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**Another Side of Eureka - the Aboriginal presence on the  
Ballarat goldfields in 1854 - Were Aboriginal people  
involved in the Eureka rebellion?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the presence of Aboriginal people on the Ballarat goldfields in 1854; the oral tradition that Aboriginal people looked after some of the children of miners during the rebellion; and the view that the effectiveness of the Native Police Corps on the Ballarat goldfields in September 1851 in maintaining order in the face of protest at a government decision to introduce gold mining licensing fees produced a flame of rebellion ... culminating in the Eureka Stockade three years later (Cannon 1993: 239).

There is no evidence for any direct involvement of Aboriginal people in the events of the Eureka stockade however there are three ways that Aboriginal people are relevant to the Eureka story. The first way is situational – the events took place on Aboriginal land. The second is contextual – a view that policing in Ballarat by the Native Police Corps is relevant to the story of the stockade. And the third is relational – the oral history that Aboriginal people looked after some of the children of the Eureka miners during the stockade.

## **Aboriginal presence on the Ballarat goldfields in the 1850s**

It is a truism to say that the events of the Eureka Stockade took place on Aboriginal land, yet it is a truth that is not often articulated. There are several testimonies that Ballarat was an Aboriginal cultural landscape; that indeed an indigenous landscape is the fundament that underlies the numerous cultural landscapes laid down post first European settlement in the late 1830s. The evidence for this indigenous spatial organization is found in clan groups bound by a common language, Wathawurrung, associated with key sites, and conferred place names on the landscape.

There were three Wathawurrung speaking clan and patri-clan groups in the Ballarat district:

- Burrumbeet baluk at Lakes Burrumbeet and Learmonth
- Keyeet baluk, a sub-group of the Burrumbeet baluk, at Mt Buninyong
- Tooloora baluk, at Mt Warranheip and Lal Lal Creek (for more information see Clark 1990).

William Withers (1999: 9) recalled that ‘The aborigines were not numerous about Ballarat even in those early days; a little earlier, however, as when Dowling Forest was taken up, they were more numerous and were often troublesome, being great thieves’. However, Aboriginal presence, and not demography, is the issue in this paper. This presence was noted by one of the earliest finders of gold in the Ballarat district.

John Dunlop was one of the earliest miners on the Ballarat diggings when he found gold in August 1851. The Select Committee of late 1853 that sought to reward

discoverers of Victorian goldfields, asked Dunlop when he arrived at Ballarat, ‘When you arrived you are sure there was no one there?’ Dunlop replied, ‘No; there was no sign of any one, only a few huts belonging to the natives’ (Stacpoole 1971: 11). Dunlop confirms there was an Aboriginal presence in the region in 1851 (see Figure 1.1 King Billy and the Ballarat Tribe 1851; and Figure 1.2 Digging at Golden Point, October 1851<sup>1</sup>)

In December 1851, it was perhaps the people who owned those huts who provided surveyor W.S. Urquhart with their names for landscape features, which were duly recorded and mapped by the surveyor. Weston Bate (1979: 25) notes ‘Urquhart found Aboriginal names for landscape features, and this speaks of the district surveyor’s feeling for the original state of the land. He named the swamp “Wendouree”, the river “Yarrowee” and gave “Bowdun” to Black Hill. By labeling the main waterholes – by then, however, filthy beyond any words – “Quimidupakup”, and the hole further downstream, “Parmoompi”, he indicated the detailed nature of Aboriginal association with the area’ (see Figure 1.3 Urquhart’s survey of the town and diggings<sup>2</sup>). Other Aboriginal names include Buninyong, Warrenheip, Burrumbeet, Ballarat, and Gnarr Creek.

The Wathawurrung association with the Ballarat district continued through and beyond the 1850s. For example, in a letter to the *Geelong Advertiser*, Paul Gooch, a miner in the Canadian and Prince Regent gullies reported in September 1852:

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<sup>1</sup> Figure 1.1 Lithograph of photograph titled King Billy and the Ballarat Tribe 1851’  
Figure 1.2 Detail from a drawing by D. Tulloch, engraved by T. Ham, in Ham’s *Five Views of the Goldfields*, in the La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria.

