

## NINGGOLOBBIN (1771-1851)

Ninggollobbin was a member of the Woiwurrung tribe of the Kulin Nation and one of the highest ranked elders, related through maternal lines (brother-in-law) to Ningalabul<sup>1</sup> and Billibellari.<sup>2</sup> Ninggollobbin was Ngurungaeta (head) of the Gunung-william-balluk<sup>3</sup> clan of the Woiwurrung tribe – he was often referred to as head of the Mount Macedon clan and took care of the stone quarry where tomahawks were made and traded, hence he was called “Ningulabul” (stone tomahawk).<sup>4</sup>

His other roles were as a choreographer of dances and a writer of songs and possibly songlines. William Barak said he was a great maker of songs that “made people glad when they heard them”<sup>5</sup> and was from a family of gifted singers, for his father and grandfather had been renowned song-makers, and this tradition was passed onto his sons. Some colonists who attended corroborees panned the accompanying singing as being monotonous drones, while others heard something more harmonious, where the “*prettiest of the tunes consist of a choral fugue in two parts, which has very beautiful variations.*”<sup>6</sup> Some recognized and appreciated the diversity of purpose in singing:

*“The songs are very numerous, and of varied character, and are connected with almost every part of the social life, for there is but little of the life of the Australian savage, either in peace or war, which is not in some measure connected with song. Some songs are only used as dance music; some are descriptive of events which have struck the composer; some are comic or pathetic. There is also an extensive class of songs or chants connected with the practice of magic, and of these many are what may be called “incantations” – words of power chanted in the belief that supernatural influence is not asked but compelled by the influence for evil or for warding off evil. Connected with this class are songs which are used at the Initiations, and which are therefore not known to the uninitiated or to the women.”<sup>7</sup>*



Aborigines north of Keilor c.1852-1856, artist Samuel Thomas Gill (1818-1880)

Ninggollobbin had enormous religious authority and was connected to many neighbouring clans and tribes through the marriage of members of his family; his sons went freely through other tribal

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<sup>1</sup> Stephens & Stewart-Muir p6

<sup>2</sup> Stephens & Stewart-Muir p32

<sup>3</sup> Also referred to as Konung-Willam clan,

<sup>4</sup> Howitt 1904: 311–312, Mount William quarry (cf. Howitt nd: 37 in McBryde 1984: 272

<sup>5</sup> Alfred William Howitt quoted in [https://www.forestsandreserves.vic.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/512470/Final-Hanging-Rock-Strategic-Plan.pdf](https://www.forestsandreserves.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/512470/Final-Hanging-Rock-Strategic-Plan.pdf). Diane Barwick Mapping The Past: An Atlas Of Victorian Clans 1835-1904 Part 1, p121

<sup>6</sup> Australia News for Home Readers 23 February 1866 p14

<sup>7</sup> David Frankel & Janine Major; Victorian Aboriginal Life and Customs Through Early European Eyes; Latrobe University eBureau; 2017. p37

territories as messengers and meeting summoners.<sup>1</sup>

Ninggollobin was also known as Captain Turnbull, John Bull, Captain John Bull, Captain John Turnbull, Ningollobin, Ninggerlabil, Nangollibil, and Ningulabul.<sup>2</sup> His sons included Winberri, Nerrimbin-uk, and Ningulabul, and sometimes it is hard to distinguish in references whether the authors are referring to the father or the son when they mention Ninggollobin/Ningulabul.

Ninggollobin the elder was born in the 1770s and died in the 1850s when he was about 80 years old. He was related to Bebejern who was the father of Barak who became a leader of the Wurundjeri clan of the Woiwurrung tribe. In the 1790s, the Aboriginal population of Victoria was about 60,000 people.

Ninggollobin gets some recognition as a 'local' resident through a disparaging mention in the publication "City of Keilor Centenary Souvenir 1863-1963" as having very bad dental problems (teeth worn down to almost stumps) and being a poor hunter. How would they know? His family and tribe were reported as living in the area of the Keilor village, but it is difficult to ascertain if the author is referring to the real Ninggollobin or just a caricature, as the Woiwurrung did not have a permanent settlement on their Keilor estates; it would have been more like a summer country sojourn. If the reference to Ninggollobin is true, then it means that one of the most powerful leaders of the Woiwurrung tribe did occasionally reside in Keilor. At least the souvenir booklet has a genuine photograph of a male corroboree dancer *en costume*.

