

## A CLOSER LOOK AT CULTURAL CONTACT: SOME EVIDENCE FROM 'YAMBUK', WESTERN VICTORIA

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The Western District of Victoria has been a favoured area of study for academics interested in the archaeology, prehistory and race relations aspects of our past. Corris, Reece, Christie, Barwick, Marcard, Massola, Critchett, Lourandos, Coutts, as well as others from the Victoria Archaeological Survey, have published work concerning the District. Yet despite the large amount of research undertaken there are many gaps in our knowledge. This is particularly so if one wants to know in detail of relations between the two cultures, of anything more than the most general outline of racial conflict, or of Aboriginal responses, of adaptive behaviour by which Aborigines attempted to establish a new life-style for themselves. To find answers to such questions new sources will have to be examined. A source area so far neglected is the diaries and journals kept by many station owners and individuals. It is true that not all have been overlooked: a selected few have been over-worked. Yet there has been no systematic attempt to study these station by station. The aim of the piece of research which led to this paper was simply to take one such source, a fairly detailed one, recording events in a key area of the District and examine the extent to which it could throw further light on race relations and provide new details of Aboriginal culture.

The main source used is the diaries of Annie Maria Baxter (later Dawbin).<sup>1</sup> Annie was the wife of Lieutenant Andrew Baxter who in 1843 took up 'Yambuk', a small squatting property in the Western District of Victoria. Annie's diaries are a mine of information. They bubble with descriptions of station life, social activities, the day to day events as well as being a record of her private feelings and thoughts. The location of 'Yambuk' gave Annie special opportunities to record the effect of European settlement on the Aboriginal people of the area. 'Yambuk', lying between the Shaw and Eumeralla Rivers, sixteen miles from Port Fairy, bordered the scene of the most violent and prolonged racial conflict in the Western District.

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<sup>1</sup> Annie is included in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* where she is described as 'a woman of outstanding personality with intellectual gifts and education well above the average'. Her diaries consisting of 32 volumes are part of the Dixon Collection, Mitchell Library. A novel Annie wrote based on the diaries, *Memories of the Past by a Lady in Australia*, was published in 1873.

## CULTURAL CONTACT: 'YAMBUK'

The Baxters arrived after racial conflict had already begun; they witnessed and took part in the increased violence of the mid to late forties. November 1834 is commonly given as the date of the first permanent settlement in the Port Phillip District. Ten years later when the Baxters arrived, Europeans had taken up most of the land. William Learmonth, arriving in the area in the same year, counted himself lucky to obtain a run at Darlot's Creek: 'the only reason why this fine run had not been occupied long before was on account of the natives, who are said to be very troublesome here harbouring in a country close by [Mt. Eels] . . .'.<sup>2</sup> Thus by mid 1844 two races were in direct competition for the land and its resources.

Aborigines lived on the land before it was taken up by the Baxters and continued to live there afterwards. Lourandos assessing the resource potential of various zones in the Western District for hunter-gatherers concluded that, 'The densest populations could be expected in areas of perennial wetlands, waterways and fertile coastal (e.g. estuarine) regions'.<sup>3</sup> This was such an area and Annie's diaries support Lourandos' conclusion regarding the high resource potential of the environment. The Aborigines were able to exploit food from the sea, the lake just behind the coastal dunes and the fresh water rivers. Extensive middens are proof of the use of food from the sea. Fish, black swans and wild duck were caught at the lake. Other birds in the area were the wood duck, snipe, quail and pigeons. The fish in the fresh water river were plentiful: Annie's black boy could catch a large fish in a few minutes. At the mouth of the river, eels and mullet were easily caught. There were many dingos. Kangaroos and possums were also available. A pioneer remembers the Aboriginal meaning of the word Yambuk as 'red kangaroo' and mentions the large numbers that existed in the 1840s.<sup>4</sup>

Who were the Aborigines and how many were there? The work of Lourandos would seem a likely place to look for answers. Using records made by George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector of the Aborigines, Lourandos had identified 158 bands in south-western Victoria and has placed these on a map. Unfortunately, as he states, only one-third of these can be given a precise location.<sup>5</sup> It is not clear from his work who these Aborigines were. Nor can one learn who the Aborigines were from Annie's diaries. What one can be certain of is that there were two distinct groups of Aborigines; those who lived on the property or in the general area, and second those from the Mt. Eels area. The only identifying reference made by Annie is to indicate clearly when the Aborigines concerned are what she calls 'the Mt. Eels tribe'. While Annie's diaries alone do not allow the band to be named they do identify distinct groups. It is hoped that by using the original survey maps of the area in conjunction with information from a large number of diaries and journals, it will be possible to locate accurately Robinson's south-western Victoria bands.

