

Aborigines

An assessment of the fortunes and lifestyles of the Aborigines in the Brisbane Valley since European settlement relies on the recorded and physical evidence of their struggle in the midst of alien commercial intruders who wreaked enormous social change by their investment decisions. The Aborigines' response to the arrival of the Europeans is evident in the *Journals* of explorer, Allan Cunningham. In fact, his actions towards them might well have determined their response to the establishment of the Colinton run by the Balfour Brothers in May 1841. The burning of the lush plains along Cressbrook Creek was proof both of their displeasure at the arrival of competitors and their method of control of their territory.

Settlement came from the south across the river via Wivenhoe and from the east over the D'Aguilar Ranges from the South Pine area. In each case settlers used the Aborigines' routes to the Bunya ceremonial grounds and this stimulated strong antagonism. The Kilcoy massacre in 1842 was known to pastoralists in the region and to missionaries from the German Mission in Brisbane. Its legacy has been a legend in the Valley and the documentary and physical evidence illustrate the practical difficulties of aristocratic pastoralists consolidating their investment in their new realm. The Brisbane Valley was also a leader in the establishment of official government missions with the reservation of Binambi in the Durundur area in 1878. This was in response to Reverend Duncan McNab's representations to the Secretary of State for the Colonies in London on behalf of all Queensland Aborigines.

The history of the Aborigines in the Brisbane Valley also illustrates the 'fringe dweller and or reserve syndrome' evident throughout Australia. The actions of the white settlers were also based on a consideration of their welfare. It may seem perverse to admit this while the history of indifference and cruelty has also to be written. Both altruism and cruelty characterize the behaviour of graziers and selectors in the Brisbane Valley since the 1840s. The Aboriginal culture of the Brisbane Valley is generally opaque to us because we have few written records of those tribes who were wiped out between the 1840s and the 1860s.

Today's community must endeavour to

understand the Aborigines' folklore and the logic of their actions from three standpoints. Firstly, from the Aboriginal point of view imagining the trauma and opportunities brought by white settlement; secondly, from the settlers' point of view, understand what kind of people the Aborigines appeared to be and what was the best way to deal with them; and from the reader's point of view deciding which accounts of the actions of both Aborigines and white settlers seem plausible and pertinent. The second approach has been practised by Australian historians so far. The first and third approaches require a deeper regard for and immersion in ethnography and psychohistory and a more selfconscious appraisal of the reasons for writing history and then understanding that history.

By the turn of the century the Valley was radically changed, with the burgeoning timber and dairying industries; Aborigines had been removed to government reserves such as Cherbourg. The Valley was effectively depopulated of Aborigines except for a few railway fettlers and farm labourers. The presumption that these changes and disintegration of Aboriginal social structures were the hallmarks of post-contact history results from the well-founded anxieties about Aboriginal welfare under white Australian colonial and state government policies. However the disintegration hypothesis is less convincing if we suggest that, before contact with the Europeans, there was a much more fluid group life of Aborigines than the tribe structure. Clearly hunting bands in the Brisbane Valley would have reflected emotional preferences and environmental demands.

After the graziers and selectors radically changed the food-gathering options, the Aborigines were forced away from the banks of the Brisbane and Stanley Rivers, Cressbrook, Emu, and Sandy Creeks. They found themselves on the edge of the new towns, or in the Durundur reserve in the 1870s, in small groups that did not necessarily accord with their ancestral lineage. However, they did retain some of their spiritual heritage, which one of the early Esk Shire Councillors, Alex Smith, learnt from the forty odd old Aboriginal men who used to sit on the bank of Sandy Creek (Esk) in the 1870s. Historical inquiry reveals the frailty of understanding on which people have based their

actions towards one another. Because of their rapid dispersal from fertile river flats it is extremely difficult to reassemble the Aboriginal viewpoint in the Brisbane Valley between the 1840s and the 1870s. But a sensitive interpretation of the nuances and personal descriptions in correspondence of the graziers, selectors, and government officials in the Brisbane Valley in the nineteenth century reveals fragments of the Aborigines' responses and actions, as well as those of the white settlers.¹

