EARLY VICTORIA AND THE ABORIGINES

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Your Committee have found that the subject was brought before the Legislature of New South Wales prior to the separation on five different occasions; but in no case were any effectual means adopted for the amelioration of the Aborigines... It appears that at the first settlement of the Colony in 1836 there were from six to seven thousand Aborigines distributed over its area... There are not more than a few hundreds remaining... The great and almost unprecedented reduction... is to be attributed to the general occupation of the country by the white population; to vices acquired by contact with a civilized race, more particularly by the indulgence in ardent spirits; and hunger in consequence of the scarcity of game; and also in some cases cruelty and ill-health... Being weak and ignorant, even for savages, they have been treated with almost utter neglect... To allow this to continue would be to tolerate and perpetuate a great moral wrong. A vigorous attempt should be made to provide for the remnants of the various tribes so that they may be maintained in comparative plenty...

So concluded the Select Committee of Victoria's Legislative Council, appointed in 1858 to "enquire into the present conditions of the Aborigines of this Colony and the best means of alleviating their absolute wants." Two years later a Central Board to watch over the interests of the aborigines was set up in partial achievement of its recommendations. These events are of some significance for they represent the first locally inspired systematic investigation of aboriginal affairs in Australia and an attempt to deal with them which has proved more lasting and influential than most. From modest beginnings the Board grew: father of the present Aborigines' Welfare Board and prototype for similar bodies in New South Wales and Western Australia. Even by 1869 it could point to four mission and two government farm-stations with managers, missioners, matrons, and school masters established among fourteen newly gazetted reserves, food depots dispensing the "necessities of life", an annual expenditure of £4,000 to show up the £956 of 1858, and an Act for the Protection and Management of Aborigines whose wording demonstrated the control of its powerful centralized administration.

This article is an outline of the events and attitudes which led to these changes, and formed the basis upon which the Central Board grew.

Perhaps the best known "ineffectual" attempts to ameliorate the aborigines' condition were the Native Police Forces (1837-39, 1841-53) and the Protectorate of Port Phillip (1838-49); offers of a useful place in society and shields from the ills of contact which cost upwards of £40,000. Efforts were also made to settle the aborigines in villages where they could learn moral habits and useful skills. Such plans were always embarrassed by a perverse determination "not to be fixed," but as the idea of roving protectors proved a failure, the tendency to collect "the remnants" on to reserves for their own protection grew. If they were capable of improvement, reserves would at least be more convenient. During the eighteen forties E. S. Parker established a station school at Mt. Franklin, and William Thomas, the other remaining assistant protector, attempted a settlement at Narre Warren. There was also a Methodist mission at Huntingdale and a school on the Merri Creek.

All these schemes soon fell apart. The tribes would not stay long at any one spot but were always moving off, leaving schools, chapels, and dormitories for young girls to their makers. Mid-Victorian teaching methods captured little
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interest. The general lack of contact is well summed up by Lucy Anne Edgar, daughter of the master at Merri Creek:

They were hard to distinguish. They all had the same brown shiny faces, the same glistening eyes with immense whites, the same flattened noses, the same enlarged mouths with enviable sets of teeth; they wore nearly the same dress, smoked everlastingly the same stemless black pipes and played the same interminably monotonous tunes on the same foolish little Jew's harps.2

Explorers like Mitchell and Strzelecki3 saw and admired the aborigines in their native state, but most emigrants were more concerned with the problems of progress, economic gain, and government in a new and fluid society. When they did look at tribal culture they expected to find political organization, written laws like their own, and the familiar virtues of toil and reward. Unable to comprehend the close knit structure of small groups bound by spiritual ties to their land, they imposed European terms on aboriginal customs. The 1858 Committee asked “What is the form of government? does it assume a monarchical or democratic character, or does it rest with the priests?” and answers ranged from “total anarchy” to “autocracy.” Respondents disagreed about tribal laws; questions dealing with property rights and the hiring of labour revealed the interests of the Committee but were hardly designed to facilitate understanding.4

