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A history of Aboriginal Illawarra Volume 1: Before colonisation

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A history of Aboriginal Illawarra Volume 1: Before colonisation

Abstract

Twenty thousand years ago when the planet was starting to emerge from its most recent ice age and volcanoes were active in Victoria, the Australian continent's giant animals were disappearing. They included a wombat (*Diprotodon*) seen on the right, the size of a small car and weighing up to almost three tons, which was preyed upon by a marsupial lion (*Thylacoleo carnifex*) on following page. This treedweller averaging 100 kilograms, was slim compared to the venomous goanna (*Megalania*) which at 300 kilograms, and 4.5 metres long, was the largest terrestrial lizard known, terrifying but dwarfed by a carnivorous kangaroo (*Propleopus oscillans*) which could grow three metres high.

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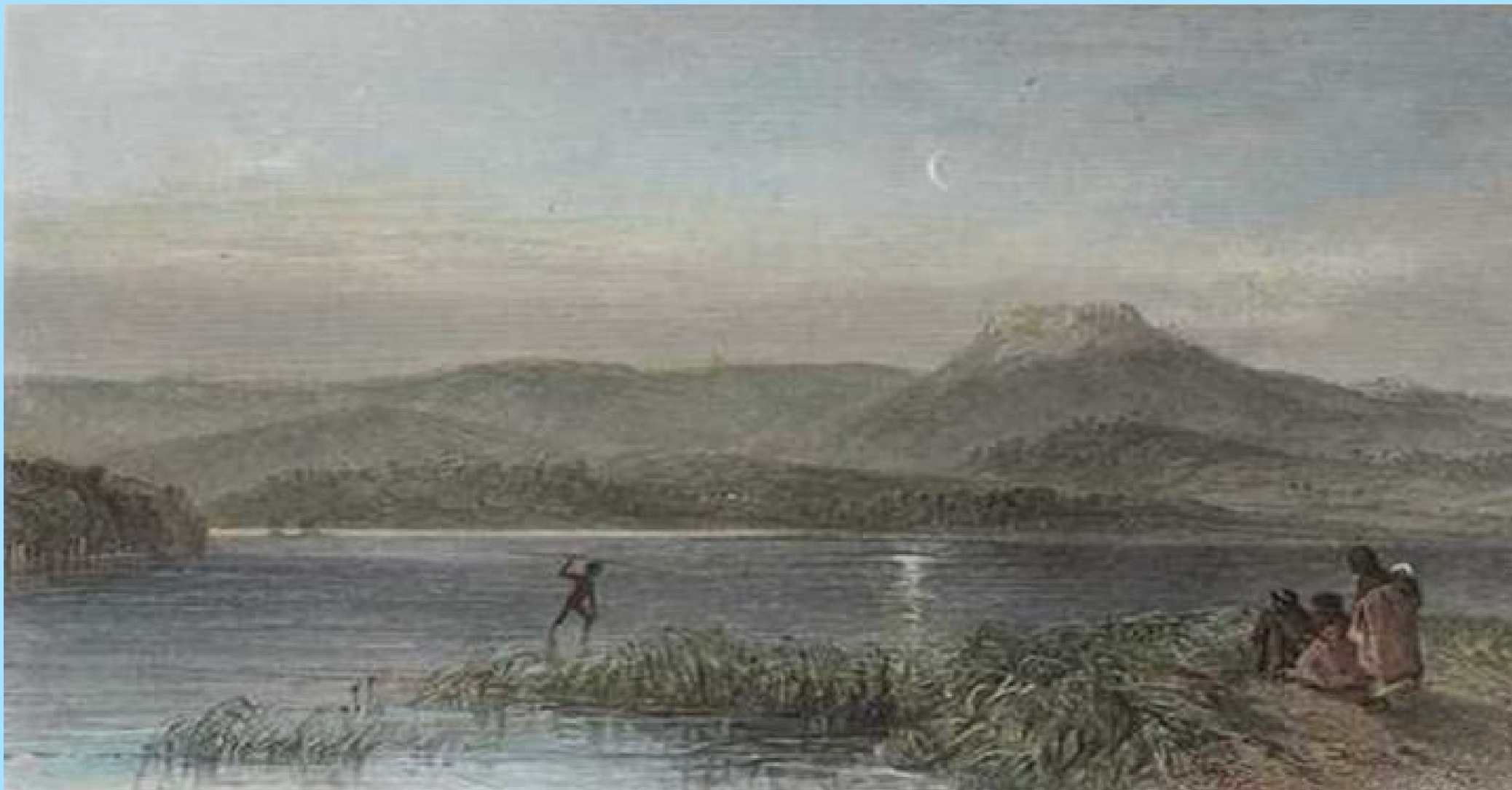
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A History of Aboriginal Illawarra Volume 1 Before Colonisation



Mike Donaldson, Les Bursill and Mary Jacobs

One day our history will be known
And through our own books be shown
Our children will be proud
In the knowledge their heritage is sound

Ruth Simms

Cover Picture: John Prout painted 'Tom Thumb's Lagoon, NSW' now in the National Library of Australia, in 1847 when about 1,000 white people lived in Illawarra.

This is where the Port Kembla steelworks now sits.

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To order copies of the book, email Mary Jacobs: jacobsmary76@gmail.com

Warning: Stories, images and names of dead people in this book will cause sadness and may cause distress.

Acknowledgements and Thanks

Since the publication of *Noogaleek* nearly twenty years ago, Dharawal and Dhurga scholars have written five histories of Illawarra, and five collections of carefully recorded memories, views and stories of about 50 people have appeared, including Terry Fox's remarkable *Travelling with Percy*. It is this body of Aboriginal knowledge that we have relied upon in writing this story, and in adding to it, we thank its makers. This is not to say that we have eschewed the work of white historians, and we are particularly thankful for Michael Organ's outstanding work over many years. We found Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth* eye-opening, and we appreciated his encouragement when he addressed the first Illawarra Aboriginal History Conference in 2015. We thank him, Bruce Howell and Joseph Davis for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this book. Volume 2, covering Illawarra's Aboriginal history from 1770 - 2000, will be published in 2017.

Les Bursill, Mike Donaldson, Mary Jacobs,
Dharawal country, December 2015.

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Contents	Page
In the Beginning	1
People of the Illawarra	2
Dreaming and the Law	5
Land, Forests, Middens	9
Totems	14
Fire	16
Art	18
Knowledge, Power and Healing	20
People of the Sea	23
Crossing Borders	25
Our Past is our Future	27
References	29



A Dharawal campsite in coastal Illawarra used for millennia

Picture Index

John Prout, 'Tom Thumb's Lagoon, NSW', 1847, National Library of Australia	Cover	Robert Westmacott, 'View in the Kangaroo Valley Showing the Manner the Natives Climb the Trees for Opossums and Bandicoots', 1840-1846, National Library of Australia	16
Dharawal Campsite, Illawarra			
Giant Wombat	1	Typical Dharawal Hand Stencilling, Royal National Park	17
Marsupial Lion	2	Life-Size Engravings near Garie Beach	18
Rock Shelter at Port Hacking	3	Wandjina-like figure, Darkes Forest	19
Creation Serpent, Illawarra Escarpment	5	Kangaroo Grapes	21
Robert Westmacott, 'The Bourke Falls, Illawarra', 1838	7	S. T. Gill, 'Coo-oo-ee!! A Rough Sketch from the Mountains, Shoalhaven NSW', 1850s, State Library of NSW	22
August Earle, 'Cabbage Tree Forest, Illawarra', 1827, National Library of Australia	8	William Blake, 'A Family of New South Wales', 1757-1827, National Gallery of Victoria	23
Conrad Martens, 'Mullet Creek, Illawarra ', 1853	9	Robert Westmacott, 'Fishing at Corrimal Beach, Condon's Creek', 1848, National Library of Australia	24
Edward Close, 'Storm above Red Point and the Five Islands, Illawarra, with Aborigines in the Foreground', 1815	10	Orca, Killer Whale Engraving, Maianbar, Bruce Howell	26
Conrad Martens, 'Coolangatta Mountain', 1860	15	Dharawal Campsite, Illawarra	28
Robert Westmacott, 'Bulli, from the Coal Cliffs, Illawarra', 1840-1846, National Library of Australia	15	Robert Westmacott, 'Mount Keera, Belambi N.S.W', 1831-52, State Library of NSW.	Back Cover

A History of Aboriginal Illawarra Volume 1

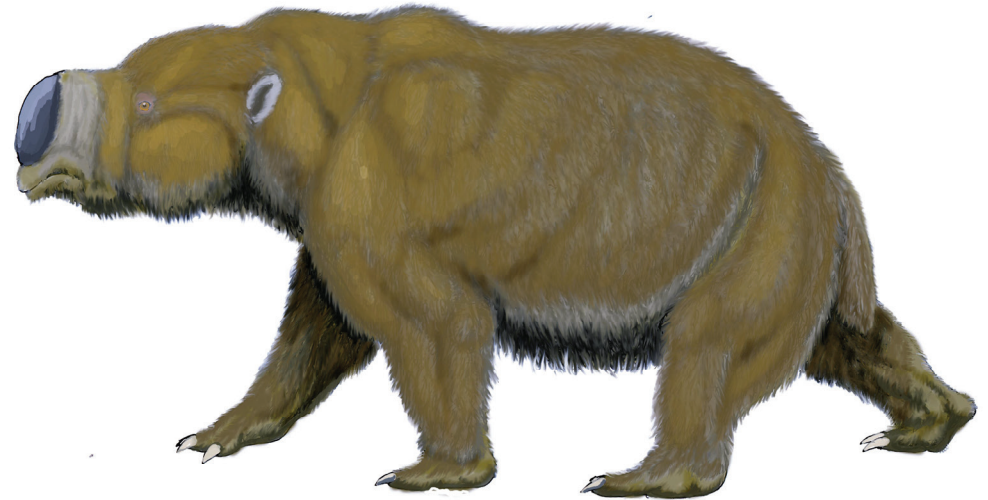
Before Colonisation

In the Beginning

Twenty thousand years ago when the planet was starting to emerge from its most recent ice age and volcanoes were active in Victoria, the Australian continent's giant animals were disappearing. They included a wombat (*Diprotodon*) seen on the right, the size of a small car and weighing up to almost three tons, which was preyed upon by a marsupial lion (*Thylacoleo carnifex*) on following page. This tree-dweller averaging 100 kilograms, was slim compared to the venomous goanna (*Megalania*) which at 300 kilograms, and 4.5 metres long, was the largest terrestrial lizard known, terrifying but dwarfed by a carnivorous kangaroo (*Propleopus oscillans*) which could grow three metres high.

Carbon dating at Bass Point of a campsite of the Dharawal-speaking Wodi Wodi clan places people in Illawarra during this time. Most local stories say that people were always here, from the beginning, others say that they arrived by canoe. The severest challenge they faced was not the deadly megafauna but surviving the freezing temperatures and arid topography of the last ice age. Because they settled the coastlines, as fisher-gatherers they were able to adapt to the continent's drastic climatic conditions.

