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**THE FIRST PEOPLE OF BLACK ROCK
THE BUNURONG TRIBE OF ABORIGINES**



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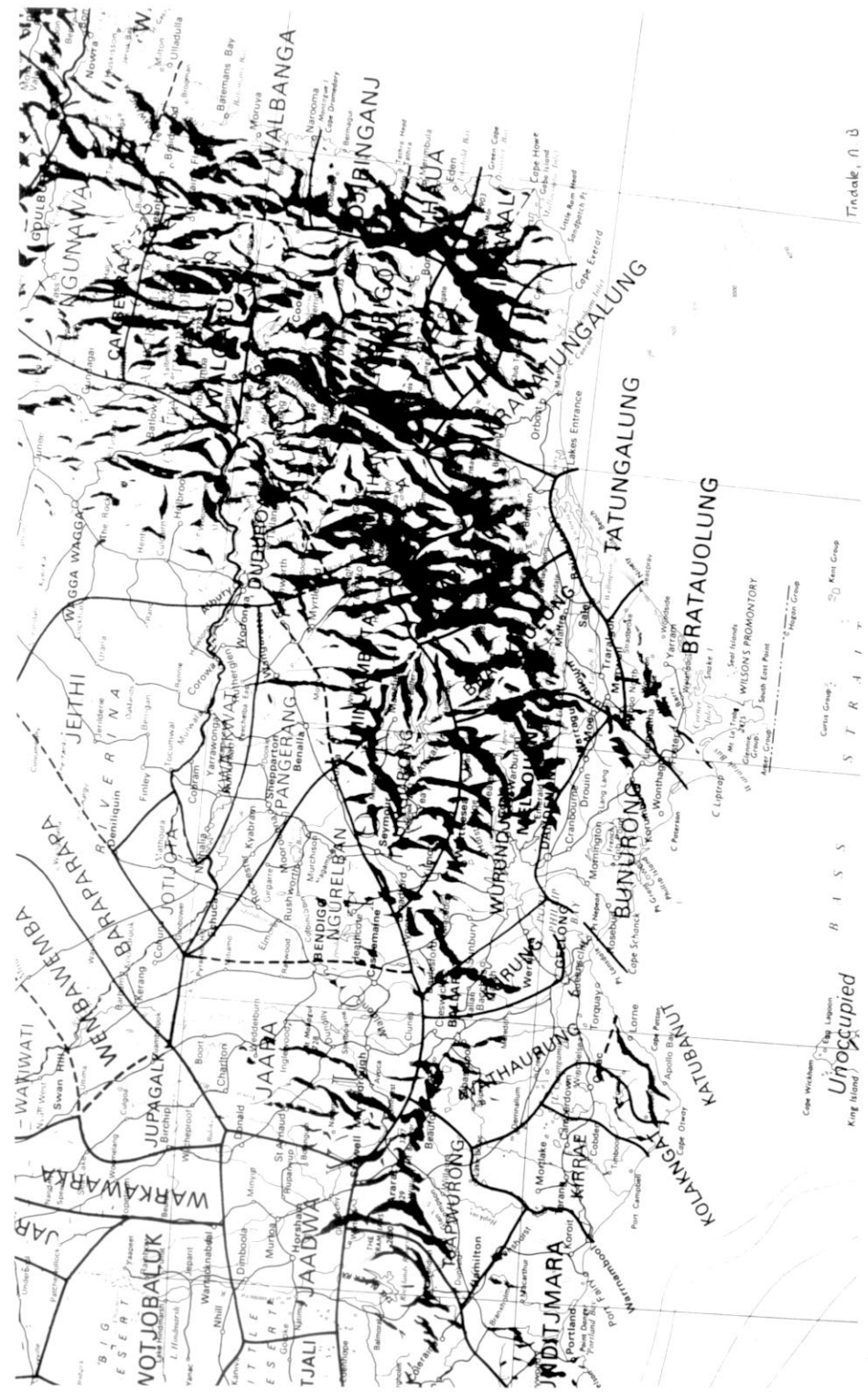
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INTRODUCTION

Little has been recorded of the aboriginal people who inhabited the Black Rock area for an extensive period of time before white settlement. This account gives a brief history from evidence available of the Bunurong Tribe who were the original inhabitants of the area which is now known as Black Rock. It is certainly interesting to read the section which describes the water holes which were, and some still are, the last traces of the Bunurong people.



THE BUNURONG TRIBE OF ABORIGINES

The Bunurong Territory

The first people who inhabited the area now known as Black Rock were the Bunurong Tribe of Aborigines who in the early 1830's numbered about 300. By 1859 however, there were only 15 survivors recorded by A. W. Thomas, the Assistant-Protector of Aborigines. The Bunurong people hunted throughout the area as kangaroos, wallabies and many other species of Australian fauna flourished in this open scrub country. The vegetation included banksias, acacias, eucalypts, she-oaks, ti-tree with grasses and wild flowers in profusion.