Contemporaries who thought about it were dismayed at the effect they were having on the aborigines. There is a cartoon in Punch showing aborigines before and after a “course of civilizing association with the European race.” The savage of the woods is contrasted to a bizarrely clad fellow who squats in the gutter, bottle in one hand and pack of cards in the other.5 While many felt that the aborigines had been cruelly treated, they were still thought to be constitutionally unsuited to modern life, an anachronistic people “not destined . . . in these days of grasping enterprise to endure much longer as one of the varieties of mankind.”6 Through physiological limitations or natural perversity “they just remained as they were . . . amid the wonders that are introduced around them”7 and the decline of native races before white civilization was regarded as a world wide phenomenon, a natural law.

Indeed the race was fast disappearing. Of the estimated five to ten thousand aborigines in Victoria before white settlement, probably less than three thousand remained in 1850, and about two thousand ten years later. The spectacular fall seemed even greater to contemporaries as the more settled areas suffered most. In 1853 only 20 were left at Geelong and by 1858 just thirty-two of the once three hundred strong Yarra tribe were counted.8 Deprived of their land and families the survivors wandered “demoralized and repugnant”, scrounging and begging what sustenance they could. John Bulmer described those on the gold fields as “drunk and debauched by men who should have known better,”9 “poor hangers-on, leading a life of mendicancy on the scant charity of the white man.”10 Men on the land complained that the aborigines were unreliable and shifty. To many they were simply “crawlers” who would beg or steal but not work steadily for their keep.11 Perhaps some of these refusals to be useful stem from an intelligent appreciation of the situation. When a group at Merri Creek were asked to help mend one of their huts:

they looked as if he had asked them to fly. Astonishment kept them dumb: they stared at each other helplessly.
“What for work?”
“White fellow work plenty, black fellow no work.”

By the eighteen fifties then, the aborigines posed a growing social problem. Between 1851 and 1858 the vote for the aborigines averaged about £1,500 per annum. Of this over half went to pay the salaries of Thomas, now Guardian of
the Aborigines in the counties of Evelyn, Bourke, and Mornington; a teacher and overseer at Mt. Franklin; and medical officers. One third was for stores, mainly at Franklin, although special requisitions were made by Thomas and the Commissioners of Crown Land.

The Guardian’s duties were exhaustive, “to take cognizance of everything,” chase the unemployed away from Melbourne, and help those in need. His reports commented on the problem of alcohol: “hear of awful drunken scenes of beastly drunkenness of the Barrabool and Leigh Blacks rolling about the streets of Geelong on Separation Day.” But they also found cause for optimism.

Early in Melbourne, perambulate the town find several blacks from the interior, some from Sydney side and three from Adelaide. They were all comfortably dressed and had arrived with teams or stock which show the value of aboriginal services.

Thomas’ methods were generally to shepherd his charges onto reserves, and he supported strongly the request of aborigines from the Upper Goulburn for a reserve, stores, grain, stock, and tools. To him came requests for stores, medicines etc., and he hoped these boons would be extended “through the length and breadth of Victoria.” These activities are important, for Thomas was justly the most respected expert adviser to the government, and his incipient program of reserves and depots is strikingly similar to that of the Central Board in the eighteen-sixties.

The early humanitarian confidence that “the benign influence of Christianity and the energy and enterprise of British colonists will eventually render (the aborigines) . . . civilized and prosperous communities” floundered, and by 1850 Thomas was virtually the only public servant in the field. However the Protestant churches turned to the aborigines with increasing interest during the eighteen fifties. In the same decade missions were founded for the diggers, sailors, “lower orders” of Melbourne, Chinese, Jews, and neighbouring Pacific Islanders, and between these bodies and the Central Board there was considerable overlap of office holders and subscribers. In general they were the older and more respectable members of society-squatter families like the Hentys, Learmonths, and Blacks; the firms of Macredie Bros., Grice Sumner and Coy., Buckley and Nunn, James Henty and Co.; and members of parliament Dr. Embling, T. Fellows, R. Heales, G. Higginbotham, J. McCulloch, J. McPherson, W. Macredie, F. Sargood, J. Service, T. G. Smith, and H. Wrixton. Governors Barkley and Manners Sutton, and judges Molesworth and Stawell took the role of patrons. Six of the seven members of the first Central Board and at three later appointments were active in the societies. It is worth noting here the support given the societies and Central Board by men like Richard Grice and Peter Beveridge: men who had suffered personal and financial losses at the hands of aborigines in the early pioneering days.

