

## **Submission to YOORROOK Justice Commission**

**Viki Sinclair 30.11.24**

**Korumburra Vic 3950**

### **Acknowledgement Of Custodians of Country, the Gunaikurnai**

I firstly want to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the country upon which I live, the Gunaikurnai people. I pay my full respects to their Elders past, present and emerging and in recognition that their story has never really been told and acknowledged by people like me, a direct descendant of one of the original settlers of Gippsland. I thank you for this opportunity to publicly tell my personal story of my family's part in this terrible time of white settlement enacting aboriginal genocide to the original aboriginal peoples here in Gippsland.

### **My personal history & research of my family's involvement and responsibility in the C19<sup>th</sup> indigenous massacres of Gippsland**

I am a descendant of my great great grandparents Colin McLaren of Stirling, Scotland and Elizabeth Stewart Medley of Waterford Ireland who were among the original white settlers in the Lake Wellington, Sale & Maffra areas. I believe my great great grandfather Colin McLaren was among those many people and groups who perpetrated significant massacres and killings of aboriginal people in this area during the time of the first white settlement especially from 1840-1850 but continuing up til the end of the 19th Century and even beyond. I wish to properly acknowledge my family's role then and my current moral responsibility for the terrible impact this past has had on our traditional owners, right up to this very day. I hope my story will add to the many submissions to this Commission to bring about real and lasting change to Gippsland's documented and accepted history and so help towards real positive change for indigenous people here.

My personal research about my early settler family has revealed the near genocide of the indigenous people living across Gippsland, the forced removal of many children from their remaining families after the early massacres and other damaging, deadly white perpetrated acts carried out at this time including the forcible and often lasting disconnection of most people from their families, groups, clans and kin. The enforced denial and punishment for use of indigenous language, cultural practices and beliefs has caused disastrous, heartbreaking but inevitable inter generational damage including much loss of life. It has shattered previously very effective aboriginal systems of law and order, and a way of living successfully in lifestyles which emphasised human well being including family life. This has had lasting damaging health, housing, education, economic and social consequences up to this very day. The existing, perpetuating indigenous aboriginal lore and highly developed social systems provided a secure, highly successful system of social, physical and spiritual cohesion providing amazing sustainability to the long time aboriginal nation of Australia. As a result of this careful knowledge, practice and nurturing, we have in Australia the oldest living indigenous culture remaining in the known world with evidence that the ancestors of indigenous people here today have lived on this continent for over 65,000 years! However, the gap in access to a quality life and even survival between them and all other people in Australia is widening and will continue to do so until this matter of truth telling is finally addressed. We all need to learn and come to understand with this our true past if we are to address and end forever the terrible gap in well being between the aboriginal and post colonial settler peoples of this country and are able to ever live in harmony in a healthy future together.

I have been part of many groups and actions for much of my life to support indigenous justice and human rights and the thought of opening up this potentially distressing part of my own history was something I wanted to protect myself from at all costs. I avoided it for a very long time. My first job was working with indigenous people in and around Alice Springs. This experience from Day 1 challenged all my preconceived, understanding and learnings not only about aboriginal life but life generally in Australia. I was totally ill-equipped to support aboriginal people being only 23 years

old as a naive, first year, trained “Social Worker” living always in Melbourne in relative comfort and privilege. The one thing I had going for me I now recognise was that I was raised in a family with a strong commitment to universal social justice and human rights. I had no aboriginal culture orientation provided before undertaking this work. I soon found that most of my predominantly aboriginal “clients” were still living quite traditional lives and using their native languages as their first language. All still lived in or had close ties to their indigenous communities as they always had but were now living in great deprivation and poverty. I found they had sometimes no running, accessible water nearby or access to the basics of life or necessary services like health and education other than what was left by the non indigenous settlers around them. This was a direct contrast to the white residents of these areas. The nature of their lives mostly in town housing, camps, settlements or reserves they were now living permanently on was also usually forced upon them as the only alternative provided or left available for these trying to live on country. The out station aboriginal movement was in its infancy and not really well supported or even promoted. Many people had major health problems, large numbers were elderly, most were with their families including their children and there was evidence already of growing social and cultural breakdown in the early 1970’s. It was a parallel universe to me at that at this time of my life and in fact it was then the same reality for all of Alice Springs. To be honest, I think I failed in understanding their lives and in providing what they wanted and often needed most and certainly in advocating for any real change to improve the unjust system that perpetuated this cycle continuing. Two very different worlds co-existing somehow alongside each other not terribly well but with strong, unrecognised evidence of the most damaging loss and harm to the traditional owners’ people in the area.

