

Aboriginal people and Frontier Violence: the letters of Richard Hanmer Bunbury to his father, 1841-1847

By Professor Ian D. Clark

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In 1841, twenty-eight year old Richard Hanmer Bunbury, a veteran of service in the Royal Navy, which left him with only one hand, arrived in the Port Phillip District of New South Wales, gripped by an 'epidemical rage for colonisation'. Through close relationships with officials such as Charles Joseph La Trobe, he lost no time in pursuing squatting interests in the Grampians (Gariwerd) district. This paper examines his relationships with the Djab Wurrung Aboriginal people¹ of Mount William (Duwil), and publishes extracts from his correspondence with his father on Aboriginal matters. It reveals that although he made many perceptive observations of Aboriginal lifeways, he accepted the view, common on the frontier, that Europeans should be armed at all times, and that Aboriginal people could not be trusted around stations.

We are fortunate that the Bunbury family correspondence spanning the years from 1824 to 1872 has survived, and excerpts from letters with an Aboriginal content are published here, in full, for the first time.² Many sketches by Richard Hanmer Bunbury are held in the National Gallery of Victoria; they are primarily of scenes at and near *Barton*

station, and some are of botanical specimens (see p.--). Regrettably, none are of Aboriginal people.

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Richard Hanmer Bunbury, born 18 December 1813 at Mildenhall, Suffolk, England, was the fourth and youngest son of Lieut.-General Sir Henry Edward Bunbury (1778-1860), 7th Baronet, and Louisa Amelia Fox, his first wife. He entered the Royal Navy on 23 January 1827, obtained his first commission on 31 July 1833 and ultimately reached the rank of Captain.³ According to *Burkes Peerage*, the Bunbury family was of Norman origin, originally called St. Pierre, adopting the Bunbury name from the manor of Bunbury, part of the lands they obtained at the Conquest.⁴

On 19 December 1838 in England, Hanmer Bunbury – the name by which he was usually known – married Sarah Susanna (Sally) Sconce (b.1816), eldest daughter of Robert Clement Sconce, Chief Commissary of Navy at Malta, and Sarah Knox. They had a family of seven children.⁵ He died in Melbourne on 23 April 1857, at Murray's Prince of Wales Hotel, Flinders Lane East.⁶ His family then

left Australia for England where Sarah Bunbury died in 1872.

Billis and Kenyon mistakenly claim that Bunbury arrived in Port Phillip in February 1836, but he did not arrive until 1 March 1841.⁷ He emigrated with his wife Sarah, her brother Robert Knox (Bob) Sconce (later Anglican minister at St Andrew's, Sydney) and Robert's wife Elizabeth Catherine (Lizzie) Repton, on the *Argyle*. Georgiana McCrae was a fellow cabin passenger, and so were William Campbell, James Hamilton McKnight, and James Irvine, later well-known squatters in the Western District.⁸ On arrival, Bunbury rented *Forest Hill Cottage*, Brunswick Street, Newtown (now Fitzroy) in March 1841 for six months, while also purchasing *Stanney* on Darebin Creek, with the intention of moving there once their Forest Hill lease expired. On 7 August 1841, Bunbury was appointed magistrate in the Port Phillip District. Subsequent appointments were Superintendent of Water Police, Williamstown, in September 1842; first Harbour Master, Port of Melbourne, in February 1844, and Water Police Magistrate.⁹

In Melbourne the Bunburys were selective in terms of who they socialised with: primarily the La Trobes, Dr and Mrs Meyer, Georgiana McCrae, Mr and Mrs Lyon Campbell, and Major and Mrs St John.¹⁰ Several sketches by Sarah Bunbury are held in the State Library Victoria collection, including one of the La Trobes' house at Jolimont.

'Seized with this epidemical rage for colonisation'

Hanmer Bunbury's motives for emigrating were, as his father

described, that he had been 'seized with this epidemical rage for colonisation' and no parental argument could 'divert him from his scheme of settling in Australia'.¹¹ Fellow squatter Colin Campbell at *Mt Cole* recalled how the 'excitement on the revelation of a new country which was opened up by Batman and others during 1835 to 1840 combined with the Australia Felix discoveries of Major Mitchell had raised expectations to the highest pitch'.¹² It was dubbed 'Major Mitchell's Australia fever' and Australia Felix was commonly referred to as an 'Eden' and 'a promised land.' H.S. Wills commented in his 1843 diary about the manic speculation in the Port Phillip District:

During the last three years what an entire revolution has taken place in the affairs of the colony! At the commencement of this period, speculation was a mania, and indulged in to an unprecedented extent. The Crown lands of Port Phillip realised enormous and, in our infantile state, the most preposterous sums.¹³

Bunbury's older brother, Henry William St Pierre Bunbury, had served as a lieutenant in the 21st regiment which was stationed in New South Wales, Tasmania, and Western Australia from 1834 to 1837. Whilst in Western Australia Henry explored the country between Pinjarra and Busselton and his diary contains comments on the local Aboriginal people and their way of life.¹⁴ He gave his younger brother advice about which district to settle in and warned him to be wary of Aboriginal people.¹⁵

Within weeks of arriving in Melbourne, Hanmer Bunbury was making preparations to visit Horatio

Wills' station in the Grampians where 300 head of cattle were available for purchase at £5 per head. As the Aboriginal people in this district were considered a problem another station stockman would be required. Nevertheless the 'general opinion is that if you treated them well there was nothing to be feared'.¹⁶ In April he decided to take over squatting rights to the station which is referred to in correspondence as *Mt William* and *Barton*. The slab and bark hut was named *Barton Hall*, after his family home in Suffolk.

A minority of pastoralists in the 1840s did not live on their stations but placed them in the hands of superintendent-managers. Hanmer Bunbury appointed a superintendent named Grigsby or Gregsby, who was from Maidstone in Kent.¹⁷ His own poor health and need for ready access to medical assistance prevented him from living full-time at *Barton*. Diagnosed as having an enlarged left cavity of the heart, it was recommended that he rest and avoid worry.¹⁸ War injuries may also have influenced his decision. As a thirteen-year-old midshipman, he had lost his right hand on 20 October 1827 in the Battle of Navarino at Pylos during the Greek War of Independence against the Ottoman Empire.¹⁹

R.B. Thompson has noted that 'success as a squatter in the Western District was never assured, even with its advantages of reliable rainfall and grassy plains. A constant state of anxiety from the need to make important decisions, often without experience or precedent, and with profound commercial consequences, was reinforced by an uncertain economic environment of boom and bust'.²⁰ In his study of thirty squatters he found that thirteen were 'successful' and sixteen ultimately

'failed'. Some were forced out by insolvency, such as the Kirklands of *Trawalla*; others such as Hanmer Bunbury avoided bankruptcy by finding employment in the public service.

