

Australian ethnography and frontier history: do we know what we think we know?

Michael Lever

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Abstract: The early European settlement of much of Australia was typified by the advance of squatters well beyond boundaries permitted by governments of the time (Reynolds 2021). This article explores existing understandings of the relationship between such a settler, Peter Beveridge, and local Aboriginal people through a critical reading of documentary resources many of which were written by Beveridge himself. This article concludes that little of Peter Beveridge's claims regarding Aboriginal people or his knowledge about their lifestyles should be accepted without careful scrutiny.

Introduction

Source credibility is a primary concern in any historical endeavour. Yet little critical examination has been carried out on many of the early historical and particularly ethnographic sources which Australian archaeologists rely on. Ethnography is frequently used to inform understandings of Aboriginal life before colonisation, and to comprehend the events and processes inherent to the mechanisms of early colonisation and its frontier. A new wave of scholarship is bringing fresh perspectives to ethnographies and early histories with results that often challenge previous consensus. Sylvia Hallam made a powerful and incisive start on this process many years ago (Hallam 1975), but her work, like that of Eric Rolls (Rolls 1981), which also derives new perspectives on land usage from existing documents, was perhaps before its time and did not spark the same engagement produced by more recent works. More recently however, such reevaluation has been solidly re-initiated through a groundswell of works (Gammage 2011; Pascoe 2016; Irish 2017; Gapps 2018; Brodie 2017; Gerritsen 2008). These authors re-read and interrogate existing sources and provide new voices for the past. Some critical work has also been carried out on the role of ethnographic literature in positioning Aboriginal people as worthy recipients of government protection or suppression (Boucher 2015). But the scope of these new works is generally broad and thematic and predominantly they do not grapple with the fine-grained verifiability of the many diverse ethnographic claims regarding Aboriginal life that combine to form a primary historical resource. The documentary interrogation of written ethnographies for historical veracity has not been the subject of extended investigation. I argue that a reevaluation of these sources is well overdue. A discipline-wide critique, or even a critique of the works of a single major ethnographer, is beyond the scope of a single article. What I will set out to do here, is examine what can be derived from the application of a forensic analytic approach to the writings of a minor Victorian ethnographer, Peter Beveridge (1829–1885).



Figure 1: Peter Beveridge circa 1865. La Trobe Picture collection, State Library of Victoria H10173.

In attempting to evaluate the accuracy of Beveridge's observations of Aboriginal life I am bound by two primary constraints. Firstly, there is an embedded bias and inequity of substantiation in that I have no access to Aboriginal documented histories and narratives against which to balance Beveridge's inherently white account. Secondly,

as a non-Aboriginal man conducting research at my own behest, it is not appropriate for me to attempt to reclaim, rediscover or retell Aboriginal narratives and stories of the past, or even postulate what Aboriginal perceptions of Beveridge may have been. Elsewhere in my practice I do make exactly such retellings and speculations in weighing historical colonialist individuals against each other. Yet, such a process is inherently inequitable in this instance. This is because in the face of the great historical and ongoing imbalances of power that are inherent between the coloniser and the colonised in Australia, the appropriation of the Aboriginal voice or speculation about Aboriginal perspective by a non-Aboriginal, is in itself I believe, an act of colonisation (Tuhiwai-Smith 2012; McNiven & Russell 2005; Land 2015). Almost certainly there will be Aboriginal history and story around Peter Beveridge, but those histories and stories belong to the Watti Watti and other Aboriginal people and are theirs, not mine, to explore and share.

Ethnography or creative writing?

Culture is not a static entity and projecting the Aboriginal lifeways that were observed shortly after colonisation back into the deep Aboriginal past is therefore an inherently fraught endeavour. Yet in many archaeological studies, ethnography provides a starting point for interpretation of the archaeological record (McBryde 1978). The field of ethno-archaeology has waxed and waned in popularity and has often been most strongly advocated by archaeologists with anthropological training, such as is common in the United States (David & Kramer 2001; Hayden 1987).

