

# First Peoples – Before European Colonisation

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## WOIWURRUNG

The people of the Woiwurrung language group are the traditional 'owners' of the lands between Gisborne, Sunbury, Mt Macedon and the Werribee River in the west, to Mt Baw Baw in the east, and to the Great Dividing Range in the north. Boundaries tended to follow the natural features of the landscape, such as rivers and mountain ridges.

Within each language group were a number of family groups, or clans. Within the clan structure were various family groups comprising thirty to sixty people who lived, hunted and travelled together. Numbers would vary depending on family visitors to the group at any one time. They did not live in permanent settlements but, rather, camped for periods within defined clan boundaries where food was plentiful, and moved on when the land needed to rejuvenate. Aboriginal people did not own the land in the European sense but belonged to, or were 'owned by' it. The land provided all the Wurundjeri (now the common term for descendants of all the Woiwurrung clans) needed – food, water, shelter, medicine – which they treated with respect. (Source: *The Aboriginal History of the Yarra* website.)

The clan occupying the area now known as Upper Plenty was the Balluk-Willam, whose lands extended from east of the Great Dividing Range to Lancefield in the north.

The Kulin Nation was an alliance of five landholding nations in central Victoria who spoke a related language.



Map showing the clans forming the Kulin Nation. Based on a map from Aboriginal Melbourne. Permission: Gary Presland.

## THE DREAMING

The Dreaming is a complex concept at the centre of Aboriginal religion and life. 'The Dreaming' is the closest translation of the Aboriginal concept of 'how the world works'. Its closest Christian parallel would be the story of creation.

In most stories of The Dreaming, the ancestral spirits came to earth in human form. As they moved through the land they created animals, plants, rocks and land formations. Once the ancestral spirits had created the world they changed into trees, stars, rock, watering holes or other objects. These are the sacred places of Aboriginal culture and have special properties.

The ancestral spirits also laid down the laws and established the relationships and responsibilities of groups and individuals (kinship obligations) to each other and the land. These are the laws by which Aboriginal people lived.

Dreaming stories passed on important knowledge and cultural values to later generations through song, dance, painting and story-telling.

A 'corroboree' was a highly structured performance involving music, dance and costume. A great deal of skill and knowledge was required to perform, and, while anyone could perform, the ceremony was for invited guests only. The different clans present would compete to outdo each other.

