

Aboriginal fire-management practices in colonial Victoria

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Abstract: Through a close reading of particular episodes and a focus on the minutiae of action and context, this article adds to the literature on the customary use of fire by Aboriginal people in south-eastern Australia by highlighting the historically significant role Aboriginal people played in toiling alongside colonists and fighting fires during the colonial period. By scrutinising the written colonial records it is possible to reveal some of the measures that Aboriginal people used to help the colonists avoid cataclysmic fire. Lacking many direct Indigenous sources due to the devastation caused by rapid colonisation, we do this for the most part through a detailed examination of sheep and cattle graziers' journals, newspapers and government records. The article commences with an overview of colonists' observations of and attitudes regarding Aboriginal practices in relation to fire with specific reference to the region now referred to as Victoria and New South Wales. It concludes with an examination of the few recorded instances in which Aboriginal people tutored colonists in fighting fires, educating them how to use fire as a management tool, and the significant value they placed in Aboriginal knowledge relating to fire.

Introduction

Over the past 30 years, a shift towards utilising Aboriginal knowledge concerning the use of fire in Australian Aboriginal cultures has come about largely through documentation of traditional practices, analyses of sparse historical records, and knowledge that has been and continues to be passed down by Aboriginal

communities.¹ Nevertheless, in south-eastern Australia, and particularly in Victoria, it needs to be acknowledged that Aboriginal burning management regimes were severely disrupted in the early period of colonisation, and Aboriginal peoples' exclusion from their lands, coupled with significant depopulation, has significantly interfered with the transmission of intergenerational knowledge.² This paper aims to contribute to the recent revitalisation of Aboriginal peoples' engagement in fire-management practices, and assist in informing this social movement and related policy changes. It draws heavily on early colonists' records from Victoria, but Aboriginal people's experiences as residents in south-eastern Australia cannot be limited to Victoria, given state borders are imposed and somewhat arbitrary, and there were and remain fluid movements and cultural responsibilities of Aboriginal groups throughout much of what is now Victoria and New South Wales (NSW).

While many researchers such as Egloff have highlighted the dangers of relying on sparse written historical records to analyse the use of fire by Aboriginal communities, there is a growing body of evidence that emphasises the value that can be gleaned from a fine-grained analysis of those archival records that do exist.³ From the earliest period of colonial contact on the Victorian and New South Wales coastline, British and French mariners commonly commented on what they opined was the extensive use of fire by Aboriginal people. By way of example, in January 1802, at Cape Schanck and Port Phillip Bay (Victoria), John Murray 'found it impossible to survey any part of the Coast as yet from the numerous Native Fires which cover'd [sic] this low Shore in one volume of smoke'.⁴ Similarly, James Grant, in the following summer at Cape Bridgewater (south-west Victoria), noted the prevalence of fires – but on this occasion did not offer an opinion as to whether they were Aboriginal fires or not. Grant wrote: 'Many fires seen ... While near shore we saw plainly several fires ... Saw several fires ... plenty of grass and fine woods ... many fires a little way inland'.⁵ Numerous fires were seen the following spring, further east along the Victorian coastline at the short-lived British convict settlement at Sullivan Bay, near present-day Sorrento (100 kilometres south of Melbourne), in October 1803. This time the observer, the Reverend Knopwood, was ashore and made frequent observations about 'native fires' on the Mornington Peninsula and 'across the bay' (Geelong, Victoria), as well as 'large native fires' to the north-west

1 Steffensen, *Fire Country*; Foreman, 'The 1840 Western Port Journey', 320–32; Gott, 'Aboriginal Fire Management in South-Eastern Australia', 1203–8; Hateley, *The Victorian Bush*; Gammage, 'Victorian Landscapes in 1788', 83–87; Hallam, *Fire and Hearth*; Flannery, *The Future Eaters*; Pyne, *Fire: A Brief History*; Williamson, 'Cultural Burning in NSW', 1–21; McKemey et al., 'Cross-cultural Monitoring', 893–904; Ngurra et al., 'Yanama budyari gumada', 279–93.

2 Prober et al., 'Ngadju Kala', 716–32.

3 Egloff, 'Lightning Strikes: Rethinking the Nexus', 275–85. Also, see Fletcher, Hall and Alexandra, 'The Loss of an Indigenous Constructed Landscape', 138–49; Cahir et al., 'Winda Lingo Parugoneit', 225–40.

4 Shillingshaw, *Historical Records of Port Phillip*, 30.

5 Grant, *The Narrative of a Voyage of Discovery*, 69–73.

(Melbourne).⁶ In her study of settler colonial understandings of Aboriginal fire practices in Victoria, McMaster concludes that the possibility Aboriginal people were using fire to disorient and hinder the landing of the uninvited arrivals is one these explorers did not record their opinion about.⁷ Indeed, it would have been impossible for them to know.