The question of the size of the Aboriginal population in Western Victoria at settlement or in 1841, before the worst of the racial conflict occurred, is a question of

<sup>2</sup> Learmonth 1983: 223.

<sup>3</sup> Lourandos 1980: 46.

<sup>4</sup> Bennett 1887.

<sup>5</sup> Lourandos 1980: 52a.

national relevance. Butlin, in *Our Initial Aggression* has used Western District population figures as part of his argument to convince the reader that the commonly accepted figure of 300,000 Aborigines in Australia at settlement is far too low. He has seized upon Lourandos' estimate of 7,900 for the Western District (as opposed to 3,000 accepted by Radcliffe-Brown for a comparable area) to persuade readers of the likelihood that the Aboriginal populations in south-eastern Australia in '1788' were 'of the order of five (or more) times the number proposed by Radcliffe-Brown'.<sup>6</sup>

The size of the Aboriginal population is an important question but Annie's diaries do not help in any conclusive way. She writes of 'a large camp' on the far side of the river opposite the homestead. Soon after her arrival twenty three Aborigines walk uninvited into her home. In early 1846 upwards of one hundred Aborigines passed by on their way into Port Fairy for a corroboree. Perhaps the most interesting reference is to a hunting party Annie came across when she was horse-riding on the run. The Aborigines numbered a few more than twenty.<sup>7</sup> They were carrying fire sticks and spears. Lourandos' estimate according to Butlin means 'roughly 1 person per 1.5 square miles (3.9 km<sup>2</sup>)', that is a 'one hundred square mile property would encircle about seventy - odd blacks - perhaps something of the order of 15 spear-carrying adults'.<sup>8</sup> The Baxter property consisted of 10,000 acres or 15.6 square miles. Unfortunately it is impossible to make much of this. Butlin's figures are statistically derived. The Aborigines were not so evenly distributed. Some locations were obviously very popular, for example Mt. Eels and a swamp south of Mt. Napier, others were unimportant. There is no way of knowing where Annie's hunting party had come from or whether there were many more, or no more, groups nearby.

In accounts of Aboriginal resistance to European settlement the Port Fairy district is famous for the high level of violence. Settlers in 1842 petitioned La Trobe asking for protection against the Aborigines whose 'numbers, . . . ferocity, and . . . cunning, render them peculiarly formidable'.<sup>9</sup> Christie writes, 'In the Western District guerilla warfare reached its height in the early forties'.<sup>10</sup> It was a campaign which, he admits, was maintained for several years with the Aboriginal attacks in 1844-5 being so constant that Browne described the hostilities as 'the Eumeralla War'. Annie's diaries provide detail of this period giving information on the length of the resistance, the importance of individuals as leaders, the nature and frequency of Aboriginal attacks and of the retaliation of the Europeans. Annie's diaries show that the Aboriginal resistance which had flared up in 1842 began again in mid-1845 and continued till 1847. Soon after the Baxters' arrival Annie records in her diary that the local Aborigines are 'quietly disposed'. However in April 1845 she comments, 'The blacks are busy with his [Mr J. Brown's] and the Umeralla cattle; spearing and killing them - and are likely to be troublesome all the winter.'

<sup>6</sup> Butlin 1983: 175.

<sup>7</sup> Dawbin MSQ181: 21 May 1846.

<sup>8</sup> Butlin 1983: 142.

<sup>9</sup> Settlers and Inhabitants of the District of Port Fairy to La Trobe, 1842.

<sup>10</sup> Christie 1979: 62.



Drawing of an Aboriginal 'village' in south-western Victoria. From manuscript by William Thomas in the Smyth Papers, La Trobe Library Melbourne. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the Library. For discussion see paper by Williams in Part 2.

