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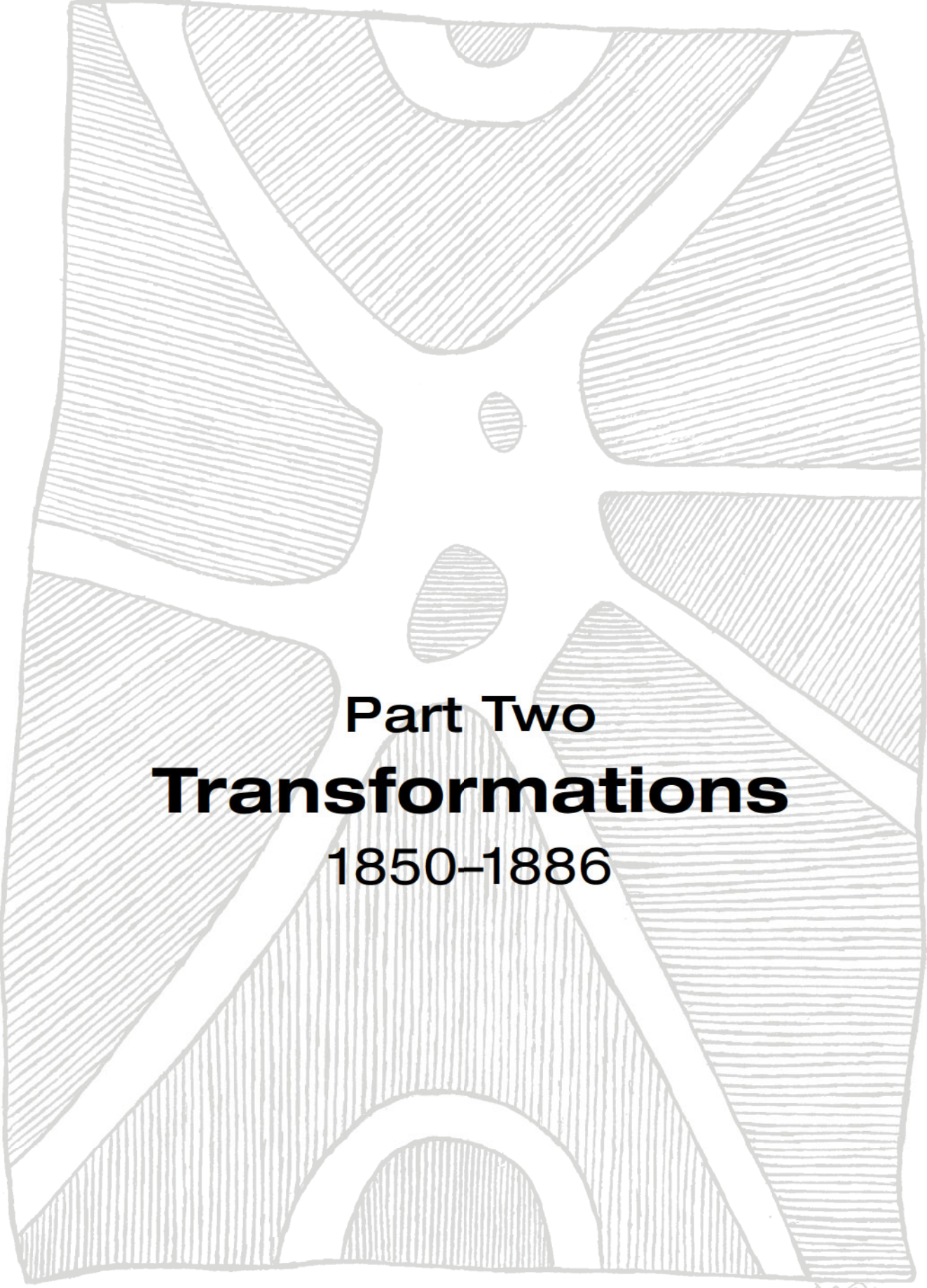
RICHARD BROOME

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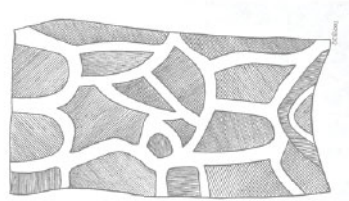
Part Two
Transformations
1850–1886

The wild times became quieter times as the frontier ended and white hegemony was extended over Victoria. Aboriginal and European cultures engaged, leading to change. The Aboriginal economy was swept away by pastoralism, gold mining and a small farming revolution. These disruptions to their links with land led to a decline and loss of the great Aboriginal tradition of the ceremonial cycle. The continuing catastrophic population decline compounded the loss of tradition, as knowledge was lost with the death of each elder. Diseases, especially tuberculosis but also measles, bit hard into the bodies of the people. Alcohol abuse played havoc as well. The population plummeted further. Missionary and secular enterprises to change Aboriginal people added to the pressures on them. A Board was established to protect and control their lives and transformations inevitably occurred.

Transformations were not always forced or imposed by circumstance. Aboriginal people across Victoria made choices from a new and limited range of options in the post-frontier world. They pushed and fought for land; they began to farm, work and play like Europeans; some adopted Christianity or began to listen to its message; most of the younger people learned to read and write, which empowered them. Aboriginal letters, petitions, and appearances before inquiries meant that their ideas were no longer mere shadows on a wall, pale reflections of what Europeans thought they believed, but were framed in their own words ringing out clearly. These words testified to their effort to forge new ways of being Aboriginal and becoming a free people again.

6

Negotiating Two Worlds



In the 1850s the Kulin sought to live as their great ancestors determined, but the pace of change quickened around them. The luck of geology deposited mineral wealth in Victoria which led to wondrous transformations once gold was discovered in 1851. As young men rushed from all parts of the globe to Victoria's golden gullies, Aboriginal people were shouldered aside in their own lands. The colony's non-indigenous population exploded ninefold in the decade to 540,000 people, while Aboriginal numbers fell by a further ten per cent to around 1,800 by 1860. Their percentage of the total population fell tenfold from 3.3 to 0.3 per cent over the decade.

Original owners were marginalised in their own lands, including in Melbourne where Aboriginal people were not now welcome. The land was progressively alienated by freehold sale from 1854, putting it legally beyond Aboriginal control. The newcomers controlled the land, government, the economy, and the infrastructure of education, religion, and the law. English was the official language. The newcomers also controlled the public discussion about Aboriginal people, which labelled them as 'inferior' and 'doomed to fade'. Across the colony Aboriginal people were obliged to negotiate with and adapt to aspects of this mega European world in the 1850s, while striving to stay enmeshed in their own cultural ways. It required great deftness and the skills of a diplomat.

