long both he and Gipps came to support the idea. La Trobe stressed the limited power of the Border and Mounted Police up-country. Both agreed that a Native Corps might help to civilise its members and employ them on 'useful labour', and at the same time prevent outrages and capture their perpetrators. It was organised in 1842 under Henry Dana, a young immigrant who had unsuccessfully sought government posts in Van Diemen's Land and had briefly held a run on the Glenelg in 1840. He came from a military family and though he had no training or experience himself, as an enthusiastic 'gentleman-amateur' he proved a competent commandant. The recruits, presumably seeking an alternative to their increasingly insecure life in the bush, totalled about one hundred in the next ten years, with the corps strength rising from about twenty-five at first to forty-five in 1851. This was hardly enough to solve the problem of Aboriginal employment, but they showed themselves very skilful in tracking and capturing suspects and dispersing marauding groups—and of course they were cheap at threepence a day. Once on a trail, they seemed certain to catch the men they were pursuing; they certainly played an important part in 'pacifying' the Western District, so the squatters and the Portland Guardian thought them a success.2

But overall their reputation is mixed. Notable Aborigines like Billibellary and Barak served in it, but neither did so for long. Over time many became drunkards and had to be dismissed. Protector Thomas said they were 'a dangerous body'. Recently several historians have asserted that they killed a number of victims because of their own feuds. Firm evidence is again hard to come by. Barry Bridges says there were 'unnecessary killings'. Beverley Blasket concludes that they killed 125 altogether. It is certainly possible that they were too violent when they 'pacified' the district north of Portland in 1842. Of a 'collision' on the Snowy River in Gippsland in December 1846 in which the details are obscure, Commissioner Tyers thought Dana 'not act with prudence' and Gipps questioned both his authority for acting as he did and his explanation— which was 'not satisfactory'; he acted 'with great want of discretion, to say the least of it', wrote the Governor, though La Trobe conceded he had been in 'a very awkward predicament'. On the other hand, Marie Fels in her recent detailed study, Good Men and True, gives a more favourable verdict. She admits that Dana and La Trobe could be over-enthusiastic, and that the Police did sometimes kill Aborigines because they were members of an enemy group, but goes on:

Prevention of conflict was the main function of the force, and it was accomplished mainly by being there; there is no necessarily sinister interpretation required of settlers' [favourable] testimony ... The native police contributed to the pacification of the Western District not by a reign of Terror, but by being perceived by local Aboriginal groups ... to be efficient and effective to such a degree that it was difficult to avoid detention and capture (sometimes with loss of life).

As in so many parts of the Aboriginal story there seem to be almost as many opinions as writers. By 1848 La Trobe himself had come to think the Native Police the only aspect of Aboriginal policy that had not been a total failure, but all the same he admitted that when the men left the force they usually reverted to their former ways, like others taking little interest in European food or clothing or cultivating the land or building better shelters. He had come to realise that it was an error to believe that the Aborigines would ever 'submit to guidance', admitting that neither entreaty nor example nor cajolery, not even internal conviction drawn from actual experience of the real kind intentions of the Government and the better class of Europeans towards them, and of the advantages of submission to a new system, will strip the savage of his natural propensities or make him a willing participant in the advantages held out to him.3

Apart from this police work, which La Trobe encouraged, the squatters themselves employed a few of the Aborigines, especially when white labour was particularly scarce and its wages high. This might have helped to 'civilise' them but much depended on the employer's attitude. The former clergyman, Joseph Docker, was successful with them on his Bonherambro run on the Ovens, but his experience was in striking contrast with that of his neighbour, Dr George Mackay. In the Wimmera C. B. Hall thought Aborigines useful for 'stripping bark, finding lost horses and as guides or messengers'—but these were limited operations. Protector Parker reported in 1848 that Aborigines were 'extensively' employed near the Loddon and Avoca rivers where they had proved useful. They were particularly welcome in the Wimmera where white labour was very scarce. Hugh Jamieson employed them on his run near the Murray, though insisting that there was 'a certain limit to their usefulness and improvement'; he would employ whites again when they were available—in a sense echoing the comment of Evelyn Sturt, a squatter on the South Australian border, that though he found these Aborigines useful when he had gained their confidence, they were very indolent. Perhaps they might have worked better and stayed longer at their jobs if they had been better paid. Overall the Pioneers' Letters do not refer often to their employment, though in this as in other matters, obviously there is a great deal that is not recorded.4