As the ice receded, the sea levels steadily rose between 5,000 and 8,000 years ago. A Yuin creation story tells of the sea covering land that was once dry. The Five Islands north of Bass Point were joined to Hill 60 at Port Kembla, forming part of an undulating range of small inland hills, and the coastline at Stanwell Park was 15-20kms further east. The big rivers and estuaries like Port Hacking and the Shoalhaven were completely freshwater running east to the sea through forests and woodlands on the gradually sloping plain of the continental shelf. Five or six thousand years ago, Lake Illawarra formed, and the climate settled down to resemble the current one about 1,000 years ago. The coastline then did not look too much different from today, but the human occupation of Illawarra measured on these shores may in fact have begun more than 25,000 years ago, with all evidence of that now well under the water. Further inland at Parramatta there is evidence of human occupation 30,000 years ago.



An artist's impression of a giant wombat, an early Illawarra marsupial mammal.



An artist's rendition of a Marsupial Lion from 20,000 years ago.

People of Illawarra

As a region, Illawarra is a white invention and the people that lived in it long before the lake that bears this name existed, came over several millennia to comprise two major groups, Dharawal and Dhurga. The two adjacent territories they inhabit are each far larger than the 5,600 square kilometres that make up Illawarra today, generally regarded as comprising Wollongong, Kiama and Shellharbour Council areas. The two peoples differed. The Dharawal clans shared a common language and one country, but at least three dialects were native to the Dhurga with several clans within their own territory born to each one.

People did not usually identify themselves by the name of the language they spoke, for they spoke several, but by the clan within which they lived, for it was the key political and land-using body. The Dhurga clans included the Brinja, Gerrinja, Jerrungarugh, Kurnai Gunai, Garrangutti, Kudingal, Muroo, Murramarang, Numba, Wagonga, Walbanja, Wandandian,

Wollaga, Worrigea and Yuin who were born into Djiringanj, Thaua and other languages and dialects. Their country extends from northern Victoria, west to the foothills of Snowy Mountains, and north through Shoalhaven to the Wollongong escarpment, and out on to the southern tablelands as far as Goulburn. People who spoke Dharawal as their first language lived in the country that stretched from the Kurnell peninsula in the north, to Campbelltown, Camden and Bowral in the west, and to Shoalhaven in the south. The Camayragal, Dhargarigal, Gweagal, Goonamattagal, Goorungurragal, Murro-ore-dial, Noron-Geragal, Oaree, Ory-ang-ora, Tagarigal, Threawal, Wandandegal and Wodi Wodi clans spoke Dharawal as their first language, one of 145 languages spoken today out of over 500 initial Australian languages.

To the west of the Dharawal and Dhurga live the Gandangara whose country is bordered by Goulburn, Lithgow and Picton. The continent's population was at least 750,000. Coastal river valleys, lakes and estuaries in particular were more densely populated, so it is likely that Dharawal and Dhurga people together numbered 4-5,000 living in a dozen or more clans in each country.

Each clan comprised 50-250 men, women and children belonging to hearth groups of no fewer than fifteen people who frequently and regularly shared a cooking fire. These contained a number of uncles and aunts who were largely responsible for the upbringing of the children. To this day, Uncle and Auntie are terms of respect and do not necessarily reflect kinship.

Three Dharawal-speaking clans lived north of Bulli Pass, then a major Dreaming track to Sandon Point, a place of ritual, ceremonies and burial.

The Gweagal clan lived from the southern shore of Botany Bay as far south as the northern shores of Port Hacking, hunting, gathering and, above all, fishing off these beaches and along the Georges River. Women were guardians of important reserves of white clay which was traded far and wide. The Dhargarigal were responsible for the southern shore of Port Hacking as far south as Sandon Point. The Noron-Geragal clan cared for the land from the Woronora River up on the heights of Menai down to Appin and east to Bulli Pass that included important ceremonial and healing springs. They canoed along and fished the Woronora and Georges Rivers as well as the creeks around Heathcote and Waterfall, and headed for the Campbelltown-Appin area in the cold and stormy seasons.

Near Wollongong, the Wodi Wodi clan perhaps the biggest in Illawarra numbering about 250, inhabit the land south from Lake Illawarra to the Shoalhaven River and inland to Mittagong. The clan remained on the coastal plains during the warm seasons, taking advantage of their abundant marine resources. The vast middens there, destroyed in the 1860s to make lime, gave the township of Shellharbour its name. Lake Illawarra was a good source of food throughout the year. According to Yuin Elder, Guboo Ted Thomas,

The Lake is a livelihood. That's where the tribes would come from south and north and everywhere. They can stay here for two or three days. Plenty of mussels, bimballas, oysters, fish and everything. They can have a couple of days here and then move on. Tucker was always plentiful.

For longer periods, many of the Wodi Wodi generally camped at Bass Point during the season of January and February. Their favourite camping grounds also included Tongarra, Shellharbour Village and Minnamurra. A round trip of these four campsites covers about 60kms, with the longest walk between them taking about four hours. In the cold and stormy seasons they moved away from the coast to the many rock shelters in the deep valleys of the escarpment and further inland, and depended on the small fish, eels and yabbies but more on the terrestrial resources there. Men would even collect plant food at this time.



A large rock shelter in the Southwest Arm of Port Hacking. The shelter contains the remnants of cooking fires and has extensive charcoal art on the ceiling.

People moved on to another campsite, such as the one shown on the previous page, not only to leave country to rest and recover from their visitation but also to show respect for the country they were moving through. According to Guboo Ted Thomas, when he was nine, his father, uncle and other Yuin elders took him on an educational walk from Mallacoota on the Victorian border 600km northwards through their country, showing him the sacred sites for which he would be responsible once he had completed a sufficient number of his initiations. During the 1950s Uncle Lionel Montga, like many others, walked 100kms along the tracks from Wallaga Lake to Pebbly Beach, between Ulladulla and Bateman's Bay, in the company of his Elders.

Except in bad weather, getting about was generally not unpleasant. People were fit, not overburdened and seldom walked for more than 4 or 5 hours along well-known and well-maintained paths, usually about a metre wide. They knew they were going to a well-established and well-equipped camp in a pleasant location with a different menu close to fresh water and firewood. They were intimate with and loved the land they moved through. They walked through country that created and sustained them, surrounded by totems that cared for them.

They burned forest, scrub, mangroves and reeds to make and maintain their tracks. One well-used path ran 150kms from Jervis Bay via Nowra through Kangaroo Valley, Wilde's Meadow and Robertson to Appin, a five day journey. The Eden Local Lands Council is restoring the Bundian Way that runs 360kms from Twofold Bay through Towamba and the old Pericoe Road via the Bundian Pass to Delegate and Byadbo, then to the Snowy and the Pinch.

The clan always travelled along a songline or storyline, a pathway journeyed by a creative spirit while bringing their country into existence. Everything lies on a songline, otherwise it was not created and does not exist. Songlines thread the continent. Some are very short, others travel for thousands of kilometres, crossing many countries and language groups. A songline is a map, a compass and a calendar. As John Mumbler explains,

Walking tracks are similar to the pathways created by Biame. Some walking tracks are more religious than every day bushwalking tracks, but they still get you from A to B. The tracks along the coast show you the easiest way to find food and a good place to camp.

Depending on family, clan and totem affiliation, some resources were shared. Some people from affiliated clans would travel many kilometres to Illawarra for the whale festival or to enjoy the mass-migration of four species of eels down Illawarra's many creeks. Dhurga people, but not Dharawal, travelled to the Southern Highlands, Gandangara country, for the harvesting of the bogong moths. Long distance travel was a normal, but not frequent, part of life.

People often sang while they walked to reinvigorate country and had special music for important occasions, weddings, funerals. Songs and stories, carrying a variety of themes, were highly valued, and song makers and storytellers travelled far to learn a new one. Men from Shoalhaven journeyed to Appin, Sydney, Lake George, Tumut, Twofold Bay, Albury and beyond. As well as to learn new things, they travelled to sit in council, to share news, ideas and experiences, to organise events, to get away from trouble, to trade, to form or reinforce political alliances and to discuss the Law.

Dreaming and the Law

All the communities of Illawarra have different stories about how time began. But all of them tell of how creative spirits made dreaming tracks, particular paths around the continent, and throughout Illawarra, bringing life. In the process, they formed its natural physical features, the escarpment, lakes, swamps, forests, creeks, coastline, mountains. Birrangooloo, the mother of all and her husband Biame, the father of all, are two creation beings particularly active in the region. As John Mumbler explains, "Everything comes from Biame and Birrangooloo, the Law and all. It is all still going on, it's not just in the past". They, along with the Creation Serpent, shown here, and other ancestral spirits each with a personal name, shaped the country itself as well as the plants, fish, humans, birds, animals it contains, along with the Law in a Dreaming that has always been and will continue forever. The Creation Serpent could



The Creation Serpent, at the top of the Illawarra escarpment near Waterfall, with his companion the Grey Coastal wallaby.

inhabit many abodes simultaneously. Other spirits settled down in the places important to them including Mt Keira, Mt Kembla, Mt Coolangatta, Mt Gulaga and Mt Mumbulla, and they actively remain there still, like Umbarra, the black duck, which has become the form of Merriman Island in the middle of Wallaga Lake. The connection between the people and their land, particularly their ceremonial sites, is so strong that the facial features of Jack Mumbler, Biamanga, and his son Percy Mumbler are believed by some to have been present in the rocks on Mumbulla Mountain long before they both were born.

In Dreaming stories, creative spirits can easily change their shape, size and location. They turn into rocks, mountains and islands, animals, birds and people. The animate and the inanimate are continuous, connected and are made what they are by a spirit-like substance, the essence and source of all things, resembled perhaps by the Hindu notion of Brahman. The heart of the Dreaming is

that every part of the life force - the creation beings, the land, the sea, humans, fauna, flora and natural phenomena – is inextricably and eternally connected to every other part. All things are bound together. All are part of the Dreaming. Their unity and harmony must be respected, ensured and maintained.

By practising ritual and ceremony, humans are able to enter into a direct relationship with creative spirits, who could be benevolent, hostile or unpredictable, to conserve the world and balance all that is in it.

Elder Merv Penrith explains,

The culture is in the trees, in the bush, in the waters, mountains, the animals and the birds. It's all there for the teaching. How can it be gone when all these things, all this oneness, all this creation is still around us? For thousands and thousands of years our Elders have brought our people through.

As might be expected from people with ample time for reflection and discussion, the Dreaming they developed is comprehensive. It assigns to and explains tasks and responsibilities for every single thing in the world. Through stories, music, dancing and art, the beliefs of the Dreaming and the rules established by the creation spirits are carried down through hundreds of generations.

