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# Angus McMillan: a convenient scapegoat

By Robert Christie

Rob Christie, a former secondary teacher of history and a primary school principal, has lived in Gippsland for the past forty years and in that time has written a number of books specialising in Victorian high country goldfields history, and most recently *Life on the Dargo Crooked River Goldfield* (2022). His book on Angus McMillan and the Gippsland massacres is forthcoming in 2023.

When James Cook in 1770 looked from the deck of the *Endeavour* across the water to the south-eastern corner of Gippsland, his ship was observed by members of the oldest race on earth, the Gunaikurnai. Little were they to know that within 100 years their environment and culture would be drastically transformed, and their numbers decimated by people with limited concern for the land or its original inhabitants. Angus McMillan has been the focus for much of the censure associated with the treatment of the Gunaikurnai, his name reinforced in memory by the monuments that record his exploration across Gippsland.

The British did not acknowledge they were invading ground that belonged to Aboriginal people. The term 'terra nullius' meaning 'nobody's land' was later used to justify the occupation of the continent. Jan Morris when discussing the British Empire says the Industrial Revolution gave the British a sense of material superiority, while evangelical Christianity bolstered their attempt to civilise what they considered the 'baser cultures'.<sup>1</sup> It was expected that the Indigenous population would recognise and adopt the 'benefits' of European civilisation. Relations were cordial initially, but deteriorated when the Indigenous people showed no interest in embracing a new lifestyle.

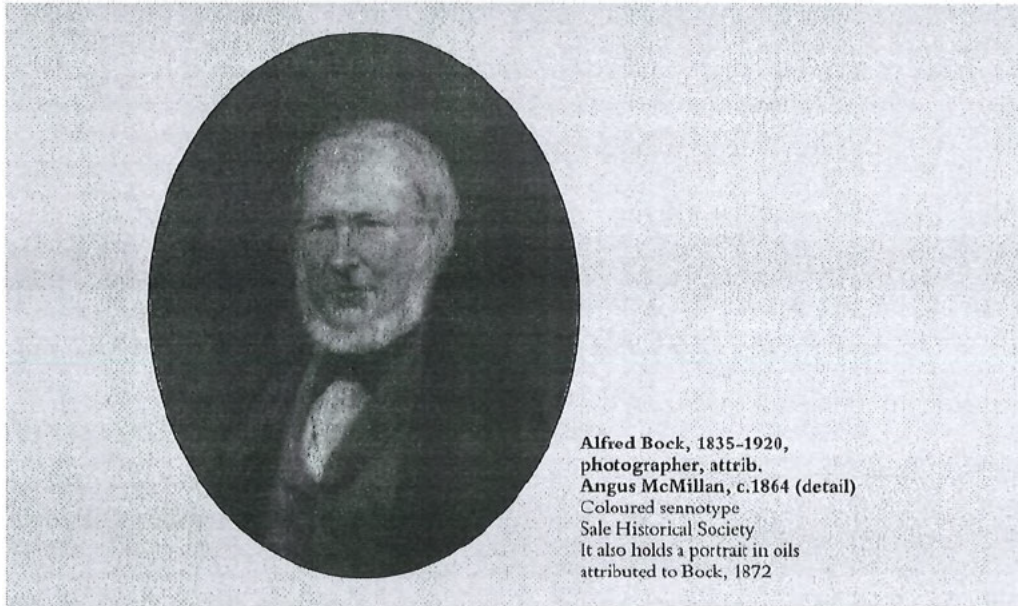
In the decades after 1788, British settlement spread south from Port Jackson to Van Diemen's Land, north to the Hunter valley and

Moreton Bay and across the Blue Mountains to the western plains. The Gippsland coastline was first mapped in 1797. Sealers based on offshore islands, bays and beaches were the first Europeans to make contact with the Gunaikurnai people. It was not a positive experience, as Robert Hughes depicted in *The Fatal Shore*. The area afforded constant shelter and secure retreats for 'runaways and villains of the worst description... the rapparees and bolters who formed... island colonies kidnapped hundreds of black women from their tribes not only because they needed sex, but because many coastal Aborigines were expert seal hunters.'<sup>2</sup>

Permanent settlement around the extensive bay named Port Phillip was seeded by John Batman's so-called treaty with the Wurundjeri people in 1835 and the Yarra village that developed named Melbourne in 1837. When Charles Joseph La Trobe arrived there in October 1839 it was described as a town of 'no very attractive appearance. It had but few houses, many of these of wood, with large, vacant spaces between most'.<sup>3</sup>

## Overlanders on the eastern front

The eastern portion of the Port Phillip District, isolated by rugged terrain, had for thousands of years been inhabited by five clans of the Gunaikurnai (and east of the Snowy River by the Bidwell) who lived in harmony with their environment.<sup>4</sup> Change loomed when prolonged drought on the Monaro forced settlers to push



Alfred Bock, 1835–1920,  
 photographer, attrib.  
 Angus McMillan, c.1864 (detail)  
 Coloured seantotype  
 Sale Historical Society  
 It also holds a portrait in oils  
 attributed to Bock, 1872

south in search of pasture, dispossessing the Indigenous people and ending their traditional way of life.

Edward Baylis, one of the first Europeans to visit the region, travelled as far as the Gippsland Lakes in 1838, followed in 1839 by the Scotsman, Angus McMillan who was hailed as a hero during his lifetime but faced ignominy following the 1987 publication of *Our Founding Murdering Father*.<sup>5</sup> Its author Peter Gardner, a former secondary school teacher, blamed McMillan for massacres of the Indigenous population in Gippsland.

McMillan was born into a farming community at Glenbrittle on the Isle of Skye in 1810. His father was a tacksman,<sup>6</sup> and the family were strict Scots Presbyterians. During his journey to Australia in November 1837 McMillan compiled a list of twenty-seven resolutions based on the scriptures by which he vowed to live his life.<sup>7</sup> He arrived in Sydney in February 1838 with letters of introduction to Lachlan Macalister, one of the largest pastoralists in New South Wales, and commenced work as an overseer on his property *Clifton* near Camden on the Goulburn Plains.

In February 1839 he moved 500 head of cattle south to James MacFarlane's property on the Monaro called *Curnawong*, where he 'first met a tribe of native blacks'.<sup>8</sup> According to his friend and supporter John Shillinglaw, McMillan spent considerable time around the campfires of the Aboriginal people and learnt something of their history and traditions. Writing in 1874 Shillinglaw commented that, 'His discreet conduct and amiability of character... won the confidence of the neighbouring tribes of blacks

and in a few months he mastered a good deal of their language'.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, McMillan's attitude like most Europeans was condescending. He referred to 'the abject wildness, the childlike intellect and the simplicity of rude nature that I found in the natives when I first broke ground amongst them'.<sup>10</sup>

The treatment of the Port Phillip Indigenous population was of concern to the government. Superintendent La Trobe had specific instructions from the Colonial Office for 'the prevention as far as possible of collisions between them and the Colonists'.<sup>11</sup> In La Trobe's eyes, only the law and Christianising the Aboriginal people would ensure peaceful co-existence.<sup>12</sup> However, having had no close association with any Indigenous group in the remote east, there was no way that he could ensure that Colonial Office policy could be enforced there.

