

Fire and Aboriginal People in Colonial Victoria

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Living with Bushfire: A Community Conference

2 Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners - and an acknowledgement that:

“Some whitefellas don’t have much in the brain box”

- My first eyewitness experience of Aboriginal land management by fire was a bewildering and educative one.



‘After the Balanda fire’ (1995) Fred Cahir, Ramingining, Arnhem Land, Northern Territory

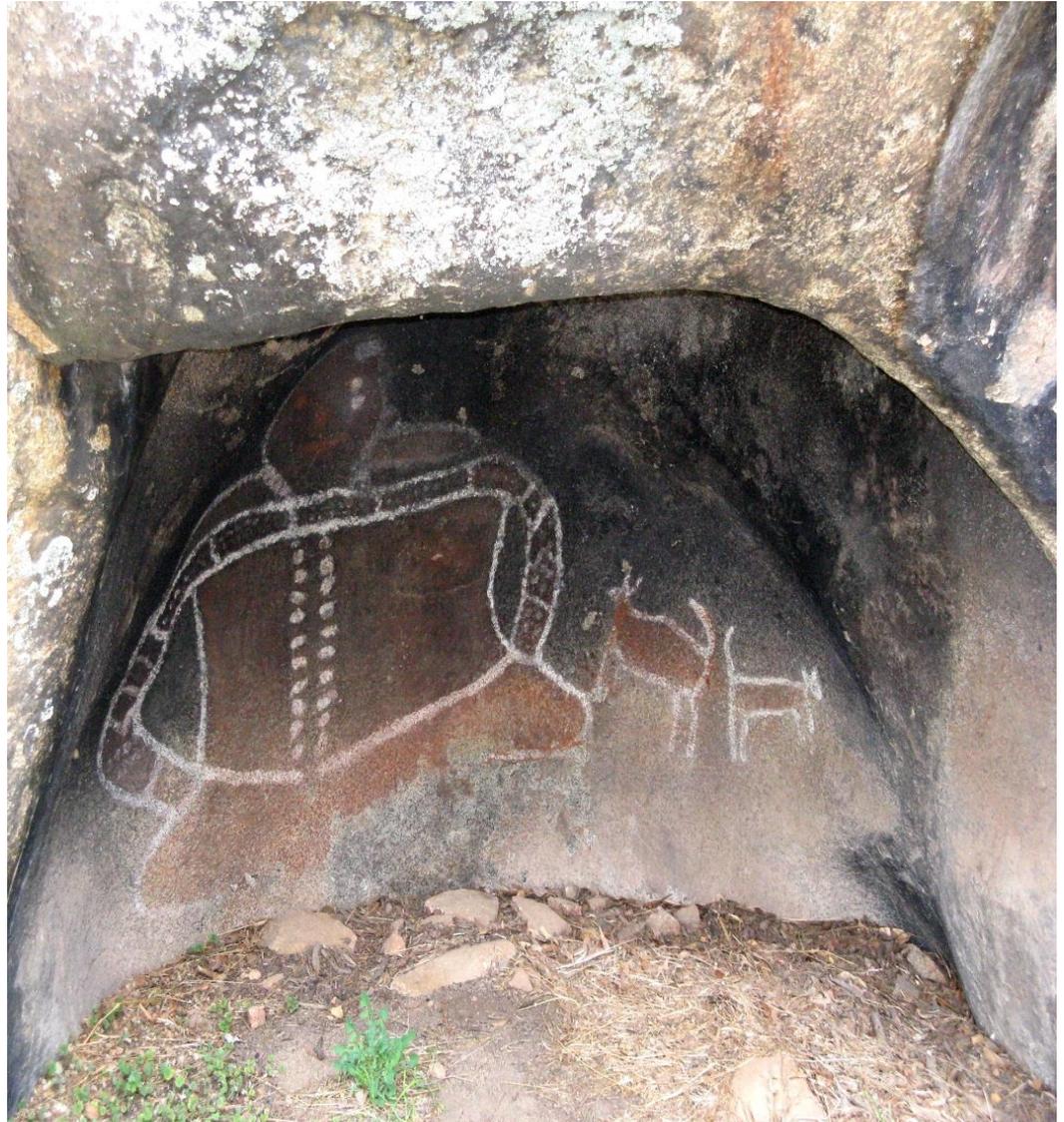
Presentation Objectives

With specific reference to Victoria:

