

## JOHN GREEN

I KNOW THAT I COULD MOVE THE ABORIGINES IF I COULD ASSURE THEM IT WAS FOR THEIR GOOD TO DO SO, BECAUSE I COULD SPEAK TO THEM AS MEN AND BROTHERS, AND I KNOW THEY WOULD GO, BUT I WILL NOT TRY; DECIDEDLY NOT.

MoE, Q5127, p. 132.

*John Green was the last witness summoned at the Inquiry. He and his wife Mary had established Coranderrk in 1863 and had lived there for 12 years, working and raising their children alongside the Kulin. Green also served for 14 years as the Board's first Inspector, during which time he was a regular visitor to all six of Victoria's missions and reserves. A man of principle as well as stubborn, Green refused to cooperate in the Board's plans to break up Coranderrk. As a consequence, in 1874 he was pressured into resigning his position as manager, and dismissed from his job as Inspector the following year. Seven years later, the Inquiry finally gave Green the chance to present his own version of the events that had led to his removal from Coranderrk.*

Relatively little is known about the life of the Scottish Presbyterian lay preacher John Green (1830–1908) and his wife Mary Smith Benton Green (1835–1919). Young and energetic, he was 27 years old and she was 22 when they sailed for Victoria the day after their wedding on 24 August 1857. Soon after their arrival, Green commenced work as a ‘bush missionary’ to the Europeans in the goldfields. Without the patronage of a missionary society or the support of government funds, he set up a dwelling and a chapel, and by 1860 was riding out to Yering to hold regular Sunday services for the Woiwurrung families camped there. His Presbyterian morals and Christian message resonated strongly with the Woiwurrung, and Barak became his first convert.<sup>1</sup>

At Yering, Mary gave birth to their first child — the first of 12 — and started a school for the Woiwurrung children. The young Woiwurrung couples were about the same age as the Greens and their children played together. They developed a bond of trust and friendship. In 1861, when the newly established Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interest of the Aborigines employed him as Inspector, Green left his family in the care of Barak and Wonga for weeks at a time during his



**Figure 30.** John and Mary Green on their wedding day in Scotland (1857) the day before they sailed for Australia. They helped establish Coranderrk in 1863 and lived there for 12 years, working and raising their children alongside the Coranderrk families. Source: Museum Victoria (XP2792).

inspection tours.<sup>2</sup> The trust was reciprocated in 1863 when Wonga and Barak placed their peoples' hopes in the Greens by establishing Coranderrk. Wonga and Barak had wanted land where the Kulin could settle down and raise their children, and Green promised that this 'would be their home if they would stay and work.'<sup>3</sup> It was a promise he fought to keep in the years to come.

Although other missions and reserves were founded across Victoria during this time, none was built around the type of rapport that the Kulin and the Greens shared at Coranderrk. Arguably, this collaborative and relatively egalitarian relationship was the key to Coranderrk's success. Of course much of it relied on the willingness of the Kulin to live according to Green's Christian doctrines, and to adopt the 'white man's ways' by settling down and working the land. But their successful collaboration was also the fruit of Green's character and his approach towards Aboriginal people. In this regard the term 'manager' was something of a misnomer, for unlike most other missionaries

and superintendents, Green ‘worked *with* and not *over* Aboriginal people.’<sup>4</sup> He respected and treated the Kulin as ‘free and independent men and women.’<sup>5</sup> Most importantly, Green’s leadership did not depend on coercion: ‘When he spoke and argued he usually relied upon his moral authority as a respected leader, in the traditional manner of the *ngurungaeta* rather than his externally imposed powers as manager.’<sup>6</sup>

The Coranderrk residents valued these qualities in Green and described their relationship with him in terms of friendship and collaboration. ‘Mr Green is very neighbourly’, Thomas Bamfield informed the Inquiry, and ‘Mrs Green was like a mother to all the natives, and was good to the women when they were confined, and she used to look after the sick.’<sup>7</sup>

Green shared credit for Coranderrk’s success not only with the Kulin but also with Mary. As with most other women in the nineteenth century, the work of missionary wives received far less attention than that of their husbands. Yet Mary Green’s involvement at Coranderrk was essential to its success. As well as raising her own large family, she was charged with the care of up to 40 children in the dormitory; she taught in the school and maintained all the station correspondence during her husband’s tours of inspection; she served as a midwife, cared for and administered medicines to the sick, helped the women to make cheese and butter for sale, and more. Mary Green worked as hard as her husband and received far less acknowledgement.

