

**The Cultural Interactions of Aborigines with Whales, Whalers  
and Whaling in southwest Victoria 1828-1850**

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**A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Business (Research).**

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**STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP:**

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## **Abstract**

The primary aim of this thesis is to reconstruct the history of Aboriginal cultural associations with whales and whaling in southwest Victoria in the nineteenth century. Despite there being a considerable corpus of information about Aboriginal peoples and whaling in southeast South Australia and southern New South Wales, there is a relative poverty of information on southwest Victoria. One of the primary objectives of this thesis is to offer explanations for this absence of information. Through an analysis of the Convincing Ground massacre that is believed to have taken place in the early period of whaling at Portland Bay, it will be argued that the violence characterised by this event fundamentally transformed race relations at Portland to such an extent that Aboriginal people avoided interaction with whalers. The rationale for this research is twofold: first to contribute to the history of frontier relations in Victoria; second, to reconstruct from archival sources the cultural and economic associations between Victorian Aboriginal people and whalers.



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## **Acknowledgements**

There are a number of individuals, groups and organisations that I would like to acknowledge and thank for their assistance in completing this dissertation: my supervisors Professor Ian Clark and Associate Professor Fred Cahir for their invaluable advice and feedback on my dissertation drafts and for providing advice on useful references for my research – with Ian and Fred I was in good supervisory hands; Dr Rani Kerin also for her helpful and meticulous professional editing of this thesis; Federation University Australia and the Business School for giving me the opportunity to complete my Master of Business by Research – without them I would not be where I am now; my parents for their unfailing support all through my research and providing me with the motivation to continue on my current path; my partner Amy Southern who supported me through the good and frustrating times during the editing process; the State Library of Victoria and the Portland History House for allowing me to peruse their collections; and my numerous colleagues, friends and acquaintances for getting me through the more trying stages of my research.

## **Introduction**

This dissertation examines Aboriginal peoples' relationship with whales and whaling in southwest Victoria, and seeks to explain the paucity of information about this relationship. Comparisons are drawn with South Australia, Tasmania and Twofold Bay in New South Wales, but these locations are not the focus of the dissertation. Instead, they help to outline the situation in southwest Victoria, illustrating the ways in which Aboriginal-whaler relations were different there compared to other colonies.

The first whaling in southeastern Australia occurred three years after the foundation of the Botany Bay settlement in 1788 on the far south coast of New South Wales and Bass Strait. Whaling was one of the first commercial ventures actively pursued in colonial Australia. In addition to this, whaling was conducted at New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria from the 1810s to the 1850s (Diamond 1995; Clarke 1991, 1996; Staniforth 2006a, 2006b; Nash 2003; Powling 1980). In Tasmania and Victoria sealing preceded whaling as the main commercial venture in Bass Strait during the 1810s and 1820s. A connection between sealing and whaling is evident within works by Plomley (1966), Ryan (1972, 1996), Amery (1996), Taylor (2000, 2002) and Russell (2012). The over-hunting of seals resulted in a greatly reduced population by the late 1820s. Subsequently, whaling became a more viable commercial industry (Chamberlain 1989; Nash 2003; Russell 2001, 2005, 2007, 2012; Taylor 2000, 2002; Townrow 1997). Aborigines from northern Tasmania worked in the sealing industry from the start of the 1800s and, with the inception of whaling in South Australia, cooperated with whalers before and after 1836 when the South Australia Company was formed which established the colony of South Australia (Taylor 2002). Clarke and Staniforth have examined interactions between Aboriginal people and Europeans in South Australia. Davidson (1993, 2004), Diamond (1995) and Wesson (2001) have looked at this relationship at Twofold Bay, and Nash (2003) and Russell (2001, 2005, 2007, 2012) have studied it in Tasmania. Russell's (2012) work is pivotal to this thesis as it details how Aborigines adapted to changing circumstances and 'moved beyond colonial imposition' (Russell, 2012, p.7).

There have been few studies of Aboriginal cultural associations with whales and whaling in Victoria. Critchett's (1984, 1992, 1998) work focuses upon the massacres of Aborigines in western Victoria and Portland and only briefly examines Aboriginal people's associations

with whaling. Clark (1990, 1995, 1998d, 2005, 2011, 2014) has researched Aboriginal historical geography in western Victoria documenting Aboriginal languages and clan organization, and considered the various processes of dispossession Aboriginal people experienced. Clark has conducted extensive research into violence in western Victoria, especially on the subject of massacres. He is known for his research into the Convincing Ground massacre and violent incidents over land and resources in southwest Victoria.

### **Convincing Ground Massacre**

The Convincing Ground massacre is believed to have followed a dispute between local Aborigines and European whalers over a beached whale near Portland in southwest Victoria around 1833 or 1834. It is alleged to have occurred when a whale, harpooned by whalers, escaped and came ashore. The Aboriginal peoples of the Kilcarer gundidj clan purportedly attempted to enforce their traditional right to the beached whale but, the whalers, believing the injured animal was their property, strongly objected. The whalers are said to have used firearms to enforce their claim, resulting in the almost total destruction of the clan.

Although an account of this event is located within the Chief Protector of Aborigines George Augustus Robinson's journals recording his visit to the Portland area in May 1841, the incident has been the cause of considerable debate with historians and other writers disputing when, where and why it occurred, and even whether it occurred. In terms of Aboriginal-whaler relations, its occurrence helps to explain the paucity of information on Aboriginal cultural relationships with whales and whaling in southwest Victoria, for in its wake Aboriginal people stayed away from the area. With the exception of Dawson (1881) who described Aboriginal ceremonial celebrations involving beached whales, there is almost nothing known of Aboriginal relationships with whales and whaling in Victoria. By contrast, we know a great deal about Aboriginal involvement with sealing and whaling in New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania.

This dissertation argues that the dearth of information on Aboriginal cultural interactions with whales and whaling in Victoria is a direct result of the Convincing Ground massacre; it therefore takes the view that the massacre occurred, and will seek to demonstrate this in chapter five. Although the absence of information about Aboriginal-whaler relations may also be attributed to a lack of mutual respect between Aborigines and whalers, and the lack of

informants besides Robinson showing any interest in detailing Aboriginal traditions during the early nineteenth century, this thesis maintains that it was the mass killing of Aborigines on a beach near Portland in the early 1830s that foreclosed Aboriginal involvement in the whaling industry in Victoria, and which forged a different history of cross-cultural encounter in that colony.

### **Great Australian Silence**

Until the late 1960s Aboriginal history was, as Clark (1998a) has argued, ‘a neglected field within Australian historiography’ (p.15). Aborigines were viewed in terms of ‘ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism which [saw them] ... become a melancholy footnote to Australian history’ (p.15). The anthropologist WEH Stanner (1969) ‘accused historians of being the high priests of a cult of forgetfulness and disremembering’ (p.15), and coined the phrase the ‘Great Australian Silence’ to describe this disremembering. This disremembering reflected Social Darwinist attitudes towards Aboriginal people during the nineteenth century. Attwood (1990) has argued that Social Darwinism was prevalent in regards to Aboriginal-European frontier history in the nineteenth century. The ideas and attitudes brought over to the colonies by European settlers influenced racial attitudes towards Aborigines, such that Aborigines – perceived as ‘primitive savages’ – were viewed as a threat to Europeans ‘on the pastoral frontiers’ (Markus, 1977, p.174). Work published regarding Aborigines prior to the late 1960s was coloured by these attitudes. This led to a marginalisation of Aboriginal history until recent times (Corris 1969, 1975; Reece 1974, 1979; Clark & Cahir 2003). Ryan (2010) describes this marginalisation as a ‘conspiracy of silence about settler massacres’ (p.261).

Aboriginal history was marginalised in Victoria until the work of such as Clark (1990, 1995, 2003, 2005, 2011) and Critchett (1984, 1992, 1998). Christie (1979), Cahir (2001, 2007), Attwood (1990, 1994, 2005b), and Russell (2012) have also contributed to lessening the marginalisation of Aboriginal history and historiography in Victoria. Silenced by an ethnocentric and Eurocentric colonial society during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Aboriginal histories were also actively concealed. As Reynolds (1972) notes, frontier violence between Aborigines and Europeans was often concealed by writers during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Colonial writers repeated claims that Australia was founded ‘without bloodshed’ (p.471) which ‘reflected deep psychological needs in the

Australian community' (p.472). This reluctance to mention atrocities against Aborigines was due to a perceived need to protect the colonies' reputation abroad. According to Reynolds, there was also a 'concern for public opinion' that the 'crimes of amateur assassins are left to oblivion' (p.472).

Revisionist histories by Reynolds (1972, 1976, 1978) and Christie (1979) showed that Aborigines violently resisted the invasion of their traditional lands by Europeans. Christie's (1979) study documented the coming of white people to Victoria and the disruption to Aboriginal traditional life. The promise of Aborigines being British subjects during the colonial era was detailed, but in the end Christie concluded that Aborigines were treated little better than 'children' (1979). This theme of dispossession is reflected in Broome's (1990, 2001a, 2005) work, with emphasis placed on traditional Aboriginal food sources being lost to livestock and attempted assimilation of Europeans into the Aboriginal system of reciprocity. Yet Broome also notes that Aborigines often lent or sold their labour to Europeans in exchange for food and other supplies. Broome's work can thus be seen as a blend of the two main historiographical traditions regarding Aboriginal responses to invasion: resistance and accommodation. During the 1980s and 1990s, historians such as McGrath (1995) and Fells (1988) 'sought and documented instances of co-operation, negotiation and harmony between Europeans and Aboriginal groups' (Russell 2001, p.218). Their work showed that frontier relations were not always violent and that some Aborigines adapted to changing circumstances through employment in the cattle industry and as native police. We can view these works as being 'islands of cooperation', meaning that they outline instances of Aboriginal-European cooperation (Clark 1998a).

Russell's (2012) work on the impact of colonialism on Aborigines during the nineteenth century shows how some Aborigines involved themselves in European commercial industries, including whaling. She maintains that Aborigines were not necessarily 'disempowered slaves or even indentured servants' (p.7). Nor was resistance to colonial expansion and dispossession universal, as some Aborigines in New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania actively involved themselves in the whaling industry (Clarke 2001; Nash 2003; Russell 2012; Wesson 2001). Russell's discussion of how Aborigines adapted to changing circumstances sets her work apart from earlier work in which Aborigines are seen as victims of colonisation. This is Russell's most significant contribution to academia and to our understanding of Aboriginal frontier history. Expanding upon Russell's work, this

dissertation seeks to analyse why Aborigines in southwest Victoria did not adapt to colonisation in the same way as Aborigines in South Australia, Tasmania and New South Wales.

### **Research Methodology**

The theoretical paradigm informing this discussion is constructivism. According to Klugman (1997), '[r]eality does not exist in any ultimate empirical way, but is rather a construction of the person who is viewing or experiencing reality at any given moment' (p.304). Understood thus, constructivism relates to my research as it directly underscores the importance of the reconstruction of our early colonial history. The virtual absence of any mention of Aboriginal cultural associations with whales, whalers and whaling in southwest Victoria in scholarly works reinforces the need for a reconstruction of how we view our colonial history in Victoria and our relationship with Aboriginal people. Klugman (1997) has stated that 'the self is a construction with local characteristics, rather than no entity with universal features' (p.298). Relationships between Aborigines and whalers in Victoria during the nineteenth century were influenced by what Klugman has described as 'familial and cultural influences' (p.306). Yet these relationships are not sufficiently acknowledged in the literature. Instead, until recently, Aborigines were viewed as 'passive fringe dwellers' (Reynolds, 1976, p.50) to European expansion. Building on the work of Reynolds (1972, 1976, 1978), Broome (1990, 2001a, 2005), Attwood (1994, 2005b), Clark (1995, 2011, 2014), and Russell (2012), this dissertation aims to achieve a reconstruction of our understanding of Aboriginal frontier history, focussing on the whaling industry in southwest Victoria.

The view of British civilisation as being 'superior' to the culture and way of life of Aboriginal people that was commonly held during the nineteenth century and beyond is described by Thornhill (1992) as the practice of Australians seeking to 'rationalise the tragedy which was overtaking Australia's aboriginal people' (p.49). It is indicative of the attitude towards Aboriginal people as not only being inferior to European peoples but also dismissive of Aboriginal histories or violent incidents of first contact between Aboriginal people and European settlers. Subsequently, such incidents were often dismissed as being inevitable in the face of 'the advance of British civilisation' (Frame, 2009, p.255) and 'the rationale of "progress" in the minds of some colonists' (Thornhill, 1992, p.48).

The primary research method used within the dissertation has been critical historiographical studies. This method has been used to explore how and why historians and others have interpreted Aboriginal peoples interactions with whales, whalers and whaling in southwest Victoria compared to New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania. It has also been used to critique perspectives offered by historians on why Aboriginal people competed with Europeans for land and sea resources during the early to mid-nineteenth century. A secondary methodology is drawn from Attwood's 'reading the signs' approach from his 2005 lecture on his book *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History*. This approach is evidenced in the care taken in determining the credibility of historical narrators, especially in relation to determining reasons for the paucity of information on Aboriginal cultural associations with whales, whalers and whaling in Victoria, and in relation to the Convincing Ground massacre. The dissertation will outline the different discourses regarding these matters, and will assess the credibility of historical accounts by academics as well as by tabloid historians known as 'history warriors' (Attwood, 2005a, p.1). A third method has involved primary historical research. Explorers journals and other contemporary sources have been closely studied for the insight they provide into the apparent lack of cultural interactions between Aborigines and whalers in Victoria.

The purpose of my thesis is threefold: first, to explain the lack of cooperation between Aborigines and whalers in southwest Victoria; second, to outline the reasons for this anomalous situation by comparison with New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania; third, to discuss the events surrounding the massacre that allegedly occurred in 1833 or 1834 on the Convincing Ground at Portland Bay, and consider its implications for Aborigines and whaling in southwest Victoria. A detailed overview of the historiography of frontier violence, particularly frontier conflict associated with coastal regions and maritime industries, and the debate between Clark (2005, 2011) and Connor (2005, 2006, 2007, 2009) over the Convincing Ground massacre, informs the latter discussion.

A critique of the sources used during the course of writing the dissertation forms the basis of Chapter One. Chapter Two centres on an evaluation of Aboriginal, global, and regional whaling histories. The history of Aboriginal cultural associations with the whaling industry in New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania is discussed in chapter Three. In Chapter Four the focus shifts to whaling in Victoria and its development as a commercial industry, including what is known of Aboriginal involvement. Chapter Five examines the historical

controversy surrounding the alleged Convincing Ground massacre. An outline of the historiographical debate between Clark and Connor regarding this incident underscores the dissertation's main argument, namely, that the Convincing Ground massacre did occur, that it fundamentally transformed relations between Aboriginal people and whalers, and is one of the main reasons behind the paucity of information on Aboriginal cultural relationships with whales and whaling in southwest Victoria. The concluding chapter summarises the key issues, and offers thoughts on the implications of this study for future research on Aboriginal cultural associations with whaling.

# Chapter One

## Critique of Sources

Aboriginal associations with whales, whalers and whaling are an important part of the history of Aboriginal and European interactions on the Australian frontier. The advantages and disadvantages of using particular historical sources – both primary and secondary – such as diaries and journals, ethnographic collations, and regional and local histories, to recover and reconstruct this history is the focus of this chapter.

### Aboriginal historiography

Attwood (1989) states that ‘the question most often posed to historians of “Aboriginal History”’ focuses upon ‘the availability and nature of sources’ (p.21). Furthermore, he claims that government correspondence, reports and diaries, and journals of explorers ‘can yield a considerable quarry of material in which not only European but also Aboriginal voices can be heard’ (1989, p.21). His argument builds on Reynolds (1978) earlier assertion that ‘the barriers which for so long kept Aboriginal experience out of our history books were not principally those of source material, but rather those of perception and preference’ (p.163). While not disagreeing, Clark (1989) sounded a warning note when he observed that ‘squatters opinions of Aboriginal linguistics ranged from disdain to respect’ (p.16). This is an important point, as Aboriginal oral testimony of Aboriginal-European interactions has been challenged by academics and writers for its ‘authenticity and immediacy’ (Denning, 1988, p.117). Reynolds (1976) states that evidence of contact will always be inadequate. It will also always be problematic, for as Clark (1998b) argues, ‘it must be recognized that each of these sources of evidence poses problems for any attempt to utilise historical evidence in an effort at reconstructing an Aboriginal colonial history’ (p.37). Thus, each source needs to be analysed and critiqued in light of considerations ‘of the problems of Aboriginal historiography’ (Clark 1998b, p.37).

Clark (1998b) states that it is important to avoid ‘an uncritical or naïve reading of textual evidence’ (p.37). McBryde (1979) notes that criticism of textual evidence ‘would prevent the literature being used uncritically as a source for convenient ethnographic parallels, or to build unstable reconstruction from select evidence’ (p.140). It is also recognised by Lawrence

(1969), Reynolds (1976) and McBryde that ethnohistorical evidence is ‘for the most part fragmentary and non-comprehensive’ (McBryde, 1979, p.140). McBryde reinforces this when she states that Aboriginal ethnohistorical accounts ‘were never intended to be comprehensive, balanced accounts’ (p.37) as they are fragmentary by nature.

According to McBryde (1979), the majority of nineteenth century ethnohistorical sources were ‘not the product of the research of professional historians or ethnographers’ (p.142), but rather of amateurs. Many – if not most – observers of Aboriginal culture during the mid to late nineteenth century were affected by Social Darwinist views of European superiority; consequently, many important aspects of Aboriginal culture were overlooked (McBryde 1979). This importance of author bias or subjectivity is also highlighted in the work of Urry (1980) who stated that ‘ethnohistorical sources are shaped by the personal perspective and background of the person producing the information source’ (p.68-72). This is reflected in numerous ethnohistorical and ethnographical works relevant to this thesis including, Meyer (1843, 1846), Teichelmann and Shurmann (1840), Teichelmann (1841), Smyth (1878) and Dawson (1881). Topics covered in these sources typically included tribal boundaries, population, leaders, types of dwelling, types of food eaten, superstitions, ceremonies, marriage, death and corroborees. Neglected were stories of Aboriginal dispossession and retaliation, and there was no mention, or apparent cognisance, of the ways in which some Aborigines defied the ‘stereotype of frontier violence’ (Blaskett, 1979, p.6). Despite providing the local Aboriginal equivalent of the word ‘whale’ – ‘kundabul’ – Dawson (1881) makes almost no mention of whales, whalers or whaling in western Victoria. This kind of omission reinforces McBryde’s caution that a critical analysis of the strengths and limitations within such works is essential.

