ABORIGINAL HISTORY

Volume 33, 2009
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Preface

Woollarawarre Bennelong: rethinking the tragic narrative

In her recent magisterial history of early Sydney, Grace Karskens mused on a critical distinction in emphasis between settler history and Aboriginal history: ‘in settler history we seem to be searching constantly for beginnings’, she notes, ‘but in Aboriginal history in the colonial period so often the search is for endings’.1 This preoccupation with endings especially haunts the ‘storywork’ surrounding Woollarawarre Bennelong, one of the best known but least understood Aboriginal men of the early colonial era.2 Most of this storywork has figured Bennelong as a tragic soul – caught between two worlds, reconciled to neither, the victim of an addiction that was his only means of enduring the fall. Despite some variations in the telling of his life with the British colonists, the tragedy of his end usually dominates the overall tone.

The following three articles represent the fruits of a shared frustration with the tragic narrative so long accorded Bennelong. Originally presented as a trio of papers at the University of Sydney in April 2009, they bring together scholars who might not otherwise have met – an independent writer dedicated to unearthing the lost details of various Aboriginal lives in early Sydney, a British historian working on indigenous travellers from the New World to Europe throughout the eighteenth century, and a graduate student investigating the modern representation of various key ambassadors in the colonial Australian past.3 Bennelong featured in all our stories, but in none did he seem to behave as the conventional historiography told us he would. Within our different contexts, Bennelong never fitted the role of doomed outcast. Instead, he played politics, told jokes, took opportunities, shouldered grief, bore tedium, and asked some difficult questions.

Bennelong as a ‘cultural broker’ in the New World is not alone in suffering the imposition of a tragic fate. Powhatan’s daughter, Pocahontas, shares a similar history of initial congratulation, later suspicion, and subsequent pity for her role as a native mediator at Jamestown from 1609 to 1616. The Wampanaog Tisquantum, better known as Squanto, is likewise seen today as a solitary loser, forever stuck between his local Patuxet tribe and the pilgrims he helped at New

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1 Karskens 2009: 422.
2 ‘Storywork’ is Lyndall Ryan’s phrase.
3 Our thanks go to Dr Dirk Moses for convening the seminar, to the audience for their enthusiastic response, and to Professor Peter Read for encouraging us to publish.
Plymouth between 1620 and 1622. Closer to home, the Raiatean refugee Mai, who served as a critical informant for James Cook between 1773 and 1779, is also often viewed as a ‘tragedy’ – a view that suggests that the ‘fatal’ approach to South Pacific colonisation has not entirely melted away. Interestingly, all of these individuals spent some time in England, visiting the country of the newcomers with whom they negotiated, just as Bennelong would in 1793. Yet Bennelong’s story is perhaps the least ‘promiscuous’ amongst these others. The relentless uniformity with which the tragic narrative has applied to Bennelong owes much to the isolation until recently of colonial Australian history from other histories of cultural exchange, diaspora, and creolisation.

Each of our articles sheds new light on Bennelong because each places him in a new or little-appreciated context. Freed from the tyranny of the ‘first contact’ context, Bennelong emerges as a more connected, resilient, global, and human individual than usually allowed.

First, Keith Vincent Smith places Bennelong in the context of his own Eora people, emphasising the complex web of kin relationships that Bennelong both inherited and grew during his life. Building upon his superlative study of Bennelong’s life until 1792, Smith argues that Bennelong was a master politician, brokering alliances among various factions via marriages for himself and his sisters in order to secure, and later extend, his leadership within his Wangal clan. That Bennelong also tried his political hand at brokering alliances with the British newcomers, Smith continues, was simply one aspect of his ongoing strategising – an approach that he evidently rejected as unsuccessful as early as 1797.

Smith supports his argument in two ways. First, he has scoured the early records for evidence of status among Bennelong’s extended family, which, combined with his anthropological understanding of the power of kin relations among the Eora, paints a picture of deliberate social advancement. That a Cadigal, Nanbarry, wished to be buried in the same grave as Bennelong some eight years after his death was just one example of his enduring significance among all Eora. ‘There could be no greater mark of respect’, comments Smith. Second, Smith brings an innovative reading to some of the more menacing documents extant on Bennelong. In sources that are usually seen today as examples of hostility and dismissal, he finds evidence of independence and influence. George Howe’s grumblings about Bennelong’s backsliding or David Dickinson Mann’s head-shaking over Aboriginal recalcitrance both point, for Smith, to the considered way in which Bennelong distanced himself from the British after 1800. Similarly, the fleeting observation by a merchant-shipman of a ‘battle’ between many

4 For discussions of the reputations of these two American New World figures, see Brown 1999 and Salisbury 1999.
5 For the supposedly discredited ‘fatal impact’ approach see Morehead 1968. For a recent ‘fatal’ view of Mai see Connaughton 2005.
6 See Fullagar forthcoming.
7 Dortins, this volume, paraphrasing Keith Jenkins.
8 Smith 2001.
Eora in 1813, in which ‘about thirty men were wounded’, signifies not excessive violence but rather the grand scale on which the ritual revenge for Bennelong’s recent death was fought.

The next article, by Kate Fullagar, places Bennelong in an altogether larger context – that of indigenous travellers to new worlds over the past 500 years. Within this long, international context, Bennelong joins a tradition of adventurous individuals who made the most of an unexpected turn in their lives. Fullagar finds, contrary to common assumption, that Bennelong bucked the eighteenth-century trend for such travellers, by stirring next to no response among the British as either curiosity or spectacle. Ironically, it is this lack of impact in 1790s Britain that now affords Bennelong an escape from reductive interpretations of his trip which would revolve entirely around reception. Instead, his activities in Britain become the varied experiences of an autonomous visitor, mixing pleasures with sorrows as often as any other travel story.

Bennelong’s lack of impact abroad did signify something, however. The rest of Fullagar’s article explores the implications of the shift in general British attitudes towards indigenous travellers. It uncovers the rich history of connection between ordinary Britons’ understandings of such people and their views on their expanding empire as a whole. Fullagar’s article explores the shift in attitude towards so-called savages as an indicator of a major transformation in metropolitan imperial ideology, the effects of which reverberated especially in the colony of New South Wales.

The final article, by Emma Dortins, places Bennelong in his least-studied context – that of Australian historiography. Dortins includes novels, tracts, and blogs as well as conventional scholarship in her definition of historiography. In almost every instance, she has discovered an attachment to the tragic vision of Bennelong that is truly exceptional in its doggedness. From Manning Clark to Inga Clendinnen, historians have rehearsed the popular image of a fallen drunk, ending his days ‘slinking about in dishevelled rags’.9

Dortins’ excavation of Bennelong’s storywork shows that the tragic narrative has appealed to the resisters as often as it has to the orthodox – suggesting, perhaps, the true source of its strength. While Isadore Brodsky’s Bennelong tumbled into an unstoppable ‘downward rush [of] degradation’, WEH Stanner’s Bennelong appeared little better as a ‘wine-bibber, a trickster, and eventually a bit of a turncoat’.10 Even today, the conservative Bennelong Society’s determined refusal to consider its mascot’s life after 1792 chimes rather uncomfortably with the taciturn grief of several progressive intellectuals over Bennelong’s final years.

New perspectives offer a chance for new beginnings. A reconsideration of one of the most significant Aboriginal figures in colonial history invites us to move away from the search for endings. It suggests a fresh start for the life of Bennelong. It also suggests a fresh start for the meaning of Bennelong in

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10 See Dortins, this volume.
Australia’s modern imagination. If Bennelong’s life stands for any greater truth, it is that indigenous people begin new relations when history demands them as frequently and as variously as any other folk.

Kate Fullagar
Sydney, August 2009

References


Woollarawarre Bennelong (c1764–1813) was the most significant Indigenous man in early Sydney and also, in retrospect, the most misrepresented and underestimated. He was one of the first to face the dilemma of knowing two cultures. In the end he chose his own. Bennelong did not fade into obscurity in the second part of his life after his return from England in 1795. He resumed a traditional Aboriginal lifestyle, regained authority as a leader, remarried and had a son. He died at the age of 50 as a respected elder mourned by his people.

This article is based on a careful examination and unravelling of records compiled by the British officers of the ‘First Fleet’, whose journals, diaries, language notebooks, official despatches, private letters and printed histories still survive. As Marcia Langton remarked: ‘These officers were the first British ethnologists, whatever their purposes and whatever their prejudices.’ Whatever their motives, these observers wrote down what they saw with their own eyes and what they were told by their Indigenous informants, principally Bennelong.

The first section of the article locates Bennelong in relation to his names, kin and country and traces his strategy in brokering alliances among his own people through political marriages for himself and his sisters. This plan succeeded in creating and maintaining a web of kinship ties and relationships that extended his influence and ensured that he remained a clan leader.

Captured in November 1789 on the orders of Arthur Phillip, first governor of the convict colony of New South Wales, Woollarawarre Bennelong soon became a valued informant and go-between. He formed an unlikely friendship with Phillip, who in 1792 took Bennelong and his young kinsman Yemmerrawanne to England.

Five years after his return Bennelong moved from the Sydney Cove settlement and became the leader of a 100-strong clan living along the Parramatta River west of Ryde. He eventually went to live in the orchard of the friendly brewer James Squire.

His kin succeeded him after his death. Bennelong’s brother-in-law Harry became chief at Parramatta and his half brother-in-law Bidgee Bidgee was the clan head of the Kissing Point (Ryde) ‘tribe’ for 20 years.

1 Langton 1993[1977]: 87.
The second section contests the repeated historical convention that Bennelong was despised by his own people.

Anthropologist Stephen Greenblatt questioned the motives and veracity of travellers and voyagers who wrote books in what Mary Louise Pratt called the ‘contact zone’ or ‘space of colonial encounters’. Examining the reports of Christopher Columbus (Cristóbal Colón), Greenblatt concluded that ‘We can be certain only that European representation of the New World tells us something about the European practice of representation.’ Columbus and others spent little time in the lands they ‘discovered’ driven by the quest for wonders and riches, whereas the British colonists came to establish a convict settlement in a new country. They were not travellers but settlers.

While the First Fleet outsiders considered themselves more ‘civilised’ and superior to the Indigenous people, whom they regarded as ‘savages’ or ‘Indians’, there was no reason for them not to tell the truth as they saw and understood it.

Historian Inga Clendinnen praised the ‘dutiful recording’ of David Collins, whose *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, published in London in 1798 and reprinted in many English journals, was a major influence in the ‘European representation’ of Aboriginal life and culture. Without Collins, wrote Clendinnen, ‘it would be difficult to trace the interactions between Australians [Aboriginal Australians] and British in the years after the Australians decided to “come in” to Sydney Town’. Collins spent eight years in New South Wales before leaving in August 1796.

The major aim of this paper, then, is to rehabilitate the received image of Bennelong that has for so long been copied from one history to another with no questioning of the secondary sources or interrogation of the primary historical evidence. None of the information in this essay could have been recovered without the original accounts. There would be little Aboriginal history of Sydney’s early post-colonial period without them. This methodology, as Peter Watts remarked about *Fleeting Encounters*, the inaugural exhibition at the Museum of Sydney in 1995, ‘is not from adding new data but from liberating the old’.

**Bennelong’s kin and country**

Names held layers of meaning to the Indigenous people of the Sydney area. ‘Each person has several names, one of which, there is reason to believe is always derived from the first fish or animal, which the child, in accompanying its father

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to the chase [hunt] or a fishing, may chance to kill’, wrote Marine Captain Watkin Tench. Judge Advocate David Collins observed that it was the custom to name a child once he or she was between one and six months of age. These first given names, often called totem names, after the Algonkian *totam*, meaning ‘kinsman’, linked a child with an emblem from the natural and supernatural worlds that Aboriginal people considered a part of their identity. In most parts of Australia it is forbidden to kill, injure or eat your totem. Male children took another name at initiation, which was seldom divulged to outsiders. Men and women exchanged names with each other and with European settlers, who also gave them nicknames. It was forbidden to speak the name of a recently dead person.

Bennelong had five names, written with many variations in spelling and order by the journal keepers of the First Fleet. A vocabulary kept by Governor Arthur Phillip and his aides gave them as ‘Wo-lar-re-barre, Wog-ul-trowe, Bannel-lon, Boinba, Bunde-bunda’, Philip Gidley King as ‘Bannelon, Wolewarre, Boinba, Bunde-bunda, Wogletrowey’ and David Collins as ‘Ben-nil-long, Wo-lar-ra-bar-ray, Wo-gul-trow-e, Boinba, and Bun-de-bun-da’. Bennelong had five names, written with many variations in spelling and order by the journal keepers of the First Fleet. A vocabulary kept by Governor Arthur Phillip and his aides gave them as ‘Wo-lar-re-barre, Wog-ul-trowe, Bannel-lon, Boinba, Bunde-bunda’, Philip Gidley King as ‘Bannelon, Wolewarre, Boinba, Bunde-bunda, Wogletrowey’ and David Collins as ‘Ben-nil-long, Wo-lar-ra-bar-ray, Wo-gul-trow-e, Boinba, and Bun-de-bun-da’.8

*Bund-bunda* meant ‘hawk’, but the meanings of Bennelong’s other names are obscure. ‘Bennillong told me his name was that of a large fish, but one that I never saw taken’, wrote David Collins.10 According to Captain John Hunter, Vogle-troo-ye and Yo-la-ra-very ‘were names by which some of his particular connections were distinguished, and which he had, upon their death, taken up’.11

Watkin Tench said Bennelong preferred the name Woollarawarre.

Although I call him only Bannelon, he had besides several appellations; and for a while he chose to be distinguished by that of Wo-lar-a-wàr-e. Again, as a mark of affection and respect to the governor, he conferred on him the name of Wolarwaree, and sometimes called him Been-èn-a (father), adopting to himself the name of governor. This interchange of names, we found is a constant symbol of friendship among them.12

Phillip called Bennelong *Doorow* (son) and Bennelong named both Judge Advocate David Collins and Commissary John Palmer *Babunna* (brother).
Woollarawarre Bennelong was born about 1764, somewhere on the south shore of the Parramatta River. This was the country of the Wangal. When he died in 1813, Bennelong was buried in Wallumedegal territory on the north side of the river at Ryde.

Based on surviving vocabularies and references, the original inhabitants of the Sydney coast called themselves Eora (yura), simply meaning ‘People’. In his published vocabulary (1798), Collins listed ‘Eo-ra – The name common for the natives’ and wrote elsewhere, ‘I then asked [Bennelong] where the black men (or Eora) came from.’

The Eora were united by strong ties of kinship and a common language, spoken in the area from the Georges River and Botany Bay in the south to Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour), north to Pittwater and west to Parramatta.

Eora clans were named after the places they inhabited, or for a totem that they revered, with the addition of the suffix -gal, which meant a clan or extended family group, which might number from 20 to 60 men, women and children. Clans were exogamous: they took their wives from adjoining clans and came together regularly for ceremonies or to avenge the deaths of family members. Galiang specifically meant the female members of a clan.

Bennelong, wrote Tench, ‘willingly communicated information [and] told us all the details of his family economy’. Less than three months after his capture, on 13 February 1790, Phillip passed on the names and locations of eight coastal clans in a dispatch to Lord Sydney at the Home Office in London. Bennelong also told Phillip that ‘one-half of those who inhabit this part of the country’ had died from smallpox.

Three Aboriginal clans occupied the saltwater Parramatta River at the time of the English invasion in January 1788: Wangal on the south shore, Wallumedegal to the north and Burramattagal at the source. Bennelong, wrote Collins,

often assured me, that the island Me-mel (called by us Goat Island) close by Sydney Cove was his property; that it was his father’s … He told us of other people who possessed this hereditary property, which they retained undisturbed.

‘The South Side of the Harbour from the above-mentioned Cove [adjoining to this settlement] to Rose-Hill, which the natives call Parramatta, the District is called Wann, & the Tribe Wangal’, Arthur Phillip informed Lord Sydney in February 1790.

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15 Tench 1793: 36.
16 Phillip to Sydney, 13 February 1790, *Historical Records of Australia* [hereafter HRA], vol II: 308.
17 Collins 1975[1798–1802] I: 497. Aboriginal people today say that Bennelong was the custodian of the island.
18 Phillip to Sydney, 13 February 1790, HRA, vol II: 308.
Long Cove, now Darling Harbour. In today’s geography, Wangal territory began at Memel or Goat Island, rounded the Balmain Peninsula and ran west along the south bank of the Parramatta River, almost to Parramatta, home of the Burrumattagal (Eel place clan). The Wallumedegal or Wallamattagal, a name derived from *wallumai*, the snapper fish, occupied the north shore of the Parramatta River, west of its intersection with the Lane Cove River.

**Abduction**

Governor Arthur Phillip had orders from King George III to ‘endeavour, by every possible means, to open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all subjects to live in amity and kindness with them’. No Aboriginal people ventured into the Sydney settlement after February 1788. To comply with his orders, Phillip directed that one or more be seized. On 30 December 1788, a young man named Arabanoo was taken at Manly Cove. He died from smallpox in May 1789 after helping to nurse Nanbarry and Boorong – two children who had contracted the disease – through their illness.

The governor wanted another Aboriginal man who could be taught to speak English to act as a go-between and interpreter. At the age of about 25, Bennelong was unwillingly thrust into British history when he and his companion Colebee were abducted from Manly Cove in late November 1789. They were bound with ropes and taken by boat to Sydney Cove. Colebee, chief of the harbour-dwelling Cadigal, escaped on 12 December.

Tench described Bennelong as being about 26 years old ‘of good statue, and stoutly made, with a bold intrepid countenance, which bespoke defiance and revenge’. He was wiry and muscular with a flat nose and a bright twinkle in his dark eyes. Captain John Hunter said Bennelong was ‘a very good looking young fellow, of a pleasant, lively disposition’. They would find that he was also mercurial, quick to laughter or anger, a clever mimic and a wily and cunning politician.

Bennelong endeavoured to find a place for Governor Phillip and his officers in the traditional kinship system of his people, calling the governor *Beanga* (Father) and himself *Doorow* (Son). In his dealings with Phillip, Bennelong received privileges such as extra rations and clothing and valuable items like metal knives, hatchets and fishhooks, in exchange for Aboriginal weapons and artefacts. According to Greenblatt, European voyagers ‘believed they could

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19 King 2006[1790]: 406.
20 George III to Arthur Phillip, 27 April 1787, Public Record Office [hereafter PRO], CO21/1.
21 For a full account of Bennelong’s relationship with Governor Arthur Phillip and his aides until his departure for England in 1792, see Smith 2001.
communicate with the Indigenous people ‘through the giving of gifts’, which was not reciprocal.\textsuperscript{22} By contrast, the exchange of gifts between Phillip and his aides and Bennelong and his people was usually reciprocal.\textsuperscript{23}

In November 1790, Phillip built Bennelong a brick hut at Tubowgulle, now Bennelong Point. Bennelong told Phillip that when he went to the south shore of Botany Bay in December 1790, ‘they danced, and that one of the tribe had sung a song, the subject of which was, his house, the governor, and the white men at Sydney’. The corroboree celebrated a peace agreement with his former enemies the Gweagal, who, he said, ‘would not throw any more spears’. He also became friendly with the north shore Cameragal only a few days after asking Phillip to kill them all.\textsuperscript{24} Bennelong’s hut was demolished in November 1795, two months after his return from England.

**Bennelong’s sisters**

According to a writer using the *nom de plume* ‘Atticus’, Bennelong’s father was Goorah-Goorah and his mother Ga-golh.\textsuperscript{25} In his second language notebook (1791), Marine Lieutenant William Dawes listed the names of Bennelong and his sisters: ‘Beneláng . Wariwéar . Karangarang . Wúrrgan . Munánguri’.\textsuperscript{26}

Bennelong forged political alliances with influential Aboriginal men through the marriages of his sisters Warreeweer (Wariwéar) and Carangarang (Karangarang). Warreeweer married Anganáneg or Gnung-a Gnung-a Murremurgan, who adopted the name ‘Collins’ from Phillip’s aide David Collins.\textsuperscript{27} In 1793, while Bennelong was in England, Gnung-a Gnung-a sailed across the Pacific aboard the storeship HMS *Daedalus* to Norfolk Island, North America and Hawaii.

While her husband was at sea, Warreeweer lived with an Aboriginal man described by Collins as ‘a very fine young fellow, who since his coming among us had gone by the name of Wyatt’. A few days after his return, Gnung-a Gnung-a wounded Wyatt and, said Collins, ‘the wife became the prize of the victor’.\textsuperscript{28}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Greenblatt 1995: 13.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Smith 2001: 147–155 – Chapter 20, ‘The skilful game’.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Hunter 1793: 493.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} *Sydney Gazette*, 29 March 1817: 1c–2b.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Dawes 1791, ‘Vocabulary of the language of N.S. Wales in the neighbourhood of Sydney. Native and English, by — Dawes’, SOAS, Marsden Collection, Notebook B, MS 4165 (b) [hereafter Dawes 1791]: 9.4.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Collins 1975[1798–1802] I: 250; Dawes 1790, ‘Grammatical forms of the language of N.S. Wales, in the neighbourhood of Sydney, by — Dawes, in the year 1790’, SOAS, Marsden Collection, Notebook A, MS 4165 (a) [hereafter Dawes 1790]: 16.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Collins 1975[1798–1802] I: 303; several instances were recorded in which a wife found another partner while her husband was away for some time. William Dawes recorded *Mákung* as ‘Sweetheart or lover’ and *Mákungáli* as ‘Husband. Wife’, Dawes 1791: 20.7; while Collins translated *Mau-gohn-nal-ty*, as ‘A temporary [wife]’, Collins 1975[1798–1802] I: 509; ‘marital partner – *mau-gohn-nal-ly* (a temporary wife)’, Troy 1993: 40.20.
\end{itemize}
The couple had a female child in 1791, who died the same year. Warreeweer was again pregnant in July 1793 when Gnunga-a Gnunga left Sydney, but that child also died.29

Bennelong’s brother-in-law Gnunga-a Gnunga-a came from the Hawkesbury River or from Broken Bay, north of the river. According to Thomas Campbell, secretary to Governor Lachlan Macquarie, Gnunga-a Gnunga-a’s brother Phillip or ‘Old Phillip’ said he was also the brother of Mosquito (Musqueto or Bush Muschetta),30 who in 1805 was captured at the Hawkesbury River and transported to Norfolk Island with Bulldog.31 Twenty years later Mosquito was hanged for murder in Hobart.32

When the Bidjigal resistance leader Pemulwuy speared Gnunga Gnunga in December 1795, the barbed head of the spear remained fixed in his back. The English surgeons could not remove it and considered his recovery doubtful. Gnunga Gnunga, however, left the hospital and walked about with the spear protruding from his back. ‘At last’, wrote Collins in a footnote, ‘we heard that his wife, or one of his male friends, had fixed their teeth in the wood and drawn it out; after which he recovered … His wife War-re-weer showed by an uncommon attention her great attachment to him.’33

In 1802, Nicolas-Martin Petit, a young artist with the French scientific expedition commanded by Captain Nicolas Baudin, sketched a portrait of Gnunga Gnunga, titled Gnoun-ga gnoun-ga, mour-re-mour-ga (dit Collins).

Another of Bennelong’s sisters, Carangarang first married Yow-war-re or Yuwarry, noted as We-ra-re in ‘Names of Native Men’ in the vocabulary kept by Governor Phillip and his aides (referred to here as the ‘Governors’ Vocabulary’).34 Yuwarry was the leading corpse bearer in the funeral of Ballooderry, a Burramattagal (man from the Parramatta clan) buried near Bennelong Point in 1791.35 Carangarang and Yuwarry had a daughter called Kah-dier-rang. The entry ‘Child Boy of Yuwarry’ in Daniel Southwell’s vocabulary is difficult to decipher from the original handwriting, but might be interpreted as Carrangarray, who was included in ‘Names of Native Men’ in the ‘Governors’ Vocabulary’, a name afterwards shortened to Krankie or Cranky.36

The French expedition’s anthropologist François Péron, who used a device called a Dynamometer to test the strength of Aboriginal men in the Sydney area

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31 Sydney Gazette, 9 June, 17 July 1805.
32 Sydney Gazette, 17 March 1825.
34 GV c1791: 41.13.
36 Southwell 1791, Southwell Papers, British Library, MS 16,383: 147b.3; GV c1791: 41.10.
in 1802, listed Yuwarry as ‘No. 9. Oui-roué … Well-developed torso; thin legs, ferocious and untrustworthy aspect.’37 Nothing more is heard of Yuwarry and it is presumed that he died not long afterwards.

Although ‘Harry’ is a likely contraction of Yuwarry, it can be shown that Carangarang’s second husband, named by the Reverend Charles Wilton as ‘Harry alias Corrangie’, was a much younger man.38 In 1826 the Reverend Samuel Marsden wrote that: ‘The Native Harry … lived in my family, 30 years ago [1798], for a considerable time. He learned to speak our language, and while he was with me behaved well.’ Harry, who Marsden hoped might become ‘civilised’, left to join the ‘Natives in the Woods’.39

In 1816, Governor Macquarie gave Harry and Bidgee Bidgee each a suit of slop clothing, a blanket, four days provision, a half pint of spirits and a half pound of tobacco for their services as ‘Native Guides’ in tracking ‘hostile’ Aborigines in the Appin area.40 Macquarie also ordered a ‘Reward of Merit’ gorget to be engraved for Harry.41

Dr Joseph Paul Gaimard of the French expedition commanded by Louis De Freycinet in Sydney during 1819, examined ‘Aré’ (Harry), aged 32, whose pulse rate was 87 beats per minute. Gaimard also recorded the physical measurements of Harry’s wife ‘Karangaran’ (Carangarang).42 Gaimard estimated Harry’s age at 32, giving him a birth year of 1787, making it unlikely that he could be the adult Yuwarry who officiated at Ballooderry’s 1791 funeral.

Sir William Macarthur (1800-1882), in an undated Memorandum, remarked that Harry frequently visited his family home at Parramatta before he left for school in England in 1809. Macarthur recorded the warm welcome Harry gave for his father John Macarthur when he returned in 1819 from a period of exile in England. ‘I remember that some strangers who were present were much astonished at Harrys eloquence, to which I have done very ill justice – they did not know he was the poet of his tribe’, wrote Macarthur.43

When Harry found a pit saw at Marraymah or Charity Point (Ryde) in 1819, James Squire of Kissing Point placed a classified advertisement in the Sydney Gazette: ‘If not claimed in 14 Days from this Date, it will be sold for the benefit of Black Harry.’44 In 1814 Samuel Marsden had suggested Charity Point (first named Dinner Point), where the railway bridge now crosses the Parramatta River to Meadowbank, as the best place to establish a school to ‘civilise’ Aborigines. ‘I

37 Péron 1807: 477 Table II.
38 Wilton 1828.
39 Marsden in Gunson 1974 II: 347.
42 Freycinet 2001[1839]: 111.
44 Sydney Gazette, 22 May 1819: 4.
replied, on or near the banks of Paramatta [sic] River, opposite to the flats, as number of natives were wont to resort there at that time, for the purpose of fishing’, wrote Marsden.\(^45\)

In July 1822, Captain John Piper sent a petition to Governor Sir Thomas Brisbane seeking clothes and blankets from the Commissariat Store on behalf of Harry, Krankie (1st), Krankie (2nd) and others, camped near his home at Point Piper, who were ‘almost in a state of nudity, suffering Cold and hunger in the extreme’. Piper wrote:

In order to supplicate your Excellency for relief They solicited a White Man to put their unfortunate situation in writing for your Excellency’s humane consideration, and as your Excellency has extended your benevolence to several of their suffering brethren, they humbly hope your Excellency will allow them some sort of covering from His Majesty’s store.\(^46\)

Krankie (1st) was another name for Harry’s wife Carangarang, recorded as ‘One Old Woman named Cranky’, said to be 60 years of age, when she was included in the 1837 ‘Return of Aboriginal Natives’ issue of government blankets at Brisbane Water in Broken Bay.\(^47\) Krankie (2nd) was probably the son of Carangarang and her first husband Yuwarry.

The French surgeon and pharmacist René-Primavère Lesson, who visited Sydney in 1824, named Harry as ‘chef de la peuplade de Paramatta’, that is, chief of the Parramatta people or clan.\(^48\) Writing in 1828, the Reverend Wilton said Harry was ‘Chief of Parramatta’.\(^49\)

Judge Barron Field praised Harry as ‘the most courteous savage that ever bade good-morrow’.\(^50\) When Harry gave him the words of a corroboree, Field remarked: ‘I took down the following Australian national melody from Harry, who married Carangarang, the sister of the celebrated Bennilong.’\(^51\) Harry, who attended the Orphan School at Parramatta, run by Anna Josepha King, wife of Governor PG King, was literate. In a letter to the editor of the Sydney Morning Herald in 1890, George Macarthur wrote:

Sir,—There was an old letter extant in 1848, which was written by an aboriginal named Harry, who was a very remarkable man, and one of the cleverest mimics to be imagined. Harry was taught to read and write in the school at Paramatta (not Parramatta as now spelled), and the letter to which I refer was addressed to my mother, who had, at its date,
returned with her parents to England. It commenced ‘My dear Maria.’
Subsequently Miss King returned to the Colony as Mrs. Hannibal
McArthur, of ‘the Vineyard,’ now known as ‘Subiaco.’ Many years ago
my mother showed me this letter …\textsuperscript{52}

Replying to a correspondent, George Macarthur said ‘The letter itself was
written in the year after Governor King had left the colony; that was in 1807.’ He
added: ‘I knew “Harry” and his contemporary “Bidgee Bidgee” personally and
intimately, for as boys we were allowed to go out with them on excursion to hunt
opossums and bandicoots.’ \textsuperscript{53} Harry’s letter has not been traced.

While in Sydney in 1833, the Austrian scientist Baron Charles von Hügel, was
shown a letter he thought was written by Bennelong, ‘such as a child might write,
in which he reminisced about the wife of Governor King’. \textsuperscript{54} It was more likely the
letter written by Harry. Anna Josepha King spent much of her time supervising
the Orphan School, which became known as ‘Mrs King’s Orphanage’.

Dawes included Wúrrgan or Worogan (Crow) among Bennelong’s sisters.\textsuperscript{55}
She was probably Bennelong’s half-sister by Yahuana, second wife of Bennelong’s
father Goorah Goorah. Worogan married Yerinibe or Yeranabie Goruey, called
‘Palmer’, the Burramattagal brother of Boorong and Ballooderry and half-
brother of Bidgee Bidgee, clan head for 20 years from 1816 of the Kissing Point
(Ryde) ‘Tribe’.

In 1801, Yeranabie and Worogan sailed with Lieutenant James Grant on the
sloop \textit{Lady Nelson} to Jervis Bay and on to Westernport and Churchill Island
in Port Phillip. Grant wrote that Yeranabie ‘spoke English tolerably well …
Worogan … spoke English. She had always lived in the neighbourhood of
Sydney’.\textsuperscript{56} Yarranabbi Road, Darling Point is named after ‘Yaranabi’ (Yeranabie),
‘King of the Darling Point’ tribe during the 1830s and 1840s, according to George
Thornton.\textsuperscript{57}

\section*{Bennelong’s wives and children}

Bennelong’s first wife, whose name is not known, had died before his capture
in November 1789, probably from smallpox. Soon after Bennelong escaped from
Governor Phillip’s house, on 3 May 1790, he resumed living with Barangaroo,
who, said Collins, was ‘of the tribe of Cam-mer-ray’, centred at Kayeemy (Manly
Cove) on the north shore of Port Jackson.\textsuperscript{58} She had two children from a previous

\textsuperscript{52} Macarthur, ‘Letter to the Editor’, \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 17 July 1890.
\textsuperscript{53} Macarthur, \textit{Sydney Morning Herald}, 1890 in \textit{Newspaper Cuttings}, vol 51, Australian Aborigines,
Mitchell Library, MLQ J72.9901/N.
\textsuperscript{54} von Hügel 1833–1834: 348.
\textsuperscript{55} Daniel Southwell, 1791, ‘A List of Words…’, Southwell Papers, 1787–1793, British Library,
\textsuperscript{56} James Grant, 1801, \textit{Historical Records of New South Wales}, vol IV: 106–107.
\textsuperscript{57} Thornton 1892: 7.
\textsuperscript{58} Collins 1975[1798–1802] I: 463.
husband, both of whom had died. His relationship with Barangaroo might explain Bennelong’s presence at Manly Cove when he was captured in 1789 and when Phillip was speared at the whale feast in September 1790.

Bennelong’s joking statement at the whale feast that Barangaroo had ‘become the new wife’ of Colebee and that he had replaced her with Bul-la Mur-ee Dee-in (‘two big women’) has the ring of truth.\(^{59}\) When Bennelong, in a boat with Phillip, met Barangaroo at Rose Bay on 3 February 1790 (before his escape), she told him that Colebee was fishing on the other side of the hill.\(^ {60}\) Barangaroo gave birth to a baby girl named Dilboong (Bellbird), but she lived for only a few months.\(^ {61}\) When Barangaroo died late in 1791, she, like Arabanoo and Dilboong, were buried in Governor Phillip’s garden, in the present Circular Quay precinct.

After a duel with his enemy, the Gweagal elder Mety, at Botany Bay in November 1790, Bennelong had abducted Kurúbarabúla or Goroobarooboollo, a Gweagalangi about 17 years of age.\(^ {62}\) According to Dawes, she was the ngarángaliáng or younger sister of Warungín, Wangubíle Kólbi (Botany Bay Colebee), who had exchanged names with the Cadigal leader Colebee.\(^ {63}\) Kurúbarabúla remained with Bennelong until he and Yemmerrawanne sailed to England on HMS Atlantic with Arthur Phillip in December 1792.\(^ {64}\) While Bennelong was in England, she became the companion of Caruey, a young Cadigal related to Colebee.\(^ {65}\)

Sometime after his return from England in 1795, Bennelong found another partner, who gave birth to a child about 1804. A ‘son of the memorable Bennelong’ was among the children placed in the Native Institution at Parramatta during the Native Conference in 1816.\(^ {66}\) This is the only published reference to Bennelong through all the long years of Macquarie’s term as governor of New South Wales. Macquarie did not mention Bennelong in either his private journal or his Memoranda & Related Papers.

Bennelong’s son Dicky was admitted to the school on 28 December 1816. He remained there until 1821, when he went to live in the house of the Wesleyan (Methodist) missionary, Reverend William Walker, who taught him to read and write and publicly baptised him Thomas Walker Coke (after Dr Coke, who

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59 Tench 1793: 55.
63 Dawes 1791: 9.1–2, 45.5.
64 Collins 1975[1798–1802] I: 211.
66 Sydney Gazette, 8 December 1816.
founded the Methodist Missions) at the Wesleyan Chapel at Parramatta on 8 September 1822. It was reported that many other Aborigines were present and that Dicky ‘wept much’.  

Dicky Bennelong became ill and died early in February 1823 at the age of 19. He had been married briefly to an Aboriginal girl named Maria, who also attended the Native School, but they had no children. Maria was the sister of Colebe or Colebee from Richmond on the Hawkesbury River. She had been brought up by the family of the Reverend Rowland Hassall and was a skilled English speaker, reader and writer. Hassall said Maria was named after Anna Maria Macarthur, daughter of Governor Philip Gidley King. In 1817, Maria acted as an interpreter at an inquest into the murder of an Aboriginal girl named Nanny Cabbage at Cockle Bay (Darling Harbour). The coroner, natural history artist John William Lewin, said in his report that ‘a Native of the name of Maria whose knowledge of the English Language was nearly equal to his own was called in as interpreter’.

Bennelong’s last wife and the woman buried with him in his grave at Kissing Point was Boorong, sister of his allies Ballooderry and Bidgee Bidgee, who told the French voyager Jules Dumont d’Urville he was the uncle of Bennelong’s son.

This picture of a rich network of kinship is based on meticulous tracking and unravelling of Indigenous names in First Fleet journals and vocabularies that makes knowable and visible many Aboriginal people otherwise lost to history while reconstructing Bennelong’s family members, both before and after British settlement.

After England

Following Yemmerrawanne’s death on 18 May 1794, Bennelong was anxious to return home. He boarded the 304-ton HMS *Reliance* at the port of Chatham on 30 July 1794, the date on a bill of one guinea for ‘Post Chaise to take Mr. Benalong on board the Reliance’. The name ‘Bannelong’ appears, under ‘Supernumeraries borne for Victuals only’, in the ship’s muster with James Williamson and Danl Paine (master shipwright Daniel Paine) on 15 September 1794. Four long months later, on 25 January 1795, Captain John Hunter, appointed governor of New South Wales, said he feared the ‘Surviving Man (Banilong)’ was so ill and...
‘broken in Spirit’ that he might die. After further delays, the voyage began on 2 March 1795 and ended on 7 September 1795, when Reliance dropped anchor in Sydney Cove. Bennelong had been away for two years and 10 months, 18 months of which he spent on board ships, either at sea or in the docks.

The Reverend W Pascoe Crook, a newly arrived Congregational parson and missionary, stated his opinion of the Aboriginal people in a letter from Parramatta written on 5 May 1805:

The Natives of this country are more & more Savage though Some of them have been quite Civilized they prefer wandering stark naked in the bush living on worms insects &c this is the case with Bennelong who was in England. He visits the settlements now and then, is very polite, begs a loaf and departs.75

Crook’s use of the plural ‘settlements’ implies that Bennelong visited Parramatta as well as Sydney.

Bennelong, wrote George Howe in the New South Wales Pocket Almanac (1818), was ‘hospitably protected’ by Governor King. ‘The Governor frequently clothed him and he dined at the servant’s table in the kitchen, at which presided Mrs. Dundas, the housekeeper, a worthy woman, and the butler, as worthy a young man.’ Bennelong had dressed well and lived well in London, said Howe, ‘yet upon his return to the Colony he fell off spontaneously into his early habits, and in spite of every thing that could be done to him in the order of civilization, he took to the bush, and only occasionally visited Government House’. Howe dismissed Bennelong’ friendship with Governor Phillip as an ‘early experiment’ in European attempts to civilise the native people.76

Aboriginal people could not be swayed from their ‘savage life’, in the opinion of David Dickinson Mann, who left Sydney in March 1809, ‘nor can the strongest allurements tempt them to exchange their wild residences in the recesses of the country, for the comforts of European life’. In The Present Picture of New South Wales, published in London in 1811, Mann cited the case of Bennelong as a ‘singular instance of this fact’.

For some time after his return, it is true, he assumed the manners, the dress, and the consequence of an European, and treated his countrymen with a distance which evinced the sense he entertained of his own increased importance … but notwithstanding so much pains had been taken for his improvement, both when separated from his countrymen, and since his return to New South Wales, he has subsequently taken to the woods again, returned to his old habits, and now lives in the same manner as those who have never mixed with the civilized world.

74 Hunter to King, 25 January 1795, PRO, CO201/12: 3.
75 Crook to Hardcastle, Parramatta, 5 May 1805, Mitchell Library, Bonwick Transcripts, Box 49: 141.
76 Howe 1818: 60.
Sometimes, indeed, he holds intercourse with the colony; but every effort uniformly fails to draw him once again into the circle of polished society, since he prefers to taste of liberty amongst his native scenes ...  

Similar opinions about Bennelong were repeated with only slight variations in succeeding histories of New South Wales and Australia.

Death and burial

Bennelong died on 2 January 1813 at James Squire’s orchard on the north shore of the Parramatta River. His obituary in the *Sydney Gazette* was both scathing and patronising. Professor Marcia Langton aptly described it as ‘a vicious tract that failed to mention his services to the colony’.  

Bennelong died on Sunday morning last at Kissing Point. Of this veteran champion of the native tribe little favourable can be said. His voyage to and benevolent treatment in Great Britain produced no change whatever in his manners and inclinations, which were naturally barbarous and ferocious.

The principal officers of 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 and for the last few years he has been but little noticed. His propensity for 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.

The one dependable explanation of the cause of Bennelong’s death was given in 1815 by Old Philip to ship’s surgeon Joseph Arnold, who wrote in his journal: ‘old Bennelong is dead, Philip told me he died after a short illness about two years ago, & that they buried him & his wife at Kissing point’.  

While Bennelong’s illness might have originated in the many wounds he had suffered over the years in the relentless cycle of payback battles, it was probably also aggravated by his ‘propensity to drunkenness’. According to ‘Atticus’, Bennelong had been ‘much addicted to spirit drinking, and for the last five months of his life was seldom sober’.  

Writing in 1883, Navy Lieutenant Richard Sadleir alleged that three Aboriginal men had been killed in a battle and several wounded, including Bennelong,

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77 Mann 1811: 46–47.
78 Langton 2008: 29.
79 *Sydney Gazette*, 9 January 1813: 2a.
80 Arnold, ‘Journal’, 18 July 1815, Mitchell Library, C720: 401. In 1815 Philip and his wife settled with Bungaree and his Broken Bay people at George’s Head near Mosman.
81 *Sydney Gazette*, 29 March 1817: 1c–2b.
who was ‘dangerously wounded and probably died’. Sadleir, who first came to Australia in 1826, relied on hearsay, as there is no extant report of a payback fight during 1813. ‘Thus perished Bennillong, as a drunken savage, after all the advantages he had had of visiting England, and living at the Governor’s House’, concluded Sadleir. 82

Bennelong was buried, with one of his wives (Boorong) in a grave in James Squire’s orchard at Kissing Point beside the river that separated the Wallamattagal territory, where he lived, from that of the Wangal, his birth country. ‘He [Bennelong] lies between his wife and another Chief amidst the orange trees of the garden’, wrote the Reverend Charles Wilton, minister of the Parish of the Field of Mars, in the *Australian Quarterly Journal*. ‘Bidgee Bidgee, the present representative of the Kissing Point Tribe, is a frequent visitor to these premises and expresses a wish to be buried by the side of his friend Bennelong.’ 83 It was just 25 years – half his lifetime – since Bennelong first saw a white man.

A memorial commemorating Bennelong’s burial site was erected in 1988 by the Australian Bicentennial Authority in the present Bennelong Park, by the Parramatta River (about 13 kilometres from Sydney City).

Reappraisal

After his return from England to Sydney in 1795, Bennelong was represented by contemporary observers as a flawed character: a drunk, scorned by both European and Aboriginal society. In later histories, he became the stereotype of the defeated ‘native’, a victim, scarred by dispossession and cultural loss, who could not adapt to European ‘civilisation’. 84

In *A History of Australia*, Manning Clark asserted that ‘Bennelong disgusted his civilizers and became an exile from his own people’. 85 Bennelong’s biographer, Isadore Brodsky, said he was ‘no longer wanted by his own people, and was regarded as an incorrigible savage by the whites’. 86

This interpretation was reflected in Aboriginal literature, for example, the publication *Aboriginal Australia, Aboriginal People of New South Wales*, produced by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 1997, which stated that Bennelong’s long association with Phillip ‘led to his being rejected by his own people’. Addressing the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation on 27 May 2000, New South Wales Premier Bob Carr, called Bennelong ‘Governor Arthur Phillip’s captive, house-guest, interpreter, prize exhibit.’ Carr continued: ‘He died discarded by those who had used him, and rejected by his people.’ 87

82 Sadleir 1883: 25.
83 Wilton 1828: 137.
84 See the discussion by Emma Dortins in this volume.
85 Clark 1979: 145.
87 Carr, 27 May 2000.
It is clear, however, that Bennelong, who had seen at first-hand the best and worst of European civilisation chose to reject it. In the words of John Turnbull, Bennelong laid aside, all the ornaments and improvements he had reaped from his travels, and returned as if with increased relish, to all his former loathsome and savage habits. His clothes were thrown away as burthensome restraints on the freedom of his limbs, and he became again as compleat a New Hollander, as if he had never left his native wilds.  

It is just as certain that Bennelong returned to a respected position in the Eora clan networks from which he had taken temporary leave. Henry Waterhouse indicated as much when he wrote to Lord Sydney on 20 August 1797:

Benalong in general lives with the Governor & occasionally takes a trip with his friends in their stile [style] & is subject to all their Laws, & seems to throw the Spear and wield the Club with his former dexterity.

A series of reports in journal entries and the Sydney Gazette confirms Bennelong’s leading role in ritual revenge battles around Sydney. The wounds he collected on his body in these encounters were like a map of his life. ‘Bennelong is well he has been severely bruised’, wrote Governor John Hunter in March 1798. Bennelong was greatly respected as an elder who had the power to remove teeth from boys in initiation ceremonies. He officiated at the last recorded initiation in Port Jackson, which took place in Cameragal territory ‘in the middle harbour’ (possibly at Georges Head) in December 1797.

The French scientist François Péron, who tested Bennelong’s strength in 1802, probably at Parramatta, estimated his age as 35-36 and noted: ‘The chief; pleasing figure but somewhat thin.

Bennelong was the leader of a 100-strong Aboriginal clan observed on the north side of the Parramatta River, west of Kissing Point, in the early years of the nineteenth century. ‘General’ Joseph Holt, a leader of the 1789 Irish rebellion against English rule in Wicklow, arrived in New South Wales in 1800 as a political exile. Holt managed the farms of Captain William Cox, paymaster to the New South Wales Corps. One of these was Brush Farm in the present Eastwood-Dundas area. Another was the Vineyard, a 140-acre property acquired by Henry Waterhouse from Phillip Schaeffer in August 1797. According to James Jervis, William Cox occupied the Vineyard during 1802–1803. Waterhouse’s property,

88 Turnbull 1805 I: 75.
89 Waterhouse to Townshend, 20 August 1797, Thomas Townshend Papers, Dixson Library, DL MSQ 522.
92 Péron 1807: 477 Table II.
in the present Rydalmere-Dundas area, faced John Macarthur’s Elizabeth Farm and was not far from James Squire’s orchard at Kissing Point (Ryde), where Bennelong spent his final days.

In his *Memoirs*, Holt noted aspects of Aboriginal life and culture around Parramatta under governors John Hunter and Philip Gidley King. According to Holt, while fighting and hostility continued between settlers and Aborigines at the Northern Boundary (north of Parramatta), Hawkesbury River and Georges River settlements, some 50 Aborigines were camped peacefully about the Parramatta River near Clay Cliff Creek. Holt described Bennelong and his clan visiting Cox’s farm. ‘The king of the natives his name is Bennelong, that is to say “been long” deemed their king’, he wrote. Holt bragged that he had had ‘one hundred of both male and female in my yard together’. He sometimes brought the chief and his *gin* (wife) into his house for breakfast and a glass of grog.

I tell him to not let his people take any of my melons or corn, or, if he would, I would be murray angry with him. He say bail—that means ‘never fear.’ He would walk out and let out a shout, and every one of both sexes would come and get their orders, and would obey it as punctual as a soldier on his post. He hold up his hand and say Murray tat tat, pointing his hand and telling them where they were to go to make their camp, and, at the same time, he would tell them not to touch anything of Master or he would *murray pialla* them. *Pialla* is to spear them to death. All this should be done and the gin should go and get *mogra* [fish] for Missus.94

In 1804 Holt was sent to Norfolk Island and later to Van Diemen’s Land. He received a pardon from Governor Lachlan Macquarie and left Sydney in 1812.

Lieutenant William Lawson, in his *Account of the Aborigines*, said Bennelong ‘died in the bush with his tribe at Kissing Point, which are all now I believe extinct’.95

The traditional ritual revenge combat fought in Sydney not long after Bennelong’s death at Kissing Point was not reported in the Sydney newspapers. It was, though, witnessed by ‘a free merchant of India’, a passenger on the schooner *Henrietta*, who wrote a letter dated ‘off Bass’s Straits, 17th April, 1813’ that was printed in the *Caledonian Mercury* in Edinburgh more than one year later, on 26 May 1814. The writer described the ritual, in which

the nearest relative is obliged to stand punishment … he stands at a distance with a shield of hard wood, and the rest throw spears with great dexterity at him, while he defends himself, till wounded, or perhaps killed; and there the affair ends.

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95 Lawson 1838: 554–555.
He continued:

Lately, in the vicinity of the town [Sydney], a battle took place, where about 200 were engaged, I believe in consequence of the death of the celebrated Bennelong, who visited England some years ago, and was taken great notice of. The spears flew very thick, and about thirty men were wounded.96

When Colebee’s nephew Nanbarry, a Cadigal from the eastern shore of Port Jackson, died at Kissing Point on 12 August 1821, he was buried at his own request in the same grave as Bennelong. There could be no greater mark of respect. Bidgee Bidgee, the Kissing Point (Ryde) clan head for 20 years, asked to be buried with Bennelong, but there is no record of his death or where he was buried. James Squire, who supported Nanbarry and Bennelong and was acquainted with Harry, had died in 1822. Bidgee Bidgee might be buried at Abbotsford, opposite Looking Glass Point, which was originally named Bigi Bigi.97

Bennelong’s kin mourned his death. Give final consideration to the emotional testimony of the Reverend Samuel Leigh in 1821, as recounted by the Reverend Samuel Strachan.

The first tribe they met with were related to the chief Bennelong, who had died a short time before. ‘I happened,’ said Mr Leigh, ‘to have a portrait of this celebrated chieftan, which had been taken in England, in my pocket at the time. I took it out, and showed it to them. When they looked upon his features, they were astonished, and wept aloud.’ “It is Bennelong!” they cried. “He it is! Bennelong!, he was our brother and our friend!” The scene was so affecting, that Mrs. Leigh and the missionary [William Walker], who were present, mingled their tears of sympathy with the Heathen. As soon as they had recovered from their grief, we entered into conversation with them, for this tribe can speak English.”98

From his earliest negotiations with Governor Arthur Phillip, Bennelong’s ‘constant endeavour’, in the words of Clendinnen, ‘was to establish his clan, as embodied in his person, in an enduring reciprocal relationship with the British – the relationship of profitable intimacy and mutual forbearance Phillip, for a time, seemed to offer’.99 This essay has demonstrated that, after his return from England in 1795, Bennelong’s influence continued, through succeeding governors (even after his own death), to ensure prestige for his family and allies in the Aboriginal world and to obtain privileges from the colonial rulers. The evidence presented refutes the myth of Bennelong’s pathetic demise, so commonly recited.

96 ‘New South Wales’, Caledonian Mercury, 26 May 1814.
97 Martin 1943.
98 Strachan 1873: 147.
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Bennelong’s two-year stay in Britain, from 1793 to 1795, is an often-mentioned but little-studied event in the life of one of Australia’s most significant Aboriginal ambassadors. Arthur Phillip recorded his hope to take Bennelong to Britain as early as 1791, writing to his long-time friend, Sir Joseph Banks, that if he does make the voyage ‘much information [will then] be obtained for he is very intelligent’. Bennelong himself may have imagined his travels even earlier. By 1791 he knew enough about the British need for Indigenous informants to expect a long and adventurous relationship with the newcomers.

Although Bennelong was said upon departure to understand the rigours of the voyage ahead of him, he may not have been as prepared for the experiences that lay ahead in Britain. During his stay, Bennelong lived at a number of addresses, toured key sites like St Paul’s Cathedral and the Tower of London, visited museums, attended theatre performances, enjoyed urban spas, and even took in a session of the trial of Warren Hastings at the Houses of Parliament. About one year into his residence, Bennelong’s fellow Aboriginal travelling companion, the teenaged Yemmerawanne, died from a chest infection. Bennelong shouldered the supervision, and grief, of Yemmerawanne’s burial, after which he evidently felt it was time to go home. He finally managed to secure a berth back in February 1795, docking at Port Jackson in September – nearly three years after leaving his homeland.

Historians have generally divided into two camps when they mention Bennelong’s overseas sojourn. They split between those who claim it was an instance of patronising celebration and those who declare it was more an example of gross exploitation. All, however, assume that Bennelong’s presence in Britain had a substantial impact. This article looks again at the impression that Bennelong was supposed to have made on British society. It finds that when compared to similarly-understood visitors in the eighteenth century, Bennelong attracted remarkably little attention. Relative to Indigenous travellers from other parts of the New World who had arrived in earlier decades, Bennelong stirred next to no interest from British authorities, dignitaries, or ordinary folk.

A study of his comparative lack of effect offers at least two advantages to history. First, and somewhat ironically, it promises an escape from the tragic

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1 Phillip to Banks, 3 December 1791, Banks Papers, Mitchell Library, Series 37.12-20.
2 Collins 1798–1802 I: 211.
narrative that is typically accorded Bennelong in contemporary scholarship. Most historians still insist that Bennelong’s fate was a tragedy – either despite the attentions received in Britain or because of them. The discovery of inattention opens up a more pragmatic view: it frees Bennelong from a reduction to his reception alone, which was mostly beyond his personal control, and instead allows him a travel experience that was as mixed as any other. Far from constituting an even darker perspective on Bennelong than currently pertains, a history of his ‘non-impact’ in Britain reminds us of a life that was larger than whatever any outsider nation thought him.

Second, the study of an unexpected break in a convention casts light on the nature of that convention. In this case, Bennelong’s ill-noticed visit reflected an important shift in British attitudes to Indigenous travellers from the New World. Such attitudes had for long been imbricated in more general views about Britain’s right to expand its empire around the globe, and indeed had been the key driver in shaping the way previous New World visitors had been treated. Thus, Bennelong’s minimal reception signalled a change in overall metropolitan imperial ideology.

First encounters

The early years of the colony at Port Jackson amount to the best-known episode of Bennelong’s life. His abduction, incarceration, later escape and eventual peace negotiations with the First Fleeters have been recounted numerous times, by eyewitnesses and by later chroniclers and biographers. Few, however, have related how closely these events echoed earlier scenes between British colonists and other Indigenous people from the New World – namely, Native Americans and Pacific Islanders. Phillip’s instructions to ‘endeavour by every means possible to open an intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections’ emerged from centuries of British engagement with the New World. George III’s Home Secretary, Lord Sydney, was well aware of the approaches of Walter Raleigh on the east coast of North America, for example, and of James Cook in Tahiti and elsewhere, where particular native informants had been sought and cultivated for information, cooperation and land purchases, had proved the most advantageous in unknown places.

Initially, Phillip had tried to ‘cultivate our acquaintance’ by peaceful means. The patent failure of this plan had led, first, to the abduction of Arabanoo, and then, after Arabanoo’s unfortunate and quick death from smallpox, to the capture of Bennelong and Colebee. Elizabeth Macarthur later explained that by the time of this last event the Governor was in despair over ever achieving

4 The most cogent recent account, in my view, is Keith Vincent Smith’s Bennelong. My own narrative of these years in Bennelong’s life relies most heavily on Smith. See also Atkinson 1997 and Karskens 2009.
5 Crown to Phillip, 35 April 1787, Historical Records of New South Wales [hereafter HRNSW] 1892: 89–90.
6 Bradley 1969: 68.
native confidence ‘by fair means’, so ‘ordered that two men should be taken by force’. Though Macarthur believed that Bennelong and Colebee were soon awed by the civilisation now opened to them, she also conceded that the process of obtaining their acknowledgement had induced ‘the Strongest marks of terror and Consternation’.7 The lieutenant in charge of the capture in November 1789 also remarked on its horror. The ‘crying & screaming of the women and children’, admitted William Bradley, ‘together with the situation of the two miserable wretches in our possession was really a most distressing scene; they were much terrified’. Bradley added that ‘it was by far the most unpleasant service I was ever ordered to Execute’.8

The subsequent story of Bennelong and Colebee’s relationship with the colonists resonates partially with the story of Manteo and Wanchese’s entanglements with Raleigh’s colonists in sixteenth-century Virginia. It is not certain how Raleigh’s captain, Arthur Barlowe, initiated relations with the two Algonquian men who later accompanied him to England to meet Raleigh, but the first, Manteo, remained a close contact for the eventual settlers of Roanoke while the second, Wanchese, spurned the British and devoted the rest of his life to their defeat.9 In like fashion, Bennelong – though he may have tried to run at first – soon came to discover the benefits of alliance with the newcomers while Colebee broke free of his irons within days of capture and remained a wary observer of British developments.10 Bennelong as native informant thus joined the ranks of Indigenous people in the New World who had concluded that maintaining links with newcomers was a safer and perhaps more prosperous route than closed-off rebellion.

Though his own shackle remained for a few more months, Bennelong swiftly became, in the view of the colonists at least, a cheerful and amenable resident of Government House. Various officers commented on his liveliness and intelligence, his humour and good nature, and his ‘scrupulous’ attendance to many forms of British etiquette.11 As a way of assimilating British hierarchy into something more familiar, Bennelong started to call Phillip beanga or father and referred to himself as Phillip’s doorow or son.12 In exchange, it is clear that Bennelong expected both to achieve personal advancement among his own people and to instruct the British about the subtleties and predicaments of Eora society. Bennelong was an initiated though somewhat junior warrior of the Wangal clan who appeared eager from the start to enhance his position with his kinsmen by bringing them British gifts or by conveying warnings about the newcomers’ doings. Numerous times during his first six months of residence with Phillip, Bennelong also tried to explain the complexities of tribal affiliation and place-naming within the Eora, as well as the devastation that smallpox had

7 Macarthur to Kingdon, 7 March 1791, HRNSW 1892: 502.
9 On these two Algonquians, see Vaughan 2006: 22–29.
10 On Bennelong’s initial attempt to escape, see Smith 2001: 40.
11 See, for examples, Fowell in HRNSW 1892: 373; King, ‘Journal’, 9 April 1790, Mitchell Library, MS C155.
12 See Tench 1793: 35. And see Smith 2001: 42.
recently wrought on the whole population. In this way, Bennelong reminds us of the Raiatean, Mai, who befriended Cook in Tahiti in 1773: Mai had sought an alliance with the recent arrivals not only as a way of embellishing his second-tier status in Raiatean society but also as a means of avenging Raiatean removal to Tahiti by nearby Boraborans.

Yet like Manteo and Mai before him, Bennelong never lost his independent spirit. Suddenly, in May 1790, Bennelong jumped the paling fence around Government House and walked away from his new ties. No particular event appeared to have precipitated the escape; Bennelong may have been motivated by some unrelated local issue or, perhaps, by a desire to keep Phillip on his diplomatic toes. Phillip allowed himself a moment of philosophic reflection when he commented in a letter to Banks that ‘our native has left us, & that at a time when he appeared to be happy & contented … I think that Mans leaving us proves that nothing will make these people amends for the loss of their liberty’.

Bennelong remained secluded from the British for over three months. Then, in September 1790, he was sighted again by some officers at Manly Cove, evidently down on his luck, appearing emaciated and somewhat disfigured. Phillip joined the officers for the reunion. Bennelong was said to greet the Governor warmly and call him beanga once again. But Bennelong was also careful to orchestrate the meeting to his favour, arranging for nearly 20 fellow Eora to surround the pair while they conversed. At length, Bennelong gestured towards another Aboriginal man some way off, introducing him to Phillip as one of his ‘very intimate friends’. Before Phillip could shake his hand, the man had grabbed a particularly long spear and hurled it into the Governor’s shoulder. Most later historians, following the lead of most of the British commentators present on the day, have assumed that Bennelong was as shocked and mortified about the spearing as Phillip’s fellow officers. Keith Vincent Smith, though, has proposed that Bennelong was rather the mastermind behind the affair: knowing that Phillip would want to be present for any reunion between them, he had time to arrange for a ritual and public punishment of the Governor for his earlier capture and other past wrongs by the British. In so doing, he erased the historical slate between the two groups at the same time as he recovered some of his apparently lost authority before kin peers.

Bennelong’s resurrection to power was no more obvious than in the peaceful coming-together of natives and newcomers that followed the events at Manly. From October 1790, more and more Eora people came into the British settlements for varying periods of time to share food, words and manufactures. The Aboriginal
elders had witnessed Bennelong restore justice to his personal relations with the British and demonstrated, through his confidence in Phillip’s reluctance to issue reprisals, that the benefits of alliance with the British could outweigh the costs. As Smith notes, Phillip’s magnanimity should not be forgotten here for the part it played in devising bicultural coexistence – however short-lived. ‘From this time’, recalled Watkin Tench in later years, ‘our intercourse with the natives, though partially interrupted, was never broken off. We gradually continued, henceforth, to gain knowledge of their customs and policy.’

Coexistence, of course, did not mean unmitigated amity. Violent skirmishes continued on occasion, and Bennelong himself often vacated Government House without warning for weeks at a time. But there was now a conversation in progress that could be taken up after leaving off at any time with reasonable assurance of good will from both sides. For the next two years, Bennelong was joined at the settlements by many Eora, and especially by younger men who were not yet or only recently initiated warriors. One of these young men was a teenager called Yemmerawanne. Also of Bennelong’s Wangal clan, he was said by Tench to be a ‘slender fine looking youth … good tempered and lively’, who served as an occasional servant at the Governor’s table. The colony’s Secretary, David Collins, later asserted that Yemmerawanne was ‘much attached’ to Phillip, which explained why he also accompanied the Governor to Britain in 1793. Possibly, the youth was instead a favourite of Bennelong, or, indeed, a kind of Bennelong-in-the-making, who gained a berth from his own entrepreneurial manoeuvrings. Whatever the rationale for his later journey, Yemmerawanne was, like his more senior clansman, an example of the free, independent and carefully tended Aboriginal person who now often mixed with the British.

As necessary as they were to the British, however, the Eora never fully escaped the intellectual straitjackets that the newcomers brought with them concerning New World people. No amount of conversing, it seemed, was enough to break some traditions. Every major colonial commentator of those early years referred to the Aboriginal people most typically as ‘savages’, following a connection made between New World lands and their Indigenous inhabitants as long ago as the sixteenth century. It is important to note that ‘savagery’ in the eighteenth century was a more capacious and generous idea than it became in the nineteenth century. Chiefly defined by judgements regarding social complexity, savagery was reckoned at this time to be the most simple mode of human collectivity. Not yet fully absorbed into stadial theories of human progress, though, such simplicity could be valued positively as often as it was negatively. James Boswell, for instance, wondered more than once whether savages were not ‘happier’ than

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19 Tench 1793: 71.
20 Tench 1793: 62–67, 86. Smith conjectures that Yemmerawanne may have introduced himself with the words: ‘jam ora wanné’, meaning ‘my country is wanné [wangal]’, Smith 2001: 97–98.
22 Sankar Muthu has recently reminded us of the obvious: that any appellation of savagery was ‘ultimately dehumanising’, Muthu 2003: 12.
23 Hodgen 1964; Meek 1976.
contemporary Britons, even voicing a wish to live among them in the ‘South Seas’ for a while to taste their superior ways. Boswell’s famous biographical subject, Samuel Johnson, on the other hand, held the better-known view of savagery. ‘Don’t cant in defence of savages’, he scolded his friend, ‘savages are always cruel [and] one set of Savages is like another … What could you learn [in the South Seas]? What can savages tell, but what they themselves have seen? Of the past, or the invisible, they can tell nothing.’

In spite of their own observations of social sophistication among the Aboriginal people at Port Jackson, the early colonial commentators all insisted that these Indigenes also fitted within their received model of New World people – and they, too, were split in their evaluation of Eora savagery. While later Governor, John Hunter, and free settler, Daniel Paine, for examples, considered savagery a bestial condition that was ‘irrational’, ‘ill-formed’, and ‘destitute’, officers such as King, Collins, and Phillip himself, romanticised the state as one of nature, innocence and childlike youth.

It was, then, paradoxically, as both recognised diplomat and essential savage that Bennelong boarded HMS *Atlantic* with Phillip on 10 December 1792. Accompanying the two leaders was Yemmerawanee, a couple of freed convicts, four kangaroos and several dingos. Though Collins noted that at the moment of their departure both Bennelong and Yemmerawanee had to field the ‘united distress of their wives, and the dismal lamentations of their friends’, the Aboriginal travellers themselves seemed relaxed and cheerful. They understood the journey ahead of them as the next chapter in their story of political and personal negotiation with a people who looked more and more likely to become permanent contenders in their lands. For their part, the British returnees were carrying out a tradition of escorting New World Indigenes to imperial centres that had been in effect since 1501.

The *Atlantic* set sail at first light the next morning, clearing the harbour heads by eight o’clock. Collins believed that the vessel was in good enough condition to hope for a speedy voyage of no longer than six months. True to estimate, the voyagers disembarked at Falmouth on 19 May 1793.

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27 Collins 1975[1798–1802] I: 211.
29 Arguably the first such escorting had occurred in 1501 when some Bristolian fishermen had brought three Beothuk from Newfoundland to meet Henry VII. See Quinn 1979: 103.
A history of absence

Within days, the party was in London. *Lloyd’s Evening Post* announced the arrival in a lengthy paragraph:

Governor Philip [sic] has brought home with him two natives of New Holland, a man and a boy, and brought them to town. The Atlantic has also on board four kangaroos, lively and healthy, and some other animals peculiar to that country. From the description given of the natives of Jackson’s Bay they appear to be a race totally incapable of civilization, every attempt to that end having proved ineffectual ... no inducement, and every means have been perseveringly tried, can draw them from a state of nature ... They are cruel, particularly to their women, whom they beat in a most barbarous manner on every occasion. That instinct which teaches to propagate and preserve the species, they possess in common with the beasts of the field, and seem exactly on a par with them in respect to any further knowledge of, or attachment to kindred.31

The author of this piece clearly took the Johnsonian line on savagery. In retrospect, however, the most startling aspect of the account was its singularity. Though repeated verbatim by the *Dublin Chronicle* a few days later, no other newspaper commented on the Aboriginals’ presence in Britain for the next 21 months.

The extraordinariness of this absence can only be gauged by comparing it with the impact made by some earlier New World envoys. The first properly popular visit by so-called savages occurred in 1710 when four Native Americans from Iroquoia came to argue for military assistance against French encroachment into their lands. Though Native Americans had travelled to Britain for over two centuries, the four Iroquois were the first to inspire fascination at all levels of society – from courtiers to bishops to merchants to artists to plebeians on the street. Everywhere they toured, crowds were said to materialise just for the chance to witness a supposedly pristine embodiment of savagery. Their movements were traced in all the major urban publications; their images were drawn by various artists; and their presence was requested at theatres, taverns and other public venues. When seven Cherokee turned up in 1730 to broker a treaty for preferential trade, they were similarly hounded, reported, depicted and desired. Likewise, when another envoy of Cherokee arrived in 1762, some estimated the mobs surrounding them to reach 10,000 or more. The same attention clung to every significant arrival by Native Americans until around 1770, when Pacific Islanders took over as the ideal embodiment of savagery. Mai’s arrival in 1774 caused the greatest stir of all, inspiring pantomimes and epic poetry as well as the now usual squibs, prints, portraits and odes.32

Just as Pacific Islanders were elided with Native Americans in most British imaginaries by the third quarter of the eighteenth century, so Australian

31 *Lloyd’s Evening Post*, 29 May 1793.
32 For a synthesis of all these visits, see Fullagar forthcoming. For individual accounts see Bond 1952; Steele 1977; Oliphant 1999; McCormick 1977.
Aboriginals were said to fit the model of New World savagery when they were encountered in the same decades. What bound all together was, first, British understandings of geography and, second, British determinations about what kind of person inhabited certain geographies. Following the European voyages of re-discovery to the Pacific from the 1760s, the Antipodes were called variously the ‘terra incognita of America’ or the ‘Southern Part of the New World’. As New World folk, Antipodeans instantly joined Native Americans as paradigmatic savages. More than any other group who has borne the ignominious title in the past, New World people were considered archetypal savages during the eighteenth century – mostly because they were understood first and foremost in social terms. Their supposedly simple social system – decided with little debate for all peoples from Newfoundland to New Zealand – was what most compelled Old World commentators. It was also thus what most adhered in their categorisation, distinguishing them from those who were more often identified in this age by barbarism, say, or by bondage.

Bennelong and Yemmerawanne, thus, surely fitted the British definition of ‘New World savages’ at this time and, as the first Australian Aboriginals to arrive in Britain, should have inherited the tradition of fascination that had emerged around such types over the last 80 years. Their lack of impact, therefore, appears a historical anomaly (though it bears remarking here that historians can hardly be disappointed to find their subjects escape this particular kind of attention). As a keen student of eighteenth-century British activity in the New World, Phillip patently believed that his charges would attract as much scrutiny as had their predecessors – whether welcomed or not. It is evident from the manner of his various arrangements for the Aboriginals that he expected a certain level of gawking. In every case, however, those expectations proved unfounded.

First, most previous New World envoys had inspired gossip about their place and mode of lodging while in Britain. Readers were amused to learn that the four Iroquois of 1710, for example, had never before slept in a bed, and many waited outside their Covent Garden address to ask them how they had found the experience. They were even more tickled when the Cherokee of 1730 stayed in the same West End home, one newspaper even assuming that it had been recommended to them by their ‘neighbouring’ countrymen. Yet, though

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33 See, for examples, Guthrie 1770; Cooke 1800; Pinkerton 1802.
34 Other peoples at this time were of course labelled as savage too. But it is arguable that these others were primarily categorised by an alternate property, such as barbarism in Asians or bondage in Africans. It is indeed further arguable that the appellation of ‘savage’ in these cases was more often used as a loose synonym for that alternate property than it was a proper reference to a simple social state. To paraphrase an elder authority on the history of name-calling, savagery ‘never seemed to be as important a quality’ in Asians or Africans as it was in the New World person: Jordan 1969: 27. For these reasons, the presence of Asians and Africans in Britain at this time occasion a case for interesting comparison rather than any serious complication to my thesis. For a longer discussion of all these points, see Fullagar 2009.
35 The Tatler, 13 May 1711; The Daily Courant, 3 August 1730.
Bennelong and Yemmerawanne also stayed in a West End residence for much of their stay, no remark was ever made of it – there was no speculation of footsteps retraced nor any joke of beds once more tried anew.36

Second, all earlier delegates had attracted crowds whenever they toured the key sites of London. Observers reported ‘throngs’, ‘concourses’, ‘rabbles’ and ‘gaping multitudes’ surrounding New World people who visited St Paul’s Cathedral, the Tower arsenal, Woolwich docks, Exchange Alley and the Houses of Parliament.37 The Cherokee delegation of 1762 caused such a ‘press’ of people at Vauxhall Gardens that they were forced to retire, fuelling bitter discussions in the papers about ‘wretched scene[s] of British … Debauchery’.38 Phillip set Bennelong and Yemmerawanne on a similar itinerary to their predecessors – designed no doubt, as for these earlier envoys, to impress and beguile – but they in contrast were never noticed by passers-by. No-one even remarked on the seeming piquancy of the Aboriginals’ visit to the Parkinson Museum, which famously housed artefacts from Cook’s three Pacific voyages, or on their presence at the trial of one-time imperial governor, Warren Hastings, which otherwise made the news for all 148 days of its progress.39

Third, like some of their more recent precursors, Bennelong and Yemmerawanne were assigned a language tutor to help advance their English.40 But unlike Mai from Raiatea or Lebuu from Palau, for example, whose similar lessons occasioned fierce debate about both the morality and efficacy of British legacies to New World visitors, the Aboriginals stirred negligible discussion either way.41 As with the earlier-arrived Polynesians, Bennelong and Yemmerwanne were thought by later acquaintances not to have profited very much by their tutorials, but again no comparison – cynical or otherwise – was ever made.

Fourth, Yemmerawanne’s death in May 1794 also had some firm precedents. When a member of a Creek envoy in 1734 died in Westminster, and again when Lebuu died 50 years later in Rotherhithe, British commentators went into rhetorical overdrive. The 1734 Creek death provoked various sarcastic investigations into Native American burial rituals while Lebuu’s death solicited a more sentimental or proto-romantic mourning.42 Both instances, however, stood out as noteworthy events. Yemmerawanne sickened with a mysterious ailment for over five months, requiring the administrations of laxatives, blisterings,
draughts and pills, but in that time attracted neither quipster nor elegist. He died on 18 May 1794, earning a respectable funeral at Eltham Parish Church and an entry in Eltham’s Parish burial registry. Phillip ensured that the Crown paid for his modest tombstone, still evident in Eltham’s churchyard, even if he could not summon public pause over the death in any form.

A final point of comparison between the Aboriginals’ visit and previous visits is their access to royalty. Every significant New World envoy before Bennelong had at least one audience with the reigning monarch of the day. The British bureaucrats surrounding each delegation – no matter how informally some had begun – knew it was crucial to legitimate any agreement they wished to make with these potential allies with a ceremony of introduction to the highest office in the land. For their part, eighteenth-century monarchs generally welcomed the idea of meeting figures who had proved such popular icons among their subjects – none, of course, was immune to the cultural forces that had made New World people so intriguing in this period. The royal audience, indeed, was usually the best recounted episode of any visit. As today, the fantasy of royalty made excellent press for the popular periodicals. And also like today, monarchs in the eighteenth century were highly accountable creatures: their every movement was recorded daily in public court chronicles.

Bennelong and Yemmerawanne were the first New World envoys in the century not to meet the monarch. Most historians of the matter have claimed that they did. It is perhaps the single most common statement made in today’s cursory one-line descriptions of Bennelong’s travels: that he ‘was taken to London to see the King’. But this turns out to be a narrative that supports modern opinions about the nature of Bennelong’s impact in Britain, rather than one based on evidence. No mention exists in George III’s extensive archive; no newspaper gossiped about such a meeting; and none of the court chroniclers of the time – which in this decade included the Times and The Annual Register – even suggested the possibility. It seems patent that Phillip intended for his charges to attend St James’ Palace, since he made sure – like most British escorts had before him – to have Bennelong and Yemmerawanne outfitted at a tailor’s within days of arrival. Their subsequent purchases – of silk stockings, blue and buff striped waistcoats, and slate-coloured ribbed breeches – would have been more than fine enough for a king, but it seems that they never earned quite so lofty an audience.

43 See Brook again on the medical details deducible from the bills. Brook 2001: 40–42.
44 TBP, PRO, T1/733.
45 Clendinnen 2003: 264.
46 See discussions by the first Bennelong historian to question the royal meeting – Brodsky 1973: 65. My own hunt confirms the absence of reports. Brodsky believes that the historical consensus arose from a claim made in a Port Jackson soldier’s 1803 published account. If so, it gained currency without acknowledging the part that such a claim served in the soldier’s broader argument about the wilfulness of Bennelong to return to savagery despite all the ‘comforts’ of civilisation shown him. See Bond 1803: 6.
47 TBP, PRO, T1/733. And see Brook 2001: 38.
The lack of royal encounter, along with all the other instances of inattention shown Bennelong and Yemmerawanne during their visit, signified a key change in the reception of New World peoples.48 While the visiting Aboriginals fitted the British image of paradigmatic savagery in every other respect, they defied the convention of becoming mini-celebrities during their stay. As implied before, it would be perverse to register this as any failure on the visitors’ part. Indeed, their escape from public scrutiny no doubt afforded them the time and space to enjoy, or dislike, their experiences in Britain as deeply as would any private person. But the absence did mark something unusual: if Bennelong and Yemmerawanne were accorded the status of savages, either the meaning or the effect of this label must have transformed by the 1790s.