During McMillan's explorations in 1839 and 1840 on behalf of Macalister, he encountered the feared Gunaikurnai, although most disappeared on his approach. The country so impressed him that he called it 'Caledonia Australis' as it reminded him of Scotland. He believed that it was 'a country lying dormant capable of supporting all my starving countrymen', informing Macalister, who eventually took up the *Boisdale* run, that 'with all the friends he ever had he could not half stock it'.<sup>13</sup> Macalister wanted to exploit the new country for himself rather than share it, but to be viable, a port for shipping stock to the Van Diemen's Land market was needed. Whilst McMillan was searching for a route to the coast, the Polish Count Strzelecki was pioneering a route through the area which he referred to



Eugene von Guérard, 1811-1901, artist  
 Panoramic view of Mr Angus McMillan's station,  
 Bushy Park on the River Avon, Gippsland Alps, Victoria, 1861  
 Oil on canvas  
 National Library of Australia, NK1926A, on loan to the National Gallery of Australia  
 One of two panels, Part A depicting cattle the foreground

as Gipps Land, the name officially adopted by La Trobe for the region.

Strzelecki's account of his journey, published soon after reaching Melbourne in May 1840, combined with the discovery of a harbour at Corner Inlet following the wrecking of the steamship *Clonmel* in January 1841, and McMillan's arrival at the coast a month later, provided the stimulus needed for settlement. The establishment of Port Albert and the ensuing influx of pastoralists led to conflict with the local clans,<sup>14</sup> and some resultant massacres.<sup>15</sup>

Gardner argues that Angus McMillan was primarily responsible for leading and participating in these massacres.<sup>16</sup> However, no primary documentation exists to justify these assertions and only one personal account by McMillan has survived that links him to an incident at *Nuntin*.<sup>17</sup>

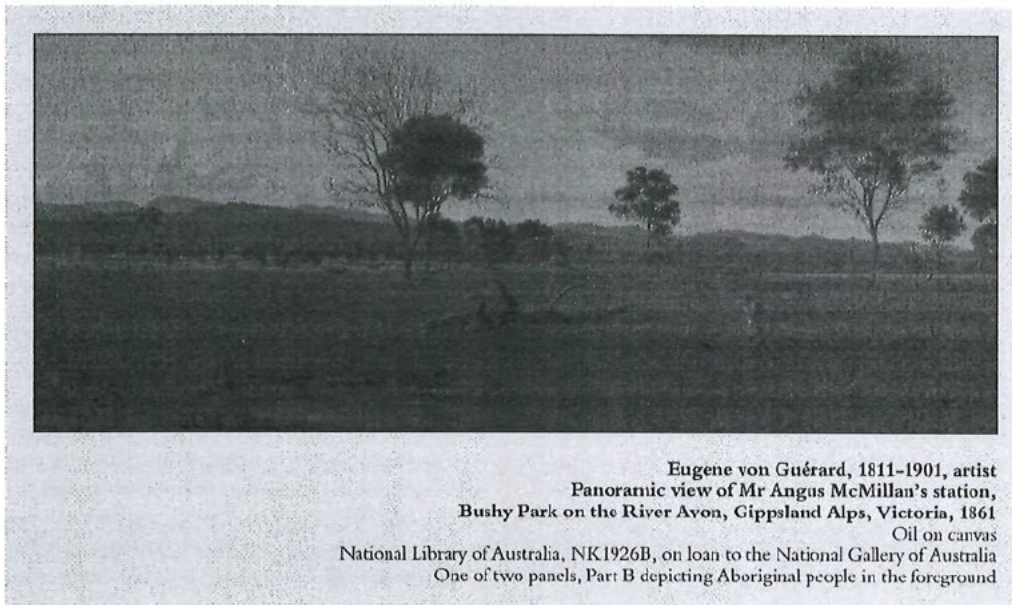
### ***Battle of Nuntin and Boney Point massacre***

In late 1840 McMillan, Alexander Arbuckle and Thomas Macalister, on behalf of Lachlan Macalister, brought four hundred head of cattle from the north to the west bank of the Avon River, south west of present-day Stratford, and established a station there called *Nuntin*, later part of *Boisdale*. McMillan left four men to look after the cattle and build a hut while he returned to Macalister's outstation *Numbla Munjie* on the Tambo River, south of today's Omeo. On McMillan's previous journeys he had little interaction with the Gunaikurnai, but their attitude to the invaders introducing cattle that degraded their lands marked a change.

As McMillan's party passed Clifton Morass near present-day Bairnsdale, they were attacked by about eighty Gunaikurnai. Only Arbuckle and McMillan were armed and McMillan fired both barrels of his shotgun. After throwing their spears the attackers quickly dispersed with McMillan commenting that 'some of them might have received a few drops of buckshot'.<sup>18</sup> No mention was made of any deaths. McMillan later said the attackers thought the gunshot report came out of the horses' nostrils.

After reaching *Numbla Munjie* McMillan received news that the men at *Nuntin* had also been attacked. With a party of eight men, he headed back 'armed with plenty of ammunition'.<sup>19</sup> On arrival, expecting further trouble, the hut was moved away from the creek running into the Avon, and rifle ports were cut in the walls. On 22 December 1840, whilst Dr Arbuckle was killing a wild dog near the creek, he was rushed by the Gunaikurnai and only just escaped back to the hut. As the warriors approached carrying green boughs McMillan assumed this was a sign of peace, so went out to meet them, putting down his weapon, as did the Aboriginal leader. However, the latter then picked up his spear with his toes, a move not noticed by McMillan, but noted by his men who were further away. Realising the danger, they fired, the 'native leader' fell dead and the others 'made a bolt of it in great confusion'. McMillan said that this 'bold skirmish gave them a lesson which frightened them from attacking the station again'.<sup>20</sup> Whether others were killed or injured is not known.

Gardner asserts that the incident did not end there but that McMillan and some of his party followed the group approximately forty



kilometres to the confluence of the Perry and Avon Rivers (Boney Point) at Lake Wellington and there shot them. It is difficult to believe that a small party, assuming some men were left at *Nuntin* to guard the hut and stock, would travel so far through unfamiliar country in pursuit of a party of Indigenous people who greatly outnumbered them. After the initial *Nuntin* attack, John McDonald had proposed to go after the Gunaikurnai but no one would accompany him since they were not confident of pursuing them into the bush.<sup>21</sup>

An alternative explanation for the Boney Point massacre is that it occurred after the area was occupied by William Odell Raymond in 1842.<sup>22</sup> In 1907 a correspondent for the *Gippsland Times* related how two shepherds and a 'blackfellow had a hut on a high bluff above a narrow flat between it and the river' (namely, at the confluence of the Perry and Avon Rivers). When one of the shepherds was found dead with the hut pillaged, the sheep scattered or left with broken legs, the surviving shepherd reported what had taken place. The next morning a party of men set out and found the Gunaikurnai eating the sheep not far from the hut. The writer then says, 'a curtain is best drawn over what followed'.<sup>23</sup>

If this account is correct, then Raymond is the obvious person to have led a reprisal, possibly assisted by adjoining stockholder Frederick Taylor, who had travelled with Raymond into Gippsland in June 1842.<sup>24</sup> Taylor had a disturbing background having been involved in the killing of an Aboriginal man near Geelong in 1836. Then, when managing *Strathdownie* station (later *Glenomiston* north of present-day Terang) in 1839, he organised a party of shepherds who

massacred approximately thirty-five Aboriginal men as reprisal for them killing a number of sheep.<sup>25</sup> Taylor fled Port Phillip after a warrant was issued for his arrest but returned to the eastern district in early 1842.

