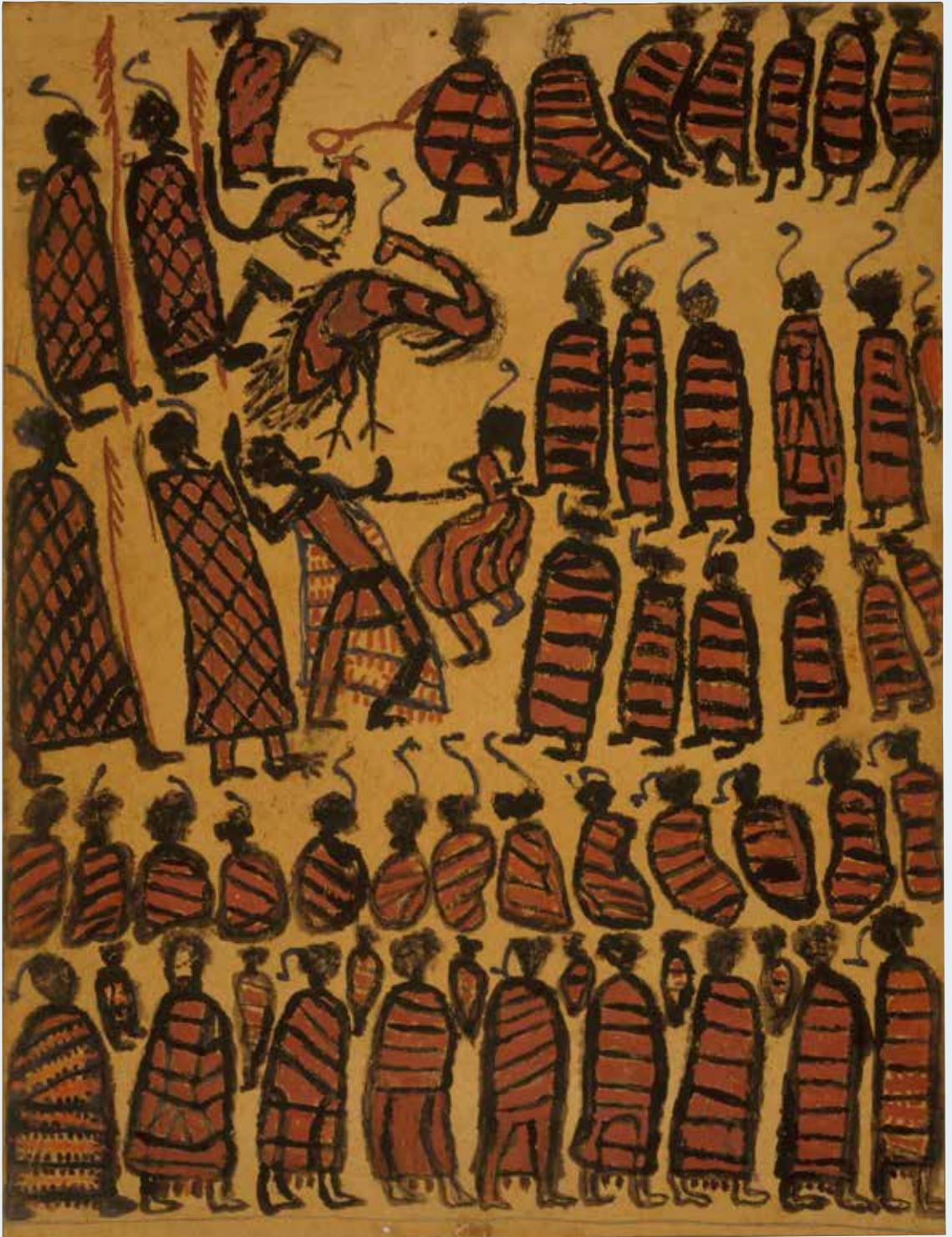


William Barak, *Aboriginal ceremony*, blue pigment, ochre and charcoal on cardboard, c. 1880 – c. 1890, Pictures Collection, H29640



William Barak, *Aboriginal ceremony with wallaby and emu*, brown ochre and charcoal on board, c. 1880 – c. 1890, Pictures Collection, H29641

MYLES RUSSELL-COOK

William Barak

Europeans set foot onto Naarm in the first decades of the 19th century. The colony known as Port Phillip District had for millennia been home to the Kulin nation, comprising Wathaurong, Boon Wurrung, Woiwurrung, Taunguerong and Dja Dja Wurrung language groups. They had witnessed the sea level rise, the coast recede; they had seen hills become islands and had witnessed climatic change as the ice age of the Pleistocene epoch ended. Early European settlers failed to recognise the complexity and sophistication of these groups, which lived sustainably on and with their Country. Naarm, which later came to be known as Melbourne, sits on the meeting point of the Birrarung (Yarra River) and its tributaries in the resource-rich lands and waterways of south-east Australia.

In June 1835, on the bank of Merri Creek, six kilometres north-east of Melbourne in present-day Northcote, British-born pioneer of Australia John Batman attempted to instigate with the Wurundjeri a treaty which was quickly revoked by colonial officials. Most people now believe that what Batman proposed as a treaty the Kulin recognised as a *tanderrum*, a ceremony conducted in the south-east permitting access and safe passage to newcomers and strangers, sometimes also called ‘freedom of the bush’. One person believed to have witnessed the signing of the Batman treaty/*tanderrum* was a young boy by the name of William Barak. As an adult, Barak was a political magnate. He was both Wurundjeri *Ngurungaeta* (head man) and also an ambassador who

dedicated his life to mediating frontier relationships between Kulin peoples and European newcomers.

