



ALMOST ALL OF VICTORIA IS MAPPED AND CLAIMED BY THE CROWN BY 1891

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

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

The government did not just dictate how Aboriginal people lived, but *where* they lived. An Order-in-Council could remove a person from one station to another at a moment's notice, like pieces being shuffled on a chessboard. In 1898, Bessie and William Rawlings were uprooted from their home and sent to Lake Condah. There was no reason given, no justification offered—only an order from a faceless bureaucracy.

By 1899, the hand of the state had a tighter clutch and a wider reach. No longer did it need justification or proof. Any Aboriginal child could be torn from their parents' arms on nothing more than the word of a manager or a government officer.

This was erasure at work. It scattered families and turned love into something that had to be hidden; clung to in the dark. The ties that had bound generations to one another, to Country and to story, were cut with the stroke of a pen, the closing of a door; with the vanishing of a child who would grow up calling strangers *mother* and *father*, their parents' real names buried in a place they were never meant to find.

For those who remained on missions, life was lived under constant surveillance and control. Freedoms that others might take for granted were tightly restricted. First Peoples had to ask permission for things no one ever should: to visit a sick relative, to walk beyond the mission boundary, to fish in the rivers where their ancestors had fished for millennia.

There was no justice to appeal to; no higher power that would intervene when a mission manager ruled unfairly.

At Lake Condah Mission, one Aboriginal man wrote of how he had asked three times for permission to take his daughter fishing. Each time, the mission manager refused. And when the man asked why, the answer was

clear enough: 'If I went against him, I would be punished.'

This account, preserved in *Daughter of Two Worlds* by Aunty Dawn Lee and cited in the submission from the McDonald Family of Tae Rak (Lake Condah) to Yoorrook, reveals the extent of the power wielded by mission managers. They controlled not just rations and residence, but daily life—deciding who could gather food, who could visit family, who could leave the mission grounds. The missions were not places of protection, but a means of confinement, where Aboriginal people were treated more like prisoners of the state than residents. And yet, even under these suffocating conditions, the act of asking—of insisting on the right to fish, to care for family, to live with dignity—became its own form of resistance.



THE SURVEILLANCE, CONTROL AND REGULATION OF THE LIVES OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE ON MISSIONS AND RESERVES WAS AKIN TO INCARCERATION.

Speaking language and practising Aboriginal culture and lore was punished.

Uncle Johnny Lovett recalled how families were penalised simply for holding on to language—for resisting erasure. 'They punished families by cutting their rations when they learnt their children language or when they spoke

language,’ he said. ‘And they’d lock them up in the dormitory down at the mission and things like that and wouldn’t give the kids back to the families unless they stopped them learning.’

Language—the very breath of culture, identity, and memory—became a site of discipline. Hunger and separation were tools to force compliance. What was written in ledgers and minutes translated into silence at the table, absence in the home, and the dissolution of intergenerational bonds.

The late Uncle Kevin Coombs (Wotjobaluk, Wemba Wemba, Wiradjuri) remembered how even language, the soft connective tissue of identity, was punished. ‘When my parents were living on the mission, they all had to attend church on Sundays,’ he told Yoorrook. ‘One Sunday, my parents were talking to each other in language, and both were struck by a churchgoer, who screamed at them: “You will not speak that heathen tongue in this place”.’

English was demanded. Culture was made into something dangerous, something to be beaten out of people word by word.

And yet even within these contradictions, resistance endured. Language survived in whispers. Ceremony went underground. The sacred held on, passed quietly between generations, waiting for a time it could be spoken aloud again.

Many eventually gave into the ways of God, finding hope and a sense of salvation in the teachings of Christ just as billions had the world over.

They were told it was for their own good—that this was a place of salvation and care. But salvation came only through submission, and care was always conditional. With no legal recourse, no voice in the system, people could disappear from the official record—reduced

to numbers, subject to orders, or written out entirely.

Every moment of life was controlled. A curfew rang out at dusk, warning that no one was to be on the paths after dark. A child could be taken without warning or explanation.



Forced removals did not just happen in Victoria. Yoorrook heard that young girls were taken from Cummeragunja and sent to homes such as the Cootamundra Girls’ Home. The late Auntie Fay Carter (Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung) told Yoorrook about this, as did Ngarra Murray (Wamba Wamba, Yorta Yorta, Dhudhuroa, Jupagulk, Baraparapa, Wiradjuri, Dja Dja Wurrung). Others have written about this including Maude Smith, and Rosalie Simkin and Lyn Loger, who quoted Uncle Hilton Walsh. He described a ‘time of snatching the young Aboriginal girls from the mission [Cummeragunja] to go and work for station hands’.

Auntie Margaret Tucker, the first Aboriginal woman to publish a memoir, recalled in her biography *If Everyone Cared*: ‘I overheard my grandmother talking with my mother about the so-called Aborigines Protection Board, which had the policy of taking all the girls who reached the age of twelve or thirteen to the Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls at Cootamundra [...] Our Aboriginal families lived in constant fear, especially the parents.’

For many who later testified before Yoorrook, Tucker’s words were more than memory—they were a call to truth-telling. Her leadership and honesty carved a space for others to speak of fear, loss and endurance.

Forcing families off reserves and missions not only separated families, but also compelled them to support themselves in a racist society.

Aunty Alma Thorpe's mother was forced to leave Framlingham at the age of fourteen under the 1886 Act.

Forced off reserves, many Aboriginal girls and women worked as domestics. Aunty Di Kerr (Wurundjeri) told Yoorrook about her grandmother, Martha Nevin (nee Wandin).

'Our grandmother was born on Coranderrk Mission. When she was old enough, she became a maid for the mission manager. When she turned eighteen, they sent her to Toorak to be a maid. She didn't have any money, get any wages. She had one day off a month.'

Martha's understanding of the world was shaped by what the mission taught her—and by what it denied her. Aunty Di explained: 'She didn't know any better, because she grew up on it. She would say "Oh no, I had a pretty good life," but some of the things [...] You would read about what they did, or what she talked about, and you would get angry and sad, or maybe just laugh a bit.'

