Review article

Reality, history and hands-on ethnography: the journals of George Augustus Robinson at Port Phillip 1839–1852

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The Journals of George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector, Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate, edited by Ian D Clark, 6 vols.

Volume one: 1 January 1839–30 September 1840, Heritage Matters, Melbourne, 1998, pp.ix+378, 2nd ed Clarendon, 2000, pp.xviii+368

Volume two: 1 October 1840–31 August 1841, Heritage Matters, Melbourne, 1998, pp.viii+393, 2nd ed Clarendon 2000, pp.xvii+390

Volume three: 1 September 1841–31 December 1843, Heritage Matters, Melbourne, 1998, pp.ix+221, 2nd ed Clarendon 2000, pp.xviii+204

Volume four: 1 January 1844–24 October 1845, Heritage Matters, Melbourne, 1998, pp.ix+337, 2nd ed Clarendon 2000, pp.xvii+318

Volume five: 25 October 1845–9 June 1849, Heritage Matters, Clarendon, 2000, pp.viii+336

Volume six: 10 June 1849–30 September 1852 Heritage Matters, Clarendon, 2000, pp.193

At a time when historians and other social scientists appear to be less interested in what really happened in the past and more interested in our present perceptions of what happened, it seems strange that the public at large are craving for real life experiences. While it is deemed not politically correct to dwell on historical facts that may contravene the favoured ideologies and theories, those preoccupied with confrontational experience (even at a distance) are obsessed with detail. Virtual reality in media entertainment is filling a gap exposed by the arbitrary nature of our controlled and selective viewing. Nowhere is this more apparent than within the strictures of historical discourse.

Historians, more than other social scientists, are in the best position to set the record straight, for our main concern should be with primary sources. Of all primary sources, letters and diaries are the most important, providing we know the provenance

of the records and the circumstances in which they were written. Even if we do not understand all the motives of the writer and lack background information, letters and diaries nearly always reveal enough for us to get the measure of the writer.

The journal diary, to use the media metaphor, is the perfect way to experience virtual reality in a controlled time experiment. We read the daily journal entries with a similar expectancy to those who may have read them closer to the time. That we are reading with hindsight is probably irrelevant since the detail is not familiar to us. We are seeing events with the eyes of contemporaries. Our sympathies may not be with the writer even though we are bound to identify with him or her in the short term, disassociating ourselves perhaps on reflection. We shall only quarrel with the big decisions, otherwise being carried along by an almost determinist propulsion.

One of the greatest gifts that one scholar can convey to others is the clean text of what might be termed a hitherto unpublished serial primary source: those magnificent runs of journal diaries and letter journals kept meticulously, particularly by missionaries and travellers, in the Victorian era. Unfortunately the journals that have been published have usually been those of famous people and very often the literary gems and most useful extracts have already appeared in previously published biographies.

Missionaries, and their close kin, the 'protectors of Aborigines', have left extraordinary records, not only of their daily activities but also of their observations on the lives and customs of the people they lived with. Missionary society archives and public libraries contain large collections of such records. Some are obviously more useful than others and those are very often the most extensive runs. While scholars periodically dip into these records they usually know what they are looking for, otherwise balking at closely written text and difficult handwriting.¹

Most of these great collections are crying out for transcription, light editing, and some form of publication. Few scholars can give the time to careful and sustained reading of these journals while in manuscript form. There may be some significance in the fact that often the most detailed journals were kept by diarists with little formal education. Of the early missionaries in the Pacific Islands one of the most prolific diarists in this category was the Wesleyan missionary John Thomas of Tonga, whose unpublished diaries and works of history and mythology run to many volumes.² Similarly, George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector of the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate, was an equally prolific diarist.

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The manuscript papers of George Augustus Robinson, comprising 72 volumes located in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, constitute one of the most important sources for Aboriginal history and ethnography during the period of pastoral settlement in southeastern Australia. Largely forgotten for more than a hundred years, they were

¹ Clark attributed the illegibility of Robinson's journal to 'a failure to form letters and numerals clearly and the conditions in the field under which the journals were written' (Clark 2000, 1: v).

