

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

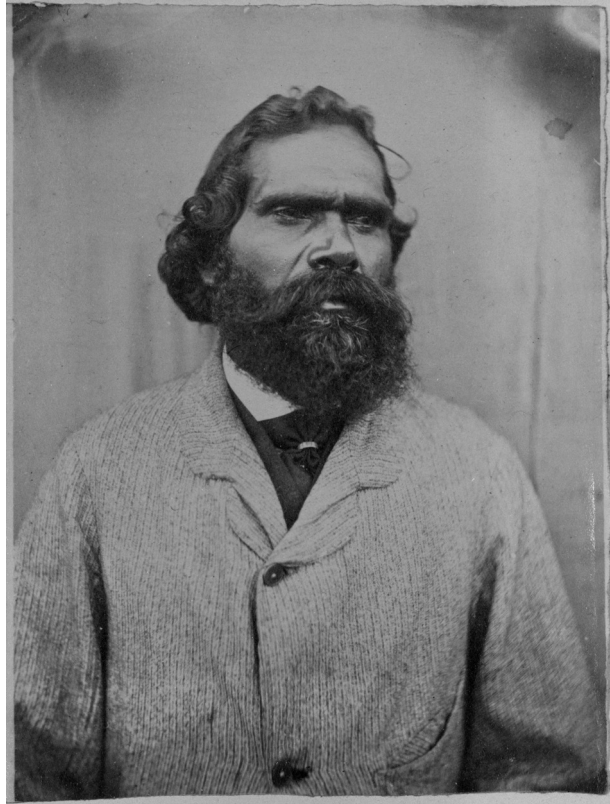


Figure 1. Wonga, the *Ngurungaeta* (clan head) of the Woiwurrung clans, successfully petitioned the colonial government to set aside land for his people at Coranderrk. Photo: Charles Walter (c.1866). Source: State Library of Victoria (H91.1/22).

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.

THOMAS BAMFIELD (*BIRDARAK*)

WHO GOT UP THAT DEPUTATION THAT WAITED ON
THE CHIEF SECRETARY?
– WE GOT IT UP OURSELVES.

MoE, Q347, p. 9.

Thomas Bamfield was a Taungerong clan head and a leading figure in the Coranderrk struggle. As Barak's chief aide, he participated in numerous deputations and petitions, organised strikes and acted as a spokesman for the Coranderrk community as a whole. His prominence made him a target for reprisals from the Board, but a lifelong friendship with Anne Bon ensured that Bamfield also had the backing of powerful allies. The first Aboriginal witness to speak at the Inquiry, Bamfield delivered a powerful testimony expressing the Kulin's wish to regain control of Coranderrk.

Thomas Bamfield (*Birdarak* c.1844–93), also known by the surnames Mansfield and Mickie/Michie, was born in Benalla and later in life succeeded his father Baalwick as clan head of the Yeerun-illam-balluk, one of the Taungerong clans.¹ Shortly after Bamfield's birth, Baalwick led the survivors of this clan to Anne Bon's station at Wappan where they were welcomed to camp around the homestead — and where, according to Bon, 'the Chiefess of the tribe' entrusted the young Bamfield to her care.² While most of his clan subsequently joined the ill-fated Acheron reserve (see Chapter 1, p. 7), Bamfield continued to visit Wappan each year during the shearing season, where Bon paid Aboriginal workers directly and at the same rate as white shearers, despite complaints from the Board that it should receive their wages. Later in life, when Bamfield was in need, he sought the help of the person to whom he referred during the Inquiry as 'my friend, Mrs Bon.'³ In fact, their lifelong friendship was crucial in shaping events during the troubled years at Coranderrk.

