

5. MERRI CREEK PROTECTORATE STATION

From 1843–1850, government expenditure on the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate was significantly reduced. Funding cuts resulted in reductions of Protectorate staff numbers, and Thomas and Parker were the only two of the original four assistant protectors to retain their positions. Medical dispensers were put in charge of Mt Rouse and Goulburn River stations. Consequently, Thomas and Parker had to conduct Protectorate business over a greater territory with fewer station staff to assist. During this period, William Thomas spent less time visiting the lands of Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung clans. He found himself increasingly occupied with official business, as well as tending to the various camps around Melbourne.

During 1843, most of Thomas's reports, returns and correspondence were addressed from Merri Creek, usually the 'Native Encampment', but sometimes 'Strangeway's Farm' (William Thomas Junior's farm). From 1844, Thomas was based at Merri Creek, referring to the site as the 'Assistant Protector's Quarters, Merri Merri Creek' (see VPRS 4410, Unit 3, Items 75–9 *passim*). It is from the reports and journals of Chief Protector George Robinson that the name 'Merri Creek Protectorate Station' was issued (see Clark 2001 Vol. 4). With the staff and funding cutbacks, Thomas gradually became less concerned with trying to shepherd the remnants of clans onto the distant station at Narre Narre Warren, and resigned himself to the fact that Melbourne was the preferred place of stay for Aboriginal people. While Thomas understood the extent of dispossession experienced by Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung people, he was less prepared to accept that the colonial economy had become integral to Aboriginal survival. Instead, he preferred to imagine, as did Langhorne, and later Robinson, that permanent, segregated Aboriginal settlements based on the rural English village idyll would satisfy the needs of these people.

Throughout the late 1840s, Thomas's position as Assistant Protector of the Western Port District became less relevant. As the destruction of Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung communities and the occupation of their lands by Europeans proceeded apace, the assistant had less to 'protect'. In contrast to his earlier operations under the Protectorate, when he regularly walked 20 miles in a day his attention gradually shifted toward ameliorating the living conditions of Aboriginal people in Melbourne, at the gaol or watch-house and in the camps flanking the settlement.

This change can be characterised as a move from a pro-active, to a reactive policy of 'protectorship'. In the early years of the Protectorate, Thomas reacted to the movements of Aboriginal people, travelling to meet them at their locations, and attempting to take the instruments of 'civilisation', or Europeanisation to them, though Robinson criticised him for not spending enough time travelling with them. For example, in 1843–1844 he persistently pursued Woiwurrung people to the upper Yarra River, and provided mobile school classes for Aboriginal children at the camps to the north and east of Melbourne. After 1844, however, Thomas was less prepared to travel, preferring fixed points of contact.

As was discussed earlier, the Yarra River was a setting where conflict over occupation of land took place. In 1839, Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung clans were determined to camp on the river by Melbourne, principally on the south banks near *Tromgin*. Officers of the Protectorate were equally determined to remove them. And while the resulting tensions between European and Aboriginal people attracted the attentions of colonial officials and the local press, less was recorded about the expansion of pastoralism along the Yarra River upstream. From the accounts of George Robinson and William Thomas, it is apparent that Woiwurrung and Daungwurrung clanspeople used the creeks that empty into the Yarra River as pathways connecting the uplands and inlands to Port Phillip Bay. These creeks include the Merri Creek, but it would appear, judging from Robinson's account, that the Plenty River and Darebin Creek were more important. It was when moving along these watercourses that Aboriginal groups most often came into contact with European settlers.

Historical sources

Most references to a 'station' at the confluence of Merri Creek and the Yarra River occur well after the last days of the Protectorate. The term 'station' was used to describe a collection of related government and church establishments operating from the 'Government reserve' situated between Heidelberg Road, the Yarra River and Merri Creek. Although this site was the location of Thomas's 'protectorate school' (1842–1844) and 'Assistant Protector's Quarters' (1843–1848), Thomas himself did not refer to the place as a 'station' during the years of the Protectorate. The only descriptions of the site as such, come from George Robinson's periodical and occasional reports (see Clark 2001 Vol. 4), and his contribution to the minutes of evidence presented to the NSW Legislative Council in 1845 (Robinson in NSW LCV&P 1845: 45–51). Other references made to Merri Creek station come from manuscripts, archives and documentation produced after the Protectorate had dissolved.³

In 1844 the Merri Creek Protectorate Station contrasted with those at Mt Rouse, Goulburn, Loddon and Narre Narre Warren as being the only one without land under cultivation or stock grazing. This reflects a significant disparity in funding, and the consequences of being established while government was retreating from the protectorate policy. Merri Creek was also the only station listed by Robinson that was not legally a Protectorate 'reserve' (Robinson in NSW LC V&P 1845: 48).

In addition, the Merri Creek station received less supervision by Protectorate officials than the other stations. For this reason, Robinson received less information describing Merri Creek station and its inhabitants. As we have seen with Narre Narre Warren, the central stations established prior to the 1843 reductions were run by staff supervised by one of the four Assistant Protectors (Robinson in VPRS 26). For each Protectorate district, one central station was funded. At Narre Narre Warren, Thomas and his family lived alongside an overseer, a schoolmaster, several indentured convicts, with the members of different clans (Robinson in NSW LC V&P 1845: 48; Thomas in NSW LC V&P 1845: 55).

No such staffing arrangement was made for Merri Creek, probably because up until the reductions, the Western Port District quota of staff was accounted for at the Narre Narre Warren station. Further, other than Thomas's hut and the Native Police Corps barracks, no housing was provided at Merri Creek. Noble Keenan was deployed as schoolmaster at Merri Creek in 1842 at the expense of his employment at Narre Narre Warren station (Thomas to Robinson 8/6/1842 and 22/9/1842 in VPRS 11, Unit 8). When, in November 1845, Thomas complained that his district received less funding than the others, Robinson explained that this was due to the lack of people attending the central station at Narre Narre Warren (Robinson Jnl, 27/11/1845).

Site selection for the Merri Creek Protectorate Station

As discussed previously, the site of the Native Police Corps quarters at the Merri Creek–Yarra River confluence was set aside from sale in the late 1830s by its definition as a 'Government Reserve'. A study of the movements of Aboriginal people from 1840–1842 allows us to trace the increased occupation of the study area by Aboriginal people and the reaction of the Protectorate. Beyond the fact that the land was available for government purposes, there is little documentation attesting to its selection for Native Police Corps or Protectorate business. We do know that many Aboriginal people preferred to stay on the Yarra River at Melbourne, rather than at Narre Narre Warren. By May 1841, the infrequency of Aboriginal attendance at Central Station caused Thomas to doubt its future (Thomas 31/5/1841 in VPRS 4410, Item 69).

Earlier, members from Woiwurrung, Boonwurrung and Daungwurrung clans preferred to camp at a number of sites along the Yarra River, often at the *Bolin* lagoons and *Kurruk* (see illus. p. 30). By 1841 Thomas had become accustomed to visiting 'his' people on the Yarra River, at *Yering*,

Ballite, Beal and Bolin. Most of these people were 'Yarra Aborigines', or members of Woiwurrung clans, but their community included some 'Goulburn' (Daungwurrung) people (Thomas 31/5/1841 in VPRS 4410, Item 69). Evidence from Hall (1989) and Ellender (1997: 13–16, 45) suggest the existence of pre-contact camping places along the Merri Creek, and at one site south of the Yarra River, opposite the confluence (see chapter 3). The significance of this area prior to European settlement remains uncertain, however, these places were important locations in the shifting Aboriginal geographies of the contact era.

When visiting Aboriginal encampments along the Yarra River, Thomas remarked that the river and lagoons at *Bolin* were important sites for Woiwurrung, specifically Wurundjeri people, particularly due to the abundance of eels found there (Thomas 31/5/1841 in VPRS 4410, Item 69). He lamented that the European settlement at *Bolin* had resulted in the west and north sides of the Yarra River being 'closed to them'. By 16 March 1841, Robinson had ordered Thomas to break-up the camp, and remove 'his' people to Narre Narre Warren. Instead, they went to Melbourne where some of the Wurundjeri settled disputes with members of the Gunung willum balug near *Tromgin* (Thomas 31/5/1841, VPRS 4410, Item 69). Their movements over the next couple of months illustrate the problems facing Thomas, as they slowly drifted back to Narre Narre Warren, then left, returned, and left for Melbourne again. By 1841, Thomas was well aware of the economic significance of the Yarra River to Aboriginal people. This is pertinent to understanding how the study area became the site for the Native Police Corps' quarters, as well as home to hundreds of people, and temporarily for Thomas himself.

The location of the Native Police Corps close to Melbourne served several interests. First, by being within close communication with the Police Magistrate and Superintendent, it was hoped some of the excesses of the earlier Corps might be averted. Secondly, while the intended base at Dandenong Creek would have enabled more rigorous police intervention in European–Aboriginal conflict on the upper Yarra River, it did not allow for speedy intervention in Melbourne, often the place where success or failure of the Corps and Protectorate was determined.

Once the Native Police Corps was stationed at Merri Creek, there was little Protectorate officials could do to keep the policemen's relatives and clanspeople from returning there. Thomas continued to attempt to remove Aboriginal people from Merri Creek up until October 1843, when he became resigned to the ultimate failure of Narre Narre Warren. This coincides with his 'giving up the property of Government' at Narre Narre Warren, a direct result of reductions in expenditure on the Protectorate (Thomas 1/12/1843 in VPRS 4410, Item 78).

Aside from his determination to follow Aboriginal people in his Protectorate district, Thomas provides no insight into why he established quarters at Merri Creek. By December 1841, Thomas recorded a large encampment on the Merri Creek, near its confluence with the Yarra River, including 'most of the Woiwurrung, part of the Boonwurrung and 'about 100 Goulburns' (Thomas 1/3/1842 in VPRS 4410, Unit 3, Item 71). Towards the end of 1841 and for most of 1842, Thomas described his frustration at not being able to persuade Aboriginal people to settle at Narre Narre Warren. Much of this time was spent travelling with different groups, often with Billibellary's portion of the Wurundjeri-willam.

By late 1843, Thomas was carrying out Protectorate business from his 'Assistant Protectors Quarters' in the Government Reserve, doling out food and blankets and encouraging children to attend school classes there (Thomas 30/11/1843 in VPRS 4410, Item 78; Thomas 1/3/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 79). From their move to Merri Creek in June 1842, until the 'giving-up' of Central Station Narre Narre Warren at the end of September 1843, Thomas struggled to keep Aboriginal people away from Merri Creek. He often found his attempts at banishment were undermined by arrivals of groups from afar, called there by messengers from the Yarra River camps (Thomas in VPRS 4410, Items 74–8; Thomas in VPRS 10, Unit 3 *passim*; VPRS 11, Unit 8 *passim*). During May 1843, H. J. Jones, Medical Dispenser from Narre Narre Warren, began to spend more time at Merri Creek and

the Yarra River flats. Jones was listed as a member of the 'little settlement' (Thomas 31/5/1843 in VPRS 4410, Item 76).

