

# READINGS IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

-The History you were never taught

## **THEME 4: THE COLLISION OF WORLDS**

One year after the arrival of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove in January 1788, a smallpox plague mysteriously broke out in April 1789. It spread through the whole country, killing 90% of the Australian population. The event is preserved in legend, story and song.

The cause, course and impacts of this first ever Australian pandemic are discussed in the first three articles.

The nature of Aboriginal resistance is then discussed, with the focus in the final two articles shifting locally to Melbourne's Yarra Valley.

AH 4.1	The Darkest Day in Australian History
AH 4.2	Just imagine Coronavirus 100 time worse
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## **THEME 4 QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

1. In checking what is historically recorded about the Lieutenant Governor, Major Robert Ross, would he be capable of deliberate genocide?
2. Is it reasonable to estimate an Australian death rate of 90% from the 1789 smallpox plague?
3. Did the level of smallpox deaths materially affect Aboriginal resistance to colonisation?
4. How many Aboriginal place names do you know the meaning of in your local area?

## THE DARKEST DAY IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

March 25<sup>th</sup> marks the anniversary of the most momentous, but least known day in Australian history. It is the day in 1789 that smallpox was deliberately released to the Australian public, by the Lieutenant Governor of the Sydney colony, Major Robert Ross.

Being a disease free environment, Australians had no resistance to European diseases. Even the common cold could kill. The smallpox therefore spread rapidly through the whole continent, and like it had done when introduced into South America, North America and Southern Africa, it killed 90% of the local population.

With a base population of at least three million people, this means that the 1789 smallpox plague killed at least two and a half million Australians. Little meaningful study has been made of this catastrophe, so tracking down how it occurred was rather like the plot of a detective novel.

The disease suddenly appeared on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1789 and everyone was mystified. Was it already here? Could the French have brought it? Did the First Fleet Chief Surgeon, John White, bring bottles of smallpox scabs with him from England?

Captain Arthur Phillip immediately questioned White, who cryptically replied that he had one bottle, but the seals were intact. That may well have been technically true right then, but what medico would purchase only one bottle when there were 1,400 people in the First Fleet to immunise?

Captain Watkin Tench in fact noted in his diary that the surgeons had bottles in their possession, but there had been no sign of the disease in the seventeen months since they had quit the Cape of Good Hope. Now why would Tench mention the Cape of Good Hope, unless that was where bottles were bought? Tench was actually speaking from first hand knowledge, because he was a passenger on the Charlotte, the same ship as White.

So why and how had the smallpox suddenly appeared fifteen months after the First Fleet landed? The key to answering this question lay in a seeming contradiction. Some history books said that *no white man* died in the plague, whilst others said *one sailor* died.

The ship passenger lists gave the answer and both statements proved to be correct. Joseph Jeffries, a sailor from the ship Supply, became symptomatic with smallpox on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, two weeks after it broke out. He was however not a white man. Jeffries had been recruited in the stopover at Rio and was in fact a Native American Indian. I knew from personal experience that Native American and Native Australian people get on famously, because they have similar cultures.

When I then read the circumstances of his death, what was *not* said came through the loudest. No surprise or disapproval was expressed about him having visited the local native people, and this can only mean that he had approval, because it was mandatory. This approval could therefore have only come from Captain James Campbell, who was the sole delegated authority.

The plot thickens. Captain Campbell was in fact the only friend and ally of the Lieutenant Governor, Major Robert Ross, who was implacably opposed to Governor Phillip. Ross believed that Phillip was soft and incompetent and that war with the natives was inevitable.

Ross and Campbell knew what needed to be done. They had both served fifteen years before in the American Indian Wars, when General Amherst had handed out smallpox infected materials to the Indians.

Fortunately the First Fleet was the most documented event in human history, so if you know what you are looking for, it is all there. All the disparate, seemingly disconnected information suddenly unravelled to show the pattern.

Surgeon White had bought jars of scabs in Cape Town and all except one ended up in the government store. Six Marines, who were supposed to be guarding the store, were caught robbing it in March 1789. Ross and Campbell did an inventory, found the jars and decided to release it, thereby avoiding the need for war.

