

1793: A Song of the Natives of New South Wales

Keith Vincent Smith

In a townhouse in London's Mayfair, near Berkeley Square, two Australian Aboriginal men sing in their own language 'in praise of their lovers'. Their voices rise above the repetitive beat of the two hardwood sticks they clap together to maintain the rhythm. They wear fashionable Regency breeches, buckled shoes, ruffled shirts and waistcoats.

The year is 1793 and the singers are Bennelong and Yemmerrawanne, far from their Wangal homeland on the south bank of the Parramatta River in Sydney. This was certainly the first time an Aboriginal song was performed in Europe.

A page from a musical score titled "A SONG OF THE NATIVES OF NEW SOUTH WALES;". The page number "15" is in the top right corner. Below the title is a paragraph of text: "Which was written down from the Singing of BENELONG, and YAM-ROWENY, the two Chiefs who were brought to England some years ago from Botany Bay, by Governor Phillips. The subject of the Song, is in praise of their Lovers; and when they Sang, it seem'd indispensable to them to have two sticks, one in each hand to beat time with the Tune; one end of the left hand stick rested on the ground, while the other in the right hand was used to beat against it, according to the time of the notes." Below this text are five systems of musical notation. The first four systems are vocal lines with lyrics: "Barrabu-la barra ma, mangine wey en-gu-na, Barrabu-la barra ma, mangi-ne wey en-gu-na, Barra-bu-la barra ma, mangine wey en-gu-na, Barra-bu-la bar-ra ma mangi-ne wey en-gu-na, barra-bu-la bar-ra ma, mangi-ne wey en-gu-na." The fifth system is a piano accompaniment, with the text "The same Harmonized with a Bass, by the Editor." above it. At the bottom right of the page is a circular library stamp.

Fig. 1. 'A Song of the Natives of New South Wales'. Edward Jones, *Musical Curiosities; or a Selection of the most characteristic National Songs, & Airs, Consisting of Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Danish, Lapland, Malabar, New South Wales, French, Italian, Swiss... the Harp, or the Piano-Forte ...* (London, 1811). British Library, R.M. 13.f.5, f. 15.

The words and music were written down by Edward Jones (1752–1824), the Welsh harpist, composer, folk music collector and bard to the Prince of Wales (later George IV), who published ‘A song of the natives of New South Wales’ in *Musical Curiosities* (London, 1811), a work of 40 folio sheets.

Woollarawarre Bennelong (c. 1764–1813) and Colebee (c. 1770–1806), leader of the Cadigal, a clan inhabiting the eastern side of Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour), were captured on 25 November 1789 on the orders of Captain Arthur Phillip, first governor of the convict colony established at Sydney in January 1788. Colebee soon escaped, but Bennelong formed an unlikely friendship with Phillip and ‘came in’ peacefully to Sydney Town with his people in September 1790.¹

The governor built Bennelong a brick hut on the east point of Sydney Cove, where his name lives on at Bennelong Point, site of the Sydney Opera House. He soon became a valued informant and go-between. ‘I think my old acquaintance Bennillon will accompany me when ever I return to England, & from him when he understands English, much information may be attained, for he is very intelligent’, Phillip wrote in a letter to Sir Joseph Banks in December 1791.²

Bennelong, about twenty-nine years of age and Yemmerrawanne, about nineteen, left Sydney Cove aboard HMS *Atlantic* in December 1792 with the ailing Phillip. After a voyage of six months, they arrived in London on 21 May 1793, where they were provided with clothing suitable for their introduction to London society. Treasury Board Papers show they visited the tailors Knox & Wilson that day and were fitted with bespoke frock coats with plated buttons, striped breeches, spotted waistcoats, waistbands and fine cotton underwear at a cost of £15 each.³ Three days later they purchased ‘hatts’ from the fashionable firm of Busby & Walker at 399 The Strand.⁴

Bennelong and Yemmerrawanne were looked after by William Waterhouse, father of Governor Phillip’s aide Lieutenant Henry Waterhouse of HMS *Sirius*, and lodged at his home at 125 Mount Street, near Berkeley Square. Edward Jones resided nearby, above the premises of Mr Chambers, grocer, at 122 Mount Street, where his *History of the Bards and Druids* was published and sold in 1794. It is likely that Jones met the antipodean visitors through his neighbour William Waterhouse. Jones wrote that the ‘Song of the Natives’:

... was written down from the Singing of BENELONG, and YAM-ROWENY, the two Chiefs who were brought to England some years ago, from Botany Bay, by Governor Phillips [sic]. The subject of the Song, is in praise of their Lovers; and when they Sang, it seem’d indispensable to them to have two sticks, one in each hand to beat time with the Tune; one end of the left hand stick rested on the ground, while the other in the right hand was used to beat against it, according to the time of the notes.

There are two copies of *Musical Curiosities* in the British Library. The score reproduced here bears the stamp: *Royal Music Library/Buckingham Palace*. Its shelfmark ‘R.M. 13.f.5’ reveals that the book was once in the Royal Music Library and is one of some 60,000 works donated to the British Museum Library in 1823 by Jones’s patron King George IV. A second copy in the British Library bears the shelfmark H.2832.h. (19.)

