THE AUSTRALIAN
AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL DAILY NEWSPAPER

Sydney Festival puts William Dawes and Aboriginal language on the stage

Jonathan Jones, Uncle 'Chika' Madden and Lille Madden will shed light on indigenous language.

By Stephen Fitzpatrick
The Australian
31 December 2016

The first recorded verbal exchange between Australians and the arriving First Fleet in January 1788 was a hearty early version of "f..k off, we're full".

John Hunter, captain of First Fleet flagship HMS Sirius, records the moment: "At 8am [on January 20] ... in Botany Bay ... we anchored with the whole of the convoy," he wrote. "As the ships were sailing in, a number of the natives assembled on the south shore, and, by their motions, seemed to threaten; they pointed their spears and often repeated the words, wara, wara."

If there was any doubt about the spoken intention, the matter is cleared up in a letter written by the new colony's chaplain, Richard Johnson, a few days after the encounter. Johnson describes how "as we came near them they spoke [to] us in a loud dissonant manner, principally uttering these words — warra, warra, war, which we judged to be to tell us to go away".

Linguist Jeremy Steele, writing just a decade ago, has a clearer handle on the matter: "What the newcomers were hearing is perhaps to be understood as the verbal root -wa, 'to move', followed by the derivational suffix -ra, signifying 'away', with the vowel a signifying the imperative."

It was an inauspicious start for George III's explicit instruction to governor Arthur Phillip to "endeavour, by every possible means, to open an intercourse with the

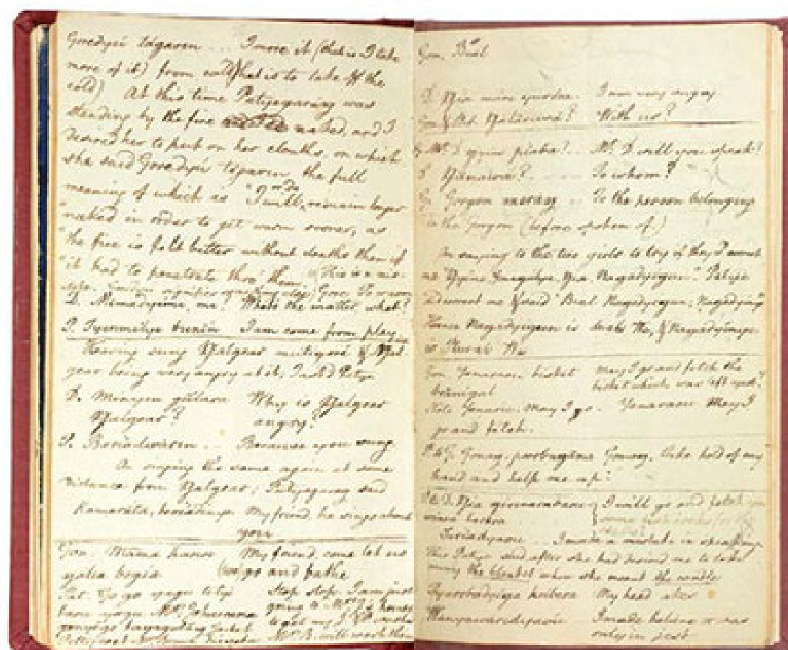
natives, and to conciliate their affections". So poorly prepared were the English interlopers that the principal word list they carried was a Guugu Yimithirr one compiled 18 years earlier on Cape York, as the Endeavour's crew recovered from its Great Barrier Reef grounding.

It was thought, at this point, that even if there did exist some kind of social structure on the great southern land — itself not even a universally held view — it would have been homogenous, a single people speaking a single language. Nothing, it transpired, could have been further from the truth.

At any rate, the word list was little help with the Eora down south. It even contained the ludicrous "kangooroo", which led to all sorts of confusion: the Gadigal, Cameragal, Wangal and other early informants of the Sydney basin region had no idea of it, understandably failing to recognise the northern word gangurru, for the red kangaroo.

Had the colonists used a different word — patyegarang — that confusion may have been cleared up. Ironic, then, that it was a young woman, a girl, of this very name, barely adult but full of mystery, who was to be integral to the unlocking of a tongue of which at the time there were at least 250 iterations across the continent.

Patyegarang, bearing the local name for the grey kangaroo, became the key linguistic informant among a dozen for the fleet's astronomer, William Dawes. Over the course of four years Dawes, a lieutenant with the Royal Marines, compiled notebooks that were not only the starting point for much subsequent understanding of what has come to be known as the Sydney language but which even now provide a deep insight into the often tragic dynamic of that period of early contact.



One of William Dawes's notebooks, filled with his observations and definitions.

The relationship between the pair might have been sexual, although novelist Kate Grenville, who fictionalised it in 2008's *The Lieutenant* and puts the girl's age at somewhere between 10 and 15 (Dawes was in his late 20s), says she doubts this.