- Outline some customary roles of fire
- Survey the 19th century written and visual records of observed fire use
- Highlight the 'fighting of fire' and 'fighting with fire' by Aboriginal people
- Draw some guarded conclusions

Fire in creation stories and ritual

- Massola (1969): ‘Men had no fire: Bunjil [Creator figure in many parts of south eastern Australia] felt sorry for them and sent some down. The Crow stole it and Bunjil sent two of his ‘young men’ [Djurdjurt and Thara] to recover it. This they did; then the young men, the fire, and the Crow were all turned to stone.’
- A Woiwurrung man, known as ‘Mr King’, described (1839) a ceremony in which fire sticks were thrown about in a way that “resembles white man’s book”. The solemnity of the Aboriginal fire ceremony was seemingly likened to that of the Bible.



‘Bunjil’s Shelter’ Grampians/Gariwerd region

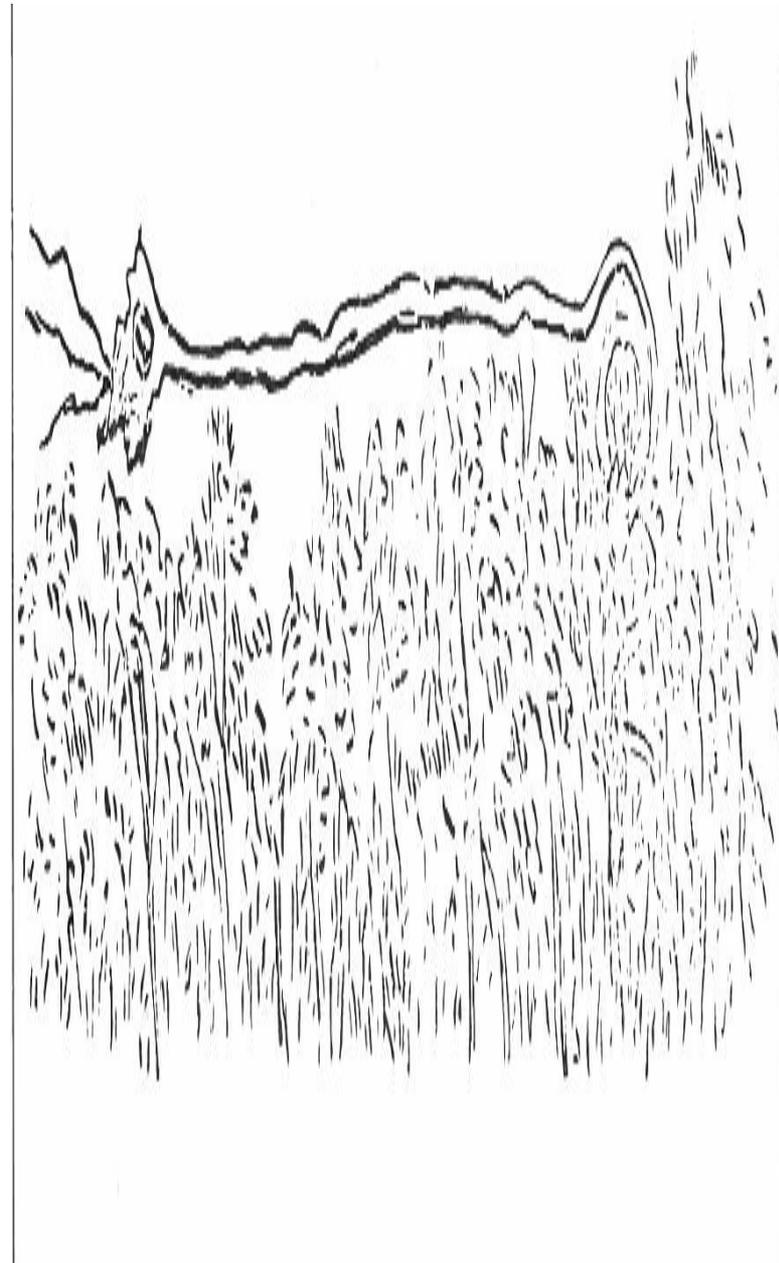
Motivation for burning

[simple Q&A]

Q: Why did Aborigines use fire for?

A: for fun, signalling, to clear the ground, 'cleaning up country', conservation and biodiversity; communal socialisation, lore and law; artwork; ceremonial occasions (life, initiation and death); Illumination; protection against bad spirits...

For eg. Brough Smyth (1878:445) described how fire was used for warding off malevolent spirit creatures such as a large snake called Myndie which caused illness: 'When Myndie is known to be in any district, all the blacks run for their lives ... They set the bush on fire, and run as fast as they can.'



