Notes and Documents

Death on the Cooper: King's secret?

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The Burke and Wills disaster is one of the iconic stories of Australian history, incorporating exploration, misadventure, death and the lone survivor. An inquiry into the fate of the expedition relied on the public testimony of the sole survivor, John King, and this has long been accepted as a factual account of Burke's passing, but, later, other versions came to light that have either been missed or not seriously considered by historians. This purpose of this paper is to give these alternative versions the serious consideration they deserve.

Background

In August 1860 Robert O'Hara Burke, William Wills and 15 other men set out from Melbourne in an attempt to be the first to cross the continent from south to north. Leading an advance party, Burke arrived at Cooper Creek on 16 December. There he again divided his party, leaving William Brahe and four other men to maintain a depot while he, William Wills, John King and Charlie Gray made a dash for the Gulf of Carpentaria, 1400 kilometres to the north. On the return trip – when they were only four or five days away from the depot – Charlie Gray died. After being delayed a day to bury Gray, the remaining three men arrived back at the depot in a starving condition on 21 or 22 April 1862, only hours after Brahe and his men had given up waiting and returned to Menindee on the Darling River. Within weeks Burke and Wills had followed Gray to the grave, but King survived by joining local Aborigines who looked after him until a rescue party arrived three months later.

The official version of Burke's death

After the fate of the expedition became known, an inquiry was set up to try to discover how the disaster had occurred. The official account of the deaths of both Burke and Wills, based upon the testimony of the only survivor, John King, was that they died from starvation. According to King, as Wills neared death he urged King and Burke to leave and try to get food for them all from the Aborigines.[1] They agreed to do this and

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1. 'King's Narrative', *Argus*, 25 November 1861.

struggled up the Creek for two days, but on the evening of the second day King described how

> From the time we halted Mr. Burke seemed to be getting worse, although he ate his supper. He said he felt convinced he could not last many hours, and gave me his watch, which he said belonged to the committee, and a pocketbook, to give to Sir William Stawell, and in which wrote some notes. He then said to me, 'I hope you will remain with me here till I am quite dead – it is a comfort to know that some one is by; but when I am dying, it is my wish that you should leave me unburied as I lie.' That night he spoke very little, and the following morning I found him speechless, or nearly so; and about eight o'clock he expired.[2]

King said that after Burke died he (King) went back to where they had left Wills and found him dead. He covered the body with sand and branches and again went in search of Aborigines, and after what he thought was a 'good many' days he was found by them when they heard him fire his gun.[3] The Aborigines already knew that Wills was dead and inquired after Burke, and when King indicated to them that Burke, too, was dead they 'were very anxious' to see his body. Some time later King showed them where it lay and 'on seeing his remains the whoe [sic] party wept bitterly, and covered them with bushes'.[4] When the grave site was visited by King's rescuers three months after Burke's death only his bones remained, minus the hands and feet.[5]

At the same time that the inquiry was in progress (and for some years afterwards), a public controversy arose over the quality of Burke's leadership. Some believed King's version that Burke was a good leader who treated his men humanely, while others believed that Burke was incompetent, and cruel to those he believed were from a lower social class.[6] In particular it was alleged that when Charlie Gray was caught stealing food Burke knocked him down and kicked him, possibly contributing to his death.[7] In spite of various rumours and accusations, the official version of events was that Burke had acted properly throughout and could not be blamed for the way the expedition ended. In the 140-odd years since the official inquiry a number of historians have queried its findings regarding Burke's leadership, but none has questioned the manner of Burke's death.

Burke's death according to an Aboriginal woman

In the summer of 1874–75 a squatter made a trip to inspect some country in the Coongie Lakes area north-west of Innamincka. Soon after he returned he sent a description of his journey to the *Town and Country Journal*, which published it in two parts in April 1875.[8] The identity of this squatter remains unknown because his name was not included in the article and it has not (yet) been found in other records of the time. Besides himself, the squatter's party consisted of three white men and two Aborigines, one of whom was a 'native of Cooper's Creek'.[9]

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2. 'King's Narrative', *Argus*, 25 November 1861.
3. Favenc 1888, Appendix XX.
4. 'King's Testimony' 1861: 5.
5. 'Howitt's Journal' 1861: 11.
6. For the best account of this controversy, see Bonyhady 1991: 204–230.
7. Bonyhady 1991: 208.
8. 'To Cooper's Creek and Back', *Town and Country Journal*, 3 April 1875 and 17 April 1875.

The squatter did not say where he started from, but he travelled into the region from the east via 'Thurgomindah' and Nockatunga (on Cooper Creek). On reaching the Cooper he went downstream to Nappamerrie where he examined the site of Burke and Wills' depot, then moved further downstream to Innamincka homestead, the site where Burke died and where '[t]he blacks show you where the body lay between two trees, one of which is marked RO'B H MK (conjoined) AH (conjoined), being Burke's, McKinlay's, and Howitt's initials'. Nearby was another tree, 'marked NP (conjoined), showing the place had been visited by the Queensland Native Police from the Bulloo'.[10]

While he was at Innamincka an Aboriginal woman who claimed to have been an eyewitness to Burke's death told him what she had seen. According to the squatter:

> An old gin whom I spoke to recollected the explorers, and helped them to cover Burke's body with bushes after his death. She also affirmed that Burke had not died from starvation, but had been shot by ''nother one white fellow'. This is a somewhat startling statement, and a rather different version of affairs to what is commonly believed. The gin could scarcely have invented such a story, and she persisted in saying that she had actually seen a whitefellow, who answers in every way to the description of King, come behind Burke when he was stooping at the fire roasting a duck, and shoot him in the side.[11]

While there can be little doubt that it was Burke who died at this site, it was the squatter who identified the murderer as King. Apparently he knew what King and Wills looked like and the woman provided enough detail for him to deduce that it was King who did the shooting. The squatter went on to discuss the woman's story and to explain his reasons for making it public, rather than, as others might have done, dismissing it as 'just a blackfellow's yarn':

> After the lapse of all these years, and the death of King, against whom this fearful charge is brought, it might be considered advisable to let the matter rest; but now that the country is being quickly settled in the neighbourhood, the traditions of the blacks will become better known to white men, and this subject will therefore, sooner or later, be mooted. And it is right that King's character should be cleared from so foul a blot, if there is no foundation for the report; while, on the other hand, if true, no one could be accused reasonably of exposing the perpetration of so dastardly a crime. Wills, however, fully exonerated his chief from this imputation, but it was notorious that both King and Gray had not very kindly feelings towards Burke, on account of the latter being very strict with them on the journey.[12]

The squatter accurately described how Burke and Wills arrived at the depot only hours after Brahe and the other men had left, how Brahe and another expedition member, William Wright, later returned to the depot but found no evidence that anyone had been there, and how Wills also returned to the depot but saw no sign of Brahe's and Wright's visit. According to the squatter, when King returned to Melbourne and told his story to the Expedition Committee he said he had a secret to do with the expedition which he would take to the grave, and that it was generally supposed that this secret

9. 'To Cooper's Creek and Back', *Town and Country Journal*, 17 April 1875.
10. McKinlay and Howitt both led parties in search of Burke and Wills and the other missing members of their expedition.
11. The story is in the second part of the squatter's account, published 17 April 1875.
12. 'To Cooper's Creek and Back', *Town and Country Journal*, 17 April 1875.

was connected with Gray's death, but it is clear that the squatter believed the Aboriginal woman's story pointed to King's secret having a different connection.

Burke's death according to King's neighbour

The Aboriginal woman's story recounted above was republished with additional comment in other newspapers, and the report in one paper contained yet another version of events. According to this account, after returning from Cooper Creek and settling in Melbourne, King often told a neighbour (unnamed) that 'Burke and Wills had a quarrel, while the whole company was starving, and that Burke drew a revolver and shot Wills in the shoulder. He fell, but immediately sprang up again and fired at Burke, shooting him in the side.'[13]

Which story is the more plausible?

While the similarities between the neighbour's story and that of the Aboriginal woman are obvious, the differences need to be explained and the validity of one story over the other needs to be assessed. On the one hand, there is virtually no chance that the Aboriginal woman knew anything of the story that King allegedly told his neighbour. Furthermore, in her own version she would have had no reason to omit the detail of the man who shot Burke himself being shot or for providing a description of King rather than one of Wills. On the other hand, it is possible that King's neighbour invented his (or her) story after reading the account of the Aboriginal woman, but why would he implicate Wills rather than King? Being a neighbour of King's, he certainly was in a position to hear the story from King, and the fact that in his version of events Burke and Wills quarrelled and shot each other can easily be explained as King's way of telling the truth about the manner of Burke's death without implicating himself. If the story told by King's neighbour was not derived from the Aboriginal woman's account, the detail in both stories that Burke was shot 'in the side' is astonishing, and gives greater credence to the general claim that Burke died from a gunshot wound.

Arguments for and against accepting the Aboriginal woman's story

With respect to the Aboriginal woman's story there are six possibilities:

- the squatter made it up
- he misunderstood what he was being told
- the Aboriginal woman remembered the story incorrectly
- she made it up
- her account was reliable
- her story was about people other than King and Burke.

If the squatter made up the story it has to be asked, 'why?' One might expect that squatters, generally thought of as part of the colonial ruling class, would be inclined to support the story that Burke was a hero and a good and humane leader who only

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13. This account originally came from the *Gippsland Mercury* and was republished in the *Southern Cross*, a paper published in Junee, New South Wales. While the story was published in 1875, unfortunately the 1875 files for both papers no longer exist so the exact dates of the publication cannot be determined. The *Southern Cross* item cited here comes from the Alexander Aitken papers in the Mitchell Library (ZML MSS 1263, item 4).

lightly chastised Gray for his 'crime'. If this squatter held such a view, publishing the story served no purpose. His stated reason for publishing was that European settlers were flooding in to the Cooper Creek district and he believed the story would be told to other white men, and eventually made public by one of them. He argued that if the story was false King's character should be cleared and if it was true the 'dastardly crime' should be exposed. In this instance the squatter cannot be accused of taking one side or the other – the story he relates is directly damning of King and only obliquely critical of Burke. Furthermore, there is no evidence that he sent his story to the colonial authorities and pushed for an inquiry. If he had done so it would have left a 'paper trail' for historians to find, but no such paper trail has been reported, and this suggests that the squatter told the story in good faith, for the reasons he stated. Of the various historians who have written about Burke and Wills, it appears that only Bonyhady has mentioned the Aboriginal woman's story, and his source comes from a newspaper item (which repeated the story from the original), rather than from official records.[14]

Could the squatter have misunderstood what he was told? Being a newcomer to the region he would not have understood the local language, so he must have communicated either directly or indirectly with the woman in Aboriginal English. Aborigines in the region probably began to learn English from King during the time he lived amongst them in 1861. By the time the squatter arrived late in 1874 some local Aborigines had been in sustained contact with settlers on the northern, southern and eastern fringes of the region for at least seven years,[15] and some of them had learnt enough English for effective communication because at one of the stations he passed through on his way out the squatter obtained the services of 'a native of Coopers Creek'.[16] He is unlikely to have done this unless the man was familiar enough with English to understand and obey orders, and to act as an interpreter. Later, about 100 kilometres downstream from Innamincka, he met an Aboriginal man from Lake Hope – a station 150 kilometres to the south that was settled by 1859[17] – who 'could speak English well'.