Even as dementia took hold in her later years, the mission never left Aunty Di's grandmother. 'She would still remember the mission. Sometimes she said "Don't look at them. Don't let them see you upset", and that stayed with [my sister] Irene and me all our life. Just hold your head high and don't look at them and don't listen. Whenever something traumatic happens to us, that's what we do.'

In a world where obedience was demanded and emotion was dangerous, Aunty Di's grandmother passed on something precious: the quiet strength of dignity held in the face of power—and a lesson in survival that endures.



Aunty Alma Thorpe described the system with brutal clarity in her evidence to Yoorrook. It was

the Board for the Protection of Aborigines that determined who was entitled to food, shelter, and even family, and who was not. The *Aborigines Protection Act 1886* (Vic) gave them the power, but it was the Board's decisions that tore through the lives of people like Aunty Alma's maternal grandfather, George Clarke, and his brothers. As the Board enforced the racial classifications set down in law, so-called 'full-blood' Aboriginal people were provided rations, but those deemed 'half-caste' were left to fend for themselves. Aunty Alma explained 'there was no provisions for the people under the Half-Caste Act [...] the "full-blood Aboriginal", they got food and all that type of thing. But under the Half-Caste Act, you didn't get it.'

Frank Clarke, Aunty Alma Thorpe's paternal grandfather, was forced to chop wood for six months just to earn a roof over his head. And even when those on rations wanted to share, the Board forbade it. A so-called 'full-blood' who offered food to kin classified as 'half-caste' could be punished for a mere act of generosity. 'You weren't allowed to share,' Aunty Alma told Yoorrook, 'even though it did happen'.

The Board's control, of course, extended beyond food. It redrew the map of family and community. Aboriginal people were made to carry identification cards—a constant reminder that their very right to exist on their own land was subject to authorisation. 'You had to carry a card to say who you were, and you could not walk off the mission without permission,' Aunty Alma recalled—as if identity could be reduced to paperwork, as if family ties and culture could be regulated by the state.

Aunty Alma remembered Lake Condah and Lake Tyers not just as places of hardship, but as something far worse. 'I seen the missions as concentration camps [...] under those terms of living on a mission [...] you weren't allowed to

visit anybody.’ At Lake Condah, even culture itself was outlawed. ‘Aboriginal people wanted to have corroborees and all that type of thing, but [...] the ministers or the preachers, they were very strict, and if they did a corroboree, they were worshipping the devil,’ Aunty Alma said. ‘So that was cut out’.

This was the regime of control: bureaucratic, moralistic and racialised—where the right to eat, to speak, to gather and to remember was regulated and withheld at will.

THE MISSIONS DID NOT NEED WALLS. THE MANAGERS WERE THE WALLS.



And yet resistance thrived in the hours between prayer and punishment. Women smuggled scraps of language into lullabies as they rocked their babies to sleep. The young men forced to labour in the fields worked slowly on purpose, refusing to be made into machines. And the older men, who’d seen the world before the mission fences, traced their stories into the dirt with sticks, teaching the children how to read the land beneath their feet.

Kindness that slipped through the cracks in the walls. A look between two people could communicate a whole conversation. Aunty Margaret Tucker remembered the rare days when someone found reason to smile—a joke told under their breath, a game played behind turned backs. She remembered the old women who knew how to soften hardship, pressing

warm hands to children’s cheeks, whispering that they were loved and still belonged.

The old ways weren’t gone—not completely. They survived in the people, in the stolen hours of the night, in the careful passing of knowledge, in the stubborn refusal to forget. No law, no mission, no decree could ever truly take away who they were. The Board sought to regulate every movement, breath and gesture. But control was never total. Resistance lived in hands that wove baskets by firelight; in footsteps that pressed against Country long after curfew; in the voices of those who refused to forget.



Throughout this time, Aboriginal people continued to move—across Country and to one another. Between Coranderrk and Cummeragunja, Lake Condah and Framlingham; between missions, towns and the growing Koorie community in naarm/Melbourne. These journeys were more than practical—they were acts of kinship, memory and resistance. They mirrored the old patterns of movement, kept knowledge alive, and carried stories, support and resources from one place to the next. Community moved with the people, and with it, the strength of refusal.

At Cummeragunja, the people slipped away into the bush, beyond the reach of watchful eyes, where they could practise culture in secret. On missions, women like Aunty Connie Hart taught others to weave, passing knowledge from hand to hand despite the threat of losing their rations. To be caught meant punishment. Still, they wove.

Aunty Glenys Watts (Gunaikurnai) said that some were made to feel shame; that fear was wrapped around culture like a wire fence. But fear did not erase knowledge—only forced it underground, where it waited.

Some resisted in words, refusing to let government authorities quietly remove them from their lands and dissolve the connections their families had forged over generations. When the state moved to close Lake Condah Mission in the early twentieth century, Gunditjmara man Ernest Mobourne stood firm. In 1912, as officials prepared to displace the residents of the mission—people whose parents and grandparents had built homes, fenced land, and cared for Country—Mobourne wrote to the authorities, challenging the injustice of their plans.

‘Our fathers were brought here some forty years back to form a mission station here and were then informed that if they built houses, fenced in and cleared the reserve, the mission station would remain theirs for them and their children’s children [...] Our fathers have passed peacefully to rest, and we would wish to live and work and be buried beside them.’

Mobourne’s words cut through the polite veneer of government policy to reveal its true intent—to displace, to dispossess, to disrupt. His testimony speaks not only to Gunditjmara resilience but to the ongoing fight to remain on Country, to uphold the promises made by colonial authorities and broken whenever they stood in the way of settler expansion. Mobourne’s plea was not just for land, but for the right to continue living where his ancestors lay, to maintain connection, community, and cultural continuity in the face of relentless interference. It did not matter. The mission was closed, the land thieved. Still, the people stayed. At Framlingham when the mission was closed, the people refused to leave. They lived in the nearby forest under poor conditions, but close to Country. The same happened when Ebenezer closed, with the Wotjobaluk moving to nearby Antwerp.

Others resisted with movement.

The Board dictated who could travel, issuing railway passes like a master granting leave. In 1916, Dinah Young requested permission to take her family from Coranderrk to Lake Condah. ‘Poor old Granny White has asked me to take the children down to see her in every letter she has written to me,’ she pleaded. The manager decided not all family members needed to go. The Board ruled it ‘not an urgent case’.

