

READINGS IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

-The History you were never taught

THEME 5: THE KULIN SEASONS

Melbourne is famed for its variable weather of 'Four Seasons in One Day'. However the Kulin people of the Port Phillip region defined eight seasons, but not just by the weather patterns. What had to be done at each particular time of the year also helped define each season. These annual seasons were also related to the Aboriginal use of a 28 day lunar month within a 13 month annual calendar. This was however not rigidly fixed as each coming season was preceded by a sequence of environmental signals in insect, animal and plant behaviour.

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THEME 5 QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Is it reasonable to spend the heat of summer by the river?
2. Given the fuel loads that worsened the Australian bush fires last summer, do you think this will lead to more use of '*mosaic pattern cold-fire burning*'?
3. In the Aboriginal scarred trees you have seen, has the scar usually been on the south-east side?
4. Do children tend to get born in particular months of the year?

THE EIGHT KULIN SEASONS IN MELBOURNE

Europeans of course see seasons as four equal periods of three months, spring, summer, autumn and winter. However anyone living in Melbourne can tell you our weather is much more variable than that. We can have four seasons in one day. Aboriginal people had a much more sophisticated understanding of Melbourne weather and more particularly, what they needed to do at certain times of the year.

There were eight Aboriginal seasons in all in Melbourne, but some seasons were only four weeks in length. Others were two or three months, but these were all lunar months of 28 days each. The Aboriginal calendar therefore had 13 months of 28 days, and the New Year started at the summer solstice.

It is quite surprising how closely their seasons are tied to these lunar months, but in reality the beginning and end dates of Aboriginal seasons were rather rubbery. This was because each season was dependent on a number of environmental signals, like the migration of particular birds or the flowering of particular plants.

To show this close meshing of the lunar cycle with the seasons in Melbourne and the activities associated with each of the eight seasons, the following brief summary is offered.

Beginning on December 22 the first season occupied the first two lunar months until February 15. It was referred to as 'Hot North Wind and Fix the Fishtraps Season'. It was heralded by the flowering of Coranderrk, the Christmas Bush. The Woiwuring word for 'hot north wind' is Mallee because that is where it comes from. At this time women kept their newborn babies near the coolness of the water and time was spent fixing the fish traps after the October floods and before the coming eel harvest.

'Eel Harvest and Inter-Clan Business Season' was the second season and it occupied the third lunar month from February 16 to March 15. This was a time when mature eels began migrating downstream to make their way to the Coral Sea to breed. Being much smaller than the females the male eels begin migrating a fortnight earlier. The males are not hunted, but messages are sent out that the harvest will begin in two weeks. Many people from other clans therefore visited during this period of feasting, so this was when matters of trade, justice and environmental management were decided.

The fourth lunar month from March 16 to April 12 is a time of late summer electrical storms and heavy downpours. It was therefore an indoors time when pelts accumulated from the previous season of feasting are turned into rugs and cloaks. This was therefore the 'Thunderstorm and Rug Making Season' and it ends with the first morning dew.

Although rainfall in Melbourne is quite even across the 12 months except for double the normal in October, the 13 lunar month calendar reveals a rain shadow period in the fifth lunar month from April 13 to May 10. That is, most of the rain in April falls in the first half of the month, whilst most of the rain in May falls in the second half. This then is the 'Morning Mist and Burning-off Season'. It was a time of burning off in many areas of Australia, but particularly southern and eastern Australia.

This was then followed by the 'Cold West Wind and Artefact Making Season' which occupied the next three lunar months from May 11 to August 2. This was again a more indoors time when women's pregnancies were advancing and time was particularly spent in educating children and preparing the older ones for their coming initiation.

The end of this season was signalled by the flowering of silver wattles. The ninth lunar month was also a one month season occupying August 3 to August 30, and was the 'Morning Frost and Bark Harvest Season'. Due to the sap now rising in the trees, this was a time when bark harvesting was easiest and new canoes could be made before the October floods.

The arrival of Darebin the Welcome Swallow and the hatching of butterflies marks the start of 'Regeneration and Women's Business Season'. This occupies the tenth and eleventh lunar months from August 31 to October 25. Through the contraceptive properties of the kangaroo apple, Aboriginal women were able to plan all births to occur in this period and so be in tune with nature.