In Australia ethnoarchaeology has been most prominently applied by the American archaeologist and anthropologist Richard Gould (Gould 1969; Gould 1978; Gould, Koster, & Sontz 1971). Yet despite rises and falls in popularity of the ethnographic approach there has been a steady ongoing utilisation of ethnography in Australia. This is particularly the case for reports written by heritage consultants in assessment of known or potential impacts on the archaeological record of proposed development. In such reports a formulaic approach is usually adopted, largely dictated by the legislative and practice guidelines of the state within which the proposed development is planned to occur. Ethnography is an almost unvarying step in such assessments and is used to evaluate the range of past local Aboriginal activities and the types of archaeological evidence that may be present as a result of them. Most, if not all, of the ethnographies used in eastern Australia date from the 19th century, and little extended critical analysis has been carried out to assess their accuracy. Establishing the credibility of 19th century ethnographers is a complex undertaking yet it is surely essential if we are to continue to use their works as widely as is the case at present. In the following paragraphs I will provide a brief example of the uncertainty surrounding the works of some very well-known ethnographers before turning to an assessment of Peter Beveridge.

Martin Thomas (Thomas 2011) points out in his biography of the autodidact Australian ethnographer R. H. Mathews (1841–1918) that major Australian academic anthropologists and ethnographers of the time such as A. W. Howitt (1830–1908), Lorimer Fison (1832–1907) and Brough Smyth (1830–1899) generally did not carry out field work or observe Aboriginal people directly. Rather, they often relied on responses to mailed surveys, questionnaires, and letters from and conversations with a large number of persons living in rural areas who were or had been in contact with Aboriginal people (Thomas 2011). The accuracy of observations recorded in such correspondence, often from people with considerable motivation to portray Aboriginal people negatively, was not subject to detailed verification. E. Curr (1798–1889) was dismissive of Howitt and Fison's work as reliant on unqualified sources, and of Smyth as incompetent in the bush (Curr 1866). Yet Curr too relied chiefly on remote informers but insisted that his informers were more credible than those informers used by Howitt and Fison.

The engagement in direct observation and conversation with Aboriginal people such as Mathews characteristically carried out, was seen by academics of the time as amateur or unworthy. Partly due to his direct engagement with Aboriginal people, Mathews was frequently publicly ridiculed by Howitt and Fison (Thomas 2011). Mathews suggested to anthropologist and ethnographer, Baldwin Spencer, that the work of Howitt and Fison was inferior for not relying on direct observation – Baldwin Spencer later responded by accusing Mathews of being a 'perfect fraud' (Thomas 2011: 260). Thomas presents Mathews as a careful record keeper and prodigious publisher, and states that the anthropologist and archaeologist, Norman Tindale, had come to the view that Mathews was 'our greatest recorder of primary anthropological data' (Thomas 2011: 11) – a view shared by A. P. Elkin (Elkin 1975). In contrast Diane Barwick considered that due to his personal enmity towards A.W. Howitt, Mathews had ignored and distorted Howitt's work (Barwick 1984). Two decades after Barwick's analysis Howitt was reassessed as a far more thorough scholar than Mathews (Rose, James & Watson 2003). If we adopt a worst-case scenario that all stated criticisms are accurate, that Howitt and Fison largely relied on uncorroborated reports from biased sources, and that Mathews was untrained and inaccurate, then one might wonder whether much benefit is to be gained at all by consulting their works. Yet an image of respectability is attributed to these works which continue to be widely consulted. It is in considering this image of respectability itself that I was brought to reappraise the evidence regarding another but far less well-known 19th century Australian ethnographer, Peter Beveridge. Although perhaps not widely cited, Beveridge's works have been drawn upon by the academic archaeological community. In particular, Beveridge's descriptions of Aboriginal oven mounds (Beveridge 1869; 1889) informed studies of Aboriginal subsistence strategies (Williams 1988) and were used to support the proposition



Figure 2: Tyntynder Homestead. Photo: M. Lever, August 2018.

of intensification of Aboriginal subsistence activities in the late Australian Holocene (Lourandos 1977; Lourandos 1980).

Peter Beveridge – a young colonist

I will briefly critically examine Peter Beveridge's works in historical context with a view to establishing Beveridge's motivation for publishing his ethnographies and to detect any biases that his writing displays. But first, a few lines about Peter Beveridge and critical events of his life.

