

Sweet Water (Kananook)¹

Peter Botsman



My pram under the ti tree at Kananook 1956

Trees can talk.

When I was very young the banksia and ti tree around the Port Phillip Bay foreshore at Kananook and Seaford talked to me and told me of the people and the land that had been there before my family. When trees talk they do not talk in words they talk in feelings and emotions. They do not write an historical litany. They enter your being and give you a feeling for things. It is only now as a relatively old man that I understand. Only a young child or a very wise man or woman can hear the trees talking. Anybody has this capacity. But you have to turn off words and your monkey mind and listen with your heart.

¹ For the mother of my children, Catriona Moore, and for the Roe Family of Broome

The first peoples of the sea shore of Port Phillip and Westernport were the Boonwurrung nation that were part of the larger Kulin constellation of Indigenous peoples. When the European invasion of their lands occurred from the late eighteenth century onwards it was different from the conflicts, battles and wars that occurred between other Aboriginal clans and nations over thousands of years.

The well known story of the escaped convict William Buckley (1780-1856), who lived with the Kulin peoples for thirty years from 1803 to 1835 provides us with very important clues as to the nature of an active traditional society. Buckley escaped with three companions in 1803 from Sullivan's Bay – an ill fated and abandoned settlement near where modern Sorrento is today. In the first weeks Buckley and three companions travelled down Port Phillip Bay past the mouth of the Kananook Creek and camped in the vicinity of the Yarra River. His companions very early on chose to retrace their footsteps and to give themselves up, but Buckley continued on his own. After weeks, an extraordinary coincidence occurred, Buckley, at death's door, lay down on a traditional grave site and picked up a spear that had belonged to a deceased Wathaurung warrior. He was found by a family of the warrior who believed Buckley to be a reincarnation. Buckley was adopted as Ngurungaeta – a person of respect – and he lived for 32 years with the Wathaurung. On 6 July 1835 Buckley appeared at John Batman's camp site and chose to move back into the European world playing a role only for a brief period as a translator between the European settlers and the Kulin people.

For an eighteenth century carpenter/soldier/convict of Cheshire, England², the nature of traditional conflict and the tragic relations, false accusations and misunderstandings with the developing Victorian settlement of Europeans was dangerous³, impossible to reconcile and probably not completely comprehensible. Even today anthropologists who spend their life in the field, with all the resources and impartiality of the modern age, admit that they know only have a superficial understanding of traditional Indigenous culture. With his knowledge of the Kulin languages Buckley ensured that John Batman's settlement of Melbourne was as successful as could be expected. His role in this brought about an automatic pardon from Governor George Arthur. But to bring about the newcomers to a level of awareness of the Indigenous mind was impossible. He wrote: "I ..looked upon the land dealing spoken of, as another hoax of the white man, to possess the inheritance of the uncivilised natives of the forest, whose tread on the vast Australian Continent will very soon be no more heard, and whose crimes and sorrows are fast fading away amongst other recollections of the past."⁴

The tragedy of the coming of the Europeans was that sophisticated Aboriginal law and understanding of the land was threatened with complete annihilation. The coming of the white man went beyond the worst conflicts between Aboriginal communities that so traumatised Buckley. In traditional society, even when two clans or Aboriginal nations wipe themselves out in fighting, the extraordinary strength of the larger kinship system, extended family and cross clan alliances means that the law and

² John Morgan, **The Life and Adventures of William Buckley Thirty-Two Years a Wanderer amongst the Aborigines of the then Unexplored Country Round Port Phillip, now the Province of Victoria**, Archibald Macdougall, Hobart, 1852

³ Ibid., p. 137

⁴ Ibid., p. 114

knowledge of the landed areas remains intact. Even if every single member in a clan or family was wiped out in a dispute the law continues in a kind of fail safe system through other distant relatives or clan groups who retain back up knowledge. Cultural practice becomes the obligation and is known and practiced by a relative in another clan group or nation. On many occasions when traditional elders see that a future calamity is likely they look to people who are born with a particular relationship to the land that symbolises that country and they are taught the law and knowledge of the area. My brother (wawa) Djalu Gurruwiwi has conveyed to me that in the contemporary jungle of modern life, in which young Indigenous people live in a kind of vacuum between worlds, all races have a role to play in maintaining the continuity of the traditional laws of the land and the respect of elders.

