The face of William Barak looks out across Melbourne city from the front of a tall apartment block. Of course, this is not the real William Barak, but a huge 85-metre-tall portrait of him. The real William Barak lived more than one hundred years ago. Although he is not as well known today, in the nineteenth century he was one of Australia’s most famous Aboriginal people. The artwork on the building is a tribute to this remarkable man.

William Barak is best known as an Aboriginal leader and artist, but he was also a storyteller, singer, boomerang expert and guardian of Wurundjeri (say: wuh-roon-juh-ree) culture. As a young man, he worked as a policeman, then later he became a Kulin community elder and one of the founders of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve. Throughout his life, William Barak worked hard to protect the rights and culture of his people, and to create understanding between them and European settlers.

A Wurundjeri Childhood

William Barak was born in 1824, not far from modern-day Melbourne. At birth, he was named Beruk (pronounced “Barak” by Europeans). It was not until he was older and joined the Native Police Corps that he was given the first name of William. He was a member of the Wurundjeri-willam clan, one of the smaller groups that made up the Wurundjeri people. His clan lived a short distance to the north-east of what would later become Melbourne city.
The Wurundjeri people are part of the Kulin nation, who have lived in what is now the Port Phillip Bay area, Victoria, for around 40,000 years. Like all Aboriginal people, the Wurundjeri-willam existed in harmony with the land. They fished, hunted, and gathered plants and insects for food. They used the skins of the possums they hunted to make clothing. They also looked after the land and were careful never to take too many animals or plants from any one place. Their year was divided into seven seasons. Each season they travelled a few kilometres, following different kinds of food that were available, such as birds’ eggs in spring and eels in summer.

There were parts of the countryside that were important to the Wurundjeri people for spiritual reasons. They had a strong connection with the land where they lived and thought of that land as a part of themselves. There were certain places that they believed held strong powers, where they would conduct special ceremonies. Many of these ceremonies were very important for children, and marked their change to adulthood. These ceremonies helped young people to understand their culture and become full members of their community.

For the first few years of his life, Barak grew up in this traditional way. As well as living on the land, he also took part in ceremonies to gain knowledge. However, when he was about 12 years old, all this came to an end and his world changed forever.
European Settlement

Large parts of New South Wales and Tasmania had been settled by Europeans in the early 1800s, but few settlers had come to Victoria. In 1835, John Batman, a grazier from Tasmania, signed a treaty with the heads of local Kulin communities, allowing Europeans to rent land around the Yarra River and start a settlement. This settlement was to become Melbourne. It is believed that William Barak, who was the son of one of the community heads, was present when the treaty was signed. Although Europeans thought this treaty gave them permanent access to the land, it is unlikely that Aboriginal people had the same view. They did not speak English, and did not understand what the treaty was about.

Local Indigenous peoples, including the Wurundjeri, were soon stunned to see thousands of Europeans flocking to the area. Within a few years, the Europeans had taken land for farms, built roads, chopped down forests, polluted waterways and killed large numbers of native animals. These actions meant that Wurundjeri people no longer had access to their usual sources of food. It became difficult for them to travel from place to place to hunt and gather, and even when they did, a lot of their food had disappeared. The effects of European settlement were so severe that large numbers of Wurundjeri people soon died from starvation. Many more died from diseases brought by Europeans, such as smallpox, measles and influenza.

There was little left for the Wurundjeri people who survived. They had lost their land, their access to local food, their traditional way of life and many family members. Those who remained had to rely on Europeans for food and shelter. While a few worked for the new settlers as servants, shepherds or farmhands, most of them lived in poverty. Some were forced to beg on the streets of the new town of Melbourne. In the space of two or three years, the traditional world that the Wurundjeri people had known was wiped away. Europeans now controlled everything and could decide what was right and wrong. Under their laws, well-fed Europeans were allowed to kill native animals for sport. At the same time, starving Wurundjeri people could be shot or hanged for the “crime” of taking sheep, cattle or chickens for food.

The Young Barak

Very little is known about how William Barak survived these devastating times. However, it is known that in 1837, at the age of about 13, he started attending school at a mission station on a site that is now part of Melbourne’s Royal Botanic Gardens. This settlement was promoted as helping local people, but it intended to “civilise” them by making them more like Europeans. Families from various parts of the Kulin nation were encouraged to live at the site for free and receive three meals each day in return for help with gardening. A school was set up to teach their children the English language, and aspects of European culture and religion.
A few years later, when he was in his late teens, Barak joined the Native Police Corps. The Native Police Corps was made up mainly of local Aboriginal men, but led by European soldiers. The local people were used as trackers to help locate criminals and missing cattle. This police force was set up with the aim of keeping young Aboriginal men in steady employment, making use of their skills and, once again, encouraging them to become more like Europeans. Barak stayed with the Native Police Corps for about 10 years, until 1853. Later, he sometimes worked as a tracker for the Victorian police. He was even sent to track the Ned Kelly gang a number of times in the 1870s.

Searching for Somewhere to Live

After leaving the Native Police Corps, William Barak moved to the Cathedral Ranges, in north-east Victoria, settling near the Acheron River. With a group of Kulin people, including his wife, Lizzie, Barak attempted to create a reserve of land where they could live quietly and farm. Although the government agreed to this, the local settlers did not. They believed the land was too valuable for Aboriginal people. The settlers wanted to move the Kulin farmers to another place where the land quality was poor and the climate very cold. After a while, Barak, his cousin Simon Wonga and many others who had been living on the Acheron River reserve decided to leave in search of somewhere else to settle. They walked south, looking for somewhere better to live. In March 1863, they found a place at Badger Creek, near Healesville. They named it “Coranderrk”, after a local flowering plant.