Captain Bunbury held the *Barton* licence from April 1841 and sold it to Thomas Chirnside in February 1850. The property is described as of '38,000 acres carrying 2,000 head of cattle, at the head of Mt. William Creek'.²¹ He also held *Moora Moora* (1844-1848), and *Saintfield* (1849-1850). By March 1842, neighbours at *Barton* included Horatio Spencer Howes Wills who had settled on land near Mount William, which he had sold to Bunbury to form *Barton*; William Musgreave Kirk at *Burrumbeep*; Thomas Chirnside at *Mount William*, a run initially taken by Alfred Taddy Thomson; and Charles Browning Hall at *Lexington, La Rose* and *Mokepilly*. Bunbury notes in a March letter:

[Mr Acheson French] is now Police Magistrate at a place called the Grange [present-day Hamilton] about forty miles from Barton, so that we shall be well within visiting distance, and they will be our pleasantest neighbours. Our near neighbours are numerous, but with one exception no society though many good friendly neighbours, willing to assist and support one another, whenever they can. Barton being upward of 170 from Melbourne by the road, you may imagine that we shall be more solitary than is quite safe, considering the disposition of the blacks.²²

Bunbury and the Djab Wurrung Aboriginal people

In a letter dated 3 August 1841, Hanmer tells his father that: 'It is a pretty place is Barton. I wish we were living there though the blacks are rather troublesome'. In signing off he notes 'Your truly affnt son Captain Boomerig as the blacks call me, Hanmer B.'. It is likely that 'Boomerig' is the Djab Wurrung attempt at pronouncing Bunbury; alternatively, it may be their name for him. James Dawson has discussed the names that Aboriginal people used for Europeans; they often highlighted physical characteristics, so it is possible that the name referred to the absence of his right hand.²³

Barton station was on the lands of the Neetsheere baluk (Djab Wurrung) clan which was also associated with Mount William and Mount Moornambool.²⁴ The Djab Wurrung knew it as Lagillik, and the home station site as Wangoruc and Tallingareena (taling = tongue). Chief Protector George Augustus Robinson met with thirteen clan members at William Kirk's *Burrunbeep* and Baillie's *Mt. Emu* stations in July and August 1841, and three more on Bunbury's *Barton* station in April 1843. Robinson and Assistant Protector E.S. Parker, who was responsible for the Mount William district as it formed part of his Loddon District, listed between them twenty-one clan members in 1841 and 1843. The clan-head of the Neetsheere baluk was Billy Urquor (aka Billy, Jacky Jacky), who was captured at Ben Boyd's *Ledcourt* station in April 1843, and chained to a tree for seven weeks before being transferred to Melbourne. *Ledcourt* had suffered many losses through Aboriginal raids on their flocks of sheep, but Billy Urquor was indignant at his arrest, and blamed other clans for the depredations.

Hanmer Bunbury's correspondence with his father alluded to his older

brother's advice, and more from other colonists about the habits and character of the Aboriginal people:

Both in the town and also in my trip up the country I have been making enquiries about the Blacks and their habits and character and making due allowance for the prejudices of the settlers and their people. I am convinced that Henry [his brother] is perfectly right in all his warnings and accounts of them, never trust a native & never allow them near your house was his advice to me over & over again.²⁵

The letter reflects prevailing views and prejudices against Aboriginal people and cites particular tropes about 'cowardice, brutal cruelty & treachery, idleness & dishonesty'. He believed that settlers should be armed at all times and not encourage Aboriginal people around their home stations. La Trobe's attitude towards Aboriginal people and his attempt to keep them from entering townships is also discussed. The attitudes of civil authorities to the Aboriginal people's freedom of movement are complex. In the 1840s these views dictated that it was in the best interests of the Indigenous people to be kept away from settlements, where they encountered 'evils' such as alcohol abuse, increased mortality, prostitution, the spread of infections including venereal disease, and injurious changes to diet. Although such reasons were portrayed as protecting Indigenous welfare, in the final analysis this spatial control probably had more to do with safeguarding the fledgling interests of the immigrant community and not offending its sensibilities. In May 1840 Chief Protector Robinson began a system of writing memoranda for Aboriginal people which he intended them to show to Europeans to ensure

their safe passage. By June 1840, this practice of character references had evolved into a new system of control. Passes had been introduced by the Protectorate; non-local Aboriginal people returning from Melbourne to their home country needed signed letters from Thomas, Robinson or La Trobe, which were to be shown to squatters to ensure safe passage. Passes were also necessary if Aboriginal people wanted to enter townships.

According to Bunbury, La Trobe believed the Aboriginal people were 'irreclaimable':

Mr La Trobe a most humane & kind hearted person when he first came here exerted himself very much in their favour and endeavoured to settle & civilize them as much as he could but he has been obliged to give the attempt up in despair, for he found they became so devious & dangerous that for the sake of the inhabitants of the town he was obliged to keep them at a distance. He says that he has seen a great deal of the savages of different parts of the world, but that these are the only ones who appear to be perfectly irreclaimable; they have no feeling of gratitude[,] for any kindness shown them they attribute to fear and become insolent accordingly.²⁶

Reference is also made to a raid which became known as the 'Lettsom affair'.²⁷ With a warrant from Governor Gipps in Sydney to find perpetrators of a settler killing, Major Samuel Lettsom, of the 80th Regiment, led a party of mounted police and arrested Woiwurrung, Boon Wurrung, and Taungurung people in Melbourne on 11 October 1840, during which an Aboriginal leader named Winberri was killed:

