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Expanding the Howitt way: Alfred Howitt in Victoria

Alfred Howitt, along with similarly enterprising siblings, grew to adulthood surrounded by the comfort and support of their family in mid-19th century England. At the centre of a literary family Alfred might have continued a tradition that lauded the ideas and writings of the time. Accorded a sound education in England and Germany and always encouraged to use curiosity as a means of approaching life he might have remained in Britain, or at least in Europe, and been well-satisfied.

But this was not the Howitt way. The Howitt way was to see opportunity and convert it to action, to notice the world and embrace challenges. Comfort was not paramount. Otherwise why would a young English man choose to travel to the opposite side of the world? Why would he endure a life-threatening voyage on a sailing vessel which might or might not reach its destination?

The immediate answer for Alfred was the prospect of finding a future through gold, an adventure inspired by his father, William. Yet this young man – after finding minimal golden rewards, after struggling for two years through heat and mud and flies – decided to remain in the new colony of Victoria, confronting the demands of an alien life. The rewards for himself and for Australia were great.

Alfred William Howitt, c. 1863. Photograph by Batchelder & O'Neill. Pictures Collection H93.371/4



II

Alfred's parents Mary Botham and William Howitt met in 1818. Delight in the natural world and commitment to the Quaker religion initially sparked their friendship. William walked with Mary and her sister Anna through the fields of Staffordshire in central England, crossing pleasant pastures alongside placid rivers, sharing knowledge of the plants and flowers around them – in Arcadian scenery as Mary described it. Both were also enamoured of romantic literature of the time. William introduced Mary to the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Walter Scott. From the beginning, Mary noted, 'knowledge in the broadest sense was the aim of our intellectual efforts: poetry and nature were the paths that led to it'. Mary saw William as teacher and guide, she being 19 and he 26, though recognising, when 'affianced' that 'the tastes of my future husband and my own were strongly similar, so also our mental culture'.¹

They married on 16 April 1821. William – self-taught in languages, natural science, chemistry and medical dispensing – set himself up as a druggist to enable an income. It was the pair's lifelong commitment to writing, poetry and prose, separately and together that leaves us with a wide-ranging view of and reflection upon their own times and attitudes. From families adhering without question to the Quaker sense of purity, peace and God's protection, together they discovered that such devotion need not limit curiosity nor a sense of fun and adventure, while still admitting the capacity for resourceful, dedicated work. Initially members of the Society of Friends they were to challenge its confining requirements.

William and Mary never doubted their allegiance to the values of Christianity. But each had grown to feel a need for freedom of thought and expression, a quest for expanded horizons. Writing was fundamental to their existence. Wherever they went they wrote, and then wrote some more. This challenged their thinking.

The first book written together in 1823 was *The Forest Minstrel and Other Poems*,² on the surface a lengthy romantic poem, perhaps not Keatsian in calibre, but revealing of the Howitt's views on life.

For revelry the village bells are peal'd
The season's self seems made for rural pleasure,
And rural joy flows with the o'erflowing measure.

Beyond the realms of poetry William expressed his horror at the contemporary global damage caused by colonialism – 'the most extensive and extraordinary system of crime which the world ever witnessed'. William expounded his views in *Colonization and Christianity*³ in 1838 in which he

proposed that a Christian driven redress commence for the misery and decimation accorded by the British on native populations. At this point he could not have dreamed of Alfred's future in confronting such a dilemma.

Initially William and Mary kept their wanderings within Europe, leaving England only to seek a broader education in Germany for their children, Alfred, Anna and Claude. Not to be idle William busily drank in his surroundings and wrote: *Rural and Domestic Life in Germany*.⁴ Travel had expanded William's horizons driving him to depart the Society of Friends in 1847. Mary followed, and tinged with some regret, explained the move to sister Anna:

Strange as it may seem to thee, I have an old love of the Society. I know that the majority of Friends are narrow-minded, living as much in the crippling spirit of sectarianism as any denomination whatever; and I know that they and I never could assimilate; yet I do love them all, with an ingrained sentiment, which makes me feel as if somehow they were kindred.⁵

The couple sought involvement, not the silent communion that Quaker services relied upon, and thus experimented with Unitarian services and even spiritualism. Mary hastened to add that William remained a Christian man and she converted to Catholicism late in life in Rome where both died and were buried. By 1852 Mary, William and family were living in St Johns Wood having moved to London to participate actively in the cultural events of their time. The rural life was no longer sufficient in intellectual terms.

