

Yulendj Boonwurrung

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The history of the first people of Melbourne—the Yaluk-ut Weelam clan of the Boonwurrung

The area we today call Melbourne was part of the estate of the Yaluk-ut Weelam clan. The Yaluk-ut Weelam were a clan of the Boonwurrung — one of the five language groups of the confederacy known as the Kulin.

As a descendant of the Yaluk-ut Weelam clan of the Boonwurrung people, I am pleased to welcome visitors to our traditional country.

The history of the Melbourne area and the Yaluk-ut Weelam clan of the Boonwurrung cannot be retold in isolation. Our history was never a written history — it was instead passed down from one generation to the next via our strong oral traditions.

In welcoming visitors to Melbourne, I attempt to meld our understanding of history, based upon our culture of oral history and compared with the written records of those early Europeans.

We are of the belief that the history of the Boonwurrung and their engagement with the Europeans who entered their country is a very complex history and deserves greater attention than to be consumed in the generalist approach that always portrays us as innocent victims who had no control over our destiny.

There has often been a tendency to portray the history of the First People as one, comprising only tragedy and dispossession. While there is no doubt that the impact of Europeans upon our people and their traditional way of life was devastating, we also believe that the history of Melbourne was unique in the way in which our ancestors demonstrated their capacity to analyse and respond to these events.

I believe that I have been very fortunate to have been handed down this heritage from my mother. My mother was born in 1906, my grandfather was born in 1860, and my great-grandmother Louisa was born around the time of European settlement, near Melbourne in the 1830s. Louisa Briggs lived until 1925. The privilege of this continuity allows me to share this wonderful heritage.

As our children grow up in this great city, it is my hope that we can all celebrate a shared sense of history — a history that makes this country so unique.

Our Country

The country surrounding the larger city of Melbourne and Geelong was the traditional country of five language groups, which were part of a confederacy known as the Kulin. Today we often refer to this as the Kulin Nation.

The five language groups that comprised the Kulin Confederacy were the Boonwurrung, the Woi Wurrung, the Wada Wurrung, the Djadja Wurrung and the Taung Wurrung. Within each of these five language groups, a number of clans existed — each with an area or Estate that was managed by the clan leaders and their families.

The Kulin Confederacy shared common beliefs and traditions, which included trade and marriage customs. A member of a language group within the confederacy could only marry a partner from outside their language group. Marriages between the closest neighbours were most common — hence the Boonwurrung tended to marry partners from the Woi Wurrung or Wada Wurrung. These marriages most likely had some impact on the exact nature of alliances, relationships and boundaries between neighbouring groups.

The land that today makes up much of modern Melbourne was part of the Estate of the Yaluk-ut Weelam clan of the Boonwurrung.



Louisa Briggs at Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, c.1876-77. Board for the Protection of Aborigines Photographic Collection.

The Boonwurrung

The Boonwurrung are best described as a Language Group of the Kulin Confederacy, who occupied the country from the coast, extending from Werribee River to Wilsons Promontory.

The Boonwurrung language was first referred to in 1836 by Stewart (in Bonwick, 1883) then by Langhorne and Wedge in 1837.

The country of the Boonwurrung people covered the coastal area around the Bay. Their country was described by Hewitt in 1840 as:

> a strip of country from the mouth of the Werribee River, and including what is new Williamstown and the southern suburbs of Melbourne, belonged to the Bunurong [Boonwurrung] a coast tribe, which occupied the coastline from here round to Hobson's Bay to Mordialloc, the whole of the Mornington Peninsula and the coast from Westernport Bay to Anderson's Inlet.

There are over 60 variations of the spelling of Boonwurrung as identified by Clark. The spelling adopted is Boonwurrung rather than Bun Wurrung. This is consistent with recommendations by Clark (1996) and Blake (1991), as it uses the 'oo' rather than the 'u', so as to stop mispronouncing the name.

The language name is derived from the word 'boon' meaning 'no' and 'wurrung' meaning 'lips', 'mouth' or 'language'. Boonwurrung was the dominant language of the area now known as Melbourne.

