

BUCKLEY'S ADJUSTMENT TO TRIBAL LIFE

William Buckley is of course firmly entrenched in Australian history and folklore as 'The Wild White Man'. A convict, he escaped at age twenty-two from a short-lived colony at Sorrento in 1803. He then spent the next thirty-two years with the Wathurong people at Geelong.

After John Batman's historic meeting with the Woiwuring in June 1835 he returned to Tasmania, leaving his party of three colonists and five Sydney Aboriginals camped at Geelong. To their astonishment the huge and bearded fifty-four year old Buckley walked into the camp on 6th July 1835, wearing a possum skin cloak.

At first he could not understand English, became a bit disoriented and had to sit down. When given a piece of bread he stared at it, then said 'bread' and his language came flooding back. Buckley became a sensation in colonial Australia and everyone wanted to know everything about his life with the natives.

The problem was that whilst Buckley had become fluent in at least five different Aboriginal languages, he remained completely illiterate in English. In agreeing to John Morgan publishing his biography in 1852, Buckley had no way of exercising any editorial control over what Morgan wrote.

In 1856, the same year that Buckley died, James Bonwick wrote another account of his adventures, without him ever having met Buckley. There are also many other documents recounting specific events or experiences with Buckley before he retreated, disillusioned, to Tasmania in 1837. The most illuminating of these was an interview recorded by Reverend Langhorne in 1837. It was not discovered and published until 1911.

Many of the stories attributed to Buckley by these various authors were often aimed at pandering to public interest in the more salacious details of his tribal life. The narratives were also designed to confirm ingrained European assumptions about Aboriginal people as '*simple and child like savages*'. Many of these accounts also included complete fabrications.

However among these many inaccuracies, false assumptions and outright lies, there were also many scattered gems of unfiltered truth. The real problem is in how to sort out the wheat from the chaff and build a more accurate picture of Buckley's tribal life. To do this it requires some basic understanding of Aboriginal culture and mindset.

The first thing that comes through these various accounts is an appreciation of how Buckley's basic personality was a key factor in his survival. Bonwick for instance judged him harshly and considered him to be of 'low intelligence', but this says more about Bonwick's pompous class driven views. Langhorne however simply noted that it was difficult to converse with him, which was understandable given Buckley's thirty-two year divorce from conversational English.

What becomes clear is that despite his huge frame and two-metre height, Buckley was a gentle natured and mild mannered man, who intuitively fitted into the culture of respect that permeated Aboriginal society.

For instance because he had picked up the spear of a deceased man named Murrangurk, he was accepted into the tribe as the reincarnation of Murrangurk, albeit a lot bigger. According to custom he was placed in the care of Murrangurk's brother, then asked if he wanted his widow back. Buckley declined as he did not want to upset existing arrangements or create any ill-will.

Later, another escaped convict found the tribe and soon began abusing women. Buckley consequently ordered him to leave and once he was out of Buckley's protection he was executed. This clearly showed that whilst Buckley might have been mild mannered, he was nonetheless a person of strong principles and firm resolve.

Buckley was also perceptive of the Aboriginal tradition of story-telling and moral parables. So once he became fluent he began telling stories about his experiences in the Napoleonic Wars. He told them about the awesome destructive and killing power of guns and cannons as well as the uncompromising attitude of the White Man.

These incredible hair-raising stories became popular theatre across all the Kulin tribes and Buckley had sell-out tours for over thirty years. The stories were however more than just theatre. In keeping with traditional culture they were morally instructive. Buckley warned that the White Man would inevitably come looking for land, take it and clear all the scrub. He warned that the worst thing they could do was kill one white man, because if they did it would be paid back twentyfold.

Buckley's prophetic message was considered so important that he was given a special role and status across the whole five Kulin Nation tribes in Central Victoria. His title was in effect '*Headman for Education about Whitefellahs*'.

Because of Buckley's warning all five Kulin tribes instituted 'Murrangurk's Law' which forbade any Kulin from killing a White Man. It proved to be a most effective strategy in their future survival, when colonists finally began arriving in plague proportions from mid-1835 onward.