JOHN PIPER, 'CONQUEROR OF THE INTERIOR'

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There are two John Pipers in Australia's history. The better known was John Piper, 1773-1851, military officer, public servant, bon vivant and landowner near Bathurst who was the subject of a short, somewhat romantic and perhaps over-sympathetic biography by M. Barnard Eldershaw: The Life and Times of Captain John Piper, Sydney, 1939. One of its two authors, Marjorie Barnard, also wrote the lively sketch of his chequered career in the Australian Dictionary of Biography. The lesser known John Piper, usually referred to simply as Piper, the subject of this article, was an Aborigine who accompanied Thomas Mitchell on his 1836 expedition into Australia Felix. Very probably he got his name by being referred to as 'John Piper's boy', this phrase being abbreviated to 'Piper'. Almost all we know about this Piper comes from the second volume of Mitchell's Three Expeditions into Eastern Australia and the copy of the journal of Mitchell's second-in-command, Granville Stapylton.

Mitchell's intention on this his third expedition was to complete the survey of the lower reaches of the Darling that he had begun in 1835. He organised his party in a valley near Orange, in March 1836 after a very dry summer. Even the Lachlan, he had learned at Bathurst, had dried up. He was to travel westwards to the Darling; water would be an acute problem. He therefore welcomed the assistance of an Aboriginal guide. He had with him twenty-three convicts or ex-convicts, several of whom had been with him on earlier expeditions. The man he trusted and relied on most was Alexander Burnett whom he designated Overseer. Mitchell's second-in-command, Stapylton, was, of course, a gentleman, an assistant surveyor. He did not join the party until nearly a month after it had started.

A group of Aborigines came to the camp while Mitchell was preparing to set out. Among them was John Piper from the Bathurst district twenty or thirty miles to the east. He spoke English adequately and agreed to accompany Mitchell as far as he went, provided he was allowed a horse and was clothed and fed. He seemed to be on excellent terms with Burnett who assured Mitchell that Piper would not desert, as had an Aboriginal guide on an earlier expedition, because after penetrating the interior Piper's fear of the savage Aborigines would prevent him abandoning the expedition.1

Piper was then a young man, not just a boy, because he was old enough to take a wife. But he thought of himself as still a young man, not yet old enough to eat the flesh of an emu. To do so, he believed, would make him come out with boils all over his body. Mitchell, like most of his contemporaries, had little sympathy for such absurd superstitions.2 It took an earlier generation of rationalists like David Collins to realise that many Aboriginal beliefs were no more bizarre than those held by many Europeans.3

Presently though, Piper decided that he was old enough to eat emu. The ceremony which would enable him to do so consisted chiefly in being rubbed all over with emu fat by an 'old man'. One of the convicts, John Richardson, was considered to be an old man—he

1 Mitchell 1839, pp. 1-4.
2 ibid., p. 29.
3 See, for example, David Collins 1798, pp. 547-8.
Thomas Mitchell's Third and Fourth Expeditions.
was thirty-nine and Piper reluctantly allowed himself to be rubbed with emu fat by Richardson. From that time he had no objection to eating the flesh of that bird.4

From the beginning, Piper despised the convicts. Like everyone else around Bathurst, he knew the distinction in white society between bond and free and at first Mitchell was the only man in the expedition free of the convict taint. Piper would act, therefore, only on Mitchell's orders. Out in the bush, he made all the 'white fellows' look stupid. He and the other Aborigines who were with the party from time to time could read traces on the earth, climb trees or dive into water far better than the ablest of the white men. In tracing lost bullocks, in speaking to other Aborigines, in hunting, Piper was the most accomplished man in the camp. In stature, he was the tallest and in authority he liked to think of himself as second only to the 'Major'. Mitchell half acquiesced in this self promotion in order to secure his best exertions.5

When Granville Stapylton joined the expedition,6 Piper was somewhat put out. Here was a rival. He appeared at Mitchell's tent and said, 'That fellow has two coats', implying that Mitchell ought to give one of them to him. Mitchell recorded the demand with an exclamation mark: what a cheeky fellow Piper was. Stapylton, for his part, recognised no rivalry. He was misanthropic. He had no time for Mitchell, loathed the convicts and barely recognised Piper except as a curiosity. He was, Stapylton thought, 'a lazy rascal useful only as an interpreter'.7

A couple of days after Stapylton joined the party, the expedition reached Lake Cargelligo, about 200 miles from Bathurst. Though partially dry it was the home of innumerable ducks, black swans and pelicans and its waters abounded with fresh water mussels which formed the chief food of the hundred or so Aborigines living on its shores. Mitchell sent Piper forward to tell these people about the expedition and to prevent any alarm at its appearance. The ease with which Piper conversed with these people proved to Mitchell that Aboriginal dialects did not vary as much as some people thought. He did not realise that the people at Bathurst and at Lake Cargelligo both spoke the same language — Wiradjuri.8

One night, while the expedition was by the lake, Piper left the camp and went to the Aboriginal gunyas. The next morning he returned and behind him marched a woman loaded with a new possum skin cloak and various other presents that had been given to him along with his new wife. How Piper arranged this matter with complete strangers was something Mitchell could not understand but he noted that several Bathurst Aborigines also hoped to obtain wives from Lake Cargelligo. Piper's wife was called Kitty and Stapylton referred to her sarcastically as Madame Kitty. She was a tall, strong woman with great presence of mind but strangely disfigured having a blind eye, opaque and white, rather like that, Mitchell thought, of some Indian idol. Almost certainly this was the result of smallpox.9

Thus reinforced, for Kitty proved to be very useful, the expedition continued down the largely dry course of the Lachlan going from one waterhole to another. Piper recruited an old, experienced man from Lake Cargelligo to act as a guide. He often used one word as they went down the course of the river which Mitchell recorded as quawy believing that it

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4 Mitchell 1839, pp. 346.
5 ibid., p. 162.
6 ibid., p. 30.
7 ibid., p. 162; Stapylton 1986, p. 60.
8 For this and other information about Aboriginal languages I am indebted to Luise Hercus.
meant a pond on the river which never dried up; each quawy having its own particular name. But Mitchell misunderstood. The word, best spelled waway, means the rainbow snake which lives in some, but not all, permanent water holes. No Aborigine would ever enter a water hole inhabited by a waway. When camped for a few days near Hillston beside a water hole which evidently did not have a waway, the party had an experience which left a nasty taste in everyone's mouth. The pond was a big one and Piper thought it might contain fish. He dived in with his fishing spear and, to his horror, brought up, instead of a fish, the putrid leg of a man. The guide from Lake Cargelligo apparently knew about the immersed body for he had not drunk any of that water, but had left the expedition there and returned home. It appeared that two Aborigines had been travelling in company, that one had died and that the survivor had simply tipped his companion's body into the water hole.¹⁰

Within a couple of days, Piper managed to find another man to replace the guide from Lake Cargelligo so the expedition continued down the course of the Lachlan. On 2 May, when about half way between Hillston and Booligal, Kitty came back from leading the expedition to tell Mitchell that there was water ahead and that there were Aborigines beside it. The party approached cautiously but the Aborigines were terrified, as was often the case when they first saw white men and their animals, and fled; all except a boy, about seven or eight years of age, who was quite blind, very likely from smallpox, and a little girl, perhaps four years old, who sat down beside him.