<sup>2</sup> Figure 1.3 W.S. Urquhart’s survey of the town and diggings, from a copy in the Engineer’s Office, City of Ballarat.

that the way in which the Eureka diggings were discovered was on the occasion of my sending out a blackfellow to search for a horse who picked up a nugget on the surface. Afterwards I sent out a party to explore who proved that gold was really to be found in abundance.

In 1852, James Bonwick (1874, p. 152) visited a storekeeper at the new diggings of Ballarat. On his way, he met a party of drunken Aboriginal men and women, who had been treated for fun by some of the rougher diggers. The following day he came upon a 'blackfellow', lying groaning upon the turf. He lifted his ragged shirt and showed his bowels protruding through a gashed wound. Shivering with cold and groaning in pain, he told Bonwick that 'Long Tom, him do it, him drunk'.

Surveyor Walter Woodbury who was surveying in the Buninyong district wrote to his mother in June 1853.

We have had a tribe of the native Blacks camped near us for the last week so that we have an excellent opportunity of seeing how they live. ... they construct what they miamias, consisting of two forked sticks placed in the ground with one stick running across the top of them, they then rest large pieces of bark or branches of trees on these which gives them a shelter from the wind. They lie all around their fires at night and all the covering they wear is a possum rug or a blanket thrown around them. Their principle food is the opossum which they find out by knocking on the trees and where they find a hollow sound they cut open the tree and so catch the opossum. They also kill turkeys, pigeons and parrots with the boomerang which they are very expert at throwing (Woodbury 1853).

Gold miner, Walter Bridges has recorded an instance in 1855 when his family encountered the Buninyong Aboriginal people. This is an important piece of evidence because it demonstrates the attempts by Aboriginal people to incorporate the newcomers, who were now their countrymen and women, into traditional kinship obligations.

My mother and wife and small boy that come out from England with us was standing at the tent one day all alone no other tents near when they saw a mob of Native Blacks and Lubrias and a mob of dogs with them come across the Gully so my wife said to Mother what ever will we do now so Mother said we must stand. 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 gotum thread you Gotum tea you Gotum sugar you Gotum Bacca. So Mother had to say yes to get rid of them and had to give them all they asked for to get rid of them. That was what was called the Bunyong tribe and when they left they gave their usual salute (Bridges n.d.).

Dr George Wakefield, in a letter to his father dated 1<sup>st</sup> May 1856, discussed multiculturalism at Black Hill.

I am living at the foot of an immense mountain called the Black Hill which is composed of quartz reefs containing immense quantities of gold. It seems to be the origin of the gold leads in this district as they commence from it. The amount of gold taken by some parties is scarcely credible .... The population too would astonish a few, here we have representatives of all the nations of the face of the globe not the least wonderful of which is the aboriginal nation. I have frequently been

present at their corroborees, and their skill in throwing the spear, boomerang etc., is wonderful. I saw the boomerang thrown yesterday. It went completely out of sight & in about 6 (seconds) descended at the feet of the thrower ... (Bowden 1977: 92).

William McLeish (Mss 24/12/1856) recalled a meeting with Aboriginal women in the Ballarat Common on Christmas Eve 1856 when as a ten-year-old he had lost his way going home:

After tramping some miles, I came to a densely wooded range and my ear caught the sound of chopping at no great distance from me, thinking it might be a bushman who might tell me if I was keeping the correct course for my home at Ballarat, I went in the direction of the sound but before I reached the place I heard human voices in the soft musical tones of the aboriginal tongue, and almost immediately after I saw a native woman sitting at the foot of a large white gum tree – her eyes were fixed on me with a cautious searching look and I never forgot the glow that burned in those eyes, but with a kindly look in them that reassured me I walked forward and she said something I did not understand and immediately the chopping was resumed over my head, and on looking up I saw another woman engaged in chopping a possum out of a branch. In a few minutes she had cut a hole into the top side of the limb of the tree and pulled a large o'possum out of the hole – there was one quick tap with the small axe she had in her hand and the animal was thrown bleeding down to the ground – two others were lying there already and the hunter came down the tree stretching her limbs down the trunk and fixing her big toe securely into small notches she had cut to enable her to ascend the tree – in a few moments she came down about 40 feet

and gathering the game and blanket up, they walked away swiftly through the forest. I saw no sign of any men or camp near at hand.

