

Dallong – Possum Skin Rugs

A Study of an Inter-Cultural Trade Item in Victoria

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe and understand the ethno-historical evidence for inter-cultural exchange, specifically in possum skins, that existed between some Indigenous groups and the non-Indigenous colonists of Victoria between 1835 and 1900.

Introduction^[1]

In June 1835 John Batman, popularly acknowledged as the founder of Melbourne, recorded one of the first times that possum skin cloaks were traded by the Aboriginal people of Victoria with the European arrivals. Before he held the formal treaty meeting with the Woiwurrung clan heads near present-day Melbourne to purchase a tract of their country, Batman had distributed gifts including blankets, beads and knives. After the meeting he wrote in his journal: ‘the chiefs, to manifest their friendly feeling towards me, insisted upon my receiving from them two native cloaks and several baskets made by the women, and also some of the implements of defence’.^[2] For the remainder of the nineteenth century these indigenous cloaks or rugs were clearly sought after by the white settlers.

The extent of inter-cultural exchange in colonial Victoria, whether between individuals or between groups, has received scant attention until now. Noted anthropologist WEH Stanner believed that systems of inter-tribal barter were widespread across Australia, while acknowledging that they had been ‘inadequately studied’.^[3] Most of the ethnographic research on Aboriginal exchange models in northern Australia has been carried out by Stanner, Donald Thomson, and Ronald and Catherine Berndt, and focuses primarily on the trade in manufactured valuable goods in terms of inter-tribal networks.^[4] Further research on pre-colonisation and nineteenth-century Aboriginal economic organisation in Victoria has been carried out largely by Isabel McBryde, whose aims were to establish what was traded, and its context and its significance within Aboriginal communities in the south-east. McBryde has clearly demonstrated that ‘Diversity and pervasiveness characterise exchange in the life of the Aboriginal societies of south-eastern Australia as revealed in the historical records of contact’.^[5] But what do we know about trade between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in this period?



John Wesley Burtt, *Batman's treaty with the aborigines at Merri Creek*, 6th June 1835, 1875, oil on canvas, painted wood. La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria.

Discussions about the continuation of 'payment in kind' in colonial Victoria in this context are too often limited to the occasional use of Aboriginal labour and sexual services.[6] At the same time, considerations of the inter-cultural exchange of goods are usually constrained by defining exchange solely in terms of consumable material items. Moreover, historians have generally overlooked the existing historical record of widespread and significant inter-cultural trade and applied a nineteenth-century filter when discussing 'economic activity' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.[7] That is to say, the vocabulary used by historians to describe the role of Aboriginal people in the economic life of colonial Victoria tends to perpetuate the distortions of nineteenth-century chroniclers, who merely contrasted 'transactions appropriate to the savage with those of civilised society'. [8] Some historians have assumed, incorrectly in my view, that Western-style economic transactions were a bewildering phenomenon for the Aboriginal people, or that the white colonists were not interested in the material culture offered by Indigenous people.[9] Others infer this by their failure to deal with it.

This paper focuses on the ethno-historical evidence for inter-cultural exchange, specifically in possum skins, that existed between certain Indigenous peoples and the white colonists of Victoria between 1835 and 1900. It has two main aims:

1. To survey the processes and contexts involved in the exchange of possum skins, and to demonstrate the degree to which Indigenous 'natural economies' articulated with capitalist economies in nineteenth-century Victoria.
2. To confirm manufactured products derived from possum skin as the pre-eminent inter-cultural trade item in Victoria in the nineteenth century.

In terms of the reconstruction of Aboriginal people's place, role and contribution within labour and economic sectoral histories in Victoria, the practice of historians has perhaps been naïve, and their discourse has gone largely unexamined. An empiricist methodology has been adopted in this paper and consequently a close examination of a large number of oral, visual and tactile sources has been undertaken in order to study the dynamics of inter-cultural trade and the extent to which it occurred. I also hope to provide a micro-revisionist narrative which evokes multiple voices, different angles of vision and diverse disciplinary frameworks.

Thousands of Skins for Sale

Possum skins and their various uses are referred to extensively in the ethno-historical records, but there has been little discussion of their considerable economic importance to the Aboriginal people of Victoria. Whilst numerous writers and historians have discussed in general terms the importance of inter-tribal trade, and some have examined the role of specific items such as greenstone axes in the Aboriginal economy,[10] few studies have looked closely at the trade in possum skins in particular.[11]

The ethnographic sources suggest that tribes were normally linked together in some kind of complex exchange system. McBryde however emphasises the social, political and judicial nature of large inter-tribal gatherings, which were a prominent feature of Aboriginal societies in Victoria, and argues that meetings held primarily for exchange 'seem to be rare'.^[12] Nonetheless a number of notable occasions were recorded by whites in which inter-group exchanges did not appear to have been performed in the shadow of more impressive (ceremonial) events.^[13]

