

## *Hidden in Plain View: The Aboriginal People of Coastal Sydney*

by Paul Irish

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This book, based on the recent PhD research of the author, arrives to complement the superb local studies of the Aboriginal Sydney region by half-a-dozen scholars working in the Burragorang, Botany Bay, Hawkesbury River, Georges River and Katoomba regions. I'm thinking of Jack Brook's *Shut Out from the World* (1994), Maria Nugent's *Botany Bay* (2005), Dianne Johnson's *Sacred Waters* (2007), Heather Goodall and Allison Cadzow's *Rivers and Resistance* (2009), Grace Karskens's *The Colony* (2009) and Val Attenbrow's *Sydney's Aboriginal Past* (2010), in addition to first-rate work by others like Jim Smith, Keith Vincent Smith and James Kohen. For this reason, I waited in some anticipation for the publication of this book. Although it doesn't quite match up to the others, it is a very welcome addition to Sydney Aboriginal historiography.

Despite its comprehensive title, the book is essentially a history of only a rather narrowly defined coastal region of Sydney from La Perouse to the southern shore of Sydney Harbour, and the lower Georges River.

The strongest parts of the book, and they are very strong, are those that focus on individuals. One is Mahroot ('Boatswain') who provided the sole Sydney Indigenous evidence to the 1845 Select Committee on Aborigines, and about whom Irish has been conducting textual and archaeological research for some years. Irish traces how Mahroot leased land in Matraville, surviving a number of attempts to dislodge him, meanwhile taking part in several whaling and other expeditions. Other identities about whom he provides fresh biographical information include Cora (Queen) Goosebery, Johnny Malone, Thomas Tomara, Bidy Giles and William Anan. Importantly, he traces how most of them developed relations with friendly white

people who became their defenders and protectors. Irish estimates that some 50 to 100 Aboriginal people were living in 'coastal Sydney' in 1845, this included a dozen at Camp Cove, 20 at Double Bay, 50 at La Perouse and others at Kurnell and along the Georges River. The information on the Camp Cove unofficial Aboriginal settlement, just inside South Head, and far from serious white settlement for decades, is particularly valuable. In fact, the section on individuals living between La Perouse and the southern coast of the harbour, especially in Chapter 4 'Entangled Lives 1850s–1870s', is the most useful part of the book because it is the most original. Elsewhere, Irish's history relies rather heavily on others like Goodall and Cadzow and Maria Nugent.

Irish is creditably prepared to enter controversial issues. He writes that we should not 'replace the erroneous idea of Aboriginal absence with the equally misleading generalisation that Aboriginal people were everywhere, all the time' (p. 145). But I believe they were everywhere – not always born in Sydney, and not always identifying as Aborigines, to be sure – but they were everywhere: living rough in rivers, creek beds, railway sidings and suburban houses, on the harbour and the Cumberland Plain, along with many other ethnic groups on the margins of society. He chides the established and critical view of Bungaree, which is that he took 'over a leadership role among the depleted Aboriginal population despite having no local connection' (p. 26). He reasons this on the basis of an evident lack of local opposition and Bungaree's obvious familiarity, through his visiting rights, to the country. It's true that the Gai-Mariagal (Cammeraygal), the dominant group at the time of settlement, would certainly have challenged a claim to local leadership – if they not been almost extinguished by smallpox. Equally important, Bungaree's geographical compass, like that of other Aborigines, was very wide. His name has been recorded near Armidale, and doubtless he made much longer journeys than that. It seems more likely that he established himself in Sydney because that's where the action was, and because there was nobody to oppose him. As for declaiming, as he was wont to do, 'These are my people, this is my shore' (p. 27), well, he may not have been the first outsider to make such a claim to speak on behalf of the Sydney lands, but he certainly wasn't the last.

This point leads to a more serious difficulty that, although Irish has valuable sections on La Perouse people 'marrying out', to Blacktown, Katoomba and Sackville, he underestimates a general Aboriginal mobility in, and familiarity with, a very large area of country. Frequently he mentions the 'affiliate' people, especially those of the south coast. Yet the people from North Head are also certainly people from coastal Sydney, however defined, but they don't rate much attention. (They took regular part in ceremonies at Maroubra, for example.) The D'harawal people of southern Sydney don't appear in the index. But we have every reason to believe that the constant movement of the 'saltwater' people up and down the coast continued for far more than a century, and cannot be said to have ended yet. 'Saltwater' people had very strong connections with each other, from Stradbroke Island to Wreck Bay

and beyond. The Black Duck and Black Swan Dreamings connected Mallacoota/Cann River people through Botany Bay, to the regions of Grafton and beyond. The La Perouse community, very many of whom had, in any case, emigrated up the coast from the 1880s, certainly shared this knowledge and took part in its requirements. Indeed, connections were strong in all directions. Auntie Fran Bodkin of the D'harawal people relates a north-eastern storyline that followed the northern banks of the Georges River through Campbelltown, crossed the Nepean and the Wollondilly rivers, and followed the Great Dividing Range ridgeline into northern Gamilaraay country. Auntie Gloria Ardlar remembers periodic visits with her father to the Burragorang valley. Karen Maber, descended on one side through the Malones of Kogarah Bay and Botany, traces the other side of her family to the Liverpool clan: to an 1843 portrait of King George, whose father was chief of the Cabramatta clan.

The close focus of the book on La Perouse and the lower Georges River (including the Salt Pan Creek), then, presents a decidedly skewed view of Sydney Aborigines, while at the same time tending to isolate them within what have become today's (European) geographical boundaries. The subtitle, 'The Aboriginal people of Coastal Sydney', is a serious misnomer; perhaps it was just a publisher's puff. Sydney Aboriginal historians and storytellers like Fran Bodkin, Dennis Foley and Karen Maber don't find a place in footnotes, while some dated and inaccurate histories by non-Indigenous historians do.

The precise eye of the local historian and archaeologist does not lead the author to speculate on some of the larger questions of contemporary Aboriginal history, which this reviewer, at least, would have liked. What were the effects of long-term immigration by other Aborigines into the city? What differences, if any, can be observed between those raised on a managed reserve, those living independently at places like the Salt Pan Creek, or those scattering themselves over the Cumberland Plain? What are we to make of younger Sydney people of Aboriginal descent whose forebears did not identify for two generations? The book, ending rather unexpectedly in 1930, does not enter these intriguing domains.

The book is a valuable addition to Sydney historiography, but it doesn't deserve the claims of its publishers.

## References

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