'This is a picture of Myndie as drawn by an Aboriginal, and it tallies with pictures made by men of other tribes' cited in Smyth (1878: 446)

Motivation for burning continued

- provision of personal warmth;
- Meeting point
- curative purposes;
- and the driving out of unwanted animals and insects.



'It was their custom to burn off the old grass and leaves and fallen branches in the forest, so as to allow of a free growth of young grass for the mammals that feed on grass ... they were at least careful to see that harm was not done to vegetables that yielded food.' (Smyth, 1878)



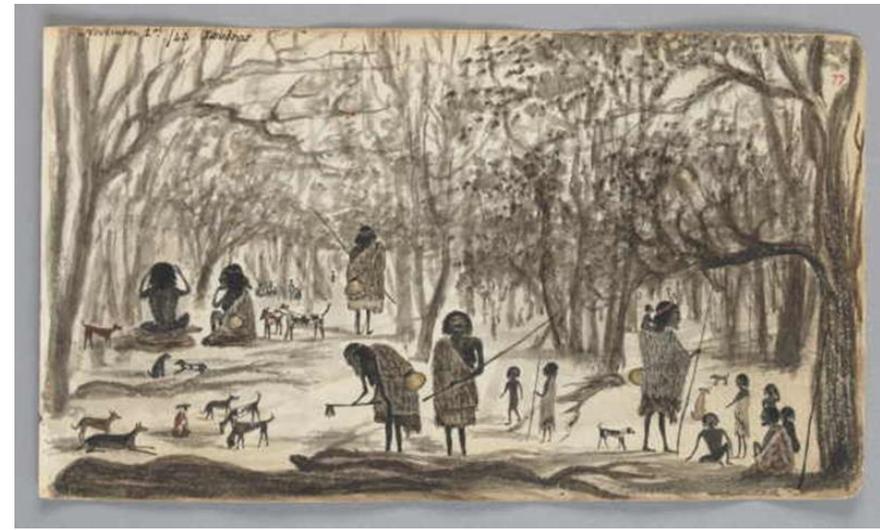
Motivations continued: Hunting of animals

'Kangaroos and wallabies were stalked and speared but when these larger animals were scarce fires were lit for the purpose of obtaining small game. The area burnt at any one time was limited to one or two acres [less than one hectare]. As the grass burned, the blacks, who had taken up positions around the fire, pounced on any lizard or small animal unfortunate enough to come into view in its efforts to escape. He emphasised that the blacks showed skill and judgement in the management of the fires and took great care not to let them get out of hand.' Harry Witham (Ormeo District)

Regeneration of plant food, identification & extending habitat

GA Robinson July 1841 in western Vic:

‘native women were spread over the plain as far as I could see them, collecting pannin, murnong, a privilege they would not be permitted except under my protection. I inspected their bags and baskets on their return and each had a load as much as she could carry. **They burn the grass, the better to see these roots but this burning is a fault charged against them by squatters.**’



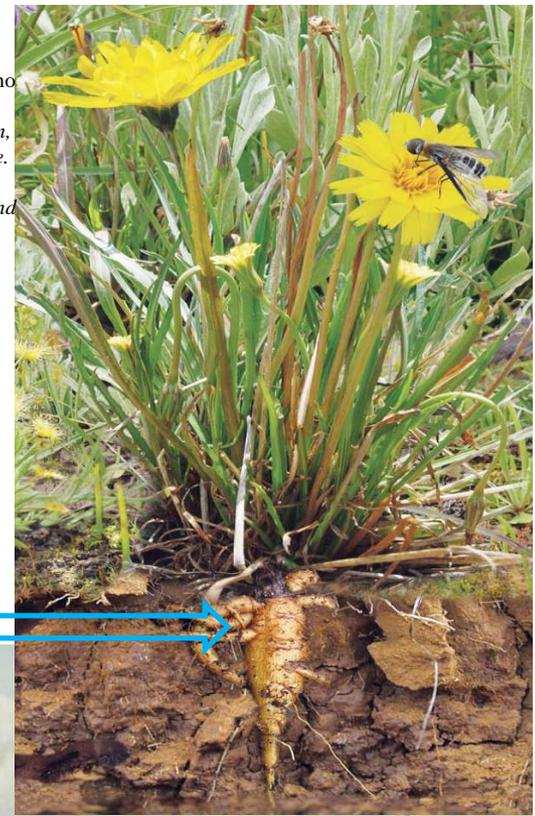
Scientific and historical motivations

Gott's (1983, 2005, 2012) ethnobotany research confirmed that frequent burning is required in order to maintain a maximal food supply of **herbaceous plant foods** [such as murnong]

By alternating patches of high and low fire fuel this mosaic **enabled the geographical spread of risk** across their territory in the event of unexpected wildfire.

Charles Sturt [Ovens River, April 1838]: 'as we advanced the reeds closed in upon us, and we moved through **narrow lanes**, or openings which the natives had burnt.'

Myrnong Yam Daisy: (a detail image) from the exhibition Volcano Dreaming. Bev Wood, Liz Fenton, Brian Bainbridge, Melissa Doherty, Trevor Pescott and Kerrie Poliness. Source: Artefact, 2012.

