

ABORIGINAL BOUNDARIES AND MOVEMENTS

IN WESTERN PORT, VICTORIA

Denise Gaughwin and Hilary Sullivan

The existence and nature of tribes and tribal boundaries in Australia have been controversial issues for some time. Peterson¹ has outlined this debate regarding the existence of tribes, their usefulness as an analytical concept and the nature of tribal boundaries. In southeast Australia the effects of early European contact have made the resolution of these problems particularly difficult. This paper presents the historical evidence relating to one 'tribe', the Bunurong, who inhabited the Western Port and Mornington Peninsula areas of Victoria. The evidence presented on this 'tribe', its boundaries, local organisation and movements, is predominantly derived from one observer — William Thomas, Assistant Protector of Aborigines, supplemented by the observations of early settlers and visitors. Thus we are seeking to elaborate upon the work of Tindale² in an attempt to discover the nature of the boundaries. In particular we aim to isolate local groups to ascertain how they used their local area and the kinds of movements made both within and beyond these areas. The contemporary documents provide some evidence of the organisation of a specific tribe, its use of relatively small area and its relationships with neighbouring groups.

The historical sources were investigated to supplement archaeological field surveys of the Mornington Peninsula and the Western Port catchment undertaken for environmental impact studies and cultural resource management. The surveys were directed toward the location of archaeological sites to assist management of sites under threat in these rapidly developing areas. The historical documents were read to obtain information on site location and settlement patterns, concentrating on evidence relating to

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¹ Peterson 1976: 1-11.

We would like to thank Diane Barwick for commenting on an earlier draft of this paper and for sharing her detailed knowledge of Kulin anthropology with us. We do, however, take responsibility for our use of this evidence. Peter Coutts assisted with comments on an earlier draft, Jane Wesson and Nick Shaw assisted in editing, while Leigh Hawking typed the manuscripts and assisted with the various drafts. The work of Gaughwin was carried out with the financial support of the Ministry for Conservation, Victoria. The contents of this publication do not necessarily represent the official view of the Ministry.

² Tindale 1974.

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the patterns of exploitation of the environment; that is an economic focus on foods, seasonality of occupation and movements, group size, and material culture. Unqualified use cannot be made of the documents. They are therefore presented in some detail especially as the Thomas papers contain interesting evidence which has not been published previously. The documents were not read in order to reconstruct the ethnography of the area; information such as kinship relations, language and religion were only briefly noted. This study of movements both within and outside of the area is therefore based primarily on the information which relates to economic patterns.

THE AREA STUDIED

The Western Port and Peninsula area is immediately southeast of Melbourne and includes some of the city's suburbs (see Figure 1). It is circumscribed by a series of hills, including the Dandenong and western Strzelecki Ranges, from which many streams

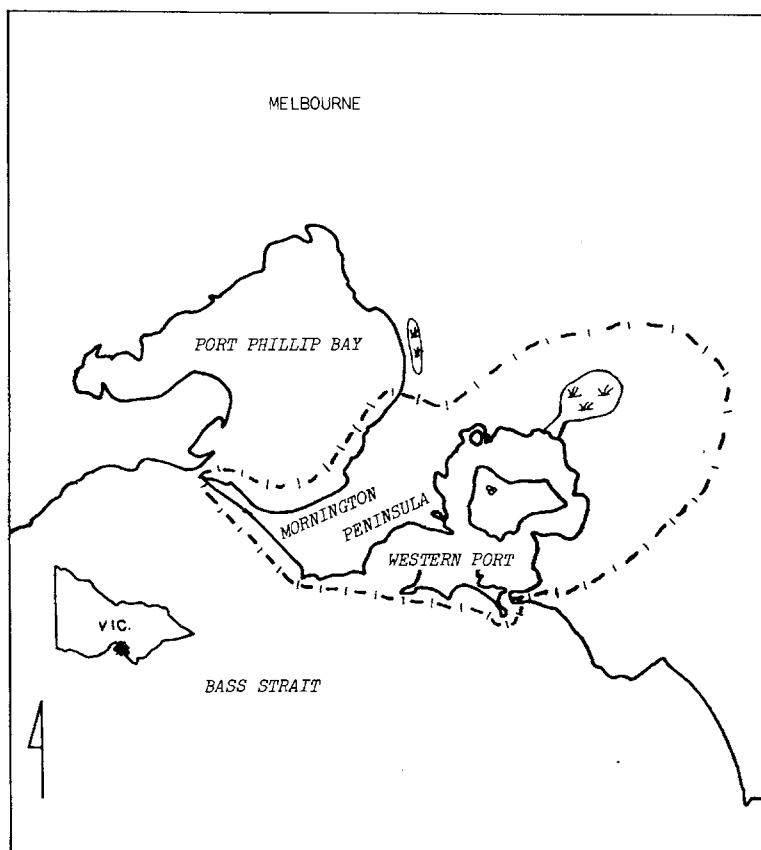


Figure 1 — Location of the area studied in detail.

descend to enter the sea. These ranges were densely forested in the past providing an upland forest resource zone.

The uplands rise fairly abruptly from the coastal plains. Open forests predominated on the well-drained areas of these plains while on areas of poor drainage, dense scrub occurred. The drainage of the plains was disrupted with the marine incursion which formed Western Port and Port Phillip Bays. This formed two extensive swamps, the Koo-wee-rup Swamp at the top of Western Port and the Carrum Swamp on Port Phillip Bay, as well as numerous small swamps.

The coastal margins of the area are diverse. Low-energy, mangrove lined coasts predominate in Western Port Bay including the shores of French Island and the northern margins of Phillip Island. Medium-energy coastlines occur in Port Phillip Bay and at some exposed locations in Western Port Bay. High-energy coastlines are present on the Bass Strait facing areas of the Mornington Peninsula and Phillip Island.