² The Thomas papers, including 13 private journals and 14 official journals, fill six large archive boxes in the Methodist Missionary Society archives, held in the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

nearly lost for ever in 1938 on the death of Robinson's youngest son Arthur in Bath, England, when the timely arrival of estate agents prevented the family housekeeper from destroying the papers.³ Even after their purchase by the Mitchell Library and post-war transferral to Australia in 1948, the papers were largely ignored by scholars, the first real use being made by NJB Plomley in his two monumental volumes covering Robinson's Tasmanian period 1829–1839.⁴

Although from the 1960s onwards some local historians and students of Aboriginal culture dipped into the later volumes, many historians continued to ignore them. While Sir Keith Hancock, or his research assistant, claimed familiarity with the journals in *Discovering Monaro*,⁵ Hancock chose to quote Robinson's 'Report of a journey ... to the tribes of the coast and eastern interior during the year 1844', as edited by George Mackaness,⁶ instead of the originals, and he certainly did not make full use of their potential. Similarly, students of the whaling industry and Ben Boyd have overlooked Robinson. The first substantial use of his diaries was made by Vivienne Rae-Ellis in her biography of Robinson in 1988.

Until 1998 only a few extensive extracts of Robinson's Port Phillip journals had been published, the most significant being by Gary Presland covering the periods January–March 1840, March–May 1841 and May–August 1841 (1977–1980).⁷ For obvious reasons the two excellent volumes on 'Aborigines and Protectors' in Michael Cannon's *Historical records of Victoria* series have very little Robinson material other than what was in the NSW State Archives and the Public Record Office, Victoria.⁸

In 1996 Ian Clark took on the onerous task of transcribing and annotating the Port Phillip journals. The most daunting aspect was the sheer magnitude of the project. This magnificent achievement appeared in two stages: the first four volumes were published in Melbourne in 1998, the remaining two in Ballarat in 2000, all six in large format with yellow card covers. A second edition – more properly a second printing in smaller format with rearranged introductory pages – also appeared in 2000. Scholars should be careful to indicate which edition they are citing for the first four volumes as the pagination does not correspond.⁹

Clark's editorial comments illustrate some of the problems he had and the nature of the manuscript:

Robinson's journals were written mostly in ink, though some pages are in pencil. Generally, transcribing the journals has not been difficult, however some words continue to defy recognition and these instances are shown by [...]. Some pages are water damaged, others have missing segments, thus the narrative for some days is incomplete, and these instances are also shown by [...]. The incomplete-

3. Rae-Ellis 1988: 265.

4. See Plomley 1966 and Plomley 1987.

5. Hancock 1972: 69.

6. Mackaness 1941. The reference given in Hancock 1972: 69 fn.1 is incorrect.

7. These extracts were published in the Records of the Victorian Archaeological Survey series by the Ministry for Conservation, Melbourne.

8. See Cannon 1982 and Cannon 1983.

9. All references cited below are to the 2nd ed.

ness does not diminish the value of the journal as a whole and is little more than a source of irritation.

At times Robinson left blank spaces in his narrative, no doubt intending to return and complete the missing information at a later date; however, he rarely did this, and these instances are represented by [blank].

Robinson's erratic spelling has been allowed to remain, as I have endeavoured to keep editorial changes to a minimum. In the few instances where his spelling does detract the correct word is inserted into the text in square brackets thus, [], for example, when Robinson spells weir as 'were', [weir] is inserted beside it to remove any ambiguity. Robinson rarely punctuated his journal, and at times when adding punctuation it was necessary to add a word or two to remove ambiguity.

Robinson, like many nineteenth century commentators, did not hear Aboriginal languages very well, for example he was deaf to initial 'ng' in Aboriginal words. With few exceptions, Victorian Aboriginal words do not begin with vowels, so when Robinson reproduces words and has them beginning with a vowel, we can be certain he did not hear these words correctly. An example of this is the local name for the eel pots he observed in use in southwest Victoria, which he represented as 'arrabine'; Dawson (1881) more correctly represented them as 'ngarra-ban', hearing the initial 'ng'.