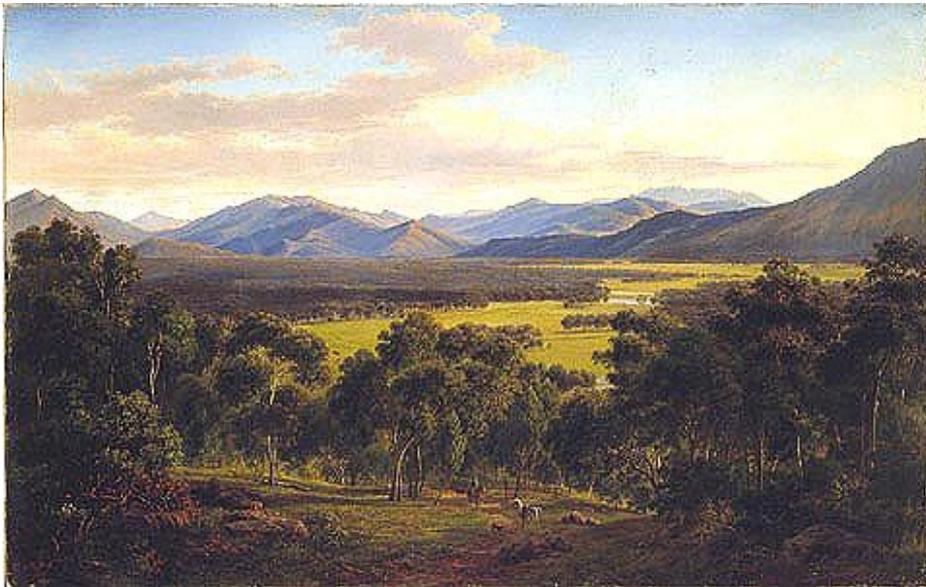


The historical record – used with caution

- Rhys Jones' 'fire-stick farming' (1969)  ignited debate about fire, Australia's landscape and Aboriginal people:
 1. Aboriginal people had little impact on the naturally occurring fire regime
 2. Fire activity increased with the arrival of European colonists, and
 3. Indigenous fire use was formative in the country's 1788 landscape
- Bill Gammage's (2012) *The Biggest Estate of Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia*: Aboriginal people used fire with precision, with intention and everywhere across Australia.
- Gammage's insightful contribution to the study of Australia's fire history is not without fault and has attracted criticism for applying its argument too widely across the country - and not consulting with Aboriginal people.

Very difficult to make large generalisations

- Regional differences eg 'in Gippsland' [specific vegetation zones?]
Le Souef (1840-60), Robinson (1840s) and Howitt (1890) considered the yearly burning of the eucalypt forests by Aboriginal people had ensured that the country was kept **'open'** and that the re-forestation of the country had occurred when the Aboriginal firing regime had declined.



E VON GUERARD, SPRING IN THE VALLEY OF THE MITTA MITTA WITH THE BOGONG RANGES, 1866



Robinson, for instance noted in 1844 that once the Aboriginal peoples in Gippsland had been usurped of their land: **'the country in consequence is unburnt, and that this is the reason the country is so scrubby.'**

From earliest period of colonisation on the coastline

- In January 1802, Cape Schanck and Port Phillip Bay, Murray 'found it impossible to survey any part of the Coast as yet from the numerous Native Fires which cover'd [sic] this low Shore in one volume of smoke'.
- Flemming, Arthurs Seat, Nov. 1802 'country was all newly burnt'.
- Grant, Dec 1802, Cape Bridgewater: 'Many fires seen...While near shore we saw plainly several fires...Saw several fires...plenty of grass and fine woods...many fires a little way inland...Many fires were seen
- Knopwood, Dec 1803-Jan 1804 frequent observations: 'native fires' on the Mornington Peninsula and 'across the bay' (Geelong), and 'large native fires' to the northwest (Melbourne).
- Captain King, 1818: 'In passing Cape Howe, we observed large fires burning on the hills, made by the natives'.
- Dumont D'Urville, 1826, Western Port: 'enveloped in huge spiralling clouds of smoke, no doubt resulting from the habitual burning off by the savages...fine stands of trees easy to get through...vast grass-covered clearings, with well defined paths linked by other tracks so regular and well-marked...it is hard to conceive how these could have happened without the hand of man.'

Inland too!

- Hume and Hovell's 'Journey of Discovery to Port Phillip' in 1824 is punctuated with references to Aboriginal people firing the land.
- Edward Henty in southwest Victoria, January 1835: 'Many fires in the bush',
- Webster, Hume R. Dec. 1840: 'from what I could judge, the firing of the grass had been quite recent...blacks have set fire to the grass ... we saw that as far as we could see from the camp the country was burned black...
- Kirby, Swan Hill, 1840: 'In the distance where the blacks had not burnt the reeds, it looked like large fields of ripe wheat; and nearer where they had burnt them, it had the appearance of a splendid crop just before it comes into ear.'

Senior Aboriginal peoples' intimate knowledge of fire

An old man...went and set fire to the Bush...I bid him desist but he said Black fellows ... would not know where they were if he did not make fire, and made one so [effectively] about him that I could not get aside him.

