

Aboriginal guides of the Hunter Region 1800–1850

A case study in Indigenous labour history

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This article provides a brief history of the important contribution made by Aboriginal men in the Hunter region of central eastern New South Wales to colonial development from 1800 to 1850. In the Hunter, as in many parts of Australia, Aboriginal men gave critical aid to colonists exploring the vast, difficult terrains and waterways of the country. Aboriginal guides helped colonists in a number of ways, ranging from locating essential human needs such as water and food to discovering rich natural resources like coal and grasslands suitable for pastoral and agricultural industry. In particular instances, for example when individuals joined in major exploring expeditions, their assistance extended far beyond the boundaries of the Hunter region. Their invaluable contributions deserve a meritorious place in Australian exploration history.

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In his groundbreaking work *With the White People*, Henry Reynolds acknowledged the critical role of Aboriginal men in the exploration of Australia, while also suggesting there exists a notion of Aboriginal servitude and lesser status when he wrote “The Aboriginal guide – the ubiquitous, albeit often anonymous “black boy” – played a vital role in the European exploration of the continent.”¹ According to Reynolds, guides performed vital roles as diplomats, trackers and path-finders and assisted colonists on their travels by supplying water and food.² Similarly,

¹ Henry Reynolds *Black Pioneers: How Aboriginal and Islander People Helped Build Australia* (originally published as *With the White People*), Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books 2000, 33.

² Ibid.

historians Jill Milroy and John Host, in their study of Aboriginal labour in Western Australia, found that guides played a critical role in the development of that colony. Milroy and Host noted, 'From the earliest days of European settlement, WA has relied like other Australian states on the skills and labour of Aboriginal people. Without their expertise as guides and trackers, colonial expansion would have been severely restricted.'³

The popular genre of Australian exploration history remains relatively untouched by such scholarly insights. As historian Nigel Parbury notes, 'In general Aboriginal guides were written out of the legend of Australian exploration and generations of Australian school children learnt of the discoveries and exploits of white explorers. All credit went to the white man, as did the land.' Parbury acknowledges that there were notable exceptions, such as Wylie, who journeyed with Edward Eyre across the Great Australian Bight, and Jackey Jackey, who took part in Edmund Kennedy's Cape York expedition and was its sole survivor. These men 'were too central to the story be written out'. Instead, Parbury suggests, they were 'used as uplifting stories of native fidelity'.⁴ They thus appear only as the subservient 'black boy' whose 'ubiquitous' presence Reynolds noted.

Aboriginal men have thus been consistently assigned a lesser status and significance in comparison to the heroic European explorers valorised in popular and educational literature. In this article I argue that the work of such Aboriginal guides and their contribution to colonial development may be better understood by placing it in the context of the local, daily assistance that some of them offered to colonists from the days of early contact. Using a case study of the Hunter River region, I show that their contribution went far beyond subsidiary roles on epic exploratory expeditions, and extended to assisting colonists arriving in the Hunter by orientating and educating them to unfamiliar lands, waterways and environment. A close re-reading of early European accounts of settlement, exploration and contact yields a surprisingly rich and diverse history of the ways in which Aboriginal knowledge, skills and labour supported economic development.

On the frontiers of colonial settlement, even a day trip into the country, whether crossing a river or walking through a forest, was a journey of

³ John Host and Jill Milroy 'Towards an Aboriginal labour history', in John Host, Jill Milroy and Tom Stannage (eds) *World Studies in Western Australian History*, Perth: Centre for Western Australian History, University of Western Australia 2001, 6.

⁴ Nigel Parbury *Survival: A History of Aboriginal Life in New South Wales*, Sydney: Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs 2005, 65.

exploration. From a colonial perspective, exploration was any excursion to a strange place where something new was learned or gained with the support of Aboriginal guides. The contribution of Aboriginal guides was crucial to such endeavours, and not limited to marathon journeys of exploration.

The history of colonial development in the Hunter can be broadly divided into two major phases between 1800 and 1850. The first phase of development was dominated by a secondary penal colony which began on the southern banks at the mouth of the Hunter River in March 1804. The penal colony was established primarily to exploit large deposits of coal and abundant stands of timber using convict labour. Colonial development in this period from 1804 to 1822 was limited to the immediate waterways around the Newcastle settlement and the inland districts of the Hunter remained largely unknown to colonial authorities.

A second phase of colonial development commenced following the discovery of vast grasslands and large freshwater rivers in the Upper Hunter Valley in 1820. From this time the Hunter Region was opened up to free settlement, heralding a burgeoning pastoral and agricultural industry where millions of hectares were forcibly occupied by colonists resulting in major disruption to local Aboriginal people. Amidst the rough and tumble frontier conflict that followed colonial development in the Hunter, some Aboriginal men provided invaluable service as guides, helping new colonists who arrived in the Hunter and who would have otherwise been disorientated in a foreign land.