The area would have provided very good conditions for hunters and gatherers as a variety of environments were available with concomitant diversity of food resources. The economic potential of each environmental zone has been described elsewhere.³

THE EARLY CONTACT PERIOD

Western Port was visited by the crews of many ships on their way to and from London or engaged in exploratory trips to Tasmania and Bass Strait between 1797 and 1803. These visits were generally short and had little impact on Aborigines in the area, although on two occasions altercations took place between Aborigines and Europeans.⁴

Following the reports by the explorers Bass and Flinders of large seal colonies in Bass Strait, Western Port appears to have been frequented by sealers. The earliest record of their presence in the area dates to 1812⁵ although it is likely that they had been coming to Western Port since the turn of the century. By 1826 sealers were living year-round on Phillip Island exploiting the fur seal colony at Seal Rocks.⁶

It has been argued for Tasmania that the presence of sealers had a disruptive effect on the local tribes due to their practice of removing the young Aboriginal women by barter or force.⁷ Competition over resources and warfare between the two cultures appears to have resulted from the presence of the sealers.⁸ In Western Port there are suggestions that relations were not always amicable. No Aborigines were ever seen on Phillip Island by Europeans. In 1826, d'Urville⁹ thought that this was due to the presence of the sealers. In addition, there is a report of one Aboriginal, a man, who returned to Western Port after many years. He had been taken by sealers to an island in Bass Strait.¹⁰

³ Gaughwin 1981: 230-238; Sullivan 1981: 127-150.

⁴ Gunson 1968: 1-3.

⁵ Bowden 1964: 100.

⁶ Wetherall 1826: 204; Cunningham 1966 (1827): 71.

⁷ Plomley 1966: 3.

⁸ Gaughwin 1978: 17-20.

⁹ d'Urville 1830: 128.

¹⁰ Haydon 1846: 118.

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Warfare between the Western Port Aborigines and those inhabiting the area to the east seems to have greatly affected population numbers. In 1840 Thomas¹¹ indicates that the population

have suffered severely from the Two Fold Bay Blacks is evident, some of their songs . . . upon their sufferings about four years back seventeen were killed not nine miles from Melbourne. About nine years back two were killed where we was (sic) encamped by Western Port and about 28 or 20 years back nearly half the tribe were killed between Kangerong and Arthurs Seat.

The latter fight is likely to be the same one described to Haydon¹² by an elderly man who said:

Look at my people, said he, where are all my brothers? do you see any old men? I talk with the young men. My old companions sleep at Monip.

Twofold Bay is the name of the bay in New South Wales near Eden, which makes this attack seem most unusual as the whole of Gippsland had to be traversed. However it is possible that 'Two Fold Blacks' was a general name given to all Gippsland Aborigines as the term Gippsland was not then used and the nearest substantial European settlement was Twofold Bay. Another raid was said to have occurred in 1833 or 1834 by the Gippsland people 'who stole at night upon the Western Port or Coast tribe and killed 60 or 70 of them'.¹³ All the writers of the time stress the long standing enmity between these two groups. The possibility that these conflicts increased due to the effects of the sealers' presence must be considered. It is also possible that the area was depopulated creating a buffer zone between the two groups. The nature of the evidence does not allow for resolution of this problem.

Permanent European settlement in the area began with the establishment of Melbourne in 1835. Grazing licences were taken up from 1837 onwards. The depletion of traditional foods was rapid and had far reaching effects on the Aborigines.

From 1839 to 1841 Thomas was pointing out the lack of food in the district. In August 1839 he observed that sheep and cattle were responsible for the decline in the numbers of kangaroo and emus.¹⁴ The hoofed animals not only reduced the native fauna but had disastrous effects on plant foods, particularly yams. Thomas¹⁵ recorded an Aboriginal viewpoint:

No Murnong, no yam all Port Phillip, No much byone white man Bullock and sheep, all gone Murnong.

That this situation occurred early and was widespread is also attested to by Thomas¹⁶:

. . . I do not think that of the five tribes who visit Melbourne that there is in the whole five districts food to feed one tribe . . . they say 'no country, no good pickaninny'.

¹¹ Thomas, Original MS, Mitchell Library, Uncatalogued set 214, Item 8, Letter to G.A. Robinson, 6 June 1840.

¹² Haydon 1846: 152.

¹³ Thomas ML Item 21. Language and Customs of Australian Aborigines, Miscellaneous papers: 88.

¹⁴ Thomas ML Item 9. Letter to Robinson, 6 August 1839.

¹⁵ Thomas, La Trobe Library, Original MS, undated, in the R.B. Smyth Papers, Box 1176/6a. 97.

¹⁶ Thomas ML Item 3. Journal, 11 August 1844.

As a result the Aborigines had to interact more with the European settlers and the Protectors of Aborigines. Potentially the most disruptive of these effects, in terms of defining tribal boundaries and traditional movements, was the Melbourne settlement itself. Thomas continually tried to prevent the Aborigines going to Melbourne. He was concerned that they had access to alcohol and that fighting occurred. Aboriginal population numbers were reduced after the establishment of the Melbourne settlement. By 1863 there were only eleven Bunurong surviving; all were adult.¹⁷

It is considered unlikely therefore that the evidence recorded even in the earliest sources fully reflects the traditional situation. The combined effects of the reduced population, depletion of bush foods and the attractions of Melbourne must have changed the traditional patterns of movement. The degree of change is difficult to measure and it is with this caution that the following evidence is presented and discussed.