When the Native Police Corps relocated to Merri Creek, the site stipulated for their occupation was simply known as 'the government paddock'. This was bounded by the Heidelberg Road to the north, Merri Creek to the west, and the Yarra River to the south and east.

Buildings and structural features

Towards the end of 1842, William Thomas began to spend more time visiting encampments near the Native Police Corps quarters in the Merri Creek government reserve. Any records which may have acknowledged the use of Power's or McArthur's huts by Protectorate officials, employees or Aboriginal people in 1842–1843 have not been found. Between June 1842 and April 1843, Thomas erected a hut at the site shown on Thomas's sketch map of 1847 (illus. p. 61). According to Blake (1982: 22), Dana had drawn up plans for the first building for the Corps by December 1842. Whether this 'store' was built remains uncertain. A reconstructed map of the study area also shows the location of Thomas's hut (see illus. p. 67). The appearance of the front of Thomas's hut was described by Lucy Edgar (1865: 16) as surrounded with flowers, including polyanthus, very large cowslips and the 'fastest growing' and 'largest' native shrubs.

Mr Power's hut is also shown on Thomas's 1847 map (VPRS 11, Unit 10, Item 658). This hut was described by Edward Curr (1883: 10–11) as:

. . . a rustic looking little wattle and dab [sic] building of three rooms, well shaded by trees, and situated within ten yards of the bank of the Yarra, at about three hundred yards from its junction with the Merri Merri Creek. The floors were ground, ceiling there was none, and around the outside was a verandah, up the posts of which were trained creepers. In front there were three French windows, which looked on the river flowing by amidst lovely wattle trees . . . The kitchen and servant's room were detached, and a little further off was a stable. (Curr 1883: 11)

Power's building was occupied until at least December 1845 (see Thomas to Robinson in VPRS 11, Unit 10, Item 621) but was in ruins by March 1847 (Thomas to Robinson 12/3/1847 in VPRS 11, Unit 10, Item 658).

Information about the style of barracks built for the Native Police Corps comes from Robinson (Jnl 28/6/1843). He wrote: 'A slab hut without chimney was the barrack of native police'. The location of the barrack buildings is unknown, except that it was near to Thomas's Assistant Protector's Quarters.

While William Thomas was hopeful that Aboriginal people would build permanent houses at the station, there is no evidence to suggest they ever did. On one occasion, one Boonwurrung member of the Native Police Corps, Yonker Yonker, while in jail told Thomas he planned to construct his hut between the Assistant Protector's Quarters and the Merri Creek Aboriginal School, but he did not get this chance, dying soon after leaving jail (Thomas 5/11/1847 in VPRS 4410 Item 93).

Administrative responsibility for the land

Administrative responsibility for the land rested initially with Captain Lonsdale and later Police Magistrates. From 1846 onward, the government reserve was gradually broken up. McArthur's former residence and a small portion of land surrounding the building, on the promontory between Merri Creek and the Yarra River, were given over to the Collins Street Baptist Church for the purpose of operating the Merri Creek Aboriginal School. In 1848 the newly created Metropolitan Lunatic Asylum was granted a small portion of land in the southeast corner of the reserve. During the 1850s, the asylum grounds were expanded to include much of the southern

area of the reserve, but not to encompass the land on which any known Protectorate, or Merri Creek Aboriginal School building stood (Deasey 1995: 13–15).

Life at the Merri Creek Protectorate Station

In an attempt to gain an understanding of life at the Assistant Protector's Quarters, it is valuable to explore the different relationships that existed within Aboriginal communities, and between these and other identifiable groups. The latter include the Protectorate and the wider bureaucracy, European settlers, the Native Police Corps, and other Aboriginal people from districts near and far. The nature of the government reserve encampments differed significantly from those at the Protectorate Stations, because of the reserve's proximity to Melbourne. At the reserve, rapid cultural and economic transition took place. The reserve also served as a depot for Aboriginal people leaving jail.

Life at the Merri Creek Protectorate Station was a life between worlds. The order and routine that characterised life at Narre Narre Warren was noticeably absent at Merri Creek. The population fluctuated markedly, serving both as a home to the Wurundjeri-willam — both Bebejan's and Billibellary's people — and place of stay for those from distant territories visiting Melbourne. In this manner the dynamics operating at Merri Creek can be seen to reflect the adaptability of Aboriginal people. The occupation of Merri Creek also reflects changes in Aboriginal geographies, from tract-based clans, to a semi-traditional economy, where interaction with Europeans and their settlements became a necessary and regular part of life.

Relationships between Aboriginal people and the Protectorate

Interaction between Thomas and the Aboriginal people of his district began in the summer of 1838–1839 on the banks of the Yarra River at Melbourne. Relations between the Assistant Protector and Aboriginal people revolved around day-to-day matters. As Thomas was responsible for the daily economy of Europeanisation and christianisation, it was to him that Aboriginal people usually directed their wants and dissatisfactions with the government. Some Aboriginal people called Thomas '*marm-in-arta*' (or 'father') (Smyth 1878 Vol. 2: 466).

A significant difference between the Chief Protector and Assistant Protector Thomas lay in their methods of Europeanisation. Robinson stressed the importance of gaining the trust of Aboriginal people by travelling with them and not forcing their settlement on stations, by learning their socio-cultural and economic needs and mores, and then providing materials to enable permanent or semi-permanent settlement. What underscored this was an appreciation that embedding European lifeways in Aboriginal people would not be achieved through imposition, but rather through gradual acceptance.

Thomas, on the other hand, saw his role more as that of a missionary. He was far more proactive in his attempts at Europeanising Aboriginal people. Initially, he paid less attention to their culture, seeing his role as more to do with instilling in them a desire for things European. By 1839, the traditional economic life of Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung people had been seriously undermined by land dispossession, and Thomas understood this fact well. The provision of rations was, for Thomas, the central means by which he could influence them. Indeed he actively cultivated a provider-recipient relationship with them, based on exchange.

In this way, Thomas saw his role as a captain of the economy of colonisation — where food, blankets and medicines were exchanged for attention to Scripture, adherence to the rule of law and manifestation of a Protestant work ethic. As a result of the lack of rations, and to a lesser extent because of his will, Thomas rarely distributed necessities without some form of exchange. On this matter he was supported by Superintendent La Trobe, and the Colonial Secretary's office. They agreed that rations should not be given to any Aboriginal people absenting the stations



George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector of Aborigines (T.F. Chuck, n.d., photograph, La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria)

(Deas Thomson 2/3/1841 in VPRS 10, 1841/234). Thomas's endeavours were also shaped by the relationships he developed with important individuals, most notably Billibellary.

By gaining the trust of, and forming a strong relationship with Wurundjeri-willam *ngurungaeta*, Billibellary — also referred to as 'Chief of the Waverong' — Thomas and Woiwurrung people had access to each other through a personal relationship. Billibellary's motivations are important in understanding this relationship. He saw his relationship with Thomas, and to a greater extent the one forged with George Robinson, as means to accessing and influencing the directions of the Protectorate and its policies that greatly affected his people. Similarly, Thomas and Robinson found that cordial and friendly relations with Aboriginal spokesmen like Billibellary, Derrimut or Boronuptune (among others), provided them ways to influence Aboriginal people. In January 1844, when Thomas experienced difficulties moving a group away from Heidelberg Road, he was able to influence Billibellary to affect the move. This allowed Thomas to avoid employing the last resort of calling for the assistance of colonial law enforcement officers (Thomas 8/1/1844 in VPRS 11, Item 599).⁴ As it happened, Aboriginal people from far and wide were camping by Heidelberg Road in anticipation of judicial proceedings against Poleorong, since 1839, arweet or spokesman, of the Ngaruk willam clan of Boonwurrung (Clark 1990: 367). He and a Wathawurrung man were accused of the murder of an old Woiwurrung man. Thomas intervened, having Poleorong detained, to the anger of some Boonwurrung people. That night, the Assistant Protector was so fearful for his life that he slept in Billibellary's *miam*, or hut (Thomas 2/3/1844 in VPRS 4410, Unit 3, Item 79). These events illustrate the strength of the relationship between these two men at this time.



'Billibellary, Chief of the Yarra tribe on settlement being formed' (William Thomas, c. 1839, pencil sketch on paper, La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria)

Some weeks later, when the Assistant Protector accompanied Robinson on an inland expedition in 1844, he left the key to the Merri Creek protectorate store with Billibellary. Upon returning on 2 May 1844, Thomas registered his respect and thanks to the *ngurungaeta* for keeping tight control of the store. Billibellary had barely touched it, refusing access to those who pressured him (Thomas 1/6/1844 in VPRS 4410, Unit 3, Item 80). Whether this reflects austerity on Billibellary's part, or alternately the absence of his people from the site, remains uncertain.

Thomas's relationship with Billibellary also yielded significant concessions to the assistant protector's drive to see the Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung permanently settled in one place. In 1843, having witnessed the rapid occupation of his lands, Billibellary claimed that Wurundjeri people would settle and cultivate the Yarra River valley if they were granted a reserve there (Thomas 2/1/1844 in VPRS 4410, Unit 3, Item 78).

Relations between Thomas and Billibellary were not always strong. When Billibellary and one of his wives visited Robinson in September 1845, he described Thomas as 'no good' (Robinson Jnl 13/9/1845). It should be noted that Thomas at this time spent many months working from Robinson's quarters at Melbourne, removed from the various encampments.

As we have seen, from September 1841 until March 1843, Thomas considered himself to be stationed at Narre Narre Warren, and continued to attempt to remove Aboriginal people from Merri Creek to the central station. His efforts illustrate his commitment to Narre Narre Warren, and his resolve that Melbourne, and the various European cultural practices therein, was not a suitable or beneficial place for Aboriginal people to live (VPRS 4410, Unit 75). His efforts demonstrate that he rarely acted outside official Protectorate policy. It was only when funding was effectively withdrawn that he was prepared to abandon the central station, even though Aboriginal people had had little enthusiasm for the place since the relocation of the Native Police Corps in 1842. The influence of the Corps on the life of other Aboriginal people was significant, and is addressed later.