Aboriginal guides and penal settlements, 1804–22

At the turn of the eighteenth century, the Hunter region lay almost undiscovered from a colonial perspective. Lieutenant John Shortland charted the entrance to the Hunter River in September 1797, noting the presence of ‘a very considerable quantity of coal of a very good sort, and lying so near the water side as to be conveniently shipped’.⁵ Shortland’s report influenced colonial authorities in Sydney who subsequently instructed colonists to go to the Hunter and extract coal. Captain William Reid was directed by Governor Phillip Gidley King to sail the *Martha* to ‘the Hunter River for coals’ in July 1800 and accidentally discovered the entrance to Lake Macquarie. First Fleet colonist David Collins wrote:

⁵ John Windross and John Paul Ralston *Historical Records of Newcastle 1797–1897*, Sydney: Federal Printing and Bookbinding Works 1978, 8.

By the master's account it appeared, that he had not been in the river, but in a salt water inlet, about five leagues to the southward ... He was conducted by some natives to a small distance from the mouth, where he found abundance of coal.⁶

Aboriginal people were not only guiding colonists to valuable resources, but helping a disoriented captain, uncertain of his bearings.

In the following year a survey party led by Lieutenant James Grant explored the lower banks of the Hunter River to assess its commercial potential. Bangaree, an Aboriginal man from the Sydney district, accompanied the party and when they encountered an Aboriginal man in the Newcastle district, Grant asked Bangaree to act as an interpreter, noting in his report,

With us ... went one of the natives Bangaree ... Our new acquaintance Dick, as soon as he got on board, continued his cries of Whale Boat ... in order to discover what he meant by this, I introduced him to Bangaree, with directions to the latter to question him on the subject.⁷

In these early stages Aboriginal men were being used as interpreters on the frontiers of colonisation in the Hunter.

Grant reported to Governor King that a plethora of riches awaited colonial development in the lower Hunter River district, including a large harbour that was sheltered from all winds, where 'great advantage from a mine of coals' could be acquired. Grant also described large forests, including cedar 'which is growing in abundance on the banks of that river, of a large size, and excellent quality'.⁸ Governor King directed Lieutenant Charles Menzies to establish a secondary penal colony on the southern bank near the entrance to the Hunter River at Newcastle. King's instructions to Menzies were to 'proceed in His Majesty's armed tender Lady Nelson' and 'after taking the necessary measures for securing the stores, provisions, yourself, and people, you will cause the prisoners to be employed in getting as many coals as possible at hand, and procuring cedar from the upper part of the harbour'.⁹

⁶ David Collins *An Account of the English Colony in New South*, vol 2, Sydney: A H & A W Reed Pty Ltd 1975, 213.

⁷ James Grant *The Narrative of a Voyage of Discovery, Performed in His Majesty's Vessel the Lady Nelson, of Sixty Tons Burthen, with Sliding Keels, in the Years 1800, 1801 and 1802, to New South Wales*, London: C Roworth for T Egerton 1803, 150.

⁸ *Ibid*, 152,153.

⁹ *Historical Records of Australia: Series 1, Governors' Despatches to and from England*, vol 4, 1803–June 1804, Sydney: Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament 1915, 619.

For the deputation of twenty soldiers and about the same number of convicts who arrived at Newcastle on 30 March 1804, the Hunter was an imposing and remote wilderness. After setting up a tent campsite the prisoners were assigned positions in working gangs as colliers and timber cutters. To convicts, the prospect of hard labour, meagre rations and desolate living conditions inspired a strong desire for freedom, culminating in numerous escapes. Menzies used Aboriginal men as guides in alliance with the soldiers to pursue absconders from the penal colony. As the early historian of Newcastle Henry W H Huntington wrote:

At the close of the year 1804 one or two persons of a restless character induced several others to elope from the settlement and commit themselves to the insurmountable dangers of the forest. Immediately the commandant (Lieutenant Menzies) heard of the escape of the desperadoes he despatched a detachment of military in search of the fugitives. A party of natives accompanied the soldiers, and tracked the runaways to their lair.¹⁰

Colonial authorities were relying on prisoners to mine coal and cut timber and thus apprehending absconders helped to safeguard their labour supply. Soldiers, like convicts, were unfamiliar with the wilderness surrounding the penal colony; Aboriginal men, by guiding soldiers in pursuit of felons, were also orientating them to the geographical layout of the terrain. In 1820 the reports made by Commissioner J T Bigge suggested Aboriginal men had an ongoing role in providing support to the soldiers at the penal colony. Bigge stated:

Many attempts are made by the prisoners to escape, and the native blacks that inhabit the neighbourhood Port Hunter and Port Stephens have become very active in retaking the fugitive convicts. They accompany the soldiers who are sent in pursuit, and by extraordinary strength of sight that they possess, improved by their daily exercise of it in pursuit of kangaroos and opossums, they can trace with wonderful accuracy, the impressions of the human foot. Nor are they afraid of meeting the fugitive convicts; by their skill in throwing their long and pointed wooden darts they wound and disable them, strip them of their clothes, and bring them back as prisoners, by unknown routes and paths to the Coal River.¹¹

Bigge's reference to the 'unknown routes and paths to the Coal River' shows how Aboriginal acquaintance with the terrain assisted the

¹⁰ H W H Huntington, 'History of Newcastle', *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 14 January 1898.