INFORMANTS

The main informant is William Thomas who took up his duties as Assistant Protector of Aborigines in 1839. He left a wealth of both official and personal papers which are now housed in the Mitchell Library, Sydney (ML), the La Trobe Library, Melbourne (LT) and the Public Records Office of Victoria (PRO). These papers include a daily journal (which Thomas kept for the whole of his working life) correspondence, official reports, note books and a draft of a book entitled 'The language and customs of the Australian Aborigines'. This manuscript unfortunately is not dated but as it is a synthesis it appears to have been written in his later years when he had gained a great deal of knowledge.¹⁸

From 1839 to 1843 Thomas spent a great deal of time with the Aborigines in Western Port, setting up stations at Arthurs Seat (1839-1841), on the Mornington Peninsula and later at Narre Narre Warren (1841) on the Dandenong Plains. He hoped that these stations would encourage Aborigines to settle into an agricultural lifestyle, away from the damaging effects of the European settlement. However, in 1843 he was forced to leave the Bunurong and go to Melbourne to the neglected Woiworung.¹⁹

The records of his early years with the Protectorate contain the most information regarding traditional activities. He also recorded reminiscences by the Aborigines of 'how things used to be'. However Thomas' major preoccupation was the administration of the settlements and the material in his papers regarding the traditional activities of Aborigines takes the form of brief comments and descriptions interspersed with administrative matters.

¹⁷ Barwick 1971: 292.

¹⁸ This book is now with the Brough Smyth papers in the La Trobe Library, Melbourne (LT).

The other sources which have been used are the diaries, publications and letters of early explorers and settlers including Hovell 1826-7, Tuckey 1803, Haydon 1846, Rawson 1839-40, Jamieson 1839, Gellibrand 1836, McCrae 1911, Flemming 1803 and d'Urville 1830. These men did not have long contacts with the Aborigines nor did they leave substantial records of their observations. However they are useful for additional facts and to supplement Thomas' reports.

¹⁹ D. Barwick pers. comm.

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Thomas did not travel extensively through the area. Although there are records of several trips around the Mornington Peninsula in 1840, he only twice ventured to the east of the Koo-wee-rup Swamp. There is also evidence that the Aborigines did not always reveal the true nature of their activities to him, especially those of which they knew he would not approve, such as fighting and possibly religious activities. For example, in February 1840, he accompanied some Aborigines on a trip to Western Port. While he was told by the men that they were travelling to the east on a hunting trip he later discovered that their prime purpose was to raid the Gippsland Aborigines.²⁰ His attempts to keep the Aborigines out of Melbourne failed. By 1843 he was almost totally occupied keeping order in the camps which sprang up around Melbourne, keeping the Aborigines out of the settlement itself and visiting the gaol.

THE TRIBE AND ITS BOUNDARIES

The tribe which inhabited the lands around Western Port Bay was given a variety of names by Thomas: the 'Boonurong', the coast tribe, the Western Port tribe, the Port Phillip tribe, or 'one of the two Melbourne tribes'. He seems to have used the term 'tribe' for named localised land-owning groups properly called clans.²¹

Later Thomas learned from Robinson that 'tribe' was the encompassing dialect unit and 'sections' were the land-owning territorial units, now called clans. These clans derived their names from the locality in which people were born, the places to which they usually resorted²² and frequently from their language or a mythological reference.²³

It is likely that there were five clans in the area. The Yallukit-willam was based around St Kilda and their territory probably extended from the Werribee River to Mordialloc. There is no clear mention of this group in Thomas' accounts. A group called the Bonkoolawal appear to have inhabited the land east of Western Port.²⁴ However, little is known of this group and in 1840 Thomas²⁵ stated that the area to the south of the Bass River was not frequented by Aborigines. It is possible that this is a valid clan or it may be that it was a geographical label of a patriline.²⁶ Another group seems to have occupied the area near the Tarwin River, adjoining the westernmost Kurnai. Members of this groups were named the Yowenjene. They are identified in the following passage from Robinson²⁷ who travelled through the area in 1844:

West of Wilsons Promontory or Wommum as called by natives is the country of the Yowenjene (now extinct) a powerful section of the Boonwerong nation at Western

²⁰ Thomas ML Item 8, Letterbook, 27 February, 1840 and Thomas, Original Ms., PRO. Letter to Robinson, 6 June, 1840.

²¹ D. Barwick pers. comm.

²² Thomas Lt, Ms: 105.

²³ D. Barwick pers. comm.; see also Howitt 1904.

²⁴ Thomas ML Item 21, Language and customs of the Australian Aborigines: 14.

²⁵ Thomas ML Item 8, Letterbook, 28 February 1840.

²⁶ D. Barwick pers. comm.

²⁷ Robinson in Mackaness 1941: 8.

Port, who have (with the exception of two individuals) been exterminated by their neighbours the Gippsland Aborigines.

Little else is known about the latter two groups. Although Howitt tried continually to check the existence of these groups with surviving Kulin people, they were reluctant to mention extinct clans and deceased estates.²⁸

We do, however, know quite a lot about the Bunurong-balluk, said to occupy the area from Mordialloc to the Tarwin, including all of the Mornington Peninsula. Thomas mentions some 'principle families' and the lands they claimed.²⁹ This listing includes some clans and also known leading men thus indicating that he did not differentiate between them. However, at least one is likely to have been a clan. The Yallock Bulluk, literally the river people, were said to claim the area between the mountains to the top of Western Port. This area was very well watered with various small rivers and swamps and covered an approximate area of 380 km².

This evidence indicates that the whole district was occupied in an organized fashion. It is not known whether the groups which claimed rights in various parts of the landscape were also the land-using units. What is interesting, however, is that all the known clans had territories which contained varied resource bases such as different coastline types and inland areas, or uplands and plains areas as well as coasts. Some clans obviously must have had more of one type of landform than others, thus explaining Thomas' separation into the 'coast tribe' or the 'Western Port Blacks' or the people's name for themselves as the river people.

