

ABSTRACT

Reassessing the Magnitude of Australian First Contact Aboriginal Resistance in Sydney 1788-1805: Psychic Invasion of a Narrative Landscape and a Nativist Response.

There has been a frequent assertion that the death toll from smallpox in first contact Sydney was far greater than early estimates, and a frequent assertion that what occurred was 'war', yet there has been little to connect and dissect these assertions, and little account taken of the spiritual and religious aspects of warrior resistance.

This paper brings together demographic factors, nativist religious impulses and warrior resistance, to propose, not just a physical, but a psychic invasion of a Narrative landscape, and to reveal a far more powerful and complex pattern of resistance and an extraordinary scale of warfare.

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A Narrative Landscape and Psychic Invasion.

In an early response to Aboriginal harassment of settlement and the desperate need for arable land, Judge Advocate, David Collins described a considered decision to clear fell 120 acres at Portland Place, some 2½ miles from Parramatta, a well-watered site with a chain of ponds.¹ It was a task swiftly accomplished in a matter of a few weeks with settler labour and a gang of 70 convicts.

As a place of waterfowl, eggs and game this was a favoured Aboriginal haunt but those Aborigines that ventured to the edge of that cleared space found a devastated landscape. Caught between awe and outrage at such vast erasure, the most conspicuous realisation was the absolute absence of sound, the sheer volume of silence. No bird songs, no rattle or scurrying of creatures, no crackle of insects. There was nothing that represented the familiarity of their world of minutely tessellated patterns of living sound: they understood landscape as a vibrant breathing entity of animate things both seen and unseen, an intimate engagement and living accord.

These emotions are difficult to detect in any historical narrative, but they are there like an itch that pesters our composure. They are understandable

however when considering one of the fundamental colonial preoccupations - alienation or outright appropriation of land. It was a central obsession, but it was profoundly disruptive of Indigenous culture.²

The fact that only some 50 acres of actual forest was felled at Portland Place meant the remainder was marsupial grassland, a crafted Aboriginal landscape with the woodland sculptured by fire-stick farming³ to create nooks and blind cul-de-sacs to corral game for ease of culling, so this was not some untouched wilderness as some might presume but a landscape with which Indigenous people vigorously engaged.⁴

For Aboriginal people landscape maintenance was a central purpose to which the British settlers were oblivious. To them fire was simply a threat to crops and curtailing the practice a means of ensuring livelihood. To the Aborigines ceasing the use of fire was the end of both a way of life and a livelihood.

While largely ignorant of the centrality of Indigenous landscape maintenance, white cultural practice often unintentionally overlaid the fashioned outcome of Indigenous land use: the park-like landscape fired for game readily lent itself to sheep and cattle and the ponds watered stock as well as it did game and birdlife. Paths and roads frequently wended similar courses simply because Aborigines moved on convenient gradients from one water source to another, just as wagons needed reasonable gradients and horses and bullocks required frequent watering. But while white use of landscape was utilitarian, divorced from transcendent concerns, for the Aborigines, the sacred and profane interpenetrated “country”.

Remarkable tales of place patterned this numinous landscape. They adhered to topographical features, and through an array of detailed and intertwined stories people traversed the countryside like a map: a *Narrative Landscape*, a map of movement in stories and their retelling.

These points of geographical importance and direction were also nodes of awesome, but not always benign, significance, places to be nurtured and renewed by rites and ceremony, a detailed, rule-ridden formula of connection, totem, and potency of place. It was not a neutral nature but one of enormity and power, indistinguishable from religious purpose,⁵ that is, from *meaning* which is at the core of what is perceived as *reality*. *Meaning* and *reality* are central constructs, though not artifices, of the healthy psyche: without these the soul shrivels.⁶

The land cleared at Portland Place inevitably had stories of adhered significance, tales peculiar to place, yet ones that through *songlines* and paths elsewhere, linked it to other aspects of an ancestral *Dreaming*:⁷ the region of Abiding Events,⁸ timeless episodes of explanation adhering to geographical features. These were places from which people originated and to which they returned so the tales of place cohered into a grander narrative that was part of the scaffolding of what it was, literally, to be a *person*. Europeans, however, viewed Aborigines through the lens of Christianity, a “portable” religion detached from place. It led them to overlook the significance of Aboriginal belief locked to landscape, to “country”.

Once this is understood, the significance of European intrusion takes on heightened importance. Invasion not only robbed Aborigines of their “country” but their being; it was nothing less than a *psychic* invasion, an invasion of the mind.

Aboriginal Religion and Resistance: The place of Nativist belief.

There has been a tendency from the earliest period to characterise Aboriginal people as with ‘no religion but fear’⁹ and it stubbornly resisted revision into much of the twentieth century.¹⁰ They were seen as bound by superstition and night fears, demonic terror and ritual magic but this in the European mind did not constitute religion. It lacked the eschatology and tell-tale soteriology of “real” religion. This condescension meant that the intrusion of a European *Weltanschauung*, perceived worldview, over time bludgeoned Aboriginal psychic certainty. European values and religious certitude were much more potent even than their *presence*.

Once the primacy of place is appreciated aspects of common human behaviour have no meaning. Aborigines for example, could not comprehend warfare for the sake of acquiring territory or another’s “country”,¹¹ as the British accepted without question. If you were defined by place, within a defining cosmos, why would you want that of another? But it also meant the preservation of “country”, was characterised by a violent tenacity once it was fully realised that the British demanded exclusive possession. ‘Few societies under domination accept that position in silence’ and ‘movements of emancipation’¹² inevitably arise.

There has been a tendency, however, to see resistance to occupation purely as a warrior response and not to discern a deeper cultural response involving beliefs and religious interpretation. It was simply not possible for Aborigines to have a merely *secular* military response: it involved their entire mental furniture, taxing the depth of attachment to sacred space, to

origin and continuity of being. Anything less would have entailed an utter mental capitulation and psychic submission.

