

Australia's First Fleet Journals and Europe's Last Frontier

Livio Dobrez, ANU, Canberra

The eighteenth-century South Pacific was the last great portion of the globe still entirely cut off from the rest and open to assimilation by the latest burgeoning European imperialisms. Once exposed to new technologies and ideologies, guns and bibles, military and economic exploitation, syphilis and gonorrhoea, it provided Europeans with a final and enduring set of clichés: after the tough barbaric Fuegians (the climax of a discourse initiated by Herodotus on the Scythians) came the warlike tattooed Maori and the outrageously Venusian inhabitants of Otaheite. At first, Australian Aborigines barely entered the picture. They had experienced regular contact with northern neighbours, notably Macassan trepang fishermen and Melanesians, and had been the butt of insulting remarks in the seventeenth-century journals of Dutch navigators wholly oriented to opportunities for material profit — which were not much in evidence on the coast of Western Australia at the time. (We may note as an aside that the same coastline now fuels the Asian economic boom.) In addition, Aborigines had been involved in farcical episodes described without the slightest irony in William Dampier's best-selling *A New Voyage Round the World* [1697], the account of his bucaneeing visit to Australia, and in *A Voyage to New Holland* [1703], which chronicled his subsequent, more official visit. Dampier has a significant place in British exploration of the region — and of course his travels helped generate that literary classic of cross-cultural contact, *Robinson Crusoe*. On one occasion, his companions give the Aborigines ragged, cast-off clothing, in expectation that these new-found servants will carry heavy barrels for them. When the Aborigines show no enthusiasm for hard labour, a nice European grasp of the relation of effort and reward demands that the shabby gifts be repossessed. One is reminded of the strict meaning of the expression “man” Friday (Friday too receives clothes in return for servitude). This from Dampier's first voyage. The second involves a contact situation equally out of the pages of Defoe. Attempts to capture an Aborigine in order to discover the whereabouts of water result in an absurd theatre complete with cutlass-duel, chase and counter-chase along a beach. To Dampier as to the Dutch, native Australians are literally ‘miserable’, i.e. without wealth, and so of no interest. Between April and August 1770, James Cook, commander of the *Endeavour*, and Joseph Banks, his gentleman-scientist in residence, textualized the meeting of Australian and European, this time on the eastern side of the island continent. But contact on this occasion was also minimal. At Botany Bay, now a suburb of south Sydney, European landing was opposed, in the first instance by two intrepid males immortalized in a sketch by Sydney Parkinson. In Queensland,

where Cook repaired his ship after a near-fatal collision with the Barrier Reef, relations foundered on a breach of native etiquette when the British refused to share captured turtles with Aborigines.

However, if cross-cultural contact had been modest up to this point, the arrival of the British so-called First Fleet of 1788 changed everything. Led by Governor Arthur Phillip, it consisted of eleven ships which reached Botany Bay after an eight-month voyage with some 1500 passengers including c.850 convicts (of which c.250 were women), c.200 marines and 40 of their wives. Shortly after, the British decided to shift to the more suitable location of Port Jackson, setting up their settlement in what is now the central Sydney Circular Quay area. Naturally the place was inhabited — by a people the newcomers referred to as the Eora (Eora in fact being the language of the region). The British wanted to build a strategic base with cheap penal labour. Keenly aware of rival French moves (having encountered two ships under the command of Jean de Galaup de Lapérouse while at Botany Bay), Phillip assessed Sydney with military eyes: it was “one of the finest harbours in the world” because in it “a thousand sail of the line might ride in perfect security” (47).