Afterwards an old man, some more children and the mother of the four year old girl came to the explorers' camp. The old man told Mitchell the names of the water holes between their camp and the Murrumbidgee but he refused to act as a guide. But the mother of the young girl, prompted by the old man, agreed to accompany the expedition. She was a widow named Turandurey, so she and her daughter, Ballandella, joined the expedition. Turandurey proved to be an excellent guide. She was about thirty years of age; she knew the country well; she was adept at finding water and she could converse freely with other Aborigines on the lower reaches of the Lachlan. Perhaps her own language was Mathimathi and she had learned some Yitayita and Wiradjuri.¹¹

About this time two other young Aborigines attached themselves to Mitchell's party. They were both called Tommy. Mitchell's men called one Tommy Came-first; the other Tommy Came-last. Mitchell, always conscious of the need to conserve his food supplies, tried to discourage them. Tommy Came-first was told firmly to leave the party but he refused. He said he would follow the party despite the 'Majy's' orders as he could always find possums in the trees. When Mitchell was told this he was pleased by his independence and allowed him and Tommy Came-last, whom he had somehow picked up in the bush, to remain with the expedition. So Mitchell took with him down the Lachlan and into Australia Felix a little Aboriginal community. There were Piper and Kitty, Turandurey and Ballandella and the two Tommies.¹²

On 7 May Piper's skills as an interpreter were put to the test. When a few miles from Oxley, the expedition met an Aboriginal family which had just come north from the Murrumbidgee. Mitchell wanted to question the head of the family, an old man, about the supplies of water to the south and told Piper to open negotiations. But etiquette demanded patience and silence between the two Aboriginal men for some considerable time. Piper and the old man stood about eight yards apart, neither looking at the other and both remaining silent for a quarter of an hour or more. Mitchell was irked by this delay and told

¹⁰ ibid., p. 41, p. 56; Stapylton 1986, p. 64.
¹¹ Mitchell 1839, pp. 60-4.
¹² ibid., p. 67.
Piper to ask certain questions but was ignored. Piper still remained silent. Turandurey, however, became the channel of communication for both men spoke alternately to her in low voices. At length Piper addressed the old man directly, raising his voice a little, but with his head still averted. The other answered in the same way, until, by slow degrees, they got into conversation. So eventually Mitchell learned that there was water a mile or two further on, that the Lachlan contained much more water a couple of days journey lower down and that the Murrumbidgee was not much further to the south.13

Mitchell found the Murrumbidgee on 12 May about thirty miles downstream from what he believed was its junction with the Lachlan. Piper was called on once more to negotiate with the people living there, probably Yitayita speakers. He was the first to discern a group of Aborigines on the other side of the river. Mitchell told him to cooee; they answered the call and soon appeared on the opposite bank where they sat down silently, each man with a green bough twined round his waist or held in his hand. These Aboriginal men, Mitchell had discovered, could not immediately speak to each other on first meeting, but no such convention inhibited the women and Turandurey now stood boldly forward and addressed the men opposite her in a very animated and apparently eloquent manner. Mitchell admired her appearance and earnestness and delighted in the confident authority with which she spoke. He thought himself very fortunate to have met with such an interpreter.

At length the Murrumbidgee Aborigines proposed swimming over. Mitchell invited them to do so, speaking to Piper who then spoke to Turandurey who then spoke to the Murrumbidgee dwellers. They then requested that those wild animals, the sheep and the horses, might be driven away. At this both Turandurey and Kitty laughed and laughed, but the animals were removed as requested. The warriors of the Murrumbidgee were about to ‘plunge into the angry flood’ wishing, Mitchell supposed, to show off like so many Caesars before the two women. But their obvious fears of the sheep said little of their prowess in the eyes of those whom they would impress.

The weather was cold but the first man across carried with him a piece of burning wood and quickly converted his glowing embers into a fire to dry himself. He was soon followed by a grey haired chief and two other men. Piper tried to talk to them but had great difficulty in understanding their language. He said it was ‘Irish’. This was not a witty way of saying that the language was unintelligible, as one might say that some foreigner was talking double Dutch. It was a statement of fact, for most Irish convicts in the 18th and early 19th centuries knew only Gaelic and, consequently, many Aborigines learned ‘Irish’ as their first European language. One of the swimmers, however, was from Lake Cargelligo and Mitchell was intrigued to see him act as an interpreter between Piper and his friends of the Murrumbidgee. From all this parleying Mitchell was confirmed in his belief that the Murrumbidgee presently ran into the Murray and that this larger river was joined at a greater distance by the Darling from the north.14

The expedition camped on the Murrumbidgee for a couple of days while Mitchell with five men went upstream to determine where the Lachlan entered the larger river. In Mitchell’s absence that night, a group of Aborigines came into the camp, sat down and demanded food. Through Piper they enquired particularly why the ‘Majy’ had gone to the Lachlan junction with so few men because the Aborigines living there were very savage. Stapylton was alarmed and next day sent off a mounted party with Piper to follow Mitchell’s tracks and assist him if necessary. Mitchell was not attacked and Piper found his

14 ibid., pp.75-7; Troy 1992.
tracks returning to the camp. He was following these when he came across a group of Aborigines, all armed with spears, also following in Mitchell’s footsteps. He sounded the bugle and the Aborigines, much alarmed, drew up at a distance. They would not allow Piper to approach them but one came forward and told him that ‘Majy’ had gone home. Piper was dubious about this and to still his fears he insisted on examining the points of their spears.15

Now freed from anxiety about lack of water, the expedition followed the Murrumbidgee downstream until 21 May when, nearing the Murray, the four year old girl, Ballandella, slipped from the cart in which she was travelling and fell under one of the wheels which broke her thigh. Mitchell at once got his medical attendant to set the fracture, but as the femora had been broken near the socket it was difficult to bandage the limb so as to keep the bone immobile. The child bore the pain with admirable courage and patience and her mother showed every concern, soothing her daughter with soft and musical terms of endearment. This treatment and the mother’s care were successful and Ballendella eventually recovered from this mishap.16

Mitchell now decided to form a depot beside a lake near the Murray. Here he left Stapylton in charge of eight men to guard the stores and look after the stock. He took with him, to go down the Murray to the Darling, fourteen white men; Piper looking splendid in new boots, white sox and a red shirt; Kitty, who could make herself useful as a driver of a cart, and the two Tommies. Turandurey and Ballandella were left in the depot with Stapylton. The girl was now strapped securely to a board to ensure the bone was not disturbed in its healing. There was now no possibility of these two returning to their home on the Lachlan. They had become a fixture and would have to wait with Stapylton for Mitchell’s return from the Darling. Meanwhile, the assistant surveyor looked at the attractive young widow and decided it would be his duty ‘to keep off the Black Gentry’.17

Mitchell planned to travel light. Rations, tents and gear were packed into two carts each to be drawn by five bullocks. He thus hoped to cover fifteen miles a day and have his men in good shape to deal with the ‘fire-eaters’ of the Darling.18