Two accounts of human remains being found on Lake Wellington may be evidence of a massacre at 'Boney Point'. Crown Lands Commissioner Charles Tyers, who arrived in Gippsland in January 1844, encountered an overpowering stench of rotting corpses whilst boating on the lakes.<sup>26</sup> The stench would indicate that the deaths were recent. He attributed the murders to the 'Black Police' but gave no evidence to justify this. If this incident is associated with Boney Point then it would date the massacre to either late 1843 or early 1844 and is unlikely to have been a reprisal for the *Nuntin* attack.

George Robinson, Chief Protector of Aborigines, had a similar experience in June 1844 when travelling between Raymond's *Strathfieldsaye* station on the Avon and Loughnans' *Lindenow* on the Mitchell River. On the northern shore of Lake Wellington he commented, 'I saw many human bones and skulls on the margin of Lake Wellington'.<sup>27</sup> These bones may have been different from the ones seen by Tyers, but could well refer to 'Boney Point' or another massacre. In a later assessment, Peter Gardner also identified Odell Raymond of *Strathfieldsaye* as the 'perpetrator' of the 'affair', with no mention of involvement by McMillan. However, he then concludes, 'I still prefer the latter individual as the one most likely involved'.<sup>28</sup> The location of the massacres, the distance from *Nuntin* and Gardner's own statement about the perpetrator of the affair cast doubt on involvement by McMillan.

### *Warrigal Creek massacre*

Gardner believes that this massacre, following the killing of Lachlan Macalister's nephew Ranald in 1843, is definitive proof that McMillan was 'the Butcher of Gippsland'. His information was sourced from an article written by 'Gippslander'<sup>29</sup> of Bairnsdale and published in 1925 in a school magazine called *The Gap*.<sup>30</sup> Gardner identified Ronald [sic] Macalister as one of the most important men in Gippsland hence the severity of the reprisal for his murder.<sup>31</sup> However, there is no other reference to Ranald's importance, casting doubt on Gardner's accuracy in this regard. Conversely, there are numerous references to both Lachlan Macalister and another nephew, Matthew, in newspapers and government correspondence.

Accounts of events surrounding the murder are confusing. *The Port Phillip Herald* of 29 July 1843 reported the killing after receiving a letter sent from Port Albert to a 'mercantile house' in Melbourne telling how 'Mr Macalister was decoyed from his station by a party of blacks on pretext of having found a flock of sheep that had been missing, and that having got him to a spot favourable for their murderous purpose, they set upon him with their waddies and despatched him under circumstances of the utmost barbarity.'<sup>32</sup>

According to 'Gippslander' the murder was in retaliation for hot coals thrown by Macalister's hutkeeper around the feet of Gunaikurnai who refused to leave the hut. When Macalister was returning after dark from a visit to Port Albert: 'three of them waited for him as he returned, putting three spears through him and killing him at once.' Macalister's horse then bolted, which McMillan found the following day whilst travelling with cattle between Sale and Woodside.<sup>33</sup>

A different version in *The Australian* of 2 August 1843 came from the captain of the *Agenoria* who reported 'the blacks to be in a very riotous state. On the 13th Ultimo Mr Ronald [sic] Macalister was removing his sheep station about two miles from the settlement when he was attacked by Blacks and murdered: his body was found the following day by a native in his employ'.<sup>34</sup>

Chief Protector George Robinson recorded another version in his diary dated 19 May 1844, nearly a year later: 'Mr Macalister was... alone it seems on horseback and supposed riding serenely along... the black[s] took him by surprise or he must have been parleing [sic] with them at the time it happened. He had a brace of pistols in his holster, his body was found, he was on his way to the Port with cattle.'<sup>35</sup>

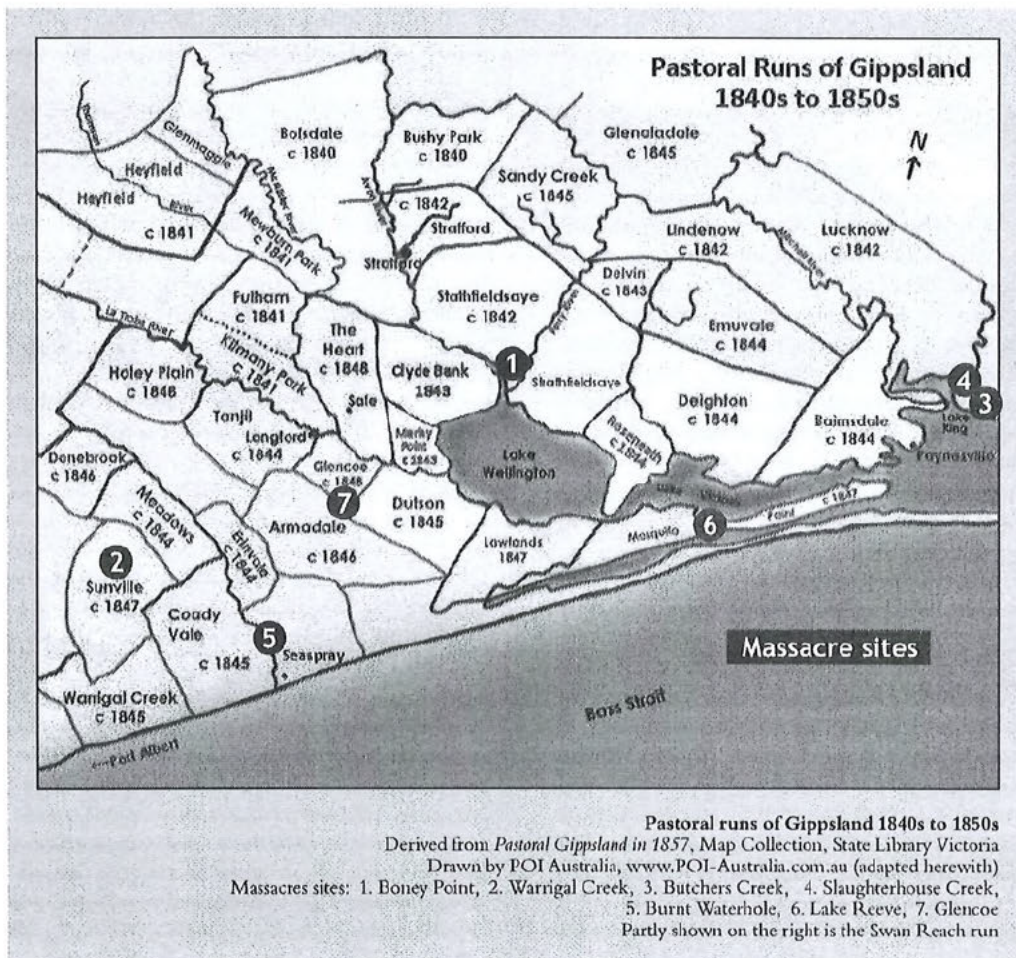
On 1 June he added: 'Macalister was the gentleman killed by natives: they are supposed to have killed him with sticks, there was no spear wounds no person saw it done or saw natives; hence there is no direct proof. He was nephew to old Macalister and a cousin to Tom Macalister'. Later he was told that 'some depraved white men had in a fit of drunkenness shot at and killed some friendly natives. Mr Macalister being the first European met after the perpetration of this revolting barbarity was in accordance with their usages murdered.'<sup>36</sup>

Another year passed before Assistant Protector William Thomas recorded his version in his diary on 21 April 1845: 'The blks were fond of Mr McAllister and Mr McAllister of them, but in Mr McAllister's absence some of his Men had stolen some Lubras, and on the blks wanting them they deliberately shot the blacks... this was unbeknown to Mr McAllister & when he returned they met him on the road and killed him'.<sup>37</sup>

Although the reason for Ranald's death is unclear, there is no doubt about the events that followed. After meeting pastoralist Henry Meyrick, Thomas recorded on 22 January 1847 that Meyrick advised him 'that the aborigines had been cut off in awful numbers', that the slaughter after the murder of Macalister was 'awfully reckless and merciless'. Meyrick also hinted at a perpetrator. 'He gave a reported act of a Scotchman who went out with a party Scowering'. In modern terms scowering would mean cleansing the area of Aboriginal people.<sup>38</sup> Who the Scotsman is can only be surmised. Although Gardner concludes that it must be McMillan, it could have been one of the Macalisters, even another Scot altogether.