According to Yuin Elder Guboo Ted Thomas,

Whiteman has got to come and learn all about Dreamtime. He's got to come and say to the Aboriginal, 'What went wrong?' People today are starting to think about the Aboriginals. How, for 40,000 or 50,000 or a 100,000 years, they've looked after the land and they never had any problems at all. This tribe's been here all the time, the Yuin, all around Wallaga Lake. I'm trying to teach people how to love one another. What's missing today is spirituality. We need that coming together. Australia is a very racist country towards Aboriginal people and I believe that its time now that we must come together and be as one. Today its money, money, money. That's their god. That's the problem.

Unlike money, the Dreaming answers a number of the big questions of human existence like Who am I? Where did I come from? Where do I belong? What is my place in the world? What should I do with my life? Like an ancient Internet that exists only in memory, thought, art and speech, this encyclopaedic source of knowledge and advice encompasses ethics, philosophy, psychology, geography, astronomy, climatology, gastronomy, pharmacology, biology, healing, spirituality, histories, art, politics, diplomacy, ceremonies, songs and dances and technical knowhow.

Crucially, the Dreaming contains the Law, which, according to Elder Mervyn Penrith,

tells us how to live together and treat one another with respect. It tells us about our links with the land, our Mother, from whom we are born and to whom we return. It is the Law of our sacred places and of what happened in the Dreamtime.

The Law contains the rules and regulations that govern how people live, such as regulations for protecting and enhancing resources, dealing with illness, and travelling to other countries; marriage and divorce protocols; and rules of personal conduct about lying and

cheating but not many about stealing, for there was no private ownership of productive resources. The Law, brought by constant visitation to each clan by their clan totem and expressed by a Koradji, prescribes penalties and punishments for those who break it.

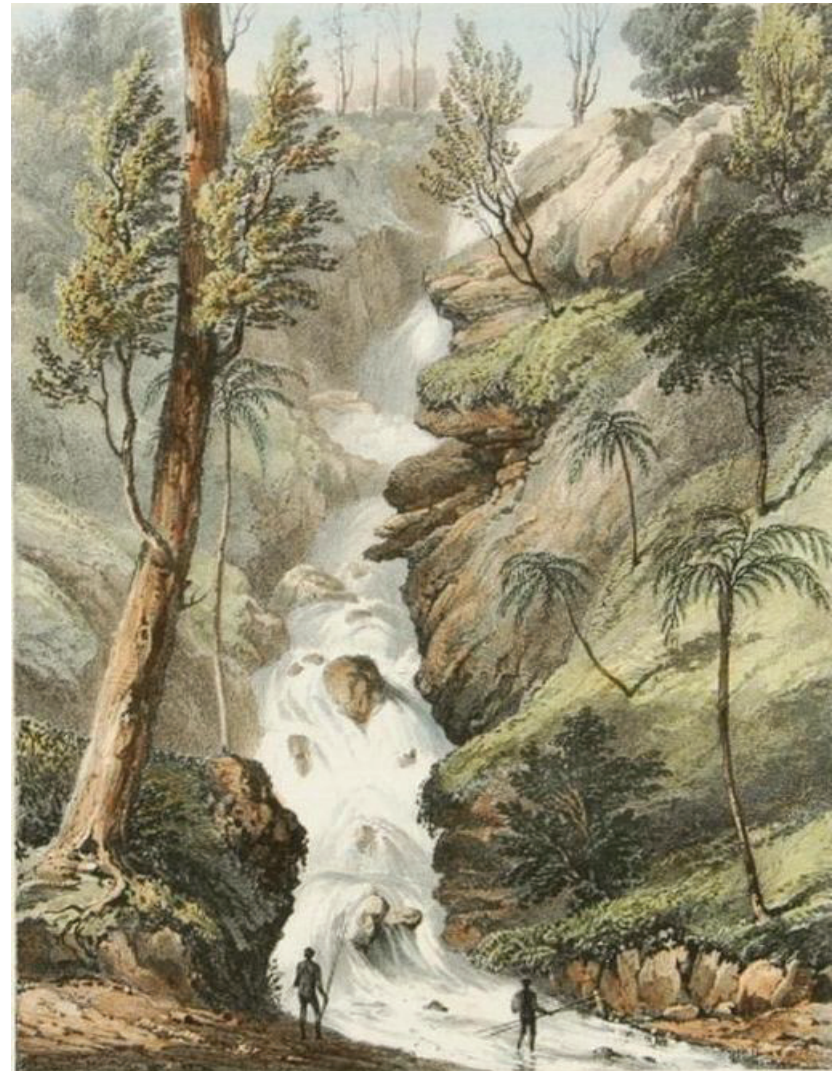
All people on the continent followed its fundamental directions: respect all beings, animate and inanimate, and acknowledge the part they play in the universe; preserve the order and continuity of the world by acting thoughtfully in it; maintain and sustain who, where and what one is by working together; carefully undertake one's responsibilities to and in one's own country but think beyond it; plan long term; ally with fire; regulate populations; obey the Law. "We lived a disciplined and protocol-driven life", in the assessment of Dharawal scholar Jade Kennedy. "There were more directions and rules of behaviour than today, and most people tried hard to obey them".

There were few rules concerning property. To take another's personal items, jewelry, cosmetics, belts, cloaks, fighting spears, axes, was improper. All other property including canoes, fish traps and spears, hand lines and hooks, animal traps, tools, torches, utensils, baskets, bags, blades, bowls, clap sticks, is communal, used within the clan by those able to. Hearth groups shared their food according to age, status and relationships.

In George Brown's words,

The old people cooked and shared it up amongst the women and the children. And the bloke that caught it, he was the last bloke to eat. It was all part of a participating system, and this is how I think they worked their survival systems out.

Elders consulted together within their clan and with others from a number of clans, to interpret and to apply the Law. As well as arbitrating disputes between individuals and clans, they would decide on collective courses of action, such as the establishment of reserves, the organisation of big burn offs, the creation of grasslands, the timing and location of ceremonies, the construction of dams, weirs and fish traps, the bridging of streams and the building of bora grounds and major art works. Their authority was based on their knowledge of the Dreaming and the Law. Although people helped those from neighbouring countries fleeing war, wildfire, flood and drought, trespass was treated harshly. Except by a few specialist messengers, clan borders and the borders of Dharawal, Dhurga and Gandangara countries could not be crossed without invitation from an appropriate person.



Robert Westmacott, The Bourke Falls, Illawarra, New South Wales, 1838, National Gallery of Australia



Augustus Earle, Cabbage Tree Forest, Illawarra New South Wales, 1827, National Library of Australia

for young women to marry older men, and outliving them, to then marry young men of around 30, who in their older age, married younger women. After age 40, human fertility decreases rapidly. This sensible marriage arrangement, which paired the less fertile with the more fertile, helped clans to maintain a low and stable birth rate. With access to contraceptives (emmenagogues) all year round, a woman seldom had to care for more than two babies or toddlers. As with a natural morning-after-pill, depending on the season and their location, they ate parts of the coral fern (*Gleichenia dicarpa*, *microphylla*), beach morning glory (*Ipomoea pes-caprae*), native raspberry (*Rubus moluccanus*), brush kurrajong (*Commersonia fraseri*) and water pepper (*Persicaria hydropiper*) to regulate clan size, to protect their health and to support their mobile way of life. Lengthy periods of breast-feeding also reduced ovulation. Children were mostly spaced at least three years apart. Illawarra mothers ensured that clan populations remained stable enough not to exhaust their country. They restricted their pregnancies so their children numbered only those who could survive the harshest of times.

As Yuin Elder Max Harrison explains,

If you go into an area where you have been told not to go, well, then you are likely to get whacked. If you are a grown man you are likely to get speared.

At a Corroborree in 1824, 15 warriors, before a very large and appreciative audience, hurled 120 spears in 30 minutes at two Lawbreakers who with their shields parried them with amazing dexterity, throwing some back at their firing squad and mocking their inaccuracy. Although a keen-eyed marksman could pin a python to a tree or knock a duck out of the air, the guilty men survived unwounded. After their ordeal, no one paid the duo any more attention.

Marriage laws, too, were rigorous, not allowing, for example, people of the same totem to marry. Marriage generally required reciprocation from, and created or met obligations between, clans. To marry without the clan's approval was a grave crime. Men remained in their own country and women came from another clan, but generally from within the same language group. People married at specific places including Coolangatta Mountain and Minnamurra. A number of couples would marry there at a corroborree and the wedding guests, who travelled long distances, were the totemic brothers and sisters of the happy couple, so all the bluetongues from far and wide might come together with all the willy wag tails for the occasion, for instance.

After marriage, the couple could fish, harvest, and hunt in the country the wife had left although her husband still had to get permission. It was not unusual

Land, Forests, Middens

It is possible to get some sense of Illawarra before colonisation from the 15,000 hectare Royal National Park north of Wollongong, the home of three Dharawal-speaking clans. In the Park one gains a sense of quiet majesty and ancient and ongoing continuity, and experiences the absence of artificial noise and light, buildings, roads, pollution and crowds while enjoying a variety of ecological sub-systems, and is amazed by the vastness and brightness of the night sky.

But other than this, the experience is misleading. The hills in the National Park were steeper, valleys deeper, rivers and creeks wider and more swiftly flowing, and the coastline was more ragged. A sense of this can be gained from Robert Westmacott's 1838 painting of Bourke Falls on page seven. The construction of roads, railways, piers, dams and weirs, flattens and fills the countryside, constricts waterways and reduces coastal swamplands.

White timber getters cut out the largest trees in the National Park before it was declared, the second in the world, in 1879. The tall tress stood vastly higher than those currently growing on the valley sides mostly at around ten metres. Like Westmacott's Bourke Falls, Augustus Earle's painting on the previous page, of an Illawarra cabbage tree forest seems almost out of proportion to the modern eye, the human figures too small in relation to the vegetation around them. But left to grow out their lifespan, two thousand years or more for some, trees grew huge like the Blackbutt eucalypt near Nowra that soars eight stories high, more than three times the height of the venerable fig tree that overshadows Thirroul Library planted in 1892.

On Mt Keira stands a Moreton Bay Fig of 58 metres, with a trunk ten metres in diameter; and a Red Cedar in the Minnamurra Rainforest near Kiama has a crown that spans 30 metres. "You could walk from Wollongong to Sydney on the branches of the trees", according to Dharawal scholar Jade Kennedy, a very long way off the ground.



Conrad Martens, Mullet Creek, Illawarra, New South Wales, 1853.



Edward Close, *Five Islands Aborigines*, 1815, State Library of NSW

Their growth unimpeded, the tallest trees in Illawarra forests were frequently covered in climbing vines, mist covered and rising even into the clouds, as shown on the previous page in Conrad Marten's painting of Mullet Creek at Kanahooka near Wollongong. Under a massive tree was a perfect burial site because ancestral spirits passed along tree-roads between earth and sky, and large trees held memories of their passing. Well-known men and women were buried at the base of huge trees on which their totems were carved. Fig trees, belonging-trees, were believed to contain ancestral spirits. For thousands of years, ceremonies were carried out under or around some of the fig trees throughout Illawarra, particularly at the massive birthing tree at the town of Figtree which survived until 1996, and once stood at the junction of three main Dreaming tracks.

