

**MARI NAWI**  
(**'Big canoes'**)

*Aboriginal voyagers in  
Australia's maritime  
history, 1788-1855*

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## ABSTRACT

The English ships that came into Port Jackson in 1788 changed the lives of the Indigenous People forever. Theirs was a canoe culture and saltwater, as much as the land, was their natural habitat. The alien invaders dispossessed them of their land and brought the smallpox virus that, within two years, killed more than half the original population.

Driven by the will to survive, many among the surviving Aborigines proved to be resilient. In an unexpected way, the English ships would enable them to adapt to the new reality and to make the transition from bark canoes to ocean-going ships.

This thesis charts the life experiences of those who remade their lives and played a significant role in Australia's early maritime history, actively assisting the colonists to explore and settle their own country.

The study focus is on Indigenous People who sailed through Port Jackson in the period 1788-1855. It brings to the foreground men and women whose contribution has never been properly acknowledged, adding the names of some 65 Aboriginal voyagers from Port Jackson, Botany Bay and the Hawkesbury and Shoalhaven rivers to our shared history.

They would become boatmen, sailors, sealers, whalers and pilots, guides, go-betweens and trackers, valued for their skills and knowledge. Their assistance and cooperation contributed to the fledgling colonial economy. In later years some were officially created 'chiefs' and given land grants, fishing boats and gorgets.

They were present at critical events as they followed the expanding geography of exploration and the establishment of settlements like Newcastle, Hobart and Melbourne.

Some, like Bennelong and Bungaree, are famous, but the majority are unknown.

This work is the result of three years of research, following a paper trail of scattered primary documents: ship's musters, logs, official journals and despatches, petitions, shipping arrival and departures records, shipping news and Claims and Demand notices. It draws on oral, linguistic, pictorial, anthropological and genealogical evidence.

Fresh research has clarified some historical facts and corrected some long-standing errors.

**Certification**

This is to certify that the following thesis is all my own work, except where acknowledgement had been made to the work or ideas of others. It has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Signed.....*K V. Smith*.....

Keith Vincent Smith

15 August 2008

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This thesis was primarily researched in the Mitchell, Dixon and State Libraries of New South Wales, Sydney, whose unique collection of manuscripts, maps, art works, and published books provided much of the historical evidence. With Anthony Bourke, I was privileged to curate the exhibition *Eora: Mapping Aboriginal Sydney, 1770-1850* at the Mitchell Library Galleries during 2006.

I have also drawn on the original material resources of the National Library, Canberra; Macquarie University Library, Sydney; State Records New South Wales at The Rocks, Sydney; Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington and Hocken Library, Dunedin, New Zealand.

The following institutions have provided portraits and other images for which they retain the copyright: Mitchell Library, Sydney; National Library of Australia, Canberra; The Natural History Museum, London; British Library, London; Lesueur Collection, Museum d'Histoire Naturelle du Havre; State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Sea-changes

The first sailing ships that entered the world of the Indigenous People of Botany Bay and Port Jackson caused fear and wonder. They thought they were giant birds, monsters or floating islands and that the figures climbing the masts were devils or possums.

After a voyage of eight months from Portsmouth in England, HMS *Sirius*, HMS *Supply*, and nine convict transport ships anchored in Botany Bay on 19-20 January 1788. In a report printed in London in 1789, an anonymous officer wrote:

The natives alarmed, ran along the beach in seeming great terror, and made much confused noise; they seemed very frightened, so much that they took their canoes out of the water upon their backs and ran off with them into the country, together with their fishing tackle and children.<sup>1</sup>

When she met the artist George French Angas at Camp Cove, near South Head, in 1845, Cora Gooseberry Bungaree spoke of her father's reaction to the First Fleet ships at Botany Bay in 1788. Baringan Caroo, as she was first named, was the daughter of Mooroo-boora of the Murro-ore-dial clan at today's Maroubra. Her story tends to authenticate the officer's description:

On the approach of the vessels, the natives, who had never seen a ship before, imagining them to be huge sea-monsters, were so terrified that they ran into the bush, and did not stop to look back until they reached a place now called Liverpool, distant about twenty miles, where they hid themselves in trees.<sup>2</sup>