In April 1845 William Thomas had a conversation with a man named Hatcher who had recently returned from Gippsland. He said that there had been a slaughter of 'blacks' following the Macalister murder with few of them left. He added that on his brother Buntine's property 'a cart Load of Blks bones might be gathered up'.<sup>39</sup> Gardner assumes these are the bones from Warrigal Creek, but as Wayne Caldow explains Buntine's property on Bruthen Creek was a significant distance west from the Warrigal Creek site.<sup>40</sup> The fact that these bones were visible in 1845 indicates that they had not been moved from elsewhere as part of a cover-up from the authorities, but maybe evidence of another massacre site.

Who organised and led the attack at Warrigal Creek remains veiled in secrecy. 'Gippslander' says: 'The settlers were so enraged at this murder that they determined to give the



blacks a lesson and formed what they called the "Highland Brigade". Every man who could find a gun and a horse took chase after the blacks'. This is the only mention of the 'Highland Brigade' in any source. 'Gippslander' says that the 'Brigade' found the Aboriginal men camped around a waterhole at Warrigal Creek where they surrounded them, 'killing a great number'.<sup>41</sup> This information was related to him years later by two survivors, 'Club Foot' and 'Bing Eye', who were about twelve or fourteen years old at the time.

Gardner admits that secrecy and the lack of primary records make 'it impossible to state with complete certainty that McMillan led the "highland brigade"', conceding that 'it is just possible that McMillan may have been absent from the region at this time'. The circumstantial evidence implicating McMillan was based on his close association with Macalister, the fact that the 'highland brigade' implied an ethnic association and his assumptions about McMillan's participation in other massacres.<sup>42</sup> He concludes that if as some assert Lachlan Macalister or a relative led the reprisal then 'Angus McMillan rode by his side'.<sup>43</sup>

George Dunderdale's *Book of the Bush* written in 1870 implicates Lachlan Macalister as leader of the reprisal.<sup>44</sup> Referring to Ranald as Donald, Dunderdale says he was killed a day after he had fired on some Aboriginal men at a distance without provocation whilst moving stock to Port Albert. The stockmen who found him sent a messenger to Lachlan Macalister who 'had a long experience dealing with blackfellows and bushrangers'. The murder of his nephew gave him both a professional and a family interest and he soon organised a party to look for the perpetrators.<sup>45</sup>

According to Dunderdale, Macalister's party found a group of men near Gammon Creek,<sup>46</sup> where they were shot and thrown into the waterhole – a similar scenario to the Western District massacre involving Frederick Taylor.<sup>47</sup> Dunderdale said that the 'gun used by old Macalister was a double-barrelled Purdy, a beautiful and reliable weapon, which in its time had done great execution', implying it may have been used in similar circumstances elsewhere.

Macalister's role is supported in Gardner's *Through Foreign Eyes*, where he quotes from a speech given in 1907 by Allan McLean, a former

Victorian Premier, at *Nyerimilang* homestead on the Gippsland Lakes. The written speech is reportedly held in the Melbourne University Archives. McLean knew the early Gippsland settlers and speaking of the Macalister murder said: 'Captain Macalister determined on a black raid. He mustered all the good shots and they kept up the chase... killing over 500 blacks on the trip'. McLean also supplied details about hundreds of skulls with bullet holes that he had seen.<sup>48</sup>

William Hoddinott, who it is believed was 'Gippslander', wrote a further *Gippsland Times* article in May 1940 entitled 'Interesting Reminiscences'. In it McMillan is only mentioned because of his association with Macalister's hutkeeper with whom he travelled to Gippsland. There are two significant changes to the 1925 story: firstly, that Macalister's horse took fright and galloped towards Sale, and secondly, that Macalister caught it when droving cattle and was then attacked and killed.<sup>49</sup> No mention is made of the two Aboriginal men who survived the shooting and provided the original eyewitness account. Those differences certainly cast doubt on the veracity of the writer's information and on the role if any played by McMillan.

### ***Butcher's Creek and other massacre sites***

With regard to other possible massacre sites, Richard Mackay in his book *Recollections of Early Gippsland Goldfields* commented that at Maffra the blacks were 'troublesome and there had been a fight',<sup>50</sup> but with no further detail. Gardner implicates McMillan because of his relationship with writer Richard Mackay.

At Butcher's Creek, which is on Bancroft Bay, Lake King, east of present-day Metung, several accounts tell of a massacre there, based on a story from Colin McLaren,<sup>51</sup> one of the stockmen involved.<sup>52</sup> Allan McLean also commented on that massacre saying that 'they killed every man woman and child'.<sup>53</sup> To the west of this site and close to today's town of Johnsonville is Slaughterhouse Creek. In 1849 Tyers was informed that thirteen or fourteen whites led by Yal Yal of the Native Police had killed eight Warrigals ('wild blacks') in about 1846. A hide rope with eight nooses attached was found stretched between two trees. Their bodies were found around the lake. The informant said that Turnmile, a Native policeman, and Tootgong could provide more information.<sup>54</sup> The area was deemed to be near Jones' outstation on the *Lucknow* run bordering McLeod's *Bairnsdale* run and Loughnan and Taylor's *Swan Reach* run.<sup>55</sup> Taylor's reported presence in the

vicinity of a number of the massacre sites leads to the question of whether he had any involvement in the incidents.

The only definitive comment associating McMillan with any killings was written by Caroline Dexter in the *Ladies Almanack* of 1858. She was acquainted with McMillan describing him as 'of a kind and affable nature, unobtrusive manners and liberal views'. On the matter of the Indigenous people she said 'he was compelled in his early struggles to destroy numbers of more treacherous natives'.<sup>56</sup> She concluded that he was regarded by the 'remnants of the Aborigines as Father, priest and King', that they felt secure on his run from attacks of their powerful neighbours.<sup>57</sup> This latter statement was supported by Jean Gamel, a worker at Sigismund Frankenberg's store at Stratford in the 1860s, who wrote: 'As a consequence there was always a camp around the homestead. He was much liked by the blacks for his kindness and was known to them as "Father Mac"'.<sup>58</sup>

William Balleny Howden initially worked for the Port Albert Company of Turnbull and Orr.<sup>59</sup> In Ian Howden's book, *William Balleny Howden: the triumphs and tears of an Australian pioneer*, the author refers to a discussion his great-grandfather had with Angus McMillan: 'Angus McMillan told me there were extreme cases where indiscriminate killing of Aborigines took place involving the death of innocent women and children. Angus was very considerate to the Aborigines but he was aware that a group of his stockmen had been guilty of indiscriminate killing'.<sup>60</sup>

Whether this is an actual quotation is not clear as it is not footnoted. The author's prologue makes it clear he is not rewriting a diary but is compiling his great-grandfather's life story, making inevitable assumptions. Much of his material came from the Port Albert Museum archives. If the quotation does have a documented basis, further doubt is cast on the 'Butcher' allegations about McMillan and the Gunaikurnai.

