

**William Barak
and the
Affirmation of Tradition**

Herb Patten

Compiled by Les Harsant, Healesville
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HERB PATTEN was born in Orbost, Victoria, in 1943. He was first recognised as a serious gumleaf player when he was 7 years old, and the following year, he gave his first public performance, accompanied by his aunt on the piano. From then on he played widely at family and clan gatherings. As a young musician he became the lead singer with the rock band, The House of the Rising Sons. His repertoire of 300 songs together with his musical enthusiasm led him to meet Australian rock giants of the period, Johnny O'Keefe, Col Joy, Little Pattie, and many others.

Herb is an intuitive player who at first played completely by ear. His repertoire spans traditional pop classics and folk music. As well, he wrote the Country and Western ballad, 'Newmerella Pines' and is an authority on the well known Aboriginal folk song 'Jacky Jacky'. In 1995 he played the gumleaf at the opening of Melbourne's Moomba Festival and at a concert with the great Dizzy Gillespie.

For the last five years he has given classes on gumleaf playing for the Music Department of Monash University, Victoria. His work has been acknowledged by invitations to play at the Edinburgh Festival and by performances in Hong Kong. [In 2000 Herb Patten was voted on to the committee of the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages. (VCAL NEWS, June 2001)]

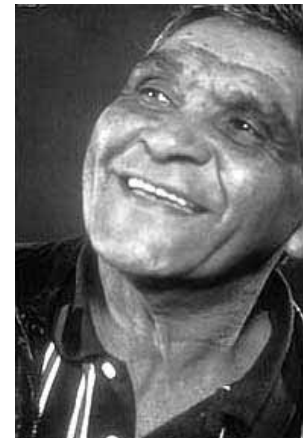
A few relevant publications.

1994 'William Barak and the Affirmation of Tradition' in Helen Penrose (ed). 'Brunswick; One History, Many Voices'. Melbourne. Victoria Press.

1998 'Gumleaves' in Adrienne L. Kaeppler and Jacob W. Love (eds) 'Garland Encyclopaedia of World Music' Vol 9. New York. Garland Publishing.

www.currency.com.au

"Although gumleaf playing has been primarily identified with Aboriginal players and taught by Aboriginal teachers, there is also a colonial and twentieth century non-Aboriginal tradition of gumleaf playing"



The gumleaf is perhaps the most flexible object to be found in the Australian bush.

So with a build up like that, we are proud to present Australia's leading Aboriginal exponent of the art, Herb Patten and grandson Jarrod Atkinson [recently a senior student at Worawa Aboriginal College] plus an anonymous friend in a trio of gumleaf players, performing the popular TV Soap theme 'Neighbours'. This is wild stuff indeed! (Recorded by Sherre DeLys for The ABC.)

HERB has just brought out an excellent new CD on Currency Press with a full on text about how to play the gum leaf. We thoroughly recommend it.

Here is a little from Robin Ryan's introduction in the illustrated booklet:

'But the gumleaf is no superficial novelty - when played seriously it is capable of complex and highly expressive music. It has been mistaken for a whistle, flute, clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, violin, and female voice (Not to forget Herb's great impressions of many bird calls).



Although gumleaf playing has been primarily identified with Aboriginal players and taught by Aboriginal teachers, there is also a colonial and twentieth century non-Aboriginal tradition of gumleaf playing. From 1977, the Australian Gumleaf Playing Championship (held annually in Maryborough, Victoria), with its coveted Golden Gumleaf Award, has become a focus for enthusiastic Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal players from around the country'.

At left is an archive photo of an Aboriginal gumleaf orchestra, circa 1930.

Adapted from an ABC Radio program website, **Australia Adlib-Neighbours:**
www.abc.net.au/arts/adlib/stories/s872232.htm

William Barak and the Affirmation of Tradition

He had refined tastes, being fond of music and painting ... When Barak could get a sheet of drawing paper he made the outside of his chimney his easel, having the canopy of heaven for his studio. His brush and his colours were crude, the colours being pigments extracted from the earth. Notwithstanding this, some of his pictures are to be seen in the museums of Europe.