The final season occupied the twelfth and thirteenth lunar months from October 26 to December 21. This was the 'Yam Harvest and Men's Business Season'. Yam cultivation and harvesting was very much the responsibility of women, so now that their birthing and initiations were out of the way, it was back to the grindstone. This was the time for the men to conduct their own initiation ceremonies before the heat of summer returned.

HOT NORTH WIND AND FIX THE FISHTRAP SEASON

Aboriginal people were skilled astronomers. Like at Stonehenge, they often used circular stone arrangements to map the summer and winter solstices and the lunar cycles.

Aboriginal people used an ordinal counting system that went from first to twenty-eighth and stopped there. This showed they understood the relationship between the rotation of the Earth, its movement around the Sun, and the movement of the Moon around the Earth.

We know this is so, because from one observed full moon to the next full moon is twenty-nine and a half days. So Aboriginal people understood the planetary movements, then compensated for this and worked on a thirteen month lunar calendar of twenty-eight days each.

Well, actually the month ending at the summer solstice had twenty-nine days, because 13 times 28 equals 364 days. So there was a one day adjustment on the summer solstice each year. And of course every four years there was a two day, leap-year adjustment.

In the Melbourne area the Aboriginal season referred to in Europe as Summer therefore began at the summer solstice on December 22nd. However it only lasted two lunar months from December 22nd to February 16th.

This is because it was followed by the eel harvest season, which went for about one lunar month from February 16th to March 16th. So whilst this was also the 'Summer' period it was defined by its particular seasonal activity.

When I was young my grandfather told me that the Aboriginal summer period was named after the hot north wind. He said that the word for this was Mallee, because that was where the hot north wind came from. This made immediate sense to me as a kid, because I knew that in summertime we would often have red rain from all the Mallee dust in the air.

As already indicated, Aboriginal seasons were however not simply defined by the prevailing weather at a particular time of year. They were also defined by what you have to do at that time. When you think about it, the tasks associated with the hot north wind season are obvious and logical.

In tribal times all births were planned to occur in September and October in order to be in tune with nature. By the start of the hot north wind season these babies would only be between two and four months old, so the logical place to be in hot weather was by a river.

Also, October is the wettest month of the year in Melbourne and the Yarra used to regularly flood. This annual October flooding only stopped when the Upper Yarra Dam was built in 1956. So it also stopped the annual practice of kids making rafts in the winter to punt around the flooded river flats in October.

In tribal times these October floods would cause damage to the fish traps all along the river. The obvious time to do annual maintenance on these fish traps was when the river was at its lowest flow. This of course which was during the hottest time of the year. So this is why the two month period from the summer solstice was the 'Hot North Wind and Fix the Fishtraps Season'.

There were many places along the Yarra in Manningham where families congregated particularly at this time of the year. They fixed the fishtraps whilst enjoying the lifestyle in the shade by the river. The riverfront at the Warrandyte Township is just one example of this. The fact that settlers observed middens, piles of freshwater mussel shells, in this location is testament enough by itself.

These fishtraps were built on the natural geological structures in the rapids of the rivers and were often over a metre in height. Many settlers observed and marvelled at these structures and the following is a quote from John Batman when he sailed up Hovell's Creek at Geelong in May 1835.

'We saw several places on going up, which the natives had made with stones across the creek, to take the fish. The walls were built of stones about four feet high and well planned out. Two or three of these places following each other down the stream with gates to them.'

These fishtrap walls were of course obliterated by floods within a couple of years of colonisation and dispossession. So at an unconscious level, for most Australians it was like they were never there. However if you take an opportunity to walk down the Warrandyte Township riverfront, just say between the bridge and Forbes Street, you will see the geological structures across the river I am talking about.

It takes no imagination at all to immediately see where the fishtraps Batman was talking about would have been. It will be like you have had laser surgery to correct a lifelong vision impairment.

EEL HARVEST AND INTERCLAN BUSINESS SEASON

Beginning in mid-February each year and lasting about four weeks, eel harvest season was a most important time. People travelled from distant inland areas to the coastal rivers to participate, so it was also an opportune time to conduct inter-clan business. This included justice issues, dispute resolution, marriage planning, and deciding on the burning-off schedule that began in mid-April.

Summer Solstice effectively begins the Aboriginal year on December 22nd so the Eel Harvest and Inter-clan Business Season occupied the third lunar month, from February 16th to March 13th. The flowering of casuarinas and late summer storms effectively marked the end of this eel harvest and inter-clan business period in mid-March.

