

A Fascination with Bunyips: Bunbury, La Trobe, Wathen, and the Djab Wurrung people of Western Victoria

By Professor Ian D. Clark

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This paper examines the interest of three men — Richard Hanmer Bunbury, Charles Joseph La Trobe, and George Henry Wathen — in the existence of bunyips, as well as examining Djab Wurrung¹ mythology surrounding the creature: its association with a rock painting in the Black Range near Stawell, a story concerning some swamps near Mount William, and the ground drawing of a slain bunyip near some waterholes on *Challicum* station. It highlights the serious inquiry into the existence of bunyips by scientifically-minded officials during La Trobe's administration, and La Trobe's own participation and agency in the debate.

Origins

Aboriginal water spirit beings throughout south eastern Australia are generally called 'bunyips' — some have been described as animal-like, and others as aquatic humanoid creatures.² Generally taken as a symbol of danger in inland waters, descriptions of bunyips often contain the theme of posing a threat to children who have strayed too close to the water's edge. The word bunyip is believed to derive from *banib*, the Wemba Wemba, Wergaia, Djab Wurrung and Wadawurrung word for this creature.³ The Wemba Wemba also knew them as *tanggal*. Other Murray River language groups knew



Duncan Elphinstone Cooper, 1813/14–1904, artist
Ramenong hut, Fiery Creek, Victoria, 1853

Sepia wash, National Library of Australia, NK10163/21
 From a series depicting Chalicum station at Fiery Creek

Ramenong waterhole, associated with the Chalicum bunyip, is shown in the middle and foreground

them as *Katenpai* (Wiradjuri); *Kyenprate* (Wadi Wadi); *Tumatpan* (Jabulajabula and Yorta Yorta) and *Dongus* (Barababaraba). In the Warrnambool district they were called *Torong*, which is also the word for a canoe made of bark. In the Melbourne district they were called *Tooroodun* (Boon Wurrung) and in Gippsland *Tanutbun* (Ganai/Kurnai).⁴ Across Victoria just a handful of place names reference bunyips:

- Bukkar wurrung (middle lip), the bank between lakes Bullen Merri and Gnotuk. 'A gap in this dividing bank is said to have been made by a bunyip, which lived at one time in Lake Bullen Merri, but, on leaving it, ploughed its way over the bank into Lake Gnotuk, and thence at Gnotuk Junction to Taylor's River (Mount Emu Creek), forming a channel across the country'⁵
- Bunyip township and Bunyip River, which adjoin the *Buneeep-Buneeep* pastoral run, are derived from banib, the fabulous, large, amphibious monster⁶
- Bangyeno banip, waterholes on the Avoca River near Amphitheatre, meaning 'bunyip waterholes'⁷
- Tooradin, where the bunyip (Too-roo-dun) lives⁸
- Wurrung kilingk (lip of waterhole) is the Keeray Woorroong name of a spring near the *Mount Fyans* pastoral run where a bunyip was reputed to live.⁹

Places in Victoria, where sightings of bunyips have been reported include Tooradin, the Yarra River near Melbourne, Phillip Island, the Barwon lakes, the Barwon River at South Geelong, Lake Modewarre, a spring at Mount Fyans, Lake Bullen Merri, Cape Otway, Mount William Swamp, Mount William Creek, Black Waterhole on Charleycombe Creek at Chalicum, Lake Hindmarsh, Lake Albacutya, the Murray River, and the Avoca River at Amphitheatre.¹⁰

The *Geelong Advertiser* first broadcast the discovery of a knee joint fragment of some gigantic animal in July 1845. When the bone was shown to an 'intelligent black', he recognised it as belonging to the 'Bunyip', a creature he declared he had seen.¹¹ He willingly drew a sketch, and when the bone and picture were shown to other Aboriginal people, all confirmed that it was the Bunyip. One stated that he knew where the entire skeleton of a bunyip could be found; another that his mother was killed by a bunyip at the Barwon lakes near Geelong, and that another woman was killed near where the punt crosses the Barwon River at South Geelong. One Wadawurrung man, Mumbowran, showed several deep wounds on his chest that had been made by a bunyip's claws. The Aboriginal people explained that the reason 'why no white man has ever yet seen it, is because it is amphibious, and does not come on land except on extremely hot days, when it basks on the bank; but on the slightest noise or whisper they roll gently over into the water, scarcely creating a ripple'.¹² The *Geelong Advertiser* journalist believed that the

bunyip combined characteristics of a bird and of an alligator. Its head was emu-like, and its body and legs were alligator-like. Barrett considers these large fossil bones were 'fossil remains of Diprotodon, and of giant kangaroo'.¹³

In 1846 E. Lloyd published an early account of the bunyip, noting that a friend in the Port Phillip district often questioned Aboriginal people on the subject and that 'their answers were always given with every appearance of faith in its existence'. They described the bunyip 'as tall as a gum tree... [a] big one gum tree'.¹⁴ It could tear trees out by the roots by grasping them with its arms.

Bunbury and buniyps

Captain Richard Hanmer Bunbury, like many early European settlers in the Port Phillip District and elsewhere, was fascinated by stories of the bunyip. As two letters to his father in 1846 and 1847 indicate, he believed the bunyip's existence was incontrovertible:

... the question of the existence of an unknown animal in this country is at last set at rest; the beast exists, but what it is remains to be decided & I would give a year's salary to be able to go and look for one. The blacks call it nearly the same name all over the country some 'Bunyeep' & some 'Banep' and they all sketch the same animal, something between an Emu and an Alligator; beating Jonathan's half horse half alligator hollow. Until lately no white man had seen one & it was considered to be fabulous and the extreme fear of them manifested by the blacks was attributed to superstition; but lately in some of the newly explored parts of the country they have been repeatedly seen & some points clearly ascertained: they are amphibious and move about solely at night, frequenting all the large rivers & lagoons and the deep waterholes of many of the creeks, though apparently soon leaving settled neighbourhoods as no traces of them have ever been seen by whites in many places said by the blacks to be frequented by them.

