

CHAPTER 1
**A BRIEF HISTORY OF CORANDERRK,
1835-81**

Invasion and dispossession

The Kulin clans who established the Coranderrk Aboriginal station in 1863 were true survivors.

They had inhabited the lands and waters of central Victoria for thousands of years. Yet their world would change forever in 1835, when the first wave of British settlers arrived on their shores. These newcomers occupied the Kulin's ancestral lands and claimed them as their own, bringing with them large herds of cattle and sheep, as well as firearms, alcohol and disease. At the heart of the ensuing conflict was the fundamental issue of land. To the original inhabitants it was an inseparable part of their identity, spirituality and way of life; to the newcomers, it was a vital source of economic wealth, and the primary reason why they had migrated to this part of the world.

The British colonial invasion of Victoria was swift, as pastoralists, squatters and convict workers took possession of vast tracts of land around Port Phillip Bay.¹ The introduction of large-scale pastoralism caused massive disruptions to local hunter-gatherer economies, and although the Kulin sought to defend their lands, they were soon overwhelmed by the sheer number of settlers who continued to arrive. Before long, the settlers had taken possession of most of the habitable land in Victoria, displacing the Kulin, as well as many other Aboriginal nations, and driving them to the edge of survival.

The Aboriginal population of Victoria was greatly reduced as a result of colonisation.² Those who survived were pushed to the fringes of colonial society and were not welcome in the newly founded city of Melbourne. They camped along creeks and waterways on their country and sought to eke out a living as best as they could by fishing, hunting and gathering where possible, or by working for settlers on pastoral stations. Concern for the welfare of these surviving Aboriginal people among influential humanitarian politicians back in Britain led to the establishment of a protectorate in 1838. Five men were appointed as Protectors, charged with the task of defending the interests of the Aboriginal population of Victoria. However, they were largely ineffective.³

From the 1840s, the Kulin sought new ways of ensuring their peoples' survival. The Woiwurrung speaking clans — which included the Wurundjeri clan, whose territory encompassed the city of Melbourne (see pp. xiv–xv) — actively sought to regain access to some of the land lost to the colonisers. To this end, Woiwurrung clan head Billibellary (c.1799–1846), appealed to Assistant Protector William Thomas (1793–1867) for a grant of land, proposing that his people could make a place for themselves in the new colonial order by living sedentary lifestyles and farming the land. The government of the day did not grant this request, but the relationship Billibellary established with William Thomas during this period planted a seed of collaboration which would later lead to the establishment of Coranderrk.

Sixteen years later, in 1859, Billibellary's son Wonga (c.1824–75) approached William Thomas with a new request for land — this time on behalf of his Taungerong kinsmen. Wonga explained, 'They want a block of land in the country where they may sit down, plant corn, potatoes ... and work like white men.'⁴ Persuaded by Wonga's argument, Thomas successfully obtained an interview with the Board of Land and Works and accompanied Wonga and a group of Taungerong men into

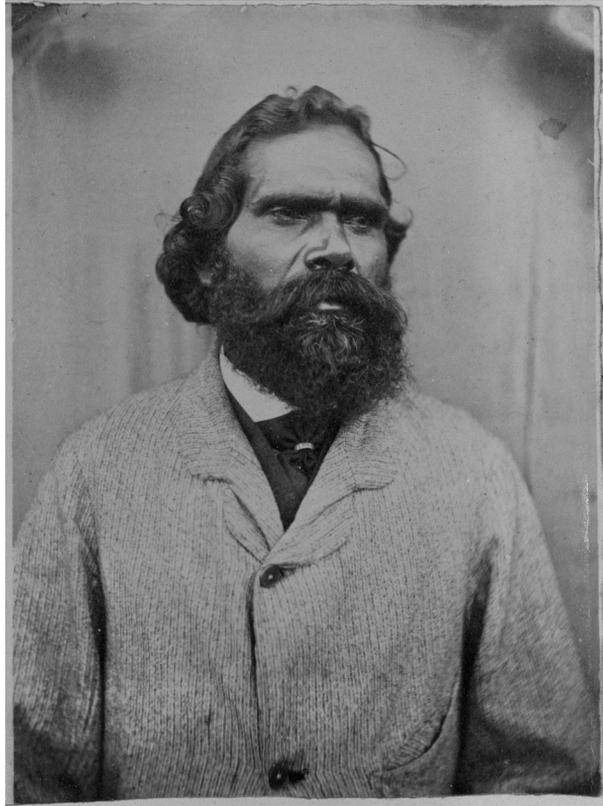


Figure 1. Wonga, the *Ngurungaeta* (clan head) of the Woiwurrung clans, successfully petitioned the colonial government to set aside land for his people at Coranderrk. Photo: Charles Walter (c.1866). Source: State Library of Victoria (H91.1/22).