¹ Keith Vincent Smith, *Bennelong: The Coming In of the Eora, Sydney Cove, 1788–1792* (East Roseville, NSW, 2001).

² Phillip to Banks, 3 December 1791. Sydney, State Library of New South Wales, Mitchell Library, Banks Papers, A81, pp. 34–44.

³ London, The National Archives, Treasury Board Papers (TBP), T.1/733:382.

⁴ TBP T.1/733:380.

Edward Jones's notation of *A Song of the Natives of New South Wales* was reprinted by Carl Engel in *An Introduction to the Study of National Music* (London: Longmans Green, 1866). Australian historian James Bonwick reproduced Engel's score in *Daily Life and Origin of the Tasmanians* (London, 1870).



Fig. 2. Yuremany [Yemmerrawanne]. Artist unknown. Silhouette. *Australian Aborigines, pre-1806*, Sydney, State Library of New South Wales, Sir William Dixson Collection, DGB 10.f.14



Fig. 3. Banalong [Bennelong]. c. 1793. W.W. [William Waterhouse]. Pen and ink. *Australian Aborigines, pre-1806*, Sydney, State Library of New South Wales, Sir William Dixson Collection, DGB f. 13.

The images of Yuremany (Yemmerrawanne) and Banalang (Bennelong), now in the Dixson Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, were probably made not long after they arrived in London. 'W.W.', who sketched Bennelong wearing a ruffled shirt and spotted waistcoat, was most likely William Waterhouse. Both men were in good health for the first four months of their visit, but then became frail and sick, according to a report in the London *Observer* (29 September 1793):

The two natives of New South Wales at present in this metropolis, are in appearance scarcely human; they continue to reside in Mount Street, Berkley-square, in the neighbourhood of which they are to be seen daily; they cannot walk without the support of sticks, and appear to have lost all that agility they are said formerly to have possessed; one of them appears much emaciated; notwithstanding they are indulged in every inclination, they seem constantly dejected, and every effort to make them laugh has for many months past been ineffectual.

The London performance therefore took place before their illness, sometime after June 1793, when they saw the opera at the King's Theatre with Governor Phillip, and before September 1793, when they toured 'Country Seats of the Nobility', giving demonstrations of their 'manner of throwing the spear, dancing &c'.⁵

Bennelong soon recovered, but Yemmerrawanne's health continued to decline and the two men left London on 15 October 1793 and took up residence in a house in the village of Eltham in Kent, now a suburb of South London. After a long illness, Yemmerrawanne died

⁵ *True Briton*, London, 2 July 1793.

of a lung ailment on 18 May 1794. He was buried in the churchyard of St John's, Eltham, where his gravestone survives. The London newspapers briefly noted Yemmerrawanne's death, adding poignantly, 'His companion pines much for his loss'.⁶

Weakened by illness, Bennelong boarded HMS *Reliance* at Chatham on 22 July 1794 as a 'Supernumerary' 'borne for victuals only'. The ship did not leave until 2 March 1795, after which Bennelong was treated by Surgeon George Bass and soon recovered. After a prolonged voyage the *Reliance* dropped anchor in Port Jackson on 7 September 1795. Bennelong had been away for two years and ten months, eighteen months of which were spent on board ships, either at sea or in the docks.

Songs travel

Songs were highly valued in Australian Aboriginal society, especially in the ritual of acting out stories or myths through a fusion of song, music and dance called in the Sydney language *carabbara* or *carriberie*, a word that has entered the English language as 'corroboree'. Songs might be ancient and 'travelled' from distant language groups. Aboriginal songmen sometimes said they did not understand the words they sang. The British officers made no attempt to translate the meaning of the lyrics and it is pointless to try to do so today.

Referring to Wolle-warre (Bennelong), Lieutenant Philip Gidley King, who brought the first Australian Aboriginal vocabulary to London in December 1790, wrote that 'he sings, when asked, but in general his songs are in a mournful strain, and he keeps time by swinging his arms.' Describing the boojery *carriberie* ('good corroboree') staged at the governor's request by Colebee and Bennelong near his brick hut in March 1791 in *Transactions at Port Jackson* (London, 1793), Governor Phillip wrote:

Their music consisted of two sticks of very hard wood, one of which the musician held upon his breast, in the manner of a violin, and struck it with the other, in good and regular time.⁷

Although Bennelong and Yemmerrawanne said theirs was a love song, British 'First Fleet' officers and journal keepers also recorded the words, but not the music, of the same and similar songs from the Sydney area, which they were told were about hunting, courtship and ancestors. The stargazing marine lieutenant and engineer William Dawes (1762-1836) included 'A Song of New South Wales' in his notebooks, filled with 'Sydney Language' words and candid dialogues with his chief Aboriginal informant, a girl named Patyegarang (Grey Kangaroo). Dawes's notebooks, once owned by the British linguist William Marsden, are now in the collection of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. In his transcription, Dawes substituted the letter 'P' for 'B':

Parabula Parama Manginiva Yenbongi
three or four times repeated, then
Parabula Parama Berianggalangda
*Toindinma Manginiva Yenbongi*⁸

⁶ *London Chronicle*, London, 27 May 1794; *Morning Chronicle*, 28 May 1794; *Morning Post*, 29 May 1794.

