

Secret Selves: Representations of 'First Contact' and Australian Cultural Narratives in Early Colonial Texts.

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His grief, however, soon diminished: he accepted and eat of some broiled fish which was given to him, and sullenly submitted to his destiny...

Watkin Tench, 'The Indians', 1789

A 29 year-old officer of the marine corps, Watkin Tench embarked on a three-year tour of duty to New South Wales 'for the protection of the settlement intended to be made there' (Tench, 1789). Recruited by a canny London publisher, prior to the departure of the First Fleet, to 'satisfy present curiosity' (Tench, 1789) about *terra australis incognita*, Tench produced two virtuosic accounts of the voyage to Botany Bay and life in Port Jackson.

Tench's fish-eating native, tearfully completing his last supper before succumbing to his 'destiny', is Arabanoo. His capture was ordered by Captain Arthur Phillip who believed a native intermediary could provide the local knowledge required to make the new colony a success.

'Secret Selves' is a Year 11 English unit which explores the historic documentation of pre-settlement and early colonial Australia. While we focus primarily on European representations of the land and its inhabitants, our study extends to depictions of settler and penal society in artwork, personal letters and journals, and to *The Secret River* by Kate Grenville. Grenville's controversial interplay of personal history, historical fact and narrative allows us, in her words, to enter 'the experience of the past' (Grenville in Lang, 3). It also makes for a deeper understanding of textuality, and opens up alternative epistemologies to apply to our stories and histories of 'origin'.

Nothing was written on the ground. Nor was it written on any page. But the blankness itself might tell the story to anyone who had eyes to see (Grenville, 325)

'Historical', non-fiction texts need to be read critically and deconstructively. While we are positioned to expect their truthfulness and authenticity, they are, of course, as culturally situated as any other type of text. We wanted our students to engage in the kind of close reading that would set them up for success in Senior English. We wanted them to appreciate how language represents time, place and culture.

The writings of William Dampier, James Cook, Joseph Banks, and those listed in the First Fleet manifests, are fascinating in their mix of 'scientific' discourse, official reportage on the state of the colony, and subjective responses to the natives of New South Wales. The shift from the 'professional' to the 'personal' in these texts is instructive for students; texts which proclaim their authenticity and objectivity reveal their partiality and subjectivity. These are not 'innocent' observations of fact.

The archive of colonial writing, paired with *The Secret River*, reveals how shaky the dividing line between fact and fiction,

between imagination and history, can be. Anouk Lang applies Linda Hutcheon's concept of historical metafiction to describe the discomfiting but powerful way in which readers of *The Secret River* are 'lured into a world of imagination, only to be confronted with the world of history' (Hutcheon in Lang, 8). We found that the documentary texts we studied lured us with 'fact' and observed 'truth', only to unsettle us with richly allusive and figurative writing, complicating their classification as 'historical' accounts. The novel prompts us to question what constitutes an authentic source of history; what to do with troublingly different versions of historical truth; and how to distill truth from entrenched cultural myths about European settlement and national origin.

Grenville's narrative uncovers the 'secret selves' or identities beyond those of 'white man' and 'native' represented by our early writers. And this is what our unit, 'Secret Selves', is all about: reading the 'blankness' of a text, and not just the markings of a page; detecting the moments when a text betrays its stated intentions; and appreciating that texts are representational even, or especially, when curatorially labelled as primary sources. With this in mind, we needed to establish a cultural and historical context for our students so they could fix these texts within eighteenth and nineteenth century Enlightenment thinking. We began by exploring European attitudes to the physical environment of New Holland pre-1788 and following the arrival of the First Fleet.

Students were already familiar with the term *terra nullius*, the British justification for taking possession of land. However, they didn't appreciate the ideological complexity of the concept. Many early accounts described Tom Lynch's 'nothing but landscapes'; an empty land waiting to be 'coloured in', even 'invented', by colonisation (Lynch, 2014). William Dampier, writing of the north-west coastline of New Holland, laments, 'There were no Trees, Shrubs, or Grass to be seen...I saw there was no Harbour here...a place where there was no shelter...we searched for Water but could find none, nor any Houses, nor People, for they were all gone' (Dampier in Lamb, 148). His description established New Holland as a place of deficit, a pre-civilised land in its originary state. In 1788, Richard Johnson, chaplain to the Port Jackson settlement, writes 'the ground and country were most wretched, nothing to be seen but impassable rocks, thickets and swamps' (Johnson in Stockley, D et al, 18). Thomas Mitchell, exploring the Murray area and western districts of Victoria in the 1830s, describes 'a country ready for the immediate reception of civilised man; and destined perhaps to become eventually a portion of a great empire' (Mitchell in Stockley, D et al, 26). The common view expressed in these early accounts was that the 'natives' had neither the intelligence nor the drive to make proper use of the land. The British perceived no evidence of cultivation or animal husbandry; the natives' clothing was scant; their tools and weaponry were rudimentary; and they appeared to have no permanent shelter.