However, whereas every known calamity in the Indigenous world was protected, the genocidal regime of European colonisation meant that between 1788 and 1870 two out of every three Indigenous Australians was killed and as a result the detail and majesty of Indigenous ceremonies and law was lost. But even in the lands where the traditional people were lost, the magic and spirits were there so long as the waters and creeks flowed and the balance of nature was maintained. But without the traditional custodians this could not last for long.



Peter of the Bunurung, Cranbourne, Photograph, 1860-70

My imaginary as a small child was vivid. I would have long discussions with my companion Yang Yang and we would undertake great adventures on our family block at 32 Kananook Ave, Seaford. I lived there for the first six years of my life from 1956 to 1962. In front of our house was a line of suburban houses and behind them were the mysterious. Sand-dune banks of the Kananook Creek, the creek itself/ To get to the beach you had to walk down Kananook Ave to Mc Culloch Ave and over a rickety bridge that terrified my sister. It was a hundred and fifty metre walk across the Nepean Highway. The bridges across the creek from Seaford to Frankston gave access for people living on the suburban blocks to the sea shore. The eighteen bridges of Kananook Creek were painted by Dacre Smyth in 1986 but I remember a time in the late 1950s and 1960s when they were far more humble wooden affairs than those painted by Dacre. There were always planks missing and the sway of the bridge as you walked remains a fond memory.



Dacre Smyth, Brodie St, Bridge. 1986

My mother's father (ngathi) and mother (mari) owned the block. My father built my childhood home there with the support of his father (mari'mu) and there were strict instructions from my mari to leave the beautiful trees alone. My father had one of his first postings as a primary school teacher at Cranbourne South then a one teacher, rural school. He would go on to Frankston Teachers College and beyond. On holidays he worked for the local council on the roads. One day one of the great drain pipes they were laying crushed him and I remember my worried mother meeting him as he limped up the driveway with his arm in a sling. My father had an incredible work ethic. In his last year at Cranbourne South around 1962 the school went from sleepy

rural school to a multi-cultural cauldron as new immigrants came to work in Dandenong at motor car plants. There were great changes coming but Seaford and Kananook were still places where I could still hear the earth stirring and the magic of the place.

Our block was just bush, when you walked along the mandatory concrete pavement on the street you could not see the house at all, just banksias and ti tree. As with all my mari's houses it was a small quarter acre of wilderness in a sea of asphalt, concrete and glass. No suburban lawn just bush. People would complain about overhanging branches and mari would diligently pull out her hand saw and make the most minimal excisions possible. The block at Kananook Ave would later be subdivided and raped and pillaged like everything else but my mari's wilderness was my learning ground. It was where my mother and father and sister and I lived very happily until I began primary school. It was where something big was planted in my mind.

Something happened to me at Kananook. I cannot tell you what I learned from who or how. But the world was a magical kingdom. I knew that the polluted and smelly Kananook Creek had once been a place of grandeur, sweet water, a precious place where fresh water flowed for miles less than eight hundred metres or so from the saltwater. I saw shapes and faces of the old people who had lived here in the past in the wattles and she-oaks. My first home was what we would now call a sacred site. It was a place for permanent camps where fish and eels and shellfish were abundant nearby and where there was shelter from the prevailing winds.



Mother, me and my mates the wattle men

As a young child I could feel the presence of others all around me and they were invisible to everyone who did not look with a particular squint or sideways glance. I now know this is common feeling and knowledge for Aboriginal people. It was a heaven on earth in my ti tree hideways on Kananook (Sweet Water) Ave and people of my generation who had the joy of being one generation away from the creatively managed wilderness that Australia once was had a precious gift that is increasingly

rare. We Australian boat people from other shores can still come to understand if we can only listen, feel and see with our hearts.