I have worked with Aborigines in the Victoria River district and elsewhere in the Northern Territory for over 30 years, documenting historic sites, Dreaming sites and recording oral history, and I well understand the difficulties and misunderstandings that can arise when Aboriginal English is used, or if leading questions are asked. If the squatter somehow misunderstood the woman's initial statement this misunderstanding should have been cleared up because after hearing her 'startling' account he said he questioned her closely, but she 'persisted' in saying that she had seen one man shoot the other. As for leading questions, it is difficult to imagine that the squatter somehow managed to suggest to the woman that Burke had died from a gunshot wound, and that she gave him the answer she thought he wanted to hear, and even if she had done so, under close questioning she almost certainly would have changed her story. The fact

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14. Bonyhady 1991: 281. His source for the story is the cutting from the *Southern Cross* in the Alexander Aitken Papers, Mitchell Library.

15. Durack 1978: 88; Watson 1998: 18.

16. *Town and Country Journal*, 3 April 1875. When James Conrick passed through Nockatunga homestead in late in 1873 he 'acquired the services of a "civilised" Aborigine called Simon who knew the people and the language of the Cooper' (Tolcher 1997: 22).

17. 'The Far North', *The Register* (South Australia), 7 March 1860.

that in the face of close questioning she persisted in her version of events suggests that she was telling the truth as she knew it.

Could the Aboriginal woman have incorrectly remembered the events she described? First, the wonderful capacity for memory possessed by Aborigines was often remarked upon by early Europeans, and is well-known by anthropologists and others who work with Aborigines today. A typical example comes from Ludwig Leichhardt's journal of his expedition to Port Essington in 1844–45 in which he describes the powers of memory of his two Aboriginal assistants as being 'Daguerreotype' (ie photographic).[18] The arrival of the Burke and Wills expedition in the Cooper Creek country, the great size of their horses and camels, the presence of some expedition members at the Cooper Creek depot for four months, their use of firearms, the deaths of Burke and Wills, King's presence amongst them for several months afterwards, and the arrival of Howitt's and McKinlay's search parties with more horses and camels were major events in the lives of local Aborigines, events that were still very well-remembered in the mid-1880s, and 'regarded as red-letter days'.[19]

Second, Aboriginal oral history accounts from the 'early days' (usually before the story-teller was born) can sometimes contain elements from two separate events, but stories from the teller's personal experience almost always closely conform with and complement European documentation of the same events.[20] It is highly unlikely that Burke's death from starvation, witnessed or otherwise, could be transformed into a death by shooting in the space of 13 years.

Did the woman make up her story? As the squatter himself noted, it is difficult to imagine why she would have done so. Even in the unlikely event that one of the early settlers told her about the controversy that raged around Burke's leadership and his alleged mistreatment of some of his men, it is highly improbable that she would have concocted a story in which Burke was shot. When she told the squatter her story he claimed that he questioned her carefully. If he asked leading questions and she gave him the answers she thought he wanted to hear, then it is unlikely that she would have stuck to a story she made up beforehand.

Could her story relate to some unknown event involving people other than Burke and King? There certainly were other white people in the broader Cooper Creek region before and after Burke and Wills, and before European settlement. The best known is, of course, the expedition led by Gregory in search of traces of Ludwig Leichhardt in 1858,[21] but there were others. In the summer of 1859–60 McDonald and Hack travelled up Cooper Creek from the south as far as the Coongie Lakes area, north-west of the present town of Innamincka.[22] In December 1860 two men were reported to have perished in 'Sturt's desert',[23] and in September 1861 Curlewis and party found supposed white men's graves about 80 kilometres east of the Cooper.[24]

18. Leichhardt 1847: 118.
19. Larcombe 1926: 174.
20. For example, see Rose 1991, 2003; Lewis 2004.
21. Gregory 1981[1884].
22. 'White Men's Graves', *Argus*, 28 December 1861.
23. 'The Exploration Mystery', *Argus*, 13 December 1861.

When Burke and Wills went missing, four expeditions were sent in search of them and in the Coongie Lakes area roughly 100 kilometres west of the Cooper Creek depot camp,[25] a party led by John McKinlay discovered horse-hair from a saddle, a pannikin and other European items, and the skeleton of a white man buried in a shallow grave. The skeleton was clothed in a flannel shirt and the skull, which was severed from the body, bore what looked like sabre cuts. In what appeared to be a second grave, apparently dug with a spade, they found a few bones and human hair of two colours.[26] McKinlay was convinced he had found the remains of Wills, Gray and Burke or King, murdered during a fight with Aborigines,[27] but, when King was found alive and the remains of Burke and Wills were discovered on Cooper Creek, his conclusion could not be sustained and a question arose as to the origin of the remains. When King heard about McKinlay's discovery, for various reasons he asserted the skeleton was that of Gray, but the different coloured hair and the apparent injuries to the skull were never satisfactorily explained.[28] In addition, recent research indicates that it is highly unlikely that the grave could be Gray's.[29]

If there ever was another unknown expedition in the same region and one member of it shot another, and, even if this unknown expedition was in the region some time before Burke and Wills, the time between the shooting and the story being told to the squatter would still be relatively short, and there is little possibility that two separate stories were conflated. Even if the woman's story was a conflation of two different events, it would be remarkable if both events occurred at the place where Burke died. Anyone who has worked with Aboriginal people in their own 'tribal' area knows that their knowledge of their country, and places in their country, is extraordinarily reliable. If the woman's story of one man shooting another referred to a different party at a different place it is inconceivable that she would have confused one place with another. None of the white men involved with the Burke and Wills disaster found evidence for another party or grave along Cooper Creek and no mention of other whites or another a grave was made by the Aborigines.

So what reliance can be placed on the story the Aboriginal woman told to the squatter? First, as the squatter himself noted, the woman could have no reason to make it up. Indeed, I find it difficult to believe that such a story would even have occurred to her. Second, I believe that the detail that the man who was shot was stooping over a fire to cook a duck also adds to the likelihood that her story was factual. Third, the events she described occurred only 13 or 14 years earlier and she claimed to have witnessed them herself. She was described by the squatter as an 'old gin', so she almost certainly was an adult at the time of Burke's death, rather than a child who might not have

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24. 'White Men's Graves', *Argus*, 20 January 1862; 'Leichhardt's Remains and White Men's Graves', *Argus*, 27 August 1864.
25. H Kenny, 'Leichhardt's Fate. His Three Expeditions', *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate*, 19 May 1920.
26. 'McKinlay's Expedition', *Argus*, 5 December 1891.
27. 'The South Australian Expedition, in Search of the Burke and Wills Exploration Party', *Mount Alexander Mail*, 6 December 1861.
28. Bonyhady 1991: 210; Larcombe 1926: 184–185.
29. Corke 1994.

clearly understood what she had seen. Therefore I believe the Aboriginal woman's recall of these events is likely to be reliable.

In the years after he was rescued King always was reluctant to talk about events on the Cooper or found it difficult to do so without showing signs of emotional distress. This was usually attributed to his quiet, shy nature and the events being too painful to relive. The latter reason was the one that King himself gave in a letter he wrote to the *Argus* in January 1863 when he requested that he no longer be contacted about the circumstances of Gray's death.[30] However, the possibility must be considered that his reticence was at least partly the result of a guilty conscience, perhaps extreme remorse, and fear of discovery. If he was guilty of murder it certainly was in his interest to promote a public version of events in which Burke was a hero who had died of starvation.

Would King have had reason to shoot Burke? The answer is probably 'yes'. In his article the squatter noted that 'it was notorious that both King and Gray had not very kindly feelings towards Burke, on account of the latter being very strict with them on the journey'. This is in accord with Bonyhady's study, which shows Burke to be an authoritarian and sometimes cruel leader – particularly to men such as King and Gray who he considered beneath him socially – or to others whom for some reason he had come to dislike.[31] While King's public statements about the expedition were always supportive of Burke, Bonyhady notes hearsay evidence, suggesting that at Cooper Creek King told at least one of his rescuers that when Gray was discovered stealing food, Burke had 'knocked down, kicked, and so ill used' him that he (King) 'would have shot the leader, if he had had a pistol; and that poor Gray was never afterwards allowed to have his meals with the others'.[32] He also was reported as saying that a day or so before he died, 'Gray was thrashed unmercifully by Burke'.[33]

The squatter who reported the Aboriginal woman's account believed it inevitable that other whites in the Cooper country would hear the same story, but there is no evidence that this happened. John Conrick pioneered Nappamerrie station in 1873 and spent 50 years in the region. He undoubtedly heard about Burke and Wills from local Aborigines, but in a series of articles he wrote in 1908 he makes no mention of an Aboriginal story that Burke had been shot.[34] In about 1885 Herbert Kenny became the manager of Innamincka station. As a boy he had seen the Burke and Wills expedition leave Melbourne and as a result he had a particular interest in the story, and often talked about Burke and Wills with local Aborigines. However, like Conrick, he makes no mention of the story that Burke had been shot.[35]

30. 'Gray's Death', *Argus*, 21 January 1863.
31. For example, see Bonyhady 1991: 97–112, 208 for a summary of Burke's treatment of another expedition member, Ludwig Becker, who died between Menindee and Cooper Creek in April 1860.
32. Bonyhady 1991: 210.
33. Bonyhady 1991: 210.
34. 'Burke and Wills revisited', *Adelaide Observer*, 21 March 1908, reproduced in the Stockman's Hall of Fame paper, June 2003.
35. H Kenny, *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate*, 19 May 1920.

It may be that Conrick and/or Kenny did hear the story but dismissed it in favour of the official version. Alternatively, it may be that the 'old gin' and any others who witnessed the shooting did not live for long after the squatter's visit in 1874–75, and Aborigines born after the death of Burke and Wills or who were not present at the time adopted the 'standard' European version of events.

Another potential problem with the Aboriginal woman's story is the final entry in Burke's notebook. According to King, as Burke lay dying he made entries in a notebook and then gave it to him with the request that, if he (King) survived, he should pass it on to the President of the Exploration Committee, Sir William Stawell. When the notebook was examined by Stawell and the Expedition Committee none of the entries had anything to say about Burke being shot, either by King or by Wills, but the final entry was in praise of King, saying that he had 'behaved nobly' and expressing the hope that he would be cared for and rewarded.[36]

In thinking through the alternative versions of the death of Burke, this entry of Burke's seemed to be a problem. If Burke wrote it as he lay dying, as King claimed, he is unlikely to have written it after being shot by King! There is of course, no way of knowing exactly when the note was written and it is possible that Burke had made the entry before King shot him. Another possibility is that, after shooting Burke, King fabricated the entry to provide himself with 'cover', and perhaps to help ensure favourable treatment by the Expedition Committee.

