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Ambassador between the Present and the Past

Bernard Smith, in his 1980 Boyer Lectures, called on writers to engage with the tragedy in Australian history because tragedy embodies a moral commitment and has the power to act as the midwife of ‘atonement’. He felt that Australians had avoided tragedy because ‘the tragic muse was an old Aboriginal woman, surviving precariously as a fringe dweller in some unknown country town’—and white Australians wanted to forget her. He argued that engagement with the tragedy of Aboriginal history would spur the ‘concerned conscience’ to agitate for the improvement of legal, health and education outcomes for Aboriginal people. Yet, tragedy’s potential to play a constructive role in the ‘education of democratic citizens’ has long been in dispute; philosophers from Plato to Nietzsche have variously found that tragedy has the potential to morally corrupt or to undermine genuine moral responsibility. Smith himself acknowledged the danger that a tragic history ‘could readily fall into sentimentality, making oppressive institutions tolerable, even enjoyable, in the very process of exposing them’.¹

¹ Smith remarked that ‘at times it would seem as if all the culture of old Europe were being brought to bear upon our writers and artists in order to blot from their memories the crimes perpetrated on Australia’s first inhabitants’. It did not occur to him to examine the implications of mobilising this cultural armoury in the service of *remembering*. Smith, ‘The Spectre of Truganini’, 16, 22–34. Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, quoted in Muldoon, ‘Thinking Responsibility Differently’, 246.

Paul Muldoon, in an essay examining the limits of justice as a paradigm for reconciliation, noted that ‘when historians refer to the fate of the Aborigines as a “tragedy” ... the only element that generally remains of the original Greek signification is that of a necessary or unavoidable catastrophe’. For tragedy to have the transformative power that the ancient Greeks endowed it with, it must be uncomfortable, it must decentre or disturb the audience, prompt each audience member to look into their own all-too-human soul and know that they could share the fate of the protagonist. To transform, tragedy must make the assumed foundations of social endeavour quiver beneath the feet of the audience, showing how civilisation itself, far from being a safe refuge, has terror and confusion on its underside. If a ‘tragedy’ is simply inevitable, its audience achieves easy absolution via the kind of sentimental masochism that Bernard Smith worried about; as Muldoon put it, when tragedy is reduced to ‘misfortune’, it becomes ‘a category of event to which the concept of responsibility has little or no application’.² W. K. Hancock, charting Australia’s great romance with wool in 1930, rendered Muldoon’s point with exactitude. Hancock explained Aboriginal history in terms of Social Darwinism, stating that ‘the advance of British civilisation made inevitable “the natural progress of the aboriginal race towards extinction”’. Though he did not interrogate this ‘natural’ explanation, Hancock was able to offer an acute account of the level of responsibility it might engender:

Australian democracy is genuinely benevolent, but is preoccupied with its own affairs. From time to time it remembers the primitive people whom it has dispossessed, and sheds over their predestined passing an economical tear.³

A tragic outcome for Bennelong has a bearing on the level of responsibility that storytellers and their audiences might feel for Aboriginal history across the subsequent two centuries. As Mark McKenna stated of local historians in south-eastern New South Wales who have added Aboriginal history back in over the last few decades:

Acknowledging that the settlers had poisoned or shot Aboriginal people ... allowed historians to remove them from their historical narrative. Once the unpleasantness was out of the way, history could continue as a non-Aboriginal story.⁴

2 Muldoon, ‘Thinking Responsibility Differently’, 245–48.

3 Hancock, *Australia*, 32–33.

4 McKenna, *Looking for Blackfellas’ Point*, 94.

It has become increasingly relevant in academic and public spheres to suspend the doom of ‘the fatal moment when Phillip stepped ashore’ and to re-examine contact history, focusing on the texture of what actually happened, the variety of relations that were entered into, the kinds of cooperation that made European settlement possible, and the agency and strategies of Indigenous peoples in accommodating, as well as combating, the colonists.⁵ Inga Clendinnen returned to colonial relationships in *Dancing with Strangers* in this spirit, hoping to recover the many-coloured and fragile optimism of the ‘springtime’ of first contact. However, she found resounding failure in the persons of Phillip and Bennelong. For Clendinnen, these men were the leaders of two peoples on whose shoulders the weight of history rested. She found that Phillip and Bennelong had the best chance of setting up enduring good relations between European colonists and Indigenous Australians; instead, they established a course through uncertainty, conflict and mutual disrespect across the continent. Thus, ‘each failed, to their own and their people’s injury, and to ours’.⁶ One implication of Clendinnen’s interpretation is that Phillip and Bennelong, right back there at the ‘beginning’, should bear more responsibility than those who came after them for the pain and violence in Australian history.

According to Tim Rowse, history-making almost inevitably involves the making of ‘counterfactual’ claims for, in maintaining a conviction that the course of history is not inevitable, we imagine other courses that history might have taken. Rowse has challenged Australian historians to be reflective about the nature of these claims that are closely bound up with the ways in which we imagine our own complicity in the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples.⁷ Underlying Clendinnen’s analysis of Bennelong and Phillip’s failure is a powerful counterfactual claim that, had goodwill been maintained, the British colonisation of Aboriginal lands might have been mutually beneficial. The nature of the failure she perceived, and the character of her counterfactual claim, made it possible for her to call for a reconciliation based on a renewal of the mutual curiosity and concern that she found in early British–Aboriginal relations in the Sydney area.⁸

5 Elder, *Blood on the Wattle*, 11; Byrne, ‘Archaeology in Reverse’, 240–41.

6 Clendinnen returned to the history of the Sydney colony in pursuit of ‘social justice between Australia’s original immigrants, and those of us who came later’. Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*, 5, 286.