One of Ninggollobin's special roles was as a choreographer of corroboree dances. These events have often been depicted with men as the star characters and women in a subsidiary role of beating time on possum skins stretched over their legs. But not always. Sometimes a couple of men and women would lead the dancing and sometimes there were women-only corroborees.<sup>3</sup> Corroborees involved elements of dance, song, ritual and discussion, and were held for a variety of purposes including tanderrum ceremonies, the rituals of marriage or initiation, and the resolution of trade or other disputes. Some early British observers referred to corroborees as war dances, and some recognised pure theatre:



*"Suddenly, all was attention, waiting and watching for the entrance of the artists. The women performers entered first. They carried their opossum cloaks to act as musical instruments and seated themselves in a semicircle, with the opossum rugs stretched across their knees so that the skins acted as drums, the basic instrument of their orchestra. The leader entered, carrying a corroboree stick of dry resonant wood about eighteen inches long. With faultless ease he took up his position between the women and the fire. As he turned towards the women, he made a droning sound, then struck the sticks. The great corroboree dance began.*

*The women beat their opossum skins in perfect unison. The dancers entered; they carried corroboree sticks and arranged themselves in straight rows. The leader scanned the company. All was ready. He beat his sticks with a rhythm that was taken up by the women and dancers. The exact group unison awed the spectators who sometimes praised or criticized in hushed whispers.*

*The dancers moved sideways then back; to the other side, then back; advanced, then retreated. While keeping up his nasal drone, the leader quickened his time: the dancers quickened their steps. Once more the leader turned to the women, who raised their voices in song. He then turned to the dancers. They shook themselves and leapt into the air to incredible heights. At last, taking a deep breath, they uttered a loud, shrill yell in such unison that it seemed to come from one voice. Thereupon, they vanished into the bush for a short rest, after which they appeared again.*

*This time the dancers formed a curved line, went through more steps, stampings and shakings of the body. In song, the women raised their voices to the loudest pitch, then lowered them to a soft cadence. The dancers formed in lines of four deep. In a flash, the perfect order was transformed into chaos, just as quickly, order and rhythm were restored. They shouted, stamped and jumped, the women beat louder and louder, their voices rose to the utmost pitch and volume. With decision, the leader struck his sticks. The great cadenza was over."<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Gary Vines, U L Daly Reserve, Gisborne, Victoria: Preliminary Cultural Heritage Assessment, 2013, Biosis P/L.

<sup>2</sup> <https://aiatsis.gov.au/collections/item/XX159739>

<sup>3</sup> Aboriginal History Journal: Volume 41, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Agnes Paton Bell, Melbourne: John Batman's Village, Cassell Australia, 1965; pp34-35

Corroborees were also used in inter-tribal discussions focussing on sharing information about new developments and planning for combined action; for example, in December 1843, around 800 people from seven tribes gathered in Melbourne in connection with the arrest of two men:

*"The ceremonial dance, originating in the Australian Alps, lasted six days and involved seven dances, six of which featured a war emblem and the seventh a bough, the emblem of peace. The dance included 25 pieces of bark to represent each of the new Native Police. The barks were collected together and put in the centre of the camp 'in silence proclaiming good will to all around'."*<sup>1</sup>

In 1835 Ninggollobbin was a 'signatory' to the 'treaty' that was perpetrated by John Batman. This treaty was disallowed by the British Government, and one wonders how, when and what information was told to Aboriginal leaders about this. Batman's tactics nevertheless "opened the floodgates" and soon there were lots of colonists arriving from Tasmania trespassing and taking over the traditional owners' land for their sheep and cattle farms, and showing no accountability to the traditional owners. Soon, the First Nations People lost not only their land but also their autonomy.

