

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

BUCKLEY TAKES HIS CHANGE

By Mary Ryllis Clark, *Discover Historic Victoria*, 1996

On 6 June 1835 John Batman signed a controversial treaty with a small group of Aborigines in what became the Port Phillip District of the Colony of New South Wales. Batman traded a motley collection of items, including blankets, knives, shirts, jackets, handkerchiefs and flour, for about 202 500 hectares of land between the future Melbourne and Geelong.



The First Settlers Discover Buckley. By Fredrick William Woodhouse, courtesy of State Library Victoria.

Batman went back to his business partners in Launceston claiming to be the biggest landowner in the world. He left some of his party behind under the leadership of his friend John Helder Wedge to establish a base and explore the bay. They were camping at Indented Head in late July when 'a wild white man' walked into their midst.

He was enormous - nearly 200 centimetres tall - and deeply tanned, with long, flowing hair and a beard. He wore a kangaroo-skin cloak and carried an Aboriginal shield and spears. He seemed unable to speak any English but showed the group a tattoo on his arm with the initials 'W. B'. With Wedge's encouragement, the man gradually recovered the use of his native tongue and bit by bit told the party his remarkable story.

His name was William Buckley. He was born in 1780 in Cheshire, and at the age of 22 was convicted for receiving stolen goods and deported to Australia for life. He was one of the convicts that Lieutenant-Governor David Collins took to Sullivan Bay (Sorrento) in 1803

when the British government first attempted to establish a settlement in the Port Phillip area.

The isolation, poor soil and lack of fresh water defeated Collins and he left after a few months, but not before several convicts had disappeared into the bush. The only one who survived was Buckley, although Collins reported that they all had 'perished miserably in the woods'.

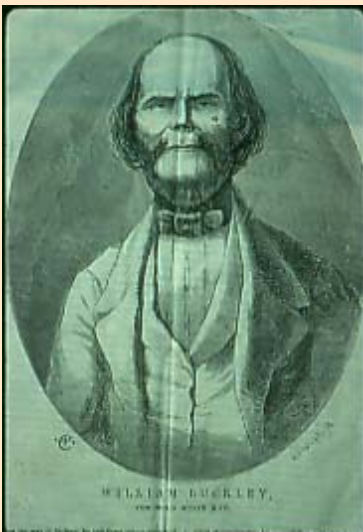
As Buckley made his way round the bay and inland towards Mount Defiance, he came across a mound of earth with a spear stuck in it. He didn't know it was a grave and took the spear, which he later claimed saved his life.

When he reached what we know as Barwon Heads, he collapsed from weakness and exhaustion. Here he was found by some of the Wathaurung people, who looked after him with great kindness. It was some time before Buckley realised that they believed he was the reincarnated spirit of one of their recently deceased kinsmen because he was carrying the dead man's spear. They gave him the

VICTORIA'S HERITAGE

same name - Murrangurk - and accepted him fully into the tribe.

Wathaurung land covered the area roughly south of present-day Werribee, including the site of Geelong and the Bellarine Peninsula. Buckley learned to lay fish traps, to hunt and to survive in the bush. He also learned the language and customs of his adopted people and was given a wife, by whom he had a daughter. In his reminiscences Buckley recalled the land around the future Geelong with great affection. There are still several significant sites in the area relating to William Buckley, such as the Buckley Park Foreshore Reserve near Point Lonsdale, where it is said Buckley hid in the cave on the beach. There is also the Buckley Falls at Geelong.



William Buckley, by Fredrick Grosse and Nicholas Chevalier. Courtesy of State Library Victoria.

Buckley spent a lot of time at the falls. The Barwon River breaks into several rivulets just before the falls so it was a great place for trapping fish and water fowl. This was one of the first places Buckley took white settlers to see.'

Buckley was very emotional about seeing white men again: 'I arrived in sight of a long pole, or staff, with the British colours hoisted upon it, and there I also saw a sort of camp. I now was overwhelmed with feelings connected with the past, the present, and the future.'

Ironically, in the long run, his meeting with the white settlers did not prove to be a good thing for William Buckley. He was eventually caught between both his worlds, the white and the black, and was never again at peace in either of them.

At first, Buckley was very useful to the Europeans. Wedge obtained a pardon for him from Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, and John Batman paid him 50 pounds to act as a go-between and explain Aboriginal customs and traditions.

Batman's treaty with the Aborigines was declared illegal by the authorities in Sydney, but when they realised the settlement of Melbourne was there to stay, they sent Captain William Lonsdale to assume command. He employed Buckley as 'Police Constable, Official Interpreter, and Attendant to point out various localities'.

Despite this, Buckley did not readjust well to European ways. He disliked the discipline of his work and was quickly upset by any criticism. He preferred bush tucker to salt pork and damper. Many of the Europeans were suspicious of him and he eventually lost the love and respect of his Aboriginal family.

However, Buckley's reminiscences and many contemporary records indicate that the 'wild white man' tried hard to establish friendly relations between the Aborigines and Europeans. He saw the inevitability of European settlement and wanted to be a bridge between the two races. In the end Buckley was distressed and disillusioned when the people he had lived with for so many years were barred from their traditional hunting and food-gathering places, such as his beloved falls on the Barwon River.

Buckley left Melbourne in 1837 feeling bitter and unhappy, and spent the rest of his life in Hobart where, in 1840, he married again. He died in 1856 aged 76 and has remained something of an enigma. Was he an illiterate convict who taught the Aborigines nothing about European ways or was he an intelligent and courageous man who for thirty years was able to adapt successfully to a totally different way of life?