The Boonwurrung Language Group consisted of six clans or estates: they were known as the Yaluk-ut Weelam, Ngurrak Weelam, Mayune Baluk, Boonwurrung Baluk, Yawen Djeera and the Yaluk Baluk.

The authority within each clan was maintained through status that was both earned and inherited. The N'Arweet, or head man of each clan, had local authority over the 'estate' within Boonwurrung country. However, the authority of N'Arweet extended across all 'estates'. This is evidenced by the action of Yaluk-ut Weelam clan leader Derrimut in the 1840s, when he was involved in the 'blood feud' with the Gunai over the country at Wilsons Promontory.

According to traditional law and custom, the language of the Boonwurrung was required to be spoken by other Kulin clans Visiting their country. This is explained as the spiritual base to the Boonwurrung country.

Compliance with this cultural protocol was especially relevant as the demi-god Loern resided on Boonwurrung country in the area today known as Wilsons Promontory. Visitors to Boonwurrung country were required to undergo a ritual that afforded them rights and accompanying responsibilities.

The Yaluk-ut Weelam

The Yaluk-ut Weelam were one of six clans of the Boonwurrung.

The estate of the Yaluk-ut Weelam extended from Werribee River around the bay to include the areas we now know as St Kilda, Toorak and Brighton.

The word Yaluk-ut Weelam translates as ‘people of the river’.

The Yaluk-ut Weelam Estate looked down towards their sacred river, known as the Birrarung. This part of the Birrarung was salt water, and waterfalls farther up the river ensured that the freshwater was not contaminated.

The word ‘Birrarung’ translates as ‘river of mist’. The term ‘yarra’, which the Europeans termed the river, was based on a misunderstanding — the Kulin people were referring to the ‘waterfalls’ when providing this name.

The Traditional Landscape

The landscape of the Melbourne area consisted of hills, scrub and creeks flowing into the Birrarung. To the south, where Melbourne is located, the landscape consisted of wetlands and swamps and provided a major source of food — fish, birds, wallaby and possum, as well as plants including myrrnong and water plants.

This network of wetlands provided a rich source of plant and animal foods and resources for Yaluk-ut Weelam. Just a short way along the river were located waterfalls, which separated the salt water from the freshwater.

The Falls were a basalt ledge that ran across the river, half a metre or so above the high-tide mark. The Falls, located where Queens Bridge is now, were blasted out in the later part of the nineteenth century. These falls played a vital role for the Yaluk-ut Weelam and other Kulin when crossing to the southern banks. They also provided an important link for the Europeans in the early days of the settlement.

The wildlife around Boonwurrung country was abundant prior to European settlement. Tuckey, a First Lieutenant of the Calcutta, which was part of the early attempted settlement at Sorrento, described the fauna in the area:

> The kangaroo inhabits the neighbourhood of Port Phillip in considerable numbers, weighing 50 to 150lbs, the native dog, the possum, flying squirrel, and field rats make up the catalogue of animals we observed. Aquatic birds are found in abundance on the lagoons, as are black swans, ducks, tea, block and pied shags, pelicans, gulls, red-bills (a beach bird), herons, curlows and sand forks. The land birds are eagles, crows, ravens, quoll, bronze winged pigeons, and many beautiful varieties of the parrot tribe, particularly the black cockatoo. The emu is also a native of this part of the country.

The swamp and lagoons dominated the lower area to the south and west. Early illustrations of the area tend to provide an 'English' or romantic view of the country.

At Melbourne's foundation, John Batman set up his home on Batman's Hill at Melbourne, and John Pascoe Fawkner established his neighbouring residence. Batman's Hill became the westernmost point of the settlement.

The Culture and History of the Yaluk-ut Weelam

Social Organisation

A description of the social organisation of the Boonwurrung and the Yaluk-ut Weelam can be drawn from our oral history and those observers who were closely engaged with the people in the period following the arrival of the Europeans.