### **Explorers Journals**

Explorers journals have played an important part in outlining early interactions between Aborigines, sealers and whalers. The strengths and weaknesses of using journals by Mitchell (1838), Robinson (1841), Osburne (1887) and Donnelly (1888) are discussed below. Elkin (1963) stated that information gathered by explorers belongs ‘to a phase of casual or incidental anthropological observation’ (p.3-28). Additionally, Clark (1998b), in his critique of explorers journals, has observed that ‘most explorers were not trained anthropologists’ (p.38). This observation is reinforced by Watson (1979) who writes that the ‘ideological

underpinnings' (p.54-62) of explorers journals were grounded in the assumption of Christian and Imperial superiority. For example, the journals of Donnelly (1888, 1893, 1896) and Osburne (1887) clearly represent the viewpoints of the authors and the expectations of colonial society (McBryde 1979; Urry 1980). With reference to such journals, Reynolds (1978) explains that 'it cannot be assumed that what explorers observed was necessarily typical of traditional Aboriginal society' (p.54). Indeed, as Clark (1998b) notes, often within explorers journals observations of Aboriginal tribes are little more than 'superficial descriptions of the visible aspects of Aboriginal life' (p.39). Yet, despite this unbalanced view of Aboriginal cultural life, such sources can provide 'a record of what the Aborigines did in a particular instance' (Clark, 1998b, p.40).

Mitchell's (1838) journal is a valuable contextual source. Mitchell journeyed from New South Wales to southwest Victoria, reaching the coast in 1836 after travelling through inland New South Wales and through the Grampians. His description of Aborigines signalling European whalers whenever a whale entered the bay stands as an important example of cooperation between Aborigines and whalers. According to Mitchell, Aborigines at Mount Clay near Portland lit a signal fire whenever they sighted a whale entering the bay. He explained that these signal fires would have given 'timely notice' (p.243) to whalers at Portland Bay. He surmises that this sort of cooperation would have brought about 'a better chance of the whale running ashore, in which case a share must fall finally to them' (p.243). This is the only direct (first-hand) observation of Aboriginal-whaler cooperation in Portland Bay during the early nineteenth century found during the course of this research. The timing of Mitchell's observation suggests that a post-Convincing Ground agreement was forged between Aborigines and whalers.

Mitchell's journal (1838) shows that he conversed a great deal with the Hentys. The Hentys were a family from Britain who immigrated to Swan River in Western Australia in the early 1830s but their pastoral enterprise there was not successful. They moved to Launceston and in November 1834 they moved to Portland Bay to establish a pastoral and whaling enterprise. They became a prominent and respected European family of Portland, with their name being synonymous with the founding of Portland. In May 1841 Edward Henty informed George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector of Aborigines in Port Phillip, of an event at Portland Bay in the early 1830s in which many Aborigines were said to have been killed by European whalers, resulting in poor relations between whalers and Aboriginal people on the coast

(Clark, 1998d, p.211) A close reading of Mitchell's journal indicates a similar conversation between a Henty (first name not mentioned) and the explorer in 1836. In an entry titled 'Sagacity of the natives on the coast', Mitchell wrote of contact between European whalers and Aborigines that: 'I understood it frequently happened....' (p.243) and 'the natives never approach these whalers...' (p.243). Here Mitchell was referring to the smoke signals Aboriginal people used to inform whalers that a whale had entered the bay, something they did from a distance, with little or no direct contact with whalers.

### **Diaries and Journals**

This section critiques the diaries, journals and transcribed sources particular to the dissertation, namely Donnelly (1888), Kenyon (1928), Presland (1980), Peel (1996) and Clark (1998d). Peel's transcription of the Henty journals was written to portray the viewpoint of events near Portland described by Edward and Stephen Henty. Written in 1996 as a redaction of journal entries, it is not immune to the bias of its original authors and must be read carefully. Peel displays the journal entries within separate sections of entries by Edward and Stephen. They are shown as they were transcribed and there is little evidence of editing by Peel before the publication of the work. It is interesting to note that despite many entries regarding whaling and trade at Portland Bay, there is little reference to interactions between Aborigines and Europeans. This is not surprising as perceptions of Aborigines were heavily coloured by the 'personal perspective and background' (Clark, 1998b, p.38) of the people producing the primary materials. The virtual omission of any mention of Aboriginal involvement in daily life around Portland correlates with the advice given to George Augustus Robinson by Edward Henty in the early 1840s that Aboriginal people had not visited the township for years after the early 1830s (following the alleged massacre) until Robinson's arrival in Portland in 1841 (Clark 1998). That they returned after 1841 suggests an Aboriginal presence, albeit one less visible, throughout this period. This is an important point, because it means that the lack of cooperation between Aboriginal people and whalers was not a consequence of depopulation alone, but something else.

Clark's (1998d) transcription of George Robinson's journals and official reports has shed considerable light on Aboriginal-whaler relations in southwest Victoria. During the early 1840s Robinson visited southwest Victoria in his role of Chief Protector of Aborigines in Port Phillip, and assessed the welfare of Aboriginal peoples there. Clark expanded on the work of

earlier transcriptions of Robinson's journals by Presland (1980) and Kenyon (1928), transcribing all of Robinson's Port Phillip journals; Presland only transcribed them from February to August 1841, and Kenyon only published a condensed version of Robinson's 1841 report. Written from the point of view of the original author – Robinson – whose words are presented in full within the transcriptions, these sources all suffer the same limitations. The main problem is that Robinson's views on events are not based solely on first-hand observation – ie. his own experiences – but often come from conversations Robinson had with official figures that were later recorded in his journal and diaries; in other words, second-hand accounts. That said, it must be stated that Robinson was a very experienced ethnographer, having spent time as a conciliator in Tasmania during the 1830s.

Clark (1998a) argues that Robinson's journals 'are of critical value in that they provide detailed information on the location, numerical composition and interaction of Aboriginal clans' (p.41). Additionally, 'they provide an understanding of and perspective into Aboriginal resistance and response to European invasion, the loss of their land and forced modification of their culture' (1998a, p.41). Robinson's journals also contain notes on European pastoral runs and places where Aborigines were not allowed to venture, which emphasise the level of dispossession of traditional lands in southwest Victoria. One of the problems of using Robinson's journals is 'the difficulty of applying strict geographical controls' (Clark, 1998b, p.41) to the textual source as well as a lack of clan names making it hard 'to reconstruct the local geographies of disruption' (p.41).

Donnelly's letters and reminiscences (1888, 1893, 1896) also provide some insight into the relations between Aborigines and European whalers in this study's region and chronological framework. Donnelly lived on the southwest coast in or near Port Fairy from where he sent correspondence to T.H. Osburne. The strength of Donnelly's work is that he makes mention of Aboriginal interactions with whales and whaling in Port Fairy and their connection to the Mahogany Ship. The Mahogany Ship was supposedly a Portuguese ship that got shipwrecked in the 1600s on the southwest coast; it was the site of numerous Aboriginal-European interactions including an encounter between the Mills brothers of Port Fairy and local Aborigines (Carroll 1989; Donnelly 1888-1896). Although plagued by bad grammar, as a primary source, Donnelly's letters are an invaluable source documenting one man's first-hand observations, opinions and viewpoints regarding interracial relations and whaling; author bias and subjectivity notwithstanding.

## **Ethnographic Collations**

As discussed by Clark (1998a, 1998b) and Corris (1968), there are three main shortcomings of using ethnographic collations as a source. First, it was often the case that the Aboriginal people being studied 'were a generation or more removed from pre-contact life, and may not have full knowledge of the pre-colonial situation' (Clark, 1998a, p.42). Indeed, Presland (1989) argues that 'the very rapid dislocation of traditional Aboriginal culture in south eastern Australia ... before the development of ethnography as a field of discipline' led to there being 'no ethnographic studies of Aborigines in this region' (p.9). Ethnographic work relating to Aborigines in southwest Victoria was done in the late nineteenth century, well after the demise of traditional Aboriginal society in this area. Second, the questions asked of Aboriginal informants were shaped crudely and 'were often framed in such a way that they solicited answers that confirmed the ideological presupposition of the collator' (Clark 1998a, p.42). Third, the collators in some cases were subject to 'ideological prejudice and myopia' (Clark 1998a, p.42) and only asked questions of informants that suited their purpose.

The three main nineteenth century collators of ethnographic materials relevant to southwest Victoria were Smyth (1878), Dawson (1881), and Howitt (1904). These works are relevant to the dissertation as they outline and paraphrase first-hand accounts of Aboriginal culture in western Victoria. Dawson's (1881) is a first-hand account of 'western Victorian Aboriginal society' (Clark, 1998b, p.42). There are a number of strengths within Dawson's work. These include his ability to 'question Aboriginal informants in their own languages' (Clark 1998b, p.42), and the extensive vocabularies he compiled. Dawson also had information regarding 'tribal names and territorial extent' (Clark 1998b, p.42) which are used within contemporary accounts of Aboriginal customs, languages and vocabulary. Corris, Lourandos and Critchett have also praised Dawson's work. In Corris' (1968) view, Dawson's account is 'a reasonably accurate statement of the conditions of Aboriginal life in the relatively early stages of the contact situation, when some memory of undisturbed conditions remained intact' (p.19). Lourandos (1980) found Dawson's work to be 'extremely accurate and invaluable (cited in Clark, 1998b, p.42) after cross-checking it with Robinson's journals and reports. Critchett (1981) agrees with Corris and Lourandos on the above points.

Whales and whaling are barely covered by Dawson (1881). This may indicate a lack of interest in whales and whaling, or lack of appreciation of the importance of whaling. However, as Clark (1998b) has argued, 'Dawson was not a professional ethnographer and was therefore not attempting to fit his data into a speculative theoretical system' (p.42). This fact, together with his lack of access to Robinson's 1841 report from Portland Bay, and a lack of available informants from Portland's Aboriginal tribes owing to depopulation, could also explain the oversight. However, despite his virtual omission of whales and whaling in connection with Aborigines in western Victoria, the importance of Dawson's work cannot be underestimated, for as Clark (1998b) has observed, it 'provides a framework for an understanding of the Aboriginal styles of living' (p.42).

As well as documenting Aboriginal culture in southwest Victoria, Smyth (1878) wrote on Aboriginal culture and language in other parts of Australia, including Tasmania. His body of work is a good example of ethnographic work as it is the result of years of fieldwork amongst Aboriginal peoples. It therefore makes a significant contribution to the history of anthropologists investigating Aboriginal people in the Australian interior in the nineteenth century. As will be discussed later, missionaries and writers in South Australia completed similar fieldwork to Smyth during the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s. The limitations of using ethnographic works created by missionaries are many. Invariably, if not inevitably, such works are coloured by deeply ingrained ideological views and prejudices. These are reflected in the work of Meyer (1843, 1846), Taplin (1874, 1879), Teichelmann and Shurmann (1840) and Teichelmann (1841). The strengths of using such works are that they provide good first-hand accounts of Aboriginal customs, languages and tribes in South Australia with most Aborigines retaining memories of pre-contact times.

In regards to Smyth's (1878) work on the customs of Aborigines in Victoria, critiques by contemporary historians have been mostly positive. Clark (1998b) states that 'Smyth offers a good deal of information on the infrastructure of Aboriginal society' (p.43) in a similar fashion to Dawson (1881). Lourandos (1980) claims that Smyth's information is valuable due to his exposure to 'useful and detailed information from Local Guardians and individuals who had more intimate knowledge of aboriginal culture of particular localities' (cited in Clark, 1998b, p.43).

Howitt's (1904) work on the Aboriginal tribes of southeastern Australia expands upon the fieldwork of these early ethnographers. It is stated by Clark (1998b) that 'the strength of Howitt's (1904) work rests with his recognition that he was studying a remnant people who had experienced a rapid break-down of their traditional culture' (p.43), and with his awareness of his own 'methodological inadequacies' (p.43). Howitt had little information regarding Aborigines in southwest Victoria, being acquainted with only a few Aboriginal tribes, so he 'used Dawson as his main source of information' (Clark, 1998b, p.43); this is obviously a major limitation on his work.

## **Newspapers**

Most Melbourne-based newspapers were established well after whaling had peaked during the mid to late nineteenth century. Nevertheless, newspapers are an important information source for this study as they provide valuable insight into the day-to-day happenings at Portland and Port Fairy during the nineteenth century. As a source of information, they can provide firsthand accounts of contemporaneous events, including whaling reports, the names of whalers and some Aboriginal people involved in whaling. The problem is that these accounts are likely to be biased towards a particular viewpoint, namely the European settlers, and that the accounts given of Aborigines near whaling stations are very brief.

The main critiques of newspapers as a source come from Freire (1975), Markus (1979) and Clark (1998a, 1998b, 2003). Markus (1979) states that one should be aware of the 'inherent bias' (p.137) within newspaper articles, as well as the paternalistic views of unsympathetic colonial observers regarding Aborigines. He also suggests that 'the more newspaper evidence can be cross-checked from other information sources, the greater the likelihood of reliability' (Clark, 1998b, p.43). Highlighting the 'inherent bias' asserted by Markus, Clark (1998b) writes that newspaper articles regarding Aborigines 'are more likely to appear when their actions make a direct impact on the lives of Europeans' (p.43). According to Freire (1975), the language of newspaper articles in the nineteenth century portrayed Aborigines as participants of 'the pedagogy of the oppressed, in the elaboration of which the oppressed must participate' (1975, p.124). This meaning that Aborigines had European civilisation imposed over their traditional culture and was reflected in newspaper articles, which portrayed them as inferior to the colonisers.

It is interesting to note that modern day newspaper sources regarding the Convincing Ground incident are more plentiful. This is mainly due to the controversy surrounding the site of the alleged massacre of Aborigines by whalers that erupted in the mid-2000s. The articles used in this thesis come from Portland's locally published newspaper the *Standard* (2005, 2006, 2007). Their content mainly revolves around the Convincing Ground and the controversy over whether it was the site of a massacre. The articles give a modern day perspective on the controversy; highly subjective, they are fuelled more by emotion than factual evidence.

### **Regional Victorian Histories**

Kiddle (1961), Corris (1968) and Cannon (1982) have contributed significantly to regional history in Victoria. Corris (1968) outlines the interactions of Aborigines and Europeans in the Western District of Victoria, including first contact between Aborigines and Europeans, and the efforts of missionaries and others such as George Augustus Robinson to protect Aborigines. Additionally, Corris addresses the cultural background of Aborigines with regards to social and territorial organisation, government, religion, magic, totemism and economy. He also includes a discussion of the cultural traditions mentioned above in the work. Kiddle (1961) examines how the pursuit of capital gain in colonial Victoria became 'the ruling passion' (p.102) during the early to late nineteenth century. The contribution of Kiddle (1961), Corris (1968) and Cannon (1982) to regional history cannot be excluded from the dissertation. Kiddle's work on the pursuit of capital gain in colonial Victoria underlines the imperialist dogma of progress during the nineteenth century.

The main works regarding regional Aboriginal history that also concern aspects of whaling and frontier violence in western Victoria have been completed by Clark (1990, 1995, 1998d, 2005, 2011) and Critchett (1984, 1992, 1998). Clark's works mainly deal with documenting Aboriginal languages and clans within western Victoria and reconstructing the process of dispossession of Aboriginal peoples, as well as alleged and confirmed massacres and killings of Aboriginal people. The direct relevance of Clark's works revolve around his discussion of the Convincing Ground massacre near Portland and its implications for Aboriginal-whaler relations, and his studies of Aboriginal local groups and demography in the southwest Victoria which enable some consideration of depopulation in the Portland district. Critchett also discusses the Convincing Ground event. As discussed in chapter five, she believes that

its origins lay with the whalers' interference with Aboriginal women, however this line of argument is disputed by Clark (2011).

Kerley (1981) outlines race relations between Aborigines and Europeans in the Portland-Warrnambool district from 1834 to 1886, arguing that 'some assumptions that have been made about the relations between Aborigines and whites in this period are untrue' (p.ii). The cultural norms of Aborigines within the area are discussed as well as the inherent difficulties of policing the southwest coast of Victoria from Port Phillip during the 1830s and 1840s. Kerley states that Foster Fyans, the Crown Lands Commissioner in Victoria from 1839, investigated reports of alleged violence against Aboriginal people. However, in all cases the accused perpetrators were cleared. In one case, Fyans laid the blame for an atrocity near Portland on 'Vandemonian 'ruffians' in the settlement' (p.11). Corris (1968) noted that there was 'little evidence' (p.52) of whaling activity left by early sealers and whalers. Whaler Thomas Browne (pen name Rolf Boldrewood) 'hinted at more violent and passionate contacts between whalers such as "Port Fairy Campbell and his merry men", and the Aborigines', but, according to Corris (1968), 'he gave no details' (p.52).

Two other Aboriginal regional histories are included within the dissertation. Coutts' (1981) work on Victorian Aborigines from 1800 to 1860 is a significant example of a regional history. Coutts outlines Aboriginal cultural practices such as hunting and gathering techniques, and has sections devoted to Aborigines living in particular environments in Victoria. Noteworthy is his statement that 'the ethnographic data for the coastal area of Victoria is poor making it difficult to focus on a particular coastal region' (p.15). He also gives a general overview of Aborigines living in coastal areas. In doing this, Coutts studies the area making use of 'the results of recent archaeological studies to gain additional insight into the hunting and gathering strategies used by Aborigines in coastal environments' (p.15). His discussion of how Aboriginal cultural traditions became affected by colonial expansion and the role of newspapers in forming opinions about Aborigines is invaluable within the context of the dissertation. A notable advantage of Coutts's study is that he reconstructs the traditional life of three geographical study areas including the coast of Portland.

