

The Black Resistance

An introduction to the history of
the Aborigines' struggle
against British Colonialism

Fergus Robinson and Barry York

Widescope

and his son — in addition to twice the rate of pay he was originally offered. The earthly powers (British colonialism) agreed. Robinson was granted in all, 1 075 hectares of land; lump sums totally 8 000 pounds and he was made Chief Protector of the Port Phillip Aborigines in 1838.

As for the Flinders Island concentration camp, it is sufficient to point out that the first officer-in-charge, Sergeant Wight, was characteristic of commandants who followed. On the pretext that a rebellion had broken out Wight imprisoned fifteen male Tasmanians on a rock in the ocean for five days — without food, water or wood — so that the 'guards' could rape the women without interference.

Despite every degradation they suffered, the Tasmanians were never cowed. When Robinson was commandant of the island he decided to take a number of Aborigines including the famous Truganini, to Port Phillip.

For Truganini (one of the captive Tasmanians) her sufferings at Flinders Island were only the culmination of a life of degradation at the hands of the colonial aggressor. She was born the daughter of Mangana the respected elder of Bruny Island. Her uncle was shot by a colonist, her mother stabbed to death, her sister abducted and enslaved and her 'fiance', Paraweena mutilated and drowned.

In Victoria the group split away and made a series of attacks on the settlement. Following their capture two were hung. Truganini was shipped back to Tasmania. After she died in 1876 and as a final insult to her race, her body was disinterred and her bones put on public display in the Tasmanian Museum.

Had not Robinson appeared, West, author of *The History of Tasmania* commented, 'the last savage ... would have perished with his weapon in his hand.'¹⁰

The Tasmanian Aborigines were never completely exterminated (they have direct descendants in Tasmania today) originally numbering no more than 5 000, their crowning glory is that they held the British advance in Tasmania for three decades setting an example of heroic struggle against foreign control.

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4 Victoria

British colonial aggression and expansion into the Port Phillip district became pronounced by the mid-1830s. Before 1851, Victoria was not an independent colony, but merely that section of New South Wales south of the Murray and east of what is now the South Australian border. It was administered by a police superintendent under the authority of the Governor of New South Wales.

The history of the first years of settlement was a bloody one in which the British colonial invasion encountered fierce resistance from the Aborigines. However, these encounters have been largely obscured. Instead emphasis has been placed on John Batman and his 'treaty' of 1835; on the squating aristocracy, especially the Hentys; and on the political elite of the period, headed by Lonsdale and then LaTrobe. A magnificent resistance movement has been 'neglected' and the British colonisation glorified — presented to schoolchildren as a progressive untroubled march of civilisation and progress. In fact, British colonisation did nothing but harm to the Victorian Aborigines. What is more, the Aborigines did all in their power to resist and hinder it: in the late 1830s and early 1840s the Port Phillip Aborigines waged a fierce war against the encroachments of the colonists.

The invasion of the Port Phillip tribal regions took the form of a two pronged attack, coming from New South Wales to the north, (roughly following the route of the present day Hume Highway), and from Tasmania (Van Diemen's Land) to the south. The latter was spearheaded in 1835 by John Batman, whose treaty with two or three of the Aboriginal tribes around Melbourne was a grotesque piece of trickery, aimed at defrauding the people of their land and winning Government endorsement for a private venture. The Aborigines had no concept of land as personal private property, something that could be bought and sold; the purpose of the treaty was merely to put pressure on the Govern-

ment to back a land seizure with armed force when the Aborigines realised what was the aim of the tactic. Behind the talk and the niceties of the British law was the intention of driving them out of the district if necessary. However, it was not until 1836 that the speculative value of Port Phillip was fully appreciated. Major Mitchell, the Surveyor General for the Colonies, returned to Sydney from his explorations in Victoria to tell of new and rich land to the south, of unprecedented suitability for sheep. He wrote of beautifully grassed plains in the Loddon River area, 'different from anything I had ever before witnessed .. a land so inviting and still without inhabitants'. But there were inhabitants, and they challenged Mitchell's explorations:

The hostile disposition of the natives ... not only deterred us from crossing the Karaula, but seemed to require my particular attention homeward.¹

'Mitchell's line' stretched from the Albury area on the Murray roughly as a diagonal across Port Phillip, to Portland on the south-west coast. It was to be the line of aggression, the thrust of squatting occupation.

