

THE INSIDIOUS ACCLIMATISATION SOCIETY

After Simon Wonga assumed Kulin leadership in early 1851, it took a further twelve years of struggle before the Coranderrk Mission Station was officially established in June 1863. William Barak was then number two man and Wonga had been diagnosed with tuberculosis the year before in 1862. So leadership increasingly fell to Barak over the next decade as Wonga's health worsened.

By the time of Wonga's death in December 1874, Coranderrk had become the most successful Mission in Australia, and not just in economic terms. With the enlightened Reverend John Green as their front man, Wonga and Barak were able to sustain traditional culture. As a deliberate political strategy as well in tribute to John Green, Barak increasingly wove stories that showed parallels of his culture with Christianity.

Also as a deliberate political strategy, Barak forged strong and genuine friendships with influential local settlers. This for instance included the winemaker Baron dePury, and David Mitchell who built many Melbourne cathedrals and the Exhibition Buildings. Mitchell's daughter, Helen, was to become the world famous opera singer, Dame Nellie Melba. Such people often had European nobility as guests, and Barak was always introduced as their local nobility.

One such occasion, when Mitchell was entertaining overseas guests, was in June 1875. Mitchell asked Barak to shoot some Indian Deer for him that had been released at about 1870 into the Yarra Glen area. Barak subsequently shot five deer for about ten shillings each, and in doing so, set in motion, events that would threaten the survival of Coranderrk for the next fifty years.

The deer had been released by a most influential group, the '*Acclimatisation Society of Victoria*' (ASV), which had formed in 1857. It was dedicated to enlivening the '*drab Australian bush*' by introducing many exotic plants and animals, thus causing wholesale destruction of native flora and fauna. The introduced species for instance included starlings, sparrows, salmon, camels, angora goats, foxes, blackberries and rabbits.

The ASV had established the Melbourne Zoo in 1862 and envisioned establishing a '*wildlife sanctuary*' in the Healesville area. By 1872, the Acclimatisation Society had begun morphing into the Zoological Society and in 1875, was incensed to hear that some of its precious Indian Spotted Deer had been shot.

The Society immediately sought an explanation from the Aborigines Protection Board (APB), through their member, Robert Brough Smyth, who was also the APB Secretary. In 1862, Smyth had previously colluded with squatters and corrupt politicians to prevent an Aboriginal Reserve being established at Acheron.

In 1868, Smyth tried to have Coranderrk closed and the residents sent to Gippsland, but he was thwarted by John Green. Smyth then undermined Green and finally engineered his

sacking in August 1874. From that time on, the conditions at Coranderrk deteriorated rapidly.

To their chagrin, the Acclimatisers were informed that the Aborigines at Coranderrk had permission to hunt game to supplement their rations, so the Society decided on a direct strategy - take over the APB and get rid of Coranderrk. So within two weeks of learning of the loss of six deer in June 1875, the Acclimatisation and Zoological Society had three of its members appointed to the APB, and a fourth member two months later.

Under the hostile Board, conditions at Coranderrk continued to deteriorate, so on 18th February 1876, Barak walked to Melbourne with a deputation of Elders to see James MacPherson, the Premier. MacPherson immediately launched an investigation into Smyth's conduct. This led to Smyth ultimately being sacked, but the Acclimatiser-dominated APB simply continued on as before.

Not even a Royal Commission, launched in 1877, was able to dent the power of the Aborigines Protection Board. It continued to fill the role of Secretary, with people who were plainly malevolent to Aboriginal people and who treated the succession of Coranderrk managers as mere puppets.

On 22nd March 1881, the now 58 year-old Barak, with a still-healing broken leg, again walked to Melbourne with a deputation of Elders to see the then Premier, Graham Berry. This led to a Parliamentary Inquiry being launched in September 1881, but once more the APB manipulated the outcome and nothing was achieved.

The population of Coranderrk continued to drop, both through an increasing death rate and more people leaving to find gainful employment. The continued push for '*assimilation*' of Aboriginal people then saw the so-called '*Half Caste Act*' of 1886 passed, which forbade any mixed-race Aboriginal person under age 35 from living on a government Reserve.

It was the death knell for Coranderrk and Barak himself died in 1903 at age 80. With only a dozen or so elderly people left by 1923, Coranderrk was closed. However before that, the famed naturalist Colin Mackenzie was in 1920, granted 70 acres of land excised from Coranderrk on which to site a wildlife reserve. It may have taken nearly fifty years from when Barak shot their deer, but the Acclimatisers had finally won.