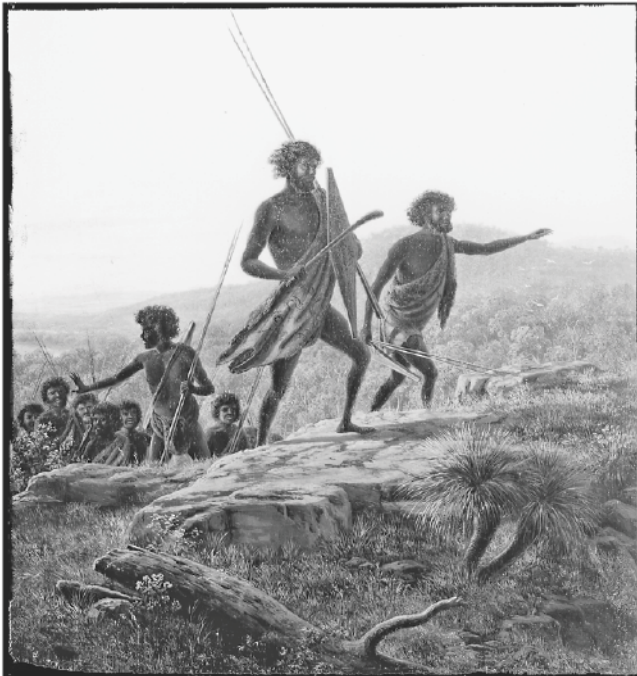
Imagining Aboriginal people

As European colonisation swept across global frontiers, causing indigenous deaths through disease, dispossession and violence, a widely

shared European notion arose: that indigenous people simply faded before the ‘stronger’ white civilisation.

This notion was a rationalisation for the usurpation of indigenes’ lands. Colonisers invented ‘laws’ governing the contact of peoples and also ‘flaws’ in indigenous peoples to shift the blame for colonial destruction onto both the natural order of things and the victims themselves. This notion that the so-called ‘weaker’ races fell inevitably before the ‘stronger’ flourished in post-frontier Victoria and elsewhere, as Aboriginal numbers continued to decline. The naturalist William Blandowski, first head of the new Museum of Victoria, wrote in 1855 that it was a ‘universal but mysterious law’ that white settlement across the globe led to ‘sweeping the backward races from the face of the earth.’¹ William Westgarth also commented in his *The Colony of Victoria* (1864): ‘It could almost seem an immutable law of nature that such inferior dark races should disappear—people hardly see how—before the white colonist.’² This notion of an inevitable fading away led to a loss of respect for Aboriginal people, indicated by a decline in press attention and the frequent haughty comment made about them in documents.

Before the 1850s, Europeans in Australia believed they were technically and socially superior to Aboriginal people, due to environmental and cultural factors not biological ones. ‘Race’ was still a blurred category, interchangeable with ‘people’ or ‘group’, and it was not associated with immutable genetic inferiority. The keys to difference amongst peoples were environmental and historical forces, not biological facts, as



‘Native Chasing Game’,
Eugene von Guérard, 1854.
(Rex Nan Kivell Collection,
courtesy of the National
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AN2282444-1)

most people still believed that the world was one creation by God, and that all men were descended from the seed of Adam and Eve. Hence Aboriginal people were of one flesh with other men—albeit a flesh degraded over the five millennia since biblical creation. This sense of Aboriginal ‘degradation’ allowed settlers to believe that when ‘civilisation’, with its technology, was pitted against ‘savagery’, ‘civilisation’ always prevailed. Europeans were deemed ‘progressive’ and Aboriginal people ‘primitive’: a circular and self-fulfilling justification for Aboriginal decline. Colonists argued in essence that Aboriginal people were inferior simply because they were inferior. Phrenology, a popular pseudoscience that interpreted head shape as a key to intelligence, added *proof* of Aboriginal incapacity. ‘Scientific’ claims about Aboriginal decline were well publicised, which simply reinforced what many settlers believed already. Blandowski, head of the Museum, lectured on the Aboriginal fate at the Melbourne Mechanics Institute in 1856, which was featured in the daily press.³

By the 1850s, theorists overseas were increasingly convinced that biology or race, not environment, was the key to human difference. However, their ideas were slow to penetrate the Australian colonies.⁴ Charles Darwin sharpened biological explanations for human difference when he outlined his theory of ‘natural selection’, but as his book *On the Origin of Species* was not published until 1859, his ideas did not have an impact until the 1860s. Indeed, educated and experienced opinion in the 1850s was still divided on the matter of Aboriginal humanness, equality and ability. The 1858 Select Committee on Aborigines collected divided opinion on Aboriginal intelligence. Missionary witnesses were optimistic about the future for Aboriginal people, but old colonists like William Thomas and William Hull were pessimistic. The missionaries, new to the colony, were embarking on a great spiritual adventure and were thus hopeful, whereas Thomas had seen far too many of his ‘sable friends’ die over a score of years to be sanguine. William Hull was more certain in his pessimism, claiming that the Aboriginal race would not survive as it was ‘the design of Providence that the inferior races should pass away before the superior races.’⁵ The Committee questioned how Aboriginal people ‘could be saved from ultimate extinction’, and blamed them for their own demise. It reported that they declined because of their alcohol abuse and because, unlike the ‘strong’ Maori, ‘being weak and ignorant, even for savages, they have been treated with almost utter contempt.’⁶

By the 1850s colonists had invented an imaginary race against time. The *Argus* responded to Blandowski’s 1856 lecture by arguing that

cultural information and material should be collected before the Aboriginal people are ‘wiped off the face of the earth.’⁷ Similar calls were made over the years. In 1861, Governor Sir Henry Barkly, President of the Royal Society of Victoria, called for urgent research into Aboriginal ‘dialects and traditions’ as whole tribes ‘are, under some mysterious dispensation, rapidly disappearing.’⁸ Robert Brough Smyth, Secretary of the Central Board of the Aborigines, with the Board’s approval embarked on the task of collecting ‘every fact of importance connected with the blacks,’ assisted by information from honorary correspondents—the Board’s unpaid local guardians.⁹ The Mechanics Institute proposed a Museum in 1862 with an Aboriginal skull as the collection’s nucleus, unearthed as settlers farmed the land. The National Museum began exhibiting Aboriginal materials.¹⁰ However, in 1868 David Blair, a member of the Legislative Assembly, bemoaned a mere ‘row of grinning skulls in the national museum’ as the sole effort to collect Aboriginal cultural information from each group before extinction. Blair believed the gathering of ethnographic information was ‘a debt, which we, the civilized and Christianized successors of these fast decaying savage races owe to science, to civilization, and to humanity.’¹¹