In any case, what is evident is that many colonists' observations of Aboriginal peoples' familiarity with the use of fire in the landscape continued for decades. The French explorer Dumont D'Urville commented in 1826 that Western Port (Victoria) was 'enveloped in huge spiralling clouds of smoke, no doubt resulting from the habitual burning off by the savages'. After going ashore for a brief period, D'Urville noted the park-like appearance of the landscape, which he half-heartedly conceded was *probably* made by the Aboriginal people. He encountered 'fine stands of trees easy to get through ... vast grass-covered clearings, with well-defined paths linked by other tracks so regular and well-marked ... it is hard to conceive how these could have happened without the hand of man'.⁸

McMaster extends this argument, asserting that the complexities of the explorers' observations cannot be overstated, since accusations of carelessness and 'savagery' sit alongside admiring descriptions of the fire-handling skills they observed. When fire-handling skills were described, McMaster finds, the exotic and outlandish were often stressed.⁹ These complex patterns of observation and misinterpretation on the part of settler colonists regarding Aboriginal fire practices arguably reflect a broader pattern of cultural misunderstanding across 'the frontier'. Within the prevailing European understandings of the time, Aboriginal people were seen as 'savages' due in large part to their *perceived* inability to intervene in – to cultivate – the land. And, in a peculiarly and destructively circular and self-affirming interpretation, since Aboriginal people were understood as 'savages', they could not be seen as intervening in – or cultivating – the landscape. As the following sections of this article suggest, the dominance of this perspective often led settler colonists to disregard, disavow or misinterpret evidence to the contrary.

The implications of these patterns of misinterpretation and misrecognition were and remain vast and go to the very foundations of settler colonial Australia under the legal fiction of terra nullius. As the following discussion illustrates, however, the failure of settler colonists to fully or properly recognise Aboriginal intervention in and management of the landscape, by fire and by other means, does not necessarily imply the absence of at times unwitting observations of the same. Indeed, the examples provided below serve to highlight the value and significance

6 Reverend Knopwood, cited in Shillingshaw, *Historical Records of Port Phillip*, 135–61.

7 McMaster, 'Taking Fire, Making Fire'.

8 D'Urville, *An Account in Two Volumes*, 59.

9 McMaster, 'Taking Fire, Making Fire'.

of applying a contemporary historiographical perspective to the reinterpretation of the existing archival record in contributing to the ongoing project of overturning the understandings and interpretations that underpinned and justified the settler colonisation of Australia.

Aboriginal fire-management traditions

The observations of Aboriginal peoples' fire practices recorded by European explorers as well as by the squatters who followed in their wake and invaded the Aboriginal lands did not simply dismiss or unswervingly disparage the fire skills they observed. A salient example can be seen in the journal of John Murray, who in January 1802 referred to the extraordinary proficiency with which fire was managed by Boon Wurrung people in Westernport Bay. As the HMS *Lady Nelson* left Port Phillip, he noted, with manifest wonderment, that the fire, which 'must have covered an acre of ground', was 'dous'd [doused]', apparently 'at once'.¹⁰

Conversely, other British colonists made reference to the ease with which Aboriginal people were quickly able to make a 'roaring blaze'.¹¹ Edward Henty, in January 1838 in south-west Victoria, wrote with great vexation about the fire-handling skills the Gunditjmara people used to disturb and eject the colonists from their Country. Henty was one of many colonists who recorded his direct observations of Aboriginal peoples' dexterous ability to manage the direction and intensity of fire – and noted that this fire-handling knowledge was often used against the colonists. He wrote of how they were 'obliged to leave off [the shearing] in consequence of two natives setting fire to the grass all round us within a few hundred yards of the Hut'. Henty described his frustration and ire, as well as the Gunditjmara's dogged persistence to continue burning (and extinguishing) the grasslands with a preciseness that astounded him:

Natives burning the grass by the River. On approaching them they put it out but when we turned they commenced again with double vigour, fired a ball over them which only frightened them a little, for one fellow returned making a circle and lighting a fire as he went, rode after him and frightened him away ... [R]ode over to the new station. On my return I found that the Natives had been burning close to us, which spoiled our days shearing in consequence of being obliged to put the fires out.¹²

There are similar accounts by colonists in other regions of south-eastern Australia attesting to the precision with which Aboriginal people used fire, with devastating effect upon their houses and crops. One colonist near Geelong lamented his

10 Murray, 'Log of H.M. *Lady Nelson*', 331.

11 Tuckey, *An Account of a Voyage*, 182.

12 Henty, *The Henty Journals*, 205–6.

discovery in 1845 of a hut with a ‘great many clothes and tools reduced to ashes. The blacks [had] fired the hut ...’. He was convinced that the local Wadawurrung would just as easily destroy his own livelihood with fire: ‘My crops in the bend of the Moorabool have cost me putting in £48, but I am as certain that the blacks will fire them when ripe, as I am that they have reduced the poor people’s hut to ashes’.¹³

Similarly, Robert Hamilton, a squatter at Mt Emu in central Victoria, recalled that in the late 1830s or the early 1840s ‘the Aborigines were rather troublesome ... as the season was very dry they set fire to the grass and burned a large extent of the country’.¹⁴ In February 1848, another colonist, A. C. Cameron, noted with great apprehension the ease with which Aboriginal people could utilise fire to destroy: ‘We have had no rain lately. The grass being so very dry I have to be constantly on the watch for fear the Blacks should set fire to it. Mr McPherson has had about 1,000 sheep burned; the whole flock of nearly 1,700 are more or less injured’.¹⁵