**Savagery transformed**

The 1790s were, of course, a particularly distracting decade in Britain. It could be argued that Britons were too wrapped up in their current French Revolutionary wars to notice the latest arrival of a New World savage.49 Except, most other New World envoys in the eighteenth century had also arrived in time of war: the War of Spanish Succession (1701–1713), the Seven Years War (1756–1763) and the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783) were in the background of several earlier visits and had never detracted from the interest shown in them. Moreover, Londoners in 1793 were not so distracted that they ignored the four kangaroos that had come with the Aboriginals. Hundreds swarmed to view the one on display in the Lyceum Museum in the Strand. On show every day from eight in the morning till eight in the evening, for the not inconsiderable price of a shilling, the museum was hesitant to give too much away:

> to enumerate [the animal’s] extraordinary Qualities would far exceed the common Limits of a Public Notice. Let is suffice to observe that the Public in general are pleased, and bestow their Plaudits; the ingenious are delighted; the Virtuoso, and Connoisseur, are taught to admire!50

One reader of the popular *Gentleman’s Magazine* was evidently tantalised to extremity. Unable to get to the Lyceum himself, he wrote a letter to the editor asking if he had ‘no kind friends … that will give you some account … of the

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48 This inattention can be said to have continued for nearly three generations, before New World visitors became popular again – in almost entirely negative ways – from the 1880s. Roslyn Poignant’s 2004 account of the Aboriginal people who travelled to Britain as part of RA Cunningham’s spectacle business in the 1880s shows how such people were now fascinating for the way they fit into positivist views of race rather than as exemplars of a simple society. The definition of savagery – not just its function – had changed dramatically, becoming a sign of science rather than of political theory. The first Aboriginal cricket team to tour Britain in 1868 was not a profoundly popular phenomenon, though the interest they did attract was no doubt a precursor to the scientific thinking behind the interest in the later Aboriginal circus acts rather than a remnant of enlightenment views (see Mulvaney 1967).

49 Hiatt offers this argument, 2004: 88–89.

gamgarou, the new animal just brought to England from South Wales by Governor Phillip. Certainly, Sir, it would give much satisfaction ... to be informed of the ... creature.”

It could also be argued that personal reasons accounted for Bennelong’s neglect: Bennelong did not appear a prince as had many earlier New World visitors; Bennelong was too acculturated to British ways to stand out as different. Neither conjecture, however, absorbs the full impact of his visit’s precedence. Britons were more than aware that several earlier delegates had not been princes – the Cherokee of 1730, for instance, were barely acknowledged as competent officials. Certain earlier delegates, too, had experienced even more contact than had Bennelong – the Iroquois had been negotiating with colonial newcomers for nearly three generations by the time their representatives travelled in 1710. Bennelong’s pedigree and demeanour had been sufficient to attract the attention of the First Fleeters so could reasonably be expected to do the same in Britian.

Thus, it was something about the supposed savagery of Bennelong, rather than any particular circumstance or individual trait, that no longer pertained in 1790s Britain. To understand this change, we need to grasp not only the existence of greater fascination for earlier New World envoys but also its content. Why had Britons been so intrigued by savage visitors before 1790? What had they actually said in their myriad reports of their daily activities around London? As I have argued elsewhere, most discussion surrounding New World envoys from 1710 to around 1785 can be said to revolve around a single theme: the recent explosion of Britain’s commercial reach into precisely those lands from which the delegates had come. Entailed in this discussion was the attendant complication of domestic social and cultural relations. The simplicity accorded the delegates turned out to be one of the most powerful stimulants to the debate on Britain’s conversely complex society. Savagery in its embodied form was peculiarly potent because it seemed to work for all sides in the contest: it was mobilised in defences of British expansion as often as it was for attacks, and within each camp it could work either sympathetically or antagonistically. The flexibility of the concept in this era is what made it so especially ‘good to think’.

For example, when the four Iroquois visited in 1710, commentators used them in different ways to make different polemical statements about the effect of expansion. One pamphlet noted admiringly that ‘these princes do not know how to cocker and make much of themselves’, which for the author contrasted alarmingly with the manners that ‘our Luxury [now] brings upon us’. Another popular squib agreed that Britain’s new fortunes had engendered a dangerous...
decadence, but rejected the contrastive model: it believed that Britons now suffered an empty culture just like savages always had in the New World. ‘Since no one brought less’, it quipped, ‘of Wealth, Knowledge, or Dress / Than those who from [American] India are come.’ But ‘no one before’, it concluded, has ‘Return’d from our Shore / With so little advantages Home.’ On the other end of the debate, the famous essayist, Richard Steele, praised Iroquoian savagery as a way of praising Britons. He believed that the Iroquois would feel at home in London since their innate ‘generosity’ and ‘dignity’ – borne of their minimalist condition – complemented the politeness and civility spawned by advanced commerce. A popular ballad at the time gave the fourth variation on the theme: it attacked savagery as a means of congratulating British accomplishment. The *Four Indian Kings Garland* was a love story about an Iroquois who falls for an English maiden but who can never succeed because he is of a ‘sad condition’ and she is of the ‘boldest’ state on earth.

In every significant delegation following, the same kinds of response emerged. When the Creek Tomochichi arrived in 1734 to secure fair race relations within the new colony of Georgia, his presence occasioned one poet to rhapsodise over his ‘wond’rous form’, so ‘uncloath’d and artless’, which contrasted so damningly with a Britain now lost in ‘soft luxurious ease’, having sold its ‘ancient virtue’ to ‘large commerce [and] wealth without end’. The *Caledonian Mercury*, on the other hand, sniggered over the Creeks’ lack of religion and language during the same visit, applauding them only for their capacity to admire Britain’s ‘grandeur … riches … and extensive trade and commerce’, which together accounted for the British ‘benevolence’ shown the envoy.

In 1762, when three Cherokee arrived to confirm their recent peace with Carolina traders, the debate over British expansion seemed only to have deepened. The *London Chronicle* was horrified to see the frenzy of gawkers whip up around the delegates, contrasting the calm of the ‘savages’ with the excesses of Britons, who apparently lacked decorum because of their economic insatiability and concomitant militarism: ‘if we were not by commerce in pursuit of trifles round the globe’, the paper declared, ‘we should not need to station fleets in every part of it’. Other organs felt that the visitors themselves were to blame for the British frenzy. They pointed to the savages’ intemperance and hyper-sexuality as the real cause for corrupting an otherwise ‘fair’ and ‘courageous’ people.

The visit of Mai from 1774 to 1776 was perhaps the most famous instance of a New World envoy in the eighteenth century. Like his predecessors, Mai occasioned debate on British expansion from all approaches. The bestselling

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55 Anon 1710c.
56 *The Tatler*, 13 May 1711.
57 Anon 1710a.
58 [Fitzgerald?] 1736.
59 *Caledonian Mercury* (Edinburgh), 1 November 1734.
60 *The London Chronicle*, 31 August 1762.
61 For intemperance, see *St James’ Chronicle*, 31 July 1762. For sexuality, see Howard 1762.
squib, An Historic Epistle from Omiah, pursued the especially popular pro-
savagery/anti-British line. A virtuous Mai asks if Britain can really ‘boast, with
all her pilfer’d wealth, / A larger share of happiness, or health?’62 Another satire
of the times shared the Epistle’s scepticism about British wellbeing but did not
think savagery its opposite: the anonymous author of Transmigration chastised
British economic success in the New World as ‘simple FORNICATION’, which
for him put the nation exactly on par with Pacific societies.63 The apologist views
similarly came from contrary positions on savagery. When the Reverend JE
Gambier met Mai in 1774, he compared the ‘strict & rational temperance of this
Savage’ with the ‘unaffected’ and ‘intrepid’ abstemiousness of British people.64
The poet William Cowper, however, felt that Mai was an example of a pitiful,
rude savagery – one that ‘can boast but little virtue’ in its easy inertness – which
was for him most unlike Britain, where virtue flourished under a thriving
culture.65

During most of the eighteenth century, then, the question of expansion – and
more importantly its social and cultural effects – was very much on Britain’s
moral table. The embodied ideal of savagery had proved one of the major means
of its popular analysis. Far from serving as a frivolous escape from some of the
more vexing issues of the age, the fantasy of savagery provided Britons with a
way of confronting, and dissecting, their various possibilities.

But this was clearly not the case by century’s end. That Bennelong and
Yemmerawanne did not receive the same treatment as their New World
predecessors speaks of a profound shift in metropolitan discourse about British
expansion, or at least about savagery’s relationship to it. While many recent
historians have investigated the transformation in British imperial style in this
decade, fewer have attended to the change in rhetoric that accompanied it. In
1989, CA Bayly gave perhaps the most succinct account of the shift in style.
His Imperial Meridian argues that in response to the ‘world crisis’ of the 1780s,
which included not only the American Revolution but also the intimations of
radicalism burbling in France and various local uprisings in Asia, Britain forged
a newly ‘despotic’ practice of empire.66 Despotism involved both an aggressive
political centralisation and a rigid social theory. Bayly’s classic example of
‘imperial despotism in miniature’ is, in fact, the colony of New South Wales after
1795, where increasingly authoritarian leadership together with progressively
segregationist policy found reinforcement in the ‘similar … despotisms’
sprouting all over Britain’s global sphere of influence at this time.67 Bayly is less
articulate about contemporary metropolitan views on this hardening, though
– other than to declare that the British somehow discovered the ‘ideological
will’ for their ‘more vigorous world empire’ when they needed it, and that the ‘classical fear that empire necessarily corrupted civic virtue through luxury and decadence was already on the wane by the 1770s’.68

What remains under-examined is the way that domestic discourse on British global activity underwent a major reorganisation of priorities in the late eighteenth century. It was not just the classical fear of imperial corruption that waned during this time but also its flipside of bravado about commercial redemption. The whole field of debate over whether or not Britain should build its empire had fallen away by the 1790s. In its place arose a new field of debate that was similarly riven with disagreements but which ran in an entirely new direction. Where previous discourse had centred on the right of empire to exist, the latter discourse centred on the question of best practice now that empire was established. It was a shift from fundamental to secondary questions; from issues surrounding contact to issues surrounding management.

This is not to claim that Britain now entered a period of consensus – it was after all the era of fiery contests over political, cultural and religious enfranchisement for British subjects wherever they lived in the world. Britons from late-century fought with as much energy as any earlier polemicist over the proper reach of missionaries, for example, or the kind of education that colonial offices provided, or the degree to which self-government could be entertained in the dominions. But these disagreements were categorically not debates over the question of imperial presence per se. The secondary concerns regarding the building of empire had swamped any sense that Britons should continue to debate the more fundamental question of whether they should engage in empire-building at all.

In the former discourse, savagery had been an eloquent tool for analysis. As a sign of radically simple society, it offered a useful means for thinking about the consequences of increasing complexity that was said by all to follow expansion. It helped Britons to ask themselves whether or not greater trading advantage around the world, with its consequent boost to wealth and sophistication, was what they truly wanted for their nation.

The latter discourse based on secondary questions, however, seems to have had less use for the concept. It is of course always fraught to argue a case from absences, but given the myriad comparisons, it is possible to conjecture that from about 1790 savagery gradually lost its appeal. A notion of social simplicity just did not seem as salient to a debate about how things could be better as it had proved to a debate about whether things should actually emerge at all.

‘At home now’

Bennelong’s neglect in Britain has been overlooked until now due to a lack of comparative approach. Historians have seen the kindly condescension or

repugnant abuse that they expect to see because they have never seriously studied Bennelong in any context larger than that of Sydney’s first four years. Only when understood as the latest version of New World savagery to arrive on British shores does Bennelong’s dismissal by the locals start to look noticeable and simultaneously strange. The investigation into how Bennelong fitted a larger context but missed its conventional procedures uncovers a critical change in Britain’s domestic attitude towards New World indigenes. This, in turn, uncovers a critical change in the metropolitan outlook on empire itself. Bennelong’s lack of appeal as an embodiment of savagery spoke to a significant break with older concerns about imperial decadence and a new resolve to concentrate now only on imperial details.

Before Bennelong’s voyage to Britain, Watkin Tench claimed to have imagined that his Aboriginal acquaintance would one day become something ‘like a second Omai [Mai]’, a noble savage taken back to the colonists’ own country, destined to share the Polynesian’s fate as ‘gaze of the court and scrutiny of the curious’.69 But Tench, like Phillip, turned out to be solidly a man of an earlier eighteenth century. He had been schooled in the early-modern history of British encounter with the New World and expected that the process of colonising *Terra Australis* would largely follow suit. Tench did not see that his own colony was swiftly becoming an instance of an entirely new brand of British expansionism, nor did he suspect that his countrymen back home would view their traditional native informants in entirely new ways.

It was to this changing colony that Bennelong returned in September 1795. His personal reaction – like that of many returnees from anywhere in any time – was a combination of swagger and confusion: he liked to show off his new clothes and ideas to his half-listening friends but was hurt to find his wife, Kurubarabulu, taken up with another man and that other kin relations had adjusted subtly in his absence.70

What Bennelong made of the tenser colonial politics at Sydney Cove is less clear. Perhaps the straightening attitudes of the new Governor, together with his greater intolerance of Indigenous difference, was what finally pushed Bennelong to leave the British settlement once and for all. Few of the early colonial commentators saw it this way, however. Even though David Collins admitted that relations between the societies at Port Jackson had deteriorated to ‘open war’ by the late 1790s, the now Judge Advocate claimed to be amazed at Bennelong’s subsequent rejection of the British. ‘This man’, Collins wrote,

69 Tench 1793: 87.
and troublesome savage ... Instead of living peaceably at the governor’s house, as he certainly might always have done, Bennilong preferred the rude and dangerous society of his own countrymen.71

Like Phillip and Tench before him, it seems, Collins could not appreciate the significance of the imperial toughening that was going on around him.

Yet as Bennelong’s half-presence through the records of his journey reminds us, no one is ever entirely cognisant of, or indeed fully explained by, grand historical forces. At the level of everyday intimacy – which is surely the level at which Bennelong experienced most of his time in Britain, unencumbered by the consciousness of past precedence – the great waves of time break only intermittently. Bennelong’s final word on his travels – the jaunty and solipsistic letter to his old carer back in Eltham – indicated as much. It read:

Sir, I am very well. I hope you are very well. I live at the Governor’s ... I have not my wife; another black man took her away; we have had murry doings: he speared me in the back, but I better now ... all my friends alive and well. Not me go to England no more. I am at home now. I hope Sir you send me anything you please Sir. Hope all are well in England ... Bannolong.72

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The many truths of Bennelong’s tragedy

Emma Dortins

In life, Bennelong was by no means the only mediator between the Aboriginal peoples of the Sydney region and the colonists, but across the latter half of the twentieth century, he took on a singular role as chief intermediary between the present and the past. It is through Bennelong’s story that many Australians feel they know something of the great encounter between the invading Europeans and the Australian Aborigines, and something of the truth of its outcomes. Bennelong, as Lyndall Ryan has shown of Trucanini, is surrounded by dense and various ‘storywork’ which has made him ‘a resilient figure in debates about the future of Australian Aboriginals today … [and the focus of] a struggle for ownership and possession of the colonial past’. While some of this storywork has been undertaken in scholarly articles and monographs, much of it can be characterised as a ‘form of social knowledge’ that has taken place without historians: novels, children’s books, political and promotional material and the ‘user generated content’ of the internet. While stories of Bennelong are profuse, however, they are not nearly as ‘promiscuous’ as I had expected. In most popular, official and even academic accounts published in the past seven decades, Bennelong dies broken and rejected as a result of his exhilarating but corrupting involvement with the colonists. Storytellers have demonstrated a loyalty to Bennelong’s tragedy or failure across significant shifts in Australian and Aboriginal historiography. This paper begins to explore some of the variations on Bennelong’s tragic story, attempts to separate out some of its layers of plausibility, and to enquire into the possible meanings of this repeated re-inscription of cross-cultural tragedy.

The modern originator of Bennelong’s tragedy was perhaps Eleanor Dark, in her enormously influential novel of 1941, The Timeless Land. Dark sought to tell,
for the first time, ‘a story of the white settlement partly from the black man’s point of view’. Drafts featured a long prologue depicting Aboriginal life before the arrival of the First Fleet. But the novel was immense, and with war looming, Dark felt the need to focus the story more intensely on a ‘clash of values’ within white society. On publisher William Collins’ suggestion, she funneled her prologue into a much terser tableau focused throughout on Bennelong, one of her chief Aboriginal protagonists. It is thus Bennelong who both begins and ends the story, transformed from a sweet child trailing after his fictional father, Wunbula, in the first paragraphs, to the broken adult of the Epilogue. In the final scene, Bennelong revisits the rock platform where Wunbula had made a carving of Cook’s ship, and where father and son had looked out to sea together. He is drunk and angry. When he stumbles across the carving, he throws himself down and starts to vandalise it until he collapses, overwhelmed by alcohol and a sense of loss:

the ground lurched, and the whole world spun. As he pitched forward across the rock a bit of broken bottle gashed his arm, and blood ran into the defaced grooves of Wunbula’s drawing. Bennilong lay still, snoring heavily, while the merciful, swift twilight of his land crept up about him to cover his defeat. The End.

Dark’s Bennelong had been drawn by a ‘thread of destiny’ into the ‘alien world’ of the white men. His initial anger at being kidnapped had subsided as he found himself wanting to be like these fascinating strangers. But he was destined to fail: Dark’s Aborigines, though self-sufficient and creative within their own culture, were nevertheless conceived through a social Darwinism still pervasive in the interwar period, as the ‘monkey-like’ ‘children of the human family’, hard-wired to an unchanging existence. With this proviso, his rush to cultural exchange was Icarus-like. When published, Dark’s novel was both celebrated and criticised as being almost closer to history than to fiction, providing, despite the late shift in focus, an unprecedented view of cross-cultural relations in the colony. Manning Clark said that his own History of Australia was inspired by Dark’s novels, and although much less interested in an Aboriginal perspective in this history, he concurred with Dark on Bennelong’s unenviable fate, saying

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Swedish. When published, it was seen to be almost more a work of history than of fiction. (Barbara Brooks, Introduction in Dark 2002: vi–vii; Humphrey McQueen, Introduction in Dark 2002: xix, xxii; Brooks 1998: 357–359.)

7 Dark 1980: 539–544.
8 Dark 1980: 49.
9 Dark’s Barrangaroo, for example, senses a danger in the British arrival but cannot apprehend it, as ‘the passing centuries, going quietly over the heads of her ancestors, had evolved in their brains no machinery for the understanding of Change’, Dark 1980: 151, 179–180, 406; Reynolds 2005: 67–72; Brooks 1998: 364–365.
Bennelong: ‘disgusted his civilisers and became an exile from his own people, and rushed headlong to his dissolution as a man without the eye of pity from the former, or affection from the latter’. 12

WEH Stanner, in his Boyer Lectures of 1968, found a slow revolution underway in his contemporary Australia, in which the ‘Aboriginal question’ was rising to the surface in social and political discussions. 13 A new history, entirely different from what had gone before, would be necessary, acknowledging the Aboriginal side to the story. 14 This new history would not necessarily hold a more sanguine view of Bennelong, however. When Stanner asked his listeners to imagine Aboriginal men and women of ‘outstanding … character and personality’, he made a quick qualification: ‘I am not thinking of mercurial upstarts like Bennelong’. 15 In another influential article, he described Bennelong as a ‘volatile egotist, mainly interested in love and war; a tease, a flirt and very soon a wine-bibber; a trickster and eventually a bit of a turncoat’. 16 Stanner felt that the Aboriginal–British relations developed around the Sydney colony in 1788–1790 had broadly set the pattern for relations across the continent, and credited the readily-pleased and soon ‘mendicant’ Bennelong with being at the head of a chain reaction ‘which … forced one tribe after another into some sort of dependency on Europeans’. 17

Throughout the 1960s, the iconic Sydney Opera House was under construction on Bennelong Point, where the small brick house built on Bennelong’s request, and Phillip’s orders, had formerly stood. When the Opera House was opened in 1973, Bennelong was accorded a level of interest perhaps unequalled since the 1790s. He appeared in the opening ceremony in the shape of Aboriginal actor Ben Blakeney, who delivered an oration from the topmost peak of the tallest shell. 18 Stanner had set up a strong link between Bennelong’s story and the ‘Aboriginal question’. Where it had previously been possible to tell Bennelong’s story simply as the story of a ‘remarkable character’ who had fascinated the colonists, been to England and back, and died in a tribal fight, 19 now it was increasingly invested with explanatory power: following the 1967 Referendum, and as the much-televised tent embassy was removed from the lawns of Parliament House for the second time, biographers of Bennelong felt a responsibility to engage with

12 Clark 1962: 145.
15 Stanner 1968: 45.
18 Ziegler 1974. The oration reminded listeners that this place had been an Aboriginal place, of ‘the dreamtime – of spirit heroes, and of earth’s creation’ and ceremony, and suggested that the place was presided over by a laughing, singing spirit-presence.
19 See for example McGuanne 1901, and the adaptation of McGuanne’s story for the Bennelong Bugle, a periodical circulating amongst the workers on the Opera House site from 1962, in which Bennelong is an action figure dashing in and out of the settlement, who returns from England ‘a drunken quarrelsome swaggerer, eventually went bush, and in 1831 [sic] was killed in a tribal fight’. Bennelong Bugle, 1962, vol 1: 16–17.
the broader ‘Aboriginal question’. In a biography commissioned by the Royal Australian Historical Society to mark the Opera House opening, John Kenny found Bennelong instructive as:

the first of his people to be a well-documented example of their social incompatibility with their conquerors – an incompatibility which has persisted, afflicting the conquerors’ conscience and mocking their compassion and ingenuity.20

Founding chairman of the Council of Aboriginal Affairs, HC Coombs, provided the foreword to Kenny’s book, and agreed that the relationship between Phillip and Bennelong was ‘disturbingly pertinent to our respective positions to-day … a sombre episode which, with minor variations, has been replayed countless times throughout Australia’.21 In this account, Bennelong again suffers not so much from loss of land and resources, from upheaval in the political, social and economic world of the Eora, or from loss of family and allies through smallpox; he is above all the victim of ‘an ignorant and futile attempt to civilise him which made him a pathetic victim of confusion of his own and the founders’ cultures’.22 If Bennelong was at times more a pathetic failure than a tragic figure, the notion that his story was predictive of Aboriginal stories across the continent lent the matter a gravity of magnitude which invited noble sentiments.

A second biography celebrating the Opera House opening, by journalist Isadore Brodsky, also claimed relevance to the ‘Aboriginal question’, seeking to do Bennelong’s ‘memory some justice’, and make a ‘contribution to [the Aborigines’] emancipation and proper recognition in Australian life’.23 Brodsky’s loyalty to the cultural hierarchies of an earlier age, however, defeated his ostensible will to justice in the present. Like Dark, Brodsky understood Bennelong to be a ‘Stone Age’ man, caught between eternal childhood and manhood on the evolutionary scale.24 Brodsky sent Bennelong on a vertical trajectory: a dizzying rise towards ‘civilisation’ as Phillip and his officers endeavoured to ‘enlighten and to refine’ him, and then a fall as he failed to maintain its standards.25 The clear pinnacle of his career was his putative visit to King George III.26 But not long after his return from England ‘civilisation fell off him like an unwanted cloak’. Brodsky’s Bennelong first took a ‘step backwards in his civilized progress’ and then tumbled into an unstoppable ‘downward rush’ of ‘progressive degradation’.27 As in Dark’s narrative, Bennelong’s failure is prefigured in traditional tragic fashion: from his first taste of alcohol we know that this substance will lead to his ruin.28

20 Kenny 1973: 5.
22 Kenny 1973: 5.
24 Brodsky 1973: 76.
26 Brodsky 1973: 20, 65 and plate opposite.
28 Brodsky 1973: 27.
In a lecture celebrating the discovery of the First Government House Site in 1984, archaeologist John Mulvaney agreed with Stanner’s assessment of Bennelong’s dubious legacy: ‘a behavioural pattern which has been termed “intelligent parasitism”, but which simply adapted to the whims of European patrons’.29 Inspired by a ‘resistance’ historiography that invoked the power and drama of the Vietnamese anti-colonial struggles, and an Aboriginal activism characterised by violent confrontations with the police and ‘the belligerent rhetoric of the Black Power movement’,30 Mulvaney turned his listeners’ attention to Pemulwuy as a man who would be ‘most celebrated by his people around 1988’. He doubted that Bennelong ‘is much honoured today by his people’.31 But Aboriginal thinkers did not necessarily cut Bennelong off as Mulvaney expected them to do. Eric Willmot, in his novel *Pemulwuy*, certainly depicted Bennelong as a ‘loser’. But all his characters were losers (except, perhaps, the charismatic eponymous hero). Bennelong is simply the most spectacular loser, with Governor Hunter a close second. He is not, however, the pathetic victim of one culture crashing against another, like wave against cliff, as Kenny and others would have us believe. Rather, he plays hard at politics and he falls hard.32 Ann Curthoys observes that Australians love a ‘good’ loser, like the martyrs of Gallipoli,33 and Willmot’s Bennelong gives his all for his cause, to gain and keep the initiative in dealings with the British, and knows when he has been trumped.34 In the bicentennial *Encyclopaedia of the Nation*, Charles Perkins similarly paid tribute to Bennelong as one of a group of Aboriginal leaders, leading ‘a school of thought among the Eora people … that the British arrival was an important event from which both people had much to gain’.35 Perkins noted the different ‘approaches’ of Colbee and Pemulwuy, but he did not claim that these men maintained their integrity in a way that Bennelong did not.36

Much loved country singer and song-writer Ted Egan, published *The Aboriginals Songbook* in time for the bicentenary, in which he depicted Bennelong as ‘the first political victim’ and a lost soul:

I couldn’t help thinking that Benelong/Never again sang the eagle song/For he seemed just like a man whose spirit left him/Doomed was he forever more/He lost his way as he lost his law/And the white sea eagle sings its song alone.37

At the beginning of the new millennium, Egan’s remained very much the dominant verdict on Bennelong. A recent children’s book titled the final three chapters of Bennelong’s story: ‘A lonely man’; ‘Rejecting tribal law’; and ‘Drunkenness and...
death'. The Sydney Opera House World Heritage Nomination (2006) concludes its brief consideration of the man: ‘Bennelong dies in 1813, alienated from both Aboriginal and European cultures’. The Marrickville Council website finds him ‘increasingly depressed, drunk, aggressive and vengeful’ in the period leading up to his death. Inga Clendinnen, in her recent, close re-examination of social, political and cultural exchange in the first years of the colony, Dancing with Strangers, found Bennelong a complex and intelligent mediator. Clendinnen returned to colonial relationships hoping to recover the many-coloured and fragile optimism of first contact, and to see whether there were ever any other possibilities but cross-cultural failure. She found resounding failure there through Bennelong and wrote him a death almost as apostrophic as that wrought by Dark 65 years earlier. When Clendinnen’s Bennelong returns from England, he is a virtual ‘Englishman’ who had ‘decided to commit himself to the British account of things’, yet he finds his influence with the colonists far less potent, he experiences terrible luck with women, and obliterates his disappointment with rum. She concludes:

Bennelon, with his anger and his anguish, simply drops from British notice. He did not die until 1813 … Over the last years of his life Bennelon abandoned the British in his heart, as they had long abandoned him in the world. At fifty he fumed his way to an outcast’s grave. He should have died earlier, in the days of hope.

Clendinnen acknowledges that the last years of Bennelong’s life are little known, but she is content to imply that they were characterised by a burning anger and a lonely exile from both Aboriginal and European society.

Keith Smith’s 2001 biography left off as Bennelong sailed for England. His justification at the time was that Bennelong’s latter years were discontinuous with the diplomat’s life he had traced to that point:

In this second part of his life, Bennelong was a changed man. He abandoned the white settlement, took to drink and was frequently wounded in payback battles … That is another story.

Perhaps he did not want to write a tragedy, but at that time felt that curtailing his narrative was the only way to avoid it. But as can be seen in Smith’s article in the present volume, he is now able to marshal enough evidence to refute conclusively the claim that Bennelong died outcast from both Aboriginal and European society, and to set our musings on his relationships with the British much more firmly within his Eora kinship structures.

40 Marrickville Council, ‘Cadigal Whangal’ webpages.
41 Clendinnen 2003: 265.
44 Smith 2001: viii.
Many of Bennelong’s twentieth-century biographers have imagined him only loosely moored to Eora ways of being, ready to drift towards the British and their abundance of civilised riches. But it seems clear that if we historians and storytellers are to hazard a re-creation of his thoughts, we must first and foremost imagine him as Gerry Bostock has, for example: as an Eora man, remaining captive in the settlement longer than he needed to so that he could acquit the special responsibilities associated with that place, perhaps, because someone had to, ‘to sing back the spirits of [the Gudjigal people] who died outside their country’, even if he was not yet fully trained for the task.45

After his return from England, Bennelong appears to have reintegrated himself into Eora networks and patterns of life as they had adapted to the presence of the colony.46 As Isabel McBryde began to demonstrate as early as 1989, Bennelong’s status remained high into the nineteenth century. Although his semi-official role as mediator had waned, he continued to command attention from ‘persons of the first respectability’, and maintained a purposeful pattern of movement between his Aboriginal community and the settlements at Sydney and Parramatta, trading, socialising, and participating in events and ceremonies.47 As Kenny had acknowledged in 1973, Bennelong’s people continued to remember him with respect in the decades after his death.48

Grace Karskens recently asserted that: ‘stories of Bennelong as the “first drunken Aborigine”, shunned by women of both races, a man hopelessly and helplessly “caught in a void between two cultures” are myths’.49 So we must ask: why has tragedy remained the most appealing mode for biographers of Bennelong across the past 70 years, despite appealing alternatives, and in the face of mounting evidence that suggests other narratives? My answer to this question is that the veracity of Bennelong’s tragedy is multi-layered; his story has never simply been a reflection of the available historical evidence. As well as interacting with the primary sources, the tragic version of Bennelong’s story has maintained a mutually affirming relationship with a nest of notions about Aboriginal history and cross-cultural relations that have held continued claims to plausibility across the period, despite what have been understood as radical changes in the making of Australian history.

49 And she asks: if the taken-for-granted failure of Bennelong is not true, is it perhaps necessary to rethink ‘what happened to Aboriginal people in early Sydney’, or even across the continent, as a whole? Karskens 2009: 422–424. Thomas Kenneally has also begun to question Bennelong’s tragedy: in Commonwealth of Thieves he accepted the story of Bennelong’s decline and alienation, but in Australians: Origins to Eureka he notes that Bennelong has often been used by European writers as an ‘archetype of his people’s tragedy’, but that this may have more to do with ‘attitude’ than evidence. Kenneally 2005: 446, 2009: 219.
Bennelong’s tragedy is based in a particular interpretation of the best-known sources for his life. His tragedy reflects the ‘shape’ formed when the accounts of the First Fleet’s diarists are combined with the acerbic Sydney Gazette report of his death. Together, the journal writers offer lively coverage of a succession of notable incidents involving Bennelong in the period 1789–1792; his kidnap and residence at Government House, his behaviour when Phillip is speared, the way his household on Bennelong Point functions, and so on. The excitement of the diarists as they observed the world of the Eora during this period is palpable. For Watkin Tench, in late 1790, ‘our greatest source of entertainment now lay in cultivating the acquaintance of our new friends, the natives’. If this closely engaged reportage gives an illusion of completeness, the relative sparseness of references to Bennelong after 1795 may give the impression he has fallen into an abyss. Storytellers generally assimilate, rather than reflect upon, this pattern. Bennelong’s tragedy also relies on a fairly disingenuous reading of these sources. As Kate Fullagar observes in the present volume, European attitudes to the Eora were changing, and relations became more tense, as the settlement became more secure – the Eora and the British were no longer ‘new friends’ when Bennelong returned from England. We should surely be wary of adopting, as Brodsky does, for example, David Collins’ frustration as he finds that Bennelong could have enjoyed a legitimate and comfortable place living with the Governor into the nineteenth century but threw this chance away. 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 the demise of the notional noble savage, but he did not come full-circle to ask whether its demise may, or may also, have shaped the way our sources report on Bennelong’s behaviour.

The written sources emanating from the colony itself, no matter how sensitive or enlightened we might find some of the diarists, are centred in European thought and at Sydney Cove. When the writers feel that Bennelong is drawing closer to them and their way of thinking, he appears to be safe in the bosom of civilisation. When he appears less often, the colonists feel he is drifting away from what Tench described as ‘the comforts of a civilised system’, back to ‘a precarious subsistence among wilds and precipices’. As Maria Monypenny has demonstrated in the Tasmanian context, the ongoing use of this pseudo-geographic ‘coming in’ and ‘going out’ is thoroughly linked with the maintenance of a Eurocentric perspective. Manning Clark, for example, refers to Bennelong’s

50 Sydney Gazette, 9 January 1813.
51 Tench 2009[1793]: 160.
53 Willey 1979: 128.
54 Tench 2009[1793]: 108.
increasingly frequent ‘absences from the Governor’s house’ on his return from England. These absences necessarily signify ‘presences’ somewhere else, but they are not presences that Clark is interested in imagining.

Few of Bennelong’s modern biographers have been able to imagine him moving between the colony and Aboriginal life in a sustainable way. A play produced by Koorie in Theatre in 1995 was exceptional in finding a positive metaphor for Bennelong’s ‘in-between’ status: his story is intertwined with that of Ancestor Platypus, an animal with a ‘multifaceted nature’ like Bennelong’s, that helps him find a niche in a rapidly changing world. Most storytellers are uneasy when Bennelong appears to be ‘in limbo between two societies’, and feel a need to send him one way or the other. Where Clark imagined Bennelong ‘going out’ of the settlement as part of a downward trajectory, an article in the National Aboriginal Day magazine of 1981 sought a happy ending, and proposed instead: ‘Occasionally he went back to his tribe but his visit to England made him feel superior to other Aborigines and he always returned to his white friends in Sydney.’ Tench had commented that Bennelong, coming and going from the settlement in late 1790, sometimes wore the clothes that he had been given, and sometimes he carried them in a bag around his neck. It appears Bennelong dressed when it suited him and this left the colonists with an equivocal understanding of his place in the settlement. Our late twentieth-century storytellers are much less willing to be equivocal. A children’s book published in 1970 concludes its story as Bennelong sails for England, finding 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.’ More often, however, this will to a definite outcome results in Bennelong’s fall. ‘Swimming Monkey’, a contributor to current web forum Everything2.com, uses Bennelong’s state of undress to evoke despair and disgrace, saying:

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.

As Simon Schama has put it, to honour the ‘obligations of tragedy … we must proceed until all is known; a verdict declared; a sacrifice made ready; an

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56 Clark 1962: 143.
60 Tench 2009: 108.
62 Endeavour Reading Programme 1970: 44. Dark had said something only slightly different, but with quite a different meaning: that dressed, Bennelong’s shadow was the ‘same as the shadow of a white man’. Dark 1980: 264–265.
63 Swimming Monkey 2007.
atonement decreed’.64 Once dressed, the tragic Bennelong cannot again be undressed without being naked. Once he seems to have reached the peak of his career, storytellers are impatient to get rid of him. Clendinnen is not alone in feeling that Bennelong ‘should have died earlier’. Manning Clark returned him from England to show ‘other aborigines [sic] the benefits of civilisation’.65 But only two pages later, Bennelong demonstrates the awful, ironic reality that ‘the closer his contact with civilisation, the more the aborigine was degraded’. Far from being interested in further ups and downs in Bennelong’s fortunes, Clark disposed of him there and then – indeed, ‘headlong’, as we have seen.66 The next time we meet Bennelong in Clark’s history he is in his grave.67 A twenty-first-century biographer writes ‘only eight years after [Bennelong’s] return, he died an alcoholic’,68 robbing him of ten years of life between 1795 and 1813. Perhaps this omission is part of a systematic ‘misremembering’ of Bennelong’s latter years as well as an arithmetic mistake.69 As Karskens observes, storytellers have wilfully overlooked that ‘Bennelong got his life back together’ after facing an initial series of reversals on his return from England.70

Hayden White suggests that history is woven of two kinds of truth: ‘correspondence’ to the world, and ‘coherence’. The latter is formed as the historian forges a comprehensible narrative from the chaotic and incomplete evidence left behind by the past, using the literary modes of romance, comedy, tragedy and satire. White encourages historians to recognise and deploy consciously the literary aspects of their work to draw out historical truths, but feels that many historians, and readers, instead conflate a history’s shape with the shape of the past itself.71 One of the ongoing attractions of a tragic mode Bennelong’s story is surely that it makes the evidence of Bennelong’s life cohere into a compelling story, in which there is only one reversal of fortune for Bennelong – one which leads directly to his death.

Tragedy, of course, 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, or cameo appearances in a broader story. An eclectic local production, tracing Aboriginal history from the Dreaming to the present, encapsulates Bennelong’s life thus:

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64 Schama 1991: 262.  
65 Clark 1962: 143.  
68 Flood 2006: 42.  
69 Portelli 2003: 30.  
70 Karskens 2009: 422.  
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.\footnote{Ellis 2006: 113.}

This biography 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, and recruits the reader’s prior knowledge of this failure. It relies partly on intertextual consensus, and gives the tragic wheel another spin as it does so. Even if the reader has no prior knowledge of him, the compact evocations of Bennelong’s alcoholism, and his unsuccessful attempt to reconcile ‘two worlds’ provide ample explanation of an inevitable and partly self-destructive course towards alienation and despair. Importantly, the adjective ‘tragic’ gives a signal to the reader about how she should feel, a matter I will also revisit in what follows.

New versions of Bennelong’s story are not born into a vacuum. As Hayden White argues, existing versions of stories, and points of consensus within the writing and reading community, exert considerable influence on the perceived possibilities for telling the story in the future - making some modes and explanations seem purely logical and others outlandish.\footnote{White 1978: 128.} Broader stories of Aboriginal decline and death have formed a constant background for the re-telling of Bennelong’s story across the twentieth century. In the late nineteenth century, tragedy was commonly invoked to express regret about the inevitable process of Aboriginal extinction, evincing ambivalence about the success of the pioneers in the certainty that it was ‘too late’, or impossible, to make amends.\footnote{Foster, Hosking and Nettelbeck 2001: 26–28.} Histories of the early twentieth century expressed less regret, but no less certainty, Spence and Fox claiming in 1910, for example: ‘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’.\footnote{Spence and Fox 1982[1910]: 142.} Although it was becoming patently clear in the post-war period that Aboriginal populations were maintaining themselves, or in fact increasing, as Charles Duguid sought to bring to Australians’ attention,\footnote{Duguid 1963.} the narratives of fatal impact continued. Bruce Elder, in his anti-celebratory bicentennial history \textit{Blood on the Wattle}, no doubt partly inspired by the Aboriginal renaissance of the 1970s, wrote:

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.77

For Elder, Phillip’s first footfall was to bring about the end of Eden. As Grace
Karskens observes, ‘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’.78 Likewise, Heather Goodall has observed the readiness with
which stories of Aboriginal success have been erased from public memory in
a ‘politics of failure’.79 Each new version of Bennelong’s story has been born
into a reciprocally affirmative relationship with powerful narratives of fateful
Aboriginal decline, death, extinction and failure. His tragedy gives this large-
scale, impersonal movement of history a human face and, as a specific instance,
apparently supported by historical evidence, contributes to the truth quotient of
the larger tragedy. Thus Clendinnen casts Bennelong and Phillip as the leaders
of two peoples, on whose shoulders the weight of history rested, and finds that
‘each failed, to their own and their people’s injury, and to ours’.80 She means that
Phillip and Bennelong had the best chance of setting up enduring good relations
between European colonists and Indigenous Australians, and that they failed,
instead setting a course through uncertainty, conflict and mutual disrespect
across the continent. This grand narrative makes me uneasy: if Bennelong’s story
can provide an answer to our questions about what went wrong, right back there
at Australia’s beginning, how can we remain receptive to stories of Aboriginal
survival and regeneration across the following two centuries? And how can we
truly appreciate the diverse and ongoing impacts on Aboriginal communities of
the Queensland Native Police patrols of the 1860s, or government policy of the
1920s?

Bennelong’s tragedy is emphatically a cultural tragedy, played out on
the beaches where Manning Clark’s ‘barbarism’ meets ‘civilisation’.81 The
momentum of the British Empire, and its history of progress, sets these two
cultural continents on a collision course. To generations of white historians, like
Bruce Elder above, it has seemed inevitable that the ‘weaker’ Indigenous culture
would come off worse. The collision might easily crush anyone standing near the
edge. As it is 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’.82 In Brodsky’s biography, Bennelong was desired by the British
to be ‘the bridge between 18th century civilisation and the Stone Age’. But this
bridge was badly built; ‘the foundations were always shaky, the bridging material

77 Elder 1988: 11.
78 Karskens 2009: 422.
80 Clendinnen 2003: 286.
81 Clark perceived a ‘terrible sense of doom and disaster which pervaded the air whenever the
European occupied the land of a primitive people. For the culture, the way of life of the aborigine
[sic] was doomed’ as soon as the British set eyes on their land. Clark 1962: 3–4, 110.
82 Korff 2009. Creative Spirits is a web design company that sponsors a number of websites
encouraging Australians to learn about Aboriginal history, culture and art.
human, and the mode and motivation of construction ever suspect’. 83 Here, all
that was necessary for Bennelong’s ‘fall’ was gravity, the bridge faltered and he
plunged into the void commonly understood to lie between these two cultural
islands. 84 Eleanor Dark had located the destructive force of colonisation within
the souls of her Aboriginal characters. They are a ‘timeless’ people confronting
‘change’, which 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’. 85 Dark’s Bennelong is singled out as a man in
particular danger. His fellow captive, Colbee, managed to remain aloof, resolved
not to engage with the captors beyond a watchful compliance. Colbee thus
remains ‘whole’ while Bennelong is torn by an internal ‘strife’, as part of him is
drawn towards the white men and the possibility of becoming like them. 86

This is a familiar story: a 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 domination of his African workers has
transcended duty and come to dominate his own identity – he is re-shaped into
their cultural image. Kurtz has lost his senses, and his colleagues are at once
fascinated and appalled. 87 A not dissimilar imaginary drives Peter Goldsworthy’s
to the ‘Centre’ as a doctor, and returns initiated as a Warlpiri man, abrasive,
discontented, and terminally ill. 88

Following Mary Douglas’ theorisation of cultural purity and pollution,
Bennelong’s willing pastiche of dress, manners and language, seems to offend
‘cleanliness’ and invite danger. His ingestion of British substances, like alcohol,
and ideas, at once sees him absorbed into the British cultural and political body,
and signals the contamination of the Aboriginal body via Bennelong’s mouth. 89
For Clark, Kenny, Stanner and Mulvaney, as illustrated above, Bennelong’s
story showed what would happen to Aboriginal people when exposed to
‘civilisation’, recycling, with different inflections, the nineteenth century theory
of ‘degeneration’, which held that a race could actually fall downwards on
the evolutionary ladder (or off the bottom of it) through unhealthy living. 90
As Douglas suggests, the belief that pollution weakens is closely followed
by a suspicion that only those who are weak or careless would fail to resist
pollution. 91 JJ Healy, writing for a popular audience in 1977, made the charge
that this process was self-destructive almost explicit, finding ‘continuity between

83 Brodsky 1973: 41.
84 Karskens 2009: 424.
87 Conrad 1991[1899].
88 Goldsworthy 2003.
89 Douglas 2002: 4–5, 142.
Bennelong and those Aborigines who would speed the dissolution of their own societies by a self-generated fascination with the artefacts of European society'.

Over the past 20 years or so, the use of Bennelong’s story to imply that Aboriginal people’s ‘problems’ are self-inflicted has perhaps become less explicit. But in the ongoing narration of Bennelong’s story as a cultural and an alcoholic tragedy, the implication that transculturation is analogous to a shameful cultural addiction persists. In the Barani Indigenous History pages of the Sydney City Council website, a disavowal of Bennelong’s adoption of ‘European dress and ways’ is paired with an acknowledgment of his importance: ‘While Bennelong suffered from the worst aspects of enculturation, he also represents those who tried to change the behaviour of Europeans on Aboriginal lands.’ It is as if a cleansing of his memory is required.

Bernard Smith, in his Boyer Lectures of 1980, characterised Bennelong as a man who had tried to function on both sides of the cultural divide, a ‘game’ which has ‘always been an emotionally difficult one to play; its benefits precarious. Most became alcoholics’. Smith accorded Bennelong a legacy, passed down 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.

Like Bennelong’s, Namatjira’s is a life contaminated by that vice of the Europeans, alcohol, and overstretched to breaking point by the embrace of two worlds. Smith felt that unlike the heroic resistance leaders, Pemulwuy, Yagan and their ilk, these ‘Quislings’ or ‘Jacky Jackies’ have ‘always been regarded by Aborigines with suspicion’. Their ambiguous, vulnerable and tainted condition is super-historical in Smith’s account. It is not the product of oppression, for example, in Namatjira’s own time. Rather, as Smith insists through repetition, it has ‘always been’. Indeed, Smith’s logic suggests that to be colonised will always carry the risk of being divided, weakened. Ian Anderson finds this motif of internal division a constant refrain within his own discipline, and replies: ‘personhood is had through coherent experience ... The separation of black bit, white bit is a denial of humanity’. Another reply comes from a contributor to the First Australians guestbook on the SBS website, introducing herself as a

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92 Healy 1977: 32.
93 Heiss 2002.
96 Smith 1980: 37.
97 Anderson 2003: 51. See also Birch 1993, ‘You see me/ half Black/ half white/ but never whole’.
Wardandi Bibbulmun woman: ‘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’.  

Alcohol is a key ingredient in the story of Bennelong’s failure. Twentieth-century biographers have reached for the bottle without hesitation, finding as a recent children’s book does, 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 the first draught flowed down Bennelong/Caliban’s throat in a 2001 reinterpretation of Shakespeare’s The Tempest as a reconciliation story. But 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 and insolent ‘propensity to drunkenness’ cited by the report of his death in the Sydney Gazette. These two comments were made at opposite ends of Bennelong’s association with the British, certainly, but they were also thoroughly bound up with ideas surrounding social class, morality and alcohol at a time when, as Stephen Garton argues, the British were attempting to wrest Aboriginal peoples’ wealth from them and fit them into colonial society and economy – right at the bottom. When Bennelong ceased to drink exclusively with the officers, their interpretations of his drinking became more closely aligned with attitudes towards the lower classes, who took ‘unruly’ pleasure in bloodsports and drinking to excess. Neither does the symbolic valency of alcohol diminish as we approach the present. The social understandings surrounding alcohol abuse in contemporary Australian society are so rich that there is room in Bennelong’s story for everything from pity, as in Melinda Hinkson’s ‘lonely alcoholic with a broken spirit’, to the smutty humour of Keith Willey’s comment: ‘The nature of [Bennelong’s] association with the brewer, James Squire – apart from a notable liking for his product – is not known’. When Mulvaney, among others, finds that Bennelong’s drinking reflects a lack of steadiness of character, and an inability to discriminate between good and bad parts of British culture, he projects onto Bennelong eighteenth-century ideas of classed morality, but also finds a readily comprehending audience in the present. As Marcia Langton has demonstrated, alcohol has long played a part in the popular and official representation of Aboriginal communities. Langton sees 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 finds that, from Bennelong’s lifetime, the image of the ‘drunken Aborigine’ has sustained its own momentum.\(^{108}\) Indeed, I believe that the association of Bennelong’s fall with alcohol has helped to sustain this story of tragedy across the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

III

There is one last kind of truth I would like to consider in closing. American scholar of public memory Vivian Bradford proposes a path of moral relativism through the maze of public historiography. He is happy to acknowledge a diversity of historical expression and eschew the notion that any one version has a monopoly on transcendent truth, but reserves the right to measure public memories ‘by the quality of the social relationships established or sustained through their expression’.\(^{109}\) Tragedy stakes a claim to be morally elevating. Bernard Smith’s larger purpose in his Boyer Lectures was to call on Australian writers to engage with the tragic muse ‘an old Aboriginal woman, surviving precariously as a fringe dweller’, a muse that white Australians had thus far preferred to forget.\(^{110}\) He argued that engagement with the tragedy of Aboriginal history would spur the ‘concerned conscience’ to agitate for improvement of legal, health and education outcomes for contemporary Aboriginal Australians.\(^{111}\) For tragedy to have the transformative power that it was renowned for in the Greek polis, however, it needs to present a noble hero, felled by a weighty dilemma which shakes the audience’s own sense of self and society.\(^{112}\) Bennelong’s tragedies are for the most part too easy on the concerned conscience, embedded as they are in comfortable old narratives affirming European superiority, Aboriginal fragility and the role of the caring person in saving the Aborigine from himself. Bennelong, understood as a politically and culturally compromised drunkard to the last, fails to take responsibility for his fate as a hero ought. He fails to regain the respect of the audience as Othello did, for example, when come to his senses at last, he asks of Lodovico ‘Speak of me as I am … of one that loved not wisely but too well’. Too many of Bennelong’s tragedies allow the concerned conscience to confuse tragedy with ‘inevitable misfortune’, as it had been in the nineteenth-

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110 Smith meditates ‘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 does not occur to him that the unreflective use of this cultural armoury in the service of remembering these crimes might provide us with only a partial and highly problematic view of the past. Smith 1980: 16, 22–23.
111 Smith 1980: 31, 34.
112 Muldoon 2005: 248.
century tragedies of Aboriginal extinction, handing out easy absolution to its audience. As outgoing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma recently observed:

The Australian community had become so accustomed to stories of Indigenous disadvantage that they had become immune to it, and ... 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.

Re-telling Bennelong’s story in the present as an allegory for Indigenous failure is gratuitous. However well-intentioned, it can end up simply indulging the ‘industrial deafness’ of non-Indigenous Australians. More than this, the audience might feel absolved by Bennelong’s comprehensive failure, and social and spiritual obliteration. His ‘Christ-like suffering’, as Andrew Lattas has put it, may ‘restore settler Australians to a lost moral order’, without any efforts towards justice in the present.

The ‘concerned conscience’ has gone on to become a major force in Australian history making and politics since Bernard Smith evoked it in 1980, being heavily involved in Reconciliation and in the final ousting of John Howard for 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 perhaps reflected a disaster that continues to unfold for the concerned conscience in the present: a realisation of the continued culpability of non-Indigenous Australians in the destruction of Aboriginal lives, lifeways, culture and society. 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 an easy target for accusations of ‘conspicuous compassion’, a cheap expenditure of tears and talk, taking the place of ‘sensible action’. Renewed conservative claims on Australian history have seen the Bennelong Society, a conservative think-tank on Aboriginal policy founded in 2001, adopt Bennelong as a poster boy for assimilation. The Society’s Bennelong readily perceived the ‘benefits’ of the British lifestyle; devised, with Phillip, the ‘peaceful coming-in of the Eora’; and is deemed to have succeeded in British terms, as the Society would like Aboriginal people to do in the present and future. The Society dissociates itself from Bennelong’s latter years, his retirement from public life, explaining on its website that Bennelong’s drinking problem began during his time in England. This Bennelong represents a self-conscious response to the down-beat, dead-end of Bennelong’s tragedy. It is in the interests of the

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113 Muldoon 2005: 245.
114 Calma 2008.
115 Calma 2008.
118 Dissel nd. See also Johns 2000.
119 Dissel nd.
Society and its supporters to hold a monopoly on ‘sensible’, constructive action, the solution to the ‘Aboriginal problem’, which those who have promoted self-determination have only further compounded. The Society’s no-nonsense go-ahead Bennelong endorses 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 re-assertion 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 recent television series First Australians aired various interpretations of Bennelong’s life. Peter Read’s Bennelong, for example, ‘goes out’ of Sydney Cove in his later years because he has seen all that Europeans have to offer, in a situation of relative equality. He ultimately rejects it, choosing his own life. Inga Clendinnen had the last word on Bennelong, though, saying ‘to see that light-footed man, that man of so much political skill and resilience so reduced is, I think, tragic’. In the book which accompanied the series, Marcia Langton closely followed 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.

In First Australians, Bennelong’s story appears among many stories, of hope, friendship, massacre and cruel institutions, death and pain, survival and celebration across the continent, and across more than two centuries. Why should not two of our foremost public thinkers come together around Bennelong’s story to grieve for generations of talented Aboriginal men cut off by war, incarceration, accident and suicide?

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, but in the light of a body of evidence for the varied fortunes and strong relationships of Bennelong’s last 18 years, it is clear that we must reflect further on his story and on its uses. Tragedy is not life, or history, but a dramatic or literary genre with its own logic and genealogy. If Bennelong’s life is ‘tragic’, then it is storytellers who have made it so.

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Rosalie Kunoth-Monks and the making of *Jedda*

Karen Fox

Filmmaker Charles Chauvel described the casting for *Jedda*, released in Australia in 1955, as ‘a unique experiment’. He referred to the casting of two Aboriginal people, who had never acted before, as the film’s stars. Much scholarship has examined the film itself, analysing its themes and its representations of Aboriginal people. Less attention has been paid to the ways in which its Aboriginal stars, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks and Bob Wilson, experienced starring in the film.¹ This paper focuses on Kunoth-Monks, who was for a brief time widely known and acclaimed throughout Australia, and whose starring role continued to be remembered throughout her life, even as she moved into areas of activity far removed from the film industry.² Writing on the practice of film history, Barbara Klinger has advocated an approach which seeks to provide a ‘total history’ through investigating ‘a film’s “ancillary” texts’ (for example, promotional material and popular media texts).³ For historians interested in filmic representations of, by or for Indigenous peoples, the narratives found in texts surrounding the participation of Indigenous peoples in filmmaking can be as rich as the films themselves for analysis. In this paper, I critically explore narratives about Kunoth-Monks’ experience of filmmaking, and recurring representations of her, which appeared in the popular print media, in publicity material for the film and in the memoirs of Chauvel’s wife and filmmaking partner, Elsa, as well as Kunoth-Monks’ own memories. Exploring her brief time as a film star provides insight not only into the film and the Chauvels’ attempt to represent Aboriginal people on film, but also into the ambiguous and sometimes uncomfortable experience of being simultaneously a traditional Aboriginal woman and a film star.

Creating sensations and stars

With his wife Elsa, Charles Chauvel made several films, all displaying his intense nationalism and love of Australia’s landscape. Many of his films centred on pioneering life in the bush, the achievements and spirit of the Australian military or relations between cultures.⁴ Among these were pioneer tales such

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² Note that, although Kunoth-Monks was still Rosie Kunoth when *Jedda* was filmed, Kunoth-Monks being her married name, I have referred to her throughout as Kunoth-Monks to avoid confusion.
⁴ Molloy 1990: 103.
as Sons of Matthew (1949), the patriotic films Forty Thousand Horsemen (1941) and Rats of Tobruk (1944), and the melodrama Uncivilised (1936), in which a white woman becomes caught up in a tribal war. During his career, Chauvel also showed interest in representing Indigenous people on film, and in filming on location in difficult places. Stuart Cunningham, who has provided the most extensive analysis of Chauvel’s filmmaking, observed the existence of a ‘general consensus’ among scholars that Chauvel’s work represents ‘the most avowedly nationalist filmmaking in Australia’.5

The impetus for making Jedda, Chauvel’s last film, came from a conversation he had while in the United States. Over coffee in a New York restaurant, a journalist with Time magazine suggested that he make a movie that was not possible elsewhere, and that he have Aboriginal people act in it.6 Making the decision to partly base the plot on fact, he and Elsa blended three ‘authentic tales of the outback’ to create the story of Jedda, an Aboriginal girl brought up by a white station owner’s wife after her own child dies.7 Jedda feels drawn to her Aboriginal heritage, and allows herself to be sung to the campfire of Marbuk, a supposedly uncivilised newcomer to the station, despite the desire of the part-Aboriginal head stockman, Joe, to marry her. Presenting Jedda as driven by natural tribal instincts that had previously been suppressed in her, the film suggests that primitivity, or ‘blood’, must trump education and civilisation, making assimilation an impossibility. The story ends in tragedy after Marbuk abducts Jedda and takes her to his country, where he is sung to death by his own tribe for bringing back a girl of the wrong tribal group, and leaps to his death off a cliff, pulling Jedda with him. Released in 1955, Jedda starred Rosalie Kunoth (as she then was) and Bob Wilson, billed as Ngarla Kunoth and Robert Tudawali.

A strong publicity campaign preceded the release of Jedda. Considerable publicity usually attended Charles Chauvel’s films, particularly those which appeared later in his career, and the ‘sagas’ of making them thus became ‘as well known as the films themselves’.8 Before Jedda was released, coverage of the forthcoming film appeared in a range of media, from trade papers such as the Film Weekly to women’s magazines such as the Australian Women’s Weekly, and from the New South Wales government’s Aborigines Welfare Board publication Dawn to the geographic magazine Walkabout. Some of this promotional material reflected elements of the ‘biographical legend’ about Chauvel which Cunningham has identified. This myth portrayed Chauvel as an ‘established producer of quality films’ who disdained ‘quickies’, and as a heroic and ‘independent’ filmmaker who battled against difficulties to produce uniquely Australian films.9 In the publicity material which preceded the release of Jedda, the choice to involve Aboriginal stars was touted as a source of uniqueness which gave the film curiosity value. Chauvel noted in a progress report on filming in The Film

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5 Cunningham 1991: 19.
7 Carlsson 1989: 151.
Weekly in 1952 that one of the ‘native talent’ then being screen-tested would be chosen to play the character of Jedda. ‘Our casting is a unique experiment’, he wrote, ‘and one which I hope will capture the interest of filmgoers throughout the world’. Even before the film appeared, its Aboriginal stars were thus placed as a potential source of public curiosity and attention.

**Becoming Jedda**

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks was born in a river bed on Utopia Station in Central Australia, the daughter of Alan and Ruby Kunoth. Ruby was a traditional Aboriginal woman from Utopia Station, and Alan was of German and Aboriginal descent. As a child, Rosalie travelled between stations while Alan worked as a shearer, managing to stay with her family at a time when other children were being taken. Raised in a traditional Aboriginal way, she did not learn English until her parents wished her to attend school in Alice Springs, where she stayed at St Mary’s Hostel for Aboriginal children. Kunoth-Monks was still at school when she was cast as Jedda. On their second visit to St Mary’s in search of a girl to play the role, the Chauvels decided that none of those selected by the nuns to meet them were suitable. In her memoirs, Elsa described spotting Kunoth-Monks just as she and her husband were on the point of departure. She drew his attention to her, remembering ‘an elfin looking face with large velvety brown eyes and soft, long wavy hair’ watching from behind a tree. Kunoth-Monks was soon on her way to Coolabah for screen tests. In an interview given later in her life, she remembered Charles commenting upon her shyness during the screen test. She recalled that he had considered shyness to be ‘the trait of the Aboriginal woman’ and that he had spoken of her as ‘the more traditional’ of those who were screen-tested. Looking back, she believed that she was given the role of Jedda because she seemed ‘closer to the traditional Aboriginal’ in both ‘mannerism’ and appearance. In her turn, Elsa remembered screen-testing ‘some very attractive girls’, but finding them ‘too inter-mixed and too far removed from the primitive that we were looking for’. As they sought a girl to play Jedda, the Chauvels thus hoped to find someone who could embody both primitive mystery and modern film star beauty.

Between 1940 and 1956, documentary ideals were highly influential in the film industry. In much of Charles Chauvel’s filmmaking, including *Jedda*, ‘a “documentary” impulse’ was clearly evident, although his work remained

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11 Chryssides 1993: 176.
13 Kunoth-Monks, interview with Hughes, 10–12 July 1995, Utopia, Northern Territory [hereafter interview], tape 1.
15 Chryssides 1993: 181.
16 Kunoth-Monks, interview, tape 2.
17 Chauvel 1973: 122.
18 Cunningham and Routt 1989: 181.
‘myth-making’ in his efforts to express the essence of Australia and the Australian character.19 Publicity material, as well as the narration at the beginning of *Jedda*, emphasised the film’s authenticity – that it featured people from the Northern Territory reprising their real lives, and that research had been undertaken into Aboriginal lives and customs.20 Chauvel had been advised by long-time Territory resident Bill Harney, who had resigned from a post as a patrol officer several years before to focus on writing. Harney’s wife Linda was of Aboriginal descent, and he greatly enjoyed Aboriginal company, learning a great deal about Aboriginal lifeways.21 When *Jedda* was released in 1955, several commentators recognised its documentary qualities. In the *Weekly Times*, ‘M. S.’ termed it ‘a most unusual study of primitive and modern existence’ which showed ‘aspects of life in the interior’ which had ‘never before been seen’ on film, with ‘authentic backgrounds’ and ‘strictly correct’ depictions of Aboriginal life.22 A reviewer for the Adelaide *Advertiser* considered that the film was ‘substantially authentic’, showing the ‘vastness’ and beauty of the Territory and the ‘life and character of the aborigines’, who were described as ‘the world’s oldest race in one of the oldest countries, in which the white man has only begun the process of development and civilisation’.23 *Dawn* magazine praised the film’s educative possibilities and potential for societal improvement. It observed:

> As many *Dawn* readers live in big cities or on board Stations, they will find much of ‘Jedda’ as strange and unusual as will the white population ... but ... nothing has been exaggerated, nothing distorted, nothing garbled.24

Such understandings of the film emphasised its documentary aspects as a work that provided a glimpse into a remote and mysterious place and an ancient way of life which was becoming lost, rather than its qualities as a dramatic narrative.

The Aboriginal stars of *Jedda* were also depicted in ways which stressed their status as bona fide Aboriginal people, and thus the authenticity of the film. In a promotional booklet titled *Eve in Ebony*, Kunoth-Monks was described as ‘a genuine aborigine’ and as ‘primitive’.25 Reference was made to her descent as a member of the Arunta (Arrernte) people in publicity material and the print media. In search of authenticity, she wore dark make-up for the film, so that she did not look too fair-skinned beside Wilson.26 She was named Ngarla in the credits of the finished movie, Elsa Chauvel having told her that Rosalie, Rose and Rosie were not sufficiently Aboriginal. Elsa had therefore chosen Ngarla, her mother’s skin name, despite Kunoth-Monks’ unhappiness at the false

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21 Kennedy nd.
23 A Correspondent, ‘Film “Jedda” is gripping’, *Advertiser*, 5 January 1955: 5.
24 ‘Jedda is YOUR film’, *Dawn* 3(9), September 1954: 8.
25 Chauvel et al c1954.
26 Chryssides 1993: 185.
idea thus given of the marriage line appropriate to her.\footnote{Chryssides 1993: 183–184.} For Kunoth-Monks, this interchange was the moment when she and Elsa ‘fell off from each other’, because ‘I’d been brought up knowing who I am, and for a white person to change my skin was more than I could take’.\footnote{Kunoth-Monks, interview, tape 3.} Katrina Schlunke has argued that, although the practice of adopting a screen name was not unusual in itself, the re-naming of Kunoth-Monks as Ngarla constituted ‘the flower arranging version of Aboriginality’, as the Chauvels had sought a name that would seem more appropriately Aboriginal to white filmgoers.\footnote{Schlunke 1993: 11.} Emphasising the authenticity of the name, the promotional booklet \textit{Eve in Ebony} asserted that ‘Rosie’ was Kunoth-Monks’ ‘Christian name’, while ‘Ngarla’ was ‘the old tribal name she went under as a small girl, wandering barefoot and ragged through the sandy wastes of Central Australia’.\footnote{Chauvel et al c1954.} At the same time, Charles wrote of his delight in having found a girl who was ‘free of tribal restrictions’ to play the role. He explained that he had frequently been informed that it would be ‘impossible to find a girl from the aborigine womenfolk who would have the confidence, or who would be de-tribalised enough to act for us’. ‘It is part of the everyday living of the Australian aborigine’, he wrote, ‘that the woman is a mere chattel’ and subject to ‘old tribal taboos’ and superstitions, at least while young.\footnote{Chauvel et al c1954.} The authentic Aboriginality symbolised by the name ‘Ngarla’ was thus linked to primitivism, superstition, poverty and abjection, the sub-text being that ‘Rosie’ had been rescued from this situation by the advent of Western civilisation and Christianity, in the form of the Chauvels and their filmmaking venture.

\textbf{Making the film}

Kunoth-Monks remained away from home for some time during filming. In her recollections of making the film, Elsa Chauvel reasonably stressed the difficulties involved in making the film, such as handling the delicate colour film in the heat of the Territory, camping and working with untrained actors. Her account envisioned the filmmaking as a heroic endeavour, with Charles as the hero, and herself the helpmate at his side. The Chauvels’ daughter, Susanne Chauvel Carlsson, wrote a later account with similar overtones, imagining her parents as having faced ‘the hardships of pioneers’.\footnote{Carlsson 2005: 52.} Remembering her relationship with Kunoth-Monks, Elsa placed herself as a maternal figure, relative to Kunoth-Monks’ childish primitivity, often using imagery reminiscent of nature and animals. Elsa wrote that Kunoth-Monks was ‘a shy, rather clumsy and inarticulate child at first’, but under her protection she ‘soon gained confidence and would romp around the camp like an excited puppy, or curl at my feet as I sat doing the script notes’.\footnote{Chauvel 1973: 129.} Promotional material described her in similarly
de-humanising terms as ‘one of the most beautiful specimens of her race’, a comment which carried echoes of earlier discourses of racial science. Elsa’s unconscious ideal of white womanhood was also evident in her remembrance of her role as a peacemaker between Kunoth-Monks and Charles when Kunoth-Monks refused to do what she had been asked to do. While he was ‘desperate and frustrated’, Elsa remembered having taken Kunoth-Monks ‘away for a while’ to ‘talk it out’, and noted that the issue was often that she had been asked to act in a way that was contrary to ‘tribal custom’, thus necessitating ‘a slight alteration … to the script’. At other times, the issue was that Wilson was to touch Kunoth-Monks, who was worried that Wilson’s wife would be angry. Far from being ‘free of tribal restrictions’, Kunoth-Monks was clearly well-schooled in the laws of her people, and perhaps surprisingly, she was also able to exert at least some influence on the final shape of the film through her position as a traditional person.

Kunoth-Monks’ memories of making the film were very different in emphasis from those of Elsa Chauvel and Susanne Carlsson. She recalled her dislike of being taken away from her place and people to unfamiliar country and to a ‘situation where you didn’t have any control whatsoever’, and her ‘most prominent feeling’ during filming was ‘homesickness’. She was not informed that she was to play Jedda in the film, but was simply given instructions to care for her appearance. During the first three months, she did not know what the cameras were doing, thinking Charles Chauvel and the cameraman were ‘a temperamental lot’ because they complained that ‘the sun wasn’t shining in the right place, or that someone was casting a shadow’. Rather than recalling Elsa as the peacemaker, she had ‘very fond memories’ of Charles ‘smooth[ing] the ruffled feathers on both sides: his wife’s and mine’. Elsa she remembered as ‘the bully-lady’, who made her diet to achieve a sufficiently slim appearance and gave her a ‘smack … for sucking my thumb and for being shy’. At the same time, she acknowledged that Elsa was ‘the taskmaster’ who ‘had to get it done’, and that she was ‘responsible’ both for ‘the outcome of [the] film’ and for Kunoth-Monks herself. When filming moved to Sydney, Kunoth-Monks lived in the Chauvel household. This experience she later described as relatively comfortable, although she did recall instances of difficulty. One such was when she wanted to play. ‘Sometimes I rolled on the front part of their lawn, playing, just being boisterous’, she remembered, remarking that such behaviour ‘was a bit out, because young girls were brought up to behave in a certain way in the 1950s, whereas that wasn’t the way I was brought up’. Another was at the dinner table, where it was ‘out of the ordinary that this little savage, brown girl was

34 Chauvel et al c1954. For more on the discourses of racial science, see Anderson 2007; Douglas and Ballard 2008; McGregor 1997.
35 Chauvel 1973: 129.
36 Chryssides 1993: 183; Kunoth-Monks, interview, tape 2.
37 Chryssides 1993: 181.
39 Kunoth-Monks, interview, tape 2.
chewing on the bones at the table’.\textsuperscript{41} Despite the difficulties of their relationship, however, Kunoth-Monks did not have strongly negative feelings towards the Chauvels.

In her memoirs, Elsa Chauvel remembered similar aspects of Kunoth-Monks’ stay with the family to those recalled by Kunoth-Monks herself. Like Kunoth-Monks, Elsa emphasised a cultural clash in some of the incidents she recounted, but she placed a different complexion upon these events. ‘It must have been a strange experience’ for Kunoth-Monks, she wrote, and it was ‘quite an experience for us’.\textsuperscript{42} Elsa described Kunoth-Monks’ pleasure in bubble bath, her dislike of foods such as asparagus and broccoli, and having ‘watched with amazement Ngarla crunch and crunch a lamb knuckle until there was not a particle left’.\textsuperscript{43} Kunoth-Monks’ playing on the lawn was also described. She had been dressed for church, appearing ‘so attractive with not a button or a bow out of place’, and had returned home to be ‘within five minutes … tumbling and rolling all over the lawn like a wild puppy, until her dress was a rag and her brown legs a mass of scratches’.\textsuperscript{44} Elsa also noted that Kunoth-Monks ‘would curl up on the floor and tell us strange stories of her childhood’, and Carlsson likewise later wrote of having been ‘entertained through dinner with hair-raising tales of [Kunoth-Monks’] tribal days’.\textsuperscript{45} In these recollections, the mystery, strangeness and violence of tribal and outback life were emphasised. Yet Elsa and her husband appeared to view Aboriginal people relatively positively, refusing to believe that they could not make good actors. At the same time, Elsa’s recollections of making \textit{Jedda} clearly placed Charles and herself in a parental position relative to the Aboriginal people who had worked with them on the film. On leaving the Territory, she recalled:

\begin{quote}
Our little families of aborigines lined up to say goodbye, each clutching our farewell gifts and crying like children. Charles and I felt the parting equally as much as these loyal people had worked beside us and given of their best. It was like parting with members of our own family.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

In this passage, the praise for the loyalty of the Aboriginal workers evokes the faithful Jacky Jacky figure, a stereotypical caricature of Aboriginal people who had assisted early European explorers.

\textbf{The premiere night}

Once filming was over, Kunoth returned to Alice Springs and had ‘forgotten about’ the film until the premiere, held in Darwin’s Star Theatre.\textsuperscript{47} It was a

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\item \textsuperscript{41} Kunoth-Monks, interview, tape 2.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Chauvel 1973: 138.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Chauvel 1973: 138–139.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Chauvel 1973: 139.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Carlsson 2005: 52; Chauvel 1973: 138.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Chauvel 1973: 136.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Chryssides 1993: 187.
\end{itemize}
big event, the city’s first world premiere. The theatre foyer, from which ABC presenter Peter Lee gave ‘a spot broadcast’, was ‘decorated with pandanus palms and aboriginal curios’.48 Crowds waited outside to see the more than 200 invited guests arrive in formal attire.49 The Film Weekly, presumably referring only to white Australians, commented that ‘[p]ractically every inhabitant of the northern city turned out to see the first showing’ of the film.50 Kunoth-Monks’ dress was described in many media accounts, placing her within the discourse of glamour around a movie star and a premiere. She ‘looked very charming’, thought the Northern Territory News, while Elsa commented that she ‘looked a dream of a girl’ and that ‘her quite simple deportment gained the admiration of all’.51 Kunoth-Monks herself recalled that she ‘looked like a princess, or a queen’ as she had read about in children’s books.52 She stated that as she had experienced filming as ‘hard work and not being able to do my own thing’, the premiere night was when she ‘first … realised this thing was putting me in an enviable position’.53

The glamorous discourse that Kunoth-Monks was placed within was what might be expected for a white film star, and she did not consider it entirely negative. She stated later that ‘it became almost glamorous to be an Aboriginal person’. ‘There was an Aboriginal girl standing up there looking nearly as good as Marilyn Monroe’, she recalled, and ‘acting the same way’.54 Kunoth-Monks’ attractive appearance was often mentioned in the media around the time the film was released. Several references were made to her skin colour, as ‘a brown-skinned beauty’, a ‘comely chocolate heroine’ or as having ‘dark loveliness’.55 These comments called on her descent from an ancient tribe to add mystery to the glamour. However, such depictions were significantly outnumbered by comments on her prettiness that did not mention her colour, subsuming her race under a focus on beauty and femininity. Part of her appeal was also the charming shyness sometimes reported. Soft voices and timidity were considered attractions of Aboriginal women in the earliest days of contact.56 Such descriptions imagined Aboriginal women within ‘European aesthetic traditions’.57 Media descriptions of Kunoth-Monks in the 1950s imagined her within Hollywood aesthetic traditions, even while deploying the idea of the exotic as an attraction. The juxtaposition of exoticism and glamour was occasionally recalled in later articles about Kunoth-Monks’ life. In 1971, John Sorell described her in the

49 Brister 1995: 40.
50 ““Jedda’s” spectacular premiere!”, The Film Weekly, 13 January 1955: 12.
54 Chryssides 1993: 189.
56 McGrath 1990: 197–199.
Melbourne *Herald* as ‘quite a dame’, having become ‘matronly’ at 34 years of age, but still having the ‘flashing eyes and the mischievous smile and dusky allure that entranced, captivated and excited Australia 18 years ago’.\(^{58}\)

In reports of the premiere night, the Aboriginality of the lead actors was most clearly foregrounded in a discussion about where they sat for the showing, since the Star was at that time a segregated theatre, as well as in relation to their acting ability. The *Northern Territory News* claimed that Wilson and Kunoth-Monks were both ‘conducted to special seats in the dress circle’, while the *Daily Telegraph*’s story was that Wilson and his wife sat downstairs with the other Aboriginal attendees, Wilson having stated he did not want to sit upstairs, although on the night he wished he had.\(^{59}\) A similar report was made in the Adelaide *Advertiser*, which also noted that ‘[f]ewer than 20 natives – each selected – watched the first screening of the picture’, and that Aboriginal people were generally only able to go to the theatre on Wednesday nights.\(^{60}\) Kunoth-Monks also remembered that she had sat upstairs while Wilson and his wife sat downstairs, adding that there ‘was a difference there, but I wasn’t aware of it on the night’.\(^{61}\) In 2000, the *Northern Territory News* explained that Wilson was:

> publicly demonstrating that he was an Aborigine and would remain one despite official hopes that he would be an early and spectacular example of successful Aboriginal assimilation and achievement in the white world.\(^{62}\)

His sitting downstairs, negative at the time, was thus re-imagined as an act of solidarity with other Aboriginal people. Kunoth-Monks herself, asked in later life why she was ‘made an honorary white on the night’, speculated that it was because she was from elsewhere, and suggested that ‘Bob probably chose to sit with his people, which was probably his stance … if it happened in Alice Springs I would have said, “No, I’m sitting with my mum”, and gone down’.\(^{63}\)

Although Kunoth-Monks reportedly told the *Advertiser* after the event that she had enjoyed the film, her later comments suggest that this was not the case. She said in an interview for the television programme *Australian Biography* that she was given:

> a little paper saying, ‘I hope you all enjoy the film as much as I did making it’ … So that’s what I said. If it had been left to me I would have said, ‘I hated making this bloody film. I hope you enjoy it more than I did’, you know.\(^{64}\)

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\(^{58}\) John Sorell, “‘I cry a little about the Alice’”, *Herald*, 15 November 1971: 2.


\(^{60}\) ‘Stars see “Jedda”’, *Advertiser*, 4 January 1955: 17.

\(^{61}\) Kunoth-Monks, interview, tape 3.


\(^{63}\) Kunoth-Monks, interview, tape 3.

