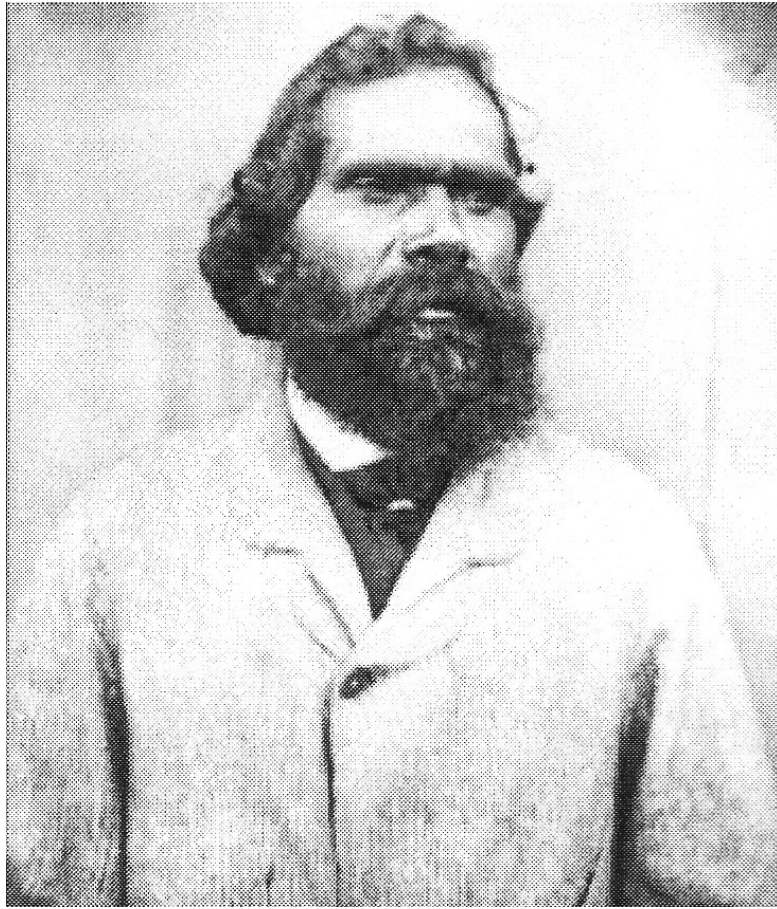


Simon Wonga - His Life Journey



Simon Wonga at Coranderrk 1866

Jim Poulter

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Jim Poulter (*PhD. M.S.W. Dip.Crim. Dip.Soc.Stud. Life MAASW*) is a Forensic Social Worker by profession and the author of many Aboriginal theme books. This includes illustrated children's books, children's novels, local histories, pen portraits, academic texts and journal articles. Many of these books and papers have been in co-authorship with, forewords by, or the endorsement of Aboriginal Elders.

Jim's forebears first settled at Templestowe in Woiwurung Country in 1840 and established a close relationship with the local Aboriginal people. Jim has continued this involvement over his own lifetime at both a personal and professional level. He has worked closely with a number of celebrated Elders, tribal people and key Aboriginal organisations, in order to strengthen knowledge of and pride in our Australian Aboriginal history and heritage.

During the 1970's and 1980's Jim was a key figure in both the Victorian and Federal Public Services, when he conceived and was tasked with establishing Aboriginal Liaison Services. These pioneering organisational mechanisms addressed the cultural difference issues facing Aboriginal people in gaining access to government services. The key to the success of these schemes was prior consultation with Aboriginal Elders, then by employing appropriately skilled Aboriginal people to mediate the delivery of services in a culturally sensitive manner. Jim then moved on so he could be succeeded in the job by an Aboriginal person.

However, Jim is probably best known to the public for having in the early 1980's posited that the tribal Aboriginal football game, now known universally as Marngrook, was a precursor to Australian Rules football.

Illustrations

Cover: 'Simon' Wood engraving, LaTrobe picture collection, State Library of Victoria.
Title page: Portrait photograph of Simon Wonga by Carl Walter 1866, LaTrobe picture collection SLV
Page 7: 'Simon and Maria' engraving from photograph by Haselden, (circa 1862) P. Brown publisher

SIMON WONGA – HIS LIFE JOURNEY

Simon Wonga (pronounced Wong-ah, not Wong-gah) was a visionary and charismatic Aboriginal leader in the early colonial period in Victoria. As paramount leader of the Kulin people from 1851 to 1874. It was his insight, drive and strategic brilliance that, against all odds, ultimately engineered the establishment of Coranderrk Aboriginal Station at Healesville in 1863. Under Wonga's astute leadership, Coranderrk then became economically and socially the most successful Aboriginal Reserve in Australia.

However, the enormity of Wonga's achievements is still scarcely appreciated within the general community, because Wonga has historically lived in the shadow of his cousin William Barak, who succeeded him as paramount leader of the Kulin. Barak battled heroically to build on Wonga's heritage and faithfully employed the strategies that Wonga had shown him over the previous twenty-four years.

It could even be said, that in regard to the building of friendships and strategic alliances with people of power and influence, the pupil may have ultimately surpassed the master.

What we know of Wonga's childhood

There is virtually no record of Wonga's childhood, apart from him stating in 1861 that his birthplace was at Woori-Yallock (meaning rapid creek) in the Upper Yarra region of the Dandenong Ranges.¹ This area is the most westerly point of the habitat area of the Eastern Australian Wonga Pigeon, after which he was named and which was his personal totem.

Some people have been misled about Wonga's birthplace, by the Aboriginal Protection Board Secretary Robert Brough Smyth, having in 1878 claimed that Wonga was born at Arthur's Seat on the Mornington Peninsula. Smyth was also incorrectly stated that Wonga was named after this mountain. In the 1840's an early settler in that area, Georgiana McCrae, recorded the name of this landmark as 'Wango'² which is pronounced 'Wahng-oh' not 'Wong-ah'. It was also not a habitat area of the Wonga Pigeon.

