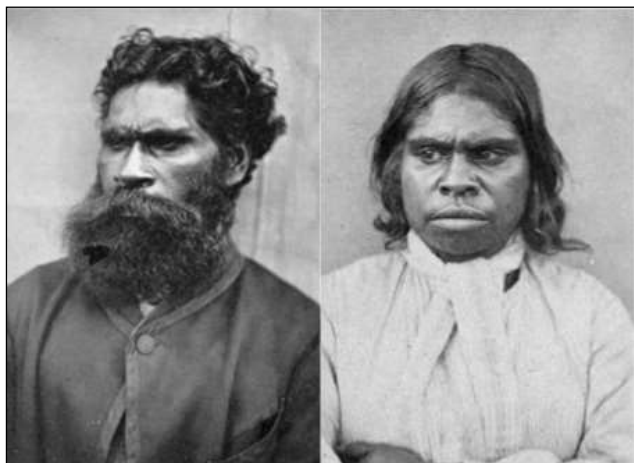


WILLIAM BARAK (1823 - 1903)



Barak (aka Beruk, Berak, Bair-uk, Berwick, Berrick, Bearack, King Billy, King William) was born in September 1823 at Brushy Creek (Croydon) near the Yarra River in Wonga Park at the Barangeong Birthing Site. His father was Bebejan who was Ngurungaeta (clan leader) of the Wurrundjeri clan whose Country centred on the Darebin Creek and the Plenty River; they were part of the Woiwurrung tribe of the Kulin nation which comprised of five tribes centred around Melbourne. Bebejan was born about 1795 to Poers-roen-gy (father) and Barta (mother). Barak's mother was Tooterrie, a Ngurailam-wurrung woman who was born about 1790 around Murchison on the Goulburn River, Victoria. Barak had a brother Jellybrook (Harry Miller 1816-1891) and a sister Borate (Annie 1835-1874).

Barak was identified as a gifted child at an early age and was groomed for leadership. He was initiated in 1834 at age eleven and this was probably at Ngyelong (Hanging Rock) which was a key male initiation site for the Woiwurrung.¹ Barak also had some training in the arts of the wirrarap (doctors and sorcerers) but apparently did not practice this role in later life.

The early 1800s was a difficult time for First Nations People in general and their generation of Ngurungaetas in particular, as their world was changing incomprehensibly around them, triggered by the arrival of the British colonizers and their boatloads of convicts in the 1780s.

Within weeks of the first colonial arrivals in New South Wales the Aboriginal people were succumbing to diseases to which they had no immunity, the worst ones being chicken pox, small pox, influenza and measles – it's been said that in 1789 the first smallpox plague in Australia wiped out half the Aboriginal population and a whole generation of elders.² James Boyce estimates there were at least 60,000 First Nations People in Victoria in the 1780s.³ The numbers declined to about 30,000 in the 1790s and halved again to 15,000 in the 1830s after the second smallpox plague in 1828 wiped out another generation of elders.⁴ Each epidemic resulted in a 50% mortality rate for the local people.

An average figure for the Aboriginal population of Victoria in 1836 is 6,500, which means that the generation of older Woiwurrung leaders like Ninggollobin, Billibellary and Bungeerim, had been witnessing the death of about 90% of their people during their reign as ngurungaetas.

In 1835 when John Batman and his Port Phillip Association followers came from Tasmania looking for new land to occupy, there were only about 3,500 Woiwurrung people left in Victoria.⁵

Barak's connection with early Melbourne colonial history is that as an eleven-year-old he and his thirteen-year-old cousin Wonga were observers at the signing of John Batman's treaty with the Victoria's Kulin Nation people in 1835. Barak's father Bebejan (aka Bebejern, Bebejin or Jerum Jerum) and his uncle Billebellari (Wonga's father) were two of the signatories to the treaty. There has been much conjecture about where this treaty occurred, and Barak was always adamant it was at Brushy Creek. Some later reviewers claim the Kulin representatives were not impressed with team Batman's consequent behaviour:

*"Their fathers had offered the strangers hospitality and protection. But the Ngamajet [white men], if men at all, were mannerless men. The few granted sanctuary in 1835 had returned with others of their kind who did not return to their own country when the seasons changed. They stayed on Kulin land and called it their own."*⁶

Governor Bourke of New South Wales also wasn't impressed with Batman's treaty and declared it invalid in August 1835. The authorities declared that the British Crown owned the entire land of Australia and that

¹ Poulter

² Poulter p3

³ James Boyce p215

⁴ Poulter p3

⁵ (Broome 1987:6) Isabel Ellender, *The Aboriginal Heritage of the Shire of Eltham*. March 1994; p11

⁶ Rebellion at Coranderk p16

only it could sell or distribute the land – legally, the First Nations People who had occupied their country for 100,000 years were now dispossessed of their birthright, according to British law.