¹¹ Dan O'Donnell *The History of Early Newcastle 1800–1870: Documents and Illustrations*, Newcastle: Longworth & Goodwin, Lambton 1969, 22.

recapture of fleeing prisoners, and highlights the limited geographical knowledge colonists still had of the Hunter in 1820.

Aboriginal men, through their intimate knowledge of the landscape, thus played an active role assisting the soldiers, making a major contribution to the colonial development of the area by ensuring the prisoner population remained incarcerated and continued to supply labour to exploit coal and timber. Indeed it would seem that without Aboriginal guidance and support the convict labour supply would have been severely depleted by abandonment. Their role brought Aboriginal people into direct conflict with convicts, sometimes with fatal outcomes as seen in the trial of John Kirby and Jack Thompson. 'Burigon', an elder of the Newcastle Aboriginal community, was returning the two escaped convicts to the penal settlement when he was mortally wounded from a knife attack by the hand of Kirby. The commandant at Newcastle, James Thomas Morisset, reported to Governor Macquarie with the intention of bringing the perpetrator to trial. Paraphrasing the evidence given at the trial, the *Sydney Gazette* commented on the sad death of 'this kind, useful, and intelligent elder'.¹² John Kirby was hanged on 18 December 1820 – the first white man to be executed in the colony for the murder of an Aboriginal person. Indeed the commandants at the Newcastle penal colony generally took a stern approach toward convicts who caused injury to Aboriginal people. The register of monthly punishments reveals that Morisset ordered floggings for several convicts who assaulted Aboriginal people. In September 1819 a convict was given 75 lashes for 'stabbing a native'. In October the following year another convict was dealt 25 lashes for 'intimidating a native'.¹³ Such punishments perhaps indicate the high value that officials placed on Aboriginal support for the settlement.

Under the rule of Lachlan Macquarie, who was sworn in as governor of the NSW colony in 1810, several important exploratory expeditions culminated in major economic developments. Ever on the lookout for land suitable for agricultural and pastoral industry, Macquarie had great success with the discovery by Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth in 1813 of vast grazing lands in the Bathurst district. However the lands to the north west of Sydney presented a rugged mountainous barrier

¹² R v Kirby and Thompson, 1820, Superior Courts of NSW. Accessed 23 August 2012. Available from: <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/cases/nsw//NSWSupC/1820/11.html>.

¹³ Monthly Returns of Punishments, Newcastle, CSIL Special Bundles 4/1718, (September 1819) in Gianni Di Gravio (ed.), *Virtual Sourcebook of Aboriginal Studies in the Hunter Region*, Archives Rare Books & Special Collections Unit, Auchmuty Library, University of Newcastle, 2005.

and attempts by William Parr and Benjamin Singleton to penetrate this country proved unsuccessful. A route was finally discovered when John Howe, a constable stationed at Windsor, made an exploratory expedition to the north of the Hawkesbury River in 1819 with two Aboriginal guides, Myles and Mullaboy.

On 24 October 1819, Howe left Windsor with his party of five Europeans and two Aboriginal guides and travelled north-west, until halted by impenetrable terrain. Howe noted in his diary on 30 October:

Sunday – sent two natives out as we could proceed no further in the direction I wanted to go, for creeks, lagoons and rocks that are impassable. They returned about half-past 7 o'clock with two boys, having met a guide that would wait for and go with us.¹⁴

Howe reached the Hunter near Doyle's Creek on 5 November 1819, where he found 'much fine grazing land', but he was not satisfied with the route. The following February Howe led another expedition, again using Aboriginal guides, and this time he successfully reached the vast open grasslands of upper Hunter Valley. As historian Nancy Gray puts it: 'following the expert advice of the native guides, Howe mapped a route which is now the Bulga Road'.¹⁵

The importance of Aboriginal guides to John Howe cannot be overstated. The impenetrable rugged mountains with meandering valleys and rock cliffs presented an extreme challenge but, with the support of his Aboriginal guides, Howe found a route to the upper Hunter Valley after several earlier attempts had been aborted by Singleton and Parr. Myles and Mullaboy had played a vital role helping Howe find a route to the valley's grasslands and rich alluvial soils ideal for agriculture and pastoral industry.