Massola's (1969) study is based on the observations of the author regarding his travels in southwest Victoria, and subsequent historical research. Importantly, Massola states that after Henty's whaling crews arrived in Portland in November 1834 Aborigines avoided the area.

Additionally, there is mention of Aborigines near Mount Clay lighting ‘a smoky fire to warn the whalers’ of whales entering the bay, presumably based on his reading of Mitchell’s journal. This is significant as it provides clues as to why there was a dearth of information on Aboriginal cultural relationships with whales and whaling in southwest Victoria. Yet this is not new information, as Massola derived it from Mitchell’s 1836 visit to Portland Bay.

### **Local History**

A strength of using local history sources is that one can peruse the local accounts of events in a particular area; a disadvantage is that they are often biased in favour of the focussed area, and tend to be uncritical of other local sources such as diaries, local history booklets, newspapers and reports. Within the study area the local histories include Learmonth (1960, 1983) and Wiltshire (1975, 1976, 1978). Learmonth (1960, 1983) is an example of how local histories can be romanticised and can marginalise Indigenous peoples. Wiltshire (1975) removes the romanticist element from Portland’s early history and interactions between Aborigines, settlers and whalers.

Learmonth’s (1960, 1983) work on Portland’s early history outlines the advent of whaling in the area and the development of the Portland township until the mid-twentieth century. It is significant that while Learmonth included an extract from Robinson’s official report of his visit to Portland in 1841, he removed Robinson’s discussion of the Convincing Ground massacre. This raises questions about Learmonth’s historical integrity and weakens the credibility of his work. Additionally, his studies include almost no references to Aborigines or their involvement with early Portland commercial and social life, and are strongly romanticist in tone. As local references, Learmonth’s works cannot be ignored, but the reader should be aware of their lack of historical accuracy and integrity.

Learmonth’s omission of Robinson’s conversations with Edward Henty, James Blair and Charles Tyers are emblematic of ‘the great Australian silence’ (Stanner 1969). According to Stanner (1969), the telling of Australia’s colonial history into the mid-twentieth century was ‘carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape’ (p.24) because Aborigines were believed to have ‘no connection with our civilization past, present, or future’ (p.24). This is described by Stanner as ‘a cult of forgetfulness practised on a national scale’ (p.25). This forgetfulness is evident within Learmonth’s works (1960, 1983) which are focussed on

the conventional narrative 'of the coming and development of British civilization' (Stanner, 1969, p.25) in Australia. By contrast, Wiltshire's works (1975, 1976, 1978) do not forget Aboriginal involvement in Victorian colonial history.

Within Wiltshire (1975) it is immediately apparent that primary references regarding Aboriginal-European interactions are plentiful. Additionally, an analysis of the reference list indicates that there are more primary sources than secondary sources. The newspaper sources give firsthand accounts of interracial relations in and around Portland during the early to mid-nineteenth century, which strengthen the historical integrity of the work. Yet even these sources are subject to author bias. Inevitably, articles relating to interracial interactions printed within the *Portland Guardian*, *Portland Mercury* and the *Port Phillip Herald* were biased towards the viewpoint of settlers within the Portland area. The description of sheep stealing by Aborigines as 'outrages' is an example of this. From the perspective of Aboriginal people, these were not 'outrages': the sheep were sustenance for a malnourished people whose land had been despoiled; in some cases, the stolen sheep may have been targets of revenge against the despoilers (Critchett 2003). From the point of view of the Aborigines, the 'outrage' was the uninvited presence on their land of the settlers and their sheep.

Wiltshire (1975) overlooks Bassett's 1962 work regarding the Henty family and Richmond Henty's 1886 work on his childhood memories. This major oversight weakens the historical credibility of Wiltshire's work. Wiltshire refers to the Convincing Ground but explains that it was named by Mitchell in 1836; this further weakens his work as Kenyon's partial transcription of Robinson's 1841 report was available from 1928 outlining Robinson's discussion of the Convincing Ground massacre. The over-reliance by Wiltshire (1975) on primary references is both a strength and weakness of the work, for while he gives a good overview of events as they happened, his interpretation of the sources is questionable.

Cannon (1982) outlines the records of Aborigines in the Port Phillip district between 1835 and 1839. His work contains an innumerable and invaluable array of primary sources such as court records, letters and manuscripts regarding Aboriginal people. Records within the work regarding Aborigines in southwest Victoria have been closely read. They portray first-hand accounts of Aboriginal-European interactions and information on Aboriginal-European relations. Its strong emphasis on primary sources makes it one of the more invaluable

references within the dissertation. It gives a good overview of how Aborigines were perceived during the early to mid-nineteenth century.

**Conclusion:**

Settler diaries and journals, ethnographic collations, explorers' writings, newspapers and historical accounts provide some insight into the level of cultural interactions between Aborigines and Europeans in south eastern Australia. However, as this chapter has shown, the credibility of these sources must be carefully analysed; questions must be asked about how Aboriginal people were perceived by Europeans during the nineteenth century and how this coloured the impressions they generated. The following chapter will look at the development of whaling in south eastern Australia and how it influenced relations with Aborigines in New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria.

## **Chapter Two**

### **The Whaling Industry**

Within the previous chapter there was a critique of the main nineteenth century sources used in this thesis and discussion of how ideological prejudice coloured the representation of Aboriginal people in such works. The focus shifts in this chapter to an examination of the history and historiography of the whaling industry in Australia.

#### **Pre-Contact Aboriginal Whaling**

As outlined in the previous chapter, there is little published information on pre-contact Aboriginal whaling in Victoria. Dawson (1881) provides one of the only sources regarding Aboriginal traditions and whaling in southwest Victoria. However, in New South Wales and South Australia there are numerous accounts of Aborigines whaling before contact with Europeans. These accounts are outlined by academics and writers such as Clarke (2001), Wesson (2001), Davidson (2004) and Staniforth (2006a, 2006b).

According to Dawson (1881), Aborigines in western Victoria considered the beaching of a whale to be a time of great celebration, marked through ceremonies, corroborees and feasting. However, Dawson mentions little else on the subject of Aboriginal cultural associations with whales and whaling. By comparison, Wesson (2001) and Davidson (2004) detail Aboriginal whaling traditions at some length in New South Wales. The whaling operations conducted by the Davidsons at Twofold Bay coincided with pre-contact Aboriginal winter migrations to the far south coast and whalers made use of traditional skills on whaling ventures (Wesson 2001, Davidson 2004). Aborigines were highly respected for their strong ability in hunting whales, and their ability to enlist the help of killer whales that herded whales towards the whaling boats (Wesson 2001).

Literature regarding Aboriginal whaling traditions before first contact in South Australia postulates that Aboriginal coastal groups viewed whales as former totemic beings that had transformed when their spirits entered the ocean (Clarke 2001). According to Clarke (2001), there was a system of 'giving certain groups rights and privileges to the resources of the sea' (p.22). Aborigines in southern South Australia built small watercraft to hunt small whales.

However, it is considered by Clarke to be unlikely that they ‘actively hunted whales or dolphins’ (p.22). Nevertheless, the skill of these Aborigines in hunting small whales in watercraft was an asset that European whalers made use of once whaling operations began in earnest on the South Australian coast (Gibbs 1969, Clarke 2001, Staniforth 2006a).

## **Global Whaling**

The work of Estes, Demaster, Doak, Williams, and Brownell (2006) is valuable in terms of analysing the development of whaling on a global scale. They detail the different eras and developments in whaling methods such as indigenous methods in central Africa and in South-East Asia, Basque whaling methods in the eleventh century in Europe, Pelagic whaling by British whalers in the open sea, and shore-based and bay whaling. Their comprehensive study not only provides insight into the development of whaling from a global perspective, it also provides a good contextual background for outlining how European whaling developed in Australia, especially in terms of its interactions with Aboriginal people.

Basque-style whaling involved pursuing ‘whales in small open boats, attacking them with hand harpoons and lances’ (Estes et al, 2006, p.89). The pursuit of whales through use of Basque whaling methods was usually done by boats launching from the shore or from near the shoreline. The Basque-style whaling methods were followed in Britain, Denmark, Netherlands and Germany. Basque methods, which involve setting upon sighted whales with boats, harpoons and lances, have been popularized in fiction such as *Moby Dick*. Essentially, ‘a whale was sighted from the mother ship, oar-powered boats were launched in pursuit, and the whale was harpooned’ (Estes et al, 2006, p.89). Whilst these particular methods of catching whales were mainly confined to the Arctic and North Antarctic waters, they provided the benchmark for whaling engaged upon in other regions such as America and later in the South Pacific where Basque-style whaling methods were practised to a large extent.

The predominant North American styles of whaling were Pelagic and shore-based whaling. Pelagic involved an on-board try works for flensing whales with a mother ship working with its other boats to capture whales. The capture of whales was initially done with harpoons and lances but ‘firearms and explosives of various forms’ (Estes et al, 2006, p.86) were used in the nineteenth century. Shore-based whaling involved whaling boats launching from the shore which were generally ‘hand- or sail- powered’ (Estes et al, 2006, p.86) and made use of

hand harpoons and lances before upgrading to firearms and explosives to capture whales. Pelagic and shore-based whaling methods gradually merged as ‘new methods invented and adopted in one sector of the fishery, such as the shoulder gun and bomb-lance, soon found their way into the other’ (Estes et al, 2006, p.91). Other methods of whaling such as Norwegian-style shore whaling involved the use of powered boats which operated from whaling stations on the shore, and were advances on earlier Basque and American methods of whaling.

The whaling trade as engaged in by Britain from the seventeenth to the twentieth century made use of various methods of whaling from basic Basque-style whaling with hand harpoons and lances, to more modern methods of whaling involving powered ships with on-board factories for the processing of whales in the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century. The British initially engaged in whaling near Spitsbergen in northern Europe and then Greenland during the mid-eighteenth century. During the late eighteenth century, due to colonial expansion throughout the southern hemisphere, the British felt it necessary to expand their whaling operations from the northern to the southern hemisphere. War between Britain and the United States in the late eighteenth century complicated matters, causing a significant degree of danger for British whaling fleets operating west of South America near Chile and Peru (Jackson, 2005). There was the danger of capture in Spanish waters. For whaling fleets near the Cape of Good Hope, there was risk of capture by Dutch ships. The outbreak of revolution in South America in the early 1800s did not make matters any easier for British whaling fleets risking the voyage south-west. The American Revolution forced the British out of American waters in the 1770s and 1780s, so another whaling ground needed to be found for the southern fishery. Jackson (2005) outlines the situation faced by British whaling fleets at this time:

With such a large proportion of the southern fishing grounds occupied or claimed by aliens and enemies, it was natural that the English should turn increasingly to what was probably the most important development in the early nineteenth century, namely the extension of whaling and sealing around the new Australian colony (p.120).

Francis (1991) gives an extensive overview of the development of whaling from its Basque origins in Europe to its beginnings in America in the seventeenth and eighteenth century and then to the development of the southern fishery in the south Pacific and Bass Strait on the

Australian coastline. Whaling became an economic force in Australia during the early to mid-nineteenth century.

### **Expansion of whaling into Australian waters**

Captain Melville of the *Britannia* during the late 1790s noted that there were a large number of whales on the New South Wales coast but only captured one whale in his first voyage due to bad weather. This capture signalled the beginnings of European whaling on the Australian coast. Henceforth the industry 'was launched in the western Pacific' (Francis, 1991, p.74). Whaling expanded from these modest beginnings to prominent sites such as Twofold Bay on the far southeast coast of New South Wales in 1828 (Davidson 2004), South Australia around 1829 (Nash 2003), Launceston and Hobart in Tasmania in 1803 (Nash 2003), and Portland in Victoria in 1828 (Wiltshire 1976). Whaling was mainly engaged upon by American and British whalers until the 1820s. During this time whaling operations were opened by whalers such as William Dutton on the southwest coast of Victoria in 1828, the Mills brothers at Port Fairy in the early to mid-1830s, and during the mid to late 1840s in New South Wales when Archibald Davidson built a whaling station on Twofold Bay in New South Wales. With the introduction of enterprising colonial Australians, Australian whaling in the European context came of age. Blainey (1968, p. 103) argues that 'whaling's influence on Australia's own strippling economy was small until a fleet of Australian ships joined the chase'.

Bach's (1982) work mainly outlines the history of shipping around Australian seaports. Its importance lies in its discussion of the development of whaling in Australia during the early to mid-nineteenth century and its demise due to the depletion of whale stocks in the southern fisheries and the Californian Gold Rush in 1848. Dakin (1963) details the exploits of whaling fisheries in Australia in the nineteenth century in far greater detail. He makes reference to whaling at Twofold Bay and, significantly, mentions an Aboriginal whaler known as 'Jamie Imlay' who was named after the prominent Imlay whaling family there. Dakin also outlines the development of Australasian bay whaling and the exploits of whalers during the early to mid-nineteenth century. However, southwest Victoria is seldom mentioned by Dakin, with the exception of a brief mention of whaling operations being undertaken at Portland before the settlement of the area by the Henty family in 1834. Dakin does not make any other mention of whaling in Portland, Port Fairy or other locations in Victoria. Little or no mention of Aboriginal interactions with whales and whaling is made by Dakin or Bach. This weakens

the historical credibility of both works because Aborigines played a significant role in whaling at Twofold Bay and at other locations outside Victoria. With the expansion of whaling into Australian waters in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century whalers often took the lead in regards to the exploration of the coast of Australia. As Jackson (2005) notes, the initial settlements ‘in Victoria and Western Australia were whaling settlements, and the first profitable industry in South Australia was whaling’ (p.121). Within the colonies whalers acted independently of government authority and interacted with Aborigines beyond the areas of government control.

## **Sealing**

Before whaling came sealing. It is acknowledged that sealing was an integral part of the development of Australia’s colonial economy during the early nineteenth century. Writers and academics such as Merry (2003), Russell (2001, 2005, 2007, 2012), Ryan (1972, 1996), Stuart (1997) and Taylor (2000, 2002) have outlined the development of sealing and have also examined its impact upon Aboriginal peoples. Sealers made use of Aboriginal women from northern Tasmania on sealing boats as part of reciprocal exchanges. After the decline of sealing in the 1820s and into the 1830s and 1840s in New South Wales and South Australia (Clarke 1991, 1996, 2001; Nash 2003), Aboriginal peoples’ labour was used in the whaling industry. Therefore, it is important to include the impact of sealing and how its decline brought about the rise of the whaling industry in southern Australia.

Sealing developed in the wake of the first settlement at Port Jackson. The re-stocking of provisions for the fledgling colony during the late 1780s and into the 1790s required schooners to maintain communications with outlying settlements up and down the coast of New South Wales. These ships were mainly used for supplying the colony with fish to supplement the diet of settlers who subsisted on flour, biscuit and wheat grown along the Hawkesbury River. However, by the late 1790s, expeditions by George Bass and Matthew Flinders paved the way for sealing in present-day Victoria. The schooners used to fish and to carry supplies to outlying settlements were small in size and were not suited to the venture of sealing. Bach (1982) states that ‘the first real incentive to build larger vessels came with the discovery in 1797 of fur seals on the islands of Bass Strait’ (p.71) which led to later ventures to the islands for seal furs. Smith (2010) argues that sealing was first conducted on ‘the islands and rock ledges of Bass Strait, which became the first destination for sealing gangs’.

Sealing was also pursued a great deal in Tasmania during the early 1800s. However, Norman (1989) outlines that ‘after 1832 sealing declined tremendously’ (p.26) in Tasmania due to ‘greedy, ignorant methods’ (p.26) such as killing large numbers of seals for their skins and not harvesting the seal’s oil.

The sealing industry made use of Aboriginal women to labour on the boats as well as providing sealers with a source of sexual labour. Merry (2003) writes about how notions of “place” have informed and affected historical constructions of gender, race and class’ (p.81) and how these influenced ‘the development of cultural relationships between the sealers and Tasmanian Aboriginal women of Bass Strait and Kangaroo Island’ (p.81). Merry (2003) discusses how Aboriginal men traded the services of their women ‘for hunting dogs, seal carcasses, flour and potatoes’ (p.81) in the early nineteenth century. Ryan (1996) also makes note of this attempt by Tasmanian Aborigines to incorporate sealers into their system of reciprocation. However, some sealers kidnapped Aboriginal women when they could not barter enough of them through trading with northern coast tribes. The abduction of Aboriginal women by sealers reveals the grim reality of sealing in Bass Strait and on the South Australian and Victorian coasts in the early nineteenth century (Ryan, 1972, 1996).

Taylor (2000) argues that life on the Bass Strait islands ‘would not have been possible without the Aboriginal women’ (p.73) who were taken from northern Tasmania. Her point regarding these women is reflected within Ryan’s work (1996) in her description of Aboriginal women traded as cheap labour to sealers in exchange for blankets, dogs and food. Taylor (2000) discusses how sealers on Kangaroo Island in 1819 were viewed as having ‘criminal status’ (p.78); they were villains who ‘had performed savage acts of abduction’ (p.78), and who lived off the labour of their Aboriginal ‘mistresses and huntresses’ (p.78). Taylor’s explication of the relationship between Aboriginal women and sealers is important within the context of sealing and whaling in South Australia and elsewhere, for many sealers became whalers, and both industries used and misused (abused) Aboriginal women and men.

The link between sealing and the development of the whaling industry is strong. The use of Aboriginal female labour by sealers such as William Dutton carried over to whaling operations in Victoria (Russell 2012; Wiltshire 1975, 1976, 1978) exemplifying the transition from sealing to whaling in southeast Australia in the 1820s and 1830s. Wiltshire (1976) states that Dutton in 1833 ‘established a thriving industry on the shores of the Bay’ (p.13) and that

Dutton, not Henty, should be acknowledged as the founder of Portland. Other sealers, such as Charles and John Mills, transitioned to whaling operations during the early to mid-1830s (Carroll 1989). In both South Australia and Tasmania, Aborigines were reliant on sealers and whalers as employers of their labour; in turn the sealers and whalers benefited from the Aborigines' knowledge of hunting and killing whales and seals (Staniforth 2006a, 2006b).