Reinterpretation of Australian settlement in the 1970s pioneered by Henry Reynolds challenged white complacency. From a white pioneering people, able to innovate with bailing twine, invent a stump jump plough and cure the curse of foot rot in sheep, came the barbed language of “invasion” that deeply affronted. Far from benign, white settler society was transformed into metaphors of war, and far from a shining pastoral vision, it pockmarked the landscape with death.

The new language of invasion and resistance was borrowed from the recent events of World War II and with it an underlying heroics that sought to understandably valorise Aboriginal response. But this appropriation of *secular* memes from another time and place lent a Eurocentric taint to Indigenous response, evading any suggestion that religious elements or apocalyptic aspects of nativist belief inflected Aboriginal reaction.

In part this derives from the shackles of earlier views of Aboriginal religiosity. Even when Aboriginal religious belief was acknowledged, it was seen as rigid and incapable of transformation. Early anthropologists, like Strehlow, saw Aboriginal religious expression as ‘firmly fettered by rigid bonds of tradition’¹³ and too inflexible to adapt responsively to white intrusion. Belief and the *Dreaming* were seen as static, immutable and immune to innovation¹⁴ though others saw ‘ample ethnographic evidence for change’¹⁵ and ‘a good deal of innovation,’¹⁶ incorporation and re-interpretation. Not only is the Aboriginal worldview far from static it ‘adapts with great, and almost feverish speed to new challenges,’ in fact, ‘at a faster pace than traditional Christianity ever did.’¹⁷

A recurring aspect of all religious traditions is that they eschew innovation, yet most engage in unconscious re-invention. Rather than alteration, the assertion is of “revival”, returning to some unaltered origin, a back-to-basics fundamentalism. Innovation is denied yet reconfiguration and syncretic borrowing is frequent, a controversial suggestion Swain makes about Aboriginal religious experience.¹⁸

The pattern is common: in response to pummelling by missionary Christianity, nineteenth century Ceylon experienced a fervent Buddhist Revival, a transformed Buddhism aptly described as “Protestant Buddhism”.¹⁹ It involved not only enthusiastic local devotees but also oddly, European Theosophists that in imperial arrogance imagined they

knew what Buddhism “really” was – a kind of Anglicanism without God - and proselytised it through their influential English medium schools.²⁰

Whether in faith or social behaviour, societies are prone to re-invention,²¹ which is how groups innovate and alter while maintaining the illusion of stasis - and Aboriginal society is no exception. They would not have survived through countless millennia by remaining static and their minds (and faith) unaltered.

Societies buffeted by change are always the most prone but when that change cranks up to a critical level religious re-invention sometimes assumes an apocalyptic pitch, what has been variously described as chiliastic, nativist or millenarian. Trompf²² has given a detailed taxonomy of the various definitional nuances and cautions the phenomena is far from uniform; even in the more particular area of cargo cults diversity abounds.²³ But however it is labelled - revivalism, millenarianism, reform, rebellion or nativism – ‘common to all is the hope of self respect and positive self identity’.²⁴

Central, too, is society in transition. Such movements arise when people find themselves in ‘an exposed and defenceless position’ that has ‘disturbed the normal, familiar, pattern of life’ and removed the ‘emotional support afforded by traditional social groups’ and where ‘their kinship-groups [have] disintegrated’. Millenarianism – and its concomitant manifestations - breaks out ‘again and again’ against a ‘background of disaster’, plague, famine or pestilence.²⁵

One such example is the Java War of 1825-1830 triggered by a catastrophic famine that decimated the population. The massive rebellion that emerged was led by a charismatic leader, Diponogoro, who proselytized millenarian beliefs drawing on animistic and Hindu as well as Islamic motifs with messianic elements of the Just King. But disruption of land utilisation also played a crucial role – in this case the shift to a cash economy based on plantation agriculture that undermined traditional village obligation.²⁶

Similarly, wholesale land clearance in Sydney, discussed *supra*, also disrupted traditional Aboriginal land use and landscape maintenance. In North America, the alienation of prairie hunting grounds also disrupted traditional practice. Altered land use that ruptures traditional practice continually recurs as a crucial factor in patterns of Indigenous resistance and feeds powerfully into religious, apocalyptic millenarian and nativist features of resistance.

There is much evidence of Millenarianism in European and Asian experience, in North American Indian nativist movements and in Melanesian cargo cults, yet it has been largely discounted in the Australian context.²⁷ There was not the apparent theatre of North American Ghost Dance movements²⁸ but nevertheless there was an inevitable reassessment of indigenous cosmogony in the light of British occupation that gave rise to revivalist practices, honing the edge of resistance, and granting an apocalyptic fervour beyond simple rage. This has happened wherever Indigenous cultures were scarified by European intrusion so not to encounter it in Australia would have been unusual indeed.²⁹

While more recent anthropological studies have acknowledged nativist elements in Aboriginal reaction to European intrusion, earlier observations by Siebert³⁰ of the Molonga cult indicate potent anti-European sentiments in Aboriginal reaction in the late nineteenth century. Like the North American Ghost Dances, the Molonga was a prolonged choreography building to ecstatic pitch around a theme of resistance: whites are devoured by a female water spirit and ‘destructive magic’ directed broadly to ‘kill the settlers’ and their Aboriginal allies.³¹ Though Reynolds rightly sees this conjuring as rooted in resistance, he avoids the early misconception of viewing *magic* outside the religious realm.³² Such invocation inflects resistance with religious fervour and the apocalyptic urgency of a chiliastic nativist movement.