Campbell knew that Joseph Jeffries had formed friendships with the local people and always took presents when he visited. Jeffries arrived back from Norfolk Island on the ship Supply on March 24 and Campbell gave him the clothing and blankets that he and Ross had infected.

This infected material was then given to the local Australians on March 25 1789, the same day the Marines were hanged. The virulence of the scabs is much reduced, so the first people who caught it had a greater chance of survival, but they then passed it on in full virulence over a longer period to greater numbers.

The incubation period for the disease is seven to seventeen days, but commonly ten to twelve days. It then takes about a week to die. The arithmetic is simple and compelling. Jeffries arrived back on March 24 and the disease broke out a fortnight later.

## IMAGINE CORONAVIRUS 100 TIMES WORSE

In the March edition of the Warrandyte Diary I talked about the smallpox plague of 1789. It was spookily prescient of the situation we now face with Coronavirus and I will continue the theme.

Nowadays, social media can spread information (or misinformation) about important events, but back in 1789 the Australian social media was song, dance and message-stick. It was essentially the same in medieval Europe, when wandering minstrels sang witty songs to local audiences, about the political or social news of the day. The nursery rhyme 'Ring a Ring a Rosie' was for instance about the 14<sup>th</sup> century Black Death Plague. The first sign of the plague was sneezing, and we all still say 'Bless you' because you were as good as dead if you sneezed.

When the smallpox pandemic suddenly and inexplicably broke out in Sydney in early April 1789, the suffering was catastrophic. Australia had been a disease free environment and not even the common cold was present. Suddenly, people became feverish and pus filled sores broke out all over their bodies. They suffered in indescribable pain for about ten days then died in relentless numbers.

First Fleet officer David Collins visited some campsites with his native friend Arabanoo and graphically recorded the following:

*'...those who witnessed his expression and agony can never forget either. He looked anxiously around him in the different coves we visited; not a vestige in the sand was to be seen of a human foot; the excavations in the rocks were filled with the putrid bodies of those who had fallen victim to the disorder; not a living person was anywhere to be met with. It seemed as if, flying from the contagion, they had left the dead to bury the dead. He lifted up his hands and eyes in silent agony for some time; at last he exclaimed, 'All dead, all dead' and then hung his head in mournful silence.'*

Smallpox had scourged Europe over the whole of the eighteenth century, so the First Fleet doctors were well practiced in quarantine procedures. History therefore proudly records that 'no white man died of the plague' after it broke out in April 1789. However it spread inexorably along the coast and through the river systems to reach every corner of Australia.

The spread of the disease was also unwittingly aided by the social media of the day. In Sydney a song was created, replete with ghoulish shrieks and groans to convey the pain and suffering involved. Messengers were sent out with the song to warn other tribes. The only problem was the messengers had been incubating the disease and passed it on with the song.

It is a standard protocol in traditional Australian society that a song is never translated when it is learnt. It must always be sung in the language of the people who created it. So imagine my surprise in finding that Jimmy Dawson, an early settler at Warrandyte in 1840, had recorded the words of the smallpox song that had originated in Sydney. Jimmy has shifted to Part Fairy in the Western District in 1844 and began a lifelong process of documenting the cultural information he was given. The chilling words of the song (without the ghoulish shrieks and groans) are translated as follows:

*Red hot Echidna spikes are burning me  
Piercing me until pain overwhelms me  
Comfort me my sisters  
I am a grinning, grinning, grinning skull  
I am a grinning, grinning, grinning skull  
I am a grinning, grinning, grinning skull*

The fact that this original song was recorded in the Western District of Victoria, some sixty years after the plague had swept through, is testament to the accuracy of Aboriginal oral history conveyed in story and song. All that is required is some basic understanding of the cultural symbolism embedded in the story.

Some historians have opined that the smallpox plague never reached Victoria, but this is at odds with Aboriginal oral history. The Woiwurung language people of the Melbourne area recount the legend of the Mindye and describe the devastation wrought.