Then William had an idea. He would take his sons to Australia!

III

The 19th century generation of the wider Howitt family saw opportunity, healthy living and a rich experience of life as a rationale for extensive voyaging. William's brother, Dr Godfrey Howitt MD, was the first to contemplate broader horizons. Together with his wife and family, brother Richard, and his wife's two brothers, Robert and John Bakewell, Godfrey had emigrated to Australia in 1839. On returning home four years later Richard wrote in *Impressions of Australia Felix*⁶ that Godfrey had 'sought a more salubrious climate to ... save the life of his eldest boy'. He also noted that Godfrey, as a naturalist 'has dreams and expectations ... and expects, moreover, to better his condition ... in this world's wealth' while Richard himself, 'with none to care for doing neither harm nor good [was] simply expanding his mind to enrich it with novel imagery'. He was fully aware that he was leaving Europe where the 'noblest shape of man, the god-like' dwelt, the Europe of science and civilisation, of history and poetry.⁷

Landing firstly in Launceston, Tasmania, in the midst of novelty and scenic delight Richard noted 'how painfully the horrible visitation the arrival of European settlers had proved to the aboriginal island-people'. William's earlier unvisited views on colonialism became real for Richard.⁸

Such thoughts set aside after finally crossing Bass Strait to William's Town, Port Philip life became one of seeking a place to settle. Land mania had surrounded a huge government sale of 10 June 1840 and Richard was party to it. A lucky purchase saw him settled on the banks of the Yarra at what is now the suburb of Alphington. His poetry considerably less flowery than his brother's, and appreciative of a gentle aspect of the Australian environment, he wrote:

Through the Eucalyptus shade,
 Pleased could watch the bell-birds flutter,
 Blending with soft voice of waters
 The delicious tones they utter.
 From long tossings on the ocean,
 From the voyage vast and drear,
 Joyance find we in the wild-wood,
 Rest, by Yarra flowing clear.⁹

Such joy was to become intermittent. Living in tents, still ahead were the building, carpentry and tree-felling, fencing and other back-breaking tasks. He was accompanied in these tasks by his nephew Tom, leasing the property to him when 'walking'. The Howitt wanderlust became too much to resist. Describing the land north of Melbourne, walking through the Australian alps as he called them and as far as Cape Schanck, the Mornington Peninsula and Geelong, *Australia Felix* offers lively and evocative descriptions of the natural world, a talent which the Howitts possessed. For a time he was able to balance the good and bad in everything that confronted those 'who went in search of the golden fleece'.

As Richard walked he saw the pastoralists and squatters beset by physical hardship and government regulations, mostly issued from distant London. Attempts to tax already struggling settlers were attempted without any understanding of the ongoing problems attached to land ownership and water.

Britain has dependencies, children more than twelve thousand miles off,
 for whom the home-kindness sends out occasional suits of comfortable
 clothing: yet unfortunately, constructed without accurate knowledge of
 the size of persons, do not fit. Then only think of the uncomfortableness
 and destitution endured whilst vast voyages are performing to and fro:

that often twelve months must elapse before any inaccuracy can be rectified; and of consequent colds, fevers, ague fits and convulsions which take place. Such is the situation.¹⁰

Moments of hope arose for the future. There were those who were prospering with vineyards, seemingly supported by the Governor Mr La Trobe – a ‘kind and intelligent patron’.

