

## UN Sung, UNWANTED.

One of the shortcomings of aboriginal history is the general failure of early colonial historians (with few isolated exceptions) to record faithfully outstanding native personalities of their time.

This creates a gap of authenticity in basic tribal history, particularly that of the coastal region of New South Wales, which has a mixed, and sometimes a somewhat confused, picture of detribalisation--a development that produced outstanding leaders but of whom almost nothing has been recorded.

Detribalisation occurred from the onset of European presence in Australia; at first, it was slow and confined to selected areas, coincident with white man's intrusion in various stages.

First, after 1788, European authority sought to establish holding settlements from which explorers and sailors could move to get a physical appreciation of what the great unknown continent contained.

It was only natural that aborigines instinctively resented the coming of the white man; they had had for ever so long lived in their remote isolation, that the arrival of another race of people could only be viewed with alarm. This was not an instance of customary violation of tribal boundaries: it was an invasion without warning, and an event never envisaged in legend and myth. In other words, there was neither historical nor mystical reason for the coming of white man in such circumstances--a movement of foreign people who seemed to have little in common with the primitive native whose culture had sprung from almost the beginning of mankind itself, and whose survival, though simplistic and certain, was based on an intimate ~~knowledge of nature~~ understanding of nature-- a knowledge and experience obtained over countless generations to provide a lifestyle formula to ensure that the delicately poised scales governing human habitation were as evenly balanced as possible.

Therefore, from the very beginning there was a positive attitude of Europeans to dictate their personal appreciation of the culture and personality of the aboriginal. It was: he was black in colour; he still pursued some stone-age practices; he had no knowledge of the advancement in materialistic facilities, services and pleasures. Thus, the aboriginal was to be regarded as an individual of a lower order. This was not a difficult stance for the English invaders to adopt--a race that for many generations had practised a rigid class system among its own people.

Is it any wonder, then, that the early colonialists, whether administrator, missionary or settler, could possibly believe that the people whose domain they had aggressively entered could produce leaders of their type and standard, or even what may be termed today as scholars.

As has been written and said so many times in recent years, the true scholarship capacity of aboriginal people will never be known because so much culture was destroyed and ravaged and the speed and scope of detribalisation developed with the spread of European occupation of traditional areas formerly the territories of large and powerful tribes.

Aboriginal leaders who sought to protect their land and preserve their cultural activities were, in the main, branded as low criminals--they were considered an impediment to the whites and their progress to create a new form of society and rule in a new land. And because of kinship loyalty that is a fundamental part of tribal character, the people whom the leader served suffered a similar humiliation....and finally the same fate: broken tribal life, indignities..no security..no hope to maintain the old ways of life..and in ever so many cases the fatal and final act of extinction.

No matter how we may examine early and mid-colonial history, there can be no escaping of the real truth: ~~that~~ that, notwithstanding our breast-beating claim to be a Christian nation, we Europeans acted as conquerors of old. Australia was a spoil of great value; its exploitation, in the name of development, must proceed without hindrance. If the original race could fit in, well and good. If not, and its extermination occurred because of lost culture and tribal experience, there would not be much misgiving. There would be some for whom such a finality would be welcome.

This brief but critical picture will in places raise eyebrows and cause mutterings; there will be people, perhaps many, who will challenge and contradict such a statement. But if they do they should start to examine their own conscience and try to analyse what is happening today--a period in which there is more enlightenment, sympathy and understanding; but also at a time when aboriginal leadership is still being questioned.

The scene is like an oldtime movie; serial: each week we see a new crisis, freshly-created problems and their associated divisions between the two races--yet the theme is just the same as ever it was: who shall own land and how shall that land be used. Are we not still the conquerers? Can we look in the mirror of truth and still criticise South Africa?

Many will have heard of the famous Tasmanian aboriginal Trugganini, who in recent years was honoured on a stamp as one of Australia's famous women. Most of those who have a reasonable knowledge of this brave and outstanding woman of a tribe that died out in 1876 have so because of their interest in Australian history.

But how many children known of this person and other outstanding aboriginal leaders and scholars. Very few. They are denied opportunity under our present system of education to learn very much about the basic history of the first Australians, who probably in their full tribal state could have had more authoritative clues on prehistory than many white scholars.

Fortunately, in the Lower Hunter region, and particularly Lake Macquarie, we have been able to preserve the history of a few famous characters in two periods of tribal history: when the tribe was functioning before the decline set in because of European settlement, and when the tribe became extinct with the death of its last full blood member.

