

## 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 farming, 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. Fires since, including those of 6th February 2020, again showed the message was 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.