholars’ in Melbourne, before closing it because of ill-health. Kirkland served as registrar of the Court of Requests for six months, and as a clerk of the Magistrates’ Bench. On 7 September 1841 Katherine and her children sailed for Britain aboard the barque, Brilliant. In July 1842, Kirkland was declared insolvent and forced to sell his colonial estate. His friends raised money for his passage to Scotland where he returned in 1842, broken physically and financially.²⁶

Katherine turned to one of the few remunerated activities open to middle-class women in nineteenth-century Britain, particularly if they remained anonymous. A connection by marriage to the Chambers brothers may have smoothed Katherine’s path to publication: Kenneth Kirkland’s cousin, James Muir Dowie, had married Annie Chambers, the daughter of Robert Chambers. Or Robert’s interest in evolutionary theory may have opened doors to Katherine’s narrative because it dealt with Aborigines.²⁷

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Conclusion

*Life in the Bush* is a pivotal text in the history and historiography of interracial frontier relationships. In the hinterland of Port Phillip during the early 1840s, colonists and Aborigines alike were sorting out their roles and position in the emerging settler society. Katherine’s reference to both ‘wild’ Aborigines and to the family groups who gravitated back to the Trawalla homestead site in a peaceful move to coexistence reflects this as yet unresolved relationship. Written in a period of historical transition, Katherine has captured Indigenous culture, before its integrity was destroyed and reassessed through the eyes of the conquering white man.

Katherine seemed to be caught between the pull to reiterate the British preconceptions and stereotypes of colonial scenes and of the Indigenous inhabitants as strange and wild, and a realisation when she lived amongst the Moner balug at Trawalla that these assumptions were misplaced. This tension infiltrates a text that both pays homage to British middle-class values while also displaying a need to fairly represent the Aboriginal people. As the period of writing corresponded with rising imperial confidence, Australian colonists were apt to express their racial superiority without reservation. A J Campbell, minister of St George’s Presbyterian Church, Geelong, wrote in 1862 that the white man had a God-given right to cultivate the earth and to graze animals because, ‘If the aborigines make no use either of the grass-covered surface or of the fertile soil, I think we are ... entitled to put our sheep on one, and our ploughs into the other’. In acknowledging that Aborigines had been ‘poisoned, shot down, demoralized, and slain by drink and loathsome disease’, Campbell accepted as inevitable that ‘the white man’s progress involves the black man’s disappearance’. Katherine complied with the process of settlement as a member of the perceived superior race and as a supportive wife. She therefore reflected British attitudes, while sometimes qualifying and questioning them. Her narrative voice moves from fear and ignorance to guarded appreciation, which included sympathy with Indigenous reaction to settler incursion.

As a trailblazer in the historiography of friendship between Indigenous and white women on Australia’s raw frontier, Katherine, unable to foresee her readers’ acceptance, would have been uncertain about how to represent interracial communication that involved Indigenous female help. On one level, she viewed Aborigines from the perspective of a respectable middle-class British lady—a persona that she was bound to perpetrate for her authorial image. On another level, the text hints at a closer interracial relationship than the author

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is prepared to divulge. Katherine masks these parts of her story by resorting to generalisations or remaining silent on crucial details. She further displayed her confusion by, on the one hand, reiterating the racial stereotypes of Aboriginal ugliness, laziness and violence and, on the other, revealing an empathy with Indigenous culture and concerns.

Katherine represents the difficulty of white, female colonial writers, who know about male interracial conflict but who have experienced a tentative (or fuller) friendship with black women. She slanted her interpretative message of frontier violence by referring to it in general terms that did not specify the activities of her own family. Although she lived in a climate of racial violence, (actual clashes and the threat of attack), her silence on the subject supports Tom Griffiths’ observation that, on (and of) the frontier, ‘murder could not be openly discussed’. Furthermore, her omissions demonstrate that the ‘shifts in interpretation’ that Chilla Bulbeck attached to the part played by memory in secondary reports of the frontier (as found in ‘books ... docu-drama, national celebrations and monuments’) could similarly apply to a primary source.79

While choosing to hide an emerging relationship with Indigenous women and to suppress explicit details of frontier conflict, Katherine presented a vivid picture of Wathaurong confidence, honour and firm identity in her portrayal of their traditional welcoming ceremony. The dramatic power of the corroboree revealed the strength of Indigenous territorial authority in those early days of white settlement, before the imminent demise of Aboriginal social and cultural cohesion. By depicting their pride of land ownership in 1839 and 1840, Katherine’s text has captured the last years of pre-colonial Indigenous hunter-gatherer society.

Katherine Kirkland’s commentary from 1842 remains trapped within a larger story waiting to be told. As a forerunner in the genre of black-white frontier relationships, this early colonial text laid a foundation for the interpretation of the accounts of other women from different inland locations and of different times. The women in the following chapters inhabit ground (geographically and culturally) on which the events of colonisation have determined that a different type of interracial relationship has evolved. The works of Mary McConnel and Rose Scott Cowen have moved on and beyond the veiled references of Life in the Bush to present a ‘clearer’ picture of interracial relationship, albeit from their own points of view. Within these discourses, Indigenous strengths of character again emerge.