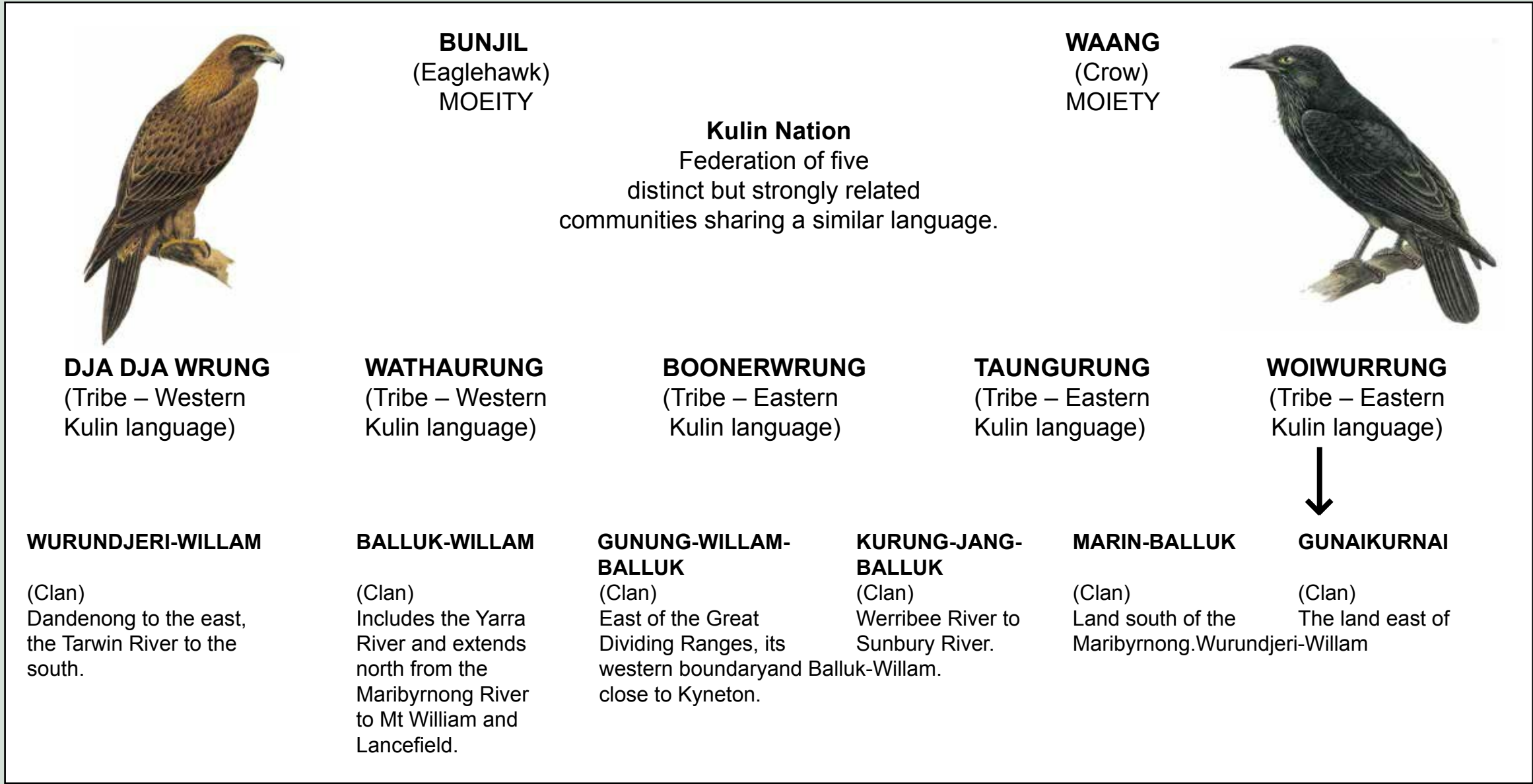
Man ornamented for corroboree. Photograph by: Antoine Fauchery and Richard Daintree, 1857-1858. Courtesy: SLV.



## MOEITY

The people of the Kulin Nation were represented by Bunjil (eaglehawk) and Waang (crow). An individual's moeity was inherited from their father and dictated all behaviour, social relationships and marriage partners. Wurundjeri clan law only allowed marriage between different moieties and clans, thus keeping genetic variation strong.

The moeity system also created alliances between other clans, which were maintained by regular meetings for trade, initiations, celebrations and resolving differences.



## WAY OF LIFE

Contrary to popular belief the Aboriginal people were not nomads but moved around their tribal lands depending on where seasonal foods were available. All clan members knew their land in great detail, including the best times to visit each area according to weather and availability of food. They would only travel out of their land for ceremonial reasons, to meet with other clans or to trade. They were permitted to enter into another clan area where there were family connections and/or if physical survival depended on it, for example, in times of food scarcity.

At various times in the year clan meetings would occur. The clan living in the area would issue the invitation to meet, always at a time when food was plentiful. These were important events to settle differences but also to allow young people to meet and select partners from other clans in the language group.



Victorian Aboriginals in front of Mia Mia (temporary shelter). Photographer: Fred Kruger, circa 1866-77.

When foreign people passed through, or were invited to tribal lands, the ceremony of "Tanderrum", or, freedom of the bush/welcome to country, was performed. This allowed safe passage and temporary access and use of land and resources. It was a diplomatic rite involving the landholder's hospitality and a ritual exchange of gifts. The leaves of the wattle, cherry ballart and river red gum were burnt on a fire as part of the ceremony. The smoke was both cleansing and sent prayers to Bunjil.



Smoking pyre.

Locally sourced green leaves are placed on a small fire. The smoke is used to cover participants' bodies, ridding them of what is needed. It also cleanses the area. The group feels it is leaving behind troubles and beginning something new. Reasons for holding the rite are then discussed. The ceremony ends with dancing and singing.

