

BILLIBELLARY (1799–1846)



Headman of the five Kulin tribes from 1836 until he died in 1846.¹

Billibellary was Ngurungaeta, custodian of the Mt William quarry, and song-maker of the Wurundjeri-willam clan of Woi-wurrung language speakers of the Kulin nation. The clan's domain was from Mt Macedon and east of the Maribyrnong River including Moonee Valley down to the Yarra River and its tributaries. They were often referred to as the Yarra tribe because one of their traditional camping and meeting places was along the Yarra River where the town of Melbourne was established in the late 1830s. Many authors writing about Aboriginal clans in the 1840s say that Billibellary was the 'paramount chief among the southern Kulin'. Jim Poulter says Billibellary was

Billibellary was also known as Billbolary, Billibellary, Billbilyeary, Bil-bil-ye-ry, Jika Jika, Jacky Jacky, Jakka Jakka, and Jaga Jaga. He had several wives including Menegerook and Nougurouk.

Billibellary's sons included Wonga, Kulpendue and Munnering. His daughters included Bungereok, Wigal, and Susannah. William Thomas gave an account of the ceremony of Murrum Turrukerook (female coming of age) which was held for Bungereok, and though the choreography is described the cultural meanings of the routines are not. However, Thomas states that the intent of the ceremony was for young men to confirm that they would not defile her person without her consent or allow others to do so, and would protect her until she was lawfully married:

"There were ... two large fires of bark made ... at about 100 yards from the encampment at which was one aged lubra sitting down pensive. Bungereok, the young woman (daughter of the Chief Billibellary) was brought forth in the encampment covered all over from head to foot with kunnundure (charcoal powder), except white spots all over her face and body, which gave her a singular appearance. She was attended by her mother, and another who led her. Her mother aided her up on a log, where the young woman stood silent and sad as though doing penance. She held a small branch in her hand, every leaf taken off, and on each twig was a piece of bread. About twenty young men went up to her slowly; each threw a little stick at her – merely a twig; the young men then drew near, and each bit off a bit of bread from the twig of the young damsel, and then spat it into the fire, and turned back and approached a second time, stamping and making the earth shake under them as they do in corroboree, and raving and stamping out the fire. The same two lubras, who were her attendants, gathered the twigs thrown at her by the young men, and buried them deep in the earth. (This was to prevent her kidneys from wasting and falling into other's hands.) The twig held by the damsel was then demanded by the one who had charge of the fires, who gathers up the ashes and covers up the little twig when it is burned. She is then handed down from the log by her mother, who, with the other attendants, takes her to her Ceremony father's mia-mia. A corroboree, if it is a chief's daughter, as was this case, takes place at night, at which the father leads the dance."²

Billibellary was one of the chiefs who met John Batman in 1835 at a tanderrum which he portrayed to the British authorities as a purchase of 600,000 acres of land for between \$200 and \$400 and annual contributions of food and goods. Some contemporary authors claimed that this was a good price, but in 1836 Batman reportedly sold his 7,000 acre Kingston property in Tasmania for \$20,000³ – if true, Batman was offering Kulin people mere sales spiel and peanuts.

The chiefs involved in the treaty included Jagajaga (Billibellary) of Wurundjeri-Willam; Jagajaga (Jerrum Jerrum) of Wurundjeri-Willam; Jagajaga (Murrumbear) of Balluk-Willam; Cooloolock of Wurundjeri-Balluk; and Bungarie of Marin-Bulluk. However, Batman's group were 'mannerless men' who broke normal protocol and 'did not return to their own country when the seasons changed'; they stayed on Kulin land and called it their own.⁴ The 'treaty' was disallowed by the British and the promised ongoing resources did not arrive, whereas the thousands of incoming British settlers and ex-convicts were unstoppable at a time when the Aboriginal population was in rapid decline due to British-introduced diseases.

¹ Jim Poulter, Readings in Australian History -The History you were never taught.

² Thomas Francis Bride, Letters From Victorian Pioneers, 1889, p98. Bungereok married Yonki Yonka c.1841/2 who died of unknown causes in 1846 and was buried at Emerald Hill.

³ <https://tomelbourne.com.au/john-batman-founder-melbourne/>

⁴ Barwick, Rebellion at Coranderrk.

According to William Thomas, the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung and the Boonwurrung clans together numbered about 350 in 1836, but at his census taken in 1839 there were only 230 souls,⁵ which was a decline of one-third of the population in just three to four years. The bigger picture was much worse, because the Aboriginal population in Victoria had fallen from about 60,000 in 1780 to just 5,000 in 1846.