The letter continues:

Nothing will induce the blacks to go into some water holes where they expect them to be; and on the Murray two or three blacks have been seen who have been terribly mangled by them while fishing; their habitations appear

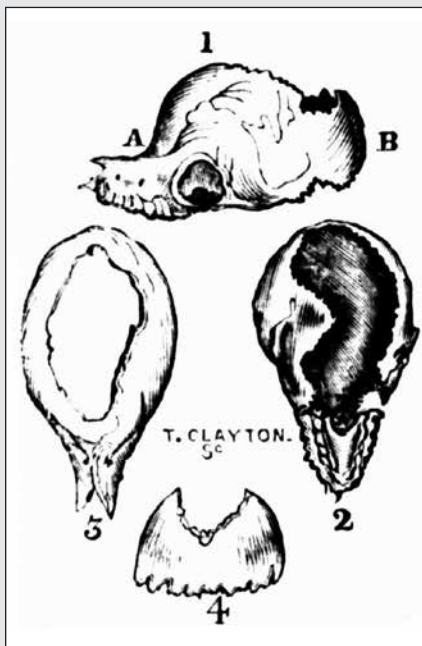
to resemble the otter, the entrance being below water. In the almost impenetrable country about Cape Otway a surveying party has lately seen numerous traces of them in the reedy swamps & heard the animals at night both in the water & out & describe them to be of considerable size & the traces to be of a four-legged animal walking on a very long narrow foot, no claw marks are to be traced.

The head is described by some as like that of a large mastiff or young calf and by others more like that of an emu with large eyes & long snout, the head altogether above a foot long, the neck is long & curves above the water & appears to be covered with feathers like the emu. A curved portion of the back has been seen once or twice & is said to have appeared serrated as if covered with large scabs. The size variously described by whites and blacks at from six to sixteen feet. I hope before long to be able to give you a more correct & minute account of this strange animal which at any rate I expect will turn out to belong to an entirely new genus.¹⁵

In his second letter, Bunbury gives a more detailed physical description obtained from reported sightings of the creature, and reproduced images published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* by William Hilton Hovell, the gentleman explorer:

I wrote a long letter to Charles [his brother] a short time ago giving him a full account of the progress of our acquaintance with the 'Bunyp' with a rough sketch of the portion of a skull which had been found. Since then we have heard nothing further on the subject, and no steps have been taken by anyone of our settlers to procure a specimen. I believe it would be no easy matter to do so, and might require patience; watching & travelling; but what would that be for such an object. Why a live Dinotherium¹⁶ would be a common place animal to a 'Bunyp' at least if we can in any way trust the description given by the blacks & other sketchings & the head have proved to be correct with the exception of the large tusks pointing downwards which it is generally drawn with & cannot I think be reconciled with a small space occupied by the temporal muscle.

I should not at all wonder if I was to



Thomas Clayton, fl. 1844–1849, engraver
The skull of a Katenpai (Bunyip), 1847

Woodcut
(*Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 February 1847 p.3)
Taken from drawings made under W H Hovell's
direction at Gwynne Brothers' station on the
Edward River

1. Side view of the upper half of the skull, length from A to B about 9 inches (23 cm);
2. Internal view of the upper half of the skull, inverted;
3. Skull seen from above;
4. Skull seen from behind

start off myself some fine day & shoot a Bunyip I fancy I should make as much money by it as by my cattle. In case my letter to Charles should be lost, I give you a very rough idea of the skull that has been found. Extreme length about 15 inches to where broken off. Extreme breadth of the cavity of skull about 5½, length of cavity 7½ in. Molars 3 on each side. No appearance of false molars, but apparently a small canine tooth about ¾ of an inch in front of molars. Molars covered by the gum & membranes & had evidently not been used in mastication, bone of skull scarcely thicker than card board; the animal must have been very young if not uterine, yet the sutures of the skull were firmly closed & scarcely visible; query marsupial? Orbit of eye remarkably large & very large in the skull.¹⁷

La Trobe and bunyips

In February 1847 the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a letter from settler and explorer William Hilton Hovell, outlining his research

into the 'apocryphal animal'.¹⁸ Hovell explained that a settler on the Murrumbidgee in 1846 named Athol T. Fletcher had been advised by the local Aboriginal people that they had killed a 'Katenpai' on the banks of a lake near the Murrumbidgee in the Balranald district. Fletcher went to the place described and found a large portion of the skull of some kind of animal. Chief Protector George Augustus Robinson mentioned the discovery in his journal: 'The bunyip found in lower Murrumbidgee. I presumed a specimen of alligator. Elephant matter'.¹⁹ Hovell's letter reproduced four sketches of the skull (left).

Fletcher brought the skull to Melbourne and loaned it to Edward Curr at *St Heliers*, near Melbourne, who loaned it to his friend, Tasmanian botanist Ronald Campbell Gunn, who showed it to James Grant, a noted surgeon and naturalist in Van Diemen's Land. Gunn discussed the bunyip in a paper published in the *Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science, Agriculture, Statistics, Etc.*, of which he was editor. Gunn had been private secretary to Sir John Franklin when Franklin was Lieutenant-Governor of Van Diemen's Land (1837-1843), and he was a friend of Charles Joseph La Trobe. Their correspondence on the matter of the bunyip is held in the State Library of New South Wales, and was edited and published by L.J. Blake in 1975.²⁰

Charles Joseph La Trobe's interest in the existence of the bunyip is shown in letters, commencing 23 January 1847, to his friend in Van Diemen's Land:

You have heard probably the constant rumours of the existence of some unknown beast in the rivers & lakes of P. Phillip — under the native name 'Bunyep' or 'Bunyip'. That there is such an [*sic*] one whether round or square, fat or lean — & that of tolerable size — I have been long convinced. At last, Lonsdale writes me word that they have found the head of one in some stream near Murrumbidgee & that it has been brought down to Melbourne. According to description it must be a long snouted animal something of this shape:



a long bill-like snout the forehead rising abruptly the eye placed very low — strong grinders, cavity for brain very large. The end of the snout is broken off but the blacks who



Peter John Clark, photographer
Bunjil's shelter, 2013

have seen it say it ought to have two long tusks projecting downward at the termination.

