

Coranderrk: We Will Show the Country

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Giordano Nanni is a writer and historian. He has authored two books: 'Coranderrk: We Will Show the Country' (with Andrea James), which features the verbatim script of the play and a history of the 1881 Coranderrk Inquiry, and The 'Colonisation of Time: Ritual, Routine and Resistance in the British Empire'

(Manchester University Press, 2012). He conceived the idea of re-staging the 1881 Coranderrk Inquiry through verbatim-theatre and was key to its development through the Australian Research Council (ARC) funded Minutes of Evidence project, on which Giordano is a Senior Research Associate at The University of Melbourne. He also co-writes the internet news-parody show, [Juice Rap News](#).

We interview Dr Nanni here below. First, some background to the play is given.

Coranderrk: We Will Show the Country is a groundbreaking theatrical performance that combines theatre and history to provide unprecedented insight into a remarkable yet little-known chapter of Australia's past. Consisting entirely of the actual words spoken and written by Aboriginal and European men and women at the 1881 Parliamentary Coranderrk Inquiry, and drawing on petitions, letters and newspaper articles dated from the time, this unique play enables the voices of key historical figures such as William Barak and Anne Bon to be brought before contemporary audiences.

The script of the play was adapted collaboratively from the official minutes of evidence of the 1881 Coranderrk Inquiry, by historian and writer Giordano Nanni and Yorta Yorta playwright Andrea James, between 2009 and 2010. Its subsequent public presentation was funded by the Minutes of Evidence Project - an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage grant involving 13 partner organisations which seeks to spark public conversations about history and structural justice.

The play was first performed in 2011 at the La Mama Courthouse theatre featuring a cast of nine actors, directed by Rachael Maza and Isaac Drandic of ILBIJERRI Aboriginal Theatre Company. The play was subsequently performed in 2012 at Federation Square for Melbourne's inaugural Indigenous Arts Festival, and at the Sydney Opera House. [Click here to read more...](#)

1. What was the genesis of the project for you?

For me this journey started around 12 years ago when I first came across the transcripts, or 'minutes of evidence', of the 1881 Coranderrk Parliamentary Inquiry. I was 23, I'd just started my PhD at The University of Melbourne and I was trying not to get lost in the archives. That summer, as I worked my way through the 141-page transcript of the Coranderrk Inquiry, I became captivated by the voices it contained and deeply inspired by the Coranderrk people, black and white, and the collaboration they had forged 150 years ago. Today, it still strikes me as the most remarkable story I've ever encountered.

When I first learnt about it, and having only recently moved to this city, I assumed this story was well known to most Melburnians. The fact that it was almost virtually unknown seemed to me a great injustice. How could a story such as this, so tragic yet so inspiring and empowering, not be known locally? (Of course, most Aboriginal people in Victoria are all too familiar with it. But I hadn't met any of Coranderrk's descendants at that time.) I began to think of a way to get people to engage directly with the voices of Coranderrk contained in the Inquiry's transcripts, and the idea of using verbatim theatre to re-enact the 1881 Coranderrk Inquiry seemed like a great way of achieving this goal.

2. What was of particular interest for you in this Aboriginal and Australian story?

What strikes me most powerfully about the Coranderrk story is that it's not only a story of black versus white - a story of injustice. It also illustrates what can be achieved when white and black work together, *towards* justice.



Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, 1866

Acknowledgements: Carl Walter 1831-1907, photographer and [State Library of Victoria](#)

Take for example Coranderrk's success as a community. Aboriginal reserves and missions were intended to be places of confinement and exclusion of Aboriginal people; but Coranderrk became a vibrant, productive and virtually self-supporting Aboriginal community. This success derived to a great extent from the resilience and adaptability of its Aboriginal residents, guided by strong leaders like Barak and Wonga; but it was also due to the collaborative relationship which Barak and the Coranderrk families managed to forge with the first manager, Scottish lay-preacher John Green, and his wife Mary. The Green and Coranderrk families founded Coranderrk together in 1863 and over the next 12 years lived there, raising their children and working the land side by side.

