



VICTORIA



Douglas Kilburn. *South-east Australian Aboriginal man and two younger companions*
1847. Photograph, 1/4 plate daguerreotype, plate 10.8 h x 8.2 w cm.
National Gallery of Australia, accession 2007.81.122.





Chapter 5

PHOTOGRAPHING KOORIS: PHOTOGRAPHY AND EXCHANGE IN VICTORIA

Jane Lydon

From their first encounters with photography, Kooris — the Indigenous people of Victoria — showed an active interest in the medium. They saw and engaged with photographs in the form of daguerreotypes within a decade of white settlement of the colony of Port Phillip — even before the first portraits of Aboriginal people were produced. In this chapter I examine historical interactions between photography and Indigenous people in the Port Phillip district — known from 1851 as Victoria — and the rich and vital meanings photographs have today. My guiding question has been ‘How does photography express the process of cross-cultural exchange?’

Following sporadic attempts to establish settlements along the coast of Victoria, in 1835 Melbourne was founded by an entrepreneurial association of wealthy squatters led by John Batman. Over the following decade, an influx of pastoralists saw the astonishingly rapid invasion of the traditional country of the people of the Kulin Nations (Figure 1) — leading to violence, murder and rape. Over this decade, British humanitarians sought to soften this brutal struggle for the land, and the British Colonial Office appointed five ‘Aboriginal Protectors’; by 1848, however, Governor Charles Joseph La Trobe concluded that the experiment had ‘totally failed’. During the violent decades of the 1840s and 1850s, various local attempts were made to settle the Indigenous people in ‘black villages’, small farming communities where they would learn ‘the arts of civilised life’ and become Christians.¹

In 1843 pastoralist and naturalist John Cotton took up the station Doogallook in the Goulburn River valley, on the traditional country of the Taungurong people.



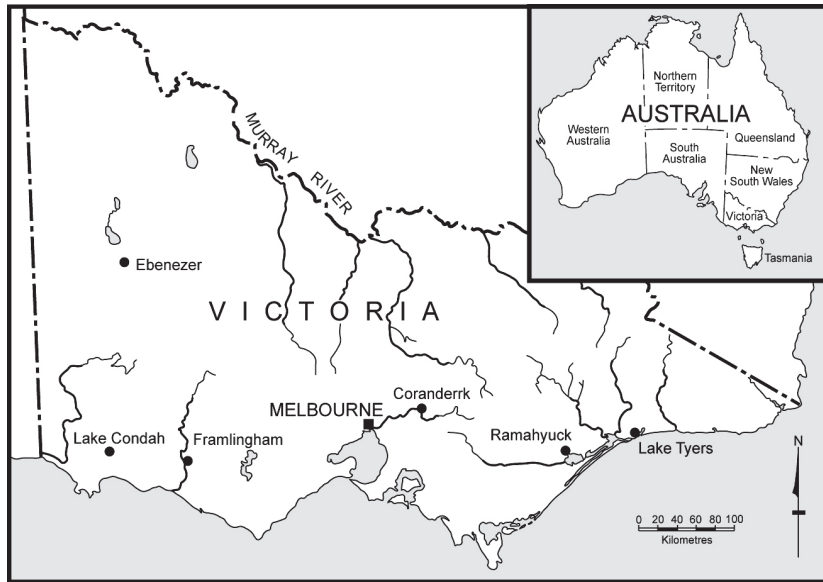


FIGURE 1: Map of Victoria, showing missions established around 1860.

Cotton wrote to his brother in England about his encounters with ‘Mr William Hamilton’, who visited his home and admired his family portraits in the form of daguerreotypes.² This was no doubt the leader of the Neenbullock clan, also known as Billy Hamilton, who had been jailed in 1843 after a confrontation with the local Assistant Protector, William Le Souef.³ Cotton wrote to his sister-in-law:

Your portrait and William’s [his brother] ornament one side of our sitting-room, and they never fail to attract the attention of a half-civilised black known by the name of Mr Hamilton, who usually pays me a visit when he is anywhere in the neighbourhood, and, pointing to the pictures, says: ‘That one your brother’, then, turning to the other, ‘Lubra belonging to your brother’. Mr Hamilton has some notion of drawing himself, and when he was here last, a few days back, he asked for paper and pencil, and drew several figures of blacks fighting, dancing, etc. Mr Hamilton speaks English remarkably well, and assumes the manner of a gentleman.⁴

Hamilton was interested in the images’ ability to stand in for kin, to root the viewer in a world of family connections that demonstrated identity and relatedness — a use of the medium that continues to be important for Kooris into the present.





