



Suggestion 32

Viki Sinclair

8 pages

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Victorian Redistribution suggestion uploaded from the AEC website.

Name: Viki Sinclair

Organisation:

Address: [REDACTED]

Phone number: [REDACTED]

Additional information: Please find my attached submission as a consequence of the redistribution of the McMillan electorate in Gippsland Victoria. I am requesting consideration of the removal of the name "McMillan" and a subsequent name change as outlined, following the redistribution.

I wish to present a case to the Australian Electoral Commission for a name change to the electorate of McMillan when its redistribution occurs in the near future.

I believe this change is imperative, being well founded on a strong case to replace the current name of McMillan with a name that is decided upon via an agreed process by the local Gunnai Kurnai people. These people were and still remain directly affected by an appalling legacy of almost complete genocide of their people which is left from the life of Angus McMillan. They therefore can never accept the choice of his name for any electorate in Gippsland or indeed Australia. Nor can I for the very same reasons.

Being a member of our local Bass Coast South Gippsland Reconciliation Group, I am aware in advancing this proposal, that it is acceptable to the Gunnai Kurnai people who have developed a naming process for this very purpose.

This submission explains how and why I personally have reached this conclusion. I believe it provides a new way forward. The choice of an indigenous name for this electorate decided by representatives of the local Gunnai Kurnai will help lead us to a future which takes into account our recognition, knowledge and valuing of our ancient indigenous heritage in Australia , especially in the region of Gippsland.

Impact of white settlement on Gunnai people E. Gipps and Angus McMillan

British settlement in Australia was based on the concept of “terra nullius”, despite the obvious existence of indigenous people and their well recorded resistance to this happening. Further, International law did not permit such occupation at the time – a fact which was completely disregarded in all British settlement of this land.

Manning Clark in "The History of Australia" has stated that “On all the frontiers of settlement, settlers treated the aborigines as vermin which had to be destroyed”. In frontier areas, they were called "savages". He states that the white settlers carried out “indiscriminate slaughter” on the aboriginal population. “Few, if any, questions were ever asked about the methods they used”.

In East Gippsland, as with all other white exploration and occupation, extreme conflict soon arose between aboriginal peoples and English settlers for the fertile, well watered country. Several thousand cattle and sheep were brought across from NSW by white settlers in 1839, looking for good pasture. The Gunnai who were the local tribe in East Gippsland have been described in early writings as a very proud, tall and strong people who were feared by neighbouring tribes. They would never have quietly accepted a takeover occupation, wholesale murder of their people and removal from their country. Nor indeed did any indigenous community in this land.

Horribly, the total aboriginal population of Gippsland was decimated by the new settlers in a very short time. This genocide also resulted in their languages and customs being nearly obliterated by 1900. They were estimated to be 4000 in number before settlement and less than 100 within 20 years. Others put the figures from 2000 in 1840 (the date of first settlement) to 87 in 1830 and 11 in 1863. (Aboriginal population figures range a lot due to poor statistical methods used at the time.)

Commissioner Tyers wrote to Governor La Trobe estimating the figures of Gippsland Aborigines to be as follows: “1843 – 1,800; 1853 – 131”.

The Tatungalung tribe with a minimum of 500 people formerly occupied the land around the Gippsland Lakes. Very early settlers describe that it was difficult to find firewood close to the Gippsland Lakes, so numerous were the people living there. Yet by 1855, “when the last battle was over, just a handful of adults and boys were left”. (Odell Raymond, Strathfieldsaye near Stratford 15.8.1853).

Angus MacMillan was irrefutably the leader in these massacres that occurred in East Gippsland. He and his Highland Scots “Brigade” and major landholders and their employees of the time, have been incontrovertibly implicated by researchers in these brutal killings. In all there were 9 known documented massacres in East Gippsland but others are more than likely.

Whatever the statistics, the story is clear – almost all the Gunnai people were killed immediately following white settlement. Only a handful of white settlers such as squatter Henry Meyrick in 1846 stood out against such horrors and resisted the atrocities and/or documented what really happened. His words are found on a memorable monument in the central town park in Stratford. The Bataluk Cultural Trail was one of the groups responsible for its establishment. The inscription includes the following, taken from a letter home by Meyrick to relatives in England in 30th April, 1846.