In what luxuriant diamonded rows were the vines growing ... Everywhere was evidence of industry and skill ... Such a vineyard as this, although small in itself, is a noble and important one as a commencement: the forerunner of rich Australian vintages.¹¹

A joyous reflection occurred in coming across a shepherd’s hut at dusk. One occupant appeared ‘ghost-like in his shirt, initially wary of his visitors, the latter finally invited in to a bright fire and deliciously roasted leg of mutton’. Being Scottish shepherds, with a copy of both Burns poetry and the Bible on their shelves, Richard waxed lyrical about God and Man and the poetical spirit in the wilderness. At this time he commented that if the natives across the river could know of such feelings ‘betwixt one state the other, they would decide most wisely to drown themselves in the Yarra’.¹²

Still, it was the management of the sheep themselves, the lifeblood of the colony, which most troubled Richard. On a ferry ride from Geelong to Melbourne, carrying sheep along with passengers Richard recognised the pity in melting down thousands for their fat, when many in the colony were starving. Thus ‘... all the poetry of pastoral life had died in me’ the pastoral life that he knew in England and that which he had just experienced wandering the mountains ‘... the pastoral vocation as a felicitous one, serving at once God and man’ had been destroyed.

Eventually Richard needed the sustenance of his homeland away from the often displayed greed, monstrosity and villany of colonial life, away from the unfulfilled promises of English brochures that proclaimed a ‘delightful and prosperous colony’ where ‘Labourers are scarcer than ever’ and ‘the demand for female servants is *enormous*’ with husbands on offer at every turn.¹³ He sailed for home.

Meanwhile Godfrey, settled comfortably in Melbourne in his medical practice, was becoming a well-respected public figure who involved himself in setting up the Victorian Philosophical Society and establishing a valuable entomological collection and library. It may have been his success, rather than Richard’s tales of immorality and hankering for home, which provoked William to risk a venture to Melbourne with his two sons in 1852. Claude had

died but another younger son Charlton together with Alfred travelled with their father, leaving only Anna and the younger Margaret (Meggie) at home with Mary.

Mary offers us a personal rationale for the Howitt men's journey, leaving behind the local excitements of the time, the colonial collections of flora, of found objects, that were arriving in London from all over the world.

In the self-same year of the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park [1851] gold was found in Australia. The marvellous gold-romance of California had now begun in our own colonies. It seemed, in a period of over-population and misery in Europe, that gold, the great lure of the human heart, had been revealed in vast continents to call out people thither with a voice against which there was no appeal. Nothing was talked of but Australia and the wonderful inducements offered to emigration. My husband, who was a good sailor, and needed a real change from his hard brain-work, suddenly resolved on a trip to the new El-Dorado, where he should once more see his brother, Dr Godfrey Howitt, who was successfully established with his family in Melbourne. He should also learn what opening there might be on the Australian continent for our two sons, who were to accompany him.¹⁴

William and his sons knew little of what lay ahead. Others were completely unaware. The excitement on arrival was palpable when the pilot stepped on board at the heads of Port Phillip Bay; and then the doubts as he remained aloof. 'What and if the whole story should prove untrue?' Until a passing vessel comes gaily by and the master shouts. 'Come along! We'll show you the way to the diggings'. 'Hurrah ... There are Diggings then! It is no hoax!'¹⁵ Excitement often turned to despair for those who had little financial backing. The prices of provisions, of carriages, of horses and bullocks made life impossible. As time went on William, Alfred and Charlton were to find that the mounds of riches described in attractive brochures throughout England were mounds of mud thrown up by the diggers.

heaps of clay are trodden by hundreds of men constantly crossing them in all directions into a slippery, adhesive limbo of bird-lime and filth, which require not only much nerve, but much muscular power to traverse: for your jackboots sink deep into it and refuse to come out.¹⁶

They continued to struggle for two years in various landscapes traversing Victoria's grasses and mountain forests, battling against heat and cold, against wind and rain, against hostile fellow human beings and against the interminable attacks of 'flies' which beset their journey.

Running the gauntlet of petty theft and that of horses and equipment was an everyday threat. Sharing disgruntlement about the lack of government spending on roads and bridges, amidst the constant threat to life and limb, they never travelled alone.