All the time they were encouraged about the town & treated with great kindness; there were two or three large tribes encamped in the neighbourhood, by degrees the numbers increased, other tribes came gradually in, until their numbers had become quite alarming between 4 & 500 fighting men having mustered at one of their dances; information is said to have been given by some of the Black servants employed in the town that it was the intention of the tribes to attack the town in the night & make a general massacre, whether that was true or not a body of the settlers, police, & soldiers turned out surrounded the blacks and took 150 prisoners dispersing the remainder excepting a few who were recognized as having been concerned in murders and outrages up the country, the prisoners were soon released & warned not to come near the town again; since that time there are very few to be seen about here, about a dozen or so begging in the town but not more.²⁸

Bunbury is not flattering in his characterisation of the Aboriginal people of western Victoria; he refers to an earlier massacre of clans in March 1840 at *Konongwootong*, the station of the Whyte brothers, on the Koroit Creek, north of Coleraine, that became known as *Fighting Hills*:

Cowardice, brutal cruelty & treachery, idleness & dishonesty are the principal characteristics of the natives of this part of the country, but the tribes vary very much in character; about Portland Bay some of the tribes have shown the ferocity & determined courage that distinguished the natives of Van Diemens Land while others are the most abject cowards as an instance

of the former: three brothers of the name Whyte were owners of a large sheep station between Portland Bay and Port Fairy, one night a tribe [...] in their neighbourhood & known to muster 43 fighting men came down to an outstation, watched till the shepherd drove the flock out in the morning then speared him & carried off the whole flock; the Whytes soon heard of what had happened, assembled their people and pursued the natives, about ten miles from the place where the shepherd was killed, in one of the steep wooded ranges they found them busy cooking some of the sheep they had killed with the others regularly encamped in a bush yard as well arranged as a shepherd could have done it; a skirmish ensued[-] the blacks were driven back with the loss of several of their number and the sheep carried off towards the station; the blacks however having mustered all their force returned to the attack and the fight was continued for some time, the Whytes & their party sheltering themselves behind the trees from the spears and firing with great effect on their less wary assailants. Five times the blacks returned to the attack, one of the Mr Whytes & three or four of their people were wounded, but at the last attack the blacks could only muster nine fighting men, only two of whom escaped, 41 out of 43 had fallen.²⁹

One form of European intimidation on the frontier was charging on horseback at Aboriginal people. William Adeney documented Aboriginal fear: 'Aborigines will often run at the sight of a stock keeper' who would 'dash in among these naked wanderers flogging them with their long heavy whips at the least symptom of ill will and often with no

provocation whatever'.³⁰ Burchett was another to comment that 'a horse proves the best protection to a party of whites in the bush'.³¹ Bunbury therefore fails to contextualise the Aboriginal response of flight. It was a rational reaction to past treatment rather than a symptom of cowardice:

In this part of the country the tribes are generally fine athletic men but desperate cowards, I have seen several of them upwards of six feet high and very muscular, but whole tribes will run as hard as they can go from one man with a pistol or even from one man on horseback if he will but ride right at them, without looking whether he is armed or not.³²

Bunbury reflected the common belief that many killings of white people resulted from encouraging Aboriginal people around their stations and treating them with kindness:

A good many murders and outrages have been committed at different stations particularly within the last 8 or 10 months; two occurred while I was up the country the other day and within 25 miles of the station I was at, and the result of all the enquiries I have made is that in every instance the incidents have been occasioned by the extraordinary carelessness by the parties themselves.

Experience appears to have no effect whatsoever on the shepherds & hutkeepers; on some stations they find the blacks useful in bringing in the wood & water they want and the women are an attraction they encourage them about their huts & give them part of their rations & any clothes they can spare and really treat them very kindly (regardless

of the fact that almost every victim has been a hutkeeper or unarmed shepherd). This good feeling goes on for a few months, perhaps the man begins to put confidence in the blacks, goes about unarmed & has his hut constantly crowded with the blacks & their gins, they make their own observations as to the arms being carried by the man or kept loaded or not loaded in the hut and at last take advantage of his carelessness & secretly knock his brains out, sometimes without the slightest precious difference perhaps even when he is cooking some food for them; sometimes some theft or insolence makes the man angry, he refuses the usual quantity of food & tries to drive the blacks away but it is generally too late &... surrounded with blacks he is immediately despatched & the hut plundered & burnt; sometimes if he has prudence enough to get hold of his gun or pistols before he shows his displeasure he may succeed in driving them away but in several instances even that warning has not been sufficient, the blacks have been allowed to return to the hut as usual & have taken the first opportunity of the man being at work & off his guard to revenge themselves by murdering him and the way in which they mutilate the bodies of their victims is quite horrible, some they have completely cut to pieces.³³

This commonly-held prejudice, however, is at odds with the experience of George Augustus Robinson, the Chief Protector of Aborigines.³⁴ When Robinson travelled through the western district of the protectorate in 1841, he found that stations where Aboriginal people were welcomed and encouraged – such as at William Blow's *Sinclair's*

Run (later known as *Allanvale*), and Colin Campbell's *Mount Cole* run (later known as *Buangor*) – had, by and large, experienced minimal losses from Aboriginal people, and both parties were on the best of terms. Yet Bunbury found no such examples:

I have been unable to hear of a single instance in which people have been kind to them & encouraged them about their stations & given them food & clothing, and have not suffered for their good natures. The gentleman [Horatio Wills] from whom I have bought cattle was extremely kind & would not believe that they were a treacherous unfeeling race, the consequence was that he was nearly speared, one of his men wounded, & one killed. At the same time I cannot hear of anyone who has kept the blacks at a distance, & made a rule of no one at any time or under any pretence going unarmed, having suffered, a sheep or two speared now and then perhaps but nothing worse. No number of blacks in this part of the country will expressly attack even a single armed man.³⁵

In early July 1841, Bunbury returned to Melbourne after several weeks at Mount William. He brought 'presents of emu ornaments, opossum skins and a kangaroo tail, from which they made a most delicious soup, "very like hare soup"'.³⁶ Katherine Kirkland at *Trawalla* was another who was open minded to sampling indigenous foods, particularly *murrnong* (daisy yam, *Microseris lanceolata*), which she put in soups for want of better vegetables.³⁷ She thought it tasted like turnip.

