

Yagan – An Unrecognised Legend.

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Descriptor

“Yagan – an unrecognised Legend” explores how figures in history can become legends over time and how our view can alter with more information. It focuses on Yagan and his significance in the settlement of Western Australia and the failure of our society to date to fully recognise his contribution and importance.

Yagan – An Unrecognised Legend.

Yagan “was the first man in W.A. to promote reconciliation between the English invaders and those who have been in occupation of this land for the previous 40,000 years.” (Colbung, 1995: 3). This claim would suggest a legendary status; however, the name Yagan is still largely unknown in Australian society or worldwide. Hasluck identified “Yagan the native patriot, unknown to history” (1961: 33). Yagan has been compared to many notable figures in history: William Wallace (CB, 1922: 34) (Hasluck, 1961: 33), a black Robin Hood (Durack, 1964: i), Caesar, Alexander the Great and Napoleon (Gary, 1947: 8). While these comparisons to European legends provide a hint of the man and his contribution to his people there is no widespread legend of Yagan in oral history or literature. In 1829 a new British colony was founded on the Swan River, Western Australia. The few references in historical texts show the significant role Yagan played in the interaction between the white settlers and the indigenous Nyungar of Western Australia (Darlington and Smithies et al, 2013: 128). This is; however, where facts, history and legend appear to diverge. A legend is what an event or person symbolises to people and often appears to become of greater historical significance than the facts. There is currently no legend of Yagan but it may develop as Australian society moves further towards reconciliation and gains a greater understanding of Yagan’s story.

On 1 June 1829 the British transport ship, *Parmelia* arrived in Western Australia to form a new colony on the Swan River. First interactions with the indigenous people were friendly with trading of fish and game for flour and bread (Cormick, 2003:1). Despite the existence of the indigenous people the British Crown claimed the land was terra nullius, the legal concept that it belonged to no one and could be taken without permission. Captain James Stirling proclaimed the Nyungar people British subjects. These views shaped future policy denying the Aboriginal people of their land and traditions. The settlers viewed Aboriginal people as nomads with no connection to the land and did not understand their reliance on the land. As settlement expanded, the indigenous population was forced to take food from the settlers by hunting stock that grazed on their traditional lands and taking crops that had replaced their traditional foods. Although food sharing practices were quite natural to the Nyungar, this was regarded by the British as theft and this cultural misunderstanding led to direct conflict.

The story of Yagan emerges from the clashes between the settlers and indigenous people arising over land use and food resources. Yagan was part of the Nyungar tribe, son of Midgigoroo, chief of the tribe in the district Beeliar, the region named by the indigenous people south of Perth bounded by the Swan River, Canning River and the sea. (Hasluck, 1961, 33). In 1831 a Nyungar was shot having taken potatoes from a settler's crop. A group of Nyungar people, including Yagan, sought justice for the killing and a settler, Enion Entwhistle, was killed during the resulting attack. Mary Durack acknowledged that "No son of the Bibblumum would kill a white man if a white man did not kill a native first." (1964: 17). A second incident in June 1832, with the killing of a settler named Gaze, resulted in Yagan being identified by the authorities as being responsible. He was declared an outlaw and a reward of £20 was offered for his capture. Later in 1832 Yagan was captured and Robert Lyon Milne, a settler, argued for Yagan to be treated as a prisoner of war to save him from execution. Yagan was exiled on Carnac Island where Lyon had the responsibility of "civilising him". (Cormick, 2003:1). After six weeks Yagan escaped. Tensions continued to grow and further killings of settlers and indigenous people, including both Yagan's brother and father, occurred. The reward for Yagan's capture increased to £30. On July 11, 1883 Yagan and another Nyungar, Heegan, were killed by brothers William and James Keats. Yagan was decapitated and his back skinned of his distinctive tribal markings. His head was sent to England. It is this act of beheading and the attempts to reclaim his head that is most well known.