Years later, when the Aboriginal Protection Board removed John Green from Coranderrk, and subsequently attempted to shift the Kulin as well to make room for white settlement, the people conducted a highly effective campaign to save their home and have their ally reinstated. "We want only one man here, and that is Mr John Green", their petition read.¹ Their campaign was extremely effective - partly due to the sagacious and charismatic leadership of Barak who succeeded in uniting the various clans who lived at Coranderrk towards a common goal.

1. Board appointed to enquire into and report upon the present condition and management of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, Minutes of Evidence, p. 98.

And partly, again, due to the cooperation of a number of settler figures who sought to bolster the Coranderrk community's campaign. The most powerful of these was the wealthy widow Anne Fraser Bon. It was due to her persistent petitioning and lobbying alongside the petitions and deputations of the Kulin that the government finally appointed a Parliamentary Inquiry in 1881 to investigate the Board's management and to review its decision to break up the reserve.

So this is what immediately stood out for me about this story - the powerful theme of collaboration and co-operation between Indigenous and settler Australians towards a shared goal: justice.

3. What is the significance of the Coranderrk story for Victoria/Australia?

The significance of the Coranderrk story for Victoria, and Australia as a whole, is immense.

First of all, it must be said that for many Aboriginal Victorians, this is a story of huge personal and historical significance which has touched many families across generations. Because the Coranderrk residents were eventually moved off the station, or to other reserves, their descendants continue to live in communities across Victoria and New South Wales to this day, where the story

of the Coranderrk struggle is still a source of pride and inspiration to many Aboriginal people. It is therefore a living story, too. Indeed the connections between the people depicted in the play *Coranderrk: We Will Show the Country* and their living descendants are closer than I could have imagined when I first set out on this project. For example, Uncle Jack Charles (who portrayed Barak), Pauline Whyman (who portrayed Caroline Morgan) and Andrea James (my co-writer) all had ancestors who were witnesses at the 1881 Inquiry. Clearly, therefore, for many contemporary Aboriginal Victorians, the archive on which Coranderrk is based is not just a valuable historical artefact but also a personal record of their ancestors' lives and achievements.

There are so many lessons to be learnt from this story – both for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, young and old. I've already mentioned the theme of collaboration and friendship which runs through the Coranderrk story, a theme which is conspicuously absent in many other chapters of Victorian and Australian history that deal with early encounters between Indigenous and settler peoples. Unlike many of these, the Coranderrk story provides positive (as well as negative) models of behaviour – both male and female – which can help to guide and inspire better and more respectful relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people today. Sadly, when it comes to the treatment of Aboriginal people in the past, whitefellas have few historical figures with whom they could identify without feeling a profound sense of shame or repulsion. Figures like John and Mary Green and Anne Fraser Bon are exceptions to this rule. Were they better known, their actions would have the power to inspire contemporary Victorians and Australians, providing them with positive models of behaviour in an otherwise dim chapter of their history.

Meanwhile, Aboriginal figures like Barak, Wonga and Bamfield – as well as the strong women of Coranderrk, from Louisa Briggs to Caroline Morgan and Alice Grant – are role models to contemporary Aboriginal people today. They are reminders of the strength and resilience of Aboriginal people in the face of the toughest adversities; of the long tradition of resistance towards colonial injustice and of the struggle towards self-determination; and of the power that can be generated when communities overcome local differences and politics in order to unite for a common cause.

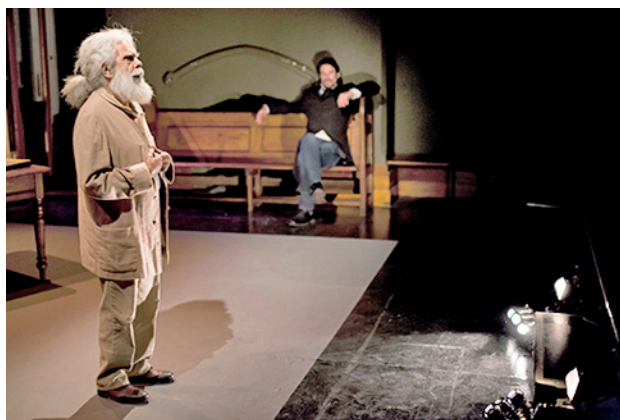
The Coranderrk story also challenges myths about the past. We have inherited a distorted historical consciousness

> From top right.

