

## The Wiradjuri in and around Bathurst

*Thank you to Shannon Tanner, who researched and wrote this piece whilst undertaking her Yr 12 work experience with Peter's office.*

*Thanks also to Wiradjuri elder, Gloria Rogers, for her input.*

The Calare electorate sits in the eastern portion of Wiradjuri country. The Wiradjuri people were the largest language group in NSW with an estimated population of 12,000 before white settlement.

They were known as the people of the Three Rivers: the Wambool (Macquarie), Kalari (Lachlan) and Murrumbidjeri (Murrumbidgee). Drawing a line through the present towns of Hay and Nyngan approximates the western boundary. The Great Dividing Range made the eastern Boundary, while Gunnedah and Albury mark the northern and southern extremities.

Distinctive features of the Wiradjuri people were their possum skin cloaks and the use of incised trees at burial grounds, called taphoglyphs. They believed in a creation unified by Baiame, who is all-powerful, all knowing and eternal.

At the time white people arrived in the area, Windradyne was the leader of the easterly groupings of the Wiradjuri tribe. The Aborigines watched and followed the early white explorers. They were curious at first as they thought that the white people were ghosts or supernatural beings.

A road was built into the region and Governor Macquarie set out to inspect the area, which would later be known as Bathurst. He set up his headquarters there in 1815.

The first land grants close to Bathurst were given in February 1818. Ten grants, each of 50 acres, were taken up on the Kelso side of the Macquarie River. Governor Macquarie took care to develop the area slowly, trying to promote friendly relations between the natives and the new settlers. As such, all land south and west of the Macquarie and Campbell Rivers could not be taken up by private settlers. In 1820 there was a total of 114 Europeans in the area.

Macquarie was sympathetic towards ex-convicts, known as 'Emancipists', and this attracted a great amount of rivalry from the wealthy graziers and officers known as the 'Exclusionists.' In response to complaints to England, Commissioner John Thomas Bigge was sent out to examine and report on the state of affairs. Based on Bigge's report, a new system of land tenure, whereby land also became available for sale, was implemented by the British Government in 1821.

In response to this and ill health, Governor Macquarie resigned.

The new Governor, Sir Thomas Brisbane, left the administration to John Oxley and Major Frederick Goulburn. They encouraged 'free' settlers to the Bathurst area, and much of the land along the Fish and Macquarie Rivers was taken up. Naturally, this land was in areas through which the Wiradjuri had hunted, and more importantly, included areas of great social and sacred significance to them.

Up until then the Wiradjuri people had been described as “timid, inoffensive and friendly”. However more and more of their land was being taken and more white people were settling.

Between October 1823 and January 1824 relations between the white and Wiradjuri peoples deteriorated. By 1824, the European population had risen to 1267 and whites were occupying an area of approximately 100km wide by 200km long. By 1825, 91,636 acres of land had been cleared and fenced.

The Wiradjuri began to attack the settlers' livestock as their natural meat diet of kangaroo and possum began to diminish. Occasionally shepherds who tried to protect their stock were killed also. Windradyne was captured under the instructions of Major Morisset in 1824, after two bullocks were killed on a Government farm. He was put in prison for one month and returned to his people with renewed strength to continue the fight for freedom.

By this time most settlers saw all Aboriginal people as the enemy and were committed to their elimination. Numerous massacres took place as white soldiers shot Aborigines on sight. Food poisoned with arsenic was cooked and left out for the Aborigines to eat, killing many. Although some of the settlers were sympathetic towards the Wiradjuri people, the killing continued without punishment, and no official records of any of the massacres were kept.

The Wiradjuri people fought back by killing settlers who had poisoned or killed other members of the tribe. They were not cold-blooded killers, and only took lives under Wiradjuri law. However they were fighting a losing battle, and so Windradyne organised more attacks on the white soldiers.

On 14 August 1824 Sir Thomas Brisbane proclaimed martial law west of Mount York. This law was used to justify every atrocity and massacre as it gave the whites the right to kill the Wiradjuri people with no fear of standing trial. Hundreds of Aborigines were killed.

In December 1824 Windradyne and his people travelled over 194kms into Parramatta. He had decided to speak with the Governor to try and end the merciless killings of his people. Martial law was thereby ended after 4 months.

Windradyne died in 1835 after being wounded in a fight. He was taken to the Bathurst District Hospital, but he returned to his people and died after gangrene set into his wounds. He was buried on the Suttor property of Brucedale in a sacred burial ground. The Suttor family had always been respectful of the Wiradjuri people. They had learned their language and had been regarded as friends by Windradyne.

One hundred and twenty years later, the family erected a memorial over the grave.

The surviving Bathurst Wiradjuri people split up. Some of them stayed in the Bathurst area while others travelled further west and south to other Wiradjuri country.

The remaining Bathurst Aborigines tried to retain their traditional lifestyle but food had become scarce, and disease and alcohol added to their plight. By 1850, the

Wiradjuri around Bathurst had all but disappeared. The Aboriginal Protection Board continued to forcibly remove people from their traditional lands and children were still taken from their parents until 1972.

The Wiradjuri in other areas maintained the struggle, combining with surrounding tribes to continue their fight for justice.

### **References**

Coe, Mary, *Windradyne: a Wiradjuri Koorie*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1989.

Elder, Bruce, *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Australian Aborigines since 1788*, Child and Associates Publishing Pty Ltd, Frenchs Forest, 1988.

Grassby, Al, and Hill, Marji, *Six Australian Battlefields: The Black Resistance to Invasion and the White Struggle Against Colonial Oppression*, Angus and Robertson Publishers, North Ryde, 1988.

Salisbury, T, and Gressner, P.J., *Windradyne of the Wiradjuri: Martial Law in Bathurst in 1824*, Wentworth Books Pty Ltd, Surry Hills, 1971.