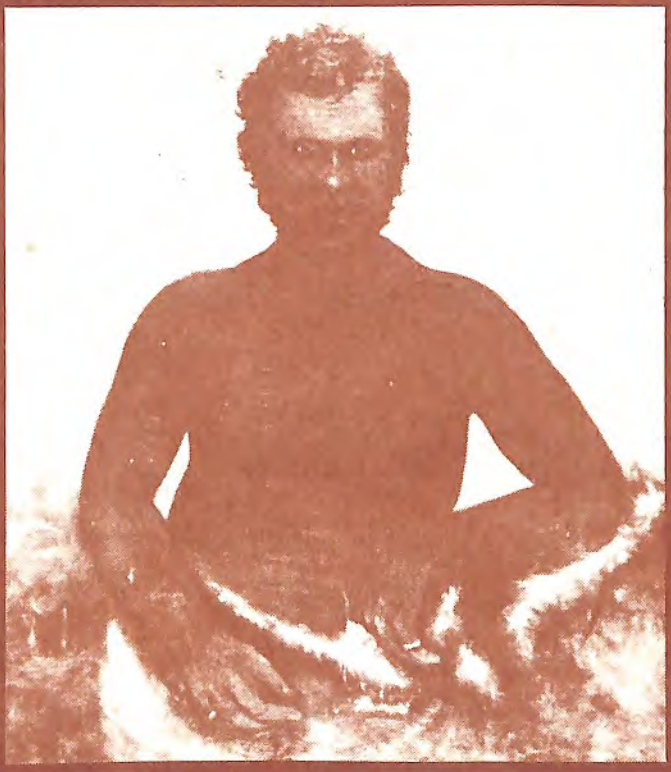
THE FIRST RESIDENTS OF MELBOURNE'S WESTERN REGION

GARY PRESLAND



PUBLISHED FOR THE FOOTSCRAY CITY COUNCIL AND
THE LIVING MUSEUM OF THE WEST

Cover photograph: Derrimut, headman of the *Yalukit.willam* clan. (State Library, Picture Collection)

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INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years before Europeans settled in what is now the western region of Melbourne, this area was the estate of a number of Aboriginal clans. When John Batman and others founded Melbourne, there were two tribes living in the Port Phillip region. The members of these tribes lived an ordered life in an environment which supplied almost everything they needed. By connections through marriage, and by ceremonial ties, each member of this Aboriginal society had access to resources over an enormous area, stretching from near the Otways in the west to the Dandenong Ranges in the east, and as far north as around Seymour.

The Aborigines lived a lifestyle which was very closely related to the environment. Any study of this way of life therefore, has to take account of what the countryside was like before Europeans arrived, and the changes which have occurred since then. What we know about the life of the Aborigines before Europeans came, and about how the countryside has changed through time, has been learned by studying a variety of sources of information. These sources include historical descriptions and accounts, geological evidence, and archaeological investigation.

This book gives a general account of what is known as a result of these studies, as it applies to the western region of Melbourne.

THE LANDSCAPE

When Europeans first settled in the Port Phillip district, they saw a landscape which looked vastly different to that we see today. But that landscape itself was a result of long processes of change, some of which had

been going on for hundreds of thousands of years. There is some evidence to show that Aboriginal people were living in the Maribyrnong River valley, near present day Keilor, about 40,000 years ago. Since that time there have been enormous changes to the landscape - all of which the Aborigines must have witnessed and lived through.

Many of the most spectacular and significant changes to the countryside have been to the Maribyrnong-Yarra River system.

Ten thousand years ago the valley of the Yarra River was more than 35 metres deeper than it is today and the river flowed at the bottom of a deep canyon. At that time the world's sea level was considerably lower because a great deal of water was locked up in the ice sheets covering Europe. So there was no water in Port Phillip Bay, and instead of flowing through the flat land in West Melbourne the Yarra turned to the south and flowed down the eastern side of a large grassy plain. At this time the Maribyrnong River flowed more directly to the south east and joined up with the Yarra near what is now Williamstown.

In the long period that Aborigines have lived in the Melbourne area the Maribyrnong and Yarra River system has deposited a great deal of mud and silt in their valleys, and raised the ground level by hundreds of metres.

From about 10,000 years ago, the sea started to rise, as the Ice Age came to an end. As the ice sheets in the northern hemisphere melted, the water flowed back into the sea and the level slowly rose. By about 8500 years ago the gradually rising sea had reached Port Phillip Heads and began to fill the area of Port Phillip.

The water continued to rise until about 7000 years ago, by which time the level of water in the Bay was much higher than it is today. The top of the Bay stretched as far north as Flemington and water covered the area of Flemington racecourse and many of the inner city areas such as the lower parts of West Melbourne, Port and South Melbourne, and St Kilda. At this time Footscray was a beach side area and the Maribyrnong River was affected by tides as far north as Braybrook.

