

In 1818 the colonial outpost Bathurst was just three years old and urgently needed a second access through the rugged Blue Mountains.

Bantagran was a young English-speaking Daruk Aboriginal from Windsor, one of the five Macquarie towns along the Hawkesbury supplying the colony with grain and ships. At Kurrajong across the Hawkesbury he met a miller, Benjamin Singleton, who chose him as guide for some white men to explore a way to Bathurst by passing the Grose Valley.

As it turned out Bantagran not only saved their lives but opened an invaluable dialogue between Singleton and elders of Aboriginal (Hunter valley) tribesmen.

Taking horses early on 25 April 1818, the five Europeans left Singleton's overshop watermill at Kurrajong with Bantagran ahead. Well down Wheeny Creek Bantagran stopped Singleton's horse with a gesture and pointed excitedly to fresh footprints. 'Gabba, Mister Singleton,' he explained, and as the other horsemen approached and gazed uncomprehending Singleton repeated the news 'A white man.'

Suddenly the Daruk broke the bush silence with a great shout. They strained their ears, waiting.

From afar came a thin wavering cry of distress. Bantagran waded ahead and was standing by an inert body as the horsemen dismounted. Refreshed, the stranger explained he was a servant whose master lived at Sackville, below Windsor, and he had been lost five days without food. At the confluence of Wheeny Creek and the Colo river, they sent him with firm directions and food towards the Hawkesbury.

They crossed the Colo river and travelling north spent the night on a steep height where Bantagran had found a spring. By the Daruk's steady guidance and Singleton's pocket compass they followed a high ridge along the Mellong Range for two days, arriving at Putty on 29 April.

Determined to strike west for Bathurst, Singleton's party found themselves clambering the shoulders of stony and rough mountains of 2000 feet, and could not avoid travelling northward. At length they came to a scrubby mountain 4000 feet high which Bantagran informed them was Koorie Koodji.

They camped for the night at the north-western slopes of Koorie Koodji, bypassing steep western gullies. At about eight o'clock (2nd May) when

In Other Times...

An
Historical feature by JACK HORNER

Bantagran and the Hunter River

relaxed around the camp fire they heard the unmistakable sounds of voices and of sticks breaking. Boulders crashed towards their fire. They scattered and the five Europeans calmed their horses before taking up positions behind trees, guns cocked, uncertain of their enemies. Bantagran looked after himself.

A smaller boulder shot past. Luckily rain fell which developed into a cold hard unrelenting drizzle. Nonetheless they spent a tense night.

Next morning, having rounded Koorie Koodji, they found another huge mountain, Koorie Att-ai, blocking their path west. At ten o'clock the party fell in with more than 200 intensely curious Aboriginal people dressed in possum skin cloaks against the night's cold rain. Surprise checked the five men, but Singleton allowed Bantagran to take over.

'I know these people now,' Bantagran said quickly. 'They are Wonj-arua people. This is not my country. We just left Darkinang country. But I speak the language.'

He stepped eagerly forward and began to speak. The Europeans stood beside their grazing mounts and sighed with relief, for the people had many spears with them. But for Bantagran they might have been dead. After a silence, two leaders replied in turn. Bantagran then brought five clan leaders to Singleton: one spoke a little English, and he was introduced as Mu:pi.

MU:PI ('Mawby' in Singleton's original account) confirmed in his broken phrases that really wild country lay westward. Bantagran interpreting, this conversation followed:

MU:PI: What is your business there?

SINGLETON: We wish to find the white man's station at Bathurst. We are looking for good land and a path across the mountains for our cattle.

MU:PI (pointing dramatically north-east): Better land that way. Over there you find a river. West country, that is no good.

SINGLETON (incredulous, but too curious to contradict): How far is this river?

MU:PI: Two days.

SINGLETON: A wide river?

MU:PI: So wide, we cannot swim across 'im. We do not drink from 'im.

SINGLETON (thoughtful): I suppose that means it is salt. Which way does it flow?

MU:PI: Two days.

SINGLETON (more excited): Then it is tidal! The tide must rise and fall!

MU:PI (very friendly): Good land. The river flows that way (gesticulating east and west) with a large flat of land beside 'im.

Singleton, consulting with the explorers and Bantagran, abandoned the idea of crossing the mountains in view of what Mu:pi had reported. Furthermore, a dash to the large river seemed risky — for one thing, Bantagran was not anxious to pass through country not his own, and should anything happen to the guide the Europeans were either lost or betrayed.

So they returned on 14 May to the Wheeny Creek Mill. When Singleton reported to Governor Macquarie, he believed the river rose in Liverpool Plains (Oxley had crossed there) and ended at Port Stephens. But Bantagran was the first Aboriginal to describe the river to a local landholder, John Howe, who organised two official journeys to find it. He included Bantagran in the first and Singleton in the second. They found the river flats on 17 March 1820, and so the site of a new town, Singleton, was (St) Patrick's Plains.

Mr Jack Horner

5th July 2003

Mr Gionni di Gravio,
Archives,
Rare Books & Speciall Collections Unit,
University of Newcastle,
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Callaghan, N.S.W. 2308.

Dear Mr di Gravio,

I greatly apologise for the month's delay in answering your letter of 5th June, I have found the magazine which you requested and will now post it on to you. The article you asked for is entitled "Bantagan and the Hunter River".

Thank you for sending us the historical materials from 'Virtual Sourcebook of Aboriginal Studies in the Hunter Region' , which I found interesting to read.

At the time I wrote this particular article for the journal "Aboriginal News" of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Box 17, Woden, Canberra, I was living at East Kurrajong near Windsor, NSW. I note that I have no date for an original source, and conclude that I put the article together from more than one source. So the date of the issue of "Aboriginal News" is the date you would display as the source.

I am very happy that you wish to onclude my article% in your 'Virtual Sourcebook'. and give you my permission to include it.

Yours Faithfully,

J. Horner.
Jack Horner.