Visits from the Chief Protector of Aborigines

George Augustus Robinson visited *Barton* station on three occasions, in July 1841, April 1843, and May 1847, interacting principally with the station superintendent, Edward Grigsby, since Bunbury was in Melbourne. On the 1841 visit, Robinson was told by a youth, Currercalconedeet, that "Thomson, Captain Bunbury, Captain Brigs and Mr Wills shot natives, plenty natives, "all gone too much boo white man".³⁸ It is difficult to determine whether Robinson is being told that these squatters personally shot Aboriginal people, or that their men were responsible. In 1928 a newspaper article presented an account from a former Barton employee of a massacre by station hands of Aboriginal people in a gully between Redman's Bluff and Mount William:

The run called "Barton" at the foot of Mount William, was first owned by a man whose name has escaped my memory, but he was instrumental in the almost total destruction [of the] tribe of aborigines that proved troublesome, spearing sheep and cattle on the station. An old Stawellite, who was an employee on the station, recounted the incident in my hearing. He said that the blacks were enticed into the gully, between the Redman's Bluff and Mount William, and shot down by station hands, very few escaping. There was no inquiry made into the tragedy at the time, and the sheep-spearing ended.³⁹

Captain Bunbury called on Robinson in Melbourne on 7 October 1841, after Robinson's return from his extensive tour of the Western District. Robinson noted that Bunbury 'had heard that I had said that natives had been killed at Grampians. Said the natives were more quiet the last winter than they had been

for any period before... Captain Bunbury said he was of the party who went after Thomson's sheep, the natives fled, got a woman and she told where the sheep were put. Said natives were at Wills station, they recovered 200 of their sheep'.⁴⁰

A Bunbury letter dated 14 August 1841 discussed that search for sheep stolen from Alfred Taddy Thomson's run at Mount William. He expressed surprise at Aboriginal people's skill in driving sheep, but abhorred their method of tethering the animals by breaking their legs. It was commonplace for Europeans on the frontier to retaliate by ransacking recently abandoned Aboriginal camps, deliberately destroying or stealing Aboriginal implements and items of clothing, such as possum and kangaroo cloaks. Their habitations, known locally as wurns, were regularly destroyed:

I assure you it is a disagreeable ground to walk through as any man for his sins would not wish to meet with, particularly if you happen to be in chase of fifteen or twenty armed blacks with whom you have already had a brush with & who you know to be concealed in the scrub within a few yards of you but where you can't exactly tell for the life of you & every moment as you crawl laboriously along you expect to find the point of a spear or a knife in your side before you can make any use of the pistol ready cocked in your hand, or perhaps to have a regular volley of spears at you the moment you emerge at the farther side; such a scramble I had the last time I was at Barton in company with five other gents, & a more disagreeable job I never undertook; the story was as follows:

One fine forenoon one of the shepherds of our neighbours a Mr Thomson came home in a desperate fright; he had been tending his sheep on the plain, about three miles from the home station when all at once, according to his story, a whole tribe of blacks advanced upon the flock from the forest, and chased & threw a great many spears at him, drove him off one way & the whole flock of 600 or 700 sheep the other though firing at them five times. Upon close cross examination however he acknowledged that they had not thrown a single spear at him though he saw some of them shake their spears at him, away he ran, at all accounts. Mr T. immediately mounted with some of his men, & started in pursuit, followed the tracks, and though the blacks could not have had more than an hour's start of him, he never overtook them until after a round of about nine miles over sharp rocky ranges & through thick scrub which puzzled even the horses; he saw the smoke of their fires where they had camped to eat; the blacks ran instantly & he found about three hundred & fifty of the sheep and ten or twelve already killed and cooking. How the blacks had driven the sheep there was a mystery, most assuredly no white man could have driven sheep such a distance & over such ground in the time; half the sheep were still missing, the blacks had evidently divided them & gone different ways & where to look for the others he could not tell; next morning he came over to me for assistance & I went over with my stock keeper to his station to be ready to start early the following morning; in the evening Mr T's partner and another gent arrived from another part of the country.

Bunbury's description in the passage below of his stock keeper as a Sydney native meant a white man born at Sydney rather than an Indigenous person from Sydney:

We stowed close that night four of us sleeping in Mr T's tent for he had no hut having only lately arrived. ...up at daylight & off directly after breakfast for the mountains... singularly enough this run took us right on to the tracks of the missing division of the sheep. On the scent, we went right up the face of the mountain, my stock keeper a Sydney native was tracker & hard work it was at times; to puzzle pursuers the blacks had driven the sheep through the thickest parts of the scrub, over rocky ground where no foot marks would show, up the hill & across & up gullies, backwards & forwards & at last up a very steep ridge covered with thick forest & in some parts most dense & difficult scrub; when the blacks carry off sheep they drive them at such a pace that the fat ones are very often knocked up, in that case the blacks will neither leave them as they are for fear of them getting away nor kill them for fear of their spoiling, but they just break two or three of their legs as they know they will live many days in that state & they can carry them off at their leisure.

In the course of our scramble we fell in with about twenty poor beasts in this condition, & they helped to guide us after the others, on we went, often obliged to dismount & lead our horses and at last caught sight of the smoke of the blacks camp rising through the thick trees more than a thousand feet above the bush of the plain we had left. On we went quietly until close up to the

'mi-mies' as the blacks call their little bark huts, the blacks saw us, and bolted in all directions through the thick scrub as we dashed into the camp; the blacks are like eels, down go their blankets & skin cloaks & they slip through the thickest scrub with extraordinary rapidity. Never take your eyes off a black even for a moment & where you think there is neither tree nor bush large enough to hide him & you will see no more of him hunt as you may; they do not merely escape, they vanish by magic or the black art; certainly though close upon them we only succeeded in capturing one old 'loobra', as they call their women here, she showed us after a good deal of trouble where the sheep were & we found about 200 of them in a patch of dense scrub which they had been forced into but could not of themselves get out again; at the camp which consisted of 8 or 10 mymies we found about 30 sheep killed; cut up, cooked & cooking, but no more live ones.

Bunbury goes on to recount how he 'souvenired' some items and then destroyed the camp. His description of its contents shows the interesting mix of Aboriginal and European implements in use:

We then set to work & ransacked the mymies & a curious lot of things we found, stolen axes &... wedges, table knives ivory handled, files, chisels & sheep shears, a few things we carried off and then burnt everything else, spears, arms of all kinds, baskets, blankets, all the meat & everything that would burn.