The Mindye is described as being a ten mile long, serpent like creature with the head of a dog, a mane and the tail of a possum. It spat poison and moved at such speed it was invisible, but the poison was in the dust that followed. The pock marks left on any survivors were referred to as 'the cups of the Mindye' and other scarring as 'the scales of the Mindye'.

In my 2016 book 'The Dust of the Mindye' I estimated that the death rate from the 1789 smallpox was around 90% of the Australian population. With a minimum base population of three million, that means the death toll was at least 2 ½ million Australians. It is a sobering comparison to our present predicament.

## THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF OUR GREATEST PANDEMIC

In the previous two Diary issues I talked first about how the smallpox pandemic of 1789 was deliberately started by the Lieutenant Governor, Major Robert Ross. I then described how the disease spread throughout Australia, partly aided by the warning song that had been composed.

Although the disease was new to Australia, in Europe and other parts of the world there had been rolling plagues of the smallpox virus through the entire eighteenth century. Any survivors gained lifetime immunity, so the overall death rate was usually 30% to 40 %.

In populations experiencing their first exposure to smallpox, such as North America and South America in the sixteenth century and South Africa in the seventeenth century, the death rate was always around 90%.

Australians were even more vulnerable as this was a completely disease free environment. There was no resistance to European diseases and even the common cold could kill. The resulting Australian death rate from the 1789 smallpox plague was therefore at least 90%, with the actual numbers killed being at least 2 ½ million Australians. The enormity of this figure is hard to comprehend, even if it happened today.

This article will therefore begin to explore the social effects that accompanied this massive depopulation. This is something I have never seen attempted before by any previous author, and one can only wonder at the reasons for this.

The first point to understand is that, like the present day Covid19 virus, the smallpox virus was not an equal opportunity disease. Some people who caught the disease survived, but this was only the fittest 10% of people from later childhood and up to middle-age.

Like the present Covid19 the elderly were particularly vulnerable to smallpox. Unlike Covid19 however, young children were also particularly vulnerable. For those who caught smallpox in Australia, the harsh reality was as follows. If you were under six years old you were dead. If you were over sixty you were dead. If you were a pregnant woman you were dead.

I often use the term 'Druidic Meritocracy' to describe the nature of traditional Australian society. This means that people were promoted to authority in society solely on the basis of both their religious and secular knowledge. Both male and female Eldership was therefore achieved solely on merit, and through meeting the twin tests of knowledge and character.

So just think about the implications from that aspect for a moment. Suddenly in one fell swoop, a whole generation of Elders, both men and women, is wiped out before the next generation of Elders have completed their training. Nothing could have prepared them for this dislocation.

At the other end of the scale the youngest generation has also been wiped out, along with every pregnant woman. This meant that suddenly there were more men than women and there was a dearth of women of marriageable age. Not only that, but there was going to be a dearth of marriageable women for the next generation.

In traditional Australian society men had no say in who married who. Marriage was controlled by women a generation ahead by a process of mother-in-law gifting. Men had to be proven hunters and providers before they could marry, so were usually in their mid-twenties or later when they did. On the other hand girls were married at about fourteen, so a husband might be ten or fifteen years older than their wife.

This meant that a man was around the same age as their future mother-in-law. Both grew up knowing each other, and knew that the as yet unborn child of the girl would be the future wife of the boy. So to make sure there was no possibility of a sexual attraction between a future mother-in law and her future son-in-law, he was never allowed to look at her face. He would rather blunder into a tree than look at his mother-in-law. Some might think it is an excellent rule.

However in the apocalyptic post-smallpox world of Australia, these generation-ahead marital arrangements were thrown into chaos. Female authority was consequently a prime casualty of the smallpox plague. A man's marital prospects now depended almost solely on either elopement or abduction, and this had two results.

First, previously unknown levels of domestic violence now became an institutionalised norm, and in some communities this result is still being felt more than two hundred and thirty years later. Second, as the rate of wife abductions increased, so did intertribal conflict.