Dinah Young went anyway.

Aunty Margaret Tucker’s cherished biography summed up life on the missions: ‘Even in those places, where they tried to take everything from us, we found ways to hold onto ourselves. We sang in whispers. We remembered in silence.’



ABORIGINAL PEOPLE ON THE MISSIONS QUICKLY LEARNED THAT THEIR SURVIVAL DEPENDED ON THE WHIMS OF THOSE IN CHARGE.

A kind word, a compliant attitude, a willingness to obey without question: these could mean the difference between being granted or denied even the smallest freedoms.

When Agnes Carter wrote to the Board in 1917 asking for an empty house at Lake Condah, she pleaded her case as though standing trial, knowing that her behaviour and compliance would determine the outcome: ‘I have craved

for years to have a house of my own and not one word can be said against me or my family for bad behaviour.'

Even then, there was no guarantee.

The mission managers used forced relocation as a punishment. Emily Stephen, née Wood, was a Gunaikurnai woman sent from Lake Tyers to Lake Condah for three months. She was transported under police guard, an act of a forced relocation with no recourse. Aboriginal families were still chased on horseback like fugitives on their own Country.

When Emily asked to return home, she was denied. Her behaviour, the Board decided, warranted another three months' exile.

The managers' disdain for their charges was barely concealed. In 1913, Captain RW Howe lamented that there was no law to 'compel those strong able-bodied half castes to work & support their wives or else go to gaol'.

The most basic requests were treated with contempt. In 1917, a former resident of Lake Condah asked for her bed to be sent to her. The request was denied. The manager, WL Galbraith, wrote smugly: 'No end to the wants of natives.'

Aboriginal people were spoken about as though they were not people at all.

Life on reserves and missions was an exercise in endurance. Managers ruled over Aboriginal residents with unchecked authority, meting out punishment at will. Even letters were controlled. The Board intercepted correspondence, reading and censoring messages between family members. Mothers who wrote to their daughters in institutions found their letters confiscated. 'I asked if I could go home to my mother as I am feeling unhappy here and very lonely for my mother,' Winnie Austin wrote in 1916. 'I have been away for nine months.' Her request was refused without explanation.

Permission to visit family. A few extra rations. A less punishing job. The line between subsistence and punishment was drawn not by law, but by the mood of the mission manager, the missionary, the white authority who held the keys to food stores, gates and the right to belong.

Uncle Colin Walker (Yorta Yorta) recounted this control at Cummeragunja in his submission to Yoorrook: 'The mission manager walked around in the night. If your grandmother sent you somewhere, to your aunties', for a bit of flour or sugar and tea, they would ask you what you were doing and tell you to go back or they would kick you up the backside.' What began in childhood as a vague awareness deepened into painful clarity with age. He reflected: 'In the young days, it was good being a child. But when you grow up to be an adult, you're thinking of the things that happened.'

Visiting family was not a right: it was something to be negotiated, documented, permitted. 'If you came to stay with your parents on the mission,' explained Uncle Colin, 'you had to go to the manager's quarters and sign a paper to say you are staying with your mum and dad—how degrading that was. It was breaking up the families, the extended families.'

Uncle Colin recalled, 'You couldn't be close to your families while you had the white managers on the mission, unless you lived there on Cummeragunja as a family. But if family came to visit, you knew there was a time limit on their stay.'

The memories of this cruelty linger long after the dissolution of official policies, as Uncle Colin observed: 'We have been through that—that is gone now. But it will never be gone from our minds for those who are still alive.'



THE BOARD FOR THE PROTECTION OF ABORIGINES ENSURED ITS CONTROL EXTENDED DEEP INTO THE PRIVATE LIVES OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE.

In 1897, Reverend Friedrich Hagenauer, who had become secretary of the Board, wrote to a local police officer, asking him to investigate a Framlingham man who planned to marry an Aboriginal woman of mixed descent. The problem? According to the law, the woman was classified as ‘white’. And if a black man married a ‘white’ woman, even if both were Aboriginal, she would lose all access to government rations.

Hagenauer made the consequences plain: ‘A black man marries a half-caste woman, who is in the eyes of the Law, as a white woman, the same must leave the reserve and cannot any longer receive Government Supplies.’ This was not simply about ration cards—it was about severing people from their communities, their lands, and their supports.

Under this system, marriage across these manufactured racial lines could mean exile, turning kinship into a battleground where government policy dictated who could live where, with whom, and under what conditions.

Historian Jan Critchett uncovered the story of Julia Russell, a woman who sought to adopt a relative’s child. Russell, who was non-Aboriginal,

made a simple and heartfelt appeal: ‘The father of the child is a relative of my husband’s. As I have no child of my own.’

Yet the Board refused. The child, they argued, was ‘almost white’—and therefore not under its jurisdiction.

This refusal was not an act of kindness or liberation: it was abandonment. The Board’s decision meant the child was cast adrift, denied connection to family and community, without protection from either the Board’s oversight or the settler society that refused to accept Aboriginal people.

This story, documented in Critchett’s *Our Land Till We Die: A History of the Framlingham Aborigines*, stands as a stark example of how the Board weaponised racial categories, controlling Aboriginal lives until they no longer wanted responsibility—until a child was deemed white enough to discard.

Parents married young to prevent their children from being taken. Some made the agonising decision to move off reserves entirely, knowing that to stay meant forced separation—families pulled apart by the Board’s policies.

But leaving was not easy. To step beyond the bounds of the mission meant giving up the rations, the housing, and the fragile stability that accompanied the Board’s control. It meant venturing into a settler world where Aboriginal people were met with hostility and exclusion from employment. There was no safety net outside the missions—only the hope of staying together as a family, even as poverty and racism closed in.

The authorities did not just remove people from the land; they worked to dismantle the bonds between them altogether. To leave the mission was to gamble with survival, to trade the known confines of control for the uncertainty of freedom. And yet, so many chose it. The fear

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of losing teenage children, of watching them taken and scattered, outweighed even the fear of destitution.

This control left marks that stretched far beyond the missions. In conversation with her granddaughter, Meriki Onus, Aunty Alma Thorpe reflected on how the *Aborigines Protection Act 1886* (Vic), which she and others refer to as the ‘Half-Caste Act’, had shaped her life. ‘The Act was designed to assimilate the Black people,’ Aunty Alma said. It gave the Board the power to decide where people lived, where they worked, and who they married.

