

1. 'Tickpen',¹ 'Boro Boro':² Aboriginal economic engagements in early Melbourne

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European colonisation of south-eastern Australia brought Aboriginal people into contact with a vast array of new material culture items. These were often first introduced via 'gift giving' and exchange in an attempt to create and cement social alliances. Many Aboriginal people engaged in the new economy including the cash economy via trade and exchange, employment and what the Europeans described as begging. For the most part such engagements have not been systematically studied or analysed. In Melbourne, Kulin people used a form of economic action that Europeans perceived to be 'begging' as a means to engage with the settler economy from the very earliest days of contact. Although there were other mechanisms used by Aboriginal people to obtain funds and material culture, begging was highly visible and tended to elicit negative responses from the settlers. In this chapter, I explore Aboriginal economic engagement and what was described as begging. I argue that this was far from a mere opportunistic strategy for the acquisition of money, food and other goods, but was perceived by the Kulin as a viable, justifiable form of economic engagement – a kind of reciprocity for what they had lost. This was both economic entrepreneurialism and agency as the Kulin shifted their traditional econoscape to accommodate the new resources presented by European colonisation. In using the term econoscape I am drawing on the working of Arjun Appadurri, via the Australian analysis of Rae Norris.³ An econoscape refers to the mode of production, its variability and capacity to change. It is overlain with cultural relevance and recognises that different cultural groups will perceive these differently. I use this term to describe the economic landscape of the Kulin. This framework allows an interrogation of three interwoven themes: begging and reciprocity; wages, employment and begging; and finally, the longevity of begging as a form of economic engagement.

1 *The Age*, 10 December 1883: 5.

2 'William Adeney diary sketch, Aborigines in Melbourne, 1843', William Adeney diary, State Library of Victoria (SLV), MS 8520: 306.

3 Rae Norris, 'The More Things Change: Continuity in Australian Indigenous Employment Disadvantage, 1788–1967', unpublished PhD thesis, Griffith University, 2006: 4; Rae Norris, *The More Things Change: The Origins and Impact of Australian Indigenous Economic Exclusion*, Post Pressed, Mt Gravatt, Queensland, 2010. See also Rae Norris, 'Australian Indigenous employment disadvantage: What, why and where to from here?', *Journal of Economic and Social Policy* 5(2), Article 2, 2001.

Images, paintings and etchings created by Europeans in the nineteenth century often featured Aboriginal people either begging or otherwise soliciting food, money and the benevolence of white settlers. Undoubtedly such images also depicted the supposed charity and generosity, as well as superiority, of the European settlers. Most of these are rural images highlighting the persistent historical (though erroneous) leitmotif that after the establishment of European cities Aboriginal people were confined to the edges and fringes of urban settlements. One particularly well-known and often exhibited image, painted in Adelaide by Alexander Schramm in 1850, is entitled *A Scene in South Australia*. Another, also in Adelaide, dated to 1857 was Charles Hill's tellingly entitled *The First Lesson*. In this image, a mother demonstrates to her children the importance of charity and kindness. These two paintings illustrate that pastoral care and Aboriginal welfare had always been a responsibility – as such they are both nostalgic and mythic. These images ostensibly created after the closure of the frontier can be seen to illustrate contact as benevolent and indeed charitable. In Victoria one of the most prolific nineteenth-century artists, ST Gill, produced several similar examples, in which Aboriginal people's wellbeing appears to be predicated on European largesse (Figures 1, 2, 3). In each of Gill's images, seated Aboriginal people are depicted on the margins of settler's huts, visually occupying a liminal space between two worlds – the domestic-internal and wild-outside. They sit between the old and the new, in subservient poses I take to imply begging. Aboriginal people are shown as dependent, dispossessed and figuratively marginal, while their dislocation from traditional modes of economy sees them unable to supply themselves with food, perhaps seeking employment, assistance and benevolence.

On the Melbourne streets from the beginning of first settlement in 1835, Europeans disapprovingly observed and commented on Aboriginal people 'soliciting sixpences'. This did not end, as was intended, with establishment of reserves and missions in the 1860s.⁴ Even decades later, in the 1880s, as members of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines visited Coranderrk Aboriginal Station at Healesville they observed a remarkable continuity. According to a contemporary report in *The Age*:

An ancient warrior [known as] ... Pretty Boy ... [whose] principle acquaintance with the English language seemed to consist of being able to say "Gib it tickpen", and until that coin was handed over the visitors knew no peace'.⁵

4 An article in *The Argus*, 13 September 1860, described Aboriginal people as 'soliciting sixpences from township to township'. Leigh Boucher and I used this phrase in our article, "'Soliciting sixpences from township to township': Moral dilemmas in mid-nineteenth-century Melbourne", *Postcolonial Studies* 15(2), 2012: 149–165.

5 *The Age*, 10 December 1883: 5.

1. 'Tickpen', 'Boro Boro': Aboriginal economic engagements



Figure 1: *Hut door*, 185?, ST Gill.

Source: National Library of Australia, nla.pic-an2351777.

