

'Wurundjeri People' by William Barak (1824–1903), National Gallery of Australia



Bringing to Life the Voices of the Past

Theatre provided the perfect medium for writer and historian Giordano Nanni to revive the 150-year-old voices of the Coranderrk community and share their incredible story.

I came across the transcripts, or “minutes of evidence”, of the 1881 Inquiry into the Coranderrk Aboriginal reserve 11 years ago. I stumbled upon them while studying in the archives at the University of Melbourne, doing preliminary research for a PhD in history. As I worked my way through the 141-page transcript over the summer I became captivated by the voices it contains. I became deeply inspired by the Coranderrk people, black and white, and the collaboration they had forged 150 years ago, which still strikes me as one of the most remarkable stories I’ve ever encountered.

What struck me most powerfully was the fact that this was not a story about black versus white, but one that illustrates what can be achieved when white and black work together towards justice. Although Aboriginal reserves and missions were intended to be places of confinement and exclusion of Aboriginal people, Coranderrk, which was located on the lands of the Wurundjeri people near the present-day township of Healesville (about 60km outside Melbourne), was also a vibrant, productive and virtually self-supporting Aboriginal community. Its success derived to a great extent from the collaborative relationship, which the early Aboriginal residents (comprising some 40 surviving members of the Kulin clans of central Victoria) forged 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.

This small land holding, comprising 4850 acres, was all that remained of the once extensive territories of the Kulin clans. When the Aboriginal Protection Board attempted to remove them to make room for white settlement, the residents protested vehemently. They waged an effective campaign, which spanned several years, under the leadership of the charismatic Wurundjeri elder William Barak, writing letters and petitions to newspapers and ministers and walking in deputation into Melbourne. Their protests attracted the

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support of powerful allies in the white community – most notably the wealthy widow Anne Fraser Bon. Thanks to her persistent petitioning and lobbying, the demands of the Coranderrk community could no longer be ignored and, in 1881, a Parliamentary Inquiry was appointed to investigate the Board's management and to review its decision to break up the reserve.

It was the first Inquiry of its kind in Victoria and it enabled the people of Coranderrk to have their claims to justice placed on the official record. The Inquiry was successful in the short term, leading to the permanent reservation of the land in trust to the Aboriginal population. Tragically, however, the people were eventually forced off their lands in the closing years of the century through the implementation of the so-called 1886 "Half-Caste Act". Yet the Coranderrk struggle went on to inspire other fights for land and self-determination, helping to kick-start the modern Aboriginal rights movement in Victoria.

Back in 2002, when I first learned about it and having only recently moved to this city, I assumed this chapter of history 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 was particularly upset that the transcripts of the Inquiry, a rare and telling archive of Aboriginal and European oral testimonies from the late-nineteenth century, had received so little attention. Carrying the immediacy of the spoken word, the voices in the transcripts reveal the dignity, patience and sometimes humour with which the Coranderrk residents challenged the authority of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines and its officers; the arrogant (and at times ridiculous) ways in which the latter sought to justify their paternalistic policies towards Aboriginal people based on misguided racial ideologies; and the courage and integrity of the several white witnesses who defied convention and supported the Coranderrk residents. This evidence, so pertinent today,



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had been sitting there in the archives gathering dust for more than a century.

And then one day an idea floated into my mind: what if we could get brilliant actors to re-enact sections of the Inquiry on stage, thereby bringing the actual voices of the past within direct reach of a much bigger audience? Instead of talking about the past, we could allow the voices of the past to speak for themselves. As exciting as the idea was, I had to put it on ice: I had a PhD thesis to start writing...

Seven years later I made my first visit to Coranderrk and had the privilege of meeting Auntie Joy Murphy Wandin – Senior Elder of the Wurundjeri people and great-great niece of William Barak. I spoke to her about the idea of re-enacting the Inquiry and with her blessing and encouragement began working closely with the transcripts to draft a script. As the journey unfolded an extraordinary and diverse group of people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, came together: researchers at the University of Melbourne, thanks to whom the necessary funding and support was secured; Rachael Maza (of ILBIJERRI Theatre Company), who directed the initial performances; Liz Jones (of La Mama Theatre), who generously provided performance and rehearsal space, and also acted in the part of Anne Bon; and, of course, my able co-writer Andrea James,




with whom I edited the script. The Minutes of Evidence project (MOE) was born.

In 2010, we assembled a cast of nine brilliant black and white actors, including Uncle Jack Charles (himself a descendant of Coranderrk), to pilot the first-ever reading of the Coranderrk Inquiry. The response was more powerful than any of us had expected and consequently, after conversations with descendants and the local community in Healesville, two more readings took place for the local community at a venue on land that was once part of Coranderrk itself. These historic performances were attended by descendants of Coranderrk, including those of John Green. How amazing to be among the descendants of the people who had established Coranderrk – together again on Coranderrk land after 150 years – hearing the actual voices and words that were once spoken at the Inquiry.

The MOE project was subsequently awarded a prestigious Australian Research Council (ARC) grant, which enabled the first public performance of Coranderrk – We will show the country. It premiered at the La Mama Theatre in 2011 under the direction of Isaac Drandic (ILBIJERRI Theatre), and was followed by further performances at Melbourne’s Federation Square and the Sydney Opera House in 2012. I think the success of the performances is a testament to the genuine yearning many people now have for the truth about the nation’s past and to the need for an honest and un-sensationalised way of portraying it. By providing access to primary historical documents – and crucially, to the voices of Aboriginal people in the nineteenth century, often conspicuously absent from historical records – Coranderrk enables

audiences to form their own conclusions based on the evidence presented.

Theatre provides an ideal medium for younger people to learn in an engaging way and it’s therefore exciting that the Victorian Department of Education (one of the MOE project’s key partners) is creating resources and materials about Coranderrk to accompany the play. The play itself has also been adapted for school audiences. Entitled CORANDERRK, it premiered in December 2013 at Belvoir St Theatre in Sydney and will continue to tour in 2014. The new script combines verbatim and non-verbatim elements in order to retell the broader history of Coranderrk in an engaging and theatrical way, and Andrea James has brought a powerful contemporary Aboriginal perspective to the new work, essential for the story to be retold in a culturally appropriate manner.

I’m honoured to have played a part in shedding more light on the beautiful history of Coranderrk. Thanks to the collaboration between the MOE project partners, to ILBIJERRI Theatre and to Victorian teachers, I hope that in ten years Coranderrk and the names and voices of its people, black and white, will be known widely to all who live and grow up in Melbourne and Victoria. 

Note: Those who were unable to see the play may be interested in the book, Coranderrk – We will show the country, recently published by Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS; featuring the original verbatim script and a history of Coranderrk and the 1881 Inquiry, including over 40 archival and performance images of the play.

www.readings.com.au/products/17493859/coranderrk-we-will-show-the-country

www.aiatsis.gov.au/asp/coranderrk.html

Dr Giordano Nanni is a writer, historian and Senior Research Fellow at the University of Melbourne. He conceived the idea of re-staging the 1881 Coranderrk Inquiry using verbatim-theatre and was central to its development through the ARC-funded Minutes of Evidence project. He is the author of The Colonisation of Time (2012) and co-writer of the cult internet show, Juice Rap News.