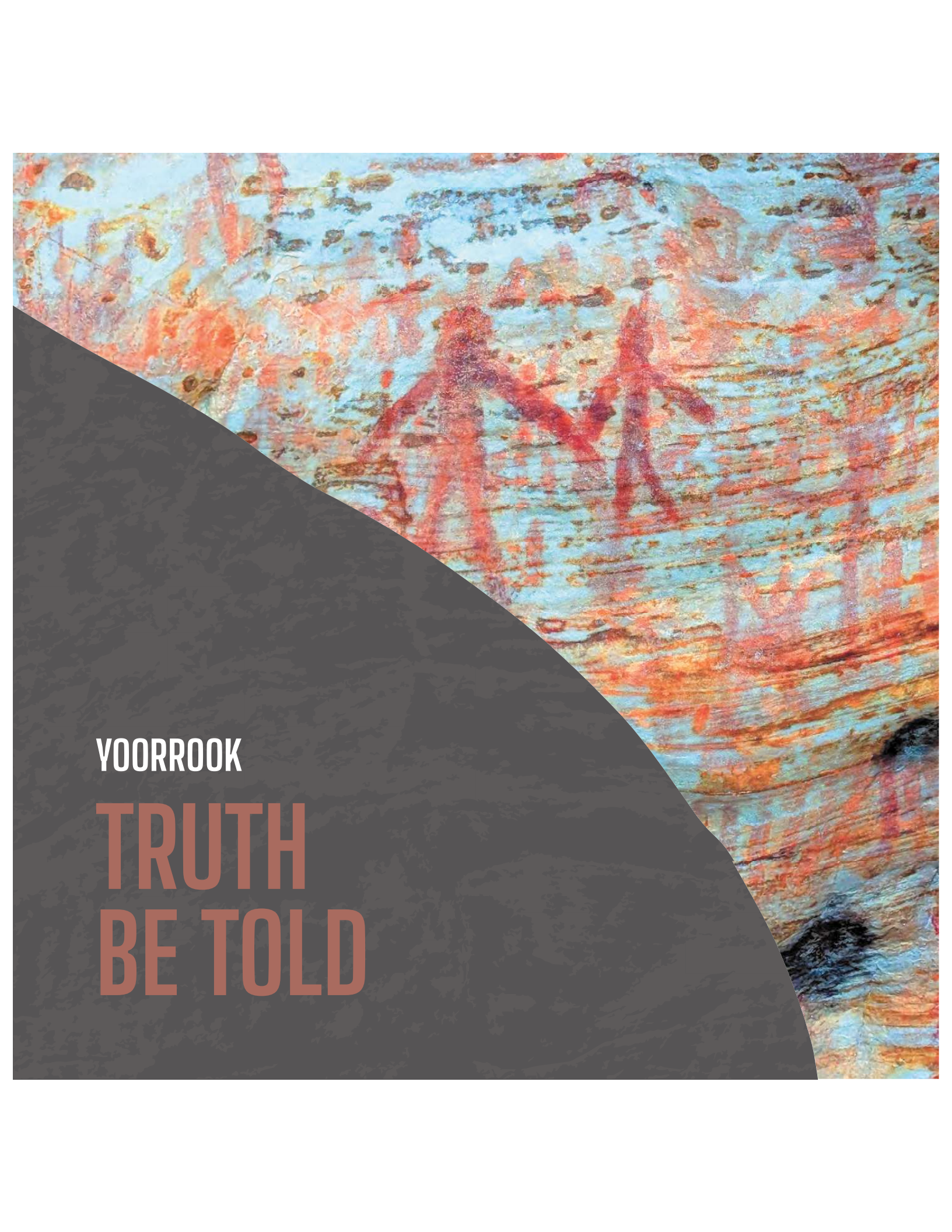
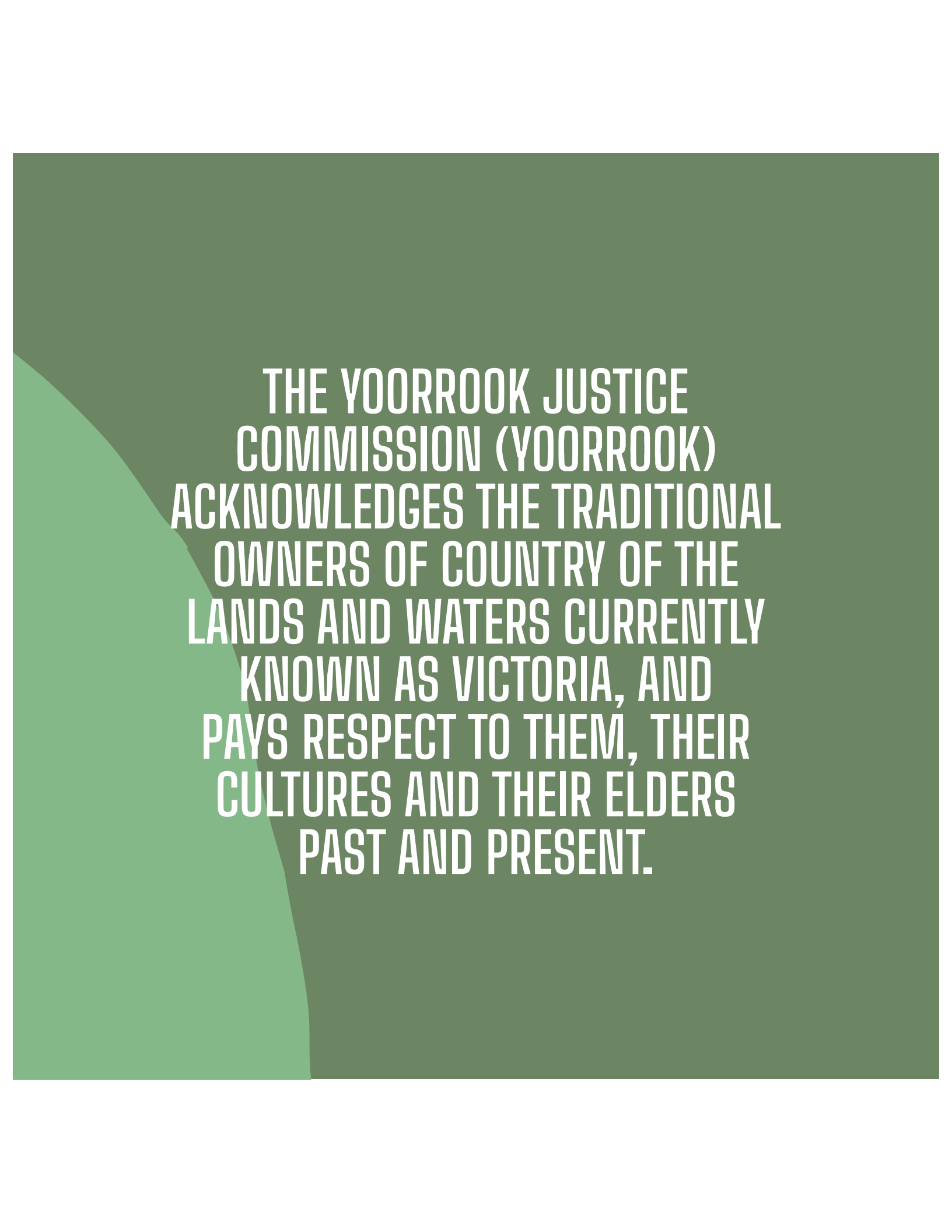




VOORROOK

TRUTH BE TOLD





**THE YOORROOK JUSTICE
COMMISSION (YOORROOK)
ACKNOWLEDGES THE TRADITIONAL
OWNERS OF COUNTRY OF THE
LANDS AND WATERS CURRENTLY
KNOWN AS VICTORIA, AND
PAYS RESPECT TO THEM, THEIR
CULTURES AND THEIR ELDERS
PAST AND PRESENT.**

YOORROOK TRUTH BE TOLD

Published by order, or under the authority,
of the Parliament of Victoria, June 2025.
© Copyright: Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2025

Copyright Notice

Yoorrook is a Royal Commission established under section 5 of the *Inquiries Act 2014* (Vic) by Letters Patent published in the Government Gazette on 14 May 2021 (as amended). To the maximum extent permitted by law, Yoorrook claims copyright over its written work, including this report.

Yoorrook's report sometimes references and/or reproduces material that was not created by Yoorrook. In some cases, a third party may hold copyright in this material and their permission may be required to use the material.

ISBN Electronic version: 978-0-64552-19-4-8

This report should be cited as *Yoorrook Justice Commission, Yoorrook: Truth Be Told (2025)*.

Photo Credits

Cover: Irene van den Berg

Page 239 (Uncle Jack Charles) Louise Kennerly/The Sydney Morning Herald

Page 245 (Aunty Fay Carter) Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation

Page 275 (Aunty Carolyn Briggs) The First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria

Page 297 (Uncle Brendan Kennedy) Doug Gimesy

Graphic Design

Grindstone Creative

Professor the Honourable Margaret Gardner AC
Governor of Victoria
Government House
Government House Drive
Melbourne VIC 3004

Ms Ngarra Murray and Mr Rueben Berg
Co-Chairs, First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria
48 Cambridge Street
Collingwood VIC 3066

19 June 2025

Your Excellency, Ms Murray and Mr Berg,

In accordance with the amended Letters Patent dated 4 April 2023, we are pleased to present to you the final report of the Yoorrook Justice Commission. This report includes an official public record based on First Peoples' experiences of systemic injustice since the start of colonisation, First Peoples' testimonies published in accordance with the relevant information and data sovereignty protocols, and the Commission's final findings and recommendations in satisfaction of clause 7(d) of the Letters Patent.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Eleanor
A Bourke AM
Wergaia/Wamba Wamba
Chairperson



Adjunct Professor
Sue-Anne Hunter
Wurundjeri/
Ngurai Illum Wurrung
Deputy Chair



Travis Lovett
Kerrupmara-
Gunditjmara/Boandik
Deputy Chair



Distinguished Professor
Maggie Walter
Palawa
Commissioner



The Hon Tony North KC
Commissioner

THE CLOAK AND THE MIRROR

We were told this land was empty. A myth stitched into maps and laws, into classrooms and monuments. But the truth was always here—in the earth, the rivers, the sky. In culture forbidden but not forgotten. In the whispers that survived when language was punished.

The history of this land is bound by two cloaks. One is warm, woven from fibres of care and culture, wrapped close around Country and kin. The other is a heavy cloak of forgetting and silence: truth draped in denial. This second cloak was meant to smother. But even under its weight, memory moved; quiet but alive.

What is now called Victoria existed long before its name. It was held, sung, walked and remembered. Knowledge was carried in story and ceremony; in hands that lit fires the right way, that harvested without greed. This was not emptiness. It was presence, deep and abiding.

The hatted strangers came from all directions under the southern sun. For half a century, word of their arrival had spread along ancient songlines. The moment of contact may not have been a surprise—but it was seismic. The forever-point.

Tracing the history of this place post-colonisation reveals a tangled, jagged line. To follow it is to witness survival in the face of squattocracy, poverty in the face of struck-gold wealth, and endurance in the face of attempted elimination.

From Gunditjmara Country in 1834, and every place before and since, the conflict never ended. It simply changed shape—from musket to manager, from protector to policy. It lives in soil turned by boots and bulldozers; in absences and archives; in laws that still speak over First Peoples.

Today, Victoria hums with a different kind of energy. Not because of what happened here, but in spite of it. Walk its streets and you'll hear Woi Wurrung beside Vietnamese, Dja Dja Wurrung alongside Arabic. From Fitzroy to Shepparton, cultures mix, meals are shared, and stories once buried are now told with pride. It is not perfection, not yet justice, but it is movement.

Early settlers presented the Wurundjeri with a gift: a mirror, smooth and foreign. But it didn't reflect the dignity and sovereignty of those who received it. It showed only what the colonisers wanted to see: a passive, vanishing people.

By now, we've all had a chance to look into the mirror. It's time to let in the light—mirrors don't work in the dark—and meet our reflection square-on, so that we might look to the future with clear eyes.

We don't need permission to tell the truth. And we don't need to wait to imagine something better. Victoria has been presented with an opportunity to take the lessons from our past and apply them to a shared future: a new line of history where guilt and shame are not our concern, but what happens next is. The shroud can be lifted. A new chapter can begin.

CONTENTS

04	THE CLOAK AND THE MIRROR	
08	FOREWORD	
	Hon Steve Bracks AC	
10	MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRPERSON	
	Professor Eleanor A Bourke AM	
12	INTRODUCTION	
	About this Report	15
	Content Warning	16
	Copyright/IDS	17
	Terminology	17
	The Complete Official Public Record	17
	Other Reports	17
	Acknowledgements	18
20	TIMELINE OF COLONISATION IN VICTORIA	
28	PART I: THE JAGGED LINE	
	Sovereigns, Squatters and Settlers	32
	Massacres and the Dawn of Injustice	48
	Gold-diggers and the 'Aboriginal Problem'	62
	Letters, Petitions and Deputations	74
	Protection, Assimilation and the Stolen Generations	82
	Thinking Black, Fighting Back	104
	The Edge of Something New and Ancient	130
138	PART II: THE SILENCE AND THE TELLING	
	Inside Australia's First Truth-Telling Commission	142
	A Solid Foundation	146
	The Architecture of Truth-Telling	152
	Significant Moments	158
	Truth Told and Truth Heard	184

240

PART III: SELECTED TESTIMONIES

Introduction	242
Uncle Jack Charles	244
Aunty Fay Carter OAM	250
Uncle Kevin Coombs OAM	256
Aunty Eva Jo Edwards	262
Damian Griffis	268
Chief Commissioner Shane Patton APM	274
Aunty Carolyn Briggs AM	280
Aunty Vicki Couzens	286
Suzannah Henty	292
Aunty Di Kerr OAM	298
Uncle Brendan Kennedy	302
Premier Jacinta Allan	308
The Right Reverend Dr Richard Treloar	314
Aunty Jill Gallagher AO	320
Professor Raymond Lovett	326
Jarvis Atkinson	332
Nerita Waight	338
Deputy Premier Ben Carroll	344
Aunty Nellie Flagg	348
Uncle Paul Briggs OAM	352
Damien Murray	358
Uncle Ricky Baldwin	366

370

PART IV: KEY FINDINGS

382

TELL THE TRUTH

A poem by Gunditjmara Elder Uncle Jim Berg

384

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Letters Patent	386
Appendix 2: Full List of Recommendations	394
Appendix 3: References	434

FOREWORD

Until now, official histories of Australia were written by the colonisers, the oppressors, the ‘victors’. The stories about First Peoples’ occupation of this land for thousands of years were ignored, distorted and covered up; written out of history—as was the devastating impact of British colonisation from 1788.

When I was elected Premier in 1999, I appointed three respected Elders to a Premier’s Aboriginal Advisory Committee so I could get direct, first-hand advice about what we needed to do to improve the lives of First Peoples. I encouraged my government colleagues to listen and learn. Most, if not all, of us had received limited formal education about Aboriginal people’s histories and experiences.

Little appears to have changed over the last few decades: indeed, in her evidence to the Yoorrook Justice Commission, the Premier Jacinta Allan acknowledged that, like many Victorians, she was unaware of the true scale and costs of colonisation, including massacres that had taken place near her home on Dja Dja Wurrung Country.

The Yoorrook Justice Commission is the first truth-telling process in Australia’s history. *Truth Be Told*, the Commission’s final report and official public record, will go a long way towards remedying this for present-day readers and future generations alike.

For nearly four years, the Yoorrook Justice Commission listened to First Peoples’ stories in formal hearings, during visits to massacre sites, and ‘in testimony offered beside rivers and aquifers and smoking trees’.

In the words of the Commission: ‘It has created a space where oral testimony stands alongside written record; where the law listens to lore; where the rivers, and skies, and scarred landscapes of Victoria speak again through the voices of those who have always known them.’

I grew up in Ballarat, a regional city that became rich during the gold rush in the 1850s. This chapter of history was a core part of the school curriculum, and was embedded in the cultural life of the city.

But as the Yoorrook Justice Commission tells it, for First Peoples, the gold rush was not a story of fortune or progress—‘it was a catastrophe’. Sacred sites were desecrated. Land was excavated and exploited. And the profits reaped would never flow to the very people who had cared for and stewarded the land for centuries.

History is indeed written by the victors.

Truth Be Told tells us that the version of Australian history taught in our schools was a fiction. It presents us with a new, expanded history of Victoria, and makes for reading at once distressing and inspiring.

Distressing because it shows, through powerful, emotional storytelling, the devastating impact of colonialism on Australia's First Peoples.

It documents how concepts of *terra nullius* and *aqua nullius* were used to justify British colonisation across Australia. It illustrates the rapid, lawless and catastrophic establishment and expansion of the colony by squatters in western Victoria. It demonstrates the devastating effects of the State's attitude towards First Peoples, characterised by notions of 'protection' and assimilation. This was legally sanctioned destruction of culture, language, family and connection to Country. Children taken from families. Aboriginal people of mixed descent forcibly removed from reserves and their loved ones. Theft of land, stolen wages and slavery leaving First Peoples excluded from economic opportunity. For decades, every aspect of Aboriginal life—housing, employment, marriage, culture, community—was regulated and surveilled by a government body with the Orwellian name 'Aboriginal Protection Board'.

Despite the horrors it unearths, however, the report is also inspiring. It highlights First Peoples' unique and inherent connection to Country; the strength of their cultural practices and traditional knowledges. Not only are we told the incredible stories of survival and resistance, but we also see the admirable efforts of Aboriginal leaders reshaping their communities with programs and initiatives that create pride and prosperity from First Peoples' knowledge and culture.

It is a source of shame that many of the colonial policies outlined in *Truth Be Told* were first developed in Victoria. Perhaps more shameful still is that many were adopted by New South Wales, and later by other states, too.

While the stories and the histories brought to light by Yoorrook are often heartbreaking, the fact that they are now being shared on the public record opens the door to understanding and transformation. They offer a path forwards. *Truth Be Told* also documents many heartfelt apologies from the Premier, Ministers, the Police Commissioner, Department Heads, churches and settler families.

These apologies are sincere. They cannot undo historic damage, but they can give us hope for a better future—a future in which we acknowledge the truth; the voiceless have a voice; and all Victorians, including First Peoples, are bound together by justice and our shared humanity.

We cannot change the past. There is no easy fix. But we can be proud that First Peoples' enduring strength, resilience and activism have coalesced to initiate a historic commitment from the Victorian government: we are now the first state to embrace Voice, Treaty and Truth. And it's my sincere hope that the rest of the country will follow our lead with reason and compassion.

Steve Bracks.

Hon Steve Bracks AC



MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRPERSON

It is with great pleasure that I invite you to read the Yoorrook Justice Commission's final report, *Yoorrook: Truth Be Told*.

The purpose of *Truth Be Told* is unique. It has been written so that Victoria's First Peoples—those who gave evidence to the Commission, and the broader community—can recognise themselves in its pages. It ensures that First Peoples' truths about colonisation will sit on the public record alongside the colonial narrative that has, until now, been the dominant account of the past.

