

Even dynamite could not destroy the people of the Budj Bim stones



By [Tony Wright](#) Melbourne Age: July 12, 2019

The final indignity was delivered when 13 sticks of dynamite were detonated, destroying the lovely old stone church.



The remains of an ancient Indigenous stone house at Lake Condah, part of the Budj Bim landscape. *CREDIT: TYSON LOVETT-MURRAY*

Australians, particularly those of far south-west Victoria, are celebrating this week.

The ancient stone country known as Budj Bim - land of an eel-trapping and preserving system that is at least 6600 years old - has been added to UNESCO's exalted World Heritage list.

Should you venture to this long-hidden country 40 kilometres north-east of Portland, however, it is best you tread lightly.

Behind the elation at the global recognition of Budj Bim lie almost two centuries of torment and misery.

Those who built those ancient weirs and eel-smoking systems within a volcanic lava field, a clan of the Gunditjmarra people known as the Kerrupjmarra, were required to endure abuse and injustice that would make the strongest weep.

We don't have to disappear into distant history to find the pain, either.

Having been born a short drive from Budj Bim - though I was ignorant of the Indigenous name of the place until recent years - I still know people, old now, who were ripped as children from their parents there and consigned to distant orphanages.

They never knew that for years their mothers had written desperate letters of love and longing that were intercepted by matrons and handed to the Board for the Protection of Aborigines and never delivered.

I recall such a mother who became mad with loss and roved western Victoria for years trying to drown her grief.

Nine of this tortured woman's children, taken from Lake Condah by police in 1945 because she and her husband had no house on their own country, were split up and sent to boys' and girls' homes in Colac, Box Hill, Ballarat and Geelong.

One of those boys later wrote of his time separated from parents and country: "After school I would climb up the wattle tree and pick gum and look out to the west, and I knew deep in my heart I came from out there somewhere. Many times I would cry myself to sleep thinking of my lost family, my Mum, Dad, brothers and sisters." He was told that his parents were dead, a wicked, common lie.

To begin to understand, you need to know that central to the ancient Budj Bim landscape are the remains of a far more modern place: the Lake Condah Mission.

It opened in 1867 as a Church of England Mission, about 3 kilometres from the lake where for thousands of years the Kerrupjmara practised aquaculture and gave the lie to the idea that all Australian Aboriginal people were nomadic.

Having ingeniously ensured - at least a thousand years before neolithic people raised the first stones of Stonehenge - that they had a reliable source of fish and eels from the lake to supplement the kangaroos and other wildlife they hunted, they built permanent houses with stone walls.

But time brought European sealers and whalers, brutal men, a lot of them, to nearby Portland and Port Fairy.

Learning of rich pastures a little inland - named in 1836 by the explorer Major Thomas Mitchell as Australia Felix ("the lucky south land") - squatters and their roughneck shepherds followed with sheep and guns and arsenic.

And so was laid the making of a frontier war: the Eumeralla War, named after a stream that emerges from the stone country and tumbles to the sea.

The Gunditjmara, having had their land and right to hunt stolen by squatters, stole sheep and herded them into their stony citadel where mounted pursuers could not go.

Settlers, troopers and native police waited them out and shot them at will when they emerged.

We have no space here to explore the ghastly detail, though there is a place alongside Lake Condah on Darlots Creek called Murderers Flat.

More instructive is the University of Newcastle's [recent interactive map](#): "Colonial Frontier Massacres in Central and Eastern Australia 1788-1930."



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Identified massacre sites are marked by yellow dots (each representing a minimum of six Aboriginal people killed) and blue squares (for Europeans killed).

There are so many yellow dots packed across south-west Victoria they overlap, leaving no clear map at all. It is the most densely-concentrated area of known massacre sites in all of Australia.

By the end of that asymmetric war, the Gunditjmara survivors were depleted, starving and living in fear.

And so the Board for the Protection of Aborigines was established, and gave churches the job of offering sanctuary to survivors.

The Church of England, bent on “civilising through Christianising”, set up the Lake Condah Mission. The Gunditjmara from the Portland and Heywood areas had earlier refused attempts to move them from their country to a mission at Framlingham, near Warrnambool.

