

BURRUMBEEP HILL

(Neil Murray)

In March 2008 we were on our annual Healing Walk. This time we were walking the northern reaches of the Hopkins River between Ararat and Wickliffe. On the third morning out, with my dog at my heel, I walked ahead of the others for an hour then left the river and set out across a barren flood plain to investigate Burrumbeep Hill that had curious standing stones and boulders on its summit. As the ground began to steepen I scanned the country behind - but the others were not in sight. I figured they were probably a couple of kilometres back obscured in the timber that clung to the river. Breathing hard, I was bent double as I made the summit and picked my way to the base of a three metre high stone monolith. I rested with my back against it and gazed across the flood plain. The river looped neatly around the eastern base of the hill. Secret pools glistened between the red gums and reeds. I wondered what story there would have been for the place.

Prior to my ascent, I'd dislodged a stone axe with my boot at the base of a red gum tree at the foot of the hill. I knew that this place was where district clans had in 1841, met with George Augustus Robinson, their protector. They'd stamped the ground and declared passionately that the country was theirs. And they'd made their complaints clear to him; "tell the white men to stop shooting at us".

An eagle soared above me. A fox slunk through bracken then trotted off the brow of the hill, its tail floating behind its body like a stiff flame before slipping below the riverbank. Three roos were bounding slowly across the plain, lifting effortlessly one by one to clear a fence. They propped and looked back in the direction they'd come. Then I saw them too. Hominid shapes, walking upright, emerging from the tree line and starting to come across the plain towards the hill where I waited. From this distance I couldn't tell whether they wore clothes or animal skins. I was struck with a primordial recognition of ourselves as human animals sharing the landscape with other creatures. Utterly dependent-like them, on a supply of water, food and air. That despite the plethora of technological gadgetry that cocoons us in our modern world-that is what we still are.

Up on Burrumbeep hill I wait
With my back against the stone
wait for my people to come
cross the plain below

I see kangaroos moving
And the eagle flies above
Only grandfather redgums know
A hollow tree to leave my bones

In the long grass I sleep
and the wind it keeps
Constant lonely echo
old people are gone
missing from this place
Still I love them so
Only grandfather redgums know
The songs of long ago

Up on Burrumbeep hill, upon Burrumbeep hill
I wait.
Upon Burrumbeep Hill, upon Burrumbeep Hill

There at last I see them come
cross the plain below
Walking like we've done
Since the days of long ago
And I'm glad I'm not alone
In this battered land I roam
In this battered land I roam
I'm glad I'm not alone

Up on Burrumbeep hill, upon Burrumbeep hill
I wait.
Upon Burrumbeep Hill, upon Burrumbeep Hill
Up on Burrumbeep hill, upon Burrumbeep hill
I wait.

Only Grandfather redgums know
The songs of long ago