When William became ill, the news conveyed to England by a returning traveller, a month passed before his recovery, and many more before Mary would know of his survival.

For upwards of two years my daughters and I dwelt alone at The Hermitage, busily occupied in writing, painting, and studying; our anxious hearts filled with the deepest solicitude for our dear absent ones, who were bravely encountering deprivation and toil.¹⁷

William's personal travails were captured in his letters home and subsequently published in *Land Labour and Gold* on his return. He had the capacity to turn detailed perceptions into meaningful generalities. As the title suggests, land ownership or rather acquisition was a regular topic – an issue which would need to be sorted out between squatters and the people. The people remained as Richard had described – a mixed bag – ex-convicts,¹⁸ failed gold-diggers, squatters, settlers and perhaps Aborigines. Having commented at a comfortable distance on the misery of the 'natives' of the world, William was much more colonial in perspective at close quarters, not necessarily lacking in empathy, but the differences too great to resolve.

Amid the wonders which are introduced around them, they remain just where they were. They see fields tilled and yielding abundance of food, yet they do not cultivate; they see houses rise full of comfort and plenty, yet they raise none, but still crouch under the miserable gunyah, or mimi of withered boughs; they see the white man ride on horses, but they still wander on foot. The white man carries fire-arms; they, for the most part, still carry the spear and tomahawk. The white man has his flocks and herds; they still lie in wait for the kangaroo, and climb the notched tree in pursuit of the opossum. The white man grows his fields of potatoes: they still grub up the wretched root of the hawkweed, called by them the murnong; still eat the roots of fern, and pick the grub from the wattle. The white men live in harmony, and overrun the earth with their numbers; they kill one another when ever two different tribes meet, and thus carry, in their most rooted customs, the means of their own extinction. But the vices and diseases of the white men, the only things which they acquire from them, or imitate in them, kill them off faster than they kill one another. They fish and hunt,

make baskets and opossum rugs, and sell their produce to the white men, and drink it. There is a heavy penalty on selling spirits to them; but though there are nominal Protectors of the Aborigines, they do not seem to enforce the law on their behalf; and it remains a dead letter. The fire-water is killing them off.¹⁹

William's real value lay in describing the white man's experiences for those in his homeland. His ability to write enticingly about the bush was evident, even if the 'evergreen' gum trees around the Yarra Valley did not appeal. 'The greater proportion of them', he wrote, 'are of the genus Eucalyptus, and have foliage something resembling the willow, but of a dusky hue, which creates a monotony'.²⁰ The gum tree, later to become an aesthetic and botanical emblem for Australia, a turning point in appreciation of the Australian landscape for artists and scientists alike, created a similar reaction in many European travellers comparing the countryside with that of an English spring. William brought the town of Melbourne to life for those not able to visit. In relating how the Royal Botanic Gardens were alive with carriages, 2500 people making as handsome an appearance as in England, elegant women, a band of music and 'a fine showing of flowers, fruits and vegetables', his resonant language did not go unappreciated. A letter to William Howitt after the publication in England of his volume acknowledged the value of his writing.

In reading you I found I was in the hands of a man who had really been there, and had seen things with his own eyes, and judged them with his own judgement, and rarer art still, could paint them to the life ... The real fact is that there have not yet been in Australia two centuries of poets, to tell people what to hear and what to smell. You extinguished that piece of cant.²¹

Despite the relative hardships of his stay, despite the ongoing constitutional confusions between British and colonial governance, which both he and Richard had pointed out, despite the battles for land and the 'unexplicated chaos' of life in general, William arrived 'home' convinced of potential greatness for Australia. Still a colonist seeing England as the 'the ancient heart of Christianity, freedom and civilisation – encompassing the earth', William proclaimed as he wrote his last letter on 28 March 1855 following his return to London:

To us this is a strange land, to the next generation it will be the native land ... to them the gum-tree and the wattle will assume the place of the oak and the elm. 'Discovery will generate discovery' ... Advance Australia!²²

IV

Alfred took up the challenge as his father had hoped. Staying on his uncle Godfrey's small farm in the first instance, he was soon off, the Howitt wanderlust and quest for new experiences too great to ignore. Alfred must have drawn upon his uncle Richard's writings and intriguing illustration.