It appears to be a recent skull as some of the flesh was on it when found — and search is going to be made for the bones. Now what can this be? They do not give me any dimensions — but state it must be a very large animal.²¹

After Gunn had been loaned the skull by Edward Curr, La Trobe wrote: 'The Bunyip's head you will have had in your hands—what do you make of it? I am convinced that we shall get more than one strange animal before we have finished'. (8 March 1847)

La Trobe then wrote an article for the Royal Society of Tasmania, but withdrew it from publication when later opinion suggested the skull was that of an aborted animal, possibly a foal:

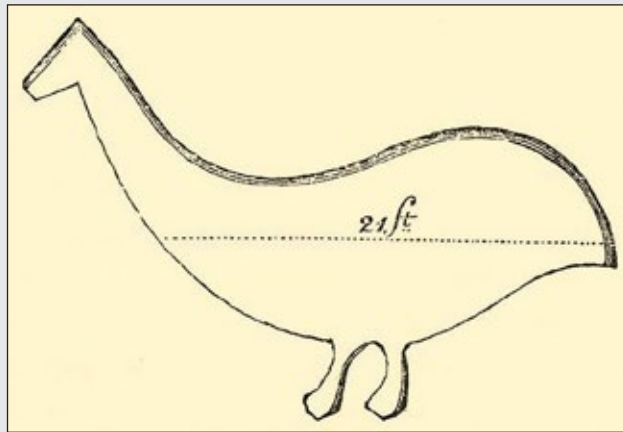
I saw the drawings of the Bunyip yesterday at Hobson's. He begins to have some strange misgivings—and really I have the reputation of the 'Tasmanian' so much at heart, that I think I should let the forthcoming number come out without 'the article'—& trust that before another emerges from the Press we may be able to tell you more. There is some jealousy about the skull itself of which neither I nor Hobson have as yet caught

a glimpse. I promise you that I will do my best endeavour to catch a whole one. It would not do to be caught describing & drawing an abortion. (26 April 1847)

During the same week, Chief Protector Robinson spoke with Dr Edmund Charles Hobson, a prominent Melbourne physician and vertebrate palaeontologist, and noted in his diary that 'La Trobe said bunyip head a foetal animal, a young horse, was clear that animal could not live in water'.²² La Trobe was relaying Dr James Grant's analysis of the skull which confirmed that it was of a young animal, possibly foetal, a large herbivorous animal, possibly a camel.²³ Gunn concluded his *Journal* paper, 'Every effort is now making to obtain an entire or living Bunyip, or ascertain whether it is to be classified amongst fabulous animals'.²⁴ Robinson, too, was unsure of the existence of the bunyip: 'must be true people say because all the natives agree in the description, so all are one; people and natives agree in description of the devil, yet none have seen him &c.'²⁵ By the end of 1848, Robinson was of the opinion that the bunyip was identical with the bittern.²⁶

In July 1847, having examined the Murrumbidgee skull which had been loaned to the Colonial Museum in Sydney, natural scientist William Sharp Macleay, reported his findings in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.²⁷ He was convinced that it was the 'skull of a *lusus naturae* [a freak of nature] on the ground of its being

George Henry Wathen,
1816-1879, artist
The Bunyip
(*The Australasian*, January
1851, facing page 302)
Breast to tail as marked
21 feet (6.4 metres)
Head to tail approximately
28 feet (8.5 metres)



absolutely identical with that of a foal', which had undergone some kind of malformation. He noted that if it should be proved to belong to a different species it would be placed between the horse and the llama, but he doubted this, as the bunyip is held to be a solitary aquatic animal, whereas the skull was that of a solipede, a mammal having a single hoof on each foot, which if full grown would have delighted in grassy dry land, and the society of its own species. William Westgarth, on a visit to London, showed a sketch of the skull to Professor Richard Owen, palaeontologist at the British Museum, who confirmed that it was a hydrocephalic skull of a foal or calf.²⁸ Given this outcome, it was not surprising that the word 'bunyip', quickly became synonymous with 'hoax' and 'humbug', as G.C. Mundy noted in 1852: 'A new and strong word was adopted into the Australian vocabulary: Bunyip became, and remains, a Sydney synonym for "imposter", "pretender", "humbug", and the like'.²⁹

Charles Joseph La Trobe can be credited with one of the earliest attempts to study and analyse bunyip sightings. He formed the view that three animals were likely candidates:

I can say little about the Bunyep! — beyond this, that I am more & more convinced that there are two large nondescript animals to be found in our waters — that of which our blacks give a description being quite distinct from that which appears to frequent the waters and lakes more to the north. A third animal of which glimpses have been seen occasionally in the waters directly communicating with the sea is I have no doubt a seal. I send you two sketches of the animal described by our blacks & these coincide in the main with those which I have seen delineated by the tribes N of Mt Macedon. No. 1 was sketched upon the sand in front of

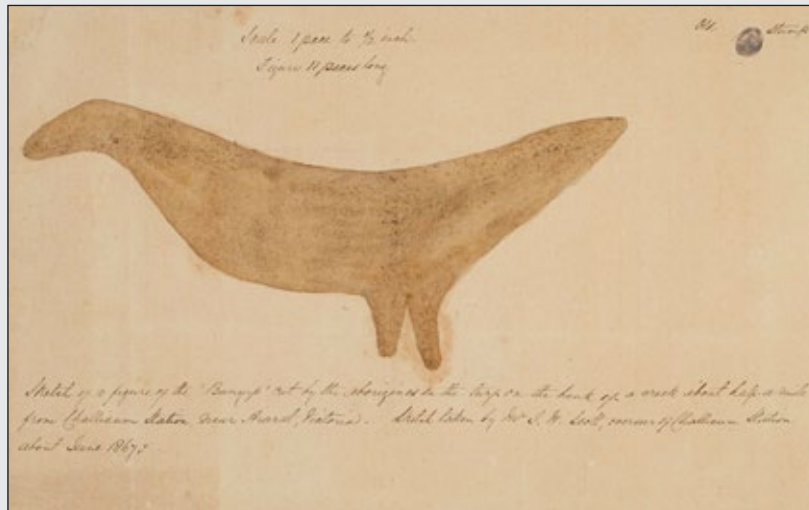
Capn Coverdale's cottage & tho' 10 or 12 ft. long was still said by the artist not to be quite as large as life. A few days after being at the Native Police Station, Dandenong, I have made some enquiries amongst the older natives — and No. 2 is the animal drawn by one of them. I send you the 'original'. The two sketches certainly are intended to portray the same animal. It is pretended that before the Europeans arrived the Yarra near Melbourne possessed many of them. We will catch him yet if he does exist.³⁰