The policy of the 1880s infiltrated the following century. Reflecting on her life in the 1930s in Victoria, Aunty Alma recalled that ‘there was a lot of pressure for me to marry white [...] but I married Black,’ she said. ‘I was determined that my family would be Aboriginal.’ In Fitzroy in the 1930s, ’40s and ’50s, most of the Black men were her cousins, so she had to be intentional. Deliberate in who she chose as her partner. She met her husband, Gunnai man Alister Thorpe, at a Sir Pastor Doug Nicholls event in Fitzroy. In defying the pressure to assimilate, she kept the line of her people strong.



The meaning of *ownership* was always slippery—a concept that shifted depending on who was asking and who was being told. For Aboriginal people living under the shadow of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, ownership was a fiction. They were made to understand that they possessed nothing. The houses they built, the land they cleared and cultivated, the tools they used to work or mend—none of it belonged to them. It was all claimed by the state. Even the clothes on their backs were not truly theirs, but issued,

logged in ledgers, and liable to be withdrawn at any moment.

This control even encompassed their own bodies. Aboriginal people were legally classified as wards of the state, but the language often used made the reality starker: they were considered ‘property of the Queen’. This meant their movements could be restricted, their labour controlled, their families shattered—all under the guise of legal authority. The connection to home, to family, to Country was never secure. What little they had could be stripped away at any moment.

This was not just about denying land; it was about denying belonging. The state held the power to define who could remain, who could be moved on, and who was permitted even the smallest comforts of ownership.

At the same time, First Peoples were told to be grateful. To cherish what was never really theirs. To sweep the floors of houses they did not own, to mend fences on land that had been stolen from them, to work for rations as if they were wages.

It was control dressed up as charity. It was possession denied and then enforced. The land belonged to the Queen. But when the state no longer wanted it—when the soil had been depleted and the fences fell—it was never handed back, but sold. And once again, Aboriginal people were left with nothing but the memory of what had always been theirs.

In 1884, Captain Page, Secretary of the Board, wrote with exasperation to Reverend Kramer at Ebenezer Mission. Rose Kennedy had asked to inherit the home of her late uncle and aunt, believing, as she had been told, that the house would pass down to family, just as it did for white people: ‘The house was built by my Uncle when the first missionaries were here; when the house was built and finished the missionaries

made them understand that the house was their own and when they die it was to be for their children after them (the same as white people).'

But this, Captain Page made clear, was not the case. No matter who built them, no matter who lived and died within their walls, the houses remained station property. He lamented the 'trouble and annoyance' caused by Aboriginal people who believed they had rights.

In 1895, Albert Coombes was given seed and horse feed by the Board to grow wheat—but when harvest time came, he discovered the truth: the crop was not his. He was granted only a 'reasonable share', with the rest belonging to the Board. His land could not be used as collateral for a loan; could not be leased or sold. He had worked the earth, but the colony held the deed.

Even those granted land in their own name found it was a tenuous possession. In 1926, Jessie Alberts believed she had secured land for herself at Framlingham. Then, without warning, the Board moved to lease it out for grazing. She offered to rent the land she thought was hers. The Board's response was cold: if she wanted it, she would have to 'submit a tender like everyone else'.

Anything given could be revoked at a moment's notice.

Death offered neither certainty nor dignity: the state even withheld post-mortem return to Country. Auntie Glenys Watts spoke to Yoorrook of her great-aunt Lucy, who died while her family played her favourite hymn on the organ at their home in Koo Wee Rup. Lucy had asked to be buried at Lake Tyers with her ancestors. But the state refused. 'They said no, because if she was buried up there, that meant that the whole family would want to go and visit her,' Auntie Glenys recalled. 'So they decided no, she wasn't allowed to be buried at Lake Tyers. So she was buried

at Pakenham.' Others, including community members and even a non-Indigenous supporter named Mrs Bon, petitioned for Lucy to be laid to rest at Lake Tyers, but the government denied them all. 'Upon Lucy's death,' Auntie Glenys said, 'she was not allowed to go back to Lake Tyers to be buried, even though all of my old ancestors were buried there.'

Land was never just about property. It was about belonging, memory and the right to be laid to rest with your people. And even that, they tried to take.

FOR THOSE WHO LIVED OUTSIDE THE MISSION FENCES, POLICE BECAME THEIR WARDENS.

The Board was distant, its offices tucked away in Melbourne—but the police hovered; arbiters of survival.

George and Emily Edwards were among a number of Aboriginal families who, despite their meagre means, provided shelter for others, including a Mrs Alberts and her children. In 1897, when Constable J Akeroyd informed the Edwards that they would no longer receive food or clothing from the government, they faced an impossible choice: evict Mrs Alberts and her children, or go hungry themselves. 'They said they would not turn Mrs Alberts and the children out in the cold and I could stop the rations. They said they could beg for their living.' Akeroyd stopped the rations.

Uncle Brendan Kennedy (Tati Tati) recounted to Yoorrook what it meant to be at the mercy of the police for food. 'My mum and aunties were starved and given rations from the police. How oppressed and demoralising is that, to have to go to the police to collect coupons to go to the store and present those coupons to the store owner,' he said. 'There were only certain things they were allowed to have. I remember them saying that when they were kids, they would take it in turns to have the egg from their chicken.'

THIS WAS THE COST OF DEFIANCE. CHILDREN HIDING UNDER TREES AS THEIR ELDERS TOOK THEIR LAST BREATHS BESIDE THEM.

When Aboriginal people were removed from reserves, police escorted them from the premises. And when they resisted, it was the police who hunted them down.

Uncle Brendan Kennedy told the Commission of a police pursuit. His ancestor, Maggie Farrant, was a child when she fled with her grandmother through floodwaters. 'They were being chased on horseback by the police through the floodwaters and had to hide under the log of a fallen tree. Granny Farrant's grandmother died there, and she was laying there with her. The little girl was laying there with her grandmother.'

This was the cost of defiance. Children hiding under trees as their Elders took their last breaths beside them.