7 Rowse, ‘Historians and the Humanitarian’, 254–56.

8 Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*, 287.

Rowse identified a similar strain of ‘humanitarian’ argument running through the ‘history wars’—namely, that ‘the “rule of law” could have limited the extent to which the usurping Britons used physical force to secure their dominion’. He argued that Clendinnen’s implicit claim ‘can never lose its pertinence for Australians who wish to ameliorate the impact of a colonisation that they cannot reverse’.⁹ Historians have responded to Clendinnen’s counterfactual scenario from various directions. Gordon Briscoe, appearing back to back with Clendinnen on the *First Australians* television series, stated that he had found no evidence that the British were attempting to establish a future based on mutual understanding; rather, it was clear from the outset that change was to be imposed.¹⁰ For John Hirst, the notion that more goodwill in the beginning may have resulted in a better outcome for Aboriginal Australians was a ‘liberal fantasy’; he argued that the ‘concerned conscience’ becomes absorbed in the colonial phase of Australia’s history at the expense of acknowledging the relentless bureaucratic ‘second attack’ on Australia’s Indigenous peoples in the early twentieth century.¹¹

Clendinnen’s imagined audience, drawn into a sympathetic circle of readers by her frequent use of the first person plural, was characterised by Alan Atkinson as ‘Australians ... probably of British descent, but not British ourselves, well informed, well travelled and with a distinctive moral attitude’.¹² Members of Bennelong and Surrounds Residents for Reconciliation, an active group based in the federal electorate of Bennelong (inner north-western Sydney) might be included within this circle. This group, which backed Maxine McKew’s challenge of then Liberal Prime Minister John Howard in the Bennelong electorate in 2007, gained inspiration from Clendinnen’s ideas about Bennelong. Having recently read *Dancing with Strangers*, in her maiden speech to Parliament, McKew said:

It is a complex story, the story of early European settlement ... [It should be known] that there were ... moments when trust and goodwill ruled hearts on both sides of the divide. The universal disaster did not have to happen and it does not have to happen now. For Bennelong there was no happy ending. When he returned to his own land after three years in England, he was scorned by the Europeans and by his own people.

9 Rowse, ‘Historians and the Humanitarian’, 254.

10 Nowra and Perkins, ‘Episode 1: They Have Come to Stay’.

11 Hirst, *Sense and Nonsense*, 82, 88–90.

12 Atkinson, ‘The Charmed Circle’, 9–10.

He was the first of tens of thousands of Aboriginals who have attempted or been forced to straddle both worlds, only to end up lost between both. A question for us all as we start out on the road to reconciliation is to ask: what was Bennelong trying to do in forging a friendship with the British? At the very least, we can say he was making a connection, attempting to build a bridge. And that is what we need to do.¹³

Neither McKew nor the Residents for Reconciliation denied responsibility for the present. McKew took up Clendinnen's call for a reconciliation inspired by past goodwill. For their part, the Residents for Reconciliation dedicated significant time, energy and resources to actions ranging from participation in the 'Stop the Northern Territory Intervention' campaign to the promotion of local Aboriginal artists; they also planned to dedicate a memorial to Bennelong.¹⁴ In addition, the organisation supported and publicised Keith Smith's work on Bennelong, helping him to 'rehabilitate' Bennelong from the myth of his 'pathetic demise'.¹⁵ Of course, no reader is captive to a single interpretation of Bennelong's story. Members of this group may have drawn inspiration from both Smith's and Clendinnen's works, as well as rethinking the relationship between the two under the tutelage of Keneally's *Australians: Origins to Eureka*.

McKew's version of history contains a mixture of recognition and insistence on destruction that are inseparable. How should her impulse to destroy Bennelong in narrative, even as historical goodwill and mutual understanding are remembered, be understood? Does this kind of insistence on destruction point to a thread of hostility intermingled with the very goodwill involved in remembering Bennelong?¹⁶ As we have seen already, Bennelong has been remembered by many storytellers over the past 40 years as a friend to the colony, with the obliteration of his health, family life, self-respect and future prospects following close behind. Explaining this, Andrew Lattas suggested that storytellers and their audiences might feel cleansed by Bennelong's comprehensive failure, his 'Christ-like suffering' restoring 'settler Australians to a lost moral order'.¹⁷

13 McKew, First Speech to Parliament, 14 February 2008.

14 Judy MacGregor Smith, Bennelong and Surrounds Residents for Reconciliation, personal communication with author, 13 November 2008.

15 Smith, 'Bennelong among his People', 8, 24. The Bennelong and Surrounds Residents for Reconciliation hosted a talk by Smith about Bennelong and the Indigenous history of Ryde in conjunction with a visit to Bennelong's grave at Kissing Point in October 2008.