This letter of 23 September 1847 held by the State Library of New South Wales does not contain any drawings or pictures, so unfortunately the sketches sent by La Trobe have been separated from the letter at some stage. In a subsequent letter to Gunn, La Trobe revealed his personal inclination by referring to: 'sea serpents or bunyips to other people' when he wrote: 'What a pity you and I are not idle men with plenty of loose time and spare cash. We should not have been catching sea serpents, or bunyips to other people, or even gold finding'.³¹

The Djab Wurrung, Wathen and bunyips

The Djab Wurrung Aboriginal people of the Ararat, Stawell, and Hamilton districts were in no doubt as to the existence of bunyips. Three of their stories relate to bunyips — the story of a clash between Bunjil and a bunyip; the death of one of two brothers by a bunyip at a swamp near Mount William; and the Chalicum bunyip.

In their story of the creator spirit Bunjil, as painted in a rock shelter in the Black Range near Stawell, Bunjil had been cut to pieces in a clash with a bunyip, but had been pieced together and brought back to life by some birds. The rock



James W. Scott, 1849-1904, artist
Sketch of a figure of the Challicum Bunyip, near Ararat, Victoria, c.1867

Watercolour
 R E Johns Scrapbook no.1, Museums Victoria, XM 4709.1.1
 Inscribed: 'Sketch of a figure of the Bunyip cut by the aborigines in the turf on the bank of a creek about half a mile from Challicum Station near Ararat, Victoria. Sketch taken by Mr. J. W. Scott, overseer of Challicum Station about June 1867'. 'Figure 11 paces long'. Top right 'Old Stump'.

painting, a memorial to the episode, depicts Bunjil revived.³² In 1925 Rev. John Mathew published an article in *The Australasian* in which he presented information obtained during a visit to Lake Tyers in June 1924. Unfortunately Mathew does not identify his Lake Tyers source, other than she is 'a woman from the Wimmera'. The article is interesting as it brings together Bunjil's shelter near Stawell, Bunjil as creator, a clash with a bunyip, and mother-in-law

avoidance. It detailed an origin story explaining the killing of Bunjil by Bunyip, his restoration and why the commemorative painting was made in the Black Range rock shelter. From a theological perspective it is evocative of ontological dualism represented by the clash between good and evil, with core elements such as the death of Bunjil, his return to life and eventual transcendence into the heavens as a star. The 1925 article reads as follows:

Around the name of Bunjil (literally eaglehawk), a good deal of mythology has accumulated in Victoria. Bunjil is the name of one of the phratries, or exogamous classes, the other being, Wa, the crow. But Bunjil was also an ancient hero,³³ regarded by some as the father of the first man, and finally he was translated to the sky, where he now appears as a star, either Femalhaut or Altair.³⁴ We must not expect consistency in aboriginal or any other mythology, and preliminary to what follows it should be explained that no love is lost between a man and his mother-in-law. These relatives are not allowed to speak to each other, or even to look at each other. If a son-in-law looked at his mother-in-law he would turn grey.

A woman from the Wimmera told me this interesting story about an episode in which Bunjil and Bunyip figure, and which happened in the far back time when people were in the form of birds.

Bunjil, with his wife and two sons were one day at the top of a precipitous cliff on the Grampians. He caught his family in his arms, and jumped down with them safely. He was pretending to do the same with his mother-in-law, who was also there, but he dropped her and she was severely hurt. In this condition she was abandoned. Recovering somewhat, she bound up her broken limbs, and made her way to the Little Wimmera where the other natives were camped. Then Bunyip came along and wanted to take her. She said to him that if he would leave her alone, she would send him her son-in-law instead. He consented, so she dragged the river, and made a nest at the river

side, like that of a kangaroo rat. Bunyip hid his head in this. By and by her grandchildren came and proposed to catch Bunyip. She would not let them but told them to send their father, Bunjil. When he came he wanted to spear Bunyip, but she said: "Don't spear it, catch it!" So he caught hold of Bunyip, and Bunyip caught hold of him and rent him in two. A big tree, where the river cannot be bottomed, still marks the spot.

Bunjil's body was separated into fragments, and the birds came and tried to gather them together. One little bird used a small rainbow by way of a net, but it proved to be too small. Another bird used a bigger rainbow, and gathered up the pieces. Then they were spread out on a possum rug, and they gradually drew together, until Bunjil was whole and alive again. The other birds, namely, the natives of that age, were afraid that he might jump into the river again, so they caught him, and took him to the camp. As a memorial of this episode there is at a certain place a cave with a figure of Bunjil and two dogs. A native once told Dr A.W. Howitt that there was a figure of Bunjil and his dog painted in a cave behind a large rock near Stawell (V.).³⁵

James Dawson recorded in 1881 another Bunyip story concerning Djab Wurrung country as told by Morpor, the old 'chief' of the Morpor gundidj people of Spring Creek, to his daughter and her husband, two of Dawson's primary language informants. It concerned two brothers, one of whom was very tall, who went to a swamp near Mount William to gather swans' eggs. After gathering a great many and roasting them on the bank of a lagoon, the smaller brother returned to gather more. He was caught by a bunyip who held him aloft so high that his brother could see him. He approached the bunyip, exhorting it to "Be quiet, and let me take my brother". The bunyip gnashed its teeth and gave him up, but he was dead, and his entrails had been devoured'.³⁶ The corpse was carried to their home where they watched it for two days, placed it in a tree for a month, and then burned it, with the exception of the leg and arm bones, which were given to the friends of the deceased. Elsewhere, Dawson notes that when Aboriginal peoples in southwest Victoria first saw horses they took them to be bunyips and would not venture near them.³⁷