Between 1836 and 1839 British colonialists expanded their land seizing so as to occupy all of central Port Phillip, and by 1839 mobs of sheep could be seen every few miles along Mitchell's Line. Pastoral expansion had entered largely from the north, but it had also come from Melbourne and Geelong, and from Tasmania. In the first half of 1836, for example, forty-eight crossings of Bass Strait were made, bringing some 20 000 head of sheep, most of which were driven westward. By 1840 the invaders numbered 10 291 and had brought with them a total of 782 283 sheep. Only the tribal regions of Gippsland in the south-east and the Wimmera in the north-west were still unpenetrated.

Elsewhere the encounter gave rise to fierce resistance on the part of the Aborigines and in many cases the expansion of pastoral frontiers was delayed for several years. Scarcely a station was exempt from the swift raids that marked Aboriginal campaigns; some stations were attacked repeatedly and flock after flock driven off or killed. The settlers' response was murderous, and as early as 1836 some were contemplating a war of extermination against the Aborigines. Colonial newspapers endorsed these attitudes, encouraging 'punitive expeditions', while Lonsdale set up a Native Police Force in 1837 to strengthen the invaders forces.²

The Aboriginal uprising cannot be passed off as a series of skirmishes caused by 'misunderstandings'. It comprised military campaigns aimed to force the colonists to retreat, and to win back

the hunting grounds lost to station settlement. Consequently Aboriginal strategy concentrated on the destruction of the flocks and supplies of the settlers; such destruction was not 'wanton' but a sophisticated form of warfare developed for a particular form of war. The Melbourne *Age* asserted that 'in this country they the Aborigines pass away without struggle. They simply vanish .. they are weak and helpless ...'³ In fact, nothing could be further from the truth; they contested every inch of their hunting grounds. A squatter on the Campaspe River near Heathcote, J. Patterson, recorded that —

The Aborigines have invariably shown themselves hostile to the settlement of new country ...⁴

Wherever the colonisers sought to build their empire, the opposition of the original occupants of the land greeted them. William Clark took 73 000 hectares in the Pyrenees, near modern Ararat, but 'the natives .. attacked the shepherds, so that they refused to take out their flocks alone.'⁵

The Aboriginal offensive began in the north-east of the new district, where the Murray and Owens River tribes embarked on what has been described as a 'seven year reign of terror'. They fought a guerrilla war shaped by the inferiority of their numbers and fire power, and characterised by constant mobility and surprise attack, usually directed at key manpower and stores as well as stock.

In 1838 the Aborigines scored a victory that was to hold back the invaders for a number of years. The Faithfull brothers were large landowners in the Goulbourn district of New South Wales. In February 1838 they decided to take more land for their flocks to the south and sent a party to the Broken River district in north-eastern Victoria. This party camped near the present site of Benalla, but

unfortunately, within a few days of their arrival ... they were attacked by the Aborigines, many ... men murdered, the stock scattered ... and about 200 pounds worth of property ... taken away.⁶

This incident, on 11 April 1838, cost the Faithfulls ten and possibly fourteen men killed, as well as the loss of countless sheep and supplies; the battle signalled the colonial invaders' contact with the 'fiercest and most intractable' Aborigines yet encountered.⁷ Faced with opposition on this scale the Faithfulls abandoned plans to explore further south and withdrew to the Owens River. William tried to establish a station at Bontharambo, but owing to uneasy conflict with militant tribes-people he withdrew again, this time to near the present site of Wangaratta, where he established a homestead in July 1838.⁸