Since the removal of the Aborigines to the Cherbourg reserve there has been a general ignorance of the Aborigines' culture in the twentieth century until the resumptions of land for the Wivenhoe Dam project stimulated an interest in Aboriginal relics. A large Bora Ring and native camp site survive above projected water level on the high northern bank at the junction of the Stanley and Brisbane Rivers. In 1981 University of Queensland archaeologists recovered Aboriginal artifacts 4,500 years old from the Fernvale area. At the site known as Platypus Rock Shelter, one hundred feet above the river, platypus bones were found in an Aboriginal camp site. Very likely the Aborigines used this as a winter hunting camp, trapping fresh water fish, shell fish, tortoise, and platypuses. These Aborigines used a distinctive tiny stone bladelet called a microlith. The archaeologists were also inclined to the opinion that the explorer Major Edmund Lockyer may have intruded upon the camp site, contributing to the immediate antagonism of the local Aborigines to the first pastoralists.²

The earliest written record of the interaction of Brisbane Valley Aborigines with European permanent settlers is the correspondence of Dr Stephen Simpson, Commissioner for Crown Lands at Moreton Bay from 1842 and public servant until 1855. That history was one of constant violence. Very serious allegations about the premeditated murder of Aborigines on the Mackenzie Brothers'

Kilcoy station were brought to his attention soon after his appointment in May 1842.

Simpson first heard about the Aboriginal massacre on Kilcoy Station from escaped convicts, David Bracewell and James Davis who came back from Wide Bay with Petrie, Wriotsley, Russell, and Joliffe after their expedition there in early 1842. Bracewell reported that the Inwarrah and Tombarah tribes from the Bunya area informed a meeting of tribes in the Wide Bay area that at least thirty blacks of the Wooganbarah tribe died from the effects of eating food given to them on a station. The Aborigines were infuriated and determined to seek vengeance. Davis recorded that he recovered a watch from one of the blacks who had been to the scene of the deaths. The watch belonged to a shepherd of the Mackenzie Brothers. That shepherd and another man had been murdered in revenge three months after the deaths of the Aborigines from poisoning.

Reverend William Schmidt, a German Missionary, also heard of the poisoning and reported it to Dr Simpson on 14 January 1843. That was ten months after his return from Sydney where he had heard the news from his own missionary brothers, Reverend Eipper and lay missionaries, Nique and Rode. They had spoken to Aborigines of the Umpiboong (Humpybong, later named Redcliffe) area, who had been taking provisions up to the Archer Brothers' stations, and from Davis and Bracewell who stated sixty Aborigines had been poisoned. However Schmidt had indicated that he was unwilling to investigate the matter because of 'his fear of offending the Squatters generally'.

Simpson attempted to investigate these allegations when he made his northern expedition in March – April 1843 in search of a new site for the German mission. He met the Dallamburah and Coccombarah tribes who gave circumstantial evidence but he did not meet the Giggarbarah tribe

Fat bullocks at Esk Saleyards.

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whose members were said to have been the victims. The only information that station personnel would give was that sheep had been treated with arsenic for scab and as some sheep occasionally died by poison getting down their throats, the Aborigines could have died from eating the carcasses of these dead sheep. There the matter rested until the May 1861 hearings of the Select Committee of the Queensland on the Native Mounted Police Force; Captain Coley gave evidence that Evan and Colin John Mackenzie had been involved in poisoning Aborigines on their Kilcoy station by putting arsenic in flour. That evidence was never refuted.³

The first positive government intervention for the welfare of Moreton District Aborigines was the Gazette notice prohibiting removal of the Bunya tree because of Aborigines' use of its nuts. However Dr Simpson reported to the Colonial Secretary in November 1845 that too much importance had been attached to the Bunya as food for the Aborigines because the crop was very uncertain. He said that the occupation of any country for sheep could not interfere with the Aborigines' use of the Bunya scrubs.⁴