16 Rutherford, *The Gauche Intruder*, 10–13.

17 Andrew Lattas 'Aborigines and Contemporary Australian Nationalism: Primordiality and the Cultural Politics of Otherness', quoted in Broome, 'Historians, Aborigines and Australia', 71.

Sherman Alexie, of the Spokane/Coeur d'Alene people of Washington, provides an ironic recipe for nation-defining popular fiction across the Pacific that has distinct affinities with Bennelong's tragedy. The readers of Alexie's 'Great American Indian Novel', imagined to be beneficiaries of settler-colonialism, will be offered both absolution and ascendancy by the plot's spectacle of 'Indians [with] tragic features: tragic noses, eyes and arms', and the travails of the hero, who will be a 'half-breed, half white and half Indian'. The narrative will transform the truth of American history, making real the settler fantasy of being one with the land, without predecessor; in this novel 'all of the white people will be Indians and all of the Indians will be ghosts'.¹⁸

Andrew McCann linked the ubiquitous rendition of the vanished or vanishing Aboriginal race with white Australians' desire to identify with the land. He argued that it is the writing of an Aboriginal tragedy (anticipating an Aboriginal extinction that has not yet arrived but inevitably will) that has allowed settlers to engage in a 'romance' with Australia, in which it is the settlers who struggle, who sacrifice, who shape and are shaped by this harsh landscape.¹⁹ Bennelong's tragedy, like the overarching tragedy of Aboriginal extinction, may be a 'melancholy footnote' to white history, but it is a footnote on which this history depends. As Frances Peters-Little observed, it is Aboriginal *history* that has been made to disappear by these narratives:

Bennelong's children survived, as did a lot of Aboriginal people's children ... But they were told they were no longer Aboriginal because they didn't live in a certain way ... That's been the process of genocide. It's being told you're not what you are. They're around, they're everywhere.²⁰

Bennelong's contribution to the romance of 'progress' is not always related to his suffering. His friendship with Governor Phillip and its 'metaphorical clasping of hands, the black and the white' has, at times, carried a hovering implication that this mateship, or paternal-filial bond, absolves the white hand for its dispossession of the black, or even constitutes an agreement

18 Alexie, 'How to Write the Great American Indian Novel', in *The Summer of Black Widows*.

19 McCann, 'Unknown Australia', 37–50; McCann, 'The Literature of Extinction', 48–54. Brantlinger coined the term 'proleptic elegy' to show how this 'wished-for lack' has become a central part of nationalist celebration for 'settler' societies to the present. Brantlinger, *Dark Vanishings*, 3, 189–90.

20 Frances Peters Little, personal communication, quoted in Smith and Plater, *Raging Partners*, 79.

of some kind.²¹ A 1969 children's book created a clasping of hands in which a handover was very strongly implied. In the story, Bennelong is depicted as hating Phillip and the British for intruding and staying in his country; however, he comes to understand that these strangers now own 'the land'. Bennelong broadcasts this to his people and works through the resentment that he feels as a result of this new reality. The book reaches an almost homoerotic pitch when Bennelong makes an (ahistorical) visit to Phillip's bedside as he convalesces after being speared at Manly:

Phillip was in bed, but he received him, and for a few moments the two men were quite still—each regarding the other. Then both smiled—and Bennelong shot out his hand ... Their paths had crossed before; this time they met—and it was in friendship.²²

Relinquishing his dream of seeing the next generation of boys become strong hunters, Bennelong sailed to England with the virile Phillip, never to return.²³ This narrative of assent and forgiveness implied a mutual understanding between Bennelong and Phillip that the Aboriginal epoch had passed, symbolised by a peaceful handover to British Australians that even Bennelong acknowledged as progress.

Like the rhetorical recruitment of the Opera House as a memorial for Bennelong, a number of popular and official stories have created a similar sense of 'rightness' by finding that Bennelong, with his enthusiastic appreciation for British culture, is aptly commemorated by the continued growth of the nation. A 2005 children's book included a section dedicated to 'Bennelong today', in which an unproblematic continuity was drawn between Bennelong, the Opera House and a raft of commercial and political ventures that have taken his name. 'On Sydney Harbour today', we are told, 'residents and tourists can enjoy luxury cruises in the motor

21 Brodsky, *Bennelong Profile*, 37. In the 1980s television series based on Dark's *The Timeless Land*, we are confronted with Phillip's face looking lovingly towards Bennelong like a new father. *The Timeless Land: The Early Days of British Settlement in Australia*, disc 1. The notion that the two men exchanged names as 'a sign of their deep affection for each other' continues to circulate unaccompanied by comment on the nature of kin ties and their formal and political meanings for the Eora. See Hinkson, *Aboriginal Sydney*, 7.