I appropriated some arms, opossum & squirrel skins and one of the original green stone

tomahawks now becoming rare as the blacks are generally supplied with iron ones by the protectors. As soon as we had destroyed the camp and drove the sheep down to the plain & sending Mr Thomson back in charge of them we returned up the mountain to the camp and after hunting for some time caught sight of the smoke of the blacks' fire higher up the ridges; with some difficulty we got up within about thirty or 40 yards of them when we stopped by a dense tea tree scrub we could hear the blacks talking and breaking sticks for their fires at the farther side, so dismounting we scrambled through the tea tree very fast and quietly as we could but the blacks heard us and bolted, nor could we see one of them again; at this second camp we found quantities of mutton roasting, but no more sheep & after a short search we were obliged to return to the station; next day we went out over the mountains but did not see either a black or a sheep.⁴¹

On 12 March 1842, Assistant Protector E.S. Parker was informed by Charley, alias 'Neptune', an employee of Captain Robert Briggs's at *Ledcourt* station, that one of Bunbury's stock keepers had killed an Aboriginal man named 'Cockatoo Jack',⁴² who was believed to have killed Wills's hutkeeper John Collicott in late 1840.⁴³ The stock-keepers at *Barton* were Sydney men called 'Bill the Native'⁴⁴ and 'Cawpin'. When Chief Protector Robinson met these men on 11 July 1841, Bill 'became outrageously insolent to me; he damned and abused the government and would shoot all the bloody blacks in the place if they interfered with him, and set me at defiance'.⁴⁵ Eight days later at Kirk's *Burrumbeep* station on the Hopkins

River, south of present-day Ararat, where Robinson had established temporary headquarters, Bill and Cawpin attended a corroboree staged by local Djab Wurrung clans. Later in the evening the Djab Wurrung people came to Robinson and accused the two 'blackguards with having fired at them and having taken their women'.⁴⁶ Bill and Cawpin later went to work at H.S. Wills's adjoining stations *Lexington*, *La Rose* and *Mokepilly*. When Robinson returned to this district in April 1843, he learned that Bill had been convicted for ten years for stealing cattle from Thomas Chirnside's *Mt. William* station. Wills had written to the court on his behalf informing it of the great distress into which the family had been thrown by the imprisonment. But by April 1843, Bill had escaped from gaol with two others and had returned to the Duwil (Mount William) district.

Robinson's second visit to *Barton* was on 13 April 1843. His record reads:

I called my two native police and went on to Captain Bunbury's huts. My people and horses wanted refreshment but it was denied. Came to Bunbury at sunset. Mr. Grigsby a quiet man, is overseer, he is from Maidstone in Kent. A Mr. Young, brother to the young man in Aire's office, was there. Bunbury has moved his home; no water. I was well received. Some natives were encamped on a creek. I went alone to see them. They knew me. We had met before and they called me marmanorer [father] and was quite delighted. They all had venereal. No natives were allowed there when Bill the Native was there; he shot them. Got 34lbs beef at 3s 6d, ½lb tobacco 3s 1d for the natives.

Robinson took the names of seven Aboriginal people, noting that another six were on the station. They belonged to the Neetsheere baluk, Yam Yam Burer baluk, Tin baluk, and Watteneer baluk clans. The following day he climbed Mount William, accompanied by Gregsby and Young:

Fine morning, stopping at Bunbury. Natives visited me. I gave them 3lbs salt beef and ½lb tobacco for which they were thankful. They were destitute of covering and sorely afflicted with venereal. The day was remarkable fine and as more natives were expected I thought I would avail myself of so favourable an opportunity to ascend to the top of Mount William. Mr Grigsby, the overseer to Captain Bunbury, and a Mr Young wished to accompany me.⁴⁷

In November 1844, that climb was recalled during a meeting with Superintendent La Trobe who was a regular visitor to *Barton* and had himself recently climbed Mount William with Bunbury. Robinson recorded the occasion: 'Went to office, called on His Honor, civil, complemented [*sic*] me for having ascended top Mount William, he had been there this last trip, delighted with Mt William, equal to mtns Switzerland, told me yarn, and Captain Bunbury, who went up with him, said it was hard work for him but for Mrs R. [*sic*] it was no joke'.⁴⁸

Another visit by Bunbury to Robinson's Melbourne office in January 1844 is recorded in the office journal: 'Memo: Capt. Bunbury, this gentleman informed the C.P. [Chief

Protector] yesterday that the blacks had been spearing his cattle at Mount William'.⁴⁹ Robinson's journal entry for his final visit to *Barton* on 23 May 1847 is very brief and matter-of-fact: 'Ten miles to Wills', went on to Bunbury, seven miles. Fine day. Remained for the night. Mr Gregsby there'.⁵⁰

Aboriginal use of fire

Bunbury's correspondence discusses Aboriginal uses of fire, noting in August 1841 'the constant fires... in all parts of the country, kindled either accidentally or by the blacks for the sake of the young & sweet grass that springs up the year after the burning of the old & attracts game'.⁵¹ Four months later, he wrote: 'The whole face of the country appears from any elevated ground to be enveloped in smoke so numerous & extensive are the fires. Sometimes they arise spontaneously from the friction of dead branches of the trees in windy weather; sometimes they are lighted by the blacks for the sake of the young grass that springs & entices the kangaroos & emus &c.; sometimes accidentally ... for even in the middle of summer there is a fire in every black "my-my" as they call their own huts'.⁵²

Bunbury also notes that fires were used to burn out stations. Squatters around *Trawalla* in 1838 believed the Aboriginal people had deliberately lit fires in an attempt to drive them away.⁵³ It is possible though, that squatters assumed an intention that did not exist. As the year had been particularly dry, the Indigenous people may have simply been practising traditional methods of encouraging the growth of grasses. Elsewhere Bunbury supports the view that fire was sometimes used against intruders. In a letter dated 18 December 1841, he wrote that local clans near *Barton* had lit fires 'not unfrequently for

the purpose of burning out a station; last year they made several most determined attempts to burn the huts of two of my neighbours'. In this early period, squatting runs were vulnerable and had little defence against the Aboriginal use of fire as a weapon.⁵⁴

Loss of faith in the efficacy of the Aboriginal Protectorate

In a March 1842 letter Bunbury wrote:

The blacks have been very troublesome lately in all parts of the District, near Port Fairy they took possession of a station and after being driven off, returned, dangerously wounded two of the mounted police & carried off and eat [*sic*] their horses; at another station they killed & eat [*sic*] four horses; at another they killed the hutkeeper & a lot of sheep, at another not far from me they speared two shepherds & carried off a whole flock of sheep, at another they speared a horse, at Barton they speared one of my best horses in both hind legs but he has recovered completely, and at Hall's they have speared about a hundred head of cattle. We shall have some trouble & bloodshed I fear in that part of the district before we can get them quiet again.⁵⁵

Like many other squatters and settlers, he was critical of the Protectorate:

I suppose in England the system of the "Aborigines Protectors" and their establishments are considered to be most useful, as everything that is praiseworthy & philanthropic, but out here there is but one opinion on the subject including Mr La Trobe & all persons who are most anxious to preserve & civilize the blacks, and that is that they have done no good whatsoever, that is in no one point

are the blacks benefited by the protectorate system which rather encourages them in habits of idleness & covetousness, while in many they have lost considerably. I am going up to Barton again this day week but I will endeavour before I go to find time for telling you something about these unfortunate blacks & their prospects.⁵⁶

An 1843 letter reveals the squatters' growing frustration with the government in terms of providing protection from Aboriginal attacks on people and stock. It also indicates the worry that his wife Sarah held for her husband's safety when he was at *Barton*:

The government neither can nor will do anything for the protection of the settlers, but they are very ready to prosecute them if they treat the blacks harshly. Henry [Hanmer's brother] did not do the Blacks of this country justice; I don't think the worst of the North American Indians ever equalled them in treacherous cold blooded barbarity. Poor Sukey [his wife Sarah] heard of the Blacks being so troublesome up at the Grampians, and the stories of course had lost nothing in the transit from one terrified shepherd to another, so that the poor dear girl was in a terrible fuss, and I found her on my return last Tuesday night, after nearly six weeks absence, really worn as a curl [of] paper and far from well; dear little soul she is a sad fidget when I am away.⁵⁷

Observations of Aboriginal lifeways

Hanmer Bunbury demonstrated his keen observation of Aboriginal lifeways. Three letters reveal his admiration of the efficacy of their hunting techniques,

especially in hunting bush turkey, the Australian bustard, *Ardeotis australis*. His respect for Aboriginal ecological knowledge by concurring with their prediction of a long drought is also demonstrated. He begins:

How formidable a weapon even a light wooden spear is in the hands of these savages, you may guess from the horse having been struck through the centre of the forehead & killed on the spot. The hardest blow I ever saw given by a spear was one where the spear entered the side of a large fat bullock 5 or 6 years old, a little behind the shoulder & the point protruded eight inches through the skin a little in front of the hip on the opposite side; I do not know the force from what distance the spear was thrown but I am satisfied that a ball... & smooth bore would not have gone through at twenty yards.⁵⁸

The quality of local spears prompted comment:

The spears used by the blacks about the western parts of this district are of the rudest possible description, for having no reeds like the tribes in this neighbourhood of the Grampians, they are compelled to use the long thin stems of the tea tree & the stringy bark saplings which amass there and amongst the thick scrubs; these they sharpen to a long taper conical point & harden the whole spear which is about six or seven feet long in the fire to prevent its warping but they can never take out the inequalities & a light zigzagging caused by the outside twigs, even the bark is often not removed so that the spear spins much this way, yet with the help of the throwing stick they can send these rude missiles from 80 to 120

yards & for short distances with surprising accuracy, provided it is not in the direction of a gun or pistol, their nerves being greatly affected by any such apparition; the inequalities of the spear thrower however give it a wobbling motion in its flight which renders it easy to avoid if thrown from any distance.⁵⁹

He also noted the arsenal of weapons typically carried by a fighting man:

Besides three or four light throwing spears every man when fully equipped carries one or two strong heavy spears about eight feet long for close quarters, these spears are almost invariably barbed either with barbs deftly cut out of the solid stick or with pieces of bone or glass and attached with strong cement & sinews. Considering that in addition to his spears, a shield, leangle, waddy, tomahawk, & one, or more, commonly two boomerangs, are invariably carried by a warrior his accoutrements are far from light.⁶⁰

There is a fascinating account of the brilliant strategy used by the Aboriginal people in trapping for food the elusive bush turkey:

... the blacks will generally succeed in catching them if they try but they are generally too lazy to go after them; their plan is to crawl along the ground perfectly flat holding a leafy branch of a tree or a small bush in the left hand in such a manner as to screen the hand from the bird's sight, while two long wands are carried in the right hand, one of which has a strong open noose at the end made of the sinews of the kangaroo, and the other has small bird generally a lark or a quail dangling by a string about six inches in length, the wands are kept close

together so that the open part of the noose may always be over the bird; thus provided the black crawls towards the turkey whose attention is soon attracted by the little bird which is kept in constant motion as if fluttering over the bush, & nearer & nearer draws the bush, until the inquisitive bird stops to examine the little one which seems to be twittering towards it, when near the noose drops over its head & a twist is given to the stick & the prisoner is secured. The great art appears to consist in the management of the bush so as to make it always maintain a natural position & appearance.⁶¹

On their superior ecological knowledge:

The drought continued with great severity until the beginning of this month and has done a good deal of mischief in different parts of the country, many thousands of lambs have perished from the want of grass for the ewes; the Blacks say we are going to have three dry seasons and I am inclined to believe them.⁶²

Aboriginal-settler interaction

Captain Richard Hanmer Bunbury was one of many British emigrants who responded to 'Major Mitchell's Australia fever'; what did they know of the Indigenous people of Port Phillip? The myth that Australia was an uninhabited land derived from the Crown constitutional status placed on it as 'an uninhabited colony acquired by settlement'. Emigrant colonisers knew that Port Phillip was occupied by Aboriginal people, but probably gained the impression from Mitchell's reports that it was sparsely populated. Nonetheless, when deliberating a move to Australia Felix, the prospective

emigrant may have been a little worried about the Aboriginal people. On this last point Hartwig has written: 'The very fact that a people is prepared to come unmasked to a country, appropriate it and alter and disrupt the indigenous way of life pre-supposes that they believe their own culture to be superior, and that they constantly reassure themselves on this score'.⁶³ Hanmer Bunbury's correspondence reveals particular information about Aboriginal people received from experience, as well as from his older brother and other settlers at Port Phillip.