Aboriginal guides and colonial development, 1822–1850

When colonists first arrived at Newcastle they often relied on Aboriginal people to guide them on excursions into the surrounding countryside. For the colonists, even short day trips outside the immediate precincts of the settlement were potentially perilous ventures into the unknown.

¹⁴ J F Campbell *John Howe's Exploratory Journey from Windsor to the Hunter River in 1819*, Sydney: Royal Australian Historical Society 1929, 232–241.

¹⁵ Nancy Gray 'Howe, John (1774–1852)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University. Accessed 15 March 2010. Available from: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/howe-john-2205/text2855>.

Aboriginal guides escorted colonists on such journeys and familiarised them with the physical geography of these new lands, waterways and environments. For instance in 1821 a party of colonists, including Reverend Middleton, was guided to Lake Macquarie by Aboriginal people. A participant on this trip later recalled:

Our parson, the Rev F A Middleton, who was an especial favourite with the blacks, started with myself, with the whole tribe of upwards of 100 on a walking trip to Lake Macquarie. Our necessary supplies, blankets, &c., they carried on their heads. On arrival, I was enchanted with its beautiful scenery, and can never forget it. The whole surrounding country and lake were serene and still; solitude reigned; no tree disturbed; no trace of white man's civilisation, but all in its wild natural state. We enjoyed all the wild sports of Australian bush life in its primitive state as the Aborigines of that day (before they were contaminated with our vices) were accustomed to enjoy them, shooting, fishing, kangarooing, and hunting, our game was ample for us all. They supplied us also (by diving) with the finest mud oysters for which the waters of the lake are noted. These we scalloped on our bush fires, and we spent five or six days of as much enjoyment as I have ever had in any part of the world.¹⁶

In the same year plans were being implemented to open up the Hunter for colonial occupation. In March 1821, Governor Macquarie instructed Captain Francis Allman to supervise the relocation of the Newcastle prison population to Port Macquarie.

Allman sought help from three Aboriginal men from Newcastle to act as interpreters, bush constables and trackers. Birabhan, Bob Barret and Werahkatah (Jemmy Jackass) were influential in developing positive relations with Aboriginal people at Port Macquarie as well as apprehending prisoners who attempted escape.¹⁷ Historian Iaen McLachlan noted:

Allman partly solved the escape problem by enlisting the support of the Aborigines. Allman armed several of the Aborigines he trusted and by 1823 Monunggal had taken part in a number of captures of runaway convicts and his name was feared by the prisoners.¹⁸

Allman with support from Birabahn, Barret and Jackass was able to befriend Aboriginal leaders such as Monunggal who in turn assisted the

¹⁶ Windross and Ralston *Historical Records of Newcastle*, 8.

¹⁷ Niel Gunson (ed) *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L E Threlkeld, Missionary to the Aborigines 1824-1859*, vol 2, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies 1974, 315, 316.

¹⁸ Iaen McLachlan *A Place of Banishment, Port Macquarie 1818-1832*, Sydney: Hale and Iremonger 1988, 79, 80.

colonist to apprehend escaped convicts and deter further attempts. Such an alliance was crucial during the resettlement of the convict population to Port Macquarie.

At Newcastle colonial authorities moved quickly, following Howe's discovery of the upper Hunter Valley, to prepare the region for colonial development. Governor Macquarie's successor, Thomas Brisbane, instructed Henry Dangar to commence surveys of the Hunter Valley and also Port Stephens for the Australian Agricultural Company (AAC). Thousands of hectares were designated for colonial occupation. Commenting on the 'extraordinary advances in settlement' between 1822 and 1825, which added considerably to the 'respectability and importance' of the colony, Dangar took the Hunter River district as a particularly notable example of that expansion:

here, from March 1822 to November 1826, when I left the surveys of that district, the amazing extent of 372 141 acres were appropriated to settlers; 132 164 acres were allotted for church and school purposes; to which may be added 100 000 acres which were surveyed and not appropriated; making altogether 604 305 acres. In this division of country, occupying upwards of 150 miles along the river, which in 1822, possessed little more than its aboriginal inhabitants, in 1826–27, more than half a million of acres were appropriated and in a forward state of improvement.¹⁹

Hundreds of colonists arrived in the Hunter and thousands of hectares of 'wilderness', the homelands of Aboriginal people, were turned into sheep and cattle stations. The region had developed from a penal colony with a primary interest in coal and timber to large scale pastoral and agricultural industry. Dangar highlights this rapid colonial development stating:

The traveller's attention is everywhere arrested by a busy agriculture; houses and yards of respectable settlers; healthy and well-fed labourers; and every appearance denoting rapid improvement. Here, in 1827, were upwards of 25 000 head of horned cattle, and 80 000 fine and improved-wool sheep; with a capital already in possession of the settlers, and in great activity ... This is a scale of capital and industry introduced in one division of a colony, in five years, to which I doubt whether a parallel instance in the annals of colonization can be adduced.²⁰

¹⁹ Henry Dangar *Index and Directory to Map of the Country Bordering upon The Hunter River; The Lands of the Australian-Agricultural Company; with The Ground-Plan and Allotments of King's Town, New South Wales*, London: Joseph Cross 1828, 127, 128.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 128.