In his daily entries Robinson employed his own system of abbreviation and shorthand, for example he often represented the word 'native' with 'N-'. Generally, his system of abbreviation has not been retained.¹⁰

The journals themselves are a hotchpotch of entertaining trivia, daily movements and events, character sketches, statistics, detailed observations of Aboriginal life and snippets gleaned from reading such as the self-educated men of the 19th century copied into their 'commonplace books'. Robinson had an eye for a good looking woman and he was fascinated by the names of settlers he encountered such as Teddy the Winkler (who told lies) and Piss Ant Robertson.¹¹ A cast of famous and infamous characters cross the pages: John Pascoe Fawkner, the Henty Brothers, Lieut. Governor La Trobe, Benjamin Boyd, Tahiti Bill, the Imlay brothers, GH Haydon, the Lutheran missionaries at Encounter Bay, and a host of minor characters. Rough black and white sketches illustrating everything from corroboree positions to an image of a 'torodon' or bunyip accompany the entries.¹²

Three regular types of listings recur throughout the diaries: lengthy lists of Aboriginal words and place names, detailed breakdowns of distances travelled, and a census-style listing of all the Aboriginal people encountered recording both Aboriginal and common names with tribal affiliation.

* * *

While it has become customary to judge the Aboriginal Protectorate, like the early Aboriginal missions, as a failure, this is largely the result of a flawed historiography. Just as we should not judge the Protectorate and missions by the criteria for success laid down

¹⁰. Clark 2000, 1: vi-vii.

¹¹. Clark 2000, 4: 276.

¹². Clark 2000, 5: 141. For images see *ibid*: 149, 160.

in the 1830s, so we should also avoid replacing the contextual values of that early period with the ideological values of more recent times. The Protectorate did have positive results. More than anything else it set a humanitarian standard for settler society so that no one could justify acts of oppression as being in the interest of the state. Further, it provided for posterity a great collection of knowledge about the culture and language of the Aboriginal people of southeastern Australia in the contact period.

That the Protectorate was not more effective was partly due to both its personnel and structure. Worthy as the protectors were, in many respects they were not necessarily the best candidates. Both Robinson, the Chief Protector, and Charles Wightman Sievwright (assistant protector) were creatures of patronage: Robinson was fully endorsed by Sir George Arthur for his work in Van Diemen's Land so that his appointment was a forgone conclusion, and Sievwright was literally 'placed' through his aristocratic and military connections. Both men were considered as leadership material but both had serious character flaws and had left England under a cloud.¹³ In fairness to both men, however, they were probably better qualified to stand up for the rights of the people they protected than the three 'missionary' appointments.

The choice of three Wesleyans as the other assistant protectors appears to have been deliberate. Lord Glenelg wrote specifically for recommendations to Dr Jabez Bunting, John Wesley's arch-conservative successor, and his nominees were accepted.¹⁴ Wesleyan missionaries already had a reputation for being less confrontational to government than their Calvinist peers, especially in South Africa and the West Indies, and they were not viewed in the same light as other Dissenters. London Missionary Society missionaries were already in the public eye for stirring: John Smith of Demerara had been sentenced to death for conspiracy during a slave revolt in 1824; John Philip had been found guilty of libel in South Africa in 1829 for exposing the condition of the Hottentots; and Lancelot Threlkeld was a thorn in the side of the New South Wales administration.¹⁵ The three men selected – James Dredge, Edward Stone Parker and William Thomas – proved to be conscientious, but they found their role difficult and frustrating. Also, as Robinson reminded Parker, their 'duty lay with Blacks not Wesleyans'.¹⁶ Dredge, the most conservative of them, early wished he had been a missionary rather than a protector and eventually resigned.¹⁷ Thomas was undoubtedly the best adapted and became the most knowledgeable about the people in his care.

Robinson, who had mostly acted alone in Van Diemen's Land, was not a good leader of men. Obsessed with his own importance, he was undoubtedly one of the models for George Henry Haydon's pompous magistrate 'Robberson'.¹⁸ With much of the insecurity of the upwardly socially mobile he continually played out a game of status testing and rank pulling with those he met. Though he respected Aboriginal people,

¹³. See Rae-Ellis 1988: 7 and passim; Corris 1968: 91ff; Cannon 1982: 21–23, 33; Cannon 1983: 365, 380–81 and generally.

¹⁴. McCallum 1957: 3.

¹⁵. Smith's sentence was revoked but he died a 'political martyr' in prison. For Threlkeld see Gunson 1974.

¹⁶. Clark 2000, 1: 19.

¹⁷. Christie 1979: 95. For Dredge's criticism of his situation see Cannon 1983: 426, 428, 430, 432–33, 711.

