

EMINENT INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN

Great Warriors - YAGAN



It is tragic that it has taken a struggle over the skull of Noongar warrior Yagan to bring him to the attention of the Australian public, for during his life he was one of the most respected Aboriginal resistance leaders.



Portrait of Yagan, chief of the Swan River

Yagan was of the Nyungar people from south-west Western Australia, where Perth, Fremantle and Albany are now situated.

When Captain James Stirling established a colony on the Swan River in 1829, he proclaimed the Nyungar British subjects. Early reports show that the local people and the European settlers cooperated well at first, trading fish and game for bread and flour.

When the clashes did come, they were over land and resources. The Nyungar annual practice of burning the land was mistakenly seen as an act of hostility by the settlers, and the Nyungar saw the settlers' livestock as fair game to replace the dwindling stocks of native animals, which the settlers were hunting or displacing.

In 1831, a Nyungar was shot while taking potatoes from a settler's garden. Yagan was amongst the group that returned to seek revenge. A settler, Enion Entwhistle, was speared in the attack, but his two sons escaped to report the incident.

In June 1832, another man, named Gaze, was killed by Nyungar warriors. Yagan was named one of the leaders responsible and officially declared an outlaw. A reward of £320 was placed on his head.

Attacks and reprisal attacks grew. The *Perth Gazette* wrote: "The reckless daring of this desperado, who sets his life at a pin's fee, is being the subject of general observation, and we firmly believe for the most trivial offence, even with a loaded musket at his breast, he would take the life of any man who provoked him." Efforts to capture Yagan were increased, and later in 1832 he was captured.

Yagan was described as over six feet (1.8 metres) tall and possessing "a dignified bearing ... head and shoulders above his fellows, in mind as well as in body, and though a subject of terror to the white people, he yet commanded their admiration". The contradictory views of Yagan by the settlers can be seen in reports of the time that described him as either courteous and hospitable or very menacing.

Yagan was saved from execution by a settler, Robert Lyon, who argued that Yagan should be treated as a prisoner of war rather than a criminal. It is tragic that this never became a precedent for later indigenous resistance fighters.

Yagan was sentenced to exile on a rocky island off Fremantle, Carnac, where Lyon was to be responsible for "civilising" him. Lyon sympathised greatly with Yagan's fight to protect his people and his land, and he published many articles about him. Yagan did not stay in exile long, however. After six weeks on Carnac, he and his Nyungar companions stole a small boat and returned to the mainland.

Yagan was soon being pursued by the military again, after taking part in a pay-back slaying of two men who had shot a Nyungar without provocation. The reward on his head was increased to £330, but the armed patrols that scoured the countryside had no success.

The growing conflict between muskets and spears took a heavy toll on the Nyungar people. Yagan's brother, Domjuim, was killed and decapitated, and his father, Midgegooro, was captured, tried and shot. Tensions in the colony were high, with rumours that hundreds of well-armed Nyungar were mobbing to attack outlying areas.

Yagan next appeared at the farm of George Moore and demanded to know what had happened to his father. Moore wrote in his diary: "Yagan stepped forward, and leaning his left hand on my shoulder, while he gesticulated with the right, delivered a short of recitative, looking earnestly at my face. I regret that I could not understand it; I thought from the tone and manner that the purport was this: 'You came to our country; you have driven us from our haunts and disturbed us in our occupations. As we walk in our country we are fired upon by the white men. Why should the white men treat us so?'"

On July 11, 1833, with a group of Nyungar, Yagan approached two young shepherds he knew, James and William Keats, and asked them for flour. Recognising Yagan and keen for the reward, William, when he saw the chance, levelled his musket at Yagan behind his back and shot him dead. Both brothers then fled, but William was caught and speared to death.

James soon returned to the scene with an armed party. They found the body of William and, some distance away, the bodies of Yagan and another Nyungar, Heegan. Heegan was still alive and was shot in the head. Yagan's head was cut off and his tribal markings skinned off his back.

James Keats received the £330 reward, but the *Perth Gazette* criticised his actions as "a wild and treacherous act ... which it appears to us will annihilate the surest road to perfect amity — mutual confidence ... We are not vindicating the outlaw, but, we maintain, it is revolting to hear this lauded as a meritorious deed."

Nyungar resistance was to continue under leaders such as Calyute, south of Fremantle, and Weep of the upper Swan group, until the Battle of Pinjarra in 1834, when troops slew up to 50 Nyungar warriors and forced a surrender.

Yagan's head was preserved by smoking in a hollow tree stump for several months and was then taken to England by one Ensign Robert Dale. It was described as having had the hair combed, possum fur string tied around the forehead and red and black cockatoo feathers added for show.

The head was presented to the Liverpool Royal Institute for exhibition. In January 1835, London's *Literary Gazette* noted that phrenological examination had confirmed the "barbarous passions" of its owner when living.

In 1894 the head was passed on to the Liverpool City Museum, where it was exhibited until 1964, it was buried in the Everton Cemetery.

Ken Colbung, the 66-year-old descendant of Yagan who was instrumental in finding the head and having it exhumed, said the spirit of Yagan would now be able to join the continuum and could perhaps live on in a new body. His fighting spirit and stance against injustice should at least live on in our history.