

NEWS

Play reveals lost tales

Rebel helped forgotten voices

BY TOM O'CALLAGHAN

A SHEPHERD wandering a "desolate" land 150 years ago might reveal life before a cultural genocide swept away key Indigenous practices.

Raffaello Carboni was shepherding in central Victoria during the boiling hot summer of 1853/54 when he lost his entire flock and turned in desperation to a Dja Dja Wurrung clan near the long dead volcano Mount Tarrengower.

Ever the adventurer, he decided to spend some weeks with them.

Researchers have now poured over an operatic pantomime Carboni began writing from a Melbourne jail cell, a year later.

The miner and activist was facing the death penalty for his part in Ballarat's bloody Eureka Rebellion, when soldiers attacked and killed diggers over controversial mining licences.

Carboni walked free when no jury would convict the rebels for treason.

He would remember the previous summer as a chance to relive his "days of innocence".

"Fine landscape this run on the Loddon: almost a match for Bella Italia, but there are too many mosquitoes," he would write.

Still, Carboni described these lands as "laid waste and desolate" as hot winds blasted moisture away.



The highly respected Queen Jellibung (sometimes referred to as Queen Jerribung in historic sources) may have been the inspiration for a play academics have pored over for a new academic paper. **Picture: SUPPLIED**

And this political activist was not so innocent that he failed to notice the end of an era.

Daily life revealed

It is incredibly rare to find accounts of the daily life of Dja Dja Wurrung peoples of central Victoria from the 19th century, let alone the time before colonialists arrived with their diseases and guns, author Roy Maloy said.

The Dja Dja Wurrung man is one of three academics who poured over Carboni's play for a paper published in academic journal *Australian Historical Studies*.

"We have so few accounts in Black Fella land about what was happening in this 1835 to 1850s period for the Dja Dja Wurrung," he said.

It is a critically important period of time because that is when squatters, and eventually miners, occupied huge tracts of central Victoria.

So the dearth of accounts about the people they

forced out makes Carboni's play precious.

It shows a very human experience of how people survived against great odds, Maloy said.

"There was a lot of death," he said.

"And you think about it, if you're a dude in this period, you look left and this person's dead, look right and that person's dead."

The Dja Dja Wurrung was not a big group to begin with. Many estimates put their pre-colonial population as about 2000 people.

It was even less by the time white squatters arrived, thanks to European diseases that had already ravaged central Victoria.

Carboni's new friends had moved into the area looking for seasonal delicacies in waterholes dotting the area.

His records bolster evidence from another historical source that the Dja Dja Wurrung hunted and fished there.

Maloy and his fellow researchers - Victoria University's Rob Pascoe and Federation University's Barry Golding - say the play paints a portrait of daily life in an Indigenous camp.

"The thing that really captures my imagination is normality," Maloy said.

"It's a picture of daily life, of how a mum would wake up with a dad and go and find duck eggs from the waterhole to feed the kids," he said.

The academics are not convinced Carboni got everything right. Nor did they ever expect him to in a play that needed to make sense to a 19th century Italian audience.

But Carboni's accounts line up with other historic evidence about the way Dja Dja Wurrung lived in the 19th century.

They also echo experiences Dja Dja Wurrung people may have told Carboni.

That's got Maloy thinking.

He wants to use Carboni's play as the basis for new performances paying homage to his Ancestors and showcasing Dja Dja Wurrung culture.

Because in spite of the hardships these characters go through at the hands of colonisers, they remain proud, resourceful and resilient.

They are survivors.

Hopes to revive play

Carboni never got a chance to stage his operatic pantomime *Gilburnia*; he published it in Europe in 1872, before it was lost.

An expert discovered a copy by chance in an Italian bookshop in the 1990s.

Carboni probably decided to make the piece a pantomime because it was the closest thing to an Indigenous corroboree.

But people should not get the wrong idea. *Gilburnia* is a tragic tale.

It follows the story of a Dja

Dja Wurrung "queen" called Gilburnia, likely inspired by a real, well-known Elder that Europeans knew as Queen Jellibung.

Two suitors, Boom and Rang, compete for her hand in marriage through ritual combat.

The action inside the Indigenous camp is interrupted by miners in the nearby settlement of Maldon firing off guns to mark the dawn.

The miners attack the camp and abduct Gilburnia.

Boom dies after slipping and falling. The miners' ring-leader is eventually killed.

Colonial authorities arrest Rang for murder. As they pronounce his death sentence, a violent hurricane hits the court house in a climax believed to interweave Dja Dja Wurrung storytelling with notions of heavenly intervention.

The play probably spoke to Carboni's sense of a Garden of Eden threatened by colonialisation and development, the academics say. It also reflected the sexual and legal exploitation Carboni would have seen or heard of.

Maloy sees similarities between Gilburnia's character and Boudicca, the British queen ancient Romans raped and publicly humiliated.

She raised an army and rebelled.

The Dja Dja Wurrung's resistance might not have slaughtered 70,000 ancient Roman soldiers and allies, but they did not wilt under enormous pressures.

Their population shrunk to just tens of people in the decades after Carboni met them.

They refused to die out.

It laid the groundwork for a thriving culture for thousands of modern-day descendants.