

THE MYSTERY SURROUNDING WONGA'S DEATH

In the colonial period, Simon Wonga was the paramount Kulin leader from 1851 to 1874 and in my opinion, he stands alongside Sir John Monash as the two greatest Victorians in the history of our State.

It is of course widely known that the strategic brilliance and magnetic personality of General Monash was a key factor in the Allies winning the First World War. Then after the war, as head of the State Electricity Commission in the 1920's, Monah established Victoria's electricity grid.

Despite the fact that very few people have ever heard of Simon Wonga, let alone know of his achievements, the comparison between Monash and Wonga is not fanciful. Wonga too had a magnetic personality and was strategically brilliant in the way he achieved the establishment of Coranderrk Aboriginal Station in 1863, against all odds. Wonga then further demonstrated his leadership and organisational skills by over the next decade making Coranderrk economically and socially the most successful Aboriginal Reserve in Australia.

Wonga has been diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1861, but remained in reasonable health until the late 1860's. His condition then began to deteriorate markedly, and during this time his second in command, William Barak, increasingly 'spoke with Wonga's voice'.

Both Wonga and Barak had worked hand-in-glove with John Green, who had been the Manager of Coranderrk Station for a decade. However, all three were constantly faced with the machinations of Robert Brough Smyth, the despotic Secretary of the Aborigines Protection Board. Smyth had gained his position in order to get access to Mission records across the state and write a definitive anthropological text, which he finally did in 1878.

The depths to which Smyth was capable of descending, had previously been shown when the Aboriginal leader Derrimut died in 1863. Derrimut was buried in the Melbourne Cemetery, but a few months later Smyth had Derrimut's body exhumed and had his skull harvested 'for the purposes of scientific study'. Smyth confirmed this by noting in his diary that the skull of 'a recently deceased Chief' was now in his possession.

By August 1874 Wonga was terminally ill, and with Smyth having by then collected all the data for his book, he decided to get rid of Green. Smyth obviously had his plan well in place, because a new manager started only a week after Green's dismissal. From that point the mystery surrounding Wonga's fate began to deepen.

In November 1874 the visiting doctor in his quarterly report, expected the gravely ill Simon to be dead by Christmas. When the doctor next visited in January 1875 he noted that there had been two deaths since his last visit, but no names were mentioned. It is quite apparent that Wonga had died in December 1874, but there is no record of any funeral or burial arrangements having been made. Nor is there any record of any enquiry by Barak or the

other Elders as to any arrangements. This may in part represent the cultural prohibition on mentioning a dead person's name, but there is nonetheless also no mention of the grief of residents or any 'Sorry Business' around December 1874.

Unfortunately, the mystery as to the whereabouts of Wonga's body is not seen as a mystery, because of a simple error of identity at Coranderrk cemetery. In 1864, the Aboriginal Protector William Thomas, recorded that 'The King from Geelong' has gone to see Wonga at Coranderrk, but there is no further record of him. Apart that is, from the person in gravesite 45, being listed as 'King Symon from Geelong' and the person in gravesite 43 being listed as 'Maria Symon from Geelong'. Neither had a burial date entered in the original record.

However, when these records were transcribed in the mid 1970's it was simply assumed that 'King Symon from Geelong' must have been Simon Wonga, and Maria Symon must have been Wonga's wife, Maria. This error was then concreted-in by additions made to the transcribed cemetery record. This saw a death date of 1875 added, as well as the note 'Preceded Barak as Chief of the Yarra Tribe'.

The transcribed record for grave 43 then just listed the occupant as 'Maria', thereby strengthening the assumption that it was Maria Wonga. However, it should be noted that Maria Wonga outlived Simon by many years and married again, so it is quite apparent that grave 43 does indeed contain 'Maria Symon from Geelong' the wife of King Symon.

So, the question remains as to what really happened to Wonga's body. There is no proof that Robert Brough Smyth gained possession of Wonga's body, despite his established form of having harvested Derrimut's skull a decade before. What we do know however, was that as Kulin leader William Barak was implacably opposed to Smyth and ultimately succeeded in having him sacked in early 1876.

This leads me to think that Wonga was in fact secretly buried at Coranderrk, without overt mourning and in an unmarked grave, so that his body could not be harvested by anyone 'for the purposes of scientific study'.