



Detail of incised decoration on a wooden shield from the south-east. Collections of the Sheffield City Museum, England.

Photograph: Isabel McBryde.

Scale:  centimetres.

A MEMORIAL FOR THOMAS BUNGELEEN, 1847-1865

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The cover design for Volume 8 of *Aboriginal History* comes from a small engraving in R. Brough Smyth's *The Aborigines of Victoria*, depicting the memorial proposed for an early victim of Victoria's nineteenth century assimilation policy. This wood carving by a man of the 'Yarra tribe' was commissioned by Smyth, secretary of the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines 1860-76, and William Thomas, Protector and later Guardian of Aborigines in the Melbourne-Western Port region 1839-67. The artist had died before Smyth belatedly queried the meaning of his design, and the manager of Coranderrk Aboriginal Station had to report that the surviving:

Aborigines of the Yarra do not know what meaning he attached to the several figures; but they suppose that the men represented in the upper part . . . are friends who have been appointed to investigate the cause of the death of Bungeleen; the figures of the birds and animals (emus, lizard, wombat (?), and kangaroos) indicate that he did not die for lack of food; and the strange — somewhat obscure — forms below the hollow band are those of *Mooroops*, or spirits who have caused the death of the Aboriginal by their wicked enchantments.¹

Unpublished records² suggest the artist was Simon Wonga (Wonga, c. 1824-1874), favourite son and heir of Billibillary (c. 1799-1846), *ngurungaeta* (headman) of the Wurundjeri-balluk clan of Woiworung. Under Wonga's leadership the Woiworung and neighbouring Bunurong clans began in 1847 to negotiate new alliances with the remote and previously hostile Kurnai people of Gippsland. This drawing commemorates the beginning of contact and intermarriage between Kulin and Kurnai, as well as a Woiworung leader's kindly concern for a lonely lad who had spent his life among alien people.

Hysterical rumours of a 'captive white woman' in Gippsland (caused, Thomas was certain, by sightings of fairskinned offspring of coastal sealers) prompted a number of 'rescue' expeditions in 1846 and 1847. In February 1847 a private party brought back two Kurnai: Boondarral, 'their young king' aged twenty, and Kurrowbeek, aged nineteen, who begged Protector Thomas to stop the killings in Gippsland. But he could not prevent the official expedition led by Native Police officers which returned in July 1847 bringing three mummified hands (Kurnai charms) which were soon on sale in a chemist's shop, 'six quite young (literally children) lubras' and five hostages, Bungeleen's young family. Kin remembered him as Bunjil Laen-buke, known to frequent the lakes' outlet, headman of the Waiung clan about Lake King and Bairnsdale ('Brabralung' of central Gippsland). He died in custody at the Narre Narre Warren Native Police Barracks on 22 November 1848, aged about fifty-six. A wife aged sixteen, Moombulk, had died there in August; a second wife known as Kitty and her sons, aged two years

¹ Smyth 1878, I: 288.

² Thomas Papers; Howitt Papers; Board for the Protection of the Aborigines, Records.

and six months when seized in Gippsland,³ were then placed at the Merri Creek school under Thomas' supervision.

By March 1850 Harry and Thomas 'Bungeleen' — a corruption of their father's title and name — were the only scholars; in April Kitty 'deserted' her children to marry one of the Native Police. She died a year later. In January 1851 the boys were placed with Melbourne school teacher John T. Hinkins, whose reminiscences provide a painful record of their tuition in European habits. Harry, renamed John, and Thomas were publicly baptised 29 August 1852 with much fanfare; but after John's death on 9 January 1856 Hinkins found his brother increasingly 'uncontrollable'.⁴ When placed with the Lands Department as messenger he made several bush journeys with Protector Thomas to Wonga's camp, while the surviving Woiworung and Bunurong were vainly petitioning for a reserve where they could farm for themselves. The Protector's correspondence commended this twelve-year old 'gentleman', but when he 'got into bad company' after hours, Thomas and Hinkins squabbled about his fate. By government decision he was bonded in August 1861 to three years' service on the steamship *Victoria* and forbidden shore leave. He proved 'very useful' when the ship went to the northern coast to search for the missing Bourke and Wills Expedition, but was bitterly unhappy; the Protector urged that he be sent to the reserve on the remote Acheron river where the Woiworung had chosen to live, but by official fiat this experiment in assimilation continued. The ship's company was disbanded in August 1864 and Thomas Bungeleen

³ Thomas, Journal, 10/2/47-3/3/47; 12/7/47-28/9/47; 5/8/47-30/11/48; Howitt Papers; Howitt 1904; Howitt in Smyth 1878: I, 56-57. Contemporary records are quoted in discrepant accounts by Cuthill (1960, citing an 1875 newspaper) and Garryowen (1888: II 610) who notes that 'Boondowal' and 'Karrowutbeet' accompanied the final official expedition.

⁴ Thomas, Journal and Correspondence 1850; Hinkins 1884.



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was placed with Smyth, Secretary for Mines, to train as a draftsman.⁵ He again boarded with Hinkins, who encouraged his ambition to join the Independent Order of Odd-fellows; his admission in December 1864 was, he said, a high honour for 'the first of my race'. On 3 January 1865 he died of gastric fever, aged eighteen. He was buried in his brother John's grave at Melbourne General Cemetery.⁶ Hinkins records that children of the Sunday school he had attended 'subscribed among them enough to erect a tombstone' — 3 5s 6d.

⁵ Thomas, Journals and Correspondence 1858-64; Hinkins 1884; Smyth 1878, 1: 23-25; Board for the Protection of the Aborigines, *Annual Report* 1861-1864.

⁶ Hinkins 1884.

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