Thomas³⁰ gives a clear account of the Bunurong tribal boundaries (Figure 2):

The geographical limits of the two Melbourne tribes may be said to extend from the source of the Yarra Eastward, the Tarwin River South East - the Dividing Range between the Yarra and the Goulbourne River - North South by the sea coast and west the river. I would here state that the Aboriginal boundaries of countries are judiciously defined by Mountains, Creeks and Rivers which I believe is general thro'out the Aborigines - for example, the Yarra tribe claim all the country North and South of the Yarra - the Coast Tribe on the other hand claim all lands from the Dandenong Range, because all the creeks and waters from those parts fall into the sea . . . the character of the region is diversified, containing rivers, swamps, Ranges, creeks and abundance of yams, roots, etc. for all the necessities of life.

The situation on the eastern boundary with the Kurnai speakers is the least clear. Both Thomas and Robinson noted that the area west of the Tarwin was inhabited by people who were a part of the Bunurong tribe. Although Smyth claims that this area was disputed land³¹ it is clear from the earlier accounts that it was Bunurong land which was probably under dispute by the surviving groups of Bunurong and Kurnai people. It is probable that the query regarding the status of this area arose after the

²⁸ D. Barwick pers. comm.

²⁹ Thomas ML Item 23. Language and customs of the Australian Aborigines, Miscellaneous notebooks, book A: 66.

³⁰ Thomas ML Item 21. Language and customs of the Australian Aborigines, Miscellaneous papers: 91-2.

³¹ Smyth 1878, II: 14.

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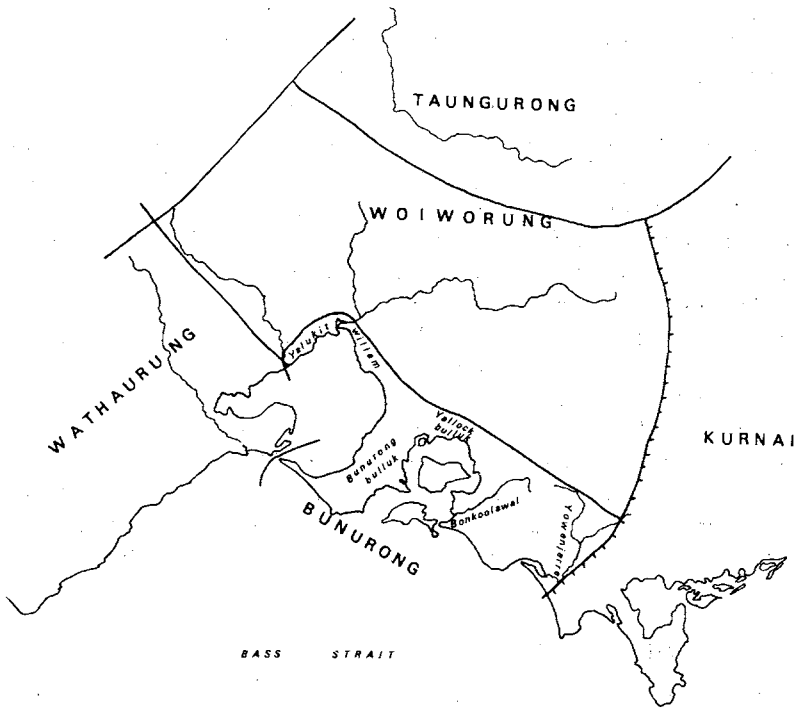


Figure 2 – Social groups in the south central region of Victoria.

extinction of its Bunurong inhabitants and with an increase in hostilities between Bunurong and Gippsland Aborigines as a result of the years of contact with sealers and the later settlers. To the north, the boundaries are delineated by the sources of streams in the ranges. For example, east-west running river valleys such as the La Trobe, which rises in these ranges but runs northeast of the Tarwin, were in the Kurnai area. Thus the boundary must have been the top of the catchment. In the west of the area it appears that the boundary ran from the Dandenong Ranges south to Mordialloc or thereabouts. However the later evidence suggests that the Bunurong also had claims in land around the Port Phillip coast to the Werribee River.

POPULATION SIZE

Thomas³² thought there were about 500 people in the Bunurong and Yarra (Woiworung) tribes prior to the Melbourne settlement and the known Kurnai raids. If we assume that half of this number were Bunurong, then the population before the Kurnai raids c.1810 would have been approximately 250. An estimate by an early settler was 'upwards of 300'.³³ As both reckonings were made after the sealer incursions and the possible effects of new diseases, three hundred people may be thought to be a conservative estimate of the pre-contact Bunurong population. If however, we use this figure for the total population of the whole of the tribal territory, the population density is one person per 26 km². This figure would be very low for a rich coastal environment. We feel that these estimates relate only to the western part of the tribal territory. If so the population density of the whole of the western half of the tribal territory would be approximately one person per 9 km². If, as is likely the figures refer only to the Mornington Peninsula as far as Tooradin and Mordialloc, an area of 1250 km², the density would have been in the order of one person per 4 km². This figure of 0.25 people per square kilometre is reinforced by consideration of the size of that area said to belong to the Yallock Bulluk. This area is 380 km². If the clan which stated it owned the land was a large group of up to one hundred people the figure of one person per 3.8 km² emerges.

All these postulated densities are suggestions only, presented to give some idea of the nature of land use. Barwick has highlighted the pitfalls in these types of calculations by pointing out that Thomas counted Woiworung as Bunurong when they were in the latter's territory.³⁴ However, as we are also concerned with the numbers of people who used the landscape, the tribe of their affiliation, while significant, does not alter the densities of people who live in the area under study.

ECONOMY AND MOVEMENTS

Here we present briefly the patterns described in the documents to ascertain whether the usual food gathering activities were contained within the boundaries of the Bunurong. It would appear that the observed movements made in the company of Thomas (but not when he was providing food) were generally within the tribal territory he described. He stated³⁵ that the regular route had been around the Mornington Peninsula, starting along the Port Phillip Bay coast, then moving to the Bass Strait coast, then to the coast on Western Port Bay and along it, returning across the plains to Dandenong (see Figure 3). As far as we can ascertain these travels were predominantly made by members of one clan although members of other clans and tribes were also present.