Gammage has led research over the past decade or so into the frequency and purpose of Aboriginal fire-management practices, and has specifically highlighted how Aboriginal people used fire intentionally to create park-like landscapes.¹⁶ Many have contested Gammage’s suppositions, noting that debates about fire management are often characterised by an incomplete understanding of historical fire regimes.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Gammage and others argue that the frequency and ubiquitousness of eyewitness accounts in the colonial records attest to the argument that the British colonists observed Aboriginal people purposefully and with great skill and exactness using fire to mould the landscape.¹⁸ A case in point is Lieutenant John Murray of the *Lady Nelson*, who wrote often during his stay at Western Port of the evidence of Aboriginal people’s purposeful use of fire and the park-like environment they thus created:

I went on shore and walked through the woods a couple of miles. The ground was hard and pleasant to walk on. The trees are at a good distance from each other and no brush intercepts you. The soil is good as far as we may be judges. I saw several native huts and very likely they have burnt off several hundred acres of ground. Young grass we found springing up over all the ground we walked ... After dinner I took a walk through the woods of this part of the country ... To describe this part I walked through is simply to say that it nearly resembles a walk on Blackheath and the Park if we set out of question the houses and gardens of the latter. The hills and valleys rise and fall with inexpressible elegance.¹⁹

13 C. J. Dennys, ‘Outrages by the Blacks’, *Geelong Advertiser & Squatters’ Advocate*, 25 October 1845, 2.

14 Hamilton, in Critchett, *Distant Field of Murder*, 27.

15 Brown, *Clyde Company Papers*, Vol. 4, 271.

16 Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth*.

17 Silcock, Witt and Fensham, ‘A 150-year Fire History’, 329–74.

18 Gott, ‘Aboriginal Fire Management in South-Eastern Australia’, 1203–8; Hallam, *Fire and Hearth*; Cahir et al., ‘*Winda Lingo Parugoneit*’, 225–40; Pascoe, *Dark Emu*.

19 Lee and Grant, *The Logbooks of the ‘Lady Nelson’*, 87.

At times the colonists did not see, or did not remark upon, the connection between Aboriginal fire-handling skills and purposeful moulding of the environment, but simply marvelled at the park-like landscape they were greeted with as they encroached on Aboriginal Country with their sheep and cattle.

For example, James Kirby, an overlander recollecting his experiences of the 1840s near present-day Swan Hill, remarked: 'In the distance where the blacks had not burnt the reeds, it looked like large fields of ripe wheat; and nearer where they had burnt them, it had the appearance of a splendid crop just before it comes into ear'.²⁰ In March 1837, Governor Bourke remarked of the landscape immediately abutting Melbourne that the country has 'the appearance of an English park'.²¹ Likewise, George Russell, a squatter, did not fail to be impressed by how park-like the landscape appeared. He did, however, fail to observe Aboriginal people's use of fire to create the landscape that so impressed him or at least did not acknowledge this in writing. Like many of his contemporaries, he simply noted upon his arrival in Melbourne that:

The country immediately round Melbourne at this time looked very pretty. The grass had been all burnt off by bush-fires, and the autumn rains had caused it to spring up again. Batman's Hill looked so green and fresh that when I got my first sight of it, on coming up the river, I thought it was cultivated ground and that a crop of grain had been sown on it.²²

Charles Griffith, a squatter who took Wadawurrung land in 1840 near present-day Bacchus Marsh, was so struck by the Wadawurrung landscape's resemblance to the English countryside that he found it 'difficult to believe that I am in a foreign country'.²³

Around Gariwerd (the Grampians) in western Victoria, colonists recorded the impact of Aboriginal fire regimes and how their subsequent disruption by colonisation brought about environmental changes. In 1853, Phillip Rose, at the Rosebrook station, commented that 'From my own experience, I think the country greatly improving in grass, but in some districts getting scrubby from fires not being so frequent, principally in box forests'.²⁴ One western Victorian pastoralist, J. C. Hamilton, recalled how 'the country when we took it up was lightly timbered with red and white gum, yellow box, sheoak, and honeysuckle. There were pines on the sand banks, belts of stringy barks, but only a few bullocks here and there'. He believed 'the country remained open until brush fences were started, and the use of wholesale fire given up. This gave the timber a chance of going ahead as it

20 Kirby, *Old Times in the Bush of Australia*, 28.

21 Governor Bourke, 9 March 1837, in Boys, *First Years at Port Phillip*, 65.

22 Russell and Brown, *The Narrative of George Russell*, 80.

23 Griffith, 'Diary', 1840–1841, State Library of Victoria, MS 9393.

24 P. D. Rose in Bride, *Letters from Victorian Pioneers*, 324.

liked'. Hamilton went on to observe how, in the absence of burning, 'honeysuckle started at first on the light sandy soil, and it became a dense scrub ... The bullock sprang up everywhere, taking the best of the country ... Red gum also went ahead'. Of the Wimmera in 1846, at the time of the arrival of pastoralism in the region, he remarked:

all the country round here ... was covered with kangaroo grass – splendid summer feed for stock of all kinds. It was at its best during January, February and March, and remained good up to May, but it lost its colour after that, and gave place to a finer grass – herbs such as yams etc. ... The country was like this for some years after 1846, until destroyed by the indiscreet use of fire ... There was less loss in those days than now. We were in the habit of burning all rubbishy country in the autumn ... we burned the country into comparative safety.²⁵

