

## 3.2 Living on Country as First Peoples

### Summary of theme

The City of Ballarat occupies the traditional Country of the Dja Dja Wurrung and the Wadawurrung peoples, who are two of the five language groups of the Kulin Nation. They are the traditional custodians and caretakers of the land and waterways and have an ongoing connection to Country today. The land, waters and sky are integral to First Nations culture and identity. This theme also examines the impact of British invasion and colonisation on the Dja Dja Wurrung and Wadawurrung peoples, and the survival of Aboriginal culture today.

### Consideration of this theme in relation to the HUL approach

The foundational landscape of the City of Ballarat, as it was at the time of British colonisation, was a pre-existing cultural landscape, shaped for countless generations by First Nations people in both tangible and intangible ways. Across the City of Ballarat, which is the traditional Country of the Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples, there are many places associated with Aboriginal occupation and use.

There are also places associated with the invasion of Country by newcomers; the dispossession of First Nations people from their Country; the subsequent conflict that ensued; and the legacy of manifold and systemic injustices that First Nations people have been subject to on account of colonisation. Many places in the municipality tell the story of traditional life and the resilience of First Nations people to defend their rights to land and culture, and to remain on their Country.

Every place within the municipality, whether a township, mining area or farmland, exists within a much older landscape from which language, culture and stories have emerged. The landscape holds these deep cultural associations and is alive to the ongoing cultural expression of Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples.

### Consideration of First Nations history relative to this theme

*This theme relates exclusively to First Nations history.*

### 3.2.1 Country of the First Peoples

The City of Ballarat occupies the traditional Country of the Dja Dja Wurrung and the Wadawurrung peoples, who are the Traditional Owners and caretakers of the lands and waterways of the area that is now the municipality of Ballarat. These represent two of the five language groups that make up the Kulin Nation.

Archaeological records have dated the human occupation at coastal sites in western Victoria to over 60,000 years old. The landscape of Ballarat and the wider area has changed significantly during the long period of human occupation. Over that time, First Nations people adapted to changing conditions, which included significant variations in temperature and rainfall.

Over the millennia before British colonisation, Aboriginal people occupied the land and managed resources in a way that was both sustainable and in line with their spiritual beliefs and cultural practices. They gently modified the land and waterways to ensure sufficient resources for human survival.

For the Kulin, the formation of Country, including land, waters and sky—as well as the delicate ecosystems that Country supports—is intrinsically connected to Ancestors and spiritual beliefs. There were symbiotic effects in their interactions with the natural world. Aboriginal people remain deeply committed to caring for Country and continue many traditional cultural practices.

This well-watered and resource-rich area included grasslands, forested areas, creeks, springs, lagoons and rich volcanic soil. The land and water supported a wide variety of animals, birds, reptiles, fish and insects, as well as plant foods that Aboriginal people relied on. Plants and animals also provided materials for housing, tools and weapons, containers, bags and baskets, clothing and rugs, jewellery and other forms of personal ornamentation.

Country provides vital resources for people through the wetlands, rivers and creeks that irrigate Country, and the wildlife and plants that can be utilised for food, medicine and other purposes. Prior to the disruption caused by colonisation, additional resources not provided by Country were obtained through extensive trade routes that extended across the territory of the five tribes of the Kulin Nation, and beyond.



**Figure 3.13** Eugene von Guérard, *Warrenheip Hills near Ballarat*, 1854. (Source: National Gallery of Victoria)



**Figure 3.14** Sketch by Eugene von Guérard of the large lagoon that settlers named Black Swamp, and later Yuille’s Swamp, then Lake Wendouree, 1853. (Source: State Library Victoria, Accession No. H3812)

A light tree cover was maintained by seasonal burning during the cooler months. The practice of burning stimulated the regrowth of vegetation, which not only managed the timber load and helped avert summer bushfires, but also benefited grazing animals such as kangaroos and wallabies by regenerating the grasslands. The Kulin built earthen ovens on the banks of creeks and rivers. They built fish traps at the edge of lakes and lagoons. The lagoons were rich in fish, eels, fresh-water crayfish and fresh-water mussels, as well as duck and swan eggs. Eels were prolific in Lake Burrumbeet.<sup>15</sup>

The Kullin harvested plants such as the nutritious root vegetable murnong (or Yam Daisy), which was a mainstay of their diet.<sup>16</sup> Wadawurrung women and Dja Dja Wurrung women dug for yams using a digging stick which left a hole in the ground. In August 1835 John Helder Wedge made a sketch of Wadawurrung women and children digging for yams and carrying baskets (FIGURE 3.15).