He would also participate in the learned societies that his uncle Godfrey helped to establish. But he was off on his own trajectory. Acceptance came to depend upon sustained local presence. His was the generation that gradually shifted the focus of appreciation of the landscape and its contents to a local aspiration and a sense of belonging. As early as 1854 Howitt had described the 'beauty of the bush' in a letter to his sister Anna²³ while on a member of the Blandowski expedition which included the Buckland River near Mt Buffalo in central Victoria. The capacity in which he did so changed considerably over time. He quickly became independent in the bush as gold miner and cattle drover, though his letters home documented a struggle to survive.²⁴

The 1854 expedition had been led by the inexperienced enigmatic William Blandowski²⁵ and ironically despite its failure was the initiator of Howitt's collecting career. Howitt's frustration along the way was squarely aimed at Blandowski's management. To his mother in England he wrote: 'all day long Mr Blandowski and his eccentricities' distracted, making comments such as 'de mare hab valk' as the horses disappeared along with the men – some not to return. 'Howeet' he would call when in trouble.²⁶ Faith in his own bushcraft saw Howitt describe similar difficulties of disorientation suffered by artist Eugene von Guerard on an 1858 expedition to Gippsland saying extraordinary 'delusions' took hold of him when he lost his bearings in rough bush.

An expedition in 1860 presented a career break-through. Having spent eight years on short-term droving and collecting expeditions a letter to his mother enthused:

I write in haste to say that I expect to be appointed tomorrow to the leadership of the Prospecting Party into Gippsland ... If I am as fortunate as to find a gold field I hope it will give me considerable standing here.²⁷

It was also likely to pay £400–£500 per year. This was the beginning of his fascination with mineralogy. Firstly though, following and likely due to the success of the 'Prospecting' venture Howitt was singled out to lead an expedition to find the missing explorers Burke, Wills and King and their party. Favourable timing and apparent talent inspired the government's choice and it was not disappointed. Reaching the country of the Dieri tribe near Coopers Creek, Howitt found the party with only King alive, brought him back to

Melbourne and immediately returned to retrieve the remains of Burke and Wills. With respect to his successful location of the Burke and Wills party in 1861 a newspaper praised Howitt's abilities, in contrast to the impetuous Burke:

All seems to have been perfectly easy and unexciting simply because all was well ordered, carefully pre-arranged and inflexibly carried out.²⁸

V

Alfred Howitt's diary related a number of different early experiences with 'natives' varying from appreciation to frustration dependent on either willing cooperation or the need for bribery. On one occasion it took the trade of a tomahawk, a knife, a red shirt and a nightcap to receive favours; on another the natives 'came to the other side of the waterhole and commenced dancing for our entertainment'; perhaps Howitt's first sighting of a corroboree.²⁹ At worst was his description of the Coopers Creek or Dieri natives as 'an idle incorrigibly restless, lying race'.³⁰ He clearly saw himself as entirely separate in calibre from Aboriginal Australians. This was some years before serious research of the native 'race' was to become a dedication, but it was this expedition that took him to outback territory over an extended period: time enough to spark an interest in kinship and marriage laws of the Dieri people, and their environment.

On 18 December 1863 Alfred William Howitt was appointed as police magistrate, warden and coroner of Victoria to act at Omeo in Gippsland. He held this position for 26 years based with his wife (nee Maria Boothby, known as Liney) and children living on a hop-growing farm. The role enabled ample opportunity to collect information, on his own behalf, about the environment and native population. Liney's life revolved around five children, no doubt lonely and demanding. It is her letters home to the Howitts that tell much of the personal lives of Alfred and herself.³¹

