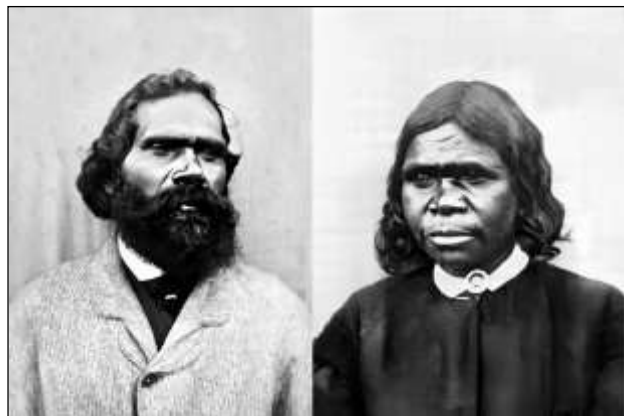


SIMON WONGA (1821-1874)



Simon Wonga, the Ngurungaeta of the Yarra (Woiwurrung Wurrundjeri-balluk) tribe, was the eldest son of Billibellary and was born in 1821 at Woori-Yallock in the Upper Yarra region of the Dandenong Ranges. He was named Wonga and was also known as Wonga Wonga and Wongu; he was given the forename Simon by William Thomas in 1839.¹ Wonga's mother had been a sister of Captain Turnbull (Ninggollobin) the Mount Macedon Ngurungaeta. Wonga was a precocious child with excellent memory and intelligence; he was identified as a gifted child from an early age and was groomed for tribal leadership.² He grew up to be 5 ft 10 in. in height, well built, and dignified in

appearance and gait.³ Wonga's siblings were Mary Anne Wigal (c.1826), Budbeduruck (c.1828), Tommy Munnering (c.1833), Mintoolluk (c.1836), Suzannah Bergyunuck (1839) and Robin Kulpendure.⁴

Wonga probably passed many times through Keilor and Braybrook east of the Maribyrnong River as that was the country of the Yarra Yarra tribe. Wonga's family is significant in early settlement history because in 1835 Wonga was a young (thirteen-year-old) witness to John Batman's meeting with his father Billibellary and other Kulin elders. Wonga grew up during the time of colonization and became one of the new generation of Aboriginal leaders who had to deal with the imposed British-based laws and authorities. It was an era when the Aboriginal population was rapidly declining as British squatters were rapidly settling in and taking over country. Some of the earliest squatters in Brimbank were Joseph and Michael Solomon (supporters of John Batman) who from 1835 occupied land along the Maribyrnong River from Keilor to Braybrook on traditional Maribulluk hunting and camping grounds .

In 1839 at age eighteen Wonga was already being elevated into trainee eldership but suffered a near-death experience. He severely injured his foot while hunting with other young men on his final walkabout test in the Dandenong Ranges and was left on his own while the others went to get help. By the time his father found him he had been without food for four days and was in a bad state. He was taken to William Thomas's home, where Rev. Thomas and his wife Susannah restored him to health. Wonga befriended the family over the next few months and even began calling Thomas 'father' and this is when Wonga was given the name Simon. Wonga kept in close contact with Thomas over the next few years, sharing much of his understanding of traditional culture, language and beliefs, and learning from Thomas how European society worked – information that would help him to develop into the skilled and respected negotiator he became in later life.⁵

In 1840 Governor LaTrobe ordered William Thomas to get Aboriginal people out of Melbourne and a reserve was established at Nerre-Nerre Warren near Dandenong. The allocated food rations were not sufficient and the people survived by working and through traditional hunting. During 1842 the Nerre-Nerre Warren station was struggling and the government tried to boost it by co-locating the newly formed Native Police Force there.

In 1844 there was a media report that the Aborigines were planning their last corroboree – “one last aboriginal defiance, hurled in despair” – to be held in Melbourne. William Westgarth has written:

“The last great native demonstration near Melbourne, and, indeed, so far as I can recollect, the last of its kind within the colony, took place about a mile north-east of the town, in the middle of 1844. This was a grand corroboree, arranged for amongst themselves by surrounding tribes, including the still considerable tribe of the River Goulburn. This was, as it were, one last aboriginal defiance, hurled in despair from the

¹ Rev. William Thomas (1793–1867) was assistant protector of Aboriginal peoples of the Port Phillip and Westernport districts from 1839. He was guardian of the Aborigines of Victoria when the protectorate system was dismantled in 1849, and was official visitor when the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines was established in 1859. Thomas worked closely with the Boonwurrung (Westernport) and Woiwurrung (Yarra) peoples who were part of the Kulin confederacy or nation. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14443058.2023.2180771>

² Jim Poulter, Readings in Australian History: The History you were never taught.

