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Preface

Woollarawarre Bennelong: rethinking the tragic narrative

In her recent magisterial history of early Sydney, Grace Karskens mused on a critical distinction in emphasis between settler history and Aboriginal history: ‘in settler history we seem to be searching constantly for beginnings’, she notes, ‘but in Aboriginal history in the colonial period so often the search is for endings’.¹ This preoccupation with endings especially haunts the ‘storywork’ surrounding Woollarawarre Bennelong, one of the best known but least understood Aboriginal men of the early colonial era.² Most of this storywork has figured Bennelong as a tragic soul – caught between two worlds, reconciled to neither, the victim of an addiction that was his only means of enduring the fall. Despite some variations in the telling of his life with the British colonists, the tragedy of his end usually dominates the overall tone.

The following three articles represent the fruits of a shared frustration with the tragic narrative so long accorded Bennelong. Originally presented as a trio of papers at the University of Sydney in April 2009, they bring together scholars who might not otherwise have met – an independent writer dedicated to unearthing the lost details of various Aboriginal lives in early Sydney, a British historian working on indigenous travellers from the New World to Europe throughout the eighteenth century, and a graduate student investigating the modern representation of various key ambassadors in the colonial Australian past.³ Bennelong featured in all our stories, but in none did he seem to behave as the conventional historiography told us he would. Within our different contexts, Bennelong never fitted the role of doomed outcast. Instead, he played politics, told jokes, took opportunities, shouldered grief, bore tedium, and asked some difficult questions.

Bennelong as a ‘cultural broker’ in the New World is not alone in suffering the imposition of a tragic fate. Powhatan’s daughter, Pocahontas, shares a similar history of initial congratulation, later suspicion, and subsequent pity for her role as a native mediator at Jamestown from 1609 to 1616. The Wampanoag Tisquantum, better known as Squanto, is likewise seen today as a solitary loser, forever stuck between his local Patuxet tribe and the pilgrims he helped at New

1 Karskens 2009: 422.

2 ‘Storywork’ is Lyndall Ryan’s phrase.

3 Our thanks go to Dr Dirk Moses for convening the seminar, to the audience for their enthusiastic response, and to Professor Peter Read for encouraging us to publish.

Plymouth between 1620 and 1622.⁴ Closer to home, the Raiatean refugee Mai, who served as a critical informant for James Cook between 1773 and 1779, is also often viewed as a 'tragedy' – a view that suggests that the 'fatal' approach to South Pacific colonisation has not entirely melted away.⁵ Interestingly, all of these individuals spent some time in England, visiting the country of the newcomers with whom they negotiated, just as Bennelong would in 1793.⁶ Yet Bennelong's story is perhaps the least 'promiscuous' amongst these others.⁷ The relentless uniformity with which the tragic narrative has applied to Bennelong owes much to the isolation until recently of colonial Australian history from other histories of cultural exchange, diaspora, and creolisation.

Each of our articles sheds new light on Bennelong because each places him in a new or little-appreciated context. Freed from the tyranny of the 'first contact' context, Bennelong emerges as a more connected, resilient, global, and human individual than usually allowed.

First, Keith Vincent Smith places Bennelong in the context of his own Eora people, emphasising the complex web of kin relationships that Bennelong both inherited and grew during his life. Building upon his superlative study of Bennelong's life until 1792, Smith argues that Bennelong was a master politician, brokering alliances among various factions via marriages for himself and his sisters in order to secure, and later extend, his leadership within his Wangal clan.⁸ That Bennelong also tried his political hand at brokering alliances with the British newcomers, Smith continues, was simply one aspect of his ongoing strategising – an approach that he evidently rejected as unsuccessful as early as 1797.

