

WILLIAM BARAK- AUSTRALIA'S LEADING CIVIL RIGHTS FIGURE OF THE 19TH CENTURY



William Barak 1823-1903

William Barak was born at Brushy Creek in present-day Wonga Park in 1823. The park was named after his cousin Simon Wonga who preceded Barak as Ngurungaeta (Headman, pronounced ung-uh-rung-eye-tuh) of the Woiwurung. Both Wonga and Barak had been present as 13 and 11 years old in 1835 when John Batman met tribal Elders on the Plenty River. Batman claimed he was purchasing their land, but to the Woiwurung it was a Tanderrum Ceremony, inviting white people to share the bounty and stewardship of the land. Apart from having been decimated by the smallpox holocausts of 1789 and 1828, the motivation for offering to share the land was that the escaped convict William Buckley had warned them for many years that white men would come with terrible weapons and take the land. The Woiwurung were soon to be massively disappointed when the incoming stream of white people showed a complete ignorance on any principles of ecological management and brought even more diseases.

Within a decade the Kulin people had been driven from their lands and prevented from conducting annual burning off to regenerate food sources and prevent bushfires. The remnants of the Kulin were forced to either live in poverty on the urban fringes, or in camps along the Yarra such as at Bolin-Bolin Billabong and Pound Bend in Warrandyte. Both Barak and Wonga meanwhile set about gaining an education in the ways of the white man with Barak attending the government's Yarra Mission School from 1837 to 1839, then joining the Native Mounted Police in 1842. In this role Barak soon found fame as a blacktracker and was often employed to track lost children and fugitives. With gold discovered at Warrandyte, Ballarat and Bendigo in 1851 many troopers and officers left the Native Police and with the death of its Commander Henry Dana in 1852 the Native Police Force collapsed. Barak then joined his cousin Simon Wonga, who after the death of his father in 1846, eventually succeeded him as Headman. Wonga had organised the last great corroboree of the Kulin Nation at Pound Bend in Warrandyte in March 1852, then worked on a cattle-run at Wonga Park whilst planning and lobbying to gain a grant of land for his people. It was here at Wonga Park (named after Simon) that Barak joined Wonga where they first met the lay preacher, John Green. Green was to become instrumental in the ultimate founding of Coranderrk in 1963.

It took until 1859 until Wonga was finally successful in his petition for a grant of land on the Acheron River in the Upper Goulburn. Wonga and Barak then led the remnants of the Kulin tribes on a march from Melbourne to Acheron to claim their land. However, it was not long before they were cheated out of their land by powerful local squatters Hugh Glass and Peter Snodgrass who had enormous parliamentary influence. The Kulin were forced on to cold and miserable land at Mohican before finally being able to gain a promise of land in the Upper Yarra area. Wonga and Barak then led the remaining 30 of their people over the Blacks Spur Songline to Healesville in February 1863. After unsuccessfully petitioning the Aborigines Protection Board, the politically savvy Wonga and Barak led a deputation to Governor Barkly's residence in South Yarra. They walked all the way from Healesville on the Queen's Birthday, May 24th 1863 to present gifts to the Prince of Wales and 'The Great Mother Queen Victoria'. The Governor, Sir Henry Barkly, then successfully pressured the government to formally grant Coranderrk to the Woiwurung in June 1863.

With John Green appointed as Superintendent, Wonga and Barak set about establishing crops of wheat, vegetables and hops and a large herd of cattle. By the time Barak succeeded Wonga on his cousin's death in December 1874, Coranderrk had already established itself as the most economically thriving Mission Station in Australia, but the government pocketed the profits. Despite the economic success of Coranderrk repeated attempts were made by the Aborigines Protection Board to close Coranderrk and sell it off. Many times, Barak and other Elders walked from Coranderrk to Parliament House, by-passing the bureaucrats and going straight to the Parliament. This strategy was also accompanied by clever use of the newspapers of the day and aided by Barak's growing national and international fame as an artist, singer, storyteller and keeper of his people's culture. With his charismatic and dignified persona Barak became an Australia-wide leader for the civil rights of Aboriginal people and in his later years became an internationally feted celebrity. He died on 15th August 1903 and lies at rest in the Coranderrk Cemetery.