Of interest here is the novel, *Burke's soldier*, the story of the Burke and Wills expedition from King's point of view. In this novel the author, Alan Attwood, devised a scenario similar to that suggested here – that King forged the note after Burke died.[37] Although much of Attwood's book was based upon historical documents, this part of his book was purely a work of imagination.[38] However, after he had devised this scenario, Attwood went to an exhibition about Burke and Wills where there were samples of Burke's and King's hand-writing displayed side by side. He was immediately struck by their similarity and in the explanatory notes at the end of his novel Attwood notes that, 'what had been conjecture on my part suddenly didn't seem so fantastic'.[39] Samples of Burke's and King's handwriting are reproduced on page 126 of Bonyhady's book. These look much more alike than different and it is not difficult to imagine that if King did forge the note in question it would pass as Burke's writing.

Conclusions

Of the two 'new' stories about Burke's death, the Aboriginal woman's is the most likely to be reliable; in this scenario King was a murderer who concocted his account of Burke's death and possibly fabricated the note Burke supposedly wrote praising him for his 'noble behaviour'. If the story King is said to have told his neighbour was true, King was not a murderer, but he still concocted his account of Burke's death and was involved in the cover-up of a major crime.

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36. Bonyhady 1991: 207.
37. Attwood 2003: 434–441.
38. Personal communication, Alan Attwood.
39. Attwood 2003: 449.

The stories Aborigines tell of events they have witnessed are usually very reliable, and there are aspects of the Burke and Wills story that make a 'King shoots Burke' scenario plausible, but there are also aspects which cast doubt upon this having occurred. It will probably never be known exactly how Burke died, but the 'official' story can no longer be taken as the truth of the matter, and there is good reason to suspect the commission of dark deeds on the Cooper in 1861.

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Could First Fleet smallpox infect Aborigines? – a note

Christopher Warren

In April 1789, British colonists at Sydney Cove noticed large numbers of Aborigines dying from smallpox. Two hundred years later this event still raises concerns that unknown First Fleeters may have infected Aboriginal clans with smallpox. Contrariwise, several authors – including Josephine Flood, Alan Frost, Charles Wilson and Judy Campbell – maintain that First Fleet smallpox did not cause the outbreak as, in Flood's words, 'infection of Aborigines with bottled scabs was not merely implausible but impossible'.[1]

However this view is based on an assumption that the hot weather during the Fleet's voyage and at Sydney Cove would have sterilised any smallpox virus. This is not so and none of these authors have tested their 'hot weather' assumption by referring to the temperature records of the First Fleet. Once this is done alternative conclusions follow.

This article reviews the evidence and demonstrates that British smallpox could retain sufficient viral activity until 1789 to infect local Aborigines. Whether infection occurred from this source is a separate issue that remains shrouded in conflicting evidence and is not being considered here.

The literature

The 1789 outbreak of smallpox is controversial but the question we are concerned with here, the continuing infectivity of British smallpox, can be separated from associated issues. Other issues are canvassed by Cumpston, Curson and Campbell.[2] Material on the infectivity and transmission of smallpox was published in Dixon and by the World Health Organisation in *Smallpox and its eradication* authored by Frank Fenner and others.[3]

Of the 18th-century literature concerning the 1789 outbreak, only the memoirs of Captain Watkin Tench mention stocks of smallpox material. There is no mention of smallpox material in the official lists of medical supplies. There is one other mention in the 18th century of smallpox material – in Philip Gidley King's 1792 letter to Sir Joseph Banks requesting supplies to protect children at Norfolk Island if necessary.[4]

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1. Flood 2006: 125.
2. Cumpston 1914; Curson 1985; Campbell 2002.
3. Dixon 1962; Fenner et al 1988. The latter resource is available on the internet at http://whqlibdoc.who.int/smallpox/9241561106.pdf

In the 19th century, Edward Curr and Frank Tidswell concluded that the 1789 smallpox outbreak originated from the First Fleet but no author appears to have addressed the role, if any, of the British supplies. Curr and Tidswell assumed that smallpox from a hypothetical outbreak on the *Alexander* remained infective and escaped into the community.[5]

Early in the 20th century, EC Stirling and JB Cleland suggested that the 1789 outbreak of smallpox may have originated from Asian seafarers arriving in northern Australia.[6] In 1914, JHL Cumpston rejected this view on the grounds that the First Fleet's:

> variolous matter cannot be dismissed lightly as a possible source of the epidemic … the safest course would seem to be to follow the generally accepted theory that the introduction of the disease amongst the aborigines was in some way associated with the arrival in Australia of a comparatively large number of Europeans.[7]

In the 1980s Noel Butlin suggested 'the British were well aware'[8] that First Fleet smallpox could 'remain infective for many years' and that Tench's 'wild' and 'unworthy' supposition needed closer inspection.[9] This proposition was supported by David Day[10] but contested by Judy Campbell, Charles Wilson and Alan Frost who argued that, as 'variolous matter' was damaged by conditions during the First Fleet's voyage, it was incapable of transmitting infection.[11]

After the year 2000 – and except for a few including Reynolds, Foley and Maynard and Kociumbas[12] – the rigour of the literature degenerates. In 2002 Judy Campbell labelled Butlin's work as myth-making and claimed that his comments damaged 'prospects for reconciliation in modern Australia'.[13] In addition several commentators – John Connor, Tim Flannery and Tom Keneally – introduced problematic variations into the literature. These authors claim there was only 'a bottle' of smallpox scabs[14] and that it 'remained sealed'[15] or 'unbroken and secure on a shelf'.[16] At this point the literature provides no resolution and various writers simply recycle past theories for alternative sources for the outbreak or support First Fleet responsibility, depending on their varying estimations of the relevance of the imported British supplies of smallpox. However scientific papers on the infectivity of smallpox, particularly several items published in the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* and *The Lancet* in the 20th century, can provide additional clarification (discussed below).

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4. Copy at http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/banks/series_39/39_004.cfm (accessed 24 October 2006).
5. Curr 1886: 226. Tidswell's comment is in Cumpston 1914: 172.
6. Stirling 1911; Cleland 1912.
7. Cumpston 1914: 2.
8. See Butlin 1985: 334.
9. Butlin 1983: 21.
10. Day 1997[1996]: 63.
11. Campbell 1984; Wilson 1987; Frost 1995.
12. Reynolds 2001; Foley and Maynard 2001; Kociumbas 2004.
13. Campbell 2002: 60f.
14. Connor 2002: 30.
15. Flannery 1999: 88.
16. Keneally 2005: 202, 209.

In general, the post-Butlin claims of destruction of smallpox virus by heat during the First Fleet's voyage have prolonged controversy – much of it revisiting old issues that otherwise would be unsustainable. To some extent this controversy compromises scholarly examination of 'first contact' and 'frontier conflict' issues and diverts Aboriginal history from foundational themes.

Smallpox at Sydney Cove

As noted above, we have only one report of smallpox materials at Sydney Cove – a pointed quote from Captain Watkin Tench informing his readers that First Fleet surgeons 'had brought out variolous matter in bottles'.[17] 'Variolous material' is the 18th century term for infectious smallpox scabs or pus collected from infected patients and used to prevent others contracting the disease. ('Variola' is the Latin name for the smallpox virus.) Unfortunately Tench did not indicate what type of variolous matter he was referring to. First Fleet surgeons would not have purchased fluid variolous matter or moist pus on cotton as mould and humidity would have endangered the virus.[18] This suggests First Fleet material was dried variolous matter and we know from Dr Gatti, a leading contemporary physician, that 18th century inoculators were advised to use 'powdered matter' when 'only scabs are to be had'.[19] The inclusion of variolous material in medical supplies by sea-surgeons was not compulsory in the 18th century,[20] as its use was still objectionable to many; smallpox was relatively rare at sea, and incidental outbreaks could be handled by sourcing fluid variolous matter from patients.[21] Nonetheless, with children aboard, First Fleet surgeons may have purchased variolous materials before departure from England or at Rio de Janerio.

The capacity of smallpox-related virus in scabs to survive long sea voyages should not be underestimated. According to William Russell, the Superintendent-General of Vaccination and Inoculation in Bengal, scabs were 'one of the most certain means of preserving the [cowpox] Virus in a state of activity for a length of time, and the easiest mode of conveying the Infection to a distance'.[22] In 1804, cowpox scab material was recommended for transmitting vaccine virus from Bengal to New South Wales[23] and as late as 1813, we still find scab material being used.[24] All things considered, it appears that First Fleet bottles contained scabs although some bottles may have contained other forms of dried inoculation material.[25]

The voyage

The First Fleet departed Portsmouth in May 1787 and sailed through tropical heat while crossing the equator en route to Rio de Janerio. For some writers, this period of hot weather, plus the heat experienced through a summer or two at Sydney Cove, would

17. Tench cited in Fitzhardinge 1961: 146.
18. Haygarth 1793: 303; Jenner, 1798: 56f.
19. Gatti 1768: 33.
20. Lloyd and Coulter 1961, vol III: 349.
21. Dr Thomas Trotter in Lloyd 1965: 309f.
22. Russell 1813: 1.
23. Shoolbred 1807: 370.
24. Russell 1813: 1. Ivory tips were used also.
25. James Watt mentions discharge from smallpox sores dried on cotton wool and stored in bottles, see Watt 1989: 145.

have deactivated any smallpox. Charles Wilson, for example, claims that as variola 'passed *en voyage* through tropical temperatures ranging from 82 degrees upwards … It is hardly possible that [it] could have remained active in such conditions for such a period of time.'[26] However, this is incorrect, because Wilson misinterprets the temperature data. The First Fleet records indicate that smallpox passed through temperatures ranging only from 82 degrees and below.

The records kept by Captain Hunter and Lieutenant Bradley (on *HMS Sirius*) and surgeon White (on the *Charlotte*) provide two sets of independent data.[27] The highest reading was from the *Charlotte* on 26 June 1787 (85°F at noon) but Hunter and Bradley in *HMS Sirius* did not corroborate this. They recorded 82°F. As no higher noon cabin temperature was recorded, it is clear that, during the voyage, smallpox materials insulated in chests and packaging never reached '82 degrees and upwards' (see Appendix). Of course, it is also necessary to consider the nature of the heat experienced after arrival at Sydney Cove, and here, Lieutenant William Dawes' records of land-based temperatures throughout 1788 and 1789 are available. The Australian Bureau of Meteorology published the data in 1981.[28]

Sydney Cove temperature

William Dawes' temperature data consist of temperature readings at various times of the day such as 'b.s.r.' (before sunrise), 's.s.' (sunset) and noon. Despite the lack of uniformity in the times of each day's readings we can estimate the likely daily mean air temperatures as between Dawes' daily lowest and highest temperature recordings. The results are displayed in Fig. 1.