³ The Australian News for Home Readers 25 August 1865 p13

⁴ <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Wurundjeri-1>

⁵ Poulter <https://www.u3aknox.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/AH8SurvivingColonisation.pdf>

expiring native cause against the too-victorious colonial invasion. We of the town had heard of the proposed exhibition, and many, including myself, went out to see it. There were present seven hundred aborigines of all ages and both sexes. The performances were chiefly by the younger men, in bands of fifties, for the respective tribes, while the females, in lines by themselves, beat the time.”⁶

There may have been a local connection as in 1844 there was a large native encampment near Keilor, and the police went to this camp to identify John Bull from among several hundred men assembled there.⁷ There are several possible reasons for the men gathering at Keilor. They could have been meeting for ceremonial purposes or because they had been dislocated from their traditional meeting areas. As the colonists arrived in greater numbers they pushed aside the native population. The earlier rhetoric of people living in harmony did not last a decade but morphed into separation and segregation. Before long the Aborigines were banned from Melbourne in the nighttime and had to move to outer areas such as Footscray in the evenings.

After his father's death in 1846, Wonga was selected to become Ngurungaeta, but he declined because he was only 25 and thought he was not yet ready for that responsibility. To overcome this, a Regency was put in place with Billibelleri's younger brother Berberry (aka Bearberry, Barberra) in the role of Ngurungaeta, while Wonga completed what he considered to be his training in 'whitefella' ways.

Wonga married Maria in about 1846 and they stayed together until his death. Wonga's respect from his own and neighbouring communities was becoming more evident during this time as in 1847 under his initiative the Woiworung and neighbouring Bunurong clans began to negotiate new alliances with the remote and previously hostile Kurnai people of Gippsland.⁸

In October 1850 the government agreed to establish a 2000 acre Aboriginal Reserve at Pound Bend, Warrandyte. This was the time that Wonga decided to take on a more formal leadership role and accepted his clan's earlier offer to be appointed Ngurungaeta, and thus Berberry's regency came to an end.

Wonga became Ngurungaeta of the Wurundjeri people in 1851. The European population of Victoria had already reached 77,000 and vastly outnumbered the Aboriginal population which had reduced to about 3,000. Their traditional country had also been taken over by 390,000 cattle and 6,600,000 sheep.⁹ In Victoria, there were only a few Woiwurrung left on their traditional country. Even the Argus was reporting the view that *"It is deeply to be regretted that the Aboriginal population of Australia is gradually but certainly disappearing from the face of the earth."*¹⁰

Wonga was a smart leader and concluded that the survival of his people required new strategies and concessions to the now dominant outsiders. The worst-case scenario for Wonga occurred with the discovery of gold in the 1850s, which accelerated the rush of new migrants. The gold rush began with the announcement of the first finding of gold at Clunes (traditional land of the Djadja Wurrung) and Warrandyte (traditional land of the Wurundjeri).¹¹ Within a decade the non-Indigenous population of Victoria was over 500,000¹² and Wonga's conundrum was so much harder.

One benefit of the gold rush was that many farmworkers and labourers left for the diggings and the natives could therefore find jobs easier and earn better pay. Wonga started putting his 'whitefella' business knowledge into practice, including management skills such as quantity surveying, cost estimation, bargaining, and negotiating labour hire contracts with pastoralists, as he:

*"... contracted out teams of Wurundjeri men and women to learn agricultural, building construction and cattle mustering skills. At a cattle run near Warrandyte the station owner was so impressed with Wonga's leadership and skill at mustering he named the station 'Wonga Park' after him. Wonga's skill at providing cost estimates for the work involved and organising his workers was highly impressive. At the time of the Warrandyte gold rush, Wonga secured a contract to harvest bark for a Richmond publican to build the first beer hut on the goldfields. Whilst doing the job the publican gave Wonga and his men some tobacco and food, but later deducted that from the agreed sum. Wonga immediately went to William Thomas and complained of a breach of contract. Thomas then threatened to sue the publican if he did not pay the full agreed amount, thus gaining immediate results."*¹³

⁶ William Westgarth, *Personal Recollections of Early Melbourne & Victoria*, pp15-16