---

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Pickersgill (ed.), *Victorian Railways Tourists’ Guide*, Sands & McDougall, Melbourne, 1885, p. 187.

<sup>16</sup> Nelly Zola and Beth Gott, *Koorie Plants, Koorie People: Traditional Aboriginal food, fibre and healing plants of Victoria*, Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne, 1992, pp. 7–9.



**Figure 3.15** Spearing eels, Back Creek, c.1852. (Source: National Library of Australia, via Sovereign Hill 'Hidden Histories' website)



**Figure 3.16** Wadawurrung women digging for root vegetables, from a sketch by John Helder Wedge, titled 'Native women getting Tam bourn roots, 27 August 1835'. (Source: Wedge papers, Manuscript Collection, State Library Victoria)

Trees were valuable resources. They provided shade and shelter and they were also meeting places and birthing places. Large hollow trees were used to smoke eels. The bark of large eucalypts was used to make shelters, canoes, and coolamons. Protruding knots in the bark were made into water containers. The limbs of trees were used to make tools and other weapons. Large trees were scaled to procure possums, which were caught for food and also for their skins, which were sewn into cloaks and rugs.

The annual movements of Wadawurrung people, which were connected to the availability of resources, are described in the following account:

The Wadawurrung peoples made two significant journeys across this landscape throughout the year. During the summer they travelled from Ballarat to the ‘food bowls’ of Lake Burrumbeet and Lake Learmonth, via the creeks and wetlands. During the winter the Wadawurrung returned to Ballarat, where shelter from the wind and the harsh winter weather conditions of the western basalt plains was provided by the natural depression of the land at the area now known as Bakery Hill.<sup>17</sup>

Tools were fashioned from the available stone (FIGURE 3.17). Quartz was also used to make stone tools.<sup>18</sup> Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples also obtained prized greenstone axe-heads through trade with the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people. Gold was known to the Kulin. The Dja Dja Wurrung people called it kara but did not regard it as particularly useful as it was too soft for tool-making.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 3.17** Spear tip fragments, Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation. (Source: Post Office Gallery, 2013)

Detail about the use of resources can be gleaned from historical records, from the landscape itself, and from traditional knowledge. For example, the placename ‘Opossum Gully’ appears on an early map of the area near Lake Burrumbeet, which probably refers to there being plenty of possums in that locality.<sup>20</sup> A place named ‘Yam Holes’ appears on an early plan of Lake Burrumbeet, suggesting that the yam daisy, which commonly grew alongside waterways and bodies of water, was harvested here.<sup>21</sup> A digging stick, used to harvest the yam daisy would leave a hole.

<sup>17</sup> Extract from Cardigan Village Plan (City of Ballarat, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> Terra Culture, ‘Ballarat West Employment Zone, CHMP’, 2015, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> ‘First Nations’ interpretation Panel, Clunes Museum, viewed 18 November 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Mineral District of Ballarat, 1859, PROV.

<sup>21</sup> Clark et al., 2019; Zola and Gott 1992.

## **Population and social organisation**

Various different names were given to different tribes and clans of Aboriginal people in Settlers referred to the Wadawurung by various names, including 'the Barrabools', the 'Lal Lal tribe', 'the Moorabools' and later 'the Ballarat tribe'. The Dja Dja Wurrung people were often referred to as the 'Loddon tribe'.

The nineteenth-century amateur ethnographer James Dawson noted in 1881 that, 'Within the Wathaurong territorial name there is thought to have been from between 14 and 25 smaller clans who traversed a wide area in groups of up to 100 in response to seasonal food sources, ceremonial obligations and trading relationships'.<sup>22</sup> At the time of British colonisation it is estimated that there were up to 5000 Wadawurrung people occupying Wadawurrung Country.

The members of families and clans lived their lives in accordance with their particular roles and obligations within the family, the clan and the wider social group. This included particular practises and beliefs, in terms of such things as what food could be eaten, where foods were found, ceremonial and ritual practices, social interaction, and the adornment of the hair and body. Places and elements of the natural world were significant for their role in representing the stories of the Ancestors. Cultural importance provided meaning to their being and their place in the world.

## **Spiritual beliefs and ceremony**

Spiritual life was deeply connected with the land, water and sky, and spiritual beliefs were integral to existence and shaped cultural practices. Many of the traditional ceremonies (or corroborees) that were held in the wider Ballarat area had an important spiritual dimension.

