

A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WIRADJURI
PEOPLE AND THE NON-INDIGENOUS COLONISERS OF
WAGGA WAGGA 1830-1900.

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**Charles Sturt University Archives Summer Scholarship,
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Table of Contents.

Introduction.....	3
Methodology.....	4
First Contact.....	5
Wiradjuri Camps and Colonial Stations.....	7
Relationships of Note.....	10
Marriage.....	14
Blankets.....	15
1865.....	16
Wiradjuri Camps in an Urban Setting.....	20
Burial.....	22
Aboriginal Relationships in Wagga Wagga as an Imported Narrative.....	23
Conclusion.....	28
Bibliography.....	31

Introduction.

The site where Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, stands is a part of the southernmost Wiradjuri language area. While there have been two notable and widely referenced histories of the area, "*A History of Wagga Wagga*" (Swan, 1970) and "*Wagga Wagga: A History*" (Morris, 1999), there appears to be little known about the relationships experienced between Wiradjuri people and non-indigenous colonisers of the area between 1830 and 1900. Comprehensive texts have been written to provide an account of the Wiradjuri experience in Riverina colonial history such as "*The Hundred Years War: The Wiradjuri People and the State*" (Read, 1988), and "*Survival Legacies: Stories from Aboriginal settlements of southeastern Australia*" (Kabaila, 2011). These books also serve to highlight the dearth of information to be found regarding these relationships on the site of Wagga Wagga, by providing more information concerning surrounding areas.

Both the Swan (1970) and Morris (1999) Wagga Wagga histories devote early chapters to the Wiradjuri language group. They adopt the broad brush strokes of anthropology (Swan), or an alignment with the contemporary historical orthodoxy of a broader national narrative (Morris) to describe events in pre-colonial and colonial Wagga Wagga (Wallace & Whitford, 2011, p. 5). Neither text offers an examination of the more complex relationships that must have arisen between Indigenous and non-indigenous people between 1830 and 1900.

The aim of this study was to examine historical sources already cited in Wagga Wagga history texts through a specific lens, searching for relationships between Wiradjuri people and non-indigenous citizens of colonial Wagga Wagga. There was a further examination of some of the resources available at the Charles Sturt University Regional Archives in search of sources that do not appear in local histories, in the hope that they could shed new light on these relationships.

Methodology.

For the purpose of this study, a geographic area was defined as the “Wagga Wagga area”. It is the area created by making a circle with a 50 kilometre radius from the centre of what is now the central business district of Wagga Wagga, New South Wales. Fittingly, it is the site of a sand hill that has had historical significance for both Wiradjuri and non-indigenous cultures, and is where the Wagga Wagga courthouse now stands. Choosing a 50 kilometre radius was purposeful, as there is more that is known about the relationships between Wiradjuri people and non-indigenous colonisers between 1830 and 1900 in areas on or beyond this boundary. Nearby towns and cities such as Ganmain, Narrandera, Lockhart and Albury were therefore excluded from the study, although as will be discussed later, perhaps the narratives that emanated from these places and beyond informed not just historians such as Swan and Morris, but the people living in the Wagga Wagga area between 1830 and 1900.

Resources were compiled by examining the relevant sources cited in the two Wagga Wagga histories mentioned, as well as trawling through the microfilm of the *Wagga Wagga Express* and *Wagga Wagga Advertiser* newspapers. Priority was given to the *Wagga Wagga Express*, as it began in 1858, while the Advertiser began a decade later. Other sources were scoured, such as the Wagga Wagga Bench Book, and Australia Trove, an electronic database containing images and transcripts from prominent colonial newspapers.

Over the course of the study, the 2010-11 Charles Sturt University Summer Scholarship Portfolio (CSUSSP) was compiled which contains many resources formerly cited by historians, as well as some that will not be widely known. A database was created to itemise the contents of the resource portfolio, and to provide a brief insight into each source. This report provides a window into some of the key features of the resource portfolio, while providing a commentary to help readers contextualise the information. Importantly, the 2010-11 CSUSSP is accessible through the Charles Sturt University Regional

Archives, meaning that readers can use their own critical literacy skills and understanding to contextualise the information within it.

First Contact.

The first documented interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures on the site of what is now Wagga Wagga was in the summer of 1829/30. At that time, Captain Charles Sturt travelled from Sydney to where the Tumut and Murrumbidgee rivers meet, then west along the Murrumbidgee past the site of modern Wagga Wagga and onto the plains beyond. While on this journey, which Sturt documented meticulously in a journal that was later published in 1833 (Sturt, 1999), the party was intermittently accompanied by people from the Wiradjuri language group. The relationships between Sturt's party and some Wiradjuri men, particularly two men who came to be known to Sturt as Jemmie and Peter, could be characterised as pragmatic and mutually beneficial.

The prelude to initial contact and communication between Sturt and Wiradjuri people was one of both parties being aware of the presence of the other, but unable (on Sturt's part) or unwilling (on the part of Wiradjuri people) to establish contact. In describing his journey while being just to the west of where the Tumut River runs into the Murrumbidgee River, Sturt wrote the following : -

"Although the fires of the natives had been frequent upon the river, none had, as yet, ventured to approach us, in consequence of some misunderstanding that had taken place between them and Mr. Stuckey's stockmen. Mr. Roberts' stockmen, however, brought a man and boy to us at this place in the afternoon, but I could not persuade them to accompany us on our journey – neither could I, although my native boy understood them perfectly, gain any particular information from them" (Sturt, 1999, p. 149).

This exchange speaks of a wariness of non-indigenous people on the part of Wiradjuri people, but indicates Sturt's awareness that local knowledge would be invaluable to his task. We know from this passage, that Sturt's intention was to engage with Wiradjuri people in a way that would facilitate the successful completion of his mission, meaning that his party would be probably be unlikely to initiate aggression. This attitude was not typical of non-indigenous colonial explorers, and would serve Sturt well later in the journey.

Sturt, in his journal of the expedition (Sturt, 1999), cites numerous occasions where he took the advice of Wiradjuri men regarding the optimal route to take with his bullock drawn drays. This was undoubtedly an invaluable asset for Sturt, as there were times early in the expedition when he was unaccompanied by Wiradjuri men, and was forced to turn around and retrace his steps in order to find a more accessible course along the Murrumbidgee River (Sturt, 1999, p. 145). The expedition was physically demanding on man and beast, and considerations regarding the rationing of provisions would have weighed heavily on Sturt. Finding the most economical route for the expedition party was vital, and potentially lifesaving, making the local knowledge of Wiradjuri men invaluable.

On the 1st December, 1829, Sturt's party was joined by two Wiradjuri men who later became known to the party by the names of Peter and Jemmie, who acted as their guides (Sturt, 1999, p. 150). Sturt immediately took the advice of these men regarding the best possible route to take. The next day, one of the Wiradjuri men asked for and received the use of a tomahawk to assist in the capture of an opossum by smoking it out of a hollow tree (Sturt, 1999, p. 150). This may indicate that Sturt was intent on making an overt display of material exchange with his newfound companions, if only temporary, as well as a show of faith regarding personal safety. Later on that day, Sturt sent George Macleay and a Wiradjuri man "with the flour to the river, with directions to cover it up with tarpaulins" as a food store to be protected from the rain (Sturt, 1999, p. 152). This journal entry outlines an extraordinary level of trust on Sturt's part, given the value of flour to the welfare of the men on his expedition.