Scraps of ethnographic information were gathered and disseminated. From the 1850s, public lectures of varying standards were given at the Royal Society, Mechanics Institute and elsewhere on Aboriginal culture by old colonists, including William Hull, Gideon Lang and Peter Beveridge, who were considered to be ‘experts.’ Aboriginal customs, beliefs, laws, government, ideas of birth, marriage and death, their weapons and warfare, and their languages were discussed, all according to white (mis)understandings. However, while Hull was pompous, Lang admired Aboriginal culture and openly discussed white brutality, calling for added protection for Aboriginal people. Beveridge, a former pastoralist, gave an affectionate and considered view of his former Murray River friends. These lectures were published in Melbourne and picked up by the regional press, the *Riverine Herald* publishing the lectures of Lang and Beveridge in their entirety, a fact that attests to some residual interest in Aboriginal people.¹² However, the reception of these publications was beyond the benign lecturer’s control. A reviewer of Lang’s humane lecture of 1865 doubted Lang’s optimistic view of Aboriginal intellectual capacity and said Lang also failed to disprove the law of the ‘inevitable degeneracy of the inferior animal.’¹³

Brough Smyth, Secretary of the Central Board, lectured learned societies on his research collection, demonstrating the use of Aboriginal tools. His views were encapsulated in a long awaited two-volumed

work, *The Aborigines of Victoria* (1878). Although it remains of some interest and historical value to Aboriginal people today, the cultural information it contained was viewed predominately through white eyes, especially emerging racial (not environmentally-based) views of difference. For instance, in a section on ‘mental character’, Smyth claimed that while Aboriginal mental capacities varied as among whites, and that they learned quickly when young and had ‘keen senses, quick perceptions, and a precocity that is surprising’, an Aboriginal person had on maturity, he said, a limited capacity for improvement that prevented ‘a complete change in the character of his mind’. Smyth and many of his European informants mistook Aboriginal cultural preferences and conservatism for an inherent inability to learn. The Victorian Parliament distributed the volumes of Smyth’s book at no cost to Mechanics Institutes and libraries across the colony.¹⁴ Readers who also consulted the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1875 at these libraries would have read that Aboriginal people had ‘little power of generalisation’, lacked ‘moral restraint’, had ‘no religion’, and were a ‘have not’ people without cultivation, domestic animals, permanent buildings or much in the way of manufactures. The article claimed their ‘want of ingenuity and contrivance’ had ‘undoubtedly been promoted by the natural poverty of the land in which the race settled’.¹⁵

The great European notion of the ‘inevitable’ Aboriginal decline was connected to another prevalent notion that developed from the 1860s: the notion of ‘the last of the tribe’. This idea reflected white romanticism, guilt as well as emergent racism. The romanticism and guilt stemmed from a sense of loss, the idea that something unique in human history was passing, a form, perhaps, of their early selves. The racism was based on the growing belief that Aboriginality was defined immutably by physical attributes—especially the shape of the face, texture of the hair and skin colour—and not culture. Thus, only ‘full bloods’ in the terminology of the day were considered by whites to be ‘real’ Aboriginal people, and thus their passing heralded the ‘end of their tribe’. Descendants from the union of ‘full bloods’ with Europeans were termed ‘half castes’, ‘quadroons’ (quarter caste) or ‘octoroons’ (one-eighth caste), to indicate the degree of Aboriginal descent or ‘blood’ remaining. They were not considered by whites as being ‘authentic’; in fact, they were often considered superior to ‘real’ Aboriginal people as they had white ‘blood’ and thus possessed ‘superior’ attributes.

Europeans never considered labelling by degrees of ‘blood’ applied to themselves, yet the English and other European colonists were



'Native with Original Tomahawk and Shield, Fernyhurst, Australia Felix' photographed by Eugene Montagu Scott in 1853. (Courtesy of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria)

of mixed origin, despite their claims of purity. Most Aboriginal people did not and still do not distinguish between degrees of blood. Aboriginality was (and is) to them a cultural definition. Individual groups of dark-skinned people traditionally saw other groups of equally dark-skinned peoples as foreigners because they were not of the same dialect and cultural group. They identified with culture, not skin colour. Europeans did much the same thing among themselves—English and Germans often saw themselves as culturally different and racially the same—but increasingly after 1860 viewed Aboriginal people through the prism of biology and race.

Some of these 'last of' people were termed 'kings' and 'queens' by the European settlers who created these Aboriginal 'leaders' to enable better dealings or merely for their own amusement. The kings were presented with 'king plates', crescent-shaped brass plates with engraving. The 'king-plates' and titles were used for political and other advantage by Aboriginal people. At Geelong in 1866 King Jerry demanded 'restitution of all provinces of which he has been illegally deprived, after having held them by indefeasible title from time immemorial, together with all improvements thereon, and revenues accruing from all sources'. King Jerry, who had reputedly seen the Governor about the matter, was ejected from the Town Hall by Sergeant Morton to the amusement of the *Argus*, but not until he had made his point about original ownership.¹⁶ Similarly, King Billy, 'the last of the Loddon tribe', described as a sober, peaceful man always 'tidily dressed', proposed in 1872 to erect a toll gate on the new bridge over the Loddon by 'the right which his progenitors enjoyed in the ages of antiquity'.¹⁷ Aboriginal people not only appropriated these regal titles to gain power and status in the eyes of whites, but also to confirm their traditional power. Historian Edward Ryan has discovered that titles were passed on by

Aboriginal people, King Johnny being succeeded in the Donald area in 1883 by King Robert and in 1902 by King Anthony Anderson. As there were few remaining elders to confer his title, Anthony Anderson asked the local shire council to do it by presenting him with a 'king plate' inscribed: 'Anthony Anderson, King of Birchip, Morton Plains, Donald and surrounding country'.¹⁸

The colonial press recorded 'last of the tribe' deaths from the 1860s. Obituaries were given for King William of Tallock Bullock (1860); King Charley of the Goulburn (1868); King Jerry of the Dandanoe (1870); and King Jack of the Wharparilla people (1880).¹⁹ Virtually every district had a king or queen. Other elders, though not described as monarchs, were also farewelled as the 'last of' their people. The farewells of 'full bloods' were reported with pathos and regret and no doubt secret relief that the 'original owners' of the soil had passed on—settlers did not generally recognise the claims of 'half castes' to land. Sometimes local Europeans attended funerals—the residents of Ballan honoured King William in this manner in 1860. Occasionally other Europeans, such as residents of Murchison, raised (or proposed raising) a subscription to enclose the grave, as was done after the death of King Charley in 1868, who had requested to be buried in a coffin.

The reports of these 'last of' deaths were unusually respectful and sometimes laudatory, King Charley being described as a 'peacemaker', a man of 'great power' and 'very muscular'.²⁰ Henry Kendall's poem 'The Last of His Tribe', written in 1869, caught the pathos of this colonial notion, and became a popular poem for generations. Kendall's poem concluded:

Will he go in his sleep from these desolate lands,
 Like a chief to the rest of his race,
 With the honey-voiced woman who beckons, and stands,
 And gleams like a Dream in his face—
 Like a marvellous Dream in his face?

