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### Re-imagining Sandon Point

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## Re-imagining Sandon Point

### Abstract

When a housing development at Sandon Point north of Wollongong NSW obliterated country that has spiritual, political and economic significance for generations of indigenous people, the consequences were dramatic. Protests and court cases followed. This paper explores loss by imagining life at this place long before land clearing and concrete pours took place. The paper draws on the destroyed evidence of early indigenous life, written colonial accounts, paintings and drawings as well as indigenous memory. It argues that the evidence courts and developers rejected as central to Sandon Point's indigenous history, has contributed to its contemporary definition as a significant indigenous place. When objectors took the housing project to court, proceedings uncovered significant evidence that affirmed extensive indigenous life at Sandon Point. However, loss of indigenous heritage was not confined to the construction of houses. Building work uncovered evidence of indigenous history hidden for hundreds of years. However, it failed to stop building work and while it was in the public gaze for a time, it is now locked away in various government agencies.

### Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Social and Behavioral Sciences

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# Re-imagining Sandon Point

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Paper presented at the International Australian Studies Association (InASA) Conference - Re-imagining Australia: Encounter, Recognition, Responsibility conference, Maritime Museum of Western Australia and Curtin University, Perth, 7-9 December 2016.

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## **Abstract**

When a housing development at Sandon Point north of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia in the early 2000s obliterated country that has spiritual, political and economic significance for generations of Indigenous people, the consequences were dramatic (Organ 2013). Protests and court cases followed. This paper explores loss by imagining life at this place long before land clearing and concrete pours took place. The paper draws on the destroyed evidence of early indigenous life, written colonial accounts, paintings and drawings as well as indigenous memory (Organ and Speechley 1997). It argues that the evidence courts and developers rejected as central to Sandon Point's Indigenous history, has contributed to its contemporary definition as a significant Indigenous place. When objectors took the housing project to court, proceedings uncovered significant evidence that affirmed extensive Indigenous life at Sandon Point. However, loss of Indigenous heritage was not confined to the construction of houses. Building work uncovered evidence of indigenous history hidden for thousands of years. However, it failed to stop building work and while it was in the public gaze for a time, it is now locked away in various government agencies (Organ 1994b).

## **Context**

Spiritual – Sandon Point as meeting place, burial site and corroboree ground (Organ 1990 & 1993)

Political – Sandon Point as meeting place and corroboree ground

Economic – Sandon Point as a body marking site and source of clay (Organ 2006 a & b)

## **Imagining**

circa 2000 BC, east coast of Australia, in the area of Sandon Point, 50 miles / 80 kilometres south of Sydney.<sup>1</sup>

Piana and Kibarra, a young sister and brother, are walking along the sandy beach, in a northerly direction.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This imaginary scenario was developed by the authors based on discussions with local people over an extensive period and a study of Australian Aboriginal history and culture, with special reference to the coastal region of Illawarra (Organ 1990, 1993; Organ and Speechley 1997). The geographical description is accurate. The events portrayed are fictional, though developed according to what is assumed to be everyday events in the life of the local people and archaeological evidence. The date (circa 2000 BC) has been selected based on the discovery of an approximately 4000 year old Aboriginal burial at Sandon Point during 1988. Aboriginal people have been in Australia for at least 50,000 years and most likely in the Illawarra for a similarly extensive period.

<sup>2</sup> The Aboriginal names Oolamgow, Piana, Kibarra and Nutangle have been taken from blanket distribution lists compiled at Wollongong on 21 May 1834 and 7 May 1838. A

It is a warm, sunny day, early afternoon, with summer fast approaching.

They nibble on some berries as they walk along, having spent the morning with their uncle Nutangle collecting seafood – shellfish, crabs and lobsters – off the large rock platform that juts out into the sea on the south side of the area that is part of their Country.

The platform is an extension of a ridge which connects the ocean with the nearby mountain range – the 1000 foot high escarpment bordering their homeland to the west and towering over the thin coastal plain where Piana and Kibarra live.

The ridge is the lower extension of the path down the steep, densely wooded mountain face they call Bulli.

Their family, and travellers from the west and north-west, use this path regularly for visitations, hunting and ceremony.

They also travel along well-worn paths connecting the coast with a heavily wooded hinterland to the west, cut through with numerous creeks and river headwaters flowing in a north-westerly direction and containing sandstone caves and shelters often used for storytelling and teaching by elders.

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transcription of the listings is found in Organ (1990). Oolamgow was a 30 year old male with a wife and two children; Nutangle a 25 year old male with a wife; Piana a 19 year old female and Kibarra a 16 year old boy.

Piana and Kibarra also spend days walking through this area hunting, learning about the animals and plants around them, listening to stories, and camping with their family and teachers.

