



JOHN BATMAN 1801-1839
LIAR, SWINDLER, LECHER, AND MURDERER-
BUT OTHERWISE A GOOD BLOKE

John Batman is famously remembered for two things. His statement on reaching the future site of Melbourne in 1835 that: 'this will be the place for a village', and his bogus 'Treaty' with the Wurundjeri to purchase their land. To many people he met, Batman was seen as an engaging, ebullient, energetic, and enthusiastic person. To others he was self-aggrandizing, deceitful, and morally bankrupt. This divided opinion existed not only between his contemporaries, but also between historians and biographers. The reality is of course that his personality encompassed both sides of the one coin.

This is shown in his participation in Tasmania's 'Black War' between 1828 and 1830. He led a raiding party that massacred fifteen defenceless Aboriginal men women and children. He then captured two wounded men plus a woman and her two-year-old child and began marching them back to the settlement. However, when the two men could not keep up because of their injuries Batman blithely recorded 'I was obliged to shoot them'. Despite being a self-confessed murderer, Batman is nonetheless lionised by some historians for his 'compassionate' attitude to Aboriginal people and his actions such as above have subsequently been excused as 'mercy killings'.

In May 1835 Batman led an expedition to Port Phillip on behalf of a syndicate of Tasmanian settlers who wanted to open a new colony on the mainland. He left with a contract of sale that had been drafted by Joseph Gellibrand and returned on the 11th June with the document having purportedly been signed by the Chiefs of the local tribe. Batman's supposedly contemporaneous journal and his subsequent report to the Governor contain many contradictions and entirely implausible assertions. His journal recounts four consecutive days of walking approximately thirty miles a day, but Batman had tertiary stage of syphilis and died only four years later. Such exertions would have been extremely difficult for a highly trained military commando, but impossible for a man with tertiary syphilis.

Batman's journal and his account of his meeting with the Woiwurrung people is clearly a tissue of lies that he contrived to try and legitimate his purported purchase of the land. Any truth in his account can only be properly ascertained by comparing it to the only other eyewitness account of this event. William Barak, who was to become Headman of the Woiwurrung in 1874, was present at the meeting with Batman in 1835. He was almost twelve at the time and dictated his memories of the event in 1888. His statement clearly shows that Batman's Sydney blacks were sent out ahead of the exploration party and made contact with the local people near Heidelberg. Arrangements were then made to meet with Batman the following day on 'Muddy Creek'.

The 'Treaty' meeting therefore took place on the 6th June 1835, not on the Merri Creek, which means 'rocky' and not on the Darebin Creek which means the 'Welcome Swallow', but on 'Muddy Creek' which is Kurrum Yallock, the Aboriginal name for the Plenty River. After his meeting with the Elders the last distance Batman recorded as having travelled was that he walked 12 miles in a southwest direction, before he arrived back near Royal Park. It seems that this is the only reliable distance recorded in his spurious journal as it confirms Barak's recollection. If you reverse the route and head from the Royal Melbourne Hospital intersection 12 miles northeast along the Songline that is today Plenty Road, you will reach the ford on the Plenty River in present day Greensborough. This was a traditional Aboriginal camp and meeting place and a logical site for such a meeting. This then is the site of Batman's historic meeting with the Woiwurrung. -At Partington's Flat, next to the ford on the Plenty River at Greensborough.