

## **Rescues**

**Fred Cahir and Lucinda Horrocks, 2015**

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**In the colonial period Aboriginal people, both on land and on water, would help Europeans in times of need. They were often recognized as saviours by colonial diarists and letter writers at the time.[1] There are many heroic stories of Aboriginal people rescuing Europeans during floods. The bark canoe is prominent in these accounts.**

The most famous account of bravery on bark canoes is from the 1852 flood of Gundagai, in New South Wales, when the Murrumbidgee River overflowed, killing almost 100 people in one of Australia's largest natural disasters.[2] Four Wiradjuri people played a vital role in rescuing townsfolk from certain death with their bark canoes. Singlehandedly, Yarrrie, who was reported as being 'willing to run any risk to give assistance', rescued 49 people using his canoe to pluck them one or two at a time off rooftops.

In these times, skill with a canoe was crucial. But in swirling floodwater, no matter how skilled at watercraft you were, going out on a canoe was a great risk. Even more so when, as in some accounts, the Aboriginal rescuer would put the European on the canoe and jump into the floodwater to steer the canoe by swimming with it. In the Orbost district, an Aboriginal named Joe Banks rescued a sick non-Aboriginal man during the floods by 'making a canoe out of a sheet of bark from the roof and placing the sick man in it, swam through the turbulent waters, towing the canoe and its helpless occupant to safety.' [3]

Some accounts of rescues are intriguingly personal, showing unexpected interactions between the colonisers and the Aboriginal people they had usurped from their lands.

In colonial Geelong in about 1840, an unidentified Wadawurrung man went to great lengths to help a domestic servant lost in the bush find her way back to her home at Kardinia. She recalled that she:

"... wandered about for some time, not knowing which way to turn, then I was attracted by a fire...As I neared the fire I was surrounded by a number of aboriginals each holding a tomahawk in his hand...We were soon on the banks of the Barwon, where the native with his tomahawk cut a large piece of bark from a tree, and, in less time that it takes me to tell, placed it on the water, placed me on it, and plunged into the river beside me. I was conscious of being slowly paddled across the stream. All the time, I could feel his hot naked body touching my face...Soon I was lifted up on the other side, and, in the same manner, almost dragged on until we reached Kardinia. The Dr [Thompson] rewarded the native by giving him food to take back to the camp." [4]

This story has an unusually sensual tone, reflecting perhaps the significance of the encounter in the eyes of the woman who remembered it.

Another encounter between Aboriginal rescuer and European rescuee shows the basic water safety knowledge possessed by Aboriginal people in contrast to the hapless European newcomer. In 1867 a Mr McLachlan, who couldn't swim, lost control of his horse when crossing the flooded McAllister River in

Gippsland, ending up stranded on one bank with his horse on the other. A local Aboriginal man, 'Billy', finding the riderless horse, went in search of the rider and found McLachlan puzzling how to get across.

"Billy, after signifying his pleasure at meeting McLachlan alive, speedily solved the difficulty by making a canoe from the bark of an adjacent tree, wherewith to cross the river. Before getting on board, McLachlan considered it his duty to inform his black friend he could not swim. 'Then you take off 'em boots,' says Billy; 'if 'em go down, you then swim like 'em duck.' " [5]

A little time later, when the hastily made canoe started to split, Billy advised McLachlan that if the boat breaks apart he would try to save him, but that McLachlan should not catch him too hard around the head or neck. Fortunately, and by 'skilful management' on Billy's part, they made it to the other side.

These anecdotes, though coated in the colonial perspectives of the writers, show a depth and diversity of interactions on the rivers of Victoria between Aboriginal and non Aboriginal Australians. They tell that humble bark canoes, and the people who made them and navigated them, saved people's lives and helped make Victoria prosperous.

The knowledge of colonial Victoria's reliance on Aboriginal people's skills and technology fell out of historical accounts in the 20th century, untaught and forgotten. But the diaries, letters, manuscripts and newspapers still tell the story if we take the time to read them.

[1] A typical example is the Reverend Westwood who employed 'Shephard', an Aboriginal guide during his trek through the Moira region, 'depending on him with his life'. See: J Westwood, *Journal of J Westwood Being an Account of Eight Years Itinerary to the Townships and Squatting Stations of Victoria* (Melbourne: JJ Westwood, 1865) p. 401.

[2] S. Wardiningsih; 'Remembering Yarrrie: An Indigenous Australian and the 1852 Gundagai Flood. *Public History Review*, vol.19 (2012) pp.120-129.

[3] Cited in 'Personalities and Stories of the Early Orbost District' (R.H.S.V Ms, 1972).

[4] Cited in: J. Cary, 'Canoes of Geelong Aboriginals', *Geelong Naturalist* 1, (1904): 36.

[5] *The Argus*, Thursday 17 October 1867, p.7.