The Bunurong were the first of the Victorian Aborigines to be contacted by Europeans; at Sorrento in 1803, at Corinella, Western Port in 1826, and at Melbourne, in 1835. As well as these recorded early contacts, they also suffered from sporadic visits from sealers, who abducted and kept native women at their camps along the coast.

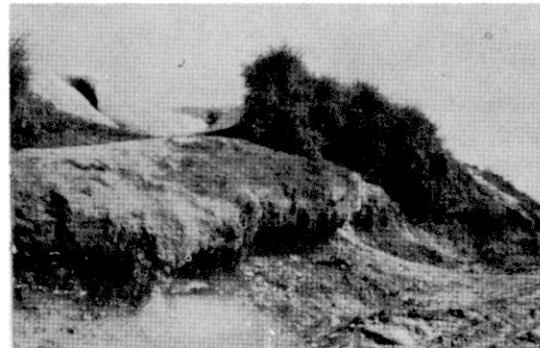
Together with the Woewurong, or Yarra Tribe, the Bunurong Tribe formed what early writers called "The two Melbourne Tribes" because of its geographical position, it was also called "The Coast Tribe."

The territory occupied by the Bunurong extended along the coast from the Werribee River on the east, to Cape Liptrap on the west, an area taking in Williamstown (Koort-Boork-Boork),¹ St.Kilda (euro-yoroke) the eastern environs of Port Phillip (Nerm) and all of Western Port (Warn-mer-in). In land it reached to the Dandenong Ranges (Cor-han-warabul). Mirboo, Warragul, Neerim and the Upper Latrobe River.

COASTAL MIDDENS

The Bunurong were, in fact, a coastal people, much preferring the seashore to the then densely forested inland areas. This is evidenced by the almost continuous line of middens on the cliffs and sand dunes of Port Phillip, Bass Strait, and Western Port. Very large ones once existed around Port Phillip, at the mouth of the Werribee River, at Point Cook, Altona, Point Ormond, the foot of Oliver's Hill at Frankston, Point Davey, Mornington, Martha Point, Point Franklin, near Portsea, and at the head of Point Nepean.

1. This means "place of she-caks" where the natives obtained the timber they preferred for implements. Mirboo meant "kidney", a place where they were likely to obtain kidney-fat from their enemies, as this was close to the Bunurong-Kurnai border. "Warragul" was a term applied by the Bunurong to the Kurnai, meaning "ferocious" and "savage." Euroyoroke meant "sandstone" - for grinding axes: Werribee was "backbone" or "spine": and Neerim meant "elevated."



Eroding Kitchen Midden at the foot of Oliver's Hill, Frankston. (*Vic. Nat. Vol. 76 - 1959. Nov. P.181*)

"Midden", or "kitchen midden," is a term borrowed from the Danish. It was originally applied to the accumulations of shell and other food remains left by Mesolithic man in that country. Victorian coastal middens are easily recognized. All the shells and animal bones comprising them are in a fragmentary condition and often exhibit signs of having been burnt. The sand and any

stone present, especially the large stones used as hearths, also frequently show these burn marks. Some of the middens are quite extensive, and the accumulation may be two or three feet deep.

Years ago it was possible to form a representative collection of the stone and bone artefacts used by the Bunurong by carefully searching these middens. Mr. S.R. Mitchell has given a list of the stone implements in *Stone Age Craftsmen*. To these must be added bone points, possibly used for extracting shellfish, for "barbing" fish spears and for fish gorges. Also of bone were the awls used by the native women in making their cloaks. The possum skins of which the cloaks were made would be pierced with these implements then laced together with sinews. Fine examples of bone awls have been collected at Point Ormond and at the foot of Oliver's Hill.

Most of these middens have now disappeared; subdivision of the land, road-building projects, sea erosion, and the bull-dozer have put an end to them.

OTHER TRIBES

The Bunurong certainly had enemies. These were the tribes living to the east, the dreaded Braiakolung and the fierce Brataoulung, the most westerly sections of the Kurnai tribes, who collectively inhabited the Gippsland forests as far as the New South Wales border. They would come unannounced and raid the Bunurong camps at daybreak, killing every man and carrying off the younger woman.

One of these attacks had taken place just before white settlement of the Peninsula, as evidenced by a report, published in Letters from Victorian Pioneers. This report states that "Previous to the country which lies on the Western side of the Bay of Western Port (between what was at one time Manton's and Allan's run) being occupied by squatters in the year 1835, the Gippsland blacks attacked some

five and twenty of the Western Port tribe in the grey of the morning and cut off every one of them. Their tombs consist of many cairns plainly visible to this day."