While reports of nativist movements appear in later investigations none have been evidenced closer to settlement in 1788. The earliest report is of the Baiame Waganna from 1829 but it provides useful insight.³³

The Baiame Waganna exhibited all the tell-tale aspects of a nativist movement: the mesmeric dance; the emphasis on renewal and revitalism; a return to basics harbouring anti-European resentment - all set against the devastation wrought by smallpox. The other moment when disease played such a potent role in Aboriginal/settler relations was in the first year of contact history, in 1789. Willey captured the enormity of the moment in his aptly titled *When the Sky Fell Down*³⁴ but this catastrophe requires greater consideration.

Disease and the Great Dying: Reassessing the Impact.

Disease, like famine and pestilence, is a potent factor in social disintegration. In 430BCE Thucydides, writing on the *Peloponnesian War*, described the catastrophic impact of “plague” (possibly typhoid fever) on Athens. More than a third died resulting in social fragmentation, lawlessness and the emergence of apocalyptic ecstatic cults. In 1867 a

typhoid epidemic among the Nevada Paiutes wiped out 10% of the population and gave rise to the Ghost Dance rituals aimed at revitalising native belief – and generating alarm in white observers.

In Sydney, Governor Phillip estimated some 50% of the Aboriginal population around Sydney had died as a result of disease in 1789.³⁵ The effect was catastrophic. Bennelong told Collins that only three of Colby's Sydney mob had survived, forcing a merger with other groups. The fracturing of social fabric was horrendous.

The epidemic, the Great Dying, shredded Aboriginal society, rupturing social connection, religious practice and customary behaviour, all the minute and nuanced threads that hold communities together. The extent of that collapse can be seen in the disappearance of the culturally central initiation practices. Bennelong directed the last recorded initiation ceremony in the Sydney area in December 1797, that is, *within nine years* of the arrival of the British, which is an astonishingly rapid evaporation of cultural practice, so disease had a potent impact.

Ships sailing the harbour noted the strange silence and absence of voices and the myriad caves and coves about Sydney harbour became bloated with corpses and the sweet stench of death took the place of voices in the watery air.

Arabadoo, the colony's captive, had been taken out by boat to look for survivors and searching among the rocks and inlets they found them 'filled with putrid bodies'. Arabadoo 'lifted up his hands and eyes in silent agony' and then at last he moaned, 'All dead' and 'hung his head in mournful silence.'³⁶ Elsewhere they found an old man desperately ill beside a fire while a young boy, covered in ulcers, poured water on his head. Nearby were the emaciated bodies of a mother and little girl.

Later governor John Hunter found bodies hunched up, their heads between their knees or just leaning against a rock, dead. 'I have seen myself, a woman sitting on the ground, with her knees drawn up to her shoulders, and her face resting on the sand beneath her feet.'³⁷ As the people fled into the surrounding country they spread the disease onto the Hawkesbury and wider hinterland.³⁸ *Terra Nullius* became eerily literal.

Governor Phillip estimated an Aboriginal population of approximately 1500 within a radius of 10 miles of the Sydney settlement³⁹ and various commentators hypothesize around 2500-5000 in the Greater Cumberland area.⁴⁰ These figures remain educated estimates but it suggests a death toll

(based on Governor Phillip's assessment of 50%) of *at least* 750 around Sydney and *at least* 2600 for the region⁴¹ and they point to a catastrophic impact. Collins later reported 'many places covered with skeletons'⁴² along bush paths some distance from the settlement, so the death toll spread like a brush fire considerably beyond the colony.⁴³

This was greater than the approximate 30% mortality rate of smallpox in societies where it is endemic, but this was a virgin soil⁴⁴ population lacking herd immunity, a factor that figured in the immense death toll following the Spanish conquest of Mesoamerica. Daniel Paine estimated the Aboriginal population 'about our settlement' in 1796 – some 8 years later – did 'not exceed' 500⁴⁵ so the perceived mortality was considerable though Paine's estimate is obviously rough.

Do we have to consider other factors however that may suggest an even greater death toll? Evidence from the South American experience indicates demographic pressures, for instance, play a pivotal role in exacerbating mortality from disease. If the Sydney Aboriginal population was about 1500 about Sydney and the First and Second Fleets brought some 2000 to Sydney Cove – more than doubling the population density - then the pressure on resources would have been immense.

The fishing seines the British employed dredged the harbour of fish: Collins described a haul so heavy it had to be drawn up into the shallows to await the retreating tide. But as Tench averred 'when the fish are scarce, which frequently happens' the Aborigines watched the seines being drawn in and 'plunder its contents' despite white resistance and even after 'having received a part of what has been caught'.⁴⁶ By May of 1788 Lt Bradley is reporting a noticeable shortage of fish among the Aborigines, describing 2 men 'so intent upon fishing' they did not notice the white presence, 'nor did they strike a fish in the whole of the time' they were with them.⁴⁷ Governor Phillip was also fully aware of the impact. He wrote to Lord Sydney that the Aborigines were 'not pleased with our remaining amongst them as they see we deprive them of fish, which is almost their only support'.⁴⁸

This lent desperation to the issue. The dependence of both the Sydney Aborigines and the British on fishing created resource depletion and demographic pressure exacerbating the mortality of disease but there were also further factors.

The identification of genetic homogeneity in the South American Indian population has suggested even greater death rates, as high as 80-90%. This

is a staggering figure,⁴⁹ propelled to that level by a particular genetic vulnerability to European diseases in Indigenous people.⁵⁰

This has been an extremely controversial hypothesis, as much political as scientific and historical. Indigenous commentators are understandably wary of a “natural” explanation that subtly exculpates European agency and not so subtly suggest Indigenous vulnerability as a “deficiency”. It allows shrug-of-the-shoulder language like “inevitable” and “unavoidable” to cloak the catastrophe of European invasion.