The traditional social structure operated at several levels — in the first instance, allegiance towards the clan and the N'Arweet or leader of that clan. Young men who had been initiated held the next level of authority within the clan.

Women, although they held authority in relation to the upbringing of children, were considered to be the property of men.

The relationship with the language group and their moiety, Bundjil (the eagle) and Waan (the crow), was instrumental in relationships with other Kulin groups — including marriage rights.

The structure of Boonwurrung society had come under significant pressure — even prior to 1835, when the Europeans arrived in Melbourne. In addition to the random kidnapping of their women from the late 1790s, introduced diseases had also impacted the health of the Boonwurrung.

The Boonwurrung Neighbours

The Woi Wurrung

The Wurundjeri clan of the Woi Wurrung were the immediate neighbours of the Yaluk-ut Weelam and the Boonwurrung. As Boonwurrung men could not marry a Boonwurrung woman, they generally chose their wives from the Woi Wurrung and the Wadda Wurrung.

For example, the Yaluk-ut Weelam man Yonki Yonke married the daughter of the Wurundjeri Chief (Ngarangatta) Billieberi in 1840. Derrimut's mother was a Wurundjeri woman.

The Woi Wurrung and the Boonwurrung continued to maintain close relationships, especially following the creation of the Aboriginal Reserve at Coranderrk (1863–1924). This was very evident in the evidence given by the Coranderrk residents in the Parliamentary Select Committee hearing in 1881.

The Gunai

The Gunai (also pronounced Kurnai) shared the eastern border of Boonwurrung country. The Gunai were not part of the Kulin Nation and were the traditional enemies of the Boonwurrung.

Yaluk-ut Weelam men, including Derrimut, continued their animosity towards the Gunai until the 1850s. The relationship involved ongoing conflict after the arrival of the Europeans. The most recent of these conflicts occurred when the Yaluk-ut Weelam, along with men from other Boonwurrung clans, conducted a raid on the Gunai in 1838.

The feud between the Gunai and the Boonwurrung appears to have been resolved and settled by the 1860s.

History of Creation of the Bay

The history of the formation of Port Phillip Bay was retold by the N'Arweet of the Yaluk-ut Weelam.

The Boonwurrung had a very strong and detailed oral history that recalled events estimated to be more than 10,000 years old. The existence of such a strong oral tradition was shown in evidence given in 1858 to a Select Committee of the Legislative Council. Referring to a Boonwurrung N'Arweet known as Old Benbow, Magistrate Hulls stated:

> With regard to traditions, I may say it is not generally known that the blacks — Cunningham [Yankee Yankee], Murray and Did Bembo, say that their grandfather, 'My uncle', as they call him — they do not know the word grandfather, my uncle is the term they use for all progenitors — 'when

> Hobson's Bay was a kangaroo ground', they say 'Plenty catch kangaroo, and plenty catch opossum there'; and Murray assured me that the passage up the bay through which the ships come, is the river Yarra, and that the river once went out the heads, but that the sea broke in, and that Hobson's Bay, which was once a hunting ground become what it is. (Hull in Victoria 1858:12)

This recollection of the flooding of the bay due to the ice age is even more remarkable, because many Western scientists did not accept ice age theories until the twentieth century. The Boonwurrung recalled other stories from their past, including stories of great earthquakes, through dance, story and song.

I present a contemporary retelling of this story in my capacity as N'Arwee't, which has been recorded in the online archive accompanying my doctoral dissertation:

> Many years ago, this land that we now call Melbourne extended right out to the ocean. Port Phillip Bay was then a large flat plain where Boonwurrung hunted kangaroos and cultivated their yam daisy.
>
> But one day there came a time of chaos and crises. The Boonwurrung and the other Kulin nations were in conflict. They argued and fought. They neglected their children. They neglected their land. The native yam was neglected. The animals were killed but not always eaten. The fish were caught during their spawning season. As this chaos grew the sea became angry and began to rise until it covered their plain and threatened to flood the whole of their country.
>
> The people went to Bundjil, their creator and spiritual leader. They asked Bundjil to stop the sea from rising. Bundjil told his people that they would have to change their ways if they wanted to save their land. The people thought about what they had been doing and made a promise to follow Bundjil. Bundjil walked out to the sea, raised his spear and directed the sea to stop rising. Bundjil then made the Boonwurrung promise that they would respect the laws.
>
> The place the Kulin then chose to meet is where the Parliament of Victoria is now located. They debated issues of great importance to the nation; they celebrated, they danced.
>
> This land will always be protected by the creator, Bundjil, who travels as an eagle.