While the party was still on the higher reaches of the Lachlan, Mitchell had been told by the locals that the Aborigines of the Darling, who spoke some form of Paakantyi, were coming to fight him. The reason for this belligerence was an affray on the Darling near Menindee which had occurred the previous year during Mitchell’s second expedition. Mitchell had been in the camp about three-quarters of a mile from the incident at the river and the account he gave of it, in the first volume of his Three Expeditions depended on what the convicts who were engaged in the conflict told him. Their story was that several Aborigines had been shot, two or three probably killed, after some of them, although unprovoked, had attacked a watering party. The truth was almost certainly far otherwise. Several Aborigines of Menindee reported to Sturt and his party nine years later in 1844 that they had seen this shooting and that it accompanied the rape of a woman by one of the convicts or (the details vary a little according to the different reports) that it occurred after a quarrel about a convict’s refusal to give the woman a kettle promised in return for sexual favours. Whatever the truth, Mitchell and his men had every reason to anticipate hostility. This must have especially weighed on the minds of the four convicts in the party who had been involved in the killing.19

16 ibid., pp. 86-7; Stapylton 1986, p. 74.
18 ibid.
19 Sturt 1984, p. 32, pp. 38-9; Brock 1975, pp. 50-1; Browne 1966; pp. 32-3; Eyre 1845, II; pp. 470-2.
By 24 May 1836, Mitchell and his light party reached Lake Benanee about eight miles from Euston. The lake was then a full sixteen miles in circumference and its surface and beaches were covered with Aborigines. They loudly shouted the news of the arrival of the white men from group to group and many of them followed the explorers in a body as they continued on for a mile or two beyond the lake before making camp.

Mitchell and his men, to their surprise, recognised several of the Aborigines they had encountered at Menindee, two hundred miles away, some ten months earlier. Whether these Darling Aborigines had come to attack Mitchell and his men, as they suspected, is doubtful for they had women and children with them and could only have conjectured about the route he would take. It was more likely that they were on a journey, perhaps undertaken at regular intervals, to dance a corroboree with Aborigines near the junction of the Murrumbidgee and the Murray. Such a corroboree had taken place about three weeks earlier.20

The Darling Aborigines at first gave no sign of hostility. Each man carried a green bough and the elders did all they could to guide the expedition onwards by the easiest of paths. Mitchell was puzzled by this unexpected civility and remained suspicious, although it was now far easier to communicate with them because both Piper and Kitty knew something of their language.

During that afternoon many women and children assembled before the camp and now and then small groups came right up to the tents. Mitchell learned through Piper that after the shooting at Menindee the Aborigines living there had fled precipitately to the westward and had not returned to the Darling for some months. Mitchell had pointed out to him a son and two daughters of a woman who had been killed. The girls looked alike and reminded Mitchell of their mother. The younger was the most beautiful Aboriginal girl Mitchell had ever seen. As she sat, naked, she reminded Mitchell of the statue of 'Eve at the Fountain', a famous work by Edward Hodges Baily which had instantly given the sculptor an international reputation. While Mitchell looked at her, regretting the tragic fate of her mother, an elder who stood by begged him to accept her in exchange for a tomahawk.

That evening was a time of great anxiety for the whole party. It must have been especially so for the four convicts who had done the shooting. Of these four, Joseph Jones, the man who had probably raped and had then murdered an Aboriginal woman and killed her child, must have been particularly apprehensive. Would he be marked out as a special target for vengeance? Would the Aborigines tell Major Mitchell through Piper what had really happened? If they did would he be able to make a plausible denial? These private fears were unfounded; there was no discussion of the earlier killing but the general anxiety for the safety of the party remained.

Night closed in. The Aborigines lit a cordon of fires around the camp, sent away their women and children and could not be kept away from the carts. Piper became alarmed when Kitty overheard them arranging for three men to seize and strip him while others attacked the tents. He approached Mitchell with a look of thoughtful responsibility and asked him what the Governor had said to him about shooting blackfellows. Mitchell told Piper that the Governor had said positively that they were not to shoot them unless their own lives were in danger. Piper said these hostile blackfellows were only myalls or 'wild natives', and that their lives were in some danger. Mitchell recognised this but thought the danger not extreme. It was now about eight o'clock. He came out of his tent and found an Aboriginal man talking to Kitty. He ordered him away and then drew up his men in a line and, as arranged, let off a rocket. The men gave three cheers and the Aborigines ran off.

20 Mitchell 1839, p. 131.
From a distance they prepared a corroboree and invited the explorers to attend it. Piper told them to get lost and they did not, in fact, proceed with the dance.\textsuperscript{21}

The Aborigines again approached the camp soon after day-break. They set fire to all the surrounding scrub so that it seemed it would soon be enveloped in smoke. Mitchell went to his tent for his rifle and directed eight men to advance towards the Aboriginal camp displaying their muskets but not to fire unless attacked, and to return at the sound of the bugle. The Aborigines at once fled and the expedition got under way. After a mile or so the party heard the Aborigines following in their rear; they kept at a considerable distance but Mitchell observed through his telescope that they were armed as if for war. He was now alarmed that these Aborigines seemed so little deterred by their knowledge of the power of firearms. Moreover, Piper had gathered that there was another group of these Darling Aborigines lower down the river so Mitchell believed his party was sandwiched between two groups of hostile and dangerous opponents. However, that day’s journey and the next were accomplished without further incident, although Piper knew from the tracks on the ground that the party was constantly kept under observation.

Towards the evening of 26 May seven Aborigines, probably Thathithati, who lived along the Murray and who seemed unfriendly towards the Paakanitji from the Darling, came towards the explorers’ camp. Piper recognised several he had seen at Lake Benanee and invited them to talk through him to Mitchell. They told Mitchell (what he already knew) that the Darling Aborigines did not live at Lake Benanee but had come from afar to fight the white men. One of these informants repeatedly asked Piper why Mitchell had not attacked the Darling Aborigines while he had had the chance to do so. They were the same Aborigines, Mitchell was told, who had intended to kill Charles Sturt and his men six years earlier when they were sailing down the Murray near its junction with the Darling. That massacre had been prevented by an intrepid Murray dweller, an elder who had recently died and who had been greatly esteemed by his compatriots. Mitchell asked Piper to say how much the white men also respected him.

So, that evening Mitchell was confirmed in his knowledge of the continuing hostility of the Menindee Aborigines and informed that the influential elder who had earlier kept the peace was now no more.\textsuperscript{22}

The next morning, 27 May, Mitchell’s party went on its journey as usual but it had not gone far before the men heard a vast body of Aborigines following their tracks, shouting prodigiously and raising what Mitchell, no doubt advised by Piper, took to be war cries. There were, perhaps, four hundred of them as Mitchell later counted 135 fires at one of their encampments.\textsuperscript{23} Mitchell now felt he had to decide whether to wait for the Aborigines to attack or to anticipate the expected blow by a pre-emptive strike. He had already been warned by Piper that the men watering and herding the cattle at night were likely to be picked off one by one. This was a risk he could not take.

