

Introduction: Ambassadors Between the Present and the Past

Shipwreck survivor James Morrill was re-adopted into frontier settler society in 1863 after spending 17 years living with Birri-gubba people in North Queensland. In researching his story, I wanted to know how he had experienced his Birri-gubba adoption and whether his beliefs and world view had changed as a result. Instead, I found a story about a story: a story Morrill told not once, but repeatedly—to magistrates, journalists and jostling public audiences who shaped it with their questions and with the kind of colony they were making. After his death, Morrill's story lived on, and he became a 'first white resident' of North Queensland. His story became part of the region's pioneer history; however, it also remained apart from it, emerging as well from the profound reservoir of knowledge that Aboriginal peoples of the Burdekin had shared with Morrill, knowledge that is claimed and reclaimed as Birri-gubba people tell his story today.

In this book, I follow the ins and outs of Morrill's story and two others: the story of Bennelong and the personal costs of his relationship with Governor Phillip and the Sydney colonists, and the story of friendship between Wiradjuri leader Windradyne and the Suttor family. Each is an intimate story about people involved in relationships of goodwill, care, adoptive kinship and mutual learning across cultures, and the strains of maintaining or relinquishing these bonds as they took part in the larger events that signified the colonisation of Aboriginal lands by the British and Aboriginal peoples' adaptations in response. This book focuses on the changing meanings of these stories as they have been told and retold by generations of storytellers. It is through histories of storytelling that I seek to reinterpret these three relationships and to shed light on the ways in which cross-cultural bonds and cultural crossings have been understood more generally in Australian engagements with the past.

Regarded from a distance, each of the three stories contributes to a now well-recognised pattern of Australian history-making. A few intriguing and isolated retellings survive from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which Aboriginal histories formed curious historical backwaters or ‘melancholy footnotes’—to pluralise John La Nauze’s epithet—to memoirs, local histories and stories of empire. A proliferation of versions, stemming from the 1960s and 1970s, reflects both the democratisation of history writing and access to publishing in postwar Australia, including for Indigenous people, and a growing recognition of Indigenous histories that stretch into the deep time of ancient human migrations and continue to be a central part of contemporary Australian histories and lives.¹ Closer examination reveals committed and passionate storytellers telling and retelling each of these stories for reasons of their own, from the lifetimes of Bennelong, Morrill and Windradyne up to the present. Storytellers have told these stories to demonstrate social theories and narratives of local and national progress, or to advance civil rights and land rights activism. Sometimes, even at the same time, they have been told to make family connections, communicate intimate personal reflections and more free-floating musings on human nature, and for the joy of storytelling itself. This book explores the historical, social, cultural and narrative meanings of these three stories as they have been told and retold by storytellers grappling with the realities of their own times and their own place in history.

The form of narrative, or ‘genre’, is an integral part of the traditions formed by the tellings of these stories. Morrill’s story, even from his own lips, is entangled with shipwreck and castaway stories; Bennelong’s story has come to be closely associated with features of tragedy and elements of a much larger story of ‘cultural collision’; and the friendship of Windradyne and the Suttor family has shifted in emphasis over the decades, and is now understood by many storytellers as a reconciliation story. Critical histories and their public and popular interpretations since the 1970s have multiplied the possibilities for these stories by helping Australians to think about a much greater range of historical relationships between Aboriginal people and settlers. At the same time, genre has generated and transmitted cultural meanings on parallel paths, intersecting at times with

1 La Nauze, ‘The Study of Australian History 1929–1959’, 11. For an account of this change, and how it has been reflected upon by historians and other public thinkers, see Curthoys, ‘W. E. H. Stanner and the Historians’.

conscious shifts in Australian history-making, but not at their bidding, making these stories ‘ambassadors’ between the present and the past on several levels.

Retelling old stories of friendly relationships between Aboriginal people and settlers over the past three decades embodies a fascinating ambivalence. If recognising moral actions in the past helps us move forward in an ethical way in the present, then stories of goodwill might provide a foundation for present and future reconciliation. Yet, this process is riddled with anxiety. Could the course of history have been different? How should we feel about friendly relations in situations in which they did not seem to make a difference, let alone friendships that now seem to have been based in inequality, or even made in the service of invasion?