Russell (2012) strengthens the link between sealing and the whaling industries development by stating that passing whaling vessels 'often took seals for their skins and their oil' (Russell, 2012, p.11). That is to say that some British and American whaling ventures whaled near seal breeding areas. Smith (2008; 2010) shows how sought-after seal oil and skins were during the early nineteenth century in southern Australian waters. There were a good number of people who worked as both sealers and whalers 'depending on the season and the availability of resources' (Russell, 2012, p.12), including William Lanne, an Aboriginal man. Russell (2012) continues by showing that the sealing and whaling industries 'created similar community structures, which often functioned outside of wider society' (p.12).

### **Conclusion:**

The development of sealing and whaling in south eastern Australia brought about diverse interactions with Aborigines in New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania, and Victoria following its inception at Port Jackson in 1790. Aborigines in South Australia and Tasmania relied upon the sealing and whaling industry for employment and were able to use their traditional skills in these industries. Consequently, there were some cases of Aboriginal-sealer and Aboriginal-whaler cooperation in these colonies. The following chapter will outline Aboriginal peoples interactions with whaling in New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania.

## **Chapter Three**

# **Aboriginal people and whaling: Tasmania, New South Wales and South Australia**

There has been a good deal of research on whaling in Tasmania, New South Wales, and South Australian, and many of these studies include accounts of Aboriginal involvement. This is in contrast to Victoria where there has been no specific study on Victorian whaling and little on Aboriginal associations with whales and whaling. The chapter will discuss the historiography of whaling and Aboriginal associations with whaling and sealing in Tasmania, New South Wales and South Australia. In particular, the level of cooperation between Aborigines and European whalers and sealers will be analysed. This will provide a corpus of evidence with which to compare and contrast the situation in southwest Victoria.

### **Whaling in Tasmania**

According to Kostaglou (1995, p. 10) ‘the first whaling station in [Tasmania] commenced operations at Ralphs Bay’ in 1805. Whaling at this location continued until 1818 and was mainly done ‘by British whalers’ (Kostaglou, 1995, p.10). This was the case because of British tariffs ‘on colonial goods exports including whale oil’ (Kostaglou, 1995, p.10). There was also the British East India Company’s monopoly on goods acquired ‘in the south seas’ (Kostaglou, 1995, p.10). The trade monopoly was lifted in 1819 and the trade of colonial whale goods to Britain was allowed. Thus it can be argued that the Tasmanian whaling industry was active a decade before seasonal whaling began at Portland in Victoria.

The Tasmanian whaling industry peaked around 1837 (Kostaglou 1995). During this time there were still plenty of whales for bay whaling purposes near Hobart. Subsequently, whalers such as Alexander Imlay and Captain Kelly vied ‘to outflank each other and erect stations in previously uncharted waters’ (Kostaglou, 1995, p.14). As a result of excessive bay whaling ventures, ‘the annual right whale migration had become a thing of the past’ (Kostaglou, 1995, p.15) by the 1850s. The peak of whaling operation in Victoria occurred at a similar period to Tasmania. There was excessive whaling that caused right whale numbers

to drop significantly by the early to mid-1840s (*Sydney Morning Herald* August 1844; Critchett 1984; Kostaglou 1995; Powling 1980; Townrow 1997).

Norman (1946) analyses whaling, sealing, piracy and shipwrecks in Tasmania in the nineteenth century. His research shows that whaling in Tasmania declined gradually throughout the nineteenth century, but that it continued until the end of the 1800s. The early periods of whaling and sealing in Tasmania were 'as rough as you make them' (Norman 1989, p.27). This was also true in Victoria as sealing and whaling in Bass Strait, Portland and Port Fairy was initially seasonal (Carroll 1989). Norman's work is valuable in terms of its relevance to sealing and whaling operations in Tasmania and its detailing of how whaling declined due to poor methods. Kostaglou (1995) has also written much on shore-based whaling in Tasmania in the nineteenth century. Kostaglou discusses Aborigines living on whaling stations and serving in whaling fleets. Kostaglou (1995) researched Aboriginal involvement through archaeological remains on whaling station. Firth (2006) also conducted archaeological research on whaling in Tasmania. Her work focuses mainly on whaling entrepreneurs who began in Tasmania and moved to South Australia and Victoria. However, as there is 'little personal information on the whaling entrepreneurs of Tasmania' (p.47), her work does not give much information on the whalers themselves.

The relationship that Aboriginal people had with Europeans in Tasmania during the first half of the nineteenth century was far from cordial. This was the time of the 'Black Wars' when Aboriginal people were forced from Tasmania to offshore islands such as King Island in the Bass Strait (Ryan 1972, 1996). During the early 1800s, however, there was a significant degree of cooperation between Aboriginal tribal groups on Tasmania's northeast coast and sealers. This involved the exchange of Aboriginal women for items such as 'tobacco, flour and tea' (Ryan, 1996, p.67). These mutually advantageous interactions were possible, according to Ryan (1996), 'because the sealers made no claim to Aboriginal land' (p.67). They are described by Russell (2012) as having provided a way for Aboriginal women to adapt to changing circumstances while also enabling them to put their traditional skills to use on sealing boats. Aboriginal women's skills at catching mutton-birds and seals were valued by the sealers who also used them for sex. According to Ryan (1996), once the 'economic value of Aboriginal women in catching seals was exploited by the sealers, the economy and society of the North-East people changed' (p.67). The former hunting and gathering lifestyle

of Aborigines in north eastern Tasmania began transforming into an economy of exchanging human labour for goods.

Kostaglou (1995) asserts that 'the remnants of independent tribes [lived] semi-permanently' (p.44) at Adventure Bay with the whalers, and that cooperation between Aborigines and whalers was 'meagre' (p.44). This perhaps explains why most of the evidence of participation in whaling ventures by Aborigines is anecdotal, such as accounts of Aboriginal women serving 'as whale watchers in the lookout overlooking the bay stations at Bicheno' (Kostaglou, 1995, p.44), and accounts of Aboriginal men serving in 'the pelagic sperm whale fleets in the 1850s and 60s' (Kostaglou, 1995, p.44).

Within Russell's (2012) work it is explained that whaling and sealing ventures were carried out in Tasmania with the help of Aboriginal whalers named Henry Whalley, Walter George Arthur and William Lanne. These Aboriginal men were afforded respect for seemingly being 'the last of [their] people' (p.79), and because they were viewed as 'civilised' Aborigines. In other words, as Russell explains, they were not 'perceived as a threat by the colonists' (p.79). Lanne, who 'interacted with Europeans for much of his life' (p.75), earned a great deal of respect for his ability and enterprise in adapting to European commercial occupations. He was well liked for embracing 'royal status' (p.79) and European ways. However, after his death in 1869 of 'English cholera, typhoid, choleric diarrheal, and the effects of advanced alcoholism' (p.82), he was viewed as no more than a scientific specimen. Russell has shown that Aboriginal whalers like Whalley, Arthur and Lanne could adapt to changed circumstances and adopt a European lifestyle. However, the disrespect shown to Lanne's body after his death reveals the extent to which Aborigines were still perceived as anthropological and scientific curiosities and not as human agents. Nevertheless, they are still tangible cases of Aborigines cooperating with whalers and having good relations with whalers.

An alleged violent incident at Risdon Cove, the site of the first British settlement in Tasmania, during the early nineteenth century stands in marked contrast to such cooperation. It is purported by McPherson (2001) that during 1803 at Risdon Cove there was considerable friction between Aborigines and Europeans. McPherson describes how local Aboriginal people of the Risdon Vale area approached European sailors upon discovering burnt out fires and debris from the latter's fishing operations. Soon afterwards they came under attack from

cannon fire, presumably from the nearby ship in the cove. The attack is described by McPherson thus:

Suddenly the ground shook, and the space in front of the people coming up the hill burst into what looked like a wall of flame. Then the people began to fall in slow motion as though caught in a strong silent wind. At the same time soil and plants were spurting into the air mingled with pieces of what were once people. Blood and soil fell to the earth as though in slow motion, covering the people close to where they fell. The silence was terrifying as the people fell to the ground, in a rain of blood and earth (p.34).

This attack by European sailors is said to have taken at least eighty Aboriginal lives. In its wake there were 'no other accounts of Aboriginal people being recorded in the Risdon Vale area again' (p.34), instead the area became known as one 'of fear, death and mourning' (p.34). This serves as an important example of Aboriginal people avoiding an area that had been the scene of a massacre of their people. In the case of the Convincing Ground near Portland, Clark (1990, 1995, 1998d, 2005, 2011) has stated that Aborigines avoided the Portland settlement and whalers from the early 1830s until George Augustus Robinson arrived in the area in 1841. In both cases caution and fear precluded venturing onto the site of a massacre.

Nash (2003) claims that there was limited cooperation between Aborigines and whalers in Tasmania. However, he noted that in 1829 Robinson visited whaling stations at Bruny Island in order to address 'his concerns over the influence of the whalers on the remnants of the Nuenonne people who had been gathered at Missionary Bay on the northern part of the island' (p.53). Robinson removed 'the surviving Aborigines from the island' (p.53) due to whalers using Aboriginal women for sexual purposes. They may have been used for labour on the whaling stations as well, but that contribution has not been documented.

In many ways the Tasmanian Aboriginal-whaler relationship was not dissimilar from Portland Bay in Victoria, although there seems to have been more Aboriginal-whaler cooperation in Tasmania than in Victoria. This is because Aborigines are known to have lived on whaling stations and served on whaling fleets (Kostaglou 1995); but since there have been no comprehensive studies of Aboriginal-whaler relations in Victoria, it is difficult to judge.

Regarding the similarities, it is worth noting that the ethnographer Dawson (1881) and his daughter conducted interviews with a number of ‘very intelligent’ (p.iii) Aboriginal people from southwest Victoria who told them the Aboriginal word for whale – ‘kundabul’ – but nothing else, apparently, about whales or whaling. It is presumed that either Dawson did not glean any information on Aboriginal involvement with whaling because he did not ask his informants about whaling, or they did not know anything other than the Aboriginal word for whale, or that he considered the information he obtained insignificant and excluded it from his publication.

### **Whaling in New South Wales**

The research conducted on Aboriginal cultural associations with whaling in New South Wales has been headed by academics and writers such as Davidson (1993, 2004), Diamond (1995), and Wesson (2001). The whaling industry began early in the nineteenth century in New South Wales as one of Australia’s first economically viable industries. The colonial government of New South Wales noted in the 1830s and 1840s that the state was ‘the centre of the whaling industry’ (Shirley, 1996, p.6). The best-known whaling families came from the 1830s at Twofold Bay. These were the Boyds, Davidsons and Imlays who operated at Twofold Bay until around 1930. As depicted in Brierly’s 1867 painting of whalers at Twofold Bay, these whaling families employed Aboriginal whaling boat crews. The whaler Benjamin Boyd established whaling operations at his settlement of Boydtown on Twofold Bay, in competition with the town of Eden, with around eight boats ‘including several manned by local Aborigines’ (Davidson, 1993, p.33). The Imlay whalers made use of ‘the local Aborigines extensively in the whale boats with whom they had good relations’ (Davidson 1993, p.31). The Davidson family also employed Aboriginal-manned whaling boats with wooden huts on the shoreline of the whaling station near Eden so that Aborigines working with the Davidsons could stay during the whaling season.

This was noted by George Robinson during his visit to Twofold Bay in 1844. His journals record instances of Aborigines living on the Boyd, Davidson and Imlay whaling stations. Furthermore, Robinson states that on 14 August 1844 there were ‘two whale boats manned by crews of Aboriginal Natives’ (cited in Clark, 1998d, p.35). These two Aboriginal whaling crews belonged to the Imlays and Boyds respectively. Additionally, there are interesting observations with regards to whale types found at Twofold Bay compared to Hobart and

Portland Bay. Robinson states that 'Hobart Town whales are said to be the best whales' (cited in Clark, 1998d, p.39) with whales at Portland Bay being mainly calves, and 'young bull whales mostly at Two Fold Bay' (p.39). The above reference to the 'best whales' being at Hobart could explain the longevity of the Tasmanian whaling industry and the targeting of whale calves at Portland Bay leading to the decline of whaling in southwest Victoria during the 1840s.

Diamond (1995) discusses how Twofold Bay was chosen by Ben Boyd 'as the site for his whaling operations and as a port for his steamships' (p.98). Boyd's settlement Boydtown first began to emerge during 1843. Subsequently, Oswald Brierly 'was appointed manager of the whaling station' (p.99). Boyd had intended 'to develop Boydtown as a port for whalers and other shipping' (p.102), however the town did not thrive owing to the rivalry between Boydtown and Eden, and because Brierly was unable to manage adequately 'the affairs of the whaling station' (p.103-04).

According to Cruse (2005), Aboriginal people were employed within the pastoral and whaling industries at Twofold Bay largely because its isolation 'limited the availability of white workers' (p.17). In addition to this, the 'European shore-based whaling industry took advantage of the traditional migration to the coast over winter' (p.18) by Aborigines, as it occurred in conjunction with the whaling season for European whalers. However, as Davidson (2004) notes, the contrasting reliabilities of European and Aboriginal whaling crews were quite striking. When whaling was progressing slowly during the whaling season European crews were more likely to abandon their post for other forms of employment. In contrast, the Aboriginal whaling crews at Benjamin Boyd's whaling station in 1844 were described as being 'not as likely to abandon a station mid-season' (Davidson, 2004, p.26). This is largely due to Aboriginal workers and their families living on or near the whaling station for much of the whaling season as part of their seasonal migration. On the Davidson whaling station there were small wooden huts that housed Aboriginal workers, providing incentive for Aborigines to remain on site for longer. Additionally, the whaling station was likely to have been built on traditional Aboriginal lands giving them a greater reason to remain near their ancestral estates. The reliability of Aboriginal whaling crews can also be read as a reflection of the high degree of importance that Aboriginal people placed on whaling. It is noteworthy that Aborigines who worked in the boating crews at Twofold Bay received an equal wage to their European counterparts. The payment of equal wages to

Aboriginal whalers was indicative of a significant degree of respect for Aboriginal people and their traditional skills in capturing whales. This degree of respect was seldom seen at other whaling centres such as South Australia, Tasmania, and southwest Victoria (Wesson 2001).

Aboriginal whalers made use of traditional knowledge in helping to lure whales to the harpoons on the whaling boats (Wesson 2001). They also had a method of whaling that lured whales on to the shore where, once beached, they could be killed. This method consisted of luring whales by use of fire and smoke whilst gaining the sympathy of the whales in the water off shore. Aborigines held a 'spiritual belief that the souls of prominent community leaders [were] reincarnated as dolphins and orcas' (Wesson, 2001, p.10). The orcas, more commonly known as killer whales, were used to help herd whales to harpooning boats and were rewarded for their efforts with the choice parts of the whale. The killer whales had their own special names due to their status as whale hunters and reincarnated ancestors of Aboriginal tribal communities. These whales had names like Brierly, Tom, Young Ben and Old Ben, and could be recognised through the shape of their body and fins (Davidson 1993 and 2004, Wesson 2001).

A deeper level of cooperation and mutually beneficial cultural exchange is suggested by the possible transfer of an ancient Aboriginal remedy for curing rheumatism. In New South Wales during the nineteenth century there was a local cure for rheumatism which involved cutting open a freshly killed whale and sitting inside it for some time until the sufferer could no longer stand the stench of the dead whale; this presumably mirrored Aboriginal tradition (Shirley 1996).

**Figure 1**



Brierly, Oswald, 1867. *Whaling off Twofold Bay, New South Wales*. Australia,  
Retrieved on October 28<sup>th</sup> 2010, from  
<http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/work/6294+whalers-off-twofold-bay-new-south-wales>

## **Whaling in South Australia**

During the mid-1830s there were changes being brought about in the House of Commons in London. There was a proposal that South Australia be founded as a colony without convicts and only free settlers and pastoralists. The Foundation Act of 1834 not only brought about the founding of South Australia, but also the sentiment of treating Aboriginal people without the violent altercations and massacres that had occurred in other colonies. The Commissioners of the newly formed South Australia Company stressed that their intention was to make the new colony ‘an example to all in its peaceful relations between white settlers and Aborigines’ (Gibbs, 1969, p.122). The initial contact with Aboriginal people was fairly peaceful with some families establishing themselves in the vicinity of Adelaide. However, the semblance of peaceful relations began to dissipate in the late 1830s with conflict erupting over the usage of traditional Aboriginal land and resources for stock grazing and farming. These incidents occurred chiefly around the Murray River district on the New South Wales border, Port Lincoln and the Flinders Ranges (Gibbs 1969).

The conflict over the usage of traditional Aboriginal land came about due to cultural misunderstandings and ignorance of different cultural norms. Gibbs (1969) described the situation thus:

The whites believed that the Aborigines had no land of their own. Actually, each tribe had a definite area which was its tribal home, and to which it was deeply bound by spiritual ties. Furthermore, the whites did not understand the highly-organized pattern of Aboriginal life, and believed the Aboriginal to be merely a barbarous savage (127).

This sad state of affairs continued until missionaries arrived from Europe in the 1840s and 1850s in an attempt to address the situation (Gibbs 1969). Mission stations were set up by the Anglican Church at Port Lincoln, and at Adelaide, Encounter Bay and Port Lincoln by the Lutherans. Such missions were created for not only aiding Aboriginal people but also ‘to provide education, religious knowledge and physical help for them’ (Gibbs, 1969, p.130). German missionary Heinrich Meyer operated his school for Aborigines at Victor Harbour from 1840 to 1846, which allowed him to observe Aboriginal culture at whaling stations as well as whaling mythology (Meyer 1879). Whale mythology of the Bunganditj people of Guichen Bay was documented by Smith (1880). Our understanding of Aboriginal interactions with Europeans and whaling is derived largely from the work of Meyer (1843, 1846), and other missionaries such as Taplin (1874, 1879), Teichelmann and Shurmann (1840), and

Teichelmann (1841). This is complemented by later research conducted by academics such as Gillen (1912), Spencer (1927), and Bates (1966), and more recently by Foster (1983), Clarke (1991, 1996, 2001) and Staniforth (2006a, 2006b).

