

## THE FORGOTTEN WOIWURRUNG CLAN - THE NGARUK WILLAM BALLUK OF THE DANDENONG VALLEY

British settlement in the east Metropolitan area of Melbourne began immediately after John Batman claimed to have reached a 'Treaty' with the Woiwurrung in 1835. However, we all know this land was not 'Terra Nullius'. Like the rest of Australia, it had been sustainably farmed by Aboriginal people for untold eons prior to British colonisation.

The Dandenong Valley area was part of the Kulin cultural nation. This occupied Central Victoria around Port Phillip Bay and into the upper reaches of the Golburn and Loddon Rivers. Cultural nations are federations of similar language groups. Each of these languages have one universal word for 'human beings' or 'the civilized people' and of course this word in the Kulin Federation was 'Kulin'.

Each language group within a federation usually defines itself by having a different word for 'no' despite how similar their languages might be. While Europeans use the word 'tongue' to denote a language, Aboriginal tribes most often used the word 'lip', which was often a variation of the word 'wurrong'. A language group is therefore often defined by their word for no, followed by their word for lip. Woiwurrung therefore translates as 'Woi is no in our language'.

The Kulin Federation consisted of five language groups. The Bunnurong of the South Gippsland area, the Wathurong of the Geelong and Ballarat areas, the Dja-Dja Wurrung of the Bendigo-Loddon Valley area, the Taungurong of the Upper Golburn, and the Woiwurrung of the now greater Melbourne area. This Woiwurrung territory included four catchments, the Werribee River, Maribyrnong River, Yarra River, and Dandenong Valley. These four catchment areas were owned and managed by four separate clans of the Woiwurrung, the Kurung of the Werribee River, the Gunung of the Maribyrnong River, the Birrarung of the Yarra River and the Ngaruk of the Dandenong Valley. Since 1863 the Birrarung people have adopted the nickname used by other tribes, that of 'Wurrundjeri' (the Witchetty grub eaters). The Ngaruk on the other hand, whose territory stretched from Croydon to Kooweerup, have largely been forgotten. Their nickname incidentally was Balluk-Willam, which literally, and quite aptly for this area, means 'bog-dwellers'.

Tribal and clan boundaries across Australia were commonly marked by shared ridge-line travel routes or 'Songlines'. Ngaruk clan territory was marked by such Songlines and these are still present in today's major roads. The catchment area of Gardiners Creek was part of the Yarra River, so this was part of Birrarung land. The approximate course of present day Springvale Road was therefore the Songline separating the west flowing water of Birrarung land from the south flowing Dandenong Creek-Cardinia Creek on Ngaruk land. In the north, the course of present day Mount Dandenong Road was the Songline separating the west flowing Yarra from the south flowing Dandenong Creek.

The Dandenong ranges, known as Corhanwarrable, were therefore shared between the Birrarung and the Ngaruk, with the Birrarung owning the northern slopes and the Ngaruk owning the southern slopes, all the way down to the Kooweerup wetlands. This abutted

Bunnerong land, with the Ngaruk-Bunnerong boundary being the Songline that followed the course of present day Dandenong Road and the South Gippsland Highway. The full name of the Ngaruk clan of the Woiwurung was 'Ngaruk Willam Baluk', with Ngaruk meaning rocky slopes, Willam meaning home country and Balluk meaning people of a catchment area. In context Ngaruk-Willam-Balluk therefore meant 'From the rocky slopes of the Dandenongs to Koowerup is the home country of the people in this catchment area.'

At the time of colonisation, the Headman or Ngurungaeta (Ung-uh-rung-eye-tuh) of the Ngaruk was Moonie-Moonie and along with Birrarung Headman Billibelleri, he was persuaded to join the Native Police and so give it their tribal authority. However because of subsequent involvement of the Native Police in massacres of other Aboriginal people in the east, west and north of Victoria, Billibellari withdrew his support. Moonie-Moonie was then killed during an engagement in the Wimmera in September 1845. This caused a leadership vacuum for the Ngaruk, but it was to be resolved by the unfolding events that had their roots in the earliest colonial settlement of the Ferntree Gully area.

The first settler in the Dandenong Valley had been the Reverend James Clow who in August 1838 settled near present day Wellington Road on the Dandenong Creek. To establish his holding he simply followed the Dandenong Road Songline out from Melbourne, diverged onto the Wellington Road Songline and stopped once he got over the Dandenong Creek. Clow then established a cattle run from there, right up to present day Ferntree Gully. His son James Maxwell Clow managed the section of the run that lay at the foot of the Dandenongs.

Five months after Clow established his cattle run in the Dandenong Valley, William Thomas arrived in the colony in January 1839, to take up his appointment as Aboriginal Protector. He initially established his residence at the Aboriginal encampment at the present day Botanical Gardens and soon befriended Billibelleri who was Headman of the Birrarung people, now known as the Wurundjeri. Billibelleri's son Wonga, then seventeen, had been marked out from an early age for tribal leadership. This was not because he was Billibelleri's son, because there is no hereditary right of leadership in Aboriginal society. It was because he had shown precocious ability from an early age and was being groomed for leadership entirely on the basis of merit, nothing more.

In August 1839, on the cusp of his 18th birthday Wonga and four others of a similar age were sent on a trek to Mount Dandenong as part of their ongoing initiation. At the top of Mt. Dandenong Wonga met with an accident and his foot was badly crushed. The four other youths returned to the Botanical Gardens camp and alerted Billibelleri, who with his brother walked to Mount Dandenong and searched for Wonga. By the time they found him Wonga had been without food for four days and was near death. Billibelleri knew that his best way of saving his son was to take him to the outstation that Reverend Clow had established at Ferntree Gully and get him immediate white medical help.