Over my lifetime (I am now 78 years), I have worked in groups alongside aboriginal people in varied forums, visited and taken part in many events, visited places of importance to aboriginal people to try to learn more and more and still continue to read and listen widely to better increase my understanding and knowledge. I have met many wonderful people, black and white who have taught me so much a lot along the way. I am now a longtime member of the South Gippsland Bass Coast Reconciliation Group for many years now, helping to obtain a name change to the previous McMillan electorate on racial grounds.

### **Why tell this truth**

I believe that truths like mine need to be “put on the table” for all to know, being documented as they will be in the ways white people can I hope fully understand and come to accept. Very few white historians or people have ever recorded first hand the words of aboriginal people themselves about what happened here and its lasting impact. We in most cases have not seen the need to learn how we might learn about this from these aboriginal descendants, we have not learned aboriginal languages, we have not taken the necessary time to listen to people’s oral stories, we have not spend long hours sitting down with these descendants to listen to and record their knowledge of these early times pre white settlement and its impacts upon their families lives. We have not had the patience and wisdom to learn how to read the land or to let aboriginal people teach us about these things. We do not still mix with or even live close to aboriginal people across much of this country. It seems aboriginal inclusion in our history has never been felt necessary or even deliberately excluded from our education system and history telling.

Nearly all our recognised and accepted Australian history comes from published written accounts by white historians, usually based upon white people’s correspondence and written documents from their past. As aboriginal communities did not use the written word but rather used storytelling, yarning, art and cultural practices, their contribution was not recognised, valued and even rarely attempted. I am therefore grateful to be part of this genuine story telling gathering which allows people like me but far more importantly the aboriginal peoples of this land we now call “Gippsland” to speak their truth in the ways they want and can at last about these things.

I ask all non-indigenous Australians to please listen and learn as I finally did. The evidence of our stories will then hopefully become the new, true narrative and universally accepted version of the history of “Australia” in which the story of this country rightfully begins over 60,000 years ago.

### **My truth – My story.**

I wrote the following letter on 3rd July 2015 to several Gippsland local papers having come to new understandings about my background and wishing to be personally and publicly accountable for what happened in Gippsland during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The letter told of my original facing up to the truth of my ancestry which I had avoided and feared for many years.

This is an extract from my letter of July 2015:

*“I have long believed that my forebear Colin McLaren who explored with Angus McMillan, helped “discover” the area around Port Albert and opened it up to settlement. I always felt a certain pride in this, my connection with the early history of Gippsland. Similarly, I was taught and believed from early childhood that Capt. Phillip “discovered” Australia by landing at Botany Bay in 1788.*

*However, “discover” is a very misleading word in the context of exploration. It was used erroneously by explorers who found or “discovered” new lands for their home country government. In Australia, it completely denied the existence of the indigenous people who lived here for 40,000 -60,000 years. Their rich civilisation was totally discounted by the new arrivals. I now realise that, by holding onto my learned beliefs, along with most, I have covertly endorsed “terra nullius” in Australia.*

*My need for personal exploration was sparked after watching “the Secret River” ABC TV series recently. What really happened at this time in Gippsland? What role did my original settler forebears play? I feared the worst and I have found the worst.*

*The truth I found is very relevant to this NAIDOC Week in Gippsland.*

*My early Gippsland McLaren family set up together in 1841 near Stratford (at Strathfieldsaye near Lake Wellington, owned by Odell Raymond), with Colin as a stockman and his wife Elizabeth as housekeeper. Their lives were harsh and they had likely come from poverty in their home countries of Scotland and Ireland. It seems my great great grandmother may have come on her own from Ireland in 1841 at 14 years with an 8 year old sister, perhaps as a Bounty Immigrant! She was married at just 17, after working on one of Odell Raymond’s outstations. Colin was most likely a sailor in earlier years. They were obviously desperate to seek and make better lives and establish a family here – so much like the family depicted in the ABC film. They were uneducated in this foreign land, far from their countries of birth and in great isolation.*