Shelters, known as 'willams', were built from available materials, such as branches and sheets of bark placed over a sapling hung between forked posts. In warmer weather windbreaks were made using branches of trees. The type of shelter constructed depended on conditions at the time and the planned length of stay in that particular area. The length of stay would also be dependent on the local availability of food.



Aboriginal people outside a slab hut in Victoria. Photographer: Fred Kruger, circa 1880.

There were strict rules governing the arrangements of huts and shelters, depending on the age, sex of family members and the tribal affiliations of any visitors.

Campsites were usually close to water. Hunting and gathering activities were confined to a five- to ten-kilometre radius of the campsite with men and women responsible for different activities.



Aborigine in canoe. Photographer: Fred Kruger, circa 1880.

Everyone would leave camp in the morning; the women and the children fishing and gathering plants, while the men and teenage boys would hunt kangaroos, wallabies and possums and trap birds.

The riverside campsites meant ready access to river reeds and rushes that could be split into fibres and pounded to make ropes, nets, fish traps, such as an eel trap, right, and baskets. Aboriginal men carried reed spears and a spear thrower, a boomerang and hafted (a 34-cm-long wooden handle, or haft) stone axe, often worn on a string belt around the waist. Sharp stone knives and ceremonial objects were carried in grass string bags. Women would carry food in reed baskets and string bags, such as the dilly bag, along with their favourite digging stick.



Bilang bilang – dilly bag.

## Recreation

A favourite ball game of the Wurundjeri was Marn Grook. "The men and the boys joyfully assemble when this game is to be played. One makes a ball of possum skin, somewhat elastic but firm and strong. The players of this game do not throw the ball as a white man may do, but drop it and at the same time kicks it with his foot. The tallest men have the best chances in this game. Some of them will leap as high as five feet from the ground to catch the ball. The person who secures the ball kicks it. This continues for hours and the natives never seem to tire of the exercise." (*The Aborigines of Victoria*, Robert Brough Smyth, 1878.)

Marn Grook could involve up to 50 players and was played at gatherings and celebrations. It was played over a large area and to observers appeared to lack a team objective, having no real rules, scoring or winner. However, it is believed by many to be the origins of Australian Rules Football.



Marn Grook. The caption on the picture reads: 'Never let the ball hit the ground.' From William Blandowski's *Australien in 142 Photographischen Abbildungen, 1857* (Haddon Library). Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. Source: Wikipedia.

## TOOLS, IMPLEMENTS AND WEAPONS

### Fire

The importance of fire as a tool should not be underestimated. Aside from the obvious uses, such as for cooking and providing warmth, fire was also used to manage the land, clear understorey in forests and maintain grasslands. In addition, fire-fronts were used to drive game to waiting hunters.

Fire played an important part in manufacturing tools, for example, hardening wooden spear points and digging sticks, heating resins and preparing plant fibre for string making. Fire also played an important part in many religious ceremonies, such as Tanderrum.



Fire sticks.

### Kannan (ganan): digging stick

Ganans were an essential part of a woman's toolkit. Saplings of any hardwood were collected and shaped, then both ends were hardened in the fire. They were sometimes used as fighting sticks but usually used in combination with a tannuk to dig up tubers, such as murnong. Digging sticks also helped aerate the earth.



Digging stick.

### Tarnuk, coolamon: wooden bowl

Tarnuks are multipurpose vessels used for collecting foods, such as nuts, fruits and small game, and for carrying water. They could also be used for cradling small babies. Usually they were crafted from hardwoods, such as the timber from the manna gum. Cracks were mended with a mixture of tree resin and wood ash.



Tarnuk, top, lined with paperbark to accommodate a baby.

### Bilang bilang: dilly bag

Bilang bilang were used to carry collected foods, such as berries and tubers, as well as personal belongings. They were worn around the neck or often placed over the head and secured behind the ears in order to keep the hands free. Plant fibres, such as lomandra or cumbungi, were used to make the bags.



### Grinding stone

Grinding stones were used for many purposes, including pulping roots and tubers, and crushing small animals to make them easier for small children and the elderly to chew and digest. Pounding some foods on a grinding stone and washing in water could help remove toxins from poisonous plants. Leaves and bark were used to mill but this was not common in Victoria. Soft rocks and clay were crushed to make pigments for painting and decoration. The larger grinding stones were not usually carried but were left in camp ready for the next visit.