New Victorian Acts in 1910 and 1915 maintained the earlier controls over reserve residents. In 1916, these were subsequently extended through a series of regulations. The *Aborigines Act 1915* (Vic) codified biological definitions of Aboriginal identity by restoring the distinction between 'half-caste' and 'full blood'.

The rules were set by those in charge. And those in charge were men like Bruce Ferguson, the manager at Lake Tyers, who seemed to take pleasure in keeping families apart. In 1917, Eliza O'Rourke, a resident of Lake Condah, wrote to the Secretary of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, pleading for assistance. She had saved enough to purchase a small cottage and land in Heywood and was preparing to leave the mission, striving for some measure of independence. Yet even this modest hope was subject to the Board's approval.

Eliza's letter reveals the layers of control she faced. Although she was receiving her son's military allotment while he served in World War I, she still needed the Board to continue her rations—not just for herself, but for another woman who would be living with her. Her request was simple, but in the paternalistic system that governed Aboriginal lives, nothing was guaranteed.

Behind this bureaucratic process stood Ferguson, who made no secret of his willingness to exploit the system to inflict further harm. As Eliza wrote, 'Do try your best to help me, as Mr Ferguson seemed to delight in the thought of keeping my son away when he knows very well that it worries me so.'

In those few lines, the reality of the mission system comes into sharp focus—where even a mother's right to be near her son could be

withheld, used as leverage, another thread in the long history of government-sanctioned cruelty.

The missions were purportedly places of protection, yet those who lived there called them something else—prisons, camps, places where freedom was not just taken away, but mocked. Aunty Alma Thorpe called them ‘death camps’ and ‘concentration camps’.



With the *Aborigines Act 1915* (Vic), the Board for the Protection of Aborigines was granted sweeping new powers. For those on missions, it no longer needed to prove that a child had been abandoned or mistreated to justify their removal. The Board could, at its own discretion, separate children from their families, severing the sacred bonds of kinship that had endured for generations.

This was not care, but legislated conquest. It rendered Aboriginal children wards of the state, ripped from their communities, placed in institutions or sent to work as servants and labourers.

This law formalised a practice already in place—the systematic removal of children. It gave the state legal cover to do what it had done for decades: tear apart families in the name of assimilation. The impact of this amendment was profound and harrowing. Children were placed into institutions or foster homes, often far from their ancestral lands and cultural heritage. The rationale for these forced removals was couched in terms of protection and assimilation; yet the reality was an organised effort to erase Aboriginal identity and amputate the transmission of cultural knowledge.

Some who were taken never returned. At Cummeragunja, young Aboriginal girls were removed from their families and taught to cook, clean and care for white families, often under

harsh and isolating conditions. As Aunty Fay Carter recalled, this was not unusual: girls were taken from missions across the country. Their removal was part of a wider pattern—what many have come to remember as a time of profound grief and loss.



From the late 1880s to the early 1920s, missions and reserves were progressively closed down. The Board could no longer justify their cost, and by the turn of the century, the Victorian Government had grown increasingly reluctant to fund them. The land they sat on was becoming more desirable to settlers, and Aboriginal resistance, whether expressed through quiet refusal or organised protest, was seen as an administrative burden.

The first attempt came in 1889, when Framlingham was targeted for closure. Settlers in Warrnambool wanted the land for an agricultural college, and the Board—always eager to serve their interests—agreed without hesitation. But the people of Framlingham refused to go quietly. They fought back, organising through local newspapers, lobbying politicians, and even travelling to Melbourne to make their case in person. They spoke with Chief Secretary Alfred Deakin, and argued their right to stay. Deakin dismissed them, citing costs and government efficiency. But they did not give up.

In the end, the people of Framlingham won. The Board withdrew its oversight, removing the mission manager but allowing residents to remain. They were no longer under government control, but they remained on their land. It was a victory—hard-won, but fragile. And it did not set a precedent. Ebenezer Mission was shut in 1904, and Ramahyuck in 1908.

Others were shuttered in 1917, after the Board directed that Lake Tyers remain as the only

reserve, far from the eyes of white society. Some residents were allowed to see out their days at Coranderrk and others went to live on Country nearby their old reserve.

In 1919, Lake Condah was officially closed, though the people remained, clinging to the land until the 1950s, when it was finally sold off and carved into blocks for Soldier Settlement. No land at the former Lake Condah mission site was given to the Gunditjmara men who had served.

In his evidence to Yoorrook, Uncle Jim Berg (Gunditjmara) described how this was experienced on the ground: 'They just shuffled them off to other missions via Coranderrk down to Lake Tyers. Coranderrk was one of the most successful missions because they grew hops and they wanted more land, and the government says, "That's it. No more land. Missions closed."' At Lake Tyers, people from all over Victoria were thrown together. 'We talk about the Stolen Generation,' he said. 'We don't talk about the "Lost Generation". The missions and the reserves are nothing but prisons.'

Hospitals turned away Aboriginal patients, or treated them on verandahs. Women gave birth outside—not in beds, but on cold wooden boards, their pain echoing from walls that did not welcome them.

Pushed to the fringes, Aboriginal families built lives where they could. Many came to Melbourne, to Fitzroy, where the hard streets offered more opportunity than the open antagonism of the country. Others moved to the city's western suburbs—Footscray, Yarraville and beyond, where factories and industry along the Maribyrnong River offered a meagre foothold. Families moved between city and country, following seasonal work, clinging to what they could.

With no place to call home and no recognised status in the eyes of the state, Aboriginal people were rendered easy targets for the law. First

Peoples had become outsiders. And outsiders could be charged with vagrancy. No home, no job, no rations—and yet the fact that these circumstances were the government's doing, not their own, was immaterial. They were seen not as the consequence of policy, but as personal failings.

Police waited to pounce. A man who had once been jailed, even for something as desperate as taking food, could now be charged with consorting. The law was designed to prevent criminals from gathering. In practice, it was wielded against Aboriginal families trying to survive. Sitting on a street corner, talking to a cousin, meeting outside a shop—all could be grounds for arrest.

The government had stolen their land, restricted their movement, taken their children, and pushed them into poverty. And then, when they tried to exist outside that system—to survive it—they were sometimes arrested.



