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Kurrburra the Boonwurrung ‘Wirrirrap’ and Bard (1797-1849)

A man of high degree*

Introduction¹

Kurrburra (aka Mr Ruffy) (1797-1849), Aboriginal ‘wirrirrap’ (doctors, healers, bards), sage counsellor of his people, consultant with koalas, and heroic slayer of a feared orangutan-like cryptid that lived in the ranges north of Western Port, is believed to have been born in 1797, and was a member of the Yawen djirra clan, the eastern-most group of the Boonwurrung People whose Country stretched from Wirribi-yaluk (Werribee River) to Wammun (Wilsons Promontory) in Victoria. His moiety was Bunjil and in the early 1840s he had two wives: Kurundum (1819-?) and Bowyeup (1823-?), and two children, whose names are not known. Kurrburra’s traditional Aboriginal name is the Boonwurrung word for the iconic marsupial *Phascolarctos cinereus*, more commonly known as the koala.²

The Boonwurrung People were amongst the first of Victoria’s Indigenous Peoples to have contact with Europeans. They witnessed major events such as George Bass’s visits in 1798 and 1802; the visit of ‘Le Naturaliste’ in 1802; the short-lived penal establishment at what is now Sorrento in October 1803; the escape of the convict William Buckley in late 1803 and his travel through their lands until he arrived in Wadawurrung Country near Geelong; the second short-lived penal settlement in 1826 at what is now Corinella; and the eventual colonization of Melbourne in 1835.

In these intervening years the Boonwurrung also suffered from incursions by sealers and whalers, and the forced abduction of Aboriginal women, girls and boys. Added to this was internecine conflict between the Boonwurrung and their eastern neighbours, the Ganai,³ with whom there was a blood-feud apparently over the Ganai’s unauthorized use of Boonwurrung natural resources, which saw numerous violent clashes between the two groups and considerable loss of life. From 1837 until 1849, Boonwurrung Country also functioned as a site for government initiatives designed to impress European values and customs upon

1 Cultural warning: Readers of this article should be aware that some of the archival records and publications of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contain words that are now considered offensive. Such words may appear in the article where a quote is made from these archival records or publications. The history also refers to persons who have passed away and to incidents of a distressing nature.

2 See Barry John Blake: *Woiwurrung, the Melbourne Language*, p. 112.

3 Native title groups now use the term ‘GanaiKurnai’.

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Aboriginal people, including a government mission that operated from 1837 until 1839 at what is now the site of the Royal Botanic Gardens in South Yarra; the Native Police Corps; and the establishment and operation of the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate, from 1839 until its closure in late 1849.

Perhaps the best known Boonwurrung men in colonial Melbourne were two Yalukit-willam clan heads, Derrimut and Bullourd (aka King Benbow). Derrimut is famed for his role in preventing an Aboriginal massacre of the European settlement in Melbourne in October 1835 during its early establishment;⁴ Bullourd was employed as a messenger by Chief Protector George Augustus Robinson in the mid-1840s. Both Derrimut and Bullourd were active in representing Boonwurrung interests and were instrumental in securing the reservation of Boonwurrung land at Mordialloc in 1852. However, this paper is concerned with Kurrburra, one of several Boonwurrung 'wirrirraps' (doctors, healers), who was recognized as an authority within his community despite not being a clan-head. Kurrburra's standing was confirmed in a recent publication, produced in consultation with the Boon Wurrung Foundation, as a "famous Boon Wurrung doctor, dreamer and diviner in early Melbourne".⁵ Kurrburra is of particular interest because of the circumstances by which he acquired his name, and through the stories that exist of his powers and abilities. In reconstructing this biography of Kurrburra's life we will also examine the role of 'wirrirraps' in Victorian Aboriginal society.

In terms of contemporary published sources, we first learn of Kurrburra in a sensational account published in 1846 of an orangutan-like cryptid that lived in the mountains at the back of Western Port Bay, Victoria, and that the great doctor was the only person alive who had killed one of these creatures.⁶ Other published primary sources include William Thomas's contributions to Smyth, and Bride;⁷ contributions from William Barak to Howitt;⁸ and analyses of a song of Kurrburra's by Torrance, and Tate.⁹ However, it is in the recently published journals and papers of two officials of the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate that we learn the most about Kurrburra: the writings of Assistant Protector William Thomas, and the Chief Protector George Augustus Robinson.¹⁰

Aspects of Kurrburra's history have been researched by Barwick, Wesson, Fels, and Clark.¹¹ On the basis of information provided by George Augustus

4 See Ian D. Clark: *You have all this place, no good have children*.

5 Meyer Eidelson: *Yalukit Willam*, p. 83.

6 See George Henry Haydon: *Five Years' Experience in Australia Felix*.

7 See Robert Brough Smyth: *The Aborigines of Victoria*; Thomas Francis Bride: *Letters From Victorian Pioneers*.

8 Alfred W. Howitt: *On Australian Medicine Men*; Id.: *Notes on songs and Songmakers of some Australian Tribes*; Id.: *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*; Alfred W. Howitt Papers: *Notes by Howitt on the Kulin nation from information provided by Ber-uk*.

9 See George William Torrance: *Music of the Australian Aborigines*; *The Argus*, 30 June 1923, p. 7 (Henry Tate: *Aboriginal Music*).

10 See Marguerita Stephens: *The Journal of William Thomas Assistant Protector of the Aborigines of Port Phillip & Guardian of the Aborigines of Victoria 1839-1867*; Ian D. Clark: *The Journals of George Augustus Robinson*.

11 See Diane E. Barwick: *Mapping the past*; Sue C. Wesson: *Aboriginal flora and fauna names of Victoria*; Marie H. Fels: *'I Succeeded Once'*; Ian D. Clark: *Aboriginal Languages and Clans*; Ian D. Clark: *The Tara-Waragal and the Governor's Levee in Melbourne*, pp. 33-54.

Robinson, Barwick and Clark have identified Kurrburra as a member of the Yowengerre, the eastern-most Boonwurrung clan, which was associated with the Tarwin River watershed and Wilsons Promontory.¹² Blake renders Yowengerre as 'Yawen djirra', where 'djirra' is a plural marker.¹³ They were also called the Yowen(w)illum, which means 'Yowen dwellers'. Yowen and Tarwin may be cognate. According to Thomas, however, Kurrburra was the head of one of the principal families of the Yallock-baluk, the adjoining Boonwurrung clan at Bass River and Tooradin.¹⁴ This discrepancy is discussed below.