So during this time, from late 1841 until early 1843, Thomas visited groups throughout the Western Port District, though it would appear he was reluctant to break-up their encampments. Even after years in the job, it was not uncommon for Thomas to request directions from his superior on whether, and when to disperse the camps. While Thomas was reluctant to break-up encampments, when he did, he cited alleged misdemeanours by Aboriginal people as reasons to do so. He then moved camp occupants to Narre Narre Warren (Thomas 1/12/1842 in VPRS 4410, Unit 75).

Those who did choose to settle at Narre Narre Warren found life at Central Station was very different from life in the bush. Residents worked hard to build up the station, informing Thomas that they needed the assistance and company of their clanspeople. On one occasion in December 1842, at the request of those at Narre Narre Warren, Thomas travelled to the Merri Creek–Yarra River confluence to gather people. He was rebuked by Wurundjeri people at Merri Creek, who told him that as there was 'no food' at Central Station, they would not go there with him (Thomas 1/3/1843 in VPRS 4410, Unit 75).

Despite Thomas's concerns that Central Station could not attract Aboriginal people to stay for long periods of time, he readily sanctioned seasonal migration. In February 1841, when Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung people left for traditional cultural and economic purposes unknown to him, Thomas impressed upon Robinson that 'the Aborigines are neither sulky nor dissatisfied, but they must go . . . and their intended return after three moons' (Thomas 5/2/1841 in VPRS 10, 1841/234).

The failure of Central Station had a profound effect on Thomas's actions thereafter. Any ideas of being the provender for and saviour of Aboriginal people were eroded as his charges refused to partake in his offerings. Thomas's disillusionment as a missionary, and uncertainty over the survival of the Central Station culminated with the vegetable harvest, which he and a handful of others reaped themselves. In the absence of anyone to eat it, Thomas watched in despair, as two cart-loads of 'good vegetables' rotted, while people went hungry at Merri Creek (Thomas, 1/6/1843, VPRS 4410, Item 76). Indeed his fixation on proving a success at Narre Narre Warren took place at the expense of the 'care and protection' of people at Merri Creek. On the occasions that he was in Melbourne, Thomas often stayed with Robinson. From there he had access to Aboriginal camps at the Merri Creek–Yarra River confluence, north of Melbourne, and south of the Yarra River at *Tromgin* (Thomas, 4/7/1843 in VPRS 11, Items 586, 592 and 593).

Merri Creek was not the place for a materially comfortable, colonial lifestyle, as imagined by some liberal Whigs in London. By the time that Thomas was based at Merri Creek, the Port Phillip Protectorate was a lean operation. There were few rations to be distributed, and Aboriginal people

continued to eke out their living from traditional forms of subsistence and from the narrow and temporary niches in the economies of European settlers.

Aboriginal people were rarely encouraged by the Protectorate to assemble at Merri Creek. During 1844, following the relocation of the Native Police Corps to Dandenong Creek, Thomas was prepared to put up his tent at camps around Fitzroy. Here, Thomas would conduct school classes and Christian church services, intervene in Aboriginal dispute-settlement processes, and with the help of Medical Dispenser Jones, tend to the sick (Thomas, Journal of Proceedings, VPRS 4410, Item 81).

Camping at the Merri Creek–Yarra River confluence became more frequent during the Native Police Corps' occupation of the place. As many as 500 people camped at the site during September 1842 (Robinson Jnl 30/9/1842). As Protectorate officials sought to keep them from the Corps' quarters, camps sprang up all around the site, south of the confluence (in present day Studley Park), west of the Merri Creek, and north and south of Heidelberg Road. Thomas was repeatedly ordered to disperse these camps, and was permitted to call on police for assistance, though he very rarely engaged their services (Thomas 24/12/1842 in VPRS 11, Item 467).

Later, Aboriginal groups were frequently moved from the areas around the government reserve, and were encouraged to camp on the reserve itself, where the Native Police Corps had been stationed (Thomas 8/1/1844 in VPRS 11, Item 599).

Hunger was the main reason Aboriginal people assembled by the Assistant Protector's Quarters. In one instance in 1844, on returning to the site after only eight days in the bush, Aboriginal people, including those of the Gunung willam balug, declared that 'the bush big one hungry no belly ful like it Melbourne' (Thomas 1/9/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 81). Visits to Melbourne had thus become an integral part of the movements of Aboriginal people, as pre-contact subsistence patterns were increasingly undermined by the squatters' occupation of their ranges.

When impeded by laws, Aboriginal people found ways around them so that they could continue to visit Melbourne and attempt to satisfy their needs. The introduction of a law prohibiting unregistered dogs from entering Melbourne provoked a 'strong and bitter reaction' from Aboriginal people. In response, women took charge of the dogs and remained on the outskirts of the settlement, while the men went to town to procure their wants: food, money, tobacco and liquor (Thomas 1/12/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 82).

There is evidence to suggest that Aboriginal people at Merri Creek had become accustomed to exchange with Thomas. This is partly borne out by their experience at Arthur's Seat and Narre Narre Warren, where rationing was regular. In the early days of the Protectorate, such exchange was tangible: payment followed work, religious and educational instruction, and presentation of skins and baskets. At Merri Creek however, Aboriginal people were not compensated so readily or systematically. For weeks at a time, Thomas had nothing to give them, and Aboriginal people were puzzled when after attending his Christian service: no food was forthcoming. In this respect, it is surprising that Thomas was disappointed at the declining numbers in attendance on the following Sundays (Thomas in VPRS 4410, 80–2 *passim*). In another respect, this reveals his naivety in believing that the majority were genuinely interested in Christian devotion. Aboriginal people were far more aware that religious instruction was a form of exchange between white and black.

By 1844, Thomas was tired of supplying rations from his own family's store to children attending school classes, and was relieved to receive flour from the government for them (Thomas 1/3/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 78). Later, in December 1845, Thomas requested more rations from the government commissariat to distribute to Aboriginal people attending his services (Thomas 1/1/1846 in VPRS 11, Item 627). Late in 1845, Thomas was told in no uncertain terms by Robinson, on complaining to the Chief Protector about the lack of funds dedicated to his district, that had he

attracted more people to Narre Narre Warren, then the Protectorate could have supplied him with the same level of rations received by other districts (Robinson Jnl, 27/11/1845).

The Aboriginal people of Thomas's district were adept at bargaining for their welfare. Food, blankets and tobacco were not the only things received in exchange for Aboriginal complicity to Protectorate policy. In one instance some Woiwurrung people assured Thomas that they would stay at Central Station if Thomas went to *Turruk* (Toorak) to collect an old man who was too ill to walk (Thomas 31/5/1841 in VPRS 4410, Item 69). This transaction was completed.

Trading of Aboriginal manufactures such as baskets, skins (kangaroo and possum) and buckets was common. One relatively reliable market was Robinson, who either added the trade goods to his vast collection of such items (see Sculthorpe 1990), or sold them to the merchant George Lilly (Robinson Jnl 2/7/1840). Lilly was a draper and supplier of food to the Protectorate (see Clark's 2000 annotation of Robinson Jnl 22/1/1842). He also had a stall at the Melbourne market.

In February 1842, Thomas informed Robinson, in concluding his Journal of Proceedings for that quarter, that the Aboriginal people of his district would be willing to settle at Narre Narre Warren if he had more rations to offer them (Thomas 1/3/1842 in VPRS 4410, Item 71). It had become apparent to the Assistant Protector that provision of material necessities was fundamental to Aboriginal complicity. Despite this, Thomas struggled to accumulate enough rations to distribute at Merri Creek. When he did have blankets, Thomas distributed them with great satisfaction.

Even though Aboriginal people had frequented the Merri Creek for generations, and Thomas had been an assistant protector for six years, it was not until December 1845 that Thomas reported some benefit of having Aboriginal people in Melbourne encamped on the one site. He suggested to Robinson that '... it was better to have them congregate in one spot' where there was '... a degree of order, more under the Protector's eye' (Thomas 1/12/1845 in VPRS 4410, Item 83). It is interesting to note that in January 1844, Thomas began to refer to his hut in the government reserve as the 'Assistant Protector's Quarters', rather than 'Native Encampment, Merri Merri Creek'. This conflicts with Robinson's verbal orders in November to disperse camps near the confluence of Merri Creek and the Yarra River. Thomas complained of the fact that the encampments had been '... continually shifting. Not more than 1 mile each time', and that not 'one nook along the Yarra from the [Dight's] falls to Melbourne where there is not trees stripped of bark' (Thomas 1/12/1845 in VPRS 4410, Item 83).

During 1846, the establishment of Merri Creek Aboriginal School, under the supervision of the Collins Street Baptist Church, prompted Thomas to revert to the policy of driving Aboriginal people away from the vicinity of the Merri Creek–Yarra River confluence. This was undertaken on the grounds that their presence would distract the pupils from their study and Europeanisation. For the most part, it appears that these fears were well founded. In June 1846 he 'sent away' a group of 97 Aboriginal people from distant territories (Thomas 30/6/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 87). They did not move far. From January to July 1847, Aboriginal groups, from near and far, continued to camp in the vicinity of the confluence, within a half a mile of Thomas's quarters (see Robinson Jnl 17/6/1847, and Thomas in VPRS 4410, Items 93, 96, 97 and 99).

Repeated arrivals of hungry Aboriginal people from 'the bush' forced Thomas to renege on his policy of removal, except where he could threaten them with legal action, such as in the event of theft, assault and intoxication. The prospect of confinement and transportation were sufficient reason for Aboriginal people to 'go bush'. For example, in October 1846, following several noisy nights at the encampment, a group of local clanspeople left for the bush after being threatened with 'measures to be taken' (Thomas 30/11/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 93). Again, on 26 April 1847, when more than 350 Aboriginal people encamped in the 'precincts of Melbourne', one Woiwurrung man (probably Billy Hamilton) and one Boonwurrung man fled from town after allegedly getting drunk and breaking a baker's shop window in Fitzroy. Thomas had informed them that theirs were transportable offences (Thomas 31/5/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 97).

Hundreds of Aboriginal people continued to camp within a mile of Thomas's quarters. Reports of 'outrages' on the Yarra River squatters' stations began to subside by August 1847 as the terrible effects of a new influenza epidemic took its toll. Thomas's indefatigable lecturing on common law principles and details of sentencing would have meant little to peoples witnessing the wholesale destruction of their families — diseased, starving and, often completely destitute (Thomas 31/5/1847 and 31/8/1847 in VPRS 4410; Item 97 and 99; Barwick 1998).