Inter-tribal killings reached heights never seen before, prompting settlers and historians to falsely conclude that, like domestic violence, this was an age-old traditional norm. Historians have even gone so far as to count up the number of frontier period deaths recorded, to conclude it exceeded the deaths of Australian soldiers in the First World War. And this proves exactly what?

## ABORIGINAL RESISTANCE TO COLONISATION

In the October article I talked about how the local Wurundjeri waged an economic war against settlers like Major Newman by burning their paddocks and driving off their stock. This was by no means an isolated event as it was a pattern of resistance across Australia.

Nowadays we are more aware of this active resistance by Aboriginal tribes, but some people are still caught up in the myth that Australia was 'peacefully settled'. I have even often been asked why Aboriginal people 'didn't put up a fight like the American Indians or the Maoris'.

Resistance actually began very soon after the First Fleet arrived at Sydney Cove. It soon became apparent to the locals that the new arrivals intended to stay and do so on their own terms. They began netting shoals of fish in the harbour and when the local people went to take their share, muskets were fired over their heads to scare them off.

With the 1,500 new arrivals having doubled the population overnight, the harbour was fished out and all the game was gone. The newcomers were now starving and for the first time in their lives, so were Aboriginal people. Typically, resistance began by burning the outlying paddocks and huts of the settlers. Convicts not guarded by musket-bearing Marines simply disappeared or were found mutilated.

The Lieutenant-Governor, Major Robert Ross, wanted The Governor, Captain Phillip to build a stockade to ensure the safety of the settlers, but Phillip refused. The two top men very quickly became bitterly opposed over 'native policy'. Ross had served in the North American Indian Wars where General Amherst had handed out smallpox infected blankets to the natives, and Ross wanted to take decisive military action, but Phillip refused.

The perilous situation facing the colony was then magically solved when a smallpox plague suddenly broke out in the Aboriginal community. The smallpox outbreak was in fact a deliberate act by Major Ross after he had discovered jars of smallpox scabs in the government store. The jars had been purchased by the Chief Surgeon, John White, when the First Fleet stopped over in Cape Town. To distribute the infected clothing and blankets Ross had duped a sailor who had established friendly relations with the local people. The sailor, Joseph Jeffries, had been recruited at the Rio de Janeiro stopover. Jeffries was in fact a Native American 'Red' Indian and had a very similar culture to Australian Aboriginal people.

Like all the new European diseases, Aboriginal people had no resistance to smallpox and it spread around Australia killing 90% of the native population. The total death toll I estimate as being at least two and a half million people. It is obvious that this 90% reduction in population greatly hampered Aboriginal resistance across Australia and contributed to the myth that there was little effective resistance.

I first became aware some forty years ago of the resistance war that had been fought in the Western District of Victoria. This had been through a book written by Jimmy Dawson, who had been an early settler at Warrandyte in 1840. Dawson had moved to the Western District in 1844 and had established close relationships with the Gunditjmarra people. He documented their languages, culture, and stories in a book first published in 1880 and which contained innumerable fascinating insights into Aboriginal culture.

I had by the late 1970's also got to know several famous Gunditjmarra Elders, such as Banjo Clarke and Reg Saunders. They told me stories of the resistance war that their forebears had fought against colonisation. This had lasted eighteen years from 1834 and ended with a massacre at Lake Condah in 1852. I then researched early newspaper accounts which openly talked about the 'Eumerella War' and how hundreds of heads of cattle were often driven by the Aboriginal people over cliffs or into the Stony Rises where they broke their legs.

I was fascinated by the story of the Gunditjmarra, because despite their ultimate defeat, it was a story of survival. People like Banjo Clarke had kept their culture and he became the Hereditary Keeper of Framlingham Forest. Captain Reg Saunders became the only Aboriginal soldier to be promoted to officer rank in the Second World War. On top of this the Gunditjmarra produced every Aboriginal boxing champion in Victoria, as well as a host of famous cricketers and footballers.

I became so enamoured with their story of survival that in 1983 I approached Film Victoria about making a documentary film. They put me in contact with a film producer and in 1984 'The Fighting Gunditjmarra' was made with the help of both Reg and Banjo. The film traces the story of the tribe's resistance war, the story of Reg Saunders and the story of young Graeme 'Porky' Brooke, the latest Gunditjmarra boxing champion.