With the exception of two men, Kurrburra and Munmungina, Robinson noted on 1 July 1844 that the Yawen djirra clan was defunct.¹⁵ According to Robinson, the clan had been exterminated by the neighbouring Ganai clan, the Boro Boro Willum. This supports the information that Thomas received from Pinterginner (aka Mr Hyatt) on 12 February 1840, that "all the blacks from Wilson's Promontory [...] to Kirkbillesse [near Tooradin] all this country where we now were [...] were all dead, not one left. Two Fold Black fellows [i.e. the Ganai] long time ago killed many many, rest all dead".¹⁶ Fels has studied the internecine conflict between the Boonwurrung and the Ganai and has identified six instances of conflict between 1820 and 1846: a massacre of the Boonwurrung by the Ganai near Arthurs Seat circa 1820; a Ganai attack of the Boonwurrung at Brighton in 1834 where upwards of 77 Boonwurrung were killed; a Ganai attack about 1835 that killed 12 Boonwurrung at Kunnung, a river near modern-day Kooweerup; a Boonwurrung raid into Gippsland in February 1840; a retaliatory raid by 97 Ganai fighting men on 3 October 1840 when they trashed the huts at Jamieson's station and carried off their European plunder; a joint Boonwurrung and Woiwurrung sortie into Ganai country in May 1846.¹⁷ Regarding the latter, an old warrior named Berberry explained to Thomas that "the Gippsland blks [blacks] are very bad men, steal & kill white man's bullocks & they gone to helpem white man too much frightened to gago bush".¹⁸ We know the composition of the February 1840 and May 1846 avenging parties, and Kurrburra is not listed in either of them. Why he did not participate is unknown, but it is hard to imagine that he did not suffer some personal losses of family members through this internecine conflict with the Ganai.

In the ethnographic record, the following variant spellings of Kurrburra's name have been recorded: Car.per.rer / Carborer / Car.per.re / Carbora / Kur.

12 See Diane E. Barwick: Mapping the past; Ian D. Clark: Aboriginal Languages and Clans.

13 See Barry John Blake: Woiwurrung, the Melbourne Language, p. 48.

14 See William Thomas: Papers.

15 See Ian D. Clark: Journals of George Augustus Robinson. Munmungina (aka Dr Bailey) was the son of Purrine, the late clan-head of the Yawen djirra. Munmungina's own country was Tobinnurrick Creek and Koornong Creek, Manton's and Jamieson's runs at Tooradin and Lang Lang. Purrine's country was Wammun (Wilson's Promontory). Munmungina died at Mayune on 16 August 1845 – see William Thomas qtd. in Thomas Francis Bride: Letters from Victorian Pioneers.

16 Marguerita Stephens: The Journal of William Thomas, Vol 1, p. 132.

17 See Marie H. Fels: 'I Succeeded Once'.

18 Thomas Jnl, 21 May 1846, qtd. in Marguerita Stephens: The Journal of William Thomas, Vol. 2, p. 176.

bo.roo / Kar.bor.er / Kurboro / Kurburu / Kurrburra / Kaborer / Kurboror / Kub-burrough / Kurborough / Mr Ruffy.¹⁹

In 1841, Kurrburra supplied William Thomas with the names of the hills in the Yering district in the Yarra Valley and gave him information on their custodians, particularly whether or not they were extant.²⁰ Wesson postulates that there were two men named Kurrburra in Melbourne in the 1840s, a Boonwurrung Kurrburra and a Woiwurrung Kurrburra, and that the Kurrburra who supplied Thomas with this information is not the same Kurrburra that Robinson referred to above.²¹ Clark has examined her reasoning for this division and has concluded that she is incorrect, and that there is only one Kurrburra, the man who is the subject of this biographical study.²²

Kurrburra was also known as 'Mr Ruffy' or 'Ruffy', presumably after one of the Ruffy brothers (Arthur, Frederick, Henry, James and William), who kept a roadside inn at Cranbourne, east of their 'Tomaque' run (1836-50), and 'Mayune' run (1840-45) at Westernport Bay.²³ Henry and Arthur were at 'Tomaque'; and all five brothers were at 'Mayune' from 1840-45, and Frederick Ruffy, alone, 1845-50.²⁴ This name exchange may also be further confirmation of Kurrburra's Boonwurrung connection. Although Kurrburra had taken the surname of the Ruffy brothers, the Ruffy brothers were situated on the estate of a neighbouring Boonwurrung clan, the Mayune-baluk. Given the tension between Kurrburra's clan and the adjoining Ganai, and the apparent violence between them, it is not unreasonable to assume that he spent as much time as possible away from the perceived Ganai threat. His being off his own Country may also explain Thomas' identification of Kurrburra as a member of the Yallock-baluk at Anderson's and Massie's station to the west of his traditional lands. It is possible that he had been adopted by these other clans – there are similar situations documented in south-west Victoria where surviving members of what were effectively defunct clans were adopted by adjoining, more populous, clans and in different census lists they were sometimes recorded as being members of both clans.²⁵

Kurrburra was remembered as a 'bard' by William Barak;²⁶ he was described by Thomas as being held in high esteem as a sorcerer, a dreamer and diviner, a very wise man and a doctor.²⁷ Given that the eastern Kulin people considered 'kurrburra' (koalas) to be the sage counsellors of Aboriginal people in all their difficulties,²⁸ and that Kurrburra the bard was considered to be possessed of their spirit, it is not surprising that he too was held in high regard.

19 See Ian D. Clark: *The Tara-Waragal and the Governor's Levee in Melbourne*.

20 See *ibid.*

21 See Sue C. Wesson: *Aboriginal flora and fauna*, p. 16.

22 See Ian D. Clark: *The Tara-Waragal and the Governor's Levee in Melbourne*. This view is supported by Marie H. Fels: 'I Succeeded Once'.

23 See Ralph V. Billis, Alfred S. Kenyon: *Pastoral Pioneers of Port Phillip*.

24 See *ibid.*

25 See Ian D. Clark: *Aboriginal Languages and Clans*.

26 See Alfred W. Howitt: *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*.

27 See Robert Brough Smyth: *The Aborigines of Victoria*; Thomas Francis Bride: *Letters from Victorian Pioneers*.

28 See Thomas undated Mss written for Mr Duffy qtd. in *William Thomas Papers*. See also Rolf Schlagloth, Fred Cahir, & Ian D. Clark: *The historic importance of the koala in Aboriginal society in Victoria (Australia)*.