Contrary to some press articles of the time, the Batman brothers were not friends and conciliators of the Aborigines, their facade of friendliness masking greed and cruelty. They were self-interested exploiters and occasionally worse. John Batman had been involved in bounty hunting and a massacre of Tasmanian people, and had admitted to deliberately killing two injured men. In 1829 he led a night attack on a family group numbering 60 to 70 men, women and children. In his report of the incident to the police magistrate, Batman estimated that they had killed 15 people.⁷ Henry Batman, John's brother, was involved in one of the first massacres of Kulin people in Victoria at Mount Cottrell, when a group of 17 men (including some natives) organised revenge killings:

*"On 16 July 1836, a number of Aboriginal people of a single Wathaurong (previously thought to be possibly Woiwurrung) clan were murdered in retaliation for the killing of squatter Charles Franks and his convict shepherd Thomas Flinders. Estimates of the number of victims vary between 5 and 35, with recent research ... by the University of Newcastle ... putting the number of dead at 10 Wathawurrung people."*⁸

According to Aboriginal oral history, there were 35 victims of this massacre, including men, women and children. It's likely that the execution of Franks and Flinders was reprisal for the abduction of a young Aboriginal woman that had occurred on the property several months earlier.⁹ Port Phillip Magistrate William Lonsdale investigated the massacre incident and interviewed the alleged killers in order to apprehend any offenders and commit them for trial: *"Unsurprisingly perhaps, although all the witnesses to the investigation (the pursuing party) heard shots being fired ... no-one saw anyone killed."*¹⁰ Some even said they were unaware if any Aborigines were wounded.¹¹ It appears that no Aborigines were interviewed as witnesses, probably because their testimony was not admissible in court anyway. Lonsdale reported that the incident must have been greatly exaggerated and no further action was taken.

In August 1836, Barak's father Bebejan died of the common cold at the young age of about 40 years.¹² Bebejan's brother, Billibellary, became the new Ngurungaeta. Clan numbers were declining. William Thomas estimated there had been 350 Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung peoples in 1836, but counted only 207 three years later in 1839.

By this stage the British colonisers had already established their Melbourne base and the government created the Yarra Village Mission (later Botanical Gardens site) for Aborigines under the supervision of Anglican missionary Rev. George Langhorne. The purpose of these missions was to 'Civilize and Christianise' the Aboriginal population, and though some of the missionaries were genuinely concerned for the welfare of their charges, it was often through an intervention of coercion and control to segregate them from their traditional ways; e.g. sometimes rations were held back if people did not attend church services. For the missionaries it was an opportunity to proselytize their religious cause. The Yarra Mission school for children was established late in December 1836 teaching basic literacy, numeracy, singing hymns and reciting catechisms. Barak attended there between 1837 and 1839. Although at first successful, the school closed within three years due to an erratic and dwindling enrolment.

In late 1839, Barak's eighteen-year-old cousin Wonga was elevated into trainee eldership. However Wonga was then badly injured and it was feared he might die. Sixteen-year-old Barak was therefore inducted into trainee eldership as a potential replacement for Wonga. This ceremony was held at the traditional Tromgin site (Botanic Gardens) and was witnessed by the Protector William Thomas.¹³

The relationship between Aborigines and squatters soon grew more fractious. It was reported as early as December 1839 that force must be used to evict the Aborigines from Melbourne¹⁴ which was their traditional camping, food gathering, and ceremonial sites for several clans. Police were authorized to

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Batman

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Cottrell_massacre. The Koorie Heritage Trust has produced a Massacre Map of Victoria showing 68 known sites where massacres occurred between 1836 and 1853, accounting for thousands of deaths. <https://kooariweb.org/foley/images/history/pre50s/masmap.html>

⁹ David Moloney, *Shire of Melton Heritage Study Stage Two: Environmental History*, 2007, p16.

¹⁰ David Moloney, *Shire of Melton Heritage Study Stage Two: Environmental History*, 2007, p16.

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Cottrell_massacre. A worse massacre occurred in 1846 at Warrigal Creek – some accounts say 60 people were killed, others suggest that up to 150 people. The series of related incidents apparently started after a clanswoman was abducted. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Warrigal_Creek_Massacre

¹² Poulter

¹³ *Surviving Colonisation - Wonga & Barak* - Jim Poulter.pdf

¹⁴ *1835 The Founding of Melbourne* p185

shoot the dogs of Aboriginal people. They sometimes burnt campsites. In 1840 just over 400 Kulin camped north of Narm (Melbourne) and refused to leave. In October 1840 the camp was forcibly broken up and a young Woiwurrung clan leader, Winberry,¹⁵ was killed. The brief period when the village on the Yarra was genuinely a multicultural camp lasted for less than three years. From 1839 Melbourne was British at its core, with large numbers of homeless Aborigines surviving wherever and however they could on the geographic, social and economic margins of the town.¹⁶ People had to walk from Melbourne to Footscray or elsewhere for the night.