Peter Beveridge was a Scottish-born squatter. In 1845 at the age of fifteen he accompanied his considerably older brother Andrew and Edmund and James Kirby, two sons of a neighbour in Melbourne, in driving 1,000 cattle from southern Victoria to a place in Watti Watti country in the northwest of the State. They settled at a location 16 kilometres northwest of Swan Hill on the Murray River, beyond the areas then permitted for European settlement (Kirby 1897). There the Beveridge and Kirby brothers established the first pastoral run in the region; Tyntynder station. Guided by a Mr McDougall who had not been to the area before, the party also included two bullock drivers, two building hands and a male cook (Kirby 1897: 25). At the time of this trip, Andrew Beveridge had already obtained a degree in divinity from Edinburgh (Steele 1899) and was probably a formative mentor to the young Peter. In a retrospective work regarding the founding of Tyntynder, it was proposed that, given Andrew's degree in divinity, a large consideration in settling near the Murray was the opportunity for him to spread the Gospel of Christianity to Aboriginal people, who were favourably treated by the Beveridge family (Steele 1899). This sentiment is found on Andrew Beveridge's gravestone

which states that his death was considered to be 'a loss sustained by the Christian church'. From the memoirs of James Kirby (Kirby 1897) it seems Tyntynder was under the management of the Beveridges. The ongoing role of the Kirby brothers is not well defined. Finding the conditions at Tyntynder promising, the Beveridge brothers sent for a third sibling, George Beveridge, to bring their sheep holdings and to establish the sheep station 'Piangil' about 15 kilometres from Tyntynder. In 1846 shortly after the arrival of George Beveridge, Andrew Beveridge was speared to death by local Aboriginal people at Piangil (Hone 1969). In 1847 Peter Beveridge's parents and remaining siblings joined him at Tyntnder, which was then run as a partnership between Peter and George Beveridge. The brothers initially constructed a drop-log cabin as their residence, later building a more elaborate brick homestead (Figure 2).

Despite these financially promising beginnings, the Tyntynder station was an economic failure in the long term. In 1868 the partnership between Peter and George Beveridge was declared insolvent, with court minutes reporting that the two brothers had a total of £67 in assets and £17,500 in debts. Drought was the stated cause for insolvency (*Age* 10 September 1867: 5; 25 April 1868: 2). The family left Tyntynder and dispersed, Peter to French Island and his parents to Kilmore, Victoria. In his final illness, Peter moved to his mother's house in Kilmore where he passed away in 1885, aged 56. Little is to hand on Peter Beveridge's activities after leaving Tyntynder. He had been spared the disgrace of being declared a bankrupt, due to a technicality relating to the legal definition of his activities as a squatter (*Age* 25 April 1868: 2). Nevertheless, at the time, substantial ignominy



Figure 3: Grave of Andrew Beveridge at Tyntynder. Photo: M. Lever, August 2018.

was associated with the status of an insolvent and it is likely that Peter Beveridge would not have continued to be a well-regarded member of wider society.

Appearances and Reality on the Lower Murray

It is with this diminished respectability and social standing in mind that I will turn to Peter Beveridge's publications. Peter saw himself as an ethnographer and claimed in works published after leaving Tyntynder that he had spent his 23 years at there in close observation of Aboriginal people. This claim is supported by at least two pieces of evidence. In 1859 the Victorian Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Aborigines included extended interviews with persons deemed knowledgeable on Aboriginal lifeways. Peter Beveridge was a prominent respondent to questions posed by the Committee. His tone of assertive confidence in his knowledge matched the tone of other respondents, whose testimonies nevertheless frequently strongly contradicted each other. In 1863, Peter Beveridge was appointed an honorary correspondent for the Swan Hill District of the Victorian Central Board for the Care of the Aborigines (*Star* 4 May 1863: 3).

While still at Tyntynder Peter Beveridge sent an article to the Royal Society of Victoria titled *A Few Notes on the Dialects, Habits, Customs, and Mythology of the Lower Murray Tribes*. The article was read and accepted by the society in 1861 (Beveridge 1861), although due to delays in publishing it was not printed until 1868. In 1869, probably penned after leaving Tyntynder, Beveridge had a short and perhaps heavily edited piece on Aboriginal

Ovens read at the Royal Anthropological Society of London, and published in the prefatory notes to that organisation's journal (Beveridge 1869). By far the longest work published during Beveridge's lifetime was his article for the Royal Society of New South Wales, *On the Aborigines inhabiting the Great Lacustrine and Riverine Depression of the Lower Murray, Lower Murrumbidgee, Lower Lachlan, and Lower Darling* (Beveridge 1883). This expanded significantly his previous piece published by the Royal Society of Victoria. These items comprise the core of a posthumously published collective work titled *The Aborigines of Victoria and Riverina as seen by Peter Beveridge* (Beveridge 1889).