'Wirrirraps' in traditional Aboriginal society

As a 'wirrirrap' Kurrburra would have possessed the powers to heal and also to harm,²⁹ although, the ethnologist Alfred W. Howitt explained that medicine men were not always doctors; they "may be a 'rainmaker', 'seer,' or 'spirit-medium,' or may practise some special form of magic".³⁰ Some medicine men were bards who devoted their poetic faculties to the purposes of enchantment, such as the Bunjil-yenjin of the Kurnai, "whose peculiar branch of magic was composing and singing potent love charms".³¹ The Reverend Francis Tuckfield, a Wesleyan missionary to the neighbouring Wadawurrung wrote in the early 1840s of his amazement in finding that in each tribe there was a 'wirrirrap' who claimed they could fly "contrary to the general established laws of Nature". Furthermore, he related how a Wadawurrung 'wirrirrap' had confirmed to the tribe that there was a Heaven, and that he had been there.³² Missionaries such as Tuckfield were aware of the enormous influence 'wirrirraps' had on their communities.³³ Tuckfield wrote of the 'wirrirrap's' prodigious skills:

He is, they say, perfectly acquainted with almost all diseases and their cures, and in the case of death if he can be brought on the spot in a short time after the spirit leaves the body, he can bring the individual alive again. This he does by flying after the spirit and bringing it back.³⁴

William Jackson Thomas, the oldest son of William Thomas, and who was intimately associated with his father's work in the Aboriginal protectorate, has written of the "medicine men" of the Boonwurrung. Given that William Thomas Jnr was with his father at Arthurs Seat, where he had his own pastoral station, we can be certain that he personally knew Kurrburra. Thomas Jnr wrote of the role of 'wirrirraps' in determining the identity of those responsible for unexplained deaths amongst the Boonwurrung. His account also confirms the feud between the Boonwurrung and the Ganai:

It appears according to the firm belief of all Black fellows that death is in no case (except accident) the result of natural causes, but is always the work of an enemy, of some other tribes, who causes the death by craft, charms, or muttering some form of imprecation [...] After the man is buried, a space of about one foot is cleared all-round the grave not a blade of grass left, made quite smooth – the Graves are always round about four feet in diameter – The Medicine Men if there are more than one in the Tribe, make a long and careful examination of the ground so cleared, mumbling a monotonous sort of chant all the time, at length they find or pretend to have found the direction of the Tribe a member of which has caused the death – The Medicine Men of the Western Port Tribes generally spot a member of the Gipps Land tribes as the delinquent – This is noted as one against that tribe – after several deaths the cup of iniquity of the Gipps Land tribes is supposed to be full, and calls for punishment – For the purpose of inflicting this punishment eight or ten young strong men are selected, who are to show their skill and bravery

29 See Alfred W. Howitt: *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, p. 365.

30 Alfred W. Howitt: *On Australian Medicine Men*; id.: *The Natives Tribes of South-East Australia*, p. 355.

31 Alfred W. Howitt: *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, p. 356.

32 G. W. Greenwood: *Reverend Francis Tuckfield's magnificent failure at Bunting Dale*, p. 11.

33 See Fred Cahir: *'My country all gone, the white men have stolen it'*, pp. 181 f.

34 Francis Tuckfield qtd. in Michael Cannon: *The Aborigines of Port Phillip 1835-1839*, p. 113.

in an expeditionary raid into the enemy's country – When they near the borders of the Enemies country they divide into parties of two or three advance in the most stealthy manner being careful to leave as little trail as possible, at length they find a weak detached little camp – they wait until they see the young men depart to hunt then they fall on the unfortunate old men and Women all of which they ruthlessly murder [...] This is no one-sided affair – for the Gipps Land Natives act exactly on the same lines. The Western Port Natives tell of many fearful slaughters of their tribe by the Gipps Land Natives.³⁵

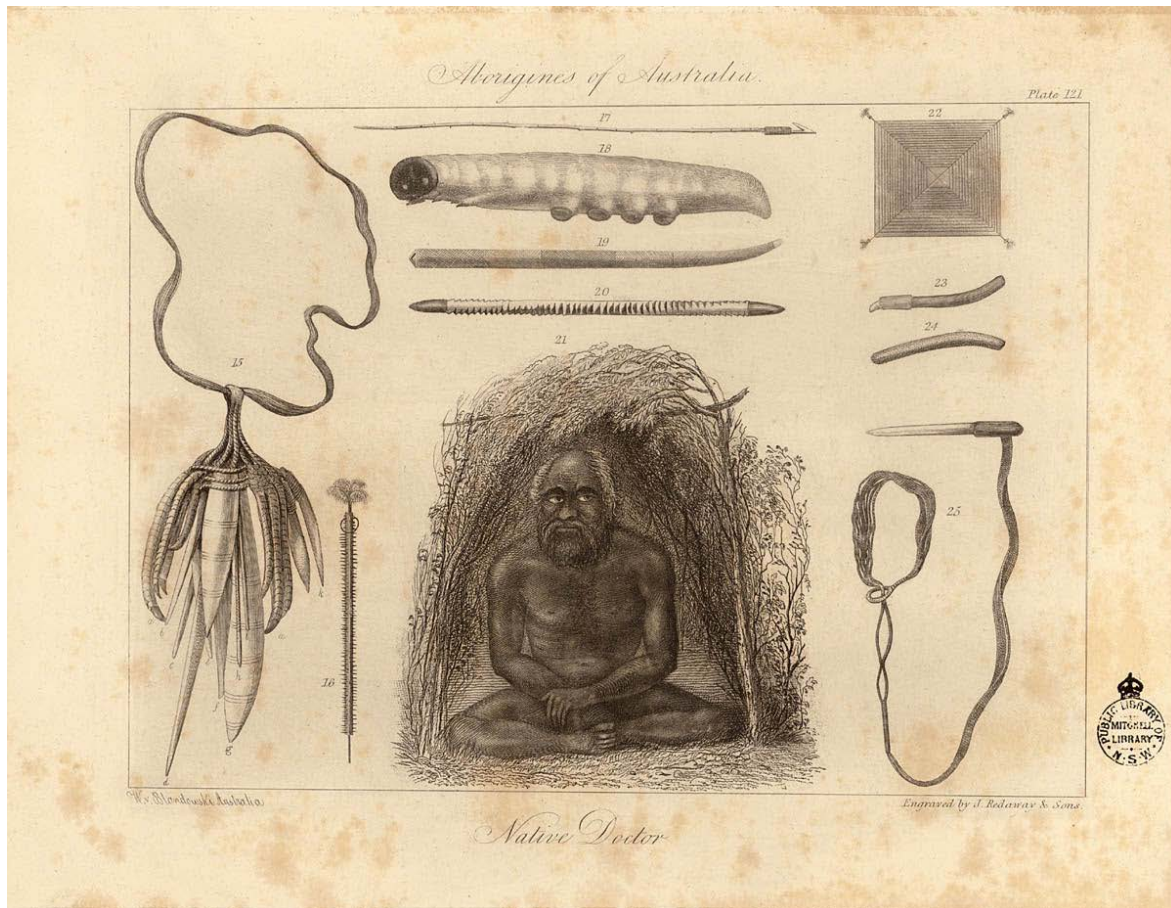


Figure 1: 'Native Doctor' William Blandowski

Henry Meyrick who squatted on Boonwurrung land at 'Colour' (Coolart) on the Mornington Peninsula, in the 1840s, discussed Boonwurrung "doctors" in family correspondence. This part of the Mornington Peninsula belonged to Bobbinary, the 'ngarweet' (clan-head) of the Burinyung-baluk clan, and who was another famed Boonwurrung 'wirrirrap', so the following account probably refers to Bobbinary, although it is possible that it refers to Kurrburra.

