

Extract from "The Red Gate" – a history of Alexandra,

Gerald W Noble, Acacia Press, Blackburn, 1969, pp 6-7

Aborigines of the Kulin tribes inhabited the district from the Yarra River to the Alps and as far north as the Ovens River; the principal tribe in the Alexandra district was the Yauung-Illam-Baluk.³⁵ There is not one recorded instance of hostility between black and white in the district, for this tribe seems to have been very peaceful. West of Mansfield, however, many acts of treachery on both sides led to some fearful consequences.³⁶

John Cotton noted the peacefulness of the aborigines on his station:

We have found them perfectly innocuous but a little troublesome, as one could not move out of the house or go to the store without being applied by several of these people for tobacco, etc. To scrape acquaintance with them, at first I gave them a fig or two of tobacco, but they soon found something was expected in return and we bartered cabbages, carrots, melons, wheat, rice, sugar, etc. for opossum skins. . . . waddies, shields, boomerangs, etc. They never fail to thank you for anything you may give them, and appear generally willing to do anything for you that may be in their power, particularly, if you promise them a small remuneration in the way of something to eat.³⁷

Perhaps diminished numbers took away much of the aggressiveness of the blacks, for it was commonly noticed by early settlers in various parts of Port Phillip that epidemics decimated the tribes in the 1830s. Harmonious relationships between the two diverse cultures were not easily secured, however, and official policy was to discourage pastoralists from employing aboriginal labour. When an overseer further down the Goulburn complained of the blacks spearing one of his bullocks in 1841, Lands Commissioner LeSouef told him that "if he persisted in giving them beef while he was so improperly availing himself of their services then he could not justly complain if they helped themselves to it when he had nothing

more for them to do"³⁸ Early in the white occupation the unfortunate aborigines suffered for their innocent hunting of the 'white man's kangaroos', and even into the 'forties squatters yearned, "Oh for the good old days when the settlers could take the law in their own hands!"³⁹

The mining boom brought mobs of demoralized natives to the district and drunken orgies occurred when townsmen gave liquor to the black women. The second issue of the *Alexandra Times* reported:

Near the Catholic Church on the hill, a small tribe of blacks have been camped for some time past, who keep up a tremendous yabber every night, to the great annoyance and inconvenience of the persons residing in the neighbourhood.⁴⁰

(Three weeks later, the same newspaper expressed surprise and profound regret that people were choosing land on the U.T. Creek rather than on the Catholic Church hill.⁴¹) Some whites, however, did spring to the defence of the natives. In July 1868 Donald McKenzie advertised in the paper that

Any person found giving the BLACKS spirits, or taking their Blankets, will be reported by me to the Government- and action will be taken at once.⁴²

Eventually, of course, it became plain that high-pressure civilization and stone-age culture could not live happily together on equal terms, and the Colonial Government removed all of the natives to the Coranderrk Reserve in Healesville.

(JV -not before aboriginal reserves were tried on the Acheron and Mohican Stations.)

³⁵ Howitt, A W, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia* (London 1904) pp70-71. See also Smyth, Robert Brough, *The Aborigines of Victoria* Melbourne 1878) Vol I, p42

³⁶ *Mansfield Courier*, Nov 24, 1909

³⁷ Letter, March 1844, Mackaness, *op cit*, Pt I pp 44-45

³⁸ Report to La Trobe "respecting the trespass lately committed in the Goulburn district". Nov 10, 1841. Manuscript in the author's possession.

³⁹ Alexander Hunter, July 20, 1842, *op cit*, p95

⁴⁰ *Alexandra Times*, June 5, 1868

⁴¹ *ibid.* June 30, 1868

⁴² *ibid.* July 24, 1868