The term “First Fleet Journals” applies to material written by those who landed on the eastern shore of New Holland, which Cook had named New South Wales, in 1788. It amounts to a dozen or more currently published documents, depending on how one counts. Doubtless there are additional documents in English archives, attics and cellars. Generally speaking these are less histories than chronicles, or records of events as they happen, in short, diaries, though more often of the public and not private kind. They may include letters or be structured as letters. Their antecedents are histories of navigation and contact (Bernal Diaz’s *The Conquest of New Spain*, Richard Hakluyt’s *Voyages and Documents*, William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation*) and, more directly, the logs and journals of recent British seamen — as well as the genre of the travel account, prompted by curiosity (Herodotus, Marco Polo) or, by the time of the Enlightenment, scientific interests. With a couple of notable exceptions, the First Fleet journals are not concerned with self-expression. To that extent they may be thought of as pre-psychology. Like those celebrated prototypes in Marcus Aurelius and St Augustine, they chart moral rather than psychological processes — that is, when they deviate from their main focus, which is factual and descriptive. Journals are kept by all military ranks, generally for practical purposes, such as the use of a memo to justify promotion or extra salary payments. At the same time, published journals are necessarily by the gentleman or at any rate officer class, and for an official or semi-official purpose. They tend to begin as diary entries or rough notes — eventually edited for wider public consumption. Clearly the process excludes the

illiterate and gives small scope to the convict and, initially, women — though there are convict letters, some by women, and, by the time of the Second Fleet, in 1790, the journal of the genteel and socially influential Elizabeth Macarthur. Particularly when intended or revised for a more general audience than naval authorities, reports from the antipodes inform people back home about places and events, eulogize or criticize the settlement project and, above all, present the author as he wishes to be seen, whether by superiors of some kind, or loved ones, or the reading public.

In the broadest sense, three options present themselves to the journal writer. He may comment on the enterprise in question, after the manner of Bernal Diaz or William Bradford. The significance of South Pacific exploration and, by the end of the century, British settlement in a continent previously unknown to Europeans is, not surprisingly, to the fore in the journals. Governor Phillip clearly thought of the colony as long-term. His official dispatches regarding its foundation (presented in journal form, with additional material from other officers, by the publisher John Stockdale), had as a frontispiece an engraving of a Wedgwood medallion, originally modelled in clay brought back from Australia, accompanied by a poem by Erasmus Darwin (Charles' grandfather), both engraving and poem extolling the future of the colony — as Hope, prophesying a city with — yes — a colossal bridge, leads Peace, Art and Labour towards it (v). Other journal writers were less convinced the project had a future, especially in the early period of near-starvation for convicts and military alike. Either way, to foreground the (undoubtedly momentous) nature of the First Fleet enterprise has, as its consequence, the fact that one will view the place and its indigenous people either as a mere *setting* or as an *obstacle* to be overcome. A second option for the recorder, however, is to foreground not the imperial project but the travel narrative, after the classical manner of Marco Polo or, closer to 1788, Dampier and Cook or, post-1788, Charles Darwin on the voyage of the *Beagle*. In this case Australia is straightforwardly matter for curiosity, including the scientific variety. First Fleet journals usually combine the two generic options of the enterprise chronicle and the travel book in varying proportions.

There is a further option, which is, consciously or unconsciously, to make use of the journey as pretext for the recording of an inner drama. This possibility by and large waits for its realization on the nineteenth century, though some of its elements exist in early journal and letter accounts, as we shall see. We may note by way of an addendum to the above remarks that, insofar as most journals focus on factual chronicling of the imperial project and descriptions of places and their indigenous inhabitants, these two elements are bound to constitute a binary of the active/passive kind. Narrative of the project concentrates less on its British

protagonists than on what it is they are *doing*; descriptions of Australia and its indigenes concentrate on the character of what is passively *there*, for European observation. In the language of Sartre and Beauvoir, the cross-cultural relationship is of the subject/object kind. Even so, there are many points in some of the journals at which the Eora assume centre stage to an extent suggestive of their lively existence independent of the anthropological eye.