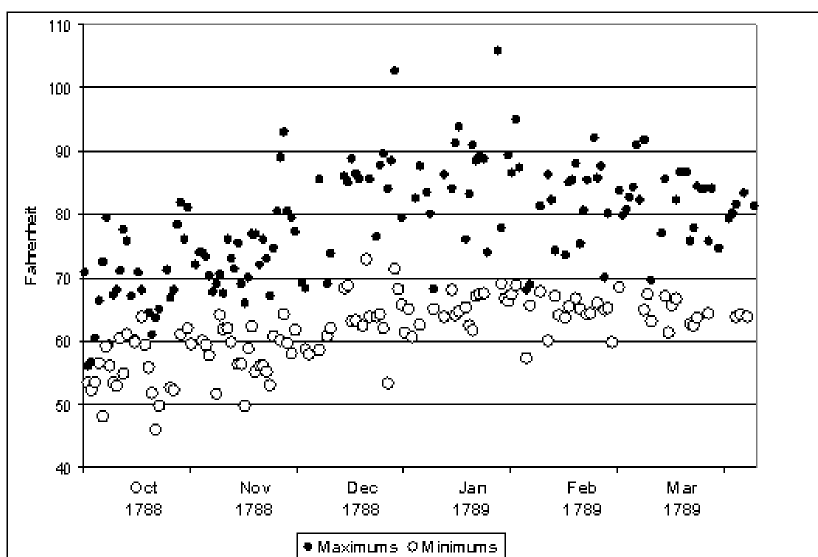

Fig. 1: Daily highest and lowest temperature recordings, Dawes' Observatory – summer 1788–1789 based on Dawes' records (McAfee 1981)

26. Wilson 1987: 79.
27. Bradley 1969; White 1971[1790].
28. McAfee 1981.

Dawes' data show two instances of daily temperatures exceeding 100°F but on both occasions the preceding morning and following evening temperatures were much lower. Such isolated heat peaks would not affect well-insulated stocks of smallpox. In general, given consistently cooler minimums usually below 70°F, we can assume that contents of medicine chests in storage did not warm over 80°F (27°C) for significant periods.

Other attempts to estimate the First Fleet's temperature environment at Sydney Cove have not been successful. Frost in *Botany Bay mirages* and Campbell in *Invisible invaders* exclusively rely on anecdotal, informal temperature data. Frost cites peak readings from thermometers occasionally exposed to hot wind and/or direct sunshine. He claims this data (eg 38.8°C for November and 44.4°C for December) 'may be taken as indicative' of Sydney weather.[29] This is not so; and single readings from thermometers 'occasionally exposed to hot wind and direct sunshine', should be rejected. Campbell and Flood base much of their smallpox deactivation thesis on the same data[30] without mentioning the hot wind and direct sunshine.

The impact of hot wind in distorting temperature readings is well illustrated by Peter Cunningham's observation that thermometers in the shade, due to the effects of hot wind, rose instantly 'from eighty degrees to a hundred and ten'.[31] We also have the evidence of both surgeon Worgan and Tench that temperature readings commonly fell by as much as 30°F in a day[32] and occasionally over 50°F.[33] Such radical daily variations suggest that Frost and Campbell's temperatures do not represent the more moderate temperatures that reached the smallpox. The chest contents would have remained close to each day's average depending on the insulation and the thermal mass. Frost and Campbell's data also conflicts with modern data that indicates that Sydney maximum temperatures only average 26°C (79°F).[34]

Smallpox virus survival

Smallpox is exceptionally stable when dried especially if kept in a cool place[35] and survives for years under suitable conditions.[36] According to James Moore, Chinese traditional inoculators kept scabs 'in close jars for years'.[37] In Britain, it is reported that variolous matter kept for a year and a half 'in a small bottle' was used by an inoculator apparently without adverse comment.[38] According to Peter Razzell, variolators successfully stored material 'for several years, before using it to good effect'. He quotes an example (actually from the Shetland Islands) of an inoculator, John Williamson, who

29. Frost 1995: 202.
30. Campbell 2002: 62; Flood 2006, Note 74: 280.
31. Cunningham 1966: 186.
32. Worgan 1978: 22; see also An Officer 1978: 39. Phillip also noted large (over 30°F) daily temperature ranges, see Commonwealth of Australia 1914: 57.
33. Fitzhardinge 1961: 196.
34. Castles 1992: 107.
35. Fenner 1988: 682.
36. Periodic assays showed that in temperate climates, smallpox scabs could retain infectivity at room temperature for several years. See Fenner 1988: 115b.
37. Moore 1815: 219.
38. Glass 1767: 5.

preserved virus underground 'a long time before he puts it to use – sometimes seven or eight years'.[39]

Possible instances of smallpox surviving for decades in cool and temperate climates have been recorded. For example, reportedly, smallpox from a 30-year-old grave in Somerset, England, infected 14 people when opened in 1759.[40] In Montreal, when immense quantities of smallpox, ie dozens of smallpox corpses, were buried in soil close to and below 0°C and accidentally reopened years later, a local outbreak of smallpox suggested that residual infectivity persisted for more than 100 years.[41]

Even when stored in undesirable conditions, virus in dried scabs retained residual infectivity for at least two years. This is apparent from traditional variolators in Afghanistan who told World Health Organisation investigators they could retain smallpox scabs for two years but such material was not reliable.[42] The Afghans sought to replenish their stocks each year. In the 18th century in India, inoculators frequently used virus four or five years old albeit with some degeneration.[43] More recent analysis by PD Meers also indicates that smallpox virus survives for long periods. In 1985 after reviewing the evidence he concluded that inactivation might take 25 years at room temperature or longer if cooler.[44] In 1986 American anthropologist Steadman Upham concluded that virus remained infective for years. He noted that:

> in environments with temperatures between 22°C and 30°C and with relative humidities between 25% and 55%, variola virus remains stable and infective for a number of years. As temperature and humidity rise above 30°C and 55% respectively, variola virus rapidly loses infectivity.[45]

Further evidence for smallpox longevity is available in the scientific literature, although reports from scientific studies need careful interpretation before applying them to First Fleet smallpox. In particular, results from studies of virus in aerosols, in glass capillaries or as smears on slides, cannot be used to assess the behaviour of smallpox in dried scabs as the form of the material affects virus longevity.[46] In 1947, Professor AW Downie and KR Dumbell examined the survival of virus in dried scabs. According to their data,[47] smallpox virus in scabs kept between 18°C and 20°C survive for over a year. They also noted that if their experiment had continued they would have shown virus surviving for a longer period.[48]

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39. Razzell 1976: 35.
40. Razzell 1976: 35. Low temperatures due to the Little Ice Age would have assisted virus survival.
41. Marsden 1855; Meers 1985: 1103.
42. Fenner et al 1988: 682.
43. Razzell 1976: 35.
44. Meers 1985: 1103. Meers also suggested that should whole corpses be taken into account, or when there are hundreds of victims, 'significant prolongation, perhaps to over 100 years' may follow in the right conditions.
45. Upham 1986: 120.
46. Virus as aerosols or as smears on glass slides deactivates faster than virus in dried scabs. See Downie and Dumbrell 1947: 552.
47. Downie and Dumbrell 1947, Table IV: 552.
48. 'It seems likely that repeated further examinations of our specimens using larger numbers of eggs would have shown the survival of variola virus for longer periods', Downie and Dumbell 1947: 552.

Occasionally scientific studies have been misapplied. For example, Frost cites a finding by FO MacCallum and JR McDonald that virus from scabs survived for mere months at a continuous temperature of 30°C (86°F). However, this has no relevance to First Fleet smallpox, as First Fleet stocks never experienced 30°C, day and night, as in MacCallum and McDonald's incubator.[49] By citing incubator results, Frost omits the more important and radically different results MacCallum and McDonald obtained from samples exposed to a day-night temperature cycle between 20°C and 24°C. In these conditions the virus in scabs outlived the 18-month experiment.[50] MacCallum and McDonald stated that smallpox can 'survive for many years, ten or more, at from 4°C to 5°C in closed bottles'.[51] Campbell also used incubator temperatures (35°C)[52] and therefore estimated the impact of temperature on First Fleet smallpox incorrectly.

Frost cites a finding by Professor Arie Zuckerman that smallpox is 'unlikely to survive in dried crusts (and presumably clothing) for more than a year'.[53] Frost then suggests that due to weather conditions 'there must be considerable doubt that the smallpox virus would have remained "live"'.[54] However, the original author of Zuckerman's statement was Isao Arita,[55] and it must be understood in its original context. Arita's statement only concerned 45 samples of tribal variolation material collected in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Pakistan. This has little relevance to First Fleet smallpox, as British smallpox material was not stored in the same manner as tribal material.

The relevant research on the deactivation of smallpox in natural circumstances is the work of HL Wolff and JJ Croon, reported in the *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* in 1968.[56] Wolff and Croon examined the deactivation of smallpox stored in unsealed double envelopes in a laboratory cupboard as temperatures ranged from 30°C in summer to below 15°C at night. In these conditions smallpox deactivated slowly. Their data showed smallpox lost activity over many years (see Table 1).[57]

Table 1: Deactivation of smallpox in scabs with fluctuating temperatures between sub-15°C and 30°C (59°F and 86°F)

Period	Viable particles per scab
2 years	56,000
3 years	52,000
4 years	24,000
5 years	32,000
6 years	12,000

49. MacCallum and McDonald decided not to embark on too extravagant an experiment and tested the effect of a single temperature, 30°C, they believed to be an appropriate mean temperature: see MacCallum and McDonald 1957: 249. Sydney's annual mean temperature is 17.4°C.
50. MacCallum and McDonald 1957, Table III: 252.
51. MacCallum and McDonald 1957: 247.
52. Campbell 2002: 62 – using Huq 1976.
53. Frost 1995: 201.
54. Frost 1995: 202.
55. Arita 1980: 27-29. The age of the sample material was not relevant.
56. Wolff and Croon 1968: 492-493.
57. It is worth noting that Wolff and Croon's data is consistent with the practice of British variolators storing their material for up to seven years.

As Wolff and Croon's experiment included normal daily and seasonal temperature variations, their findings provide a benchmark for assessing the impact of temperatures on smallpox materials during the voyage and at Sydney Cove. Their data suggest that where smallpox temperatures remain between 15°C and 30°C, virus activity declines to around half strength every couple of years.

In the case of First Fleet smallpox, however, there are additional considerations. In particular it can be assumed that the smallpox was better insulated than Wolff and Croon's supply. The insulation would have consisted of several elements: the cooler microclimate in the ship's storeroom (or storehouse when on shore); the medicine chest or other container; the still air inside the chest; any additional packaging; and finally the glass or ceramic bottles containing the smallpox. This much greater thermal insulation, compared to Wolff and Croon's double envelopes, would ensure that First Fleet smallpox was relatively unaffected by any isolated extreme temperatures. Dawes' data (Fig 1) show a period of around three months when daily maximums sometimes peaked over 30°C (86°F) which exceeds the upper limit of Wolff and Croon's temperature range. However the net effect of this short period was minor, firstly because of the insulation but also because of the preservative effect of colder temperatures encountered as the First Fleet approached and crossed latitude 40°S.[58]

In general then, assuming professional conduct by its custodians, we can conclude that First Fleet smallpox was not exposed to temperatures over 85°F during the voyage or at Sydney Cove. Consequently, unless new records come to light, we can conclude that First Fleet smallpox survived the voyage and storage at Sydney but with some moderate loss of activity as suggested by Wolff and Croon's data (see Table 1). The only remaining question is whether this degraded material could still infect local Aborigines in early 1789.

Smallpox infective?

