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## History, Tragedy and Truth in Bennelong's Story

Storytellers' insights into Bennelong's character and his relationships are made possible by the first-hand accounts of the First Fleet's commissioned diarists and letter writers. Together, the journal writers offer a lively and detailed coverage of Bennelong's relationship with the colony across the period 1789–92: his kidnap and residence at Government House, his behaviour when Phillip was speared at Manly, his aptitude in learning English language and manners, and what they learned from him about the life ways of the Eora people. In Hunter's published journal, Bennelong is an almost constant presence between September 1790, when he conversed with Phillip before Phillip was speared at Manly, and September 1791, when Bennelong attempted to arrange the birth of his child in the governor's residence.<sup>1</sup> The excitement of the diarists as they observed the Eora world, often through Bennelong, is palpable. For Tench in late 1790, 'our greatest source of entertainment now lay in cultivating the acquaintance of our new friends, the natives'.<sup>2</sup>

Twenty-three years later, *The Sydney Gazette* summed up his life:

Of this veteran champion of the native tribe little favourable can be said ...  
The principal officers of the government had for many years endeavoured, by the kindest of usage, to wean him from his original habits and draw him into a relish for civilised life; but every effort was in vain exerted

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1 Hunter, *An Historical Journal*, 305–60.

2 Tench, *A Narrative of the Expedition*, 160.

and for the last few years he has been but little noticed. His propensity to drunkenness was inordinate; and when in that state he was insolent, menacing and overbearing. In fact, he was a thorough savage, not to be warped from the form and character that nature gave him by all the efforts that mankind could use.<sup>3</sup>

The diarists' close and often sympathetic reportage creates an illusion of completeness for the years that are easy to imagine as Bennelong's prime. By contrast, the sparseness of information for the last two decades of his life, along with *The Sydney Gazette's* dire assessment, give the impression that he fell into an abyss after his return from England. In combination, these sources suggest a certain shape for Bennelong's story: a rise and fall. Many of Bennelong's storytellers have assimilated this pattern, rather than reflect upon it.

As Hayden White observed, it is easy for both historians and their readers to remain unaware of the narrative structure of a history, believing that its shape is simply the shape of the past itself. In White's analysis, all narrative histories within the Western tradition operate within literary modes, presenting and explaining the past to their readers using the storylines of tragedy, romance, satire and comedy. White perceived these storylines as indispensable (and also inescapable) for the historian in the task of forging a coherent story from the chaotic and incomplete evidence left behind by the past. He argued that any history thus has two interwoven levels of truth: 'correspondence' to the past and 'coherence'.<sup>4</sup> It is worth scrutinising Bennelong's stories from this point of view, to see whether we can distinguish between these two levels.

Accounts from Bennelong's own lifetime only show a rise and fall for Bennelong if they are interpreted uncritically. As Isabel McBryde pointed out, European attitudes towards Eora people changed as the settlement became more secure. By the time Bennelong returned from England, the two groups were no longer 'new friends'. In fact, in the late 1790s and early years of the new century, Aboriginal people of the Cumberland Plain and Hawkesbury River were in open conflict with the colonists.<sup>5</sup> We should be wary of adopting (as Brodsky did without question four decades ago) the frustration Collins expressed in 1798, protesting that Bennelong could have enjoyed a legitimate and comfortable place

3 *The Sydney Gazette*, 9 January 1813, 2.

4 White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 122–23, 128–29.

5 McBryde, *Guests of the Governor*, 27.

living with the governor into the nineteenth century, but threw this chance away.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the bitterness lingers. Keith Willey made a revealing half circle of historical thinking in his 1979 book *When the Sky Fell Down*. He discussed 'the end of the Noble Savage', by which he meant the demise of Rousseau's ideal in the hearts and minds of the Sydney colonists. He found that Bennelong's 'rapid degeneration' contributed to this demise, but he did not come full circle to ask whether this ideological shift may, or may also, have shaped how the authors of our sources perceived or reported on Bennelong's behaviour.<sup>7</sup> Inga Clendinnen similarly forgot to take out her Enlightenment gentleman's eyeglass when she saw Bennelong tragically 'reduced' as he gained a reputation as an 'irreconcilable savage'.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, she confused an assessment of Bennelong's own life prospects (which were no doubt constricted and compromised in some ways) with the rapidly declining capacity of the British to imagine and relate to Eora people in any way other than to judge them as more or less successfully civilised.

The written sources produced inside the colony, no matter how sensitive or enlightened we might find some of the diarists, were centred in European thought articulated from the small fragments of empire at Sydney Cove or Parramatta. When the writers felt that Bennelong was drawing closer to them and their way of thinking, he appeared to be safe in the bosom of civilisation. When he appeared less often, and undressed, the colonists felt he was drifting away from what Tench described as 'the comforts of a civilised system', back to 'a precarious subsistence among wilds and precipices'.<sup>9</sup> As Maria Monypenny demonstrated in the Tasmanian context, the ongoing use of this pseudo-geographic 'coming in' and 'going out' is part of the maintenance of a Eurocentric perspective.<sup>10</sup> In the case of Bennelong's story, it forms the foundation for a perceived 'fall', or at least a sudden transition from fame to obscurity. For example, Manning Clark referred to Bennelong's increasingly frequent 'absences from the Governor's house' on his return from England. These absences signified 'presences' somewhere else, but they were not presences that Clark was interested in investigating. By contrast, interpreting some of the

6 'Instead of living peaceably and pleasantly at the governor's house, as he certainly might always have done, Ben-nil-long preferred the rude and dangerous society of his own countrymen.' Collins, *An Account of the English Colony*, 134.

7 Willey, *When the Sky Fell Down*, 128.

8 Clendinnen appearing in Nowra and Perkins, 'Episode 1: They Have Come to Stay'.

9 Tench, *A Narrative of the Expedition*, 108.

10 Monypenny, 'Going Out and Coming In', 73.

same sources differently, and with insights drawn from archaeology and anthropology, McBryde discerned a pattern in Bennelong's movements in and out of the settlement, which she described as 'independence'.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, many stories of Bennelong have no direct relationship with primary sources and first-hand accounts. They rely on other 'second order' storytellers for both information and its interpretation. Yet, whether a storyteller has returned to Tench and Collins themselves, 'the birth of a new version' of Bennelong's story does not occur in a vacuum. As Hayden White and Martin Jay argued, existing versions of stories, and points of consensus within a writing and reading community, exert considerable influence on the way stories are told; even before a storyteller begins a new version, some explanations seem logical and others outlandish.<sup>12</sup> Bennelong's story told as a tragedy, or a fall or failure, has a logical feel to it. For white Australian storytellers and audiences, it is specious, credible, fits into what we know of the world, and seems to help make sense of Australian history.