The Tanderrum or Treaty

The country around Melbourne was subject to what is often described as ‘Batman’s Treaty’.

In 1835, Batman claimed to have negotiated a Treaty with the traditional owners of the country, with both Woi Wurrung and Boonwurrung.

The notion of land ownership among the Kulin was complex. While boundaries and the estates of various clans within the nation existed, the notion of selling or even leasing country was not a concept that even existed among the Kulin.

The Kulin did, however, have a protocol for entry into their country. This was known as the Tanderrum — it ensured safe passage for visitors, who were required to obey the laws of country, and traditionally with the Boonwurrung, and even required them to speak the Boonwurrung language.

The Kulin, and in particular the Boonwurrung, had observed encounters with the Europeans for at least the previous 40 years. Communications with other nations and clans would have no doubt ensured that the Kulin were aware of the presence and impact of the Europeans.

It is therefore conceivable that the Tanderrum was an attempt by the Kulin to negotiate an arrangement with the Europeans. There is no doubt that by the Europeans agreeing to this Tanderrum, the Kulin had established a relationship that involved mutual obligations.

The Tanderrum may have only provided the Kulin with a short-term solution to the crises that confronted them. The Tanderrum may have also impacted the way in which relationships between the Europeans and the Kulin were conducted. Despite the Kulin losing access to their country, it is one part of Australia that recorded no massacres. The Kulin also engaged with the Europeans — particularly those with power and authority — in unique relationships that are still recognised in modern Melbourne.

Derrimut

Derrimut was the N’Arweet (Chief) of the Yaluk-ut Weelam and played a significant role for both his people and the Europeans, having a major impact on the future of his country — now known as Melbourne.

Derrimut was an active negotiator who quickly learnt English and attempted to resolve disputes between the government and his people. Within weeks of Fawkner arriving, Derrimut was hunting with guns.

During the early days, Derrimut had speared the local magistrate, Mr Hulls, for entering a sacred ceremony. The recognition of Derrimut's authority, and the early recognition of his cultural obligations, was evident when Magistrate Hulls decided not to charge him for the incident — thus recognising Derrimut's role and responsibility in traditional law. Hulls later described the incident to the Parliamentary Select Committee.

> … in consequence of my not bringing Derrimut to justice for spearing at me they had great confidence in me. That was at a corroboree somewhere near where the new military barracks are now building, and his people flew upon him and threw him down upon the earth, and I walked off and escaped with my life.
>
> They knew that I was a magistrate and expected that I should bring him up, but I did not do so, because it was my own fault; I did not know that he was the chief of the tribe and the head of the corroboree that was going on, and he was drunk, and I called him a drunken fellow, and he immediately took up a bundle of spears, one of which he threw at me, and it went into a tree close to me.

However, Derrimut ultimately despaired of his losing battle when the last of his people were moved from Moorabbin to Coranderrk Reserve.

Derrimut died of a broken heart in May 1864. He was buried in the Melbourne General Cemetery and a tombstone was erected in his honour by the European settlers. His tombstone is still maintained. Derrimut's headstone, located in the Melbourne Cemetery, reads:

> This stone was erected by a few colonists to commemorate the noble act of the native chief, Derrimut, who by timely information given, October 1835, to the first colonists, Messrs Fawkner, Lancey, Evans, Henry Batman and their dependants, saved them from massacre planned by some of the up-country tribes of Aborigines.
>
> Derrimut closed his mortal career in the Benevolent Asylum May 28th 1864; aged about 54 years.

