

INTERPRETING AN IMAGE

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Picturing Sound and Song at the Murray River Crossing Place

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Abstract

This piece argues that documentary evidence drawn from George Robinson's journal and Lady Jane Franklin's letter, twelve months earlier, demonstrate the Murray River police hut and its surrounds were a 'contact zone', that is places where people, long separated geographically and historically, encountered each other, and where they were beginning to establish ongoing relations. This is 'a place of evocation', that is a place for sharing stories among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people relating to the productive lives pursued nearby before the intrusion of Europeans and stories relating to the impact of that intrusion.

George Robinson, the chief protector of Aborigines in Port Phillip, sketched stock being swum across the newly designated official crossing place at the Murray River on 25 April 1840.

The speckled ink sketch (Figure 1) focuses on 20 to 30 men, represented as hatch marks, as they urged sheep and cattle into the water, and then splashed and shouted to keep them swimming to the other side. There was, Robinson says, 'bustle' and 'din' that could be heard at a great distance.

Robinson sketched the noisy scene from the vantage point of the police hut, high on a hill overlooking the crossing. The crossing was not wide, the water was not deep, but it could be dangerous. Robinson noted that many sheep drowned. Aboriginal people, probably Wiradjuri, had gathered to feed on the carcasses.

In the foreground of the sketch are the fenced graves of two stockmen, drowned near the ford in dangerous water holes where

whirlpools formed. In the mid-distance is a substantial public inn, where there was a blacksmith, and a cultivated paddock close to a native encampment represented with other hatch marks. Robinson was told a township had been laid out nearby. In the distance the word 'hill' suffices for a sketch of an activity, not a landscape. Alongside his sketch, Robinson notes: 'A number of Blacks were employed'.

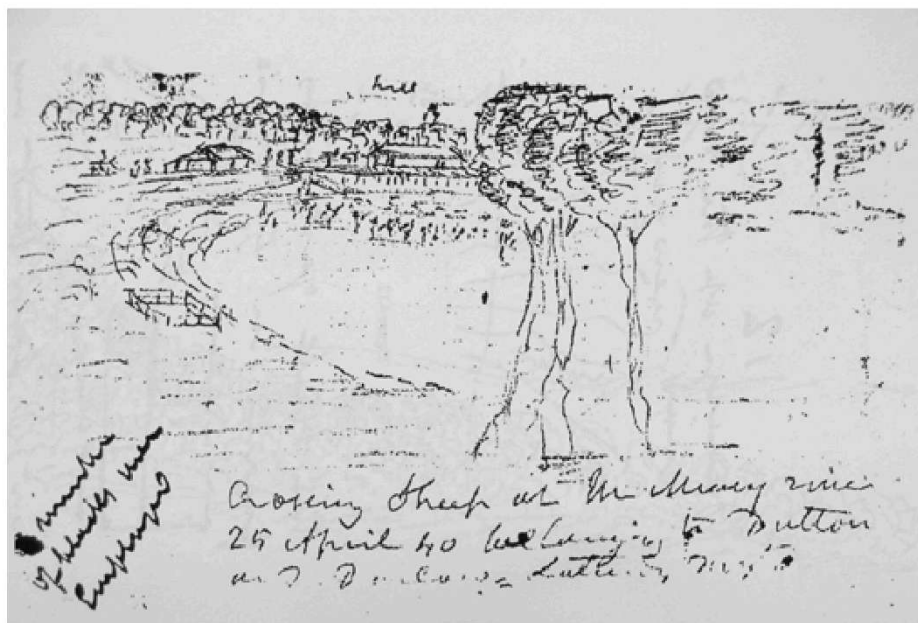


Figure 1: 'Crossing sheep at the Murry [sic] River' (Courtesy Ian Clark (ed.), *The Journals of George Robinson, Chief Protector, Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate*, Volume 1, Melbourne, Heritage Matters, 1998, p. 266)

The sketch was Robinson's personal memory prompt. It appears in the first of his personal journals where he recorded his expeditions through his protectorate.¹ The superintendent of the Port Phillip District, Charles La Trobe, was worried about the increasing number of Aboriginal people coming to Melbourne. He had hopes that the chief protector might be able to help alleviate the conditions in the hinterland that were forcing Aboriginal people to move. He ordered Robinson to visit the Goulburn River District because of the recent conflict between squatters and the traditional Indigenous landowners.