In addition to the official Phillip publication [1789], journals of major interest include the following. Watkin Tench, Captain of Marines, wrote the two most readable accounts of Sydney's first four years, published in 1789 and 1793. The first of these went into several French editions and was translated into Dutch. Both were translated into German. Surgeon-General John White's journal [1790], with its expensive botanical and zoological illustrations, was a considerable success to an audience becoming increasingly fascinated by natural history. It had two French editions, as well as a German and an abridged Swedish translation. The 1793 semi-official journal of Captain John Hunter, later governor of the colony, supplemented by other matter, chiefly from Lieutenant Philip King (himself a later governor), also contained descriptions and illustrations of interest to naturalists. King's journal was not published in its own right until the twentieth century. Its author made some notable sketches of Aborigines, one of these being turned into a somewhat European-looking *bon sauvage* engraving by William Blake. A last journal published in two volumes in 1798 and 1802 had the distinction of its first, and weightier, volume being translated by Friedrich Schleiermacher. That was by the Judge Advocate of New South Wales, David Collins. While without the flair of Watkin Tench's writing, Collins' is immensely detailed as regards historical events, cross-cultural contact and natural history, including an illustration of that perplexing *ornithorhyncus paradoxus*, the platypus, and an entire series of engravings depicting Aboriginal activities, in particular a male initiation ceremony. The tone is patronizing, a little less of the Enlightenment than Tench, but it nonetheless represents an early British example of what was to become the nineteenth-century discipline of anthropology. Moreover the pictures are professional, almost certainly originating in drawings by Thomas Watling, who painted the first Australian oil landscape: a 1794 view of Sydney. Watling arrived in 1792, an artist convicted for the forgery of Bank of Scotland notes. His desperately pleading letters, aimed at obtaining a pardon, amount to a journal of the period. He was employed, most unhappily, by surgeon White, for whom he must have made many sketches.

Diary journals and letters not published at the time but now available include, in addition to King's and Watling's, a waggish account by Surgeon George Worgan; the naval log of Lieutenant William Bradley; a well-illustrated, scientifically

interesting account by Assistant Surgeon Arthur Bowes Smyth which features the first image of an emu — and of a kangaroo suspiciously (to me) reminiscent of the one painted by the famous George Stubbs at the time of Cook's voyage. There is also a somewhat hysterical diary by Lieutenant of Marines Ralph Clark, to which I shall return. Finally there are two barely literate memos kept by Sergeant of Marines James Scott and Private John Easty. However rough, these matter, since they give rare voice to people not of the officer or comparable class.

The First Fleet journals made a stir in Europe (even though they had to compete with the French Revolution), and with good reason. Naturally earlier publications in the genre had also done so, especially those generated by Cook's voyages. Cook had an immense Europe-wide reputation. On different occasions he took with him highly talented artists and well-known scientific figures such as Banks, long-term president of the Royal Society, Daniel Solander, follower of Linnaeus, Johann Reinhold Forster (referred to as "Ulysses" by Herder) and his son Johann Georg, whose work made an impact on Alexander von Humboldt (Smith:64). On Cook's second voyage, the Forsters bypassed Australia. Several French expeditions, however, visited at about the time of the First Fleet or within a few years of it. Following Lapérouse came Bruny d'Entrecasteaux and Nicolas Baudin, both accompanied by distinguished artists and naturalists. All of these generated considerable interest in Europe. But as regards Australia the 1788 British were the first to establish serious contact. The fallout for science was substantial and, as Bernard Smith, among others, has argued, it played a part in the collapse of the Great Chain of Being model of natural history and its replacement by the Theory of Evolution. I have discussed this elsewhere (2000), but it is worth stating here that the journals of White and Hunter, and Watling's letters, show awareness of a family likeness in the botany and zoology of New South Wales, which was seen as a 'promiscuous' hybridity. From Lucretius to Banks the view had been that species were distinct. The taxonomic reassessment prompted by an entirely new flora and fauna supported the idea that species had evolved from one another.

The other modern discipline whose origins are (even more closely) tied to the Pacific and to Australia is anthropology. It was, we might say, invented by the Enlightenment via the French Revolution and those behind the Baudin voyage, namely the Société des Observateurs de l'Homme. At the same time its tenets were implicit in the visual and verbal records of the British from Cook to Phillip and the early recorders of the colony. The point being that, unlike their predecessors in the Americas, Europeans in the late eighteenth century came with what we now recognize as more or less modern attitudes. Columbus saw the Caribbean as the Earthly Paradise, that's to say post-lapsarian Eden. The French and British came to the Pacific with something of the spirit of Kant's *aude sapere*.