Old Benbow (King Benbow)

Benbow ‘Bul-lut’, also known as Old Benbow, was one of the last Yaluk-ut Weelam to live on his country at Melbourne.

Following his arrival in Yaluk-ut Weelam country, John Batman established his residence on Batman’s Hill. Old Benbow and his wife Kitty lived on this property on the land now known as Batman’s Hill, located near Southern Cross Station.

Benbow later joined the Native Police. His son Big Benbow played an important role in protecting the remaining estate of the Yaluk-ut Weelam, as did his reunited grandson Yonki Yonke.

In 1849, King Benbow made a formal request for land. He chose the formal visit from New South Wales Governor Fitzroy to make his claim. Benbow arrived at the Royal Hotel, dressed in his uniform. Benbow sent his brass plate to the Governor, as we would send our business card.

His intention was to petition the Governor for an area of land to be set aside for his people. Benbow was duped by the Governor and never got the opportunity to present his petition.

Benbow died shortly after and was buried at Brighton. It is said that his wife Kitty, who had lived with Benbow at Batman’s Hill, never left his grave and died shortly after.

Image of Yonki Yonke, on stone by Henry Hainsselin, 1846. Printed by C. Risdon, Exeter Collection of the National Library of Australia.

Yonki Yonke

Yonki Yonke, also known by his European name Robert Cunningham, was born sometime around 1823.

On 6 June 1841, the Yaluk-ut Weelam were shocked when a handsome Aboriginal man, speaking perfect English and dressed well in European clothes with carefully styled black wavy hair, appeared at the encampment on the south side of the Yarra.

Yonki Yonke surprised and shocked the members of the Yaluk-ut Weelam as he introduced himself as the lost son of Big Benbow, who, along with his mother and eight other women, had been kidnapped approximately eight years previously, in 1833.

William Thomas described the event:

> Yonki Yonke was kidnapped with eight women near Point Nepean when he was nine years of age, four years before the first settlers came to Port Phillip. He appeared where I was encamped on the south of the Yarra in the afternoon. His appearance was intelligence, fine keen eyes, long black hair which hung in ringlets on his shoulders and which he appeared to have bestowed much care. He came to my tent and told me he was a native of this place which I did not believe at the moment but which a few hours convinced me was correct by the caressing and joyous formalities among the natives. (138 Thomas Miscellaneous Papers, mf CY 3130, frame 35 ft, ML. 139 Thomas Journal, Ms set 214, item 2, CV 3126, frame 23 ff, ML.)

Yonki Yonke slept in his father's tent that night, and on the following Tuesday the Yaluk-ut Weelam welcomed him back with a traditional welcome.

The Yaluk-ut Weelam performed a ceremony known as a formal ceremonial welcome on the Tuesday. The ceremony, known as Kobin Koolin, was performed when one of their clan had returned after a long absence.

William Thomas described the ceremony:

> When the individual appears, his kindred fall on his breast and weep (tho evidently he has difficulty to restrain) but is, at it were, motionless during the scene which is truly affecting to behold. (147 Port Phillip Gazette, in Syme 1984: 62. 148 Thomas Journal, CY 2605, item 5, frames 283—284, ML.)

The day following his arrival, Yonki Yonke recounted his story to William Thomas, who recalled:

> Yonki Yonke had been kidnapped along with 8 women, including his mother, by a man called George Meredith. One of the women managed to escape by diving overboard. The others were taken to Preservation Island in the Bass Strait. After a year in Tasmania, Yonki Yonke was then taken by ship to the Swan River settlement in Western Australia.

In Western Australia, Yonki Yonke worked as a shepherd and earned enough money to purchase a ticket on a ship to Adelaide. From Adelaide he then sailed on

a ship to Melbourne to be reunited with his family. On returning to his family, Yonki Yonke dispensed with his Western clothes and joined his family in traditional Boonwurrung culture — and began actively engaging in the affairs of his clan's estate.