\(^{64}\) Kunoth-Monks, interview, tape 3.
Because scenes were not filmed in the order in which they finally appeared, she did not understand the plot of the film whilst making it. When she saw the finished product that night she was unhappy and ashamed. The behaviour of the character of Jedda irritated her as she watched the plot unfold. ‘I kept saying: “that woman there, she’s stupid, she should run now”’, she recalled in a later interview. She remembered seeing ‘a very suggestive scene’ in the film, and commented that ‘[t]he first thing that came into my head was “what’s Mum going to think?”’, as her mother might have thought it ‘real’. Speaking on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) television programme *Message Stick* in later life, she explained that according to her ‘grandmothers’ law’ she ‘was not to talk [to] or look at this strange man’ (Wilson), but she was made to raise her head to do so, leaving her ‘ashamed’ because ‘[t]hey slowly broke my law to make me act’. The Chauvels’ inability to understand this was evident in the comments of Charles in *Eve in Ebony*, as he explained that trying to cast Jedda ‘became disheartening, because we were trying to make women, who had been hopelessly suppressed for thousands of years, “emote” freely before the cameras’. While the Chauvels did not accept the popular prejudice that Aboriginal people could not be actors, this comment displays a lack of understanding of Aboriginal culture and customs, and a continuing belief in Aboriginal primitivity.

**The reception of the film**

At the time of the film’s release, positive reviews outnumbered negative. ES Madden in the *News-Weekly* considered it ‘highly successful’ and able to ‘hold its own with the best from any studio in the world’, while the *Weekly Times* thought it ‘[u]ndoubtedly the best film produced in Australia’. An important aspect of many positive responses was the film’s status as unusual. In a special section about *Jedda* in *The Film Weekly*, it was described as being ‘big boffice’ because it was ‘something completely different’ and a film that ‘could only have been made in Australia’. In relation to its uniqueness, the unnamed author of the article noted both that ‘[t]he magnificent backgrounds have in most instances never been photographed before’ and that ‘[t]he casting is revolutionary: two Australian aborigines in a ₤100,000 gamble on their ability to act’. A reviewer in the *Advertiser* noted that *Jedda* was ‘expected to arouse great interest’ because it was unusual. Not everyone greeted the film with rave reviews, however. One reviewer for the *Northern Territory News* saw it as ‘[d]ramatically unsound’, drew attention to ‘flaws in Chauvel’s direction’ such as a ‘lack of dialogue’ and

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65 Chryssides 1993: 188.
66 Chryssides 1993: 183.
68 Chauvel et al c1954.
70 ‘Salute to “Jedda”’, *The Film Weekly*, 14 April 1955: special section, A.
71 A Correspondent, ‘Film “Jedda” is gripping’, *Advertiser*, 5 January 1955: 5.
commented on the sometimes ‘amateurish acting’.\textsuperscript{72} Gerry Grant in the left-leaning \textit{Overland} thought the film ‘thoroughly bad’, arguing that it ‘peddles the worst kind of racist nonsense’ as well as being ‘technically and artistically third-rate’. Grant’s criticism centred on the film’s implicit suggestion that assimilation was not possible, which he saw as evidence of the Chauvels’ belief in Aboriginal ‘inferiority’.\textsuperscript{73} Later readings of \textit{Jedda} which were more approving of its anti-assimilation stance presumably reflected a changing policy climate and shifting societal beliefs. Overseas, the \textit{New York Times} reviewer appeared to simply find the film baffling. Jedda ran away with ‘a weird-looking tribal barbarian’ because of ‘some rather obscure reason’, the reviewer wrote, unable to grasp her having swapped a ‘happy’ future ‘[f]or this frightening specimen’.\textsuperscript{74}

A number of reviewers placed the Aboriginal actors with the scenery as highlights of the film, giving an impression of Aboriginal people as natural attractions of Australia along with its landscapes. One such was Brian McArdle, writing in the \textit{Age}. He considered that \textit{Jedda} brought the ‘remote, virtually uncharted regions and peoples of northern Australia’ to film ‘not as museum curiosities, but as living human beings’, and commended Charles Chauvel for his focus on the ‘comely chocolate heroine’, the ‘black hero-villain’ and the ‘dramatic landscapes of the Northern Territory’.\textsuperscript{75} This association of Aboriginal people with naturalness was also apparent in comments on their supposed natural acting ability. Charles described Kunoth-Monks as ‘beautiful, intelligent and a born actress’.\textsuperscript{76} Madden thought she and Wilson both had ‘the instinctive sense of the dramatic so characteristic of their race’, and ‘M.S.’ in the \textit{Weekly Times} stated that they were ‘[l]ike most Australian natives … born mimics’, whose ‘almost flawless portrayals … show how their natural talents have responded to clever direction’.\textsuperscript{77} The idea that Aboriginal people were ‘apparently a race of natural actors’ also appeared in the London \textit{Times}, praising Wilson.\textsuperscript{78} The \textit{Film Weekly}’s reviewer, while less impressed by the acting performances, was more explicit about placing Aboriginal people with nature and the animal world, commenting that ‘through sheer animal magnificence, Robert Tudawali emerges as a strong screen personality’, giving him little credit for any acting craft.\textsuperscript{79} Ironically, Kunoth-Monks herself remembered her acting as natural in a rather different way, explaining that ‘most of the emotions’ she was asked to act ‘were fear anyway, so it was natural’.\textsuperscript{80}

Later understandings of the film varied widely. Several aspects led commentators to see it as innovative or daring. It was the first film by an

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\item \textsuperscript{73} Grant 1956: 7.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Brian McArdle, ‘Jedda opens new cinema field’, \textit{Age}, 24 August 1955: 2.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Chauvel et al c1954.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Our Correspondent, ‘A Northern Territory film premiere’, \textit{Times}, 5 January 1955: 5.
\item \textsuperscript{79} ‘Reviews’, \textit{The Film Weekly}, 12 May 1955: 13.
\item \textsuperscript{80} Kunoth-Monks, interview, tape 3.
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\end{footnotesize}
Australian shot in Australia in colour, with unstable Gevacolor film that had to be sent to London for processing, and was the first Australian entry to the Cannes Film Festival.\textsuperscript{81} For the first time, Aboriginal people were given star status as actors in the two lead roles, despite having no training as actors, roles for which they became celebrated and remembered while white members of the cast were forgotten.\textsuperscript{82} Alan McKee summed up the variety in readings of the film as falling into at least two totally opposed views, ‘simplistically glossed as “good Jedda/bad Jedda”.\textsuperscript{83} The film was produced in a time when the ability of Aboriginal people to assimilate, as was promoted by government policy, was fervently debated. Jeremy Beckett was one of many commentators to consider the film ‘an explicit critique of assimilationism’.\textsuperscript{84} Colin Johnson (later known as Mudrooroo) thought the film of interest because Aboriginal people were ‘not relegated to a romantic backdrop’ but were ‘allowed to be centred in the film’.\textsuperscript{85} Marcia Langton, on the other hand, thought it ‘sickening’ racist nonsense.\textsuperscript{86} Paul Watson has noted that the film was ‘[a]ncedotally, … hugely popular with Aboriginal audiences’.\textsuperscript{87} Kuntoh-Monks herself, looking back, praised its anti-assimilation stance. She commented that:

I think it was a very brave thing for Mr. and Mrs. Chauvel to do. I appreciate the Aboriginal context … and I also appreciate the story line itself … [b]ecause in my life time I’ve seen so many children taken into care by policies, by the government … and that failing and miserable adult trying to come back and trying to find their roots.\textsuperscript{88}

While the film came to be considered an Australian classic, many critics clearly remained ambivalent about its messages and divided over its portrayals of Aboriginal people.

**Jedda the assimilated?**

Curiously, given the anti-assimilation slant of the film, publicity material and articles about it in 1954 and 1955 sometimes depicted Kunoth-Monks and Wilson themselves as assimilation successes. Wilson was profiled in the publicity booklet *Eve in Ebony* under the headline: ‘Robert Tudawali – *civilised savage*’, while Kunoth-Monks was said to have been ‘taken’ to St Mary’s Hostel in Alice Springs and ‘raised in the ways of the white people’ while she was ‘still young enough to be taught’.\textsuperscript{89} *Dawn* magazine described the stars as ‘two

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{81} Carlsson 1989: 151–152, 2005: 51–52; Walsh 2005: 55.
  \item \textsuperscript{82} Among those who have claimed the film was path-breaking, daring or a first for this reason are: Ackland 2001: 18; Beckett 1993: 15; Carlsson 2005: 51; Haskins 2001–2002: 98.
  \item \textsuperscript{83} McKee 1997: 116.
  \item \textsuperscript{84} Beckett 1993: 16. Karen Jennings likewise argued that the ‘preferred reading’ of the film should be as ‘an anti-assimilationist text’, Jennings 1993: 36–37.
  \item \textsuperscript{85} Johnson 1987: 47.
  \item \textsuperscript{86} Langton 1993: 47.
  \item \textsuperscript{87} Watson 1996: 16.
  \item \textsuperscript{88} Kuntoh-Monks, interview, tape 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{89} Chauvel et al c1954, original emphasis.
\end{itemize}
typical Australians, hard working and good living’ and ‘a credit to their race’.\textsuperscript{90} Despite Kunoth-Monks’ lack of knowledge about films, \textit{Dawn} claimed that she had a ‘favourite film star’, Stewart Granger, just like ‘white girls her age’.\textsuperscript{91} At the same time, promotional material in the 1950s continued to emphasise her difference. The booklet \textit{Eve in Ebony} ended its profile of her with the comment that she ‘retains the age-old, primitive emotions of her race, and will always be a somewhat unknown quantity with her charming will-o’-the-wisp quality’.\textsuperscript{92} Contrasting these discourses, Kunoth-Monks herself prosaically recalled that she had learnt at a young age that she ‘belonged to both sides’, due to her father’s German-Aboriginal descent, and she believed she had ‘learned to straddle the two worlds’.\textsuperscript{93} She expressed her anger when people would not provide her the same courtesy: ‘If I drop my h’s, or whatever, or use my colloquialisms which is ‘this mob’ or ‘that mob’, I am looked on as not quite civilised, and it makes me angry’.\textsuperscript{94} For her, discourses of civilisation and otherness were not selling points for a movie, but sources of hurt and frustration that impinged on her life.

Writers of promotional material for the film in the 1950s forecast a future for Kunoth-Monks in which she would represent the abilities and worth of Aboriginal people to white society. Quoting from \textit{Eve in Ebony} once again: ‘Ngarla Kunoth, beautiful aborigine girl, has become a proud ambassadoress of one of the greatest aborigine races in the world’.\textsuperscript{95} \textit{Dawn} also took up this refrain, contending that having ‘proved herself a very talented actress as well as a charming young Australian woman’, there was ‘no doubt’ that she would ‘bring a great deal of very favourable publicity to the aboriginal people’.\textsuperscript{96} Kunoth-Monks did become an important political voice later in her life, not as a role model of assimilation, but as a strong leader among her own people in her own country. After \textit{Jedda}, she returned to Alice Springs for a time, before joining the Anglican Community of the Holy Name in Melbourne. Receiving a dispensation from her vows, she left the convent some years later when she began to feel that she had become estranged from her people. As she learned of the experiences of Aboriginal people, observed corruption in places of authority and discovered the misery on Melbourne streets, she became aware of problems that needed solutions.\textsuperscript{97} After leaving the convent, she took a job as an Aboriginal Liaison Officer in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Melbourne. On her return to Alice Springs in 1977 to operate the Ayiparinya Aboriginal Hostel, she saw great change since she had left, which she described as ‘cultural genocide’ wrought by alcohol, loss of culture and country, racism and bureaucratic problems in Aboriginal Affairs.\textsuperscript{98} She increasingly spoke out about the issues she observed. Becoming involved with the Country Liberal Party, she twice ran unsuccessfully

\begin{footnotes}
\item[90] ‘Jedda is YOUR film’, \textit{Dawn} 3(9), September 1954: 10.
\item[91] ‘Jedda is YOUR film’, \textit{Dawn} 3(9), September 1954: 9.
\item[92] Chauvel et al c1954.
\item[93] Chryssides 1993: 179; Rintoul 1993: 331.
\item[94] Rintoul 1993: 332.
\item[95] Chauvel et al c1954.
\item[96] ‘Our cover’, \textit{Dawn} 3(10), October 1954: contents page.
\item[97] Kunoth-Monks, interview, tape 4.
\item[98] Chryssides 1993: 196; Kunoth-Monks, interview, tape 5.
\end{footnotes}
for office in the Northern Territory seat of Macdonnell. Hindsight made her ‘glad’ later in life to have lost these elections, as she had ‘discovered … that the policies of the party control you’.99 Her involvement with government continued in her time as Ministerial Officer to Paul Everingham, the first Chief Minister of the Territory, until a plan to flood a sacred site made it impossible for her to continue in that position.100 Kunoth-Monks has held many important positions in relation to Aboriginal affairs, including in the Aboriginal Development Commission, the Central Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service and the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Royal Commission. Her return to the film industry came later in life and in a position of greater strength. She did not act again, taking instead a role behind the scenes, as a ‘co-ordinator’ for Aboriginal people involved in movies.101 Asked to act in Tracey Moffatt’s Night Cries, a short film possibly inspired by or referencing Jedda, she refused.102 Kunoth-Monks later returned to Utopia Station with her family to live a traditional life. Speaking on Message Stick in 2005, she noted that she was ‘not an actress’, and that her ‘purpose now is to retain our language and our land’ and to ‘hold onto our corroboree and our rituals’.103

Kunoth-Monks’ journey from acting to activism was paralleled by a general shift in descriptions of her in the print media from depiction as a pretty, charming and shy young glamour girl to portrayal as a confident, outspoken or even formidable woman. In the Bulletin in 1990 she was termed ‘impossible to ignore’ when she had ‘a full head of steam’.104 She was described in the Sydney Morning Herald the same year as ‘a formidable woman’, while in the Territory Digest she was referred to as a ‘53 year-old firebrand’ whose ‘outspoken rhetoric seems contrary to her kind nature’.105 Yet she did not escape Jedda, as her starring role in the film was referenced over and over to remind readers of her 1950s fame outside the Northern Territory. Ben Hills, writing in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1990 on problems in Alice Springs, maintained that media representatives wanted to speak to her not ‘because she is a big wheel in the official Aboriginal organisations’ but because she was best known to the wider public as the star of Jedda.106 Reports on her having joined and left the convent, her subsequent job in Aboriginal Affairs and her marriage all referred to her in their headlines as ‘Jedda’, blurring the distinction between her filmic character and herself.107 This blurring fell away in the print media over the years in favour of references to her as being originally made famous as a film star, a trend with a continuing thread of emphasis on the film as the basis of her celebrated status.

101 Chryssides 1993: 175.
Over the years since the release of *Jedda*, various writers have reflected on the impact of the film on Kunoth-Monks’ later life. In her memoirs, Elsa Chauvel wrote of her relief at Kunoth-Monks having found ‘peace and fulfilment’ in the church, because she had been concerned about the impact on Kunoth-Monks of her time spent in the filmmaking world and its ‘publicity and limelight’, particularly given that there might be no more work for Aboriginal actors. Starring in a film, Elsa felt, was of benefit to Kunoth-Monks, giving her opportunities and allowing her to avoid working as a domestic and marrying ‘a member of her tribe’ or ‘a half-caste white man’. Elsa wrote patronisingly that she was ‘proud indeed of the pretty brown Aranda girl, who worked so loyally beside Charles and me’ and who went on to work in which she ‘strove to uplift and improve the standing of her people’.108 She contrasted this with the early and tragic death of Wilson, and that of artist Albert Namatjira, although acknowledging that ‘the pressure of extreme publicity, adulation and limelight’ could cause tragedies for white people too.109 As Schlunke observed, Elsa thus constructed herself ‘as having created “Ngarla’s” life beyond the making of the film’ and her actions as having ‘precipitat[ed] Kunoth-Monks’ later successes’.110 John Ramsland and Christopher Mooney likewise emphasised the film’s role in her life, contending that starring in *Jedda* and being a celebrity ‘made her a prominent figure ... in Aboriginal affairs amongst her own people’.111 Kunoth-Monks herself was quoted in 1997 saying that ‘[m]y life has been dominated by *Jedda*’.112 While she acknowledged in one interview that without being cast as Jedda she might have been married at a younger age to someone not of her choosing, and that she might have been less ‘eloquent and expressive’, she suggested in another that ‘[t]he positive aspect’ of the experience was ‘the geographical awareness’ she gained from her travels.113 Although not sorry to have acted in *Jedda* since it ‘made me aware Australia was a big country’ and it ‘showed Australia that two Aboriginal actors could play the lead quite competently’, she once said that she became:

fed up sometimes when people ask me to talk about *Jedda*. I tell them ‘*Jedda*, the person, fell off a cliff. She’s dead. *Jedda* was a small part of my life.

Indeed, far from seeing the film as a benefit to her later work, she was quoted by Hills in 1990 saying that she got ‘a bit sick of that being dragged up all the time’ because ‘[w]e’re here to talk serious stuff’.115 For Kunoth-Monks, *Jedda* was a far less significant part of her life than it has been for many other commentators.

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108 Chauvel 1973: 140.
109 Chauvel 1973: 140–141.
110 Schlunke 1993: 12.
113 Chryssides 1993: 203; Kunoth-Monks, interview, tape 3.
114 Chryssides 1993: 203.
Conclusion

Examining and weaving together the multiple and often conflicting narratives which surround the making of *Jedda*, and exploring the experiences of its Aboriginal stars, provides a much more complex and multi-hued story than that which is usually evident in writing about the film. I have focused in this paper on the experiences of Kunoth-Monks, interweaving her memories of making the film and her reflections upon her brief turn as a film star with narratives found in publicity material about the film, in the print media, in the memoir of Elsa Chauvel and in other texts. As an actress with a leading role, Kunoth-Monks figured in the print media as a star, depicted in glamorous terms and placed within white western discourses of beauty, femininity and modernity. At the same time, as one of the first Aboriginal film stars, she was portrayed in ways that mobilised popular racial discourses, particularly discourses about assimilation, primitivity and exoticism. Until she spoke of her own recollections in later interviews, Kunoth-Monks often had little input into these constructions of her story, which were often distant from her actual experiences of being a film star. Understanding the multiplicity of narratives about making the film, the ambiguous experiences of its Aboriginal stars, and their mobilisation in the print media as the first Aboriginal film stars, adds greatly to our understandings of *Jedda*. Such a multi-hued history reveals *Jedda* as not merely a classic Australian film, nor even a rich text for understanding ideas of race and gender with wide currency at the time of its release, but also as an unstable moment, a moment of volatile encounters, fluid possibilities and shifting meanings.

Acknowledgements

This paper has benefited from the comments of Bronwen Douglas, Ann McGrath, Tom Griffiths and Chris Ballard, as well as from those who provided feedback when it was first given as a seminar in the History Program in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University and as a paper at the Film and History in the Pacific Workshop held in Canberra in 2008. I also wish to thank the referees, whose helpful suggestions have improved the article.

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Keeping it in the family: partnerships between Indigenous and Muslim communities in Australia

Peta Stephenson

Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders with Muslim forebears have a connection to Islam that tends to be culturally rather than scripturally based. Born and raised in Darwin in the late 1960s, Indigenous-Malay descendant Sam Ahmat, for instance, describes her family’s lineage in these terms: ‘We’ve got Malay, Torres Strait, Mohammed and Aboriginal’.¹ For Sam, self-identification as a so-called ‘Mohammedan’ (or Muslim) has very little, if anything, to do with religion. It is primarily an expression of kinship. Assan (Ken) O’Shea is another case in point. Growing up on post-war Thursday Island with his Muslim Malay (adoptive) grandparents, he notes that his grandparents were ‘Mohammedans and that’s the most important thing’, explaining, ‘for me, that’s my Muslim religion, and that’s my Muslim background’.² Evidently, kin-based identification of this kind sharply differs from that associated with formal conversion to Islam. For convenience we might differentiate it from conversion by calling it *kinversion*, defining this as the phenomenon widespread among people of Aboriginal-Muslim descent of invoking Islam as a marker of family continuity and identity.

This article forms part of a larger study based on interviews conducted with descendants of Aboriginal-Afghan and Indigenous-Malay unions that explores the growing phenomenon of Indigenous Australians’ identification with Islam. Its object is to draw attention to a legacy of religious conversion that is usually left out of conversion studies – an identification with Islamic values that is not formal but familial. Any cross-cultural accommodation can involve kinversion, and the term is not put forward here to suggest that my interviewees’ experience is unique. However, it is the case that the double marginalisation Indigenous people and Muslims experience in Australia makes kinversion particularly significant. Involving an active rather than passive identification, kinversion becomes in these circumstances a mechanism of identity formation that involves sophisticated negotiations across cultural and power differences, across gender and generations. It represents a mode of social behaviour that combines resilience and respect, an ability to secure social cohesion against the odds whilst allowing for the co-existence of incommensurable historical and human realities.

¹ Sam Ahmat in interview with the author, 17 December 2007, Darwin, Northern Territory.
² Ken O’Shea in interview with the author, 16 March 2008, Caboolture, Queensland.
Kinversion, it is proposed here, is a powerful means of creating social cohesion, and particularly warrants recognition in a time when the rhetoric of the ‘clash of civilisations’ devalues ordinary sociability and the creative ways in which individuals negotiate their religious and cultural identities. The phenomenon of Muslim kinversion amongst Australians of Indigenous descent is rooted in history. It emerges from an experience of legislative and institutional segregation, and in its resistance to the racism inscribed in this, constitutes a powerful counter-conviction: that people of different racial, cultural and national backgrounds can co-exist.

It is also important in what follows to differentiate the data of the historical record from that furnished by oral history – they are related but serve different purposes and are not necessarily substitutable. Aboriginal-Afghan and Indigenous-Malay descendants might not be familiar with the full historical circumstances behind the founding alliances that they regard as integral to their present-day identity. At the same time the very phenomenon of kinversion attests to the long shadow that colonial history casts, and all of my interviewees are acutely aware that a long-term and systemic racism has shaped their inheritance, even if the primary purpose their self-narrations serve is the performative one of self-production here and now.

With this methodological caveat, the first part of the article is historical. Kinversion is the result of long-term and widespread contact between Muslims (almost invariably men) and those (almost entirely women) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background. The ‘kinverts’ discussed in this paper are descendants of either ‘Afghans’ or ‘Malays’, two major sources of labour in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were almost entirely Muslim in origin and/or conviction. My object in the first section is not to rehearse the history of their encounter with Indigenous Australia – a growing number of accounts of these cross-cultural entanglements now exists – but to extract from that scattered literature some salient cultural and historical experiences common to both immigrant and Indigenous communities that may have facilitated the forging of cross-cultural alliances. The argument here is that these perceived cross-cultural convergences fostered attitudes of mutual tolerance and accommodation whose legacy is still evident in the phenomenon of kinversion.

The balance of the article describes the social impact of these historical events through the lens of family history. Within the family, exposure to Indigenous and, of course, non-Indigenous Australian cultures is perceived to have brought about a new self-consciousness: immigrant Muslims fathering families in Australia had, perhaps for the first time, to justify their faith. In some but not all cases, this revealed a capacity for tolerance that family descendants highly regard. In terms of the extra-familial importance of these cross-cultural marriages, this is seen in the formation of communities that were multicultural long before that term came into wide circulation. The final section seeks to recuperate the agency of the Indigenous women who embarked on new lives with Muslim men: again, through oral family history, these women are perceived to have exercised considerable ingenuity and sophistication as they negotiated their way
between multiple, and sometimes conflicting, ethical and social expectations. As the article shows, the admired behaviour of the interviewees’ forebears is inseparable from the interviewees’ goal of finding and sustaining distinctive identities for themselves.

**Historical background**

The first Muslims to settle permanently in Australia were the so-called ‘Afghan’ cameleers. The camel handlers were usually members of nomadic clans that travelled across the border between Afghanistan and India, but when they arrived in Australia they were indiscriminately lumped together as Afghans or ‘Ghans’, regardless of whether they came from Afghanistan or the north-western frontier district of the Indian sub-continent (now Pakistan). Between the 1860s and 1920s, an estimated 2000 to 4000 camel men (no official records were kept) provided a vital lifeline for the developing continent. With their strings of camels the Afghans transported food, building materials, furniture and equipment to isolated stations, mines and government camps, returning with baled wool, ore and other commodities bound for southern or international markets. By the 1930s, when the advent of motorised transport into the interior of Australia heralded the demise of the camel industry, Afghans had covered about three-quarters of the continent and their camels had carried goods in every mainland state except Victoria.

While Afghan camel handlers carted goods throughout the dry heart of the continent, Malay indentured labourers worked in the pearl-shelling grounds off the Western Australian, Northern Territory and Queensland coasts. Like ‘Afghan’, ‘Malay’ is another all-encompassing term. It does not refer to the Malays of present day Malaysia, but was used in nineteenth and twentieth century northern Australia to refer to those who came from Singapore, Java, Timor, Kupang, Sulawesi and elsewhere in the Indonesian Archipelago. The Malays also began arriving in Australia from the 1860s but, unlike the Afghan cameleers, demand for their labour continued until the late 1960s. The pearl-shelling industry wound down from the post-Second World War period, but many Malays who arrived here as young men in the late 1950s and 1960s remain in Australia. A significant number of Muslim Malays married local Indigenous women and today there are many Indigenous-Malay people in the Torres Strait, Darwin, Broome and elsewhere in the Top End.

At least three conditions might have influenced the formation of Indigenous-Muslim partnerships that lay the foundations of kinversion. These are, first, general cultural convergences. Second, the comparable lifestyles of Malay and north Australian Indigenous communities and of Afghan and desert dwelling

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4 Stevens 1993: 49.
5 Cigler 1986: 98.
6 Manderson 2001: 579.
Aboriginal peoples and third, systemic marginalisation wherein Indigenous and Muslim communities were thrown together because of white racism and discriminatory legislation.

There was a considerable degree of cultural convergence or overlap between the Muslim camel drivers and the Aboriginal communities they encountered. Like their Aboriginal counterparts, Afghan cameleers were peripatetic. As noted, the majority came from nomadic tribal clans and once here they continued to practise nomadism within discrete areas and, as with Aboriginal people, were simultaneously both ‘fixed’ and mobile. Other points of cultural convergence included the practice of revisiting particular areas at certain times. Aboriginal people returned to specific sites for religious reasons or to gather foodstuffs that were seasonally available, while Afghan cameleers made return journeys to mosques and other areas of significance along the various inland tracks. Each was accustomed to surviving in a climate of extreme heat and aridity where the occupants had resisted invasion and, more recently, modernisation.7 Although Afghanistan was never incorporated into the British Empire the Afghans had some experience of British invasion of their homeland. Both came from tribal cultures where the avenging of injustices with violence or murder was understood. Eating with the hands was customary; both practised the circumcision of young boys as a rite of passage; in Afghan and Aboriginal societies great respect was shown towards their leaders and elders; and they observed their obligation to provide food and other resources for newcomers and fellow countrymen.

A degree of cultural overlap also existed between northern Indigenous and Malay communities, born of their shared spatial and geographical orientation. Northern coastal Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, like their Malay neighbours, are salt-water people. Each comes from a marine culture where the seas between different landmasses connected, rather than divided. Malay pearl-shellers, like the Indigenous people they encountered, visited sites on a seasonal basis – each took advantage of particular resources at specific times. Both worshipped from the ground, observed strict rituals and led a lifestyle based around the temporary erection of ‘camps’. Pilgrimage to sites of spiritual significance is also shared. Muslims are expected to travel to Makkah (Mecca) at least once in their lives, while Aboriginal people are obliged regularly to visit and maintain sacred sites.

A level of cultural convergence might have also contributed to the marriages or long-term partnerships between Muslim men and Indigenous women. The unaccompanied men had to look for local brides. White women sometimes married the foreign men, but most viewed them with contempt. In addition, Pamela Rajkowski suggests that ‘Aboriginal women did not protest their lot, due to the way they were raised, which was in many ways similar to the expectations and duties placed on Moslem women’.8 For Muslim women obedience was a religious requirement and lack of compliance was likely to

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7 Rajkowski 1995: 64.
attract severe punishment. In Aboriginal and Muslim societies wives were often much younger than their husbands, and both cultures were polygamous. Arranged marriages were customary and in each culture a girl was betrothed to her husband at a young age, with the marriage occurring when she reached puberty.

While they understood the Afghans and Malays to be distinct from themselves, it also appears that some Indigenous communities perceived these outsiders to be in some ways like them. Central Australian Arrernte people devised a hand-sign to refer to the Afghans, a circular motion of the hand around the head referring to the turbans the Afghan men invariably wore. German missionary Carl Strehlow found that another part of this hand-sign included a gesture that meant ‘black’, an indication that the Arrernte seemed to have perceived the Afghans as black people like them. Christine Choo suggests that the generally positive relations between Aboriginal people in the West Kimberley and ‘brown-skinned Muslims’ might also have stemmed from a sense of cultural affinity borne of the fact that the ‘Asians of Malay background … had dark brown skins, not unlike the colour of Aborigines of mixed background’. This is corroborated by research conducted by Athol Chase on north Queensland’s Cape York Peninsula. In his interviews with senior men from the Lockhart River region, Chase found that what he called ‘Asian Moslems, Malayans’ were referred to by his informants as tungkupinta, a term that translates as ‘having dark skin’. This categorisation, which could also include Aboriginal people, distinguished them as a human group that was separate from Europeans. As Chase remarks, coastal Aborigines welcomed ‘the Asian visitors, having learned from experience that it was the Europeans who wished to dispossess them of their lands’.

This brings us to certain ‘negative’ reasons for Indigenous and Muslim communities finding common cause, stemming from white imperialist attitudes. Indigenous and Muslim people were lumped together as subject peoples as a result of the widespread acceptance of Social Darwinist assumptions about the inherent superiority of whites. One manifestation of white racist ideology was the introduction of discriminatory legislation. In the case of Indigenous people, this sought to deny them any role in the future constitution of Australian society, while for non-white immigrants, it served to control and restrict their access to Australian territory. Other legislation introduced in Queensland (1897), Western Australia (1905) and the Northern Territory (1911) also made it illegal for white, Afghan, Malay and other non-Indigenous men to marry an Indigenous

15 The pearl-shelling industry was so dependent on Asian indentured labourers that they, unlike their Afghan counterparts, were exempted from the provisions of the ‘White Australia’ policy (though they were barred from ownership of boats, businesses or land and from naturalisation). See Ganter 1998: 24.
woman without first gaining the written permission of the Chief Protector of Aborigines.\textsuperscript{16} Ironically, the common desire of Indigenous and Muslim migrant communities to avoid the control of white police and other officials resulted in a cultural convergence that was based on shared strategies of resistance.

**Religion relativised**

The Afghan and Malay Muslims who came to Australia, whether as indentured labourers or ‘free’ migrants, had usually left countries where Muslims were in the majority. Their religious practice in their homelands may have been ‘automatic’ or ‘unreflective’, but in Australia they were cultural, religious and social minorities and were thus liable to be drawn to reflect on their religious identity.\textsuperscript{17} What had formerly been a conventional identification might assume in the new environment a special personal significance, a development that could have a significant impact on the way Muslim fathers and husbands interacted with their Australian-born families.

Nameth Allick Khan, for example, who came to Australia in 1892, and died in Marree in 1950 at the age of 84 was a devout Muslim and raised his children according to the Islamic religious and cultural traditions of his homeland. His granddaughter, Marilyn/Fatimah, believes that her grandfather’s staunch adherence to his traditions was in part a reaction to the novelty of his situation, and to the rapidly changing socio-economic environment, ‘It would have been hard for everybody at that time, things were changing. Their lives were changing before their eyes and they really had no control over it’.\textsuperscript{18} Experiencing the rise and demise of the Afghan camel carting industry and the subsequent decline in the Afghan cameleer community, ‘Grandfather must have been frightened too’, reflects Marilyn’s sister, Beatrice Boerkamp (nee Khan):

\begin{quote}
like all the old Afghans that were up there [in Marree] that had created this new world for themselves, but [were] still really steeped in their own way. It must have been so frightening that they lost their own country, and they were now ready to lose what they came here to make ... I guess that’s why they hung on so much [to their Islamic traditions].\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Beatrice, like her siblings, was given both an English and an Afghan name as a child. Known familiarly as Zanzibar, her Peshawar-born\textsuperscript{20} grandfather ‘was a very strict disciplinarian. He was a Muslim, and his family would live the life of a Muslim as long as he was alive. And we did, oh believe me’.\textsuperscript{21} Other

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\textsuperscript{16} Stephenson 2007: 62–81. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Bouma, Daw and Munawar 2001: 59, 69. \\
\textsuperscript{18} Marilyn Robertson in interview with the author, 9 June 2007, Adelaide, South Australia. \\
\textsuperscript{19} Beatrice Boerkamp in interview with the author, 9 June 2007, Adelaide, South Australia. \\
\textsuperscript{20} Peshawar is located on the edge of the Khyber Pass, near the border of Afghanistan. It is now a regional city in Pakistan, but prior to Pakistan’s creation in 1947, Peshawar was part of what was considered to be the North-West Frontier Province of British India. \\
\textsuperscript{21} Beatrice Boerkamp in interview with the author, 9 June 2007, Adelaide, South Australia.
\end{flushleft}
Indigenous-Muslim descendants recount similar experiences. Mona Wilson (nee Akbar) described her Peshawar-born father as a devout follower of Islam who ‘kept his faith ‘till the day he died’.22 Similarly, the late Aboriginal-Malay Septu Brahim stressed that his father ‘was a strict Moslem … [who] practised it very, very strongly’.

In these and many other Indigenous-Muslim families, seeing their father at prayer was a common occurrence. As a young child Joanne Nasir remembers walking in on her Muslim Indonesian grandfather while in sujud, an Arabic word meaning prostration to God. Muslims prostrate while facing Makkah (Mecca), with their hands, forehead, nose, knees and all toes touching the ground. Unaware that her grandfather was engaged in ritual prayer, Joanne assumed ‘he [was] looking for something under the bed’.

But generalisation is difficult: other descendants noted that their fathers were less committed to their religion than their Muslim peers. Born on Thursday Island in 1924, Eva Salam Peacock25 is the daughter of a Makassan father and Torres Strait Islander mother (of Islander, Danish and Sri Lankan descent). According to Eva her father ‘wasn’t a very religious man. I didn’t see him do all the things that religious Muslims do’.26 Speaking of her Muslim step-father, who came to Broome from Singapore in the 1930s, Sally bin Demin recalls, ‘my step-father never prayed that much’.27 This apparent variety in religious devotion is demonstrative of the fact that religious minorities negotiate their relationship with the dominant society in a number of ways. In my research some sought to manage the transition to a new life and culture by abandoning their religious practises altogether; others practised their faith in private; some expected their wives and children to become Muslim, while others took a more ecumenical approach and lived happily in multi-cultural and polytheist households and communities.

Family anecdotes indicate that most Afghan and Malay fathers were accepting of their wives’ and children’s adoption of a non-Muslim faith. Eva Salam Peacock’s experiences are typical: ‘Dad was a Muslim but he didn’t mind if we were Catholic. He didn’t mind us going to a Catholic school’. This attitude might be partly due to the Qur’anic injunction, ‘let there be no compulsion in religion’. ‘Ali’ (a pseudonym), a Singapore-born Muslim Malay who came to Broome in 1950 to work in the pearl-shelling industry, had this to say: ‘No, that fella want to go Catholic, that’s his business, his life. He want to go Muslim, his life … According to my religion, wrong thing to push people … I respect the other people’.29 Ali’s Aboriginal Catholic wife ‘Patricia’ agrees, commenting:

24 Joanne Nasir in interview with the author, 17 December 2007, Darwin, Northern Territory. 
25 Salam (or salaam) means ‘peace’ in Arabic. Salaam ‘alaikum is a universal greeting with which Muslims address each other, meaning ‘peace be upon you’.
27 Sally bin Demin in interview with the author, 5 September 2006, Broome, Western Australia. 
29 ‘Ali’ (a pseudonym) in interview with the author, 15 July 2005, Broome, Western Australia.
‘Yeah, well he’s got his – I don’t interfere with his religion or when he goes out and prays or whatever. He doesn’t interfere with mine, so just leave it at that and everyone’s happy that way. No forcing business, you know’.30

The Aboriginal wives of Afghan men had similar experiences. Esther Kite was married to her late Afghan-Aboriginal husband for more than 20 years. In our conversation she described her husband as a ‘strict’ Muslim who always ‘kept his religion’. He avoided pork, prayed regularly at home, treated his Peshawar-born father’s Qur’an reverentially and instructed their children how to say ‘the Afghan prayer’. Notwithstanding this he was very accepting of his family’s Methodism. As Esther recalls, ‘in those days [late 1950s to early 1960s] we didn’t have anywhere to go, like Mohammadan church, but the kids used to go to a Methodist church, all the children were baptised in the Methodist church’.31

Muslim husbands were perhaps also disposed to recognise their wives’ and children’s religious beliefs because they were in the minority. In the early twentieth century when there were relatively strong Afghan and Malay communities in Australia, the men held firmly to their Islamic beliefs and traditions. Over time, with a decline in the number of Muslim arrivals in Australia, and an increase in the rate of inter-marriage between Muslims and non-Muslims, the men’s Islamic beliefs tended to become more of a private affair. Joanne Nasir recalls that her Muslim Indonesian grandfather:

was of the belief that you’re in somebody else’s country, and he married into a different culture, so he was willing for his children to make their own decision ... he allowed the children to make the choice, whether they became Catholic, the Uniting Church, Muslim, Hindu – but at the same time he followed his religion very much within himself.32

But, again, generalisation is difficult: not all Muslim grand/fathers tolerated their families’ religious beliefs. Some expected their Aboriginal wives and children to accommodate, if not fully embrace, Islam. Aboriginal-Malay Septu Brahim recalled that during his upbringing his father’s Muslim religion predominated:

My [Catholic] mother was brought up with Irish and Germans [at Beagle Bay mission near Broome] and then she had the Aboriginal culture too. She had two cultures. But my father ... he only had the one culture ... and my mother had to fit in. Yes, we never ate pork or bacon and every Thursday night after he finished work ... he’d read the Koran and we’d get into it. If any visitors came, he’d make them sit there and listen to him praying.33

30 ‘Patricia’ (a pseudonym) in interview with the author, 15 July 2005, Broome, Western Australia.
31 Esther Kite in interview with the author, 12 December 2007, Alice Springs, Northern Territory.
32 Joanne Nasir in interview with the author, 17 December 2007, Darwin, Northern Territory.
33 Brahim 2000: 51.
Septu’s father was profoundly opposed to his son’s christening as a Catholic, particularly when it occurred without his knowledge or consent. According to Septu he was a toddler (in the early 1930s in Port Hedland) when a visiting Catholic priest was conducting christenings at the local church. He and some other neighbourhood children were christened, an event that was casually communicated to Septu’s father by an unwitting co-worker. According to Septu his father ‘just dropped everything and blew his top and went out the back door, came racing home and went berserk’.

Aboriginal-Malay sisters Semah and Halimah Mokak’s baptisms were also carried out in secret. Semah recalls that her Aboriginal mother took her and her sister to be baptised while their Malaysian Muslim father was out at sea working on a pearl-shelling lugger. Semah’s mother was obliged to have her daughters’ baptism performed in a clandestine fashion because, according to Semah, her Muslim ‘father had this really strong hand on all of us about being Muslims and we were Muslims and that was it’.

Some stratagems for securing a proper religious education were decidedly opportunistic. Semah, Halimah and the other Mokak children have vivid memories of their school holiday visits in the 1960s to the Daly River (about 140 kilometres south of Darwin), where a white South African imam (someone who leads the prayers during Islamic gatherings) who was a friend of the family’s resided. As Halimah recalls:

Well [the imam], I think he was a bit of a shady sort of a character, but I don’t know – he was a friend of a very dear old lady friend of ours, who used to look after this community with the Malak Malak people on the Daly River. So we used to go on holiday there every school holidays, and so that’s where Dad met him. So he was then appointed our religious instruction imam, and so we would have to – in the bush, with all the local kids all peering through the grass - we’d have to put down our little mats, and what I strongly remember, we used to laugh so much because the imam had his two big toes missing, so he didn’t have balance. When he used to go down to initiate his prayer, we were all behind him, so we would just start laughing, we just couldn’t stop laughing, you know – we had to try and be serious. So, we were learning all this, and we’d do the Islamic chant, La illaha ill Allah [There is none worthy of worship except Allah] and then, you know, you’d look around and you’d see all these little eyes in the bush, doing the same thing, all the local Malak Malak kids, and it was just so funny.

From all accounts the South African imam was a rather eccentric character. To this day Semah and Halimah are not sure what prompted him to leave South Africa, or why he was living at the Daly River Aboriginal mission.

34 Brahim 2000: 52.
35 Semah Mokak-Wischki in interview with the author, 15 August 2006, Brisbane, Queensland.
Perhaps as important as the content of these lessons was the impulse behind them, the evident commitment to educating the children into a tradition that transcended place and tribe. Born in Marree in 1941, Aboriginal-Afghan Dean Mahomed was instructed in the ways of Islam by his great uncle Mullah Assam Khan (a mullah being one learned in Islamic theology). Dean recalls that he and the other Marree ‘Ghantown’ boys prayed ‘twice a day, morning and before sundown’. He continues:

When we was kids we had to go there, you had to wash – the bore drain went through the chapel [mosque], and on the duck board you had to wash your hands and wash your feet before you went in there ... You had to go in barefoot and you went in there and you said ‘La illaha ill Allah, Mohammad rasul Allah’. Mullah Assam Khan was in charge of all of us as we prayed ... and he said, ‘My boy you’ve got to wash your feet and wash your hands before we go in that Mosque’.

The repetition of these rituals across the outback, inside or outside nascent Muslim communities, surrounded by amused or uncomprehending onlookers, not only served to produce a sense of distinct family at the time: remembered generations on, this determination to communicate religious values strikes the descendants as admirable. It is out of respect for the spirit of those initiatives that they self-identify as kinverts.

**Multicultural community**

People removed from familiar support networks and beset by cultural and socio-economic difficulties in a new and strange land tend ‘to seek support among those with whom they share some commonality’. In Australia, Afghan and Malay Muslims each created social and religious connections with fellow countrymen and other Muslims. The various ‘Ghan’ towns or camps dotted throughout inland Australia played an important role in the Afghan communities’ negotiation of a new life in a new country. They were places of religious guidance, friendship, support and where recent arrivals could learn from the more established Afghans how to navigate the way through an alien system and society. Ghan camps and, in particular, urban mosques also became important places of refuge for elderly Afghans who had little employment opportunities following the demise of the camel carting industry.

The ‘Malaytowns’ or quarters in north Australian coastal communities were also sites where ethnic and religious identities could be sustained and renewed. In the pearling industries of Broome, Darwin and Thursday Island there were both transient populations of indentured Malay workers, who were focused on earning money and returning to their homelands, and a resident Malay

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37 There is none worthy of worship except Allah and Muhammad is his Messenger.  
38 Dean Mahomed in interview with the author, 23 April 2007, Port Augusta, South Australia.  
population with strong links to the local Indigenous community.\textsuperscript{40} Sally bin Demin recalls seeing the Malay men in Broome’s Malay quarters engaged in \textit{silat}, a martial art form practiced throughout the Malay Archipelago.\textsuperscript{41} Others, including sisters Majunia and Rose bin Swani (the daughters of a Japanese-Aboriginal mother and Singapore-born Muslim Malay father), have very fond memories of the wonderful smells of the delicious food, including rice, curries and satays that the young Malay men shared with them and their siblings.\textsuperscript{42} Mark bin Bakar was raised by his Kitja Aboriginal mother and Malay step-father (who came to Australia from Singapore in 1950). Growing up in Broome in the 1960s, he recalls his frequent visits to the Malay lodgings on the foreshore:

\begin{quote}
I felt very free when I went up to the Malay quarters … I used to run through the men’s quarters that were laid out like an army camp with lines and lines of beds. I felt at home there. Dad used to take us to the Malay quarters prior to going down to the creek for fishing and crabbing. We’d drag all these Malay boys with us to the creek and would come back with all this fish … The kitchen there was a big communal one and … there were big pots of curries and chillies which gave off a beautiful aroma.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

Disagreements within Muslim communities in Australia occurred of course, but Malays and Afghans also supported their fellow countrymen in a variety of ways. Many Afghans and Malays offered financial support to newcomers, or a meal and a place to sleep for those who needed them. Majunia and Rose bin Swani recall that when their Malay father died (in Broome in 1975), the younger itinerant Malay pearl-shell workers, who looked upon him as a father, regularly came to their aid. The young Malay men helped the bin Swani family with odd jobs, brought them cooked meals and generally supported his widow and adolescent children in any way they could.\textsuperscript{44} In Darwin Joanne Nasir noted that her Muslim grandfather was ‘very considerate to his fellow Indonesians and relations. He offered his family and his property and everything else, and if anybody was travelling through, [the family’s 20 acre property] was their meeting ground’.\textsuperscript{45} In the 1920s, a number of Afghan men came to the aid and support of Peshawar-born Jack Akbar, who was fleeing Western Australia’s Chief Protector of Aborigines for engaging in an ‘illicit’ affair with his Aboriginal partner Lallie. According to their daughter Mona Wilson (nee Akbar) it was because of the help offered by her father’s ‘people’, and a dear friend in Farina (in South Australia), that her parents made their way safely to Adelaide, where they were married.\textsuperscript{46}

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\textsuperscript{40} Ganter 1999: iii.
\textsuperscript{41} Bin Demin 2007: 33.
\textsuperscript{42} Majunia and Rose bin Swani in interview with the author, 3 September 2007, Broome, Western Australia.
\textsuperscript{43} Bin Bakar 2002: 44.
\textsuperscript{44} Majunia and Rose bin Swani in interview with the author, 3 September 2007, Broome, Western Australia.
\textsuperscript{45} Joanne Nasir in interview with the author, 17 December 2007, Darwin, Northern Territory.
\textsuperscript{46} Mona Wilson in interview with the author, 21 November 2005, Kyneton, Victoria.
\end{flushright}
Afghan and Malay Muslims created their own ethnic and religious networks of support, but this did not exclude an engagement with the wider Australian community. Some Muslims, particularly in the early days, had little contact with non-Muslim society, but over time the majority became active participants in their local communities. Some white Australian men worked side by side with the Afghans, while others worked closely with Malay men. In the event that an Afghan or Malay required a character reference, it was often white storekeepers and other influential townsfolk who did them this favour.47 In Broome Anthea Demin, of Aboriginal-Malay heritage, noted that the local Muslim men have been long supporters of the town’s church and school, through their contributions to fundraising and other events.48

Festivals held at the end of the month-long fast of Ramadan were eagerly attended by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The holy month of Ramadan is the ninth month of the Muslim lunar calendar, during which Muslims abstain from food, water and sexual relations each day from sunrise to sunset. The festival marking the end of Ramadan is known in Arabic as Eid ul-Fitr. Europeans and others living near Afghan communities knew the huge communal feasts as ‘Afghan Christmas’. Curries, rice, fruit and sweets were served, with dancing and singing, and gifts given to the Afghan, white Australian and Aboriginal children.49 In Broome the Malay Muslims also invited non-Muslims to celebrate ‘Malay Christmas’ or Hari Raya, the Malay term for Eid ul-Fitr. The Malays not only fulfilled their religious obligations, they also contributed to the town’s social fabric. In Mark bin Bakar’s words:

We used to have it at Malay quarters and everyone went to it, the whole town went to it. It didn’t matter if you were white or Black, everyone celebrated Hari Raya. For every one Malay there were probably two non-Muslims.50

The strong family and community bonds extant in ‘Ghan’ camps and ‘Malay towns’ were held together by shared ethnic, national and religious ties but also, at times, a forced alienation from white Australian society.51 Interviewees Halima binti Hassan Awal and ‘Patricia’ recall growing up in the 1950s (on Thursday Island and in Broome, respectively) when they and their families were subjected to petty apartheid. They could not sit with the white townsfolk at the local cinema, were obliged to frequent separate public facilities and were even treated at the hospital apart from the white patients.52 Close-knit Indigenous-Muslim families and communities did not result solely from the desire to be among kindred spirits, they also formed a bulwark against an often hostile white Australia.

47 Rajkowski 1987: 52.
48 Anthea Demin in interview with the author, 5 September 2006, Broome, Western Australia.
50 Mark Bin Bakar in interview with the author, 14 July 2005, Broome, Western Australia.
52 Halima binti Hassan Awal in interview with the author, 30 March 2005, Brisbane, Queensland.
Making common cause

Generalisations need to be treated with circumspection. The permutations of accommodation generated within a relatively small group of Indigenous-Muslim families are remarkable. They not only influenced the internal family dynamic and the face the family showed to its immediate neighbours. They could in exceptional circumstances elicit non-stereotypical behaviour from the wider population. The all too evident vulnerability of the men and women who came together across laws and cultures was dramatically exposed by the operations of the law. At the same time, the tenacity, uprightness and decency of individual Muslim men in this situation occasionally had the power to produce an empathy that, in another permutation, broke down barriers between races and creeds – and this potential, while of limited historical significance, is of considerable symbolic importance to the descendants of such events.

The story of the Aboriginal-Indian Sahanna family is a case in point. The late Kemel Ngummurra Si Hanna (Jack Sahanna) was born in about 1934 at Moonlight Valley station, more than 200 kilometres south-west of Wyndham (in north-west Western Australia). As a nine year old Jack, the son of an Indian father and Aboriginal mother, was forcibly taken from his home and family to Beagle Bay mission (about 120 kilometres north of Broome). His younger sister Meriam (Mary Ann) was also taken away. According to Jack’s daughter ‘Ruth’ (a pseudonym), it is not clear whether Jack spoke his mother Mary’s east Kimberley language, or his father’s tongue when he arrived at the mission, but none of the officials there could understand him.53 He had to learn English, eventually forgetting his original tongue and, in the process, becoming ‘estranged from his family and background’.54

In the late 1920s Jack’s father Sianna Sindhi, or Sahanna, had started a cattle run, Moonlight Valley station, on the east Kimberley’s Salmond River. When Sahanna first came to the area a local Aboriginal man Tommy showed him where he could ‘sit down’ on his ancestral lands. Accompanied by his partner Daisy and their two daughters Mary and Winnie, the Aboriginal family moved to Sahanna’s station.55 It was an arrangement that benefited both parties. Sahanna could not prosper without cheap Aboriginal labour and local Aboriginal families were guaranteed a livelihood while remaining on their own country. In the 1930s Sahanna, who was now in his sixties, fathered two ‘mixed-race’ children. Jack was born to Mary, and a few years later, a daughter was born to Mary’s sister Winnie. In Aboriginal and Muslim cultures, as we have seen, wives were usually considerably younger than their husbands. In Muslim societies a man had to work for years to save enough money to support his young wife, while Aboriginal men had to go through initiation before they were deemed ready to

53 ‘Ruth’ (a pseudonym) in interview with the author, 2 September 2006, Broome, Western Australia. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent quotations are taken from this interview.
55 According to Regina Ganter (who also discusses the Sahanna family in her Mixed Relations), it is not clear if the lease was in Sahanna’s name or whether it was held through a dummy owner. See Ganter 2006: 180.
take a wife. In each culture polygyny was practised and, from an Aboriginal and Muslim perspective at least, Sahanna’s sexual relationships with two younger women were acceptable.

But not everyone approved of Sahanna’s cross-cultural partnerships. Following Jack’s birth Sahanna came under increased scrutiny by Western Australian officials. As a so-called ‘Asiatic’, Sahanna was not permitted to employ Aboriginal labourers or ‘cohabit’ with Aboriginal women. Restrictions upon their employment of Aborigines denied ‘Asians’ (including Afghans) the most common pretext used by white men for having Aboriginal women on their premises. According to Regina Ganter’s research, a local constable suggested to Sahanna in 1937 that he employ a white manager who, she claims, ‘would safeguard the kind of morality that could be officially sanctioned with a permit to employ Aboriginal labour’. In 1943 Sahanna employed a white stockman and a permit to employ Aborigines was subsequently issued. By this time there were at least three children and a dozen adult Aboriginal residents at Moonlight Valley.

Sahanna no doubt assumed the presence of Aborigines on his station was now covered by the employment of the white manager. Unfortunately, a result of the white man’s actions was the further intrusion of the Aboriginal protection bureaucracy into the Sahanna family’s affairs. The white manager shot and killed Mary’s Aboriginal husband and Sahanna, along with the Aboriginal residents, was taken to Perth as a witness in the trial. Ganter notes that while he was in Perth, Sahanna came under pressure from Western Australian Commissioner of Native Affairs, Frank Bray. He was threatened with prosecution for ‘cohabitation’ unless he consented to the removal of his children and agreed to pay maintenance for their upkeep to the department.

Prior to his removal Jack had very fond memories of time spent with his father. ‘Ruth’ recalled hearing her father talk about his experiences, which included riding camels, rounding up cattle and going out ‘with his father all the time. He spent a lot of time with him while his mum was staying at camp’. Other recollections confirm that Sahanna introduced his son to the Islamic faith. Jack recalled waking up early and accompanying his father on a camel to the top of a nearby hill, from which they would say their prayers. He also remembered not eating pork.

According to ‘Ruth’, before Jack’s removal Sahanna had plans to send his son away to school. He wanted Jack to be educated, to make something of his life: ‘he had to be somebody, and he remembered his dad always telling him, “I’m going to send you away because you’re going to be somebody one day”’. It remains unknown how Jack’s Aboriginal family would have responded to this. What family lore does recount is the obvious agency they exhibited in their attempts

57 Bottrill c1992: 5.
to prevent the Aboriginal protection bureaucracy from taking Jack away. Jack’s Aboriginal grandmother painted him with a black muddy substance so that the tracker sent to locate and remove him would not detect him among the other so-called ‘full-blood’ children. On the tracker’s fourth attempt (while almost all of Moonlight Valley’s residents were at the Perth court case), he discovered Jack because it was a rainy day and the black substance was dripping off him. Many years later this same tracker relocated Jack as an adult and apologised for removing him from his family. ‘Ruth’ recalled his visit as an adolescent and the way her ‘Dad was just sitting there, tears were just running down [his face]’.

White interference in this case both helped and hindered the Sahanna family. The intrusion of the Western Australian Aboriginal protection bureaucracy broke the family apart. On the other hand, it also provoked empathetic behaviour among the authorities: in advising Sahanna how to circumvent the restrictions placed on his employment of (and cohabitation with) Aborigines, the local constable sought to help keep the family together. Ann McGrath suggests that the unofficial advice that some police and other influential whites gave ‘mixed-race’ couples (about impending raids or ways to avoid the imposition of a removal order) complicates the somewhat exaggerated ‘and misleading image of a general populace wholeheartedly enthusing about “White Australia”’. In any case, the vicissitudes of the Sahanna family become a microcosm of the struggle for an Australian identity which continues to preoccupy politicians and pundits today. Heir to this complex history of resistance and loss, kinverts not only acknowledge a legacy of pain: they inherit a far more nuanced, sophisticated and realistic understanding of the complexities of identity formation in this country than is presented in either our history books or the media.

**Kinversion and alternation**

Women feature prominently among the story-tellers I have interviewed. Although they narrate the experiences of male forebears, they inflect their accounts with an irony that is both affectionate and critical. It is likely that the stories they tell have come down to them largely from their mothers. The characterisation of the men’s behaviour as lying along a spectrum between strict orthodoxy and relative tolerance of other ways reflects the experience of those who suffered the consequences of these different attitudes. They also suggest that women’s experiences and views, while they may have been respected, were not necessarily well understood or probed by the men folk. The women in my interviews were recounting the experiences of men but, in the way they told the stories, and in the sense they communicated of knowing more than they let on, they were also relating women’s stories – the experiences of women coming to terms with, and circumventing patriarchal attitudes.

Thus, while Afghan and Malay descendants alike spoke of the way their Indigenous mothers became Muslim after marrying their husbands, few

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59 McGrath 2003: 46.
identified with Islam spiritually and theologically. The often mission-raised women tended to identify with various Christian denominations and, while they adopted particular Islamic rituals or behavioural norms during their married life, this was perhaps more an indication of their preparedness to accommodate their husbands’ beliefs and practices, than a desire to become religiously practising Muslims. Indigenous wives’ adoption of Islam helped create a sense of unity within their racially, culturally and religiously diverse families. In the words of Aboriginal-Malay descendant Semah Mokak, ‘I think Mum just, you know, she was a Muslim to please Dad really’. In an interview with Dilara Reznikas, Semah’s sister Halimah characterised their mother’s (cultural) acceptance of Islam in these terms: ‘My mother was a Catholic woman and she converted to Islam, but she didn’t practice Islam as such … We were the ones that used to practice Islam, but she still used to go to church with her mother’.

Significantly, taking on the new religious and ideological codes of their husbands did not include the women forgoing previously held beliefs and commitments. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women adhered to many Islamic religious and cultural practices during their married lives (at least in the presence of their husbands), these did not replace their prior held convictions. The kind of identity change they exhibited could be described as one of ‘alternation’. According to Richard Travisano, unlike conversion, alternation refers to a less radical form of religious and ideological change which is much more inclusive of former commitments. Rather than replacing the old with the new, they are combined. Indigenous wives exercised agency in deploying particular worldviews and identities in particular contexts. In some environments it was appropriate to utilise a specific set of beliefs and practices, while in other situations an alternative set of religio-cultural traditions was foregrounded.

Indigenous women who entered partnerships with Afghan and Malay Muslim men accommodated at least three religio-cultural systems. Unless they were completely cut off from their country and kinfolk at a very young age the women had access to the beliefs and practices of their local tribe or language group. These were usually enmeshed with the various Christian traditions they were exposed to on reserves and missions. Such introduced beliefs were, in turn, combined with their Muslim husbands’ religious and ideological practices. Another factor to bear in mind, however, is that many Aboriginal and Islander women who married Muslim men had, themselves, been raised by Muslim fathers or step-fathers. Such women combined or alternated between a further layer of cultural, ethnic, national and religious loyalties. This raises the question of whether we might more accurately characterise these women as kinverts or as alternators, individuals engaged in an ongoing process of ‘alternation’. Kinversion is a broad category that includes growing up in a Muslim ambience

60 Halimah Mokak in interview with Dilara Reznikas, date unknown. Partial transcript in the possession of the author.
and kinverts’ proclamation of a Muslim identity is inextricably bound up with their desire to honour their grand/parents or other ancestors. As such, kinversion does not refer specifically to the particular act of integration or accommodation that Indigenous women undergo in marriage. This form of alternating identity change might best be understood as a discrete sub-set of kinversion.

In this sense, kinversion is both an historical and a cultural category. It embraces the behaviour of many Indigenous women marrying Muslim men, but it also applies to the descendants of these unions. Aboriginal-Afghan descendants are tremendously proud of their heritage. They want their forebears’ immense contribution to Australia’s material wealth and cultural landscape to be acknowledged and appreciated. But, in common with Indigenous-Malay kinverts, honouring the memories of their forefathers does not necessarily extend to reclamation of their religious beliefs. As Philip Jones, senior curator at the South Australian Museum, remarks: ‘The [Afghan] descendants today … there probably isn’t any religious gesture they make, other than generally steering away from pork. But if Ramadan came around, I don’t think it would impinge on their lives any longer’.63 This does not mean, however, that the kinverts I met are any less attached to their Muslim identity, even if only in symbolic terms.

Many Indigenous-Muslim kinverts imbibed Islamic religio-cultural beliefs and practices as a natural part of their upbringing in a Muslim household. Others, as we have seen, were given more formal religious instruction. My interviews with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians who grew up in Muslim households and communities have revealed unique and profound insights into the religious and cultural traditions of their Islamic families and forebears. But can they be characterised as Muslim? The vast majority of descendants are not interested in taking on Islam in any strict sense. This is why I have proposed the terms kinvert and kinversion. They are labels that I hope preserve and pay homage to the descendants’ connection to an Islamic orientation, but differentiate their experiences from those of Muslim converts. Religious conversion usually involves drastic transformations in one’s life. Converting to a (new) religion often entails a complete change of allegiance from one source of authority to another.64 But the Indigenous-Muslim descendants I have encountered combined Islamic and Christian practices and traditions in their daily lives: they celebrated the end of Ramadan and Christmas; they were taught to recite passages from the Qur’an and the Bible, how to perform salat (the daily prayers of Islam) and sing Christian hymns.

In light of this, the question of whether or not Indigenous-Muslim descendants are Muslim seems a little simplistic. To answer in the negative disregards the immensely significant role that Islamic beliefs and practices have played in their daily lives. But nor do the vast majority of Indigenous-Muslim descendants I have met necessarily consider themselves members of the ummah, or international community of believers. Whether or not they are Muslim is a question that only

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63 Philip Jones in interview with the author, 4 December 2007, Adelaide, South Australia.
64 Travisano 1970: 600.
individual descendants can answer. To judge from the evidence presented here, responses will be highly personal. When I asked Halimah Mokak if she would call herself a Muslim she replied: ‘Well no, but I would say I was brought up a Muslim because it’s just been involved in all of my daily life’. Growing up with what he described as ‘a very strict Catholic upbringing, but also the disciplines of the Islam faith’, Aboriginal-Malay Mark bin Bakar stressed that ‘the convergence of the two religions’ made him who he is today. Another Aboriginal-Malay, Johari bin Demin, also possesses this doubled cultural and religious identity: ‘I’ve had, I suppose, a Catholic influence throughout my life, but I do feel some affinity with Muslims and I can understand [them], I can connect with them and I’m aware of what their issues are’. Aboriginal-Afghan descendants espouse a similar view. ‘Ruth’ suggests that even though her father Jack (who was nicknamed ‘the Ghan’ in Broome) was baptised at Beagle Bay as a Catholic, ‘he never forgot who he was back then. He always knew his father was a Muslim and he remembered himself being part of that, but that never clashed with having to become a Catholic’. Shirley Wilson’s stance is similar: ‘We were brought up with a Christian upbringing, plus the Muslim thing at home, part and part’. This dual identity is eloquently summed up by her sister Mona: ‘So I sit on two chairs, you know. I sit on the Christian chair sometimes and on the Muslim chair sometimes. I sit on the Afghan chair sometimes and I sit on the Aboriginal chair sometimes. It depends’. This is a statement of considerable wisdom and wit. It captures the formidable resourcefulness which informs the everyday lives of kinverts. Kinverts belong neither to the past nor to the present. They insist on the kinship of past and present, on the value of a continual accommodation of different histories in building a sense of self in the present. And this attentiveness to the way identities are negotiated when there is good will and commitment to human values is not only a personal legacy: it defines an attitude to the world that translates into principled action designed to communicate the exceptional contribution kinversion can make to the larger projects of thinking who we are, how we narrate ourselves, and where we propose to ‘sit’.

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Christianity, colonialism, and cross-cultural translation: Lancelot Threlkeld, Biraban, and the Awabakal

Anne Keary

This essay aims to reconstruct a cross-cultural conversation about sacred matters between Lancelot Threlkeld, a missionary with the London Missionary Society (LMS), and Biraban, a leading man of the Awabakal of eastern Australia. Between 1825 and 1841, Threlkeld devoted himself to learning the language of the Awabakal in hopes of converting them to Christianity, while Biraban, his principal language teacher, helped him translate Christian concepts and educated him about Awabakal traditions. The records of their endeavours are preserved, albeit in an edited and fragmented form, in the missionary’s grammars, vocabularies and Scriptural translations. A close examination of these linguistic texts reveals, in outline, the dynamics of a complex, multi-faceted exchange. Read carefully – and in conjunction with Threlkeld’s other writings – these texts yield new insights into the cross-cultural translation and indigenous reception of Christianity during an early period of British colonisation.1

Threlkeld’s voluminous writings have been the subject of numerous studies. Most scholars have focused on his letters and public reports. Threlkeld

1 A note on terminology: most contemporary scholars use the name Awabakal to refer to both the people who lived around Lake Macquarie and their language. However, it should be noted that the name Awabakal is a relatively recent invention. It appears to have been given to the ‘Lake Macquarie’ people by John Fraser when he edited and republished Threlkeld’s writings under the title The Australian Language as Spoken by the Awabakal, the People of Lake Macquarie, being an account of their language, traditions, and customs (Threlkeld 1892). Fraser may have created this name on the assumption that ‘Awaba’ was the indigenous name for Lake Macquarie and that Aboriginal people in the east used ‘kal’ to denote belonging to a place. But the term ‘Awaba’ was Fraser’s addition to his reprint of Threlkeld’s original 1834 Grammar and Threlkeld himself never used the name Awabakal. In fact, according to a visiting philologist, Horatio Hale, Threlkeld was not aware of any name that the people used to refer to themselves (Hale 1846: 482). From Threlkeld’s own translations, it would appear that the people more often spoke of themselves as people belonging to Mu-lu-bin-ba, the name of the site upon which the British established Newcastle (Threlkeld 1834b: 15). Moreover, Threlkeld records ‘Nik-kin-ba’ or ‘a place of coals’ as a name for the lake region (Threlkeld 1834b: 83; ‘Reminiscences’ Threlkeld 1974: 64). More recently, Amanda Lissarague has termed the language spoken by the Awabakal as the ‘Hunter River and Lake Macquarie language’ or HRLM on the basis that Threlkeld often used this descriptive phrase when referring to the language and that the language was closely related to dialects spoken by neighbouring peoples in the region. (Lissarague 2006: 12–14. While some scholars now use this term to refer to the language, (eg Carey 2009), many linguists continue to use the name Awabakal (See McGregor 2008). In this essay, then, for ease of expression, I will use Awabakal to refer to both the language and the people.
is a central figure in Henry Reynolds’ account of those all-too-few British humanitarians who exposed and protested colonial violence against Aboriginal people. Threlkeld is also central to Anna Johnston’s study of missionary writing in the Pacific. Using the conceptual tools of post-colonial theory, Johnston has analysed the complex ways in which Threlkeld’s representations of indigenous Australians both supported and unsettled dominant understandings of race and gender in colonial society. It is only recently that scholars have turned their attention to Threlkeld’s language studies. Amanda Lissarague has used the works of Threlkeld and others to produce a grammar and linguistic analysis of the language spoken by the Awabakal people. From an historical perspective, David Roberts has shown how Threlkeld used his linguistic works to defend and promote his evangelical endeavours, while Hilary Carey has examined Threlkeld’s grammars and vocabularies in the context of the colonial study of Aboriginal languages, and more recently as texts that are revealing of ‘conversations in the contact zone’ and the disintegration of indigenous ‘camp life’. Meanwhile, in a new study of Aboriginal engagement with the colonisers’ culture of literacy, Penny van Torn has discussed Threlkeld and Biraban’s relationship as translators and Biraban’s response to Christianity, but without close analysis of the linguistic texts themselves.2

This essay extends and diverges from these studies. It focuses primarily on Threlkeld’s linguistic works but it is specifically concerned with what these texts can tell us about the cross-cultural translation of Christian and indigenous religious concepts during the early years of colonisation. As an attempt at retrieving and reconstructing Aboriginal voices from British sources, it is ethnohistorical in its methods and goals.3 Missionary linguistic texts, as scholars

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3 For the most part, studies of Aboriginal missions have focused on missions in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries and it is only recently that Australian scholars have adopted an ethnohistorical approach to mission sources. Historians have tended to dismiss the early colonial missions as short-lived failures: Swain and Trompf 1995: 79–86; Woolmington 1988. Inga Clendinnen, in her recent and widely praised ethnohistory of encounters between Aborigines and the First Fleet, argued that the kind of reconstruction of indigenous religious thinking that she undertook in her previous study of Spanish/Maya relations was ‘impossible for [Australia] ... not least because after the first few years the Australians ceased to be of much interest to the British, while in Mexico the friars remained committed to the pursuit of souls’. However, Clendinnen ignores the fact that missionaries in early colonial Australia such as Threlkeld, did, in fact, leave records of their encounters with Aboriginal peoples: Clendinnen 2005: 5. More recently, scholars have shown how an ethnohistorical approach can illuminate the history of Aboriginal responses to evangelisation. For the early period see Carey and Roberts 2002; Brock 2003; and for interesting ethnohistorical work on the indigenous reception of Christianity in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Austin Broos 1994; Magowan 2003; Swain and Rose 1988; Van Gent 2003. More generally, on the need to consider Aboriginal engagements with mission Christianity as dynamic and dialectal see Ranger 2005; Brock 2005 and for an informative discussion of ethnohistory in Australia see Brock 2004. In North America, Africa, and the Pacific, the ethnohistorical study of missionary sources for insight into indigenous responses to
in other fields have shown, were hybrid, cross-cultural productions. They necessarily emerged, as Derek Peterson writes, ‘out of a sustained dialogue with native others’, and bear the marks, however refracted, of indigenous interests and intentions. But these texts were also, of course, colonial representations of indigenous peoples and their languages, and they were intended, too, as instruments of colonial transformation. In this essay, then, I read Threlkeld’s linguistic works as both colonial representations of indigenous people and products of interaction with them in a colonial environment. In doing so, I consider how colonial assumptions about indigenous inferiority were variously reproduced and undermined in Threlkeld’s representations of the Awabakal and their language and, at the same time, how the texts themselves, as works of translation, are revealing of a mutual, if unequal, engagement with different structures of meaning. This engagement was necessarily bound up with colonial relations: it can be analysed in terms of knowledge and power, domination and resistance, but such analysis should be particularised. It should also be open to the possibility that the engagement produced other ways of relating, other ways of knowing. As Nicholas Thomas has reminded us, it is important to recognise that ‘colonialism’ and ‘culture’ – and, one might add, cross-cultural interaction – ‘were often deeply mutually implicated without reducing one to the other’. And that ‘the process of colonization’, and evangelisation, ‘may be conditioned, in a profound way, by singular features of indigenous cultural structures and power relations’.

The study of Threlkeld’s grammars and vocabularies presents an opportunity to analyse such processes at the localised level of interpersonal, ethnographic encounters. Specifically, then, I examine these texts to show how linguistic exchange provided Biraban and others with an opportunity to redefine their relationship to the missionary and assert and defend the significance of their sacred sites and Ancestral Beings in the face of colonisation; how the Awabakal and other Aboriginal peoples interpreted the missionary’s Christian deity; and how, perhaps most intriguingly, Biraban translated key Christian concepts in terms of male sacred knowledge as Awabakal ceremonial life began to break down. Further, I look at how these texts illuminate the complexity of the missionary’s own relationship to indigenous culture: his dependence on, and even growing understanding of, the very cultural categories he sought to displace.

Christianity is well established. Some of the works that I have found particularly useful include Burkhart 1989; Greer 2005; Landau 1995; Neylan 2003. For an interesting discussion of the critical reading of missionary sources see Douglas 2001.

4 Insightful studies of missionary linguistic texts include: Fabian 1986; Rafael 1993; Peterson 1999; Worger 2001; Gardner 2006.
5 Peterson 1999: 36.
6 Fabian 1986; Gilmour 2006.
7 Thomas 1994: 41, 64.
Establishing a mission in a colonial world

In order to understand the dynamics of Threlkeld and Biraban’s cross-cultural dialogue it is necessary to understand the early history of the mission and the position each man occupied in a rapidly changing colonial world. Each came to the encounter with very different understandings and expectations of the other.

When Threlkeld arrived in Australia in late 1824, he was already an experienced missionary. The son of an English brush-maker and a former circus performer, Threlkeld had joined the mainly non-conformist LMS in 1813 following a life-altering conversion. After receiving some training in theology and English grammar, he had been sent by the LMS Board to its mission in the Society Islands.8 There, on the island of Raiatea, Threlkeld had learned the local indigenous language, translated the gospel, established a school, and, according to his own report, succeeded in baptising 1,100 individuals.9 A dedicated missionary of the dissenting tradition, his experiences on Raiatea did not alter his belief that all non-Christian, non-European others were depraved, uncivilised heathens who could only be saved – and then civilised – through a knowledge of the gospel.10 But Threlkeld had also proved himself to be a ‘difficult’ man while in the Society Islands, an individual capable of questioning authority when he believed principle required it.11

Threlkeld initially expected his stay in New South Wales to be temporary. He had come to New South Wales with a travelling LMS Deputation, headed by Daniel Tyerman and George Bennet, in hopes of finding a new partner after the death of his first wife. However, events in the colony led him to alter his plans. Soon after their arrival, the Deputation began making inquiries about the Aboriginal people of the country. They were shocked by the physical and moral condition of the indigenous people they encountered. They were also struck by how little evangelical work had been undertaken on their behalf. Earlier colonial attempts to convert and ‘civilise’ Aboriginal people had focused on teaching children in the homes of clergy or in the Parramatta Native Institution and they had met with little success.12 As a consequence, the Deputation learned, most of the colonial clergy, particularly the senior Anglican minister, Samuel Marsden, had come to view Aboriginal people as incapable of ‘civilisation’ and without hope of salvation, ‘as untractable as the kangaroos and oppossums … of this strange country’.13 And while the clergy were pessimistic, they were informed that many among the growing settler population viewed Aboriginal people

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11 On Threlkeld’s role as colonial critic see Johnston 2006.
13 Tyerman and Bennet 1832: 268.
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with open hostility and had even publicly advocated their extermination.\textsuperscript{14} The Deputation, however, was undeterred. Although they were inclined to accept the colonial view that the Aboriginal people were the ‘lowest class of human beings’, they insisted, nonetheless, that they were human beings and therefore possessed of souls to be saved.\textsuperscript{15} Tyerman and Bennet therefore proposed a new mission and asked Threlkeld to stay on. They also proposed the adoption of new strategies. Noting that the failed evangelical efforts of the past had focused on teaching Aboriginal people English, the Deputation argued that if the gospel was preached to the ‘Natives’ ‘in their own tongue’, as on the Society Islands, a new venture might succeed.\textsuperscript{16} Further, they argued that a mission station should be established at a remove from, rather than within, colonial settlements, so that the ‘Natives’ would be less subject to the ‘immoral’ influences of the convict population.\textsuperscript{17} After considering a number of sites, the Deputation chose land near Lake Macquarie, 20 miles south of Newcastle, and applied to the colonial government for a grant of 10,000 acres. With Governor Brisbane’s support, the new mission was initiated.\textsuperscript{18}

The object of Threlkeld’s evangelical endeavour, the Awabakal, occupied a very different position in the evolving colonial order. Certainly, they were not as untouched by colonisation as the Deputation would have liked to believe. Since 1804 when the penal colony of Newcastle was founded on their fern-gathering grounds of Mulubinba, they had been in contact with the British, mainly as occasional traders.\textsuperscript{19} Then, when Governor Brisbane decided to close the penal colony in 1821 and Newcastle became a port for free settlers, the Awabakal witnessed as a wave of colonists invaded the lands of the neighbouring Wonaruah and Geawegal peoples along the Hunter River valley.\textsuperscript{20} When these peoples resisted, the colonial government sent in military forces to ‘secure’ the valley, providing a stark object lesson in terror to all indigenous peoples in the region.\textsuperscript{21} While the Awabakal were still able to fish and hunt on their own lands and, importantly, maintain their spiritual connections to their country during

\textsuperscript{14} See Threlkeld to Burder and Hankey, 2 February 1825, Threlkeld 1974 II: 178.
\textsuperscript{15} Tyerman and Bennet 1832: 260.
\textsuperscript{16} Tyerman and Bennet 1832: 279.
\textsuperscript{17} Extract from a letter to Brisbane from Tyerman and Bennet, 8 February 1825, London Missionary Society 1829: 294. On the decision to establish the mission near Newcastle see also London Missionary Society 1825: 17.
\textsuperscript{18} ‘Deed of Trust to Aboriginal Mission by Sir Thomas Brisbane’, Historical Records of Australia [hereafter HRA], series I, vol XI: 512–513.
\textsuperscript{19} On Mulubinba as an Awabakal site see Threlkeld 1834a, ‘A Selection of Prayers for the Morning and Evening…’, Mitchell Library, ML ZA 1446, Reel CY 2214 [hereafter Threlkeld 1834a]: 15–16, 1850: 47. On Awabakal territory and the groups that make up the Awabakal see Austin 1995: 4–5; Gunson in Threlkeld 1974 I: 72. For a general account of contact between the Awabakal and the British at Newcastle, see Roberts nd. Although relations were generally peaceful, there were incidents of violence, see Menzies 1804.
this time, they too found themselves subject to invasion. Coinciding with the establishment of the mission, six colonists took up grants of land around Lake Macquarie between 1826 and 1829. Although this takeover was more limited than the invasion of the Hunter River valley, it still had a significant impact. Soldiers and the convict labourers assigned to work on settlers’ pastoral runs, attacked Aboriginal men and assaulted Aboriginal women. This escalation in violence was also accompanied by an increasingly virulent racism. Threlkeld reported that many colonists in the region had come to regard Aboriginal people as not even human, but as ‘a species of Baboon’.