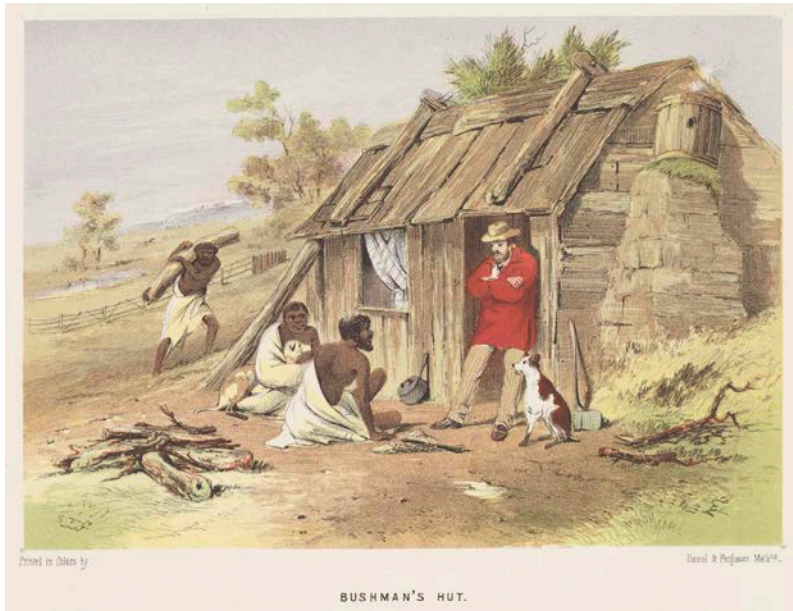


Figure 2: *Bushman's hut*, 1864, ST Gill.

Source: National Library of Australia, nla.pic-an7150080.

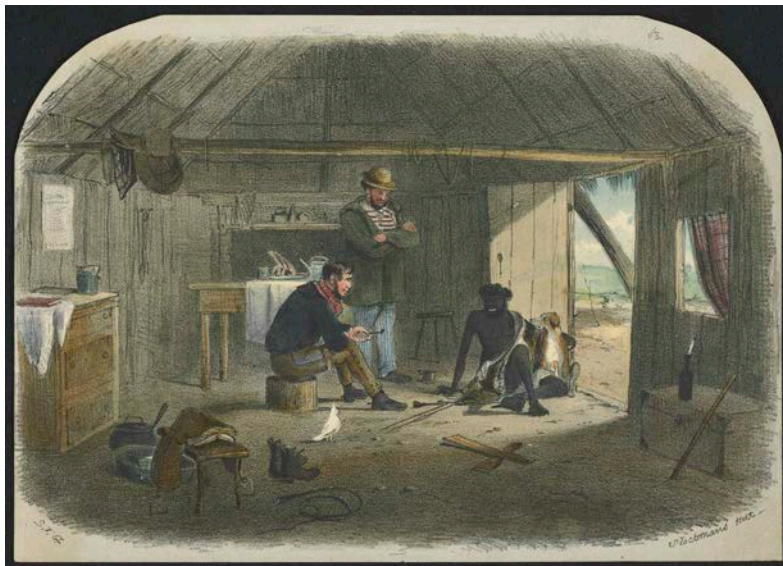


Figure 3: *Stockman's hut*, 1856, ST Gill.

Source: National Library of Australia, nla.pic-an7178362.

It would seem that 'begging', as the Europeans called it, was an effective strategy for securing what was wanted.

In Melbourne's early days, as the embryonic city developed, the lives of the Kulin people were irrevocably changed.⁶ The rapid nature of this development meant that the impact on the Kulin was pronounced and dramatic.⁷ Disease and violence devastated the population and the survivors (often thought of as 'remnants') became a source of anxiety and concern for the European émigrés.⁸ As explored elsewhere in this book, in the late 1830s humanitarian concerns led to the establishment of the Aboriginal Protectorate system which, at least in theory if not practice, aimed to remove the Kulin from the streets of Melbourne and deliver them to locales where they might be Christianised, educated, controlled and governed. Yet into the mid-1850s and beyond, Aboriginal people remained an unwelcome and uncontrolled feature of urban street life. The first mission station along the Yarra River, near the present-day botanical gardens, was close enough for groups to readily enter the fledgling city.⁹ Similarly, the nearby presence of communities of Aboriginal people around Port Phillip Bay meant they had easy access to the city and its public spaces. Melbourne's officials instituted numerous mechanisms to confine Aboriginal people and keep them out of the urban environs. As Penelope Edmonds has clearly demonstrated, even into the 1850s Aboriginal presence on Melbourne's streets remained a concern to the governing authorities.¹⁰ A major part of that concern was the activity of begging.

6 The Kulin people is a confederation of five related Aboriginal communities. They are known as the Woiwurrung (now called the Wurundjeri), the Boonwurrung, Taungurong, Wathaurung and the Dja Dja Wurrung. They occupied the area known now as south-central Victoria and included the location of present-day Melbourne. Information from the Department of Planning and Community Affairs: Aboriginal Affairs. See also Lynette Russell and Ian J McNiven, 'The Wurundjeri of Melbourne and Port Phillip', in J Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of World's Endangered Indigenous People*, Greenwood, New York, 2001.

7 The speed of Melbourne's development and its metropolitan nature is well documented in Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968: 280; Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria 1851–1861*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1963: 382; Edmund Finn, *The Chronicles of Early Melbourne*, centennial edition, Vols 1–3, Heritage Publications, Melbourne, 1976 [1888]; Thomas McCombie, *A History of the Colony of Victoria*, Sands and Kenny, Melbourne, 1858: 1.

8 Thousands of years of isolation meant that the Kulin were highly susceptible to a range of European diseases including influenza, smallpox, tuberculosis and syphilis. Coupled with violence, this massively reduced the population. While many regard the destruction to have been as great as 80–90 per cent, some more conservative estimates still claim a reduction in the population of least 50 per cent in the first two decades. See Richard Broome, 'Victoria', in Ann McGrath (ed.), *Contested Ground: Australian Aborigines under the British Crown*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1995; and Lyndall Ryan, 'Settler massacres on the Port Phillip frontier, 1836–1851', *Journal of Australian Studies* 34(3), 2010: 257–273.

9 AGL Shaw, *Victoria Before Separation: A History of the Port Phillip District*, Miegunyah Press, Carlton South, 1996: 115–116.

10 Penelope Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous People and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 2010: 88.

