CHAPTER 1

PRE-SETTLEMENT

The Aborigines\textsuperscript{1} are believed to have been on the South Coast of New South Wales for at least 20,000 years, judging from dating of carbon found in a cave near Burrill Lake. It is hard to get such a number of years into perspective. A thousand generations? A hundred times the duration of white settlement? We are not used to such scales of time. It is short as geologists measure time, but it is long enough to include the peak of the most recent ice age, when sea levels were lower by up to 100 metres. The shore would have been further east, and Brush Island not an island at all, for much of this time.

Few legacies of the Aborigines remain.\textsuperscript{2} Murramarang headland has a large midden which was found by anthropologists from the Australian Museum in the 1920s, and from which many artefacts were collected. At that time, the midden area was bare, with shifting sand dunes that would cover or expose parts of it, so on each visit you could expect to see something new. The present vegetation is recent, and the result of deliberate efforts to ‘stabilise’ the dunes.\textsuperscript{3}

\textsuperscript{1} Today, the term Aborigine is rarely used, having been replaced by ‘Aboriginal people’ or ‘Indigenous people/communities’ (A.G. and S.F).
\textsuperscript{2} Many legacies of traditional Aboriginal use and occupation of the area still remain. The area has numerous recorded archaeological sites, and one of the best known is the large midden on Murramarang headland (see previous section). Local Aboriginal communities also have oral traditions rich in descriptions of Aboriginal traditional and historical life in the region (A.G. and S.F).
\textsuperscript{3} Collection of Aboriginal artefacts was rife across NSW before legislation was brought in to make it illegal without a permit. Many artefacts from Murramarang headland can be found in the Tabourie Museum. The same legislation (\textit{National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974}) enabled declaration of Murramarang Aboriginal Area in 1976, in recognition of its considerable cultural and scientific values. NPWS stopped vehicles driving over the sand dunes, as it was destroying vegetation and causing massive dune blow outs that exposed and damaged the cultural deposits. The area began to revegetate naturally, helped by a NPWS deliberate seeding programme to stabilise the dunes and protect the archaeological sites (A.G. and S.F).
The area has an aura of timelessness. But it may have been in use only briefly in the 20,000 years of Aboriginal presence in the area. It is fascinating to speculate on the possible location of earlier middens, now underwater off Brush Island. Was there a ‘Murramarang Tribe’? The Aborigines were nomadic, and their social organisation less rigid than might be inferred from our word ‘tribe’. For the same reasons, it is very unlikely that there was any aspect of Aboriginal custom that was specific to the small area we are interested in. Aboriginal oral tradition preserved a record of early contact with white people, but the details are not clear. Coomee, a full-blooded Aboriginal woman from this district who died at Ulladulla in 1914, claimed her grandmother remembered ‘the first time the white birds [sailing ships] came by’.

One family living at Bawley Point is proud of its descent from the local Aborigines. L. W. (‘Sonny’) Butler’s great-grandmother was a full-blood Aborigine. Several generations of Butlers have been professional fishermen in the district. Aborigines now prefer to be referred to as Kooris, but I will keep to the terms used at the time of my story.

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4 Archaeological excavations in the 1960s showed that initial occupation of Murramarang headland around 12,000 years ago was probably sporadic, with much more intensive occupation following the stabilisation of the sea level around 6,000 years ago (A.G. and S.F.).