Although Aboriginal people continued to camp around Melbourne, few Woiwurrung speakers returned for any length of time after the spring of 1847 (see Thomas in VPRS 102, 104, 106, 109, 112; Fels 1988; Barwick 1998). Certainly the Protectorate had little to offer them. In the first cold week of the spring of 1848, Thomas recorded the 'painful' process of distributing just six blankets amongst a group of more than 20, camping south of the Yarra River by Dight's Falls (Thomas 30/11/1848 in VPRS 4410).

William Thomas conducted Christian services regularly, indeed very few Sundays passed without reference to the service. Whether he preached in his official role as Assistant Protector or in his capacity as a devoted Christian is unclear. He was prepared to go to Aboriginal people at their camps and such services were not uncommon. They were performed at several sites including 'the encampment between Richmond and New Town' (Thomas 24/8/1845 and 31/8/1845 in VPRS 11, Unit 10, Item 614).

As with school classes, Thomas enjoyed a greater audience when he had food to offer for attendance, and requested more rations when confronted with dwindling numbers (see Thomas 2/1/1846 in VPRS 11, Item 627).

Attendance at church services was not always solely to receive rations at the end. Evidence suggests that a genuine interest in Thomas's teachings existed. This was stimulated in part by his use of the Woiwurrung language at the services. On one occasion, when many 'Devil's River' (or Daungwurrung) people attended a service, other members of Daungwurrung clans more familiar with Thomas's preaching, explained the proceedings to them (Thomas 30/11/1842 in VPRS 4410, Item 74).

On another occasion, during severe flooding of Merri Creek in January 1844, a party of Woiwurrung people had crossed the creek, and in lieu of the missed Sunday service, they requested another (Thomas 2/3/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 79). Thomas was delighted to perform the service for them. He probably did so in the recently vacated Native Police Corps Barracks, which were being used for school classes. Usually, church services were performed in Thomas's tent, hut or open air, but on this occasion more space was needed to accommodate the 242 Aboriginal people camped near the confluence (Thomas 2/3/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 79).

William Thomas's attempts to engage Aboriginal people in Christian devotion were genuine and long-standing. By April 1846, he had translated much of the liturgy he preached into the Woiwurrung language. Most of these translations were lost when his papers were reportedly stolen from his quarters on 16 May 1844 (Thomas 1/6/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 80, and 30/4/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 86).

Prior to the Collins Street Baptist Church organising their mission school at the confluence in 1846, inculcating Aboriginal children with European-style education was the responsibility of the Protectorate. Each Assistant Protector was required to employ staff for, and oversee, school classes. Although well provided for — with schoolrooms and teaching materials such as slates and exercise books — the efforts of the schoolmasters at Narre Narre Warren (Wilson, Keenan and Peacock) were repeatedly undermined by the decision of Aboriginal people to vacate the site (see Thomas to La Trobe 5/2/1841 in VPRS 10, Unit 3, Item 1841/234; Thomas to La Trobe 7/4/1841 in VPRS 10, Unit 3, Item 1841/507; Thomas to La Trobe 1/6/1841 in VPRS 10, Unit 3, Item 1841/797). When the Native Police Corps was based at Merri Creek, Thomas was surprised to see all of the

school children from the central station arrive at the depot (Thomas 8/6/1842 in VPRS 11, Unit 8, Item 423).

From the establishment of the Native Police Corps quarters at the confluence in 1842, Thomas conducted school classes there, as he was unable to make children attend school at Narre Narre Warren. By August 1843, he described teaching at the Corps' quarters as one of his 'sole occupations', the other being visiting Aboriginal incarcerates in jail (Thomas 1/9/1843 in VPRS 4410, Item 77). By November 1843, Thomas was pleased by the progress the children were making, recording that they enjoyed singing in the Woiwurrung tongue (Thomas 2/3/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 79). Whether the songs sung were the hymns that Thomas translated or traditional songs remains uncertain. An example of one of the hymns is reproduced below.

By 1844, women from the Wurundjeri-willam — including Konningurrook and Moorurrook, both wives of Billibellary — had sufficient confidence in the Assistant Protector to leave their children with him for education at his quarters. Thus began a tradition of entrusting Thomas with children. It is not clear whether or not the parents or relatives of these children sanctioned a British education, or just used Thomas to supervise in their absence. However, the important point is that parents or relatives trusted Thomas. Perhaps this was because they did not want the rising generation to be as alienated from European society as they were. But probably it was because dwindling traditional food resources were forcing families to take decisions to secure the economic future of their children.

When people dispersed from encampments near the confluence at the end of January 1844, following the Native Police Corps move to Narre Narre Warren, some Woiwurrung people let their children remain at Thomas's Protectorate school. This encouraged the Assistant Protector to continue to hold classes for these children, recording a high turnover of pupils (Thomas 2/3/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 79). When children were not brought to him, Thomas would visit the camps in the morning, 'doing the rounds' distributing medicines and collecting children for the school day' (Thomas 1/6/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 80).

By May 1844, Thomas was increasingly teaching in the English language, and expected his pupils to be able to converse in his tongue 'within a few weeks' (Thomas 1/6/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 80). This was not to be as, from July 1844, he recorded that:

The irregularity of their attendance will show the discouragement attending any exertion to benefit them under existing circumstances. On the last of June [1844], the Blacks shifted from near my quarters, 2 miles distance none have since attended Instruction — I endeavour to keep them in remembrance what they have acquired but find little success (Thomas 1/9/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 81).

When reporting of the progress of his educational endeavours several months later, in November 1844, Thomas complained that since Aboriginal people had ceased to camp by his quarters, he had been unable to accomplish 'any good' with the children. In fact, according to Thomas, they had 'retrograded' (Thomas 1/2/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 82; Thomas to La Trobe 9/11/1845 in VPRS 26). Later, Thomas (31/5/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 88) described his attempts at education as a 'series of so many beginnings'. He claimed that pupils could read two or three syllable words, but this was 'forgotten when they went bush'. In April 1845, he was again holding regular school classes, but with greater numbers in attendance than before. His church services were similarly well attended (Thomas 30/4/1845 in VPRS 4410, Item 86).

One way in which Thomas gained the confidence of Aboriginal people was through forming close working relationships with key individuals, especially Billibellary. Billibellary saw Thomas, and to greater extent Robinson, as a means of access to colonial policy making.

For Aboriginal people who were incarcerated, Thomas was often one of few people able to visit and console them. He spent a considerable proportion of his time in the company of the accused, and was often more impressed with Aboriginal people in jail, than he was with those camping



Billibellary's wife and child frequented the confluence of the Merri Creek and Yarra River (unidentified artist (possibly William Thomas) c. 1842, pencil sketch on paper, La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria)

near Melbourne (Thomas 31/5/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 88). One accused man with whom Thomas believed he had developed a 'close' understanding was Kunnin Koombra Kowan, who, convicted of theft and awaiting transportation to Van Diemen's Land, relied on Thomas in 'remembering him to his father' (Thomas 31/5/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 88).

Upon the release of Aboriginal incarcerates, Thomas was responsible for their transition back to their own country. For many of these people, he failed to organise transport, instead taking them to the Merri Creek Protectorate station. Two such men, who refused to stay at Merri Creek, were Warri, aka Engobar, a member of the Tarinban, a Bangerang (or Yorta Yorta) clan (see Clark 1990: 398–401) and Koort Kirrup (Thomas 31/5/1843 in VPRS 4410, Item 76 and 31/3/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 85); a clan head of the Palapnue gundidj, a Dhauwurdwurrung clan belonging to the Stokes River (see Clark 1990: 71–5). They refused to stay as they perceived hostility from local Aboriginal people because they were foreign, or *mainmeet*.

As the decade progressed, Thomas was successful in forming positive relationships with Aboriginal people. For many of the Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung, Thomas did provide the protection from the consequences of European incursions. His association and company were actively sought (Thomas n.d. in VPRS 4410, Unit 82). So there were many ways in which Thomas developed relationships with Aboriginal people. While forming close relationships with key individuals, especially Billibellary, was very important, his day-to-day engagements as school-teacher, preacher, confidant and friend made him a familiar, if not always convivial figure in the lives of many Aboriginal people.

Relationships between Aboriginal people and European settlers

Quelling the fears and paranoia of European settlers in the vicinity of the Merri Creek–Yarra River confluence was a chief concern of William Thomas, and it was here that his role as protector was truly valuable to Aboriginal people. On more occasions than not, reported ‘outrages’ upon settlers were found by Thomas to be false, or based on a misunderstanding of Indigenous culture, and Aboriginal notions of exchange. Often, what constituted an outrage was simply the encampment of Aboriginal people on alienated land — the expression of Aboriginal peoples to determine their own lifeways.

Such ‘outrages’ could not have been avoided, as both settlers and Wurundjeri claimed the right to occupy the resource rich Yarra River lands. A similar conflict occurred between the Yalukit willam and Mayune balug and settlers along the Port Phillip coastline.

With the rule of law, hierarchies of man and evidence of their own succession shaping the beliefs of many white settlers, Aboriginal claims to territory were overlooked and trivialised. While some Protectorate officials gave credence to continuing claims to sovereignty by Aboriginal people, settlers did not feel that they had to defend their right to the land.

On the basis of immediate exclusion of Aboriginal tenure (from all levels: sovereignty, ownership and occupation), Europeans felt justified in their dispossession of Aboriginal people from their traditional estates. For the settlers, issues of ownership were the preserve of state and of sovereignty: the right to occupy was established by the British claim to sovereignty. In any event, possession was nine-tenths of the law and in reality was one hundred percent of the law. To the Aboriginal people of Port Phillip, the British claim to sovereignty was largely uncommunicated, and therefore did not exist. So while settlers grew impatient with Aboriginal encampments and ceremonies conducted on their land, Aboriginal people continued to conduct themselves according to their own traditions, on their land. Relations between Aboriginal people and European settlers can be seen, therefore, as a conflict between two mutually exclusive codes of land tenure.

Most of the conflict between Aboriginal people and European settlers occurred when Aboriginal people were not resident at Merri Creek, and were either camping in the vicinity, or migrating. Much was made by settlers of ‘outrages’ allegedly committed along the upper Yarra and around the lower reaches of its tributaries, the Darebin Creek and Plenty River. Complaints often came from European travellers along Heidelberg Road, who claimed they were pestered for food and tobacco, and whose horses and bullocks were troubled by dogs belonging to Aboriginal people from Merri Creek camps (Thomas 30/11/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 82; Thomas 31/1/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 84). Owing to such complaints, Thomas was prompted to disperse people from camps by Heidelberg Road (Lemon 1983: 18). Thomas was particularly concerned over these complaints, as he knew that the operations at the Merri Creek Protectorate Station had become a very public focus of Aboriginal-European relations.