Thompson, in his study of thirty diaries, letters, and memoirs written by early western Victorian squatters, found a prevalence of negative references toward Aboriginal people, and these were maintained for life. Squatters felt no need, ethical or political, to resile from their earlier attitudes and actions when they came to give an account of themselves in their memoirs'.⁶⁴

Don Watson has argued there were three types of squatter: 'those who thought that their right to the land was qualified by an obligation to treat the Aboriginal inhabitants with kindness; those who believed that their right was conditional only on extermination; and those who combined murder with kindness':⁶⁵

Christianity could instruct settlers
in the language of the *Song of*

Solomon or the *Book of Job*. It could inform Europeans that the Aboriginal people were 'black but comely' (a fact which many squatters had discovered for themselves), 'our sable brethren', 'our dusky neighbours', or it could underpin the idea that the blacks were born to suffer as an accursed race, the sons of Ham.⁶⁶

Colin Campbell revealed through his actions and writings that he belonged to the type of squatter who adhered to the 'black but comely' view of the *Song of Solomon*. It is speculated here that Bunbury also belonged with that type, though he followed the conventional wisdom that Aboriginal people were not to be trusted, that his men should be armed at all times, and that any Aboriginal depredations should be punished. Bunbury's view that kindness towards Aboriginal people automatically brought suffering for those showing the kindness is not supported by the foregoing analysis of cultural relations on the colonial frontier.⁶⁷ Indeed the opposite is suggested – that on stations where Aboriginal people were welcomed, treated respectfully, and given gainful employment, the stations were violence-free, standing as islands in a sea of conflict. On the other hand, where European station hands failed to appreciate their cultural obligations or deliberately chose to ignore them, violence often ensued.

¹ The spelling 'Djab Wurrung' conforms with that adopted by the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages. The alternative 'Djabwurrung' is used in the author's previous publications. (Ed.)

² Papers of Bunbury Family, 1824-1872, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 8098. Also, copy in Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria, MS 13530.

³ For his naval service see W.R. O'Byrne, *A Naval Biographical Dictionary: comprising the life and services of every living officer in Her Majesty's Navy, from the rank of Admiral of the Fleet to that of Lieutenant inclusive*, London: John Murray, 1849.

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- ⁴ B. Burke, & A.P. Burke, *A Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Peerage and Baronetage, The Privy Council, Knightage and Companionage*, 26th ed., London: Harrisons & Sons, 1914, p.529.
- ⁵ Henry Fox (Harry) Bunbury, b.8 October 1839, Malta – d.16 October 1870, Lahore, Bengal, India; Robert Francis Argyle (Frank) Bunbury, b.12 February 1841 [born at sea aboard the ‘Duke of Argyle’ on the voyage to Port Phillip] (Reg. 12479) – died September 1841, Darebin Creek; Louisa Harriet Constance (Cometina) Bunbury, b.5 March 1843, Williamstown – d.14 May 1923, Bad Kreuznach, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany; Cecil Hanmer Bunbury, b.12 February 1845 – d.22 December 1909, Brighton, Sussex, England; Robert Clement Sconce Bunbury, b.19 January 1847, Williamstown – d.10 December 1930, Hampshire, England; Frances Susannah Bunbury, b.1850, Melbourne – d.7 May 1915, Windsor, Berkshire, England; Herbert Napier Bunbury, b.15 February 1851, Williamstown– d.18 January 1922, Menton, Alpes-Maritimes, Provence-Alpes-Cote d’Azur, France.
- ⁶ *Argus*, 25 April 1857, p.4.
- ⁷ R.V. Billis and A.S. Kenyon, *Pastoral Pioneers of Port Phillip*, 2nd ed., Melbourne: Stockland, 1974, p. 36.
- ⁸ *Leader*, 14 June 1890; *Argus*, 18 April 1922, p.6.
- ⁹ *Port Phillip Gazette*, 25 August 1841, p.2, 10 September 1842, p.2; *Melbourne Weekly Courier*, 10 February 1844, p.3; *Argus*, 15 July 1851, p.1.
- ¹⁰ Trudie E. Fraser, ‘The Bunbury Letters from New Town’ in M. Lewis (ed.), *Brunswick Street Lost and Found: proceedings of a seminar at Fitzroy, 20 May 2012*, Fitzroy: Fitzroy History Society, Faculty of Architecture, University of Melbourne, National Trust of Australia (Victoria), 2012, 45-48, p.52.
- ¹¹ Paul de Serville, *Port Phillip Gentlemen and Good Society in Melbourne before the Gold Rushes*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980, p.29.
- ¹² Colin Campbell, *Memoirs*, unpublished manuscript, Banfield Collection, Ararat Regional Library, n.d. p.9.
- ¹³ Horatio Spencer Howe Wills Journal, 29 April 1843, in *Diary of Horatio Spencer Wills, 1843 Apr 30 – 1851 Aug 22*, State Library Victoria, Australian Manuscripts Collection, MS 9139. Copy in Ararat Regional Library.
- ¹⁴ Cara Cammilleri, ‘Bunbury, Henry William St Pierre (1812–1875)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (accessed online 21 June 2016).
- ¹⁵ W. St Pierre Bunbury and W. P. Morrell (Eds), *Early Days in Western Australia: being the letters and journal of Lieut H.W. Bunbury, 21st Fusiliers*, London: Oxford University Press, 1930.
- ¹⁶ Fraser, pp.45-48, 52.
- ¹⁷ Possibly Edward Gregsby, a 31 year-old farm labourer who arrived in Port Phillip on 1 March 1841 per the *Argyle*. (Public Record of Victoria, Melbourne, VPRS 14. Register of Assisted Immigrants from the United Kingdom).
- ¹⁸ Fraser, p.55.
- ¹⁹ Georgiana McCrae, who was a fellow passenger on the *Argyle* noted in her journal: ‘We played whist, or looked at some capital landscapes painted by Captain Bunbury with his left hand, he having parted with his right one, so he said “to feed the Turks at Navarino”’. (Hugh McCrae, ed., *Georgiana’s Journal: Melbourne a hundred years ago*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1934, p.44.) Several ink and watercolours by Bunbury are held in the National Gallery of Victoria. His right hand was severely wounded and he had his arm amputated at the elbow. Two medals were awarded to him: a Naval General Service medal and one from the Royal Humane Society sold at auction in March 2011. See https://www.dnw.co.uk/auction-archive/lot-archive/lot.php?auction_id=224&lot_id=198356. The latter medal was awarded to him for saving the life of a crew member who had fallen overboard. ‘What rendered this act more brilliant was the circumstance that Lieut. Bunbury has but one arm, having been deprived of the other while a Midshipman of H.M.A.S. Asia at the battle of Navarino’ (*The United Service Magazine and Naval and Military Magazine*, 1836, p.257).
- ²⁰ R. B. Thompson, ‘Sir Walter Scott in the Western District, 1836-1851, Thesis (PhD), Deakin University, 2013, p. 128.
- ²¹ *Australasian*, 29 November 1941, p.32.
- ²² Bunbury letter to father, 9 March 1842.
- ²³ James Dawson, *Australian Aborigines: the languages and customs of several tribes of Aborigines in the western district of Victoria, Australia*, Melbourne: G. Robertson, 1881, p.47f.
- ²⁴ Ian D. Clark, *‘We are all of one blood’: a history of the Djabwurrung Aboriginal people of Western Victoria, 1836-1901*, [Charleston, SC]: Createspace, 2016, Vol.1, p.138.
- ²⁵ Bunbury letter to father, Sir Henry Bunbury, 27 April 1841.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*

