

Lynette Russell

**‘An unpicturesque vagrant’: Aboriginal
Victorians at the Melbourne International
Exhibition 1880–1881***

THE GRAND DAME of Melbourne architecture, the Royal Exhibition Building was the first non-Aboriginal cultural site in Australia awarded UNESCO World Heritage listing. In 2004, in Suzhou China, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee announced that the Royal Exhibition Building and surrounding Carlton Gardens qualified under cultural criterion (ii) of the Operational Guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention. Criterion (ii) lists sites that exhibit ‘an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design’.¹ The Royal Exhibition Building does, however, have links to the Aboriginal community of Melbourne beyond being constructed on Kulin land. Contemporary Kulin connections are intensified by the proximity to the Melbourne Museum and Bunjilaka

Aboriginal Cultural Centre. This article considers some evidence of Aboriginal presence at the Exhibition building during the Melbourne International Exhibition of 1880-81.

The Exhibition building was famously built to house the Melbourne International Exhibition of 1880-81. Designed by architect Joseph Reed, the building was heralded as a magnificent achievement – indeed it was monumental, with its dome the tallest construction in the city. As Graeme Davison illustrated in his seminal study *Marvellous Melbourne*, our metropolis was, in the 1880s, a boom city; the International exhibition was to be a celebration of the city’s economic success, its technological and industrial achievements and all that was marvellous.² The newspapers and magazines carried articles that exulted the enthusiasm and energy of the city along with the incredible optimism that characterised the 1880s boom. Asa Briggs in *Victorian Cities* (the period not the region) chose Melbourne as a quintessential ‘Victorian community overseas’. He thought it an intellectually and culturally sophisticated metropolis.

As Ian Morrison has observed, Melbourne, built on the back of the gold rush, was, by the 1870s, a major city. The early 1870s population of nearly 200,000 more than doubled by the early 1890s. Technological developments including the telegraph and transport meant that the southern most mainland city was no longer victim to the tyranny of distance.³ In keeping with the emphasis on modernity and coupled with a

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generally widely held belief that the Victorian Aboriginal community was either confined to missions and reserves where they were expected to die out or had been absorbed into the wider society, the International Exhibition, unlike the Indian and Colonial Exhibitions or indeed the Great Exhibitions of Europe, did not significantly feature Aboriginal culture or its products, as the focus was on industry and development. There was, however, an Aboriginal presence that is rarely written about.

The Melbourne International Exhibition opened on 1 October 1880 and ran until 30 April 1881. The Exhibition was well attended particularly by the middle classes which probably also attracted Aboriginal people to frequent the surrounding gardens. A writer in the *Argus* noted:

It must be confessed that if our visitors are to judge the Victorian aboriginal from such specimens as may happen to be visible in, or about, Melbourne during this Exhibition time, they may be confirmed in the conclusion that he is all they have been taught to believe him.

For civilisation has not agreed with him. Contact with the white man . . . has made him too familiar with the white man's habits, his vices, and his diseases. As he stands clad in the white man's cast-off rags, gibbering out a request for white money, there is none of the nobility of the savage about him. He is only an unpicturesque vagrant . . .⁴

Although there does not appear to have been an increase in begging as recorded in official court records and, indeed, it is likely that any incidents were treated outside of the court system. My research, however, has uncovered Aboriginal people at the Exhibition in Melbourne engaged in what Europeans described as 'begging' in Melbourne, such as that depicted in the overt visual image that appeared in a French journal in June 1881.

The cover image of the *Journal des Voyages* [The Travel Newspaper] showed Aboriginal people dressed in what appear to be hand-me-down or off-cast (ragged) clothes hands outstretched begging for money, which was tossed to them by a well dressed woman. The title of the article is 'Throughout Australia—Melbourne Exhibition—The country's beggars'. The accompanying text notes:

Everything in this city of 430,000 souls, save for the width of the streets, reminds one of England, and the colony faithfully reproduces that metropolis with an incredible exactitude, in a land which was unknown two hundred years ago, and which remained in its natural state until thirty-five years ago.

But sometimes a group of 'aboriginals' serves to remind you that you are separated from London by 73 days at sea.

The men and women have skin darker than that of crocodiles, their hair is crinkly and filthy, their faces forlorn and brutish. Ragged trousers tattered and torn clothe their repulsive bodies; worn out boots dangle beneath their naked thighs and legs, their European rags originally multicoloured but now as brownish as the skin they hardly even cover; opera hats reduced to the state of an old withered apple or feathered 'hats' all given by an Irishwoman who blushed at their lack of clothing; a miserable jumble of rags over scrawny torsos the colour of dirty ebony black; these are the original owners of this continent, whom every day the Europeans push further away into the bush.

Journal des Voyages

ET DES AVENTURES DE TERRE ET DE MER

N° 205. — Prix : 15 centimes

Bureaux : 7, rue du Croissant.

Abonnements. — PARIS, 8 fr. — DÉPARTEMENTS, 10 fr. — ÉTRANGER, 12 fr. — Dimanche 12 Juin 1881.

TEXTE. — A travers l'Australie : L'Exposition de Melbourne. — Les Robinsons de la Guyane (suite). — Aventures périlleuses de Narcisse Nicaise au Congo (suite). — A travers la Guyane.

ILLUSTRATIONS. — A Melbourne : Les mendiants du pays. — En Tunisie : Le palais du Bardo ; Les cavaliers de l'armée du bey. — Carte de la Tunisie, pays des Kroumirs.