In October 1840 about 400 people from Melbourne and other visiting Kulin clans were taken prisoner in a mounted police raid in Melbourne as retaliation for frontier violence on the Ovens River (about 280 kilometers north-east of Melbourne).¹⁷ This police intervention was in complete contrast to the earlier incident involving Henry Batman at Mt Cottrell. It seems that when natives are allegedly involved in frontier violence against colonists, the long arm of British law is so powerful that it can apprehend hundreds of natives hundreds of kilometres away from the scene of the crime, but when colonials allegedly kill 35 natives close to Melbourne, British justice asks a few questions and does nothing.

In 1841 there were about 1,230 Kulin people in Victoria.

In 1844 Barak became a tracker (Police Trooper No.19) with Captain Dana's Native Mounted Police in 1844 and was given the name of William Barak. He remained with the Native Police Force until it was disbanded in early 1853. Ngurungaeta Billibellary (1799–1846) had encouraged Barak and other young Aboriginal men to join the Native Police in the belief they would learn discipline and survival skills in the new environment. Unfortunately, Barak also learnt to drink heavily, which was becoming problematic, until confronted by young lay preacher John Green:

*"On one occasion Barak had imbibed a little too much and mislaid his spears. He accused a Gunnai man Punty of stealing his spears, which Punty denied. Barak then crept up behind Punty, cut a lock of his hair and threatened to use the hair to put a spell on Punty. When the two men started fighting, Green intervened, took Punty's hair, cut a lock of his own hair and gave it to Barak. Green then challenged Barak to put a spell on him instead. It proved to be a turning point in Barak's life and although Barak did not become a teetotaler, he only drank moderately from then on."*¹⁸

In 1846 the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Port Phillip estimated there were 5,000 Aboriginal people in the state of Victoria, which was at least an 80% decline compared to 1800. Two decades later, in 1863, the total for Victoria was 1,908 (at least 90% down on 1800) and of the Woiwurrung tribe there were only 22 men, women and children.¹⁹

In June 1847 there was a major epidemic of influenza that lasted for more than a year and led to the deaths of many people among the Woiwurrung, Boonwurrung and Taunwarrung clans.²⁰

With the disbandment of the Native Police in 1853, William Barak joined Simon Wonga at Wonga Park (Mooroolbark), where they met the Reverend John Green who had arrived in 1858. The three of them were to develop a close relationship over the next sixteen years when they settled at Coranderrk.

Barak and Wonga were two of the Wurundjeri elders who petitioned William Thomas to secure land for the Kulin-Taungurong people at Acheron (near Alexandra in central Victoria) where they could live independently, and the Government agreed to the proposal. Barak and his Gippsland-born wife Lizzie were among the first group who settled at Acheron (in 1859). Barak's two infant daughters had died but he had hopes of more children with his young wife Lizzie, who was from the Brataualung clan of Kurnai.

After a year of productive developments at Acheron, some local squatters wanted the land for themselves and started agitating until the Government ordered the Aboriginal settlers to move to the Mohican station south of Acheron. Here the land was so poor and the weather so cold that no one wanted to settle there.

¹⁵ Winberry (Winberri, Windberry, Tinbury) (c1820-1840) was a Kulin-Taungurong Aboriginal resistance leader who in 1840 led an armed group against British colonists in central Victoria, and was shot dead by the New South Wales Mounted Police during the Lettsom raid. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winberri>

¹⁶ Boyce - 1835 The Founding of Melbourne p186.

¹⁷ Rachel Standfield, Archives of Protection, 2018 Pacific Historical Review p76
https://www.academia.edu/82904073/Archives_of_Protection

¹⁸ Poulter, Readings In Australian History - The History You Were Never Taught.

¹⁹ City of Keilor Centenary Souvenir 1863 to 1963, p42

²⁰ Gary Presland, *Aboriginal Melbourne: The Lost Land of the Kulin People*, McPhee Gribble, 1994, p90

The station was unsuitable for agriculture and had to be abandoned.

The Kulin leaders then suggested a traditional camping site at Coranderrk, near Healesville. In 1863 Simon Wonga (aged 42) who was already known as the “old chief”, Barak (aged 40), and preacher John Green led forty people on a march over the Black Spur Songline to a traditional site on Badgers Creek at Healesville: *“Like the Israelites, they had been passing through the wilderness, and made a long and circuitous wandering”*.²¹

By then Thomas calculated there were only 22 survivors of the Woiwurrung or Yarra tribe and they were joined by some of the Taungurung tribe of whom 95 still lived.