- 27 Vivienne Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson: Protector of Aborigines*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988, p.207. See also Michael F. Christie's 'Lettsom Raid' in the *Encyclopedia of Melbourne* online at www.eMelbourne.net.au.
- 28 Bunbury letter to father, 27 April 1841.
- 29 For more information see Ian D. Clark, *Scars in the Landscape: a register of massacre sites in Western Victoria, 1803-1859*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1995, pp.145-155.
- 30 W. Adeney, Diary 19 August 1842 to 17 March 1843, Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria, MS 8520A. Entry for 28 January 1843.
- 31 Burchett Letters, 1839-1875. State Library Victoria, MF. 170. Letter 23 November 1839.
- 32 Bunbury letter to father, 27 April 1841.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Ian D. Clark (ed.), *The Journal of George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector, Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate, 1839-1852*, [3rd ed.], Charleston, SC, Createspace, 2014. Single volume edition, pp. 392, 404, 523.
- 35 Bunbury letter to father, 27 April 1841.
- 36 Fraser, p.55.
- 37 Katherine K. Kirkland, 'Life in the Bush. By a Lady' in *Chambers's Miscellany of Useful and Entertaining Tracts*, London: W. and R. Chambers, 1845, Vol. 1, No. 8, p.14.
- 38 Robinson Journal, 15 July 1841, in Clark, 2014, p.394.
- 39 St. E. D'Alton in *Australasian*, 7 July 1928, p.56.
- 40 Robinson Journal, 7 October 1841, in Clark, 2014, p.436.
- 41 Bunbury letter to father, 14 August 1841.
- 42 Aboriginal Protectorate Weekly, Monthly, Quarterly and Annual Reports and Journals, 1839-49, Public Record Office of Victoria, Melbourne, VPRS 4410.
- 43 A list in Great Britain, House of Commons, *Sessional Papers*, Vol. 34. Aborigines (Australian Colonies) 1844, p. 318, notes that in August 1841 Bood Yarramin, aka Good Morning Bill, was shot by R.H. Bunbury's storekeeper; however, Robinson, learned that this man and an Aboriginal woman, had been shot by a shepherd named Tarenbe, an employee of William Kirk on his *Burrumbeep* station. Good Morning Bill Creek which starts below Kirk Hill and merges with Nekeeya Creek, is believed to be named after Bood Yarramin, however *The Australasian* (29 September 1866) claimed the 'singular name Good Morning Bill Hill [presumably referring to Kirk Hill] has been given – said to have been from the custom of a lonely shepherd located in the neighbourhood, far from any other human being, and who, to practise his manners and his mother tongue to that small extent at least, every morning on leaving his hut doffed his bonnet, and looking up to his great neighbour [Mount William], addressed the mountain with a politely familiar "Good Morning Bill" ' .
- 44 Presumably a reference to the fact that he was born in Australia.
- 45 Robinson Journal, 11 July 1841, in Clark, 2014, p.391.
- 46 Robinson Journal, 19 July 1841, in Clark, 2014, p.397f.
- 47 Robinson Journal, 14 April 1843, in Clark, 2014, pp.501-502.
- 48 Robinson Journal, 23 November 1843, in Clark, 2014, p.641.
- 49 Ian D. Clark (ed.), *The Papers of George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector, Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate*, Volume 1: *Chief Protector's Office Journal 1839-1850*, Charleston, SC: Createspace, 2014, p.96.
- 50 Robinson Journal, 23 May 1847, in Clark, 2014, p.751.
- 51 Bunbury letter to father, 14 August 1841.
- 52 Bunbury letter to father, 18 December 1841.
- 53 Robert Hamilton, Memorandum of Robert Hamilton (1896) in H. Anderson, *The Flowers of the Field: a history of Ripon Shire*, Adelaide: Hill of Content, 1985, p.217.
- 54 Fred Cahir, Sarah McMaster, Ian Clark, Rani Kerin and Wendy Wright, 'Winda Lingo Parugoneit, or Why Set the Bush on Fire? Fire and Victorian Aboriginal People on the Colonial Frontier', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol.47, 2016, pp.225-240.
- 55 Bunbury letter to father, 9 March 1842.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Bunbury letter to father, 5 July 1843.
- 58 Bunbury letter to father, 25 December 1844.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Bunbury letter to father, 1 April 1845.

⁶² Bunbury letter to father, 25 May 1845.

⁶³ Mervyn C. Hartwig, 'Aborigines and Racism: an historical perspective' in F.S. Stevens (ed.), *Racism: The Australian Experience; a study of race prejudice in Australia*, Vol. 2: *Black versus White*, Sydney: Australia and New Zealand Book Company, 1972, p.15.

⁶⁴ Thompson, p.117.

⁶⁵ Don Watson, *Caledonia Australis: Scottish highlanders on the frontier of Australia*, Sydney: Collins, 1984, p.169

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Clark, *We are all of one blood': a history of the Djabwurrung Aboriginal people of Western Victoria*.