Beveridge was considered sufficiently noteworthy as a colonist to be included, with a brief entry in *The Dictionary of Australasian Biography* (Mennell 1892). In his published works, Beveridge speaks of his close association with Aboriginal people, a relationship which he claimed had allowed him unprecedented access to observe all aspects of their life directly. His works certainly read as though he had gained a level of sustained insight to the lives of local Aboriginal people. When reviewing the re-publication of Beveridge's main work, *The Aborigines of Victoria and Riverina* (2008), Ryan (2011) actually called for a more positive engagement with his ethnography.

In the following sections I will apply techniques of biographical analysis to his works, with the aim of trying to perceive what can be observed of Beveridge the individual. This is a forensic biographical technique described by the biographer Leon Edel as learning to see 'the figure under the carpet' (Edel 1986). Edel uses the



Figure 4: Tyntynder homestead complex as seen from Andrew Beveridge's grave. Photo: M. Lever, August 2018.

metaphor of viewing a patterned carpet, where the visible pattern is that which the carpet-maker wishes the viewer to see. However, from the visible pattern, the informed and critical viewer can also discern those aspects the carpet-maker wishes to remain hidden on the underside of the carpet; the knots, knot density, twists and floats and differences in warp and weft. Biographical analysis allows one to discern information on the working and intent of an author from biographical text.

A primary technique in biographical analysis is the search for disconformities or omissions within a written corpus when compared to known events in the author's life. Such gaps often reflect acts of erasure by the author and when taken with further corroborating evidence may reflect an effort to rewrite the past in a manner that points the reader in a different direction from events that transpired. Such a gap exists noticeably in Peter Beveridge's writing about the killing of his older brother Andrew by local Aboriginal people. Peter Beveridge frequently depicts Aboriginal violence and judicial killings disparagingly. Yet not once in the 250-odd published pages written by him is there a mention of the spearing of his own brother who was buried only some tens of metres from the Tyntynder Homestead (Figures 3 & 4). At the time of Andrew Beveridge's killing, Peter would have been only seventeen years of age. It was he who recovered his brother's speared body, rode with it 15 kilometres to Tyntynder, and buried him within plain view of the homestead. It is hard to believe that these events would not have had a major impact on Peter Beveridge's emotional and mental state, and on his attitudes towards Aboriginal people as well.

I propose that this gap is a highly significant one – for it is in examining the death of Andrew Beveridge and the subsequent prosecution of his killers, that a very different picture of the Beveridge brothers emerges from the image provided in contemporary media accounts and in subsequent listings of the Beveridge family in dictionaries of biography (Hone 1969; Mennell 1892). Even at first glance, the course of events provided in media accounts of the time (*Argus* 1 September 1846: 2; 22 September 1846: 2; *Port Phillip Patriot and Morning Advertiser* 26 November 1846: 2; 18 December 1846: 2) do not cohere with the overt motives and causes that these articles attributed to the participants in events leading to Andrew Beveridge's death.

Eyewitness accounts reproduced in these media reports stated that several Aboriginal men had approached the hut of Andrew Beveridge at Piangil on 23 August 1846, announcing themselves by cooeing as they approached, and calling for Andrew. He approached them and an argument ensued which ended when the Aboriginal men speared Andrew Beveridge in the stomach and back from close quarters. The newspapers invariably reported that the argument arose over sheep that Andrew Beveridge accused the Aboriginal men of stealing. A £10 reward was posted for the capture of Andrew Beveridge's killers, and in short order three Aboriginal men, Bulleteye, Bobby and Ptolemy were captured, accused and brought to Melbourne for trial. A trial lasting less than four hours ensued, on 25 February 1847 (Ryan E. 2016: 46). All three Aboriginal men were defended by Redmond Barry; they pleaded innocent to the charges of murder and named individuals who they claimed were responsible for the

killing. The jury reached its decision without leaving the jury box, finding Bulleteye not guilty, and Bobby and Ptolemy guilty of murder. The judge noted to the accused that the release of Bulleteye would allow him to return to the Murray and advise other Aboriginals of the consequences of such actions and that, given the actions of the court, pastoralists had no need to take the law into their own hands. As for Bobby and Ptolemy, the judge ‘most impressively sentenced them to be hanged’ (*Argus* 2 March 1847)

Many years later, Mitchell Beveridge—the youngest brother—wrote of the affair:

As far as my knowledge goes, the natives in this district were humanely treated by the white settlers, and no provocation was given for such outrages as that in which my brother lost his life. (Beveridge M. 1911).