Wonga's birth year is also often cited as 1824, along with that of his cousin, William Barak. However, for both Wonga and Barak, these 1824 birthdates are also demonstrably incorrect. The error with William Barak's birthdate comes from him having said in 1888 that he was about eleven years old at the time of the meeting with Batman in June 1835.³ So 11 from 1835 is 1824. However, Barak was in fact eleven years and nine months old, having been born around September 1823. Also, although Barak and Wonga were contemporaries, all indications are that Wonga was the older man by at least a couple of years.⁴

Wonga's birth year was therefore most certainly not 1824 and was no later than 1821. It is also very probable that like Barak, he was born in September or October, during the 'Women's Business Season'. In tribal days this was the time of year when Aboriginal births were consciously planned to occur.⁵

Despite a lack of written or oral history about Wonga's early life, we can nonetheless be very sure of a number of things. First, Wonga was a gifted child. In keeping with the abilities he demonstrated throughout his adult life, we know that Wonga had extraordinary observational powers and an eye for detail. He also had high mathematical, procedural, and organisational skills. All of Wonga's abilities were based on the most prized of all Aboriginal faculties, that of a prodigious memory.⁶

Like many Aboriginal people, Wonga also had an extraordinary trained ability for sound replication. This meant he could not only copy the call of any given bird or animal, but he could also replicate the purpose of the animal's communication. That is, as was common amongst

Aboriginal people, he could quite literally *talk to the animals*.⁷ His extraordinary communication skills also extended to human language. By adulthood Wonga had mastered at least five Kulin languages and several dialects, as well as English. His fluency and grammatical correctness in English was in fact often a source of official comment.⁸

We also know that around late 1828 when Wonga was aged seven, a second smallpox plague swept around Australia.⁹ Wonga and his family did not catch the disease and so survived. However, just as had occurred in the first smallpox plague of 1789, a whole generation of Elders was wiped out.¹⁰ This meant that Wonga's father, Billibelleri, probably achieved his status of Woiwuring Songman (number two in the tribal hierarchy) immediately following the 1828 smallpox plague.

In tribal times it was common for gifted children to be initiated into adulthood at a slightly younger age than normal.¹¹ So it is likely that Wonga was initiated at age eleven, around November 1832, which was the time of 'Men's Business Season'.¹² There is also a strong likelihood this initiation ceremony was at Ngyelong, (ung-eye-uh-long) which is now known as Hanging Rock. This is because it was a principal site of male initiation for the Woiwuring as well as other Kulin language groups.

Nearly three years later in June 1835, Wonga at almost 14 and Barak at almost 12, were both present at the historic meeting of the Woiwuring with John Batman on the Plenty River at Greensborough.¹³ At that time, Barak's father Bebejern was Ngurungaeta (ung-uh-rung-eye-tuh) and therefore first in tribal authority, whilst Wonga's father, Billibelleri was Songman and therefore number two in tribal authority.

It is interesting to note that Bebejern as the Headman was about five years younger than Billibelleri, and the nephew of Billibelleri's wife.¹⁴ This situation, where the younger man, although junior in family relationship, was nonetheless senior in tribal authority, clearly shows that tribal leadership in Aboriginal society was based solely on merit.

That is, contrary to what is often posited, tribal leadership was not based on age, family seniority, lineal descent or any right of inheritance. These are assumptions arising from European culture. In reality, the main universal qualifications for Eldership in Aboriginal society were the twin tests of knowledge and character, and training as a 'Knowledge Keeper'. There was also no separation between Church and State in Aboriginal society, so across Australia, Elders exercised a blend of both religious and secular authority. Traditional Aboriginal society could therefore appropriately be described as a 'Druidic Meritocracy'.¹⁵

A year after this historic meeting in June 1835 with Batman, Bebejern died of the common cold in August 1836, at the age of just forty. His body was bound in traditional knees under the chin position, sheeted in bark and buried laying on his side facing east, at the Yarra and Merri Creek junction.¹⁶ Billibelleri then succeeded him as Headman at the end of a twenty-eight day 'Sorry Time'.

By this time, at now just on fifteen years of age, Wonga had already been identified as a future leader. In keeping with his precocious ability, Wonga's formal apprenticeship as an 'Elder-in-Training' probably began prior to his eighteenth birthday around September 1839.

Wonga and the Aboriginal Protector William Thomas

On the cusp of his eighteenth birthday in late August 1839, Wonga and four other youths were sent on a walkabout trial to Mont Dandenong, where Wonga badly injured his foot. The other youths left him there and went back to the Aboriginal camp where the Botanical Gardens are now sited, and reported the accident to Wonga's father, the Headman Billibelleri. Accompanied by his younger brother Berberry, Billibelleri then went to Mount Dandenong and looked for Wonga.

On the way there they passed the Ferntree Gully residence of Reverend James Clow. This was at the northern end of a cattle run Clow had established along the Dandenong Creek two years before in August 1837.¹⁷ By the time they found him, Wonga had been without food and water for four days and was nearly dead. Billibelleri knew that his son's only chance of survival was to get him to Dr. Cousens, the medical officer who worked at the Botanical Gardens Aboriginal camp. Billibelleri and Berberry then piggy-backed Wonga down Mount Dandenong, to the Ferntree Gully residence of Reverend Clow.¹⁸

Clow sent a message to William Thomas the Aboriginal Protector based at the Botanical Gardens and gave aid to Wonga over the next fortnight. Thomas wasn't able to borrow a wagon, so finally on 12th September 1839 he walked the twenty-one miles along the Toorak Rd-Burwood Highway Songline, out to Ferntree Gully.¹⁹ After staying overnight, Thomas borrowed a wagon from Clow and, accompanied by Billibelleri and Berberry, took the injured Wonga back to Thomas' hut at the Botanical Gardens.

As it was feared Wonga might die, the Kulin Elders Billibelleri, Ningulabul and Poliorong met and decided to induct the then sixteen years old Barak, into trainee eldership, as a possible replacement for Wonga. Some authors have mistakenly believed that this ceremony was Barak's initiation into adulthood,²⁰ but this is clearly not so. Barak had already received keloid initiation scars, most probably at age eleven in late 1834, at Hanging Rock.

Barak's keloid scars were clearly visible on his chest and back when he was an adult,²¹ and these scars were demonstrably not received in the Botanic Gardens ceremony of 1839. The ritual described was of Barak receiving a possum skin amulet, reed necklace, nose-peg, waist string and apron, so it was clearly his induction into apprentice Eldership, not his initiation into adulthood.