*White settlement did not occur in Gippsland without resistance. As clearly shown in “The Secret River”, extreme conflict soon arose between aboriginals and the English settlers for this fertile, well watered land. Several thousand cattle and sheep were brought across from NSW, looking for good pasture. The local tribes had already been impacted on the Wilson’s Promontory coast by white sealers and whalers who stole up to 5 wives each from the local aboriginal tribes in the late 1700’s. This so decimated the women in the area, that savage conflicts developed between tribes over women.*

*Manning Clark in his writings has stated that “On all the frontiers of settlement, settlers treated the aborigines as vermin which had to be destroyed”. In frontier areas, they were called “savages”. Whites carried out “indiscriminate slaughter” on the aboriginal population. “Few, if any, questions were ever asked about the methods they used”.*

*Horrifically, the total aboriginal population of Gippsland was decimated by the new settlers in a very short time. This genocide also resulted in their languages and customs being nearly obliterated by*

1900. They were estimated to be 4000 in number before settlement and less than 100 within 20 years. Others put the figures from 2000 in 1840 (the date of first settlement) to 87 in 1830 and 11 in 1863. (Aboriginal population figures range a lot due to poor statistical methods used at the time.) The Tatungalung tribe with a minimum of 500 people formerly occupied the land around the Gippsland Lakes. Yet by 1855, "when the last battle was over, just a handful of adults and boys were left" (Odell Raymond, *Strathfieldsaye* 15.8.1853). Aborigines had begun to retaliate as their living and hunting places were fenced with settlement. In effect, aborigines usually only attacked a few livestock at a time and killed white settlers on an individual basis when specific intrusions and actions became intolerable. Whatever the statistics, the story is clear – almost all the Gunaikurnai people were killed in East Gippsland, immediately following white settlement. Only a handful of white settlers such as squatter Henry Meyrick in 1846 stood out against such horrors and resisted the atrocities and/or documented what really happened.

Angus MacMillan was the major leader in the indigenous massacres that occurred in East Gippsland. He and his Highland Scots "Brigade" and major landholders and their employees of the time, have been incontrovertibly implicated by researchers in these brutal killings. In all there were 9 known documented massacres (others are more than likely). My relative Colin McLaren was almost certainly a member of his Brigade.

East Gippsland was very isolated geographically, so that these early "civilised" white men could act with impunity. They well knew their actions were criminal and that they could hang, as evidenced by their agreeing to an Oath required by MacMillan that swore them to secrecy about the massacres. Colin McLaren ended his days living alone on Rotamah Island for 30+ years. During this time, he told the stories of those early days to people who wrote them down. McLaren "never tired of singing the praises of his old boss" MacMillan. However, it is evident from Colin McLaren himself that he was directly implicated at least in the Boney Point and Butcher's Creek near Maffra massacres along with MacMillan.

The massacre at Warrigal Creek near Woodside was the worst known and is well documented. There 60-180 people were mowed down ruthlessly in a vicious "blood bath" and without warning in retaliation for the killing of one of the Macalister's. Some even put the deaths at 300, other state up to 1000. The creek was running with blood. Whole communities across East Gippsland were similarly attacked in their communal gathering places – all the babies, women, children and men. Very few women were left by the end.

The few people who escaped this murderous genocide ran initially to inhospitable swamps and far ranges. Eventually, for their "protection", all were rounded up and forcibly put in Reserves and Missions, now notorious for their cruelty and repression. MacMillan remarkably took on the role of "protector of aborigines" after he had subdued and removed them from the land. It was then that the forced removal of children began. It is well known that landholders took aboriginal women for sexual purposes, resulting in illegitimate children. These "half caste" children were usually not recognised or supported by their fathers and were taken under great duress from their aboriginal mothers and families later, to become "the stolen generation".