Relationships within Aboriginal communities

In the context of this study, it would be impossible to construct a full and authoritative account of relationships within Aboriginal communities around Melbourne in the 1840s. Some aspects of life at the Merri Creek government reserve and other related sites were recorded. It must be highlighted that most of these accounts were determined by the interests of non-Aboriginal people. The purpose of this section is to draw together existing accounts of Aboriginal camps, their relationship to one another, and information concerning ceremonies and conflicts. The main sources used are the journals and official records, registered and unregistered, of Chief Protector George Robinson and William Thomas. In addition, accounts by early travellers and squatters in



Warri, a Bangerang (Yorta Yorta) man who refused to stay at the Merri Creek encampment in May 1843 on account of perceived hostility from local Aboriginal clans (unidentified artist (possibly William Thomas, c. 1843, pencil sketch on paper, La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria)

the Port Phillip district have been useful. To assist in the interpretation of the accounts, Clark (1990) has been a valuable tool.

Throughout the 1840s, the confluence of Merri Creek and the Yarra River was an important site in Melbourne for the assembly of clans from around the Port Phillip district. Besides being a traditional meeting place for the Wurundjeri-willam, specifically Billibellary's and Bebejan's mobs, members from all Woiwurrung clans visited the site. Some visited more frequently than others. These included the Gunung willam balug (from the south side of Mount Macedon), the three patriline of the Wurundjeri-willam and the Bulug willam. According to Protectorate records, Boonwurrung people appear to have camped by the confluence less often, though the families of Bobbinary (arweet: Boonwurrung balug) and Poleorong (alias Billy Lonsdale, arweet: Ngaruk willam) and others from those clans were prominent (William Thomas Papers Jnl 1846, ML and 'Family Connections' census; Clark 1990: 364–86).

In addition to the many Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung clans that frequented the Merri Creek–Yarra River confluence, Daungwurrung clans (particularly the Warring-illam balug and Yowung-illam balug — both from around the upper-Goulburn River) were regularly in attendance. Also, some Djadjawurrung and Wathawurrung people visited the site, although Wathawurrung people were more likely to encamp to the south and west of Melbourne. Many important gatherings of Aboriginal people from across what became Victoria occurred at this and other sites near to the settlement throughout the 1840s. Other significant places include the south

bank of the Yarra River opposite Melbourne, *Tromgin*, *Turruk*, *Worrowen*, *Bolin*, and the vicinity of present-day Royal Park and Melbourne General Cemetery.

Many gatherings of Aboriginal people were recorded in Protectorate records, however details of events and people or clans present are often absent. In April 1842, many people gathered at *Turruk*, including the Wathawurrung balug (from near the 'Barrabool' hills), Warring-illum balug and probably fellow Daungwurrung clans, and all the Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung clans (Thomas 31/5/1842 in VPRS 4410, Item 73). The purpose of the visits was to resolve inter-clan grievances, but the intervention of the Native Police Corps and Assistant Protector Thomas disrupted proceedings and they were cut short (Thomas 31/5/1842 in VPRS 4410, Item 73).

Later that year an encampment of 500 people was observed at the Merri Creek government reserve (Robinson Jnl 30/9/1842). Some Daungwurrung groups had been there for six months or more, when members of the Boonwurrung balug, Mayune balug and Ngaruk willam left the *Ballnarring* camp to join them. In addition, people of the Wurundjeri-willam were also at Merri Creek by late September. In anticipation of food and blankets, many of these people gathered to hear the preachings of the roaming protector, William Thomas. There were some in attendance that had not seen this man preach before. These came from the distant country of the Yerrunillam balug, near the 'Devils River'. Some of the Daungwurrung clanspeople found it necessary to explain the proceedings to them (Thomas 26/9/1842 in VPRS 11, Item 423; Thomas 1/12/1842 in VPRS 4410, Item 74). The purpose of the great assembly is uncertain and on 3 October 1842, after only 11 days, all the groups dispersed, including the Daungwurrung people.

On leaving the Merri Creek–Yarra River confluence, Woiwurrung, Daungwurrung and Boonwurrung clanspeople journeyed north towards the lands of the Gunung willam balug, to the south and west of Mt Macedon. They were followed by a white man, who also wanted to go to the ranges. After getting away from the clutter of the Europeans' settlement, they were unexpectedly met by Assistant Protector and preacher William Thomas, whose purpose seemed to be to keep them from passing other white men. He informed the group that the stranger was a convict, who was then apprehended and taken to Melbourne. When the group had travelled a little further, at least two days from Melbourne, Thomas convinced Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung clan-members to return to their lands, leaving the Daungwurrung to travel on without them (Thomas 1/12/1842 in VPRS 4410, Item 74).

On 17 February 1843, messengers were sent from the camp at the Merri Creek–Yarra River confluence to inform Billibellary's people that some Daungwurrung clanspeople had arrived at the camp (Thomas 1/3/1843 in VPRS 4410, Item 75). Members of the Wurundjeri-willam who were at the confluence requested the presence of those at Narre Narre Warren for dispute settlement processes (Thomas 1/3/1843 in VPRS 4410, Item 75). Six days later, on 23 February, Woiwurrung clans joined their kin who had enlisted in the Native Police Corps. As the proceedings began, the white protector, Thomas, came between them, with Woiwurrung and Daungwurrung clans on one side and the Boonwurrung on the other. Because of Thomas's repeated complaining and interference, the judicial proceedings were suspended. The protector then remonstrated with them that they were all welcome to go to Narre Narre Warren, but the offer was refused. Probably they were aware that at Narre Narre Warren, they would be expected to do a great deal of work digging the ground for very little, poor quality food (Thomas 1/3/1843 in VPRS 4410, Item 75; Thomas 28/2/1843 in VPRS 12).

In the summer of 1843–1844, clans from across Woiwurrung-speaking territory gathered at the confluence to perform a friendly ceremony known as *gaggip* (Thomas 1/3/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 79). Throughout the month of December 1843, Daungwurrung speaking clans arrived to participate in the ceremony. Thomas counted 70 at his religious service on 17 December 1843. Little is known about this event, except that seven dances were performed over many days, this time from 21 December (the summer solstice) until 29 December 1843. The ceremonies culminated with

the seventh dance on 29 December, described by Thomas as the biggest ‘friendly ceremony’, at which there were 290 people present, including members of Woiwurrung, Boonwurrung and Daungwurrung clans (Thomas 1/3/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 79; William Thomas Papers, Jnl, December 1843, ML).⁵

One commentator, Mr McCabe (in Hull 1846: 13–14), in the Spring of 1843, witnessed a corroboree on the Merri Creek at Dight’s Mill, and ‘saw a large and rude temple of stringy bark covered with various hieroglyphics in white chalk’. On another occasion, William Thomas reported nearly 900 Aboriginal people were present in the ‘Government paddock’ (where the Lunatic Asylum now is) (Thomas in Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Aborigines, 1858/9).

Accounts of friendly ceremonies and assemblies are few, especially at the Merri Creek Protectorate Station. The memoirs of early European settlers of Port Phillip provide descriptions of some ‘corroborees’ held opposite Melbourne on the south banks of the Yarra River, behind Flagstaff Hill, or east of Melbourne (in the Richmond vicinity). Unfortunately, these are of varying values as they lack detail and are thoroughly ethnocentric (see Curr 1883; Kyle 1925). More reliable accounts exist of hostile meetings — judicial proceedings or ‘battle’ scenes — as they were probably of greater concern to European observers (see Walker n.d. MS 000431, RHSV).

The settlement of disputes was fundamental to inter-clan relations. Several accounts survive, many of which resulted in the death of the offending party or parties. One of the most infamous accounts details the punishment of Poleorong (alias Billy Lonsdale, an important Ngaruk willam man) and Warrador (alias Jack Weatherly) (Clark 1990: 367). The two men were held accountable for the death of a ‘Werralim youth’ from the Campaspe region, from a Ngurai-illam wurrung clan, who was working on the Manton brother’s pastoral station at Western Port in 1844 (Thomas 13/2/1844 in VPRS 11, Unit 8). According to Thomas (in Smyth 1878 Vol. 1: 82), the young man was found dead, and once reports had been relayed back to Ngurai-illam wurrung country, Poleorong and Warrador were accused.

After messengers had been sent between Ngurai-illam wurrung, Daungwurrung, Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung clans, it was decided that meeting and settlement was necessary. Over a period of many weeks, clanspeople from a number of regions arrived. According to Thomas (in Smyth 1878 Vol. 1: 82), the groups assembled there were from the ‘Loddon, Campaspe, Mt Macedon, Goulburn, Yarra, Bar-ra-bool, Western Port, Bun-yong and Leigh’. They camped around present-day Clifton Hill and Westgarth, close to Thomas and the Merri Creek Protectorate Station. In addition to the above-mentioned clans and groups, Billibellary summoned members of the Native Police Corps from Narre Narre Warren, and 16 were in the encampment by 5 February 1844. In total there were between 675 and 800 individuals present (Thomas 13/2/1844 in VPRS 11, Unit 8). When Poleorong and Warrador eventually faced the judicial proceedings, nearly 100 spears were thrown, with both using their shields to deflect them. Neither was fatally wounded.⁶

At the end of June 1844, members of Daungwurrung and Wathawurrung clans again assembled, this time at ‘a spacious rise approximately 2 miles north of the new jail’. This took place after a ‘Grand Council’ of 106 men decided to unite the various camps around Melbourne. By 30 June, according to Thomas (31/8/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 81) there were 320 people camped there. On 3 July 1844, Boonwurrung people joined them expecting conflict. This did not occur, as the Assistant Protector affected the dispersion of the camp, warning people that if they were to ‘fight’, the police would be called. Their response was to disperse. Although some of the Daungwurrung remained at the site, others joined Woiwurrung clanspeople ¼ miles northeast of Melbourne. The Gunung willam balug and ‘North Eastern Aborigines’ went to a camp 2¼ miles northwest of Melbourne. Boonwurrung and Wathawurrung clanspeople went to *Nerre Nerre Minnim*, 1¼ miles south of Melbourne (Thomas 31/8/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 81).

This may have been the 'battle' reported by William Kyle (1925: 166–7) to have occurred on Heidelberg Road in the Ryrie's Hill area, near the confluence of Merri Creek and the Yarra River. Kyle described a conflict between Wathawurrung clans and Woiwurrung and Daungwurrung clans, sometime in 1843 or 1844. According to this account, eight men were killed. They were buried at an 'old graveyard of the Yarra tribe' at Merri Creek (Kyle 1925: 167). These graves may be the 'mounds' referred to by Lucy Edgar (1865: 33).