As time went on there were more and more reported outrages and atrocities and 'collisions' between whites and blacks. Not surprisingly Aborigines were especially hostile to the squatters occupying new runs and this, of course, is what they were doing all the time, but, as Gideon Scott Lang commented, 'bloodthirsty as the blacks are, the whites have quite or more than equalled them'. Much of the violence in the Western District between 1839 and 1845 was due to men arriving who believed they had to teach the Aborigines a 'good lesson' before they would have peace; as Niel Black said in 1840 after taking
up his run at Glenormiston, near Terang, the Blacks or natives have occasioned me much uneasiness for some time. I could not stand the thought of murdering them [but]... I believe it is impossible to take up a new run without doing so'. This probably had already happened in the case of his predecessor's overseer, Frederick Taylor, who was alleged to have taken a leading part in killing about thirty-five of the local tribe in November 1839; but in any event the large and rapid influx of settlers caused a significant shortage of food and water in an area where the native population was much denser than elsewhere and this naturally led to violence. The result in the Port Fairy–Heywood–Mr Rouse triangle—and to only a slightly less extent further north past the Grampians—was almost a guerrilla war, with many native casualties, though the exact number is uncertain. There were probably about a dozen deaths there in 1839 as well as Taylor's case, and up to 75 in 1840, including about fifty in the attack led by the Whyte brothers in retaliation for some Aborigines stealing sheep a few days after they had arrived on their run near the Wannon, and ten on a run near the Grange newly occupied by Charles Wedge, who apparently was unwilling to follow the principles of his uncle and who long had trouble, and whose station, according to Robinson, was known as 'a spot celebrated for the maltreatment of the natives'. After heavy sheep losses he mounted swivel guns at his homestead as did the Winters—but there were only two white victims that year, one being that dubious character, Patrick Codd.

Outside the Western District, there were probably eight white and about a dozen black fatalities in 1840 and rather fewer in 1841, but in the west the situation was still very bad. Robinson, who travelled through the district from 21 March to 24 August, reported a number of savage attacks and killings by the whites; he said the settlers spoke of 'dropping the Aborigines as coolly as if speaking of dropping birds'. They argued that the Aborigines were 'not human, so killing them was not murder'. Attacks were usually said to be in retaliation for the Aborigines taking sheep or attacking shepherds, but often the Aboriginal attacks were in retaliation for the shepherds' interference with native women. In all, four whites were killed and probably sixty Aborigines. John Robertson reported a 'fearful loss of life' at Gibson and Bell's newly occupied run on the Glenelg after a shepherd was murdered, thanks to the 'two heartless vagabonds' who were overseers there. John Francis, W. J. T. Clarke's manager at Woodlands, a property 'newly occupied and beyond other settlers' on the Wimmera border east of Ararat, is said to have shot seven Aborigines there in June or July; Clarke later wrote that the natives had been 'defiant' and had killed numbers of his sheep, 'destroying them wantonly and slaughtering them for their support', but Francis was a man who often had trouble with Aborigines, and as he was later killed by a white shepherd, it is possible he was hot-tempered and 'defiant' himself. Another eight were said to have been poisoned by Thomas Connell, an overseer at one of the Henty's stations, though in this case (as in some others) it was suggested that the victims had eaten the carcasses of sheep dressed with strychnine or arsenic for scab. But despite the squatters' repeated denials, some cases of poisoning seem to have been deliberate. The stories are frequent, and though usually based only on hearsay evidence, Robinson specified two in his 1845 Journals, which Gipps took a year to report to London. Some would say 'where there is smoke there is fire', and there is detailed evidence in the case when Dr Kilgour's overseer was said to have given flour laced with arsenic at his Terrone station near Port Fairy; as in other cases, the accused were shepherds and an overseer so possibly the charges were justified and Kilgour's own denials were made in good faith—but Robinson had said two years before not only that Kilgour had 'a more depraved set of servants' than he had ever met with, but that he was, 'like all new arrivals, a declared enemy of the blacks'; they had 'never injured him except by being on his run, which he says is an injury as the cattle run away when they see the blacks'—while the latter complained that he had 'stolen' their weirs and fish-traps.

In 1842 reported violence was quite small overall, but in the west thirty Aboriginal and ten European fatalities were reported—the worst year on record for the latter, thanks to attacks led by 'Cocknos' (Ty. koo-he)—'a restless, malevolent savage', according to Boldrewood—'Koort Kurrup, 'Jupiter' (Tarc. rare rate) and 'Roger' (Tagara). The Aborigines, according to Robinson's reports, included nine killed in March after the theft of 700 sheep and the murder of Donald McKenzie at Emu Creek, but an 'incident' at Hunter's station at Eumeralla the same month followed some timber workers 'interfering' with native women, and an accusation by Fyans that a 'gang of savages' had driven the people from the establishment and destroyed 'every article about the place'. Unfortunately this turned out on investigation to be requests by five Aborigines for flour and shirts—certainly repeated on three successive days; three were arrested in due course but released without trial. More serious was the notorious murder the same month of three women and a child in a premeditated shooting on Osprey's run at Caramut (the Muston's Creek massacre)—the work of Osprey's ex-convict servants, though probably with the foreknowledge of Osprey and his overseer who certainly tried hard to hinder the investigation. The fact that this crime took place just as the local squatters were petitioning La Trobe for more protection against native attacks infuriated the Superintendent. 'Will not the commission of such crimes call down the wrath of God', he demanded, 'and do more to check the prosperity of your district and ruin your prospects than all the difficulties and losses under which you labour?' Gipps was equally angry, and said it would be most prejudicial to the character of the District and the whole colony, but when he told La Trobe that he would have to consider cancelling all licences in the
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District and convert it into an Aboriginal reserve if the murderers were not discovered, the Portland Mercury complained that the Governor was improperly 'declaring every settler in the Port Fairy district accessory to an atrocious murder'. In the end three white men were arrested, but they were acquitted when tried.9