## **Placenames**

Placenames are a window to a First Nations cultural landscape by providing a record of the language and sometimes the meanings associated with places. A full understanding of the meaning of places however is difficult to discern from the documentary records (in maps etc) left by early settlers. Often the context for the Aboriginal placenames is not known or not given. (The Traditional Owners of the respective area would be able to provide a fuller understanding of placenames in the area.)

There would be infinite names attached to places across Wadawurrung Country and Dja Dja Country, but only a tiny proportion of those were documented in early maps and other records. Settlers, explorers, surveyors and others recorded these names when they

---

<sup>22</sup> Dawson, 2014 (1881), p. 83.

were known and when there was a need to apply a name to a place. Settlers sometimes sought out the local placenames known to the First Nations people of a particular area. It is highly likely that some names were recorded incorrectly or that their meanings were mistaken or misunderstood. Nevertheless, of the many names that have survived in the records and in the oral tradition of First Nations people, there are associations with Ancestral stories, references to food sources, and other cultural meanings that go a small way towards reconstructing Country before white settlement. The name for Lake Learmonth, for example, was Tombin/Tombine, which was recorded by Robert Brough Smyth as meaning ‘fresh water mussel’, which indicates a food source that was formerly obtained at the lake.<sup>23</sup>

The meanings and stories attached to places on Country are woven into the landscape. Some of the local placenames, albeit in Anglicised forms, are a record of these traces of meaning, which were often recorded in the nineteenth century by surveyors who had been instructed to use the Aboriginal name of the place. These adapted Aboriginal words were used to name the counties, parishes, towns and postal hamlets that filled the map of European settlement. Pastoralists also frequently adopted an Aboriginal placename as the name of their run. The original forms of these words have lost their context but nevertheless carry some connection with the association of the word for the place and what a particular place might have been associated with—often this was a particular plant or animal, a landform, or an ailment. Documented meanings of local placenames are given in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1** Aboriginal placenames within the present-day City of Ballarat that were documented in the nineteenth century (pending approval by the Dja Dja Wurrung and Wadawurrung Traditional Owners) [Refs: References: Ian D Clark, various historical plans]

Placename	Meaning	References
Ballaarat, Ballarat	Resting place	Withers, 1870
Borriga	Mount Bolton (loose ground’)	Ian D. Clark, 2021 [from Robinson]
TBC (Creek)	[near Ascot]	
Bowdun	Black Hill	W.S. Urquhart, 1851, 1852
Bungaree	From bungairee meaning ‘hut’	Blake 1977, p. 52
Burrumbeet	1. ‘dark soil’ 2. ‘muddy waters’	(1) Brough Smyth 1878, vol. 2, p. 217 (2) Pickersgill, 1885, p. 187
Buninyong, Boninyong	From bunning-yowang, (‘a man with knees drawn up’?)	Brough Smyth, vol. 2, pp. 179, 217

<sup>23</sup> Robert Brough Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, vol. 2, pp. 179, 217.

Placename	Meaning	References
Drawall, Drawill	Miners' Rest ('stony' or 'much rain')	Brough Smyth, vol. 2, p. 179; Ian D. Clark, 2021.
Gong Gong (outside LGA?)	[n.k.]	
Gunapan	Bald Hill (meaning n.k.)	Ian D. Clark, 2021
Kulorgaleyallock	Sago Hill (meaning 'lava creek')	Ian D. Clark, 2021
Mortillo	Mount Blowhard ('wild')	Ian D. Clark, 2021
Narwrightwidwid	[Black Hill]	Brough Smyth, vol. 2, p. 179
Parmoompi	Waterhole on Yarrowee River, near Mount Pleasant	W.S. Urquhart, c.1852
Peerewerrn	[n.k.]	[n.k.]
Quimidupakup	Waterhole on Yarrowee River, near Mount Pleasant	W.S. Urquhart, c.1852
Tombin; Tombine	Lake Learmonth ('fresh water mussel')	Brough Smyth, vol. 2, pp. 179, 217; Ian D. Clark, 2021
Warrenheip, Warreneep, Warrengoop	'emu feathers'; so named on account of their resemblance to the 'ferns and other forest growth' on Mount Warrenheip	Withers (1887)
Waubra	'means lose the way; crooked watercourse in area'	Blake 1977, p. 275
Wendouree	'go away'	W.S. Urquhart, c.1852
Uran-uran; Wran-wran	Sebastopol Meaning n.k.	Brough Smyth, 1878, vol. 2, pp. 179, 192
Yarrowee	River with lots of waterholes	Ian D. Clark, 2021

### 3.2.2 The impact of invasion

In establishing the Colony of New South Wales, the British claimed all the country south of the Murray River for the British Crown. The illegal land claim by the Port Phillip Association in 1835, and the inevitable land rush that followed, forced the official declaration in 1836 of the Port Phillip District of the Colony of NSW. The annexation of the Port Phillip District as a colony for British imperial expansion was catastrophic for the Kulin people.