Poems and sentiments like this helped colonists and their descendants to pass over the facts of usurpation and Aboriginal dispossession. Kendall's poem was read in schools at least a generation before it appeared in the *Eighth Book of the Victorian School Reader* (1928), which was used until the 1960s. Walter Robins of East Malvern studied it at school in Melbourne around 1900 and recited it to me in his nineties, eighty years later.²¹

The world of tradition

The Kulin around Melbourne in the early 1850s frequented traditional campsites, mostly along the many creeks and waterways encircling the town from the Maribyrnong River, through the Yarra, its wetlands and its tributaries, to the Mordialloc Creek. They refreshed themselves and caught fish, eels and fresh water mussels from grassy banks, as was customary. They continually moved about these campsites and back into the interior, following food, the movements of friends, ritual gatherings, because that was how life was to be lived. They occasionally entered Melbourne to sell things, particularly *bullen bullen*—lyre bird tail feathers—and clothes props, or to purchase supplies, including tobacco and, when they could obtain it illegally, alcohol.

There was less intimacy in the 1850s between Aboriginal people and settlers compared to the early Port Phillip days. (Goldrush society was bigger, faster and more self-possessed.) William Thomas, the Guardian of the Aborigines (after the Protectorate's closure), remained their daily advocate. He spoke their language fluently, believing it 'elegant' and a 'simple and harmonious' tongue. He compiled a grammar and extensive vocabulary of the Melbourne Kulin, and had translated into Kulin the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, parts of the Book of Genesis, and elements of the Anglican liturgy for church services.²² But his old rapport with the Kulin was dented by the loss of his confidant Billibellary and other of his old friends, and a certain grumpiness overcame him in old age. Thomas's reports became more distant, rarely discussing Aboriginal individuals and personalities as before, describing people generally as 'the Yarra tribe', 'the blacks', and 'lubras'. The Kulin were not wanted in Melbourne—as had been made clear by Superintendent La Trobe a decade earlier—and their presence became a matter of constant negotiation. Thomas travelled on horseback most days and weeks in the early 1850s to check on the Kulin's whereabouts and to dissuade them from coming into Melbourne town, especially during festivals.

Each year during the 1840s the Kulin had visited the races at Flemington, no doubt to marvel at the commotion and join in the fun, as whites dressed up, wagered money on inconsistent horses and drank to excess. Thomas now sought to end their visits by vigorous action. In early March 1851 he scoured the outskirts of Melbourne for intending Kulin race-goers. On Tuesday 4 March he dissuaded seven Boonwurrung near Brighton from attending, warning them that there would be a great many constables at the races and 'any black found drunk would be immediately taken to the watch house.'²³ Grumbling, they retraced

their steps, telling him that some Woiwurrung near the Plenty were also intending to go. On Wednesday 5 March Thomas warned off another party near Dandenong Creek, who with disappointment left for the bush. The next day he met eight Woiwurrung and three Daungwurrung people near the Darebin and 'had no difficulties in dissuading these from going to the Races, they had heard of my charge to the Western Port blacks [Boonwurrung]'. On the Friday Thomas met a South Sea Islander who had attended the race meeting and was amazed to find no Kulin there. Thomas replied that 'they could not go without getting drunk and they know it'.²⁴

Traditional reasons usually drove the Kulin to Melbourne, groups coming weekly during some periods. Several Daungwurrung (Goulburn) people told Thomas at Heidelberg in June 1851 that 'they had arrived but yesterday and that they did not come to go to Melbourne but to talk with my blacks (the Woiwurrung)'.²⁵ Groups contacted by Thomas usually asked him the whereabouts of other Kulin. Clearly, inter-group relations among the Kulin were still vibrant in the 1850s. Day after day Thomas travelled Melbourne's outskirts checking the whereabouts of Aboriginal groups. The Kulin he met usually begged Thomas to allow them to stay and Thomas constantly begged them to leave. Although Thomas clearly badgered them, it was mostly a give and take relationship. However, with the inflow of overseas miners from 1852 the Kulin no doubt also came to observe and ponder the antics of a gold rush town. Thomas often expressed disappointment at the 'prodigal liberality of the gold diggers', who gave money and handouts to Aboriginal people in Melbourne.²⁶ Occasionally he appealed for police assistance, as he did in late April 1851, summoning them to break up a camp at South Yarra due to drunken behaviour, the group being shifted to Brighton.²⁷

The desire for alcohol also attracted the Kulin to Melbourne. Thomas, whose Methodist religion opposed alcohol, deplored this and probably exaggerated its impact. The Kulin procured money to buy alcohol through the generosity of gold diggers or by working. Indeed, they acted like most white rural labourers of the time, who worked hard and drank hard. Thomas claimed of the Kulin: 'They work well for a few weeks, receive wages, and then a drunken bout they must have, notwithstanding they are eight or more miles from a country inn'.²⁸ Aboriginal drinkers often binged on rum and spirits to the point of oblivion, like many whites—for the colonial population as a whole drank spirits heavily, far more so than people in Britain.²⁹ Despite the law preventing sales of alcohol to Aboriginal people, they were still able to obtain it. Magistrate William Hull observed that they give money to a child to buy

it for them or ‘to some low man of the lower class of people, then they all drink it together.’³⁰

Some Kulin asserted their right to drink, challenging William Thomas: ‘white man get em drunk and why not blacks?’³¹ And why not, we might ask? They were theoretically equal British subjects under the law. However, the consequences of drunkenness were dire for a people already dispossessed of land, facing severe cultural disruption and depopulation. Binge-drinking caused loss of authority, violence and sometimes death. The young seemed to be the most avid drinkers and Thomas claimed that respect for elders was being undermined. And alcohol-induced violence occasionally carried off key people, Thomas remarking after one drunken spearing that ‘the Yarra blacks have lost by this death almost their last leading man.’³² Alcohol abuse even affected ritual, Thomas lamenting in his description of a Kulin funeral that several Kulin were ‘staggering round the scene in a state of intoxication, vociferating most awful curses.’³³ Several Kulin deaths occurred each year in the early 1850s from respiratory disease through lying drunk in the open.