Over the next few months Thomas's wife Susanna helped nurse an impatient Wonga back to health. Wonga, who had now been given the name Simon by Thomas, thought his foot would never mend. At one stage he moodily called Dr. Cousens '*Big-One stupid white Doctor*'.²²

By early 1840 Wonga was well and itching to get back with his people. However, his father Billibelleri instructed him to stay with Thomas and learn all he could about 'Whitefellow ways'. The Aboriginal Protector was a government figure that Billibelleri wanted to cultivate in order to advance the interests of his people. So, for the next two years until the beginning of 1842, Wonga accompanied Thomas on his rounds, visiting Aboriginal encampments and local settlers, and absorbing all he could.

Whilst Wonga found Thomas to be annoyingly patronising and sanctimonious, he nonetheless learnt about the very strange ways that Whitefellahs thought and behaved. Billibelleri's instruction for Wonga to stay with Thomas ultimately proved to be astute, and it played a critical role in the future survival of the Kulin people. To give some idea of Wonga's masterful mimicry of any given bird or animal, as well as his impish wit, two incidents can be recounted from his more than two years with William Thomas. The first incident occurred when Thomas and Wonga were camped overnight at Bolin-Bolin Billabong in Bulleen in 1840. On the other side of the river, the township of Heidelberg had by then become closely settled with many farms and farmyard animals. After Thomas and Wonga had set up camp and were talking by the campfire about eleven o'clock at night, Wonga asked: '*Do you want to hear me make fowl crow?*'

Not knowing what he meant, Thomas agreed, and Wonga began crowing like a rooster at dawn. Immediately there was a response from a nearby rooster, then another and another. Pretty soon all the roosters in the district were crowing as if dawn had arrived. The cacophony kept up for quite a while, but when Wonga stopped, the roosters eventually realised it was a false alarm and settled down again. Thomas however was still giggling and found it hard to get off to sleep.²³

The second instance of Wonga's amazing mimicry was in 1841 when he and Thomas were in a bullock-driven wagon heading to Yarra Glen. As they approached the Ryrie Brothers farm,

Wonga saw a herd of horses grazing in the distance. He asked if Thomas wanted to see him call the horses. When Thomas responded yes, Wonga stood up in the wagon and started neighing like a lead stallion.

Within a few minutes all the horses had come galloping over and were milling around their new leader, much to the disquiet of the bullocks. Thomas then asked Wonga to send them away, so Wonga put his possum-skin cloak on his spear, whirled it over his head, and the horses all scattered.²⁴ It was coincidentally at Yarra Glen in February 1841 that Wonga first met Lanky Murrum, a high ranking Taungerong man, and they were to become close friends over the next two decades.²⁵

Establishing Nerre-Nerre Warren Station

By August 1840, Governor LaTrobe was sick of Aboriginal people coming from near and far to see what was going on in Melbourne and congregating at the Botanical Gardens. With colonists selling them grog, there many crimes and scenes of dissipation occurring. LaTrobe therefore instructed William Thomas to '*itinerate with the Natives*' and find a more suitable camp site away from Melbourne.

Thomas therefore asked Billibelleri to lead the Aboriginal people out of Melbourne and establish a new Reserve. With the traditional site at the junction of Merri Creek and Yarra River already ruled out, Billibelleri and Wonga led the Kulin from the Botanic Gardens to Bolin-Bolin Billabong in Bulleen. However, Thomas also regarded this as being 'too close to civilisation'.²⁶

Billibelleri, as his second choice suggested Pound Bend in Warrandyte, so Thomas went off alone to assess the situation. Thomas then spent the next couple of days social climbing with the upper-class settlers in that area. This included George Selby, Jimmy Dawson and the redoubtable Major Charles Newman, who was renowned for shooting at any Aboriginal people who dared to cross 'his' land.

Thomas finally returned to tell Billibelleri that Pound Bend was also an unsuitable site for a Reserve. Billibelleri was furious that his first three choices had been rejected. He threw up his hands and walked away, telling Wonga to take Thomas wherever Wonga thought fit. Wonga's subsequent actions must clearly have been shaped by his experiences the year before when he had injured his foot and been nursed by Reverend Clow at Ferntree Gully. Clow's main residence was however further south, near present day Dandenong, where Wellington Road crosses the Dandenong Creek.

With Thomas in tow, Wonga led his troop from Bolin-Bolin via the Doncaster Road-Mitcham Road-Boronia Road-Stud Road Songlines, all the way down to Nerre-Nerre Warren. He then stopped right opposite Reverend Clow's run on Dandenong Creek. William Thomas wanted to keep going down into Westernport, but Wonga refused, saying there was no water further on.²⁷

This was clearly not so as there are plenty of water sources in Westernport, albeit sometimes a little brackish. However, crossing the Dandenong Road Songline would also have meant crossing from Woiwurung land into Bunnerong land, where Billibelleri did not have full authority.

Besides, Wonga clearly wanted to refresh his friendship with Reverend Clow, who was not just any ordinary sort of settler. Clow had ideas that were quite revolutionary for the time. Clow had established close relationships with local Aboriginal people and believed that they should be given inalienable rights over tracts of land in order to establish an independent economic base by growing crops and running livestock. It was a vision that Wonga embraced and pursued from that time on.

When Nerre-Nerre Warren Station was established at the Police Paddocks near Dandenong in September 1840, the now nineteen years old Wonga and his father Billibelleri, hoped that it

would provide an economic base for the Kulin people. It was never to be. The government only saw it as a ration station on which to herd the remnants of Kulin society.

The people on Nerre-Nerre Warren Reserve willingly supplemented their meagre rations through traditional hunting and Thomas' son, William Jackson Thomas, often accompanied them on these expeditions. Born in 1820, he was the same age as Wonga, and William Junior recorded his experiences of that time in fascinating and insightful detail, such as follows:

'They had no guns yet daily brought in kangaroo. I felt very desirous of seeing how they managed to be so successful. Therefore one fine morning my friend Wonga and two other young strong athletic fellows started to supply the daily needs. I accompanied them as spectator. They left the encampment armed with reed spears and throwing sticks to make a descent on kangaroos. We passed over several low ranges, walking very cautiously to make no noise. They act with great caution on nearing the top of any eminence, looking carefully over the land beyond before showing themselves

At length they descried in the distance a small flock of kangaroos quietly and contentedly grazing in the rich grass of a Light wood Flat. Halting and retiring some distance that so the kangaroos might not be alarmed, proceeded to make preparation, dressing themselves with small green boughs tied round with strips of skin, with a large bough in the left hand and their spears in the right They exactly resembled the bushes all around.