Stories were told about the visit years earlier of a solitary vessel that lingered for one week at Kamay (Botany Bay) before returning to the sea. This was the English discovery ship HM Bark *Endeavour*, commanded by Lieutenant James Cook. 'They thought they was the devil when they landed first, they did not know what to make of them. When they saw them going up the masts they thought they was opossums,' Maroot, an Aboriginal elder of the Kameygal on the north shore of Botany Bay, told his son Boatswain Maroot.<sup>3</sup>

Cruwee (Creway), who claimed to be at Kundal (Kurnell) when the *Endeavour* entered the bay on 29 April 1770, told Obed West: 'they thought the vessels were floating islands'. West wrote: 'I have often conversed with Cruwee, who was an intelligent fellow ... It was very amusing to hear him

describe the first impression the blacks had of the vessels, and although very fearful, they were curious and would, with fear and trembling, get behind some tree and peep out at the monsters which had invaded their shores.’<sup>4</sup> Judge Advocate David Collins, who recorded ‘Boo-roo-wang --- An island’ in his ‘New South Wales’ Vocabulary, added in a footnote: ‘This word they applied to our ships’.<sup>5</sup>

Finding Botany Bay unsuitable, Captain Arthur Phillip decided to establish a permanent settlement in a small sheltered cove in a harbour to the north that James Cook, passing by in 1770, had named Port Jackson. The people on these ships had come to stay. On 26 January 1788, the white-sailed vessels came to anchor in Warrane or Warang (Sydney Cove).<sup>6</sup> From them some 1,030 men, women and children – transported convicts and marines — came ashore to establish the convict colony of New South Wales.

Dispossessed of their land by the settlers, the traditional social organisation and kinship ties of the coastal clans around Port Jackson were shattered. Further settlements along the Parramatta and Hawkesbury Rivers forced inland clans from their territories.

The most devastating impact of the convict colony came from an epidemic of smallpox in April and May 1789 that killed hundreds of Aboriginal men, women and children, but did not affect any Europeans. After his capture in December 1789, Woollarawarre Bennelong, who had survived smallpox, attempted to convey to Governor Phillip the extent of the losses suffered by his people. Phillip informed Lord Sydney that according to ‘the native now living with us [Bennelong] and who has recovered from the disorder before he was taken, half of those who inhabit this part of the country died’.<sup>7</sup> The source of this catastrophe is unknown. Whether or not it was deliberately introduced is hotly debated, but cannot be resolved from available evidence.<sup>8</sup>

The survivors proved to be resilient. In an unexpected way, the English ships they feared at first would enable them to adapt to the new reality. Driven by the will to survive, numbers of them would undergo a sea-change: a transformation from canoe paddlers to deep-sea sailors.

In 1791 a ‘little native boy, named *Bon-del*’ sailed from Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour) aboard His Majesty’s brig *Supply*, bound for the isolated Pacific Ocean settlement of Norfolk Island.<sup>9</sup> This first Aboriginal Australian to



go to sea in an English ship was a 10 year-old orphan, whose father had been killed in battle and whose mother was bitten in half by a shark.<sup>10</sup> Bondel was to be the forerunner of generations of Aboriginal men and women who sailed from Sydney Cove to new settlements around Australia and ports throughout the world.

This thesis will show that Aboriginal men and women from the present Sydney region played a significant role in Australia's early maritime history and economy, and actively assisted Europeans to explore and settle their own country. While the focus is on Indigenous People who sailed through Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour), the scope of this work is much wider, expanding to coastal and continental exploration, international voyages and the founding of new settlements, including those at Newcastle, Moreton Bay, Van Diemen's Land and Port Phillip.

These voyagers were young, adventurous and physically strong, good swimmers and skilled spearmen, uniquely suited for a life of hardship and endurance at sea. They became boatmen, sailors, sealers, whalers and pilots, guides, go-betweens and trackers, valued for their skills and traditional knowledge. These voyagers travelled the globe. They would sail into the unknown and face the hazards of life in small ships, sustained by a diet of hard biscuits and salt beef, and would endure long periods away from their families. They would battle stormy seas, howling winds and extremes of temperature. Some would survive shipwreck.

The evidence is contained in the details of a series of historical biographies of the lives and adventures of Aboriginal voyagers who went to sea in sailing ships that have been arranged in a thematic framework.

The thesis brings to the foreground the men and women whose participation has never been properly recognised or acknowledged. Previously untold stories of some 65 Aboriginal voyagers and their experiences have here been pieced together through three years of research, involving the examination of original documents or microfilm copies of ship's musters, logs, official journals and despatches, shipping arrivals and departures records, and shipping news in newspapers, as well as oral history and linguistic, anthropological and genealogical evidence.