The Kulin’s constant visits to Melbourne created almost daily power struggles with Thomas. For instance, on Tuesday 6 May 1851, Thomas met a Kulin group north-east of the Merri Creek who begged him to let them stop there a few days. He visited them the next day and found more had arrived from the upper Yarra. He initially gave them until Saturday to leave. However, on the Thursday he came armed with a complaint about their dogs and ‘pressed them to hasten again to the bush’. Thomas returned on Friday, begging them not to join the other encampments nearer town. On the Saturday the Kulin promised to leave that day, but were still in the Merri Creek camp that evening. Up before dawn, Thomas arrived on horseback at 8.30 a.m. on Sunday morning and to his relief found the people preparing to leave. He conducted a church service and with a handshake saw them on their way before noon. Thomas had finally prevailed but the Kulin had managed to stay an extra five days.³⁴

Land sales and entreaties to ‘move on’ made it imperative for the Kulin to gain land that was acknowledged as their own. Indeed, Billibellary requested land in 1843 and the Kulin’s demands soon became insistent too. In August 1850 Thomas reported that the Woiwurrung (the Yarra blacks) ‘again point out the spot they would wish to locate upon. I again object, they reason the matter with some degree of art.’³⁵ Thomas did not identify the spot but in September he visited the Bulleen camp of the Woiwurrung, commenting that ‘the blacks [are]



Young girl photographed about 1858 by Antoine Fauchery/Richard Daintree.
(Courtesy of La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria, H84.167/47)

impatient for a station. I again state the impossibility of their having it in their neighbourhood.' The suggestion was that they wanted it on the Yarra at Bulleen, which was too close to white settlers for Thomas's liking.³⁶ In 1852 the Woiwurrung gained 782 hectares on both sides of the Yarra at more distant Warrandyte. In August the Boonwurrung (Western Port Tribe) 'selected the spot they would desire to have as a reserve', being about 340 hectares on the Mordialloc Creek.³⁷ These two reserves were both 25 kilometres from Melbourne, sufficient distance to isolate them from the town.

These reserves remained low key. They were never staffed by whites or permanently occupied by blacks. However, they acted as distribution depots. Thomas, encouraging a dependence on rations, convinced Governor La Trobe that the only means to keep the Melbourne Kulin from the town was to ration them from reserves: 'I would guarantee to keep my own blacks out, and then I know the others would not come.'³⁸ Rations of flour, tea, sugar and tobacco were soon provided, an annual blanket distribution initiated, and tomahawks were, for a time, handed out. During the first few years the Boonwurrung stayed for some weeks at a time at Mordialloc, using the supplies there as well as fishing in the Creek, but as Thomas said the 'Yarra tribe have not [though passing through their depot] desired aught but a little tobacco.'³⁹ The rations improved but remained little used as the Kulin were mostly in work. By 1857 Thomas drew as usual for the year for both stations: 270 kilograms of flour, 70 kilograms of sugar, 7 kilograms of tea, 10 kilograms of tobacco and 8 kilograms of soap, and a pair of blankets each, 'all of which last for a year or longer'. Home medicines were also

on hand, including salts, linament, castor oil, Dover's powders, sticking plaster, sulphur and bluestone.⁴⁰

Other Aboriginal people besides the Kulin visited Melbourne. There was a constant movement of drays and stock from the interior and upcountry Aboriginal youths travelling with them. The youths who came from as far as the Murray stopped over in Melbourne, gaped at this gold rush boom town, and returned to the bush. Some individuals were extremely mobile. In June 1851 Thomas met two gold seekers, one black, one white, the Aboriginal man having travelled from the Sydney District with a consignment of horses for Geelong. His name was Thomas Walker, and Thomas recognised him as a celebrated 'converted black'. On hearing he had been in Port Phillip for five weeks Thomas feared for his soul in this godless society, but to his amazement Walker replied: the 'peace [of God] is all sufficient'. Thomas farewelled him saying, 'My dear brother, avoid temptation' and urged him to return promptly to his Christian friends. Walker replied: 'Christ will take care of me.'⁴¹ Unfortunately, Thomas Walker, like many colonial men, soon fell to the demon drink.⁴²

One incident in 1851 reveals the power of both tradition and change in Aboriginal society—and the fact that adult men outnumbered women in most Aboriginal groups by 1850.⁴³ In April a DjaDjawurrung woman from Avoca named Polly was brought to Melbourne by a settler, Mr Sanger, to wed a white shepherd with whom she had lived for two years. Polly was lodged at William Thomas's house which caused a commotion among some Gunai/Kurnai people visiting from Gippsland, some of whom were 'strangers' to him. About 50 camped on the Merri at Brunswick near his house. Thomas believed that the news had been passed from group to group: 'I cannot account in any other way for the appearance of so many strange blacks unless upon this errand.'⁴⁴ While Thomas was at church on Sunday 27 April, the visitors came to his house and insisted that Polly be turned over to them, one man saying she was his 'wife'. Thomas's daughter brought Polly into the house and bolted the doors. Thomas returned to news of the demands and went to the Merri camp and found that the group was searching for a Gippsland woman who had 'escaped' from them some months earlier. He resolved it thus: 'I then got two who were deputed (one who knew her) to accompany me and to see for himself, he at once said "big one bungallarly" (stupid) blackfellow, that not the lubra.'⁴⁵ Polly was 'awfully frightened at seeing them', as these were not her people, and she left within two days, there being difficulties 'in making the compact [marriage]'.⁴⁶ In January 1853, Thomas reported that the white shepherd 'has kept true to her and she to him, though on account

of his occupation, he cannot be continually with her; when he can, he returns and brings her clothes and what she requires. She has been in my district from the time she left my roof, at Pentridge [now Coburg], and is a kind, faithful, and affectionate servant'.⁴⁷ However, in 1859 Thomas reported he saw Polly with an Aboriginal group, her 'white husband' having died.⁴⁸

When the Gunai/Kurnai people of Gippsland visited Melbourne in the 1850s, extensive customary activities occurred. They were traditional enemies of the Kulin and in the past had engaged in bloody feuds with them, causing significant loss of life. But the pressures of colonialism had caused new alignments and in the late 1840s they had more friendly interactions. In April 1852 some Boonwurrung returned to Melbourne with about ten Gunai/Kurnai—'Warrigal [wild] blacks' Thomas called them. Thomas's efforts to remove them failed. Three camps formed as messengers brought more Gunai/Kurnai to Melbourne as well as Kulin from Geelong, Ballarat and the Goulburn. The people begged Thomas to allow them to stay for corroborees as they had not met in four years. He relented and collected them on the Yarra about twenty kilometres from Melbourne, probably near Templestowe. They held nightly corroborees for two weeks then moved camp regularly over the next few months, partying with the help of Melbourne's alcohol supplies. Thomas, disgusted at their 'debauchery' and riotous behaviour, broke up the camps with police help, but not before four murders and five deaths had occurred, some of which were alcohol induced. Thomas ordered the Aboriginal people home, 'assuring them that never more should there be an assemblage'.⁴⁹ (He later complained it took six months to remove them from Melbourne, such was the Kulin's desire to socialise.)⁵⁰