The only specific reference regarding McMillan pursuing Aboriginal people is found in Crown Lands Commissioner Charles Tyers' field books. In May 1844 Tyers learned that McMillan's cattle had been killed by the 'blacks', whom McMillan and others pursued into the ranges: 'Blacks fixed their spears, party fired, not known if any blacks were killed'.<sup>61</sup>

Although there is little evidence directly tying McMillan to any massacre, some accounts implicate others in the violence. Pastoralist William Brodribb wrote, 'we gave our overseer



full instructions how to act should they ever make an attack... Not to fire over their heads but to shoot at their legs, and if hard pressed to kill one'.<sup>62</sup> George Robinson, the Chief Protector, referring to Port Albert in May 1844, said: 'There is reason to fear that... a large amount of mischief had been inflicted on the original inhabitants by the lawless and depraved who had infested the Port'.<sup>63</sup>

The Native Police, formed in March 1842 under Henry Pulteney Dana, were also responsible for numerous killings across Gippsland before the force's demise a decade later following Dana's death. Feared by the Gunaikurnai they were referred to as 'the harpies of hell'.<sup>64</sup> Early European settlers were aware of conflict between Aboriginal people close to Melbourne and those in Gippsland. William Thomas who gave evidence before the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Aborigines in 1858 said that the 'Gipps Land blacks and the Western Port blacks... have been continually at enmity... from time immemorial' (but were now on more friendly terms).<sup>65</sup> Significantly, in about 1836 most of the Bunurong were killed by Gippsland 'blacks',<sup>66</sup> and those that remained later joined the Native Police as this gave them an opportunity to exact revenge.<sup>67</sup> 'Gippslander' says that after Warrigal Creek many blacks were still being killed but principally by the Black police.<sup>68</sup>

Notwithstanding, inter-tribal conflicts were responsible for many deaths, as Robinson recorded in 1844: 'Two miles above the crossing place upstream [on the flat west side of Tambo] is the spot where great slaughter of Gipps Land blacks by the Omeo and the Mokeallumbeets and Tinnermittum, their allies, took place... Saw the human bones strewd about bleached white. Strange idea occurred to me whilst viewing the scene of the slaughter. I thought it appalling – best forget the whole sale slaughter by Christians'.<sup>69</sup> Robinson was clearly aware of atrocities carried out by Europeans but was not confident to identify the participants. Later writers did.

Both John Campbell of *Glencoe Station* and Patrick Coady Buckley of *Coady Vale* were responsible for attacks on Aboriginal people. At Campbell's station after a large party of Gunaikurnai threatened the house they were repulsed with broken bottles and scraps of metal fired from a brass canon.<sup>70</sup> When Dana journeyed to Gippsland to investigate the reported 'slaughter of blacks', he was informed that 'the gun with its miscellaneous loading was discharged right in amongst them... many of them were fatally wounded'.<sup>71</sup> Campbell also trained a savage deerhound 'to chase human

game'. The dog would seize 'a blackfellow by the heel, throwing him and worrying him till Campbell came up on his horse'.<sup>72</sup> What followed is not stated.

Buckley's diary covering the period 1844 to 1872 gives a graphic account of his views and treatment of the Indigenous population. Although the original diary<sup>73</sup> was rewritten in later years, he recorded regular Aboriginal hunts. In one beach incident Buckley drove a man into the surf, before pulling him out with reins wrapped around his neck, commenting 'nearly hanged him'.<sup>74</sup>

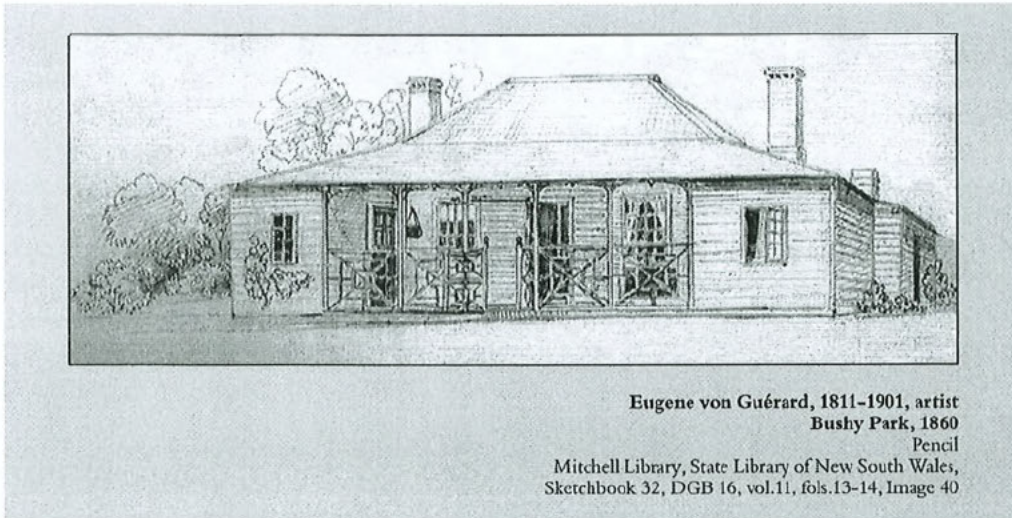
After Buckley's death 'Prospect', the location of Buckley's former run (now known as Seaspray), became a popular site for visitors. In March 1876 a Mr Webb brought home with him a collection of bones that he had found whilst bathing in the 'burnt waterhole' at Prospect. *The Gippsland Times* reported: 'They are those of natives, and bear pretty distinct evidence of having been hastily buried in the sand hummocks. The aborigines in the earlier days of our history were extremely troublesome and the settlers had but little compunction about shooting them down. Two perforations in the skull of one support the assumption that shot was the immediate cause of death'.<sup>75</sup> While there is no evidence to conclusively prove that Buckley was involved, the location and his history of Aboriginal hunts make him an obvious suspect.

In 1846 the search for the 'white woman' (supposedly held by Aboriginal people) was taking place. A Melbourne newspaper reported that whilst searching the Lake Reeve area a private expedition 'came across a great many skulls and human bones, which were the remains of the Worrigals who had been shot...'<sup>76</sup>

Although law in the form of Crown Lands Commissioner Tyers came to Gippsland in 1844, the distances were too great to police effectively and his relationships with the pastoralists probably prejudiced his dealings with the original inhabitants. In 1849 after he was given information about eight Aboriginal men being hanged there is no indication in Tyers' diary that he ever followed up the incident.

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Charles Joseph La Trobe visited Gippsland twice, in 1845 and 1847. During his 1845 journey (when he drew an early *Map of Gippsland*<sup>77</sup>) he met Macalister, McMillan, Raymond and Tyers at Port Albert,<sup>78</sup> then travelled as far east as Lake King, visiting different stations where discussion centred around protection of the white population from the Aboriginal one.



