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1-1-1997

### Illawarra Aborigines - An Introductory History

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## Illawarra Aborigines - An Introductory History

### Abstract

Archaeological evidence indicates Aboriginal people were resident in the Illawarra region of coastal New South Wales, Australia, for at least 20,000 years prior to the arrival of European after 1788. The non-Aboriginal view is that they reached the area as a result of migration from South-East Asia, across the former land bridge to the north, or in canoes by a similar route, and then along the coast to areas such as Sydney, Illawarra and Tasmania, where they found rich food resources. Aboriginal people themselves believe that they came from the land, that it is their mother, and that the Dreaming contains the answers to such mysteries. The Dreaming lies at the core of Aboriginal spiritual belief - it has no beginning, no end, and does not recognise time linearly, as in days, months and years. It is a part of everyday life, encompassing totems, ceremony, the division of labour, social structure and storytelling. This chapter provides a brief overview of local Aboriginal history and culture, along with an account of events following the European invasion.

### Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Social and Behavioral Sciences

### Publication Details

This book chapter was originally published as Organ, MK and Speechley, C, Illawarra Aborigines, in Hagan, JS and Wells, A (eds), A History of Wollongong, University of Wollongong Press, 1997, 7-22.

# Illawarra Aborigines

Michael Organ and Carol Speechley

“.....this day we crossed the shallow entrance from the sea of Lake Illawarra.... The Lake was *illustrated* by Natives in their canoes, looking very characteristic and beautiful, now that the process of English civilization had disarmed this part of the coast of those savage dangers with which it threatened Mr Flinders and Mr Bass, when they were here in the Tom Thumb.... The view was so picturesque - the lake, the hills, the Aborigines, the spirit of them all - as to deserve a painter.....” (Barron Field, 20 October 1823) (1)

## Introduction

Archaeological evidence indicates Aboriginal people were resident in Illawarra for at least 20,000 years prior to the arrival of European. The non-Aboriginal view is that they reached the area as a result of migration from South-East Asia, across the former land bridge to the north, or in canoes by a similar route, and then along the coast to areas such as Sydney, Illawarra and Tasmania, where they found rich food resources. Aboriginal people themselves believe that they came from the land, that it is their mother, and that the Dreaming contains the answers to such mysteries. The Dreaming lies at the core of Aboriginal spiritual belief - it has no beginning, no end, and does not recognise time linearly, as in days, months and years. It is a part of everyday life, encompassing totems, ceremony, the division of labour, social structure and storytelling

Whilst the word ‘Illawarra’ is obviously Aboriginal, its precise meaning is unclear. One interpretation is that it is derived from, or an English misspelling of the word ‘Eloura’, meaning anything from ‘a pleasant place’ to the area about Lake Illawarra, or the lake itself. Individual Aborigines were also called Illawarra in the recent past.

Traditional Aboriginal people in the Illawarra, prior to the coming of the white man, were made up of distinct family groups and extended families. All members had specific responsibilities, based on age and gender. The traditional language of the Illawarra clans was Dharawal (or Tharawal/Thurawal, a local word for cabbage palm). It was spoken and understood from Sydney in the north, west towards the Blue mountains and Goulburn, and as far south as Bega. Clan boundaries were well defined and each clan was responsible for ensuring the well-being of their lands. They incorporated many different land management techniques, including the burning off of areas to promote re-growth. Traditional Illawarra Aboriginal people saw themselves as part of the land, not separate from it. Every aspect of traditional Aboriginal society was governed by strict law.

The story of the Illawarra Aboriginal people is one of survival as a hunter-gather society over a period of more than 20,000 years; of the development of a rich and varied culture during that time; and of decimation and near total annihilation at the hands of European invaders in the space of a mere generation during the first half of the nineteenth century. Accounts of pre-frontier Aboriginal economy and society in Illawarra are little known, as are events during the period immediately following the arrival of white settlers. Precise population figures for the Aboriginal occupation of Illawarra throughout the millennia and leading up to the European invasion of 1788 are unknown, though it is likely to have been one of the most densely populated regions of the continent, with anywhere from 2-4 people per square kilometre. (2) The thin coastal strip east of the escarpment has often been likened to a ‘Garden of Eden’, with its abundant supply of natural resources, though when we look at Aboriginal society this tag could also be applied in the spiritual sense, with Mount Coolangatta on the Shoalhaven River long revered in local mythology as a gateway to the hereafter - to an Aboriginal ‘heaven’ beyond the seas. (3) Sites such as Mount Keira and Red Point are similarly significant.

Noel Butlin (4) addressed the various problems associated with this question of pre-invasion indigenous populations. Whilst numbers obviously varied over time, it is believed that there were anywhere from 300,000 to 1 million Aborigines in Australia on 26 January 1788, with perhaps 2-3000 of those residing in Illawarra. Whatever the exact figure, such was the lifestyle of this hunter-gatherer society that sustainable use of the local environment and its resources was the norm. For this reason artificial population controls were implemented, limiting individual families to 2-3 children.

In accordance with traditional Aboriginal religious beliefs the people had a spiritual attachment to the flora, fauna and even the topography. Totems and dreaming stories reinforced a sense of attachment to, and protection of, the land. Conservation of the natural environment was practised and refined, alongside day-to-day utilisation of available resources. For example, a large section of bark would be cut from a tree to make up a canoe of approximately 12-14 feet in length; however the tree would recover from this process due to the precision and economy of the cut. This contrasted with the ring barking technique introduced by Europeans to aid in the clear-felling of forests, or for the construction of dwellings and vessels of transportation.

The attraction of Illawarra as a result of its riches - both aesthetic and natural - continued well after the breakdown of traditional Aboriginal society in the mid nineteenth century. The first generation of white settlers were, by the 1830s, referring to the region as 'the Garden of New South Wales', reflecting the widespread agricultural and pastoral exploitation of the coastal plain, and to Wollongong as the new 'Brighton', after the English seaside resort of their homeland. Development of the area quickly resulted in substantial profits for landlords such as Henry Osborne, Charles Throsby Smith and Robert Marsh Westmacott between 1828-51. Subsequent generations have participated in the transformation of this nineteenth century garden into a twentieth century industrial complex, with the resultant success soundly based upon the use of local resources. Since 1849 coal has formed the basis for continuing industrial development, whilst throughout the century timber, wheat, corn, cattle and dairy products were the commodities in demand.