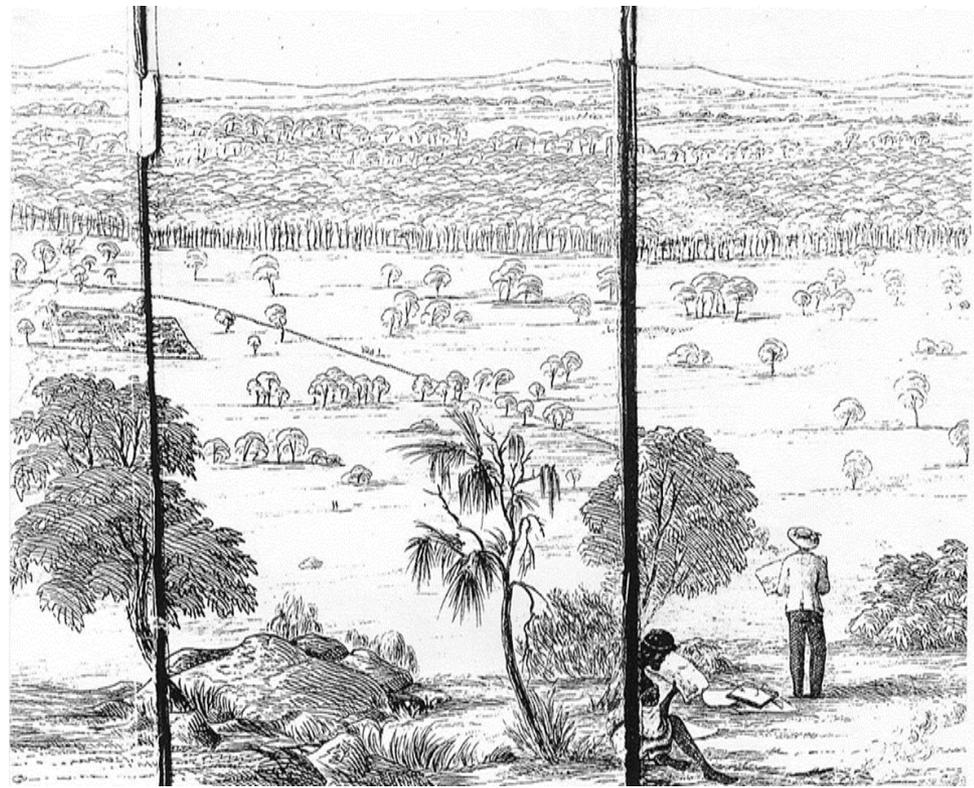
[The fire] Burnt furiously beyond conception for a thick scrub but a quantity of old grass [decayed] was underneath which accounted for it. The Old Man persisted, at half past one I again went where it was burning and to my great surprise what 2 hours before was a dense forest was now passable... I came up [to] the old man who had an old close body coat on, which I suppose he had put on to keep his body from being burnt and kept perhaps for the purpose as I never saw him with it on before. ... I went on till I came to the end of that already burnt [section] about half a mile and was surprised at the extent [of the fire.] As far as the eye could take in was still in flames and burning. At a little distance it sounded like water coming down a gentle fall, [but the] fire appear[ed] like a wall around you... (William Thomas, Cape Schank, c.1840)

‘having the appearance of an English park’

Gov. Bourke, 9 March 1837

‘Most of the high hills were covered with grass to the summit, and not a tree, although the land was as good as land could be. The whole appeared like land laid out in farms for some hundred years back, and every tree transplanted’

J Batman, 29 May 1835



‘The [Werribee] Plains are as open as the heaths of Cambridgeshire’ Charles Wedge , 1837

‘The ground is like a beautiful carpet, covered with grasses, herbs and flowers of various sorts – the scenery was that of an extensive park’ J Norcock, Sept 1836



Fighting *with* fire: Retaliation, Offensive, Defence & Signal



R: 'The woods are on fire every night. The blacks [Djabwurrung] set them alight in retaliation for being driven away' (Chabrillan, 1850s)

O: 'the landscape was being deliberately torched to drive us away' (Webster 1840). 'The fires in the bush are often the work of the natives, to frighten away the white men' (Kirkland, 1838)