We probably cannot now imagine how it must have felt to be an indigenous person prior to this time in the 1840's, living harmoniously over generations on this plentiful land. Nor can we imagine what it was like to face an unwinnable, sudden and brutal invasion by another race of people with superior firepower, with no capacity for recourse or recognition. These events are so very recent. They happened only 175 years ago i.e. 4 generations of my family, largely from 1840-1850.

Areas such as South Gippsland may not have had the same murderous history but indirectly white settlement there effectively annihilated its traditional owners also. The impact of diseases including syphilis, diet and poor living standards took a harsh toll. It is estimated that the population decreased by 95% at the end of the 19th Century.

What did the white settlers achieve? What was it all for? I know that these early settlers were hoping to make their fame and personal fortunes, yet many like MacMillan and McLaren, died

*intestate or with little left for their descendants. Was it really all worth it in the end? We, who now live in beautiful Gippsland as a result of this history, must never forget what got us to here. It is our history too. It came at such an unthinkable, terrible cost!*

*My own extreme distress at what I have learned now needs action, not words. There must be full public recognition and valuing of the prior occupation of aboriginal people in Gippsland for over 30,000 years in ways that bring about lasting change for people's of indigenous backgrounds here."*

This later personal journey of research starting with my Gippsland ancestors in the early 1840's has hit home on a far deeper level than I could have ever imagined or had ever experienced before. As a consequence, while I personally did not carry out the terrible acts in Gippsland of the 19th century, I now hold forever an inherited grief and will always feel moral and active, personal responsibility for what what happened and which still continues today as terrible injustice for our aboriginal peoples of Gippsland.

One unexpected, positive consequence of this letter for me was the receipt of some wonderful emails from people who supported my speaking out. Peter Gardner, well known and highly respected author of books about this such as "Gippsland Massacres" 1983 was one such person whose kind thoughts I greatly valued. I have learned so much from reading his thorough research, so forensically gathered despite considerable opposition and which he finally self published to provide what I believe is the first accurate and culturally aware, comprehensive account of the early Gippsland frontier wars written by a white person. I came to understand from this post letter experience that that I was one of the few if any of the numerous original descendants of white settlers perpetrating aboriginal deaths at the time who have publicly spoken the truth of their ancestors' involvement in this genocide at this time.

Another wonderful relationship I developed as a consequence of my letter was with Cal Flynn, author of "*Thicker than Water*", April 2016. Cal became a unique "soulmate" for me as she was undertaking the same painful journey and at the very same time of trying to find out the truth of her original white settler ancestors here and their responsibility for aboriginal genocidal acts of the time. Cal's journey was a particularly heavy burden as her indirect forbear was Angus McMillan. She like I, had a lifetime commitment to human social justice but at the time with a focus on Scotland, the land of her birth. It was wonderful to finally meet her in Yarram when she talked with many in the local community including school children to help spread the truth of what she had personally found and experienced, telling stories so honestly of the frontier wars and indigenous genocide she had written about. **Her book should be mandatory reading in all Gippsland schools and be included in all home and public libraries.**

I include a few pieces from my correspondence with Cal Flynn to show what that journey was like for me at that time -

#### **Email to Cal Flynn from Viki Sinclair 5.7.2016**

*I guess for me it really resonated having gone thru an almost identical crisis of faith in learning the initial heroics of my ancestor and then being faced with the undeniable fact that I am actually the descendant of a mass murderer of aboriginal people, the people who have lived here for over 40,000-60,000 years, whose unity with the land is unparalleled and who are the people who are the original guardians of our land. The truth of inter-generational guilt is so real. For me, I have slowly and painfully tried to work thru my conflicts this last year. You address this so well.*

*I also am riveted by what his story tells us about mankind and our possible horrendous actions under certain situations. It seems such a universal story but*

*in uniquely Australian context – even more so given the cultural wealth and incredible longevity in history of the indigenous people here. How does an apparently ordinary, virtuous man change into someone who indiscriminately can help murder a whole nation of people in 20 years?? As is said in your book, "You can't take it back". You can't change the past – just learn and grow.*

.....