Tragedy arrived in New South Wales as part of the cultural baggage of the First Fleet; Watkin Tench reached for a line from Joseph Addison's well-known early eighteenth-century tragedy *Cato* to help express the gravity of the moment as the ships approached Botany Bay.<sup>13</sup> History has long sailed in the company of tragedy, and the two have met and mingled both in Bennelong's own story and in the larger cultural traditions that have helped to shape how we tell it. Among Europe's cultural elite, tragedy was considered to be at the apex of literary achievement during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Animated discussions ensued about tragedy's relationship with history, and these trickled down to influence Australian historians. Manning Clark followed the epoch-making Leopold von Ranke in deriving the framework for his history from the genre of tragedy.<sup>14</sup> Bennelong's storytellers have called

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11 Clark, *History of Australia*, 143; McBryde, 'Barter ... Immediately Commenced', 238–77.

12 White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 128.

13 Tench, *A Narrative of the Expedition*, 37.

14 Hirst, *Sense and Nonsense*, 57–58; Curthoys and Docker, *Is History Fiction?*, 71–73, 86–87, 180. As Curthoys and Docker noted, whether or not Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* could be considered a tragedy, and where this placed history in relation to literature, was a matter of energetic debate in Europe in the early twentieth century. Clark employed a dramatic opposition of 'barbarism within (Aboriginal culture) and civilisation without' as the setting for his history.

on tragedy by reaching for themes, narrative devices, features of character and ideas about how tragedy feels that are recognisable as part of our contemporary culture.<sup>15</sup>

Stories of Aboriginal decline and death have formed a constant background for the retelling of Bennelong's story across the twentieth century. They are part of a grand narrative that gained momentum from the seventeenth century and consolidated into a 'discourse of the triumph of Saxondom over the whole globe' by the end of the nineteenth—the narrative of the inexorable extinction of primitive races.<sup>16</sup> In the late nineteenth century, such stories were often expressed in a regretful voice, evincing ambivalence about the success of the pioneers in the certainty that it was 'too late', or impossible, to make amends.<sup>17</sup> Histories of the early twentieth century expressed less regret, but no less certainty. A 1910 history of Australia proclaimed: 'it is possible to calculate with almost certainty a date on which "the last post" will be sounded over the Australian, as it has been over the Tasmanian aboriginal race'.<sup>18</sup> Although it was becoming patently clear in the postwar period that Aboriginal populations were maintaining themselves or, in fact, increasing, as Charles Duguid sought to bring to Australians' attention, the narratives of fatal impact continued.<sup>19</sup> In 1962, Manning Clark declaimed:

When those aboriginal women uttered their horrid howl on first seeing the white man at Botany Bay in April 1770, that howl contained in it a prophecy of doom ... For the culture, the way of life of the aborigine was doomed.<sup>20</sup>

As Grace Karskens observed, 'in settler history we seem to be searching constantly for beginnings ... but in Aboriginal history of the colonial period so often the search is for endings'. This does not need to be so. In her recent history of Sydney, Karskens looked to a much longer Aboriginal story that is not one of failure or 'fatal impact', but of Aboriginal people responding to change. She asked: if the taken-for-granted failure of Bennelong is not true, is it perhaps necessary to rethink 'what happened

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15 Particularly the ancient Greek mythic tragedies, which are constantly reinvented, and Shakespeare's works, which have featured on school curricula for generations and are performed by the John Bell Shakespeare Company to more than 80,000 Australian students each year. Christopher Bantick, 'Why Shakespeare Still has a Role in the Curriculum', *The Age*, 27 April 2014.

16 Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings*, 1–10.

17 Foster, Nettelbeck and Hosking, *Fatal Collisions*, 26–28.

18 Spence and Fox, *Australia*, 142.

19 See Duguid, *No Dying Race*; Kerin, *Doctor Do Good?*

20 Clark, *History of Australia*, 110.

to Aboriginal people in early Sydney', or even across the continent, as a whole?<sup>21</sup> As the survival of Aboriginal people and cultures in south-eastern Australia has been gradually acknowledged over the past few decades, a number of histories have been written in which an Aboriginal post-invasion 'romance' is charted, deeply infused with pain and loss, but depicting cycles of renewal, survival and transformation, as well as defeat, dispossession and death. Heather Goodall's *Invasion to Embassy*, a history of Aboriginal people's fight for land over more than 200 years, could be interpreted this way.

However, when Bennelong's story re-awoke from mere chronicle to be re-examined as history in the mid-twentieth century, it was reborn into a reciprocally affirmative relationship with powerful narratives of fateful Aboriginal decline, death and extinction. Bennelong's tragedy gives this large-scale, impersonal movement of history a human face. Conversely, as a specific instance apparently supported by historical evidence, it contributes to the truth quotient of the larger tragedy. To white Tasmanians, Trukanini's death in 1876 and the display of her remains in the Tasmanian Museum from 1904 seemed to provide both proof of the extinction of Aboriginal Tasmanians and comforting evidence of a good reason for their extinction (i.e., their presumed place on the bottom rung of the human evolutionary ladder).<sup>22</sup> In a similar way, Bennelong's tragedy is often understood as the opening chapter of a more general Aboriginal tragedy, and has seemed to provide evidence that the decline and death of the Aboriginal race was unavoidable once Aboriginal people had come into contact with European culture.

