David Fox

THE FIRST INTERPRETERS IN AUSTRALIA

Watkin Tench was a lieutenant-captain with the First Fleet which landed at Botany Bay in May 1788. His *A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson,* published in 1793, provides one of the most insightful eyewitness accounts of these events, describing *inter alia* the efforts of the settlers to communicate with the indigenous population through their first interpreters, Arabanoo, and then Bennelong.

Arabanoo

December 1788 « …Unabated animosity continued to prevail between the natives and us. Tired of this state of petty affairs and endless uncertainty the governor (Arthur Phillip) at length determined to adopt a decisive measure by capturing some of them and retaining them by force. Pursuant to his resolution, boats were dispatched to Manly Cove, where several Indians were seen standing on the beach. A proper opportunity being presented, our people rushed in amongst them, and seized two men. Only one of them was secured; the other effected his escape.
The prisoner appeared to be about thirty years old, not tall, but robustly made; and of a countenance which, under happier circumstances, I thought would display manlines and sensibility. Curiosity and observation seemed, nevertheless not to have wholly deserted him. He showed the effect of novelty upon ignorance, he wondered at all he saw. Though broken and interrupted with dismay, his voice was soft and musical, when its natural tone could be heard; and he readily pronounced with tolerable accuracy the names of things which were taught him. When pictures were shown to him, he knew directly those which represented the human figure. Among others, a very large handsome print of Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Cumberland being produced, he called out ‘woman’, a name by which we had just before taught him to call the female convicts. To prevent his escape, a handcuff with a rope attached to it was fastened around his left wrist. He called it ‘bengàdee’ (ornament), but his delight changed to rage and hatred when he discovered its use.

His reserve, from want of confidence in us, continued gradually to wear away. He told us his name, and Manly gave place to Arabanoo. One of our chief amusements was to make him repeat the names of things in his language, which he never hesitated to do with the utmost alacrity, correcting our pronunciation when erroneous. Much information relating to the customs and manners of his country was also gained from him. »

In February 1789 Arabanoo tried to escape by diving overboard as the « *Supply* » was setting sail for Norfolk Island. Although recaptured, he died three months later of smallpox.

« Arabanoo was not lacking in docility ; but, either from the difficulty of acquiring our language, from the unskilfulness of his teachers, or from some natural defect, his progress in learning it was not equal to what we had expected. By his death, the scheme which had invited his capture was utterly defeated. »

Bennelong

December 1789 « Intercourse with the natives, for the purpose of knowing whether or not the country possessed any resources by which life might be prolonged, as well as on other accounts, becoming each day more desirable, the governor resolved to make prisoners of two more of them. Boats properly provided, under the command of Lieutenant Bradley of the *Sirius*, were accordingly dispatched on this service and completely succeeded in carrying off, without opposition, two fine young men, Bennelong and Colbee, who were safely landed among us at Sydney. Colbee contrived to effect his escape within about a week.

Bennelong we judged to be about twenty-six years old, of good stature and stoutly made, with a bold, intrepid countenance which bespoke defiance and revenge.

Unlike poor Arabanoo, he became fond of our viands and would drink the strongest liquors, not simply without reluctance but with eager marks of delight and enjoyment. He was the only native we knew who immediately showed a fondness for spirits. His powers of mind were certainly far above mediocrity. He acquired knowledge, both of our manners and language, faster than his predecessor had done. He willingly communicated information, sang, danced and capered, told us all the customs of his country and all the details of his family economy. Love and war seemed his favourite pursuits, in both of which he had suffered severely.

His head was disfigured by several scars; a spear had passed through his arm and another through his leg. The cause and attendant circumstances of all these disasters he related to us.

‘But the wound on the back of your hand, Bennelong ! How did you get that ?’

He laughed, and owned that it was received in carrying off a lady of another tribe by force. ‘I was dragging her away . She cried aloud, and stuck her teeth in me.’

‘And what did you do then ?’

‘I knocked her down, and beat her until she was insensible, and covered with blood. Then…..’

His temper seemed pliant, and his relish of our society so great that hardly anyone judged he would attempt to quit us were the means of escape put within his reach. »

Watkin Tench describes the shortage of food during the early months of 1790 : « Food was rationed. Both soldiers and convicts pleaded such loss of strength as to find themselves unable to perform their accustomed tasks. Our friend Bennelong, during this period of scarcity, was as well taken care of as our desperate circumstance would allow. We knew not how to keep him and yet were unwilling to part with him. Had he penetrated our state, perhaps he might have given his countrymen such a description of our diminished numbers and diminished strength as would have emboldened them to become more troublesome. Every expedient was used to keep him in ignorance…want of food has been known to make him furious and melancholy ».