Billibellary was a custodian of the Mount William Quarry and its prized greenstone axes. Normally each clan lived within its boundaries, but sometimes there were special arrangements, such as this quarry near Lancefield, which was under family proprietorship that included more than just the Wurundjeri people:

*"On the one side it included the husband of Billi-billeri's sister, one of the Headmen of the Kurnung-willam, who lived at Bacchus Marsh, and who was named Nurrum-nurum-biin ... On the other side it included Ningu-labul, and in another direction Bebejern, the son of an heiress in quarry rights, from whom an interest came to Berak through his father Bebejern. But it was Billi-billeri, the head of the family whose country included the quarry who lived on it, and took care of it for the whole of the Wuurunjerri community. When he went away, his place was taken by the son of his sister, the wife of Nurrum-nurmm-biin, who came on such occasions to take charge, when it may be assumed, like Billi-billeri, he occupied himself in splitting stone to supply demands."*⁶

There were smaller quarries located along the rivers valleys and 11 have been found along the Maribyrnong River that were used for making spear heads and scrapers. One of these quarries is on the riverbank south of the E. J. Whitten Bridge; it is on the eastern riverbank and therefore part of Wurundjeri-Willam country. Presumably some trading would have occurred across the river with the Marin Bulluk, as there were several fords that would have facilitated foot traffic across the waters.

Because Billibellary was a respected leader, he was often used by the authorities to communicate with Aboriginal people; for example, William Thomas and Captain Dana used his influence in 1842 to recruit Aboriginal men to form the Native Police Corp. Billibellary insisted on seven days to consider the request and on the seventh day he and 21 men enlisted. William Thomas wrote about him that:

*"Billibolary (Bil-li-bel-la-ry) was chief of the Yarra tribe; he stands foremost, and justly so, as ever having been the white man's friend - generous, frank, and determined as he was. Having received intimation that Government was desirous of forming a native police, I consulted this chief who had often protected my life. I remember well the day I and Captain Dana, on a huge gum log, on the 17th February 1842 made known to Billibellary the Government's intention, and to further it stated that his influence was applied to first. ... Night after night did this faithful chief address the encampment. True to the day, on the 24th he had the company together, leading the train."*⁷

Thomas recorded the inductees of the Native Police Corps in 1843 as including:⁸

- Billibolary (Bil-li-bel-la-ry) - was chief of the Yarra tribe; he stands foremost, and justly so, as ever having been the white man's friend - generous, frank, and determined.
- Buckup (Bug-gup) - a fine intelligent young man; after two expeditions he was made a corporal, and received pay; he continued in the police till his death.
- Boro Boro (Bur-bor-rough) - remained but a few months in the service; his habits and disposition were too restless for restraint.
- Benboo - this harmless man was but a short time in the service and was not by nature or disposition adapted for the police.
- Berring - continued in the service for some time, but was in two journeys and subsequently went to the Devil's River.
- Culpundurra (Kul-pen-dure) - this fine young man was the son of Billibellary, but widely different in disposition and character and was eventually killed at the Goulburn in a drunken fray with the Goulburn clan.
- Curra Curra (Kur-rek-Kur-rer) - remained but a few months in the police, afterwards going to and from Gippsland, where he died in 1848.
- Gellibrand (Beruke) - was a faithful man much respected by the whites, especially the gentry; he took his name from the unfortunate gentleman who was lost with Hesse; he was one who accompanied the whites in search of Gellibrand.
- Giberuke - a noble-looking man, but sullen, and in no way to be depended upon; he soon left the service and subsequently moved to the Goulburn.
- Murrumbear (Mur-rum-Mur-rum-bean) - a fine powerful man, next to Billibellary he had the greatest influence

⁵ Stephens & Stewart-Muir p330

⁶ Howitt 1904 pp311–312

⁷ Thomas Francis Bride, Letters From Victorian Pioneers, 1889, p70

⁸ Thomas Francis Bride, Letters From Victorian Pioneers, 1889, p71-76

over the Yarra mob, but soon left the police, having joined only to set the example.

