A man, his dog and a diary
James Ritchie’s journey in the Western District, 1841
Melinda Barrie and Sophie Garrett

The University of Melbourne Archives (UMA) holds a number of significant collections relating to the hardy pioneers who arrived in Victoria in the mid-19th century. Diaries kept by Victoria’s early settlers—whether taking the form of a sheaf of loose pages, a notebook or a series of annotated almanacs—reveal much about colonial life, recording journeys undertaken, impressions of a new landscape and its people and the daily lives of the writers.

University of Melbourne scholar Margaret Kiddle was one of the first historians to consider the particular character of European settlement in the Western District of Victoria. Kiddle used many diaries and letters during the research for her 1961 book *The men of yesterday*, recognising the historical importance of family and business documents. Some of the papers she used have since come to UMA, including those of Scottish immigrants the Ritchie family. Other Western District holdings at UMA include records from department stores, legal firms, the fruit and meat industries, the racing industry, and numerous families and individuals.

In the mid-19th century the sons of many British families set out to take up opportunities in distant lands, as prospectors and settlers. By 1857, one male worker in three in Victoria was a miner, and one in five was a farmer or pastoralist. Tucked away amongst the Ritchie papers are diaries, letter books, watercolours and drawings by various family members, in particular James Ritchie (1812–1857) who founded the Ritchie pastoral dynasty in the 1840s, and his brother Daniel (1816–1865), whose descendants continued to build and expand the business.

James Ritchie kept a diary of his journey through largely unsurveyed parts of the Western District. He had landed at Williamstown in 1841 and promptly made his way to Aitken’s Station near Geelong to take up work as an overseer. Confident and bold, Ritchie embarked on a journey west later that year, joining a party that was herding more than 200 head of cattle, travelling up to 32 kilometres per day. He recorded that the party set off on 13 November, heading for an area near Port Fairy, and stopping along the way at properties already established. Ritchie’s companions had been warned that their chosen run was ‘not fit for anything’ but on arrival Ritchie wrote:

> It turned out one of the choicest runs in the country; it is abundantly watered. The soil for the most part is strong vegetable mould producing fine nutritious feed, and very rarely if ever injured by drought. It abounds with game and splendid timber. Such is the end of the expedition, a termination that fully satisfies the wishes of everyone concerned.

By 1857, one male worker in three in Victoria was a miner, and one in five was a farmer or pastoralist. Tucked away amongst the Ritchie papers are diaries, letter books, watercolours and drawings by various family members, in particular James Ritchie (1812–1857) who founded the Ritchie pastoral dynasty in the 1840s, and his brother Daniel (1816–1865), whose descendants continued to build and expand the business.

Parting company with the other drovers on 9 December, Ritchie continued his journey ‘all alone and on foot, carrying my gun, powder and shot, with other things amounting altogether to about 20 lbs. weight’. He soon met a fellow traveller, a ‘herculean denizen of the bush’ and an ‘ingenious companion’. They travelled together for a few days, taking wrong roads in the newly settled country, which Ritchie described as follows:

> light forest, the trees blackwood, wattle, etc., the herbage nourishing buttercups etc. … and growing long and fresh as spring. There were several marshes we saw bearing strong aquatic grasses as if it was nourished with plenty of moisture. I would expect water could be found in abundance a few feet deep; if so, there might be more splendid runs obtained in this neighbourhood.
An unrelated Mr Ritchie, ‘a most liberal man’, had established a station in this area, and offered hospitality to his namesake for the night.

Although James Ritchie had every intention of taking up a run and exploiting the land, he seemed aware of the plight of Victoria’s Indigenous people: I had lost all traces of the track some time before coming to the River and had made my way through a low forest to the top of a bank where all at once burst upon the sight a clear flowery country, the broad river to the ocean with a breeze giving perpetual wind. I stood wondering at the soul satisfying prospect that now and then rewards the panting traveller. Yet I could not altogether suppress a feeling of fear, for I knew the natives must esteem this one of the choicest hunting fields in the country.
Here is their cradle and their grave, from the water and the land they could live a life of endless luxury, and now perhaps they were whetting their spears to drink the blood of a daring foe who had recklessly offered himself a sacrifice for past injuries.6

Descriptions of encounters with Indigenous people are scattered throughout the diary. At one point, Ritchie met some natives armed with sticks and he took his shoes off as he backed away—possibly wanting to indicate that he meant no harm. He observed that natives lived in a settled way on several stations, and that at Mt Elephant ‘the blacks lived in perfect peace with the white people’.7 As he approached the coast near Port Fairy, Ritchie saw fires and prepared for an encounter with the local people—the location suggests these were Gunditjmara people.8 Cautious, if not afraid, Ritchie prepared his weapon but did not meet anyone. With blistered feet, he became disoriented in a patch of burnt scrub. Blackened all over, he eventually found his way to a whaling station, deserted but for a stinking carcass in a pool of water from which he drank. Exhausted, he slept under a tree with his faithful dog.