Selecting the lee side and forming themselves in a sort of semicircle about 10 yards apart they cautiously advanced step-by-step keeping their eyes on the kangaroos, if by chance the breaking of a twig stepped on alarmed the game, they stood as still as statues. When the game settled again to feed they would take another step or two. They were in no hurry, so as to accustom the kangaroos to their particular bushes.

Stalking this way took more than an hour. Then Wonga judged that they were near enough gave a pre-arranged signal and simultaneously three Spears hurled with the accelerated force of a throwing stick sped on their mission. Two kangaroos were struck one through the thigh, the other in the shoulder'²⁸

Nerre-Nerre Warren Station Fails

Despite the Kulin efforts to become self sufficient at Nerre-Nerre Warren, the government vision ran counter to this. Its aim was to instead '*Civilise and Christianise the Natives*' and assimilate Aboriginal people into the lower rungs of colonial society.

Although William Thomas had a genuine interest in the welfare of Aboriginal people, he was nonetheless imbued with evangelistic zeal. He sought at every opportunity to ensure the salvation of Aboriginal souls through their conversion to Christianity.

In view of his father Billibelleri's instructions to stay and learn about whitefella ways, Wonga had been willing to endure Thomas' endless sermonising about 'God's All-Seeing Eye' and the damnation torment that awaited all sinners. However, Wonga reached the end of his tether at Nerre-Nerre Warren Station on Christmas Day 1841. Thomas announced that a Christmas Service would be held prior to anyone having a meal and Wonga lost his temper. He picked up a firebrand and threatened to throw it at Thomas unless everyone was fed first. Thomas later moaned sanctimoniously in his journal:

*'This youth I have ever been like a father to, but he is a violent disposition soon ruffled. Oh give us patience &c under all our endeavours with these poor heathen.'*²⁹

Although they shook hands the next day, it marked a breach in their relationship that lasted for nearly the next eight years. Wonga was not mentioned again in Thomas' journal until August 1849, even though they were subsequently at Merri Creek together until 1846.

By the beginning of 1842 Nerre-Nerre Warren Station was struggling and the government tried to boost it by co-locating the newly formed Native Police there. At first Billibelleri supported the idea and accepted an officer rank. He also encouraged his nephew and Wonga's cousin, William Barak to join the Native Police in early 1842. Barak was by that time aged eighteen.

The government view was that the Native Police would teach Aboriginal people the skills and discipline necessary for success in white society. However, those signing up, including Barak, also learned the military habit of heavy drinking at the end of the day, thus resulting in a ten-year stall to Barak's progress.

An ulterior motive of the government also soon became apparent when the Native Police were deployed against their own people in punitive expeditions to the west, north and east of the colony. When Billibelleri learned in November 1843 that the Native Police had been personally involved in a massacre of seventeen Aboriginal people at Portland, he withdrew his patronage.³⁰ However the Native Police Force continued to operate from the Police Paddocks until it disbanded in early 1853, when its Commander died.

By 1844 William Thomas had established his residence at the junction of the Merri Creek and the Yarra and a Baptist school was also established there. The Junction of the Merri and Yarra at Dights Falls had always been a traditional gathering place and Billibelleri spent the last couple of years of his life there. Billibelleri subsequently died of pneumonia at the Merri Creek camp on 9th August 1846.³¹

Wonga, then on the cusp of his twenty-fifth birthday, was shattered. He declined the offer by the Elders to succeed his father as Headman, so the leadership passed to Berberry, the younger brother of Billibelleri. For the next four years, Wonga and his wife Maria lived at Westernport, close to the Reverend Clow, until Wonga recovered his spirits in late 1850.



Maria and Simon circa 1862

Wonga's friend Lanky Murrum had also been at Merri Creek when Billibelleri died, and like Wonga he was deeply affected. Murrum told William Thomas that he was leaving the camp and

taking his children out of school, in order to *'Take them bush and teach them to be real Blackfellas'*.³²

Murrum took his wife Mary and two children Billy twelve and Lanky five (named Ben by William Thomas) to the Templestowe area. It was here that Murrum established a close relationship with a local settler, John Chivers. John had arrived in 1840 and was one of only two settlers in the Middle Yarra region known to have become fluent in Woiwurung. The other settler to become fluent in the local language was the redoubtable Jimmy Dawson, who had also arrived in 1840 and settled at Warrandyte.

John Chivers' sons Willie then aged six and Tom aged two, were to become inseparable friends with Murrum's sons Billy and Lanky. Willie and Tom maintained a lifelong friendship with Lanky, who later assumed the surname of Manton, when working as a drover at Swan Hill. The friendship between Willie, Tom and Lanky lasted for another eighty-three years, until the deaths of both Willie and Lanky in 1929.³³

Wonga becomes Headman

In October 1850 the government finally approved establishing a two thousand acres Aboriginal Reserve at Pound Bend in Warrandyte.³⁴ This was merely ten years after Billibelleri had first requested that site. On hearing this, the now twenty-nine years old Wonga decided to come in from the cold and advised the Kulin Elders he was now available for any role they wished to allocate him. Berberry immediately agreed to relinquish leadership, so by the beginning of 1851 Wonga had been installed as paramount Kulin leader.

In the time spent with Reverend Clow at Dandenong, Wonga had developed a clear plan to gain a government grant of land and establish an economic base for his people. To do this he first needed to provide farm work opportunities with settlers so that his people could gain the necessary skills in growing crops, mustering stock and constructing European style farm buildings and houses.

By the time Wonga assumed Kulin leadership in early 1851, his close friend Murrum had become number two Taungerong man to 'Tallboy' Bearing, and Murrum strongly supported Wonga's plans. However, the fates initially conspired against Wonga.

From the beginning of colonisation in mid-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 suddenly erupted, with the fires being fanned by a tornado-like hot north wind and searing temperatures. Five million hectares of Victoria, one third of the whole state, ended up in flames. The smoke from the fires was driven across Bass Strait and blotted out the sun in Tasmania. The death toll included twelve people, a million sheep and inestimable wildlife.

A valuable lesson on the need to alleviate fuel loads through Aboriginal cultural burning should have been learned from this horrific 1851 experience. But it was not, and many other fatal bushfires continued over the next 170 years. However, it seems that now the message might at last be getting through.

