

READINGS IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

-The History you were never taught

THEME 8: SURVIVING COLONISATION

Over the twenty-five year neo-colonial period from 1850 to 1875, one Aboriginal figure, Simon Wonga, stood head and shoulders above all others, yet he is hardly known.

Wonga's vision for the Kulin people within the new world confronting them was to establish a viable economic base as farmers, whilst still retaining their cultural roots.

Thirteen years after becoming paramount Kulin leader in 1850 at the age of twenty-eight, Wonga's strategic acumen and persistence finally paid off. Against enormous odds and skulduggery Wonga achieved the establishment of Coranderrk Aboriginal Station at Healesville in 1863. Coranderrk then went on to become economically and socially the most successful Mission in Australia.

This section maps Wonga's life Journey and shows how William Barak continued Wonga's legacy after succeeding him as paramount Kulin leader in 1875.

AH 8.1	Simon Wonga, a man of destiny
AH 8.2	Wonga's baptism of fire
AH 8.3	Warrandyte's first festival in 1852
AH 8.4	The original Aussie Rules
AH 8.5	Three experiences of Burke and Wills
AH 8.6	Let's celebrate Wonga Day on May 24
AH 8.7	How Barak got his act together

THEME 8 QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. How many students at Wonga Park Primary School do you think know about how Wonga Park got its name?
2. Has the refusal by the AFL to recognise Marngrook as a precursor to Australian Rules football, been an example of 'institutional racism'.
3. Is it an overstatement to say Simon Wonga stands alongside Sir John Monash as the two greatest Victorians?

SIMON WONGA –A MAN OF DESTINY

Simon Wonga was in my view the single most important figure in the survival of the Kulin people during the colonial period. To show you the esteem in which I hold Simon Wonga, to me he stands alongside Sir John Monash as the two greatest Victorians ever. This is notwithstanding that General Monash virtually won the First World War for the Allies. Big call, but let me tell you something of Wonga's life and achievements in this and three following articles and you can judge for yourself.

Wonga was born at Woori-Yallock in 1821. As indicated previously, he was present as a thirteen year old at the 'Treaty' meeting with Batman on the Plenty River at Greensborough in 1835. Wonga was the son of Billibelleri who had become Headman of the Wurundjeri in 1836.

A quick learner with a prodigious memory, Wonga was marked out for tribal leadership at an early age. It was irrelevant that his father was tribal leader, because Aboriginal leadership is decided only on merit. This includes conditions of knowledge and character. At eighteen years of age in 1839 Wonga was sent on a Walkabout trial to Mount Dandenong, but badly injured his foot. Without food or water for four days Wonga was close to death when his father finally found him. Billibelleri then piggy-backed his son to the station of the settler at Ferntree Gully, Reverend Clow, who contacted the Aboriginal Protector, William Thomas.

Over the next few months Wonga was nursed back to full health by Thomas and his wife, but Billibelleri instructed Wonga to stay with the protector and learn what he could of Whitefellow ways. Over the next four years Wonga helped Thomas establish the Aboriginal Reserve at Nerre-Nerre Warren near where Reverend Clow had his main station in present day Knox. Clow had rather unconventional views for a man of that time. He believed that Aboriginal people should be given control of their own areas of land to establish an economic base like white people, growing crops and managing livestock. It was a view that Wonga quickly adopted.

When Billibelleri died in August 1846, Wonga, at barely twenty-five was asked by the Elders to be Headman of the whole Kulin federation. He then began to put his plan into action by getting teams of Aboriginal men and women to gain employment on the farms of local settlers, so they could learn crop cultivation, building construction and livestock management skills.

At first he was not successful, but with the advent of the gold rush in 1851 many white workers deserted their employers. This drove up the opportunities and wages of Aboriginal workers. As local people are well aware, the gold rush actually began in Warrandyte, but it is not well known that Wonga in fact won the contract with a publican from Richmond, to build the first beer hut in Warrandyte.

After the work was done the publican tried to pay Wonga less than the agreed sum. Aboriginal people had no standing at court and could not give evidence, so the publican thought he was on a safe bet. However, Wonga went to William Thomas who was also a magistrate, and Thomas threatened to personally sue the publican if he didn't pay up.