In this increasingly hostile environment, Threlkeld’s position became more complicated. Having established his mission on Awabakal land, at a site they called ‘Bah-tah-bah’, he was, in many respects, a colonist too. He also continued to hold to the colonial – and evangelical – view that the ‘heathen’ Aborigines lived in a state of ‘darkness, error, superstition, and misery’, and, in many respects, his goal of converting them to Christianity and instructing them in ‘the arts of civilised life’, supported colonial interests in that it was necessarily aimed at encouraging the Awabakal to reject their spiritual connections to the land and accept the colonising society’s religion and settled, agricultural way of life. However, as Threlkeld went about building his mission house for his children and his new wife, Sarah Arndell, he became more and more involved in the lives and conflicts of the Awabakal. Motivated by conscience and an evangelical belief in the fundamental, and therefore redeemable, humanity of Aboriginal people, he became the Awabakal’s defender. He again proved himself to be a ‘difficult’ man by vehemently and publicly rejecting the most racist views of the colonists, declaring that the Awabakal possessed ‘an equal share of intellectual power with others of the human race’. He also reported and denounced colonial attacks against Aboriginal people. This stance earned him the growing confidence of the Awabakal who increasingly looked to him as a protector, but his efforts on their behalf drew the hostility of the settler majority: the attorney-general, Saxe Bannister, warned him that ‘there were many who would banish [him] from the Colony and prevent every attempt of a Missionary nature among the Blacks if

23 On the colonisation of Awabakal country see Clouten 1967: 52.
26 For Threlkeld’s views on the state of the Aborigines see his ‘London Missionary Society Report, December 1825’, Threlkeld 1974 II: 189. For a statement of the goals of his missionary project see his instructions in Tyerman and Bennet 1825.
27 As he wrote to the LMS Directors ‘If I do not speak then my conscience says I become accessory [sic] to their death – God will give me wisdom and prudence’: Threlkeld to G Burder and WA Hankey, 4 September 1826, Threlkeld 1974 II: 213
they could’.30 As he commenced his work as a missionary, then, Threlkeld began to shift positions and perspectives as he variously condemned and supported colonial interests, disparaged and defended the Awabakal.31

The other figure who emerged as a crucial intermediary for the Awabakal in this period was Biraban. If Threlkeld came to Awabakal country as an experienced missionary, Biraban, his language teacher, met him as an experienced interpreter and go-between. Born around 1800, Biraban had been taken by the British some time during his boyhood and assigned as a servant to a Captain John M Gill at the military barracks in Sydney. As a mark of his claim to the boy, Gill renamed him M’Gill. When Gill returned to England he attached Biraban to a Captain Francis Allman who took him first to Port Macquarie in 1821, and then to Newcastle in 1824. During these years Biraban developed his cross-cultural skills, working as an interpreter, guide and ‘bush constable’ tracking runaway convicts. He learned to speak English fluently and acquired a working knowledge of the ways of the colonists. It was these skills, no doubt, that led to him being assigned, probably by Allman, to help Threlkeld learn the language of the Awabakal and build his mission station.32

For Biraban, relocating to Newcastle with Allman presented an opportunity to return to his own country and people. As Threlkeld’s records show, at the same time as he began assisting the missionary, he re-established relations with his band. This was marked, in 1826, by his initiation. Threlkeld reported: ‘A few weeks back Be-rah-bahn returned from a ceremony performed in the mountains, which has initiated him into all the rights of an Aborigine.’33 In this ceremony, elders would have instructed Biraban in the exclusive spiritual knowledge of men and a karaku or medicine man would have knocked out one of his front teeth to mark his initiated state.34 Undoubtedly Biraban was older than the other youths who went through the ceremony at the same time, but for all Awabakal men, initiation was both a transformative rite and an important first stage in an

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30 Saxe Bannister to Threlkeld, 10 August 1826, Threlkeld 1974 II: 213. However, it should be noted that while Threlkeld condemned colonial assaults against the Aborigines, he did not question their right to take possession of the country and ‘improve’ it. Indeed he believed they should be protected in their appropriation of Aboriginal land. During one outbreak of Aboriginal–settler conflict, he recommended that that a ‘force should go overland to strike terror by appearance only, and convince the settlers that they will be protected’, Threlkeld 1974 II: 93–94.
31 On Threlkeld’s complicated position in colonial society see Johnston 2003: Ch 9.
32 On Biraban’s early life see Threlkeld 1974 I: 6. Francis Allman was a trustee of the LMS mission so it is likely that he encouraged Biraban to assist Threlkeld.
34 On men’s initiation rites in Aboriginal Australia see Elkin 1977: 3–5; Berndt and Berndt 1964: 136–157; Howitt 1904: 509–642. Threlkeld noted that the ceremony was restricted to men: women were ‘not admitted to see the ceremony’: ‘Second Half Yearly Report of the Aboriginal Mission Supported by the London Missionary Society … June 21st, 1826’, Threlkeld 1974 II: 206. Also note that karaku was an Awabakal word, see Threlkeld 1834a: 88. He did, however, use ‘korarje’ in his earlier writings and this term, or its variant, ‘karadji’ is used by Elkin in his study of Aboriginal ‘Clever men’.
ongoing process of acquiring spiritual knowledge. In Awabakal society, status and knowledge were inextricably linked: the more sacred knowledge men possessed, the more authority they exercised.35

Threlkeld’s report of Biraban’s initiation was detailed and an early indication of his interest in Awabakal cultural practices – even as he condemned them as ‘cruel and … vain’.36 Several of his observations are worth noting. First, he reported that Biraban and two other boys were required to sleep on the grave of a recently deceased girl for the purpose of obtaining the bone used by the karakul for tooth avulsion.37 This suggests that elders singled out Biraban and the other youths for a special test: the custom of sleeping on a grave in order to obtain the bone was reserved for those considered to be potential karakul.38 Threlkeld later learned that for the Awabakal, the bonegiver was the Ancestral Being Koun, although the spirit of a deceased person might also be involved. On this occasion, Threlkeld reported that the ‘spirit of the girl came to one of them and gave them the bone’, a statement that suggests Biraban was passed over.39 Nonetheless, the fact that he was tested indicates that the elders regarded him as a potentially powerful individual. A further point to be noted is that this was the first time Threlkeld recorded the name ‘Be-rah-bahn’, an indication that Biraban may have been given this name as a sign of his initiated state. Possibly this was his totemic name: Threlkeld later learned that the name meant ‘eaglehawk’.40

Biraban’s return to Awabakal country, his initiation, and his subsequent marriage to a woman named ‘Ti-pah-ma-ah’ made him a full member of his band.41 In this respect he was establishing a position according to custom, but, through other activities, he was carving out a new position for himself. Building upon his knowledge of the colonists and his new role as Threlkeld’s language teacher, Biraban became an advocate and go-between for his people. It was Biraban who reported assaults on Aboriginal people to Threlkeld who, in turn, reported them to the colonial authorities. And when the British distributed goods to Aboriginal people, it was Biraban who acted as their Awabakal contact. In 1829, for instance, his name heads a list of men ‘assembled at … Newcastle,

35 On the link between knowledge and status in many Aboriginal societies see Stanner 1979: 39.
40 On the meaning of the name see Threlkeld 1834b: 13. On the significance of the name change see Bennett 1969: 14. It should also be noted that in 1828 Threlkeld listed M’Gill’s Aboriginal name as ‘We-pohng’ in his ‘Return of the Black Natives belonging to Lake Macquarie and Newcastle’, 21 May 1828, State Records of New South Wales [hereafter SRNSW], Colonial Secretary’s In Letters [hereafter CSIL], 4/2045. The meaning of ‘We-pohng’ cannot be retrieved but it was possibly an age group term or a kinship name. On Aboriginal naming practices see Dixon 1980: 27–29. On totemism, see Berndt and Berndt 1964: 189–196; Stanner 1979: 106–143.
41 She is listed as ‘M’Gill’s wife in the ‘Return of the Black Natives belonging to Lake Macquarie and Newcastle, 21 May 1828’, SRNSW, CSIL, 4/2045.
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on the occasion of a general distribution of rugs, shirts, &c. to the black natives’. 42 Colonial officials, imposing their own conceptions of authority, listed him as a ‘chief’ in ‘Native Returns’ in 1828 and 1833 43 and in 1830, Governor Darling presented him with a brass plate inscribed ‘Barabahn, or MacGil, Chief of the Tribe at Bartabah, on Lake Macquarie; a Reward for his assistance in reducing his Native Tongue to a written Language’. 44 Although the Awabakal would not have recognised him as such – traditional authority was exercised by male elders – it is highly likely that Biraban’s work as a cross-cultural intermediary increased his influence in the band. 45

During these early years, Biraban’s translation work with Threlkeld informed – and was informed by – the development of their colonial and cross-cultural relationship. While the award Biraban received from the governor – quite possibly on Threlkeld’s recommendation – was significant it notably cast him in the role of assistant. To a considerable extent this mirrored Threlkeld’s own representation of Biraban’s position. Although it was, in fact, primarily Biraban who instructed Threlkeld, carefully teaching him Awabakal words and phrases as they traveled, fished and talked, the missionary often tended to downplay Biraban’s work. 46 As Penny van Toorn has observed, Threlkeld was ‘equivocal’ about Biraban’s role, describing him as ‘my black tutor’, or ‘the valuable assistant in obtaining a knowledge of the language’, but then claiming for himself the role of primary translator. 47 This is strikingly evident in the title Threlkeld gave their first published work, printed in 1827: Specimens of a Dialect of the Aborigines of New South Wales; Being the First Attempt to Form Their Speech into a Written Language. In this title, Threlkeld privileges the work of writing, the communicative medium of the colonising society, over Biraban’s efforts to teach him the Awabakal language; indeed the title implies that by transcribing Awabakal words he was transforming their speech into a language proper for the first time. As David Murray has observed, writing of a parallel colonial history, although it is the colonised who do most of the language-learning and

42 Threlkeld, ‘Return of Black Natives in the district of Newcastle, 1829’, SRNSW, CSIL, 4/2045.
43 In 1828 a police officer listed Biraban under the name ‘M’Gill’ as ‘Chief’ of the ‘Coal River tribe’, – Coal River being the alternate British name for the Hunter River. The ‘usual place of Resort’ of the ‘Coal River tribe’, the officer gave as ‘The town of Newcastle’. See ‘Return of the Black Natives in the district of Newcastle, 1828’, SRNSW, CSIL, 4/2045. Threlkeld, better informed, listed Biraban as ‘belonging to Lake Macquarie and Newcastle’, in 1828, and named ‘Jemmy Jackass’ or ‘We-rah-kah-tah’ as ‘King of the District’, see ‘Return of the Black Natives belonging to Lake Macquarie and Newcastle, 1828’, SRNSW, CSIL, 4/ 2045. In 1833, a police officer again listed Biraban (McGill) as chief in the ‘Nominal Return of Natives present at the issue of Blankets at Lake Macquarie . . .’, SRNSW, CSIL, 4/666B.3, but in 1835 and 1838 the title is given to ‘King Ben’ in ‘Return of Aboriginal Natives, taken at Lake Macquarie on June, 1835’, SRNSW, CSIL, 4/2285.3, and ‘Return of the Aboriginal Natives, taken at Ebenezer Lake Macquarie on the 21st May 1838’, SRNSW, CSIL, 4/1133.3.
45 On the role of headmen in south-eastern Aboriginal society see Howitt 1904: 295–326.
translating in colonial situations, the colonisers typically repress full knowledge of their translation efforts in order to maintain ‘an image of uncomplicated colonial dominance’. 48 Certainly, it could be argued that Threlkeld’s Specimens, as an assertion of the missionary’s authority as a grammarian to organise and categorise the language, worked to promote an image of colonial superiority and control. It is worth noting, too, that the text includes the translated dialogue fragment: ‘man belonging-to speak’ which is highly suggestive of Threlkeld’s very colonial understanding of Biraban’s relationship to him. 49 And yet it was also the case that Threlkeld presented the text as proof that the Awabakal did, in fact, have a language and were, contra the views of the settler-colonial majority, capable of instruction, civilisation and salvation. 50 And further, even though Threlkeld considered Biraban’s efforts primarily as subordinate to that end, it is evident from the words and phrases in the text, and from Threlkeld’s related unpublished notes, that through the process of translation Biraban and others were able to compel the missionary, on occasion, to orient himself toward their framework of meaning. 51 It should be noted, though, that the Specimens did not include any references to religious topics. Possibly neither Threlkeld nor Biraban wished to discuss such matters in any depth until he felt confident the other would understand. Threlkeld, at least, stated that he did not wish to attempt ‘to make known Salvation to the Aborigines in their own tongue’ until he was ‘competent’ in the language and could ‘argue with them as men’. 52

Threlkeld’s optimism about the prospects for future evangelical success among the Awabakal was, however, short-lived. In 1829 the LMS dismissed him on the grounds that his expenses had become extravagant. 53 Although sympathetic supporters persuaded Governor Darling to grant him 1,000 acres on the northern side of the lake and a salary, the salary was 350 pounds less than he had previously received. 54 With less funding, and more limited supplies, Threlkeld found it difficult to persuade the Awabakal to stay. 55

The Awabakal, meanwhile, faced more serious threats. In the late 1820s and through the 1830s, outbreaks of epidemic disease took more lives. Threlkeld later

49 ‘A dialogue fragment from the Specimens: Yan-te-bo kore ko-ba wean’ which Threlkeld translated firstly as, ‘Thus man belonging-to speak’, and then, ‘let it be thus, as a black man speaks’ is suggestive of the missionary’s view of his relationship with Biraban (Threlkeld 1827: 24).
50 This is particularly evident in Biraban’s efforts to explain Awabakal pronominal forms and conceptions of agency; in the language the Awabakal used to describe their relations to place – strikingly as a matter of being, rather than simply residing; and in their attempts to explain aspects of their material culture and cultural activities. For a full analysis of this text see Keary 2002: Ch 6.
51 Threlkeld 1827: iv.
53 Threlkeld to Thomas Mitchell, 29 August 1829, Threlkeld 1974 II: 247.
54 He later reported that where once he had been able to employ up to sixty men at a time, the loss of the Society’s support meant he was able to employ six at most. See ‘Examination of the Rev. L. E. Threlkeld by the Committee on the Aborigines Question 21 September 1838’, Threlkeld 1974 II: 271.
estimated that at his first mission site, ‘upwards of sixty Blacks lie mouldering in the dust, of whom many were destroyed by … the epidemic of the time’.  

Colonisation exacerbated the impact of disease. European livestock destroyed indigenous plants and drove away game, compelling the Awabakal to seek food in Newcastle and at other settlements. The number of violent assaults against Aboriginal people, women in particular, increased. Better than most, Threlkeld understood their desperate situation: ‘their land is taken from them, their food destroyed and they are left to perish’.

The Aboriginal response to this onslaught varied. Most found themselves forced into deeper relations of dependence on the invading population. According to one colonial observer, ‘Many of the … Blacks now loiter about the larger towns, earning a scanty and precarious subsistence, chiefly by begging’. Alcohol became another deadly attraction. However, some Aboriginal men responded with violence. In 1835 Threlkeld learned that the neighbouring tribes ‘were on the way down here to kill all belonging to this district’. Although this large-scale attack did not materialise, smaller groups of young men did periodically assault settlers, taking food, guns, and other articles and, in some cases, killing.

There is also evidence that under the impact of colonisation, the Awabakal social and cultural order was breaking down. Reports of young men dressed in European clothing attacking settlers suggest that young people were developing new forms of violence, possibly without the sanction of band elders. According to Threlkeld, the traditional practice of punishment also fell ‘into desuetude’ in the 1830s. And, most tellingly, James Backhouse, a Quaker who visited the mission in 1836, reported the ‘abandonment of the practice of ornamenting themselves by cutting their flesh; [and] their ceasing to knock out a tooth, on their youths attaining to manhood’. Backhouse’s companion, George Walker, attributed the end of initiation ceremonies to ‘their intercourse with Europeans’, but demoralisation and population loss, particularly the loss of knowledgeable elders, were no doubt important contributing factors. Biraban’s initiation in 1826 was, in fact, the last Threlkeld recorded.

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57 By 1841 ten land grants totalling several thousand acres had been issued by the New South Wales government for lands around Lake Macquarie. See Clouten 1967: 52–67. See also Jervis 1946. Threlkeld wrote of colonial sexual assaults of Aboriginal women in his report of 1837, noting that the ‘usual consequences’ were ‘disease and death’: ‘Annual Report of Mission to the Aborigines New South Wales, 1837’, Threlkeld 1974 I: 137.
58 Threlkeld to G Burder and WA Hankey, 4 September 1826, Threlkeld 1974 II: 213.
60 Threlkeld to Alexander M’Leay, 25 August 1835, Threlkeld 1974 II: 257.
63 Backhouse 1843: 383.
Translating religious knowledge

It was in this deteriorating situation that Threlkeld and Biraban began the work of translating religious concepts. Together, they completed the Gospel of Luke in 1831, a set of ‘Prayers for morning and evening service’ in 1834, the Gospel of Mark in 1837, and two published texts: in 1834, an Australian Grammar and in 1836, An Australian Spelling Book that included a set of lessons derived from scriptural selections. In 1850, after Biraban’s death, Threlkeld reprinted these lessons in his final study of the language of the Awabakal, Key to the Structure of the Aboriginal Language, and added a set of explanatory notes that further illuminate his conversations with Biraban. Although it is certainly the case that Threlkeld’s organisation and editing of these works again worked to repress Biraban’s role, in the phrases and vocabulary these texts contain there is plentiful evidence of Biraban’s work as interpreter and translator of Threlkeld’s words. Further, it is notable that the Grammar and the set of explanatory notes include both translations of Christian terms and comments on the ceremonies, sacred sites, and Ancestral Beings of the Awabakal. Clearly, the work of translation involved a two-way exchange, but in a colonial situation, it was not an exchange between equals. Each pursued the exchange from a different vantage point and with different interests.

As a colonial evangelist, Threlkeld, of course, assumed that he was in charge of the work of translation and that Biraban would serve him and his god’s purposes. Like all evangelical Protestants, he believed it was solely through the ‘Word of God’ that the Holy Spirit effected saving grace: the translation of Scripture so that all peoples could have direct access to the Word in the vernacular was a fundamental missionary duty. The assumption underlying this belief was that ‘God’s Word’ was a transcendental spiritual truth that existed prior to language but was also, as such, a truth that could be accessed through any language. As Aleida Assman has argued, ‘the spiritual status of the gospel was the gold standard that permitted the use of native tongues as convertible currencies’. Any language could become a transparent vehicle for the transcendent ‘Word of the God’. These assumptions about the translation and transmission of Scripture were further supported by the theory that all non-Christian peoples possessed an ancestral memory of their relationship to the Christian god and, however much their religious notions might have degenerated, there were certain universals – the idea of a deity, the concept of the soul, the very notion of religion itself – that remained. Threlkeld’s task, as he understood it, then, was simply to acquire a knowledge of the relevant indigenous words and use them to communicate

65 The following dialogue fragment appears in Threlkeld’s Grammar: ‘Kore ko ba wiwella bitia; Man belonging speak thou me; Speak to me in the black’s language.’ Threlkeld 1834: 128. Threlkeld translated the sentence first literally and then in free form. We can assume that ‘Man belonging’ was a reference to Biraban.
67 Threlkeld’s acceptance of the notion that a memory of the true God persisted among non-Christian peoples is evident, for example, in his comment that the Awabakal were not ‘left without some instinctive feeling of dependence on the great “Unknown Being”’: ‘Reminiscences’,
Christian truths. Threlkeld initially sought a knowledge of Awabakal religious concepts only in hopes of finding equivalents for Christian terms or gaining an understanding of potential ‘obstacles’ to their evangelisation.68

Biraban, on the other hand, approached the translation of sacred matters as a cross-cultural go-between in a colonial world. For him, this work of translation opened up an arena for engaging with a British individual – and British colonial society – on new terms. As an initiated Awabakal man, he was interested in the acquisition of sacred knowledge. He evidently wanted to learn more about the missionary’s traditions and he took the work of translating seriously. Threlkeld later recalled that Biraban ‘went through [his texts] sentence by sentence, and word for word, while I explained to him carefully the meaning as we proceeded’.69 But, as we shall see, Biraban was able to direct the translation of Christianity to his own purposes. Moreover, he did not see Christianity as an exclusive religious truth nor view the missionary as his superior in spiritual knowledge. At the same time as he learned about Christianity, it is evident that he tried to teach Threlkeld about the significance of Awabakal Beings and sites. In the face of the colonisation of his country and the demoralisation of his people, this was to defy a colonial order that insisted on the subordination of Aboriginal people and denied the existence of meaningful Aboriginal life-worlds.

As we shall see, neither Threlkeld nor Biraban was able to fully control the process of translation. Certainly, Threlkeld’s claims to colonial mastery were complicated and modified as the work of translation turned into a cross-cultural dialogue about Awabakal Beings and sacred matters, and, at the same time, while Biraban was able to direct Threlkeld to use certain Awabakal terms, he was unable to control the missionary’s transcription of his words. As the work of translation proceeded there was, to use the words of translation theorist Wolfgang Iser, ‘a mutual conditioning of positions, relationships, and the space between them. The positions in play [did] not stay the same, the relationships [kept] changing, and the space between them [was] made operative according to prevailing needs’.70

Sacred Beings and cross-cultural exchange

The translation of ‘God’ was a necessary starting point: in order to introduce Christianity Threlkeld had to name his deity. Initially, he thought that the Awabakal might possess a general term for ‘deity’ that he could use for his own purposes. In Raiatea, he recalled, the LMS missionaries had adopted the Tahitian

68 Tyerman and Bennet instructed Threlkeld to make himself ‘familiar with [Awabakal] customs, superstitions, and habits’ as by ‘a knowledge of these, you will see what the principal difficulties opposing your success are’, Tyerman and Bennet 1825.
69 Threlkeld 1892[1857]: 126.
term ‘atua’, in the belief that ‘atua’ ‘unquestionably referred to deity’. As early as 1825 he thought he might have found a similar term when Biraban and some other young men told him that a figure called ‘Koen’ was the ‘being who made the first man’. But Threlkeld also learned that Koen provided the bone the karakul used for tooth avulsion in initiations. He added cautiously, ‘their precise idea of this spirit is not as yet ascertained’. He then made no further notes on Koen, Koin, or Koun, as he later spelled the name, and Biraban offered him no more information, until one day, probably in the early 1830s, Threlkeld asked Biraban to whom he called in times of danger. Biraban answered ‘Koun’ and, on this occasion, he gave the missionary a fuller account. Threlkeld related – and rephrased – this account in his 1834 Grammar. As he presented it, Koun, had three names, Ko-in, Tip-pa-kál, and Pór-râng, and he was

in appearance like a black; he resides in the thick brushes or jungles; he appears occasionally by day, but mostly at night. In general he precedes the coming of the natives from distant parts, when they assemble to celebrate certain mysteries, as knocking out the tooth in the mystic rite, or when performing some dance. He appears painted with pipe clay, and carries a fire-stick in his hand; but, generally, it is the doctors, a kind of Magicians, who alone perceive him, and to whom he says, ‘Fear not, come and talk.’ At other times he comes when the blacks are asleep, takes them up as an eagle does his prey, and carries them away. The shout of the surrounding party often occasion him to drop his burthen; otherwise, he conveys them to his fireplace in the bush, where close to the fire he carefully deposits his load. The person carried tries to cry out, but cannot feeling almost choked: at daylight, Ko-in disappears, and the black finds himself conveyed safely to his own fire-side!

This extended description of Koun and his powers was significant for both Threlkeld and Biraban but for different reasons. For Threlkeld, Biraban’s explanation made it clear that ‘Koun’ could never serve as an equivalent for ‘God’, even though, as he later wrote, there was no other approximate ‘word in the language but of [this] equivocal character’. Although, as he understood it, their belief in Koun showed that the Awabakal were not ‘without some instinctive feeling of dependence on the great ‘Unknown Being’, Koun was too human, too embodied to be considered god-like for Threlkeld’s purposes. More importantly, he did not seem to possess any of the characteristics – omnipotence, transcendence, an interest in exercising his power for good – that the missionary attributed to his own deity. Threlkeld accordingly decided to introduce new words for god in his translations: Eloï, which was derived from the Hebrew

71 Threlkeld 1850: 75.
73 For an account of this exchange see ‘Reminiscences’, Threlkeld 1974 I: 62.
74 Threlkeld 1834a: 80–81.
75 Threlkeld 1850: 51.
Elohim, and Jehovah or Yehóa, as he transcribed it for Awabakal pronunciation. He rejected ‘God’ itself because, as he later told another missionary linguist, William Ridley, ‘the Aborigines … had become familiar with the word God in profane oaths’.

For Biraban this explanation of Koun’s powers was significant for other reasons. This was important sacred knowledge. Indeed, the fact that it took Biraban several years to tell Threlkeld about Koun suggests that he may have felt torn between a reluctance to impart such knowledge to the uninitiated English man and an interest in instructing him. Certainly, as the nineteenth-century anthropologist AW Howitt later noted, if it had been lawful Biraban could have told Threlkeld more about Koun and the ‘mysteries’ Awabakal men celebrated when called together by him. Although Threlkeld probably misunderstood much, clearly Biraban wanted him to understand that Koun was a powerful Being; that it was he who established the laws and ceremonies of initiation; and that access to him was restricted to initiated men, particularly the karakul. In fact, it is likely that Threlkeld’s earlier understanding that the Awabakal believed that Koun ‘made the first man’ was a misunderstood reference to Koun’s role as the giver of initiation law, that is, the ‘maker of men’.

A number of factors may have influenced Biraban’s decision to tell Threlkeld about Koun: an interest in asserting Koun’s powers in response to Threlkeld’s assertions about the powers of his god; a growing confidence in a man who had proven himself a defender of the Awabakal; and, perhaps, during a period of considerable flux in Awabakal life, a willingness to break with custom and speak of such matters to an outsider. Indeed, in the context of gendered relations of knowledge and power in Awabakal life, Biraban’s decision to teach Threlkeld about Koun and the sacred lives of Awabakal men suggests an invitation to establish a more significant relationship with the missionary on Awabakal terms.

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77 Threlkeld 1850: 51. He used Eloi in his 1836 scriptural selections, in his set of Prayers for Morning and Evening Service, and in his gospel translations. However, he used Jehovah in his Grammar (Threlkeld 1834b: 130) and probably in his preaching, judging from his records of Aboriginal responses to his efforts. His use of Hebrew words may have derived from an understanding that while all languages were supposed to be potential vehicles for the Word of God, Hebrew held a privileged position as the first language of God. On this view of Hebrew see Olender 1992.
78 Ridley 1873: 277.
79 Howitt 1904: 497.
80 A Howitt and, more latterly, AP Elkin, have suggested that Koun was another name for a ‘sky-hero’ or ‘All-Father’ figure common to tribes throughout the south-east. Known by a variety of names, the more well-known of which were Baiami of the Wiradjuri and Daramalun of the southern coastal tribes, this figure was understood to have given people their laws, instituted male initiation rites and then gone to reside in the sky from where he visited the karakul on the occasion of particular ceremonies, particularly men’s initiation ceremonies. See Howitt 1904: 496–500; Elkin 1977: 25, 79–81. Niel Gunson points out that while this generalised description of the sky culture hero corresponds with much of Biraban’s account of Koun, Koun both looked like a man when he resided in the bush and like an eaglehawk when he flew in the sky. Moreover, he often seemed less powerful than his female counterpart, Tip-pa-kal-lé-un. ‘Introduction’, Threlkeld 1974 I: 1–3.
81 In anthropological literature initiation is still referred to as the business of ‘making men’.
At the very least, in adopting the role of Threlkeld’s instructor, he was adding a new dimension to his relationship with the missionary and challenging the hierarchies that Threlkeld and other colonists otherwise sought to maintain.

As they continued the work of establishing names for the tripartite Christian deity, the dynamics of their relationship and the work of translation became more complex. In their attempt to translate ‘Holy Spirit’, Threlkeld and Biraban did find and agree on the use of two Awabakal words: ‘Yirriyirri’ to convey ‘holy’ and ‘marai’ to convey ‘spirit’, making ‘Marai yirriyirri’.

However, Threlkeld’s later comments show that this translation was in no way straightforward. In the notes attached to his set of scriptural lessons, Threlkeld defined yirriyirri as ‘Sacred, reverend, holy, not to be regarded but with awe’, but then added that yirriyirri also described ‘the place marked out for mystic rites … not to be profaned by common use, hence holy’ – in other words, an initiation site – and he observed, too, that a sacred messenger could be described as ‘yirriyirri-lang, one who acts sacredly, one who is holy’. Evidently, then, yirriyirri did not refer to a general quality of sacredness; rather, it referred to the specific sacredness of men’s spiritual domain. A dialogue fragment in Threlkeld’s 1834 Grammar makes this gendered meaning explicit: ‘Why do not women go with the men? Because it is a sacred concern … Yanoa yirriyirr ka ke.’

The use of yirriyirri to translate ‘holy’ highlights some of the conflicting intentions at work in Threlkeld and Biraban’s cross-cultural dialogue. For Biraban, it would appear that this particular translation offered an opportunity to teach the missionary more about Awabakal men’s sacred practices and, at the same time, manage the Awabakal interpretation of Christianity. In suggesting yirriyirri to translate holy, Biraban was effectively casting the Holy Spirit as a yirriyirri figure for Awabakal men. Threlkeld’s use of yirriyirri, on the other hand, raises other questions. Clearly he was aware of the word’s meaning but rather than introducing a term of his own – ‘Holi’ perhaps – he accepted yirriyirri. Indeed, he used it for all translations of ‘holy’ or ‘sacred’, in his Awabakal gospels. He even used it, perhaps at Biraban’s prompting, to translate ‘prayer’ as ‘Wi-ya-li ta Yir-ri-yir-ri’ that is, loosely, ‘speaking in a sacred way’. It would appear, then, that Threlkeld was willing to go along with Biraban’s gendered representation of the Holy Spirit as a Being for men only. While he no doubt hoped to break down the word’s exclusive meaning, perhaps he reasoned that the Christian deity was male and indeed, in many respects, a full knowledge of Christian sacred practice was restricted to men. Whatever the case, his acceptance of yirriyirri shows both a growing awareness of an Awabakal world of meaning and a recognition of the necessity of engaging with that world on less than certain terms.

The missionary’s notes on the word marai as a translation for ‘spirit’ point to a similarly unstable engagement with Awabakal concepts. In English, of

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82 Threlkeld 1850: 49.
83 Threlkeld 1850: 59.
84 Threlkeld 1834a: 129.
85 Threlkeld 1834b.
course, ‘spirit’ refers to both supernatural figures and a non-corporeal, eternal component of the self. It appears that Biraban offered Threlkeld no general term for Ancestral Beings (although he discussed them at length), but he did teach the missionary about Awabakal conceptions of the self. Threlkeld recorded fragments of their exchanges. In his 1834 Grammar he wrote that marai meant ‘the soul, the spirit’, adding, ‘the same as the wind, we cannot see him’, in the explanatory notes attached to his scriptural selections he elaborated: ‘Marai’, is ‘the spirit … in opposition to corporeal substance … and mamuya is a ‘ghost’, and finally in a lexicon he later completed for his translation of Luke’s Gospel in 1859 he defined marai as ‘spirit, soul of a living being’ whereas mamuya was the ‘spirit of a dead person’. These definitions clearly show that marai was not the same as the European ‘spirit’ or soul: marai was a noncorporeal component of the living not the dead self. Biraban might have added that it was through the marai that an individual made contact with supernatural beings: it was an individual’s marai that left the body during sleep or ceremony, travelled to other realms, encountered Ancestral Beings such as Koun, and acquired knowledge.

In suggesting marai, then, for Holy Spirit, Biraban was reconfiguring the missionary’s Being in Awabakal terms and, in the process, quite possibly reconfiguring Awabakal understandings of the sacred. As there is no indication in Threlkeld’s translations that marai was the term to be used only for men’s living spiritual selves, one wonders what it might have meant to the Awabakal to conceive of a marai as yirriyirri, that is, exclusively male. The notion that a sacred being might possess a marai may also have been new. To introduce such ideas was to suggest other ways of understanding the spiritual realm. Threlkeld, for his part, may have thought that in Awabakal terms the Holy Spirit could be regarded as the marai of the Christian god, that is, the sacred unseen spirit of a living being, in this case, ‘God’. But again one suspects that he must have been aware of the potential complications of the translation.

For both Biraban and Threlkeld, then, it is evident that the work of translating ‘God’ and ‘Holy Spirit’ opened up a new realm of cross-cultural exchange. There was, of course, no need to translate Jesus Christ; Threlkeld simply inserted the name as ‘Jesu Krist’ in his Awabakal prayers and gospels. But at the same time as Threlkeld sought to introduce his deity to the Awabakal, Biraban asserted his role as the missionary’s instructor in Awabakal sacred matters. Indeed, it was, perhaps, in response to Threlkeld’s statements about his deity, that Biraban decided to teach him about other Awabakal Ancestral Beings and sacred sites. Threlkeld recorded abbreviated versions of Biraban’s accounts in his 1834 Grammar. In a section labelled ‘persons’, he described Koun’s wife, the variously named Tip-pa-kal-lé-un, Mail-kun, Bim-póin, as a Being who carried off ‘the natives in a large bag beneath the earth’ and speared children dead; the male Being...
Ko-yo-ró-wén who attacked at the night, skewered men ‘with his cudgel’ and then roasted and ate them; Ko-yo-ró-wén’s wife, Kur-ri-wilban, who had ‘a long horn on each shoulder growing upward’ with which she impaled her victims; and Put-ti-kán who, Threlkeld related, was ‘like a horse’ but bounded ‘like a kangaroo, the noise of which … is as the report of a gun’. In another section on ‘places’, Threlkeld recorded a description of Yi-rán-ná-lai where Biraban had once compelled him to be quiet lest he anger the Being who resided there. He also included the story of Kur-rur-kur-rán, the place of petrified wood, formed when a large rock ‘fell from the heavens and killed a number of blacks … they being collected together in that spot by command of an immense Guana’; the story of Mul-lung-bu-la, the name of two upright rocks created when ‘two women … were transformed into rocks, in consequence of their being beaten to death by a Blackman’; and the story of Wau-wa-rán, the waterhole where the monster Wau-wai resided and threatened to kill those who disturbed him. In addition, he recorded the names of 33 other places and made notes on the animals, plants or minerals with which they were associated. It is likely that these, too, had a spiritual significance for the Awabakal.

Threlkeld’s record of Biraban’s accounts can be considered from a variety of perspectives. For Biraban the telling of these stories was, in many respects, a powerful assertion of the persistence of an Awabakal sacred geography in the face of colonisation. In teaching Threlkeld about Ancestral Beings, the names of places, and the stories associated with them, Biraban was telling him parts of Awabakal ‘Law journeys’, journey stories that Heather Goodall has described as ‘powerful dramas of ethical and emotional struggles, as well as physical conflicts, between the great protagonists of the creation stories’. Much, clearly, was lost or distorted in Biraban’s efforts to communicate these stories, and in Threlkeld’s rewriting of them, and the introduction of European elements such as the horn, the ‘horse’, and the sound of the ‘gun’, suggests either innovation or translation difficulties. Nevertheless, as accounts of Law journeys, these stories would have contained important information about the rules of Awabakal life, relations between people and places, and proper modes of behaving at sacred sites. For Biraban to tell Threlkeld these stories was to assert that the land around ‘Lake Macquarie’ was his people’s country, and that it was country alive with the presence of Awabakal Ancestral Beings despite the British presence.

91 Threlkeld 1834a: 80–81.
92 Threlkeld 1834a: 85. Of Yi-rán-ná-lai, he later related that when he called out while walking beneath some rocks there, Biraban ‘instantly beckoned me to be silent’ and told him the ‘tradition of the place’: ‘Reminiscences’, Threlkeld 1974 I: 65.
93 Threlkeld 1834a: 83–85.
94 Threlkeld 1834a: 82–85.
95 Goodall 1996: 3.
96 On stories of Ancestral Beings as sources of knowledge about the foundation of Aboriginal social institutions see Stanner 1979: 28–30. It should be noted that the stories, as recorded by Threlkeld, contain some introduced elements: the horns on the shoulders of Kur-ri-wilban (prior to contact the Awabakal would not have seen horned animals); the description of Put-ti-kán being like ‘horse’ and making a sound like ‘the report of a gun’. Possibly Biraban introduced these elements in his effort to explain matters to the missionary. Possibly the meaning of certain aspects of the stories was shifting in response to colonisation.
It was also to reframe his relationship with the missionary as a relationship in Awabakal space, a space in which he controlled the terms of their exchanges. When Threlkeld questioned his stories, Biraban corrected him. As Threlkeld later wrote, ‘to call into question the truthfulness of their tradition would at once rank you amongst the “Stupid fellows”, as the Aborigines term all heterodox persons who … do not hold the tradition of their fathers’.97

Threlkeld’s attitude toward Biraban’s stories was complex. As a missionary he regarded and recorded these stories as evidence of Awabakal ‘ignorance’, examples of the very ‘superstitions’ he sought to displace.98 In his Grammar he dismissively characterised their Beings as ‘imaginary’.99 His emphasis on their violent, threatening nature to the neglect of other characteristics – Koun, after all, was the Being to whom Biraban called for assistance – suggests the influence of prevailing European colonial theories about the inferiority of ‘savage religions’: savages were motivated by irrational fears of evil spirits rather than the inspiring love of God and the Awabakal were surely savages.100 Indeed, as Threlkeld saw it, while the Awabakal had ‘superstitions’, they lacked the most basic components of religion proper; they had, he later wrote, ‘no priesthood, no altar, no sacrifice, nor any religious service, strictly so called’.101 Such a conception of religion did not allow for the possibility of a sacred life grounded in landforms created by Ancestral Beings and expressed in ceremonial reenactments.

And yet even as Threlkeld derided Awabakal stories, he recorded them, and however abbreviated and distorted his records were, it is evident that he listened to Biraban, attended to the pronunciation of names and gained some understanding of Awabakal spiritual life.102 In his relationship with Biraban, there were moments in which he had to orient himself, albeit in limited ways, in an Awabakal world: Biraban made him stay silent at Yi-rán-ná-lái; in conversation with the Awabakal he had to use their place names, and through such conversations he was made aware of an Awabakal sacred geography. Indeed, the very number of the place names he recorded attests to both the instruction he received from Biraban and others, and his willingness to pay attention. In subsequently writing about Awabakal Beings and places for a colonial audience, and labelling them as superstitious, Threlkeld was re-establishing colonial hierarchies but he was also indicating to his colonial readers that such matters were worthy of their attention. This was not insignificant. In a society in which

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97 ‘Reminiscences’, Threlkeld 1974 I: 64.
99 Threlkeld 1834a: 80–81.
100 For a discussion of missionary theories of religion in the nineteenth century see Chidester 1996: 75–92. On the definition of religion in the West see also Tambiah 1990: Chs 1 and 2; Asad 1993: Ch 1.
102 Christopher Herbert has noted a similar paradox in the texts of Threlkeld’s missionary colleagues in the Pacific who produced detailed ethnographies of the very cultures they also described as depraved, even diabolical. Herbert, however, is more interested in exploring the contradictions embedded in the missionary’s ethnographic texts than in the details of their cross-cultural engagement with Polynesian peoples: Herbert 1991: Ch 3.
many regarded Aboriginal people as barely human, Threlkeld’s accounts of Awabakal Beings pointed to an Aboriginal realm of meaning whose very existence few colonists would have imagined.

**Defining, and redefining, the Christian deity**

Threlkeld’s ambivalent attitude toward Awabakal cultural life persisted. Possibly in response to what he had learned about Awabakal Beings and places, he decided, in 1836, to produce a set of nine lessons about the Christian god and the nature of a proper relationship to him. These lessons, no doubt designed to complement the missionary’s set of ‘Prayers for Morning and Evening Service’ and his translation of Luke’s gospel, were composed of Biblical verses. They emphasised that the Christian god consisted of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that he was the all-powerful creator, lord, judge and savior of all, and that a relationship with him required belief, worship and love. Biraban and Threlkeld translated the lessons and the missionary included them in his 1836 Spelling Book. Threlkeld then later added a series of explanatory notes that shed light on the translation of key terms in the lessons and the translated gospels and prayers. Many of the lessons, aimed at negating Awabakal conceptions of the sacred, had distinctly colonial overtones. However, it is evident from Threlkeld’s notes that as he inquired after translations for terms to define his god, Biraban continued instructing him, compelling him to engage with the very world he sought to displace. And, to a considerable degree, Biraban continued to control the translation of the missionary’s message.

Of all Threlkeld’s theological assertions, the idea that the Christian god was the sole and supreme creator was the most colonial in its implications in that it was directly aimed at undermining Awabakal creation stories and their spiritual relationship to their Beings and their land. As Threlkeld later wrote, the Awabakal’s ‘reverence for Remarkable Places’, ran counter to the true ‘Spirit of Christianity’; they had to be shown that the Christian god was the only god and the creator of everything and that people should worship him in ‘every place’. In other words, Awabakal attachments to particular places and Beings had to be broken; they had to be made to realise that it was the Christian god who created everything. Accordingly, for his lessons Threlkeld sought translations for: ‘There is one God; and there is none other but he’; ‘He hath made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that is in them’; and ‘Know ye that the Lord he is God; it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves’. To translate the word ‘create’ Threlkeld adopted ‘Uma’, which he understood from Biraban to be an all-encompassing word meaning ‘to make, to create, to cause power, to effect, to do’. To convey the idea that his god was all-powerful, again an implicitly colonial assertion, Threlkeld sought translations for: ‘with God all things are possible’;

104 Threlkeld 1836: 13–14 (Mark xii 32; Acts iv 24; Psalms c 3).
105 Threlkeld 1850: 55.
‘God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things’; and, for the Lord’s prayer, the last of his lessons, ‘Thine is the power and the glory for ever.’ For these phrases, Biraban gave him: ‘Kaiyu’ meaning ‘able, powerful, might’ to make Kaiyu-kan, ‘one who is able’; Kaiwul meaning ‘great’ in a comparative sense; and, for ‘power and glory for ever’, ‘killibinbin yanti katai’ which, Threlkeld wrote, could be translated as ‘bright-shining thus always’. With these translations Threlkeld’s message became entangled with some distinctly Awabakal ideas about the sacred; particularly with his use of ‘killibinbin,’ (‘brightness’ or ‘shining’) to convey ‘glory’, for brightness, especially the brightness of fire, had a special significance for Awabakal men. Quite possibly Threlkeld understood this. From Biraban he had learned that initiated men received a small bright quartz stone called a ‘Yar-rod’ which ‘mysterically … meant fire or water’; that sacred messengers, puntinai, always carried fire with them as a ‘protection against the powers of darkness’, and that when karakul visited the ‘sky’ they might have contact with fire. Biraban’s suggestion of ‘killibinbin yanti katai’ or ‘bright-shining thus always’, to convey ‘power and glory’, suggests, then, a particularly Awabakal interpretation of the Christian god’s power. Threlkeld’s awareness of this is suggested in his inclusion in his lessons of the verse ‘For our God is a consuming fire’ – a choice which is otherwise somewhat perplexing. It would seem, then, that even as Threlkeld ostensibly sought to assert the omnipotence of his deity and displace Awabakal traditions, he was willing to draw upon their conceptions of sacred power.

The other terms to define his deity for which Threlkeld required translations – lord, father, judge, saviour – raised other difficulties. In most cases, there were no exact equivalents; Biraban appears to have offered the missionary the most proximate words available. For ‘lord’, Threlkeld borrowed pirriwul, which he believed meant ‘chief, lord, king’, although it probably meant leader or headman as there was no indigenous concept of chief. For his lessons, Threlkeld used this to translate numerous verses emphasising his god’s position as supreme ‘lord’, and quite possibly the Awabakal’s experience of British governance and colonial attempts to make chiefs gave them an understanding of what the missionary sought to convey. To translate ‘father’, Threlkeld used ‘Biyung-bai’ which, he learned, was an ‘address to a father or elderly person’, rather than ‘Bin-tun-kin’, which referred specifically to a ‘male parent’. In order to convey the idea of judge and judgment, Threlkeld chose nguraki which he understood to mean ‘skillful, wise’ or ‘A wise person, an initiated one’. Most likely this term referred to tribal elders who, Threlkeld learned, settled ‘the mode of satisfaction’

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106 Threlkeld 1836: 14, 16 (Matthew xix 26; 1 John iii 20; Matthew v 13).
107 Threlkeld 1850: 55, 68. In his Grammar, he defined ‘Kil-li-bin-bin’ as ‘To shine, to be bright, to be glorious’, Threlkeld 1834a: 97.
108 Threlkeld 1892[1859]:215.
109 Threlkeld 1834a: 92, 93.
111 Threlkeld 1836: 13 (Heb. xii 29).
112 Threlkeld 1850: 47.
113 Threlkeld 1834a: 86, 1850: 53.
when someone violated Awabakal law. Threlkeld and Biraban came up with ‘Mirromullikan’, which Threlkeld understood to mean ‘he is for-to-be one who keeps with care’, hence a Saviour. Threlkeld also noted that to ‘express a deliverer would be mankillikan, one who takes hold of, but the evil must be expressed out of which the person is taken, or to be taken’ – a note that points to a distinctly different realm of spiritual activities and Threlkeld’s awareness of the difficulties of borrowing terms from that realm. Threlkeld did not use ‘mankillikan’. On occasion, though, it appears that the two men agreed to be inventive. In order to convey the notion of taking care of, in order to translate ‘The Lord is my Shepherd’, for the lessons, they used ‘Wirrilli’, from ‘Wirrilliko, for to wind up as a ball of string which the blacks do to their long fishing lines, and opossum fur cords, to take care of them, to preserve them’. Clearly, in this case and for the other words Threlkeld used, Biraban’s translations reframed the missionary’s message in distinctly Awabakal terms. And again, it is evident that the work of translation offered Biraban an opportunity to teach Threlkeld about Awabakal social roles and relations.

Further lessons in Awabakal cultural categories followed from the translation of terms to describe the human relationship with the Christian deity. The translation of ‘belief’, for instance, appears to have led to a remarkable discussion of differences between European and Awabakal epistemologies. For Threlkeld, as for all Christian missionaries, belief was crucial: converts not only had to possess a knowledge of Christian doctrine, they had to demonstrate a profound sense of conviction. But, as Biraban appears to have explained, the Awabakal did not distinguish knowledge from belief; rather they differentiated ways of knowing according to the bodily sense involved and, in some cases, whether the object known was a person or a thing. As Threlkeld understood it: ‘to know a person by sight is gi-milliko’, but ‘to know a thing by sight’, ‘na-killiko’; ‘To know by touch was nu-mulliko’; while ‘ngurrulliko’, was ‘to know, to perceive by the ear, to understand’, or ‘to hear, to obey’. Threlkeld selected ngurrulliko to translate both ‘to know’ and ‘to believe’, perhaps on the basis that belief followed not from seeing but from hearing God’s Word. He also, tellingly, translated this as ‘to hear, to obey’. In his lessons, Threlkeld used ngurrulliko to translate his central message: ‘believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved’.

Lastly, in their efforts to translate terms to convey the more personal aspects of the human relationship with the Christian god, Threlkeld and Biraban appear to have engaged in an extensive exploration of Awabakal emotional vocabulary. This is evident from the word lists Threlkeld included in his Grammar and from his scriptural translations. In his Grammar, he included, ‘Yi-mul-liliko – to make

114 Threlkeld 1850: 56; Threlkeld 1834a: 90, 98. On the role of tribal elders as adjudicators see Threlkeld to William Westbrook Burton, 2 March 1836, Threlkeld 1974 II: 258.
115 Threlkeld 1850: 59.
116 Threlkeld 1850: 57–58.
118 Threlkeld 1850: 54.
119 Threlkeld 1850: 61.
120 Threlkeld 1836: 16 (Acts xvi 31).
light, as fur is caused to lie lightly before the blacks twist it into a cord, … to encourage, to cheer up’, and ‘Bur-kul-li-ko – to be light as a bird, to fly, to be convalescent’. The care with which Threkleld transcribed these definitions suggests a growing appreciation, on his part, for the cultural specificity and poetry of Awabakal emotional expression. For his scriptural translations and prayers, however, it appears that Threlkeld had to adopt and adapt Awabakal words for his own purposes. To translate ‘worship’ and ‘praise’, for instance, Threkleld and Biraban used ‘Murrárág koiyelliela – to be good in manner; to worship’ and ‘Murrárág wiyelliko – to speak good; to praise’. To convey ‘love’ they chose the ‘nearest’ word, ‘pitul’, which, according to Threlkeld meant ‘Joy, peace, gladness, happiness, love.’ And for ‘repentance’, Threlkeld and Biraban borrowed ‘Minki’, which Threlkeld understood to mean ‘any mental or moral feeling; the feeling of sympathy; sorrow; compassion; penitence; patience, repentance’ – a sequence of definitions that suggests an attempt to infuse his own meaning into the word. All of these translations, products of a dialogue about feelings and mental states, indicate that despite the missionary’s public denigration of Awabakal cultural life, he and Biraban occasionally reached surprising levels of cross-cultural understanding.

**Indigenous responses to Christianity**

During and after all of this work of translation both Threlkeld and Biraban went about disseminating a knowledge of Christianity among Aboriginal people. Threlkeld’s method was to read from his translated texts. At first, he read to ‘small parties of natives, sometimes in the open air, sometimes in my Barn’. Then, as Awabakal numbers declined, he broadened his efforts and began preaching to ‘tribes at Port Stevens and its vicinities … Hunter’s river and its dependencies … and other contiguous tribes’.

Biraban’s methods of communicating were, not surprisingly, rather different. He relied on the spoken, not the written, word and, significantly, he conveyed his knowledge of Christianity at the same time as he learned and communicated new Aboriginal songs. Threlkeld observed his activities in both capacities. In 1835, he reported that ‘Several of the blacks belonging to this district headed by M’gill are traveling to Windsor, Parramatta, and Sydney in order to teach other tribes a new song and dance which have lately been brought down from the regions beyond the Liverpool plains.’ And through the 1830s, Threlkeld’s reports indicate that Biraban travelled far to communicate his knowledge of Christianity as well. In 1837 Threlkeld related that some Aboriginal people near

121 Threlkeld 1834a: 96, 104.
122 Threlkeld 1859: 226. In his earlier translations Threkleld transcribed this as ‘murroróng’; see Threlkeld 1836: 16.
123 Threlkeld 1850: 52.
124 Threlkeld 1859: 223; Threlkeld 1834a.
the Hunter River recognised him as ‘the person of whom M’gill the Aborigine had spoken’, and ‘appeared to be apprised of my pursuits’. And the following year he wrote that when he spoke to another group about ‘Death, Judgment, and a Righteous God’, they responded ‘O yes! M’gill had informed them before!’ From these and other encounters, Threlkeld concluded that ‘the Christian knowledge which has been communicated to M’gill and other Aborigines, has been the subject of discussion amongst the remnant of the tribes forty miles distant’. The fact that Biraban communicated the religious knowledge he had acquired from Threlkeld at the same time as he passed on the songs he received from other tribes suggests that he regarded both in the same light: as knowledge to be learned and transmitted for indigenous purposes.

The ways in which Aboriginal people responded to Christianity, whether they learned of it from Threlkeld or Biraban, seem to have varied. Threlkeld’s records indicate that some rejected the Christian god outright; others developed new interpretations of their own traditions in opposition; while others, including, most significantly, Biraban, reinterpreted the Christian deity within an indigenous framework. No one interpretation of Christianity dominated. In all cases, indigenous people were working within a world of shifting meanings as they tried to comprehend the new religion in the context of the traumatic changes wrought by invasion.

Threlkeld’s accounts of responses to his preaching show that scepticism was common. Indeed, from an Awabakal perspective, it is likely that few of his claims made sense. For instance, given that most Awabakal Beings had spouses Threlkelds’ representation of his god as a father, a Biyung-bai, with a son but no wife was perplexing. On at least one occasion the missionary was asked if his god ‘had … a wife?’ The Awabakal also questioned Threlkeld’s insistence that his god was an all-powerful creator who made, ‘uma’, everything. After preaching to one group ‘respecting creation’, he reported that a woman asked ‘if Jehovah created the Moon as well as the Sun’, and added that ‘several enquired if the different descriptions of Kangaroos were all made by him?’ On another occasion, an Awabakal boy, ‘Billy Blue’, told him ‘he thought it was all gammon [lies] that master had told him about the Creation, for who was there who saw God create man?’ Given the colonial implications of Threlkeld’s assertions about his god’s powers as the creator of the earth and all living things such responses are not surprising. For the Awabakal, the very forms of the land and the character of its creatures bore witness to the truth of their creation stories and the truth, therefore, of their relationship to their country.

134 I have also discussed the Indigenous response to Threlkeld’s insistence that his god was the sole creator in Keary 2006.
Alongside reports of Aboriginal responses to his preaching, Threlkeld also presented a number of accounts of his efforts to convert Aboriginal individuals facing death. For Threlkeld, death was the last hope for conversion and salvation. For Aboriginal people, on the other hand, death was becoming all too common as disease, starvation and violence wreaked their toll. As Threlkeld’s accounts show, Aboriginal responses to Christianity were profoundly shaped by the trauma of this unprecedented mortality.

One of the most striking ‘point of death’ exchanges Threlkeld recorded involved an Aboriginal man known to the colonists as ‘Mickey’. In 1835 Mickey was captured, tried and sentenced to death by the colonial authorities for the alleged rape of an English woman. Before his execution, Threlkeld visited him in gaol and endeavoured to ‘instruct him in the knowledge of God our saviour’. Mickey, he wrote, responded by declaring that ‘The Blacks had a much more powerful Being than the Whites had, who … would if he were executed, put out the eyes of all the Whites, and smite them with total blindness!’ This defiant declaration suggests the emergence of a pan-Aboriginal opposition to the colonists manifested in a view of competing spirit forces. Evidently, Mickey accepted the existence of the ‘Whites’ Being but he clearly regarded him as the Being of the colonists only. His assertion that the ‘Blacks’ collectively had a more powerful Being capable of blinding all the ‘Whites’ points to the development of an intertribal resistance movement that looked to an indigenous Being whose powers mirrored the great power, Kaiyu, that the whites attributed to their god. His declaration also most surely reflected a desire to return upon the whites the devastation they had inflicted upon Aboriginal people. This interpretation of colonial conflicts in spiritual terms – and attribution of new powers to an indigenous Being – suggests considerable cultural innovation in response to colonisation. Although we cannot know how widespread this idea of an all-powerful indigenous Being was, it is worth noting that in the same year Mickey issued his threat, Aboriginal people warned Threlkeld about the possibility of a large-scale attack against the whites. Evidently, collective hopes and plans for the destruction of the colonial population were circulating during this period. Mickey’s threat suggests that for many such hopes had a spiritual dimension.

In another ‘point of death’ exchange recorded by Threlkeld an Aboriginal man named ‘Charley’ offered a very different interpretation of Christianity in the face of colonisation. Charley had been deputed by his elders to kill an English man who had taken an Aboriginal woman and then transgressed tribal law by obtaining and opening an initiated man’s ‘Mur-ra-mai’, or sacred ‘talisman’, as Threlkeld put it, in the woman’s presence. The colonial authorities subsequently arrested, tried and sentenced Charley to death. Again the missionary visited and

136 Threlkeld to Alexander M’Leay, 25 August 1835, Threlkeld 1974 II: 257.
137 For an interesting discussion of an indigenous nativist movement among the Wiradjuri at this time see Carey and Roberts 2002.
138 See Threlkeld’s description of the ‘Mur-ra-mai’ and the law against Aboriginal women seeing it in Threlkeld 1834a: 88–89.
encouraged Charley to ‘believe in and pray to Jesus Christ’ and taught him some ‘suitable prayers in his own tongue’. According to Threlkeld, after several days praying Charley asked ‘Jesus to cast away all his evil deeds and to receive his soul when the whites kill his body.’ Then, on the morning of his execution, he asked: ‘When I am dead, shall I make good houses and be like the Whites in the other world?’ At the gallows, he stood and repeated the prayer Threlkeld had taught him – ‘Lord Jesus receive my spirit’ – before the executioner let the trapdoor fall.\textsuperscript{139}

From Threlkeld’s perspective, Charley’s apparent acceptance of Christ could be counted a success. The meaning of this acceptance, though, is open to question. Charley’s interest in whether he would make houses and ‘be like the Whites in the other world’, – (as a \textit{mamuya}?) – indicates not faith in Christ but a very different interpretation of the missionary’s message. Unlike Mickey, Charley was not interested in the destruction of the white population; rather he appears to have hoped to become like the whites, or at least acquire their material assets. Tony Swain and Barry McDonald have suggested that this idea that Aboriginal people would become like whites, ‘jump-up whitefeller’ after death, was a product of a cosmological shift as Aboriginal people sought to accommodate the colonists in a new moral order. They argue that as an indigenous ‘locative cosmology’ gave way under the impact of colonisation to a cosmology focused on temporality and the future, becoming ‘like whites’ after death was a way of making sense of the colonial presence and an indigenous future.\textsuperscript{140} Certainly Charley’s question shows that this idea was circulating in the 1830s, although it was clearly one response among many. His particular situation – isolated from his people and awaiting execution by the ‘Whites’ for following customary law – also tells us something about the trauma that might have induced such a shift.

In the context of these widely varying responses to the new Christian deity, it is notable that some Awabakal did come to view this deity as a living presence in their lives. References to Awabakal regard for the Christian god are scattered throughout Threlkeld’s texts. For example, when he told an Awabakal man who had sworn a ‘dreadful’ oath, ‘that such language provoked God’, he reported that the man later asked him, ‘whether he who is above was still angry with him for the expression he had used?’\textsuperscript{141} On another occasion, he related overhearing an Awabakal boy correcting another who had sworn: ‘Do not say those words, they are bad … for he who is above is angry with those who use them.’\textsuperscript{142} Other Awabakal appear to have been concerned about the consequences of uttering the Christian god’s name. Threlkeld wrote about one boy who, when ‘asked if he knew who was the Saviour?’ replied, ‘Yes’, but when asked what his name was answered that ‘he did not like to mention it, because it was sacred’. He

\textsuperscript{139} ‘5th Report, 1835’, Threlkeld 1974 I: 122.
\textsuperscript{140} Barry McDonald discusses this idea in his analysis of New England corroboree songs from the 1840s. Unlike Swain, however, McDonald argues, as I do, that this shift was only one response to contact among others: Swain 1993: Ch 3; McDonald 1996.
\textsuperscript{141} ‘3rd Report, 1833’, Threlkeld 1974 I: 118.
\textsuperscript{142} ‘9th Report, 1839’, Threlkeld 1974 I: 159–160.
noted that this was not a ‘solitary instance’ and that he had observed ‘a similar feeling in others’.\footnote{143} The Quakers who visited in 1836 also observed of some of the Awabakal that: ‘when allusion is made to a Supreme Being, … their countenances immediately assume an air of seriousness [and] they cast their eyes to the ground’.\footnote{144}

In all of these accounts it is notable that the Awabakal expressed their regard for the Christian deity in relation to matters of speech – and that they were all men or boys. While it is possible that the missionary’s emphasis on the power of the Word may have led some to think that this was his god’s particular concern, it seems more likely that they were responding to Biraban’s representation of Christianity as a sacred – \textit{yirriyirri} – knowledge for initiated men. Rules regulating speech governed the behavior of initiated men in Awabakal society: sacred matters were to be spoken of with care, in certain circumstances, and only with qualified individuals.\footnote{145} Threlkeld and Biraban’s translation of prayer as ‘\textit{Wi-ya-li ta Yir-ri-yir-ri}’ or ‘Speaking in a sacred way’, could only have reinforced such a notion.\footnote{146} The boy’s refusal to say the name of Christ was, then, more likely a way of claiming knowledge in accordance with Awabakal codes of conduct rather than a sign that Threlkeld’s preaching was having the effect he intended.

While these examples are suggestive of Biraban’s role in translating and transmitting a knowledge of Christianity to Aboriginal people there are, unfortunately, only a few clues as to exactly how he portrayed the new religion and its deity. However, one piece of evidence, a dream narrative Biraban recounted to Threlkeld in 1836, offers some revealing insights. It is also the strongest evidence that Biraban did, in fact, represent a knowledge of the Christian god as a \textit{yirriyirri} knowledge for men. Threlkeld was so struck by the dream that he reported Biraban’s account in full:

\begin{quote}
The night before last, when coming hither, I slept on the other side of the Lake, I dreamed that I and my party of blacks were up in the Heavens; that we stood on a cloud; I looked round about in the Heavens; I said to the men that were with me, there \textit{He} is? there is \textit{He} who is called Jehovah; here he comes flying like fire with a great shining – this is \textit{He} about whom the whites speak. He appeared to me like a man with clothing of fire, red like a flame. His arms were stretched out like the wings of a bird in the act of flying. He did not speak to us, but only looked earnestly at us as he was flying past. I said to the blacks with me, let us go down, lest he take us away; we descended on the top of a very high mountain … we came to the bottom, and just as we reached the level ground, I awoke. We often dream of this mountain, many blacks fancy themselves on the top when asleep.\footnote{147}
\end{quote}

Although Threlkeld clearly rewrote and rephrased Biraban’s narrative, his report nevertheless provides much valuable information. The first point to be emphasised is that Biraban encountered Jehovah in a dream. Throughout the indigenous south-east dreams were the realm of encounters with the supernatural: through dreams, an individual’s marai travelled to other realms, acquired religious knowledge, and channelled supernatural power. Dreams enabled cultural innovation: Ancestral Beings revealed new songs to people in dreams.148 For Biraban, then, to dream of an encounter with a supernatural being including, and perhaps especially, a being ‘about whom the whites speak’, was both to demonstrate an unusual spiritual power and introduce new religious knowledge in a recognised and legitimate manner. Such a dream would have enhanced his role as a messenger of Christianity by grounding his authority to speak, not in the missionary’s book, but in an indigenous form of experiencing the sacred.

The second point to be made is that the Jehovah of Biraban’s dream bears a striking resemblance to Koun, the powerful law-giver of initiated men. Penny van Toorn, in her analysis of this dream narrative, has suggested that Biraban was influenced by Biblical images of winged spirits and that he envisioned Jehovah as the south-eastern ‘sky-god’ Baiami, but this interpretation ignores the evidence of Biraban’s translation work and his description of Koun.149 Like Koun, Biraban’s Jehovah is a male being who visits Awabakal men in their sleep, flies in the sky, is associated with fire (Koun carried a firestick), and threatens to carry men away. This Jehovah is most definitely not the father, judge or lord of all from Threlkeld’s teachings but a distinctly indigenous being, who, it seems, appeared only to men. It is possible that certain parallels between Threlkeld’s stories about Jehovah and Awabakal understandings of Koun suggested themselves to Biraban. For instance, Threlkeld’s claim that his god resided in ‘moroko’, ‘the sky’, corresponded with an Awabakal understanding that the sky was, at times, the realm of Koun.150 Also, Jehovah’s appearance as being ‘like fire with a great shining’ and ‘dressed in clothes of fire’ recalls Biraban’s translation of ‘power and glory’ in the Lord’s Prayer as ‘killibinbin yanti katai’ or ‘bright-shining thus always’. But for the most part, even though this Jehovah is referred to as ‘He about whom the whites speak’, his fiery appearance, flying in the sky, is indigenous in form and character. In short, it appears that Biraban remade the Christian deity as an indigenous being, incorporating him into a distinctly Awabakal cosmological order, and portrayed him as a special yirryirri figure for Awabakal men.

149 van Toorn 2006: 47–52. It should also be noted that there is no record of Biraban mentioning Baiami in Threlkeld’s writings. On the question of the relationship between Koun and Baiami see footnote 80.
150 Threlkeld 1850: 56. On the sky as a sacred realm see Berndt and Berndt 1964: 413.
A third point to be made is that Biraban’s mention of the mountain he descended in the dream and his statement, rephrased by Threlkeld, that ‘many blacks fancy themselves on the top [of the mountain] when asleep’, situates his encounter with Jehovah in an Awabakal sacred geography. Threlkeld observed that the Awabakal distinguished ‘high places’ as ‘sacred’, and he reported that on a high hill he had once found ‘a circular erection of stones, of about 5 or 6 feet diameter, and two or three feet high’. Biraban informed him ‘that the tradition was, that the Eagle-Hawks brought these stones and placed them together in the form in which they were found’. Possibly, given the fact that Biraban’s own name meant eaglehawk, he had a personal totemic association with the mountain. It should also be noted that Koun, who took men like ‘an eagle does his prey’, according to Biraban, was strongly associated with this bird. Jehovah’s appearance in Biraban’s dream like a ‘bird in the act of flying’ and Biraban’s descent from the mountain resonates with associations to these elements of Awabakal men’s sacred lives. Although the connections remain obscure, what is clear is that Biraban’s encounter with Jehovah took place in Awabakal terms and in an Awabakal country still alive with spiritual significance.

However, there is an ambiguity in Biraban’s dream narrative that should be noted. In most Awabakal dream encounters Beings speak. As related by Threlkeld, Koun, for example, introduced himself to *karakul* by saying ‘Fear not, come and talk.’ Given that the Awabakal learned from spirit beings through hearing – ‘*ngurrulliko*’ – Biraban’s report that Jehovah did not speak but rather ‘looked earnestly’ at the party as he flew by is significant. It suggests that while Jehovah, the powerful Being of ‘whom the whites speak’, might make himself manifest to Biraban and his men, they were not, or perhaps not as yet, to be granted full access to a knowledge of his powers.

Considered in the broader context of colonialism, Biraban’s dream narrative is evidence of an innovative response to Christianity. Unlike Mickey, Biraban did not reject the Christian god, the whites’ Being, as a force to be opposed; nor, like Charley did he view this Being as a figure who would preside over his transformation into a white person in the after-life. But nor, significantly, did he accept the Christian deity as Threlkeld presented him: the Jehovah Biraban encountered was not an all-powerful creator, lord, judge, father, or saviour; and Biraban did not conceive of his relationship to him as a personal relationship expressed in terms of belief, worship, repentance and love. Rather, in refiguring Jehovah as an indigenous Being, Biraban was acting in a fashion consistent with his activities as a translator, cross-cultural go-between and defender of indigenous

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152 Stanner observed that totems were often associated with places marked by striking physical features, including mountains: Stanner 1979: 134.
153 van Toorn has suggested that Biraban’s vision of Jehovah as ‘Biami in the form of Eaglehawk’ was part of a post-colonial reinterpretation of south-eastern indigenous traditions in which the eaglehawk figure represented the whites who stole children. This is an interesting interpretation but again it ignores Biraban’s description of Koun and Koun’s relationship with initiated men. See van Toorn 2006: Ch 2.
154 Threlkeld 1834a: 80.
sacred life: he was incorporating the colonists’ deity into an indigenous cosmology without conceding authority to the colonial order. One might further speculate that in the context of the breakdown of the Awabakal social and cultural order – the end of initiation ceremonies, the reduction of hunting opportunities and the colonists’ attacks on Awabakal women – Biraban’s vision represented an effort to transform the colonists’ deity into a new source of power and knowledge for Awabakal men. Certainly, Biraban’s vision provided another opportunity to cast himself as a leader at a time when elders were dying and traditional forms of authority were failing. By the late 1830s it is clear that Biraban had established a position for himself as a leader and visionary. In 1839 a visitor to the mission station, the American naval explorer, Charles Wilkes, reported that Biraban was ‘always a leader in the corrobories and other assemblies’.155

For Threlkeld, on the other hand, Biraban’s dream was evidence that his message was having some effect, but it was certainly not the conversion he hoped for. Indeed he later wrote despairingly that ‘although [Biraban] is better informed [about Christian doctrine] than any of the natives with whom I am acquainted’, he doubted ‘whether any moral or religious impression has been made upon him’.156 Nevertheless, it is notable that while rejecting Biraban’s indigenous interpretation of Jehovah, there are indications that during the 1830s Threlkeld became open to the idea that Aboriginal people might at least have their own ways of transmitting, if not understanding, Christianity. In 1835 he expressed the hope that Aboriginal messengers like Biraban might become messengers for Christianity: ‘the same custom which promulgates the new Song will convey throughout Australia, “The glad tidings of a Saviour Christ the Lord”’.157 Given the prevailing climate of colonial contempt for Aboriginal people, Threlkeld’s vision of indigenous messengers, the sacred or yirriyirri puntimai, communicating Christianity across the country stands as a remarkable expression of appreciation for the institutions of Aboriginal cultural life.

Conclusion

Threlkeld’s mission closed in December 1841 after the colonial government withdrew its support. Disease and dispossession had devastated the Awabakal. In 1840, Threlkeld counted only 16 in his annual return.158 In the face of such catastrophic loss, Biraban himself succumbed to alcoholism and passed away shortly afterwards. Years later, Threlkeld remembered him as his ‘almost daily

155 Wilkes 1845: 269.
158 ‘Return of the Aboriginal Natives, taken at Lake Macquarie on 1st May 1840’, SRNSW, CSIL, 4560.
companion for many years’ acknowledging that he was ‘principally indebted [to his intelligence] for much of [his] knowledge respecting the structure of the language’.159

In his final years, while serving as a chaplain in Sydney, Threlkeld returned to his study of the language of the Awabakal and produced his most ambitious work, *Key to the Structure of the Aboriginal Language*, in 1850.160 In it he sought to demonstrate the philologist Max Muller’s theory that ‘*every sound forms a root*’; and that each letter was a ‘*visibleroot … conveying an abstract idea of certain governing powers which are essential*’.161 With this theory, Threlkeld analysed a series of words, including, most notably, ‘Koun’. The letters ‘K-O-U-N’, he contended, conveyed ‘Being, purpose, power, and presentiality’, an analysis that suggests a continuing fascination with Koun and, perhaps, a lingering suspicion that this Being represented a remnant understanding of the ‘true’ god.162

Threlkeld’s *Key* can be read from a variety of perspectives – as a contribution to philological studies, a defence of the integrity of the Awabakal language, or as a curious piece of colonial literature. But, it is, perhaps, most interesting to consider Threlkeld’s final analysis of the language of the Awabakal in relation to Biraban’s interpretation of Christianity for, in a sense, each man turned his knowledge of the other’s culture into a claim for authority in his own. While Biraban used his interpretation of Christianity and his vision of an indigenous Jehovah to cast himself an Awabakal spiritual leader, Threlkeld used his knowledge of the Awabakal language to claim the authority of the European natural scientist. With the *Key* Threlkeld recast the translation work that had failed to produce success in the mission field as a gain for colonial science. In 1851 he sent his study to the Royal National Exhibition in London and in 1854 he was rewarded with membership of the Ethnological Society.163 For both Threlkeld and Biraban, then, the work of translation created new sources of authority. But in the context of colonial relations there were also significant differences between their approaches. Biraban, acting in his position as go-between, appears to have sought to accommodate the colonial presence by refiguring and incorporating the Christian deity as a living force in an Awabakal world. Threlkeld, on the other hand, used his skills and his position in colonial society to turn the living linguistic and cultural world of the Awabakal into an object for philological study.164 In the *Key*, the structures of philological analysis, the letter-by-letter breakdown of Awabakal words for the purpose of proving a European theory, work to obscure the dynamism of Threlkeld’s original cross-cultural exchanges with Biraban and naturalise an image of colonial dominance.

159 Threlkeld 1850: 5.
161 Threlkeld 1850: 9.
162 Threlkeld 1850: 29.
163 Richard Cull to Threlkeld, 31 July 1854, Threlkeld 1974 II: 298.
164 Threlkeld 1850: 9; Richard Cull to Threlkeld, 31 July 1854, Threlkeld 1974 II: 298.
For Threlkeld, then, the work of translation that he had first pursued as part of a project of colonial transformation ended up as material for the production of colonial knowledge. But this work was always and unavoidably, a cross-cultural activity and Threlkeld’s texts were necessarily dialogic productions. Preserved in the fragments of speech in his linguistic texts and in the records of his exchanges with Biraban and other Awabakal, there are traces of a counter-history of translation and cultural innovation that show how the Awabakal confronted, interpreted, and even used Christianity in their attempts to deal with the traumatic changes wrought by colonisation.

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The provision of water infrastructure in Aboriginal communities in South Australia

Eileen Willis, Meryl Pearce, Carmel McCarthy, Fiona Ryan and Ben Wadham

The provision of water supplies to Aboriginal people in South Australia, particularly to communities covered under the Commonwealth-State (South Australia) Bilateral Agreement is considered world class in terms of the suitability of the technology to the remoteness of many of the communities and the harsh arid environment. This article explores the history of domestic water supplies to these Aboriginal communities. The article begins with a brief outline of pre-contact Aboriginal technologies for the maintenance of water supplies and reflects on the continuity of these approaches through the early years of pastoralist and missionary settlement. This is followed by a description of the services offered by the state and federal governments since the late 1970s to the present. The provision of these services can be divided into three distinct phases: the initial installation of state government infrastructure beginning in 1979 following the transfer from mission to government control; the appropriate technology phase from 1989 to 2000; and the mainstreaming phase from 2000 to 2009. The provision of essential services to any population is influenced by various political events. In the case of water supplies to Aboriginal communities three events are examined: the impact of the National Competition Policy on the work of the Essential Services Team, the Department of State Aboriginal Affairs (DOSAA) Strategic Plan on water supplies in Aboriginal communities in 2000, and planning for the National Water Initiative in 2005.