One of the founding pioneers of Coranderrk, Bamfield was a passionate advocate for 'the welfare of the station,' to which he brought many of the survivors of his clan.⁴ He held a unique position at Coranderrk given that he played two key roles: as Barak's chief aide and also as a Taungerong clan head. These dual roles meant that he became heavily involved in disputes against the Board as well as factional disputes between clans.⁵ Board officials interpreted Bamfield's prominence in these disputes as evidence of his supposed hostility, and consequently labelled him 'a very troublesome man,' 'the ringleader of the discontented blacks' and 'the moving spirit of all the mischief which

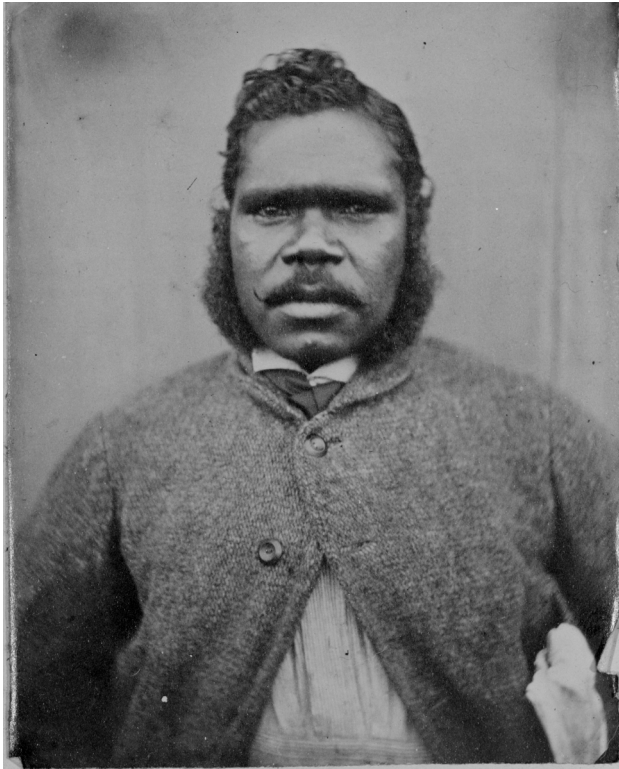


Figure 19. Thomas Bamfield was a Taungerong clan head, Barak's right-hand man and a passionate advocate for Kulin land rights at Coranderrk until the end of his life. Photo: Charles Walter (c.1866). Source: State Library of Victoria (H91.1.30).

occurred at Coranderrk.⁶ These claims were used not only to justify attempts to evict Bamfield from the station, but also to portray the discontent at Coranderrk as being the product of a lone agitator, instead of the collective will of a whole community. Rather than addressing Bamfield by his Aboriginal or European names, Board officials nicknamed him 'Punch' (a reference to his generous girth) in an attempt to demean and infantilise this senior member of the Kulin community.⁷

While vilified and harangued by his opponents, Bamfield also had the backing of influential white allies who were prepared to publicly defend him. For example, six months after the Inquiry, Bamfield was sentenced to prison for 30 days with hard labour after Reverend Strickland and Captain Page had him summoned to court for being 'drunk and disorderly' at the Easter races.⁸ (The irony was not lost on Bamfield, who reminded Strickland about his own drinking habits). Angered by Bamfield's arrest, the Kulin despatched a delegation to seek help from Mrs Bon. She immediately wrote a letter to the Chief Secretary, accompanied by a petition, which she had signed by seven prominent Members of Parliament from both Houses, including Alfred Deakin, which ultimately led to Chief Secretary Berry (voted back in office 1883–86) ordering Bamfield's release from prison after three days.⁹

Bon's intervention deeply embarrassed the Board and the three senior magistrates who had sentenced Bamfield to prison, and provoked a series of heated articles in the newspapers as well as a major parliamentary debate, during which Kulin ally and radical politician John Dow defended Bamfield by asserting that he 'had been represented as a mischief-making black — mischief making because he would not hold his tongue under oppression.'¹⁰