5. PHOTOGRAPHING KOORIS: PHOTOGRAPHY AND EXCHANGE IN VICTORIA

In 2010 Hamilton's great-great-granddaughter and Taungurong Elder Maxine Briggs wrote that 'Victorian Aboriginal people continue to search out the pieces of their shattered communities like some kind of emotionally charged jigsaw puzzle'; she explained that

These revered ancestors who were captured in the collections of 19th century photographs are blood relatives, they are not distant relatives because they lived a hundred years or so ago, they live on in the photos and we are responsible for them just as we are for our living kin.⁵

For white settlers the medium was a way of recording new sights and peoples, and some were quick to grasp its commercial possibilities as a means of satisfying the curiosity of distant audiences. Cotton, himself, had ambitions — never realised — to photograph the Taungurong, and in August 1848 he commented, 'When the new plates arrive from England I hope to be able to take portraits of the blacks; they would be very interesting, I think, to you at home and might be a source of profit to myself.'⁶ He was well aware of the work of Melbourne-based photographers such as George Goodman, who had arrived in Sydney to set up a studio in 1842 and visited Melbourne in 1845, in that year reporting a remarkable profit of £870. In December 1848 Cotton noted:

Mr Kilburn is doing them well, I understand, at Melbourne. We have been taking some of the blacks this morning, but there is some defect or other in every plate. It is a very delicate operation, and requires much practice and nicety. If I can procure a guinea or two for each portrait I take of the blacks, it will add grist to the mill.⁷

In July 1849 he mused:

I wish some of our eminent painters would take a voyage to Australia — they would learn many a beautiful effect not attainable in Europe, and the natives would be a source of great profit to them. Their figures have such a noble, picturesque effect when clothed in the possum rug. I think Eastlake might give a hint of this sort to some of our men of colour at home. They would make much by their studies on their return to England.⁸

However, his brother William did not agree with this assessment, and advised against sending any photographs, on 'the probability of the photographs not





CALLING THE SHOTS



FIGURE 2: Douglas Kilburn. *South-east Australian Aboriginal man and two younger companions 1847*. Photograph, 1/4 plate daguerreotype, plate 10.8 h x 8.2 w cm. National Gallery of Australia, accession 2007.81.122.



FIGURE 3: John Skinner Prout. *Family group, Australia Felix [Victoria]*. Drawing on paper. British Museum, accession AN76102001.





selling at all, for I really do not think a purchaser will be found, if we may judge of the Australian beauties by the photograph portraits published in [William] Westgarth's *Australia Felix*'.⁹

Westgarth's popular guide for prospective settlers was one of the first to include photographs of Indigenous Australians, in the form of engravings based on Douglas Kilburn's remarkable 1846–47 daguerreotype portraits of Kulin people in cloaks and traditional adornments, as well as blankets and other appropriated items.¹⁰ Westgarth, however, did not offer a favourable view of Indigenous Australians: as historian Jessie Mitchell notes, his account was typical of such accounts during the 1840s in emphasising the colony's potential for settlers, but characterising Aboriginal people as lazy, savage and doomed to extinction.¹¹ One reviewer noted of Westgarth's discussion of Australian Indigenous people that it was 'a disagreeable subject, because so soon as our curiosity is gratified, every philanthropic hope is destroyed by the conviction, forced upon us by the failure of repeated attempts, that the race is incapable of elevation'.¹²

Despite this disparaging contemporary framework, Kilburn's four extant daguerreotypes (two more are known to be held in private collections) remain remarkable testaments to the Indigenous people around Melbourne a decade after invasion. They bear traditional scars, ornaments and dress, despite their studio poses and signs of change. As the first photographic record of Australian Aboriginal people, Kilburn's photographs were quickly copied by artists such as John Skinner Prout, who produced a beautiful watercolour sketch in late 1846, seemingly based on a Kilburn daguerreotype now held in the National Gallery of Australia.

Seven years later, one of Eugene von Guérard's first projects, upon settling in Melbourne, was to produce a watercolour sketch, based on a daguerreotype now held by the National Gallery of Victoria.¹³ Together with Westgarth's illustrations, these interpretations of the photographs were widely circulated among a curious European audience.¹⁴

Kooris, as the Indigenous people of Victoria are known, were highly visible in the landscape during the 1850s, despite the destructive effect of the gold rushes, with their influx of miners. Although officials sought to keep them away from white settlement, they continued to travel across traditional country, and visited towns and the diggings to satisfy *their* curiosity about European culture and people — as evident in visual records such as the paintings and drawings of