Tragedy does not simply denote a fall; it is also a riff on inevitability. A characteristic dramatic strategy of the genre is to set up a pair of irreconcilable opposites, which, just by coming into contact with each other, lead to an inexorable unfolding of events.<sup>23</sup> Bennelong's tragedy is emphatically a cultural tragedy, played out on the beaches where Manning Clark's 'barbarism' meets 'civilisation'. In narratives of Saxon triumph, the momentum of the British Empire, and its history of progress, set those two cultural continents on a collision course. It is the necessity of this collision that Clark's Aboriginal women recognised in their instinctive, howling 'prophecy of doom'.<sup>24</sup> For nineteenth-century European thinkers,

21 Karskens, *The Colony*, 422–24.

22 Ryan, 'The Struggle for Trukanini', 159–61.

23 White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 128.

24 Clark, *History of Australia*, 3–4, 110.

'collision' itself became a favoured metaphor for explaining movements of people around the globe, and it has continued to appeal to storytellers attempting to characterise the colonisation of Australia.<sup>25</sup> N. J. B. Plomley imagined a 'culture clash' occurring with the colonisation of Tasmania, in which the 'weaker' Indigenous culture inevitably came off worse. Keith Smith followed suit in his 1992 biography of Bennelong's younger contemporary Bungaree, stating that 'when the two races met, a clash of cultures was inevitable'.<sup>26</sup> Bruce Elder, who gave a brief rendition of Bennelong's story as part of a larger Aboriginal tragedy published for the bicentenary, set up an Eden-like Aboriginal society in opposition to the invading British:

The fatal moment when Phillip stepped ashore was the moment when the conflict began. There was no spear thrown; no musket fired. But the course of events was set upon its inexorable path. The two cultures were so different ... There was no possibility of compromise. One side respected the land; one side exploited the land. One side was basically peaceful and benign; the other was essentially sadistic and autocratic. One sought harmony; the other was driven by aggression and competitiveness.<sup>27</sup>

Eden was about to collide with civilisation and its power to corrupt. This powerful and indifferent force, of two cultures colliding like tectonic plates, is indeed one that could easily crush anyone standing near the edge. As it was economically put on the 'Creative Spirits' website, 'Bennelong got caught between the two worlds and he died as a lonely alcoholic with a broken spirit in 1813'.<sup>28</sup>

Eleanor Dark located the destructive force of colonisation within the souls of her Aboriginal characters. They are a timeless people confronting change that comes upon them like a spiritual poison, creating a 'division in their own hearts'. One of her Elders, Tirrawuul, dies because he cannot 'endure even the first faint forewarning shadow of change' to a life governed by a 'faith which never had been challenged'. She marked Bennelong, the mediator, as a man in particular danger. His fellow captive, Colbee, resolved not to engage with the captors beyond a watchful compliance and managed to remain aloof. Colbee thus remained 'whole' while Bennelong

25 Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings*, 173–219.

26 Plomley, 'Book Review', 50–52; Smith, *King Bungaree*, 20.

27 Elder, *Blood on the Wattle*, 11.

28 Jens-Uwe Korff, 'Bennelong Point', Creative Spirits, accessed 16 March 2009, [www.creativespirits.info/oznsw/sydney/sitescbd/operahouse.html](http://www.creativespirits.info/oznsw/sydney/sitescbd/operahouse.html) (site discontinued). The updated site both reiterates this notion, and challenges it as 'myth', citing Keith Vincent Smith's work. See [www.creativespirits.info/australia/new-south-wales/sydney/bennelong-point-opera-house](http://www.creativespirits.info/australia/new-south-wales/sydney/bennelong-point-opera-house), accessed 8 July 2018.

was torn by an internal ‘strife’, as part of him was drawn towards the white men and the possibility of becoming like them.<sup>29</sup> Richard Sadleir, writing in the 1880s, had cause to examine Bennelong’s inner life for a different reason. He was convinced that only religion could bring Aboriginal people into ‘British’ life, and felt the British were culpable for arriving in New South Wales with so little religious supervision. Bennelong’s story illustrated the inevitable results of this secular approach; he perished ‘a drunken savage, after all the advantages he had had of visiting England, and living at the Governor’s house ... We have here the failure of mere civilisation which produces only outward effects. Religion alone can reach the heart’. The problem was that Bennelong’s inner self had not been transformed in the right way through his contact with the British. Sadleir declared that the ‘reckless and degraded class of men’ that first colonised New South Wales were not destined to ‘elevate or raise’ the natives, but rather to ‘depress and vitiate, and ultimately to destroy them’.<sup>30</sup> He stopped short of finding Bennelong’s own heart corrupted (perhaps to keep open the possibility of redeeming Aboriginal people on the whole via conversion). However, in using the verb ‘vitate’—to corrupt, to spoil, to make impure—he gestured towards the diagnosis that would become most prominent in stories of Bennelong’s fall over the past four decades: a division or sickness in his own soul. Bennelong’s tragedy emerged as storytellers began to engage with the sticky soft tissue of cross-cultural contact and attempt to make sense of Bennelong’s inner life once more in the mid-twentieth century.

Fascination with self-destructive cultural transgressions has deeply penetrated the Western literary and popular imagination. The archetype is, perhaps, Joseph Conrad’s character Kurtz in his 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*. Kurtz’s rule over his African workers transcends duty and comes to dominate his own identity; he is reshaped in their cultural image. Kurtz loses his senses and his colleagues are at once fascinated and appalled.<sup>31</sup> A not dissimilar imaginary drives Peter Goldsworthy’s 2003 novel *Three Dog Night*, in which grown-up Adelaide private school boy, Felix, goes to the ‘Centre’ as a doctor and returns initiated as a Warlpiri man. As one review put it: ‘Felix has long moved between mainstream and black society—gone to drink, chain-smoking and now, as we learn, terminal

29 Dark, *The Timeless Land*, 177, 179–80, 264–65. See also Clendinnen, *Dancing With Strangers*, 268.

30 Sadleir, *Aborigines of Australia*, 22–25. Sadleir recognised that the settlement of the Sydney region had deprived Aboriginal people of their food resources.

