

WILLIAM BARAK

A brief essay about William Barak drawn from the booklet *William Barak - Bridge Builder of the Kulin* by Gibb Wettenhall, and published by Aboriginal Affairs Victoria.

Barak was educated at the Yarra Mission School in Narm (Melbourne), and was a tracker in the Native Police before, as his father had done, becoming ngurungaeta (clan leader). Known as energetic, charismatic and mild mannered, he spent much of his life at Coranderrk Reserve, a self-sufficient Aboriginal farming community in Healesville. Barak campaigned to protect Coranderrk, worked to improve cross-cultural understanding and created many unique artworks and artefacts, leaving a rich cultural legacy for future generations.

Leader

William Barak was born into the Wurundjeri clan of the Woi wurung people in 1823, in the area now known as Croydon, in Melbourne. Originally named Beruk Barak, he adopted the name William after joining the Native Police as a 19 year old.

Leadership was in Barak's blood: his father Bebejan was a ngurungaeta (clan head) and his Uncle Billibellary, a signatory to John Batman's 1835 "treaty", became the Narm (Melbourne) region's most senior elder. As a boy, Barak witnessed the signing of this document, which was to have grave and profound consequences for his people.

Soon after white settlement a farming boom forced the Kulin peoples from their land, and many died of starvation and disease. During those hard years, Barak emerged as a politically savvy leader, skilled mediator and spokesman for his people. In partnership with his cousin Simon Wonga, a ngurungaeta, Barak worked to establish and protect Coranderrk, a self-sufficient Aboriginal farming community in Healesville, and became a prominent figure in the struggle for Aboriginal rights and justice. When Wonga died in 1875, Barak succeeded him as clan leader.

While at Coranderrk, Barak recorded Koorie culture through storytelling and art, and invited white settlers and dignitaries to visit the reserve. Skilled in the arts of diplomacy and friendship, over time he gained growing respect and fame within his own culture, in settler society and even abroad.

During his years of leadership, Barak endured significant personal hardship. After the death of his first wife Lizzie at Coranderrk, he married a young Murray River woman called Annie, and the couple had a son, David. But during Barak's involvement in the ongoing struggle to save the reserve, both Annie and young David died of tuberculosis.

When he died in 1903, at around 80 years of age, the man known as the King of the Yarra was buried at Coranderrk, in a simple grave marked by a wooden cross.

Artist

Over his lifetime William Barak gained a reputation as a skilled artist, creating a series of unique paintings, drawings and artifacts. Most of his paintings were completed at Coranderrk reserve in his later years.

During his last two decades he painted the ceremonial side of Wurundjeri culture - in particular, corroborees. In Barak's day these ceremonial meetings were held almost nightly

around Melbourne. A corroboree typically involved elements of dance, song, ritual and discussion, and could be called for a number of reasons: marriage, initiation, trade or dispute settlement.

Barak's paintings and drawings had a strong linear emphasis. He depicted Wurundjeri people wearing traditional possum skin cloaks, clapping boomerangs together, and performing dances and hunting ceremonies. Animal totems - emus, echidnas, turtles - also figured in many paintings.

Art offered Barak a chance to express his own identity, record the traditional ways of his culture, and pass this knowledge down through the generations. His work also gave non-Koorie people an opportunity to learn about indigenous culture. When Governor Sir Henry Loch's request to witness a corroboree was refused by the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, which had banned such "heathen" practices, Barak was commissioned to paint the Governor a picture of a corroboree instead.

Today, Barak's paintings and artefacts are held in a number of Victoria's cultural institutions, including the Koorie Heritage Trust, the National Gallery of Victoria, the State Library of Victoria and the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery.

Diplomat and cultural ambassador

In the years following white settlement, Barak played a major role in advocating for Aboriginal rights and protecting his people's culture. He painted artworks depicting traditional ceremonies, welcomed non-Koorie visitors to the Coranderrk reserve to learn about Aboriginal culture, and visited Government House to demonstrate boomerang throwing and fire-making.

He also struck up friendships, working relationships and diplomatic links with a number of influential non-Koories, including Governor Sir Henry Loch, anthropologist Alfred Howitt, Swiss Consul Baron Guillaume de Pury, lay preacher John Green and settler Anne Bonn. The red-haired Scotswoman and her station-owner husband met Barak while he was doing itinerant farm work, and Anne later proved a loyal friend and supporter in his struggles to protect Coranderrk from closure.

Sharing his expansive knowledge of culture, land and history, Barak acted as a primary source when Howitt compiled his 1903 book *The Native Tribes of South East Australia*. The two men remained in touch for many years.

Storyteller

A gifted and charismatic speaker, Barak used storytelling to express his culture and identity. A document entitled *My Words*, held at the State Library of Victoria, was dictated by Barak and written down by an Aboriginal man called William Edmonds. Coranderrk Superintendent Joseph Shaw arranged for the story to be recorded.

Native Police Trooper

In the early 1840s, when Barak was 19 years old, the influential leader Billibellary, Barak's uncle, negotiated a recruitment deal that saw 22 clan elders and heirs join the newly formed Native Police Corps. Barak was among them; on joining the Corps, he changed his first name from Beruk to William.