Saltwater, as much as the land, was the natural habitat of the inhabitants of the Sydney coastal area, who identified themselves as Eora ('people').<sup>11</sup> Theirs was a canoe culture and they had depended for countless generations on fresh fish and seafood. The harbours, rivers, creeks and lagoons, sandy beaches and muddy estuaries were their natural highways and principal sources of food. Men and women skimmed across the water in their fragile bark canoes (*nawi*). In inland waters, such as the Hawkesbury and Nepean Rivers, canoes 'differed in no wise from those found on the seacoast,' wrote Marine Captain Watkin Tench.<sup>12</sup>

It will be shown that, from their experiences, Aboriginal mariners sought and found a place in the colonial society that had dispossessed them. Going to sea gave them status and confidence in dealing with English officers and officials. Their assistance and cooperation contributed to the fledgling economy. In his introduction to *With the White People* (1990), historian Henry Reynolds, who did not consider voyaging Aborigines, called such people 'black pioneers'.<sup>13</sup> Aboriginal voyagers crossed conventional social boundaries. On colonial ships, all members of the crew ate, talked, slept, smoked and drank together and learned something of each other's language and customs. In later years some of these men became leaders of their people, while a few were officially created 'chiefs' and given fishing boats, land grants and metal gorgets.

There is no precedent for such a study in the area and time frame selected, that is from 1788-1855. Secondary sources have proved to be of little value because this is the first systematic review of Aboriginal men and women who went to sea.

The text is arranged thematically to track the numerous voyages and experiences in the context of the expanding frontiers of modern Australia. It is divided into three sections.

**Part 1: Canoes, ships and wooden boats**, reviews the canoe culture of the Indigenous People of coastal Sydney and the Hawkesbury River. Based on First Fleet journals and accounts, the first chapter considers the experience and skills that that peculiarly fitted these hunter-fisher-gatherers for a life at sea.

The earliest destination was Norfolk Island, 1000 nautical miles north-east of Port Jackson, where the commandant, Lieutenant Philip Gidley King, planted crops to supply the Sydney settlement. Nanbarry, Bondel (Bundle) and Bungaree crewed ships on this supply route.

Some Aboriginal rebels became voyagers against their will. Bulldog and Musquito were sent by Governor King to Norfolk Island in 1805, and transported again to Van Diemen's Land in 1813. Musquito was later hanged for murder. Dual, captured in 1816, was transported to Van Diemen's Land by Governor Lachlan Macquarie, but reprieved two years later. He returned to the mainland and became a guide for explorers Charles Throsby and Hamilton Hume.

At the age of five, Tristan Maumby, an Aboriginal orphan, sailed to Norfolk Island in 1795 with the Reverend Samuel Marsden. In 1807 Tristan jumped ship and ran away at Rio de Janeiro in Brazil to avoid being taken to London with the Marsden family. After seven years of self-imposed exile, Tristan returned to Sydney in 1814, but died a few days after landing.

A thriving sealing industry followed the discovery by Matthew Flinders and George Bass that Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) was an island separated from the mainland by Bass Strait. Several young Aboriginal sailors, including Bidgee Bidgee and Bondel, signed on in sealing gangs and were rewarded with their small share of the profits, often in the form of rations, clothing and liquor.

During a sealing expedition in 1810, Boatswain Maroot, from the north shore of Botany Bay, was one of the first people to land at Macquarie Island in the sub-Antarctic ocean, where he was stranded without supplies for more than a year. He stowed away to return to Sydney, and later went on five whaling voyages.

Thomas or Tommy Chaseland, son of an Aboriginal mother and a Hawkesbury River settler, went to sea at ten years of age and, in time, became the most famous whale harpooner and pilot in the South Island of New Zealand.

**Part 2: With the Explorers** deals with Aboriginal men and some women who went on major sea expeditions, finding food and water and acting as envoys and go-betweens.

Worogan and her husband Yeranabie went to sea with Lieutenant James Grant in 1801 aboard the 60-ton sloop *Lady Nelson*. In an 11-week voyage they visited Jervis Bay, then Westernport and Churchill Island in Port Phillip Bay (Victoria). They are the only known Aboriginal husband and wife who went to sea.