31 Conrad, *The Heart of Darkness*.

cancer'.<sup>32</sup> His cultural crossing and illness are not explicitly causally related; yet, the two travel hand in hand in the book, and the unpredictable 'dark' side of Felix is never dissociated from his involvement in Warlpiri culture. Similarly, poet and historian Barry Hill penned an essay entitled 'Crossing Cultures' in 2003 in which linguist T. G. H. Strehlow was cast as an 'exemplary case of successful crossing', as he experienced an intense and long-term immersion in Aboriginal culture. At the same time, Strehlow:

In agony over his internal contradictions, as *the* one who possessed the truth about Aranda culture, dropped dead in a seizure of recriminations ... From beginning to end you could say he was doom-laden.<sup>33</sup>

In mid-twentieth century anthropological thinking, the notion that Aboriginal culture could not survive the processes of transculturation that had taken place across south-eastern Australia was pervasive. Whereas the imagined 'going native' of European individuals led to madness or death, Aboriginal 'cultural crossing' seemed to lead to the extinction of a people. Stanner, as we have seen, understood Bennelong to be at the head of a chain reaction of dependency on Europeans that he felt had proceeded with settlement, or even ahead of it.<sup>34</sup> For Stanner, Clark, Mulvaney and others, Bennelong's story showed what would happen to Aboriginal people when exposed to 'civilisation', recycling, with different inflections, the nineteenth-century theory of degeneration. Though this theory was well and truly defunct in scientific terms by the mid-twentieth century, it had an ongoing life into the postwar world through eugenics, and it resonated with archaeological and anthropological scholarship, particularly through the 1970s. The theory is based in a neo-Lamarckian notion that acquired characteristics, 'both favourable and unfavourable, could alter human heredity and be transmitted down the family line'. It was up to a species to make itself 'fit', and a race could actually fall downwards on the evolutionary ladder through unhealthy living.<sup>35</sup>

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32 Goldsworthy, *Three Dog Night*; Robin Osbourne, 'Book Review—Three Dog Night and Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time', Northern Rivers General Practice Network, accessed 28 January 2008, [www.nrdgp.org.au/columns/bookreviews/bookreview3491.html+Three+Dog+Night&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=3&gl=au](http://www.nrdgp.org.au/columns/bookreviews/bookreview3491.html+Three+Dog+Night&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=3&gl=au) (site discontinued). The book has received considerable interest in medical circles due to Goldsworthy's previous medical career and the book's subject.

33 Hill, 'Crossing Cultures', 117.

34 Stanner, 'The History of Indifference', 19–20.

35 Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 14–15. According to Marcia Langton, traces of eugenicist ideas remain in both popular thought and public policy through the concept of the 'drunken Aborigine', bolstered by a 'once respectable' theory that Aboriginal people have a genetic trait making them peculiarly susceptible to alcohol, and a converse pride in the superior capacity of white men to hold their drink. Langton, 'Rum, Seduction and Death', 198–99.

As an anthropologist and policymaker, Stanner championed a view of contemporary Aboriginal communities as dynamic entities, engaged in a process of negotiation with Western technologies, laws and economies within their own metaphysical frameworks. Yet, as Clendinnen noted, he also had a strong emotional and aesthetic attachment to an ‘unstained vision of the physical hardihood, intellectual sophistication, and spiritual exuberance of the “Traditional Aborigine”’. He repudiated the flexibility and ingenuity of the astute political operator, who, like Bennelong, he felt was ‘an arch-manipulator, with wit and charm but no principles’. Although Stanner may often have used the notion of ‘dependency’ in a merely technical way, his association of the process with the ‘turncoat’ and ‘trickster’ Bennelong suggests a kind of moral alarm.<sup>36</sup> In his telling, Bennelong was responsible for leading Aboriginal people into a servile, imitative state, which was deliberately dissociated from Stanner’s metaphysically independent Aboriginal communities. Bennelong’s tragic fall was to be an opening chapter in a story of ‘race suicide’ or, in its new incarnation, the inexorable social process of cultural suicide.<sup>37</sup> While the ironies of Stanner’s views were soon pointed out, it has taken several decades of dedicated work to dismantle the valorisation of an ‘authentic’ and remote Aboriginality, idealised in anthropological circles so as to be remote from anywhere the anthropologist might be. The view of Aboriginal people as rigidly ‘tradition-bound’ and, thus, highly vulnerable to change, has very gradually given way to a recognition that the strength of Aboriginal cultures may be in their very flexibility.<sup>38</sup>

Even now, Bennelong’s adaptability seems to offend a deep-seated notion of cultural purity within the Western storyteller. His ambiguous flirtation with gentlemen’s dress, ingestion of European fare, and willing pastiche of manners and languages, seems to infringe cultural ‘cleanliness’ and, thus, to invite danger not only to himself, but also to Aboriginal people in general. Following Mary Douglas’s theorisation of cultural purity and pollution, Bennelong’s ingestion of alcohol sees him absorbed into the British cultural and political body, and signals the contamination of the

36 As Alexandra Stern noted, degeneration was a concept ‘imbued with both scientific and moral meaning’. Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 13. Clendinnen, ‘The Power to Frustrate’, 419, 429–30; Stanner, ‘Durmugam, a Nangiomeri’ (1959), quoted in Clendinnen, ‘The Power to Frustrate’, 424.

37 Alarm about ‘race suicide’ swept across Theodore Roosevelt’s America on the back of the notion of degeneration. Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 13. Interestingly, Clendinnen described Bennelong’s ‘performance’ of the irreconcilable savage as ‘suicidal’. Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*, 277.

38 In 1980, Diane Barwick noted the persisting preference for fighters over negotiators in revisionist accounts of Aboriginal history. See Veracini, ‘A Prehistory of Australia’s History Wars’, 43–47, 451–52; Macdonald, ‘Does “Culture” Have “History”?’’, 185.

Aboriginal body via Bennelong's mouth.<sup>39</sup> Echoing Dark, Clendinnen argued that Colbee had negotiated relations with the British with more dignity and less risk than Bennelong. She attributed Colbee's success, in part, to his maintenance of his 'wholeness', claiming that 'Colbee kept a sure footing in both camps, perhaps because he was never tempted to make any accommodation to British values, but remained always a tribal man'.<sup>40</sup> Clendinnen's comparison may be a valid historical one; however, it is interesting that she associated integrity with aloofness, and strength with perceived authenticity, just as Stanner had done, according to her, in his unguarded moments.

