



Aboriginal people. In order to maintain the essence of their way of life, the Kulin and other nations within the Port Phillip District had to adopt new ways of living out their place in the world. This called for a high degree of adaptability, which can be demonstrated through a number of episodes in the post-contact history of the District.

***Changing alliances:*** In the pre-European world of the Kulin clans, there were clearly defined cultural boundaries between different groups, generally based on language. The Kulin considered clans that did not speak a Kulin language—even neighbouring clans such as those of the Kurnai, in Gippsland—as foreigners or wild men. They referred to such groups as Mainmeet and neither traded with them nor married them. Their only contact was in conflict (Barwick 1998; Presland 2010). In the wake of European invasion of all Aboriginal estates and the massive reduction in Indigenous population as a result, old alliances and arguments had to be put aside. It wasn't long before Kulin and Kurnai were fighting a common enemy and there was a need to forge new connections.

One of the earliest instances of this change in traditional ways came during the period of the third Native Police Corps. Initially, the Corps was comprised almost exclusively of Kulin men but in 1847 William Thomas, Assistant Protector of Aborigines, noted that Benbow was introducing Kurnai men to Kulin members. Five Kurnai men were enlisted in the Corps during its period of operation – 1842 to 1853 (Fels 1986).

Marriage to previously foreign groups was also contemplated in order to create new alliances. William Barak married Lizzie who was of a Brataualung clan of Kurnai. Lizzie had come to him as a sister-exchange betrothal because his sister Borat had married a Brataualung man (Barwick 1998; Wiencke 1984). Thus new alliances were forged between the previously irreconcilable nations.

***Adopting a settled farming lifestyle:*** For thousands of years the life of the Indigenous population of the Port Phillip District was based on regular

movement around clan estates. People cared for their country and sustained themselves through the management of natural resources (Presland 2010). In the changed world of European occupation and greatly diminished numbers, Aboriginal people chose to remake their lives, by adopting a settled lifestyle.

During the ten-year period of the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate (1839–49) four stations had been created across the Port Phillip District: the station for the Melbourne/Westernport area, was located on Dandenong Creek at Narre Warren; in the Loddon area the station was at Franklinford; for the Western District, at Mount Rouse; and for the Goulburn River district, at Murchison. The only successful station was that run by Edward Parker at Franklinford, near Daylesford, where local Kulin clans successfully engaged in agriculture. At the close of the Protectorate in December 1849, a number of families stayed on and continued to associate with Parker, who lived on a property adjacent to the old station (Cannon 1993).

The Aboriginal Reserve at Coranderrk stands as perhaps the best example of a positive expression by Indigenous people of their desire to reform themselves in a fixed agrarian context. In 1859 the remnants of Woi wurrung and Taung wurrung clans had asked for, and been given, an area on which to permanently settle, on the Acheron River, 54 km from Yea. Within a couple of years, however, they were pushed off the land to a nearby area of poor quality. They had been betrayed by the men who were appointed as local guardians, the very individuals who were charged with administering to their needs (Barwick 1998; Nanni and James 2013). Still keen to have an area they could settle on and farm for themselves, in 1863 a group of Kulin people was led by Simon Wonga and William Barak to a site on Badgers Creek near Healesville in the upper Yarra valley (Nanni and James 2013). This site had formerly been used for traditional ceremonies by Kulin clans, and was thus a place to which the clans could relate (Barwick 1998). The choosing of the Coranderrk site was therefore a further demonstration of the preparedness of Aboriginal Victorians to assert their identity and be an agent for change, rather than passively accept the directions of authorities (Goodall 1988). At almost the same time that the Kulin were selecting Coranderrk as their choice for a

station, Kurnai clans were subtly guiding the Moravian missionaries to the place *they* wanted their station to be – on the Avon River close to Lake Wellington (Attwood 1989).

Over the succeeding forty years, the Kulin defended their presence at Coranderrk and their right to self-determination. In this they were lead once again by William Barak. With the death of his cousin Simon Wonga in 1875 Barak had become *Ngurungæta* of the Kulin, and was their principal spokesman (Nanni and James 2013). His leadership was sorely needed: in the years following the establishment of Coranderrk, the reserve came under threat from local squatters and even the government body that oversaw its operations – the Board for the Protection of Aborigines (BPA). In 1865 some local settlers applied to the government to select land within the reserve. Although this application failed, Europeans maintained pressure over a number of years (Christie 1979). Attempts were made in 1869 to revoke the land and have the residents moved to a different site. Robert Brough Smyth, an influential member of the Board tried to elicit help from the manager, John Green, to persuade the residents to move. Local squatters stood to benefit if the Coranderrk reserve was broken up, because the work of the Kulin in fencing and clearing the land had made it considerably more productive. The government also stood to make a decent profit on the sale of the land. Although there was some discontent among the Kulin about how Green was distributing the small profits made through the produce of the reserve, they were prepared to take action to ensure that he remained in his position. (Barwick 1998; Wiencke 1984). The strategies developed by Barak and the Kulin to defend themselves against threats such as this to the way of life they had developed, as well as to their attachment to Coranderrk, were in themselves a demonstration of the adaptability of Aboriginal culture.

***Adoption of European strategies of protest and action:*** The threats posed to Coranderrk required the most effective action on the part of the Kulin. They needed to fight in ways that would be understood by the authorities, as well as the wider public; in short, they needed to adopt European strategies. This they did with great success. Beginning in 1875, following the forced removal of

John Green as Manager of the station, the Kulin petitioned parliament in writing (and on four occasions in person), and wrote to the press and other allies. Between 1875 and 1893 there were seven petitions presented by residents of Coranderrk (Barwick 1998). On more than one occasion residents also withheld their labour as a form of protest (Nanni and James 2013; *The First Australians*, ep. 3). The effect of these strategies led, in part, to the Coranderrk Inquiry of 1881.