There are four families of blacks with us. One of them is the doctor of the tribe. I saw him cure one of the other blacks of a pain in his breast. He made the sick man lie on his back; kneeling by his side, he began to thump the fellow's breast most unmercifully. On a sudden he jumped up, showing us an immense nail, which he said he pulled out of his breast. He then began singing, and threw the nail into the

35 William Jackson Thomas qtd. in Ian D. Clark, Fred Cahir: The Children of the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate, pp. 262 f.

sea, saying he had cured him. The patient ("Cognomine" Wougill, alias "Lively") was sufficiently recovered to go kangarooing with me next day.³⁶

G.G. McCrae, in "a note on the aborigines of the coast" also discussed a "great 'doctor'" among the Western Port Aboriginal people, and it is possible that this is referring to Kurrburra, or Bobbinary:

There was always one great "doctor", as we used to call him, in the tribe. Among themselves he was known as the coradge, or wizard, and he was credited with supernatural powers. He was held infallible in surgery and in cures of disease, for if anything went wrong after his treatment the patient was to blame. By his incantations (made at the right time) he could procure for his followers either the rain or the wind they desired, and he besides possessed (in their opinion) the power of life and death over people, no matter at how great a distance.³⁷

Aboriginal societies throughout Australia had their own healers, who were referred to in the nineteenth century literature as 'doctors', 'medicine men', 'sorcerers', and 'sacred men' (see Fig. 1).³⁸ In Victoria 'medicine men' were known by different names: for example, 'Wirrirrap' (Boonwurrung; Woiwurrung; Wadawurrung); 'Wavoit' (Daungwurrung); 'Bungal' (Wergaia; Wembawemba); 'Mekigar' ('one who sees') (Wiimbaio); 'Wurowuurn' (Dhauwurdwurrung); 'Lanyiwil' (Djabwurrung); 'Murri-malundra' or 'Budjan-belan' (Ngarigo); 'Gommerá' (Yuin); and 'Biraark' (Ganai).

Aldolphus P. Elkin has noted that an Aboriginal doctor was an "outstanding person, a clear thinker, a man of decision, one who believed, and acted on the belief, that he possessed psychic power, the power to will others to have faith in themselves".³⁹ He describes them as "men of high degree" – persons of special knowledge, self-assurance and initiative. Indigenous healers play significant roles in the religious, judicial, and therapeutic foundations of community life and they are often described as clever men and women. The word 'clever' resonates with a respect for the healer's extensive therapeutic knowledge and skill, and a degree of fear for their presumed mystical, supernatural, and spiritual capabilities.⁴⁰ Philip Clarke's assessment is that the closest equivalent in contemporary western medicine would be a professional who is both a general practitioner and a psychiatrist.⁴¹ As Clarke explains, the role of the healer was to diagnose problems, advise on remedies, and suggest and perform ritualised healing procedures, explore the impact of community social and cultural issues upon the illness, and to reassure their patients that they could be cured.

Howitt explained that Aboriginal doctors did not exercise their powers gratis:

Presents were given them by people who had benefited by their art, and also by people who feared lest they should suffer from it. They received presents of weapons, rugs, implements – in fact, of all those things which are of value to the

36 Frederick J. Meyrick: *Life in the Bush*, p. 133. Fels: 'I Succeeded Once', p. 185, considers the doctor referred to is Wongoro, aka 'Old Doctor', another Boonwurrung wirrirrap.

37 George Gordon McCrae: *The early settlement of the eastern shores of Port Phillip Bay*, pp. 22 f.

38 'Native Doctor' William Blandowski, *Australia Terra Cognita*, W. v. Blandowski, Melbourne. State Library of New South Wales, Call No. PXE 864; IE No. IE1033358.

39 Adolphus P. Elkin: *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*, p. 10.

40 See Daniel Suggit: *A Clever People*, p. 8.

41 See Philip A. Clarke: *Aboriginal healing practices and Australian bush medicine*, p. 9.

aborigines, not forgetting a share of the game caught. Especially did they reap a harvest at the great gatherings.⁴²

In terms of the making of medicine men, Howitt noted that the Wurundjerri (Woiwurrung) "believed that their medicine-men became such by being carried by the ghosts through a hole in the sky to Bunjil, from whom they received their magical powers".⁴³ Howitt observed that the "class of blackfellow doctors was almost extinct in the tribes of which I had a personal knowledge. [...] In those tribes with which I had friendly relations, the medicine-men were of the second generation, that is, it was their predecessors who had practised their arts in the wild state of the tribe. [...] The Wirrarap of the Wurundjeri [...] disappeared about the time of the early gold-diggings in Victoria".⁴⁴

Dawson has noted that in south western Victoria, in the early 1840s, Tuurap Warneen, the clan head of the Kulurr-gundidj, the Djabwurrung clan that belonged to 'Kulurr' (Mt Rouse), was a "doctor of great celebrity in the Western District".⁴⁵ So celebrated was he for his supernatural powers, and for the cure of diseases, that people of various tribes came from great distances to consult him. He could speak many dialects. At meetings he was distinguished from others by having his face painted red, with white streaks under the eyes, and his brow-band adorned with the quill feather of the turkey bustard, or with the crest of a white cockatoo.

