

Meeting the Waylo: Aboriginal Encounters in the Archipelago

by Tiffany Shellam

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Tiffany Shellam's first book, *Shaking Hands on the Fringes*, was a brilliant and eye-opening work that looked back at the white military garrison at King George's Sound in Western Australia from the perspective of the King Na-yup. Now, in *Meeting the Waylo*, she has turned her attentive eye to another set of encounters, those 'slippery transactions laced with danger, violence and forced friendships', between the Aboriginal men who agreed to voyage with white explorers on British ships and the Waylo, the Aboriginal people of northern Western Australia. By unravelling and re-reading colonial records, and reconnecting them with 'counter archives' – that is, the 'traces, inscriptions, markings, oral histories, songs' left behind by the expeditions – Shellam has revealed these early explorations and their legacies in a startling new light.

Waylo was the name that southern Aboriginal people of Western Australia used for the unknown people living in the region north of the Swan River, strangers they feared as formidable giants. These stories, then, are about more than encounters between Aboriginal people and Europeans; they are also about encounters between Aboriginal people who were strangers to one another. But this time the perspective is not so much that of the 'Waylo' as of the Aboriginal intermediaries Migeo (from the Swan River region), Boongaree and Bundle (from the northern and southern Sydney region, respectively). Shellam is interested in the *meetings* themselves: the rituals and protocols, the unstable dance of encounter, and the utterly divergent motivations and worldviews of the white and Aboriginal explorers, and in the unfolding legacies of these meetings.

The book is elegantly structured in five parts. The introduction explores the construction of colonial archives, framing three sections successively examining the experiences of Migeo, Boongaree and Bundle. A set of concluding chapters meditate upon the implications for Australian history, offering powerful insights into historical practice and Shellam's own collaborative work with the Yaburara, Ngarluma, Yindjibarndi and Woo-Goo-To-Oo people of the Pilbara, whose guidance framed her analysis of rock art and oral history especially.

First Nations people worldwide argue that *their* history does not exist wholly in the archives of their oppressors, and archives are themselves instruments of dispossession, exploitation and racism. Yet it is by returning to such records – carefully unravelling them, reading against the grain of colonising mindsets, reconnecting them to those other traces, and setting them once more in the great sweep of Western Australian coastal landscapes – that Shellam has recovered these lost Aboriginal-centred histories.

For it is clear that these archival records did not originally exclude Aboriginal people – they were named and their actions recorded, sometimes in extraordinary detail. It was in subsequent processes of rewriting, editing, archiving that they were erased from 'history'. Polished published accounts in particular were literally reshaped to diminish or exclude the roles of Aboriginal people. Descriptions were edited out, incidents rewritten and reinterpreted, and then documents were mislabelled and misfiled, sketches hidden away in private albums, artefacts separated from the fact of their violent theft. By reconstructing the whole spectrum of history making, both European and Aboriginal, Shellam offers a salutary lesson on the colonialist nature of the archive, but also reveals the precious riches held in archives and museums, and how they can be seen anew.

Like *Shaking Hands on the Fringes* and a number of other recent collaborative studies, *Meeting the Waylo* offers a new kind of Australian history, and a way forward in the project of decolonisation and the truth-telling required for Makarrata. Shellam is deeply attentive to culture, ritual, emotional lives and spirituality – that is, to all the things that mattered most to Aboriginal people. If we are to break out of the colonial, Western and strictly 'rational' ways of thinking that so often dismiss these aspects of human life, this is how to do it.

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