In the year Buckley escaped from Sorrento, 1803, the Kananook Creek was documented by a party of surveyors charting the eastern shore of Port Phillip it was a 'fine freshwater river of some thirty feet in width' and for the Aboriginal people of the area it was a loved haven with abundant sea food.⁵ As a child, skipping down the hot concrete jungle pavement and across the hot sand, to spend the day on the beach, where the banksias and paths through the ti tree were like a myriad of rooms and passageways, was a very special thing. There were still pippies, shell fish, flounder, sting ray and whiting.



But no-one, including me, really understood this, for us newcomer Australians the land was something to be used, abused and worn out.

The cursed Nepean Highway was a black double carriage way strip along the foreshore of Port Phillip Bay that became congested on the day it was opened. The Carrum Carrum Swamp which had been the source of the sweet water of Kananook Creek became the sewerage treatment site for metropolitan Melbourne. The sewerage

⁵ Dacre Smith, **The Bridges of Kananook Creek**, Dacre Smith, Toorak, 1986



was pumped down to Westernport Bay. Kananook Creek itself became nothing more than a closed off drain that flowed only when it rained exuding sludge into Port Phillip Bay near the Frankston Pier. We destroyed the previous network of carefully managed, inter-locking creeks and hunting areas in less than forty years. That is why it was such a privilege to see the traces of the old magic world all around. I saw them clearly in my childhood. I was meant to see them so I could tell this story to those who come after me from non-Aboriginal Australia to help people feel what had been here before and to create a bridge to the knowledgeable Aboriginal people who can help us to repair damage and stop the unthinking development of the suburbs. In the early 1960s around Seaford and Kananook there were blue tongue lizards to track. There were tadpoles to collect. Frogs to catch. I remember the birds – the finches, the willy wag tails, the golden thrushes and the precious birds nests in the reeds and swamps and ti tree and banksias and the tiny eggs with blue speckles. There were banks of stumpy gums above rickety bridges over creeks with eels

and mussels. The banks were places of a million hiding places for teen age lovers, for intrigue and danger. On the beach the banksia's roots were unearthed by wind. In the creeks and swamps we would play around with bits of tin, making bridges, boats, driving through the undergrowth like knowing brave little bush men. Sometimes the waves would unearth a treasure.

My childhood paradise was an island in which it was possible to feel the world that had been before us. It was about to be swamped by development, bitumen, housing estates with box like brick veneer houses that all looked the same. My suburban street with its pavement, drains, "nature strips" would be replicated a thousand, ten thousand, twenty thousand times. My island was doomed: would I be the last to touch its tiny traces of its wildness?

Yorta Yorta elder Paul Briggs told me that for Victorian Aboriginal people being a part of contemporary Australia is a 24/7 negotiation. It is a cycle of deep depression about many thousands of sacred areas like my childhood magic kingdom. It is not just that we have paved paradise. We have lost touch with the spirit of the land. What we think of as a pristine environment is nothing like what was here before. The land broken up breaks Aboriginal peoples hearts. This is why thousands of Aboriginal warriors died fighting European farmers.

It also creates an unsustainable, foul, polluted, accursed, ugly place to live.

Steve Bracks the former Victorian Premier has written that the difference between the prosperity of Victoria and stagnancy of NSW in recent times is that he followed Jeff Kennett's lead to go for growth. Melbourne is now bursting at the seams and Labor as much as anybody does not understand. Over and over again we are burying what is

good about this country. It is not the Greens who can find a way back. It is only the first custodians that have this key. It is not just about leaving things alone. The Bunurong managed an intricate series of natural eco systems and kept the universe in balance.

