

THE LITTLE-KNOWN LEGACY OF JAMES CLOW

It can be safely asserted that Simon Wonga was the most influential Aboriginal figure of the Victorian colonial period, and his successor, William Barak, was then the most influential figure in the post-colonial period. Both were men of vision and pioneers of land rights for Aboriginal people in Victoria, but both men were decisively influenced in their vision, by the little-known Reverend James Clow.

Biographical accounts on Clow's life briefly mention his 'positive attitude to Aboriginal people', but make no mention of his key relationship with Simon Wonga. This is despite the fact that in 1839 Clow had saved the teenage Wonga's life, and in doing so changed the course of history.

Born in Scotland in 1790 to a middle-class merchant family, Clow took up a church vocation and was ordained in 1813. After taking up a position with the East India Company, he lived in India for the next eighteen years, then retired and migrated to Van Demen's Land in 1837, with his wife and eight children.

As the new colony at Port Phillip had just been established, the now 48 years old Clow and his family decided to move there. So, in August 1838, Clow took out a pastoral lease on 36 square miles of land on the east side of Dandenong Creek, between present-day Ferntree Gully and the Police Paddocks at Lysterfield.

Clow's eldest son, James Junior, was responsible for the northern end of the run, near the foot of Mount Dandenong, and he soon came into contact with a now seventeen years old Wonga. By that time, it is most likely that Wonga had already been formally designated as an 'Elder in Training'.

One reason for this assumption, is that three years before Clow's arrival, Wonga had at the age of almost fourteen, been present at the historic meeting with Batman. At that meeting, Batman had been given eight names of tribal leaders, which he then forged onto his bogus treaty. Historians have since clearly identified seven of these names, but have been unable to identify 'Yan-Yan' the eighth name. However, as Yan-Yan means 'young boy' I believe it referred to Wonga and his potential as a future leader.

But the event that was to converge the lives of Wonga and Clow, occurred in August 1839, when Wonga was on the cusp of his eighteenth birthday. He and four other youths went on a hunting expedition up Mount Dandenong, during which Wonga injured his foot so badly, that the other youths ended up leaving him there. They then walked 25 miles to the Aboriginal camp at the Botanical Gardens, where they informed Wonga's father and tribal leader Billibelleri. He immediately set off with his brother Berberry, to rescue Wonga and by the time they found him, Wonga had been without food and water for four days, and was close to death.

Knowing that the only possible nearby help could be found at Clow's hut, which was located at the base of the mountain, Billibelleri and Berberry piggy-backed Wonga there. Clow Senior then cared for Wonga for the next ten days, until the Aboriginal Protector, William Thomas, came and took Wonga by cart to medical care at the Botanical Gardens.

Wonga survived and recovered his health over the next few months, then late in the following year he played a pivotal role in establishing the Nerre-Nerre Warren Aboriginal Station at the Dandenong Police Paddocks. It was no coincidence that this was right next to Reverend Clow's run, and enabled Wonga to consolidate their friendship over the next three years.

Clow's vision for the future of Aboriginal people was far from the prevailing 'Soothe the dying pillow' approach, which he vigorously condemned. He believed Aboriginal people should have inalienable right to freehold tracts of land on which they could run stock and raise crops, thereby establishing a viable economic base. Clow also believed that they should be unhindered in maintaining their traditional culture and practices. Amazingly, for a clergyman of that time, he held the firm view that Christian missionaries should not be allowed to have access to such Aboriginal Reserves.

Wonga continued to live near Clow even after the Nerre-Nerre Warren Station collapsed in 1842. Then when Wonga's father Billibelleri died in 1846, the now 25 years-old Wonga declined the offer to succeed him as Kulin leader, as he felt he was not ready. So, he and his wife Mary continued to live near Clow until he learned in early 1850, that the government intended to establish an Aboriginal Reserve at Warrandyte.

Wonga then took up the Kulin leadership role and began to implement the plan inspired by Clow, gaining farm and construction work for his people with local settlers. However, the gold rush intervened and it took another 13 years before Coranderrk was finally established in 1863, bringing Clow and Wonga's vision into reality.

Unfortunately, James Clow had died two years earlier at the age of 71, and so did not live to see the fulfilment of his unique vision.