Eel harvest takes place when mature ten to thirty year old eels begin migrating downstream in southern rivers. They make their way to the ocean and swim all the way to the Great Barrier Reef to spawn. Being much smaller than female eels, male eels cannot swim as fast, so their migration starts two weeks earlier.

Male eels were not hunted, but their migration is the sign to send messages out to gather in two weeks when the female migration will begin. Each female eel lays about two million eggs so not many have to make it through. However all the males are required to fertilize the eggs so are not hunted. After hatching the small glass eels migrate all the way back down the east coast to the coastal rivers.

With the impending arrival of guests from other clans, the local hosts ensured that other foods were abundantly available. Kangaroo stocks from the nearby firestick maintained paddocks and possum stocks from the nearby woodland copses were culled. The carcasses were then stored in smoke houses to be ready for the arrival of guests. Grass seeds to make damper were also harvested and stored in kangaroo skin bags ready for use by guests. Stocks of freshwater mussels were also stored in damp earth pits.

All along southern rivers such as the Yarra, Aboriginal aquaculture engineering such as eel and fish traps abounded, but many of these works were invisible to European eyes. In my very first article I talked about how Aboriginal people had for aeons, principally through fire, had carefully managed the environment. Many of the colonists commented that the whole country: *'Looked like an English Gentleman's Estate'*, but mistakenly believed that this was the 'natural' state of affairs.

Sometimes though, the engineering works were so obvious that they had to be acknowledged. For instance when John Batman arrived in Port Phillip from Tasmania in May 1835 and explored what is now known as Hovell's Creek, he noted the fishtraps in his diary. *'The walls were built of stones about four feet high, and well done and well planned out.'* Mostly however, Aboriginal technology was so blended into the environment it just wasn't seen.

Take the riverfront area of the Warrandyte township for instance. This was originally a three hundred metre long Woiwuring aquaculture area. The locations of fish traps, eel traps, freshwater mussel farms and yabby farms is still today quite apparent, if you actually know what you are looking at.

If you stand on the Warrandyte Bridge and look east upriver, you will see rock formations across the river marking the start of the rapids area. This was where the eel traps operated during the eel migration period in late February and early March. The natural rock formations were enhanced by placing stones to channel the eels into races where they were either caught in woven eel traps. The children had great fun catching by hand and beaching any eels that escaped the traps.

The area underneath the bridge was also where the Aboriginal Travel route (Songline) crossed the river and continued along the ridgeline to Kangaroo Ground.

Now looking west from the bridge, the rapids area you see was often adjacent to freshwater mussel farms. Mussels were a staple part of the Aboriginal diet, and before the Spring floods the mussels were collected in their hundreds. They were then taken to places above the flood line and stored in earthen pits for later use. Once the soil is on top of them, the mussels go into suspended animation and stay fresh in these 'refrigerators' for up to two years. There is clear evidence that these mussel farms were indeed along this stretch of the river in Warrandyte, because middens (high piles of shells) were observed there by early settlers.

Near Forbes Street is another rapids area and Songline crossing, followed by some deepwater areas. These deep areas were maintained as breeding ponds for blackfish and yabbies, as well as sheltering areas for eels. During Summer a lot of duck-diving would be undertaken by Aboriginal people in these deep areas to remove any rocks swept into them.

THUNDERSTORM AND RUG MAKING SEASON

High west wind electrical storms occur in this early autumn period over the fourth lunar month from March 16th to April 12th. Because of these electrical storms and heavy downpours, activities were again fairly village centred.

It was during this time that the pelts accumulated over the eel and inter-clan business season were converted to rugs, cloaks, carry bags and suchlike. This also included the art work decorating the leather side of the pelts.

The decorated leather side of a possum-skin cloak was worn on the outside, thus giving a waterproof protection. The soft fur was therefore worn on the inside, giving warmth and comfort against the skin. It was a matter of some amusement to Aboriginal people when European photographers always asked them to turn their coats inside-out and have the fur showing for the photograph.

The first signals for the end of the storm and rug making season and start of the following cool dry autumn burning off period, were the nesting behaviour of possums and tunneling behaviour of wombats. From this time on wombats would be seen during the daytime either renovating their burrows or just sun baking. However the actual commencement of the burning off season in mid-April each year only began with the advent of the first morning dew.

This morning dew is of course absent in the hot dry north wind months and the period of late summer electrical storms. Its arrival was the signal that this moisture would facilitate slow burning of the accumulated and now dry grasses.