The 'Dunmore' Journals ('Dunmore' was located just north of 'Yambuk') indicate that the first violence since July 1843 (when the Journals started) took place in March 1845. From then on there is little relief for the European property owners until 1847. Annie's diaries reveal a consistent response from the Aboriginal population. There is no seasonal pattern. In every month from April 1845 to May 1847 there is mention of being harrassed by Aborigines except for July, November and December 1845 (no entries in Annie's diary and no mention of violence in 'Dunmore' Journals) and October, November, December, January 1846 (no entries in Annie's diary; 'Dunmore' Journals make it clear that the Native Police were staying there).

There are twenty one mentions of Aboriginal violence in the eighteen months for which there are diary entries in this period (March 1845-April 1847). The activities of the Aborigines consist of spearing and killing cattle, killing sheep, running cattle about including off the run, stealing potatoes and ransacking a hut, threatening settlers including spearing a man in the head, hanging around the house at night, lighting a large fire on the run, confronting individual settlers. Again, as in the Port Fairy settlers' 1842 petition to La Trobe, it is the number of incidents which stand out.

The Aborigines threatened individuals to a greater extent than Annie's diaries reveal. The 'Dunmore' Journals list the following incidents:

- May 1845 — Crawford comes and makes out an affidavit regarding a skirmish with the natives.
- June 1845 — Peter and James attacked by the Blacks and forced to fly — on the return with arms the Blacks have disappeared.
- 22 July 1845 — Blacks chased Mr Cunningham, threw spears at him.
- 5 January 1846 — Pye came to get warrants for Blacks who had attacked his hut and tried to spear his wife.
- 10 August 1846 — Putting cattle together — disturbed by blacks.

How seriously such activities harmed the economic interests of the squatters (and threatened their lives) can be gauged by the level of their reaction. They banded together to protect themselves, organising armed hunting parties to deal with the Aborigines. Annie who heard what they had to say wrote, 'If *half* is done or carried into effect, that they purpose — why, I would not wish to be one of the Mt Eels tribe of blacks'.<sup>11</sup>

Thirteen hunting parties are mentioned by Annie between June 1845-April 1847. Most of these consisted of five to six armed gentlemen. These hunting parties are quite separate from the activities of the Border Police or the Native Police — both in the area at various times during the period. Only in two cases is an individual recorded as hunting the Aborigines. Not surprisingly armed hunting parties are not mentioned as much in the 'Dunmore' Journals though some incidents are mentioned. However there is more mention of the activities of the Native Police and Border Police. When the Aboriginal leader is caught in April 1847 Annie comments, 'The settlers about here are determined to hang him if they can'.<sup>12</sup>

To what extent did such hunting parties harm the Aboriginal population? Of thirteen

<sup>11</sup> Dawbin MSQ181: 27 June 1845.

<sup>12</sup> Dawbin MSQ181: 18 April 1847.

incidents, Annie makes no mention of the result of five. Of those whose result is recorded, we learn 'the birds have flown', the Aborigines couldn't be found, only women and children were in the camps. Compared with the successful 'outrages' of the Aborigines, the results of European 'outrages' make odd reading. Whereas the Aborigines knew exactly where to find the Europeans and how to harm them, the Europeans it appears, often could not find the Aborigines let alone physically harm them. The only descriptions of confrontations between the two races are ones which occur unexpectedly and in which Annie is involved. But Aborigines are killed. Annie reports the shooting of two Aboriginal children, one of whom died, by Mr Cunningham from a nearby station. The reaction of local Aborigines to the presence of the Native Police is one of fear indicating that their methods are violent. Annie wrote, 'The Lubra Lizzy came in great distress to tell me that some Black Policemen were at St Kitts'.<sup>13</sup> At least once the 'Dunmore' Journals state, 'Went out and frightened Aborigines'.<sup>14</sup> In cases where the Aboriginal men are not met with, other damage is inflicted: three spears taken,<sup>15</sup> several spears taken, others burnt,<sup>16</sup> 'burning of mia-mias, killing of puppies, breaking of spears and bottles; bags, rugs, everything pitched into the fire'. On this last occasion Annie wrote, 'I saved some bags and two spears jagged with glass — which I bore off in triumph. Some good Kangaroo skins too . . .'<sup>17</sup> Such activities would have been harmful at a period when replacement of these items could have been becoming even more difficult. The Native Police contributed to such destruction, 'they brought some good axes and spears'.<sup>18</sup> The entry in the 'Dunmore' Journals mentioned above reads in full, 'Went out after the Blacks and frightened them — took their weapons . . .'<sup>19</sup>

These comments are taken from the records of two pastoral stations only. If such activities were occurring throughout the District the effect on the Aboriginal society would have been considerable.