No doubt, John Green’s approach to ‘managing the blacks’ was tinged with contemporary colonial notions of ‘civilisation’ and ‘progress’, and he was not free of the paternalistic attitudes of the times towards Aboriginal people, as some have noted.<sup>8</sup> But he was exceptional for his time in that he did not ascribe to notions of racial or biological difference and superiority between white and black. During his testimony he flatly denied the proposition, commonly ascribed to by most Europeans at this time, that ‘mixing the blood [improves] the intelligence.’<sup>9</sup> His sympathy and respect for Aboriginal traditions and needs was also atypical: he did not attempt to obstruct Aboriginal beliefs and rules that did not directly interfere with Christian practice, such as the segregation of menstruating women, the use of herbal and magical healing, and the speaking of Kulin languages. In fact, Green himself acquired a fair grasp of the Woiwurrung and Taungerong dialects.<sup>10</sup>

Yet the relationship between the Kulin and the Greens was not always an easy one: collaboration presented challenges and difficulties, and demanded compromises and concessions from both sides. Prior to becoming his first convert, Barak tested and questioned Green’s Christian beliefs and teachings — from Sabbath keeping to temperance.<sup>11</sup> In turn, Green challenged Barak’s beliefs and interceded when these conflicted with Christian teachings.<sup>12</sup> Disagreements must have been a regular part of the negotiation process that characterised the early years at Coranderrk. Indeed on one occasion in 1868, Barak and Wonga went so far as to form a deputation to the Board’s offices in Melbourne in order to protest the fact that Green had prevented them from selling the potato crop and managing the profits for themselves.<sup>13</sup> But Green quickly learnt his lesson: by the time the Board Secretary came up to investigate the complaints against him the matter had already been settled internally. Green had complied with the leaders Wonga and Barak who were now ‘satisfied with the arrangements which have been made in regard to the hours of labour, the disposal of

produce, etc.<sup>14</sup> It was the first and last Kulin protest against Green, who from then on recognised the limits of his power.

Even after their removal from Coranderrk in 1874, the Greens maintained their friendship with the Coranderrk residents. They moved onto the plot of land they had purchased adjoining the Coranderrk reserve where they built their home *Goorngalang* (after the Woiwurrung name for the stone quartz native to the Healesville area).<sup>15</sup> The recent loss of their main source of income was not the only challenge for the couple in the ensuing years. Tragically, in January 1876, an epidemic of scarlet fever claimed the lives of their six youngest children in the space of three weeks. But the Greens continued their association with the residents of the station, who came to them ‘almost daily for medicine and advice, sometimes as many as ten and twelve.’<sup>16</sup> Even though the Board had forbidden Green from conducting monthly services at Coranderrk, the Kulin always preferred to attend his Presbyterian sermons — much to the vexation of Reverend Strickland and Captain Page who were both Anglicans. Page thought this was ‘one of the ways of spiting the manager [Strickland]’. But Green’s explanation was that the Kulin felt a closer affinity with him: ‘One said: “Mr Green knows our inside — he speaks inside to us.”’<sup>17</sup>



