

# A Contextual Understanding of 'My Words' by William Barak

On 26<sup>th</sup> May 1888 famed Wurundjeri Elder William Barak began dictating some of his recollections to a teenage student at Coranderrk School. Barak was in his 65<sup>th</sup> year, feeling unwell and fearing he might die. Because of Barak's stream of consciousness and the Aboriginal concepts embedded in his narrative, its profound implications have not previously been understood. Elements of both Aboriginal oral history and colonial documentation have been utilised to help draw out these implications. The following interpretation therefore shows the implication of Barak's narrative in *italics* and his original words **bolded**. This interpretation was produced by Jim Poulter, in consultation with Wurundjeri Elders and is subject to ongoing revision, the latest being in April 2020

**I was born in the year 1823 at Brushy Creek in Wonga Park which was named after my cousin Simon Wonga and I was about eleven years old when Batman visited Port Phillip Bay.** *As a child we all heard the convict William Buckley talk about his previous life in Europe. Buckley, whom we knew as Murrangurk, was escorted all over Kulin Country to speak at every Black's camp. He told us about how he had fought in the Napoleonic Wars and about the guns and cannons Europeans possessed, and the killing these weapons caused. He warned us that white men would soon come to our Country with these weapons because they wanted land. I have never forgotten it and I remember Buckley's words every time I think of that first meeting with Batman in 1835.*

*It was thirty-two years prior to this meeting with Batman that Buckley had come to live among us when he escaped from the failed colony at Sorrento in December 1803. We had not seen a white man until five years before Buckley came to live with us. This was when George Bass, not Captain Cook as I had wrongly thought, landed at Westernport in 1798.*

*Then in June 1835 Batman came looking for Country just as Buckley had warned us. Batman sailed into Port Phillip Bay looking around the sea and landed where he found a lot of blacks on the other side of Geelong. After Batman had left to go back to Tasmania on the 9<sup>th</sup> June 1835, he left his team at Geelong. Then on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1835 Buckley came in the camp. He had no trousers and was all raggedy and only wore a possum skin rug. After Buckley proved who he was by showing them his tattoo, they took him back to live with white people again and we were all sorry. But a month before Buckley came out of the bush, Batman had come to Melbourne and moored his boat 'Rebecca' at the William Street falls. Batman wanted to meet with the Woiwurrung Elders and he had seven Sydney Blacks with him as guides and interpreters. Their names were Pigeon, Joe the Marine, Old Bull, Bungett, Bullett, Stewart and Jacky. Their job was to go ahead of Batman and make contact with the local Blacks.*

**Batman sent the Sydney men with some potatoes from Melbourne to find the camp of Yarra Blacks. Then the Sydney Blacks travelled to Heidelberg.** *Being 'Out of Country' the Sydney Blacks followed proper protocol and were 'Singing Country' as they went along the Heidelberg Road Songline that follows the Yarra on the north side. When they got to Warringal they were told by the few people there that the Elders knew white men had finally come, so they were having a special meeting. All the blacks were therefore in a camp at Kurrum, which means Muddy Creek. But then not much later, Batman's lawyer, Gellibrand, gave it the whitefella name of the Plenty River. Batman's Sydney men were told that his request for a meeting would be taken to the Elders at Kurrum near Greensborough and Batman should go there the next day and wait. Batman's message was then taken to the Woiwurrung Elders who decided they would meet him the next day on the Plenty River at Greensborough.*

**Next morning they all went down to see Batman arrive, not just the Elders but also every old man and woman and all the children.** *This included me and my three cousins Wonga, Keelbundoora and Jika-Jika. We were all the sons of the three Headmen, who were regarded as brothers, so we regarded ourselves as cousins. I was the son of the Headman, Bebejern; Wonga was the son of the Songman, Billibelleri; and Keelbundoora and Jika-Jika were the sons of Jagga-Jagga who was the Kidney-fat Man or law enforcer. We all went to Batman's camp near the ford on the Plenty at Greensborough for rations.*

*The Elders welcomed Batman onto Country with a Tanderrum Ceremony, after which he held a whitefella ceremony. In asking the names of the three headmen so he could write it down, Bebejern and Billibellari deferred to their leadership 'brother' Jagga-Jagga as they were on his land. That is why the name Jagga-Jagga is written three times on Batman's 'Treaty'. The men with Batman had brought a couple of sheep and so they then killed some sheep by Batman's order and we all feasted. Later, the parishes of Bundoora and Jika-Jika were named after Jagga-Jagga's two sons, because this was in acknowledgement that Batman had met with the Woiwurrung on his land on the Plenty River. It was not at Merri Creek because Merri means 'rocky' not 'muddy'. It was not Darebin Creek either because Darebin means the bird 'Welcome Swallow'.*

*Seeing Batman at Greensborough on the 6<sup>th</sup> June 1835, three months before I turned twelve, I could not help but remember again the things that Buckley had told us in the years before. Buckley told the Blacks to look at his face and see how he looks very white. He said that any man you see out in the bush with a white face not to touch him. Also when you see an empty hut belonging to a white man, you are not to touch the bread in it. Instead, act as if you are Out of Country and you are approaching the camp of another tribe. Follow the 'Out of Country Rule' and make a camp outside and wait till the man comes home. When the man comes home and finds everything safe in the house he will be friendly and share his food with you. Murrangurk told us that they are good people when you respect their property, but if you kill one white man they will hunt down all your mob and shoot you down like a kangaroo. He said a lot of white fellow will come here by-and-by and clear all the scrub all over the country, so just remember what I have said when you see a white man in your Country.*