

Windradyne: warrior who saved his people from genocide

By ANDREW MEENAHAN

April 27, 2015, 4 a.m.

PROUD HISTORY: Wiradyuri elder Dinawan Dyirribang is a descendant of Windradyne.

SENSING the so-called Black War of 1824 was a lost cause, the noble Wiradyuri warrior Windradyne gathered a handful of his surviving people and walked 300 kilometres across the Blue Mountains and into the heart of enemy territory.

There, wearing a hat emblazoned with the word PEACE, he presented himself to Governor Thomas Brisbane, who was hosting his annual Parramatta feast.

Thus, Australia's shameful sole period of martial law came to an end, possibly preventing the extermination of one of Australia's largest Koori tribes.

But rather than be celebrated as a powerful symbol of goodwill and understanding between the original inhabitants and the invading white settlers, this moment in history has largely been ignored and forgotten.

Bathurst, Australia's oldest inland town, next week celebrates its bicentenary – 200 years since Governor Lachlan Macquarie proclaimed the settlement on May 7,

1815.

The date is also significant in Wiradyuri culture, but not as a celebration. "We want to remember what happened on that day," said Dinawan Dyrribang, a descendant of Windradyne and an Elder of the Bathurst Wiradyuri and Aboriginal Community. "It was a day we exchanged trinkets and a flag was raised, but there was no treaty signed and no agreement by the settlers to live under our laws.

"It was the day they stole our land and our sovereignty."



One of the finest looking natives we have seen in this part of the country. He is not particularly tall but much stouter and more proportionably limbed than the majority of his countrymen; which combined with a noble looking countenance and piercing eye, are calculated to impress the beholder with other than disagreeable feelings towards a character who has

been so much dreaded by the Bathurst settler. Saturday is, without doubt, the most manly native we have ever beheld. – SYDNEY GAZETTE, December 30, 1824

If Windradyne, nicknamed Saturday by his enemies, had been a Zulu warrior, such as Shaka, or an Apache Chief, such as Geronimo, his name would have been similarly etched in folklore, but in Australia, the prevailing wisdom is that the settlers met only token resistance as they stole the land from the original Australians.

This may have been the case in many areas of the new colony, but in Bathurst the Wiradyuri mounted a fierce guerrilla-like war that forced the governor to take the extraordinary step of suspending normal governance to legalise the slaughter of Koori resistance fighters under the protection of martial law.

Under martial law, white settlers west of Mount York (near Mount Victoria in the Blue Mountains) were able to kill Wiradyuri people without fear of having to stand trial.

Although the proclamation said “helpless women and children are to be spared” a news report on an incident recorded in the normally conservative Sydney Gazette on June 10, 1824 documents otherwise: “... but the only

horde they fell in with comprised three women; and without questioning the propriety of such a step, immediately dispatched the inoffending creatures, notwithstanding they were females! Heaven will not readily absterge so foul a stain."

“THE SOLDIERS CAME THROUGH IN A LINE AND FORCED OUR PEOPLE OVER A CLIFF.”
”

One question that does not seem to have been seriously considered by historians is, what would have happened if Windradyne had not surrendered? How far would Governor Brisbane have pushed in what the Sydney Gazette described as “an exterminating war”? History is written by the victors but Wiradyuri researcher and author Mary Coe, in her highly regarded book on the Bathurst wars Windradyne, a Wiradjuri Koorie, makes a strong case that declaring martial law was an attempt at genocide.

She cites many brutal attacks and even massacres, including one at Billywillinga northwest of Bathurst, where soldiers used food as a bait to lure mainly women and children into an ambush, where they were slaughtered by open fire.

Dinawan Dyrribang leads tours of sacred sites and

places of historical significance including another massacre site, Bells Fall Gorge.

"The soldiers came through in a line and forced our people over a cliff," he said. "There were other massacres at Clear Creek and in the Capertee Valley where the men tried to draw the soldiers away from the women and children but they went in and killed them anyway."

But the resistance fighters were no easy beats. They used stealth and speed to attack and kill settlers and stock at Millah-Murrah, Warren-Gunyah and Mill Post. The white people were not used to such dogged and inspired warfare from the native forces.

Windradyne sent for reinforcements from surrounding districts and, together with fellow leaders Blucher from the northwest and Old Bull from the south, they formed a council of war to plan their strategy.

With 600 warriors, they split into smaller divisions and employed swift guerrilla-style raids before utilising their knowledge of the bush to move to another district and strike again. The white men did not like to venture too far from settlements and were cumbersome in the bush so the Kooris were able to surround several Redcoat parties and attack on their own terms.

But, inevitably, force of numbers and modern weaponry

began to take its toll, leading to Windradyne's pragmatic decision to end the fight.

The incident that first radicalised the young leader epitomises the lack of understanding between the two cultures.

A group of Wiradyuri people, including Windradyne's wife and family, gratefully accepted a farmer's gift of potatoes as they passed a vegetable garden on the flats of the Macquarie River.