The impact of British invasion and settler colonialism on the Dja Dja Wurrung and Wadawurrung peoples has been manifold and profound. The impact of the invasion was felt before the contact period, with smallpox spreading from New South Wales through Aboriginal communities in Victoria. This would have infected and killed large numbers of

Aboriginal people in the Ballarat area.<sup>24</sup> Various British explorers, runaway convicts and other absconders had passed through this area prior to 1836. Although Aboriginal people had little contact with Europeans prior to the direct colonisation of the area, the broader impacts of colonisation had nevertheless impacted Aboriginal people prior to the mid-1830s. This was evident in the form of new diseases against which they were not protected, including smallpox; the potential changes to traditional trading patterns; and most likely a sense of fear and general unease about the comings and goings of the large, white, bird-like shapes in the bay, which could be seen from Wadawurrung Country.

The permanent settlement of strangers in Ballarat and Buninyong from the late 1830s, together with their foreign animals, and the new world order that ensued, severely disrupted the lives of Aboriginal people across the Port Phillip District.

As the colonisers pushed into Dja Dja Wurrung an Wadawurrung Country from the late 1830s and through the 1840s, the situation for Aboriginal peoples became dire. Sources of fresh water and food were compromised, traditional trade practices broke down, and the colonial authorities prohibited many cultural practices. Among the Kulin in general there was widespread sickness and malnourishment, a low birth rate, and high infant mortality. Patterns of living and meeting, movement, and hunting and gathering activities were severely disrupted when particular areas of Country were no longer freely accessible or were no longer resource-rich as a direct result of European land-use practices.

The system imposed by British imperial colonialism, including understandings of British law, Christianity and unfamiliar land-use practices, disadvantaged the Dja Dja Wurrung and Wadawurrung peoples across all facets of their lives. As a result of the impacts of colonisation, the population of Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples declined significantly through the nineteenth century.

Settler colonialism had both tangible consequences and imposed a mindset that was founded on inherent injustices. This resulted in loss of Country, loss of resources, the denial of civil liberties, and myriad other injustices. Settlers also brought with them diseases and alcohol that severely impacted Aboriginal people. Settlers killed many Aboriginal people and created a situation of fear and retaliation.

---

<sup>24</sup> William Withers, *History of Ballarat* (Gutenberg); Richard Broome, 2005, cited in Nicola Cousen, 'The Smallpox on Ballarat', *Provenance*, 2018.

In 1837, the Port Phillip Protectorate was established with the objective of protecting Aboriginal people from harm and exploitation. George Augustus Robinson was appointed chief protector, along with four assistant protectors.

Through the 1840s and 1850s, Aboriginal society became increasingly fragmented due to the alienation of Aboriginal people from their Country, settlers' misuse of land and waterways, and the depletion of resources. In 1847, when pastoral licence-holders became entitled to a pre-emptive right, this allowed them to gain tenure and establish a permanent footing.

Several small reserves were set aside as Aboriginal reserves in the 1840s and 1850s. By the late 1840s, Aboriginal livelihoods had deteriorated, and their population had declined significantly. Pastoralist Thomas Learmonth, who had taken possession of a large area of Buninyong, declared in the early 1850s: 'I should consider myself to be nearly correct if I set down the whole aboriginal [sic] population in the district around Buninyong at the time of its settlement—taking a radius of 30 miles from the mountain as a centre—at 300 souls; now probably there are not 30.<sup>25</sup>

The Port Phillip Protectorate was wound up in 1849 and was generally considered to have been a failure. Through the 1850s, Aboriginal people were provided with even less 'protection', although 'local protectors' were appointed by the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines (BPA). A report of the BPA in 1863 noted that there were 69 Aboriginal people at 'Ballarat and Mount Emu'.<sup>26</sup> Local protector Andrew Porteous reported a slightly higher number in 1865 of around 100 Aboriginal people at Ballarat and Mount Emu.<sup>27</sup>

The dramatic fall in population is attributed to the destructive force of settler colonialism and the economic imperatives of pastoral capitalism. In addition to the direct attacks and the killing of Aboriginal people, population decline was also caused by introduced European diseases for which Aboriginal people had little immunity and the impact of alcoholism. The dispossession of their Country and the associated significant impact on resources and cultural life was to the great detriment of peoples' health and livelihood.

