

ABORIGINAL RESISTANCE TO COLONISATION

In the October article I talked about how the local Wurundjeri waged an economic war against settlers like Major Newman by burning their paddocks and driving off their stock. This was by no means an isolated event as it was a pattern of resistance across Australia.

Nowadays we are more aware of this active resistance by Aboriginal tribes, but some people are still caught up in the myth that Australia was 'peacefully settled'. I have even often been asked why Aboriginal people 'didn't put up a fight like the American Indians or the Maoris'.

Resistance actually began very soon after the First Fleet arrived at Sydney Cove. It soon became apparent to the locals that the new arrivals intended to stay and do so on their own terms. They began netting shoals of fish in the harbour and when the local people went to take their share, muskets were fired over their heads to scare them off.

With the 1,500 new arrivals having doubled the population overnight, the harbour was fished out and all the game was gone. The newcomers were now starving and for the first time in their lives, so were Aboriginal people. Typically, resistance began by burning the outlying paddocks and huts of the settlers. Convicts not guarded by musket-bearing Marines simply disappeared or were found mutilated.

The Lieutenant-Governor, Major Robert Ross, wanted The Governor, Captain Phillip to build a stockade to ensure the safety of the settlers, but Phillip refused. The two top men very quickly became bitterly opposed over 'native policy'. Ross had served in the North American Indian Wars where General Amherst had handed out smallpox infected blankets to the natives, and Ross wanted to take decisive military action, but Phillip refused.

The perilous situation facing the colony was then magically solved when a smallpox plague suddenly broke out in the Aboriginal community. The smallpox outbreak was in fact a deliberate act by Major Ross after he had discovered jars of smallpox scabs in the government store. The jars had been purchased by the Chief Surgeon, John White, when the First Fleet stopped over in Cape Town. To distribute the infected clothing and blankets Ross had duped a sailor who had established friendly relations with the local people. The sailor, Joseph Jeffries, had been recruited at the Rio de Janeiro stopover. Jeffries was in fact a Native American 'Red' Indian and had a very similar culture to Australian Aboriginal people.

Like all the new European diseases, Aboriginal people had no resistance to smallpox and it spread around Australia killing 90% of the native population. The total death toll I estimate as being at least two and a half million people. It is obvious that this 90% reduction in population greatly hampered Aboriginal resistance across Australia and contributed to the myth that there was little effective resistance.

I first became aware some forty years ago of the resistance war that had been fought in the Western District of Victoria. This had been through a book written by Jimmy Dawson, who had been an early settler at Warrandyte in 1840. Dawson had moved to the Western District in 1844 and had established close relationships with the Gunditjmarra people. He documented their languages, culture, and stories in a book first published in 1880 and which contained innumerable fascinating insights into Aboriginal culture.

I had by the late 1970's also got to know several famous Gunditjmarra Elders, such as Banjo Clarke and Reg Saunders. They told me stories of the resistance war that their forebears had fought against colonisation. This had lasted eighteen years from 1834 and ended with a massacre at Lake Condah in 1852. I then researched early newspaper accounts which openly talked about the 'Eumerella War' and how hundreds of heads of cattle were often driven by the Aboriginal people over cliffs or into the Stony Rises where they broke their legs.

I was fascinated by the story of the Gunditjmarra, because despite their ultimate defeat, it was a story of survival. People like Banjo Clarke had kept their culture and he became the Hereditary Keeper of Framlingham Forest. Captain Reg Saunders became the only Aboriginal soldier to be promoted to officer rank in the Second World War. On top of this the Gunditjmarra produced every Aboriginal boxing champion in Victoria, as well as a host of famous cricketers and footballers.

I became so enamoured with their story of survival that in 1983 I approached Film Victoria about making a documentary film. They put me in contact with a film producer and in 1984 'The Fighting Gunditjmarra' was made with the help of both Reg and Banjo. The film traces the story of the tribe's resistance war, the story of Reg Saunders and the story of young Graeme 'Porky' Brooke, the latest Gunditjmarra boxing champion.