Annie makes very little comment about the Aboriginal way of life or changes to it, but her diaries provide some evidence of the destruction of Aboriginal society that was occurring. Strangely, she never mentions seeing Aboriginal women collecting food. If the basis of the Aboriginal diet was the plant food, especially roots and tubers, collected by women, as stated by Lourandos,<sup>20</sup> one would have expected that Annie in her many outings would have come across women carrying out their daily tasks. She certainly comes across a group of Aboriginal men hunting. One would expect that the chance of coming across women involved in the time-consuming task of obtaining a large quantity of plant foods would have been much greater. Unfortunately the close

<sup>13</sup> Dawbin MSQ181: 18 September 1846.

<sup>14</sup> Dunmore Journals: 23 July 1845.

<sup>15</sup> Dawbin MSQ181: 16 January 1846.

<sup>16</sup> Dawbin MSQ181: 1 March 1846.

<sup>17</sup> Dawbin MSQ181: 4 June 1846.

<sup>18</sup> Dunmore Journals: 23 July 1845.

<sup>19</sup> Dunmore Journals: 23 July 1845.

<sup>20</sup> Lourandos 1980: 47, 102.

settlement<sup>21</sup> of the District, and the presence of sheep in large numbers would have drastically lessened the quantity of plant foods available.<sup>22</sup> The squatters' view that Aboriginal use of fire sticks and presence on the run were harmful to their enterprise and hence to be actively discouraged, would have also lessened the possibility of collecting food in the traditional manner. That Annie, who frequently rode on the property and helped with the work, fails to mention women seen collecting food indicates a substantial change in diet and also in the role of women in the crumbling society. Annie's comments also indicate other ways in which Aboriginal society was crumbling. The sick are being abandoned and left unburied. Dawson mentions killing of the aged or infirm as a normal procedure and explains the ways of burial. But the Aborigines are no longer always carrying out their customs. In the case of one poor sick woman, abandoned by all, Annie has her buried. Increasing levels of disease in the population are also obvious from Annie's diaries. The 'large camp across the river' of 1844 has by 1847 become the 'Camp Des Invalides'. 'Poor things!' she writes, 'they really don't remind me scarcely of human beings'.<sup>23</sup> The context implies that the sick people are women.

It is the women that Annie feels for most. That women suffered from venereal disease caught from Europeans is well known. But it is the details of what this means to an individual that brings home the outrage of the disease for those women who caught it. Annie tells the story of an attractive woman who became diseased as a result of sexual relations with shepherds from Mr Ritchie's station 'Aringa'. The disease took the hideous form of the woman losing her palate and she was reduced to speaking in a whisper. Her former lovers at this stage put her into a 'tub of sublimate, used for sheep dressing, after which she fell into a rapid decline'. Annie is appalled at her appearance, 'I never could have imagined it possible to (sic) anybody to exist in such a state. She made Baxter so sick'. When she dies, Annie muses for some time in her diary,

Neglected, unattended, almost starved at times — not a soul to care for her, or mourn her! . . . Man (I mean white man) in this instance, as in many more, has been only the means of making this poor woman's condition worse than it originally was; all she knew of him was to bring her to that fearful state in which she suffered and eventually died.

Annie's commentary also records the ending of the Aboriginal violence with the capture of the leader of the Aborigines, Cocknose, in April 1847. The combination of the efforts of hunting parties, Border Police, Native Police, with other factors meant that the Mount Eels Aborigines had come to accept that nothing they could do would reverse what had happened. For years, despite the closeness of the local Aboriginal group, Annie had let only 'Old Man Jack' come to the house. By early 1846 a black boy 'Tommy' is on hand often doing errands and helping with the station work. With the cessation of hostilities on the part of the Mt Eels tribe, a more friendly attitude is taken to the local Aboriginal people. For example, in April 1849, Baxter and Dr Aplin go down to the cave at the mouth of the river to see Old Man Jack catch eels and

<sup>21</sup> Kiddle 1961: 44.

<sup>22</sup> Lourandos 1980: 105.

<sup>23</sup> Dawbin MSQ181: 13 May 1849.

<sup>24</sup> Dawbin MSQ181: 26 May 1847.

mullet. Dr Aplin walks down with the Blacks, while Baxter rides. Annie records that seventy nine eels were caught and 'every one of them is killed by the Black biting its head!'; one of the few instances in the diaries where interest in the Aboriginal way of doing things is shown and a comment made on the method.