Preventing large bushfires

Aside from Aboriginal fire practices and land management more generally, there is specific evidence of the Aboriginal mitigation of large bushfires. In Gariwerd, for instance, one unidentified observer wrote, on the basis of his discussions with early colonists, that 'The whites brought with them the danger of fire'. He noted:

In those days the tranquillity of the valley was never broken by bushfires: the native knew the danger of allowing his campfire to spread to the scrub, which was then almost impenetrable, except for tracks trodden down by himself or by the animals. In the dry seasons, wide expanses of dried-out river swamps, covered with dry rushes and reeds shoulder high, became potential infernos. The aborigines were aware of this and acted accordingly.²⁶

Indeed, Niewojt's study of the Otway ranges in southern Victoria concluded that deliberate, systematic burning of the eucalypt woodland by the Gadubanud people facilitated Aboriginal movement through dense woodland, in addition to ensuring good yields of vegetable crops. Niewojt also noted that by alternating patches of high and low fire fuel this form of 'mosaic burning' enabled the geographical distribution of risk across their territory in the event of unexpected wildfire.²⁷ Along with such findings, historical accounts indicate that Aboriginal people used their considerable local knowledge of fire behaviour to avoid large bushfires. One colonial observer, Simpson Newland, writing of his experiences in South Australia from the 1840s through to the early twentieth century, described how Aboriginal people took care to avoid major conflagrations: 'In my long experience [over 70 years] I have never

25 Hamilton, *Pioneering Days in Western Victoria*, 38–39.

26 'Pioneers of the Grampians', *Horsham Times*, 1 April 1938, 4.

27 Niewojt, 'Gadubanud Society in the Otway Ranges, Victoria', 175–99.

known any serious bushfires caused by the blacks'. He claimed that 'trees that were always consumed by bushfires were all flourishing in the perfection of beauty and health when the whiteman arrived'.²⁸ J. C. Byrne, in 1848, also commented on the avoidance of large fires by Aboriginal people:

It is a strange circumstance, with their many dense forests of huge timber, that the Aborigines seldom, if ever, indulge in large fires, and if you ask them the reason, they tell you that the time is not far distant when wood will be extremely scarce and difficult to procure, and that therefore, they are desirous of saving it. This appears to be the only way in which the natives exhibit any providence.²⁹

References to the negative reaction of Aboriginal people to the widespread use of fire by the colonists are also extant in the historical record.³⁰ First-hand Aboriginal perspectives regarding their customary use of fire to create open grasslands, along with their avowed fear of large, poorly managed bushfires, were commented on by Assistant Aboriginal Protector William Thomas, who in March 1840 was residing on Boon Wurrung Country near Cape Schanck. Thomas had spent several days remonstrating with the Boon Wurrung about their customary burning practices and was incensed that they continued to 'set the bush on fire in all directions'. He persistently exhorted them to desist, holding the opinion that 'Natives do great injury through continuing [to] burn [the] bush'. The Boon Wurrung were equally consistent in their insistence to continue burning the bush in all directions, their concern being directed towards a 'great fire' nearby – made by white people – which 'much alarmed them'.³¹ A lengthy entry in Thomas's journal provides clear evidence of the skilful management and containment of fire by a local Elder, and the many purposes to which fire was put by Aboriginal people. These included clearing and cleaning Country, creating and maintaining pathways, conserving significant remembrance sites and allowing greater access to plant and animal food supplies.³² Arguably, it is one of very few first-hand accounts in the written records that clearly demonstrate senior Victorian Aboriginal peoples' intimate knowledge of fire and of the conditions required to mitigate the danger of an out-of-control conflagration.³³

Similar observations of Aboriginal peoples' careful management of fire and their watchfulness in avoiding unmanageable fires can be found in written records from other regions of south-eastern Australia. Harry Witham of Omeo, in the Gippsland district of eastern Victoria, for example, emphasised that 'the blacks showed skill and judgement in the management of the fires and took great care not to let them

28 Newland, 'Annual Address', 24.

29 Byrne, *Twelve Years' Wanderings*, 374.

30 Cahir et al., 'Winda Lingo Parugoneit', 225–40.

31 W. Thomas in Stephens, *The Journal of William Thomas*, Vol. 1, 140–42.

32 Foreman, 'The 1840 Western Port Journey', 320–32.

33 Cahir et al., 'Winda Lingo Parugoneit', 225–40.

get out of hand'.³⁴ Indeed, colonists would come to make extensive use of Aboriginal knowledge and practice including Aboriginal labour in the managing of fires in south-eastern Australia.

The Aboriginal contribution to settler colonial fire management

Many colonists in the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century wrote about the indispensability of Aboriginal knowledge and labour in the initial period of invasion – commonly the first five to 10 years of their infringing on and attempting to usurp Aboriginal Country. Historian Henry Reynolds's work was among the first to utilise settler colonial accounts of Aboriginal pioneers, revealing how the skills and knowledges of Aboriginal people formed an indispensable component of the settler colonial endeavour.³⁵ Other historians have since continued to expand on how integral Aboriginal peoples' labour, traditional knowledges and skills were to the development of Australia as a nation-state, particularly in the formative periods of colonisation when sheep, cattle and the mining industry were crucial.³⁶ Likewise, settler colonists drew upon both Aboriginal labour and Aboriginal knowledge to manage fire. Nevertheless, the contribution of Aboriginal labour to fire management has been generally underemphasised in the existing historiography of settler colonial Australia, as has been the intellectual capital they contributed to the development of settler colonial fire-management skills and techniques. The following discussion explores some of the evidence for this contribution.