⁷ City of Keilor Centenary Souvenir p32

⁸ Barwick

⁹ Barwick, *Rebellion at Coranderrk*

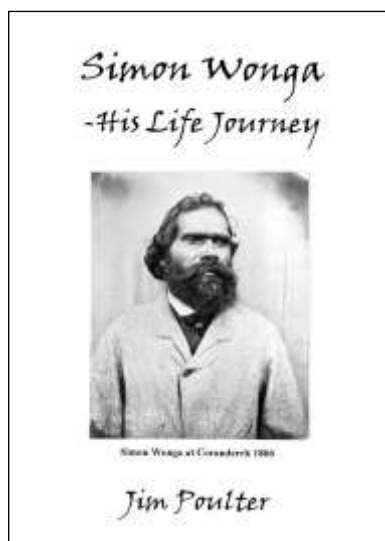
¹⁰ Daniel Bunge "The Language Of The Aborigines Of Victoria" Argus 18 March 1851 p1.

¹¹ <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Barak-18>

¹² <http://www.marinecare.org.au/index.php/sanctuary/aboriginal>

¹³ Jane Lydon, *Aboriginal History* 2002 Vol 26 ch0549.pdf

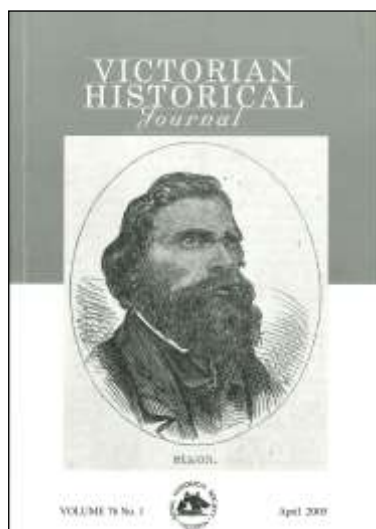
At this time Aboriginal people had no legal capacity to sue or give evidence in court, which shows how unequal treatment under British law could be. Another observation of the time is that Aboriginal people did not have written language *per se* but Wonga was able to record details of contracts – he kept a notched stick on which he recorded, for example, the amount of materials harvested, the number of men employed, and the number of days they worked.¹⁴



The communal benefit of Wonga's contracting business is that it gave his clan the opportunity to learn about European agriculture, building, and animal husbandry, which became essential survival skills when they eventually settled on reserves such as Coranderrk. In 1851 the Wurundjeri people were told they had to leave their traditional land at Pound Bend. Wonga decided that Kulin people should hold a ritual farewell to tribal life and planned for a last Kulin Federation corroboree, a huge two-week celebration of traditional culture. It was said this event marked the end of traditional Wurundjeri life but not the end of the Wurundjeri people. Jim Poulter writes:

*"All Kulin people and some Gunnai from Drouin were informed that a last great Gaggip [friendship gathering] would be held in March 1852 at Pound Bend in Warrandyte. This was the normal time for inter-clan business which was always held during the eel harvest from mid-February to mid-March. ... Ultimately, several hundred people had gathered at Pound Bend by early March 1852 to play their traditional games such as wrestling, football [marngrook], spear and boomerang throwing, plus traditional dances each night."*¹⁵

In 1859 Wonga heard from his Goulburn River friends that a settler had abandoned his run at Acheron at the junction of the Acheron and Goulburn rivers. It was prime land and on in February 1859 Wonga led a seven-man deputation of Wurundjeri elders and petitioned William Thomas to secure land for the Kulin-Taungurong people: *"They want a block of land in the country where they may sit down, plant corn, potatoes ... and work like white men."*



The Government agreed to the proposal and 80 Taungurong established the Acheron station on land north of the Cathedral Range. After a year of clearing the land, fencing 17 acres and planting seven acres of wheat and vegetables, the Government ordered them to move to another location – the Mohican station, south of Acheron. Influential local squatters who wanted the Acheron land for themselves and Melbourne financier Hugh Glass had lobbied government ministers and so the tribe was sent to the Mohican station, where the land was so cold that no Europeans were willing to settle there.

This sad episode has a link with Brimbank through Hugh Glass. Glass emigrated to Victoria in the 1840s and became a successful merchant, squatter, speculator, financier, political lobbyist and Member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly. He owned Keilor Binn Farm for a brief time and thus was a local ratepayer. He was also a financial backer to James Watson (of Watson & Hunter) who named Keilor. Keilor has a long history of settlement by the Kulin people, but they were mostly gone by the 1850s. According to Barwick, there were few Woiwurrung and

Bunurong left at this time, and in the mid-1860s there were only 200 people left of the five Kulin tribes and only 22 people left of the Woiwurrung tribe.