Uniformed and armed, the Native Troopers undertook military training and policed the region on horseback, dealing out rough justice to Koorie and non-Koorie alike. During this time Barak also became known as a skilled tracker. Many years after he hung up his Native Police uniform, he was engaged regularly to track missing children and fugitives from the law - including notorious bush outlaw Ned Kelly and his gang.

Barak was fond of recounting the time he tracked down the Kelly gang hiding in thick scrub, and told the white police: "Robbers in there - go and get them." But the white police told Barak to go in first, saying they'd follow behind. Barak replied "I have no gun. I track. You are cowards." The white police then deemed it wise to send for reinforcements.

The Batman "treaty"

When farmer John Batman first rowed down the Yarra River (the Birrarung), he was excited to see acres of lush green land - ideally suited, he thought, to farming.

In 1835, at the age of 12 years, Barak witnessed the first and only bid for a "treaty" between Aboriginal and white Australians, when eight Koorie clan leaders met with Batman on the banks of Merri Creek. Batman had brought along several "Sydney blacks" to help with negotiations, but regional differences meant the language barrier remained, and the conversation was conducted largely in mime.

The resultant misunderstandings had dire consequences for the Kulin peoples of the Narm (Melbourne) region. To Batman, his "treaty" was a land purchase contract - whereas to the traditional owners, it was a temporary permit visa. Batman assumed he had gained 360,000 hectares of land in exchange for blankets, beads, knives and mirrors; however, the original inhabitants thought these items were gifts, traditionally exchanged as part of the tanderum hospitality ceremony held when newcomers enter another people's land.

After this historic misunderstanding, Batman inaccurately declared himself "the greatest landowner in the world." As the expansion of farming quickly forced the Kulin peoples from their traditional grounds, the population was ravaged by introduced diseases and starvation.

Coranderrk

In 1843 Barak's uncle Billibellary, a prominent leader, told Melbourne's Aboriginal Protector William Thomas that dispossession and rapid change had left his people with a sense of having no future. "If Yarra people had a country on the Yarra...they would stop on it and cultivate the ground," he added.

This desire for land to call their own remained strong amongst the region's indigenous peoples. In 1859, Billibellary's son and heir Simon Wonga took a deputation to Protector Thomas, requesting "a block of land in their country where they may sit down, plant corn, potatoes...and work like white men."

Realising this wish proved a long struggle, as neighbouring farmers protested every proposed site. But at last, in 1862, the Board for Protection of Aborigines agreed to set aside Coranderrk, a 930-hectare block on Badger's Creek, in Healesville, 60km east of Melbourne.

The final step was to gain approval from Governor Sir Henry Barkly. The savvy Wonga decided to maximise his people's chances: on the Queen's birthday, 1863, he led a walking

party bearing gifts for the just-betrothed Prince of Wales, which he delivered to the Governor, along with a speech addressing the "Great Mother Queen Victoria".

Soon after, Coranderrk was gazetted. Wonga and Barak led a group of 40 men, women and children on a long walk through virgin bush to reach their new land. Their friend, Pastor John Green, appointed manager of the reserve, walked with them. Homes were built and land was cleared for wheat crops, vegetables and hops, and 70 head of cattle. Three years later, impressed by the success of the farm, the government doubled the size of the reserve. The thriving Coranderrk village soon included a school, dairy, church, bakery, butchery, hop kilns and orphan dormitories.

But in 1874, when Barak succeeded Wonga as clan leader, Coranderrk came under threat: there were calls to subdivide the land and shift residents to a remote spot on the Murray River; John Green, who opposed the carve-up, was dismissed as manager. Barak launched a political campaign from his house, assisted by Thomas Dunolly and his nephew Robert Wandin, who were adept at writing letters and petitions. In a press interview that year, Barak famously said: "Me no leave it, Yarra, my country. There's no mountains for me on the Murray."

A second walk was launched to Parliament house, this time to meet Chief Secretary Graham Berry, who later became Victorian Premier. But while his intervention stopped the closure of the reserve, maintenance funding was cut and Coranderrk began to sink into poverty, mismanagement and disrepair.

Seven years later, in 1881, having caught wind that the reserve was yet again threatened with closure, Barak organised a third long walk, leading 22 men the 60 kilometres from Coranderrk to Parliament House to meet with Premier Berry. They camped overnight in Kew, at the house of Barak's friend Anne Bon, who accompanied them onward. But while Berry said that personally he supported their requests - disband the Board, reinstate John Green as manager and make Coranderrk a permanent reserve - he doubted that Parliament would agree.

Berry appointed a Board of Inquiry to investigate the condition and management of Coranderrk. Barak continued to voice the residents concerns, "(We want) the Government (to) leave us here, give us the ground and let us manage here and get all the money". The Board's report was published in 1882 and served to prolong the life of the Reserve.

Despite the repeated efforts of Wonga, Barak and many others the struggle for land to call their own was lost in 1924 with the closing of Coranderrk Reserve. The residents were encouraged to move to the Lake Tyers Mission, however nine people refused to leave.

Today Coranderrk continues to be a significant place, the old homestead still stands and a small portion of the land has been returned to the Wurundjeri Council.

William Barak Bridge at Birrarung Mar

In December 2005, the William Barak Bridge was declared open. Set on the banks of the Yarra River (the Birrarung), and linking Birrarung Mar to the MCG Stadium, the bridge stands as a tribute to William Barak, a 19th century leader and artist who worked to bridge the divide between the settler community and the land's Aboriginal inhabitants.