It was partly the *First Australians* television series—a substantially Indigenous production presenting a history of the past two centuries from an Indigenous perspective—and responses to it, that focused my attention on stories about mutually respectful and caring relationships.² Such stories were a central feature of the series, partly because producers Rachel Perkins and Darren Dale wanted to help their viewers maintain a sense of ‘salvation and hope’ as they contemplated a history that is bleak in so many ways. Perkins and Dale wanted to communicate the moral complexity of Australian history in the face of political forces that had tended to reduce it to a ‘goodies and baddies story’.³ Their aim struck home with some viewers. For example, ‘Matthew from North NSW’ praised *First Australians* as:

A beautiful documentary. Seriously brought a tear to my eye. There was friendship in the past, let’s not let this war mongering, ignorance that prevailed ruin this nation again. I want our kids to look back to our generation with pride not shame, not hurt.⁴

Past friendship, as much as past violence, engaged this viewer emotionally and sounded a call to better relations in the present, as well as showing him that they might be possible. Stories of friendship showed him that pride in Australian history might be possible too, without denying the dispossession of Aboriginal people. Stories of mutual respect, cultural

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

3 Sacha Molitorisz, ‘The Story of Black Australia’, *The Age*, 9 October 2008, Green Guide, 12; ‘Unearthing Our First Voices’, *The Canberra Times*, 14 October 2008.

4 ‘Matthew from North NSW’, 16 October 2008, SBS *First Australians*, Your Comments, accessed 16 December, 2008, www.sbs.com.au/firstaustralians/.

curiosity and the building of trust between people tend to be small-scale, with faces we can focus on and individuals with whom we can identify—the kinds of histories that readily tap into the ‘distinctly personal sense of historical subjectivity’ that Anna Clark found at the centre of her respondents’ engagement with the past when she spoke with diverse groups of Australians about Australian history.⁵ The *First Australians* series was firmly based in the activity of *retelling* stories—that is, telling them from an Indigenous perspective to new generations, to broader audiences and on television. The series invited viewers to become part of a community of storytellers and listeners capable of communicating across time and across cultures, engaging in a thoughtful, and personal, re-examination of the national past.

Telling stories of caring and respectful cross-cultural relationships can be uplifting, and can forge connections between people. However, in tracing the stories of Morrill, Bennelong, and Windradyne and the Suttor family, this book finds that it is never straightforward. As much as such stories are founded on cross-cultural understanding, they are also infused with an incompleteness of understanding, as first the participants themselves, and then subsequent storytellers, have sought to apprehend and articulate these relationships from within their own social and cultural realities. The contemporary written sources for Windradyne’s friendship with the Suttor family are a pair of letters to the editor of the Sydney papers, in which the foreground is occupied by an imagined relationship between a gentleman writer and his gentlemen readers. The writer positioned himself as a patron to Windradyne and his people, a form of friendship that is hard to conceive of in the early twenty-first century. There is no way of telling how differently he may have thought about his bond with Windradyne when there was no-one listening.

Stories of goodwill and good relations cannot be separated out from broader histories of colonisation, conflict and dispossession. Bennelong’s meals with the governor, his exchange of language and customs with the officers and his journey to England were born of kidnap, prolonged by imprisonment, diluted as the colony expanded and became more sure of itself, and were then loudly and enduringly interpreted by the victors. Reaching an understanding of his story that embraces the sincere and open curiosity on both sides, as well as a critical appraisal of the intentions

5 Clark, *Private Lives*, 112–13.

and power dynamics of Bennelong's time in and out of the colony, is genuinely difficult. Yet, it has been attempted in so many contexts that those who present Bennelong's relationship with the colony as simply 'friendly' stand out as being both disingenuous and culpable.

It would be disingenuous to celebrate the mutuality of these three stories—as stories that embrace communication, respect and compassion across cultures—unless we also acknowledge the histories of the separation of Aboriginal children from parents, and parents from grandparents, breaking the vital links of oral storytelling between generations of Aboriginal people. A part of all these stories is the suppression of Aboriginal languages and traditions, and the movement of many Aboriginal people—sometimes forced, sometimes times seeking work or refuge—away from the places connected with the stories of ancestors, and even parents and grandparents.⁶ Most of the people you will encounter telling stories in this book before about 1960 will be non-Indigenous people. However, flowing from cultural revival over two, three and four generations, Aboriginal people have begun retelling Bennelong's, Windradyne's and Morrill's stories in the public realm as part of the 'histories that matter' to them, connecting up the family traditions and cultural knowledges that were maintained across the generations with the histories documented by non-Indigenous history-makers. As we emerge from the reconciliation era, this book reflects on the role of stories of friendship in sharing histories, and acknowledging the different experiences and different priorities that Aboriginal and non-indigenous storytellers may have in telling these stories.

Australians engage with the past in manifold ways: making family, public, political and media histories popular via commemorative activities, memoir, theatre, art and literature, and in the conversations we have with each other—making history 'at the dinner table, over the back fence, in parliament, in the streets', as Tom Griffiths put it.⁷ In this book, I consider each of these three stories of friendship as a living tradition that is maintained (or, after lying dormant, may be revitalised and reclaimed) in the telling. While the objectives and understandings of the people who tell the stories are undeniably diverse—as family historians, academic historians, song-writers and so on—they are brought into conversation, in a sense, in telling the same story.