Truth Be Told tells the history of Victoria through the voices of First Peoples who testified before the Commission. Part I, 'The Jagged Line', illustrates the rapid change forced upon sovereign peoples of this beautiful country as the British empire tore across its landscape. It tells us how colonial systems persist exactly as they were designed—to exclude First Peoples from society.

Part II, 'The Silence and the Telling', then takes readers behind the scenes at Yoorrook to understand a more recent journey through history that has given First Peoples greater hope for the future.

I have lived through many of the policies described in these pages. I have worked in both the public service and education sectors for decades. I know that change cannot be guaranteed. However, First Peoples in Victoria now know that the truth of our history and our stories are on the public record.

As Chairperson of the Yoorrook Justice Commission, I am proud to have shared this experience with so many First Peoples, other Victorians and many who have come to live here from elsewhere.

Victoria has led Australia by completing the first truth-telling commission. This is a testament to the hard work and advocacy of generations of Aboriginal Elders, many of whom I have stood alongside. For the dignified contributions of our cultural leaders and for those who have staunchly affirmed that our sovereignty was never ceded, this work is in your honour.

If it were not for the intellectual and cultural leadership of Jill Gallagher as the former Treaty Advancement Commissioner, we would not be on the journey to Treaty. I would also like to acknowledge the inaugural Co-Chairs of the First Peoples Assembly of Victoria, Geraldine Atkinson and Marcus Stewart, for leading Victoria in this unprecedented space.

I would like to thank all my fellow Commissioners who have led the work of Yoorrook: Deputy Chair Commissioner Lovett, Deputy Chair Commissioner Hunter, Commissioner Walter, Commissioner North and former Commissioners, Commissioner Bell and Commissioner Atkinson. A special thank you to my family and friends for their support.

It is my hope that *Yoorrook: Truth Be Told* is the first chapter of our new shared future. It is now up to all Victorians to learn a more complete history of colonisation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Eleanor A Bourke'.

Professor Eleanor A Bourke AM
Chairperson, Yoorrook Justice Commission



INTRODUCTION

This is the final report of the Yoorrook Justice Commission. It is not a typical Royal Commission report because it answers a different call. When Yoorrook was established in May 2021 by the State Government and the First Peoples Assembly of Victoria, it was given a unique and important mandate. Beyond the normal inquiry functions of a Royal Commission, Yoorrook was also tasked with creating an official public record based on First Peoples' experiences of systemic injustice since the start of colonisation. This has never been done before.

For over four years, Yoorrook has engaged with thousands of First Peoples across Victoria to uncover the truths of our colonial past. It received oral testimonies, family histories, books, poetry, story and song from those who have come to trust the Commission with their custody and care. Representatives of the State, churches, and non-First Peoples have also come forward to reckon with their past.

Truth Be Told is a compilation of Yoorrook's work and official public record. Contained in these pages are some of the missing pieces of our state's jagged history. They are the words of First Peoples that will finally be granted admission to the public record alongside the version of history long accepted as definitive. None of this is done to deepen the wounds of colonisation, nor to create a sense of shame. It is done in the hope that by finally coming to terms with the past, all Victorians may develop a shared understanding of our history and a common aspiration for a future built on truth, justice and pride in the First Peoples of Victoria.

The Letters Patent and Terms of Reference of the Commission dated 14 May 2021 can be found at Appendix 1. Amendments to the Letters Patent can be found on Yoorrook's website.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Yoorrook: Truth Be Told has been divided into four main sections.

Part I, ‘The Jagged Line’, draws on evidence given to Yoorrook in addition to secondary sources to provide a detailed account of the history of the State of Victoria from the start of colonisation. Written in the tradition of First Peoples’ approach to storytelling, it blends oral history, collective memoir and rigorous research to offer a new perspective on colonial history—a reclamation of Victoria’s past that privileges voices and stories previously overlooked or deliberately suppressed.

Part II, ‘The Silence and the Telling’, examines the story of the Commission from its inception and earliest days to its conclusion—from the ceremonial opening and early roundtables to hearings on Country and at Yoorrook’s Collingwood precinct. It highlights some of Yoorrook’s key moments, including unprecedented apologies from government ministers.

Part III, ‘Selected Testimonies’, comprises extracts of evidence from twenty-two key witnesses, spanning a range of themes and historical periods. The Commission engaged with more than 9,000 First Peoples, held sixty-five public hearing days with 208 witnesses and received more than 1,300 submissions. The evidence selected and summarised in this chapter offers an insight into the breadth and depth of the truths shared with Yoorrook.

Part IV, ‘Key Findings’, summarises ten key findings about the history of colonisation in Victoria made by Yoorrook, based on consistent themes identified in the evidence presented to the Commission across all areas of its inquiry. These key findings serve as important markers for setting the record straight and empowering all Victorians to move forwards with a shared understanding of our history.

An extensive bibliography (Appendix 3) has also been provided to help guide readers through the primary evidence received by Yoorrook, which formed the basis of this historical account, as well as many secondary sources. Combined, these references provide an excellent starting point for anyone wishing to learn about Victorian history in greater depth.

CONTENT WARNING

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this book may contain images, voices or names of deceased persons in photographs, film, audio recordings or printed material.

This book covers the history of Victoria from the start of colonisation to the present day. It features stories from both historical and contemporary sources, and discusses racism, violence, forced relocation and institutionalisation, physical and sexual abuse (including that of children and young people), family violence, and substance and alcohol use, and may be distressing for some readers.

The following numbers offer free and confidential support if you or a loved one need help:

Lifeline: 13 11 14

First Peoples' Health and Wellbeing:
03 9070 8181 (dial 4)

13YARN: 13 92 76

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636

COPYRIGHT/IDS

Yoorrook's status as a Royal Commission means it does not have legal personality independent of the State of Victoria. One result of this is that copyright over its written products, including this report, is held by the State. This highlights the challenges associated with ensuring Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) over information about First Peoples, even when collected or produced in the context of a First Peoples-led process such as Yoorrook. To the maximum extent permitted by law, Yoorrook claims copyright over its written work, including this report (whilst acknowledging the State of Victoria's separate interest). Permission must be sought from First Peoples to use their data or evidence for any secondary purpose.

TERMINOLOGY

Yoorrook uses the term 'First Peoples' to include all Traditional Owners of a place in the state of Victoria (including family and clan groups) and their ancestors, as well as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander persons who are living or have lived in Victoria before or since the start of colonisation. This definition is provided in Yoorrook's Letters Patent. Where appropriate, Yoorrook may also use other terms such as 'Traditional Owners' or 'custodians', 'Aboriginal people', 'Indigenous' or 'Koorie' to describe First Peoples, especially where they have identified themselves in this way.

In certain contexts, Yoorrook and/or persons engaging with its processes may refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples elsewhere in Australia as also being 'First Peoples', without those communities or individuals necessarily having a connection to Victoria.

Wherever possible, Yoorrook uses First Peoples' words and ways of speaking. Yoorrook's commitment to language revitalisation includes respecting the right of First Peoples individuals and communities to identify themselves through their use of language.

When citing submissions, consultations, evidence, research or data, Yoorrook adopts the terminology used in the original document; this includes using terms such as 'Aboriginal', 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander', 'Indigenous', 'Koori' and 'Koorie'.

Some of the historical material quoted in this book contains content and language that is racist or otherwise discriminatory, derogatory and offensive, reflective of the prevailing attitudes towards First Peoples at the time of these sources' writing. Such language is in no way representative of the views of the Commission.

THE COMPLETE OFFICIAL PUBLIC RECORD

Yoorrook's complete official public record is made up of all its published records and can be found online at yoorrook.org.au and at State Library Victoria.

OTHER REPORTS

Yoorrook has prepared three interim reports: *Yoorrook with Purpose* (June 2022), *Yoorrook for Justice* (September 2023), and *Yoorrook for Transformation* (June 2025). These are the responses to the seventeen areas of inquiry into past and ongoing systemic injustices experienced by First Peoples in Victoria.

These are available to read and download via the Yoorrook website: yoorrook.org.au

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our deepest gratitude to the Elders, community leaders and all First Peoples who provided evidence, offered guidance, or otherwise participated in the Commission—from the earliest roundtables to formal written evidence; and from public hearings to intimate submissions made in confidence. Your willingness to share your truths and lived experiences—often painful—was an act both courageous and generous. Your stories have proven vital in creating a more honest and complete picture of Victoria's history. Yoorrook acknowledges, too, all other Victorians who contributed to this fuller picture by giving evidence.

Thank you to all Yoorrook staff who assisted in this process of truth-telling—whether by providing culturally safe, trauma-informed support for witnesses and colleagues or by wrangling deadlines, contractors and stakeholders. Thank you, too, for combing through, analysing and synthesising evidence; helping bring Yoorrook's work to a broader audience; sharing professional expertise and cultural knowledge; or by other means of contribution. A special thank you to Yoorrook's CEOs, past and present, for steering the ship in uncharted waters.

Yoorrook would like to thank Karen Jackson, Associate Professor Nikki Moodie, Dr Michael Maguire, Mark Kulkens and Jidah Clark for their valuable insights while serving on the Expert Advisory Committee.

Yoorrook wishes to extend its gratitude to Counsel Assisting Tony McAvoy SC (Wirdi), Fiona McLeod SC, Tim Goodwin (Yuin), Sarala Fitzgerald and Sarah Weinberg for their roles in helping bring these stories to light with profound care and sensitivity.

Solicitors Assisting King & Wood Mallesons (KWM) played a critical role, providing expert legal advice and preparing evidence with care in order to capture the voices and stories of their narrators with compassion.

Yoorrook would like to thank the Minister for Treaty and First Peoples, a portfolio held by both the Hon Gabrielle Williams MP and the Hon Natalie Hutchins MP during the Commission's term, for their stewardship of the truth-telling process through Government. To the Government employees and lawyers that spent their time responding to Yoorrook's processes, we are grateful for your commitment to truth-telling.

Special thanks to Daniel James (Yorta Yorta), Jennifer Down, Amanda Lourie and Lauren Hodes for their work writing, researching and editing this report, and to Martin Hughes for his expert advice on publication.

Thank you to Grindstone for their patience, flexibility, speed and care in all matters design, and for helping bring this book to life.

Yoorrook's logo and other design elements were created by artist Dixon Patten (Gunnai, Gunditjmara and Yorta Yorta artist with bloodlines from Dhudhuroa/Jaithmathang, Djab Wurrung, Monaro, Wemba Wemba, Barapa Barapa, Wadi Wadi, Yuin and Wiradjuri).

Finally, Yoorrook would like to acknowledge the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria and its members and Co-Chairs since 2021, who brought Yoorrook to life in partnership with the Government of Victoria. While the Commission's work has drawn to a close, the First Peoples' Assembly continues to shepherd the work—and shape the future—of truth, treaty and voice in Victoria.

TIMELINE OF COLONISATION IN VICTORIA

1787

British Government issues instructions to Governor Arthur Phillip for the establishment of the first colony in Australia. These include a direction to treat the 'Savages Natives' with 'amity and kindness', and to punish settlers that harm them.¹

1788

Captain Arthur Phillip establishes a convict settlement at Sydney Cove with the arrival of the First Fleet.² This is the beginning of the European colonisation of Australia.³

1803

Convict settlement established at Sullivan Bay (near present-day Sorrento).⁴ Disbanded after seven months due to Bunurong/Boon Wurrung resistance and lack of water.⁵

1834

Henty brothers illegally invade Gunditjmara Country in Portland Bay, beyond the areas approved by colonial authorities.⁶

Convincing Ground massacre.⁷

1835

Kulin Country invaded by John Batman, who claims to sign a treaty with Kulin Elders to purchase sizeable tracts of land. Kulin Elders say it is a 'Tanderrum' that provides temporary access to their land.⁸

Governor Richard Bourke issues a proclamation voiding the Batman Treaty, reiterating the British Crown's sole right to land.⁹

1836

Port Phillip declared a legal settlement, leading to the 'squattling rush'.¹⁰

Governor Bourke introduces ten-pound 'squattling licences'¹¹ that permit squatters to reside lawfully on the land.¹²

New South Wales Surveyor General Major Thomas Mitchell sets out to trace the course of the Murray River, naming the western plains of Victoria 'Australia felix' ('happy south land').¹³

Mount Cottrell, Werribee massacres.¹⁴

1837

Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes ('Buxton report') recommends that the government assume responsibility for the protection of 'the natives'.¹⁵

Mundy, Pyalong Station, Goulburn River massacre.¹⁶

1838

Port Phillip Protectorate established (1838–49) to 'protect' First Peoples.¹⁷ George Augustus Robinson appointed 'Chief Protector'.¹⁸ By 1841, stations established at Narre Warren, the Goulburn River, Mount Rouse and Franklindford.¹⁹

Governor Bourke establishes armed mounted police in Port Phillip.²⁰

Faithfull massacre, Benalla.²¹

Darlington Station massacre.²²

Barfold Station, Coliban River, Campaspe Plains massacre.²³

Mount Mitchell massacre.²⁴

Murdering Flat massacre.²⁵

1839

Buntingdale Aboriginal Mission established near Colac, operated by Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society.²⁶

Maiden Hills massacre.²⁷

Restdown Plains Station, Campaspe River massacre.²⁸

Mount Emu Creek massacre.²⁹

Blood Hole massacre.³⁰

1840

Angus McMillan invades Gunaikurnai Country (present-day Gippsland).³¹

Governor La Trobe instructs protectors to remove Aboriginal people from Melbourne.³²

Tahara Station massacre.³³

Latrobe Valley massacre.³⁴

Wootong Vale massacre.³⁵

Fighting Hills massacre.³⁶

Fighting Waterholes massacre.³⁷

Mustons Station massacre.³⁸

Mount Rouse massacre.³⁹

Victoria Valley massacre.⁴⁰

Grampians massacre.⁴¹

Boney Point, Gippsland massacre.⁴²

Connell's Ford massacre.⁴³

Burrumbeep Station massacre.⁴⁴

1841

Merri Creek Protectorate Station established.⁴⁵

Butchers Creek, Gippsland massacre.⁴⁶

Mount Sturgeon Station massacre.⁴⁷

Woodlands massacre.⁴⁸

King River, above Oxley Plains (Wangaratta) massacre.⁴⁹

1842

Tambo Crossing massacre.⁵⁰
 Caramut Station massacre.⁵¹
 Eumeralla massacre.⁵²
 Tarrone Station massacre.⁵³
 Hollands Landing, Gippsland massacre.⁵⁴

1843

Grazing licences introduced to 'preserve the rights of the Crown to the lands'.⁵⁵
 Warrigal Creek, Gippsland massacre.⁵⁶
 Warrigal Creek Mouth massacre.⁵⁷
 Bruthen Creek, Gippsland massacre.⁵⁸
 Freshwater Creek, Gippsland massacre.⁵⁹
 Gammon Creek, Gippsland massacre.⁶⁰
 Victoria Range massacre.⁶¹
 Budj Bim massacre.⁶²
 Clunie, Glenelg River massacre.⁶³

1845

After just over a decade of colonisation, less than 240 male European colonists hold all of the pastoral leases then issued.⁶⁴
 Mount Arapiles/Dyurrite massacre.⁶⁵

1846

Aire River Estuary, Cape Otway massacre.⁶⁶
 Snowy River massacre.⁶⁷

1847

City of Melbourne proclaimed.⁶⁸
 Mount Eccles massacre.⁶⁹

1848

Beveridge Island massacre.⁷⁰

1849

Victoria formally mapped and surveyed. The colonial government starts to record the sale and transfer of land.⁷¹

Port Phillip Protectorate is abolished.⁷²

1850

The Slaughterhouse massacre.⁷³
 Murderers Flat, Darlot's Creek, Lake Condah Mission massacre.⁷⁴

1851

Official establishment of the colony of Victoria after the Port Phillip District separates from the colony of New South Wales.

Gold discovered, leading to population growth and the rapid accumulation of colonial wealth.⁷⁵

Moravians (German Protestant Church) establish a mission at Lake Boga (south-east of Swan Hill).⁷⁶
 Milly, Brodribb River massacre.⁷⁷

1853

Native Police Corps disbanded.⁷⁸
 Victoria Police Force established.⁷⁹
 University of Melbourne founded.⁸⁰

1854

Apsley, Western Wimmera massacre.⁸¹

1855

Anglican mission established at Yelta.⁸²

1856

Between 1856 and 1860, approximately 850,000 acres of land in Victoria are surveyed annually.⁸³

1859

Acheron Station established. In 1860, residents are relocated to Mohican Station.⁸⁴

Ebenezer Mission (also known as Lake Hindmarsh) established on Wotjobaluk Country by the Moravian Church.⁸⁵

1860

The Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of Aborigines established (operational from 1860–69).⁸⁶

By 1860, the settler population has grown to 538,000 (from 76,000 in 1850).⁸⁷

By 1860, approximately 4.5 million acres (or about eight per cent of the total area of the colony of Victoria) has been sold.⁸⁸ Between 1860 and 1862, nearly six million acres are made available for sale, and around two million acres alienated to private landowners.⁸⁹

1861

Framlingham Mission established on Kirrae Whurrung (Girai wurrung) Country, on the Hopkins River.⁹⁰

1862

Lake Tyers Aboriginal Reserve established by the Church of England at Bung Yarnda on Gunaikurnai Country.⁹¹

1862

Ramahyuck Mission established by German Moravian missionaries and Presbyterians on Gunaikurnai Country at a known massacre site (Boney Point).⁹²

1863

Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve established.⁹³

1867

Lake Condah Mission established on Kerrupjmara Country, supervised by the Church of England.⁹⁴

Framlingham Mission closed. Residents resist Board attempts to move them to Lake Condah.

1869

The *Aborigines Protection Act 1869* (Vic) is passed as 'an Act to provide for the Protection and Management of the Aboriginal Natives of Victoria'.

The Board for the Protection of Aborigines established (previously the Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of Aborigines).⁹⁵

Framlingham Mission reopens after residents resist attempts to move them off.⁹⁶

1871

The *Aborigines Protection Act* creates regulations for the Board to remove 'any Aboriginal child neglected by its parents or left unprotected' to a reserve, industrial school or reformatory.⁹⁷

1877

The Royal Commission on the Aborigines is established to consider the conditions of First Peoples and 'the best means of caring for and dealing with them in the future'.⁹⁸

The 1877 census estimates there are approximately 1,067 Aboriginal people in the state, 486 living on a mission or reserve.⁹⁹

1881

The Maloga Petition, jointly authored by forty-two men from the Maloga mission, is submitted to the New South Wales governor. It requests that land be granted to the community, and highlights the scarcity of native game and other food sources due to the presence of settlers and their sheep.

Parliamentary Inquiry into Coranderrk.¹⁰⁰

1884

Coranderrk Station made a permanent reserve.¹⁰¹

1886

The *Aborigines Protection Act 1886* (Vic) is introduced, commonly—and offensively—known as the 'Half-Caste Act', changing the definition of Aboriginality and creating two legal categories of 'full-bloods' and 'half-castes'.¹⁰² First Peoples between the ages of fourteen and thirty-five who are of mixed parentage are expelled from reserves and missions.¹⁰³

1888

Cummeragunja Reserve established on Yorta Yorta/Bangerang Country, along the banks of the Murray River.

1890

The *Aborigines Act 1890* (Vic) (also known as the *Aborigines Protection Act 1890*) extends powers to remove First Peoples' children from their families.