Otherwise pastoralists accused the Aborigines in the Moreton District of being the 'most treacherous beyond all tribes' and 'keeping the settlers in a constant state of apprehension', as they reported in the *Sydney Gazette* of 22 March 1842. They wrote to their colleagues in the Hunter Valley and published in the *Australian* newspaper of 21 November 1843, reporting Aborigines' stealing from drays, driving off flocks of sheep and 'Pillaging the shepherds'. In 1843 one party pursued them with a week's rations but became exhausted chasing them and were said to have been 'more successful in falling in with the blacks the second walk (sic),' but newspaper reporters did 'not wish to say too much on that subject'. There were then five thousand Aborigines in the whole of the Moreton region. Although they had a superstitious dread of an Evil Spirit and reputedly practised cannibalism, Simpson considered that they were intelligent, prepared to toil for increased comforts, were basically good natured and jovial in spirit.

According to Simpson the intention of the Brisbane Valley Aborigines in approaching stations in early 1842 was simply to kill in revenge for the poisonings. Hutkeepers on Bigge's and Balfour's stations were murdered and several people travelling between stations were attacked. J. Balfour complained to Simpson that the threats of the Aborigines was causing local labourers to leave the stations and it was impossible to obtain labour

at any price. The squatters offered to provide an armed man at every station to check the Aborigines. Whilst Simpson indicated his desire to recover the cost of the Border Police from settlers, on 3 October 1843 he reported to the Colonial Secretary a list of daily attacks in September on sheep, cattle and shepherds in the Laidley, Tenthill, and Helidon areas. The situation was so volatile on the Ipswich — Helidon — Drayton road that the 28th, 58th, and 99th regiments were stationed at Helidon for three years to subdue the Aborigines and to assist drays passing through the scrub and up the range.⁵

There were six murders by Aborigines of white people in the Brisbane Valley between 1842 and 1844 — Murray and M. Bond on Mackenzie's run, B. Goldrich on Bigge's, and J. Robertson on Balfour's in 1842, J. Maynard on Mackenzie's in 1843, and G. Sinclair on Graham and Ivory's run in 1844. J. Nowland was wounded by Aborigines on McConnel's in 1842. By 1844 the problems of the Aborigines had quietened down.⁶

Nevertheless one of the most violent acts by Aborigines against settlers was the murder John Uhr of Wivenhoe at Christmas 1845. John Uhr and a shepherd had been living in a hut between the scrub at the foot of the D'Aguilar Range and the Brisbane River. They had a large supply of stores and were tending eight hundred sheep. While the shepherd was out with the sheep the Aborigines plundered the hut and killed Uhr dumping his body in the river. The Aborigines attacked the shepherd who fended them off with a gun from inside the hut; he was saved by Major North's employees. The offending Aborigines moved east over the range spearing Joyner and Mason's cattle. Dr Simpson requested that Lieutenant Seymour of the 99th regiment send up a corporal and eight men to remain at the head station for a few days until the panic subsided. Mrs Mary McConnel recalled many years later that when she and her husband were travelling up to Cressbrook they met Edmund Uhr, his wife and daughter, packing up to leave Wivenhoe because of the death of Uhr's brother.⁷

In 1847 the Aborigines demonstrated their opposition to the growing settlement of the Valley. A group of at least three hundred gathered on the Upper Brisbane River not far from Scott's Taromeo station for a kipper-making feast. On 4 August some approached a shepherd employed by the Bigge brothers, burning off grass surrounding the sheep and carrying off fifteen sheep unnoticed. Next day they took a hundred more and by driving them along the bed of the river they escaped to the mountains where they allegedly slaughtered and consumed the animals. Pursuit parties found

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scraps of skin and bones in deserted camps. During the winter of 1847 the Aborigines practised a system of concerted slaughter of cattle as well as sheep, especially stealing from Scott's and Henry Mort's outlying stations. Balfour's hutkeeper was murdered in 1848 and another hut on the station was pillaged. By then the Cressbrook Police Station had been closed and sold. There was a similar incident in 1850 when fifty sheep were stolen from Simon Scott's station. A station hand had been killed at Colinton only a short time before and 'nearly all the blacks concerned in the murders in this and the surrounding neighbourhood were with this mob,' reported the *Moreton Bay Courier* newspaper correspondent.⁸