Bennelong has been, and continues to be, imagined as a kind of cultural 'half-caste', someone embodying the worst of both races and, as Henry Reynolds argued, 'commonly assumed to be morally and physically defective, unpredictable, unstable and degenerate'.<sup>41</sup> Plomley's 1970s account of the social place of the 'hybrid' mirrors Bennelong's imagined exile, belonging 'to neither race (shunned by both), and lacking a racial background they have no history'.<sup>42</sup> Bernard Smith, in his Boyer Lectures of 1980, characterised Bennelong as a man who had tried to function on both sides of a cultural divide—a 'game' that has 'always been an emotionally difficult one to play, its benefits precarious. Most became alcoholics'. Smith accorded Bennelong a legacy, passed down through a line of 'fool kings' and 'clowns' to, among others, Albert Namatjira:

Life between the two cultures has always been fraught with these terrible tensions. Take the case of Namatjira ... His tragic end is well known. In sharing liquor to which he was legally entitled with others of his tribe who were not, he was caught between the laws and customs of two societies. His trial and death shortly afterwards are now a part of the history of both cultures.<sup>43</sup>

Like Bennelong's, Namatjira's was a life contaminated by alcohol and overstretched to breaking point by the embrace of two worlds. Smith argued that, unlike heroic resistance leaders such as Pemulwuy and

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39 Mary Douglas has explored the dyad of purity and pollution, a ubiquitous human preoccupation with physical and social 'cleanliness', which takes quite different forms for different peoples, but universally implies a danger in departing from purity, and associates pollution with weakness. The body of the individual can form a microcosm for the body politic. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 4–5, 142.

40 Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*, 268.

41 Reynolds, *Nowhere People*, 3–5.

42 N. J. B. Plomley, quoted in Anderson, 'Black Bit, White Bit', 46.

43 Smith, 'The Spectre of Truganini', 37–39.

Yagan, these 'Quislings' or 'Jacky Jackies' have 'always been regarded by Aborigines with suspicion'. Not long after Namatjira's death in 1959 (and perhaps even during his lifetime), an identification with Bennelong was made.<sup>44</sup> The strains placed on each man as a colonised person become super-historical via such comparisons; in Smith's account, Bennelong and Namatjira succumb to an internal division and weakness that has 'always been' (as he insists through repetition). Finding this motif of internal Indigenous division a constant refrain within the discipline of anthropology, Ian Anderson replied that 'personhood is had through coherent experience ... The separation of black bit, white bit is a denial of humanity'.<sup>45</sup>

As Mary Douglas suggested, the belief that pollution weakens is closely followed by a suspicion that only those who are weak or careless would fail to resist pollution.<sup>46</sup> J. J. Healy, writing for a popular audience in 1977, employed an excess of reflexive language to illustrate his conviction that Aboriginal people could be held responsible for their own tumbling descent, finding 'continuity between Bennelong and those Aborigines who would speed the dissolution of their own societies by a self-generated fascination with the artefacts of European society'.<sup>47</sup> Over the past 20 or so years, the use of Bennelong's story to imply that Aboriginal people's 'problems' are self-inflicted has become less explicit. However, the ongoing narration of Bennelong's story as a cultural and an alcoholic tragedy carries a persistent implication that transculturation is analogous to a shameful cultural addiction. The Barani Indigenous History pages of the City of Sydney Council website acknowledge Bennelong's importance at the same time as they disown his adoption of 'European dress and ways': 'While Bennelong suffered from the worst aspects of enculturation, he also represents those who tried to change the behaviour of Europeans on Aboriginal lands'.<sup>48</sup> It is as if a cleansing of his memory is required. The anthropologist's, and now the historian's, ongoing desire to escape

44 Ibid., 37. In 1962, Bill Beatty suggested that 'there are certain aspects in Bennelong's story that seem to find sympathetic echo in the case of ... the late Albert Namatjira, torn between his tribal laws in Central Australia and the existing laws of the white man'. Beatty, *Early Australia*, 171.

45 Anderson, 'Black Bit, White Bit', 51.

46 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 4-5, 142.

47 Healy, 'A Most Tragic Theme', 32. Cowlshaw has shown that when the concept of race was no longer ostensibly in currency in the 1960s and 1970s, and the 'blood' of a person could no longer provide a valid indicator of their allegiance, cultural practices and even accoutrements readily became essentialised to provide the same kind of categorising information. Cowlshaw, quoted in Byrne, 'Deep Nation', 91.

48 Heiss, 'Barani: Sydney's Aboriginal History'.

the 'rotted frontier' and to find 'the unspotted savage' is, of course, much more than incidentally related to assimilation, which, in the immediate postwar decades, declared tribal life akin to an addiction that must be given up for a good, clean, modern life.<sup>49</sup>

Alcohol is a key ingredient in the story of Bennelong's failure. His twentieth-century biographers have reached for the bottle without hesitation, finding either that Bennelong drank 'to ease the pain of loneliness and confusion', or that it was alcohol itself that precipitated his alienation (a foreboding musical squall broke out as Bennelong took his first draught in a recent play).<sup>50</sup> Yet, alcohol is by no means a historiographically neutral substance. The first-hand accounts depict Bennelong engaging in both 'good' and 'bad' drinking, with Tench's admiring comment that he could hold his grog like any gentleman contrasting with the vulgar 'propensity to drunkenness' cited by the report of his death in *The Sydney Gazette*.<sup>51</sup> It is true that these two comments occur at opposite ends of Bennelong's association with the British. However, they are also thoroughly bound up with ideas surrounding social class and alcohol at a time when, as Stephen Garton argued, the British began to wrest local Aboriginal peoples' wealth from them and attempt to fit them into their allotted place in colonial society and economy—right at the bottom.<sup>52</sup> At first, Bennelong drank in the governor's dining room, the officers using wine to initiate him into 'civilised' company; by such means, the officers may have hoped to bring Bennelong into a kind of gentlemen's agreement about his role in the spread of civilisation. For his part, Bennelong seems to have been alive to the ritual significance of the consumption of wine as part of the sharing of elite male goodwill, as he demonstrated when he accepted Governor Phillip's offer of wine at the whale feast at Manly and proceeded to toast 'the King'. When Bennelong ceased to drink exclusively with the officers, their interpretation of his drinking became more closely aligned with their attitude towards the lower classes, which they disparaged for taking 'unruly' pleasure in bloodsports and drinking to excess in public.<sup>53</sup>

49 Clendinnen, 'The Power to Frustrate', 415; Haebich, 'Imagining Assimilation', 66–67.

50 Sheppard, *The Life of Bennelong*, 27; Tweg, 'Dream On', 50. Brodsky's Bennelong is also explicitly doomed from his first taste of alcohol. Brodsky, *Bennelong Profile*, 27.