An organised conflict was to be held near the Merri Creek Protectorate Station in 1846 (Thomas, 29/1/1846 in VPRS 11, Unit 10, Item 630). This meeting was frustrated by the arrival of some intoxicated Aboriginal men prior to the engagement of the two sides — members of Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung clans on one side and representatives of some of the Daungwurrung and Djadjawurrung clans on the other. According to Thomas (31/1/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 84; Thomas Papers Jnl 1846 ML) the 'indiscriminate' throwing of *wonguins* disturbed the event. The Assistant Protector used this as a means to interrupt proceedings, riding into the 'fray' on his horse, 'preventing any serious injury' (Thomas 31/1/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 84).

In March 1847, before the onset of that year's influenza epidemic, Thomas (31/5/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 97) reported an assembly of Daungwurrung clans at the confluence of Merri Creek and the Yarra River. The Assistant Protector then described the dispute settlement meeting as an 'annual event', convincing them not to proceed into the environs of Melbourne. After a few days 'debating', the 'principal fighting men' went to 'the bush' to meet others and settle their disputes at a place about 35 miles north of the settlement. Before leaving Melbourne however, it was decided that all parties would gather by Melbourne for dances. On their return to the Merri Creek Protectorate Station, Thomas (31/5/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 97) estimated there were 230 people present. None of these were 'Loddon' people.

On 31 July 1847, Thomas (31/8/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 99) reported that groups of Aboriginal people were to meet 40 miles north of Melbourne for dispute settlement. Thomas's efforts at keeping Aboriginal judicial proceedings from the vicinity of the town may have had some success, however the devastating effects of influenza that winter had a far greater impact on the movements of Aboriginal people. No more events like this were reported by Thomas to have occurred in Melbourne for the rest of that decade.

The assembly of parties for 'friendly ceremonies', after the judicial proceedings, was occasionally documented by Europeans. Perhaps the most insightful account of such an event occurring near Melbourne is provided by Robinson (Jnl 11/4/1839). After the populous Wathawurrung balug had resolved grievances with Daungwurrung and Woiwurrung clans — specifically Billibellary's mob of the Wurundjeri-willam — Robinson described a general reconciliation between the groups. He wrote:

I shook hands with all the parties and they acknowledged that fight all gone by and by plenty at corrobbery. Many very interesting and affectionate scenes occurred during these occasions when the Wartowerongs came in some of the opposite party came to different individuals and embraced each other in the most affectionate manner . . . When these parties met they mutually embraced each other (Robinson Jnl 11/4/1839).

A similar account comes from the winter of 1843, ten days after judicial proceedings involving Boonwurrung and Wathawurrung clans. On 17 July, the Wathawurrung balug joined the Gunung willam balug for a 'corroboree'. The next morning, they held the 'biggest *Gaggip* in years' (Thomas 31/8/1843 in VPRS 4410, Item 77).

Thomas describes another reconciliation principally involving Billy Hamilton (also known as Yabee) and the Nira balug, as well as other Daungwurrung people and some Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung clans. After justice had been meted out at Mercer's Vale (35 miles north of Melbourne) they all planned to gather at Melbourne for dances (Thomas 31/5/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 97).

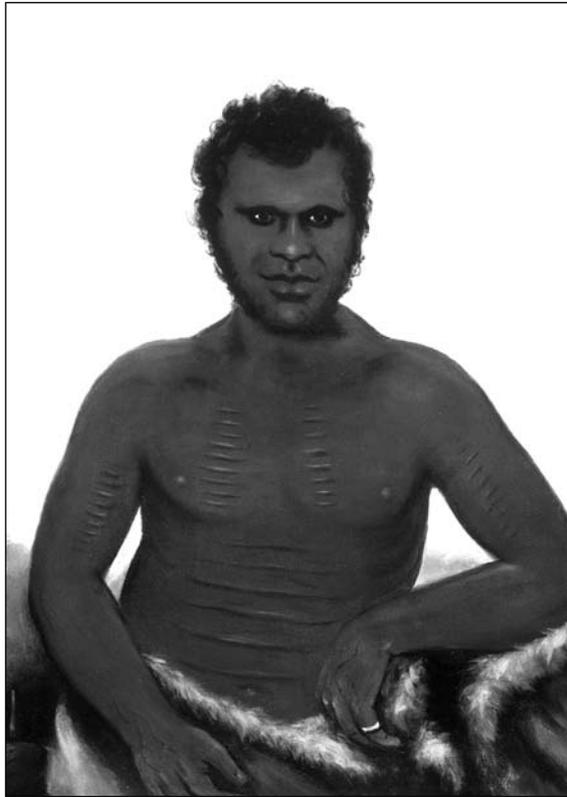
It would appear from these accounts that reconciliation was an integral part of some judicial proceedings. One can only surmise as to the degree of interference in these processes by William Thomas, who sought to keep the parties separated after anything perceived as conflict. In July 1847, Thomas addressed a group of 343 people, mainly from Wathawurrung clans, but also from Boonwurrung clans, telling them that ‘no more law fights to be held near Melbourne’ (Thomas 31/7/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 99). Thomas himself was under frequent pressure to execute this policy from his superiors.

Violence against individuals also featured in life at the Merri Creek Protectorate Station. The notion of *mainmeet*, which affirmed otherness on the basis of geographical foreignness and cultural difference, was an important factor governing the movements of Aboriginal people throughout the 1840s. Several surviving accounts document the killing of individuals from distant country on the basis of their being *mainmeet*, ‘no good’ and ‘foreign’ (see Clark 1990: 11–14). Assistant Protector Thomas (in Papers, ML, MSS. 214/9, and in VPRS 4410, Item 112) detailed the accounts he was aware of. The importance to Aboriginal people of such notions of belonging and otherness can be seen by the reluctance of some individuals visiting Melbourne to camp with Woiwurrung people.

Some instances of Aboriginal violence upon other Aboriginal people were recorded in protectorate records. All of the cases recorded by Thomas and Robinson involved men inflicting violence upon other men. The first reported case where a person was killed on account of his foreignness was recorded in the first week of September 1839. According to Robinson (Jnl 15/9/1839), Peter, from the Murrumbidgee River district, was working on George Langhorne’s station — 1¼ miles southeast of Melbourne — tending dairy cows. Described as having lived with Mrs Langhorne, Peter’s body was found by Richard Godfrey, a prisoner employed at the station (Clark 2000 Vol. 1: 79). According to Thomas (Papers, Correspondence, Returns etc. 1838–1845, ML MSS. 214/9, CY Reel 3082), he learned from Aboriginal people on 17 September 1839, that ‘Poleorong, Tallong (King) [and] Derrimot’ were accused of the killing. On 18 September, Derrimot denied the accusation when asked by Robinson (Jnl 18/9/1839). A coffin was ordered for the body and burial was planned to proceed at George Langhorne’s station (Robinson Jnl 15/9/1839).

On 25 April 1840, Reubertmunung, a Daungwurrung man, was reported by Thomas (Papers, MSS. 214/9, CY Reel 3082) to have been speared and killed ‘while acting in a Corroboree’. This occurred while visiting a large camp of approximately 500 Aboriginal people, north of the Yarra River, near Robinson’s quarters. Eberburn, a Wathawurrung man, informed Thomas that Wathawurrung and Daungwurrung people were engaged in the ‘corroboree’ (Thomas Papers, MSS. 214/9, CY Reel 3082). A few weeks earlier, members of the Wathawurrung balug, Gunung willam balug, as well as some Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung clanspeople settled disputes at this site (Thomas 1/9/40 in VPRS 4410, Item 67). It was likely, therefore, that the death occurred as a result of the judicial proceedings. The death of Bareing, a Woiwurrung man, allegedly committed by Nerre Ninnin and Yal Yal of Boonwurrung clans, occurred on 8 June 1841 at Mayune on the pastoral station of the Ruffy brothers’, on the traditional lands of the Mayune balug, by Westernport Bay (Thomas Papers, MSS. 214/9, CY Reel 3082). This killing occurred under similar circumstances to that of Reubertmunung, namely when his people were visiting the area. It is not known if judicial or dispute settlement processes occurred at the meeting. It is interesting to note however, that according to Thomas ‘the Yarra Blacks were agreed not to spear the murderers but to deliver them up to the English Law’ (Thomas Papers, MSS. 214/9 CY Reel 3082).

In contrast to the deaths of Reubertmunung and Bareing, the death of Jemmy, from the Adelaide area, appears not to have occurred during judicial proceedings, or any other gathering involving others of his clan. The killing occurred ‘on the new Sydney Road by the Merri Merri Creek about 12 miles north of Melbourne’. Thomas was informed by some Daungwurrung men that ‘Tinmeginnin, Kunnundegun and Warrengulk’, also Daungwurrung, committed the killing



*Derrimut, a Yalukit-willam (Boonwurrung) clan-head
(Benjamin Duterrau, 1837, oil on canvas, Mitchell Library,
State Library of New South Wales)*

(Thomas Papers, MSS. 214/9, CY Reel 3082). After the Colonial Surgeon and Coroner had examined the body, Thomas buried Jemmy, probably at the place of death.

Bobby, a 'Pillowen Black [was] Speared on the Keilor Rd about 5 miles from Melbourne' on 12 December 1844, and he died the next day (Thomas Papers MSS. 214/9 CY Reel 3082). According to Thomas (30/11/1848 in VPRS 4410, Unit 4, Item 112), Bobby was employed by Mr Forster Grange and was killed by Wathawurrung people.

The presumed murder of Tommy, a pupil at Merri Creek Aboriginal School, occurred on 24 November 1848 by the Yarra River, near its confluence with Merri Creek (Thomas to Robinson 31/10/1848 in VPRS 11, Unit 11, Item 707). On this event, there are several surviving testimonies. They are those of Old Tobin, William Thomas, and Francis Edgar (schoolmaster at Merri Creek Aboriginal School). All of these agree that Wyredulong, a former pupil at the school, and a few others lured the boy away and murdered him. Their accounts declare that Tommy's body was weighed down with stones and thrown into the Yarra River (see statements of Old Tobin, Francis Edgar and William Thomas in VPRS 4410, Unit 4, Item 112). As no statement was recorded from any possible witness and as the body was not recovered, it is difficult to accept these statements as authoritative.

