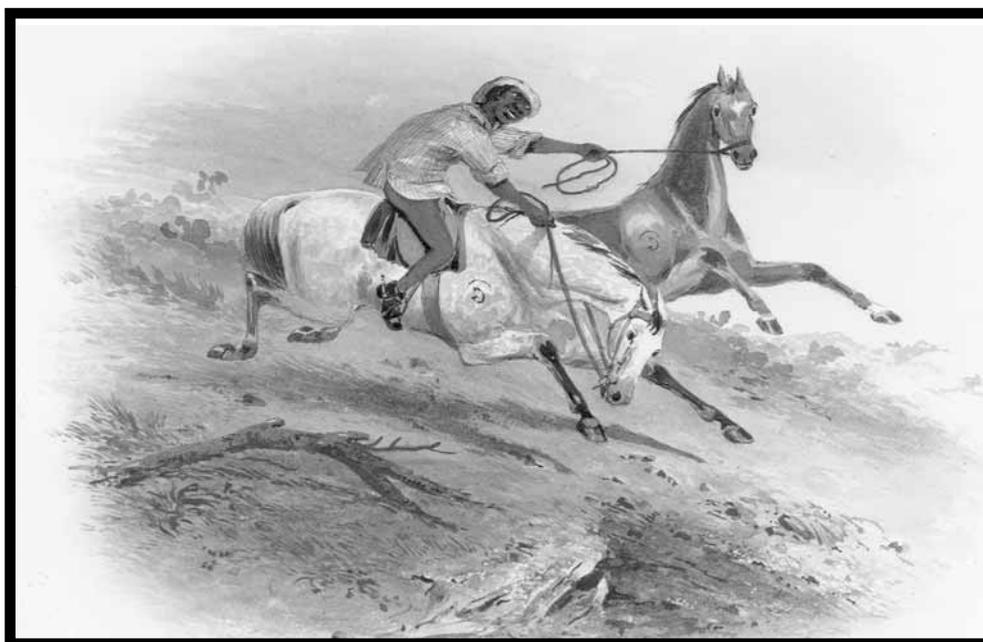
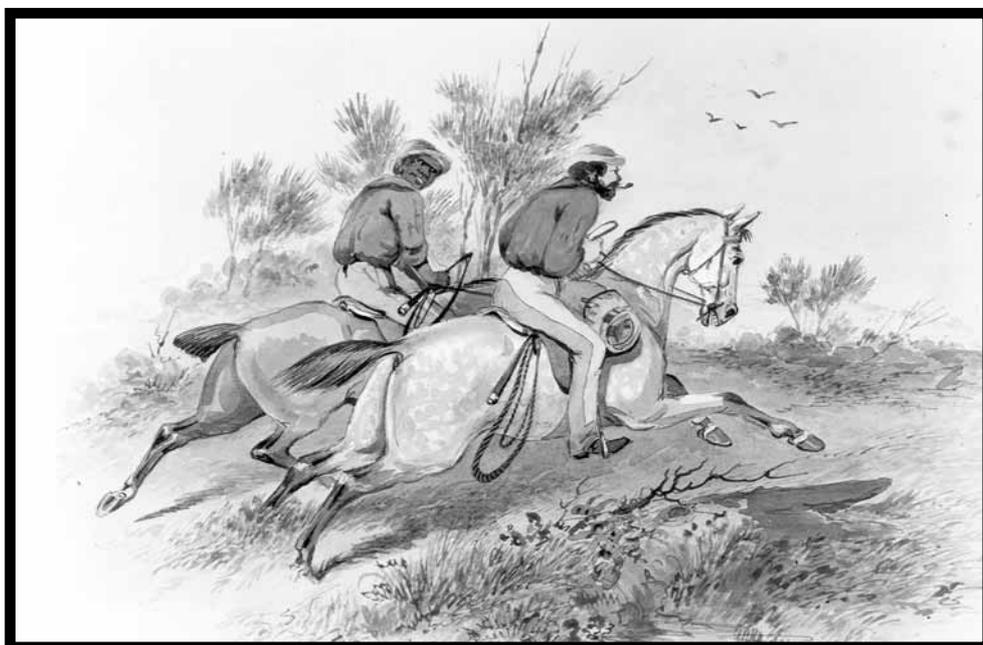


