

MURRANGURK'S LAW

Murrangurk was the tribal name given to William Buckley, the convict who escaped in 1803 and spent the next 32 years living with the Kulin people in the Port Phillip Bay area. Buckley had a profound but little appreciated impact on the ultimate survival of Aboriginal people in Central Victoria.

After escaping at Sorrento, Buckley walked around the Bay and near Geelong found a spear at a fresh grave, which he used to catch fish. He was approached and asked if he was the owner of the spear, Murrangurk, come back to life. Luckily Buckley just grunted and nodded. They took him to their camp and the Elders of course knew he was one of the white men they had heard about.

They appointed a couple of tutors and in less than two months Buckley was fluent in Wathurong. Ultimately he became fluent in at least six Aboriginal languages, even though he was illiterate in English. Buckley had served in the Napoleonic Wars and began telling them many stories about the weapons of destruction and the uncompromising attitude of white people. He was escorted to camps all over the Kulin Federation to tell his stories and effectively had the title of 'Headman for Education on Whitefellahs'.

Buckley told them if they ever saw a person with a white face like his, never kill them, because if even one white man was killed, they would *'Hunt down all your mob and shoot you like kangaroos'*. The Kulin therefore passed 'Murrangurk's Law' forbidding anyone in the five Kulin tribes from killing a white man. It is most interesting to see how this law played out in practice locally.

The first settler in what is now Manningham was Major Charles Newman, who claimed land at the junction of Mullum Creek and the Yarra in 1837. From the first, he fired with deadly intent at any native who dared to cross 'his' land. Despite this severe provocation the Kulin did not seek deadly payback. Instead they conducted an economic guerrilla war against the Major and settlers like him, destroying their fences, setting fire to their paddocks and driving off their stock.

In 1840, my great-grandfather, John Chivers arrived in the colony and was hired by Major Newman to fell trees. Unlike the Major, John established friendly relations with the local people, often trading butter, sugar or tea for game. John learnt the Woiwurung language and as far as I am aware was one of only two settlers to do so. The other was Jimmy Dawson who had also settled at Warrandyte in 1840.

One of the many stories passed down my family is that when it was greying dawn one morning, John was lighting the fire to cook breakfast. As he was doing so, a troop of painted-up natives he knew, were passing by. John asked the warriors what was going on and if they wanted to share breakfast with him.

They responded that they first had to go and kill the Major, but would come back for breakfast when they had done so. Apparently the Major had shot and killed one of them the previous day while they were in the process of burning his paddocks to drive off his stock.

The troop continued on the four hundred metres or so to the Major's turf-block hut, but the Major's wife, Catherine, had also risen early to light the fire. She saw the troop of natives approaching and realising their intent, roused the Major. It was too late to start shooting from the narrow slit windows of his hut, so Catherine got the Major to hide up the large chimney.

The warriors entered the hut and were of course not interested in exacting any payback on Catherine. She had never fired on them as the Major often did. She had never killed anyone, only the Major had. So their planned payback was directed solely at him.

Catherine assured the men that the Major had gone to Melbourne and wouldn't be back for a couple of days. Not necessarily disbelieving her, they searched the one-room hut, but couldn't find him and left to share a hearty breakfast and pot of tea with John.

After the warriors had left, the Major emerged from the chimney with his whiskers and clothes singed by the heat of the fire. It was an amazing feat not to have coughed from the smoke and given himself away, but then again, his life had depended on it.

Having been told this story many times as a child, I always wondered why the tribesmen didn't return the next day to finish the job. It's not as if the Major hadn't thoroughly earned such a fate anyway. It was only decades later when I learned about Murrangurk's Law, that it all finally all made sense to me.