Although he escaped in May 1790 contact was reestablished with Bennelong later the same year.

“On the 7th September a party of men went in a boat to Manly cove, intending to land there and walk on to Broken Bay. On drawing near the shore a dead whale in the most disgusting state of putrefaction was seen lying on the beach, and at least two hundred Indians surrounded it, broiling the flesh on different fires and feasting on it with the most extravagant marks of greediness and rapture.

Bennelong, on hearing his name, stepped forward and entered into conversation. He was greatly emaciated and so far disfigured by a long beard that our people not without difficulty recognised their old

acquaintance. His answering in broken English, and enquiring for the governor, however, soon corrected their doubts. He seemed quite friendly. He had freed himself from the fetter which was upon him when he had escaped from us.

Bennelong, trying to instruct his countrymen , tried to put on a shirt, but managed it so awkwardly that a man by the name of McEntire, the governor's gamekeeper, was directed to assist him. The length of his beard seemed to annoy him much, and he expressed eager wishes to be shaved, asking repeatedly for a razor. A pair of scissors was given to him, and he showed that he had not forgotten how to use such an instrument, for he forthwith began to clip his hair with it. The women and children stood at a distance and refused all invitations to approach nearer. 'My favourite has become the wife of Colbee ! But I have got *bulla murree deein* (two large women) to compensate for her loss.'

It was observed that he had received two large wounds in addition to his former numerous ones …and were probably acquired in the conflict wherein he had asserted his pretensions to the two ladies.

Our party now thought it time to proceed on the original expedition. When the natives saw that the boat was about to depart, they crowded around her, and brought down, by way of present, three of four great chunks of the whale, which stank immoderately, and put them on board, the largest of which Bennelong expressly requested might be offered, in his name, to the governor. It so happened that the governor's ship was nearby and reached Manly Cove shortly afterwards. Governor Phillip stepped out unarmed and called for Bennelong, who appeared.

They discoursed for some time, Bennelong expressing pleasure to see his old acquaintance, and inquiring by name for every person he could recollect at Sydney.

Bennelong's love of wine has been mentioned; and the governor, to try whether it still subsisted, uncorked a bottle and poured out a glass of it, which the other drank with his former marks of relish and good humour, giving for a toast, as he had been taught, 'The King'."

The climate of jovial good humour at this reunion was then marred by an incident in which another aboriginal, "seemingly a stranger and but little acquainted with Bennelong" advanced on the party and, misconstruing a gesture from the governor, hurled his spear at him, piercing his shoulder.

"Instant confusion on both sides took place, Bennelong disappeared and several spears were thrown from different quarters, though without effect."

15th September 1790 "A fire being seen on the north shore of the harbour, a party of our people went there. They found Bennelong and several other natives. Bennelong was given a hatchet and fish. A bottle of wine was produced. Having finished the repast, he made a motion to be shaved and, a barber being present, his request was complied with, to the great admiration of his countrymen.

On being asked where their women were, they pointed to the spot but seemed not desirous that we should approach it. However, in a few minutes, a female appeared not far off. Bennelong persuaded her to come to us, telling us she was his wife, Barangaroo. Having first put a *petticoat* on her, he brought her to us. But this was the prudery of the wilderness, which her husband joined us to ridicule, and we soon laughed her out of it. The petticoat was dropped with hesitation, and Barangaroo stood 'armed cap-a-pee in nakedness'. At the request of Bennelong we combed and cut her hair, and she seemed pleased with the operation. Wine she would not taste, but turned from it in disgust, though heartily invited to drink by the example and persuasion of Bennelong. In short, she behaved so well, and assumed the character of gentleness and timidity to such advantage that, had our acquaintance ended here, a very moderate share of the spirit of travelling would have sufficed to record that amidst a horde of roaming savages in the desert wastes of New South Wales might be found as much feminine innocence, softness and modesty (allowing for inevitable difference of education) as the most finished system could bestow, or the most polished circle produce."