Smith supports his argument in two ways. First, he has scoured the early records for evidence of status among Bennelong's extended family, which, combined with his anthropological understanding of the power of kin relations among the Eora, paints a picture of deliberate social advancement. That a Cadigal, Nanbarry, wished to be buried in the same grave as Bennelong some eight years after his death was just one example of his enduring significance among all Eora. 'There could be no greater mark of respect', comments Smith. Second, Smith brings an innovative reading to some of the more menacing documents extant on Bennelong. In sources that are usually seen today as examples of hostility and dismissal, he finds evidence of independence and influence. George Howe's grumblings about Bennelong's backsliding or David Dickinson Mann's head-shaking over Aboriginal recalcitrance both point, for Smith, to the considered way in which Bennelong distanced himself from the British after 1800. Similarly, the fleeting observation by a merchant-shipman of a 'battle' between many

4 For discussions of the reputations of these two American New World figures, see Brown 1999 and Salisbury 1999.

5 For the supposedly discredited 'fatal impact' approach see Morehead 1968. For a recent 'fatal' view of Mai see Connaughton 2005.

6 See Fullagar forthcoming.

7 Dortins, this volume, paraphrasing Keith Jenkins.

8 Smith 2001.

Eora in 1813, in which ‘about thirty men were wounded’, signifies not excessive violence but rather the grand scale on which the ritual revenge for Bennelong’s recent death was fought.

The next article, by Kate Fullagar, places Bennelong in an altogether larger context – that of indigenous travellers to new worlds over the past 500 years. Within this long, international context, Bennelong joins a tradition of adventurous individuals who made the most of an unexpected turn in their lives. Fullagar finds, contrary to common assumption, that Bennelong bucked the eighteenth-century trend for such travellers, by stirring next to no response among the British as either curiosity or spectacle. Ironically, it is this lack of impact in 1790s Britain that now affords Bennelong an escape from reductive interpretations of his trip which would revolve entirely around reception. Instead, his activities in Britain become the varied experiences of an autonomous visitor, mixing pleasures with sorrows as often as any other travel story.

Bennelong’s lack of impact abroad did signify something, however. The rest of Fullagar’s article explores the implications of the shift in general British attitudes towards indigenous travellers. It uncovers the rich history of connection between ordinary Britons’ understandings of such people and their views on their expanding empire as a whole. Fullagar’s article explores the shift in attitude towards so-called savages as an indicator of a major transformation in metropolitan imperial ideology, the effects of which reverberated especially in the colony of New South Wales.

The final article, by Emma Dortins, places Bennelong in his least-studied context – that of Australian historiography. Dortins includes novels, tracts, and blogs as well as conventional scholarship in her definition of historiography. In almost every instance, she has discovered an attachment to the tragic vision of Bennelong that is truly exceptional in its doggedness. From Manning Clark to Inga Clendinnen, historians have rehearsed the popular image of a fallen drunk, ending his days ‘slinking about in dishevelled rags’.⁹

Dortins’ excavation of Bennelong’s storywork shows that the tragic narrative has appealed to the resisters as often as it has to the orthodox – suggesting, perhaps, the true source of its strength. While Isadore Brodsky’s Bennelong tumbled into an unstoppable ‘downward rush [of] degradation’, WEH Stanner’s Bennelong appeared little better as a ‘wine-bibber, a trickster, and eventually a bit of a turncoat’.¹⁰ Even today, the conservative Bennelong Society’s determined refusal to consider its mascot’s life after 1792 chimes rather uncomfortably with the taciturn grief of several progressive intellectuals over Bennelong’s final years.

New perspectives offer a chance for new beginnings. A reconsideration of one of the most significant Aboriginal figures in colonial history invites us to move away from the search for endings. It suggests a fresh start for the life of Bennelong. It also suggests a fresh start for the meaning of Bennelong in

⁹ Swimming Monkey, ‘Bennelong’, in the blog Everything2.com, 19 December 2007, viewed 17 March 2009 discussed in Dortins, this volume.

¹⁰ See Dortins, this volume.

Australia's modern imagination. If Bennelong's life stands for any greater truth, it is that indigenous people begin new relations when history demands them as frequently and as variously as any other folk.

Kate Fullagar
Sydney, August 2009

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