Billibelleri and his brother Berberry carried the injured Wonga on their backs down Mount Dandenong to Clow's station and a messenger was duly despatched on horseback to alert William Thomas. Thomas sought to borrow a dray but was unsuccessful, so he walked all the way to Ferntree Gully. Defining the route he took is quite easy. He simply followed the

Toorak Road Songline which then becomes the Burwood Highway Songline. Such a route is twenty-one miles, the exact distance that Thomas recorded in his diary.

Wonga had spent five days in Reverend Clow's care before Thomas was able to transport him back to Melbourne. Over the next few months Wonga was nursed back to full health by Thomas and his wife Suzannah. At the end of this time Wonga, who had been given the English name Simon, stayed on with Thomas for the next three years. Wonga became a constant companion to Thomas, accompanying him on his rounds tending to the health and problems of the dispossessed Kulin. This was not entirely a matter of choice for Wonga as Billibelleri saw that it was a necessary new component of his son's learning. He therefore instructed him to stay with Thomas and learn whatever he could of this new world that the whitefellahs had imposed on them.

After his foot had healed, Simon Wonga therefore began accompanying Thomas on his rounds. Despite being a rapid learner, Wonga refused to attend Thomas's school, but his younger brother Tommy Munnarin did. In his time with Thomas, Wonga often demonstrated his wicked wit and his ability to mimic any animal sound or human accent.

One year after coming to live with Thomas, Wonga in September 1840 accompanied him as a guide to the Westernport area in order to establish an Aboriginal Reserve there, away from the temptations of Melbourne. Wonga and the others had originally wanted to establish a Reserve at Bolin-Bolin, on the opposite side of the river from Heidelberg, but Thomas regarded this as too close to this heavily settled area. Wonga therefore led the party along the Doncaster Road-Boronia Road Songline to the Stud Road Songline, a route that took them past the Reverend Clow's station. Wonga then pronounced that the site to the south, known as Nerre-Nerre Warren, was the best place for the reserve. Thomas was reluctant to choose a site so soon and wanted to continue on into Westernport. However Wonga then claimed, quite falsely, that there was no water further on and Thomas was stuck with Wonga's decision.

There are two reasons for Simon Wonga deceiving Thomas. First, if he had crossed the Dandenong Road Songline they would have been in Bunnerong Country where Billibelleri's authority would have been compromised. Second, Wonga wanted to re-establish contact with both James Clow senior and junior, the settlers who saved his life the year before. There is no written account of their relationship at this time, but the results are evident in the unfolding of history. Reverend James Clow was somewhat different to your average settler. He held strong view that Aboriginal people had inalienable rights to their land and that tracts should be set aside for their exclusive use and that they should be able to establish an independent economic basis through cattle grazing and crop growing.

This idea took root in Wonga's mind, but Nerre-Nerre Warren never achieved this vision. It became increasingly hemmed in by settlers and no economic base was established beyond the handout of government rations. Ultimately the Reserve failed and was abandoned in September 1843. Two years later Moonie-Moonie was dead and with Billibelleri sickening, Simon Wonga began taking more leadership responsibility. With the death of Billibelleri in August 1846, the newly married Wonga declined the offer of leadership. Billibelleri's brother Berberry therefore succeeded him as Headman for the next four years while Wonga lived

near Reverend Clow. Wonga then felt he was ready, so Berberry stepped down and Wonga became paramount leader at the age just twenty-nine in late 1850.

Wonga at first pursued his father's plan to have a Reserve formally declared at Pound Bend in Warrandyte and this was finally achieved in early 1851. Wonga also began organising teams of Aboriginal men and women to be hired out to white settlers in the Yarra and Planty valleys, so that they could learn the necessary agricultural, stock mustering and construction skills. At first he had little success but with the advent of the gold rush many white labourers deserted their employment and took off to the goldfields. This had the immediate effect of driving up Aboriginal employment opportunities and wages, so Wonga's plan started to gain traction. On one occasion Wonga approached the owner of a new station near Warrandyte and when asked to demonstrate his horse mustering skills, Wonga simply opened up the corral gate and started whineying like a lead stallion. Within minutes some fifty horses had come and put themselves in the corral. The owner was so impressed with Wonga's skill and leadership that he not only employed Wonga and his men, he named his station 'Wonga Park'.

With the gold rush compromising the viability of Pound Bend as a permanent Aboriginal Reserve, Wonga realised that their traditional life would soon completely disappear. He therefore decided to give the Kulin an opportunity to bid farewell to their traditional existence and organised the last ever Kulin Nation coroborree at Pound Bend in Warrandyte in March 1852. The celebrations lasted fourteen days and nights and featured all their traditional games, such as Marngrook the traditional Aboriginal football game, which was a precursor to Australian Rules football.

Wonga then in early 1859 gained the agreement of William Thomas for the Kulin people to establish a station at Acheron in the Upper Golburn. Ultimately they were cheated out of this land by the local squatters and forced onto cold and inhospitable land at Mohican, before finally securing a permanent grant of land at Coranderk in 1863. All Wonga's plans then finally came into fruition and Coranderk became the most economically and socially successful Aboriginal Mission in Australian history. It is not at all a stretch to say that the enlightened views of Reverend James Clow, had played a key role in the formation of Simon Wonga's plan for the survival of the Kulin people.

**Jim Poulter, March 2021**