There is much in this account of events that does not cohere. If these Aboriginal men were furtive sheep thieves with a debt to Andrew Beveridge, why would they loudly announce their approach? Why would they deliver killing blows to Andrew Beveridge over his anger at their theft? Fortunately, a detailed examination of the events around Andrew Beveridge’s death has been recently undertaken. Ryan (2016) reveals that the underlying causes of events were actions and themes that 19th century society was not willing or able to address openly and which were left concealed beneath a thin and implausible narrative which maintained some modicum of respectability for the white actors involved.

These concealed motives are reflected in notes taken by William Thomas, the Assistant Protector of Aborigines. He visited the three Aboriginal men accused of Andrew Beveridge’s murder in prison. He recorded discrepancies between the records of events that had been given in court and the version of events given to him by the accused men. They claimed that the spearing of Andrew Beveridge was motivated by the capture and sexual enslavement of Aboriginal women by staff at Piangil, and the murder of Aboriginal men who had attempted to rescue these women. They told him:

That the shepherds entice lubras into the huts & made the men in the [illegible] go away & because they wanted to take the women to miams, they shot 2 blacks; 1 afterwards died. (Victorian Public record Series P1, Inward Correspondence, Superintendent of Port Phillip 19/89/400, cited in Ryan 2016)

Writing some 50 years after the spearing of Andrew Beveridge, James Kirby, who had accompanied the Beveridges to Tyntynder, also gave a chronicle of events that was not consistent with the casual killing of Andrew during an argument over stolen sheep. In his description of the establishment of Tyntynder, Kirby is emphatic that the white settlers were at first not ‘in any way’

molested by local Aboriginal people (Kirby 1897: 56). At some point, however, spearing of cattle commenced, then increased. Kirby did not provide a motive for these Aboriginal spearings, which did not appear to be related to food gathering. He claimed that it was as part of ongoing tension that arose when three Aboriginal men were killed by a party led by Andrew Beveridge for stealing sheep shortly before Andrew Beveridge’s death (Ryan 2016). After Andrew Beveridge had sent an Aboriginal interpreter to remonstrate with local Aboriginal people, and to threaten them with reprisals for further damages to stock, the message was sent in reply that they, the Aboriginal people, would be the ones to carry out any killing – specifically of Andrew Beveridge at dawn on a defined day (Kirby 1897: 56). Kirby did not personally witness the events of Andrew Beveridge’s spearing, but he and Peter Beveridge rapidly proceeded from Tyntynder to the scene of the murder at Piangil, and questioned staff there. Arriving at Piangil on 23 August 1846, James Kirby and Peter Beveridge found Andrew Beveridge dead of multiple spear wounds and his tent perforated by spears. The other staff at Piangil had been allowed to flee without harm, and ‘the sheep were still in the yard’ (Kirby 1897: 56).

In light of the evidence assembled above, the spearing of Andrew Beveridge does not at all sound like the result of an impassioned argument over stolen sheep. Rather, it resembles an organised and judicial delivery of punishment —‘pay back’—by local Aboriginal men, for the abduction and sexual abuse of Aboriginal women, for the killing of Aboriginal men attempting to rescue their women, and for the killing of Aboriginal men because of sheep theft. This pay back was delivered at a time and place stipulated by Aboriginal men, who announced themselves and called Andrew Beveridge out. Peter Beveridge himself stated several times that among the local Aboriginal people, capital punishment by spearing was only meted out for the crime of murder (Beveridge 1883: 55; Beveridge 1889: 108). After Andrew Beveridge’s death, Piangil was taken over by a Mr Byerly. James Kirby mentioned several times that the Byerlys and their cattle were left unmolested by the local Aboriginal people with whom the Byerlys enjoyed good relations (Kirby 1897: 81). In stark contrast, Kirby described how the nights at Tyntynder were spent shut up with Peter Beveridge in a log cabin, taking turns to keep for hostile Aboriginal men watch through gunports (Kirby 1897: 65). Given the peace enjoyed by the Byerlys in their neighbouring property, it seems fairly clear that the cause of conflict at Tyntynder was not cattle, sheep or white people generally, but the Beveridges themselves.