32 Thomas ML Item 24, Language and customs . . . 1858: 6; ML Item 21, Language and customs: 170.

33 Jamieson 1839 cited in Gliddon 1977: 222.

34 D. Barwick pers. comm.

35 Route 1, Thomas ML Item 12, Letter to La Trobe, 15 July 1850; Route 2, ML 1, Journal 2-15 May 1840; Route 3, ML 1, Journal 12 July-1 August 1840; Route 4, ML 8, Letter to Robinson, 27 February 1840.

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Although Thomas did not mention the types of food obtained on these journeys, his general comments indicate that a variety of food resources would have been exploited. Recent archaeological surveys in the area indicate a much more extensive use of the Port Phillip and Bass Strait coastlines than of the mangrove coast of Western Port Bay.³⁶ Over 600 sites were recorded; none showed evidence of exploitation of low-energy coasts nor were any sites located directly on those coasts. It appears that of marine shellfish there was a distinct preference for rock platform species and that land and freshwater resources in the Western Port coastal plains were far more intensively exploited than marine resources in this area.

The regular movement between the Peninsula and the top of Western Port Bay would indicate that the existence of the land owning groups described by Thomas did not preclude access to these areas by other Bunurong people, at least in the western half of the tribal territory. If this was due to his presence or some change in response to European settlement, it is not stated. The situation to the east is unclear. Although Thomas³⁷ recorded one journey with the Aborigines from the Mornington Peninsula to the east of the Koo-wee-rup Swamp (see Figure 3) the main purpose of this journey, as indicated earlier, was to raid the Gippsland people. It is possible that the presence of this extensive swamp restricted movement, but it is more probable that the possibility of conflict with the Kurnai prevented use of this area.

Some preliminary archaeological evidence indicates that the swamp may have restricted movement between the eastern and western parts of the tribal territory. Tertiary silcrete, which is available on the Mornington Peninsula is present in large quantities on sites west of the Koo-wee-rup-Swamp but is found in only small quantities on those to the east.³⁸ A similar distribution pattern is evident for greenstone artefacts from the Mt William quarry situated to the north-west in Woiworung territory.³⁹

The writers have so far located only three references to seasonal movement. Thomas⁴⁰ noted in March 1841,

Their fare at this time of the year in migrating from water to water is chiefly eels. Although eels appear to have been more numerous and easier to catch in late summer, eeling was carried out from December to July.⁴¹ Eels are noted as an important food

³⁶ Sullivan 1981; Gaughwin 1981.

³⁷ Thomas ML Item 8, Letterbooks, 27 February 1840.

³⁸ Gaughwin 1981: 105.

³⁹ McBryde 1978.

⁴⁰ Thomas, PRO Box 2, 12 March 1841.

⁴¹ *Ibid*; Thomas ML Item 2, Journal 13 February 1841.

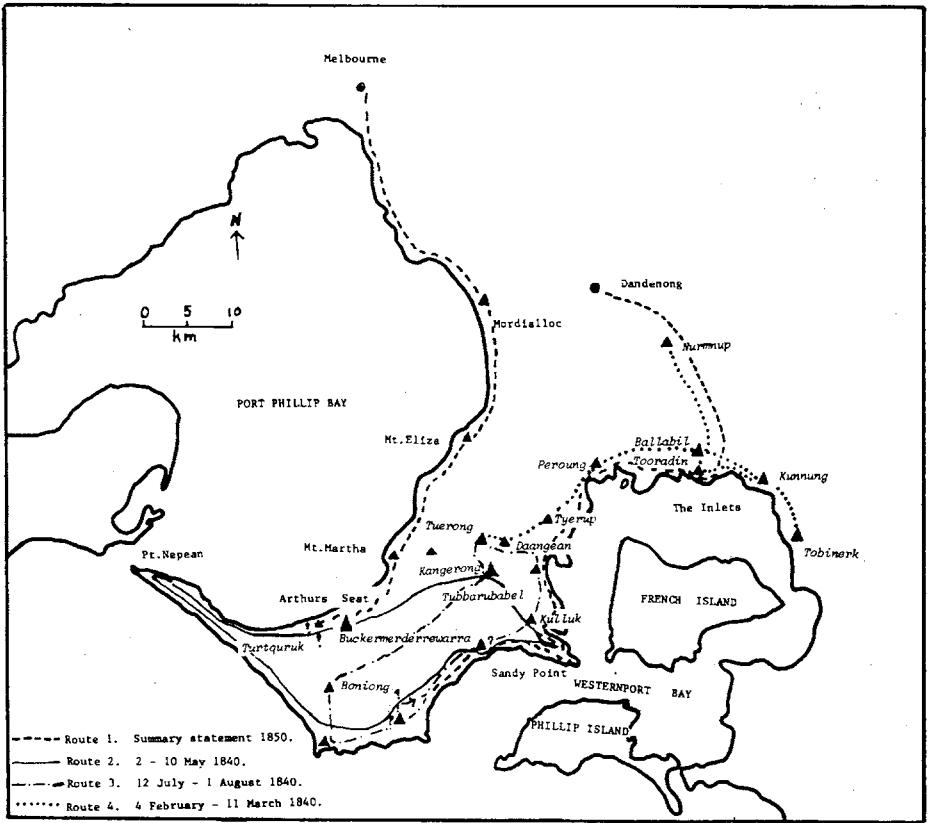


Figure 3 – Routes of movements and site locations.

resource which allowed people to camp for long periods as Thomas commented when attempting to have the Bolin Swamp on the Yarra reserved for Aboriginal use:⁴²

Bolin . . . 'supported the yarra blacks from its abounding in eels one month in the year'

In winter, some groups travelled to the ranges to the north to hunt lyre birds.⁴³

It is possible that this movement was not as extensively undertaken before the advent of Europeans for whom the feathers were prized items; they paid for the colourful tail feathers and gave guns to assist with the hunting.

⁴² PRO, Petition to the Governor, 22 June 1841.