## THE HISTORY OF THE YARRA

The geological history of the present day course of the Yarra starts about 800,000 years ago. Volcanic eruptions in the Great Dividing Range spewed molten lava down into the northern and western areas of Melbourne and blocked the course of the Yarra through there. The flat areas in the northern and western suburbs are therefore these lava plains. With these lava flows filling up the drainage systems to the north and east of Melbourne, huge inland lakes developed around Whittlesea and Yarra Glen.

Gradually, the Plenty River wore its way south along the eastern edge of the lava flow, thereby creating the Plenty Gorge. At the same time the Yarra gradually wore the Warrandyte Gorge to join the Plenty at Bulleen, the site of another inland lake. The final course of the Yarra was then worn through the Kew Gorge around the southern end of the lava flow.

Until about 8000 years ago before the sea levels rose, the Bay area was dry. The Yarra flowed south through what is now Port Phillip Heads, then west across the Tasmanian land bridge. Rising seas after the inter-glacial period then began filling the Bay to its present level.

The fascinating part of all this is how the Wurundjeri story on the creation of the Yarra has so accurately reflected this geological process. Rather than having a Dreamtime story of the creation of the river by the movement across the landscape of a giant Snake Creator Spirit, the creation of the river is attributed to two Ancestor Heroes. In other words it is a record of the living memory of the geological process that had been witnessed over the period of human occupation, which probably exceeds 100,000 years.

The Ancestor Heroes Barwool and Yan-Yin each decided to free their land from the great waters. Yan-Yin began digging a channel south with his stone axe to free Morang from water. In doing so created the Plenty Gorge. At the same time Barwool started digging a channel east to free Moorool from water and in doing so created the Warrandyte Gorge.

When they met at Bulleen each had been unaware of the other's work, and decided to join forces, but first they had a rest. This is why Bulleen means 'resting place'.

Barwool and Yan-Yin then began their work again and wore out many stone axes before they finally cut the Kew Gorge through to Jillong, which was the name of the plains to the south of Melbourne. All the water from Morang, Moorool and Bulleen then poured out and made a great lake called Narm, now known as Port Phillip Bay.

It is astounding how close this story is to the actual geological processes involved, but it is something by which I am no longer surprised. Many of the Dreamtime stories I have read are compatible with scientific theories such as the Big Bang, geophysics and evolution. All you have to do is not just dismiss the stories as primitive folk tales and look more deeply.

There is only one more story to relate about the history of the Yarra, and that is how it actually got its present day name. The Wurundjeri name for the river is Birrarung, which means 'River of Mists'. However the river actually got its present name by courtesy of John Helder Wedge, the surveyor who belonged to John Batman's Port Phillip Syndicate.

After Batman came to Melbourne in early June 1835 and with met the Wurundjeri, he returned to Tasmania, leaving the rest of his party camped at Indented Head, now Geelong. This included five of the seven Sydney Blacks who had accompanied him to Port Phillip as guides and interpreters.

In August 1835 Wedge came from Tasmania to do some survey work and was dropped off at Indented Head. After some survey work there, three Sydney men and two Geelong men then rowed him to Melbourne in a whale boat. They made their way five miles up from the mouth of the Yarra at Hobson's bay to the site where Melbourne now stands. As they approached the falls between present day Queen Street and William Street, a Sydney man exclaimed 'Yarra! Yarra!', meaning 'waterfall' in their Sydney language. Wedge however thought they were saying it was the name of the river.

It was only when they were returning to Indented Head by foot that Wedge realised his error. On reaching the ford on the Werribee River, his guides again exclaimed 'Yarra'. Wedge duly noted his mistake, but it was too late. The river's name had now been irrevocably changed from Birrarung to Yarra.

Unfortunately there are still many official histories of the Yarra recycling the mistaken belief that the men with Wedge were Woiwurung and that 'Yarra' was therefore a Woiwurung word meaning 'ever flowing'. It was however just our first urban myth.

