

THOMAS BAMFIELD (*BIRDARAK*)

WHO GOT UP THAT DEPUTATION THAT WAITED ON
THE CHIEF SECRETARY?
– WE GOT IT UP OURSELVES.

MoE, Q347, p. 9.

Thomas Bamfield was a Taungerong clan head and a leading figure in the Coranderrk struggle. As Barak's chief aide, he participated in numerous deputations and petitions, organised strikes and acted as a spokesman for the Coranderrk community as a whole. His prominence made him a target for reprisals from the Board, but a lifelong friendship with Anne Bon ensured that Bamfield also had the backing of powerful allies. The first Aboriginal witness to speak at the Inquiry, Bamfield delivered a powerful testimony expressing the Kulin's wish to regain control of Coranderrk.

Thomas Bamfield (*Birdarak* c.1844–93), also known by the surnames Mansfield and Mickie/Michie, was born in Benalla and later in life succeeded his father Baalwick as clan head of the Yeerun-illam-balluk, one of the Taungerong clans.¹ Shortly after Bamfield's birth, Baalwick led the survivors of this clan to Anne Bon's station at Wappan where they were welcomed to camp around the homestead — and where, according to Bon, 'the Chiefess of the tribe' entrusted the young Bamfield to her care.² While most of his clan subsequently joined the ill-fated Acheron reserve (see Chapter 1, p. 7), Bamfield continued to visit Wappan each year during the shearing season, where Bon paid Aboriginal workers directly and at the same rate as white shearers, despite complaints from the Board that it should receive their wages. Later in life, when Bamfield was in need, he sought the help of the person to whom he referred during the Inquiry as 'my friend, Mrs Bon.'³ In fact, their lifelong friendship was crucial in shaping events during the troubled years at Coranderrk.

One of the founding pioneers of Coranderrk, Bamfield was a passionate advocate for 'the welfare of the station', to which he brought many of the survivors of his clan.⁴ He held a unique position at Coranderrk given that he played two key roles: as Barak's chief aide and also as a Taungerong clan head. These dual roles meant that he became heavily involved in disputes against the Board as well as factional disputes between clans.⁵ Board officials interpreted Bamfield's prominence in these disputes as evidence of his supposed hostility, and consequently labelled him 'a very troublesome man', 'the ringleader of the discontented blacks' and 'the moving spirit of all the mischief which



Figure 19. Thomas Bamfield was a Taungerong clan head, Barak's right-hand man and a passionate advocate for Kulin land rights at Coranderrk until the end of his life. Photo: Charles Walter (c.1866). Source: State Library of Victoria (H91.1.30).

occurred at Coranderrk.⁶ These claims were used not only to justify attempts to evict Bamfield from the station, but also to portray the discontent at Coranderrk as being the product of an lone agitator, instead of the collective will of a whole community. Rather than addressing Bamfield by his Aboriginal or European names, Board officials nicknamed him 'Punch' (a reference to his generous girth) in an attempt to demean and infantilise this senior member of the Kulin community.⁷

While vilified and harangued by his opponents, Bamfield also had the backing of influential white allies who were prepared to publicly defend him. For example, six months after the Inquiry, Bamfield was sentenced to prison for 30 days with hard labour after Reverend Strickland and Captain Page had him summoned to court for being 'drunk and disorderly' at the Easter races.⁸ (The irony was not lost on Bamfield, who reminded Strickland about his own drinking habits). Angered by Bamfield's arrest, the Kulin despatched a delegation to seek help from Mrs Bon. She immediately wrote a letter to the Chief Secretary, accompanied by a petition, which she had signed by seven prominent Members of Parliament from both Houses, including Alfred Deakin, which ultimately led to Chief Secretary Berry (voted back in office 1883–86) ordering Bamfield's release from prison after three days.⁹

Bon's intervention deeply embarrassed the Board and the three senior magistrates who had sentenced Bamfield to prison, and provoked a series of heated articles in the newspapers as well as a major parliamentary debate, during which Kulin ally and radical politician John Dow defended Bamfield by asserting that he 'had been represented as a mischief-making black — mischief making because he would not hold his tongue under oppression.'¹⁰

Bamfield was not silenced: within a year he was the subject of new reprisals as Page attempted to have him forcibly removed to the Lake Tyers reserve in east Gippsland. The event triggered yet another deputation as 21 men walked into Melbourne to protest Bamfield's eviction from the station. During their interview with the Chief Secretary, Yorta Yorta man Alfred Morgan politely asked for Bamfield to be allowed to return to Coranderrk, explaining that the residents of the station had their own code of law for deciding whether to evict individuals from the station. 'If he does anything wrong,' Morgan assured Berry, 'we will assist to put him off the station.'¹¹ To Page's chagrin, the deputation once again succeeded in securing the Chief Secretary's intercession. And again, when the Chief Secretary's intervention was criticised in Parliament, Dow defended Bamfield's character and activism, by stating that he 'was as intelligent as many a white man in the colony'. 'Bamfield was persecuted,' Dow told Parliament, 'because he had the feeling of a free man, and would not be hunted from the land which belonged to him.'¹²



Bamfield was the first Aboriginal witness to testify at the Inquiry. His examination focused on one of the hearings' key subjects: the provision of rations to the station's residents. Although it was not the chief cause of the Kulin's complaints against the Board, the shortage of rations did relate to two central aspects of the Coranderrk struggle: the station's ability to be self-supporting; and the Kulin's expectation of what historian Richard Broome calls 'right behaviour' — that is, the expectation of '“proper maintenance and protection”, in return for the loss of their ancestral lands and cultural autonomy.'¹³

Both of these needs had been met during the first decade under John Green's tenure. During this time, the station had been well on its way to becoming self-sufficient and instead of working for money the residents received basic rations supplemented by vegetables from the garden, cheese, milk and meat from the cattle. The only wage they expected was for their work in the hops gardens, which had been introduced by the Board as a cash crop in 1872. However, the Board was often slow in paying wages and on more than one occasion the profits from Coranderrk's hops were instead siphoned off to subsidise government coffers. At the same time, the Board insisted that work in the hops grounds should take priority, which led to the vegetable gardens, fences and stock being neglected. In 1877, matters were made worse when the Board introduced a new regulation which required people to pay for their meat — supposedly 'to encourage them to be independent'.¹⁴ The policy not only infringed on Kulin expectations of 'right behaviour' but also left many families indebted to the local Healesville butcher.