Howitt's serious collecting activities began with rocks. While theories about geology in terms of the age of the world were being examined globally, there were, in spite of isolation, opportunities to contribute 'new world' evidence, largely provoked by the gold rushes. Distance from Europe ensured that Howitt did not emerge as a world authority but he became recognised in local circles, playing his part as collector and analyst. He connected with geologists Alfred Selwyn³² and Georg Ulrich³³ working on the Geological Survey of Victoria. In 1866 they deemed rocks in western Victoria and in the mountainous Eastern region to be metamorphic. Through practical



Cooper's Creek, wood engraving from a sketch by Alfred Howitt, *Illustrated Australian News*, 24 January 1863, p. 9. Pictures Collection, IAN24/01/63/9

petrographic work Howitt was able to support theories of gradual mutability, not drastic change by supernatural or catastrophic events. By the 1870s Victoria had become a source of interest and one of the most industrious collectors of rock samples was Alfred Howitt, as was later acknowledged by TG Vallance,³⁴ prominent geologist and historian.

The earliest coherent observations of metamorphic phenomena in Australia were made by a police magistrate, stationed in a remote part of Victoria and largely self-taught in geology.³⁵

According to Vallance, Howitt would have made the most of his own German education, drawing on the presence of Ulrich who sponsored him as Fellow of the Geological Society in 1874.

Howitt transferred the methodology of knowledge accumulation from geology to natural science. Absorbing his environment like a sponge, the eucalypt became his obsession: a sight to behold no doubt, riding on horseback through confronting terrain, alone for hundreds of miles, reading European tomes.³⁶ The miles he covered were in the distant forests of Gippsland. Yet he managed to connect with the centre of activity in Melbourne to ensure safe housing and recording of the fruits of his labour. The importance of Howitt's collecting and cataloguing of eucalypts was immediately recognised by Baron von Mueller, Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne.

The maligned ‘monotonous gum tree’ was becoming of interest in both aesthetic and scientific terms. Howitt’s approach was a scientific one. While collecting seeds of eucalyptus trees to send abroad to his father,³⁷ he was establishing his own collection of eucalyptus samples and writing up his findings in ‘Eucalypts of Gippsland’.³⁸ As von Mueller later acknowledged, *Eucalyptus Howittiana*:

was named in honour of Alfred William Howitt ... who possessed a marvellous first hand knowledge of various sciences, usually enumerated under the designation of Natural History ... the present writer is proud that he enjoyed the friendship of, and received instruction from Dr Howitt for many years.³⁹

It was at this time, while considering long-term change in apparently solid rock formations, while contemplating and collecting living botanical specimens – their derivation and application – that the role of scientific observation and its relationship to mankind began to unfold within Howitt’s agenda. The native people of the land he had hitherto studied became his driving force.

Both William and Richard had been of the belief that the Australian Aborigine would die out. Albeit 20 years earlier, William described Aborigines as a ‘miserable spectacle of humanity’ and had to admit ‘that that which will not go onward in the world’s progress, must go down’. Going onward meant the advancement of European values, even if located elsewhere. Richard earlier regretted that contact had rewarded the Aborigines for their age-old protection of the land with disease, death and dispossession. However, these ‘natives’ were not really of lasting interest to men returning to a ‘civilised’ world. Alfred, on the other hand, while not disputing such demise, nor allowing them equality, had been living among Australian Aborigines in various roles for over 20 years and was questioning a variety of religious and mythical belief systems, as well as confronting something quite remarkable, the idea that an ancient culture apart from the European contemporary world view could exist, with living examples to interrogate. This awakening, this questioning also provoked troubling personal dilemmas.

The role of the church as he knew it played on his mind privately. In 1874 he wrote to his sister, Anna, while on a judicial assignment in Beechworth.

I spent the morning in church – I am sorry to say that it seems to me all churches are in a poor way – I don’t know what condition they will be in in a century. They must either modify some of their dogmas or else they will be high and dry. The gulf now between the churches and the intellect of the



'Eastwood', former home of AW Howitt, c. 1866 – c. 1885. Photograph by Frederick Cornell. Pictures Collection H87.16/76

country is widening ... the same dry stuff Sunday after Sunday ... many of them must shut their eyes.⁴⁰

In a different context, but borne of new experiences, this was the same dilemma that his parents had faced prior to leaving the Society of Friends.