Although contact raised fundamental theological issues for them as for the Spanish in the Americas (were these hitherto unknown inhabitants innocent of Original Sin or Fallen, i.e. Noble or Ignoble Savages?), Enlightenment ideas encouraged more detached observation. Phillip's and Tench's journals especially illustrate a humane and open attitude towards Aborigines. It goes without saying that this judgement is what they aim to elicit. Journals are not written to set the author in a less than attractive light. But even if we read between the lines, in short practise a considered hermeneutics of suspicion, Phillip and Tench emerge as well-meaning according to their lights. They accept the Eora as human equals, wanting only in technology. Thus they expose them to "civilization", e.g. offer (a select few, captured with extreme difficulty) accommodation, clothes, haircut and shave, plus English food and wine. The Aborigines, motivated by the famine/feast psychology of the hunter-gatherer, inevitably overeat. But turn up their noses at pork and, with one striking exception, dislike alcohol. Phillip reveals to them the art of boiling water, but there is disappointment in their lack of zeal in immediately adopting a European way of life. Why, asks Tench, are they not keen to take up house-building and agriculture? This when they are not, as Banks erroneously thought, devoid of curiosity, indeed evince astonished admiration at a successful leg amputation performed by a British surgeon (282)! In a way quite unlike Dampier, Tench assumes Aboriginal intelligence, at a contact moment when nineteenth-century racism has not yet come into being. All the Eora lack is a solid European education, since "untaught, unaccommodated man, is the same in Pall Mall, as in the wilderness of New South Wales" (294). It would be too much to expect an eighteenth-century Englishman to grasp the relativity of his own tribal customs.

I have discussed the situation of cross-cultural contact and its effect on the participants elsewhere (1994, 1996, 2008). Here I simply want to focus on it with reference to Tench, while also stressing the literary nature of his journal. The latter is evident to any reader and is clearly on the author's mind when he asserts that his aim is to "amuse" as well as "inform"; likewise when he self-consciously asks us not to pass harsh judgement on a military man in the role of writer (5, 6). What, as far as I know, has not been noted by commentators on Tench's structuring of his text is the genre within which he operates, which is that of eighteenth-century Sensibility. The Enlightenment represented an initial phase of the dominance of technological, libertarian, bourgeois culture. Its concept of a post-feudal civilization encouraged the expression of subjectivist individualism, something which might take forms as diverse as the cult of Feeling (whether secular or religious-pietistic) or, a little later, full-blown Romanticism. In the sphere of political science, Locke had argued *contra* Hobbes that humans in the State of Nature had Reason to guide them not to competitive warfare but to cooperation — and Rousseau took this up, stressing a natural human generosity or pity for others.

Watkin Tench operates within this model, most specifically when he records Aboriginal responses to the flogging of convicts (“strong abhorrence of the punishment, and equal sympathy with the sufferer”, 222). But he operates within the Rousseau model in a more general sense as well.

When applied to the aesthetics of landscape, Sensibility underpinned the tenets of the neoclassical ‘picturesque’, the Beautiful as expounded by Burke and Kant. It could not cope with a beauty that awes or terrifies: the Sublime. The British of 1788 viewed Australia through neoclassical eyes, the best example, and the most self-conscious, being the genius-in-exile, *il penseroso* Thomas Watling, who sheds many ritual tears of Sentiment in New South Wales (44) — though of course he had real enough cause for misery. His Sydney foreshores are arcadian — and fearfully wild (24, 25). We may debate whether this last is to be read as a Salvator Rosa flourish or as heralding the Sublime, after the manner of Caspar David Friedrich. Either way, it is noteworthy that a sober officer like Tench cannot follow this aesthetic logic. His response to the wilderness surrounding Sydney is that it is a desert, something to be improved by agriculture — and he is meticulous in charting this development. At the point at which his journal passes from aesthetic observation to practical utilization of the land, i.e. to the taming of wilderness (from unproductive Sublime, let’s say, to productive pastoral), we enter the Enlightenment discourse of Progress.