- Moonee Moonee - a fine young man who was sent on two important journeys, and died in the service while at the Wimmera in 1845.
- Nangollibill (Ning-goolobin) alias John Bull - a fine powerful man, but no sooner were the police ordered upon distant duty than he and several others deserted; he being a man of importance, Captain Dana was awfully prejudiced against him.
- Nunuptune - remained a few months in the force; he was a good-tempered fellow but restless as a hyena in confinement. He was unjustly accused of taking Mr. Willoby's child at Western Port, which so frightened him that for years he scarcely rambled further than along the coast from Mount Eliza to Point Nepean.
- Nerimbineek (Ner-rim-bin-uk) - brother to the unfortunate Windberry (shot by Major Lettsom's party); he continued in the force for a considerable time before leaving, and for some years rambled along the Goulburn to the Devil's River and Moogolumbuk tribes.
- Peripe (Pee-rup) - started in the force in 1843 continued in it till 1847; after leaving he was going to and fro to Gippsland; he was subsequently killed there in May 1850.
- Perpine (McNoel) - an active, shrewd, able, and intelligent policeman; he had the boldness to be the first to fire at a white man when with Commissioner Gisborne's police up the Yarra.
- Polligary (Polligerry) - an able-bodied man, intelligent, and could be fully depended upon; he went through a routine of service for Government, being selected for most of their important journeys.
- Munmungina (Mun-Mun-gin-ner) - a fine and faithful man of good disposition and temper; had been out on three expeditions, the Wimmera was the last, where he was taken ill, and returned before his comrades.
- Tonmiel - a young, steady, and faithful policeman who continued in the service till his death; he had been on duty the whole round of the colony from Portland Bay west to Gippsland east and the Murray north.
- Tomboko - he was industrious and sober and continued in the service for at the least three years; Captain Dana was particularly partial to him.
- Waworong - continued in the service for at least four years and proved a faithful servant of Government, but left after becoming infected with disease.
- Wideculk (Wi-gee-gulk) - a fine youth who was in the force nearly two years; after returning from the Murray River, he became tired of that kind of life, and was continually asking for furloughs.
- Yamaboke (Yam-mer-book) - an intelligent and faithful man, good tempered, and no one on a bush excursion more to be depended upon; he was a considerable time in the native police and had accompanied most of the journeys through the district.
- Yuptun (Yeap-tune) - had one of the coolest, commanding tempers, but when drunk was the most determined on mischief; Captain Dana and other officers believed that for patience, perseverance, and other requisites in a long journey, no European could equal him.

Billibellary agreed to join the Police Corps and was given an officer's rank but set some non-negotiable limits, such as refusing to ride a horse or go out of 'his Country' on police business: "*young men go as you say, not me*".⁹ He also encouraged Wonga and Barak to join, which is probably when Barak received the British name of William, but Wonga was apparently not commissioned as a Native Policemen because he was lame after damaging his foot in 1839.¹⁰



Native Police of Port Phillip, 1850, sketch by William Strutt

⁹ Stephens & Stewart-Muir p237

¹⁰ Stephens & Stewart-Muir p237

Billibellary later withdrew his support for the Police Corps after a major crisis when they were called to arrest Aboriginal people for punishment, even to shoot those who resisted,¹¹ and in 1843 were involved in a massacre of 17 Aboriginals at Portland.¹² Despite this, Billibellary continued to work closely with Assistant Aboriginal Protector Thomas and the authorities where he believed he could help his own people in their struggle for survival; there was an attitude of trust between Billibellary and Thomas.¹³

Lieutenant-governor Charles La Trobe arrived in Port Phillip in September 1839. The next day, Billibellary quizzed Chief Protector of Aborigines George Robinson about the new governor and whether he meant to give them anything, referring to rations and blankets in fulfilment of Batman's Compact and the feast they had enjoyed when Governor Sir Richard Burke came in 1837. Thomas has recorded rather sarcastically "*They have it in their head that they're all going to be supplied with everything ...*"¹⁴

Late in 1839 Thomas was trying, unsuccessfully, to get the Aborigines to leave Melbourne. Instead, Billibellary pointedly told him that the Wurrundjeri Woiwurrung and their Taungarang guests and allies would stay, reminding the protector of their agreement with Batman, and their expectation that the newly arrived Superintendent Latrobe would honour Batman's compact.¹⁵

Latrobe refused to supply provisions and Thomas, Robinson and Latrobe threatened them with police raids if they did not leave. The failure of the provisions was yet another humiliating betrayal for Billibellary and his people were hungry.¹⁶

The authorities were devising ways to keep the clans out of Melbourne even to the extent of banning them from staying overnight. During the 1840s the authorities passed the Dog Act allowing police to shoot the Aborigine's dogs, in the belief that this would keep Aborigines out of Melbourne - this resulted in the killing of Billibellary's dog, among others, which would have further displeased the ngurungaeta.