A corroboree was staged at the Wendouree Swamp in March 1857 and was witnessed by a *Ballaarat Times* reporter. At one particular interval, he reported that a performer

would go round to the visitors and make a strong appeal to each and sundry to give “black fellow a shilling”. Some people were silly enough to comply with this demand ... In leaving the place we stumbled on the mia-mia of King Billy. He was sitting in state at one side of a small fire, and in company with the princess his daughter, and his son-in-law. The old man seemed grieved at the revelry and debauch which on all hands surrounded him, and was evidently taking no part in the noisy performance. The princess did not imitate her father’s taciturnity, but, at once, with all the volubility of a female tongue, proclaimed that the whole district of Ballaarat was at one period the patrimony of her sire. The dogs barked, the savages yelled, and the corroboree was pronounced at an end – all hurried towards their homes – while the blackfellows crowded to the nearest hotels, to spend in rum the proceedings of the night’s pantomime (*Argus* 13/3/1857).

Antoine Fauchery (1965) commented on the attraction of the gold fields to Aboriginal groups. ‘They always wander from place to place without ever staying anywhere for more than three or four days. Divided into nomadic tribes made up of fifteen or twenty individuals, they are seen now in the bush, now in the towns, and still more frequently on the diggings, which they visit by preference (Fauchery 1965, p. 96).’ Fauchery’s comment on the attraction of the goldfield is not an isolated example.



Fauchery (1965, p. 98) has recounted the encounter of an Aboriginal man at the Ballarat diggings with a band of wandering musicians.

...it was, I think, the first time music was heard on the diggings. An agreeable sensation for all, and particularly novel for the natives. Coloured men, women and children were laughing, foaming, twisting in a general fit of epilepsy. [Only one man] kept his dignity, and, neglecting the varied ensemble of the orchestra, all his attention was fixed on the trombone. You know the mechanism of the trombone: four tubes inserted one within the other, which are lengthened and shortened at will as the notes require it. It was this mechanism above all that aroused the lively interest of the observer. What could that yellow, shining creature be, that was now four feet long and now only two? What could possibly, in their back and forward movement, become of those hard metal tubes that had no points of separation, even from the Alsatian who was blowing into them with the strength of his lungs? – A mystery! – The full extension of the instrument did not over-astonish the black man; but when he saw it, drawn back by the instrumentalist's hand, go up again, diminish and reduce itself to its simplest proportions, he completely lost his head; he touched the brass with his black quivering hands then he came back to the Alsatian, on whose person he devoted himself to the most minute researches, opening his coat, his waistcoat, feeling in his pockets, pulling aside the pleats of his shirt, thrusting his hands everywhere, but finding nothing, nothing at all that might tell him where half of the instrument disappeared. Suddenly he stopped, enveloped in a fiery gaze the musician and the trombone now all of one piece, then struck his forehead and cried, "He is swallowing it." And he ran away, waving his arms in the air, and showing signs of the most dreadful despair.

Gold miner, Thomas Pierson (Mss), who has given us a first-hand account of the Eureka uprising, noted that ‘While at the diggings we saw many of the aboriganeese or natives of this country, they are very black, tall & straight – have straight hair, they are very lazy can’t be hired to work, they used to come to ours & other tents every day begging, many of them can talk English, they are very degraded, the women lewd, and almost entirely naked – have only a scarf around their loins – some have robes made of opossum skins – they don’t even make a hut to live in but bend a small tree throw some branches over it and lay down on the ground. They are given to theft otherwise inoffensive if not put up to be otherwise by whites, the bushrangers get them for guides ....