While convict forger and artist Thomas Watling blasts the 'face of the country [as] deceitful; having every appearance of fertility and yet productive of no one article in itself fit for the support of mankind, he nevertheless pays homage to the 'elysian scenery of a Telemachus...the secret recesses for a Thomson's musidora'. In a fit of nostalgia, he croons of the 'cooling zephyrs [breathing] every perfume', the 'mangrove avenues' and 'picturesque rocks' (Watling, 1793). That his perception of New South Wales is filtered through the Neo-classical and Enlightenment valorisation of order, harmony and control is evident in the richly allusive quality of his writing. Nature was something to be tidied and organised, and made pleasing to the eye. The park-like landscape around Sydney Cove, owing to the indigenous practice of systematic burning for the purposes of hunting and rejuvenating the land, is praised in several early colonial accounts. Watkin Tench depicts a landscape of which Capability Brown would have been proud: 'certainly pleasing, being diversified with gentle ascents, and little winding valleys, covered for the most part with large spreading trees, which afford a succession of leaves in all seasons' (Tench in McLaren, 6). Such odes to the natural beauties of the new colony, of course, serve the political purpose of justifying European sovereignty by reinforcing the idea of a benign, sparsely populated, land ripe for plucking and reclaimed from the unappreciative Dampier and his litany of complaints.

Later, Frenchman, Jacques Arago, writer artist and draughtsman on a three-year scientific voyage, rhapsodises in 1819 (Arago in Rolls):

The town of Sydney Cove, the capital of the country of Cumberland, is situated partly in a plain and partly on a little hill... and makes a charming picture. The principal buildings contrast strangely with the old wooden houses that are gradually disappearing, their place being taken by houses of beautiful cut stone decorated with pleasing sculptures, and embellished with balconies in a really fine style. One would imagine that our best architects had deserted Europe and come to New Holland to reproduce their most elegant mansions.

He praises the 'splendid barracks' and the 'beautiful colonnade' of the military hospital, lauding Governor's good 'taste' in value-adding to the natural landscape by surrounding his residence with a 'magnificent English garden'. Reflecting the eighteenth century fascination with exploration and travel writing, Arago's ebullient testimonial would surely have bolstered European perceptions of this far-flung 'nether Eden' (Tench in Lamb, 149).

Similarly, Elizabeth Macarthur, in her letter to friend Eliza Kingdon, re-creates an Edenic scene of her life in New South Wales, perhaps in an effort to counter any suggestion that she has been banished to the edge of the universe. Certainly, her lyrical descriptions are an expression of hope that her antipodean life will be prosperous and happy. She likens the country to 'an English park', drawing from a store of pastoral and Romantic imagery to represent Parramatta as an Arcadian idyll: 'it is now spring and the eye is delighted with the most variegated landscape. Almonds, apricots, pear and apple trees are in full bloom... the whole country gives us a grateful perfume'. In this letter at least, the natives are merely 'troublesome', mentioned almost parenthetically, and unlikely to taint the 'progressive state of this yet infant settlement' (Macarthur, E 1795 in Webby, 96).

When it comes to acknowledging that the Great South Land was an inhabited *terra nullius*, early writing characterises Aboriginal people as passive and incurious, and colonisation as a relatively peaceful, even inevitable, process. Aboriginal culture was also assumed to be primitive and static. Henry Reynolds, in *The Other Side of the Frontier*, in response to Geoffrey Blainey's reference to the 'calm apathy' of Aboriginal people when first encountering Europeans, argues that any apparent indifference to the presence of the white man was likely to be a show of good manners (Reynolds, 33). However, the eighteenth century 'civilised' man struggled to recognise the natives of New South Wales as human. Such attitudes legitimised the destruction of native land and communities; at best, colonisation would bring light to dark places, a *mission civilisatrice* which would draw 'the most wretched people on earth' (Cook, J in Lamb, 148) into the benevolent embrace of the white man.