By the time I had started primary school my father and mother, in that post WW11 betterment mode, bought their own house and we moved from Kananook Av to Kirkwood Ave across the road from the great Kananook Primary School which produced amongst other graduates Sean Carney of the Age, Russell Greene of St Kilda and Hawthorn and many others who I remember with great affection. There were many great football matches played in the school grounds and at the newly created Kananook Oval. Our primary football team were undefeated and won the Grand Final in my last year there in Grade 5. It was a triumph that has remained with me all my life and I can still see Russell Greene beginning his runs from centre half back rarely failing, even then, to kick truly. But there were many others as well including the young Malcolm Beaman who later kicked 100 plus goals in a season for Karingal High School.

ESSAYS WON PRIZES

'I THINK WE FORGET'

"Though this country a great many people walk as aliens. They are blind to the harmony of the soft brown of our landscape, to the delicate coloring of the leaves of our trees, to the various marvelous shades of green which are softened through the foliage when spring comes."

This was written by Vance Palmer in *Sheila Reid's Magazine* in 1905. It is still true today.

But not only is it true of our landscape; it is also true of the natural inhabitants of that landscape, Australian birds and animals.

As Palmer said: "People are blind!"

How many people bother to watch and care for our animals?

You may have read in the "Herald" some weeks ago where Graham Finney wrote that the red kangaroo was being wiped out by so-called hunters. This is needless slaughter!

If we are not careful, the red kangaroo will disappear like the famous Tasmanian Wolf.

John Gould, the famous English naturalist, wrote: "When the comparatively small island of Tasmania becomes more densely populated and its primitive forests are intersected with roads from the eastern to the western coasts, the numbers of this singular animal will speedily diminish."

Prophetic words! Once the Tasmanian wolf was found over much of Australia. No doubt the arrival of the dingoes spelled its doom. But the dingoes never reached Tasmania. And yet the wolves have met a more horrible fate — people — just as John Gould had predicted.

Why is there such a need for the RSPCA? Why do people not think? Are we really so cruel and thoughtless? I don't think so. I think we forget. We need to remind ourselves that only we have these creatures. If you don't think of yourselves, think of the next generation.

—Peter Robinson, 11 years, of Kirkwood Ave, Hawthorn, who attends Kananook State School.

Two boys have won the first prize in the essay contest conducted by Peninsula Animal Aid.

They are Gary Harris, 13, of Ingles St., Moorabbin, who attended Peninsula Animal Aid, and Peter Robinson, 11, of Hastings Rd., Somerville, who attends Somerville State School, and Neville McNew, 11, of Napier Highway, Mt. Eliza, a pupil at Mt. Eliza State School. Both wrote on the subject, "A kind act to an animal."

The three runners-up will each receive £2.

See essays, page 3

Prize winners: Gary Harris, 13, of Queen St., Frankston, who wrote on the same subject as the two winners. In the 13 years and under section, the judges (Standard Newspapers' assistant editors) could not separate for second prize the entries of Christine Taylor, 11, of Hastings Rd., Somerville, who attends Somerville State School, and Neville McNew, 11, of Napier Highway, Mt. Eliza, a pupil at Mt. Eliza State School. Both wrote on the subject, "A kind act to an animal."

The three runners-up will each receive £2.

See essays, page 3

We moved to our own new house in Kirkwood Ave in 1962. We lived there until 1968. At age 11 I had my first article in print. I was astonished to read what I had

written 44 years later. It was headed by a Vance Palmer quote: "Through this country a great many people walk as aliens". I remember my Dad helping me with the article. But my feelings were in the writing. There was one banksia tree in our yard in Kirkwood Ave. We left the wild of Kananook for a modernist garden. Dad had a different concept of development than my mother's mother. He spent hours in his rockery planting kangaroo paws and other natives from the local nursery where he worked in the school holidays. I was forever in that solitary tree. For a long time there was twenty five acres of bush next door. Gradually though house after house was built. We played in the housing shells. But something had been planted in me. In the unbuilt up blocks I would get lost in the bush and paddocks around Seaford. In those days there were still thrushes and birds of all sizes and colours nesting in the ti tree. and I would drift in my wanderings as far as Nar Nar Goon through blackberry patches in fields where the grass would grow above my head. In those days it was nothing for a child to be gone all day and to turn up for the evening meal at night.