22 Wilton, *The Unknown Land*, 19.

23 *Ibid.*, 20. Similarly, Eleanor Dark and the children's book that follows her story created a fictional father for Bennelong who had seen Cook's ship, and who always wished that his son would travel in such a 'magic boat': 'It is the wish of my father, the wish of Wunbula, that I stay here with the white men. For one day Wunbula's wish will come true. Wunbula's son will travel in the magic boats, the magic boats of Wunbula's corroboree'. Endeavour Reading Programme, *Bennelong*, 44–45.

yacht MV *Bennelong* on the waters once fished by Bennelong and the Wanghal people'. Thus, 'Bennelong lives on' (apparently) through these various ways in which his name is 'honoured'.²⁴

The implications of this grafting of the goods of the present onto Bennelong's story are brought into sharp relief by John Birmingham in his conclusion to *Leviathan: The Unauthorised Biography of Sydney*, in which he imagines the ghost of Arthur Phillip returning to Sydney in the present: '[I'd] shout him the most expensive lunch. I'd tell him that, all things considered, he'd done well ... The city he helped raise is one of the finest in the world'. However, Birmingham flinches as the ghost asks him what has happened to the descendants of Aboriginal people he knew. Birmingham realises that if Phillip's apparition were to appear, so might Bennelong's, and that this Bennelong might not be satisfied by the naming of an electorate after him, or any other gesture of 'tribute' to his memory. Birmingham encounters Bennelong with some trepidation; he cannot think of anything to say except an inadequate 'sorry' and stops short of trying to imagine what Bennelong's ghost might say in reply.²⁵ Here, as in Yusef Komunyakaa's poem, it is as if a happy innocence in Australian history, once sponsored by Bennelong, is being relinquished.²⁶

Henry Reynolds encountered many people who felt 'let down, cheated, sold short' by their school education. His book *Why Weren't We Told?* provided an account of his own gradual recognition of frontier conflict, repressive legislation and racist ideology in Australian pasts and presents. Reynolds's research shook his belief that 'Australia was a society that valued equality above all other virtues and was committed to a fair go for all' and forced him to relinquish the notion that Australia had been peaceably settled.²⁷ Likewise, a contributor to the *First Australians* online comments page recoiled from the saccharine version of Bennelong's friendship with Phillip he had been taught as a child: 'We were never taught of these atrocities at school ... I do remember learning the charming story of the friendship between Philip [sic] and Bennelong—not so "charming" now'.²⁸

24 Sheppard, *The Life of Bennelong*, 29.

25 John Birmingham wanted to write a happy, carefree history of the city he loved, but that was not what happened; to his own surprise, he produced a 'black armband biography'. Birmingham, *Leviathan*, 509–10.

26 Komunyakaa, 'Bennelong's Blues'.

27 Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?*, 2–9, 135–38.

28 'Ross Mac from Moorooka', 22 October 2008, SBS First Australians, Your Comments, accessed 20 March 2008, www.sbs.com.au/firstaustralians/.

It is perhaps this rejection of a 'charming' colonial history that leads to an interpretation like McKew's and Bernard Smith's, in which Bennelong's obliteration must be recognised by the 'concerned conscience'.

Muldoon found that, for tragedy to transform the citizen and engage his sense of responsibility, a level of awareness is required; audience members must enter into a contract of sorts and must recognise their own participation in a theatrical or literary process in which they will be reorientated towards the reality of their own lives.²⁹ The complex relationship of Bennelong's story with truth makes this self-awareness difficult to gain. As I have argued above, Bennelong's example has become not simply an ordinary truth, tied to evidence, but an allegorical truth of the kind better captured in drama than by historical investigation.³⁰ The problem is compounded as Bennelong's life is often narrated in the language of the theatre, partly due to the location of the Opera House on Bennelong Point, and also the temptation to understand the early Sydney colony as a kind of 'stage' of history. In 1977, J. J. Healy undertook to flesh Bennelong out as a fully fledged 'actor' on history's stage, in which he had often been depicted contemptuously as a 'marionette' dressed up in English clothes. In this work, Bennelong returned from London intoxicated by British culture, like an actor drunk on bright lights and applause, and unable to separate 'role' from reality. Healy's Bennelong was a prophetic player *acting out* a story that interpreted the future.³¹ Clendinnen too, at times, characterised the colony as a kind of tableau and referred to 'players' on the colonial stage; one of her reviewers validated this approach by complementing Clendinnen on her staging of 'a classic drama of human will'.³² Under such circumstances, when the distinction between theatre and life is muddled, Hayden White's call to a circumspect and reflective use of dramatic tropes in history is, perhaps, even harder to hear than usual.

29 Muldoon, 'Thinking Responsibility Differently', 245, 248.

30 Felicity Collins examined the question of what kind of truth can arise from fiction, allegory and film, and whether it can be admitted as 'historical truth'. She concluded that some aspects of the past, perhaps particularly traumatic ones, are examined to advantage via dramatic modes, and that these can create a constructive dialogue with more traditional historical forms of investigation. Collins, 'Historical Fiction', 55–71.

31 Healy, 'A Most Tragic Theme', 30–32.

32 'Enter Banleelon' is one of Clendinnen's chapter titles; when she discusses 'roles' available to Aboriginal people, it is with a nod to the theatrical. Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*, 277. Fox, *Dancing with Strangers*, 456–58.