Begging and reciprocity

European settlers in Melbourne were troubled by daily encounters that involved what *The Argus* newspaper often termed ‘begging’, which as Richard Broome observes, was more likely seen by Aboriginal people as a kind of reciprocal exchange for their dispossession, relocation and the disruption of their traditional hunting and gathering practices.¹¹ Wesleyan missionary Reverend Joseph Orton, writing in the mid-1830s, described the clash of worlds and the catastrophic impact this had on the Aboriginal economy. According to his reckoning, those that stayed near to Europeans in the ‘settled districts [had] become pilfering – starving – obtrusive mendicants’.¹² Chief Protector of Aborigines, George Augustus Robinson, reflected that if whites were now hunting kangaroos, which were food for the Kulin, why then would the Kulin not be entitled to ‘hunt sheep’.¹³ Rev. Orton’s point concurs with Robinson’s idea of reciprocity, as he observed, the Aboriginal people:

are almost in a state of starvation and can only obtain food day by day, by begging or hunting. The latter mode is however almost abandoned on account of their game being driven away by the encroachments of settlers, and the roots on which they used to partially feed have been destroyed by sheep.¹⁴

Henry Reynolds has shown that although many Aboriginal groups met the encroaching pastoral advance violently, others used what might be described as covert forms of resistance.¹⁵ These included subtle weapons such as ritual and magic and the ‘granting’ of sexual favours which incurred reciprocity and obligation. Many of these forms of engagement and resistance were in a sense invisible to the Europeans.¹⁶ Not all early black–white interactions, however, can be regarded as domination and resistance.¹⁷ From the beginning of settlement significant numbers of Aboriginal men and women deliberately engaged with the society of the white newcomers and entered into the colonial economy as

11 Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History Since 1800*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005.

12 Michael Cannon (ed.), *Historical Records of Victoria (HRV)*, Volume 2A, The Aborigines of Port Phillip 1835–1839, Victorian Government Printer, Melbourne, 1982: 116–123.

13 In Shaw, *Before Separation*: 139.

14 *HRV*, Vol 2A: 122.

15 Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1981: 108–109.

16 Ian McNiven and I have previously explored the role of these unseen forms of resistance see ‘Ritual response: rock art, sorcery and ceremony on the Australian colonial frontier’, in M Wilson and B David (eds), *Constructed Landscapes; Rock-Art, Place and Identity*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2002: 27–41.

17 In my book *Savage Imaginings* I explore the discourses of resistance/domination/aculturation/assimilation at length, in short my argument is that these can not be easily distinguished from each other. See *Savage Imaginings: Historical and Contemporary Representations of Australian Aboriginalities*, Australian Scholarly Publications, Kew, 2001.

'economic agents'.¹⁸ The exemplary work of Penelope Edmonds documented Kulin clan members venturing into Melbourne to 'barter, buy munitions, exchange their labour, and sell goods such as skins and lyrebird feathers'.¹⁹ While some of the early colonists directly engaged Aboriginal people, it was usually on casual labour contracts. I suggest that these new entanglements were how the Kulin transformed their traditional hunting and gathering activities and accommodated the influx of new resources and new pressures and created a new econoscape. Fred Cahir, concentrating on the mid-century goldfields has indicated that actions 'construed as begging' were part of a cultural tradition that enmeshed and obligated newcomers, settlers and other non-Indigenous people to engage with local traditional owners by sharing food, supplies, tobacco, and so on.²⁰

Miner Walter Bridges perceptively described the new econoscape in 1855. On the Ballarat goldfields, Bridges recorded an exchange that offers a neat summing up of how Aboriginal people might have perceived the act of begging or soliciting. He wrote:

My mother and wife and small boy that come out from England with us was standing at the tent one day all alone, no other tents near when they saw a mob of native Blacks and Lubrias [lubras] ... So up they come yabbering good day Missie You my countary [country] woman now... Blacks said You gotum needle missie you gotum thread you Gotum tea you Gotum sugar you Gotum Bacca [tobacco]. So Mother had to say yes to get rid of them and had to give them all they asked for ...²¹

Bridges' family had pitched their tent on Aboriginal land²² and it is clear from this interaction that the clan saw this as meaning they had rights to the miner's possessions. By referring to Bridges' mother as 'country woman', the Aboriginal people were emphasising that they were now related to each other and as kin, they the traditional owners were entitled to be provided with supplies. This activity of soliciting supplies or begging is an extension of the earlier exchanges,

18 I cover the idea of Aboriginal people engaging in the new colonial economic system in my book *Roving Mariners: Aboriginal Whaler and Sealers, in the Southern Oceans 1790–1870*, SUNY Press, New York, 2012.

19 Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*: 125, 138. Edmonds also notes that a man known as 'Pigeon' knew what were acceptable wages and complained vociferously when he had not been paid.

20 Fred Cahir, *Black Gold: Aboriginal People on the Goldfields of Victoria, 1850–1870*, Aboriginal History Inc. and ANU E Press, Canberra, 2012: 16.

21 Cahir, *Black Gold*: 16. Cahir is more ambivalent about this event arguing that: 'It is difficult, however, to discern how much of this invoking of kinship ties ... had as much to do with opportunism and how much with the cultural rituals of sharing one's goods'. This event is also quoted in Ian D Clark and David A Cahir, 'Aboriginal people, gold, and tourism: the benefits of inclusiveness for Goldfields tourism in regional Victoria', *Tourism, Culture & Communication* 4(3), 2003: 132.