Under Bishop Perry Victorian Anglicanism was evangelical in tone, involving an almost literal belief in the biblical condemnation of sinners to everlasting punishment and death. Missionaries and churchmen spoke of the “saving and consoling truths of Christianity” and, overwhelmingly preoccupied with death, they found it more painful to contemplate “all Jews, Turks, infidels, and heretics” dying without the Word than the hardships that these people might suffer while alive. Here in Australia was a chance to participate in the unfolding of God’s great plan, “the gradual and wonderful . . . progress of civilization and the Christian religion throughout the world,” and the intertwining of the two is significant. The Religious Tracts Society felt a paternalistic duty to instil a fear of the Lord in young people from which wisdom and good citizenship would naturally flow. In this sense then, missions were a civic duty and could justly expect government aid. While institutions such as the Benevolent Asylum and Melbourne Hospital were backed
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by boards of honorary gentlemen’s and ladies’ committees, the Victorian government heavily subsidised charitable works. The tendency increased throughout the century, but was already strong in the eighteen-fifties. It is also relevant to note that the Melbourne Orphan Asylum was taken over as a public responsibility from the Church of England in the eighteen-sixties. 20

With faith in their God and a civic duty towards the dispossessed aborigines, the Melbourne Church of England Mission to the aborigines of Victoria (M.A.V.) held its first meeting in 1853. Disturbed by the plight of the “Murray Blacks,” they resolved to establish a mission school from which native preachers might itinerate. Next year Thomas Goodwin recommended Yelta at the Murray-Darling junction as a suitable site; the government granted six hundred and forty acres, and in 1855 Goodwin and volunteer John Bulmer set off. Soon a little garden had been laid out, a school room built, and the aborigines who visited the station were occasionally induced to make proper use of these facilities. However, as they were always moving on and refused to leave their children to be educated, the government was asked to supply the lure of stores. These were granted in 1857 and permanently after 1859, but aid for salaries and farm improvement was refused. 21

The spiritual aspect was not ignored. Prayers were held twice daily and Goodwin always “took the opportunity of a funeral to direct the attention of those present to the only hope for dying sinners.” This must have been a continual theme for he reported that the race was fast passing away. 22 His efforts had “little perceptible result.” However there were encouraging reports of Perth’s Native Institution and Poonindie “savages clothed in their right mind, worshipping Him who their fathers knew not, reading, writing, and tilling the soil.” When the Church of England Assembly petitioned the government for “the fostering care of the state” in 1857 they quoted Poonindie as an example of what could be done. The public should provide a number of central establishments where resident missionaries giving religious, secular, mechanical, and agricultural instruction would transform the aborigines. 23

Aid was also given Moravian Missionaries. As part of their general overseas expansion the European Synod of the Moravian Church had sent Messrs. Spieseke and Hauser to Victoria in 1849. They were feted by Bishop Perry and Governor Latrobe, and the new Victorian government provided land on the Loddon. At Lake Boga 1850-1856 they suffered the same hardships as Yelta, but their attempt to enforce segregation by shutting off the main road to Swan Hill which ran through the reserve was a naive one. In the fuss that followed the station was abandoned, Hauser returned to Europe, and the embarrassed Government offered the Moravians’ London office all co-operation and a better site in the Wimmera. 24