Those taken into Lake Condah found themselves prevented from speaking their own language or practising their traditional ceremonies. Their behaviour was controlled by the withholding of rations for such transgressions as failing to attend prayers or school lessons.

With Christianity at the centre of the mission’s purpose, a church began to rise in 1883: St Mary’s Church of England.

Funds were raised through performances around western Victoria of the mission’s Indigenous choir. The voices of the “black choir”, as newspapers spoke of them at the time, were said to be glorious.

A Cornish stonemason, John Dashpar, moved his family to the mission to oversee the building.

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The Indigenous men of the mission formed a chain and hauled the big blocks of stone, hand to hand, shoulder to shoulder, from a quarry across Darlots Creek.

The handsome bluestone building with a 23-metre tower was consecrated by the Anglican Bishop of Ballarat in 1885. The very next year, an extension of the

Aboriginal Protection Act - a grotesquely misnamed piece of legislation - destroyed a lot of the lives of those settled at the Lake Condah Mission.

It was known as The Half-Caste Act.

The idea was that Aboriginal people were dying out. Those with European blood were expelled from the mission to somehow assimilate with the white community. "Full bloods" would receive care until they expired. Those thrown out had nowhere to go, and so set up camps and makeshift homes not far from the mission, where they still had family.

By 1910, the policy was an obvious failure. Missions were allowed to offer rations and assistance to those battling to live beyond their boundaries.

But momentum was disappearing. World War I intervened; about 15 of the men of Lake Condah signed on and sailed away.

When the war was done, much of the mission's land was split up for soldier settlement - and not one Indigenous soldier from Lake Condah got an acre. In 1919, with only four old people still in residence, the mission was officially closed.

The Gunditjmara, however, wouldn't be fobbed off.

A number of displaced families moved in to the grounds, living in tents, a big old dormitory and a few huts. And there they remained, anchored by the presence of the church their ancestors had built, and which remained open.

For decades, on irregular Sundays, Aboriginal families that had once lived at the mission came from all around to attend services alongside white neighbours.

Auntie Laura Bell, 83, a Gunditjmara elder from Heywood, remembers the adventure of travelling to the church as a child; her parents, an uncle and aunt and a tribe of children all on the tray of a horse-drawn cart.



Laura Bell with the roll of honour from St Mary's church, in the ruins of the Lake Condah Mission. *CREDIT:JOE ARMAO*

Families brought with them pots of stew and the makings of damper, and after church, when the singing was done, they trooped to the nearby home of an Indigenous family at a place called Dunmore, and sat down to a feast, the kids grabbing handfuls of cooked rabbit.

It was, says Auntie Laura, a special thing, when the families reminded themselves that this was their place, their community - and that they had survived.

But after World War II, the few families still living on the mission were forcibly removed, and all remaining land was sold for new soldier settlers - and once again, not one Indigenous soldier from Lake Condah got an acre.



St Mary's Church - consecrated in 1885 and destroyed in 1957 - was built by the labour of Gunditjmara men. *CREDIT: COURTESY OF GUNDITJ MIRRORING TRADITIONAL OWNERS CORPORATION*

But the church still stood, a symbol of Gunditjmara resilience.

And so, in 1957, declaring the church had developed a lean and was a public danger, the state authorities did the unthinkable.

They brought in contractors with dynamite.

The whole district, white and black, was scandalised.

Thirteen sticks of dynamite were placed around the stones that had once been lugged by hand by survivors of the Eumeralla War. The tower came down in one mighty piece.

The bluestone was taken apart and transported to Hamilton, where it was used to extend the Anglican Christ Church on genteel Church Hill, the favoured Sunday destination of Western District graziers.

The Gunditjmara of the stones were not finished, however.

Over a period of 28 years from the 1980s and into a new century - a story that deserves its own pages - they fought clear to the High Court to get back the land of their ancestors. And they won.

Finally, their land and their thousands of years of achievement are recognised by the world.

A flood of tourists can be expected to this haunted country (though, in an untimely twist, the air passenger service from Melbourne to Portland and Warrnambool ceased only last week).

Tread gently when you come. Old agonies lie there.



Then Indigenous affairs minister Jenny Macklin with Gunditjmara elders (left to right) Ken Saunders, Euphemia Day and June Gill in front of one of the homes on the mission after their native title victory in 2008.*CREDIT:REBECCA HALLAS*