As well as being famed as a bard, G. H. Haydon, in his publication 'Five Years' Experience in Australia Felix', mentioned that Kurrburra was the only person now alive amongst the Boonwurrung, who had killed a fearsome creature, similar to the orangutan, that lived in the mountain ranges at the back of Western Port Bay.⁴⁶

An account of this animal was given me by Worronge-tolon, a native of the Woorrong tribe, in nearly the following words:—"He is as big as a man and shaped like him in every respect, and is covered with stiff bristly hair, excepting about the face, which is like an old man's full of wrinkles; he has long toes and fingers, and piles up stones to protect him from the wind or rain, and usually walks about with a stick, and climbs trees with great facility; the whole of his body is hard and sinewy, like wood to the touch". Worrongy also told me "that many years since, some of these creatures attacked a camp of natives in the mountains and carried away some women and children, since which period they have had a great dread of moving about there after sunset. The only person now alive who killed one, he informed me, was Carbora, the great doctor, who had succeeded in striking one in the eye with his tomahawk. On no other part of his body was he able to make the least impression". All this might be very probable when it is considered that, in the time before the white people came, their golboranarook, or stone tomahawk, was not by any means a sharp weapon.⁴⁷

In a review of Haydon's publication, 'The Port Phillip Patriot and Morning Advertiser' mentioned his reference to killing native bears called 'Carbora' during an expedition through Western Port, and added that Carbora was "the name also

42 Alfred W. Howitt: *On Australian Medicine Men*, p. 47.

43 Alfred W. Howitt: *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, p. 405.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 412.

45 James Dawson: *Australian Aborigines*, p. 58.

46 See George Henry Haydon: *Five Years' Experience in Australia Felix*, p. 66.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 65 f.; *Geelong Advertiser and Squatters' Advocate*, 16 July 1847, p. 1.

given to a native doctor".⁴⁸ The origin of Kurrburra's name is worthy of more consideration.

The Origin of Kurrburra's name

Kurrburra, the Bard, was named after the Boonwurrung word for the koala, 'kurrburra'. Indigenous people were often named after animals, and examples are easily found: Beruke, aka Gellibrand, a member of the Gunung-willam clan of the Woiwurrung, was named after the kangaroo rat, 'baruk'.⁴⁹ Robinson explained that at his birth a kangaroo rat ran past and so he was named.⁵⁰ William Barak, the 'ngurungaeta' of the Wurundjeri-willam clan of the Woiwurrung, was named after a small white grub found in a gum tree, 'bearuk';⁵¹ Burrenun, aka Mr Dredge, was named after 'Burrunan', a large fish of the porpoise kind.⁵²

There are two traditions as to how Kurrburra obtained his name. The first tradition, sourced in the 1840s, is that Kurrburra's parents gave him this name at his birth after a 'kurrburra' (koala) in a nearby tree made a noise. Thomas noted that the koala explained to Kurrburra's parents that their son "may always consult me".

When blacks dream of bears it is to warn them of pending danger. One Kurboro named after a bear was always consulted, he was so named because a bear made a noise up a tree under which he was born the father pretended that the Bear said the boy born under me may always consult me. Bears generally by the blacks are regarded & even consulted occasionally.⁵³

Kur-bo-roo, a well-known Western Port black, and held in high esteem as a sorcerer, a dreamer, and diviner, was named 'The Bear', under the following circumstances. Kur-bo-roo was born at the foot of a tree, and during his mother's trouble a bear in the tree growled and grunted until Kur-bo-roo was born, when he ceased his noise. By this, it was said, the bear intended to show that the male child born at the foot of the tree should have the privilege of consulting the bears, and the child was called Kur-bo-roo. Kur-bo-roo attained to some excellence in his profession, and was regarded by all as a very wise man and doctor.⁵⁴

Kurrburra's story is connected to the Boonwurrung belief that 'kurrburras' (koalas) are privileged and revered animals, and when people are in difficulty, they will seek advice from 'kurrburras'.⁵⁵ William Thomas experienced this first hand in November 1841 when in the company of Wougill (aka Lively), the man Meyrick had witnessed being cured by a wirrirrap at Coolart in 1840 (see above). Thomas and Wougill were looking for tracks left by the four Tasmanian Aboriginal people who had been involved in a shooting at Western Port Bay. They had

48 The Port Phillip Patriot and Morning Advertiser, 15 May 1847; also see Geelong Advertiser and Squatters' Advocate, 16 July 1847, p. 1.

49 See Barry John Blake: Kulin Vocabulary List.

50 See Robinson Jnl 15.10.1840 qtd. in Ian D. Clark: Journal of George Augustus Robinson.

51 See Alfred W. Howitt: Papers; Barry John Blake: Kulin Vocabulary List.

52 See Thomas qtd. in Fels: 'I Succeeded Once', p. 122; Blake: Kulin Vocabulary List.

53 William Thomas undated 'writing' for Mr Duffy qtd. in William Thomas: Papers.

54 William Thomas qtd. in Robert Brough Smyth: The Aborigines of Victoria, Vol. 1, pp. 447 f.

55 Boonwurrung, and other Victorian Indigenous groups' stories of kurrburra will be the subject of a separate paper.

travelled less than a kilometre when Wougill abruptly stopped. Thomas noted the following account in his diary. "Lively stop'd short, & says do you hear, I said me hear Bear or something, he stop'd some minutes & said no stooped [stupid] that fellow, he tells me no you go that way, come over here". Thomas attempted to "laugh him out of his superstitious notions", but it had no effect. "Lively said that Kurboro never told a lie". Thomas realised he needed Wougill's services, so he said to Wougill "well go where Kurboro tells you". Wougill took him back a distance where the koala was still grunting, and "not above a mile further we again came upon very fresh tracks" of the four people they were tracking. Thomas noted "I cannot state but I felt my surprise while he explained now you see no lie tell it Kurborra".⁵⁶

Thomas also noted that dreaming of koalas was a sad omen, and recounted an incident at Narre Narre Warren, when Kurrburra dreamt he was surrounded by "bears":

When a black man dreams of bears, it is a sad omen. All the people are afraid when any one dreams of bears. One time, when there were about two hundred blacks at Nerre Nerre Warreen (on the Yarra) [sic], including about eighteen children attending the school, Kur-bo-roo had a dream. He dreamt that he was surrounded by bears. He awoke in a great fright about one o'clock in the morning, and at once aroused the whole encampment. Fires were suddenly set ablaze. The young blacks climbed the trees, cut down boughs, and fed the fires. The men, women, and children rushed hither and thither, displaying the greatest terror. I reasoned with them, sought to soothe them, endeavoured to control them; but all my efforts were useless. They fled from the spot where they had so long lived in comfort. By eight o'clock in the morning the forest was a solitude - not a soul remained; and all because of a dream of Kur-bo-roo.⁵⁷

The song of Kurrburra

The second tradition of Kurrburra's naming was provided by the Woiwurrung 'wirrirrap' William Barak in the early 1880s. In conversations with Alfred W. Howitt, Barak told Howitt that Kurrburra was given this name because he once killed a 'bear' and its 'murup' (spirit) went after him, and taught him a 'gunyuru' (song). Howitt in a general discussion of songs and song making, refers to examples of the 'inspired song', a class of song, and also of the belief of the composer, that he was inspired by something more than mortal when composing it.⁵⁸ This observation relates to Kurrburra's song, in that Kurrburra was given the song by the spirit of a 'kurrburra' that he had killed. Strehlow, in a study of Australian Aboriginal songs, noted that "old Australian songs" were typically concerned with magic, religion, ritual events and sacred festivals, and included "charms against sickness; war songs, poems concerning the exploits of supernatural

56 Marguerita Stephens: *The Journal of William Thomas*, Vol 1, p. 404.

57 William Thomas qtd. in Robert Brough Smyth: *The Aborigines of Victoria*, pp. 447 f. The notation (on the Yarra) possibly added by Smyth would seem to be incorrect. This reference has caused some confusion and has often been taken to refer to Nerre Nerre Minnum (South Melbourne), but the fact that Thomas refers to a school, is clear indication that it is concerned with the protectorate station at Narre Narre Warren.