Though the government tried to disperse them, to scatter families and break their bonds, Aboriginal people found one another again. They gathered and shared what little they had, forming new communities in the face of displacement. After the Cummeragunja walk-off, families settled at an area along the banks of the Goulburn River near Mooroopna and Shepparton known as 'The Flats' and nearby Daish's Paddock, refusing to return to the New South Wales mission that had denied them dignity. The late Aunty Fay Carter spoke of growing up in that community woven together by resilience and care. 'I was raised there,' she told Yoorrook, 'and I'm so privileged.'

To the east of Melbourne, in the bushland near Drouin in Gippsland, Aboriginal people came together again at Jackson's Track—a place

of refuge for those who had been pushed out of Lake Tyers.

In places like The Flats and Jackson's Track, where the state sought to dissolve Aboriginal identity, people rebuilt—creating spaces where culture could survive, and where family could remain family. Aunty Fay recalled: 'Even though it was hard times, I'm privileged to have had that experience of being raised in that situation and learning and understanding just what racism does to a people. And learning how we survived. And we survived because, you know, they say Aboriginal people are a sharing, caring people. Let me tell you, they were the true days of sharing and caring. That's how we survived, because we shared and we cared for one another.'



THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE, LIKE MANY INSTITUTIONS OF ITS TIME, DID MORE THAN OBSERVE THE COLONIAL PROJECT—IT PROPAGATED THE IDEAS THAT SUSTAINED IT.

Within its lecture halls and journals, the University taught and promoted theories that were not only racist but devastating in their reach and consequence. Among these were eugenics, Darwinian evolution, and assimilationist doctrines—pseudo-scientific

frameworks that sought to rank, categorise, and ultimately diminish First Peoples.

In 2024, the University turned its gaze back on this history with the publication of *Dhoombak Goobgoowana: A History of Indigenous Australia and the University of Melbourne*. The collection offers a scholarly reckoning with the institution's role in entrenching these harmful ideologies.

It documents, for example, the work of Wilfred Agar—a geneticist, professor of zoology, and Dean of Science, who championed eugenics throughout his tenure. From 1936 to 1945, Agar served as President of the Eugenics Society of Victoria, advocating for policies that promoted the sterilisation of those deemed 'unfit', restrictions on immigration, and the perpetuation of racist myths about First Peoples.

Agar was not alone. Richard Berry, professor of anatomy from 1906 to 1929, took these ideas further, measuring Aboriginal skulls in an attempt to construct a hierarchy of intelligence based on head size. His work, thinly disguised as science, gave ammunition to others, including Professor Frank Tate, who used it to argue that the number of students from poorer suburbs should be limited. First Peoples were barely considered in these equations; their potential dismissed before it could even be imagined.

The research these men produced was widely read, taught to generations of students. It helped cement the social and scientific legitimacy of policies that harmed Aboriginal people as biologically inferior. The legacy of these ideas ripples through time, echoing in the structures and assumptions that continue to shape the world First Peoples are forced to navigate. It supported the idea that a colony without Aboriginal people was not just a thought experiment, but something to be actively pursued. And it would lay the foundation for what would become known as the 'White Australia Policy'.



THE WHITE AUSTRALIA POLICY WAS THE NATION'S FIRST DECLARATION OF SELFHOOD—WHO IT WAS FOR, WHO IT WAS AGAINST, AND WHO WOULD BE MADE TO FADE INTO HISTORY.

Enshrined in the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* (Cth), it was framed as a border policy; a way to keep the young federation racially pure.

There was an inherent irony in the federation of 1901 that resulted in Victoria becoming a state. It was an act of unity and nationhood, a refusal to accommodate *outsiders*, yet an act that continued to deny its true first inhabitants of their most basic rights. The contradiction sits at the heart of this country to this very day. But the policy's boundaries did not stop at the ports. Its logic reached inland; into laws and policies that sought to control, contain and erase Aboriginal people from the national identity.

For First Peoples, the intent was clear: they were not part of the future that White Australia imagined. The colony had long justified its expansion with the belief that Aboriginal people would either die out or be absorbed. When the former did not happen as quickly as expected, the latter was pursued with brutal determination.

The aforementioned *Aborigines Protection Act 1886* (Vic) had already begun this work in Victoria, forcibly removing Aboriginal people of mixed descent from reserves. At around the same time, the idea of the White Australia Policy was spawned by the ironically named Australian Natives' Association (established for and by native-born white men). Many politicians and prime ministers were members of the Australian Natives' Association, including Alfred Deakin. At its core was the notion that those who could not be removed from the land must be divested of their identity instead.

These policies shaped Aboriginal life in almost every way imaginable. Citizenship was denied, wages withheld. Under the cover of assimilation, entire generations of children were taken from their families, placed into institutions where their language was forbidden and their culture erased. The goal was to ensure that Aboriginal people, as a distinct group, would cease to exist—not by force of arms, but by force of policy.

The White Australia Policy would remain in place for most of the century, until it was no longer culturally tenable for Australia's reputation abroad. But it seeped into the very bones of the nation. As Dr Jacyntha Krakouer (Mineng Noongar) told Yoorrook: 'We didn't want a future white Australia at the time, when we had the 1901 White Australia Policy in place—we didn't want future White Australia to look like how Aboriginal people raise their families, we didn't want Aboriginal people. We wanted to eliminate Aboriginal people. That's something that's hard to sit with, but that's how assimilation links into this logic of elimination. Child removal was the policy that was used to enforce that assimilation and that logic.'



The Board became stronger and more brazen. By 1922, it had expanded its authority over First Peoples via a bureaucracy of exclusion. It wielded blood quantum as both a measure of identity and a tool of control. To be deemed *too white* was to be denied rations, housing and community, forced instead into a settler world that had little room for Aboriginal people beyond the margins. To be *too Aboriginal* was to remain under the strict surveillance of station managers and government officials.

It was in this climate that Bruce Ferguson, manager of Lake Tyers Aboriginal Reserve, wrote to the Board about Mrs J Connolly and her family. His letter, clinical in tone but heavy in implication, exemplifies the cruel arithmetic of racial classification:

'Sir,

I have to report with reference to:—

(1) Colour of Mrs J Connolly :- Mrs Connolly, her husband and child, age about 3 yrs, are almost white in appearance. They call themselves half-caste, but there is no family so nearly white as they are residing on the Aboriginal station.