John Green was examined on 8 December 1881. The opening question, ‘You reside at Healesville?’, was the 5000th to be recorded in the minutes of evidence. What Cameron and the Board had hoped would be a short and discrete inquiry had lasted two and a half months and examined 69 witnesses over the course of ten hearings, generating dozens of articles in the press. Cameron had attempted to restrict the investigations to the present conditions and management of Coranderrk. But the evidence gathered by the Inquiry overwhelmingly suggested that the cause of the trouble stemmed from the Board’s removal of John Green with the intent of closing the station. The *Argus* had also recently published a letter in which Green disputed the Board’s version of events leading to his dismissal. ‘If I am called on by the board of inquiry to explain to them, Green’s letter concluded, ‘I will do so in person.’<sup>18</sup>

Green’s examination was now essential: not so much as to allow him to present his own version of events as to give the Board the opportunity to counter the damaging allegations.

Representing the Board, Captain Page led the cross-examination of the Inquiry’s final witness. He began by contesting Green’s claims that he had never resorted to calling the police in order to manage the Aboriginal residents; but the only evidence Page could produce was a letter written by Mary Green during one of her husband’s absences on a tour of inspection. ‘You cannot be said to be managing the station if you were absent’, Page retorted deprecatingly; but Green was quick to counter: ‘I was not managing the station at all from an official point of view. I got nothing for it.’<sup>19</sup> Cameron was shocked to learn that Green had ‘not only the management of Coranderrk, but [also] the inspection of six stations’, and that his work at Coranderrk was ‘over and above what [he was] engaged to do.’<sup>20</sup>

‘A restrained and patient witness’ Green responded satisfactorily to all criticisms.<sup>21</sup> He gave a detailed account of the confrontation with the Board Secretary, Robert Smyth, who had pressured him into offering his resignation as manager of the station: ‘I was really very sick at the time,’ Green told the Inquiry. ‘I had been very ill with low fever, and had come back from a long tour round the Wimmera district, and had all those letters waiting for me.’ Green revealed that he had subsequently attempted to withdraw his resignation but the Board would not allow him.<sup>22</sup> He went on to explain the nature of the collaborative and egalitarian relationship that formed the basis of his success with the Kulin at Coranderrk, and addressed Page directly when he stated: ‘That is where I consider you have failed with your management when any dispute arose with them.’<sup>23</sup>

Although we know little about Green’s personal character (the whereabouts of his private diary and correspondence, if in existence, remain unknown), his testimony at the Inquiry hints at his stubborn as well as modest and principled nature. The Board’s Vice Chairman had previously described Green as ‘one of the most impracticable men he had ever met’<sup>24</sup> — suggesting that while Green had been diplomatic towards the Kulin, he had been somewhat of a headache for his employers on the Board once they sought to break up Coranderrk. Even when he offered to withdraw his resignation and to resume the management of the station, he did so on the explicit condition that he and the Kulin should be free of the Board’s interference: ‘I would not go back if the inspector could come up and tell me, or any of the blacks, to do anything,’ he explained during the Inquiry.<sup>25</sup>

Diane Barwick described Green as ‘an admirable man but an impossible public servant’; while historian Bain Attwood’s assessment is that Green was ‘a young, idealistic and obstinate man who passionately identified with the plight of the downtrodden.’<sup>26</sup> Perhaps, this persistent struggle against injustice was what the Kulin appreciated most in John Green. Decades later, when Barwick interviewed their descendants in the 1960s she found that Green was still remembered kindly — ‘John Green was a good man, the old ones said.’<sup>27</sup>

*Scene 21: John Green*

- Cameron** [We have one final witness:] Mr John Green — examined.  
*[Green steps up]*
5002. **Cameron** You established the Aboriginal station at Coranderrk?  
**Green** Yes.
5003. [About] nineteen years [ago].  
5004. [I managed Coranderrk for] twelve years.
5000. **Cameron** You [currently] reside at Healesville?  
**Green** Yes. [...]
5077. **Cameron** Do you often see the blacks now?  
**Green** [Yes,] very often.
5078. Sick people come to me almost daily for medicine and advice — sometimes as many as ten and twelve.
5165. **Cameron** Are you aware that they are all favorable to you and your management of the place?  
**Green** Yes. [...]
5037. **Bon** Did you find them good workers?  
5038. You never had any reason to complain?  
**Green** No, never.
5175. **Page** How did you manage when they disobeyed?  
**Green** Reasoned with them [...].
5176. **Page** You would not call in the police?  
**Green** No; never.
5197. **Page** Did you ever have to punish the blacks?  
**Green** No.