Whaling in South Australia was undertaken from the mid-1830s to the early 1850s. Clarke (2001) asserts that 'whaling was the first official industry in the Colony of South Australia' (p.27), beginning in 1837. However, whaling was engaged upon in South Australian waters by Hobart, Launceston and American-based whalers before 1836. Moreover, Aboriginal people were involved in the South Australian whaling industry both before and after 1836 at Encounter Bay. Clarke states that they manned whaling boats and that they were found 'to be no less expert' (Clarke, 2001, p.28) than the European whalers. The use of harpoons was similar to their use of spears, and harpooning came to them naturally.

Firth (2006, p. 18) suggests 'that the South Australian whaling industry was divided into two distinct phases'. The first phase occurred before the establishment of the South Australia Company and encompassed 'the involvement of the Tasmanian-based whaling industry' (Firth, 2006, p.18). The second phase began in 1835 with the formation of the South Australia Company. The South Australian Company instituted the colony of South Australia and the concept of good treatment in regards to Aboriginal people. It also brought whaling into the economic spotlight as an alternative to sealing due to diminished seal numbers in Bass Strait. The best documented whaling stations on the South Australian coast were the Encounter Bay, Fowlers Bay, Sleaford Bay and Streaky Bay stations. The type of whaling that was done at these stations was mainly bay whaling, which meant that whaling activity was centred on the coastal area of the station. These whaling stations were also distinguished by their whaling operations being associated with different companies and locations. The first whaling operations originated 'with the official settlement of South Australia such as the whaling activities of the South Australian company and Hagan and Hart' (Staniforth, 2006a, p.1). The whaling operations were carried out by 'Hobart based whalers in a number of whaling stations on the far west coast of South Australia' (2006, p.1) before the establishment of the South Australian company.

Whaling was not confined to stations such as Streaky Bay or Sleaford Bay. Whaling stations at Coffin Bay, Encounter Bay and Thistle Island were also prevalent in the building of the South Australian whaling industry. However, Coffin Bay and Thistle Island were not

successful fisheries. Encounter Bay whaling began with three main whaling stations at Police Point, Granite Island and Rosetta Head. Whaling began in the area from around 1837 when directors of the South Australian Company proposed 'the establishment of a whale fishery at Encounter Bay' (Clarke, 1991, p.41). The three stations that were established in the area were gradually amalgamated into one entity from the late 1830s to the mid-1850s. This excludes an unsuccessful attempt in 1871 and 1872 to re-establish the fishery. The fishery changed hands many times through the years due to mismanagement and dissatisfaction with fishery management. It was still considered to be 'the most successful and longest-lived of the South Australian shore whaling bases' (Clarke, 1991, p.41).

During the course of the development of the sealing and whaling industries in South Australia there were a number of whalers from Tasmania who set up operations on the mainland and on Kangaroo Island. Some of the earlier contact with Aboriginal people was peaceful. A good example of this can be found in 1833 when a trader named John Jones delivered whaling supplies and provisions to Hog Bay in South Australia as well as passing by Jervis Bay 'where he found an Aboriginal community of up to ten families' (Taylor, 2002, p.60). Jones ended up employing at least five men from this group to aid in sealing ventures. The remuneration Jones gave his Aboriginal employees is significant; weapons and ammunition were given to two of the Aboriginal men who remained in his employ for five months. During the colonial era of Australian history it is implied that weapons would not have been given to a potential enemy (Taylor 2002). Therefore, this suggests that relations between Aborigines and Europeans were on a more equal footing on some parts of the South Australian coast.

Staniforth (2006a) mentions that Aborigines and whalers interacted at locations such as Streaky Bay, and yet he claims that the presence of any Aborigines at the whaling station itself is dubious. This is because the closest Aboriginal artefacts were found between 600m to 3km from the location. Staniforth explains the situation in the following terms:

Unfortunately the distance of the material from the site, the presence of Edward John Eyre in the area some years before and the fact that no excavations had been conducted means that no unequivocal evidence of indigenous presence actually at the whaling station has been found. (Staniforth, 2006a, p.14)

However, the lack of Aboriginal artefacts near the Streaky Bay whaling station site does not discount the presence of Aborigines at the site during its history. Staniforth's assertions regarding Streaky Bay were made on the basis of archaeological evidence only, and do not take into account evidence gleaned by Meyer (1843, 1846), Gibbs (1969), Kostaglou (1995), Clarke (2001), Nash (2003) and Firth (2006) that Aborigines were present on whaling stations at Encounter Bay and Streaky Bay. In some cases they would mend nets or man whaling boats for European whalers (Clarke 2001).

Contact on the South Australian mainland and on Kangaroo Island was not always peaceful. Sealers often abducted Aboriginal women from Tasmania who held the initial assumption that they would be returned to their tribal homelands (Russell 2012, p.102). In most cases this was not the case as sealers and whalers took advantage of their skills in catching kangaroos, mutton-birds and wombats for sustenance. On Kangaroo Island during 1834 a sealer-turned-whaler George Meredith hired the services of three Aboriginal men to aid in a sealing operation and was subsequently killed when they neared the mainland. This incident caused some fear as one of the Aborigines in question was known as 'Encounter Bay Bob' and feared by settlers for being 'a notorious warrior' (Taylor, 2002, p. 61).

Furthermore, it is worth noting that white Kangaroo Islanders of European origins were few in number and had to negotiate on Aboriginal terms in regards to the usage of indigenous labour, land and resources. Taylor (2002) outlines that 'for all their knives, guns and boats, the white Kangaroo Islanders were in the minority, both numerically, and culturally, on the yet uncolonised coast' (p.62). However the acknowledged hegemony of Aborigines on their own land on the non-colonised coast did not survive the onset of colonisation and whaling operations along the South Australian coast

## **Conclusion**

Several points need to be emphasised. First, that Aboriginal associations with whales and whaling in New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania were significantly greater than in Victoria. Secondly, alleged violent incidents in Tasmania, such as those at Risdon Cove and the 'Black Wars' (McPherson 2001, Nash 2003) greatly damaged relations between Aboriginal and European whalers. Thirdly, in New South Wales there was a good deal of mutual respect (Wesson 2001) between Aborigines and whalers based largely on an

appreciation of the Aborigine peoples' skill at harpooning whales and steering whaling boats. Finally, in South Australia there was a largely harmonious relationship between Aborigines and whalers, but by the late 1830s and into the 1840s incidents such as those at Streaky Bay whaling station in 1847 eroded Aboriginal cultural associations with whales and whaling in South Australia. The following chapter examines Victorian whaling and Aboriginal associations with whaling in Victoria.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Aboriginal people, whales and whaling in Victoria**

This chapter outlines the history of early contact between Aboriginal people and Europeans at Port Phillip, later Victoria, and examines the development of the whaling industry in that colony, focussing on Port Fairy and Portland. Aboriginal peoples roles in the whaling industry will also be explored, and reasons for their involvement and/or avoidance of whaling stations will be provided.

#### **Aborigines in Port Phillip**

The recurring themes within the thesis are colonisation, depopulation, death, disease, dispossession and interracial violence between Aborigines. Broome (2005) contends that Aborigines in the Port Phillip district did not passively succumb to the colonisers, but ‘manipulated, accommodated, imitated and resisted the European presence’ (2005, p.2). While Broome’s contention is true, the Aboriginal resistance to European colonisation still caused a severe depopulation of clans in Port Phillip. During this time the Aboriginal population fell ‘by eighty percent’ (Broome, 2005, p.2) owing to the resistance as well as introduced diseases such as smallpox decimating their populations in a number of areas in the district.

The first encounters between the Aborigines and the British occurred in the early 1800s with surveyors being initially regarded as spirits of their dead, but their intent was questioned by local clans and hostilities followed (Broome, 2005, p.4). Boonwurrung and Wathawurrung Aborigines also encountered similar surveying parties at Sorrento and the western part of Port Phillip Bay which caused more hostile exchanges of musket fire and spears. Later, several escaped convicts including William Buckley, who travelled around to the western part of the bay and was taken in by the Wathawurrung after they discovered him dying of exposure and thought him a deceased ancestor, owing to his ghostly whiteness, were encountered (Broome, 2005, p.5).

Following the abandonment of the Sorrento convict settlement in the early 1800s, there were encounters between Aboriginal people and barkers, sealers and whalers at Port Fairy,

Portland Bay and Wilson's Promontory up until the 1830s (Broome, 2005, p.6). The arrival of the Hentys at Portland Bay in November 1834 and John Batman's surveying of the future site of Melbourne that year brought about a 'deluge of new things' (2005, p.10). Batman, who had formed the Port Phillip Association with a number of fellow Tasmanian adventurers, initiated a deal to use Kulin Aboriginal land with payment of provisions and blades, and the Hentys brought farming technology, livestock and servants with them (2005, p.10).

John Wedge, one of the Association members, was later engaged to investigate claims of violence by European colonisers against Aboriginal people in the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate, established in 1839. The attempt to protect Aborigines from European violence within the Protectorate was well meaning, but 'violence against Aborigines' (Broome, 2005, p.14) by sealers, shepherds and others still occurred. The well-documented efforts of Chief Protector George Augustus Robinson to protect the Aboriginal population of Port Phillip from European vices earned him admiration and respect from the clans. However, the so-called 'civilisation' (Broome, 2005, p.35) imposed upon the Aborigines – with its concomitant loss of traditional food sources and disruption to traditional ceremonial life – caused tensions to arise. With this in mind, it is prudent to assume that accounts of violence against Aborigines at Portland Bay in the early 1830s by whalers including the Convincing Ground massacre would have been more common than archival records indicate. Despite efforts at peaceful interactions, European sealers and whalers still imposed their right to land and sea resources over traditional Aboriginal rights (Broome, 2005, p.35). This, coupled with a lack of mutual respect and understanding of Aboriginal customs, caused significant conflict over land and resources between clans and whalers at Portland Bay and nearby pastoral runs.

### **Whaling in Victoria**

Wiltshire (1975, 1976, 1978) contends that systematic large-scale whaling by non-Indigenous people in Victoria did not commence until 1828 with the arrival of William Dutton at Portland Bay. Prior to 1828 whaling in Victoria was opportunistic and seasonal. The whaling industry expanded after 1833 when Dutton established a try-works for processing whale blubber and oil (*Portland Guardian*, June 1838). Wiltshire (1976) describes how Dutton 'established a thriving industry on the shores of the Bay' (p.13) almost two years before squatters arrived at Portland Bay. The richness of the southwest Victorian waters was

evidenced by the sighting of thirty whales by a whaling boat that ‘came into Port Fairy’ (Carroll, 1989, p.77) in 1835.

Dakin (1963) states that ‘after an abortive attempt in 1803 to form a settlement at Port Phillip, the southern coast of what is now Victoria had been left alone, except by whalers and sealers’ (p.58). However, as outlined by Townrow (1997), ‘the activities of sealers and whalers in Victoria were intermittent, and the industry was primarily based in Sydney, Launceston and Hobart’ (p.7). Initially, sealing was significantly more viable as an economic activity for Americans and Europeans who engaged in sealing within Bass Strait from the late 1790s to the 1820s. However, with the rise of whaling in Tasmania at the beginning of the 1820s and in Victoria in the late 1820s, sealing rapidly declined in viability. This decline was brought about by the extensive slaughter of seals and a concentration on whales as a resource for harvesting (Chamberlain 1989; Nash 2003). The sealing industry in Bass Strait was no longer viable by 1832. As a result, whaling in the southern waters of Australia increased in economic importance.

The whaling period in Portland commenced with the permanent presence of Dutton on the southwest coast of Victoria (Wiltshire 1975, 1976, 1978). He was closely followed by whalers from Tasmania such as Alexander Campbell, John Griffiths, Charles and John Mills, Henry Reid, Peter Sinclair, and James Wishart (Carroll 1989; Learmonth 1960, 1983; Wiltshire 1975, 1976, 1978). Additionally, other whaling boats came to southwest Victoria from ‘Sydney, Hobart, England, France and America’ (Learmonth, 1960, p.5). There were also cargoes ‘of oil and whalebone for the London market’ (*Launceston Advertiser*, 3 Sept. 1835) that arrived from Portland Bay in 1835. This is an example of how international whalers harvested whales for their oil and exported the oil to colonial centres such as London.

Carroll (1989), Davis (1968), Learmonth (1960, 1983), Powling (1980) and Wiltshire (1975, 1976, 1978) argue that the development of the whaling industry in Victoria occurred in tandem with the growth of the pastoral industry and was led by prominent families such as the Griffiths, Hentys, Sinclairs and Reids. This is also reflected in newspapers such as the *Launceston Advertiser*, *Portland Guardian*, *Portland Mercury* and syndicated articles in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Geelong Advertiser* and *Argus*. In relation to Tasmanian whaling, Firth (2006) states that ‘there is regrettably little personal information on the whaling

entrepreneurs of Tasmania' (p.47). This is different in Victoria with documentation on whaling entrepreneurs being more extant.

Henry Reid established whaling stations 'both on Kangaroo Island and Portland Bay' (Firth, 2006, p.47). However, there are few historical records on Reid's whaling activities. As Firth notes, most of his activities are 'either not recorded or simply did not warrant a mention' (p.48). The level of whaling activity at Portland and Port Fairy during this period was recorded in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Courier* (Hobart), *Argus*, *Geelong Advertiser*, *Cornwall Chronicle*, *Port Phillip Gazette*, *Sussex Coast Mercury*, *Portland Gazette*, *Portland Guardian* and *Portland Mercury*. The content of these articles focussed mainly on the number of whales captured by whalers at Portland and Port Fairy. However, there were occasional articles during the mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth century regarding whaling identities such as Campbell, Dutton, Henty, Reid or Sinclair (*Sydney Morning Herald* Aug. 1844; *Portland Gazette* May 1848; *Portland Guardian* July, Aug. and Sept. 1844, April 1857; *Portland Mercury* Aug. 1844; *Courier* Aug. 1844, 1848). The following is a typical example:

WHALING.-We are highly gratified in being able to state that the whaling parties from this Port, stationed at Portland-Bay, have been generally very fortunate this season. We understand that the merchants of this place, engaged in the trade, united since the commencement of the season in one company, have 300 tuns of oil. Mr. Kelly's party have filled all their casks, upwards of 100 tuns; and only in-consequence of the non-arrival of more casks, (which were detained by the wreck of the Mary and Elizabeth at Port Sorell,) were prevented from securing more. We congratulate the speculators and all interested in the welfare of the Port, on the success thus far attending the attempt at establishing a whaling trade out of Launceston.

(Syndicated extract from *Launceston Advertiser* in *Sydney Herald*, 20 July 1835)

The presence of numerous whales at Portland Bay would have helped maintain whaling operations for over a decade following the arrival of Dutton in 1828 (Wiltshire 1976). Carroll (1989) maintains that whaling operations were successful because the whales that frequented 'the coasts about Bass Strait were chiefly what were known as 'right whales'' (p.59), meaning that 'they were the 'right' whales to hunt' (p.59). Such whales are said to have harboured a high amount of whale oil and whalebone, both of which were highly valuable

within the markets of that time. Right whales migrated north at the onset of winter towards Twofold Bay in New South Wales and some migrated westward to Portland Bay and Port Fairy. Some of these whales were known to remain around the coasts of Tasmania, which makes the presence of whalers at Encounter Bay and near Launceston understandable. The presence of right whales in places such as Portland Bay and Port Fairy made these areas highly profitable places for whaling by American and European entrepreneurs.

As well as the whaling station established in Portland there were a number of whaling stations created in and around the Surrey River mouth north of Portland. Other notable whaling localities in western Victoria included: Double Corner, Whaling Point and the Convincing Ground near Portland (Clark 1998d, 2005, 2011). Whaling localities near Port Fairy were Griffith Island, Rabbit Island, and the Mills whaling station. Osburne (1980) states that Port Fairy began 'as a whaling station [operated] by the celebrated Johnny Griffiths' (p.227) before the advent of the Mills brothers' whaling ventures. Launceston whalers 'Reiby and Penny' (Powling, 1980, p.14) also whaled at Port Fairy during the 1834-1835 seasons. It is worth noting that the coastline around Port Fairy 'was favoured for whaling' (Neil et al., 1973, p.28) due to the water being 'not so deep'. This meant that 'whalers did not have to cut adrift as often as at Portland' (Neil et al., 1973, p.28). The whaling station was situated on Griffith Island after whaling operations were moved there from Rabbit Island. This occurred in 1837 with Alexander Campbell providing materials 'for the new buildings' (Powling, 1980, p.15) from Launceston. The acquisition of land by the Mills brothers 'near the Moyne River in the early 1830s' (Neil et al, 1973, p.28) near Port Fairy is indicative of the Port Fairy area being preferable for whaling purposes.

By November 1834 there were many Europeans engaged in various seasonal occupations at Port Fairy (Turner 1904). These including 'barking' which involved the removing of bark from trees at places such as Western Port, further east along the coast from Portland Bay (Turner 1904). Whaler John Griffiths was involved in the stripping of 'wattle-bark at Western Port' (Powling, 1980, p.14) in 1834. Turner (1904) states that 'the whaling season, which lasted from April to October, was generally a very busy time, [with] as many as fifty whales being sometimes secured within the six winter months' (p.77). It was during the 1836 whaling season that John Griffiths, Alexander Campbell and John and Charles Mills started to make names for themselves in whaling at Port Fairy' (Powling, 1980, p.11). Powling notes that all of the above mentioned whalers 'were from Launceston or its vicinity, although

Griffiths was originally from New South Wales and Campbell from the Isle of Mull' (p.11). These men laid the foundations for Port Fairy as a township (Powling 1980).