The impact of the Beveridges on local Aboriginal life had not escaped official notice. The Beveridge’s station at Tyntynder was in breach of the law – as pointed out by Crown Lands Commissioner Frederick Powlett to the Superintendent of Port Phillip, Charles La Trobe, who had refused the Beveridge family request for squatting

rights there. Powlett had recommended that the lands of Tyntynder should be reserved for Aboriginal people, and that conflict with Aboriginal people was likely were the Beveridges to remain (VPRS 30/5/1-28-8 cited in Ryan 2016)

Inconsistencies and insights

If Andrew Beveridge had been involved in outrages against Aboriginal women and murder of Aboriginal men then it may be more understandable why Peter Beveridge made no mention of his older brother's death at the hands of Aboriginal men in his own writings. It is also understandable why court proceedings accepted the shaky narrative provided by the police in support of Andrew Beveridge's innocence. Andrew Beveridge's killing and associated events would have had a traumatic impact on the 17-year-old Peter Beveridge and the expression of this trauma would be expected to somehow work its way, if only unwittingly, into his writings. Although he makes no overt mention of his brother's death in his ethnographic writings, nevertheless it seems evident to me that traces of his trauma can be detected in his published writings, particularly in his attitudes towards Aboriginal women. For it is in the inconsistencies in his writings on Aboriginal women that Beveridge's prejudices, and possibly his and his brother Andrew's own actions against Aboriginal women, are most detectable, and a very different 'figure under the carpet' emerges.

Beveridge often positions himself as sympathetic to the Aboriginal race, which he depicts as dying out. Yet even where he adopts such a sympathetic attitude, he is irrationally vicious towards Aboriginal women, placing the blame for Aboriginal racial decline on their shoulders. He informs us that venereal disease was a chief cause of death and depopulation among Aboriginal people and that it had entered the Aboriginal community as a result of the 'wanton profligacy' of Aboriginal women. This is a claim which appears regularly throughout his works, often in opening passages (Beveridge 1861: 14; 1883: 22; 1889: 7, 16). Beveridge is at pains to assure the reader that this transfer of venereal disease to Aboriginal women could not have been due to white men – but was due to Aboriginal women being characteristically 'wantonly profligate' and having sexual relations with infected Maccassan and Chinese traders in northern Australia, from where Aboriginal women spread venereal disease across the continent. As if seeking to exonerate the Maccassan and Chinese from blame, he notes that Aboriginal women had a characteristic tendency to freeze in fear when sexually assaulted, thus making their rape unresisted and almost blameless (Beveridge 1889: 7, 14). Apart from the odious act of blaming Aboriginal rape victims for being assaulted, the denial of white participation in sexual crimes and spread of venereal disease is untenable (Butlin 1983). Possibly most pointed though, is the question of how Beveridge was supposed to have gained the knowledge that Aboriginal women