(2) Whether I think provision should be made for them on the Aboriginal station. In view of the Boards instructions that no one – nearer white than half-caste is to receive assistance, the visits of this family to the station have not been encouraged. They usually appear after dark and seek permission to remain until morning, but it very rarely happens that they leave next day. If they were half castes I would recommend that provision should be made for them here, but being so nearly white they should be able to do better off the station...

Yours faithfully,

BRUCE FERGUSON mgr'

This dark chapter in history contributed significantly to what is now known as the Stolen Generations: an era marked by grief, loss and the enduring resilience of Aboriginal communities striving to preserve their heritage against the tides of assimilationist policies. This period ran from the late nineteenth century all the way through until the 1970s.

The *Aborigines Act 1915* (Vic) survived in various guises and under various amendments until 1969. If you were Aboriginal and born before 1970, you arrived on earth with the Protection Acts hanging over your head.

They came in the night. They came at dawn. They came when mothers were at work, when fathers were away, when a grandmother stepped out for water. They came with papers and uniforms and the cold authority of the state. They came with lies and force and the silence of neighbours who turned their faces.

And they took the children away.

For as long as the colony had existed, Aboriginal children had been ripped from the arms that had cradled them; from the land that had sung them into being. At first, the colonists called it 'civilising'. Later, they called it 'protection'. Then they justified it by invoking 'neglect'. The vocabulary changed, but the intent remained the same: total elimination of the native.

Aboriginal children were taken to missions, to foster homes, to orphanages where the walls were high and the rooms chilly. They were placed with white families who told them their mothers were dead, who scrubbed their skin raw and forbade them to speak their ancestors' words. They were told they were lucky; that they had been saved from their own people.

But they knew. Deep inside, they knew.

They were stolen from hospitals. Their mothers lay sick, recovering from illness, from childbirth, from the wounds of poverty and grief. Welfare officers promised temporary care, promised the children would be returned. But they lied. The mothers went home with empty arms. Their children had been given away.

Many of these children were delivered to 'reception centres'—one in many out-of-home care models adopted by the state over the years. At reception centres, children were effectively criminalised under the *Children's Welfare Act 1958* (Vic) with a conviction often documented as being 'in need of care and protection'.

Uncle Larry Walsh was two-and-a-half years old when he was taken. A toddler standing before a magistrate, made a criminal before he had even learned to speak his own name. A child marked by the law, sentenced to a life without family, without the certainty of knowing where he belonged.

He recalled the day his life was changed: on 24 May 1956, while his mother was in hospital giving birth to his younger brother, he and his two sisters were taken from their home. Later, he learned that authorities had come and taken not only them, but a group of other children—all at once, like a sweep. As Melbourne prepared for its glittering turn in the spotlight as the host city of the Olympics, children were being snatched with impunity from loving families. Their stories would remain largely unheard for decades.

Uncle Larry knew he had two sisters, Patsy and Joylene, but they were separated early. Patsy, still a baby, was seen as adoptable. Joylene and Larry remained together for a short time in the Cardinia Orphanage, but by age five they too were split up. 'The orphanage started separating us at the age of five,' he remembered in his testimony

to Yoorrook. 'They said: "You're going to a boys' home, and you're going to a girls' home."'

Still, they tried to remain close. They wrote letters, requested photographs, pleaded for visits. Most of these requests were denied. And yet, despite the barriers, they held on to each other however they could. Uncle Larry's sister kept a photo of him, aged eight, until he was in his sixties. Her son finally gave him a copy.

The trauma of separation was deepened by deception. Each time Uncle Larry was placed in foster care, it was in non-Aboriginal homes, where he was told again and again that he was not Aboriginal. That he was unwanted by his parents. That no one had ever come looking for him. But he knew that wasn't true. The lie lived alongside his instincts.

It wasn't until adulthood, when Uncle Larry finally gained access to his government file, that the truth was confirmed. His mother had written countless times. She had asked for updates, pleaded to see him and his sisters, requested information. All of it was refused. 'They even discuss it callously in my files,' he said. 'There were decades of time where I knew they were lying—before proof was handed to me.'

For Uncle Larry and so many others, the system that claimed to protect Aboriginal children in fact criminalised them from infancy. It punished them for being poor, punished their families for surviving outside of state control, and then punished them again for trying to come home.

When Aunty Eunice Wright (Gunditjmara) was nine years old, she and her siblings Gloria and Ronnie were taken into police custody while their mother, Lyall, was hospitalised with tuberculosis. Seven years passed before Eunice and her siblings saw their mother again.

The late Uncle Jack Charles (Taungurung, Boon Wurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Woiwurrung,

Yorta Yorta, Palawa) was taken, too; dragged through a cycle of foster care, of institutions that swallowed children whole and spat them out broken. He grew up knowing only absence, knowing that his mother had carried eleven babies into the world but not been allowed to keep a single one. 'I think about how Mum would've suffered' he said, 'having all eleven of her babies forcibly taken away from her.'

Police cells became holding-pens for the stolen. They would sit on the hard floors, small arms wrapped around their knees, waiting for a court that had already decided their fate. Gloria McHenry was locked away in a Heywood police cell before being sent to Royal Park. At the train station, the police were waiting. Siblings were separated. Their only remaining comfort—one another—gone in an instant.

And for those who had mothers who were able to fight, who hid their children, who fled across borders, who pulled them out of school to keep them safe, the fear was unrelenting. The knock at the door. The welfare car on the street. The knowledge that, at any moment, the state could reach in and take everything.

Families lived in a state of constant siege. Police and welfare officers made their rounds, inspecting cupboards, counting tins of food, deciding whether a child would be taken. Mothers learned to keep empty tins on the shelves, arranged neatly as proof that there was enough to eat.

Professor Julie Andrews (Wurundjeri Woiwurrung, Yorta Yorta, Wiradjuri) remembered how, when the social workers arrived, she had to hide in the bedroom, silent and invisible. But when white men came to Framlingham, forcing their way into homes in search of young girls, the same welfare officers turned away.

Their concern was never for Aboriginal children.



THEY WERE TOLD THEY WEREN'T ABORIGINAL. THAT THEIR PEOPLE DIDN'T WANT THEM. THAT THEY HAD BEEN ABANDONED.