Despite the persistent tendency for many explorers, and later squatters, to interpret Aboriginal fire practices as 'primitive' or simplistic, some observers did attribute at least some degree of complexity to Aboriginal people in this regard.³⁷ McMaster convincingly concludes, for example, that many colonists recognised the fact that Aboriginal people were using fire purposefully and skilfully to obtain a desired outcome and that some colonists even came to mimic the Aboriginal fire practices they witnessed.³⁸ Colonists such as Lachlan Ross affirm this interpretation. Writing of his pastoral experiences in central Victoria in the mid-nineteenth century, Ross observed that:

34 Cited in Fawcett, 'Upper Hume Catchment: Ecological Report', 82.

35 Reynolds, *With the White People*. For an additional contemporaneous example, see McGrath, *Born in the Cattle*; for examples of more recent research, see Konishi, Nugent and Shellam, *Indigenous Intermediaries*; Shellam et al., *Brokers and Boundaries*.

36 See, for example, Broome, 'Aboriginal Workers on South-Eastern Frontiers', 202–20; Cahir, *Black Gold*; Cahir, Clark and Clarke, *Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge*; Cahir, Tout and Horrocks, 'Reconsidering the Origins of the Australian Legend', 4–12; Curthoys and Moore, 'Working for the White People', 1–29; Fijn et al., *Indigenous Participation in Australian Economies II*; Keen, *Indigenous Participation in Australian Economies*; May, *Aboriginal Labour and the Cattle Industry*; McGrath, *Born in the Cattle*; Russell, *Roving Mariners*.

37 See McMaster, 'Taking Fire, Making Fire'.

38 McMaster, 'Taking Fire, Making Fire'.

nothing had to be done to improve them [sheep runs] except burning off the superabundance of grass, now and again, on parts of the run. In burning the useless grass a quantity of fallen timber was burnt at the same time, so the burning kept the pastures fresh, and in some measure free from fallen timber. Even before we white folk made our appearance in this land, and for some time afterwards, the aborigines were in the habit of burning off the old grass on portions of their hunting grounds, so as to have good fresh grass for their kangaroos, wallabies, emus, turkeys.³⁹

In the more remote districts of Victoria there is clear evidence that co-dependent relationships were very common, and of benefit to both peoples; European reminiscences often highlight a mutual ethic of caring for the land, with local Aboriginal people effectively acting as park rangers and sharing bush lore.⁴⁰ In McMaster's view, however, while many of the colonists' subsequent methods of fire management and mitigation were reminiscent of techniques used by Aboriginal people, the written record often contains no clue as to where the colonists acquired such skills.⁴¹ Fortunately, there are important exceptions. Mary Gilmore, for example, a colonist in the Riverina district of New South Wales, emphatically acknowledged Aboriginal people as the providers of fire-management knowledge and expertise in the mid to late nineteenth century. Gilmore vividly recalled how colonists would start fires and let them run, oblivious to the danger involved, and how local Aboriginal people would be relied upon to assist and to educate them on how to deal with the results:

As to fire, it was the natives who taught our first settlers to get bushes and beat out a conflagration. My grandparents used to tell of how new immigrants when they first came to the country, unaccustomed to the danger in the wild country, would start fires and let them run heedless of the result; and then stand panic-stricken at having loosed something they could not control. And they would go on to relate how the natives would run for bushes, put them into immigrants hands, and show them how to beat back the flame as it licked up the grass. Indeed, it was a constant wonder, when I was little, how easily the blacks would check a fire before it grew too big for close handling or start a return fire when and where it was safest.⁴²

Gilmore's account, as George Main has highlighted, emphasises the superior skill Aboriginal people possessed in relation to managing fire, as well as the reputation they held among the colonial population as a result, insisting that "Send for the blacks!" was the first cry on every settlement when a fire started'.⁴³ Continuing in this vein, Gilmore described the finer nuances of extinguishing fire that were passed on to her family, and the wider community:

39 Ross, *From Rossville to the Victorian Goldfields*, 35.

40 Cahir, *Black Gold*.

41 McMaster, 'Taking Fire, Making Fire'.

42 Gilmore, *Old Days: Old Ways*, 219.

43 Main, 'Red Steers', 1–5.

There was a difference between the blacks' method and the white's. The white man used large bushes and tired himself out with their weight and by heavy blows; the blacks took small bushes and used little and light action. The whites expended the energy of panic; the blacks acted in familiarity, as knowing how and what to do. They used arm action only, where the white man used his whole body. Where, as a last resort, the white man lit a roaring and continuous fire-break, the aboriginal set the lubras to make tiny flares, each separate, each put out in turn, and all lit roughly in line. The beaters they used were so small that they hunkered to do the lighting and beating.