Methodology

Data for this paper came from two research projects carried out under the auspices of the Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division (AARD) of the Department of Premier and Cabinet (South Australia). In 2003 the research team provided AARD with a report on Aboriginal community residents’ views of their domestic water supply and, from 2005 to 2007, the implications of the National Water Initiative on two communities under the Commonwealth-State Bilateral Agreement and two communities outside the Agreement were

2 Both projects were funded by the Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division of Premier and Cabinet (AARD). Project 1 was also funded by Veolia Water. The second project was funded by AARD, the Commonwealth Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, United Water, the CRC in Aboriginal Health and the Desert Knowledge CRC.
examined. Data were gathered on the history of domestic water supply in ten of the 18 communities covered under the Agreement. Further data were collected through focus group interviews with Aboriginal people in ten communities, and interviews with personnel from the Department of State Aboriginal Affairs (DOSAA), SA Water, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the Commonwealth Department of Families and Community Services (FACS) and the South Australian Government Department of Human Services. The insights of these staff provided a framework for examining some of the major developments over a 30-year period from the late 1970s to the present.

Fig 1. Location of Aboriginal communities in South Australia.

4 Department of State Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation (DOSAA) became Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation (DAARE) in 2003, and Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division of Premier and Cabinet (AARD) in 2005. The Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) became Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) in 2006. The Department of Human Services (DHS) became the Department of Health in 2004.
The majority of Aboriginal communities that formed part of this study are in arid to semi arid regions with mean annual rainfall around 250 millimetres or less. In most regions the rainfall is highly variable and characterised by droughts of varying duration. Over most of outback South Australia summer temperatures are high with averages above 30° to 40°C, and winter temperatures ranging from 20°C to below freezing. Water supplies in these communities come from three sources: the Murray River through SA Water, groundwater within the communities or supplied through local government, and rainwater harvesting (RWH) through the provision of household water tanks and other larger scale catchment infrastructure. In a small number of communities the groundwater supply is not sustainable over the next 20 years, while river and RWH supplies are subject to the impact of drought.

Water supply in Aboriginal communities prior to government intervention

Prior to European settlement and for the first 150 years of colonisation the irregular rainfall, drought and scarcity of permanent water supplies in South Australia meant that Aboriginal people such as the Kokatha, Pitjantjatjara, Mirning, Wirangu, Adnyamathanha and Pangkala living in remote outback areas depended on their traditional knowledge of water sources and skill in accessing supplies. Details of this knowledge have been recorded by a number of historians and anthropologists who point to Aboriginal people’s depth of memory of water sources, and technologies in accessing and conserving water. For example, Bayley records that knowledge of the type and location of water sources was passed on through oral instruction and the use of stylised maps; this knowledge extended even to the approximate volume of water held at the source. Adults memorised this knowledge passing it on to children as they visited these water sources in the cyclic journeys that governed their lives. Similar reports are noted by Tindale for the Great Sandy Desert; he talks of the use of stylised maps using spirals to identify the location of pools and soakage-wells.

Aboriginal people’s knowledge of water sources also came from observation of the behaviour of animal and birds. Magarey notes the importance of animals and birds as guides to water sources for Aboriginal people. Birds such as the zebra finch, the striated pardalote and the red browed pardalote are excellent water finders leading people to uncover wells, rock holes and springs. Bayley also cites accounts of Aboriginal people extracting water from desert oaks,

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5 Bureau of Meteorology 2008.
6 Willis et al 2004.
7 Bayley 1999.
8 Tindale 1974.
9 Magarey 1899 as cited in Bayley 1999.
bloodwoods and cork trees using grasses joined together. Water was also obtained from the roots of trees such as red mallee, desert kurrajong, desert oak and *Grevillea nematophylla*.

Traditionally Aboriginal people employed a range of human-made technologies in accessing water. This included enlarging rock holes and in some cases chipping grooves in the rocky slopes surrounding them to divert more water into the holes. Often rock holes were covered with branches or flat slabs of rock to reduce evaporation and stop animals gaining access. Other examples of the constructed water sources in desert regions included impoundments or dams made from clay with wooden shovels. One described by the explorer Giles in 1889 in the far western regions of South Australia had clay dug out from a dam approximately 18 metres long and 1.5 metres deep. Another described by Basedow involved a method of extracting water using a very small circular opening on the surface of the rock hole leading to a reservoir of water below. In such cases:

A bundle of grass or bush was tightly wound around the bottom end of a rod, about five feet long. The rod was inserted in the hole, the bundle foremost and tightly fitting into the passage, and slowly pushed inward through its whole length. After a short time it is rapidly withdrawn; the water that had collected in front of the ‘piston’ being thereby forcibly ejected. This water was then collected inside the walls of a small enclosure built with clay outside the entrance.

Aboriginal people were able to survive in small groups using these existing water sources, but the gradual move by pastoralists and cameleers into the remote regions of South Australia during the early colonial period resulted in the need to find larger quantities and regular water supplies; the source of which often owed much to Aboriginal knowledge. For example, Anderson reports that the first permanent water supply at Port Augusta (Fig 1) was discovered by Paul Michen, the protector of Aborigines with assistance from the local Nukunu people. Likewise, the presence of water determined where missions were established. The current sites for Koonibba east of Ceduna (Fig 1) and Nepabunna in the Flinders Ranges were motivated by the presence of small creeks and springs which functioned as the major water supplies for these communities until the 1970s and played a significant role in the water conservation ethic developed by Aboriginal people as they moved to fixed settlement. The Adnyamathanha people at Nepabunna speak fondly and with wry humour of the missionaries’ endeavours to conserve water even to the point of coming uninvited into people’s houses to turn off dripping taps.

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10 Bayley 1999.
11 Bayley 1999.
12 Giles 1889.
13 Basedow 1906: 5.
Knowledge of Aboriginal water sites also played a major role in development in remote regions. The establishment of the railway siding at Ooldea (Fig 1) owed much to the soak nearby. This central meeting place for a number of Aboriginal groups provided up to 320,000 litres of water per week during the major construction period of the railway service around 1912.\textsuperscript{16} Sustainability and conservation of water remains a paramount concern for Aboriginal people who continue to manage these traditional water sources, rivers, rock holes and water holes today mainly through Natural Resource Management (NRM) projects, and previously through the Community Development Employment Programs (CDEP), and cultural tourism related endeavours. Water conservation occurs also as a result of cultural obligations and is strongly linked to the Dreaming both as providing markers or boundary points for ownership of country, and as a basis for ‘explaining’ country. The most obvious example of this is the Rainbow Serpent.\textsuperscript{17} Understanding of the importance of water goes beyond scientifically motivated environmental considerations of sustainability to a strong belief in the metaphysical meaning of water; summed up in the belief that if waterholes ‘no longer hold water for Anangu the country dies’.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{State government intervention from 1979 to 2007}

The initial foray of the South Australian State Government into supplying domestic water and other essential services to remote Aboriginal communities began by chance but moved quickly from an \textit{ad hoc} response to a planned program characterised by standardised equipment highly suitable for the arid environment and remoteness from mainstream services. Significant influences were the various reports on the health of Aboriginal people in remote regions during the 1960s and 1970s, but also the gradual up-take by the state government of their responsibilities to the various communities following the national move for churches to hand over responsibility of missions to the local Aboriginal people from the 1950s onwards. This move, accelerated by the 1967 referendum, resulted in the gradual formation within state governments of dedicated units with responsibility for remote community infrastructure.\textsuperscript{19} While it should not be presumed that state governments had no engagement in Aboriginal communities, especially education and the subsidising of health services, prior to 1967, much of the day-to-day infrastructure was funded or handled by missionary societies. In South Australia, government involvement in providing Aboriginal communities with water infrastructure can be divided into three phases: the first period extends from 1979 to 1989 and coincides with the transfer of missions to local Aboriginal people under policies of self-determination and the signing of the first State–Commonwealth Bilateral Agreement dedicating funds for community infrastructure; the second period from 1990 to 2000 was a time of consolidation and standardisation of infrastructure; while the final

\textsuperscript{16} Mattingley and Hampton 1988.
\textsuperscript{17} Toussaint et al 2005.
\textsuperscript{18} Aboriginal Lands Integrated Natural Resource Management Group 2003: 64.
\textsuperscript{19} Willis et al 2004.
period, 2000 to the present, represents a move towards mainstreaming in line with both federal government policy for Aboriginal communities following the disestablishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. This move is consistent with risk management practice for water supplies across Australia and is in line with the National Water Initiative and Australian Quality Drinking Water Guidelines.

The initial phase from 1979 to 1989: getting started

The major catalyst for state government engagement in the provision of essential services on Aboriginal communities was the 1976 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs, Review into Aboriginal Health. The findings from this review pointed to the need for improved public health as a major way of confronting Aboriginal health issues. The Commonwealth government committed $50 million over five years to be spent on improvements to essential services in Aboriginal communities across Australia. Senior staff from the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs in the regional office in Alice Springs approached the South Australian Government Outback Services to begin the task of providing appropriate water infrastructure to communities on what would eventually become known as the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankuntjatjara Lands (APY) Lands (Fig 1).

Outback Services, a small division within the SA Public Buildings Department, already had a presence on the APY Lands managing government assets and infrastructure connected with state education, government housing and law enforcement. The APY lands cover an area of approximately 10 per cent of the state and were formerly part of the North West Aboriginal Reserve. The Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act 1981 (SA) was proclaimed in 1981. Initially introduced by the Dunstan Labor Government in 1978 following lobbying by the Anangu people, it took the Tonkin Liberal Government to finally pass it in 1981. The Act provides the Pitjantjatjara and Yankuntjatjara people with ownership and title over their land beyond the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 (Cth) used in the Northern Territory. The significance of the Act was that it represented the first state government recognition of land ownership and gave total ownership of land to the Anangu people.

An assessment and recommendation for improvements of the essential services infrastructure in Aboriginal communities in the then APY Lands was undertaken by the Outback Services Division at this time as part of the state government’s response to the federal review on Aboriginal health. In 1985 Outback Services was renamed the Aboriginal Works Division, still within the Public Buildings Department, and then within Department of Housing and Construction (known as SACON or South Australian Construction) with the

21 National Health and Medical Research Council 1996.
work team from Outback Services known as the Aboriginal Works Division of SACON. Federal government funding was limited to capital works and administered by SACON.

South Australia was fortunate in its allocation of federal money, receiving more than its per capita share of funds because some states did not take up their allocation. This enabled SACON to move to a planned approach of technology standardisation throughout the communities as an efficiency measure, and to instigate a policy of equal distribution based on service priorities and available funds across many of the communities. The focus at this point became purchasing or designing innovative equipment that could withstand the harsh desert environments and, for the most, part could be repaired by local people in case of breakdown. These two principles became an abiding feature of the service. By the early 1990s most communities had upgraded water infrastructure, but funds did not extend to well planned maintenance services. These continued to be provided on an ad hoc basis in response to major breakdowns, although with increasing experience the SACON team were able to predict community needs and pre-empt major breakdowns through systematic capital works programs. State-funded maintenance budgets arrived with the signing of the initial Bilateral Agreement (between the South Australian and the Commonwealth governments) in 1989. Prior to this time maintenance programs were generally limited to breakdown situations and funded by the federal government through the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

John Kavanagh, one of the initial technicians and the architect of these services, commenting on the state of former missionary-installed infrastructure (before standardisation) noted:

as the money became available we just looked at the next priority on the list, keeping in the back of our minds all the time that we had to attack problems in a number of communities, rather than just concentrating on one or two.24

For the SACON Essential Service Team (EST) the strategy was not just to facilitate maintenance for the number of local private contractors who performed the maintenance work, but to instigate a program that enabled community essential service officers (ESOs), some of whom were Aboriginal people, to handle routine maintenance and breakdown issues themselves without having to always call for outside technical assistance. In many instances this meant that state-of-the-art technology was not always installed; sometimes hardier or simplified technologies were used with the remoteness, arid climate and distance from highly technical services in mind. As Kavanagh noted:

we haven’t embraced all the technology that’s been available as we were looking for simplicity and something the Essential Service Officers could manage.25

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The appropriate technology phase – 1989 to 2000

In 1989, through the State–Commonwealth Essential Services Agreement (Bilateral Agreement) the Electricity Trust of SA (ETSA), the Engineering and Water Supply Department (EWS) and the federal Labor government through the federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) and later under the auspices of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), agreed to provide matched funding allocations for services to a number of Aboriginal communities. Sixteen communities (Fig 1) came under the Bilateral Agreement in South Australia. These were Amata, Fregon (Kaltjiti), Iwantja (Indulkana) Kalka, Mimili, Pipalyatjara, Pukatja (Ernabella) and Yunyarinyi (Kenmore Park) from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yangkuntjatjara (APY) Lands; and the Aboriginal Lands Trust (ALT) communities of Davenport, Gerard, Point Pearce, Koonibba, Nepabunna, Raukkan (Point McLeay), Umoona and Yalata. Umuwa in the APY Lands and Oak Valley the sole community of the Maralinga Tjarutja (MT) Lands were not part of the original agreement, but were included in the revised Bilateral Agreement in 1997. There are of course many more Aboriginal communities in South Australia; however, they were not part of the Bilateral Agreements while ATSIC was operational. The most recent Bilateral Agreement now includes all Aboriginal groups as the Commonwealth moves to transfer full responsibility to the state.

In 1992 the State Labor Government created the Department of State Aboriginal Affairs (DOSAA) transferring the SACON Aboriginal Works Division to DOSAA now called the Essential Services Team (EST) within the portfolio of the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Kym Mayes. The Bilateral Agreement was renegotiated in 1997 to become the Agreement for the Provision of Essential Services Infrastructure in Aboriginal Communities in South Australia (the Bilateral Essential Services Infrastructure Agreement). One of the outcomes of this was the formalisation and improvement of funding and partnership arrangements between the state government and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) which was committed to providing annual grants of not less than $2.7 million to South Australia for the improvement of essential services infrastructure within Aboriginal communities. The state government also committed to match ATSIC funding which was then channelled into the provision, maintenance, operation and management of essential services infrastructure (water, power and sewerage) to the 18 communities. Funding for essential service infrastructure for communities outside the Bilateral Agreement, such as the many newly developing homelands, remained the direct responsibility of ATSIC, but it was not uncommon for the EST to advise both ATSIC and the community on infrastructure if requested to do so.

The significance of the 1989 Bilateral Agreement was that it provided certainty in funding arrangements over a set period of time although the federal government had provided funds for major capital works since 1979. With the signing of the Bilateral Agreement the states matched these funds. As Kavanagh noted:
We started to get far more pro-active with maintenance regimes; we had the money now, we could afford to put programs in place. We started looking for specialists that knew how to care for this equipment … Things started to really, really evolve.26

What is impressive about the Department of State Aboriginal Affairs (DOSAA) program is the strategy of installing robust, but simple technology that was standardised across the entire state. This ensured efficiency in responding to breakdowns and allowed the locally based Essential Service Officers to respond to minor breakdowns when they occurred.

DOSAA’s programs continued the focus on maintenance and infrastructure standardised across all sites as well as site-specific developments. For example, in terms of broad developments, groundwater monitoring equipment was installed in bores in all communities in order to observe long-term sustainability of aquifers. This represents one example of the pro-active development approach that enabled the prediction of a failing water supply well in advance of the event, thus ensuring the community was not compromised. At the level of individual communities: household meters were installed at Davenport, Nepabunna and Pukutja as there were no data on domestic water use; a reticulation system at Iwantja was replaced; two new bores were installed at Pukutja; and a major upgrade of the rain water storage and treatment compound was constructed at Nepabunna. The team established preventative and routine maintenance schedules across all 16 communities included in these arrangements, resulting in access to good water infrastructure for Aboriginal people in South Australia’s remote communities in line with the Australian Drinking Water Standards.27

The impact of the National Competition Policy on the work of the Essential Services Team

Initially, DOSAA project managed many of the contracts funded by ATSIC. The creation of the ATSIC infrastructure programs – Health Infrastructure Priority Projects (HIPP) and the National Aboriginal Health Strategy (NAHS) – resulted in an increase in service provider stakeholders, and the National Competition Policy made it a requirement that the Essential Services Team compete for tenders for projects with other government departments and the private sector. Consequently EST’s monopoly on the provision of essential services to remote Aboriginal communities was broken as were the advantages of standardisation. The private companies that tendered for these projects were not in a position to consult with DOSAA as both were competing for the same job, nor was DOSAA able to inform them, or insist on safeguarding standardisation across the communities. Despite this, the essential services team, made up of a small work unit with technical and trade skills and later an engineer, was still responsible for the routine maintenance of infrastructure, including infrastructure installed through private contracts. Commenting on these times Kavanagh noted that:

27 National Health and Medical Research Council 1996.
where we had tried to put in place uniformity of equipment, it started to fragment, because other organisations came in with different perceptions of how things should be done…

**Mainstreaming essential services from 2000 to 2007**

Just prior to the state election in 2002, which saw the Liberals replaced by a Labor government, the EST team moved to regularise the provision of electricity, water and sewerage services on all Aboriginal communities covered under the Bilateral Agreement through the development of a strategic plan that would lead eventually to mainstreaming these services within the portfolios of the state’s two major providers: ETSA and SA Water. The rationale for this shift arose out of risk management considerations and a desire to bring Aboriginal communities within a regulatory framework. The immediate motivation for this move arose from two adverse incidents: one on the APY Lands where a child had been electrocuted during a house fire and the Coroner noted the lack of regulatory procedures in Aboriginal communities; the second was the outbreak of *E. coli* and *Campylobacter* species at Walkerton in Canada in 2000 where 2300 people became ill and 7 died as a result of a failure in water supply risk management on an Indigenous community. While the quality of work overseen by DOSAA was later judged to be best-practice by an SA Water audit, DOSAA knew mainstreaming would prevent duplication of regulatory provision and ensure a robust risk management regime.

DOSAA contracted SA Water to perform all major services because of its strong position as a major public corporation engaged in water supply provision in South Australia with technical and regional capacities for improving water provision to Aboriginal communities. Besides the economies of scale, SA Water had extensive experience in supplying water from various sources including the Murray River, groundwater, dams and reservoirs; experience in transporting water via pipeline networks; access to Community Service Obligation (CSO) funds enabling the provision of water at regulated prices in rural and remote South Australia; established management structures for meter reading, account concessions, connections, disconnections and complaints; expertise in water treatment; previous experience as a direct service provider to Aboriginal communities at Point Pearce and Davenport through the use of bulk meter readings; and experience as maintenance managers of water supply infrastructure in two Aboriginal communities – Raukkan and Gerard. The last ATSIC contribution of $4.5 million was approved for the 2003/2004 financial year.

Initially there was some anxiety amongst Aboriginal leaders that the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation (DAARE) would relinquish

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29 Hrudey et al 2002.
30 Morgan et al 2003.
31 Department of State Aboriginal Affairs 2002: 27.
its policy responsibilities to SA Water and in 2004 a small group representing Nganampa Health in the APY Lands, an ATSIC regional councillor and the Aboriginal Health Council formally met with the DAARE Chief Executive, Peter Buckskin to make their views known.

Significantly, SA Water formed a team of specialists to deal with DOSAA’s (now formally DAARE) contract, with the head of the unit, Lee Morgan, insisting on an internal structure that would not marginalise Aboriginal issues within SA Water. A natural progression of these developments was the transfer of two of the key technical and engineering staff from the DAARE to SA Water in 2005/2006. This move meant that the detailed corporate knowledge held within DAARE moved across to SA Water with minimal interruption to services for Aboriginal people. While there have been two restructures within DAARE since then it has maintained its project management role, leaving the conduct of work to SA Water and the range of private providers they sub-contract. Meanwhile DAARE shifted its staffing base to policy and project management expertise, but interestingly between 2005 and 2006 re-established its expertise in water engineering along ‘with asset and project management, feasibility and conceptual studies, design, documentation and contract supervision’. This move reflected a realisation that while it no longer provided the technical services, it needed staff with the technical knowledge to make informed decisions on funding and to negotiate with SA Water.

The roll out of the Strategic Plan for electricity initially proceeded with little delay, but eventually stalled along with the transfer of infrastructure services for water supplies. The transfer of water infrastructure was more complex given the need to take account of land ownership and to negotiate with the three Land Holding Authorities: the Aboriginal Lands Trust, the APY Land Council and the Maralinga Tjarutja Trust. What was achieved very quickly was transfer of the provision of infrastructure services to SA Water on an annual contract basis, but the change of government delayed broader consultations with Aboriginal people and to date has not occurred. In the meantime other political events such as the disestablishment of ATSIC, and in 2006 the changes to the Commonwealth Municipal Services funding, known as the MUNS Scheme for town based Aboriginal communities, such as Davenport, Koonibba and Umoona over-took these negotiations. Internally, DAARE restructured again in 2006 moving from a statutory authority to a unit within Premier and Cabinet and was renamed the Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division (AARD). This move consolidated Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division of Premier and Cabinet’s role as project manager of essential services with the capacity to broker funds to be outsourced to SA Water and ETSA, but left many questions to do with the impact of the National Water Initiative, user pays, water rights and the renewed focus on conservation and sustainability to be addressed.

33 Parliament of South Australia 2007.
**The National Water Initiative**

In 1994 COAG released its Water Reform Framework which ‘recognised that better management of Australia’s water resources is a national priority’. The Water Reform Framework provided the basis for the implementation of the National Water Initiative (NWI) Agreement signed on 25 June 2004. While the deadline for the implementation of the NWI legislation is 2010, there have been numerous intermediate deadlines for various reform objectives since the signing of the agreement. An underlying theme throughout the NWI is to use water in a sustainable way.

An additional factor of the NWI in relation to domestic water supply is the commitment to the principle of user pays. In short, the NWI Agreement (Clause 65) stipulates consumption based pricing, and full cost recovery and consistency in pricing policies across sectors and jurisdictions. Removal of subsidies (eg, Community Service Obligations) and full cost recovery remain guiding principles and objectives. Resolution of these issues in Aboriginal communities is a new issue confronting the major stakeholders in water supply to Indigenous peoples. This includes their capacity to pay for existing and future services and to engage in the planning processes.

The likely impact of the NWI on Aboriginal communities, AARD and SA Water is three fold. Firstly, responsibility for efficient water use rests with the water service provider and part of the responsibility lies with the community. For example, part of Clause 64 of the NWI Agreement requires the ‘efficient delivery of the required services’, which makes service providers, such as SA Water, responsible for ensuring that water is delivered ‘efficiently’. This might be interpreted as a duty of care to fix leaking pipes and take steps to identify and overcome inefficiencies within the water delivery service so as to minimise wastage. Service providers will be bound by Clause 69 of the NWI Agreement which requires any new works or refurbishments to be ecologically sustainable before they can be implemented. In terms of remote Indigenous communities, this might be interpreted to mean that service providers are not permitted to extract water from bores at a greater rate than the natural recharge rate for the groundwater resources over a sustained period, nor to install new bores where an aquifer is being dewatered, although not all states interpret the legislation this way. This in turn requires the service provider to make these guidelines clear to Aboriginal communities and to provide a service that does not adversely impact on existing supplies.

The requirement to move to full cost recovery for all rural surface and groundwater based systems recognises that while perverse or unintended pricing outcomes are to be avoided, it is acknowledged that some services that are uneconomical might need to be ‘maintained to meet social and public health obligations’. This will be a challenge in the Aboriginal context where AARD...
will need to be able to make recommendations to government on the capacity or otherwise of the communities to meet this aim. While the NWI recognises that some communities will never be economically viable, nonetheless it states that in such cases states agree to achieve ‘lower bound pricing’ in line with commitments to the National Competition Policy (NCP). It is therefore possible that some element of ‘lower bound’ costs may be introduced into communities that currently do not pay for water. The legislation does, however, state that water pricing will be reviewed ‘on a case-by-case basis’. Furthermore, in South Australia the introduction or continuation of a Community Service Obligation (CSO) is permitted.

With reference to the aspiration that water use be ecologically sustainable, there are qualifying phrases that include ‘where practical’ or ‘where feasible’. In terms of the NWI legislation, it appears that Aboriginal communities will have to comply with the legislation and show efficient and sustainable water use.\(^{37}\) Much work has been done in this area by agencies other than AARD or SA Water, particularly in the more arid regions of the APY Lands.\(^{38}\) The NWI Agreement makes allowance for external environmental impacts such as prolonged drought or climate change that affect the availability of water resources, noting:

As these are outside the influence of the community, but the community may suffer reduced access to water of acceptable quality and quantity as a result of the environmental externalities, such impacts will be recognised and built into the water resource accounting systems in terms of what is available for communities to use in a sustainable way.\(^{39}\)

Along with this a number of communities have moved to develop their own water management plans that go well beyond sustainability issues to include the way in which water is key to environmental health issues.\(^{40}\)

Application of the principles of the NWI to Aboriginal communities is further complicated by two other developments. These are the disestablishment of ATSIC and federal government amendments to the *Municipal Services Act* which moves to mainstream all or most services on those Aboriginal communities that are situated close to large rural towns. Mainstreaming in this sense means that the specific needs of communities will come under the jurisdiction of local government. This includes garbage collection, keeping the neighbourhood tidy and animal control, and puts into question how water, electricity and house rental services will be managed. Most recently this has resulted in five of the communities that sit within the Bilateral Agreement – Davenport, Point Pearce, Umoona, Koonibba, and Raukkan – no longer being designated as remote Aboriginal communities for purposes of funding. This will require resolution of a number of issues. Currently, SA Water or local government delivers water to these five communities to the property gate where it is metered. A single account

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37 Council of Australian Governments 2004: Clauses 64 and 69.
38 Dodds et al 2001; Fitzgerald et al 2000.
40 Davies et al 2002.
is dealt with by the local Aboriginal community council levying residents to meet the costs. Under the new arrangements these communities may not be included in the Bilateral Agreement. It is possible that major infrastructure upgrades will become part of SA Water’s ordinary business, and individual householders will need to have their meters read on a regular basis in order to receive their account. They will presumably also either pay council rates or local councils will be funded by the federal or state governments for these services. This move assumes standardised mail services, access to houses, street signage and house numbering. A further issue not yet resolved is access to subsidies and concessions. At present Aboriginal residents on communities are not eligible for many concessions as they are not home owners. The land and property are held by one of the land trusts or councils and any move to user pays in line with the NWI will need to resolve these issues. All this excludes the compounding issue of water rights and the looming problem of the sustainability of aquifers in some communities.  

Concluding comments

An audit of water infrastructure on the 18 communities conducted by SA Water in 2004, reported that it was for the most part of a high standard and highly suitable for the environmental context. In a later report to state government on domestic water supplies to all remote towns in South Australia the service provider DOSAA, was put forward as the state benchmark suitable for all outback towns in South Australia. The quality of the service provided by the Essential Services team at DOSAA (now restructured as AARD) was partly a result of significant funding, but it was also a result of a highly dedicated and stable team of innovative technicians and engineers who have remained in the sector for over two decades and developed a deep knowledge of both the physical and socio-cultural environment as well as the possibilities for public utilities. With experience spanning several decades one of the engineers and a technician moved on to SA Water shortly after routine maintenance was transferred to SA Water, and one technician moved to FaHCSIA. This ensured a continuity of well planned water services to Aboriginal communities despite the shifts in administrative arrangements. These individuals have maintained their engagement in policy and project management. Commenting on the opportunity to innovate and trial equipment with a freedom not always available to private providers, Kavanagh makes the point:

I think today, we have built such reliability into the equipment, and that’s as a result of putting in place good maintenance programs, and when equipment does reach the end of its useful life it’s replaced. So, it’s that planning component. If you look at the latest SA Water Reports, the checklist appraisals, the emphasis they seem to be promoting is

41 Willis et al 2004.
42 Morgan et al 2003.
43 Keneally 2005.
water treatment. They are looking to refine. I think they’ve looked at the infrastructure and said ‘well, I don’t think there’s too much wrong with the basic infrastructure, but there are areas where we can improve the product itself. We’re going to raise the bar now, because we’re going to look at more of the quality issues. The thing is, we’ve always stayed within the drinking water guidelines, but they’re reasonably broad, the quality is not necessarily as good as it could be. I think the problem is going to be that the funding is not going to come quickly enough. The systems that are being promoted by SA Water, I’ve no reservations about what’s being proposed, but they’re going to be expensive. And if it occurs, it’s going to take some period of time.44

Acknowledgements

Funding for the various projects mentioned in this paper came from Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation Division of Premier and Cabinet, South Australian Government, United Water and the Commonwealth Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. Our thanks are also extended to staff within the Aboriginal Division of SA Water.

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Gadubanud society in the Otway Ranges, Victoria: an environmental history

Lawrence Niewójt

The Otway Peninsula is probably the least known Victorian tribal area, as 19th century records are virtually silent concerning its aboriginal inhabitants.

— DJ Mulvaney, 1961

Nearly 50 years since Mulvaney’s archaeological research at Aire River, local historians have ventured little beyond cursory statements regarding the Gadubanud people of the Otway region. Though scholars acknowledge the long-term Aboriginal presence in the area, the dearth of documentary sources has deterred sustained inquiry into the history, economy and enduring relics of pre-contact Aboriginal society. While past attempts at ‘ethnohistory’ presented surveys of what little information could be gleaned from official papers, to date there has been no attempt to move beyond these brief (but informative) summaries.1 Circumventing the perceived roadblock posed by an exhausted documentary record, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of Aboriginal presence in the Otway region by broadening the range of research questions we are prepared to investigate and employing an expanded set of evidentiary materials. A synthesis of the diverse lines of inquiry pursued by archaeologists, earth scientists, ecologists, historians and geographers enables us to gauge the scale and magnitude of past Aboriginal interventions in the landscape. Approaching old sources with a fresh eye for detail and analysis, we can reconstruct the cultural landscape created by the Gadubanud people prior to their disastrous encounter with Europeans in the late 1840s.

The Gadubanud people, residing at various nodes of settlement throughout the Otway region, adapted the land and altered the distribution of ecological communities to best serve their needs. The risks inherent in a subsistence economy were contained and spread geographically using a sophisticated system of land management. Furthermore, a pattern of semi-nomadic movements linked inland, estuarine and coastal occupation sites that were known for their high food yields and provided dietary variety throughout the year. The reconstruction of the Gadubanud’s settlement and land use patterns in the Otway region of Victoria – despite the absence of a detailed documentary record – validates Robin and

Griffiths’ declaration that ‘much Aboriginal history is environmental history’ and emphasises the potential utility of interdisciplinary approaches in this area of research.²

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**Fig 1.** The traditional territory of the Gadubanud people and the approximate location of various clans

Source: Clark 1990: 189. Reproduced with the permission of Professor Ian D Clark.

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The Gadubanud people in the written record

Hemmed in by a rising ocean that stabilised about 7000 years ago, the uplifted sedimentary rocks of the Otway Range run from north-east to south-west at an elevation of about 500 metres above the sea. A few isolated peaks reach up to 675 metres, and at many points along this coastline bare mountains and tree-clad ridges plummet dramatically into the sea. In the north, the narrow belt of foothills merge with the undulating volcanic plain that is the definitive feature of Victoria’s Western District. Littoral plains are found only at Apollo Bay and further west, but even these flat stretches of coastal terrain do not exceed five kilometres in width. Vegetation within the traditional territory of the Gadubanud people varies from heath on the sea cliffs, to dunes near the Cape, open forest on the eastern slope, wet sclerophyll forest in the mountains and tracts of rainforest along some watercourses and mountain gullies (see Fig 1). Highly productive ecosystems, such as the wetlands found at the base of the northern foothills (at the headwaters of the Barwon River) and the numerous river estuaries of the coastal zone, provided a vast food supply and a range of options regarding the seasonal sequence, frequency and intensity of harvesting.

Although they were rarely recorded beyond their country, the Gadubanud maintained complex ties with other Aboriginal groups and were known to have close linguistic and familial connections with their northern neighbour, the Gulidjan people of the Lake Colac area. They avoided the primitive sheep stations that rapidly spread across the volcanic plains of the Western District after 1837, and shunned the company of heavily-armed European settlers. As a result, comparatively little is known about their social organisation, leadership, customs, language and traditions. What follows is a brief summary of what the documents tell us about these people.

The modern name given to these people derives from the work of James Dawson, who recorded the Cape Otway language group as ‘Katubanuut’ and claimed that this meant ‘King Parrot language’ in the local dialect. These people were closely associated with the Gulidjan who resided in the vicinity of Lake Colac, but were considered to be ‘wild blacks’ by both the Wathaurong to the north-east and the Girai wurrung to the west. Their presence was first recorded by Chief Protector Robinson in 1842 when he met three Gadubanud people at the mouth of the Hopkins River (near present-day Warrnambool) and received details of four clans that resided on the western edge of the Otway Ranges: three lived at the Cape Otway peninsula and one was said to reside north of Moonlight Head. One of these clans was said to belong to Bangurer, which was noted as the local place-name referring to Cape Otway. Later that year, an unconfirmed report blamed the Gadubanud for the removal of food and blankets from an

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4 Le Griffon 2006.
5 Dawson 1881: 2.
8 Robinson cited in Clark 1990: 190.
outstation, and in 1844 they were suspected of killing ‘a white teenage boy’.\textsuperscript{9} In 1853, a letter from George Armytage to Superintendent La Trobe identified a fifth clan associated with the Gadubanud people. The ‘Yan Yan Gurt tribe’ was said to reside at the east head of the Barwon River, 12 miles south-east of Birregurra, near the base of the Otway Ranges.\textsuperscript{10}

Dawson also noted that the Gadubanud residing at Cape Otway were linguistically affiliated with the Djargurd speakers of the Warrnambool area.\textsuperscript{11} Their meeting with Robinson – which took place over 50 kilometres beyond the western boundary of their traditional territory – is the only confirmed record of the Gadubanud people beyond their homeland. With respect to the great meetings held in the Western District near Caramut, Dawson noted that ‘None of the sea coast tribes attended the meetings at Mirraewuwe, as they were afraid of treachery and of an attack on the part of the others’.\textsuperscript{12}

This level of insularity was highly unusual in Victoria, where trade links and marriage ties amongst Aboriginal groups were known to span hundreds of kilometres. On 2 April 1846 Superintendent La Trobe, on his third and final attempt to reach Cape Otway, met with seven Gadubanud men and women in the valley of the Aire River before trekking across the open grasslands to his destination.\textsuperscript{13} Also in April 1846, the squatter Henry Allan made an unsuccessful attempt at a north–south crossing over the mountains, guided by two Aboriginal women from the Wesleyan mission at Buntingdale. In the northern foothills of the Otway Ranges, on the upper reaches of the Gellibrand River, he found an unoccupied Aboriginal camp. On his return trip through the area, he revisited this site and found a large number of implements that had not been there before.\textsuperscript{14} At Cape Otway, in July and August of 1846 the contract surveyor George Smythe encountered a group of Aborigines consisting of one man, four women and three boys.\textsuperscript{15} They killed a member of his surveying party, and in late August 1846 Smythe returned to the area on a retaliatory expedition with a retinue of several Wathaurong warriors from the Geelong area. Armed with muskets and tomahawks, Smythe and the group came across seven Gadubanud at the mouth of the Aire River, which they attacked and killed.\textsuperscript{16} After this August 1846 massacre, a final note regarding the Gadubanud people appears in the colonial press. On 4 January 1848 an article in the \textit{Geelong Advertiser} reported a conflict

\begin{footnotes}
\item[10] Armytage in Bride 1898: 175.
\item[12] Dawson 1881: 3.
\item[14] It is suspected that the tools found by Allan were manufactured at a set of ‘grinding rocks’ found on Lardner’s Creek, one mile upstream from its junction with the Gellibrand River. There, the basalt of the volcanic plains forms large outcrops near slabs of sandstone that had been exposed by the rushing water, and the grooves on its surface signify its importance as a site of production where basalt ‘blanks’ were manufactured into sharpened axe heads that could be used or traded. See Massola 1962: 66–69.
\item[16] \textit{Geelong Advertiser}, 29 August 1846, ‘The Late Slaughter of the Cape Otway Blacks’.
\end{footnotes}
between two Aboriginal groups near Port Fairy. Two men were killed in the attack, among them ‘a man who belonged to the Cape Otway tribe, the last of his race’.17

These chance encounters with the Gadubanud people point toward an extremely low resident population in the Otway region at the time of contact. No more than eight members of this language group were ever seen together at one time, and the sum of all recorded individuals would yield a total number of 26 people (3+7+8+7+1). This total indicates a remarkably tiny group size for a vast territory stretching from Painkalac Creek (near Aireys Inlet) in the east to the Gellibrand River that flows west of the mountains. With over 100 kilometres of coastline yielding shellfish, the presence of several wetlands and productive estuaries, and the plant foods available both in open land and potentially acquired through trade with neighbouring groups, it would be reasonable to suspect that the region’s ‘carrying capacity’ would have encouraged the flourishing of a far greater population. Evidence from the archaeological record, historic coastal survey maps and an assessment of regional food resources suggest that the pre-contact population of the Gadubanud was far larger than indicated in the documentary record. These alternate sources of evidence point to the existence of a sophisticated resource management regime and movement corridors that were maintained through the selective deployment of fire to generate a specific type of landscape mosaic. While it is impossible to produce a precise figure for the historical population of the area, a survey of the potential food supply suggests that, rather than the ‘tens’ of Gadubanud people recorded in historical documents, we should begin to adjust our thinking to accommodate the ‘hundreds’ that once lived in the Otway region.

**Regional food resources**

Under the management of the Gadubanud people, the Otway region yielded a food supply that was diverse, conveniently accessed and organised in a flexible manner so that surplus, rather than scarcity, was the norm. In general, spring and summer were the seasons of greatest abundance, while winter was the leanest season. The ability of Aboriginal society to make full use of nature’s bounty was noted by James Dawson, finding that in western Victoria ‘Articles of food are abundant, and of great variety for everything not actually poisonous or connected with superstitious beliefs is considered wholesome’.18 As a result, differences in taste and cultural approaches to sustenance need to be kept in mind when considering the carrying capacity of Australian environments and the efficacy of various land management regimes.

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17 *Geelong Advertiser*, 4 January 1848, ‘The Blacks’.
18 Dawson 1881: 18.
Wetlands, such as those found near the outlets of the Gellibrand and Aire rivers, provided a fine variety of foods. Fish, eels, waterfowl and bird’s eggs added much protein to the diet yet responded to exploitation with a high rate of annual regeneration. In the region’s lakes and wetlands, particularly those at Gerangamete, Irrewillipe and Chapple Vale, food was reliable and easily accessed. Some reports from the Western District noted the means by which wetland foods were procured. Dawson was told that ‘Swans are killed in marshes, by the hunter wading among the tall reeds and sedges, and knocking the birds on the head with a waddy’. Clark and Heydon’s work on Aboriginal placenames confirms the importance of waterfowl in local diet. Their dictionary lists the Aire River estuary’s Gadubanud name as Gunuwarr, which translates to mean ‘swan’. Fish were commonly caught at night, the technique being that ‘A fire is lighted on the bank, or a torch of dry bark held aloft, both to attract the fish and give light’. Consumption patterns could be adjusted to favour foods that were ‘in season’, thereby conserving resources that had become scarce or were

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19 Lourandos 1980: 249.
20 Dawson 1881: 93.
21 Clark and Heydon 2002: 92. Further study of archival materials may yield additional insight and, potentially, a salvage grammar and wordlist similar to recent work completed in the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie areas of New South Wales. See Lissarrague 2006.
22 Dawson 1881: 95.
in a state of recovery. The abundance of eels in local marshes, found both on the coast and in the northern foothills of the Otway Ranges, would have meant that the Gadubanud people had no need to join other tribes for the corroborees that took place at the Western District lakes during the autumn season eel harvest.

Fishing in the tidal estuaries could also produce a substantial protein source, an ideal supplement to the large volume of starchy tubers growing in the shallows and at the water’s edge. Species such as water-ribbons (*Triglochin procera*), the club-rush (*Scirpus maritimus*), and the rhizomes of the tall spike-rush (*Eleocharis sphacelata*) were commonly found throughout the region and provided decent nourishment. The water-ribbon could be found in the swift-flowing streams on the Otway coast, in lakes, swamps or floodplains. Plants can yield over 200 starchy tubers, with each root up to 5 cm long and weighing 0.5-2.5 g. The attraction of the Gellibrand and Aire River estuaries was heightened by their sheltered topography, and at the same time they were located within easy walking distance of the ocean. At these sites, a diet of starchy plant foods could be combined with animal protein unique to freshwater and marine environments without requiring elaborate group movements. At Aire River, archaeologists found that molluscan remains of larger intertidal marine species and freshwater mussels were present along with the remains of parrot-fish, more extensive ‘indeterminate fragments of fish’, and snails.

William Buckley’s memoirs provide a detailed set of observations on the use of some Otway wetlands. On one of their wanderings in south-western Victoria, Buckley’s mob was invited to take part in an exchange of tuber roots for eels. The groups were to meet at a place called Bermongo. Located at the headwaters of the Barwon River, the marsh was teeming with eels. When they arrived for the exchange, prepared with woven baskets full of starchy tubers, they found a large congregation of about 80 men, women and children. Though Buckley does not name the group involved in the exchange with his Wallarranga mob, it is very likely that they were dealing with the Yan Yan Gurt clan, the only clan of the Gadubanud people known to live on the north side of the range. The exchange emphasises the long-distance character of trade connections in the Aboriginal economy and the strong desire for dietary variety. This event also bolsters Dawson’s claim that many varieties of fish were part of the Aboriginal diet and that the *tuupurn* eel was ‘reckoned a very great delicacy’.

Several kilometres to the north of this site, Buckley experienced threat of attack when his group stayed at the Gerangamete swamp. In his description of

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23 Scarlett 1977: 3.
26 There is a high probability that this site was located near the present-day community of Barramunga, in the area now flooded by the West Barwon reservoir. See Clark and Heydon 2002: 25.
27 Morgan 1852: 66.
28 Armytage in Bride 1898: 175.
29 Dawson 1881: 19.
this incident, in which it is clear that the group had resided at the swamp for some time without invitation or permission, he stated that his mob was threatened with attack in a night-time ambush but managed to flee safely. Though he did not give a name for the group that forced them away from the wetlands, the level of fear communicated in his account suggests that these fierce protectors of the marshes had a history of hostility with his mob.

Fleeing the scene of their illegal squatting, they covered several kilometres in the darkness of night and reached the top of Sugarloaf Hill within a few hours. This movement rate indicates that open forests covered this part of the range and that fire was regularly deployed to clear undergrowth. It is likely that this trail was originally blazed by the Gadubanud and was similar in form to the ‘native path’ taken by La Trobe in 1846 from Moonlight Head up into the forested mountains. Burning would clear ground and help establish the gaps in the canopy that was necessary for navigation by moonlight. The presence of burnt and unburned tracts, characteristic of a landscape mosaic within the Otway forests, is further evinced in Buckley’s account. From Sugarloaf Hill, with a good view of the coast, the group split into two and Buckley led his cohort to a place near the seaside which he called Kirkedullim. While only a few hours were required to travel from the swamp to the main ridge of the coastal range, the trek to the sea required them to wander for several days until they made a lengthy halt at his favoured spot on Painkalac Creek. Enjoying the warm summer weather on the coast, Buckley noted that the group had access to plenty of freshwater and sustained themselves by catching fish. The windward side of the eastern Otway Range, especially the elevated, wetter areas, possessed no signs of being subjected to frequent burning. For the Gadubanud, this was the remote edge of their territory.

The rock platforms of the Otway coast also proved to be an important food procurement zone, allowing access to shellfish at low tide. Even today, heaps of deposited shells persist as lasting reminders of Aboriginal food harvesting, and these middens are occasionally found in close proximity to tidal estuaries. At Seal Point, located on Cape Otway peninsula, archaeologists discovered ‘all the features of a semi-sedentary seasonal (warm weather) base camp’. Across Bass Strait, on a similar stretch of coastline in northern Tasmania, research has shown that ‘Shellfish contributed about half the total flesh weight throughout the whole occupation’. Though shellfish alone could not make up a diet, such an easily obtained source of protein added variety to food consumption patterns and could be relied upon as the main source of nutrition at certain points in the year.

30 Morgan 1852: 121.
32 Morgan 1852: 122.
33 Lourandos 1980: 250.
34 Flood 1989: 179.
However, food procurement in the coastal zone had distinct seasonal limitations. In the years prior to European settlement in western Victoria, William Buckley spent considerable time living on the coast near present-day Aireys Inlet. He found that his exposed hut on the coast was subjected to ‘dreadfully cold and tempestuous’ weather in winter and that the shellfish supply became very scarce and difficult to collect during this period. Environmental scientists have noted that the rough weather and huge swells characteristic of the Southern Ocean in winter would have made food harvesting in rock pools and ledges a dangerous task with a very low probability of success. The food scarcity experienced by Buckley during winter compelled him to migrate inland. Episodic shifts away from the coast would have allowed natural regeneration of the food resource, minimised the environmental impact of shellfish harvesting, and satisfied a strong desire for dietary variety. A journey over the mountains to the Barwon River eel marshes would have been a sensible response to the onset of seasonal change. Wintering on the leeward slopes of the northern foothills posed many advantages, not the least being the abundant timber available for the perpetual campfire.

Beyond marsupials, the Gadubanud exploited a wide range of animal protein sources. These included: native rats and mice, snakes, lizards, frogs, birds and their eggs. Possums provided sustenance in addition to a fur pelt that could be fashioned into a warm cloak. Hunting was most easily performed at forest edges largely due to the combination of good visibility, adequate cover in the re-growth vegetation, and proximity to the habitats of the pursued game. These factors would encourage attempts to burn out patches and establish a well-indented forest perimeter that maximised edge spaces. In general, the forests were less suitable environments for the pursuit of game as undergrowth reduced visibility, hampered movement and established barriers that could interfere with thrown spears. These factors severely constrained the utility of wet sclerophyll forests as a food procurement zone. With regard to hunting in areas along the sea coast, the presence of a rich marine mollusc food resource provided incredible flexibility in the frequency and intensity of game hunting so that this activity was guided by taste and dietary choice rather than absolute necessity. In the more open woodlands of the northern foothills, a completely different set of game animals could be found, including: eastern grey kangaroo, red-necked wallaby, common brushtail possum, sugar glider and fat-tailed dunnart.

Vegetables were a crucial component of the food supply. In western Victoria, plant foods were known to have comprised at least half of the diet. Crops of tuber

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36 Morgan 1852: 36.
38 Mannino and Thomas 2002: 467.
39 At Seal Point, evidence shows that dietary variety was provided in situ, with the remains of seals, possums, wallabies, and fish found at the middens alongside a large number of ‘sandstone pestle-mortar type’ tools used for pulping plant fibre. See Bowdler and Lourandos 1982.
40 Flood 1989: 90.
plants such as the murnong yam (*Microseris lanceolata*) were maintained through landscape burning. This yam could grow in forest clearings and was favoured by Aborigines because of its sweet, milky, coconut-like flavour. Although physical transplant from one site to another could be performed, the wind-borne seed was known to colonise clear ground. The activity of digging for roots aerated soil patches and encouraged further seed germination. In Victoria we find 218 species of edible roots that could have been incorporated into the Aboriginal diet. High in carbohydrates and available year-round, the root crops grow in dense clusters so that ‘a large amount of food can be collected in a relatively small area’. This spatial concentration poses a problem for researchers: small yam patches and the process of harvesting could go unnoticed in the documentary record. Residing on the Bellarine Peninsula, William Buckley mentioned that there were long periods when his mob subsisted almost entirely on roots dug up by the women, while ‘men procured opossums occasionally’. Readily available and encouraged by the burning of clearings, in the eastern Otways tuber and yam patches were known to occur along corridors frequently travelled by Buckley’s Wallarranga mob.

The signs of yam cultivation may still be witnessed in the region today. Following the ‘Ash Wednesday’ fire of February 1983 at Anglesea, in the spring local residents witnessed ‘a phenomenal flowering of tuberous perennials’. By contrast, nearby unburnt areas exhibited quite sparse flowering of perennials. A ten-year study of recovery from this fire showed that most of the flowering species were herbaceous, and these declined in the following years as the forest regrew and the canopy closed. Subject to systematic burning in the past, the maintenance of these herbaceous species for food would have required burning at three-year intervals to hold the forest in an arrested stage of fire recovery and ensure an optimal supply of starchy tubers. In this way, fire deployed in the eucalypt woodland of the eastern Otways established a multifunctional landscape.

Burning maintained the open structure of the forest, allowing continued use of the movement corridor in addition to ensuring good yields of vegetable crops. Furthermore, this flexible system of land management could easily accommodate changes in population by altering fire frequency and physically enlarging yam fields. The tending of herbaceous plants in this manner ensured that foods could be harvested and consumed without the need for storage facilities, and the patchy landscape pattern possessed characteristics that were also conducive to

44 Gott 1982: 60.
45 Morgan 1852: 47.
46 Gott 2005: 1205.
48 The herbaceous species which were staple foods on the Basalt Plains, located northwest of the Otway region, were also known to require frequent burning in order to maintain a maximal food supply. Tussock grassland (*Themeda* sp.) unburnt for three years provides few gaps on which non-grass plant species can germinate or thrive. See Stuwe 1994: 93–95.
game hunting. Fresh re-growth after a burn enticed animals to graze the open paddocks, while the interspersed visual barriers, aural suppressants, and ease of pedestrian mobility worked to the advantage of the hunter.

Although the thick forests were associated with a scarcity of food and the difficulty of its procurement, even there the Gadubanud could find something good to eat. While the closed-canopy rainforest complex offered little food, the more extensive wet eucalypt forests were markedly more productive. Indeed, though drier climatic conditions since about 4300 BP encouraged a shrinking of the rainforest complex and concomitant expansion of the eucalypt communities, this differential productivity could have motivated Aboriginal burning and the hastening of localised transitions. Ashton’s long-term study of the mountain ash (*Eucalyptus regnans*) in central Victoria sets out several positive qualities of the wet sclerophyll forest complex. Older stands would suppress undergrowth – easing movement and increasing visibility – and encourage the growth of ferns that could act as a habitat for game, particularly wallabies. The pith of bracken fern (*Pteridium esculentum* Forst.) was also edible. Studies have found it to possess a higher carbohydrate content than the potato, and so the harvest of this resource may have prompted specific trips into the forest. This foodstuff would have been a convenient source of nutrition for journeys across the mountain range and expeditions into the forest in search of the raw materials needed for the manufacture of trade goods. The discovery of pulping tools at the Seal Point archaeological site suggests that the Gadubanud residing there made intermittent use of tree ferns as a source of carbohydrates.

The land-based economy of the Gadubanud people was predominantly geared toward the procurement of foodstuffs that would sustain their society. Lacking many of the conceptual constraints that limit the modern-day diet, the Gadubanud found sources of nutrition in many types of environments that make up the Otway region: coast, wetland, estuary, forest and grassland. Ongoing adjustments in the timing and intensity of harvests provided for the long-term sustainability of food resources, and the lack of dependence on any one particular food allowed a dynamic society to cope easily with the vagaries of climate and mitigate against risk of resource failure. The skilful deployment of fire encouraged the development of a complex landscape mosaic that arranged resources in a convenient manner, replenished root crops and opened up the movement corridors that linked cultural points of interest. Under Aboriginal management, the Otway region could yield enough food to sustain a population that numbered in the hundreds.

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52 Bowdler and Lourandos 1982.
Settlement distribution, communication corridors and landscape burning

Given that the Gadubanud economy was overwhelmingly focused on feeding its population and not the production of trade commodities, the investigation of regional food resources has helped confirm the existence of three important settlement concentrations in the Otway region: the Aire River estuary, Cape Otway and the wetlands found along the Barwon River. The locations of Gadubanud camps noted by George Augustus Robinson, William Buckley, and George Armytage exhibit a tight correlation with highly productive food procurement zones and significant archaeological deposits (see Figs 2 and 3).

An archaeological study, released in 1998, encompassed the Otway Ranges and the entirety of the Gadubanud territorial area. In total, 276 Aboriginal archaeological sites were recorded in the study area. 'Archaeological density', corresponding to the number of artefacts found per square kilometre, was calculated to be highest at a distance less than five kilometres from the ocean,

Fig 3. Distribution of archaeological sites in the Otway region

53 The latest survey report addressed the fact that there had been 'little systematic archaeological study within the Otway area as a whole'. All previous findings were compiled into a single dataset and supplementary fieldwork was completed to address spatial gaps in coverage. See Presland 1982: 4.
whereas the mountainous zone (containing the wet sclerophyll forest and cool temperate rainforest) was found to have the fewest occupation sites. Pre-European population distribution was summarised in the following statement:

Late precontact period Aboriginal occupation of the Otway Range appears to have been concentrated on narrow strips along the peripheries of the Range. The central core of the range, including the upper slopes and the plateau, was also visited and exploited by Aboriginal populations but on a much lesser scale than the ecotonal peripheries.

Most archaeological sites mentioned in the study contain stone artefacts or flaked stone implements. Flint artefacts, which could only have been produced at a few known coastal locations, are usually found within three kilometres of the ocean. At Aire River, Mulvaney found hundreds of stone chips, flakes and artefacts in two rock shelters. The overwhelming majority of these were made of flint, likely sourced from the ‘irregularly shaped nodules of flint cast on the beach’ near Cape Otway. The latest archaeological study identified two additional sites where flint artefacts were found on the northern side of the Range, approximately 18 kilometres inland, near the present-day community of Forrest.

The discovery of flint artefacts, of coastal provenance, near the headwaters of the Barwon River (East Branch), suggests the existence of a trans-Otway movement corridor. This track linked the people of the coast with their brethren at the northern wetlands, a food harvesting zone so important that it once attracted Buckley’s mob from their distant base on the Bellarine Peninsula. While the discovery of artefacts made from coastal flint suggests a northward direction of travel, there is little doubt that a track kept open by frequent burning would encourage traffic in both directions.

The route chosen for this trans-Otway track would have deliberately expedited the process of crossing the mountains in order to minimise the length of the journey and its physical strain on the traveller. The main ridge of the Otway Range receives an average annual rainfall in excess of 1800 mm, with 60–65 per cent of this precipitation falling in the May–October period. Scheduled to coincide with the eel harvest, an autumn crossing of the mountains had a high probability of experiencing rain. This would make for a cold, wet journey from the coast to the marshes, and so a winding track would be both impractical and highly undesirable. For the Gadubanud, this forest landscape was also imbued with superstitious significance for it was said to be the domain of spiritual beings, and known for its roving packs of wild dingoes. These considerations,

59 Morgan 1852: 66.
60 Linforth 1977: 61.
61 Dawson 1881: 89.
as well as the need to account for the movement barriers found in the Otways – dense undergrowth, steep topography, enormous fallen trees, leech-infested forest gullies, incessant rains and thick mud – worked to channel traffic to only a few possible routes.

Fig 4. Running north–south, the Elliott Zone is characterised by a series of parallel valleys that would have provided the most direct route over the Otway Range


An examination of topographical data alongside studies of regional geomorphology offers several potential north–south routes over the mountains. Of prime significance is the ‘Elliott Zone’, a geological shear zone that transcends the main ridge of the Otway Range in a north–south alignment (Fig 4). This zone is marked by a series of parallel valleys (and watercourses) on the coastal face of the range and, on the north side, the relatively straight trough followed by the Barwon River as it flows across the volcanic plain.62 From the coast, following Skenes Creek, Wild Dog Creek or the east branch of the Barham River (west of Apollo Bay) would allow pedestrians to reach the top of the main ridge directly. Regardless of the valley used in the ascent, once atop the ridge the trekkers

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would need to aim toward Mount Sabine and, just before reaching the pinnacle, they would veer northward once more and descend toward the Barwon River valley along the back of a spur ridge. Marching down this ridge, the Gadubanud would reach a point requiring the crossing of a stream. Only two kilometres beyond the ford they would find the first eel marsh at the headwaters of the Barwon, the Bermongo recorded in Buckley’s memoir.

But which route did they take? The Barham River valley route would have been an unlikely choice for pedestrian traffic due to the greater (east–west) distance covered and the steep nature of the final ascent to the ridge. The gentler ascent and shorter length of the Skenes Creek and Wild Dog Creek routes made them significantly more appealing, and the watercourses marking these paths were easily accessed from the coast. Nearly identical in distance and structure, either one of these routes could have been used by the Gadubanud. However, evidence dating from the start of European occupation in the region suggests that Wild Dog Creek was the favoured route over the Otways.

At the end of the 1840s, when William Roadknight came to establish a cattle run on Cape Otway peninsula he crossed the mountains using the valley of Wild Dog Creek and made the remainder of his journey westward along the coast. William and his son Thomas expended a great deal of effort widening this track into a ‘good sound Dray Road’. In a letter to Superintendent La Trobe, Roadknight described the process of discovering and cutting this route. He acknowledged that their success was directly dependent on ‘the local knowledge acquired by my son during this arduous undertaking’63. The Gadubanud people also maintained the coastal movement corridor, as landscape burning between Apollo Bay and Seal Point had established easily-traversed grass and heath vegetation on the undulating hills that lead to Cape Otway.

In March 1849, Superintendent La Trobe used a track to cross the Otway Ranges and reach the sea at a point east of Apollo Bay. Although he did not specify, it is most likely that he followed the Wild Dog Creek track charted by Roadknight only a few years earlier. He noted:

It is a rough track, but still it is one, - 50 miles wholly in the forest, a basin in the higher portion of the range 12m. through, - is entirely filled with Fern Trees of great beauty.64

This movement corridor could only have been opened with the systematic blazing of the trail. The rough state of the track reported by La Trobe highlights the prolonged absence of fire: vigorous undergrowth had begun to fill in the open spaces.

The discovery of a vast area of fern trees in an elevated portion of this high-rainfall region gives a sense of the vegetation change initiated by landscape burning. Fern trees tend to establish themselves in clearings and may grow quite

64 Blake 1975: 36.
thickly along forest edges. Their proliferation atop the mountains would have required the removal of any pre-existing closed canopy forest cover, likely the rainforest complex marked by the myrtle beech tree species. The ferns would then take over these discrete clearings or form the understory beneath an open-canopy eucalypt forest community. La Trobe’s description of the ‘entirely filled’ basin omits mention of tree cover, suggesting that either the area was devoid of trees or that the coverage was not particularly significant. In the Otway Ranges, both the myrtle beech and mountain ash trees could grow up to be imposing giants with trunks several metres in diameter – the type of forest feature that tends to elicit commentary – and so the lack of comment about this aspect of forest structure gives a strong indication that the vegetation communities had been transformed through the deployment of fire. A decade earlier in Tasmania, George Augustus Robinson remarked on the fern trees found in areas recently burnt by Aborigines and noted their abundance along a ‘direct road for the natives’ that led to the Tamar River.65 Most certainly, the proliferation of fern trees La Trobe found atop the Otway Range did not get there by accident.

On the coast, we can gauge the effects of Aboriginal fire use and land management practices from a survey map produced by George Douglas Smythe in 1846. Created in preparation for the lighthouse construction project at Cape Otway, Smythe chronicled the vegetation and forest communities found along the coast, documenting a cultural landscape that had been transformed by the fire-stick (Fig 5). The large timber forests had been left to occupy the highest, most inaccessible terrain whilst the frequent pedestrian traffic between Cape Otway and the Aire River was eased by the removal of heath scrub and its replacement by grass cover. In such a zone of good soil, high rainfall and proximity to vigorous forests, the appearance of grassland and the stark boundary with the forest signals that this landscape mosaic was shaped and kept in place by the regular application of fire to the land. By manipulating the seasonal timing, intensity and frequency of fire deployment the Gadubanud people were able to reconfigure vegetation communities and structure a landscape that fulfilled their needs for sustenance and unhindered mobility along high traffic corridors.

More information regarding the application of fire to the region’s forests has recently emerged from the study of sediment core samples taken at Chapple Vale, Aire Crossing and Wyelangta. The data collected from swampy patches at Aire Crossing (near the top of the Aire River basin) and Wyelangta were both found to be in the midst of cool temperate rainforest stands that have experienced little significant change from roughly 9000 years BP.66 Largely unmanaged by fire, both sites possessed low charcoal readings. At Wyelangta, scientists found such floristic stability that they believed ‘the site may be the first identified glacial refugium for rainforest in Australia’.67 The sediment record from Chapple Vale, a swamp site located on the western slope of the Otway Range, exhibited a sudden and sustained rise in charcoal levels from around 2500 BP. Researchers

concluded that the ‘substantial increase in charcoal’ must have been the result of frequent fire and that this ‘may have had substantial influence on the vegetation from this time’. However, the appearance of so much charcoal in the sediment record was not attributed to Aboriginal fire management. Instead, the authors of this study maintained that climate was ‘a major controller of vegetation change to sclerophyll communities’ at this site.

Fig 5. Portion of map drawn by GD Smythe in 1846 during the course of a survey in preparation for the construction of a lighthouse at Cape Otway.

Source: Public Record Office of Victoria, CS32-1 Aire River to Cape Patton.

Other studies of long-term environmental change in western Victoria have attributed vegetation change to anthropogenic burning. When researchers examining the Holocene sediment record at Lake Wangoom found reductions in wet forest pollen taxa and higher representations in grass species (Poaceae) they attributed change to the fact that ‘effective precipitation was lower than the previous two interglacials, although it also may be a product of anthropogenic burning in the region’. Favouring ridges for movement corridors across the Otway Range, it is unlikely that the Gadubanud would have deployed fire near swampy gullies found at Wyelangta and Aire Crossing. The significantly lower

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70 Harle et al 2002: 718.
elevation of the Chapple Vale site, and its proximity to the Gellibrand River, may have played a role in the extension of regular burning to this locale over 2000 years ago. Moreover, the timing of this change in fire pattern fits the wider sequence of Aboriginal population shift from the plains of western Victoria southward toward the forest hinterland and coast. This evidence points to the extension of Aboriginal fire management to the western slope of the Otway Range prior to the outright shift of population and land use practices to the coast, and certainly well before the 1420 BP first occupation date recorded at Seal Point.

In May 1847, the westward extension of the coastal survey by Robert Hoddle generated a picture of the Aire River estuary as an important site of economic activity for the Gadubanud people. Hoddle’s map provides a detailed view of this settlement area and the ways in which specific land use decisions were inscribed in the land (Fig 6). Thick forests protected the northern and eastern flanks of the basin so that a large proportion of the valley was shielded from gales, and yet timber required for fuel and shelter material was kept close at hand. A well-defined boundary between an open wetland–grass shore complex and forest was undoubtedly maintained by fire. Selective burning also generated a well-indented forest edge that could serve as a habitat for animals, while the stark transition between open land and tall forests made these trees susceptible to windfalls – a useful means of toppling large trees and harvesting wood fuel in an age when only stone axes seem to have been available for this task. The patchwork mosaic encouraged through selective burning allowed for low-lying vegetation, mainly heath and grassland plains, to take hold near the coast where pedestrian movement was channelled.

Atop the outcrop that divides the estuary from the sea, a conspicuous configuration of ‘good grass’ and ‘she-oak timber’ marks a paddock used for hunting kangaroos and wallabies. When the marsupials had been lured onto the grass, the hunters would be able to spear the animals from behind the cover of she-oaks with a high probability of success. The placement of this visual barrier on elevated ground allowed for superior visibility of the surrounding terrain, while a spear thrown downhill could cover more ground and maintain a higher velocity. Even if a first attempt at spearing the animal missed its mark, the cul-de-sac formation chosen for this paddock allowed easy blockage of the isthmus, thereby forcing the spooked marsupials toward the marshes where their movement rate was severely constrained and they faced little chance of survival. While there may have been times when the Gadubanud lit fires at forest edges to flush out game into the paths of hunters, the use of fire to concentrate feed in paddocks of fresh grass and arrange visual barriers in the landscape allowed for a more predictable procurement of meat protein at Aire River.

71 This sequence of land use extension from more arid inland areas to the coastal hinterland during the Holocene era is similar to that identified by Beaton in Queensland. See Beaton 1985: 1–20.
72 Bill Gammage has noted the existence of similar wallaby trap formations in Tasmania. See: Gammage 2008: 251.
Archaeological investigations at Aire River provide additional detail about Gadubanud land use and economy. In 1960, John Mulvaney excavated two rock shelters located on the north side of this outcrop, overlooking the wetland. Radiocarbon dating of charcoal deposits yielded a base occupation date ranging from 325 to 415 BP, and the rapid accumulation of debris – over six feet in depth over the period of occupation – attested to the site’s popularity. Food debris found on site included: marine shellfish, kangaroo, rats, birds, fish, seals and abalone. This collection of remnants indicates that both coastal and estuary-based animal protein were consumed by the people residing at the Aire River, and indeed access to this wider range of foods must have heightened the appeal of this locale. In 1979, IMF Stuart followed up Mulvaney’s investigation with a detailed survey of the Aire River valley. Seventy-three archaeological sites were recorded in the study, finding that ‘The vast majority (64) of these sites are shell
middens, but they also include 6 lithic scatters, 2 rock shelters and one isolated artefact.74 Local abundance of certain species made food procurement in the Aire River area a simple task: on La Trobe’s third attempt to reach the Cape in April 1846, in the vicinity of this estuary, he and companion Henry Allan feasted on shellfish for breakfast before pushing on to their destination.75 The dietary preferences indicated by the food debris found at the Aire River archaeological dig were similar to those later exhibited at Seal Point. Subsequently, a shell midden discovered nearby in a rock shelter at Moonlight Head was found to be occupied between 1030 BP and 180 BP. This was likely a favoured spot of the Ngarowurd gundidj clan identified by GA Robinson’s Gadubanud informants.76 This archaeological find extended the known period of Aboriginal presence on this portion of the Otway coast and underscored the locale’s significance as a settlement node.77

While the linkages between the Aire River and Cape Otway settlement nodes are quite clearly evinced in the coastal surveys and La Trobe’s discovery of a cleared path between these two locations in 1846, it is probable that alternate movement corridors also existed in the Otway region. A more direct route connecting the people of the Aire River estuary with those of the Barwon eel marshes, circumventing Cape Otway, would have had a marked utility for the Gadubanud people. Proof that a movement corridor along the main ridge of the Otway Range may have linked the Gadubanud’s northern and western clans first appeared in La Trobe’s journal. Approaching the Cape from the west, his entry for 1 April 1846 noted that at Moonlight Head they came upon a trail ‘where taking a native path to the left we had gone up into the ranges’.78 Focused on reaching the site of the future lighthouse, La Trobe and his guide did not follow this path, instead choosing to continue along the coast to Cape Otway. In 1928, the headmaster of the school at Lavers Hill (located on the main ridge of the Otway Range, several kilometres north-east of Moonlight Head) found three stone axe heads left behind by the Gadubanud people. Reporting on this five decades after the discovery, his son noted that the artefacts were found ‘beside a soak or spring 100m to the north of the present Great Ocean Road’ and he posited that ‘people used the site because of the close proximity of water to a main trail along the ridge, making descent into the more thickly vegetated gullies unnecessary’.79 Since such a path would be kept open with regular burning, the axes were not used for felling trees. More likely, they were used to notch tree trunks so that hunters could climb up and capture possums. Trail blazing had the added benefit of encouraging the growth of wattle trees, whose gum was edible. Gum was harvested during the autumn by cutting notches in bark to let the gum exude, where ‘It is then gathered in large lumps, and stored for use’.80

75 Blake 1975: 18.
76 Clark 1990: 189.
78 Blake 1975: 18.
79 Douglas 1978: 222.
80 Dawson 1881: 21.
It would have been a convenient source of sustenance during a trek over the mountains in time for the eel harvest on the north side of the range. Though there is a great deal of uncertainty regarding this particular path through the Otway forest, there are good reasons why the Gadubanud would have deposited axes at rest stops along the route between the Aire River and Barwon wetland settlement nodes.

The arrival of Europeans in the Otway region during the late 1840s led to the violent disruption of Aboriginal society and ended a long-standing system of land management. With the cessation of burning practices, surface vegetation could experience rapid ‘thickening’ and hinder pedestrian movement. West of Cape Otway, in April 1846 Superintendent La Trobe walked along the coast at a comfortable pace, utilising the corridors cleared by the Gadubanud. He moved quickly across this part of the region, requiring one day to reach the Gellibrand River from the Allansford station, another to walk between the Gellibrand and Johanna rivers, and a final one to reach Cape Otway. Only three years later, in March 1849, La Trobe and his party encountered much difficulty and marched at a considerably slower rate of movement. The landscape had not been burnt; the coastal heath grew wild, scrub took hold in places it had not been allowed previously to grow, and the vegetation thickened. The 20 to 25 miles from Apollo Bay to Cape Otway were completed with relative ease along the numerous beaches, but west of the Cape he found the travel much more strenuous:

The 40 or 50 m. from the Cape to the Gellibrand was not achieved without a good deal of exertion, a great deal more indeed than on my first excursion, for it was found quite impossible to follow my old track, and it was not until the fifth day that we managed to fight our way through that terrible scrub, and across the precipices of Moonlight Head to the camp where the horses were awaiting us.

In the absence of the fire-stick, the character of coastal vegetation changed rapidly. Where La Trobe had required two days to move between Cape Otway and the Gellibrand River in April 1846, only three years later the very same journey required five days. In this way, the disruption of Aboriginal society came to be expressed in the land: heath and scrub thickened, the landscape mosaic began to possess less defined boundaries between vegetation communities, well-tended environments began to build up fuel loads and wood debris. In January 1851, the Black Thursday fires swept through western Victoria and incinerated great swaths of the Otway forest.

**Conclusion: the reconstruction of an Aboriginal cultural landscape**

The Gadubanud people of the Otway region cared for their country and their imprint could be witnessed in the cultural landscape they created. The

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81 Blake 1975: 18.
82 Blake 1975: 36.
reconstruction of patterns of settlement, land use and communication requires a patient engagement with studies produced in a diverse set of disciplines ranging from the earth sciences to geography and archaeology. The identification of past geographical patterns allows us to piece together the decisions and constraints dealt with by generations of Aboriginal land managers that led to the development of a distinct cultural landscape. Knowledge about the land-based economy, the distribution of population and the food sources utilised by the Gadubanud people can help us protect the Aboriginal heritage of this region, guide future development away from areas of cultural and archaeological significance, and highlight the ways in which environmental constraints guided land use by Aborigines and later European occupants of the Otway region.

Fire was an important tool utilised by the Gadubanud people. It was essential for clearing movement corridors along the coast and through the forest, and allowed them to generate a complex landscape mosaic that increased the variety of foodstuffs located within walking distance of key settlement areas. For them, the Otway region was indeed a living larder. By alternating patches of high and low fire fuel this mosaic enabled the geographical spread of risk across their territory in the event of unexpected wildfire. Landscape complexity equated with food security in that the health and longevity of their people was ensured should there happen to be a localised collapse in the food resource. Working on the other side of the Bass Strait, Bill Gammage found a similar situation amongst the Aborigines of Tasmania: ‘With patches spaced over many miles, their resources were more drought, flood and fire evading, more certain, than those of farmers’.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Nicholas Brown, Bill Gammage, Tom Griffiths and Jock Galloway for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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Dhudhuroa and Yaithmathang languages and social groups in north-east Victoria – a reconstruction

Ian D Clark

The determination of Aboriginal languages in north-east Victoria has been acknowledged by a number of authors as one of the most problematical areas in the reconstruction of Victorian Aboriginal languages and dialects at the time of first contact.1 Of particular interest is the Omeo district and resolution of the labels ‘Jaithmathang’ and ‘Gundungerre’. This article will provide a systematic analysis of primary sources relative to language, dialect and social group names. It also provides an overview of lexicostatistical analyses of vocabulary from the study area and undertakes a preliminary analysis of vocabulary from the Omeo district to determine its similarity with neighbouring languages. Finally it analyses previous research into constituent social groups.

Dhudhuroa – the language

The etymology of the language name ‘Dhudhuroa’ has been explained by Blake and Reid as follows:

Dhudhuroa appears to consist of the first syllable of the word for ‘no’ reduplicated. The word for ‘no’ is dhubalga. It is common in southeastern Australia to base language names on the word for ‘no’. The remainder of the name is likely to be wurru, which means ‘mouth’ or ‘language’ in a number of Victorian languages.2

Variant spellings

The earliest recording of the name ‘Do.dor.dee’ is found in the papers of GA Robinson, and dated 1840. Other variants include ‘Dodora’; ‘Dodoro’; ‘Toutourrite’; ‘Theddora-mittung’; ‘Dhuthuro’wa’; ‘Dhoo-dhoo-ro’wa’; ‘Dhudhuroa’; and ‘Duduroa’. Theddora-mittung is sourced from Howitt,3 and Blake and Reid are of the view that Theddora is sufficiently similar to Dhudhuroa.

1 Tindale 1940, 1974; Barwick 1984; Clark 1993, 1996a,b; and Wesson 1994, 2000, 2002.
2 Blake and Reid 2002: 179.
3 Howitt 1904: 77.
‘for us to be able to equate them, assuming stress on the first syllable as in most Australian languages. The location Howitt ascribes to Theddora tends to confirm this’. Variant spellings contained in quoted sources are retained in this article.

Lexicostatistical analysis of Dhudhuroa

Lexicostatistical analysis of the Dhudhuroa language is shown in Table 1, which gives percentages of common vocabulary between the languages that are listed. Blake and Reid’s analysis is that these figures are quite low and do not suggest a close relationship between Dhudhuroa and any neighbouring language.

Table 1: Dhudhuroa: percentages of common vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pallangan middang (Waywurru)</th>
<th>Ngarigu Daung wurrung</th>
<th>Yortayorta</th>
<th>Ganai</th>
<th>Wiradjuri</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>3-19%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>10-13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15-16%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Percentages are from Blake and Reid 2002: 183.

Dixon made the following observations on this language:

Although this language seems to have been spoken in a limited area, almost certainly by a single tribe, it is markedly different from its neighbours. In vocabulary, T11 [Dhudhuroa] scores less (mostly, much less) than 25% with T9 [Yorta Yorta] and T10 [Yabala Yabala] to the west, Wiradhuri to the N and T8 [Wuywurrung] to the south-west. Grammatically, it differs most strongly from T8 – Wuywurrung. T9 shows only some minor pronominal similarities; T10 repeats these and also shows similarities in case inflections. Wiradhuri pronouns are very close (but in a negative way – T11 and Wiradhuri simply both follow the normal Australian pattern; they are similar only in neither showing much idiosyncratic divergence). Wiradhuri verbs (and maybe nouns) on the limited data available show some points of similarity to T11 – more than to T8 and T9 but (especially noun morphology) less than to T10. All-in-all there is no basis for positing genetic relationship between T11 and any of its neighbours. All similarities are general Australian features/areal trends.

