

Government House

Unveiling of Statue to Balbuk (Fanny Balbuk Yooreel)

Address by the Honourable Kim Beazley AC Governor of Western Australia

Wednesday 8 June 2022

Speech

I would firstly like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet – the Whadjuk Noongar people – and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

That acknowledgement has special resonance today as we gather to remember the life of a remarkable Western Australian woman, Balbuk.

I am deeply grateful for Aunty Liz Hayden and Aunty Milly Penny for the help that they and many others have given to this project.

Not only is this significant as it is the first statue of an Aboriginal Australian woman to be erected in Perth's CBD, it is the first statue of any woman! With plans afoot for a similar tribute to Edith Cowan, a plan that I support, I am hopeful that this will be the first of many.

I will describe Balbuk as others saw her and recorded her life, but before I do, I want to say something about our purpose here today and express my gratitude to many who have advised along the way.

We need to comprehend the complexity of our history. There were many dispossessed by our expansion and settlement here, and in different ways, made their anger felt.

We need to incorporate them in our memory and our understanding. This is particularly important as we move towards the 200th anniversary of British presence and claim.

We have many memorial reminders of that advent. Very little of the resistance to it.

Here was the heart of the incursion. Balbuk protested at the heart.

Historian Bob Reece observes that Balbuk was: “the last full-descent woman of Kar’gatta, the Bibbulmun name for the Kings Park area of Perth”.¹ Her life story is a compelling snapshot of how life was lived by local people and the impact of white settlement here. Elders describe hers as a story of defiance and determination.”²

The statue we unveil today reveals her striking appearance. She was described by historian Daisy Bates as “fine looking... strong-limbed and sturdy.”

“Her great passionate, masterful eyes were set in a face marvellously changeful in expression, and wonderfully attractive when the light of friendship and affection illumed it.”

She was not, however, someone to be trifled with, “capable of such fierce and quick changes under varying emotions, that amongst her people she was ever more feared than liked.”³ She was a fierce and authoritative woman.

In 1840 she was born of the Balbuk people, whose traditional hunting lands stretched as far north as Gingin, south to Fremantle and swept along the Derbarl Yerrigan or Swan River.

¹ <https://www.journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/1038>

²

https://web.archive.org/web/20150411173046/https://perth.wa.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Fighting%20for%20families,%20country,%20rights%20and%20recognition_0.pdf

³ Aboriginal Perth – Bibbulmun Biographies and Legends by Daisy Bates p88

Balbuk's life is significant as she and her grandparents have strong cultural links to this whole area. From his favourite camp beside the freshwater spring near Kings Park on Mounts Bay Road, her grandfather witnessed the arrival of Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick Irwin, cousin of James Stirling.⁴

When Irwin chose to set up camp very close to the family, Yal'goonga "quietly remov(ed) himself and his belongings to another camp... to make way for them."⁵ The newspapers of the time made mention of his peaceable and kindly disposition. It is worth recalling that first contact made here was not met with violence or hostility, but with grace.

From her earliest days, Yal'goonga's granddaughter, Balbuk, walked between worlds.

As a child, she lived a traditional life with her family, fishing and gathering local fruits, but also spent time playing happily with the children of white settlers.

Although she was immersed in both cultures, Balbuk's strong mind and determined nature soon saw her collide with both traditional and white law.

There was fierceness in the strength of her convictions and she was fearless in their defence.

In her later years, after time spent away, Balbuk moved back to her traditional home place, which had changed much since her youth.

By then it was taking shape as the early city of Perth. The swamplands near here and at the site of what is now the Perth central railway station were being fenced off

⁴ Source: Ryan, J. C., Brady, D., & Kueh, C. (2016). Where Fanny Balbuk Walked: Re-imagining Perth's Wetlands. *M/C Journal*, 18(6).

⁵ Aboriginal Perth – Bibbulmun Biographies and Legends by Daisy Bates p78

and built upon, with no regard for how the Balbuk people moved through and used the lands.

Balbuk believed that these lands near Government House included the site where her grandmother was buried. Once fences were erected here, she would complain loudly to the officials here and demand access to the site. At the railway station, she would break down the early fencing they had erected so that she could walk along her traditional pathways as her ancestors had always done.

Her loud protests about the taking of her homelands and its appropriation by European settlers made Balbuk one of Western Australia's earliest Aboriginal land rights activists.

A fierce warrior for her people, sadly in her older age, like many of her contemporaries, she suffered greatly due to the loss of her traditional way of life.

Without access to hunting and gathering, she was reduced to begging for food and beer from the settlers, who were compassionate to her plight.

A historian of the time recalls: "She was understood and sympathised with, notwithstanding her ungracious manner, by those old white settlers in whose midst she had spent her childhood, who knew her history and that of her people, and who felt deeply with her in her...isolation."⁶

She passed away in 1907 in Perth hospital at the age of 65 years. Upon hearing of her death, Balbuk's relatives uttered the poignant words: "her heart has ceased to heat."

Balbuk's fiery spirit, and her importance as an activist for her people, live on.

⁶ Aboriginal Perth – Bibbulmun Biographies and Legends by Daisy Bates p78

Not far from here, a riverside walk that marks the path of one of her regular wanderings has been named “Balbuk Way.” And here today we unveil a statue of her that depicts how she looked to those who saw her as a regular figure walking through early Perth, with her digging stick.

The path of her traditional walking track is depicted at this memorial, and its natural curves and lines stand in contrast to the stark gridlines of our City’s built landscape.

I thank everyone who assisted in the design and creation of this memorial, many of whom are here with us today, and those who have joined us to celebrate her life.

Among these, I want to give special thanks to the designers and creators of this work, Smith Sculptors. Unfortunately, Charles Smith and Joan Walsh-Smith are unable to be with us today, but we are very grateful for the time and love they poured into this work. This follows public art installations they have done around WA including the memorials to the HMAS Sydney II in Geraldton, the Lock Hospital Tragedy in Carnarvon, to name a few, and other commissions in Canberra and overseas.

Their carefully rendered vision of Balbuk is a lasting reminder that her people’s connection to this place endures.

We recall that long before our forebears imposed boundaries and structures and buildings, this place had life and people, movement and activity.

Her story resonates with many Aboriginal Australians who find themselves walking between worlds, navigating two cultures, and seeking – as Balbuk did – to find their own path between.

Her resolute defence of her rights and connection to country inspires us to maintain our fire and to fight for what we believe in, as she did.

I am proud to witness the unveiling of this statue of Balbuk.

In dedicating this statue, we remember and acknowledge her as a descendant of the original Swan River people, whose ancestors are buried in this area and who lived peacefully upon these lands for millennia.

I invite our guests to come forward to unveil the statue.