Rita Timbery-Bennett recalls it.

We used to be taken over there, Muriel Davis, Alma Maskell-Bell and myself. We were never allowed to climb up there. Queen Emma Timbery had lots and lots of children and quite a few of her children were born there. And quite a few of the children that came just before us [1937] were born there as well. No man would ever go there.

But while the trees were much taller and the rainforests more impenetrable, animals were nearly always in view and within earshot. Illawarra sustained around 500 species of birds, mammals, bats, frogs and reptiles. The silence that seems so profound in the Park today was broken not only with the sound of constantly moving water and its amphibians, but by the squawking of parrots and cockatoos, flocks of which sometimes hid the sun. Even the howling of the dingo packs could be drowned by their cacophony. The very loud heavy breathing and high-pitched screeches of quolls and the barking of possums also punctuated the night. Smoke was almost always in the sky, generally a familiar and comforting sight.

There was substantially more grassland and more open forest, and less rainforest and less undergrowth than today. The grassy areas, like the delightful camping and picnic grounds in the Park around Audley and Wattamolla, were larger and more numerous. They alternated patchwork fashion with open forest, pleasant to stroll through, and with almost impenetrable rainforest with towering timbers festooned with climbing plants. This alternation of meadows with woodland and with thick forest, evident in the painting *Five Islands Aborigines* (1815) by Edward Close, shown here, was the product of generations of peoples' gradual, regular and systematic intervention over hundreds of years.

Middens, accumulations of materials created in the course of daily life, would have been much easier to see, for some of them were huge. But when once middens were visible and popular destinations, these days they are hard to spot. Settlers dug up many dray loads of shells and bones from middens in Moon Bay to build the bank that stands in the main street of Bega. At the northern boundaries of Dharawal country and of the National Park is almost one continuous midden running 10km from Bundeena to Audley along the southern bank of the Hacking River. Over a few thousand years, the middens have spread out over the surrounding vegetation and the calcium carbonate in the shells produced fields of alkaline-tolerant grass scattered with ferns, a perfect spot for a campsite. Wherever a 'No Camping' sign appears in the Park by the water's edge or near a creek, a midden almost certainly lies, for an area attractive to campers now, was even more beautiful then. Similarly, the public camping grounds at Bulli and Windang are sited on middens.

In Port Kembla, one midden runs for 600 metres, taking in Boilers Point and the northern end of Fisherman's Beach near Hill 60, and another runs for 30 metres on the other side of Boilers Point at the northern end of North Beach. Very large middens at Summer Cloud and Mary Bays stand near the Bora grounds on the ridges overlooking Wreck Bay. More than 30 metres long and three to seven metres high, Aragunnu midden, 20 kms from Bermagui in Mimosa Rocks National Park, is accessible by a boardwalk. It is not hard to understand why some of the very many middens that dot Illawarra's coastline are so huge. Two kilograms of shellfish produces about 200gms of meat, easy enough for one person to eat. If fifteen people eat two kilograms each of shellfish every day for six weeks, over 8,000 years that makes 10,000 tons of shell. As well as seasonal visits by one clan for a length of time, between 4 or 5 clans would generally attend an Illawarra corroboree, normally held regularly at particular spots at appropriate times of the year for several weeks. Several hundred guests could very quickly down quite a few tons of Sydney rock oysters, Eastern rock lobsters and blue swimmer crabs. Over thousands of years, it all adds up to a simply staggering amount.

Country

Illawarra then was not a wilderness like much of the National Park is now, for over millennia it was slowly transformed and carefully managed by Dharawal and Dhurga people according to the Law, an oral tradition governing ecology and human relationships backed by custom and sanctions, which formed part of the Dreaming. Country is not considered inanimate, for it has a pulse, it breathes and it nurtures; it talks, listens, rejoices, suffers and punishes. The natural world is alive. Everything exists because it has a spirit that gives it the characteristic shape that makes it what it is, a rock, a hill, a red gum, a possum, a dolphin or a child. Fire, water, wind and rain have spirits. On leaving the body of a porpoise at its death, a spirit will make another, even different, shape by becoming a human, say, or a goanna or a tree.

Like porpoises and fish, inanimate objects also have spirits and life. Elder Percy Mumbler told a Select Committee of the NSW Parliament in 1979,

I was on Mumbulla Mountain with Ted Thomas a couple of months ago. I saw the way that the mountain was getting chopped about by the log haulers for the chip mill. I would not like to see the mountain get chopped about, for there are sacred sites on that mountain. I would not like them to be destroyed and killed. Those things are alive today and I would not like them to be destroyed or killed by the bulldozer.

People not only belong to but are made out of their country and must sustain it as it sustains them, and return to it when they die, as

Yuin Elder, Ann Thomas explains,

And so we became part of this earth. We never professed to own the land. This land owns us. And so we are an ancient race of people still living in this country.

Peoples' spiritual and material well-being depends on their relationships with a particular place. To maintain country as it has always been requires, as Mary Duroux, Percy Mumbler, Mary Davis, Guboo Ted Thomas and Max Harrison well understood, positive and active intervention by all who live in it. All country is cared for, not just the resource-rich areas. Unless the right people correctly perform the proper ceremonies at the appropriate time, unless country is sung into well-being, it could vanish and fragment the world. Every centimetre and all the plants and creatures in it must be looked after. Some places may not be visited for years, but they are never out of mind. Over time, the clan patrols every hectare of the land they manage, burning, refreshing and balancing it. People give life to country and it gives life to them.

Each clan in Illawarra sustained its own ground and knew it intimately. They managed not only the plants that they preferred but also those that the animals they ate relied upon, providing the sweetest feed, safe scrub and plenty of shelter for them. The grassy meadows they created helped animals to flourish and also made living resources predictable and available. They established a circuit of such places within their own country, moving to the next preferred spot when they had harvested sufficiently from the area within which they were camped. When the time was right, people travelled seasonally to use known and established resources that, over many, many generations, they had made convenient and accessible. Clans were able to move to camp sites where they knew food would be because they had shaped these places to provide reliably for them. Clans were responsible for the country that provided for almost all their needs. There was little that country did not offer and they managed it by burning it, by not contaminating it and by avoiding wastefulness, so that life could continue to flourish. Respect for country was shown by self-restraint, by not consuming more resources than needed, and by knowing when to take from the land and sea and when not to.

The land and sea signal their readiness. The stars, seasons and weather patterns, understood through the Law which governed them, indicated which fish, plants and animals can be consumed and which must be left alone until the time is right. September thorough November could be a difficult period as the Law restricted hunting and harvesting in the breeding and growing season to protect young plants and baby animals and the unborn. But nature provided in other ways by making sea mammals more available at that time.

At other times, having feasted for a few weeks in one place, the clan moved on to another camp where they knew they would find new food and water, along with the canoes and the shelters they had constructed on previous visits containing the tools useful in that area. They returned the following year when growth had recovered, trees were bearing, and the fish and animals had replenished.

According to Percy Mumbler,

Oh, you wouldn't spend much of a day to look for food because you'd know how to get it. Well, they'd feed their kids quick and lively. Well then, soon as they know their children are filled up with the nourishment they got, well, they can play about then until such time again till, "Oh, we've got to move. Another baambali [bush camp] tonight. Up the river." Well, they'd stop here for so long as they wished to stop. They'd stop here for blooming weeks, months, see, because they know the tucker's here. Soon as the tucker slackens off, well, they mooch on then, see.

Seasonal changes influenced the size of the social group at any one time. People came together in larger groups and stayed longer when resources were readily available, but formed smaller and more mobile groups during the mid-year seasons when resources were less abundant.

Although seldom alone, people were hardly ever crowded. They had plenty of space to live in, were commanded by no one person, valued knowledge and skill and had ample time and lots of help to make their lives comfortable and enjoyable. The inhabitants of the night sky were not strangers to the people below many of whom studied them almost every clear night. These ancestors or friends guided them when they fished at night or must travel through the bush when darkness fell. Their position and movements told of approaching events. The night sky was a calendar marking seasonal change, and alterations in animal and plant behaviour. Each country had constellations particular to it. Certain constellations such as the shark, the emu, the kangaroo, related to the breeding cycles of particular fish and animals. There was plenty of time for astronomy and for story-telling, philosophy, art, fun and games, mischief and invention, and of course, to learn languages. It was not unusual to speak four or five, and a good linguist was highly valued.

Scarcity was unusual. Mostly people had plenty to eat with a few hours work each day and many people liked an afternoon nap, particularly the women who provided most of the fish, harvested the seafood, fruit and vegetables and cared for the young children. Closely interdependent with nature, people lived in a world in which they knew their places and were in turn known by the land they occupied. The rhythm of life, in nature and in society, was generally orderly and regular, and most often, agreeable.

But not always. Death by illness, wildfire, warfare and by misadventure was also part of their lives. For weeks the members of Wagonga clan who live south of Moruya were preparing for the annual Egg Festival. The visitors arrived and soon more than 200 people assembled south of the Narooma golf club on the beach across from Baranguba (Montague Island) about five kilometres away, the largest island off the NSW coast after Norfolk Island. They set out in 70 or 80 canoes, some of which they had lashed together, for the rip in the channel is notorious. Amid cheers and dancing and a great deal of sky-larking, the fleet set off to harvest the sea birds' eggs for which the island is renowned, leaving the children and many of the older people behind.

Shortly before sunset, the young adults headed back from their monster picnic to the campers waiting on the southern headland keenly anticipating a share in their bounty. But a kilometre from land, a fierce southerly storm hit them, and the watchers on the shore stood helplessly as canoe after canoe was driven under by the tempest. All but one man perished. This is the reality of life.

All the cycles of life, death, fertility and reproduction related to each other and to the seasonal circle of constant movement which saw people travel around their country, thus completing an annual cycle, beginning where they ended. Their own movement indicated the seasonal changes they followed. In January and February, signaled by the appearance of the blossoms of the wattle (*Acacia implexa*) and the birthing of Eastern grey kangaroos, people camped in the shade along the creeks, like Hewitt's Creek near Sandon Point where even today middens remain. Dharawal clans migrated to the rivers, lakes and estuaries in the following season, around March and April, when the coastal myall (*Acacia binervia*) flowered, for fish were running in the rivers and four species of freshwater eels were heading in massive numbers for the sea *en route* to New Caledonia. Prawns were abundant in the shallows of tidal rivers and lakes. The dwarf apple (*Angophora hispida*) flowered when honey production was at its peak and the small beetle in its bark was handy for medicinal purposes.

Around April and May, the lilly pilly (*Syzygium luehmannii*), still a favourite for making jams, jellies and toffee, ripens. When the trees dropped their fruit, the mating calls of the quolls rang out through the forests, and the constellations were in position in the night sky, it was time to head for the coast. Along the way, a fire specialist, Dharamuoy in Dharawal language, carried out his responsibility to survey the fire-readiness of the bush and grasslands to determine when, where and how large burn-offs should be undertaken and how to preserve animal shelter and food plants from fire by back burning. A substantial flowering of the Sydney green wattle (*Acacia decurrens*) indicated that controlled burns were needed to safeguard country from wildfires.