---

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Learmonth, 11 August 1853, Buninyong, cited in T.F. Bride (ed.), *Letters from Victorian Pioneers*, 1898, p. 42.

<sup>26</sup> BPA Annual Report 1863, cited in Smyth, 1878.

<sup>27</sup> BPA Annual Report 1865; *Ballarat Star*, 23 October 1865, p. 2.



**Figure 3.18** Eugene von Guérard, *Aborigines met on the Road to the Diggings*, 1854. (Source: Geelong Art Gallery)

### Frontier conflict

The incursion of pastoralists and their servants into the Ballarat area from the late 1830s created inevitable conflict through the region. There was competition for resources, as well as a climate of fear and uncertainty, which inevitably led to conflict and often physical aggression. Settlers routinely reported on the danger posed by Aboriginal people. Squatter W.C. Yuille had been the subject of attacks by the Wadawurrung on an earlier station at Murgheboluc.<sup>28</sup> What prompted these attacks is not recorded, but this may be part of the reason he moved north to Ballarat.

Settlers' aggression towards Aboriginal people in the early pastoral period has been obfuscated in the early records and in later local history accounts. Settlers and their servants who were the perpetrators of violent attacks on Aboriginal people were generally silent on the subject and were often 'protected' for fear of incrimination. Aboriginal victims of colonial aggression and violence lacked the means and the know-how to bring a charge against the wrong-doers in a foreign (British) legal system. Likewise, Aboriginal people accused of violence towards settlers were generally not granted a fair hearing in court: in effect, they were denied a voice that could be heard

---

<sup>28</sup> A.G.L. Shaw, *A History of the Port Phillip District: Victoria before Separation*, The Miegunyah Press, Carlton, 1996, p. 113.

and as such there are conflicts that will probably never be known. Much of the detail of frontier conflict remains shrouded in silence.

Details that have been uncovered about violence and aggression towards Aboriginal people on the pastoral frontier in Victoria and in the early settled districts are numerous, and together make a strong case for attacks on Aboriginal people in most parts of Victoria.<sup>29</sup> In 1840, George Arden commented on the continuing conflict in the pastoral areas west of Melbourne, mentioning Buninyong as one of four places where 'depredations are still of frequent occurrence'.<sup>30</sup>

Despite Arden's claim, there is only one documented (known or recorded) attack on Aboriginal people in the area. This comes from the Chief Protector of Aborigines, George Augustus Robinson, who reported in 1847 that 'two Aborigines were killed at or near Anderson and Mills's public house in Buninyong'.<sup>31</sup> This is the only massacre in the Ballarat municipal area that is included in the 'Massacre Map' currently being developed at the University of New England.<sup>32</sup> However, it can be assumed that there was more than one case of violence and murder committed by settlers in the study area.<sup>33</sup>

Several historians of colonial settlement in western Victoria have noted that much of the violence perpetrated against Aboriginal people was covered up or went unreported.<sup>34</sup> Crimes by white male colonists committed against Aboriginal women were not always reported, but anecdotal evidence from various primary sources suggests that this was a significant issue. There is no doubt that the period of pastoral invasion and occupation between 1836 and c.1848 was marked by conflict of various degrees. There would almost certainly have been violent conflicts, and in some cases this would have involved Aboriginal people being killed by settlers. Another documented case was the killing of two Aboriginal people at Sebastopol.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The antiquarian imagination in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1996.

<sup>30</sup> George Arden, *Latest Information from Australia Felix*, Port Phillip Gazette, Melbourne, 1840, p. 93.

<sup>31</sup> Robinson journals 1839–49, 25 November 1847, cited in Ian D. Clark, *Scars in the Landscape*, 1995, p. 175.

<sup>32</sup> University of Newcastle, 'Colonial Frontier Massacres, Australia, 1788-1930', 2022, <https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/map.php>

<sup>33</sup> See testimonies by local settlers – e.g. Bride 1898, Withers 1874, Kirkland.

<sup>34</sup> See Critchett 1990.

<sup>35</sup> Information provided at Miners Rest community consultation, 20 April 2023.

Settlement and its ramifications also caused tension and conflict among Aboriginal people. William Thomas wrote of his impressions of a battle between the Barrabool and Buninyong clans of the Wadawurrung.<sup>36</sup>



**Figure 3.19** Detail from a sketch by Charles Frederick Somerton titled 'Mount Buninyong', published in the *Illustrated Melbourne Post*, April 1862. (Source: State Library Victoria, Accession No. IMP00/04/62/28)

### The impact of pastoral occupation

Pastoralists occupied land that they took up as leaseholds from 1837. As a means of survival in the colonial economy, Aboriginal people traded goods and labour in exchange for food and sometimes money.<sup>37</sup> They assisted colonial endeavours by acting as guides, which included leading pastoralists to good country and sourcing food for them. Cahir notes that Thomas Learmonth pegged out land near Mount Buninyong for a pastoral run as a result of a Wadawurrung guide who had led him to the area.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> William Thomas 1857, cited in Bride, 1898, p. 94.