All of these journal entries are examples of Sturt's willingness to place his faith in the judgement and behaviour of Wiradjuri men whom he had only just met. Perhaps, these gestures were not lost on his Wiradjuri companions. Sturt's trust was certainly not misplaced or betrayed in the area Wagga Wagga now sits, and these journal entries suggest the existence of a positive rapport between Sturt's party and some Wiradjuri people at that time. These events took place approximately 34km to the east northeast of Wagga Wagga, at a place that the Wiradjuri called "Pontebadgery" (now Wantabadgery) while heading west through what is now North Wagga Wagga. Sturt described Jemmie and Peter as having been of "infinite service" to him in his endeavours (Sturt, 1999, p. 154) while travelling through what would become the Wagga Wagga area.

Wiradjuri Camps and Colonial Stations.

During the period between 1830 and the inception of the Robertson Land Acts of 1861, there was a rapid occupation of land, particularly along the river corridors by sheep and cattle graziers (Kabaila, 2011, p. 30). Stations were rapidly and progressively established west along the Murrumbidgee River, onto the Hay plains and beyond from 1832. Wiradjuri people were still able to move freely along the river corridors and the back country connecting stations, but it is apparent that some Wiradjuri bands camped on stations (Kabaila, 2011, p. 30). An example of this in the Wagga Wagga area can be read in *"The Recollections of a Bushy"* (Cox, 1969, Number 2), by Richard Cox, which made references to a Wiradjuri camp at Livingston Gully in the years of 1849 and 1859.

There is evidence of the existence of a pragmatic relationship between early station managers in the Wagga Wagga area and Wiradjuri people. A willingness to use Wiradjuri people as labour was expressed by John Peter in a response to a questionnaire sent out by the NSW Government in 1840 (DeServille, 1980). Peter was one of the first squatters to come into the Wagga Wagga area. He established the "Borambola" station (21 kilometres east of what is now central Wagga Wagga) for George MacLeay, and a neighbouring holding

for himself, along the Murrumbidgee River in 1836. In 1837, Peter married a landed widow, Mary Bourke, acquiring the “Gumly Gumly” run in doing so, and went on to become one of the most prosperous squatters of his generation. He returned to Scotland in 1861 (DeServille, 1980), and was a giant of colonial Wagga Wagga’s formative days.

Seven questions were put forth in the 1840 government questionnaire in order to gain information from station managers regarding the viability of using Aboriginal people as an ongoing labour source in rural areas. Peter responded by saying that he “sometimes had as many as twenty employed at one time and generally about seven” Aboriginal workers. Peter used Wiradjuri women and boys as domestic staff, and the men in “washing sheep, stripping bark, reaping and shepherding” (DeServille, 1980, p. 35). Peter said that he had “never been in the habit of giving them any wages, or any other remuneration, but their rations, and a little woollen clothing during the cold weather” (DeServille, 1980, p. 35). Clearly, Aboriginal people represented a very cheap labour option for Peter, a quality that would not have been lost on the fiercely ambitious business man that he was. Peter’s response to the fifth question gives some insight into the way that he viewed Aboriginal people at that time.

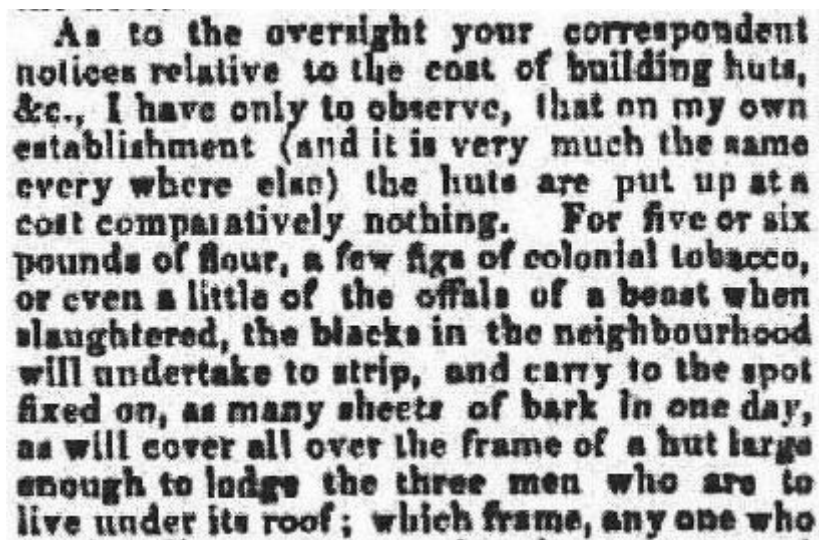
“Question 5. Can you offer any suggestions as to the means by which they (Aboriginal people) may be more readily induced to engage in the above (station work) or in any other useful occupations?”

By kind treatment on the part of the Settlers, taking care that those they have employed are kept as much as possible separate from the European servants, who look upon them jealously, and treat them harshly – if they were taught to apply to the Commissioner of the district for redress of any depredation committed by other Tribes, and those that take the law into their own hands severely punished they would no longer have the same inducement to wander about” (DeServille, 1980, p. 35).

Peter thought that his Aboriginal labourers should be taught to embrace European law as a superior option to their own. While his attitude to Aboriginal

people seems patriarchal and exploitative, he appears to show a genuine concern for their basic welfare and safety, so long as they complied with European laws. If his interest in ensuring that Aboriginal people were treated kindly by squatters is genuine, and there is further evidence to suggest that this may be so, then it paints Peter as an enigmatic figure. He was regarded as ruthless in business matters, particularly when it came to acquiring land from rival squatters (Swan, 1970, p. 67), whose welfare was less of a concern to him.

A willingness to use Wiradjuri people as a cheap labour source was also expressed by Charles Thompson in 1842. Thompson, who established the “Eunonyhareenyha” station on the northern bank of the Murrumbidgee River, east of where central Wagga Wagga now stands (Morris Index, 1988), contributed a letter to the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper on the 17th December, 1842 (Thompson, 2011).



As to the oversight your correspondent notices relative to the cost of building huts, &c., I have only to observe, that on my own establishment (and it is very much the same every where else) the huts are put up at a cost comparatively nothing. For five or six pounds of flour, a few figs of colonial tobacco, or even a little of the offals of a beast when slaughtered, the blacks in the neighbourhood will undertake to strip, and carry to the spot fixed on, as many sheets of bark in one day, as will cover all over the frame of a hut large enough to lodge the three men who are to live under its roof; which frame, any one who

Extract 1: part of Charles Thompson’s letter to the editor, *Sydney Morning Herald* 17th December, 1842.

Thompson’s letter was written as a correction to an earlier report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* regarding the financial viability of sheep farming in the Wagga Wagga area. He was explicit in outlining the “cost comparatively nothing” of using Aboriginal labourers to help source the materials, then erect bark huts to serve as accommodation for his non-indigenous employees. His comment

that “it is very much the same everywhere else” (Tompson, 2011) suggests that using Wiradjuri people as labour in this way was commonplace for station managers around Wagga Wagga at the time. The erection of bark huts may be an example of local squatters exploiting a Wiradjuri skill set that would inevitably have led to an exchange of skills between cultures. As with John Peter, Tompson’s payment to his Wiradjuri labourers took the form of material goods, such as tobacco, flour and offal.