The historical facts from the time provide a basis for a legend of Yagan. Yagan was compared to many European legends because of his "commanding personality; remarkable courage and steadfast determination to enforce the rights of the aborigines as he conceived them." (CB, 1922:34). Colbung identified Yagan's personality as "that of a true hero; he could be gentle, yet he could be fierce; he had a sense of give and take, and of chivalry in his dealings with whites, particularly in the sharing of game, yet when roused he became a formidable foe." (Colbung, 1995: 11). There is evidence that Yagan interacted positively with settlers attempting to build relationships by helping lost children and settlers. He also acted as a protector of women when husbands were away and helped with building and farming in the settlement (Durack, 1964:19). Yagan was identified as being responsible for coping with a disastrous bushfire and leading settlers' short expeditions (CB, 1922:34). The settlers' views of Yagan expressed at the time provide evidence that Yagan's actions were regarded as significant. Reports in the Perth Gazette from the period show that the settlers both feared and admired Yagan, describing him as "either courteous and hospitable or very menacing"

(Cormick, 2003:1). Robert Lyon Milne in convincing Commissioner Mackie that Yagan should be treated as a prisoner of war rather than executed when captured stated “I urged that they were guilty of no crime but that of fighting for their country. We call their deeds *murder*, so might they ours; but the fact was that they had a *right* to make war after their own manner” (Reece, 1970:590). Captain James Stirling is described as recognizing Yagan as “one of the most intelligent men I’ve met, black or white”. (Colbung, 1995:2). In an extract from the diary of settler George Fletcher Moore’s written on 27 May 1833 it is clear that there was an understanding of Yagan’s position and empathy for his actions. Moore describes a meeting with Yagan and provides an interpretation of his words as “You came to our country; you have driven us from our haunts, and disturbed us in our occupation: as we walk in our own country, we are fired upon by the white men; why should the white men treat us so?” (1884: 191). . Moore continued “There is something in his daring which one is forced to admire.” (1884:192). Yagan had learned the English language, his acts were retaliatory and in accordance with his own cultural laws and traditional values. He was protecting his people’s food sources and use of the land. The policy at the time however, that indigenous people were British subjects and therefore British laws applied consequently led to him being named an outlaw at the time and becoming a controversial figure in history.

The legend of Yagan did not develop, in contrast to the legends of Wallace and Robin Hood, due to the continuing misunderstanding of aboriginal culture following settlement and the struggle for reconciliation. This is evidenced by the fact that in August 1978, Sir Charles Court, the Western Australian Premier in considering a plan to erect a statue to Yagan sought the opinion of historians and the retired Governor General Sir Paul Hasluck on the status of Yagan. Sir Paul Hasluck provided advice “that it would be inappropriate to commemorate an individual, especially one such as Yagan who he acknowledged as a tragic figure but not a leader.” (Green, 1997:45) Some historians present opinions that Yagan was not a patriot fighting for his land and people and that his actions were more about taking from the settlers what he believed was his right and vengeance for those close to him who were killed. The view is presented that he does not deserve recognition as he did not unite the tribes or conduct any organised resistance (Unknown, 2009). This view contradicts the evidence from contemporaries and an article in 1922 reported in relation to Yagan “No more conspicuous figure has arisen amongst the aborigines of this island continent than this character” (CB, 1922:34).

By the late 20th century attitudes and understanding of the initial interactions between settlers and the indigenous people were beginning to change and the importance of Yagan was being recognised. The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Dr Kim Hames, in 1997 recognised in a ministerial media statement, that “Over the years, Yagan has become a symbol for Western Australian Aboriginal people, particularly those in the South West, and his importance in the reconciliation process can not be discounted” (1997). He also acknowledged that Yagan’s role provided an example and opportunity for unity and should be regarded as a “major step forward along the road to healing old rifts between Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal people.” This view mirrored the views of Ken Colbung who urged Aboriginal Elders to use Yagan’s vision as a catalyst for real reconciliation (Colbung, 1995:9). It is this recognition that will lead to the development of Yagan as a well known legend in the future. This identification of the fact that the influence exerted by Yagan reached beyond his time period and direct descendants to a wider audience is crucial in establishing a legend.

