

# **SIMON WONGA STANDS ALONGSIDE SIR JOHN MONASH**

In 2014 I had the pleasure of successfully nominating Simon Wonga onto the Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll. I felt at the time that his achievements had not been properly recognised, and that William Barak had been given much of the credit that was in fact due to Wonga.

After being badly injured at Mount Dandenong age 18 in 1839, Wonga's life had been saved by a settler the Reverend Clow. When Wonga got married in 1846, he and his wife went and lived near Clow for the next four years. In their subsequent deep discussions, Wonga developed a plan for the Kulin people to take up farm work and learn agricultural, stock mustering and building construction skills.

Gaining these work skills would then show that they could economically succeed on a government grant of freehold land. Wonga therefore in fact pioneered the concept of Aboriginal land rights.

To me, Simon Wonga stands alongside Sir John Monash as the two greatest Victorians in our State's history, and perhaps you might agree when you hear how he finally achieved his dream and established Coranderrk Station at Healesville in 1863.

Wonga's father Billibelleri had been Headman of the five Kulin tribes from 1836 until he died in 1846. Wonga was then 25 and had been groomed for leadership. Not because he was Billibelleri's son, but because his innate ability, character and knowledge made him the standout choice. However, Wonga did not feel he was ready, so in 1846 the leadership passed to Billibelleri's younger brother Berberry.

When the government approved the establishment of an Aboriginal Reserve at Pound Bend in Warrandyte in October 1850, Wonga decided he was now ready to implement his plan. His Uncle Berberry willingly stepped aside and Wonga then began implementing his plan.

Unfortunately, gold was discovered at Warrandyte in 1851 which compromised the viability of the Reserve at Pound Bend. A new Reserve was consequently declared at Woori-Yallock, only for gold to be found there as well. However, the meagre gold at Warrandyte and Woori Yallock was soon vastly overshadowed by the discoveries at Ballarat and Bendigo.

Curiously, the Ballarat and Bendigo gold discoveries turned out to be an advantage to Wonga's plans. With workers deserting their employment and flooding to the goldfields, it inadvertently drove up Aboriginal work opportunities and wages. Wonga was therefore able to get contract work for Aboriginal people on farms up the Plenty and Yarra valleys. Wonga in fact won the contract to build the first public house in Warrandyte. It's a pity his name is not commemorated in some way at the present-day Warrandyte pub.

With the disbandment of the Native Police in 1853, William Barak joined Wonga at Wonga Park, where they met the Reverend John Green who had arrived in 1858. The three of them were to develop a most fruitful relationship over the next sixteen years.

In February 1859, Wonga received information that a settler in the Upper Goulburn had abandoned his run. Wonga knew it was prime land, so he led a deputation of Elders to see the Aboriginal Protector William Thomas. The deputation also included my great-great-grandfather's friend, Simon Murrum. Thomas got approval for them to claim the land, so Wonga, Barak and others left Melbourne, to establish Acheron Station in March 1859. They were later joined by Reverend Green and others from Woori Yallock.

Over the next two years, Wonga and the Kulin people made a great success of the venture, but they were ultimately cheated out of the land by neighbouring squatters Hugh Glass and Peter Snodgrass. Glass, a land speculator, was the richest man in Victoria and Snodgrass a Parliamentarian, so draw your own conclusions.

The Kulin were forced onto bleak and inhospitable land near Cathedral Mountain, where people started dying like flies. So, in early 1863, Wonga, Barak and Green led the remnants of their group across the Great Dividing Range, via the Black's Spur Songline, to present day Healesville where they claimed land there.

Wonga had learned his lessons well. The demise of Pound Bend, Woori-Yallock and Acheron had shown him he would get nothing from the parliamentarians. So, he went over their heads. On May 24th 1863 which was Queen Victoria's birthday, Wonga led an Aboriginal deputation to Government House. They presented gifts of woven baskets, artefacts and possum skin rugs to Sir Henry Barkley for 'The Good Queen Mother' and the just married Prince of Wales. Then Wonga presented a petition for the land at Coranderrk.

Immediately afterward, Sir Henry made it clear to the government leader that if the grant of land was not made immediately, 'the Queen would not be happy'. The result was that a month later on 30th June 1863, the land grant at Coranderrk was duly approved. Over the next decade Coranderrk became socially and economically the most successful Mission in Australian history, until Wonga died in 1874.

Wonga was not just a great leader for his people he was also a giant influence in reconciliation and the sharing of Aboriginal culture with all Australians. It would be good if his legacy was honoured in more tangible ways.