Material gains, particularly food, would have been attractive to some Wiradjuri people as the ever increasing livestock numbers diminished traditional food stocks after 1830 (Kabaila, 2011, p. 30). Tobacco features prominently as a coveted commodity by Wiradjuri men in several texts that appear in the 2010-11 CSUSSP. It is noteworthy that in every such source, there is an expectation on the part of Wiradjuri people that goods would be exchanged for labour or knowledge. In the John Hurst and Richard Cox reminiscences, for example, assistance with river crossings was met with a pre-arranged exchange of figs of tobacco for the Wiradjuri men.

Relationships of Note.

There are several recorded examples of what appear to be genuine friendships between non-indigenous men and Wiradjuri people. Richard Cox, in his reminiscence *“Recollections of a Bushy”* (Cox, 1969, Number 2, p. 8), recalled his friend James Bourke, the youngest son of Mary (Widow) Bourke, who later became Mrs. John Peter (Morris Index, 1988).

My early recollection of James Bourke was one of extreme admiration. I thought him the personification of everything noble and lovable and this opinion was shared by all at Livingstone Gully. He used to take me on his horse and gallop past the house cracking his stockwhip. He played leap frog, marbles, cricket and hand ball. He was tall and slight and had the most lovely head of auburn curly hair, the equal of which I never saw since. He died at Big Springs about 10th June 1859 at the early age of 22 years.

I remember he could speak the Aboriginal language like a native and there being a black’s camp at Livingstone Gully James Bourke used to call old blackfellows round him and the picaninies and talk to them and generally would get on his horse and chase them cracking his whip near them and finish by giving the old men tobacco. He married Martha Best in 1858 but after his

Extract 2: from “*Recollections of a Bushy*”, by Richard Cox, in the Journal of the Wagga Wagga and District Historical Society (Number 2, p. 8), 1969.

It can be assumed that Bourke’s use of his whip carried playful, rather than sinister overtones. His ability to speak Wiradjuri language fluently, and the respect that he paid to “the old men” (an indication of his understanding of Wiradjuri hierarchy) with gifts of tobacco suggest that Bourke was intimate with the Wiradjuri clan camped near Livingston Gully, 17 kilometres southeast of Wagga Wagga.

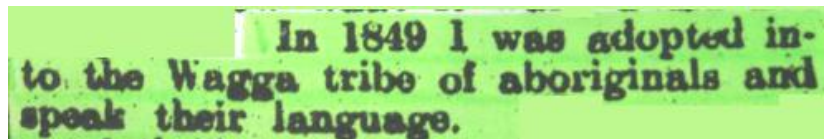
In the same reminiscence, Cox recounts wandering away from his father’s home on a station at Livingston Gully when he was 4 years old (circa 1849). He became lost, and was found by an old Aboriginal man named “Yarry”. His father found him some time later, sound asleep in the Livingston Gully Wiradjuri camp, clearly at ease in his surrounds. From these accounts, we know that the relationships between some of the farmers of Livingston Gully, and the Wiradjuri people who camped there was relatively cordial, at least until the death of James Bourke in 1859.

Probably I was tenacious of life for at four years of age I followed my brother without his knowledge and got lost in the bush. I had gone about a mile when I was picked up by an old blackfellow named Yarry and taken to his camp where I was found by my Father several hours after sound asleep in a lubra’s opossum rug. She intended taking me home in the morning, it being against the habits of the Murrumbidgee blacks to leave camp after dark believing that “dibbel dibbel ran along in dark, by God.” It is peculiar that the Aboriginal acquired the swear part of English without the Missioner’s assistance.

Extract 3: from “*Recollections of a Bushy*”, by Richard Cox, in the Journal of the Wagga Wagga and District Historical Society (Number 2, p. 12), 1969.

Another recount of positive rapport can be found in a letter contributed to the *Wagga Wagga Advertiser* newspaper by Mathew William Best on the 12th December, 1905. Matthew was the grandson of George Best, the man who established “Wagga Wagga” station in 1832 (Morris Index, 1988). Mathew Best was also the brother-in-law of James Bourke from Livingston Gully. The letter is

well known amongst Wagga Wagga historians for the richness of its content, and for a tantalising reference to a possible follow-up contribution by Best to the *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*. In the letter, Best described his “adoption” into a band of Wiradjuri people, and consequently learning to speak the language (Best, 12th December, 1905). Best’s use of such a familial word as “adoption” suggested an intimate relationship based on mutual respect.



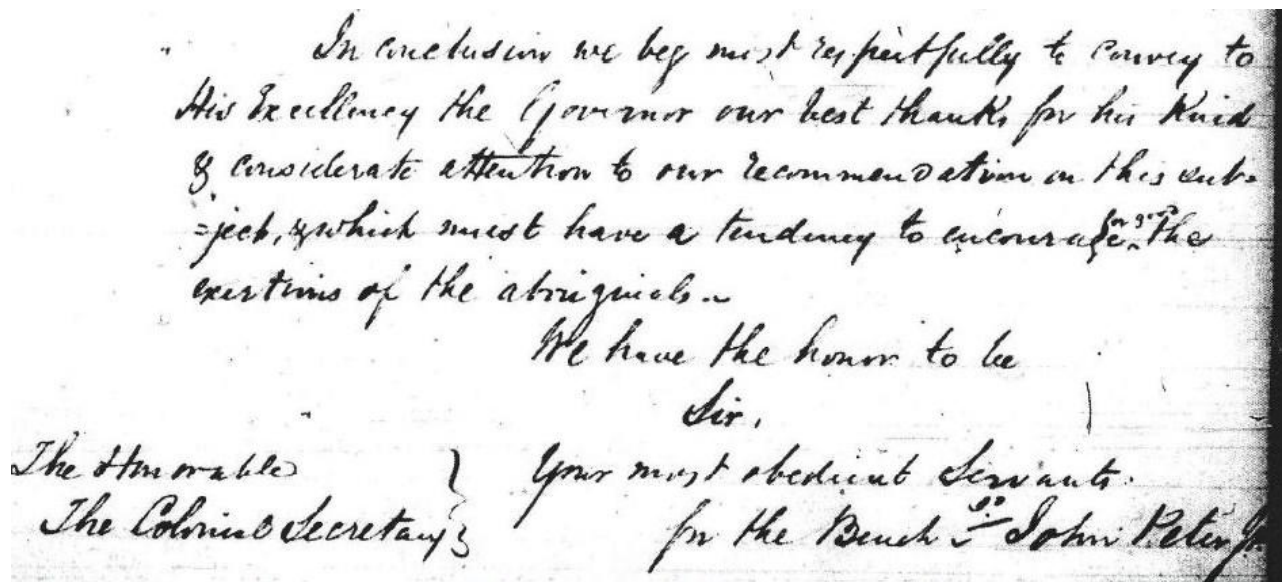
In 1849 I was adopted into the Wagga tribe of aboriginals and speak their language.

Extract 4: part of Mathew Best’s letter to the editor in the *Wagga Wagga Advertiser* 12th December, 1905.