The expedition was then travelling along the outer bank of the Murray which was relatively free of timber but which had a good deal of scrub further from the river. Mitchell sent his trusted overseer, Alexander Burnett, together with Piper and half his men into this scrub with orders to hide and allow the Aborigines to follow along the track towards the two carts which Mitchell intended to halt out of sight after crossing a low hill.\textsuperscript{24}

Peering through the bushes, Burnett saw a large body of Aborigines approaching; he thought there were between two and three hundred of them; all were men and all were

\begin{enumerate}
\item ibid., pp. 90-5.
\item ibid., pp. 95-9.
\item ibid., p. 123.
\item ibid., pp. 101-2.
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armed with bunches of ten or fifteen spears. When the leading Aborigines were fourteen or fifteen yards away one of their dogs gave the alarm by barking. On being discovered, Burnett’s men advanced towards the Aborigines who at once drew together in a body and retreated down the bank towards the river. It was then that Charles King, one of the killers on the Darling, without waiting for orders, raced forward and fired at the Aborigines. This shot made them run for their lives. The rest of Burnett’s party then ran down the bank and started shooting.

As soon as the firing began, Mitchell, who was out of sight about three hundred yards away, went to the top of the hill and saw the Aborigines swimming across the river. They swam backwards, keeping an eye on the gunmen and at each flash they instantly dived under water. The men with Mitchell also ran furiously down the steep river bank to join in the shooting, not a man remaining with the carts, Kitty alone being left with the horses and cattle. Mitchell himself, his fourteen men, Piper and the two Tommies were strung out along two or three hundred yards of the river bank firing at the Aborigines as they swam about a hundred and forty yards to the safety of the reeds along the opposite bank. They continued shooting for four or five minutes and fired perhaps seventy or eighty shots. Mitchell thought one of the two Tommies sent one man to the bottom and that Piper hit one or two. Piper was later told that seven Aborigines had been killed and four wounded. This rout and slaughter gave great satisfaction and unspeakable relief to Mitchell’s fear crazed men. Mitchell himself, though regretting the necessity of killing ‘savages’, thought he would always remember that day as one on which the manifest wisdom and goodness of God deserved the especial gratitude of man. Piper’s feelings are not recorded, but he was a bellicose fellow and no doubt enjoyed the action, whatever concerns or regrets he may have felt about it afterwards.25

As the expedition continued down the Murray, travelling a dozen miles or so a day, Piper acted as interpreter whenever the party met groups of Aborigines, although Mitchell was beginning to have doubts about the accuracy with which he did so.26 There was no doubt, however, about his and Kitty’s general usefulness in negotiations. On the last day of May, when the party was approaching the junction with the Darling, they saw a big group of Aborigines who, when they saw the white men, began jumping, wringing their hands and shrieking as if in a state of utter madness or despair. They ran away but Piper and Kitty ran after them and quietened their fears. The next day, while the expedition was going northwards up the Darling, these Aborigines accompanied Mitchell’s two carts in single file on each side. They carried no spears and were apparently no threat. Mitchell was riding some way ahead of his party and, chancing to look back, he was so alarmed by the close contact of such numbers with his men that he halted and shouted a warning. An old man and several other Aborigines suddenly turned and ran. When Mitchell went back to the carts the rest of the Aborigines fell back, those in the rear running off at full speed as if some plan had just been frustrated. Piper and Kitty were able to explain. These particular Aborigines, it seemed, believed that European clothes were impervious to spears, so they had decided to abandon their arms and had detailed six or eight of their number to each of the white men in order to overpower them by a sudden, simultaneous attack. Mitchell’s warning had disrupted this scheme.27

Mitchell travelled up the Darling for only a couple of days till he was confident that it was the same river he had been on the previous year. Not wishing to spend more time in the desert he returned to the Murray and started upstream to rejoin Stapylton at the depot.

25 ibid., pp. 102-4; Mitchell 1836, 27 May; Government Gazette 1837, pp. 65-72.
26 Mitchell 1839, pp. 105-6, p. 108.
27 ibid., pp. 110-3.
When the party returned to the place where the shooting had been done, Piper carefully read the ground. He told Mitchell that many of the Darling Aborigines had left their spears, nets and other possessions on the ground when they fled and had later returned for them. He also said that a considerable number had not swum across the river but had simply retreated along the bank. Mitchell now estimated that their numbers on that fatal morning must have amounted to at least a hundred and eighty.28

Mitchell’s party again reached Lake Benanee on 9 June. The lake was now almost deserted. He saw only one or two men fishing and took Piper down to the beach to talk to them. They found most of the Aborigines had abandoned the huts along the shore but a few boys ran out into the water. Piper pursued them till they were up to their ears in water. Mitchell soon could scarcely distinguish them from the floating water fowl and feared they would drown. He called to their pursuer to come back, but Piper would not be baffled by mere boys and walked on through the water like a giant, brandishing a short spear. Finally, near the centre of the lake he overtook one of the boys and led him back towards the shore. Mitchell thus learned that the Darling Aborigines had only the day before returned to Lake Benanee. For nearly two weeks since the slaughter they had remained on the south bank of the Murray and were then fishing in a lagoon near the river, where Mitchell later saw the smoke from their fires and heard their voices but had no further contact with them.29

Next day Mitchell reached the depot and found all was well. No Aborigines had approached the camp. Ballandella’s leg was healing well, her mother having been unremitting in her care of the child. Good grass had been found so all the stock were fresh and well fed. The reunited exploring party soon continued to travel upstream along the northern or right hand bank of the Murray. They were now very close to the junction with the Murrumbidgee. From the number of huts along the river it seemed to Mitchell that the inhabitants, probably Mathimathi speakers, were numerous but he did not know how many had died from smallpox. They were, though, shy and there was little contact between white and black. But they did not seem to talk Irish like the Murrumbidgee Aborigines. When he could get close enough, Piper still seemed to be able to talk with them.30

Mitchell crossed the Murray on 13 June. It took all day to get the wagons, carts, stores and stock across the 110 yards of water. The local Aborigines seemed very friendly and watched with interest. Several came up to Mitchell in the morning and laid several newly made nets at his feet. He declined to accept any of these gifts except one beautifully woven bag, telling its owner, through Piper, that he would give him a tomahawk in return for it when the party had passed over the river.