The considerable range of ceremonial as well as purely utilitarian goods that were derived from possum skins demonstrates the importance of this commodity to the Aboriginal people of Victoria. Indeed, its significance as a material cultural item may be gauged from the many diverse purposes it was used for, both before and after European contact. A list of uses would include sleeping rugs, cloaks, musical (percussion) instruments, spiritual amulets, ornamentation, handles for tools, footballs, medicines, pouches for tools, housing, water bags, baby carriers, yarn, initiation dress, and burial shrouds for deceased clans people.^[14]

Trading networks between the Aboriginal people of Victoria and the predominantly British colonists prior to pastoralism in 1835 are well documented. Indeed the recorded instances of inter-cultural trade (often initiated by Aboriginal people) are numerous.^[15] The context of these bilateral transactions may have had as much to do with peace-keeping overtures, cementing a new trade network and intense curiosity about exotic goods as they had with the simple exchange of valued goods for valued goods. William Buckley, an escaped convict from a short-lived British penal settlement at Sorrento, Victoria, in December 1803, recounted being the unwilling recipient of an inter-cultural exchange offer, somewhere on the Bellarine Peninsula. Three unidentified Wathawurrung men of the Bengallat Bulluk clan, after rescuing Buckley from perishing, requested that he give his stocking to them 'as an assurance offering'. Buckley steadfastly refused to comply and was left unmolested.

Some time later he was accepted into the Bengallut Bulluk clan near Indented Head and described how exchange in Aboriginal societies involved more than just economics:

That night there was another great Corroberree, with shakes of the hand, and congratulations at my return. When these ceremonies were over, I went with my new relations to their hut, where they regaled me with roots, and gum, and with opossum roasted after their fashion ... They presented me also with an opossum-skin rug, for which I gave my new sister-in-law my old jacket in exchange...^[16]

The diverse and complex patterns of Indigenous production and exchange served both symbolic and concrete functions, and this was also observed in the ways in which Aboriginal people approached inter-cultural trade. Indeed, at times the economic aspects of the exchange seem to have been secondary to the social function of establishing a relationship with the Europeans, in both the pre-pastoral and pastoral periods.^[17]

From the outset of British colonisation in the Port Phillip region in 1835 there were attempts to open up formal trading networks with the Indigenous people. Squatters from Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), who had occupied land around Indented Head (on the Bellarine Peninsula), sought to employ local people in making baskets.^[18] Members of the Port Phillip Association hoped that if a significant bilateral business relationship could be established, then inter-racial relations would be more conciliatory at Port Phillip than they had been in Van Diemen's Land. At the same time, it appears that the colonists' trade in possum skins and other Indigenous manufactures was not solely to establish and cement rapport. The Europeans greatly admired the ease with which Aboriginal people procured the possum skins^[19] as well as the aesthetic nobility the possum skin cloaks afforded the wearer. They also acknowledged the outstanding qualities of the possum skin rugs. William Thomas, Assistant Protector of Aborigines in the Western Port District, saw many Boonwurrung and Woiwurrung people 'dressed comfortably' in possum skin rugs, giving them a 'majestic appearance'.^[20] Newspaper reports also confirmed Thomas's view. The *Illustrated London News* described the manufacture of 'very warm and beautiful cloaks of opossum skin, which they wear with the hair side inwards, the other side ornamented with geometrical patterns drawn with wonderful accuracy'.^[21]

Moreover, many white people rapidly developed a keen appreciation of the usefulness of possum skins. Official reports and personal correspondence describe the colonists using possum skins for a range of different purposes, most of them mimicking the traditional uses. Edward Curr, a young squatter at Port Phillip in 1841, wrote of a typical overseer's hut having an 'opossum-rug' spread over the bed.[22] In January 1838 Matthew Tomkin, a mounted police constable, was murdered near Mt Macedon (north-west of Melbourne). Tomkin's friends 'buried him, having wrapped him up in an opossum rug'. [23] Katherine Kirkland, one of the first white women in the Ballarat district, described how she hung her baby at her side in a basket as she had seen the local Wathawurrung women do.[24] On some occasions the settlers made innovative adaptations of the possum skins traded to them. A number fashioned fur-lined caps and jackets for themselves,[25] whilst others made pocket books out of 'opossum skin'.[26]

The demand by pastoralists and their servants for possum skins and especially possum skin rugs was widespread. So popular were the latter that a small number of white entrepreneurs established a lucrative trade in the skins. GA Robinson, Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Port Phillip District, observed how a number of pastoralists and merchants in Melbourne and the 'settled districts' had become wealthy from the considerable inter-cultural trade in artefacts, possum skins and lyrebird tails.