Framlingham Mission closed. Some residents resist and stay at Framlingham.¹⁰⁴

1893

The Government cancels 2,400 acres of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve.¹⁰⁵

1901

Federation: *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1901* (Cth) passed. The colony of Victoria becomes a state of Australia.

The Australian Government passes the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* (Cth) (the White Australia Policy).¹⁰⁶

Victorian census records 653 First Peoples—a thirty-nine per cent drop from the 1877 census total of 1,067, tallied prior to the introduction of the *Aborigines Protection Act 1886* (Vic).¹⁰⁷

1904

Ebenezer Mission (Lake Hindmarsh Aboriginal Reserve) closes and the land, except the cemetery, is returned to the Victorian Lands Department to make available for selection.¹⁰⁸

1908

Ramahyuck Mission closed.¹⁰⁹
Lake Tyers Aboriginal Reserve transferred to Board control.¹¹⁰

1910

The Victorian Government passes the *Aborigines Act 1910* (Vic), which brings First Peoples of mixed parentage under Board control again.¹¹¹

1915

The *Aborigines Act 1915* (Vic) repeals the *Aborigines Protection Act 1890* and *Aborigines Act 1910*. Regulations are issued in 1916 to extend Board control of Aboriginal people's lives.¹¹²

1917

The Board illegally sells part of the permanent reserve at Coranderrk.¹¹³

The Board attempts to close reserves and 'concentrate' First Peoples at Lake Tyers. Some First Peoples refuse to move and remain at Lake Condah, Antwerp, Coranderrk and Framlingham.¹¹⁴

The *Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act 1917* (Vic) provides land for returned soldiers following World War I.¹¹⁵ The Board offers First Peoples' reserve land to the government for the scheme.¹¹⁶

1918

Lake Condah Mission closed. Gunditjmara people continue to use the site.

1924

Coranderrk is closed. Residents protest, with some remaining at Coranderrk.¹¹⁷

1933

The Australian Aborigines' League (AAL) established by William Cooper, Sir Pastor Doug Nicholls, Margaret Tucker, Bill and Eric Onus and others in Melbourne.¹¹⁸

1937

William Cooper sends a petition to the Prime Minister to be forwarded to King George VI, requesting action 'for the preservation of our race from extinction and to grant representation to our race in the Federal Parliament.'¹¹⁹ The petition is not forwarded to the King.

1938

On 26 January, William Cooper, Pastor Doug Nicholls, Margaret Tucker and others protest the invasion of Australia in a Day of Mourning.

1939

Cummeragunja walk-off: residents at Cummeragunja Mission protest poor living conditions, mismanagement of land and harsh treatment.¹²⁰

1945

The *Soldier Settlement Act 1945* (Vic) allows for the compulsory acquisition of land for soldier settlement following World War II, including much of the land from the former Lake Condah Mission site.¹²¹

1948

Lake Condah and Coranderrk land provided to the Soldier Settlement Commission.¹²² No returning Aboriginal servicepeople are recorded as having been granted blocks at either of these locations.¹²³

1957

Pastor Doug Nicholls and others establish the Victorian Aborigines Advancement League.¹²⁴

The *Aborigines Act 1957* (Vic) establishes the Aborigines Welfare Board (operational 1957–68). The Act formally adopts policies of assimilation and broadens the definition of Aboriginality to 'any person of Aboriginal descent', bringing people previously outside of the Board's control back under its surveillance.¹²⁵

1963

Pastor Doug Nicholls marches with Lake Tyers/Bung Yarnda representatives and others to protest the closure of Lake Tyers Aboriginal Reserve.¹²⁶

1965

Lake Tyers Aboriginal Reserve declared a permanent reserve.¹²⁷

1967

National referendum on Indigenous recognition in the Australian Constitution. More than ninety per cent of the electorate votes to amend the Constitution to allow the Commonwealth Government to make laws with regard to First Peoples and to count them in the census.¹²⁸

The *Constitution Alteration (Aboriginals) 1967* (Cth) is enacted.

1970

The *Aboriginal Lands Act 1970* (Vic) grants freehold title to some residents at Lake Tyers and Framlingham.¹²⁹

1972

Aboriginal Tent Embassy established outside Parliament House on Ngunnawal/Ngambri Country (Canberra).¹³⁰

Uncle Jack Charles and Bob Maza set up Australia's first Aboriginal theatre company in 1972 in Melbourne and name it 'Nindethana'.¹³¹

1973

Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service (VALS) established.¹³²

Establishment of the Victorian Aboriginal Cooperative Limited (VACL) to 'enable Aboriginal people to satisfy their need for adequate housing'.¹³³

The Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) established.¹³⁴

1976

Victorian Aboriginal Child and Community Agency (VACCA) established.¹³⁵

Victorian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group established (later the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated).¹³⁶

1979

Framlingham residents protest to secure land rights.¹³⁷

1980

First Peoples establish the Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria (which became Aboriginal Housing Victoria, still in operation today).¹³⁸

High court case *Onus v Alcoa of Australia Ltd* in which Sandra Onus and Christina Frankland challenge the proposed construction of an aluminium smelter, which, they argue, would damage Gunditjmara cultural heritage. Negotiations lead to legal action against Alcoa being withdrawn in exchange for the Victorian government's transfer of the former Lake Condah Mission and cemetery to the Gunditjmara.^{139 140}

1984

Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Limited established.¹⁴¹

1988

Aboriginal people and supporters hold protests across Australia against the bicentenary celebration of colonisation and dispossession.

1992

The High Court of Australia in *Mabo v Queensland [No 2]* rejects the idea that at the time of colonisation Australia was 'terra nullius' (land belonging to no one). Consequently, native title can be recognised in Australia on Crown land.¹⁴²

1993

The Commonwealth passes the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) to provide for the recognition and protection of native title, including a mechanism for a group to seek a determination as to whether its native title rights still exist and can be recognised.¹⁴³

2002

The High Court confirms on appeal that the native title rights of the Yorta Yorta Aboriginal community cannot be recognised.¹⁴⁴

2006

Victoria passes the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006* (Vic), which provides for the protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage places and objects.¹⁴⁵

2010

Victoria passes the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010* (Vic) as an alternative to the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth), for Traditional Owner groups to negotiate a Recognition and Settlement Agreement with the state to provide formal recognition of and rights and interests in land.¹⁴⁶

2017

The Uluru Statement from the Heart called for Voice, Treaty and Truth as a path forwards for First Nations' self-determination in Australia.¹⁴⁷

2018

Victorian Treaty Advancement Commission established.¹⁴⁸

Victoria passes the first Treaty legislation (*Advancing the Treaty Process with Aboriginal Victorians Act 2018* [Vic]).¹⁴⁹

2019

First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria established following elections by First Peoples.¹⁵⁰

2021

Yoorrook Justice Commission formally established.

2022

Victoria passes legislation (the *Treaty Authority and Other Treaty Elements Act 2022* [Vic]) to create the Treaty Authority to oversee Treaty negotiations between the First Peoples' Assembly of Victoria and the Victorian Government.

Yoorrook releases its interim report *Yoorrook with Purpose*.¹⁵¹

2023

Yoorrook releases *Yoorrook for Justice: Report into Victoria's Child Protection and Criminal Justice Systems*.

The 2023 referendum on the Australian Indigenous Voice to Parliament.¹⁵² Sixty per cent of the Australian population and 54.2 per cent of the Victorian population votes 'no' to a proposed law 'to alter the Constitution to recognise the First Peoples of Australia by establishing an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice'.¹⁵³

2024

Victorian Treaty negotiations begin.¹⁵⁴

2025

Yoorrook releases its final interim report on land injustice, health, education and other social injustice issues and its Official Public Record.

PART I: THE JAGGED LINE

YOORROOK TRUTH BE TOLD

THE JAGGED LINE: TRUTH-TELLING ABOUT VICTORIA'S PAST

We walk on stolen land: a truth etched into the soil, in the rivers that have carried stories of a people for millennia, and in the skies that have witnessed it all. The scars of colonial invasion—its massacres, violence and relentless erasure—are not confined to the past. They reside in the present, shaping the lives of First Peoples in Victoria today. The land that once nurtured the Gunditjmara, Wurundjeri, Yorta Yorta, Latji Latji and all of the nations that knew home in this place now called Victoria is crisscrossed with legacies of injustice; a painful inheritance that refuses to fade.

This is not merely history; it is a living reality.

Colonial systems have shapeshifted but never relinquished their grip. From the first footsteps of invaders to the halls of contemporary power, the machinery of dispossession persists. Its imprint is visible in land stolen and sold, in laws that segregated and silenced, in families torn apart, and in systems that dehumanised and oppressed.

This is more than an account of history—it is a reclamation. For the first time, the voices of Victoria's First Peoples are entering the public record on their own terms, with oral testimony accorded the same authority as the colony's written archives. You will hear from some of those who testified before Yoorrook, unearthing their own pasts and the stories passed down through generations to help assemble a new historical perspective: fragmented, often impressionistic, but no less vital. This work traces the threads that bind past and present, revealing how historical injustices continue to manifest today—perpetuating harm, deepening inequity, and guiding the unfinished story of this place.

**THIS IS MORE THAN
AN ACCOUNT OF
HISTORY—IT IS A
RECLAMATION.**

SOVEREIGNS, SQUATTERS AND SETTLERS

For more than 1,600 generations, First Peoples have lived upon, shaped and been shaped by these lands and waters now called Victoria. Long before the British Empire turned its gaze southward, this place was home to nations with complex societies, intricate trade networks, and vast ecological knowledge. Its people had adapted and thrived through shifting climates, surviving two ice ages. They had left records of their existence in places like Budj Bim's lava flows, among the dunes at Lake Mungo and down the long stretch of beaches to the east. Their stories were inscribed in stone and soil, in the curves of riverbanks, and in the pathways of the winds.

Yet Victoria's fate was decided by British authority, without reference to the First Peoples who had stewarded the land for millennia. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the British Empire was expanding at an unprecedented rate. The Whig government of the 1830s, driven by economic liberalism and reformist ideals, sought to extend its influence through a careful mix of benevolence and control. The empire framed its expansion in the language of 'civilisation', even as it dispossessed the very peoples it claimed to uplift.

Victoria was not part of Britain's original gambit in Australia. The empire's resources were pumped into the settlement at Sydney Cove during the colonial outpost's infancy.

Unlike New South Wales, which was claimed in 1770 and settled in 1788 as a penal colony, Victoria's invasion occurred later, driven by opportunistic settlers rather than convicts. It was an extension of empire, not a prison. Its purpose was profit, not exile. The fertile plains south of the Murray River, so carefully managed by First Peoples for thousands of years, were seen as a prize waiting to be claimed.

Despite the rhetoric of humanitarianism, which saw the British government instruct Governor Arthur Phillip to treat First Peoples with 'amity and kindness', the reality was starkly different. The Bank of England grew fat on the profits of sugar and slavery, and directives of the colonial office were more pragmatic than principled. 'Kindness' towards Indigenous people was preached but rarely practised.

Port Phillip District, as it would be known by the British, remained beyond their reach for decades after 1788. Its far-flung location and the imperial decree that restricted settlement to designated areas initially delayed expansion southward. But ambition outpaced policy. Major Thomas Mitchell's explorations in the 1830s revealed to the colonial elite what First Peoples had known forever: the landscapes of the south-east were rich; their plains fertile, their rivers abundant.

As he travelled through the western districts, beyond the scope of his sanctioned expedition, Mitchell's reports ignited a frenzy. Pastoralists in New South Wales and Iutruwita/Tasmania—then known as Van Diemen's Land—did not wait for official authorisation. They moved swiftly, their herds and homesteads carving deep scars into Country long before the ink dried on any papers of legal decree.

Prior to European invasion, the place now called Victoria was the most densely populated region on the continent. An estimated 60,000 First Peoples lived across its diverse landscapes—wooded highlands, volcanic plains, coastal inlets, and sprawling river systems. Each nation was deeply tied to Country through lore, language and custom.

Victoria's history did not begin with the arrival of sheep and cattle. The Gunditjmara people had been farming eels long before the first Europeans laid claim to agriculture on

this land. The people of Budj Bim, with their vast aquaculture systems of stone weirs and channels, had cultivated food in ways that sustained people and place alike. Meanwhile, the lands of the Gunaikurnai in the east, rich with forests and waterways, held their own stories of survival, adaptation and deep connection.

Victoria was not a blank canvas. Its history did not begin with European arrival: it was interrupted by it. It was, and remains, a place of ancient sovereignty. The soil beneath Melbourne, Ballarat, Geelong and Portland had already been worked by human hands long before the settlers arrived.



INVASION DIDN'T BEGIN WITH CANNON FIRE, THE WHIRLING OF A BLADE OR A BATTLE CRY OF *CHARGE!*

It began with an anchor dropping, a creaking of an oar, and the winds that had brought the strangers here.

There was a current of tension among the people who witnessed the approach of the ship, then the boat, and finally the people. These strangers heaved themselves over waters and towards land that did not belong to them.

The unease provoked by the creaking of the oar and the distant mutterings of an alien language on that morning in 1834 has remained the baseline. To this day, the tension rises and falls. And yet, what was about to unfold would unleash more devastation on a people and their

civilisation than that innocuous yet portentous incursion onto the lands of the Gunditjmara could ever foretell.

Long before that morning's horizon was punctured by foreign salt-crusted sails, the people of this place had heard rumours of strangers. Sealers and whalers drifted along the perilously beautiful coastlines of their Country, their presence a disturbance; an unfamiliar ripple against the currents of time that had flowed uninterrupted for millennia.

These early encounters were not mere curiosities—they were tremors, warnings of the storm to come. Along the Murray, Wadi Wadi people bore scars left by smallpox, the disease arriving as a silent harbinger of devastation even before the invaders themselves. The Dja Dja Wurrung people shared stories of the Mindi, a serpentine shadow whose arrival brought death and presaged the violence that would soon follow.

These accounts, shared in the hushed cadence of lore, spread across trade routes and songlines, connecting communities like veins carrying lifeblood across the body of the continent. The tales spoke of strange men and their alien customs creeping ever closer. They were stories of resistance and caution, but also of the inevitability of collision.

As far back—or as recently—as 1803, mariners traced the edge of the southern continent, casting their sights upon the lands of the Bunurong/Boon Wurrung.

A military outpost was established near what we now call Sorrento. An isolated instalment of the British Empire's military apparatus, intended to stave off any attempted incursions from arch foes the French, who, it was feared, would use Bass Strait as a point to steal land to which neither they nor the British had any legitimate claim.





VICTORIA PRIOR TO COLONISATION IN 1834

Vicmap, Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, Esri, USGS

The land resisted from the start. Fresh water eluded the settlers. Food was scarce. The Bunurong/Boon Wurrung stood firm in their defence of Country and, helped by the elements, forced the invaders back onto the waters on which they had arrived. By 1804, the camp was abandoned and moved south to the River Derwent: a brief flicker in the timeline of Victoria's invasion, but an opening moment in the dispossession of the Palawa of lutruwita/Tasmania.

BUT EVEN IN RETREAT, THE SEEDS OF DISPOSSESSION WERE SOWN.



The arrival of the long ships marked a rupture; a point from which there was no return. They came bearing foreign flags, weapons, and a hunger for land that could not be sated. Yet they carried no understanding of the people they sought to dominate and eliminate.

The invaders did not see the profound connections that bound the First Peoples to the land, their intricate knowledge of its rhythms, or the spirituality held in every tree, river and stone. They saw only a vast landscape ripe for exploitation.

On Gunditjmara Country, the first chapter of invasion was written in blood.



The Gunditjmara people are renowned for their engineering prowess, having constructed one of the world's oldest and most sophisticated

aquaculture systems. Long before European settlement, the vast interconnected networks of stone channels, weirs and holding ponds at Budj Bim sustained communities and economies through a carefully managed system of eel farming. This aquaculture infrastructure predates the Egyptian pyramids and Roman roads. It is a testament to the advanced hydrological knowledge and environmental stewardship of the Gunditjmara. These systems, now recognised as part of the Budj Bim World Heritage area, were not simply tools for survival—they were central to a thriving cultural landscape. The Gunditjmara built permanent stone dwellings, establishing some of the earliest recorded village-style settlements in Australia. Their mastery of fire-stick farming helped to maintain the land's productivity, fostering ecosystems that supported abundant plant and animal life.

Sustainability was at the heart of this knowledge system. The Gunditjmara understood the beat of Country. They harnessed the seasonal flows of lava channels and wetlands to ensure a reliable food source for generations. Their aquaculture was not about taking from the land—it was about working with it; maintaining a balance that ensured prosperity without depletion. This knowledge, carried through songlines, ceremony and lived practice, speaks to a legacy of innovation that continues today.

The land had sustained the Gunditjmara people for millennia. Its volcanic plains bore the imprint of ancient engineering—stone aqueducts, eel traps, channels woven into Country with purpose and precision. But these systems, perfected over countless generations, were soon trampled beneath hooves.

In 1834, Edward Henty came ashore at Portland Bay, his ships heavy with livestock and the weight of colonial ambition. The Henty

family brought sheep, cattle and machinery. They carved a sheep run into Gunditjmara Country, naming it 'Merino Downs'. They built a homestead and scattered outstations across the landscape. In doing so, they superimposed a foreign order upon an ancient one.

When settlers came to the lands now known as Victoria, pastoral huts and sheep folds were erected from felled trees and bark, waterways fouled and trampled by sheep whose hooves were like jackhammers. Sacred sites, once places of ceremony and care, were desecrated or buried beneath sheep pens and ploughs.

Keicha Day (Gunditjmara, Yorta Yorta), spoke about the oft-celebrated mechanisms of colonisation, describing the anguish felt by First Peoples:

'There's nothing pioneering about genocide. There's nothing pioneering about raping and murdering First Nations people. There's nothing pioneering about killing people over a whale that was beached, and not only killing them, but massacring, like, torturing [...] That is absolute colonial violence, and it was perpetrated by people that we name streets after.'

The violence was not incidental; it was foundational. Suzannah Henty is a sixth-generation descendant of one of the earliest colonisers of Gunditjmara Country. Speaking to Yoorrook about her forebears, she did not hide or soften the truth. 'The process of establishing Victoria's first settlement was a war,' she said.

Gunditjmara people were suddenly threatened on the very stations that claimed their land. In June 1838, one Gunditjmara person was shot dead by a hut-keeper at Merino Downs. In October of that same year, three more were killed.

In 1840, the number grew. Dozens of Aboriginal people were murdered by one of the Hentys' overseers. These were not isolated incidents. They formed part of a broader pattern of violent dispossession, one marked in the dirt not designated on official maps. 'There are hundreds of unmarked sites of conflict in which members of the Henty family were likely involved,' Suzannah Henty stated.

The cost of this invasion was not just the loss of land—it was the fracturing of a sovereign people's right to exist on their own Country, according to their own law. It was a war waged not just on bodies, but on memory, spirit and continuity.

The Gunditjmara resisted, but the violence of invasion was relentless. It was not just the killing of people; though that was horrific and indiscriminate. It was the killing of Country itself. Land was gouged, exploited, and left to bleed. Patches of bare earth were eroded by the impact of flocks of sheep that pounded the ground.