In 2001, the Melbourne Theatre Company and Indigenous performance group Jagera Jarjum staged a production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, reinterpreted as an exploration of reconciliation. Shakespeare's character Caliban was remodelled on Bennelong, played by Indigenous writer, director and actor Glenn Shea. The conclusion of the play is ambiguous for Bennelong, he leaves the stage unreconciled, deaf to the cries of the Ancestors.³³ One reviewer made a revealing assessment of this ambitious project:

Bennelong may have seemed like a good idea initially as Caliban's model but it effectively straitjacketed the actor Glenn Shea, preventing him from giving life to the character the play text itself offers and sending him offstage to an uncertain freedom, especially with Bennelong's tragic, alcohol addicted end in mind.³⁴

While Shea's performance may or may not have been constrained by his understanding of the historical Bennelong, this reviewer's understanding of the play was certainly constrained by hers. Before she saw the play she knew, presumably from retellings of his story, that Bennelong died an alienated alcoholic. Thus, even as an experienced theatregoer perceiving him on a fresh stage, she struggled to accept a different dramatic outcome for Bennelong. Unaware of the 'theatre' already inherent in the familiar story of Bennelong, the reviewer could not be touched by the cathartic power of Bennelong's appearance in *The Tempest*. In Muldoon's terms, she had become a spectator rather than a citizen.³⁵

Aristotle felt that the tragic hero needed to be 'highly renowned and prosperous' so that his or her story would be of some consequence, but also be enough 'like ourselves'—the flawed human audience—to make us sympathetic to his or her plight, partly through fear that the same kind of disaster could strike us.³⁶ In a culture in which non-Indigenous Australians compete with each other to be at the centre of narratives of victimhood

33 Tweg, 'Dream On', 51.

34 Ibid.

35 Muldoon, 'Thinking Responsibility Differently', 245, 248. A similar rejection of new dramatic possibilities for Bennelong is apparent in the media response to Enoch's *I Am Eora*. One article cited actor Jack Charles's affinity with his character, Bennelong, and Charles's recovery from addiction and incarceration at the same time as reasserting Bennelong's ongoing alienation (whereas the play itself seems to suggest otherwise): 'Charles said that as a man who had lived through addiction, jail time and racist abuse, he had a deep understanding of Bennelong. However, while Bennelong died a lost soul, Charles said he had "jumped off" his addictions to become an elder and "law man" within his Melbourne community'. Lissa Christopher, 'Black Perspective Sheds Light on Early Sydney', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 January 2012, 4.

36 Aristotle, *Poetics*, quoted in Sayre, *The Indian Chief as Tragic Hero*, 3.

and struggle, Aristotle's famous and wealthy hero might elicit anything but sympathy.³⁷ Indeed, Bennelong has been criticised for arrogance and ambition; however, more often he is pushed off the bottom of Aristotle's scale, as a protagonist that we might pity or even despise. If he seems essentially weak, primitive or corruptible, as he does if the audience accepts the racial or cultural determinism we have seen in so many histories, then Bennelong is, by definition, not 'like ourselves'. 'Classical amateurs' in the colony toyed with the notion of sympathising with Aboriginal people by semi-facetiously identifying Bennelong and his peers with the most ancient of Greek heroes.³⁸ 'Atticus', writing to *The Sydney Gazette* in 1817, compared Bennelong with Theseus who lived in a time before history, went naked and engaged in violence against women and children. Nevertheless, he made Bennelong's hyper-primitive difference clear by reminding the reader more than once of his difference in colour.³⁹ Isadore Brodsky, apparently missing the sense of absurdity infusing Atticus's comparison, felt it necessary to redeem Theseus from this debasing association, declaring that (while each was superior to his countrymen as 'Atticus' had claimed), 'where Theseus scaled the great heights, Bennelong only plumbed the depths'.⁴⁰ Contempt for Bennelong has pervaded his story. Peter Read remembered learning, via history materials at primary school in the 1950s, that Bennelong was a 'white man's dog'.⁴¹

Australian sympathies may have an egalitarian tenor, but moral fibre, constancy, self-reliance and an anti-servile disposition are, perhaps, no less important for their engagement than the 'greatness' Aristotle required.⁴² Bennelong's self-respect and respect-worthiness are often reflected on in stories about his younger contemporary, Bungaree. With his king plate and cast off fancy dress, as a mimic and performer, and as a drunk, Bungaree was Bernard Smith's archetypal 'fool king'. In Smith's account, he outdid Bennelong both in genius and in self-abasement; yet, at the same time, reflected both these 'achievements' back onto Bennelong.⁴³ F. D. McCarthy's short 1966 biography of Bungaree was dripping with

37 Curthoys, 'Expulsion, Exodus and Exile', 2–3, 6–8.

38 *The Sydney Gazette*, 13 January 1805, 2; 14 July 1805, 2; 29 March 1817, 1–2.

39 *The Sydney Gazette*, 29 March 1817, 1–2.

40 That this comparison was made in jest is signalled at the beginning of the article when 'Atticus' makes fun of Napoleon for identifying himself with both Caesar and Alexander. *The Sydney Gazette*, 29 March 1817, 1–2; Brodsky, *Bennelong Profile*, 79.