⁴³ Thomas ML Item 10, Report on the state of encampments in the vicinity of Melbourne, 31 July 1846.

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In addition to these movements, Thomas observed⁴⁴ that the Bunurong were predominantly land-based in their economy:

[they] have no intercourse by sea with other countries — the coast tribe however used in former times to make very large canoes and go over to French Island at certain seasons after eggs.

Despite the existence of the two large bays, there does not appear to have been extensive use of canoes for transport or fishing. Apart from the account quoted above of the canoes on Western Port in 'former times', canoes were only observed in use on rivers.⁴⁵ Therefore sea-going canoe travel was either not commonly practised or this technology was very vulnerable to the changes brought about by the European presence. If marine transportation had been an integral part of traditional economies permitting a different movement pattern it seems strange that it was given up so quickly. Therefore we think that canoe travel on the bays was not commonly practised.

The historical documents stress the use of land mammals for food. This may be due to observer bias as these foods were more noticable and were hunted by men. It is likely that there was a sexual difference in diet with women and children who 'subsist principally on roots which during the summer and autumn ripen in succession'.⁴⁶ Those land mammals seen to have been of particular importance were the kangaroo and the possum, both of which were described as principal food sources. Thomas⁴⁷ believed that the availability of kangaroos was the main consideration when selecting campsites, or in causing people to shift camp, noting that when no kangaroos were available near a camp 'they are compelled to go thro' the range of their country perpetually, perpetually shifting'. Bunce, who travelled predominantly in the uplands, thought that possums provided the main source of food,⁴⁸ predictable in these densely forested slopes.

Thomas considered the Aboriginal so accustomed 'to his pursuit that he never seems more at home' than while climbing trees to catch possums.⁴⁹ If movements were made on a regular basis to gather plant foods, these were not recorded in the documents consulted. To place this in an environmental context it should be stated that the open forests interspersed with swamps and wetlands. This would have made these resources commonly available within very short distances of each other. Each of the clan areas contained these landforms with the exception of uplands in the Yallock bulluk area.

The regular foraging territory of the Bunurong-Bulluk therefore appears generally to have been within the clan area described by Thomas. As we have little information relating to the other areas this pattern cannot be confirmed for other clans.

44 Thomas ML Item 21, Language ...: 44.

45 Tuckey 1803: 119; Grant 1803: 138-9.

46 Thomas LT Ms: 97.

47 ML Item 24, Letter to Mr Duffy, 28 April 1858.

48 Bunce 1859: 72.

49 Thomas LT Ms: 93.

Aboriginal movements over the land appear well organised, with the activities of each group known to other members of the Bunurong. Thomas noted this and concluded they were a socially cohesive group.⁵⁰

I have been out journeying with perhaps not 1/3 of the tribe for it is seldom that more than that number can keep together . . . asked them where the rest of their tribe is when they commenced and told me not less than 12 parts of the country and some may be 80 or 90 miles off. The Aborigines may be called truly a social compact community, they know too when each will return.

This indicates the regular patterns of use of the Western Port area in contact times as well as the social networks of the foraging groups. That people knew where other bands were likely to be located further reinforces the idea that they usually resided within well known areas.

Throughout the area paths were observed apparently well-used. Near Tooradin Hovell noted that native paths made travel through low-lying areas much easier and quicker.⁵¹ Similarly, Gellibrand commented on tracks along the Port Phillip coast which made travel easier and led to a 'native well' on the beach.⁵² Paths were also observed along the banks of rivers by Murray⁵³ in 1801 and by Bass⁵⁴ on the Bass River in 1798. As areas of continual or regular use might be thought to develop into paths, this further supports the notion that movements were methodical.

Although the evidence is limited and made difficult to interpret as food was supplied by Europeans, the normal size of a food-gathering party appears to have ranged from small fishing groups of a few women and children up to groups of 20 or 30 people. However larger groups would congregate at favourable locations for short periods. These camps were not, however, comprised entirely of Bunurong-bulluk, the land-owning group, but included other Bunurong and some Woiworung. In February 1840, for example, 101 people were encamped near the waterholes at Tubberubabel for 14 days. They moved a few miles northeast to another waterhole at Tuerong where they stopped for 10 days:⁵⁵

beginning to find some difficulty in procuring food for so many they held a council which ended in an understanding to separate. 44 were to remain and divide themselves into 6 parties traversing the country from Mt Martha to Cape Schank. 57 were in one body to cross the country to Western Port.

This demonstrates the gregarious nature of these people as after twenty four days together they were unwilling to separate. It further serves to indicate the patterns of movement onto the Mornington Peninsula in one direction and out across the Western Port plains in the other. It could be suggested that as these waterholes were at the

⁵⁰ Thomas ML Item 22, Language . . . : 334-336.

⁵¹ Hovell 1826-27, original Ms, ML: 39.

⁵² Gellibrand 1858: 70.

⁵³ Murray 1915 (1801): 101.

⁵⁴ Bass 1895 (1798): 312.

⁵⁵ Thomas ML Item 8, Letter to Robinson, 27 February 1840.

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boundary of two clan territories and that this splitting represents the clans or those with rights in territory returning to their lands. However to support this suggestion it would be necessary to further investigate those individuals present at Tuerong and their affiliation.

Over a decade earlier Hovell⁵⁶ had met with a group of people near the Carrum Swamp which numbered 'more than 100 men, women and children'. The composition of this group is not known, but as some of the men and boys had a front tooth missing while others did not, it is likely that more than one clan was present. This observation confirms that large groups were not necessarily related to European settlement. Barwick⁵⁷ suggests that the Bunurong-bulluk area was sacred ground that many clans visited for ceremonial activities. So some of these large groups may have been associated with ceremonies. However it was still necessary for them to find food within the district. Thomas provided some interesting statistics on movement. Kangaroos again are seen to initiate this, as⁵⁸

on entering their New Encampment and often while pitching my tent and the blacks their miams hut had kangaroos running amongst us as th' unconscious of our intrusions, after three days stay, have been out with them not seen a kangaroo within their daily range, thus their migratory moves. . .