Anne Fraser Bon, 1931

FROM 1863 Aboriginal people were living on the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station near Healesville, some seventy-four kilometres from Melbourne. In 1892, the German ethnographer Arthur Baessler visited the station. He made this visit specifically to meet the artist, Barak, who by the 1890s was the most famous Aboriginal person in Victoria, regarded by Europeans and Aborigines alike as an extraordinary survivor. Born in the early 1820s before his people had contact with Europeans, as a boy he witnessed their first incursions into Victoria. Concluding his description of this impressive man, Baessler wrote: 'Like all the blacks in Coranderrk, William [Barak] was a Christian who regularly went to church on Sundays but knew a lot about his former faith and had retained the fear of evil spirits common to all natives.'¹

Baessler's assessment highlights Barak's position. Although he adopted many things from the European culture, Barak had kept his traditional knowledge and belief, and it is this continuity which gives context to his practice as an artist. Drawing helped keep his traditional culture alive, not only for himself but for those around him. He drew Aboriginal subjects almost exclusively. His activity as an artist was one aspect of the struggle which characterised his life: the struggle to preserve his identity in the face of the drive in European society to assimilate Aboriginal people. This struggle was, in his case, inseparable from the history of the Coranderrk settlement.

Barak was to preserve many aspects of Aboriginal tradition, the most important being his position as Elder of the Wurundjeri clan of the Woiworung, whose country encompassed the territory around the Yarra River. Barak's status was handed down from his father, Bebejern, who died shortly after the arrival of Europeans in Victoria, but who had been one of a group of important men in Aboriginal society. He was directly related to Billibellary, one of the signatories of Batman's 'treaty', and to Ningulabal (known to Europeans as Captain Turnbull), whom Barak described as 'a great singer and maker of songs' and who was guardian of the stone quarry at Mt William, a position of great significance in the traditional organisation of Aboriginal society in Victoria.²

Barak's responsibility as an Elder was expressed most visibly in his leadership at the Coranderrk settlement, where he spent the second half of his life from the early 1860s until his death in 1903. From 1874, after the death of his cousin Simon Wonga, Barak was the principal Elder living there.

Reproduced
from Helen
Penrose, ed.,
*Brunswick:
One history,
many voices,*
Victoria
Press, South
Melbourne,
1994: pp.18-
22, 306-07.

Coranderrk

Coranderrk was essentially an agricultural reserve, established by Europeans under a policy which John Mulvaney has described as 'humanitarianism through compulsion, compassion based on assumed racial and intellectual superiority, rather than compensation for lands lost.'³ Uncharacteristically however, the site of the reserve was chosen by Aboriginal people. Since 1859, a group of people who had come mostly from around the Goulburn and Yarra rivers were living under the guardianship of William Thomas on a 2000 hectare reserve on the Acheron River. Within a few years, however, pressure on the land from European pastoralists made the selection of another reserve necessary. The Elders chose a site at Coranderrk, and in 1863 forty people moved there along with a guardian, the Presbyterian lay-preacher John Green.

The fact that the European authorities who made up the Board for the Protection of Aborigines succumbed to pressure from pastoralists, established a theme which underlay the entire history of the Coranderrk settlement. William Thomas wrote that it was 'enough to deter Aborigines from ever after having confidence in promises held out to them.'⁴ In being forced to leave Acheron, they were deprived of the use of their reserve for no better reason than that the land was coveted by Europeans. This situation threatened to be repeated with Coranderrk. In the mid-1870s, after Coranderrk had been established as a successful settlement, there were suspicions that the authorities were intending to break up the reserve. European greed was clearly at the bottom of these plans. The *Age* commented:

It is pretty well understood that certain officials and their friends in Melbourne have had their attention directed to the [agricultural] value of Coranderrk, and consequent thereupon there has sprung up in certain quarters a large amount of so-called interest in the welfare of the Coranderrk natives. It has been suggested that for the benefit of their health, they ought to be shifted up to the Murray.⁵

'For the benefit of their health'—no-one believed it for a moment! The Coranderrk residents remained steadfast in their opposition to any move. Green said he would have no part in it, and was dismissed by the board. In 1876 a deputation of Coranderrk Aborigines led by Barak travelled to Melbourne to call on Colonial Secretary Graham Berry to request Green's reinstatement. They were unsuccessful, although they did receive assurances that the government did not intend to break up Coranderrk.⁶ An enquiry was held into Coranderrk in 1881, which resulted in its gazetting as a 'permanent reservation' in 1884.