The Board's approach to managing Coranderrk following Green's removal effectively aimed to turn the Kulin into workers on the station rather than allowing them to become its owners. As Bamfield explained during his testimony, the primary objective of the Kulin was to make the station self-supporting. But the Board's ambition for Coranderrk to be financially profitable was at odds with the Kulin's aspiration for self-determination.

Bamfield's testimony illustrates the way in which Aboriginal witnesses generally conducted themselves throughout the proceedings — with patience, dignity and modesty. To make a positive impression on the Commissioners, they knew they needed to satisfy the colonisers' expectations and conventions so they tolerantly dealt with the continual questions about rations, food and clothing. They endured the racial prejudices of a society which assumed that skin colour was a measure of intellect, and the constant insinuations in many of the Commissioners' lines of questioning, which revealed their preconceptions that Aboriginal people were lazy and expected to receive free food and rations — a paradox given that Coranderrk's hops regularly topped Victoria's markets, despite the men having often worked for no pay.

Scene 7: Thomas Bamfield

Cameron **Thomas Bamfield, Aboriginal, examined.**

[Bamfield steps up]

250. **Cameron** Where do you come from?
 Bamfield Benalla.
251. **Cameron** How long have you been here?
 Bamfield Fifteen years about.
252. **Cameron** Are you married?
 Bamfield Yes.
253. **Cameron** How many children have you got?
 Bamfield Three alive; three dead.
265. **Cameron** Do you get good allowances of food?
 Bamfield Not very well.
266. We get enough rations — not meat.
 268. We have got to buy it.
269. **Cameron** Does not the station allow you any?
 Bamfield No, not since Mr Green left; we have got to buy our meat.

281. **Cameron** You would be perfectly satisfied if you got enough meat?
Bamfield We would be satisfied if we had meat the same as we used to.
282. We used to kill our own before — the whole station supplying itself.
283. [Now] we have to buy it [...] from the butcher.
322. **Cameron** You have been working constantly?
Bamfield Yes, since I have been on this station.
323. [Fifteen years]. I worked for ten years for nothing just to try to keep
ourselves in the station. We had plenty then.
324. **Cameron** You were not paid wages then, and you got everything you wanted?
Bamfield Yes.
284. **Cameron** [So] what you want is that you should not have to buy anything?
285. Do you think it is unfair to make the people on the station work?
- Bamfield** With the number of people here they ought to make the station
support itself.
286. **Cameron** Would you like to see the people work on the station?
Bamfield Yes.
287. **Cameron** You would not object to work?
Bamfield Yes, we all object to work.
290. **Cameron** You are not satisfied with the present management.
Bamfield No.
291. **Cameron** Will you be kind enough to tell [us] your objection — what
complaints you have to make?
Bamfield Mr Strickland, [the manager] is not a fit man to work the station.
[L1] I do not know what he was put here for.
292. He has made no improvements since he was in this place, such as
looking over the run and the cattle — everything to make more
293. grub and clothing. And we have got the run open, [it's not fenced
in]. We have got everybody's cattle in — more than our own.
315. Since the station was [taken over] by Mr Strickland there are no
improvements to keep us quiet.
317. He does not understand how to manage the station.
[L1] Under Mr Green we used to kill our own cattle, and grow our own
potatoes, cabbages, onions, carrots and pumpkins — everything we
could grow. We had plenty of milk, butter, and cheese...

347. **Cameron** Who got up that deputation that waited on the Chief Secretary?
 Bamfield We got it up ourselves.
348. **Cameron** No one tried to agitate on the question?
 Bamfield No.
349. **Cameron** No one has tried to make you dissatisfied with the management of
 the place?
 Bamfield No.
- [L1] Why should they take advantage of a poor black because he cannot
 read and write? I think they have done enough in this country to
 ruin the natives without taking it from us anymore.²³
 [The witness withdraws]

ANNOTATIONS

Thomas Bamfield (*alias* ‘Tommy Michie’) testified on 29 and 30 September 1881 at Coranderrk (*MoE*, pp. 6–9; 98). Anne Bon, Thomas Embling and John Dow were not present at these first two hearings.

Q266. (Bamfield). Elided Q266: ‘Not enough, or is it the quality? — We get enough rations – not meat.’ And Q268: ‘How is it you do not get enough meat? — We have got to buy it.’

Q283. (Bamfield). This statement is inferred from Bamfield’s answer to Q283. Source text reads: ‘You kill your own now occasionally? — No, we have to buy it. What we have got on the station we have to buy it the same as from the butcher.’

Q323. (Bamfield). Elided Q322: ‘You have been working constantly? — Yes.’ And Q323: ‘Fifteen years? — Yes. I worked for ten years for nothing...’

Q291. (Cameron). Source text reads: ‘Will you be kind enough to tell the Board your objection...’

[L1]. (Bamfield). Letter by Bamfield submitted to the Inquiry on 30 September (*MoE*, pp. 8–9).

Q315. (Bamfield). Source text reads: ‘... Since the station was started by Mr Strickland.’ Bamfield’s choice of words is ambiguous, since John Green ‘started’ the station. Amended for clarity.