Eugene von Guérard, 1811-1901, artist  
Bushy Park, 1860

Pencil

Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales,  
Sketchbook 32, DGB 16, vol.11, fols.13-14, Image 40

La Trobe's many journeys throughout the colony allowed him to experience first-hand the conditions in various parts of the country, but as John Barnes has written, 'the behaviour of the settlers who took the law into their own hands... [was] certainly kept secret from La Trobe, who would have been appalled at the way in which the determined settlers set about exterminating indigenous people in the area'.<sup>79</sup>

### *The later years*

By the 1850s the Gunaikurnai, although still spearing cattle, had been broken in spirit, their numbers so reduced that they effectively presented no threat to the white population. Lacking the means or ability to continue their harassment they began to settle around the stations such as McMillan's *Bushy Park*. Their suppressed culture and exposure to previously unknown diseases continued to reduce their numbers. The Native Police and the Protectorate were later replaced by missions at Ramahyuck and Lake Tyers, further repressing their old way of life and culture. Pepper wrote of the missions that 'our people were finished before the mission men came'.<sup>80</sup> He maintained that because the missionaries looked after the sick and gave them food and medicine, the Gunaikurnai as a group survived.

Very little is known of McMillan's activities during the latter part of the 1840s but the regular sale of stock allowed him to build a substantial house at *Bushy Park*, expand his holdings and become a comparatively wealthy man. By 1856 he had twelve men working for him, each paid £100 per annum, and was one of the largest stock-holders in Gippsland with fifty horses and 1,500 cattle on *Bushy Park* and six horses and 800 cattle on *Cungmundi* further north at Dargo.<sup>81</sup>

McMillan maintained close affiliation with ministers of the Church of England. In April 1848 the Reverend Francis Hales spent five nights at *Bushy Park* and wrote of McMillan, 'he seemed a well-disposed, steady man; religiously brought up and I trust a servant of God'.<sup>82</sup> Reverend Willoughby Bean, a regular visitor to *Bushy Park*, commented on 2 February 1849: 'started for my headquarters in the Upper District, viz. Mr McMillan's *Bushy Park*...'.<sup>83</sup> It is difficult to reconcile the picture of a man who had engaged in the consistent wholesale killing of Indigenous people with one who maintained a close connection with the church, albeit several years after the massacres took place.

In October 1859 he was elected to the Legislative Council in the second parliament in the Colony of Victoria. He was involved in numerous committees including the Royal Society of Victoria's Exploration Committee responsible for the Burke and Wills Expedition, and the Committee of Management of the Zoological Gardens. He helped equip the Gippsland Prospecting Party which found gold in the Dargo and Crooked Rivers. He also maintained an interest in the Gunaikurnai, representing two men in court charged with murder in 1858. In March 1860 he was appointed one of several correspondents to the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines.<sup>84</sup>

Parliamentary life was always going to be a challenge for McMillan. In addition to *Bushy Park*, *Sandy Creek* and *Cungmundi* he took over the *Tabberabbera* run at Dargo in 1850; in December 1856 he acquired the 16,000 acre (6,475 hectare) *Stratford* run, and in 1858 the 32,000 acre (12,950 hectares) *Eagle Vale* run beyond *Cungmundi* at Dargo.<sup>85</sup> Perhaps he realised that successfully managing his properties and the requirements of being a Member of Parliament were not compatible, as he resigned



Robert Christie, photographer  
Angus McMillan portrait from cairn at  
Iguana Creek crossing, 2022

Robert Christie, photographer  
McMillan monument at 'Bushy Park', 2020

from Parliament in November 1860.<sup>86</sup> Whether he over-extended himself is unclear, but in 1861 his properties were put up for auction; they did not sell and the agents foreclosed.<sup>87</sup>

Despite advancing years his deteriorating financial position forced him to accept the position of leader of a party to cut a track linking the main Gippsland goldfields of Omeo, Crooked River and the Jordan. Work commenced in early 1864 and had nearly been completed when on 11 April two of his men found a piece of quartz heavily impregnated with gold on the Crooked River.<sup>88</sup> A rush began on 13 May, but McMillan continued with his task and completed cutting 227 miles of track eight-foot wide (333 kilometres, 2.4 metres wide) suitable for packhorses.

McMillan's health was failing and the hardships endured were taking their toll. On 24 April 1865 he had a severe fall when leading a packhorse. His finances were still in a precarious state, and he was issued with several summonses for outstanding debts. Whilst returning to his remaining property at *Cungmundi* on 18 May he was taken ill at Simon Gillies' Iguana Creek Hotel,<sup>89</sup> and died of endocarditis.<sup>90</sup>

#### *A suitable focus for censure*

Some controversy will always surround Angus McMillan, but the lack of primary

source material relating to the early history of Gippsland makes it impossible to determine his involvement in the events that took place. Gardner's sensational title, *Our Founding Murdering Father*, created interest in the massacres when published in 1987, but it was not until the 'Black Lives Matter' campaigns of 2020 that McMillan's name came to a prominence that was not accorded other early settlers. The spotlight fell on the line of stone cairns erected across Gippsland in 1927 that were inscribed either 'In honour of Angus McMillan Discoverer of Gippsland' or simply 'Angus McMillan passed this way'.

In the current climate it is difficult to challenge views that have been accepted for the best part of forty years and revision is often seen as having a racist base. Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark in *The History Wars* put forward the view that 'historians are ill prepared for such public controversy... they have found it increasingly difficult to put their side of the argument... the prejudices of the columnists and commentators who dominate the national media pass largely unchallenged'.<sup>91</sup> The Black Lives Matter campaigns have certainly influenced public opinion when it comes to Angus McMillan; his guilt has been assumed and he has become a suitable focus for censure. However, others who played a significant role in the destruction of the Gunaikurnai have been ignored.

McMillan should be remembered as an ambitious man who created a small empire for himself (albeit lost) but also for his connections with the Aboriginal people, both good and bad. The cairns which have kept him in the public eye should be the focus for telling the largely untold story of the Gunaikurnai in Gippsland and if this includes the darker side of white settlement that must be included.<sup>22</sup> McMillan is a conduit

between the present and what should be known of the past, but there is insufficient evidence to warrant him being portrayed in Gardner's words as the 'Butcher of Gippsland'.

#### Endnotes

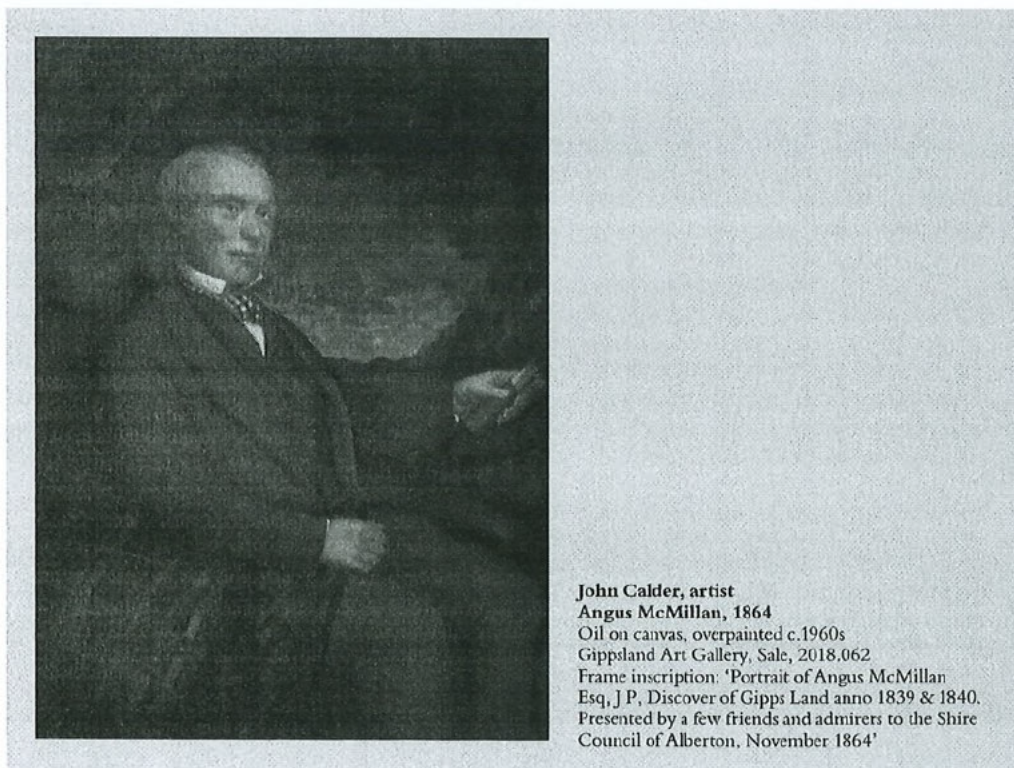
There are numerous variations in the spelling of Aboriginal names in the relevant literature.