The third Bunyip site of significance to the Djab Wurrung was beside the Black Water Hole on Charleycombe Creek, Challicum. It was a ground drawing, originally about nine metres in length, of a bunyip that had once inhabited the waterhole and had captured a tribesman and devoured him. The bunyip was afterwards speared, placed on the bank where the Djab Wurrung traced around its carcass, and thereafter visited the site periodically to re-draw the figure. In 1849, English geologist George Henry Wathen, whose family were friends with the La Trobes, was encouraged to visit Port Phillip. Wathen, a geologist, author and magazine publisher, arrived on 12 December 1849 per the barque *Hamlet*.³⁸ It is believed that a letter from Charles Joseph La Trobe, a friend of his family's, suggesting he 'try his hand in the new colony' may have been the inspiration for

his visit.³⁹ In November 1850, Wathen visited *Challicum* station and talked with Aboriginal families who lived there about their bunyip traditions. He was taken to a series of waterholes, shown where the bunyip was taken and speared, its outline marked out, and the turf within the outline afterwards removed. Wathen sketched and measured the outline.⁴⁰

During 1850-51 Wathen published out of Geelong a quarterly magazine he called *The Australasian*,⁴¹ which reprinted articles from English magazines. The first issue appeared on 20 October and a total of four issues were published over a year. Wathen returned to England in late 1854. In 1855 he published *The Golden Colony: or, Victoria in 1854, with remarks on the Geology of the Australian Gold Fields*. *The Argus* published a favourable review of the work.⁴²

Wathen recorded his visit to the Djab Wurrung district as 'Notes of a Tour in the Australian Pyrenees, in November 1850', reproduced in *The Golden Colony*:⁴³

Sunday, November 24. — At Challicum.⁴⁴ There is now an encampment of the "mi-mis" of the Aborigines at this station.⁴⁵

November 25. — With T. I visited the mi-mis of the natives and talked to the loubras about the traditions of the Bunyip, an apocryphal monster said to have existed once [upon] a time in a neighbouring water-hole. It happened, they said, "a long time ago," repeating the English words with a peculiar musical cadence. They had no chronology more exact than this... After breakfast we drove to three large water-holes, where, according to native tradition, the Bunyip was taken and speared; as it lay dead on the grass its

outline was marked out, and the turf within the outline afterwards removed. The shape of the cutting, now indistinct, is that of a bird, not a reptile. I sketched and measured it. Bunyips are supposed by the natives still to exist in the deep water-holes of the creeks.⁴⁶

Although Wathen considered this was the shape of a bird, it is equally identifiable as a seal.

Earlier, Wathen had published an article on 'The Bunyip of Challicum' in the January 1851 issue of *The Australasian*. In 1898 it was republished in the *Evening News*:

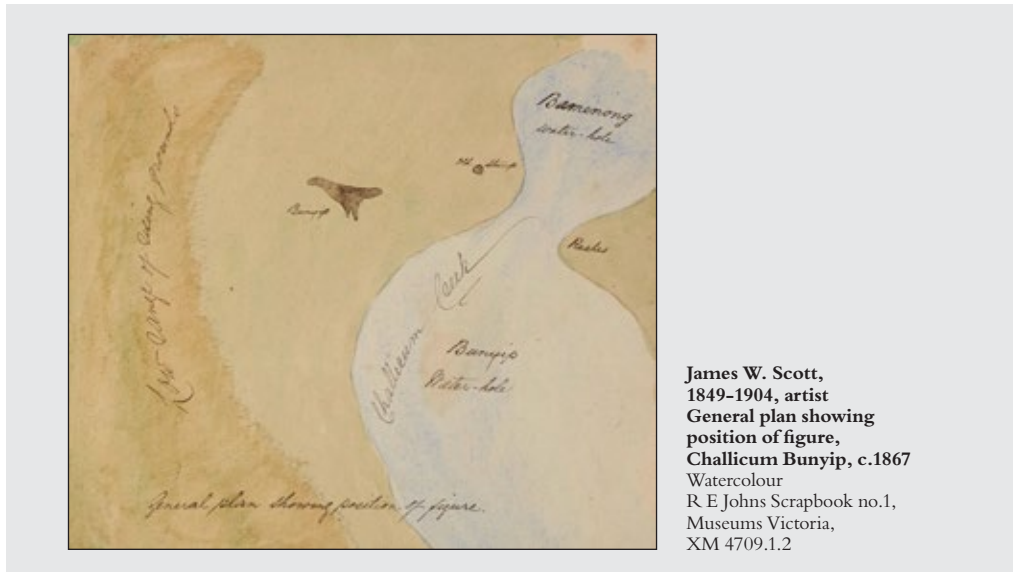
Probably no race of men have held possession of a country for ages, and yet left so few traces of their existence behind as the aborigines of Australia. Egypt has her pyramids, her temple, palaces, large as towns; her yet more wonderful tombs those subterranean labyrinths of painted chambers, rivalling the gorgeous creations of the Arabian Nights... But the Australian natives, what trace of their existence will they leave behind, when swept from the list of nations? We know of nothing besides than the pictures, rude and unintelligible, discovered by Captain Grey, in some caves in Western Australia, the 'camp ovens', where, in happier times, they roasted the kangaroo whole, and the object of the present article, the Bunyip of Challicum.

The Bunyip, it is well known, is a mysterious monster of undefined size and shape, supposed by the blacks, to inhabit the deep pools of the Australian rivers. Whether we view the report as founded upon the real existence of some unknown animal, or a pure creation of Australian fancy, a delineation of the Bunyip, by a native hand, cannot but be considered an object of interest. Such a delineation, with a legend attached to it, still exists, cut out on the turf, near the Fiery Creek, not many miles from the southern base, of the Pyrenees, about six and a half miles from the station of Messrs. Cooper and Thomson, for which they have retained the native name of Challicum.⁴⁷

