Imagine a time, around 20,000 years ago. The landscape of Murramarang and Kioloa looks markedly different. Most noticeable is the absence of the ocean, which is not even visible in the distance, being about 120 metres lower than today and 14 kilometres further out. The climate is cold and dry and ocean water is captured in the massive polar ice caps. In place of the ocean there is a large rolling plain with rocky outcrops, ridges and hills, covered in forest and bush, and providing sustenance for Australia’s grazing megafauna — giant kangaroos, wombats and diprotodons.

Around this time, a geological epoch known as the Pleistocene was coming to a close, having commenced around 100,000 years earlier. Around 20,000 years ago the greater Australian continent (Australia, New Guinea and Tasmania) was already occupied by Aboriginal people who had ‘island-hopped’ from Southeast Asia some 30,000 years earlier when sea levels were at their lowest, although the exact route will probably never be known.¹ Over generations, this founder population fanned out across the continent and, as numbers increased, settlement occurred along what we now call the NSW South Coast. Although rising sea levels may have drowned much of the earliest archaeological evidence, two important sites demonstrate the great antiquity of Aboriginal occupation in the region. The first is a large shell midden at Bass Point, near Kiama, where archaeological excavations conducted in the late 1960s showed human occupation commencing around 17,000 years ago.²

²  Bowdler, S. Bass Point: the excavation of a southeast Australian shell midden showing cultural and economic change, BA (Hons), University of Sydney, 1970.
Second, and closer to home, archaeological excavations in the floor of a large sandstone overhang on the southern side of what is now Burrill Lake found that humans had lived there from 21,000 years ago. This archaeological research (conducted more than 40 years ago and mentioned by Bruce in his opening chapter) generated considerable national and international interest because, at the time, it was one of the oldest archaeological sites yet discovered in Australia and seriously challenged existing theories of human origins and dispersal. It put the Antipodes on the world map!

The Burrill Lake rockshelter would have been next to a river flowing out onto the plain, and the archaeological evidence in the lowest levels of the cultural deposits reflect a diet based on terrestrial resources. It is not until the higher and younger deposit levels are reached that marine species appear amongst the food remains, correlating with palaeoenvironmental data showing that the sea reached its current level around 5,000 to 6,000 years ago. Those first generations of Aboriginal Australians must have experienced and adapted to climate change on an unparalleled scale.

In the early 1980s, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) covered the floor of the rockshelter with a thick layer of gravel to protect the precious cultural layers underneath. Today the Burrill lake rockshelter is surrounded by houses but it still manages to convey a powerful sense of the past. The rockshelter is situated on a small piece of land owned by the Shoalhaven City Council, who manages it in conjunction with the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH, formerly NPWS) and local Aboriginal communities. The rockshelter’s significance is reflected through its listing in the Shoalhaven Local Environmental Plan and on the State Heritage Register. It remains of cultural significance to Aboriginal people, has historical value as one of the earliest systematic excavations in Australia, and has scientific value, due to its age and its provision of important information on early Aboriginal occupation.

**Saltwater people settle in**

The archaeological evidence for Pleistocene occupation of the eastern seaboard is sparse, suggesting that population levels were low. But the story is very different following the rise and stabilisation of the ocean at its current level around 5,000 years ago. Rocky headlands, such as O’Hara Head, Murramarang Point and Snapper Point, jutted out over massive rocky shore platforms, and

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behind them was a network of wetlands, lagoons and coastal lakes. Together with the surrounding forests, they were a bountiful resource to a now fully coastal Aboriginal population. Also created by rising seas were many small offshore islands, which were often important spiritually and as a source of particular foods such as penguins, seals or shearwaters. They may have become inhabited as a result of population pressure on the mainland. Human populations possibly increased in response to the abundance and variety of resources. Archaeological sites become much more numerous after this time, especially around 2,000 years ago, although this may also be partly a function of having had less time to decay.

Figure 5: Aboriginal sites recorded in the Murramarang area in 2014.

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The dots in the map in Figure 5 are Aboriginal sites recorded on the OEH database between Bawley Point and Kioloa. While the number and position of dots is partly a function of where people have looked, it also reflects traditional Aboriginal use and occupation of the landscape. Traditional saltwater Aboriginal people probably lived along the coast for much of the year, and the map shows a focus on headlands, perhaps because they had resource-rich rocky platforms below them and provided good vantage points to see schools of fish or advancing hostile tribes. All the headlands extending from Bawley Point down through Murramarang National Park contain shell middens and many have extensive scatters of stone artefacts.

Much of what we know of ancient Aboriginal life comes from a study of these shell middens, where calcium carbonate in the shell preserves organic material such as charcoal from fires, animal bone and occasionally plant remains. The material evidence points to the importance of fish and other marine creatures in the traditional diet. Bones of many different fish species can be found when shell middens are scientifically excavated, giving an indication of species preference and even the time of year that the ancient fishers were at work. Also present may be fishhooks made from abalone and turbo shell honed to shape with stone files, and stone points, once attached to five-pronged fishing spears made from specially selected wood. Whale and seal bones, such as those in the Murramarang Point midden, indicate opportunistic feasts on large beached marine mammals, and the presence of bird and marsupial bones demonstrates that the ocean was not the only source of sustenance.