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4 Blake and Reid 2002: 179.
5 Blake and Reid 2002. This view is confirmed by Dixon 2002; Wafer and Lissarrague 2008; Eira 2008.
Sources of Dhudhuroa vocabulary

Sources of Dhudhuroa vocabulary are confined to GA Robinson’s vocabulary papers,\textsuperscript{7} RH Mathews, and JFH Mitchell’s ‘Barwidgee vocabulary’.\textsuperscript{8} Robinson’s vocabulary papers from 1844 include two words he identified as belonging to the ‘Mitta Mitta language’: ‘Bogong fly: bung.ung.bar’\textsuperscript{9} and ‘Black Man: jar.ber’\textsuperscript{10} Robinson’s source is not identified. Analysis of these two words against Blake and Reid’s study confirms that they are Dhudhuroa words.\textsuperscript{11}

Mathews’ article is the paper he published from his Dhudhuroa notes itemised below.\textsuperscript{12} Blake and Reid’s analysis of this article is that it ‘contains only a small proportion of the material in his notes. It does contain vocabulary not in the notes’.\textsuperscript{13} Mathews’ Notebook 6 contains grammatical information and some stories in English.\textsuperscript{14} Page 40 is headed ‘Neddy Wheeler, Dyinningmiddha or -buttha Tribe, native of Mitta Mitta River. Dhuthuro’-wa- Pronouns’. It contains the following note: ‘Neddy Wheeler is a native of Mitta Mitta River, where his father also belonged – His tribe was Dyinning middhang [the -ng is underlined and followed by a question mark] Ned’s mother belonged to the Walgalu tribe and Language, about Walaragang junction of Tooma River or Tamberamba Creek up the Murray’. Other pages are headed ‘Dhuhuroa’. Notebook 7 contains grammatical information and some vocabulary. Page 40 is headed ‘Neddy Wheeler of Jinningmiddha tribe, native of Mitta Mitta – his father belonged to there – his mother belonged to Walgaloo tribe Walaragang. Dhoo’-dhoo-ro’wa Language’. In terms of drafts, Folder/document L contains ‘The Dhudhuroa language’ (5 pages). This is headed ‘The Dhudhuroa Language/ This language is spoken on the Mitta Mitta and J[?]ooma rivers and Upper Murray river into which they flow/ Minyambuta dialect of the D was spoken on the Övens, King, ??, Buffalo and Broken Rivers’. Finally, Folder/document AJ, contains ‘The Dhudhuroa language’ (4 pages).\textsuperscript{15}

Mitchell also collected some vocabulary which he entitled ‘Barwidgee’, after a pastoral property north-east of Myrtleford. One short version was published by John Mathew.\textsuperscript{16} Mitchell’s vocabulary shares 62 per cent (54.5/88) with Dhudhuroa and 30 per cent (25/84) with Pallanganmiddang (Waywurru). Blake and Reid’s analysis of this vocabulary is that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{7} In Clark 2000c.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Mathews 1909, Notebooks and Papers, National Library of Australia [hereafter NLA], MS 8006; Mitchell 1899.
\item \textsuperscript{9} See Clark 2000c: 205.
\item \textsuperscript{10} See Clark 2000c: 203.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Blake and Reid 2002.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Mathews 1909.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Blake and Reid 2002: 179.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Mathews nd, Notebook 6, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [hereafter AIATSIS], MS 299: 30–40.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Mathews nd, Notebook 7, AIATSIS, MS 299: 40–45.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Mathew 1899.
\end{itemize}
almost all the words that are not Dhudhuroa are Pallanganmiddang or are words that were spread by Europeans. … On the figures and allowing for the intrusion of non-local words one could assume Barwidgee was a dialect spoken by the Dyinningmiddang, probably a western dialect bordering the territory of the Pallanganmiddang.17

Status of Robinson’s and Bulmer’s ‘Omeo’ vocabularies

In his collection of vocabularies from south-east Australia, Robinson included three lists of some ‘Omeo’ vocabulary. The first list was entitled ‘Vocabulary of language spoken by the Omeo, & Cape How & Twofold Bay Tribes of Aboriginal Natives, August 1844’.18 Robinson does not source this vocabulary, and other than ‘August 1844’, it is undated. Analysis of Robinson’s journal for August 1844 reveals that during this month he spent time at Cann and Mallacoota in far east Victoria, before returning to Twofold Bay. Analysis of the ‘Omeo’ vocabulary by both Blake and Reid and Dixon failed to include it in Dhudhuroa.19 Dixon’s analysis is that it belongs with the Ngarigu language.20 A second list of five ‘Omeo’ words appears in Robinson’s journal.21 Once again, these words do not correlate with the Dhudhuroa vocabulary supplied by Neddy Wheeler (which is the basis of Blake’s and Reid’s 2002 reconstruction). A third list appears in a comparative table of words taken from ten areas, including ‘Omeo’.22 This list is unsourced and undated, and Dixon’s tentative analysis suggests it too belongs with Ngarigu, as it includes such words as ‘Yin’ for ‘Black Man’ and ‘Goengaller’ for ‘Wild Black’.23 Finally, Joseph Bulmer provided EM Curr with an ‘Omeo’ list.24

The correlation between these ‘Omeo’ vocabularies and the Mitta Mitta and Dhudhuroa vocabularies provided to RH Mathews is problematical. The ethnographic evidence provided by Howitt (see below) attests to a common unity between the Yaithmathang from Omeo and the Theddora-mittung from the Mitta Mitta. If the vocabulary entitled ‘Omeo’ does in fact come from Yaithmathang people then this unity would not appear to be linguistic, and a separation between the two may be appropriate (a view supported by Koch).25 This is clearly the view of Wesson who separates ‘Yaithmathang’ from ‘Theddora’. Though, as will be seen below, Wesson complicates the matter by distinguishing

17 Blake and Reid 2002: 180.
18 Clark has transcribed this vocabulary: Clark 2000c: 199–204.
19 Blake and Reid 2002; Dixon, Papers, 2002.
20 Dixon, Papers.
22 This list is included in Robinson’s 1844 Report, and is found in the NSW Governor’s Despatches vol 47, 1845: 763–762. It is identical to the list in his vocabulary papers. For a transcription see Clark 2000c: 326–327.
23 Dixon, Papers.
two more languages, an ‘unnamed language’ north of ‘Theddora’, along the Mitta Mitta River, and the ‘Gundungerre’ language between ‘Yaithmathang’ and ‘Ngarego’.26

In the absence of a clear source of Robinson’s ‘Omeo’ words, any analysis can only be tentative, and conclusions speculative. Wesson has suggested the source of the vocabulary is Bit.to.cort.27 On 22 June 1844, Bittocort, aka Billy Blue, a ‘Yaymittong’ man from Omeo, agreed to accompany Robinson’s entourage to the east, however, owing to too much snow, Robinson’s attempt to travel eastward was aborted, and they returned to Omeo on 26 June 1844.28 Another possible Yaithmathang source was a man named ‘Charley’. Robinson does refer to obtaining a census of the ‘Yaymittong’ on 22 June 1844, and this list does appear in his vocabulary volume, so it is possible that Robinson obtained the ‘Omeo’ vocabulary at this time. Robinson was accompanied from WO Raymond’s ‘Stratford’ station on the Avon River on 5 June 1844 by an ‘Omeo native’ named Charley who had agreed to accompany Robinson to his country. Charley provided Robinson on that day with the names of the ‘chiefs’ of the ‘Dodoro’, ‘Mokalumbeet’, ‘Omeo’ and ‘Menero’. Whilst it would be tempting to suggest this listing supports a distinction between ‘Dodoro’ and ‘Omeo’, it may well be nothing more than a distinction at the local group level, and not the larger ‘tribal’ level. Charley, on 14 June 1844, informed Robinson that the Omeo word for the Bogong moth was ‘olleong’. On 22 June 1844 at Omeo, Robinson reported that he succeeded in obtaining upward of ‘200 words of language, anatomical names, numerals, and census’. It is possible that any one or a collection of the ‘Yaymittong’ provided Robinson with this information.

Robinson’s journal for the period from 29 June to 3 July 1844 has been water damaged and large portions of text are either missing, or illegible. Nevertheless, one scrap was transcribable, it read ‘Omeo belonged I think to the Maneroo Blacks’. On 7 July 1844, Robinson was at Richard Brooks’ ‘Gejedric’ station near Jindabyne, where he met seven Maneroo men, women and a young girl. He noted ‘The language is the same as the Omeo Blacks’. These people were identified as the Bim.me.mittong or Maneroo tribe,29 and included the ‘chief’ Nal.loke, ‘Old Tom’. Koch has shown that Bimme mittong is a term that means ‘plains people’.30 These scraps of evidence from Robinson and the ‘Omeo’ vocabularies he and Bulmer provide suggest that the country from Omeo north-east into New South Wales is part of an Ngarigu linguistic continuum – this is discussed in more detail later in the paper.

Table 2 lists a sample of ‘Omeo’ words sourced by Robinson in 1844, and compares them against three other wordlists: Bulmer’s ‘Omeo’ vocabulary; Bulmer’s ‘Moneroo’ vocabulary which he informed Curr was ‘Ngarigo’, and Hercus’s ‘Southern Ngarigu’ dialect collected in the 1960s.

26 Wesson 2002.
28 See Clark 2000b.
29 See Robinson papers in Clark 2000c: 190.
30 Koch forthcoming.
### Table 2 Comparison of ‘Omeo’ and Ngarigu vocabularies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Robinson’s Omeo vocabulary*</th>
<th>Bulmer’s Omeo vocabulary**</th>
<th>Bulmer’s Moneroo vocabulary (Ngarigu)***</th>
<th>Southern Ngarigu****</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Man</td>
<td>Yin</td>
<td>Yune</td>
<td>Marrin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>wotter</td>
<td>watha</td>
<td>watha</td>
<td>wada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>myermyal</td>
<td>miamial</td>
<td>ngagung</td>
<td>bubul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep</td>
<td>kubberki</td>
<td>kappuga</td>
<td>gabug</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad</td>
<td>pooreni</td>
<td>kiaro</td>
<td>mado</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>goengower</td>
<td>koingowa</td>
<td>jamogang</td>
<td>yalaganj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>moomergong</td>
<td>moomogung</td>
<td>mumogang</td>
<td>wadibala</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hut</td>
<td>gunje</td>
<td></td>
<td>gundji</td>
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<td>Sun</td>
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<td>mamat</td>
<td>mamat</td>
<td>djaua</td>
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<td>kabatang</td>
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<tr>
<td>Possum</td>
<td>whyjun</td>
<td>wadthan</td>
<td>wajan</td>
<td>wadjan</td>
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<td>munje</td>
<td>manja</td>
<td>manjar</td>
<td>mandja</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wind</td>
<td>goro</td>
<td>koorokmang</td>
<td>yerrung</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>inde</td>
<td>nginda</td>
<td>nindegA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>ular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>workoaer</td>
<td>bore</td>
<td>boor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>korunerger</td>
<td>warkolala</td>
<td>wajala, blala</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>meerul</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>wanj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild Black</td>
<td>goengaller</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>beung</td>
<td>papang</td>
<td>papang</td>
<td>bubang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>mung</td>
<td>najan</td>
<td>najan</td>
<td>ngadjan</td>
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<td>worbang</td>
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<td>kallin</td>
<td>warranin</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leangile</td>
<td>bunde</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>warregul</td>
<td>worregal</td>
<td>merrigang</td>
<td>mirigan</td>
</tr>
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<td>buller</td>
<td>boolo</td>
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<td>Koala</td>
<td>tundyal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dandial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A road</td>
<td>pyal</td>
<td>bial/jinnang</td>
<td>jennum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horse</td>
<td>yaereman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>yaramin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snow</td>
<td>konermar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>gunama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold</td>
<td>curreet</td>
<td>karritt</td>
<td>katata</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot</td>
<td>weenu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ngulma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ground</td>
<td>tyerr</td>
<td>thia</td>
<td>thairra</td>
<td>dinadj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emu</td>
<td>norooin</td>
<td>ngurr run</td>
<td>ngooroon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the sample of words used here for comparative purposes, there is a similarity of 72 per cent (18/25) between Robinson’s and Bulmer’s Omeo wordlists, 44 percent (12/27) between Robinson’s ‘Omeo’ and Bulmer’s Moneroo ‘Ngarigo’ wordlist, and 33 per cent (7/21) with Hercus’s ‘Southern Ngarigu’ wordlist. There is a score of 40 per cent (6/15) between Bulmer’s Moneroo wordlist and Hercus’s list. Koch’s research has uncovered slippage in Bulmer’s Moneroo and Omeo vocabularies which has resulted in the publication of incorrect terms for a number of concepts.31 ‘From a comparison of terminology with other wordlists for the same and related languages, it can be concluded that some of the words in the Bulmer lists in Curr should be attached to the meaning of the next word in the list’.32 Once this slippage is corrected, the effect is that it increases the sharing between the Omeo and Ngarigu lists. Indeed, Koch has found 80 per cent shared vocabulary between the Omeo and Ngarigu wordlists from combined sources.33 Of Bulmer’s ‘Ngarago’ vocabulary, Curr noted:

The language this gentleman [Bulmer] informs me, is called Ngarago, and it will be seen that it has many words found but little altered in the dialects of Queanbeyan, Moruya, and Omeo. Whether this was always so, or is the result of the mixture of tribes, consequent on our occupation, is now impossible to determine.34

Curr’s observation confirms that the Omeo word list provided by Bulmer is part of an Ngarigu continuum. Given that he was unaware of the Robinson word list, his rejoinder that this similarity may be a post-contact phenomenon may be dismissed. Robinson’s and Hercus’s lists scored the lowest degree of correlation. As there is almost a 120 years time differential between when these wordlists were recorded their low correlation is to be expected. Hercus explained the status of knowledge of Ngarigu in the 1960s when she undertook her linguistic fieldwork:

Little was known of this language apart from a brief vocabulary by Mathews (1908), a very short list by John Bulmer (Curr 1886:3/430) and manuscript notes by Howitt (1904). An examination of these scanty published materials makes it quite clear that Ngarigu was closely related

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31 Koch forthcoming.
32 Koch pers comm 17 July 2009.
33 See Wafer and Lissarrague 2008.
34 Curr 1887 III: 429.
to Ngunawal, which was spoken slightly further north, in the Tumut, Canberra and Yass districts, and which was described in a grammatical sketch by R.H. Mathews (1904). Ngarigu therefore seems to belong to the so-called ‘Inland Yuin’ group of languages of the Monaro. This older evidence was confirmed by our investigations.35

Table 3 lists a sample of 50 ‘Omeo’ words sourced by Robinson in 1844, and compares them with Dhudhuroa, and Pallanganmiddang wordlists. This list clearly shows that the ‘Omeo’ words Robinson obtained from Jaithmathang people from Omeo are neither Dhudhuroa nor Pallanganmiddang.

Table 3 Comparative analysis of Robinson’s 1844 Omeo vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Robinson’s 1844 Omeo vocabulary*</th>
<th>Dhudhuroa**</th>
<th>Pallanganmiddang (Waywurru)***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Man</td>
<td>Yin</td>
<td>Djaba</td>
<td>Djerri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young woman</td>
<td>gundergolan</td>
<td>nawagada</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>wotter</td>
<td>ngiyambanba</td>
<td>karra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>myermyal</td>
<td>warra</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run</td>
<td>muni</td>
<td>binila</td>
<td>ponade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep</td>
<td>kubberki</td>
<td>nyiminye</td>
<td>ngurrangurra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad</td>
<td>pooreni</td>
<td>geberri</td>
<td>purrandra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>goengower</td>
<td>gundja</td>
<td>kayangi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White man</td>
<td>moomergong</td>
<td></td>
<td>warrantha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hut</td>
<td>gunje</td>
<td>ngudjuwa</td>
<td>warri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>munumel</td>
<td>nhawayu</td>
<td>winbinbi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moon</td>
<td>kuberaong</td>
<td>wurrayu</td>
<td>yuwarra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possum</td>
<td>whyjun</td>
<td>djawa</td>
<td>barra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fish</td>
<td>munje</td>
<td>yambo</td>
<td>karrewa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wind</td>
<td>goro</td>
<td></td>
<td>karri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
<td>inde</td>
<td>(ng)ina</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>uler</td>
<td>nyinde</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>workoaer</td>
<td>godi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>korunerger</td>
<td>pulido</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>meeral</td>
<td>bandjina</td>
<td>yuwarru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wild Black</td>
<td>goengaller</td>
<td>norrandja</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>beung</td>
<td>mema</td>
<td>mama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>mung</td>
<td>baba</td>
<td>bab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sky</td>
<td>minjeke</td>
<td></td>
<td>tetha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swim</td>
<td>bulmy</td>
<td>banggayi</td>
<td>yakathi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This preliminary linguistic comparison and survey of the literature lends weight to the view that the Omeo Aboriginal people did not speak Dhudhuoroa, and either spoke Ngarigu, or a dialect of Ngarigu. Their ‘Ngarigu-ness’ is confirmed by the lexicostatistical analysis and by their use of gungala, the Ngarigu word for ‘wild blackfellow’ and Yin, the Ngarigu word for ‘man’. Given the distinctiveness of the Omeo language from its northern neighbours, Dhudhuoroa and Pallanganmiddang, the issue of whether it was named Ngarigu or had a separate name must now be discussed.

In the literature there is support for both ‘Jaithmathang’ and ‘Kandangora mittung’ as possible language names for the people of the Omeo plains. The issue, then, is what to make of these names? Are they both local group names

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Canoe</th>
<th>worokong</th>
<th>mawudha</th>
<th>matha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boomerang</td>
<td>kolin</td>
<td>wan.gewa</td>
<td>wan.ga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leangile</td>
<td>bunde</td>
<td>gudjerru</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>warregul</td>
<td>wingga</td>
<td>bawa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain</td>
<td>buller</td>
<td>dalga</td>
<td>buburra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koala</td>
<td>tundyal</td>
<td>bawiyaga</td>
<td>norroga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A road</td>
<td>pyal</td>
<td>garriga</td>
<td>bandju</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horse</td>
<td>yaereman</td>
<td>yarraman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stringybark</td>
<td>poreongareer</td>
<td>dhadha</td>
<td>dhadha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gum tree</td>
<td>gewer</td>
<td>gumbarro</td>
<td>piarrerra</td>
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<tr>
<td>Box tree</td>
<td>tilmarer</td>
<td>dharringgu</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snow</td>
<td>konermar</td>
<td>binarru</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice</td>
<td>joyerdong</td>
<td>woloda</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold</td>
<td>curreet</td>
<td>garrgudang</td>
<td>bawatha</td>
</tr>
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<td>Hot</td>
<td>weenu</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ground</td>
<td>tyerr</td>
<td>gurratba</td>
<td>merri</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dance</td>
<td>wokki</td>
<td>nganyarri</td>
<td>pada</td>
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<td>Sing</td>
<td>yungermille</td>
<td>ngatjbayi</td>
<td>kado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk</td>
<td>byi, or, by</td>
<td>dhurrg(u)wayi</td>
<td>yawati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emu</td>
<td>noroin</td>
<td>marriyawa</td>
<td>marra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big kangaroo</td>
<td>joooitbar</td>
<td>marrawirra</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stomach</td>
<td>binde</td>
<td>bandharra</td>
<td>murrang(g)a</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blood</td>
<td>korobar</td>
<td>kurru</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grass</td>
<td>nulloke</td>
<td>murru</td>
<td>kambarru</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Clark 2000c.
** Blake and Reid 2002.
*** Blake and Reid 1999.
of a language, the name of which is unknown, or is one of these names both a local group name and a language name, a situation not uncommon elsewhere in Victoria, although in those cases they have the suffix denoting a group name added to the language name, for example Boonwurrung baluk, Nguraiillum wurrung baluk, Wathawurrung baluk, or Thedorradd-mittung? Mittung (midhang in Blake and Reid’s (1999) orthography) is the equivalent of -baluk in the Kulin languages of central Victoria. Another complication is that -midhang may have an etymological association with ‘speech’/‘tongue’. This has support from Heather Bowe who considers that -midhang could be an equivalent of -wurrung, which also means ‘mouth’ or ‘tongue’ and occurs as a suffix in the names of many Victorian languages. However, in the languages of the Alpine region of Victoria and southern New South Wales, such as Pallangandmiddang, Dhudhuroa, Birrhdawal, Gaanay, and Ngarigu, the suffix -midhang clearly seems to be used in the formation of ethnonyms (see Appendix One).

In regards to Yaithmathang, Howitt argued that the first part of the name was derived from ya-yau ‘yes’. Wafer and Lissarrague have argued that ‘Yait(h)mathang/Yaymittong was, in all likelihood, the name of the language spoken by the people of the Omeo plain, which is a variety of the South-east NSW language’. This is supported by Koch who ‘believes that Yaithmathang is likely to be the name of the most southerly language of the South-east NSW (“Yuin”) group, spoken by Howitt’s “Omeo Tribe”’. However, Wafer and Lissarrague opt for ‘the cautious approach of calling it “the Omeo language” with “Yaithmathang” only as a possible alternative name (or perhaps variety)’.

There is some support in the primary sources, admittedly scanty, for ‘Kandangora-mittung’ as a language name in that Howitt’s Ngarigu informant, Mickey, states the ‘Manero people called the language of the Thedora Kundung-orur’. If the southern extremity of the Ngarigu or Yuin continuum is called Kandangora-mittung, it means that it is very similar to the language at the northern extremity, Gandangara. One possible reading of Mickey’s reference is that he is saying the Omeo language is the same as the Gandangara, thus it is part of a Gandangara language continuum or cluster, thus he is not speaking of a dialect name for the Omeo people, but the supra-language entity that it belongs to. This latter view is clearly taken by Jackson-Nakano, who in her history of the Kamberri peoples of Canberra and Queanbeyan, has read Robinson’s 1844 references as referring to the ‘Gundungurra’ language spoken around Goulburn in New South Wales. Indeed, Jackson-Nakano argues in favour of a language continuum, linking the ‘Gundungurra’ in the north, with ‘Ngunnawal’, ‘Walgalu’, and ‘Ngarigo’.

38 Howitt 1904: 78.
39 Wafer and Lissarrague 2008: 68.
40 Wafer and Lissarrague 2008: 68.
41 Howitt 1904: 77; Fison and Howitt 1880: 35.
42 Wafer and Lissarrague 2008.
43 Koch in Wafer and Lissarrague 2008: 66f.
The view that the name Gandangara ‘may have had a much broader applicability among the inland Yuin’ finds some support from Koch, who notes

I suspect that the name Gandangara may have been widely used among the inland Yuin either as an ethnonym or as a language term – Robinson has a remark that seems to apply it also to people around Tumut. … Various terms that appear to be cognate with ‘Gandangara’ are also given by ILDB as alternative names for ‘Yaithmathang’. These include ‘Gundanara’, ‘Gundanora’, ‘Jandangara’ and ‘Kandangoramittung’. In other words if, as we suggest here, ‘Yaithmathang’ is actually a name for the Omeo language then ‘Gandangara’ appears to have been used for inland Yuin languages extending from the most northern (the variety here called ‘Gandangara’) to the most southern (the variety here called ‘the Omeo language’). One interpretation that could be placed on these data is that ‘Gandangara’ may have been a superordinate language name applied to the inland Yuin languages.46

A re-analysis of Robinson’s references in the light of this superordinate reading is that it is possible that some do refer to the Goulburn speaking ‘Gandangara’; however the reference to the ‘Gundungerro’ being Gippsland natives would surely be referring to the ‘Kandangora-mittung’ at Omeo. Robinson’s references to ‘Gundungerre’ are as follows:

- ‘The Gundungerer on the Tumut mountain’,47
- ‘Gun.dunger.ro; G. Land natives’.49

Conclusions about the language continuum that may explain the use of the name Gandangara in both the Omeo district and the Southern Highlands of New South Wales need to be reconsidered in the light of the latest findings by Koch who claims a discontinuity between the southern inland lects (Omeo, Ngarigu, Walgalu and the Canberra language) and the northern inland Yuin lects (Ngunawal and Gandangara).50 Koch has found that ‘unique items of vocabulary combine with the distinctive pronoun forms to support the idea that [Ngarigu, the Canberra language, Wolgal, and the Omeo language] were dialects of the same language, whereas Ngunawal was in a dialect relation with Gundungurra from the southern highlands’.51

Until further research is undertaken, the label ‘Yaithmathang’ will be used to refer to the Omeo language area, although ‘Kandangora-mittung’ may be an equally valid alternative.

46 Koch in Wafer and Lissarrague 2008: 106.
49 Robinson vocabulary papers in Clark 2000c: 182.
50 Koch in Wafer and Lissarrague 2008; Koch forthcoming.
51 Koch forthcoming.
Language area and local group information

Primary information on the Dhudhuroa and Yaithmathang language areas is found in the journals and papers of protectorate official William Thomas, and in the ethnographic records of Smyth, Howitt, Curr, and Mathews.52 Table 4 shows the primary sources that refer to Dhudhuroa and Yaithmathang local groups.

In a list of ‘tribes’ in the north-east of Victoria, Thomas records the following names: ‘Moogollumbeek – east of Devils R [illegible] [illegible]; Toutourrite – east of Moogollumbeek; Kinninmetum – ditto of Toutourrite; Yamberdin – on other side of range of E Kinninmetum; Worgorrometum, E of Yamberdin; one more tribe then 2 FoldBay’.53 Comparison of these names with other recorded variants suggests the following analysis: Toutourrite/Toutourite is cognate with Theddora/Dhudhuroa; Kinninmetum correlates with Robinson’s Keninmitum; Yamberdin is possibly a poor hearing of Yaithmathang; Worgorrometum is cognate with the Ngarigu group Wararerer mittong, identified by Robinson as one of three tribes east of the Mokalumbeet ‘next along the Dividing Ranges are the Yattemittong, Tinnemittong, Worarerer mittong and other tribes eastward’.

Smyth noted that he had been unable to ascertain the names of the tribes from the Indi or Limestone River. He listed the following group names for the north-east region: Gundanora: high plains of Omeo (informant AC Wills, former police magistrate and warden at Omeo); Ginning-matong: Tallangatta Creek (James Wilson); Pallanganmiddah: lower Kiewa (Thomas Mitchell, Tangambalanga); Thara-mirttong: river Kiewa (HB Lane, police magistrate and warden).54 Smyth does not record the name ‘Dhudhuroa’. Curr’s informants in the study area included Reverend J Bulmer (Moneroo, Gippsland, Omeo, Snowy River), Reverend Hagenauer (Gippsland), and Thomas Mitchell (Upper Murray).55

Howitt refers to the ‘Theddora of Omeo, and the Mitta-Mitta River’ in a list of tribes in his article.56 Howitt published the following regarding ‘tribal organisation’ in north-east Victoria:

The Ya-itma-thang, commonly called the Omeo tribe, was divided into two sections – (a) the Theddora-mittung, occupying the sources of the Mitta-Mitta River and its tributaries down to about the Gibbo Mountain, thus being the neighbours of the Mogullum-bitch, the furthest out of the Kulin tribes. – (b) The Kandangora-mittung, who lived on the Omeo plains, the Limestone River down to the junction with the Indi River, and the Tambo River to Tongiomungie. On the latter river they were in contact with the Kurnai. … The first mentioned, the now extinct Ya-itma-thang, occupied the mountain country in which rise the rivers Mitta-

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52 Thomas nd, Papers, Mitchell Library, Set 214, Items 1–24; Smyth 1878; Howitt 1883, 1904; Curr 1886–87; Mathews 1904, 1909.
54 Smyth 1878.
55 Curr 1886–87.
56 Howitt 1883.
Mitta and Tambo, and some of the sources of the Ovens, and extended north at least as far as the Upper Yackandandah River, called by them Yakonda. I have been able to learn but little of the local organization of the Theddora. … The eastern boundary of the Ya-itma-thang was about the Cobbora Mountains, and thence down the Indi River to Tom Groggins’s Run, their neighbours on that side being the Wolgal and Ngarigo tribes.\footnote{Howitt 1904: 77.}

Mathews published two papers that are relevant to this study. In the first he noted: ‘Adjoining the Ngarrugu on part of the west was the Walgalu and westerly again of the latter was the Dhudhuroa’.\footnote{Mathews 1904.} In his second paper, Mathews addressed Dhudhuroa territorial limits, delineating their country as follows:

The Dhudhuroa was spoken by the Dyinningmiddang tribe on the Mitta Mitta and Kiewa rivers, and along the Murray valley from Albury to Jingellic. Minyambuta, a dialect of the Dhudhuroa, was the speech of the tribes occupying the Buffalo, King, Ovens, and Broken rivers, with the tributaries of all these streams. From Jingellic eastward was the country of the Walgalu tribe, whose speech resembled partly the Dhudhuroa and partly the Dyirringan, a tongue spoken from about Nimmitabel to Bega.\footnote{Mathews 1909: 278.}

**Modern reconstructions**

During the twentieth century, Tindale, Fesl, Clark, and Wesson conducted research into Aboriginal language area delineation in the study area.\footnote{Tindale 1974; Fesl 1985; Clark 1993, 1996a; Wesson 1994, 2000, 2002.} Tindale’s delineation of Dhudhuroa location is as follows: ‘Mitta Mitta and Kiewa rivers; at Tallangatta, and along the Murray Valley from Jingellic and Tintaldra to Albury’.\footnote{Tindale 1974.} Dixon’s analysis of Tindale’s reconstruction is that it is poor, copying Howitt whereas examination of lexicostatistical materials would show that there were several different languages including (T11) Dhudhuroa, and (T12) Pallanganmiddang, and almost certainly different ‘tribes’ even if they all named themselves with the same suffix -mathang.\footnote{Dixon, Papers.}

Eve Fesl, in her Masters dissertation on Gippsland languages, presented the following analysis:

The JAITMATHANG were commonly called OMEO (Howitt 1904). They occupied the elevated plateaux in the North-west corner of the Dividing Range and along with the Brabralung people, also claimed the valley of the Tambo River. Their neighbours included the Mogullum-bitch, the most southerly of the Kulin tribes (Howitt 1904). In the East the boundary extended from the Cobbera Mountains down the Indi River to Groggins...
Run, their neighbours being the Wolgal and Ngarigu tribes. Westward their territory extended to the Bogong Range via the Mitta Mitta and Gibbo Rivers.63

In terms of north-east Victoria, Wesson postulated five language areas: Theddora; Yaithmathang; Gundungerre; Ngarego, Unnamed Wolgal, and an ‘Unknown language’ centred on the Mitta Mitta River drainage basin. Wesson alludes to the ‘complete loss’ of two languages – Gundungerre and the ‘Unknown’ Mitta Mitta River language. Wesson dismantles the linguistic information provided by Neddy Wheeler, Mathews’ Dhudhuroa informant. Although Mathews is very clear that he is a member of the Dyinningmiddhang, and that his language was Dhudhuroa, Wesson argues that Mathews is wrong, and attempts to unravel the information he presents.

The Theddora, like the Gundungerre, were eventually considered to be a sub-group of the Yaithmathang (Howitt 1904: 77) and the Theddora were described as belonging to a country which included Mogullumbidj territory (Howitt 1054/2a). But this does not explain why Neddy Wheeler, Mathews’ language informant, a Kiewa River and Barwidgee man (who grew up at Wheeler’s Nariel station on Corryong Creek) spoke Theddora and why he claimed that the country of the lower Mitta Mitta and Murray Valley was Theddora language country (if this is in fact what he told Mathews). One possible explanation is that Neddy was taught to speak Theddora language by a Nariel Aboriginal employee and that Mathews made some inappropriate assumptions about Theddora language territory. Neddy’s list of 277 words is the only available evidence of this language.64

Neddy Wheeler is not the only source of Dhudhuroa vocabulary, Wesson has overlooked Mitchell’s ‘Barwidgee’ vocabulary,65 and the two words recorded by Robinson in 1844 of a language he calls ‘Mitta Mitta language’.

Table 4 Dhudhuroa and Yaithmathang local groups: primary sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dhudhuroa local group name according to reconstructions</th>
<th>GA Robinson 1844*</th>
<th>Howitt</th>
<th>Other sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boengar mittong</td>
<td>GAR 1844</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Djilamatang</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reid 1860; Andrews 1920; Tindale 1974; Mitchell 1981</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

63 Fesl 1985: 51.
65 Mitchell 1899.
Local groups in the study area

In the study area, four researchers have attempted to reconstruct local groups. Fairweather in a history of mining at Omeo devoted a chapter to the Aboriginal people of that district in which he reconstructed two ‘divisions’ of the Theddora or Ya-itma-thang tribe, however it is clear that Howitt is his primary source. Fairweather noted that the Ovens and Murray Advertiser of 8 October 1857 referred to some members of the Warrajabaree tribe at Omeo, but Fairweather was unable to recognise this name. Presumably Warrajabaree is a reference to Wiradjuri. Fesl delineated four ‘divisions’ of the ‘Omeo/Jaitmathang’ language (see Table 5). A summary of Clark’s 1993 delineation of Dhudhuroa and Jaitmathang local groups is presented in Table 5. In 1996, Clark was commissioned to produce an atlas of Victorian local groups for Aboriginal Affairs Victoria. In this reconstruction, Clark collapsed Jaitmathang, Djilamathang and Dhudhuroa into one language area, which he named Dhudhuroa. Accordingly, seven local groups were delineated (see Table 5). Wesson failed to delineate any Dhudhuroa local groups. She considered Theddora-mittance, Jaitmathang and Kandangora-mittance to be language names only, and not local group names.

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67 Howitt 1904.
68 Fairweather 1983; 7.
69 Fesl 1985.
70 Clark 1993.
71 Clark 1996b.
Table 5 surveys modern reconstructions of Dhudhuroa and Yaithmathang local groups and shows the judgement of this study.

### Table 5 Dhudhuroa and Yaithmathang local groups: reconstructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local group name</th>
<th>Fesl 1985</th>
<th>Clark 1993</th>
<th>Clark 1996b</th>
<th>Wesson 2000, 2002</th>
<th>This study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boengar mittong</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
<td>Unknown language</td>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Djilamatang</td>
<td>Djilamatang</td>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
<td></td>
<td>Unnamed Wolgal</td>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginning matong</td>
<td>Omeo or Jaitmathang</td>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
<td>Unknown language</td>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarrer mittung</td>
<td></td>
<td>Waywurru</td>
<td>Waywurru</td>
<td>Unknown language</td>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pallangmiddah</td>
<td>Omeo or Jaitmathang</td>
<td>Waywurru</td>
<td>Waywurru</td>
<td>Minubuddong</td>
<td>Pallanganmiddang (Waywurru)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theddora mittung</td>
<td>Omeo or Jaitmathang</td>
<td>Dhudhuroa or Jaithmathang</td>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tinne mittong</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
<td>Unknown language</td>
<td>Variant name of Ginning matong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kandangora mittung</td>
<td>Omeo or Jaitmathang</td>
<td>Dhudhuroa or Jaithmathang</td>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yaithmathang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yatte mittong</td>
<td></td>
<td>Dhudhuroa or Jaithmathang</td>
<td>Dhudhuroa</td>
<td></td>
<td>Yaithmathang</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More detailed analysis of Dhudhuroa and Yaithmathang local groups is found in Appendix One. A summary of conclusions for each group now follows.

**a) Boenger mittung**

Wesson has suggested that Boen.ge.a. mittong means ‘the people who belong to the Pilot Range, from Beong.e.o meaning the Pilot Range’. Presumably this is based on her mistranscription of the third locative entry listed in Appendix One which she has transcribed as ‘Boeng.e.o mountains SW from crossing place’. Wesson also mistranscribes the second entry as ‘Boen.ge.a.mittong – on Mitta Mitta lower’. She fails to refer to the citation in Robinson’s 1844 report. If the location of this local group is the source of the Mitta Mitta River then this

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74 Mackaness 1978.
would clearly locate it in Dhudhuroa (even in Wesson’s narrower delineation of Theddora boundaries) and not in the country she delineates as ‘unknown language’.

**b) Djila mittung**

This is an obscure group first recorded in 1860 by Central Board Honorary Correspondent David Reid, from Chiltern. Djilamatang is considered a tribal group by Tindale. Tindale cites five references in support of his delineation, however, analysis of the published materials does not support Tindale’s delineation. For example, Lane discusses Wiradjuri and the Thara mittung belonging to the Kiewa River, and Mitchell’s vocabularies concern the Pallanganmiddang and are not about this group. Howitt is silent on Djilamatang. So all things considered, it is difficult to know the basis of Tindale’s delineation, and it does not withstand scrutiny. Andrews’s statement (see Appendix One) is questionable, Gilamatong is unlikely to mean ‘swift’ because it conforms to the naming principles of local groups, the first element often being a toponym and the second element –matong, cognate with ‘mittung’ which means ‘people’. Tindale nevertheless did concede that it could be a Dhudhuroa local group. Wesson considers the ‘Gillamatong’ to be a Wolgal group, but her reasons for this are never articulated.

**c) Djinning mittung**

This was first listed in Robinson’s 1844 journal and report, and confirmed by local sources such as James Wilson in 1858 and later by RH Mathews. Although Clark and Wesson distinguish two groups, one named Tinne mittung and the second named Djinning mittung, a re-analysis of the locative information and the phonetic equivalence of Ch/Dj/Tj, and comparison of Robinson’s journal narrative with his official report which was based on his journal, suggests the names are cognate, and therefore represent the same group.

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75 Victoria 1861.
76 Tindale 1974.
77 Lane in Smyth 1878; Mitchell in Smyth 1878; Mitchell in Curr 1887 III; Howitt 1904; Mitchell 1954 verbal communication.
78 In Smyth 1878 I: 37–38.
79 In Smyth 1878 and Curr 1887.
80 Howitt 1904.
81 Andrews 1920: 35.
82 Tindale 1974.
84 Victoria 1858–59.
85 Mathews 1909.
d) **Kandangora mittung**

This is considered a language name, and not a local group name, by Wesson. Wesson presents the following conclusions about Gundungerre:

The Gundungerre were a group who are known from references made by Lhotsky and Robinson. This group was later mentioned by Wills (1859, [in Smyth] 1878), Howitt (1050/2c) and Fison (1890) who described them as subgroups of the Yaithmathang of Omeo. Lhotsky made a clear distinction between the Kunora or Gundanora who belonged to the country ‘over the Snowy River [from Cooma] and in the Alps’ and the Omeo tribe ‘near the lake and Stanley’s plains’ (Lhotsky 1835: 106). Robinson described a group named ‘Gun.dunger.re’ which belonged to the country ‘towards the Tumut mountains’ (Robinson 1844d). Unfortunately Robinson did not give his point of reference for this description (and the date is difficult to estimate as it comes from his notes rather than his journals) but he was probably writing from Omeo. Hence this group has been mapped with an eastern boundary on the Snowy River and the Yaithmathang to the west utilising the country about the Indi River and with a northern boundary at Tom Groggin. Remnants of this group must have gravitated to Omeo because their name became synonymous with the Omeo people (Wills 1859) and by the 1870s were considered by Howitt’s informants to be a sub-group of the Yatte-mittong.

Wesson makes too much of Lhotsky’s distinction between the ‘Gundanora’ and the Omeo tribes; rather than suggesting he is referring to two distinct language groups, it is more plausible to consider them as distinct local groups. Local group attribution is supported by the inclusion of the local group affix -mittung in several sources (see Appendix One). The reference that suggests Kangdangora may be a language name is the record Howitt obtained from a Ngarigu speaker named ‘Mickey’, however it must be noted that Howitt himself when he came to write his ethnography clearly referred to the group as a section of the Ya-ithma-thang, and not a language name. Wesson’s suggestion that the Gundangora were adopted into the Yaithmathang owing to severe population decline, and thus lost their separate linguistic distinction, is speculative and unsupported.

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87 Wesson means Howitt and Fison 1900.
89 Seddon comments that Lhotsky’s account of the Aboriginal people who visited Cooma is ‘hearsay: his informant was Mr Bath, an overseer for a group of Sydney “pastoralists” who was living in a bark hut at Kuma’, Seddon 1994: 125.
e) Theddora mittung

This is another example of a local group and a language sharing the same name, or at least the first element of the local group name. Wesson failed to acknowledge the existence of a Theddora-mittung local group.90

f) Yaithmathang

It has been argued above that Yaithmathang is a local group name, and the probable language name. Analysis of vocabulary provided by Yaithmathang people supports that they spoke a dialect of Ngarigu, and not Dhudhuroa.

Conclusion

This paper surveys the primary literature and critiques earlier attempts at finding some resolution to the complexity of Aboriginal territorial groups in the country eastward of and including the Mitta Mitta River basin. In 1940, Tindale delineated just the one group in this region, that of Jaithmathang, however in his 1974 atlas, he delineated three groups – ‘Jaithmathang’, ‘Duduroa’, and ‘Djilamatang’ – however he did raise the possibility that these three may be ‘clans’ or ‘hordes’ of a larger single entity. Clark in his 1996 reconstruction adhered to this unitarian view, and considered Djilamatang, Yattemittong, Theddora mittung, and Kandangora mittung to be part of a larger group named Dhudhuroa. Wesson divided the region into six languages: Theddora, Yaithmathang, Gundungerre, Ngarego, Unnamed Wolgal, and an Unknown language along the Mitta Mitta River, north of Theddora.91 None of these reconstructions is supported in this paper. The evidence for Djila-mittung is very weak. No linguistic information has survived for this group. Analysis of the sources that Tindale cites to support his delineation of the group as a separate tribal entity has not supported him, and his work does not withstand scrutiny.92 Wesson considers it to be a Wolgal clan, but her reasons for this are never articulated.93 Tindale, however, did concede that it may be a Dhudhuroa group, and this is considered likely.

Analysis of ethnohistoric records and linguistic analysis suggests that there were at least two distinct language groups in the Mitta Mitta River drainage basin – Yaithmathang and Dhudhuroa. Dhudhuroa in the north was a distinct language. The name of the dialect of the Omeo people is unclear, but there is some suggestion in the literature that it was Yaithmathang. Kandangora-mittung may be an alternate name. Yaithmathang has been shown to be a dialect of Ngarigu, which means that it forms part of the language continuum that includes Walgalu, Ngarigu, and the language spoken at Canberra. Analysis of local groups in the study area has argued that at least seven named groups existed: five Dhudhuroa

93 Wesson 2000.
(Boengar-mittung; Djila-mittung; Ginning-mittung, Tarrer-mittung, and Theddora-mittung), and two Yaithmathang groups (Kandangora-mittung and Yatte-mittung).

Appendix One: detailed analysis of Dhudhuroa and Gundungerre local groups

a) Boenger mittung

(Boenger; Boen.ge.a mittong; Boeng.e.o.mittung)

Location:
- Boen.ge.a mittong on Mitte Mitter source, Robinson 1844 in Clark 2000c: 181
- Boeng.e.o.mittung: SW from crossing place, Robinson 1844 in Clark 2000c: 181

Group location:
Sources of Mitta Mitta River.

Sources:
Robinson 1844 Report (Mackaness 1978); Robinson 1844 in vocabulary volume (Clark 2000c).

b) Djila mittung

(Gelematong; Gillamatong; Djilamatang; Gilla matong; Dlijilma midthung)

Location:
- ‘A branch of the Wiradjuri, roving about the head waters of the Murrumbidgee, was known as “kunamildau” or “come by night”, owing to their often attacking other tribes during the hours of darkness. They were probably the people we read of as “Gilamatong” or “swift” who are said to have raided as far west as Wangaratta, and were supposed to have [been] ultimately wiped out by a general uprising of the various river tribes’, Andrews 1920: 35.
- ‘Djilamatang: west of Mount Kosciusko, and on upper headwaters of Murray River. At enmity with the Jaitmathang, Walgalu, and Ngarigo, who, on the
only occasion in post-European times when there was intertribal action in the Albury area, used to exterminate the Djilamatang people. T. W. Mitchell, M.L.A., confirmed that data passed to Curr and Smyth by his grandparent belonged to this tribe and he supplied further details of boundaries’, Tindale 1974: 203-204.

- ‘The Gillamatong had no tribal region but ranged the upper Murray to the alpine areas’, Mitchell 1981: 12.

**Group location:**
West of Mount Kosciusko, upper headwaters of Murray River.

**Sources:**

c) **Djinning mittung**

(Tinne mittong; Tin.ne mitong; Tin.ne.mittum; Tinner mittum; Tinnemittong; Kenin mitun, Ginning matong; Guining-matong; Jeenong-metong; Din.ne.mittum; Dyinning-middhang; Jinning middha; Dyinningmiddha)

**Location:**
- ‘The Tallangatta creek was the hunting ground of the Ginning-matong tribe. There are only three of this tribe now alive’, James Wilson in Victoria 1858-9: 26.
- ‘Tallangatta Creek, a tributary of the River Mitta Mitta, was, according to Mr James Wilson, the hunting ground of the Ginning-matong tribe’, Smyth 1878 I: 37.

- ‘Neddy Wheeler, Dyinningmiddha or -buttha Tribe, native of Mitta Mitta River. Dhuthuro’-wa … Neddy Wheeler is a native of Mitta Mitta River, where his father also belonged – His tribe was Dyinming middhang’, Mathews nd, Notebook 6, Ms 299: 40.


- ‘The Dhudhuroa was spoken by the Dyinningmiddhang tribe on the Mitta Mitta and Kiewa Rivers, and along the Murray Valley from Albury to Jingellic’, Mathews 1909: 11.

**Group location:**
Mitta Mitta River and Tallangatta Creek.

**Sources:**
Robinson, Journal, 3 June 1844 and 1844 report; Thomas Papers vol 23; Victoria 1858-59; Bonwick 1863; Smyth 1878; Mathews 1909, Notebooks; Mackaness 1978; Barwick 1984; Clark 1993, 2000a,b,c; Cleary 1993; Wesson 2000.

d) **Kandangora mittung**

(Kunora; Gundungerer; Gundanora; Gun.dung.er.reer; Gun.dung.er.ro; Kandangora; Kandangora mittung; Karrndtarrngkorra midtung)

**Location:**
- ‘The Kunora alias Gundanora tribe, over the Snowy river [from Cooma] and in the Alps, may consist of 300 men, they never go further than Menero. Then there is the Omeo tribe, near the lake and Stanley’s plains’, Lhotsky 1835: 106 in Neal 1976: 27.


- 'The name of the tribe that inhabited the high plains of Omeo was, according to information furnished to the Select Committee of the Legislative Council by the late Mr. Alfred Currie Wills, formerly Police Magistrate and Warden at Omeo, Gundanora. He stated that in May 1835 there were about 500 or 600 men, women, and children resident on the elevated plain of Omeo. … Their hunting and fishing grounds extended northward to the Cobberas Hills, southward and eastward to the River Tambo, and westward to the Bogong Range, via the Gibbo and Mitta Mitta rivers', Smyth 1878 I: 37.

- ‘Extending down the Mitta Mitta, the Kiewa and the Ovens River as far as Buffalo, were tribes called Theddora and Kandangora’, Howitt and Fison 1900: 47.

- ‘His language is called Ngarego; that of Gippsland he calls Kungela. Wild Blacks are called Budara. The Omeo language is called Kundung-urur. White men called Mugean’, Mickey in Howitt Papers in Young, Mundy and Mundy 2000: 295.

- ‘The Kandangora-mittung, who lived on the Omeo plains, the Limestone River down to its junction with the Indi River, and the Tambo River to Tongiomungie. On the latter river they were in contact with the Kurnai. It is worth noting that the old road from Omeo to Bruthen follows the trail by which the Gippsland and Omeo blacks made hostile incursions into each other’s countries’, Howitt 1904: 77-8.


Group location:

Omeo Plains.

Sources:


e) Theddora mittung

(Dodoro; Do.dare; Doodore.rer; Dodore; Dodorera; Dodora; Do-dor-dee; Do.dorer; Theddora; Theddora mittung; Dtedtorra middung)

Location:

- ‘The Do.dor.er blacks are under Mt Barker, head of McAlister’, Robinson, Journal, 23 May 1844 in Clark 2000b.

- ‘Extending down the Mitta Mitta, the Kiewa and the Ovens River as far as Buffalo, were tribes called Theddora and Kandangora’, Howitt and Fison 1900: 47.

- ‘the Theddora-mitting, occupying the sources of Mitta-Mitta River and its tributaries down to about the Gibbo Mountain, the Upper Kiewa River and the Ovens River to the Buffalo Mountain, thus being the neighbours of the Mogullum-bitch, the furthest out of the Kulin tribes’, Howitt 1904: 77.

- ‘An intelligent Theddora woman told me that her tribe extended as far as the upper waters of the Yakonda (Yackandandah), from which place she went as a wife of one of the Omeo Theddora’, Howitt 1904: 78.


- ‘Omeo, Theddora mittung = Cobungra, Yackandanda, Kiewa, Ovens River down to Buffalo’, Howitt, Papers, Ms 1054/2a in Wesson 2000: 85.

**Group location:**
Sources of Mitta Mitta River.

**Sources:**
Robinson 1844 Journal in Clark 2000b; Howitt and Fison 1900; Howitt 1904; Barwick Papers; Clark 1993; Wesson 2000.

**f) Yaithmathang**
(Yate mittong; Yaymittong; Ywa mitong; Yaitmathang; Yattemittong; Ya-itmathang; Ya-itma-thang)

**Location:**
- ‘there is the Omeo tribe, near the lake and Stanley’s plains’, Lhotsky 1835: 106 in Wesson 2000: 77.

- ‘The blacks of Omeo are called the Yaymittong’, Robinson Journal, 22 June 1844, 24 July 1844 in Clark 2000b; Fison and Howitt 1880: 350.

- ‘Yate, or, Yay.mittong, Omeo tribe’, Robinson vocabulary papers in Clark 2000c: 205.

- ‘The Yate-mittongs are the original inhabitants [of Omeo]’, Robinson 1844 Report in Mackaness 1978: 13.
- ‘The Yatte-mittongs are the original inhabitants [of Omeo] with whom the Mountain Tribes as far Eastward as Maneroo Downs are in Amity’, Robinson 1846 letterbook in Wesson 2000: 77.

- ‘Yate mittong or Omeo tribe’, Robinson vocabulary papers in Clark 2000c: 205.

- ‘The Omeo Blacks called themselves Ya-it-ma-thang. I have tried to get the meaning of the word but Jinny says it means the same as Brabelong but I suspect it means some peculiarity of the people as speech. I think it means people who speak quickly or it might refer to the term ya being much used as ya you (yes) and of course this is just speculation’, Bulmer 1881 in Howitt Papers in Wesson 2000: 77.

- ‘The Omeo tribe lived about the Plains, the Mitta Mitta and over eastward where they joined on to the Maneroo tribes. They also extended down by Bindi to Tongio but not as far as Numlamungi’, McFarlane’s Johnny in Howitt Papers in Wesson 2000: 78.

- ‘the now extinct Ya-itma-thang occupied the mountain country in which rise the rivers Mitta Mitta and Tambo, and some of the sources of the Ovens, and extended north at least as far as the Upper Yackandanda River, called by them Yakonda. … The eastern boundary of the Ya-itma-thang was about the Cobbora Mountains, and thence down the Indi River to Tom Groggin’s Run, their neighbours on that side being the Wolgal and Ngarigo tribes’, Howitt 1904: 78.

- ‘Each of these tribes had its own specific tribal area called a “bimble”. The Ja-ita-mathang bimble was roughly in about Corryong and extended towards Omeo’, Mitchell 1981: 12.

**Group location:**

Omeo.

**Sources:**


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Book Reviews


Andrew Gunstone, founding editor of the *Journal of Indigenous Studies* has selected 18 papers that were published in that journal between 1999 and 2007 and he presents them as a *tour d’horizon* of Australian Indigenous Studies. What do we get?

Some essays look at history: Ros Kidd’s useful summary of the Queensland government’s systematic misappropriation of the earnings of Indigenous people under ‘the Act’; Glen Stasiuk’s exuberant evocation of the loyalty of ‘Aboriginal warriors’ – variously motivated, but persistent – to the military culture of those who colonised them (strangely, he omits the Native Mounted Police); Will Sanders on the Howard government’s attempt to reverse the ‘anti-colonial’ tendencies of Australian public policy. Two essays – by Gill Cowlishaw and by Shayme Breen – narrate and comment on the History Wars. ‘Neutral, disinterested inquiry’ is rare, observes Cowlishaw, ‘because of the emotional weight of Indigenous issues’ (p. 58). Shayne Breen does not seem to mind: his essay celebrates the black armband historians for creating ‘a cultural space that allowed Aborigines to tell their stories and to have their telling heard’ (p. 189).

In a retrospective on the Reconciliation Decade, Gunstone summarises what he found disappointing about the work of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1991–2000. The Council’s education program was more about attitudes than about improving non-Indigenous knowledge; its vision of reconciliation did not include such Indigenous rights as their right to self-representation; socio-economic gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous did not diminish.

The health gaps to whose persistence Gunstone alludes are succinctly described by Ian Ring and Ngiare Brown (is it the same person as Ngaire Brown, mentioned p. 27?). Pointing to circulatory disease, injury, respiratory illness and diabetes, they insist that although we know how to diminish all four big killers, and although we have the health service policies that could deliver such progress, Australians have simply not yet allocated the resources required to make a difference. They lack the political will to promote health services more aggressively and to reconstruct the physical environments in which Indigenous
Australians live. Ring and Brown published this in 2003. I wonder what their assessment of the Northern Territory Emergency intervention that began in June of 2007, would be?

One could read Gunstone’s account of what ‘reconciliation’ was allowed (by the Australian government and by the Council itself) alongside Larissa Behrendt’s statement of her ‘vision of a reconciled Australia’. Behrendt’s vision is clearest when she deals with the law (referring to the Indigenous exercise of ‘the right to be economically self-sufficient’ (p. 232), she does not explain how, in practice, that could be). Her vision includes: some constitutional changes; a ‘return’ to ‘neutrality of the public service’ (p. 245) including restoration of its recently lost ‘corporate knowledge about Indigenous affairs’ (p. 246); and the ‘recognition of Indigenous jurisdiction’ based on ‘customary law’ (pp. 238–239) and on ‘the values that we claim as “Indigenous”’ (p. 242).

The restricted terms in which ‘Indigenous jurisdiction’ is understood by judges interpreting the Native Title Act 1993 is the topic of Wayne Atkinson’s angry essay on the Yorta Yorta claim: the Yorta Yorta were not able to satisfy judges that they were a group with an historically dynamic customary law. Craig Jones writes that the Native Title jurisdiction has the potential, in its mediation processes, to make room for the politics of the Aboriginal domain: the key conceptual move is for mediators to see the process as trilateral, not simply bilateral, because there are likely to be negotiations within the Indigenous side about how to deal with the non-Indigenous party. Thus ‘the goal of mediation is to produce outcomes under Australian and Aboriginal law’ (p. 262). Magistrate Kate Auty’s essay on the Shepparton Koori Court tells what it was like to work with the ‘elder or respected person’ and the ‘Aboriginal Justice Worker’ in that experiment. The values of this court were a product of cross-cultural exchange; she evokes the court as a conversation about sentencing as a solution to community problems. Perhaps Kooris felt ‘cultural safety’ in Auty’s courtroom. The concept is explained by Tangi Steen, Sydney Sparrow, Jenny Baker and Sharon Gollan; using focus groups, their research highlighted the ways that Indigenous students could experience a classroom as welcoming or forbidding.

The effect of reading Jones and Auty is to become aware of the small, localised and institution-specific ways that Aboriginal knowledge – what Aboriginal people know, now, about themselves and their environments – may be a force in contemporary Australian life. Other essays also deal with ‘knowledge’ as localised practice. John Morieson writes of the ‘astronomy of the Boorong’; he used fragmentary sources, including the oral heritage of Aborigines in Victoria’s Mallee country, to reconstruct how the night sky was understood by some Aboriginal people. Marlene Drysdale comments on the mutual learning between non-Indigenous nurses and Indigenous health workers in community clinics, lamenting that training of the latter is impeded by a lack of ‘consensus’ about their role. Bronwyn Fredericks and Leilani Pearce celebrate ‘Privileging the Voices of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled Health Service Sector’ in contemporary Queensland. If their account is right (and they are describing institutions in which they themselves give professional
leadership), then some agencies of the state have proved to be more permeable to Indigenous knowledge than the more holistic essays in this volume would make you think.

The two essays that attempt to give an account of ‘Indigenous knowledge’ as a distinct system are pitched in a language that is common to Philosophy as a discipline – such as ‘ontology’ and ‘epistemology’ – while insisting on the non-Western identity of the Indigenous system. Indeed, the essays by Arbon and Foley can be read as fervent statements of personal identity that employ the idiom of Philosophy (or Cosmology). In Veronica Arbon’s case, the sense of distinction is even more specific: not merely the ‘Indigenous’, but the Arabana, world-view. Having journeyed to the ‘ancient knowing of Indigenous people’, she states her need not to be ‘captured within the deep core of separation, domination and control lurking in western knowledge systems’ (p. 140). Similarly, Dennis Foley warns his reader not to let ‘Indigenous research’ be ‘tormented or classified in the physical and metaphysical distortions of … western approaches’. The other three essential features of ‘Indigenous Standpoint Theory’, as stated by Foley, are that ‘the practitioner must be Indigenous’; his/her research must benefit his/her community or the wider Indigenous community; and that ‘wherever possible the traditional language should be the first form of recording’. This is a demanding charter for Indigenous research – not least because the meaning of ‘be Indigenous’ and ‘benefit’ are debatable. Imagine a Journal of Indigenous Research dedicated to Foley’s four criteria. I am glad that Gunstone’s journal has adopted a more relaxed and pluralist approach to defining the field of Australian Indigenous Studies.

In his introduction, Gunstone refers to ‘Australian Indigenous Studies’ as an ‘academic discipline’ (p. xxvi). Yet his collection does not support that claim. Many disciplines appear in this book, with ‘Indigenous’ matters their topic of inquiry. Australian Indigenous Studies will best flourish if people recognise its intellectual plurality and refrain from systematising it and from writing as if one could legislate its borders.

Tim Rowse
University of Western Sydney
Peter Sutton’s *The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the End of the Liberal Consensus* is a multi-faceted book: memoir, ethnography, policy critique and history. In reviewing it for *Aboriginal History*, I highlight the historical understanding that it develops and brings to bear on contemporary policy debates. The book could make three contributions to Australian historical research. First, it could introduce into the historians’ vocabulary the term ‘liberal consensus’ to describe what now appears to be an intelligible period of Australian Indigenous policy history: 1968–2000. Second, it highlights the resilience of Indigenous parental authority to colonial encroachment and invites a more complex explanation of Indigenous disadvantage. Third, it intensifies already existing doubts about using the gross categories ‘Indigenous’ and ‘non-Indigenous’ to denominate the actors in Australian colonial history.

In this review I will take up each of these issues. First, I argue that Sutton’s notion of ‘liberal consensus’ is incomplete and that he does not clearly distinguish between two ways that it might function in our historical understanding. Second, I argue that Sutton finds it difficult to assign weight to Indigenous parental authority and thus is not clear about what stance future governments should adopt towards it. Third, I conclude that Sutton is so committed to generalising about Indigenous culture and experience that he is unable to propose a convincing alternative to the categories assumed by identity politics and public policy discussion.

The book opens with a vignette of recent social change on Cape York – in particular the apparent rise in the incidence of homicide, suicide and rape among families known to Sutton ‘since the introduction of a regular alcohol supply in 1985’ (p. 1). He then states his thesis:

that a number of the serious problems Indigenous people face in Australia today arise from a complex joining together of recent, that is, post-conquest, historical factors of external impact, with a number of ancient, pre-existent social and cultural factors that have continued, transformed or intact, into the lives of people living today. The main ways these factors are continued is child-rearing. (p. 7)

Thus, a concern for children is in two ways central to Sutton’s book, and in distinguishing them I can begin to describe its underlying architecture as simultaneously an ethnography (of Indigenous Australia and of non-Indigenous good will) and a critique of some prevalent Australian notions of post-colonial fair play.
Ethnography as ethical reconnaissance

The first way that children figure is that Sutton – in common with many thinkers influenced by the psycho-analytic tradition – understands child socialisation to be a determinant of deeply entrenched cultural patterns. This theory of cultural reproduction is relevant to the extent that Indigenous Australians have successfully resisted transformation of their child socialisation practices. The second way that children matter in The Politics of Suffering is ethical: Sutton questions the priority that some have given to respecting ‘cultural differences and racially defined political autonomy’ rather than ‘a child’s basic human right to have love, wellbeing and safety’ – a priority that has displaced ‘care as the primary determinant of special helping measures for citizens in trouble’ (pp. 10–11). To be sure, children are not the only ‘citizens in trouble’: the well-being of ‘the unborn, infants, children, adolescents, the elderly, and adult women and men’ (p. 10) is a neglected priority, he says. Vulnerable children are nonetheless his recurring example of the disordered ethics that he wishes to challenge. In keeping with this dual significance of the child, The Politics of Suffering is a work both of social science and of ethical advocacy.

For anthropological writing to operate in both scientific and ethical registers is not unusual; at least since the rise of Boasian and Malinowskian alternatives to ‘racial science’, the discipline of Anthropology has been the site of a humanism that has been all the more robust for being grounded in the facts of authorial experience. Sutton puts his personal experience front and centre of his frequently autobiographical book, and those who have praised The Politics of Suffering in reviews have, correspondingly, evoked the author’s grieving witness as an assurance of the book’s integrity. That Anthropology has long embodied moral and civic pedagogy can be illustrated by the case of Ruth Benedict. She authored not only a seminal work in the ‘culture and personality’ approach to human diversity to which Sutton’s book is an intellectual heir (Patterns of Culture 1935) but also a book that held racial science to blame for racism (Race and Racism 1942) and declared ‘for or against, we must take sides. And the history of the future will differ according to the decision that we make’.¹

In understanding The Politics of Suffering as a work in this anthropological tradition of ethical advocacy, it is important to take seriously Benedict’s mode of address: she challenges her readers to conceive themselves as poised to make a judgment and to decide an allegiance that will reform them and their world of relationships. Sutton does this too, continually prodding the reader to be reflexive about three ways of thinking that we might take for granted: first, categorical thinking that substantiates ‘Indigenous/non-Indigenous’ and makes sense of individuality in terms of each individual being either Indigenous or non-Indigenous; second, ‘cultural relativism’; and third, ‘social justice’. Critical of the grip that these three ways of thinking have on our political imagination, Sutton has written a polemical ethnography of recent Australian liberal sensibility.

Let me expand a little on his three targets.

¹ Benedict 1942: 3.
First, Indigenous/non-Indigenous. It is fundamental to his social philosophy that Sutton seeks ‘a better balance between the collective and the personal than we have achieved in recent decades’ (p. 164). Exemplary of the ‘personal’, as he has experienced it, is the quotidian ‘coalface caring business’ (p. 11) of service providers in troubled communities. He himself has been a carer. On Cape York in 1976, he combined field work with ‘running a basic [non-profit] food store (the protein was all hunted), and administering the Flying Doctor medical kit’ (p. 24) – anthropological compassion later gratefully and publicly acknowledged by Gladys Tybingoompa (p. 32). In Chapter 7 he extols ‘the personal’ against the ‘corporate’ or ‘collective’ by evoking a series of friendships between anthropologists and informants – relationships that are not intelligible in the categories made available by identity politics. In his final chapter he criticises ‘Reconciliation’ as a civic ideal founded in a flawed schema of collective ‘Indigenous’ and collective ‘non-Indigenous’ agencies.

Second, ‘cultural relativism’. If the conceptual alternative that twentieth century anthropology offered to ‘race’ was ‘culture’, the ideological alternative that it offered to ‘racism’ was ‘cultural relativism’. As Sutton says, cultural relativism has been ‘not merely … an intellectual or scientific standpoint but also a moral stance, a kind of scientifically underpinned engine of tolerance’ (p. 144). Sutton is wary of cultural relativism because of its ethical crudity (it makes no distinction between the predatory and the vulnerable members of a culture, its indiscriminate tolerance is not bounded by respect for universal human values). He is clearly annoyed and frustrated by the self-satisfied subjectivities that he sees as characteristic of ‘cultural relativism’, and his many critical passages on the culture of ‘cultural relativism’ – if I can put it in that way – have enlivened the reception of his work. Cultural relativism thrives partly on its psychological rewards (he sees it as ‘self-redemptive’, p. 11). However, Sutton’s philosophical assessment of ‘cultural relativism’ is not necessarily negative, and it is more subtle than his strictures on cultural relativists would imply. ‘Its virtues and vices depend on the context we want to apply it to, and it can’t be damned or praised for itself alone, free of context’ (p. 162).

Third, as well as mocking the ethical simple-mindedness of many adherents of ‘cultural relativism’ Sutton takes aim at another flawed ethical formation: an overstated regard for ‘social justice’ as a matter of ‘politics and law’. That concern is also rewarding for those immersed in it; it is ‘geared to creating benefits for politically or bureaucratically active adults, in the first instance’, it bestows ‘political glamour’ and it is ‘career-enhancing’ (pp. 10–12). Sutton believes that the instruments of a properly ethical concern for Aborigines are not ‘politics and law’ but actions that work at the level of ‘the personal’ (p. 12).

One vehicle for Sutton’s ethical commitments is his historical account of what he calls ‘the liberal consensus’.

The ‘liberal consensus’ and its history

The ‘liberal consensus’ combined naïve cultural relativism with an optimistic projection of the possibilities of politics and law and assumed and revalued
the categorical distinction Indigenous/non-Indigenous. The ‘liberal consensus’ became influential, Sutton suggests, between 1968 and 1974 and it set the terms of public discussion until 1999–2000. Sutton summarises it thus:

[Aboriginal] communities should be free of mission or state governance, self-managed through elected councils and relatively autonomous. Land rights would ensure their inhabitants security of tenure and, where possible, a source of income. Traditional culture would be encouraged, not discouraged. Pressures to assimilate to a Euro-Australian way of life were racist and should be curtailed. Liberation, not retraining, ... would lift people’s self-respect and pride, and enable them to embark on a new era in which the quality of their lives would improve. There was an expectation that collective decision-making would be based on a regard for the good of the community. Health would improve through better access to services and a power shift from government health agencies to those who came to form the Indigenous health industry. (p. 17)

This is accurate as far as it goes. However, Sutton has omitted two crucial items in the ‘liberal consensus’ that emerged from 1968 to 1974.

One was the doctrine of anti-discrimination. This had many legal and policy manifestations before 1968, including the release of Aborigines from many restrictions on their behaviour, such as legally withholding the right to vote and to drink alcohol. In the period 1968–1974, the achievements of ‘anti-discrimination’ were largely to do with empowering Aborigines as consumers, with the standardisation of wages and welfare payments to Indigenous Australians. The achievement of formal equivalence in such income entitlements in these years consummated Paul Hasluck’s policy of assimilation, a legacy welcomed by those who also held the convictions Sutton describes as the ‘liberal consensus’. One feature of the termination of the ‘liberal consensus’ is that it has again become respectable to advocate, if only as an ‘emergency’ measure, racial discrimination in welfare entitlements.

The second idea that Sutton omits from his summary of the ‘liberal consensus’ was the conviction that the new, post-assimilation mode of Indigenous advancement would be enabled by public funds flowing through government agencies to Aboriginal organisations that would be set up (under Fraser government legislation in 1976) to provide health, schooling, housing and other essential services. To omit this second item from the ‘liberal consensus’ renders incomplete – to say the least – Sutton’s account (pp. 17–41) of how that consensus came ‘undone’, for that conviction was always, in one respect, fragile. Whether governments spend too much or too little on assistance to Indigenous Australians has been persistently at issue since the Whitlam government. The question has been polled since the 1960s, and these polls have consistently revealed respondent dissensus. Australians have been divided about Indigenous entitlement to financial support. The ‘liberal consensus’ – in the augmented sense that, I suggest, is more accurate historically – was thus highly vulnerable to that current of Australian opinion that has long been suspicious of tax-funded state support for vulnerable people. Aborigines have been a prime example for
those who view the interventionist welfare state as an expensive mistake. By omitting this taxation/entitlement theme from his account of liberal political culture, Sutton has reduced the plausibility of his history, in Chapter 1, of the ‘shattered orthodoxy’ (p. 17).

The history of the dissolution of the ‘liberal consensus’ that Sutton presents in his first chapter is an engaging memoir of his own presence in Queensland communities (from June 1970), as the ‘liberal consensus’ changed the ways of administration 1968–1974. Recalling the solidarities and enmities that these changes occasioned among the non-Aboriginal residents of Cape York, he also offers vignettes of Aboriginal activists, including admiring sketches of the emerging political sophisticates Marcia Langton and Noel Pearson. Comparing ‘old and new’ Aboriginal activism in the 1990s, he contrasts the ‘old’ concern for the ‘symbolic and rights agenda’ and the new emphasis on ‘quality-of-life issues’ and appreciation of ‘the complex pragmatics of governance’ (p. 31). The pertinence of this emerging agenda, Sutton suggests, was that, as a result of the ‘liberal consensus’, living conditions on Aboriginal communities were less monitored for adherence to hygiene standards and there was a ‘decline in the standard of living and safety’ (p. 31). A growing research literature described these bad conditions, though Sutton is silent on whether the authors explained them as a consequence of the ‘liberal consensus’. That explanation, with which Sutton has some sympathy, began to be circulated by Noel Pearson from 1999, and by 2005 it had achieved wide credibility. Sutton describes one impact of this historical narrative – that the ideas and practices of the ‘liberal consensus’ had inflicted unintended suffering on Indigenous Australians – as ‘a fair amount of catharsis’ (p. 33) and as a ‘wave of unusual honesty and self-examination’ (p. 41). Journalists who had seen the world through the terms of the ‘liberal consensus’ were ceasing to do so. In this refreshed climate of discussion, ‘taboos’ on public discussion of ‘political morality, personal morality and cultural values’ were set aside (p. 35). In the controversy about the Howard government’s Northern Territory intervention in 2007, principles of ‘political rights’ were trumped by declarations of humanitarian intent. There is now no ‘political consensus on Australian Indigenous policy’ (p. 40). Much later in the book, when discussing whether and in what respects Aboriginal customary law should be recognised, Sutton argues that the ‘liberal consensus’ has become vulnerable also because the Aboriginal domain that it values has itself been changing. At least, this is what I think he is referring to when he writes: ‘wider demographic, cultural and social changes are working to hasten the decline and fall of the kind of strong relativism that informed liberal progressive opinion in the 1970s’ (p. 160).

Two histories are at play in Sutton’s story of the successful challenging of the ‘liberal consensus’: a narrative of the declining influence of a set of ideas (the ‘liberal consensus’); and a narrative of the degrading impact of policies favoured by the ‘liberal consensus’ on Aboriginal communities. He puts more effort into setting out the first history, an evocative tale of people he has met and of political scenes in which he has participated. In addressing the second history, he does not clearly distinguish two propositions: that the ‘liberal consensus’ inhibited our public recognition that conditions on some Aboriginal communities are very
bad and not improving; and Noel Pearson’s thesis that the application of the ‘liberal consensus’ to public policy caused the degradation of these Aboriginal communities’ conditions of life.

The first proposition is plausible: reading Sutton enables me to see how my hopes framed in terms of the ‘liberal consensus’ have led me to highlight the potential of Indigenous agency; when confronted by instances of Indigenous stupidity, greed, mental illness, treachery, violence, laziness and apathy, it was tempting to treat these qualities as marginal and/or as the fading legacies of colonisation. It has been refreshing to be able to acknowledge, publicly, that the difficulties of realising the hopes promoted by the ‘liberal consensus’ point, in part, to unmet Indigenous responsibilities and to cultural and historical explanations of flawed Indigenous agency.

However, a reader will be disappointed if he/she expects Sutton to expound the argument that the application of the ‘liberal consensus’ to public policy caused ‘the downward spiral since the 1970s’ – the Pearson thesis that has played so well in the press since 2000. Sutton implies some sympathy for the Pearson thesis, though his formulations are notably cautious – ‘many agreed that this was an important part of the truth’ (p. 49) and ‘there was an apparent correlation between the progressiveness of policy and the degree of community disaster’ (p. 55). Where Sutton differs from Pearson is in the weight that he gives to persistent Indigenous authority structures.

As Sutton tells the story, there was a ‘breakdown in social control in a number of Aboriginal settlements’ as state and church, in the period 1968–1974, withdrew or redesigned their authority. I understand him to qualify his account of state and church withdrawal when he suggests that the administration of goods and services in Aboriginal communities has remained ‘functionally, not politically, by non-Indigenes’ (p. 56) – not necessarily officials of state or church, to be sure. At the same time as non-Indigenous authority was receding and/or changing its forms, access to alcohol improved (and Sutton recalls his own hospitality on Cape York). According to the ‘liberal consensus’, the destiny of resurgent Aboriginal authority was to deal with these new circumstances. What Aboriginal authority was there?

Sutton’s answer to this question – crucial to his story, one would think – is curiously indirect, piecemeal and scattered throughout the book. He briefly mentions household ‘matriarchy’ as a newly significant formation. He implies that surviving Aboriginal custom was strong enough to make it difficult to establish the legitimacy, in Indigenous eyes, of incorporated Aboriginal organisations with codes of responsibility that could contradict obligations to kin (p. 81). At the same time, he assures us, many Indigenous people have embraced modern ways, including formal organisations. His main point about Indigenous authority, in the era of ‘liberal consensus’, is that it was able to resist colonial influence: it has proven robust, and the forms of its persistence worry him. For example, in the Western Desert, it remains realistic for Aboriginal people to fear that they will be ‘strangled for religious misbehaviours’ (p. 79). The persistence of customary Indigenous authority is mainly to be found, he says, in the ways
that parents raise children. The effect of persisting approaches to child-rearing becomes a central topic, running through Chapter 3: ‘[S]ome very deeply seated and old cultural conceptions of power, obligation and economy’ (p. 64) have determined how Aborigines have responded to the circumstances of the late twentieth century.

Sutton is committed to the view that child socialisation reproduces Indigenous culture. In some Indigenous families, he suggests, the socialisation process has recently so miscarried that it has produced young adults who can be effective in terms of neither Indigenous nor non-Indigenous expectations. Some contemporary adults can function in Indigenous society but, unlike their own parents who had long contact with white employers, missionaries or officials, they lack the cognitive and emotional skills to go beyond the regional Aboriginal domain. Some young people have been socialised to drink alcohol in destructive ways. Sutton is worried that where Indigenous child socialisation processes persist, they reproduce maladaptive behaviour. He chides adherents of the ‘liberal consensus’ for being blind to the significance, in determining Indigenous disadvantage, of such cultural factors as: egalitarian social organisation; power structures that encourage dependency; family loyalties; certain beliefs about the causes of illness; minimal hygiene practices; demand sharing and the rejection of accumulation; use of physical force in disputes; fatalism and a sense of an unchanging world (p. 85). Children still learn these patterns of culture, and what they learn, Sutton argues, disables their engagement as adults with the wider Australian society and sometimes with their own.

In underlining these cultural factors as real and persistent determinants of behaviour, Sutton is correcting what he sees as the blindness of the ‘liberal consensus’ to cultural explanations of disadvantage. Accepting that corrective, we are nonetheless left with the question: are these major or minor determinants of persistent Indigenous disadvantage? This is a difficult question to answer in a generalised way, as Sutton rightly points out, but it is not a question that he can evade. Weighing the causal importance of culture and thus the relevance of cultural factors to government intervention is a difficult intellectual task. While Sutton urges it upon those whom he criticises (see pp. 123–126, for example) it is a challenge that he himself can defer, as long as he preoccupies himself with the idiocies of the ‘liberal consensus’. It is surprising to me (though evidently gratifying to such reviewers as Christopher Pearson) that the ‘liberal consensus’ as a (‘stupid’) structure of perception and feeling occupies so many scornfully worded pages in Sutton’s book. As long as non-Indigenous self-delusion is his theme, rather than assessing ‘Indigenous culture’ as a phenomenon in history, he can rub our liberal noses in problematic features of Indigenous culture, without saying how important they are in determining what Indigenous people and governments now do.