The country was left to us for some years as a consequence of the hostility of the blacks [i.e. his neighbours, other settlers, were driven away by aboriginal opposition] which became so unbearable that I could not keep shepherds, although well armed, without employing a horseman ... to patrol the woods lest the natives cut them off ... My cattle were destroyed in numbers within the short distance of only six miles from my hut ... Thus I and my men were kept in a perpetual state of alarm. We dared not move to supply our huts with wood or water without a gun, and many of my men absconded from my service, throwing away their firelocks, and in some cases destroying the locks and making them wholly useless from sheer terror of the blacks.⁹

Another settler in the same district, George Mackay, arrived on the same day as the attack on Faithfull's party at Broken River. He relates that the atmosphere of frontier war was such that

'A panic seized the servants and they deserted their employers. Bowman, Faithfull and White abandoned their cattle on the runs, and I was left alone with three assigned servants, my freemen having absconded ... I was thus compelled to leave the Owens.'¹⁰

Mackay returned to the Owens Valley six months later, to find the Aborigines no less determined to defend their land than before. This time, indeed, they had adapted their mode of warfare to include use of the colonisers' firearms, thus strengthening their powers of resistance and displaying a capacity for innovation and learning that the colonialist invaders had often denied they possessed.

The blacks were not numerous, but very hostile. They murdered a number of whitemen and destroyed a great many cattle and horses. In May 1840 21 of them *all armed with guns* [our emphasis] besides their native weapons, attacked my station in my absence. They murdered one of my servants and burned my hut and stores, and all my wheat ... Four horses ... were killed, and only seven head of cattle, out of nearly 3 000, were left alive ... I have lost my capital ... my health ... fifteen years of the best period of my life. I have undergone many hardships, exposed myself to many dangers, and am now a poorer man than I was when I became a squatter.¹¹

Aboriginal raids continued, and the uprising intensified to a point where the overland route from New South Wales to the south was endangered. Such was the alarm that the British House of Commons was forced to debate a proposal for a special detachment of troops to be sent to the Port Phillip District to protect the invaders against the Aborigines.¹²

George Faithfull claims at length to have defeated the Owens warriors in a great battle which may have occurred as part of a systematic Aboriginal ambush strategy. The battle cost them many black lives, and it showed clearly that their determination to defend their land was militant and heroic:

Riding with two of my stockmen one day ... we were all at once met by some hundreds of painted warriors ... Our horses bounded and neighed with fear ... Our first impulse was to retreat, but we found the narrow way blocked up with natives ... and we were at once saluted with a shower of spears ... This was the signal for a general onset. The natives rushed on us like furies ... I ordered my men to take deliberate aim ... Unfortunately, the first shot ... did not take effect;

in a moment we were surrounded on all sides by the savages coming boldly up to us ... I fired my double barrel right and left, and two of the most forward fell ... I had time to reload, and *the war* [our emphasis] thus began continued from about 10 o'clock in the morning until four in the afternoon ... It was remarkable that the children, and many of the women likewise, had so little fear that they boldly ran forward, even under our horses' legs, picked up the spears and carried them back to the warrior men.¹³

In central Port Phillip the situation developed along similar lines. Parker, the Government appointed missionary to the Loddon River area, reported that:

When I took charge of the first District of country assigned to my care I found everything in a state of the greatest confusion. Aboriginal outrages, involving extensive loss of property, and in some instances of life, were of frequent occurrence.¹⁴

He provided a list of settlers killed by Aborigines in this district since it was first settled:

1838, May or June: shepherd on W. Boughman's property
1839, 22 May: a shepherd and hutkeeper of Mr C. Hutton;
1840, June: a shepherd of Messrs Jennings and Flayne;
1840, 21 November: a hutkeeper of Mr Willis, near Mt William;
1841, 19 March: a hutkeeper of Mr Oliphants;
1841, May: a shepherd of Mr Bennetts;
1842, March: Mr A. M. Allen, killed near the Loddon.¹⁵

In the same report Parker told of how some 'of the most influential men among the Aboriginal tribes frequenting Melbourne declared to me their intention of retiring to the mountain and forest ranges and killing every white man they could find unprotected.'

