

## **TRUTH-TELLING INCLUDES SOME GOOD STUFF**

It is an age-old, but true saying that the winners write history, and the writing of Australian colonial history has been no exception. The dispossession, dispersal and disadvantaging of Aboriginal people, has in past eras often been denied, ignored or glossed over.

We therefore need to approach this with a clear-eyed recognition, not just of what historical wrongs occurred, but also of how this may have led to the perpetuation of Aboriginal disadvantage into the present day. However, this must be done with reference to the values and processes of today's society, rather than being a fruitless railing against the evils of 'colonialism and imperialism'.

It must therefore also be done without any imputation of inherited racial guilt for these past injustices. Conversely, neither can we claim exoneration on the basis that our forebears might have been personally blameless of any wrongdoing. The plain fact is we can take neither blame nor credit for the sins or virtues of our forebears. We are all only responsible for what we do in our own lifetime.

On that note, maybe one way of highlighting historical wrongs, without engendering a sense of present-day guilt, would be to identify those people who in the past, have fought against injustices to Aboriginal people. In other words, showcase those people who have been figures of reconciliation. Those are the people who worked with and for Aboriginal people, to achieve change in their own lifetime.

The life experience of Simon Wonga is a good case in point. He was a charismatic leader who developed a vision for the survival of the Kulin people in the new world suddenly thrust upon them. I personally regard Simon Wonga as standing alongside Sir John Monash as the two greatest figures in Victoria's history. However, in forming and achieving his vision, Wonga also had the help of some principled and stoic colonists.

The first of these was Reverend James Clow who in 1838 established a cattle-run along the Dandenong Creek up to present day Ferntree Gully. The following year, Wonga was badly injured on Mount Dandenong and Clow saved his life. Over the next decade they formed a close friendship in which Wonga developed his vision of land rights for his people.

Clow was instrumental in Wonga forming the strategy of Kulin people learning European agricultural and farming skills, so as to build a secure economic base when they gained their own reserved land. This also meant that while adapting to their new reality, they would still be able to preserve their traditional communal culture.

In 1851, Wonga was invited to become supreme leader of the Kulin people. He based himself at Wonga Park and began to implement his plan, by finding farm and building construction work opportunities for his people. The subsequent arrival of John Green at Wonga Park in 1858 marked the beginning of a fruitful partnership with him over the next

fifteen years. Green became the first Manager of Coranderrk in 1863 and stoically battled the Aborigines Protection Board until he was sacked in 1874.

Green had also helped in the establishment of Coranderrk, but the main figure in bringing this about was the Governor Sir Henry Barkly, who had been appointed in 1858. Barkly was the highest paid governor in the British Empire, charged with eliminating the graft and corruption in Victoria that had accompanied the gold rush. It was also part of his brief to protect the interests of Aboriginal people as British citizens.

Barkly saw how the Kulin had been cheated out of land at Acheron and formed a secret alliance with Wonga to establish Coranderrk. This was done by arranging for Wonga and the Kulin Elders to lodge a petition with him on the Queen's Birthday in May 1863, along with their personal presents to the Queen. The result was that, not wishing to risk the Queen's displeasure, the government immediately established Coranderrk.

But while Clow, Green and Barkly were among the very first colonists to show their courage and integrity in working with and for Aboriginal people, they were not the only ones, nor the last. Take for instance the local Warrandyte settler Jimmy Dawson, who spent a lifetime documenting Aboriginal culture as well as advocating fiercely for them,

On one occasion, when the Editor of the Argus newspaper refused to publish Jimmy's list of names of early settlers known to have killed Aboriginals in 'Sunday Hunts', Jimmy did his block. The then elderly Jimmy laid waste to the editor's office with his walking cane. He was a fearless advocate indeed.

The point of all this is, let us by all means have truth-telling, but not as a means of somehow attributing blame or guilt on the present generation. You can't change the past, but society must nonetheless continually try to redress disadvantage as it accrues, so, that as far as possible everybody starts on scratch, not with some behind it.

In a plural, democratic society, nobody should start life inheriting a disadvantaged status. Everyone has the right to equal opportunity in the present day and it remains a core Australian value.