Clearly within this discourse the terrifying otherness of the Sublime cannot escape some association with the European idea of the Savage. For Tench, however, the Savage (in the form of the Eora) poses no threat. Whereas Watling, as a convict, resents courtesy shown to Aborigines by Phillip — and convict letters of the time express keen anxiety about Aborigines — an officer writing in the benevolent mode of Sentiment can afford a degree of anthropological objectivity. Tench structures his journal, much of which chronicles the phenomenon of contact, as a series of sentimental vignettes or theatrical tableaux. Instead of the celebrated set piece in which the young Werther encounters Lotte slicing bread for the children, we have a first encounter at Botany Bay. Holding an English child in his arms, Tench advances towards a group of Aborigines, baring its chest to show the whiteness of its skin — whereupon an old, “uncouth” Aborigine touches it “with great gentleness” (36). No doubt the exchange illustrates the idea of a common humanity — or, less benevolently, is intended as an allegory in which the Old, about to give way to the New, marvels at the revelation. At this stage it is still possible for the allegory to cast the European in the role of an innocent child.

Not all Tench’s tableaux involve Aborigines. The description of the British landing at Port Jackson and the establishment of the settlement takes the well-worn

neoclassical form of a progression from chaos to harmonious order. However, the best examples of literary structure are episodes dealing with the Eora, especially in the second journal, where the narrative is carefully focussed on dramatic moments, with juxtaposition of episodes and elaboration of character. Here Tench's model is less the theatre of sentiment than the sentimental novel. Three of the Eora are given special attention: Arabanoo, the black man of Feeling; Baneelon (or Bennelong, as in Bennelong Point, the site of the Sydney Opera), the passionate Savage; Gooreedeeana, the neoclassical beauty. Tench's narrative is to say the very least engaging, even if it largely glosses over the horror of the effects of Europeans on the Eora. In fact within about a year of contact, smallpox had halved the local native population. This, added to a low-level warfare against the invaders which the British military could only interpret as discrete acts of violence, doubtless destroyed the fabric of Eora society. In his ignorance, Tench reads evident chaos as support for the Hobbesian view of the State of Nature as conflict. However, while he dismisses Rousseau's portrait of the savage, his treatment of the Eora is entirely in line with Rousseau — and his savage entirely, though realistically, noble. When he explains that the Eora lead unregulated lives and interact as equals, he is echoing the *Discourse on Inequality*. Likewise when he says that they are indolent and averse to work. Likewise when he characterizes them as living by their passions, the emotions of the present, and therefore as fickle, changeable as children. At the same time his account involves a level of anthropological detail which is generated by actual contact and the desire (fulfilled in hit-and-miss fashion) for accuracy. Tench's Eora emerge as individual personalities, however filtered through the European imagination. They are always named and indeed constitute the chief *dramatis personae* of the narrative. Bennelong in particular dominates with his irrepressible, to Tench humorously inexplicable, excess. He readily learns English, consumes any amount of food at the governor's Christmas table, sings dances and capers, shows off his familiarity with European gadgets to other Aborigines, orders the British barber to give him a shave, reacts with violent fury when displeased with his wife who, however, is more than a match for him. On the occasion of his meeting the British after an absence, he plays the buffoon at their expense, mimicking the voice and manners of the French cook "with his wonted exactness and drollery" — also asking after "a lady from whom he had once ventured to snatch a kiss" and "by way of proving that the token was fresh in his remembrance" planting an ironic kiss on Lieutenant Waterhouse! (178) But his chief pride is his exploits in Love and War. How did you get the wound on your hand? he is asked — and replies that he was bitten by the enemy woman he was carrying off. What did he do? "I knocked her down, and beat her till she was insensible... Then —" (160).

Bennelong is nothing if not *Sturm und Drang* and the journal deliberately juxtaposes him to Arabanoo, an altogether more decorously neoclassical savage. Agitated when captured, “extraordinarily courteous” and with a “soft and musical” voice (140), Arabanoo is filled with wonder at details of the British settlement, firmly refuses alcohol and, when handed over to the barber, begins to eat the lice removed from his head until inhibited by the disgust of his hosts. His own disgust is expressed at a public flogging of convicts. Arabanoo is “gentle”, sighs at the sight of Eora fires in the distance, weeps when he is able to see some of his people again. His death, of smallpox, is given the status of a Sensibility set piece. And yet he comes to life as more than a sentimental cliché from the pages of Richardson or Sterne. Rather he is “impatient of indignity” though in the power of his British captors, independent of mind, returning an insult “with interest” and often with a humour that finds its mark. (150).