Students note the representation of indigenous people as animal-like, ranked just above monkeys in the Great Chain of Being. William Dampier condemns 'the miserablest people in the world' as grotesque brutes, with 'great bottle noses, pretty full lips and wide mouths'. They were poor fishermen, did not appear to worship any deity, and were unable to clothe and house themselves properly. He expresses surprise that the gift of British clothing ('finery') was not repaid in willing labour, and that 'they did not seem to admire anything we had'. Furthermore, they were lazy and 'stood still like statues without motion, but grinned like so many monkeys' when tasked with carrying barrels of fresh water (Dampier in Lamb, 148). The inferiority of the natives was later 'proven' by the pseudo-science of phrenology. Thomas Watling, Watkin Tench, Jacques Arago, among others, defined indigenous people in terms of their posture, dexterity and muscularity. To Watling, 'the inhabitants of New South Wales are centuries behind some other savage nations'; even in the hierarchy of savagery, indigenous Australians were relegated to the lowest rung (Watling, 1793).

European efforts to make sense of the 'savage' world were also informed by Rousseau's 'Noble Savage'. The natives of New South Wales existed in a pre-lapsarian world as children of nature. They were truly free and untainted by the 'dark Satanic mills' of civilisation. Captain Cook answers William Dampier's disparagement of the natives as 'the miserablest people in the world' by declaring them 'far happier than we Europeans' (Cook, J in Lamb, 148). First Fleet surgeon on the *Sirius*, George Worgan, gives a colourful account of the 'rude children of Nature', the Eora people of Port Jackson. He allegorises them as 'Adamites' and 'Evites', frolicking with 'the same kind of pleasure which children show' (Worgan, 1788). In Joseph Lycett's painting, 'A Distant View of Sydney...A Family of Aborigines' (The Lycett Album, 34), an indigenous family is depicted in Romanesque clothing, suggesting nobility and dignity. They are walking away, not fleeing, from Port Jackson, implying that they are free agents, able to live peacefully, but necessarily separate, lives and leave the British to continue with the business of colonisation. Governor Philip Gidley King's 'A Family of New South Wales' provides another idealised portrait of an indigenous family (in Broome, 29). Students note the presence of indigenous women and children in these paintings as evidence of an attempt to humanise the savages, to represent their lives as organised, domestic and purposeful. However, unlike Lycett's family, Gidley King's is, by facing left, retreating back into the primitive past.

The narratives of Watkin Tench and George Worgan are especially interesting for their lively 'voice' and their ambivalent representations of first contact. While both writers purport to give a factual account of life in the new colony, based on careful observation and recording, their writings are frequently emotive and subjective. Perhaps conscious of their British readership, with its fascination for exotica, Worgan and Tench provide a mixture of taxonomic description, sentimental, entertaining and amusing vignettes, and emotional outpourings of disgust, delight, affection and curiosity. Worgan recounts an encounter with some native 'damsels' who reject his chivalric favour, a gift of a handkerchief tied to a piece of wood (Worgan, 1788):

If that is the way you treat my favours Madam, says I'll keep my handkerchiefs to – There is something singular in the conduct of these Evites, for if ever they deign to come near you, to take a present, they appear as coy, shy, and timorous, as a maid on her wedding night, (at least as I have been told maids are) but when they are, as they think out of your reach, they hollow and chatter to you, frisk, flirt, and play a hundred wanton pranks, equally as significant as the solicitations of a Covent- Garden strumpet... [They] will laugh and frisk about you like a spaniel, and put on the airs of a tantalizing coquet. (Worgan, 1788)

Far from being innocent 'Evites', these women are sexualised as temptresses, fickle and fascinating for the hapless Worgan, who alleges that he is untutored when it comes to 'maids'. He then shifts from a chivalric discourse to a more conventional representation of the women as objects of disgust:

Indeed, if it were not for the nauseous, greasy, grimy appearance of these naked damsels, one might be said to be in a state of Tantalism, whenever they vouchsafe to permit us to come near them; but what with stinking fish-oil, which they seem to besmear their bodies, & this mixed with the soot which is collected on their skins from continually setting over the fires and... the constant appearance of the excrementitious matters of the nose which is collected on the upper pouting lip, in rich clusters of dry bubbles, ... every inclination for an affair of gallantry... is banished. (Worgan, 1788)

While he admires 'the softness' and 'plumpness in their limbs and bodies', enough to 'stop a Druid in his pious course', Worgan is simultaneously repulsed by this female 'otherness'. Like Worgan, Tench confesses a grudging admiration of the 'Indians', but is unable to see them as anything other than second-rate humans or specimens of natural history.