The now moderate westerly breezes, together with the morning dew would facilitate the use of 'cold fires' that burnt more slowly and could be kept out of the tree canopies. Keeping the fires out of the tree canopies of course ensured that the burning-off did not turn into bushfires, but these cold fires nonetheless generated a great deal of smoke which could be seen all over the countryside in the next season

BURNING-OFF SEASON

This time of year was very important to Aboriginal people in traditional times. Mid-April to mid-May each year was the common burning-off period across a lot of Australia. Burning-off could occur at other times but this was the real season.

This cool but dry four-week window was when to get rid of the accumulated summer grass so as not to pose a bushfire threat the following summer. It was the primary means of managing the whole ecology and ensuring the continuing productivity of the land.

The use of fire as a tool of ecological management was not appreciated by early settlers or scientists, with the term '*firestick farming*' first being coined by the archaeologist Rhys Jones in 1969. His research put a time frame of human occupation in Australia of around 40,000 years.

However in 1985 the Indian archaeologist Gurdeep Singh dramatically changed this. His analysis of sedimentary core samples at Lake George in NSW showed regular human firing of the environment had been occurring for more than 120,000 years.

When Captain Cook (actually Lieutenant at the time) sailed up the east coast of Australia in April and May 1770, what he recorded was most interesting. He saw thick smoke along the eastern ranges and speculated that the natives were probably using fire to drive game out into the open to be hunted. He was quite wrong, but it has since become an enduring myth that Aboriginal people used fire to hunt game.

The reality is that fire was used extensively across the continent as a land management tool and any association with hunting was quite serendipitous. In fact before full scale burning-off began, Aboriginal people would usually ensure that animals were herded into safe areas.

What Cook saw was the mid-April to mid-May burning-off season of Eastern Australia in full swing. Typically the weather at this time is cool but relatively dry. Most of the April rain falls in the first half of the month and the May the second half. The early April rain dampens the dry summer grass and the slight to moderate winds do not fan the grassfires out of control.

Additionally, the mosaic pattern of burning employed meant that lit areas burnt back onto each other and could not form a fire front. This in turn meant that whilst the smouldering fires generated a lot of smoke, the flames were low and did not get into the canopy of the trees. As everyone in Australia knows, our terrible bushfires are caused when the eucalyptus from gum trees explodes into fireballs that race across the tree tops. A whole forest can explode into flames in a few seconds.

Aboriginal people were therefore expert at managing 'cold fires' so called because they generated enormous amounts of smoke, but very little flame or heat. Many settlers often expressed amazement at how Aboriginal people wandered calmly out of what seemed to be forest infernos. What was being witnessed however was '*mosaic pattern, cold fire burning*'.

This situation was brought home graphically to me about thirty years ago. I had the unforgettable experience of being with the iconic Gunditjmara Elder, Banjo Clarke, when he conducted some burning off in the Framlingham Forest. This forest was near Warrnambool in Victoria's Western District and Banjo had inherited the role of Traditional Keeper of the Forest. \

I had turned up in late April wanting to talk to Banjo about a book I had in mind. However he simply held up his hand and said '*You write the book and I'll put my name to it.*' It was a flattering statement of trust. He had important things to do and said we could talk while we were in the forest. He did not explain anything of what he was doing or why, so I just had to observe and try to figure out for myself what I was witnessing. It literally took years for me to do so.

Banjo started at the northeast end of the forest and just wandered back and forth in a generally southwest direction, lighting fires as he went and then waiting until the fire had burnt a patch of ground. He then continued his meander, again lighting fires in a seemingly haphazard way. Slightly damp from dew, the grass smoldered and burnt slowly with the gentle south-westerly zephyr, toward the already burnt grass behind us. Meanwhile it generated smoke that filled the forest behind us.

When we finally emerged from the forest we were near his house overlooking the Hopkins River. The smoke rising up from the forest made it look like we had just left a blazing inferno in which we had no right to survive. In reality we had experienced not the slightest discomfort from either smoke or flame. It was my indelible introduction to Burning-Off Season.

COLD WEST WIND AND ARTEFACT MAKING SEASON

Just like the summer period was define principally by the hot north winds, so the deep winter period was principally defined by the cold westerly winds. The cold west wind winter and artifact making period occupied the sixth, seventh and eighth lunar months from May 11th to August 2nd.