The locality is not unsuited to the tradition. A vast treeless, shrubless, trapean plain, out of which the rock here and there protrudes; a little stream, stealing through the long grass on its banks, and here expanding into three large deep, waterholes;... The tradition, though very generally known to natives, is exceedingly meagre in its details. One of these water-holes was, it says, inhabited by a Bunyip, who one day got hold of and devoured a "blackfellow". The other blackfellows, on seeing this, speared the Bunyip and dragged him out of the waterhole. As he lay on the grass beside the pool, they marked an outline of his form on the turf, and afterwards removed the soil within this outline, leaving a figure of the monster in intaglio on the ground.⁴⁸ Such is the tradition; and we have preferred giving it in its native simplicity to, dressing it up with ornaments and incidents unknown to natives themselves. As to the period (when the event happened, nothing more can be learnt from the blacks than that it was 'a long time ago;' a phrase which they repeat and reiterate with that peculiar musical cadence which must be familiar to all accustomed to communicate with them. They seem to have no chronology more accurately marked than by phrases such as this. The space where the turf was removed is now partially overgrown, and the feet and extremities of the figure cannot be made out without much difficulty. It will, however; be seen from a glance at the sketch that it bears more likeness to a bird of the ostrich or emu family than to a reptile. Its dimensions are colossal. It measures about 28ft⁴⁹ from head to tail. It should be added that the natives maintain that many bunyips still exist in the large waterholes; so that we are not allowed the hypothesis of an extinct species, nor does the monster appear to have anything in common with the huge amphibious saurian of the pre-Adamite World... As to the story of the Bunyip of Challicum, even though we should consider it a mere fiction, it may still be viewed with interest as perhaps the single extant memorial of Aboriginal mythology, the only analogue in Australia (so sterile of romance) to the beautiful myths of Greece, to the gorgeous imaginings of Oriental fancy, to the fantastic creations of our own fairy-land of the north...⁵⁰

The *Geelong Advertiser* commented that Wathen's account was 'a very curious article', but found 'no reason to doubt' that the engraving was indicative of the existence of 'some huge and seemingly ferocious creature'.⁵¹

In July 1856, W.H. Wright, the Commissioner of Crown Lands based at Eversley, shared his knowledge of the Challicum ground drawing with R.E. Johns, the clerk of petty sessions at Moonambel, who had an interest



James W. Scott,
1849-1904, artist
General plan showing
position of figure,
Challicum Bunyip, c.1867
Watercolour
R E Johns Scrapbook no.1,
Museums Victoria,
XM 4709.1.2

in Aboriginal antiquities.⁵² Johns discussed the bunyip in his private papers:

I heard of it first in July 1856... from [W.H. Wright, the] Commissioner of Crown Lands for the Wimmera District, who informed me that the aborigines of the district were then in the habit of visiting the place annually and re-tracing the outlines of the figure, which is about 11 paces long and 4 paces in extreme breadth, and not unlike a rude tracing of a goose. The large water-hole near is said to be still the abode of a bunyip, and one old shepherd, who asserts that he saw it some years ago, could never afterwards be induced to leave his hut after dark.⁵³

In 1867 Johns obtained a sketch of the waterholes and the bunyip. A comparison of the general plan (above) with that of Duncan Cooper's sketch of *Ramenong hut* (see p.28) confirms that they concern the same waterholes.

In what *may be* one of the earliest known European attempts at protecting an Aboriginal cultural site in Victoria, Massola notes that 'The spot on which the drawing was cut was kept fenced off for a while; then the grass grew, and the outline became indistinct. Finally, it was decided that keeping a lot of grass fenced off served no useful purpose; so the sheep were fed on it, and their hoofs completely obliterated what was left of the drawing'.⁵⁴

Bunyip Myth and Tradition

Europeans brought their own myths of legendary monsters which they readily grafted onto Indigenous stories, especially those of

a sensationalist kind. Wathen is aware of the process of colonial mythogenesis surrounding the bunyip, and is eager to put a distance between himself and other commentators in the habit of embellishing Indigenous tradition with 'ornaments and incidents unknown to the natives themselves'. Wathen's contribution is one manifestation of the expanding bunyip story *genre*. Men of faith also concerned themselves with the existence of the bunyip. Father William M. Finn considered the Aboriginal notion of the 'Bunyip as a Satan of the Aborigines, that was once master of all he surveyed, as *bunkum*'. He believed that those who convinced themselves that they had seen it 'had mesmerized themselves with Jamaica rum'.⁵⁵ Reverend John D. Mereweather during his Anglican ministry in the Riverina district in the early 1850s was no less keen to get to the truth as to whether or not Bunyips were 'real'. For example, on the Edward River, he met an 'intelligent black fellow' named Charley and attempted to elicit information from him:

Some say it is an amphibious animal, which makes its home at the bottom of deep water-holes in the beds of rivers, and which draws down blacks, whilst bathing, to devour them; sometimes even pursuing them on the banks. Others assert that it is a beast, like the small hippopotamus, which lives among the reeds in the marshes by the side of rivers, and which causes great harm and loss to the indigenes, by sallying out at night and destroying the apparatus for catching fish: others declare that it is a gigantic, blood-thirsty otter, that eats children when it can catch them. When I asked Charley to portray me one on the dust

with the point of my stick, he drew a great bird. I suspect that this creature does not exist now, even if it has once existed. The savages, however, unanimously declare that some voracious animal exists in or about their rivers, and they have great dread of it. It may be a tradition that they have, just as we have of dragons.⁵⁶

Several months later at a Murray River station, Mereweather was told by a black fellow, that a carcass 'of that wonderful beast the bunyip' was 'lying rotting on a sand-hill nine miles off'. However, recent flooding prevented him from visiting the site. He also learned of 'a savage, voracious reptile, called the "mindei," which is said to haunt the Billibong [Billabong Creek] plains. It is, so they say, about twenty feet long, three feet in circumference, and has short legs'.⁵⁷ Several days later he noted hearing 'evidence which goes so far as to prove that the bunyip is but a large and voracious otter'.⁵⁸ On the Darling River, he was 'assured, that in these parts there is found an owl which barks like a dog; also a carnivorous kangaroo. I hear, too, tales of the mindei, or great snake with legs, which, as the blacks declare, eats the sheep; although I suspect it is a stalwart black biped that kills and eats them. The aborigines here, too, obstinately persist in their belief of the existence of the monstrous bunyip'.⁵⁹