Dingoes, snakes, eagles, hawks and owls, goannas and quolls were Illawarra's only predators apart from humans whose careful control of their environment kept the animal populations balanced along with their own. Kangaroos, wallabies, kangaroo rats, pademelons, wombats, bandicoots, possums, eagles, hawks, crows and dingoes, all were declared to be noxious in the 1880s by the Colonial Government. None were thought to be problematic before the colonists came. To maintain this dynamic equilibrium, this complex web of being, so well for so long, people relied on two main systems of regulation, the use of fire with which they shaped and protected their environment, and a system of clans and totems through which they controlled and limited their own consumption and reproduction.

Totems

A totem is a life force stemming from and part of an ancient and existing creative spirit. To say "I have rock wallaby dreaming", means to be descended from the single ancestor of all wallabies and of all wallaby people and to be connected to all of them through the past and present and into the future. All members of the rock wallaby totem are brothers and sisters. For these people to kill a rock wallaby for food was unthinkable. There was no distinction in the value of living beings. The people belonging to a totem know all there is to know about its activities, habits and life cycle. They know the minutia of its habitats in their country, their dietary needs, their rainfall and fire requirements.

Birds are a familiar totem among Yuin people. Trish Ellis' totem is the crow, her mother's is the willy wag tail, Australia's largest fantail. Trish's grandmother's is the magpie and her daughter's is the peewee. The plover is Max Harrison's totem, which means that they are of the same spirit, that he is plover; plovers are his brothers and sisters. He cares for all plovers and for their habitat, and they for him. He could no sooner harm one than he would his unborn grandchild or his dead grandmother, both of whom might be plovers.

You must protect your totem at all times. When I see a plover, I give it a lot of respect, and hold it in high regard. We don't eat our totems. All of our people, don't eat umbarra, the black duck, one of our most significant totems. Umbarra is our friend. However, an outsider with permission, may come into our country and eat umbarra.

Each clan also has a totem, Max Harrison's was the willy wag tail. Percy Mumbler's clan totem, and the origin of his father's surname, was murumbul, the black snake.

Totems play an important part in daily life, affecting with whom people could associate, the ceremonies they could or could not perform and attend, and what they could harvest and eat. They gave all animal, bird, fish and plant life a chance to survive because

killing and harvesting were controlled and shortages of a particular food were prevented. The children in a hearth group would often be chosen by different totems, which gave animal, bird and plant life a chance.

Elder Mary Duroux, whose totem is the echidna, explains, "People would never run out of food because their totems were protected because people did not eat their own totem". People also protected the animals of their totem, ensuring their abundance. Rules in the Law for killing animals and harvesting plants, what type, when, how many and where, were overseen by the hunter or gatherer from their totem. Nothing was taken from country without the permission of the creative spirits. Resource use was controlled and shortages of a favourite food were prevented. The resources available always supported fewer people than was possible.

Six men hunting together would each try to avoid killing or damaging his own totem, and would refrain from eating it when it was dead. When they visited the kangaroos' meadows, it mattered that only five out of six of them hunted the animal. There were rules about how to kill, as well. A hunter must chase down a wounded creature. He had to prove to those of its totem that he had finally killed it, for every person must treat animals with respect and never harm them needlessly or abuse them. Cruelty to an animal would cause great mental and physical pain to those of its totem and was severely punished under the Law.

Totems choose people. When Max Harrison says his personal totem, the plover, chose him, he means that his nature was revealed to his mother by a plover. A spirit baby is believed to wait until it recognizes the potential mother who was its ancestor returned from the past, and then to place in her a new human life. When his mother first felt the movement of a baby inside her, she knew that a spirit child had entered her. She looked around her, carefully studying the area and all the animals, insects, birds and vegetation in it. A plover, the spirit's totem, then made itself known, perhaps by staring at or approaching her.

Most people firmly believe that totems communicate with humans, sometimes warning them of forthcoming events or drawing their attention to certain objects or directions. Percy Mumbler explains

Every blackfella has a moodjingarl. It's given to him before he's born. It's his power, his spirit. It looks after him and warns him of danger. My moodjingarl's the mailbird, the owl. If there's danger coming, that owl will sing out in the night to me. If I don't take any notice, that bird will fly down through the camp and hit me with his wing as he passes. If I still don't take any notice, he'll swoop down and flutter in the ashes of my fire. He'll lie there fluttering in the ashes as though he's hurt. He'll get up



Conrad Martens Coolangatta Mountain 1860



Bulli, from the Coal Cliffs, Illawarra, Robert Westmacott, 1840-1846, National Library of Australia.

and flutter away and try to lead me off. I know there's danger then, close up. That mailbird, mymoodjingarl, will lead me away until I'm out of danger.

Similarly, Trish Ellis was not surprised to learn that her sister had been trying to get in touch to tell her she was unwell, for the previous day a kookaburra, her sister's totem, called loudly and flew low over her, and whenever this happened she had learned that it was sensible to get in contact.



Robert Westmacott, View in the Kangaroo Valley Showing the Manner the Natives Climb the Trees for Opossums and Bandicoots, 1840-1846, National Library of Australia.

small part of the waterfront corridor fashioned over centuries by such burning along 3,000kms of New South Wales' coastline. By less frequent burning, they created open woodlands as seen in his painting of Kangaroo Valley. Well-timed, methodical and controlled burning maintained open woods and grasslands. This patch-work countryside provided comfortable travelling close to food, and limited any wildfires and out of control burn-offs.

Over 350,000 years, eucalypts made themselves at home in Illawarra. Fire is their ally, so transforming a eucalypt forest into grassland is very difficult. Seventy per cent of the continent's 25,000 plants need or tolerate fire, and Dharamuoy has to know them and their whereabouts in his country. In deciding what day and hour to burn, he takes into account the fuel loads, wind speed and direction, humidity, landfall, as well as the humans, plants and animals affected. Safety was paramount. To burn improperly was

Fire, too, was a totem to which the fire specialists all belonged. The rules for fire use they followed, set by the Law, varied from place to place and season to season and depended upon their comprehensive and detailed knowledge of the area to be burned and of the nature of fire itself.

Fire

When Elder Wagin met Alexander Berry in 1822, Berry showed him the grassy meadowland at Mt Coolangatta near Nowra on which he had settled and was building his estate. When he asked who had cleared it, Wagin replied that those who came before his grandfather had made it. To achieve grasslands like those shown in Conrad Marten's depiction of the mountain, required the regular and systematic burning over many generations of the forest that covered it and would grow back over it. People let the fuel accumulate so that the fires could run, and then by firing every 2-4 years for more than 100 years, created perennial grasslands out of forests. Robert Westmacott's painting *Bulli from the Coal Cliffs* on the previous page shows a

against the Law. A day's fire at the wrong place and time might wipe out a year's food, for about 250 plants in Illawarra supplied 80% of peoples' diet. Causing uncontrollable fires was a very serious offence for fire was a totem, and when Dharamuoy lit one, he was answerable to the ancestral fire spirit for its effects.

Most of Illawarra was burnt about every 1-5 years generally to maintain and enhance existing country. It was a big decision, never taken lightly or alone, to burn a forest. Dharawal and Dhurga were maritime people, and although shell, bone and rock were very significant raw materials, forests provided them the means to harvest the sea, and other essential items. Canoes, paddles, fishing lines, torches and nets were made of bark, along with huts, bedding, blankets, rain capes and bags.

But most days, most of the year, people would burn country. A burn a day kept wildfires away. To see smoke rising in the sky was to know that country was being attended to. Fire made the land comfortable, cheering, abundant and beautiful as seen in Westmacott's painting of Kangaroo Valley. It shows four different alternating plant regimes - grass lands, open forest, dense scrub and rainforest. The Valley, entirely surrounded by mountains, confined and located almost all the animals and plants of Illawarra within its 250 square kilometres. They were encouraged to stay and to flourish, their spirits respected. Five or six clans could visit on a regular basis, each with their own camp site, and the Valley was a well-liked location for corroborees.

Maintaining this bounty through the generations, as reliably as any fence, required the continuing application of at least four different fire regimes, for in its unmanaged state, the Valley was rainforest that is returning now, along with eucalypts. More than dams, canals and digging sticks, fire was the clan's main land management tool. In Illawarra's coastal sandstone country, they burnt cool fires in September and October, but hot fires from January to March to open hard seeds and pods and to germinate legumes. Skillful and controlled firing kept the forests dense, the woodlands open, the grass copious and the game convenient.

Hills and slopes featured tree lines or lanes, as at Coolangatta, made by careful burning over many decades. Dense forest left in the gullies is fired along its leeward edge, the wind driving the flames towards the grasslands and lanes and the kangaroos and other animals towards the waiting hunters. Those that were allowed to escape would head into adjacent forest and then on to the next grassy area. Kangaroos avoid a recent killing ground, so places to attract them must be nearby and sufficient in number to keep the animals happy and accessible. Regular firing also suited the kangaroos' preferred food. Kangaroo grass (*Themeda triandra*) requires fire every two or three years to flourish. The cooler the fires, the larger the grassy meadows. People burned to lure animals, rather than to drive them, as the Dharawal saying, "Kangaroos bring grass", suggests. Grey kangaroos can see and smell up to 20kms, and will travel up to 30kms to feed on the fresh green Kangaroo grass they prefer that grows rapidly after fire. Young kangaroos need soft nutritious shoots with their high nitrogen content. An Elder explained, "You burn a patch for wallabies and kangaroos to live on. Instead of you hunting them, they come to you."

Consistent burning also conserved shrubs that contain the many nutrients and compounds, crude protein and fibre crucial to animal



Typical hand stencilling of the Dharawal people located in the Royal National Park.

well-being, and that kill parasitic organisms. It encouraged other grasses and edible foods such as yams, orchids, lilies and herbs, and maintained bird populations by ensuring their food supply.

Art

People were very careful with the use of fire. Fires at the mouth of a rock shelter avoided asphyxiation and did not encourage rockfall. People seldom lit them in their shelters which number several thousands in Illawarra. In that part of Dharawal country made up of the catchment areas and the Royal, Heathcote, Dharawal and Garrawarra parks, bounded roughly by Dapto, Bowral, Campbelltown and Sutherland, Caryl Sefton and other members of the Illawarra Prehistory Group have over nearly 50 years so far located and documented more than 1,200 rock shelters containing art work.



These life size engravings on the coast near Garie Beach, of dancing men are part of a Black Duck Dreaming story and could be several thousand years old.

Charcoal and ochre paintings and drawings of spirits, animals, fish, birds, humans, tracks and symbols are common in these rock shelters along with engravings and hand stencils on rock surfaces.

Just over 50% depict kangaroos, about 20% fish and eels, about 10% birds and about 10% reptiles. Kangaroo and goanna images are generally found in open country, fish near rivers and bays and whales in clear sight of the sea.