The aboriginals said that not only must fire be met by fire, but that it could only be fought while still not too hot to be handled closely; that when it became so hot that it burnt and exhausted men it had to be met from a distance. They also said that a big fire as a fire break was as dangerous as a big fire itself as the wind might change and bring it back on the watchers; that the value of the small flares was that they could be put out at once; that only lanes of grass were left between them, and these, if ignited, could easily be met.

I have seen a whole station in a panic – men, women, and children nearly killing themselves with frantic and wasteful effort; and then a handful of blacks and lubras under their chief come and have the fire confined and checked in no time. Having the confidence of habit, they allowed the fire freedom where it seemed least dangerous. In one such fire they concentrated on the sides, letting the centre flame run forward. But far in advance of this ran lubras hunkering down over their half-yard-wide flares. Behind the first row a second line was at work, and behind this a third, each fire opposite the gaps between the forward ones. The advancing tongues of flame having been kept narrow by attention to the sides, the draught was narrow, so a very wide front of little fires was not necessary. When the advance met the little islands of burnt grass it died there; in the lanes between it was beaten out.

The chief told my father that unless fire was kept narrow and beaten out before it created a high wind it was no use trying to fight it. Once it created its own such wind it was invincible. It seems strange to think that there was a time when we did not know this, but it is a fact.⁴⁴

Frequent references in Victorian station records of the mid-nineteenth century attest to how sought-after the fire-management skills of Aboriginal workers were. A case in point was the series of large and destructive bushfires that swept through much of western Victoria in 1854. This fire was, according to one squatter, 'fought with as many of his Black troop as he could muster'. In 1858, he remarked that '[t]he blacks' were once again 'busy fighting fires for me'. On yet another occasion in the same year, the diarist noted: 'I have had a lot of blacks with me [fighting]

44 Gilmore, *Old Days: Old Ways*, 219–20.

at the fire'.⁴⁵ In some instances, squatters quarrelled among themselves over who would retain the district's valuable Aboriginal workers, who frequently doubled as fire managers:

the most of my shed men are my faithfull darkies ... I have just come in from a wild goose chase after a fire that sprung up at the Peak about mid-day. I went at full speed with as many of my Black troop as I could mount ... Neither shearers nor any one else are making their appearance yet, and to make the matter worse Francis Ormond Esquire [neighbouring sheep station owner] has engaged my blackfellows. It has made me so savage.⁴⁶

Some historians have argued that such forms of cooperation on the frontier can be interpreted as one means by which Aboriginal people sought to avoid being driven off Country and also to placate settler colonists in order to enable them (that is, the Aboriginal people) to stay on Country.⁴⁷ In any case, the historical record is replete with examples.⁴⁸ However, despite an apparent reliance on Aboriginal labour and knowledge in bushfire mitigation, the historical records do occasionally suggest an ambiguous picture of Aboriginal attitudes towards very large fires. William Thomas, the Assistant Protector of Aborigines in Port Phillip (1838–50) and Guardian of Aborigines in Victoria (1850–67), experienced a fire at 'Mount Ararat', a sheep station near present-day Cranbourne (a south-eastern suburb of Melbourne), in 1842, that was wrongly blamed on the Boon Wurrung people. Thomas recorded his observations that the squatter was relieved when the resident clan helped bring the fire under control, and subsequently issued a reward in return for their help. However, the next day another fire started, and this time the squatter believed the Aboriginal people started it so that they could put it out and receive another reward.⁴⁹ Thomas also recorded what he interpreted as a relaxed reaction by the Boon Wurrung to the cataclysmic Black Thursday bushfires that burned through much of Victoria on 6 February 1851:

The Western Port Blacks were comfortably encamped on the sand rises by the plains, betrayed not the slightest concern at the fires, but on the contrary seemed pleased at the gratuitous food it presented, birds, opossums [sic] and other animals might be seen gathered in great quantities.⁵⁰

Thomas's brief comment on the Aboriginal people's relaxed reactions to the impact of such a major bushfire is likely to have been a misinterpretation, considering other writers' more detailed observations of Aboriginal people's responses to such fires. Indeed, material describing Black Thursday provides such evidence. William Strutt's

45 Brown, *Clyde Company Papers*, Vol. 6, 215, 499.

46 Brown, *Clyde Company Papers*, Vol. 6, 104, 353.

47 Reynolds, *With the White People*; Cahir, 'Are You off to the Diggings?', 22–34.

48 Cahir, Clark and Clarke, *Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge*.

49 W. Thomas, 4 January 1842, in Stephens, *The Journal of William Thomas*, Vol. 1, 422.

50 W. Thomas, 10 February 1851, in Stephens, *The Journal of William Thomas*, Vol. 2, 480.

historical *Black Thursday* painting (Figure 1) is a curious mixture of the representational and the contrived.⁵¹ It was, however, according to Strutt, based on first-hand observers' accounts.⁵² In the foreground of Strutt's picture are seemingly two Aboriginal people: one fleeing the cataclysmic fire on foot, with a white child in his arms; the other on horseback, with stockwhip in hand, urging the stampeding stock to escape the threat of the fiery maelstrom bearing down upon them. Some substantiation of the claim that observer accounts of the Black Thursday fire did inform Strutt's rendition of Aboriginal people in his painting can be gleaned from the memoirs of the Egan family at Smeaton in central Victoria. They recalled how it was the local Aboriginal people who saved their children from the inferno descending upon them on Black Thursday by directing them to a safe spot near a creek.⁵³



Figure 1: William Strutt, *Black Thursday*, 1854, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Source: Courtesy National Gallery of Victoria.