A discussion of the use by Europeans of the Illawarra environment will be left to subsequent authors. This chapter will deal with its employment by the local Aboriginal people in everyday life and ceremony up until the middle part of the nineteenth century, when, following the arrival of the First Fleet at Sydney in 1788, the number of native inhabitants was greatly reduced and traditional society was irrevocably broken down, culminating in its substantial disappearance by the turn of the century.

### **The Arrival of the Thurrawal (5)**

Based upon oral and written testimony from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sources, plus archaeological evidence and modern radio-carbon dating techniques, we know that Aboriginal people have occupied the area of coastal Australia now known as Illawarra for at least 20,000 years. In other parts of the continent evidence of habitation extends beyond 50,000 years BP, up to perhaps 100,000 years BP. (6)

Precisely how and when Aboriginal people arrived in Illawarra is unknown. One scenario suggests that the occupation of Australia some 50,000+ years ago followed a coastal trend, moving south from Asia and spreading inland only during recent times (approximately 5000 years ago). The Aboriginal view is that life originated in Australia during the Dreamtime and that this land is the origin of civilisation, analogous to the western biblical tradition of a Garden of Eden. In light of recent archaeological studies and long held Aboriginal beliefs, it is likely that a geographical region such as Illawarra, lying on the coast and rich in natural resources to sustain a relatively large population, would have served as one of the earliest sites of occupation. Oral tradition indicates that the first people arrived in Illawarra by sea, and not overland. This event is described in a number of accounts, most notably as the Gang-man-gang or Billen-Billen (Windang Island) dreaming story. (7)

### **Arrival of the Thurrawal Tribe in Australia**

In the remote past all the animals that are now in Australia lived in another land beyond the sea. They were at that time human creatures, and resolved to leave that country in a canoe, and come to the hunting-grounds in which they are at present.

The whale was much larger than any of the rest, and had a canoe of great dimensions; but he would not lend it to any of his fellows, who had small canoes, which were unfit for use far from the land. The other people, therefore, watched in the hope that an opportunity might present itself of the whale leaving the boat, so that they could get it, and start away on their journey; but he always kept a strict guard over it.

The most intimate friend of the whale was the starfish, and he conspired with the other people to take the attention of the whale away from his canoe, and so give them a chance to steal it, and start away across the ocean. So, one day, the starfish said to the whale, "You have a great many lice on your head; let me catch them and kill them for you." The whale, who had been

very much pestered with the parasites, readily agreed to his friend's kind offer, and tied up his canoe alongside a rock, on which they then went and sat down. The starfish immediately gave the signal to some of the co-conspirators, who soon assembled in readiness to go quietly into the canoe as soon as the whale's attention was taken off it.

The starfish then commenced his work of removing the vermin from the whale's head, which he held in his lap, while the other people all got quickly into the canoe, and rowed off. Every now and then the whale would say, "Is my canoe all right?" The starfish, who had provided himself with a piece of bark to have ready by his side, answered: "Yes, this is it which I am tapping with my hand", at the same time hitting the bark, which gave the same sound of the bark of the canoe. He then resumed his occupation, scratching vigorously about the whale's ears, so that he could not hear the splashing of the oars in the water.

The cleaning of the whale's head and the assurances on the safety of the canoe went on with much garrulity on the part of the starfish, until the people had rowed off a considerable distance from the shore, and were nearly out of sight. Then the patience of the whale becoming exhausted, he insisted upon having a look at his canoe to make quite sure that everything was right. When he discovered that it was gone, and saw all the people rowing away in it as fast as they could go, he became very angry, and vented his fury upon the starfish, whom he beat unmercifully, and tore him almost to pieces.

Jumping into the water, the whale then swam away after his canoe, and the starfish, mutilated as he was, rolled off the rock, on which they had been sitting, into the water, and lay on the sand at the bottom till he recovered. It was this terrible attack of the whale which gave the starfish his present ragged and torn appearance; and his forced seclusion on the sand under the water gave him the habit of keeping near the bottom always afterwards.

The whale pursued the fugitives, and in his fury spurted the water into the air through a wound in the head received during his fight with the starfish, a practice which he has retained ever since. When the people in the canoe saw him coming after them, the weaker-ones were very much afraid, and said: "He is gaining upon us, and will surely overtake us, and drown us everyone." But the native bear, who was in charge of the oars, said, "Look at my strong arms. I am able to pull the canoe fast enough to make good our escape!" and he demonstrated his prowess by making additional efforts to move more rapidly through the water.

This voyage lasted several days and nights, until at length land was sighted on ahead, and a straight line was made for it. On getting alongside the shore, all the people landed from the canoe sat down to rest themselves. But the native companion, who had always been a great fellow for dancing and jumping about, danced upon the bottom of the canoe until he made a hole in it with his feet, after which he himself got out of it, and shoved it a little way from the shore, where it settled down in the water, and became the small island now known as Gan-man-gang, near the entrance of Lake Illawarra into the ocean.

When the whale arrived shortly afterwards, and saw his canoe sunk close to the shore, he turned back along the coast, where he and his descendants have remained ever since.

Accounts such as Gang-man-gang record the true history of the local people, in a form which has both literal and spiritual meaning, and which caters to the oral mode of transmission. The use of Dreamtime animals to represent individuals reinforces totemic associations which were an important part of Aboriginal spirituality and its intimate connection with nature. The Dreamtime is at the core of Aboriginal spiritual belief - it has no beginning, no end, and does not recognise time linearly, as in days, months and years. According to those beliefs. The Dreamtime is sometimes represented as referring to past events or pure mythology, however it is a continuous phenomenon and therefore more appropriate to refer to it as 'the dreaming'. The Aboriginal people of the Illawarra call their dreaming the Alcheringa. The main creator spirit of the Illawarra is Biamie (from which is derived the word Kiama). Biamie sent his two sons to the earth, one was Duramulun, the law-giver, who, during the dreaming, taught the local people traditional laws and customs related to kinship, totems, religion and social observances. Dreaming stories relating to all aspects of the local culture have survived, including those on the creation of the Illawarra landscape, e.g. 'The Story of the Five Islands'(8), and other aspects of the environment such as the night sky and the weather. Elements of the language, including word lists and grammar, have also come down to us via the historical record and the descendants of the original Illawarra people.