As well as drawing, engraving and painting, artists often stencilled designs on rock surfaces, frequently showing the imprint of an opened hand, sometimes a foot or a tool, the earliest form of art in coastal New South Wales. Often a family activity, the stencils were made by spurring a slurry of ochre and

water over the hand with explosive puffs. The slurry would penetrate the rock surface, more durable even than engravings. Often the artists would plaster the surface with a clay overlay before starting to paint. To fix the paint and make it adhere more firmly to the

surface, the artist thoroughly chewed tree orchid bulbs and spat on to the bark, wood or rock. Bees' wax and honey was good for fixing the paint, along with some birds' eggs and bird and fish oil. Unlike painting which was a community activity, only under the direction of the responsible Elders were Biame and other mythical Dreaming figures engraved by specialists on smooth rock surfaces along with the main totems – such as the whale, the dolphin, the rock wallaby, and the goanna. Rock engravings were rarely geometric or abstract like the designs made on bodies, clothes, weapons and tools. They were seldom for decoration, and sometimes contained information readable only by the initiated, perhaps indicating a renewal ceremony, such as the Dancing Men engravings from the National Park, shown here.

The tip of the Bundeena Peninsula in the Royal National Park, Jibbon Point, was an extremely sacred area and contains rock engravings predating the births of Jesus and Mohammed, even of Buddha and Moses. Of the 800 sites in the Park of which Dharawal Elder and archeologist Les Bursill is a guardian, it is the only one that the Elders have opened to the public. A pleasant one kilometre walk along Bundeena Bay leads to a recently constructed platform, from which can be viewed eleven rock engravings which provide a good sample of what is found throughout the National Park, depicting a life-sized pair of whales, a kangaroo, a stingray, a shark and Mumuga/Biame, a six-fingered human-like creation spirit.

The most sacred images were only ever drawn in sand, and then destroyed after that knowledge had been expressed. Mysteriously, figures like the distinctive spiky-haired and long-fingered depictions of cloud and rain ancestral spirits, Wandjinas, seen here, are thought to be found only in Western Australia, but have also been found in a couple of places. Throughout Dharawal and Dhurga countries are tens of thousands of axe and spear shaping grinding grooves found at tool-making sites near running fresh water which were places of constant and regular visitation. As the hard stone tool was rubbed on the rock face to form the desired edge, the sandstone surface was worn away by each stroke of the stone, forming a convex groove, one for each tool. The older the tool, the deeper the groove, but new grooves were started to ensure that the clan's axes were consistently shaped. No one wanted to be the odd man out.



A Wandjina-like figure, overdrawn with hand stencils, a stencilled stone axe, a fish, and a large kangaroo at Darkes Forest.

The rock stone arrangements, carved trees and particularly body decoration were other very popular pastimes all along the coast. Most people devoted time, effort and imagination to ornamenting their bodies, and adorning their hair. They also decorated their tools and weapons differently to other clans. Highly valued ochre produced the colours of red, yellow, brown, orange and bluey-grey, but the most popular colours in the artist's palette were red, black and white.

The grass tree and wild apple tree had a gum that produced a good red for painting weapons. Charcoal and coal were readily available for black. Gypsum gave a clear white colour, most commonly worn for mourning, as did pipe clay, kaolin, to which the northern Dharawal clans had easy access. Not only was gypsum crucial for art, but fisherwomen used it to line the bottom of their bark canoes to make a base for fires to cook fish and provide light for night fishing. Containing zinc, the clay was also a dietary supplement, delicious when mixed with berries such as geebung (*Persoonia*) each species of which has its own distinctive flavor from mango to plum. Even today, some pregnant women get cravings for this antacid.

In Dhurga country, at Currarong, south of Nowra in Abraham's Reserve, accessible by steps from Coomies' Walk, is a large rock shelter in use for 2,000 years. People came there several times each year, to make and repair fishing gear, weapons and wooden containers and to make art. Further south at the Goanna Dreaming Camp at Coles Creek near Lake Conjola, is a very large shelter, 40 metres in length and seven metres at its apex, containing more than 200 pictures that show how art styles have changed over 5,000 years. Or perhaps it's the cave's users who have changed, bringing new styles with them. The large cavern is thought not so much to have been an art gallery but to have been used for ceremonial activities and for education and training. There was a lot for young people to learn and education was life-long.

Knowledge, Power and Healing

Knowledge was the key to survival and all of it was transmitted by art, dance, spoken word and by practice. A life of constant movement meant that children had to thoroughly learn their way around and where they were in their country. As well as learning the location of and the right season in which to harvest fruit, berries, seeds and roots, the habits of insects, animals, birds and reptiles had to be studied and their habitats understood. Girls were quickly schooled in coastal marine life and the habits of fish. Being able to read correctly the seasonal changes of growth, the tides, prevailing winds and weather was vital to collective well-being.

In addition to knowing all about the location, capture and preparation of food, people learned to recognize which wood, bark, fibre, gum, mud, clay, bones, shells and stones were best for making canoes, shelters, lines, nets, weapons, tools and utensils, and then mastered the arts of their construction. Percy Mumbler could fashion a good spear to catch fish in "two or three minutes", or put together a bark canoe using local resources.

All people were in the habit of learning. In a culture based on sacredness, all parts of daily life are directed by the knowledge held by initiated Elders, men and women, and passed on by them through the generations. The well-being of specific animals and plants was associated with the welfare of particular individuals. People specialised in the knowledge appropriate to their totem, and while all people had responsibility for preserving, enhancing and transmitting some knowledge, there were different levels of knowledge accessed through initiations. Only at the first initiation were the names of the ancestral spirits revealed, and a new personal name given to the initiate.

The most knowledgeable Elders were known as Koradjis, usually translated as clever people, who were committed to a strenuous lifetime of learning and teaching. They had passed through many levels of initiation, some even apprenticed for 30 years, and were very knowledgeable. Their learning gave them power to manage their country as long as they respected its laws and punished Law breakers. They were leaders of ceremonies, keepers of knowledge and owners of songs. Song cycles are a series of songs linked together musically and performed as a whole work. Sometimes the cycles contained between one and two hundred songs which had to be learnt and memorized perfectly.

They also practiced medicine and pharmacology, and treated their patients using steam, hot mud and heated stones. Some were seers and mystics. Others claimed they could visit people in their dreams, change into their totem, or were mediums who could visit the spirits and talk with them about the clan's enemies and of future events. Some were said to be able to become invisible, be in more than one place, create illusions, read minds and control the weather. A few could heal by touch and kill by magic. The skeleton of one of these, identified by the items in his grave, was found in 2006 at Sandon Point where he has been for more than 3,000 years and remains still.

Nyaadi McGrath, the grandmother of Guboo Ted Thomas, was a healer who took him along on her healing rounds, and taught him about the Dreamtime. Max Harrison's grandfather, James Muns Hammond from the Kurnai Gunai clan at the southern end of Dhurga country, and five of his Uncles, taught Max the Law and initiated him. Grandfather Muns lived to be 104, and as a boy his father, Charlie Hammond, had survived a massacre at Brodribb River in the Snowy Mountains in North Gippsland.

Muns also taught Max all he knew about healing, and there was a lot to know. The healer who taught Muns would know, for instance, not only that the cables spun by the golden orb spider (*Nephila*) that anchor its massive webs to the trees and bushes are the strongest natural substance, but that they could be gathered during March, April and May, and also how to use them to stitch wounds.

Max said that he was cured of appendicitis by Muns who taught him how to treat the illnesses that commonly afflicted people, rheumatism, fevers, colds, dysentery, skin eruptions, bites, sores, wounds and burns. Wattle bark treated coughs and colds. The Australian bugle (*Ajuga Australis*) was great for wounds and gangrene. The bleeding heart (*Omalanthus nutans*) leaves were crushed and used to stop bleeding. The leaves of the stinging tree (*Dendrocnide*) cured rheumatism. Wild hops (*Dodonaea siscosa*) relieved stomach disorders and sore throats. The sap of the iodine plant (*Ervatamia orientalis*) and of the sandpaper fig (*Ficus coronate*) was put on wounds and sores. The leaves of the toothache tree (*Euodia vitiflora*) were soaked in small wooden bowls and the tea applied to sore teeth and gums.

The eucalypts were a major source of medicines. Forest red gum (*Eucalyptus tereticornis*) was used for breathing difficulties, for salving wounds and for energy. White gum (*Eucalyptus viminalis*) leaves were a laxative that were not to be confused with the



Typical local Kangaroo Grapes, vegetables, fruits and berries made up a substantial part of the daily diet.

leaves of the Sydney red gum (*Angophora costata*), ribbon gum and scribbly gum, which were all good for treating dysentery and diarrhoea but probably not as good as the leaves of the dysentery tree (*Grewia restusifolia*). Scribbly gum (*Eucalyptus haemastoma*) resin has antibacterial properties useful for cut and sores, while red stringybark (*macrorhyncha ssp macrorhyncha*) leaves are a source of rutin which strengthens the immune system.



S.T. Gill, Coo-oo-ee!! A Rough Sketch from the Mountains, Shoalhaven NSW, 1850s, Mitchell Library, Sydney

grapes (*Cissus antartica*) as seen on previous page, wombat berries (*Eustrephus latifolius*), currants (*Leptomeria acida*) and geebung (*Persoonia levis*).

Beach morning glory, known as 'mile a minute morning glory' by gardeners, was used for skin infections, inflammations and haemorrhoids. Berries of the native grape (*Cissus hypoglauca*) treated sore throats. Headache vine (*Clematis glycinoides*) leaves were crushed and inhaled to treat headaches and colds. Juice of the leaves of the swamp lily (*Crinum pedunculatum*) was rubbed onto stings and bites to reduce pain. The stinging nettle (*Urtica incisa*) leaf was used as a decoction and as a poultice for sprains.

Tonics and stimulants were readily available. The roasted stalks of the black tree fern (*Cyathea Australis*) made a tonic which revitalised after an illness and fortified those doing poorly. The corkwood tree (*Duboisia myoporoides*) has narcotic properties and its leaves are harvested commercially as a source of hyoscine for use against travel sickness. An infusion of hopbush (*Dodonaea lanceolata*) leaves was drunk to reduce pain and sticky hopbush (*Dodonaea viscosa*) leaves were chewed as a stimulant.