In general dried scabs are not infective as the virus is locked away in the scab's fibrous matrix and in dried fluid at the base of each scab. However scabs will fracture if blankets, coats and handkerchiefs containing scabs are rubbed against human bodies. This creates particles that may release virus into the human body through nasal membranes, wounds or invisible abrasions. An infective dose can be as low as one infectious particle[59] although around 300 infectious particles per ml may be required for a 50% success rate.[60] Possible low dosage requirements and informal transmission mechanisms were demonstrated by the 1966 and 1978 Birmingham[61] and Aberdeen[62] outbreaks of smallpox. Very minute doses of virus must have caused these outbreaks. Using Wolff and Croon (Table 1) we can infer that if the British smallpox was 2 or 3 years old by 1789, it could have maintained around 50,000 viable particles per scab.[63] Even if the First Fleet's

58. Also, for Sydney, modern mean minimum temperatures are below 15°C from April to October.
59. Fenner et al 1988: 187f stated 'although because of non-specific protective mechanisms a larger dose would usually be required'.
60. Using analogy with vaccina virus, see Fenner et al 1988, Note a, Table 14.15: 684.
61. Two cases of remote smallpox infection at Birmingham Medical School – first in 1966, second in 1978, see Fenner et al 1988: 1100.
62. Reported by Dr AW Downie: see Razzell 1976: 35.

smallpox suffered greater heat and degenerated to half or quarter of this strength, it is still probable there remained thousands of viable particles per scab.

In either case, this material appears sufficient for transmitting a mild case of smallpox to local Aborigines either by opportunistic variolation through casual skin scratches or wounds, or by insufflation through the nose.[64] While initially this may cause a mild infection, any such first cases would infect their associates by releasing virus in aerosols that subsequently could enter the bloodstream through the mucous membranes of the upper respiratory tract. This second route of entry may easily ignite a major outbreak of smallpox. In 2003 Frank Fenner suggested that the only way First Fleet material could transmit smallpox (ie 'take') 'would be by surgeons using their lancets for deliberate variolation'.[65] This is arguable. Smallpox material around two years old may not have been capable of guaranteeing successful variolation when used in deliberate single doses but such material would have retained sufficient viral activity to infect at least one or two susceptible Aborigines if applied more generally.

Conclusion

Wolff and Croon's data, historical anecdotes concerning smallpox longevity in the environment, the temperature records of First Fleeters, insights from contemporary medical practices and WHO statements on the infectiousness of smallpox all provide a firm basis for interpreting the historical record concerning the British smallpox materials in New South Wales in 1788. There is little doubt that smallpox scabs collected in 1787, if handled professionally, would have retained significant viral activity for more than two years. King's 1792 request to Banks indicates King had no concerns about a voyage damaging the virus. Combined with the very low dosage for infection this demonstrates that if deployed in significant quantities (ie bottles), the First Fleet's smallpox could infect highly susceptible people such as local Aborigines around Port Jackson sometime before April 1789.

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63. Viable particles detected by chick cells could underestimate activity in human cells. Smallpox virus is more active in human than in chick cells at least at some temperatures: see Razzell 1977: 38.
64. Fenner et al 1988: 246.
65. Fenner 2003: 48. Evidence supporting this claim has yet to emerge.

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Appendix, Temperature, degrees Fahrenheit, Sydney, 1787–1788

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
1787																																
Mar	C	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	52	52	52	54	59	60	58	60	60	63	57	59	60	61	64	61	63	65	70
	S	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	59	59	61	61	60	60	61	62	63	62	63	64	64	66	66	65	67	69
Jun	C	71	74	73	74	72	75	75	73	75	75	76	78	73	72	73	74	74	76	76	81	82	82	82	81	82	85	82	80	81	82	
	S	67	71	72	72	72	74	72	70	70	72	71	72	72	73	74	73	73	75	77	81	80	82	80	80	81	82	81	80	81	82	
Jul	C	79	80	80	80	81	81	80	79	78	78	77	77	78	77	78	78	79	80	81	79	79	79	75	77	76	75	73	73	72	72	75
	S	81	81	81	81	81	81	81	80	80	79	79	78	79	79	79	79	79	80	81	80	80	79	77	78	76	76	75	74	73	74	74
Aug	C	75	73	72	69	71	72	72	74	65	70	77	76	75	76	75	76	69	69	72	74	75	76	76	74	72	70	72	76	78	74	75
	S	74	75	-	72	71	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sep	C	78	72	72	76	71	72	73	68	68	68	68	67	64	66	68	67	66	63	57	58	59	59	59	54	54	53	-	61	59	56	
	S	-	-	-	-	73	73	74	70	68	68	71	71	70	70	68	70	68	66	60	60	59	60	63	57	54	57	60	62	59	56	
Oct	C	61	60	62	64	63	63	62	60	60	58	60	60	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
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John White on board the *Charlotte* (C) and John Hunter and William Bradley on board *HMS Sirius* (S) collected daily temperature data from 13 May 1787 (White 1971[1790]; Bradley 1969). White's recordings end on 26 January 1788 when he broke his thermometer and the Hunter/Bradley record ends on 1 October 1788 when *HMS Sirius* departed for Capetown. 'E' denotes end of recording.

‘That child is my hero’: an interview with Alf Taylor

Anne Brewster

Alf Taylor is a Western Australian Nyoongah writer. He was born in the late 1940s and spent his childhood in the Spanish Benedictine Mission at New Norcia, 250 kilometres north of Perth. He has published two books of poetry, *Singer songwriter* in 1992 and *Winds* in 1994, and a collection of short fiction, *Long time now* in 2001. This last book was published in Spanish in 2006.

Taylor has recently completed the manuscript of his life story of growing up in New Norcia Mission, ‘God, the Devil and Me’, which is part-memoir and part-theological satire. Excerpts of it have been published in the anthology of Indigenous writing, *Those who remain will always remember* (2001), and in the literary journal, *Westerly* (2003 and 2005). The first *Westerly* excerpt won the Patricia Hackett Prize (2003). To my knowledge, Taylor is the only Indigenous person to have published a substantial piece of writing about New Norcia. He has travelled widely and talked about his experience at New Norcia in Spain, India, UK and Germany.

I first met Alf at the launch of *Winds* in 1994 at Dumbertang in Perth. When I started collecting material for the anthology of Australian Indigenous writing, *Those who remain will always remember* – co-edited with Angeline O’Neill and Rosemary van den Berg – I asked Alf if he would like to contribute a piece that described how he started writing, and this small piece grew into ‘God, the Devil and Me’. For this, Alf, Peter Lavskis and I visited New Norcia, where we encountered an elderly priest. It was the first time that Alf had returned since childhood.

This interview was conducted in two stages: in Perth on 1 June 2006, and in Tubingen, Germany, 4 November 2006.

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AB: Alf, can you tell me about your mother’s and your father’s background?

AT: My mother’s name was Queenie Harris. She come from up around the Norseman area, and she was a Ngadu woman.

AB: Is that part of the Wongi group?

AT: The Wongi and the Ngadu people, they’re all from around that area but they are separate and each tribe retained their own individual customs. I’m just learning all of this, from different people I speak to, because, as you know, I was taken away and put

Alf Taylor and Anne Brewster, Germany, 2006

in a mission where they said that our Aboriginal culture and our Aboriginal language was a mortal sin. Getting back and learning about my mother's side was quite overwhelming. My mother married my father, a Nyoongah, whose name was Rosendo Taylor; he had the same name as Bishop Rosendo Salvado from New Norcia. My father's tribe came from the Victoria Plains around New Norcia.

AB: So, do you think of yourself as Nyoongar, then?

AT: I'm honoured to be of Nyoongar origin and Ngadu origin. I feel at ease with myself when going to my father's country and also feel very at ease when I go into my mother's country.

AB: Can you tell us about New Norcia?

AT: When Bishop Salvado came there he had good intentions for the native people. He was given land by the West Australian government to cater for the Aboriginal people who were in that area at that particular time. And what he wanted to do was to teach my father, his father and brothers to work the land and when they proved that they'd become solid citizens, they would be given their own land back, in return of learning the ways of the Spanish monks. So the government gave all this land to Bishop Salvado, with his intentions of giving back the land to the Aboriginal people who were around that area.

But there was also another monk – his name was Bishop Torres – and he was the political one. He knew that all this land was given to Bishop Salvado or to the New Norcia Benedictine monks. At that time Salvado was the boss of the monks and all the Aboriginal people who, I wouldn't say they were captured but, out of curiosity, they came to see these monks. Curiosity got the better of them and they got these Aboriginal people – my father and all his family. Bishop Torres plus Bishop Salvado – but he was just a priest at that time; he was Father Salvado – won the trust of these Aboriginal people and then slowly they were taught Christianity … all the things like, you know, looking after themselves, looking after the land – even though they owned the land. The monks won their trust and that was exchanged for flour, tea, sugar … trinkets. Father Salvado, at that time, was a good man and he had good intentions for the Aboriginal people. He did such a good job with these Aboriginal people in that area that Bishop Torres wrote to the Bishops in Rome, the Cardinals, saying that this man, Father Rosendo Salvado, was doing such a wonderful job with these Aboriginal people, therefore he should be appointed a Bishop. And so, while Father Salvado was working with my family, Rome received that letter and they wrote back to Bishop Torres, saying, yeah, we know of his work and all the things he's doing for the native people … we would be quite honoured to make him a Bishop. So, the Vatican sent him the fare back

from Perth and New Norcia and he was to jump on this ship and sail from Fremantle all the way to Rome. And, of course, that was, what, 18 months, two years by boat, to get to Rome.

And by this time, while he was gone to receive his appointment as a Bishop, Bishop Torres – through his cunning – wrote to the government and said: I think this land should be given back to the monastery, and we can distribute whatever we think is right. So the government apparently wrote back to Bishop Torres and said to the Benedictine monks, you can have the land and when you see fit and the native people have achieved their object of working the land and caring for the land – and they already did care for the land – you can give it back to them. So, Bishop Torres received this great big parcel of land set for the Benedictine monks, and that was all in his name, or the Benedictine monks. This was all unknown to Bishop Salvado, because … I guess, he was quite excited going from a priest to a bishop. While he was over in Rome or the Vatican, this has all been going on behind his back, and Bishop Torres got all this land. All this land that once was supposed to be given back to the Aboriginal people to care for, it was given to the Benedictine monks … This has been passed down to me; the story has been told to me by very respected elders. When Bishop Salvado got back, he's back with the native people who he loved working with: he had been telling the people at the Vatican that these people could quite easily look after the land, care for it and turn it into great big farming areas and do wonderful things with it. But it was too late: it all belonged to the Benedictine monks. When he actually found out the truth it really hurt him, because of what Bishop Torres had done – he had strong links to the government in Perth at that time.

AB: You've just finished writing your life story about being in New Norcia. Can you remember much?