Yonki Yonke did join the Native Police along with other Yaluk-ut Weelam men, but soon became disillusioned and after a short time was listed as a deserter.

As a Boonwurrung man, Yonki Yonke chose his wife from the neighbouring Wurundjeri Clan, Bungurook, who was the daughter of the Wurundjeri 'chief' Billibellary.

He died suddenly in 1846 and was, according to his tradition, buried at the foot of a hill on the south bank of the Yarra.

Yonki Yonke was revered by his people and respected by the Europeans. His death was reported in the *Port Phillip Gazette and Settlers' Journal*, 11 November 1946 (p. 2), and it was recorded that Yonki Yonke had been buried according to the customs of the Yaluk-ut Weelam.

> The sudden demise of Bob Cunninghame, a well known aborigine, having led to some surmise, Mr Assistant — Protector Thomas resolved upon ending every doubt by an examination of the body. Accompanied by one or two parties he proceeded to his grave, which is situated on the brink of hill, across the Yarra opposite Melbourne. On removing the earth they found Bob tightly bound with card in an oppossum rug, in an inclined position. A strict examination of the body was made, but no mark of external violence appeared, and the remains of poor Bob were again quietly consigned to the dust, without much ceremony. By the way, it would be right that a Coroner's inquest should be held on all aborigines who have met their death by accident or violence 'as being British subjects, they deserve this protection.'

William Thomas, born of Welsh parents, was appointed Assistant Protector of Aborigines in 1837, responsible for the Port Phillip, Westernport and Gippsland districts.

Thomas understood and respected the structure and hierarchy of traditional Yaluk-ut Weelam society. His relationship with the traditional owners was unique for its time. He earned their respect and shared both happy and conflicting times with Derrimut and other leaders.

Thomas maintained a diary, which today is one of the most valuable resources for the Boonwurrung descendants, recording the life and times, culture and language of the Yaluk-ut Weelam and its leaders.

His writing was prolific, providing a substantial record of Boonwurrung language — these records are being used by the Boonwurrung Foundation to reconstruct the Boonwurrung language (see online archive Boonwurrung dictionary).

In recognition of his commitment towards the traditional owners, he was given the title Marminata, which translated means ‘the good father’.

The Legacy of the Boonwurrung

The edict by La Trobe banning the use of firearms by the local Aboriginal population was followed shortly after by a ban on Aboriginal people entering the Melbourne township. These actions signalled an end to the occupation of Melbourne by the Boonwurrung.

The last of the N’Arweet passed with the death of Old Benbow at Brighton in 1947 and Derrimut at North Melbourne in 1864.

The Yaluk-ut Weelam moved initially to the Aboriginal reserve at Mordialloc and then to Coranderrk in the Upper Yarra, which opened in 1864.

The survivors of the Yaluk-ut Weelam and Boonwurrung included some of the women who had been kidnapped by sealers. The last of these women to return was Louisa Briggs, who returned to her country in the late 1840s.

The Melbourne area fell into rapid decline after 1840 — its pollution from abattoirs and other heavy industry created a stigma on the area for many years.

The revival of the Melbourne area coincided with a period of greater awareness and appreciation of Melbourne’s Indigenous heritage.

Tanderrum, Melbourne Festival 2015. Photo: Steven Rhall. Courtesy of RISING.

Louisa Briggs and Her Boonwurrung Legacy

When Louisa Briggs died at the Aboriginal Reserve at Cummergunga in 1925, it represented an end of an era. Many believed that Louisa was as old as 100. Louisa's remarkable life and her story of survival have provided motivation and inspiration to her many descendants, many of whom have provided leadership and support to both the Victorian Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

The fact that she lived to at least ninety years of age has meant that the oral history tradition of her family has been maintained. This strong family oral history has been documented by a number of her descendants. Louisa's story provides us with further evidence of the engagement between the Boonwurrung and the Europeans prior to the settlement of Melbourne.