Perhaps the best that can be achieved, by way of an explanatory model, is to say that certain contemporary circumstances have interacted with certain inherited dispositions to produce damaging patterns of behaviour. When Sutton commented on Gillian Cowlishaw’s critiques of his work in 2005, he suggested...
that wherever limited colonisation had left much of the Indigenous socialisation processes intact, it was not plausible to explain violent behaviour as primarily a response to imposed colonial conditions:

in my view [violence] is rooted much more immediately in the dynamic local polity of competitive interpersonal and gender relationships, in a cultural world where jealous rage is not normally suppressed during child socialisation, where berserks are legitimated childhood reactions to thwarted desires, where, under recently sedentary conditions, dispersal is no longer the favoured option during conflict, and where drugs, especially alcohol, act as disinhibitors for strong emotions. In other words, it is rooted much less in realms of broader social control and colonial resistance, with their loaded hints of collective good, and much more in the struggle of the person.2

Consistent with this, in Sutton’s powerful review of archaeologies, histories and ethnographies of violence among Aborigines (Chapter 4 of The Politics of Suffering), he suggests that male violence against women ‘is found at its most extreme in communities that have remained closest to their cultural traditions, and where alcohol is available in quantity’ (p. 101). He adduces his Aurukun data to illustrate such a place (though he does not compare it with a community that has not remained close to their cultural traditions). Of all the elements in the ‘liberal consensus’ that could be reassessed, now, as damaging mistakes, the legislated end of restrictions on Aborigines’ access to alcohol emerges, in Sutton’s book, as the most consequential misjudgment. Paternalistic and discriminatory though they may have been in intention and effect, there were social benefits in the laws, institutional structures and patterns of settlement that mobilised racial/cultural criteria to apportion unevenly the liberty to drink. We can’t go back to those days, writes Sutton. However, nor is he attracted to any of the current ‘collectivist’ solutions to the alcohol abuse problem, such as zoning communities as grog-free and restricting retail supply. The solutions that interest him are characteristically in the realm of the personal, the helpful dyad: he commends one-to-one talks between patients and their doctors as prompts to self-reform.

Sutton’s wariness of the collective and the corporate is consistent with his suspicion of histories that assume the centrality of government policy in the determination of Indigenous well-being. Consider the logic of Sutton’s emphasis, in his history of Indigenous Australia since the 1960s, on the persistence of cultural factors. To the extent that they are the major reason for persistent Indigenous disadvantage, then the causal importance of other factors is diminished. Perhaps the revised modes of government and church presence, approved by the ‘liberal consensus’, were not so important? Perhaps no imaginable configuration of polity and economy would have saved Aborigines from their maladaptive cultural patterns? Or perhaps we need to distinguish among the policies approved by the ‘liberal consensus’, weighing the causal importance of different policies and

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highlighting those that interacted powerfully and perversely with features of Indigenous culture. Policies that had the effect of improving Indigenous access to alcohol emerge in Sutton’s account as particularly important.

Causal models and the politics of intervention

Sutton gives us good reason for wanting a causal model that is clear about the relative weights of Indigenous culture and non-Indigenous policy in the generation of misery: such a model is relevant to our assessment of what, if anything, changes in government practices could achieve. Reading his chapter on health policy, I sensed that Sutton is troubled by the question of the relevance of government. On the one hand, Indigenous culture, he says, is much less accessible to deliberated manipulation and critical self-reflection than government policies are. On the other hand, he alludes to the possibility of ‘remov[ing] by appropriate interventions’ unhygienic customary practices (p. 122); and he attributes real health benefits and lasting behavioural change to some of the practices enforced under assimilation (p. 132). He acknowledges the possibility that external initiatives to promote changes in Aboriginal behaviour will resonate with ‘traditional Aboriginal values’ and thus be accepted (pp. 133, 136–137). To assign great causal significance to entrenched, socialised Indigenous culture is not necessarily to diminish one’s hopes in what governments may do. Sutton’s emphasis on cultural determinants could nonetheless nurture that worm of doubt within the ‘liberal consensus’ to which I drew attention above: if what governments do or provide is of little consequence, why spend so much ‘tax-payers’ money’ on public provision?

Sutton generally seems to be more interventionist than such welfare state sceptics: he would direct more expenditure to health promotion, that is, to adult education for behavioural change (p. 141, and see Sutton’s op-ed piece in The Australian, 30 September 2009). He even goes so far as to say that ‘the cycle of childhood socialisation needs to be re-geared’ – a metaphor that does not illuminate the imagined mechanism of social engineering (p. 143). However, he has no proposals to make about schooling, and (remarkable in a book so concerned with child socialisation) the term ‘education’ does not appear in his index.

In a 2005 paper, Sutton explained that his underlying policy preference was for ‘a fundamental reversal of interventionism’. As he explained:

I support greater intervention where there is, for example, an unmet need to protect vulnerable individuals. This need has been increasing in recent decades, and interventionist strategies have been increasingly a matter of demand from Aborigines, not just from members of the wider society. But in the longer term I consider it false to assume that more intervention will remove the underlying factors at work. In that sense I question the present vast intervention of an officially maintained and publicly funded organisational racial separatism. That includes
being in favour of a gradual withdrawal of non-essential services from settlements and institutions which, without it, would have to make more of their own way in the world, perhaps even sink or swim.³

Sutton is not a policy nihilist but an advocate of the broad thrust of late Howard government and Rudd government policies towards remote and very remote Indigenous communities: questioning subsidised spatial separation and encouraging population concentration, and promoting engagement with the mainstream labour market. To the extent that such policies give rise to more ‘vulnerable individuals’, this policy stance could exacerbate Sutton’s ambivalence towards state ‘intervention’ into Indigenous lives. Opportunities for ‘coal-face caring’ may proliferate.

Reconciliation: the dance of the categories

Sutton closes with a critique of reconciliation that, while suggestive and thought-provoking, is bedevilled by a tension that runs through the whole book. As I pointed out above, in his critique of social justice/politics/law, Sutton wishes to revalue the personal and to question the collective or corporate as vectors of action and feeling. The categorical habits of Australia’s contemporary languages of social analysis and civic concern arouse his suspicion repeatedly throughout the book: needs for care, he protests, will not be grasped through narratives of colonial history ordered in the generalised terminology of identity politics. Conflicts, solidarities and grievances are matters of local configuration, scenes deeply susceptible to the projects and personalities of the individuals present. This ontology of the local is integral to Sutton’s anthropological humanism. ‘Reconciliation’ thus strikes him as a particularly ill-conceived project, because, via national apologies and possibly reparations, it seeks to bring into a condition of empathy two nation-wide categories of Australians. The project tends to institutionalise the categories, he argues, as much perpetuating as overcoming their estrangement.

The official creation of this parallel universe of Indigenous/non-Indigenous functions, committees, boards and programs creates a career structure such that those who want to tread this ladder of success are easily wedded to the continuance of racial division, and indeed to the status of victimhood that prompted the compensatory acts in the first place. If one’s career is wedded to suffering and its compensation, then there cannot be an easily accepted endpoint for special status as victim. Victimhood thus becomes, for many, the family business, a business of status as well as of economics. (p. 205)

What is more, he goes on to say, such a project cannot work emotionally. Insofar as ‘reconciliation’ is emotional work, it is ‘a state of being between persons, or a resolution of issues within one’s consciousness’ that are independent of the measured gaps between the two statistical entities: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia.

³ Sutton 2005: 40.
At this point, while continuing to discuss emotions, Sutton changes his argument. From asserting – credibly – that there cannot be empathy between gross statistical entities, only empathy between individual human beings, he shifts to saying that there are huge emotional differences between Aborigines and other Australians. That is, having just critiqued categories, he reinstates them to remark that Aborigines and other Australians have ‘quite opposed ways of responding with the feelings’.

The visceral intensity of a remote Aboriginal settlement is almost impossible to describe. It is also pretty well invisible to the casual outside visitor, until the lid blows off. There are cross-cultural limits to empathy, and thus to real mutual recognition. (p. 206)

Thus one of Sutton’s most powerful reasons for disbelieving in ‘reconciliation’ is his experience of the radical emotional alterity of Aborigines: it stands ‘in the way of better mutual acceptance’ (p. 207).

This is strikingly categorical thinking, albeit anchored in Sutton’s experience of particular places. Its presence within a chapter that is, ostensibly, so opposed to categorical thinking gives one pause. It is clear from reviews, with their concern to evoke Sutton as a man who was ‘there’, at troubled Aurukun, that the credibility of The Politics of Suffering rests partly on our willingness to accept that Sutton’s witnessing of particular places at particular times is a reliable source of knowledge of Indigenous Australia and of its relationship with non-Indigenous Australia. Certain versions of categorical thinking may strike Sutton as implausible and artificial, and well may he say that formal reconciliation ‘politicizes and collectivizes the very things that need to be dealt with by individuals’ (p. 209), but his book demonstrates the limited relevance, to Sutton himself, of such an atomising paradigm of relatedness. He is deeply committed to a generalised model of Indigenous sociality, based largely on what he has found, as field-worker, in many remote and very remote Aboriginal communities. The Politics of Suffering has been welcomed or refused in the terms that he offered it: generalising representation of some abiding and widespread characteristics of Indigenous Australia.

References


Tim Rowse
University of Western Sydney

As he has done before, Bain Attwood extends to his readers the courtesy of locating his authorial position – not native born, in fact raised and educated in New Zealand, a country which has long had a Treaty with its Indigenous people, a Treaty which dates from the same period as Batman’s treaty with our Indigenous people, which he is about to examine in this book. He does not accord this latter treaty the status of capitalisation, and I will follow him in this. He sets out his starting point simply:

A sense of legitimacy is crucial to nations since this is what gives them their staying power. All nations have problematic beginnings and have to undergo a transition from *de facto* coercive power to *de jure* authority … The principal challenge to the Australian nation’s sense of itself as morally good has lain in the knowledge that the land was, and perhaps still is, someone else’s, and that it was taken without the Aboriginal people’s consent. (p. 5)

Attwood takes two foundational ‘legends’ as he calls them, Batman’s treaty, and Batman’s statement that ‘This will be the place for a village’, and subjects them to the most rigorous scrutiny – how they were produced, how they were remembered, re-invented, inverted, criticised, memorialised and finally undermined by the emergence of the sub-discipline of Aboriginal History together with political activism: it is magisterial in scope.

In this work Attwood uses a number of concepts familiar to historians, foundational history, monumental history, antiquarian history, but in following Nietzsche (pp. 6–7), he goes beyond what many were trained to believe is the historian’s job – to understand and explain the past – and takes a loftier stance from which critical history is more or less equated with moral judgment. He is persuasive.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 examines the perspectives and the expectations of all players, the land owners (Attwood follows Barwick’s account4), the Port Phillip Association, Governors Arthur and Bourke, the imperial government: in addition, it locates Batman’s treaty within the wider context of William Penn’s Treaty of 1683, and notes that Batman was hailed as the ‘Tasmanian Penn’. This connection is important in explaining how what was essentially a land purchase attempt became known as a treaty. By far the most powerful section of Part 1, in my view, is the meticulous teasing out of the shift in meaning of sovereignty. Quickly disposing of *Terra nullius* as a much later invention, he asks on what grounds did the British claim sovereignty and answers that it is still not clear (p. 73). There were three traditional ways, conquest, cession and occupation of a literally uninhabited land (which Australia clearly

4 See Barwick 1984.
was not). In a beautiful piece of historical research Attwood demonstrates the shift in meaning from sovereignty as a concept related to people, to sovereignty as a concept related to territory (pp. 72–82). I disagree though with the statement that ‘There are no reasons for arguing that the Colonial Office or the colonial government were in favour of upholding Aboriginal rights to land in any real sense’ (p. 87). Under the Squatting Act, one of the functions of the Commissioners of Crown Land together with their Border Police was to protect the rights of Aborigines in distant parts of the country: half the expense of the Border Police was considered to be incurred on behalf of the Aborigines.

Part 2 ‘Legend making’ is a grand tour through every mention of the treaty over the 100 years to 1935, the apogee of the legend (p. 229), with numerous illustrations, detailed examinations of the waves of interpretations of Batman, a history lesson in itself which tells us more probably than we thought we needed to know, but which sets up Part 3 ‘Remembering history’, to my way of thinking, the most significant part of the book, and the most heartening. In Part 2, Attwood is persuasive that it was James Bonwick who was most influential in constructing the Batman legend, and all subsequent writers take their position in relation to him.

Part 3 documents the unsettling of the foundational legends by the rise of Aboriginal activism, the political scene, the Mabo case, the struggle for a real Treaty, the Bicentennial protests, the ‘black armband’.

The weakest part of the book in my view, is in Part 1 – ‘The Kulin’s treaty’ (pp. 52–58) in which Attwood, though basically following Barwick, is forced into imagining responses, when there actually is evidence, though as yet unpublished. Two of the signatories were the Boon Wurrung clan heads, Kollorlook and Budgery Tom, prominent in the records of the Assistant Protector William Thomas, and there are records of the Port Phillip people’s opinion of Batman and of the deal they got, and their reciprocal response: on 13 September 1840 they related to Thomas all the good services they had done for the whites under the treaty, including that they had killed no-one, and now the government (unlike Batman) was saying stay away from Melbourne. The population figures 50,000 to 100,000 for Victoria, and 1500 to 2500 for the Woiwurung, are exaggerated; it would have been of benefit to include the mechanics of dispossession which Ian Clark has listed; the map of Kulin territory misrepresents Boon Wurrung territory on the east and the west.

It is easy though, to criticise a book for what is not there – overall, this book is a wonderful addition to knowledge, referenced minutely and beautifully produced in typical Miegunyah Press style.

Reference


Marie Fels
Red Hill South, Victoria
In substance, *Unfinished Business* picks up where Attwood (see above review of *Possession: Batman’s Treaty and the Matter of History* by Bain Attwood) left off, though not in a chronological sense. Gunstone’s book is the second edition of a work published first in 2007, itself developed from a PhD thesis. The underlying substantive issue, the elephant in the room, is sovereignty, that same issue with which imperial Britain and colonial Australia contended in the early nineteenth century (and with which both continue to grapple, in Britain’s debate on the Lisbon Treaty, and Australia’s debate on border protection). In Australia, sovereignty and its meanings underpin both the Indigenous demands for a treaty, and successive federal governments’ refusal or inability to negotiate such.

Gunstone’s central purpose in this book is to explore the ten-year formal process of reconciliation (p. 5). He commences with the Hawke government’s position in the late 1980s, facing general public apathy and racism, facing poor outcomes of previous policies in Indigenous health, education, and so on, facing as well, Indigenous hostility because Labor had abandoned its promises to recognise land rights and negotiate a treaty. Instead of land rights and a treaty, the government proposed a formal reconciliation process, to extend over ten years, intended to culminate in the centenary of Federation in 2001. Reconciliation was not achieved, and Gunstone in this book shows why and how the process failed.

Gunstone sees three streams of writing about this failed reconciliation process, for which he uses the terms conservative, progressive and critical and gives thumbnail sketches (p. 3). Conservative writers focus on practical reconciliation, dismiss ‘black armband’ revisionist history, and locate reconciliation within the framework of a united Australia. Progressive writers recognise the importance of symbolism, but a perceived greater need for a national identity has resulted in some progressive writing being critical of Indigenous claims to sovereignty and the need for a treaty. Gunstone locates himself within the critical stream, stressing the importance of recognising and protecting Indigenous rights – rights possessed by Indigenous people by virtue of being the original inhabitants of this country (p. 4).

The starting point for the reconciliation process was the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991* (p. 49) passed with bi-partisan support. The three broad goals of the overall process of reconciliation were:

- education of the whole community
- a national commitment to address disadvantage
- some type of formal document.

But from the very start, one of the provisions of the Act – that the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) seek advice mainly from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC – in whose elections only a minority
of Indigenous people participated, averaging 22.9 per cent for the decade) – precluded the CAR from benefiting from that widespread Indigenous opinion outside ATSIC which advocated rights based on sovereignty (pp. 53–54). Further, the CAR’s own Vision Statement ignored matters such as sovereignty, land rights, self-determination and a treaty, which could not be fitted into a nationalist framework of reconciliation (p. 57).

*Mabo* changed things in a positive way, mainly because Prime Minister Keating linked the decision with reconciliation in his landmark Redfern speech of December 1992. But *Mabo* and the *Native Title Act* of 1993 taken together, lost the coalition support which the cause of reconciliation had previously enjoyed (p. 71), and things got tougher for the cause of reconciliation with the election in 1996 of the Howard government which rejected self-determination in favour of practical measures to address practical problems.

Gunstone sees the CAR education program as basically a failure (Chapter 3), because more emphasis was placed on changing community attitudes with slogans rather than educating with factual information about the historical, political and moral consequences of white settlement: he uses the terms invasion, massacres, genocide (p. 160). The section in Chapter 3 entitled ‘Numerous definitions’ is particularly telling.

In Chapter 4 Gunstone concludes that not only did socio-economic conditions *not* improve, in some areas they went backward, and this, even in spite of a sympathetic government for the first five years, and a government allegedly offering practical solutions to practical problems for the second five years of the ten-year process towards reconciliation. And in Chapter 5, he judges that the CAR did not achieve its goal in the document it produced because that document failed to reflect adequately the broad range of Indigenous opinion (p. 237).

Gunstone has produced an excellent and necessary record of the ten-year process towards reconciliation: he has done a valuable service. But it is a bleak record, and Gunstone’s is, I suspect, a less than measured critique. Even in the account of the Sydney Harbour Bridge walk (and the other walks around Australia), which received huge publicity, with numerous first hand personal narratives published in newspapers, and shown on all television channels, Gunstone has selected negative evidence to quote (pp. 89, 116–117). In selecting thus, he has done a dis-service, in my view, because critical history is rendered more powerful when it treats even handedly a position opposed to the author’s.

There is no arguing though with the conclusion – neither government has achieved success in the tackling the fundamental Indigenous demands for self-determination, land rights and treaty. Contrary to the author’s position, I do not see sovereignty as belonging conceptually with this trio: in my view, it is the concept of sovereignty which *underpins* these three claims, and reconciliation is a possible outcome of reaching a shared understanding, agreement even.
The unfinished business of this book is the business of the future – the national conversation about the multiple meanings of sovereignty: it has started already in *Sovereign Subjects* (reviewed in *Aboriginal History*, vol 32, 2008).\(^5\)

Marie Fels  
Red Hill South, Victoria

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\(^5\) Moreton-Robinson 2007.
In **Convincing Ground**, Bruce Pascoe invites his readers to join him in exploring the experiences of Indigenous Australians through the brutal period of colonisation and conquest, focusing on the experiences of the Gundidjmara people in western Victoria in the 1830s and 1840s but drawing connections with Indigenous experiences in other parts of Australia. These are juxtaposed with Pascoe’s commentary on recent politics concerning race and human rights in Australia. The title, ‘Convincing Ground’, refers to the site of one of the earliest documented massacres in Victoria where sealers contested the ownership of a whale carcass that had washed up on the beach near Portland by firing on a large group of Gundidjmara people who had gathered to feast on it. By foregrounding such stories he urges readers to consider how they so often contradict the legacy of mainstream Australian history noting that, ‘Too often Aboriginal Australians have been asked to accept an insulting history and a public record which bears no resemblance to the lives they have experienced’ (p. ix). **Convincing Ground** presents a history where contemporary Indigenous Australians, and those who may not identify as such but have some Indigenous ancestry, can recognise connections between this history and their own family histories.

The book presents an assortment of frontier stories, drawn from a wide range of sources including letters, diaries and newspaper reports. It juxtaposes these with Pascoe’s personal accounts of interactions with individuals he encountered in the course of the research. Running through all these stories is a deep empathy for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals battling hardships of different kinds and a genuine endeavour to comprehend the circumstances of their lives and their actions. While the stories help to understand conflict over land, they also reveal something of what the land was like at the time of colonisation and the kinds of livelihoods that it supported. Not only do we get a sense of how life changed for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, we also gain insights into the enormous transformations of the land itself throughout this period.

Pascoe bluntly appraises the character and morals of those who committed atrocities against Indigenous people as well as the administrators and magistrates who declined to implement principles of justice as they were understood at the time. These include prominent figures such as Governor La Trobe, Geelong Police Magistrate Foster Fyans and Joseph Tice Gellibrand of the Port Phillip Association, who played instrumental roles in wresting land from the Kulin nation. The unrelenting theme shaping relationships between settlers and Indigenous nations during this period was the promotion of economic interests in land over and above most other concerns. Even well-educated advocates for Indigenous people, such as James Dawson, a squatter whose detailed descriptions of the Gundidjmara stone houses, language and culture reveal both an interest in and engagement with local people, shared the dominant view that European occupation of their lands was justified by the overriding economic good of developing land for agriculture. Pascoe asks,
If Dawson, one of the few to understand the complicated system of clan boundaries and land obligations, saw no flaw in the imperial principle of forced land usurpation then what hope was there for justice to survive, or even arrive? (p. 35)

Pascoe’s work is infused by a larger concern with the contradictory morals he finds in the recorded events and attitudes of colonial Australia and how, in many ways, some of these contradictions are still with us. While the book is anchored in his detailed research of historical records for western Victoria, and his own experiences in tracing frontier stories, its canvas is much larger, engaging with issues of national history and national identity. By better understanding, not just violence and racial prejudice, but the conflicting rationales used to justify it, Pascoe hopes we will be better able to engage with current contradictions around human rights and national identity.

For me, the most poignant passages were those where Pascoe describes attempts by himself and two Gunditjmara elders to join in the 150th birthday celebrations of the Cape Otway Lightstation, only to be met with hostility by some members of the organising committee (p. 136). These accounts highlight some of the practices that privilege the perspectives of the colonisers in the writing and celebration of Australian history. To what extent are these exclusionary impulses enacted all over Australia in numerous but often mundane ways? What will it take to shift this dynamic and what might be achieved by doing so? Less engaging were the links made sporadically throughout the book’s 20 chapters between historical events and events in recent Australian politics. These sometimes seemed too far a stretch to be meaningful and in any case may have been better left for the reader to draw. However the final chapter, where Pascoe states his case for interrogating the ‘airbrushed’ parts of Australia’s history so that we may learn ‘to love our country rather than our lifestyles’, makes compelling reading and captures the imagination with possibilities for the future. Through this book Convincing Ground, Pascoe seeks to open up Australia’s contact history for a much wider range of people to engage with. Describing himself as ‘a mug historian with no training’ (p. 200), he issues his readers with an invitation and a challenge,

The field of research of these and other events is open to any who care to spend their time and intellect in the pursuit. Many leads will prove false, but others will tell us more about the Silent War, about who we are. (p. 201)

Reference


Ruth Lane
Environment and Planning Program
RMIT University
Twenty years ago, in an essay titled ‘Para-ethnography’, the anthropologist Eric Michaels expressed scepticism about the emergence of the concept of ‘Aboriginality’.6 For reasons that will become apparent, Martin Nakata’s book led me to revisit Michaels’ critique and to query the etymology of the term. According to the Macquarie Dictionary, early use of the word occurred in the Bulletin magazine. ‘Aboriginalities’ was the title of a regular feature consisting of ‘a colloquial anecdote about Australian Aborigines or Australian bush subjects in general’. Given that the Bulletin for much of its life carried the slogan ‘Australia for the White Man’ on the masthead, the genesis of the term is queer indeed. Yet it may not have surprised Michaels whose essay was a response to Sally Morgan’s My Place a book he criticised for its ‘deceptively frank autobiographical style’. Her unpacking of her family history, resulting in the triumphant discovery of her grandmother’s Aboriginal origins, seemed highly suspect to Michaels, not only for the incorporation of theosophy, New Age astrology and other ‘interesting syncretisms’ into Morgan’s account of being Aboriginal, but also for the seamlessness with which her new-found Aboriginality erased her non-Aboriginal ancestry. Michaels said of Morgan’s memoir and of Bruce Chatwin’s The Songlines (also analysed in his essay) that they contribute to ‘discourses of modern ‘pan-Aboriginality,’ a recent social construction characterized by denying the local particularity of past (and many contemporary) societies, their languages and law’.7

As we know, Aboriginality lost none of its currency in the wake of this critique. Indeed, it appeared ever more commonly in public debates and became a widely accepted term in Australian English. Yet in recent years a new form of subjectivity – or at least a new descriptor – has been on the ascendant. I refer to ‘Indigeneity’, a neologism that has increased in currency as the adjective ‘indigenous’ becomes ever more reified (to the extent that one risks chastisement for using it without a capital ‘I’). Eric Michaels never lived to see this development, but it seems to me that his original criticism has only grown in value. If a modern, publicly digestible notion of Aboriginality threatened to homogenise the perception of Australia’s heterodox Aboriginal cultures, what are we to make of an essentialised ‘Indigeneity’ that transfers this normalising ambition to the entirety of the globe? Are there sufficient similarities between a Celt, a Samoan and a Kalahari Bushman for a transcendental notion of ‘Indigeneity’ to be even vaguely useful?

That the rhetoric of ‘Indigeneity’ effaces distinctions between the cultures it purportedly valorises is particularly evident in the Australian context where a capitalised ‘Indigenous’ is fast becoming synonymous with ‘Aboriginal’ (a

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6 Michaels 1994[1988].
term, I realise, that is not without its problems). In the process, the distinctive Melanesian culture of the Torres Strait Islanders (TSI), which the term ‘Indigenous Australians’ was originally intended to include, is – yet again – elided. Such falling between the cracks is not uncommon where minority groups sit within broader minority classifications. The Islander population resident in the Torres Strait is 6958. They live for the most part on just a handful of the 270 islands, many of them now unoccupied.8

With the lingering complexities persisting from the colonial era and its subsequent – if only partial – unravelling, a degree of osmosis between Aboriginal and TSI cultures is almost inevitable. The High Court of Australia’s Mabo judgement is the most prominent in terms of national history, resulting as it did from a unique configuration of cultural differences and affinities. Eddie Mabo and his fellow litigants were able to prove their ownership under common law of ancestral territory in the Torres Strait by documenting their hereditary rights to gardens over many generations. The High Court then extended these native title rights to the Aboriginal peoples of the Commonwealth, despite the fact that traditionally they had never been gardeners or tillers of the soil.

The Mabo decision is spectacular but exceptional. For the most part, the intercultural traffic has gone the other way. This is essential background to Martin Nakata’s analysis of the formation of Islander identities. Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Disciplines is in part an interrogation of educational policy and its many limitations in negotiating cultural difference. There is an autobiographical thread here, sketched briefly in the opening pages. Nakata was born to a Japanese father and a mother of mixed Samoan and Islander heritage. Education was valorised within the family and he attended Catholic and state schools on Thursday Island.

As he progressed through the educational system, he lurched awkwardly between various models of pedagogy. On the island, he had teachers ‘who probably did not know we existed until they found out they had a transfer to the region’. The Torres Strait Creole spoken locally was not understood by teachers, nor even recognised as a language. The final years of high school he spent on mainland North Queensland ‘where I understood nothing of what the teacher was teaching’ (pp. 6–7). Remarkably, he went on to tertiary study in Adelaide where he experienced sympathy and understanding, but also a degree of isolation familiar to many Indigenous students. As he began to investigate the pedagogic models developed for remote communities, staring in the face the dumbed-down Aboriginal or Islander student hypothesised by generations of educators, the seeds of his critique began to sprout. ‘My task was not simply to know my position but to know first how I was positioned in and by Western disciplines and knowledge practices.’ (p. 11) Little wonder that the book exhibits distrust of a one-size-fits-all ‘Indigeneity’.

The acknowledgements explain that substantial parts of the book are drawn from Nakata’s doctoral thesis, supervised by educationist Mary Kalantzis in the 1990s. From its beginnings as an interrogation of educational policy, it morphs into something bolder and grander: an argument with Western constructions of ‘the Primitive’. In particular, it addresses the quite extensive literature, ranging from anthropology to the (pseudo) sciences, concerning his own part of the world. But as occasion permits, he wanders more widely. Exploring the positioning of Islanders as ‘savages’ and the effect of these discourses upon Islanders’ lives in terms of governance and policy formation, the rubric is broadly Foucauldian, a debt signalled in the book’s title.

So Nakata begins his dance with the juggernaut of Western knowledge. The gang plank that gives him access is the six volumes of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to the Torres Strait of 1898, led by Alfred Court Haddon. The seven-month expedition is considered a pivotal event in the history of the social sciences, both for its ground-breaking use of film and phonography in an ethnographic context, and for its use of genealogies to map kinship, research undertaken by the psychologist WHR Rivers, the expedition’s most influential member.

The heart of the book is a survey of the linguistic, psychological, physiological and anthropological work carried out by the Cambridge team. Nakata is unsympathetic to their findings, redolent as they are with notions of nineteenth century savagery. As valuable as Rivers’ genealogies are to Islanders today, Nakata laments his distortion of data. His attempts to chart racial differences through the perception of colour is denounced as a ‘cardhouse of theory’ (p. 63). Curiously, I found the digest of the Cambridge expedition’s investigations rather more interesting than Nakata’s critique, much of which seemed rather obvious. Nakata does little of the legwork that we see, for example, in the anthropological histories of George Stocking, where discarded theories are situated intellectually and socially.

Despite his distaste, Nakata displays an almost compulsive interest in the work of the Cambridge investigators. That curiosity and the panoply of responses that result – ranging from exuberant dissection to sheer exasperation – create a distinctive spectacle for the reader. ‘Why are we so caught up in what others thought?’ he asks towards the end of the book (p. 170). He later explains the basis of his fascination, proposing that the Cambridge volumes should be ‘basic reading’ for Torres Strait Islanders. ‘What better way to develop critical reading skills, to gain some understanding of systems of thought and knowledge production and to anchor down a Torres Strait or Indigenous standpoint in students’ analyses of systems of thought and knowledge?’ (p. 195)

For a book concerned with Islander identities, there are very few Islander points of view other than those of the author. Apart from the Nakata family, only a couple of Islanders are named in the index. There is little flavour of the Torres Strait itself; not a sniff of salt or seaweed. Nakata is appreciative of more recent ethnographers such as Jeremy Beckett whose consultative methodologies
have resulted in persuasive accounts of Islander experiences and perspectives. But Nakata himself does very little in the way of opening up comparative worldviews. Islander epistemologies are not invoked to reveal the limitations of how Western knowledge approached them. For this reason, I came away with the feeling that the latter part of the book’s title, ‘Savaging the Disciplines’, was clever wordplay, though not particularly apposite. The almost punk aspiration of giving the disciplines a down-and-dirty savaging should leave some meat and bone on the faculty carpet. In truth, there is little of that.

Rather, as becomes evident towards the end of the book, the objective is to find an opening to the realities of Islander experience within the theoretical edifice itself. Instead of a savaging, this is more a contest by Queensberry Rules. In setting up a theory of what he calls the ‘Cultural Interface’ Nakata argues that it is possible to reconcile theory and lived experience for Islander subjects.

I have also progressively suggested that centralising Islanders as the agents of ongoing continuity in their everyday lives via the inclusion of their interpretation of their everyday experiences within the ongoing and changing order may go much further in providing more useful representations of Islander ‘realities’ and more useful knowledge about the positions of Islanders. (pp. 208–209)

It is a monster sentence, and it is not alone on that front. It comes in a part of the book that deals thoughtfully and subtly with the chauvinism he discerns in some Indigenous scholars who seek to write off Western knowledge and creativity holus bolus. But the moments of lucidity are often strangulated by the verbage.

Despite limitations that stem partly from a reluctance to shed its thesis origins, this is an important book: a sustained exploration of a significant body of anthropological literature from an Islander perspective. If, as I suspect is true, each book we write provides the scaffolding from which our next book is written, I am looking forward to the sequel. Perhaps it will bring about a re-deployment of the argument – not as a theoretical configuration, but through practice. There is rich material to be explored at this cultural interface, especially the responses of contemporary Islanders to the great harvest of film, photography, recorded sound and ethnological collections amassed by the visitors from Cambridge. They could well give rise to discussion that will allow a remarkable airing of voices. I imagine it as a dialogue diverse and yet euphonious.

Reference


Martin Thomas
Department of History
University of Sydney

Is race a dirty word? Since the end of the Second World War it has been denounced, denied and euphemised. It has become, as Bronwen Douglas puts it, ‘all but unsayable’ in most academic discourses. And yet race has also continued to live a healthy existence within popular discourse. It has a powerful, if subverted, meaning within indigenous lexicons. And in the last decade there has been, as Douglas notes, a renewed scholarly interest in the history of the ‘pernicious consequences’ of racialist thought.

Foreign Bodies makes an important contribution to this more recent field of scholarly inquiry. It is, Chris Ballard explains, ‘the first attempt to assemble the writings of a group of scholars with a common interest in the history of racial thought in Oceania’. This scholarly group, made up Chris Ballard, Bronwen Douglas, Paul Turnbull, Stephanie Anderson, Helen Gardner, Christine Weir and Vicki Lucker, first began to work together on this project nearly a decade ago.

They did so aware they were breaking new ground, and were subsequently surprised at what they found: Oceania (defined as ‘stretching from the Hawaiian Islands in the north, to Indonesia in the west, coastal Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand in the south, and Easter Island in the east’) had played a more fundamental role in the development of metropolitan-centred, scientific ideas of race from the mid-eighteenth century then had been hitherto supposed. When this group then attempted to map this regional influence upon a more worldwide historical picture of the construction of race they were surprised again; by a general paucity of scholarly work that would make such a task possible.

The result, therefore, is more than a regional history, but an initial and significant remedy to a broader paucity in scholarly histories of the idea of race. By its very geographical focus Foreign Bodies cannot – as Douglas argues previous significant histories of race have done – focus almost exclusively on anglophone literature. Oceania was, she reminds us, originally a French cartographic vision and as such continues, as Ballard contends, to shape contemporary Polynesian identities. Douglas’ obvious fluency and familiarity with French language, thinkers and archives is usefully employed and ably demonstrated in her two impressive opening chapters. The first is, no less, a history of a European idea. Carefully and tenaciously, Douglas tackles the idea of race to reveal its historical, etymological and ontological ‘slipperiness’, and thus provides a much-needed broad historical template onto which she, and in turn the other contributors, can then map the ideas of race as they pertain to Oceania.

Foreign Bodies goes beyond its regional interest to offer to postcolonial and history of science writing a refreshing new understanding of the relationships between field and metropole and between European Enlightenment humanism,
colonial interests and scientific thought. The writers, in Douglas’ words, ‘refuse to explain away the science of race as a simple effect of particular European discourses or social, political, or colonial circumstances’. While they challenge, successfully, the ‘naturalness of race’ by revealing its historicity and many contradictions, the writers also oppose the idea, which so many popular and some academic histories purport, that the science of race (particularly from the mid-nineteenth century) was merely the handmaiden of colonialism; explaining and justifying conquest under the oft-used and irritatingly inaccurate heading of ‘Social Darwinism’. While coeval, Douglas explains, colonialism and the emergent science of race were ‘parallel but porous domains of praxis ... linked by complex, ambiguous intersections and exchanges’.

Such an approach allows for the thinkers and writers about race to appear, throughout Foreign Bodies, not as an amorphous and unified mass, but as individual scholars whose own ideas at times developed, and who disagreed, often fiercely, with each other over questions of human difference. In a thorough and convincing chapter, Paul Turnbull effectively rectifies the widely held misconception that the demand for Aboriginal bodies in European centres was spurred solely by a desire to demonstrate Darwinian speciation. Turnbull reminds us that early Darwinists sought and used stolen Aboriginal bones to argue for descent from one ancestral form (monogeny) while members of the Anthropological Society of London sought the same material to demonstrate an aggressively antithetical idea that human origins were plural in their evolution (polygeny).

It is testimony to the sophistication of Foreign Bodies that the impact upon, and influence of, Christian philosophy to such radically challenging ideas is neither side-stepped nor sweepingly generalised as is so often the case in histories of science and of colonial discourse. In an outstanding chapter Helen Gardner traces the debates held throughout the nineteenth century as to whether some races lacked a ‘faculty of faith’; the capacity for religious belief or for conversion to Christianity. Gardner maps the role these debates also played within the ‘increasingly strident’ disputes between polygenists and monogenists, and their complex relationships with the British Evangelical missionary movement of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. Christine Weir then brings Oceanic missionary and race discourse into the early twentieth century in an excellent chapter exploring the ways Christian Pacific leaders utilised by-then normalised ideas of racial hierarchy to make morally charged calls to the white international community to assist in advancing the black Pacific.

In a scholarly history predominantly of white men and their ideas (the ‘foreign bodies’ in the title refer foremost to the Europeans in Oceania), it might be easy to overlook the experiences and influences of the studied subjects, but Stephanie Anderson’s chapter is a notable diversion from any such tendency. It is a poignant account of the 1885 meetings in Paris between local anthropologists and three Aboriginal people in Cunningham’s troupe. Anderson reproduces an engraving of Jenny, who, vulnerably topless, looks askance from the camera’s lens. ‘[W]e cannot now simply read her state of mind off the engravings’,
considers Anderson, ‘and yet we know that this woman has experienced the deaths of most of her group during the tour’, as well as the imminent, or perhaps recent, death of her husband. The subsequent reflections of anthropologist Paul Topinard, invited to study Jenny’s racial typology, are moving to then read: ‘The death of her husband … has not affected her, Mr Cunningham assures me. I am not so sure … there is some kind of sadness about her’.

‘We do not pretend that the volume provides the final word’ on the history of the science of race in Oceania, considers Chris Ballard, ‘but see it as also plotting the outliers of a new archipelago of enquiry’. Certainly Foreign Bodies achieves this rather modest statement; it makes an important, serious and welcome contribution to the history of race and to colonial histories of Oceania. It will prove essential reading to scholars in the field, and should be listed in bibliographies and course guides dealing with indigenous histories, postcolonial theory, and histories of the human sciences.

Rebe Taylor
University of Melbourne
This book is another in the series of excellent collections which have emerged from the conferences of the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Association, and the work of Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Australia’s leading scholar of whiteness and founder of this organisation. Indeed, largely due to Moreton-Robinson’s influence, Australia has produced the largest body of whiteness scholarship outside the United States. And again like many of the previous collections, the introduction to this work sets out an exciting new agenda. The editors begin by noting that the aftermath of 9/11 has seen the emergence of a ‘global alliance of industrialized nations in which white people are culturally and economically dominant … whose wealth was built on colonizing practices’. The claims to a race-blind ‘moral authority’ on which this alliance is based, highlights ‘how transnational whiteness can mobilize virtue when there is a perceived threat to its authority’. They go on to argue that the collection demonstrates that ‘whiteness is an imperial project that has undergone change over the centuries’, that it is ‘a transnational process of racialization’, one that ‘travels’, ‘within and across borders’. They note the collection primarily consists of studies of literary texts, but also make strong claims that there are ‘valuable historical studies’ as well. They particularly point to the absence of considerations of colonialism or indigenous dispossession within the dominant US whiteness literature (which is structured around slavery), a significant gap further elucidated in Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s chapter.

Strangely, however, given the collection’s title, and the rationale provided in the introduction, none of the individual chapters explicitly deploy the framework of transnationalism. Indeed, most are nationally bounded studies which present close analysis of a small number of texts. Even those which are not nationally based, do not position themselves as transnational, although some use a colonial frame. The collection’s claim to transnationalism lies in its inclusion of studies from a variety of contexts – Australia, South Africa, the United States, colonial India and the Pacific – not in the approaches adopted by the contributors. Despite this quirk, the collection contains much of interest, and the chapters are almost all of a high standard. Many do directly address the relationship between whiteness and virtue. It is this, and the way that most contributors draw on Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s work, which provides coherence to the volume.

The collection is divided into two sections. The first, ‘Whiteness in National Imaginaries’, opens with Tony da Silva’s fascinating analysis of ‘redeeming’ whiteness in post-Apartheid South African writing, particularly life writing. This is followed by Maryrose Casey’s insightful analysis of the ‘history wars’, and particularly Bain Atwood’s controversial treatment of ‘stolen generations’ narratives’, Jo Lampert’s discussion of whiteness-as-goodness in 9/11 children’s books, and Fiona Nicoll’s examination the coverage of Indigenous issues in the Australian in the early 2000s, which she argues uniformly represented the
nation as a ‘white possession’ and Indigenous men in particular as dangerous and incapable, both of which undermined any notion of Indigenous sovereignty. The section concludes with Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s survey of US whiteness scholarship – which elaborates on arguments she has mentioned briefly in previous work about how this has failed to take colonialism or Indigenous peoples into account. This she argues this has functioned to ‘displace Indigenous sovereignties and render them invisible’.

The second section, ‘Gendering Whiteness’, beings with Urbashi Barat’s discussion of whiteness in Kipling’s *Kim* and the Bengali author Tagore’s *Gora* (which was published shortly after *Kim* and possibly influenced by it). This returns to the relationship between whiteness and virtue and explores how whiteness has operated differently in India. Next is Suzanne Lynch’s exploration of racial production in Hannah Craft’s *The Bondswoman’s Narrative*, a fascinating text written by a ‘mixed-race’ slave (c1853–60), recently ‘discovered’ when it was purchased by Henry Louis Gates Jr. Lynch largely bypasses questions of truth-vs-fiction in order to explore what the text reveals about the ‘horizons of race’, resistance and instability. Martin Crotty explores white masculinity in Australian children’s adventure stories (1875–1920) and the possible synergies between the approaches of whiteness and gender studies. Tanya Serisier explores the intersections of whiteness, feminism and the politics of vulnerability, through the unlikely juxtaposition of a radio broadcast by Laura Bush following the invasion of Afghanistan, and Dan Brown’s novel *Angels and Demons*. In both, the ill-treatment of Muslim women is invoked in ways which support the war on terror. Finally, Annie Werner looks at tattooing as a marker of ‘savagery’ and the colonised other in white colonial literature, focusing on literature about the Pacific, but also observing how this trope emerged in the United States.

As the editors rightly note, there is a lot more to be done in exploring the transnational manifestations of whiteness, and its relationship to colonialism and the indigenous people. As with so many of these collections, the tantalisingly brief introduction touches on many significant issues about how whiteness ‘travels’ which need more in-depth treatment. It seems a missed opportunity that the chapters do not speak directly either to each or to the introduction. Strangely also, despite the claims to history which are emphasised in the introduction, the book does not engage with the small but significant body of historical scholarship on the transnational and colonial construction of whiteness, much of which has also emerged out of Australia, most notably the work of Warwick Anderson, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds. There may be good reasons for this (one suspects this is a deliberate omission), but they are not explicitly discussed. Moreover, the historical studies included are confined entirely to literary studies. Nevertheless this array of studies does contribute to the understanding of whiteness as a global phenomenon, born out of European imperialism. Indeed, the quality of the national studies presented here gives one pause to wonder about the universal necessity of a transnational frame. There is still, it seems, an important place for the nation, and for empire, alongside the ‘transnational turn’.

Jane Carey
Monash University

Hoff has compiled a history of the Bundjalung people since European settlement which is richly annotated with firsthand accounts from early observers and illustrated with historical photos. Her history is far from objective with a liberal infusion of her own interpretations of what the Aboriginal characters in early cross-cultural encounters might have been thinking or feeling. For example ‘The warriors were probably pleased to see them gone ... They were disturbed and curious about the large horned animals’ (p. 36).

Hoff interprets the past in the light of her deep admiration of the Bundjalung people and this is apparent throughout the book. For example, ‘they used their intelligence, superior strength and fitness and knowledge of the environment to co-exist with peaceful Europeans without giving up too much of their own culture’ (p. 43).

However despite a blatantly partisan approach, this book provides an engaging and informative read, and as one progresses through the volume it is clear that, in the main, Hoff has managed to infuse a balanced sense of humanity into both the accounts of settler interactions and responses and those of the Aboriginal landowners.

What was difficult for Bundjalung people to understand in the post invasion era was that these strangers – Irish, Scottish, English, German, French and so on had no specific beliefs in common ... It seems that the gooris soon formed their own opinion of the white strangers integrity and acted on their own judgment. (p. 51)

Hoff maintains her unapologetic bias towards the Bundjalung people presumably in an attempt to redress biases in early ethnographic accounts. On the negative side, her approach builds in some traps for the unwary reader in separating fact from conjecture, especially where the thoughts and intentions of long dead people are assumed or interpreted. However on the positive side, the book is undeniably useful due to the wide range of historical and ethnographic sources used and the liberal use of direct quotations from these sources. In writing this history Hoff had the benefit of the rich resources of the Richmond River Historical Society as well as the oral tradition of the local Bundjalung people. The Richmond River Historical Society has built a strong reputation around both its extensive collections and its committed team of staff and volunteers. It has developed a strong, long-term relationship with members of the local Aboriginal community and this has borne fruit in initiatives such as this book and a number of recent exhibitions.

The Bundjalung people continue to maintain a vibrant oral tradition and no doubt it is in part due to the participation of a number of elders in informing Hoff’s
history that the author feels at liberty to present this heavily nuanced story of the Bundjalung’s first contact encounters, subsequent turmoil and ultimate survival. This last point is another that sets this ‘local history’ apart from so many others. So often where such histories do address the period of early settler-Aboriginal contact, they present Aboriginal culture as if it had ended somewhere in the past, lost on a vague and somewhat romantic ‘frontier’; sad accounts of a lost culture. In contrast while Bundjalung Jugun does not deny that the history of the Bundjalung people is to a large extent one of loss and tragedy, it is also presented as an undeniable story of survival and as a celebration of Bundjalung culture.

This book is a ‘must have’ for the bookshelves of anyone who is living or working in Bundjalung country. Its sometimes moralistic tone is far outweighed by its usefulness which is based on a wide review of historical sources that have been brought together in this volume.

Susan McIntyre-Tamwoy
School of Arts and Social Sciences
James Cook University
Beyond Awakening: The Aboriginal Tribes of North West Tasmania: A History by Ian McFarlane, xviii + 302 pp, jointly published by Fullers Bookshop, Riawunna and the Community, Place & Heritage Research Unit, University of Tasmania, Launceston, 2008, ISBN 9780980472004, $29.95.

The historical use and abuse of Tasmanian Aborigines has always been a political issue. The nineteenth century saw European assessments of the Tasmanians range from Rousseauian noble savages, to bloodthirsty barbarians, to pitiable remnants, doomed to inevitable extinction by their own weakness. Their designation as racially unfit served to underscore and justify the Tasmanian colonial project. A century later, they became a major focus of the ‘history wars’ as a conservative national administration resisted a full and frank address of Australia’s treatment of Indigenous Australians. Pervasive myths framed the Tasmanians as culturally stagnant, unable to make fire, unwilling to eat fish and willing to trade women to sealers and settlers. Single and often erroneous reports from one region were extrapolated throughout the island as the norm, assuming the mantle of fact.

In focusing on one regional area of Tasmania, Ian McFarlane exposes colonial and post-colonial mythmaking. The starting point for his study of the tribes of North West Tasmania is an assertion that cultural homogeneity – indeed, the very concept of Tasmanian Aboriginality – is a European construct. He does not explicitly seek to ‘correct’ conceptions on backwardness and racial unfitness, exemplified through the oft-cited references to fire and scale fish. Rather, McFarlane asserts that pre-contact Tasmanians were not one homogenous people, but instead comprised a culturally diverse ‘patchwork of mini-states’.

The first chapter of this book uses documentary and archaeological evidence to reconstruct the land and resource use, migration patterns and social organisation of the North West tribes, prior to European contact. Sweeping generalisations about this period led to the assumption of Tasmanian backwardness, and in addressing them, McFarlane’s approach is necessarily conservative. One by one, he takes on myths about Tasmanian Aboriginal culture. While resisting making absolute judgements, McFarlane makes a powerful case that the people of this region probably generated fire, likely ate scale fish, and almost certainly did not trade women to sealers. The importance to the study of Tasmanian history, and history in general, of this exhaustive examination into the habits of the North West tribes cannot be overstated. In correcting misconceptions about the occupants of one region, McFarlane ensures that the misinterpretations which for over a century blamed the Tasmanians for their own demise – namely, their evolutionary unfitness – are rendered obsolete.

A major focus of McFarlane’s study is the activities of the Van Diemen’s Land Company (VDLC), represented in the North West by Edward Curr. The VDLC figures largely as an instrument of dispossession and genocide. Its pastoral leases in the poorly surveyed North West, administered by a violent managerial attitude towards the Indigenous people, had a catastrophic effect.
on the migration patterns, food resources and social organisation of the area’s tribes. Curr emerges from the documentary evidence as a brutal, genocidal actor in the dispossession of the people of the North West, and in the treatment of assigned workers (convicts). Curr openly proposed extermination as the best method of dealing with the Aboriginal ‘problem’, and the Directors of the VDLC, while paying lip service to the growing pressure for more humane treatment of Aborigines, allowed his practices to proceed from 1827 until 1842.

McFarlane’s examination of the VDLC’s systematic use of violence shines a light onto the lesser-acknowledged role of corporate enterprise in the dispossession of Tasmanian Aborigines. Better known, however, is the role of the colonial administration, in the form of conciliator George Augustus Robinson, appointed by Governor George Arthur to pacify tribal Tasmanians. Robinson’s interactions with the tribes of the North West are on the surface less violent, but ultimately more effective in moving towards the final goal of clearing the land for European settlement. With tactics ranging from false promises to the persuasion of the gun, Robinson removed to a series of offshore locations those whom Curr had been unable to remove. Robinson’s important role in the dispossession has been well told, thanks to his copious journals, but in focusing just on his interactions with the North West tribes, this book is able to personalise the event.

McFarlane uses the story of Parperloihener man Tunnerminnerwait (or Pevay) as a motif for gaining an insight into the experience of colonial contact on the people of the North West. As a child, Tunnerminnerwait was witness to VDLC’s policy of violence and massacre. As a teenager, he accompanied Robinson on his ‘Friendly Mission’ tours to make contact with Tasmanian Aborigines at large, and he saw his few remaining family members and friends taken into captivity. He travelled with Robinson to Hobart, then to Flinders Island, and eventually to Port Phillip, where he accompanied Robinson on an exploratory journey through Western Victoria in 1841. Finally, Tunnerminnerwait led a band of four other Tasmanians (including Trucannini) on a bid for freedom which culminated in the murder of two whalers and the death of Tunnerminnerwait and his friend Maulboyheener in Melbourne’s first public execution. Tunnerminnerwait emerges from Robinson’s journals, Melbourne’s newspapers and McFarlane’s Beyond Awakening as the tragic yet enigmatically unbowed face of the North West tribes.

There is a time and a place for history writing which is methodologically conservative, and nowhere is this better illustrated than in McFarlane’s incisive study. Beyond Awakening illustrates that a concise, systematic study of one group or area can greatly inform the broader picture. Through strict attention to sources, the avoiding of absolute judgements and a thorough presentation of evidence, McFarlane delivers an important addition to the body of knowledge on Tasmanian history – and, by extension, the history of colonial–Indigenous relations as a whole.

Leonie Stevens
La Trobe University

The editors of this magnificent new edition of NJB Plomley’s Friendly Mission have usefully incorporated Plomley’s later additions and corrections, along with valuable new material and an expanded index. They have also chosen to preserve the first editor’s musings on his task. Plomley was less than sanguine about the utility of the project: Robinson ‘omitted much of what we would have liked to know, particularly in regard to the Aborigines, and his journals are slipshod, too wordy and too concerned with trivia’. He therefore toyed with an idea which, 50 years ago, must have looked beguilingly scientific:

Ideally, perhaps, one should abstract the facts from the journals and present them in an ordered arrangement under various subject headings, with necessary additions from other sources to link what Robinson had to say to other knowledge.

But ebullient Robinson resisted tabulation: after ‘several attempts … to preserve the material in this way’ his editor regretfully re-committed to the classic editorial slog of decipherment, transcription and dedicated annotation. Plomley chafes at Robinson’s adventurous spelling, his idiosyncratic squiggles, his ‘verbosity, concern for trivia and failure to observe systematically’, while he transforms a self-indulgent, semi-private manuscript into a beautifully annotated, readable text while preserving its inimitable flavour and its diary form. History is full of close shaves.

I am personally grateful for Plomley’s heroic decision because I am addicted to reading Robinson, for his sturdy presence on the page; his comfortable conviction of God’s special favour; above all for the drifts of ethnographic detail which accumulate like autumn leaves as Robinson trudges along on his ‘friendly mission’ to Tasmania’s harried, hunted Aborigines. Chronically irritable with white assistants, convict or free (‘useless, refractory, contumelious petulant [sic]’), he is with Aborigines curious, patient and kind. He notes their moods, their forms of address, the details of their domestic economy; he remembers who is related to whom; he compiles his earnest wordlists. He also enjoys black company. At a place he will call ‘Friendly River’ he makes contact with a group of Port Davey blacks. His contact technique is simple: he simply ‘makes towards them’, and it works: ‘[The evening] was spent with great conviviality, singing and dancing to a late hour’. Then heavy rain comes on, and Robinson finds his improvised blanket-tent invaded: ‘several of the natives crawled under my blanket, together with the dogs belonging to them, so what with the knapsacks and them I was so crowded that I could scarcely move’. In the morning he discovers he is covered with lice, but that is nothing new: ‘I found it almost impossible to keep myself clear of vermin whilst laying around their fires and associating with them, as
I was obliged to do were I at all desirous of being successful among them’. Robinson accepts the dogs into his tent because he has come to understand how close they stand to their human owners. Later, on a crowded boat with some ‘sable companions’, ‘the people on board the Tamar threw one of the native dogs overboard wilfully during the night’, and we can imagine why. But how many whites would have been attentive to the native response? Robinson is: ‘All the natives very uneasy about it. Jock the woman that owned the dog was in tears all day in consequence of it’. He also notices how eager even newly-contacted groups are to get their hands on English hunting dogs – dogs big enough not just to bail but to pull down a kangaroo. I was alerted to that hunger only when I read James Boyce’s revelatory *Van Diemen’s Land*, but there it was, lurking in Robinson all the time.

For whom is he writing? The idiosyncratic abbreviations, above all the luxuriant detail, suggest he is writing mainly for himself: to keep himself company through dark nights and days of rain; to burnish the mirror of self-regard – and also as an aide-mémoire for future importunings. This is a man of ‘humble origins’ recording what he believes to be heroic service which he hopes will see those origins eclipsed and transformed.

How ‘reliable’ is he? As reliable as self-love and self-interest allow. He reports, lushly, Indiana Jones-style adventures: see, for example, the mesmerising yarn he spins out of small events for the 21 October 1833 entry in the ‘Macquarie Harbour’ journal. ‘Trugernanna’, or as we know her ‘Truganini’ has the supporting role in that tale, which points to another rare quality: Robinson might talk more with men, but he spends much time with women. They are always towing him across rivers (Robinson cannot swim), guiding him along native paths or heading off into the bush to find him some supper.

Robinson likes the native Tasmanians. He enjoys their company. He also pities them: ‘Poor creatures! They are living without hope and without God in the world’. He shows us how desperate they are: how precarious their understanding of their threatened present, and of their baleful future. For a time he does his best to please, protect and to reassure them. For a time. Then self-interest and vanity pivot him from sympathy to a deliberate policy of deception, coercion and betrayal.

Over the last pages of his *Van Diemen’s Land* James Boyce has pieced together the coercion and the deceit by which Robinson, his sons and his agents rounded up the last of the western tribes, delivered them to locations judged too vile even for convicts and there abandoned them to death. Boyce acknowledges he was able to expose what he judges to be deliberate, racially-motivated ethnic cleansing (the white incomers having no interest in the ‘cleansed’ lands) and the frank acceptance of the extinction of a people by a close reading of Robinson’s journals. Robinson pities the people he betrays, but – recording his thoughts and actions with a kind of innocent confidence in the legitimacy of his secular

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9 Boyce 2009.
and social ambitions, reinforced by the reassurance of Governor Arthur’s covert support – he detaches himself from responsibility for them. As far as I know, no-one has yet availed themselves of this extraordinary opportunity to make an intimate study of evil actions made banal by thinking them so.

The uses to which the Robinson journals have been put have been multiple, and we cannot predict what they might yet be made to yield. Our debt to Plomley, to Quintus Publishing and to the Queen Victoria Art Museum and Art Gallery is immeasurable.

Reference


Inga Clendinnen
Melbourne

This is a handsomely designed and well-conceived companion for the re-publication of the incomparable Friendly Mission. Perhaps its title should not have echoed Inga Clendinnen’s essay title, ‘Reading Mr Robinson’, but rather been called Reading Friendly Mission, in recognition of both George Augustus Robinson and his indomitable editor NJB (Brian) Plomley. Through great labours, both men gave unparalleled representations of the first Tasmanians in Friendly Mission, which will endlessly challenge and intrigue all who venture within. The fact that there are 16 papers in this companion is invidious for both reviewer and reviewed, but detecting themes will assist.

The editors, Johnson and Rolls discover a ‘stifling parochialism’ in most approaches to Robinson’s journals and other colonial historiography. Alan Lester, Elizabeth Elbourne and Patrick Brantlinger are quick to counter that with a wider vision for Robinson’s work. Lester sets Robinson in a wider imperial framework and transcolonial debates between evangelicals and settlers about the fate of Indigenous peoples. He reveals how Robinson emerged from those debates, contributed to them, and rose in reputation and job status through them. Elbourne sees parallels between the Cape Colony and Van Diemen’s Land, marked as they were by land taking and labour coercion, and explores the comparisons and the connections between the colonies. She finds it remarkable that Keith Windschuttle gained so much attention here in questioning a violent frontier history, since the history of empire in the Cape and elsewhere is marked by obvious and endemic violence and brutality. Brantlinger discusses how James Bonwick’s writings and other colonial knowledge about Tasmanians built on Robinson’s work but without the same humanity.

The impact of Robinson’s work has been profound since it was opened to the world by Plomley in 1966, and many of the authors attest to its deeply personal effect on them. Lyndall Ryan who is unashamedly an admirer of Robinson as a witness and a man – a position I too hold – introduces us clearly and lucidly to the shifting historiography produced by historians of Tasmania and Robinson over a generation. Rebe Taylor reveals in excellent fashion how archaeologist Rhys Jones’ controversial and now discredited ‘regressive thesis’ of Aboriginal Tasmanian society, was inspired by his reading of Robinson’s journals – particularly Robinson’s silences, which proved to be a dangerous methodology for Jones to use in this case. Ian Macfarlane discusses the Cape Grim massacre and reveals how Robinson’s journals are vital to understanding the history of north-west Tasmania as the only other major archive is that of the Van Diemen’s Land Company papers – which was bent on utilising and taking Aboriginal land and its grasses. John Connor reveals how careful mining of Friendly Mission can reveal elements of the frontier war and Aboriginal experiences and perceptions of it. In all of these writings the History Wars lurk. Keith Windschuttle’s claims, which Elizabeth Elbourne from far off Montreal described as ‘highly optimistic readings of carefully selected sources, including Robinson’s Friendly Mission’, often fail under scrutiny.
The editors to their great credit give space to four Indigenous voices, Pallawa people, to have a say on *Friendly Mission*. Rodney Dillon, a fighter on many Indigenous issues, condemns Robinson as the source of many contemporary Pallawa troubles. Wendy Aitken, argues that Robinson’s ‘good intentions’ can be a mask for a racial policy and that Plomley’s editing was completed in the context of a ‘whitewashed history’ and its interpretation should be acknowledged as such. Sharon Dennis anticipates she is facing a highly controversial document and is caught between respect for research and the views of her fellow Pallawa. She suggests the new edition of *Friendly Mission* should have carried a warning that Pallawa people disagree with elements of it, and that it is a representation of the past not the truth. Dennis will bide her time before reading such a confronting book. Ian Anderson presents a powerful consideration of a book that threatened his very selfhood in the 1980s, but which he has come to value in many ways. Anderson rejects Plomley’s framework of hybridity to describe Pallawa, which he argues convincingly is still implicitly based on racial categories. Instead Anderson argues for an identity, for himself at least, based on place and family – and in that sense reveals a generic human response to identity – for none of us are pure anything and all of us are rooted to place and kin.

Two authors tell us something of Robinson the author of *Friendly Mission*. Cassandra Pybus refers to the rivalry between Gilbert Robertson, a magistrate, whose two black Tasmanians Robinson commandeered for his Bruny Island mission. In 1835 controversy arose as to who first formed the idea of the conciliation. Pybus is not an admirer of Robinson which shows in her partial language tinged with hindsight. Robinson was not aware until the end at Flinders Island (the subject of Plomley’s *Weep in Silence*) that he might be presiding over a catastrophe and like most of us daily tried to comprehend unfolding events and pathways in the contemporary world in which each day brings surprises. Henry Reynolds is much more the careful historian arguing that Robinson was led by curiosity, humanity, Christianity and a belief in the equality of Tasmanians who were brothers of one blood with him. Robinson also saw them as original owners who were owed rights. Only as his career progressed did the ambitious and status-seeking side of the civil servant of empire outweigh his Christian humanitarianism.

What does this companion lack – more on Robinson perhaps? While the editors give a vignette of Plomley and his intellectual traditions, little is presented on Robinson the man, save for passing comment by Pybus and Reynolds. However, a biographical piece would have been invidious to write and would have proved partial to one side only. Perhaps a chronology of his life might have sufficed – but even such a list might be interpretative. In that sense Nicholas Thomas who has the last word appeals rightly for the ambiguities and complexities within Robinson to emerge in any reading of his work. There are many Robinsons to be explored by emerging scholars and all who would search, which makes this publication welcome and timely.

Richard Broome
La Trobe University
This is a beautiful book. Wakefield Press’ overall design, high quality paper, appealing lay-out, plus the numerous, well-reproduced and integrated illustrations and attractive cover, make for an experience that is aesthetic as well as intellectual. This befits the topic: a study of artefacts and encounters on a variety of Australian frontiers.

Philip Jones selects a range of intriguing objects and then elaborates on their stories, explaining along the way why they mystified and intrigued their collectors, earlier scholars and this author. Some items from the inventory include: Master Blackburn’s whip, broken shields, metal, fire drilling equipment, toas, the magic garb of Daisy Bates, Namatjira’s Jesus Plaque and a large block of Ochre.

Philip Jones is an historian interested in cross-cultural objects and aesthetics. He has spent many years working at the South Australian Museum, studying and building up its collections. This is fairly unusual, as over the last half-century, historians in Australia have been primarily concerned with texts. They use archival records, newspapers and secondary literature. Only a couple of decades ago, they started harnessing oral history, and some became interested in the visual, the performative, heritage and popular memory. Some attempted to draw on many different kinds of evidence. A few investigated artefacts. But generally this has been the sphere of the anthropologist and the archaeologist.

For historians employed at a museum, however, this mind-set must change. It is their job. In the academy, using and critiquing objects as data is not even part of training for historians. In order to be trained to deal with such sources, they will need to study ‘art history and curatorship’ or some additional ‘thing-oriented’ course elsewhere.

I am not exaggerating about the inbuilt ‘hard evidence’ conservatism of the history profession. Only a year or so ago, one prominent American-based journal rejected at least one article that drew upon material culture, on the grounds that they only published articles based upon ‘textual evidence’. Unfortunately I fear that is the kind of journal whose conservatism gains an ‘A’ rating in quality audits.

Ochre and Rust amply illustrates the different kinds of histories that can be told when the author uses objects as starting points. Jones’ cross-cultural explanations are often enabled by careful readings of linguistic accounts (in particular the wealth of evidence created by Luise Hercus) as well as rich museological documentation in text and other forms.

The book’s final chapter ‘That special property’ takes us on a journey in search of ochre. Jones tells us about a lengthy sacred pilgrimage; we discover the shine and glimmer of special quality ochre, how it stood for blood – sacred blood. Smeared over bodies for ceremonial reasons, or bones in funerary rites, it denoted vast epic stories. Jones connects this phenomenon with people all over...
the world. The Australian coming of shepherds and police on the pilgrimage route changed everything: it caused anxious, conflictual encounters with colonisers; it blocked the highway. Alternative supplies were substituted, but they were not as good, and lacked much of their inherent meaning as they were not from the right place; no-one was satisfied or happy with the compromise. Colonisers tried to exploit the resource, and then Indigenous custodians started doing the same thing. Ochre-driven ceremonies ceased. A substance, an essence, thus becomes poignantly imbricated in long traditions, in rapid disruptions, in failed solutions, and in a little-known story brought together. Such stories are retrieved like undiscovered artefacts of frontier.

Rust is equally evocative. Metal spear blades; metal axe heads hafted onto traditional tools and weapons. These objects become imbricated in negotiation and exchange in that liminal space of frontier. They transmogrified with new uses, new meanings. Indigenous makers adopted not only newly introduced materials but also new manufacturing techniques. The same object has a new meaning in its transformed context. What secret meanings, for example, might still be contained in Albert Namatjira’s Jesus Plaques?

This book contains some finely realised prose and elegantly told stories that can take on a lively rhythm. While this generally makes for a satisfying read, a few things niggled. Sometimes the author’s intellectual curiosity flows outwards to communicate fluently to the general reader; sometimes it becomes a side-tracked insider-academic voice too concerned with splitting hairs. At other times the reflections on things become somewhat perambulating, repetitive and even vague; a harsher editorial pen would have ensured a more riveting read.

I wondered why the term ‘race’ was barely used and why the term ‘frontier’ was not rigorously interrogated or qualified. Was the largely unproblematised use of such terms a valiant attempt to avoid the hard-edged, often meaningless boundaries postulated in the dichotomous ‘sides’ of the History Wars? Jones does make judgements – for example he is somewhat scathing of Daisy Bates at the same time as being more sympathetic than most authors.

Jones is less driven by the hope of political outcomes than by open-minded curiosity and a desire to solve mysteries. Perhaps it is good that Jones does not define a frontier with clear boundaries. As he promises, this book is about the lives of frontier objects and the lives of those who carried them. In its diverse, myriad journeys, Ochre and Rust deploys objects to redefine frontier. A vivid human-to-human trade in things both shapes and frames colonising relationships, with very specific, although not always legible, meanings. Synthetic objects denote Indigenous modernities. Ochre and Rust presents a ‘new’ frontier, populated not only by words, politics and human faces, but by haphazard relics, by painted and clad bodies and by curious hybrid artefacts signifying human ingenuity, adaptation and boundary-crossing relationships. Via these carefully investigated, meaningful objects, new paradigms for frontier start to come into shape. Frontier journeys take some different routes, thus refreshing and reinvigorating the history of frontier.

Ann McGrath
Australian National University

The time of Basedow’s expeditions was indeed a different time: those Aboriginal people who could still recall Herbert Basedow have now all passed away. The last living link in South Australia to the medical expeditions was the Arabana elder Laurie Stuart, born 1911, deceased 2005. He was listed as no. 46 on Basedow’s third expedition. He was a young boy living near Anna Creek siding when Basedow came there after the influenza epidemic, the yarirda ‘evil curse’, that killed so many people who lived by the Ghan railway line. Laurie Stuart had a distant recollection of ‘those people who came through with a buggy’, but he had subsequently heard more about Basedow from his elders. He associated Basedow mainly with Punch Arrerika, an Arrernte man who was Basedow’s cameleer on several expeditions. Punch – so named by Basedow – spent his later years at Curdimurka among Arabana people. ‘Nanna Laurie’ wanted to show us Punch Arrerika’s camp when we went through Curdimurka in 1995. He had no trouble at all finding his way through the large spread of debris on the historic campsite by the old Curdimurka siding. He led us straight to the spot where Punch had been living: Punch features on several photos in A Different Time, including a portrait on p. 128.

Seeing that with the death of Laurie Stuart the oral history of Basedow has lost its last link, it is particularly gratifying that this excellent and beautiful book has now appeared, letting us see Basedow and many of his photographs in historical perspective.

The chapter ‘Basedow, the photographer’ makes the reader aware of the enormous changes that have taken place in the practicalities of photography over the last 100 years. It is hard to imagine these days the difficulties of using glass plate negative cameras when transport was by camel. These difficulties made the taking of photographs a more formal act, and Basedow tended to make at least some of his photographs distinctly artistic, posed and traditional: David Kaus shows this in the brilliant juxtaposition of two photographs of a humpy near Arltunga (p. 36). The first photo is by Basedow and shows a dark, empty humpy with a traditional-looking old man sitting by the entrance: the whole image is set out as if it were before white contact. This is a striking photo and was in fact one used in the publicity for the exhibition. The second photo is by Basedow’s assistant Frank Feast. There is no old man by the entrance of the humpy, but various belongings are piled up inside, five men in early twentieth century garb are standing about outside, there is a dog in the distance, and – a raw amateur’s mistake – the shadow of the photographer is visible in the foreground: there is nothing memorable about this ordinary-looking image.

Many of Basedow’s photos are beautiful without posing, and are of sheer natural beauty, such as the scenes from the Elsey and Wilton Rivers, from Uluru
and Crown Point, and from the Petermann Ranges. There are many remarkable portraits, mostly of Aboriginal people, but also photos of various dignitaries, and a fine picture of Pastor Carl Strehlow, standing in the church doorway at Hermannsburg, clasp[ing what is no doubt a bible or prayer-book. There are wonderful action photos of travel with camels. Some of these show the underlying kindness and concern for humans and animals that characterised Basedow: pulling a cow from a bog, removing a splinter from the toes of a camel, Arrerika watering the camels, and even Spotty, Basedow’s dog, wearing little leather shoes specially made to protect his paws.

The achievements of Basedow were not well known to the general public before the 2008 exhibition at the National Museum of Australia and the subsequent publication of the present book. His two books on Aboriginal culture are not inspiring and have not attracted much attention. The reports of the medical expeditions remain unpublished, though with their lists of names of Aboriginal people they give remarkable insight into who was where in 1919–1920 in the north of South Australia and adjacent areas of Queensland and the Northern Territory. Anthropologists working on land-claims have trawled through these lists over recent years, but Basedow’s work as a whole has not been widely appreciated.

David Kaus has made up for this: the present book has very fine chapters on ‘Basedow as a man’, and ‘Basedow as a scientist’ and gives insight and remarkable documentation for all the expeditions. Having spent many years on the study of Basedow and his collections, he is able to give us a brilliant account and assessment, so we can see Basedow as a humane and dedicated person, concerned about the welfare of Aboriginal people.

David Kaus writes of Basedow’s photographical collection as follows:

This valuable archive of places, people and times is one of Herbert Basedow’s enduring legacies: a window on a different time. (p. 41)

It is a most beautiful book, well written and well produced, and the author and the National Museum of Australia Press deserve our highest praise. It is a book that will be appreciated for many years to come.

Luise Hercus
Australian National University

Until ten years ago, the title and the cover-picture of this book would have captured most associations with ‘Afghans’ in the Australian popular imagination. Two bearded men in long robes and turbans, one sitting on an ornately ornamented camel and the other standing by a laden camel. Religion, travel, transport, camels, different ways of living. All these were featured in the stories, artefacts, photographs and documents in the South Australian Museum travelling exhibition curated by Philip Jones and Anna Kenny, from which this book derives. But the book is much more than a catalogue of exhibits.

Philip Jones begins with a vivid word-picture of some of the last elderly Muslim cameleers sitting in the courtyard of the Adelaide Mosque in the early 1950s. This is followed by glimpses of the histories of artefacts collected for the exhibition, carefully preserved by descendants and by a few pastoralists and others who recognised their importance. Setting the background for the exhibition, he observes the absence of collections of material relating to the cameleers in Australian museums.

There are clues to the reasons for the absence both here and in the second essay by Anna Kenny. The ‘Afghans’ (Kenny gives a good discussion of the use of this term) came as individuals or in small groups from a variety of places in what are now Pakistan, India and Afghanistan. They were on short contracts to work as long-distance transporters. After 1901, the White Australia policy made it almost impossible for them to bring wives. This made it hard for them to establish settlements, although they did build mosques in a few towns. While some started families with Aboriginal women, and a handful were formally married to Australians (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal), the majority returned home at the end of their contracts. Once the railways came, and put the cameleers out of business, there was no pressure for sponsoring Muslim migrants. So, the small communities around the mosques in places like Perth, Adelaide and Marree gradually dwindled. Their families merged into Aboriginal communities or into the wider Australian society.

The introductory essays are followed by eight chapters consisting of a succinct text linking a wonderful collection of beautifully reproduced illustrations and associated descriptions. The artefacts, maps, documents, and contemporary drawings and photographs not only bring the text to life, but also draw the reader’s attention to many other aspects of the lives of Muslim cameleers – from the blue glass fragments of chlorodyne bottles showing what took the place of alcohol, to the invoice charging for water for camels.

The chapters trace the history of the cameleers, starting with their homelands, then their sponsorship to Australia, their work in major expeditions from the late nineteenth century to the Madigan expedition (and including a biographical
sketch of Saleh Mahomed, one of the best-known cameleer explorers). There is a detailed description of aspects of the camel transport trade, from the equipment and harness to photos of strings of camels laden with anything from ore to firewood for burners, to railway sleepers, to bagged chaff to station stores. There is also a discussion of other trades embarked on by Muslim immigrants from hawking to herbalism (including some information on the well-known Mahomet Allum).

These are followed by a chapter on the relations between the Muslim immigrants and Aborigines. Aborigines learned camel-handling skills from the Muslims, represented them and their camels in wood, on boomerangs, rock art and drawings, and made use of camel hair for waist belts. There is a chapter on daily life in camel camps and Muslim enclaves in towns with some revealing and touching photos of the families and young children, a pair of children’s slippers. This is followed by a discussion of their relations with Australians generally – the kinds of official paperwork they had to deal with, the sources of conflict, from competition with the bullockies to competition over water (perceptions of difference, conflicts over livelihood, water, racism), to the decline of the camel transport which led to some cameleers letting their camels go free, thus creating the feral camel problem of today. The last of these chapters is a brief discussion of how the Muslim cameleers have been represented in drawings, paintings and films (and more recently Ghan train paraphernalia), and of how their descendants are helping to keep the stories of the cameleers alive.

A significant contribution of the book is the appendix of brief biographic details on more than 1100 Muslim pioneers. It contains details of where they were born, family connections, where they lived, occupations, dealings with officialdom, and sometimes small portraits from the Commonwealth certificate of ‘exemption from the dictation test’. The men are mostly turbaned, but there are the occasional fez or hat, and a few bare heads. The information comes from many sources, occasionally from their own memoirs, or from lists of contributors to mosque building funds, or from dealings with the bureaucracy (Fakir Mahomet from Karachi who had a Sydney-born Australian wife, Emily Ann, but whose request for naturalisation was rejected), or more tragically from dealings with the law (Dost Mohammad from Baluchistan who was killed by his Australian-Italian wife’s two brothers in a brawl, and whose wife was in turn knifed to death in India as revenge).

One can always quibble about what is not in the book (I would have liked more on how they were engaged overseas, what the contracts were like, how they actually talked and engaged with other Australians, how they learned to write English, who they used as intermediaries in dealing with Australians). But for some of those questions one can turn to the substantial reference list. The main deficiency in the book is the frustrating lack of an index. Other than that, it is a book which is beautiful to look at, thought provoking, has some interesting maps and contains important reference material.