That evening Mitchell, accompanied no doubt by Piper, visited the Aborigines to whom he owed the tomahawk and sat down at their fires. There were about twenty of them, all men. The man who had given Mitchell the bag expressed his gratitude for the tomahawk by offering him another net. He also introduced his son. He had observed the two Tommies to be well dressed, well fed and apparently happy and Mitchell gathered that he was willing to place his own son under his care. But Mitchell was apprehensive and distrustful. He tried to explain that he had no more tomahawks to give away and that his men were likely to be ‘very saucy’ with their guns if too much troubled. He now believed it was necessary all the time to impress on the minds of even the most friendly of these ‘savages’ that the white men, though inoffensive, were strong and dangerous to provoke.31

28 ibid., pp. 122-3
29 ibid., pp. 124-5.
30 ibid., pp. 126-8.
31 ibid., pp. 128-30.
After crossing the Murray, the expedition camped for a couple of days. Mitchell was busy with his maps and the blacksmith with the boat carriage. Piper talked to the local Aborigines. They told him that the Darling Aborigines had danced a corroboree with them about six weeks earlier and had promised to return in a month’s time but had not turned up. They asked Piper whether he had seen any of these Aborigines. Piper simply denied having seen any of them. When he reported this conversation to Mitchell the Major rebuked him for not telling the truth: that the explorers had been obliged to fire upon them and kill some of them. He asked Piper why he had lied. His excuse was that he could not tell the truth ‘because they would hate me so.’ Unfortunately Piper’s language does not reveal whether his motive was fear or shame. Perhaps it was a mixture of both.32

Piper by this time had become so homesick that he begged Burnett never to mention Bathurst to him. Though so far from his home he could still point directly towards it. To return there, however, except eventually with the expedition, was out of the question and, as Mitchell receded ever more southwards, poor Piper was, as it were, dragging an ever lengthening chain. But he knew Mitchell intended to return and could be confident of his eventual repatriation. In the meantime he and the two Tommies, who were his humble servants, enjoyed the pleasures of the chase, exploring the bush with the party’s dogs and looking for game several miles in front of the plodding bullocks and the wagons. Kitty and Turandurey stayed close to the main party and often gave notice of obstacles in time for Mitchell to avoid them. He had learned sufficient of their language to ask for directions and to understand their replies. He felt deeply indebted to these five Aboriginal friends for the assistance they were always ready to provide.33

The expedition continued travelling upstream along the southern bank of the Murray. By 20 June it was in Watiwati country approaching Swan Hill. Mitchell noticed smoke coming from reeds by the river a mile or so away. Piper went boldly up to the fire and found three families in three canoes on the river. Some of them, he told Mitchell, had come from Waljeers, more than a hundred miles away on the Lachlan — another example of the way Aborigines travelled big distances around the country.34

The next day the party came across Lake Boga, a few miles south of Swan Hill. As they approached it they disturbed a group of Aborigines, probably Wembawemba, who fled from their huts leaving their fishing spears, skin cloaks and other possessions behind. They soon appeared on the lake in twenty-four canoes, all making for a small island in its centre. This was covered with reeds and so formed a fortress from which the Aborigines could easily throw their spears against any assailant without being exposed or even seen. Mitchell took his party on but left Piper and the two Tommies behind to find out, if they could, the name of the lake and the course of the river. This proved disastrous. When the expedition was out of sight, a dozen Aborigines, armed with spears and boomerangs, sprang from the reeds and, when Piper asked the name of the lake, the angry answer was ‘I won’t tell you’. They blamed him for bringing the white fellows into their country and said they did not like him. An old man called on the others to kill Piper. Two spears were thrown at him which he parried with his carbine. He then fired at the man nearest him, wounding him in the jaw. The others immediately disappeared into the reeds. The wounded man fell; Piper reloaded and killed him with a shot through the body.

It was getting dark when Piper rejoined the expedition. He was full of importance about killing his man, or so Stapylton thought. Mitchell was disappointed that Piper had got

32 ibid., p.131.
33 ibid., p. 135.
34 ibid., p. 137.
At the end of June, attracted by the fertility and beauty of the country, Mitchell left the Murray and turned south-west into Victoria. On 30 June, having directed the party on its way, he ascended Pyramid Hill which rose some 300 feet above the surrounding plain. There was a magnificent view, shining fresh and green in the light of a fine winter's morning. Here, he declared, was a most inviting land and one without inhabitants. He was half conscious of the obvious fact that the land had its Aboriginal inhabitants because the last sentence in his journal said he was the first European intruder on the sublime solitude of these verdant plains. The Aborigines were there. He was seeing them and hearing them and observing the smoke of their fires all the time, but they simply did not count as inhabitants. Mitchell felt he was the harbinger of mighty changes and that his steps would soon be followed by the white men and their stock for which this superb country seemed to have been specially prepared.

There were changes for Piper too. Since his fatal contact with the people at Lake Boga, Piper had enjoyed little success in meeting the Aborigines. Repeatedly they were seen but only at a distance, for they ran off when they saw the expedition, and all the waving of green boughs and the invitations shouted by Piper could not make them stop and talk. Perhaps he was reaching the limits of the area in which he could understand the local language and make himself understood. Certainly once he was in Victoria his usefulness as an interpreter was practically exhausted; the languages had become too different from his own.

But Piper continued to be useful in other ways. When Mitchell reached the Loddon River he ingeniously built a bridge across it on a fallen tree. Unfortunately, the night before the party was to cross it, the river suddenly rose so much that the bridge was four feet under water. The expedition crossed by boat and the carts and wagons were hauled through the water by drag chains and a strong team of bullocks on the far bank. One cart was pulled by a rope to the bottom of the river when the rope broke. The water was now about twenty-three feet deep, but it was not too deep for Piper to dive to the bottom and fix a heavy chain to the submerged cart by which it was safely hauled out on the far side.

Mitchell was euphoric about the magnificent country they were now passing through, but Turandurey was homesick. Ballandella was fast recovering the use of her broken leg and no longer needed the care of the white men. Kitty thought she might get a bigger share of the rations if the mother and child left the party. She persuaded Turandurey to start her journey home by pretending to go with her, intending to abandon her and her child in the bush and return to Piper and the expedition.

In the middle of the night of 1 July, just before the expedition crossed the Loddon, the two Aboriginal women and the child silently disappeared. There was a heavy frost that night which made it difficult to track the absconders. Piper was absent all the next day looking for them and returned during the evening with Kitty and Ballandella, but not Turandurey. Both women's feet were shockingly frost bitten; Turandurey’s being so bad that she could not walk. Stapylton thought that being alone in the bush without fire she would die when the frost returned that night. The next morning, however, Turandurey struggled into the camp with her feet in a most deplorable condition. She was angry with Kitty for her treacherous conduct and, according to Piper's interpretation, she sorely
reproved her. The two quarrelling women with their frost bitten feet could not have been of much assistance when, on this day, the expedition was occupied in its difficult crossing of the Loddon.

Despite this setback, Turandurey still wanted to go home but Ballendella did not want to leave the expedition. On first joining the party she had preferred a snake or a lizard to a piece of bread, but now she preferred bread and wept when Turandurey proposed to take her home. Mitchell had got to know and respect Turandurey and would not keep her or her child against her will. To help them return to the Lachlan he gave her a tomahawk to make a little canoe for Ballandella which, by swimming, she would push across the Murray. She left the expedition on 4 July and returned to the encampment on the Loddon. There were many Aborigines on the opposite bank who very angrily wanted to know who had made the fires on her side of the river. She was afraid, made no reply and hid herself. They danced a corroboree in a furious style during which she and her child crept away and spent two nights in the rain without fire. Her feet were still not fit for travel so she crawled fifteen miles back to the expedition on her hands and knees. Piper, for some reason, seemed very angry at her return, but Mitchell made sure she was treated with as much kindness as before.