Facts, history and legends are intertwined. A society’s interpretation of history changes with different attitudes and views towards the facts at any given time. It is this interpretation that has seen the legendary status of Yagan change. At the time of settlement in Western Australia, Yagan was regarded as an admired indigenous leader. However, the legend of Yagan did not develop due to the attitudes in society. He was seen as a tragic, controversial figure but his story did not appeal to a wider audience, the need for reconciliation had not been embraced. Yagan’s status as a legend comparable to the likes of William Wallace will emerge again. This will be achieved with a greater understanding between indigenous Australians and the wider community and as the acknowledgement and need to address the injustices suffered by the First Australians grows as part of the reconciliation process. The facts support the legend of Yagan however our view of history has not. The legend of Yagan should be embraced in the future with better knowledge and understanding of his significant achievements in presenting the rights of the indigenous of Western Australia.

Annotated Bibliography

Bernard, H. (1929) Yagan.. *The West Australian*, 7 December, p.5.

A newspaper article from 1929 revealing the attitude of the day to aboriginals but identifying the different impression revealed in the Diary of Mr George Moore in regard to Yagan.

Bolton, G., Durack.M.,Erikson,R. (1978) Yagan seen as a real leader. *The West Australian*, October 12, p.53.

A letter to the Editor of The West Australian expressing surprise at the Western Australian State Government's rejection of the plan to erect a statue of Yagan and questioning why society at the time can not recognise his importance.

Bropho, R. (1997) Unity for Yagan, the known soldier. *Aboriginal Independant Newspaper*, 16 July, p. 7.

A newspaper article gaining the views of Nyungah Elder Robert Bropho in relation to Yagan and the actions to be taken on the return of Yagan's head from England. It provides an indigenous perspective of the importance of Yagan and his role as an activist.

CB (1922) An Aboriginal Wallace. *Western Mail*, 27 July, p.34.

A newspaper article from 1922 revealing the attitude of the day to aboriginals but identifying Yagan as a character that stood out and compelled respect by his courage and foresight. It outlines the story of Yagan and his interactions and the admiration and fear of him by the early settlers.

Colbung, K. (1995) *Yagan The Swan River Settlement*. Redfern NSW: Australia Council for the Arts.

A book by Bibbulman Nyongah Elder Ken Colbung AM,MBE, JP outlining his search and work for the return of the head of Yagan. It provides a view of the importance of Yagan to aboriginal people and the path to reconciliation and the failure by the Western Australian Government to recognise Yagan as a figure of importance. The book draws attention to the racism inherent in the continued retention of Aboriginal remains by British museums. It sets out Yagan's story as if told by Yagan himself, providing a valuable insight into the indigenous view of the period.

Cormick, C. (2003) Yagan: an Aboriginal resistance hero. *New Holland Update*, December 2003, p.1-2.

An article in the Official newsletter of the VOC (Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie [United East Indies Company])Historical Society setting out the story of Yagan and recognising the tragedy that it had taken the controversy over securing the return of Yagan's head to bring him to the attention of the Australian public.

Darlington, R., Smithies, G. and Wood, A. (2013) *History alive 9 for the Australian curriculum*. Milton, Qld.: John Wiley & Sons Australia.

A history text book that sets out the facts relating to Yagan and his role in aboriginal resistance. The text identifies Yagan as an aboriginal leader.

Day, G. (1933) Yagan, Wallace of the Aboriginals A stirring epic of Swan River conflict with colonists. *The Daily News*, 23 September, p.27.

A newspaper article in the context of the Commonwealth Government sending an expedition to Arnhem Land following some "murders by natives" recalling the series of hostility between settlers and Yagan in Western Australia in 1832. It sets out in detail the character of Yagan and interactions with settlers including images of aboriginal culture.

Durack, M. (1964) *Yagan of the Bibbulmun*. Edinburgh: Nelson.

A children's story book that recreates the life and times of Yagan and his tribe and their role in the early years of the Swan River settlement in Western Australia. It provides a general view into Bibbulmun tribe beliefs and way of life. It highlights Yagan's view of sharing and the settlers' impact on food and land resources and the intermediary role Yagan played between his tribe and the settlers.