6 See, for example, Read, *A Hundred Years War*; Langford, *Don't Take Your Love to Town*; Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*; Kijas, *Revival, Renewal and Return*.

7 Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*, 1.

My approach to understanding the tellings of each story is inspired by folklorist Linda Dégh, who listens carefully for the ‘birth of a new version’ of an old story as the storyteller performs a tale that matters to them, reinterpreting traditional material for their audience as they do so. This approach allows me to inquire into the significance of each interpretation on its own terms, characterising rather than categorising it, and trying to explain what its storyteller *does* do, rather than policing ‘offences against the truth’ or enumerating its failings. Like Dégh, I have come to think of telling a story as an event in its own right—a new ‘birth’ of meaning—that adds new historical, social and cultural meaning to the wider conversation about the past.⁸

Each time I encountered a new version of an old story, I asked Dégh’s question: ‘why tell this story now?’ I also asked Michel Foucault’s question: ‘how is it that [this] particular statement appeared rather than another?’ In his *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault urged historians to encounter everything as if it was unexpected, and to sift back through the soil of time, finding new knowledge in the placement of even the most mundane items. While a new version of Bennelong’s story may look like many others, it is not enough to say it is unremarkable, for it is also a tiny ‘monument’ to human activity (unceasing meaning-making about the past) that can be examined to see how it was made, what uses it may have had and through whose hands it may have passed.⁹ In the layers of storytelling, patterns of enduring and shifting meanings can be read—and this is what I seek to draw out in the three ‘lives’ or histories of stories examined here. What have these stories meant to storytellers? What kinds of knowledge have they been understood to embody and what kinds of knowledge have they produced? This inquiry is as interested in the social and cultural realities of the storyteller as the ‘original’ events that the stories are about. I have found, in exploring the telling and retelling of these three stories, that closely examining the lives of the stories reflects insight back onto the events and relationships themselves, thereby potentially creating new knowledge about them.

Neither history nor story is easy to define; the two have run the gamut from deep communion to uneasy truce. Linked to the notion of ‘scientific’ history, the professionalisation of history from the nineteenth century led those who considered themselves historians to turn their backs on local

8 Davison, *The Use and Abuse*, 18–19, 275; Dégh, *Narratives in Society*, 21.

9 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 6–7, 25–28.

and family stories in favour of archival research that could shine a light on the formation of nations and institutional change. The histories they produced predominantly narrated the progress of civilisation and industry through the efforts of eminent men. From the 1930s, the influential *Annales* school, named after the French scholarly journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, rejected narratives of important individuals engaged in war, diplomacy and politics as superficial. Instead, they sought to describe human populations, their relationship with geography and climate, and fundamental economic, social and cultural structures beyond the reach of individual change-makers. Taking in far greater scales of time, quantifying large human patterns on the one hand and documenting impressionistic micro-histories on the other, the *Annales* approach threw into doubt the straightforward relationship between history and its narrative vehicle. History did not simply correspond with the past itself—the relationship between the two was not natural; it was cultural or even literary. Since the 1980s, it has been increasingly re-recognised that historical inquiry can take place through story (including local and family stories) and, also, that investigating story is an important part of historical inquiry. However, the debate thrown open in the mid-twentieth century is by no means settled; the most radical view of history as story (i.e. that writing history is more of a poetic act than an empirical one) continues to be rejected by most historians who, to different degrees, maintain that the past can be known, and can, and must, be communicated in ways (including via story) that capture the truth and reality of past events.¹⁰

Story is a broader stream than history. If history-making is a more or less conscious engagement with the past—an inquiry into the past or an explanation of it—story is, perhaps, one of the fundamental ways of communicating: ‘an art deep within human nature ... one of the oldest communicative skills that we possess’. Yet, one of story’s central roles remains to transmit the ‘histories that matter’ to successive generations.¹¹ Graeme Swift examined the relationship at length in his novel *Waterland*; he argued that history seeks to provide an explanation in response to the constant human question ‘why?’. Story takes over when life cannot be explained and when explanation is not enough; it reaches towards history again when even ordinary people long for ‘presence, for feature, for purpose, for content’. Together, history and story are pervasive modes of

10 Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*, 5, 25–26, 214–16; O’Malley, *Making History New*, 184–87.

11 Binney, *Stories without End*, 21.

human reality, only occasionally interrupted by the naked, non-narrative 'here and now'. Swift found history and story mingling at different orders of magnitude: the histories of progress in mastering a landscape, or the changes wrought by war, intertwined with stories of people's lives—both set against the long, slow story of the formation of sands and rivers, and the rise and fall of seas.¹² I do not seek to define or separate history and story. Instead, I aim to make a purposeful inquiry into the past that is immersed in story. I use narrative to coalesce and communicate my own meanings; I use the three stories I have chosen as a way of defining my field of interest. In the event, I often find stories making history and histories embracing stories.