Bodily presence can clearly be glimpsed, however, in fragments from the notebooks. “Patyegarang was standing by the fire naked, and I desired her to put on her clothes,” Dawes writes, in an elegant longhand that propels the reader immediately up a steep hillside to the little hut at Tar-ra (Dawes Point) where he lived alone, just to the west and out of sight of the rowdy Sydney Cove settlement, and where he conducted many of these interviews.

Patye, as he often shortens her name in writing, insists that clothing would only increase the time it took to absorb the fire’s warmth; and there are at least two references in the notebooks suggesting she had on occasion slept in the hut, including one where she complains that a candle left burning is keeping her awake.

At another point Dawes notes a single word, “putuwa”, which he describes very specifically as meaning “to warm one’s hand by the fire and then to squeeze gently the fingers of another person”. All of this raises some very interesting issues around physical intimacy.

One, as Sydney Festival director Wesley Enoch notes, is the simple “was there a romantic relationship? You look at those words and wonder, what were they doing, and you start to put narratives on all of it.”

As part of a focus on Australian languages for Enoch’s first iteration of the festival, artist Jonathan Jones, a Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi man, is working with young Gadigal woman Lille Madden and elder Uncle Charles “Chika” Madden on an installation that will have Lille Madden reading from the Dawes notebooks. There will also be language classes — all of which were quickly fully subscribed to — with Darug woman Jacinta Tobin and Gadigal man Joel Davison.

It all comes under the rubric of Bayala, meaning in the Sydney language to speak, and for Queenslander Enoch there’s an interesting dilemma: he doesn’t speak his own family’s Jandai language, from North Stradbroke Island, but he thinks it’s a “fundamental question” that the fight to preserve and even revive fragmentary languages carries on.

As well as being part of claiming — or reclaiming — culture and identity, Enoch believes, it’s integral to the project of remapping the fluidity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity, where the original outsiders’ view of a homogenous pre-colonial Australia persists in all sorts of ways.

“I feel sometimes a pressure to have a singular thing, that singular Aboriginal polity; well, the lack of a singular thing is I think its strength and we should just accept that,” he says.

Our conversation comes just days after “your auntie Pauline Hanson” has queried the authenticity of Aboriginal identity, claiming it’s possible to become indigenous by marriage, and Noel Pearson has praised the Queensland One Nation senator for her potential to, paradoxically, be a far-right champion for indigenous Australians.

“I mean, one of the joys of Aboriginal culture is that it is able to survive because it is malleable,” Enoch says. “It moves and shifts and changes, takes into account new influences, new technologies, new peoples, and keeps rolling around with it — and then you confront the need for an empirical-based, research-based culture, and you get the tension that comes with that.”

The Stolen Generations trauma created contested narratives and family histories for many indigenous people, which he says is partly what Hanson was latching on to, but "I think what she was raising is stuff about adoption, about marrying in, about advocacy for your children and your family, and I love that — it's complex".

He sees a productive shapeshifting around indigenous identity, especially in recent decades. It starts with the "whole solidarity conversation", as he puts it, of achieving overwhelming victory in the 1967 referendum, of winning land rights, "that indigenous Australia had to kind of step together, if we want change". From there it morphs in the 1990s and 2000s to "the great discussion about our diversity, where we come from, what were our cultural backgrounds, our educational backgrounds, the growing black middle class, home ownership … all these things that the laws had changed through solidarity, were now coming up with things that made us different again".

It is in precisely this multitude of differences, what he calls the "fragmenting of the central indigenous argument", that language — and its revival, where necessary — has such a key role to play.

Anthropologist Norman Tindale's *Tribal Boundaries in Aboriginal Australia*, published in 1974, was hugely influential in demonstrating the ways in which the doctrine of terra nullius at the time of European arrival was a fiction, though it was to be almost two decades before this was formally recognised in the form of the Mabo ruling.

Tindale's map has been substantially revised since, and in its official form comes with a warning from copyright holder the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies that it is not to be relied on for making native title claims. However, it offers a compelling description of the interlocking nature of the hundreds of language groups — essentially, nations — at the time of European contact.

"You look at those Tindale maps and you go, yeah, absolutely, we are not one united language," Enoch says.

Many of these 250 distinct tongues have been lost, with only about 120 still spoken - nationwide and just 13 considered to be in full daily use, a 2014 AIATSIS survey found. But even a language thought to be gone can prove strikingly resilient, as Sydney's case has proved.

Linguist Jakelin Troy has been instrumental, drawing on the Dawes notebooks and other sources in work since the late 80s to help reconstruct it. The growth in advocacy for indigenous languages has led to some being taught at HSC level in NSW schools, with plans for full ATAR status on the way, and legislation last month making the state the first to formally recognise their importance. The official theme for next year's NAIDOC week is "Our Languages Matter", with an acknowledgment they are more than a means of communication but contain within them specific ways of understanding law, culture, history, country and more that are themselves at risk when the languages die.

Even then, Enoch admits, there is a trauma around the loss of language that is reinscribed and amplified as the language is pieced back together, manifesting as what he calls "a loss of agency" in its return.