They were told that Aboriginal people were bad. That they should be ashamed of where they came from, that their blood carried something unworthy. Christine Stewart's white adoptive family loved her. But when she was taunted at school, called names, made to feel small and ugly because of her skin, she could not talk to them about it. They had never known what it was to be hated for the body they were born into.

The damage lasted far beyond the end of this phase of removals. Unanswered questions carried on. The late Uncle Kevin Coombs described the anguish of not-knowing to Yoorrook: 'Family is so important. People need to know where they come from, to have an identity and cultural connection they can be proud of and have. So many still don't know where they belong—it all goes back to the Stolen Generation.'

'If you ask any Aboriginal family about the Stolen Generation, nearly every family has been affected by the removal of our kids, through this injustice.'

VOORROOK TRUTH BE TOLD

THINKING BLACK, FIGHTING BACK

During World War I, Aboriginal men signed up to fight for the empire that had stolen their lands. They had been told they were not citizens; refused the right to vote; pushed to the margins of society. Still they volunteered. Many were motivated to fight in international conflicts in the hopes of improving their circumstances at home.

They marched in boots issued by a government that refused them citizenship. They saluted a flag that had flown over their dispossession. They stood shoulder to shoulder on foreign soil with the very settlers who, back home, had fenced off their Country.

Five Lovett brothers—Alfred, Leonard, Frederick, Edward, and Herbert—were among the Aboriginal men who enlisted. Others, like James Arden, were discharged as ‘unfit’. Some bore the scars of war—men like the late Uncle Kevin Coombs’s great-uncle, who was gassed. Some, like Reginald Rawlings, Harry Thorpe, and Daniel Cooper, son of William, never returned. And for what?

In the trenches of World War I there were no rations doled out by a mission manager, no curfews, no overseers to dictate their movements. For the first time, perhaps, they felt a kind of equality.

But when the war ended and the lucky ones made their way home, that fleeting sense of recognition was gone. The country for which they had fought did not fight for them. Their wages and pensions did not match those paid to white returned soldiers. First Peoples were denied entry to Returned Service Leagues (RSLs) and continued to be barred from other hotels and clubs, such as the Heywood Hotel. In Victoria, only two First Peoples are known to have received land under the Soldier Settlement schemes.

The promise of belonging had been a lie. They were expected to return to the shadows; to be grateful for whatever scraps the government saw fit to give.

The late Uncle Kevin Coombs described the paradox experienced by First Peoples who served, including members of his own family: ‘I think it’s wrong that Aboriginal soldiers like my grandfather and his brother went to war and fought for Britain, but weren’t given land like the other soldiers when they returned. Especially when this was their country in the first place.’

Families, too, remained subject to the whims of the Board.

‘It seems because we are black people, they can do what they like with us,’ wrote Ada Austin. Several young men from her family were on the frontlines. ‘They ought to treat us all alike, as we got relations fighting at the front, and they shouldn’t treat our children like this.’

The Board, indifferent, continued its exploitation, withholding wages, denying access to returned soldier and widower pensions, and docking rations. It petitioned the Department of Defence to stop payments altogether, believing the women were wasting the money. There was no proof; only contempt.

Those who survived returned to the same laws and restrictions that had dictated their lives before they left. They were soldiers—heroes, even—when they fought for the Empire, but Aboriginal men when they returned.



In the 1930s, Australia, like the rest of the world, stumbled through the Great Depression—and, unknowingly, towards another great war. This was a time of rising nationalism. But the movement was rigidly defined. It was for white Australians, steeped in loyalty to Britain and

determined to preserve a social order that excluded Aboriginal people from full citizenship.

Founded in the 1870s, the Australian Natives' Association (ANA) was a society for Australian-born white men. It positioned itself as the vanguard of a uniquely Australian nationalism: its members spoke of a nation forged by men who had been born on the sunburnt land, rather than those who had merely arrived upon it.

To the ANA, the future belonged only to those who could claim a lineage of colonial struggle. Aboriginal people were not seen as Australians, or even as a people with a future within the nation-state being forged. Instead, the ANA became one of the key architects of the very structures that denied Indigenous rights and helped to shape policies of exclusion, ensuring that Aboriginal people were written out of Federation in 1901.

The White Australia Policy; the constitutional exclusion of Aboriginal people; the framing of Australia as a land 'taken', rather than one still lawfully owned by First Peoples—these were ideas legitimised, if not actively championed, by the men of the ANA. Its members saw themselves as the rightful inheritors of the land. But their calls for self-determination were built on a foundation of dispossession.

In the twentieth century, Aboriginal leaders began to demand recognition, land rights and justice, and the ANA stood against them. Their nationalism was exposed for what it was: an assertion of white dominance. It retreated into the same anxieties that had built the settler state—fear that the land that settlers had claimed might one day be claimed back.



In the depths of the Great Depression, as Australia's streets swelled with jobless men and its politics tightened against the suffering of

its most vulnerable, the question of who truly belonged in this nation loomed large.

But a quiet yet unyielding resistance to white Australian nationalism was taking shape. Not in government or in the parlours of polite society, but in the modest homes and gathering-places of Aboriginal leaders who refused to accept the terms of their dispossession.

At the heart of this movement stood William Cooper, a Yorta Yorta man of extraordinary determination—and one who understood how to forge ahead in a white world. Writing in 1937, he declared: 'The white man cannot "think black" but I submit that our chieftain, which is your particular position, and the Government, which is our guardian, should set themselves to learn to "think black".'

Where others may have turned inwards, Cooper turned to collective action. In the 1930s, he and a group of fellow Aboriginal activists across Victoria—including Thomas Shadrach James, Aunty Margaret Tucker, Bill Onus, and Pastor Doug Nicholls—established the Australian Aborigines' League. It was an organisation born of the imperative for Aboriginal people to speak for themselves; to demand justice not as a favour but as a right.

Meanwhile, the Great Depression had exposed the failures of capitalism and deepened inequality, leading to a surge of radical political movements across Australia. The Communist Party of Australia (CPA) gained traction among workers, unemployed Australians, and those who saw in its message a promise of justice where democracy had failed them. With its calls for workers' rights, land reform, and an end to racial discrimination, the CPA became one of the few political movements willing to engage with Aboriginal activists, offering solidarity in the fight against government oppression.