58 See Alfred W. Howitt: *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, p. 418.

beings; charms to control wind, sun, and rain; love charms; and songs of the homeland'.⁵⁹ The songs were regarded as having been composed by supernatural beings and were regarded as sacred and only fully-initiated men were allowed to sing them.

In conversations with William Barak, Howitt learned more about Kurrburra and his song, and revealed that Kurrburra had the gift of extrasensory perception and precognition:

As an instance he told the following: -"The Mūrūp give the Coroboree songs to the Wiriraps. A man called Kūrbūrū who lived at Dandenong used to be able to tell the Kūlin when the Berbira were coming after them to catch them.⁶⁰ This man was a Būnjil (Thara) his own name was Kūrbūrū (native bear) and he got it because when once he killed a native bear its mūrūp went with him. After that it taught him a "gūnyūrū".⁶¹

Howitt discussed Aboriginal songs and songmakers in an 1887 journal article entitled 'Notes on songs and Songmakers of some Australian Tribes':

In the tribes with which I have acquaintance I find it a common belief that the songs, using the word its widest meaning, as including all kinds of aboriginal poetry, are obtained by bards from the spirits of the deceased, usually their relatives, during sleep in dreams.⁶²

One must be struck by the existence in an Australian tribe of a family of bards, the prototypes of the "sacred singers" of olden times. The song is a good instance of this class of compositions, and also a good example of the belief held by these "sacred singers" that they were inspired by something more than mortal when composing them.⁶³

As connected with magic, or rather with the supernatural, the following song may serve as an example. It brings into view a curious belief in some connection supernaturally between beasts and man and which is found in so many Australian beliefs and tales.⁶⁴ It was composed and sung by a bard named "Kurburu" who lived many years ago in the early days of the settlement of the country by the whites, near where the town of Berwick now stands, in the Western Port District. He was supposed to have killed a "native bear" and being possessed of its spirit ("murup") thenceforth chaunted its song.⁶⁵

| | | | | | |
|----------|-----------|-------------|-----------------|---------|---------|
| Enagurea | nung | ngalourma | barein | gurukba | murnein |
| There | now | cut-a-cross | track | blood | ? |
| burunbai | nganungba | lilira | muringa | | |
| hurt | myself | chipped | tomahawk (with) | | |

Kurburu's song

The singer, Berak, gave me the following free translation, "You cut across my track, you spilled my blood, and broke your tomahawk on me".

At Howitt's request, musical transcriptions were made of three songs ('Kurburu's song, Wenber's song and Corroborree Song') and notated by the organist, composer and scholar, Reverend Dr George William Torrance.⁶⁶ Torrance interviewed

59 Theodore G. H. Strehlow: 'Australian Aboriginal Songs', p. 40.

60 Alfred W. Howitt: Papers, p. 26.

61 Ibid., p. 27.

62 Alfred W. Howitt: Notes on songs and Songmakers of some Australian Tribes, p. 330.

63 Ibid., p. 330.

64 Ibid., p. 332.

65 Ibid., p. 333.

66 See Aline M. Scott-Maxwell: Re-sounding Coranderrk, pp. 32-47.

William Barak, who sang each song, and then made a brief description of them.⁶⁷ Howitt published Torrance's transcription of Kurrburra's song (see Fig. 2) in his 1904 ethnography:⁶⁸

Kurburu's song serves as an example of those which are connected with the supernatural, and it brings into view a curious belief, which is found in so many Australian legends and tales, of a supernatural relation of men and beasts. It was composed and sung by a bard called Kurburu, who lived during the early settlement of the country by the whites near where the town of Berwick now stands. He was supposed to have killed a "native bear," and being possessed by its Murup or spirit, thenceforth sang its song.⁶⁹

Sounded as if in the key of B minor.

Tempo moderato. M ♩ = 100.

mf

ē - - na gur - é - a nung ngal - ūr - ma bá - reng

rit. > *tempo.* ^ ^

gūr - - uk ba mirnín mirnín nge būrun bāngan bōdha¹

> ^ ^ ^ ^

e - lē - re mūr - ingá: ē yam-yam mūdhan gūru bai wirge ngū-rak.

"The above was repeated several times, without break or pause, omitting the 'intonation' at each repetition, and ending abruptly at the double bar.

Figure 2: Kurburu's Song.

Henry Tate was another who assessed the songs recorded by Howitt and transcribed by Torrance. He noted that "little is actually recorded in musical notation of the remarkable and characteristic sound fantasies that once rang throughout the length and breadth of Australia that the scattered fragments which have been preserved gather a constantly increasing musical interest and value as time goes on in Dr. Alfred W. Howitt's 'Native Tribes of Southern Australia' three dirge-like songs recorded by Dr. Torrance possess considerable rhythmic interest".⁷⁰

Another was composed by Kurburu, a native minstrel who lived where the town of Berwick now stands. It was generally believed by the native composers that they were inspired by some mystic power, something "that rushes down into the breast of the singer". This belief is exhibited in Kurburu's song. Kurburu had killed a native bear and its Murup or spirit entered his breast and made him sing [...].⁷¹

67 See George William Torrance: *Music of the Australian Aborigines*, pp. 335 f.

68 See Alfred W. Howitt: *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, p. 420.

69 *Ibid.*, pp. 421 f.

70 *The Argus*, 30 June 1923, p. 7 (Henry Tate: *Aboriginal Music*).