Despite the destruction, the spirit of Gunditjmara Country endured. Its rich soil whispered ancient stories. Its waters carried the memories of those who fought to protect it. This resistance was not merely physical; it was spiritual, cultural, and deeply rooted in the knowledge that to harm the land is to harm the people.

Over the coming decades, the colonisers, sanctioned and unsanctioned, would use the same contours of land as its original inhabitants. They sank their picks into vulnerable valley floors shaped by careful hands, dredged waterways that had carried stories for millennia, and tore into plains once tended with meticulous care. Their advance was an encroachment that set two worlds hurtling towards collision.

Songlines turned into stock routes; and routes into roads, which led to 'settlements', which

turned into towns—patches of consolidated wealth in the vastness of the land from which that very wealth was torn. It was a reconstitution so total that it displaced and, in some cases, obliterated everything that was there before. It was unrelenting, terrifying, but most of all exhausting for the First Peoples of the place that later came to be known as Victoria.



INVASION IN THE SOUTH-EAST OF THE CONTINENT HAPPENED ON MANY FRONTS AND UNDER MANY GUISES.

In lutruwita/Tasmania, or Van Diemen's Land, as it was then known, British settlers had waged a campaign of terror against the island's First Peoples throughout the early 1830s. The brutal frontier conflict would come to be known as the 'Black War'. Between 1828 and 1832, martial law was imposed, bounties were placed on Aboriginal heads, and military patrols swept across lutruwita/Tasmania to capture Palawa people. Few were caught, but their resistance was ultimately broken.

Following negotiations led by Aboriginal Protector George Augustus Robinson, the people were banished to Flinders Island, and lutruwita/Tasmania was open to unrestricted exploitation. The colonists named it a 'war' not to dignify their opponents, but to cloak their killing in the language of legitimacy.

As the Henty brothers seized Gunditjmara land, another wave of colonisers set their sights on Kulin Country, drawn by the fertile plains surrounding the bay.

In June 1835, John Batman, representing the Port Phillip Association from Van Diemen's Land (lutruwita/Tasmania), sailed across the Bass Strait to Indented Head on the Bellarine Peninsula. Outside the bounds of 'legal' settlement and without the imprimatur of the Crown, Batman sought to carve out his own claim on Port Phillip—then still part of the colony of New South Wales.

His expedition moved like a shadow across the bay, stalking the curves of its shoreline, the bends of its rivers, the rise and fall of Country that had long been known to others. These lands were neither unclaimed nor empty. They held stories of lore and memory—all threaded into the land by the Kulin Nations, whose people had walked those paths since time immemorial.

Along the way, the expedition's members met with people of the Kulin Nations. The encounters were brief, weighted, expectant. Goods passed between the outstretched palms. Blankets, sugar, mirrors and trinkets from foreign hands; in return, baskets woven tight with knowledge of generations, spears honed by the land itself. It was an unequal exchange. One side measured the other's worth in objects. The other saw something deeper. An omen, a shift; the prelude to something that could not be undone.

For, in fact, beneath the surface of these meetings—gestures of trade, the illusion of goodwill—lay the darker intentions of a man with blood on his hands. As Associate Professor Katherine Ellinghaus testified, Batman arrived in Kulin Country as a man who had been involved in the violence that happened in lutruwita/Tasmania. 'His party killed an estimated fifteen

people and captured others, including keeping a two-year-old boy.⁷

Shortly before setting foot on Kulin land, Batman had led a raid in the cold, mist-draped country near the foothills of Ben Lomond, in the northeast of lutruwita/Tasmania. This was the homelands of the Plangermaireener people, where forests met the winding curves of the South Esk River and the highlands stood like sentinels over the plains below. In a gully not far from the river, a camp of fifty or sixty Aboriginal men, women and children lay sleeping. Batman and his armed party moved in silence beneath the trees. The camp was alerted to the trespassers' presence, and made for their lives, running away from the looming danger. While the Aboriginal people had posed no threat, Batman ordered his men to open fire.

When the sun rose, at least fifteen people lay dead. The survivors—those not felled by musket or blade—were captured and marched away. Among them, a two-year-old boy. In cold, clinical terms, Batman described how he felt obliged to shoot dead two wounded survivors who were unable to keep pace on the return to his farm.

It was the architect of this raid, a man who saw death as conquest and capture as success, who would soon arrive on Kulin Country, carrying a so-called treaty in one hand and the unrepentant legacy of the Black War in the other.

On Kulin land, Batman was outnumbered. There would be no reinforcements riding over the horizon, no easy path to victory. The old method—muskets at dawn, fire in the undergrowth—was beyond his reach. Batman had to reconsider his approach. And in any case, the world was changing. In London, the weight of moral reckoning had brought down the slave trade. The voices of evangelicals pressed the Crown to see its subjects as human beings, no matter their colour. The language of justice was

beginning to creep into the works of empire. Brute force alone would not suffice here; not after the British Government had begun, at least on paper, to acknowledge the rights of Indigenous peoples.

Batman knew this. He adapted.

Where violence might fail, another weapon would take its place: ink on paper. A lie dressed as law.

He framed his claim as a lawful agreement. In doing so, he hoped to swindle an empire with the same sleight of hand that would soon steal a continent.

Despite his role in bloodshed, Batman recognised that the land he sought belonged to the Kulin Nations. In a meeting with Kulin Elders near Merri Creek, Batman signed two deeds that he framed as treaties, claiming 500,000 acres of land in and around Port Phillip Bay and an additional 100,000 acres around Geelong and Indented Head.

These deeds, written in English, bore no trace of Aboriginal cultural lore or understanding. There was also no sanction from the Crown. Batman instead ordained himself in what he saw as his own kingdom. He moved with intent, his motives sharp as the edge of a freshly whetted blade. He understood the delicate balance between conquest and conscience.

Batman's 1835 'treaty' is often mistaken for an early recognition of First Peoples' sovereignty. In reality, it was a deception.

That so-called treaty—understood by some as a transaction; by others as trespass—reverberated across generations. What the Kulin Elders understood as an agreement for temporary access—akin to a Tanderrum, or visitor's visa—was manipulated into a claim to the land. Batman effectively assumed the role of the colony's first property developer.

Uncle Andrew Gardiner (Wurundjeri) traces his lineage back to that moment. 'My ancestry is through my mother, Waria Terrick Gardiner,' he told Yoorrook. 'My grandmother [was] Jessie Jemima Wandin Terrick; my great-great-grandfather Robert Wandin; my great-great-grandfather, Bebejan, head man of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung clan of the Wurrung people back in the 1830s. He was around in the time when Batman tried to introduce the treaty.'

New South Wales Governor Richard Bourke nullified Batman's claim with the 1835 Proclamation, declaring all land property of the Crown. But this was not an act of protection—it was an assertion of British sovereignty. The Crown could not allow even the suggestion that Aboriginal people had the right to negotiate over land. To do so would threaten the legal fiction on which the entire colony rested: that the land belonged to no one.

Bourke's ruling reinforced the Crown's absolute authority, ensuring that land was taken through occupation and government-sanctioned sale, not through agreements with those who had lived on it for millennia.

Batman's professed treaty did not mark a moment of mutual recognition—it marked a collision between two worldviews: one rooted in reciprocity, the other in conquest. What the Kulin people offered was ceremony and conditional hospitality; what Batman claimed was possession.

Governor Bourke's swift rejection of the treaty was not a repudiation of Batman's methods. Rather, it was a reinforcement of the colonial project's foundations: dispossession by decree, not negotiation. In this way, the events of 1835 crystallised the mechanics of invasion—where Indigenous law was not misunderstood, but deliberately overwritten; where sovereignty was not shared, but denied.



By the mid-1830s, a squatting rush swept across the land. Wealthy settlers, drawn by the promise of even greater prosperity, laid claim to vast tracts, transforming fertile soil into sprawling sheep runs. Reports from explorers like Major Thomas Mitchell, who praised the western plains as 'Australia Felix', fuelled the rush.

Squatters claimed these territories with little or no regard for their existing inhabitants. They saw First Peoples not as custodians, but as obstructions: barriers to be torn down in pursuit of their own desires. On horseback, with muskets in hand, the weight of colonial law at their backs, and the silent sanction of empire, they set about clearing the land. But it was not only people who bore the cost.

This stampede created a relentless cycle of displacement and destruction. As pastoral runs expanded, First Peoples were pushed from their homes and stripped of resources essential for survival.

The settlers' hunger for more land created fierce competition that left Aboriginal communities facing starvation, disease and violence. The transformation of the landscape disrupted long-standing ways of life, replacing equilibrium with exploitation.

The squatting rush was a defining force in the colony's development, marking a moment when settlers began to assert control on an unprecedented scale. For First Peoples, it signalled a deliberate effort to diminish their presence—an attempt to remake both the land and the society that grew upon it.

IT IS NOW KNOWN THAT AT LEAST
FIFTY MASSACRES HAPPENED IN
VICTORIA. PRISING THE TRUTH
ABOUT THESE MURDEROUS ACTS
FROM BENEATH THE CLOAK OF
SILENCE HAS NOT BEEN EASY.
IT WAS NEVER GOING TO BE.



VICTORIA'S COLONISATION STANDS AMONG THE MOST BRUTAL CHAPTERS IN AUSTRALIA'S HISTORY.

Years of painstaking research have helped to pass on stories almost lost. It is now known that at least fifty massacres happened in Victoria. Prising the truth about these murderous acts from beneath the cloak of silence has not been easy. It was never going to be.

We will never know the full toll of the reprisals; the opportunistic killings; the quiet, calculated murders carried out under the cover of settlement. Much of the violence was never recorded. Instead, it was concealed by those who committed it, and forgotten by those who benefited from it. But thanks in large part to the research of Dr Lyndall Ryan and Dr Bill Pascoe, we do now know that those fifty documented massacres claimed the lives of more than 978 Aboriginal people.

The violence was not random. There is a striking and undeniable connection between massacre sites and land stolen for pastoral expansion during the same period. In her evidence to the land injustice hearings, Distinguished Professor Marcia Langton (Yiman and Bidjara) highlighted this dark relationship: 'There is a correlation between the squatters taking up their runs and the [...] killings that this database refers to. But [...] the massacre records are the tip of the iceberg. It is unlikely that most of the killing was recorded, because if the killings were executed by, say, shepherds and

the workers for the squatters, then they likely couldn't read and write. So we don't know what they did because they wouldn't have been able to write it down.'

The bloodshed began early, and its memory and trauma has endured. People still mourn. On Gunditjmara Country, the Convincing Ground massacre marked the first atrocity in Victoria. European whalers, jealously guarding a whale carcass, turned their weapons on the Kilcarer Gundidj people, who had harvested resources from this coastline for countless generations.

Around 60 to 200 Gunditjmara men, women and children were killed in 1834. Chief Protector George Augustus Robinson, visiting the area in 1841, documented chilling accounts. Edward Henty and Police Magistrate Blair, settlers whose words carried authority, described Gunditjmara survivors as 'wild' and 'a bad set'.

The western districts of Victoria became a graveyard for countless Aboriginal lives. Gunditjmara, Djab Wurrung, Jardwadjali, Peek Wurrung, and Keeraywoorrong peoples faced repeated massacres. The Whyte family and other accomplices of Konongwootong station killed over sixty Wulluwurrung/Nundadjali people at the Fighting Waterholes and Fighting Hills massacres in early 1840; at Frederick Taylor's Glenormiston station, near Lake Terang—also known as Mount Emu Creek—settlers killed thirty-five Aboriginal people; fourteen Wulluwurrung/Nundadjali people were killed at Murdering Flat; a further fifteen at Connell's Ford, and a further fifteen at Wootong Vale.

Aboriginal communities were devastated—massacred and scattered as their land was taken. With the hope of colonial-measured prosperity came a tide of frontier violence that turned sacred Country into theatres of war. Yet the toll was not one-sided. There was resistance:

it was war and there were battlegrounds, but there were killing fields, too.



To this day, the Gunditjmara people are defined by their spirit of resistance. During the 1840s, they waged the Eumeralla Wars, fighting fiercely to defend their Country. The war was fought in the dense scrub and rolling plains of Gunditjmara Country, where resistance ran as deep as the lava flows beneath; and along the eponymous Eumeralla River.

Marcus Stewart (Taungurung) spoke of this history as an enduring story of defiance. 'A key example of resistance in the nineteenth century is the Eumeralla Wars in the south-west of what we now call Victoria,' he told Yoorrook, 'between British colonists and Gunditjmara people. The conflicts occurred from the mid-1830s to the 1860s and were particularly intense between 1834 and 1844. The Gunditjmara employed guerrilla tactics and economic warfare against the livestock and property of the British colonists, occasionally killing colonists.'

This was not just survival—it was a campaign, and a refusal to surrender Country. It was a war remembered in the bones of the land, in the stories passed from Elder to child. And it is still remembered today; not only in words, but in the continued fight for recognition, justice and truth.

The arrival of Europeans laid the foundation for a colonial economy that would feed off stolen land. Their livestock flattened eel traps and scarred the intricate aquaculture systems at Budj Bim, disrupting food sources that had sustained the Gunditjmara for thousands of years.

In response, the Gunditjmara fought back—strategically targeting settler infrastructure, destroying crops, and driving off sheep and

cattle, a tactic that struck at the occupation's economic nerve.

As 'settlement' spread, so too did the resistance. The Gunditjmaras' knowledge of the landscape allowed them to mount ambushes, evade capture and withstand counterattacks. They fought with spears, wit and an intimate understanding of the land's natural defences. The colonisers, unable to control the frontier through force alone, escalated their efforts, deploying the Native Police Corps and Border Police under the command of men like Captain Foster Fyans. These forces, composed partly of Aboriginal men from outside the region, were tasked with hunting down and 'pacifying' their Gunditjmara counterparts. Their methods were merciless—burning villages, poisoning waterholes, and executing people on sight.

By the 1840s, the conflict had reached a fever pitch. Massacres punctuated the landscape, from Fighting Hills to Murdering Flat, where entire families were wiped out. The Gunditjmara, however, fought on. The Eumeralla River ran red, but it did not run silent.

The war did not end with a treaty, nor with a decisive battle. It faded under the speed of relentless colonial expansion, yet its echoes remain. The Gunditjmara survived. Their land, though bruised, still carries their story. And today, through song, ceremony, and truth-telling, they continue to resist, ensuring that all they fought for will never be forgotten.



Colonial dispossession relied on a deadly combination of brute force and legal manipulation. Central to this was the doctrine of 'terra nullius', which denied the existence of First Peoples' sovereignty and their custodianship of the land. This fiction allowed British authorities

THE INK ON BATMAN'S DEEDS
HAD BARELY DRIED WHEN OTHERS
FOLLOWED. THE LURE OF LAND AND
WEALTH PROVED IRRESISTIBLE. THE
FRONTIER PRESSED FORWARDS
WITH A RUTHLESS INEVITABILITY.

to claim ownership of all land in the colony, nullifying First Peoples' complex systems of governance and law.

Terra nullius was more than a legal concept: it was a cultural weapon that facilitated erasure. It stripped First Peoples of their status as landowners and reduced them to non-entities in the eyes of the law. Distinguished Professor Marcia Langton described terra nullius as a cornerstone of the colonial project, legitimising theft while dehumanising those whose land was stolen.

Governor Richard Bourke's 1835 Proclamation, which declared Batman's deeds invalid, reaffirmed the Crown's claim over all land. Yet this proclamation also emboldened settlers, providing a framework for large-scale land acquisition under the guise of legality. Land that had been cultivated for thousands of years was surveyed, divided, leased and later sold off without consultation or consent.

The ink on Batman's deeds had barely dried when others followed. The lure of land and wealth proved irresistible. The frontier pressed forwards with a ruthless inevitability.

By 1834, British colonisers had set foot on Gunditjmara Country. By 1835, Kulin Country had been claimed. What began as tentative incursions soon hardened into permanent settlements, marking the opening chapter of a deeper conquest.

The early infiltrations were carried out in defiance of colonial laws, designed to ensure that the wealth of plunder found its way back to the Crown.

These were actions that ignored the sovereignty of First Peoples—and, for a time, even bypassed the authority of the British Crown itself. They took place without any formal approval from the monarchy, revealing the

entitlement and audacity that characterised the colonial approach.

The squattocracy was a hand that took without hesitation. It measured worth in acres and profit, never in stories—and certainly never in the truth or in First Peoples' sovereignty. Squattocracy was the belief that the land was waiting to be tamed, that its people were drifting towards oblivion, that history began with the arrival of the stranger. This mindset endures—stitched into systems, echoed in courtrooms, embedded in maps from which old names have been scrubbed clean. It is a lie told so often that it has begun to believe itself.

With this mindset, the colonial government, seeking to impose its control over the burgeoning settlement, began to develop systems to regulate and manage land use.



In 1836, the Port Phillip District was declared open for settlement by the Governor of New South Wales, setting in motion a series of colonial processes designed to strip First Peoples of their lands.

Squatting licences and leasehold systems were introduced under the pretext of regulating land use and returning some money to the Crown, but their true purpose was to legitimise dispossession and strengthen the colonial claim to ownership. These measures disrupted intricate, millennia-old bonds between First Peoples and Country. Clerks began to make their presence known—an ominous sign of the creeping interference that would eventually come to regulate First Peoples' lives for generations.

Surveyors became central figures in this process. Their work was not neutral or benevolent. It was instrumental to the colonial agenda. By marking land as property, they redefined it as European space, ready to be carved up and exploited; its ageless rhythms broken into neat calculations.

Rivers once flowing with story and ceremony were reduced to water systems, bent to serve the invaders' will. Sacred grounds became pasture, the soft tread of bare feet replaced by the relentless march of hooves. The land, once alive with its own law, its own breath, was forced into grids and parcels, leased, bought and sold as if its spirit could be owned. In the wake of this transformation, the land itself was made a stranger to its own seasons, its own heartbeat.

There was no forethought—nor afterthought—given to what the lines on the maps meant for people that lived here. It was going to happen and whatever was in the way was either seen as an obstacle or an enemy. The transformation was swift and deliberate.

By 1837, Robert Hoddle's grid of Melbourne was inscribed on Wurundjeri and Bunurong/Boon Wurrung Country. Interred beneath the cobbled streets, the land would never see daylight again. Its connection to all was cloaked in the stiff starch of the colony.

The grid symbolised the beginning of a new order: one that redefined stolen land as property and subjected it to a system of auction and speculation. This speculative frenzy laid the foundation for Melbourne's growth, but its cost was borne by the First Peoples who were forcibly removed from the land that was central to their cultural, spiritual and physical wellbeing.

Colonial authorities were relentless in enforcing exclusion, but they did not always succeed in keeping the Kulin people off their own

Country. Aboriginal people continued to move across Country, defending and caring for it.

Land that was once open and connected became fenced, divided and closed off. Areas of great cultural and spiritual significance, such as the northern banks of the Birrarung/Yarra, were restricted or repurposed. Policies were enacted to expel First Peoples from Melbourne entirely, targeting not only their presence but also their livelihoods and practices.

