

## **THE ENDURING FRIENDSHIP OF BARAK AND BON**

In early 1859 the Kulin people, under the leadership of Simon Wonga, gained initial permission to take over an abandoned farm in the Upper Goulburn near present day Alexandra. Their intention was to establish an economically self-sustaining Reserve for themselves, by growing crops and running livestock 'like whitefellahs'..

William Barak was at that time not in the Kulin leadership group. After spending more than a decade in the ultimately disgraced Native Police, Barak was trying re-establish his standing. He was able to do this over the next couple of years at Acheron, and by then had risen to Number Two Man behind Wonga.

Much of his success in re-establishing his name and reputation can be attributed to the strong friendship that he developed with Ann Bon, the wife of a Scottish settler, John Bon. It would prove to be a friendship that endured for the next 44 years, until Barak's death at age 80 in 1903

Already a successful and wealthy pastoralist, John Bon had only met and married the much younger Ann in 1858. On arrival at his Upper Goulburn station 'Wappan' in that same year, Ann quickly showed that she would be no ordinary shy and retiring young housewife. With her husband's full support, Ann involved herself in all aspects of farm management, including the hiring and firing of workers.

Unlike many local settlers, John Bon had willingly employed Aboriginal workers on full wages, so Ann continued and extended this practice. She quickly found, particularly when working through William Barak, that the Aboriginal men and women were loyal, reliable and skilled in all that they did.

In particular, the men proved to be top class shearers and became much sought after across the region. Even after Coranderrk was established in the Yarra Valley in 1863 and the Kulin all moved there, the men continued their seasonal shearing work for Bon and other pastoralists in the Upper Goulburn Region.. Ann also maintained her contact with Barak and often visited her many friends at Coranderrk.

When John Bon died unexpectedly in 1868, Ann was left with a young family and the flourishing Wappan Estate to manage, but she was more than up to the task. Over the next decade, her shrewd management saw her become one of the wealthiest women in Victoria. She also became a significant philanthropic donor, in particular to the Austin Hospital of which she was a founding member.

Ann subsequently bought a stately house in Kew which, to the quiet concern of some local residents, became host to occasional crowds of overnight guests from Coranderrk. By the time of Simon Wonga's death from tuberculosis in late 1874, Coranderrk had become socially and economically the most successful Aboriginal Mission in Australia, but the writing

was already on the wall. The land in the Upper Yarra had become too valuable and Coranderrk was an impediment to development.

The Aborigines Protection Board consequently began starving the Mission of resources, causing conditions at Coranderrk to deteriorate badly over the course of the 1870's. This resulted in many deaths from pneumonia and other lung complaints, so Barak decided to try and bypass the APB..

In 1881, with the key help of Ann Bon, William Barak led a deputation of Elders to see the Chief Secretary, Graeme Berry, who initiated a Parliamentary Inquiry. Ann Bon was duly appointed to sit on the Inquiry which produced its findings late in 1881. It recommended that Coranderrk not be sold and that the Aborigines Protection Board be made responsible to the Chief Secretary.

However, the APB simply ignored the findings and continued to run Coranderrk down. In 1886 it engineered the infamous 'Half Cast Act' and with Berry now the Agent-General in London, the Bill was passed by parliament. This then saw all Coranderrk residents of mixed-race ancestry and aged over 35, forced off the Mission. Coranderrk was therefore doomed to wither away with an ever ageing and frail population.

Ann Bon continued to provide her personal material and financial support to Coranderrk residents over this period of inevitable decline, as well as penning frequent letters of complaint directly to the Aborigines Protection Board. This caused the Board members much ire and consternation and it testily rebuked her for her 'constant meddling' in Board affairs.

Bon made several applications to be appointed to the Aborigines Protection Board, but all were refused until after Barak's death in 1903. In what may have been an act of conscience, Bon was finally appointed to the APB, but they soon began to regret their contrition. Bon continued her advocacy and exposure of inappropriate policies and practices, which caused the Board to formally censure her on three occasions for 'disloyalty'. Ann Bon continued her passionate advocacy for Aboriginal people, right up to her death in 1936 at the grand age of 98.