I refer, of course, to Biraban, that remarkable character who attached himself to Rev L E Threlkeld, pioneering missionary, who established his first station at Belmont ~~in 1825~~, Lake Macquarie, in 1825, and to "old" or "Queen Margaret", who died in Newcastle Hospital at the turn of the century. She, too, had a long and interesting association with Lake Macquarie, though she was born at Wai-yong (now Wyong--yam place).

The mention of Margaret introduces another aspect of aboriginal history: the manner in which so many writers have denigrated women and their place in tribal society.

Margaret was born in the 1820's of the Brisbane Water Clan of the Awabakal. Actually, she was an Awabakaleen, a woman of the tribe of Awabak. The language was one of the few to have genders incorporated in the noun and verbal structures. Thus Awabakal meant a man of the Awaba tribe.

Margaret was indeed an outstanding person, as the sole photograph of her shows. She had a remarkable life. As a child she knew Threlkeld, and later she spent some time in an English home. Her husband was Ned, after whom Black Ned's Bay at Lake Macquarie was named. The couple came to Lake Macquarie in 1859. While accepting much of the religious teaching imparted to her, she never surrendered her tribal beliefs and character. This factor was to have a unique impact on the small lakeside village where she lived for so many years. It was then known as Pelican Flat; today it is called Swansea.

But Margaret always used the Awabakal names--Yirrita-ba, the sacred place (Swansea Heads); Ngarlgabah (now called Gallgahba)--ordinary communication language, the sand spit; ceremonial language, place to relax; and Biddo-da-bah, Swansea Channel.

And for many years while Margaret was resident there was almost as much Awabakal spoken by most white people as English. Margaret attracted to herself many tribal remnants in the 1870s and 1880s, such as Joe and Maggie Bullock, the last Awabakal people from Wickham in Newcastle.

Margaret indeed was a pleasant and graceful person, but she and the other lingering representatives of the tribe always regarded Swansea and its surrounds as their patrimony.

But Margaret and her family had land problems, notwithstanding the fact that the Awabakal had occupied the area for thousands of years. The land story now being unfolded elsewhere is not new. Both old Ned and Margaret, at different times, faced the real threat of losing their land. But they had friends and a sympathetic local Press.

These stories of fear and hardship over land ownership became known only last year as the result of research in long forgotten newspapers files in Newcastle.

I think it is best to allow the characters involved tell ~~themselves~~ their own story, so I shall quote the newspaper reports of more than a century ago.

We will begin with an extract from the "Newcastle Chronicle" dated September 2, 1871, and headed "A Case for a Government Inquiry."

It said:

"Old Ned, the last male of his tribe in this district, with whom all fishing and shooting parties are acquainted, is threatened with expulsion from his little holding on the south side of the lake by a person who has made a free selection on which this aboriginal has his habitation ... Old Ned has long resided on this spot. His household, consisting of his wife, who bears an irreproachable character and strange to say of her race has never tasted liquor, his children, and his blind mother. He possesses a nice little garden plot, a pig or two, and some poultry at his door. This is the man, one of the original inhabitants and owners of the soil, who is now threatened under a liberal land act with banishment from his squattage so that a free selector can reap the benefit of his labours. No matter how for such a proceedings as this may be sanctioned by law, we venture to hope that the Government once apprised of these details, will regard them in the light of equity only, and that it will prevent one who has a right to the land far better than the Crown itself from being disturbed and driven from it."

A report drew a reply a week later, for on September 9, a letter, headed "Naboth's Vineyard", was recd from Rev John Shaw, of Scone, who wrote:

"Ned is well known in Newcastle and Brisbane Water. A former clergyman at Gosford, I am acquainted with the lives of the family mentioned and have feared that some one would play Ahab by selecting their little plot. The dwelling and situation are better than those of many selections--and as the event has proved a tempting bait to anyone without bowels or conscience. Ned is a hard working inoffensive man. He maintains himself by getting beeswax and honey. Margaret, his wife, is an ornament to her sex.. she is a fine looking woman.. The house they live in is divided into rooms. Margaret acts as a dressmaker and is an excellent needlewoman. She is a skilful cabbage tree hat maker and her hats realise £2 to £4. Ned grows a little corn, a few vegetables and some tobacco. He attends to sporting parties on the Lake and maintains his aged mother. His home is everything.. close to honey, fish and fresh water. He is peaceful. If any subscription could be started to help Ned, I will forward £2. But I think the Governor could interfere, for if I recollect right a portion of his oath of office expresses that that he will protect the aboriginal inhabitants of the country. Here is a case where surely that protection is required."