22 According to Clark the Keyeet baluk, a sub-group of the Burrumbeet baluk, a Wathaurung-speaking clan lived at Mt Buninyong. See Ian D Clark, 'Another Side of Eureka – the Aboriginal presence on the Ballarat goldfields in 1854 – Were Aboriginal people involved in the Eureka rebellion?', University of Ballarat, School of Business, Working Paper 2005/07.

which included gift giving as a way to create alliances and indebtedness. Gift giving as a means to secure relationships and engagements with Aboriginal people was a characteristic of early Victorian contact relations. Indeed Batman's illegitimate treaty was based on the settlers' assumption that they were entering into gift giving in exchange for land.²³ Though as Bain Attwood observed, it is highly unlikely the Kulin thought this is what the gift exchange involved. The Kulin, like other central and western Victorian Aboriginal groups, practised the tanderrum ceremony which was a diplomatic ritual involving hospitality and gift exchange.²⁴ Rather than being naïve about the meaning of Batman's treaty, Diane Barwick suggested the clan heads believed they were conducting a tanderrum, allowing the Europeans non-permanent access and use of their lands.²⁵ Two years later, in March 1837 when Governor Bourke toured the Port Phillip colony he continued the tradition, distributing blankets and clothing and issued the gift of 'four brass plates as honorary distinctions for good conduct'.²⁶

EM Curr recalled of Melbourne in 1839 that Aboriginal people were a feature of the street life. He wrote that:

These once free-born lords of the soil seemed to make themselves useful under the new *régime* by chopping firewood, bringing brooms for barter, and occasional buckets of water from the Yarra; and might be seen a little before sundown retiring to their camps on the outskirts of the town, well supplied with bread and meat ...²⁷

According to Curr both the Kulin and the settlers benefited from this arrangement. For the Aboriginal people it facilitated access to certain European goods, while the settlers obtained useful objects and materials. Assistant Protector of the Aborigines William Thomas commented in September 1840 that Aboriginal people were securing all they needed in Melbourne, which made relocating

23 For a comprehensive history and analysis of this 'Treaty' see Bain Attwood (with Helen Doyle), *Possession: Batman's Treaty and the Matter of History*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2009. See also James Boyce, *1835: The Founding of Melbourne & the Conquest of Australia*, Black Inc, Melbourne, 2011; James Bonwick, *John Batman the Founder of Victoria*, Wren, Melbourne, 1868.

24 Ian Clark, *Sharing History: A Sense for All Australians of a Shared Ownership of Their History*, Key Issues, no. 4: Council of Aboriginal Reconciliation, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1994.

25 Diane Barwick, 'Mapping the past: an atlas of the Victorian clans 1835–1904, Part 1', *Aboriginal History* 8(2), 1984: 122. See also Robert Kenny, 'Tricks or treats? A case for Kulin knowing in Batman's treaty', *History Australia* 5(2), 2008, Monash University Epress.

26 *Historical Records of Victoria*, Volume 1, The Beginnings of Permanent Government, Victorian Government Printer, Melbourne, 1982: 102, March 8th 1837.

27 EM Curr, *Recollections of Squatting Days in Victoria, then called Port Phillip District from 1841 to 1851*, George Robertson, Melbourne, 1883: 21. Penelope Edmonds, however, has shown that there were many instances where 'beggars' went empty handed, or worse were subjected to violence.

them to distant sites much more difficult. He wrote: 'The fact is that ... [they] are so bountifully supplied by Melbournians that they not only get lazy but dainty, no longer begging bullocks' heads, sheep heads etc'.²⁸

In this period Thomas was attempting to move the Kulin people from the township to a station at Arthur's Seat on the Mornington Peninsula 75 kilometres from Melbourne. Begging or the acquisition of food and provisions was sufficiently attractive to many Kulin that being persuaded to move proved difficult for Thomas.

In contrast, arriving in 1840, William Westgarth did not see any reciprocal benefits for colonists or the Kulin:

The natives still strolled into Melbourne at the time of my arrival, and for a couple of years or so after; but they were prohibited about the time of the institution of the corporation, as their non-conformity in attire – to speak in a decent way – their temptations from offers of drink by thoughtless colonists, and their inveterate begging, began soon to make them a public nuisance.²⁹

Westgarth, who demonstrated an almost evangelical zeal for improving society, was part of the intellectual elite that was then forming in Melbourne. He was one of the proponents of the Melbourne Mechanics Institute and went on to found a Benevolent Society. His interest in Aboriginal culture spanned both ethnographic and humanitarian perspectives and led him to publish a sympathetic and concerned booklet, *Report on the Condition, Capabilities and Prospects of the Australian Aborigines*.³⁰ Part of Westgarth's concern for Aboriginal welfare stemmed from his observations of what he termed begging and vagrancy. As Edmonds notes, 'begging and public nuisance' were constant concerns for the Protectors and other officials.³¹ Indeed, she cogently argues that this was a key element in the establishment of reserves on land some distance from Melbourne. Furthermore, violence was regularly meted out to many Aboriginal 'beggars', often condoned or at the very least ignored by the authorities.

28 Quoted in Marie Hansen Fels, *'I Succeeded Once': The Aboriginal Protectorate on the Mornington Peninsula, 1839–1840*, Aboriginal History Monograph 22, Canberra, ANU E Press, 2011: 112.

29 William Westgarth, *Personal Recollections of Early Melbourne and Victoria*, George Robertson & Co., Melbourne, 1888: 9.

30 William Westgarth, *Report on the Condition, Capabilities and Prospects of the Australian Aborigines*, William Clarke, Melbourne, 1846. Geoffrey Serle, 'Westgarth, William (1815–1889)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/westgarth-william-4830/text8057>, accessed 3 January 2013.

31 Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*: 126–127.

William Adeney was a contemporary of Curr and Westgarth, who in 1842 had recently arrived from London, and intended to 'take up' land in Western Victoria. In his earliest days in Melbourne he made a diary entry of a scene he had witnessed:

I was sitting writing a letter the other day and rose to peep through between the blind and window frame to see how the day looked out of doors when at the same moment a black horrible looking face suddenly came into very close proximity to mine but on the other side of the glass. It was that of an old native woman who activated by the same curiosity as my own no doubt wished to see through the same aperture what was inside. As it happened I was regularly startled and could not imagine for a moment what it was. The old woman was as much surprised as I was and after gazing with open mouth a few seconds said boro boro but what she wanted I could not understand ... [they are often seen] accosting passers by with "give me black money" and various other similar expressions begging bread.³²

The term 'boro boro' is fascinating as a form of begging. To borrow (from which I take it this word drawn) is generally used to refer to taking and using something that belongs to someone else. There is the implicit assumption that the borrowed item will be returned. Not wishing to extend the analogy too far, it is nonetheless possible that this is a continuation of the expectation of reciprocity.