In 1843 La Trobe sent up a squad of Native Police to try to restore order in this very disturbed district. They captured three Aborigines, including the notorious Koort Kirrup, but they were never brought to trial; more significantly the police killed between twenty and thirty more, a proceeding which seems to have been more effective in pacifying the country. The 'wild blacks' had become afraid, reported Dana in November, 'knowing that they can now be followed to any place they got to', and La Trobe could notice 'a pause in the continual attacks of the natives'. Despite that comment, 1843 was a bad year. Though the deaths of only two whites were reported, about forty Aborigines seem to have been killed in the Western District, mostly by the native police—including fifteen or more following an attack on Purbrick's 'Koroite' station, about ten near the Fitzroy River when the police were searching for stolen sheep, and six at Ricketts' station on the Glenelg where, according to the owner, Aboriginal attacks were driving him insolvent. After that, in six years from 1844 to 1849, only about twenty-five Aborigines and eight whites are known to have been killed in this part of the country, the former including either seven or nine near Cape Otway in 1846, shot in cold blood by George Smythe's surveying party helped by squatter Roadnight and others in retaliation for the murder of one of the surveying men—all but one were women and children. All told, thirty-five Europeans were reported as having been killed by Aborigines in the Western District between 1835 and 1848. The number of Aborigines killed is less certain—almost certainly three hundred, according to Dr Critchett's detailed list, and not improbably at least fifty more.10

That area was probably the worst for the inter-racial violence in Port Phillip, thanks to its fertility and therefore its attractiveness to both Europeans and Aborigines, although the latter were evicted and suffered everywhere. Robinson journeyed through the Wimmera in the autumn of 1845 and found the local clans peaceable and rather aloof, though settlers employed a few. All the same there was trouble. 'Every spot where water and grass is met with is being occupied', noted Robinson, 'hence the situation of the Aborigines must, if driven from their water-holes, especially in dry seasons, be perilous and truly pitiable'. So collisions followed as the squatters spread, and that May eleven of them asked La Trobe to send Dana with a party of Native Police to the district to protect their property. He did so and between July and October when pursuing suspected sheep-stealers and trying to make arrests, the party killed three Aborigines and wounded several others. Protector Parker reported that on the way the police had boasted that they would kill as many as they could and were not going to take prisoners. However, they did arrest Yanem Goona, an allegedly 'troublesome chief'. Found guilty at his trial, he was sentenced to be transported for ten years. Protector Thomas thought there was not 'one tittle of evidence' that he was guilty, but Judge Therry insisted that 'if the prisoner was a member of the community where the sheep was [sic] found, although he had no hand in the actual stealing, as a member of the community he was equally guilty'—though he admitted that the prisoner was a man 'without education, without knowledge of the rights of society and devoid of everything connected with civilisation'. Another case had a different outcome. Sergeant Dalpin of the Border Police and two of his men, who were assisting the Native Corps to arrest Jim Crow, an Aboriginal leader, were charged with his manslaughter after he was killed when allegedly resisting arrest. Dalpin insisted that they were acting in self-defence but the Crown Prosecutor, James Croke, commented that it was 'strange that four mounted and armed men were not able to capture a single Aboriginal, armed only with a spear'. He thought Dalpin's conduct showed 'a great departure from discretion, sound judgment and humanity'. But the accused had popular support, and at his trial Judge Therry summed up in his favour, and the jury brought in a 'not guilty' verdict without retiring. Neither La Trobe nor Gipps appeared concerned about the case but in London Stanley was and sought full report; but he could do nothing more and when the report reached the Colonial Office, Grey, by then Secretary of State, made no minute on it and did not acknowledge it. As for the squatters, two years later they complained again of 'outlaws who infest the border'—but they did not mention Aborigines. In Gippsland in 1842 there had been a massacre near Port Albert by a group of 'lawless and depraved' white men; in 1843 about sixty Aborigines were killed at Warrigal Creek, north-east of Alberton, in retaliation for the murder of Ronald Macalister. Then Frederick Taylor, 'notorious for killing natives' according to Robinson, who had had to flee from the Western District in 1840 for suspected atrocities, reappeared on the scene and was soon suspected of repeating his offences; perhaps fortunately in 1844 he had his licence removed for trespassing. Two years later Dana's Native Police were accused of killing between fifteen and twenty-three 'offending natives' on the Snowy. It seems that in this District, where there were no Protectors, and where La Trobe admitted it was difficult to maintain order, the philosophy of force prevailed. Henry Meyrick thought Gippsland a 'most lawless place' and told his mother that year, 'The blacks are very quiet here now, poor wretches'. Too often it was the quiet of the grave.11

Different people had different experiences in different places at different times—depending variously on the characters of the settlers and of the Aborigines, on the closeness of settlement, on the extent of food and water