71 *Ibid.*

Kurrburra's engagement with the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate

During the period from 1839 to 1844, Kurrburra was closely associated with the endeavours of assistant protector William Thomas. Thomas was heavily dependent on the senior Aboriginal men of his district whose knowledge of English was superior to his knowledge of local Kulin dialects.⁷² These men, such as Kurrburra, were cultural intermediaries or 'go-betweens' whose knowledges of geography, natural history and ethnography were translated into the process of settler colonialism.⁷³

Kurrburra was resident at Thomas's protectorate stations at Tubberubbabel, on the Mornington Peninsula in 1840, and at Narre Narre Warren in 1840. In terms of other localities he is known to have frequented, they include the Boonwurrung encampment on the south banks of the Yarra River, at Melbourne (1840, 1844), Arthurs Seat (1840), Tooradin (1840), Dandenong (1840), Kornwarra (Western Port) (1840), Toolum (Balnarring) (1840); Kurk Billessee (near Tooradin) (1840), and Kullurk (Coolart) (1849). Very little is known of Kurrburra between 1845 and his death in February 1849 at Kullurk.

Kurrburra is first named in Thomas's journal in an August 1839 list of Aboriginal people determined to go from Melbourne to Thomas's new headquarters at Arthurs Seat.⁷⁴ From this list we learn that Kurrburra was aged 42, and had two wives Kurundum (Quondom) aged 20, and Bowyeup, aged 16, and two children, details unknown.

On 12 March 1840, at 'Toorodun', Thomas noted that "a trifling altercation took place between Kurboro and another respecting" an Aboriginal woman, but on Thomas's interfering, Kurrburra desisted and said he was "no more sulky" [that is, angry].⁷⁵ Six days later, encamped at Dandenong, Thomas observed "Kurbur-rer a little sulky but pacified him".⁷⁶ The following month, Kurrburra was one of many sick Aboriginal people in Melbourne who were attended to by Thomas.⁷⁷

On 7 June 1840, Kurrburra was at Thomas's Tubberubbabel station at Arthurs Seat.⁷⁸ On 5 July 1840 Old Tuart (aka Old Murray) persuaded Kurrburra and his family to leave the station, but Thomas overtook them and they returned to Tubberubbabel with him.⁷⁹ Thomas knew that the success of his district's protectorate stations was dependent upon his ability to ensure that leading Boonwurrung and Woiwurrung elders such as clan-heads and wirrirraps, and their families, spent as much time as possible at the stations. This was one of his motivations in cultivating relationships with community leaders, and partly explains his distress when they left the stations and in this instance his pursuit of Kurrburra and

72 See Rachel Standfield: *Protection, Settler Politics and Indigenous Politics in the work of William Thomas*, p. 5.

73 See Felix Driver: *Intermediaries and the archive of exploration*, p. 16.

74 See Marguerita Stephens: *The Journal of William Thomas*, p. 40.

75 Thomas Jnl, 12 March 1840, qtd. in Marguerita Stephens: *The Journal of William Thomas*.

76 Thomas Jnl, 18 March 1840, qtd. in *ibid.*

77 See Thomas Jnl, 12 April 1840, qtd. in *ibid.*

78 See Robinson Jnl, 7 June 1840, qtd. in Ian D. Clark: *The Journals of George Augustus Robinson*.

79 See Thomas Jnl, 5 July 1840, qtd. in Marguerita Stephens: *The Journal of William Thomas*.

encouragement to return to the protectorate station. This instance also serves to highlight the colonial practice of 'strategic intimacy' whereby a colonial agent (Thomas), builds a working relationship with a local elite and cross-cultural broker (Kurrburra), to gain access to local knowledge, extend their reach, and thus improve their governance.⁸⁰

In August 1840, Kurrburra speared one of his wives and was most remorseful afterwards. Her identity is not revealed. Thomas gave the following account of the dispute: "During my absence, Kurboro had speared his lubra [wife] & the encampment had been in a cabal, he came to me [ere?] I knew it & told me the tale said she no fetch me water & I big one sulky [angry], plenty sorry me, plenty cry, big one sulky, Marminarta, knowing that such is their custom, I reprov'd him, went to his lubra [wife] & dressed the wound they both seemed sorry".⁸¹

Thomas abandoned his protectorate station at Arthurs Seat in September 1840, and established a new station at Narre Narre Warren that same month. Over the next 18 months Kurrburra visited Narre Narre Warren on several occasions, coming and going as he pleased. For example, on 25 November 1840 he left the station with his two wives and others to go to Kornwarra, Toolum, and Kirkbillessee to catch eels, promising to return after five nights.⁸² Kurrburra returned on 6 December 1840, and left after five days. Thomas noted that he left the station without saying good-bye to him.⁸³

Thomas had established a ritual at the station where he greeted the residents in the mornings and bid them good night in the evenings, so the fact that Thomas mentioned Kurrburra's departing without bidding him farewell, is a clear indication that Thomas felt slighted. It also reveals the limitations of Thomas's influence in his role as protector.

On 31 March 1841, there was a major brouhaha at the Narre Narre Warren station involving Kurrburra's wife Kurundum who struck Mrs Wilson, the station manager's wife, because she would not give her any water, on the grounds that she could not spare any. Kurundum snatched some water and threw it into Mrs Wilson's face, and then struck her with her digging stick. William Thomas broke and burned Kurundum's stick in front of her as a punishment and cautioned that he would not suffer any insult to Europeans on the protectorate station. Kurrburra then punished his wife by spearing her in the arm. Thomas recorded "I was much displeas'd with Kurboro who was also in tears. I showed great sorrow & spirted water from my mouth for some time on the wound, pretended to mourn".⁸⁴ Kurrburra and his two wives returned to Narre Narre Warren on 7 April 1841,⁸⁵ and left on 30 April 1841.⁸⁶ On 7 June 1841, Jemmy, Mr Murray's son, and a nephew of Kurrburra, was stabbed and later died near Thomas Ruffy's Cranbourne Inn.

80 See Tony Ballantyne: *Strategic Intimacies*, p. 11.

81 Thomas Jnl, 6 August 1840, qtd. in Marguerita Stephens: *The Journal of William Thomas*.

82 See Thomas Jnl, 25 November 1840, qtd. in *ibid*.

83 See Thomas Jnl, 11 December 1840, qtd. in *ibid*.

84 Thomas Jnl, 31 March 1841, qtd. in *ibid*.

85 See Thomas Jnl, 7 April 1841, qtd. in *ibid*.

86 See Thomas Jnl, 30 April 1841, qtd. in *ibid*.

Cannon suggests the murderer was Kurrburra, although Thomas was told it was a Boonwurrung man named Yal Yal.⁸⁷

In one of Thomas's notebooks there is a series of sketch maps of the mountains around Yering station in the upper Yarra district, drawn by William Thomas from information he gleaned from Kurrburra.⁸⁸ In the sketch maps there is a series of 53 mountain peaks and under each is annotation that provides the name of the peak and sometimes the name of the leading man of the mob or patriline associated with the peak, whether or not the associated mob is defunct ("all gone dead"), and other locative information. Thomas annotated the sketch maps "There can be no doubt from these names & ranges taken from an old wandering Black named Kurrburra (alias Ruffy) how particular the Blacks are of giving names to every portion of country [...]" The existence of these sketch maps is an important part of Kurrburra's legacy, especially as an interpreter of Aboriginal cultural heritage to Thomas, who assiduously recorded it.