Barak adopted Christianity in about 1860 and Wonga also believed that Coranderrk was to be a Christian community. John Green, Coranderrk’s first superintendent, stated that *“all attend prayers twice every day, and keep the Sabbath better than many of the Europeans.”* However, even Christian realms have variations. The early Kulin converts were introduced to and continued in the Presbyterian form of worship, even though a number of their later managers were Anglicans. Broome hints that the converts might have had a pragmatic approach whereby *“Christianity was embraced and blended with Aboriginal spirituality”*.²²

The Aboriginal population numbers continued to decline. In 1863 there were only about 1,900 natives in Victoria, of which about 200 were of the Kulin tribes, and of these only 22 were Woiwurrung.

Simon Wonga and William Barak started applying their traditional diplomacy protocols in their new environment. Indigenous society had evolved sophisticated formal negotiations between tribal groups for purposes such as sharing of resources, travel across country, trade, marriage arrangements, and conflict resolution. Wonga and Barak were soon targeting a new audience. In 1863 they led a deputation of Wurundjeri and Taungurong people to attend Governor Sir Henry Barkly’s public celebration in the Exhibition Building of the Queen’s birthday and the marriage of the Prince of Wales. They presented Barkly, as the vice-regal agent of Queen Victoria, with gifts for the Queen and Prince.²³ There was even a picture of the presentation to the Governor published as front page news in a Melbourne newspaper.²⁴



Petition to Governor Barkly, Melbourne Leader 30 May 1863 p1

Wonga and Barak also presented the Governor with a petition for more land at Coranderrk. This was an astute strategy and proved productive because the Governor went out of his way to support their request. The government gazetted 930 hectares there in June (extended to 1960 hectares in 1866) as an Aboriginal reserve. A message from Queen Victoria offered her protection, which led to a view among the Kulin that Coranderrk was a gift from her.²⁵ Unfortunately, the latter was not quite up to expectation in that the Kulin did not obtain title to the land, which was in the hands of the Board of Protection. From its start in 1863, the Coranderrk settlers had to work hard to make their reserve habitable and

²¹ Edward Nichols, Healesville & Yarra Glen Guardian 5 December 1931 p2

²² Broome p85

²³ Jane Lydon *Aboriginal History* 2002 Vol 26 ch0549.pdf

²⁴ Melbourne Leader 30 May 1863 p1

²⁵ Broome p83

productive. The men quickly cleared the land and built bark huts. The women made and sold enough rugs to buy boots, coats and hats for all, and a few horses. Within two years there were 105 people living there, almost all the remaining Kulin nation, and a score of Bangerang, mostly children, who arrived from the Murray River.²⁶ Settlement was made harder because there were few resources allocated for the reserve. Rations were scarce and money even scarcer. The Board refused to pay Aboriginal workers any wages despite improvements being made to the land and despite the knowledge that workers were also supporting a large number of orphans. After many protests, the Board finally paid a small male wage to supplement rations, at a third of the European rate, but people had to buy their own meat. The Board lacked funds to extend the reserve for sufficient stock to produce meat for the resident population, or a surplus for sale. The cultivation of hops was successful and regularly topped Victoria's markets, but the profit was diverted to subsidise the Board's operations. According to Broome:

"Coranderrk prospered despite the challenges of pioneering facing all farmers and some unique difficulties. Since 64 of 105 residents in 1865 were children, there were only 28 able-bodied men to clear the heavily timbered reserve. Also, as the Central Board provided a little money and few rations, the men had to hunt for several days a week and periodically work on adjoining properties to get money for seed, stock and equipment. The women and old men made baskets, rugs and artefacts for sale. Their efforts were vital to the settlement's survival. So too were Green's contributions from his own salary, for he was made Coranderrk's manager. Despite the little time that could be devoted to developments, by 1874 the Coranderrk men had cut materials for and erected 32 cottages, various outbuildings, yards and 7 kilometres of boundary fencing. The community had 65 acres under crop and managed 450 head of stock. In 20 years 1215 acres had been converted from dense bush to improved pasture."²⁷

