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BOTANY BAY: WHERE HISTORIES MEET

Maria Nugent

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This absorbing, easy-to-read text interprets the intersecting histories of, and cross-cultural interaction at, one of Australia's premier sites of national symbolism. After reading this book, I was left contemplating the many facets of a geographic location I had grown up with, loved and – no doubt like many other Sydneysiders – either underestimated its history or its national importance. This is an important historical study. It will provide fresh insights to a broad range of people: those who have grown up in Sydney or lived in the vicinity of the Port of Botany Bay, scholars and armchair historians; as well as Indigenous Australians (especially the descendants of the traditional custodians). Maria Nugent has blended accounts of changing historical perceptions and Indigenous and non-Indigenous interaction into a compelling narrative of place. This impressive work is also notable for the admirable level of composed passion and its lack of political rhetoric.

Botany Bay is a place infused with the memory, the spirit and the physical traces of the founding events of a young colony that became a nation. The Bay, its foreshores and hinterland and the La Perouse area are also synonymous with Indigenous history well before the First Fleet of 1788, and before the time of Captain James Cook. Nugent allows the reader to visit the recorded history by her excellent footnoting and yet the reader can also consider different scenarios by the interpretation of informed snippets of Indigenous oral history that is also well-recorded and footnoted. Nugent's writing often juxtaposes events so that the reader can gain different views/concepts/understanding. As an example she illustrates the British foundation myth by discussing a commemorative performance of the arrival of the *Endeavour* in front of Queen Elizabeth II on 29 April 1970 (p. 176) with a mourning ceremony commensurately held nearby by Indigenous people who have ancestral connections to the land. Nugent manages to present different viewpoints subtly, without confrontation.

Throughout this work the reader is somewhat seduced by the dual complexity of the historical record. These two versions are the discoverer/coloniser

account and the continuous Indigenous presence. Nugent indicates the accuracy of the coloniser seems to consistently whitewash Indigenous involvement, yet it in fact relies on the Indigenous knowledge and voice to provide authentication.

To illustrate this, Nugent recalls an early nineteenth century event during which an old Aboriginal woman, Sally Merrmong, showed a young boy the grave of Forby Sutherland – a member of Cook's crew who died whilst the ship was at anchor in Botany Bay. Nugent recounts "Sally had vivid recollections when as a little girl she witnessed Captain Cook's ship come in and a party land at Kurnell" (p. 29). Another example is the placement of a plaque by the Philosophical Society of Australia in 1822 to mark the spot where Cook actually stepped ashore. The accuracy of this spot was subject to identification by an old Indigenous man, yet no acknowledgement was given to the "natives testimony" (p. 28). Nugent allows the historical event in the burial of a British sailor, or the place where Cook stepped ashore to be recorded. It is the Indigenous presence that allows the recorded history to exist. Nugent for me allows history to take on life and meaning by the interaction of this Indigenous presence.

This review may seem to paraphrase some of the chapters and this is not my intent, rather the intention is to raise issues that I have found interesting and hopefully this will encourage the reader to also discover Nugent's text. Having said this, it is the imperialist myths of the eighteenth century to the narratives of Cook's presence in Botany Bay that were woven during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was difficult for historians to ignore the Indigenous occupation of the region. Nugent (p. 27) notes that the exclusion became more evident from the 1930s onwards when Australian history became more professionalised and institutionalised, a history that seems to eradicate the Indigenous occupation. Nugent lifts this veil of silence in Australian historiography and sheds light on Aboriginal and coloniser interaction. In time the northern peninsula of Botany Bay became the dumping ground when police forcibly closed the Aboriginal camp at the government boatsheds in Circular Quay in July 1881 (p. 47). Nugent's reference to a letter printed in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1878 complaining about the annoyance caused by the North Shore Aboriginal camp at Blues Point and the camps scattered around the Sydney landscape at Manly, Neutral Bay, Double Bay, the north shore of Botany, at La Perouse as well as Kurnell and Sans Souci provides evidence that Indigenous people were well-established within the metropolitan landscape. An official report in 1881 highlighted by Nugent also states there were about 50 people at the Botany reserve and La Perouse (p. 47). The story of the Indigenous relocation from Sydney, the closure and withholding of rations for the metropolitan and city-dwelling Aborigines is retold by Nugent within a mire of political intrigue

involving George Thornton, the appointed Protector of Aborigines for the colony. In modern times we would call this ethnic cleansing. Thus began the permanency of the Indigenous settlement in a European context in a camp considered outside the city limits.