Ten years before the gold rush began Billibelleri had tried to get Pound Bend declared an Aboriginal Reserve. It was finally gazetted in 1851, only for the gold rush to make it unworkable. Wonga could see that tribal life was finished, so he organised one last great corroboree at Pound Bend in March 1852. At this first ever Warrandyte Festival 165 years ago, Wonga and his people said farewell to their traditional life.

After the corroboree, Wonga continued arranging contract labour whilst negotiating with the government to gain suitable land 'to farm like Whitefellahs'. Ultimately he gained land at Coranderrk and it became economically and socially the most successful Reserve in Australian history. When Wonga died in December 1874 his cousin William Barak succeeded him as Headman.

The only part of the story left to tell is how Wonga Park got its name. When a new station was set up near Warrandyte in the mid 1850's, Wonga sought employment for his men. Asked if they could muster horses, Wonga said yes, so the owner pointed to a herd of horses in the distance, inviting Wonga to round them up and put them in the corral. Expecting Wonga to get on a horse and crack a whip, he was surprised when Wonga instead went to the corral, opened the gate and started neighing like a lead stallion. Within minutes fifty horses had put themselves in the corral and Wonga simply closed the gate.

The owner was so impressed that he gave them all jobs and named his new station Wonga Park.

WONGA'S BAPTISM OF FIRE

When Simon Wonga's father Billibelleri died in August 1846, the Elders wanted Wonga to succeed him as Headman, but Wonga was shattered and declined. He had just married Maria a Wathurong woman, and was also in no mood to have daily dealings with the sanctimonious Aboriginal Protector, William Thomas.

Wonga and Maria therefore left Merri Creek and went to live in the Dandenong area near Reverend Clow, who had saved Wonga's life in late 1839. Over the next four years Wonga recovered his spirits and absorbed Reverend Clow's vision on how Aboriginal people could accommodate to the new economic realities confronting them.

Clow believed that Aboriginal people should have inalienable rights to tracts of land on which they could grow crops and run livestock, thereby having a viable economic base whilst still retaining their cultural identity. Wonga absorbed the vision and resolved to step by step bring it into being.

In October 1850, Wonga learned that the government had approved the establishment of an Aboriginal Reserve at Pound Bend in Warrandyte. This was exactly ten years after Billibelleri had first made the request for this site. Wonga came in from the cold and Berberry his Uncle, willingly stepped aside from the leadership, which Wonga accepted very early in 1851.

Wonga began seeking work opportunities with local settlers so his people could learn fanning, mustering and construction skills. However the fates initially conspired against him. From colonisation in 1835, Aboriginal people had been prevented from conducting annual ritual burning off, so by 1851 Victoria was a tinder-box of accumulated fuel loads.

On 6th February 1851 the 'Black Thursday' bushfires erupted. Fanned by a tornado-like hot north wind and searing temperatures, five million hectares, a quarter of Victoria, ended up in flames. The smoke was driven across Bass Strait to blot out the sun in Tasmania. The death toll included twelve people, a million sheep and inestimable wildlife. A valuable lesson should have been learned about Aboriginal cultural burning from this horrific 1851 experience, but even though 6th February 2020 is again on a Thursday, the message seems lost.

The second factor conspiring against Wonga's plan was that many settlers were not keen to employ Aboriginal people. What then followed seemed to be another setback, but it proved to be an advantage. In mid-1851 gold was discovered at Warrandyte and hundreds of diggers flooded into the area.

Within a couple of months though, the rich deposits at Ballarat and Bendigo were discovered, so as quickly as they had appeared, the diggers all disappeared. Many local farm workers also disappeared off to the diggings, so work opportunities for Wonga's people suddenly increased. However, three years later another strike was made at Warrandyte, so in 1854 the diggers all flooded back in. This ultimately made Pound Bend unviable as an Aboriginal Reserve and it was not until 1859 that an alternative presented.

Wonga heard from his Goulburn River friends that a settler had abandoned his run at Acheron. It was prime land and they now had the skills to make a go of it, so on 28th February 1859 Wonga led a seven man deputation to William Thomas. They convinced him that they wanted to '*sit down on the land like white men*' to plant crops and run cattle, so Thomas gained permission for them to go to Acheron and stake their claim.