One of the reasons why Aborigines were so antagonistic was the taking of two boys, John Bull and Bungaree, as 'hostages' on Cressbrook in the 1840s. That was the way the McConnells described the labour arrangements in a book published years later.⁹

There were claims of a deadly feud between Brisbane tribes (known by the whites as 'Megantyn') and the Bribie Island 'Ningy-Ningy' in 1852. Large numbers of the Brisbane Aborigines were moving into the Brisbane Valley and Logan areas for refuge and to regroup. There were also instances of Aborigines fighting in Ipswich over tribal allegiances; further north, the Burnett and

Brisbane Valley Aborigines were suffering from harassment of settlers, the Chinese shepherds, and a general lack of labour. In 1854 a Chinese butcher lost sixty-six sheep in the charge of an Aboriginal shepherd but they were recovered within two days.¹⁰

The 'depredations' occurred as far north as the newly-settled Burnett region. In July 1849 two white station hands were murdered and the Aboriginal tribe retreated towards the Wide Bay area but still determined to keep up the guerilla warfare. Even a dray from Maryborough to the Burnett had to go under escort. Although the violence between Aborigines and white settlers had declined by 1851, Dr Stephen Simpson reported a marked decline in both their numbers and their cultural values. Many were congregating in Ipswich and Brisbane stealing but unwilling to work. In late 1852 a group of Aborigines from the Wide Bay District were suspected of killing a Chinaman on Balfour's station but the Native Police failed to apprehend them.¹¹

On 8 May 1858 the *Moreton Bay Courier* editor stated that it was his newspaper policy to oppose the wholesale slaughter of Aborigines. His view was that the long term solution was 'to raise them nearer to ourselves in the scale of humanity'. He considered that the Native Police had largely failed, but that Aborigines should not be sent back

Monsildale station. 1913.

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to their tribes as they would undoubtedly lead murderous attacks and the whites would not be able to track them. However, there had to be some guarantee extracted from squatters that they would not abuse their vigilante power if the Native Police were wound down. Furthermore, the editor believed that Aborigines ought to have rights to land and that they should be protected and given large tracts of land to rear animals. The same editorial railed that 'power is in the hands of the white man and not in that of the black' and reported that between thirty and forty Aborigines were slain in the Moreton region in early 1858 by 'a party of white men organized for the purpose' after two whites had been killed by Aborigines.¹²

The Aborigines continued to practise their Bunya Bunya (*Auracaria Bidwellina*) festival each January, described by some settlers as a 'rude dramatic performance'. Before ceremonies commenced it was said to be customary to kill a young male and female Aborigine, who were selected by elders unknown to them. Their bodies were skinned by old women, cut up, roasted and everyone partook of a small piece of flesh. Then they feasted on the fruit. The unripe fruit was soaked in water, pounded, and made into cakes, and toasted. The ripe fruit eaten raw tasted like oily chestnuts to the pastoralists who appeared to be aware of the New South Wales government regulation that bunya trees must not be felled.¹³

The Evangelical Church proposed to establish The Moreton Bay Aborigines Friends Society to evangelize the tribes. The Reverend W. Ridley, University of London, undertook the study of the local Aboriginal language to be able to do just that.¹⁴

Gradually courts replaced summary justice. A famous case occurred in 1861. Billy Horton was arrested for 'feloniously ravishing' Mrs Jane Rae at North's station, Fernie Lawn. The trouble started when Joseph North believed he saw an Aboriginal named Nelson on his station who was suspected of murdering a German woman about three years earlier. Two constables despatched to the area found that North was mistaken and left. A group of Aborigines then went up to the hut of Mrs Rae and assaulted her, accusing her of calling the police. Asked afterwards if she knew who did it she said in pidgin, 'Bail me know blackfellow', fearing they would kill her if she said yes. Two troopers were despatched with a telegram to Lieutenant Wheeler to arrest the culprit. Billy Horton was then arrested for the assault. Mrs Rae later said that her reason for not admitting he had committed the offence was her dread of her husband knowing what had taken place.