The next newspaper reference is on October 21 and is headed: "Honor to whom honor is due."

The report says: James Hannell, Mayor of Newcastle, first mentioned the matter to the Chronicle and later write to the Minister for Lands, who has issued an instruction that Old Ned is not to be disturbed, and that the colonial surveyor is to measure 20 to 30 acres to be notified as a reserve, which will render him and his family from intrusion".

Since there were no further reports on the matter, it seems that security was given to Ned and his family as promised by the Minister. But we are still trying to check records of this event and another that involved Margaret. Ned died two years later.

Margaret became news in 1879 when on April 18 of that year the "Newcastle Morning Herald" published a story headed "Last of her race", as follows:

"Fifty years ago this was unattractive and dreary looking country. Aborigines were seen in their native state. The tribes were numerous and happy. The withering blight of white man's presence had not come upon them.

"There were frequent disputes, often ending in pitched battles. The nullah, boomerang and spear not seldom sent the poor darkies to their last homes. The present site of the Victoria Theatre was a battle ground for the Port Stephens and Lake Macquarie tribes. Mr CH Hannell, a relative of the first Mayor previously mentioned, when a boy saw a pitched battle between these two tribes.

"Of the once famous Port Stephens tribe only a few remain. Of the Lake Macquarie tribe only one representative is left: "Old Margaret, wife of Old Ned. The late James Hannell and others interested themselves in the welfare of Margaret. They waited on Mr J S Franell, Minister for Lands, to secure to her for life land upon which she established a home. Since that time Mr Robert Talbot has taken up a selection at Catherine Hill Bay that include's Margaret's hut and little garden. Until lately, she was not disturbed, when, it was said, men went into the yard and pulled the fence down and were going to destroy the fruit trees at the instance of Mr Talbot. On hearing this Mr C H Hannell sent a telegram

to Mr Farnell reminding him of his promise to protect the poor old creature, It would be an act of wanton cruelty to disposses her of the small block of land she now occupies when it is considered that the whole of it was the patrimony of her tribe."

The report brought the following published retort by Mr Robert Harwood, of Newcastle: "I can assure you that you have been misled that Mr Talbot, of Catherine Hill Bay, wishes to dispossess Margaret of her land. Those whom know Mr Talbot will not be likely to misjudge him... I was at Margaret's location Monday last in Mr Talbot's company. He volunteered to show the last of the Lake Macquarie aborigines. Mr Talbot uttered a friendly "good day" to Margaret as we rode by. Neither stock nor stone had been disturbed. Mr Talbot spoke in the kindest terms of Margaret and added that although his deposit money for 80 acres of selected land had been taken, the alleged holders of a mineral lease disputed his right. He awaited the decision of the Minister for Lands. Mr Talbot would be the last man to instruct anyone to interfere with Margaret."

Mr Talbot himself replied on April 24:

"..... I was astounded at the attack. I immediately proceeded to the abode of Margaret, who received me in her usual friendly manner by asking after my wife and children. The item in the paper had upset the poor old soul terribly. She said, "It is not you at all, Mr Talbot; you are always generous and kind to me."

"I selected certain land which I believe takes in Margaret's location. Since then, parties claim it is portion of a mineral lease. It has always been my intention not to interfere with Margaret and her family. I have always felt a deep interest in old Margaret.

"I have studied aborigines and their race for the past 15 years, particularly where they have become extinct by the introduction of the white race, the last of my aboriginal friends being Lalla Rookh, Tasmania, whom I used to visit at Hobart Town when in the HMS Clio eight years ago. Her native name was Trugannini, meaning seaweed.

"Old Margaret was born near Wyong. She is between 40 and 50 and has two children by Ned-- Ellen about 22 and Willie 19. Old Ned lies buried near Margaret's present abode."

In rather optimistic vein, the Editor of the Newcastle paper added a very interesting postscript: "We have received a document signed from Margaret signed by the good lady herself, and other letters, all of which corroborate Mr Talbot's statement. We now devoutly trust that 'the last of her tribe' has regained her usual equanimity and will live happily ever after."

But the trials and tribulations of Margaret were not over because she faced another threat early in 1880. The story began in January of that year when Mr Hungerford, a member of Parliament, and Alderman Peter Fleming paid a visit to the last of the Lake aborigines. The account stated: "They have had an ocular demonstration of her wants..the old lady is failing and should be protected. Mr Hungerford has promised to do all in his power to get Margaret a grant of land and provisions for the remainder of her life. Margaret hitherto made a precarious living by getting and selling honey, but this has been a bad season for bees and has deprived her of getting a livelihood."