The Mohican Station was not suitable for agricultural purposes or human settlement and had to be abandoned, so the Kulin suggested a traditional camping site located at Coranderrk, near Healesville, and requested ownership of this land. Access to the land was provided but not granted as freehold. In 1863 Simon Wonga and William Barak led their remaining tribe of 40 people across the Black's Spur Songline to Badgers Creek on the Upper Yarra and established Coranderrk Mission Station. By then Thomas calculated there were only 22 survivors of the Woiwurrung or Yarra tribe and they were joined by some of the Taungurong tribe of whom 95 still lived:

¹⁴ Poulter pp9-10

¹⁵ Poulter p9

*"At Coranderrk, on the refuge that Billibellary had sought from Robinson as early as the winter of 1840, 67 men, women and children began to work again, building gardens, huts and a school. At Coranderrk, births were once again celebrated and the population began its recovery, though the history of that station became one of unending struggle and rebellion against a 'protection board' and colonists who, in the main, wished the 'original occupants of the soil' to be gone."*¹⁶

Over the next few decades the Coranderrk population increased and it became the most economically successful Aboriginal Mission Station in Australian history.

Wonga's siblings started dying in the late 1850s: his sister Wigal died in 1858; his brother Kulpendure died in 1859; and his brother Munnering died of tuberculosis in 1860.

Simon Wonga built his own bark-hut home and settled into Coranderrk as the leader of his people. He was a good orator, knew many dialects and English, but always spoke Woiwuru (the language of the Woiwurrung) when he was addressing his people. Even the Argus, Melbourne's main newspaper at the time, reported on his charismatic presence:

*"Wonga, the principal man of the Yarra tribe, who is now living comfortably with his wife in a well-built hut of his own at Coranderrk, is perhaps as favourable a specimen of the Australian aboriginal as one could meet. He has adopted European clothing and habits and it is not too much to say that he is in every sense of the word a superior man. He speaks English well but not rapidly, and it is only when addressing an assemblage of his people in his native tongue that he becomes fluent. At such a time his attitude, his graceful movements, the sometimes rapid utterance of short sentences, and the oratorical pauses (always effective) make the hearer regret that he is not fully conversant with the aboriginal tongue. Wonga has great influence with his people, and he appeals sincerely desirous of improving them."*¹⁷



Wonga family home at Corranderrk 1863

Wonga's health started deteriorating in the early 1860s after he contracted tuberculosis and became very ill in the early 1870s. First Nations People had always had their own doctors (Wer-raaps), whom they usually preferred, though they did consent to being treated by white doctors that their 'protectors' preferred. The results were sometimes unpredictable, as had happened to Wonga at one stage:

*"An example of the blacks' faith in their doctors was provided by Wonga a member of the Yarra Yarra tribe Wonga attended the Melbourne Hospital where he was operated upon for ophthalmia. The operation was successful but he was discharged still blind for, as is usual with this operation, it takes several days for the sight to return. Wonga did not understand this and he consulted 'Tall Boy' a noted Wer-raap who pretended to extract three straws from the back of Wonga's head. On the next day Wonga could see and on the day after his sight was almost normal. To his death he treasured the three straws and the belief that 'Tall Boy', and not the hospital surgeon, had regained his sight for him."*¹⁸

¹⁶ Stephens & Stewart-Muir p420

¹⁷ Argus 13 September 1869 p7

¹⁸ Gordon Leckie, "Black Magic – Curses and Cures of the Aborigines", Argus 27 August 1932 p7

In December 1874 it was reported that Wonga was near death and he may have died shortly afterwards, but there is no actual record of his death or the funeral arrangements.¹⁹ He had passed away at age 53 years. Wonga died of tuberculosis at Coranderrk in 1875, having 'given his word' to his cousin, William Barak.²⁰

William Barak succeeded Wonga as Ngurungaeta and maintained his leadership at Coranderrk for three decades until he died in 1903. He was the sole Woiworrung Ngurungaeta after Wonga's death.²¹

Wonga's wife Maria lived several years after Wonga's death and remarried but the details are unknown.

The Melbourne suburb of Wonga Park and Wonga Road are named in memory of the late Simon Wonga.



Coranderrk station in 1885 – from Meyer Eidelson's *Melbourne Dreaming*



Coranderrk station - <https://yoorrookjusticecommission.org.au/news-stories/the-legacy-and-closure-of-coranderrk-station/#prior>

¹⁹ Poulter p14

²⁰ Stephens & Stewart-Muir p421

²¹ Barwick, *Mapping the Past* p124