Off and Racing

Characters and yarns from the inner sanctum—racing speak



'Outward Bound' (top) and 'The Squatter's Tiger' (bottom), watercolours by S.T. Gill courtesy the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

Aboriginal horsemen first ventured into horseracing as strappers and stable hands. They began to appear more frequently—particularly in remote areas and at bush races. The *Illustrated Australian News* in 1891 describes a *Blackboys'* race in northern Queensland. Colin Tatz has highlighted similar events at Camooweal, Birdsville and Brunette Downs. Aboriginal jockeys were popular, for the best and fairest race was often fought out by these eager riders and sometimes the best horses were kept aside for the *Blackboys'* race. But although Aborigines rode many of the horses, they collected little of the prize money, socialised separately and were not allowed to buy beer. These races were presented for entertainment and amusement and were obviously widespread. Commenting on his experiences, South Australian Aboriginal horseman Marty Dodd recalled,

In those days (1930s & 1920s), you know, the Aboriginal lads, weren't allowed to ride...They had a race, what they called a *Blackboys'* race, at the end of the day.

Dodd 2000

In the Northern Territory similar races were conducted.

Organised horse racing began in the district in 1895 and was enjoyed by Aborigines and whites alike. Sometimes Aborigines were jockeys for whitemen in the main races, but there were also *Blackboys'* races'.

Lewis 1997

In 1835 an annual holiday race meeting was conducted near Fremantle in Western Australia on a cleared space at the back of town. The race meeting took on a festival atmosphere and other events included wrestling, foot races, and wheelbarrow races, climbing greasy poles and chasing greased pigs. Members of the local Aboriginal community were encouraged to attend. This was most likely as curiosity items for the local settlers. However the Aboriginal people upstaged their hosts. The little boys and girls raced for small prizes, the men ran for a purse and the Aboriginal people ran for loaves. An Aboriginal man called Migo so distinguished himself that he was afterwards pitted against the best runner amongst the white men and won by roughly a metre.



Blackboys' Race from 'A Race Week up North' by R.G. Tait courtesy the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

In the early days of organised racing in Australia only a few jockeys were recorded as Aboriginal. However, records reveal the presence of Aboriginal jockeys on major Australian tracks from the 1840s. An Aboriginal jockey called 'Sandy' rode successfully in Brisbane and Melbourne in the 1840s. He rode in the Melbourne Town Plate, the forerunner of the Melbourne Cup. Another Aboriginal, simply recorded as 'Jackey', also won metropolitan races in Western Australia in the 1870s including the Red Hart Stakes at Perth in 1877.

Newspaper reports from the Wollongong area of New South Wales illustrate the success of Aboriginal riders:

Illawarra Mercury 1857

Traveller ridden by a Darkey took the lead and 'travelled' at such a rate that little Butterfly could not keep up with him

The Empire 1857

The Maiden Plate — first, Mr Thompson's 'Stranger' (Charley — aboriginal)... The riding of the 'blackfellow' excited much admiration.

The Empire 1857

Weight for age — Ladies Bracelet

Third place — J.Ward's 'Countess' (blackfellow)

The Two Year Old Stakes

First place C. Wright's 'Black Swan' (Charley — aboriginal)

Young 2000

Records from the 1860s reveal that there was an Aboriginal camp very close to present day Flemington, on the site of the tennis courts in South Yarra's Faulkner Park, near the corner of Park Street and Toorak Road.

Bookmakers

Bookmakers and all forms of gambling were banned in South Australia in 1884 with the introduction of an Act of Parliament. It was not until 1933 that the Betting Control Board re-licensed bookies to operate at racecourses and off-course betting shops and legal bookmakers reappeared on the racecourses at the beginning of 1934.

This action initiated amendments to legislation with two members of parliament suggesting that both women and Aboriginal people should be excluded from the new off-course betting shops. Women were to be excluded on the grounds that they should be kept on a 'higher plane' than men; Aborigines were to be excluded because they had a childish mentality. The two proposals were overwhelmingly rejected; one speaker who knew Aborigines well, claimed that:

most were '... cleaner and whiter of heart than some politicians'.

Lemon 1987