

The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung: A Summary of Past and Ongoing Land Injustice

1835

The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation are the Traditional Owners of a large area of central-southern Victoria that includes much of what is now Greater Melbourne and environs. Wurundjeri territory extends to the Werribee River in the west, north to the Great Dividing Range and beyond, east to Mount Baw Baw and south to Mordialloc Creek.

The invasion of Victoria began at Portland in 1834, the site of Victoria's first permanent European settlement. The following year Wurundjeri lands were invaded with the establishment of Melbourne. This experience of land injustice is longer than most other First Peoples in Victoria. It continues today.

In 1835 settlers from Tasmania led by John Batman and John Pascoe Fawkner established Melbourne on the lower reaches of the Birrarung (Yarra River). The following year, 1836, Major Thomas Mitchell explored and reported on the fertile pasture-like country of the plains of central and western Victoria. He called this land Australia Felix – 'fortunate Australia' or 'lucky Australia' in Latin. These were not natural parklands, but culturally created, managed landscapes, the result of countless generations of firestick farming by Wurundjeri Ancestors. News of his 'discovery' led to a further land rush and land grab from two directions – Tasmania and Sydney. Many of these outsiders had extensive experience dispossessing Aboriginal people of their land. It was not fortunate for the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung.

It was the beginning of the Wurundjeri experience of land injustice. During the years of the so-called 'Protectorate' (1839-1849) greedy squatters drove the people from their clan lands, and their herds of cattle and sheep damaged the Country, destroying much of the Wurundjeri's main staple food, *murnong* (Yam Daisy) and driving off game. The Ancestors were also prohibited from entering the new township of Melbourne. The Wurundjeri became fringe-dwellers in their own Country. Violence and disease followed, and a demographic disaster unfolded.

The Wurundjeri community of today embody this land injustice and population decline. All Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people are the descendants of one ancestor, Annie Borat (1847-1881), sister of William Barak (1824-1903), the people's beloved *Ngarangaeta* (headman). Of all the Wurundjeri alive in her time, only Annie Borat has living descendants.

Coranderrk 1863-1924

Coranderrk is synonymous with the Wurundjeri experience of life after colonisation, the Wurundjeri experience of land injustice.

In 1863, the Wurundjeri and other Kulin people relocated to Coranderrk on the upper reaches of the Birrarung, near Healesville. Their right to settle there was soon recognised by the government, which in June 1863 gazetted Coranderrk Aboriginal Station as a reserve of 2,300 acres. The area of the station was soon increased to almost 5,000 acres.

Coranderrk became a thriving settlement. Cattle were raised and crops grown. The people lived in cottages and grew and harvested award-winning hops. They welcomed visitors with displays of cultural practices and sold handicrafts and artefacts. But covetous eyes were always looking at the Station from across the fence-line – neighbouring settlers who desired its fertile land. Members of the government and public service were also not happy with the residents' self-management and their willingness to stand up to overbearing station managers, and their objections to restrictive, paternalistic policies.

In the 1870s, the Victorian Board for the Protection of Aborigines campaigned to close down the Station and relocate the Aboriginal residents far from their Country, to a remote location on the Murray River.

Throughout the 1870s and 1880s the Aboriginal people of Coranderrk actively resisted efforts to control their lives and close the station through years-long protests, including deputations to politicians, journalists and other supporters. This sustained resistance is often cited as one of the first Indigenous campaigns for land rights and self-determination.

For example, in March 1881, Coranderrk leader and Wurundjeri Elder William Barak walked the 67 kilometres to Melbourne, leading a deputation to then premier Graham Berry. Berry promised Barak a parliamentary inquiry into the treatment of the Aboriginal people resident at Coranderrk. During the enquiry, Barak and other Aboriginal people proclaimed their desire to remain on their traditional land at Coranderrk and manage it by themselves.

The *Aboriginal Protection Act 1886* – known as the 'Half-Caste Act' – was an attempt by the government to integrate 'half-castes' into white society and increase government power over the lives of Aboriginal people in Victoria. It meant that people who were not of full Aboriginal descent were forbidden to live on stations like Coranderrk. Their expulsion led to the separation of families and the crippling of Coranderrk as an enterprise, as so many of the able-bodied workers were forced away. By 1893 there were only 31 people living on the Station and in the same year the Victorian government made the decision to reclaim half the land of Coranderrk.