Tench's famous record of the capture of Arabanoo from Manly Cove is a complex text in its blend of 'detached observation' (Tench in Mitchell A, 3), its almost operatic sentimentality, and its use of imperialist and Enlightenment discourses to frame the Eora people and their reaction to the British. His account begins with the language of officialdom: boats 'proceeded' to Manly Cove, 'pursuant to [the governor's] resolution'; a 'proper opportunity being presented', two men 'were seized' (Tench in Webby, 55). Tench's use of the passive voice, and the scarcity of adjectives and adverbs, make the incident seem neatly algebraic. However, when he takes a closer look at the captive, Arabanoo, Tench's writing is enlivened with literary flourishes, uncovering his personal engagement with an event which is now couched as narrative. Arabanoo 'set up the most lamentable cries of distress' upon realising his captivity; however, a meal of 'broiled fish' soon mollified him and he

'sullenly submitted to his destiny' (Tench in Webby, 55). The word 'destiny', of course, makes his capture right and just, a result of 'natural' law. Arabanoo's sullenness is infantile and, like a child, he is offered 'every blandishment... to soothe him'. Tench is struck by the native man's appetite:

He dined at a side-table at the governor's; and eat heartily of fish and ducks, which he first cooled. Bread and salt meat he smelled at, but would not taste... On being shewn that he was not to wipe his hands on the chair which he sat upon, he used a towel which was given to him, with great cleanliness and decency. (Tench 1793 in Webby, 56)

Students noted Tench's phrase 'fish and ducks' as reflecting his view of Arabanoo as a savage. Rather than referring to culinary 'dishes', Tench names the cuts of meat in the way a hunter might. The fixation with aboriginal 'dirtiness' lurks beneath Tench's expression of surprise at Arabanoo's concern for hygiene. We found the description of the post-prandial bath particularly offensive. Tench records that Arabanoo was 'completely washed and scrubbed from head to foot', the purpose of which was to 'ascertain the real colour of the skin of these people'. The ablution scene is described almost affectionately and paternalistically; however, Tench concludes by adding: 'to prevent his escape, a handcuff with a rope attached to it, was fastened around his left wrist' (Tench 1793 in Webby, 57). As much as his portrayal of Arabanoo might appear to be, in part, comfortingly domestic, it remains fixed in the overarching discourses of conquest and cultural imperialism.

Surveyor General of New South Wales, Thomas Mitchell, offers another useful 'first contact' narrative, '*At the Darling River*'. Like Tench, Mitchell uses the vocabulary of military conquest and officialdom to describe a hostile encounter with the natives:

At about nine o'clock this morning, Joseph Jones came into report that a native had pointed a spear at him... and that this native, accompanied by a boy, kept his ground in a position... which prevented Jones from driving them back. (Mitchell 1839 in Webby)

The vocabulary associated with military manoeuvres – 'advancing towards him', 'kept his ground' – construct this encounter between colonist and native as a war. Challenging the assumption that colonisation was largely peaceful and met with little resistance, Mitchell describes himself 'holding out a green bough' to a native, ostensibly to defend himself but also suggestive of a conciliatory 'offering'. The native adversary 'thrust' and 'shook' a bough in response, the change of verb representing the natives as violent and antagonistic. Tellingly, Mitchell replaces the word 'native' with 'savage' as the drama escalates, and his account becomes increasingly emotive. The natives shun Mitchell and Burnett's 'endeavours to conciliate and inspire confidence' by behaving monstrously in way that eludes description, according to Mitchell:

...they repeated their gesticulations of defiance with tenfold fury, and accompanied the action with demoniac looks, hideous shouts and a war-song – crouching, jumping, spitting, springing with the spear and throwing dust at us... In short, their hideous crouching postures... with the fiendish glare of their countenances, at times black, but now all eyes and teeth, seemed a fitter spectacle for Pandemonium, than the light of the bounteous sun. Thus these savages slowly retired along the river-bank, all the while dancing in a circle like the witches in Macbeth... Any further attempt to appease them was out of the question. (Mitchell 1839 in Webby)

With our focus on language features and close reading, we note Mitchell's use of cumulation, the burst of present participles creating a sense of immediacy, as well as mounting hysteria. In 'crouching', rather than standing erect, the natives are animals and not men made in God's image. Their otherness is further underlined by the vampiric 'all eyes and teeth', suggesting predation or cannibalism and, therefore, drawing upon European prejudices about 'primitive' races. Mitchell's literary allusions afford students the opportunity to consider the way intertextuality builds our understanding of the cultural constructedness of these texts. Mitchell's reference to Milton's Pandemonium, the capital of Hell, hints at the eighteenth century rationalist and Christian Humanist view of the world as polarised into good and evil; civilised and progressive, or barbarous and backward. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* leaves the implied reader in no doubt that *terra australis* is, indeed, a place outside of the ordered, God-given world. Mitchell's writing takes yet another turn when he refers to the 'savages' as 'children of the smoke'. He appears to regain the composure he displayed at the start of his narrative. He calmly concludes that the erstwhile 'fiends', now 'aborigines, are 'so little influenced by reason' and no match for the 'superior' British. He is mitigating the horror of his experience by reducing the natives, at least in his own mind, to creatures who lack Reason, that which makes us 'paragon of the animals'.

