

Fire Stories

Bushfires and Australian Colonial History



Student Booklet
Year 4



Australian Government
Australian Research Council



AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR THE
HISTORY OF EMOTIONS

Extracts from

The Cricket on the Hearth: A Fairy Tale of Home

A story by Charles Dickens,
published December 1845

[Extract #1]

Mrs Peerybingle set the kettle on the fire to boil before John got home.

With its warm steam gushing forth in a cloud, which merrily and gracefully hung about the chimney-corner, it sang its song with cheerfulness, and its iron body hummed upon the fire.

That this song of the kettle's was a song of invitation and welcome to somebody out of doors, to somebody at that moment coming on, towards the snug small home and the crisp fire, there is no doubt whatever.

It's a dark night, sang the kettle, and the rotten leaves are lying by the way; and, above, all is mist and darkness, and, below, all is mire and clay; and there's only one relief in all the sad and murky air...

The kettle sent his fireside song of comfort streaming into a ray of the candle that shone out through the window, and a long way down the lane. And this light, bursting on John as he approached towards it through the gloom, cried, 'Welcome home, old fellow! Welcome home, my boy!'

[Extract #2]

After dinner, as John soberly and thoughtfully puffed at his old pipe, and as the Dutch clock ticked, and as the red fire gleamed, his heart grew light and happy, and he was thankful with all his might.

Wheels were heard. A horse's feet. The barking of a dog. There were visitors at the door! Caleb and Bertha came in from the cold.

'Come!' cried the jovial John. 'Off with the great-coat, off with the thick shawl, off with the heavy wrappers! And a cosy half-hour by the fire! A game at cribbage, you and I? That's hearty. The cards and board, Dot. And a glass of beer here, if there's any left, small wife!'

Depictions of Fire from Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain

Image 1: John Crocker Bulteel, depicted in his hunting attire with two of his favourite foxhounds, watercolour by John Frederick Lewis (1805–1876), Private Collection. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



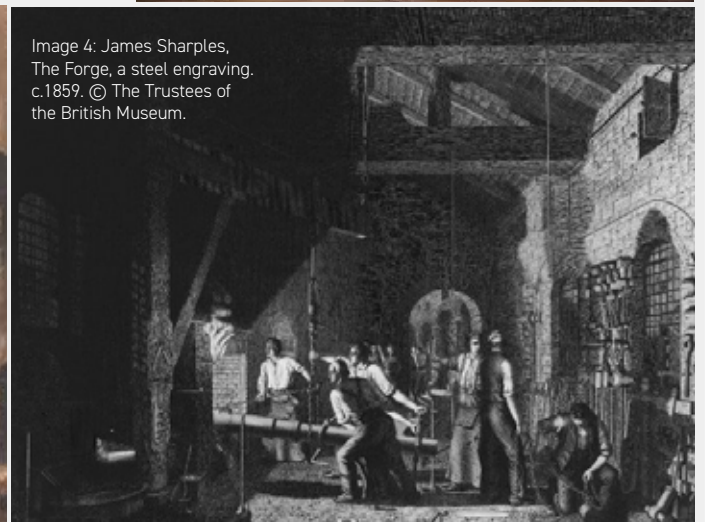
Image 2: Hugh Cameron, *The Light of the Fireside*, c.1867. Oil on canvas. Used with permission McLean Museum and Art Gallery, Inverclyde Council, Scotland, UK.



Image 3: Fire in London (*Microcosm of London*, plate 35), Designed and etched by Thomas Rowlandson. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1959.



Image 4: James Sharples, *The Forge*, a steel engraving. c.1859. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Very few people could afford large oil paintings or portraits of themselves like the gentleman in image 1. Etchings and engravings were pictures cut into a metal plate, coated with ink and pressed onto paper. Printers could produce many copies of a single image this way. Because 'prints' were much cheaper to make and could be made in large numbers they were relatively cheap to buy and many more people were able to own them.

'Black Thursday, Victoria 1851'

By William Howitt. *Cassell's Illustrated Family Paper*, Saturday 4 February 1854

BLACK THURSDAY is one of the most remarkable days in the annals of Australia: Thursday the 6th of February, 1851. That is a day memorable in the popular mind for its terrible and unexampled devastation.

The country was this year visited with an extraordinary and intense and long-continued drought. The grass was dried up to a state of tinder. Water-holes and creeks, which had never been known before, since the white man came into the colony, to fail, were now hollows parched and cracked with heat.

In this state of things, came one of those hot winds from the north which sweep over the whole country like a typhoon, burning and stifling you in their course, like the breath of a furnace.

The whole country lay, as it were, prepared for ignition-ready for the match, and there it was! The various fires on the mountains and in the bush received the kindling impulse—the flames shot forward with the wind, and the whole country was speedily one huge conflagration! Lighted at so many points, the forest blazed

and roared in a manner so startling and terrible, that the population, scattered thinly through the bush, were struck with consternation. Some rushed with green boughs, as in ordinary bushfires, to beat out the flames, but in most cases without success. The terrible element came roaring forward.