These “trapdoors in terminology”, with their racist sub-text are potent and caution needs to be heeded when approaching similar genetic issues among the Aborigines of south-eastern Australia. Immunologist Peter Roberts-Thompson⁵¹ highlights a restriction in Aborigines of the major histocompatibility complex (MHC) – the genetic region of the human genome important for defending immunity. This lack of polymorphic variants, required for enhanced protection against pathogenic microorganisms, makes Aborigines highly vulnerable.

With such a genetic profile, demographic pressure and no herd immunity, the impact of disease was far more devastating than the reported estimate of 50% and may even have approximated the extraordinary levels suggested in South America.

If this hypothesis has validity, then the impact of disease in Sydney was far greater even than the previous and ominous estimates of 50%. If a death toll closer to 80% is considered then the Aboriginal population in the Greater Cumberland region of between 2500 and 5000 was reduced to between 500 and 1000, a cataclysmic erasure. Worse still, in the aftermath of disease and the subsequent social collapse, the population continued to decline alarmingly, making Paine’s estimate of 500 around 1796 a sobering possibility. Such a population collapse mandates a radical re-examination of contact history and the impact of European intrusion.

Disease, Resistance and Nativism.

Stephen Gapps in his *Sydney Wars* speculates just ‘how many more warriors would have been marshalled’⁵² if the death toll from disease had not been so catastrophic and suggests, with some justification, historians, ‘generally ignore the military ramifications’⁵³ of the disease outbreak. He implies that Aboriginal conflict and resistance was profoundly muted and ‘temporarily halted’⁵⁴ by disease and population collapse until about 1795 and yet he points out that ‘despite the devastation’ of disease, Aborigines ‘continued to assert control’ beyond the perimeter of settlement.⁵⁵ It

appears a contradiction, however, for while the capacity to muster forces may have been profoundly, if temporarily, compromised, the determination to engage in conflict did not.

Again, context and comparison can assist. If, for example, the experience of the Black War of Van Diemens Land is any guide then population collapse does not necessarily diminish conflict, in fact the opposite occurs. In the Black War of the 1820s Aboriginal/settler conflict actually *increased* as the Aboriginal population declined. The notorious Black Line to corral Aboriginal combatants was instituted when the perceived threat was greatest and when the incidents of conflict were at their highest and yet the population, by that stage, had dwindled to a remnant.

Aboriginal/settler conflict *peaked* when the Aboriginal population was *least*:⁵⁶ Conflict was in *inverse proportion* to their *presence*. Population collapse and heightened desperation spurred a furious response and a similar pattern emerges in Sydney when scrutinised carefully.

Desperation and tenacity however are not sufficient in themselves. Logistical support was crucial for combat to occur and this came in the form of the introduced high protein South American Indian foods like maize and potatoes⁵⁷ – high in energy, highly calorific, highly portable *fighting foods* – maize in Sydney and potatoes in Tasmania. This is the why the Hawkesbury maize grounds became a focus in the pattern of resistance⁵⁸ and Aborigines understood the virtue of storage. After a corn raid, Tedbury led settlers to a huge Aboriginal cache of ‘at least 40 bushels of corn’⁵⁹ or about 1.3 tonnes, an astonishing haul.

While the catastrophic impact of disease on the social fabric of Aboriginal society in Sydney incited resistance, nativist elements in that resistance were inevitable and, though the evidence is difficult to detect in the early record, it is unmistakable in Pemulwuy, the first major Aboriginal figure of resistance who was described by Governor King as having a ‘great influence’ over the Aborigines, something of an understatement.⁶⁰

Illustrations of him show a nuggetty man, less wiry than other local blacks and he is reputed to have had an odd stigmatism in one eye, which magnified his stature among a people who saw such afflictions as ominous. He was also a revered inland lawman and ritual leader⁶¹ but what elevated his stature to messianic standing among his people was his evasion of death at the Battle of Parramatta.

By 1797 Pemulwuy had initiated retributive raids and battles to drive out the British presence. Using the maize harvest for logistical support, Pemulwuy brazenly attacked the principal government farm at Toongabbie, the core site of British agriculture as well as a number of other farms at the Northern Boundary. Retribution was swift with a punitive expedition formed to retaliate, pursuing him unsuccessfully towards Parramatta before giving up in exhaustion.

For Pemulwuy and his warriors, evasion was second nature and their contempt for British ineptitude was visceral, so pronounced in fact that they reeled round and entered the town itself. A hundred warriors stormed the town centre with Pemulwuy in the lead, in a towering rage. It was an awesome act, not just of defiance but of proprietorial assertion against the assumed right of the British to 'hunt them down like wild animals' in their own 'country'.⁶²

Pemulwuy and his warriors loosed a fusillade of spears and the military returned fire bringing down Pemulwuy with gunshot wounds to the head and torso and leaving five other warriors strewn dead in the streets of Parramatta. He was taken to the hospital, his condition critical and his death expected, but within days he had escaped, a shackle still attached to his ankle.⁶³ This miraculous recovery gave him a reputation that spread like flames through the people as a man of superhuman power and immunity from gunfire, the making of a nativist myth, akin to the "ghost shirts" of North American Indians that were reputed to protect against gunshot wounds.

Pemulwuy's fierce courage had the fervour of faith with nativist elements that enhanced his traditional ritual role. It was not simply the heroic resistance that suit the images of European romanticism captured by John Pilger, Marji Hill and Al Grassby.⁶⁴ It is a much more poignant and saddening attempt to rescue, in defiance, a crumbling world.

In any arena of military occupation, collusion and collaboration is always the fault line of resistance. Within half a year of being declared an outlaw Pemulwuy in 1802 was dead, his head severed, pickled and sent to London, bringing to an end the first phase of borderland resistance.

But it was only a lull in resistance despite a report in the *Sydney Gazette* happily noting that natives on the Hawkesbury had 'relinquished their mischievous behaviour'.⁶⁵ Conflict again reared up at the time of the maize harvest of 1804 and the immediate catalyst was the encroachment of farms further up the Hawkesbury towards Portland Head, close to Broken Bay.