Coranderrk stood on the land which was Barak's own by hereditary right. He had been born not far from the site, and although his early life had been spent in various places around the Yarra, Coranderrk belonged to his own clan, the Wurundjeri. When in 1876 a journalist visited Coranderrk, Barak acted as spokesman.⁷ To the question 'Do you or do you not want to leave Coranderrk?' Barak replied forcefully that he did not. 'Yarra,' he said, 'my father's country. There's no mountains for me on the Murray.'⁸

Aboriginal people wanted to keep Coranderrk, and to regain the self-rule of the settlement which had been established by Green. The European authorities saw Coranderrk as one element in the regime of government and church control over Aborigines. They wanted, initially at least, to see Coranderrk operating successfully as a self-supporting agricultural settlement. It never became self-sufficient. The Aboriginal people were often frustrated by the inept or unsympathetic managers appointed to Coranderrk after Green. Many of the grievances expressed by the Aborigines in the 1870s which led to the 1881 enquiry involved its management as a farm.

Throughout its history as an Aboriginal settlement, Coranderrk was, in outward appearance, a typical European farming community. One observer who visited Coranderrk in its first years noted that the Aborigines were 'all dressed in European clothes, not received in charity, but acquired by the earnings of their own industry.' The same commentator noted approvingly that the inhabitants lived in huts, 'neatly constructed of wood and bark' and standing in a row, 'like one side of a street.'⁹ A decade later a more detailed description of the reserve indicated that while some of these slab buildings were in a bad state of repair, there were newer, weatherboard houses.¹⁰ Describing the interiors of the houses, that visitor observed that the people living in them 'are extremely fond of pictures and other decorations, and love to clothe the walls of their houses with such works of art as they can lay their hands upon ... pictures out of old fashion books and 'Galaxy of British Beauties' or from the Graphic or British Workman.'¹¹ In Barak's house a print of Queen Victoria hung above the chimney.¹²

This, then, was Coranderrk; the structures were indisputably European. In this context, Barak's art served as a visual reminder of the traditional culture of his people. Barak not only drew traditional subjects, he made artefacts, sang traditional songs and told stories which he knew from childhood.¹³

Barak's art

Two subjects dominate Barak's drawings: corroborees and possum skin cloaks. First and most important are depictions of the central site of Aboriginal spiritual and communal life—the ceremony and the ceremonial dance performed at corroborees. A characteristic arrangement in Barak's corroboree drawings recurs with subtle variations throughout his work. Across the top of the page are rows of dancers with boomerangs, their legs bent: below them is a space with a fire or a pair of fires, and in the lower part of the drawing are two rows of seated spectators who keep time by clapping. In the centre of this group are two towering male figures wearing possum skin cloaks, using boomerangs as playing sticks. Sometimes the large figures in cloaks are at the edges rather than at the centre of the composition; sometimes there is only one; figures which look like small children waving branches occasionally appear.

Emus, echidnas, snakes and lyrebirds are often incorporated into Barak's designs, not merely as a part of the bush surrounding the main players, but occupying the same central space. Such animals are probably totemic, and thus are on a level akin to that of humans and ancestors. As with Tommy McRae's corroboree subjects the bush itself, where it appears, is briefly indicated by a single tree or a fringe of trees around the top edge of the composition.

The second recurrent motif in Barak's art is a design of groups of figures wearing possum skin cloaks. Possum skin cloaks were the traditional apparel of the Aborigines across the southern parts of Australia, but in southern Victoria they were more voluminous than elsewhere.¹⁴ Consisting of between fifty and eighty skins sewn together with kangaroo sinew, Victorian possum skin cloaks were generally worn with the skin side out. They were elaborately decorated with designs incised into the skin side of the pelt and highlighted with charcoal and ochres rubbed into the lines. According to A. W. Howitt, each individual had their own design, and these were traditionally geometric, composed of lines, herringbones, chevrons and circles, although representations of figures and animals were sometimes encountered.