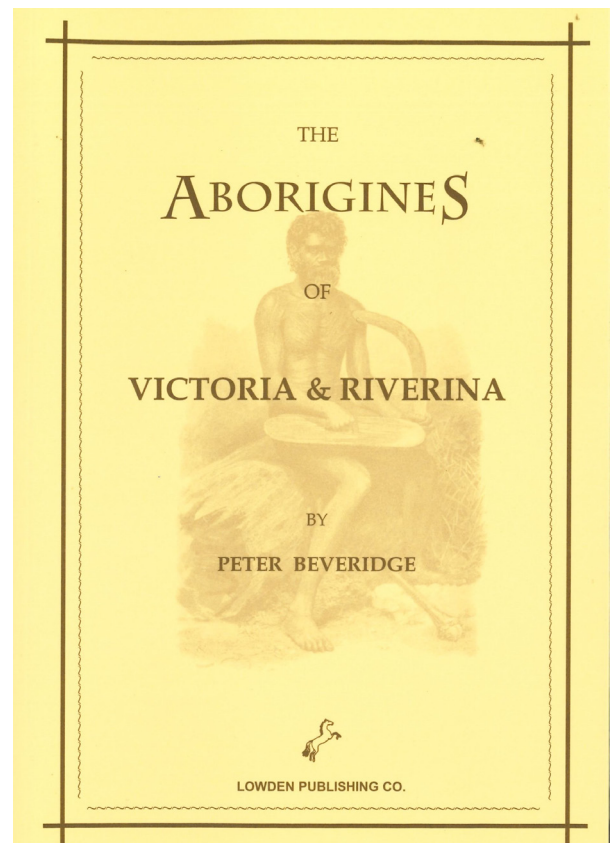


Figure 5: Originally published posthumously, Peter Beveridge's The Aborigines of Victoria and Riverina (1889) was republished in 2008. It has been claimed to provide 'a unique insight into Aboriginal lore, customs, daily life and very survival'. (<https://www.historyvictoria.org.au/product/the-aborigines-of-victoria-and-riverina-by-peter-beveridge/>).

(apparently in the far north of Australia) tended to freeze in the face of sexual assault. Did Beveridge enjoy close communication with Maccassan and Chinese traders? Or is it possible that he was speaking here from his own personal experience or of those close to him?

Tellingly, Beveridge's earliest published piece (Beveridge 1861) contains his derision of the Aboriginal bloodline as weak in the face of European 'blood', noting that in 1861, the local Aboriginal population under the age of 15 were 'mainly from European fathers'. It was the Beveridges and their station hands who were the first whites to arrive in the area – almost exactly 16 years before this statement went to print, and who were the most likely parents of such children. Possibly in his eagerness to deride the Aboriginal bloodline as corrupted by white blood, Beveridge has implicated himself and his family as among the corruptors. In possible external corroboration of the Beveridges' activities, in 1881 a young 'half-caste' Aboriginal woman living on Ebenezer Mission had the name Rebecca Beveridge and gave her father's name as Peter Beveridge (Ryan 2016) – possible evidence of the

sexual practices, which Peter Beveridge goes to great length to claim, did not occur. Perhaps, Beveridge's frequent denigration of Aboriginal women was intended to assure his readers that he would not have been intimate with them.

The pattern of inconsistency continues, with Beveridge producing ongoing descriptions of Aboriginals which make it evident that he either had not observed Aboriginal life anywhere as closely as he would have the reader believe, or that he was simply fabricating sensationalist denigrating allegations possibly to highlight his own standing as an authority on Aboriginality. Thus, among many other risible claims he informs us that Aboriginal people were incapable of sustained physical exertion (Beveridge 1861: 18; 1883: 27), had no religion (Beveridge 1861: 18), no laws (Beveridge 1861: 21; 1889: 107), had no love of any sort (Beveridge 1883: 21, 65) and practiced cannibalism (Beveridge 1861: 22). In particular he was eager to point out on several occasions, in keeping with his general misogyny towards Aboriginal women, that Aboriginal women would often eat their infant children due to no more motivation than 'laziness' (Beveridge 1861: 22; 1889: 26, 57). By way of contrast, James Kirby, of similar age, close familiarity, and observing the same Aboriginal women as Peter Beveridge was adamant that Aboriginal people, specifically women, never practiced cannibalism (Kirby 1897: 110).

The sensationalist nature of much of Beveridge's writing and the very fact that he submitted pieces to two Australian Royal Societies, and an esteemed London journal indicate to me that he sought to gain acceptance and status in the scholarly and academic world, perhaps at the very same time that his social standing reached its nadir with his descent into insolvency in 1868. If he was left with no financial capital to show for 23 years' work in remote northern Victoria, perhaps he sought to eke out some social capital from these decades through scholarly standing based on his claimed knowledge of Aboriginal life. Such claims of knowledge would in any case be difficult to contradict. Beveridge had already experienced in his testimony to the 1859 Victorian Report of the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the Aborigines that expert committees seemed perfectly willing to accept totally contradictory accounts of Aboriginal life so long as these accounts were voiced by white men. Such variation in accounts of Aboriginal behaviour could further be attributed by Beveridge to what he frequently claimed as the primitive incoherence of Aboriginal life, reflected in the multiplicity of mutually unintelligible Aboriginal languages in close proximity to each other.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of both Beveridge's desire to ingratiate himself and to achieve acceptance in the scholarly world, and his tendency to do so through sensationalist accounts that project sexual violence as the accepted fate of Aboriginal women, comes in fullest length of about half a page in his paper to the Royal Society of NSW (Beveridge 1883: 32) and is reprinted