Earlier settlements had been abandoned because of concentrated Aboriginal attacks but renewed settlement led to renewed attacks.

In June of 1804, Aboriginal attacks again forced settlers to relinquish their holdings⁶⁶ and Governor King despatched troops to Portland Head [present day, Ebenezer] Once again nativist elements can be discerned. After a raid fourteen settlers pursued their Aboriginal attackers, which ended in confrontation with a much larger mob of some 300 Aborigines, an alarmingly large battle group.

When asked why they were attacking the settlers they made the 'ironical declaration' that they would have 'corn, wearing apparel and whatever else the Settlers had',⁶⁷ a demand 'repeated in later instances' of 'Aboriginal violence against Europeans.'⁶⁸ It seems odd to our ear and to those listening then but it is a profoundly revealing comment. Ironic or defiant, the declaration marks a determination to appropriate the settlers' abundance. It is white abundance, the core of perceived white power that is coveted but like nativist cargo cults⁶⁹ it is more about *power* than possessions. This is the classic manifestation of millenarian cultist fervour but is passed over as just avarice.

Cargo cult responses are difficult to detect in the Australian context but are not unknown. Frederick Rose⁷⁰ reported on a case at Angas Downs in the Northern Territory in the 1960s. It originated in the experience of American trucks (often with Afro-American drivers which provided an additional curiosity) laden with goods transported for wartime. The view arose that these were intended for the local population but were tricked out of it by the whites.

This was reinforced by the fact that after the war a considerable number of trucks, bulldozers and other wartime materiel ended up on properties as war surplus. A belief ensued that the Americans would once more return with trucks laden with flour, tea and sugar but the local people would not be deceived by the whites a second time and they would receive the bounty themselves. What is interesting is the observation by Petri and Petri-Odermann that a 'very materialistic expectation of salvation' is not associated with the traditional cultural and 'cultic complexes'⁷¹ of the people of the western desert. It was a novel idea arising from the extraordinary bounty that wartime produced.

In the Sydney of 1788 white presence also equated with abundance and the novelty of their powerful technology, and cultic belief arose around an appropriation of white abundance and associated power.

Assessing the Magnitude of Resistance.

The cultic aspect is one thing but the size of the mob – about 300 - deserves further consideration. The numbers have been questioned as exaggerated⁷² but even assuming some engrossment it was a considerable horde.

Appreciating the deeper significance however draws on the demographic outcome of disease and population collapse. The Aboriginal population in the Cumberland region in the wake of disease, according to Phillip, was at least halved to between 1300-2500 however if the decline approximated South American experience, approaching the 80% discussed *supra*, then the number may have been as low as 500-1000.

This by any measure is an absolute demographic collapse and the population continued to decline, something noted by the British but put down to their “savagery” and internecine conflict. In contrast, by 1796 the British population was 3959⁷³ so the continued demographic pressure on the Sydney Aborigines was immense.

The figures are arguable, but the magnitude is not. Even taking the cautious estimate (assuming a death toll of 50%) of 1300-2500 Aborigines in the wider Sydney region after the 1789 smallpox outbreak means that the 300 warriors that confronted settlers in June 1804 was *proportionately* quite considerable, somewhere between 25-50% of the male cohort (assuming gender equity).

If an even greater decline of 80% is assumed – to around 500-1000 people – then 300 warriors begins to represent an extraordinary response, a substantial proportion of, if not virtually the entire, male population. That is as close to total war as can be imagined in Indigenous conflict, even if conducted using guerrilla tactics.

Gapps in his *Sydney Wars* assumes “war” as an accepted description and does not justify use of term, though continuing public reticence and the legacy of the *History Wars*⁷⁴ might merit caution. If there is an argument, however, about whether to describe the Sydney conflict as *war*, then the *magnitude* of reaction, the *proportional* size of the Aboriginal response described, leaves no other possible description.

By June of 1805 renewed, intensified “outrages” on the Hawkesbury had led to a “General Order” naming Musquito as a principal leader whose ‘apprehension... might effectively prevent any further mischief’⁷⁵ along the Hawkesbury and Georges Rivers. Musquito may well have been the

strategist behind the mob of 300 as it mirrors the logistical command he mustered in Van Diemens Land.⁷⁶ And as with the confrontation with the mob of 300, nativist elements continued to arise.

On 11 April 1805⁷⁷ a settler John Llewellyn and his servant were attacked in the Portland Head area. Branch Jack, an associate of Musquito, and known to them, was invited to share a meal with Llewellyn and he took the opportunity to make off with the settler's musket and powder horn. A war party of about twenty then stormed the clearing and speared the two.

On the same day, further upstream, Thyne Adlum was attacked and killed by the same mob and body parts were found in the ashes of Adlum's burned farmhouse. The attack was brutal with bodies mutilated and limbs strewn. The attack was extremely ominous since such mutilation often indicated ritual magic. The extent of this is unclear but, for example, "Bret" hands were sometimes removed as grisly talismans and hung 'around the neck and worn in contact with bare skins under the arm'⁷⁸ to forewarn of an enemy approach from behind – a deathly tap or pinch as warning. This was a mix of ritual magic and brutality, part of the apocalyptic element of nativist fervour.



Bret or dead hand.

Howit, *Native Tribes*, p460.

The brutality continued. Around 25 April 1805 there was another 'barbarous murder' of two stockkeepers near Prospect. One had been 'grinding part of their provision' when Aborigines 'rushed in upon him and clove his head with a tomahawk'. They awaited the arrival of his companion who 'unhappily shared the fate of his murdered fellow-servant'.⁷⁹

These killings electrified Sydney town with the *Gazette* muttering about the 'impropriety'⁸⁰ of encouraging further settlement in the area and others, including the military, wondered whether settlers really could be protected,⁸¹ which of course is exactly what the Aboriginal attacks intended – to terrorise the settlers into abandoning their claims.