How to write and publish became a problem, for Alfred's views could not easily align either with those managing Aboriginal affairs, or with the missions which enacted their instructions. With some frustration he wrote:

I do not know what to do about the mission – paper! ... On the one side of me is the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines and on the other the Church of England Mission. I cannot write my paper without giving my friends ... Brough Smyth (Secretary to the Board) and Bishop Perry ... several digs in the ribs and stamps on their corns.⁴¹

He did write, copiously, as had his parents before him. Initially influenced by Henry Morgan, pioneering American anthropologist, connected with the Smithsonian Institution, Howitt teamed up with Dr Lorimer Fison⁴² to write *Kamilaroi and Kurnai*,⁴³ a seminal study of the tribes surrounding his home, which they chose to publish in Melbourne 'to occupy the field before the claim was jumped'. Such writings would become the cornerstone of his life and legacy.

At first his ethnological efforts and his circulars seeking information, were met with ‘ignorance, apathy, disinterest – what use is it ...?’ he asked himself. A letter to Mary suggested Alfred had reverted to geology and chemistry in his spare time so disappointed was he in the reception to his ideas. But he was only temporarily deterred from his ethnological collecting. His greatest work, published in 1904, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, relied on his field notes centred on the Kulin tribe in Gippsland but as he summarised:

the materials for this work were collected during the past forty years, commencing during explorations in Central Australia, where I came in close and friendly contact with two tribes who were in a condition of complete savagery.⁴⁴

Howitt also developed a range of contacts who continually supplied him with information over 40 years, ranging across marriage, religion and communication – Aboriginal culture. What was significant was Howitt’s ability not only to resist European thinking but to influence it. He set out to collect data; he recorded his findings; and he drew his own conclusions. In due course he published to a receptive international audience.

Howitt was increasingly valued by the great British social theorists of the time Edward Tylor, James Frazer and French sociologist Emile Durkheim. James Frazer quoted Howitt’s findings in relation to the Australian Aborigines, as he wrote *The Golden Bough*⁴⁵ and continued to wonder about the roles of magic and religion and eventually science in humankind. Frazer supported Howitt against others of his colleagues over 20 or more years in bringing to bear Australian knowledge on the question of the origin of man. This eventually saw Howitt awarded a doctorate from Cambridge University in 1904.

Locally Howitt faced some critics as to his methodology of collecting information. Even now Howitt’s surveys have been criticised in terms of current value and professionalism,⁴⁶ suggesting that questions were framed to lead answers and that southern Aborigines were ‘tainted’ by white contact. Tribes in Victoria had of course been affected by colonial activities, but the questions were constructed to expand what little knowledge existed.⁴⁷

To fend off contemporary critics he wrote:

These instances extend over a great part of the south-eastern quarter of Australia, and they have been recorded either from my own observation or from that of competent correspondents ... But in those cases I have exercised my judgment as to the individual value of their evidence, when compared with that of others.⁴⁸



Display of some of the message sticks collected by Alfred William Howitt and housed in the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, since 1888 (1989.46.2-8). Image copyright Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

The slate being rather clean prior to such questioning, knowledge was largely fractured and drawn from individual journeymen returning to Europe with impressions directed at serving European purposes. Howitt contributed to wide-ranging Australian understandings. Much later, for instance, WEH Stanner,⁴⁹ the 20th century anthropologist, noted in relation to Howitt's writing:

He wrote in a careful, informed way on a wealth of empirical topics – boomerangs, canoes, name-giving, cannibalism, migrations, wizardry, songs, message-sticks, sign-language – but most valuably on the kinship structures and intergroup relations of social life.⁵⁰

Stanner noted message sticks as a specific interest of Howitt.