51 Tench, *A Narrative of the Expedition*, 117–18; *The Sydney Gazette*, 9 January 1813, 2.

52 Garton, *Out of Luck*, 9–12, 15, 19–20, 36. See also Reynolds, 'Aborigines and European Social Hierarchy', 124–33. Reynolds presented a convincing case that nineteenth-century thinkers sought to integrate Aborigines into colonial society as landless labourers.

53 McIntyre, 'Bennelong Sat Down to Dinner', 39.6–39.10; Karskens, *The Colony*, 128.

The symbolic valency of alcohol does not diminish as we approach the present. Postwar renditions of Bennelong's story coincided with an era of strong temperance activity, reflecting theories of predisposition and approaches to alcohol abuse from medical and scientific perspectives that gained momentum from the 1890s.<sup>54</sup> The social understandings surrounding alcohol abuse in contemporary Australian society are so rich and various that there is room in Bennelong's story for everything from pity, as in Melinda Hinkson's 'lonely alcoholic with a broken spirit', to smutty humour, as in Keith Willey's comment that 'the nature of [Bennelong's] association with the brewer, James Squire—apart from a notable liking for his product—is not known'.<sup>55</sup> In the 1980s, John Mulvaney found that Bennelong's drinking reflected a lack of steadiness of character and an inability to discriminate between good and bad parts of British culture. He contrasted the way in which Arabanoo, while he savoured bread and tea, 'resisted alcoholic drinks with "disgust and abhorrence"', according to the approving Tench, but his successor, Bennelong, succumbed to grog.<sup>2</sup> Mulvaney, too, approved of Arabanoo ('his conduct was something [that] modern Aboriginal people can honour'), whereas Bennelong's willingness to partake of alcohol was evidence of a lack of similar moral fibre.<sup>56</sup> In making this comparison, Mulvaney projected eighteenth-century ideas of class-differentiated morality onto Aboriginal men trying alcohol for the first time; in doing so, he found a readily comprehending audience in the present.

As Marcia Langton has demonstrated, alcohol has long played a part in popular and official representations of Aboriginal communities. Langton perceived Bennelong as the first 'drunken Aborigine', transformed by the alcohol that was pressed on him by the colonists, and then depicted as a 'degenerate native' lacking the restraint and dignity necessary for civilisation. She argued that, across the centuries since Bennelong's

54 Garton, *Medicine and Madness*, 56–57; Garton, *Out of Luck*, 104. An article about the residential rehabilitation program tailored to Aboriginal needs at Bennelong's Haven uses the language of 'habit' and 'addiction' in telling Bennelong's story. See Miller, 'A Haven for Alcoholics', 602–05.

55 Hinkson, 'Exploring Aboriginal Sites in Sydney', 65; Willey, *When the Sky Fell Down*, 146.

56 Mulvaney, *A Good Foundation*, 13. Clendinnen wrote: 'In those first encounters on the beach most Australians had shunned the wine or rum pressed on them—except for Baneelon. Restless for glory in this as in so much else, he was soon quaffing wine with all the flourishes with which the white gentlemen surrounded it'. The implication is that Bennelong's drinking was power hungry and immoderate. Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*, 275. *The Sydney Gazette* of the first decade of the nineteenth century contains much correspondence on the unfortunate way in which Aboriginal people had picked up the bad language of rough London from the convicts, and how difficult it was to steer them towards good manners. See Garton, *Medicine and Madness*, 56–57.

lifetime, the image of the 'drunken Aborigine' has sustained its own momentum.<sup>57</sup> I agree that the association of Bennelong's fall and disgrace with alcohol has helped to sustain this story of tragedy across the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. This story has survived because it seems to be true. We 'know' that alcohol can be addictive and that alcohol abuse can result in the breakdown of a person's relationships as they become aggressive or morose, unreliable and incompetent; thus, Bennelong's tragedy is plausible. Ideas about alcohol have undoubtedly changed over the past 200 years; however, in application to Bennelong, they translate readily. Alcohol abuse has maintained a conceptual association with the disadvantaged and Aboriginal people have remained marginalised. Research and legal processes continue to find alcohol a factor in violence occurring in Aboriginal communities at the same time as political grandstanding takes advantage of public opinion on the matter; for example, Tony Abbott proposed a 'crackdown on alcohol abuse in Aboriginal communities' in February 2010 as he sought election as leader of the opposition.<sup>58</sup> Thus, Bennelong's alcohol-fuelled tragedy is malleable, its truth continually and continuously reflected in the existing social order.<sup>59</sup>

The First Fleet diarists were keenly attentive to the responses of Aboriginal people to English food and drink, and clothing and grooming practices; Tench reported with great interest meetings at which Eora men, including Bennelong, submitted to a shave by means of a cutthroat razor.<sup>60</sup> As a longed-for ambassador for the British, Bennelong's receptiveness to the appurtenances of gentlemanly culture, and his aptitude for assimilating British language and etiquette, certainly excited the First Fleet diarists. Yet, Tench observed that Bennelong, coming and going from the settlement in late 1790, sometimes wore the clothes he had been given and sometimes carried them in a bag around his neck.<sup>61</sup> It appears that Bennelong dressed when it suited him. This left the colonists with an equivocal understanding of his place in the settlement.<sup>62</sup> Later storytellers

57 Langton, 'Rum, Seduction and Death', 195–206.

58 *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 February 2010, 1. See also, 'Alcohol "Primary Cause" of Aboriginal Violence', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 April 2010, 7; 'Call for More Alcohol Rules to Cut Aboriginal Violence', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 February 2009, 3.

59 Spillman, 'When Do Collective Memories Last?', 451.

60 Tench, *A Narrative of the Expedition*, 134–38, 142–43.

61 *Ibid.*, 108.