Gary, J. (1947) A Black Napoleon. *Sunday Times*, 2 February, p.8,9.

A newspaper article setting out the story of Yagan and making comparisons to many European great leaders. It raises the controversy of his death given his actions were due to the impact of the settlers.

Government of Western Australia 1997. *Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Ministerial Media Statement*. [press release] 27 August 1997.

A media statement in support of the work to return Yagan's head to Western Australia. It reveals the change in Government attitude towards Yagan's role and legacy.

Green, N. (1997) The two faces of Yagan. *Sunday Times*, September 21, p.45.

Newspaper article by Guest columnist Dr Neville Green, a Perth historian representing the current attitudes towards Yagan as a hero or villain in the context of the removal of the head from the Yagan statue erected on Herrisson Island.

Hasluck, A. (1961) *Yagan the Patriot*. *Journal and Proceedings (Western Australian Historical Society)*, vol 5, part 7, 1961, pp 33-48.

A journal discussing the importance of Yagan in terms of a discussion who would be the most noteworthy Western Australian in a hundred years. It recognises that Yagan was largely unknown. The article questions whether Yagan was a patriot and considers the comparison to William Wallace by the settler Robert Menli Lyon by analysing who Lyon was and what weight could be attached to his views. The article expresses the view Yagan was not a patriot but does recognise he did draw attention to the problems of his people.

Hasluck, A. (1967) *Yagan (?-1833)*. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/yagan-2826/text4053>, accessed 13 May 2013

A biography entry summarising the life of Yagan.

Hutchings, G. (1964) A Black Robin Hood. *The Canberra Times*, 29 August, p.9.

A review of Mary Durack's book "The Courteous Savage"

Moore, G. (1884). *Diary of an early settler in Western Australia and also a descriptive vocabulary of the language of the aborigines*, London: Walbrook

(Downloaded online: <http://archive.org/details/diaryoftenyearse00mooriala>)

A primary source, a diary of Western Australian settler George Moore, provides a clear picture from a settler's perspective of the early years of settlement and interactions with indigenous people. The diary entries relating to Yagan identify a certain admiration for him and empathy for the impact of settlement on his people.

Reece, B. (1970) *A most singular man: Robert Lyon Milne Early Days Perth, WA*, v.13, pt.5, 2011: 585-606. Availability: <http://0-search.informit.com.au/henrietta.slwa.wa.gov.au/fullText;dn=201213348;res=APAFT> ISSN: 0312-6145. [downloaded 07 May 13].

A journal article discussing Robert Lyon Milne, an early settler who is regarded as an early advocate of the rights of the indigenous people. It explains his role in protecting Yagan as a prisoner of war to prevent his execution and his "civilizing" him on Carnac Island. It provides a clear interpretation of a settler's impression of Yagan and interpretation of the interactions he had.

Stokes, J. (1947) A "Wallace" Among Swan River Natives. *The West Australian*, 27 December, p.5.

A newspaper article giving an account of trial of skill between Yagan and another aborigine in January 1833 and the conflicts leading to Yagan's arrest and eventual death. It includes a drawing depicting an apparent event in which Yagan joked about his escape from Carnac Island. The article highlights the different sides of his character.

Unknown. (1833) Yagan and Heegan Two Natives Shot. William Keats, A youth speared. *Perth Gazette*, 13 July, p.110.

A newspaper article advising of the death of Yagan, Heegan and William Keats. It is a factual account of the death taken from a statement of facts by the deceased's brother James Keats. It reveals an attitude of gratification and regret. It identifies that the killing was to obtain the reward

Unknown (2009) *Yagan 1795?-1883* Pandora Archive. [online] Available at:

<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/95993/20090319-1853/nowandthen.roadsfree.com/yagan.html>

[Accessed: 5 Jun 2013].

A webpage summarising the story of Yagan from the time that he first came to the attention of the authorities in 1832 to his beheading. It sets out the story of Yagan but presents a view that he was not acting as a patriot but rather for his own purposes motivated by vengeance.