This deletion of the Aboriginal from the historical landscape is methodologically examined by Nugent. Her recount of Mr Trescoe Rowe in a 1996 letter to the Aborigines Welfare Board (which replaced the Aborigines Protection Board in 1940) requesting information of the Aboriginal camp at Darling Point in the 1890s is another example of Nugent's stewardship substantiating the continual Indigenous presence in and around Sydney pre- and post-colonial. Rowe recalled (p. 55) that the Aboriginal people had been removed to La Perouse in the late 1890s. Nugent writes, "This example illustrates how the practice of racial segregation cannot be achieved purely on physical grounds; it is accompanied by and reinforces structures of forgetting" (p. 55). In latter years this "forgetting" of the Indigenous presence was reinforced when Botany Bay and its northern peninsula were considered a wilderness and a wasteland with the removal of the unclaimed graves from the Devonshire Street Cemetery around 1900 to a thin strip of land near the Coast Hospital and the Aboriginal settlement. The construction of a tramline to carry the coffins was an irony for it now opened up what had previously been seen as a wilderness and wasteland which proved to be a beautiful seaside location for Sydneysiders. Aboriginal settlement became a tourist destination that Nugent examines in Chapter 3. The boomerang and shell artefacts of the early 1930s that Nugent mentions are still evident with Laddi Timbery plying his trade on most Sundays, selling, making and throwing Boomerangs at the "circle".

Nugent describes the construction of Long Bay Gaol between 1900 and 1909 resulting in incarcerated and infected inmates becoming neighbours to the Aboriginal settlement (p. 59). The Coast Hospital having been constructed in 1881 following a smallpox outbreak (p. 44), later became a leprosarium. It seems that the nearby Aboriginal community was treated somewhat similarly to those with infectious diseases; they were to be kept away from society. Nugent mixes these issues with numerous thought-provoking concepts. The hospital, the cemetery and the gaol actually brought short-term prosperity to the Indigenous community in the Bay, as it enabled community members to obtain work. Some obtained semi-permanent employment, mostly in menial tasks at the hospital until it closed. By then factories had sprung up and the Botany industrial developments were within walking distance to a tram or later a bus ride that took you to the factories. Many of the critics of the Aboriginal camps outside of the reserve would have been surprised to know that many families had members who actively sought employment. Nugent illustrates this well. Within my own family I

had several relatives who were employed to exhume graves in cemeteries in and around what is now Central Station. It is interesting that the city "blacks" of Glebe and Manly worked on the exhumation, and the "Larpa" mob worked on burying them. As a child I was told the stories of the unclaimed remains that went to the Bay, as many of the coffins were of cheap timber and it was a gruesome job of re-boxing the remains and the coffin debris. To my Uncles' horror, many contained only rocks or bricks. There were no human remains. Their overseers told them just to box them anyway. Perhaps some of the unclaimed souls of the Devonshire Street Cemetery were victims of the body snatcher industry of the nineteenth century?

I found Nugent's recounting in Chapter 4 of the landing of the French in Botany Bay in 1788 to be of particular interest as it raises the question as why there is so much interest given to the French expedition. The background on Laperouse's violent interaction with Samoans prior to the arrival of the ships *Astrolabe* and *Boussole* possibly substantiated their erection of a stockade (p. 93) and perhaps the French attitude to Indigenous Australians. Nugent raises the question: Did Perc Le Receveur therefore die as a consequence of wounds inflicted from injuries sustained whilst he was in Samoa or was it the result of a violent clash with local Indigenous Australian people? There are links between the violence shown to the Aboriginal people by Cook, the French, and the British colonists. The point Nugent clarifies is that Cook shot at them, so did the French, resulting in a negative experience for Governor Phillip. The Indigenous groups could not discriminate between Cook, the French or the First Fleet. Nugent quotes Lieutenant David Collins to substantiate these views (p. 94). The French may have had more of a negative influence on the cross-cultural encounters for the First Fleet than has previously been envisaged. Nugent adds weight to recent claims by historians that the British colonisation of this country was based on the use of firearms, no doubt the legacy of Cook and La Perouse.

Once again Nugent illustrates the importance of the Indigenous knowledge on the history of the landscape as she notes that with the loss of the French expedition off Vanikoro shortly after departing Botany Bay, the site of the former French camp almost instantly became a memorial to the expedition (p. 95). When the crew of the *Coquille* made a pilgrimage to Botany Bay in 1824 it was an Indigenous man, Cruwee, who identified the gravesite of Perc Le Receveur. Once again, Indigenous knowledge had determined an important site as had been the case in 1822 in determining James Cook's and Joseph Bank's first landing place (p. 100). In time this site became a little piece of France, in fact the premier W.A. Holman proposed in 1917 that a land grant be actually given to the French to commemorate the site. Children at the La Perouse Public School for many years were taught to sing the French national anthem,