Aboriginal people were clearly aware that the presence of Europeans and the development of the city of Melbourne had disadvantaged them; that their lives had been fundamentally changed. They had been dispossessed without payment. In 1858, when the Victorian Select Committee into the condition of Aboriginal people collected evidence and testimony, politician William Hull observed that Boonwurrung elder Derrimut was alive and 'lay about in St Kilda'. According to Hull, Derrimut had said 'give me shilling, Mr Hull'. Hull refused, offering instead to 'give [him] some bread'. Derrimut fatalistically responded that:

'Derrimut soon die,' and then he pointed with a plaintive manner [to the area surrounding them] ... 'You see, My Hull, all this mine, all along here Derrimut's once; no matter now, me soon tumble down'.³³

32 Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*: 46; also Adeney diary, the extensive diary entry includes with it a delicate pen and ink sketch of an Aboriginal man, woman and small dog. 'William Adeney diary sketch, Aborigines in Melbourne, 1843', SLV MS 8520: 296–307.

33 Quoted in Ian Clark's article, "'You have all this place, no good have children...'" Derrimut: traitor, saviour or a man of his people?', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 91(2), December 2005: 107–132. Quote on p. 177.

Wages, employment and begging

In the first few decades of European settlement there were few options for paid employment, though some Aboriginal people found work in tanneries, as farm labourers and bullock drivers.³⁴ In 1836, George Langhorne on the first government mission school, in an attempt to encourage the Kulin to attend, gave out rations, food and blankets. He emphasised that should they choose to work a few extra hours they would receive extra rations. Langhorne was convinced that by bringing the Kulin into a European economic system they would learn to value labour as an exchange for goods and rations.³⁵ For the most part, attempts to impose economic engagement failed. However, in those instances where Aboriginal people themselves exerted autonomy and control (limited as it undoubtedly was) they were more likely to succeed. Curr, above, offered an example of Kulin agency and autonomy when he noted that cutting wood had become a means of obtaining resources for men while some Aboriginal women were employed as domestic servants. For the most part, what little employment was available tended to be seasonal and cyclical.³⁶

The most significant shift came with the 1850s gold rush when Aboriginal people could be recruited for harvesting and other work as so many European men headed to central Victoria to make their fortunes. Outside of Melbourne on the actual goldfields Aboriginal people (in particular Dja Dja Wurrung clan members) found work as trackers and native police.³⁷ In his expansive analysis of black and white relations on the goldfields, Cahir records a range of ways that Aboriginal people made money.³⁸ Aside from wood and bark cutting they did domestic service, laundry, labouring, babysitting, as well as manufacturing and selling baskets, possum skin cloaks and producing Corroborees as staged fee-for-service events.³⁹ However, many Aboriginal people were still regarded as 'neglected and degraded', as a correspondent in the *Gold Diggers' Monthly Magazine* of 1853 observed. They were perceived as beggars and intemperate vagrants:

34 Alan Pope, 'Aboriginal adaptation to early colonial labour markets: The South Australian experience', *Labour History* 54, May 1988: 1–15. See also Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*: 148–149; R Castle and J Hagan, 'Centuries of Aboriginal unemployment in NSW', *Modern Unionist* 8, June 1983: 19, 52. For an excellent discussion of the colonial representations of Indigenous people as 'naturally idle' see Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, F Cass, London, 1977: 9.

35 Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*: 88.

36 Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians*: 148–149.

37 Cahir, *Black Gold*: 47–56.

38 Cahir, *Black Gold*: 67–72.

39 Cahir, *Black Gold*: 81–83.

[Whose] revelries and quarrels disturb the camp at night, and disease, misery, violence and even murder follow in the train. We [Europeans] were horrified at the sight of an expiring blackfellow – the victim of the preceding night's drunken fracas.⁴⁰

Associating drunkenness and violence with begging is a common theme in these descriptions.

As Edmonds has noted, vagrancy laws were only applied to white people who attempted to live around or loiter near Aboriginal people. Vagrancy laws – not applied to Aboriginal people – in a sense confirm the fact that they could not be homeless *per se*, as they were *sui generis* 'at home' – living on **their** country. It was prohibited to sell Aboriginal people alcohol, which as Penelope Edmonds notes was at odds with their status as British subjects.⁴¹ However, concerns over Aboriginal drunkenness led to the administration of 'peremptory punishments' for those Kulin 'who drank excessively and caused serious disturbance'.⁴²

Rarely, Aboriginal people's work was both admired and even celebrated. In the 1840s a group of young Aboriginal men (infantilised at the time as the 'Black Boys') were responsible for the construction of an important bridge across the Merri Creek, near to the Merri Creek Aboriginal School and the Yarra Bend Asylum.⁴³ The Merri Creek Aboriginal School was one of the earliest institutions in Victoria dedicated to the education of the Kulin people. Begun in 1845, the school sought to Christianise and educate, as well as enable a sort of self-sufficiency from the produce gardens and stock. When Edward Peacock, founding schoolmaster of the Merri Creek Aboriginal School, left in 1848 he was replaced by Francis Edgar who had arrived from Hobart accompanied by his wife, daughter Lucy and mother-in-law. Lucy wrote a detailed memoir 15 years after the family left in 1851. Although her memories are of her childhood adventures and the domestic circumstances of the family, aspects of her narrative are very useful.