Unfortunately their neighbouring squatters at Acheron included two of the most unscrupulous men in the colony, and they had no intention of letting a bunch of Blacks lay claim to the land they now coveted.

The first of the local squatters was Peter Snodgrass. He was a boisterous, hard living man who had made his name capturing a gang of bushrangers at a shootout at Whittlesea in 1842. He had then been elected to the first Victorian Parliament in 1851. He openly advocated '*peppering blacks*'.

The second was Hugh Glass, the richest man in the colony. He had 49 runs which he had secured through bribery of an estimated 300 politicians and bureaucrats. Glass and Snodgrass soon won over Robert Brough Smyth, the Secretary to the Aborigines Protection Board. So instead of gazetting the Acheron land as an Aboriginal Reserve, Smyth had land further upriver by Mount Cathedral gazetted.

The short version of the story was that the Kulin were forced off the good land at Acheron, onto bleak, windswept and inhospitable land at Mohican. People began dying like flies and many left to go back to the Yarra Valley. However Wonga ultimately turned disaster into triumph.

Having seen first-hand how Victoria had earned the reputation as the most corrupt and lawless colony in the British Empire, Wonga began plotting his way forward before even quitting Mohican in early 1863. But how he finally achieved victory at Coranderrk is a whole other story.

THE FIRST WARRANDYTE FESTIVAL IN 1852

In March each year the Warrandyte Festival is celebrated but it is much more than a couple of decades old. In fact the first recorded Warrandyte Festival was held in March 1852, this being the last ever great Gaggip of the Kulin Nation.

As Warrandyte people well know, the great Victorian gold rush began here in April 1851. At that time Simon Wonga was the Headman of the Kulin Federation and only a couple of months before he had finally got agreement of the government to establish a Reserve at Pound Bend. His plan was to gain employment with local settlers for groups of his men and women, so that they could develop the necessary farming skills to succeed economically in this new world. However over the latter half of 1851 the gold rush showed that the livestock station and produce farm that Wonga envisaged, would now not be sustainable at Pound Bend.

Wonga therefore decided to hold one last Gaggip and play all the traditional games so that his people would have an opportunity to say goodbye to their tribal life. Toward the end of 1851 Wonga despatched messengers to the tribes around Port Phillip Bay, saying that a Gaggip would take place in March 1852.

On hearing this, Murrum, an Elder who was a close friend of my great-great-grandfather, John Chivers, approached Wonga with a suggestion. He said that since the arrival of white men a lot of young men had lost their culture. Many had drifted away to the urban fringes and lost themselves in alcohol, violence and degradation.

Murrum had started to go down such a path, but with the death of Wonga's father, Billibelleri, five years before in 1846, he had redirected his life. Murrum had taken his two sons out of the Aboriginal Protector's school at Merri Creek and taken them bush, to teach them to be 'real blackfellahs'. Murrum then suggested to Wonga that all the young men who had kept their culture should be rewarded with formal initiation, so they could then participate in the Gaggip as adults.

Wonga readily agreed that it was a good idea to be acted on straight away. November was the traditional time for the adult initiation ceremonies for men, which was now. However, the initiation site on Dandenong Mountain was occupied by settlers, so the ceremony would have to be conducted at Ngeyelong, now known as Hanging Rock.

Murrum was grateful for Wonga's agreement as Headman, but told him there was a problem. He had established a close friendship with a local settler, John Chivers, whose wife had died the previous year. So whenever John was away carting goods to other parts of the colony, Murrum and his family looked after John's two sons, Willie and Tom. Both these boys had learnt the language and embraced the culture, but right now Murrum and his wife were caring for Willie and Tom, so he could not leave them behind.

Wonga did not hesitate and told Murrum that the future of their people lay not only with Aboriginal people embracing the economic realities of the white man's world, but with white people embracing the Aboriginal world, just as Willie, Tom and their father had done.

Ultimately, Willie and Tom made the trek to Hanging Rock and to my knowledge are the only white boys ever to attend a male initiation ceremony in Victoria. An old great-uncle in telling me the story that had been told to him by his father Tom, said cryptically '*they sang all the way*'. I only realised many years later this meant they had learnt the 'Song to Hanging Rock' encoding the travel directions along the Songlines they followed.