During the rest of July and most of August the party travelled through Victoria generally in a south-westerly direction towards the mouth of the Glenelg. They often saw or heard Aborigines, but more often than not the local inhabitants ran away or refused to have anything to do with the white visitors. Stapylton recorded a marked change in Aboriginal behaviour. On seeing the expedition, the Aborigines now stooped down, almost to the ground, and silently, stealthily stole away without the clamour of many voices heard earlier further north. Stapylton puzzled over this and thought it might have been due to Aboriginal terror on seeing a new race of beings. It is possible, however, that the new caution now so evident was due to the knowledge, spreading from the scene of the slaughter on the Murray, that this group of white travellers was extremely dangerous. Aborigines here, as in other places, travelled widely. Mitchell’s camp near the Grampians, for example, was visited by two Aborigines who had a smattering of English and who had been at two European cattle stations. News of the massacre could well have spread widely through south-eastern Australia.

But not all Aborigines were so frightened or so shy, and now and then Piper seems to have been able to understand at least the gist of what was being said to him. Near Wedderburn, he managed to talk to an old woman and several boys. They said, pointing to the south-east, in the direction of Port Phillip, that a station of white fellows was there and that they had been to the sea which was not very far away (in fact it was about 120 miles). The old woman spoke with expressive gestures of a part of the coast she called ‘Cadong’, where the waves raged, and of a river she called ‘Woollamaee’ running into it. The next morning Piper persuaded an old man with his wives and some boys to come into the camp to talk to Mitchell. The man pointed towards Cadong to the south-west, that is, towards Portland, about 160 miles away. He said it was not Port Phillip but water like it. When Mitchell mentioned the Aboriginal name for Lake Alexandrina, ‘Keyinga’, the old man said it was a place filled with rain water, that is a river, and not like Cadong which was salt water. He described the whole country to the south-west as abounding in good water and excellent grass. Piper’s face brightened up with the good news the old man gave him and he assured Mitchell that they would ‘find water all about: no more want water.’ Mitchell

40 ibid., p. 127, p. 139; Mitchell 1839, pp. 180-1.
rewarded the man with a tomahawk on which he at once sat and continued to talk to Mitchell very fluently. Piper explained that he was saying how glad he was to receive the gift and listing with a sort of poetic fervour all the various uses to which he would put the axe. These conversations, though no doubt assisted by pantomime, indicate that Piper could still understand a good deal of what was said to him.41

The next meeting with Aborigines was much less fruitful. On 18 July, not far from Mount Zero, the expedition was travelling along a river when some Aborigines were heard on the opposite bank. Piper approached them as cautiously as possible but could not persuade them to cross the river. All he could do was to discover that their name for the river was ‘Wimmera’. In this way another Aboriginal name was fixed on the map.42

Between Mount Arapiles and the Glenelg River, the expedition met a more confident group of Aborigines. One of the carts had fallen behind the main party and the solitary driver was approached by four Aborigines who demanded tomahawks; but being an old bushranger, the driver coolly laid out all his cartridges, one by one, before him on a tarpaulin, with his pistol and carbine, ready for action. On seeing this, the Aborigines backed off.43

The next day, 28 July, the party remained in camp but a convict named Pickering and Piper went out reconnoitring. They found some huts which probably belonged to those Aborigines the bushranger had met the previous day. The huts were empty except for one Aborigine who refused to listen to, or could not understand, Piper’s explanations. He furiously poised his spear at Pickering and Piper called to him that he would be speared if he did not immediately fire. He did so and wounded the man in the upper arm or the shoulder. But he was not badly hurt and not at all intimidated; he followed Piper and Pickering some way from his hut, throwing burning branches, fire sticks and mud at them and loudly shouting for help from his compatriots.44

The consequences were not as serious as Mitchell feared. As the expedition proceeded the next day several Aborigines approached the chaining party. One of them spoke loud and fast, pointing to where Pickering had fired the shot the day before, and then, touching his shoulder in allusion to the wound, he raised his spear at another convict named Blanchard. He yelled in alarm. The Aborigine was satisfied. He lowered his spear, laughed and came forward quietly and showed it to the frightened chain man. Another convict ran for help but the Aborigines quietly vanished into the bush before it came.45

Piper’s next meeting with Aborigines came about a week later, on 5 August, when the expedition was camped near Chetwynd (so named after Stapylton’s third given name). The men heard some Aborigines approaching through the bush. Piper as usual went towards them and found they were all women with their children. From the moment they saw the white men, their cattle and horses, until they were quite out of hearing, their shrieks were so loud and incessant that it seemed they had no earlier knowledge or rumour of the expedition being in their part of the country. In the evening several Aboriginal men were heard approaching. Piper and Burnett invited them towards the camp but they could not be persuaded to sit down and talk. Piper had failed again.46

There was better luck next time, for luck seems to have played a part in determining whether a conversation would occur or not. On 10 August, on the Wando River, a few

41 ibid., p. 166.
42 ibid., p. 184.
43 ibid., p. 195.
44 ibid., pp. 196-7; Mitchell 1836, 28 July.
45 ibid., 29 July; Mitchell 1839, pp. 197-8.
46 ibid., pp. 205-6.
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miles north of Casterton, Mitchell on horseback saw two figures in the distance who either
did not see, or did not mind him. As he got closer he saw they were a woman with a small
boy. She took fright and began to run but Mitchell soon overtook her and, with the few
Aboriginal words he knew, he persuaded her to stop until Kitty and Turandurey came and
talked to her. Luckily, this woman was not as alarmed as might have been expected and she
and Mitchell’s two women seemed to understand each other perfectly. So Mitchell through
Piper and then through the two women of the expedition questioned the woman of the
Wando about the nature of the country. He was delighted to hear that the whole of the land
to the east was similar to the well watered and fertile land they were in and that there was
firm land for the passage of the carts and drays: in Piper’s words, ‘there was no more
sticking in the mud.’ When the party left her, Mitchell gave her a tomahawk and his two
women explained its use to her and, on Mitchell’s instructions, assured her of the white
men’s friendliness to the Aborigines.47

A few days later, on 14 August, some of the bullocks were missing and the expedition
had to wait till they were found. Two parties went in search of them, one guided by Piper,
the other by the two Tommies. When most of the bullocks had been brought in, the
expedition started again but two were still missing. They had not been found the next day.
This was a loss Mitchell could not tolerate. He told Piper that unless they were found he
would have no provisions for a week, and he condemned the bullocky who had lost them to
be kept on watch every second night for the rest of the journey.48

Presumably the bullocks were found for Mitchell says no more about them; certainly
Piper was not long out of favour. His physical abilities continued to be useful. His
exceptionally acute hearing enabled him to discern the distant sound of a waterfall and
Mitchell sent him off to examine it and to see if the Glenelg was navigable by the party’s
whaleboats. Piper, too, repeatedly climbed trees to look over the country ahead and
Mitchell was prepared to alter course on the advice Piper gave him from aloft in the trees’
branches.49