At this stage the Aboriginal population of Victoria was about 6,500 having declined from about 60,000 in 1780. Of the Marin Balluk (Boi-beritt) clan, the Brimbank mob, there were about 100 to 150.

Locally, the first squatter-settler who settled on the Maribyrnong River was Joseph Solomon the younger, who arrived in 1835 and occupied land along the river at Keilor, Avondale Heights, and East Braybrook (Marin-Balluk and Wurrundjeri country). And though he did establish cordial relations with some Marin-Balluk people, he nevertheless did occupy their land. As has been observed, "*pre-contact living cycles and food economies were increasingly undermined by the squatters' occupation of their ranges*" which contributed to the decline in the Aboriginal population.



In 1839 William Thomas was appointed Protector of Aborigines for the Port Phillip, Westernport and Gippsland. He became responsible for the delivering 'civilization and christianisation' as well as food rations to the Aborigines in his districts, and it was to him that Aboriginal people directed their wants and dissatisfactions with the government. Some of the people called Thomas 'marm-in-artar' (or 'father')<sup>2</sup> but Thomas had no real power to safeguard their lives or livelihoods. Ninggollobbin became closely involved with Thomas in these difficult times but there were also confrontations. The distribution of rations was also used as a means of control. Ninggollobbin would challenge some of Thomas's decisions regarding allocation of rations and even threatened to go the governor, but Thomas had the upper hand; for example, he would give a full ration of "Sabbath flour" to those from his own clan attending Sunday service, but a lesser amount to the strangers. Stephens and Stewart-Muir write that:

*"Ninggollobbin and Poleorong challenged him. They want the flour &c to be laid before them and distributed at their will, as Thomas had observed him to do with Western Port marking right, seniority and fraternity. When he refused, Ninggollobbin became very insolent, holding up finger 'flour, tea, sugar, rice, tobacco and soap', and saying pointedly that the Governor [sent these provisions to] Black fellows. ... He threatens to go to the Governor. I bid him go and tell governor to come and serve them himself. I give him none for his insolence."*<sup>3</sup>

In 1840 Ninggollobbin was involved in the aftermath of the Lettsom raid, which was the mass arrest and imprisonment of approximately 400 Kulin people near Melbourne. In trying to deescalate the situation Ninggollobbin pointed out the Goulburn men whom the soldiers wanted; his actions caused a rift between clans for some years. Such concessions were not necessarily reciprocated. At one stage Ninggollobbin's wife went missing and Thomas gave police a detailed account of a search for the wife in the settlement, but the Police Magistrate Lonsdale refused Thomas any police aid on the Aborigines' behalf.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Janice Newton, *Aboriginal History Journal*: Volume 41, 2017, Two Victorian corroborees: Meaning making in response to European intrusion.

<sup>2</sup> Smyth 1878 vol 2: 466 quoted in *Aborigines - indigenous-history-full-report.pdf*

<sup>3</sup> Stephens & Stewart-Muir p88

<sup>4</sup> *Making Settler Colonial Space*, Edited by Tracey Banivanua Mar and Penelope Edmonds <https://epdf.pub/making-settler-colonial-space-perspectives-on-race-place-and-identity.html>

In 1842, 23 Wurundjeri Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung men and youths were sworn in to form the Native Police Corps, including senior men Ninggolobbin and Munmmunginner.<sup>1</sup> Their duties were various and their legendary tracking skills were sometimes put to good use:

*"Mr. Dana, commandant of the native Police force, was despatched on Thursday last, to Nerre Nerre Warren, to assist with his blacks, in tracing and recovering an unfortunate woman who was lost some days previously... the missing woman was the wife of a labourer on the station. The search fortunately proved successful but not until, it is positively stated, the woman had been lost nine days. What makes the escape almost miraculous, is that the poor creature was exposed during the whole of the time, and in the most inclement weather, with two children, one an infant in arms, the other a little thing at only three years old."*<sup>2</sup>