The incident occurred at the Rae's sawpit. Jane Rae had been at the river washing and then left the children at the river and went up to the hut to put the kettle on. When she went to the saw pit to obtain chips she was assaulted by an Aborigine who raped her. Her son Edward heard her scream; she later complained to the Police Magistrate. She mentioned 'Stink-a-Bed Johnny' and from her description one of the constables said it must have been Billy Bow-Bow. Sergeant George Elliott said he had known the accused for fifteen months and 'gave him the character of being an industrious black, and very quiet while in town'.

Billy Horton was tried at the Supreme Court in Ipswich before Judge Lutwyche. Despite the evidence, the jury returned a guilty verdict. Kipper Billy was charged with aiding and abetting Billy Horton and also found guilty. Billy Horton addressed the Judge and Jury to the effect that Mrs Rae had first said that he was not the man, and afterwards that he was the man. Judge Lutwyche then pronounced the death sentence. However the *Burnett mailman* — who knew Billy Horton well — said that on the day in question he saw Horton eleven miles on the other side of the Brisbane River and that on his subsequent arrival at the inn, Jane Rae's son came up and informed him of the assault. In March 1861 the Police Magistrate was ordered to inquire into the mailman's statement about Horton's whereabouts on the day of the assault. Within a month Horton received a pardon from the Governor Bowen and was freed. No one else was arrested for the crime.¹⁵

In the 1860s the Aborigines were used as agricultural labourers. In winter they were willing to work well providing they were fed and well supervised. Besides clearing undergrowth and scrub they picked cotton expertly. They took their cheques for cotton picking to Ipswich in 1868 and while the men drank, the women bought clothing. The following year after the cotton price had fallen markedly, most were unemployed and exchanged their blankets for drink in Ipswich. The police eventually drove them out of town.¹⁶

The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Aborigines in Queensland published in 1874 recommended the establishment of reserves and the appointment of Protectors. The Commissioners also considered that huts and schools should be constructed on the reserves and that rations, clothing, and implements should be supplied for growing crops. The report also acknowledged the success of many cases of employment of Aborigines, but stated that there had to be a system of monitoring and enforcing Agreements and provision for Aborigines to sue for unpaid wages

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where necessary. Failure to pay agreed wages was a common practice. The Commission acknowledged that since one-quarter of the colony's income came from land once occupied by Aborigines a portion of it ought to be held in trust for their benefit. The supply of liquor to Aborigines was to be prohibited and Aborigines were to be excluded from towns where liquor was available.¹⁷

When the Durundur reserve, called Binambi, was set up on Monkeybong Creek the local residents were displeased and petitioned the Secretary for Lands on the subject. Trustees of the reserve, R.J. Smith and Henry Wood, had organized five miles of two rail fence. There were two paddocks, one proposed for agistment and the other enclosing the natives' horses and bullocks. Aborigines were occupied in ringbarking, hewing, splitting firewood, stripping bark, tracking strayed horses and bullocks, storing corn and storekeeping — at rates of one shilling per acre, twenty-three shillings per cord, and ten shillings per hewn cord of firewood. There were nineteen Aborigines occupying five slab huts and fifteen gunyahs. The Esk and Cressbrook correspondent of the *Queensland Times* considered that the Aborigines ought to be given '80 acres of land to call their own once more, before it is all alienated from them'.¹⁸

During the depression of the 1890s Aboriginal station hands were sacked. As in all times of hardship, people take to gambling and two Aboriginal stockmen at Taromeo in 1896 illustrated that trait characteristically well. As the rain prevented them leaving, they played cards, making the place like a 'small scale Monte Carlo' with several week's earnings at stake. One lost all his money, then his blanket and clothes, then his cards, then his tobacco.