Being a season not conducive to travel it was again more of a village based 'sit-down' period. It was a time conducive to the close instruction of children in various skills and also when women's pregnancies were developing.

It was therefore also a time spent in artifact and tool manufacture in preparation for the active and bountiful spring period that was coming. Artifacts were of course able to be made throughout the year, but this and the teaching process involved was the major activity in this period of cold and inclement weather.

During any breaks in the weather, traditional games would be played and this included the tribal football game of Marngrook. The more limited children's versions of Marngrook were popular daily game for the children.

The first of the games was Parndo. This directly equates with 'markers-up' where one child kicks to a group and the child who marks the ball then takes their turn to kick to the group. The only difference being that the child kicking the ball did to whilst encircled by the other children, who then rushed in to compete for the mark.

The second of the games was Bidi which directly equated with 'kick to kick' where two groups of players kicked the ball between them. These children's versions, like the adult game of Marngrook, emphasised kicking the ball high rather than long, and so encourage spectacular high marking by the contestants. Like the adult game, these children's games were open to both sexes.

The only restrictions in the adult game were that all opponents had to be matched by size, gender and totemic group. In other words a big person could not be matched with a small person, a man could not play against a woman, and you opponent had to be 'right-skin'. That is, the skin-group hat you married into.

These tribal football games were not restricted to the winter season though, and were played year-round as the opportunity presented. This included in particular the inter-clan business period. However the reduction of grass following the burning off season and the lower temperatures made colder months the most conducive time for playing Marngrook.

The first flowering of Silver Wattles signaled the end of the cold west wind and artifact-making season and the arrival of the morning frost and bark harvest season.

THE SPECIAL MONTH OF AUGUST

When I was researching the Aboriginal seasons in Melbourne a few years back I was interested to see that some horticulturalists had identified six Aboriginal seasons in the Yarra Valley. These seasons were labelled as High Summer, Late Summer, Early Winter, Deep Winter, Early Spring and True Spring'.

It was an interesting conceptualisation, but did not account for what Aboriginal people had to do in a particular season. Nor did it account for the lunar calendar which I knew Aboriginal people used. My particular interest at this time however was the 'Early Spring' period as there was an unaccounted ninth lunar month from the third to the thirtieth of August.

The early spring period that horticulturalists had identified was seen to start about the end of July or beginning of August, and was heralded by the blooming of wattle trees at the end of their 'Deep Winter' period. However I could not find any Aboriginal source material to agree or disagree with the 'Early Spring' season.

Fortunately, I happened to bump into Mick Harding whom I had known for a few years. Mick is a Senior Taungerong (Goulburn River) Elder and a fantastic artist and wood carver. He uses traditional Victorian geometric patterns as his inspiration. Mick is also Chairman of the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council.

Knowing that Aboriginal seasons were defined by activities as well as weather patterns, I asked Mick what was the name and principal task of this early spring season. Without hesitation, Mick just said 'August is Bark Harvest Season'.

Mick then went on to explain that this was the time of the year when the sap started to rise in the trees and they gave up their bark easily. After the August period the bark increasingly stuck like glue to the tree. This of course made immediate sense to me and a lot of other bits of information began to click into place in my mind.

Harvesting bark at this time of year also provided new canoes in time for the October floods. Before the Upper Yarra dam was built in 1956 flooding used to occur annually in the Yarra Valley and in my childhood, kids spent a lot of time in winter making rafts. Harvesting bark in August also gave the tree a better chance of healing before the heat of summer.

It had also occurred to me that almost all the scarred canoe trees I had seen, had the scar on the south-east side of the tree. This was no coincidence, because this aspect also gave the tree the best chance of healing. In Victoria the sun is of course in the north, so in the hottest part of the day the sun beats down from the north and north-west. The prevailing winds in Victoria are from the south-west and north-west, so having the scar on the south-east side also protects the tree from the desiccating westerly summer winds.

If you want to see an excellent example of what I am talking about, go and have a look at the 500 year old Red River Gum scarred tree at Heide Museum of Modern Art in Templestowe Road Bulleen. The tree stands in the upper car park. A canoe was cut from the tree a couple of hundred years ago and it epitomises what I have been talking about.

The tree is named 'Yingabeal' which basically means in Woiwurung 'Songline Marker Tree'. If you are interested to know more, Wurundjeri Elder Bill Nicholson and I did videos which can be accessed simply by Googling 'Yingabeal Culture Victoria'.