AT: Yes, I can. I remembered a lot of that life and, quite amazingly, looking back on the child as he went through the New Norcia Mission. I am quite fascinated by the life he lived in that particular era – in the late 50s and into the early 60s. They were very cruel to that child. I think what helped me most is I severed all ties with that child. I gave him that life … I watched his life unfold before my eyes as I wrote his story. It was the only way I could write this story. We were two complete opposite beings: he was the child; I was looking at that child. Doing that helped me a lot to write. I was quite sympathetic to that child, but if I was to play the part of that child I would have hurt. The child suffered … day to day through the … Spanish culture … the Mass … religion … the floggings … being called an ugly little black devil, being told that you're never going to make it in life; that you're going to drink yourself to death at a very early age. That child used to agree with those brothers when they used to tell him these things. He used to say: 'Yes, brother, I'm going to do that when I grow up.' The more I write about this child, I feel sorry for him. I think that child became my hero. …

That child became my hero by giving me his life for me to tell the world about the sufferings he went through in the mission. They've always told him that his Aboriginal culture was a mortal sin and his Aboriginal language was a mortal sin. You know, you tell this to a six, seven-year-old child … and they made hell such a damning place … all the kids in that mission didn't want to go to hell; they wanted to go to heaven. I remember he became an altar boy at the ripe old age of eight; he served on the altar of God. He

thought that, by getting on the altar of God, maybe I'll make friends with God. God lived on the altar. And they changed the wine into Christ's blood and they drank this – the priests – and then the holy bread, that was Christ's body. And he thought, by drinking this wine and swallowing Christ's body, he could become something like Jesus Christ. Because he was – not only him but all his friends – downgraded, humiliated … they used to get floggings over nothing … Mass was every day, every night … prayers. They didn't want to educate those children at that particular time. What they wanted to do was domesticate these children, and hopefully they would become good labourers.

By telling the story, I find that the child, sort of, doesn't belong to me. I'm trying not to ignore the sufferings that child had but I feel as though I want nothing to do with his life.

AB: But at the same time, you said you befriended him and you admired him.

AT: Exactly. Our people have heroes; well, that child is my hero. He gave me his life for me to write. I mean, there's something in our lives, like when we feel … you don't want to relive the hurt, that pain. But I think that child helped me … mentally.

AB: And that's where you started writing – with the child – didn't you?

AT: I started with the child. When I started on my memoir, 'God, the Devil and Me', I found, by keeping that child with me, it was hurting me … to the point I thought, I couldn't do this; I've got to separate from him … sever ties with the child, and let him go back into the mission and let me look at him. This was his suffering. Although there was a lot of suffering, he found that with the other boys in the mission, within the ranks of confinement, there was a lot of … laughter …

AB: Did you see much of your parents or your extended family while you were in New Norcia, or were they too far away?

AT: There were a lot of children in that mission, and most of the other kids, their parents were in different towns and a very long way from New Norcia itself. And, in that particular era, if your parents wanted to visit you, they had to go to the native authorities, get a pass from the native welfare, and then take it to the police, who stamped it, then you were able to go from, say for instance, Perth to New Norcia. They had to catch a bus or get a lift somehow. And when they got to New Norcia – this is any parents who wanted to see their kids – the police pulled them up and said, 'What are you doing in this town?' They knew straight away that you were strangers. You had to produce this pass to authorise you to travel from wherever you came from. I mean, South Africa learnt from this government. I think a delegation from South Africa came over here, particularly in Perth, and they learnt from the government here, and they went back and put the same ruling on their blacks as this government did to the blacks in this country at that particular time. And, if you ask me, I think Hitler learnt too from them.

AB: You also wrote a little bit about Toby, about that child, in *Long time now*, didn't you?

AT: Yes. Toby and that child were very good friends. That child couldn't see Toby. I remember him sitting on a log and Toby his friend would always be with him. He couldn't see Toby; he didn't have an idea what Toby looked like. But he imagined this Toby to be something like him. Toby's mum and dad got killed in a car accident when Toby was a young boy. And so he felt for Toby, and I guess Toby felt for him. He

couldn't see Toby but Toby would talk to him and he knew when Toby was cryin' … all these emotions that his little body felt. Looking back on them, now I think I see a very humorous side to the child and to Toby. I remember him sitting on a log one day and he saw this beautiful rainbow and Jesus stepped down off this rainbow, and the child was talking to Jesus. And he said to Jesus, 'Please, dear Jesus, I have a friend here. Could you please tell me what he looks like?' And Jesus looked at the child, looked at his imaginary friend, and said, 'Look Alfred, I cannot tell you … I cannot describe your friend. I know what he looks like, but I want you to use your imagination.'

AB: So, do you remember this – thinking this as a child, do you?

AT: Yes, this is the child. He can remember. I can remember the child sitting on the log and he comes in contact with the Devil. He even talks to the Devil. He tells Toby to go and look for the man with no head on because the Devil has taken his horse, Satan. And the Devil says to the child when he made contact … see, what he did – he stole the horse of the man with no head on … and, you know, it's crazy.

AB: So Alf, did you talk to Jesus and the Devil or the angels or God, and things like that when you were a child?

AT: Me or the child?

AB: The child.

AT: I tell you what, that child had a place in heaven. He was ready to go to heaven. But the longing for his mother … he used to talk to Jesus, he used to talk to the Devil … the angels … It's scary, thinking back on that child's life … to think back on him kneeling before the altar of Christ and speaking to Jesus as if Jesus were actually there. It's quite amazing. His memory is not so much my memory; he showed himself to me and I look at his life and I can actually see what he went through.

AB: I wanted to ask you a little bit about the humour in 'God, the Devil and Me' and *Long time now*. Your humour is complex and it's got a 'sting in the tail', hasn't it? And sometimes it's quite black … it's quite sharp. Humour must have played a part in your lives as kids.

AT: Oh, it did, it did. It played a very important part in our life. Without humour, like I said, I would have been dead. You get six cuts across the hand and tears are flowing down your eyes, and you're ready to go and have a great big cry somewhere in a dark corner or against a wall. And then you look around and you see some boy doing some silly thing like falling over himself or trying to talk his language – you know it's a mortal sin – and he's trying to mix that up with English. You're covering your mouth and you're pointing at him and you're laughing and saying, 'You committed a mortal sin.' This is after your hands are still stinging. Like I said, laughter was my sunlight and roses while locked in New Norcia. That was the only thing we could turn to. I think Jesus, while nailed to the cross, at least he should have put a smile on his face. I reckon he'd look good with a smile. Even with a crown of thorns and two nails in his hands. I reckon the world would have loved him a little bit more if he had a smile on his face. Everyone tells you that he died for you, and I always think – yeah, a smile on his face would say 'I'm happy to die for you people.' And they'll all say, 'Yeah, you're the silly bugger that died.' That's the sort of thing that helps me.

AB: The humour in 'God, the Devil and Me' and *Long time now* is a critique of Christianity, the church, and white Australia isn't it? But it's also sometimes humour turned against yourself and you have a good laugh at Nyoongar culture – Aboriginal culture – too.

AT: This is one good thing about being a Nyoongar. You can always come up with some outrageous but funny things. And I think that was a gift that I was born with. In Aboriginal culture you will find not one but many clowns in a family, and they will also be the respected elders. They're a race of many characters I think.

AB: Do you think humour is quite a strong part of Nyoongar culture?

AT: It's got to be, because of, like I said, the degradation, humiliation and the ostracism. Because, I mean, they were all locked away; they weren't allowed in towns after six o'clock at night. If they were found in towns after six o'clock at night, the police had every right to come and pick them up, put them in jail, and let them out the next morning … so that there's no trouble caused or they're not walking past some church or anything like that.

AB: We were talking the other day about 'God, the Devil and Me' and the way that you use the characters of Jesus, the apostles and Satan. You said that you like to challenge your readers and take them to different places.

AT: That's true because when you read a book, you learn. You gotta make the reader work out what the writer is actually writing about. I mean, gone are the days of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. Reading now, I find is becoming more of a riddle, it makes people guess, makes them think. Even though in that mission that child suffered so much degradation, suppression, cruelty mental abuse, physical … what I wanted was not only to have the reader cry with me, but also in a split second laugh along with me. And I found that by juggling humour and sadness they can actually go together.

AB: How do you feel about the past now that you've finished the memoir? Does it feel like it's a long way away?

AT: It does. It does seem so far away. It's like a distant memory, but again, the child, he reminds me of that memory. He doesn't want me to forget that memory. With all sorts of emotions I was suffering at that particular time I looked for escapes, through alcohol and drugs, but then I thought, okay, you're only hurting yourself. Why not let the child go and let him relive that memory for you? By reliving that memory, I look back and I felt for the child, not for me. I cried with the child. I laughed with the child even though sometimes I felt like getting the child and giving him a smack myself. But the child, he helped me. Now I can talk about the life of the child, and I'm free of hurt, free of resentments, regrets … In other words…bearing a grudge. Because that child, I think he was the one who knew that I was hurting within myself. And instead of him hurting me, he let himself go from me. It wasn't me who was suffering; it was the child who suffered.

AB: I think that's an extraordinary accomplishment Alf. The humour is very powerful in your work, because you can write about terrible, cruel things, and some of the terrible issues facing Indigenous people today. You captivate an audience through humour.

AT: Writing in that particular way has helped me. I would say that it helped my readers to understand, or try to understand, what I am writing about. When I write … I don't want my readers to feel sorry for me. If I do go into a structure of writing where I feel

hurt, then, with that hurt, I try and turn that into humour. I don't know – it's just a gift I've got of doing that. … Like I said, it's my ancestors who guide me on the way I write. Because when I write, if I can't feel what I'm writing, I know my readers are not going to feel what I've written, so when I write I make sure that the feelings are in what I write. Because then I know that my readers are actually feeling what I feel when I write. I find it's very important, when you write, you've got to have feeling, and if you haven't got feeling, I think to myself, it's not worth writing at all.

AB: I wanted to also ask you about some of the stories in *Long time now*. I wanted to ask you first about the title.

AT: I remember a very good friend of mine, Peter Bibby. He said, 'look, I want you to continue writing short stories. You tell some extraordinary stories.' I wrote about eight, and he said, I want another 20, keep going. I was travelling all around Australia. Eventually, I got all these short stories out and I sent it all up to him. And he went through them, and just loved them. He said, 'Okay, we need a title.' … I said, 'I've been at these stories for a long time now, and I want to get them out.' And I said, 'Call it *Long time now*.' It was there all the time.

AB: The phrase is mentioned in the last story, isn't it?

AT: Yes, I use that all the time, 'long time now'. And in the book, *Long time now*, I bring people who have since gone on – I bring them back to play a certain part, so I myself haven't forgotten them. That's my way of reminding me that they are still around somewhere.

AB: So some of the characters are based on people who have passed on?

AT: Well, in some Aboriginal cultures, using the Aboriginal names of deceased persons is forbidden. So I don't like to say any names, especially the names of the people I'm writing about, say, the Wongi people.

AB: And in *Long time now*, Edward Jacky Singer and Nora – are they based on your mother and grandfather?

AT: … No. … He was a tribal elder, and I call him that because … the Aboriginal people had their original Aboriginal given names, but the white men couldn't say them. Native Affairs couldn't say their Aboriginal names so they give them Singers, Billy-cans, Taylors, and you know … easier to say. So with Edward Jacky Singer, I started the story and I didn't know what last name to give him, and I looked around and there was a sewing machine in the corner … and I thought, that's it – Edward Jacky Singer, that'll do. So that's originally come from a sewing machine, that name …

AB: Some of the characters, like 'old Tommy Toothpick' and 'Uncle Dollar' and so on, represent a certain generation of Aboriginal people that is disappearing. Do you think it will be replaced by another one?

AT: No, I don't think so. I think that particular generation of people … those people were actually true to life, you know, I've seen them myself. But what I've done is I've picked out, like with Tommy Toothpick … I've picked a certain emotion or whatever … I picked something from him … I pick them all, and make this one …

AB: A composite character?

