

A CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF 'MY WORDS' BY WILLIAM BARAK

On 26th May 1888, famed Woiwurrung Elder William Barak, began dictating some of his recollections to a teenage student at Coranderrk School. Barak was in his 65th year, feeling unwell and fearing he might die. Because of Barak's stream of consciousness and the Aboriginal concepts embedded in his narrative, its profound implications have not previously been understood. Elements of both Aboriginal oral history and colonial documentation have been utilised to help draw out these implications.

*The following interpretation therefore shows the implication of Barak's narrative in italics and his original words **bolded**. This interpretation was produced by Jim Poulter, in consultation with Woiwurrung Elders and is subject to ongoing revision, the latest being in August 2022.*

*I was born in the year 1823 at Brushy Creek in Wonga Park which was named after my cousin Simon Wonga and I was about eleven years old when Batman visited Port Phillip Bay. As a child, I heard the convict William Buckley talk about his previous life in Europe. Buckley whom we knew as Murrangurk, was escorted all over Kulin Country to speak at every Black's camp. He told us about how he had fought in the Napoleonic Wars and about the guns and cannons Europeans possessed, and the killing these weapons caused. He warned us that white men would soon come to our Country with these weapons because they wanted land. I have **never forgotten it** and **I remember Buckley's words every time** I think of the first meeting with Batman in 1835.*

*It was thirty-two years prior to this meeting with Batman that Buckley had come to live among us. However, five years before Buckley came, the first white man we had seen was when George Bass landed at Westernport in 1797. Then in 1835 **Batman came looking for Country** just as Buckley had warned us. **Batman sailed into Port Phillip Bay looking around the sea and he set ashore where he found a lot of blacks on the other side of Geelong.** Later on, when Batman had left to go back to Tasmania, **Buckley came in the camp** where some of Batman's party had remained. Buckley had **no trousers** and was **all raggedy** and only wore a **possum skin rug**. So after Buckley proved who he was by showing them his tattoo, they took him back to live with white people again. But before Buckley was found, Batman's boat had come to Melbourne and moored at Williamstown then he went to the Yarra River.*

*Batman wanted to meet with the Woiwurrung Elders and he had seven Sydney Blacks with him as guides and interpreters. So, **Batman sent the Sydney Blacks, Pigeon, Joe the Marine, Old Bull, Bungett, Bullett, Stewart and Jacky with some potatoes from Melbourne to the camp of Yarra Blacks.** Being out of their Country the Sydney Blacks followed proper protocol and travelled along the Heidelberg Road Songline on the north side of the Yarra to*

Heidelberg, where they were told by the few people there that all the rest of the Yarra Blacks and the Elders were **camped at Kurrum**, for a meeting. Kurrum means **Muddy Creek** and is now known as the Plenty River. The Sydney Blacks were told that Batman's request for a meeting would be taken to the Elders on Kurrum at Greensborough and Batman should go there the next day and wait. Batman's message was then taken to the Woiwurrung Elders who agreed to meet him at Greensborough.

Next morning, they all went down to see Batman. Not just the Elders but also every old man and woman and all the children. This included me and my three 'other brothers' - Wonga, Keelbundoora and Jika-Jika. We were all the sons of the three Headmen, who were regarded as brothers. So, seeing your father's brothers are your 'other fathers' not your uncles, we were 'other brothers' not cousins. I was the son of the Headman, Bebejern, Wonga was the son of the Songman, Billibelleri; and Keelbundoora and Jika-Jika were the sons of Jagga-Jagga who was the Kidney-fat Man or law enforcer. Jagga-Jagga was also the Keeper of the Plenty River and Diamond Creek catchment area, so the meeting was to be held on his land.

We all went to **Batman's camp** near the ford on the Plenty at Greensborough. The Elders welcomed Batman onto Country with a Tanderrum Ceremony, after which he held a whitefella ceremony. In asking the names of the three headmen so he could write it down, Bebejern and Billibellari deferred to their brother Jagga-Jagga as they were on his land. That is why the name Jagga-Jagga is written three times on Batman's 'Treaty'. The men with Batman then **killed some sheep by Batman's order** and we all feasted. Later, the parishes of Bundoora and Jika-Jika were named after Jagga-Jagga's two sons, because this was in acknowledgement that Batman had met with the Woiwurrung on Jagga-Jagga's land on the Plenty River. The meeting was not at Merri Creek as some people have said, because Merri means 'rocky' not 'muddy'. It was not Darebin Creek either because Darebin means the Welcome Swallow.

Seeing Batman at Greensborough in June 1835, three months before I was to turn twelve, I could not help but remember again the things that Buckley had told us in the years before. **Buckley told the Blacks to look at his face and see how he looks very white.** He said that **any man you see out in the bush with a white face not to touch him.** Also, **when you see an empty hut belonging to a white man, you are not to touch the bread in it.** Instead, act as if you are Out of Country and you are approaching the camp of another tribe. Follow the Out of Country protocol and **make a camp outside and wait till the man comes home.** When the man comes home and finds everything safe in the house he will be friendly and share his food with you. They are good people when you respect their property, but **if you kill one white man, they will hunt down all your mob and shoot you down like a kangaroo.** A lot of white fellows will come here by-and-by and clear all the scrub all over the country, so just remember what I have said when you see a white man in your Country.