This rapid land grab had severe consequences for the Aboriginal population. Faced with a sudden onslaught of cattle and sheep 'in possession of the settlers', Aboriginal people in the upper Hunter Valley defended their lands and waterways against the intrusion. Aboriginal historian James Miller noted in reference to the upper Hunter Valley in 1826, 'The Kooris could bear it no longer, but they knew they needed united action to overcome the white man's power.'²¹

Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld, who established mission at Lake Macquarie in 1825, reported to the London Mission Society that a militant offensive had begun against Aboriginal people in the upper Hunter Valley. On 4 September 1826 he wrote,

But Alas! The blood of the Blacks begins to flow, we are in state of warfare up the country here – two Stockmen have been speared in retaliation for the 4 natives who were deliberately shot without any trial or form whatever.²²

Robert Dawson, inaugural manager of the AAC, gave a similar bleak picture at Port Stephens. The AAC, which included investors from England, received a million-acre land grant extending from Stroud to the southern side of the Manning River, encompassing the lands and waterways of Port Stephens.²³ Dawson established a site on the western side of Port Stephens at Carrington in February 1826. He wrote 'The natives are a mild and harmless race of savages; and where any mischief has been done by them, the cause has generally arisen, I believe in bad treatment by their white neighbours.'²⁴

When he first arrived at Newcastle, Dawson kidnapped an Aboriginal man to act as his guide, using tobacco and clothes to conciliate his captive. He wrote:

The black man whom we had thus caught, was our only guide, and it was with much reluctance that he consented to act in that capacity alone; but after travelling a few miles he soon became reconciled, and elated with the thought of the clothes and good cheer I had promised him when we should arrive; he was still further gratified in being allowed to carry a musket.²⁵

²¹ James Miller *Koori, A Will to Win: The Heroic Resistance, Survival and Triumph of Black Australia*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson 1985, 34–36.

²² Gunson *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L E Threlkeld*, 213.

²³ Damaris Bairstow *A Million Pounds, A Million Acres: The Pioneer Settlement of the Australian Agricultural Company*, Sydney: D Bairstow 2003, 5.

²⁴ Robert Dawson *The Present State of Australia*, London: Smith & Elder Company 1831, 57, 58.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

After this Dawson developed positive relations with Aboriginal people at Port Stephens, as noted by historian Damaris Bairstow who states: 'Dawson's exploration of December, 1826, was guided by aborigines who also found water and lit the fires'.²⁶ Dawson expressed gratitude for the support he received, writing: 'I was indebted to the natives who acted as my guides upon every occasion, not only when on horseback, but also in the boat, in which they frequently rowed me up the rivers and various creeks ... The assistance which I derived from them, whether as guides or labourers, exceeded any thing I can describe.'²⁷

To colonists in an alien environment critical needs like water were essential and Aboriginal men located water for Dawson on his exploratory travels at Port Stephens. He noted: 'They would walk miles rather than drink bad water. Indeed they were such excellent judges of water that I always depended upon their selection when we encamped at a distance from a river, and was never disappointed.'²⁸ On one occasion he wrote of a journey that lasted from half-past six in the morning until eight at night, by which time the party, which included Aboriginal guides, were exhausted and thirsty. Their thirst was quenched when the 'black men' located water, 'which only they could find in this sandy desert'.²⁹ Dawson wrote of his frontier explorations at Port Stephens:

When I take an excursion in the bush, I am generally pretty well attended, and never enjoy myself more than at such times. I have several pack-horses, with tents for myself and companions when I have any, and men sufficient to accompany us, if on an expedition of any importance, and where difficulties in travelling are anticipated from rivers, rocky mountains, and creeks; and two or three natives always attend as guides and interpreters.³⁰

The 'rivers, rocky mountains and creeks' mentioned by Dawson would have presented formidable barriers without the support of Aboriginal guides.

Dawson rewarded Aboriginal people for their services 'by giving them such food as we had, and also tobacco of which they are excessively fond'.³¹ As historian Mark Hannah found in his research on Aboriginal employment with the AAC, 'Aboriginal workers did have to adjust to the

²⁶ Bairstow *A Million Pounds, A Million Acres*, 85.

²⁷ Dawson *The Present State of Australia*, 28–29.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 150.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 72–73.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 49.