It is believed that Louisa was born sometime during the 1830s. In an interview with researchers from Sydney University undertaken in 1923, Louisa's recollection was recorded:

> Further conversations lead her [Louisa Briggs] to tell us that her mother's name was Mary and her grandmother's Marjorie. The latter was a fullblood of Melbourne. In her girlhood, Louisa was taken in a little sailing boat to Tasmania and lived in the 'ighlands' there. Louisa's father was John Strugnall, a white man, and her mother a halfcaste. She returned from Tasmania to Melbourne when that city had more than three houses, but was smaller than Cumeroogunga and the Exhibition ground was all forest.

Louisa's granddaughter, Ellen Atkinson, provided an account of Louisa to researcher Diane Barwick during the 1960s:

> Aunty Ellen had vivid memories of her grandmother, Louisa Briggs, who died at Cumeroogunga in 1925 just before her ninetieth birthday. This 'good Christian' woman, who went on working for the people to the end of her days, delighted her grandchildren with tales about shepherding and the Victorian gold rush. Aunty Ellen could still 'remember her telling about meeting one of the old gangs — not the Kelly Gang, another — who asked to spend the night in her hut'. Like her surviving sisters, Aunty Ellen was tiny and had exceptionally curly hair. She explained that Louisa was a tall woman with straight hair. 'My mother's mother came from a coast family. They lived on the coast south of Melbourne.'

There were many accounts provided by the Boonwurrung of their women being stolen during years following the settlement at Melbourne. The accounts record that Derrimut's wife and Big Benbow's daughter, 'Mary', were among those who were kidnapped. There is also evidence to suggest that some of the Boonwurrung men travelled to the Bass Strait and Tasmania to search for their wives.

The sealing industry was a harsh and cruel world, with many of the sealers being escaped convicts or renegades from society. The sealers plied their trade from the islands in the Bass Strait and made occasional trips back to the mainland.

The sealing trade began to decline in the late 1830s and the kidnapped women and children were stranded in the islands. Louisa and her aunt Anne were both determined to return to their country, and sometime during the late 1840s (coinciding with the beginning of the gold rush), they returned to Melbourne, along with Louisa's husband, a Tasmanian Aborigine named John Briggs.

Although it was a rough and deprived existence, Louisa's years living on the Bass Strait Islands had possibly saved her life. In 1897, Commander Crawford Pasco recorded his meeting with Louisa Briggs when she was a young girl, thus confirming her story:

> On Preservation Island was Jimmy Munro, who held the title of King of the Straits, and had been there [1842] for thirty seven years. He had his lubra, but no family of his own. She had one little girl, whom he had brought with the mother, but I never knew what part they had been taken from til forty years after, when I met the 'little girl' at Coranderrk Aboriginal Station in Victoria as Mrs Briggs, then an aid grandmother. Visiting this station, where I knew some of the blacks, Mrs Briggs said she knew me when she was a little girl at Preservation Island, and remembered my having given her some biscuits. She told me that she and her mother were near Pt Nepean at the entrance of Port Phillip, when Jimmy came in with his boat and carried them off. She told me the name of my vessel, in proof of her memory, the Vansittart.

Louisa became an activist and her family continued to carry on her tradition. Her activism is described by Barwick:

> Louisa (and her husband) joined 'the acid rush' in Victoria and worked as shepherds in the Beaufort district and farmed as a squatter near Violet Town until the late 1860s.
>
> Between 1853 and 1871 they had nine children. Work was scarce and in 1871 the destitute family joined Coranderrk Aboriginal station, near Healesville.

Next year a dispute with the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines, which managed the station, over the board's failure to pay a cash wage to all the workers resulted in John being expelled after seeking paid work elsewhere. In 1874 the family returned, in great need, to Coranderrk. There Louisa acted as a nurse and dormitory matron and was appointed a salaried staff member in 1876.

The board's policy over Coranderrk's income, and the inclusion of newcomers who were not related to the Kulin clan inhabitants, caused resentment among the residents. Rebellion ensued. Louisa's leadership and hereditary right made her a spokesperson. She had learned to read, but not to write, so her children acted as scribes for her numerous letters of protest.