When the sea level stabilized at its present height, about 5000 years ago, the waters of the Bay retreated a little. During the previous 2000 years a new land surface had been built up by the accumulation of silt in the bay water. The ground surface in the flat area where Victoria, Swanston and Appleton Docks were later constructed, and through which Footscray Road and Dynon Road now run, is a result of this built up of silt.

When Europeans first arrived they were attracted by the sweeping grasslands to the west of the Maribyrnong River. The wide volcanic plain, the edge of which is now covered by the Western suburbs, presented rich pastures for the colonists' sheep. There was a thick covering of native grasses, with a few trees growing along the major water courses, such as Kororoit Creek.

What the settlers didn't know was that, to some extent, the type of vegetation that was growing in these areas was a result of things that Aborigines had been doing for possibly thousands of years. In some areas it was the practice of the Aborigines to start fires which would clear out forest, and promote the growth of grasslands. This new growth attracted game animals such as kangaroo and emu, and the Aboriginal hunters didn't have to travel far to their prey. When the

Aborigines stopped their fire-stick farming - because they were removed from their land - the vegetation changed and scrubby plants started to return.

CHANGES

The European settlers began to effect and change the landscape very soon after they arrived. Some of the changes that have been brought about, particularly around the Melbourne area, are dramatic. As cattle and sheep grazed the original vegetation, many of the native plants became eaten out. And new grasses, introduced from overseas, were planted. Large areas of forest were cut down to provide timber for building, and for fires. But it wasn't only the vegetation which was changed, it was the very shape of the countryside. Around the Footscray area perhaps the biggest changes have been to the Yarra River which has been altered in its course.

Until the late 1880s the Yarra used to flow through the land where the Swanston and Appleton Docks now lie. There used to be a big bend in the river in that area, and the Yarra looped to the north of its present course and flowed into the Maribyrnong just near Shepherd Bridge. This bend was taken out in the 1880s to provide better port facilities in the Yarra River.

The area to the north of the river, where Footscray and Dynon Roads now run, was a swampy flat land, covered with marsh and swamp grass. It was an area where there was plenty of bird life and one that provided the Aborigines with a rich source of food and other materials. This watery area was progressively drained and has been built over.

The dramatic changes to the landscape since white settlement have destroyed much of the fragile evidence of the Aboriginal past in this part of Victoria. Some indications do remain however and have been studied by archaeologists. This evidence takes the form of archaeological sites such as campsites, isolated artefacts and trees from which bark has been removed. Through the study of these sites and with the help of historical records it is possible to know something of the way of life of the original inhabitants of the western region.

ABORIGINAL SOCIETY

Each of the two tribes in the Melbourne area was made up of a number of clans who identified with particular parts of the tribal territory. Within the western region, there were three such clans. One of these clans was the *Marin.balluk* and their estate was all the area between Kororoit Creek and the Maribyrnong River and stretching up to Sunbury. The area to the west of Kororoit Creek as far as the Werribee River was the estate of the *Kurung.jang.balluk.* Both of these clans were a part of the *Woiworung* linguistic group (or tribe) whose territory was all the area drained by the Yarra River and its tributories, down to where the Yarra and Maribyrnong joined, and west as far as the Werribee River.

The other tribe in the Port Phillip region was the *Bunurong* who lived on the Mornington Peninsula and around Western Port Bay. The *Bunurong* also claimed a strip of land which stretched around the top of Port Phillip Bay to the Werribee River. This narrow strip, perhaps a few kilometres wide, was the estate

In traditional Aboriginal societies like those living in the western region, the basic economic unit was the family. A family group usually consisted of a man with at least one wife (but commonly two or three) and their children. In areas like the Port Phillip region, where resources were plentiful, a number of families generally formed a larger group, called a band. This larger group lived and travelled together for most of the year.

Foraging groups of 30 to 35 people were not uncommon. However, on a day-to-day, practical level, that was about as many people as could live together continually and still find enough food. From time to time, larger numbers of people came together and when this happened there were special arrangements made for feeding everybody.

Although the foraging bands that lived in the western region estates were essentially independent, the members of these groups regularly met with other members of their tribes. In fact there was a fair amount of movement between the different groups within a tribe, so at any given time people belonging to other clans of the *Woiworung* and *Bunurong* might have been seen in the Western region.

From time to time there would also have been people from other tribes, who were visiting their relations. The men of the *Woiworung* exchanged brides with a neighbouring tribe, usually the *Taungurong* who lived in the Goulburn River area. It was usual for the wife to come to live with the husband's group so *Taungurong* women came to the Port Phillip area and *Woiworung* women went north to the Goulburn River.