“... The blacks are very quiet here now, poor wretches. No wild beast of the forest was ever hunted down with such unsparring perseverance as they are. Men, women and children are shot whenever they can be met with...

I have protested against it at every station I have been in Gippsland, in the strongest language, but these things are kept very secret as the penalty would certainly be hanging.

... For myself, if I caught a black actually killing my sheep, I would shoot him with as little remorse as I would a wild dog, but no consideration on earth would induce me to ride into a camp and fire on them indiscriminately, as is the custom whenever the smoke is seen. They [the Aborigines] will very shortly be extinct. It is impossible to say how many have been shot, but I am convinced that not less than 450 have been murdered altogether...”

However, this Stratford memorial would seem to be the only location in all Gippsland where the massacres are currently recorded in a very public place to recognise that they did indeed occur.

East Gippsland was very isolated geographically, so that these early “civilised” white men could act with impunity. Historical accounts show they saw themselves at the time as “frontiersmen” in a wilderness country. They were extremely isolated from any significant white settlement centres and well outside law’s reach. They well knew their actions were criminal and that they could hang, as evidenced by their agreeing to an Oath of secrecy required by MacMillan about the killings. This was probably inspired by fear of legal retribution as they would have been well aware of the recent hanging of all those involved in the previous Myall Creek massacre in NSW 1838, given they had come from southern NSW. Killing of aboriginal people had become so prevalent and accepted at this

time, that part of the Myall Creek accused' s defence was that they did not realise killing an aboriginal person was even a crime.

The few people who escaped this murderous genocide ran initially to inhospitable swamps and far ranges. Eventually, for their "protection", all were rounded up and forcibly put in Reserves and Missions, now notorious for their cruelty and repression. MacMillan remarkably took on the role of "Protector of Aborigines" after he had subdued and removed them from the land. It was then that the forced removal of children began. It is well known that white settler landholders abused and took aboriginal women for sexual purposes, resulting in children. These so –called "half caste" children were usually not recognised or supported by these white fathers and were taken under great duress from their aboriginal mothers and families into these missions, to later become what we now know as "The Stolen Generation" – a devastation the effects of which still continue today.

Areas such as South Gippsland may not have had the same murderous history but indirectly white settlement there effectively annihilated its traditional owners also. The impact of diseases including syphilis, diet and poor living standards took a harsh toll. It is estimated that the population decreased by 95% at the end of the 19th Century.

My Family's Involvement in the Massacres:

My original white settler Maclaren family set up together in 1841 at Strathfieldsaye near Stratford, in Gippsland with Colin as a farm labourer and his wife Elizabeth as housekeeper. Their lives were harsh and they had likely come from poverty in their home countries of Scotland and Ireland. Colin came from Stirling in the Scottish Highlands and was probably a victim himself of dispossession by the English under the appalling Highland Clearances of the time. My great great grandmother came on her own from Ireland in 1841 at 14 years with an 8 year old sister, probably as a Bounty Immigrant. She was married at just 17, after working previously on one of Odell Raymond's outstations. Colin was most likely a sailor in earlier years. They were obviously desperate to seek and make better lives and establish a family here. They were uneducated, far from their countries of birth and in great isolation in a foreign land.

I had long believed that my great, great, great grandfather Colin MacLaren, who explored with Angus MacMillan, helped "discover" Gippsland in Victoria and thus opened it up to white settlement, in particular the area around Port Albert. I always felt a certain pride in this, my connection with the early history of Gippsland and Australia.

However, very recently in 2015 I came to learn a very different story hidden underneath this official version of events. My need for personal exploration about my early settler family and their relationship with the local aboriginal people was finally triggered after watching "The Secret River" ABC TV series. I needed to know what really happened here in East Gippsland. I feared the worst and I found the worst.