Traditional meetings were at the core of Aboriginal *joie de vie*. Forty-three Gunai/Kurnai men returned to Melbourne in 1857, corroboreeing at Dandenong before camping at Brighton with the Kulin, who were 'highly delighted with their arrival'. They danced almost nightly, once for an audience of 300 Europeans. After ten days Thomas bribed them with rations and blankets to leave, but they pleaded to stay another day to see the races, to which he consented. He eventually got them on the road to Gippsland but not before messengers returned with more Kulin, delaying their departure, much to Thomas's grief. Some drunkenness continued, although Thomas remarked that 'a more quiet, orderly community would not exist when once beyond the pale of spiritous liquors'. Finally he rationed them and ushered them to Gippsland after a month in Melbourne. While en route

Thomas watched them playing cards, remarking: ‘to my astonishment [they] played like white people, dealing out, proclaiming trumps, and following [suit] accurately’. They said a gentleman in Gippsland had taught them.⁵¹

Entering the European world

The Gunai/Kurnai’s card skills were indicative of the increasingly enmeshed nature of cultural interactions between two very diverse cultures—one nomadic/semi-nomadic, one pastoral/farming. Apparently simple things like learning the rules of card games were being passed back and forth across the frontier. Such black–white transactions—economic, cultural, convivial and sexual—were myriad, as dramatic as negotiations over reserve land or as low key as a card game. Most encounters were not recorded and are lost to us or, if recorded, were not described in much detail so we don’t get a sense of what such encounters meant to the participants. What did the Gunai/Kurnai take a card game to be: social interaction, a means of gambling, a ritual process? Certainly to play cards effectively they had to become numerate in the European way, make new associations in order to declare trumps, and perhaps adopt the rules of honourable play by always following suit and not renegeing. But what did the kings, queens and jacks on the cards mean to them? For Europeans they conjured up ideas of dynasties of royal European houses, of heads chopped, castles defended and Divine Rights asserted. Even jokers held a special place in European culture as merry fellows able to tread a fine line between jest and social commentary in the face of the powerful. Perhaps Aboriginal people understood the joker only too well, having been forced to play his role too many times in the face of European power. We can never know such things, because these shifts in understanding were so subtle. It is certain that each culture was modified by these contacts, even if Europeans thought themselves more superior. Indigenous peoples were more vulnerable to change being the less powerful party in these transactions, and because the whites controlled the structures of the colonial world, but each side was influenced by the other nonetheless.

One repeated encounter on the frontier, often recorded but usually in a fragmentary way, were corroborees attended by whites. We can only guess at how these were understood on each side. What did whites make of them? Were their imaginings of Aboriginal people confirmed or modified by these performances? We know European artists drew

corroborees as dramatic open-air, fire-lit events, exotic and archetypal representations of 'savagery'. Were Aboriginal people showing ritual about country to welcome, impress and claim ownership? Were they increasingly influenced by a new or additional profit motive, as moneys, rations and alcohol flowed their way at such events?

William Thomas recorded a new performance twist in January 1856, when six Yarra blacks engaged for six nights at the Queen's Theatre, dancing and demonstrating 'native habits', and entering the European world of theatrical performance. The *Argus* reported that attendances were good, the audiences being intrigued by the 'violent, muscular exertions' of the 'kangaroo' and other dances. Thomas attested to the Aboriginal performers' professionalism, saying 'to their credit they kept sober to the end of their engagement'.⁵² Corroborees at Ballarat were also staged in a theatrical town awash with money and diggers to entertain. A group of Ararat Aboriginal people, 'advanced in civilization', frequented the town: 'The women have their hair neatly combed and oiled, and the men are dressed as Europeans. The King wears a white bell-topper, of which he seems as proud as if he wore the Crown of England'. At the suggestion of the impresario of Ballarat's Royal Theatre, a suggestion which the people 'accepted with avidity', the Ararat people took to the stage. After the first piece, one Aboriginal man stepped into the footlights and announced the program. The *Ballarat Star* commented that 'in his intelligence and manners he was a pattern to hundreds I have seen of Europeans attempting to address an assemblage'. One of the group left to round up 50 more of his kin for another performance, but the outcome was not reported.⁵³

Work formed another frequent intercultural transaction. Europeans increasingly looked to Aboriginal workers in the gold-rush labour crisis and Aboriginal people sought work as their traditional bush-tucker economy faltered. They engaged as bullockies, stock handlers, wool washers, weeders, gardeners, harvesters, and on general farm maintenance, being paid in money and food like other workers. About forty Woiwurrung worked on farms and stations mostly in the Plenty River area, staying until the work was completed. Thomas reported in late 1852 that 'an experienced farmer gave me to understand that most of them were occupied on his and the surrounding farms; he had several reaping, two of whom each cut half an acre per day. All were not so ready, the middle-aged generally reaped sitting, working themselves forward as they go'.⁵⁴ Thomas noted that the Boonwurrung were less keen on steady work but assisted settlers along the coast and inland for some months 'in parties of three, four, and five'. Those on the Plenty in

late 1852 worked below the current European wage rate at ten to fifteen shillings a week plus food. They went on strike for twenty-five, but Thomas persuaded them to return to work for fifteen shillings. By 1860 the Melbourne Kulin learned to work by contract and quotation. Billibellary's son, Simon Wonga, was observed by Thomas sizing up and quoting on supplying bark for a farmer's barn. Wonga stated: 'cut bark where we find good trees, *only cut it*, you cart it away, and white man put bark on, pay us blackfellows two pounds'.⁵⁵

Throughout rural Victoria small groups of Aboriginal workers helped resolve the labour crisis of the 1850s. Most able-bodied DjaDjawurrung men washed sheep on the Loddon and Campaspe Rivers. Stations in the Wimmera employed Wergaia-speaking people as shepherds—their bush skills allowed squatters to let their sheep wander like cattle, to be tracked when needed. They had learnt the value of money and were paid wages, which magistrate Edward Bell claimed 'in ordinary times, would be considered high for emigrant labor [*sic*].' He added that those acquiring 'a degree of European civilization in dress and habits of living' still left for 'their accustomed haunts', to engage in 'the sports and savage (though generally harmless) warfare of their respective tribes'. Similar continuities and change occurred at Portland Bay.⁵⁶

At Alberton in Gippsland eleven Gunai/Kurnai males, three aged about 10, and eight under 20, as well as Henry, a Woiwurrung man aged 25, weeded and reaped 40 hectares over two months. Their wages of £2 were low, but their valuing of money was recent. Probably more important