5196. I always treated them as free men, and reasoned with them.  
I made [a] law with their own sanction [...] and also fined some
5197. of them for drinking. [But] that was the Aboriginal law, that if any  
got drunk they were fined. They were fined [...] and some of them  
were chastised according to their own law.
5196. If the Aboriginal is put into the question, he will strive to keep his  
own law. *That* is where I consider you have failed [...].
5051. **Cameron** Did you find them truthful as a rule?  
**Green** Very.
5052. **Cameron** And honest?  
**Green** And honest.
5054. **Cameron** Which of the two, the real blacks or the half-castes, [...]  
5055. did you find the best workers?  
**Green** I never found any difference.  
5055. There were some splendid workers, both blacks and half-castes.
5056. **Cameron** Do you consider full blacks are as intelligent as the half-castes?  
**Green** Undoubtedly.
5057. **Cameron** Mixing the blood does not improve the intelligence?  
**Green** No.
5121. **Bon** What led to your giving up the Inspectorship?
5106. **Green** I do not know if you are aware of it, but I never received a penny  
for being at Coranderrk. My engagement with the Government  
was purely Inspector of Aborigines [...]. For the first four years [at  
Coranderrk] I had to pay Harris, [the farm manager,] out of my  
own salary [...].
5107. **Cameron** What was your salary?  
**Green** Three hundred pounds.
5109. **Cameron** [And] you had to pay your own expenses?  
**Green** Pay all my own expenses.

5168. **Bon** [Did your wife, Mrs Green, receive] no salary as matron?
5167. **Green** [...] I asked for something for Mrs Green, [but] they would  
5168. never give her a penny [...] — and she had often the whole  
correspondence to carry on.
5166. **Cameron** Am I to understand that you had not only the management of  
Coranderrk, but [also] the inspection of *six* stations, at three  
hundred pounds a year?
- Green** Yes, decidedly.
5109. I stated I would have to give it up; I could not make ends meet  
[...]. The first seed potatoes [...] and the first plough [...] I bought  
[...] out of my own money. [...] [But we] went on clearing ground  
until we had about 130 acres cleared and I put in green crops.  
5040. The first year I cut with the Aborigines 26 000 hops poles; the  
second year 16 000, also with the Aborigines. [In 1874, we picked  
nearly eight tons].
5158. **Cameron** With only the blacks working?
- Green** Only the blacks working.
5159. [And those hops earned over one thousand pounds].
5160. That was the first wages I ever paid to the Aborigines. [...] And I  
might say I had to write to the Board several times for the money  
5070. [...] stating that I wanted to have this money as I had promised the  
Aborigines that they should have good houses erected for them,  
and also to fence in the station with the money [earned] from the  
sale of the hops.
5007. **Cameron** Was [Coranderrk] ever all fenced in?  
5008. Have you ever applied to the Government for means to fence it in?
- Green** To the Central Board — yes.
5071. **Bon** What was their reply?
- Green** No reply.
5009. [They never supplied the sufficient money.]
5106. **Cameron** [Why did you resign from your position at Coranderrk?] Will you  
give [us] your own version of it now?



