

WILLIAM BUCKLEY - A NIGHT AT THE THEATRE WITH MURRANGURK



'The first settlers discover Buckley' an 1861 painting by Frederick William Woodhouse, courtesy S.L.V.

William Buckley was a convict who was transported to Australia in 1803, having received a 14-year sentence for a -minor theft. He was sent to a short-lived settlement near present day Sorrento in Victoria and when it was to be closed, he and some other convicts escaped in late 1803 and began walking north around Port Phillip Bay. Buckley separated from the others and continued on to present day Geelong, while avoiding contact with Aboriginal people. Near Geelong Buckley chanced upon a fresh Aboriginal grave and took the broken spear on it to try his luck fishing. Whilst resting by the dunes he was seen by an Aboriginal family who recognised the spear as having previously belonged to a local man named Murrangurk. Because black people lose their skin pigmentation after death and turn an ashen white, they reasoned that Buckley must be Murrangurk 'jumped up', in other words having come back to life.

When brought to the Aboriginal camp the Elders of course knew that he was a 'Namantji', one of the white people who had increasingly been seen in coastal areas over the previous 15 years. The family of the original Murrangurk was appointed to teach him the Wathurong language, so within a few months Buckley was proficient and began telling them stories of his service in the Napoleonic Wars. This was such great entertainment that over the next 32 years that he lived among them, the new Murrangurk was escorted all over Kulin Nation territory in Central Victoria to tell every clan and family about the wars and weaponry in Europe, and the killing wrought by the weapons. Tribal people flocked to hear him and he was accorded a leadership status as a teacher. Buckley warned them that 'white men will come here bye-and-bye and clear the scrub all over the country' and said that if they saw a man with a white face like his, never to kill them because 'If you kill one white man they will hunt you all down and shoot you like kangaroos'.

Suitably warned by Murrangurk, the Kulin leaders directed their people to never kill any white man who came into their Country. 'Murrangurk's Law may well have saved the Kulin people from complete extinction, which was almost achieved by European diseases. Between 1789 and 1828, smallpox alone reduced the Aboriginal population by at least 95%. Buckley saw the terrible disruption to the fabric of tribal life that followed on from the first plague of 1789 and was himself a disfigured survivor of the 1828 plague. The death of 2½ million people across the whole of Australia caused by the first plague is not recorded in our history books, but the death of one sailor in the First Fleet is.