

THE HISTORY OF THE YARRA

The geological history of the present day course of the Yarra starts about 800,000 years ago. Volcanic eruptions in the Great Dividing Range spewed molten lava down into the northern and western areas of Melbourne and blocked the course of the Yarra through there. The flat areas in the northern and western suburbs are therefore these lava plains. With these lava flows filling up the drainage systems to the north and east of Melbourne, huge inland lakes developed around Whittlesea and Yarra Glen.

Gradually, the Plenty River wore its way south along the eastern edge of the lava flow, thereby creating the Plenty Gorge. At the same time the Yarra gradually wore the Warrandyte Gorge to join the Plenty at Bulleen, the site of another inland lake. The final course of the Yarra was then worn through the Kew Gorge around the southern end of the lava flow.

Until about 8000 years ago before the sea levels rose, the Bay area was dry. The Yarra flowed south through what is now Port Phillip Heads, then west across the Tasmanian land bridge. Rising seas after the inter-glacial period then began filling the Bay to its present level.

The fascinating part of all this is how the Wurundjeri story on the creation of the Yarra has so accurately reflected this geological process. Rather than having a Dreamtime story of the creation of the river by the movement across the landscape of a giant Snake Creator Spirit, the creation of the river is attributed to two Ancestor Heroes. In other words it is a record of the living memory of the geological process that had been witnessed over the period of human occupation, which probably exceeds 100,000 years.

The Ancestor Heroes Barwool and Yan-Yin each decided to free their land from the great waters. Yan-Yin began digging a channel south with his stone axe to free Morang from water. In doing so created the Plenty Gorge. At the same time Barwool started digging a channel east to free Moorool from water and in doing so created the Warrandyte Gorge.

When they met at Bulleen each had been unaware of the other's work, and decided to join forces, but first they had a rest. This is why Bulleen means 'resting place'.

Barwool and Yan-Yin then began their work again and wore out many stone axes before they finally cut the Kew Gorge through to Jillong, which was the name of the plains to the south of Melbourne. All the water from Morang, Moorool and Bulleen then poured out and made a great lake called Narm, now known as Port Phillip Bay.

It is astounding how close this story is to the actual geological processes involved, but it is something by which I am no longer surprised. Many of the Dreamtime stories I have read are compatible with scientific theories such as the Big Bang, geophysics and evolution. All you have to do is not just dismiss the stories as primitive folk tales and look more deeply.

There is only one more story to relate about the history of the Yarra, and that is how it actually got its present day name. The Wurundjeri name for the river is Birrarung, which means 'River of Mists'. However the river actually got its present name by courtesy of John Helder Wedge, the surveyor who belonged to John Batman's Port Phillip Syndicate.

After Batman came to Melbourne in early June 1835 and with met the Wurundjeri, he returned to Tasmania, leaving the rest of his party camped at Indented Head, now Geelong. This included five of the seven Sydney Blacks who had accompanied him to Port Phillip as guides and interpreters.

In August 1835 Wedge came from Tasmania to do some survey work and was dropped off at Indented Head. After some survey work there, three Sydney men and two Geelong men then rowed him to Melbourne in a whale boat. They made their way five miles up from the mouth of the Yarra at Hobson's bay to the site where Melbourne now stands. As they approached the falls between present day Queen Street and William Street, a Sydney man exclaimed 'Yarra! Yarra!', meaning 'waterfall' in their Sydney language. Wedge however thought they were saying it was the name of the river.

It was only when they were returning to Indented Head by foot that Wedge realised his error. On reaching the ford on the Werribee River, his guides again exclaimed 'Yarra'. Wedge duly noted his mistake, but it was too late. The river's name had now been irrevocably changed from Birrarung to Yarra.

Unfortunately there are still many official histories of the Yarra recycling the mistaken belief that the men with Wedge were Woiwurung and that 'Yarra' was therefore a Woiwurung word meaning 'ever flowing'. It was however just our first urban myth.