A further report on the Hungerford -Fleming visit was published on February 6.

Margaret was described as the last living native of the original tribe of aborigines in that district. She has a son 20 and a daughter 26. The three of them erected a four-roomed house and engaged in garden produce and poultry. Mr Hungerford has submitted to the premier, Sir Henry Parkes, that the land she resides on be dedicated to her and her children for life. Sir Henry did not see any objection and promised immediate attention. Previously Ald and Mrs Fleming had a boat made for the old woman at the cost of 13 guineas to assist her to get fish for sale."

A further report on February 20 stated: Mr Hungerford has seen the Colonial Secretary. The Premier wants a report to be furnished. He is waiting for this report to come from the police. A couple of officers left yesterday to make the necessary report."

On March 15, 1880, The Secretary for Lands, W W Stephen, advised that his department had approved a reserve of 40 acres for the use of Margaret.

There is no further reference to Old Margaret in the "Herald" files--even her death is not publicly recorded in the Newcastle Press. It is evident that all her old friends had died also.

Reporting in that period was fragmentary and sometimes contradictory in fact. I sought the aid of the Lands Department some months ago to trace this reserve to find out what had happened to it on Margaret's death. But the department was unable to find any map record.

I am determined to chase this inquiry through, no matter how long it takes. It would seem that in the past too many aboriginal land areas have changed hands, with the original purpose and history having been lost. Respect for Margaret's memory and the real interest shown at that time by a few of the citizens who cared demands that the full truth should be made public.

There are several interesting points in these reports. First, as previously indicated, there were in those times still some people who had a practical interest in the welfare of the remnants of the Awabakal tribe as they approached extinction. After all, the tribe had been prominent in Australian pioneering missionary history; there were in Margaret's day a few old aborigines who could remember one of the last great chiefs of the tribe--Biraban-- a man who has legitimate claim for having played a prominent part in early aboriginal history. He was not only a leader but also a scholar in aboriginal languages.

He was the man who acted as language tutor to Threlkeld, now regarded as one of the greatest and most authentic scholars in aboriginal languages of all time. Threlkeld was not the only one to acknowledge Biraban's scholarship in this field; there were others whose names, except one, have so much been by-passed in colonial history of this region. The exception was Dr Ludvig Leichhardt, the famous German explorer, who evidently had a high regard for Lake Macquarie aborigines. For his first expedition in 1844 he selected Harry Brown (Nga-ah-ko-ro) and his companion from Belmont, Charley. They took part also in the abortive expedition of 1847. Their names are perpetuated by Brown's Lagoon and Brown and Charlie's Mount.

Biraban, whose first tribal name was We-pohng, gained his second name after reaching the highest level of initiations in his tribe. It meant eagle hawk. Not only was he a fully initiated person--and this meant passing through up to 14 different ceremonies--he became, in turn, a karakal (sorcerer or witch doctor) and finally a periwal (a chief of his clan and then the tribe throughout the Lake Macquarie area).

As a boy, he frequented the shores and hills of Lake Macquarie. He was quite young when taken to Sydney, where for some years he was the personal servant of an officer at the military barracks. In that period he acquired an unusually high fluency in the English language; it was said by some who knew him that he spoke better English than some Europeans. He was an outstanding linguist: today he would probably be rated as a language scholar.

In addition to his own tongue--Awabakal, a beautiful if somewhat complicated language in some respects, particularly regarding its ceremonial usage--he was able to converse in the languages of Kattang group in the Port Stephens and Dungog areas, in Wonarua and Darkinoong--tribes south and north of Wollonbi, Darook, and Kamilaroi. Since Threlkeld recorded, if vaguely, an association between the Awabakal and a tribe at Moreton Bay, Queensland, it is more than likely men of high degree had a passing knowledge of that language.

In 1821, by arrangement with Captain Francis Allman, Biraban and two other aborigines from this area--Jemmy Jackass and Bob Barrett--went to Port Macquarie, then being established as a penal settlement, to act as bush constables. There is little doubt that he would have quickly learned some of the two languages spoken in his police district: The Ngamba of Port Macquarie and the Ngaku farther south.