Victoria enacted the Aborigines Protection Act in 1869, which was designed to control the movement of Aborigines, including regulation of residence, employment and marriage. This loss of agency would have been a bitter psychological blow for people who were previously self-governing, now having to get permission not only to marry, but also for minor matters such as having outside visitors or visiting relatives offsite, obtaining temporary offsite employment, and even taking a few days off for a cultural walkabout. Important cultural practices such as corroborees were banned. The Act excluded people of mixed parentage from their definition of an Aboriginal, and barred anyone not of full descent and those of mixed descent over 35 years of age from all reserves - the contemporary European view was that only people of full-descent who clung to their ancient customs were real Aborigines. This broke up the Coranderrk population which included orphans of mixed parentage - those least able to support themselves became fringe dwellers on the edge of British colonial society.²⁸



Wedding at Coranderrk, Illustrated Australian News for Home Readers 5 April 1868 p8

²⁶ Broome p83

²⁷ Broome p83

²⁸ Janet Schulz, *The Wurundjeri William: The Original Inhabitants of Moonee Valley*, 2012, p14



In 1865 Barak married Annie Ra-gun, who was from the Bumbang Station below Euston on the Murray River. They married in a Presbyterian ritual with 60 Kulin and 40 Europeans as witnesses. At this stage Barak was important enough in some Anglo eyes that the wedding announcement was reported in the Age:

*"Marriages. Barak—Jack. On the 24th ult., at Coranderrk, aboriginal station, Upper Yarra, by the Rev. R. Hamilton, of Collingwood, William Barak, of the Yarra tribe, member of the aboriginal settlement, to Annie, of the Lower Murray tribe, daughter of Jack, deceased."*²⁹

Barak and Annie had a son, David, who died of tuberculosis in 1881 at age 14. Annie also died of tuberculosis in 1881 at age 35 years.

Barak had married three times. His first wife was Lizzie from Gippsland; they had two children who died in infancy and Lizzie died in 1864. In 1890 Barak married Sarah Wood, a sister of Lizzie from Gippsland; they did not have children and Sarah died in 1894.³⁰

After Simon Wonga died in 1874, William Barak became the elder of the Wurrundjeri-william clan. At this stage he was the only Woiwurrung clan head left and thus was probably the main statesman for the Wurrundjeri clan and possibly the Woiwurrung tribe. Anne Bon has written of him:

*"His house was the council chamber in which the elders met to discuss their affairs, which were connected chiefly with what they considered the injustice and want of sympathy shown them by the Aborigines Board. Barak had two intelligent half-castes as secretaries, whose letters were well composed, neatly written, and honoured by receiving space in the columns of 'The Argus' and other newspapers. Barak had many political friends among whom were Sir Graham Berry, Mr Alfred Deakin, Messrs. E. Zox, J.L. Dow, R. Murray Smith, J. MacPherson Grant, Robert Stirling Anderson, Sir James Patterson, Mr W.A. Watt, Sir Henry Wrixon, Sir Bryan O'Loghlen, Messrs F. Longmore, R. Richardson, and many others."*³¹



Home of the Barak family at Coranderrk

The ever-changing political and bureaucratic hazards also had to be tackled. From 1875 and over the next decade Barak and the younger Kulin at Coranderrk fought the schemes of Board members Edward Curr and Albert Le Souef to sell the land and revoke residents' right of appeal against Board decisions. In 1886 the Coranderrk residents wrote to the Chief Secretary asking that their rights to appeal the Protection

²⁹ Age 2 March 1865 p4

³⁰ Also Massola, *Coranderrk: History of the Aboriginal Station*, p37

³¹ Anne F. Bon 1931

Board's decisions should be retained. The petition, which was written by one of the residents at the station (possibly Robert Wandin), was signed by all the adult males at Coranderrk, and reads as follows:

*"Sir - We wish to ask for our wishes, that is, could we get our freedom to go away shearing and harvesting, and to come home when we wish, and also to go for the good of our health when we need it; and we aboriginals all wish and hope to have freedom, not to be bound down by the protection of the board as, as it says in the bill (clause 5). But we should be free like the white population. There is only few blacks now remaining in Victoria. We are all dying away now, and we blacks of aboriginal blood wish to have our freedom for all our lifetime, for the population is small, and the increase is slow. For why does the board seek in these latter days more stronger authority over us aborigines than it has yet been. For there is only 21 aborigines on the station Coranderrk, including men and women. Your servants, Chief William Barak, etc ..."*³²

Coranderrk became a permanent reserve but the Aborigines Protection Board, backed by the 1886 legislation, began implementing an 'absorption' policy which excluded young persons of mixed descent from government-supported reserves, including two men whom Barak had named to succeed him as ngurungaeta.



In the late 1880s Barak started extending his artistic talents through painting and craftwork, when he was in his late 60s. The Coranderrk residents had started selling their craftwork soon after coming to Healesville as a way of earning money, and indeed visitors had starting coming to the reserve as sightseers for the novelty of artefacts and performances. Ann Bonn wrote that:

"When Barak could get a sheet of drawing paper he made the outside of his chimney his easel, having the canopy of heaven for his studio. His brush and his colours were crude, the colours being pigments extracted from the earth. Notwithstanding this, some of his pictures are to be seen in the museums of Europe."