Another report, supplied by W. Thomas to the Legislative Council's Select Committee on Aborigines in 1858-9, states that "In McMillan's Estate, at Little Brighton, was a large gum-tree, having carved on the trunk for a yard or two high, a host of blacks lying prostrate as dead. Near this spot, in 1833-4, the Gippsland blacks at Midnight stole upon the Western Port, or Coast, tribe, and made sad havoc, killing sixty or seventy of them. The spot was named Worrown, or 'Place of Sorrow'; The tree mentioned, I am sorry to say, was shattered by lightning many years ago".

The last of the Bunurong

There is some doubt as to who were the last of the Western Port Bunurong. In 1875 an aborigine named Jimmy and his wife Eliza were employed at Harewood House, near Tooradin. They were then both very old and the date of their death is uncertain.

The last of the Port Phillip Bunurong were Jimmy Dunbar and his wife Nancy, who were married at Dandenong, with a wedding party being given to them by Mr. G.K. Dunbar, the owner of Dunbar's Hotel in that town. Jimmy's surname, Dunbar, probably came from this worthy publican.



Jimmy Dunbar and his Lubra Nancy, from a picture published in 1877
(Vic. Nat. Vol. 76 - 1959 - Nov. P. 183)

Jimmy, a well-built and sensible man was at one time a member of the Native Police. He had a retentive memory, was an excellent mimic, and an expert with the boomerang. In his later years he was in the habit of offering large parts of Mordialloc², of which suburb he considered himself the sole owner, in exchange for a little tobacco or rum.

2. Moody-yallock: Running fresh water

Nancy died in her mia-mia near the Mordialloc Creek in April, 1877; a week later Jimmy was removed to the Alfred Hospital in a dying condition. His pack of twelve or fourteen dogs followed and camped outside the hospital but when Jimmy failed to reappear they set off back in the direction of Mordialloc.

ABORIGINAL WATERHOLES

There are few remaining relics of the Bunurong people but there are their waterholes some of which still exist and are worthy of a visit.

Running fresh water was scarce on the eastern shores of Port Phillip, the few streams being more or less brackish. Shortage of water, it will be remembered, was one of the reasons given for the relinquishment of Collin's settlement at Sorrento in 1803.

To the Bunurong, however, water was no problem: it could be obtained from many springs and wells. Some of the swamps, now dried, would also provide water, and food, after a day's march. The fact that wells were relatively plentiful, though only small quantities of water could be obtained from each, can be gathered from the report of Gellibrand, a Hobart Town Lawyer and a well-known figure of early Melbourne. When he arrived in Victoria, in 1836, he disembarked at Western Port and journeyed overland with a party to the infant settlement on the Yarra. They started from Sandy Point, made their way to Arthur's Seat, following the coastline to Melbourne. Although they had no native guide and did not know the country, each day the party found native water wells at which they were able to quench their thirst. The last of these wells Gellibrand reported as being on the beach, about seven miles from the mouth of the Yarra.

All these springs and water holes were the natural drains of the Carrum and Dandenong Swamps and of the innumerable depressions present between the regular series of long sand ridges from Brighton to Mordialloc. The drainage lines of all this surface water had a north-westerly trend, the springs along the seashore using the mouths of this system. At the present day, with the configuration of the land having changed through reclamation, drying of swamps, construction of drains and channels, building of roads, and erosion of the seashore, many of these springs have ceased to flow, while most of the remaining ones are covered by sand, and difficult to find.

A good idea of what they originally looked like can be had by paying a visit to Rickett's Point. About sixty yards on the Melbourne side from the Beaumaris Yacht Club there is an outcrop of reddish sandstone on the beach. In the first "slab" projecting above the surface of the sand there is a circular hole, about eleven inches in diameter, and about three feet deep.

Originally, this hole must have been a shallow depression which filled with fresh water seeping into it from the sides. The natives would be

quick to take advantage of it, and would gradually deepen it until, in due course, it would reach its present dimensions. The "mouth" of the hole would be kept small by the Aboriginal diggers, so that it could be covered with a flat stone to ensure that no rubbish or animals could fall in it and contaminate the water. Later, the mouth would have been widened by white people, shepherds, fishermen, and others, so that they could immerse their billies.

The subterranean inflow of fresh water into this hole is four gallons every hour, which would be more than sufficient for the wants of a small group or family of Aborigines.

The following list of the native water wells reported from the relatively restricted area of Beaumaris - Black Rock demonstrates that they were plentiful around Port Phillip.

No. 1. about half-way up the cliff between the Beaumaris Yacht Club and the boat sheds.

No. 2. already described as being 60 yards on the Melbourne side of the Beaumaris Yacht Club.

No. 3. was about 100 yards on the Melbourne side of number 2, but is now lost under the sand.