<sup>37</sup> Cahir, *The Invasion*, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Cahir, 2019.

Some Aboriginal people managed to remain on their own Country by living and working on the pastoral runs or by working on the goldfields. They were sometimes depicted in artworks, for example in the sketch of Yuille’s home station (FIGURE 3.20). In other cases, pastoralists refused to allow Aboriginal people to remain on their own Country, as was the case with Thomas Learmonth.<sup>39</sup> The early historian of Ballarat, W.B. Withers, however, noted that the Learmonth brothers attempted to establish good relations with the Wadawurrung people he had dispossessed ‘by feeding and being kind to [them]’.<sup>40</sup>



**Figure 3.20** A sketch of A.B. Yuille’s pastoral station at Ballarat, by Campbell, dated 1847, which depicts a group of Aboriginal people (centre) who appear to be dancing. (Source: National Library of Australia, ref. nla.obj-147155346-m)

### The impact of the gold rush

The gold rush caused a complete upheaval to the fabric of Aboriginal society and a devastation of land and water. The sudden influx of thousands of people to the Ballarat goldfields forced the interaction of Aboriginal people with the newcomers, who occupied their Country and were responsible for the decline in food and fresh water, and other resources.

While the pastoral invasion had had a significant impact on traditional Aboriginal life, gold-mining activity and the associated social and economic implications threw the existing social and economic order—and, literally, the land itself—into chaos. Whereas pastoral occupation involved small numbers of colonists spread across a large area of

---

<sup>39</sup> Bride, 1898.

<sup>40</sup> Withers, 1874.

country, the sudden arrival of many thousands of miners created hot spots of activity and rapid land degradation. For First Nations people, it has been observed that mining represented 'the world turned upside down'.<sup>41</sup> The wider social and environmental disorder that was a product of the madness for gold had a negative impact on Aboriginal people. As Cahir has documented, however, First Nations people nevertheless adapted with initiative to new opportunities. They participated in the mining economy through the supply of goods such as food and skins, by serving as guides, and by actively searching for gold.<sup>42</sup> On the goldfields, Aboriginal people were engaged for a range of labouring jobs. It is recorded, for example, that they cut the bark for the roof of the first St Alipius Catholic Church at Ballarat East, which was built in 1852.<sup>43</sup>

The lives of Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung peoples were severely disrupted by the advent of mass goldmining activity from 1851. In addition to the incursion of pastoralists and their servants, and the associated loss of land and resources that had impacted on Aboriginal people since 1837, goldmining was a second significant impact on traditional Aboriginal life in the Ballarat area. The gold rush brought thousands of foreigners to Ballarat over a very short period of time. This put the Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung people in a vulnerable position in terms of ready access to alcohol, being susceptible to exploitation and maltreatment, and a decline in the availability and accessibility of traditional food and places of safety and refuge. It is likely that Other First Nations people were also attracted to Ballarat in search of work and opportunity and found work where they could.<sup>44</sup> The Native Police also performed various duties on the gold fields, including accompanying the government gold escort.

By the late 1850s, there were few Aboriginal people living in the Ballarat area. Aboriginal people continued to live on Country where they could, and these living areas were largely restricted to Crown land. Aboriginal people were frequently brought to the Ballarat police station and lock-up, under the terms of the *Vagrancy Act 1853*. The Aboriginal population in Ballarat became increasingly fragmented due to alienation from much of their Country. Some Aboriginal people probably moved to Melbourne where there were opportunities for work.

In the process of digging up the ground to find gold, some miners encountered Aboriginal tools and other cultural items, especially large items such as axe-heads. James Bonwick

---

<sup>41</sup> This phrase has been used in various sources; quoted here from *National Trust Magazine*, 2023, citing Paul Roser, ICOMOS, 2023.

<sup>42</sup> Fred Cahir, *Black Gold*, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Dorothy Wickham, *St Alipius: Ballarat's first church: The early years*, the author, Ballarat, 1996.