Mitchell traced the Glenelg down to the sea which he reached on 20 August and then
led the expedition south-east towards Portland where he was surprised to find, on 29
August, the farming establishment, begun a couple of years earlier, of Edward and Frank
Henty. As well as the Henty brothers there were several groups of whalers based on
Portland Bay. Mitchell spent some time there watching a whale being chased and learned of
a remarkable example of Aboriginal adaptation to the coming of the white man. The local
Aborigines had never even shown themselves to the white people at Portland Bay. They
had nevertheless learned both to assist and benefit from the whaling. Often several different
boats pursued the same whale and in this competition the whale would occasionally escape
and run ashore. It was of little value to the whalers as its removal from the beach was too
difficult. They therefore left the whale where it was to provide abundant food for the
Aborigines. So they became accustomed to watch out for whales and, whenever they saw
one, they sent up a column of smoke which the whalers recognised as a signal. The
Aborigines clearly realised that by giving this notice a greater number of whalers would
compete for the whale and it was more likely to finish up on the beach.50

Piper would often accompany Mitchell on journeys away from the main body of the
expedition but sometimes he would stay in the camp while Mitchell was away exploring or
taking angles. He might spend the time hunting kangaroos which the Aborigines in the

47 ibid., pp. 211-3.
49 ibid., p. 222, pp. 234-5.
50 ibid., pp. 242-3.
party relished though the white men did not fancy them. Mitchell’s return to the camp was often first announced by Turandurey and Ballandella who could hear the sound of horses’ feet at an astonishing distance, long before they appeared in sight. Piper was usually the first to meet Mitchell and would assure him of the safety of the party as if he had taken care of it during the Major’s absence. Mitchell encouraged his sense of responsibility by giving him credit for the safety and well-being of the encampment.51

On the long return journey, generally north-eastwards from Portland to Sydney, the expedition met few Aborigines. Mitchell knew they were in occupation of the whole country by the smoke from innumerable fires he observed whenever he looked over the land from the tops of hills or mountains. But they were not aggressive like the Aborigines on the Darling and usually avoided the white travellers. The party often heard voices in the bush, but the local inhabitants seemed to Mitchell to be as timid as kangaroos and no more likely to approach members of the expedition.52

This was not what Mitchell wanted. He always hoped to learn from the local people the nature of the country ahead and their names for its natural features. Piper was well aware of this and always did his best to persuade Aborigines to come to Mitchell for questioning. His diplomatic skills, however, were limited by the shortness of his temper. Near Hamilton, Piper met two Aborigines and invited them to the camp but all to no effect until, finally enraged at one of them, he threw his tomahawk at him and nearly hit him as he sidled off into the bush. This earned him a severe reprimand. Mitchell was quite prepared to capture an Aborigine by force in order to question him and then release him. Piper often carried handcuffs for just this purpose. But mindless mayhem Mitchell would not tolerate.53

The expedition’s progress through the western district of Victoria was fearfully slow. It was a wet season. The ground was soft. The carts were repeatedly bogged and the bullocks were exhausted from the continuing heavy hauling through the mud. Mitchell decided on 17 September to split his party. He would go ahead with fourteen men, the freshest of the bullocks drawing the light carts and a month’s provisions. Stapylton and the remaining nine men were to stay where they were, encamped near Dunkeld, for two weeks to rest the remaining bullocks before following Mitchell’s tracks to the Murray where he would arrange for further supplies to be sent. The party’s Aboriginal members arranged among themselves that Piper, Kitty and Tommy Came-last should go with Mitchell while Tommy Came-first and Turandurey should remain with Stapylton.54

When Mitchell was about to set out with his reduced party he noticed that Turandurey had marked her face with white ochre around the eyes — a sign of mourning; Ballandella’s face, was similarly painted. Turandurey, who was as careful and affectionate as any mother could be, had decided to entrust her daughter’s welfare to Mitchell’s care. He was pleased by this proof of Turandurey’s confidence in him and glad of the opportunity he was being given to observe the effect of a European education on an Aboriginal child. Turandurey probably despaired of ever being able to train her daughter in her traditional ways and realised, according to Mitchell’s account of her feelings, that women were much better treated by Europeans than by Aborigines. Piper, for instance, had said that Aboriginal law was that the first two attempts of a woman to leave her husband might be punished by a beating but that for the third he might put her to death.55 So Ballandella went with

51 ibid., p. 244.
52 ibid., p. 247, pp. 253-4.
53 ibid., p. 256; Mitchell 1836, 22 June; Stapylton 1986, p. 146.
54 ibid., pp. 186-7; Mitchell 1839, pp. 262-4.
55 ibid., p. 86.
Mitchell’s party under the immediate care of Kitty; eventually she would be adopted into Mitchell’s family and sent to school.  

A couple of weeks later, not far from Heathcote, Piper’s keen eyes lit on a razor in a deserted Aboriginal encampment. On the blade of the razor was inscribed ‘Old English’. If such an artefact was found so far from European settlement it seems almost certain that news, or at the very least rumours, of the white men had come too.  

On 7 October, two days later, the party was camped close to Mitchellstown. Piper discovered that a group of Aborigines had been following them. He and Burnett persuaded seven of them, including an old man and two boys, to approach the encampment. Mitchell went out to meet them as he did not want them in the camp. They told him the name of the creek they were on and gave him two neatly woven baskets in exchange for two tomahawks. But then several of the Aborigines did come right into the encampment. Piper at first wanted to make friends with these people but, as usual, found it difficult to do so. He then became angry and stormed around, sword in hand, trying to send them away. Piper was always an angry young man. His word on picking up his musket was usually ‘bell gammon soldiers’, meaning ‘soldiers are no joke!’ Three of the visitors tried to placate him by telling him what he said was a ‘long yarn’. One wonders how much of it he understood. The old man meanwhile went around casting a covetous eye on everything in the camp. Long after it was dark they still sat around with scarcely any fire and, Mitchell believed, bent on mischief or murder. He had earlier arranged with his men what to do in such a case. At a given signal, Burnett leaped out, wearing a gilt mask and holding in his hand a blue light with which he fired a rocket. Two concealed men bellowed hideously through speaking trumpets while the others shouted and discharged their guns into the air. The astonished Aborigines at once disappeared and the explorers saw them no more. In their haste, they left behind the two tomahawks given to them and several roughly shaped heavy clubs. These clubs, Mitchell believed, had been fashioned with the sole purpose of beating out the white men’s brains as soon as they fell asleep. The incident prompted the darker side of Mitchell’s judgment. He was convinced that no kindness or understanding could restrain the desires of these wild men to kill the white strangers when they first appeared among them. No explorer was safe, he thought, unless a member of a powerful and well armed party.  

This farce, which might easily have turned into tragedy, was the expedition’s last meeting with Aborigines. From now on they kept out of Mitchell’s way although, no doubt, they kept his party under observation. But there were dangers other than the hostility of the local inhabitants.  

On 13 October the party reached the Broken River at Benalla. James Taylor, a convict who had been brought up in a hunting stable and had been transported for horse stealing, was in charge of the expedition’s horses. He was also the bugler and the other men called him Tally-ho. He was a skilful rider and Mitchell often used him to swim his horse across rivers to discover the best place for the cattle to climb out on the opposite bank. On this day he rode into the water and simply disappeared. Burnett, going on foot to the spot, called out, ‘the man’s gone!’ The horse came out with the bridle on its neck but the only sign of  

56 ibid., pp. 265-6; Brook 1988, pp. 63-76. Brook’s article describes Ballandella’s subsequent life, her marriage and what is known of her descendants. His discussion of Turandurey’s experiences on Mitchell’s expedition has several inaccuracies and I cannot accept his suggestion that on this expedition she became pregnant or that Piper was the father.  