To the west of Melbourne, the invaders were constantly attacked, particularly around what is now the Colac and Werribee districts, where the Aborigines had a reputation for outstanding abilities at close range concealment. On the Moorabool River, twenty kilometres from Geelong, around November 1837,

the natives drove three men (two shepherds and a hut-keeper) from their hut, notwithstanding the men having shot two of them. They robbed and burned the hut to the ground ...¹⁶

T. Learmonth, the famous pastoralist, complained at much the same time that:

as the Aborigines were committing depredations within fifteen miles of Geelong ... settlers were afraid to penetrate into the interior in order to take up runs.¹⁷

Further west, around where Wannon, Hamilton and Coleraine now stand, pastoral expansion was very slow. The thick bush in the area provided good cover for the Aborigines who were able to hold back the pastoral frontiers with ferocious and regular attacks. Settlement remained clustered around Portland Town until as late as 1840.

In August 1842 the *Portland Mercury* asserted that the country 'might as well be in a state of civil war'.¹⁸ Complaints from settlers poured into Sydney exhorting Governor Gipps to take drastic action. They told of the terror that gripped the overland route to Adelaide and of some tribes in the west which had adapted to the superior technology of their enemy by seizing rifles and ammunition and making a devastating use of both. In one two-month period alone Port Fairy suffered casualties to the extent of twelve men either killed or wounded, and approximately 3500 sheep driven off. A list of the Aboriginal victories is as follows:

- (i) Man killed, 100 sheep taken, and hut robbed of everything it contained, including a double-barrelled shotgun with ammunition;
- (ii) Three hundred sheep and 102 tonnes of potatoes taken;
- (iii) Five horses taken and seven head of cattle killed; fifty-six calves stolen and thirty-three driven off; two men wounded; the station has been attacked four times;
- (iv) Six hundred sheep taken, of which 130 were recovered; hut robbed and two double-barrelled shotguns taken; ten cows and forty calves killed; hut attacked several times, and man severely wounded;
- (v) Three flocks attacked simultaneously, one of which was taken away, and shepherd desperately wounded. Most of latter flock recovered; one man taken, but recovered;
- (vi) 200 sheep taken and man speared; shepherds fired at; two horses taken, station attacked and flock of sheep carried off, and shepherd desperately wounded;
- (vii) Two horses killed; hut robbed and men driven off station;
- (viii) Shepherd killed — found with spear through his heart;
- (ix) One horse taken; thirty sheep; fifty sheep; 250 sheep and man wounded; fifty sheep; 260 sheep, and man killed; 300 sheep; 700 sheep taken, but mostly recovered; 180 sheep, station attacked and robbed, and hutkeeper severely wounded; a very valuable bull killed and a number of calves; six cows, three bullocks, twenty calves and one man killed, and cattle driven off; 200 ewes and 150 lambs; 450 ewes and lambs.¹⁹

At Port Fairy the settlers were so afraid that 'they were compelled to take the law into their own hands'.²⁰ Thus in invader Bell's words, it was 'scarcely to be wondered at' that the ferocity of Aboriginal resistance to colonisation provoked a vicious and bloody response.²¹ Mass shootings, poisoning of tribes (often with spiked flour and other supplies) and a general effort to massacre the entire Aboriginal population, became the ways the settlers used to overcome opposition to their expansion. That they were reduced to such desperate and foul means is a standing testimony to the success of the Aboriginal struggle. The Commissioner of Crown Lands at Portland Bay summed up the crisis in January 1842:

Murders of shepherds and hutkeepers throughout the district, combined with a reckless destruction of property, particularly on sheep farmers. In many instances flocks have been driven away and destroyed; in other instances, from one to two hundred ... barely a settler in the district has not lost property to a considerable amount.²²

Warfare between the invaders and Aborigines seems to have reached a peak of intensity in 1842. According to A. P. Elkin:

Between 1842 and 1844 ... there seemed to be an uprising of Aborigines from Port Phillip on the south to Wide Bay in south-eastern Queensland. Incidents occurred with such frequency that observers thought they must have been planned.²³

There are reports of Aboriginal 'aggression' from Colac, Kelso, Indented Head, Casterton-Portland Bay, Bunninyong and the Werribee River in the west; the Tambo, Broken and Macarthur Rivers in the north-east; and the Campaspe, Glenelg, Loddon and Wimmera Rivers in the north-west. Charles Wedge, a settler near Portland reports that they had had but little trouble with the Aborigines up until 1841-42.