I was one of the last lucky ones to see the vast plains of long grasses and spinifex that would cry in the winds. Behind the sand dunes along Port Phillip Bay, Kananook Creek would meander behind the embankments before finding an entrance into the sea near Frankston Pier. With the new housing developments, new waterways were cut through the sand dunes. These cut off the natural flow of the life giving creeks and the run off from many sinks and septic tanks made them stink and become a foul smelling open sewer. It must have broken the hearts of the Boon warung people. Was I the last child to feel the life in the banks above the creeks and in the banksia and ti tree. There were still eels to catch, mussels to gather but they like everything else must have been hanging on as the toxic environment that enveloped them.

Nar nar goon means koala. I didn't ever see any koalas in my child patrols of the bush areas. No-one did. The world of Aboriginal Australia had been destroyed by the generations that came before me. There are pictures of trucks with thousands of koals skins. William Buckley, the white man, who lived for years amongst the Victorian clans of Port Phillip Bay, could not cope with the radical difference. He chose to move back into his comfortable Western life and we have been doing so ever since.

In the post war the new houses were comfortable. They were not hand made. They were mass produced. Families went to show-homes to see the design and format of the post war AV Jennings homes. My grandfather came back from the war and build dozens of them. Families scrimped and saved a deposit and went to banks to buy their own homes. These were places of televisions of "I Love Lucy", of "Rin Tin Tin", of "Rescue 8", of Robin Hood, of Cannonball. These were homes with modern kitchens, central heating, carpets and modern plaster and cornice walls.



Most of the second, third and fourth generation European Australians loved the new houses. They replaced the radio, the coppers, open fireplaces, woodstoves, cold bedrooms and rising damp of the 19th century houses built around (what we now think of as) the inner city suburbs. Postage stamp backyards with outhouses were replaced with spacious backyards with gardens, septic tanks and later sewerage systems that allowed an inside toilet. If you liked the old houses you were thought of as mad or old fashioned or just plain stupid. How could they compare?



After forty years I return to my childhood haunts and the island has been washed away in a sea of suburban evil. It is the worst kind of horror to return to Nar Nar Goon and Cranbourne and what were the little sections of shrub and bush around Seaford. When you come back suddenly, after all that time, nothing prepares you for the sheer ugliness of it all. There is no possible preparation for the destruction and desolation of the landscape. There is a feeling of gut wrenching loneliness and wonder at how it could all have happened like this. None of the original contours of the land are recognisable. Australians think of the American suburban landscape as atrocious, but we have caught their disease doubly. Our destruction of the environment is more inexcusable. Such a relatively small number have destroyed so much so quickly. Everything of natural importance in the suburbs has been utterly destroyed and carved up by badly planned freeways and suburbs. There is no question of any wild area. Forget walking, you will be hit by a truck or a fast moving vehicle.

The horror is that my perspective is an absurdity to the tens of thousands of depression and war children determined to do better and the new Australians of the 1960s that came to Dandenong and worked at the car factories and industrial areas. To have a well paid job and a room above one's head was enough for them. These were people escaping a world of carnage and catastrophe. These were suburbs of new life and calm. There could only be incomprehensible communications about the loss of bush. The sons and daughters of those escaping Europe for a better life would one day hence live the contradictions and cultural and environmental clashes. But it simply made no sense as it was happening.

Through the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s old and new Australians created a mindset, a modernity that celebrated the bitumen and concrete of the suburbs and simply wanted more. The rapacious greed of the suburban developers and the egalitarian sewers of the Whitlam government came together in a relentless and unstoppable push. Layer upon layer of foreign experiences and expectations all burying the spirit of the land.