Crushed to make medicines. Large were used to mill but this was not common in Victoria. Soft rocks and clay were crushed to make pigments for painting and decoration. The larger grinding stones were not usually carried but were left in camp ready for the next visit.

### Axes and hatchets

Ground-edged stone axes and hatchets were general-purpose tools used for a variety of tasks: to cut open the limbs of trees to get possums from hollows; to split open trunks to get honey, grubs or the eggs of insects; to cut off sheets of bark for huts or canoes; to cut down trees; to shape into wood for spears or shields; and to butcher large animals. They were important tools and there was at least one stone axe in every camp, in every hunting or fighting party and in every group travelling through the bush. Axes were valued trade items.



Pineaxe.



Stone axe.



Stone axes.

### Woomera: spear thrower

The woomera could be described as the equivalent of the Swiss army knife because it has many functions. Primarily, it is a spear thrower, which acts as a lever to allow men to throw spears at greater distances and speeds. Most woomera had a peg or socket at one end to engage the butt of a spear. The curved body could be used as a mixing bowl to prepare ochres. A sharp stone, which functioned as a knife, was often attached.



Woomera: spear thrower.

### Boondi stick

Clubs were used as weapons for hunting game and fighting. They differed in shape and design. The timber used in manufacture depended on availability, but they were usually crafted from heavy hardwoods.



Boondi sticks.

### Killer boomerang

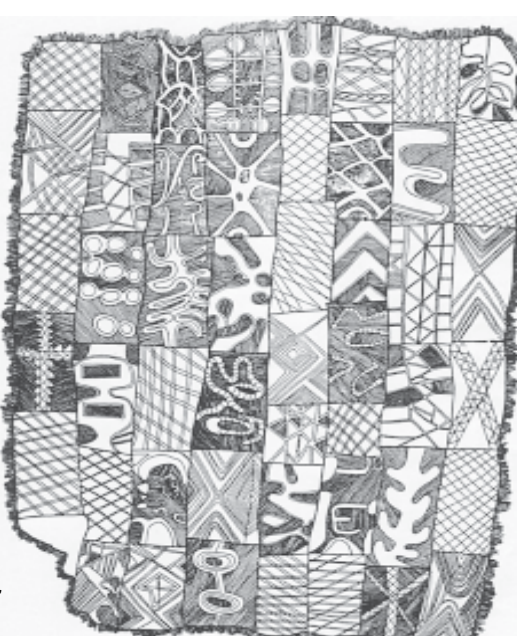
The killer boomerang, right, is a non-returning boomerang, characterised by its long tapering edges and heavy weight. It can be aimed and thrown with great force to bring down large game, such as kangaroo. They were often used in ceremonies and for making music. While non-returning boomerangs were used for hunting, returning boomerangs with a symmetrical curved shape were generally used for leisure, or sometimes to act as a decoy to bring down birds of prey.



### POSSUM-SKIN CLOAKS

Possum-skin cloaks are one of the most sacred cultural expressions of southeastern Aboriginal peoples.

Possum skins were pegged out on sheets of bark using fire-hardened wooden pegs. The stretched skins were left to dry and decorated using red and yellow ochre



Sewn and incised possum-skin cloak of Wurundjeri origin (Melbourne Museum).

designs on the skin side. They were then sewn together using the sinews from kangaroo tails as thread.

Aboriginal people throughout southeastern and western Australia wore the cloaks to keep themselves warm, protect them from the weather, carry babies, to sleep on or under, for burial, and to share stories and language through the etched designs.

The cloak was worn over one shoulder and under the other, and was fastened at the neck using a small piece of bone or wood. They were warm, weatherproof cloaks worn either fur-in or fur-out depending on the weather.



Portrait of an unidentified woman carrying a baby, wearing a possum-skin cloak. Photographer: Samuel White Sweet, South Australia, circa 1870s.