Soon the people had to flee before the remorseless enemy in all directions, and in every quarter, even over an extent of many hundreds of square miles. The women and children fled from their blazing huts; the shepherds left their flocks to perish, unable to drive them to any conceivable place of refuge. Cattle in vast herds were seen careering madly before the fires. Troops of horses, wild from the bush, with flying tails and manes, and neighing wildly, galloped across the ground with the fury of despair. Flocks of kangaroos, and of smaller animals, leaped desperately along, to escape the horrible conflagration, and hosts of birds swept blindly on. Horsemen, seeing the raging sea of fire advancing with whirlwind speed from almost every quarter, galloped madly and for scores of miles, till their horses fell under them.

In *one day*, a whole country of 300 miles in extent, and at least 150 in breadth, was reduced to a desert. It was one blackened and burning waste.

Black Thursday, 6 February 1851

A painting by William Strutt, 1864



Courtesy of the State Library of Victoria

Listen to the 'Black Thursday Soundscape', a voice production of first-hand accounts of the bushfires taken from the newspapers that William Strutt would have read at the time.

http://www2.slv.vic.gov.au/collections/treasures/black_thursday/sound_bt.html

The Homestead Saved

Colour engraving of a painting by James Alfred Turner



The Homestead Saved: An Incident of the Great Gippsland Fire of 1898.
Melbourne, Globe Engraving Co., 1908, after a painting by James Alfred
Turner. Courtesy of National Library of Australia.

Black Friday, Victoria, 13 January 1939

Herald, 28 June 1940, p. 7

Noojee Fire Heroine 'Only Did Her Job'

Eighteen months ago, Mrs Gladys Sanderson, acting post mistress at Noojee, tied the keys of her post office round her wrist, and, with the bushfires roaring through the town, raced for the river—the last hope of safety.

Yesterday the Governor-General ... announced in Canberra that she had been awarded the medal of the Order of the British Empire (Civil Division) for 'gallantry and devotion to duty'.

Today from her home in Noojee, built on the ashes of the home that was destroyed on Black Friday, she told, diffidently and with reluctance, the story of the work that won her the award.

On that day ... Mrs Sanderson was in charge of the Noojee Post Office, relieving her father ... [F]lames were sweeping through the densely timbered hills surrounding the town, and before midday women and children were being hurried off to safety at Warragul.

Back in the hills isolated families were in danger of being cut off ... unless they could be warned of the advance of the fire, which was racing faster than a horse could gallop through the timber. Mrs Sanderson was the only one in the

town who could operate the telephone switchboard that was the only link with these isolated people.

She knew the danger not only to the families in the hills, but to her own family in Noojee and to herself...

"By 1.30 p.m. the town was as black as if night had come", Mrs Sanderson said. "Then, as the fire raced down on us, we could see the dull red of the flames through the smoke."

"Houses were already on fire. It was only my duty to stay at the Post Office. Then it had to be evacuated, too, as I the fire drew in..."

[Mrs Sanderson and others took shelter in the river for three hours. When she went back to the post office she found books in the safe had been burnt by the intense heat. She spent the night at Warragul and then went back to Noojee to open an emergency post office the next morning. The policeman in charge of evacuating the area told the Herald that he had to push Mrs Sanderson out of the post office before she would leave and said, "She stuck to the 'phone and got out every message for me".]

Source: Trove

trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/243230165

Black Saturday, Victoria, 7 February 2009

YouTube clip: 'Victorian Bushfires – The Heroes' 2009

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pQCyOF6szw>

This YouTube video was made by a member of the public to say 'thank you' to volunteer fire-fighters for their efforts fighting the February 2009 bushfires in Victoria



Fire-fighter walking around near bushfire.
© AdobeStock, VanderWolf Images.

After watching the tribute to fire-fighters, discuss the following:

- What is a hero? Is this clip suggesting that fire-fighters are heroes? (clue: the title)
- Describe how the fire-fighters appear in this video (e.g., brave, determined, exhausted, courageous, heroic, strong, skillful, bonding together, committed)
- The chorus of the song 'I Am Australian' accompanies the video clip. Do you think the creator of this video is suggesting that battling bushfires can be linked to feelings of patriotism (love for Australia)? Is fighting bushfires part of Australian identity?

Images

Title page: *The Homestead Saved: An Incident of the Great Gippsland Fire of 1898*. Melbourne, Globe Engraving Co., 1908, after a painting by James Alfred Turner. Courtesy of National Library of Australia.

p. 2:

Image 1: *John Crocker Bulteel*, depicted in his hunting attire with two of his favourite foxhounds, watercolour by John Frederick Lewis (1805–1876), Private Collection. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

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p. 4: William Strutt, *Black Thursday, February 6th 1851*, 1864. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of State Library of Victoria.

p. 5: *The Homestead Saved: An Incident of the Great Gippsland Fire of 1898*. Melbourne, Globe Engraving Co., 1908, after a painting by James Alfred Turner. Courtesy of National Library of Australia.

p. 7: *Fire-fighter walking around near bushfire*. © AdobeStock, VanderWolf Images.