The half dozen boys whom Willie nearly 12 and Tom aged 7 had accompanied, returned home as men with Mohawk style hairdos, ritual chest scarring and knowledge of adult dances and body painting. This included Murrum's sons Billy 17 the oldest and Ben 10 the youngest of the group. They accordingly participated in the 1852 Gaggip as fully fledged adults. John, Tom and Willie were invited guests and along with many other curious settlers they attended and watched the many different events. For the next fourteen days they watched the daily and nightly performances of all the traditional games and dances.

Probably the most exciting of these games the settlers witnessed was the game of Aboriginal football called Marngrook. A hundred or more players were often involved in these matches which lasted about five hours. The most memorable feature of the game was the way in which Aboriginal men launched themselves on the backs of others, to catch the possum-skin ball in flight six feet in the air.

And the AFL still refuses to believe Marngrook was a precursor to Australian Rules football.

THE ORIGINAL AUSSIE RULES

In the last article I mentioned how the Aboriginal football game, now known universally as Marngrook, was played at the first 'Warrandyte Festival' in 1852. My great-grandfather Tom Chivers, his brother Willie and father John attended and watched, so I grew up hearing vague references to this game. In my secondary school days in the 1950's, I attended Scotch College and there heard about how Tom Wills had invented Aussie Rules. Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar had played the first game in 1858, with Tom Will as the umpire, so it was a key part of the school's folklore.

It was not until the early 1980's when I learned something about Tom Will's childhood that I realised it closely mirrored that of my own great grandfather, Tom Chivers. Tom Wills was born in 1836 and grew up near Ararat. He became fluent in Tjapwoorong language, songs, dances and games. At age 14 he was sent to Rugby School in England, and became Captain of the school football and cricket teams. Wills returned to Victoria seven years later in 1857 at age 21 and immediately established himself as the foremost cricketer in the colony. He declared that cricketers needed to play football to remain fit over the winter if Victoria was to ever beat New South Wales at cricket, but that it should be '*a game of our own*'.

With some others, Wills then drafted the first Australian Football rules in 1858. Historians have always jumped to the conclusion that he was inspired by having played Rugby in England. It is a fairly typical reaction that springs from the pervasive effects of the idea of 'Terra Nullius' which assumes Aboriginal culture as vacuous and incapable of influencing white society. In fact, when he was at Rugby School Tom Wills inspired the playing the game of Rugby in new ways that came directly from his experience of Marngrook, or Mingorm as it was called in Tjapwoorong. Evoking images of the high mark in Marngrook, English newspapers reported how '*Wills, to the admiration of the spectators rose above the swarm of boys...*'

In 1983 I therefore published my proposition that Australian Rules was derived from Marngrook. Rather than writing an academic article I did this through the popular press and the idea gained strong support with ordinary Australians. I was therefore quite stunned when the AFL produced an official history in 2008 that completely dismissed the connection with Marngrook as '*a seductive myth*'.

With some hubris the AFL historian asserted that there was no evidence that Marngrook had been played where Tom Wills grew up. She of course meant documentation written by white men. More than this, the historian asserted that the game would not have been imported from elsewhere in the Western District, because tribal people never left their own areas for fear of being killed. I responded promptly to this ludicrous assertion and the exchanges became known as '*the football history war*'. However it soon petered out to a cease-fire with the AFL continuing to support its historian.

Well, after a nine year cease-fire the war may have resumed. Professor Jenny Hocking of Monash University recently uncovered an Aboriginal eye-witness description of the game right where Tom Wills grew up. However despite the obliteration of its official history by this discovery, it is unlikely that the AFL will formally acknowledge or redress the situation. In many ways the situation the AFL refuses to face, typifies the paradox confronting the Australian public.

In recent years the AFL has done a most commendable job of denouncing on-field racism, but this tends to see racism as just a problem of poor individual attitude. In reality, Australians overwhelmingly are not personally racist. We are probably the most egalitarian society on Earth. The real problem is that we have received ideas with racist notions embedded in them, and we have not yet learned how to challenge these received ideas. This is called *institutional racism* and it still runs deep.