5127. **Green** I may state that on one occasion Mr [Robert] Smyth [— then the Board Secretary —] came to Coranderrk, and told me that there were influences being brought to bear upon the Board and the Government to have the Aborigines removed from Coranderrk [...] and he believed that they would be well inclined to give way. But, he said, 'If we give up the station we will be handsomely paid for our improvements [...]. He [also] said: 'Of course we know we cannot move them without you. You know you can easily move them.'
- I stood and listened to him. I said, 'Mr Smyth, I know that I could move the Aborigines if I could assure them it was for their good to do so, because I could speak to them as men and brothers and I know they would go, but I will not try — decidedly not.'
5123. **Bon** You were to be used as a sort of decoy?
- Green** I understood so. I knew afterwards it was a fact.
5127. **Bon** [And] that led you to retire from the whole thing?
5122. **Green** When I heard it was the object of the Board to move the Aborigines from Coranderrk, I declined to go.
5209. I think it would be most cruel to move them, because there is no doubt that many of the Aborigines who came there as children have been taught that it would be their home if they would stay and work. I was sure no Government would seek to take away that piece of ground if they would do their work. [...]
- I stated long ago that, if medical men could show to me from data that they would be more healthy elsewhere, I would be able to induce the Aborigines to go to that locality; but, seeing there was no data that I could work upon conscientiously with the Aborigines, I could not move in it.
5122. So I was dismissed because I would be no party to moving the Aborigines from Coranderrk.
5208. **Cameron** Have you in any way incited the blacks to move on your behalf?
- Green** Decidedly not.
5209. **Page** At no time?

**Green** At no time.

I think [...] it would be cruel on the part of the Board to move the Aborigines from Coranderrk, and that is why I refused to be a party to it.

*[The witness withdraws]*

## ANNOTATIONS

**John Green** testified on 8 December 1881 in Melbourne (*MoE*, pp. 127–37). ‘We have one final witness’ added for emphasis.

**Q5003–4.** (Green). Elided Q5003: ‘How long ago? — Nineteen years about.’ And Q5004: ‘How long were you managing Coranderrk? — Twelve years.’

**Q5037.** (Bon). Green’s answer is ‘Yes.’

**Q5175.** (Green). Omitted text: ‘shamed them out of it.’

**Q5196.** (Green). This is a condensed version of Green’s explanation in *MoE*, Q5196–7, pp. 135–6.

**Q5106.** (Green). Omitted text 1: ‘purely Inspector of Aborigines, and I undertook that office with the understanding that I would be allowed to collect children that I found in my travellings and make a home for them.’ Omitted text 2: ‘out of my own salary to stop with Mrs Green.’

**Q5168.** (Bon). Source text reads: ‘She received no salary as matron?’ Altered for clarity.

**Q5167.** (Green). Omitted text: ‘I may also state that...’

**Q5168.** (Green). Omitted text: ‘Never a penny.’

**Q5109.** (Green). This is a highly condensed version of Green’s lengthy account. For the full version, see *MoE*, p. 130.

**Q5040.** (Green). The last statement is inferred from Q5156: ‘Do you remember the amount of hops you produced in 1874? — Over 15,000 lbs.’ And Q5157: ‘Eight tons? — Not quite, but very nearly.’ (The year 1874 was the last that Green was at Coranderrk).

**Q5159.** (Green). Inferred from the question: ‘Do you remember what those hops realised in 1874? — About £1,100.’

**Q5160.** Omitted text: ‘Do you know what the expense was? — Just about £92 for picking, and I might say...’

**Q5070.** Omitted text: ‘and when the hops were sold I wrote to the Board...’

**Q5009.** (Green). Inferred from the question: ‘They never supplied you with sufficient money to do it? — No.’

**Q5106.** (Cameron). Source text reads: ‘With reference to that statement that appeared in the paper, will you give your own version of it now — why you left Coranderrk?’ (For Green’s direct answer see Q5106 in the script). The ‘statement’ referred to is the letter written by Green to the *Argus* on 30 November 1881, in which he had detailed the circumstances of his dismissal.

**Q5127.** (Green). Omitted text 1: ‘— that would be in 1868 or thereabouts.’ Omitted text 2: ‘you will get a handsome price for your house here; and we will get a good price for all our improvements, and will be able to establish good buildings for the aborigines; it is thought to send them to Western Port.’