“There are people who have always been speaking [the Sydney language] — or speaking fragments of it, or words of it — and now people are saying that what you’re speaking has no connection to the written record,” he says.

“This [reconstructed] language might be absolutely the purest line, we don’t know. Or it might actually be as the amalgamations of tribes and clans happened in this area, after the smallpox epidemic [of 1789], say, or as different people come together, language shifts and changes.

“So as we’re looking for something pure and museum-like in a world that is not a museum, you have the trauma of trying to prove authenticity, which I find quite troubling.”

Troubling, too, precisely because it is an authenticity created by the outsider; in this limited case, Dawes, even as he trod lightly — quite literally, counting his steps to measure distance and direction in a way remarkably sympathetic to notions of country long established by the original Australians.

The man left behind him an almost spiritual aura; academic Ross Gibson has described him as “austere and idiosyncratic … a secular mystic” who inserted himself into the country itself, just as he tried to insert himself into its language. His notebooks are filled not with mere word lists but with speculations about the nature of the society he was documenting.

“He used the notebooks to describe spaces that were defined more by consent than conquest, spaces measured not by extensive technologies (guns, sextants, telescopes) but by intensive looks and conversations staged in campsites, observatory rooms, harbourside coves and bathing beaches,” writes Gibson, a Dawes specialist whose *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-91* brilliantly interrogates the notebooks’ contents and their significance.

Fellow officer Watkin Tench, the First Fleet’s extensive documenter, had a clear view of Dawes’s importance: “Of the language of New South Wales I once hoped to have subjoined to this work such an exposition, as should have attracted public notice; and have excited public esteem. But the abrupt departure of Mr Dawes … precludes me from executing this part of my original intention, in which he had promised to co-operate with me; and in which he had advanced his researches beyond the reach of competition.”

Tench gave great detail about the language itself. It was, he wrote, initially perceived as “harsh and barbarous in its sounds” but on closer consideration revealed itself “to abound with vowels and to produce sounds sometimes mellifluous, and sometimes sonorous”. So much so, he noted, that the name Tilba had already been given to the newborn daughter of the aforementioned chaplain, Johnson.

A drawing from journal A Voyage to New South Wales by William Bradley. Picture: State Library of NSW

“What ear can object,” Tench wrote, “to names like … Baneelon [Bennelong] … among the men, or to Wereeweea, Milba, or Matilba, among the women. Parramatta, Gweea, Cameera, Cadi, and Memel, are names of places. The tribes derive their appellations from the places they inhabit. Thus Cameeragal means the men who reside in Cameera, Cadigal, those who reside in the bay of Cadi, and so of the others.”

Some of these names have survived intact — Parramatta is an obvious example, and the Cadigal are widely known as the people on whose land the first settlement was built — and some less so: Cameera is better known to Sydneysiders by its modern lower north shore spelling as Cammeray.

Memel has relatively recently regained general currency as a place name, after two centuries of colonial appropriation as Goat Island; as Me-mel, or “eye”, it was a frequent resting spot for Bennelong and his Cameeragal wife Barangaroo. Indeed, judge advocate David Collins took it as direct evidence of indigenous real estate ownership, writing in 1798 that Bennelong had revealed to him “it was his own property; that it was his father’s, and that he should give it to By-gone, his particular friend and companion … He told us of other people who possessed this kind of hereditary property, which they retained undisturbed”.

Both Bennelong and Barangaroo make appearances in Dawes’s notebooks, of course, but it is Patyegarang who plays the central role — and then, unlike those others, disappears, mysterious, leaving no trace in any other colonial writing. Part of the cause for this is Dawes’s falling out of favour for questioning an order from governor Phillip to mount a punitive mission on the Bidjigal warrior Pemulwuy, with the intention of bringing back several severed heads as a warning.

As a consequence he was disendorsed for a second posting in the colony, which may have produced vastly more documentation even as the very people he was studying were being swept into history. Much of what he did collect is thought to have been destroyed in a 19th-century West Indies hurricane.

Had the two slim notebooks not turned up in a London library in 1972 we would had have nothing of her, but instead Patyegarang is central to the story of Dawes's genius, giving a glimpse of how her people, beset by so much change so quickly, were able to interrogate the new arrivals on their intentions — and deliver warnings about their impact.

It is Patyegarang who informs Dawes that the Eora are "angry … because the white men are settled here" and "afraid … because of the guns"; there is a suggestion here that she was far more than just a neutral correspondent but was his equal in many ways, perhaps even a sort of political negotiator for her people.

Here is a glimpse of a potential for conversation so great — and the possibility of an outcome so different to the one presaged by Hunter and Johnson in the migrants' sudden violation of sovereignty in Botany Bay — had there been among them a greater number possessing Dawes's mettle, intellect, patience and intuition.

Because all of history tells us there were plenty who did, among those whose land it was. Patyegarang just turns out to be one of the very few to have gotten, in that Eora first contact, a fair and lasting hearing.