## The Story of the Five Islands

In the Alcheringa, Oola-boola-woo, the West Wind, lived on top of Merrigong (the Illawarra Range) With the West Wind were his six little daughters Mimosa, Wilga, Lilli Pilli, Wattle, Clematis and Geera.

Sometimes the children's cousins, who lived in a seaside camp just north of Red Point, came up the mountain for a visit. The little children brought gifts of fish, pretty sea-shells, fruit and flowers, but Mimosa, an unpleasant child, was sulky and disagreeable to the visitors. When her sisters played and laughed with their cousins, Mimosa scratched and fought. Oola-boola-woo was so annoyed at his daughter's rude behaviour he snatched off the piece of the mountain upon which she sat, and threw it out to the sea.

How strange to see a large piece of rock flying through the air with the little black girl, Mimosa, clinging to it! Plop! went the great rock into the sea, giving Mimosa a shower bath, which cooled her naughty temper. "Whoosh, gurgle, goggle," she cried, coughing and choking. She looked about and was startled to see she was some distance from the land. In fact, she was on an island, to which neither her sisters nor her friends could swim, for fear of sharks. Poor Mimosa! Too late she regretted her naughtiness. Day after day she sat on the island, until she turned into a mermaid, slid into the sea and swam about.

Mimosa's fate should have been a lesson to her sisters, but, bye and bye, they grew lazy, careless and disobedient. One evening Oola-boola-woo, the West Wind, came home, at sunset, to find Wilga lying on a warm rock, playing with a pet lizard. She had not washed her face or combed her hair, nor had she tidied the house. Oola-boola-woo felt that his patience was at an end. He had had a hard day blowing up dust storms in the west and helped to fan a great bushfire, near Appin, so he was tired.

Taking a big breath, he blew Wilga and her rock out to sea. How surprise the people in the camp were next morning, to see two islands in the sea, not far from the coast. It wasn't long until Lilli Pilli, Wattle and Clematis were blown out to sea, on pieces of rock so that there were five islands, with five little mermaids sunning themselves.

So Geera was the only child left in Oola-boola-woo's home on the mountain top. How lonely she was! Her father was often away, so there was no one to talk to. There was no one to play with, for the children in the camp had long grown tired of climbing the mountain side to visit the unruly family, on the top. Geera sat hunched, with her arms around her ankles, gazing down at the smoke of the blacks' camp, or staring out at the Five Islands. Year after year she sat, so still and quiet she turned to stone. Dust and dead leaves fell upon her, grass and wild flowers grew over her, and so she became part of the mountain range. She is now known as Mount Keira.

When Aboriginal people arrived in Illawarra over 20,000 years ago Australia was in the middle of an Ice Age - the climate was colder, a land bridge existed between the continent and Tasmania, giant marsupial megafauna inhabited the coastal fringes, and the coastline extended some 10 kilometres to the east as the sea level was as much as 100 metres below its present level. When the Ice Age came to an end around 15,000 years ago, and the last of the megafauna became extinct (c.5000 years BP), though continued to live on in dreaming stories (viz. the Bunyip and local Wallanthagang legends), the climate in Illawarra gradually reached a state similar to present-day conditions. In such an environment local Aboriginal society was able to evolve to a degree similar to that encountered by Europeans during the second half of the eighteenth century. Unfortunately only small segments of the ancient lore of that pre-invasion society were ever recorded by the invaders, or survived with the descendants of the original inhabitants.

In trying to recreate and understand the complexities of traditional Aboriginal society in Illawarra, comparisons can be made with other coastal communities of eastern Australia. However to a certain degree that which existed in Illawarra was unique. Peter Turbet's *The Aborigines of the Sydney District Before 1788* (9) is perhaps the best attempt at this, presenting a succinct summary of the most important aspects of Aboriginal life and culture to the immediate north. It uses numerous examples from, and is applicable to, the Illawarra and South Coast people. The recent archaeological work of Caryll Sefton and the Illawarra Prehistory Group is also significant. (10)

## **Aboriginal Economy and Society**

The traditional Aboriginal people of Illawarra were a hunter gatherer society wherein the division of labour was based upon gender and age. Men hunted on land and fished with spears or line from canoes, while women gathered vegetable products, shell fish, and likewise fished with shell hook and line, nets, or spear. Accounts of women diving for lobsters off the entrance to the Shoalhaven River are known. There are numerous historical reference to Aborigines fishing in the Illawarra region, utilising the local creeks, lagoons, wetlands and nearshore marine environment. Englishman Barron Field, during a visit to Illawarra in October 1823, recorded an account of Aborigines in their canoes night fishing off Red Point with the aid of torchlight. Robert Marsh Westmacott, a local settler, in 1848 published a description and lithographic view of Aborigines catching fish in Condon's Creek, just south of Bass Point. A rather novel method was employed: the creek was dammed at the downstream end; bark was stripped off a nearby Dog Tree and wrapped in bundles which were then immerse in water and placed over a blazing fire; as they become hot the bundles emitted a strong odour. Whilst in this state they were thrown in the water and shortly thereafter the fish would float to the surface, stupefied. They would then be gathered up, allowed to recover, and eaten.

Education was very important because the children represented the future of the Dreaming. This process began at an early age with the telling of Dreaming stories to educate and inform the children about Aboriginal values such as respecting elders and Aboriginal social structures, and being able to identify clan connections and responsibilities. During this initial stage it was the Aboriginal women who were primarily responsible for education of the young. They had distinct teaching styles which included drawing in the sand to illustrate stories, making animal tracks with their hands so the children could recognise those tracks later on in life, and using string made out of fibres from trees to tell stories.

