

SORTING FACT FROM FICTION:

Historical research on the coastal Aboriginal people around Sydney

Keith Vincent Smith

1. Canoe culture

My research over the past 20 years has focused on the history and social life of the Indigenous people who inhabited Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour) and the coast. Aboriginal lifestyle and customs were roughly similar here on the Central Coast of NSW and along most of the eastern coast of Australia.

They lived between the saltwater and the sky. Fish was their chief support and their *nawi* or stringybark canoes, fishing spears used by the men and handlines and shell lures of the women were their most precious possessions.

We built a full-sized replica canoe as a centerpiece for the exhibition **MARI NAWI Aboriginal Odysseys**, which I curated for the State Library of New South Wales in Sydney from August to December in 2010.

Aboriginal bark canoes (*nawi*) were 3 to 4 m long and about 1 m wide, shallow and made from a single sheet of bark, cut while green and bent into shape over a fire. The ends were bunched and tied with cord or vines and the sides were held apart with wooden spacers. Bark for canoes was usually taken from the inner bark of the stringybark gum (*Eucalyptus obliqua*) or from the *goomun* or 'fir tree' (*Casuarina* species).

The ends were bunched and tied with bark cord and the sides held apart by wooden spacers. The drawing by French artist Nicolas-Martin Petit of an Aboriginal couple shows the small fire that burned in the middle of the canoe and the paddles (*narewang*) used to propel them.

The first printed reference to bark canoes at Botany Bay after the arrival of the First Fleet in January 1788 attributed to 'An officer' appeared in London in April 1789. The author scorned the 'despicable' bark canoes of the Sydney area, but praised the skill and boldness of the paddlers, noting that Aboriginal people took their canoes to sea and valued them highly.

2. Seafarers' stories

The MARI NAWI exhibition and my book **MARI NAWI Aboriginal Odysseys** tell the story of Aboriginal men and women who went to sea from Port Jackson in English sailing ships.

The big story or paradigm of this research is a previously unwritten slice of Australia's maritime history. The smaller, personal stories of more than 80 Aboriginal men and women seafarers back up that theme.

The stories of these remarkable people were unknown until now because the evidence and sources are so widely spread: letters, journals, ships' musters, logs and the artwork

(evidence in itself) of portraits, images of ships and ports throughout the world. In re-examining these documents and piecing them together it's possible to return Indigenous people to Australia's shared colonial history.

Our traditional history is one of convicts and explorers.

Until now this has been a secret history.

The Independent newspaper in London called the exhibition '**The secret maritime history of the Aborigines in settling Australia**'.

The ships that at first frightened the Aboriginal people gave them a way of fitting into the colonial society and economy.

They rebuilt their lives.

They sailed beyond the horizon.

They were physically adapted to a life at sea.

They had good eyesight.

They could throw a spear.

They could find water.

They could catch fish.

They knew Aboriginal protocol.

Beyond that they had resilience and a determination to survive.

While Aboriginal men and a few women made the transition from their *nawi* or bark canoes to English sailing ships, illustrations and other evidence show that both kinds of watercraft co-existed in Sydney Cove until the 1830s.

Bundle or Bondel, a 10-year-old orphan whose father had been killed in battle and whose mother was bitten in half by a shark was the first Aboriginal Australian to sail through the heads of Port Jackson and beyond the horizon. He was the forerunner of generations of Aboriginal voyagers who sailed to destinations around the continent and throughout the world.

Bundle attached himself to Captain William Hill of the New South Wales Corps and sailed with Hill to Norfolk Island on the storeship HMS *Supply* in March 1791. He returned in September 1791 on the *Mary Ann*, whose master, Mark Munro, usually hunted whales off Greenland.

Lieutenant William Bradley of HMS *Sirius* said Bundle 'was much pleas'd at the Idea of the Voyage, he is the first who has had confidence & Courage enough to go to Sea'.

Talk with images

Let's look at some of the Aboriginal voyagers from this part of the world – they came from Broken Bay.

Bungaree

After Bennelong, Bungaree or Boongaree (c. 1775–1830) is the best-known Aboriginal voyager. Because the others on board were British, Bungaree became the first Australian to circumnavigate the continent when he accompanied Lieutenant Matthew Flinders on HMS *Investigator* in 1801–03.

The first voyage of 'Bungary' was in May 1798 aboard HMS *Reliance*, from Sydney Cove to Norfolk Island, with Nanbarry and Wingal (from Broken Bay). On this 60-day

round trip Matthew Flinders first met and came to respect Bungaree. One year later, Flinders took Bungaree with him on a survey voyage to Bribie Island and Hervey Bay on the sloop *Norfolk*.

In 1801 Bungaree took part in the establishment of a penal settlement at the Hunter River (now Newcastle). After landing from *Lady Nelson*, Lieutenant-Colonel William Paterson told Governor Philip Gidley King that 'Bonjary ran off ... and has since not returned'.