Dogs belonging to Kulin Nation people in naarm/Melbourne were killed. During the 1840s, the Melbourne Town Council directed the police to enforce the 1839 'Dog Act' (*An Act for abating the Nuisance occasioned by the great number of Dogs which are loose in the Streets of the Towns of Sydney Parramatta Liverpool and Windsor in the Colony of New South Wales*) against the Kulin Nation. Aboriginal people's dogs—companions, protectors, hunters—were systematically slaughtered.

The killings were not incidental; they were deliberate acts of displacement. The Council believed that by eliminating the dogs, they could drive Aboriginal people from the streets of the growing city. At the same time, new by-laws forbade bathing in the river and its tributaries—practices central to hygiene, ceremony and cultural continuity.

These waterways, once living arteries, were transformed into drains for the colony's waste. The people were cut off from their lifeblood, and it was replaced by putrid run-off from the burgeoning colony.

The river would never run clear again.

The lower reaches of the Birrarung/Yarra became inhospitable and uninhabitable. Life that had provided bounty for people on its banks since the dawn of memory was now suffocated.

It took mere decades. By the 1860s, almost all land in Victoria had been claimed and sold in parcels to settlers, and the Crown's process of dispossession was largely complete. Then came the reserve system to move First Peoples to fragments of their own land, denying them the space to practise culture, care for Country, or maintain their way of life. This happened so swiftly that by 1884, *all* land in the colony had been divided and categorised and First Peoples were confined to smaller and smaller segments of land through the reserve system. The rapid pace of this transformation left little room for resistance or recovery, and yet the people of the continent did not lay down.

This is the history of Victoria. This is the truth of what happened. It is a story of removal, denial and exclusion that metastasised throughout the colony.

VOORROOK TRUTH BE TOLD

MASSACRES AND THE DAWN OF INJUSTICE

By the time British ships arrived at Port Phillip Bay, the Empire had long been reaching further into the world's oldest soils. Colonisation in Victoria was not an isolated act, but part of a broader imperial design—a restless hunger for land, labour and capital that reached from the Caribbean to India, and from West Africa to Australia's southern shores.

In 1833, just one year before the Henty brothers landed at Portland Bay, Britain passed the *Slavery Abolition Act*. It marked the formal end of slavery across much of the Empire, a moment many greeted as moral progress. But the reality was layered with contradiction. While enslaved people were nominally freed, the British government paid out vast sums of over £20 million (the equivalent of £18–20 billion, or AUD \$37–41 billion, in today's money); not to the formerly enslaved, but to the slave owners as compensation for the 'loss' of their human property. It was one of the largest state-sanctioned wealth transfers in British history, and it enriched the very classes who would go on to invest in new frontiers, including the Port Phillip District.

As ships arrived in what would become Victoria, they carried not only sheep and steel but also the profits of dispossession already earned elsewhere. Among the passengers was Charles Edward Bright, who settled in Melbourne in 1854 and became a prominent businessman and civic leader. His family's wealth included £8,384 in compensation for 404 enslaved people in Barbados, received under the *Slavery Abolition Act* of 1833. The end of slavery was not the end of the Empire's violence—it was a recalibration.

On Kulin land, that violence took a different shape: not chains and sugar plantations, but fences, rifles, and the myth of an empty land. Reports of cruelty drifted back across the seas,

carried on pages smudged with sorrow. In Britain's drawing rooms and chambers of power, whispers turned to speeches, and speeches to outrage. From Australia came stories of massacres left unpunished, of women stolen, of hunger hollowing out once-thriving nations.

Victoria's frontier delivered its own horrors. As the Eumeralla Wars were being waged in the west, across in the east pastoralist Angus McMillan and his men—the self-appointed 'Highland Brigade'—left a trail of blood in a series of massacres in Gippsland from 1843 onwards, in which hundreds of Gunaikurnai people were killed.

From the Campaspe Plains to Barmah Lake, mounted police and settlers enacted retribution, killing dozens of Aboriginal people in coordinated attacks.

These atrocities formed the backdrop to the 1837 *Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes (British settlements)*, also known as the Buxton Report, which declared that 'every law of humanity and justice has been forgotten and disregarded'. While the committee's scope reached across the Empire, the evidence it heard from Van Diemen's Land of the Black War and early violence in the Port Phillip District sharpened its focus on the settler violence erupting in Victoria.

Yet these massacres are not merely historical footnotes. They are remembered today in oral histories, in paintings, in the rhythm of dance, in the scars of Country. As Marcus Stewart reflected, frontier massacres 'have a traumatic and enduring impact on Aboriginal communities and are remembered to this day'.

Among those who took notice were evangelical reformers—men and women who had waged a fight against slavery and won, only to find themselves staring at another abyss: the unchecked brutality of colonial rule. They urged

Britain to reckon with the contradictions of its moral posturing, to see the truth behind the banners of progress and civilisation.

The Buxton Report did not merely observe colonial violence, but indicted it. Page after page laid bare the reality of empire: the floggings, the forced removals, the deliberate poisoning of waterholes, the systematic dismantling of whole societies. It talked of Traditional Owners' rights to land. It was a report that, for a moment, forced Britain to look at itself.

In response, the Colonial Office turned its gaze to the Port Phillip settlement, proposing a protectorate—a bureaucratic salve for a moral wound too deep to heal with policy alone. The Protectorate was designed to oversee and 'protect' Aboriginal people under British law. In practice, however, it served to monitor, control and assimilate them, embedding surveillance where there should have been justice. In truth, it was little more than a thin veil draped over the machinery of expansion. The dispossession would continue. The land would still be taken, the rivers dammed, the people displaced. The only difference was that now it would be documented.

What began as a promise to safeguard First Peoples soon became a policy of attempted isolation and power. Protectorates, and later missions and reserves, were plotted out across Victoria, their boundaries restrictive.

Here, Aboriginal people were put away, hidden from view so as not to inconvenience the settlers' dreams of dominance.

The Port Phillip Protectorate was established in 1839, with George Augustus Robinson named as Chief Protector. He was no stranger to Aboriginal people, having presided over the removal of Palawa communities in lutruwita/Tasmania to the Wybalenna Aboriginal Establishment on Flinders Island, where broken hearts and broken

spirits meant death often came quickly to those exiled from their homelands.

Alongside Robinson were four Assistant Protectors—William Thomas, Edward Stone Parker, Charles Sievwright, and James Dredge, all tasked with implementing this misguided vision. The Protectorate was funded by the leasing of stolen Country; a cruel irony embedded in its very foundation. It spoke of *protection* while overseeing dispossession; of *civilisation* while dismantling culture. It was a ledger in which lives and land were accounted for, recorded, and erased all at once.

During the decade-long existence of this fragile and flawed enterprise, the colony was kindled by violence. Frontier lawlessness was not an aberration but an extension of the colonial mindset in practice. Marauding settlers prowled across the lands, spreading massacres like bushfires; ember attacks razing lives and cultures.

The justice system offered no justice: Aboriginal people were hanged or imprisoned for acts of resistance, while settlers who murdered with impunity walked free, shielded by juries of their peers. In the colony and its system of justice, First Peoples were peerless.

Stations were established on Aboriginal Country—at Narre Warren and Merri Creek for the Bunurong/Boonwurrung, at Loddon for the Dja Dja Wurrung, on the Goulburn River at Murchison for the Taungurung, and at Mount Rouse for the Djab Wurrung.

For the settlers, they were places to corral and control, stripping away the autonomy and mobility that defined Aboriginal life. For Aboriginal people, they became tenuous havens amidst the violence and chaos. Here, on these fragments of land, rations could be secured when hunting grounds were stolen.





But the land could not be forgotten. Despite the Protectors' efforts to tether Aboriginal people to these stations, movements across Country continued. Wurundjeri and other Kulin Nation peoples still gathered at Bolin Bolin swamp for the eel season, holding fast to tradition even as fences closed in around them. Connection to Country was not a habit to be broken. It was a lifeline, and it could not be dissolved.

The Protectorate's focus often turned to children, who were seen as vessels for acculturation. Education and religion were used as tools to separate young people from their families and traditions. In their reporting, the Protectors lamented parents' refusal to leave their children behind, blind to the unbreakable bonds of kinship that anchored Aboriginal life. Though they collected words and fragments of culture, translating Christian texts into Aboriginal languages, their efforts came hand-in-hand with a relentless suppression of spiritual and cultural practices—the first chapters of a campaign of cultural erasure.

Even among the Protectors, prejudice and violence simmered.

Robinson documented atrocities, his journeys revealing the depth of the colony's cruelty. Settlers slaughtered kangaroos, which they saw as being in competition with sheep and cattle, and advocated military retaliation against acts of resistance. Yet Robinson, too, was complicit. His fellow 'Protector' William Thomas wielded threats of police force to impose his will on Kulin people, while Edward Stone Parker celebrated his suppression of cultural ceremonies among the Dja Dja Wurrung.

The Port Phillip Protectorate was never what it claimed to be. Promises of shelter and safety cloaked its true purpose—it was not a shield, but a gear in the great colonial machine, designed to pave the way for settler expansion under

the guise of benevolence. Its stated aims of protecting Aboriginal people were incompatible with the colony's relentless hunger for land and labour. By 1849, its contradictions could no longer be concealed.

The Protectorate was closed—not because the need for protection had lessened, but because its existence interfered with the colony's economic ambitions. Land hunger triumphed over moral posturing. Aboriginal people, the colony decided, were better left unprotected if protection stood in the way of profit.

In the end, the Protectorate became just another chapter in the ragged, tangled story of invasion—a system that ruminated on notions of humanity while inflicting unspeakable harm.

But even as these structures bore down, First Peoples held fast. They held on to one another, to their languages, to Country. In a time when the world around them insisted on their disappearance, survival became the ultimate resistance. To deny the weak expectations of the colonisers—those who saw no future for First Peoples beyond annihilation or assimilation—was, in itself, a powerful act of defiance. And there was nothing passive about it.

**IN THE FACE OF SUCH
CALCULATED CRUELTY,
HOLDING ON WAS A FORM
OF COURAGE FEW COULD
COMPREHEND.**



The violence left no region untouched. On Gunaikurnai Country, the Warrigal Creek massacres wiped out as many as 150 lives, while fifteen were lost at Milly Creek. On Wadawurrung/Wathaurong Country, Mount Cottrell became the site of another massacre, with ten killed. The Murray River and its surrounds carried their own burden of tragedy. At Moira Swamp, twenty-six Yorta Yorta people were murdered, and seventy were killed where the Murrumbidgee and Murray rivers meet. In its submission to Yoorrook on land injustice, the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) noted how the very vocabulary of these sites is haunted to this day: 'We are continually reminded of the atrocities committed against our people in the pursuit of land and the establishment of the colony by places bearing name of what happened: Convincing Ground, Skull Creek, Murdering Gully, Poison Creek, Butchers Ridge, Butchers Creek.' As Uncle Rob Hudson (Gunai Kurnai, Monero Ngarigo) explained in VACCHO's submission, most of these sites are named after what happened there.

The record of individual brutality is no less chilling. Rolf Boldrewood, a colonist and author, wrote with casual candour that 'for one reason or other the gun was rarely a day out of our hands'. Gippsland colonist Agnes Buntine whipped Gunaikurnai people and forced them into the sea. Patrick Coady Buckley put a rope around a Gunaikurnai man's neck and made him run into the surf for four hours. Cannons were fired into camps. Bungelene, another Gunaikurnai man, was chained to a tree outside Native Police headquarters. In the Wimmera, Sundays became days of leisure-time hunting, only the prey was not kangaroo or wallaby, but

human. CB Hall wrote of being shown the body of an Aboriginal person in a waterhole, shot in the back of the head. Near the same site, he found other bodies burned and left beneath a log. At Lake Boga, AM Campbell recounted how colonists Curlewis and Cowper invited Aboriginal people on a duck-hunting trip as a ruse. Far from accompanying the hunters as peers or guides, they were being summoned to their own murder.

These were not the acts of rogue outliers. They were the workings of a system that sanctioned violence as a means of stamping out resistance; of opening land to settlers and stock. The landscape became the ledger of loss, with the full score only known to a small few.



Some survived the horrors to bear witness. Alice Dixon escaped one of the massacres at Konongwootong. Billy Thorpe carried the memory of Warrigal Creek. Charlie Hammond, a child captured after the Milly Creek massacre, was taken to Buchan and forced into labour on a station. Their lives, shaped by unimaginable grief, ensured these atrocities would not be lost to time.

Aboriginal women and children were the most vulnerable to frontier violence. In 1842 at Caramut Station, six Gai wurrung/Djab Wurrung people were shot as they slept, including four women, one of whom was pregnant, and a child. Two survivors sought refuge nearby at Mount Rouse and reported the incident to Assistant Protector Charles Sievwright. The perpetrators faced trial for one count of murder only. A jury swiftly declared them not guilty.

Rape and abduction were rampant. Colonisers ignored official orders prohibiting the kidnapping of women. In Portland, whalers sought to seize Guditjmara women, while on Gunaikurnai

Country, the kidnapping and assault of a young woman sparked violent retribution. The banks of the Birrarung were not safe, with women attacked in their camps. Children, too, were targeted—whipped with bullock lashes, taken from their families, and forced into servitude. Poison became another weapon in the war on First Peoples. Flour and damper, the new staples of survival, were laced with arsenic or plaster of Paris and handed out as rations. Entire unsuspecting families ate, trusting in the most fundamental act of hospitality: bread given in hunger. A short time later, they were dead.

Afterwards, their bodies were discarded without ceremony. ‘They were pretty ruthless,’ Uncle Johnny Lovett (Gunditjmara, Boandik) recalled. ‘Mix things up when they came to the stations for their handouts [...] when they died, they just picked them up and chucked them in the river or burned them.’

Phillip Pepper wrote of Christian de Villiers’s inn on Dandenong Road, which fed weary travellers by day and carried out quiet executions by night. There, the damper served to Aboriginal people was a fatal sentence. Those who consumed it suffered slow, agonising deaths. De Villiers’s hotel came to be known as the ‘No Good Damper Inn’. The epithet turned atrocity into anecdote; murder into legend. The killings became folklore shared over drinks, stripped of their horror.

Protectors recorded the grim toll, but government officers fought to deny settler violence. Reverend Benjamin Hurst of the Buntingdale Mission reported massacres on Gunditjmara Country, as detailed to him by coloniser Robert Tulloh. But Police Magistrate James Blair gathered subpoenas from a number of colonisers, including Stephen Henty, to discredit Hurst’s claim. Superintendent La Trobe and Governor Gipps told British authorities that Reverend Hurst had been ‘taken in’ by Tulloh. La

Trobe also recommended that Tulloh’s licence not be renewed, which Gipps was happy to approve—a stark warning to those who dared to speak out.



THE KILLINGS ON THE OXLEY PLAINS, SOUTH OF WANGARATTA, REMAIN ONE OF THE BLOODIEST CHAPTERS IN VICTORIA’S HISTORY—BUT ALSO AMONG THE LEAST-KNOWN.

Today, its site is bereft of markers and monuments. There is scant acknowledgement of the event among the historical societies of Benalla and Wangaratta. At the site of coordinates -36.52,146.391, you will find no memorial to what happened by the river. Perhaps what happened on the Oxley Plains brings too much shame.

Anywhere between 150 and 300 Aboriginal lives were taken in the years that followed, part of an ongoing cycle of reprisal for alleged cattle and sheep theft—and in retaliation for what became known as the Faithfull Massacre, which occurred just days after first contact in the region in April 1838. It remains the only recorded massacre of white settlers in Victoria at the hands of Aboriginal people.

Ten stockmen were overlanding cattle for William and George Faithfull when they camped at Broken River, unaware that they had made their fire on a significant Yorta Yorta meeting-place. A few days later, nine more of the Faithfulls' shepherds arrived with 4,000 sheep, reportedly harassed Yorta Yorta women, and later claimed that sheep were missing.

At dawn on 11 April, as the stockmen prepared to leave, around twenty Yorta Yorta warriors launched a coordinated attack, killing eight shepherds while several others escaped. It was not a random act of violence. It was a ritual act of justice—likely in response to earlier killings of Yorta Yorta people by settlers along the Ovens River. What followed, however, was not justice, but slaughter: punitive expeditions sanctioned by the settler colony, in which dozens—and by some accounts, hundreds—of Aboriginal people were hunted and killed in reprisal, their deaths largely unrecorded, their names erased. We will never know their identities or their number.

The events served as a clarion call to all the invaders to follow. When it comes to the blood-drenched Oxley Plains, though, the cloak is once again lowered and memory is shrouded.

But the river remembers. It carries the weight of what was done there, whispering its grief through the reeds. The Oxley Plains had been a battleground long before the rifles and horses returned that day; long before the settlers scrawled their names across Country they would never understand. The people of the Waveroo/Waywurru had pushed back again and again, standing firm against those who demanded what was not theirs.

The Waveroo/Waywurru people fought with knowledge passed down through time itself, reading the land, moving unseen through the trees, striking where they could. They refused to surrender to the hunger of empire. For years,

the settlers had tried to break them. Poison in the flour, ambushes in the night, burning camps while the people slept. But still, they endured.

Dawn on the day of the massacre probably broke like any other—soft, golden, the air alive with birdsong of cormorants overhead. But the stillness did not last. A band of settlers, hut-keepers, shepherds and stockmen, armed and on horseback, swept through like a storm, the gallop of the beasts rumbling the ground, their masters' rifles piercing flesh and air alike. There was nowhere to run. The river, once a place of refuge, turned to a graveyard.

Men, women, children: none were spared.

The earth swallowed the dead. The trees bore silent witness. And when the killing was done, the land itself seemed to hold its breath. The settlers would call it victory, would tell themselves the land was now theirs: emptied, tamed. But the river knows better. It knows that this was not conquest, only cruelty. That the fight did not die with those who fell, but was carried on in memory and story.

The Oxley Plains massacre was not an ending. It was the breaking point of a war waged in the shadows of empire—a war that has never truly ended.

The cycle of retribution sparked by the killings of settlers was utterly out of proportion to the original event. The ensuing violence swept through the region for years, indiscriminate and unrelenting. Aboriginal men, women and children were hunted down, shot, poisoned; their communities fractured and scattered. These were not isolated bursts of frontier panic. They were calculated acts of terror designed to clear the land for settler occupation. Reprisals became a language of control, teaching any who remained the cost of resistance. Loss of stock was answered with loss of human life. And with each new killing, the settler hold on

the land tightened, while the truths of what occurred were buried deeper beneath the myth of peaceful settlement.

Today, we write this not just as history, but as truth-telling; as reckoning. To remind those who have forgotten—or who never knew—that the land has not forgotten. That the resistance did not vanish with the dead. That their voices still echo, and have made their way through time to reach these pages.



To understand the roots of injustice in Victoria, we must return to the point where law and violence first converged on this land—when the apparatus of the State was not designed to protect First Peoples, but to pacify and contain them.

From the earliest years of invasion, policing in Victoria was informed by the needs of a settler colony intent on taking land and crushing resistance. As Dr Bill Pascoe told Yoorrook, these were not chaotic or accidental clashes resulting from frontier panic—they were killings by design. The colonial authorities, he explained, made a deliberate choice in the creation of their police forces. ‘The role of the police in this is quite important,’ Pascoe explains. ‘At the time, there were two models for the police to be based on. One was the London Bobbies [...] the other model was the Irish mounted police.’