In 1858 Spieseke and the Rev. F. A. Hagenauer opened school and held prayers at Lake Hindmarsh (Ebenezer). A typical day began with the distribution of rations to children, invalids, and workers. After breakfast and prayers the men tended the cattle or worked in the garden while the women and children attended school or performed useful little tasks. Attendances fluctuated between 5 and 100, one or two aborigines regarding the station as home. 25

The Moravians pressed for more stores and a permanent reserve. In this they were aided by the Melbourne Association in aid of the Moravian Mission to the Aborigines of Australia (A.M.M.) and the increased public interest which came with news of the first convert. Two years after he had “sowed the grain of mustard seed,” Spieseke was overjoyed when the lad Pepper approached him saying:

Oh, I do not know how I feel, I want to speak to you about my state...
Oh I have wept for my sins. Last night I could have cried aloud, and I have thought — and I have thought — and I have thought about how our Saviour
that night went down into the garden and prayed there till the sweat came down from him like drops of blood, and that for me.26

The conversion is significant for it showed that improvement was possible, while the way it was reported indicates the enthusiasm with which it was sought. Although "often overcome with temptation and sin," Pepper's faith meant salvation, and Hagenauer seems almost glad that he died young, so sure was he to dwell in the city of God. However, such events were rare. Disease, fighting, drink, and the depressing effects of cultural dislocation all took their toll, and missionary persistence is a tribute to their singleminded devotion to an ideal.

Drawing together some of the rather diffuse strands indicated above, there were obviously several pressures leading towards a renewal of official activity by 1858. No government could ignore the plain extinction of a whole block of its subjects, especially if they were felt to have been shabbily treated. As an inferior (and now generally harmless) race the aborigines were entitled to protection, and there is a mixture of genuine sympathy, local pride, and guilt in McCombie's exclamation that "it was a stigma on the colony that nothing had been done for these unfortunate natives."27 Such motives were probably stimulated by reports from other states which showed that the aboriginal was capable of accepting some sort of settled existence.

The scale of the problem and a tendency to rely on the state for services worked against private action; men who had previously demanded protection in outlying areas stressed that:

As the miseries to which the occupation of their country by the whites are caused by a public and common act, so any alleviations which can be resorted to should be managed under public control.28

Correspondents to the 1858 Committee were not hopeful in their suggestions of food handouts and reserves, but the old protectors (Thomas and Parker) and churchmen (Spieseke, Hagenauer, and Chase) were led by their experience to hope "the remnant" might be induced to settle on reserves, attend school, and learn to farm.29 In this way there could be a gradual transition between nomad and settled life. The aborigines would retain, it was thought, some ties with the land; at the same time learning from the example of their protectors and being shielded against the evil influences of "vicious low whites."

Requests by missions for stores, land grants, and other kinds of aid were mounting; sympathetic settlers reported the lamentable state of aborigines in their areas; and the more influential sections of society contained men who were interested in church work and knew of its need for financial stability. Some means of assessing the various claims was necessary. Responsible government had only been recently established, and in the adjustment of administration and expenditure which followed, some review of the aborigines' position was to be expected. The influence of missions and squatters is significant, and contrasts with the apathy of most post-gold immigrants. All four members of the 1858 Committee who could be traced arrived in the eighteen-thirties or eighteen-forties, while of the eighteen speakers in the rare parliamentary debates from 1856 to 1860, only two had followed the gold discoveries. Sixteen of these twenty interested men were or had been run holders; a trend which might have been expected in the Legislative Council but not in the Assembly, as about half the Assembly members had arrived in the colony during the eighteen-fifties.30

One other factor was a request by the British Association for information on races about to become extinct.31 This probably explains the timing of the Committee and why details of native customs and characteristics were sought; but other pressures were already moving strongly towards some review of the problem.
Sincerely wishing to redress a great moral wrong perpetrated against "an unoffending people," the Committee recommended that several old hunting grounds be preserved. Under the guidance of missionaries "the poor wandering natives" were to learn the habits, religion, and occupations of European life. The government must provide blankets and provisions at first but it was hoped that these stations would soon become self-supporting.