Apart from August being 'Bark Harvest Season' this month has also assumed great importance for Wurundjeri people, because since colonial times many of their leaders have died in this month. It started with the Headman Bebejern, who died from the common cold in August 1836. This was only a year after the famed meeting with Batman on the Plenty River at Greensborough in 1835. Bebejern was buried at the Merri Creek and Yarra junction in traditional knees under the chin position and sheeted in bark.

His successor, Billibelleri, died of pneumonia ten years later on 9th August 1846 and was buried in the same ceremonial fashion at the same Merri Creek location. Billibelleri was ultimately succeeded by his son Simon Wonga and whilst Wonga did not die in August, but in December 1874 from tuberculosis, it is interesting to note the progression of symptoms from common cold, to pneumonia to tuberculosis.

William Barak, who succeeded Wonga as Headman, became the most famed of all Wurundjeri leaders. He was also a renowned painter, singer, diplomat and chronicler of his people's history and culture. Barak died at age eighty on 15th August 1903. Finally, Winnie Quogliotti who founded the Wurundjeri Tribe Council in 1985, died three years later on 4th August 1988.

WOMEN'S BUSINESS SEASON

The European named season of Spring in Melbourne coincides with the beginning of the Kulin season of 'Regeneration and Women's Business'. It is so named because in traditional Aboriginal society, birth control practices ensured that all children were born in this 'Spring' period.

Woiwurrung women for instance used the kangaroo apple as a contraceptive. When green it is toxic, but when red ripe in December and January it is harmless. Consequently all Woiwurrung children were conceived in Summer and born the following September or October.

Aboriginal people saw themselves as part of the ecosystem, so children being born in Spring was just being in tune with nature. Spring babies also had time to gather strength before the heat of Summer.

The arrival of this two month season is heralded by the hatching of butterflies and the arrival of Darebin, the Welcome Swallow. This little bird spends Winter in Northern Australia, but returns at the end of August to announce Women's Business Season. During this time births were attended by the midwives and women elders, but it was also when girls in early teenage were formally inducted into adulthood.

All birthing ceremonies were held at special locations, usually southwest of a camp and marked by special 'Birthing Trees'. These were created by two saplings being tied together, so that the tree grew with two original trunks fused into a single trunk above the birthing site. Also called 'Arched Marker Trees' they were adjacent to a cleared area where the ceremonies to induct girls into adulthood were conducted. These initiation ceremonies were known as *Murrup Turukurup*.

As well as being marked by Arched Marker Trees, the directions to such birthing and initiation places were often marked by 'Ring Marker Trees'. This is where the branches of a sapling had been tied so that a branch or trunk of the tree grew with a hole in it, like the eye of a huge needle. Such Marker Trees gave the men adequate warning that a birthing place was nearby and must be avoided.

I know of two such trees in Manningham. The first was an Arched Marker Tree that stood in Newman's Road Templestowe near its junction with Webster's Road. My mother used to pass it on the way to school before it was removed about 1928.

The second was a Ring Marker Tree off Reserve Road in Wonga Park near Brushy Creek. It was about 500 metres south of the birthing place near the junction of Brushy Creek (Barneong) with the Yarra. This was in fact the birthplace of the famed Woiwurrung leader William Barak. The marker tree fell many years ago with the huge ring branch now lying on the ground.

Women were of course entirely responsible for care of such sites and the preparations for birthing. Men were forbidden to enter birthing sites, unless at the express invitation of women for specific ceremonies, but not the birth itself. Birth was entirely women's business. The role of men was just to leave food at a designated spot and otherwise pace up and down in worried anticipation. During the women's business season men also had to undertake the gathering tasks normally done by women.

After giving birth in the possum cloak lined depression under the birthing tree, the mother was bathed with smoke from herbs. The child was ritually daubed with ochre, the umbilical cord cut and the placenta buried. The child was then introduced to their father who was presented with the umbilical cord, which he wore in pride as a necklace. The child's totems would then be confirmed by the family. Totems signified spiritual relationships that linked the child to their family, clan and world around them.

In the women's initiation ceremony, two smoking fires were lit and the women dusted the initiates with powdered charcoal. Food was placed on a stick like a shishkebab and held by the girl. The young men of the tribe would form a row and stamp their feet in unison as they slowly approached and encircled her. The young men then threw sticks or flowers toward the initiate and vowed to protect her as a sister.