Our nation was founded on the notion of *Terra Nullius*, and this totally spurious, legally vapid notion proposes that Australia was a vast empty continent. That is of course apart from a few simple, primitive, pagan, nomadic, stone-age, hunter-gatherers. In reality, all these pejorative terms still underpin our perceptions and make it very hard to see the achievements of traditional Australian society. If civilization is assessed on the degree of civil cohesion, and an absence of poverty, hunger, pestilence and war, then traditional Australian society was the greatest civilization the world has ever seen. And this is part of **our** fabulous heritage as Australians.

Wouldn't it be good if the AFL took less of a tokenistic approach, embraced the Aboriginal origins of Aussie Rules and organised games of Marngrook during its Indigenous Round? Or am I Dreaming?

THREE EXPERIENCES OF BURKE AND WILLS

In June 1859 the South Australian government offered a 2000 Pound reward for a successful north-south exploration of Australia. In today's money this was worth more than \$300,000. The Royal Society of Victoria accordingly set up an exploration committee to plan and raise funds for an expedition. The inexperienced duo of Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills were appointed to head the ill-fated adventure.

By early 1860 Australia was abuzz with the proposed expedition, including two local boys. The first was my great-grandfather Tom Chivers. He was then aged fifteen and fast gaining on his adult height of more than six feet. The second was his lifelong Aboriginal mate Lanky.

Lanky was three years older than Tom, and at eighteen years had already reached his full adult height of barely five feet. Perhaps his jockey-size had been an advantage, because Lanky had already proven himself to be a gifted horseman while employed as a stockman in the Wonga Park area.

Lanky's father, Murrum, had worked closely with Simon Wonga in setting up these job opportunities for Aboriginal people with local settlers. Together with Wonga, Murrum had taken a delegation of Elders to the Aboriginal Protector William Thomas in February 1859, seeking a grant of land at Acheron in the Upper Goulburn. Murrum's presence in that delegation was due to the fact that he was a Senior Elder of the Taungerong, the Goulburn River tribe.

That meeting was successful in gaining a promise of land at Acheron and the local Kulin quickly took it up. They were ultimately cheated out of the land by squatters, who were also Parliamentarians, but that is another story. The point here is that February 1859 was the last reference I have been able to find anywhere of Lanky's father, Murrum. By that time Murrum was aged 56, so given his age and the life expectancy of Aboriginal people at that time, I can only assume that Murrum had died by early 1860.

This assumption also fits in with a significant life choice made at that time by his son, the diminutive Lanky. About early 1860 Lanky decided to leave the Yarra area where he had grown up and go droving at Swan Hill. He soon gained work with a local pastoralist named Manton, so as was common practice he adopted his employer's surname. For ever after that he was known as 'Lanky Manton'.

The only problem was that another Aboriginal worker had also adopted the surname Manton and he had a son named Lanky, who was born in 1853. So there ended up being two people named Lanky Manton in Swan Hill at the same time, but who were twelve years apart in age. Their biographies subsequently became confused and it took a lot of sorting out, but that too is another story.

By the time August 1860 arrived everyone in Melbourne was in a fever of anticipation, with the Burke and Wills expedition due to leave Royal Park on the fourth. Young Tom Chivers was by then only one month away from his sixteenth birthday, so he decided to ride his horse into Melbourne and see for himself.

The nineteen-man expedition took twenty-three horses and twenty camels. They had twenty tonnes of food and equipment, loaded on six wagons. This included a cedar table with two chairs and a Chinese gong. The expedition finally set off at 4pm watched by about 15,000 people. One wagon broke down before they had even left Royal Park.

Unfortunately young Tom Chivers was not among the 15,000 spectators because he arrived too late. Tom went home disappointed and for ever after told the story against himself.

Having often heard this story when I was young, I decided to make up for it and attend the 150th year anniversary re-enactment that was to be held in August 2010. However when I rang up on the third to confirm the time for the next day, I was told that the re-enactment had already taken place the day before. I was quite peeved that I hadn't made up for Tom missing out in 1860, but then in some weird way it seemed to add a little more symmetry to our lives.

As it turned out though, Lanky was in Swan Hill when the expedition passed through there on 6th September 1860, so he often proudly related this fact to his children and grandchildren. When he returned to the Yarra Valley ten years later and resumed his friendship with Tom, he also no doubt told him.

