

## *James Grassie: Poet and Aboriginal Story Teller of Victoria*

by Andrew Peake

258 pp., Andrew Guy Peake, Glandore, SA, 2014, \$33.00.

Review by Jason Gibson  
Museum Victoria

The poet and storyteller James Grassie (1816–1898) landed at Hobsons Bay (Williamstown, Victoria) as a free settler in 1853. He was in his late 30s at the time and had already published a collection of stories from his homeland under the title *Legends of the Highlands from Scotland: From Oral Tradition* (Grassie 1843). As a young man, Grassie had received education in the Classics and Latin at the Inverness Academy and had become well versed in poetry and the arts. The reasons for Grassie's departure from Scotland are unknown but like so many of his Scottish brethren upon arriving in Victoria he travelled in search of employment throughout the goldfields. While he worked in a range of occupations, including a tutor for squatters' children and a pastoralist, his primary interest continued to be literature and oral history.

Writing for a number of different regional newspapers such as *Border Watch* (Mt Gambier) and the *Portland Guardian and Normanby General Advertiser* (south-west Victoria), Grassie exhibited his passion for poetry and literature. What is most interesting about his writing though is the record of colonial Victoria contained within it; in particular his vignettes on the effects of colonisation on the Aboriginal people living between Ballarat and the South Australia border. Unlike his contemporary and fellow Scotsman in the Western District, James Dawson, Grassie's work does not assume an ethnographic or even academic tone. While Dawson may have benefited from the support and advice of Professor Herbert Augustus Strong (in classical and comparative philology at the University of Melbourne), the works compiled in this edited volume reveal a writer without academic mentorship, more interested in literary style than empirical accuracy.

Historians, anthropologists and linguists interested in this part of Australia will find Grassie's writing thought-provoking but ultimately frustrating as it is difficult to determine what is literary fiction and what is not. His references to Victorian 'corroboree' songs and even some interpretations of the associated song texts, as well as glosses on presumably Dhauwurd wurrung words (given the region that he writes about) are tantalising, but dubious to say the least. Also amongst Grassie's prolific writings are a number of short stories and poems dedicated to figures of Aboriginal resistance in the region, particularly the individuals 'Koort Kirrup', 'King Hendo' and 'Mingburne'. The numerous poems and short stories describing these men exhibit a fascination (possibly a fixation) with Aboriginal resistance that, despite being largely sympathetic, ultimately resembles a eulogy.

Having recently travelled through the 'stone country' of the Dhauwurd wurrung and been told snippets of the local stories, it seems that Grassie's work is of historical significance but needs to be read in conjunction with other more ethnographically oriented texts from the time (Smith 1880; Dawson 1870, 1881) and more recent scholarly sources (Clark 1995, 1990; Wettenhall 2010). That Grassie witnessed some of the historical events recounted in his writing is surely the case; however, as editor Andrew Peake explains, Grassie often feigned witnessing historical events that predated his arrival in colonial Victoria. It is probably best to sum up this book then as a useful, additional resource for those interested in the history of colonisation in Victoria, but one that needs to be read with great caution as he obviously blends historical narrative with his own idiosyncratic literary embellishments and inventions.

Peake has done a good job of pulling together this disparate material (which can all be found on the National Library of Australia's fabulous Trove facility) but the index is fairly limited and unfortunately does not appear to contain some of the key Aboriginal terms used by Grassie. Bringing to attention the achievement of a popular writer of Scottish origin in regional Victoria, is timely given recent scholarship focusing on the achievements of the Scottish in Australia (Cahir et al. 2015; Inglis and MacDonald 2014). While these brought together a fantastic exhibition of Scottish art and made every effort to incorporate an Indigenous perspective on the Scots, missing from the exhibition were the contributions of this enigmatic poet and writer. Thanks to the work of Andrew Peake I am sure Grassie's contributions will now be more widely known.

## References

- Cahir, Fred, Alison Inglis and Anne Beggs-Sunter (eds) 2015, *Scots under the Southern Cross*, Ballarat Heritage Press, Ballarat.

- Clark, Ian 1990, *Aboriginal Languages and Clans : An Historical Atlas of Western and Central Victoria, 1800–1900*, Dept of Geography and Environmental Science, Monash University, Melbourne.
- 1995, *Scars in the Landscape: A Register of Massacre Sites in Western Victoria, 1803–1859*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.
- Dawson, Isabella 1870, 'The language of the Aborigines. To the editor of the Australasian', *The Australasian*, 19 March 1870: 8.
- Dawson, James 1881, *Australian Aborigines: the languages and customs of several tribes of Aborigines in the western district of Victoria, Australia*, George Robertson, Melbourne, [archive.org/details/australianaborig81daws](http://archive.org/details/australianaborig81daws), accessed 7 September 2014.
- Grassie, James 1843, *Legends of the Highlands from Scotland: From Oral Tradition*, James Smith, Inverness.
- Inglis, Alison and Patricia MacDonald (eds) 2014, *For Auld Land Syne: Images of Scottish Australia from First Fleet to Federation*, Art Gallery of Ballarat, Melbourne.
- Smith, Christina 1880, *The Booandik Tribe of South Australian Aborigines: A Sketch of Their Habits, Customs, Legends ...*, Spiller, Adelaide, [archive.org/details/booandiktribeso00smitgoog](http://archive.org/details/booandiktribeso00smitgoog), accessed 19 October 2014.
- Wettenhall, Gib 2010, *The People of Budj Bim: Engineers of Aquaculture, Builders of Stone House Settlements and Warriors Defending Country*, em PRESS Publishing for the Gungitj Mirring Traditional Owners Corporation, Heywood, Vic.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 39, 2015*,  
edited by Liz Conor, published 2015 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.