Woiwurrung woman and child about 1858, photographed by Antoine Fauchery/
Richard Daintree. (Courtesy of La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria)

to them were the added payments in kind: their share of a bottle of (diluted) rum, a fig of tobacco, a gun with some powder and shot, one blanket, three shirts, one pair of trousers, and a cap. Andrew McCrae, the Police Magistrate, reported 'they worked steadily, as many hours as the whites who were their fellow-labourers, and did the same amount of work'. Indeed, two Aboriginal workers and one white beat a team of three white workers in a reaping contest for nine litres of rum.⁵⁷ A year later they worked as sheep-washers, shepherds, stockmen, reapers, and house servants at various locations around Gippsland due to the labour scarcity, earning praise from settlers. W. O. Raymond reported that he 'could not have washed my sheep without the Dergo' people, whom he paid one shilling each per day. However, Charles Tyers, the Commissioner of Crown Lands, bemoaned that, despite this useful work, they are 'too idle to cultivate the soil and to lay up provision for to-morrow, they hold to their wandering propensities when unemployed by the white people.'⁵⁸

Across the colony by the 1850s, Aboriginal people dressed like, worked like, ate like and, in some senses, acted like European rural workers, to the point of strike action at the Plenty River. Yet they were not the same, remaining staunchly Aboriginal in their identity and core culture. This was evident in Thomas's description of Woiwurrung labourers in January 1853, when he noted their refusal to become sedentary and to live in houses like Europeans:

All efforts, however, to further improve their condition, have been tried without avail. I have pressed, and the farmers and others also have urged their becoming as we are, and not merely in work and diet; but to stop in houses and open convenient places at night, comfortably clad and stretched, is what they will not hear of; the hook, axe, or bridle down, and all further of civilisation for the day is over; off goes apparel, and they bask under the canopy of heaven as in their primitive wildness, evidently enjoying their freedom from incumbrance; nor do I conceive of any further advancement beyond what they have obtained practicable to those in the settled districts, nor have they any desire to be meddled with further. Such is their wandering propensity, that all the kindness, entreaty, or persuasion cannot secure them one day beyond their determination; and they have latterly been particularly cautious how they make bargains for labour on this account.⁵⁹

Thomas was disappointed by this cultural tenacity, seeing them in biblical terms as 'voluntarily degraded', being like Ham, the son of Noah, and his descendants, 'fugitives upon the face of the earth', that is, itinerants.

Thomas despaired of their future in 1852, moved by both real concern and affection for the Melbourne Kulin whose numbers had plummeted to 39 Woiwurrung and 20 Boonwurrung, none of whom were under 14 years of age. Similar declines occurred elsewhere, but at least there were children inland and hopes for the future. Writing to Governor La Trobe in September 1852, Thomas prefigured aspects of later Aboriginal policy. He believed that the only hope ‘to improve their condition and avert the extinction of their race’, in fact to maintain ‘a community of the race’, was to create single-sex Aboriginal schools at inland locations. These pupils would graduate to Aboriginal schools in Melbourne, where they would be educated and taught a trade. Their centralising would stifle their ability to return to the wilderness and would ‘amalgamate the tribes unconsciously, being young, they cannot have any prejudices’. Special Aboriginal legislation would facilitate ‘marriages among themselves, also between them and the white population’. He was aware that removal of children was a radical step, which might earn him the title of ‘misanthrope’ (man-hater). However, he convinced himself that it was more humane to take them from their so-called ‘miserable’ parents, to ‘rescue’ them as he saw it, than not to do so. Thomas thus set aside the rights of parent and child to be with each other. His aim, unlike later policy makers, was not physical or racial absorption, but the opposite: to save the ‘race’. Although he did not oppose marriage to Europeans, his plan was based on ‘marriage with their own race’. Thomas clearly aimed at cultural assimilation, to ‘materially improve the condition of the black population, and facilitate their permanent civilization’. They were to be settled rural workers sharing the gift of ‘equal advancement’. But they were also to be ‘a community of the race’.⁶⁰

A few young DjaDjawurrung people, residents of the former Loddon Protectorate station, fulfilled Thomas’s positive vision. An Aboriginal school begun by Edward Parker survived the Protectorate’s closure and was attended in 1853 by 6 to 12 students. Eight young men who were employed by Parker on the former Protectorate land attended night school in winter, ‘walking some miles in the dark wet evenings’, returning late at night ready for work the next day. Three young women ‘also received occasional instruction’. By 1858 there were ten pupils boarding at the school, seven with European names, and three males with traditional names: Morpoke, Warbourp and Weregoondet. Nine were aged 4 to 15 years and one, Mary Jane, was an adult. All of them could read and write, and some had knowledge of arithmetic.⁶¹ A dozen other children had been through schooling for at least six months and had then left, a truancy mirrored by some white farmers’ children. Parker

also placed some Aboriginal children with white families to enable their Christian education. This followed his own experience of raising the young boy Kolain. However, one child educated by a Kyneton family was 'lured' away by a carrier to work and become, as Parker feared, 'the associate of drunken bullock drivers'.⁶²

Two former young male residents of the Loddon Protectorate station at Franklinford, Yerrebullah and Beernbannin, were given four hectares each to farm. They fenced it themselves and, with some aid in ploughing, planted half of the land. Parker wrote in March 1853 that 'they are now fairly established as farmers, and their care and industry in cultivating their ground are combined with remarkable prudence in the disposal of their earnings'. They were expected to gain a handsome sum of £100. Parker reported in early 1859 that the two were still farming successfully, being no different 'from our ordinary peasants'. A few others sought to emulate them. Two other families took up land at the former Loddon station in the mid-1850s, but one family man died from pulmonary disease and the other from falling down a mine shaft. Parker sought to secure the land for their families.⁶³

In all, six men and their families took up land at Franklinford. One of them, Tommy Farmer, told an 1877 Royal Commission that for six years he supported a wife and two children on the land which he ploughed and planted with potatoes and wheat, selling the latter in Castlemaine. He declared: 'Yes, I did keep myself; but a great number of my own people came and camped round me and eat me out'. Like other selectors, misfortune struck. He lost his bullocks: 'that broke me down, and I could not get on'. Then his family died and Tommy Farmer walked off the farm, moving to Coranderrk reserve in 1864. John Green, the Central Board's former inspector gave a slightly less admirable version. Green told the same inquiry that Edward Parker, the former assistant Protector, at times had to reap the wheat on Tommy Farmer's property, and the government received only a fifth of the property's value at the end. Joseph Parker, son of Edward, confirmed that all the Franklinford Aboriginal farmers, except Tommy Farmer, died from respiratory disease and misadventure and the land reverted to the Crown.⁶⁴

Lost boys

The journey into the European world often left Aboriginal people disoriented and disappointed. The Bungaleen brothers, Harry and Tommy, cut adrift from Gunai/Kurnai society at the Merri Creek School as

we saw in an earlier chapter, moved deeper into the European world as they grew. We left the two young boys, six and four, at the failing Merri Creek School in early 1851, eagerly expecting to go to Hobart Town with the school teacher Edgar and his family, to grow into ‘white fellars’. But inexplicably the Edgars left without them, the two boys leaning against the playground fence staring after them, motionless, alone, without tears and without words, abandoned by those they thought loved them. William Thomas took the boys to John Hinkins, the schoolmaster of Pentridge (now Coburg) National School, who agreed to foster them for 5 shillings each per week and £5 for an outfit.⁶⁵ Hinkins was the settler who, with his young daughter Jenny, had lived amongst Yorta Yorta at Gunbower station some years before.