The natives state that white men in the country and residents in Melbourne supply them principally for the purpose of shooting bullen-bullen ie native pheasants and squirrels, the skin of the latter and lyre tails of the former being given as an equivalent for the use of guns and ammunition. These skins and tails are I understand of valuable consideration and have by some been turned to very profitable account.[27]

Robinson also noted the considerable trade in possum skins in the Goulburn district. In November 1842 he recorded that George Bertram, an overseer at the Goulburn Aboriginal Protectorate, profited by trading in possum skins in large quantities and that 'sometimes the skins were made into cloaks'. [28]

It is infinitely harder at this distance to determine exactly why Indigenous people entered into this venture with the colonists, but the acquisition of guns, the lure of exotic foods and a societal emphasis on maintaining kin relationships are some of the probable incentives for their active participation in inter-cultural trade. It is also extremely difficult to determine who was instigating and institutionalising the trade, though a number of first-hand reports clearly point towards Indigenous people making the first approach. Very little discussion

has focused on the role of money in the early period of acculturation at Port Phillip, which is surprising given the significant number of Aboriginal people described in the historical records as receiving money in exchange for goods.[29]

Possibly the first record of the sale of possums in Victoria comes from the Melbourne area. John Pascoe Fawkner, the first European to occupy land in the vicinity, recorded in February 1836:

Mr Henry Batman sent blacks out to get parrots, got [William] Buckley to abuse William Watkins for buying squirrel skins for me and I find him forbidding the natives to sell us any skins or birds. He wants them all himself. [30]

Several months later Fawkner repeated his complaints about Batman trying to gain exclusive rights to the possum skin trade: 'both Buckley and himself [Henry Batman] ordered the blacks not to sell us any squirrels or baskets'. [31] It is of interest that Fawkner used the terms 'buy' and 'sell' when discussing locally manufactured items as it suggests a very early use of money in transactions with the Aboriginal people on the Port Phillip frontier.

George Langhorne, a missionary in Port Phillip (1836-39), also noted that a substantial monetary trade was well established in 1838:

A considerable number of the blacks obtain food and clothing for themselves by shooting the Menura pheasant or Bullun-Bullun for the sake of the tails, which they sell to the whites.[32]

Langhorne was convinced that the Kulin people (a confederation of at least five language groups) frequenting Melbourne were intrinsically involved in the colonial monetary system: 'Money they obtain readily in the town in return for the trifling services they perform, and the bakers in Melbourne assure me they are their best customers'. [33] Moreover, one of the reasons Langhorne submitted to the Colonial Secretary to explain the mission's failure was the Kulin people's disdain for charity and their rapid acculturation of the principles of buying and selling. He lamented that on account of the Kulin's so readily earning money from a labour-exchange relationship with the Europeans he was unable to attract them to the mission:

The blacks might earn a comfortable subsistence in the town [Melbourne], were it only as hewers of wood and drawers of water, and indeed some few who were constantly working here are now employed in Melbourne, having attached themselves to individuals there from whom they obtain money in part payment for their services. On this account they generally refuse to labour here...[34]

Broome's discussion of the attitudes of Aboriginal workers in south-eastern Australia to the workplace has emphasised the importance of reciprocity, yet Broome acknowledges the opportunity taken by some Aboriginal people to actively engage in the job market for financial gain.[35] Thematic and regional research by Clark and Fels also reveals a small but significant number of Aboriginal people exchanging their labour for money.[36] By 1844 the trade in possum skins was so lucrative that large volumes of skins were now being offered for sale to white settlers.[37] Assistant Protector of Aborigines Thomas reported that he had been canvassed by the Aboriginal people to the north of his district: 'Loddon blacks arrive, bringing in some thousands of skins for sale'.[38] Similarly, Dr James Horsburgh, the medical officer at the Goulburn Protectorate Station (1846-53) noted that the 'natives also obtain both money and food for opossum skins, about 2 [sterling] pounds of the former article being laid out in my presence to hawkers'. [39] The rapidity with which the Aboriginal people of Port Phillip entered into monetary commerce is a subject worthy of more attention by historians.

As the squatters penetrated beyond the Melbourne and Geelong regions, the inter-cultural trade continued unabated, though not always using money as a medium. [40] George Gilbert, a bullock driver in the Goulburn district, witnessed 'large quantities of skins' being procured from the Aboriginal people in exchange for flour.[41] EB Addis, Commissioner of Crown Lands (Port Phillip District, 1836) considered that the 'Barrabool tribe' [Wathawurrung] was attracted to the Geelong township chiefly because of the ease with which they were able to trade possum skins and lyrebird tails for the new foodstuffs:

... the town of Geelong attracts them greatly, partly from curiosity and otherwise by the facility they procure offal meat from the sheep and cattle killed at the butcheries, and rice, flour or sugar, in exchange for birds and skins... [42]

Assistant Protector Thomas recorded in May 1840 that the people in his Western Port District were eager to work on the station and to exchange 'Aboriginal manufactures' for food rations.[43] Aboriginal hawkers also became a regular sight for the squatters and their pastoral workers. Katherine Kirkland, a 'lady' pastoralist in central Victoria (Trawalla) regarded these trade encounters as one of the pleasures of bush life:

Occasional adventures with the savage aborigines streak the homeliness of the picture with something like the hues of romance ... We sometimes got some skins of the opossum and flying squirrel, or tuan, from the natives. It was a good excuse for them to come to the station. I paid them with a piece of dress, and they were very fond of getting a red pocket handkerchief to tie round their necks.[44]