As a coastal dwelling, hunter-gatherer society, the Illawarra people survived on a rich diet of seafood, local animal life such as kangaroo, wallaby and possum, and a wide variety of plant life, which was used not only for nourishment but also as medicinal aids and in ceremonies as the basis for body ornaments. In everyday life they made use of the coastal, escarpment and back-escarpment environments, giving rise to a mixed economy based on fishing and hunting.

Economy as such - as in the use of money and the accumulation of wealth and property - was non-existent in Aboriginal Australia prior to 1788, and European economic concepts had no initial appeal. Land and goods were not brought or sold, though there were isolated examples of bartering for items such as axe heads and ceremonial attire. Wars of conquest were unknown because of tribal and family links to individual parcels of land. The Aborigines were independently minded, resilient, and refused to adopt European values. For example, the Five Islands people proudly displayed their distinctive body markings at tribal gatherings and during corroborees and conflicts, as a sign of both unity and uniqueness. (11) Any form of assimilation was fought from day one by all levels of Aboriginal society, yet the European invaders saw no other way of dealing with these people, coming as they were from a position of imagined racial and intellectual superiority, strict social hierarchy, and religious intolerance.

Food, shelter and implements were shared amongst members of the tribal or family group. In this largely patriarchal society status was based upon rites of passage, age, and knowledge. All were equal, though due respect was given to recognised elders, male or female. Women played an important role in the day to day survival of the family and tribal group. The first European observers considered their treatment by males as harsh, and this worsened as a result of introduced drugs such as alcohol and opium, and the corresponding breakdown of traditional society. A visiting surveyor in 1825 noted that Illawarra women would be compelled by the men to fish, and if unsuccessful, they would be beaten. Marriage betrothal was arranged during the male initiation rite, often resulting in the attachment of young women to elderly men. Polygamy was widely practised, though divorce was also available.

Recent archaeological studies, involving extensive investigations of local sites such as middens, burial mounds, scarred trees, surface and rock overhang campsites, and cave and rock art localities reveal much about everyday life. As summarised in Sefton (12), they indicate a nomadic lifestyle, moving camp according to the seasonal availability of their food supplies. The diet was based on coastal resources such as fish, shellfish and marine birds for protein, land mammals, reptiles, plus vegetable material such as fruit, leaves, roots and flowers of plants, of which no real archaeological evidence survives.

The local people basically went about naked, using ornately carved and decorated possum skin rugs for warmth and protection. Loin cloths were also used. As added protection the Aborigines smeared their bodies with fats, grease and fish oil, plus a coating of sand, dirt and ashes to act as a barrier against

mosquitoes, flies, and variations in temperature and climate. An individual so covered repulsed many Europeans upon first contact, the latter unable to appreciate the practical utility of such a protective coating. For decoration and ceremonial purposes they adorned themselves with feathers, kangaroo teeth or head bands, and beads formed of short pieces of reed or teeth. Men had their noses perforated and bones, the thickness of a quill about 10 cms long, pushed through them. The knocking out of one of the front teeth signified passage through initiation rites. Similarly, women has a section of their little finger removed during their youth.'

Day-to-day existence centred around hunting and food gathering, eating and sleeping. They had few possessions as such, apart from that which could be carried, comprising hunting implements and, in the case of women, a small bag bearing cooking utensils. Individual campsites within the tribal area were utilised over a long period of time, resulting in the large midden accumulations which survive to the present day and form such an important resources for the archaeological study of local Aboriginal society. According to Sefton, 'the tool kit of the Aborigines in the Illawarra region was complex and adapted to each specialised environment. The basic implements of a hunter-gatherer society can be divided into two groups: 'extractive' and 'maintenance' tools. The extractive group covers all those tools, weapons and containers used in obtaining food, while the maintenance tools include all tools used to make or maintain the extractives. Materials used were stone, shell, bone, and a wide variety of vegetable materials such as wood, gum, vine, hair and bark. Extractive implements included ground edge hatchets, shields, spear throwers, boomerangs, digging sticks, bark canoes, fishing lines, shell fish hooks, baskets and water containers, together with several types of spears used for fishing and hunting. Maintenance tools included large pebble choppers, fish hook files, scrapers, adzes and chisels. Some tools, such as ground edge axes, were used for both gathering food and making other artefacts'. (13)

For shelter, the local people used caves, rock overhangs, or the more common gunyah, made out of local timber and erected as needed. Gunyahs in the Jervis Bay area were often quite elaborate, similar in size and form to the tepee of the American Indian, though made entirely of local wood and plant fibre. Judging from the evidence of remnant campsites, near shore habitation was common. Tribal and family groups would gather in sheltered areas by the beach, perhaps in the lee of largish sand dunes, and close to rock platforms and creek or lagoonal outlets, where both salt- and fresh-water fish and shellfish could be easily acquired. There were few caves or rock overhangs available on the Illawarra coastal plain, though they were available within and beyond the escarpment. As the Illawarra people tended to bury their dead at such campsites, i.e. within nearshore sand dunes or by the edges of creeks and streams, the rise in sea level over the last 15,000 years, and subsequent movement of the shoreline westerly, has resulted in the obliteration of many of the oldest coastal camp and burial sites. As a result, some of the richest extant archaeological sites in the region are located in the forested area west of the escarpment, with cave art and rock engravings also common.

Aboriginal people resided in groups at specific camping grounds and were made up exclusively of family members. For this reason, reference is made to the traditional peoples groups as 'clans' instead of 'tribes'. A tribe can be made up of people who are not related. At these camping places older children had the responsibility of looking after younger children and older people. They also had the task of collecting fire wood. Girls and young children would go with their mother to learn about the bush foods in their area: how to find them, what they can be used for (e.g. bush medicine), how to obtain them, and when. Older boys would go with their father and learn how to hunt. According to who they were they may learn how to make boomerangs and other weaponry. They also learnt how to make nets and hooks, and were given instructions on how to use these implements and under what circumstances.