For Alfred Howitt, and for many others, William Barak, leader of the Wurundjeri tribe was an invaluable informant. He proved that it was possible to draw on remembered knowledge, not least through his late-life paintings. That knowledge remains of inherent value. Barak described the message stick as being partly representative and partly ornamental.⁵¹ Howitt was not attracted by aesthetic works. During early contact he had viewed rock paintings in Central Australia as 'rude hieroglyphics drawn in some white substance by the blackfellows'.⁵² His interest in the message sticks was social or cultural. In 1889 highlighting the role of information on message sticks and their markings, Howitt wrote *Notes on Australian Message Sticks and Messengers*.⁵³ He was interested in the reason for the existence of message sticks, who were the bearers and recipients, and what was the meaning of the 'marks' and decoration within the context of communication, cultural and trading activity. With further investigation he was able to say:

The message itself is ... conveyed by what whites in certain districts call a 'blackfellow's letter - a message-stick. There has been much misunderstanding, not to say mis-statement, as to the real character of these message sticks and the conventional value of the markings on them. It has been said that they can be read and understood by the person to whom they are sent without the marks on them being explained by the bearer.⁵⁴

Many of these objects he sent to England to be housed in the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford.

To Howitt these items were important for exchange or present-giving and meaningful for ceremonies, but also as potential linguistic forms. This led to his documenting of language and its meaning from tribes across Victoria and a particular understanding by Howitt that performance and song were expressions of a complete culture. This was a momentous step for Howitt - its implications a platform for Australian anthropology.

The songs are very numerous, and of varied character, and are connected with almost every part of the social life, for there is but little of the life of the Australian savage either in peace or war, which is not in some measure connected with song.⁵⁵

His extensive collection of words and music from those he described as 'native bards' and his evident delight in corroborees opened up countless opportunities for viewing Aborigines as people with a heritage. These were not his parents' bards - not Wordsworth or Coleridge. Rather Alfred was describing a nascent idea that white man was limited in his understanding of Aborigines and that for them these centuries old songs were inspired by customs and beliefs attached to an ancient spiritual realm, different from his own, but entrancing. He saw the 'sacred singers' as inspired by something more than mortal and noted:

It is to be regretted that more attention has not been paid to the songs of the Australian blackfellow. There is something to be learned from them as to the mental condition of the aborigines and their intellectual status. They throw light also upon their beliefs and upon their customs. No doubt there are among their songs, as among those of the civilised peoples also, some which are coarse or indecent. But these can be dis-regarded, unless by chance even they may prove to have some bearing upon custom or belief. As it is, the white man knows little or nothing of the blackfellows' songs. To most people they are unmeaning or barbarous chants, and to the missionaries, who have some more knowledge of them, they savour of heathendom, and

must, therefore, be altogether pushed into oblivion and be forgotten. Thus, it is that before long all these songs, old and new, will be lost. As it is, a source of simple and innocent amusement is cut off from the aborigines by, no doubt, well meaning but very narrow minded men.⁵⁶

Echoing the values of his family, open to new ideas and rejecting those which no longer had meaning in his own life, he opened a channel to an ancient people and the natural world they inhabited. And he wrote about it all. Alfred expanded the Howitt way beyond imagining.

Howitt died in March 1908. An obituary in the *Pastoralists' Review*⁵⁷ sombrely stated this his death 'removes from our midst one who played a very prominent part in the history of Victoria'.

His legacy was to be valued beyond his lifetime, as had been predicted four years earlier.

On 22 April 1904 the Melbourne *Argus* published an article entitled: 'One of the Pioneers – Mr A W Howitt honoured'.

Professor Baldwin Spencer, President of the Royal Society of Victoria presented him with the Mueller medal, 'a small tablet of silvered bronze bearing on the obverse a representation of Baron von Mueller and on the reverse a waratah, with the inscription "For Researches in Natural Science"'.

Spencer stated that the medal was awarded:

in recognition of his [Howitt's] distinguished services in Australian science, extending over nearly thirty years. Mr Howitt's scientific research had ranged over the three subjects of botany, geology and ethnology ... Mr Howitt would perhaps be best remembered in connection with his ethnological researches. In the central deserts of Australia and in the wild mountains of Gippsland he set himself to study the Australian aborigine ... [thus laying] the foundation of the knowledge of Australian anthropology.