The build-up to these events had been considerable. In April 1805 a huge gathering of some three to four hundred Aborigines – again a mob *proportionately* huge – joined together from the ‘interior of the mountains’⁸² and north beyond the Hawkesbury. It points to the involvement of warriors beyond the Cumberland region and formidable leadership on a scale that was organisationally unusual. It also created logistical considerations, which meant it had to be planned to coincide with the corn harvest to sustain a concerted campaign.

This remarkable alliance marks the emergence of an unusual pan-Aboriginal response but also indicates an underlying social collapse compelling the amalgamation of disparate groups based on connections through the extensive marriage and ritual circles and paths. The drawing together of disparate groups with war-like intent and a vision of a reconstructed past presents similarities to North American experience and figures like Tecumseh and his prophet brother Lalawethika who drew together the fragmented clans under a prophetic vision.

Nativist elements and an apocalyptic vision of white erasure come through the emphatic declaration of continued warfare emerging from Aboriginal confrontation with settlers who, after renewed attacks, had sent out a punitive expedition. They caught up with the Aboriginal battle group on the other side of a creek whose swirling stream prevented closer contact. More than likely the Aborigines had allowed contact in circumstance where they held the advantage.

The settlers ‘commenced a parley’, wanting to know why there had been an upsurge in attacks. From the Aboriginal point of view, it was long past the need for explanation,⁸³ but it annoyed the settlers that the Aborigines offered no ‘motive whatsoever’ and worse indicated they were determined to continue their attacks at ‘every opportunity’. This was an important strategic contact engineered to emphasise a determined continuation of war. The resolution on the white side was equally determined that ‘before the flame can be extinguished, severity will be found necessary though reluctantly resorted to’.⁸⁴

The murders at Prospect in April 1805 that brought together so many Aboriginal factions also revealed the increasing division between those Aborigines dependent on white culture and those offering resistance. The strength of desire by some to avoid conflict led a deputation to the Rev Samuel Marsden, farmer, magistrate and occasional clergyman, in May 1805. The Aborigines were obviously deeply wary with ‘prodigious

numbers' scattered in the scrub and 'no more than twenty approached near enough to be conversed with'.⁸⁵

Marsden was emphatic. If the "tame" Aborigines wanted to reside safely among the settlers, they would not only have to give up the names of the perpetrators they would have to aid in their apprehension.⁸⁶ Though names were disclosed all were obscure. Musquito is not mentioned and another well-known figure, Tedbury (Pemulwuy's son), is also omitted as one of the 'assassins',⁸⁷ indicating Aboriginal resistance to disclosure.

Tedbury was eventually captured and 'soon *brought over*', admitting to being 'one of the ruffians' involved in the murder of 'the stockmen at Prospect'. Tedbury then took his captors to where the 'property taken from the unfortunate victims in their cruelty lay concealed'.⁸⁸ On the way, they 'fell in with a small cluster' of Aborigines including Bush Muschetta, another name for Musquito.

The meeting was likely planned and was no coincidence. Musquito addressed them 'in good English' and before 'escaping' declared his 'determination' to continue his 'rapacities',⁸⁹ the same message as the meeting across the raging stream. The encounter was intended to drive home the message of resistance as well as underlining his leadership, and far from 'escaping', as suggested, once the message was delivered, Musquito made a strategic departure.

General Orders in the *Gazette* on 9 June 1805 once more expressed the hope that the 'apprehension of the Native called Musquito might effectually prevent any further mischief in those quarters.'⁹⁰ The relentless harassment by authorities saw the capture of nine of those involved, several of whom now volunteered to assist in the 'search of Musquetta, who ...still keeps the flame alive'.⁹¹ The capture of those nine indicates the degree of coercion and the relentless pressure on resistance. It was sufficient in late June 1805 to force the 'Principal of the late Outrages',⁹² Musquito, to submit to white authority in a deal involving complex political machinations resulting in the release of Tedbury.

Musquito confined to the Parramatta gaol fulminated furiously, threatening to set fire to the building and 'destroy every white man within'. At night Musquito and his companion Bull-Dog attempted escape but another prisoner loudly alerted the turnkey, preventing the getaway of 'two criminals whose turpitude might have engendered more excesses', which indicates the importance the British attached to the capture of Musquito.⁹³ He was banished to Norfolk Island and later to Van Diemens Land but after

renewed violence with the Tasmanian Aborigines against white settlement, he was hanged 25 February 1825.⁹⁴

Conclusion

First contact history has necessarily been viewed through the principal records and diaries, white sources, which focus understandably on preoccupation with survival and success of the colony. The Aborigines were seen as peripheral: sometimes a feral nuisance and obstacle to progress, and occasionally a curiosity. It was an odd denialism given the magnitude of the constant threat: most whites travelled armed and usually in company for greater protection. There was an obvious interest in the peculiarity of “savage” behaviour but little depth of understanding or empathy. There were exceptions like Dawes and some convicts like John Wilson and William Buckley⁹⁵ but they rarely left more than scattered observations, so our early understanding is fraught and even the official record, limited.

By necessity we have to draw on experience and observations from elsewhere. Concepts of the *Dreaming* and the potent importance of landscape described by anthropologists of the twentieth century is assumed to similarly manifest in first contact Sydney in 1788. The complex trading routes that linked Aboriginal society over a wide area are the paths also of ideas and religion as they were elsewhere. Marco Polo’s surprising encounter with Nestorian Christians in the Chinese capital was simply about faith following the paths of trade.

Concepts of nativist belief draw on the experiences of North America and Melanesia but also from European Millenarianism. Again, cautious twentieth century anthropological evidence points to nativist responses to white intrusion in Australia and a religious inflection in resistance to the European presence.