The process of recovery after the 1851 fires was still underway when gold was discovered at Anderson's Creek in July 1851. In a matter of days 400 gold prospectors had flooded in, throwing the future of Pound Bend as an Aboriginal Reserve into doubt. However, the rush at Warrandyte did not last long. With gold being discovered at Ballarat and Bendigo in August and September 1851, the diggers at Warrandyte flooded out just as quickly as they had come. Paradoxically, this gave a fillip to Wonga's plans.

With farm workers deserting their employment to go to the diggings, opportunities for Aboriginal people along the Plenty and Yarra valleys suddenly opened up. Fortuitously, their wages were

also driven up to parity with white workers. With his plan gaining traction Wonga decided that Kulin people should have the opportunity to say a ritual goodbye to tribal life. He planned for this symbolic farewell at a last Kulin Federation corroboree at Pound Bend in March 1852, at which they would play all their traditional games.

When Wonga put this idea to Murrum around early November 1851, Murrum suggested that all the boys who had kept their culture and had not drifted into the urban fringes, should be initiated. This would then enable them to take part in the Gaggip as adults. Wonga thought the idea was great but suggested they would need to do it immediately as November-December was the appropriate time of the year for male initiations. Also, as the journey to the initiation site at Ngyelong (Hanging Rock) and back, would take two weeks, time was of the essence to organise the Gaggip. They therefore needed to take the boys now.

Murrum then raised a complication. The wife of his settler friend John Chivers had died two years before, so John's two boys, Willie and Tom often stayed with Murrum and his family, when John was away on business. Indeed, John had just left, carting produce to sell at the goldfields and would be away for at least a week. Like their father, both boys spoke Woiwurrung fluently and had grown up immersed in tribal culture. Wonga saw no problem and said that the Templestowe boys Willie and Tom Chivers deserved to come with them and share the experience of the culture they had so readily embraced.

Consequently, about half a dozen Aboriginal boys plus Willie and Tom Chivers went to Hanging Rock for the last ever male initiation ceremony held there in November 1851. The oldest of the initiates was Murrum's seventeen years old son Billy, and the youngest was his ten years old son Lanky. For ever after, these six boys would be traditionally bound together as brother initiates of that year.³⁵ When they returned from Hanging Rock two weeks later, except for Willie and Tom, all were now men with the keloid scars on their chest and back to prove it.

Pound Bend and Wonga Park

After the last initiation ceremony at Hanging Rock, Wonga sent out Wirri-Girri (messengers) in December 1851. All Kulin people and some Gunnai from Drouin were informed that a last great Gaggip would be held in March 1852 at Pound Bend in Warrandyte. This was the normal time for inter-clan business which was always held during the eel harvest season from mid-February to mid-March.³⁶

William Thomas the Aboriginal Protector became concerned when people started arriving in December and he tried unsuccessfully to get them to leave. Ultimately several hundred people had gathered at Pound Bend by early March 1851 to play their tradition games such as wrestling, football, spear and boomerang throwing, plus traditional dances each night. William Thomas duly recorded in his journal:

*'They had not met for many years and wanted to have once more some corroboree together....and night after night for fourteen days they did indulge themselves.'*³⁷

For the next few years, Wonga found increasing work for his people up the Plenty and Yarra valleys. He became a skilled quantity surveyor, contractor and negotiator, impressing many local settlers. An instance of this occurred about 1854, with the Aboriginal Protector William Thomas noting:

*'...a barn was erected and one, Wonga, was asked what he would charge for roofing it with bark. He went around the building two or three times, consulted the three blacks with him, and finally said, -Cut bark where we find good trees, only cut it, you cart it away and white man put bark on, pay us Blackfellows two pounds.'*³⁸

Also, around this time, land to the east of Warrandyte was being opened up and Wonga approached the manager seeking work for his men. Oral history suggests that when Wonga was

asked by the manager to demonstrate his mustering skills by rounding up the horses in the distance, he did what had been recorded by William Thomas in 1841. That is, rather than getting on a horse riding out and cracking a whip, Wonga simply opened the corral gate and called the horses to him.

They were promptly all given jobs and Wonga legendary prowess as a horse whisperer and leader of men, ultimately led to the area being known as 'Wonga Park'. Aboriginal men continued mustering work there for decades afterward.³⁹ There is in fact a burial ground for Aboriginal stockmen who died there, somewhere in the vicinity of Lower Homestead Road. However, its precise location has never been properly investigated and determined.

Also in 1854, a second gold rush occurred at Warrandyte, but this time it lasted longer. So, in May 1856 a Richmond publican, Patrick Geraghty, contracted with Wonga and his men to build the first Warrandyte pub which he named *The Union Hotel*. The bark structure included a kitchen and stables for an agreed contract price with Wonga of five Pounds.

During construction Geraghty often came around to check progress and in doing so gave Wonga and his men some food and tobacco. On completion of the contract the publican deducted two pounds for the value of the supplies and refused to pay the full contract price of five pounds. Wonga promptly went to Thomas the Aboriginal Protector and demanded that he take action on their behalf.

When questioned by Thomas as to how he could prove the contract, Wonga showed Thomas a notched stick on which, like an abacus, he had recorded the amount of timber and bark they had harvested, the number of men and the days each man had worked.⁴⁰ Aboriginal people had no legal capacity to sue or even give evidence in court⁴¹ so Thomas, who was also a Magistrate, threatened Geraghty that he would personally sue him if he did not pay up. The publican duly paid Wonga the two Pounds owed.

The Union Hotel as built by Simon Wonga stood for about ten years, until the bark walls were replaced with weatherboards. It was then renamed *The Warrandyte Hotel* and this structure stood until 1925 when it burned to the ground. A Mechanics Institute Hall was then built on the site and this still stands on the corner of Mitchell and Yarra streets in the Warrandyte Township.

Barak and Green join Wonga

When the Native Police folded in 1853, William Barak joined Wonga at Wonga Park, but by then Wonga's younger brother Tommy Munnering had risen above him in the pecking order.

In 1858 a young Scottish lay preacher, the Rev John Green, arrived at Wonga Park and the scene was now finally set for Wonga to realise his dream. Green was a breath of fresh air from the sanctimonious and patronising Aboriginal Protector William Thomas. Green quickly established strong equality-based relationships with Wonga, Barak and the other Kulin.⁴² When Wonga apprised Green of his plans to establish an independent economic base for his people, Green immediately offered to help as a go-between with authorities if they ever needed him.

Green was however no passive bystander and his forthrightness had an immediate and lasting impact on William Barak in particular. In his decade with the Native Police, Barak had been inculcated into a pattern of heavy drinking at the end of the day and he had continued this pattern at Wonga Park.