<sup>44</sup> Cahir, 2019.

claimed that some miners at Ballarat (c1850s-60s) found a stone tool 23 inches below the surface in ground that had not previously been disturbed.<sup>45</sup>



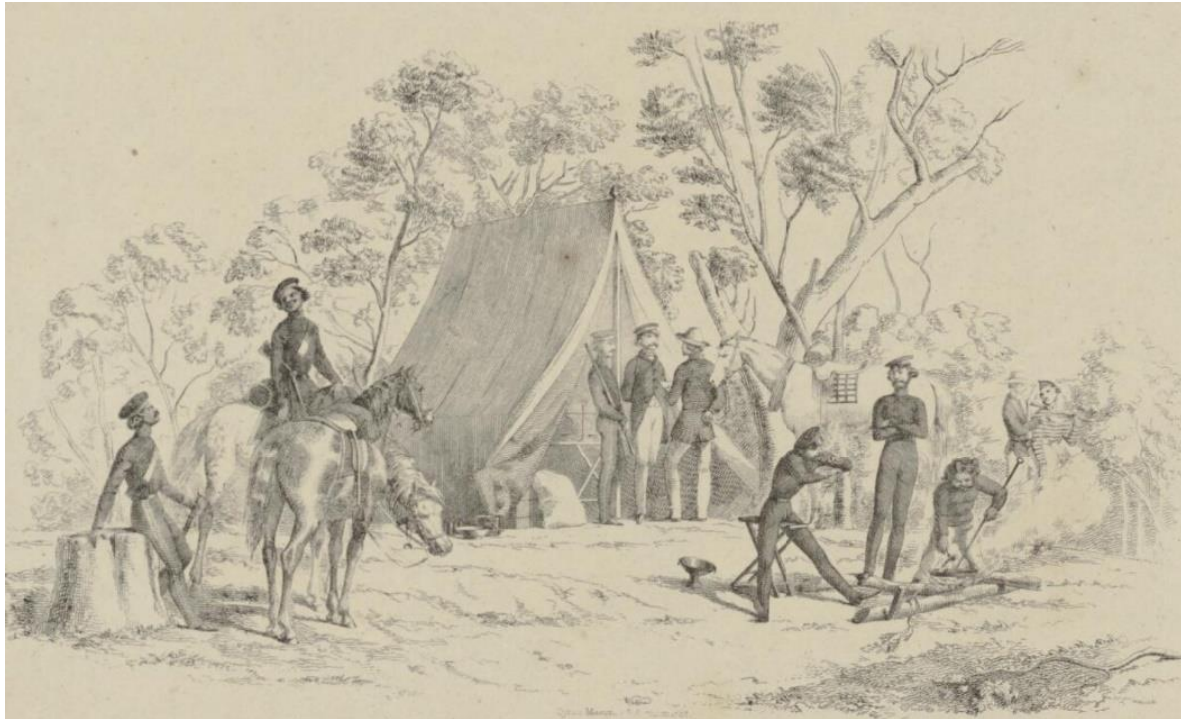
**Figure 3.21** Detail from a sketch by David Tulloch of Golden Point, Ballarat, [1851?], showing two Aboriginal people walking through the camp. (Source: National Library of Australia)