The Aboriginal presence on the Ballarat goldfields as attested to by these written descriptions is also confirmed by numerous pictorial representations (see Figures 1.4 & 1.5<sup>3</sup>).

So the events of the Eureka Stockade took place on Wathawurrung land; as attested to by Wathawurrung cultural geography. However is there a more direct involvement of Aboriginal people in the events of Eureka?

### **Native Police Corps presence – a prelude to Eureka?**

What are we to make of the view that the effectiveness of the Native Police Corps on the Ballarat goldfields in September 1851 in maintaining order in the face of protest at

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<sup>3</sup> Figure 1.4 ‘Alluvial Gold Mining at Ballarat in 1854’ from A.W. Strange 1971 *Ballarat A Brief History*, Lowden Publishing, Kilmore.  
Figure 1.5 Detail from ‘Warrenheip Hills near Ballarat. 1854’, Eugene von Guerard, Oil on Canvas, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

a government decision to introduce gold mining licensing fees produced a flame of rebellion ... culminating in the Eureka Stockade three years later (Cannon 1993: 239)?

One of the most significant and best-documented impacts Aboriginal people had on the goldfields was through the role of the Native Police Corps. Members of the Corps were the first police on the goldfields. On duty, they accompanied the commissioners on their rounds, and like so much police work their presence alone was important, along with their readiness to intervene in the event of any disorder (Fels 1988, p. 213).

William Brownhill, who found gold at Brown Hill in 1851, told James Oddie of how he was caught without a licence, taken to the commissioner's camp, and 'guarded by eight or nine black troopers, who in their uniform and polished boots, looked as proud as possible (Fels 1988, p. 212)' (see Figure 1.6 'The Scene at the Commissioner's Tent'<sup>4</sup>).

A London publication of the Religious Tract Society from 1853, entitled 'Australia and its Settlements', includes an account of a visit to Ballarat and the scenes that were observed in the evening: 'The native police, lithe and graceful as kangaroo-dogs, are enjoying a round of sham combat; one black fellow attacks with a frying-pan, the other pretends to shoot him with his knife; a painter might study their attitudes' (No Author 1853: 22).

Artist and miner, William Strutt had a high opinion of the Native Police. At the Commissioner's Tent, at Golden Point, Ballarat, the police were headquartered, and

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<sup>4</sup> Figure 1.6 'The Scene at the Commissioner's Tent', from T. Ham, in *The Gold Digger's Portfolio*, in the La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria.

the ‘fine and interesting corps of aboriginal black Troopers did their share of duty here before they were unwisely disbanded. I was getting interested in these fine soldierly fellows, and my drawings from them are the only existing pictorial records of their ever having existed at all (Mackaness 1979, p. 27)’. Strutt’s numerous portraits of the Native Police Corps at Ballarat and in Melbourne are testimonies to the high regard he had for these Aboriginal men.

The useful black troopers were for a time made to escort prisoners to town (as also drawn by me) these fine fellows were at first the only mounted police, and indeed performed all the police duty at the Ballarat Diggings (Mackaness 1979, p. 31).

In September 1851, a detachment of the Native Police and Lydiard escorted the first packhorse conveyance of gold from Buninyong to Melbourne. In October 1851, Dana and the sergeant major returned to Nerre Nerre Warren, leaving some troopers under the control of Police Magistrate William Mair, however four of them deserted within a fortnight under Mair’s control – two from Ballarat and two from Buninyong. Fels (1988, p. 215) believes that given Mair’s attitude to them in 1849, when he objected to pollution of his mounted police paddock by the native police camping in it, the troopers were unlikely to enjoy serving under him.