When travelling, Thomas found that a group of Aborigines rarely moved more than eight or nine miles (12-14 kilometres) a day 'having their food to procure as well as to journey'.⁵⁹ In another account he elaborated on the logistical details:⁶⁰

they generally averaged 2 and a half miles in an hours good walking through the bush and deduct a quarter for going round and over dead logs which reduced travelling time thro' the day to less than 2 miles the hour, this may seem strange but such was the case in 1838, 39 and regularly understood by white bush travellers.

He also found that they seldom camped more than three nights in one place and often only one night.⁶¹ However, on the trip to Western Port noted above, the group were encamped ten days at Tuerong before they began the journey and for eight days at Kunnung and four at Tobinerk, although at the seven other camping places their stay was for three nights or less.⁶²

It seems that while travelling the people were busy but the day was not long:⁶³

all are employed; children in getting gum, knocking down birds etc; women in digging up roots, killing bandicoots, getting grubs etc; the men in hunting kangaroos, etc, scaling trees for opossums etc. They mostly are at the encampment about an

⁵⁶ Hovell 1826-27, original Ms, ML: 71.

⁵⁷ D. Barwick pers. comm.

⁵⁸ Thomas ML Item 24, Language: 1.

⁵⁹ Thomas PRO, Letter for the blacks of the Mt Macedon District, 3 July 1840; 1854: 399.

⁶⁰ Thomas ML Item 24, Language . . . : 10.

⁶¹ Thomas 1854: 398.

⁶² Thomas PRO, Return to Robinson, Journeys made with the number of days at each station, 1 September 1839 to 29 February 1840.

⁶³ Thomas 1854: 399.

hour before sundown – the women first, who get fire and water, etc. by the time their spouses arrive . . . In warm weather, while on tramp, they seldom make a miam – they use merely a few boughs to keep off the wind, in wet weather a few sheets of bark make a comfortable house. In one half hour I have seen a neat village begun and finished.

He describes these huts and the numbers of people involved, in some detail:⁶⁴

Their habitation is frail but answers well their purpose, a few slabs of bark cut in a few minutes and erected is their habitation, these slats of bark are about 6' long oblique raised to the angle of about 90 degrees windward, every alternate sheet is reversed so that no rain can enter, the sides are filled up with short pieces of bark and brush and a sheet of bark at the top . . . A good Miam (a hut) will hold 2 adults and 3 children – they are not permanent are knocked down or burnt on breaking up the Encampment – they consist of one apartment only. In a large encampment they are divided into hamlets – some influential black taking charge of six or eight Miams, and so on say 5 Hamlets. These hamlets are 50 yds or more from each other, while miams in a single hamlet is (sic) not more than 3 or 4 yds apart merely sufficient to avoid danger from each others fires.

Taking his figures for the large encampment it is possible to see that each 'hamlet' under the leadership of one man would have had from 30 to 40 people in it while the total numbers of people in these camps would have been between 150 and 200. Unfortunately we do not know which encampments he is referring to; that is, whether this pattern was observed in the combined camps of several tribal groups or whether it was the pattern at one of the Mornington Peninsula camps. The numbers of people would seem to suggest one of the larger camps around Melbourne.

While encamped in one location, the Aborigines exploited a range of approximately ten kilometres radius around the camp. Thomas, when discussing kangaroo hunting, describes:⁶⁵

a body of Natives dividing themselves into portions of 5 or 7 leaving an Encampment in the morning diverging (according to the direction of their chief) in various directions scouring their bounds for 5 or 6 miles around the Encampment.

EXTERNAL RELATIONS

This section investigates movements which were not expressly seen to relate to the Bunurangs' daily food gathering activities within the tribal areas, but took them outside their usual range into the territory of their neighbours. In this section we have relied heavily on the later work of Howitt and information supplied by Diane Barwick. Nevertheless Thomas makes a number of relevant statements. He described the Bunurong's relationships with their neighbours as follows:⁶⁶

There was a kind of confederacy between the five tribes near Melbourne which I doubt not but is carried thro' the length and breadth of Australia – viz the Yarra, coast, Barrabool, Goulburn and Devils River tribes – the blacks do not marry from

⁶⁴ Thomas ML Item 21, Language . . . : 88.

⁶⁵ Thomas ML Item 24, Language . . . : 1.

⁶⁶ Thomas ML Item 21, Language . . . : 94.

their own tribe, but must get a lubra from another, and this runs thro'out the tribes, for instance a Yarra black must get his wife from the Goulburn, Barrabool, Devils River or Coast tribe, others in like manner, thus a kind of Social Compact is kept up against any far distant tribe who may in a body intrude on either of their country – these five tribes not withstanding are (or used to be) in continual frays with each other mostly arising from lubras.

Thomas did not use the names of the tribes correctly or consistently. In this passage the 'Yarra' tribe would be more correctly termed the Woiworung. They occupied the land on either side of the Yarra River.⁶⁷ Tindale has termed this group the Wurundjeri although he also states that the language name Woiworung is a valid alternative.⁶⁸ His 'Goulbourns' were several clans of the Taungurong who constantly visited Melbourne but usually lived west of Seymour and around Kilmore. The 'Barrabool' are several clans of the Wathaurung some of whom resided near Geelong while others were situated inland as far as Ballarat. The 'Devil's River' were two clans of the Taungurong who were situated on the Broken River above and below Benalla and on the Delatite River about Mansfield.⁶⁹ Howitt unites these tribes into a larger unit, the Kulin nation, based on their common language, intermarriage and social organisations.⁷⁰ While Thomas' omissions and inconsistencies are obvious, it should also be remembered that Howitt, while working with the advantage of the new concepts of anthropology, was nevertheless unable to make any direct observations of the Bunurong people.