It is here that they read the carvings on the sandstone rock platforms and the art on the cave walls, or eat and sleep in the caves and shelters when the weather turns cold or wet.

On such journeys, especially in the winter, they travel with decorated possum skin rugs which keep them warm, and a few tools such as string and hooks for fishing in the streams, spears for hunting animals such as kangaroo, small carry bags, and axes and cutting stones to help in the preparation of meals.

In some localities they also make small wigwam-like huts out of tree branches and bush twigs, or camp in the stumps of the big cedar trees which dot the side of the mountain at Bulli.

Closer to the beach, there is a headland which offers protection from the prevailing southerly winds.

Piana and Kibarra continue to walk along the beach, noticing two of the tribal canoes lying on the sand, close to the surf.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The coastal Aboriginal people had a diet which was substantially based around seafood.

They obtained this through fishing with spears, lines and hooks, and nets. Canoes assisted in both fishing local lagoons and near shore waters. The local people were able to swim and dive as part of this search for fish and crustaceans such as lobsters which were plentiful off rock platforms such as that at Sandon Point.

The canoes are used by their family for fishing in the waters off the headland, especially in the small sheltered bay on its northern side.

As they look out to sea this day, Piana and Kibarra notice three canoes beyond the breaking surf.

There are two people in each canoe, fishing with spears, lines with hooks.

A woman has jumped into the water and speared a large fish, which she is passing on to a man in the canoe.

They also see some seals bathing in the sun on the rocks of the headland, close to where the family is fishing.

Occasionally the spray of a large whale and calf is observed, as they rest in the lee of the rocky outcrop whilst on their long, slow journey south.

As they continue walking, Piana and Kibarra pass by a large sand dune, behind which is a fresh water lagoon fed by two creeks.

Earlier that day Piana and Kibarra had been tasked by their uncle Nutangle with carrying the seafood they collected from the rock platform, over to the camp site on the northern side of the lagoon.

Here a ceremony was to be held later in the day in association with the burial of Oolamgow.



Oolamgow was a senior man of the tribe and a well-known kuradgi who had died the previous day.<sup>4</sup>

People up and down the coast were aware of his illness and had travelled from far and wide to attend the ceremonies marking his death.

Oolamgow was to be buried in the sand dune near the beach, alongside others of his tribe.

After the burial a corroboree would take place, involving singing, dancing, story-telling and feasting.<sup>5</sup>

The corroboree would go well into the night, and stories of the stars and sky, local events, people and the land would feature.

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<sup>4</sup> On 9 March 1988 the undisturbed burial site and complete skeleton of a kuradgi man was exposed in the eroding sand dune north of Sandon Point. Following archaeological investigations, the burial was identified as approximately 4,000 years old. This discovery was a significant catalyst for the setting up of the Kuradgi Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the site during 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Aboriginal society and culture is very much based on oral tradition, especially in regards to teaching, learning and storytelling. Many of these stories were presented through song, dance, acting out or orally and were an integral part of the education of young people, the passing down of history, and engagement with the local environment, whether that be in regards to accounts featuring local plants, animals, landforms or the sky and stars. A small fraction of this corpus of learning has been recorded by non-Aboriginal people since their arrival in Australia in January 1788, whilst much remains in contemporary Aboriginal society (Organ 1994a).

As the two walked further along the beach the sand was replaced by flat rock extending into the sea, with pools of water containing shells and small fish.

Adjacent to this was an outcrop of clay – white, pale brown and reddish - exposed as if extruded from the sand dune which covered it on the west.

This clay was well known throughout the region and used by the men, woman and children for ceremony, covering their bodies in distinctive markings that signified their tribe and status.

Beyond it, the sand once again took over as Piana and Kibarra walked along the beach, until just north of the creek outlet where it was replaced by exposed rocks and a small cliff abutting against the breaking waves of high tide, before eventually opening out onto a long sandy beach.

Piana and Kibarra decided to head west along the northern bank of the creek to a slightly elevated area overlooking the lagoon to the south.

This was the corroboree ground and eating place that would be used following the afternoon burial ceremony.

Later today they would feast on seafood, local plants and animals such as kangaroo, koala, duck and possum.

Individual totems would determine the food which could be eaten by those at the corroboree.

As Piana and Kibarra looked out from the hill they could see to the south of the lagoon a number of people in the area of a large rocky outcrop, making tools such as axe heads and cutting implements for the ceremony that day.

They could also hear the faint strains of singing and clap sticks on the sand dune where Oolamgow was to be buried, and see smoke rise.

Piana and Kibarra quickly headed off in that direction, to join their family and friends.

They did not want to miss any of the burial ceremony which was about to begin .....

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