For Aboriginal people, 'history'—as an industry, a discipline and a Western cultural tradition—remains a difficult space. Aboriginal people have fought to gain access to the archives that hold traces of their pasts, found that much of the new 'Aboriginal history' written by academic and professional historians does not speak to their own experiences and priorities, and grappled with history as an integral part of the highly divisive process of establishing native title. The recognition and justice that many had hoped would flow from the acknowledgement that 'white Australia has a Black history' have been partial at best.¹³ Part of the problem lies with the slippery nature of history itself. Gordon Briscoe observed that 'history' is a word used 'with gay abandon' by Europeans, at once a discipline, a force for progress and a void for forgetting: 'it seems that as soon as Indigenous people gain some appreciation of their own past, Whites shift the goal posts'.¹⁴

John Maynard described history as central to the wellbeing of Aboriginal people. He argued that a 'scientific', document-based approach to history, which may aspire to global hegemony, is only one way of making history. For Maynard, story is the 'core and soul of history' and can reclaim the past from what he characterised as the deconstructive dead-end of academic history-making. Mudrooroo elaborated on the tension between recognising and championing distinctive Indigenous ways of making history (so that they are not swallowed up by a standardised Western

12 Swift, *Waterland*, 35, 51–54.

13 See, for example, Fourmile, 'Who Owns the Past?', 16–27; Peters-Little, 'The Community Game'; Grieves, 'Windschuttle's Fabrication', 194–99.

14 Briscoe, 'Review', 25.3.

narrative), and ensuring that these are recognised as ‘history’—because history has come to mean the ‘true’ past and such a past (with authority and power) is vital to the cultural identity of Aboriginal people.¹⁵

When I invite Aboriginal history-makers into the story space of this book, it is with great respect for their commitment to truth; the use of the terms ‘story’ and ‘storytelling’ are not intended to trivialise their meaning-making about the past.¹⁶ Considering Aboriginal perspectives and the ‘popular’ history of hobbyists and columnists side by side inevitably creates tension. ‘Popular’ history-making is often, at least on the surface, about entertainment. Meanwhile, Aboriginal people continue to fight for the recognition of their living heritage. In 1994, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Michael Dodson found it necessary to argue that a people’s right to self-definition:

must include the right to inherit the collective identity of one’s people, and to transform that identity creatively according to the self-defined aspirations of one’s people and one’s own generation.¹⁷

The ‘gap’ in recognition is perhaps akin to the socio-economic gap that continues to reproduce affluence for non-Indigenous Australians at the expense of Aboriginal people and their access to country.

In taking all storytellers seriously, I assume that ‘history is never bloodless’.¹⁸ As Bain Attwood and Helen Doyle showed in their close examination of the story of Batman’s treaty with Kulin leaders at Port Phillip near today’s Melbourne, telling a story about the history of land can, itself, be an act of possession; further, it can, in the mouths of non-Indigenous people, continue and be ‘continuous with the original work of dispossession’.¹⁹ None of the three stories explored in this book is trivial; whether a storyteller acknowledges it or not, telling Morrill’s, Bennelong’s or Windradyne’s stories, and many others like them, is always about the present as well as the past, and always opens a dialogue with the stories of other parties who make history about the same places.

15 Maynard, ‘Circles in the Sand’, 117–20; Mudrooroo, *Us Mob*, 178.

16 Birch, ‘History is Never Bloodless’, 48. Birch argued that the term ‘stories’ was being used as a dismissive appellation for Aboriginal testimony.

17 Dodson, ‘The End in the Beginning’, 5.

18 Birch, ‘History is Never Bloodless’. Birch adopted this title from Birmingham, *Leviathan*, 509.

19 Attwood with Doyle, *Possession*, 105.

My intention in tracing the telling and retelling of these three stories of cross-cultural adoption, care, curiosity and respect is to show how rich in meaning the lives of these stories are. Rather than tell an authoritative version, or arbitrate between versions, I aim to do as Maria Nugent did in exploring stories of Cook's landing at Botany Bay—that is, to draw out their 'open-ended quality, to reflect upon the lively and constant interplay between past and present' and to be part of the ongoing conversation between storytellers, proposing 'yet more possibilities for interpreting this particular past'.²⁰ At the same time, I want to reflect on my involvement—as observer historian and storyteller—and encourage other historians to continue working at how we do this, as stories are part of our cultural inheritance. A better understanding of how they have been passed down to us, the meanings that they had when told by previous generations and what they have to do with 'history', can help us to be more conscious of our own effect as history-makers as we retell old stories with new meanings in the present, and pass them on to new generations.

20 Nugent, *Captain Cook Was Here*, x–xi.

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