Photographs from the theatrical performance, *We Will Show the Country*:

1. The Coranderrk Petition is read out.
2. William Barak testifies in the Coranderrk Inquiry.
3. Caroline Morgan testifies in the Coranderrk Inquiry.
4. Thomas Bamfield testifies in the Coranderrk Inquiry.

Source of images: Steven Rhall (photographer), with permission from the Minutes of Evidence Project.



filled with notions of Aboriginal people in the past that are often invoked to bolster contemporary prejudices. Through the power of the historical evidence revealed in the transcripts of the Inquiry, the Coranderrk story literally smashes these prejudices. For example, it shows that Aboriginal people were hard workers, despite the odds and adversities they faced; that they were not reliant on or desirous of “hand-outs” and “white welfare”. Instead, they wanted self-sufficiency and independence. As Barak’s testimony clearly stated: “We will show the country that *we can work it [the station] and make it pay, and I know it will*”.²

“We will show the country” are powerful words which reverberate to this day. It is almost as if the Coranderrk people were addressing not just the countrymen and women of their time but also us – today. They are still waiting for the opportunity to show this country what it means to live justly on this land. Such is the power of this story. “It just wants to be told”, as ILBIJERRI Artistic Director Rachael Maza put it. Coranderrk is indeed a story that will be taught in all Victorian schools until it rightfully gains its place as one of the most widely known and celebrated stories in our historical canon.

4. What were the challenges in uncovering information?

Accessing information was not a challenge. We have so many advantages today thanks to the recent digitisation of archival sources, including the [Minutes of Evidence](#) of the Coranderrk Inquiry, the annual reports of the [Board for the Protection of Aborigines](#), the photo collections of the State Library of Victoria, digitised articles from newspapers (e.g. *The Argus* and *The Age*) and much more.

But this project is not only about engaging with written sources. It is also about engaging with the living descendants of the Coranderrk community. This process was at times challenging: there are many people who can trace their ancestry to Coranderrk, and so the process of engaging meaningfully over several meetings necessarily spanned more than two years – and is indeed ongoing. Although we wanted to speak with everyone, this was not always possible. Consequently, some people expressed regret that they had not been approached earlier in the process. Another challenging and lengthy process was that of seeking cultural permissions for use of photographs. But with patience, dedication – and a touch of persistence – we were able to speak with many people and utilise the proper processes and protocols required. The Minutes of Evidence project team’s engagement also included a staging of the play *Coranderrk: We Will Show the Country* on Coranderrk Country, for the benefit of descendants and Healesville community members. These attempts to be as inclusive as possible may have been challenging but they

2. William Barak, letter submitted as evidence on 18 November 1881, in Board appointed to enquire into and report upon, the present condition and management of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, Minutes of Evidence, p. 99.

were also essential to the project’s success and integrity. We could never have gone ahead without the support of the Coranderrk descendants with whom we spoke. Among these, Aunty Joy Murphy Wandin, senior elder of the Wurundjeri people, stands out for the level of support and involvement which she invested into the project from its very commencement.

As a result of this sometimes challenging process, the project grew with added purpose and honesty, not just as a work of literature and theatre, but also as a model of proper engagement with Indigenous communities.

5. What resistance, if any, did you face?

The only serious resistance we faced was the difficulty of negotiating bureaucratic, organisational and logistical hurdles, which are germane to any large collaborative project. Considering how the Minutes of Evidence project brought together a wide and diverse group, ranging from academics to theatre-makers, education experts and community members, it is not surprising that we sometimes spoke different ‘languages’ and had different understandings and expectations of processes and outcomes. But all of this was part and parcel of the project and, as such, essential to steering it in the right direction. Ultimately, this story inspired everyone to overcome differences and to share a common goal: making this story better known and more accessible to as wide an audience as possible – inspired (I like to think) by the model of cooperation of the Coranderrk community itself.

6. What historian’s skills did you most need to employ?

Often, the most basic ones: attention to detail, correct citation of sources and transcriptions of primary sources. Historians can easily shape and influence the perception of the reader merely by opting to select certain bits of information over others. Coranderrk is by necessity a highly abridged version of the Inquiry’s Minutes of Evidence, condensing 5,349 questions and 10 days of hearings into an 80-minute performance. In the process of editing the transcripts, Andrea James and I had to make decisions about what to include and omit. Honesty was probably the most essential element required in this process.