Jane Simpson
University of Sydney

Some time in the late 1980s, Ngaliwurr, a Yolngu woman with great cultural knowledge, worked with me at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sound Archive to document her brother’s extensive collection of recordings of clan songs. As a Christian, she agonised about whether she needed to give up important aspects of her traditional culture as she moved deeper into Christianity. This question arose just before Fiona Magowan left for her fieldwork in Arnhem Land, where she became immersed in Yolngu culture and saw how Ngaliwurr’s people were dealing with that same dilemma. Ngaliwurr’s question remains, but this book helps us to understand some of her thinking when she asked it.

Magowan’s 1994 doctoral thesis at Oxford University, ‘Melodies of mourning: a study of form and meaning in Yolngu women’s music and dance in traditional and Christian ritual contexts’, provides much of the material for this book. As a student of John Blacking, she has been trained both as a social anthropologist and as an ethnomusicologist. She has published both nationally and internationally on aspects of syncretism, ways of knowing and connections of land and culture amongst Yolngu people. This background, plus her extensive field research and experience in journalism, qualifies her eminently to write a creative book that ties together various strands of Yolngu knowledge of ecology, song and ritual and how these have been applied to their Christian beliefs.

The subtitle, ‘Music and Emotion in Northern Australia’, describes the underlying theme of each of the nine chapters. Both concepts are intimately connected with the land as Yolngu experience the songs and stories evoked by their country and the memories of those people connected with it that have passed away. The first chapter gives a scholarly précis of issues in the anthropology of emotion and of the senses, women’s roles in ritualised sentiment, and how Christianity has formed an important part of Yolngu life. After exploring how cultural changes are affecting the Yolngu, Magowan moves on to a chapter describing the place of music in the education of children. Chapter 4, ‘Performing emotions’ depicts how ritual enacts feelings of grief, anger and joy through song and dance. Chapter 5 describes how closely the senses are interwoven in Yolngu perceptions of ‘touching through the eye’ and ‘visioning with the ear’. Ways that landscape evokes the ancestors are explored in Chapter 6. The last part of the book draws upon the concepts shown in the preceding parts in order to demonstrate how they apply to the Christianity practiced by the Yolngu.

Magowan takes us on her own personal journey as she first arrived in Arnhem Land, sharing her feelings of general bewilderment as she entered into a complex culture where each sound, gesture, and place was interconnected.
Her questions about the culture and her depth of feeling as she grapples with cosmological issues appear throughout the book and provide some welcome pauses amidst the detailed analytical concepts.

Many works on Yolngu culture and song concentrate upon men’s performances; however, this book focuses upon the songs and associated emotional experiences of women, demonstrating how Yolngu children are socialised into the intricacies of the adult world. There are few studies of children’s acquisition of musical skill and knowledge through songs, and this important book fills a gap in that literature. One of the most innovative parts of the book appears in Chapter 7, ‘Crying for Jesus’, where Magowan uses the Western theological concept of perichoresis, a Greek term used by theologians to describe the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity in order to explain how Yolngu see the relationship amongst ancestors, persons and the environment (p. 142). She traces some of these connections step-by-step through a story based upon the Yolngu Turtle ancestor. Later on, she introduces us to the Rev Dr Djiniyini Gondarra, a respected clan leader and ordained minister in the Uniting Church, describing some of the ways he has constructed a Yolngu/Christian cosmology that maintains both traditional and Christian elements. The magnificent bibliography guides the reader to most of the major sources in the anthropology of emotion as well as many works on Indigenous music.

Any book dealing with the Yolngu requires the reader to recognise some terminology in Indigenous language/s. Magowan gives us a glossary at the very beginning, which is most welcome as readers will need to use it often. Also the book is dense where she describes existing scholarship in areas of emotive anthropology. It seems that the Yolngu have already sorted out many of these issues within their own society, and this book helps us to understand how sophisticated they really are. This book was shortlisted in 2008 for the Stanner Award, given by the AIATSIS Council to the author of the best published contribution to Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Studies.

On a personal note, my friend Ngaliwurr Munungurr has now passed away. I am thankful to this book for helping me to understand her better.

Grace Koch
Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

Writing in the 1930s, AP Elkin commented that ‘it is probably now too late to see a burial ceremony in its old and complete form’, but that nonetheless ‘some of the old practices are still carried on, for it is in such a significant social and individual crisis as death that the old faith and customs break through in spite of an apparently genuine acceptance of modern ways’. His tone is marked by the ‘extinctionist’ view of Aboriginal culture prevalent at the time and reflects an equation of culture with ritual practice. More than 70 years later traditional ritual practice has ceased in large parts of Australia, but as this book demonstrates Aboriginal cultural beliefs about death continue and funeral practices, even if seemingly Anglo-Australian, carry very distinct cultural markers. While death is a universal human experience, the manner in which death is experienced continues to represent a significant division between Aboriginal societies and the dominant culture in which they now find themselves embedded.

Like Howard and Frances Morphy, who provide a fitting and succinct afterword to this excellent collection of essays, the book prompted me to reflect on the place of death in my own life. I am now 38 and have attended all of three funerals: those of my great-grandfather, my grandmother and my mother-in-law. All the contributions in this volume point to the regularity with which Aboriginal people across the nation attend funerals. One reason for this is the actual number of deaths, another the size and nature of people’s social networks. When everybody in your social field is kin or kin of kin, every death concerns you. While reading this book I was visiting the north-east Arnhem Land community of Elcho Island (Galiwin’ku) when almost 1000 people came to the airport to see off the body of a young man who had tragically died during the night. Such a spontaneous collective response to an individual death is unimaginable in any mainstream Australian suburb.

The contributions in this volume range widely across the country; they include examples from remote Western Desert and Yolngu communities, Kimberley and Queensland towns, country New South Wales and the Torres Strait. Not surprisingly, the nature of ritual and mortuary celebration varies: all incorporate Christian aspects, but some include many traditional elements (including ritual wailing, dancing, singing, and primary and secondary burials) while others appear on the surface like regular Christian burials. The cross-cultural dynamic of funerals, however, has many parallels across the nation. Significantly, funerals are shown to be a domain of cultural reproduction, the claiming of a uniquely Aboriginal space; one of the few spaces in the Aboriginal life experience where Aboriginal people can take control and direct proceedings. At funerals, Aboriginal people can take pride in practices that defy the expectations of the dominant culture.

Grieving practices are one example. Across many of the chapters the tension between the stoic Christian approach to death is contrasted with the socially sanctioned, even expected, wailing and other public forms of expressing grief among Aboriginal communities; including those who may ascribe to the Christian faith. Grieving is a social process and people are not left to grieve alone nor expected to do so in silence.

At an even more fundamental level, Aboriginal funerals are anti-economical, thereby making them essentially heretical from the perspective of the dominant culture. There is the immediate financial cost, as families and communities may need to cater for large numbers of visiting relatives, while those coming from afar need to pay for fuel, flights and accommodation along the way. Then there is the indirect cost. Those people in employment may need to take extended periods of leave, while those not employed (the majority in remote communities) have that much less time to pursue their employment options. That seems to have been the thinking of then Federal Health Minister Tony Abbott when he urged Aboriginal people to ‘speed up their grieving in order to make themselves “work-ready”’, while visiting the Pitjantjatjara lands in 2006 (cited by Redmond, p. 83).

As the editors point out in their introduction, given the frequency of death in communities one could have expected people to become emotionally numb. Apathy around the seemingly endless cycle of funerals would be understandable, yet the opposite seems to be the case. Substantial social and emotional energy is invested in funerals; again and again. Throughout the book one can see that at least some of that energy arises from the paradoxical situation where the death of an individual serves as a cause for social reproduction; a public confirmation that a particularly constituted kinship network persists and is united. Because of this, there is substantial social pressure on individuals and families to attend funerals, to be seen to be present. Related to this is the risk of being accused of having caused the death, eg by sorcery or ill-wishing. Absence from a funeral may well give rise to such suspicions, a concern frequently reported in the book. Focusing on those aspects, however, all too easily gives rise to a cynical view of Aboriginal mortuary practices. A view in which the individual counts for little and is subject to ‘irrational’ (ie accusations of sorcery) pressures from society. This view, even if unarticulated, seems to underpin the reasoning of some of public commentators who occasionally criticise Aboriginal funeral practice in Aboriginal policy discourse and is frequently encountered in (white) remote Australia.\footnote{Sandall 2001.} An equally important, and more positive factor, also reported across the chapters, is that these extensive communal mortuary rites play an important role in the healing of those most affected by the death. On the evidence of the mortuary rites, Aboriginal societies have a keen awareness of the interrelationship between the health (including mental) of individuals and social health. By providing social support to the grieving, society itself is maintained in balance. A simplistic appeal to ‘grieve more like us’, as was made by Abbott, may be well-meaning in terms of the economic priorities of our own cultural
world view, but it fails to engage with the social priorities of Aboriginal culture. Another priority that is often missed because it is so divergent from ours, is the well-being of the spirit of the deceased.

The question of the afterlife is of course closely entwined with that of death. This book documents that Aboriginal people across Australia believe that people continue life in spirit form after the death of the human body. Equally common is the belief that these spirits are frequently dangerous to the living, at least during the first period after the death. This is explored in most detail by Smith who shows how among the Wik speaking people of Cape York, the recently deceased are considered dangerous because they are disturbed by their sudden isolation from their kin. No longer able to properly engage with those who remain alive, they experience grief, trauma and possibly anger, and may try to take this out on the living. They are dangerous until this traumatic period is over. Mortuary rites, as well as the accompanying smoking ceremonies and other cleansing practices, including name avoidance, can therefore be interpreted as directed both at the grief of the next of kin who remain alive, and the grief of the recently deceased.

Smith’s account includes an interesting twist, when some of his informants deliberately do not smoke houses or property so as to keep the spirit of the deceased with them rather than ‘chase ‘em away’ (Smith, p. 196), presumably in cases where the deceased is considered ‘safe’. With time, of course, the recently deceased can become beneficial ancestral spirits who may assist the living in everyday affairs.

This book contains some beautifully written ethnography. Musharbash’s chapter stands out particularly, with its haunting images of Warlpiri sorry camps, but most authors contribute passages of striking ethnographic imagery. Many of the chapters are highly personal, revealing the close relationships between anthropologists and informants and the emotional impact on the former when ‘informants’, who in fact have been friends and teachers, die.

It is the kind of work that can be read again and again from different angles, as it touches on cross-cultural relations and policy issues, psychology, theology and that most fundamental of human questions of what constitutes a good life and a good death. To make this work available to a wider audience hopefully a more affordable paperback edition will be released before too long.

References


Kim McCaul
Attorney-General’s Department
South Australia
What an extraordinary and welcome book! Let me ‘out’ myself at the start: this is a book about Anglican missionaries, and I am an Anglican missionary. For most of my adult life I have worked under the authority of local Indigenous Christian leaders translating the Bible into their language on what had once been an Anglican mission. I have often wondered what Church historians might make of our work in a hundred years time. This book has begun to give me an early answer, and I am grateful to Noel Loos for it.

Loos has not moderated his passion developed over a lifetime of research and friendship with Indigenous people in the Anglican missions in Queensland. The confronting title warns of a passionate narrative that is as much theological and personal as it is historical. Loos’ thesis is that the good news about Christ came to Indigenous people through white people, often in white people’s language, and muddled up with white people’s technology and largesse and especially, white peoples’ power. The black cross is iconic of Indigenous suffering, suggesting that as the waves of invasion, conquest and irresistible pressure for re-acculturation swept over them, it would have been easy for them to see themselves as the one suffering on the cross of these historical experiences. But Loos sets this black and white scene in order to describe something multi coloured in its human outworking, utterly moving and quite miraculous: many Indigenous people did, and still do, accept the news that Christ, who was neither white nor black, suffered for the sins of everyone, both white and black, in showing God’s desire to forgive regardless of any human attribute or achievement. The great question Loos addresses is,

How is it that Indigenous people who experienced displacement and humiliation at the hands of the outside white world, can see past their personal histories, and past our clumsy and motivationally muddled missionary work to the every-coloured Christ who is Lord and Judge of all cultures and colours, and who offers salvation to all cultures? How has it happened that out of badly run ‘missions’ there has arisen an increasingly independent Indigenous-led Church with its own theologians and evangelists, confident enough in themselves to demand and receive a place in the highest counsels of the Church.

Loos has not written a theoretical answer to these questions, nor has he tried (he may attempt this later) to provide a broader history of this process across Australia. He has instead provided a fine-grained snapshot describing what happens to real Indigenous people in contact with flesh and blood missionaries in Queensland, and in the context of the work of one real life Anglican mission agency over the last century and a half. The power of his book is in this focus on the ‘people on the ground’: Loos shows us the missionaries warts and all, celebrating the astonishing way God uses ordinary people in cross cultural but
genuinely personal relationships. Loos has tried with some success to give credit where it is due to those missionaries who were, more often than not, painfully aware of their often unavoidable role as the velvet glove on the iron fist of the outside world. Loos has a parenthetical chapter on the Forrest River massacre and proposes the missionary Ernest Gribble as a sort of gritty and uncomely hero, who sparked a royal commission by his courageous advocacy, and who Loos suggests indirectly set off Australia’s recent ‘history wars’. Gribble is well documented, so often carries Loos’ narrative of work in the Queensland missions. Through Gribble Loos tells the story of lots of other people, missionary and Indigenous, who lived through it all. He also reveals the pain and slow-motion battles of constant, mundane negotiations with an outside world, usually about the resources to care for people about whom that outside world was ignorant and dismissive. Even the missionary agencies were then, as are governments now who replaced them in running the communities, more inclined to rhetoric and self congratulation than to the risks and costs of genuine empowerment and the emergence of unmoderated Indigenous voices. But they have emerged despite all.

Loos has reported the abuses, the policy failures and the complicated way mission organisations represent their denominations, which in turn reflect the mainstream Australian society. The vision and compassion of the few is always dependent on the funding of the many, and both must operate within the irresistible parameters of a rapidly de-Christianising nation.

In fact, for the vast majority of Australians, even those in the churches, the very existence of an Indigenous church, or of missionary work for that matter, are unknown, shocking, laughable or completely inconceivable. The fact that Indigenous church leaders are ministering and teaching independently, courageous and without resources is simultaneously a shock and rebuke to us. The fact that there are now Indigenous bishops and clergy, and that the Australian Anglican church is at least trying to keep up with God’s work outside the cathedral, is a great encouragement. I hope through this book Loos can help some Australians visualise the reality of Aboriginal Christian lives and leadership, not focusing on the horrors but on the victories.

Loos, has concentrated on Queensland, and so does not deal with Aboriginal Churches worshipping and teaching in their own languages, which is the norm in the Anglican communities in the Northern Territory. Bible translators are continually moved by the way Indigenous people uncovered in words of their own language, a message that predates and outranks all the powerful white world does or offers, and a message about the infinite value of each person before God regardless of culture, technology or political power. We have seen Indigenous Christians confront simultaneously the injustice and manipulation of white officials and power hungry people from their own society. The frequent testimony of Aboriginal men is that in Christ, they are empowered to rebuild their lives from the suicidal despair of long term unemployment and transgenerational low self esteem that lead automatically to drug abuse and lateral violence in all its horrible forms.
This is a book that should be welcomed into what must certainly be a continuing discussion, as the Indigenous churches face continuing, inevitable change and growth, swept along and trying always to make Christ known to their own rapidly changing linguistic and social contexts, and as the nation also changes unpredictably the forms in which our demands are placed upon Indigenous people. Other books may be provoked by this one to tell a similarly detailed story of the other frontiers, where the same Christ met the same needs despite all of us, politicians, voters, Church people, media, academics and missionaries.

Rev S Etherington
Darwin
Despite its privileged position as the established church of the colonising power in the Australian colonies, the Church of England tends to be eclipsed in the story of nineteenth century evangelisation by the efforts of English Dissenters, Wesleyan Methodists, Roman Catholics, Scottish Presbyterians, Moravians and Lutherans. This is partly due to the amorphous and disconnected nature of early Anglican missionary activity. Apart from the English Church Missionary Society, which failed to sustain its missions, there was little organisation except perhaps for diocesan committees. For instance, the Church of England Mission to Aborigines of the Diocese of Melbourne fostered missions at Yelta (1855), Lake Tyers (1861), Lake Condah (1867) and Framlingham (1867).

Also of some importance was the supervisory role of the Anglican hierarchy. Chaplain Marsden, despite his negative attitude, actively promoted the work of three societies. LE Threlkeld’s mission at Lake Macquarie, after his break with the London Missionary Society, came directly under the nominal oversight of the Church authorities. Bishop Broughton was particularly sympathetic. The Church of England also came to the support of the Reverend John Brown Gribble when his own Congregational denomination was unable to support him thus leading indirectly to the important Anglican missions at Yarabah and Forrest River staffed by the Gribble family. The Anglicans also supported the work of the Moravian missionaries. In Melbourne, Bishop Charles Perry and the Reverend Lloyd Chase were promoters of the Moravian Mission at Ebenezer in the Wimmera which produced the celebrated Aboriginal convert Nathaniel Pepper.

Largely unsung were other individual Anglican Church leaders and laymen who assumed a caring role for the Aboriginal people. Chaplain Middleton at Newcastle was concerned for their welfare, as was the Reverend CPN Wilton. In 1842 the Reverend George King opened a ‘native school’ at Fremantle. In South Australia Archdeacon MB Hale started a ‘native school’ at Poonindie in 1850. Another in this group of early Anglican philanthropists was Archdeacon John Ramsden Wollaston (1791–1856) in Western Australia.
Wollaston’s diaries covering the period 1841–1856 were first edited by Canon A Burton and the Reverend Percy U Henn in two volumes, *Wollaston’s Picton Journal 1841–1844* and *Wollaston’s Albany Journals 1848–1856*. The dust jackets to each volume carried the sub-title ‘The Personal Diary of an observant, educated Early Settler in Western Australia’.

A new scholarly edition of *The Wollaston Journals* under the general editorship of Geoffrey Bolton was published by the University of Western Australia Press. The first two volumes appeared in 1991 and 1992. Volume three (1845–1856), edited by Wollaston’s descendant Helen Walker Mann containing journals and correspondence, finally appeared in 2006.

Wollaston is mainly remembered, if at all, for his attempts to establish ‘native schools’, but he was frustrated by official attitudes. On 5 June 1848 he wrote in his Albany Journal:

> I need not repeat the insuperable difficulties in my position, wh have prevented even an attempt to educate any of their children: but my opinion as to what *might* be done, were means at hand, remain entirely unchanged. – I have always been upon the best terms with the several tribes, & never met one of these degraded fellow beings without receiving a nod, a smile or a ‘good morning’. – There have been of late two or three instances of very cruel treatment of some of them by whites; for wh the latter are most justly visited with punishment (chiefly imprisonment at Fremantle & hard labour) *when they are found out*. – But the grants of Government are chiefly beneficial to the Protectors, & their Subordinates, & are of little service to the natives generally or in the protection of the property of the Settlers. (*Wollaston Journals* vol 3, pp. 70–71)

Wollaston may have called his Aboriginal friends degraded, which related to their conditions and social position, but his views about their potential and capacity for learning were enlightened and far removed from those of some philanthropists who believed in a ‘racial hierarchy’ in which the Aboriginal was placed much lower than the European.

Wollaston should be remembered for his positive approach:

> I want first to have the numerous Children of the Whites in proper training; & next (or, after a time, simultaneously) the Children of the Aborigines. – My formerly expressed opinion of the capacity of the latter remains the same. They wd do credit to any school, if taken due pains with. – As I can barely manage to maintain my own family, my hands are tied at present. (p. 95)

When he inspected the ‘native school’ at King George Sound in 1848 he reported that ‘the native Australians have been very untruly underrated. In intelligence, good temper & faithfulness to their engagements they are

12 Burton and Henn 1948, 1954.
remarkable’ (p. 132). And his opinion in April 1851, after catechising the children in a Fremantle Sunday School – ‘white and native’, had not changed. He thought ‘the natives’ far the best (p. 220).

Although Wollaston hoped that Christianisation would solve the problems arising from colonial occupation he was only too well aware of the unfortunate immediate consequences of frontier contact. He wrote in May 1853:

I sadly fear very many of these natives have been shot, not merely in self defence, but wantonly & lawlessly. – In these parts the ‘Warrang’ greatly abounds wh is a kind of yam, & when roasted sweet, pleasant, & nourishing food – this grows where the best feed for stock is found. Hence the usurpation of the Ground & the secret destruction of the poor Aborigines. Is it to be wondered then that they should retaliate upon the flocks & herds! – The abundance of the Warrang & the paucity of animals, may account for the greater concentration of these tribes. Such doings are very shocking, perpetuated under the mask of civilization & Xianity but alas! the well known consequence of Colonization among savages in all parts of the Globe. (p. 311, see also p. 345)

Perhaps the most moving references in the Journals are Wollaston’s intimate pen portraits of individual Aborigines, mostly converts: young Pead, the 12-year-old ‘apprentice’ to a carpenter who was ‘almost equal to a man in the sawpit’ (pp. 44–45), ‘Captain’, who wore an old military uniform and made ‘a point of going to Church in full costume’ (p. 96), Waylie (properly Wylie) who accompanied Eyre on his expedition from South Australia to Albany in 1841, a man of ‘mild & pleasing countenance of great intelligence’ to whom Eyre had just sent a double barrelled gun (pp. 96–97, 132), Lindal, employed as a whaler (p. 132), the ‘half cast’ boy Frederick Christian (p. 170) and Eliza Wobart who married a carpenter from a whaler and ‘since her marriage has taught her husband to read’ (p. 133).

By the end of the nineteenth century Anglican mission work appeared more consolidated. The Australian Board of Missions, founded in 1850 as a largely episcopal body co-ordinating Anglican mission work in the Asia-Pacific region, supported its own missions within Australia from the 1880s. Separate from this was the low church and Evangelical Church Missionary Society tradition kept alive by auxiliaries. At the end of the century there were several separate church societies working independently, the Church Missionary Society of Victoria (within the Diocese of Melbourne), the Church Missionary Association of Victoria (CMA) established in 1892, and a similar body in New South Wales which amalgamated with the Victorian CMA in 1916 as the Church Missionary Society of Australia and Tasmania (CMS).

It was the CMA and then the CMS which established missions in Northern Australia. These missions came under public scrutiny in 1932–33 when tribal Aborigines who had killed eight non-Aboriginal men were persuaded by missionaries to come in and explain their conduct only to be subjected to an unsympathetic and punitive administration. There was a backlash against the
Anglican missionaries who expected a more understanding outcome and the trial was a landmark in awakening Australian consciousness to Aboriginal rights. The federal government appointed a trained anthropologist to itinerate in Northern Australia to mediate between the administration and the people acting under tribal law.

Against this background Reverend Canon JW Needham, head of the Australian Board of Missions, published *White and Black in Australia* (SPCK, London, 1935) for the interdenominational National Missionary Council of Australia, ostensibly the first attempt at a comprehensive history of missions within Australia. Until John Harris published *One Blood*... (Albatross Books, Sutherland, 1990) the missionary story was largely told in individual mission histories.

In Northern Australia the Anglicans have been well served by the writings of the Reverend Keith Cole and the EK Cole Publishing Fund. *Refuge on the Roper: The Origins of Roper River Mission Ngukurr* by Murray Seiffert is in this tradition. Like Needham’s *White and Black in Australia* it is a work of missionary apologetics inspired by current critical views of the churches for assisting the implementation of the government’s former White Australia policy. Seiffert invokes the work of John Harris and Henry Reynolds to present a positive missionary image.

The book contains eight chapters. The first chapter describes the Roper River region and the interest in it shown by the newly formed CMA. Chapter 2 – ‘The aborigines regard the land as theirs’ – explores the history of the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, especially the conflicts that took place on the telegraph, cattle and mining frontiers. As well as using written sources Seiffert draws on Aboriginal oral sources. As the author reports ‘It does not make for comfortable reading, and neither it should’ (p. 2).

Chapter 3 – ‘A cry goes out!’ tells how news of the maltreatment of Aborigines was passed to members of the Anglican Church in Victoria. Even though the majority of Australians at that time expected the Aboriginal people to die out or merge with the white population, the churches felt impelled to combat the injustices and some leaders such as Bishop Gilbert White of Carpentaria and the Reverend AR Ebbs, secretary of CMA in Victoria, did not believe that the Aboriginal people would disappear if protected from invading interests and tribal fighting.

White, like Wollaston in the 1840s, believed in ‘equal capacity’ at a time when most anthropologists still regarded the Australian Aborigines as a ‘child race’, a view that persisted until the Porteus intelligence tests were discredited in the second half of the twentieth century. The Roper River mission was founded to relieve and better ‘the conditions of the Aborigines of Northern Australia’, not merely to proselytise.

Chapter 4 – ‘Explaining the new mission’, is largely about Ebbs’ attempts to arouse interest and support while Chapter Five – ‘Preparing the new mission’,
discusses the role of Bishop White and Ebbs, particularly their trip across the Gulf of Carpentaria looking for a suitable site. Chapter 6 discusses the motivation behind the mission and emphasises the role of protection.

Chapter 7 attempts to place the northern Australia venture of the CMA (CMS) in the older Evangelical tradition of the ‘parent’ CMS in England with its strong anti-slavery connections. The CMA was ‘establishing a sanctuary’ – a ‘Refuge on the Roper’. Chapter 8 tells something of the beginnings of the new mission established in 1908 through the lives of some of its missionaries and early converts, particularly the Aboriginal missionaries, James and Angelina Noble and Horace Reid.

The first baptisms occurred at the Roper mission in May 1913 and Seiffert tells the story of some of the Aboriginal Christians, not necessarily all converts in the traditional Evangelical sense but certainly influenced by the mission teaching (see p. 131). For about 40 years the chaplain at Ngukurr has been the Reverend Canon Michael Gumbuli Wurramara.

That high church bishops could work amicably with low church missionaries and even Dissenters had been proven in the nineteenth century and this was certainly the case at Ngukurr. According to Seiffert (p. 127), the only comment made by Bishop Gilbert White ‘that has a hint that the bishop and the missionaries came from different traditions within the Anglican Church’, was his remark that ‘What is wanted is a Christian community, rather than self-conscious individualistic religionists’. No doubt when the largely non-conformist London Missionary Society handed over its work in Torres Strait to the Diocese of Carpentaria they expected the work to be carried on by the CMS under a similar arrangement rather than by ritualists.

Refuge on the Roper ends with a discussion of Aboriginality and points out that the Indigenous issues in the Northern Territory today can be seen in the ‘challenges facing the missionaries a century ago, issues of economy, sexuality, tradition, legal systems, and so on’ (p. 139).

What is the place of Christianity in Aboriginality? When I reviewed Phillip Pepper’s You Are What You Make Yourself To Be in the 1980s I accepted his Christian stance as a genuine expression of modern Aboriginality – of what it was to be an Aboriginal, a view supported by Diane Barwick when another colleague portrayed Phillip Pepper as a pathetic Uncle Tom character. Since the publication of Robert Kenny’s prizewinning study of Phillip’s grandfather, The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathanael Pepper & the Ruptured World (see review this volume) no one should doubt the genuineness of Nathanael’s conversion and its rootedness in Aboriginality. The Lamb Enters the Dreaming is a new Australian classic and deserves to be on every school curriculum.

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13 Pepper 1980.
While Nathaniel (as the family spell his name) was perhaps the first acclaimed baptised Aboriginal convert it is doubtful if he was the first convert. Missionary narratives from around Australia reveal an extraordinary level of caution and fear of ‘backsliding’ in the early years of contact. But many Aboriginal people responded to Christianity and identified it with their Aboriginality.

In Victoria there was much to challenge the new Aboriginal spirituality, particularly reaction to the legislation (1886, 1890, 1910, 1915) enforcing the separation of ‘half caste’ and ‘full blood’ Aboriginal families. The unfeeling self-seeking intervention of officials and the do-gooders (aka ‘Bible bashers’) of Drouin, determined to place families singly in white neighbourhoods, is told in *Jackson’s Track: Memoir of a Dreamtime Place* by Carolyn Landon and Daryl Tonkin.15

The second and third generation of Nathaniel Pepper’s family were regarded as ‘half caste’ and could not live with their parents on the mission station at Lake Tyers. *Footprints: The Journey of Lucy and Percy Pepper* tells the harrowing story of Phillip Pepper’s parents from official archival sources as they tried to make a living for themselves. Lucy was consumptive and in the end could not return home to die.

Percy was a strong worker but found it difficult to support his family and his employers took advantage of him. He enlisted in the First World War and served in France and Belgium. Though he qualified for a Soldier Settler’s block at Koo Wee Rup he found it difficult to meet payments owing to his family’s health problems and the seasonal floods. Although he stayed on longer than most of the returnees he received no assistance and the farm had to be sold. He never succeeded in getting another block in a drier climate.

Many of those ‘evicted’ from Jackson’s Track took to drink but Constable Simpson’s allegation in 1924 that Pepper was ‘a selfish drunken fool’ would have indicated a great low in his life since Lucy had just died and his family were no longer with him. He was afterwards a member of Pastor Doug Nicholls’ congregation in Fitzroy (p. 105).

The official records reveal the mean spiritedness of some of the officials dealing with Aboriginal affairs. CL Greene, acting manager at Lake Tyers from 1915 to 1917 was called to account for ‘destroying an official letter’, a letter from Lucy which he had just consigned to the rubbish bin and he informed his superior (30 September 1915) that Pepper ‘being related to some of the blacks on this station might cause a lot of trouble if allowed on the station’ and he refused to support his application (p. 45). His superior thought the manager’s view was a ‘wrong one’ but negative views were common. The arguments that the Peppers and related families were ‘almost white’ and should not be entitled to Aboriginal assistance on grounds of colour read like the rantings of an apartheid regime (see pp. 82–85).

15 Landon and Tonkin 1999.
Footprints is beautifully produced. As a family history it is a moving record of life between the wars and a family’s struggle to make good. The proliferation of Aboriginal life histories is a new development. My favourite is one which tells a Tom Sawyer-like story of growing up on the former Framlingham Mission in Victoria.16 Apart from a brief and somewhat obligatory invocation to the wrongs of the past it is a light-hearted celebration of life.

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Niel Gunson
Australian National University

16 Lowe 2007[2002].
The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathanael Pepper and the Ruptured World is an exhilarating historical inquiry into engagements between Aborigines and newcomers in Australia, and more specifically their different spiritual worlds. In this book Robert Kenny unravels the complex explanations of human difference in 1860 in the Wimmera, western Victoria.

Kenny traces the life of Nathanael Pepper, a Wotjobaluk man who was born in the Wimmera at the moment when the region was inundated with sheep; soon after Moravian missionaries arrived to establish Ebenezer Mission, at a time when missionary endeavour throughout Australia’s colonies was considered a sad failure. However, as Kenny shows, Ebenezer ‘was to surprise the sceptics’ and some of the Wotjobaluk. The surprise came in the form of the mission’s first Aboriginal convert, Pepper, who chose for himself the baptismal name Nathanael. Pepper’s conversion, which roused wide interest in religious and secular circles in Australia and London, was considered a ‘major breakthrough’ in missionary efforts. Kenny’s interest in this moment, rather than announcing it as the ‘beginning of Aboriginal Christianity’, reassesses Christianity’s role in ‘social movements’ and, in particular, what it meant to Pepper. In a colony in which the majority of newcomers believed the Australian race was a doomed one, Pepper, Kenny argues, offered evangelicals, and his own people, a glimmer of hope.

The beauty and benefit for Kenny’s readers is to be taken into the microscopic layers of Pepper’s experience – a rare occurrence in Australian history. There is so much to gain in reading history at such an honest pace: we meet Pepper, the missionaries who he became close to and characters such as Horatio Ellerman who experienced his own conversions (from heathenism to Christianity and from a murderer to a redeemed humanitarian). But we are also taken on an intimate tour, taken almost inside a colonial relationship – to grasp the push and pull of what the Moravian’s (or Christianity) were offering to the Wotjobaluk as their world was rupturing. Kenny forces us to look patiently before we jump into short and fast conclusions, knocking off some old caricatures on the way.

Kenny was intrigued by Pepper’s choosing his own baptismal name, Nathanael, and drawn to explore this story. As Kenny explains:

There is only one Nathanael in Scripture, and only one substantial incident concerning him. In exegetic tradition this incident revolves around what is known as ‘Nathanael’s Question’. In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, Philip tells his friend Nathanael is from Can, whose townspeople had contempt for those of Nazareth – one might even say that ethnic tension existed between the two places – and thus Nathanael asks his question in response to Philip’s news: ‘Can anything good come
out of Nazareth?’, to which Philip replies, ‘Come and See’. That Pepper’s brother, Charley Charley, would later take the baptismal name [Philip] seemed to indicate a clear reference to the Scripture by the brothers.

Kenny pondered (and we, reading along with him wonder) what the conversion of Nathanael Pepper would have looked like: ‘its immediate politics, its antecedents, its aftermath – if we decided that Pepper’s choice of name was meant as a paraphrase: “Can anything good come out of the settler’s Europe?”’ Kenny’s inquiry starts from this point.

As other historians have noted, and Kenny himself reminds us, colonial encounters were fraught with misunderstandings. However, as this book clearly shows, it is often historians who construct the misunderstandings of such slippery moments, rather than allowing for at least some unambiguity, some clear understanding. Kenny persuasively details Pepper’s conversion as one in which he was aware of what such an activity meant; he was a willing participant, not coerced into the conversion by the Moravians and, Kenny argues, a true believer.

Central to Kenny’s interest is what the introduction of sheep and cattle did to Wotjobaluk lore. This question becomes central to understanding how Pepper and the Wotjobaluk received the intruders and their spirituality. The lamb – totem of Jesus Christ – becomes, in the Wotjobaluk world of the Dreaming, totem of the Europeans. Whereas the connection of the religious symbolism of the Lamb and ‘the white things wandering about the paddock’ was, argues Kenny ‘lost to the settlers’, it was not to the Wotjobaluk who witnessed the importance of sheep to the settlers – they even had shepherds to protect these sacred animals. This revelation is at the heart of the book and, in my opinion, is the most important historical revision that Kenny makes. It allows us to go beyond the stale tale of violence between Europeans and Aborigines over the spearing of sheep as being a focused attack on the ‘settler’s economy’, or that such attacks were food related. To perceive the sheep as European totem, such attacks can be understood, at least in the Wimmera, as motivated by ritual on the totem of the European, giving much wanted complexity to an old narrative. As Kenny states: ‘It was not so much the European human that disrupted the world view of the local people of the Wimmera and elsewhere, but the animals they brought with them’.

This is a rare book. It is not often in Australian history that you come across a historian who is as interested in historical method – the practice of constructing history – as he is in his subject. This is evident from the first pages of the book. We are led from the present: Kenny begins with his journey in 1998 to the Wimmera, to the ruins of Ebenezer: we witness the tangible ruins of the past we are soon to be told about and they re-emerge throughout the book. He writes:

the historian’s job is to get beyond memory as it is to get beyond ruins; to approach that which was there before memory, and put memory to the test. From the scant records, from archaeology, from anthropology, from
linguistics, from memory, from analogy with peoples in other parts of Australia whose worlds have been less disrupted by Europeans, we can piece together a tentative sense of the world of the Wimmera before the European – an imagined way to join the dots.

He warns us of how the ‘gulf between the mind-set of the world we inhabit and the mind-set of the colonists in Victoria in this period was as wide as that between those colonists and the Aborigines they confronted’. Kenny is honest when he steps onto shaky ground, but asks us to allow that ‘this kind of history demands imaginative gambits that the discipline … traditionally avoids’. Kenny’s personal journey is an important part of the story, reminding us of the constant dialogue between the past and the present, and I am glad he has included this in the book. He takes his time, working through the complex systems of belief and interpretation of Christianity, pervasive racial science and Wotjobaluk lore. While it can be slow, deep reading, it is good reading: we have learnt to be attentive to detail, and the gentle conclusions that Kenny offers are rewarding.

I could continue to praise Kenny for his original and fine scholarship, his poetic style and for illuminating such an important story; however, he has just been awarded joint recipient of the Prime Minister’s History prize which reveals the quality and positive reception of this book.

Tiffany Shellam
Deakin University
This is a lovely story by Samantha Faulkner – a tribute to her grandfather, the sprightly and life-loving 90 year old, Ali Drummond. It is a book of which he and his family should be immensely proud. As a family history it is more than good, however its impact to a broader audience is lessened by some inherent problems, detailed later.

Ali Drummond is a man of the Torres Strait, as clearly signalled in the subtitle of the book, and he is arguably a Thursday Islander, through and through. He has lived his life to the full, among many things, as a pearl shell diver, a fisherman and a dab hand at lawn bowls. He is at home in the sea and fishing for his family remains one of his key loves. He had a carefree as well as hard life growing up on TI (Thursday Island), and it is no doubt a measure of his character and positive forbearance that saw him grasp life so eagerly with both hands. As many of his generation experienced, he lost both parents at an early age. His mother’s sisters each took some of his siblings but this splitting up of his immediate family was difficult and he headed out on the pearling luggers as soon as he could.17 It is this story of his pearling days which really animates Ali Drummond and the book as a whole.

In association with her grandfather, Samantha Faulkner introduces most of the book’s chapters with a well-known Torres Strait song. This is a very apt and creative device. Indeed, the front page contains a song about Ali Drummond himself, entitled ‘Old Men and the Sea’:

Ali had the arms of a fisherman/ the legs of a sailor/ for so long a time he lived from the riches of the sea/ working sunrise to sunset on the turn of the tides/ with hooks and lines and nets he made his living/ now he is an old man/ but his eyes shine bright when he talks about the sea/ and he caught with his hands/ the fish that fed the islands/ Ali Drummond is a young man when he talks about the sea/18

The book begins with an Introduction. This is a short recollection of a recent day on the water by Samantha Faulkner’s sister, Donisha Duff. It is a playful story, and by narrating an incident involving herself and her grandfather, it nicely reveals both the forceful character of Ali Drummond and the dynamic between him and his granddaughter. His regaling her with stories of his youth, of his expertise in the marine world, then accidentally running into a bommie as they travel home together in his dinghy, provides a fine segue into the following chapter entitled ‘Young days’.

17 Faulkner 2007: 12.
It is in this chapter and the earlier Prologue that some of the problems with the book become apparent. We learn that Ali Drummond was born on Thursday Island of a Dayak father from Sarawak and a mother of Aboriginal and Malay heritage. Ali’s mother Cissie Malay was classified by the Queensland government of the day as a ‘half-caste Aboriginal woman’ (p. 6). Her father was from Java and her mother Nara Para was a Yadhaigana Aboriginal woman from Red Island in northern Cape York. In this chapter and the Prologue Faulkner would have been better advised to build on her earlier comments about the 19th century marine traffic through the Torres Strait (p. xv). Given Ali Drummond’s cultural background she could have nicely contextualised his position as a non-Torres Strait Islander living in and around TI and the effects of this status on his life and of his descendants. Indeed, his wife Carmen Villaflor had heritage from the Philippines and Moa Island in the Torres Strait (p. 63), thus their children and grandchildren have Torres Strait Islander heritage from their mother and grandmother.

Clearly then Ali and his parents are not Torres Strait Islanders, so the descriptions in the Prologue and in this chapter of the ways in which Torres Strait Islanders were controlled under restrictive legislation are not only superfluous but confusing and contradictory. Indeed they could be easily misinterpreted. Because Ali and his family of orientation were classified as Malay (p. 7), they would not have been subjected to the same regulations of the Queensland Act, as were Torres Strait Islanders and Aboriginal people. This Act was a ‘racial caste system’ exemplified by ‘clearly elaborated social and economic stratification’. Indeed during this time, Ali Drummond’s family would have occupied a position of higher status than their Aboriginal relatives and Torres Strait Islander neighbours, while being relegated to a lower status than European residents. They were members of the Malay club (see p. 7) and being classified as ‘half-castes’ as opposed to Torres Strait Islanders meant they were evacuated from TI to Cairns, Innisfail and Port Douglas during the Second World War. Torres Strait Islanders, resident primarily on the outer islands, on the other hand, were not evacuated – they were left behind to defend their islands.

Faulkner demonstrates a confusion about the past, at times explaining that her grandfather’s family was not subjected to the Queensland Act and then at other times writing as if they were. When you know the history of Torres Strait and the applications of The Aboriginals Restriction and the Sale of Opium Act and its subsequent incarnation as the Torres Strait Islander Land Act it is possible to read between the lines, fill out the context, and interpret many of these statements. However, for readers who are not fully conversant with the cultural history of Torres Strait, and in particular the segregation and power imbalances between Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders, ‘Half-Castes’, Malays and Europeans, many misconceptions will follow. These inaccuracies are unfortunate and would not

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19 This is the short hand commonly applied to The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1879 (Qld), and its later reincarnation The Torres Strait Islander Land Act 1991 (Qld).
have occurred had a thorough content edit and check on historical accuracy been undertaken. Indeed, Faulkner could have included a description of how Ali’s and Carmen’s children and grandchildren were classified, remembering that Carmen did have Philippine-Torres Strait Islander heritage. In so doing she might have avoided some of these traps and could have given us a greater sense of the multicultural complexities and delights of life on Thursday Island and of growing up in such a dynamic family.

The next chapter ‘Life on the water’ opens with the lyrics of ‘Forty Fathoms’.22 The song reflects the movement of pearling luggers between the deep and dangerous waters around Erub (Darnley Island), and the home waters of TI. This skilfully sets the scene for tales of Ali Drummond’s life and travels as a pearlshell and trochus diver, and trepang collector in what is, not surprisingly, the longest and most detailed chapter of the book. Here Ali Drummond recollects the ways in which the shell and trepang were collected, how they worked the tides, where and how far away from TI they ventured, and his friendships with his Japanese crew. He describes the knowledge he gained as well as the foods they prepared and ate, and the trading they did with Torres Strait Islanders as they passed their islands en route to work the nearby reefs. There are vivid descriptions of food preparation and of the realities of diving: the friendships and the tensions on board, the snakes, finding good grounds, the cold, the darkness, the equipment, the tidal drift, the sharks, the bends, and some close shaves with death. However, there are sections in this chapter which lack adequate structure.

The Second World War is seen as a watershed in Torres Strait history, so it is not surprising that Faulkner includes a chapter ‘Wartime’ in which Ali Drummond worked for two years on TI and nearby islands before moving to Cairns and Mossman to join his wife and children in early 1942. The following chapter ‘Life on the land’ lacks overall interest to the general reader. It recounts what Ali Drummond did and when he did it, but perhaps it falls flat because the sea is really where he is at home. While in Mossman Ali Drummond cut cane, and when he was called up to join the army, his boss successfully argued that he was needed to work on his farm.

In 1948 Ali Drummond and the family were back on his beloved TI, and the following chapter ‘Family’ details how he met his wife, provides genealogical details of her family, and of their subsequent children. Unfortunately it is recounted in a fairly pedestrian way. This information is no doubt very useful for members of the Drummond extended family but not very engaging for the broader public. These are the sort of small stories which we all tell within families, of small events which signify a lot to us as family members. But, their significance or interest beyond the family is limited, especially when they are presented in this way.

The final chapter ‘And now’ brings us up to date with Ali Drummond’s life since his retirement in 1978 and the death of his wife. It is clear that he continues to have enormous energy, love of life, love of his family, love of his people, and love of TI.

Overall there are far too many factual, spelling and grammatical errors in this book (eg Saibi p. x; Arukun p. 16; Brilliant Point instead of Vrilya Point; missing preposition ‘of’ p. 11; missing word ‘know’ p. 65; p. 73 should read pounds (as in money value) and not pounds, as in weight; p. 41 ‘the scarce of oxygen in his blood’, and so on. These should have been picked up and corrected in a thorough edit of the manuscript by the publishing house before it went to press.

Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, this book makes a significant contribution to the oeuvres of biography, history, music and fiction about the experiences of people living in and around Thursday Island. Key among these works are the late Ellie Gaffney’s autobiography *Somebody Now*, Betty Osborne’s history of the evacuation of ‘mixed-race’ women from TI during the Second World War, and Terri Janke’s recent novel *Butterfly Song*, as well as the music of the Mills Sisters and Henry (Seaman) Dan which foreground and celebrate TI as ‘home’. This biography adds to that burgeoning corpus of stories and songs about TI and indeed several of these songs preface most of the chapters: ‘Old Men and the Sea’, ‘Old TI’, ‘Forty Fathoms’, and ‘Port War Hill’. *Life B’Long Ali Drummond* is a study of a life lived on and around TI. Despite its flaws, it provides us with a snapshot of TI and surrounding areas from the early twentieth century to the present. As she describes her grandfather’s life, Faulkner gives us a sense of the different businesses, the segregation policies, the carefree as well as the hard life, the details of diving, and the significance of the marine world of Torres Strait to her grandfather. Fundamentally, this is a personal, family history:

If there is a message in this book it would be to appreciate what you have, namely your family, and to remember that we all, each and every one of us, have a story to tell (p. viii).

References


Maureen Fuary
Department of Anthropology, Archaeology and Sociology
James Cook University

It is strange that the name Doreen Kartinyeri is not as well known as those of other Aboriginal leaders, such as Langton or Dodson. A little over a decade ago, Kartinyeri was one of the most controversial figures in the nation, famous for her role in the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair which was in many ways the beginning of the battles over understandings of history and land that became known as the culture wars.

Kartinyeri was the most prominent proponent of what became known in the media as ‘secret women’s business’ – the claim that the site of the proposed bridge at the mouth of the Murray was the site of sacred importance of Ngarrindjeri women, for reasons that could not be disclosed to men.

The affair resulted in a Royal Commission that found Kartinyeri and her fellows had fabricated ‘secret women’s business’. The findings of that Royal Commission were later effectively overturned by a Federal Court case in 2001. The whole issue dragged on for years, damaging almost everyone who touched it. It was a crucial episode in our history and in our understanding of Aboriginal claims to land in the wake of the High Court Mabo judgement.

The affair brought several important people to public prominence through their denunciation of Kartinyeri and her fellows. One was Dr Ron Brunton, now on the ABC Board. In 1996 Brunton wrote that the new Howard government’s handing of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair would ‘set the stage for its approach to Aboriginal affairs, and its attitude to probity in public life’. He was right.

Another who came to national attention through Hindmarsh Island was the columnist Christopher Pearson, briefly a speechwriter for Prime Minister John Howard and later on the SBS Board. Yet Kartinyeri disappeared from the popular consciousness. When she died at the end of 2007, there were very few headlines.

Kartinyeri has been much written about, but this book is so far as I know the first time she has spoken for herself at length. It is really a piece of oral history related by Kartinyeri to cultural heritage consultant and historian Sue Anderson, who has done an admirable job of curation and compilation. Plainly written, retaining a sense of Kartinyeri’s voice, it is a story of resilience that also provides insights into both the persistence and adaptability of culture.

While we catch glimpses of the trauma surrounding the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair, the more original and unique content is about Kartinyeri’s life history.
Anthropologist Peter Sutton, in an interview for my 2003 book about the affair, expressed the opinion that the idea that ‘secret women’s business’ was a fabrication was now ‘insupportable’. He said:

The balance of probabilities lies with evidence suggesting jealously guarded fragmentary parts of maybe several old traditions, whose custodians tended to treat such knowledge as private or family property, emerging in spite of competitive politics between individuals and factions.24

This book gives a context for that statement. It is a close-grained account of a twentieth-century Aboriginal woman’s life. It helps us understand how, despite decades of dislocation, missionary rule and prejudice, Kartinyeri was able to learn enough about her culture to be accepted by others as a custodian.

Doreen Kartinyeri was a thin, wiry woman, a smoker, a swearer and a fighter who polarised emotions long before the name Hindmarsh Island hit the headlines. Born at the Point McLeay Aboriginal reserve on the edge of the lakes at the Murray mouth in 1935, she was sent away to the Fullarton Girls Home in Adelaide at the age of ten following her mother’s death. Her baby sister was removed by the state against the family’s will.

After a period serving as a domestic, Kartinyeri married and moved to the Point Pearce mission on Yorke Peninsula, where she developed a strong friendship with her Auntie Rosie Kropinyeri. She claimed that it was when she was pregnant with the first of her nine children, sitting on the beach with Auntie Rosie, that she was told, all mixed up with practical advice on pregnancy and childbirth, the stories of the lower lakes and ‘Kumarangk’ – the Ngarrindjeri name for Hindmarsh Island.

Kartinyeri gives fascinating accounts of mission life, and how she began her work as an historian by recording the history of the Point McLeay and Point Pearce families, much of which had been lost through dislocation. She published several books of genealogy, and was awarded an honorary doctorate. This work led to a job in the Family History Unit of the South Australian Museum, which is where she was working in the early 1990s, when she heard of a plan to build a bridge from the little town of Goolwa to Hindmarsh Island, which sits at the mouth of the Murray River.

Kartinyeri first contracted stomach cancer during the Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair. She blamed the Royal Commission, and the building of the bridge, for her illness. When I was interviewing her in 2001 she predicted that the Murray would soon stop flowing because the bridge had been built, and that all Australians would suffer as a result. I imagine she saw herself as vindicated by recent events.

Meanwhile her genealogies continue to be an important source for South Australian Aboriginal people trying to trace their histories.

Kartinyeri or ‘Auntie Dodo’ as she was known to her family and friends, emerges from this account as neither a saccharine romanticised elder nor the scheming manipulator her enemies portrayed, but a full, vibrant and complex human being, and a survivor.

For historians, there is much of interest, including insights into the ways in which pre-contact Aboriginal culture both adapted and persisted through the years of missionary dominance.

Besides this, Kartinyeri was herself a significant figure in our history, deserving of entries in, but so far neglected by, our standard biographical reference works. It is a good thing this book has been written.

Reference

Margaret Simons
Adelaide

Antonio Buti in Sir Ronald Wilson: A Matter of Conscience has delivered a meticulous, well documented and sympathetic account of the career of Sir Ronald Wilson, but this story of a life remains puzzling. All the clues are carefully presented, but questions linger after closing the book.

There is no doubting the achievement and the drive. The young orphan from Geraldton, Western Australia became a Spitfire pilot, a Crown Prosecutor, State Solicitor-General, High Court Justice, University Chancellor, President of the Uniting Church, Human Rights Equal Opportunity Commission and Royal Commissioner. All of this was achieved without a full secondary school education.

There is, also, no doubting the passion. To every task, whether judicial, advocatory or religious, Wilson was a man of energy, commitment and zeal. In his final major piece of work, the 1997 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Bringing Them Home report his passion became the subject of national controversy and international interest.

Neither is the man’s essential goodness, generosity and humanity in question. Buti accumulates many accounts of the respect Sir (‘Call me Ron’) Ronald Wilson gave to others from all walks of life and that he was accorded in return. As Buti describes it, ‘he lived simply, so that others would simply live’, and rejected many of the trappings of high office to which he was entitled.

It is the man himself who remains an enigma, although Buti competently and coherently outlines the pieces of the puzzle, leaving the reader to decide for herself in the end.

Buti is transparent in outlining the apparent contradictions of the man himself and clearly documents the transitions Wilson makes over time. He is strongest when describing Wilson’s thinking as a prosecutor and judge, sharing his subject’s background in Western Australian law and practice. This is especially valuable in gaining an understanding of Wilson’s early career as a prosecutor in Perth in the 1960s, most famously in three notorious and related murder trials. Wilson’s aggressive attack on the character of the accused in the Beamish case would lead to a death sentence.

Forty-four years later, the ‘playing it hard’ elements of Wilson’s summation to the jury would be criticised by the Supreme Court in a successful appeal. Similarly, the convicted murderer Cooke went to the gallows in 1961, declaring the innocence of two men, Beamish and Button, convicted for murders they did not commit; Cooke had. In these cases, Wilson was unapologetic for his prosecutorial role. As Buti concludes ‘his job was to prosecute in an honest and
ethical manner, which he maintained he did’ (p. 131). Wilson’s quick mind, analytical powers and prowess in advocacy were tools that would take the young lawyer far. He had little patience at the time for speculation on the morality of the law and justice. Such was not his brief.

In his active ongoing leadership role in the Presbyterian and later Uniting Churches, however, Wilson explicitly argued for the concept of service, with Christians having an obligation to serve God through their works in the world. He compartmentalised his religious view, claiming it had no effect on his work for the Crown. As moderator for the Presbyterian Church, he was responsible for overseeing the management of Sister Kate’s Home for Children, later to gain notoriety as a place of internment and forced change for Aboriginal children. Aboriginal leaders Sue Gordon and Rob Riley went through Sister Kate’s and were scathing about its management practices and attitudes and its role in separation policies. Rob Riley was to say that institutionalisation ‘made us grow up thinking that we were totally alone in the world. We had no family, no belongings, no identity’.25

Buti comments that ‘Wilson never made the connections’. As a senior officer in the Western Australian legal system, it is difficult to comprehend that Wilson could have been unaware of the issues at the time, and would not be aware of the history of separations in that state until he became involved in the Bringing Them Home report for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 30 years later.

Buti speculates that this ‘ignorance provides another reason to view Wilson as a man lacking in curiosity about the world outside the “box” of his profession, or unless it had an impact upon his immediate task at hand’ (p. 146). At this stage of his life, there is not much evidence of Wilson thinking beyond his brief, or of making connections between his role and that of the society outside the offices of the Law Department, where he started work as a teenager.

Such insularity would necessarily erode as Wilson moved his career forward to becoming Western Australia’s Solicitor-General, a knight of the realm, and that state’s first High Court justice in 1979. The latter appointment was notable: in 103 years only two justices, Wilson and then Toohey, have been appointed from outside the three major eastern states. He maintained his engagement in the new Uniting Church, as moderator in Western Australia and later president of the national church, making time to volunteer for three weeks as a builder’s labourer in the Aboriginal community of Wiluna in 1985.

On the bench, Wilson served, as always, with energy, zeal and legal acuity. He will not be remembered as a reforming judge, most often coming down on the side of the rights of the states in the federation, especially against the use of international conventions to shape Australian common law.

Looking back in the year 2000, he told Perth radio that

I’d rather not be judged by my record on the High Court … I really suppressed my personal inclination and it is a lasting cause of sorrow that there were some Aboriginal cases that came before us when I was in the minority. I was so thankful that I was and that the majority decision represented my heart.

Such hindsight revisionism is remarkable. Buti puts it on the record, but leaves the reader to judge.

Antonio Buti provides an excellent synopsis of the landmark cases where Wilson’s head apparently over-ruled his heart. These included the Koowarta case, the Tasmanian Dam case and most significantly Mabo (No. 1). In all cases, Wilson was in the minority. In the latter case he was alone in deciding that the 1985 Queensland Act (Queensland Coast Islands Declaratory Act), in extinguishing native title, was not inconsistent with the Racial Discrimination Act 1979 (Cth). Buti effectively explores Wilson’s thinking on the issues of law that influenced his minority judgement, and his view that formal equality before the law does not achieve genuine equality despite knowing that if his arguments were accepted, inequality would be further entrenched. Wilson told the ABC Law Report that ‘my heart and my mind went in different directions’.

Wilson retired from the High Court in 1989 but did not in any way retire from public life. He was appointed by Prime Minister Bob Hawke to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991. For this period, Buti’s account is not so informative or analytical. Appointed as Patrick Dodson’s deputy, also a Western Australian, Wilson was instrumental in ensuring the newly formed Council (and its Chairman) kept out of the political fray in response to the High Court decision on Mabo (No. 2) handed down in 1992. In part, such constraint was perhaps sensibly aimed at maintaining cross-party and industry support for the nascent reconciliation process, but it also suited Wilson’s innate conservatism, policy caution and legal rectitude. Observing Wilson at close quarters during the early years of the reconciliation process, from the Council’s secretariat, I personally find it hard to recall evidence for the disjunct between heart and head that Wilson claimed in hindsight.

It was another Dodson brother, Mick, who worked with Sir Ronald as co-chair of the 1997 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Bringing Them Home report. This was the experience, if there was a single experience, which allowed Wilson’s heart to overtake his head. Some might argue that it ended up on his sleeve. Buti provides an excellent summary of the process that led to the report, the moving evidence taken in oral hearings, the reception by the government, and importantly, the criticism unleashed at the report. Much of the criticism attacked the man rather than the ball, and the man under attack was Sir Ronald.

The transformation was remarkable. The champion of state rights on the High Court bench arguing against the use of international conventions in the Tasmanian Dams case became a proselyte for internationally defined human rights on
indigenous issues. Buti outlines Wilson’s accusations of policy genocide, pushed against the advice of Mick Dodson, against the Commonwealth for its treatment of children removed by the states under well-meaning but devastating policies of assimilation. This was a transformation of the conservative into the radical critic and was Wilson’s final and most celebrated act of advocacy. Buti is understated in his analysis but indicates his preference for tracing the changed Wilson to the emotionally charged experience of the Bringing Them Home hearings.

* A Matter of Conscience: Sir Ronald Wilson* is a complex tale well worth reading by those with an interest in issues of Aboriginal history, Australian law and the evolution of conscience.

**Reference**


Kevin Keeffe
Canberra

Time, history and pre-history in Peter Hiscock’s Archaeology of Ancient Australia:

Time likewise does not exist by itself,
But as sense follows from things themselves
Of what has been done in the past, what now is present,
And what in addition to follow after

Lucretius I, 458–460

John Mulvaney’s groundbreaking 1969 work, The Prehistory of Australia, revealed for the first time in a major publication the potential for a national archaeology and laid the foundation for a succession of works on the theme. While the aim and expectation of an Australian archaeology has remained the context of the endeavour has changed. As an academic discipline, Australian archaeology has in the intervening 40 years been increasingly suspended between questions of practice and legitimacy which are often characterised as a product of a post-colonial conflict between ‘science’ and Indigenous rights and interests. While there is an undoubted validity to this as a discursive framework, there remains the possibility that it is primarily a reification of archaeological practice in Australia, rather than a description of its underlying material and intellectual structure. At this discursive level the discipline is characterised as an unresolvable tangle of power relations evoking ethical debates while obscuring tensions within the underlying archaeological practice. It is the contention of Peter Hiscock’s Archaeology of Ancient Australia that Australian archaeology reflects not a post-colonial conflict of rights and identities but a failure at the very heart of the discipline to be sufficiently aware of its material and temporal context. Hiscock’s critique produces a ‘pre-history’ of Australia which attempts to redefine possibilities of archaeological practice at the continental level and by so doing raises a series of important questions about the contemporary nature of the discipline and its meaning.

Australian archaeology is practiced almost exclusively within the strongly proscribed functional domains of heritage management, academic production and contract archaeology. Within these structures the ‘discipline’ ensures its discursive reproduction via a series of ordered and compliance-driven professionalised practices.\(^{26}\) In the face of these limitations the place of large-scale continental syntheses like the Archaeology of Ancient Australia, has become problematic. While in one direction it is dependent on the product of archaeological research, which has itself declined in the last 20 years; in the other direction the gap between the newer professionalised practice and the older synthetic modes of meaning and value production has now become sufficiently large to ensure

\(^{26}\) See Brown 2008.
that the intellectual importance of studies like Hiscock’s lies as much in its relation to the proceeding syntheses and more submerged esoteric concerns as it does to the current ‘disciplinary’ practice. Beyond the need for undergraduate textbooks, archaeological practice in Australia does not appear greatly concerned with the meaning and status of archaeological knowledge outside of the now dominant frameworks of community identity and heritage management. It may be, however, a sign of a maturing (or fragmenting discipline) that there are now sufficient works aiming at a continental synthesis for their respective intellectual approaches to pull away from the domain of contemporary professional practice and map an intellectual largely of their own making.

Although Archaeology of Ancient Australia has a deceptively conventional structure and can be read as an excellent textbook this aspect is not the concern of this review which concentrates more on Hiscock’s critical structure. At its core Hiscock’s work aligns itself with an approach to Australian archaeology which sees archaeology as a material practice. His work may be positioned closer to White and O’Connell’s work than the more the recent syntheses of Flood, Lourandos and Mulvaney and Kamminga. The culture-historical approach, foundational to the discipline in Australia and characteristic of most of the proceeding syntheses, he argues, is over-reliant on fusing historical and archaeological temporal horizons, generating a deeply constrained and limited knowledge of the pre-historic past. In the favouring of, what may be seen by contemporary standards as a reactive ‘scientific’ approach, Hiscock is effectively able to sustain challenges to both the conventional post-colonial concerns and the more conventional use of ethnographic analogy in Australian archaeology. He is able to do this because the work is outwardly the most philosophically programmatic of the major syntheses. The humanistic tradition which has and continues to inform the discipline is explicitly rejected in favour of ‘science’ which is seen as the key feature of modern archaeology – the founding fathers of modern archaeology in the nineteenth century are described as ‘scientists’ (p. 1) not archaeologists. The important point to be made here is that for Hiscock this is not simply a rhetorical point; his position is very consciously rationalist and materialist in a way which we have not seen in Australian archaeology to date. The epigraph from Lucretius at the head of this is review summarises the work’s core intellectual position; one that has its origins in Hiscock’s early training in Classics. Readers attempting to read the work through the lenses of the more recent humanist and post-humanist traditions may find, as a consequence, its approach difficult.

While following a broad chronological pattern Archaeology of Ancient Australia’s structure is based on a series of case studies around familiar themes like Arnhem Land rock art, Holocene technology, human population change, economic structures and relationships to landscape (including unusually mythological relationships). In these Hiscock examines the evidence and its

29 Hiscock pers. comm.
interpretation over the past 50 or so years and in doing so is deeply sceptical of the tendency to privilege narrative tidiness over the logic of material and temporal process. Consistent with his underlying philosophical position and his specialist knowledge of lithic analysis Hiscock sees physical processes such as decay, failure, chance and loss as setting boundary conditions on possible interpretation; while adaptive processes provide the vital potential for change. Deeply aligned to the approaches of processual or the ‘new archaeology’ of the 1960s and 1970s, its rigorous application in Australia has unexpected implications. As change is seen as a product of these boundary conditions it cannot be simply charted via descriptive analysis or narratives emphasising temporal continuities.

Hiscock’s work is also unusual in his concern for what may be termed ‘archaeological constructions’ as well as interpretations. In their Prehistory of Australia Mulvaney and Kamminga reflected the conventional view that where Australian archaeology was lacking in material richness it could be supplemented by reference to the extensive ethno-historical record of Aboriginal people. Despite their caution that this should be done with due recognition of the critical historical method, the result Hiscock argues was to see the ethnography as presenting a form of timeless horizon of useful analogy.

Since historical observers expected that Aborigines had lived since the earliest periods without substantial change it was easy to think that descriptions of Aboriginal life and society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could give archaeologists an insight into how Aborigines lived in more ancient times. (p. 4)

Instead of informing archaeological practice through the rigorous testing of analogy the power of this ethnographic imagery invariably resulted in an archaeology as a form of historicised ethnography where the primary aim is to ensure the security of temporal continuity over the power of temporal difference. Hiscock’s response is to bracket off the historical, including the ethnographic record by situating both the archaeological and historical records in temporal frameworks which are uniquely their own. This is a deceptively simple step but the effect is substantial. What links there are between the two sources must be justified using historical time frames which are recognised as limited and reflecting in some instances Aboriginal interpretations of their own archaeological pasts not a reportage on it (the echo effect).

What differentiates Hiscock’s approach from Mulvaney and Kamminga’s is his replacement of caution in using analogy with an abiding scepticism towards its value at any time. The conventional interpretative structure can be viewed through this move to be deeply ambivalent because it simultaneously represents both the archaeological and historical pasts as identical while maintaining their separation. The clearest example of the difficulty is the mechanism needed to

30 See Guillaume 1990.
bridge this gap between the two distinct domains. In the interpretation of the late Holocene an intensification process is seen as being required to fuse the limited Holocene archaeological record to the ethnographic horizon. Social competition and population growth have been seen as the primary driving forces of the linking process. This ‘construction’ can only be achieved, Hiscock contends, through the discounting of the effects of material decay and contrary regional variants; the interpretative mechanism is being driven more by the need to ensure temporal congruity than the evidence of the material record.

This scepticism is not a dismissal of the value of historical, ethnographic, anthropological or ethnoarchaeological studies per se nor is it an attempt to disenfranchise Aboriginal interests in their past nor to down-play the power of their traditions to inform and reveal. Initially it simply makes the observation that Aboriginal peoples of the past are reflected in a material record which is not necessarily commensurate with European colonial observations. Although many Australian archaeologists would acknowledge this, Hiscock’s work shows that the ethnographic vision continues to be a central, pervasive and mesmerising presence which requires a continual overcoming. The degree to which this rigour is maintained over the length of the book is patchy and there are places, not unexpectedly, where the careful reader will fine examples of analogical thought. The strongly analogical discussion of the long-term changes in Rainbow Serpent images is one of the more engaging of the discussions despite its incorporation of a distinctively ethnographic interpretation of a set of pre-historic rock art images. Some will also take issue with the reliance on interpretative frameworks drawn from contemporary managerial and biological discourses and question their explanatory superiority to ethnographic analogy.

What characterises the work and what makes it such a good textbook is the emphasis on the analysis of the record. Readers are shown that the careful examination of material is capable of generating knowledge that is more firmly grounded in the record than the set of conventional signifiers of presences which they tend to play with at the present. One necessary consequence of the close study for the practice or constructions of the discipline is that the resistances inherent in the materiality are seen as reflective of its reality not as symptoms of its failure. In the face of this it is argued that we should read the evidence directly and (until there is firm evidence to the contrary) see the Australian record as that of a modern people, fully equipped with language, art, technological, social and economic capacity from the earliest time. Although this is now supported by the contemporary evolutionary evidence for the emergence of modern humans it is a more challenging proposition than the temptation to see ancient Australia as representing an insight into a pre-modern humanity.

At the continental level the application of these two basic propositions, the bounded nature of the archaeological record and the modernity of its subjects, has unexpected impacts. Firstly, the approach challenges the significance of colonial processes and their records as both the end and the final meaning of archaeological temporality. It does not, however, erase the presence of either and the relation of the historical and the archaeological becomes a zone of genuine
complexity. As archaeology is no longer required to develop narratives which secure the archaeological to the historical record they may either flow through or past each other according to their own temporal and material dynamics. Or they may represent unbridgeable gaps and collisions. If we take, for example, the proposition that in the past the ancestors of Aboriginal people in south-eastern Australia sought to manage contingency measured as ‘risk’ by the application of technological developments in stone tool technology how is it possible to relate this to a contemporary observation that Aboriginal people in the same region manage contingency through social relationships as Heil and Macdonald argue?32 Is it possible through a process of material reasoning to see this as a case of profound cultural change or is it simply not possible because the temporal and explanatory frameworks are so incompatible that the interpretations are forever locked apart? There is clearly ground here for further examination.

There is one further basic proposition that shapes this work and it is one which is the most difficult to articulate because it is expressed in the negative. This is the problem of the role of structures of causality within culture itself. Hiscock come closest to a post-structuralist position in his rejection of overarching and fixed structural relations whether they are superstructure infrastructure dialectics, the primacy of social relations, cybernetic feedback loops or enframing environmental conditions. In contrast he favours indeterminate complexity and the powers of adaptation mediating social, cultural and environmental variability.

Claims about the causal role of social processes or responses to environment that are embedded within debates of the intensification model centre on questions of whether events and trends in history, and pre-history before it, were caused by material forces or alternatively by ideas and social interactions. This is an unnecessary contrast because both phenomena were perpetually present in ancient foraging life and each shaped the other. (p. 266)

Archaeological and historical evidence for economic and social changes during the last millennium gives no support for claims that there was invariably one process of change or a single prime-mover in cultural reconfigurations. Economies and settlement systems were restructured over only a few decades or less, making it impractical to disentangle causes and effects with the low chronological resolution available to archaeologists. (p. 284)

At a general level Hiscock shares the characteristic of many of his fellow archaeologists in presenting key hypotheses as explanations. This is justified in the humanist tradition by the assumption that the explanation partakes in a common humanity which is recoverable and meaningful through time. The problem Hiscock faces and has unfortunately no space to address, is that having rejected this tradition, he exposes the more profound problem that if the discipline is to be more ‘scientific’ it lacks an equally compelling (social) scientific

basis for explanation. It is unclear whether this is a product of the incapacity of the archaeological record to delineate the necessary distinctions for such a science to develop or if it is a real feature of the societies which produced the record. If the latter the unarticulated hypotheses underlying the explanation of change are that there are structural features of pre-historic human societies (or possibly all societies) which lack the capacity to either articulate the dominance of a component or that the components are themselves poorly differentiated. If we bypass the question of how it can be known that the various components are maintained as separate and perpetual and continually interactive, there remains the sense that humans are constituted by forces which are never clearly present but appear as ever changing combinations dependent on the logic of the situation which can never be clearly articulated. The difficulty is that of deducing human history and agency from a logic defined by the possibilities of material remains alone. What this favours is an archaeology composed of localised event series determined by external processes which can only be glossed by single broad mechanisms like ‘adaptation’ and ‘change’. Here archaeology is revealed to be a form of natural history or as it is glossed ‘pre-history’.

What Hiscock means by the term ‘pre-history’ is not made clear and it is another case of a significant unarticulated hypothesis informing the work. The question of whether ‘pre-history’ (as opposed to prehistory) represents some universal underlying state of nature and necessity governing all human society or a particular historical phase in the conventional sense is not addressed. The tenor of the work would suggest the former, however, in revealing the record in this way the question which arises is whether Hiscock has produced an archaeology which has sufficiently justified its practice in Australia. Stripped of its higher humanised (but colonial and compromised) meaning the remaining pictures of local adaptation and change tend to compress the record into a disconnected series with uniform significance. While the advantage of this is that it does militate against the construction of grand syntheses the underlying difficulty is that this compression reveals the record to be less ‘human’ than traditionally imagined and more intellectually problematic.

Despite these difficulties Archaeology of Ancient Australia is by far the most rigorously examined of the syntheses written in Australian archaeology to date and as such it has challenged old assumptions and added to the rigour of the interpretation. Freed from the constraints of having to refer constantly to a historical horizon Hiscock’s book has an unexpected feature for a work of ‘science’; frees itself from the rigid temporal grid which has so pervasively dominated contemporary archaeological practice in Australia and circulates around specific regional temporalities. Welcome as this approach is there is a price to be paid. The naturalisation of the record via the singular process of ‘adaptation’ invokes a temporality of ‘eternal-recurrence’. This works against the possibility of narrative meaning while the use of physical processes as the central mechanism of archaeological reasoning evokes logic of necessity which also limits the very human capacities which separate it from a natural science. This may be the reason why some critics have reacted strongly against the outcome
of Hiscock’s work while begrudgingly acknowledging its logical power. In its favour is the possibility of multiple phases of cultural development which have not been, to date, a particularly strong feature of interpretation in Australian archaeology. Whether this change is a product of the limitation of material variability, as Hiscock would argue, or the product of the eternal revelation of the ‘every-when’ of Aboriginal thought, it points to the potential for a more temporally nuanced archaeology in Australia.

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Contributors

Ian D Clark is an Associate Professor in Tourism in the School of Business at the University of Ballarat. He has been a Research Fellow in History at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Manager of the Brambuk Living Cultural Centre in Halls Gap and Senior Researcher with the former Victorian Tourism Commission. His areas of interest include Victorian Aboriginal history, toponymic research and Indigenous tourism. He is an avid collector of the music and memorabilia of Ella Jane Fitzgerald.

Emma Dortins is currently working on a PhD at the University of Sydney, tracing stories of cross-cultural encounter, friendship and mediation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. She previously worked as a professional historian, managing, researching and writing heritage studies and community histories, and has an abiding interest in public, popular and community history, history and place, and what it means to be a historian.

Karen Fox completed her PhD at the Australian National University in Canberra in 2009. Her doctoral research explored the shifting ways in which ideas about race, gender and nation were reflected and constructed in print media representations of prominent Indigenous women in Australia and New Zealand during the second half of the twentieth century.

Kate Fullagar is a postdoctoral fellow in the School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry, University of Sydney. She completed her doctorate on New World travellers to eighteenth-century Britain in 2004 at the University of California, Berkeley. She has published numerous journal articles and was Assistant Editor of An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture, 1776–1832 (1999).

Anne Keary is an Australian scholar who received her PhD from the University of California, Berkeley. For several years, she taught Native American and Pacific history at the University of Utah. She now lives with her family in Toronto, Canada where she is completing a book entitled ‘Comparing Cross-Cultural Histories: Christianity, Colonialism and Translation in Eastern Australia and Northwestern America’.

Carmel McCarthy is a Research Associate in the Social Health Sciences Unit, School of Medicine at Flinders University. She has broad-ranging expertise in social, medical and educational research.

Lawrence Niewójt studied geography at the University of Toronto and is now completing doctoral research in history at the Australian National University. He is currently writing a PhD thesis titled ‘The Otway Ranges: An Environmental History’.
Meryl Pearce is a senior lecturer and hydrologist in the School of the Environment at Flinders University and is recognised as a key researcher of perceptions of water supply and water use in Aboriginal communities. Dr Pearce was part of a team which produced the first detailed report documenting Aboriginal perceptions of water supplies, and attitudes towards water conservation in twelve remote communities in South Australia. Subsequent research has provided the only documented response from Aboriginal communities in South Australia to the National Water Initiative legislation.

Fiona Ryan worked as a Research Associate in the Social Health Science Unit, School of Medicine at Flinders University. She has an interest in linguistics and Aboriginal languages.

Keith Vincent Smith is an independent historian and curator, author of King Bungaree (1992) and Bennelong (2001). He was senior researcher for Episode 1 of the SBS television series First Australians (2009). Dr Smith was co-curator (with Anthony Bourke) of the 2006 Mitchell Library exhibition Eora: Mapping Aboriginal Sydney 1770–1850 and senior curator of Bennelong’s River (2009). He is the author of Māri Nawi: Aboriginal Odysseys (forthcoming) and curator of the exhibition with the same title, opening at the Mitchell Galleries in September 2010.

Peta Stephenson, an ARC Postdoctoral Fellow in the Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, specialises in the study of cross-cultural encounters between Indigenous and non-white migrant communities in Australia. She is the author of The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia’s Indigenous-Asian Story (2007). Her current project traces the long history of Islam in Indigenous Australia as a way of understanding the growing popularity of Islam among contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Ben Wadham is a senior lecturer in the School of Education at Flinders University and has been researching the sustainability of rural communities since 2004. His focus has been on service governance within rural and remote towns and communities within South Australia. In particular Dr Wadham has undertaken cost of living surveys, and service provision assessments within remote Indigenous communities.

Eileen Willis is Associate Professor in the School of Medicine at Flinders University. Dr Willis is recognised as a key researcher in the area of Aboriginal use and perceptions of water supply. In 2002 she brought together for the first time Vivendi Water and the State Government Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation to jointly fund a project that examined domestic water supplies in 12 of the 18 Aboriginal communities covered under the Commonwealth Bilateral Agreement. Dr Willis has undertaken research projects for government and private organisations in the last five years, primarily small-scale in-depth qualitative studies on attitudes, values and aspirations to social policy of various population groups.
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Footnote style

2. Fisher to Hassall, 20 July 1824.
4. Evening Mail, 12 March 1869.
5. Solly to Stokell, 4 March 1869, AOTCSD 7/23/127.

Footnote numbers are placed after punctuation marks in the text. Please do not use ibid. or similar abbreviations, but repeat the short citation.

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