In May 1804 Bungaree escorted six Aboriginal men returning from Sydney in the ship *Resource*. Marine Lieutenant Charles Menzies valued Bungaree's help in capturing runaway convicts, calling him 'the most Intelligent of that race I have as yet Seen ...' However, in October Menzies reported that convicts had taken revenge by killing Bungaree's father 'in the most brutal manner'.

There is an air of genuine nobility in the expression and bearing of Bungaree in Augustus Earle's oil painting. He stands in a typical pose, his right arm raised, doffing his cocked hat in greeting. Bungaree wears a splendid scarlet jacket with brass buttons and gold lace. His metal gorget hangs from a chain around his neck.

The warships of the British China Squadron, moored near Bennelong Point, evoke Bungaree's seagoing career. In his later life, he relied on visiting ships to provide his people with grog, tobacco and old clothing. He died at Garden Island in 1830 and was buried in a wooden coffin at Rose Bay.

Gnung-a Gnung-a Murremurgan

While Bennelong was in London, his brother-in-law Gnung-a Gnung-a Murremurgan (or Anganangan) twice crossed the vast Pacific Ocean, visiting Norfolk Island, Hawaii, Nootka Sound (now Vancouver, Canada), and the Spanish colonies of the Californian coast.

The round distance Gnung-a Gnung-a traversed was some 25 000 km as the crow flies, but much further in a sailing ship driven by unpredictable winds. He left behind his wife, Warreweer, Bennelong's younger sister. On the first day he ventured into the Sydney Cove settlement, Gnung-a Gnung-a adopted the name 'Collins' from Judge Advocate David Collins.

The 350-ton brig *Daedalus* was ordered to supply the expedition to the north-west coast of North America commanded by Captain George Vancouver (1757–1798). The storeship left Port Jackson on 1 July 1793, reached Nootka on 8 October and met the Royal Navy ships *Discovery* and *Chatham* off San Francisco. Gnung-a Gnung-a sighted the Spanish settlements at Monterey, Santa Barbara (where the ship was met by sea-going Chumash Indians in their canoes) and San Diego.

After leaving North America, Gnung-a Gnung-a spent one month at Kealakekua Bay in Hawaii, where King Kamehameha wanted to buy him, offering canoes, weapons and curiosities.

Musquito (Gnunga Gnung's 's brother)

Musquito, the Broken Bay resistance leader, was first noted, as 'Bush Muschetta', by

the colonial authorities in the *Sydney Gazette* (May 1805). Two months later he and Bulldog, a lad aged 16, were given up by allies of Tedbury (Tjedboro), son of Pemulwuy, and imprisoned in Parramatta gaol.

Earlier in Sydney in 1802, Nicolas-Martin Petit, a young artist with the French scientific expedition commanded by Captain Nicolas Baudin, sketched this Aboriginal man 'painted up' with white circles around his eyes and pipeclay designs on his chest. Petit clearly identified his subject in a pencil caption as *Mousquéda ou Mousquita*.

Advised that Aboriginal peoples were not subject to British law, Governor Philip Gidley King sent Musquito and Bulldog to Norfolk Island as prisoners. They sailed on HMS *Buffalo*, a ship with the figurehead of a kangaroo, which reached the island on 5 September 1805.

King told Captain John Piper that the two Aboriginal convicts should be put to labour, but 'victualled from the Stores'. For many years they were worked as charcoal burners in the penal colony. 'Bull dog' and 'Muskitoe' were included in the *Norfolk Island Return of Inhabitants* at 6 August 1812.

'Moschetto (Port Jackson Native)' was a passenger aboard *Minstrel*, which arrived in Van Diemen's Land on 4 March 1813. Somehow Musquito's devoted brother, Philip, heard about his transfer. 'Philip, Jemmy and Scotchman, Natives' enlisted in the crew of the whaling brig *Active*, which left Port Jackson in May 1813 and twice put into port at Hobart before returning to Sydney on 27 September 1813. Phillip and his wife settled at Bungaree's farm at Georges Head (near Mosman) in 1815.

In October 1817 Lieutenant Governor Sorrell requested that Macquarie repatriate Musquito who had 'been extremely useful and well conducted' and wanted to return to Sydney. In September 1818 Musquito nearly captured the bushranger, Michael Howe, who was killed a month later. Musquito remained in Van Diemen's Land, leading attacks against the settlers.

In 1824 Musquito was captured by an Aboriginal youth called Teague and convicted of the murder of William Hollyoak. On 25 February 1825 Musquito, a Tasmanian Aboriginal man named Black Jack and six bushrangers were hanged in Hobart Town.

Keith Vincent Smith is an independent historian and curator. He is the author of *King Bungaree* (1992), *Bennelong* (2001) and *MARI NAWI: Aboriginal Odysseys*, Rosenberg (2010).