I was unaware I was walking in the exact same path and at the same time as Cal Flynn author of "Thicker than Water". Cal is a great, great great niece of Angus McMillan. She is a young, ardently Scottish woman who came to Australia to research for herself the story of his life here. She needed to understand the conflicting accounts she had obtained of his life. On the one hand he was described and revered as the "explorer - "the hard-working, generous Scot honoured with plaques,

portraits and cairns, the “pastoralist ... who ..”Pioneered Gippsland”, a man described as “courageous, strong and generous by his countrymen at the time”, a person who “befriended Aboriginal tribes”. His name was enshrined in educational institutions, streets, monuments, public spaces.

Most likely the need of such memorialisation was inevitable being the result of those early homesick settlers yearning to replicate the familiarity of home, by leaving long lasting icons and places with names of the old country and their own white people who had achieved their settlement amid great hardship. Like me, Cal Flynn describes “a thrill of pride” and “basked in the reflected glory” in these stories which exulted in his achievements. However as she read, she soon learned another version of his life. Like me, she had “stumbled upon a dark secret” which was “Far from the romance of our family folklore”. She learned that in recent years, “his name has come to symbolise some of the very worst excesses of Australia’s violent colonial past”. She needed to know the truth. Was he Angus McMillan the celebrated pioneer explorer the discover of Gippsland or was he in fact the Angus McMillan described also as “the Butcher of Gippsland” ... “a cold blooded killer”. She spent a long time here researching all the sites and places where he had been, she read all she could find including original letters and records of the time, she travelled with aboriginal people over the massacre sites and was constantly challenged by them. It was not an easy or comfortable experience but one she knew she had to finish. In the end she knew that indeed he was the perpetrator of near genocide of the Gonnai people of Gippsland. She concludes - ***“Whatever I recognise in McMillan, however engaging I find him as a man, it cannot be escaped that he must be defined by his worst actions. He was a murderer. A mass murderer. A proponent of genocide.”***

I too learned this very same truth and that my own kin had been one of McMillan’s parties that were responsible for the murder of so many Gonnai people - men, women, and children. I too undertook considerable individual research which included talking to Peter Gardener. This former Gippsland school teacher has written extensively about the exact details of each massacre to ensure any account could be verified, given the absence of major early substantive documentation and the death of so many who were thus unable to pass on their story or because they were cruelly dispersed and alienated from their people, language, culture and land over many years. For this he has often been reviled and rejected by white critics as having a “black arm band” view of our history. And yet, Gardener’s analyses are an almost forensic account of each separate massacre and event of the time – often revisited later to ensure accuracy. I too visited many spiritual aboriginal indigenous sites, as well as the massacre sites. I talked with indigenous people and especially valued my time and learnings from the Keeping Place in Bairnsdale.

I am in no doubt whatsoever that my ancestor, Colin McLaren, led by Angus McMillan, together with Colin Macalister, Tom Macalister, Ronald Macalister, Pat Coady Buckley, Harry Bayliss, Leonard Mason, Daniel Bloore, Sandy McBean, John McDonald, Edward Bath and the well respected Dr. Arbuckle who was my great great grand mother’s doctor assisting at her 5 children’s births, all took part in killings.

The Murders:

Lachlan McAlister was an early pastoralist on the Monaro in NSW. A severe, prolonged drought in the late 1830's led to him sending his employees to search for new grazing land to the south over the mountains. My ancestor Colin McLaren was one such employee along with Angus McMillan. As their exploration and settlement occurred, it seems that a team of fellow Scotsmen developed under the leadership of McMillan. They were called the Highland Brigade. Very early in their travels and time together, the killings of aboriginal people began after some early confrontations.

There were massacres of entire family and clan groups, generally as retaliation for the killing of mostly livestock or for attacks on white settler's huts causing death to some settlers. The attacks by aboriginal people increased with their reducing food supply and denial of access to their country and all that it contained and meant to them. They usually only attacked a few livestock at a time and killed white settlers on an individual basis when specific intrusions and actions became intolerable.

The years 1840 to 1842 were especially horrific but mass murders continued until 1850. The first retaliation was at Boney Point near Lake Wellington 1841. The worst massacre by far was in June 1843 at Warrigal Creek near Woodside without warning in retaliation for the murder of Ronald Macalister near Port Albert. It is well researched and documented. 150 - 500 people camping in one group were murdered in the most horrific ways. The creek was described as "running with blood". Some Kurnai figures list the likely deaths as much higher. Other figures put the deaths at 300 and up to 1000.