James Nealer, a shepherd employed by Thomas Learmonth at Buninyong (15 kilometres south-east of Ballarat) reported that a group of Wathawurrung had tried to hawk some possum skins in exchange for a sheep: 'On the 25th of July [1838] four natives came to [me and] my flock of sheep and wanted one, offering some squirrel skins'.[45] GF Read, a pastoralist also at Buninyong, was the subject of an earlier business visit in April 1838: 'A great many natives came here today and exchanged skins for flour'.[46] The rate of exchange on the inter-cultural network varied, but Charles Griffiths, a pastoralist near Ballan (60 kilometres west of Melbourne) reported on one occasion that two unidentified Wathawurrung men received flour and sugar for a kangaroo tail and skin, and on another occasion noted that he was busy tanning 'a number of opossum skins and touan skins, the latter is the flying squirrel ... which we have got from the natives in exchange for flour'.[47] In March 1845, John Cotton, a squatter on the Goulburn River, west of present-day Yea, had adopted a similar trade and exchange rate:

... they know very well that we never give anything unless we receive something in return, so they generally come provided with opossum skins, for which we give them rice, sugar, bread or anything of the sort that we can spare; they generally prefer rice and tobacco.[48]

Clark posits that the trading of Aboriginal manufactures such as baskets, skins (kangaroo and possum) and buckets was common and that Chief Protector Robinson frequently obtained such items for his own collection or sold them on to George Lilley, a produce merchant in Melbourne who also had a stall at the Melbourne market.[49]

Trading on the Goldfields

According to Clark, Aboriginal people moved quickly to 'grasp the economic opportunities presented to them by the miners flooding to the Central Victorian gold diggings' in the 1850s.[50] The influx of prospectors and subsequent social upheaval led to significant changes in the pastoral economy. Walter Bridges, a miner at Buninyong near Ballarat in 1855, described how a local clan of Wathawurrung people carrying possum skin rugs approached his wife and made a request, framed within the ties of reciprocity of neighbours, for some steel needles and thread: 'So up they come yabbering good day Missie You my country woman now. My Mother had to be spokesman the Blacks said You gotum needle Missie you gottum thread...! [51] It seems likely that the demand for Western means of sewing their rugs stemmed from the high volume of possum skin rugs being sold on the goldfields.

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It is clear that many diggers engaged in trade with Aboriginal people to obtain these much valued items. JF Hughes, a Castlemaine pioneer, described how possum skin and kangaroo skin rugs were 'sold to settlers and lucky gold diggers at five pounds a-piece'.^[52] Miner James Arnot bought a possum rug in Melbourne made of 72 skins sewn together with sinews, also for 5 pounds sterling.^[53] Aboriginal people from the Mitta Mitta and the Little River districts, to the east of the Ovens goldfield, paid regular visits with possum rugs for sale.^[54] Miners and others writing in this period have left glowing reports about the benefits of obtaining possum skin rugs from the Aboriginal people. As Annear describes it: 'One rug imparted as much warmth as a dozen blankets and in summer they were stored until colder months returned.'^[55] George Henry Wathen, a visitor on the Victorian goldfields, also extolled the virtues of possessing a possum rug and acknowledged, if grudgingly, that the settlers considered them to be undoubtedly the most highly valued inter-cultural trade item in Victoria:

... I was soon asleep on the ground, by the fire, under an overbearing banksia, wrapped in the warm folds of my opossum rug. For a night bivouac, there is nothing comparable to the opossum-rug; and it is perhaps the only good thing the white man has borrowed from the blacks.^[56]

With thousands of miners congregating in towns across Victoria, the volume of trade in possum skins increased exponentially. Frequent references in miners' accounts attest to the acumen of Indigenous people in the colony. Edward Tame, a traveller on the goldfields, noted that the skins of possums 'form good articles of commerce' for the 'Aborigines' he frequently encountered.^[57] HW Wheelwright confirmed Tame's opinion, writing in the 1850s: 'for of all the coverings in dry cold weather, an opossum-skin rug is the best, as I can well testify'. He recommended that, 'If any blacks are handy, it is best to get them to sew the skins, for a black's rug beats any other'.^[58] Reports from a number of Aboriginal Station Managers across Victoria describe the lucrative trade being conducted. In December 1870 the manager of the Condah Mission in Western Victoria wrote: 'Some of them earn a little money by making and selling baskets and mats, and occasionally an opossum rug'.^[59] According to John Green, the manager of Corranderrk, the Aboriginal station in Healesville, the high quality of the rugs, and the speed with which the Aboriginal people could manufacture them, combined with their ready sale, enabled some Indigenous Victorians to achieve a degree of economic independence:

In the course of one week or so they will all be living in huts instead of willams [traditional housing] ; they have also during that time [four months] made as many rugs, which has enabled them to buy boots, hats, coats etc., and some of them has [sic] even bought horses.^[60]

Similarly, Andrew Porteous, an Honorary Correspondent for the Aborigines in the Ballarat District (1860-77), reported that the demand by Europeans for Indigenous manufactured goods continued to be economically sustainable in 1866, 1867, 1869, 1871 and 1872:

[1866] The tribe still continue to make possum rugs, and, if steady, might make a good living by it, as they generally get 20s. to 30s. for each rug, which they can make in 14 days. The women also employ themselves in making baskets and nets, which they sell to the European.