The latter—a force specifically trained for repression and restraint—was the archetype chosen for the colonies. In Australia, ‘the main risks that they saw at the time were convict insurrection, bush ranging [...] and Indigenous insurgents,’ Dr Pascoe testified. These were not urban populations to be protected, but rural populations to be subdued. ‘So clearly the model

they were following was the Irish mounted police, designed to suppress.’

In other words, the task was not to uphold peace but to enforce dispossession. Aboriginal people were not seen as citizens to be protected, but as obstacles to be subdued. From the reprisals at Broken River to the widespread operations of the Native Police Corps, policing in Victoria emerged as a martial structure. This was not the failure of an otherwise fair system. It was the system, right from the start. Its legacy would ripple through generations.

From the very beginning of invasion, then, the policing of Aboriginal people in Victoria was never neutral. It was martial in form and colonial in function, trained to extinguish resistance. That legacy would echo well beyond the reprisals at Broken River.



Far from haphazard, the colonisers’ violence was often sanctioned by authority. Government officials, soldiers and police led expeditions of death and destruction. In 1840, Governor Gipps issued orders to Major Lettsom of the 80th Regiment. There had been conflict on Taungurung Country, and Lettsom was sent to restore order; not for the sake of peace—such directives were never for peace—but to enforce settler rule. He and four soldiers travelled the Sydney Road towards naarm/Melbourne, searching for those the colonisers had branded as troublemakers. Finding none, they pressed on, arriving in the shadow of the town, where Kulin Nations people had gathered.

There were no warrants, no charges—only Lettsom’s determination to make an example of them. His authority was soon legitimised by Superintendent La Trobe, who granted him permission to launch the raid.

TO UNDERSTAND THE ROOTS OF
INJUSTICE IN VICTORIA, WE MUST
RETURN TO THE POINT WHERE LAW
AND VIOLENCE FIRST CONVERGED ON
THIS LAND—WHEN THE APPARATUS
OF THE STATE WAS NOT DESIGNED
TO PROTECT FIRST PEOPLES, BUT TO
PACIFY AND CONTAIN THEM.

Lettsom, having returned to naarm/Melbourne, summoned reinforcements: Lieutenant Russell of the Mounted Police; twenty-seven soldiers of the 28th Regiment; and another twelve or thirteen mounted troopers. It was a force swelled by numbers, by power, by the certainty that whatever they did would go unpunished.

They found the gathering and struck. Around 200 Kulin men, women and children were estimated to have been captured and forced into submission. Wurundjeri leader Winberri stood against them, refusing to surrender his people. He was murdered for his defiance.

That night, some managed to escape. But not all. As a man named Narrokemuloke ran for freedom, a shot rang out.

Another life taken. Another body left behind.

In the chaos that followed the raid, men were taken by force—their presence in naarm/Melbourne transformed from a sacred meeting into a crime scene. These were the Goulburn River clans, Djilamatang, Ngurai-illam Wurrung, and Taungurung men who had travelled south for ceremony and to maintain kinship ties, as they had done for generations before the colony rose around them. Now, they were cast as trespassers on their own land.

Assistant Protector Edward Stone Parker managed to secure the release of all but thirty of the captured Goulburn men, yet ten were dragged before the court on 6 December 1840 and made to sit before a judge who would decide their fate—not as men upholding ancient law, but as criminals beneath colonial rule.

In the courts, *justice* was swift and indifferent. No lawyer to argue their case, no interpreter to explain the accusations laid against them, no support from the gallery. Nine of the accused were sentenced to ten years' transportation—not for violence, but for theft.

The trial made a mockery of British law, which claimed to extend its protections to all subjects. Aboriginal people were expected to obey the law, but were denied its rights. The raid and its aftermath revealed the truth: in the colony's eyes, their guilt was assumed and their defence was irrelevant. It was clear that to be Aboriginal was to have suspicion cast upon you.

Governor Gipps, receiving news of the events, acknowledged that Lettsom had 'departed in some degree from the instructions given to him'. But there was no reprimand, no inquiry, no consequence. The Crown's law was not meant to serve First Peoples. It was meant to remove them.

To this very day, not one law enforcement official has been charged over the death of an Aboriginal person. The colony started as it meant to go on.

This was how control was maintained. Not just by the mounted police or the gun, but by the quiet, bureaucratic sanctioning of violence. A poisoned meal, a raid at dawn, a report filed away whose careful phrasing obfuscated the reality. Aboriginal lives were statistics; their deaths inconveniences noted in passing. The colony moved forward, indifferent to the blood that greased its wheels.

In the twenty-four years since Henty and Batman had staked their respective claims on Gunditjmara and Kulin land, so much had changed. By the time of the colony's founding as Victoria in 1851, its First Peoples numbered just 2,000, their population having been 15,000 at the point of contact in 1834.

THROUGH A CONCERTED CAMPAIGN OF MASSACRES, VIOLENCE AND NEW DISEASES, AN ENTIRE PEOPLE HAD BEEN TAKEN TO THE BRINK.



The Aboriginal Native Police was first formed in 1837 under Captain Christan de Villiers, but it was under the command of Henry Edmund Pulteney Dana that the unit became one of the most effective and brutal devices of colonial control. Dana, a former British Army officer, understood what was required of him: discipline, efficiency and results. He enlisted Aboriginal men from outside the districts that they would be tasked with 'policing', exploiting existing cultural divisions and ensuring that his recruits had no allegiance to the people they would be ordered to hunt.

The Native Police were not a force of law; they were a weapon. They operated at the shifting edges of settlement, ensuring that the frontier moved in only one direction—forwards. Their purpose was neither to protect, nor mediate, nor serve justice. Their training was swift, their instructions clear. The rifle was their language. The boot was their law. Their role was simple: to break resistance.

Their patrols stretched across Victoria's interior, moving ahead of settlement like a blade through the land. They escorted surveyors, protected squatters, and executed reprisal raids with cold

precision. Where settlers were inconvenienced by Aboriginal resistance, the Native Police were sent to remove the problem. These were not arrests. They did not take prisoners. Their methods were final and silent. Encampments were ambushed at dawn. Shots rang out in the dark. Bodies were left where they fell. There were no reports, no trials, no names recorded.

Dana himself admitted as much. In 1843, he wrote to the Colonial Secretary, acknowledging that his troopers' work was conducted 'in so remote a district and under such circumstances that I could not, even if I wished, give a detailed report'. This was not an oversight. It was the strategy. The absence of records was not neglect but a policy of plausible deniability.

Even their uniforms carried a message. Dressed in British military-style jackets, the Native Police were a pantomime of legitimacy. The British could claim that this was not invasion, but order; not war, but governance. The Native Police made it appear as though Aboriginal people had consented to their own destruction.

There is some conjecture among historians as to why Aboriginal men enlisted. Some did so under coercion. Some sought protection. Others sought survival. Still others volunteered, perhaps to expand their own cultural power. What we do know is that the original twenty-two Native Policemen were heads of clans around Melbourne. It was a horrific episode in Victorian history. Those who tried to leave were hunted down. Some were executed by their own commanders for disobedience. Others died nameless, buried in unmarked graves by the very colony they had been forced to serve.

When Dana died in 1852, the Native Police began to fade, its use diminishing as settler numbers swelled and white militias took up their work. Its existence was no longer necessary.

The frontier had been secured. And like all tools, once it had served its purpose, it was discarded.

No monument stands to the Native Police. Their legacy is written in the land, in the empty spaces where people once lived, in the quiet redactions of history books. They were the blade in the dark; the invisible hand of colonial rule.

AND WHEN THEIR WORK WAS DONE, THE COLONY BURIED THEIR MEMORY ALONG WITH THEIR DEAD.



From Caramut Station to courtrooms across the colonies, justice for Aboriginal victims was not just rare—it was designed to be impossible. The violence inflicted on First Peoples was never an aberration, never a matter of rogue actors or isolated incidents. It was systematic. It was embedded in the very scaffolding of colonisation. Protectors might have reported the atrocities. Survivors might have spoken out. But the system turned its back—again and again.

When settlers stood trial for murder, the outcomes were predictable. Jurors, drawn from the same settler class as the accused, absolved their peers of guilt, no matter the evidence. At Myall Creek on the Liverpool Plains in NSW, in June 1838, a group of settlers mercilessly killed a group of Wirayaraay (Gamilaraay) people—mostly defenceless women, children and the elderly. Their bodies were unceremoniously piled up and burned. Later, the remains of at least twenty-eight people were found, though the actual toll was likely higher and will never be known.

Myall Creek became one of the few instances where settlers were convicted and executed for killing Aboriginal people. Eleven of the twelve men were arrested and charged with murder, and seven were convicted and executed. The backlash from the colonial public was so fierce that similar prosecutions became unthinkable. In Victoria, time and again, even the most brazen acts of violence—massacres, poisonings, rapes—went unpunished. Justice, as meted out by the colony, existed to protect settlers; not hold them to account.

For Aboriginal people, that same justice system has always been a weapon. From the earliest days, when the first arrests were made and ceremonies criminalised, the law was wielded to surveil, control and remove. Aboriginal men, women and children became targets of the legal system. This legacy continues; evinced in the grim statistics that remain largely unchanged. Today, First Peoples are overrepresented in every corner of the justice system in Victoria and across the continent, from child protection to youth detention to adult imprisonment; yet they remain the least protected from harm.

The scars of this system are not just physical. They linger in the stories of Country, in the whispered memories passed down through families, in the absence of justice that echoes across generations. They are written into the unfinished reckoning of a nation still reluctant to face its past. Until these truths are acknowledged—until justice is not only promised but delivered—that reckoning remains incomplete.

GOLD-DIGGERS AND THE ‘ABORIGINAL PROBLEM’

In 1851, the discovery of gold in Victoria unleashed a transformation that the land and its people were never meant to endure.

The promise of fortune drew an estimated 900,000 people to Victoria's goldfields of Ballarat, Bendigo, Beechworth and beyond. They flocked to the lands of the Wadawurrung/Wathaurong, Waveroo/Waywurru, Dja Dja Wurrung and countless other nations, digging and dredging without invitation.

Gold irreversibly reshaped Victoria, making it one of the richest colonies in the world. Wealth flowed outwards, paving streets, founding towns, and marking the land with fences that divided and excluded. Forests were felled, hills were levelled, rivers and creeks dammed. The patterns of the landscape were rewritten to serve colonial ambitions. Farms sprawled across Country, cementing townships that would claim permanence. Every act of settlement was another layer of eradication, imposing a new order on the land.

For First Peoples, the gold rush was not a story of fortune or progress—it was a catastrophe. The upheaval it wrought was swift and brutal. Tens of thousands of miners flooded onto Aboriginal lands, tearing through Country that had been cared for across countless generations. Campsites became diggings. Sacred sites were desecrated; their meaning scraped away along with the earth.

On Wadawurrung/Wathaurong Country, waterways once teeming with life were choked with sludge, poisoned with mercury and other mining run-off. The rivers that had sustained communities turned toxic. Hunting grounds disappeared beneath sluices and tailings.

Food sources dwindled. The web of life—of culture, ceremony, and sustenance—was ripped apart, buried beneath the slag heaps and waste of the new occupiers. First Peoples, once the

custodians of these lands, were driven to the outer margins, cast beyond even the fringes of the society that had consumed their land. Aboriginal people had virtually no legal recourse against the theft, exploitation and destruction of Country. They would fare no better when they tried to stave off the hordes of gold-greedy prospectors. The influx of miners escalated existing disputes over land and resources, with settlers willing to enforce their claims through bloodshed.

The gold rush did more than unearth precious metals—it rebuilt Victoria in the image of the Empire. It was a force that tore through landscapes and lives, stripping riverbanks, gutting forests, and carving deep wounds into the earth. But the destruction was not just environmental; it was social, political and cultural. The frenzied incursion of miners did not just escalate frontier violence; it entrenched it, turning disputes over land into open war. For First Peoples, there was no negotiation, no recognition—only elimination.

In the wake of the gold rush, Victoria's newfound wealth was poured into the foundations of empire. Lavish monuments to colonial ambition—Parliament House, the State Library, the University of Melbourne, Pentridge Prison and the Melbourne Museum—rose in bluestone and sandstone. Their facades, carved from rock quarried across the colony, were hewn from lands long cared for by the Gundjitrara, Dja Dja Wurrung, Wurundjeri and Taungurung.

While precise records of the quarries used for each site are fragmentary, stones for Melbourne's early public buildings were sourced from places like Bacchus Marsh, Malmsbury and the You Yangs. The extraction, like that of the gold that funded the buildings, was enacted without consent.

Knowledge was hoarded as ruthlessly as land, housed in grand structures that collected the stories, artefacts and even the remains of those they sought to stamp out.

For First Peoples, the gold rush was not just a theft of land but of narrative, too. Aboriginal voices were absent from the institutions that gold had built; their histories locked away in cabinets and archives, their knowledge dismissed even as it was studied. Museums and universities collected Aboriginal cultural belongings without consent, often removing sacred tools and objects from Country to display them as curiosities of a vanishing race.

Even more disturbing was the collection of Aboriginal human remains, especially human skulls. Dug up from burial grounds or taken from massacre sites, they were measured and catalogued to support racist theories of hierarchy and evolution. Aboriginal people were turned into specimens in the buildings gold had built.

Sovereignty was not just ignored. It was trampled beneath pickaxes and progress. What had rested in the earth's crust, in Aboriginal land, was now stripped, panned and smelted into selectively distributed wealth.

For the Traditional Owners of the goldfields, the seasonal cycle had changed. It was now either hot and dusty, or cold and muddy. Aboriginal people lived in the winds between these two worlds.



In 1858, politician Thomas McCombie stood before the Victorian Parliament and proposed a Select Committee to investigate the 'condition' of Aboriginal people. He framed it as a matter of inquiry and improvement, but beneath this veneer of concern lay motivations that were far more calculating.

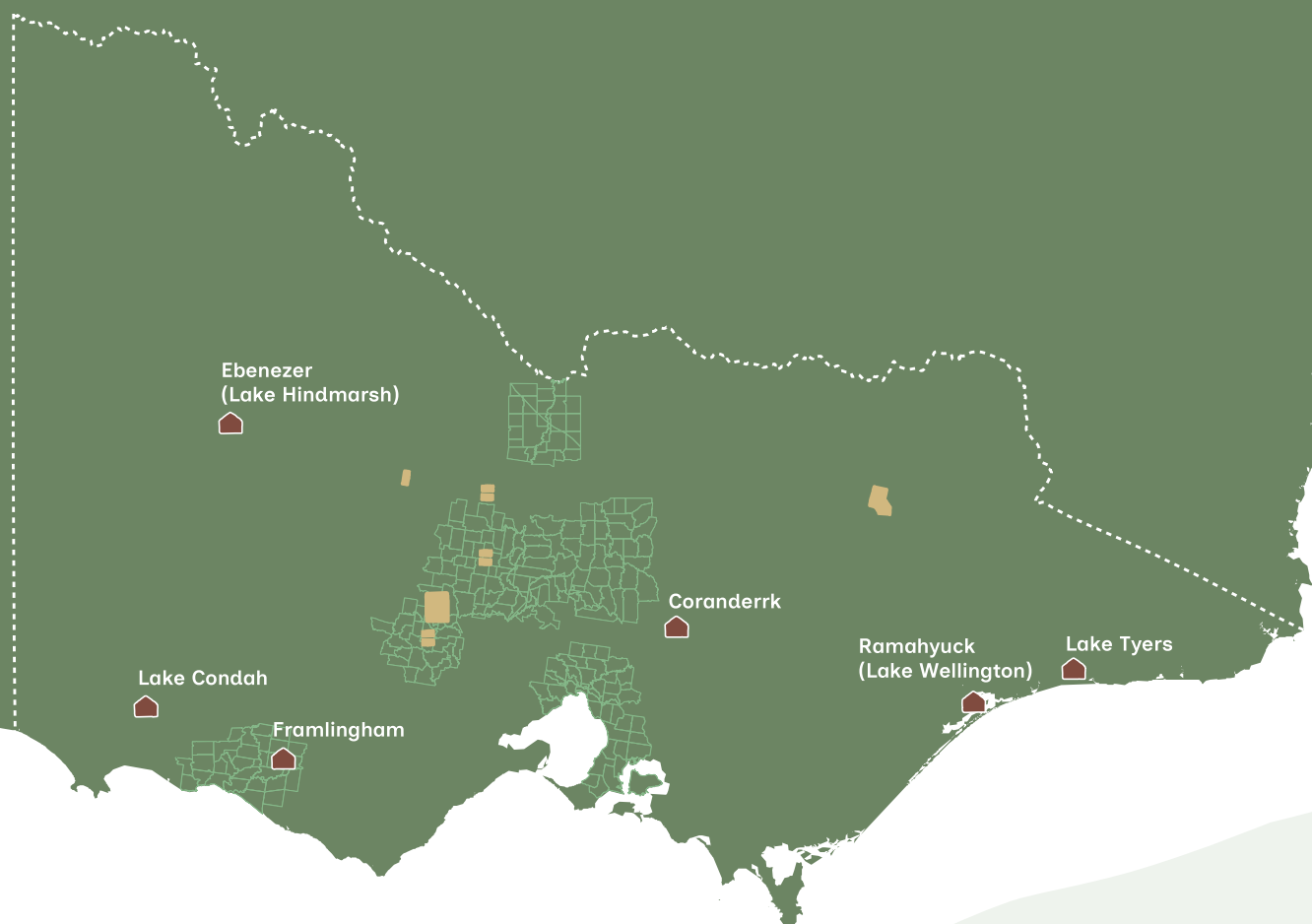
At its core, the Committee was not purely about justice or restitution; it was bound up in control. The gold rush had transformed Victoria into a booming colony, but with this prosperity came unease. The enduring presence of Aboriginal people posed a challenge to the colonial order. They were supposed to fade into history. They were an awkward reminder that the land had not been freely given.

McCombie believed in racial hierarchies and that 'higher races' had a 'duty of care' to 'inferior races'. He and his peers set out to find solutions to what they saw as an *Aboriginal problem*. They did not question the legitimacy of colonisation itself, nor did they seek to return what had been taken. Instead, the Committee's focus was on how best to manage, contain, and, if necessary, assimilate Aboriginal people into the colonial system. It was an exercise in policymaking—a means to reinforce the structures of power while appearing to act in the interests of the dispossessed.

The Committee, composed of seven men from the Legislative Council, was steeped in colonial interests. All but one, Daniel Tierney, had deep investments in pastoral stations—a prerequisite for membership of the Council at the time. The requirement that members be property owners meant, perversely, that Aboriginal people were never intended to walk through the corridors of power, their voices never to be heard in the bellowing chambers of authority. Astonishingly, among the members of the committee was James Henty, a member of the influential Henty family, whose diaries chronicled hostile encounters with Aboriginal people. He would now assist in reporting on Aboriginal peoples' 'condition'.

The Committee's methods were as revealing as its composition. It sent out circular letters to settlers deemed to have 'engagement' with





THE ESTABLISHMENT OF GOLD MINES AND MISSIONS AND RESERVES FOLLOWING THE FOUNDING OF THE COLONY OF VICTORIA IN 1851

-  Victoria
-  Land mapped and taken by the Crown
-  Missions and reserves
-  Gold mines

Vicmap, Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, Esri, USGS

Aboriginal people and invited witnesses to testify. Not a single Aboriginal voice was heard. First Peoples, whose lives and lands were the subject of this inquiry, were rendered invisible within its proceedings; no more substantial than the white spaces between words and ink splotches.