When a child reached puberty (adolescence) they would be ready for initiation. Most of the written material about initiation relates to men's business. For many years it was erroneously assumed that women did not have spiritual concerns. The Aboriginal people in the Illawarra and South Coast had specific areas set aside for initiation ceremonies, with many identified by **bora rings**. A huge circle was marked off using rocks and it was here that the initiates would begin the process of initiation. At this stage all members of the clan were involved. Even the painting of the initiates was a part of the ceremony. Every Aboriginal clan in Australia had distinct markings so that when a number of different clans, sometimes from all over the country, would meet for a corroboree, each person was immediately recognisable according to clan affiliation. After the initiates had been painted and the initiation dances and songs had been completed the boys would go with the men while the girls would go with the older women. Outside of such formal occasions, such as while undertaking daily chores, the women would teach the dreaming to the children. The following story is an example.



Near the entrance to Lake Illawarra are two peculiarly shaped rocks. Both bear a remarkable resemblance to a woman, one carrying a dilly bag that Aboriginal women so often carried hanging by a rush of fur string over one shoulder.

The day was away back in the Alcheringa (Past Dreaming) and rain was falling and becoming heavier. Two young Aboriginal women broke traditional law. They went without company out of the sight of the old women along the beach and round the bluff and even in to a cave.

During their absence the people of the clan had moved to the shelter of a pretty grove. Meanwhile the young women were protected as well in the cave. Sleep came upon them and when they awoke it was quite dark.

They had to wait until daylight and when they went back to the place of the camp all they could see was a dog. The dog had a message for the girls. It told them that they had to dance until the return of their people, but they failed, and as soon as they stopped dancing, they were turned into stone.

All down the years, every time people passed these stones some old women who knew the story told it to a group of girls and in that way it was taught to them that no young person should wander out of the sight of their guardians.

Communication between clans was very important throughout the Illawarra and South Coast region, and whenever word of an important ceremony or message needed to be sent a runner would be used. The runner would carry the message to all other clans and in turn other runners would continue to carry the message until all clans were notified. Message sticks were made of wood or stone.

Aboriginal art was another way that Aboriginal people communicated with each other. Quite often the Aboriginal art depicted on cave walls and rock faces was left as a message to other Aboriginal people advising them of foods in the area. The most common extant Aboriginal art technique in the forested areas west of the escarpment areas is the charcoal drawing. The most common motifs are kangaroos and human figures, but birds, fish, wombats, lizards, possums, tortoises, snakes and tracks are also featured. In the Illawarra region rock engravings are common, and extend inland approximately 12 kilometres. The subjects usually depicted include life-size frontal human figures, human figures in profile, kangaroos, snakes, birds, whales, fish, tracks and symbols.

Apart from charcoal, red and white ochre and clay were utilised. The red ochre or white clay is mixed with water or adhesive and blown by mouth or pipe against the hand laid upon the rock surface. The hands of children and adults feature and the purpose of these hand stencils are not known. That the hands of children are very common in the rock shelters indicates that the whole family including the children used every corner of the catchment areas, even the very rough terrain. The Aboriginal art we see today is only a remnant of what was there when the area was occupied by the Aborigines.

The traditional Aboriginal people of the Illawarra had a rich ceremonial life, with ceremonies held at specific places such as Mount Keira. Many aspects of daily life were entwined in ceremony, and specific places were set aside for tasks such as eating, refuse, camps, burials, etc.

Aboriginal women and men each had their own sacred business. This included childbirth, division of labour, initiation and dreaming. Women gave birth at a birthing site and were attended by older Aboriginal women. In regards to the division of labour, some implements were regarded as being a part of either women's or men's business. Women's implements included dilly bags, digging sticks, fishing hooks made from shell and stone implements. Women had a vast knowledge of bush foods and medicines. For example, the roots of *Alocasia macrorrhizos* were pounded and then roasted in fire, and the juice was used medicinally to treat rheumatism and nettle stings. *Alphitonia excelsa* leaves were used for red eye problems. The *Cymbidium* species orchid was eaten raw or roasted after husks removed. Tubers were chewed to treat dysentery. *Eupomatia laurina* guava fruit was eaten raw. Inner Native bark was made into fishing lines. *Imperata cylindrica* grass roots were eaten by the children as sugarcane and the leaves were used for making dilly bags. *Lomandra longifolia* leaf bases are also used to make dilly bags. Blossoms were sucked for nectar, paper bark water was obtained from bugles, and Bracelet Honey-myrtle bark was used for mosquito proof houses and for bedding. Young leaves were bruised in water and drunk for headaches, colds and general sickness.

Men also utilised bush resources as a part of men's business. For example, the leaves of the *Ficus coronata* (Sandpaper Fig) were used for smoothing weapons while the fibre from the bark of the *Livistona australis* tree was used for making fishing lines and the leaves were used to make shelters. Fire was made by rubbing two pieces of the trunk of the *Xanthorrhoea* species together while the bark of the *Polyscias murrayi* was heated and pounded to use as a kind of cement.

### **The Coming of Strangers - 'When the sky fell down'**

The news of the arrival of the First Fleet at Sydney in January 1788 was met with much consternation and foreboding throughout southeastern Australia. Dreaming stories quickly circulated to explain the significance of this event. The following, from northern Victoria, is typical of the symbolism used:

The solid vault of the sky rested on props placed at the extreme edge of the earth. News came that the eastern prop (near Sydney) was rotting and if gifts were not sent to the guardian the sky would fall, and the white-skinned ghosts or reincarnations of all the blackfellows who ever lived would break through from the spirit world to swarm over the land. The landscape and all of its Dreamtime associations would be transformed. Everybody would be killed. (14)

The sky was indeed falling in around Sydney, and evil spirits in the form of soldiers, convicts and settlers were swarming over the land. The die had been cast, and the Aboriginal nation was not unaware of the likely consequences of the invasion.

Prior to this catastrophe, Illawarra Aboriginal society had existed largely undisturbed until visitations by European explorers such as Captain James Cook in 1770. Before Cook, Asian, Polynesian and even European (Portuguese, Spanish) explorers may have visited the area, though there is no direct evidence for this apart from the Dieppe map of 1592, which supposedly charts the Illawarra coastline. (15)

The sailby of the bark **Endeavour** in April 1770 is noteworthy is that correspondents on board were the first to record brief notes about the local people and environment. They made observations of numerous campfires, on the blackness of the natives, and of a luxuriant vegetation and varied landscape. The most interesting detail is associated with the unsuccessful attempt by Cook and party to land near Woonona Point on Saturday, 28 April 1770. Before being forced back to their ship by a turbulent surf, they observed a group of people on the beach and nearby rocky headland, awaiting the landing, with bark canoes laid up on shore.