As part of their assessment for this unit, students present a seminar presentation, contextualised as a forum for aspiring young leaders. They are required to select one historical document and one artwork from the early colonial period, and record their presentation using Screencast-o-matic. Their purpose is to analyse, interpret and evaluate the way in which audience, purpose and language features operate to represent a particular cultural myth or narrative in the two texts. Students may choose to examine a narrative regarding the relationship between European and indigenous Australians, attitudes to the land, the treatment of convicts, or the lives of European women in the colony.

Students' responses are impressive. Clare writes:

Watling dispels another European myth – that 'savages' were 'cannibals'. He almost seems surprised that the only human bodies they burn are the dead. He stops short of recognizing that there is any great spiritual purpose to these cremations by stating derisively that '[the savages] haven't the smallest idea of a deity, much less a religion'. His use of the verb 'adduce' – to provide evidence for – shows that he is studying these people in an effort to record, with scientific precision, his observations based upon evidence. He is trying to approach this new encounter with rationality and restraint; however, just as he does elsewhere, Watling is unable to conceal his emotional responses to seeing savages up close, and his incredulity at the notion that they do not worship any deity. He admits that the savages are clever 'mimics', possibly likening them to trained monkeys, but that they are also 'indolent', 'unsteady' and lacking in 'assiduity and perseverance'. This contradicts his earlier assessment of the natives as 'straight and firm' and able to fashion canoes with the barest of resources. So Watling's attitude to the natives seems to be ambivalent and conflicted.

Clare uses the language of textual analysis with confidence, demonstrating the skill of close reading by identifying salient vocabulary and grammatical conventions. Moreover, she is able to move beyond mere identification to interpretation and evaluation in observing the blend of curiosity, admiration and disapproval in Watling's description.

Emma's response to Augustus Earle's 1830 painting, 'Natives of New South Wales', is equally robust in its attention to textual detail:

Earle uses visual metaphor to represent European supremacy. The imposing tavern, with its rigid, Georgian lines, seems to chastise the dishevelled and dejected group of indigenous people in the foreground. The smoke its chimneys emit, poisoning the sky, signifies European invasion. A white fishmonger carrying a full basket of fish is cynically contrasted with an indigenous mother who holds one fish with which to feed her family. With one hand on his hip, the fishmonger stares aggressively at the natives, hardened to their suffering. While the European tavern patrons observe the group in disgust, they are condemned by Earle for supplying the natives with alcohol. Our eye is drawn to the empty bottles of bull at the natives' feet, the slumped shoulders of the woman to the right, and the comical male figure at the centre. Dressed as a white man, in the red jacket of the Marines, he is reduced to a caricature, a figure of fun.

Emma argues that this is an unusually sympathetic portrayal of indigenous Australians. She comments on the mother's outstretched hand as a gesture of comfort or protectiveness. The naked child, whose distended belly might signify malnutrition, and the mother carrying an infant on her back, are a powerful counterpoint to the romanticised or 'zoological' portraits of aboriginal people by other colonial artists.

To return to Watkin Tench, Arabanoo is rewarded with Tench's approbation as his terror and distress upon being abducted are 'wearing off':

Curiosity and observation seemed... not to have wholly deserted him; he shewed the effect of novelty upon ignorance; he wondered at all he saw...

(Tench in Webby, 55)

It is not impossible to imagine that Tench's words might well have applied to many Europeans encountering the strange antipodean outpost and its native people for the first time. Annalists and artists have recorded 'first contact' and frontier experiences as characterised by a bipartisan curiosity, trepidation and wonderment. The writing is compelling in its muscularity and its refusal to remain strictly inventorial, 'scientific' or and prosaic. However, as Eleanor Collins asserts, these historical narratives, and the cultural myths which have developed from them, are also 'stories of division', or the 'poison in the flour' (Collins E, 40). Our reading of *The Secret River* and early colonial written and visual documentation has compelled us to appreciate the nexus of fact and fiction. Both offer us narratives with which we can hope to make sense of the past, using it as lens through which to view the present.

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