¹⁸. A character in Haydon's novel *The Australian emigrant*, 1854; see Gunson 1968: 42.

he placed them with servants in his social hierarchy. He believed he was fully in charge, as his bizarre experiments with mesmerism suggested.¹⁹ Among those with better educational qualifications and social standing, but with no authority over him, he tended to be officious and even patronising. With those of similar background, such as the Wesleyan protectors, he was equally overbearing, finding fault at every opportunity. If he was not obsequious to his superiors it was because he saw himself as having become a great man in the colonies, with a marble bust to prove it.²⁰

Both Robinson's journal and the journals of his colleagues display the pettiness and continuous bickering between them. Just how ludicrous the relationships within the 'closed community' of the Protectorate had become is exemplified in the nature of some journal entries. After continually complaining about Robinson, Dredge recorded in his diary on 9 May 1840 that he and Robinson 'lay in the same bed, but in consequence of a monopoly of clothing by my distinguished accomplice, I was cold and uncomfortable'.²¹ Apparently Robinson made the same complaint stating that 'The cloths or covering fell off in the night. It was cold' so on the night of 9 May he 'slept on a stretcher by myself, more congenial to my feelings'.²²

If fellow Protectors were a cause of irritation, Robinson had very little patience for travelling companions who had better social and educational credentials than himself. The talented artist and entrepreneur George Henry Haydon, who travelled into Gippsland with Robinson in 1844, was criticised throughout the journal for being 'lazy' and a 'humbug'. Haydon, for his part, made no secret of his dislike for Robinson and the two men finally parted company.²³

As one would expect, the journals contain a great deal of material relating to the injustices perpetrated against the Aboriginal population. In many of the incidents between shepherds and local tribesmen it is difficult to know what caused the conflict, but Robinson and the other Protectors usually indicate their willingness to believe the Aboriginal accounts, especially if the arguments were over women. In some instances, where the law was obviously preconditioned to the disadvantage of the Aborigines, the Protectors reluctantly had to witness the summary justice administered by the local authorities.²⁴ Dreadful atrocities involving poisoned damper and other cruelties were largely confined to convict shepherds and a particular class of pastoralist untouched by humanitarian values. Surprisingly, the nephews of Robinson's own patron, Governor Arthur, were offenders:

McIntyre [overseer] repeated story of 30 of their men, and Edmund Leeke's, among rest, having connection with two Native women, also that the Arthur's at Mt Shank had taken a Black and chained him to their tent for some time and fed him like a dog. This same man-thing they led in a chain, to shew them the camp of the Natives and they shot eight Natives in their huts, July last. Also, when the sta-

19. Clark 2000, 6: 31ff; Rae-Ellis 1988: 27, 177, 251, 253, 259.

20. Clark 2000, 1: 19; Rae-Ellis 1988: 159.

21. Quoted McCallum 1957: 14–15.

22. Clark 2000, 1: 271, 273.

23. Clark 2000, 4: 38–64; Mackaness 1941/1978: 36–69.

24. See Christie 1979: 110–117 and Clark 2000 generally.

tion was sold to Leek, the man in the chain was delivered to Leek. They gave him large damper and let him go. It is said poison was in the damper.²⁵

Other members of the 'colonial gentry' simply did not wish to recognise that there was an indigenous population. The well known Henty family, for instance, had a reputation for driving the original inhabitants away from their holdings. 'Pretty mean to drive the Natives away from home,' observed Robinson, and he attributed the murder of a white worker on another property to this practice: 'Had the Natives been allowed to have visited the station it would not have happened'.²⁶

The journals also testify to the very many instances of satisfactory relationships and harmonious adjustments. The Imlay brothers at Twofold Bay were justly famed for their employment of Aboriginal seamen in the whaling industry and Aboriginal workers on their pastoral holdings, and they were not alone. Robinson recognised that Aboriginal shepherds were far more satisfactory and less likely to cause trouble than the convict shepherds and recorded in April 1845 that 'two native boys at Fairburn have been, for nine months, shepherding 800 sheep, never lose any'.²⁷ Nor were humanitarian values confined to the Protectors and men of their class. Robinson was impressed to learn that Hamilton Hume of Yass took pride in claiming that 'he never pulled trigger against a Black in his life'²⁸ and that his fellow explorers Charles Sturt and Eyre had also successfully practised kind treatment when faced with apparent threatening behaviour.²⁹

Many of those who spoke with Robinson were pessimistic regarding the survival of the Aboriginal people, anticipating the doctrines of social darwinism. The extreme views of men such as William Hull were that the white races were 'superior' and the order of nature was for them to dominate.³⁰ Others simply accepted the inevitability of hunter-gatherers being eliminated in an unequal struggle for land. Unfortunately two other factors hastened the process: internecine warfare and disease.