In a recent study anthropologist Philip Clarke analysed accounts of bunyips in Victoria and finds that the bunyip appears to be an amalgam of several known creatures, with the emu being prominent.⁶⁰ An example of this is the description that it is 'a fearsome beast, as big as a bullock, with an emu's head and neck, a horse's mane and tail, and seal's flippers, which laid turtle's eggs in a platypus's nest, and ate blackfellows when it tired of a crayfish diet'.⁶¹ The emu/feather theme is found in Buckley's account and in the Boon Wurrung account of the 'tooroodun' in Western Port.⁶² It is possible that

the emu-like descriptions are trace memories of extinct giant birds or *Dromomithidae*, which the Dhauwurd Wurrung people of southwest Victoria knew as *mihurung paringmal* (literally meaning 'giant emus').⁶³ Dawson noted that these birds lived when the volcanic hills were in a state of eruption. They were described as so formidable that a kick from one of them could kill a person. 'These birds were much feared on account of their extraordinary courage, strength and speed of foot.... The last specimen of this extinct bird was seen near the site of Hamilton'.⁶⁴

Other possible candidates for accounts of bunyips include crocodiles and sea mammals such as seals and dugongs.⁶⁵ The Australian bittern, colloquially known as the 'Bunyip-bird', is another candidate for the sound that bunyips are purported to make. Gary Opit suggests there were two species of bunyip — one being short-necked, the other, long-necked.⁶⁶ He believes that Australian fur seals (*Arctocephalus pusillus doriferus*) or Australian sea lions (*Neophoca cinerea*) that had strayed inland through river systems are most likely fit for short-necked bunyips. A candidate for the long-necked bunyip is a Quaternary marsupial, *Palorchestes azael* which shared this country with Aboriginal people, before becoming extinct, some 20,000 years ago.⁶⁷ *Palorchestes* was the size of a large bull and may have been Australia's first tree-ripper. 'Its exceptionally powerful forearms, massive claws and bizarre head would have surely been enough to have inspired the legend of the Bunyip — or at least a few nightmares amongst Australia's first Aboriginal inhabitants'.⁶⁸ This view is consistent with that of the South Australian ethnologist, Thomas Worsnop, who considered bunyip stories were a relic of the time when humans and Diprotodon shared the continent.⁶⁹

The foregoing discussion of the bunyip tradition in Port Phillip and other parts of southeastern Australia can be seen as another indication of the 'deep history' we have inherited from Australia's first peoples.

Endnotes

- 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 Phillip A. Clarke 'Water Spirit Beings' in Fred Cahir, Ian D. Clark, Phillip A. Clarke (Eds.) *Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge of Southeastern Australia*, Melbourne: CSIRO Publishing, in press.
 - 3 Robert M.W. Dixon, William S. Ramson, and Mandy Thomas, *Australian Aboriginal Words in English: their origin and meaning*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia, 1992, p.109. Also see Frederick Ludowyk, 'There's a Bunyip close behind us and he's treading on my Tail ...' *Ozwords*, vol.17, no.2, Oct. 2008, pp.1-3.
 - 4 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 February 1847, p. 3. Heather Bowe, Lois Peeler, Sharon Atkinson, *Yorta Yorta Language Heritage*, Clayton: Department of Linguistics, Monash University, 1997, p.91. James Dawson, *Australian Aborigines: the languages and customs of several tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria, Australia*, Melbourne: Robertson, 1881, p. lvii. Interestingly, Dawson classifies bunyips with reptiles in his vocabulary. For a discussion of equivalent names from other regions see Robert Holden, *Bunyips: Australia's Folklore of Fear*, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2001, p.2.
 - 5 Dawson, p. lxxix.
 - 6 Dixon *et al.*
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- 7 Ian D. Clark, & Toby G. Heydon, *Dictionary of Aboriginal Placenames of Victoria*, Melbourne: Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, 2002.
- 8 Robert Brough Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria; with notes relating to the habits of the natives of other parts of Australia*, Melbourne: Victorian Government Printer, 1878, v. 1, p.436.
- 9 Dawson, p. lxxxiii.
- 10 See Clark & Heydon.
- 11 *Geelong Advertiser and Squatters' Advocate*, 2 July 1845, p.2.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Charles Barrett, *The Bunyip and Other Mythical Monsters and Legends*, Melbourne: Reed & Harris, 1946, p.9.
- 14 E. Lloyd, *A Visit to the Antipodes: with some reminiscences of a sojourn in Australia*, London: Smith, Elder, 1846, p.136.
- 15 Richard H. Bunbury letter to father, 30 December 1846 in Papers of Bunbury Family, 1824-1872, National Library of Australia, Canberra, MS 8098. Also, copy in Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria, MS 13530.
- 16 Dinotherium, an extinct late Tertiary elephant-like mammal.
- 17 Bunbury letter to father, 30 March 1847.
- 18 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 February 1847, p.3.
- 19 George Augustus Robinson's journal 18 December 1846 in Ian D. Clark (ed.) *The Journals of George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector, Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate*, 1 January 1839-30 September 1852, [3rd ed.] Charleston, SC., Createspace, 2014. Single volume edition, p.743.
- 20 L.J. Blake (ed.) *Letters of Charles Joseph La Trobe*, Melbourne: Government of Victoria, 1975.
- 21 La Trobe letter to Ronald Campbell Gunn, 23 January 1847, in Blake, pp.20-21. (The letters to Gunn are held in the State Library of New South Wales: Mitchell Library A249, A246, and Dixson Library DL DOC.)
- 22 Robinson 29 April 1847 in Clark, p.748.
- 23 Ronald C. Gunn 'On the "Bunyip" of Australia Felix', *Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science, Agriculture, Statistics, Etc.* vol. 3, 1949, pp. 147-9. The *Sydney Morning Herald* 9 February 1847 claimed it was the skull of a severely deformed foal.
- 24 Ibid, p.149.
- 25 Robinson 24 May 1847, in Clark, p.752.
- 26 Robinson 21 November 1848, in Clark, p.788.
- 27 W.S. Macleay, 'On the Skull Now Exhibited at the Colonial Museum of Sydney, as That of "The Bunyip"', letter to the Editors, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 July 1847, p.3.
- 28 William Westgarth, *Australia Felix...*, Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1848, p.391; Barrett, p.12; W. Howitt, *A Boy's Adventures in the Wilds of Australia; or, Herbert's note-book*, London: Arthur Hall, Virtue and Co., 1854, p.76.
- 29 Godfrey C. Mundy, *Our Antipodes; or, residence and rambles in the Australasian colonies, with a glimpse of the gold fields*, London: Richard Bentley, 1852, v. 2, p.19.
- 30 La Trobe to Ronald Campbell Gunn, 23 September 1847, in Blake, p.24.
- 31 Ibid, 2 March 1849, in Blake, p.35.
- 32 John Mathew 'Aboriginal Sketch — Gleanings in Aboriginal Magic', *Australasian*, 7 March 1925, p.66.
- 33 The newspaper article has the words 'ancient here', this is possibly a miss-publication of 'ancient hero'.
- 34 Mathew means *Fomalhaut*, the brightest star in the constellation *Piscis Austrinus*. *Altair* is the brightest star in the constellation *Aquila*.
- 35 Mathew. *Australasian*, 7 March 1925, p.66.
- 36 Dawson, p.108.
- 37 Ibid, p.99.
- 38 *Argus*, 13 December 1849.
- 39 Alan Dilnot, 'George Henry Wathen, 1817-1879'. *Margin 3*, Monash University, Clayton, 1979, p.8.
- 40 George H. Wathen, *The Golden Colony: or, Victoria in 1854, with remarks on the geology of the Australian gold fields*, London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855, pp.123-124.
- 41 Its full title was *The Australasian: a quarterly reprint of articles selected from periodicals of the United Kingdom; with original contributions chiefly on subjects of colonial interest*.
- 42 *Argus*, 23 July 1855.
- 43 Wathen, p.131. Also see G.H. Wathen, 'The Bunyip of Challicum', *The Australasian: a quarterly*, January, 1851, pp.302-304 (reproduced in the *Evening News*, Sydney, 10 September 1898, p.3.)
- 44 In 1850 *Challicum* station belonged to the Thomson brothers (Harry and George). The station had been subdivided in April 1848, with *Warrapinjoe* going to their former partner Duncan Elphinstone Cooper.
- 45 Wathen 1855, p.122.
- 46 Ibid, p.123.
- 47 Enoch R. Scott disputes this, claiming Challicum is a corruption of Charley Combe, the place Thomson came from in England. See Enoch R. Scott, *Bogamildi and Fifty Years in the North-West of New South Wales*, privately published, 1977.
- 48 The technique of creating an image by cutting, carving or engraving into a flat surface.
- 49 The *Evening News* reprint erroneously states 12 ft. The figure is corrected to that of 1851.
- 50 *Evening News*, 10 September 1898, p.3.
- 51 *Geelong Advertiser*, 1 February 1851. The Challicum bunyip is discussed in the following works: Reynell E. John's notebooks, R.E. Johns Papers, 1850-1910, MS 10075. State Library Victoria; Enoch R. Scott in *Sydney Mail*, 8 August 1934; Aldo Massola, 'The Challicum Bun-Yip', *The Victorian Naturalist*, vol. 74, October 1957, pp.76-83; Aldo Massola,