By drawing on the sources as well as the evidence from elsewhere a more nuanced picture of first contact Indigenous response is possible and even if tentative, it points to a quite different way of viewing the astonishing colonial experience of 1788 Sydney.

The centrality of “country”, of landscape, to Aboriginal belief made for a powerful *Narrative Landscape* of stories attached to topography that allowed people to travel a map of stories entailing resonant geographic features. This was in contrast to a “portable” Christian faith with no attachment to place and thus with no appreciation of Indigenous experience and faith. This made the significance of invasion far more than simply

physical intrusion: it was a *psychic* invasion, an invasion of the mind that bludgeoned Indigenous certainty in a way more potent than just the European presence.

Initial contact was powerfully destructive. Just the presence of so many incomers placed inordinate pressure on food and resources, and this exacerbated the effect of disease in 1789 so soon after settlement. Lack of herd immunity, demographic pressures and genetic vulnerability may well have compounded the staggering death toll well beyond the estimated 50% towards the 80-90% uncovered in the South American experience. This obliges reconsideration of first contact effects on Indigenous society and the resultant demographic collapse.

Though never considered in conventional narratives, the effect on religious belief, in the wake of such devastation, points to nativist and Millenarian responses that inflected Aboriginal resistance. The size of the reported mobs that gathered in resistance though can only be appreciated in the light of the demographic collapse. It indicates a *proportionately* significant mustering of forces against white intrusion, using the corn harvest for logistical support.

Disease, far from muting resistance, spurred conflict as it did in Tasmania where clashes increased as the population declined such was the imperative to survive. South American Indian foods were central to sustaining resistance, maize on the Hawkesbury and potatoes in Tasmania – portable high energy *fighting foods*. It is ironic that Indian foods figured so significantly given the manner in which early commentators like Tench continually referred to the Aborigines as “Indians”.

The picture of Sydney settlement that emerges contrasts with conventional narratives, but it presents a more dynamic depiction that grants substance and importance to the Indigenous peoples of Sydney. They were not simply displaced but routed from their land, alienated from “county” and belief by a devastating *psychic* invasion. That they were able to muster a formidable resistance in the light of demographic collapse is testimony to an extraordinary resilience.

In terms of crude numbers, the level of resistance may not appear significant but *proportionately* the magnitude of the resistance was immense, far greater than that portrayed in conventional accounts. It may have been conducted as a guerrilla campaign, but the level of engagement came as close to total war from an Aboriginal point of view as can be imagined. The juggernaut of colonial expansion, however, barely flinched

and historical accounts continue to reflect a failure to grasp the significance of Aboriginal resistance. To white society it was an irritant, a serious nuisance dismissed as ‘mischievous behaviour’,⁹⁶ the term most frequently used. The euphemistic language, however, masked a deep-seated white fear and denial of the enormity of Aboriginal combative defiance.

¹ David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony of NSW Vol. 2* [1798] Project Gutenberg Australia, Chapter V and Conclusion.

² Noel Butlin, *Economics and the Dreamtime: a hypothetical history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

³ Rhys Jones, “Fire-stick farming”, *Australian Natural History*, Vol.16, No.7, 1969, pp224-228.

⁴ see Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines made Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2011).

⁵ Max Charlesworth, “Introduction”, in Charlesworth, Morphy, Bell & Maddock, *Religion in Aboriginal Australia: An anthology*. (Brisbane: QUP, 1989), p4.

⁶ William. W. Meissner, *Psychoanalysis and the Religious Experience*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, (London: Tavistock, 1965); P. Ornstein, *The Search for the Self: Selected Writings of Heinz Kohut*, (NY: International Universities Press, 1978).

⁷ The *Dreaming*, coined by Spencer and Gillen in *The Arunta: A Study of a Stone Age People* (London: Macmillan, 1927); See also Bill Stanner “The Dreaming” in William Lessa & EZ Vogt (eds), *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach* (NY: Harper Row, 1972), pp269-77.

⁸ Tony Swain, *A Place of Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p22ff.

⁹ Klaus-Peter Koepping “Nativistic Movements in Aboriginal Australia: Creative Adjustment, Protest and Regeneration of Tradition” in Swain and Rose (eds), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*. (Adelaide: SA Govt. Printer, 1988), p398.

¹⁰ see for example James G Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A study of Magic and religion* (London: Penguin, 1998 [orig. 1890]); EM Curr, *The Australian Race* (Landon: British Library, Historical Prints editions , 2011) Also Robert Travers, *The Tasmanians: The story of a doomed race* (Melbourne: Cassell, 1968).

¹¹ Swain, *Place of Strangers*, p93.

¹² Koepping, “Nativist Movements”, p397.

¹³ TGH Strehlow, *Aranda Traditions* (Melbourne: MUP, 1947), p6.

¹⁴ Robert Bos, “Dreaming and Social Change in Arnhem Land” in Tony Swain & Deborah Rose (eds), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*; also Stanner, “The Dreaming”, p276, though he later altered his views.

¹⁵ Robert Bos, “The Dreaming and Social Change in Arnhem Land”, p425.

