

## UNDERSTANDING A DIFFERENT MINDSET

My great-great grandfather's John Chivers first arrived in Port Phillip with his wife and baby son in September 1840. They settled into a bark hut by the Yarra and quickly established a strong ongoing relationship with the local Woiwurrung. John would often trade butter, tea, sugar or flour for a possum, bandicoot or kangaroo. This would give him the opportunity to sit and talk with his new friends.

As far as I know John Chivers was one of only two local settlers who bothered to learn the Woiwurrung language. The other was Jimmy Dawson who settled at Warrandyte in May 1840.

As language is the window into culture, settlers like John and Jimmy showed they were willing to try and understand Aboriginal concepts and culture. This embrace of the Aboriginal mindset is readily demonstrated in the many stories handed down my family, containing insights into Aboriginal culture.

This interest in and respect for their culture is also readily demonstrated in the fact that although John was a lay preacher in the Primitive Methodist Church, he did not evangelise to the Aboriginal people. For all his life and well in to his eighties John preached on Sundays from the pulpit of various local churches. He walked to places as far away as Greensborough to preach, because he refused to work his horse on a Sunday. However despite his strong Christian faith he thought that Aboriginal people already led Christian lives without the need for them to embrace the faith.

One of the first things of which John became aware, was how Aboriginal people regarded white people as being appallingly ignorant on environmental matters. All Aboriginal knowledge is integrated through the totem system to ultimately serve ecological purposes, but they thought that white people and their animals were unbelievably ignorant and destructive.

For instance he was asked why whitefellas kept cutting down all the trees, didn't they know that the more trees you cut down, the less rain you get? The explanation given was that *'The trees talked to the sky'* and this is quite true in the sense that trees draw up groundwater and transpiration from the trees attracts rain.

John was also told they thought it was unbelievable how much the new animals ate, drank and excreted. Australian animals barely drank, only excreted little pills and nuggets, and never fouled their own drinking water. Sheep, cows and horses however, continually ate and continually excreted mountains of waste, even while they were eating and drinking.

What was worse, all these animals had hard hooves and were wrecking the countryside. John's new friends complained that all these thousand of sheep had come in and eaten all the grass. When there was no grass left, the sheep then dug up the roots of the grass with their hard hooves and ate that, so the grass couldn't grow back. John's friends shook their heads in disbelief saying that because the sheep had eaten all the grass, the kangaroos had all left. So even though they were now sharing the land with the white man, when they went to share a sheep, they were shot and told they were stealing.

This little story about the effect of sheep is underlined by the historical fact that three years after Port Phillip Colony was established, a livestock census was taken in 1838. It showed that there were now an unbelievable 311,000 sheep in the colony. They not only ate all the grass, but they also ate all the myrnong (native parsnip) which was a staple food source for Aboriginal people. With all the other hard hoofed animals the soil became so badly compacted that absorption was decreased and run-off increased, thus causing an increase in both drought and flood.

Aboriginal people also could not understand why white people seemed to think that the indiscriminate killing of animals was some sort of sport. John was asked why white people would shoot dozens of ducks or as many as two hundred kangaroos at a time and leave their corpses to rot. They wouldn't even bother to eat any of the animals or skin them for clothing.

Aboriginal people therefore thought that white people were quite uncivilized and this was demonstrated by their very questionable personal habits. For instance white people loved the green stuff that came out of their nose so much, that they saved it up in bits of rag and kept it in their pockets. Now how filthy is that? Worse than that though, John was quizzed on why white people loved their bodily waste so much that they built little houses and saved it up in tins. Then when the tin was full they would go and tip it in the creek. Not even the smallest Aboriginal child would behave like that.

As an ironic counterpoint to this story, when the Coranderrk Aboriginal station was established in 1863, Wonga and Barak sought official permission to hunt game in the forest to supplement their food. The official reply came back from the Aborigines Protection Board agreeing, but with the proviso that *'...as long as they do not kill wantonly'*. The comment showed how abysmally little the supposed experts really knew about the Aboriginal mindset.