Native carrot (*Daucus glochidiatus*), parsley (*Lomatia silaifolia*), native pea (*Dillwynia sieberi*), native holly (*Lomatia ilicifolia*) were among the vegetables also available in Illawarra's garden. Tubers, bulbs, roots and rhizomes were critical to the diet in the colder months. Fruits and berries were important then as well, their seeds and medicinal herbs and bushes were planted and protected from and by fire. People enjoyed a wide variety of fruit, including Illawarra plums (*Podocarpus elatus*) that contain quantities of sticky sugars hugely beneficial to the gastrointestinal tract. Their antioxidant level is seven times that of blueberries. Illawarra was also home to black plums (*Diospyros australis*), red olive plums (*Elaeodendron australe*), pine plums (*Podocarpus elatus*), the dwarf apple (*Angophora hispida*), brush cherries (*Syzygium australe*), native quinces (*Alectryon subcinereus*), sandpaper and small leaved figs (*Ficus coronata* and *obliqua*), kangaroo

People of the Sea

Not only the growth of plant food was intimately connected to the seasonal cycle, but so was life in the sea and on the coast. The Pender family followed the fishing seasons along the coast for decades until after World War 2. As well they collected oysters (*Saccostrea glomerata*), cockles (*Anadara trapezia*), periwinkles (*Bembicium*), cunjevoi (*Pyura stolonifera*), blue mussels (*Mytilus galloprovincialis*), abalone (*Haliotis rubra*) and sea urchins (*Heliocidaris erythrogramma*). Lou Duren's clan followed the seasons sailing camp to camp 300kms along the coast between Wallaga Lake and Roseby Park.

When they were sailing their boats up and down the coast, they had all different camping grounds. They'd jump from Wallaga Lake to Mystery Bay to Narooma to Blackfellows Point at Tuross. They'd go from Blackfellows Camp to the reserve at Bateman's Bay and then travel onto another reserve out the back of Ulladulla. The next one, as far as I know, was at Wreck Bay, and then one at Crookhaven Heads, Roseby Park.

Specific fishing grounds were better for particular species. Different clans had access to particular islands, bays, lake shores and creeks.

For the Dharawal clans the year comprised six seasons, and when the Gynea lily (*Dorynthes excelsa*) came into full blossom around September and October, it was time to gather at the sites of the whale ceremony. People journeyed along well-formed paths usually about one metre wide often along the tops of ridges, kept clear by regular burning, as can be seen in S.T. Gill's water colour painted in the 1850s shown on previous page. They came from the west and then down Bulli Pass to Sandon Point. Other clans travelled to Jibbon Point, Bellambi Point, Red Point or Baranguba (Montague Island) to speed the whales and their newborn on their voyage. About 40 species of dolphins and whales inhabited the continent's waters. 27,000 humpback whales passed along the east coast in their annual return migration from Antarctica to the Coral Sea. Women would sing them through, wishing them a safe journey and warning of the dangers ahead, such as the pods of orca whales awaiting them at larger bays including Port Hacking, Botany Bay and Eden.

Some Dhurga women also spoke to dolphins. Dave Tout has a vivid memory of Alice Murray doing this in 1958. The women from Broule Lake would hit the water, and speak to the dolphins when they swam up, giving them messages for their men on Baranguba (Montague Island). Specialists also worked with porpoises, dolphins and orca whales to drive shoals of fish and sea mammals into the shallow water for harvest at certain times of the year.

As a child around 1919 Guboo Ted Thomas watched as an Elder, his grandfather Peter, called in dolphins to help catch fish and Valerie Andy, who grew up at Wallaga Lake in the 1930s, had seen her grandfather dance on the shore at Baranguba, to bring in



William Blake, A Family of New South Wales, 1757-1827, National Gallery of Victoria

fish, which he promptly speared. Believing them to be their kin, people wept in public, loudly and uncontrollably, when Alexander Berry shot porpoises for sport near Nowra in 1836. The porpoises were their relatives with whom they communicated, Elders in a different form who cared for them by driving fish to the shore for them to catch.



Fishing at Corrimal Beach, Robert Westmacott
Condon's Creek 1848, National Library of Australia.

At Warumbul in the National Park where the whale engravings overlook the bay, marine mammals were driven into the shallows by orcas that hunted around the entrance to the bay. For thousands of years fisher folk collaborated with the killer whales at Eden. Into last century, an orca the whites called Old Tom would station himself at the river mouth and attract attention by lashing the water with his tail. The pack he lead of about thirty orca intercepted Baleen whales migrating southward, trapped them in the bay, cut one out and drove it up onto the beach. Old Tom was killed in 1930, aged about 100, and the skeleton of this ancestor is in the Killer Whale Museum in Imlay St, Eden.

Mostly though, men fished from the shore for mullet and flathead with barbed spears, as in the cover picture, and women, such as the one depicted in William Blake's engraving on the previous page, from 1792, fished from canoes with lines and with mother-of-pearl hooks that they had begun to use about 1,000 years before the whites appeared.

Women were the more efficient providers of protein. Each clan had between 6 and 10 canoes, each between 3 and 6 metres long. The fisherwomen sometimes fished at night aided by a torch at each end of and a fire resting on clay at the bottom of their craft. This is not to say that the men weren't good at fishing. Vivienne Mason recalls of the recent past,

When I was about 16, I remember going to Nangadga Lake with Ronnie's family. The boys walked through the water with spears, not making one ripple. Nanna Bella was sitting on the lake's edge with the fire going, they were throwing the mullet to her and she cooked them straight away. I will never forget that, they were so good at what they were doing.

Fish were by far the main source of protein for the Dharawal and Dhurga people and there was a wide range to choose from. Snapper and bream were the most popular followed by mullet, flathead, groper, morwong, tarwhine and leatherjacket. A dozen other species were also eaten. They were also trapped in tidal creeks, as seen in Robert Westmacott's painting of Corrimal Beach, shown here, in which Dharawal are scooping stunned fish into a holding pool for later consumption.

Doris Kirby recollects living from the sea.

My grandfather used to go out spearing fish. He was pretty good on that too. He'd just make a spear wherever he was. He could spot fish right out to sea. It must have been marvellous, standing up, looking out and spotting the fish.

The old Kooris along the coast, I think they used to eat seafood. They didn't worry about the kangaroo. The seafood was easier to get, shellfish, oysters and abalone and that. You'd get the low tide and they used to just go and get the shellfish. Dive under, for lobster. In those days there were lobsters and abalone everywhere. We never had possessions really

Crossing Borders

From the far south of Dhurga country, Kudingal people travelled west to the Monaro plains around December at the time of the Bogong moth feasting, bringing back baskets, tools, possum skins and weapons. Mid-year the Monaro people came east along the Towamba River valley for the whale festival. Where the Bega racecourse is, they gathered reeds to take for baskets and collected shellfish for those back home. Dharawal regularly traded fish, shellfish, waterfowl and grubs with the Gandangara to their west for possum skins. Possum skin cloaks, such as can be seen in John Prout's painting of Tom Thumb Lagoon on the cover, were a valuable trade item. Each full-length garment was made of about fifty skins and was impervious to a day's rain. When reversed to show geometric clan designs and patterns, it kept out the keenest wind, and was delightful to sleep on and under. From Coledale, Albion Park and Bombo, stone pieces and axe heads were brought to Sydney, and ones from Tumut travelled west of the Gandangara into Wiradjuri country around Narrandera, about a week's walk.

But people did not do business with just anyone. Trading-circles existed down the generations and often involved travelling for hundreds of kilometres using well-maintained tracks and songlines, at regular intervals, seasonally or annually, to meet and exchange gifts with familiar faces in a pleasant location. Webs of trade meshed thousands of kilometres, along which songs and ceremonies moved remarkably quickly, taking about 15 years to cross the continent. Valuable items like songs, stories, quartz, ochre, axes, spearheads and shells were traded over long distances. Traders walked hundreds of kilometres to the white clay pits of the Gweagal clan in the National Park.

Despite regular trade and cultural exchange, there were sometimes fatal battles between clans and with people from neighbouring countries. Percy Mumbler tells of a battle at Wallaga Lake when his grandfather, the Koradji Umbarra later known as King Merriman, and Dhurga warriors were thoroughly defeated by an army from northern Victoria that attacked Baranguba in a flotilla of canoes.

Men were falling down in all shapes. From both sides came the flights of spears. More, and more, and more they came. The air was that thick with spears flying you could not see through them. King Merriman could see the warriors being hit. He saw rushing crowds of men fighting close up with nulla-nullas and stone axes. He heard them shouting and crying out as the spears went through them. At last, King Merriman knew that the Victorian tribe was too strong. It was cleaning up the Wallaga Lake tribe.

Umbarra left the battle and sought the help of the Kiola clan from the Shoalhaven who successfully repulsed the attack. But Umbarra died a broken man, his power exhausted.

Dhurga, Dharawal and Gandangara clans had shifting and uneasy relationships, but these were underpinned by strong and enduring family, trade and cultural ties. Clans that fell out contained a proportion of people closely tied by kinship, friendship, totems, trade, knowledge or by some other attachment. A warrior would never deliberately kill or maim an opponent from his own totem, even in war, rather would he take risks to save him, for that death would kill part of himself. In the end, the ties that bound proved stronger than the conflicts that divided. Until next time. When, after negotiations had broken down, violence occurred, battles were waged

under strict rules. War was usually over violations of the Law but seldom over land. Dreaming stories relate mainly to one's own country, there is no sense in coveting country that owns others. Taking territory was rare for to do so would mean living in a place inhabited by strange and unknown spirits and few were willing to take the risk.



An Engraving of an Orca, Killer Whale, at Maianbar NSW. Photo courtesy of Bruce Howell.

Hundreds of people attended regular gatherings of the clans. They gathered for initiations, marriages, Elders' meetings, trade, dispute settlement, cultural activities and games. The Barramattagal, Gweagal, Camayragal and Cadigal clans gathered regularly for such purposes. It was a big job to time, plan, organise and harvest the resources for a corroboree in 1824 when six whole clans came together along with delegations from Parramatta, Kissing Point, Sydney, Liverpool, Windsor, Emu Plains, Broken Bay, Botany Bay and even the Hunter Valley.

Large festivals like these required planning and preparation years ahead. Over time firewood was stockpiled and material for shelters gathered and set aside. Substantial marine and land sanctuaries were declared. Inland valleys and coastal areas containing sufficient food to feed the multitude were put off limits until the large number of guests began arriving and setting up their camps. Each camp was assigned a part of country sufficient to meet their needs. When such events were over, that part of country had to be

left for several years to recover, and this had to be factored into the host clan's long-term economic planning.

As late as 1883, initiations brought together people from Shoalhaven, Moruya, Ulladulla, Twofold Bay, Braidwood, Queanbeyan and East Gippsland. These gatherings lasted several days. Over their lifetime, Dharawal men undertook not one, but several initiations which involved scarring the body, piercing the nose and removing teeth. According to Jade Kennedy,

At a certain age, men were kept separate from the clan for a period of seven years. The scarification of their bodies was a signifier of their status, an indicator of the knowledge they held. You could tell by looking at him what this man knew. In an economy based on knowledge, this was useful information.

The name most commonly used for initiation ceremonies today is Bora. The ceremonial decorations for a Bora ground had many forms. Enormous figures were cut into or moulded from the soil. Overlooking the Warumbul Bora ground in the National Park, now a Christian Youth Camp, are life-size engravings of Orcas hunting seals, such as the one above. Research in 1992 by Les Bursill revealed that the area between Warumbul Point and Dark Bay is one extensive midden.