Bamfield was not silenced: within a year he was the subject of new reprisals as Page attempted to have him forcibly removed to the Lake Tyers reserve in east Gippsland. The event triggered yet another deputation as 21 men walked into Melbourne to protest Bamfield's eviction from the station. During their interview with the Chief Secretary, Yorta Yorta man Alfred Morgan politely asked for Bamfield to be allowed to return to Coranderrk, explaining that the residents of the station had their own code of law for deciding whether to evict individuals from the station. 'If he does anything wrong,' Morgan assured Berry, 'we will assist to put him off the station.'¹¹ To Page's chagrin, the deputation once again succeeded in securing the Chief Secretary's intercession. And again, when the Chief Secretary's intervention was criticised in Parliament, Dow defended Bamfield's character and activism, by stating that he 'was as intelligent as many a white man in the colony'. 'Bamfield was persecuted,' Dow told Parliament, 'because he had the feeling of a free man, and would not be hunted from the land which belonged to him.'¹²



Bamfield was the first Aboriginal witness to testify at the Inquiry. His examination focused on one of the hearings' key subjects: the provision of rations to the station's residents. Although it was not the chief cause of the Kulin's complaints against the Board, the shortage of rations did relate to two central aspects of the Coranderrk struggle: the station's ability to be self-supporting; and the Kulin's expectation of what historian Richard Broome calls 'right behaviour' — that is, the expectation of "proper maintenance and protection", in return for the loss of their ancestral lands and cultural autonomy.'¹³

Both of these needs had been met during the first decade under John Green's tenure. During this time, the station had been well on its way to becoming self-sufficient and instead of working for money the residents received basic rations supplemented by vegetables from the garden, cheese, milk and meat from the cattle. The only wage they expected was for their work in the hops gardens, which had been introduced by the Board as a cash crop in 1872. However, the Board was often slow in paying wages and on more than one occasion the profits from Coranderrk's hops were instead siphoned off to subsidise government coffers. At the same time, the Board insisted that work in the hops grounds should take priority, which led to the vegetable gardens, fences and stock being neglected. In 1877, matters were made worse when the Board introduced a new regulation which required people to pay for their meat — supposedly 'to encourage them to be independent.'¹⁴ The policy not only infringed on Kulin expectations of 'right behaviour' but also left many families indebted to the local Healesville butcher.

The Board's approach to managing Coranderrk following Green's removal effectively aimed to turn the Kulin into workers on the station rather than allowing them to become its owners. As Bamfield explained during his testimony, the primary objective of the Kulin was to make the station self-supporting. But the Board's ambition for Coranderrk to be financially profitable was at odds with the Kulin's aspiration for self-determination.

Bamfield's testimony illustrates the way in which Aboriginal witnesses generally conducted themselves throughout the proceedings — with patience, dignity and modesty. To make a positive impression on the Commissioners, they knew they needed to satisfy the colonisers' expectations and conventions so they tolerantly dealt with the continual questions about rations, food and clothing. They endured the racial prejudices of a society which assumed that skin colour was a measure of intellect, and the constant insinuations in many of the Commissioners' lines of questioning, which revealed their preconceptions that Aboriginal people were lazy and expected to receive free food and rations — a paradox given that Coranderrk's hops regularly topped Victoria's markets, despite the men having often worked for no pay.

Scene 7: Thomas Bamfield

- Cameron** **Thomas Bamfield, Aboriginal, examined.**
[Bamfield steps up]
250. **Cameron** Where do you come from?
 Bamfield Benalla.
251. **Cameron** How long have you been here?
 Bamfield Fifteen years about.
252. **Cameron** Are you married?
 Bamfield Yes.
253. **Cameron** How many children have you got?
 Bamfield Three alive; three dead.
265. **Cameron** Do you get good allowances of food?
 Bamfield Not very well.
266. We get enough rations — not meat.
 268. We have got to buy it.
269. **Cameron** Does not the station allow you any?
 Bamfield No, not since Mr Green left; we have got to buy our meat.