³¹ *Ibid*, 59.

new economy, but those changes did not necessarily involve the adoption of contemporary European cultural values'.³² In other words, Aboriginal guides were utilising their customary skills to work with Dawson, capitalising on their knowledge of the environment.

In other parts of the Hunter, Aboriginal people were working in more orthodox European occupations by not only guiding and providing foods to colonists, but also carrying their baggage and cooking for them. This is evident in the records of surgeon Peter Cunningham, who took up a Crown Land grant in the upper Hunter Valley in 1826. Cunningham wrote:

A resident here in travelling through the wood, accompanied by a white servant and a party of blacks as porters of his luggage and conductors of his route, halted to bivouac for the night, when his black friends, after accommodating him with a fire, lighted one for themselves at a very respectful distance, and by his desire commenced cooking a brace of birds for his and the servant's supper.³³

Lieutenant William Schavell Coke was an officer of His Majesty's 39th Regiment of Foot, who arrived in Sydney on the convict ship *Regalia* on 5 August 1827. He was stationed at Newcastle and during his term befriended an Aboriginal man called Desmond. Desmond acted as a guide for Coke and constantly supplied the military officer with fresh foods. On one occasion Coke employed Aboriginal guides on an excursion north to Port Stephens. On 9 August he noted in his diary how 'the Blacks supplied us with fish', and their guide navigated a passage across the waterway. He writes 'Our Boat ran off for Nelson's Bay as it began to blow fresh. After dinner we crossed the Bay having a black as a Pilot.'³⁴ Colonists would have been greatly advantaged in such instances with the local knowledge of Aboriginal guides through these potentially dangerous waterways of Port Stephens with their strong tidal currents.

Likewise the myriad waterways and dense forests along the perimeters of Lake Macquarie presented dangers to colonists unfamiliar with these surroundings. James Backhouse, a naturalist and Quaker missionary from England, travelled to Newcastle by ship in 1836 and journeyed to Lake Macquarie to visit Reverend Threlkeld. Backhouse engaged the

³² Mark Hannah 'Aboriginal workers in the Australian Agricultural Company, 1824–1857', *Labour History* 82, 2002, 30.

³³ Dawson *The Present State of Australia*, 193.

³⁴ Cynthia Hunter *The 1827 Newcastle Notebook and Letters of Lieutenant William S Coke, HM 39th Regiment Officer in Charge of the Military Garrison Stationed at Newcastle During 1827*, Raymond Terrace, NSW: Hunter House Publications 1997, 49.

assistance of Birabahn, who had earlier given Allman such valuable support and was now providing service to Threlkeld and his visitors. He recorded that on 27 April, 'with this view we engaged as our guide Beerabahn or Mc Gill, a tall, intelligent man, the chieftain of the Blacks resorting thither. We set out with our black conductor named Boatman or Boardman.'³⁵

During his stay at Ebenezer, the Quaker missionary was also escorted around Lake Macquarie by Aboriginal guides. Backhouse recalled that on one trip on 29 April 'We accompanied L E Threlkeld in a boat rowed by three Blacks, to the site of the old missionary station, at the head of the Lake, where we landed on a fine stream of coal.'³⁶ On 2 May 1836 Backhouse returned to Newcastle with 'sable guides' leading the way. According to Backhouse his Aboriginal guides were remunerated: 'On reaching Newcastle, they received their wages in bread, tea, sugar, and tobacco.'³⁷

Captain Charles Wilkes, who commanded a United States scientific expedition to Antarctica that stopped in Sydney, noted the service of Aboriginal guides to his colleagues. Alfred Agate and Horatio Hale ventured from Sydney to visit Threlkeld at Lake Macquarie. On their arrival at Newcastle, Agate and Hale were guided by Aboriginal men to Lake Macquarie. Wilkes wrote 'Mr Threlkeld's conveyance did not arrive, and not being able to get another, they determined to walk to Lake Macquarie, and for this purpose they resorted to natives as guides.'³⁸

Successive managers of the AAC also used Aboriginal men to aid them in apprehending suspected criminals. In 1827 a convict shepherd employed by the AAC was speared by an Aboriginal man, and Dawson called upon 'native guides' to help him track down the suspected offender. As he reported: 'I accordingly took a party of the military and such native guides as I could depend upon and went amongst the distant tribes of the Myall River, where the criminal is known to have fled.'³⁹ The pursuit was unsuccessful – partly, he suspected, because his pursuing party had some kinship with the men they sought.⁴⁰ After Sir Edward Parry

³⁵ James Backhouse *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies*, London: Hamilton, Adams and Co 1843, 379.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 381.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 384.

³⁸ Charles Wilkes *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842*, Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard 1845, 248.

³⁹ Gunson *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L E Threlkeld*, 359.

