

TRUTH TELLING: RECORDS RELEVANT TO THE BUNURONG* 1839-1840

Evidence from the written records of colonial observers (Mornington Peninsula)

Source 1: 'I Succeeded Once' The Aboriginal Protectorate on the Mornington Peninsula, 1839-1840 by Marie Hansen Fels, 2011

INJUSTICE, DISPOSSESSION, DISPOSSESSION WITHOUT COMPENSATION

William Thomas, Assistant Protectorate, expresses his concern about the injustice of government policy: 'to infringe on which [their land] without remuneration is an injustice not consonant to humanity and repugnant to Christian feelings.... and what has the poor creatures for their country— not a *sou* ... can heavenly father look down with any degree of pleasure on a country located on such terms'. Page 15

LOSS OF LIVELIHOOD, LOSS OF COUNTRY, FORCED RELOCATION AND RESULTANT DANGER, STARVATION, SLAVERY, NO LEGAL RIGHTS

William Thomas' second petition to Gipps requests a whole raft of changes to what he considered to be unjust government policy:

- let them have firearms (for hunting food presumably)
- do not let settlers take them out of their own country because they are assassinated in the new country
- do not sell any more Special Surveys because the three that have been sold – Dendy's at Brighton, Unwin's at Bulleen and Jamieson's at Mt Martha – were all favoured fishing places of the natives
 - do not make them work for their rations but feed them at the same generous scale as Robinson's VDL blacks receive without having to work
- allow Aboriginal evidence to be given in court
- finally, as the Bonurong refuse to settle at Nerre Nerre Warren with the Warworong or Yarra blacks, give them what they want – a reserve for themselves between Sandy Point and Cape Schanck 'with the grand object likely to be attained of keeping the Aborigines in one place and securing the rising generation'. Page 16

LOSS OF MEANS OF SUBSISTENCE, STARVATION

William Thomas' third petition describes – 'the settlers' sheep and cattle eat the roots and herbs which were formerly devoured by the kangaroos, emus etc and the result is a scarcity of the means of subsistence for the Aborigines.' Page 17

* spelt *Bonurong* in the source

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WHITE MAN'S DISEASE

Thomas records (1893) the distressed and diseased state of the natives, in the opinion of Dr Cussen who was called to attend to them: 'In the whole of his (the doctor's) experience of 18 months (and he has had occasion to attend many) that he never visited them in such a diseased and wretched state of want and disease, and that five or six more are at the verge of death, and that unless something is done to relieve their wants, speedy extinction must soon take place. He also corroborates Mr Sievwright's account of the awful prevalence of the venereal disease.' Note that this applied to others too, not just the Bunurong. Page 36

DECIMATION OF NUMBERS

Thomas' 1839 Census: he submitted this more correct census to the Crown Prosecutor with a covering letter stating that the 83 Bunurong remaining are practically the whole of the tribe. Page 46

WHITE CRUELTY

A 13 years old Westernport /Port Phillip girl showed Thomas three wounds, two shots, large like buckshot, which had completely gone through the parts, one through the arm, and the other through the thigh. Upon further enquiry Thomas found that three others had been shot, Trinderlook, Koonmurong's lubra and Buller Bullup's lubra. He recorded their story thus: that a Gentleman whose name they think is Manborough from VDL pitched a double tent like mine (ie Thomas'). The blacks being in the neighbourhood, they came up but were ordered off. Not going off, they fired on them, the first time that they had seen or knew the effect of guns – they flew away – they were followed and at last got into the scrub. Page 60

ASSAULT ON WOMEN

Thomas reports (1840) 'In the evening, at ten or half past ten, Mr Hobson and Merrik arrived having ridden seven miles in the dark from Buckkermittewarrer to report the 'gross outrage' of the attempted assault on Barebun also known as Mary, Benbow's daughter. Page 95

IMPOSITION OF WHITE CULTURE

May 1840: I had before only spoke upon a God in my own Tongue English. We sang (ie Thomas and the Bunurong) and went to prayers. I distributed flour and rice to them, it being Sunday, and promised to distribute on the morrow Blankets and Shirts as far as they went. William Thomas, page 96

ATTACKS BY SOLDIERS, FORCED DISPLACEMENT TO OTHERS' LAND, FEAR

Thomas asks Bunurong members whether soldiers had taken any of them in a recent event (October 1840) and reports: 'One Old Man Moragine said 'me no go to Nerer Nere Warren, bye & bye big Wild Soldier come there, me stop here, die here'. I stopp'd about them some hours trying to pacify them,

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had their fears of coming to Nere Nere Warren, (they) said 'we gogo bush first and then when all gone wild soldiers, come Nere Nere Warren, and no more come to Port Phillip. Why white man big one frighten Black fellow?' I endeavoured to persuade them that the cause originated in Black Fellows killing White men, & that Governor in Sydney sent soldiers to catch Black fellows. They said 'plenty Bungarlarly (wrong) Big one wild soldiers, no Port Phillip Black Fellow kill White man.' pages 113-114

CRUELTY, ASSAULT, DESECRATION OF VALUED OBJECTS

Thomas refers to the 'unconstitutional' roundup of Major Lettsom in 1840. He laments that many people bore to their graves the scars of the wounds they received that day of Lettsom's roundup. One of these was the Bonurong chief Mingaragon/Old Mr Man.