The following day the **Endeavour** crew were more successful in their efforts, and stepped ashore at Botany Bay, where the local inhabitants were immediately encountered. Somewhat surprisingly they indicated that the Europeans were not welcome and, as a result, the first shots were fired in anger at the Aborigines by Cook and his men. This was to prove a portentous introduction to European civilisation for the people of eastern Australia.

Up and down the coast the **Endeavour** - this strange 'monster with white wings' - was observed, and stories of the encounters at Woonona, Botany Bay and Endeavour River were told. However life went on much as before for another 18 years, until the arrival of the First Fleet at Botany Bay in January 1788. This event was to change forever the way of life of the Illawarra people as it had existed for some 20,000+ years. It was to result in the almost total destruction of the associated ancient culture within a single generation.

News of the arrival of the soldiers and convicts at Botany Bay would have reached the Illawarra Aborigines very quickly, such was the efficiency of their communication system and intimate familial links between the Illawarra and Sydney people. When Governor Arthur Phillip decided to move his base north to Port Jackson, it is highly likely that Illawarra people were amongst those hundreds who lined the shores of Sydney Harbour angrily brandishing spears and chanting "whurra" [Go home!] as the ships moved towards Sydney Cove to disgorge their cargo of approximately 1000 men, women and children.

There were a number of immediate effects - both direct and indirect - on the Illawarra people as a result of the British invasion. Stories of the white-skinned foreigners - the red-coated 'sojas' and wretched convicts - and of their strange customs soon spread. Tales were told of the wearing of clothes, erection of buildings, employment of horses, tilling of the soil, and use of domesticated animals. Obvious to all was their uncivilised barbarity, both towards each other (best exemplified by the widespread use of flogging and the hangman's noose), and towards the Aboriginal people of the Sydney region, and the use of firearms. Abuses of the land and environment, as in cutting down trees, polluting streams, and killing wildlife, were

especially felt. The bush was the basis of an Aboriginal subsistence lifestyle, and the strangers showed it little respect. Such behaviour was looked upon with both interest and abhorrence by the local people.

This mixture of curiosity and dread saw Aboriginal people from far off areas arriving in Sydney to observe first-hand the possible end of civilisation as they knew it. One such traveller, upon reaching Illawarra, seeing the ocean for the first time (believing it to be the point at which the sky was falling), and being informed of the barbarity of the invaders to the north, returned to his people with news that the portents were true and catastrophe was imminent.

Those in Illawarra would have had to come to terms with the changing situation relatively quickly as there were direct and immediate effects of the invasion to the north. Escaped convicts early on made their way from Sydney to a safe and secluded Illawarra, located just 50 miles to the south, though the journey was difficult through dense forest and over rugged terrain. When explorers George Bass and Matthew Flinders visited Lake Illawarra in March 1796 they were informed by the local people that a number of such escapees, both male and female, were living amongst them and growing potatoes and corn. This news was not widely disseminated at the time, for it was in the best interests of the authorities at Sydney to continue to instil fear amongst the convicts with regards to the Aborigines in adjacent, unsettled areas. Bogus stories of cannibalism and Aboriginal atrocities were widely disseminated, acting as psychological walls to the then small penal settlement.

Even though George Bass had verified the existence of large reserves of coal at Illawarra as early as 1797, difficulties of access meant that the Newcastle deposits were the first to be exploited. Scientists such as botanist Robert Brown were also early visitors to Illawarra (in 1805), collecting specimens of local flora and fauna. Much was therefore known of the region early on in the history of the colony, before any official settlement took place.

A more insidious and dramatic effect of the arrival of the First Fleet was the introduction of smallpox and other diseases to Australia as a result of infected convicts and soldiers, and infected vials brought by surgeons from England. Tragically, in April of 1789 a disastrous smallpox plague spread throughout the Aborigines of the Sydney region. Within a short period of time at least half of the population was dead - carcasses lined the harbour shores and whole families were wiped out. Many of the infected, not knowing what was killing their people, fled, in turn introducing the disease to areas such as the Hunter Valley and Illawarra.

The precise effects of this plague on the fabric of local Aboriginal society are unknown, however it is most likely that, as a consequence, Aboriginal culture and ceremony in the Cumberland Plain and immediate environs suffered catastrophic change before white men had even set foot upon the land. Smallpox did not discriminate - all sectors of society were affected, from the youngest child to the frailest elder. Other foreign diseases such as influenza, tuberculosis and venereal disease also took their toll as the frontier expanded out from Sydney. Just as had happened previously in the Americas and Africa during periods of conquest, the European invaders of Australia brought with them a deadly calling card.

## **The European Invasion**

The history books tell us that Illawarra was 'discovered' by white explorers such as Charles Throsby and his convict servant Joe Wyld in 1815, almost thirty years after the arrival of the First Fleet at Sydney, though Wyld later claimed an even earlier discovery date for himself. (16) In light of our knowledge of Aboriginal communication networks, the earlier unofficial contact with Europeans and escaped convicts, and the intimate familial links between Illawarra and Sydney Aborigines, such a statement is now looked upon with some degree of ridicule. If Illawarra had been discovered at all, then the discovery had taken place some 20,000+ years earlier and involved Aboriginal explorers.

Illawarra, or the Five Islands district as it was then called, had been known to those at Port Jackson since the earliest days of the settlement, with American whalers working off the coast throughout the 1790s, and a number of Aborigines from the region, such as Gome-boak and Dilba, being noted in contemporary accounts. During that decade and the next, encounters between whalers and the local people at Jervis Bay and Eden resulted in a number of massacres, and Aboriginal warriors such as Botany Bay's Pemulwey led resistance campaigns against the Port Jackson settlement. The Illawarra people would not have been unaware of these events.

The so-called European 'discovery' of the region in 1815 merely coincided with the decision by authorities to extend the boundaries of white settlement beyond Sydney and exploit the pastures and other resources known to exist there. Following the arrival of Governor Macquarie at Sydney in 1810, Illawarra was opened up to cedar getters and, with the advent of drought on the Cumberland Plain during 1814-16, to pastoralists such as Charles Throsby and his nephew Charles Throsby Smith, who subsequently settled at Wollongong in 1823.