## MT WILLIAM STONE QUARRY

The right to hunt and procure food in any tract of land belonged to the group of people born there, and could not be infringed upon without permission. However, there were places in which the whole tribe had an interest. The Mt William stone quarry, near Lancefield, was one of these. Mt William was famous throughout southeastern Australia as a source of the highly valued greenstone, used for making hatchet heads. They were made from roughly shaped hard stone, which was then ground against another stone to make a sharp edge.

The Wurundjeri leader in the 1880s, William Barak, said, "When the neighbouring tribes wanted stone for tomahawks they usually sent a message to Billibellary [the main custodian]. When they arrived they camped around the place". Hatchets and axe heads were traded for possum skins and other items of value. Prestige was attached to ownership of one of these items and they were widely traded. They have subsequently been found throughout Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia.

The Mt William stone quarry is exceptional for its size, intensity of quarrying and intensive work stations. Today it is a heritage-listed site with restricted access where you can see the remains of hundreds of mining pits and the mounds of waste rock that surround the old work stations.



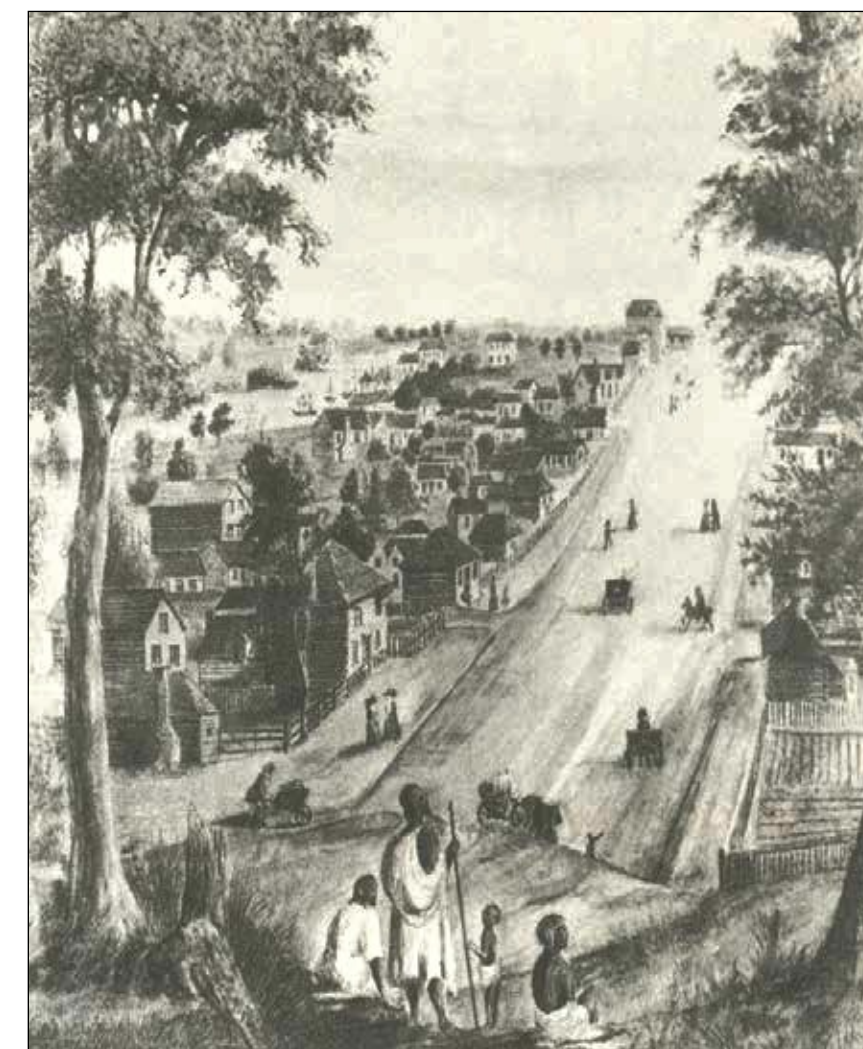
ABOVE and RIGHT: Mt William stone axe quarry.



TOP RIGHT: Example of a stone hatchet.