⁴⁰ Penny Russell *Savage or Civilised? Manners in Colonial Australia* Sydney: UNSW Press 2010, 78.

succeeded Dawson as Company manager in 1829, he engaged Aboriginal men to form a posse to apprehend robbers who had burgled the residence of a colonist at Tahlee. Following a pursuit lasting several weeks, the offenders were arrested and put on trial for robbery at Maitland Local Court House, where they were sentenced to imprisonment on Norfolk Island. Parry wrote in his diary in July 1830:

Captain Corlette was despatched in his boat to Sawyer's Point to see what could be discovered on either side of the water, while Mr Chas. Hall, with a party of blacks, set out to follow up the track, seen last night, which they succeeded in tracing to Sawyer's Point, giving reason to suppose that a canoe had been employed to carry the offender and money over the river.⁴¹

Yet again Aboriginal men had been enlisted to assist colonial authorities to apprehend law breakers and had successfully collaborated as part of a posse to arrest the thieves. In doing so they were helping colonial authorities maintain social order in the same manner as seen in the first phase of colonisation where they had performed a vital role in tracking escapees from the penal colony.

The skills brought to colonial development by Aboriginal men were still apparent in the next decade in the burgeoning pastoral and agricultural industry that characterised many parts of the Hunter. Aboriginal men were now capitalising on their innate skill to gain employment as cattle hands and shepherds where their knowledge of the land allowed them to offer highly advantageous services to colonists. Aboriginal men could find stray cattle and sheep for they knew the valleys and gullies better than any European. Their services as pastoral workers were also being utilised to apprehend cattle rustlers and bushrangers. Threlkeld noted on 31 November 1840:

Many have gone off to become good horsemen with us, and then have gone off to other persons. Two lads have been exceedingly serviceable for several weeks past, in tracing out and pursuing with the horse police, a gang of bushrangers who have plundered many persons in the districts in a most daring manner ... one of the lads traced them for miles to the very place where the horse police found and captured their horses.⁴²

So it can be seen that Aboriginal men were contributing toward colonial development in several ways as guides, trackers and stockmen in serving graziers in the pastoral industry.

⁴¹ Gunson *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L E Threlkeld*, 28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 166–167.

The contribution of Aboriginal guides from the Hunter extended well beyond the boundaries of the region – as seen earlier in the roles of Birabahn, Boatman and Jackass in the relocation of the penal colony from Newcastle to Port Macquarie. Other noteworthy examples include the heroic deeds of Galmara, alias Jackey Jackey, and Harry Brown. Both were born in the Hunter region and became involved in major exploratory expeditions to northern parts of Australia. Late historian Edgar Beale wrote of Galmara, sole survivor of Kennedy's fateful Cape York expedition in 1848, that he had:

a reputation for hard work, sagacity and superb bushcraft; as privation and disaster gradually overcame the party he steadily emerged as one of its strongest members ... trapped by the mangroves and swamps of the Escape River within a few miles of the waiting supply ship there blacks attacked them and Kennedy was killed; still in danger Jackey buried him and then made his own escape. With heroic tenacity he made his way at last to the supply ship, reaching it about a fortnight later on 23 December 1848. Though completely exhausted, he could not rest the first night of his return, but grieved for his dead master.⁴³

Subsequently Galmara guided a rescue party which failed to recover Kennedy's remains. Galmara was honoured for his allegiance to Kennedy by Sir Charles Fitzroy who presented him with a silver breast-plate in recognition of his accomplishments and assistance.

Harry Brown was an Aboriginal man from Newcastle who accompanied Ludwig Leichhardt on an exploratory expedition to Port Essington in 1844. Brown and another Aboriginal man, Charley Fisher from Bathurst, set off with Leichhardt from Jimbour Station in the Darling Downs, Queensland, on 1 October 1844. During this expedition, Leichhardt and his party were attacked by Aboriginal warriors on 28 June 1845. The two Aboriginal men, Brown and Fisher, fended off the attack and saved the lives of the group. Leichhardt writes:

Charley and Brown called for caps, which I hastened to find, and, as soon as they were provided, they discharged their guns into the crowd of the natives who instantly fled, leaving Roper and Calvert pierced with spears, and severely beaten by their waddies.⁴⁴

⁴³ Edgar Beale 'Jackey Jackey (?–1854)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University. Accessed 10 June 2011. Available from: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/jackey-jackey-2264/text2897>.

⁴⁴ Dr Ludwig Leichhardt *Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia from Morton Bay to Port Essington, A Distance of Upwards of 3000 Miles During the Years 1844–1845*, London: T and W Boone 1847, 308, 309.