41 Peter Read, personal communication with the author, 19 October 2011.

42 Curthoys, 'Expulsion, Exodus and Exile', 6–8.

43 Smith, 'The Spectre of Truganini', 37. See also Clendinnen, *Dancing with Strangers*, 273; Moorhouse, *Sydney*, 47–51.

contempt as it described him as the leader of a 'pathetic remnant' of Aboriginal life that constituted the 'township Aboriginals', a position he held not by virtue of 'tribal authority', but through his adaptability, talent for 'facile exhibitionism' and the 'completely fictitious' title of king.⁴⁴ Bungaree is a parody of Aristotle's royal yet accessible tragic hero, losing sympathy both because of his self-aggrandising posturing and because that posturing has no basis. Phillip O'Neill's exploration of the mixture of humour and seriousness in Bungaree's performances and the presence of power in his impersonations, throws into sharp relief the will of McCarthy and others to despise him, and to disqualify him—in spite of (or because of) his fame—from being a hero whose story might shake the foundations of the colony.⁴⁵

A hero may indeed be a victim of forces beyond their control; however, if they are to engage an audience on an ethical level, they must ultimately take responsibility for the choices they make.⁴⁶ A puppet opera conceived and performed for the 1988 bicentenary provided a rare opportunity for Bennelong to do just this. Two singers stood side stage next to the orchestra, while life-sized puppets with jointed arms and legs and mobile eyes played Bennelong and a range of supporting characters, including Phillip, King George and Gooroobarabooloo, Bennelong's second wife. The Bennelong puppet, pictured in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, appeared erect and dignified, as well as somewhat knowing and conspiratorial. Brodsky's epithet, 'the most observed of all observers', was evocative of its facial expression.⁴⁷ A reviewer felt that one of the production's main successes was that:

Bennelong was as much responsible for his fate as [Governor Phillip] ... Whether this was truly so or not, it helps to put Bennelong out of range of the kind of sentimental condescension that would insist on picturing him simply as a victim. This Bennelong knows how to exploit his own charm, understands how to use his white sponsors for his own purposes and, at the end, refuses the unction of pity.⁴⁸

44 McCarthy, 'Bungaree (?–1830)'.

45 O'Neill, 'Putting the English in Drag', 69–86.

46 Muldoon, 'Thinking Responsibility Differently', 249–50.

47 Sykes, 'Bennelong Makes a Point', 81. However, the article also referred to a 'clash between cultures' and described Bennelong as 'the Aboriginal introduced to white man's ways by Governor Phillip' who, left 'in limbo between two societies', became 'acceptable to neither, and died a drunkard'. Brodsky, *Bennelong Profile*, 10.

48 Roger Covell, 'No Room for Pity in Black Puppet History', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 October 1988, Arts, 22.

The reviewer felt it was partly the production's 'humorous exaggeration of very serious matters' that allowed it clarity and incisiveness. It was a tragicomedy akin, in some ways, to Willmot's *Pemulwuy*, in which the occasional indignity was not damning, and the divide between success and failure itself was interrogated.⁴⁹

When understood as a lurching, querulous drunkard at the time of his death, Bennelong fails to regain the respect of the audience. It often seems to be assumed that readers of Bennelong's stories have no connection with a sodden Bennelong of 'diminished responsibility'. However, there was one place in which Bennelong's drinking was intimately associated with personal responsibility. Bennelong's Haven, a residential treatment centre on the north coast of New South Wales, was a 'place where Aboriginal people with alcohol and drug problems can come together to undertake treatment'. Staff and residents believed, like many of our storytellers, that Bennelong 'epitomised the fate of other Aboriginals who have succumbed to alcohol since the British landed in 1788'.⁵⁰ Here, his story functioned as an 'archetypal alcoholic's story'—a starting point for participants' own recovery and regeneration. A 1982 profile of the program featured a small portrait of Bennelong, wreathed with the motto 'Love, Dedication, Loyalty' drawn by former resident, Pop Patterson, and subsequently used as a letterhead for the organisation.⁵¹ At Bennelong's Haven, Bennelong was part of a community of fellow sufferers taking responsibility for their problems and working towards a better life. If he was shamed here, it was through a socially reintegrative process that leads to mutual acceptance, and in which Bennelong and his storytellers shared shame and moved forward together.

In brief biographical narratives, Bennelong's alcoholism often functions as both a cause of early death and an epithet, as in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article that recounted Tench's description of Bennelong as 'stoutly made' with a 'defiant' countenance, 'yet he died an alcoholic in 1813 aged 48'. The effect is very different when the order of these two elements is reversed, as in the *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, which employs very similar wording, but mentions his alcoholism first and then allows

49 Covell, 'No Room for Pity', 22.

50 Bennelong's Haven was established in 1973 by Valerie Bryant-Carroll in Marrickville. Until November 2017, when it closed, it was located at the former Kinchela Boys Home on the north coast of New South Wales. Chenhall, *Bennelong's Haven*, 1–2; Miller, 'A Haven for Alcoholics', 602–05.

51 Miller, 'A Haven for Alcoholics', 602–05. The piece also recounts that one of the residents sang a song about Bennelong as part of his contribution.