⁷ Arthur Phillip in John Hunter, *An Historical Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson and Norfolk Island ...* (London: John Stockdale, 1793), p. 485.

⁸ University of London, School of African and Oriental Studies, MS. 41645, Book B, p. 31. The notebooks can be studied online at: <http://www.williamdawes.org>.

Governor Phillip's aide and secretary, Judge Advocate David Collins, reversed the words of the song in *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, published in London in 1798. Collins wrote:

mang-en-ny-wau-yengo-nah,
bar-ri-boo-lah, bar-re-mah.

This they begin at the top of their voices, and continue as long as they can in one breath, sinking to the lowest note, and then rising again to the highest. The words are the names of deceased persons.⁹

Another Australian Aboriginal song was heard in London during 1811 from Daniel Moowattin, an orphan from Parramatta who had been brought to England by George Caley, a botanical collector for Sir Joseph Banks in New South Wales. Daniel attended a London soiree where he responded emotionally when an English lady sang 'No, my love, no'. An eyewitness reported:

He sat with strongly marked expressions of attention and delight, and, when asked to sing, consented with a smile. His articulation seemed indistinct, the sounds having great similarity to each other, as, rah-rah tah, wha-rah rah, bah-hah tab-rah hah. The tune was occasionally changed; the ditty was divided into three parts or verses: the latter was particularly hurried and exulting. On being requested to put the song into English, he replied, 'not well to do; but first we take fish, next take kangaroo, then take wife.'¹⁰

Coo-ee

Musique des naturels (Music of the natives), *Chant*, *Air de Danse* and *Cri de Ralliement* or *Cou-hé* (*coo-ee*) was collected and set to music by the astronomer Pierre-François Bernier and the artist Charles-Alexandre Lesueur, from the ship *Naturaliste* with the French Baudin expedition in 1802.

Coo-éé, meaning 'to come' in the Sydney language (Biyal-Biyal) was recorded by Daniel Southwell, who sailed to Port Jackson as mate aboard HMS *Sirius* in 1788. Southwell's vocabulary survives in 'A list of words used by the Natives of Port Jackson', a manuscript copied from Southwell's letters by his uncle, the Reverend Weeden Butler.¹¹ The prolonged high-pitched call, now written as *cooee*, is still used in the Australian bush to let people know where you are, as this kind of sound travels well.

This musical score was not published until the second edition of the *Atlas* in François Péron's *Voyage de découvertes aux terres Australes ...* (Paris, 1824). It was previously believed to be the first European attempt to record Aboriginal music. Bernier died in 1803.

Words of a corroboree given by Harry to Barron Field

Mr Justice Barron Field (1786–1846) arrived in Australia in February 1817 where he presided in the Supreme Court under the Scots career soldier Governor Lachlan Macquarie. A friend of Charles Lamb and Leigh Hunt and a drama critic for the *London Times*, Field was a minor poet whose poems were said to be 'a barren field indeed'.

⁹ David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, 2nd edn (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1804), p. 394.


¹⁰ Anon., 'Moo-wat-tin', *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* (1832), pp. 199–200; reprinted in *Atkinson's Casket* (London, 1835), pp. 570–1.

¹¹ BL, Add. MS. 16383, ff. 147–9.

Field first published Harry's *Gumberry jah* song with music in 'Journal of an excursion across the Blue Mountains of New South Wales' in *The London Magazine* in 1823 and later in the Appendix to *Geographical Memoirs on New South Wales ...* (London: John Murray, 1825).¹²

A few weeks after 'coming in' peacefully to Sydney Town Bennelong told Governor Phillip that when he went to the south shore of Botany Bay in December 1790, the people there 'danced, and that one of the tribe had sung a song, the subject of which was, his house, the governor, and the white men at Sydney'.¹³ Bennelong's former enemies the Gweagal, on the south shore of Botany Bay, were acting out a 'contact corroboree' about the British colonists, transforming them into mythic creatures and ceding respect to Bennelong for the new status he had gained through his association with Phillip.

'Barrabu-la barra ma, manginè wey en-gu-na' ...

After 229 years, the words of Bennelong and Yemmerrawanne's song rang out again on the evening of Friday 24 September 2010, when two Indigenous Australian performers, Clarence Slookee and Matthew Doyle, wearing Regency style outfits, re-enacted the London scene at the opening of the exhibition *MARI NAWI Aboriginal Odysseys 1790-1850* in the Mitchell Galleries of the State Library of New South Wales in Sydney. Their song and Harry's song, incorporating the *Coo-ee* call collected by Bernier, can be heard here  Australian pianist and composer Kevin Hunt recorded these Aboriginal songs at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music.

¹² BL, 566.c.7 and 10491.e.5.

¹³ Phillip in Hunter. op. cit., p. 493.