The strength of the notion of *mainmeet* is not only supported by cases of *inter se* killings, but also by the apprehension and fear of some Aboriginal people to venture alone in foreign country. On several occasions, Thomas reported that people from distant clans refused to camp at the Merri Creek Protectorate Station for fear of attack by local people. Thomas took two men from distant country to his son's farm 'Strangeways', after they were released from jail. These men were Warri, taken to Strangeways in May 1843, and Koort Kirrup, taken in March 1846 (Thomas, 31/5/1843 and 31/3/1846 in VPRS 4410, Items 76 and 85).

Interaction with the Native Police Corps

The Native Police Corps occupied a peculiar political and authoritative position in early European–Aboriginal relations. While they retained their role as important and often powerful clansmen, such as Billibellary and Nunuptune, they were also equipped with the tools of European power. These instruments of power were both material — the gun, sword and horse — and, perhaps as important, political — a righteous belief in the rule of law (Fels 1988: 3–4).

As discussed earlier, the relocation of the Native Police Corps to the confluence of Merri Creek and the Yarra River in June 1842 was a significant factor in determining the location of Woiwurrung encampments at the site. Aboriginal people residing at Narre Narre Warren faced uncertain and infrequent access to food (Thomas 7/11/1842 in VPRS 4410, Item 67). In contrast, the Corps received regular rations. So as well as the imperative to keep families intact, residing with the policemen ensured that clanspeople had reliable access to food and necessities. The Corps received rations for themselves and their dependants and from May 1842, Captain Dana gave rations directly to the wives of policemen (Fels 1988: 74).

In addition to receiving rations from the government store, the wives and children of the Native Police Corps lived with them in their *miamis*, at the Merri Creek depot during 1842 and 1843 (Baker 1845: 40–1). To strengthen the Corps, in numbers and profile, officers used the encampments of their relatives and clanspeople as recruiting grounds. Assistant Protector Thomas (5/6/1843 in VPRS 4410, Item 76) reported that members of the Corps recruited at the camps by the Merri Creek–Yarra River confluence.

While there is no doubt that the Merri Creek encampments served as recruiting grounds for the Corps through the 1840s, the extent to which the resident Aboriginal communities assumed policing roles is uncertain. One account survives, however, of a European settler visiting Merri Creek soon after arriving at Port Phillip in 1844. Daniel Emerson (n.d. in Smyth Papers), according to his memoir, was apprehended by Aboriginal people at a Merri Creek camp. The Aboriginal people had been misinformed by Robert Jamieson, a local squatter and Melbourne identity, that he was a runaway indentured labourer. He was tied up, hand and foot, and left under the watch of the children at the camp. However, Emerson recounted that he was tied up without knots, and was able to struggle free and jump clear of the children. Spears were thrown as he ran, but he got away without injury.

Following the relocation of the Native Police Corps to Dandenong Creek late in 1843, Thomas was frequently frustrated by the power struggles that were played out at the camps by the Merri Creek Protectorate Station. As the Corps was not answerable to Thomas (5/6/1843 in VPRS 4410, Item 76) or Robinson, there was little they could do to stop what they considered to be unwanted intrusions into Aboriginal camps at Protectorate sites.

On several occasions, the Native Police Corps provided stiff opposition to the policies of William Thomas. On one occasion in December 1845, Thomas had been ordered by Robinson to force the dispersal of a group of Aboriginal people camped near Heidelberg Road (Thomas 10/12/1845 in VPRS 11, Unit 10, Item 621). Policemen at the camp stood firm against the Assistant Protector's orders. Thomas was appalled at the arrival of one intoxicated policeman the previous night, causing fear in Thomas and other Europeans. More to the point, Thomas was fearful of a possible breakdown of Aboriginal people's respect for the Protectorate's authority. He perceived this disobedience as having been introduced by the Corps. Escalating the standoff, some of the Native Policemen occupied Thomas's own hut — the Assistant Protector's Quarters — for several days, forcing Thomas to stay with Robinson in Melbourne.

Tensions between the Native Police Corps and officials of the Protectorate became a current of relations at Merri Creek. With protectorate officials blaming the policemen for encouraging their clanspeople to leave protectorate sites to join the Corps or to encamp with them, the tensions

heightened. After 1845, William Thomas reported on several occasions in his journals of proceedings that members of the Corps, particularly the important Boonwurrung men Devilliers and Poleorong, were enticing young men away from the Merri Creek Aboriginal School to enlist and enlarge the numbers in the Corps. Captain Dana was also personally accused of interfering in the operations of the school, by its teacher, Edward Peacock (Robinson Jnl 7/10/1846), and of generally frightening Aboriginal people at Merri Creek (Robinson Jnl 22/1/1847).

Amid broader accusations of disobedience, abuse of power, and of drunkenness issued from protectorate officials Robinson, Parker (Robinson Jnl 23/2/1847) and Thomas (who once had the Native Police pays stopped for several members who he believed had absented), policemen continued to frequent Merri Creek. Allegations of Native Police misconduct increased noticeably in 1846–1847 during and following the disastrous expedition to find the elusive ‘white woman’ of Gippsland.⁷

Health and the effects of exotic diseases

During the 1840s, exotic diseases continued to devastate Aboriginal clans in the Port Phillip district (see Butlin 1983), as they had for some decades prior. Those who frequented the Merri Creek encampments were no exception. Indeed, the effects of European diseases were a prominent feature of life at the Merri Creek Protectorate Station. A brief chronology of the spread of disease amongst Aboriginal camps in and around Melbourne follows. Illness was recorded to afflict not only the ‘local’ Aboriginal people of Port Phillip, but also others, including Daungwurrung, Wathawurrung and Djadjawurrung people.

In April 1842, H. J. Jones was appointed as Medical Dispenser in the Western Port Protectorate District (Robinson to La Trobe 19/4/1842 in VPRS 10, Unit 4, Item 792). Although officially stationed at Narre Narre Warren, Jones regularly attended the camps at Merri Creek. He furnished reports from which we can ascertain some detail regarding health and the effects of scourges such as dysentery, influenza and venereal diseases at the camps. More useful are Thomas’s reports, providing documentation of illnesses that went unreported by Jones.

By February 1841, when based at Narre Narre Warren, Thomas had noted the influence that Indigenous doctors had on the lives of Aboriginal people (Thomas to Robinson 24/2/1841 in VPRS 11). An influential doctor from a Daungwurrung clan declared that all Aboriginal people would die if they did not leave Melbourne. Unfortunately, there are no other surviving accounts of this instance. As a result of this dire warning, Aboriginal people left Narre Narre Warren to go eel fishing at *Bolin* lagoons.

The Daungwurrung, owing to their frequent presence at the Merri Creek Protectorate Station, were often discussed. Robinson (Jnl 22/9/1841) recorded that ‘Dr. Bailey went to town and met the Goulburn, [there] are three cases of sickness among the natives . . . Water over Goulburn and Waverong blacks south of the Yarra.’ Illness amongst Daungwurrung people at Melbourne was then noticed by Thomas amongst people camped near the Merri Creek–Yarra River confluence in June 1842. He erected his tent south of the confluence, opposite Dight’s Mill (in present-day Studley Park), and stayed with the sick for a week. With no medicines or blankets at his disposal, he encouraged them to go to Narre Narre Warren, but none of the Daungwurrung would do so — seldom was a Daungwurrung clan member’s presence recorded at Narre Narre Warren (Thomas 1/9/1842 in VPRS 4410, Item 73; Fels 1990 Vol. 1: 10–11).

William Thomas’s explanation of the causes of disease sometimes varied from the strictly physical. In September 1842 he stated that illness was also caused by moral decline: ‘I offer my opinion — I have then pointed out what I consider to be causes calculated to keep a diseased state of mind and bodies’ (Thomas 30/9/1842 in VPRS 4410).

On a visit to the Merri Creek–Yarra River confluence in December 1842, Jones described a great deal of illness there among Woiwurrung people (Jones to Robinson 21/12/1842 in VPRS 11, *passim*). He complained that his patients refused to follow his advice. Perhaps they had more confidence in traditional medicine.

By April 1844, Thomas appeared to have been performing the role of medical attendant at the camps by the Merri Creek–Yarra River confluence. Jones was effectively in charge of Narre Narre Warren in the Assistant Protector’s absence. Part of Thomas’s daily routine involved distributing medicines to camps between Richmond and New Town, and north and south of the Yarra River by the Assistant Protector’s quarters (Thomas 31/5/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 80). On 20 April 1844, Thomas accompanied Robinson on a journey to Gippsland. The key to the store was left with Billibellary, who was to distribute ‘flour only to hungry schoolchildren and sick women’ (Thomas 31/5/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 80). By 6 May 1844, upon his return to the 180-strong community at the government reserve, Thomas recorded much ‘sickness, very few outrages, no drunken cases’ (Thomas 31/5/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 80).

After the arrival of a ‘great body’ of ‘Bonnyong’ Wathawurrung, as well as Djadjawurrung people, an encampment situated 2½ miles north of Melbourne grew to contain 168 people. Many of these people were ill (Thomas 30/11/1844 in VPRS 4410, Item 82). On a particularly wet Sunday in November 1844, 41 members of this group arranged with Thomas to erect a large tent, from which he was to deliver Christian service.

At the end of October 1845, Thomas noted that ‘the few Aborigines in Melbourne move encampments every two nights, many are ill with the cough’ (Thomas c. January 1846 in VPRS 11, Item 627). This is a reference to influenza and in his quarterly report for the same period, Thomas records the ‘continual shifting’ of encampments during October and November 1845. They were scarcely ‘stopping two nights in one spot . . . and the children sick with the cough’ (Thomas 31/1/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 83).

The death of Billibellary, at the age of 47, occurred at the encampment at the Merri Creek Protectorate Station on 10 August 1846 (Thomas 31/8/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 89). Billibellary’s death caused much anxiety and distress amongst Aboriginal people at the Merri Creek encampment and other camps. They had lost a great Wurundjeri leader, known and respected well beyond his people and country. Thomas had lost his Aboriginal confidant, good friend and ‘great councillor on Aboriginal matters’ (Thomas 31/8/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 89). What caused Billibellary’s death is uncertain, though it was noted by Thomas that unlike ‘too many influential Blacks frequenting the settlement [who] fall into [drunkenness]’, Billibellary was not a drinker. Inflammation of the lungs and influenza was probably the cause. However, as his death drew near, Thomas was disappointed that Billibellary turned to traditional medicine, reporting that he had become ‘guided by the powerful decisions of superstitious Doctors’, and that he ‘recently grew wary of white Doctors and Medicines’. Perhaps this was because he had taken the Europeans’ medicine for the ten months he had been afflicted with ‘the cough’ and only got sicker.

