

BIRABAN (McGILL) (fl. 1819-1842), Aboriginal leader, was a member of the Awabakal or Newcastle tribe. From boyhood he was servant to an officer at the military barracks, Sydney, where he learnt to speak English fluently, and was given the name John McGill. He returned to Port Macquarie in 1821, helped Francis Allman [q.v.] to establish the new penal

settlement and proved useful in tracking escaped convicts. Known to the tribe as Biraban or 'Eagle Hawk' he assumed ceremonial leadership amongst his people, being singled out as 'tribal king' of the district under Governor Macquarie. Unlike many of these 'chiefs' who regarded their identity discs as sources of remuneration, Biraban brought dignity to the office, and lived up to his responsibilities by maintaining good relations between Aboriginals and settlers. A caricature painting of 'Magill' by the convict artist Browne, about 1819, shows him in corroboree stance.

When Rev. L. E. Threlkeld [q.v.] commenced missionary work at Reid's Mistake in 1825 Biraban became his principal assistant, and a 'mateship' based on mutual respect and affection developed between the two men. Biraban instructed Threlkeld in tribal lore and absorbed the principles of Calvinist Christianity. He gave daily instruction in the language and corrected the missionary's transcripts. After a year's work the language had been reduced to a written form and by 1829 the first draft of St Luke's Gospel had been completed. Threlkeld commended Biraban's 'intelligence and steady application' to Governor Darling who publicly honoured him at the annual conference with the Aboriginals at Parramatta in 1830 with a brass plate inscribed 'Barabahn, or MacGil, Chief of the Tribe at Bartabah, on Lake Macquarie; a Reward for his assistance in reducing his Native Tongue to a written Language'.

Biraban developed considerable enunciation skill, and assisted Threlkeld to interpret in court cases involving Aboriginals, and would have been sworn in as interpreter in his own right had the oath not precluded this. His answers to Judges Burton and Willis [qq.v.] in open court in 1834 impressed them with his ability, and Burton assumed that he was a baptized Christian in 1838. The Quakers Backhouse and Walker [qq.v.] and the American exploring expedition representatives, especially the linguist Horatio Hale, were impressed by Biraban's intelligence and failed to understand why he continued loyal to tribal customs. Though he never gave evidence of an Evangelical conversion, and was punctilious in observing his ceremonial obligations, he was regarded as living proof of the errors of phrenology and current racial theories. Archdeacon Broughton [q.v.] sent a drawing by Biraban of the steamship *Sophia Jane* (made to inform the missionary who had not seen it) to the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in London as further proof.

Threlkeld described Biraban as 'a very

valiant athletic man'. The United States explorers added that he was 'about the middle size, of a dark-chocolate colour, with fine glossy black hair and whiskers, a good forehead, eyes not deeply set, a nose that might be described as aquiline, although depressed and broad at the base'. His portrait was drawn by Agate, the expedition's artist. In October 1842 Leichhardt [q.v.] described a meeting with him: 'The two blacks . . . came into the hut and asked for some embers and a kettle. Calvert gave him some flour [which] he knew quite well how to use to make doughboys, though it was hardly edifying to see him kneading the dough and smoking his pipe at the same time. He used the kettle, which still contained the water in which Calvert had boiled two fowls, for cooking the doughboys. The two noble savages then went over to the small fire they had lit under a Eucalyptus tree, stretched themselves out lazily beside it until their meal was ready, ate without stopping until they swallowed the last scraps, and then slept until late the next morning, regardless of the somewhat showery night, but putting more wood in their little fire whenever they felt the cold'.

Backhouse also left a verbal portrait. Biraban's wife was known as Patty and was described by Threlkeld as 'pleasing in her person', 'kind and affectionate in her disposition' and shrewd and intelligent. He eulogized their domestic bliss presenting them 'reciprocally rouging each other's cheek with pigment of their own preparing, and imparting fairness to their sable skin on the neck and forehead with the purest pipeclay, until their countenances beamed with rapturous delight at each other's charms'. Patty predeceased her husband. Though Biraban absented himself frequently from the mission in order to get rum at Newcastle he remained consistently loyal. He continued to protect the settlers, and when Governor Gipps considered the formation of an Aboriginal Police Corps in 1837 he remarked, 'Make me the head of them, and not a bushranger shall escape my tribe'.

Biraban did not long survive the closing of the mission in 1842. The missionary recorded a generous tribute by way of introduction to his *A Key to the Structure of the Aboriginal Language* (1850). He was undoubtedly the outstanding Aboriginal of his time, at once preserving his tribal integrity and assimilating himself to the ways of the European.

Another notable Aboriginal from the Lake Macquarie mission was [Harry] Brown (b. 1819?) who accompanied Leichhardt on his first and second expeditions,

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and after whom Brown's Lagoons were named.

P. Cunningham, *Two years in New South Wales*, 3rd ed, 2 (Lond, 1828), 13; J. Backhouse, *A narrative of a visit to the Australian colonies* (Lond, 1843), 379; C. Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States exploring expedition 1838-1842* (Lond, 1852); J. Backhouse, *Extracts from the letters of J. Backhouse*, 3 (Lond, 1838), 64-67; L. E. Threlkeld, 'Reminiscences', *Christian Herald* (Syd), 1854-55; *Sydney Gazette*, 12 Jan 1830; B. W. Champion, 'Lancelot Edward Threlkeld', *JRAHS*, 25 (1939), 375.

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