A Wiradjuri man named Bulgarri featured in several 1848-49 Wagga Wagga Bench Book entries by one of the three people presiding on the bench at that time, John Peter. A series of four letters by Peter addressed to the Colonial Secretary and the Colonial Treasurer tell of Bulgarri having been of assistance in apprehending a “notorious malefactor named John Callachan” who had appeared before the Wagga Wagga bench for horse stealing (John Peter, Wagga Wagga Bench Book, Letter 48/11699). It appears that Bulgarri was responsible for apprehending Callachan, and that his “vigilance and assistance” in the matter was deserving of a 5 Pound reward that was offered for Callachan’s arrest. In the letter, Peter described Bulgarri as a “thoroughly civilised, hard working man, earning his livelihood and wages as any white man would do”. This assessment of the virtues of a Wiradjuri man through the parochialism of a colonial lens was repeated in later documents that appear in the 2010-11 CSUSSP.

Later letters from Peter described his proposed payment of the reward to Bulgarri in the patriarchal form of “some useful articles instead of money”, and his belief that the 5 Pound reward should be reimbursed by the Colonial Treasurer (Peter, Wagga Wagga Bench Book, Letter 23/11/1848). This letter concluded enigmatically with the sentence, “In conclusion we beg most respectfully to convey to His Excellency the Governor our best thanks for his kind

and considerate attention to our recommendation on this subject, and which must have a tendency to encourage for good the existence of the aboriginals". Chronologically, this is the first of several references to be found in the 2010-11 CSUSSP that alludes to the possibility that Aboriginal people may cease to exist in the Wagga Wagga area.



In conclusion we beg most respectfully to convey to His Excellency the Governor our best thanks for his kind & considerate attention to our recommendation on this subject, which must have a tendency to encourage the existence of the aboriginals.

We have the honor to be
Sir,
Your most obedient Servants.
for the Bench J^r John Peter

The Honorable
The Colonial Secretary

Extract 5: the end of John Peter's entry in the Wagga Wagga Bench

Book, dated 23rd November, 1848.

The Wagga Wagga Bench Book letters show that John Peter's earlier concerns for the wellbeing, or at least the continued existence, of Aboriginal people appears genuine. As with his earlier responses to the questionnaire of 1840 (DeServille, 1980), we see that any positive estimation on Peter's part of Wiradjuri people comes through their utility value within colonial culture.

Acknowledgements of the value of a Wiradjuri man for his ability to excel within colonial definitions of manhood are repeated in two newspaper reports on the death of a man named John Taylor. Although Taylor lived in Tumut, his death was reported in Wagga Wagga due to his exceptional cricketing prowess, which he apparently exhibited in the town.

The deceased was in the prime of life, and always earned his living as stockman and general servant, and never frequented the camps of his race. He was a universal favourite with every person who was acquainted with him, and news of his demise was heard with general regret.

Extract 6: from a *Wagga Wagga Express* article on the death of John Taylor dated 7th July, 1875.

It can be argued that, from the perspective of the author, much of the respect afforded Taylor was due to his ability to earn a living as a stockman, and to distance himself from other Aboriginal people. The report on the 7th July, 1875, was followed by a poem, presumably contributed to the *Queanbeyan Age* newspaper by a Wagga Wagga author under the name of "Whitefellow", which offers that

*"We'll miss him at his wonted place,
When the next Wagga match is played"* (Whitefellow, 1875).

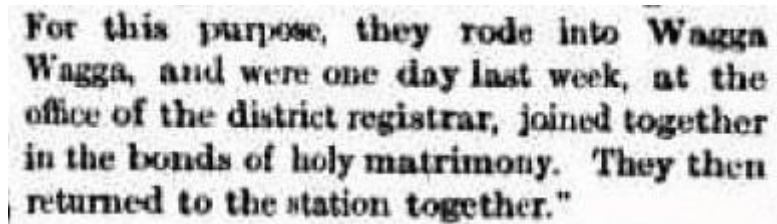
Marriage.

Two newspaper articles from the 1860s reported relationships between a Wiradjuri man and a non-indigenous woman. In the first instance in 1862, a couple from the "lower Murrumbidgee" were refused the right to marriage (see Extract 7). The term "lower Murrumbidgee" was often used in newspapers of the time to describe the Wagga Wagga area, as the following article (Extract 8) demonstrates.

THE MARRIAGE OF ABORIGINES.—I have lately heard of a case where a black man and a white woman wished to get married. They applied to several registrars and to some ministers, none of whom, however, could be prevailed on to perform the ceremony, being apparently under the impression that such unions are not permitted by law.

Extract 7: from the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper
9th December, 1862

The second article from five years later, 1867, reported that a Wiradjuri stockman and non-indigenous woman who worked on the same station on the “lower Murrumbidgee” were married in Wagga Wagga (see Extract 8). The decade of the 1860s appears to be a time of greatly increased contact between Wiradjuri people and non-indigenous Wagga Wagga citizens.



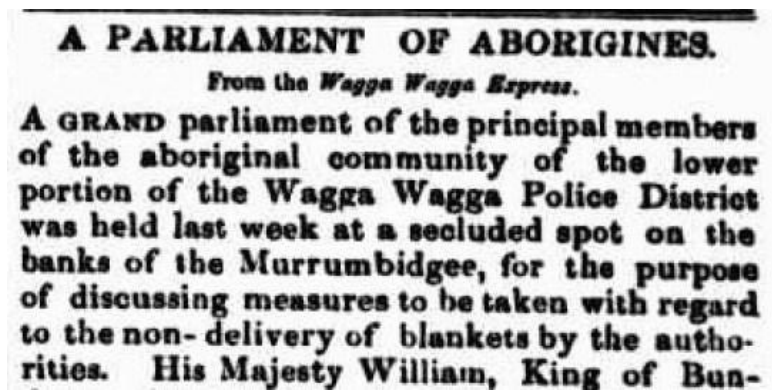
For this purpose, they rode into Wagga Wagga, and were one day last week, at the office of the district registrar, joined together in the bonds of holy matrimony. They then returned to the station together."

Extract 8: from *The Argus* (Melbourne) newspaper dated 4th January, 1867.

Blankets.

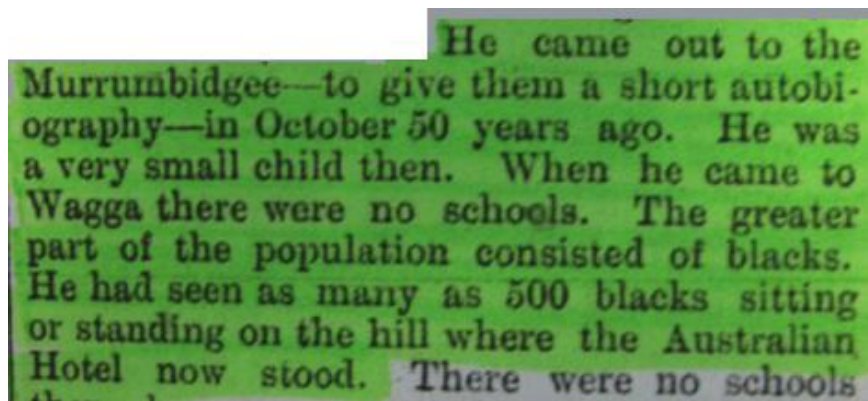
The distribution of blankets to Wiradjuri people has been well documented in Wagga Wagga histories. Blankets were distributed annually by the government as part of the commemoration of Queen Victoria's Birthday, and in effect, was an early form of welfare. The annual distribution of blankets was a time when Wiradjuri people came to gather in Wagga Wagga, and other local townships, in large groups. Over time, they incorporated the annual meeting for blanket distribution into traditional ceremonial practices (Kabaila, 2011, p. 32). This is verified in several sources within the 2010-11 CSUSSP (see J.J. Baylis, 1927, pp. 253-4).