The youths would each take food from the stick she held, chew it and spit it into one of the two fires and return to their line formation facing the girl. The sticks or flowers were collected by the women and buried or otherwise destroyed in the fire. Men and women then participated together in a ritual dance to end the ceremony.

On 25th October 2013, a special ceremony was held, led by Wurundjeri Women Elders, to formally re-dedicate the historic birthing site at Brushy Creek. It was a landmark event and probably the largest Wurundjeri women's ceremony held since colonial settlement in 1835. After the special ceremony local men and women also enjoyed participating in traditional dances.

MYRNONG HARVEST AND MEN'S BUSINESS SEASON

The Australian native parsnip is so named because it looks like a small parsnip and tastes rather like one. Its Aboriginal name is myrnong and it grew in profusion all over eastern Australia in valleys and open plains. It could be dug up and eaten at any time of the year, but tasted the sweetest and best when its yellow, daisy like flower bloomed in late spring and early summer.

Myrnong was either eaten raw, roasted in baskets or cooked in pits with meat or fish. It was a staple part of Kulin diet all year, but particularly in late in the year.

The chief period for myrnong harvest followed directly on from the Women's Business Season in September-October. So once all the births and female initiations had occurred, it was back to the grindstone doing the yam harvesting in November-December. Any newborn babies comfortably coped with the warming late spring weather whilst being carried by their mothers.

The introduction and over-grazing of sheep virtually eliminated myrnong within three years of colonisation. The massive scale of the 'sheep invasion' in the early colonial period is shown by the fact that within three years, that is by 1838 there were 3,512 settlers and 311,000 sheep in the Port Phillip District.

The late spring myrnong harvest was also the season for Men's Business. The men, now freed from the domestic duties shouldered during the Women's Business Season, could focus on the business of initiating into adulthood the boys who had already been selected and groomed. Initiation was therefore not just a single event, but a process that began in late winter. Boys about age twelve were subject to the preparatory ceremony of 'Tibbut' and spent a late winter and early spring of relative deprivation.

The boys were given Mohawk style hairdos, had to fend for themselves outside the camp and had to shun the presence of others. Each boy carried a basket of mud and chanted 'Tibbobobobut' to warn all men to keep out of his way. If they didn't he splattered them with mud, but at the same time he avoided contact with women. By the end of Women's Business Season the hair of the boys had grown back and they were now ready for their initiation pilgrimage.

Other men not involved in initiation ceremonies also often undertook pilgrimages to places like Bunjil's Cave at Gariwerd (the Grampians) or to the High Plains for the Bogong Moth Harvest. Meanwhile, groups of perhaps half a dozen young boys were escorted by Elders to initiation sites such as Ngeyelong in the Macedon Ranges, now known as Hanging Rock. Before setting out, the faces of the initiates would be painted with red ochre and charcoal, so as to announce their ceremonial intention.

The last known Tibbut at Hanging Rock was in November 1851 and I only know this through my own family history. My great-grandfather Tom Chivers was seven at the time and his older brother Willie was almost twelve. They were being cared for on a daily basis by the local Wurundjeri after their mother had died and when their father was away carting goods.

Wonga the Kulin Headman had announced that a corroboree would be held at Pound Bend in March 1852 to farewell their tribal life. A fellow Elder, Simon Murrum, suggested that all eligible boys should be initiated so they could take part in the corroboree as adults. Wonga agreed, and also agreed that the two white boys could come too. The group that undertook the pilgrimage to Hanging Rock probably consisted of three or four adults, half a dozen Aboriginal boys aged between 10 and 17, plus Willie and Tom.

No details were ever passed down about the actual initiation ceremonies at Hanging Rock, but tooth evulsion and subincision had not been practiced in southeast Australia since the smallpox plague. However the Kulin still practiced keloid scarring to the chest and back in the early colonial period.

The cuts were made with a flint knife and a mixture of ash and animal fat was then rubbed into the wounds, so that as the cuts healed they became raised, white scars. Willie and Tom were no doubt grateful they were exempt.

Now they were men, the initiates learned the adult dances that had previously been closed to them. So over the next few days as their wounds healed, the boys learned, rehearsed and performed the dances they would participate in as adults at Warrantdyte.. They also for the first time wore the ochre daubings associated with the proper ritual performance of these dances.

Tom and Willie Chivers finally arrived home about two weeks after setting off on their Walkabout to the Macedon Ranges, so we can assume that the initiation events at Hanging Rock took place over the period of about one week in November 1851.