

# *Aboriginal Relics in Victoria*

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The early history of what is now the State of Victoria presents many unique aspects. Two abortive attempts at official settlement, and the use of its coastline by sealers and escaped convicts, preceded the almost piratical occupation of the site of Portland by the Henty brothers, and of the sites of present Geelong and Melbourne by Batman and Fawkner, the two pioneers who remained enemies to the grave. The drawing-up of Batman's famous treaty with the natives, by virtue of which immense tracts of territory, including the sites of Geelong and Melbourne, were ceded to him by the Aborigines, and the subsequent rejection of this treaty by the Colonial Office, who declared it illegal, are not the least incredible episodes in this story. The occupation of the land by the "overlanders" from "Sydney side", and by the "Vandiemelanders" from Tasmania, acting against Colonial Authority, soon followed by the discovery of gold, and the "invasion" of the colony by thousands of people of all races and colour, all intent on getting rich overnight, are facts which border on fiction.

But what of the Aborigines of Victoria? History is silent. These people, dispossessed of their tribal territory, ordered away from their ancestral waters and hunting grounds, their ceremonial grounds dug up, their elders ridiculed and their women prostituted, saw their world collapse about them. The remnants of the tribes were collected into Government Stations, but this did not protect them from disease and debauchery which finished what the first settlers had begun.

The demise of tribal government and the virtual extinction of the tribes in Victoria over the short space of 20 years precluded the possibility of any detailed study of the natives' way of life, while gold-diggers, and the hooves of sheep and cattle, destroyed almost every sign of their occupancy of the land.

Perhaps, for this reason, Victoria is relatively poor in Aboriginal antiquities. Actually the existence of two painted shelters in the Grampians, and of one stone arrangement in the Western District, had been known for many years, but, with the exception of a large number of oven mounds and camping sites, no other relic was known to exist and, with the passing of the years, even these disappeared. Browsing cattle displaced the stones in the arrangement, vandals wrote their infamous names all over the paintings in the shelters, and the farmers, in an effort to get rid of the rabbit menace, ploughed over the oven mounds. Many of the coastal camp sites were either built upon, or the sand quarried and taken away, even the sea helping in this work of destruction by undermining and eroding the cliff middens.

However, there was a resurgence. The closer settlement of the land necessitated by the new immigration policies, the opening up of timbered areas, and the pushing through of Forestry Commission tracks into the more inaccessible places where the pastoralist and the gold-digger had not penetrated, revealed new hunting grounds for the anthropologist, the prehistorian, and, not the least, the field naturalist. Many important sites were thus discovered, each adding to our knowledge of the prehistory of Victoria. These include painted shelters in western and north-eastern districts, diabase outcrops which were quarried by the natives for axe making, rocks on which the axes were sharpened, water holes excavated in dry areas, and even a fish trap. This last is a channel, designed somewhat like a

maze, excavated in order to connect two lakes. The fish, in travelling between one lake and the other, would lose themselves in the shallow waters of the maze, and thus become easy victims for the natives. The lost stone arrangement in the Western District has been replaced by the finding of another, in an amazingly good state of preservation, in central Victoria. Its perfect condition is due to its having been kept hidden by a tangled mass of variegated thistle growing all over it. This thistle, introduced with seeds brought in by the early colonists, was, this year, destroyed by aerial spraying, and the stone arrangement, hidden for over a century, revealed.

### **Rock Engraving**

Even a rock engraving has been found. The absence of rock engravings in Victoria has always been a puzzle, as they are numerous in the adjoining States of New South Wales, South Australia and Tasmania. The Victorian example is merely the representation of a kangaroo track, about 10 inches long, carved on a flat rock which also bears many grinding grooves, and was, therefore, used for axe grinding. While not spectacular, it is, nevertheless, an example of Aboriginal rock carving, and we may now look forward to finding others.

Many more painted shelters, or "art galleries" have been discovered, some in entirely new districts. The paintings on the walls of these have been executed in a number of distinctive styles, and both red and white pigments have been used. Some have been superimposed on older paintings, and it is hoped that a chronological sequence will be established. In the case of one shelter we have been very fortunate in possessing, long before it was discovered, a tradition of it and of the identity of the personage figured on its walls. The existence of this shelter, but not its exact whereabouts, had been revealed to the whites by a native, almost 100 years ago. He had stated that the figure represented Bunjil, the All-Father. In the shelter he is depicted as a fat person, seated Buddha-like, and accompanied by two dogs.