One ceremonial park on the South Coast was decorated with 29 trees carved in geometric designs and with 2.4 metre tall sculptures of human figures and of Daramulun, Biame's son who punished those who violated the Law and thus brought chaos into the world. Mumbulla Mountain, another sacred living being still used for initiations, is connected via Doctor George Mountain by a 20km sacred path to the extensive system of Bora rings near Bega. Of these, Max Harrison explains,

The land has been sung. It holds the indentation of the singing, the stomping of the feet, the rhythm of the clap sticks. In Yuin country there are many places where the indentation of the singing and dancing that went on over thousands of years is still evident today. Some of these Bora rings are forty to fifty feet in diameter.

It was here that John Mumbler was initiated in the late 1940s and early '50s. He reflects,

The Government did a good job of breaking up our culture. We were the lucky ones. My father and his father could keep their stories going. They are still going on today. Jack Campbell, Ted Thomas, Jeff Tungai and my uncle Percy Mumbler helped us through the ceremonies, and now we are helping the next lot.

Merv Penrith was initiated on Baranguba, a sacred island where for generations Dhurga Elders have taught their young men. The tradition continues.

Our Past is Our Future

Over 1,000 generations Dhurga and Dharawal Elders and their forbearers have maintained Illawarra, and they have good reason to be proud of their achievements. Illawarra's Aboriginal population roughly equals its pre-invasion peak and Dhurga and Dharawal culture continues to gather strength. While most animal and bird populations are severely reduced, and some in the Illawarra are under threat, including koalas, some wallabies, the potaroo, quolls and gliders, of the 500 species native to Illawarra, few have been extinguished apart from the ground parrots (*Pezoporus wallicus*), sea leopard (*Ornithorhynchus anatinus*) and Tasmanian bettong (*Bettongia gaimardi*).

The forests and birds are returning and the big timber is reasserting itself. More than half of Dhurga and Dharawal countries is on government-owned Crown Land, made up of over a dozen State Forests and by the Dharawal, Morton, Royal, Deua and other National Parks about which the Elders have considerable say. Progress in and near the towns has been slow since 1977 when Merriman Island was the first area in NSW to be gazetted as an Aboriginal Place, but Sandon and Bellambi Points have recently been added to the growing list of fifteen such places, and what is left of the reserves is fully under the control of Local Land Councils. On the question of fire, and on many other issues, much remains to be determined, but there is no doubt that the people who survived an ice age to build a paradise and who have been to hell and back over the last two hundred years, will resolve them as they always have, in accordance with the Law and in the spirit of the Dreaming



Elder Max Harrison and a young initiate at a Dharawal campsite along the banks of the Hacking River with a midden. These middens and campsites were used for thousands of years.

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Sue Wesson and Kath Schilling *Aboriginal Women's Heritage: Wollongong*
Wollongong page 46

Place Names

Abraham's Bosom Reserve, 20
Albury, 4
Appin, 3, 4
Audley, 10, 11
Baranguba, 13, 23, 25, 27
Bass Point, 1, 3
Bateman's Bay, 4, 23
Bega, 10, 25, 26
Blackfellows' Camp, 23
Bowral, 2, 18
Botany Bay, 3, 23, 26
Bourke Falls, 7, 9
Brodribb River, 21
Broule Lake, 23
Bulli Pass, 2, 3, 23
Bundeena Peninsula, 18
Bundian Pass/Way, 4
Byadbo, 4
Camden, 2
Campbelltown, 2, 3, 17
Coles Creek, 20
Coolangatta, 17forest
Coolangatta Mountain, 5, 8, 15, 16
Coomies' Walk, 20
Corrimal Beach, 24
Currarong, 20
Darkes Forest, 19
Delegate, 4

Doctor George Mountain, 26
Five Islands, 1, 10
Georges River, 3
Goanna Dreaming Camp, 20
Goulburn, 2
Hacking River, 11, 29
Heathcote, 3, 17
Jervis Bay, 4
Jibbon Point, 18, 23
Kanahooka, 9
Kangaroo Valley, 4, 16, 17
Kurnell Peninsula, 2
Lake Conjola, 20
Lake George, 4
Lake Illawarra, 1, 3
Lithgow, 2
Mallacoota, 4
Menai, 3
Merriman Island, 5, 28
Minnamurra, 3, 8, 9
Mittagong, 3
Montague Island, see Baranguba
Moon Bay, 10
Moruya, 13, 26
Mount Gulaga, 5
Mount Keira, 5
Mount Kembla, 5
Mount Mumbulla, 5, 11, 26
Mullet Creek, 9

Nowra, 4, 9, 16, 20, 23
Parramatta, 1, 26
Pebbly Beach, 4
Pericoe Road, 4
Picton, 2
Port Hacking, 1, 3, 23
Port Kembla, 1, 11
Robertson, 4
Roseby Park, 22, 23
Sandon Point, 2, 3, 13, 20, 23
Shellharbour, 2, 3
Shoalhaven, 1, 2, 3, 4, 22, 25, 26
Snowy Mountains, 2, 21
Stanwell Park, 1
Tongarra, 3
Towamba, Towamba Valley, 4
Towamba River, 25
Tumut, 4, 25
Twofold Bay, 4, 26
Ulladulla, 4, 26
Wallaga Lake, 4, 5, 6, 22, 23, 25
Warumbul, 23, 26
Waterfall, 3, 5
Wilde's Meadow, 4
Wollongong, 2, 3, 9
Woronora River, 3
Wattamolla, 10

Subjects

ancestors, ancestral spirits, 5, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20, 24
art, 3, 6, 7, 18, 20
astronomy, 6, 13
Aunty *see* family
Baambali, *see* camping
Bogong moth, 4, 24-25
borders, 7, 24-25
burial, *see* death
burning off, 7, 13, 16-17; *see also* land management
camping, camping sites,
cave art, *see* art
caves, *see* rock shelters
ceremonies, 2, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 14, 18, 20, 23, 25, 26-; *see also* social customs *and* initiation
children, *see* reproduction
clans, clan system, 2-3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 17, 19, 20, 23, 25, 26
contraception, *see* reproduction
corroborree, 8, 17
country, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11, 14, 16, 20, 25, 26, 28
creation stories, *see* stories
Creation serpent, 5,
Creation beings/spirits, 5, 19
crime and punishment, 8, 11, 15, 20, 26
customs/regulations/codes, 2, 6, 7, 12, 14, 16, 25; *see also* Law
dance, 6, 20, 23
death and dying, 11, 13, 25
dialect, *see* language

diet and eating, 7, 11, 12, 14-15, 16, 21, 22, 24
Dreaming, 2, 5, 7, 11, 12, 18, 25, 28
Dreaming tracks, 2, 5, 10
education, 20-21; *see also* Knowledge
Egg festival, 13
Elders, 4, 6, 7, 18, 20, 23, 25, 28
family and family life, 2, 4, 7, 8, 12, 13, 15, 18
food, *see* diet and eating
fishing, 7, 8, 13, 21, 23-24, 25
forests, 4, 8, 9-11, 16-17, 19; *see also* burning off
gypsum, 19
health and healing, 3, 6, 8, 20-22
hearth group, 2, 7, 14
hunting, 3, 12, 15, 17
initiation, Bora, 4, 7, 11, 20, 25, 26
Knowledge, 7, 13, 19, 20, 22, 25, 26
Koradjis, 6, 20, 25
Land, management of, 2, 3, 6, 9-11, 16-17, 26
human relationship to, 4, 5, 6, 9-11, 11-14, 28
 see also country
language, 2, 4, 8, 13
Law, 4, 5, 8, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 20, 21, 25, 26, 28
marine/coastal resources, 3, 20, 23, 26
marriage, *see* family life
medicine, *see* health, healing
megafauna, 1, 2
middens, 3, 10-11, 14, 26, 29
moodjingarl, *see* totem

music, *see* songs
population, 2, 28
property, 6, 7
racism, 6
reproduction and fertility, 8, 13, 14
rituals, *see* social customs
rivers, *see* water
rock shelters, 3, 17, 18, 20
seasons, 3, 8, 11, 12, 16, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25
songs, songlines, 4, 6, 20, 25
spirits, spirituality, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14-16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 25, 28
stars, 12, 13; *see also* astronomy
stories, 1, 4, 5, 6, 25, 28
tools, 7, 12, 14, 15, 20, 25
totems, 4, 6, 8, 10, 14-16, 17, 20, 25
travel, 4, 6, 8, 12, 13, 16, 17, 22, 23, 24, 25
Uncle, *see* family
walking, walking tracks, 3, 4, 9, 11, 18, 20, 25
Wandjinas, *see* spirits
war, 7, 13, 22, 25, 26
water, waterways, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16, 19, 23, 24
weather, *see* seasons
whale festival, 4, 25
women and girls, 2, 3, 7, 8, 10, 13, 19, 23, 24
...as food providers 7, 13, 19, 20, 24

Names

Andy, Valerie, 23

Biamanga, 5

Biame 4, 5, 18, 19, 26

Birrangooloo, 5

Blake, William, 23, 24

Brown, George, 7

Bursill, Les, 18, 26

Daramulun, 26

Dharawal, 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 11, 13, 16, 17,
18, 19, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29

clans: Brinja, 2; Garrangutti, 2;

Gerrinja, 2; Jerrungarugh, 2;

Kudingal, 2, 24; Kurnai Gunai, 2,

25; Muroo, 2; Murramarang, 2;

Numba, 2; Walbanja, 2;

Wagonga, 2, 13; Wandandian, 2;

Wollaga, 2; Worrigee, 2

Dhurga, 1, 2, 4, 7, 11, 16, 19, 20, 21, 23,
24, 25, 27, 28

clans: Camayragal, 2, 25;

Dhargarigal, 2, 3; Gweagal, 2, 3,

25; Goonamattagal, 2;

Goorungurragal, 2; Murro-ore-dial,

2; Noron-Geragal, 2, 3; Oaree, 2;

Ory-ang-ora, 2; Tagarigal, 2;

Threawal, 2; Wandehandegal, 2;

Wodi Wodi, 1, 2, 3

Duren, Lou, 22

Ellis, Trish, 14, 15

Gandangara, 2, 4, 7, 25

Gill, S. T., 22, 23

Hammond, Charlie, 21

Hammond, James Muns, 21

Illawarra Prehistory Group, 17

Kennedy, Jade, 7, 9, 26

King Merriman, 25

Kirby, Doris, 24

Mason, Vivienne, 24

McGrath, Nyaadi, 21

Montga, Lionel Uncle, 4

Mumbler, John (Jack), 4, 5, 28

Mumbler, Percy, 5, 11, 12, 14, 15, 20,
25, 28

Murray, Alice, 23

Pender family, 22

Penrith, Merv, 6, 28

Royal National Park, 9, 17, 18

Sefton, Caryll, 17

Thomas, Guboo Ted, 3-4, 6, 12, 21, 23

Tout, David, 23

Umbarra, 5, 14, 25

Wagin, Elder, 16

Westmacott, Robert, 7, 9, 15, 16, 17, 24

Yuin, 4, 6, 8, 11, 27



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Robert Westmacott, 'Mount Keera, Belambi N.S.W', 1831-52, State Library of NSW.