Rising the next day at dawn, Ritchie realised the port was not far away but when he arrived he was not well received, perhaps because of his appearance—a week later, when shooed off a property at gunpoint, he noted that he had not used a razor for five weeks and was like a ‘mulatto’ from the sun (the only mention in the diary of his own appearance). Heading northwards away from the coast, he stopped at an inn for a cup of tea, but did not stay overnight. A resourceful man, Ritchie preferred to sleep by the road and ‘roast cockatoos for breakfast’ than spend his limited funds or ask for ‘commiseration’ from those he met. This independent spirit is evident throughout the diary.

Though travelling alone through unknown country, Ritchie did not seem to feel at risk in the landscape. He commented on getting water and food and, in one instance, on the oppressive heat, but was unperturbed. Wild ducks, cockatoos and fish are mentioned as food, but other wildlife seemed of little interest, except perhaps the ‘myriads of animalcules’ that irritated him one night as he slept on fresh-cut hay. Ritchie’s feet bothered him throughout the journey, but he returned to Aitken’s property in good spirits and good health at the end of his six-week journey.
It is unclear from the diary whether Ritchie’s route north from Port Fairy was through the area near Penshurst that later became his home, but he did mention Grange to the south-west and Mt Sturgeon to the north. Considering the view from the top of Mt Sturgeon, he wrote:

Some parts of the mountains are awfully stupendous with disjointed cliffs and hanging woods but from the mountains and away down the Wannon and the Glenelg the country is rather clear and very light forest as far as the eye can reach round towards Portland Bay, Port etc. For about 40 miles into the country it appears heavily wooded but saving that, from the west to the north east the country may be said to be half clear, half open forest for a hundred, yes, for hundreds of miles.9

By 1843 Ritchie had purchased the Deep Creek run, about eight kilometres north-east of the town of Penshurst, in partnership with his brother, John Miller Ritchie, and James Scales (or Sceales), who had emigrated on the same ship as the Ritchies.10 They renamed the Deep Creek run ‘Blackwood’. James Ritchie had seen many fine stands of blackwood trees during the period when he wrote his diary, and believed that blackwoods were ‘proof of quality’ of the land. James Scales’ brother Adolphus lived on the adjoining property, Woodhouse. Following deaths and a complex
series of transactions between the brothers, both properties came into Ritchie ownership.

There is no mention of family in James Ritchie’s diary, nor did he marry, but family ties proved strong. When James was thrown from his horse and died in 1857, Blackwood remained in the family, passing to brother Daniel. ‘Blackwood’ was not only the name James had given his property; it became a family name, with Daniel’s son being named Robert Blackwood (R.B.) Ritchie.

The complex that makes up Blackwood includes the original two-roomed homestead built for James Ritchie in the 1840s, a second, larger, bluestone homestead, woolshed and outbuildings built in the 1860s for Daniel and his family and a third homestead, stables and grounds designed in the Picturesque Aesthetic style by Butler and Ussher in 1892 for Daniel’s son, R.B. Ritchie. The property passed out of Ritchie hands in 1916 but returned to the family in 1927. Blackwood is now considered to be of heritage significance to the Southern Grampians Shire, as an example of the hundreds of homesteads that were constructed in the Western District during a 70-year period from the 1840s. Homesteads such as Blackwood are enduring symbols of pastoralist prosperity.

It has often been said that Australia’s wealth grew on the sheep’s back. The records of many stock and station agents based in the Western District complement the records of pastoralists like the Ritchie family, providing insights into the development of the wool industry and its economic influence on the fortunes of the new colony. The Ritchie papers also tell us about other aspects of 19th-century life, including transportation and slavery. Daniel Ritchie’s compassion for the victims of the slave trade and convicts was formed during tours of duty in the Caribbean and Mediterranean and to Australia as a ship’s surgeon in the Royal Navy. His journeys and experiences are meticulously logged in a diary and correspondence and depicted in pencil drawings and watercolours. He also acquired material relating to convict Matthew James Everingham, which now forms part of the Ritchie Collection.

James Ritchie’s diary ends in December 1841 with his simply ‘laying down as usual amongst the grass’. There is no shout of exaltation or triumphant yell, and no sense of the importance of his expedition, yet journeys such as his helped establish the economic strength of Victoria in the second half of the 19th century.

Melinda Barrie is senior archivist (business) and Sophie Garrett is repository co-ordinator at the University of Melbourne Archives.

The collections of the University of Melbourne Archives are available for research by arrangement, see www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/archives.

3 In addition to works specifically cited, this article also draws upon the following: James Ritchie, transcribed by Arthur Ritchie, 1896, ‘Short account of events from 1841 to 1850’. Reference no. 1974.0084, item 1/3/1, Ritchie Family Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.
5 Ritchie, ‘An account of a trip’.
6 Ritchie, ‘An account of a trip’.
7 Ritchie, ‘An account of a trip’.
9 Ritchie, ‘An account of a trip’.