*Like you, I also feel this story has universal connotations – how can people abandon all their usual moral precepts/societal mores and do such inhuman acts which finally lead to genocide. mob action and unlimited, ferocious mass killing.*

*I think your book is contributing and will add so much to the current and evolving debate on our true history and how to acknowledge and recognise it properly. I especially refer locally to pressure for a name change for the McMillan Electorate in Gippsland which is moving slowly towards fruition, the likely referendum in Australia on Constitutional change to include recognition of aboriginal people as the initial owners of this land and finally and hopefully towards Treaty between those who "invaded" or "settled" as many still prefer and the people who had lived here for countless generations as the first Australians."*

## **My personal experience of history gathering**

I wish to also share my personal experience and learnings from trying to obtain an accurate account of what was happening to indigenous people in this period to provide a broader context for and understanding of my settler family's story.

### **a) Gippsland Historical Collections**

I found so much of our Gippsland history collections are dominated by accounts of white experiences of this post settlement period with little apparent need identified, let alone steps being undertaken to obtain any relevant information from an aboriginal perspective. I became very aware there is a serious lack of a critical counterbalance to the current one-sided, post colonial settlers' accounts of our past. I found this narrow perspective to be held onto very strongly in Gippsland's various museums, collections, libraries and even in our homes. Our history records and stories of "Gippsland" do not usually even try to include the true gamut of this land's continuous indigenous history for over 60,000 years. We non-indigenous people of Gippsland are actively prevented from knowing or understanding our history which has at its beginning and core, the history of this aboriginal land called "Gunaikurnai" with its five Clans – the Brataualung, the Brayakaulung, the Brabralung, the Tatungalung and the Krauatungalung. This is pretty much missing in the places we usually go to find out what really happened as it now stands.

Throughout my long journey, I have come to learn however, there is considerable evidence already in existence of our local aboriginal culture and experiences recorded or available in all sorts of ways once you are motivated and want to start looking. There are so many books, museums, collections, local people and groups around us to take us usually "whities" into the world of the non-indigenous peoples of this land. Krowathunkooloong -The Keeping Place – in Bairnsdale was one such place for me. I found it a mind and spirit "shifting head" place. Krowathunkooloong is a deceptively unassuming, unique museum in which to immerse yourself and learn. It has illuminating, informative books and information for all ages. Taking the Bataluk Cultural Trail and finding out all you can about the story of each site you will visit, is also a "mind altering" learning experience

as you actually walk our indigenous people's old pathways and experiences on foot and directly.

I have come away with the feeling that the long-held white settler, racial bias about our indigenous history has created an almost denial of its existence where most of us now almost instinctively close our ears, eyes and minds to wanting to know anything about this other side of our past. Otherwise, all of us white descendants surely should have recognised by now that there is an indigenous context to the lives of our forbears starting out here in Gippsland! I often now wonder how my wonderful great, great, great grandmother Elizabeth felt at only 15 years of age being sent to one of Odell Raymond's outstations out on Lake Wellington, far away from even his tiny 1-2 room timber residence at Strathsfieldsaye. She would have been sent out there as the only female to "look after" the men working way out away from this original settler "homestead". She was so very young and had just been through the most confronting, challenging experience in a time of no world knowledge, being sent away from her Irish family and country, being put on that long, terrible boat journey out to here while solely being responsible for her little sister, then upon arrival in "terra nullius" being "bought" off the wharf in Williamstown by Odell Raymond and later taken without her little sister to his home Strathsfieldsaye in Gippsland in those very first days of settlement. There was speculation in my family that her first child, my great, great grandmother, Sarah Jane Stratford McLaren was the first white child born in the area, given the date of her birth and her rare middle name of "Stratford". I am very sure that young, teenage Elizabeth would have been pretty much left on her own with the stockmen working away almost permanently on the mostly unfenced land. I am also very sure from my research there was a substantial and probably continuous aboriginal community living around Lake Wellington at the time and so Elizabeth must have had some if not constant, even daily interaction with this community. I now often ponder on how her life might have been alone with them all out together living there, each undertaking their individual regular, necessary daily activities of survival and surely observing each other at the very least. What happened and what this like for her and those nearby aboriginal peoples on their cultural and spiritual lands which had sustained them so successfully for so many, long continuous generations? I can only hope that these indigenous people provided her with somewhat of a sharing and comforting presence and even contact to counter what must have been the most frightening, demanding and isolated period of her short life. I know that the book "Secret River" (Kate Grenville) encourages me perhaps to want this as my preferred "white truth". But probably I need to recognise that it likely would have increased her fears and terror given her limited life experience, lack of understanding of the indigenous local languages and culture and with such very racist views being promulgated by those "frontier living", adult white men she was placed to live with out there.