Robinson, then, was to find out more about how Europeans and Aboriginal groups were interacting. He found that some Aboriginal people were integrating themselves into the newcomers' economy. One pastoralist told him how they used Aboriginal men in 'all kinds of labour', mainly 'fetching bark, looking after stock, fetching and chopping wood,

looking after cattle'. The station manager at Indigo Creek said, 'He should be at a great loss without them'. Indigenous people were a prized workforce but not commonly paid in money. Instead, they received clothes, flour, meat, sugar, tea or tobacco.²

Robinson told a story of a man at the police hut. His name was Wor.rum.me.yeer (Ome.he), alias Joe. He had been there fifteen or eighteen months: 'He is quite domestic, does the work that a white person can do'. When Robinson visited the black encampment at the foot of a hill, he found Wor.rum.me.yeer cooking a sheep's head. He was singing a song 'about a blackfellow being tired crossing sheep'. Robinson observed that the task of crossing required hard work, and that the Aboriginal men 'were more useful than any white man'. 'Such exertions deserved to be recognised in song.'

Robinson's journal records provide documentary evidence that inform an archaeological investigation of the police hut site at the Murray River crossing place being undertaken in 2022 by Biosis Pty Ltd, a Melbourne-based heritage consultancy firm. The statements of significance that guide that investigation suggest the place may be important to the state for the ways it helps explain: first, the development of law enforcement; second, the formation of the township of Albury; third, interchanges between Aboriginal groups and settlers; and, more generally, Aboriginal occupation of the river reserve where it is located.

Robinson presents the police hut as a primary element in what Mary Louise Pratt describes as 'contact zones'—places where people, geographically and historically separated, encountered each other, and where they were beginning to establish ongoing relations.³ At and about the police huts on the line of the road north from Melbourne, settlers and Aboriginal people were finding ways to live together and separately. Some were starting to form an integrated economy.

Lady Jane Franklin, Robinson's Van Diemen's Land patron and friend, had visited the Murray River crossing place twelve months before him. She, too, met Wor.rum.me.yeer.

In her letters to her husband, Lady Franklin portrayed the Aboriginal people she encountered directly or indirectly as two sets of people: '[some] still fighting to protect their traditional livelihood by courage, stealth and skill'; and 'some accepting dependence and cultural dislocation as the price of survival on pastoral stations'.⁴ She had been very fearful moving in a small and vulnerable party through land that was still

being contested, having heard stories of the Faithfull Massacre (1838) in which overlanders were murdered the year before. She knew, however, that Governor George Gipps had established police huts with adjacent towns to protect travellers along the route she was taking (Figures 2 and 3). Lady Franklin was nevertheless much relieved to reach the safety of the Murray River where the natives were, 'quite quiet'.

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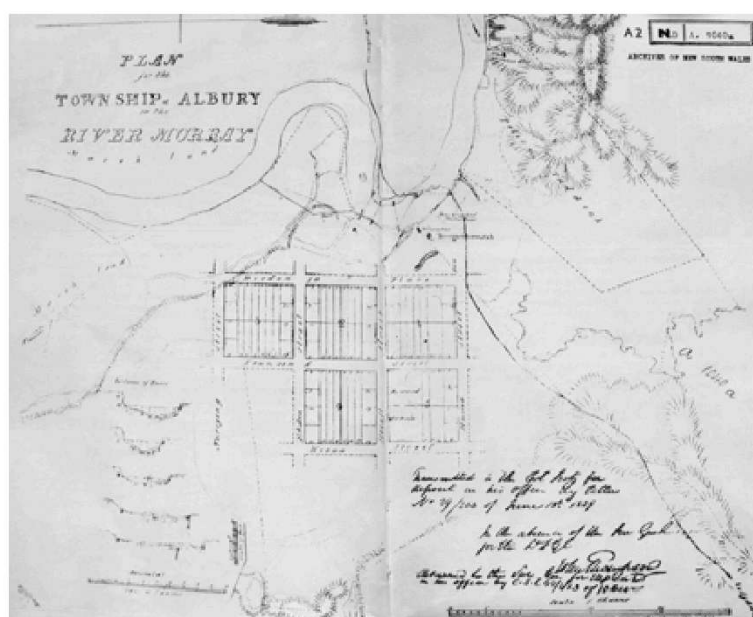
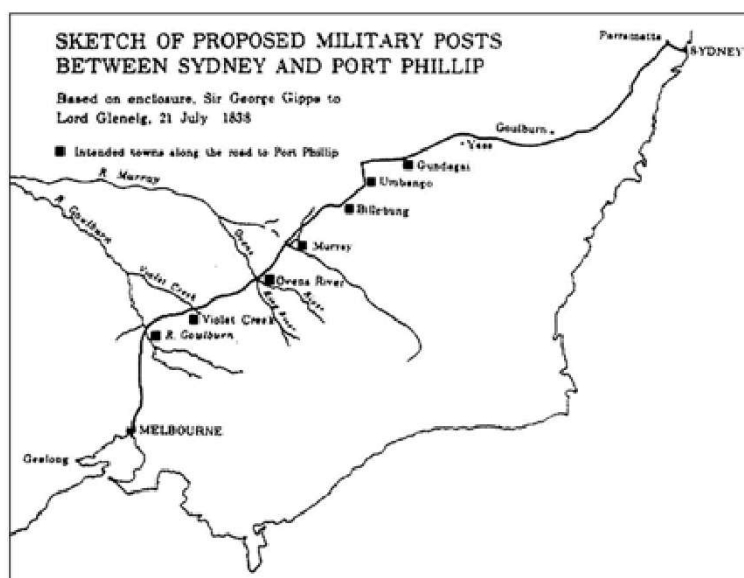