A part of the axe stone quarry at Mount William. This material was the subject of a widespread trading network. Pieces of stone from this site have been found up to 700 kilometres away. (Photo: V.A.S. files)

A group of grinding grooves near Mount Macedon. These grooves are created during the process of making an edge ground axe. (Photo: V.A.S. files)

A shell midden. These accumulations of shells and charcoal are a common type of site around the Bay. The range of shells contained in middens can vary quite a lot: some middens have a single species, others have a number of species. They also vary a great deal in size, from a couple of metres across to hundreds of metres in extent.(Photo: V.A.S. files)

A scarred tree. Bark was removed for a variety of uses such as making canoes, providing shelter, for containers, or for shields. The removal of bark and sapwood, using a stone axe, left a scar which is still visible in most cases after hundreds of years. Many scarred trees are found along major streams of water. (Photo: V.A.S. files)

The connections which were made by this sort of exchange had a number of uses. They allowed people of both tribes to move temporarily to the other's area when there was a sudden windfall, or when resources were scarce in their own area. These links also provided friends and allies who could be called on to help in times of trouble.

ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION

The Aborigines were hunters and gatherers; they made their living by hunting native birds and animals, catching fish and gathering plants within the tribal area. Some of the natural resources and materials they used were available only at particular times of the year while others, such as stone and wood, were always there. But almost everything they needed in life could be found in the tribal territory.

The way of life of these people was adapted in a number of ways to their environment. For example, the means they used in fulfilling their material needs - their hunting equipment and techniques - had been developed over a long period of time and were suited to the purpose. And they had an intimate and detailed knowledge of their landscape. This knowledge had been gathered, and was added to, by many generations of observation, and was passed on from one generation to the next, from mother to daughter and father to son.

So well did they know their territory and so efficient were they at getting all that they needed, the Aborigines had to work only about five hours a day. This is the equivalent of a three and a half day working week. The rest of their time was spent in leisure, during which they were able to

Aboriginal fishing methods such as these were in use on streams in the Western region of Melbourne, before Europeans settlers arrived. (National Library of Australia)

Aboriginal stone artefacts. The top row shows carefully shaped spear points and bladelets. Those in the bottom row are waste flakes. (Photo: V.A.S. files)

create a very rich spiritual life. In Aboriginal Australia this was of greater importance than having a lot of material possessions.

An Aboriginal band of the *Marin.balluk* might spend a few days or a few weeks in the one place, depending on the local supply of fresh water and the available food sources. Major camps were usually set up close to permanent streams of fresh water such as the Maribyrnong and Werribee Rivers and Kororoit Creek. People did lots of things in and around such camps, and some of the things they did have left evidence which remains today and indicates the places where Aborigines lived. Such places are recorded as archaeological sites. But what does the archaeologist see when these sites are recorded?

Once an Aboriginal band moved to another site, even for a short time, the deserted campsite was exposed to destruction by natural forces like wind and rain. So after many years only a few signs survive. The most common indication of an Aboriginal site is a scatter of stone tools and lots of small stone pieces called waste flakes.

The material that the Aborigines used to make their stone tools is practically indestructible and so they remain, despite the rain and wind and erosion and (later) disturbance caused by European development. Because most of the remains of plant and animal foodstuffs decay and are easily destroyed, they do not generally survive. So food remains are rarely found in archaeological sites. The pieces of stone that archaeologists find do not occur there naturally but were brought into the camp by men for use in making their tools.

After a day's hunting, men might spend some time in camp in repairing their tool kit of spears, and knives. This would involve the flaking of new stone spear points, or sharpening of knife edges. Both of these activities create small waste flakes of stone, which after thousands of years are often the only reminders of the Aboriginal past. In the western suburbs, Aboriginal campsites with stone tools have been recorded along the Kororoit Creek in Deer Park, and on top of the Maribyrnong River terraces, near the Material Research Laboratories. A large campsite of the *Yalukit.willam* was also recorded at Altona many years ago.

All of these sites contain a particular range of stone tools which are finely worked and regular in shape. This range of tools has been called microliths (which means 'small stones') and they have been found in Aboriginal sites all over south eastern Australia. These tools are often taken as an indication that the campsites where they are found are less than 5000 years old. We can say this because microliths do not appear anywhere in Australia before that time. Because these stone tools are too small to have been used in the hand, they are thought to have been mounted implements such as spear points.

THE DAILY ROUND

At the beginning of a normal day, the people in camp broke into two smaller groups - one composed of the men and youths, and the other of women and children. The women went off to forage in a particular area. During the day they would gather plant foods and capture small animals that might stray into their path. Meanwhile the men moved in another direction and hunted larger game such

as wallabies, kangaroos and emus, or caught possums. Each day's activities and the areas where the two groups would be working was decided the previous night.