There is so much work to do in "white" Gippsland to redress our predominantly false accounts of its history

### **b) Books, Stories and Writings**

I have an eclectic personal collection of books gathered over many years telling of the life of aboriginal people mostly since white settlement. However many were written a long time. As such, they contain very second hand or even more distant accounts from white, Anglo-background authors. I now am increasingly conscious of the fact also that way too many historical books of our past simply include everything in a white letter or account of an event, without the author or editor including any critical, wider indigenous context or deeper analysis or comment to provide a more accurate understanding of the worth and place of any such inclusions. Too often, they simply stand confidently and falsely in actually giving a racist, one-sided version of the "truth".

Aspects of Rob Christie's - "A Convenient Scapegoat - Angus McMillan and the Gippsland Massacres" 2023, recently again reminded me of this being an ongoing problem. So I will try to explain why I felt this at the time. I recently sought out this newly released book, hoping to glean

more about my early history and additional evidence of our indigenous past. While I found accounts which certainly portrayed wide settler brutality and responsibility in the “frontier wars”, the overall experience for me still was pretty much of a white culture perspective and bias. I was very much alerted to this possibility from the start by the author’s Preface - *“Whilst acknowledging events that took place in the 19th century have no place in today’s society at the same time it is a mistake to impose our moral viewpoint on the past.”* This seemed to promulgate the predominant “Anglo” view that we post-colonial, 21<sup>st</sup> century Australians must now have no further moral accountability or consequent responsibility to enact any redress for what is about to be told. For me who now holds a very different view, it raised the question - “Would we and do we currently now accept this position from other peoples in other countries?” I think not! I cannot only now question how the author and we ourselves feel about and regard perpetrators of other terrible genocidal massacres and inhuman treatment of people right across our world. Many of these awful, global events still touch many of us living in Australia personally- for some even now. Everyone resident here, apart from our indigenous Australians, has come from a wide variety of immigrant backgrounds. I think we all now pretty universally reject such behaviour and want to see full legal accountability internationally for any enacted racist carnage.

We need to remember and recognise that colonial white settlement happened here on this very land less than 200 years ago. These events occurred within people’s near memory and certainly their impacts are felt, told and passed down still as living stories with much pain deep within our long hurting, indigenous families! The legacy of this terrible time and racist murderous actions still badly impacts aboriginal lives and their ongoing circumstances in so many ways today. I can only believe that all too often our racial biases whether unintended or not, are still playing a very significant part in deciding what history about our early past we still want to know about, include and respect. Such biases can very effectively blinker us to the truth and even worse, cause terrible ongoing harm.

I am sure it is always extraordinarily difficult to decide which stories and facts to include and for what purpose and which may need some editing or explanation when writing such historic accounts. However I found that the way this was handled in this book occasionally caused me considerable discomfort. Two sections which caused this feeling in me arose in the telling of the “White Woman” story and the “Indigenous Battles” chapter.

The first story did not include the fact that McMillan himself actually precipitated, terrible aboriginal massacres by initially sending an erroneous letter to the press. This letter no doubt enhanced by his elevated position in society at the time, caused an almost hysterical revenge, lynching behaviour in the general white population over an event for which there was never found any evidence whatsoever. This is a most telling omission. To my mind, the specific details which were included in the author’s account also supports the original lurid, racist “fiction” which helped bring about this awful slaughter of men, women and children; old and young. I have sadly found this false version and its terrible lies being perpetuated even now, in white circles in Gippsland.