Mr. Wally Goodbody at No. 2 Well Photo: L. Cuffley
(Vic. Nat. Vol. 76 - 1959 - Sep. P. 123)

No. 4. was a few yards from a rubbish dump between McGregor and Surf Avenues. This one was doomed to disappear under the rubbish deposited there. In the old days it was known as the "Maori" well because, it is said, it was used by a group of Maoris who camped there. The presence of the Maori at this spot is puzzling and is considered in the following section.

No. 5. now lost, was on the Melbourne side of the Maori well. Old residents remember that it was covered with a wooden lid, with "Please replace this cover." painted on it.

No. 6. is about 500 yards on the Melbourne side of the Maori well, at Quiet Corner. It is excavated on a sandstone outcrop, now at high-tide level.

No. 7. was a group of springs at the foot of the ramp, opposite the hull of the Cerberus, at Black Rock, in Half Moon Bay.

No. 8. was on top of the cliff, opposite the Cerberus. In later years number 8 became blocked, and was a constant source of trouble, often breaking out in the middle of Beach Road. Eventually a storm-drain was constructed and the spring diverted elsewhere.

Aborigines must have used the springs which issue from the rocks opposite where the Cerberus now lies. Later, shepherds belonging to the Ben-ben-jin cattle station of Beaumaris probably widened these wells. The shepherds were followed by the fishermen, one of whom, known as Long Bob, built a hut on the cliffs above, and each day came down for fresh water.

The fishermen were followed by early residents and weekenders, and the wells were squared off and turned into veritable little basins.

Later still, with the increase in population and weekenders, who came to the spot by horse-tram, which ran from 1888 to 1914, an enterprising individual started to sell "hot water". while others sold winkles and other shellfish in threepenny bags, complete with a large extracting pin. Soon the picnickers found Long Bob's wells, boiled their own billies, and stopped buying water. Tradition says that the water-sellers then destroyed the basins by breaching the water-retaining walls.

THE MAORI

An eye witness described the Maori who are said to have camped in Sandringham as mentioned, as having been about twenty in number, men, women and children. The men wore only trousers which were cut short below the knees, and the women only skirts which were worn almost to their ankles. They spoke little English, earned their living by selling shellfish, had flat-bottomed boats and a lot of fierce dogs. They left the district about 1896.

Anyone who delves into the history of the Peninsula comes upon vague references to Maori. However, no one can give any precise information about them. They are supposed to have formed camps all along the foreshore, to have been fishermen, and to have worked in the lime kilns, somewhere in the period between 1840 and 1900. They are said to have been shipwrecked sailors, and in support of this theory there is at least one reference to the Maori manning the sealing ships which, in the early days, sometimes came from New Zealand to hunt seals in Bass Strait. But one would not have expected them to have women and children on board.

It is on record that in the 1860's a troupe of Maori entertainers was brought to Victoria, but because of financial difficulties the company disbanded. Somehow they found their way to Rosebud, where they became fishermen, remaining there for perhaps two years, until kinsmen in New Zealand sent them money enabling them to return home.

Nevertheless, this does not account for Maori and their families in Beaumaris as late as 1896. It is possible that, because of the original presence of these people in the Peninsula, it became habitual among an earlier generation of local inhabitants to call any people of darker skin, such as Gypsies, half-castes, and some others, Maori. The Aborigines had, of course, disappeared by this time.

GYPSES

Gypsies did in fact settle in the Sandringham district, their headquarters being at Queen's Square, between Moor Street in the west, Swan Street in the east, Bridge Street in the north, and Bamfield Street in the South.

In the early 1870's Queen's Square was known as Gypsy Village, and Picnic Point as Gypsy Point. It is said that they gave their name to a number of streets in this locality, such as Banfield, Carew, and Moor. It is strange that while people talk of the Maori, the presence of the Gypsies has been forgotten.

THE ABORIGINES AND BLACK ROCK HOUSE

In an article in Sandringham News 2.3. 1918, a Mrs Cullirane was reported as saying that the Culliranes moved to Black Rock in 1856, shortly after Charles Ebdon began the building of a holiday residence, Black Rock House. Aborigines were unknown except for an occasional visit from members of the Mordialloc Bunurong Tribe, who used to visit to sell their grass mats and other wares. Care had to be taken not to give them a deposit on orders or they may never be seen again for a multitude of reasons.

A popular story is that the battlemented walls and spike-covered gates of the courtyard of Black Rock House were used as protection against aborigines. However, it is recorded that there were no aborigines living in the area at the time. It is also recorded that the Bunurong aborigines were a peaceful tribe. It is more likely that the spikes were protection against horse-thieves as the stables were within the walls and Ebdon possessed a fine collection of thoroughbred horses.

To the present occupiers of their hunting grounds the Bunurong people are but shadowy actors in an interesting period of the history of this country, and if it were not for the occasional skeleton turned up by cultivation or erosion, and the presence or evidence of their middens and wells, they would have been entirely forgotten.

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