One of his works was presented to the Prince of Wales, and others are on display in museums in Australia, Europe and America. An exhibition of his paintings was held at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1995. An interesting possibility is that Barak was quietly subverting the Board's ban on people practicing their cultural traditions – through his art Barak was able to perpetuate images and knowledge about Kulin culture and history, and even obtained publicity in mainstream media. Jane Lydon states that Barak's compositions were linked to Kulin pictorial conventions and this tradition is best known through his art, and offers an erudite depiction of his oeuvre:

*"Wurundjeri leader William Barak, whose paintings, predominantly depicting ceremonial and hunting scenes, are also interpreted as images of the past. Barak's work combines geometric and figurative elements, for example in the detailed rendition of the abstract motifs incised upon the cloaks worn by corroboree dancers. He also tended to abstract forms such as human figures, forming banded patterns. While the uniform spatial distribution of figures across his sheet of paper was impossible for a camera to imitate stylistically, the arrangement of the Kulin and Greens in 'The Yarra Tribe starting for the Acheron' reminds us of the repetitive lines of figures which feature in Barak's art. Hence, in the photograph's thematic and pictorial relationship to traditional Kulin visual practices, we can perhaps perceive the active engagement of the Kulin."*³³

Though some colonists made disparaging remarks about corroborees with their elements of dancing and singing, others went out of their way to witness the performances. However, the Board for the Protection of Aborigines and the managers at Coranderrk banned this tradition from the reserves. In 1887 the Governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Loch, requested to see a corroboree, but the Board would not allow people from any station, including Coranderrk, to take part. In this instance, Sir Henry Loch had to settle for one of Barak's drawings of a corroboree instead.³⁴

Barak was a main contributor to knowledge about Aboriginal history in the late 1800s through his regular discussions with protectors such as William Thomas who recorded summaries of their talks in his journals, and also Alfred Howitt. The level of respect for Barak's oral history discourse might be gauged by some of

³² Argus 22 September 1886 p5

³³ Jane Lydon "The experimental 1860s: Charles Walter's images of Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, Victoria." *Aboriginal History* Vol 26, 2002 p114

³⁴ Herb Patten, *William Barak and the Affirmation of Tradition*

the Europeans who published his stories. Mrs. Aeneas Gunn published Barak's reflections "My Words" as transcribed by William Edwards, one of the students at Coranderrk. Ethel Shaw wrote "More About Barak" in the Argus.³⁵ Anne Bon wrote about "Barak – An Aboriginal Statesman" also in the Argus.³⁶ Shirley Wienke wrote and published "When the Wattles Bloom Again: The Life and Times of William Barak Last Chief of the Yarra Yarra Tribe". There are plenty more out there.

William Barak had been the sole surviving Woiwurrung Ngurungaeta after Simon Wonga's death, and he in turn had to pass on the title to someone from the new generation. Beruk's only son David, the presumed heir to become Ngurungaeta, had become gravely unwell in 1881. Determined to save his son, Barak carried David from Coranderrk to Kew Hospital, but as an Aboriginal man, Barak was not permitted to stay by David's side in the hospital. David later died, alone and without family by his side.

Regarding succession protocols, Barak had told Howitt that 'a Ngurungaeta is like a Governor' and was 'made' by other men. Although ancestry was important in clan government and ngurungaetas could name a particular son or brother as their heir, hereditary succession was not automatic. Candidates for the position had to prove their competence and win endorsement from neighbouring clan-heads, whose support enabled younger men entry into the political forums where opinions, oratorical skills and influence were tested. Barak named three younger men to succeed him in clan governance:

"I am ngurungaeta from my father. When I go I shall leave the word that my sister's son shall be Ngurungaeta with him two others. Beside each of the ngurungaeta there was the man to whom he gave 'his words' ... Beside me are Robert Wandin, Tom Mansfield who gets 'the word' from me, and Tom Dunolly."³⁷

William Barak died in August 1903, at age 80 years, from shock after falling into a fire, and was buried at the Coranderrk cemetery. It's been said that he was the last traditional elder of the Wurundjeri clan and last full-descent member of the Yarra River tribe. Several newspapers reported his passing with some reverence, including the Argus, Age, Leader, Ballarat Star, Naracan Shire Advocate, Geelong Advertiser, Healesville and Yarra Glen Guardian, and several interstate newspapers:



"DEATH OF KING WILLIAM BARAK. At the Aborigines' Station, Coranderrk, there passed away on Saturday, at the age of 85 (sic), King William Barak, the last survivor of the Yarra tribe. Barak succeeded King Simon as chief of the Yarra tribe, and the other aborigines at the station seemed to recognise his authority, for when there was trouble among the natives on more than one occasion his influence has been exerted for good, and has been of great service to the superintendent. He was in many ways quite superior to the ordinary aboriginal, being very intelligent and deeply religious, and his snow-white head gave him a very dignified appearance. He was also quite an artist in his way, and his quaint drawings of native corroborees and other customs are probably unique. He used to be an expert tracker, and was for many years in the native police. He retained, till quite recently, many interesting recollections concerning tribal fights in which he took part with the natives from Gippsland and a meeting with Buckley, 'the wild white man'. His father was buried where the Kew Asylum now stands, and Barak related that for many years he used to visit his grave 'when the wattles began to bloom', and so he said that he, too would pass away 'when, the blossoms came'. ... The funeral service was conducted by the Rev. H. Jones

M.A., Presbyterian minister, and was attended by all the natives at Coranderrk. 'The last of his tribe' was buried in the cemetery near the station, where over 200 of his fellow aborigines lie at rest."³⁸

In 1931 the people of Healesville decided to erect a memorial headstone over the grave of William Barak, "former king of the Yarra Yarra tribe of Aborigines". The cause was taken up by the Healesville branch of the Australian Natives Association³⁹ and Ann Bonn⁴⁰ was the main supporter:

³⁵ Argus December 1931 p9

³⁶ Argus 28 November 1931 p6

³⁷ William Barak 1882. Tom Mansfield died in 1893, well before Barak.

³⁸ The Age 17 August 1903 p4

³⁹ The Australian Natives' Association (ANA) was a mutual society founded in Melbourne in April 1871. It was founded by and for the benefit of White native-born Australians, and membership was restricted to that group. Wikipedia

⁴⁰ Ann Fraser Bonn was a strong supporter of William Barak. She was a Scottish immigrant who showed compassion and generosity to those in need, particularly to Aboriginals. Her home at Kew was a refuge for the sick and needy and she regularly visited sick Aboriginals in hospitals. She campaigned for their rights and antagonised members of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, so she was blocked from joining the Board but continuing direct intercessions with government members. She joined the Board between 1904 and 1936. She corresponded with Aboriginals all



*"To the Editor. Sir, The Healesville branch of the A.N.A. is desirous of erecting a permanent stone over the grave, at Coranderrk blacks' station, of one of the most distinguished aboriginals of this district, King Barak, of the Yarra Tribe, and we are sure that there are many of the same noble sentiment who would be only too glad to contribute a small amount for such a purpose. We think it our duty to give them this opportunity to do so. We have had a splendid stone of Italian marble, valued at between £300 and £400, given to us for the purpose, but the cost of removing and re-erecting it at the required site will be about £70. However, of this amount £10 has been promised by individual members of the branch, leaving a balance of £60 to be provided, and we now ask your kindness in allowing us to make this appeal through your paper. Contributions may be forwarded to the branch secretary at Healesville, and will be gratefully acknowledged. Yours, etc., A. J. Hill, President, J. Hansen, Secretary."*⁴¹

The monument was unveiled in June 1934 by Sir John MacFarland, Chancellor of the University, assisted by Rev. Donald Cameron, ex-Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, and Dr. Baird, chaplain to the Moderator.⁴²

The Melbourne community is still honouring William Barak in modern times. The road to Coranderrk is named Barak Lane. In 1985 the Worawa Aboriginal College was established on 'Barak Park' which is part of the original Coranderrk Aboriginal Station.

In 1985 the Croydon Historical Society erected a stone and plaque memorial marker commemorating Barak near the vicinity of his birthplace at Brushy Creek.

In 1991, the half-acre Coranderrk cemetery with 300 burial places was returned to the Wurundjeri people by an act of parliament.

In 1998, the Indigenous Land Corporation assisted descendants of Coranderrk to purchase 0.81 acres of the land taken from their ancestors.⁴³ Over the following decade Wurundjeri descendants were able to acquire a further 119 hectares and Coranderrk was added to the Australian National Heritage List.

In 2005 Barak was honoured when a footbridge that crosses the Yarra River and connects two major parks, Birrarung Marr and Yarra Park, was named the 'William Barak Bridge'.⁴⁴

In 2011 Barak was inducted on to the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Roll.

In 2015 the 'William Barak' building was completed on Swantson Square; it is a privately-developed multi-story apartment complex on the old Carlton and United Brewery site. The innovative building design uses shadows created by the juxtaposition of white balconies against black windows and negative spaces to form an 85-metre portrait of Barak. The image is angled to be seen from the Shrine of Remembrance.