The Chapter “Indigenous Battles” which supposedly sets out the details of the inter-tribal conflicts of the time actually provides no critical evaluation of the veracity of these stories and with no attempt to analyse the truth and content that is being included, let alone from an indigenous perspective. I eventually came to doubt even the purpose of this Chapter in this book. The overall picture as provided by the content of this section also left a most negative view of the early aboriginal inhabitants of Gippsland at very least. I believe that including such information without proper scrutiny as to truth and purpose runs the risk of promulgating the racist 19<sup>th</sup> century white view of aborigines as as earlier described by Manning Clarke, as “ruthless savages” or “vermin”. I worry that it may well cause some readers to just accept these facts as proof that the original, slaughtered indigenous inhabitants themselves were themselves a big part of the cause for their own people’s near annihilation! This could also potentially lead some readers into further dangerous,



incorrect views that our forefathers consequently had reduced culpability in the terrible, mass killings and tortures of this period and that perhaps the local aboriginal peoples were even deserving of what was done to them!

I do however strongly support the author's general intent that the "*darker side of white settlement must be included*" and that there needed to be the inclusion of details of the "*many others who played a significant role in the persecution of the Gunaikurnai*." This book certainly shows the universal racist attitudes actively prevalent in the settler community of this period. There can be no doubt from the author's detailed accounts that they formed the basis of all settler attitudes to and interactions with their indigenous brothers and sisters. The often difficult circumstances and backgrounds of these isolated, white people including my family, together with the lack of any wider family or community systems to provide necessary support, security and structure and where no law and order systems were even in place or even close at hand and absolutely no legal culpability was available to call anyone of any rank to account, let alone redress any violent actions especially towards the indigenous population, no doubt helped create and compound what was clearly a very lawless, wild frontier settlement experience for all. This was indeed a dangerous mix which helped further ferment the original white population's racist, violent attitudes towards the indigenous population. This does provide a very real likely context for what did in fact happen in Gippsland for me.

This relentless near genocidal killing of the indigenous population in Gippsland that involved all settlers is now definitely clear from my reading of this book whatever my reservations about some of the content. To me, this was the key learning from and value of this book. Only a very few supportive residents like Henry Meyrick are known to have ever protested or spoken out publicly about the universal terror and truth of these events. The following of Meyrick's writings has been documented elsewhere but not included in this book unfortunately and so I include them here now- "*The blacks are very quiet here now, poor wretches. No wild beast of the forest was ever hunted down with such unsparing perseverance as they are. Men, women and children are shot whenever they can be met with ...*" *I have protested against it at every station I have been in Gippsland. In the strongest language, but these things are kept very secret as the penalty would certainly be hanging*". (Henry Meyrick, 1846.)

However even Meyrick, with such singular, apparent full compassion for these citizens' plight and considerable understanding of their immoral, systematic extermination by the white population, finally shows that he too in the end, when personally pushed and despite all his fine words, shared this accepted mantra – "*For myself, if I caught a black killing my sheep, I would shoot him with as little remorse as I would a wild dog*".

## Conclusion

We are now all part of the long journey ahead especially made more difficult after the 2023 VOICE Indigenous Referendum when the YES vote did not get up. So many of us worked so hard for it and hoped for so much, none more than our aboriginal peoples who it affects so much and directly. However we must never forget that 40% of Australians (a total 6,286,894 people) did vote a solid YES on that day. This occurred despite a highly orchestrated, political flood of misinformation, playing upon division within some aboriginal communities and deliberate scare tactics which predictably fed potential feelings of pervasive, unbridled racism of those early settlement years to ever take over here again. I feel there is now a strong, united force across our indigenous and non-indigenous peoples which will forever resist and prevent such racism ever occurring again in this country.

*A final thought – I particularly invite other white descendants of our original settlers to look hard into what may already be accepted but are in fact often erroneous and inaccurate, limited versions of their ancestry. I certainly found that to be true. I know this will be a hard journey for many. I feel we especially have a significant moral imperative and personal role to set the record straight at last. By so doing, I feel we will add to the “truth telling” of this Yoorrook Justice Commission. I can only hope that this action would in some part give the Gunnaikurna back their lost control and power which has caused such terrible, lasting damage for them from the very start our settlement of their land. We all surely must work together towards bringing about the urgent changes needed and so vital to closing the indigenous community's ever widening gap with the rest of us Australians.*