

BARAK'S ACCOUNT OF MEETING BATMAN

William Barak is the most famous of all Woiwurrung leaders and was born in September 1823 at Brushy Creek near the Yarra River in Wonga Park. This suburb was named after Barak's cousin Simon Wonga, whom Barak succeeded as Wurundjeri leader in 1874.

Barak and Wonga were both present at the historic meeting with Batman on June 6th 1835. At the time Barak was almost 12 and Wonga almost 14. Ever since then, there has been controversy about where the so-called 'treaty' meeting was really held. The Merri Creek near Rushall Station has long been the political front runner.

About 2012, I was shown a document dictated by William Barak when he was 65 in 1888, and I had not seen it before. The document was a brief but rather discursive account of the 1835 meeting with Batman.

When I read the document I could hardly believe my eyes as it completely contradicted conventional wisdom. The problem was that unless you had some understanding of the traditional Aboriginal mindset, it would not make sense. I therefore took a copy of Barak's document and began to tease out these hidden meanings.

After this I carefully studied with new eyes, Batman's purported daily account of his six days in Melbourne and his report to Governor Arthur. There were some stark discrepancies between the two documents, which would be apparent to any reader. However some other outright falsehoods would only be apparent if you had some knowledge of Aboriginal land use and navigation practices.

There were therefore a number of irreconcilable differences between the accounts of Batman and Barak and of course I preferred to believe Barak. He was after all a man of impeccable character and integrity, whereas Batman was a proven liar, braggart, swindler, lecher and murderer. But apart from that he was a good bloke.

Take for example Batman's claim that in each of the first four days, he walked thirty miles before meeting the Woiwurrung. That is 120 miles in four days. Not even a fully fit army commando would be capable of such a feat. Batman at the time had tertiary stage syphilis and was dead four years later. He spent the last year of his life being trundled around in a wheelbarrow. So let's throw his diary to one side and look at what Barak said.

Batman brought seven Sydney Aboriginal men with him as guides and interpreters, but strangely never really mentions them after arriving in Melbourne. Barak on the other hand tells us that Batman gave his Sydney men a couple of bags of potatoes and told them to make contact with the locals and arrange a meeting.

To cite Barak's own words: *'Batman sent some potatoes from Melbourne to the camp of the Yarra blacks. Then the Blacks travel to Idelberg. All the Blacks camp at Muddy Creek'*.

This can only mean that Batman moored his boat at present-day Melbourne then instructed his Sydney men to take gifts of potatoes in a northeast direction, where smoke had been seen from the Bay. The Sydney guides then travelled along the plainly visible Songline route out to Heidelberg.

Barak's concluding snippet then explained that the Sydney men were told at Heidelberg that the Elders were already meeting at 'Muddy Creek', which translates in Woiwurrung to 'Kurrum Yallock'. This was in fact the name recorded by the Aboriginal Protector William Thomas, as being the original name of the Plenty River.

In contrast, 'Merri' means rocky in Woiwurrung, so the meeting was not held on 'Rocky Creek' as is now so widely believed. None other than William Barak says this is so, and he was there. The main source of authority saying it was on the Merri Creek was John Pascoe Fawkner, and he was not there.

It is also instructive that Gellibrand, the lawyer in Batman's syndicate, is the person who named it the Plenty River. Gellibrand also confirmed that this was indeed where Batman's meeting was held.

Having some knowledge of Aboriginal geography and the course of traditional Aboriginal Songlines was instrumental in reconstructing Batman's real itinerary, not the phony one in his diary.

To Batman's Sydney guides the landmarks and features along the Songlines would have stood out like neon lights. When the ship docked at the William Street falls, they simply followed the Songline up William Street, past the law courts and Victoria Market to the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

There the Songline split into three, Flemington Road, Sydney Road and across Melbourne University to Heidelberg Road. Once they had made contact at Heidelberg, the Sydney men returned to advise Batman and guide him to Greensborough.

After the meeting they returned by a more direct route. One of the few accurate journal notes Batman made was that to get back to their ship, they walked '*twelve miles in a south-west direction*'. Have a look at the Melways. It stands out like a sore thumb that this was the Plenty Road Songline.