In this article 'Gunaikurnai' is used for the Traditional Owners of much of Gippsland. Variants include: Gunai/Kurnai, Gunai, Gunnai and Kurnai.

- 1 Jan Morris, *The Spectacle of Empire*, London: Faber and Faber, 1982, p.13.
- 2 Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: a history of the transportation of convicts to Australia, 1787-1868*, London, Sydney: Collins Harvill, 1987, pp.331-333.
- 3 Edward Jones Brewster, first Chairman of Quarter Sessions and Commissioner of the Court of Requests, diary cited in John Leonard Forde, *The Story of the Bar of Victoria*, Melbourne: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1891, p.36.
- 4 Joanne Hodges, untitled document (no date), held at Ramahyuck Corporation, 117 Foster Street, Sale, Vic., 3850.
- 5 Peter Dean Gardner, *Our Founding Murdering Father: Angus McMillan and the Kurnai tribe of Gippsland 1839-1865*, Ensay, Vic.: P. Gardner, 1987. See also Don Watson, *Caledonia Australis: Scottish Highlanders on the Australian frontier*, Sydney: Collins, 1984.
- 6 A tacksman paid yearly rent on land owned by the lord to whom he was sometimes related, while retaining the ability to sublet the land.
- 7 Angus McMillan, Journal of a Cruise from Greenock to New Holland, 5 September 1837-22 December 1837, Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria, MS 9776, photoprint and microfilm.
- 8 *Gippsland Times*, 28 November 1862, p.3, 'The Discovery of Gippsland', extracts from McMillan's journal.
- 9 'Who Discovered Gippsland', by John Shillinglaw, *Gippsland Times*, 10 September 1874, p.4.
- 10 *Gippsland Times*, 5 December 1862, p.3, 'Discovery of Gippsland, Part II', extracts from McMillan's journal.
- 11 General Instructions to the Superintendent of Port Phillip, 11 September 1839, [https://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/resources/transcripts/vic2\\_doc\\_1839.pdf](https://www.foundingdocs.gov.au/resources/transcripts/vic2_doc_1839.pdf) (accessed 30 September 2022).
- 12 John Barnes, 'A Moravian Among the Heathen: La Trobe and the Aboriginal People'. *La Trobeana*, vol.16, no. 1, March 2017, p.16.
- 13 Richard Mackay, *Recollections of Early Gippsland Goldfields: with an appendix; being memorandum of the discovery and exploration of Gippsland by the discoverer, the late Angus McMillan, and supplied by him, in 1862, to the present writer, from discoverer's original notes*. Traralgon: W. Chappell, 1916, reprinted 1977, pp.90-91.
- 14 Peter Synan in *Gippsland's Lucky City; a history of Sale*, Sale, Vic.: City of Sale, 1994, pp. 16-23 provides a succinct account of the early settlement and ensuing conflict.
- 15 The Oxford Dictionary definition of massacre is 'a brutal slaughter of a large number of people'. (*Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edition, revised. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008, p.626.)
- 16 Gardner, *Our Founding Murdering Father*, pp.33-38.
- 17 Contact was made with McMillan's great-granddaughters in 2021 who confirmed that material written by McMillan did exist but was destroyed following the death of William Blanshard his great-grandson.
- 18 *Gippsland Times*, 19 December 1862, p.3, 'Exploration of Gippsland, Part IV', extracts from McMillan's journal.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Raymond called his run *Strathfieldsaye*.
- 23 *Gippsland Times*, 15 April 1907, p.3.
- 24 Taylor held adjoining runs *Deighton* and *Emuvalle*.
- 25 Charles Florance, 'In Pursuit of Frederick Taylor', *The Black Sheep: combined journal of the East Gippsland Family History Group Inc. and the East Gippsland Historical Society Inc.*, Vol.69, 2006, pp.6-9.
- 26 George Dunderdale, *The Book of the Bush: containing many truthful sketches of the early colonial life of squatters, whalers, convicts, diggers, and others who left their native land and never returned*, London: Ward Lock and Co., 1870, p.268.
- 27 Ian Clark (ed.) *The Journal of George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector, Port Phillip Protectorate*, Vol 4, 1 January 1844-24 October 1845, Melbourne: Heritage Matters, 2000, entry for 7 June 1844.
- 28 Peter Dean Gardner, Some Random Notes on the Massacres, 2000-2015, p.5. [https://petergardner.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Notes-on-Massacres-rev.ed\\_.pdf](https://petergardner.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Notes-on-Massacres-rev.ed_.pdf) (accessed 31 January 2021).
- 29 Gippslander was believed to be William Hoddinott whose parents came to Victoria in 1840 and worked on a mission station before coming to Merriman's Creek about 1840 and then to *Sunville* on Warragul Creek (Royal Historical Society of Victoria, A-229-D and P-132.007.Pi).
- 30 Gippslander, 'Warrigal Creek', *The Gap: a school magazine by the teachers of the Bairnsdale Inspectorate*, 1925, p.6.

