

William Barak (1824–1903)

'You got to know your father's country, Yarra was my Father's country. Me no leave it, Yarra, my Father's country. There's no mountains for me on the Murray.'

William Barak was born into the Wurundjeri clan of the Woi wurung people in 1823, in the area now known as Croydon, in Melbourne. Originally named Beruk Barak, he adopted the name William after joining the Native Police as a 19-year-old.

Leadership was in Barak's blood: his father Bebejan was a ngurungaeta (clan head) and his Uncle Billibellary, a signatory to John Batman's 1835 "treaty", became the Narrm (Melbourne) region's most senior elder. As a boy, Barak witnessed the signing of this document, which was to have grave and profound consequences for his people.



William Barak, aged 33, c1856

Soon after white settlement a farming boom forced the Kulin peoples from their land, and many died of starvation and disease. During those hard years, Barak emerged as a politically savvy leader, skilled mediator and spokesman for his people. In partnership with his cousin Simon Wonga, a ngurungaeta, Barak worked to establish and protect Coranderrk, a self-sufficient Aboriginal farming community in Healesville, and became a prominent figure in the struggle for Aboriginal rights and justice. When Wonga died in 1875, Barak succeeded him as clan leader. While at Coranderrk, Barak recorded Koorie culture through storytelling and art, and invited white settlers and dignitaries to visit the reserve. Skilled in the arts of diplomacy and friendship, over time he gained growing respect and fame within his own culture, in settler society and even abroad.

When he died in 1903, at around 80 years of age, the man known as the King of the Yarra was buried at Coranderrk, in a simple grave marked by a wooden cross.

Source: <http://www.cv.vic.gov.au/stories/william-barak/5588/william-barak-king-of-the-yarra/>

Barak endured significant personal hardship throughout his life. His first wife Lizzie died before Coranderrk was established. In 1864 he married a young Murray River woman called Annie, with whom he had two daughters and a son. The girls died of gastro-enteritis, and Annie and son David died of tuberculosis. David died alone in a hospital in Melbourne as Barak was not permitted to stay with him. Barak was the oldest man at Coranderrk when he married his third wife, Sarah.



*When I tend to feel that we haven't got much hope, well, then,
I think about those times that they had on Coranderrk.
I wish I had been there to feel the real strength, but I do feel the strength
and certainly Barak and other leaders, I believe,
have given us that fire in the belly
and we should cherish that.*

Source: 'Auntie Joy Wandin Murphy Speaks about William Barak'
Prof. Joy Wandin Murphy A.O., [Culture Victoria](#)



'King Barak last of the Yarra Tribe' c. 1899.
Oil on canvas by Victor de Pury (1873 – 1960)

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*“At Coranderrk, everything I do at Coranderrk is inspired by William Barak.
He’s my guide, he’s telling me what needs to be done.
I think of him and what he did and think about what he would do.*

*And really, I think his words say it all. His words at the Enquiry:
“Give us the land and let us manage here ourselves...and we will work it”.
That’s it, that all there is to say.*

*All this Cultural Practice work I do, people say I have so much knowledge.
But I don’t. It’s not my knowledge, it comes from my father and grandfather,
and the Aunties and Uncles, the trees, the land, the water, all of it, from way back.
I don’t prepare, I just think about what they told me and what they did,
and I know what to say.”*

Uncle Dave Wandin, 2020.