Robinson was aware of intertribal fighting in the Port Phillip District, especially the affrays between the Ganai of Gippsland and the Bunurong of Western Port, but it was not until he set out on his remarkable journey to Gippsland and the Monaro that he realised the magnitude of intertribal warfare. On 15 June 1844 he wrote:

Two miles above the crossing place up the stream is the spot where a great slaughter of Gipps Land blacks by the Omeo and the Mokeallumbeets and Tinnermitum, their allies, took place; was shown the spot by ... Charley who was present.

Saw the human bones strewd about bleached white. Strange idea occurred to me whilst viewing the scene of the slaughter. I thought it appalling, best forget the whole sale slaughter by Christians.³¹

²⁵. Clark 2000, 4: 265 (29 April 1845).

²⁶. Clark 2000, 4: 257. For Dredge's opinion of the 'barbarity' of 'white gentlemen' see Cannon 1983: 716.

²⁷. Clark 2000, 4: 253. For the Imlays also see Gunson 1974: 69, 167.

²⁸. Clark 2000, 4: 188.

²⁹. Mackaness 1941/1978: 27.

³⁰. Clark 2000, 5: 170.

³¹. Clark 2000, 4: 86.

This was a massacre in which no mercy was shown, all the old women and children being killed. Robinson was to note other feuding parties in his journal.³²

Disease, for its part, was everywhere apparent, especially the venereal. Robinson made numerous entries relating to deaths due to 'Syphilitic and other European Disease'.³³ He was witness to two cases of robust men dying from the effect of rotting penises in the Twofold Bay area.³⁴ In his 1844 Report he wrote:

As a People the Aborigines are rapidly on the decay. They are greatly reduced. They are but Remnant Tribes. Sections are extinct. Their diminution is attributable to several Causes. In their petty feuds and intestine strifes several have been sacrificed but hundreds have fallen victims to the dire effects of European disease. Variola or Small Pox often of a confluent description, Influenza, Febris and Syphilis have extended their baneful influences to the remotest parts of the Interior. The latter is now almost general throughout the Land.

Ophthalmia in some parts is Indemic. Cutaneous effection is peculiar to the Natives and prevalent. Temperance was steadily progressing among the Peasantry and other labouring Classes and but few Cases of Intemperance came under observation. In some places the Spirit dealer had declined taking out Licenses and several houses had been vacated.

Hancock was of the opinion that Monaro was a special case, that 'no evidence at all of physical conflict can be found, either in the diaries and letters of pioneers, or in official records. Monaro, we are bound to conclude, was an exception proving the rule [regarding frontier conflict]'.³⁵ Disease had effectively decimated the Aboriginal population so that it posed no threat. But while it may be salutary to reflect that Monaro had such a violence-free record, it is unlikely that it differed all that much from other remoter areas. Even Hancock admits the grave of a man 'speared by the blacks'³⁶ and as Robinson himself reflected on a 'Black shot by a shepherd' claiming self-defence: 'Who can tell, dead men tell no tales'.³⁷

* * *

Ian Clark has presented his material in a straightforward and objective scientific way. In the standard introduction to each volume he summarises its coverage, explains his editorial methods, and gives a brief résumé of Robinson's career, official headquarters, clerical assistants and private residences. His decision to confine notes largely to identifying people and places and to avoid an interpretative gloss was undoubtedly a wise one given the length of the text and the purpose of the project was to provide a source book. In volume five the text is supplemented by extracts from Robinson's 1846 Report.

Clark's notes are extremely valuable given the obscurity of some of the people and the changing nature of locations. Because of the large number of identifications there are bound to be one or two that are incorrect; one that leaps out of the page is 'Dr Lang'

³². Clark 2000, 4: 39, 180.

³³. See his 1844 Report quoted below; Mackaness 1941/1978: 33.

³⁴. Clark 2000, 4: 154, 157.

³⁵. Hancock 1972: 68.

³⁶. Hancock 1972: 68 fn.