By the time Throsby drove his cattle into Illawarra via the old Aboriginal trail down the mountain at Bulli in 1815, the local people had had many years experience in dealing with their new masters. As a result, or perhaps reflecting their very nature, they were largely seen as peaceful (read: harmless). Thus, when Governor Macquarie in 1816 unofficially declared war on the Aborigines of the Sydney region and implemented a secret punitive military campaign to rid the Cumberland Plain of its Aboriginal population, he specifically excluded the Illawarra people from any action. Elsewhere, during April of 1816 Macquarie instructed his soldiers to seek out the Aborigines and 'strike them with terror ..... drive them to a distance from the settlements of the White Men ... inflict terrible and exemplary punishments' so as the Government would not be seen to show cowardice in the face of perceived Aboriginal aggression, an aggression which, in fact, was the direct result of barbarities practised upon them by white settlers and soldiers. Macquarie's regiments were to take any captives as 'Prisoners of War', and hang from prominent trees those males killed while resisting, providing a grotesque warning to their compatriots and families.

As part of the campaign, early on the morning of 17 April 1816, and in complete darkness, an Aboriginal camp at Appin was attacked by a detachment of the 46th Regiment. Some 14 Aborigines were massacred, including elderly people, men, women and children. Macquarie labelled the incident 'unfortunate.'

Though the Illawarra Aborigines were not seen as any threat, a show of force was nevertheless called for. A detachment of the 46th briefly set up camp at Red Point (Hill 60, Port Kembla) during April-May, it being a most prominent and sacred piece of land to the local people. Following this punitive campaign aimed at reinforcing the new limits of the frontier, settlers were now free to move into Illawarra and the initial land grants were issued the following December.

Charles Throsby Smith, the first official settler at Wollongong in 1823, later reminiscing in 1863 noted that when he first came to the district in 1816, '...the Aborigines were never particularly hostile to the whites. The Wollongong tribe numbered about one hundred. They were very much finer looking than one would suppose by the few miserable specimens now left [in 1863]; but in the early days they had abundance of fish, kangaroos, possums, ducks and other wild fowl.... The Aborigines owned the authority of Chiefs, in a certain degree. 'Old Bundle' was the name given to the chief who claimed Wollongong as his particular domain - and no end of tribute have I paid to his Majesty, in the shape of tea, sugar, flour, meat, &c. Another Chief, called 'Old Timberry', ruled another portion of the tribe; but these chiefs and their adherents were by no means confined to particular localities. Timberry, however, claimed Berkeley. They roamed through the district. At this time they were at war with the Kiama and Shoalhaven blacks.' (17)

The local people clearly recognised the value of their land - it was sacred and an integral part of their own individuality and well-being. One of the early surveyors to work in Illawarra during 1825 observed that the Aborigines 'have a notion of the rights of real property, the lands which particular families occupy being marked out and bequeathed from the father to his children.' Over the millennia Aborigines had built up a system to protect their title, a system whereby you entered upon another's land only upon invitation or after following due protocol. Land rights claims were put to the first white settlers and local authorities, however to no avail. There were also inter-tribal conflicts over not only land disputes, but the appropriation of women and other violations of tribal law. Such conflicts occurred even after white settlement had become entrenched.

In 1830 a 'battle' took place at Fairy Meadow between the Wollongong and Bong Bong (Berrima) tribes over the matter of a woman. Apparently some 1500 people were involved, with anywhere from 70-100 Aboriginal men killed during the affray. As late as June 1842, local elder Charley Hooka (Geroone), whose territory included the western shore of Lake Illawarra, was killed by Aboriginal men from the Pigeon House tribe. His head was taken as a trophy and tradition has it that Hooka died defending the white settlers of Illawarra from attack. The ornate breastplate original given him by white authorities is now in the National Museum of Australia.

It has been estimated that in 1820 there were some 3000 Aborigines in Illawarra, including the Shoalhaven. This number had dwindled to 98 at Wollongong by 1846. (18) The effects of white settlement were clear - with Aboriginal society and culture irrelevant to the plans and aspirations of the new masters, the local

people were seen as a nuisance, even a pest, and no thought was given to land rights or compensation, apart from the annual issue of a blanket on the Queen's Birthday.

The effects of the issue of land grants in Illawarra after 1816 were immediate. European farming and grazing practices resulted in the destruction of traditional Aboriginal food supplies. Kangaroos, wallabies and possum, along with many other native animals and birds, were frightened away by the cattle and sheep, and hunted by the Europeans with their guns, horses and dogs; native grasses and plants were destroyed by stock feeding, to be replaced by crops of corn and wheat; vast deforestation programs were implemented by settlers and their convict servants. The land which the Aborigines had nurtured for thousands of years was now being ravaged. Their very survival was threatened.

With trees felled, pastures cultivated, and fences erected, the European concept of trespass was introduced. Vicious dogs and the gun reinforced the freehold rights of the new landowners. Cattle, sheep, oxen and other strange animals roamed freely; exotic plant species grew wild. Protestations from local elders came to nought. Aboriginal women were kidnapped, abused and used as servants; children were taken from their parents; men and boys massacred. Individual Aborigines who, following on a strong tradition of communal living and sharing of resources, sought to make use of the foreigner's harvest or one or two of his cattle or sheep, were deemed to be stealing and harshly dealt with, often to the point of death.

In one such instance, on the morning of Sunday, 15 April 1822, an Illawarra Aboriginal woman was fired at, and set upon by dogs, whilst in the act of appropriating corn from a local settler near Lake Illawarra. Whilst a number of convicts were initially involved in the attack, one Seth Hawker later returned to the scene, shot the woman in the stomach, and again set the dogs upon her. As a result she died in the field, unattended. Hawker was subsequently tried in Sydney for wilful murder, and acquitted by the Judge Advocate, with the women's act of theft clearly identified as culpable and Hawker commended for 'endeavouring to protect that property that was confided to his care'.