Figure 2: Map showing proposed military posts between Sydney and Melbourne 1838 (Courtesy Michael Cannon, *Historical Records of Victoria*, Vol. 2A, *The Aborigines of Port Phillip 1835–1839*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1977, p. 357)

Figure 3: Thomas Townsend's 'Plan of the Township of Albury at the River Murray', showing the police hut and the crossing (Courtesy NSW State Archives, N1040)

At the Murray, Lady Franklin met with and described two Aboriginal families headed by Joe and Jem. Joe, Mary and their daughter spoke a creole she dismissively calls ‘jabber English’. They did the drudgery work of fetching wood and water for the police hut. They were paid with ‘refuse victuals’; they ate potato peelings, cabbage stalks and whatever had been left on plates. She remarked on the way Joe ‘treated his gin well’ and noted his reluctance to scale a tree to show her how he hunted possums. Jem worked for the publican, and acted as human scare crow, protecting the publican’s maize crop. Both men and their families did menial chores for minimal in-kind payment and were prized for their reliability.⁵

Both Robinson and Lady Franklin are imperfect witnesses to European and Aboriginal interactions. Jane Franklin was a privileged white woman who had fleeting encounters with Aboriginal people. Hers was a curious but othering colonial gaze. George Robinson was a government official, caught between doing his job to protect but being complicit in the dispossession of Aboriginal people. Still, Inga Clendinnen found him a worthy guide and one who appeared to win the confidence of his Aboriginal interviewees with his possession of Aboriginal words and understandings of tribal affiliations that suggested he was ‘mapping the Aboriginal world of meanings and imagination.’⁶ He admired the ‘ingenuity of this singular people’, notably, as he saw it, in the way they eked a living from the rivers and the land.

Both Franklin and Robinson provide one-sided contact stories depicting European settlement. Yet, they start, even advance, conversations about how Europeans and Aboriginal groups related to each other and how the land, the river and the crossing place were being used at a stage in white Australia’s black history.

The sound, song, public inn, native encampment and police hut have all long gone. But it is to be hoped that such documentary evidence is sufficient to persuade archaeologists looking for the place and determining its meanings to see heritage values important to the local community and to the state.

The undeveloped nature of the police hut site and its immediate river reserve surrounds help make what Heather Goodall calls ‘a place of evocation’, that is a place for sharing stories among Indigenous and non-Indigenous people relating to the productive lives pursued nearby before the intrusion of Europeans and stories relating to the impact of that intrusion.⁷

Notes

- 1 Ian Clark (ed.), *The Journals of George Robinson, Chief Protector, Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate*, Volume 1, Melbourne, Heritage Matters, 1998, p. 266.
- 2 Clark (ed.), pp. 241–50.
- 3 M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London, Routledge, 1992, pp. 6–7.
- 4 Penny Russell (ed.), *This Errant Lady: Jane Franklin's Overland Journey from Port Phillip to Sydney, 1839*, Canberra, National Library of Australia, 2002, p. 48.
- 5 Russell (ed.), pp. 61–8.
- 6 Inga Clendinnen, *Tiger's Eye*, Melbourne, Text, 2000, pp. 191–221.
- 7 Heather Goodall, 'Too Early Yet or Not Soon Enough: Reflections on Sharing Histories as Process', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 33, no. 118, 2002, pp. 21–3.

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