On one occasion Barak had imbibed a little too much and mislaid his spears. He accused a Gunnai man Punty of stealing his spears, which Punty denied. Barak then crept up behind Punty, cut a lock of his hair and threatened to use the hair to put a spell on Punty. When the two men started fighting, Green intervened, took Punty's hair, cut a lock of his own hair and gave it to Barak. Green then challenged Barak to put a spell on him instead. It proved to be a turning point

in Barak's life and although Barak did not become a teetotaler, he only drank moderately from that point on.⁴³

In early 1859 Wonga's chance came, to at last gain land for his people. A Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry had just completed, and just as Reverend Clow had been advocating, it recommended that land be set aside for exclusive Aboriginal use.⁴⁴ Wonga had coincidentally just heard from his Taungerong friends that a settler at Acheron on the Upper Goulburn had quit his run. Murrum and the Taungerong Elders impressed on Wonga that they knew it was prime land, and that they could make a go of it.

So, on 28th February 1859, a deputation of Wonga and Munnering from the Woiwurung, and Bearing, Murrum, Parngean, Boorippin and Kooyurn from the Taungerong, called on William Thomas at his Merri Creek residence. They asked Thomas to get government agreement for them to take over the Acheron site so they could grow crops and muster cattle '*Like white men*'. Wonga also said they could '*Spread the good news to the Goulburn Blacks*'.⁴⁵ In other words convert them to Christianity. It was a ruse by Wonga clearly designed to appeal to the evangelical Thomas.

At first Thomas was unsure of their sincerity and so over the next three days questioned them closely. However, the seven-man deputation kept coming up with the answers that Thomas wanted to hear about their commitment to Christianity and civilisation. So, Thomas duly forwarded their request to the Lands Department with his strong support. Ten days later the Kulin were delighted to receive approval.

They immediately set out from Melbourne with Thomas on March 10th 1859 to conduct a survey of the land at Acheron. Their route is quite explicitly documented in William Thomas' journal. They journeyed up the Plenty Road Songline, past Whittlesea, then on to the Maroondah Highway Songline to Acheron. About eighty others then followed to start building fences and shelters, cultivate the land, and in their own words '*...sit down on the land like white men*'.⁴⁶

Their use of such words showed that not only had they learnt the white farming and construction skills necessary, but they had also learnt how to phrase their endeavours for white ears. However, no government funds were made available, so the people at Acheron were forced to earn money by working for other land holders in the area. This however had an enduring benefit in the friendship subsequently established between William Barak and Anne Fraser-Bon.⁴⁷

By this time Barak had re-established himself in a leadership role and following the death in 1860 both of Murrum and Munnering, Barak became number two man to Wonga. It was a clear sign of their pre-eminent prestige that, even though they were now on Taungerong land, both the number one and two men of the joint venture were Woiwurung.

However, the Kulin knew nothing of the conspiracy that was now unfolding by their neighbouring squatters at Acheron, in particular Hugh Glass and Peter Snodgrass. Hugh Glass was a land speculator and reputedly the richest man in Victoria, whilst Peter Snodgrass was a parliamentarian of considerable influence. Snodgrass was one of the estimated three hundred politicians and bureaucrats to whom Glass was rumoured to be paying bribes for their favours.⁴⁸ However another layer was added to the complexity in this saga, with the appointment in June 1860 of Robert Brough Smyth as Secretary to the newly created Aborigines Protection Board.

Cheated out of land at Acheron

Smyth was an ambitious and fastidious civil servant, who in very literal terms ensured that every 'i' was dotted and every 't' crossed in the reports of his underlings. Aged only twenty-two when he arrived in the colony in 1852, Smyth had quickly made a scientific reputation through his published articles on meteorology and geology. He became Secretary to the Board of Science in 1858 and also became a member of the Linnean Society. This was an international body that

studied physical anthropology and natural history, and also at that time had embraced the completely bogus science of phrenology.⁴⁹

Smyth's motivation in taking on the role of Honorary Secretary to the Aborigines Protection Board was therefore in no way driven by humanitarian concerns for Aboriginal people. His motive was solely to gain access to Aboriginal people as specimens of 'scientific study', and thereby further elevate his name in scholarly circles. And he proved to be completely Machiavellian in pursuit of this goal.

As APB Secretary, Smyth began collecting information from managers of Aboriginal Reserves across Victoria, aiming to publishing a definitive anthropological text. Ultimately, he did this in 1878 with the publication (at public expense) of his epic two volume tome *'The Aborigines of Victoria'*. This then saw him elevated in 1879 to the internationally esteemed scientific status of a 'Fellow of the Linnean Society'.

So, on becoming Secretary to the new Aborigines Protection Board in 1860, there was no way the upwardly aspiring Robert Brough Smyth was ever going to oppose the interests of Upper Goulburn squatters, such as Hugh Glass and Peter Snodgrass. Smyth therefore instead of supporting approval of the requested land at Acheron, arranged for approval of 16,000 acres at Mohican, which was further upstream to Acheron, and adjacent to the bleak and windswept Mount Cathedral.

As Smyth's underling, William Thomas accordingly arranged for four trustees to be appointed to oversee the Mohican project and *'protect the interests of the Aborigines'*. However, the four trustees appointed, namely Snodgrass, Maxwell, Aitken and McKenzie, were all local squatters who had a vested competitive interest in the land at Acheron.⁵⁰

The move served to expose a flaw in the makeup of William Thomas. He had previously shown that when dealing with 'the lower classes', such as the Richmond publican who had cheated Wonga of money, he was a fearless advocate for Aboriginal people. However, when Thomas was dealing with the landed gentry and upper classes, he was naively trusting and pliable. His observation of this flaw in Thomas' makeup would later serve Wonga well in ultimately achieving his plans to establish Coranderrk.

The land at Mohican immediately proved to be cold, bleak and inhospitable, and fifty-one of the eighty-six Kulin at Acheron refused to move there.⁵¹ In a stroke of good fortune, John Green had been appointed as an Inspector with the Aborigines Protection Board in August 1861 and in October 1861 he conducted an inspection of Mohican. Green strongly recommended a return to Acheron Station, but it was to no avail. The dice were already cast and the squatters had won out with their behind-the-scenes manipulations.