³⁷. Clark 2000, 4: 253.

identified as Dr Thomas Lang.³⁸ As the entry for 13 February 1840 tells us that this Dr Lang went to England with Captain Hepburn and 'wrote his NSW on board', it is quite clearly the celebrated John Dunmore Lang who went to England in the brig *Alice* with Captain Hepburn in 1833 and wrote the whole of his *History of New South Wales* on board, published in two volumes on his arrival in London.³⁹ Despite this, most of the run holders, colonial officials, property names and Aboriginal locations are carefully identified in Clark's notes, though regional specialists may quibble over some of them.

While Clark has had such works as Billis and Kenyon's *Pastoral pioneers of Port Phillip*⁴⁰ and the *Australian dictionary of Biography* to rely on, this may have restricted his vision as he tends not to realise that some characters belong to the larger vista of Robinson's 'commonplace book' entries. Thus Clark fails to identify the Irish revolutionary Lord Edward Fitzgerald and his wife Lady Pamela;⁴¹ and confuses the Astronomer Royal, Sir John Herschel, and the philosopher Sir William Hamilton. Similarly he misses the significance of the Irish patriot Smith O'Brien.⁴² Robinson's reference to 'Countess Huntindon' was to a church, not a person and refers to a family, possibly the Arnolds, first joining the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, and then the Baptists, a natural theological progression.⁴³ Clark is also vague in referring to Missionary societies. Thus Dr Bunting was not of the *Church* Missionary Society but of the Wesleyan Methodist,⁴⁴ and the Mr Smith mentioned in 1852 probably belonged to the Colonial Missionary Society.⁴⁵

At first sight, the critical reader will probably wonder why Clark, an acknowledged authority on tribal lands and languages, has not included an account of these matters in his introduction. The specialist, however, will realise at once that this is a source book to be read in conjunction with other source books, notably Clark's own *Aboriginal languages and clans: an historical atlas of western and central Victoria, 1800–1900* and Sue Wesson's *An historical atlas of the Aborigines of eastern Victoria and far south-eastern New South Wales*. Both these volumes are invaluable in supplying detailed historical references for all Aboriginal groupings and descent groups in the region covered by the volumes. Nevertheless, Clark's introduction would have been improved by a brief coverage of the subject and a map similar to the one provided by Wesson⁴⁶ showing Robinson's itinerations (see Map 1).

My own quibbles concern the Gippsland and Western Port areas which I know best. In old South Gippsland I believe there were two 'tribal' extinctions leading to a

³⁸. Clark 2000, 1: 160.

³⁹. Gilchrist 1951: 188. Lang was one of the first advocates for a Protectorate. See his letter to T.F. Buxton, 10 June 1834. Select Committee 1836/1966: 683.

⁴⁰. Billis and Kenyon 1974, though highly valuable, would benefit from a more detailed use of the Lands Department records.

⁴¹. Clark 2000, 6: 62, 167.

⁴². Clark 2000, 6: 77, 169; Clark 2000, 5: 255, 310.

⁴³. Clark 2000, 6: 58, 171.

⁴⁴. Clark 2000, 5: 269.

⁴⁵. Clark 2000, 6: 59, 185.

⁴⁶. Wesson 2000: 4. I am grateful to Sue Wesson for allowing me to reproduce her map; other maps of Robinson's 1844 journey are given in Mackaness 1941/1978: 35 and Rae-Ellis 1988: 235.

Map 1: Drawn by Gary Swinton for Sue Wesson, *An historical atlas*, showing Robinson's routes in Port Phillip and Monaro.

Map 2: drawn by Keith Mitchell for Niel Gunson, *The good country*, showing Aboriginal tribal boundaries.

large tract of country being labelled the debatable land (see Map 2).⁴⁷ The first extinction, as attested by William Thomas, George Langhorne, and local reminiscences, took place before pastoral and agricultural settlement and virtually eliminated the people originally occupying the coast between the Yallock⁴⁸ and Bass rivers. The cause was undoubtedly the settlement of Bass Strait sealers and runaway convicts from the early 1800s onwards at Mallum Mallum (Red Bluff) and Corinella or Settlement Point. These men forcibly took the local women and engaged in local skirmishes. Disease possibly helped in the decimation and the short-lived convict settlement in 1826–28 at Corinella probably hastened the progress. The land was now open to the Bunurong of the Mornington Peninsula and Cranbourne on one side and the people between the Bass and the Tarwin on the other, and this may well have been the real reason for the extensive fighting that took place between the two groups in the historic period.