Peter Beveridge, a nineteenth-century writer on Aboriginal life, commented on possum skin cloaks he had seen in northern Victoria:

Before the advent of Europeans these cloak patterns usually took a scrolly shape, and striking objects in nature, such as flowers, foliage or animals were never copied. Since then, however, we have seen the great glaring designs common to cheap druggists very successfully reproduced, even to the colour. These colours are made by mixing pigments of different shades with fish oil, and laying the shades on the respective portions of the designs requiring them, thus producing an exact counterpart to the copy.¹⁵

Unfortunately only a handful of possum skin cloaks now exist, and certainly none of the type described by Beveridge. In Barak's drawings the traditional patterned style appears exclusively, and the individuality of the designs is marked. One work in particular is striking in the clarity with which the geometric patterning on the cloaks is represented. Above the group of men in this work is a row of figures, apparently women carrying babies, whose cloaks are decorated more simply, with spots. At the very top of the drawing is a large central figure surrounded by an array of artefacts—axes, boomerangs and digging sticks. The collection of artefacts presented in the drawing is almost like a display of Wurundjeri material culture.

The sense which Barak's drawings give is one of pattern, and through the pattern comes a sense of order—the order of his traditional culture, both in its social structure and in its integral involvement with the natural world, as expressed through ceremony.

Barak drew Aboriginal subjects almost exclusively, though it has been speculated that the male dancing figures which frequently appear in the top halves of Barak's compositions are dressed in European clothes.¹⁶ We should be cautious about reading the drawings in this literal way: other drawings in which dancers wear similar dress invite different conclusions.

Such considerations raise questions about the degree to which Barak's work describes Aboriginal life as lived at Coranderrk, as opposed to life as remembered from an earlier time. It would be too simple to extrapolate that because Barak drew corroborees, such ceremonies were permitted at Coranderrk. The managers of the station and the government agency, the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, were opposed to this form of cultural expression, as they showed in 1887 when the so called 'corroboree dispute' arose. On this occasion the Governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Loch, requested to see a corroboree but the board, strongly influenced by missionaries, would not allow people from any station, including Coranderrk, to take part.¹⁷ The governor had to settle for one of Barak's drawings of a corroboree subject.¹⁸

By the 1880s, Barak was depicting a style of life which was, at least in outward appearance, a remembrance of earlier times.¹⁹ As the Loch episode illustrates, at least part of the market for Barak's work lay in European interest in the way in which Aboriginal life had been lived. In addition to corroborees, Barak drew hunting and traditional fight scenes.

In one dramatic example, now held in Dresden, a figure is bent backwards under a shower of spears. A drawing in the collection of the Wurundjeri Co-operative shows traditional fighting as it is described in nineteenth century accounts—a group of men duelling with boomerangs and parrying shields. Anne Fraser Bon recalled that some of the songs which Barak sang were accounts of tribal wars.²⁰

Laboratory testing of three of Barak's works has revealed the extent to which his work integrates natural earth pigments such as yellow and red ochres with pigments such as barium sulphate and ivory black used in manufactured colours.²¹ The green and blue washes which occur in some Barak drawings are probably European watercolours. This unique integration of earth pigments, traditionally used for body painting and the colouring of possum skin cloaks, with European mediums, symbolises Barak's situation in a particularly graphic way. His choice embraced the

possibilities of the non-traditional, but his art also resisted them and retained links with traditional practice and the natural world. In using watercolour washes combined with ochres in drawings of Aboriginal subjects, Barak took the European and made it Aboriginal.

At least some of Barak's work was for the tourist market component of Coranderrk's economy. Although run primarily as an agricultural enterprise, people living at Coranderrk also made possum skin cloaks, straw mats, baskets and boomerangs for sale, initially to generate funds to buy farm equipment.²² A visitor to Coranderrk in 1867 noted that the sale of such artefacts allowed people to buy 'clothes, ammunition, and, at times, provisions.'²³

While drawings and traditional artefacts were made for tourists, they were also made for gift giving. Barak, too, made and decorated traditional objects.²⁴ Baessler, a typical visitor of the 1890s, recorded that Barak had made for him:

several wooden lighters . . . in which bark was set alight by rubbing a soft and a hard piece of wood together, and boomerangs which he formed with an axe and knife and smoothed with bits of glass.²⁵

Such items were used as gifts when the Coranderrk residents made deputations to Melbourne. As early as June 1863, before Coranderrk was officially gazetted as a reserve, a deputation led by the elder Simon Wonga presented the vice-regal representative of Queen Victoria, Governor Barkly, with a variety of objects made at Coranderrk including weapons, baskets, and a collar of crocheted lace.²⁶ A description of the deputation led by Barak to farewell the outgoing Chief Secretary, Graham Berry, in 1886 details the presentation of a number of artefacts:

In a bundle of native weapons were included boomerangs, newly carved ... a waddy, carved and ready for use; a gnulla gnulla, or modern shield with the handle nicely lined with wallaby fur. Special presents from Barak were two long cane spears, which the chief showed Mr Berry how to adjust in the spear-thrower and to poise for business.²⁷

Berry was also presented with an illuminated address book incorporating a tribute composed by Barak.