Nevertheless, Billibellary claimed that he remembered seeing a Djadjawurrung man near his fire one night (Thomas 31//8/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 89). His Aboriginal doctors declared that someone from another tribe had stolen some of his hair, and this rendered him vulnerable to powerful remote influences over his health, resulting in the loss of his ‘*marmabulla*’, or kidney fat, hence his demise. Some Djadjawurrung and Daungwurrung men were held responsible for the death (Thomas 31//8/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 89). Thomas regretted what he felt was a change of heart in Billibellary, from exhibiting a conciliatory nature towards Europeans, to being overtly opposed to their ideas and practices (31/8/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 89).

After his death, Billibellary was buried ‘in as comfortable manner as a European’, in a spot ‘West of the Mission House, with a neat palisading 12-foot square’. Thomas wanted to erect a tablet on his grave with some inscription, a suggestion that horrified Wurundjeri people

(Thomas 31/8/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 89). The next day, while in mourning, Thomas (31/8/1846 in VPRS 4410, Item 89) noted that the camp moved because of fears that the place would be affected by the death of this most prominent *ngurungaeta*. Indeed, four years later, William Thomas reported that the Wurundjeri people would still not attend the confluence because of Billibellary's death (Robinson Jnl 4/6/1849).

There is some confusion over the location of Billibellary's grave due to the existence of another 'fenced' grave (referred to in Howitt 1845) on the promontory of land between Merri Creek and the Yarra River confluence. While it is clear that Howitt sighted a fenced grave no later than 1844, it is difficult to confirm that the site was the confluence of the Merri Creek and Yarra River. Further, it is not clear what proof Howitt had that the grave was that of an Aboriginal person. He claimed that the place was 'worthy to be the resting place of a chief' (Howitt 1845: 193). It is also possible that the fenced grave referred to thus, belonged to a European man who drowned near the confluence in 1844, mentioned in Kyle (1925: 164). It is therefore possible, that two graves existed on that promontory. If this was the case, perhaps the grave referred to by Howitt was washed away in the flood of 1844.

The death of Billibellary, coupled with a renewed spread of influenza amongst Aboriginal communities from June 1847, heralded the end of large-scale encampments of Woiwurrung people at the Merri Creek Protectorate Station. Thomas's comments on the lack of 'outrages' committed by Aboriginal people, is a haunting reminder of the huge loss of life they sustained from this outbreak. This devastation of numbers had an enormous impact on clans around Port Phillip. The desertion of a place after the death of a clan member meant that details of the spread of influenza went largely unreported by Europeans. Although the death of Billibellary in August 1846 resulted in the decamping of Woiwurrung people from the vicinity of the confluence, the desertion was not permanent. Woiwurrung-speakers had returned to the site by April 1847 (Thomas 1/6/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 97). The Woiwurrung migration from Melbourne, from July 1847 has been attributed to the outbreak of influenza (Barwick 1998: 34). The findings of this study concur with that analysis.

Numbers of Aboriginal people camping in the vicinity of Melbourne decreased dramatically after 1847. Aside from a large group, supposedly invited by some squatters to the horse races in 1848, who camped '1¼ miles South of the Yarra River', the Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung population camping in the vicinity of Melbourne rarely exceeded 100. Prior to the winter of 1847, there were seldom less than 150 people at the various encampments (Thomas, Returns in VPRS 12, *passim*). Other groups of Aboriginal people continued to frequent the precincts of the town, but also in fewer numbers.

Pinpointing exactly when this virulent strain of influenza entered communities is difficult, however references to illness can be found from January 1847: 'the rest [at Merri Creek] are dirty and miserable' (Thomas 1/3/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 96). Such reports increase in frequency from July 1847 after the arrival of approximately 100 Wathawurrung, principally the Wathawurrung balug. The majority were men who had gathered to perform ceremonies and to meet in council. Thomas recorded that the 'newcomers' were afflicted with the 'Disease' (Thomas 31/8/47 in VPRS 4410, Item 99).

By the middle of July 1847, Thomas (31/8/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 99) estimated that no less than 450 Aboriginal people were present at the Merri Creek Protectorate Station. He ordered them not to engage in 'law fights' in Melbourne. From 15–21 July 1847, Thomas (31/8/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 99) reported many 'corroborees' being held, and that when in council the men spoke of depleted '*marmabulla*'. After 21 July 1847, the groups dispersed, some travelling upstream along the Yarra River to its confluence with the Plenty River, others going to stay between Moonee Ponds Creek and the Salt Water River (Maribyrnong River). One week later, on 31 July, many of the men went to a place about 40 miles north of Melbourne for the purpose of settling disputes (Thomas

31/8/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 99). From there they gradually returned to their families in the bush, and by the confluence of Merri Creek and the Yarra River, taking with them the influenza strain.

By the end of September 1847, for the first time in more than two years, there were no Aboriginal encampments at the Merri Creek Protectorate Station (Thomas 30/11/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 102). On 21 September 1847, a council, or debate was held, at which it was decided to leave the vicinity of the confluence. Late in the morning, they burned all their European clothes (hats, trousers and coats), gathered their weapons and baggage and left. The destruction of European articles of clothing, in response to sickness, was also recorded by Robinson (Jnl 23/8/1847) after he had been informed by Mrs Peacock that the young girls at Merri Creek Aboriginal School 'tore up their frocks because got too many clothes when she was ill'. Some elderly people remained and camped between Thomas's quarters and the Baptists' Merri Creek Aboriginal schoolhouse (Thomas 30/11/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 102). Many of the women who left the Merri Creek camps went to stay at *Worrowen* and by the Brighton Road. The 'young and able' went to the bush.

By early October 1847, Aboriginal doctors were warning of imminent death unless their people left the vicinity of Melbourne. According to Thomas (1/11/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 102) 'Black Doctors' sought to move them to the ranges, they said: 'all people [black and white] will die in Melbourne'.

According to Thomas's report, influenza was widespread at both of the encampments near Brighton. It was especially affecting women, and was accompanied by deafness in both ears. Up until 11 November 1847, groups (mainly Boonwurrung) moved only 200–300 yards per day (Thomas 1/11/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 102). When the Assistant Protector met up with them just past *Bollerum* ('11 miles south of the Yarra'), they were attended to with European medicine and techniques, in addition to the care of the 'Black Doctors' (Thomas 1/11/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 102). Thomas reported one of the methods employed by the traditional doctors was to encircle the encampment with fires, about nine metres apart, and 'chant incantations'.

By 20 October 1847, Thomas recorded that the spread of influenza affected everyone in the encampment. On this day, it was decided that everyone should leave for the foothills of the *Koranwarrabin* (Dandenong) ranges (Thomas 1/11/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 102; also Robinson Jnl 1/11/1847)).

In November 1847, the number of pupils attending the Merri Creek Aboriginal School had decreased by one-third and the group of remaining Woiwurrung elders left their camp between the school and Thomas's hut (Thomas 1/12/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 102). On 28 November, three Woiwurrung people arrived at Merri Creek. They reported that there was a great deal of sickness 40 or 50 miles north of Melbourne. Two of the messengers were carrying influenza (Thomas 1/12/1847 in VPRS 4410, Item 102).

On searching for some pupils who had recently left the Merri Creek Aboriginal School, Thomas observed (on 28/2/1848 in VPRS 4410, Item 104) a 'fresh grave' at a former campsite on *Nutbubbellorum* Rivulet. When he did find the group, three miles upstream, he could not get the boys to return, nor could he persuade others at a different encampment to return. Their steadfastness on this matter resonates with the directives of their doctor who, two and a half months earlier, convinced them to leave Melbourne.

On 28 December 1847, Thomas visited a group of 28 Boonwurrung people at *Worrowen*. There he observed two new graves, belonging to the eldest man and woman of the 'tribe' (probably Nerm Nerm or Lummerlummer and Narrugrook) (Thomas 28/2/1848 in VPRS 4410, Item 104; Thomas Papers, Family Connections Census, 1/1/1846). In January 1848 only a small group of people stayed at Merri Creek, but even they left at the end of the month.

In February 1848 King William and the Wathawurrung balug clan, in which he was influential, arrived in Melbourne. He reported to Thomas the death of Malcolm (or Yam-mer-boke). According

to Thomas (1/3/1848 in VPRS 4410, Item 104; Clark 1990: 381), Malcolm was the 'last of the remains of the Mt Macedon tribe', or Gunung willam balug; however other sources indicate he was a member of the Marpeang balug (the Wathawurrung clan belonging to Bacchus Marsh) (see Clark 1990: 323). Apparently deaths from influenza were increasing in the western districts. By March 1848 some of the Woiwurrung people had returned to the Melbourne environs, along with people from Boonwurrung and Wathawurrung clans. This increased numbers of people around the settlement to 176 (Thomas 31/5/1848 in VPRS 4410, Item 106). Boonwurrung people brought with them reports of more deaths.

Bungeleen was the headman of the Waiung clan, near Lake King and present-day Bairnsdale, of the Brabralung in central Gippsland (Barwick and Barwick 1984: 9). His death on 22 November 1848, aged about 56, is less clear than that of others at the time. He was taken by the Native Police Corps — in search of the elusive 'White Woman' — to Narre Narre Warren with one of his wives called Parley and their two sons, Tommy and Harry. Robinson was told that Bungeleen was in a 'wretched state of disease' and chained to a log. But according to Thomas (to Robinson 22/3/1848 in VPRS 11, Item 693), Bungeleen was 'free from disease and quite well'. Many months later, Thomas (to Robinson 22/12/1848 in VPRS 11, Item 710) claimed that the Colonial Surgeon had attended Bungeleen and Bugup, at Narre Narre Warren, before they died. However, when Thomas visited Robinson, he reported that Bungeleen was afflicted with venereal diseases. Robinson confronted Thomas over this, seeking explanations why the assistant protector did not seek medical attention for the man (Robinson Jnl, 10/1/1848). Evidently it was only after this confrontation that Thomas directed the colonial surgeon to attend to Bungeleen's medical needs.

When many Aboriginal people gathered at Melbourne in May 1848 to attend the races, Thomas informed Robinson of the extent of the influenza epidemic. On sending his return for the 12 months past, he noted that more deaths had occurred then, than in any other 12 month period of his tenure (Thomas 31/5/1848 in VPRS 12 and 31/5/1848 in VPRS 4410, Item 106).

Although the worst of the epidemic was over by June 1848, illness amongst Aboriginal communities continued to be reported. The desertion of Woiwurrung people from the Merri Creek Protectorate Station was not reversed at any point, except for small groups. By 1847 Thomas had moved to his new house at Moonee Ponds. And with very few residents to 'protect' at Merri Creek, apart from those attending the supervised Aboriginal school, the use of the site as a protectorate station effectively ceased.