62 McBryde noted Hunter's musings about whether Bennelong had perhaps simply lost the clothes that he had been given. McBryde, 'Barter ... Immediately Commenced', 253.

have been much less willing to be equivocal. Few of Bennelong's modern biographers have been able to imagine him moving between the colony and Aboriginal life in a sustainable way. Uneasy when Bennelong appears to be 'in limbo between two societies', they have felt the need to push him one way or the other.<sup>63</sup> A 1970 children's book found that Bennelong's period of captivity transformed him. He happily adopted English dress, food and the 'easy' life, and 'liked standing in the sunlight and looking at his shadow. His shadow was no longer that of Bennelong of the Cadigals. It was the shadow of a white man'.<sup>64</sup> Conversely, 'Swimming Monkey', a contributor to the internet forum Everything2, used Bennelong's state of undress in his later years to evoke his despondency and disgrace:

As the years went by his drinking became progressively heavier and he ceased to trouble himself with dressing in the gentlemanly finery he had been so fond of earlier, instead becoming contented with slinking about in dishevelled [sic] rags.<sup>65</sup>

According to Simon Schama, to honour the 'obligations of tragedy ... we must proceed until all is known; a verdict declared; a sacrifice made ready; an atonement decreed'.<sup>66</sup> Once dressed, the tragic Bennelong cannot again be undressed without being naked. As Karskens observed, Europeans have been disconcerted by Aboriginal people in hybrid dress, equating part-European dress with indignity, immodesty and poverty, rather than cultural borrowing, innovation, friendship, trade and rivalry.<sup>67</sup>

Having once tasted alcohol, Bennelong was no longer innocent of the continuum between drunkenness and sobriety, and, upon reaching the peak of his career, storytellers have been impatient to get rid of him. Clendinnen was not alone in feeling that Bennelong 'should have died earlier'. Manning Clark disposed of him 'headlong', as we have seen, and Brodsky charted a 'downward rush [that] could not be halted'.<sup>68</sup> A twenty-first century biographer made an arithmetic mistake, writing 'only eight years after [Bennelong's return from England], he died an

63 Jill Sykes, 'Bennelong Makes a Point', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 October 1988, Arts, 81.

64 Endeavour Reading Programme, *Bennelong*, 44. Dark said something only slightly different, but with quite a different meaning—that, when dressed, Bennelong's shadow was the 'same as the shadow of a white man'. Dark, *The Timeless Land*, 264–65.

65 Swimming Monkey, 'Bennelong', Everything2, 19 December 2007, accessed 17 March 2009, [www.everything2.com/index.pl?node\\_id=1922328](http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=1922328).

66 Schama, *Dead Certainties*, 262.

67 Karskens, 'Red Coat, Blue Jacket', 8–16, 29–31.

68 Brodsky, *Bennelong Profile*, 78.

alcoholic', robbing him of a decade of life between 1795 and 1813. This error of subtraction is part of a systematic 'misremembering' of Bennelong's latter years. As Karskens observed, storytellers have wilfully overlooked that 'Bennelong got his life back together' after facing an initial series of reversals on his return from England.<sup>69</sup> One of the ongoing attractions of the tragic mode is surely that it makes the evidence cohere into a compelling story, in which there is only one reversal of fortune for Bennelong, leading directly to his death. Significantly, an Aboriginal retelling of Bennelong's story provides a rare exception; a play produced by Koories in Theatre in 1995 put forward a positive metaphor for Bennelong's 'in-between' status—the platypus, an animal with a 'multifaceted nature' that must find a niche for itself in a new world.<sup>70</sup>

The *Bringing Them Home* report found that many stolen generations survivors have experienced feelings of not belonging in either 'world'. One contributor testified:

Most of us girls were thinking white in the head but were feeling black inside. We weren't black or white. We were a very lonely, lost and sad displaced group of people. We were taught to think and act like a white person, but we didn't know how to think and act like an Aboriginal. We didn't know anything about our culture.

We were completely brainwashed to think only like a white person. When they went to mix in white society, they found they were not accepted [because] they were Aboriginal. When they went and mixed with Aborigines, some found they couldn't identify with them either, because they had too much white ways in them. So that they were neither black nor white. They were simply a lost generation of children. I know. I was one of them.<sup>71</sup>

It is clear that the idea of navigating 'two worlds' has relevance to Aboriginal people facing the continuing implications of colonisation. It is possible that some of Bennelong's recent biographers have projected these experiences back onto Bennelong (and integrated them into his tragedy) after having witnessed these feelings of alienation through survivors' testimonies. They may have been encouraged by connections drawn in public history-making, such as the 1998 exhibition about the

69 Flood, *The Original Australians*, 42. On 'misremembering' see Portelli, 'The Massacre', 29–41; Karskens, *The Colony*, 422.

70 Koories in Theatre, 'Moobbajia: Speak an Unknown Language'.

71 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), *Bringing Them Home*, 152.

stolen generations held at Government House titled 'In the Interest of Bennelong'.<sup>72</sup> The 'National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families' found that these self-understandings were nurtured by systems of removal, punishment, education and labour that were 'administered in such a way as would directly cause feelings of alienation'. Interestingly, these experiences are described as 'tragic' only a handful of times in the report, mostly in the submissions of health professionals and legal or government organisations, rather than by Aboriginal people talking about their own experiences.<sup>73</sup> While tragedy is an important part of Western/European culture in Australia (many aspects of which are part of the cultural vocabulary of Aboriginal people today), tragedy did not figure strongly in how Aboriginal people articulated their loss, pain, shame and displacement in the *Bringing Them Home* report. The genre's links with fate and inevitability were, perhaps, not helpful in articulating these experiences.

Instead of leading to a tragic end, Bennelong's negotiation of the cultural tensions of a colonised life can provide a reassuring example for Aboriginal people maintaining connections and cultural integrity.<sup>74</sup> A contributor to the *First Australians* guestbook on the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) website who introduced herself as a Wardandi Bibbulmun woman drew a very different relationship between Bennelong's actions and his Aboriginality than Stanner and Smith:

72 Stephens, 'Bennelong, the First of the Stolen', 6.

73 HREOC, *Bringing Them Home*, 204. The words 'tragic', 'tragedy' and 'tragically' occur only 11 times in the 500 page report. The authors of the report described cases in which reunion was impossible as 'tragic'. HREOC, *Bringing Them Home*, 235. Health professionals and legal or government organisations described the effects of removal on stolen generations survivors and their families, or the overall system and its intentions, as 'tragic', in the sense of being deeply sad and having caused profound and sustained loss and damage. HREOC, *Bringing Them Home*, 180, 197, 286, 363, 425, 435. One stolen generations survivor cited her loving foster father explaining the 'tragedy' that her natural father must have suffered in losing his daughter, and another talked of the holistic healing necessary for recovery of body and spirit from 'all of our past pains, traumas and tragedies'. HREOC, *Bringing Them Home*, 170, 399.