## PLACE NAMES AND MEANINGS IN MANNINGHAM

There are many Aboriginal place names in our municipality. Creeks, parks, streets, roads and suburbs bear Aboriginal names, but we are often unaware of their historical meaning. This article will therefore explain a few of these meanings.

Some Aboriginal street names are not local, but have been imported from other Aboriginal languages. One example of this was a street named 'Mundarra' that I happened to notice near Park Orchards. It means 'mighty fist' in a Sydney language. I only know this because a friend of mine from Sydney gave his son that name.

So I will try to restrict myself to names that are from the local Woiwurung language. The first name to be disqualified under this criterion is therefore the Yarra, which forms the northern boundary of our municipality. As explained in a previous article, this is a Sydney word meaning 'waterfall' and it came from two of John Batman's Sydney guides in September 1835, when they saw the Queen Street falls.

We start at the southwest corner of our municipality where Koonung Creek meets the Yarra. I have a document from 1858 that gives a different name for the creek of 'Kooniniong', but I do not know what that means. However any Wurundjeri person will tell you what Koonung means. It refers to that mythical creek you are up in a barbwire canoe without a paddle, and it is not Ship Creek.

The story, for which I have not yet found any documentary evidence, is that Chinese market gardeners began operating in Box Hill North in the 1850's. They used septic water to grow the vegetables and the run-off polluted the creek so badly that it was called 'Koonung' by local Aboriginal people. It is still today the most polluted creek in Melbourne, even though it is barrelled and runs under the Eastern Freeway.

The suburb of Bulleen gets its name from a story of two Ancestor Heroes, Barwool and Yan Yin, who rested there after they had cut the Warrantdyte and Plenty gorges to free their land from water. They then continued on to cut the Kew gorge and the water flowed out to form Port Phillip Bay.

Bulleen therefore means resting place'. The nearby Bolin-Bolin Billabong also derives its name from this story. This was the site of large inter-tribal gatherings so Bolin-Bolin means 'long resting place'.

It has alternatively been suggested that Bolin-Bolin means lyre-bird, but this is only because it sounds somewhat like Buln-Buln, the word for lyre-bird. However the lyre-bird is ground dwelling, and its habitat is alpine rain forests. Bulleen is certainly not an alpine rain forest and the river flats were also subject to annual flooding, so ground-dwelling birds could not have survived there.

Warringal Park is on the other side of the river from Heide Museum in Bulleen and the meaning of this name is often quoted as meaning 'jumping dog'. However Warringal means 'dog jumped up' which denotes a particular use of English by Aboriginal people.

The term 'jumped up' in fact means coming back to life after being seemingly dead. This makes even more sense when you know that to 'tumble down' means to die. In other words Aboriginal people often died on their feet, but sometimes then 'jumped up' and kept going.

Along Templestowe Road opposite Finns Reserve, there is a little park on the side of the hill with a most appropriate name of Bimbadeen, which means 'side of the hill'. At the junction of the Mullum-Mullum Creek and the Yarra is Tikilara Park which means 'spirit of place'. As far as I know, Mullum-Mullum means 'many white butterflies'.

I have often written before about my admiration for Simon Wonga, so I will only briefly mention that Wonga Park was named after him in the mid 1850's. This was in recognition of his skill as a leader of men and a horse whisperer.

So finally we come to Warrantdyte, which is often given as an Aboriginal name that derives from a story about Bunjil being angry with his people, then hurling a star at the ground that blocked the river and flooded the land.

Unfortunately this does not ring true to me at all. The story is more redolent of a vengeful and interventionist Old Testament Jehovah, not Booriel, who according to William Barak was an infinite being beyond human comprehension.

Being sceptical of this seemingly latter day biblical story I have searched the available documentation and have found many meanings for the word 'warran'. It can mean red, small hills, salt water, young man and wombat, but not throwing. I could also find no reference to 'dyte' which seems suspiciously like a Celtic word. Coincidentally it was the Scotsman Jimmy Dawson who called his property 'Warrantdyte' on arriving in 1840.

So if anybody can shed any further light, please let me know.