According to Donnelly (1893b) the first whaling season in Port Fairy by the Mills brothers was undertaken in 1836. Donnelly (1888) also contends that 'Western Port in olden days had a Griffiths point or island joining Lady's Bay, one of the oldest established whaling bays on the present coast of Victoria' (p.1). However, there was a sealing or whaling company named Gore and Co, which had been situated seasonally on Griffiths Island in 1832 and other years. There is little information on this whaling company besides what is in Donnelly's written letters to Osburne (1888, 1893,1896).

Powling (1980) maintains that the peak year for whaling at Portland Bay was in 1837. Furthermore, it is stated that 'there were no less than eight whaling-parties in Portland Bay' (p.16). John Mills in Portland and Alexander Campbell of Port Fairy exported '240 tuns of oil' (p.16) and '220 tuns of oil and 13 tuns of whalebone' (p.16) respectively during 1837. Powling also notes that 'so many whales were killed that the business was never the same afterwards' (p.16). Ten years later all that was left were 'the great bones strewing the beaches, the deserted and crumbling whaling-stations, and the memories of epic doings' (p.16). As a result, whalers such as Charles Mills and Edward Henty turned 'to farming' (p.16). Significantly, these sources contain little to no mention of Aboriginal involvement in whaling.

Edward Henty began with the desire to have harmonious relations with Aborigines, but claimed that he could not control the men under his employ. Another settler, Niel Black was described as being 'quite ruthless when it came to finding a run' (MacKellar, 2008, p.24). His decision to purchase a pastoral run at Strathdownie was based on the 'eradication of the Aboriginal people whose lands the run covered' (p.23). Furthermore, Black believed that success on his run 'depended on not having to fight the Aborigines for the land' (p.24).

A short report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 9 August 1844 demonstrates how the whaling industry was in decline by the mid-1840s:

May 29 - Dutton.....1 whale  
June 4 - Clarke.....1 "

June 11 - Clarke.....1 "

July 19 - Dutton.....1 "

Total: 4

(*Sydney Morning Herald*, 1844, p.2)

Critchett (1984) notes that ‘whaling was carried on to a considerable extent’ in the area during the 1840s and that the area ‘had long been the resort of whalers and sealers’ (p.12). Bennett (cited in Critchett 1984) provides further detail on the period when whaling was declining at Portland Bay due to declining right whale stocks. Townrow (1997) reinforces this point when she outlines that ‘the practice of indiscriminately killing calves, cows and bulls during the June to September season led to a rapid decline in whale numbers that could be worked from land-based stations’ (p.7). Powling (1980) adds that ‘fewer and fewer of the whaling crews were returning to Launceston when the season ended in October or November’ (p.15). Therefore, the decline of whale numbers at Portland Bay due to excessive whaling brought about the shift of whaling operations from Portland to Port Fairy during the 1830s and 1840s.

### **Aboriginal involvement in whaling**

Dutton’s arrival at Portland in 1828 is significant as it is known that he brought with him a number of Aboriginal women from Tasmania. Dutton established a sealing operation on Julia Percy Island on the southwest coast and, according to Kerley (1981), was part of a ‘group of sealers and their Aboriginal companions’ (p.2). Kerley (1981) argues that there is much evidence that sealers had been kidnapping Aboriginal women from the northern coast of Tasmania for female labour on sealing boats since the early 1800s (Ryan 1972, 1996). An example of kidnapping of Aboriginal women for cheap labour is provided by Amery (1996): a Tasmanian Aboriginal woman, Kalloongoo, was seized from Woody Island, taken to Kangaroo Island and then sold to William Dutton. It is likely that some Aboriginal women worked with Dutton during the late 1820s and into the 1830s (Amery 1996; Merry 2003; Plomley 1966; Ryan 1972, 1996; Stuart 1997; Taylor 2000, 2002). One of these women supposedly accompanied a surveying team led by Edward Henty in December 1834 (Wiltshire 1976). Whatever the possible contact with Aborigines in southwest Victoria, Dutton knew that ‘the inherent racism within the settler society condemned such liaisons’ (Russell, 2012, p.113) and that Henty seemingly disapproved of them (Peel, 1996) to the

point of removing his Aboriginal wife 'Sarah' 'into George August Robinson's charge' (Russell, 2012, p.113). Henty's disapproval is further exemplified within his journal entry which referred to Rengangi 'Sarah' as the 'Black Woman belonging to Dutton' (Peel, 1996, 5 Jan 1835).

Upon their arrival on the southwest coast of Victoria, the Hentys set up sealing and whaling ventures as well 'as the first massive sheep runs' (Kerley, 1981, p.3). They also 'stressed their goodwill towards the Aborigines' (Christie, 1979, p.24) and intended to treat them cordially. Christie (1979) observes however that around three to four years after they had landed at Portland Bay 'the Hentys were using guns to protect their property' (p.24). The usage of the traditional lands of the Gunditjmara Aboriginal people for pastoral purposes from the 1830s onwards 'conflicted directly with the Aborigines' use of the land' (Christie, 1979, p.25). By contract, whaling and sealing had only affected Aborigines on a seasonal basis. Whalers and sealers tended to rely more upon being provisioned from Sydney or Launceston than using the land for growing food and raising flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. Confirming this, Corris (1968) claims that 'the sealers and whalers who began to visit the southwest coast early in the nineteenth century left little evidence of their activities there' (Corris, 1968, p.52).

When Aboriginal people of the Kilcarer gundidj clan disputed ownership of a beached whale in the early 1830s, the potential impact of whaling on the traditional lifestyle of Aborigines on the southwest coast of Victoria was felt (Clark 1990, 1995, 1998a, 1998c, 1998d, , 2005, 2011; Critchett 1984, 1992, 1998). The use of land and sea resources by pastoralists and whalers came into direct conflict with Aboriginal traditional claims to these resources. The conflict that eventuated is discussed below

Corris (1968) states that, in all cases, the conflict between Aborigines and whites in western Victoria 'had an economic base' (p. 62). Reynolds (1978) iterates that 'in the early stages of contact death often resulted from mutual fear, anxiety and misunderstanding' (p.58). This is exemplified by conflicts over land and resources in western Victoria bringing about violent altercations between Aborigines, settlers and whalers. Critchett (1992) explains that these altercations included the killing of settlers and shepherds in retaliation for the treatment of Aboriginal women, as well as the taking of sheep and cattle for sustenance. Aborigines killed pastoralists 'for specific injuries or for serious transgression of traditional law' (Reynolds,

1978, p.58). These were viewed by Europeans as ‘armed robberies’ (1977, p.58) rather than retaliation for transgressions against Aborigines.

The high degree of tension between Aborigines and settlers on the southwest coast of Victoria included skirmishes over wool harvests on inland pastoral stations and for purposes of procuring sheep for sustenance (Critchett 1984, 1992, 1998). It is worth reinforcing the economic bases of such tensions as it played such a crucial role in relation to the origins of Aboriginal/settler/whaler conflict. With such a climate of hostility and tension, violent confrontations such as the alleged Convincing Ground massacre during the early 1830s occurred alongside hostilities between Aborigines and settlers. The tension in the area is exemplified by Bassett (1962) who stated that there was ‘fear, exasperation, and provocative gestures on both sides’ (p.406):

If Edward [Henty] was in fact nervous of the inland natives, so numerous and aggressive compared with the few to be seen close to the Bay, he was not the only member of the Henty establishment to feel that most reasonable dread. (Bassett, 1962, p.404)

The skirmishes that ensued between Aborigines and settlers during the 1830s and 1840s underline a hostile climate fostered by ill-treatment of Aboriginal clan groups on the coast. For Aboriginal people the situation was further aggravated by the loss of traditional lands (Bassett 1962; Wiltshire 1975, 1976, 1978).

It is noteworthy that the Henty family stated that ‘despite much provocation they had never killed a native’ (Bassett, 1962, p.404). This claim to peaceful settlement is significant at a time when a number of pastoralists would have used strong measures against Aborigines trying to acquire their crops and livestock for sustenance. Edward Henty’s claim is debatable given that he, like other ‘sensible and humane employers’ (Bassett, 1962, p.405), experienced difficulty in controlling his employees from exacting retribution against Aborigines (Wiltshire 1976). G. C. Collier wrote to Governor Gipps claiming that stockmen and shepherds under Edward Henty’s employ ‘armed and ammunitioned’ (Collier, Mitchell Library Sydney) themselves and shot Aboriginal men, women and children. Some of those shot were ‘unfortunate mothers with infants in their hands crying for mercy’ (Wiltshire, 1976, p.15). Niel Black at Glenormiston in 1840 counted himself ‘remarkably fortunate’ (Black,

Feb. 21 1840, p.168) to have a pastoral run with little danger of Aborigines taking livestock owing to the previous overseer Frederick Taylor's 'eradication' of the Aboriginal people (MacKellar, 2008, p.24). Thus, as Bassett (1962) notes, a claim to peaceful settlement is something 'that many pastoralists of that era and district would have been unable to make' (p.405), especially Black and Taylor. Their attitude towards Aboriginal people on Glenormiston exemplifies the ruthlessness of some pastoralists in the early to mid-nineteenth century in southwest Victoria (Critchett 1992; MacKellar 2008).

When the Hentys began to move inland from their coastal whaling operations, they 'established [pastoral] stations on the Wannon' (Wiltshire, 1975, p.11). The establishment of pastoral stations could be perceived as a more profound statement of ownership of land and resources than whaling. The creation of inland pastoral stations sent the message that Europeans had supremacy of land, resources and how these resources would be utilised. Wiltshire (1975) has argued that 'there was much friction as soon as the Hentys moved inland' (p.12). In one particular incident in 1837, three to four years after the alleged Convincing Ground massacre, Frank Henty was engaged in starting 'two men off the Bay with sixteen bales of wool loaded on two drays' (Bassett, 1962, p.405). This occurred after one of the first harvests of produce in the area and was 'the first of many skirmishes between his four shepherds and the blacks' (Bassett, 1962, p.405). These struggles over land and resources not only had an economic base, they also had a role in 'convincing' Aboriginal people of the new economic reality.

Another example of the new 'convincing ground' that was manifesting between Aborigines and European settlers was the 'Fighting Hills' massacre in 1840. This occurred after Aborigines took fifty sheep from the Whyte brother's station; the Aborigines were pursued and more than fifty were killed. The incident caused a furore, not over the killing of the Aborigines, but over the killing of the livestock. As Wiltshire (1975) has noted, in articles printed in the *Portland Guardian* about the incident 'the whole black race was automatically judged guilty' (p.25). This situation is another example of how conflict between Aborigines and Europeans arose 'most frequently from competing use of land rather than trespass as such' (Reynolds, 1978, p.56).

In the wake of this incident, the white settlers were considered to be the victims of so-called Aboriginal 'outrages' (Wiltshire, 1975, p.25). It is unclear whether the Whyte brothers were

charged for their role in the Fighting Hills massacre but, regardless of this, the incident serves as an example of how pastoralists strove to ‘convince’ Aborigines that their right to the land’s resources took precedence over traditional owners’ rights: in other words, to ‘convince’ Aboriginal people of the new reality. This incident allows us to ‘draw a generalized picture’ (Reynolds, 1978, p.56) of how ‘the European intrusion disrupted normal patterns of life’ (p.56) before looking more closely at the archival sources.

The kind of cooperation enjoyed between Aborigines and sealers in Tasmania was not to be found in Victoria where Aboriginal-European relations on the coast were mostly volatile. As previously mentioned, Mitchell observed Aboriginal people near Portland Bay lighting fires from places such as Mount Clay to signal that a whale was coming into the Bay when he visited the area in 1836. Yet, apart from this, little cooperation between Aborigines and whalers in Victoria was recorded until George Robinson’s visit to Portland Bay in May 1841 (Clark 1998d

Some indication of hostile relations between whalers and coastal Aboriginal clans can be gleaned from an incident reported by the Mills brothers at Port Fairy (Carroll 1989). This incident occurred in 1836 near the Merri River. Carroll (1989) has noted how two survivors of a whaling boat had sighted what they called ‘a strange old wreck’ (Carroll, 1989, p.78), later known as the “Mahogany Ship’. Critchett (1998) also makes reference to sightings of the wreck within her work. Powling (1980) briefly mentions the sighting of the wreck within his work on Port Fairy’s first fifty years. It was discovered ‘on the coast near Tower Hill’ (Critchett, 1998, p.17).

Unbeknown to the colonists, the wreck was looked upon with some reverence by local Aboriginal clans. Consequently the party of whalers sent to salvage timber from the wreck were met with some hostility. The whalers were led by John Mills who desired that there be no conflict between whalers and Aborigines (Carroll 1989). After two volleys were fired over the heads and at the feet of the advancing Aborigines, the two parties were said to have ‘eyed each other suspiciously’ (p.79). A member of the whaling party, Joe Wilson, mounted a foolhardy charge at the Aborigines which caused them to flee the scene. Following this, three older Aboriginal men led a ‘conciliatory delegation’ (p.79) to treat with the whalers. The Aborigines were trying to keep the whalers away from their traditional lands as well as protecting sites of significance to them. Mills (cited in Carroll) considered that one of the

other possible reasons for the Aborigines attempting to steer the Europeans away from the site was a veneration of the ship, and concluded that they possibly held it in reverence as a 'sacred object or site' (p.79).

Mill's decision on the matter of whether or not to salvage the timbers of the wrecked vessel says a great deal about his personal character. Harboring cultural sensitivity to Aboriginal beliefs and culture, he chose to discontinue the salvage operation. The confrontation with the Aborigines and the location of the wreck were kept secret for some years before 'John Mills took bearings to fix the position of the wreck' (Carroll, 1989, p.79). The bearings were almost undoubtedly a map for future reference should he or others in his employ need to find it for whatever reason. Critchett (1998) states that from the time of the first sighting of the wreck in 1836, there were a good number of people who 'reported seeing the wreck, which gradually disappeared from view over the years' (p.17) due to 'the shifting sand' (p.17).

Donnelly (1893, 1896) makes reference to the wreck within his manuscripts. He states in January 1893 that he 'would sooner discover the wreck than have 50 pounds laid in my hand' (1893). In 1842 he wrote that while 'there was neither black nor white ... to show us where she was wrecked [he] could see the white men had been about there' (1896). Massola (1969) discusses the oral traditions of Aborigines regarding the wreck of the Mahogany Ship, observing that Aborigines on the coast near Port Fairy 'had a tradition that 'Yellow Men' from the wreck had settled amongst them, intermarrying with the tribe long before the coming of the first 'white men' (p.38). If these 'Yellow Men' were mixing and intermarrying with local Aborigines then it can be surmised that interracial relations were peaceful. By logical extension it can be argued that the reverence that Aboriginal people had for the wreck was based on their traditional stories of the 'Yellow Men' described by Massola (1969).

Critchett (1998) writes about an Aboriginal named Jim Cain who had been involved in pastoral and whaling pursuits in the Port Fairy area. His involvement in whaling is not well documented. However, the mystery surrounding Cain's wife's ancestry sheds some light on the significance of the Mahogany ship in Aboriginal oral tradition. According to Critchett (1998), Nellie Cain's physical features encouraged speculation about her ancestry, namely, that she was descended from the 'Yellow Men' (Massola, 1969, p.17). This increases the

significance of the Mahogany Ship wreck to Aborigines of the area due to potential family ties (Massola 1969).

## **Conclusion**

The previous chapter showed how relations between Aborigines, sealers and whalers were relatively cordial in South Australia before 1836. The situation after 1836 was epitomised by good intentions towards Aborigines that turned to animosity when competition for natural resources forced Aborigines into the fringes of towns. As this chapter has shown, this competition for natural resources was also present at Portland Bay with Aboriginal traditional lands being overtaken by pastoralists (Wiltshire 1975). Competition for natural resources between Aborigines and Europeans also strained cultural relationships. In Victoria, it is clear that Aboriginal-European relations were hostile due to violent conflicts over land and other resources which led to little mutual cooperation. The Convincing Ground massacre of 1833/1834 is a strong example of this competition for land and other resources between Aborigines and Europeans.

## **Chapter Five**

### **The Convincing Ground Massacre**

The thesis has identified a paucity of information regarding Aboriginal interactions with whales and whaling in southwest Victoria. Connor (2007, 2009, 2010) and Clark (2011, 2014) have led the debate over the cause of this information disparity. The debate has centred on the origins of the area known as the Convincing Ground, theories of its origins and the laying of meanings. This chapter will examine the claims of Connor and Clark regarding the modern context of the Convincing Ground, theories for the origin of the place name, evidence supporting these theories, and evidence supporting violence between Aborigines and whalers at the Convincing Ground. It will be argued that what happened in the early 1830s at the Convincing Ground was one of the main causes for the paucity of information regarding Aboriginal interactions with whales and whaling in southwest Victoria and later cultural misunderstandings and altercations.

#### **Convincing Ground: Context**

The Convincing Ground debate has been led by academics and writers such as Clark (2005, 2011, 2014) and Connor (2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010) with contributions by Critchett (1984, 1992, 1998). There have been three theories regarding the origins of the Convincing Ground and how it was named. The initial theory, first proposed in 1841 and outlined by Clark, is that the Convincing Ground's origins lay in a dispute over a beached whale between (presumably Kilcarer gundidj) Aborigines near present-day Portland, and European whalers, in 1833 or 1834.

In 2005 a debate regarding the Convincing Ground was carried out within academic publications and on radio (ABC south-west Victoria). The debate arose due to landowner Michael Maher's attempted development of land near Portland which was the site of the alleged Convincing Ground massacre (*Standard*, Jan. 2005). Considerable controversy over 'the historical veracity of the Convincing Ground' (Bradmore, 2005, p.1) was aired on radio. Additionally there was criticism directed at Clark over his assertion that the Convincing Ground was 'the site of a massacre of Aboriginal people at the hands of white whalers' (Bradmore 2005, p.1). Clark subsequently defended his claim by stating that his research on

massacres in Western Victoria and particularly southwest Victoria were ‘grounded in the earliest records of the 1840s’ (Bradmore 2005, p.1). It is evident that the reports of a violent conflict at the Convincing Ground came about through Edward Henty and James Blair outlining their second-hand accounts to George Augustus Robinson in 1841.