Other sources also confirm Aboriginal involvement in managing the fire. J. Wood Beilby's reminiscences in *The Herald* on 16 January 1892 discussed Black Thursday and highlighted the involvement of the Native Police in managing fires. Beilby further noted that large numbers of Aboriginal people fought the major bushfire alongside the colonial population:

The Gap ranges to the south-east ... became ignited, and there all available local hands, including some fifty of the black (aboriginal) police, under their original commandant, Captain H. E. P. Dana, worked like Trojans to keep the line of bush fire from crossing a bare, well-beaten cattle path, running along the top of the range.⁵⁴

51 W. Strutt, *Black Thursday*, 1854, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

52 Say, 'Black Thursday', 27–34.

53 Quinlan, *Here My Home*.

54 J. Wood Beilby, 'Reminiscences of a Pioneer. Black Thursday and Droving Adventures', *Herald* (Melbourne), 16 January 1892, 1.

An unidentified squatter on the Bolwarrah run near Ballan in central Victoria recalled how his crop was rescued on Black Thursday, noting that 'a crop of seven or eight acres of oats in the stocks at Bradshaw's Creek ... would undoubtedly have been destroyed but for the assistance rendered by a lot of passing blacks to the station hands'.⁵⁵ In a similar vein, the Macdonald family, in the Portland Bay district, recalled:

The Black [Thursday] fires swept through 'Retreat', but the men were able to save most of the stock by putting them in the dry river bed. Mary was very ill and the [presumably Gunditjmara] aboriginal couple saved her and the children by taking them to a water hole and then returned to save the house.⁵⁶

Two decades later, the *Dunolly & Bet Bet Shire Express* reported that the Eddington bridge in central Victoria had been saved from certain destruction in large part due to a Dja Dja Wurrung Elder's firefighting effort. The reporter noted:

EDDINGTON BRIDGE FIRE – [Constable Weekes] in hastening to the bridge, saw his deputy, black King Tommy, and the two, with great energy and exertion, and fifty buckets of water – obtained at a distance of forty yards by Tommy – soon extinguished the fire ... otherwise the bridge must have been entirely consumed.⁵⁷

More generally, Gilmore recorded how an Elder spoke bitterly to her father of:

the white's carelessness in lighting bushfires, saying that they lit them and let them run like a child that loved destruction; that such destruction was wanton; that forest fires spoiled the fine timbers from which weapons were made and bark taken for canoes; that it took years for a forest to come back to itself after being burned; that fire destroyed birds, bees, seeds and animals.⁵⁸

McMaster has noted that it was not just in the extreme case of the Black Thursday fires that Aboriginal fire-management skills were employed by the newcomers.⁵⁹ The utilisation of Aboriginal fire skills was also occurring in the instance of smaller, more localised fires. Thomas described a journey he made around part of Westernport Bay on 9 February 1840, in which their party of men and bullocks was forced to travel through a bushfire that 'burnt furiously', 'the flames ascending high'. Thomas's dependence on his Boon Wurrung companions became critical as they reached the top of a rise, which Thomas described as the point where they were 'were forc'd to make all the speed possible as the natives said the fire might overtake us'. Thomas observed how the Boon Wurrung assumed leadership over the party and described how 'the natives went before & put it out or it had cut off our progress'.⁶⁰

55 Walsh and Turner, *The Walsh Papers*, 114.

56 Meckel, *Pioneer Profiles*, 92.

57 'Report of Eddington Bridge Fire', *Dunolly & Bet Bet Shire Express*, *Central Goldfields*, 22 February 1876, n.p.

58 Gilmore, *Old Days: Old Ways*, 219.

59 McMaster, 'Taking Fire, Making Fire', 167.

60 W. Thomas in Stephens, *The Journal of William Thomas*, Vol. 1, 129.

There is further evidence from the 1850s and beyond regarding Aboriginal knowledge of fire, and fire-managing ability. One history of Rutherglen in northern Victoria provides a vivid exemplar:

The Aborigines one evening warned Carl Butcher of a bad bushfire approaching from the north. All night the wind screamed and raged furnace-hot. About fifteen tribesmen arrived at the homestead the next morning to pick up skim milk and Carl discussed the fire threat with them. It was decided to make a firebreak at once on their advice, to run it from the orange grove down to the Chinese camp. Stock was quickly brought out of the north paddock and yarded. Carl and the Aborigines, with the Chinese to help, started the firebreak, getting it well down in a triangle; the Victoria swamp tribe was brought up and went into the cart and buggy as the wind grew stronger.⁶¹

The oral account goes on to describe how closely the non-Indigenous settler colonists, including those from Germany and China, followed Aboriginal instruction, and notes that by virtue of paying attention to local Aboriginal knowledge, the community had been able to preserve their lives and property from the bushfire:

Suddenly the fire jumped the river, and flying, flaming gum tops lighted all the trees round about. Fleeing figures sought shelter in cow-bails; the fires burned out all the paddocks. Acting on the Aborigines' advice the Chinese had quickly buried their plant, bedding, furniture and food on the south side of the sand-dunes, and thus saved all of it, even as the timely warning by the natives had saved the homestead, outhouses, and not least, the owners' lives.⁶²

Similarly, the *Hamilton Spectator* reported on 1 March 1879 that 'devastating bush fires' had begun near Lake Condah, on land that Cecil Cooke was farming. The report emphasises the avidity with which the help of the mission residents was employed: 'The aboriginals located at the Mission station were at once despatched to the scene of the disaster'.⁶³

As noted, colonists' reliance on Aboriginal knowledge of fire and fire management has not often been admitted explicitly in the historical record, despite important exceptions. Moreover, it is highly likely that further instances in which Aboriginal people assisted in the colonists' fire-managing and firefighting efforts are absent from the written historical record altogether. As Marie Fels has observed, newspapers from the time 'need to be read with caution'.⁶⁴ To cite just one example, Mrs Madeleine Scott pointed out in a letter to the editor of the *Port Phillip Gazette* on 13 March 1841 that an article published the previous week had stated that 'the blacks had set fire to her property', when in fact 'they were helping her to

61 McGivern, *Big Camp Wahgunyah*, 102–3.

62 McGivern, *Big Camp Wahgunyah*, 102–3.

63 'Devastating Bush Fires', *Hamilton Spectator*, 1 March 1879, 2.

64 Fels, 'I Succeeded Once', 75.

put the fire out'. Fels notes a similar instance regarding Thomas's experience at Meyrick's.⁶⁵ What can be retrieved from the record, however, is clearly of value in understanding the Aboriginal contribution to both fire management and firefighting in the nineteenth century.

Conclusions and implications

The written accounts of Aboriginal burning practices in south-eastern Australia indicate that the application of fire was frequent, intentional, and over generally small areas of grassland plains. According to Gammage, these grassland plains were both managed in their state by Aboriginal people and, more than likely, created by these same Aboriginal people. In this way Aboriginal people could be attributed as being both the creators and managers of these plains.⁶⁶ Colonists recognised extensive use of fire by Aboriginal people in Victoria; some also recognised the extent to which Aboriginal people used fire with skill and purpose. This is clearly demonstrated in the historical record. While cultural burning is a critical land management tool and profound expression of ongoing connection to place, it was – at least through many European eyes – lost to sight. However, the reality is that traditional owners continue to express an unbroken connection to their Country and share stories of their tradition of deploying fire in myriad ways for a multitude of outcomes. In recent years, a promising example of land management practice is the reignition of cultural burns on Dja Dja Wurrung Country, in collaboration with government authorities.⁶⁷ This was a reignition of what had been many thousands of years of careful land management and spiritual practice.⁶⁸ In other areas of south-eastern Australia volunteer fire brigades comprised solely of Aboriginal fire fighters have argued that their training has led them to rediscover traditional Indigenous burn-control methods stemming from three generations of contribution to rural fire services.⁶⁹ More recently, there has been a wealth of publications, particularly in southern Australia, about how best to support greater representation of Indigenous peoples within the natural hazards management sector and mainstream land management agencies⁷⁰ – and also the barriers to contemporary cultural fire management in south-eastern Australia.⁷¹

65 Fels, *I Succeeded Once*, 75.

66 Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth*.

67 Neale et al., 'Walking Together', 341–59.

68 Whelan, 'Indigenous Knowledge', 211–18.

69 Patterson, 'Our Heroes, Too', *Koori Mail* 270, 20 February 2002, 16–17.

70 See: Freeman, Williamson and Weir, 'Cultural Burning', 111–29; Neale and Smith, 'Indigenous People in the Natural Hazards Management Sector', 15–20; Neale et al., 'Walking Together', 341–59; Smith, Neale and Weir, 'Persuasion without Policies'.

71 McKemey et al., 'A Review', n.p.

Research has yielded positive historical and contemporary case studies, which local communities may draw upon to foster and encourage the greater involvement of Aboriginal people in local fire services and associated fire-related activities and initiatives. Moreover, this research has the potential to nurture greater interest in and engagement with Aboriginal lore and practice in relation to fire management, and to provide increased opportunities to involve Aboriginal communities in the research, planning and implementation of cultural burning programs. It is hoped that the research will lead to a greater acknowledgment of Aboriginal peoples' role in Victorian fire management, and possibly nurture their further involvement in the research, planning and implementation of fire-related land-management policies, practices and programs.

The research also has broader implications regarding the question of Aboriginal land management, cultivation and the foundations of settler colonial Australia. As this article has attempted to illustrate, the available evidence suggests that the Aboriginal peoples of south-eastern Australia were engaged in the deliberate, skilful and purposeful management of the land, including in this case through the use of fire. This logically calls into question the entire edifice of settler colonial Australia, constructed as it is on precisely the opposite presumption. It is hoped that the examples and case studies provided, obtained through close and careful reading of the written colonial archives, might therefore contribute to the ongoing project of undermining, and potentially overturning, the fundamental misconceptions concerning the Indigenous peoples of Australia that underpinned and justified the settler colonisation of Australia.

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