To combat vandalism it has been found necessary to withhold as much as possible the locality of the painted shelters, and to have them protected by a strong wire-netting enclosure. The placing of a "Visitor's Book" in the proximity of the shelter, so as to supply "visitors" with somewhere to write their names other than on the walls or on the paintings, proved a great success. These "books", complete with attached pencil, are replaced at frequent intervals.

To combat the havoc wrought by the elements is rather more difficult, and the experience of such bodies as the C.S.I.R.O. and the Council for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments (UNESCO) has been called to the rescue. The results, unfortunately, have not been good to date. The problem is not only to preserve the fading ochres, but also to prevent the rock face from flaking. In the meantime tracings of the actual paintings, as well as colour photographs, have been taken from every site. These are preserved in the National Museum.

### **Vandalism At Water Holes**

Another class of relic which suffers from vandalism is the rock wells or native rock water-holes. These are usually found in dry country. Close inspection of outcropping rocks often shows one or more holes worn into them; generally these holes are only a few inches in diameter and are small enough to be easily covered by a flat stone. However, these apertures are deceptive, because, in many cases, they open into a much wider, and certainly quite deep, underground cavity where rain water is stored, cool and clear, and kept clean by the stone cover. The underground chambers are not entirely made by the natives, very often originating in the natural weathering and wearing away of softer impurities in the rock; however, the Aborigines certainly accelerated the work of nature by deepening the holes with fire-hardened sticks and with stone tools. These rock holes are valuable indications of routes taken by the natives when moving from one place to another. Some of these water holes have been declared special reserves by the Government, but this does not protect them from vandals. The

localities are now sometimes used as picnic grounds, and often litter, plus broken bottles, finds its way into the holes, necessitating periodical cleaning out.

There is not much that can be done to prevent the destruction of camping places or kitchen middens either by the elements or through sub-division by building companies. However, site record cards have been instituted; every known camp site is now mapped, and the class of implements or any other relics found upon it is entered. A permanent record is thus kept; this will outlast the destruction of the sites.

The entering of the number and varieties of stone implements and other material found on the camp sites on the cards is helping to solve the problem of the private collector. This class of person can be of great service to anthropology if controlled, but otherwise can become a real menace. Having found it impossible to prevent him from collecting on these sites, he is now being trained to know what he is collecting, and to send lists of his finds, as well as samples of the material, to the Museum for entering on the cards. Particularly interesting artefacts are often donated by him and added to the Museum collection. If, on the other hand, the collector does not wish to donate his unusual find, a cast of the implement is made. Private collectors have also been strongly urged to clearly mark on their implements, in Indian ink, the name of the locality where they were found. This prevents some important artefacts in private collections becoming useless through forgetting where they were collected.

### **Excavation Of Camp Sites**

Information about the life of earlier Aborigines is also being obtained through excavation of rock shelters and other camping places. So far no proof of great occupational antiquity has been obtained from any of these sites, but much valuable information on natives' food, revealed by the remains of their meals, has been collected. The finding of these, and of certain types of stone implements on the several occupational strata composing the floor of the shelters, is often a valuable indication of time-sequence changes in weather conditions, affecting food supplies as well as the typology of the stone artefacts, while the materials from which the implements are made reveal ancient trade routes and tribal contacts.

Much information is also obtained from the proper excavation of native burials by observing the way the body was placed in the grave, and by the study of the implements sometimes buried with it. Totemic relationships and intertribal affinities can be discerned.

One of the problems confronting the professional archaeologist is his relationship with the amateur. The professional is jealous of his sites, and yet is torn by the desire to teach, and to impart to the amateur the techniques of excavation. He knows that the amateur often becomes over-enthusiastic, and is too impatient, or has not the time, to wait for the proper organization of a "dig" of the shelter he may have discovered. He thus often proceeds to do the job himself, forgetting that by so doing he could irrevocably destroy any evidence which may have been forthcoming. Once a site has been "dug", it has been dug for all time.

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