6 There was a ‘Murramarang Tribe’, although probably not a tribe, that usually numbered about 500. It was more of a clan or mob, consisting of an extended family, who had responsibilities for looking after specific, well-defined tracts of country together with its sacred sites, storylines, plants, animals, soils, rocks and water. The Murramarang or Mooramorrang group utilised Murramarang, Meroo Lake and Termell Lake (Wesson, S. An historical atlas of the Aborigines of eastern Victoria and far south-eastern New South Wales, Monash Publications in Geography and Environmental Science, No. 53, Monash University, Melbourne, 2000). Many local Aboriginal people today identify themselves as belonging to the ‘Murramarang mob’. Between 1832 and 1847, Murramarang was one of several locations where blankets were issued to Aboriginal people and records kept. Aboriginal people came in from across the district to receive blankets and the records give their names and group/location affiliation. Numbers dwindled from 15 to four over this period. Some of the names from blanket issue records can be found at www.ulladulla.info/category/heritage/aboriginal-heritage. The Kialoha group was associated with Kioloa State Forest (now Murramarang National Park) and inland, the country of the Tytdel/Didthol people included Pigeon House Mountain and the coastal ranges. To the south, the Durare/Turras group utilised the Durras area (Wesson, 2000) (A.G. and S.F.).

7 Smith, Jim Thurawal Traditions about their first European Contacts, unpublished MS, 1991, p. 8; McAndrew, A. Memoirs of Mollymook, Milton and Ulladulla, McAndrew, 1989, p. 36.

8 There are numerous historical references to Coomee-Nulunga, alias Maria/Moriah Billy Boy (her husband’s name). Born in 1825, she claimed her grandmother saw Captain Cook sailing past Murramarang Point, which is perfectly feasible, given the dates. Coomee-Nulunga was a well-known individual in the Ulladulla area and features in the reminiscences of a number of Europeans. The couple were sometimes referred to as Queen Maria (or Moriah) and King Billy (Goulding, M. and Waters, K. 2005 Shoalhaven Local Government Area: Aboriginal Heritage Study NSW, Aboriginal Historic Research Stage 1 [draft], unpublished report to Department of Environment and Conservation, Queanbeyan; Wesson, 2000). In 1909, a Mr Edmund Milne, who first met Coomee in about 1868 when a boy attending school at Ulladulla, presented her with a gorget (king plate), as the last member of the Murramarang tribe. The gorget states ‘Coomee. Last of her Tribe, Murramarang’, the only decorations are a series of engraved lines at each point, these lines represent the ceremonial scarring that Milne observed on each of Coomee’s shoulders (Goulding and Waters, 2005) (A.G. and S.F.).
The first European visitors to this part of the Australian coast were probably Portuguese, more than two centuries before Cook. Ward reproduced ‘The Dauphin Map’ which he claims ‘accurately charts the east coast of Australia and proves conclusively that Portuguese mariners charted it before 1536’, but not all historians would agree with this interpretation of the map.9

If the 1770 voyage of Captain Cook was not the first visit of Europeans to the area, it was certainly the most important. This, and the work of subsequent early explorers and surveyors, has been covered in many publications,10 so will be mentioned only briefly here.

I recall learning at Murramarang School in the 1920s that Cook first saw Australian Aborigines on Murramarang Beach. This may be slightly in error; Racecourse Beach seems more likely, since the ship was closer to shore there.11 The date

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was 23 April 1770. Cook described Brush Island, but did not name it, nor did he name any other features in the vicinity except Pigeon House Mountain. He contemplated a landing in the shelter of Brush Island, but decided against it because of onshore winds.

The first Europeans to travel along the coast did so in tragic circumstances. They were survivors of the wreck of the Sydney Cove, which was beached on an island in the Furneaux Group, Bass Strait, in February 1797. Seventeen survivors set out on 15 March from near Point Hicks (now Cape Everard) to walk along the coast to Port Jackson. Only three reached safety, two others having been left behind only the previous day.

Later that same year, George Bass was sent to check on the strait, which now bears his name. He had six men with him, in an open boat less than nine metres long. On the afternoon of 13 December he saw a pole or stump sticking up on Brush Island, which he thought might have been set up by shipwrecked sailors. Due to a ‘heavy and fiery sea’ he could not investigate at the time, but did land there on his return in February 1798; he found the ‘pole’ was only a dead tree. He spent the night either on the island or anchored nearby.