Bennelong, who brought his people peacefully into Sydney Town in 1790, accompanied Governor Arthur Phillip to England in 1792. This thesis challenges the accepted and often repeated notion that Bennelong was presented to King George III in London. It also disposes of the erroneous belief that his own people despised him.

Bungaree, from Broken Bay, circumnavigated the Australian continent with Matthew Flinders in 1801-2. The chapters describing the voyages of Bennelong and Bungaree build on the biographical studies of *Bennelong* (2001) and *King Bungaree* (1992) by the present writer.<sup>14</sup> While Bennelong was in England, his brother-in-law Gnung-a Gnung-a Mur-re-mur-gan (called 'Collins' by the English) crossed the Pacific Ocean to Hawaii, Nootka Sound (Vancouver) and north-west America.

Governor Philip Gidley King sent Bungaree to the first convict colony at the Hunter's River (Newcastle) in 1801 and again in 1804 when it was reopened. Bungaree's son-in-law Salamander, who took his name from a whaling ship, was at the short-lived Port Phillip settlement (at Portsea), set up by David Collins in 1804. He sailed on with Henry Hacking aboard *Lady Nelson* to the colony on the Derwent River (Hobart) in Van Diemen's Land. Salamander, as historian James Boyce suggests, was probably 'the first mainland native to travel in Van Diemen's Land in 12,000 years.'<sup>15</sup>

Daniel Moowattin, an orphan from Parramatta, became the third Australian Aborigine known to visit England. Daniel collected botanical specimens for George Caley, a botanist employed by Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society in London. Caley marked particular eucalypt leaves, gumnuts and flowers, now in the National Herbarium in Sydney, as 'Got by Dan'. Moowattin sailed with Caley to Norfolk Island and Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) in 1805-6. In 1810, he accompanied Caley on a voyage to England on HMS *Hindostan*.

Bungaree's eldest son Bowen is unknown in Queensland history, but in 1823 he took part in the discovery and exploration of Moreton Bay with John Oxley in the cutter *Mermaid*. Bowen, who carried a rifle and owned two boats, worked as a tracker, capturing bushrangers in the Pittwater peninsula, north of Sydney. In 1849, Bowen and five other Broken Bay men sailed to San Francisco at the start of the California gold rush. He was the only one to return.

There are many examples of Aborigines as facilitators, whose actions and initiative changed and influenced events. Some, like Pigeon, were present at many significant events in Australia's early colonial and maritime history. This is the subject of **Part 3: 'Sydney' Aborigines and the Palawa 'conciliation'**.

Pigeon or Warroba, from the Shoalhaven River, south of Sydney, became a sealer and in 1826 acted as a mediator at King George Sound (Albany, Western Australia) between the local Mineng people and the commandant, Major Edmund Lockyer. In later years, Pigeon, with a group of twelve mercenary 'Sydney natives', ranged through Van Diemen's Land, tracking Aboriginal Tasmanians for John Batman and George Augustus Robinson. On Batman's behalf they brokered the meetings with the Kulin headmen at Port Phillip in 1835 that resulted in the unauthorised land 'purchase' of land, including the present cities of Melbourne and Geelong, known as 'Batman's Treaty'. Pigeon was in Batman's camp at Indented Head (Geelong) when the escaped convict William Buckley gave himself up after living for 30 years with Aborigines. Pigeon and his companion John Crook were each rewarded with 100-acre land grants in Tasmania.

The study area (**Plate 1**) identifies the language groups (formerly called 'tribes') and the 'countries' of origin of the Aboriginal voyagers referred to in this study, based on research by the language historian Jeremy Steele. In the absence of a recorded name for the language spoken by the coastal clans (Eora), linguists and scholars generally agreed on the term Sydney Language. Smith (2004) suggested the name Biyal-Biyal, coined from *beal* (*biyal*), meaning 'no'.<sup>16</sup> Steele (2005) also adopted this name.<sup>17</sup>

Investigation of the lives of the seafaring brothers Bulkabra (Bolgobrough) and Willamannan has led to the recognition of a post-colonial clan located at Gunamatta Bay on Port Hacking, south of Sydney. These men were Dharawal

speakers from the Wollongong area who moved north and were often seen in Sydney, where Bulkabra collected government-issue blankets.

