

Participation

Fred Cahir, 2015

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Perhaps one of the most under-valued contributions Aboriginal people made to the 19th-century colonial economy was the one of guiding explorers, miners, travellers, drovers and stock across the inland river systems of Australia using their canoes. This afforded the most efficient and safest mode of river pilotage, particularly in remote areas where no other means of transportation was available.

Squatters, often the first colonists, relied on Aboriginal labour and Aboriginal canoes. F R Godfrey, a squatter of Boort, on the Loddon River, was struck by the usefulness and utilitarian nature of Aboriginal canoes, especially noting in his journal the debt owed to the Aboriginal water carriers who rescued 'two tons of trussed hay in a fine canoe made by the blacks' on one occasion in September 1852. He added: 'The Aboriginals were often sent across by canoe for urgently needed goods – flour, tea, sugar, tobacco and the like, which were loaded onto waiting drays.' [1]

In times when the water was high, a bark canoe was the only way supplies, mail and people could be got across rivers. Godfrey described in about 1851 how rivers such as the Loddon, in central Victoria, were prone to flooding and how one year 'All the country on both sides of the Loddon was flooded, and the wagons could get no nearer than four miles from the homestead, so supplies had to be brought in by bark canoe.' [2]

In 1859 when the waters of Joyce's Creek at Avenel, near Seymour, rose 20 feet after a flood of the Goulburn River, the Argus reported that 'passengers had to be ferried across one at a time in a native canoe.' [3]

Hubert De Castella described how Aboriginal people guided large numbers of people, cattle and supplies across the Murray River in the 1850s. In particular he noted the ease it afforded the colonists and also the economic benefits Aboriginal people derived from their entrepreneurial enterprise.

"Crossing the Murray, which is half a kilometre wide at that spot [junction of the Murray and Darling], was a large number of savages, [who] were camped on the river banks and had boats ready to help the travellers cross." [4]

Other contemporary observers noted how traversing treacherous rivers such as the Moorabool River in southern Victoria was a hazardous affair without highly skilled Aboriginal guides to speedily and safely ferry their goods across. Charles Sievwright wrote in June 1840 of how:

"... where from the state of the roads and rivers, I got them [Wadawurrung guides] to render, essential service to settlers and travellers, whose provisions must have been lost, and progress stopped but for their timely aid. The servants of Mr Murray at Colac, and the Surveyors who were proceeding to Portland Bay, can bear testimony to the skill and safety with which their provisions and equipment were transported across the Nar-ra-hil [Moorabool River], in a bark canoe, when without such assistance they must have remained some weeks upon its banks ere the river subsided." [5]

Much of the early exploration of Victoria took place with Aboriginal guidance and relying on Aboriginal skills. Surveying and geological research also heavily relied on Aboriginal guides to travel along and across rivers.

Alfred Howitt conducted geological research in Gippsland in 1875 and he described how he depended on their Aboriginal guides to construct and pilot vessels for ferrying them across rivers, and entrusted them to deliver vital stores and provisions to forward positions. He wrote effusively of their efficiency and inventiveness:

"I wanted to examine a long portion of the Mitchell River which runs through horizontal strata and which are almost unknown, I therefore sent up two blackfellows 'Long Harry' and 'Charley Boy' under the care of a trustworthy man to Tabberaberra station at the head of the Gorges. Here they made two bark canoes by the time I arrived from Crooked River and the following morning we started on our voyage... Long Harry [sat] behind with a piece of green wattle bark in each hand about 6 in. by 12 in. which he used as a paddle... The other canoe contained Charley and the provisions for three days." [6]

The frequency and degree of praise heaped upon both the usefulness of the Aboriginal canoe and the ingenuity of their Aboriginal makers by colonial pioneers such as Alfred Howitt is testament to the significant role Aboriginal people played in the formation of the Australian bush legend.

[1] Frederic Godfrey (c.1851) cited in F. Stevens, *Smoke from the Hill* (Bendigo: Cambridge Press, 1969) p. 28.

[2] Quoted in F Stevens *Smoke from the Hill*, (Bendigo, Cambridge Press 1969) p.28.

[3] *The Argus*, Tuesday 1 February 1859, p.5.

[4] H.D Castella, *Australian Squatters*, trans. CB Thornton-Smith (Melbourne: MUP, 1987) p. 128.

[5] C. Sievwright, 1 June 1840, in R. Wrench & M.Lakic (eds), *Through Their Eyes* (Melbourne: Museum of Victoria, 1994) p. 129.

[6] A. Howitt Papers, sourced from B. Attwood, ed., *A Life Together, a Life Apart. A History of Relations between Europeans and Aborigines*. (Melbourne: MUP, 1994) p. 139.