But now they began to attack our shepherds, whom they drove from their flocks, which they took into the mountains known as the Victoria Range, where they disposed of many hundreds ... they also killed a valuable horse and cow ... and drove away the whole of my milking cattle and working bullocks, some of which returned with spears in them; and these depredations did not cease until many lives were sacrificed, and ... many thousands of sheep destroyed.²⁴

Individually these 'aggressions' may appear to have been mere skirmishes, but overall the resistance had the character of a defensive, and sometimes guerrilla war. Contemporaries spoke of 'the present state of open war between the races'²⁵, and C. Hall, a squatter in the Clunes district, commented:

The diplomats of their tribes ... may have pleaded justifications [for 'aggressions'] — that their kangaroos and emus were driven away by the flocks and herds of the settlers - *for reprisals upon an invading enemy* [our emphasis], stimulating a sort of guerrilla warfare ...²⁶

During 1842 especially, Aboriginal resistance reached such dimensions that there was widespread fear and discontent among the settlers and shepherds. Curr relates an experience with some of his men, who were so afraid of the Aborigines that they were threatening rebellion.²⁷ John Hepburn, a pioneer squatter, was crossing the Ovens River, when his party broke an axle on their dray.

Here a number of natives made their appearance, and ... I was much surprised to see the alarm it caused among the men; ... at one time I was left to fix the axle by myself.²⁸

An 'Emigrant Mechanic' wrote that: all men at outstations ought to be armed; for the consciousness of power ... keeps his mind clear of that bitter enmity to the blacks which otherwise takes possession of it, when 'the lives in hourly fear of his life from them'.²⁹

The settlers fear of the Aborigines was quite widespread. John Hepburn reports that his men were 'paralysed at the sight of them', and after one shepherd had been speared to death, another wounded, and a third forced to flee in terror for his life:

all the men got so alarmed that I was compelled to threaten to shoot the first man who flinched from the position given him.³⁰

Alfred Thomson, another settler in the Ovens district, reported that the effect of Aboriginal attacks on settlers:

was great. His men's fears magnified the danger to such an extent, that they lived in a continual state of anxiety, apprehension and alarm. The huts were loop-holed to enfilade each other. They neither dined nor slept without their arms being within reach; the barking of a dog was a signal of danger which sent every man to his post; we had to place two shepherds with every flock, and when the hut-keeper went to the creek for water, a man was posted on the bank with a double-barrelled gun to guard him from the waddy of the ubiquitous Aboriginal.³¹

In places the Aborigines were even successful in *pushing back* the frontiers of settlement — forcing the invaders to retreat. Edward Bell, a settler in the Wimmera, reported that his servants were 'continually intimidated' by the Aborigines, who drove his cattle into a swamp and speared them. He recollected a 'cow being brought into the stockyard all stuck over with spears like a porcupine'. Ultimately he was compelled to withdraw from his station on the Glenelg River.³² One Mr Ricketts took up Clunzie station also on the Glenelg in the 1830s. It was not, however until 1841-42 that Aboriginal opposition to his advance developed into open warfare:

Clashes were a frequent occurrence. Shepherds then constantly murdered, and their sheep driven off sometimes 50 or 60 miles ... Mr Ricketts lost so severely by their frequent incursions that he became insolvent in 1844 ...³³

Another settler, Wilson, attempted to move into the Wimmera in 1845, but 'being afraid of the natives' retreated south to Horsham.³⁴ The Aborigines often showed considerable skill and tactical ability in fighting the colonists. David Fisher, a squatter superintendent, relates an incident near the Werribee River.