In 2016, Darebin Council, in response to a greater community awareness and disquiet about John Batman's depredations against First Nations People, changed the name of 'Batman Park' in Northcote to 'Gumbri Park' after Gumbri (Jessie Hunter), the great-niece of William Barak and the last girl born on the Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve in Healesville.⁴⁵

In 2022 a couple of Barak's art and craft works, a painting 'Corroboree (Women in Possum skin cloaks)' and a carving 'Parrying Shield' were put up for auction by Sotheby's in New York for \$600,000. They had been given by Barak in 1897 to his friends the De Pury family, who were Swiss immigrants who had established a vineyard in the Yarra Valley. The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation purchased the pieces at auction in New York using crowdsourced funds and a donation from

over Victoria, and protested to the minister when her colleagues' decisions caused injustice or hardship. She was a philanthropist who supported many causes. <https://www.auspostalhistory.com/articles/476.php>

⁴¹ Healesville & Yarra Glen Guardian 10 October 1931 p3

⁴² Age 28 June 1934 p7

⁴³ Myer Eidelson, *Melbourne Dreaming* p88

⁴⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Barak>

⁴⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Batman

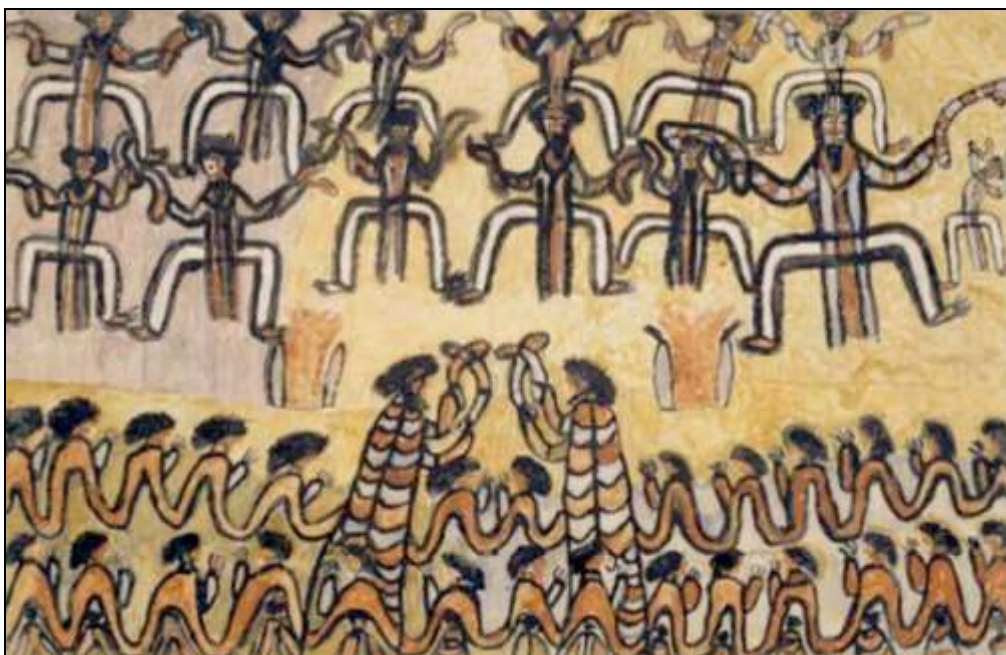
the Victorian Government, and thus the works were brought back to their rightful home in Australia.⁴⁶

These days the City of Brimbank has a William Barak Pictorial Memorial, which is in the Duke Street Reserve, Braybrook, just south of Solomon's Ford: *"Described as having a bible in one hand and a boomerang in the other, William Barak, last chief of the Wurundjeri tribe, never ceased arguing for the rights of his people. Barak was born 10 years before Batman arrived and negotiated his people through the trauma of displacement. He achieved lasting fame as an artist bringing different cultural traditions together."* The Solomons were supporters of John Batman and the Port Phillip Association; they settled along the Maribyrnong River from Keilor to Braybrook (Marin-Bulluk and Wurrundjeri country) from 1835, the year that Barak witnessed Batman's treaty.

The Barak family line continues through the descendants of his sister Annie Borate and his great-great-niece, Joy Murphy-Wandin AO, who became a senior elder of the Wurundjeri people.⁴⁷



Figures in Possum Skin Cloaks by William Barak 1898 c/o National Gallery of Victoria



Wurundjeri Ceremony by William Barak 1898 c/o National Gallery of Victoria

⁴⁶ <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2022/aboriginal-art/corroboree-women-in-possum-skin-cloaks-1897>

⁴⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joy_Murphy_Wandin