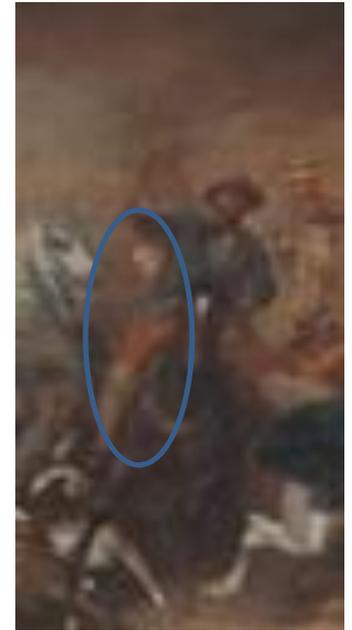
D: 'My God, the &c., &c., &c. blacks have set fire to the grass.' (Webster 1840)

S: 'The blacks have a signalling system and warn of our approach many days before our arrival' (Mitchell 1838)

Black Thursday, 6 Feb. 1851

'it was the local Aboriginal people who saved Captain Hepburn's family from the inferno descending upon them on Black Thursday by directing them to a safe spot near a creek.'

Macdonald family, Portland Bay District recalled how 'The Black Friday fires swept through "Retreat", but the men were able to save most of the stock by putting them in the dry river bed. Mary was very ill and the [presumably Gunditjmara] **aboriginal couple saved her and the children** by taking them to a water hole and then returned to save the house.'



Aboriginal traditions of fighting fire

- Gilmore (1934) recalled how local Aboriginal people would educate them in how to fight fire by: **'running for bushes, put them into the immigrants hands, and show how to beat back the flame as it licked up the grass.'**



- Fires of 1854 in western Victoria were, according to one squatter **'fought with as many of his Black troop as he could muster'** and in 1858 **'The blacks are busy fighting fires for me'**
- Early 20th century photos of Kurnai/Gurnai titled **'The First Bushfire Brigade'**
- **"Send for the blacks!"** was the first cry on every settlement when a fire started'.

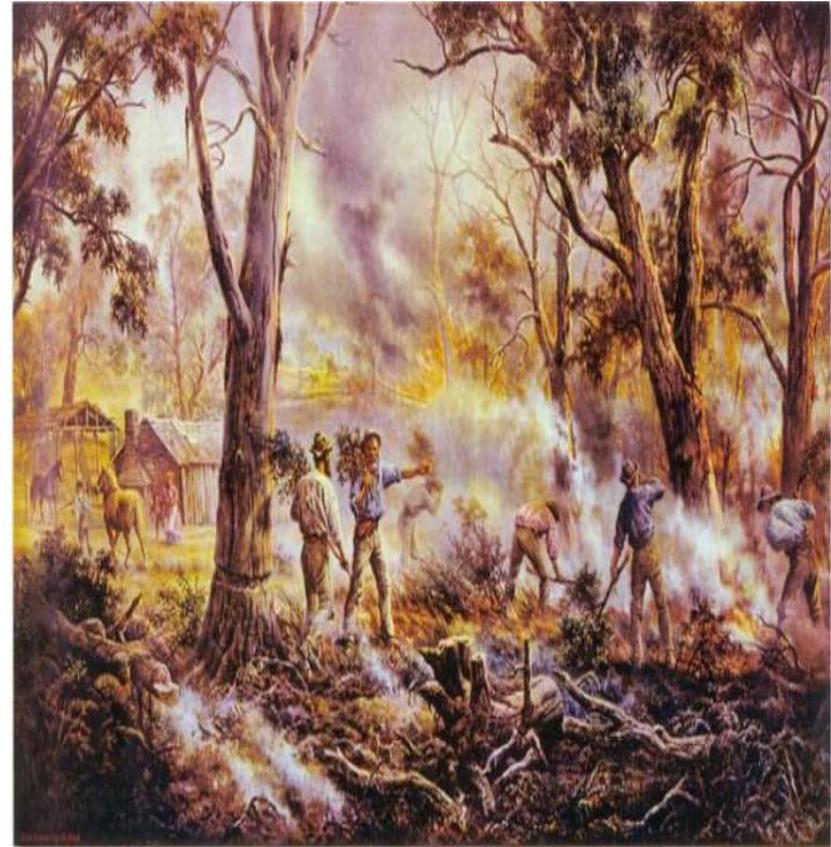
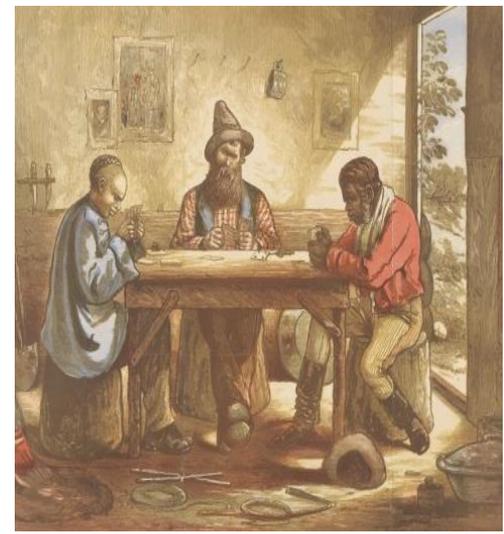
Saving those white fellas...again