The surveyor Thomas Florance was next on the scene, in 1828. He named, or recorded native names for, many of the coastal features. According to Pleaden:

He did not name either Durras or Kioloa although he called them ‘good harbours’ which is an exaggeration. Brush Island was called Mit Island, and Crampton’s Island, off Tabourie, was noted as Casual Island, neither name being explained.

He recorded native names for natural features, many of which have survived in modified form, ‘Mherroo’, ‘Tobowerry’, ‘Turmeel’, ‘Bhuril’, ‘Mherringo’ are examples, the first four being easily recognised while the last has now changed to Willinga.

Florance reached Murrarang by 31 May 1828. ‘He wrote across the site of the present holdings “very open excellent land”’. The headland opposite Brush Island was called ‘Aqua Point’, evidently for the numerous springs which flow from under the sandhills. He referred to a ‘limpid lagoon’, presumably the one

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12 The entry on page 301 of Vol. 1 of Journals of Captain Cook (Beaglehole [ed.] 1955) is under the date ‘Sunday 22nd.’, and the sighting appears to have been in the forenoon. This becomes Monday 23 April according to our date line convention. Dates in the Journal can be further confused by Cook’s use of ‘ship time’, by which the 24-hour day begins 12 hours before the day of civil time, and runs from noon to noon (see facing page 1 of the Journal). This use of ship time does not affect ‘a.m.’ times or dates, so is not a factor to be considered here.


14 ibid., pp. 48, 49.

15 Cambage op. cit., p. 17.
near the middle of Murramarang beach. Cambage claimed it ‘remained fresh until 1870, when, during the wet season, the grass-covered sand between it and the ocean was broken through’. At present, the lagoon breaks out to the sea after heavy rain, but also receives sea water during heavy seas. Cambage claimed it was sufficiently fresh for stock to drink during the summer of 1915–16. In December 1829, Robert Hoddle surveyed the land granted to Stephen and Morris at Murramarang.

The next chapter deals with the earliest settlement in the district, at Murramarang, around 1830. To set the scene for this, we might try to conjure up some aspects of conditions at that time, at least as far as they affected the early settlers.

It was only 42 years after the first settlement at Sydney, and 27 years after the crucial first crossing of the Blue Mountains. The total white population in the colony was only around 40,000, more than half of whom were convicts or ex-convicts. For the most part, these people had come from town backgrounds in England or Ireland, and so had few of the practical skills needed in a frontier society. And by virtue of their having been forced to come to Australia, most of them had little incentive to work.

There were no roads and practically no settlement south of the Shoalhaven River. The Milton district had only one settler; the next to the south would have been at Batemans Bay and then at Broulee. Inland there were a few settlers at Braidwood, but no proper roads. Direct routes to the coast from Braidwood would have been only bridle tracks: steep, hazardous and ill-defined. The Clyde Mountain road did not come till 1856. The village of Braidwood was not surveyed till 1839. Access to Braidwood from Sydney was via Mittagong and Goulburn, but the travel time with bullock wagons was six weeks, if all went well, and up to three months in times of drought or floods. There was no vehicle route into Murramarang.

None of the personal amenities of life we take for granted were available. No regular communication or transport system existed. There were no petroleum products, so lighting at night would have been by home-made candle or slush lamps (crude wicks burning animal fat). Even the humble nail, which we would think indispensable for building, was not available in quantity till around 1850; earlier each nail was made by hand by the local blacksmith. Food was limited to what could be shot or caught, or would keep for months.

16 This lagoon is known as Swan Lagoon and is partly within Murramarang Aboriginal Area, the rest being on private land. A number of Aboriginal campsites, consisting of stone artefacts, occur around the edges of the lagoon. In the early 1970s it was recorded as a place of spiritual significance to Aboriginal people, with ancestral links to the surrounding area, such as Durras Mountain and Murramarang headland (A.G. and S.F.).

17 Ellis, N. Braidwood, Dear Braidwood, N. N. & N. M. Ellis, 1989, p. 165.
This text is taken from 

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