When the Committee's final report was delivered, it offered page after page of testimony that blamed alcohol for the devastating loss of Aboriginal life since colonisation. Alcohol made it easier to fault the victim.

Its recommendations—to create small reserves to 'civilise' and 'Christianise' Aboriginal people—echoed proposals made decades earlier by a British Select Committee. The solutions were stale and paternalistic, repeating a colonial narrative that reduced dispossession and violence to a problem of morality and behaviour rather than systemic exploitation.

The report met with resistance in Parliament. Politician John Pascoe Fawkner dismissed the idea of further investment. Aboriginal people, he argued, had been a lost cause from the moment they encountered settlers. 'Wherever they [Aboriginal people] came in contact with [white men], they died off,' he claimed, basing his justification on his experience in lutruwita/Tasmania. Yet despite his objections, Parliament passed measures to set aside land, provide basic resources, and fund missionaries to oversee reserves—policies that reflected colonial magnanimity only in appearance.

By May 1860, the Governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Barkly, set these measures in stone with the creation of the Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of the Aborigines (later the Board for the Protection of Aborigines). Its name suggested a guiding hand, but its configuration told a different story. Seated around the table were politicians, businessmen and landowners—

men who had carved their fortunes from stolen earth, whose prosperity was built upon the displacement they now claimed to oversee. This was an extension of the same apparatus that had torn through Country, now sharpening its focus on the people left standing.

The Central Board delegated much of its authority to Honorary Correspondents, settlers stationed in areas where Aboriginal people were most frequently encountered. These correspondents, far from neutral observers, included men like Angus McMillan and Horatio Ellerman, both known to have taken part in massacres. The individuals who had participated in the violent displacement of First Peoples now held positions of oversight and framed their control as governance. They paid their way in blood, but not their own.

The work of the Central Board preceded the first government Act specific to Aboriginal people in the colony of Victoria. *The Aborigines Protection Act* (Vic) was passed in 1869. Over the next 130 years, seventy-four Acts about Aboriginal people would be passed.

Under the 1869 Act, the Central Board became the Board for the Protection of Aborigines (known as 'the Board'). The Board was empowered to exercise far-reaching control: deciding where Aboriginal people could live, who they could marry, whether they could work and, crucially, whether children would remain with their families. It was bureaucracy weaponised, paternalised and enshrined in policy.

No one embodied this violence more than Robert Brough Smyth, who would become the Board's long-serving Secretary. He did not wield a rifle, nor lead a raid, but his work served the same end—documenting and collecting; reducing a living culture to something that could be catalogued and owned. From the Board's correspondents, he gathered weapons no longer

thrown in battle, baskets no longer filled with gathered murnong (yam daisy), and ceremonial objects robbed of their meaning.

Smyth took notes and made sketches, assembling his findings in *The Aborigines of Victoria* (1878)—a book that laid out an entire world as if it were already gone; as though the people who had shaped it were footnotes to their own history.

Smyth's work was steeped in the dominant colonial thinking of the time, shaped by the widespread belief in the so-called 'inevitable' decline of Aboriginal people. From the 1860s onward, the myth of the 'last tribe' had taken hold.

IT WAS AN IDEA CLOAKED IN SETTLER GUILT AND ROMANTICISM, AND FED BY EMERGING THEORIES OF RACIAL HIERARCHY.



The Select Committee and the Central Board exemplified the cold logic of colonial rule. Through reports, votes and circulars, they stripped away humanity, reducing Aboriginal lives to problems to be managed and catalogued. Their recommendations smothered violence in administrative language; sterilising the crime scene, cauterising the wounds with a pen.

The result was a system of control that maintained the supremacy of settlers while

pretending to act in the interest of those they displaced.

It was called *protection*. It was everything but. It was bureaucracy harnessed to perpetuate harm. And the voices that might have contested it, belonging to First Peoples themselves, were excluded, leaving decisions about their lives to be made by those who had profited from their suffering.

The mechanisms of power had been set in motion, their purpose clear: to tighten control while masking its intent. Policies, written in ink but enforced in silence, replaced the open brutality of the frontier. The language of protection gave cover to dispossession, and those who administered it spoke in the measured tones of governance, as if care and control were one and the same. Aboriginal voices remained stifled, their exclusion not an oversight but a necessity. Indeed, the system depended on their silence.



Where brute force had once been the state's primary tool of control, by the late 1850s, a new system had emerged under the guise of 'protection': missions and reserves.

From 1857, over thirty missions were established across Victoria. Ebenezer Mission—also known as Lake Hindmarsh Aboriginal Reserve—was already in place on Wotjobaluk Country at a place known as Gurru, near Antwerp, in 1857. It was followed by the Church of England-backed Lake Tyers Aboriginal Reserve, sometimes called Lake Wellington, at a place known as Bung Yarnda, and the Presbyterian-Moravian backed Ramahyuck Mission; both established on Gunaikurnai Country in 1861 and 1863 respectively. Coranderrk was established in 1863, Framlingham in 1865,

and Lake Condah (Tae Rak) in 1867. These last two were backed by the Church of England.

The reserves were framed as offering refuge and stability in a rapidly changing world. In reality, they were places of restriction as much as protection. Life within their boundaries was carefully regulated—movement restricted, traditions discouraged, autonomy diminished. While the settlements provided food and shelter, they also imposed new rules and expectations, reshaping daily life in ways that profoundly altered the connection between people, culture and Country.

As Uncle Dr Wayne Atkinson (Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung) observed: ‘Victoria is an interesting case study in Aboriginal affairs because it has the rather dubious distinction of being the first state to introduce a comprehensive scheme to govern the lives and movements of Aboriginal people, which became the forerunner for other states.’

Missions like Lake Condah, established on Gunditjmara Country, and Coranderrk, on Wurundjeri land near Healesville, were not places of refuge designed by or for First Peoples. They were tools of colonial control; for the moulding of Aboriginal lives to fit European ideals. These missions were overseen by both the state and churches, who worked hand in hand. At Lake Condah, the Church of England managed daily operations under the shadow of government policy, while at Coranderrk, Presbyterian and Moravian missionaries imposed strict rules that dictated every aspect of life.

Families were uprooted from their homelands and transported like commodities, severed from the lands that had nourished them for millennia. Once-vibrant kinship networks were fragmented, ceremonies suppressed, languages forbidden. In their place, a rigid order was imposed upon communities—a regime of European morality,

Christian doctrine, and government regulations, as if such structures could overwrite tens of thousands of years of cultural lore and knowledge. These missions became sites of survival and resistance, but also of profound loss, where the architecture of colonial power reached into the most intimate spaces of Aboriginal life.

Life on the reserves swung between episodes of joy, appreciation, sorrow and resentment. Underpinning it all was an unrelenting tension.

These spaces offered refuge from the frontier’s worst violence, but they demanded that First Peoples leave much of themselves behind. Traditional practices, languages and ceremonies were not just discouraged, but banned outright. The *Aborigines Protection Act 1869* (Vic) formalised these constraints, granting the state sweeping authority over every facet of life on missions and reserves. Missions became places of relentless surveillance, where Indigenous identities were systematically suppressed. Leaving the reserve required permission. Resources were rationed under the watchful eye of superintendents. Families were torn apart as children were either moved to dormitories or placed in institutions designed to strangle their ties to culture. The promises made to the people of the missions may have been genuine, but they would never come to fruition in a world where the colonial mentality was stronger than the voice of divinity.

The reserve system presented an impossible choice: to remain outside and risk the violence and uncertainty of the colonial world, or to seek refuge and survival at the cost of culture, language and autonomy. These were institutions designed to reshape First Peoples into colonial subjects.

Even within the confines of these institutions, however, First Peoples found ways to resist. They fought to retain threads of connection

THE STATIONS WERE ALSO PLACES
OF REBIRTH—NOT IN THE BIBLICAL
SENSE, BUT IN THE CONTINUED
EVOLUTION OF CULTURE. CULTURE HAD
ADAPTED IN ORDER TO SURVIVE AND
REASSURE THOSE WHO HAD LIVED
THROUGH ALL THE TUMULT THAT THERE
JUST MAY BE A WAY FORWARDS.

to the lands from which they were removed. Their defiance carried forward a strength that not even the most strident colonial structures could extinguish.

On missions, First Peoples found ways to continually connect and reconnect. The stations were also places of rebirth—not in the biblical sense, but in the continued evolution of culture. Culture had adapted in order to survive and reassure those who had lived through all the tumult that there just may be a way forwards. By the mid-1870s, a little over one third of the Aboriginal population of the colony of Victoria resided on reserves or missions. For generations of First Peoples, mission life would come to be all they would know. Love would be found and lost. From time to time, happiness outweighed the sadness. The joy of living with loved ones, surrounded by community to raise new generations, meant life could go on.



Those on reserves were expected to be productive; to work for their rations, rather than for a wage. If wages were paid, they were lower than what an Aboriginal person would receive if employed elsewhere. Yet residents worked hard. Children were doing well in their education, with Ramahyuck school students topping the colony in their results in one year. Those on the reserves, especially Coranderrk, Lake Tyers and Ramahyuck, showed great skill in their farmwork, winning prizes at colonial and international exhibitions and fetching top prices at the Melbourne sales. Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation told Yoorrook the community at Coranderrk were well-respected for their hops growing. At Cummeragunja, Henry Harmony Nelson and his wife successfully ran an ice cream shop, with

Maggie Nelson making the ice cream and ginger beer sold on site. Residents of the reserves worked together, and many understood that the land they lived on would be theirs, never to be taken away, because this was what they had been told by authorities.



PARENTS WHO RESISTED THE REMOVAL OF THEIR CHILDREN FOUGHT MANAGERS WHO CITED THE 1869 ACT TO JUSTIFY THEIR DECISIONS. THE COLONY'S GRIP WAS TIGHTENING, AND THERE WAS LITTLE ROOM FOR DEFIANCE.

In Gunaikurnai Country, some Aboriginal families survived by picking beans, stooping in the fields for meagre pay. Others were forced into the steam and drudgery of laundries, their hands raw and cracked from endless scrubbing. Yet even this back-breaking work, when it could be found, was never secure.

Across Victoria, First Peoples who sought employment were often turned away outright—not because they lacked the skill or the motivation, but because racism barred the door. As Uncle Johnny Lovett told Yoorrook, the truth was plain: 'Some people just didn't

want to employ Aboriginal people.' When work was offered, it was on the worst terms—exploitative, casual and always under the thumb of those who saw Aboriginal labour as cheap and expendable. For many, survival meant enduring hardship in a system that locked them out by design.



By 1877, the colony was confident in its power and drenched in wealth, but not inclined to share it. The overt violence of the early decades had, to some extent, given way to policy-driven control: missions, reserves, the quiet encroachments of administration. The guns may have fallen silent, but they were increasingly replaced by pens, ledgers and the tightening clutches of bureaucracy.

It was in this climate that the Royal Commission into the Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria was convened in 1877. The Commission focused on Coranderrk, Lake Condah, Lake Tyers, Framlingham, Ramahyuck and Ebenezer missions. Ultimately, its function was not to reckon with the harm inflicted upon First Peoples, but to formalise and refine the state's control over their lives. Aboriginal people were seen as a problem to be managed—a people whose existence troubled the colony's conscience, but not its ambitions.

The Commission did not hear from many Aboriginal witnesses. Instead, it relied on missionaries, officials, and station managers—those already complicit in the systems of segregation and dispossession—to support its conclusions. The Commissioners recommended a continuation of the stations and missions for Aboriginal people, noting 'that their absorption in the general population may be looked forward to; but, judging from the past, so long a period must first elapse, it is unnecessary now to enter into the consideration of the subject.' The

Aborigines Protection Act 1886 (Vic) empowered the state to remove so-called 'half-castes' from reserves, breaking families and severing kinship ties. In this way, the Commission helped transform the colony's frontier war into a quieter, bureaucratic violence—no less devastating, just less visible.

And so the men who sat in judgement were the same men who had reaped the rewards of invasion. They were landowners, magistrates, men of influence—figures who had built their wealth on stolen ground and now claimed the right to decide the fate of those they had dispossessed. Their report painted the missions and stations as places of stability, where Aboriginal people could be moulded into subjects of the colony.

But not all Aboriginal people remained under the eye of the missions. Some continued to live outside their prescribed boundaries, sustaining themselves as best they could. Living off the land, collecting pay for working for pastoralists, and refusing to bend to the ways of the white man was the ultimate act of defiance. Unfortunately, however, it rendered those who clung onto life on their own terms all the more vulnerable.

The mission system had little patience for anyone who refused its oversight. In her book *A Distant Field of Murder: Western District Frontiers 1834–1848*, historian Jan Critchett included the words of an Aboriginal man, most likely from Ebenezer Mission in the Wimmera, who spoke candidly: 'We prefer this place; we get a bag of flour, a bag of sugar, and have nothing to do for it, and enjoy ourselves.' His words, stripped of performance and pretence, were an affront to the colonial mind. However limited the choices had become for Aboriginal people who rejected mission life, they challenged the narrative that their survival depended on white intervention.

The recommendations from the 1877 Royal Commission revealed the long game of colonial governance. The Commissioners spoke of a distant future where Aboriginal people would be ‘absorbed’ into the wider population. The process, they reasoned, would take time—so long, in fact, that it was not yet necessary to plan for it. In the meantime, they advocated for the continued use of stations and missions, ensuring Aboriginal people remained under colonial control: no chance to become uppity or to organise within the fledgling white society. Even those who had been apprenticed out, removed from their communities and placed into settler households were not granted entry into colonial society on equal terms. Racism, the Commissioners admitted, prevented such ‘absorption’, but they accepted it as an immovable fact rather than something to be challenged.

The Board for the Protection of Aborigines, which oversaw Aboriginal affairs, was described in the 1877 Royal Commission report as a ‘philanthropic labour’, not a matter of government priority. The Commissioners recommended that at least one politician with an interest in Aboriginal people be included on the Board. But this was no act of reform—it was an opening for pastoralists like Frederick Race Godfrey, Edward M Curr, and AAC Le Souef; men who had long sought the closure of Coranderrk. This campaign by surrounding landholders was driven by spite.

More broadly, the report itself was a tangle of contradictions. It acknowledged that the soil on some reserves was too poor to sustain crops, yet insisted Aboriginal people should be self-sufficient through agriculture. It recommended wages for Aboriginal labourers, but only under the strict supervision of station managers, who would also decide how and when payments were made. Every proposal carried the illusion of

progress, but beneath the language of reform, the truth was clear. Power would remain with those who had carved their fortunes from stolen earth. The system was solidifying.

The 1877 Royal Commission made the State’s intentions plain when it handed down its report in 1877: Aboriginal people were to remain segregated. The government, they argued, should have the authority to force those Aboriginal people living off the reserves back onto stations and cutting off rations to those who lived beyond them. Settlers, too, would have a role to play. The Commissioners suggested that the white population be authoritatively instructed not to interfere with the gathering of Aboriginal people. Where friendships had formed, where Aboriginal people had found some support within non-Aboriginal communities, these connections were now a threat.

This was the apparatus of control: laid out in careful language, presented as governance. Land had been stolen. Lives had been taken. And now, policies were refined to complete the destruction—not with muskets or chains, but with paperwork and parliamentary votes.

**ABORIGINAL PEOPLE WERE TO
BE CONTAINED, MONITORED,
AND, OVER THE COMING
GENERATIONS, DISAPPEARED.
THE COLONY CALLED IT
PROGRESS. HISTORY KNOWS
IT FOR WHAT IT WAS.**



One place, however, subverted the narrative: Coranderrk.

In 1863, the Wurundjeri—along with other Kulin people—relocated to the site on the Birrarung's upper reaches. The government recognised First Peoples' right to settle there, gazetting Coranderrk Aboriginal Station as a 2,300-acre reserve the same year. The station's area was soon expanded to encompass almost 5,000 acres.

Coranderrk became a thriving settlement. Its residents grew crops, including award-winning hops, and raised cattle. They welcomed visitors with displays of traditional activities, and sold handicrafts and artefacts. But colonisers resented the station's achievements. Neighbouring settlers envied the fertile land. The government was displeased by the residents' independence and capacity for self-management, and by their willingness to stand up to overbearing managers and restrictive, paternalistic policies.

Unlike other stations, Coranderrk was not held up as a model of progress. Though its housing, land and industries were detailed in the 1877 report, the final paragraph delivered the verdict: its residents had not made the progress 'that might have been fairly expected.' Their 'bearing and demeanour', the report observed, stood in contrast to those of Aboriginal people on other stations. In these words lay an unspoken judgement. Where the residents of Coranderrk saw dignity and self-determination, the state saw defiance. And that defiance was treated not as a strength, but as a defect.

The Commissioners did not attribute this defiance to the leadership of figures like William Barak, nor to the deep-rooted resilience of those

who had fought to hold onto their land. Instead, they found a simpler explanation.

The people of Coranderrk, they concluded, were being fed too well. A diet too generous had fostered independence where there should have been gratitude, strength where there should have been submission. Food was no longer just sustenance; it was a means of control and a measure of obedience. Coranderrk's ability to sustain itself, its refusal to conform to the expectations of dependence and passivity, marked it for punishment.

Yoorrook heard that even when Aboriginal communities managed to endure and adapt—when they forged lives under the weight of these systems, as they did at missions like Acheron—their survival was met with further hostility. Acheron Station was established in 1859 on Taungurung Country at a place known as Nyagaroon, and became a place where First Peoples could maintain kinship and culture despite the confines imposed on them. But its very success became a threat. Pastoralists, eager for the rich lands along the Goulburn, lobbied for its closure. Among them was Hugh Glass, one of the colony's most powerful squatters, whose influence in parliament ensured that Aboriginal people were once again displaced to make way for grazing.

In the end, the closure of missions like Acheron had little to do with policy or protection. It was always about land. Where Aboriginal people remained, the settler economy saw only untapped resources. Their continued presence was a barrier to expansion. And so even the fragile footholds that communities built were torn away, again and again, to satisfy the demands of pastoral empires.

LETTERS, PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS

Resistance took many forms. It wasn't all wars and reprisals. In the early days of the new and alien world, holding on was a means of resistance. Connection with one another and cultural practices was, and is, the crucial mainstay of life and society. For the blood spilt by warriors defending their Country, the blood that remained intact, flowing through the veins of those who endured, was also blood spent in the name of survival. Resistance in all its forms and in all its complexity would define First Peoples' struggle through the generations.



Survival was never passive. Aboriginal people moved across Country, between stations, into towns, refusing to be confined by the fences and regulations of the colony. The cruelly misnamed Board for the Protection of Aborigines and station managers reaffirmed their control, issuing orders, demanding passes, insisting that no one leave without permission.

But letters arrived at their desks—polite in tone, desperate in substance, and unyielding in purpose. Mothers sought to be with their daughters through birth and hardship. Friends longed to see one another. Louisa Briggs begged for permission to visit her daughter, writing 'Please Mr Page, will you be so kind enough to send a pass for me to go down to see my daughter as you promised that I could go down to be with her at her confinement.'