Before European settlement Aboriginal clans of the Dhauwurdwurrung (Gunditjmara) language group lived within distinct territories marked by landscape features such as rivers and mountain ranges. The clans that lived closest to where Portland stands today, the Kilcarer gundidj, Bome gundidj, and Ngure gundidj (Clark 1990), made use of beached whales for sustenance (Dawson 1881). This long-term, if somewhat opportunistic, usage would have made Aboriginal clans determined to protect their traditional rights to whale meat. Dawson (1881) maintained that the beaching of a whale was a time of great celebration and feasting, which explains the determination of Kilcarer gundidj Aborigines to protect their traditional right to beached whales. Later conflicts over land and resources being taken over by white pastoralists reflect the same determination on the part of Aboriginal clans. Their strong resistance to settlement suggests that an altercation between Indigenous peoples and whalers over a beached whale could have occurred.

The main account of what occurred at the Convincing Ground is contained within Robinson’s journals. Robinson’s principal informants were Edward Henty, James Blair and Charles Tyers as well as Aborigines he spoke to at Mount Clay. The former, interviewed in 1841, outlined that the altercation at the Convincing Ground took place ‘8 or 9 years ago’ (Clark, 1998d, p.48). These settlers told how the whalers, angered by Aborigines reinforcing their traditional rights to the meat of a beached whale, allegedly left for their head station and returned with fire-arms to massacre the Aborigines at the site that subsequently became known as the ‘Convincing Ground’.

In the early 2000s, during the so-called ‘history wars’ in Australia, Aboriginal oral history was looked upon sceptically by some historical commentators (Connor 2005, 2010; Windschuttle 2002). This was also evident during the controversy surrounding the attempted development of the alleged Convincing Ground by landowner Michael Maher. Maher’s development plans were disputed by Aboriginal Cultural Heritage officers in Portland in 2005 ushering in a two-year saga (*Standard*, 2005, 2006, 2007). His fight to continue the development gained the support of the South-west Action Group led by Owen Roberts, who

claimed that there was little or no evidence to suggest that a massacre of Aborigines had occurred on the Convincing Ground (Roberts 2006). In the event, Maher and much of the local Portland community established their own 'convincing ground' regarding the right to develop land versus the testimony of the Aboriginal community and other historical evidence, namely Robinson's 1841 journal and 1842 report and Clark's (1990, 1995) interpretation. Meanwhile, local newspapers likened the Convincing Ground event to an Aboriginal 'Eureka Stockade' (Lipovas, 2006?), suggesting that for Aboriginal people it was an important moment of reckoning.

### **Connor's Claims**

The two historians at the centre of the Convincing Ground debate are Clark and Connor. Clark has argued that the Convincing Ground's origins lie in a dispute over a beached whale and the massacre of many Kilcarer gundidj Aboriginal people by whalers in 1833 or 1834. However, Connor has argued that the different accounts of this incident within Robinson's journals indicate a level of inconsistency which raises doubts about whether any incident actually occurred. Robinson was initially informed that the massacre occurred around three to four years before 1841 (Clark 1998d). However, during his later journey among the Cart gundidj of Mount Clay he heard accounts of a violent incident having occurred at the Convincing Ground at least seven or eight years before 1841. Connor claims that such conflicting accounts invalidate the Convincing Ground massacre story (Connor 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010). Rather than a matter of history, he sees it as a product of fabrication and hearsay.

Connor (2005, 2007, 2010) is strongly opposed to theories suggesting that a massacre occurred at the Convincing Ground near Portland during the early 1830s. He asserts that publications by academics and writers such as Broome (2001b, 2005), Clark (1989, 1990, 1995, 2005, 2011, 2014) and Critchett (1984, 1992, 1998) have been too swift in declaring that the depopulation of Aboriginal people within the Portland area was due to a massacre caused by a dispute over a beached whale. He argues that Aboriginal people who were with Robinson when he was going past whalers near the site of the Convincing Ground 'showed absolutely no fear of crossing the Convincing Ground site, or of the whalers' (Connor, 2009, p.3). This may be the case, but it ignores the fact that Robinson was travelling with a large

entourage of Aboriginal people who were probably emboldened by their own numbers and persuaded by the promise of food and other gifts.

Connor (2005) accuses Clark of making 'several claims which contradict his own source' (p.143). In the first instance Connor quotes a small series of excerpts from Clark's works which includes his transcription of Robinson's diaries, the first of which quotes Robinson as saying that the Aborigines of Mount Clay did not allow 'any Aboriginal person near the settlement' (Clark, 1995, p.22) of Portland. Later Robinson quotes Henty's claim that 'the blacks at Mt. Clay between the first and second rivers are a wild set and will not allow white persons to come to them' (Clark, 1998d, p.207). These statements form the basis of Connor's insinuation of historical discrepancies between what Clark wrote in 1995 (in a publication on massacres of Aboriginal people in Western Victoria) and his transcription of Robinson's journals during 1998. However, the general reluctance of Aborigines of the Mount Clay Cart gundidj clan to approach the Portland settlement and to have white settlers approach them would indicate animosity between Aborigines and European whalers on the southwest coast (Clark 2011). It could be perceived that this animosity was brought about by a violent altercation between Aborigines and whalers on the Convincing Ground.

Connor makes further attacks on Clark's theory of the Convincing Ground in putting forth the question of 'how many deaths constitute a massacre' (Connor, 2005, p.131) and arguing that Europeans were not always the perpetrators of Aboriginal-European conflict. He refers to historical accounts by Atkinson and Reynolds regarding a shipwreck on the southeast coast of Australia. The ship known as the *Maria* was shipwrecked and the survivors were allegedly slain by Aborigines for their transgressions with Aboriginal women (Connor, 2005, p.132). According to Atkinson, these transgressions, or sexual 'liberties', stemmed from 'cultural misunderstanding' (cited in Connor 2005, p.132) on the part of the *Maria*'s crew and passengers. This incident holds some similarities with the Convincing Ground massacre as both involved some level of cultural misunderstandings and both were products of British colonial imperialism. It shows that Connor (2005) has a valid point in regards to Europeans not always being in the wrong in regards to interracial conflict. However, this assertion must not be taken as an attempt to discredit evidence of Aboriginal massacres. It is simply an acknowledgement of the fact that cultural clashes and misunderstandings were not one-sided.

### **Clark 2011 and 2014: Rebuttal of Connor's Claims**

Connor (2010) initially contended that the Convincing Ground massacre narrative was constructed through primary sources that were 'misread and misused' (p. 35). More pointedly, he claimed that the misuse of primary sources had led to 'the ruination of modern lives and the inflaming of dissension in a small coastal community' (p.35). Clark (2011) refuted this by stating that it was 'Connor's intervention' that had 'caused irreparable grief and harm' (p.80). According to Clark, Connor's highlighting of disagreements among historians over the interpretation of the origin of the 'Convincing Ground' – as if this disproved the massacre story – was 'a simplistic assessment that assumes that history is a one-dimensional flat terrain in which certainty can be known' (2011, p.80).

Connor (2005) claimed that the massacre story told by Henty and Blair to Robinson 'only emerged late in the twentieth century when transcriptions of his papers were made' (p.140). Clark (2011), however, argues that Connor 'is using the tactic of deflection' (p.81) to 'divert the reader away from considering critically important aspects of Robinson's evidence' (p.81). What Connor did not take into account was the fact that Robinson referenced the Convincing Ground in his journals in 1841 and 1842 as well as in his 1841 report submitted to the government 'in late 1842' (Clark, 2011, p.81). Presland (1980) and Clark (1998d) published Robinson's 1841 journal entries and Clark published the 1842 entries. The official Robinson report was partially reproduced by Kenyon (1928) and Learmonth (1934) with Kenyon publishing 'an abridged version of the official report in 1928' (Clark, 2011, p.82). Kenyon omitted some of the content, but did include discussion of the Convincing Ground which makes his work 'the first known published report of the incident' (Clark, 2011, p.82). This discredits Connor's claim that the massacre story only emerged late in the twentieth century.

Connor argues that a massacre in 1833 or 1834 could not have occurred as Aborigines were not afraid to cross the Convincing Ground in 1841 (Connor 2007). However, Clark (2011) infers that Connor is using tactics of deflection as Robinson was well liked and admired by Aboriginal people in his role as Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Port Phillip district. Furthermore, he recruited 'local Aboriginal people to travel with him as guides and envoys' (Clark, 2011, p.87) to act as 'facilitators of meetings with other Aboriginal people' (2011, p.87). Additionally, Aborigines at Portland Bay were willing to meet with Robinson also due

to his ‘many gifts and supplies’ (Clark, 2011, p.87) of food that he distributed amongst local Aboriginal clans. Connor’s argument does not take into account the fact that Aborigines were not seen at Portland during the 1830s until 1841, which suggests a catastrophic dispersion of the Aboriginal population around the area. The avoidance of Portland ended after May 1841 as a result of Robinson’s arrival at Portland Bay.

### **Convincing Ground origins**

There are four main theories of the origins of the Convincing Ground. These are Henty and Blair’s story of a dispute over a beached whale between Aborigines and whalers; Critchett’s theory of the massacre taking place as a result of whalers sexually interfering with Aboriginal women; the view that the Convincing Ground was a place for settling disputes between whalers; and the theory postulated by Wiltshire that Mitchell was ‘convinced’ to believe in the impossible when the rocks he thought he saw on his 1836 expedition to Portland turned out to be whalers’ huts. In descending order these theories will be outlined and analysed for their credibility.

#### **i. Dispute over a beached whale**

The source of this explanation for the Convincing Ground’s origins is George Augustus Robinson’s journals. Robinson spoke to Edward Henty and James Blair at Portland in May 1841 and ‘was given two explanations’ (Clark, 2011, p.1), but he ‘believed that the explanation involving a clash over a disputed whale was the most feasible’ (2011, p.1). Robinson shared a meal with Henty and Blair on 16 May 1841, and it was during the course of this meal that they outlined the origin of the Convincing Ground to him. They told him that ‘the Blacks at Mount Clay are a bad set’ (Robinson May 1841) and that he should not establish any kind of contact with them. They explained that the Convincing Ground had gained its name following a confrontation between Aborigines and whalers over a beached whale in 1833 or 1834. Henty stated that ‘a whale broke from her moorings and went on shore’ (Clark 1998d). Soon after Aborigines arrived to enforce their traditional claim to beached whale meat. The whalers’ reaction was described by Henty thus:

the men were so enraged that they went to the head station for their firearms and then returned to the whale, when the natives again attack them. And then the whalers then let

fly, to this expression, right and left upon the natives (Robinson May 1841; Clark 1998d)

Robinson (1841) made further notes in his journal that the Convincing Ground gained its name 'from some transactions with the natives of the kind mentioned' regarding the beached whale. The Aborigines of the Kilcarer gundidj 'resisted the aggression on the part of the white men' in 'the first year of the fishery', Robinson wrote in May 1841, and the whalers henceforth called the area the Convincing Ground; the Aborigines were 'convinced' of the right of the whalers to whale meat after this alleged incident.

It is stated that before Robinson's May 1841 visit, Aborigines had not been seen near Portland Bay 'for some years' (Robinson cited in Clark 1998d, p.202). After his visit in May 1841, Aborigines supposedly travelled with Robinson across the Convincing Ground near whalers without fear. As mentioned above, their respect and admiration for Robinson and the gifts of food and supplies made his visit 'a significant event' (Clark, 2011, p.88). Indeed, the visit of Robinson was so significant, according to Clark, that it caused Aborigines to 'break their apparent prohibition against visiting Portland' (2011, p.88). Blair noted after Robinson's departure that 'upwards of 200 blacks have assembled' (Blair, 2 June 1841 in Clark 1998d) on the Convincing Ground with whalers fearing an attack on their whaling huts. This gesture by Aborigines illustrates the extent to which Robinson's visit had emboldened them to venture to the Convincing Ground and, in effect, to 'convince' the whalers that they were no longer afraid of them. Given the reliability of Robinson as a massacre investigator in Tasmania in the 1830s (Clark 2011) before coming to Victoria, the story he gleaned from Henty and Blair, as well as information he likely gathered from Aborigines at Mount Clay, makes this account of the origins of the 'Convincing Ground' the most credible. It is also credible owing to the severe depopulation of Aborigines from the Portland Bay area during the mid-1830s and their avoidance of Portland until Robinson's visit in May 1841.

## **ii. Whalers getting amongst Aboriginal women**

Critchett (1992) describes the Convincing Ground massacre as ‘a metaphor for the meeting of European and Aborigine in the District’ (p.122), suggesting that the nature of relations was set with violent incidents. She states that the Convincing Ground massacre came about as a result of whalers’ interference with Aboriginal women near Portland, and that the massacre was the culmination of brewing tension. According to Critchett, from ‘the European point of view the hostilities were seen as “convincing” the Aborigines not to oppose Europeans and their actions, whether they were taking of whales or native women’ (p.122).

The previous chapter looked at the creation of new ‘convincing grounds’ as pastoralism ground over the top of Aboriginal traditional culture when families such as the Hentys moved inland from Portland Bay along the Wannon River. However, to imply that there was a convincing ground over Aboriginal women in the area is highly unlikely. Critchett’s main evidence comes from headsman McDonald who volunteered that whalers were having sexual relations with Aboriginal women. However, in doing so, McDonald was not necessarily claiming an alternative ‘cause of the Convincing Ground massacre’ (Clark, 2011, p.88). Robinson’s published 1842 report contains no mention of interference with Aboriginal women being the cause of the massacre and still only contains the narrative of a dispute over a beached whale. Therefore, the argument that McDonald offered a new explanation for the Convincing Ground massacre is severely flawed and taken out of context.

## **iii. A place where whalers settled their disputes**

In November 1840 Surveyor Tyers said that the Convincing Ground obtained its name through whalers settling their disputes on the beaches at Portland Bay. George Dunderdale supports this theory despite arriving in Victoria in 1853 and having ‘never lived in the Portland district’ (Clark, 2011, p.92). He states that the Convincing Ground ‘was so-called because the whalers used to go down there to fight, and convince one another who was the best man’ (Dunderdale, 1973 [1870], p.40). This theory is given currency in the *Manchester Geographical Society* journal in the late 1800s where Bishop Moorhouse is quoted as saying ‘[to any man who] thought he was a better man than the master, Mr Henty would say “Come to the Convincing Ground”’ (Moorhouse 1888, p.38-57, cited in Clark 2011, 2014).

It is likely that the term ‘convincing ground’ had more than one meaning. Tyers explanation of intra-whaler dispute resolution could (and probably did) exist alongside the earlier meaning generated over a dispute over a beached whale. What is curious, however, is that apart from ‘the Dunderdale reference and the address by Bishop Moorhouse, it is not possible to find any other contemporary reference to the Convincing Ground near Portland where whalers settled their disputes’ (Clark, 2011, p.93). Writings by the Hentys such as their transcribed journals (Peel 1996) do not mention intra-whaler dispute resolution on the Convincing Ground, despite Moorhouse’s claim (Clark, 2011, p.94). This is a significant point which weakens the validity of the theory as the alleged accounts of intra-whaler dispute resolutions are not consistent with accounts from the Hentys (see Peel 1996).

#### **iv. Mitchell’s 1836 visit to Portland**

During his 1836 visit to Portland Bay Mitchell saw whalers huts ‘and became convinced of the truth of the impossible’ (Mitchell 1838). He initially considered the whalers huts to be rocks, but he soon became ‘convinced’ that they were signs of civilisation in the wilderness. This has been postulated by Wiltshire (1975, 1976, 1978) as a possible origin for the Convincing Ground. However, this theory has been discredited as the earliest reference to the Convincing Ground was in Edward Henty’s diary on 17 September 1835 ‘where he noted that he “walked to Convincing Ground”’ (Peel, 1996, p.89).

Clark (1995, 2005, 2011, 2014) was one of the first historians to notice the erroneous nature of this explanation for the Convincing Ground’s origins. Unlike the dispute over a beached whale and the whalers settling of disputes among themselves, this explanation cannot be viewed as a potential place name origin as it was known as the Convincing Ground prior to Mitchell’s expedition in 1836. However, the theories of a dispute over a beached whale and as a place for settling whaler disputes both ‘have credibility when compared with other vernacular uses of the term “convincing ground”’ (Clark, 2011, p.93) and are not mutually exclusive from each other. This point shall be iterated and expanded upon later in the chapter, as it aids in better understanding how place names can have shared histories and meanings.

## **Evidence for violence between Aborigines and whalers**

The Convincing Ground was many things to many people. As already discussed, it was a place where prize fights were held between whalers, and a place where Major Mitchell became ‘convinced’ (Mitchell, 1996, p.240) of shoreline rocks actually being whaler’s huts. It was also a place where Edward Henty became ‘convinced’ that land near present-day Portland was ‘his El Dorado’ (Wiltshire, 1978, p.43) in terms of arable and fertile pastoral land, and a place where whaling was conducted alongside the barking of trees near the shoreline (*Sydney Morning Herald* Aug. 1844; *Portland Gazette* May 1848; *Portland Guardian* July, Aug. and Sept. 1844, April 1857; *Portland Mercury* Aug. 1844; *Courier* Aug. 1844, 1848). These usages of the site and explanations for the origins of its name can be viewed as being polysemous (Clark 2011, 2014). That is to say that the divergent explanations for the Convincing Ground’s origins may be right at different points in time in the history of the site, as mentioned earlier. Therefore, the site name may not be exclusively associated with the massacre story and has divergent meanings for different historical contexts and at different times during the place’s history (Clark 2014).

Clark (2011, 2014) argues that Connor does not ‘consider toponymic possibilities’ regarding the usage of ‘convincing ground’ ‘in nineteenth and early twentieth century Australasia’ (2011, p.94). According to Clark (2011), the site has ‘multiple, related meanings’ (p.94) and it has ‘accumulated iterations, glosses or etymologies laid one over the other’ (p.94). He maintains that it is not uncommon for places such as the Convincing Ground to have ‘contested histories’ (p.94). Although the dispute over a beached whale and the usage of the site for whalers to settle differences are not mutually exclusive, Connor does not entertain the possibility that both are true. He fails to take into account that the phrase ‘convincing ground’ is polysemous, which, as Clark (2014) explains, means ‘that the toponym may be a palimpsest and that both the Aboriginal-whaler dispute narrative and the intra-whaler dispute narrative may be legitimate explanations relevant at particular moments in the place’s history’ (p.8).