Harry, the older boy, acclimatised better than his brother Tommy who proved sulky and troublesome. Tommy bit Mrs Hinkins on the arm on one occasion before being flung to the ground, flogged and berated by Hinkins. Tommy also attacked Hinkins’s son and initially displayed significant anger—as one might expect, having been left by both his mother, Kitty (Parley) and the Edgars. However, the boys reconciled themselves to the family, wishing to call the Hinkins ‘father and mother’ and kiss them good night like the Hinkins’s own children. They became attentive and well behaved in church, particularly enjoying singing, and progressed well in their school lessons. They were baptised in great hope at Trinity Church Pentridge before a packed congregation on 1 January 1852. Harry, formerly Wurrabool, was renamed John after Hinkins (his third identity), and Tommy became Thomas after William Thomas.⁶⁶

Hopes remained high. When Governor Hotham was welcomed to the colony in June 1854, Hinkins officially joined the parade from South Melbourne in his gig, sporting a white silk banner displaying a kangaroo and emu under the words ‘Advance Australia’. The two boys, dressed in white, with blue kerchiefs and blue ribbon in their straw hats, stood on either side of Hinkins. Hotham shook hands with the boys and bowed after they sang ‘God Save the Queen’. Hinkins recalled: ‘Through the town the two boys were loudly cheered, and they, in return, shouted till they were hoarse’. The next day they regaled their playmates with descriptions of the grand events.

However, death stalked them. In the early 1850s Thomas was ill with colonial fever (dysentery) and both were very ill with measles. John, aged eleven, developed a fatal illness in early 1856. As he lay in the Government hospital repenting his sins before Rev. S. L. Chase, his last exclamation was in true believer style: ‘I am so sorry’!

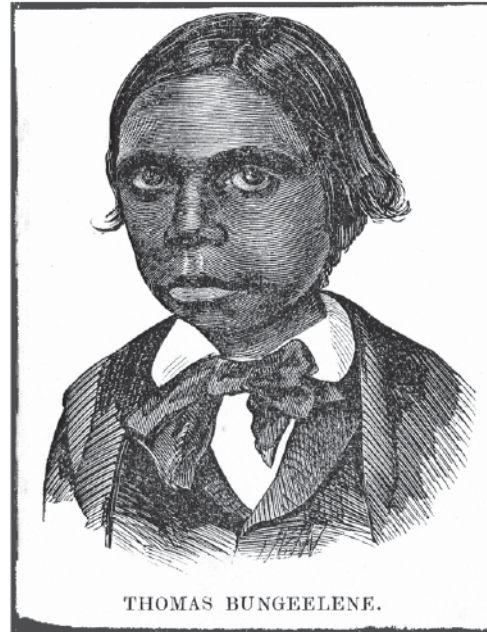
John's Moonee Ponds playmates accompanied his body to the Melbourne General Cemetery.

Thomas initially appeared unmoved by his brother's death: his third significant personal loss before the age of ten. However, he brooded, Hinkins noting that he 'was very careful of anything that had belonged to his late brother, especially his garden, which he kept with great care'.⁶⁷ Then he became rebellious. After becoming entranced by the theatre he regularly escaped to Melbourne in defiance of Hinkins, begging money for his admission and sleeping afterwards in a livery stable. Although School Inspector Geary declared in August 1857 that 'he stands first in his class and appears as intelligent and industrious as any other in the school',

young Thomas played truant three times shortly afterwards. William Thomas pronounced him as 'very unruly'.⁶⁸

After young Thomas attacked Hinkins with an iron bar in 1859, which suggests he was significantly angry and disturbed, the latter was forced to give him up. A place was sought for him at Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar, but both refused, so he was taught at Fitzroy, before becoming a messenger in the Department of Lands. Implicated with two white youths in an assault on a young girl, he was disciplined by being sent to the training ship *SS Victoria* in 1861 when aged fourteen.⁶⁹ Again he proved rebellious, until discipline and sea life controlled him. He saw service to the Gulf of Carpentaria during the search for Burke and Wills. When the *Victoria* was decommissioned, Thomas, then eighteen, became a map tracer in the Department of Mines, a report suggesting he 'writes very well . . . already he can plot from a simple field-book, and can draw plans tolerably well. He appears to like the work he has to do'.⁷⁰

Ultimately Thomas Bungaleen became reconciled to his situation. Separated from his family through death and from his people by colonial circumstance, he embraced the white world as the best way to survive. Adrift in a white world, young Thomas denied his Aboriginality three times. Once when washing his hands vigorously with soap he



THOMAS BUNGEELENE.
Thomas Bungaleen in *Newsletter of Australia*, 1857. (Courtesy of State Library of Victoria LTF052.9N47)

asked Hinkins, ‘I think they are getting a little whiter—are they not father?’; later he insisted to his fellow seamen that his parents were white; and later still, when it was suggested by a settler that a young Christian Aboriginal girl, Ellen Lassie from New South Wales, might be his wife, to ‘propagate and continue your race,’ Thomas was livid, exclaiming: ‘a black girl indeed! It’s like their impudence to speak to me about a black girl as a partner for life.’⁷¹

So much did he embrace the white colonial world that when eighteen, Thomas asked John Hinkins to assist his admittance to membership of the Society of Oddfellows, a friendly society for men which advocated temperance, thrift, hard work, and respectability: core white colonial values. Before a room full of men wearing Oddfellows regalia in December 1864, the smartly dressed Thomas gave an acceptance speech, saying: ‘Though I am the first of my race to receive this high honour, I sincerely hope I shall not be the last.’ He then gave a twenty-minute recitation, as polished young men of his day did, to entertain his hosts. This was greeted by deafening applause and the high praise of Dr Greeves, a Past Grand Master of the Society.⁷² Within a month Thomas was dead from gastric fever, his last words being to request a reading of the 23rd Psalm, the psalm of comfort for evangelical Christians of the day. As he was laid beside the body of his brother John, his Gunai/Kurnai people were being collected together at Ramahyuck, a mission on Lake Wellington, to continue in earnest their own adventures in the white colonial Christian world.