74 Bangarra Dance Theatre's production 'Bennelong', which premiered at the Sydney Opera House in June 2017, looked to Bennelong as a man who had struggled with two worlds. 'Bennelong is in all of us, as we navigate the ancient and modern elements of our lives', said the company's artistic director, Stephen Page, in the production's program; yet, the production powerfully and unambiguously depicted Bennelong's exile right at the point at which his struggle with those contradictions peaked on his return from England. A precipitous end came to the resilient, intelligent and creative character we had come to know through the dancing of Beau Dean Riley Smith, as he was suddenly enclosed in a small, reflective cell (the panels placed by the other dancers), drunk and irrecoverable. See Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore, 'Bangarra's Bennelong Review—Aboriginal Warrior's Conflict Portrayed in Dramatic Suspense', *The Guardian*, Australian edition, 1 July 2017; Fullagar, 'The Story of Bennelong is Potent and Evocative—but it is Being Contested', *The Guardian*, Australian edition, 8 July 2017.

Bennelong was an inspiration, a man who spoke the wadjela ways, but whose heart belonged to his people. We have all learnt to walk the wadjela walk, but remain embedded in our culture.<sup>75</sup>

This storyteller did not see Bennelong's story as determinative or predictive of the life patterns of Aboriginal people. Rather, she saw him as an ancestor who might provide an example of strength for people facing similar challenges in the present. Likewise, Kamilaroi Ngunnawal woman Pamela Young, working on a recent oral history book, looked to Bennelong to connect her writing practice with the 'ancient oral wellspring [that] is the source of wellbeing' for Aboriginal orators. Bennelong, having written the first letter by an Aboriginal person, had connected these 'two worlds', embodying the strength of Aboriginal tradition in a form recognisable to colonists, saying, in effect, 'I can play your game mate, I can write'.<sup>76</sup> Young did not require Bennelong to form a permanent and singular crossing between two cultural monoliths, or to stop them from colliding. Instead, she found that he began a tradition that she could draw on in her own work. Bennelong's significance as a tragic figure within a larger Aboriginal tragedy, which has seemed so pertinent to non-Indigenous Australians, is, perhaps, not as relevant to Aboriginal people.

Tragedy is a literary and dramatic form with a long history of practice and philosophy, in which some of the most complex and troubling characters of Western cultural tradition have been created. Although a few of Bennelong's biographies have approached full-scale dramatic treatments, Dark's and Brodsky's among them, most of the 'biographies' considered here are pocket-sized sketches. An eclectic local production, tracing Aboriginal history from the Dreaming to the present, encapsulated Bennelong's life thus:

He was befriended and taken to England by Captain Arthur Phillip; treated as a curiosity; learned English quickly; attempted to reconcile the English and the Eora in the early days; became a victim of alcoholism; tragic life story—wafting from the white world to the black. He was from the Cadigal Clan.<sup>77</sup>

75 'Trish Hill-Wall', 21 October 2008, SBS First Australians, Your Comments, accessed 20 March 2009, [www.sbs.com.au/firstaustralians/](http://www.sbs.com.au/firstaustralians/).

76 Carrington and Young, *Aboriginal Heritage and Wellbeing*, 35.

77 Ellis, *Aboriginal Australians*, 113.

This summation of Bennelong's life is cursory, by no means masterfully written, and probably has no direct relationship with the primary sources. Yet, it manages to convey a powerful impression. The adjective 'tragic' functions as a flag; it signals agreement with other accounts of Bennelong's pitiable failure, recruits the reader's prior knowledge of this failure and gives the tragic wheel another spin. Even if the reader has no prior knowledge of Bennelong, the compact evocations of his alcoholism and unsuccessful attempt to reconcile 'two worlds' provides ample explanation of an inevitable and partly self-destructive course towards alienation and despair. The equally economical fall of Bennelong in Andrew and Nancy Learmonth's *Encyclopaedia of Australia* suggests that this understanding was already well established by the late 1960s:

One of two Aborigines captured, befriended and trained by Phillip who took them to London ... Bennelong returned with Hunter, living at the Governor's house, almost as an exhibit, but he returned to the bush where he was rejected by his own people. Drink and degradation made him the first of many tragic failures to reconcile Aboriginal with European culture.<sup>78</sup>

Eschewing the imperialist rhetoric of Brodsky, the literary drama of Dark and the academic-speak of Clendinnen, the down-to-earthiness of these micro-biographies helps to give Bennelong's tragedy a patina of realness that contributes to an intertextual consensus that Bennelong lived a tragic life. Perhaps, most importantly, the adjective 'tragic' gives a signal to the reader about how they should feel.

In 1985, Eric Willmot warned the 'dragons' of history (i.e., white historians who wanted to keep the past to themselves) that a generation of Aboriginal scholars was about to emerge and make Australian history its own. Like Mulvaney, Willmot felt that the story of Pemulwuy would be the one that these Aboriginal historians would most want to tell (as he himself did shortly afterwards). Although Willmot viewed Bennelong's story as tainted, he did not see this as Bennelong's failure; instead, the taint came from the long period his story had spent in the keeping of the dragons.<sup>79</sup> The fabric of Bennelong's tragedy is a closely woven web of veracities: historical, allegorical, literary and moral. The threads are not easy to disentangle; however, in the light of a body of evidence for the varied fortunes and strong relationships of Bennelong's last 18 years, it is

78 Learmonth and Learmonth, *Encyclopaedia of Australia*, 54.

79 Willmot, 'The Dragon Principle', 44–48.

clear that we must reflect further on his story and on its uses. Tragedy is not life, nor is it history. Tragedy is a dramatic or literary construction with its own logic and genealogy. If Bennelong's life is 'tragic', then it is his storytellers who have made it so.

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