- Journey to Aboriginal Victoria*, Adelaide: Rigby, 1969; Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: the antiquarian imagination in Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; Thomas Worsnop, *The Prehistoric Arts, Manufactures, Works, Weapons, etc., of the Aborigines of Australia*. Adelaide: Government Printer, 1897.
- 52 Worsnop, p.168.
- 53 Reynell E. Johns, 'The Bunyip and the Mindai', in R.E. Johns Papers, 7 September 1867, p.4. In Holden, p.176.
- 54 Massola, 'The Challicum Bun-Yip', p.83.
- 55 William M. Finn, *Glimpses of North-Eastern Victoria and Albury*, New South Wales, Melbourne: Catholic Bookselling and Printing Depot, 1870, p.12.
- 56 John D. Mereweather, *Diary of a Working Clergyman in Australia and Tasmania: kept during the years 1850-1853*, London: Hatchard, 1859, p.93f.
- 57 Ibid, p.182.
- 58 Ibid, pp.187f.
- 59 Ibid, p.197.
- 60 Clarke in press; and see William Blandowski, 'Personal Observations made in an excursion towards the central parts of Victoria, including Mount Macedon, McIvor and Black Ranges', *Transactions of the Philosophical Society of Victoria*, 1855, vol.1, p.73.
- 61 James Norman, 'Aboriginal Legends and the Bunyip', *Advertiser*, Adelaide, 24 February 1951, p.6. Also see Anonymous 'Bunyip is a Fable', *Daily News*, Perth, 6 February 1947, p.5.
- 62 John Morgan, *The Life and Adventures of William Buckley: thirty-two years a wanderer amongst the Aborigines of the unexplored country round Port Phillip*, Hobart: Archibald MacDougall, 1852, p.48; Smyth, v.1, p.436.
- 63 Dawson, p.92. 'meecheerung parrinmall' = 'big emu'. Although generally perceived to be a Djab Wurrung name, presumably on the basis of the reference to the last bird in western Victoria being seen at Hamilton, which is in Djab Wurrung country, the words belong to the Kurnkopanoote dialect of Dhauwurd Wurrung language, which is south of Djab Wurrung: 'meheaaruung' (large) and 'kapping' or 'barringmall' is emu. The Djab Wurrung word for large is 'martuuk' and 'kowwirr' is emu.
- 64 Dawson, p.92.
- 65 See Peter Macpherson, *The Religion of the Aborigines of Australia as Preserved in their Legends and Ceremonies: a lecture*. Singleton: Argus Printing Works, 1883.
- 66 Gary Opit, 'The Bunyip', in Paul Cropper (ed.) *Myths & Monsters, 2001 conference papers*, Sydney, 20 October 2001, p.45f.
- 67 George M. Eberhart, *Mysterious Creatures: a guide to cryptozoology*, Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2012, p.76.
- 68 T.F. Flannery and M. Archer 'Palorchestes Large and Small Palorchestids, in P.V. Rich, G. F. van Tets, & F. Knight (eds), *Kadimakara: extinct vertebrates of Australia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, p.236.
- 69 Worsnop, p.169.