According to Lucy Edgar, until 1848, crossing the Merri Creek was achieved by negotiating some gum tree logs that had been wedged together to form a makeshift bridge. A precarious hand rail had been added but many people were anxious about crossing. This presented an opportunity for the Kulin youths

40 Cited in Clark and Cahir, 'Aboriginal people, gold, and tourism': 130.

41 Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*: 151.

42 William Lonsdale in 1836, *HRV*, Vol 2A: 201, cited in Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*: 151.

43 Today the site where the Merri Creek Aboriginal School sat, is dominated by the footings of the Eastern Freeway bridge, constructed in the 1970s. No remains have been located of the school (or the nearby Aboriginal Protectorate Station) and it is most likely that the freeway construction and the redirection of the Yarra River has destroyed all evidence.

based at the school. According to Lucy Edgar: 'Little Jemmy had earned a good deal [of money] carrying passengers backwards and forwards in our cart, when the creek was not too high'.⁴⁴

Unfortunately, heavy summer rains in 1848 saw the log bridge washed away.⁴⁵ The schoolmaster decided that he would oversee the construction of a new, serviceable and long-lasting bridge. On seeing how proud Jemmy was at 'earning' money, Schoolmaster Edgar insisted that only the labour of the Merri Creek Aboriginal students would be used:

[He] called them [the 'black boys'] together, explained the project, and offered them wages at the rate of fourpence per diem for their work at the bridge, provided there was no sulking, and no necessity for driving them to it ... their labour was persevering, so earnest. They never were lazy when called to work at the bridge – never sulky, never grumbling. And it must be remembered that this was all extra work; there was the stock to attend to, the harvest to get in, the garden to keep in order, all the same; and it was only in the afternoons they could work out of doors, because of their morning lessons. It was on account of it being extra work that wages were given.⁴⁶

Lucy Edgar describes the construction of the bridge and the great pride the Kulin men had in their achievement. When the bridge opened in November 1849 the Chief Protector of the Aborigines George Augustus Robinson and his daughters attended.⁴⁷ The five bridge builders who remained at the Merri Creek Aboriginal School received payment for their bridge and in an act I regarded as attenuated economic independence and agency, instituted a toll system for anyone crossing the bridge.

The boys were accustomed, after the completion of the bridge to run out when they saw passengers about to cross it, and demand a toll. They were always alert to their dues; they did not ask any particular sum, but took whatever was offered, and they ran in to show their gains. 'Me got white money this time – him gentleman;' or 'Him only poor fellar – give me penny'. And everyone seemed willing to add his mite [sic] towards remunerating the boys, remarking [on] the excellence of the structure.⁴⁸

44 Lucy A Edgar, *Among the Black Boys; Being The History of an Attempt At Civilising Some Young Aborigines of Australia*, Emily Faithful, London, 1865: 48–53.

45 Edgar, *Among the Black Boys*; see also Ian Clark and Toby Heydon, *A Bend in the Yarra: A History of the Merri Creek Protectorate Station and Merri Creek Aboriginal School 1841–1851*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2004: 71–72; see also Thomas, 30 November 1848, Public Record Office Victoria (PROV), VPRS 44/P, Unit 669.

46 Edgar, *Among the Black Boys*: 49.

47 George Augustus Robinson Journal, 5 June 1849.

48 Edgar, *Among the Black Boys*: 54.

The 'black boys' in constructing the Merri Creek bridge were not merely using the European streetscape as their econoscape. In this instance they were creating an opportunity to control the movements of the Europeans and in so doing secure for themselves extra resources. The actions of the 'black boys' standing on the bridge demanding money was not described as begging, on the contrary it appears that those crossing bridge and the Edgars themselves saw this as a fair exchange. That they accepted a sliding scale of payments depending on whether those crossing were 'poor fellars' or 'gentlemen' certainly suggests that the Kulin were astutely engaged in the socio-economics of the situation.

Late nineteenth-century begging

Although instances of Aboriginal people on the Melbourne streets are rare in the 1880s, I have located two examples, both of which relate to begging associated with the Melbourne International Exhibition. The Exhibition, for which the world famous Melbourne Exhibition Building was designed, was held from 1 October 1880 until 30 April 1881. Despite the fact that many Aboriginal people were by this time housed in the reserve system, and in particular at Coranderrk, Kulin people frequented the area – perhaps attracted by the large number of well-heeled visitors. A writer in *The Argus* noted:

It must be confessed that if our visitors are to judge the Victorian aboriginal from such specimens as may happen to be visible in, or about, Melbourne during this Exhibition time, they may be confirmed in the conclusion that he is all they have been taught to believe him ... For civilisation has not agreed with him. Contact with the white man ... has made him too familiar with the white man's habits, his vices, and his diseases. As he stands clad in the white man's cast-off rags, gibbering out a request for white money, there is none of the nobility of the savage about him. He is only an unpicturesque vagrant ...⁴⁹

The newspapers of the day do not suggest a significant rise in the incidence of begging as recorded in court and magistrate reports and it is likely that this was mostly treated outside of the court/legal system. It is clear, however, that there were Aboriginal people begging in Melbourne, connected to the Exhibition, as depicted in the overt visual image which appeared in a French journal in 1881 (Figure 4).

49 *The Argus*, 17 December 1880, Supplement: 55.