Barak lived at Coranderk Aboriginal Station, a farming community near Healesville, 50 kilometres north-east of Melbourne, from its beginning, in 1863, until his death, in 1903. Coranderk was established as a place for people of the Kulin nation to live after their removal from their traditional lands. By the mid-1870s, Coranderk was functioning as a substantial village, complete with a school. The residents ran their own bakery and kept their own livestock. The station attracted an increasing number of Aboriginal people, who worked together to create a productive farm, which outsiders saw as a valuable piece of land. The Board for the Protection of Aborigines recognised that nearby farmers desired the Coranderk holdings and their productivity, so it was deemed to be in the community's own interests for its residents to be moved again, this time off the mission station: 'There has sprung up in certain quarters a large amount of so-called interest in the welfare of the Coranderk natives. It has been suggested that, for the benefit of their health, they ought to be shifted up to the Murray'.¹

The people of Coranderk resisted all attempts to move them from the land, which they believed to be legally and morally theirs. Barak was a petitioner who organised missives and deputations to the colonial government and Queen Victoria herself. Barak's abilities with pen and ink, however, extended beyond the written word: he was a skilled artist.

State Library Victoria holds some of the most significant examples of Barak's work. His drawings not only recorded Wurundjeri ceremonies for future generations, but they also captured the gestural movements and dynamic rhythms of engaged dance at a time when opportunities for performing ceremony were increasingly restricted. When we look at Barak's drawings, we see what it was like to be inside the dance. We do not view them from afar, but up close, intimately positioned within the act. In the work on page 22, Barak depicts men in possum-skin cloaks, showing a variety of cloak styles. But the men who wear the cloaks have their backs to us. We cannot see their faces, suggesting this ceremony is filled with secrets; it is men's business. We are both inside and outside the circle of the dance.

Through his art as well as his engagement with European culture, Barak left a wealth of detailed, important information on Wurundjeri cultural lore. His record of his culture is a corpus of 50 or so extant drawings, each an unmediated vision from the artist's hand. His use of pencil, gouache, charcoal, ochre and earth pigments on paper represents a significant diversion from traditional artistic practices. For its time, his work was utterly modern, representing the

beginning of an artistic movement in Australia the legacy of which is still felt today. His style hinges on an immediacy and contemporaneousness that when juxtaposed with European depictions of the same time show just how deep the disjuncture was between white and black. European depictions of the landscape were nearly always literal depictions of a horizon line, but Barak painted the landscape more conceptually, flattened to two dimensions, with animated dancing figures and animals. During his life Barak took his role as leader very seriously and was committed to the rights of his people and to ensure they had land, sustenance, meaningful work and education. Barak's work remains a telling critique of colonialism from the inside looking out and an important archive of cultural knowledge and life on the frontier. Barak's work is a moving monument to Kulin life prior to European settlement/invasion.

One of the precedents set by Barak can be seen in Aboriginal-owned art centres, of which there are now many across Australia. In many ways Coranderrk was the first Aboriginal art centre: it was a place where women made money by weaving baskets from sedge, and Barak himself (as well as others) demonstrated boomerang throwing, told stories and made drawings, all for the marketplace. Aboriginal art centres exist today as places where Aboriginal artists are supported to produce art for the art market. The sale of Aboriginal art to Europeans has been a pivotal economic opportunity for Aboriginal people and one of the few ways in which they have been able to maintain agency over their material culture post-colonisation.

Contemporary Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi artist Jonathan Jones honoured Barak's contribution as mediator, leader and artist through his light box installation *Untitled (Muyan)* (2011), held in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria. After spending time at Coranderrk with Wurundjeri leader Aunty Joy Murphy-Wandin, Jones produced five monolithic white-perspex rectangular light boxes for a site-specific location facing the Yarra River. They represent the many facets of Barak as well as the five clans of the Kulin nation. There are line motifs on each box, which reference the incised zigzag and herringbone designs found on parrying and broad shields throughout Australia's south-east, as well as the possum-skin cloaks in Barak's iconic image *Figures in Possum Skin Cloaks* (1898), held at the National Gallery of Victoria. On the anniversary of Barak's death, in August 1903, the installation glows yellow, signifying wattle in bloom, which Barak himself said would herald his death.

Through Barak's pictures, we observe the strength of his cultural belief and his masterful ability to communicate his knowledge to others. While the

main subject matter of Barak's work is the business of ceremony, his oeuvre provides a precious record of life both before and on the frontier. This legacy is relevant in Australia's south-east, as Judith Ryan attested when the National Gallery of Victoria held the exhibition *Remembering Barak* (2003), on the centenary of his death. Indeed, Gawirrin Gumana, a renowned and important Dhalwangu Elder from North-East Arnhem Land, in the Northern Territory, remarked to Ryan that he believed his ancestors had come from the waters of North-East Arnhem Land, 'making a long journey down to Victoria', and that they had 'passed on his sacred designs to Barak who shared kinship with the Dhalwangu people'.² Barak's work is so significant that Gawirrin Gumana, one of the most esteemed Yolngu artists of our generation, immediately recognised Barak's importance and felt such a spiritual affinity that he felt united in their kinship.

This true hero of Naarm, who experienced the imposition of colonisation and dispossession and witnessed immense social change in his lifetime, was a diplomat, deeply respected and revered by all who knew him. Today Barak can be seen in Melbourne's skyline, his face incorporated into the facade of a multistorey building at the northern end of Melbourne's central business district (photograph on inside front cover). He looks out towards the Birrarung, keeping a watchful eye over Naarm.