Tench the last word on this ‘bold, intrepid’ man.⁵² Here, as at Benelong’s Haven, Bennelong becomes a ‘survivor’, a man whose stature is shaped, but not reduced, by his acknowledged addiction and the pain and loss he experienced. When Bennelong is a survivor of colonisation, rather than its victim, there is far greater potential for the exposure of his pain and loss to raise a corresponding sense of shame in his storytellers and their audiences. As Rosamund Dalziell observed, shame can lead to sympathetic emotions and social action, whereas guilt, with its direct link to blame, gives a reader the choice between accepting a burden and rejecting it (on the grounds that they were not directly involved in the act at hand).⁵³ In counting Bennelong a survivor, and acknowledging the many people who are descendants of his generation, non-Indigenous storytellers may also be more likely to acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will be among their audiences, and will have responses to the stories that they tell, and to any apologies they offer or call to action they make.⁵⁴

In invoking tragedy and employing its well-known features to tell Bennelong’s story, storytellers have variously combined misfortune with Aboriginal culpability; put forward notions of cultural temptation or incompatibility to explain Aboriginal dispossession to an exclusion of material and political factors; and cast Bennelong as a historiographical go-between who hands over Australia to the British, or simply provides an answer to our questions about what went wrong back there at the beginning. When all this is viewed from the high moral ground of tragedy, non-Indigenous storytellers risk making Bennelong’s tragedy merely enjoyable, a speech given in their own defence, and not a call for justice in the present.⁵⁵ As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma observed in 2008:

52 Stephens, ‘Bennelong, the First of the Stolen’, 6; Horton, *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, 118.

53 Dalziell, *Shameful Autobiographies*, 1–11. A survivor, as the members of the stolen generations are at times depicted. For example, Stolen Generations Alliance, ‘Welcome to the Stolen Generations Alliance’, accessed 8 July 2018, www.nsga.org.au/about-the-stolen-generations/current-state/; The Stolen Generations Testimonies Foundation, accessed 8 July 2018, www.stolengenerationstestimonies.com/.

54 There is a tendency in the Australian context to overlook Indigenous peoples’ responses to attempts at apology for past and present wrongs. See Dortins ‘Apology and Absolution’.

55 Casey, ‘Referendums and Reconciliation’, 137–48. John Frow discussed the meaning of ‘apology’ in the context of the stolen generations. He argued that acknowledging the suffering of others may involve the taking on of the responsibility of transforming present relationships, or it may simply strengthen the listener: “‘forgive me”, it says, “I was wrong”: the apologist gains honour, and nothing changes’. Frow, ‘A Politics of Stolen Time’, 362–63.

The Australian community had become so accustomed to stories of Indigenous disadvantage that they had become immune to it, and came to expect it ... the community and government have come to believe that this situation is intractable ... and for some people, the fault of Indigenous peoples themselves ... So while I firmly believe that these stories of disadvantage and dysfunction should be told, I also believe that they should not be told just for the sake of it.⁵⁶

Retelling Bennelong's story in the present as an allegory for Indigenous failure is gratuitous. However well intentioned, it can end up simply indulging what Calma described as the 'industrial deafness' of other Australians. The repetition of Bennelong's failure becomes a 'repeated act of colonisation' too. When the events associated with British colonisation are reiterated in the present in the guise of misfortune, tragedy becomes farce, as in Marx's famous dictum—a story of someone else's trauma told with indifference.⁵⁷

The 'concerned conscience' has been a major force in Australian history-making and politics since Bernard Smith evoked it in 1980. It can be seen in the movement for reconciliation and in the replacement of John Howard with a new prime minister who would make an apology to the stolen generations within a few months of his election. Since the 1970s, the retelling of Bennelong's story as a tragedy has reflected a disaster that continues to unfold for the concerned conscience in the present—a realisation of the continued culpability of non-Aboriginal Australians in the destruction of Aboriginal lives, life ways, culture and society. Yet, as Bennelong's tragedy was once used by the ardent monarchist Brodsky to reassure white Australians that Aboriginal people did not merit equality, it has also held its reassurances for the concerned conscience, along with an uncomfortable continuity with old narratives of Aboriginal death, decline and corruption. Gratuitous lamentations about the long-dead Bennelong's fall into disgrace, and the irreversible rupture in cross-cultural relations that this is held to signify, provide a large target for conservative accusations of 'conspicuous compassion' on the side of the political left, a cheap expenditure of tears and talk that obviates 'sensible action'.⁵⁸

56 Calma, 'Essentials for Social Justice: Reform'.

57 Weaver, *Other Words*, 142; Tumarkina, 'First as a Tragedy', 24–26. Marx, quoted in Curthoys and Docker, *Is History Fiction?*, 124.

58 Mason, 'The Tragedy of Conspicuous Compassion', 6. In the early twenty-first century, this 'sensible action' has functioned to valorise conservative policy, and actions such as the Northern Territory Intervention, at the same time as rejecting the importance of campaigns like the one for a statement acknowledging Indigenous Australians in a new preamble to the Constitution, with the notion that this would be merely 'symbolic'.