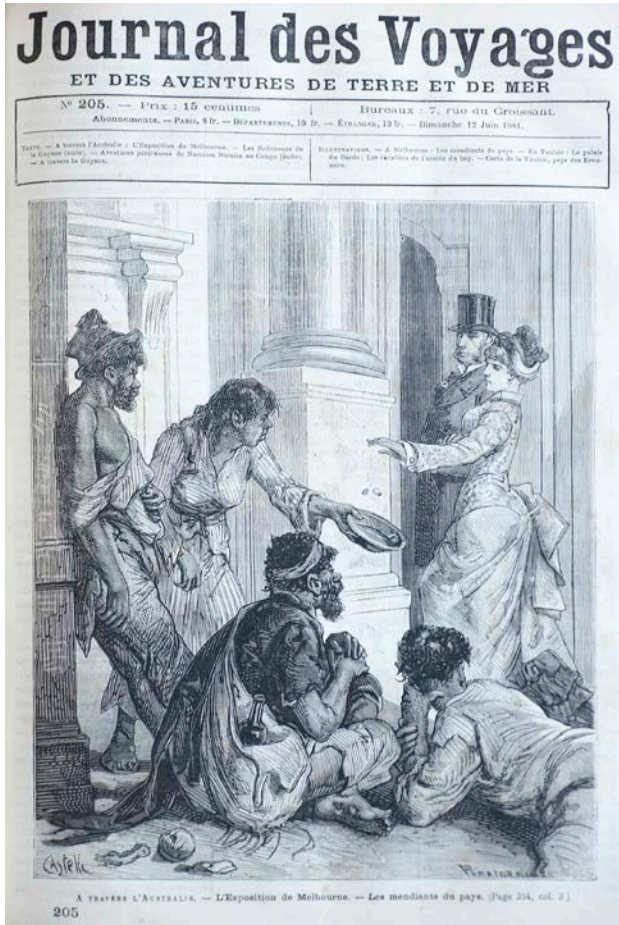


Figure 4: *Journal des Voyages* (The Travel Newspaper), 1881.

Source: Author's personal copy.

The title page of *Journal des Voyages* (The Travel Newspaper) carried an image of a group of Aboriginal people dressed in what appear to be cast-off (ragged) clothes begging for money which is tossed to them by a well-dressed woman.⁵⁰ The article is entitled: 'Throughout Australia – Melbourne Exhibition – The country's beggars'. The accompanying text notes:

Everything in this city of 430,000 souls, save for the width of the streets, reminds one of England, and the colony faithfully reproduces that

50 I am grateful to Lorraine David, French technical specialist for assistance with this translation.

metropolis with an incredible exactitude, in a land which was unknown two hundred years ago, and which remained in its natural state until thirty-five years ago.

But sometimes a group of ‘aboriginals’ serves to remind you that you are separated from London by 73 days at sea.

The men and women have skin darker than that of crocodiles, their hair is crinkly and filthy, their faces forlorn and brutish. Ragged trousers tattered and torn clothe their repulsive bodies; worn out boots dangle beneath their naked thighs and legs, their European rags originally multicoloured but now as brownish as the skin they hardly even cover; opera hats reduced to the state of an old withered apple or feathered ‘hats’ all given by an Irishwoman who blushed at their lack of clothing; a miserable jumble of rags over scrawny torsos the colour of dirty ebony black; these are the original owners of this continent, whom every day the Europeans push further away into the bush.

And to think of that famous treaty, signed in 1836 between the first settlers and the original inhabitants, by which the latter exchanged ‘*one thousand square leagues of the colony of Victoria for three sacks of glass beads, ten pounds of nails and five pounds of flour!*’

Australia – which one usually thinks of as so remote and primitive – today, has all the luxuries of Europe ...⁵¹

The French may well have had their own political reasons for depicting Aboriginal people as vagrants and rag-clothed beggars. As a critique of British colonialism, this French article offers a damning commentary. However, this critique should be tempered by the history of antagonism between France and Britain that occupied much of the nineteenth century.⁵² The article did, nonetheless, praise the British colonial city Melbourne regarding it as ‘elegant and expensively built’ with ‘nothing to envy of Paris’.⁵³ Intellectually, the city demonstrated its civility via its

public library, more scientific than literary, established ten years ago only and holds already 41.000 volumes. It has costs 120.000 pounds sterling to the colony, and attracts a considerable number of readers.

51 Translation of *Journal des Voyages*, No. 205, June 1881, Cover illustration by SC Perrichon, article by F Demays. Original emphasis.

52 Chris Cook and John Stevenson (eds), *The Routledge Companion To European History Since 1763*, Routledge, New York, 2005.

53 *Journal des Voyages*, No. 205, June 1881.

The presence of Aboriginal people begging in Melbourne towards the *fin de siècle* is at odds with previous analyses that have suggested by the later part of the nineteenth-century Aboriginal people were largely absent from the Melbourne streetscape. Their begging, probably opportunistically related to the Melbourne International Exhibition, I suggest, implies a well-thought-out strategy of economic engagement via soliciting for money. As with the 'Black Boy's Bridge', the Kulin had marked out on their econoscape the most advantageous locations for them to secure resources.

Discussion

The new econoscape of the Kulin also included the use or reuse of European clothing. While numerous nineteenth-century observers referred to Aboriginal people dressed in cast-off clothes or rags it is difficult to know precisely how they came to have these. It is possible that the ragged clothes were merely clothing they had been issued which had become tattered, equally likely these might have been secured via 'begging' or indeed scrounging through the Europeans' cast-offs. Newly arrived William Adeney in the 1840s remarked that he had

[m]et two of the poor aborigines looking almost like the inhabitants of another world. The man was clothed in some dirty pieces of blanket hung about him.⁵⁴

So taken with this was Adeney that uncharacteristically he made one of the very few sketches in his diary. The sight of Aboriginal people wearing discarded European clothing or clothing that had become tattered and rag-like was challenging to the settlers. They stood as an almost satiric announcement that theirs had been an unsuccessful assimilation. These scenes were in many ways a mimetic reminder that such mimicry could be challenging and indeed unsettling. Covered in what the Europeans might consider to be rags the Kulin as an imperfect copy or replica disrupted the notion of the city as a white space. One powerful example is depicted in ST Gill's image *Native Dignity* (Figure 5). Penelope Edmonds regards this image, first published in 1866, as 'revealing the deep anxieties about the boundaries of civility and whiteness'.⁵⁵ I would suggest that this image might even represent a mimetic moment where the apparently 'Europeanised' Kulin represent an even bigger threat than they did before.⁵⁶

54 Adeney diary, SLV MS 8520: 305.

55 Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*: 167.