Is all this what turns mainstream white Australians my age to a radical Green agenda?
Is all this what is turning the electorate green?

Perhaps. But the truth is that the radical green agenda is as ignorant about the history of our environment as were us suburban new comers. The assumption is that just protecting the environment from development is enough. The idea is that if you hive off the ecology it will recover on its own and will find a way back to a wild equilibrium.

But the Australian landscape was actively managed by Indigenous Australians. Those of us who grew up in the islands of bush were lucky enough to have a glimpse of the past before so-called European civilisation. This landscape was more magnificent than any of the cathedrals and man made structures of Europe, Asia or the Americas. The Australian environment was the largest natural cathedral of wonderous qualities, living creatures and systems of sustenance and men and women lived within and managed this grand schema in a unique harmony.

It is impossible now for many happy suburban Australians to comprehend the idea that they live on dead ground. Pocket parks and gardens are enough. What more could there be? Aboriginal Australians are our link back to the majesty of this place we call Australia. They give us our mana. If they are not included in the discussions of Steve Bracks' growth for all - then all is lost for us. Aboriginal Australians are five per cent of the population. They have proven that they will always survive against the worst we can throw at them. In formal acknowledgement of their unique place and of making them first amongst our wisest national counsel we could truly bring about an Australian renaissance. We could know the essence of this place many of us now call home and it would mark our place out amongst the legions of nations. We followers and adapters could take our guidance from the original thinkers and doers of this place we call Australia.

This is core national business. Aboriginal Australians have a special gift. They can put us back in touch with the oldest continent on earth with its monuments and creations that dwarf the world's greatest man made structures. They can give us the ability to more sensibly manage the land and the environment. It is a matter of recognising that their ancient knowledge is not something that has ever been certified. There are no written encyclopaedias. All was contained in the mind and life actions of the people. So architects and town planners and local councils have to make a leap over their usual concept of experts. They have to actively seek the words and meanings that are there in the life actions of Aboriginal people of even the most humble origins.

Let us not in Victoria or NSW or South Australia think of the Aboriginal person as an exotic creature from the Northern Territory, Western Australia, Queensland or the Torres Strait. This wisdom of our past lands and places is here amongst us. We need only start to look. We need to be acutely aware of the traumas that Aboriginal people face psychologically and socially when they take a part in our world. Their journey of repairing the great wrongs and injustices and of piece by piece putting back the jigsaw puzzles of the past is our journey. We must make it our journey. Because if we make it our journey we will learn so much more about ourselves and the place we live in. We will bring to ourselves the grace that has not existed for us in previous times. We will side by side with an Aboriginal person be able to talk as an Australian of Irish, Greek, Italian, Polish, Jewish, African or Arabic descent and it will not be a one way street.

We have been so ignorant of Aboriginal knowledge and culture because it is an oral, mind culture that is learned in the art of living and doing. Our world of the written word and of empires of knowledge removed from the practice of living is about great artifice. When we learn to live in our Australian world with our knowledge map in front of us and all around of us, with our instincts tuned to the animals and birds and forests and savannas, then we will have this incredible benefit that will improve all that we do in this place.

Write large, everything we do as a nation would become valid by including the wisdom and counsel of Aboriginal people. If our constitution is changed to acknowledge the first Australians as the original custodians of this continent – our laws become more honourable. If our parliaments includes special seats for Aboriginal people, our parliament becomes more powerful. If our economy and society becomes attentive to the deep meaning of Aboriginal law and culture then our economy and society becomes stronger. If our families become cognisant of the loving framework of extended Aboriginal families then our families gain a new and special dimension. Mainstream Australians have everything to gain and nothing to lose from a radical embrace of the original cultures of our land. We will see with new eyes the problems of the world. We will see with new eyes the nature of our country. We will become a great nation not just a replica and amalgam of other worlds that has its backbone in this soil of the place we call Australia.