During the Convincing Ground controversy from 2005 to 2007, Parker (2005) contributed a paper in which he argued that its origins lay with Edward Henty ‘convincing’ his father Thomas with ‘a black clod of earth’ (Parker, 2005, p.6) from near Portland. Parker states that the Convincing Ground is a place ‘where family history and geography meet’ (p.6) and that

‘its resurrection in the controversial circumstances of today, will probably ensure that it achieves in time the status of a public place name’ (p.6). Parker was attempting to discredit the arguments of academics and writers such as Clark (2005, 2011), Connor (2005, 2006, 2007, 2010), and Critchett (1984, 1992, 1998). Whilst he made mention of Aborigines coming across from Tasmania with sealers and whalers such as Dutton, he made no other mention of potential Aboriginal involvement in the naming of the Convincing Ground and denied that a massacre occurred there. Moreover, given that Parker did not refer to Robinson’s 1841 visit to Portland or his 1842 report which clearly outlines Edward Henty’s account of the Convincing Ground massacre, questions must be raised about the credibility of his scholarship. While it is true that Edward Henty was attempting to convince his father Thomas to come to the southwest coast, there is no evidence supporting this as the origin of the Convincing Ground place name.

In 2001 Broome published a document regarding Aboriginal deaths that occurred as a result of frontier conflict. He did not deny or object to including the Convincing Ground massacre, but he did question the accuracy of Clark’s work regarding other alleged and confirmed massacres of Aboriginal people in Victoria. His query lay with Clark’s assertions of ‘29 single deaths’ (Broome, 2001b, p.5) and ‘2 or 3 deaths’ (p.5) in separate violent altercations between Aborigines and European settlers, as these did not constitute massacres. However, since Clark stated that the Convincing Ground massacre claimed all but two members of the Kilcarer gundidj clan and if the clan was sizable before the alleged incident in 1833 or 1834, then the killing of all but two of their members would be a massacre (Clark 2011).

In arguing the case for the Convincing Ground massacre’s occurrence, one must take into account historical precedents that give the account plausibility. An incident that occurred at Manly Cove in 1790 provides several points of similarity. Governor Phillip was making a diplomatic visit to some Aborigines on the beach when he was speared (Champion 1989). A whale was said to have ‘occasioned’ the incident (Champion, 1989, p.2). The aftermath was described by judge advocate David Collins thus:

The whale ... we were informed, had never found its way out of the harbour, but, getting on shore in Manly Bay, was killed by the natives, and was the cause of numbers of them being at this time assembled to partake of the repasts which it afforded them. (Champion, 1989, p.2)

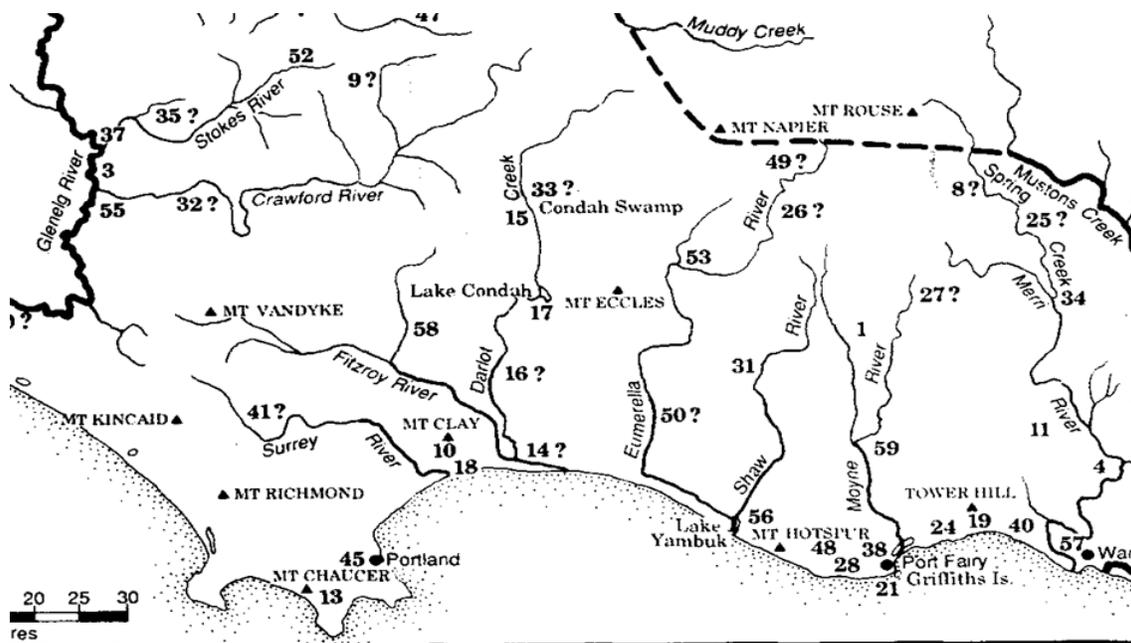
This event holds some parallels to the Convincing Ground massacre in that it also involved a dispute over a beached whale and whether Aboriginal or European rights to beached whales should prevail. At the Convincing Ground instead of Aborigines spearing a white man, there was an alleged massacre of Aborigines. There European commercial and economic interests 'convinced' Aborigines of their superior rights. Clark (2011) observes that there was 'violence levelled at Edward Henty by his whaling men during a dispute over pay in April 1835' (p.97). If whalers in the Portland area during the 1830s were willing to threaten their own employer 'with violence' (p.97), then it would seem credible that the same whalers would oppose Aboriginal claims to a beached whale. This precedent and these circumstances make the Convincing Ground story more plausible.

Likewise, the reluctance of Aboriginal people to partake of whale carrion in the mid 1830s, as observed by Major Thomas Mitchell, can be read as further evidence that the massacre occurred. In 1836 Mitchell visited Portland during one of his land expeditions to the southern coast. He noted 'the reluctance of Aboriginal people ... to approach beached whales that had escaped from whaling crews' (Clark, 2011, p.86). This could be taken as being indicative of the fact that Aborigines had had an earlier dispute with whalers regarding rights to a beached whale and having been 'taught a lesson that they were not to take beached whale but to wait their turn' (Clark 2011, p.86).

There was a severe depopulation of Aboriginal tribes living near Portland Bay during the 1830s and this also points towards a catastrophic event(s) having happened to the Kilcarer gundidj clan (Clark 1995, 1998d, 2005, 2011). Academics and writers such as Kerley (1981) have suggested that such depopulation was due to the advent of European diseases decimating Aboriginal groups near Portland Bay. Presumably such diseases would have similarly decimated nearby clans, yet the Kartgundidj people of Mt Clay were seemingly unaffected. They were still a large clan in 1840, while coastal clans in the Portland district were functionally defunct. Thus the likelihood of disease alone causing depopulation is discounted by Clark (2005, 2011), not least because it does not take into account Robinson's claim that Henty and Blair had told him in 1841 of a violent dispute between Aborigines and whalers that had occurred several years earlier (Clark 1998d). In this context, it is worth mentioning that Learmonth (1960, 1983) erased the Convincing Ground massacre from his published extract of Robinson's journal. While this in itself does not tell us anything about

whether or not the event took place, the attempt to hide Robinson’s account of it from the public gaze – to hide it from history – raises questions about Learmonth’s motives and historical integrity. Learmonth’s misuse of history brings Connor’s claims into stark relief: Connor (2010) states that any violence at the Convincing Ground was perpetrated by Aborigines and that the sources used to substantiate the massacre ‘have been misread and misused to put together a massacre narrative (p.35-36). Clark (2011), in reply, argues that Connor’s ‘use of vituperative language is ultimately counterproductive to the investigation of a massacre’ (p.80) which requires a cool temperament, sensitivity and thorough research of primary sources.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2: Dhauwurd wurrung (Gundidjmara) Language Area & Clans**

Clark, Ian, 1990. *Aboriginal Languages and Clans: An Historical Atlas of Western and Central Victoria*. Melbourne, Victoria, Australia: Monash Publications in Geography.  
 10- Cart gundidj; 14- Ngure gundidj; 18- Convincing Ground and Kilcarer gundidj; 45- Bome gundidj.

On the latter point, Clark (2011) claims that Connor ‘dismisses or ignores parts of the evidence that do not suit his argument’ (p.84). Robinson was the most experienced massacre

investigator at the time and gained the trust of the Aboriginal people in the district (Clark 2011). In addition to this, Blair and Henty were the elite of the Portland district and in Henty's case he had been in the area since November 1834. Connor's argument that their accounts are unreliable conveniently forgets the above circumstances (Clark 2011). Blair and Henty had nothing to gain from 'fabricating' (Connor 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010) evidence towards Aborigines. Henty would have been privy to instances of Aboriginal-European conflict, especially those on a significant scale (Clark 2005, 2011). A massacre would have been difficult to ignore, as would the almost total depopulation of Aborigines from Portland Bay.

### **Convincing Ground: The people involved**

There were a number of different parties involved in the Convincing Ground dispute. The first were the 'tonguers' who were 'contracted to tow the whale carcasses ashore and to cut them up' (Clark, 2011, p.97). Tonguers received payment for the oil, tongue and 'interior parts' of the whale (p.97). It is likely that these men were involved in a violent dispute with Edward Henty in April 1835 'when Henty intimated he was going to cut a beached whale with help from other employees' (Clark, 2011, p.97). The possibility that the tonguers were willing to threaten Henty with violence adds credibility to the massacre account, and raises questions about how violent they would have been towards Aborigines.

In terms of the Aboriginal clans involved, Clark (2011) states that it is presumed that the three main clans near Portland were involved. These were the Kilcarer gundidj, Ngure gundidj and the Bome gundidj (Clark 1990). In May 1841 Robinson learned of the Kilcarer gundidj being reduced to only 'two young men' (Clark, 2011, p.97) who 'had united with the Kart gundidj of Mount Clay, where they remained' (p.98) 13 kilometres from Portland.

In 1836, surveyor John Wedge stated that 'outrages have been committed upon the Aborigines at Portland Bay and other whaling stations' (Wedge, 1836, p.35). His view was consistent with the severe depopulation of Aboriginal people in the Portland Bay area at the time and discounts disease as a cause of this demographic decline. Clark (2011) argues that 'it is unlikely that three contiguous coastal groups would be practically defunct by 1841, yet an inland group only 13 kilometres away would be some 158 strong' (p.98). What is even more striking is that in other parts of Port Phillip and in other colonies in New South Wales

and South Australia, the ‘Aboriginal presence was a major issue’ (Clark, 2011, p.98) for whalers, whilst in Portland Aborigines avoided whalers prior to May 1841. This is clearly indicative of poor relations between Aborigines and whalers at Portland Bay.

### **Implications of the Convincing Ground massacre**

Clark (2011) has argued, somewhat controversially, that the Cart gundidj clan from the Portland Bay area would not allow any of their own people near the Convincing Ground or Portland. Furthermore, Clark maintains that it was probably due to the ‘affection and respect that Aboriginal groups conferred on Robinson’ (p.87) that Aboriginal people returned to the Convincing Ground site in 1841. The general avoidance of the area from the early 1830s until Robinson’s arrival in May 1841 exemplifies the fear they held of the Convincing Ground as a place where their people were massacred in large numbers. This is reinforced by the general state of relations in Portland as well.

During the early period of my research on Aboriginal cultural associations with whales and whaling on the southwest coast of Victoria, I was told by a member of the Portland History House of an account regarding the Convincing Ground and Aboriginal avoidance of the area (Portland History House 2010). The account goes that a group of Aborigines living near the area of the Convincing Ground during the latter part of the nineteenth century refused to venture onto the beach where the massacre allegedly occurred. They considered it to be a ‘haunted place’ that should be avoided. This account originated in an oral account told by an Aboriginal person to a white local from Portland. Without a date or named source, one could argue that this account is flawed. And yet it is emphasised that Aboriginal oral history accounts – even those lacking conventional referencing information – cannot be completely discounted. This is for the sake of Aboriginal and colonial historical accounts being equally weighted, and not favouring one historical method over another (Attwood 1990, 1994, 2005b).

The Convincing Ground massacre has incited modern day controversies such as the attempted development of coastal land near the supposed site of the massacre by landowner Michael Maher in 2005, mentioned above, and a debate over the validity of the Aboriginal claim to have the area protected from development for heritage reasons (*Standard* 2005, 2006, 2007). The implications of the massacre and its origins will continue to influence

historical debate over the coming years. This dissertation was designed to not only encourage further debate on the Convincing Ground massacre but to also bring about greater acknowledgement and understanding of our Aboriginal heritage in Victoria in the nineteenth century. In an article printed in the *Portland Standard* in 2005 or 2006 Aboriginal activist Walter Saunders described the Convincing Ground incident as ‘our Stockade’ (Lipovas, date/year unknown). The Eureka Stockade represented an early drive for democracy and freedom on the goldfields of Ballarat by miners. The Convincing Ground massacre represents the importance of coming to terms with our past and achieving reconciliation between Aboriginal and settler Australians. The Convincing Ground, rather than dividing the population of Victoria, should act as an example of why we should achieve reconciliation with Aborigines and their descendants.

It can be argued that the historical precedents regarding interracial conflict within Victoria and other states during the nineteenth century should be considered as a factor in discerning the lack of knowledge about Aboriginal-whaler interactions in Victoria. Later ‘convincing grounds’ were established through incidents such as the massacre at the site now known as the ‘Convincing Ground’ which saw whalers ‘convince’ Aborigines of their superior right to land and water-based resources. Further conflicts occurred when families such as the Hentys moved their pastoral operations inland. Shepherds were attacked by Aborigines and livestock was taken away for consumption. This occurred due to Aborigines losing their traditional food sources and hunting grounds as a result of pastoral expansion (Wiltshire 1975, 1976, 1978; Critchett 1984, 1992, 1998; Clark 2005, 2011).

In New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania there were some forms of Aboriginal-whaler cooperation, but in Victoria, with few exceptions, this was not the case. Writers such as Connor (2005, 2007, 2010) have attempted to deny the existence of the Convincing Ground massacre, employing ‘methods of exegesis and report discounting to dismiss evidence that doesn’t support his argument’ (Clark, 2011, p.103). The reliability of Robinson as a massacre investigator, his experience in Tasmania in the 1830s, and the reliability of his informants – Henty, Blair and possible Aboriginal informants from Mount Clay – have been explained in conspicuous detail (Clark 2011). The arguments of Connor (2005, 2007, 2010) to discount the above are superficial and poorly researched and ignore vital signs that question why there were numerous Aborigines inland at Mount Clay and yet, during most of the 1830s, absent from Portland Bay. While taking into account Henty and Blair’s story told

to Robinson, and Robinson's subsequent investigation at Mount Clay allaying the fears of Aborigines of the whalers, the evidence points towards the Convincing Ground massacre having occurred in 1833 or 1834 over a beached whale. The paucities of information regarding Aboriginal cultural interactions with whales and whaling in southwest Victoria are also explained through the Convincing Ground incident and other altercations in pastoral runs in the years after 1834 (Critchett 1992; Clark 2011).

## **Conclusion**

### **The new ‘Convincing Ground’**

A recurring theme within the dissertation has been the reasons for a dearth of information on Aboriginal cultural relations with whales and whaling in Victoria. This thesis has documented the existence of a significant body of evidence detailing Aboriginal involvement in sealing and whaling in Tasmania, New South Wales and especially South Australia (Clarke 2001; Taylor 2002; Merry 2003; Russell 2012). However, in southwest Victoria, besides the work of Dawson (1881) who noted the Aboriginal word for whale, there is no comparable ethnographic material.

Several factors explain this difference between Victoria and other colonies. Aboriginal cultural interactions with sealers and whalers in New South Wales suggest that Aborigines were respected for their traditional knowledge of catching whales (Wesson 2001). This contrasts with the Victorian situation where there was little to no mutual respect between Aborigines and whalers. South Australia was similar to New South Wales with some cases of Aboriginal-whaler cooperation (Gibbs 1969, Firth 2006), but there was also considerable violent conflict (Staniforth 2006a, 2006b). Additionally, in South Australia there was a high amount of early ethnographic work done regarding traditional Aboriginal life by the likes of Teichelmann and Schurmann, as well as others mentioned within the thesis. Tasmanian Aboriginal involvement with whaling was mainly anecdotal and meagre despite the involvement of Aborigines with sealers in northwest Tasmania in the early 1800s (Kostaglou 1995).

These factors make Victoria different to the other colonies. However, it is the contention of this thesis that the most important difference between southwest Victoria and the above mentioned states was due to the Convincing Ground massacre and later violent altercations between Aborigines and pastoralists. The paucity of knowledge on Aboriginal cultural interactions with whales and whaling in southwest Victoria was caused by violent altercations which occurred due to a lack of mutual respect between whalers and Aborigines,

An acceptance of our colonial past is key to bringing about reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in Victoria and within Australia. Acknowledging incidents such

as the Convincing Ground massacre is integral to this. The sort of exegesis attempted by Connor (2006, 2007, 2010) reveals a predetermined view of the Convincing Ground's origins. By only using evidence that supports his argument and leaving out other evidence, Connor's work hinders reconciliation and causes much angst over denial of past atrocities or mistreatment in favour of a romanticist view of exploration, innovation and pioneering settlement of a supposedly sparsely inhabited land (Clark 2011). Rather than divide Victorians, this thesis is intended to bring about a greater understanding of our Aboriginal-settler past. Such an acknowledgment has the potential to educate locals and tourists alike in the form of booklets, historical placards, museum displays and tourist brochures on our colonial past. Instead of fearing our past we should learn from it for the sake of our future; we should encourage greater understanding of our frontier history. It is hoped that a greater understanding of our colonial past, such as is offered here, will bring about more informed research on Aboriginal heritage by future researchers.

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