Green's standing with the Kulin at Wonga Park and Woori Yallock was enough for one hundred of them to come to Mohican with him from Woori Yallock in 1862. However, the bleak conditions caused many deaths and people soon started drifting back to the Yarra Valley. Wonga and Green continued to lobby and at the end of 1862, the Protection Board recognised that Mohican was simply not viable. After representations by Wonga 2,300 acres of land was identified at Badger Creek in the upper Yarra Valley.⁵²

It also seems that it was at this time that the Governor, Sir Henry Barkly, became aware of the situation. This is because while still at Mohican, Wonga already had his people preparing gifts for Queen Victoria, to be given at the Governor's official function the next May, which was still more than six months away.

So, in February 1863, the forty remaining people quit Mohican. Led by Wonga, Barak and Green, packed up their belongings in a couple of wagons and headed up the Maroondah Highway Songline. Driving some cattle before them they trekked for four arduous days with little food,

finally descending into present day Healesville via the traditional Songline, now known as 'Blacks' Spur'.⁵³

By early March 1863 they had settled on the land at Badger Creek, and set to work building bark huts and fences.⁵⁴ They also continued the work begun while still at Mohican, of producing cultural artefacts as presents for Queen Victoria on her birthday in three months time.⁵⁵ It was a plan that could not have been envisaged unless Wonga had already gained an audience with the Governor, Sir Henry Barkly.

The Good Mother Queen

Sir Henry Barkly had been the Governor of Victoria since 1856 and had previously been the Governor of Jamaica when his vice-regal powers were much greater. He had proven himself to be a great colonial administrator in Jamaica and a man of vision and integrity. However, in Victoria, he was faced with more restricted vice-regal powers and a volatile parliament that reflected the gold rush era.

The British government had been fully aware of the endemic corruption both in Victorian government and administration, and Barkly was just the man to manage such a volatile situation. That is why Sir Henry Barkly was in fact the highest paid Governor in the whole British Empire. From the time of Barkly's arrival in 1856 he showed great tactical nous in ensuring stable government in the new colony, despite the continuing rampant corruption. Sir Henry very quickly became aware of the corrupt power wielded by Hugh Glass, and no doubt was aware of his role in the loss of the Aboriginal Reserve at Acheron.

Wonga therefore decided to bypass parliament and pitch his case for Coranderrk directly to Governor Barkly himself, who was one of the few trustworthy officials in the colony. The news that the marriage of the Prince of Wales was to take place on May 10 1863 gave Wonga's plan some added impetus.

Queen Victoria's birthday was celebrated each year on May 24th and the date was later memorialised as Empire Day. The Queen's Birthday was a day of great celebration throughout the British Empire and each year Sir Henry Barkly, always held a pompous ceremonial event at Government House in South Yarra.

Wonga knew that he had to observe proper protocol by gaining permission from the Aborigines Protection Board, for the Kulin Elders to present traditional gifts at the Governor's May 24th levee. However, Wonga also knew full well that both Smyth and Thomas would give their eye teeth to attend the Governor's levee. So, Wonga duly approached Thomas to ask the Aborigines Protection Board for permission to present gifts to Queen Victoria at the Governor's levee on May 24th 1863.

Wonga's calculation immediately proved accurate. Both Thomas and Smyth scrambled to support the suggestion, as it would ensure their own invitations to the exclusive event. When Governor Barkly then willingly accepted the offer, the Kulin continued making traditional baskets, artefacts and rugs to present to the Queen. As well as this they also got busy making their own traditional ceremonial cloaks.

On the appointed day, May 24th 1863, the Elders, led by Wonga and Barak, walked along the Maroondah Highway Songline and on to Government House. All the Elders were clothed in European garb, over which they wore their possum skin cloaks. Each cloak was made from about forty pelts and had traditional totem designs on external leather side.⁵⁶

All the cream of Melbourne colonial society and members of Parliament were at the Government House reception. William Thomas and Robert Brough Smyth were both in their element, mixing with the upper classes. Both men revelled in their roles of interpreting the Woiwurung language address by Wonga and explaining traditional Aboriginal protocols. The people attending were in

breathless awe at the ceremonial dignity with which Wonga made his address and the Elders ritually presented their gifts for the 'Good Mother Queen' and the Prince of Wales.

Then at the end when everyone there had been swept up in the occasion, Wonga respectfully requested Governor Barkly's support for a grant of land at Coranderrk. Barkly had also ensured he was properly briefed before the event, so was of course well aware of the situation at Acheron and the unethical influence that was wielded by Hugh Glass over parliamentarians such as Peter Snodgrass. There is no doubt that Sir Henry had decided to correct the injustice that had occurred at Acheron. Barkly accordingly advised John O'Shanassy, the government leader of the day, that he would be forwarded the presents and his advice to the Queen. Barkly then indicated in no uncertain terms to O'Shanassy that if the grant of land at Coranderrk was not made immediately, then *'The Queen would not be happy'*.

The fact that this must have happened is blindingly obvious. Given the usual sailing time, it was more than three months before Queen Victoria actually received the gifts, along with Barkly's explanatory note. The Queen's formal response was then duly despatched via the Colonial Secretary on 18th September 1863.⁵⁷ This reply was then conveyed by ship back to Australia, and not received until early 1864. However, back in the last week of May 1863, the Victorian government was in no mood to take the next eight months playing brinkmanship with Queen Victoria and risk the displeasure Barkly had predicted. The request for land at Coranderrk was therefore processed through the administration without delay.

The result was that barely five weeks later, on the 30th June 1863, Coranderrk was officially gazetted as an Aboriginal Reserve. The presentation of the petition and the prompt gazettement of the approval five weeks later was no 'coincidence' as some authors have opined. Such a view implicitly denigrates Aboriginal capacity and what was in reality, a deliberate strategic masterstroke by Wonga.

Wonga's legacy and the mystery of his death

Wonga's strategic nous came directly from his understanding not just of the differences between colonial and Aboriginal society, but how to identify and communicate similarities. On the one hand colonial society was driven by principles of vested authority, class and wealth. On the other hand, however, Aboriginal society was driven by principles of mutual respect and reciprocal obligation.