Melbourne. Wonga, who was regarded as a skilled orator in Woiwurrung and praised by those who knew him as an influential leader with a manner that was ‘always gentle and courteous’, acted as interpreter.⁵ According to Thomas, the Taungerong’s request for land was successful thanks to Wonga’s diplomacy.⁶

As a result, 80 Taungerong established the Acheron station in 1859, on a plot of land north of the Cathedral Range (approximately 150 kilometres north-east of Melbourne) which Thomas assured them the ‘Government would most sacredly retain for them.’⁷ However, in 1860, after they had spent over a year clearing the land, fencing 17 acres and planting seven acres of wheat and vegetables, the Government ordered them to move to another location — the Mohican station, eight kilometres south of Acheron. A group of local squatters had convinced the Government to purchase Mohican as a new reserve for the Taungerong and to sell the Acheron station to them. The Taungerong sent a deputation of men to Melbourne to object to William Thomas that the land they were asked to move to ‘is not the country they selected, it is too cold and blackfellows soon die there.’ They had a valid point: the land at Mohican was so cold that no Europeans had been willing to settle there. Thomas pleaded with the Government to intervene, warning that: ‘This, the fate of Aboriginal industry is

enough to deter Aborigines from ever after having confidence in promises held out to them.⁸ But despite their protests, the Taungerong were forced to abandon Acheron. No sooner had they left the station than European pastoralists removed all traces of their presence by breaking down the perimeter fences and allowing their cattle to destroy the crops.

These events set a precedent which the Kulin clans did not forget in years to come when attempts were made to oust them from their settlement at Coranderrk. However, it did not deter them from putting faith in the promises of Europeans. They had little choice.

John Green and the establishment of Coranderrk

The Woiwurrung clans experienced similar setbacks in attempting to secure land on their own country after an influx of settlers forced them to abandon an encampment at Yering (50 kilometres north-east of Melbourne). Their prospects finally improved in 1860, when they befriended two young and energetic allies — Scottish Presbyterian lay preacher John Green (1830–1903) and his wife Mary Smith Benton Green (1835–1919) — who became instrumental in helping them to establish a farming community of their own.

Soon after arriving in Victoria in 1857, John Green worked as a preacher among the Woiwurrung adults at Yering, while Mary established a school for their children (see Scene 21, p. 161). In 1861, Green accepted a job with the newly formed Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of the Aborigines in the position of General Inspector. In that role, he attempted to re-establish the Acheron station as a place where both the Woiwurrung and Taungerong clans might settle. Thus in March 1862, the Woiwurrung families, together with the Greens and their children, walked from Yering to Acheron, cutting a new track through the forest over the Yarra Ranges (see Figure 2, p. 9). However, upon arriving there, they were prevented from settling on the land by a powerful local squatter who challenged their occupation of the reserve. After a year of uncertainty and disappointments, Green applied to the Central Board for permission to return to Woiwurrung country in order to establish a new reserve on the Yarra. The Woiwurrung and Green families were now joined by Taungerong families, totalling 40 men, women and children, as they trekked back across the Yarra Ranges along the path they had created the year before (now known to locals as the ‘Black Spur’). They arrived at their chosen site in March 1863, only to discover that the land set aside for them had once again being claimed by squatters. With nowhere else to go, they set up camp nearby, in an area at the confluence of the Yarra River and the Coranderrk (Badger) Creek. They named their camp site ‘Coranderrk’, which is the Woiwurrung name for the flowering ‘Christmas Bush’ (*Prostanthera lasianthos*) native to the area.

Before they could be sure that they would not be moved off the land again, John Green and the Kulin knew that official confirmation of the land’s reservation needed to be published in the Government’s gazette. In May, Wonga and his younger cousin Barak (nephew of Billibellary) learned that Governor Sir Henry Barkly had announced a public reception in honour of Queen Victoria’s birthday. Seizing this opportunity to present their case, Wonga led a deputation of 15 Woiwurrung,



Figure 2. The Kulin re-enacted the long trek to Acheron for this photo taken in 1865 as a way of commemorating the story of Coranderrk’s foundation. Wonga (far left) leads the way; John Green is third in the line, and women with children are in the background. For a detailed analysis of this remarkable photograph see Lydon 2005, pp. 60-9. Photo: “The Yarra Tribe starting for the Acheron, 1862”, by Charles Walter (1865). Source: State Library of Victoria (H13881/14, La Trobe Picture Collection).

Taungerong and Boonwurrung people, who walked into Melbourne bearing gifts — handcrafted rugs and blankets for the Queen, and traditional weapons for Prince Albert. When the deputation was admitted to the main hall of the Exhibition Building, observers noted that their demeanour was ‘grave and dignified’; and that Wonga addressed the Governor ‘with becoming modesty, and yet with earnestness.’ Although he spoke English reasonably well, Wonga chose to deliver his speech in his own language, Woiwurrung, with William Thomas translating into English, thereby asserting his sovereign status when dealing with the Queen’s representative.

The following month, a notice appeared in Victoria’s *Government Gazette* announcing that the Governor had ‘temporarily reserved’ 2300 acres, thereby formally establishing Coranderrk as an Aboriginal reserve (extended to 4850 acres in 1866).⁹ Copies of a letter from the Queen’s Secretary were sent to the Kulin later that year, conveying the Queen’s thanks for Wonga’s address and her promise of protection. This led the Kulin to understand that their request for land had been granted by the highest authority, the Queen herself, via her regent, Governor Barkly. During the troubled years that lay ahead, the Kulin and their supporters repeatedly recalled this historical agreement as proof of their entitlement to this land.¹⁰ The event also demonstrated the effectiveness of deputations and written appeals as means of advancing their cause — a strategy which the Kulin would deploy on numerous occasions as the Coranderrk struggle deepened.