What the diaries make abundantly clear is the closeness of the lives of black and white in the pioneering years, the inter-connectedness of their lives yet the very great distance between the two groups of people. Annie has Aborigines living close by, meets Aborigines while out horse riding, hunts for Aborigines responsible for outrages, has a trusted Aboriginal in her home, cares for and buries a sick, abandoned Aboriginal woman. Aborigines are a part of her day to day life. The cause of her personal unhappiness is her husband's spending a night with a lubra.<sup>25</sup>

Aborigines are a familiar sight in the Port Fairy district. They take messages to nearby squatters and into Port Fairy. They take letters to be posted. They guide Europeans who have lost their way. Old Man Jack waits at the Rutledge 'Big House' to take Annie's horse and puts it away for her when she visits Port Fairy. The one more civilised member of the Aboriginal hunting party Annie encountered on her property was called Merryjig Charlie after the Port Fairy hotel, the Merryjig. In February 1846, over one hundred Aborigines cross the 'Yambuk' and 'Aringa' runs on their way into Port Fairy for a 'Corrobory'.

The 'Aringa' shepherds are the lovers of the poor lubra who died in the dreadful state described by Annie. Annie's servants warned Annie that one of the 'Yambuk' men, Stevens, was 'partial' to the Black women. One incident, the shooting of two Aboriginal children by a local squatter, highlights both aspects — the close contact yet the great gulf. The death of one Aboriginal child, the wounding of the other is reported to Annie by Old Man Jack. Annie visits the Aboriginal camp. The Aborigines name a well-known local squatter Mr Cunningham as the man who fired the shots. Her reaction? 'It's too bad to shoot the unfortunates like dogs and I'll write to the man or speak to him of it.' But Annie's mischievous sense of humour takes over. She travels into Port Fairy and obtains a summons. Forging a signature, she delivers the summons to Mr Cunningham. She tells the story this way:

I told him if he liked, I would lose it etc — but he said 'No! I'll go thro' with it, it was quite a mistake my shooting the children, but my father said I should be hanged and now I'm for it!' I told him not to think too much of it, that perhaps he would only be tried for Manslaughter and transported! He said, 'I'll go anywhere, I'll do anything they wish, but it must be alone, without a Policeman and handcuffs — if it comes to that, I'll cut my throat'. I told him if he refused to go, that they would send him by water; that I should probably be in Melbourne about the time and would visit him in goal, and if necessary attend to his last requests! He seemed to feel the attention and in a manner half promised me 'Jupiter' and his dog.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Dawbin MSQ181 Item 7: 41. This occurred in New South Wales before the Baxters came to 'Yambuk' but changed their lives tremendously. Annie could never forgive the man 'who could lessen himself and me so tremendously'.

<sup>26</sup> Dawbin MSQ181: 20 September 1846.



The 'joke' continued for several weeks with Mr Cunningham worrying about his situation. At last he decided to 'go down to Belfast to answer the summons'. On his way he stayed overnight at 'Yambuk'. He was much disturbed, he 'sat by the fire rocking himself to and fro in an agony'. Not till the morning, when the man was ready to leave did Annie tell him the truth. It was just a joke. The man became extremely angry and threatened to report Annie, but as she pointed out he could hardly do that without harming himself. It was a good story; such a good one, that Rolf Boldrewood stole it and uses it in *Old Melbourne memories* giving the credit for the joke to a fellow squatter. But as a story it also comments on the European attitude to the Aborigines held at this time. Annie believed it was wrong of Mr Cunningham to shoot the Aboriginal children but her actions reveal that it was not as wrong as killing European children. The crime remains unreported. Despite Annie's sympathy for the Aborigines, the 'other' remain 'the other'.

In the Western District of Victoria in the 1840s two groups of people fought for possession of the land. To study a record of that struggle from one side only limits the information available but is preferable to denying the possibility of knowing anything. Like the anthropologist I would have liked to make available 'the answers that others guarding other sheep in other valleys, have given' about the deepest questions of life.<sup>27</sup> The ethno-historical material examined does not allow this. But it does provide a glimpse of what was happening to a group of people as they tried to guard their sheep and their valley.

<sup>27</sup> Geertz 1973: 30.

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