Alice Murray penned a similarly modest request: 'Please Mr Bedge, send me a pass as I want to see Pompy at Coranderich.' The Board saw these movements as a threat. In 1884, Secretary Captain Page made it plain: Aboriginal people should not be allowed to come and go as they pleased. Warnings were issued,

orders given—leave without permission, and there would be consequences.

Years earlier, in 1873, the residents of Coranderrk were officially warned about the dangers of stepping beyond its bounds. The following year, even playing cricket became an act of defiance, with the Secretary of the Yarra Flats Cricket Club ordered to stop 'inducing' Aboriginal players to leave the station for matches. By 1874, the Board moved to cut off all travel 'for the purpose of meeting their friends'. But no decree, no bureaucratic ruling, could erase the need for connection. Movement was life. And life would not be surrendered.

In 1874, the Board removed John Green as manager of Coranderrk. He had lived there from the beginning, trusted by residents. He had earned their respect by being fair and open-minded.

The Board saw him as a problem. Coranderrk's people saw his removal as an attack.

The following year, Wurundjeri man William Barak led a deputation of Kulin men to the Board. Barak was the *ngurungaeta*—the head of Woiwurrung clans, and a respected leader among the Kulin Nation. His envoy demanded answers. They were met with silence and indifference. That colonial cloak was drawn closed again and darkened any prospect of progress for the people of Coranderrk. By August 1875, the Board voted to close Coranderrk entirely.

But Coranderrk was not simply a place. It was home, community, resistance. Its people refused to be erased. Alliances were forged with politicians and supporters willing to listen.

In 1881, a petition was presented to the government. 'We want the Board and the Inspector, Captain Page, to be no longer over us,' it declared. 'We want only one man here, and that is Mr. John Green, and the station to

be under the Chief Sec; then we will show the country that the station could self-support itself.’ The campaign forced an official inquiry into the management of Coranderrk—the 1881 Parliamentary Coranderrk Inquiry. Twenty-one Aboriginal residents testified before nine commissioners. It should have been an opportunity for truth. Instead, the chair of the inquiry, Ewan Hugh Cameron, who had sat on the 1877 Royal Commission, censored the minutes, attempting to removing testimony that did not serve colonial interests. The fountain pen’s nib cut deeper than any sword.

Even so, the evidence was undeniable. Five commissioners dissented from the final report, calling for Coranderrk to be permanently reserved for its residents and for the Board to be removed from its management. The Inquiry demonstrated the punitive, petty cruelty of the system that governed Aboriginal people’s lives. Residents testified to their hardships: food and clothing were rationed unevenly, wages withheld, and medical care denied.

Virtually all residents at Coranderrk gave evidence at the Inquiry. Among those who spoke truth to power was Annie Hamilton, remembered as ‘Grannie Annie’ for her courage and care. Uncle Larry Walsh (Daung Whurrung) told Yoorrook about his great-grandmother: ‘Grannie Annie was recorded as helping a lot of the Aboriginal women on Coranderrk write their submissions [...] Those that couldn’t write—and Grannie Annie also testified at the Coranderrk inquiry.’ Uncle Larry’s daughter Isobel Paipadjerook Morphy-Walsh (Daung Whurrung) recalled the cost of that testimony before Yoorrook: ‘She was really brave, actually. She testified not just about herself, but about our Great Uncle David [Barak’s son]—he was sick [with tuberculosis] and she didn’t have enough food rations, and she was requesting extra blankets.’

Annie Hamilton gave evidence to the 1881 Inquiry, carrying her grief into the public record so that the brutality could not be denied. Her voice, like so many others at Coranderrk, refused to be silenced, even when the system tried to isolate and bury the truth.

Alick Campbell’s testimony at the Coranderrk Inquiry further revealed the everyday malice of colonial authority. When his wife fell ill with rheumatic fever, Campbell pleaded with the station manager, Reverend Strickland, for the use of a buggy to take her to Melbourne for treatment. Strickland refused—he needed the buggy for his own family’s leisure trip to the Black Spur.

Denied even this basic decency, Campbell then asked for money to make the journey himself. Again, Strickland turned him away, claiming to have no government funds available. ‘How am I to do?’ Campbell asked. ‘I do not know,’ Strickland replied. In the end, Campbell was forced to borrow from his neighbours—those who had little, but still offered more than the state’s so-called protectors.

Campbell’s story was one of many that revealed how policies designed to protect Aboriginal people were often little more than tools of control. His testimony captured in stark relief the everyday indignities imposed on Aboriginal people, where even the right to care for a sick wife was made conditional on the whims of those in power. It was this kind of quiet, pervasive cruelty that the Coranderrk residents resisted—not just with petitions and letters, but with their refusal to be silenced.

The fight for justice did not slow. It moved; it rose; it gathered in voices across Victoria. Resistance lived wherever First Peoples stood their ground. In 1876, at Tae Rak/Lake Condah,





ONGOING MAPPING AND TAKING OF LAND BY THE CROWN BETWEEN 1855 AND 1869

-  Victoria
-  Land mapped and taken by the Crown
-  Missions and reserves

Vicmap, Esri, TomTom, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, Esri, USGS

Robert Sutton carried that fight into the courtroom, taking Reverend Johann Heinrich Stähle to answer for assault.

The law, of course, was not made to serve men like Sutton. The magistrate did not weigh the charge; he turned his gaze on Sutton and his witnesses instead, twisting justice into a warning. Try again, and it would not be the Reverend who faced punishment—it would be *them*.

But they did not stop. Sutton's father, John Sutton Senior, alongside Thomas Green and others, sent letters, petitions, complaints—every method they could find to be heard. When ignored, they sought out allies among settlers who might amplify their voices. It was not *white interference*, as the Board claimed; it was strategy. Aboriginal people had long known how to navigate the systems imposed upon them.



When Aboriginal people at Ramahyuck wrote a letter of complaint in 1887, Reverend Friedrich August Hagenauer, the mission manager, reacted with fury.

The protest was spearheaded by John Briggs Senior, a respected ploughman born around 1825, who took a stand against the stringent control and cultural suppression imposed by Hagenauer.

Retaliation was swift: the identified 'ringleaders', including Briggs, were forcibly removed from the mission, with their children deliberately left behind as a punitive measure. Other participants in the protest faced banishment for six months and were coerced into signing pledges of good behaviour as a condition for their return. Some apologised, desperate to stay. They were permitted to return. The ringleaders were still sent away.

Many learned to endure. The bell would ring, and people would walk up to the manager's quarters with their small jars, collecting their rations of sugar, flour, tea, meat, and dripping that had already begun to turn rancid. You took what you were given.



The managers, the Board, the officials—they saw this resistance as insolence. Aboriginal people were supposed to be grateful for what little they were given. Reverend John Bulmer, a mission manager at Lake Tyers, complained that 'They take all that is given them as their due, as we have got their country, and they get what is given as rent [...] All this makes it difficult to deal with them'.

In 1888, Joseph Shaw, former manager at Lake Condah and member of the Board, wrote that Aboriginal people were no longer passive: 'When the natives were less enlightened there was little or no need of regulations, as they never thought of calling in question the authority of a manager; but now they are ready enough to do so.'

Messages travelled across reserves, stations and missions. The events at Coranderrk and a visit by William Barak and his son David to Maloga Mission inspired more activism. In 1881, forty-two men submitted a jointly authored petition to New South Wales Governor Augustus Loftus requesting land. The Maloga Petition, as it became known, was taken to Sydney and published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 2 July 1881. It read, in part: 'all the land within our tribal boundaries has been taken possession of by the Government and white settlers; our hunting grounds are used for sheep pasturage, and the game reduced and in many places exterminated, rendering our means of subsistence extremely precarious'.

Maloga residents wrote another petition in July 1887 to Governor Lord Carrington requesting that Queen Victoria grant land to the community. In November of that same year, residents again wrote requesting for land near Maloga, this time to their local member of parliament.

From 1888, residents moved to Cummeragunja Reserve (*cumeroogunga* meaning *our home*), and twenty men were granted blocks of land. For many years, conditions at Cummeragunja were good—it was a place of sanctuary. Residents had a level of autonomy and worked a productive farm.

However, conditions at Cummeragunja slowly deteriorated in the 1900s with increasing control from the New South Wales Protection Board. Residents eventually walked off Cummeragunja in 1939 to an area known as The Flats near Mooroopna/Shepparton. The historic walk-off was the first major strike by First Peoples in Australia.

Communication networks stretched beyond fences, beyond regulations, beyond the control of those who thought they could govern Aboriginal lives.

This was resistance: a refusal to be contained. Every step taken without permission was an act of defiance. Every demand for justice a rejection of the colony's authority. Aboriginal people were not passive recipients of charity or control.

**THEY KNEW WHAT WAS
OWED TO THEM. THEY
FOUGHT FOR IT. THEY
TOOK IT.**



In March 1882, as the fallout from the Coranderrk Inquiry continued, the Board moved to tighten its control. A motion, led by AAC Le Souef and seconded by Dr Alexander Morrison, called for a conference of mission managers to refine the administration of Aboriginal lives. Managers Reverend Friedrich August Hagenauer, Reverend Johann Heinrich Stähle, John Bulmer, Wilhelm Kramer and William Goodall gathered to construct a more efficient system of control, classification and removal.

The agenda was clinical, its language stripped of humanity. The managers were to consider amendments to the *Aboriginal Protection Act 1869*, the legislation that governed every facet of First Peoples' lives. They discussed the utility of apprenticing boys into trades; the hiring-out of Aboriginal girls as domestic servants; and the most 'suitable' fate for orphans. Rations were another point of discussion: how much should be allocated to those who worked, how little to those who refused, and how best to punish those deemed 'refractory' or 'disobedient'. The cruelty was methodical. Behind every bureaucratic term lay a real act of violence.

The managers delivered their recommendations with the detached precision of those who saw their subjects not as people, but as a population to be managed. Boys could be apprenticed from the age of fourteen or fifteen, but not girls because previous attempts, they noted, had failed. The risk was left unstated, but its meaning was clear: white men had abused Aboriginal girls in service, and so the managers believed the only way to 'protect' them was to keep them on missions, away from the colonial households that exploited them.

For orphans, the colonial policy was that they should remain on reserves—unless deemed 'exceptional cases'. In this context, *exceptional* did not mean requiring

additional care, but described children considered to have the greatest prospect of being assimilated into white society, often because they were lighter-skinned. These children were sent to orphanages. It was a deliberate act of separation, designed to sever cultural ties and stamp out identity.

Older people, children, and the sick were entitled to rations, but these, too, were wielded as means of control. Any able-bodied person who refused to work, according to the standards imposed by station managers or government agents, could have food withheld until they submitted. Those who resisted entirely, who rejected authority or defied the system, would be 'banished' to another station or otherwise 'dealt with', the language vague enough to conceal the savagery of such punishment. In this way, even basic survival—food, shelter, family—became conditional, granted only to those who complied.

Control was not just enforced through rules and rations; it was carved into the bodies and fates of those deemed manageable and those deemed expendable. The question was never whether Aboriginal people should have a say in their own lives. It was all about how they should be handled, divided and diminished. Work or starve. Obey or be cast out. Live under watchful eyes or be obliterated. Even the nature of survival was dictated by colonial powers. And when it came to whether First Peoples should be absorbed or contained, the debate was not over justice, but method.

Station managers such as Reverend Friedrich Hagenauer and Wilhelm Kramer supported a policy of racial separation and absorption: children deemed to be 'full descent' would remain confined to reserves. They were to be managed until, as the Board put it, 'only a few pure blacks' would remain under government care. A missionary at Lake Condah echoed this

view, writing, 'as the blacks are dying out [...] finality is greatly facilitated and will doubtless be attained in a few years'.

The recommendations were extensive and cruel. Aboriginal men who left stations for work would have to provide for their families or risk losing them. Petitions and complaints could no longer be made directly to government officials; only to the Board. No 'outside interference' would be tolerated. Work certificates, issued by station managers, would be required before any Aboriginal person could seek employment elsewhere. Travel to towns would require written permission, and police were to have the authority to remove or arrest anyone found without it.

What little remained of Aboriginal independence was to be dismantled piece by piece. First Peoples would own nothing: not the land beneath their feet, not the cattle they raised, not even the wages they earned. Every coin would pass through foreign hands before it ever reached their own. Even then, it was payment not for labour but for obedience.



By 1884, the Board for the Protection of Aborigines had begun drafting legislative changes that would further cement its control. This period saw ongoing legislation aimed at 'finality'—that is, the end of Aboriginal people. To achieve this, the Board encouraged legislation to 'merge' Aboriginal people with mixed parentage into white society. Historian Clare Land noted that once Aboriginal people had been 'largely brought under control by physical violence and coercion, racial distinctions became a "key feature of policy" in the strategies for maintaining dominance'.

Families and communities were separated. Those forced off reserves faced racism, impacting their ability to secure housing and

employment. Children were forcibly taken from families. The Board closed stations and missions, attempting to concentrate Aboriginal people at Lake Tyers on Gunaikurnai Country. It was a time of mean, increasingly authoritarian measures and punitive action against Aboriginal people who challenged the authority of managers and the Board.

The central objective was the expulsion of anyone of mixed descent between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five deemed 'capable of earning a living'. Boys and girls alike would be apprenticed out. All children of mixed parentage would be declared orphans, no matter their circumstances, and sent to industrial schools or orphanages. The intent was not hidden. These children, the Board insisted, should be denied their Aboriginality.

By the early twentieth century, the Board had made its position unmistakably clear: remove the children, and time would do the rest. In internal communications, a Lake Condah Mission manager wrote that as 'the blacks are dying out', the removal of 'half-caste' boys and girls to the Industrial Schools Department would ensure that 'finality [was] greatly facilitated and will doubtless be attained in a few years'. It was not a hidden agenda. The strategy was simple, administrative and devastating: disappearance by design, framed as inevitability.

A system that had begun with the violent theft of land now sought to erase its people through policy and law.

THE END RESULT WOULD BE THE SAME.

PROTECTION, ASSIMILATION AND THE STOLEN GENERATIONS

The colony's preoccupation shifted from Aboriginal land to Aboriginal blood. Once the land had been fenced, surveyed and renamed, attention turned inwards, to the bodies and lineages of those who remained. Clerks, with their ledgers and laws, decided who belonged.

In 1886, the *Aborigines Protection Act* (Vic) was introduced as a mechanism for the disappearance of Aboriginal people under the ongoing pretence of a regime of 'protection'. The colony had decided that First Peoples would need to be made to vanish. This was premeditated cultural elimination.

The 1886 Act—or so-called 'Half-Caste Act'—redefined who could legally be considered Aboriginal. Those of 'mixed parentage' were ordered off missions and reserves; no longer entitled to rations after a transition period, nor government support unless they were granted a licence to live at a prescribed residence. The government would decide who belonged and who did not. Aboriginal people had no means with which to resist the labels imposed upon them. It was the torture of not being allowed to be yourself.

The government called this a path to independence. It was, in fact, a sentence of abandonment. Those expelled from reserves were expected to support themselves in a society that did not want them. As Auntie Alma Thorpe (Gunditjmarra) told Yoorrook, it was 'a different type of death'.

The effects of these policies reverberated far beyond the immediate loss of land. Families were scattered, often with little hope of reunion. Communities fractured under the strain. Intricate ties to Country frayed under this relentless pressure.

The 1886 Act was crafted to dismantle the cohesion of Aboriginal life. And its consequences

are not confined to history. The dispossession and disruption it caused have left deep imprints on the lives of First Peoples, shaping both the intergenerational grief and resilience that endure today.

Writing in 1980, Phillip Pepper reflected on the lasting wounds inflicted by the government's racial policies in his memoir *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*. Notable as one of the earliest memoirs written by an Aboriginal person, it captured a time almost lost through the eyes of someone who had survived it. His words offer a window into the heartbreak endured by families torn apart by the Board for the Protection of Aborigines and its rigid classifications. 'They said anyone with white blood had to go out and fend for themselves, get jobs and houses,' Pepper recalled. 'When boys and girls with mixed blood reached fourteen, out they went to work for settlers as servants and farm hands. Only full-blood could stay [...] It broke a lot of people's hearts, that rule did.'

Pepper's memoir speaks to a system that didn't just divide people by appearance—it separated them from their kin, their communities, and their lands.

These were the everyday cruelties of a system designed to fragment Aboriginal lives, one rule at a time. It still does.

The *Aborigines Protection Act 1886* (Vic) expanded the Board's powers. Orphans (as defined by the government, whether or not they had living relatives) were handed to the Department of Neglected Children or placed in orphanages.

There was little pretence of care. The 1886 Act allocated rations to those of mixed descent for three years, clothing for five, blankets for seven. After that, they would be abandoned entirely. Alfred Deakin, in moving the Bill, made the colony's intentions clear. The provision of temporary support, he argued, would ensure that 'the half-castes would gradually cease to be a burthen [sic] upon the State'.

The work of elimination was methodical. Dr Beth Marsden explained that from 1871, the Board gained the power to remove Aboriginal children it labelled as 'neglected' and place them in industrial schools, mostly run by churches or charities, originally set up for non-Aboriginal children. Once placed in them, Aboriginal children were often sent out to work under the Board's supervision.

Inquiries and research into these institutions have shown that the education provided was minimal. Children were trained for domestic or low-paid labour, with little chance to access academic learning or skilled trades. The system was retrofitted not to empower, but to discipline and exploit.

Policies were crafted not to understand Aboriginal people, but to disassemble them—to catalogue and contain them within rigid racial hierarchies. 'Full-bloods' were to be managed. 'Half-castes' were to be assimilated. Families were split by clerks as a matter of administration. Children who had known nothing but the embrace of their kin were torn away at fourteen, thrust into a world that had stolen everything from them and now demanded their labour in return.

This was not education. Aboriginal children on missions were rarely taught beyond grade three. Formal schooling ended just as young people were beginning to think for themselves—to read the world with their own eyes. Instead of books,

they were handed brooms and boots, aprons and axes. Girls were sent to white households as domestic servants. Boys were apprenticed to farms and stations. Their value lay not in their potential, but in their obedience.

This was a system not designed to uplift, but to erase culture, to strip children of their language, their families, and their future and shape them into something more palatable to the colonial eye. These were not policies of care, but of disappearance—slowly enacted, silently endured, and generational in their impact.



In Victoria, the communities on reserves and missions were weakened after the 1886 Act removed most residents between the ages of fourteen and thirty-four, forcing the communities into a diminishing population and economic spiral in the absence of their fittest workers.

The missions became places of greater and greater contradiction. They were built to contain, yet they offered a fragile kind of shelter. The walls that confined also protected, in a sense. The same hands that doled out punishment also provided rations. Children were taken from their families, then fed and clothed by the very system that had fractured their lives. Prayers were forced upon those who already carried their own sacred words—ancient, rooted in the land, carried through bloodlines older than the Bible itself. Faith became another tool of discipline.

The numbers told the story. By 1890, 186 people had been 'merged' into the settler population. Twenty-eight Aboriginal girls worked in service for settler families. 'Several' boys were apprenticed, six orphans forcibly placed in institutions. By the following year, another thirty-eight Aboriginal people had been removed from reserves.

