

Healing the Wounds – Some thoughts on Victorian Aboriginal People and the Soldier Settlements -Peter Bakker (June 2024)

While the Victorian Government's post war soldier settlement schemes were not designed to exclude Aboriginal ex-service persons from applying for a soldier settlement, the schemes themselves did lead to the breakup of Aboriginal mission land, the expulsion and dispersal of the Aboriginal inhabitants and the denial of allocation to Aboriginal ex-servicemen and women who were intimately connected to the mission and reserve lands.

In many cases the Aboriginal families expelled (or transferred) from their local missions and reserves had been promised that these lands would be allocated to them and their descendants for their use in perpetuity. In several of these situations, members of the local non-Aboriginal community around a particular mission or reserve are recorded as protesting and campaigning for the Aboriginal population against the injustices associated with the breakup or closure of these missions and reserves. Local non-Aboriginals objected against the Government policies and forcible removals on the grounds of recognising (1) that the government was breaking historical pledges, (2) that colonisation had deprived the Aborigines of their traditional lands and lifestyle, (3) the physical and mental suffering to Aboriginal families that would result, (4) that justice required the government to provide and maintain communities and safe places of refuge to the small populations of Aborigines that remained in Victoria.

The upheaval and trauma inflicted upon Victorian Aboriginal families with the break-up of their mission and reserve lands for soldier settlements was multi-faceted. These lands that their families had worked on for two or three generations were being handed over to Anglo-Saxon ex-servicemen, who often came from outside of the district and had little to no farming expertise like themselves. In cases where the soldier settlers had already been local residents, they often had pre-existing homes, occupations and at times even sizable properties. Aboriginal families who had so little had the most to lose.

Aboriginal men who not only had a deep spiritual connection to these last remnants of their traditional country, but who knew how to live, work and care for these lands. Prior to World War One there are several cases where these Aboriginal people had appealed to the Victorian government for allotments of mission /reserve land with the aim of farming them, to become independent and not a burden on the state. Great was the hurt and indignity experienced by Aboriginal communities after WW1 and 2, having family members killed or permanently injured during service and then the exclusion of a soldier settlement block to those who returned.

Only a handful of all Victorian Aborigines are known to have been allocated a soldier settlement block. Not just in Victoria, but in all of Australia, no Aboriginal is known to have received a soldier settlement allotment that was a portion of their own or another missions or reserves. The allotments that were given were typically a distance away from their communities, so interaction and support was denied to them. With their allotments traditionally belonging to another tribal group a connection to their 'own country' was denied to them. The harsh reality was that the lands provided for soldier Settlers in Victoria were uncleared, frequently without any building for accommodation or access to public utilities (water, gas, electricity), and unviable as a farming property. A combination of the soil and climatic conditions, plus the size of the allotments and

surface materials meant that even soldiers with farming experience could not make a viable living on these properties after several years very hard work.

ofte (who were usually foreign to both the district and to life on the) actions was further exacerbated through the policies and practices of several Government agencies, namely the Aboriginal Protection Board, the State Welfare Board and the Victoria Police who were involved in the exclusion of family members from residing on missions or reserves; the denial of access to rations and clothing supplies; restrictions on movement, employment and education; enforced domestic service of minors; the forced extraction of children who were placed in orphanages and homes. historically contribute majorly to the intergenerational trauma brought upon Victorian Aboriginal families through the breakup of their families and their traditional tribal land-based communities. Because of these Victorian Government based policies not only were Aboriginal families deprived of their connection to land and the destruction of their cultural heritage but inflicted upon them a cycle social and economic disadvantage for a large portion of the twentieth century – a set of conditions not experienced by any other group in Victorian society.

While it may not be possible for a government to redress all the wrongs of the historical past its policies inflicted on different groups in their society, the Victorian Government can and should make a special effort to provide a tangible form of reconciliation for the untold level of damage it uniquely and directly imposed on the original occupants and land carers of this state. It would be impossible to quantify the entire list of Aboriginal individuals and families impacted or their differing degrees of deprivation and suffering because of past policies. In fact many Aboriginal family lines no longer have descendants who could merit a share of any compensation that could be distributed, and the descendants of other Aboriginal family groups would not be entitled to their share.

So what meaningful and effective reconciliation process and redress can the Victorian Government provide to the descendants of Aboriginal Victorians? The response needs to be a reasonable and tangible form of justice in both the eyes of the Victorian Aboriginal people as well as non-Victorian Aboriginal people.

