

HOW BARAK GOT HIS ACT TOGETHER

William Barak is one of the most famous and revered Aboriginal people in Australia. He was paramount leader of the Kulin people at Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve at Healesville from 1875 until his death in 1903. He was also a painter, singer, story teller and diplomat and was rightfully feted to visiting European royalty as our local Aboriginal royalty.

Born in Manningham at Brushy Creek in Wonga Park later in 1823, Barak's father Bebejern was the Headman of the Wurundjeri. The fact that Barak ultimately succeeded his father in this role does not indicate any hereditary right of succession in Aboriginal society. Leadership was gained solely on merit and through the twin tests of knowledge and character.

Although there is no record of his childhood, we nonetheless know without doubt that Barak was a gifted child. He was accordingly identified at an early age, and like his older cousin Wonga, was assiduously groomed for leadership. It was also common for boys or girls of special ability to be initiated into adulthood a little earlier than normal.

It can therefore be safely assumed that Barak was initiated at age eleven, around November 1834 and that this was probably at Ngyelong (Hanging Rock) which was a key male initiation site for the Woiwurung. Less than a year later in June 1835, Barak was present at the historic meeting with John Batman on the Plenty River at Greensborough.

A year later in August 1836, Barak's father Bebejern died of the common cold. His body was bound in the traditional knees under the chin position, sheeted in bark and buried at the junction of the Merri Creek and Yarra River. Barak's uncle Billibelleri was then invited to assume tribal leadership.

Three years later in late 1839 Barak's cousin Wonga was at age eighteen elevated into trainee eldership. However Wonga was then badly injured and for a while it was feared he might die. The then sixteen year old Barak was therefore inducted into trainee eldership as a ready replacement for Wonga.

This ceremony at the Botanic Gardens camp site was witnessed by the Aboriginal Protector, William Thomas and historians have since wrongly concluded that this was Barak's initiation into adulthood. It was not, this had occurred five years previously and Barak had the keloid scars to prove it.

In 1840 Governor LaTrobe ordered William Thomas to get Aboriginal people out of Melbourne and a reserve was established at Nerre-Nerre Warren near Dandenong. Then in 1842 a Native Police Force was established and co-located with the reserve. The area has for ever after been known as 'The Police Paddocks'.

Headman Billibelleri at first supported the idea and encouraged a number of young Aboriginal men to join the Native Police, including the now eighteen year old Barak. The theory was that the young men would learn skills and discipline that would help them adapt to the new social order. Unfortunately they also soon learnt the well established police practice of drinking heavily at the end of the day.

However an ulterior motive of the government soon became apparent when the Native Police were deployed against their own people in punitive expeditions to the west, north and east of the colony. When Billibelleri learned in November 1843 that the Native Police had been involved in a massacre of seventeen Aboriginal people at Portland, he withdrew his patronage. However Barak remained with the Native Police Force until disbanded in early 1853.

By this time Wonga had become Headman and had gained regular work for his people at Wonga Park. The now twenty-nine year old Barak had however fallen down the pecking order considerably, due to having continued with the Native Police and his continuing immoderate drinking. However the arrival at Wonga Park of the young lay preacher John Green, proved to be a catalyst for Barak's change.

On one occasion Barak had imbibed a little too much and mislaid his spears. He accused a Gunnai man Punty of stealing his spears, which Punty denied. Barak then crept up behind Punty, cut a lock of his hair and threatened to use the hair to put a spell on Punty. When the two men started fighting, Green intervened, took Punty's hair, cut a lock of his own hair and gave it to Barak. Green then challenged Barak to put a spell on him instead. It proved to be a turning point in Barak's life and although Barak did not become a teetotaller, he only drank moderately from then on.

It was also from that point on that Barak rehabilitated his name and tribal standing. By the time Coranderrk was established in 1863, the now forty year old Barak was number two man to Wonga. Then as Wonga's health declined from tuberculosis over the next decade, Barak increasingly '*spoke with his voice*'.