Despite this fundamental difference, Wonga and other Elders perceived that their leaders, like the leaders of colonial society, could properly be seen as a class of 'Gentlemen'. This was indeed how the Aboriginal leaders commonly presented themselves.⁵⁸ Wonga therefore willingly cooperated in any undertaking that would enhance his image and status within colonial society. He posed both in traditional and European garb for lithograph sketches, wood engravings and photographs. In 1861 he even allowed a plaster cast of his head to be made for display in a London Exhibition.⁵⁹

Wonga did this, not in pursuit of his own ego or through obsequiousness, but in an effort to build cross-cultural understanding and respect. When ordinary people today look at any of the many images and photographs of Wonga, such as those within this article, the response is always one of awe. Wonga's traits of humility, intelligence, statesmanship and strength of character are immediately obvious, and these are the very traits that ensured the success of Coranderrk over the next decade.

The training of the people in farm and construction skills that Wonga has organised in the preceding decade paid immediate dividends when the Kulin settled at Coranderrk in 1863. Crops were quickly planted and houses built. As well as this, baskets, rugs and artefacts were made for the tourist trade and a viable economic base for Coranderrk was quickly established.

Reverend John Green was installed by the Aborigines Protection Board as Manager at Coranderrk and Green made good with his pledge to Wonga. Green carried the official status as Manager, but Wonga made all the decisions in consultation with his fellow Elders.⁶⁰ Green was included in this process and in government circles this was interpreted as Green democratically involving the Aboriginal people in his decision making.⁶¹ In reality though, Green simply continued to act as Wonga's middle-man in dealing with the government and the Aborigines Protection Board.

Unlike other Reserves and managers such as Fredrich Hagenauer, who suppressed traditional language and culture, Green encouraged the preservation of traditional language and cultural practices. In response many of the Kulin embraced Green's Presbyterian Christianity and did not regard church attendance as just burdensome 'Hallalooya Work' as they derisively referred to it.

As a consequence of the prosperity in the first three years, the government virtually doubled the size of Coranderrk in 1866 to nearly 5000 acres. By then they were growing wheat and had become self sufficient in flour. Following this, hops were planted and it became a very profitable business.⁶² However, despite Green's unparalleled success as manager of Coranderrk, he was subject to constant criticism by Robert Brough Smyth, the despotic BPA Secretary. Smyth regarded him as too soft and indulgent with his native charges. By 1873 Smyth had essentially completed the task of gathering information for his epic two-volume book, so he was keen to close Coranderrk and open up the now valuable land to settlers.

Wonga had also become increasingly unwell during Coranderrk's first decade. He had originally been diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1861 and by the early 1870's had become severely ill. By this time Barak had effectively become the day-to-day leader at Coranderrk,⁶³ within the continuing tribal tradition of '*Speaking with His Voice*'. By 1874 Wonga was gravely ill and not expected to live out the year. It was probably not at all coincidental that Smyth in mid-1874 persuaded the Board of Protection for Aborigines to conduct a formal inquiry into Green's allegedly poor performance as the Manager of Coranderrk.

Even though Green was able to answer the various trumped-up allegations, he indicated in August 1874 that the lack of faith shown by the Board and its Secretary, combined with his and his family's recent ill health, made him feel like resigning. At Smyth's instigation the comment was then promptly accepted as a resignation and a new Manager, Heinrich Stahle, was installed within a week.⁶⁴

By late December 1874 Wonga was near death and although the January 1875 report by the manager noted two deaths in the previous quarter, no names were listed. There is therefore no actual record of Wonga's death and no record of any funeral arrangements in the manager's January 1875 report. There is also no record of any enquiry by Coranderrk residents as to any burial arrangements for Wonga. However, it may well be that the residents were all still culturally precluded from mentioning the name of their now dead Headman, and that the traditional twenty-eight day 'Sorry-Time' still applied.

Strangely there is also no record of any death certificate ever being issued. The mystery is compounded by the fact that at Coranderrk cemetery, Wonga's name appears as the very last on the monument, and wrongly identifies him as being Bunnerong. It seems that when the memorial was erected in 1980, they adopted Brough Smyth's erroneous 1878 claim that Wonga was born at Arthur's Seat on the Peninsula.

It is also claimed that Wonga is buried in gravesite 45 and his wife Maria is in gravesite 43. However, inspection of the National and State archives throws this into serious doubt.⁶⁶ Neither record was contemporaneous. In the early 1900's the national records were transcribed in writing from the original records. The state records were then transcribed in type from the national records in the mid 1970's, but with various additions and deletions.

For instance, the national record lists the occupant of grave 45 as 'King Symon' with his birthplace given as 'Geelong' and no death date included. In the state record '(Simon Wonga)' has been added in brackets. A death date of 1875 has also been added, plus a note '*Preceded Barak as Chief of the Yarra Tribe*'. The national record also lists 'Maria Symon' from 'Geelong' in grave 43, but the state record just says 'Maria'.

Although well intentioned, these changes have hindered consideration that Simon Wonga and King Symon might in fact be two different people. This proposition is supported by a William Thomas diary entry on 2nd June 1864 that said '*the King from Geelong*' had arrived in Melbourne to '*go and see Wonga up the Yarra*'.⁶⁵ Also, Wonga's wife Maria lived several years after him and married again, so it seems most likely that gravesite 43 does not contain Maria Wonga, but is indeed Maria Symon from Geelong.

If Wonga's body is missing, there is a gruesome possibility to consider. On 28th May 1864, ten years before Wonga's death, the Aboriginal leader Derrimut died and was buried at the Melbourne Cemetery. Five months after this, the unscrupulous BPA Secretary, Robert Brough Smyth, gained permission to have Derrimut's body exhumed 'for scientific study'. This was done, and a doctor at the Alfred Hospital then boiled down Derrimut's skull and presented it to Smyth. The demonic Smyth then duly noted in his diary that the skull of a recently deceased Chief was now in his possession.⁶⁷

There is no record of correspondence between Robert Brough-Smyth and the new Coranderk Manager in late December 1874 or early January 1875, indicating that a wagon had been despatched to or from Coranderk to fetch Wonga's body. However, this is not evidence that it did not happen. Smyth's initiation of a bogus inquiry into Green's performance in August 1874 is just the sort of Machiavellian manoeuvring one could expect from him in order to get access to Wonga's body when he died.

Is it therefore possible that Wonga's skull could have ended up alongside that of Derrimut, on the desk of Robert Brough-Smyth, the Secretary to the Aborigines Protection Board? The true whereabouts of Wonga's body is a question that has been raised before,⁶⁸ but still remains unanswered.

Wonga deserves better than to allow this macabre mystery to linger on unresolved.

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