A TRAVERS L'Australie. — L'Exposition de Melbourne. — Les mendiants du pays. (Page 354, col. 3)

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Cover image of *Journal des Voyages et des Aventures de Terre et de Mer*, no. 205, June 1881.

And to think of that famous treaty, signed in 1836 [sic] between the first settlers and the original inhabitants, by which the latter exchanged '*one thousand square leagues of the colony of Victoria for three sacks of glass beads, ten pounds of nails and five pounds of flour!*'

Australia – which one usually thinks of as so remote and primitive – today, has all the luxuries of Europe . . .⁵

As a critique of British colonialism and their management and governance of the Kulin, this is a damning commentary. The nineteenth century was a period of intense and often violent rivalry between the French and the British.⁶ The French, however, regarded the city of Melbourne to be 'elegant and expensively built' with 'nothing to envy of Paris'.⁷ This sophistication was extended to the intellectual institutions including the:

public library, more scientific than literary, established ten years ago⁸ only and holds already 41.000 volumes. It has cost 120.000 pounds sterling to the colony, and attracts a considerable number of readers.

There has been a widely held belief that by the latter part of the nineteenth century Aboriginal people were largely absent from the Melbourne streetscape, confined instead on missions and reserves. This image of Aboriginal people begging in Melbourne towards the *fin de siècle* is unusual. While the begging was probably opportunistically related to the Melbourne International Exhibition, it also implies a well thought out strategy of economic engagement via soliciting for money. It is also not a simple case of begging but rather a compensatory strategy that replaces previous strategies to acquire money, goods, food and clothing.

The Kulin people of Melbourne changed their hunting and gathering strategies to accommodate their changed circumstances. Rather than hunt for food they secured it via other means and instead of wearing clothing made of skins, they added the use or reuse of European clothing. While numerous nineteenth-century observers referred to Aboriginal people dressed in off-cast rags it is impossible to be certain about how these were obtained. These ragged clothes may have been the clothing they had been issued which had become tattered, or equally likely, these might have been secured by 'begging' or scrounging through the European's off-casts. In the 1840s the newly arrived William Adeney remarked in his diary that he had:

[m]et two of the poor aborigines looking almost like the inhabitants of another world. The man was clothed in some dirty pieces of blanket hung about him.⁹

The Adeney Diary is a wonderful cornucopia of early Melbourne observations. So taken with this scene was Adeney that he uncharacteristically made one of the very few sketches in his diary (see page 3). The sight of Aboriginal people wearing discarded European clothing or clothing that had become tattered and rag-like was challenging to the settlers. They stood as an almost satiric announcement that they chose to remain in the city and refuse any sort of assimilation. Caricaturist S. T. Gill portrayed this in his oft depicted image 'Native Dignity',¹⁰ first published in 1866. Penelope Edmonds cogently observed that this image 'reveal[ed] the deep anxieties about the boundaries of civility and whiteness'.¹¹ Of course, for the Kulin themselves, it is difficult to ascertain how they

felt about begging or the wearing of discarded clothing or indeed if they regarded them as 'rags' or an adequate replacement for their traditional labour intensive possum skin cloaks.

Forced to move to missions and reserves by the mid nineteenth century meant that many Aboriginal people had vacated Melbourne. We must recall, however, that this was no meek acquiescing to the European settlers' takeover of their land. The settlers were well aware that Aboriginal families and groups had maintained their social structure on their own terms and far from being a ruined or helpless people the Kulin continued to exert their presence in the imagination of the settlers in a range of uncomfortable and confronting ways. In the 1860s the poet George Gordon McCrae depicted this in the introduction to his poem *The Story of Balladeadro*:

the Australian blackfellow, as we see him in the streets of Melbourne, is not a poetic looking object . . . his thoughts must be of the gloomiest kind [because] his birth-right has been seized by the stranger.¹²

McCrae was well acquainted with members of the Kulin nation as he split his time between his family home at Abbotsford and the McCrae property at Arthur's Seat on Boonerwung land. In a similar vein in 1866, the *Australian* published a poem by one 'T. B. Shortfellow' (no doubt a playful rendering and homage to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, author of *Song of Hiawatha*) entitled the *Reminiscences and reflections of an Aboriginal Chieftain*. As the couple depicted in Gill's *Native Dignity* the chieftain was once a noble warrior who had been reduced to a 'debased' and 'conquered' victim – a mockery of white values. The Chieftain dreamed of a place:

Where, free from the vice and follies of white men, he might live happy,
Where no plant-distilling liquors to abase him could be found.
And he thought no pale-faced stranger had a right, by force or cunning,
To drive them back to the Mallee, or the parched and desert plain,
And that allow seducing poison as a recompense to offer,
Which destroys what pride the conquered and degraded might retain.

This is the image of a liquor-soaked dispossessed beggar. The Chieftain finishes with the begging plea: 'Mine poor fellow no got bacca, and mine big one want 'im smoke!'¹³

Perhaps it was a simple segue to see Aboriginal people sitting on the steps of the Exhibition building dressed in European cast-off clothing and begging as a conquered people. It is highly unlikely that the Kulin saw themselves this way. Perhaps replacing their possum skin cloaks with blankets or other European dress items was seen as a sensible strategy given the labour intensity of the cloak manufacture. Maybe begging for a few hours each day was preferable, and easier than trekking long distances for hunting and gathering resources thus transforming their economic landscape as they saw fit. What the Europeans termed begging was one of the ways the Kulin engaged with the imposed economic system.