in shortened form in his posthumously published work (Beveridge 1889). The extract is too foul to reproduce here but is telling in two ways. Firstly, it is written in Latin. Given the young age at which Beveridge started his pastoral career, I doubt that he was capable of being the author of this piece himself, and probably had it translated for him. Writing in Latin served a clear purpose among participants in scholarly writing of the 19th century. It was a signal to readers that the subject matter was unsuitable for the general public and also that it was of such a disturbing nature that only the initiated few, lofty minds with a classical education could be entrusted with its contents. In resorting to Latin, Beveridge sought to elevate himself to the realm of educated thinkers.

I have had the text translated and checked by a Latinist, K. Conrau-Lewis, Department of Classics, Yale University. In it, Beveridge doubly confounds himself. Firstly, the Latin text is not scholarly Latin but is plagued by errors and would hardly have impressed academics of Beveridge's time. Secondly, its content is so outrageous that at the time it was almost certainly disbelieved as sensationalism. I believe it is simply a further instance of Peter Beveridge exercising a sexually violent imagination against Aboriginal women.

Peter Beveridge's youngest brother Mitchell Kilgour provides further insight to what the Beveridge household may have been like – particularly before the Beveridge parents arrived in 1857. In a whimsical aside, Mitchell recalls his mother's affront on arriving in Tyntynder to find that the female staff allocated to her service worked in the house in the nude. Victorian-era Victoria was not a place where nudity was tolerated. This observation itself raises any number of pointed questions of which I will here only raise two: what sort of person would welcome their own middle-class Victorian mother to their house with the surprise of naked domestics? What would the atmosphere and relationships of power have resembled in a small house run by two armed single young white men with naked Aboriginal female household help?

More Questions than Answers

Of the many questions raised by the analysis and information I have provided here, two queries come to the fore in their ethical imperative. Firstly, can we rely on Peter Beveridge's writings as a reflection of Aboriginal life in Watti Watti country in the 19th century? Secondly what are the implications of these findings for the ongoing and wider use of 19th century ethnographies?

With regard to the first question, I believe I have demonstrated here that the works of Peter Beveridge, noted as valuable sources of ethnographic information, contain considerable elements of sensationalist fabrications that also served as an outlet for the author's violent sexual imaginations towards Aboriginal women. His statements on a whole range of topics, from law to religion to physical properties and cannibalism are so plainly unrealistic that it is not unreasonable to ask where the line

lies in his works between fiction and fact. Why should we accept Beveridge's observations of Aboriginal subsistence activities as factual or directly observed, given not only the prejudice evident against Aboriginal people in his writings, but his quite obvious dissembling particularly around the nature of Aboriginal women and white sexual relations with them? We need to consider the relations of power within which Beveridge gained the knowledge he claimed to possess. Was such information willingly given? Did the provision of information to him result from fear of reprisal and punishment? What implications might this power imbalance have had for the truthful nature of information provided to Beveridge? And finally, whether we wish to use information that could have been gained in such manner.

As stated at the outset, it is beyond the scope of this paper to undertake a wide-scale analysis and problematisation of the ongoing reliance on 19th century ethnographers such as Mathews, Howitt and Fison. Through examination of one minor 19th century ethnographer however, this paper adds weight to the call that such an overarching reassessment is firmly required. The writings of Peter Beveridge, a frontier colonist have been examined here. These writings are purportedly the result of direct observation of Aboriginal people, yet I have found that they incorporate what are almost certainly intentionally misleading statements regarding Aboriginal people and life. My findings demonstrate the extent to which often unidentified and unstated motives can serve to skew putative primary observations of Aboriginal life. These claimed observations, once they are sanctified through the rites of academic publication, become commodified scientific observations that can be reproduced, and against which Aboriginal claims regarding the past may be held to measure. Most disturbingly, these documented narratives can attain greater evidentiary weight than oral Aboriginal histories of the same events and processes. The recent turn to rereading ethnography is a laudable endeavour to glean deeper understandings of the past from a small body of evidence. Yet unless this rereading is made with a very critical eye we may be left with a distorted view of the past provided by prejudiced authors who had very powerful reasons to dissemble.

Michael Lever
Research Fellow,
Australian Institute of Archaeology

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