'Aboriginals had warned local land holders of a bad bushfire approaching from the north. All night the wind screamed and raged furnace-hot. Worried landholders discussed the fire threat with them. It was decided to make a firebreak at once **on their advice and started a firebreak, getting it well down in a triangle...**' Suddenly the fire jumped the river...the Chinese (and Germans) had quickly buried their plant, bedding, furniture and food on the south side of the sand-dunes, and thus saved all of it, even as **the timely warning by the natives had saved the homestead, outhouses, and not least, the owners' lives.'**

McGivern's (1983) *History of Rutherglen*



(R) The Homestead Saved, an incident of the Great Gippsland Fire of 1898", JA Turner
(L)
(Top) Bush Euchre



Some tentative Conclusions & Implications

- The **written** accounts of Aboriginal burning practices in Victoria **indicate** that the application of fire was **managed, frequent** and over generally small areas of **grassland plains**.
- Colonists recognised an extensive use of fire by Aboriginal people in Victoria; some also recognised the extent to which Aboriginal people used fire with skill and purpose. This is clearly demonstrated in the historical record.
- Research has yielded positive historical and contemporary case studies by which communities may draw upon to **foster greater numbers** of Aboriginal people to enlist in local fire services;
- **nurture greater engagement** with Aboriginal lore and practice in relation to burning practices;
- provide a greater opportunity to further involve Aboriginal communities in the **research, planning and implementation** of burning programs.

Project Firefighters

Bendigo
03 5444 2888

Dja Dja Wurrung Clans
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Project Firefighters
08 Aug 2013

The Department of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI) and Parks Victoria (PV) are running a statewide search for fit and healthy people to become fire fighters this summer. A number of the positions have been identified as indigenous. Apply online at www.careers.vic.gov.au

Project Firefighters
Opportunities available statewide

For more information contact DEPI on 136 166 or Parks Victoria on 131 963

Applications close Sunday 6 September 2013

A number of positions have been identified as indigenous. These are designated positions under "social inclusion" section 17 of the Equal Opportunity Act 2010. Only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are eligible to apply for these positions. Applications will be treated on a strictly confidential Aboriginal basis.

Are you ready for the challenge?
All training will be provided and positions are open to anyone who:

- Has a high level of fitness.
- Is a team player.
- Holds a current manual drivers licence.

Positions are available over the warmer months and include firefighters, support officers, house and creek and riparian crews. Salaries commensurate from \$0.572 per week plus superannuation. Successful candidates become full time employees and will be employed by PV. All other successful candidates will be employed by DEPI. Apply online at www.careers.vic.gov.au (Reference Number: 446)

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