In his *History of the Colony of Victoria* (1858) Thomas McCombie, mover and president of the Committee, claimed:

> It must be feared that the hopes fondly cherished of civilizing or reclaiming the native aboriginal tribes may be abandoned... the transition from rude barbarianism to civilization is seldom accomplished.

As the other members of his Committee attended few meetings, McCombie's influence over the report was probably great and yet the recommendations go well beyond merely providing comforts for a dying race. They reflect the basic confusion of aim which was to dog later policies. A genuine sympathy made it hard to conceive of the race as totally unprogressive, and however convenient collection on reserves might be, pauperization was both undesirable and uneconomical. For such reasons, improvement was planned, yet not expected. When it began to appear, there were few means of coping with it.

Closely following the Committee's proposals, a bill was passed to grant land in suitable localities for the use of the natives, and vote monies sufficient to "clothe and feed the various tribes," erect whatever buildings were necessary on the reserves, and pay lay or clerical missioners to care for the aborigines. £10,000 was suggested, a sum which could not be spent as haphazardly as the £956 of 1858. In March 1860 a Committee appointed to consider machinery proposed:

> that in order to make permanent provision for the maintenance of the aboriginal population, a sufficient quantity of land be set aside to be held in trust by a board of trustees in the particular district, in connection with a central board to be appointed from residents in Melbourne, under whose control any expenditure incurred on account of the aboriginal inhabitants be defrayed.

This was by no means an unusual device. Between 1856 and 1860 similar Boards for science, health, medicine, agriculture, and education had been set up. Such a body had been requested by Hagenauer and a group of Geelong magistrates, but more important, Richard Heales who chaired the 1860 Committee and was regarded by contemporaries as the father of the Central Board wanted to ensure that public action did not destroy private local interest.

Seven men sat on the first Central Board. Richard Heales (Chief Secretary) was the president and Robert Brough Smyth the secretary. Of the seven, five were immigrants of the eighteen-thirties and eighteen-forties, and four had pastoral affiliations. All but Stephen Henty supported the missions, charitable and temperance groups; four (Jennings, Langlands, Macredie, Sumner) at some time held office on the M.A.V. or A.M.M., while the other three (Embling, Heales, Henty) were members of parliament. Dr. Embling was the only professional man, and he and Smyth alone were interested in the zoological gardens, the Royal Society of Victoria, and other scientific organizations of the day.

In 1860 these men had very little idea of their powers and duties. The Board appears to have been established largely as a stop-gap mediator between local trustees and other workers in the field and the relevant government departments. Associated with the Lands Department and composed of representatives from parliament and the mission societies, its duties were to share money voted and forward requests to the appropriate authorities. It was not intended to draft and guide official policy. In 1862 yet another Select Committee was appointed to
investigate aboriginal affairs and there was no mention of the Board then or in any debate before 1867.

Thus regarded, the Board received numbers of requests for stores or land interested settlers immediately referred cases of severe drunkenness and neglected children. The action thus forced was important in helping the Board establish itself, but no more so than the enthusiasm of its first members. Gradually consolidating authority in their own hands they erected the enduring system of administration through which their wishes were enforced.

NOTES—


13. Ibid., 31 November, 1856.


15. Ibid., 17 February, 1860.


21. M.A.V. Annual Reports 1/1855, pp. 6-9; 2/1855, pp. 5-6; 3/1855, p. 11.


23. Memorial of the Assembly of the United Church of England and Ireland in Australia . . . 1857.

24. Correspondence re establishing Aboriginal Reserve by Moravian Mission at Lake Boga, passim, in P.L.V. Archives, Chief Secretary's Papers, Aboriginal Reserves, Box 17.


29. Ibid., pp. 5-6; 40-46.


32. T. McDermott, History of the Colonial of Victoria, 1855, p. 87.


34. Ibid., 1850-1865, vol. v, p. 706.