In further exchanges between the settlers and the aboriginals Bennelong interceded to obtain the return of fishing gear that had been stolen from his people. During the negotiations Bennelong inquired with solicitude, about the state of the governor's wound. He was persuaded to return to Sydney.

October 1790 "When we reached the governor's house, Bennelong expressed honest joy to see his old friend, and appeared pleased to see he had recovered of his wound. The governor presented Bennelong with a hatchet, some fishing tackle and a couple of petticoats.
The ceremony of introduction being finished Bennelong seemed to consider himself quite at home, running from room to room with his

companions and introducing them to his old friends, the domestics, in the most familiar manner.

He undertook to explain to his countrymen the use and nature of those things which were new to them. Some of his explanations were whimsical enough. Seeing, for instance, a pair of snuffers, he held up the forefinger of his left hand, to represent a candle, and made the motion of snuffing it. Finding that this sagacious interpretation failed, he threw down the snuffers in a rage and, reproaching their stupidity, walked away. It was observed that a soft gentle tone of voice, which we had taught him to use, was forgotten, and his native vociferation returned in full force."

November 1790. "During the intervals of duty our greatest source of entertainment now lay in cultivating the acquaintance of our new friends, the natives. Ever liberal of communication, no difficulty but of understanding each other subsisted between us. Inexplicable contradictions arose to bewilder our researches which no ingenuity could unravel and no credulity reconcile.

Bennelong, from being accustomed to our manners and understanding a little English, was the person through whom we wished to prosecute inquiry, but he had lately become a man of so much dignity and consequence that it was not always easy to obtain his company. Clothes had been given to him at various times, but he did not always condescend to wear them. One day he would appear in them, and the next day he was to be seen carrying them in a net slung around his neck. Further, to please him, a brick house of twelve feet square was built for his use, on a point of land fixed upon by himself.[1] His importance with his countrymen arose in proportion to our patronage of him. He warmly attached himself to our society. But the gratitude of a savage is ever a precarious tenure."

Tench then describes an incident in which Bennelong threatens to kill the daughter of the chief of a rival tribe, inflicting serious head wounds on her. He is restrained, threatened with punishment and taken to the hospital where the girl is being given treatment, where he is overcome by remorse. His wife, Barangaroo, "thought him perhaps too courteous and tender, and accordingly began to revile them both with great bitterness, threw stones at the girl and attempted to beat her with a club."

Tench gives several accounts of attempts by the governor to use Bennelong to assist him in communicating with rival tribes, and to administer justice. He also describes an incident in which a boat is overturned in the harbour. "Bennelong, and some other natives, who saw

the accident happen, immediately dived into the water and saved all the people."

He states further: "The natives around Port Jackson are in person rather more diminutive and slightly made, epecially about the thighs and legs, than the Europeans. It is doubtful whether their society ever contained a person of six feet high. Bennelong who towered above the majority of his countrymen stood barely five feet eight inches high.." A table then proceeds to detail the girth of the chest, belly, thigh, calf, and arm. This is probably the only occasion on which an interpreter's vital statistics have been recorded for posterity.

On canons of beauty "I have to observe that the estimation of female beauty among the natives (the men at least) is in this country the same as in most others. Were a New Hollander to portray his mistress, he would draw her as the *Venus aux belles fesses.* Whenever Bennelong described to us his favourite fair, he always painted her in this, and another particular, as eminently luxuriant."

On intelligence: "I have endeavoured to detail information rather than deduce conclusions. The behaviour of Bennelong is copiously described, and assuredly he who shall make just allowance for uninstructed nature will hardly accuse him of stupidity or deficiency of apprehension."

On pronunciation : "The letters 's' and 'v' they never could pronounce. The latter became invariably 'w', and the former mocked all their efforts, which in the instance of Bennelong has been noticed; and a more unfortunate defect in learning our language could not easily be pointed out."

In 1792 Phillip took Bennelong and another aboriginal, Yemmerrawannie, to England, the idea being that they "might gain knowledge which would help to civilise their countrymen." [2] The second aboriginal died in England, but Bennelong who was presented to King George III, subsequently returned to Australia in 1795. He comported himself as "quite the man of consequence"[3], although by now his fondness for alcohol had become an addiction. He returned to life in the bush, ultimately being killed (January 1813) in a tribal fight.

[1] Now named Bennelong Point and the site of the Sydney Opera House
[2] Grolier's Australian Encyclopedia
[3] David Collins: An account of the English colony in New South Wales

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