That some of Barak's pictures ended up in European museums was seen by Mrs Bon as the ultimate accolade for Barak. Yet the collecting of Barak's work by the Europeans in Australia was motivated by a sense that these were unique relics of a passing race, that Barak was 'the last of his tribe'. Such collectors, who dutifully sent the drawings back to their various mother countries, saw Barak's life as a kind of closure, and his art, for them, was a reminder of this fatalism. However, in the context of Barak's life at Coranderrk, and of the lives of his people, his work may rather be seen as an expression of continuity.

Notes

No comprehensive list of sources is provided in the original publication.

1. Baessler, 1895, p.185.
2. A. W. Howitt papers. La Trobe Library, State Library of Victoria, Box 1-53/2b.
3. Derek John Mulvaney, *The Aboriginal photographs of Baldwin Spencer*, Curry O'Neil, Melbourne, 1982, 1989, p. 148.
4. William Thomas to W. Brough Smyth, 22 November 1860, Australian Archives (Vic.) CRS B312, 3.
5. *Age*, Melbourne, 19 February 1876, p. 7.

6. *Argus*, Melbourne, 24 February 1876, p. 5.
7. *Age*, Melbourne, 19 February 1876, p. 7.
8. Barak told Oscar Comettant in 1888 that his father was buried next to the Yarra at the foot of Yeringberg Hill (Comettant 1890, p. 94). Anne Fraser Bon claimed that he was buried 'in the ground on which the Hospital for the Insane, Kew, now stands' (Bon, 1931).
9. *Illustrated Australian News*, 25 August 1865, quoted in Massola, 1975, (Appendix 3), p. 64.
10. *Argus*, Melbourne, 31 August 1876, p. 6.
11. *ibid.*
12. Baessler, 1895, p. 173.
13. Howitt, 1887. Some of the stories Barak told are recorded in Shaw, n.d., pp. 35-40.
14. Charles P Mountford, *Aboriginal Paintings from Australia*, Collins, London, 1964.
15. Peter Beveridge, *The Aborigines of Victoria and Riverina as seen by Peter Beveridge*, M. L. Hutchinson 1889, p. 138. Beveridge lived in the Swan Hill area between 1845 and 1868. Thereafter, he lived on French Island.
16. Ryan, quoted in Clemente, 1991.
17. *Argus*, Melbourne, 12 February 1887; *Age*, Melbourne, 4 March 1887; *Telegraph*, Melbourne, 4 March 1887.
18. Bon, 1931. The present whereabouts of this work is not known. Bon also mentions that a Barak work was presented to the Prince of Wales on his visit to Melbourne, but this drawing, too, has proven impossible to trace.
19. In about 1900 the photographer Nicholas Caire visited Coranderrk and took a photograph which he entitled 'Type of Corroboree, Coranderrk Mission Station'. The photograph, which is quite unlike the corroborees in Barak's drawings, depicts three men: two with body paint dancing and one very old man, seated, wearing a cloak and beating time. In Nicholas Caire's album of *Views in Victoria*, National Library of Australia.
20. Bon, 1931.
21. Information from Eric Archer, 1993, who was responsible for conservation treatment on these works during 1991 and 1992. Reports on the composition of these works are held in the conservation laboratories of the respective institutions.
22. Mulvaney, 1989, p. 150
23. E. H. Goglioli, quoted in Aldo Massola, *Coranderrk: a history of the Aboriginal station*, Lowden, Kilmore, Vic, 1975, p. 67 (Appendix 4).
24. There are a pair of playing sticks made by Barak in the collection of the Museum of Victoria. Acc. no. X44761.
25. Baessler, 1895, pp. 183-4.
26. Mulvaney, 1989, p. 153.
27. *Argus*, Melbourne, 25 March 1886, p. 7.