Exactly when the sketch maps were produced is contested – Wesson suggests they date from 1842;⁸⁹ Stephens from 1844 or 1845.⁹⁰ Clark's analysis, working on the assumption that the sketches were made at Rylie's station, has confirmed that Thomas visited the district on at least four occasions: late August 1840, March 1841, July 1841, and March 1845.⁹¹ All things considered; Clark believes the July 1841 date is the most probable. Kurrburra identified four peaks as "his country": Mown-nabil, Narn, Poromekerner and Noronedo. With regard to Mown-nabil, Thomas's annotation was "Very large high mount, Kurborra's country". Regarding Narn, Thomas wrote "Very high, Kurborra's country". Smyth noted that "there is a mountain named Narn in a mountain range north-east of Western Port which is inhabited by a strange animal named Wil-won-der-er, with a stone-like human form".⁹² This strange animal may be the same animal that Haydon referred to in 1846. Regarding Poromekerner, Thomas wrote: "Very high. Kurborra's coun[try]", and finally, Noronedo: "Kurborra country Wagabil".

On 17 February 1842, Thomas recorded that Kurrburra was involved in a "cruel punishment and fight" at Narre Narre Warren when he "seriously maltreated" his sister, "for marrying herself" without his consent.⁹³ Kurrburra, his family, and others left the station on 28 February 1842 for Western Port Bay.⁹⁴

Thomas abandoned the Narre Narre Warren site in March 1842 and based himself at the confluence of the Merri Creek and Yarra River, from where he visited Aboriginal camps in Melbourne and the surrounding districts. Almost a year passes before Thomas next mentions Kurrburra in his journal, when on 11 February 1843, he wrote "Kurborro informs me that his sister's child is dead".⁹⁵

87 See Michael Cannon: *Black Land, White Land*, p. 16.

88 See William Thomas Notebook qtd. in Robert Brough Smyth: *Papers*.

89 See Sue C. Wesson: *Aboriginal flora and fauna names of Victoria*.

90 See Marguerita Stephens: *White without soap*, p. 66.

91 Ian D. Clark: *The Tara-Waragal and the Governor's Levee in Melbourne*.

92 Robert Brough Smyth: *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, p. 455.

93 Thomas Jnl, 17 February 1842, qtd. in Marguerita Stephens: *The Journal of William Thomas*.

94 See Thomas Jnl, 28 February 1842, qtd. in *ibid.*

95 Thomas Jnl, 11 February 1843, qtd. in *ibid.*

The next we learn of Kurrburra is in November 1844, when he arrives in Melbourne and stays at Thomas's quarters at the Merri Creek.⁹⁶ In late November, Kurrburra and his wife were staying with the Boonwurrung at their usual encampment on the south side of the Yarra River, near the Princes Bridge. What had become of Bowyeup is not known. Thomas administered medicine to the ill Kurrburra on 29 November,⁹⁷ and again on 3 December, when Thomas gave him a "trifle to get bread & sugar".⁹⁸ Six days later, Thomas returned to the Yarra encampment and put a poultice on Kurrburra's hand.⁹⁹ Kurrburra and his wife Kurundum are listed in an 1846 census of Boonwurrung family connections.¹⁰⁰

Thomas's final journal entry concerning Kurrburra is dated 27 February 1849, when working at Robinson's office in Melbourne, he heard news from a settler named Rutherford, that Kurrburra had died at Kulluk.¹⁰¹ Kulluk is Coolart, at Sandy Point, on the Mornington Peninsula. The circumstances of his death are not known.

Conclusion

This paper has resurrected from the colonial archive a fragmentary but nevertheless fascinating biography of Kurrburra, a Boonwurrung 'wirrirrap' and bard, who lived in the first half of the nineteenth century. He is at times an elusive figure as his engagement with colonial society was only partial, however, through piecing together the scattered information that survives in colonial sources, we have shown that Kurrburra, one of several famed 'wirrirrap' in colonial Melbourne, assumed a special place in the colonial history of the Boonwurrung people and the wider Kulin confederacy. Research of this kind is an example of bringing 'hidden histories' to the surface, and highlighting and celebrating 'forgotten heroes' in settler colonialism. Using selected materials from Aboriginal protectorate records and the settler colonial archive we have sought to bring to life the intermediary Kurrburra. Kurrburra's special talents ensured that in the eyes of William Thomas and others, he became a 'character' or minor celebrity in the literature of settler colonialism.

Kurrburra shared his name with that of the Boonwurrung name for the koala, and possessed of their 'murup' (spirit), he was renowned for his ability to receive the counsel of kurrburras, and had the gift of extrasensory perception and precognition. The spirit of a kurrburra had taught him a 'gunyuru' (song), that was relayed to Alfred W. Howitt by William Barak in the early 1880s. Howitt had Kurrburra's song described and transcribed by composer G. W. Torrance. Other than his healing and counselling faculties, Kurrburra was also famed for his heroic slaying of a feared ourangutan-like cryptid that lived in the ranges north

96 See Thomas Jnl, 7 November 1844, qtd. in *ibid.*

97 See Thomas Jnl, 29 November 1844, qtd. in *ibid.*

98 See Thomas Jnl, 3 December 1844, qtd. in *ibid.*

99 See Thomas Jnl, 9 December 1844, qtd. in *ibid.*

100 William Thomas: Papers.

101 Thomas Jnl, 27 February 1849, qtd. in Marguerita Stephens: *The Journal of William Thomas.*

of Western Port. He was one of the last surviving members of the Yawen djirra clan, that had suffered at the hands of internecine conflict between the Boonwurrung and their eastern neighbours the Ganai. During the early years of the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate, he was closely associated with assistant protector William Thomas, who was responsible for the Western Port District. Another exemplar of Kurrburra's role as a cultural intermediary and informant for Thomas, was the detailed map of landscape features in the Yarra Ranges and the identification of Woiwurrung and Boonwurrung patriline associated with these named places.

Kurrburra died in late 1849, though the circumstances of his death are not known. Nevertheless, Kurrburra retains a very important place in the early history of Melbourne and the Aboriginal protectorate of the Port Phillip district.

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