An example of Wiradjuri people coming to Wagga Wagga to receive blankets can be seen in an article from the *Queanbeyan Age and General Advertiser* newspaper (Extract 9) cited the *Wagga Wagga Express* on 15th June, 1865. It is apparent that the gathering was also used to carry out traditional practices, as well as to discuss important issues for Wiradjuri people. This article is noteworthy beyond its verification of the Wiradjuri gathering. Its derisive and sarcastic tone was to herald the beginning of a series of Wagga Wagga newspaper articles that depicted Aboriginal people in a particularly unfavourable light.



Extract 9: from the *Queanbeyan Age and General Advertiser* citing the *Wagga Wagga Express* dated 15th June, 1865.

Several large gatherings of Wiradjuri people, often described by the onlookers as “corroborees”, were reported on the site of Wagga Wagga. In 1892, Basil Bennett Jr. was reported giving a speech where he recalled that, as a boy 50 years earlier, he saw 500 Wiradjuri people gathered near where the Wagga Wagga courthouse now stands. In 1842, this was right in the heart of the emerging township of Wagga Wagga.



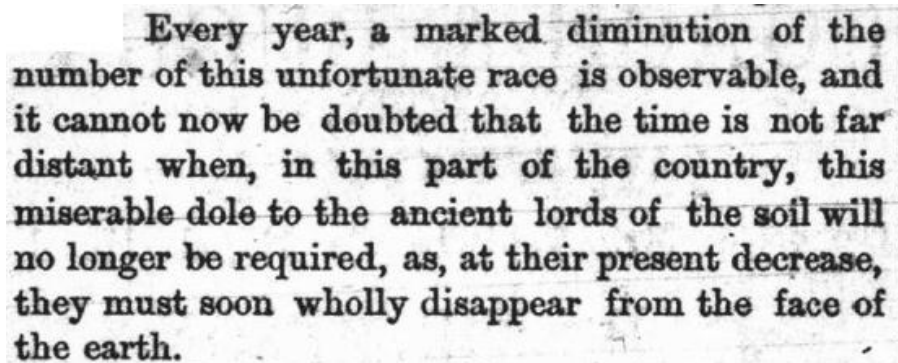
Extract 10: from a *Wagga Wagga Express* article reporting a speech given by Basil Bennett dated 5th March, 1892.

J. J. Baylis, in his 1927 history of “The Murrumbidgee and Wagga Wagga”, recalled that, “There were many blacks about Wagga Wagga in the ‘sixties (1860s), and I have seen between three and four hundred of them camped in the bend of the river below where the traffic bridge crosses it (this is a site near

where the Hampden Bridge stands today)....They generally mustered in great numbers for Queen Victoria's Birthday, May 24, when they were each given a blanket by the Government" (Baylis, 1927, pp. 253-254).

1865.

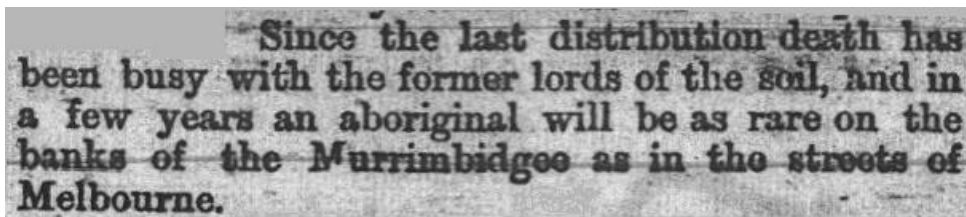
Three reports that appeared in the *Wagga Wagga Express* between May and June of 1866 were explicit in describing a sudden drop in the population of Wiradjuri people. The drop in population is made apparent at the annual gatherings for blanket distributions. The authorship of all three of these articles is not made clear, although there is a likelihood that they were written by noted colonial Wagga Wagga correspondent and community identity, F. A. Tompson. The first, dated 12th May, 1866, speculated that if the Wiradjuri people that lived around Wagga Wagga continued to perish at the rate noted in previous years, "they must soon wholly disappear from the face of the earth". (*Wagga Wagga Express*, 12th May, 1866).



Every year, a marked diminution of the number of this unfortunate race is observable, and it cannot now be doubted that the time is not far distant when, in this part of the country, this miserable dole to the ancient lords of the soil will no longer be required, as, at their present decrease, they must soon wholly disappear from the face of the earth.

Extract 11: from a *Wagga Wagga Express* article describing the upcoming distribution of blankets to Wiradjuri people dated 12th May, 1866.

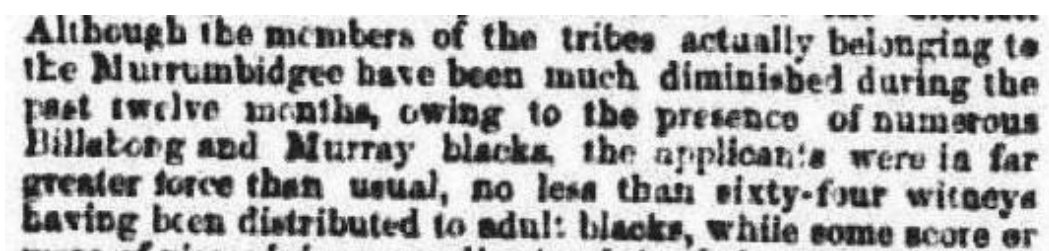
Another report from one week later said that "death has been busy" with Aboriginal people "since the last distribution" of blankets 12 months earlier (*Wagga Wagga Express*, 19th May, 1866). Neither article offered any explanation for the rapid decline in Wiradjuri population in 1865.



Since the last distribution death has been busy with the former lords of the soil, and in a few years an aboriginal will be as rare on the banks of the Murrumbidgee as in the streets of Melbourne.

Extract 12: from an article in the *Wagga Wagga Express* on 19th May, 1866.

A third article, noting a gathering of Wiradjuri people in Narrandera to receive blankets offered one explanation for the marked drop in population. The article, dated 7th June, 1866, repeated that the Wiradjuri people had “been much diminished during the past twelve months” (*Wagga Wagga Express*, 7th June, 1866). It goes on to attribute this to the “presence of numerous Billabong and Murray blacks”.



Although the members of the tribes actually belonging to the Murrumbidgee have been much diminished during the past twelve months, owing to the presence of numerous Billabong and Murray blacks, the applicants were in far greater force than usual, no less than sixty-four witneys having been distributed to adult blacks, while some score or

Extract 13: from a *Wagga Wagga Express* article on the distribution of blankets in Narrandera dated 7th June, 1866.

Together, this series of articles appear to be suggesting that the rapid drop in Wiradjuri population that reportedly occurred in 1865 was a result of conflict with rival neighbouring Indigenous language groups. In order to better contextualise this series of articles, two points warrant illumination. First, we should consider the nature of traditional Aboriginal warfare. There is a graphic description of Wiradjuri people in battle, most likely with people from the Ngunawal language group to the east of Wagga Wagga, which John Peter provided in 1863. Secondly, the impact of the Robertson Land Acts of 1861 on Wiradjuri people should be understood, with its pressure to push them into the fringes of urban settings like Wagga Wagga (Read, 1988).

