

A MANAGED ENVIRONMENT

As we all know, the Melbourne city streets were planned on a north-south, east-west grid by the Surveyor Robert Hoddle, who also did an early survey of the Templestowe-Warrandyte area in 1837. A full survey of the area was then conducted by T. R. Nutt in 1839.

It is most interesting to note Nutt's description of this area as: 'Grassy hills, thickly timbered stringy bark forests and gums'. Nutt naturally assumed, as did the vast majority of settlers, that he was witnessing and describing a virgin landscape, but he was in fact describing a carefully managed environment.

About forty years ago a famous Aboriginal Elder, Banjo Clarke, explained to me how tribes traditionally removed all trees from the tops of hills, then terraced them with stone contours, so that the water did not readily run off. This promoted grain grasses to grow on the tops of the hills, which was then harvested for milling and making damper.

The absence of shade trees meant that the kangaroos and emus did not go there to feed, thus protecting the harvest from these hilltop grass farms. This was precisely what Nutt was describing by the two words 'grassy hills'.

Elsewhere the boundaries of heavily wooded copses were maintained by removing bark from the trees on the perimeter and by regular burning off between the copses. These heavily wooded areas were in reality possum farms. Possums were a very valuable source of both food and clothing, so their habitats were protected and nurtured. This is what Nutt was referring to by his phrase 'thickly timbered stringy bark forests'.

Along the valley floors of the Yarra and its tributaries open areas were maintained by annual burning and clearing, so that there were only stately gum trees at regular twenty-five metre intervals. These areas were in reality kangaroo and emu farms. The trees not only provided shade for the animals, but also provided convenient cover when stalking game.

These open valley areas were also myrnong farms. Myrnong is a parsnip-like tuber that with the aid of annual burning-off grew in profusion along every valley floor. So these kangaroo, emu and myrnong farms were what Nutt was describing with the two simple words: 'and gums'.

Settlers were quite amazed at what they saw across Australia, often describing it as: 'Like an English gentleman's Estate'. There was no wilderness and no undergrowth and the soil was so loose, even in the forests, that settlers complained their horses would sink in it up to their fetlocks.

Heaven forbid that I should quote such an inveterate liar as John Batman, but even he was occasionally moved to describe the truth of what he saw. For instance on 30th May 1835 Batman noted in his diary:

'Most of the high hills were covered with grass to the summit and not a tree, although the land was as good as land could be. The whole appeared like land laid out in farms for some hundred years back, and every tree transplanted. I was never so astonished in my whole life.'

See how the descriptions of Batman and Nutt tally so closely? One of the basic problems Australian historians have when they read such documents is that they can only read them with a European mindset. They are conditioned out of being able to see the reality of Aboriginal land management embedded in the words.

Those settlers that saw the major weir walls and fish trap complexes along the rivers were similarly amazed at the engineering works, but unless they were strikingly obvious, a lot of Aboriginal fish and eel traps remained invisible to them. For instance, along the Warrandyte township waterfront, the early settlers noted the middens. These were piles of freshwater mussel shells and you can therefore be sure that the rapids areas were in fact adjacent to the freshwater mussel farms.

These mussels were a staple in the diet of local Aboriginal people and to make sure that they had plenty on hand when the river was in flood, the mussels were stored in 'refrigerators'. Before the floods were due, hundreds of mussels would be collected in kangaroo skin bags and taken up a nearby wet gully. A hole about a metre deep was then dug and the mussels lined up row upon row and buried. As soon as the damp dirt went on top, the mussels would go into suspended animation and stay fresh for up to two years.

Because we have been so conditioned to thinking of Aboriginal people in pejorative descriptors like simple, primitive, pagan, nomadic, stone-age, hunter-gatherers, we have been blinded to their technological and land management achievements. Aboriginal society across Australia had achieved environmental sustainability.

The plain fact is that Aboriginal people farmed the environment in ways that were invisible to European eyes. In reality, Aboriginal Australians were not 'Hunter-Gatherers', but had become 'Permaculture Farmers'