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- ¹⁶ Max Charlesworth, "Change in Aboriginal Religion" in M. Charlesworth, H. Morphy, D. Bell & K. Maddock (eds), *Religion in Aboriginal Australia: An Anthology*. (St Lucia: UQP, 1986), p386.
- ¹⁷ Koepping, "Nativist Movement", p410.
- ¹⁸ Syncretism in Aboriginal belief is a much-debated controversy. See Swain, *Place of Strangers*, Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions: An Introduction*. (NY: Cornell University Press, 1973); Les Hiatt, *Arguments about Aborigines: Australia and the evolution of social anthropology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)
- ¹⁹ Gananath Obeyesekere "Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon" *Modern Ceylon Studies* Vol.1, No.1, 1970, pp43-63; and also, Richard Gombrich & Gananath Obeyesekere *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988)
- ²⁰ Michael Powell, *Woodward of Mahinda: Cultural and Religious Themes in the life of Frank Lee Woodward* (Colombo: Sarvodaya Vishva Lekha, 2001); also, Michael Powell, *Manual of a Mystic: FL Woodward, a Buddhist Scholar in Ceylon and Tasmania*, (Canberra: Karuda Press, 2001)
- ²¹ Eric Hobsbawm & Terrence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- ²² GW Trompf, "Millenarism: History, Sociology, and Cross-Cultural Analysis" *Journal of Religious History* Vol. 24, No. 1, February 2000.
- ²³ Holger Jebens, "Trickery or Secrecy? On Andrew Latta's Interpretation of "Bush Kaliai Cargo Cults"". *Anthropos*, 97,1 (2002), pp181-199.
- ²⁴ Koepping "Nativistic Movements", p398.
- ²⁵ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. (London: Vintage, 1970), p282.
- ²⁶ Peter Carey, "Origins of the Java War 1825-1830", *English Historical Review*, Vol. XCL, Issue CCCLVIII, January 1976, pp52-76; Peter Carey, "Waiting for the 'Just King': The Agrarian World of South-Central Java from Giyanti (1755) to the Java War (1825-1830)", *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 20, No. 1, 1986, pp59-137; Justus van der Kroeg, "Prince Diponegoro: Progenitor of Indonesian Nationalism." *Far Eastern Quarterly*, Vol.18, No.4 August 1949, pp425-450.
- ²⁷ Helmut Petri & Gisela Petri-Odermann, "A Nativistic and Millenarian Movement in North West Australia" and Klaus-Peter Koepping, "Nativist Movements in Aboriginal Australia: Creative Adjustment, Protest or Regeneration of Tradition" in Swain and Rose *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*; Erich Kolig, "Post-Contact Religious Movements in Australian Aboriginal Society" *Anthropos*, 82, 1/3. (1987), pp251-259; Swain, *A Place of Strangers*.
- ²⁸ Russell Thornton, *We Shall Live Again: The 1870 and 1890 Ghost Dance Movements and Demographic Revitalization* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1986); Alice Beck Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalisation* (NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1989); Elizabeth Vibert, "'The Natives Were Strong to Live': Reinterpreting Early Nineteenth-Century Prophetic Movements in the Columbia Plateau," *Ethnohistory*. 42 (1995), pp197-229; Robert M. Utley, *Sitting Bull* (NY: Holt Paperbacks, 1993); Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, (NY: Vintage, 1987).
- ²⁹ compare for example, Terence O. Ranger, "Plagues of Beasts and Men: Prophetic responses to epidemic in Eastern and Southern Africa." in Terence O. Ranger & Paul Slack (eds), *Epidemics and Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp241-68.

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- ³² Personal communication with Reynolds, August 2018.
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- ³⁵ *Historical Records of Australia* [HRA], Vol.1 Series 1, p159. Phillip's informant was Bennelong.
- ³⁶ Collins, *An Account of the English Colony* Vol.1 [1798] 1975, p597.
- ³⁷ John Hunter, *An historical journal of the transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island with the discoveries which have been made in New South Wales and in the Southern Ocean since the publication of Phillip's voyage*, (Adelaide: Libraries Board of SA, 1968), p93.
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- ⁴² David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in NSW* (Sydney: Fletcher Reed, 1975), p52.
- ⁴³ J. Mair, "Observation on the Eruptive Febrile disease which prevailed among several Tribes of the Aborigines in New South Wales during the Years 1830 and 31," AONSW 4/2180. Mair notes scarring well inland in 1830 from the 1789 outbreak.
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- ⁵³ Gapps, p59.
- ⁵⁴ Gapps, p271.
- ⁵⁵ Gapps, p66.
- ⁵⁶ NJB Plomley, *Aboriginal/Settler Clash in Van Diemen’s Land 1803-1831*. (Launceston: QVMAG, 1992); for a discussion of Plomley’s statistics see Michael Powell, *Musquito: Brutality and Exile: Aboriginal Resistance in New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land*, (Hobart: Fullers, 2016), pp140-1 and p184. Also, Nicholas Clements, *The Black War: Sex, Fear and Resistance on Australia’s most violent frontier*, (Brisbane: QUP, 2014).
- ⁵⁷ Kenneth Kiple, *A Moveable Feast: Ten Millennia of Food Globalization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- ⁵⁸ For a discussion on the significance of South American foods on resistance patterns see Powell, *Musquito*, 42.
- ⁵⁹ *Sydney Gazette*, 19 May 1805, 3. A bushel is a dry measure of 8gallons (c.35litres)
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- ⁶⁵ *Sydney Gazette*, 1 July 1804, p4.
- ⁶⁶ *Sydney Gazette*, 24 June 1804.
- ⁶⁷ *Sydney Gazette*, 17 June 1804.
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- ⁸¹ George Johnston letter book 1803-1807 State Library of NSW, p41.
- ⁸² *Sydney Gazette*, 28 April 1805.
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- ⁸⁶ *Sydney Gazette*, 19 May 1805, p3.
- ⁸⁷ *Sydney Gazette*, 19 May 1805, p2.
- ⁸⁸ *Sydney Gazette*, 19 May 1805.
- ⁸⁹ *Sydney Gazette*, 19 May 1805, p2.
- ⁹⁰ *Sydney Gazette*, 9 June 1805.
- ⁹¹ *Sydney Gazette*, 30 June 1805, p2.
- ⁹² *Sydney Gazette*, 7 July 1805, p2.
- ⁹³ *Sydney Gazette*, 11 August 1805, p2.
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- ⁹⁵ John Maynard & Victoria Haskins, *Living with the Locals: Early Europeans' Experience of Indigenous Life* (Canberra: NLA, 2016).
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