57 Mitchell 1839, p. 288.  

58 ibid., p. 79.  

59 ibid., pp. 289-90.
Tally-ho was his cap floating on the river. Piper, Kitty and two convicts were immediately in the water. Within six or eight minutes at the most, Piper brought up the body from the bottom. It was still warm and kept so for three hours by continuous rubbing while the lungs were alternately inflated and compressed. But it was all without success. The medical attendant laid out the body between two large sheets of bark, no doubt cut by Piper, and it was buried in a deep grave. Tally-ho had been popular with his fellow convicts and Mitchell, too, was saddened by his death.60

It took four days for the expedition to travel the fifty miles between Benalla and the Murray near Howlong. The next day Piper and Burnett went across the river by boat to find a suitable place for the expedition’s passage which was accomplished in two days. Mitchell wondered whether squatters had already occupied the north bank of the Murray but the party could find no traces of sheep or cattle although Piper, skilled tracker that he was, traced the wheels of a gig drawn by one horse and accompanied by several others. These impressions, however, were several months old and did not indicate that white men had settled there.61

As soon as he could, Mitchell pressed on northwards towards the Murrumbidgee where he hoped he might meet with settlers once more because his supplies were very low. By 22 October his men were delighted to discern many tracks of cattle and Piper was able to point out a spot where a bullock had been eaten by Aborigines.62

Two days later, on 24 October, with Piper always assisting to find the best route, Mitchell reached the hut of a stockman called Billy Buckley on the Murrumbidgee about a dozen miles upstream from Wagga Wagga. He was most hospitable and, as it happened, several drays with supplies of provisions arrived coming along the road from Sydney. The trials of the journey were over. Piper was at least as pleased as the white men to emerge from the land of the myalls, especially when he met at this station several Aborigines whom he knew. He termed them ‘civil blackfellows’ and was very pleased that his important position in the expedition enabled him to lionise over them.63

A couple of weeks after Mitchell had left for Sydney, Stapylton’s rearguard reached the Murrumbidgee. Turandurey duly arrived with this group; her feet had probably not fully healed and she had evidently come most of the way riding in a cart and eating flour. She had put on so much weight that Stapylton recorded that she had grown enormously fat. To the best of his knowledge no improprieties with her as a female had ever taken place. She now left the party and was married to King Joey, from the Lachlan. Stapylton gave her two blankets as a wedding present. She left with her new husband for her home which she had left six months earlier.64

The two Tommies had become attached to Mitchell and, having arrived in Sydney, hoped to accompany him on his planned trip to England. Mitchell felt he could afford to take one, but not both, and finally decided to take neither. He arranged for their safe passage through the colony to Bathurst on the way to their own country and gave to each what clothing he could spare. Both wept when, at last, they left Mitchell’s home.

Back in Sydney, Mitchell was both paternal and patronising towards Piper who seemed to relish more than anyone else the triumph of the successfully completed expedition. Mitchell clothed him in his own red coat and gave him a splendid cocked hat and feather, which had belonged to Governor Darling. Piper’s portrait thus arrayed soon appeared in the

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60 ibid., pp. 296-7.
61 ibid., pp. 301-5.
63 ibid., pp. 310-11.
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'A drawing by William Henry Fernyhough now in the Mitchell Library, Sydney.'
print shops, an ingenious artist, William Fernybough, having drawn his likeness very accurately. Piper was just the sort of man to enjoy enormously all his newly acquired importance. He carried his head high as everyone seemed to know him and many people gave him gifts of money, with which he purchased silk handkerchiefs for himself and dresses for his wives — for he had now obtained a second to Kitty. To Mitchell’s great pleasure, Piper abstained from intoxication and looked down with contempt on those many wretched, drunken Aborigines who led an abandoned, sordid existence around Sydney.

Piper soon tired of Sydney and became impatient to return to his own country, near Bathurst. Mitchell carefully fulfilled all the conditions of their agreement, allowing him an old musket, blankets and so on and decorating him with a brass plate on which he was styled, not as usual ‘King’ for, he said, there were ‘too many kings already’, but ‘Conqueror of the Interior’ — a far more splendid title.

We know little about Piper after these triumphs except that he travelled around the colonies a good deal visiting Sydney again, the Hunter Valley, Moreton Bay and even Adelaide. By 1843 he was back in the Bathurst district and had told a surveyor there, W.R. Davidson, that he was willing to accompany Mitchell on another exploring expedition. By this time Mitchell was planning a journey into Queensland to discover a route to the gulf of Carpentaria and he was delighted to learn that he might again have Piper’s services. He told Davidson that Piper would be ‘most essentially required.’

Accordingly, when Mitchell set out for the north at the end of 1845 he took Piper with him and provided him with a horse and saddle, a double-barrelled gun, clothing, the same rations as the other men, blankets and a place in a tent. Mitchell also recruited from Boree another Aborigine, Yuranigh, who was younger than Piper but who proved to be even more useful. A third Aborigine, Dicky, a boy only ten years of age, was a native of the lower Bogan; he provided local knowledge as the party travelled down that river.

At the end of January 1846, while the party was camped for a few days on Duck Creek, ten miles or so north-east of Nyngan, Mitchell was told that Piper intended to desert the expedition and take with him the two other Aborigines. The Surveyor-General felt a deep sense of betrayal. Piper referred to the ‘Majy’ as his ‘old master’ but would now heartlessly leave him without a single Aboriginal guide at a time when such a guide was most required. As a consequence Mitchell now had nothing but evil to say about Piper: he never had intended to stay with the expedition to its end; he had not improved in speech or manners during the past ten years; he was a very bad shot and awkward with a horse; he could elicit no clear information as an interpreter; he went unwillingly about doing anything. All the others in the camp were actively at their work; Piper did no work and was the only dissatisfied person.

Piper had just drawn a week’s rations and was baking all the flour into bread. Mitchell ordered him to be seized and brought before him and Edmund Kennedy, his second-in-command, sitting as magistrates. Piper denied he intended to decamp, but Yuranigh declared he had proposed to him that they should leave the party and go in search of women. The magistrates decided that Piper should be held under arrest, sent to the nearest police station and returned under a police guard to Bathurst so he would be unable to induce the other Aborigines to desert. This measure seemed to have the required effect on Yuranigh and Dicky who served faithfully for the whole of the year-long journey. Yuranigh said that Piper had only himself to blame for what had happened to him and that he had acted like a fool.

66 Mitchell 1848, p. 47; Mitchell to Davidson, 13 November 1843.
67 Mitchell 1848, pp. 25-6, p. 47.
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For Mitchell it was a sad end to an association which he had regarded as a friendship. What Piper felt we cannot, alas, ever know. But perhaps he felt some remorse when, at length, Yuranigh returned to Boree having completely replaced him in the 'Majy's' affections.68

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