

## PLOD ESSAY: Yallock willam, First People of Westernport

On page 17 of the 7 September 2010 *Sentinel-Times* was a report that South Gippsland Shire Council, “became one of the last Victorian councils to raise the Aboriginal flag alongside the Australian flag.” Patrice Mahony, a Dungh utti woman from New South Wales who lives with her family in Wonthaggi, spoke at the flag raising ceremony about the importance of the occasion. She said, “This is a proud moment. Raising the flag... carries a strong message of community. [It is important that you] have an understanding of what this flag means to us. For me the key to that understanding is education for the whole community. We can’t walk side by side if we don’t have an understanding of one another.”



The Bass Coast Shire has been flying the flag in Wonthaggi for some time now. It makes me proud that we weren’t the last to fly it. I like to think that is because we have a tradition of social justice in our town. There is also a strong presence of our first people here that is impossible to ignore, even though their living descendants live closer to Melbourne now.

When my husband and I first arrived on the Bass Coast about six years ago, a friend introduced us to the Moonah trees behind the farm on Churchill Island. There may be about one hundred trees standing in an opening surrounded by thick coastal bush, and they caught us unawares as we walked the winding path through she-oak, tea-tree and Banksia before it curved into what seemed like a cleared space. Suddenly, there they were, the ancient Moonah tall and twisted, beaten into stark forms by the weather, their trunks pock marked and ropy from salt and sun.

The information plaque said the trees are more than 300 years old, which means they were already one hundred years old by the time George Bass and his crew entered Western Port in the *Tom Thumb* while mapping out the coast. The trees had long been spread out on what was a corroboree ground before 1801 when Lieutenant James Grant put a small dwelling under them and sowed the first wheat ever planted in Victoria.

At that moment, what had been a place of gathering and plenty for the Boon wurrung<sup>1</sup> was lost to them. The Moonah had seen it all: the song and dance of the original people, the feasting on some of the hundreds of thousands of water birds that for all eternity have been migrating to the mud flats in the shallow bay each year, the building of a barracks, the planting of a new food and the disappearance of traditions and customs that may have been going on for as many as 20,000 years.



Perhaps the history of the place is not so important as the mystery of it. The trees seemed to be looking down on the walkers, aware of our presence and warning us that we were in a special place. The Boon wurrung considered these trees to be sacred and perhaps

they had similar feelings when they were near them, but they would have known how to introduce themselves to the trees and how to behave in their presence. All we could do was stare in wonder and regret what we didn’t know.

Two new books have come my way that have helped me gain some insight into the lives of the Boon wurrung people who lived here. Gary Presland, a Wurundjeri-balluk man who was recently the Thomas Ramsay Science and Humanities Fellow at Museum Victoria, republished *First People; the Eastern Kulin of Melbourne, Port Phillip & Central Victoria*. He explains that the Boon wurrung, along with the Woi wurrung and Watha wurrung are the part of the Kulin people who have lived on land south of the Dividing Range since before the last Ice Age began. The languages of the three groups overlap each other, but they claim different parts of the land. The Boon wurrung claim all of Mornington right round two-thirds of Port Phillip Bay and Westernport to the Tarwin and some of Wilson’s Prom. The others claim from Healsville to Lancefield and northern parts of Melbourne.

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen this spelling to name the local indigenous people because that is the spelling both the Elder, Caroline Briggs, and the historian, Gary Presland, prefer.

'Country' is partly determined by the way the water flows into and out of Birrarung (the Yarra). For thousands of years there were never lines on maps until White settlers arrived.

The three groups have common Dreaming figures: The world was created by Bunjil (the eagle) and Waarn (the crow). These two, with the help of a range of lesser spirit ancestors, created both humans and the Kulin world during the Dreaming. Here is a dreaming story told by Caroline Briggs, a Boon wurrung elder who is very active in Aboriginal affairs today: "Many years ago the land we now call Melbourne extended right out to the ocean. Port Phillip Bay was then a large flat plain where the Boon wurrung hunted kangaroo and cultivated their daisy yams. But one day there came a time of chaos and crises when the Boon wurrung and other Kulin nations were in conflict. They argued and fought and neglected their children and their land, neglected the yams, killed animals they did not eat, caught fish during spawning season. As the chaos grew the sea became angry and began to rise until it covered the plain and threatened to flood the whole country. The people asked Bunjil to stop the flood. Bunjil told his people they would have to change their ways if they wanted to save their land. The people promised to follow Bunjil and respect the laws. Bunjil walked out to the sea, raised his spear and directed the sea to stop rising. Waarn became the protector of all the waterways."<sup>2</sup>

The Boon wurrung is made up of six clans whose people are responsible for certain areas of Country. The Yallock willam clan area is Bass River between Westernport and the Dandenongs. The clan head is called Wareddedolong. The Yowengerre clan area is Tarwin River watershed. Like all Aboriginal groups marriage laws were and still are complicated. If you know which clan you belong to today, you will know whom you can and cannot marry. Yallock willam (Bunjil) people can only marry Burinyung bulluk (Waarn) people from Cape Schanck within the Boon wurrung group.

The Boon wurrung were hunter gathers with the men hunting large game and the women tending the yams, gathering shellfish and seeds. William Thomas, Assistant Protector, noted in 1840 that if Boon wurrung men were away "ostensibly hunting lyrebirds in the Dandenongs, the women left camp in the morning – not to gather plant food, but to hunt."<sup>3</sup> They were especially clever at catching crays.

The Boon wurrung set up camp in sand dunes close to shore in sheltered places provided by the "swale between two dune ridges running parallel to the shore." Camps were made up of small family groups who came together at seasonal meetings at appointed corroboree grounds such as the one at Churchill Island to perform cultural rites and partake of abundant food.



For thousands of years the different people of the Kulin Nation regularly gathered in Melbourne, each group camping at specific sites determined by tradition. The Boon wurrung chose to stay in the area of what is now the Botanic Gardens; the Woi wurrung on the site of the MCG and Richmond Oval. The clan heads would meet where Parliament House now stands to debate issues of importance and to perform ritual – dancing and singing.

The first people believe that the past and the present are one, that the ancestors still live among us, that memory is as much a part our reality as is a living, walking being. When we walk on the beach and come across a midden or a cleverly shaped rock or an interesting shell, even a wonderful pattern in the sand, it's satisfying to think of who was here before us.



Map of Port Phillip Bay, M. Nicholson, Wurundjeri

<sup>2</sup> *Meerueeng-ann; here is my country*, p. 14  
Koorie Heritage Trust, Melbourne, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> *First People*, page 48, Museum Victoria, 2010.