Brown also provided a vital service in supplying fresh food to the expedition party on the gruelling journey. Leichhardt recognised this contribution when he noted: 'Brown rendered himself very useful in shooting ducks, which were very numerous on the waterholes; and he succeeded several times in killing six, eight, or ten, at one shot.'⁴⁵ In this way Brown facilitated the expedition by preserving the food supplies or as Leichhardt put it, 'saved two messes of our meat'.⁴⁶ Brown was a vital member on this epic expedition, and not a mere adjunct. Apart from providing food, Brown and Fisher were continually requested by Leichhardt to find water for the exploration party. He wrote, for example, 'I sent Charley and Brown in different directions to look for water.'⁴⁷

Reaching Port Essington on 17 December 1845 and returning to Sydney by ship in March 1846, Brown and Fisher had taken part in arguably the greatest overland expedition in Australian exploration history: a journey covering 3000 miles taking 14 months of rigorous and difficult travel to complete. Brown and Fisher received fifty pounds for their services: 'lodged in the Savings' Bank, and will not be drawn out without the approval of the Vice President of that Institution'.⁴⁸

Leichhardt conducted a second expedition in December 1846 and Brown was again included in the party along with another Aboriginal man, Womma Calias Jemmy. A final expedition in 1848, without Brown, proved fatal. The entire party, which included an Aboriginal man from Stroud in the Hunter region called Billy, disappeared somewhere in vast outback Australia without a trace.⁴⁹ Threlkeld thought so highly of the skills of Brown that he wrote, 'This aborigine might have proven of the greatest use in extricating the party from local difficulties, or in quickly discovering the ambush of hostile blacks.'⁵⁰

Conclusion

While it is apparent that colonists were inclined to engage Aboriginal guides because of their innate knowledge and skill in the unfamiliar terrain of frontier expansion, it is less clear what motivated Aboriginal

⁴⁵ Ibid, 287.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 290.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 384.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 538, 539.

⁴⁹ Jimbour: Living History, 'Explorer Ludwig Leichhardt and Jimbour'. Accessed 21 June 2011. Available from: <http://www.jimbour.com/index.php?MMID=1078&SMID=1173>.

⁵⁰ Gunson *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L E Threlkeld*, 70.

men to collaborate with people who had invaded their lands and waterways. From the outset colonial authorities used various European commodities like clothes, tomahawks and tobacco to foster positive relations with Aboriginal people at Newcastle. In one case Governor King gave six Aboriginal men 24 pounds of tobacco, to facilitate a 'good footing with them' when Menzies was setting up the penal colony. Furthermore it is evident Menzies intended to capitalise on this positive relationship, to utilise Aboriginal men to escort convicts in their canoes to the coal mines on Nobby's Island. The attraction of possessing a musket also seems to have been highly desirable to Aboriginal guides who used these weapons to acquire food for colonists such as Cunningham, Coke and Leichhardt. Furthermore it is likely Aboriginal guides became addicted to substances like alcohol and tobacco forming a relationship of co-dependency between Aboriginal and colonist. Aboriginal guides including Birabhan, Galmarra and Harry Brown all displayed a strong propensity to alcohol and were unfortunate victims of this abuse in the later stages of their lives.

Another factor worth considering was identified by historian Mark Hannah who suggested the nature of employment of Aboriginal men was akin to their customary skills rather than a total transition into European modes of labour. In this way Aboriginal and colonist both capitalised on the customary knowledge and skills of traditional practices to form a collegial relationship. It was also clear that the relationship between many Aboriginal guides and colonists was one of genuine friendship as seen in the collaboration between Coke and Desmond, Dawson and Ben and Threlkeld and Birabahn. It is impossible to be certain of motivation at this distance, but it seems that the men who assisted the colonists were, on the whole, realists who responded to the opportunities presented by European needs, using their customary skills and knowledge to maximise their own chance of survival in a changing world.

In this article it has been shown that Aboriginal guides made a significant contribution to colonial development in the Hunter and further afield. Numerous examples highlight the critical services provided to explorer soldiers, missionaries and pioneers. While contact history between European colonists and Aboriginal people was tainted by frontier conflict, positive relations were also a significant part of the picture. Collaboration occurred between colonist and Aboriginal forming a powerful alliance which significantly contributed to colonial development. Aboriginal guides not only accompanied European explorers on epic journeys, but orientated colonists on the frontiers of colonial occupation. In the Hunter colonists learnt from Aboriginal people about the peculiarities

of the Australian bush, and how to navigate the fickle waterways of Port Stephens and penetrate the rugged mountains of the Great Dividing Range. It was indeed an important contribution.

About the author

Greg Blyton is an Indigenous lecturer, historian and researcher at the Wollotuka Institute, University of Newcastle, where he specialises in Aboriginal heritage, health and social justice. He has worked extensively throughout many parts of Australia as a health worker, including remote communities in Central Australia. A strong advocate of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, he is the editor of the Indigenous Online Journal *Kulumun*, based in the Wollotuka Institute, which aims to bring resolution to barriers in Australian reconciliation and to promote greater understanding and appreciation of Australian Aboriginal culture.

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