As non-Christians whose testimony was inadmissible in Court, the Aborigines had no recourse to the legal system for real justice or compensation, and the authorities were loath to act on their behalf. The Judge in the Seth Hawker case, after acquitting the prisoner, nevertheless went to some pains to point out that 'the Aboriginal natives have as much right to expect justice at the hands of British law, as Europeans; and that ever such would be the case; in this instance it was exemplified.' Noble sentiments, though hollow in reality.

Those who survived barbarities during those first decades of the introduction of European civilisation to Illawarra had a number of options - stay on and work for their new masters in servile positions; move to other parts of the State where traditional society was yet to be attacked; or live on in camps at the fringes of white settlement, maintaining some semblance of independence and link to traditional life. All three options were adopted to varying degrees.

Traditional Aboriginal society in Illawarra had largely disappeared by the time of the goldrushes in 1851, though a number of family groups struggled on in the vicinity of Lake Illawarra and Macquarie Pass. The local people had been almost totally alienated from their land, with no likelihood of change, and farming and grazing had radically altered the natural environment such that traditional hunting and gathering was no longer sustainable. The breakdown of families, kinship, totemic associations and ceremony was also marked.

The last record of a corroboree / initiation rite (bunan ceremony) in Wollongong occurred in the New Year of 1839-40. On that occasion a number of Aborigines from various parts of coastal New South Wales were in attendance. As a new song was acted out in the darkness by people from Kiama, Wollongong, Liverpool, Brisbane Water and Newcastle, a recently arrived Anglican parson by the name of W.B. Clarke observed the proceedings. He recorded the following in his diary:

On inquiry I find the burden of the song to be: "that the white man came to Sydney in ships and landed the horses in the saltwater". It is of such ridiculous subjects that the Blacks of New Holland make their songs - and any trifling event is celebrated by a song. (19)

Few could agree that the white invasion of Aboriginal Australia, as commemorated in that song, was a trifling event! Yet this example reveals the significant gulf which existed between black and white civilisation from the earliest days of white settlement; a gulf in understanding which was to result in the sublimation of one culture by the other, not only in Illawarra, but throughout the rest of the continent as the frontier continued to expand.

## Endnotes

Throughout this chapter widespread use has been made of M.K. Organ's *Illawarra and South Coast Aborigines 1770-1850*. Aboriginal Education Unit, University of Wollongong, 1990; and *Illawarra and South Coast Aborigines 1770-1900*. Unpublished report for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, 1 December 1993. References are to those documents unless otherwise indicated.

1. Barron Field, *Geographical Memoirs on New South Wales*, John Murray, London, 1825. Quoted in Organ, *op cit.*, 1990, pp.132.

2. Burnum Burnum's *Australia*. Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1988; Nicholson, A. and Cane, S. 'Pre-European Coastal Settlement and Use of the Sea', *Australian Archaeology*, 39, 1994, pp.108-117.

3. Organ, M.K., *op cit.*, 1990, pp.lv-lvii.

4. Butlin, N.G. *Our Original Aggression - Aboriginal Populations of Southeastern Australia 1788-1850*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1983.

5. The term Thurrawal (the local word for cabbage palm) was allocated to the indigenous inhabitants of the region by a white anthropologist during the 1890s, as a tribal name, likewise the term Wodi-Wodi (or Waddi-Waddi). Similarly, this century Thurrawal has been used to refer to the language once thought to have been spoken by the people of Illawarra. Refer D.K. Eades, *The Dharawal and Dhurga Languages of the New South Wales South Coast*. Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1976. A number of tribal and language names have been allocated throughout the region and are now widely used.

6. Bowdler, S. "Bass Point - the excavation of a south-east Australian shell midden showing cultural and economic exchange", BA(Hons) thesis, University of Sydney, 1969; Sefton, C. *Aboriginal Cultural Resources Study - Illawarra Region*. Department of Environment and Planning, Sydney, 1981; Flood, J. *Archaeology of the Dreamtime*, Collins, Sydney, 1983.

7. Mathews, R.H. *Folklore of the Australian Aborigines*. Sydney, 1899. This story was given to Mathews by an Aborigine from the Shoalhaven area.

8. This Anglicised Aboriginal story, by 'E.M.', was originally published in the *Illawarra Mercury*, 4 Nov. 1950.

9. Turbet, P. *The Aborigines of the Sydney District before 1788*. Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, 1989.

10. Sefton, C., "Prehistory - The Aboriginal Heritage" in S. Dovers (ed.). *op cit.*, pp.32-6. C.f. Organ, M.K. *op cit.*, 1990 & 1993 for a comprehensive bibliographic listing of relevant archaeological studies.

11. Organ, M.K. *op cit.*, 1993, 1825 tribal markings.

12. Extracted from Sefton, C. *op cit.*, 1981.

13. *ibid.*

14. Massola, A. *Bunjil's Cave: Myths, Legends and Superstitions of the Aborigines of South-eastern Australia*. Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, 1968. C.f. "What Makes the Waves - Arilla of Northern Illawarra", in M.K. Organ. *op cit.*, 1990, pp.lxxviii-lxxxiii.

15. For reference to the Dieppe and the claimed visit to the Illawarra by Portuguese explorers in 1521 refer Lawrence FitzGerald, *Java la grande: the Portuguese Discovery of Australia. The Story of the Portuguese Discovery of Australia circa 1521*, Publishers Pty. Ltd., Hobart, 1984, 155p.

16. 'An extensive rich new Tract of Country, fit for the purposes of pasturage and agriculture, has, some little time since, been discovered, distant about 46 miles to the Southward of this, on a part of the Coast generally known by the name of the 'Five Islands,' but called by the Natives 'Illawarra.' Dispatch, Governor Lachlan Macquarie, Sydney, 12 December 1817. Joe Wyld, in 1836, told the travelling Rev. James Backhouse that he had discovered the Illawarra. No date was given, though he was most likely referring to 1805, when he visited the area as a servant to botanist Robert Brown.

17. Organ, M.K. *op cit.*, 1990, p.133.

18. Mitchell, W. and G. Sherington. *Growing up in the Illawarra*. University of Wollongong, 1984.

19. Organ, M.K. *op cit.*, 1990, p.252.