Whole communities across East Gippsland were similarly attacked in their communal gathering places – babies, women, children and men. Indeed very few women were left at all by the end. In all there were 9 known documented massacres – others are more than likely but it is hard to obtain incontrovertible evidence to claim them. The locations, the number of people killed in each and the names of specific people such as McMillan to whom they can be definitively attributed are recorded as follows on the Stratford park memorial:

1840	<i>Nuntin</i>	<i>unknown number killed by Angus McMillan's men</i>
1840	<i>Boney Point</i>	<i>"Angus McMillan and his men took a heavy toll of Aboriginal lives"</i>
1841	<i>Butchers Creek</i>	<i>30-35 shot by Angus McMillan's men</i>
1841	<i>Maffra</i>	<i>unknown number shot by Angus McMillan's men</i>
1842	<i>Skull Creek</i>	<i>unknown number killed</i>
1842	<i>Bruthen Creek</i>	<i>"hundreds killed"</i>
1843	<i>Warrigal Creek</i>	<i>between 80 and 200 shot by Angus McMillan and his men</i>

1844	Maffra	<i>unknown number killed</i>
	Snowy River	<i>8 killed by Captain Dana and the Aboriginal Police</i>
1846-47	Central Gippsland	<i>50 or more shot by armed party hunting for a white woman supposedly held by Aborigines; no such woman was ever found.</i>
1850	East Gippsland	<i>15-20 killed</i>
1850	Murrindal	<i>16 poisoned</i>
1850	Brodribb River	<i>15-20 killed</i>

Conclusion:

We probably cannot now imagine how it must have felt to be an indigenous person prior to this time in the 1840's, living harmoniously and over generations for over 30,000 years on this plentiful land. Nor can we imagine what it was like to face an unwinnable, sudden and brutal invasion by another race of people with superior firepower, with no capacity for recourse or recognition. It always shocks me that these events are so very recent. They happened only 175 years ago in just 5 generations of my family and largely in a decade from 1840-1850.

What did the white settlers achieve? What was it all for? I know that these early settlers were hoping to make their fame and personal fortunes and a new successful and happy life here. Angus MacMillan and Colin Maclaren however died intestate or with little left for and estranged deliberately by them from their families.

Colin Maclaren ended his days living alone for over 30 years until old age on Rotamah Island in the Gippsland Lakes. During his time on Rotamah he left a rich history of the time due to his stories being recorded by "The Bushman" Rowland Bell who wrote in the "Maffra Spectator" at the time. Bell described him as "never tired of singing the praises of his old boss" McMillan. He was coy however if asked directly about what role he played in the massacres. However, it is evident from the information he left behind, Colin Maclaren was directly implicated at least in the massacres at Boney Point at the meeting of the Avon and Perry Rivers and also Butcher's Creek near Maffra. I would think from his connection geographically and personally with McMillan over this period, he could have been involved in many of the killings over this period in Gippsland.

Like Cal Flynn, I am now sure that my forbear, my great great great paternal grandfather Colin Maclaren was also a mass murderer of the indigenous people of East Gippsland in those first 10 long years of white settlement.

We, who now live in beautiful Gippsland as a result of what happened, must never forget what got us to here. It is part of our history too. Yet many who live here are oblivious to this hard truth or even deny this all ever happened, preferring and/or believing the old myths and legends handed down in so very few generations.

While removing McMillan's name from my electorate is but one small token of recognition about our brutal past, it acknowledges publicly and gives veracity to the true history of white settlement here. It is now time in 2017 to remove the names of people who in fact were murderers and violators of all that humankind holds dear in all cultures and races. In this case, this means the removal of the name "McMillan" in this electorate following its redistribution process.

We need to hear from the Gunaikurnai people, as to what they say about the impact of McMillan and their choice of a new electorate name which recognises their ancient history upon which Gippsland is founded.

To me it will be a great day in and for Gippsland, when all people know this history and are proud to be part of a Gippsland electorate named by and for our aboriginal past and heritage.

Viki Sinclair

PH: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

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