- 31 Gardner, *Our Founding Murdering Father*, p.34.
- 32 'Murder at Gippsland', *Port Phillip Herald*, 29 July 1843, p.1.
- 33 Gippslander, 'Warrigal Creek', p.6. Formal settlement at Sale dates from 1844; at the time of the murder it was known as Flooding Creek.
- 34 'Shipping Intelligence', *The Australian*, Sydney, 2 August 1843, p.3.
- 35 Robinson Journal, entry for 19 May 1844.
- 36 George Mackaness (ed.), *George Augustus Robinson's Journey into South Eastern Australia [1844]: with George Henry Haydon's narrative of part of the same journey*, Sydney: [G. Mackaness], 1941, p.10.
- 37 Marguerita Stephens (ed.), *The Journal of William Thomas: Assistant Protector of the Aborigines of Port Phillip and Guardian of the Aborigines of Victoria 1839–1867*, Volume 2, 1844 to 1853, Melbourne: Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, 2014, entry for 21 April 1845. (Macalister is spelt McAllister, except in the first instance it is transcribed as McAllister.)
- 38 Scouring is the spelling in the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* and means to search or cleanse.
- 39 Thomas Journal, entry for 21 April 1845.
- 40 Wayne Caldwell, 'The Warrigal Creek Massacre: true story or apocryphal?', *Quadrant Online*, 30 December 2020 (accessed 17 March 2023).
- 41 Gippslander, 'Warrigal Creek', p.6.
- 42 Gardner, *Our Founding Murdering Father*, p.38.
- 43 *Ibid.* p.39
- 44 Dunderdale arrived in Australia in 1853 and came to Gippsland as Clerk of Courts at Alberton. He lived at Tarraville between 1869 and 1889 and collected local stories.
- 45 Dunderdale, p.225.
- 46 Gammon Creek is on the same run as Warrigal Creek.
- 47 Ian D. Clark (ed), *Scars in the Landscape: a register of massacre sites in western Victoria 1803–1859*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1995, p.107.
- 48 Peter Dean Gardner, *Through Foreign Eyes*, Ensay, Vic.: Centre for Gippsland Studies, 1988, p.95. I have not been successful in locating the speech in the Melbourne University Archives or its other collections.
- 49 *Gippsland Times*, 23 May 1940, p.5, 'Early Days of Gippsland: Interesting Reminiscences'.
- 50 Mackay, p.24.
- 51 F.C. Bury, 'History of Metung', Royal Historical Society of Victoria, Box 125/14, MS 000387.
- 52 Butcher's Creek flows into Slaughterhouse Creek before entering the Lakes.
- 53 Reported in Patrick Morgan, *The Settling of Gippsland: a regional history*, [Leongatha, Vic.]: Gippsland Municipalities Association, 1997, p.57.
- 54 Charles James Tyers diary, 1839–1849, A1428, State Library of New South Wales, entry for 21 June 1849, pp.87–89.
- 55 PROV VPRS 8168/P0002, Run 916 Swan Reach/Mibost.
- 56 Caroline Dexter, *Ladies Almanack, 1858: the Southern Cross or Australian Album and New Year's Gift; the first ladies almanac published in the colonies*, Melbourne: W. Calvert, 1858, p.37.
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 Diary of Jean Gamel, held by Robert Christie.
- 59 Howden was initially an employee of Turnbull and Orr but by the 1860s was a partner in Turnbull and Howden.
- 60 Ian C. Howden, *William Balleny Howden: the triumphs and tears of an Australian pioneer*, Bloomington, Ind.: Balboa Press, [2017], p.66.
- 61 Charles James Tyers diary, 2 February 1844–15 February 1846, MS 8151, Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria, entry for 4 May 1844.
- 62 William Adams Brodribb, *Recollections of an Australian Squatter, 1835–1883*, Sydney: John Ferguson, in association with the Royal Australian Historical Society 1978 (facsimile reprint), p.33.
- 63 Mackaness (ed.), p.10.
- 64 Watson, p.282.
- 65 *Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Aborigines; together with the proceedings of Committee, minutes of evidence, and appendices*, Melbourne: Government Printer, 1859, p.2.
- 66 Thomas to La Trobe, Letterbook, 1 January 1840 to 26 August 1840, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, MLMSS 214/vol8/item2; Robinson Journal, entry for 27 April 1844. (The incident occurred at Little Brighton, in or near today's Hurlingham Park, Brighton East; earlier incidents occurred at Western Port, and between Kangerong and Arthur's Seat.)
- 67 Robinson Journal, entry for 5 May 1844, 'It is the spirit of revenge that keeps the native police together'.
- 68 Gippslander, 'Warrigal Creek', p.6.
- 69 Robinson Journal, entry for 15 June 1844.
- 70 John Sadleir, *Recollections of a Victorian Police Officer*, Melbourne: George Robertson, 1913, pp.295–296.
- 71 PROV VPRS 90, Day book, Native Police Corps, Narre Warren, 23 January 1847; John Sadleir, 'Oldtime Memories: The Brothers Dana', *Australasian*, 26 March 1898, p.47.
- 72 Dunderdale, p.230, 'When the dog had thus expelled the natives from Glencoe, Campbell agreed to lend him to little Curlewis for three months in order to clear Holey Plains Station'.
- 73 Patrick Coady Buckley diary, January 1844–August 1853, January 1862–June 1872, MS14199, Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria.

- 74 Buckley diary, January 1844–June 1872 (rewritten), MS 000097 (Box 037-4), Royal Historical Society of Victoria, entry for 20 January 1845.
- 75 *Gippsland Times*, 28 March 1876, p.3.
- 76 *Port Phillip Patriot and Morning Advertiser*, 22 January 1847, p.2.
- 77 *Map of Gippsland*, 1845-47, Manuscripts Collection, State Library Victoria H7567. (Accessible online at <https://www.latrobesociety.org.au/images/LaTrobeMapOfGippsland.jpg>).
- 78 Dianne Reilly (ed.) *Charles Joseph La Trobe: Australian Notes 1839-1854, Yana Glen, Vic.*: Tarcoola Press, in association with the State Library of Victoria and Boz Publishing, 2006, pp.128-133.
- 79 John Barnes, *La Trobe: Traveller, Writer, Governor*, Braddon, ACT: Halstead Press, in association with State Library Victoria and La Trobe University, 2017, p. 194.
- 80 Phillip Pepper, *You Are What You Make Yourself To Be: the story of a Victorian Aboriginal family, 1842-1980*, Melbourne: Hyland Press, 1980, p.15.
- 81 *Gippsland Electoral Rolls for 1856 and Stock Assessment Payable*, Bairnsdale: Kapana Press, 1985, p.16. Reproduced from Exploration and Settlement of Bairnsdale District for Schools, document 1.
- 82 Francis Hales, 'Transcript of the diary of Reverend Francis Hales, January 1848–March 1851, Box 22/4m, Royal Historical Society of Victoria, entry for 22 April 1848.
- 83 'Rough Journal of Rev. W. Bean', 15 January–23 February [1849], *Gippsland Standard*, 8 July 1914, p.2.
- 84 'Legislative Assembly, Aboriginal Protection', *Geelong Advertiser*, 2 March 1860, p.2. (From 1860 to 1869 the Board was constituted as the Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of Aborigines.)
- 85 PROV VPRS 5920, Pastoral Run files, 1840-1878 (microfiche), accessible online via Ancestry.
- 86 Re-member (former members), [https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/index.php?option=com\\_fabrik&view=list&listid=23&Itemid=1135&limitstart=0](https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/index.php?option=com_fabrik&view=list&listid=23&Itemid=1135&limitstart=0) (accessed 17 March 2023).
- 87 *Age*, 25 May 1865, p.6, 'Death of Angus McMillan'.
- 88 See R.W. Christie and G.D. Gray, *Victoria's Forgotten Goldfield: a history of the Dargo, Crooked River Goldfield*, 2nd ed., Dargo: High Country Publishing, 1997, p.33.
- 89 Simon Gillies took up *Glenaladale* run with the McLean Bros in 1845, his Iguana Creek Hotel being on the road to Dargo.
- 90 Endocarditis usually occurs when germs in the bloodstream attach to damaged areas of the heart. People with damaged or artificial heart valves or other heart conditions are most at risk.
- 91 Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003, p.12.
- 92 Gippsland artist Annemieke Mein completed a bronze bas-relief sculpture of McMillan in 1984 for the Gippsland Art Gallery. The work is controversial; with considerable artistic licence she has included the faint outline of two skulls in his saddlebag, whereas nothing indicates that anything of this nature took place, <https://annemiekemein.net.au/bas-relief.htm>.



**John Calder, artist**  
**Angus McMillan, 1864**  
 Oil on canvas, overpainted c.1960s  
 Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale, 2018.062  
 Frame inscription: 'Portrait of Angus McMillan  
 Esq, J P, Discover of Gipps Land anno 1839 & 1840.  
 Presented by a few friends and admirers to the Shire  
 Council of Alberton, November 1864'