## COLONISATION

When the first white explorers arrived the land was covered in native grasses; the result of carefully managed environmental practices honed over thousands of years by the Indigenous inhabitants. In 1836, a total of 40,000 sheep were unloaded at Port Phillip Bay from Tasmania and within five years their numbers had swelled to 100,000. As squatters increasingly took up land on these natural grasslands, the different grazing patterns of their stock resulted in degradation of the land and loss of food for native fauna and the Indigenous inhabitants. Over time the clans were forced further and further away from their lands.



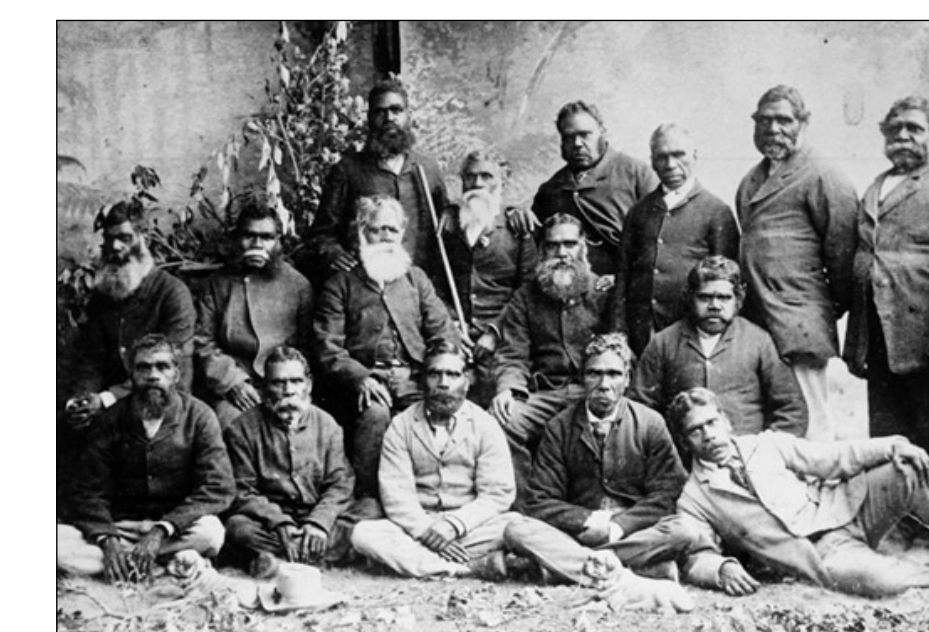
Wurundjeri near Collins Street, Melbourne, 1839. Watercolour by W Knight.

## Coranderrk Petition

Could we get our freedom to go away Shearing and Harvesting and to come home when we wish and also to go for the good of our Health when we need it ...

We should like to be free like the White Population there is only a few Blacks now remaining in Victoria, we are all flying away now and we Blacks of Aboriginal Blood wish to have now freedom for all our life time ...

Why does the Board seek in these latter days more stronger authority over us Aborigines than it has yet been?



Group of petitioners at Coranderrk. Photographer unknown. Courtesy: La Trobe Picture Collection, SLV.

In 1886 the *Aboriginal Protection Act* was passed that barred anyone other than full Aboriginal people and 'half-castes' over 35 years of age from all reserves. This broke up Coranderrk, in Healesville, which had been a haven for orphans of mixed parentage; those least able to support themselves. Many of these people became fringe-dwellers on the edge of society.



Women at Coranderrk sitting outside weaving baskets. Photographer unknown. Courtesy: La Trobe Picture Collection, SLV.

The Aboriginal Mission Station, Coranderrk. Photographer: Fred Kruger, circa 1880-81. Courtesy: La Trobe Picture Collection, SLV.

Table: Aboriginal population of early Melbourne.

Tribe	Population by year(s)			
	1836-37	1839-42	1852	1863
Wauthaurong	375	118	31	15
Jajowurrung	~	300	142	38
Woiwurrung & Boonwurrung	350	207	59	33
Taungerong	~	600	~	95
<b>TOTAL</b>	~	1225	~	181

Stats from Museum Vic Human Journeys – gallery of life storyline. Even with early census records, the above figures are the at-best approximations of population over 15 years of age between 1842 and 1863. By 1863, 80-85% of the original population ceased to exist. Out of an original family of 10, 8 would die in the 'Melbourne area'. Data collated by Dean Stewart, 2003.