An incident on the Ballarat goldfields on 21 September 1851 illustrates their success as a force prepared to intervene in case of disorder. Commissioner Doveton and his assistant David Armstrong explained to the diggers the government’s decision to introduce licensing fees, which attracted an angry response from the miners. A public meeting was held immediately, and when the first men came forward to pay the fee,

they were struck and pelted by ‘the mob’ as Dana called them. Had it not been for the presence of the Native Police, Dana reported, ‘those diggers would have been seriously injured (Fels 1988, p. 213)’.

Cannon (1993, p. 239) takes the view that the overbearing methods of the Native Police ‘so antagonised the diggers that a flame of rebellion was lit, culminating in the Eureka Stockade three years later’. Weston Bate (1979: 14) agrees with Cannon and Stacpoole (1971) to the extent that he is prepared to see this confrontation as a prelude:

Harry Stacpoole rightly sees this first confrontation between diggers and government as a prelude to the tragedy of the Eureka rebellion which was generated three years later on the same goldfield by an equally orderly population and a similarly insensitive and insecure administration.

### **Aboriginal people minding Eureka’s children?**

David Cahir, in the course of his doctoral research into the history of Aboriginal people and gold in Victoria, 1850-1900<sup>5</sup>, has uncovered some oral history that claims that Aboriginal people looked after some of the children of miners during the rebellion, in caves at Black Hill? This has not been able to be corroborated by any written source and is the subject of on-going research by David Cahir, however, preliminary findings of this doctoral research (see Clark & Cahir 2003) attest to the fact that the relationships Aboriginal people formed with gold miners were complex and varied. Child-minding and caring for non-Aboriginal children, is occasionally referenced in the primary literature (see Flett 1974).

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<sup>5</sup> The industry partner for this research is The Sovereign Hill Museums Association.

Although this oral tradition has not been corroborated in written contemporary accounts, what can be said of the Aboriginal association with Black Hill? Are there clues in the historical record that give the tradition plausibility? Nineteenth century Ballarat historian, William Withers (1999: 25) has argued that Black Hill takes its name from its physical geography, and not its association with Aboriginal (Black) people. He asserts its name was derived from its densely timbered panoply. Weston Bate (1979: 38) noted that ‘by February 1854, the lower slopes of Black Hill, once densely timbered, were nearly bare’. As noted above, surveyor Urquhart learned that the local Aboriginal name for Black Hill was Bowdun. Dr Wakefield’s letter, cited above, confirmed that in 1856 Aboriginal people were living with miners at Black Hill, so although the child-minding account is not able to be corroborated, an Aboriginal association with the hill is confirmed. The account is plausible and tallies with what is known of the interrelationships between local indigenous people and the miners they lived with.

## **Conclusion**

This paper explored the presence of Aboriginal people on the Ballarat goldfields in 1854; the oral tradition that Aboriginal people looked after some of the children of miners during the rebellion; and the view that the effectiveness of the Native Police Corps on the Ballarat goldfields in September 1851 in maintaining order in the face of protest at a government decision to introduce gold mining licensing fees produced a flame of rebellion ... culminating in the Eureka Stockade three years later (Cannon 1993: 239).

This study has not found any evidence for any direct involvement of Aboriginal people in the events of the Eureka stockade however there are three ways that Aboriginal people may be relevant to the Eureka story. The first way is situational – the events took place on Aboriginal land. The second is contextual – a view that policing in Ballarat by the Native Police Corps serves as a prelude to the story of the stockade. And the third is relational – the oral history that Aboriginal people looked after some of the children of the Eureka miners during the stockade.

That the Ballarat diggings was Wathawurrung land is not contestable – it is verified by the grammar of Aboriginal historical geography: clan names and placenames. It is also confirmed by the many written and pictorial accounts that attest to an Aboriginal presence on the Ballarat goldfields. Aboriginal Native Police were involved in an event of civil unrest in 1851 that has been described by later commentators as a prelude to Eureka. The third claim to Aboriginal involvement, that of Aboriginal people minding the miners' children during the stockade although as yet uncorroborated and the subject of further research, is plausible given what we know about the interaction of Aboriginal people and miners on the Ballarat goldfields.

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