**Plate 1**

*Map showing language groups of the Sydney area and possible shared territory west of the Nepean River*

From J.M. Steele, *The Aboriginal Language of Sydney*, M.A. thesis, Warawara Department of Indigenous Studies, SCMP, Macquarie University, Sydney 2005:23  
Reproduced with permission of Jeremy Steele

The contemporary images reproduced throughout this thesis have a multiple function. The portraits preserve in a moment of time the faces of individual voyagers and witness their existence. The original accompanying captions have contributed information and nuances not found in other sources. We see the ships on which the Indigenous voyagers sailed and the ports in which those ships anchored. Original texts of ships' musters, petitions and 'Claims and Demand' notices have also been reproduced.

Fresh research has clarified some historical facts and corrected some long-standing errors. Analysis of François Péron's list of Sydney Aborigines, whose strength he tested with a machine called the Dynamometer in 1802, reveals that several portraits by the artist Nicolas-Martin Petit were wrongly identified when subsequently published as engravings.

In this work, wherever possible, citations have been attributed to the Indigenous informants responsible for them.

Because Aboriginal voyagers took positive action in remaking their lives and participating in the dominant colonial culture, these Indigenous pioneers can truly be said to have been agents of their own destiny.

## ENDNOTES

### Introduction: Sea-changes

<sup>1</sup> Anon., *An authentic and interesting narrative* ... London, 1789:11.

<sup>2</sup> Cora Gooseberry to G. F. Angas, in *Savage Life and Scenes in Australia and New Zealand*, London: Smith, Elder & Co., Vol. 2, 1846:197-8.

<sup>3</sup> 'Mahroot' [Boatswain Maroot], 'Report from the Select Committee on the Condition of the Aborigines', *Votes and Proceedings*, New South Wales Legislative Council, Sydney, 1845.

<sup>4</sup> Obed. West, Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), 1882, in Edward West Marriott (ed.), *Memoirs of Obed West*, Sydney, 1988:42-3.

<sup>5</sup> David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, London: T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, in The Strand [1798] 1975:507.

<sup>6</sup> William Dawes, *Vocabulary of the language of N.S. Wales in the neighbourhood of Sydney. Native and English*, by — Dawes, MS 4165(b), London: School of Oriental and African Studies, London: University of London, b1791:33.4.

<sup>7</sup> Bennelong, quoted in Arthur Phillip to Lord Sydney, 13 February 1790, HRNSW, Vol. 11:308.

<sup>8</sup> The smallpox outbreak and its possible sources were reviewed and discussed in Keith Vincent Smith, *Bennelong: The coming-in of the Eora, Sydney Cove, 1788-1792*, East Roseville: Kangaroo Press, 2001:33-38. See also: 'Depopulation by disease' in K.V. Smith *Eora Clans: A history of Indigenous social organisation in coastal Sydney, 1770-1890*, MA thesis, Warawara, Department of Indigenous Studies, Macquarie University, Sydney, 2004: 104-5.

<sup>9</sup> Tench 1793:107.

<sup>10</sup> Collins 1975:147-8.

<sup>11</sup> 'saltwater/adjective 1. of, or relating to saltwater; 2. Inhabiting salt water; 3. *Aboriginal English* of or relating to an Aborigine who lives on the coast, as opposed to one living inland', *The Macquarie Dictionary*, Third edition, Macquarie University, Sydney, 1998:1880.

<sup>12</sup> Watkin Tench, *A complete account of the settlement at Port Jackson, in New South Wales* ... London: J. Debrett, 1793:18.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Reynolds, *With the White People*, Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia, 1990:2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Keith Vincent Smith, *Bennelong: The coming-in of the Eora, Sydney Cove, 1788-1792*, East Roseville: Kangaroo Press, 2001; Keith Vincent Smith, *King Bungaree: A Sydney Aborigine meets the great South Pacific explorers, 1799-1830*, Kenthurst: Kangaroo Press, 1992.

<sup>15</sup> James Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land*, Melbourne: Black Inc. 2008:58.

<sup>16</sup> Keith Vincent Smith, *Eora: A history of Indigenous social organisation in coastal Sydney, 1770-1890*, MA thesis, Warawara, Department of Indigenous Studies, SCMP, Macquarie University, Sydney, (2004:3-4).

<sup>17</sup> J.M. Steele, *The Aboriginal Language of Sydney*, M.A. thesis, Warawara Department of Indigenous Studies, SCMP, Macquarie University, Sydney 2005:5-7.