Coranderrk

Forty Kulin people walked to Coranderrk in 1863. The government gave them permission to live there, and appointed a European manager to be in charge of the station on the Coranderrk reserve. By June 1865, the community had grown to over a hundred. The leader of Coranderrk was Barak’s cousin Simon Wonga, the most senior man and a Wurundjeri elder. Wonga and Barak worked closely with John Green, the first manager, and his wife, Mary, to manage the station. They made sure the land was planted with wheat, vegetables and fruit trees, and that cows were being kept for milk. Within the next 10 years, more crops were planted and 32 cottages were built, as well as a bakery, a stable, a storeroom and a schoolroom for the children.
Shortly after Barak and his family arrived at Coranderrk, Barak's wife, Lizzie, died, and two years later he married again. He and his second wife, Anne, had a son, David. During this period, Barak became a Christian, but he also began to spend more time promoting his own culture through traditional storytelling, teaching boomerang skills and painting pictures that illustrated Wurundjeri ceremonies and customs. The government did not allow the people who lived in reserves to hold traditional ceremonies or celebrations, which often involved music and dancing, and were known as “corroborees”. This meant it was difficult for Aboriginal people to pass on knowledge in traditional ways. However, Barak was determined to do everything he could to protect his culture and hand it on to the next generation.

**The Struggle for Coranderrk**

After 10 years of stability, the situation at Coranderrk changed. The government board in charge of Aboriginal reserves wanted to move the people from Coranderrk and sell the land. John and Mary Green spoke out against this and were removed as managers. Shortly after, the leader, Simon Wonga, died. Living conditions deteriorated because the board stopped providing resources for the reserve, and many people became ill. It was at this difficult time that William Barak became Coranderrk's leader.

Barak was determined to save Coranderrk and to retain John and Mary Green, who had played a key part in Coranderrk's success. When letters and appeals to the board in charge of Aboriginal reserves did nothing, Barak decided to take a more radical approach. In 1875, along with some others, he walked 60 kilometres from Coranderrk to Parliament House in Melbourne to meet with members of parliament. He wanted the reserve to become a permanent home, controlled by the community, for the people living there.

The Chief Secretary of the government, Graham Berry, was supportive and helped to stop the sale of the land, although he was unable to have John and Mary Green reinstated. Berry became a strong ally of Barak and Coranderrk, along with Anne Bon, a landowner from a nearby estate. They supported Barak each time the reserve was threatened. Barak made the same journey twice more in the next five years. During his stays in Melbourne, he made a number of important friends, including the future Prime Minister of Australia, Alfred Deakin.

In 1881, worried again that the reserve was to be sold, Barak and 22 other men from Coranderrk made the journey to Melbourne once more. This time, following their protests, a government inquiry was held. The inquiry recommended that Coranderrk be made a permanent reservation for Aboriginal people and that it should be independent from the government board that ran it. While this was good news, it was overshadowed by bad news for Barak, as his wife and 14-year-old son had both died from illnesses while the inquiry was taking place.
Later Years at Coranderrk

William Barak had become a well-known figure from his trips to Melbourne to defend Coranderrk, and visitors came from far and wide to meet him. They came not just to hear his stories and songs, but to see his artwork and to watch his displays of spear and boomerang throwing, and fire making. He was often invited to Government House in Melbourne to meet important guests and share Wurundjeri culture. Barak had always wanted to be able to pass on as many of his traditions as he could to younger Aboriginal people. He also believed it was important to share these traditions with Europeans, to help preserve knowledge and to create better understanding between cultures. At the age of 68, Barak married for the third time. Sadly, his wife, Sarah, died four years later. Although he lived the last eight years of his life without family, Barak had the close community of Coranderrk and the comfort of knowing that he was living on his traditional Wurundjeri land. He died there on 15 August 1903, just as the wattle came into bloom. He was 80 years old, and although he had not moved a great distance during his lifetime, he had lived in two very different worlds.

Retell this Information Report
Read this information report again. Record yourself as you retell the information report. Listen to the recording.
Check! Did you remember most things in the information report?

Questions about William Barak
1. Why was artwork on a huge building chosen as a tribute to William Barak?
2. Why is storytelling an important part of Aboriginal culture?
3. What is the role of elders in an Aboriginal community?
4. How did Aboriginal people preserve their land?
5. How did spiritual life affect William Barak?
6. Why did the Europeans force Aboriginal peoples to sign treaties?
7. How did the pollution of waterways affect Indigenous peoples?
8. Why did so many Wurundjeri people die from diseases brought by Europeans?
9. Why was European law so dominant?
10. Why were local Aboriginal people effective as trackers for the Victorian police?
11. Why was Coranderrk referred to as a ‘reserve’?
12. William Barak had lived in two different worlds during his lifetime. Which world had the greatest effect on him? Why?

Vocabulary
Replace the adjective ‘radical’ in this sentence: When letters and appeals to the board in charge of Aboriginal reserves did nothing, Barak decided to take a more radical approach.