

Skill

Fred Cahir and Lucinda Horrocks, 2015

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Aboriginal people could make canoes very quickly. But to do so required specific technical knowledge. And it wasn't just the making that was important. The ability to steer and navigate canoes, understanding the rivers and the currents, and confidence in and on the water, were all valuable skills in the 1800s.

In Victoria Aboriginal people built canoes out of different types of bark - stringy bark or mountain ash or red gum bark, depending on the region. After the bark was stripped from the tree it was fired to shape, seal and make it watertight, then moulded into a low-freeboard flat-bottomed craft.

There were different styles of canoe built in Victoria. Coastal communities constructed vessels with tied ends and higher freeboard than the flatter canoes built for inland use by river communities. Some canoes were very large, able to seat up to a dozen people. Others were only large enough to hold food. Sometimes canoes were built to last several seasons, other times they were built quickly for just one use.

Because of their acknowledged skill, Aboriginal bark-cutters were in demand in colonial times. They were often hired by colonists, gold miners and squatters for the creation of shelters and furniture as well as canoes.

River life and a river economy were essential to both pre-colonial and colonial existence. Aboriginal people relied on waterways and waterholes for their essential resources and food supplies. The colonists, too, needed rivers to feed stock and crops, to transport goods, and for their own survival.

Both groups settled and camped near water. This meant that rivers were often sites of violent conflict, as each side needed access to the valuable land near water and the valuable water resource itself. But rivers and waterways were also the site of non violent interactions between colonists and Aboriginal people, where the newcomers relied on the skill and knowledge of Aboriginal experts on the water in order to get to the other side.

Gold-seekers such as Samuel Mossman, Thomas Banister and others, attested that it was only with the assistance of an Aboriginal guide that their party survived the Murray River crossing in 1853.

"We had some difficulty in fording the back-water course of the river, which we were compelled to do in consequence of the accident to the bridge; and unless we had had the assistance of a native, who directed us which way we should incline when we were in the river, we might have failed in safely getting over." [1]

A bark canoe was light and, in competent hands, manoeuvrable, and an obvious choice to get across a river when the waterway could not be forded or crossed by bridge. But it took some convincing to get Europeans into canoes. They saw them as frail craft, low to the water, nothing like the sturdy wooden boats they were used to.

Many anecdotes feature Aboriginal people reassuring European people that the vessel was safe. This extract of the traveller Hubert de Castella's journal on crossing the Goulburn River in the 1850s is typical:

"Slowly and peacefully he took us over the dead water of the little inlet we were in... 'Be careful of my saddle when we get to the other side', I said, because the edges of the boat were not two inches above water level. 'All right, everything's right' he replied." [2]

It wasn't merely Aboriginal men who were skilful on the water. Women also knew how to operate a canoe. At Moe (in eastern Victoria), one European over-landing party 'afraid to cross the creek on account of the flood and having eaten all their provisions' received relief from a female Aboriginal guide whose exceptional bush and canoe skills the travellers depended upon for their very lives. Having heard the desperate travellers 'cooeing' the unidentified Aboriginal heroine crossed treacherous floodwaters twice over 'with a very welcome parcel of damper, tea, sugar and meat'. The travellers fearing they would 'die by starvation' and encircled by rising flood waters elected to use the Aboriginal canoe and crossed the floodwaters safely. [3]

In spite of European suspicion of the 'frail craft', because of its ingenious simple design, the bark canoe became a common form of transport in colonial Victoria. Europeans would also try their hand at helming bark canoes. This led at times to tragic deaths by drowning, as some Europeans proved less adept in the water skills needed to navigate river crossings and make it safely to the other side.

[1] S. Mossman and T. Bannister, *Australia, Visited and Revisited*. (London: Addey and Co., 1853) p. 134.

[2] H.D Castella, *Australian Squatters*, trans. CB Thornton-Smith (Melbourne: MUP, 1987) p. 135-6.

[3] G. Dunderdale, *The Book of the Bush*. (London: Ward and Lock, 1898) p.280.