56 In *Savage Imaginings*, drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Homi K Bhabha and Michael Taussig, I consider the range of ways Aboriginal people consciously used mimesis and mimetic faculties to resist and engage with white society. See also Walter Benjamin, 'On the mimetic faculty', in *Reflections*, Schocken Books, New York, 1986; Homi K Bhabha, 'Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse', October 28, Spring 1984: 125–133; and Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, Routledge, New York, 1993.

In this moment the victim of invasion and colonialism has ‘metamorphosed’ and in so doing threatens the existence of the settlers, which also permits the settler’s relief from guilt. Perhaps these were ironic though, as Edmonds notes by this date Aboriginal people were virtually absent from the Melbourne streets and their threatening presence was largely in the settlers’ imaginations. For the Kulin themselves it is difficult to ascertain how they felt about their clothing or indeed if they regarded them as ‘rags’ or an adequate replacement for their traditional labour-intensive possum skin cloaks.



Figure 5: *Native Dignity*, 186?, ST Gill.

Source: National Library Australia, nla.pic-an7021882.

While the mid-nineteenth century might have seen many Aboriginal people vacate Melbourne environs, this was not meek acquiescing to the European settlers’ takeover of their land. The settlers knew only too well that some Aborigines had maintained their social structure on their own terms and where many usually imagined a ruined, helpless people the Kulin continued to exert their presence in the imagination of the settlers in a range of uncomfortable and confronting ways.

As the poet George Gordon McCrae wrote with powerful melancholy in the 1860s poem, *Balladeadro*:

the Australian blackfellow, as we see him in the streets of Melbourne, is not a poetic looking object his thoughts must be of the gloomiest kind [because] his birth-right has been seized by the stranger.⁵⁷

Based both in Melbourne at Abbotsford and also having a property at Arthur's Seat on Boonwurrung land, McCrae and his family were familiar with Kulin people. As a member of Melbourne's burgeoning intelligentsia – his mother was Georgiana McCrae – he was a sensitive observer of Aboriginal people. As such his works are telling for what they indicate about the perceptions of the time. In 1866, *The Australian* published a poem written by TB Shortfellow, an obvious and playful *non de plume* with homage to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, author of *The Song of Hiawatha*. 'Shortfellow' wrote the 'Reminiscences and Reflections of an Aboriginal Chieftain'. Like the couple depicted in Gill's *Native Dignity* the chieftain was once a noble warrior who had been reduced to a 'debased' and 'conquered' victim – a mockery of white values. The Chieftain dreamed of a place:

Where, free from the vice and follies of white men, he might live happy,
Where no plant-distilling liquors to abase him could be found.
And he thought no pale-faced stranger had a right, by force or cunning,
To drive them back to the Mallee, or the parched and desert plain,
And that allow seducing poison as a recompense to offer,
Which destroys what pride the conquered and degraded might retain.

This is the image of a liquor-soaked dispossessed beggar. The Chieftain finishes with the begging plea: 'Mine poor fellow no got bacca, and mine big one want 'im smoke!'.⁵⁸

It was a relatively simple segue to see Aboriginal people dressed in European cast-off clothing and soliciting for money as a conquered people begging for survival. It is highly unlikely that the Kulin saw themselves this way. Indeed it is possible that replacing their possum skin cloaks with blankets or other European dress items was seen as a sensible strategy given the labour intensity of the cloak manufacture. Similarly, begging for a few hours each day might well have been seen as preferable, indeed much easier than walking long distances for hunting and gathering resources, thus transforming their econoscape as they saw fit.

57 *The Australasian*, Wednesday 13 March 1867: 3.

58 *Australian Journal*, 6 May 1866; John O'Leary, 'The ethnographic verse of mid-nineteenth century Australia', *Australian Literary Studies* 23(1), 2007: 3–17.

Conclusion

Accessing European goods, clothes and money was a strategic economic concern of the Kulin throughout the nineteenth century. The assistant protectors, missionaries and other 'humanitarians' often distributed clothes and rations as a matter of course. This was recognised in the Legislative Council's Select Committee into the condition of the Aborigines questionnaire, which asked as question 4:

Has assistance in the form of clothing , food or medical attendance, been bestowed on the aborigines of your district by the Government? What means have they of living? Are there any aboriginal reserves near you, or places well fitted for being granted as such?

As a consequence of the Select Committee's report the distribution of food, blankets and clothing became centralised through the establishment of the Central Board Appointed to Watch over the Interests of the Aborigines. In many ways it could be regarded as also the consequence of the Kulin's successful strategy of engaging with the new economy via soliciting and begging.

It is clear that the establishment of Melbourne and the colonisation of the Port Phillip Colony (Victoria) had a devastating and long-lasting effect on the Aboriginal people. Governing the Kulin was an immediate and ongoing concern for the settlers. Despite the establishment of the Aboriginal Protectorate in the 1840s designed to remove them from the city, the Kulin continued to be visible on the Melbourne streets in the mid-1850s and, as this chapter has shown, beyond. According to Edmonds, Melbourne authorities required a range of mechanisms to control the presence of the Kulin.⁵⁹ However, these were constantly challenged and Aboriginal people continued to exert their admittedly reduced presence up into the 1880s. What the Europeans termed begging was one of the ways the Kulin engaged with the imposed economic system. Begging was an effective means for obtaining money and other commodities as its continuity over five decades demonstrates.⁶⁰

59 Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers*: 88.

60 Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History Since 1800*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005; see also Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell (eds), *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991.

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