John Peter gave an eye witness account of an armed conflict between two groups of Aboriginal men on the “Borambola” run, approximately 21

kilometres east of Wagga Wagga along the Murrumbidgee River, which he established for George MacLeay. He provided it in *“Appendix 1: Personal Narrative of a Prosperous Squatter”* as part of Sir Roger Therry’s *“Reminiscences of Thirty Years Residence in New South Wales and Victoria”*, 1863 (DeServille, 1980, p. 204). He described having had “at first some difficulty with the natives, who were inclined to attack the shepherds and drive off sheep. By treating them with kindness, however, I succeeded in making them useful in sheep-washing, and such-like work” (DeServille, 1980, pp. 206-207). This was consistent with Peter’s responses to the 1840 questionnaire discussed earlier. Peter also described an incident that happened in the late 1830’s or early 1840’s where: -

“I saw, upon one occasion, tribes from the east and west assemble within a mile of my station, and witnessed a pitched battle fought between them to settle some dispute. The numbers were about equal – about 400 on each side – with the wives and children of each tribe encamped in the rear.....at length they became so excited.....that they threw their spears at each other.....The reed spearswere thrown in such numbers and with such rapidity that they filled the air for about fifteen minutes, and had the appearance of a shower of spears. Some of these spears were warded off, very dexterously by the combatants on both sides, by shields of strong bark.....Several, however, on each side were killed and wounded.....”

(DeServille, 1980, pp. 207-208)

Given that a battle that involved 800 people resulted in injury or death to less than ten men in total, it seems likely that any conflicts that incurred the types of losses that the three 1866 *Wagga Wagga Express* articles report (Extracts 11-13) would have been reported or documented. For example, an article appeared in the *Wagga Wagga Express* at that time, which described a similar build up for battle by two Aboriginal language groups described as the “Mitchell and Sale tribes” (*Wagga Wagga Express*, 5th May, 1866). This article is in the CSUSSP 2010-11. Interestingly, in that instance police intervened and no deaths were incurred. Given that this story came from 300 kilometres south of Wagga Wagga, it seems likely that any battle, or more likely series of battles (if

they were fought in the way that John Peter described), involving heavy fatalities in or around Wagga Wagga would be conspicuous enough to be deemed newsworthy by the same newspaper in the same year.

The year of 1865 is significant regarding the three *Wagga Wagga Express* articles in Extracts 11-13, because it was a time that saw the impact of the Robertson Land Acts of 1861 on Aboriginal people throughout New South Wales. While areas such as where Wagga Wagga now stands had been the site of large stations (thousands of acres) along permanent water sources, such as the Murrumbidgee River, the Robertson Land Acts opened up the remaining smaller blocks (less than 320 acres) to squatters (Kabaila, 2011, pp. 30-32). The result was a massive influx of non-indigenous people to the Wagga Wagga area to work these small holdings. For Wiradjuri people, it had a disastrous effect on the landscape as land was fenced and cleared, diminishing traditional food sources, and fracturing traditional pathways between seasonal campsites (Kabaila, 2011, p. 32). Much of the station work that had been undertaken by Wiradjuri people (see Extract 1 and John Peter's response to Question 5 in the 1840 questionnaire) was then done by the new squatters, meaning that an important supplementary food and material goods source was lost to them. By 1865, Wiradjuri people had been forced to make camps on the fringes of colonial settlements such as Wagga Wagga in the search for food and material goods (Kabaila, 2011, p. 30).

Wiradjuri Camps in an Urban Setting.

The effects of the 1861 Robertson Land Acts on Wiradjuri people and non-indigenous Wagga Wagga residents can be seen in newspaper reports from the time. Numerous sources report the presence of a Wiradjuri camp on the approximate site of the Wiradjuri reserve today. The campsites ranged from the site of what would later be the Hampden Bridge (J.J. Baylis, 1927, pp 253-254) at the northern end of 1860s Wagga Wagga, to the west along the Murrumbidgee River where the racecourse is situated. Most reports that do not feature in

reminiscences come from reports on court proceedings or crimes, invariably involving alcohol.

CAMPING WITH ABORIGINAL NATIVES.—At the Police Court, Wagga Wagga, on the 25th ultimo, George Ashby and Joseph Taylor were placed in the dock, charged with camping with aboriginal natives. District constable Kyle stated that between seven and eight o'clock on Monday evening, he and constable Hamilton visited the black's camp, situated between the race-course and the Government paddock.

Extract 14: from the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper dated 4th July, 1861.

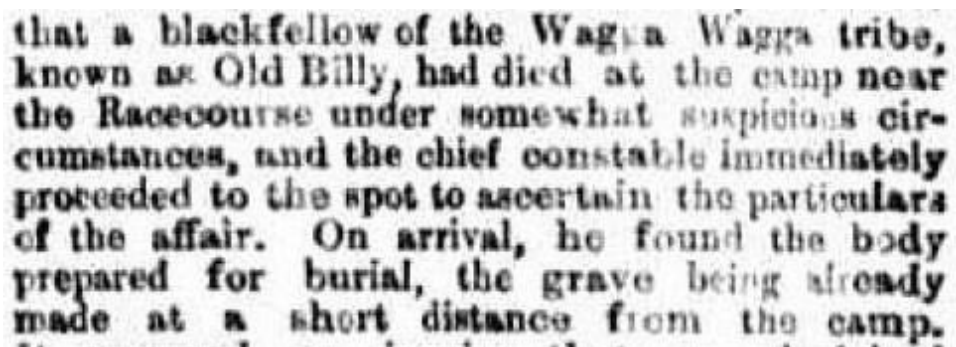
Several newspaper articles from the 1860s describe Wiradjuri camps in Wagga Wagga, and attendant problems with non-indigenous men visiting the camps with bottles of alcohol. Men who were found by police in the camps were arrested and brought before the Wagga Wagga Bench (see Extract 14). Violence was a common feature of the reports (see Extract 15), and one cites the death of an Aboriginal woman in Wagga Wagga due to alcohol poisoning from a bottle of brandy brought to camp by a non-indigenous man who was in her company.

ASSAULTING AN ABORIGINAL.—John Bourke was charged with the above offence. Sergeant Carroll said that an aboriginal had called at the police camp that morning and said “a whitefellow was down at his camp, and a blackfellow was nearly killed;” witness went down to the police camp soon

Extract 15: from the *Wagga Wagga Express* newspaper dated 4th August, 1866.

Burial.

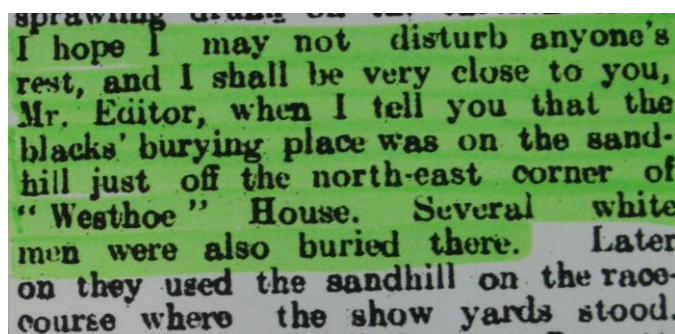
Sites for Wiradjuri burial within Wagga Wagga were mentioned in four texts that appear within the 2010-11 CSUSSP. Most of these sources have been cited by Wagga Wagga historians (Swan, 1970; Morris, 1999), but the article of Extract 16 has not been referenced until now. Long term Wagga Wagga resident, J. J. Baylis, in his local history from the *Wagga Wagga Express* of 4th July, 1914, mentioned that “The sandhills of Wagga were the burial grounds” for Wiradjuri people.



that a blackfellow of the Wagga Wagga tribe, known as Old Billy, had died at the camp near the Racecourse under somewhat suspicious circumstances, and the chief constable immediately proceeded to the spot to ascertain the particulars of the affair. On arrival, he found the body prepared for burial, the grave being already made at a short distance from the camp.

Extract 16: from *The Argus* newspaper (Melbourne) dated
20th November, 1861.

Baylis' claims were verified by several newspaper articles, one of which appeared in *The Argus* (Melbourne), which cited the *Wagga Wagga Express* (Extract 16). The 1861 article reported that a Wiradjuri man, “Old Billy”, had been prepared for burial close to “a camp near the Racecourse”. Unfortunately, the location of the burial site is not more specific, but there is some chance that it is the same site mentioned in Extract 17 near “Westhoe” house. This house was situated in Kincaid street, near the Wagga Wagga racecourse.



I hope I may not disturb anyone's rest, and I shall be very close to you, Mr. Editor, when I tell you that the blacks' burying place was on the sandhill just off the north-east corner of "Westhoe" House. Several white men were also buried there. Later on they used the sandhill on the racecourse where the show yards stood.

Extract 17: from Mathew Best's letter to the editor in the
Wagga Wagga Advertiser 12th December, 1905.

Aboriginal Relationships in Wagga Wagga as an Imported Narrative.

Newspapers are a valuable insight into history, as they “embalm the day to day histories of the districts in which they are published” (Sommerlad, as cited in Blacklow, 1999, p. 27). Therefore, the *Wagga Wagga Express*, which began in 1858, became a focus of interest. In examining all of the resources in the CSUSSP 2010-11 database, an interesting pattern emerged in the way that *The Wagga Wagga Express* covered stories that involved Aboriginal people, particularly in 1866.

The core goal of this study has been to examine the relationships between Wiradjuri people and non-indigenous colonisers of Wagga Wagga. In doing so, there has been an awareness of the need to avoid an assumption that the national colonial narrative would hold true for Wagga Wagga (Wallace & Whitford, 2011). Part of that narrative has been an assumption that there was immediate bloodshed upon contact between Aboriginal people and squatters as they fought for territory and resources, and that this must have been as true for the Wagga Wagga area as it was for nearby areas such as Narrandera (100 kilometres west).

On the evidence within the 2010-11 CSUSSP, this does not appear to have happened. The newspapers provide no evidence that would indicate that there were open acts of violence between Wiradjuri and non-indigenous people that resulted in bloodshed between 1830 and 1860 in the Wagga Wagga area. Indeed, the evidence within the CSUSSP 2010-11 indicates that there were examples of some relatively pragmatic relationships between Wiradjuri people and non-indigenous residents of Wagga Wagga in those 3 decades. This is in no way an argument to suggest that the colonisation of Wagga Wagga was endorsed or facilitated by Wiradjuri people, nor that acts of violence did not happen.

During the *Wagga Wagga Express*' inaugural year of 1858, an article titled “*Are the Aborigines British Subjects?*” was published that questioned the validity of trying Aboriginal people in colonial courts if the crime may not have

been committed in a British colony. It argued that New South Wales may not even been part of the British colony (see Extract 18).

Nor can it be contended that the crime was committed within British territory, for, as between us and the natives, no part of the soil is ours! Should even these difficulties

Extract 18: from a *Wagga Wagga Express* article dated
6th November, 1858.

In the absence of examples of armed conflict between Wiradjuri and non-indigenous people, an interesting pattern emerged in the type of articles that were printed about Aboriginal people in the *Wagga Wagga Express* during the 1860s. In 1866, the *Wagga Wagga Express* imported stories about Aboriginal people committing violent crimes from around the country. In questioning whether these articles are merely newsworthy topics from the day, it should be remembered that 1866 was the year that the same newspaper reported the dramatic drop in the population of Wiradjuri people. It suggested that this was the result of the presence of other Aboriginal language groups, yet did not deem any purported conflict that resulted in hundreds of deaths within the area to be newsworthy. In 1866, however, this series of articles was deemed to be newsworthy by the *Wagga Wagga Express*.

On February 3rd, 1866, there was a report in the *Wagga Wagga Express* on the murder trial of an Aboriginal man in Wentworth, 520 kilometres west of Wagga Wagga (see Extract 19). He was found guilty of murdering a non-indigenous man who had visited the Aboriginal camp.

From the evidence in this case it appeared that the murdered man had visited the blacks' camp and wanted to have criminal connection with one of the gins. The prisoner chased him away with a waddy and struck him as he ran down the bank of the river, and afterwards on the back of the head while he was in the water, and drowned him.

Extract 19: from a *Wagga Wagga Express* Article dated 3rd February, 1866.

This article was followed by a report on the 12th April, 1866, from Springsure in Queensland, which is 1200 kilometres north of Wagga Wagga (see Extract 20). The article, which curiously undermined its credibility by admitting that the story was hearsay, told of a particularly random and gruesome murder based on little more than a whim by an Aboriginal tracker.

ATROCIOUS MURDER.—An atrocious black murder is reported to have occurred on a station to the south of Springsure, which must be unnameable, as the information comes to us in rather a peculiar manner. It is, however, we believe, perfectly true. A native

Extract 20: from the *Wagga Wagga Express* on the 12th April, 1866.

The next article that mentioned Aboriginal people in the *Wagga Wagga Express* was on the 5th May, 1866 (see Extract 21). This article was about a party of non-indigenous men setting off to hunt down Aboriginal men who had allegedly attacked stations around Lake Hope, which is 2500 kilometres west of Wagga Wagga. In the same paper was a report that we have already discussed, which reported the tensions between the Sale and Mitchell Aboriginal language groups that did not end in conflict.

THE BLACKS IN THE LAKE HOPE COUNTRY.
—Our readers will remember that at the time of the incursions of the blacks upon the runs of settlers in the Lake Hope country some months ago, it was determined to organise a party with a view of scouring the country and capturing the perpetrators of these misdeeds. It was with the view of aid-

Extract 21: from a *Wagga Wagga Express* article dated 5th May, 1866.

This sequence of articles was followed by the local reports that feature in Extracts 11-13, describing a rapid population drop for the Wiradjuri language group, and the article from Extract 15 about the non-indigenous man, John Bourke assaulting a Wiradjuri man. There were two more local articles next – one regarding a Wiradjuri boy who injured himself in an accident who came to Wagga Wagga for treatment, the other a report on Wiradjuri people gathering to receive blankets for the Queen’s birthday.

The next article to appear in the *Wagga Wagga Express* was also from outside of the Wagga Wagga area, and involved Aboriginal people from Euri Creek in Queensland, 1700 kilometres north of Wagga Wagga. It appeared on the 25th August, 1866, and described a non-indigenous man being murdered by Aboriginal people.