Yarra Tribal Group 1858-9

It is not known how long Ninggolobbin stayed with the Native Police Corps, as within a couple of years he was being pursued by the police. In 1844 Ninggolobbin was arrested and charged with murder. He was imprisoned for the alleged killing of an Aboriginal man named Booby, an event that received lots of attention in the newspapers:

*"... at about 3 o'clock yesterday morning, the Chief Constable for the Town, with his force, the Chief Constable for the District, with his force, the mounted police, and about twenty inhabitants, proceeded to the blacks encampment, about a mile from Melbourne, which they surrounded at daylight and having collected all the blacks together, Fitzgerald and Comerford, who had accompanied the party, pointed out Bull as the black who had speared Booby."*

Interestingly, the Keilor Centenary book states that the incident occurred at Keilor when several hundred Aboriginal men were assembled there:

*"One of the first murders committed in the Keilor area ... was that of an Aboriginal called Booby. After a full inquiry, the Coroner and jury pointed the finger at another Aborigine known to the colonists as John Bull. This happened in 1844. The evidence was pretty conclusive, for the victim had not died immediately and while on his deathbed was able to point out his murderer. When William Johnson Sudgen, Chief Constable of Melbourne, confronted him with an earlier version of an identity parade. ... According to the evidence of a bullock driver, Morris Fitzgerald, who worked for J L Foster of Keilor, he was proceeding towards Keilor after having been in Melbourne on his day. Another dray with Booby the victim preceded him. Near Keilor, John Bull, whom the witness knew, approached the first dray. He had in his hands a spear. Witness didn't hear what John Bull said to Booby, but Booby gave John Bull some tobacco. Immediately afterwards there was a scream and witness saw John Bull run off into the bush - without his spear. The spear had been plunged right through the body of poor Booby."*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Stephens & Stewart-Muir p237

<sup>2</sup> Port Philip Gazette 3 August 1842 p2

<sup>3</sup> City of Keilor Centenary Souvenir 1863 to 1963, p32



Protector William Thomas came to Ninggollobbin's defence straight away. He visited Mayor Henry Moor in his capacity as Police Magistrate and wrote a report to Moor stating Ninggollobbin's innocence, including the name of the real killer. Thomas came to his conclusion after examining the spear used in the killing, which he knew wasn't Ninggollobbin's because:

*"... each man's spear carried his signature and that it was a mark of honour and law that a man used his own spear to carry out a judicial killing. It was evident to him that the fatal spear was not of Ninggollobbin's making".<sup>1</sup>*

The imprisonment created an uproar and the Kulin clans had begun to assemble in Melbourne; in its wake, more arrived - Yarra tribal people who had been long absent, returned, Mt Macedon men, women and children under the venerable Bungarim.<sup>2</sup> Thomas also recorded that a group of Wurundjeri Woiwurrung women were lamenting and lacerating themselves outside the gaol, singing and crying for Ninggollobbin. He remained imprisoned until his trial in the Supreme Court in March 1845 where he was found not guilty by the jury, after evidence from William Thomas and Sergeant Bennett, a non-Indigenous member of the Native Police.<sup>3</sup>

Ninggollobbin the elder died in 1851, aged about 80 years. He must have been one of the longest-lived leaders of his tribe. During his time he had made Bebejan and Billibillary ngurungaetas. Ninggollobbin's son, Ninggollobbin (Nangollibil) was made clan head in 1851 after his father death.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, Ninggollobbin the younger passed away in 1854.<sup>5</sup>

In 1851 the Aboriginal population of Victoria was about 2,700 whereas Europeans numbered 77,000 with 391,000 cattle and 6,600,000 sheep.



A corroboree on Emerald Hill by Wilbraham Liardet, based on a sketch he had made in the 1840s.  
Source: State Library Victoria

<sup>1</sup> Stephens & Stewart-Muir 328

<sup>2</sup> Stephens & Stewart-Muir 337

<sup>3</sup> City of Melbourne Submission to Yoorrook Justice Commission, September 2024

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mrra.asn.au/archive1/arc1-council/Council%20Projects%20&%20Services/daly-reserve/docs/daly-reserve-prelim-cultheritage-assessment-biosis-2013.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Stephens & Stewart-Muir 418