7. What previous projects informed your approach or led you towards such a project?

As mentioned, I was studying for my PhD when I first learnt about Coranderrk. The lessons I learnt from my teachers – Julie Evans, David Philips and Patrick Wolfe – and from the texts I read during this time, shaped my understanding of, and appreciation for, the importance of the 1881 Inquiry Minutes of Evidence. Without this background, I don’t think I would have been able to appreciate the complexities of settler-colonial society – divided as it was by competing interests and agendas

(e.g. settlers vs humanitarians) – and how these divisions shaped, and were shaped by, Indigenous peoples. So I would say that my academic background very much informed part of my approach to this project.

But there is another fundamental part of my approach that was very much shaped by the lessons I learned from Aboriginal people. This came about as a result of a project I initiated in 2008 called *The Juice Media* in which I set out to facilitate contemporary Aboriginal voices in gaining a bigger audience on the internet. I borrowed a video camera and created a YouTube channel where I started to upload (with the speakers' permissions) segments of talks, lectures, protest rally speeches and interviews by Aboriginal people speaking about history, justice, treaty and sovereignty. Over those years, I went through a whole new stage of education in which I began to learn, in much more practical terms, that many of the effects of settler-colonisation which I'd learned about at the time of Coranderrk were very much an ongoing reality for Aboriginal people today. It was this realisation that enabled me to understand and appreciate the contemporary resonances of the Coranderrk story. The work I did during this time also taught me the importance of knowing when to listen, rather than talk; which better prepared me for collaborating with Aboriginal people in retelling the story of the 1881 Coranderrk Inquiry.

8. Having spent a long time on this project, where do you think a subsequent focus of History and Humanities research on Indigenous histories and cultures should be in the Victorian context?

I am glad to have the opportunity to address this question because it's important to mention that Coranderrk is one of many Aboriginal communities across Australia where stories such as these took place. Other inspiring and defining struggles for self-determination, justice and dignity took place across Victoria in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – from Lake Tyers and Framlingham to Lake Condah and Cummeragunja. Coranderrk is a great starting point. But it is part of a much, much bigger and longer story of settler-colonial and Indigenous coexistence: a story that spans right across the Australian continent (and others), and across time.

9. What are the contemporary resonances of the Coranderrk story?

There are many ways in which the Coranderrk story reverberates in the present. For example, parallels can be drawn between the testimonies and petitions of Coranderrk's residents and the words of contemporary Aboriginal people living under the Federal Government's 'Northern Territory Emergency Response' ('the Intervention'). In both cases, the governments of the day were criticised for failing to consult with Aboriginal communities prior to implementing policies affecting Aboriginal peoples' lives. Similarly, the imposition of

degrading income management policies during the early stages of the Intervention strongly reverberate in the paternalistic role assumed in the nineteenth century by the Board for the Protection of Aborigines towards the residents of Coranderrk and other Aboriginal reserves. By connecting the past and the present, Coranderrk brings into relief structural injustices that endure in contemporary Australia as a result of colonisation.

The Coranderrk story also echoes in the present in positive ways. The words spoken by the Coranderrk community at the 1881 Inquiry are also echoed by Aboriginal men and women today who continue to campaign for justice, equality and self-determination in Australia. ("Nothing has changed!" Rachael Maza commented with pride while we were listening to the actors perform those testimonies.) Their claims to justice endure, therefore, just as the injustices of the past continue to have effects and ramifications in the present.

10. What key insights do you think students and teachers of History and Humanities will gain from this?

Coranderrk: We Will Show the Country, being the story of a government enquiry, is fundamentally about the search for truth and justice. All of us, from a young age, develop a sense of justice – of what is 'fair'. I hope that through this story students will gain a deeper understanding of what injustice can look like and why its counterpart justice is so important. I think many of the students will be touched, as I was, by Coranderrk's remarkable characters and their remarkable friendships, and be inspired to dedicate some of their lives and work towards justice and truth, whatever path they might follow.

In addition, I hope teachers will gain the same sense of reward when imparting this story to their students, knowing that they have the responsibility and the privilege of living in a time when they are able to teach the Coranderrk story in their classrooms.