While the focus has been concentrated on 1866, there are several more examples of reports that were imported into Wagga Wagga through the *Wagga Wagga Express* newspaper from other years in that decade. All can be found in the CSUSSP 2010-11 and the accompanying database. Most of these imported articles, some from thousands of kilometres away, involve reports of Aboriginal people behaving drunkenly, violently or murderously. In the absence of evidence that Wiradjuri people posed any physical threat to non-indigenous Wagga Wagga citizens, the *Wagga Wagga Express* repeatedly printed stories that would almost certainly have contributed to a climate of fear amongst non-indigenous town folk. This came at exactly the time that Wiradjuri people were being pushed to the outskirts of Wagga Wagga by the impact of the Robertson Land Acts of 1861.

The *Wagga Wagga Express*' imported narrative of Aboriginal people posing a threat to non-indigenous people was also being brought to Wagga Wagga in other ways. The Robertson Land Acts of 1861 brought a huge influx of non-indigenous people to the Wagga Wagga area. Some came to farm the smaller holdings that were opened up, while others came to provide services for squatters, and settled in the town. This meant that hundreds of personal narratives came into the town at that time, and some may have reinforced what people were reading in the *Wagga Wagga Express*.

One example of this is a non-indigenous man named John Hurst, who moved to North Wagga Wagga in 1864. Hurst wrote a reminiscence (Hurst, 1918) that outlined the experiences of his friend, Harry Angel, on "Uardry" station, 230 kilometres west of Wagga Wagga. In it, he wrote: -

"Harry Angel's house at that time (1844), like other stations, contained small holes around the walls so that you could shoot through them if the blacks came upon you. My wife, in her young days, often saw quarrels between the blacks themselves." (Hurst, 1918, p. 11).

People such as John Hurst and his wife brought this narrative regarding Aboriginal people from other areas with them when they arrived in Wagga Wagga. This would have reinforced the imported narrative (Extracts 19-21) of the *Wagga Wagga Express*. The result could have been that a mythology of Aboriginal violence towards non-indigenous people was built up in the Wagga Wagga area in the absence of enough evidence to justify it, and in contrast to much of the evidence contained in the CSUSSP 2010-11. Interestingly, Hurst's personal experiences with Aboriginal people were of sharing food during cattle muster camps and swimming together in his childhood (Hurst, 1918, pp. 6-7). The experience of violence involving Aboriginal people was not his, yet it found its way into his reminiscence and almost certainly into Wagga Wagga with him in 1864.

It can be argued that these old newspaper articles (Extracts 19-21) are not merely an embalment of the day to day events in the Wagga Wagga area,

but have instead become a way of preserving some non-indigenous values and attitudes, or at least those of the editor, towards Wiradjuri people at that time. It has been argued that the press is “not merely a purveyor of news and facts for individual judgement, but ‘in a very real sense they are doing our thinking for us, creating our opinions, setting our standards.....news selection and priority of treatment are far more potent and intimate influences on public opinion than editorial comment on the leader page’” (Boyer as cited in Blacklow, 1999, p. 28-29).

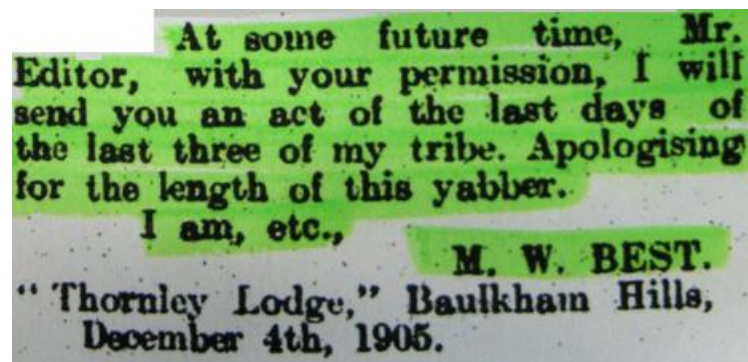
It can be argued that readers of the *Wagga Wagga Express* in the 1860s had their opinions about Aboriginal people shaped to some extent by what they read in that newspaper. Moreover, much of what they read about Aboriginal people was not an accurate representation of the behaviour of Wiradjuri people in the Wagga Wagga area, based on the evidence contained in the CSUSSP 2010-11.

Conclusion.

Along with the constraint of time for the study period, one important limitation has been sporadic nature of dates for copies of the *Wagga Wagga Express*. A fire on the premises where the newspaper was produced in the 1860s has meant that many early editions have been lost. My research of the *Wagga Wagga Express* ended on the newspaper dated 8th May, 1875 (on reel 3 at the CSU Regional Archives). The 1880s heralded the beginning of the “reserve era settlement formations” (Kabaila, 2011, p. 33) that saw the creation of Warangesda (Darlington Point) and Brungle (near Tumut) missions. Most Wiradjuri people living in camps outside of the Wagga Wagga township would have been encouraged to go there, but the *Wagga Wagga Express* may hold further clues regarding relationships at that time. Furthermore, the *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, which began in 1868 was largely unexplored.

The years around 1865 warrant closer scrutiny in order to explain the rapid decrease in the population of Wiradjuri people at that time. If it was due to conflict with Aboriginal language groups from the Lachlan and Murray areas, then there will almost certainly be evidence of it in regional newspapers from that time and place.

One source contained in the CSUSSP 2010-11 is a letter to the *Wagga Wagga Advertiser* by Mathew Best dated 12th December, 1905. Part of this letter can be seen in Extract 4. At the end of that letter (see Extract 22), Best alluded to the prospect of another letter to the newspaper which was to come later, and would detail “the last days of the last three of my tribe” that he had been “adopted” into (Best, 12th December, 1905). This letter, if it was written, could be a very valuable piece of Wagga Wagga history, and demands further effort to find it.



At some future time, Mr. Editor, with your permission, I will send you an act of the last days of the last three of my tribe. Apologising for the length of this yabber. I am, etc., M. W. BEST. "Thornley Lodge," Baulkham Hills, December 4th, 1905.

**Extract 22: from a letter to the editor by Mathew Best in the
Wagga Wagga Advertiser 12th December, 1905.**

I believe that a mythology regarding Aboriginal people was brought to Wagga Wagga to misrepresent what had actually happened there between Wiradjuri people and non-indigenous people between 1830 and 1860. This mythology cast Wiradjuri people as violent and murderous. One resounding rebuttal of the imported narrative came from Basil Bennett Jr. in 1892 (see Extract 10). He described having seen 500 Wiradjuri people come through the site of where the Wagga Wagga courthouse now stands in 1842 (see Extract 10). What is striking about this reference, particularly in light of the imported

narrative of the 1860s, is that Bennett did not describe any conflict having taken place at that time. More than that, he did not describe being afraid, which is noteworthy, given that he saw this large gathering of Wiradjuri people as a child, and that it was right in the heart of the emerging town.

The overriding sense that I am left with at the end of this study is that history is complex, because people are complex. History is riddled with paradoxes, because people are riddled with paradoxes. I believe this study has shown that we should be cautious about laying a national historical template over regional areas. What this study shows is that some Wiradjuri people and non-indigenous people shared relationships that cannot be defined by broad brushstrokes or stereotypes in the years between 1830 and 1900, and that this conversation is not yet complete.

With Thanks To.....

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