

THE UNLIKELY ALLIANCE THAT ESTABLISHED CORANDERRK

The two most instrumental figures, in the formal establishment of Coranderrk in June 1863, are undoubtedly the Aboriginal leader, Simon Wonga, and the Victorian Governor, Sir Henry Barkly. In company with his fellow Elders, Wonga presented a petition to the Governor at an official function on May 24th 1863 at Government House in South Yarra. Then on the 30th June 1863, Coranderrk was officially gazetted as an Aboriginal Reserve.

Ever since then, historical accounts have tended to treat this event as nothing more than a happy coincidence. However, something so neatly hand-in-glove, surely warrants a somewhat closer examination of the preceding circumstances.

Warrandyte

The most convenient starting point is probably in late 1850, when the government decided to establish an Aboriginal Reserve at Warrandyte. In response to this, Simon Wonga was immediately elevated to Kulin leadership, in order to guide this process. However, as fate would have it, gold was immediately discovered at Warrandyte, then shortly after that, at Ballarat and Bendigo.

Workers and immigrants flooded the goldfields and probably, the most turbulent period in Victorian history ensued over the next few years. Melbourne ended up being the richest city in the British Empire and also became a cesspit of corruption and governmental incompetence. The Eureka Stockade Rebellion in 1854 was just one symptom of the rampant government corruption that was evident.

By the end of 1856, the British government felt compelled to act and took the opportunity to appoint Sir Henry Barkly as Governor of Victoria. He was given a clear mandate to fix up the mess and given a salary that was commensurate with the job. He was in fact, at that time, the highest paid Governor in the whole British Empire.

Unfortunately, he did not have the same executive power in Victoria as he had enjoyed in his previous job as Governor of Jamaica, so he now had to rely on a more persuasive, behind-the-scenes strategy.

For instance, Barkly was a patron of the sciences and in 1859 accordingly became President of the Royal Society. In this role, he came to know the Secretary of the Board of Science, Robert Brough Smyth who, in June 1860, was to also become Secretary of the new Aborigines Protection Board. These were handy sorts of relationships.

Acheron

By this time in early 1860, Wonga had finally been able to get preliminary approval for Kulin to take over an area of land at Acheron in the Upper Goulburn. However, some local squatters, including the land speculator, Hugh Glass, and a Member of Parliament, Peter Snodgrass, were keen on taking the land themselves. Glass was by then the richest man in Victoria and was rumoured to be paying bribes to more than 300 politicians and bureaucrats for their favours.

There is therefore, no doubt that Governor Barkly had a keen interest in Hugh Glass' activities and it seems he had already established a line of communication with Simon Wonga. For instance, William Thomas, the Aboriginal Protector, noted in his diary on 8th December 1859, that the Governor had received a present of four hand-made baskets from the Kulin women at Acheron. Barkly then communicated his thanks and indicated his intention to see them.

Coranderrk

It is also known that in early 1861, Wonga had begun making representations to the Protection Board about an alternative site for a Reserve in the Upper Yarra, near his birthplace at Woori Yallock. Barkly was no doubt quite aware of this, so it seems more than just coincidence, that in 1862 the Kulin suddenly began making presents for Queen Victoria, to be given to the Governor on May 24th 1863, more than six months away.

On the appointed day, the Kulin Elders attended the Governor's official levee, along with the cream of colonial society. They ceremonially made speeches and gave their presents of artefacts to the 'Great Mother Queen'. Then as leader, Wonga presented a petition to Governor Barkly, requesting a grant of land at Coranderrk. Seemingly quite unsurprised at this supposedly surprising turn of events, Barkly gave a speech of thanks, indicating that he would immediately forward their gifts to the Queen with his personal letter of support.

It should be noted that it would have taken a minimum of three months for the gifts and Barkly's letter to reach the Queen and a further three months for any reply to come back, so this would not be until early 1864. However, rather than risking the displeasure of the Queen, and with Barkly no doubt quietly pointing this out to the government, the decision to approve the establishment of Coranderrk was taken immediately.

As a consequence, Coranderrk was gazetted as an Aboriginal Reserve barely five weeks later, on the 30th June 1863. So, are we supposed to believe that this was all just a happy coincidence or was there really an active alliance between these two exemplary men, Simon Wonga and Henry Barkly?