[1867] They continue to hunt such game as can be found in the district. The opossum is plentiful, and they make rugs with the skins. They sell the opossum rugs, and sometimes offer fish for sale, with the proceeds of which they supply themselves with rations, and sometimes with clothes, such as hats, handkerchiefs, and some of them with boots ... they have been travelling amongst the stations, only a few calling for rations.

[1872] they still fish when fish can be got, and hunt the opossum, and make rugs of the skins. The women continue to make baskets and nets, but unfortunately, they still indulge in intoxicating drink.^[61]

Newspaper reports both at home and abroad also reveal a strong interest in Indigenous manufactured goods, particularly in possum skin rugs. An 1865 report in the *London Times* noted a request by a Welshman for a possum rug to be made (by Wathawurrung people of the Ballarat district) so he could show his country people what 'the pioneers of the goldfields frequently used to sleep in'.^[62] A Wathawurrung couple obliged and were paid 30 shillings. In 1861 the *Ballarat Star* carried a satirical article supposedly attributed to 'A Blackfellow' which beseeched the Colonial Government to provide market protection for the Indigenous trade in possum skin rugs:

... You write gov'nor and ask him why protection on the wallaby track looking for grubs 'mong whitefellow? You say whitefellow no make um blankets this colony, blackfellow make 'possum rug, which whitefellow ought to buy 'stead of blanket; possum rug all along same as whitefellow's blankets;- why not give blackfellow monopoly of making and selling 'em and protect real native industry.^[63]

Two Sides of the Coin

There was often a fear, certainly after 1860, that the Aboriginal recipients of money might spend it on alcohol. Honorary correspondents such as Andrew Porteous was one who ascribed to this view:

A few of the young men are generally employed on stations, and receive a small remuneration, but all they receive, both for labor and opossum rugs, is spent on intoxicating liquors, and I fear they will not leave off this evil habit unless prohibited from visiting the gold fields and are allowed to settle on some portion of land where they would take an interest in improving it.[64]

Porteous's concern was not isolated. The same issue had been debated during the Aboriginal Protectorate period (1838-50), but reached its zenith during the gold rush. Trade in possum skin rugs, baskets and primary produce, and employment on pastoral stations after 1850 afforded Indigenous people a new degree of economic independence. Damaging social effects, in the form of alcohol abuse and absence of paternal control, were a concern reiterated many times by well-intentioned Correspondents and Guardians.[65] In his June 1871 report Porteous advocated a pass system, as he found the local Wathawurrung people could not be restricted and regulated sufficiently to keep them from their commercial activities in the towns:

The tribe still follow their occupations of fishing, hunting and making of opossum rugs, which they barter for stores, but often for grog. It is almost impossible to keep them from visiting the towns, and yet they have no business to transact in those towns except begging for grog and making themselves liable to be arrested under the Vagrant Act. They have no hunting field nor fishing river within these towns, and if they have anything to sell let them apply to the local guardian for a pass for that day, to be within a town to be named in that pass. Most of the tribe are old and feeble and unable to do any work. The young men are able and willing to work, and some of them can do work as well as any white man, but they are like many of the white men, and would spend every shilling they earn upon grog, if they can possibly get it done.[66]



Eugène von Guérard, *The barter*, 1854, oil on canvas. Collection: Geelong Gallery. Gift of W Max Bell and Norman Belcher, 1923.

It was not only a degree of economic independence that the sale of possum rugs brought to the Aboriginal people of Victoria. Eugène von Guérard, a renowned artist on the Victorian goldfields, documented an inter-cultural transaction in 1854. His oil painting, *Aborigines on the road to diggings* or *The barter*, now in the Geelong Gallery, depicts Wathawurrung people offering possum rugs for sale to white miners on their way to the goldfields. What is of particular interest about von Guérard's painting is the centrality of the Wathawurrung men and women. Unlike many artists' depictions of Aboriginal people during the nineteenth century, in which they are peripheral players cast off to the background or figures relegated to the sidelines, von Guérard has focused the activity around confident Aboriginal salespeople who are clearly directing the business at hand. Moreover, the white 'consumer' desiring to purchase the possum rugs is painted in a subservient pose, kneeling down, whilst the Aboriginal 'manufacturer' assumes an upright, dominant demeanour. A number of commentators writing on Aboriginal society in the nineteenth century conceded that the Aboriginal people of Victoria possessed a good deal of business sense.

They barter with their neighbours; and it would seem that as regards the articles in which they deal, barter is as satisfactory to them as sale would be. They are astute in dealing with the whites, and it may be supposed they exercise reasonable forethought and care when bargaining with their neighbours.[67]

Conclusion

This paper has uncovered a substantial body of evidence that clearly demonstrates that inter-cultural economic activity between white colonists and Aboriginal people in Victoria in the nineteenth century was widespread and that a greater degree of monetary trade existed than was previously thought. Accordingly, it can be argued that new paradigms are required in any discussion about the degree to which Aboriginal economies articulated with the colonial capitalist economy of the nineteenth century.

