

BARAK'S ACCOUNT OF MEETING BATMAN

William Barak is the most famous of all Wurundjeri leaders and we can claim him as a local. He was born in September 1823 at Brushy Creek near the Yarra River in Wonga Park. This suburb was named after Barak's cousin Simon Wonga, whom he succeeded as Wurundjeri leader in 1874.

Barak and Wonga were both present at the historic meeting with Batman on June 6th 1835. Barak was almost 12 and Wonga almost 14. Batman claims to have negotiated the purchase of land occupying present day Melbourne at this meeting. Ever since then, there has been controversy about where the 'treaty' meeting was really held. The Merri Creek near Rushall Station has long been the political front runner, but it should be noted that Merri means 'rocky'.

About five years ago I was shown a document dictated by William Barak in 1888. He was almost sixty-five, feeling unwell and fearing he would die. The document focussed on the meeting with Batman and the influence of William Buckley on tribal thinking, which I spoke about in last month's edition. I read the document and could hardly believe my eyes. I asked the librarian if she understood its implications, which she did not. I then explained some of them to her. The problem was that unless you had some understanding of the traditional Aboriginal mindset, it would all just go over your head. I therefore took a copy of Barak's document and began to tease out these hidden meanings.

After this I carefully studied Batman's journal, which purported to be a daily account of his six days in Melbourne. I also studied his report to Governor Arthur. Apart from some stark discrepancies between the two documents, it was again helpful to have some knowledge of Aboriginal culture to identify some of the spurious claims made by Batman.

Finally I had to reconcile the differing accounts by Barak and Batman, and of course I preferred to believe Barak's account. He was after all a man of impeccable character and integrity, whereas Batman was a proven liar, braggart, swindler, womaniser and murderer. But apart from that he was a good bloke.

Take for example Batman's claim that in each of the first four days, he walked thirty miles before meeting the Wurundjeri. That is 120 miles in four days and not even a fully fit army commando would be capable of such a feat. Batman at that stage had tertiary syphilis and was dead four years later. He actually spent the last year of his life being trundled around in a wheelbarrow. So let's throw his diary to one side and look at what Barak said.

Batman had brought seven Sydney Blacks with him as guides and interpreters, but strangely never mentions them when at Melbourne. Barak on the other hand tells us that Batman gave his Sydney men a couple of bags of potatoes and told them to make contact with the locals and arrange a meeting. In Barak's own words: *'Batman sent some potatoes to the camp of the Yarra blacks. Then the Blacks travel to Idelberg.'* Barak then explains that the Sydney men were told at Heidelberg that the Elders were meeting further up the Plenty River and they would be there the next day if they wanted to meet with Batman.

Barak of course did not refer to the Plenty River by that name. He referred to it by the translated Woiwurung name, saying: *'All the blacks camp at Muddy Creek;*' Kurrum was the original name of the Plenty River and this word means 'muddy'. So the meeting was on Muddy Creek not Rocky Creek. It is instructive that Gellibrand, the lawyer in Batman's syndicate, is the person who named it the Plenty River. He also confirmed that it was indeed where Batman's meeting was held.

You will recall in the first of these articles I talked about Songlines. This knowledge of Aboriginal geography was instrumental in being able to reconstruct Batman's real itinerary, not the phony one in his diary. To Batman's Sydney guides the landmarks and features along the Songlines would have stood out like neon lights. When the ship docked at the William Street falls, they simply followed the Songline up William Street, past the law courts and Victoria Market to the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

There the Songline split into three, Flemington Road, Sydney Road and across Melbourne University to Heidelberg Road. Once they made contact at Heidelberg the Sydney men returned to get Batman and guide him to Greensborough. After the meeting they returned by a more direct route. One of the few accurate journal notes Batman made was that to get back to their ship they walked *'twelve miles in a south-west direction'*. Have a look at the Melways. This was the Plenty Road Songline.