From 1870 onward for the next twenty years, Lanky continued to show his considerable horse riding skills by taking wild rides on a chestnut horse to visit Tom. The Aborigines Protection Board tried in vain to identify just who was taking these unauthorised rides between Coranderrk and Templestowe.

LET'S CELEBRATE WONGA DAY ON MAY 24

I have written before about how Simon Wonga developed a plan for the survival of the Kulin people in the 1840's. This was by them learning agricultural and stock mustering skills in order to establish an economic base in the new world they faced.

Wonga organised the last ever Kulin Nation corroboree in 1852 and gave his people the opportunity to play all their traditional games and thereby say goodbye to tribal life. I have also told the story of how Wonga Park got its name, in tribute to Wonga's stock mustering skills and charismatic leadership.

He was a great man and to me Simon Wonga stands alongside Sir John Monash as the two greatest Victorians in our State's history. Perhaps you might agree with me when you hear a brief account of how he secured a government grant of land to establish Coranderrk Station at Healesville in 1863. It was an achievement against all odds that showed his strategic brilliance.

Wonga's father Billibelleri was Headman of the five Kulin tribes from 1836 until he died in 1846. Wonga was then 25 and had been groomed for leadership. Not because he was Billibelleri's son, but because his innate ability, character and knowledge made him the standout choice. However Wonga did not feel he was ready, so in 1846 the leadership passed to Billibelleri's younger brother Berberry.

When the government approved the establishment of an Aboriginal Reserve at Pound Bend in October 1850, Wonga decided he was ready for leadership. Berberry willingly stepped aside and Wonga then began activating his plan.

Unfortunately, gold was discovered at Warrandyte in 1851 which compromised the viability of the Reserve at Pound Bend. A new Reserve was consequently declared at Woori-Yallock, only for gold to be found there as well. However the meagre gold at Warrandyte and Woori Yallock was soon vastly overshadowed by the discoveries at Ballarat and Bendigo.

Curiously, the Ballarat and Bendigo gold discoveries turned out to be an advantage to Wonga's plans. With workers deserting their employment and flooding to the goldfields, it inadvertently drove up Aboriginal work opportunities and wages. Wonga was therefore able to get contract work for Aboriginal people on farms up the Plenty and Yarra valleys. Wonga in fact won the contract to build the first public house in Warrandyte. It's a pity his name is not commemorated in some way at the present day Warrandyte pub.

With the disbandment of the Native Police in 1853, William Barak joined Wonga at Wonga Park, where they met the Reverend John Green who had arrived in 1858. The three of them were to develop a most fruitful relationship over the next sixteen years.

In February 1859, Wonga received information that a settler in the Upper Goulburn had abandoned his run. Wonga knew it was prime land, so he led a deputation of Elders to see the Aboriginal Protector William Thomas. The deputation also included my great-great-grandfather's friend, Murrum-Murrum. Thomas got approval for them to claim the land, so Wonga, Barak and others left Melbourne, to establish Acheron Station in March 1859. They were later joined by Reverend Green and others from Woori Yallock.

Over the next two years, Wonga and the Kulin people made a great success of the venture, but they were ultimately cheated out of the land by neighbouring squatters Hugh Glass and Peter Snodgrass. Glass, a land speculator, was the richest man in Victoria and Snodgrass a Parliamentarian, so draw your own conclusions.

The Kulin were forced onto bleak and inhospitable land near Cathedral Mountain, where people started dying like flies. So in early 1863, Wonga, Barak and Green led the remnants of their group across the Great Dividing Range, via the Black's Spur Songline, to present day Healesville where they claimed land there.

Wonga had learned his lessons well. The demise of Pound Bend, Woori-Yallock and Acheron had shown him he would get nothing from the parliamentarians. So he went over their heads. On May 24th 1863 which was Queen Victoria's birthday, Wonga led an Aboriginal deputation to Government House. They presented gifts of woven baskets, artefacts and possum skin rugs to Sir Henry Barkley for 'The Good Queen Mother' and the just married Prince of Wales. Then Wonga presented a petition for the land at Coranderrk.

Immediately afterward Sir Henry summoned the government leader and told him in no uncertain terms that if the grant of land was not made immediately, 'the Queen would not be happy'. The result was that a month later the land grant at Coranderrk was duly approved. Over the next decade Coranderrk became socially and economically the most successful Mission in Australian history, until Wonga died in 1874.