By this time he was well known to many Europeans as Johnny McGill. We do not know how he acquired this name. Its original more than likely was Sydney. Of his Port Macquarie service, Surgeon Cunningham recorded: "..... they proved of eminent service as bush constables..and were very good marksmen."

Few aborigines ever associated with prominent people of their time as Biraban did; no other aboriginal gained such praise for intelligence and service. Names famous in explorer, missionary and anthropological history generously paid tribute to this Lake Macquarie native.

We do not know how and when he died; after the closure of the Threlkeld mission at Toronto (Derarambah), he vanished, like so many others, into obscurity. Threlkeld, lamenting on the absence of his sable friends, recorded.. "they disappeared from a scene that was theirs for centuries to moulder into dust." He was dead before 1850 was reached. His wife, Patty, also an initiated woman, predeceased him. The couple had one son--Francis (Ye-row-ra) born about 1820. There is no record of his life at all.

It can be truly said that Biraban made it possible for an almost full translation to be made of the Awabakal tongue. Actually, Awabakal meant "man of the Awaba people", as did Awabakaleen meant women of that tribe. Awaba was a ceremonial name given to Lake Macquarie, meaning plain or flat surface. It came from the verb awatmilliko, to smooth out, to make level, to flatten.

It was an important circumstance that pioneer missionary Rev "ancelot Threlkeld met Biraban when he established his first station at Belmont, the site being called Bahtabah, hillside by the Lake. Their first meeting in the bush had a Dr Livingstone touch about it. The cleric was moving down a path when he was suddenly confronted with Biraban and some of his cronies, all well armed because they were on a hunting trip. Biraban quickly dissipated the missionary's fears when he said: "No worry, master; I can speak English good."

It is important to understand that by this time Biraban was multi-lingual; he could move freely in Sydney among his own race; and he and his people were in constant contact, friendly and otherwise, with aborigines from Port Stephens. He took part in spear trading in the Hunter Valley; the Awabakal were renowned spear makers and exchanged these weapons for possum string and hard spear heads. They Awabakal also had a monopoly on coal, which they called nikkin; in fact, the Lake Macquarie area itself was called nikkinba, the place of coal. The Awabakal had a knowledge of coal tar, which they called nikkin-ta garundah (coal it is melt liquid). Many instances are recorded of Biraban having been used ~~emthen~~ as an interpreter for natives from even distant places in New South Wales.

Is it any wonder, then, that Biraban became a valuable to Threlkeld to record language and tribal history. Writing at Newcastle in December, 1825, Threlkeld said: "One great advantage has been obtained in an aboriginal who attached himself at the first, and whose knowledge of the English language is sufficient to render him highly valuable. And the pains he takes that my pronunciation is correct affords convincing proof that the natives have an equal share of the intellectual power with others of the human race."

Threlkeld was always impressed by the loyalty of Biraban. He stated: "...the mission station always felt secure while his tribe was in the vicinity."

Biraban's work was recognised at the annual conference with aborigines at Parramatta in 1830 when Governor Sir Ralph Darling presented him with a crescent-shaped brass neckplate inscribed: "Barabahn, or MacGil, Chief of the Tribe at Bartabah, on Lake Macquarie; A reward for his assistance in reducing his native tongue to a written language."

Biraban also greatly impressed the United States exploring mission, led by Captain Charles Wilkes, that visited the Toronto mission in the 1830s. Horatio Hale, a scientist, recorded that "M'Gill was reputed to be one of the most intelligent natives." Alfred Agata, a botanical artist, sketched a portrait of Biraban. The accompanying description said: "His physiognomy was more agreeable than that of other blacks, being less strongly marked with the peculiarities of his race. He was about of middle size, of dark chocolate colour, with fine glossy black hair and whiskers, a good forehead, a nose what might be described as aquiline, eyes not too deeply set. It was very evident McGill was accustomed to teach his native language, for when he was asked the name of anything he pronounced the word very distinctly, syllable by syllable, so it was impossible to mistake it."

In October, 1842, we find Biraban, and Gorman, a chief of the Pamblang Clan of the Awabakal, being associated with Dr Ludvig Leichhardt, staying overnight at what is now called Charlestown Hill before proceeding to Kinti-ira-bin (now Redhead).

The Quaker missionaries--James Backhouse and G W ~~Hobman~~ Webber-- spent some time in Newcastle with Biraban in April, 1836, while touring the this area and Lake Macquarie. Walker wrote: "We had a good deal of conversation with McGill, and found him both intelligent and able to communicate his information with facility, being tolerably conversant with the English language"