

## THE ADMIRABLE JOHN GREEN

A very early settler at Wonga Park, the Reverend John Green, was a significant figure in the founding and then running of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, from 1858 to 1874. The historian Diane Barwick referred to him as 'the admirable John Green' and for very good reason.

Virtually nothing is known of John Green's early life, apart from having been born in Aberdeen Scotland in 1830, and marrying in August 1857, when his occupation was listed as a Missionary. The very next day, he and his 22 years old wife Mary, sailed off to Australia. Although he was only 27, Green had seemingly achieved some financial independence, because he was able to pursue his calling without the sponsorship of a church.

On arriving in Melbourne in December 1857, John attended a Sunday service and his strength of character was immediately on display. The sermon being given was about evangelising to Aboriginal people, but the speaker spoke of them as being inferior people. John immediately rose to his feet and interjected, saying that all people were the children of God, and we were all equal in the eyes of the Lord.

John and Mary then settled at Brushy Creek in Wonga Park, where they established a dwelling, chapel and school and set about being of practical assistance to the local Aboriginal people. Their approach soon enabled them to establish strong egalitarian friendships, and this included with the tribal leaders, Simon Wonga and William Barak.

Green immediately took on Wonga's vision of land rights for his people, and began working toward establishing an Aboriginal station at Woori Yallock, which was in fact Wonga's birthplace. Then in February 1859, Wonga took the opportunity to try and establish a station at Acheron in the upper Goulburn.

However, in 1860 a new Aboriginal Protectorate was established with the officious Robert Brough Smyth as Secretary. Smyth was immediately influenced by the complaints of wealthy local squatters and politicians, who wanted the Acheron land for themselves. As a result, Wonga and his people were forced to vacate Acheron and move to the cold and bleak Mohican Station at Mount Cathedral.

Having already come under notice for his positive work, John Green was in 1861 appointed as an Inspector with the new Aborigines Protection Board, but his democratic approach quickly earned him the enmity of the despotic Smyth. This was made worse when Green filed an adverse report on the prospects of Mohican Station, and recommending that a reserve be established at Woori Yallock in the Yarra Valley. Preliminary approval was then given in early 1862, but this was then revoked later in that year.

However, by late 1862 Wonga and Green gained an indication from sources outside the Aborigines Protection Board, that it might be possible to establish a Reserve at Badger Creek

in the Upper Yarra. So, in early 1863 Wonga, Barak, Green and the forty people remaining at Mohican, packed up and left for the Yarra Valley, driving a herd of cattle before them.

After settling at Coranderrk in February 1863 Wonga, with the close cooperation of the Governor Sir Henry Barkly, successfully petitioned for the establishment of Coranderrk. This was formalised on 30th June 1863 and John Green was appointed Manager. By this time Coranderrk was already a hive of industry. Nine European style bark huts had been erected and many possum-rugs, reed baskets and artefacts had been made for the passing tourist trade. This then provided the capital to buy clothing, tools and horses.

Within two years wheat and vegetable crops had been harvested, along with stocks of cattle, horses and pigs. This then resulted in a further government grant of 2550 acres in 1866. Hop farming then added valuable income, accompanied by Agricultural Show prizes. So, under Green's collaborative approach, Coranderrk over the next decade became economically and socially, the most successful Aboriginal Reserve in Australia.

But the writing was already on wall as the land had become too valuable, and moves were afoot to resettle the Coranderrk community up on the Murray River. Accordingly, Smyth, the Protection Board Secretary, began to pressure Green to comply, but he resisted. By August 1874 Green was at the end of his tether and threatened to resign, so Smyth used it as a pretext to dismiss him. With the death of Wonga four months later, it was all downhill from there, despite the heroic resistance of Barak for nearly the next thirty years, right up until his death in 1903.

The sacking of Green as Coranderrk Manager and then as Protection Board Inspector, did not end his association with the Aboriginal community. John and Mary continued their close friendships in the succeeding decades. Both also became stalwarts of the wider community with John being elected to the new Healesville Shire Council and serving as Mayor. However, he remained most fondly remembered within the Aboriginal community, as someone who shared their basic values.