The plight of three half-caste children in Esk in 1891 also illustrated contemporary response to the race. The three King children were declared to be neglected as they were living at Aborigines' camp and, as they were white, they were sent to an orphanage rather than the Reformatory.¹⁹

By World War I when the Brisbane Valley had become a highly productive agricultural, dairying, and timber area the Aboriginal population had been almost completely removed to Barambah reserve (later known as Cherbourg) and the Aborigine had become both loyal and sacrificial

within Queensland society and largely hidden from view. The only ones remaining were those working as stockmen and labourers on the contracting pastoral properties.

ENDNOTES

1. ER 22 July 1933; Tim Rowse, 'Aborigines as historical actors: evidence and inference' *Historical Studies* Vol 22 No 87 (October 1986).
2. *Morning Bulletin* 9 December 1981 p20.
3. For an assessment of Dr Stephen Simpson's career see ADB Vol 2 p448; Letterbook of the Commissioner for Crown Lands, Moreton Bay. 1842 — 1853 (Simpson's letters, 30 May 1842, 20 January and 6 May 1843, A/20,882 pp5,10-11,23, QSA) (The copy used for the research on Aborigines in the Brisbane Valley was the transcription by G. Langevad published as *The Simpson Letterbook In Cultural and Historical Records of Queensland* No 1 (University of Queensland, Anthropology Department, October 1979); QV&P 1861 p424; The members of the Select Committee were: R.R. Mackenzie, Member for Burnett, C. Fitzsimmons, Member for Port Curtis, R. St. George Gore, Member for Warwick, J. Watts, Member for Drayton and Toowoomba, C.J. Roysds, Member for Leichhardt, T. Moffatt, Member for Western Downs, J. Ferrett, Member for Maranoa, and C. W. Blakney, Member for Brisbane; Langevad, G., 'Captain Coley — Queensland's First Sergeant-at-Arms' RHSQJ Vol 10 No 4 pp139-150.
4. *Sydney Gazette* 21 April 1842; Letterbook of the Commissioner for Crown Lands, Moreton Bay. 1842 — 1853. (Simpson's Letter, 25 November 1845, A/20,882 p38).
5. *Sydney Gazette* 22 March 1842; *Australian* 21 November 1843; Letterbook of the Commissioner for Crown Lands, Moreton Bay. 1843-1853 (Simpson's Letters, 13 July and 8 August 1842 and 3 October 1843, A/20,882 p6,24-25); T. Pugh, *Brief History of the Moreton Bay Settlement*, 1859 *op.cit.*
6. Letterbook of the Commissioner for Crown Lands, Moreton Bay. 1842-1853. (Simpson's Letter, 31 December 1844, A/20,882 p34).
7. Letterbook of the Commissioner for Crown Lands, Moreton Bay. 1842-1853. (Simpson's Letter, 8 January 1846, A/20,882 p40); Mary McConnel, 'Memories of Days Gone By'. (Typescript, RHSQ).
8. MBC 21 August 1847 and 18 January 1851; Letterbook of the Commissioner for Crown Lands, Moreton Bay. 1842-1853. (Simpson's Letter, 31 December 1848, A/20,882 p61).
9. *The Cressbrook Estate* p4.
10. MBC 7 February, 17 April and 23 October 1852, and 3 December 1854.
11. MBC 4 August 1849 and 4 December 1852; Letterbook of the Commissioner for Crown Lands, Moreton Bay. 1842-1853. (Simpson's Letters, 5 January 1852 and 31 December 1852, A/20,882 pp.85 and 101).
12. MBC 8 May 1858.
13. NA 15 January 1856.
14. MBC 17 February 1855.
15. QT 13 and 27 December 1861, 7 February, 4 March, and 4 April 1862.
16. QT 2, 16 June 1868 and 22 June 1869 p2.
17. QV&P 1874 Vol 2 pp439-442.
18. QV&P 1878 Vol 2 pp66-67; QT 17 November 1877 p3.
19. QT 7 and 9 April 1891 and 22 February 1896.