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The implications of further research in this area are significant. If historians aim to include Aboriginal people in Australian history 'on terms of most perfect equality'[68] and to tell the same stories of wool and gold from broader perspectives, then it is necessary to re-appraise the historical sources and see that Indigenous Australians were not outside the landscape in the development of modern economic institutions. More research is needed to determine the extent to which Aboriginal people kept control of the money that passed through their hands, but the evidence thus far would suggest that they very quickly grasped the few economic initiatives available to them and exploited them skilfully – at least until the imposition of Missionary and Governmental controls, especially after the 1880s.

Endnotes

[1] Charles Griffith, a pastoralist who took Wathawurrung land near present-day Ballan, recorded a glossary of Port Phillip, Corio, Weirabee and Barrabul tribes' lexicon, which included 'flying squirrel: *toan*, opossum: *wollert*, rug: *dallong*'. C Griffith, 'Diary', manuscript, State Library of Victoria, 1840-41.

[2] CP Billot, *John Batman and the founding of Melbourne*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1979, p. 118.

[3] Cited in I McBryde, 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia: an ethnohistorical study', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 8, nos. 1-2, 1984, pp. 132-53, p. 151.

[4] I McBryde, 'Where do the axes come from?', *Mankind*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1978, pp. 354-82; McBryde, 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia'. There exists excellent academic research on trading relationships in northern Australia, and the scope of this research has been significant. However, the parallels between that research and this paper are limited as the former focuses on a different geographic location and does not examine the processes by which locally manufactured (indigenous) goods were adopted by the dominant culture. For further discussion refer to I McNiven, 'Enmity and amity: reconsidering stone headed club (gabagaba) procurement and trade in Torres Strait', *Oceania*, vol. 69, no. 2, 1998, pp. 94-115 and D Russell, 'Aboriginal-Makassan interactions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in northern Australia and contemporary sea rights claims', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, vol. 1, 2004, pp. 3-17.

[5] McBryde, 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia', p. 151.

[6] See I Clark, 'Nineteenth century capitalist expansion and the Aborigines of Western Victoria: a Marxist problematic', Working Paper, Department of Geography and Environmental Science, Monash University, 1989.

[7] McBryde, 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia'.

[8] *ibid.*, p. 132.

[9] See R Broome, *Arriving*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, Sydney, 1994, p. 32 and W Bate, *Lucky city: the first generation at Ballarat, 1851-1901*, Melbourne University Press, 1978, p. 1.

[10] See P Coutts and R Miller, *The Mt William archeological area*, Victoria Archeological Survey, Melbourne, 1977; McBryde, 'Where do the axes come from?'; H Lourandos, 'Intensification: a Late Pleistocene-Holocene sequence from south-western Victoria', *Archeology in Oceania*, vol. 18, 1983, pp. 81-94; McBryde, 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia'; H Lourandos, 'Swamp managers of southwestern Victoria', in *Australians: a historical library*, vol. 1, *Australians to 1788*, Fairfax, Syme & Weldon, Sydney, 1987.

[11] See F Blacklock, 'Aboriginal skin cloaks', National Quilt Register, 2002, viewed 2 September 2005 at <http://amol.org.au/nqr/fabri.htm>; Anonymous, 'Opossum skin rugs', *Illustrated London News*, 24 April 1852, p. 314; R Wright, 'A modicum of taste: Aboriginal cloaks and rugs', *Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Newsletter*, vol. 11, 1979, pp. 51-68; Queensland Department of Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement, 'Snug as a bug', *Archaeology Papers*, vol. 11, 1984, pp. 1-8; M Chisholm, 'The use, manufacture and decoration of possum skin cloaks in nineteenth century Victoria', typescript, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS] Library, Canberra, 1990; M Lakic, *Women's work: Aboriginal women's artefacts in the Museum of Victoria*, The Museum, Melbourne, 1992.

[12] 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia', p. 140.

[13] See A Howitt, *The native tribes of south-eastern Australia*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1904, pp. 717-18 and McBryde, 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia'.

[14] Blacklock, 'Aboriginal skin cloaks'; Anon., 'Opossum skin rugs'; Howitt, *The native tribes of south-eastern Australia*; C Daley, 'Reminiscences from 1841 of William Kyle, a pioneer', *Victorian Historical Journal*, vol. 10, 1925, pp. 158-72; J Dawson, *Australian Aborigines: the languages and customs of several tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1981, pp. 8-25; M Cannon (ed), *Historical Records of Victoria*, vol. 2A, *Aborigines of Port Phillip, 1835-1839*, Victorian Government Printing Office, Melbourne, 1982, p. 435; 'Snug as a bug'; Chisholm, 'The use, manufacture and decoration of possum skin cloaks'; Lakic, *Women's work*; I Clark (ed), *The journals of George Augustus Robinson*, vol. 1, *January 1839 – 30 September 1840*, Heritage Matters, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 42, 45; I Clark, *A history of the Goulburn River Protectorate Station at Murchison, 1840-53*, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Melbourne, 1999, p. 190.