Half Caste Act 1886 expulsion 8-34 years and trauma modus operandi

– Alfred &

Hannah took a house to Greenvale – how did they get the land

Laura Bell had a block of land there – her g.mother

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Promised land & local support

Yoorrook Justice Commission



A continual flow of financial compensation is no solution and would be impossible to equitably distributed. In many cases it would create immeasurable disharmony among individual tribal groups and family members as well as perpetuate an extremely unhealthy psychosis of victimhood amongst modern day family members who do not personal experience the historical injustices of their families.

The solution to meaningful reconciliation may come in the form of the following. When speaking to many older and wise members of the Victorian Aboriginal community **the fundamental first tier of redress that they desire is for some form of ongoing recognition of the injustices that happened.** A few historical speeches by politicians, heads of government agencies (e.g. the Victorian Police) and community institutions (e.g. the churches) saying ‘Sorry’ for their past practices is fleeting sentiment. **An ongoing acknowledgement, an ongoing ‘truth-telling’ that provides information to all Australians about what happened needs to be provided.**

Secondly, a feasible and practical form reparation to Victorian Aboriginal people needs to be provided. On the form of reparations many Aboriginal people are very divided and, in many cases, uncertain of what it could or should be, so that it can realistically help address their quest for equitable justice. Both wise politicians and Aboriginal elders understand that appropriate historical compensation could not adequately be measured nor afforded in financial terms. However, **the common and actual core need and desire of Victorian Aboriginal people, is for the reclamation, preservation, and recognition of Victorian family histories and their traditional cultures. This is where the Victorian Government can make a tremendous and meaningful contribution. In order to achieve this the government needs to listen to the Victorian Aboriginal people and assist them with = information, ideas and then provide facilities and services to achieve these goals.** The positive outcomes would on so many levels including benefits to wider Australian society.

A suggestion that I would like to throw into the mix for consideration is that some form of ‘Aboriginal Recognition and Reconciliation Centre’ could be established by the government and largely operated by Aboriginal people that would provide both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people information and displays of the different traditional Aboriginal tribal lands and cultures of Victoria as well as the historical experiences and contributions of Aboriginal people since colonisation e.g. resistance wars, exploration, the gold rushes, the arts, music, sports, Aboriginal rights, military, education and science.

A Military Involvement room

In my own area of expertise, early Aboriginal military history, I can see the value of a room in such a centre recognising the contributions and sacrifices made by various individuals, families and communities to Australia during times of war. No such facility exists in Victoria for Aboriginal people to see their family members recognised. Not only does Victoria not have a public ‘keeping place’ that records and preserves the contributions of our Aboriginal men and women during various military conflicts it also does not have a state memorial for them, as do other large states: Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia. Through the pioneering efforts in 2007 of Aunty Dot Peters and Sam Halim (former Healesville RSL sub-branch President), Victoria has the distinction of being the first state to hold an annual Remembrance Day service for our Aboriginal servicemen and women at the end of Reconciliation Week in May at the Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance. However, the Shrine does not provide, have the responsibility

or the capacity to tell the stories of individual Aboriginal soldiers and that of their wider families and communities. Like so many other aspects of Victorian Aboriginal history, their contributions to Australia's military forces has only recently started to be acknowledged – this is part is because we are still playing catchup in identifying and recognising individual Aboriginals men and women who volunteered and served. Such a proposed central 'keeping place' would immensely help in the collection and publicising of this information in Victoria.

A 'military room' could contain:

- * A memorial wall of individual small plaques for those men and women who volunteered and served.
- * Displays outlining the military conflicts and the procedures, roles and conditions under which Aboriginals served plus the contributions and sacrifices made by Aboriginal communities.
- * Displays outlining the soldier settlements – how they resulted in the breakup of certain mission stations and how Aboriginal servicemen were denied allocations.
- * Photographic, uniform, medals, historic documents, letters and memorabilia displays.
- * Touch screen display that provide information on individual service persons.
- * A display and information on the Victorian Aboriginal Remembrance Service and the history.
- * A reference library (This however could be part of a larger library elsewhere in the 'keeping place' facility).

NOTE: If the Melbourne Shrine is not able to accommodate a state memorial to Aboriginal servicemen and women who have served in all conflicts then it may be possible and desirable for this state memorial to be included within the grounds of the proposed centrally located 'Aboriginal Recognition and Reconciliation Centre'.