The men were on their way with a pack-bullock laden with provisions for Werribee Station, and were met by a tribe of Aborigines near the Murradock Hill. The men were both armed with fowling pieces, which caused the wary tribe to entrap them by stratagem, thus: by persuading one that he could shoot an emu, they got him to accompany a portion of their party to the one side of the hill, whilst, under the pretence of having shot a kangaroo, they prevailed upon the other to go in a contrary direction. Having thus managed to separate the men, the latter became an easy prey to these heartless savages, who also killed the bullocks and made themselves masters of a plentiful supply of provisions ...³⁵

The uprising was thus complete; stretching from one end of Mitchell's 'line of aggression' to the other, it was adaptive and uncompromising. Many squatters had been driven back, many would-be squatters deterred, and the thrust from New South Wales and Tasmania retarded on a number of fronts. As settlement spread into the Wimmera and Gippsland in the late 1840s the uprising spread with it. Resistance was widespread and determined.

The aggression [sic] of the Aborigines along the whole border of civilisation grew worse and worse daily; they involved generally the loss of life as well as the loss of property ... No such state ... had ever happened before since the settlement of this colony. There had been often enough local and transitory outbreaks of the retaliatory disposition of the blacks; BUT THERE WAS NEVER BEFORE AN ENTIRE LINE OF ACTIVE HOSTILITY CIRCUMSCRIBING THE TERRITORY ALONG ITS ENTIRE BOUNDARY.³⁶

However, it was rapidly drawing to an end. By 1846 the immigrant population in Port Phillip numbered 42 296, and there was more than four million head of sheep scattered across what had once been a multitude of traditional hunting grounds. On the other hand, by 1845 the Aborigines had suffered a devastating decimation of their numbers — a decline of more than fifty per cent — as a result of the British colonial aggression.

The Aborigines had defended their traditional way of life against overwhelming odds in terms of manpower and weaponry. No honest account of the Aboriginal response to the British seizure of their land can claim that they simply acquiesced. On the contrary, there was no surrender and no peace treaties; the Aborigines fought on, and although their warriors became fewer and fewer, history has no record of their submission.

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- 33 Bride, *Letters from Pioneers*, pp. 177-178
- 34 Bride, *Letters from Pioneers*, p. 309
- 35 Bride, *Letters from Pioneers*, p. 39
- 36 *Emigrant Mechanic*, p. 212

5 Queensland

... no tribes will allow of the peaceable occupation of their country but ... will endeavour to check the progress of the white men by spearing their sheep and murdering their shepherds ... History tells of no people or tribe, however small or weak, submitting tamely to the insolent intrusion of strangers, nor is the Savage of Australia, however despicable some may deem him, so utterly devoid of courage as to yield without a struggle that country which he claims as his own, or which he is used to obtain his food and to which he is undoubtedly attached.

W. H. Wiseman, 28 August 1855.

In 1609, a Dutch vessel in search of gold and slaves landed on the northern side of Cape York. The purpose of this visit was to commit aggression, to plunder the region's wealth and to use the people as slaves. These aggressors were immediately repulsed by the Australian Aborigines in an awesome show of strength. It has been said that this was the first recorded place at which the Aborigine struck a blow in defence of his country.¹

While it may have been the first recorded instance of resistance it was definitely not the first or the last. It is known that aggressors came from Spain, Malaya, Holland, China, and Portugal, some, if not all, after gold. Without exception the aboriginal people had repulsed them all. These were the responses of genuine patriots, the defenders of the people and their country. After the invasion of 1788 the Aboriginal people began a bitter, protracted, and (considering the vastly disproportionate balance of forces) a highly effective struggle *for the defence* of their country.

By 1799 the first tentative colonialist feelers were extended to Queensland. On 16 July 1799 Flinders came to Moreton Bay. He was attacked and driven off at a place called Skirmish Point. In 1824 the first settlement was established at Moreton Bay and within three months it was abandoned because of the hostility of the Aborigines. A month before its abandonment the aggressors wrote that the Aborigines 'showed open hostility and attacked soldiers and convicts at every opportunity'.²

One of the earliest recorded clashes occurred in 1824 when prisoners wood-chopping at Humpybong (now Redcliffe) had an