[15] On 1 May 1802, Captain Matthew Flinders RN and two of his crew met with three unidentified Wathawurrung balug clansmen just west of the You Yangs, approximately 20 kilometres north-west of Geelong. The three Wathawurrung men approached Flinders' party 'without hesitation' and traded their weapons for tobacco and other unspecified gifts. Flinders and his men were well received by the Wathawurrung, shared a meal with them, and discovered rice – evidence of earlier trade with white travellers (probably sealers) – in one of their huts. See M Flinders, *Voyage to Terra australis*, facsimile reprint, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1966 [1814], 30 April – 2 May 1802. See also J J Shillingshaw (ed), *The historical records of Port Phillip: the first annals of the colony of Victoria*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1972; A Andrews (ed), *Hume and Hovell: 1824*, Blubberhead Press, Hobart, 1981, p. 220; *Journey of discovery to Port Phillip, New South Wales, by Messrs. W. H. Hovell and Hamilton Hume in 1824 and 1825*, manuscript, Hovell Papers, National Library of Australia, Canberra; D Cahir, 'Conciliation and conflict: the Wathawurrung, 1797-1849', MA thesis, University of Ballarat, 2002. Peter Corris notes that sealers gathered wallaby and possum skins for export in the period 1810-34: *Aborigines and Europeans in Western Victoria*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1968, p. 52.

[16] J Morgan (ed), *The life and adventures of William Buckley*, Australian National University, Canberra, 1980, pp. 25-6.

[17] For further discussion about trading relationships and exchange of goods on the frontier see R Broome, 'Aboriginal workers on south-eastern frontiers', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 26, no. 103, 1994, pp. 202-20; R Broome, 'Aboriginal victims and voyagers: confronting frontier myths', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 42, 1994, pp. 70-7; H Reynolds, *Black pioneers*, Penguin, Ringwood, 2000, p. 249f; R Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: a history since 1800*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005, pp. 10-11.

[18] CP Billot (ed), *Melbourne's missing chronicle*, Quartet, Melbourne, 1982, p. 62.

[19] Assistant Aboriginal Protector James Dredge noted on one occasion that 'the Aboriginal men went hunting possums, and returned with between 40-50, one man had caught ten'. PROV, VPRS 4410/P0, Unit 2, Folder 47, James Dredge (Assistant Protector, North Eastern District), report of operations for the period 1 July 1839 – 29 February 1840.

[20] William Thomas, January 1839, cited in M Cannon (ed), *Historical Records of Victoria*, vol. 2B, *Aborigines and Protectors 1838-9*, Victorian Government Printing Office, Melbourne, 1983, p. 436.

[21] 'Opossum skin rugs', p. 314.

[22] EM Curr, *Recollections of squatting in Victoria from 1841 to 1851*, Melbourne University Press, 1965.

[23] Melbourne Court Register, January 1838, in Cannon, *Aborigines of Port Phillip, 1835-1839*, p. 465.

[24] The majority of visual and written sources recording the child-carrying devices used by Aboriginal people in Victoria describe a possum skin. See K Kirkland, *Life in the bush, by a Lady*, Chambers, Edinburgh, 1845, p. 16; Chisholm, 'The use, manufacture and decoration of possum skin cloaks'; Lacic, *Women's work*.

[25] An overlander noted: 'Mr Ebdon [a pastoralist who occupied land near Mt Macedon] appeared dressed in possum jacket and cap'. J Cross, *A month in the bush of Australia*, Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, 1965, p. 35. Chief Protector of Aborigines for Port Phillip, GA Robinson, noted on October 1839 an unidentified white man wearing an 'opossum rug'. *The journals of George Augustus Robinson*, vol. 1.

[26] Cannon, *Aborigines of Port Phillip, 1835-1839*, p. 435.

[27] GA Robinson to Assistant Protectors, 8 July 1839, cited in Cannon, *Aborigines and Protectors, 1838-1839*, p. 726.

[28] Three statements relating to the sale of possum skins by George Bertram are found in PROV, VPRS 4398/P0, Unit 1, Folder No. 1, Papers relating to the sale of skins by Bertram. [Includes] one letter from John Purcell to Le Souef with duplicate and statutory declaration of George Gilbert, border policeman, 1842.

[29] Broome is one of the few historians to discuss the degree to which Aboriginal people in Victoria during the nineteenth-century adopted aspects of Western monetary principles. See 'Aboriginal workers on south-eastern frontiers'.

[30] JP Fawkner, *Melbourne's missing chronicle: being the Journal of preparations for departure to and proceedings at Port Phillip*, ed. CP Billot, Quartet Books, Melbourne, p. 41.

[31] *ibid.*, 2 May 1836.

[32] Cited in Cannon, *Aborigines of Port Phillip, 1835-1839*, p. 229.

[33] *ibid.*, p. 236.

[34] *ibid.*, p. 233.

[35] 'Aboriginal workers on south-eastern frontiers'.

[36] I Clark & T Heydon, *The confluence of the Merri Creek and Yarra River: a history of the Western Port Aboriginal Protectorate and the Merri Creek Aboriginal School*, Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, Melbourne, 1998, p. 42; M Fels, *Good men and true: the Aboriginal Police of the Port Phillip District 1837-1853*, Melbourne University Press, 1988.