In 1843 Billibellary appealed to Thomas for a grant of land so that his people could make a place for themselves in the new colonial order by living there and farming the land. The government did not grant this request.¹⁷

Billibellary was still being conciliatory. In 1844 he assisted in moving a camp from Heidelberg Road, alleviating potential conflict and police involvement. In another case where Thomas had interfered in an Aboriginal matter and feared for his life, Billibellary hid him in his hut.¹⁸ Billibellary tried to make concessions to white law but it didn't always work – two men had murdered someone and the usual Aboriginal lore was a revenge killing, but Billibellary and Old Murry agreed to have them tried under white man's law, but the Crown Prosecutor decided the case could not be tried as it rested entirely on Aboriginal testimony¹⁹ and Aboriginal evidence was not accepted in court.

In June 1846 Thomas ordered the 120 residents of the Woiworung camp on the Yarra to leave and called police to force them to go: "*They were almost 'maniacal' in their grief and anger*". The people were distressed because Billibellary was dying, but Thomas felt compelled to enforce government orders.

Probably the worst of Thomas's proposals was the formal separation of Aboriginal children from their kin.²⁰ This was implemented in later years when the remnants of the native clans were sent to live on designated government reserves, and eventually there were over 30 reserves scattered around Victoria.

Towards his death Billibellary rejected the European ways. Thomas regretted what he felt was a change of heart in Billibellary, from exhibiting a conciliatory nature towards Europeans, to being overtly oppositional. Billibellary died in 1846 at the Merri Creek reserve. His death caused great distress to the people and they moved away from the Merri Creek area as they feared the place would be affected by the death of this most prominent ngurungaeta.²¹

¹¹ Gross, 1956

¹² Poulter p7

¹³ Clark, Heydon, 1998

¹⁴ Stephens & Stewart-Muir p54

¹⁵ Stephens & Stewart-Muir p69

¹⁶ Stephens & Stewart-Muir p74

¹⁷ A Brief History of Coranderrk

¹⁸ City of Melbourne Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission September 2024

¹⁹ Stephens & Stewart-Muir p186

²⁰ Stephens & Stewart-Muir p210

²¹ Clark, Heydon, 1998

Billibellary died on 10 August 1846 due to inflammation of the lungs, an ailment which killed many of his people in the period after contact with Europeans. He was buried at the confluence of the Merri Creek and the Yarra River near Dights Falls. Thomas was deeply moved by Billibellary's passing and told Governor Charles La Trobe more of his history:

"... generous, frank and determined ... in character well disposed, his uniform good character had secured him many friends, he was not given to any of those drunken habits which too many of the influential blacks frequenting Melbourne fall into. On the 1st arriving of the Settlers in 1835, he showed no hostile feelings but by his power (which it that time was great) prevented any undue advantage being taken of them, but for him and the Port Phillip Tribe who were at that time quite under his control, the whole of the first enterprising settlers might have been massacred as a plot was late for that purpose well concocted (and which could not have been guarded against but through timely warning) for some of the tribes to the north and northwest. ... On the Aboriginal Mission established by Governor Burke in 1836 he sent his second son (Kulpendure) and amid all the fickleness of his people who withdrew their children one after another, he kept his son at it till it was broken up. On the forming at Nerre Nerre Warren ... I particularly consulted him. He was among the number of the Native Police and showed a caution and deliberation ere he signed his mark ... which proved him to be possessed of prudence, and although he withdrew from the Corps, he used no influence to bias others. ... The last ten months he has occasionally been infected with a slight cough which was generally relieved with a little medicine and taking a few days turn in the bush. Since the Baptist School has been established he has scarce been absent from the Merri Creek being always supplied with provisions from the Mission House, with other necessaries from me. In the absence of that exercise he has accustomed to take previous to the forming of the Mission I believe accelerated his end, he was attended gratuitously by a skilled Physician some time previous to his death, and medicines given, but his case was soon pronounced hopeless, which was communicated to him. He grew weary of the learned Drs Medicines and wished me to attend him which I declined, he being under skilled advice."²²

The role of Ngurungaeta was taken on by Billibellary's son Berberry, who ruled as Regent. In 1851, five years after Billibellary's death, his son Simon Wonga ascended to the position of Ngurungaeta of the Wurundjeri-willam clan; he was the sole survivor of Billibellary's family after 1860.

Simon Wonga was born in 1821 and was the cousin of Barak who was born in 1823. In 1863 Barak and Wonga, who was now known as the "old chief", led their tribal members from Acheron to Coranderrk station at Healesville.

After Wonga died in 1874, Barak became the main leader at Coranderrk and remained so for the next three decades until his death in 1903.



Aboriginal people on Merri Creek. Tinted lithograph by Charles Troedel, 1864
La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria.