ABORIGINAL HISTORY 1978 2:2

SOURCES FOR ABORIGINAL HISTORY

This section, which appeared in Volume One as Archives and Publications, is intended as an aid to those writing Aboriginal history although the documents — previously unpublished manuscripts, vernacular texts, and recorded oral traditions — should be of intrinsic interest to all students of the subject. The section will also feature articles commissioned from national, state and overseas archives relating to Aborigines.

The section editor, Niel Gunson, will also consider descriptive listings of other Aboriginal source material, including photographic and film holdings, in public and private collections; and specialised bibliographies. Previously unpublished material such as letters, diary extracts, brief regional and family histories, and reminiscences should be presented in an edited form with some account of provenance and explanatory footnotes where necessary. The section editor would also like to hear from those who have material or know where it may be obtained but who have not the time or expertise to prepare it for publication. Authors should acknowledge permission to publish material held by institutions or private persons other than themselves.

RECORDS OF THE ADMINISTRATION OF ABORIGINES IN VICTORIA, c.1860-1968*

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A large and historic collection of records of the Victorian government's administration of Aboriginal people is held by the Australian Archives at its Victorian Branch. These records were transferred to Commonwealth control at the time of the transfer of the functions of the Victorian Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs to the Commonwealth in 1975. They cover over a century of government administration, from 1860 to 1968, and consequently provide a continuous history of the life of Victorian Aborigines over that period.

The records were created by authorities set up by the colonial and State governments. The first, the Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of the Aborigines, was appointed by the Governor in 1860, with Robert Brough Smyth as Secretary. Its functions were to oversee the welfare of the Aborigines of the colony, including recommending the allocation of land for reserves, appointing local agents, supplying the essential needs of the Aboriginal people and generally advising the government. This Board was reconstituted under the long-delayed Aborigines Protection Act (No. 349 of 1869) as the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines, with the Chief Secretary, the responsible minister, as ex officio chairman. The Board's considerably increased powers included authority to prescribe the place of residence of Aborigines, to control the care, custody and education of their children, to lay down conditions for employment contracts and to apportion the earnings from their labour on the Aboriginal stations. The Board worked through a system of reserves managed by missionaries or superintendents, and ration depots maintained by Local Guardians in areas much frequented by Aborigines. The Act was amended in 1886 to implement an 'absorption' policy for 'half castes', who were excluded from Board care and control until the Act was again amended (Aborigines Act, No. 2255 of 1910) to give the Board discretionary power to license needy individuals to reside at the stations and receive aid. The limited definition of eligible Aborigines was altered to include 'any person of Aboriginal descent' in the Aborigines Act (No. 6068 of 1957).

*This article is the author's private submission.
which dissolved the old Board and established an Aborigines Welfare Board, as a result of the recommendations of a Board of Inquiry (the McLean Inquiry) set up in 1955. This Board was in turn dissolved by the Aboriginal Affairs Act (No. 7574 of 1967) which established a Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, the responsible authority from 1968 to 1975.

Apart from the three consecutive Boards responsible for the continuing process of administration from 1860 to 1968, three other agencies have contributed to the records now held by Australian Archives in Victoria. One was the Royal Commission on the Aborigines, appointed in January 1877 to inquire into the present condition of the Aborigines and the best means of caring for them in the future. The report was presented to both Houses of Parliament late in 1877 and published in the Parliamentary Papers. Another was the Board of Inquiry appointed to investigate the condition and management of Coranderrk Aboriginal Station in August 1881. In 1882 its report was also presented to both Houses of Parliament and published. Thirdly there was the McLean Inquiry. McLean’s report was presented in January 1957.

There is great variety in the records created by the above agencies, everything from scribbled working papers to old leatherbound volumes. They include minute books, press copy books, maps, routine working papers, inward correspondence papers, plans and specifications, accounts, petitions, reports, ledgers, tenders and so on. Their physical condition varies. Two items, unfortunately, are currently unavailable for public access until restoration work is undertaken, but most of the records are still in a very usable condition.

Of the approximately 17.60 metres of records that were transferred I have listed the major items cleared for public access. The ‘housekeeping’ type of records (such as accounts, time books, cash payment books) have not been included, although these could prove to be useful for some purposes, especially where other records are not extant. Records created in the post-1948 period have been omitted also, as these are still closed to public access under the government’s thirty-year access policy. The list does include the minutes of the various boards, volumes of outward correspondence, and several series of inward correspondence. Two are very large. One covers matters concerning the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station, after 1924 the only station managed by the Board. The other covers matters affecting the other Aboriginal reserves and correspondence from Local Guardians. These inward correspondence series are largely composed of letters from the missionaries or managers to the Board secretary, but also include some correspondence from Aborigines, members of the public, church mission society authorities, police and other government departments and from authorities in other colonies or States concerned with Aboriginal welfare. Also listed is a series of case files compiled on individual Aborigines.

Official policy on access to Commonwealth government records provides that records more than thirty years old are available for public access but that some categories of records are withheld for longer periods. In the series listed in the appendix the only papers closed are those which might cause distress or embarrassment to living persons. Most papers restricted under this category fall between the years 1920 to 1948. Very rarely was any nineteenth century paper closed and only occasionally any before 1920. Special access to papers in the open period which have been restricted can be requested and is approved, in certain circumstances and conditions, on application to Australian Archives.

There are some gaps in the material transferred to archival custody. For example, Australian Archives do not hold any Annual Reports for the years between 1906 and 1921, there are no copy books of the outward correspondence of the Board between 1897 and 1909, and inward correspondence is entirely missing for some years and some stations. On the other hand the extant records are, at times, very comprehensive indeed. For example, the correspondence from the Coranderrk Station for the years 1882, 1883 and 1884 is so extensive that a separate file was necessary for each month’s correspondence. Also large is that from the Ramahyuck (Lake Wellington) Station for the years 1874 and 1875, and from the Lake Condah Station for the years from 1876 to 1885. When such complete collections of inward correspondence can be combined with the Minutes of the Board’s meetings, and the outward letters from the Secretary of the Board, the record of the period is very good indeed. At other times, gaps in one of the series may be compensated for by
covering records in another series. In this respect, the Minutes of the meetings of the three consecutive Boards are the most basic and reliable source, for they are complete from the first meeting of the Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of the Aborigines in June 1860, to the last meeting of the Aborigines Welfare Board in 1967 (though those post-1948 are, of course, still within the closed access period).

As well as gaps in some series, there were apparently virtually no agency control records transferred to archival custody. It is not known if the original registers of correspondence are still extant. Only one register of inward correspondence (for the years 1876-1877) was transferred to Australian Archives. Some of the related inwards and outwards correspondence was pinned together, but much of the correspondence was transferred to Archives as individual, loose items. Sometime just before transfer of the records to Archives, the papers had been arranged roughly by subject or by locality (for example, Lake Tyers) to aid retrieval. As it was not possible to establish the original system of control, Archives staff proceeded to streamline this arrangement and to extend it to establish some uniform control over the correspondence. As a part of this process, new finding aids were created, in the form of series descriptions and lists of file titles, to facilitate use of the records for research purposes.

What can the surviving records be expected to reveal? Firstly, of course, the policy of the Victorian government towards the Aboriginal people, and the changes in policy that occurred over time. Some of the changes were quite drastic in their results. Among the main ones would be that of 1869, when the first Board decided it needed greater powers to 'manage' the Aborigines, the decision of 1886 that, with few exceptions, only full blood Aborigines, were to have any call on government help, the 1910 amendment to the Act that conceded the impossibility of such a strict definition, that of the 1920s 'amalgamation policy', when eligible residents of the remaining stations were transferred to Lake Tyers, and finally the change in 1957 when all persons of Aboriginal descent were once more eligible for aid. The pressures that led to these and other less major changes in policy can be traced in the records, as can the structure and membership of the policy-making body itself, which also underwent changes over time. The performance of different Boards varied — some were enthusiastic and conscientious, some not interested, some even neglectful. The Minutes of Board meetings record their performance, how they interpreted government policy and the differences of opinion between individual members of the Board. They also reveal the important role the Secretary could and did play in Board policy and decision making especially when, as in the latter part of the nineteenth century, he was himself an experienced ex-missionary.

Secondly, and obviously, the material records the implementation of government policy, the vigour or laxity with which it was carried out and the perhaps inevitable gap between the intention and reality in such a new and difficult area of government administration. Again the Secretary's role is revealed as vital — interpreting Board policy and enforcing compliance upon missionaries, managers, Local Guardians, Aborigines and the public. The outward correspondence books show his central role, especially at those times when the Board itself was neglectful. But the great mass of detail on the day to day administration of the Aboriginal stations was recorded by the managers on the spot. The Board's agents sought advice and approval from the Secretary for all the details of their work in administering what were, in effect, rural estates. Their correspondence is as much concerned with crops, weather and returns as it is with people and supplies. They reveal the daily life of the stations and all the problems associated with their pioneering attempts to establish the reserves as viable economic units using Aboriginal labour. Some missionaries had sole responsibility for the administration of a station and the care and management of the people on it for a generation or more, and their influence on the land and the people alike must have been immense. Their correspondence unwittingly reveals the life of the missionaries as well, and their differing approaches to the work they undertook. There are contrasts to be found between the nineteenth and twentieth century administrations, as the missionaries were replaced by secular managers, the squatter Local Guardians were replaced by local police officers and the missionary-secretary by the career public servant. The new administrators reveal different attitudes and ambitions to those of the previous generations, and, of course, they had different problems to face. The twentieth-century records deal with a period of con-
traction and amalgamation of reserves, and, one suspects, of disillusionment with the old aim of assimilation, as the problems of the people living outside the Board's authority became more and more insistent upon the Board's attention.

And what of the central people in these records, the Aboriginal people themselves? Surprisingly perhaps, there is virtually no anthropological information recorded, at least that the layman can recognize. It is known that some of the early missionaries were very interested in tribal customs and beliefs, but references to such matters are rare and incidental in what are largely bureaucratic records. However, there may be some useful material for demographic studies. The earliest population statistics, compiled in 1863, in many cases give tribal as well as English names — a rare treat in these records. Estimates of the number of people of full or part-Aboriginal descent were thereafter taken periodically by the Board and give an indication of their relative numbers and the demographic changes that occurred over time. The records may also be useful for genealogical studies of Aboriginal families, though with some limitations. One would be that of the Board's long held policy to exclude part-Aboriginal people from its area of responsibility. These people's names would thus occur only spasmodically when the Board for one reason or another was forced to consider them. At times such people may feature large in the record, but it is not likely to be as consistent a record as that of people who were officially under the Board's authority and care.

Secondly, the lack of original registers (or name indexes) makes the location of genealogical material a much harder task. From the Secretary's correspondence it is clear that registers of all Aborigines in the State once existed, but these do not appear to be extant. Thirdly, the twentieth century case files and the post—1920 records generally would have limited use for genealogical studies due to the access restrictions that have been applied. However, as mentioned above, special access to material that is normally closed or expunged can be requested for a particular purpose, and possibly a case could be made for special access to pursue genealogical studies on one's own family. Of course, the problem would not exist for the older records, as restrictions are so few.

But for a study of the life and conditions of the Aboriginal people as a whole over this long period, the most informative source material is to be found in the correspondence of the administrators, be they missionaries, police, managers, civil servants or squatters. The health, habits and living conditions of the Aboriginal people, whether on or off the reserves, are recorded extensively, largely through the eyes of the white authorities, who, at the same time, reveal their own attitudes towards their charges — attitudes that changed fundamentally over the century. Of the Aborigines' own opinions on their condition there is, of course, far less on record. But their letters and petitions are not infrequent, and are always revealing of their situation.

As well as the information that can be gleaned on government policy and administration, and on the Aboriginal people themselves, there are various other potential areas of interest in the material. Among them would be the early period of land settlement in various areas of the State, and the customary and legal relationships between settlers, church mission authorities and the government. The pioneering farming activities of the missionaries indicate something of the topography of different regions of the State and changing patterns of land use. The relative benefits of different forms of transport use are recorded as the Board's authorities and the Board's supplies were transported to all areas of the State by road, coastal steamers, railways or river boats. Early medical services — medicines, treatment, fees, availability of doctors — also feature large in the missions' records. To a lesser extent there is information on schooling and on dealings with the Education Department regarding buildings, classification of schools and the supply of teachers. Information is available on the workings of local government in the early days of settlement, and on the important role of the police, both as Local Guardians and in maintaining the authority of the Board. The effects of the economic depressions of the 1890s and 1930s on the functioning of a government agency and on the lives of the people concerned can also be traced in these records.

Overall they are a rich and varied source: this is only an indication of their range. Further information on the material, or on access to it, may be obtained from Australian Archives, Victorian Branch, Outer Crescent, Middle Brighton, where these records are held.
The main series are listed below, with date ranges, content ranges in brackets where necessary, the approximate quantity of each series and a few notes on content and access.

Records of CA 2012, Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of the Aborigines, 1860-1869
Commonwealth

Record Series | Title | Date Range | Quantity | Notes
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B 314 | Minutes of Board Meetings, chronological series. | 1860-1869 | 2 volumes: 1860-1861; 1861-1872. The second volume also includes the Minutes of the first meetings of its successor, the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines. Open access. | |
B 332 | Annual Reports, chronological series. | 1861-1869 | 1 volume, containing reports for the years 1861-1867, which are bound together with B333, the Annual Reports for the years 1871-1906. There are no Reports for 1868 and 1869. Open access. (Published in Papers Presented to Both Houses of Parliament). | |
B 312 | Correspondence files. | 1859-1869 | Quantity: 0.20 metres. | |
B 333 | Correspondence files. | 1869-1957 | Quantity: 2.52 metres. | |
B 315 | Minutes of Board Meetings, chronological series. | 1869-1957 | 6 volumes: 1872-1885; 1885-1896; 1896-1906; 1907-1921; 1921-1945; 1946-1957. The first Minutes of this series are contained in the last volume of the previous Board's Minutes (B 314) and the last volume of this series contains the first Minutes of the Board's successor. Most volumes contain handwritten Minutes. This is a complete series, the only gaps in the record being the occasional periods when the Board apparently held no meetings, e.g. the war years 1914-1916. The Minutes cover all items that the Secretary considered important enough to bring before the Board, and include much personal information on individual Aborigines. Item 4 of this series contains a copy of the McLean Inquiry. Access is open to December 1947, with some restrictions, mostly in the more recent records. |
personal information on individual Aborigines. Access is open to December 1947, with occasional restrictions in the earlier volumes, and extensive expunging in the last two volumes.

B 329 Letter book comprising: (1) outward correspondence, chronological series; (2) nominal index to outward correspondence, chronological series. 1871-1922

9 volumes: 1871-1872; 1874-1875; 1880-1883; 1885-1889; 1889-1892; 1892-1894; 1894-1897; 1909-1911; 1920-1922. There are many gaps in the series. The volumes are press copy books, and contain copies of handwritten correspondence of the Secretary of the Board. The last volume contains copies of typed correspondence. All outward correspondence was recorded in these volumes until 1922. The letter books record, day by day, the whole range of official activities of the Secretary. They are a most detailed record of the administration for the periods covered, and also include much personal information on individual Aborigines. Access is open, with some restrictions.


B 337 Aborigines case files, lexicographical series. 1893-1968

Quantity: 2.52 metres. Case files were not kept on all Aborigines but only, it appears, as the need arose. Access is available to case files over 75 years old, with a few restrictions.


B 356 Lake Tyers correspondence files. Quantity: 2.1b metres. 1865-1968

The Lake Tyers papers were apparently kept separately once it became the only station. Arrangement of most of these papers is chronological and by subject. The correspondence covers the take-over from church authorities, appointment of staff, medical care, education, discipline, supplies, wages, recreation, etc. The series contains reports from managers, reports of inspections by Board members, and investigations of complaints. It is a large and important collection, including much information on individuals. Access is open to December 1947, but with some restrictions.

B 355 Agenda items for Board meetings. Quantity: 0.18 metres. 1860-1968

Contains lists of topics for discussions, rough drafts of minutes, and correspondence relating to Board meetings. Access is open to December 1947, with some restrictions.

Record of CA, Board for Coranderrk Aboriginal Station Inquiry

B 352 Report of the Board of Inquiry. 1881-1882

1 volume, containing the report plus minutes of evidence and recommendations. Access open. (Published in Papers Presented to Both Houses of Parliament).

Record of CA, Royal Commission on the Aborigines

B 353 Royal Commission on the Aborigines, Report of the Commissioners. 1877

1 volume, containing the report and recommendations, minutes of evidence, a census of Aborigines and reports of school inspectors. Access open. (Published in Papers Presented to Both Houses of Parliament).