When the popular manager was replaced, Louisa fought the plans to sell Coranderrk and to relocate its residents. To this end she gave evidence in August 1876 at an inquiry into the running of the station. Widowed in 1878, after further protests Louisa was forced off the reserve, seeking asylum at Ebenezer Aboriginal station, Lake Hindmarsh, where she again acted as a matron. Conditions there were poor and she wrote to the board to complain of the lack of food in 1878 and again in 1881. Following another inquiry into Coranderrk, Louisa returned to the station in 1882 and was left briefly in charge of the dormitory.

Legislation in 1886 forced 'half-castes' under the age of 35 off the reserves and Louisa's family was again exited from Coranderrk; they sought refuge at Maloga Mission in New South Wales. She pleaded to return to Corranderk, but the board refused reentry. In 1889 Louisa and her children moved to Cumeroogunga Reserve, on the New South Wales side of the Murray River, opposite Barmah. She again requested to return to Coranderrk in 1892 and was denied. In 1895 'half-castes' were excluded from Cumeroogunga, forcing the family to settle in a makeshift camp at Barmah. In 1903, at the age of 67, Louisa asked for the rations to which she was entitled by age and ancestry. Again the board refused. She later returned to Cumeroogunga, where she died on 6 September 1925. Out of affection, local children covered her coffin with violets. A church-going Presbyterian, Louisa was strong minded, hardworking, known for her kindness and love of children and for her humour, audacity and courage.

Louisa Briggs provided the link between the pre-settlement of Melbourne and the history of post-settlement. The fact that she lived for at least ninety years has meant that the oral history tradition of her family has been maintained. This strong family oral history has been documented by a number of her descendants, including in my own research and archival work as a living legacy: work built on principles of reciprocity and grounded in Boonwurrung values.

...

N'Arwee't Professor Carolyn Briggs AM is a Boonwurrung Elder who is recognised as a keeper of the history and genealogies of her people. Having worked extensively across education, government and community sectors, she has been active in community development, Native Title, cultural preservation and cultural promotion.

N'Arwee't Carolyn's cultural knowledge and experience has been widely recognised: she was awarded National Aboriginal Elder of the Year in 2011 by the National NAIDOC Committee, inducted into the 2017 Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll, and made a Member of the Order of Australia in 2019. She was founder and chair of the

Boonwurrung Foundation, and was a member of the former National Congress of Australia's First People.

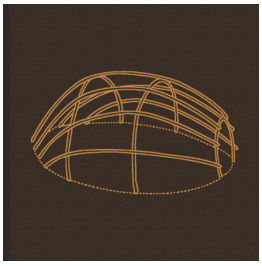
At RMIT University N'Arwee't Carolyn was appointed Elder in Residence in 2019, and in 2022 became Elder in Research in the College of Design & Social Context. Her work focuses on Indigenous oral and textile traditions, and transforming Indigenous knowledge into modern resources including augmented reality.

This essay is drawn from the work of N'Arwee't Carolyn's PhD Yulendj Boonwurrung: A journey of old knowledge *and innovative forms for assisting urban Indigenous youth to engage in contemporary Indigenous knowledge, available in full on the RMIT Research Repository.*

Essays



Things are likely to fall apart, and generally do.
Hélène Frichot



Australia in three books
Stuart Harrison



Our bog paddock's understory
Katherine Wilson



Still Tourists
Aidan Hookey

The Meanjin Papers



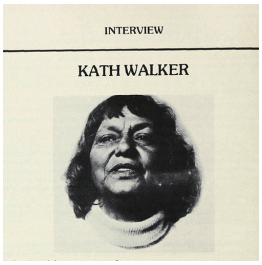
Djaara: the essential ingredient

Rodney Carter



Ilkakelheme akngakelheme—resisting assimilation

Theresa Penangke Alice



From the Archives: Interview with Kath Walker

Oodgeroo Noonuccal



Makunschan, Meeanjan, Miganchan, Meanjan, Magandjin

Gaja Kerry Charlton

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