The people who were forced away could not visit their families and Country – another form of land injustice – and those who remained were often not allowed to travel to other parts of their Country. For those remaining under the reserve system, life became even more unjust: freedom of movement, occupation, and conduct of their personal life such as choice of marriage partner, were all restricted and controlled.

On the eve of the enactment of this legislation, the people of Coranderrk were protesting against the control over their lives that would result. William Barak sent a petition in September 1886 to Chief Secretary Duncan Gillies, which is now on display in the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre in the Melbourne Museum. In it, the petitioners sought the right to travel on and off the reserve:

We wish to pass this to ask for our wishes that is, to go away shearing and harvesting and to come home when we wish and also to go for the good of our health when we need it, and we Aboriginals all wish and hope to have freedom...we should be free like the White Population.

Coranderrk was finally closed in 1924, and in 1948 was divided up for soldier settlement. In the years prior to the closure many families were sent to Lake Tyers in Gippsland under police escort. However, a number of Wurundjeri continued to live at Healesville, as they do today. An unbroken connection to Country, against all odds.

Ongoing Land Injustice

2024 will be the centenary of the closure of Coranderrk. A sad anniversary and stark reminder of land injustice past and present.

Speaking for, claiming and defending Country is a key mission of the Wurundjeri Corporation, which was established in 1985. The objectives of the Corporation, as set out in its Rule Book (p. 3) include:

To reclaim and secure land and compensation through State and Federal Governments as a result of the dispossession and dispersion of the Wurundjeri Tribes and Clans.

For the purpose of reinforcing spiritual, social and cultural contact with the land, to protect and maintain all lands claimed...

There has been some success: the return of a number of properties to the Wurundjeri including the Coranderrk homestead and Springfield Gorge (purchased by the ILC and granted in 1999 and 2000 respectively), the Sunbury Rings and Wil-im-ee Moor-ring (the Mount William axe quarry). In 1991 the Coranderrk Cemetery was granted to the Wurundjeri Corporation under the *Aboriginal Lands Act 1991* and in 1992 it acquired the site of the former Army School of Health at Healesville.

These are small slivers of what was once a vast Country. Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung Country.

Today, land injustice continues as the Wurundjeri attempt to speak for, claim and defend Country. The people are fighting in the tradition of *Ngarangaeta* William Barak and all the Ancestors. Through RAP, Treaty, TOSA and native title. This all takes time, effort and money. These processes require Wurundjeri to prove that they are the Traditional Owners. It is tiresome and traumatic. Land injustice experienced by neighbouring groups also means that some Nations do not remember their boundaries, and conflict and disputes are the result.

Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung will continue to fight against land injustice, past and ongoing.

E 9263
21/9/86

Coranderk Station

To
The Chief Secretary
Sir

We wish to pass this to ask for our wishes that is, could we get our freedom to go away shearing and harvesting and to come home when we wish and also to go for the good of our health when we need it, and we Aborigines all wish and hope to have freedom not to be bound down by the Protection of the Board or as it says in the Bill, (Clause, 5) But we should be free like the White Population there is only few Blacks now remaining in Victoria we are all dying away now and we Blacks of Aboriginal blood, wish to have now freedom for all our life time, for the Population is small and the increase is slow. For why does the Board act in these latter days more stronger authority over us Aborigines than it has yet been? For there is only 21 Aborigines on this Station Coranderk including men and women. Yours^{ts} Servants

Chief = William Barak x	Thomas Arco x	Carrigan John x
John Logan x	Dick Richard x	Samuel Powam x
John Gerrick x	Lank Mantox	Mooney, Clark x
Charles Rable x	Lanky Gilmore x	
Thomas Branfield x	Edward McLennox x	
Thomas Gilmon x	Thomas McLennox x	

September 1886 petition signed by William Barak and other Coranderk residents, opposing the restrictions of the Aboriginal Protection Act 1886.

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