They must have enjoyed this white man food because they returned the next day and helped themselves to another batch, believing, of course, that the land was for the benefit of all and the produce was to be shared. The Wiradyuri, after all, had shared their land with the squatters, albeit without any choice.

The farmer was outraged and with help from some neighbours chased the bewildered and confused natives from the land, shooting many of them dead, including Windradyne's wife.

As Mary Coe wrote: "To see his family, his loved ones shot down in front of him was more than he could take. It was the last straw; he would take no more of white man's cruelty against his people. He would avenge his family and his brothers and sisters under Wiradyuri law." Dinawan Dyrribang would like to see a monument

erected overlooking the potato garden site to recognise the Wiradyuri struggle. Ironically, this would be a hundred metres or so from where Governor Macquarie first hoisted the flag on proclamation day in what is now Bicentenary Park, the focus of this year's celebrations.

"It's about building bridges now. It's not about finger pointing, but we need to talk about the war and the killings. Until that happens there can be no real understanding," Dinawan Dyrribang said.

There is certainly little empathy or understanding reflected in an iconic Bathurst statue erected after World War 1 that takes pride of place in the showpiece town square, Kings Parade, a few metres from the carillon that honours fallen soldiers. It depicts a Koori kneeling in subservience at the feet of the explorer and surveyor, George Evans.



WRONG MESSAGE: The Evans Memorial in Kings Parade featuring a subservient Koori at the feet of the 'great white

man'. 'I am offended by this statue and so are my people,' says Wiradyrui elder Dinawan Dyrribang.

"I am offended by this statue and so are my people," said Dinawan Dyrribang, who seemed troubled, nevertheless, by the question of its removal.

"Well . . . it does show the attitude of the people of the time. I am not sure if it should be destroyed. They did build the monument. That did happen.

"I don't believe you should paint history nice like the white man has done. You have to be truthful."

Dinawan Dyrribang insists such honour - typified by Windradyne's extraordinary surrender - guided Wiradyuri rules of combat, in contrast to the ruthless and bloodthirsty cruelty of the colonials. "The white people killed indiscriminately," he said. "But under tribal law, we only attacked the individual who had done wrong."

This is evidenced by the experience of the Suttor family, squatters of the day who still have substantial land holdings in the district. William Henry Suttor, a settler who took the time to understand the original landowners – even learning their language – was one of

the first white people an enraged Windradyne came across after the potato field incident.

Salisbury and Gressor's research paper on the Wars quotes Suttor's son's account of this meeting: "The blacks were troublesome at Bathurst in those days, the cause very frequently was their ill-treatment by the whites. No wonder reprisals took place.

Our hut was one day surrounded by a large party of blacks, fully equipped for war, under the leadership of their great fierce chief and warrior, named by the whites 'Saturday'. There was no means of resistance so my father, then a lad of eighteen years, met them fearlessly at the door. He spoke to them in their own language in such a manner as not to let them suppose he anticipated any evil from them. They stood there, sullen, silent, and motionless. My father's cheerful courage and friendly tone disarmed animosity. They consulted in an undertone, and departed as suddenly and noiselessly as they came.

... They never molested man or beast of my father's. He had proved himself their friend on previous occasions but if at this time he had shown mistrust or hostility

they would certainly have killed him.”

The link between the Suttor family and Wiradyuri people remains strong today. Windradyne is buried on the family’s property, Brucedale, located north of Bathurst near the settlement of Peel and the Suttors generously allow visits to the site by appointment.

Although he surrendered the war, Windradyne’s bold confrontation of his enemies in Parramatta was ultimately victorious as it exposed the actions of his enemies and prompted the Earl of Bathurst, who was not satisfied with the communication regarding the imposition of martial law, to relieve Governor Brisbane of his post. Within a few days the Governor’s loyal servants, Colonial Secretary Major Frederick Goulburn and Major James Morriset were also sacked.

Mary Coe argues their sacking was a direct result of their actions in the war, but this is hard to substantiate. A more likely reason for the sacking surrounds issues over land grants and the handling of the Black Wars may have been a minor contributing factor.

The circumstances of Windradyne's ultimate death are clouded, but the most potent theory is he died in a fight over a woman.

His legacy is not totally ignored and a Bathurst suburb bears his name but the story of the wars of 1824, which have Gallipoli-like significance to Wiradyuri, have not been afforded the status they deserve in Australian history.

Ironically, even in trying to honour him in death the local historical society inadvertently insulted Wiradyuri people by erecting a monument and plaque at his grave which describes him as the "last chief of the Aborigines" because, as Mary Coe points out, "there have been a great many Wiradjuri leaders since the days of Windradyne right up to the present".

It also describes him as "first a terror, but later a friend to the settlers". Mary Coe again questions the description of him as a terror: "Windradyne was trying to defend his land, his people, his culture against the invading forces and in the end, if he had continued his armed resistance against them, the whites would have surely killed all of his people.

“Windradyne is a true patriot to the Koori people of Australia.”