

# Sovereign Hill Education

## Ballarat's Indigenous Heritage

### Research Notes for Secondary Schools

The Watha Wurrung are the traditional owners of the land in the Ballarat region. Although European settlement led to the demise of Watha Wurrung society, the spirit of the original people is still present, imbued in Indigenous people from other areas who, in later years, gradually replaced them. Today that spirit still survives, re-establishing and reinforcing the Aboriginal presence in Ballarat.

The Watha Wurrung language group comprised approximately 20 local bands. Their territory spread from Fiery Creek and Ballarat down to Werribee and Aireys Inlet, along the Barwon River, and across to the middle stretch of Mount Emu Creek. The Watha Wurrung were inescapably connected to the land created for them by Bunjil the Great Spirit, the Giver of Life and Customs. As its custodians, the Watha Wurrung deeply respected the land. It gave them their spiritual and ceremonial sites, their law, their artifacts, food, clothing and items of economic and spiritual exchange. The lifestyle of the Watha Wurrung can be seen today in the living areas, stone quarries, and scarred trees located around the Ballarat region.

Pastoral settlement and the discovery of gold led to a vast cultural and social transformation, not only among the Watha Wurrung, but also their neighbours, the Dja Dja Wurrung. Frontier conflict in the Ballarat region was infrequent, but the effects of dispossession and introduced diseases were devastating. The surviving members of the two groups sought to adapt themselves to their changing spiritual, cultural and physical environment. For some, this meant moving to the short-lived Aboriginal Protectorate Station near Daylesford, or taking up new forms of employment on sheep stations. Other survivors came together on the outer reaches of Ballarat, reduced to begging or modifying their traditional economy to one of selling fish, baskets and possum skins to settlers.

Ballarat's prosperity in the nineteenth century was not shared by the indigenous people of the region who were forced into a fringe-dwelling existence. Joined by Djab Wurrung people, whose country lay to the west of Beaufort, some Watha Wurrung unsuccessfully asked the government for land to farm near Mount Emu. Some took up seasonal and casual work when it was available. Despite entertaining the residents of Ballarat with a corroboree in 1867, the vestiges of once viable cultural groups were considered a nuisance, plagued by disease and alcohol. With their numbers rapidly dwindling, a few Watha Wurrung moved to the Framlingham Reserve, while others sought short term refuge at Coranderrk, a government station near Healesville.

On 23 September 1896, William (Frank) Wilson, allegedly the only surviving Watha Wurrung in the region, died in the Ballarat Base Hospital. Known in Ballarat's non-Indigenous society as "King Billy" and "the last of the Ballarat tribe", William lived his later life around Burrumbeet and Ercildoune where he was treated kindly by local farmers. He spent his final, lonely days in the shelter of a hedge. His funeral, in contrast to the loneliness of his later life and death, was a well attended, public event. He was memorialised in the Ballarat media as a "chieftain", "the last of his race". In truth, he was none of these. Indigenous society does not have 'kings' and Indigenous culture exists in Ballarat today.

*Written by John Morris, member of the Ballarat Aboriginal Co-operative.*