AT: Fantastic, yeah.

AB: Some of them are very charismatic. They're very engaging … almost larger than life. They're magnetic personalities.

AT: They are. These characters I've created, even at the Queen's Birthday party, they could walk in and all the guests' mouths would fall open, and they would just openly, blatantly stare at them with open mouths – just gaping at these people. I wanted that.

AB: Well, you certainly succeed.

AT: They are the Elvis Presleys of the Nyoongars.

AB: And I guess they won't ever die. Like Elvis keeps coming back.

AT: These guys, they'll be around forever. When I first started writing *Long time now*, the characters I created in my head, they were actually living with me. They were actually with me … in my flat. I'll probably end up in a mental institution after this gets out. Tommy Toothpick … what I saw first in my head… was an old boy, old bloke, with a toothpick in his hand, cleaning his teeth out after a lavish meal. But, as you know, it would have to be kangaroo meat and damper. And his face became clear to me, and then I started to giggle to myself; I thought, this is it, this is it. The child in the mission … I think he was eight when he wrote his first story. And what scared him … all these images, emotions he was going through. I'm getting back to him. They weren't allowed to feel emotion at that particular time, and what was scary was the images inside his head.

Because it was a Catholic school, you believed in Jesus, Mary, Joseph and all those other silly buggers … it was scary for him. And he thought that the Devil controlled his mind, because the only images you were supposed to get in your mind were Jesus and his mother looking down upon you. But when he first started to write, he got all these images in his head and he was too scared to tell the other kids next to him because they'd laugh at him, and they'd go and tell the brother and say, 'He's got things in his head. He can see things in his head.' Well naturally, you were classified as Satan. Then you'd have to get up there and six cuts across the hand, and kneel in front of the altar and start praying … forever.

AB: So, the Devil was quite a strong part …

AT: He played a very important part in the child's life. The Devil was forever around him. There was only God and the Devil. They were the only ones who played a major part of his life. And I think it was hard for him to clarify between the two. I mean, it's quite amazing what they did to this child by putting all this stuff into their head. They were saying one minute, 'You be a good little boy; Jesus is going to take you into heaven, and you've got all this beautiful garden. There'll be no one calling you any bad names … no mugs floggin' you'. Next minute, you stole a marble off your mate, and they take you and give you six cuts across the hand and tell you that you've committed a sin. And you say, 'No, I didn't, brother, I didn't take his marble.' And then they say, 'Yeah, but Jesus or God, he saw you take that marble.' And that confused you. And you think to yourself, 'No, I looked around and there was no one around – no person around.' My deliberate intention was to steal this marble, and you made sure that everything was clear … and you pinch a marble. Then the boy goes and counts his marbles and he's got one missing, and you're the last one who walks through the chapel door. And you're there, and you lost his marble – another kid beat you for his

marble – and you swear black and blue … you've got the most angelic face any child could have … and you say, 'No, I never took that marble, Brother.' And you've got your hand clasped in prayer … And then the Brother looks down and he said, 'No, but you know who saw you?' And you're thinking … and you say 'no'. 'Jesus saw you take that marble.' You say 'augh, dash!', but you don't answer. Then you stop and you think, 'that's right, yeah, all the kids, no one was around me, Jesus did see me, so I did take that marble'… six cuts. Now I look back upon that life and I enjoy talking about it. Because I think the child saved me, and he gave his part of life that I can write about. It's quite amazing how I've got connection with this child. Even though he's not a part of me, I've got a connection to him.

AB: And the older characters that we were talking about – Uncle Dollar and Tommy Toothpick and the others. A lot of those older blokes, you seem to be very interested in writing about those old blokes. They seem to be people full of wisdom … full of life experience … but they also seem precariously close to death.

AT: Aboriginal people have got a life span of about 50 years. And now with drugs coming into the Aboriginal communities, it's dropped down. I give my characters age with dignity – still have them with pride, even in their own little communities … integrity … even compassion. So, my characters are mainly built on older, much wiser gentlemen. When I say older, they'd be in their early to late 70s, even early 80s, and still carrying on like they were 20 or 30.

AB: You're very affectionate towards these blokes, and very accepting of them, even though they are drinking themselves to death.

AT: What I am trying to get across in those stories is to be mainly delivered to the young Aboriginal men and women today. That's why I create my characters in their 80s … they've done everything … worked … but mainly they enjoyed their alcohol. The older they get, the more they drink and they're on death's row. And my message is mainly for the younger generation today: look, if you keep drinking and using drugs today, you won't even see the age of these old guys who are still drinking today, and they are still managing to tell their stories to their younger children or grandchildren.

AB: What I find very fascinating about these characters is that you're not judgmental: you seem to have a wonderful ability to accept the foibles of your characters.

AT: Yes, because sometimes I think I play those characters – I become a part of those characters – and therefore I see me in them. And I want them to make people like these characters. So, I think it all goes back to the child, because no one wanted this child when he was a child. He had a cruel upbringing and … he was ostracised in his own country. And, not only him but the rest of the children too. I'm looking at him not as a child but as one of my characters, and I think he wants to be loved by everybody. So, when my readers read of these characters and say like what you just said – they're likeable … I want that child to be liked too. So therefore, I go between the child and the characters I create.

AB: And the story about the black trackers – you must have been drawing on some local history about that, eh?

AT: Ah … yeah. I've heard a lot of stories about the black trackers in the time when they were first introduced to help the police to track people. And then the police gave them

powers, only amongst their own people, in the missions like Mugumba. What they used to do to their own people, you know.

AB: But they weren't Nyoongar or Wongis, were they? Were they brought from outside?

AT: … Yeah, they were brought down from up the Kimberleys, somewhere like this. I don't think they were related to the Nyoongars, but they were given … this power to do whatever they want to their own people. And the Police and the Superintendent of the mission let them do what they want.

AB: And, going back to those old blokes, I know that you've written about your own struggles with alcohol, especially in your poetry. I found *Winds* very powerful.

AT: In *Winds* I went back to the child too. I think I was blaming the child for giving me this life. I blamed the child for making me hit the alcohol and whatever stuff there was around at that time.

AB: I thought you were very frank about your difficulties with alcohol and … the pain that people have with this, in those books. And we can kind of see that with the old boys in *Long time now*, too, so you're obviously concerned about the impact of alcohol.

AT: It played a major role in my life. I can go off blaming everyone else but … I guess I was looking for a excuse. Like I said, I was blaming the priests when they told me you're going to drink yourself to death, and I agreed with them and actually I nearly did what they wanted me to drink myself to death. I was quite lucky to realise that alcohol doesn't solve any problems; it adds problems to problems. And I found that out waking up in … some God-forsaken place. Yeah, alcohol played a prominent part in my life. Like I said, I've got no regrets; that was part of my upbringing, my adulthood … maturity. But one thing, when I knew that alcohol was taking control, I had a lot of good people around me – Ben, my brother. He helped and supported me, but the bottom line was for me to make this decision. He was always there but I was always falling down again, and he said to me, 'Look, the only way you can do it is, you do it yourself.' And the pits were coming up pretty fast towards me. And I just said, 'that's it, no more'. I don't know how long ago it was, I can't remember. I don't think I want to remember. It's like it never happened to me.

AB: Alf, can I ask you about yarning? We talked about how that's so much a part of remembering the past and so on. And a lot of your characters tell 'tall tales', don't they? It seems to me that some of the yarning is like 'pulling the leg' of the reader.

AT: If you're going to ask 'why', I don't know. Aboriginals – mainly Nyoongars – their saying is, 'get him on top of that tree and then cut it down on top of him'. It's like, they can tell you anything, if you're silly enough to believe them. They've taken you up that tree and they're cutting that tree down on top of you. Yeah, and also, it goes back to the old blokes again. They'll get a bottle of plonk … they'll start off, just yarning in general … one'd tell a story, and it'll be, that's pretty good. This other fella, he'll think … aw, yeah, I can outdo that. Then he'll bring another story that will outweigh that one. It's like … one tells a story and then another guy beats you, then another one comes up with one that's better. It's like a chess match.

AB: Sort of 'upping the ante'? … In one of the stories in *Long Time Now*, you talk about the statue of Yagan and Tommy Toothpick also having a sort of 'forlorn hope', and that

phrase has always stuck in my mind. And at the end, Yagan exacts his revenge, doesn't he? I'm wondering about that phrase, 'forlorn hope'. It's very powerful.

AT: Tommy Toothpick and Yagan … they would have to be identical in structure. Not in height, build or anything like that, but in their roles in society. And Yagan … I guess, he had that with him — he carried that all his life until they cut his head off. And I guess, Aboriginal people who, today, want to make a contribution to society — I think they feel the same. For me, I can still contribute through my stories. Now I'm in a position with my writing … it has given me more power, and there I go back to the child who made friends with that pencil. And that pencil was his weapon. This is where I find when I write, that the pencil, pen, biro or whatever is *my* weapon. I can tell people exactly what they want to hear, or I can make people very uncomfortable. But I try to write from a neutral corner, and go between the centre of that … uneasiness … Because I don't want my readers to be uncomfortable when they read.

AB: And can I ask you also about another character from *Long Time Now*: Charlie. I'm really intrigued by Charlie, especially that line that he could talk to a snake into biting itself. He seems like a real character — a real trickster. I wondered whether you could tell us a little bit more about what kind of character he is.

AT: Charlie ... he's a normal Nyoongar person, you see anywhere around the traps ... very shrewd and cautious ... I think he reminds me of me sometimes too ... Yeah, he sort of became real, true to life for me. He's very shrewd. If you put him seven days in hell, I reckon he'd manage to talk Satan into giving him a glass of water while he's staying there. Or send him up to heaven and he'll manage to get the angels to fly upside down. Very convincing ... plus charming, and ... he knew how to get around people.

AB: Do you think that you're a little bit of a trickster, like Charlie, in your work? Are you trying to do a kind of similar thing?

AT: I think I've learnt more from Charlie than I've learnt from me; or any other fraudster/trickster I've known. I learnt a lot from Charlie. You know, just by his ways of manipulation, yeah, he was an expert at that.

AB: Was 'God, the devil and Me' difficult to write while the brothers and fathers were still alive?

AT: Yes, it was. Starting off on that, I didn't want to upset the people who were still alive. But I wrote their names – their given names – I put that to the paper, and I was very uncomfortable with that. When people heard about it, they started to say things like 'you want to watch it, you're going to get sued' and 'they're going to stop it' and get an injunction or whatever. It was hard, to start off, but the more I worked on it, the more I thought, 'okay, this is how it's meant to be, is to tell the truth'. And I guess all people want to know is the truth, regardless of these people who are still alive, or whether they're dead. The two monks who cared – well, looked after – us kids, they've passed on. And that gave me open slather to say what I want. And I think 'God, the devil and Me' is … I would say I was in a battlefield. I felt that I was ducking bullets while writing this. Going back to the upbringing of the missionaries … they led me to believe that you cannot defame God, the missionaries, or Captain Cook. I often went back and thought about this, and at the end I thought, 'go for it!' At the end I didn't want to let it go. I kept on wanting it with me all the time. I think the child was more upset that I finished it, because he thinks that I have put him away in some cupboard

and doubts if I'll ever let him out again. I told him, you'll always come out when … not when I want him to come out but he can come out when he wants to come out. So, there's a lot of understanding between us. But writing 'God, the devil', the first part of it was really, really hard. I think that's where the alcohol and drugs played a very important or major part in my life. Working on this was going back to what that child went through and alcohol was an escape for me not to think of that child living through all his horrible upbringing – his cruel upbringing. But now, once I got into it, like I said, I got to the stage where I didn't want to let it go.