Tench includes some memorable female portraits, not least Bennelong’s virago wife. But it is the lovely eighteen-year-old Gooreedeeana who moves him to a most exact physical description, with some lingering over “the firmness, the symmetry, and the luxuriancy of her bosom” (276). Gooreedeeana is characterized by “softness and sensibility” (276), she is elegantly timid, charming Tench to deep pity when she shows head scars made by a brutal husband and, on another occasion, adroit at eluding his excessive inspection of her body paint. Other journal writers give less sedate accounts of Aboriginal women. Surgeon Worgan, writing privately and therefore uninhibitedly to his brother, admits to a state of Tantalism when confronted with “*naked Damsels*”. Fortunately, he adds, they are also “nauseous, greasy and grimy” and don’t blow their noses when they should (47). But Worgan’s letters adopt an exaggeratedly comical, rakish pose quite alien to Tench. If there is another journal of Sensibility it must be that of Lieutenant Ralph Clark, a private diary as incoherent as Tench’s is structured and articulate. Clark sadly misses out on Werther’s intelligence, but he has all of Werther’s sufferings and more, though he survives his experience. The ultimate unwilling traveller to Australia, he sheds daily tears, thinks constantly of his beloved madonna-like wife Betsey and his little son, dreams and wonders if his highly Freudian dreams tell of dire illnesses befalling his faraway family, is wonderfully hypochondriac, inevitably seasick, loathes those “damned whores the Convict Women” (12), abstains from strong drink and is gushingly responsive to the melodrama *Douglas*, which he is reading. With Clark we are as much in the genre of the Gothic as of Sentiment. Whatever else, though, his text brings the hardships and the sheer enormity of the 1788 enterprise to sharp, intimately-realized life.

There is much more to be said about the content and significance of the First Fleet journals. To my knowledge they have not been seriously studied as literature with,

in some instances, specifically literary generic affiliations. As records of first contact they are unique insofar as contact of the kind they represent did not occur prior to the eighteenth century and has not occurred since. In the nineteenth, under the negative influences of a renewed Christian puritanism and, later, an evolutionary view which condemned the so-called savage to eventual extinction, options for cross-cultural exchange tended to close off. The moment of 1788 was as special as it was brief. Within a short time the British in Australia initiated a further enterprise, that of systematic exploitation of the country. At that point Aborigines ceased to be objects of benevolent curiosity and became obstacles to progress requiring to be removed.

Bibliography

- [Clark, Ralph], 1981. *The Journal and Letters of Lt. Ralph Clark 1787-1792*. Sydney: Library of Australian History.
- Dobrez, Livio, 1994. "Introduction" and "Being Australian: Identity, Identities and Traces of Identity", in: Dobrez, ed., *Identifying Australia in Postmodern Times*. Canberra: Bibliotech, i-xviii and 25-46.
- Dobrez, 1996. "Not European-Made: Civilization and its Discontents", in: Maes-Jelinek, Hena et al., eds, *A Talent(ed) Digger*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 144-151.
- Dobrez, 2000. "The Phenomenon of Contact: Mythical, Real and Discursive Antipodes", in: vanden Driesen, Cynthia and Mitchell, Adrian, eds, *New Directions in Australian Studies*. New Delhi: Prestige, 440-455.
- Dobrez, 2008 [forthcoming] "Empire, Romanticism and the South Pacific", in: *La Questione Romantica*, no 18, "Imperialism/Colonialism". Napoli: Liguori Editori.
- [Phillip, Arthur], 1982. *The Voyage of Governor Phillip to Botany Bay*. Melbourne: Hutchinson.
- Smith, Bernard, 1960. *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768-1850*. London: OUP.
- [Tench, Watkin], 1979. *Sydney's First Four Years*. Sydney: Library of Australian History.
- [Watling, Thomas], 1945. *Letters from an Exile at Botany Bay*. Sydney: Australian Historical Monographs.
- [Worgan, George B.], 1978. *Journal of a First Fleet Surgeon*. Sydney: Library of Australian History.
-