If the camp was going to be moved, everybody carried their possessions and the two groups met in the middle of the afternoon at the new campsite. Women generally arrived first and started the fires. The men arrived later and set up bark or brush huts, if these were needed.

Because collecting plants is easier and a much more dependable source of food than hunting animals, it was often the women who supplied the bulk of the food. While the men might be unsuccessful in their efforts, because there was no game or the game had eluded them, the women would never come back to camp empty-handed.

One of the favorite plant foods of the Aborigines was a tuber called *Murnong*. This is a small plant with a yellow flower which looks like a daisy and has an underground tuber, something like a yam. For this reason it was often referred to as the yam-daisy. In the early years of the settlement *Murnong* grew profusely along creeks such as Moonee Ponds and Kororoit, and covered the plain to the west. It grew all year round but was particularly good to eat in Spring. The women collected the tuber in great quantities in their string bags and took it back to camp. When at its freshest it could be eaten raw, but otherwise it was roasted or baked in an earth oven.

When the bands who lived in the estate of the *Yalukit.willam* were camped along the top of the Bay, the women collected shellfish while the men were hunting further inland. Their

daily catch of shellfish was brought back to camp and cooked, and the shells dumped nearby. When shells were dumped in the same place over a period of many years, the heaps of shell became quite large. In many cases these heaps have remained until the present time in the places where they built up. Although they mostly consist of shells mixed with charcoal from fires, many of them also contain fish bones, and animal bones from the hunters' kill, and some stone flakes.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Archaeologists refer to these mounds of rubbish as shell middens and they have been recorded in many places around the edge of Port Phillip Bay and all along the Mornington Peninsula. In the estate of the *Yalukit.willam* there is a midden next to the mangrove mud flats in an area which is now part of the Williamstown Rifle Range.

Shell middens are particularly interesting because they show a number of things about how Aborigines lived. For instance, the different types of shell that are found in middens indicate the sorts of fish that was eaten. In some middens there are two or more layers of shell with a clear break between the layers. This shows that the site was used on two separate occasions and that there was a long period between the two episodes of living in the area.

Fishing was an important source of food for the Aborigines. As well as the shell fish gathered by women on the shore, fish were caught in the rivers and streams of the area. The Aboriginal groups of the Port Phillip region did not use fish hooks but they had a number of other ways of catching fish. One of these was to make a dam across

the river, using stones. A couple of holes were left in the dam for the fish to go through and a basket made by weaving reeds was held against the hole. In this way the fish were easily caught. There was a fish trap like this on the Maribyrnong River at Avondale Heights when the first Europeans came to this area, in 1803.

Another method for catching fish was to use a net. Nets were generally made of fibre, spun from stringy bark or other plant material.

We can gain further evidence for the Aboriginal way of life from other sites which have been recorded in this part of Melbourne. At a number of places along the Maribyrnong River, particularly in the Brimbank Metropolitan Park, and on the Werribee River also, there are trees which bear scars from where Aborigines removed a slab of bark. The bark was used for making canoes, containers, shields or for use in making a shelter. These sites are called scarred trees. Another use for bark, especially stringy bark, was in making nets for fishing, and making string bags. Water containers and bowls were carved from wood.

These slabs of bark were removed from the tree using a stone hatchet. The head of this tool has a sharp edge which was created by rubbing it against an abrasive surface. The head was then fixed to a short handle of wood, using fibre binding and gum. When the edge became blunt through use, it was resharpened by grinding against a gritty surface such as sandstone. This repeated resharpening made the head smaller, until it was too small for use and was thrown away. A large number of these discarded hatchet heads have been found in the metropolitan area, including the Western suburbs. People have

FURTHER READING

These books may be of some help if people want to read further material about the Aboriginal way of life in this part of Victoria.

Aborigines. The Port Phillip Project by Joan Kenny, 1984. Published by Nelson. This is one of a series of history texts written for primary school children.

Historical Records of Victoria. Published by the Victorian Government. This is a series of volumes which contain the official Government records such as letters and reports from the earliest days of Melbourne. Volumes 2A and 2B are devoted to material about the Aborigines.

The Land of the Kulin. Discovering the lost landscape and the first people of Port Phillip. by Gary Presland, 1985. Published by McPhee Gribble/ Penguin. This book is aimed at the general public and details the day-to-day life of Aborigines in the Melbourne area, before whites.

Letters from Victorian Pioneers. 1983 Edited by T.F. Bride. Published by Currey O'Neill. This book was originally published in 1898 but has since been reprinted. A number of early settlers wrote letters to be given to Governor La Trobe, in which they describe their early impressions of life in Victoria, and the Aborigines.

Melbourne before history began. Published by the A.B.C. This small booklet contains the transcript of five radio talks by Edmund Gill, which were broadcast in 1966.

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