The following account of Major Lettsom's round-up is the account of George Robinson, Chief Protectorate. One of the three tribes involved was the Bunurong (referred to by Robinson as 'Boongerongs'):

'Thirty five men and boys were chained, two by two, and separated from the rest. Their wives and children and mothers were there and witnessed a harsh and heart-rending scene and I may add, illegal proceeding. Mr Wilkinson said he witnessed the bringing in of the natives and said he was shocked by the cruelty of the military and police. If the women, many of whom had young children, happened to be behind, as also the old and infirm, they were goaded with bayonets.'

(In the afternoon of the same day) 'The natives' utensils lay in every possible direction: spears, broken rope and different articles of clothing. It grieved me to see such which to the natives these articles are of value as much or more so than our fine habiliments for a greater amount of labour has been expended upon them. Articles of some kinds lay scattered along the line of [...]. A vast number of dogs had also been shot, not as was stated by order of Mr La Trobe, but by some malicious and evil disposed white persons. I found Mr Parker at the camp with some blacks whom I had ordered there for the purpose of collecting the articles belonging to the natives. On my arrival Ningkallerbil and Little Benbow went missing with all speed and shouting for help before a mounted policeman who was galloping after them. I reprehended his conduct. Some of the white ruffians had stolen and taken away a variety of articles belonging to the natives. There was no merit in attacking the natives they were encamped on open ground and contiguous to Melbourne. All the troops [...] and mounted and border police surrounded them and all mill round. The Port Phillip natives made no resistance. One man, Pudg. ger.re Tom saw the armed party approach first and gave the alarm. The troops surrounded the native camp and commenced breaking the spears of the natives.' Page 115-116

(This outrage was not against just Bunurong but did include: 'Poor.tow.rup/Baddorup/Big Benbow/Mr Smith/George Smith's blackfellow, Budgery Tom, Chief of Westernport, Yankee Yankee's father, Barebun/Mary's father] and others Boongerongs.')

Robinson continues 'Men, women and children, old and young invalids and others were all huddled away together like a drove of cattle or sheep. Women with young children, if unable to keep up with the rest were struck. Old men, several as well as young, had sabre cuts some on their heads and on other parts of the body. I was told by Mr Wilkinson and other respectable persons it was a melancholy sight: the natives crying and making a noise as the Windberry was pointed out by a rascally white man Bill, who has associated with the blacks from the commencement of the settlement and who had been for a length of time cohabiting with Borremun's wife, alias Dredge, wife's name Mary Ann. I rode out

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with Yaldwin and saw the camp and the body of Winberri who was shot. This was a melancholy business, he was shot by Sergeant Leary, see evidence, in the act as they say of striking Vignoller. Afternoon went and saw the black buried outside the burying ground. A coffin had been made. After the natives, see list, had been drafted out, about 22 in all, they were iron and handcuffed and put in gaol and the Port Phillip men women and children were liberated'. Page 116-117

DISPOSSESSION ON THE MORNINGTON PENINSULA-EXAMPLES

William Jackson Thomas, Thomas' son, notes around 1840, 'soon, year after year, more runs were taken up – Dr Barker and John Barker took up Cape Schanck, Maurice Meyrick took a sheep station between Cape Schanck and Arthur's Seat, Cap. Reid dropped on a station down to the point of Mt Martha, Tom Goring a sheep station about four miles from Tuerong in the Melbourne road, and Stratton on the beach between Mount Martha and Mount Eliza after a time it was found that the position of 'Terubbabl' was unsuited for a permanent Aboriginal Station. A site was selected on the Dandenong Creek ... '. Page 126

SHOOTINGS

Shooting at Western Port by visiting ship's crew in early 1836

The Port Phillip Association's JH Wedge reported this shooting to the Colonial Secretary in Sydney in March 1836, nine months after Batman's treaty. William Buckley had heard a few weeks prior that a party of wattlebark strippers had surrounded a sleeping encampment of natives shortly after sunrise at Western Port and shot several. Buckley despatched messengers to request that the wounded natives be brought up to the settlement at Melbourne. Wedge visited them there and found that four had received gunshot wounds. Particularly mentioned by Wedge was a 13 year old girl wounded in both her legs by ball shot which passed through, grazing the bone: though she lived, the girl was not expected to gain the use of her legs again. Her parents carried her on their backs all the way from Western Port to Melbourne.' Page 59

COUNTER VIEW- RESPECT- OF THE BONURONG FROM SOME COLONIAL OBSERVERS

As can be seen from the records of their relationships with the Bonurong, Edward Hobson and George Smith seemed genuinely to like them and to respect them; more importantly, these day-to-day records demonstrate that the Bonurong men and women observed Europeans keenly, interpreted European reactions accurately, judged them, criticised them, defied them, manipulated them to get what they wanted, all the while giving precedence in their decision making to their prior tribal relationships. Page 178