It is probably significant that when JT Gellibrand's party landed sheep on the eastern side of Western Port Bay in 1836 there were no signs of Aboriginal occupation, whereas on the western side (Mornington Peninsula) there were many signs of occupation including a 'deserted village' of 100 'native huts'.⁴⁹

The second extinction, or 'succession' as Wesson calls it, took place much later and was caused by internecine fighting between the Bunurong inhabitants of the Tarwin river area and the neighbouring Ganai/Kurnai or Gippsland tribe in which the Bunurong were eventually eliminated.⁵⁰

The true 'successors' in the debatable land were probably the Tasmanians. Several of them were sent to recover the sheep lost at Western Port in 1836.⁵¹ By 1841 some of them were seeing it as a territory to make their own and a base to resist white oppression. Their leader 'Napoleon' claimed that 'they had unlimited bush to roam over at their will'.⁵² Their initial raids were made in the company of coastal Bunurong, but in the debatable land the five Tasmanian raiders worked alone. The murder of two whalers at Cape Patterson in 1841 eventually led to their capture and punishment. Robinson's account⁵³ is brief compared to that of the other participants, especially Thomas and Ensign Rawson,⁵⁴ no doubt due to his bitter disappointment in his charges and the unfortunate message that the alleged 'failure' of 'civilized' Aborigines conveyed to the settlers.

Apart from numerous visits to Narre Warren in the early years of the Protectorate, Robinson made very few visits to Western Port, the most detailed being the preliminary stages of the excursion to Gippsland and Monaro from 13 April to 20 October 1844. A few of Clark's identifications in the area are questionable. Robert Jamieson's station was

⁴⁷ Gunson 1968: 15.

⁴⁸ The exact border is unclear due to the confusion between Yallock and Tobin Yallock (Torbinurruck). There were certainly Bunurong living between these two rivers in historic times, perhaps temporary custodians. There were swamps either side.

⁴⁹ Gellibrand 1986: 69. This account was first published in *Transactions of the Philosophical Institute of Victoria*, 3, 1859: 63–85.

⁵⁰ For discussion see Clark 1990: 369; Wesson 2000: 10, 18–19. See also Dixon and Blake 1991: 48.

⁵¹ Gellibrand 1986.

⁵² William Thomas, quoted Christie 1979: 59.

⁵³ Clark 2000, 3: 13–14.

⁵⁴ See Gunson 1968: 45–46.

at Yallock, not Torbinurruck (Tobin Yallock): these locations were on two different rivers, the present Yallock creek and the Lang Lang River.⁵⁵ The Mallum Mallum run went to the mouth of the Lang Lang River but Mundy's residence was at the Red Bluff.⁵⁶

As one reads these extraordinary volumes one cannot fail to be impressed by the richness of the material and its eyewitness effect on our understanding of events. Clark has done us a great service by making the experience available to a wider and more sympathetic readership. Because the task was so great, one is aware that when Clark came to complete the last two volumes there is a general improvement in his notes on Robinson's contemporaries and his presentation of the material. One hopes that he or another scholar will select what is best in the six volumes and condense them into a tightly disciplined text, a single volume aimed at an even wider readership.

The three epigraphs prefacing the last volume might well have prefaced the whole series, though they can be read as an epitaph, especially Robinson's thoughts on the Protectorate and what might have been. The other two are worth recording as a tribute both to his sensitivity and his grasp of reality:

The natives should be treated [as] men, they work as men and they should be treated same as men, a fair day's wage for a fair day's labor but this is never accorded them. It is thought that if they get food it is enough for blacks. The natives have a feeling that they are men and they evince that [they are] higher beings. The settlers all abuse them, men great scoundrels &c.

George Augustus Robinson Journal – 28 January 1850

The Aborigines have ideas of property in land. Every tribe has its own distinct boundaries [which] are well known and defended. All the wild ducks are considered as much the property of the tribe's inhabitants or ranging on its whole extent as the flocks of sheep and herds of cattle that have been introduced into the country by adventurous Europeans.

George Augustus Robinson undated jotting.

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⁵⁵. Clark 2000, 3: 14; Clark 2000, 4: 34.

⁵⁶. Clark 2000, 4: 36.

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