To understand the relationships between the Bunurong and other tribes we must define the moieties to which each clan belonged. Both the surviving Bunurong clans were *bunjil* so they could only marry members of *waa* clans following the rule of exogamous patrilineal moieties.⁷¹ As each of the surrounding tribes (to the west) had *waa* clans, these groups were in constant contact and travelled to each other's lands. Examples of these reciprocal movements are found in Thomas' journals,⁷² which suggests that while the visiting groups were able to use local resources, the gaining of additional food was not the prime motive for the travels. Given that the visits were between intermarrying clans it is most likely that the travels were undertaken to visit relations.

The *bunjil* Bunurong had also to keep up contact with the neighbouring *bunjil* clans for the proper performance of ceremonies.⁷³ Thus Thomas⁷⁴ noted that the Bunurong held a ceremony with the Woiworung people after which both groups said they had to go to help the Taungurong people hold a ceremony. In other cases, the neighbouring

67 Howitt 1904: 71; D. Barwick pers. comm.

68 Tindale 1974: 208-209, 310.

69 D. Barwick pers. comm.

70 Howitt 1904: 70-72.

71 D. Barwick pers. comm.

72 Thomas ML Item 1, Journal, 11, 22 May 1840; ML Item 2, Journal, 22 June 1841.

73 D. Barwick pers. comm.

74 Thomas ML Item 2, Journal, 14 March 1841.

clans visited the Bunurong to hold ceremonies.⁷⁵ Although it is difficult to quantify in terms of number of visits, it is clear that as Thomas suggests the Bunurong had closer relationships with the Wathaurung of both clans than with other groups.⁷⁶ Thus more movements were made to the west than to the north.

Some external movements appear to have been in response to the European settlement as, for example, the gathering organised late in 1838 to welcome the Chief Protector, G.A. Robinson. On this occasion messengers with invitations were sent to 'all' the tribes. Four to five hundred Aborigines attended.⁷⁷

While the constant movement into and out of Melbourne after European settlement appears to have been primarily in response to the availability of food, alcohol, and other goods, Melbourne was also the traditional meeting place of these tribes. Thomas stated:⁷⁸

By what I can learn, long ere the settlement was formed the spot where Melbourne now stands and the flat on which we are now encamped [on the banks of the Yarra] was the regular rendezvous for the tribes known as *Warorongs*, *Boonurongs*, *Barrabools*, *Nihunguons*, *Goulbourns* twice a year or as often as circumstances and emergencies required to settle their grievances, revenge, deaths etc.

At these meetings, the Bunurong-bulluk camped south of the Yarra River, either on the bank or on the beach near the mouth of the River. It is only in later years when Thomas lived at Merri Creek that they camped on the west bank of the Yarra River.⁷⁹ That is, they tended to camp closest to their home territory.

The only example we have noted of movement to the east was related to warfare. The Kurnai called the Bunurong, Thurung or 'tiger snakes' because 'they come sneaking about to kill us'.⁸⁰ In 1839 a group of Bunurong women, children, and old men were left at the station of Samuel Rawson and Robert Jamieson at Yallock for a period of five weeks. When the able-bodied men returned they told the settler that they were responsible for many deaths in Gippsland.⁸¹ This hostility would appear to have been longstanding. If this is the case it might be expected that some demographic effects would have been manifest.

As the years passed, this enmity appears to have dissolved and marriages were contracted between the two groups.⁸² By 1850 the Bunurong were said to be more often in Gippsland than in their own territory.⁸³ By this time the dispossession and depopulation of the Bunurong was nearly complete. It seems that some members of the tribe

⁷⁵ Thomas ML Item 1, Journal, 18 May 1840.

⁷⁶ Thomas ML Item 2, Petition to Governor Gipps, 22 June 1841.

⁷⁷ Thomas W.T. ML Item 27: 44.

⁷⁸ Thomas ML Item 8, Letterbooks, 8 April 1840.

⁷⁹ Thomas ML Item 3, Journal, 1 July 1844.

⁸⁰ Howitt 1904: 41.

⁸¹ Rawson 1839, original Ms., N.L.A.

⁸² Thomas ML Item 21, Language . . . : 93; ML Item 11, Draft letter to Robinson, 12 September 1848; McCrae 1911: 25.

⁸³ Thomas ML Item 12, Letter to La Trobe, 15 July 1850.

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moved out of their territory into formerly hostile lands in search of a continuation of their hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Other members of the tribe remained on a small reserve at Mordialloc living a partly traditional life supplemented by selling ducks and eels to the European settlers.

DISCUSSION

It is clear that the historical sources are not comprehensive, so the description given here is very patchy. In attempting to discover the nature of the tribal boundaries in this area, movements of groups noted in the literature were compared with the stated tribal boundaries. This indicated that while movement of a primarily social and ceremonial nature did occur across these boundaries, normal economic and subsistence activities were broadly contained within the tribal boundaries described by Thomas.

Overall the documents leave the impression of a very gregarious society which often gave their reasons for travels in social rather than economic terms. They preferred to be in large groups. Also, the network of relationships kept up with the surrounding Kulin tribes and the necessity of regular attendance at meetings and ceremonies, further illustrates that they were engaged in extensive and regular social and ceremonial activities.

Unfortunately the lack of information for the eastern part of Western Port leaves the particularly interesting situation of the Kulin-Kurnai border unresolved. Archaeological techniques will be required to establish if this area was a 'disputed border' for a long time previous to European contact or an established part of the Bunurong tribal territory.

The historical sources, however, do provide valuable contemporary information into the use of the western part of the area. They show that a wide variety of resources was exploited, far more than archaeological evidence would indicate. In addition, the evidence on the methods of exploitation of this area and details such as the foraging radius from a camp, and the usual length of stay at a camp, provide valuable information for archaeological interpretation.

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