AB: The book? It was really hard finishing it, wasn't it?

AT: It was, it was. I didn't want to let it go. I wanted it forever to be around … I wanted it with me. But I think the most important part is where … I actually left my body and went into heaven. I was a soon-to-be 13-year-old boy, and there I am, meeting all the apostles ... I met Mother Mary first. She put me on her lap and talked to me and … I was very fond of Mother Mary, Jesus's mother, because in the Mission, when you lose a mother, it hurts so bad you want a replacement. So the nearest I got was Jesus Christ's mother. I wanted to take Mother Mary away from him and say 'that was my mother, Jesus; you go in the mission and find another mother'.

AB: *Long time now* has been translated into Spanish, and you were in Spain last year. How do you think the Spanish audiences will react to the book?

AT: I think the Spanish people will love it, because I write about a Spanish school teacher. When I heard that the Spanish publisher wanted to publish this, what I thought, it was my ancestors again have planned all this out for me …

AB: Your portrayal of those people and Christianity is pretty harsh, isn't it? How did they react to that? Did they take it on board, or … ?

AT: Yes, they took it on board, but I think the greatest surprise I think they got is that an Aboriginal person – a member of the stolen generation – who was taken away from his parents and brought up by Spanish people throws stones back at the Spanish people ... and the younger generation, they really liked it. They really and truly, tremendously enjoy this book.

AB: What sort of reactions did you get from people?

AT: Well, it was mainly about religion. A few Spanish words which we picked up as children, from the use of the Spanish monks – that sort of shocked a few of my Spanish audience members over there. They just can't believe that these Spanish monks could actually use those words on another person, especially little Aboriginal children. They were a bit taken about. … Yeah, I think they were, in fact, quite shocked that these monks used those words on us.

AB: Well, to finish up, Alf, can I ask you about travelling outside Australia and talking to audiences outside Australia. Are they different to Australian audiences?

AT: I find the European audiences in Spain, Germany, the UK, and even audiences over in India, they were sort of fascinated. Like this child was taken away and turned around and can actually poke fun at the landing of Captain James Cook and Jesus, his apostles and you know, anyone. They're fascinated to find out there were Aboriginal people here a hundred thousand years before the First Fleet and Captain Cook. Most of the audience in Australia, you know, know what I'm talking about and so it sometimes ...

gets a bit embarrassing for them, as they actually come from the landing of the First Fleet, in the English tradition. But now many take great care to try and understand the Aboriginals who were here long before the First Fleet and I think they're becoming aware that the Aboriginals were actually here first.

AB: That's a great note to end on. Thanks so much Alf.

AT: Thank you Anne.

Acknowledgements

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Hilary Charlesworth launches *What good condition? Reflections on an Australian Aboriginal treaty 1986–2006*

This is the text of the speech given by Professor Hilary Charlesworth to launch What good condition? Reflections on an Australian Aboriginal treaty 1986-2006*, Aboriginal History Monograph 13, 2006 edited by Peter Read, Gary Meyers and Bob Reece.*

The launch was held at the Australian National University on Friday 25 May 2007.

I am very honoured to have been asked to launch this fascinating and feisty volume.

The book chronicles the debates about whether a treaty would be a useful mechanism to achieve reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians over the last quarter century, a debate that has proceeded in fits and starts. The concept of a treaty with the original inhabitants of Australia is not new: David Malcolm's chapter in the book notes that Saxe Bannister, the Attorney-General of New South Wales, proposed such a treaty to the House of Commons in 1837. In modern times, as Peter Read's opening chapter reminds us, the idea of a treaty between white and black Australia was proposed in 1979 by Nuggett Coombs. Coombs established the Aboriginal Treaty Committee (whose members included Judith Wright and Bill Stanner) and Peter Read gives an engagingly frank insider's account of the Committee's work and the problems it faced, and the problems it created. One major issue was that there was minimal engagement in the work of the Aboriginal Treaty Committee by Indigenous people, and community leaders such as Charles Perkins and Neville Bonner saw the treaty idea as an unrealistic project. They sought instead economic independence through land rights. At the same time, the National Aboriginal Conference announced its interest in negotiating a treaty, or *makarrata*, and there were complex, delicate negotiations between the two organisations, which Tim Rowse describes lucidly in his chapter of the book.

Political interest in the idea of a treaty waxed and waned over the next decades, with a Senate Committee rejecting the possibility in 1983. The Barunga statement, signed in 1988, committed the Hawke government to work towards a treaty, but little happened to follow through on this promise. More recently, in the last years of its life the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission (ATSIC) became involved in the treaty issue and supported public discussion on the topic.

At the moment, there is little public attention given to the subject of a treaty; the emphasis is on what is termed 'practical reconciliation', whose goal is, as the Prime Minister said in May 2007, 'absorption of Indigenous people into the mainstream', as though they were a sort of stain, or as if claims to Indigenous particularity were somehow destructive and offensive. Practical reconciliation has adopted the treaty language

of mutual obligation, which implies equality of position, but it has corrupted this term to mean a carping, punitive, paternalism.

I must admit I found much of what I learned from this volume quite confronting. Like many international lawyers, I have been educated to have great faith in treaties and formal agreements and to believe that the clarification of obligations and rights is always a good thing. But the accounts of the authors here gave me pause. The editors of this collection offer a rather sobering, indeed pessimistic, conclusion about the utility of a treaty which is nicely summed up in the book's title 'What good condition?'. Readers will quickly discover that this line is taken from Shakespeare's play *Coriolanus* where Aufidius, the Volscian general, who is defending his city, Corioli, from the Roman invaders, replies to the assurance that the Romans will return his city 'on good condition' with the despairing retort that a treaty is of little use to those who are at the mercy of the conquerors. This is the underlying theme of many of the contributions to this volume: Peter Read suggests that a treaty may be of considerable value to *white* Australians because it gives legitimacy to the European presence in Australia, but argues it is not clear how it would assist black Australians. Eddie Mabo Jr refers to the 'treaty sideshow' and asks 'how can we explore a treaty when our communities are not able to govern themselves efficiently, economically and politically?' (p 99) So also, Sue Stanton cautions about the easy confusion and corruption of a treaty process. Steven Churches in turn tells the story of the perils of agreements negotiated between parties of unequal power, in the fascinating context of section 70 of the Western Australian Constitution.

Drawing on the Canadian experience, Ravi de Costa makes the subtle argument that we should not see treaties as an equalising mechanism, but rather as a way of communites understanding their own diversity. He argues that treaty makers have to be prepared to work on many fronts and 'to perhaps forgo perfection' (p 26).

So, the basic problem identified in this book is scepticism about whether a treaty would improve the lives of Indigenous people. But what makes this book so marvellous and rich is that it has many strands and currents and perspectives: some overlap, and some are in sharp contrast with each other.

William Jonas is far more optimistic in his chapter than Peter Read or Eddie Mabo Jr about the role of a treaty, if it were carefully drafted to allow two sets of rights: special Indigenous rights to achieve substantive, rather than merely formal, equality; and the full recognition of the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples, particularly native title.

Richard Ah Mat calls for a stop to the theorising and a start to action on a treaty, while Roderic Pitty ends his thoughtful chapter with the observation that the problem for a treaty process now is not who would negotiate for Aboriginal Australia, but who would negotiate for white Australia; the current lack of political leadership on this issue leaves a destructive vacuum.

I learned a great deal from Mick Dodson's bracingly legal analysis of the constitutional basis of a treaty and what it might contain, and from Lisa Strehlein's illuminating analysis of the idea of sovereignty.

Peter Read and Hilary Charlesworth at the launch of *What good condition? Reflections on an Australian Aboriginal treaty 1986-2006*

The book contains a focused and useful examination of Indigenous rights in higher education by Greg McConville, which draws on the Coolangatta Statement on Indigenous Peoples' Rights in Education, adopted in 1999 – a significant document of which I am ashamed to admit that I previously knew nothing about.

In the end, I kept coming back to Larissa Behrendt's clear statement of optimism about a treaty in the foreword to the book. She emphasises the value of dialogue about a treaty and the conversational process in itself. She is less concerned with the basic inequality of position between white and black Australia and argues that treaty talk requires consideration of the big picture, and articulation of what Indigenous people want.

Let me finish by remembering that in Shakespeare's play that gives the book its title, the once sceptical Volscians do finally enter into a treaty with Rome, with the terms being negotiated by the Volscian's former bitter enemy, Coriolanus. However, the play concludes with the brutal death of the negotiator by the Volscians because they feel that Coriolanus has too readily agreed to a peace agreement with the Romans, instead of sacking the city. That dramatic ending reminds us that, if there is ever to be an Australian treaty between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian, there has to be ownership of the treaty process by the broad Indigenous community, and a lack of narrow legalism and a generosity of spirit on all sides.

I think that this volume performs a great service by capturing such a rich tapestry of perspectives on the treaty issue. It has considerable historical value in tracking the treaty debate in all its twists and turns over the last 28 years and also great political significance in clarifying the range of options at stake. Most of all, it is significant in forcing us to face the tough question about whether the treaty enterprise is doomed from the start. Now that all the pieces of the puzzle are so clearly laid out in this marvellous volume, there is some possibility of resolving this issue.

Indigenous history research resources online at AIATSIS

Readers of *Aboriginal History* will be familiar with the riches of the library at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. Many will have explored its invaluable collections for research and reference. They will also have experienced the guidance of its dedicated and expert staff.

Over the past few years the library has initiated an active program of digitising, and making available on-line, components of its collections. This includes guides to special manuscript collections, for example the papers of WEH Stanner, LR Hiatt and Alice Moyle. Also covered are resources vital for topical research areas such as Native Title investigations or the history of the Stolen Generation and their legislative bases.

Rod Stroud, AIATSIS Library Director, has provided advice on the recent important additions to these digitised resources, and how they may be accessed:

- The AIATSIS Library has placed on its website all the state and territory laws cited in the *Bringing them home report*, including all the major 'Protection' Acts. Additionally, the library is making available all the published annual reports of the state and territory government agencies administering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs from the 19th century to 50 years ago.
- All of these reports will be searchable, which will greatly enhance their research value.
- In 2008, Royal Commissions and government enquiries into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander matters will also be digitised.
- To see these and other resources, go to the library's Online Exhibitions web page at http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/library/online_exhibitions

The Sally White/ Diane Barwick Award for 2008

The Sally White/ Diane Barwick Award is presented annually by the Board of *Aboriginal History* to a female Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander tertiary student who is about to start, or is, already studying for an Honours or post-graduate degree. The Award can be used for any appropriate research-related purpose.

Future candidates for the Sally White/ Diane Barwick Award are invited to apply in writing at any time, for selection in April of the following year. Please apply to Aboriginal History Inc. PO Box 3827, Canberra, ACT, 2601.

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