So to me, May 24 is not Empire Day, it is Wonga Day and it should be fittingly celebrated as the start of Reconciliation Week each year.

HOW BARAK GOT HIS ACT TOGETHER

William Barak is one of the most famous and revered Aboriginal people in Australia. He was paramount leader of the Kulin people at Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve at Healesville from 1875 until his death in 1903. He was also a painter, singer, story teller and diplomat and was rightfully feted to visiting European royalty as our local Aboriginal royalty.

Born in Manningham at Brushy Creek in Wonga Park later in 1823, Barak's father Bebejern was the Headman of the Wurundjeri. The fact that Barak ultimately succeeded his father in this role does not indicate any hereditary right of succession in Aboriginal society. Leadership was gained solely on merit and through the twin tests of knowledge and character.

Although there is no record of his childhood, we nonetheless know without doubt that Barak was a gifted child. He was accordingly identified at an early age, and like his older cousin Wonga, was assiduously groomed for leadership. It was also common for boys or girls of special ability to be initiated into adulthood a little earlier than normal.

It can therefore be safely assumed that Barak was initiated at age eleven, around November 1834 and that this was probably at Ngyelong (Hanging Rock) which was a key male initiation site for the Woiwurung. Less than a year later in June 1835, Barak was present at the historic meeting with John Batman on the Plenty River at Greensborough.

A year later in August 1836, Barak's father Bebejern died of the common cold. His body was bound in the traditional knees under the chin position, sheeted in bark and buried at the junction of the Merri Creek and Yarra River. Barak's uncle Billibelleri was then invited to assume tribal leadership.

Three years later in late 1839 Barak's cousin Wonga was at age eighteen elevated into trainee eldership. However Wonga was then badly injured and for a while it was feared he might die. The then sixteen year old Barak was therefore inducted into trainee eldership as a ready replacement for Wonga.

This ceremony at the Botanic Gardens camp site was witnessed by the Aboriginal Protector, William Thomas and historians have since wrongly concluded that this was Barak's initiation into adulthood. It was not, this had occurred five years previously and Barak had the keloid scars to prove it.

In 1840 Governor LaTrobe ordered William Thomas to get Aboriginal people out of Melbourne and a reserve was established at Nerre-Nerre Warren near Dandenong. Then in 1842 a Native Police Force was established and co-located with the reserve. The area has for ever after been known as 'The Police Paddocks'.

Headman Billibelleri at first supported the idea and encouraged a number of young Aboriginal men to join the Native Police, including the now eighteen year old Barak. The theory was that the young men would learn skills and discipline that would help them adapt to the new social order. Unfortunately they also soon learnt the well established police practice of drinking heavily at the end of the day.

However an ulterior motive of the government soon became apparent when the Native Police were deployed against their own people in punitive expeditions to the west, north and east of the colony. When Billibelleri learned in November 1843 that the Native Police had been involved in a massacre of seventeen Aboriginal people at Portland, he withdrew his patronage. However Barak remained with the Native Police Force until disbanded in early 1853.

By this time Wonga had become Headman and had gained regular work for his people at Wonga Park. The now twenty-nine year old Barak had however fallen down the pecking order considerably, due to having continued with the Native Police and his continuing immoderate drinking. However the arrival at Wonga Park of the young lay preacher John Green, proved to be a catalyst for Barak's change.

On one occasion Barak had imbibed a little too much and mislaid his spears. He accused a Gunnai man Punty of stealing his spears, which Punty denied. Barak then crept up behind Punty, cut a lock of his hair and threatened to use the hair to put a spell on Punty. When the two men started fighting, Green intervened, took Punty's hair, cut a lock of his own hair and gave it to Barak. Green then challenged Barak to put a spell on him instead. It proved to be a turning point in Barak's life and although Barak did not become a teetotaller, he only drank moderately from then on.

It was also from that point on that Barak rehabilitated his name and tribal standing. By the time Coranderrk was established in 1863, the now forty year old Barak was number two man to Wonga. Then as Wonga's health declined from tuberculosis over the next decade, Barak increasingly '*spoke with his voice*'.