Mature trees with large scars indicate the removal of bark to make canoes, although many more trees must have been destroyed by clearing over the last 200 years. Historical records and oral traditions also alert us to the use of bark canoes in the lakes and estuaries, from which men fished with spears and women with hook and line. Fish traps were used in the ocean and in estuaries for catching fish at low tide, using natural or modified configurations of stones, sand banks and depressions.

Other evidence for ancient human occupation along the coast includes a dingo found in the upper layers of the large midden at Nundera Point. The site was occupied from around 2,000 to 300 years ago, and over that time the shell diet changed from the big gastropods such as whelks and turban shells, to the blue mussel — a dietary shift confirmed in many other excavated middens on the South Coast. Human burials can also occur in middens, such as those found in

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the Murramarang resort. Rockshelters are relatively uncommon on the coast but two are nearby, at Willinga Lake and the well-known sea cave at North Durras, occupied about 400 years ago.⁸

Figure 5 also shows numerous sites away from the coast, in the tall open forests of the coastal ranges. These sites are mainly scatters of stone artefacts made by Aboriginal people using stone that produced sharp edges when struck to fashion a lethal spear point or barb. Silcrete was a local stone type favoured by Aboriginal people for making tools because it is hard and fine-grained. Some of the silica quarried at Narrawallee from 1919 and sent to Sydney was almost certainly taken from the same sources once used by local Aboriginal people.

Ironically, finding stone artefacts in forests is helped by the very actions that can damage them. They can only be seen when the ground is free of leaf litter, plants and fallen branches, hence most sites are recorded on roads and tracks, and because these tend to occur on ridgelines it seems that most sites are on ridgelines, but it may simply be recording bias. Some forest sites have only one or two artefacts, while others have hundreds. Due to field research by ANU archaeology students during the 1980s and 1990s — which recorded over 2,000 sites in the forests between Batemans Bay and Bawley Point — we can begin to understand how Aboriginal people interacted with the South Coast landscape.⁹ While the immediate coastline was a favoured location for living, hunting and gathering, coastal people also utilised the forests for many purposes. They walked along ridgelines, camping on knolls and in saddles or in sandstone overhangs where the walls were sometimes decorated with art such as animal motifs in charcoal or ochre or hand stencils. They hunted forest marsupials and birds, collected plant foods and medicines, honey, plant material for weaving baskets and the like, and gathered wood for making tools.

They also burnt the country to encourage green pick for kangaroos and to make it easier to walk through, although it is hard to find local palaeoenvironmental or archaeological evidence to elaborate on our limited understanding of traditional burning practices. The traditional knowledge required to know where, when and how to obtain these food resources was passed down through the generations, as part of growing up and belonging to ‘country’. This knowledge included taking on the responsibility of looking after the land and sea — caring for country.

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⁹ Knight, T. 'The Batemans Bay forests archaeological project’, Report to NPWS, 1996.
Yet, life was not devoted solely to harvesting resources; much time was spent in ceremonial activity, often associated with sacred sites or places of great spiritual significance. The archaeological evidence for ceremonial activity can include earth rings (banyan) or stone arrangements, such as the one on Quilty’s Mountain. Pigeon House Mountain (Didthol) is known to be spiritually significant and ceremonies probably also took place there, as they did on Mount Kingiman. Many prominent natural features, such as mountains and rivers, are connected by traditional storylines, linked back to the ‘Dreamtime’, when the world and humans were created. Knowledge of spiritual places, the creation beings that made them and the practices to protect and respect them also constitutes part of traditional knowledge.

These were the circumstances of traditional Aboriginal life prior to the establishment of colonial settlements, the period that Bruce Hamon’s book deals with. However, it is important to recognise the ongoing Indigenous contribution to the history of the region over the past 200 years. This includes their role in farming, fishing and the timber industry. In the following chapters, we have added footnotes to Bruce’s text associated with this Indigenous connection with the land. While local Aboriginal people no longer practice traditional hunting and gathering and land management, their connection with land and culture remains extremely strong, exercised politically through the Native Title Act 1993 (Cwlth) and the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 (NSW).

The Land Rights Act created Local Aboriginal Land Councils who can make application to the NSW Government to claim vacant crown land, which may be granted if not needed for an ‘essential public purpose’. Murramarang is within the boundaries of the Batemans Bay Local Aboriginal Land Council who own several parcels of land in the district, including at Kioloa. There are also local Aboriginal families with strong cultural ties to the Murramarang/Kioloa area who are not part of the Land Council system. The local Indigenous community keeps culture alive in many ways — by involvement in heritage work, teaching language and traditional arts and crafts, participating in national park management and educating the wider public about Aboriginal culture.
This text is taken from *They Came to Murrarang: A History of Murrarang, Kioloa and Bawley Point*, by Bruce Hamon, edited by Alastair Greig and Sue Feary, published 2015 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.