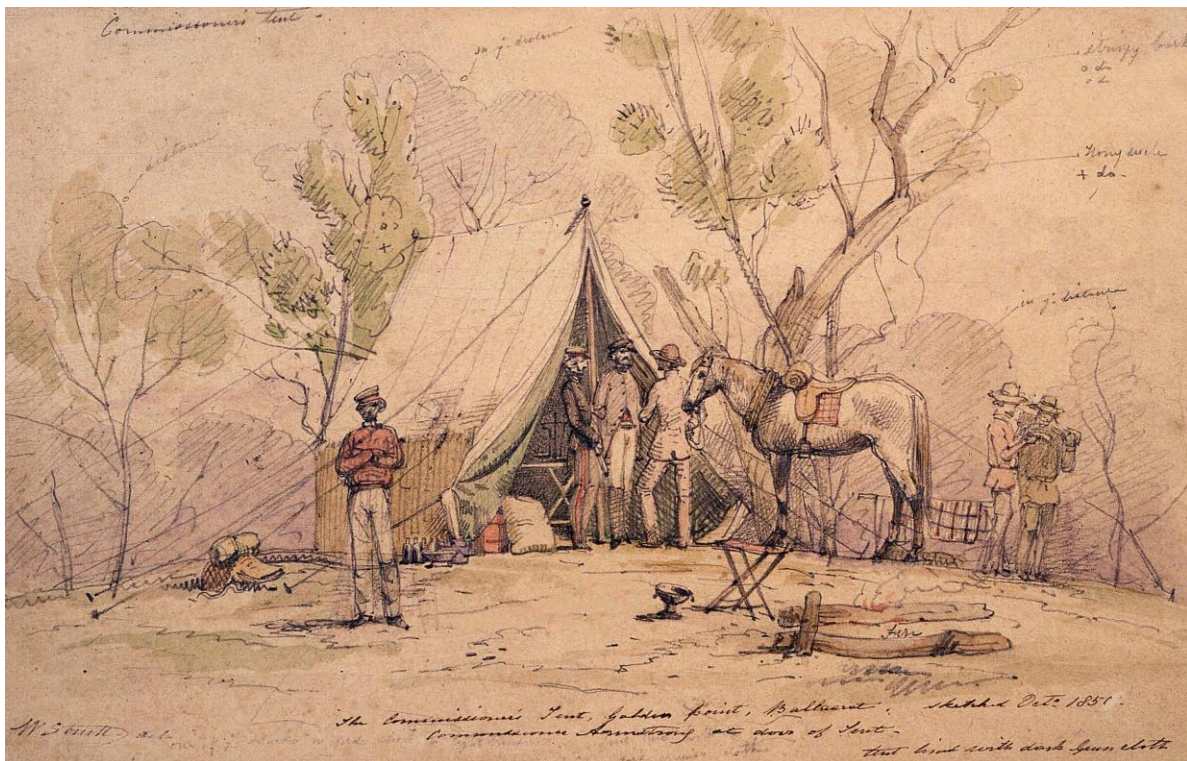
**Figure 3.22** A view of Ballarat by S.T. Gill, 1854. Two Aboriginal people wearing possum-skin cloaks are depicted on the left. (Source: National Library of Australia)

---

<sup>45</sup> Howitt, 1904, p. 15, citing Bonwick, 1870, p. 45.



**Figure 3.23** Members of the Native Police Corps stationed at the Ballarat goldfields, depicted in a sketch by William Strutt of the Commissioner’s Tent, 1854. (Source: National Library of Australia)



**Figure 3.24** William Strutt, View of Native Police at Ballarat, c.1853–54. (Source: Victoria the Golden [digital copy])

### 3.2.3 Survival

With their Country occupied and altered by the settler colonists, Aboriginal people continued to fight for the right to occupy and use their traditional land, water and resources. Aboriginal people remained on Country in central Ballarat and the surrounding area. Some Kulin worked for settlers as labourers. Work included chopping wood, collecting water, and fencing. Usually, this work was carried out for rations rather than wages. The Kulin identified that there was economic advantage in supplying items that the settlers needed, and they sold or exchanged items such as fish, eels and animal skins.<sup>46</sup>

Up until the 1870s, settlers noted Aboriginal camps at Lake Wendouree and close to Craig's Hotel in Lydiard Street.<sup>47</sup> Several Wadawurrung people occupied the Ballarat Common. Local historian Nathan Spielvogel (born 1874) remembers seeing a lot of Aboriginal people around Ballarat as a child.<sup>48</sup> Aboriginal people performed corroborees in the 1860s as a form of entertainment, for example in an event held at the Western Oval in 1867 which was accompanied by fireworks.<sup>49</sup> One settler, W. Williams, recorded that the 'last corroboree' or gathering of 'various tribes' from around the area took place 'near the old Working Miners Mine' around 1870.<sup>50</sup>

Aboriginal people attended and competed in local sporting events, including foot races and boxing. The Aboriginal Cricket Team played at Ballarat in 1866-67.<sup>51</sup>

Once the Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve was established near Healesville in 1863, some of the Wadawurrung people were relocated there, a long way from their own Country. The manager at Coranderrk John Green testified that some of the Aboriginal children from Ballarat came to Coranderrk, and that subsequently their father (King Billy) and his wives followed.<sup>52</sup>

The notable Wadawurrung man, Frank Wilson, died in 1896. He was one of three Aboriginal men in the Ballarat district who were given the name of 'King Billy' by settlers.

---

<sup>46</sup> Cahir et al., 2018, pp. 242, 243; Cannon, 1983b, p. 726.

<sup>47</sup> 'History of Ballarat District', *Weekly Times*, 28 April 1928, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> J.A. Chisholm (ed.), *The Spielvogel Papers*, vol. 3, Ballarat Historical Society, Ballarat, 1974.

<sup>49</sup> *Ballarat Star*, 1 April 1867, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Jenkins, 1964, cited in Context, 'Sebastopol Heritage Study, Part 2', 2015 (Revised), p. 35.

<sup>51</sup> See image SLNSW.

<sup>52</sup> Victoria, *Report on the Aborigines*, 1877, p. 83.