[37] Robinson noted on 4 November 1844 that William Phillips arrived in Melbourne on the Goulburn cart with a load of possum skins for sale. *The journals of George Augustus Robinson*, vol. 4, 1 January 1844 – 24 October 1845, Heritage Matters, Melbourne, 1998, p. 245.

- [38] PROV, VPRS 4410/P0, Unit 3, Folder 82, William Thomas (Assistant Protector, Western Port District), quarterly report, 31 November 1844, for the period 1 September 1844 – 30 November 1844.
- [39] PROV, VPRS 44/P0, Unit 484, James Horsburgh, General Report of the Goulburn River Aboriginal Station, 6 January 1849.
- [40] By 1839 Aboriginal people in Central Victoria were asserting that the introduction of sheep and cattle had severely depleted their staple food sources. It is probable that the environmental destruction that accompanied colonisation led Aboriginal people to seek out increasing amounts of white carbohydrate food sources as well as money. See Cahir, 'Conciliation and conflict: the Wathawurrung, 1797-1849'.
- [41] PROV, VPRS 4398/P0, Unit 1, Folder No. 1, Papers relating to the sale of skins by Bertram. [Includes] one letter from John Purcell to Le Souef with duplicate and statutory declaration of George Gilbert, border policeman, 1842.
- [42] EB Addis, 'Report of the Crown Lands Commissioner for the County of Grant', manuscript, Mitchell Library, Sydney, 1842.
- [43] Thomas recorded that the Boonwurrung people traded 17 possum and kangaroo skins and seven baskets for flour and other unspecified goods. PROV, VPRS 4410/P0, Unit 3, Folder No. 67, Periodical Report for the period February to August 1840.
- [44] *Life in the bush, by a lady*, pp. 1, 20.
- [45] Cited in Cannon, *Aborigines of Port Phillip, 1835-1839*, p. 307.
- [46] Cited in P Griffith, *Three times blest*, Buninyong Historical Society, 1988, p. 4.
- [47] *The diary of Charles Griffith*, manuscript, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, 1840-41, pp. 287-8.
- [48] Quoted in Clark, *A history of the Goulburn River Protectorate Station at Murchison, 1840-53*, p. 95.
- [49] Clark & Heydon, *The confluence of the Merri Creek and Yarra River*, p. 65.
- [50] ID Clark, 'The northern Wathawurrung and Andrew Porteous, 1860-1877', unpublished paper, University of Ballarat, 2005, p. 5.
- [51] 'The travels of Walter Bridges', manuscript, Ballarat Library, Australiana Collection, 1855, p. 10.
- [52] Cited (undated) in Castlemaine Pioneers Association, *Records of Castlemaine pioneers*, Rigby, Melbourne, 1972, p. 220.
- [53] R Annear, *Nothing but gold: the diggers of 1852*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1999, p. 92.
- [54] Pepper & De Araugo cited in I Clark, 'Aboriginal people, gold, and tourism: the benefits of inclusiveness for goldfields tourism in regional Victoria', *Tourism, Culture and Communication*, vol. 4, 2003, pp. 123-36, p. 133.
- [55] *Nothing but gold*, p. 95.
- [56] G Wathen, *The golden colony, or Victoria in 1854: with remarks on the geology of the Australian gold fields*, Longman, London, 1855, p. 131.
- [57] E Tame, 'Reminiscences of Melbourne and gold diggings 1852-6', manuscript, National Library of Australia, MS 8964, Box 925.
- [58] HW Wheelwright, *Bush wanderings of a naturalist*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1979, p. 44.
- [59] [Manager] Shaw cited in I Clark, *Aboriginal languages and clans: an historical atlas of western and central Victoria, 1800-1900*, Department of Geography and Environmental Science, Monash University, 1990, p. 49.
- [60] Cited in S Wiencke, *When the wattles bloom again: the life and times of William Barak, last chief of the Yarra Yarra tribe*, the author, Woori Yallock, 1984, p. 52.
- [61] *Report of the Central Board appointed to watch over the interests of the Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria, 1861-69 and Report of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria, 1871-95*, quoted in Clark, 'The northern Wathawurrung and Andrew Porteous, 1860-77'.
- [62] Anonymous, 'The decaying race', *London Times*, 1865, p. 5.
- [63] Curoc, 'Protection to native industry by a blackfellow', *Ballarat Star*, 16 July 1861, pp. 7-8.
- [64] *Report of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria, 1871-95*, quoted in Clark, 'The northern Wathawurrung and Andrew Porteous, 1860-77'.
- [65] E Netell, 'Town Clerk's correspondence', manuscript, Buninyong Historical Society Files, 1867, pp. 2-3.
- [66] Quoted in Clark, 'The northern Wathawurrung and Andrew Porteous, 1860-77'.
- [67] RB Smythe, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1878, p. 180. See also discussion in McBryde, 'Exchange in south-eastern Australia'.
- [68] Henry Reynolds in I Clark, *Sharing history*, Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Issues Paper no. 4, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1994, p. 10.