

# JOURNEYING WITH THE PEPPER FAMILY

Two Extracts from CONNECT - No 24, October 2010 and No 25, November 2010

## 1. A Visit to the Old Treasury Building

### The Journey of Lucy and Percy Pepper: An Aboriginal Family's Struggle for Survival

Last year Helen and I heard Mick Dodson talk about the importance of stories. He was speaking as Australian of the Year on Social Justice Sunday, 27 September 2009. Among the many good things he had to say, this sentence struck me:

*I hope we can truly have a shared history in this country as indigenous and non-indigenous people. We can't do it if we tell our stories in ignorance of each other's stories.*

Our Group's small Aboriginal affairs working party has tried to take up the challenge in these words. We met with Glenys Watts, our Shire's Aboriginal Support and Development Team Leader. We asked if she could see some way in which we might share each other's stories. She thought about it and then some time later told us that the story of her ancestors had been presented in a book called *Footprints: The Journey of Lucy and Percy Pepper: An Aboriginal Family's Struggle for Survival*. She also told us that the story, together with many family photographs, had just been featured in a new exhibition in the Old Treasury Building, which is now a museum.

We went to see the exhibition, and felt that it would be very worthwhile for our Human Rights Group to visit the Old Treasury Building to see it. The old building and its other exhibitions are also very worthy of a visit. When Glenys told us that she would join us and speak about her family, and that one of the authors of *Footprints* would also attend and speak, we were convinced that such a visit was a must for our Group.

Please accept this as your invitation to join a bus trip on **Tuesday 12 October 2010** to visit the Old Treasury Building and to meet with and hear Glenys tell stories about her family.

#### PROGRAM

9.00	Bus departs from Rosebud Shire Offices (Besgrove Street)
10.45	Bus arrives at Old Treasury Building
	On arrival refreshments in Treasury Cafe
11.15	Guided tour of the Exhibitions
12.15	Lunch in Treasury Cafe
1.00	Conversation in Deakin Room
	Welcome to Country
	Presentation by Glenys Watts
	Presentation by Dr Sebastian Gurciullo
	Questions from the floor
	Conclusion to the Day
2.15	Bus departs Old Treasury Building
4.00	Bus arrives at Rosebud Shire Offices

Costs: Bus trip plus entrance to Old Treasury \$25. Refreshments and Lunch (approximately) \$15. If you wish to join the trip, call David Ball on 5984 3333 to book a seat.

## 2. The Struggles of Early Aboriginal Victorians

### Report of a Visit to Melbourne's Old Treasury Building

When a government official visited an Aboriginal Reserve at the end of the nineteenth century, he had a set of skin-coloured discs with him. Anyone whose skin was paler than what was allowed was classified as a "half-caste" and removed from the Reserve. Adults were expected to fend for themselves, children over fourteen were sent to an institution. Why? What was the thinking behind this harsh breaking up of families?

It was government policy to confine "full blood" Aborigines to Reserves. It was believed that they were doomed as a race to die out, and that placing them on Reserves and providing them with meagre rations (flour, tea, blanket) was a kindly act by a superior race. It was to be thought of as "smoothing the pillow of a dying man". Concerning those of mixed descent, it was government policy to absorb them into the white community. So marriage between "full bloods" and "half-castes" was discouraged. "Half-caste" children were removed from their families, so that they would not grow up knowing "full blood" children. They were destined in the eyes of government to become white. Their colour was to be "bred out".

The Victorian Government's Aboriginal Protection Acts of 1886 and 1890 were particularly hard on Aboriginal families. Professor Richard Broome of La Trobe University in his 2005 book, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History since 1800*, writes:

*The two generations following the passage of the 1886 Act and its amendments were the most coercive time for Aboriginal people since white settlement. They lost significant civil rights as the Board dealt with families and moved people around as it pleased, all in the name of a grand design: the absorption and disappearance of Aboriginal people into the wider community. The Acts and their numerous regulations, while tediously detailed, make grimly rewarding reading for those exploring the Aboriginal experience under the Board's regime. Only by examining them closely can we understand why Aboriginal people, with wry humour, called the Aboriginal Protection Board the "Aboriginal Destruction Board".* (page 185)

Something of how Aboriginal people lived under this heartless regime may be gained from the pages of a small book titled *Footprints: The Journey of Lucy and Percy Pepper*. It features a series of letters from two members of an Aboriginal family and the replies by officers of the Aboriginal Protection Board. The letters are from the collections of the National Archives of Australia and the Public Record Office Victoria and published by those two bodies. This *Footprints* material is now the subject of a special display in the City Museum at Old Treasury Melbourne.

Twenty-four members of the Mornington Peninsula Human Rights Group visited the Old Treasury Building on 12 October this year to see the display. It so happens that our Shire's Aboriginal Support and Development Team Leader, Glenys Watts, is a direct descendant of Lucy and Percy Pepper. She is their great-granddaughter. Glenys and ten members of her Team joined with our Group for the visit. Glenys' mother, Rita Watkins, also attended. Both Rita and Glenys shared with us memories of their forebears and stories that have been kept alive in their family. It brought the displayed letters, photographs and texts to life for us.

After lunch we all assembled in the J J Clark Room on the first floor for a series of presentations. The room is named after the nineteen year-old architect who designed the Old Treasury Building in 1858. First, Rita read the statement she had made at the launch of *Footprints*. Here is some of it:

*I can still remember as a child that mum [Gwendoline Hudson, a daughter of Lucy and Percy Pepper] told us that they were taking children away and that we were not allowed to dance or speak any of our Gunai language outside our own families.*

*Knowing our Gunai-Kurnai values with ties to land, family and kinship, I found the information contained in the records published made me feel as though someone had reached in, taken a grip of my heart and started squeezing it so tight that it hurt.*

Glenys followed by showing us a number of early photographs of her extended family and told us more about them and how they survived. Then Dr Sebastian Gurciullo, an archivist with Public Record Office Victoria and one of the two editors of *Footprints*, gave us an insight into how public records are amassed, stored and made available to the public. During a time for questions and comments, Helen Howells, chair of our Human Rights Group, made a statement. It concerned William James Ditchburn, who was secretary of the Aboriginal Protection Board until 1916 and many of whose letters are included in *Footprints*. Helen explained that her name before marriage was Ditchburn and that recent research had convinced her that the Ditchburn, who was secretary of the Protection Board, was the brother of her grandfather. Helen told Rita, Glenys and their family that she was truly sorry for the way her great uncle had often treated their ancestors, Lucy and Percy Pepper.

Those who participated in this visit to the Old Treasury Building commend it to others. It is open from 10.00 till 4.00 on Wednesdays and Sundays and at other times by appointment. The building itself is worthy of a visit, and the various displays include some fascinating original documents, photographs and artefacts of Victoria's early history. The Pepper Room is of especial interest to anyone concerned about Aboriginal history.

JH

**Books cited:**

BROOME, Richard. *Aboriginal Victorians: A History since 1800*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2005. (467 pages, \$39.95)

FLAGG, Simon and Sebastian Gurciullo. *Footprints: The Journey of Lucy and Percy Pepper*. Canberra: National Archives of Australia and Public Record Office Victoria, 2008. (132 pages, \$10)