Renewed conservative claims on Australian history at the turn of the twenty-first century saw Bennelong adopted by the Bennelong Society, a conservative think tank on Aboriginal policy founded in 2001, as a poster child for assimilation. The society's Bennelong, having readily perceived the 'benefits' of the British lifestyle, was deemed to have succeeded in British terms, which is what the society would have liked Aboriginal people to do in the present and future. Bennelong was depicted as a 'master of adaptation and improvisation' who, in collaboration with Phillip, 'devised' the 'peaceful coming-in of the Eora' to Sydney in 1790.⁵⁹ The society found it necessary to dissociate itself from Bennelong's latter years. Special care was taken on its website to explain that Bennelong's drinking problem began during his time in England; while he was engaged in diplomatic work, his drinking was under control—it was 'good' social drinking.⁶⁰

Eve Vincent attended the society's 2006 conference and gave an account of her experience in *Arena Magazine*. She did not find the conference a comfortable place to be. Most difficult was the barely submerged implication that the Aboriginal realm, when distinctive or 'segregated' from 'Australian civilisation', was 'depraved, disordered, sick, illiterate, brutal and addicted'. Delegates derided and shouted down 'romantic' notions of self-determination and the sustainability of remote communities, and aligned themselves with an ideology-free pragmatism. For Vincent, the most disturbing aspect was 'the relative terms—civilised, savage' that the society wanted 'to invest anew with power and meaning'.⁶¹ As I hope I have shown, the telling and retelling of Bennelong's story as a cultural tragedy over the past 70 years has helped to maintain the relevance of these value-laden poles of civilised and savage. The society's Bennelong represented a self-conscious response to the downbeat, dead end of Bennelong's tragedy. It was in the interests of the society and its supporters to hold a monopoly on 'sensible', constructive action—the solution to the 'Aboriginal problem'—which those who have promoted

59 Gary Johns, 'The Failure of Aboriginal Separatism', presented to Workshop 2000: 'Aboriginal Policy: Failure, Reappraisal and Reform', The Bennelong Society, accessed 17 February 2009, www.bennelong.com.au/conferences/pdf/Johns2000.pdf (site discontinued); Dirk van Dissel, 'Woollawarre Bennelong, the Bush Politician (1789–1792)', The Bennelong Society, accessed 17 February 2009, www.bennelong.com.au/articles/bennelongbio.php (site discontinued). The society was disbanded in 2011. Some of its 'Bennelong Papers' have been transferred to the Quadrant website, see www.quadrant.org.au/blogs/bennelong-papers.

60 Dirk van Dissel, 'Woollawarre Bennelong'.

61 Vincent, 'Who is Bennelong?', 47–48.

self-determination have only further compounded.⁶² The society's no-nonsense, go-ahead Bennelong endorsed Aboriginal participation in the mainstream capitalist economy, leaving soft questions about culture and history, loss, shame and responsibility behind.

The telling of Bennelong's tragedy in the years following the history wars might be read as a reassertion of the relevance of mutual grieving, apology, atonement and the need for reconciliation on a number of levels—not only the 'practical' level offered by the Bennelong Society. The *First Australians* series showed several historians talking about Bennelong's life. Peter Read's Bennelong 'goes out' of Sydney Cove in his later years in a situation of relative equality. Having seen all that Europeans have to offer, he ultimately rejects the new settlement, choosing his own life, not unlike the traveller Gulliver who sallies forth into the world, encounters difference, difficulty and adventure, but returns to his own society and manages to reintegrate himself—changed by his new experiences, but not broken by them.⁶³ Inga Clendinnen had the last word on Bennelong: 'to see that light-footed man, that man of so much political skill and resilience so reduced is, I think, tragic'.⁶⁴ In the book that accompanied the series, Marcia Langton affirmed Clendinnen's interpretation, giving Bennelong a central place in the 'dance' with the colonists. When Bennelong returned from England he was:

Left to survive in the profoundly changed circumstances of his country. He had changed, too, not least because of his alliance with Phillip. At the end of his days, his mood of increasing bitterness and alcoholic decline reduced him from his warrior's countenance to a weak, defeated man.⁶⁵

62 See, for example, Comrie-Thompson, with Johns and Mundine, 'Nugget Coombs Revisited'.

63 We leave Gulliver settled to contented reflection in his 'little garden at Redriff', reconciling himself gradually to life in close quarters with humans once more. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, part IV, chapter 12.

64 Nowra and Perkins, 'Episode 1: They Have Come to Stay'. At least one viewer, whose thoughts were made more public than most via a review of the series in *The Age*, found Clendinnen's account the most satisfying, describing Bennelong as 'the remarkable 18th century Aborigine, an audacious wag who was kidnapped by Governor Arthur Phillip and became his interpreter and mediator. Bennelong learnt to speak English, lodged with the governor, and even sailed to England in 1792 where he charmed London society. But Bennelong died in ignominy, a man caught between cultures'. Gabriella Coslovich, 'Uncovering History in Black and Whitewash', *The Age*, 25 October 2008, Insight, 9.

65 Nowra and Perkins, 'Episode 1: They Have Come to Stay'.

In *First Australians*, Bennelong's story appeared among many stories of hope, friendship, massacre, cruel institutions, death, pain, survival and celebration across the continent and across more than two centuries. In choosing once more to follow the well-worn pathway of Bennelong's political and personal obliteration, did Langton and Clendinnen mean to come together around Bennelong's story to grieve for generations of talented Aboriginal men cut off by war, incarceration, accident and suicide? In implying, as so many had done before them, that Bennelong was at least partly a victim of his own success, what was it that they meant to say to the young men and women of today?

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