the Marseillaise, for Bastille Day (p. 111). The irony is most of these children were Aboriginal, singing the French national anthem for a French explorer who shot at their ancestors. Nugent raises an important issue regarding the history of the headland. The historical shadow cast by La Perouse was incommensurate with his actual contribution to the place other than a bit of gardening, a grave and a roughly-hewn stockade. Therefore the local Indigenous groups see the La Perouse Museum on the headland as dispiriting and insulting (p. 113). Nugent provides an account of the fact concerning the establishment of the museum in a historic building overlooking the bay, between the La Perouse monument and the grave. This discussion could have possibly been further explained concerning the NSW National Parks and Wildlife maintaining this site and the involvement of the NSW Premier's Department in the decision-making process. Was this a case of bureaucracy overriding the legitimacy of the Indigenous voice? Nugent does not fully explain the apparent mismanagement of what could have been an important Indigenous heritage site.

Chapter 5 is aptly named "From Shantytowns to Suburbs". It recalls the growth in population during the 1920s and the depression years, its subsequent demise and then a period of further growth as a place to live for non-British Europeans. Sites such as Happy Valley in Congwong Bay, Frogs Hollow behind Frenchman's Beach, Yarra Bay, Hill 60 and Goat Hill come to life in Nugent's narrative. Its story is sad, not because of the poverty and social dysfunction that arose from time-to-time, these were communities of "black" and "white" living side-by-side. Many intermarried, many had children, they mixed and there are stories of community pride and happiness. It is sad because this was an unplanned inter-racial existence that worked and wider Australia knows little of it. It was as though the concept of "reconciliation" was born within the communities of the Bay. However, from the 1940s the north head of Botany Bay became attractive to new suburban settlers owing to the relative cheap price of housing blocks and nearby industrial growth and resultant job market. Between 1952 and 1955 the local council carried out a concerted campaign to rid the area of the shantytowns as they sought to reclaim the land for development. Nugent explains this onslaught in detail. However, the author does not make reference to the violent attacks on Aboriginal people during this period by a small number of lobby groups and only pays scant attention to the questionable "arrangement" between the former NSW Premier, Sir Robert Askin, and a proposed real estate development.

My mentioning of the extremist groups of the late 1950s and 1960s is an important dimension of the cultural history of Botany Bay. Australians often view in horror movie clips of the racial violence in the southern states of the United States as police set dogs

onto young African-American men and women, fire hoses on respectably-dressed people, beating them and so on. But we do not remember or recall the violence suffered by Aboriginal men and women in the Bay area, let alone speak of the sexual assaults on our young Indigenous women or the myriad of other race-based crimes endured by the Aboriginal community as our people tried to go to work or attend social functions. This is the only area where I believe Botany Bay's social history could have been recorded more accurately. Nugent fails to mention the racial hostility directed towards Indigenous people of the Bay after the area became a desirable residential place for middle class and upper working class Australians. This omission by Nugent – although small in the overall history of the Bay after Cook's landing – is an important one for those who remember. Is this oversight the result of inadequate research; or has Nugent made a deliberate decision to omit reference to this unsavoury chapter of the Bay's history so as to respect the memory of the victims and let the matter dissipate with the blood and tears they shed on the sand during this period? There is a long history of violence towards the marginalisation of Aboriginal people at Botany Bay. This includes that practised by Cook, La Perouse, Governor Phillip, and the Randwick Municipal Council.

The remainder of this chapter reviews the relationship between history and heritage, and calls for greater recognition of the diversity within Australian settler society. Nugent draws attention to the need for more a more inclusive approach to the presentation of cultural heritage by the Botany Bay National Park. This includes recognition of the contributions made to local history by non-British migrants and Indigenous Australians. Nugent reminds us that during the mid-1900s people of different cultural backgrounds managed to co-exist on the foreshores of Botany Bay in post-war shantytowns under the historical shadows cast by Captains Cook and Phillip (p. 143). This embraced both the local Aboriginal reserve and fledgling suburban settlements.

Chapter 6 examines the industrial development which has changed the landscape forever. Nugent summarises the environmental politics thus: "Botany Bay's natural disadvantages had saved it from development, but that was only when there were better alternatives close by" (p. 149). The endless environmental reports and ultimate reconstruction of the Bay to suit industry are well-recorded by Nugent. Chapter 7 – "Remembering Dispossession and Survival" – is an important resource for teachers of Australian contemporary history, Indigenous political interaction and/or cross-cultural studies. Once again Nugent touches on the recurring themes of reconciliation and Indigenous survival. I suggest readers obtain a copy of Nugent's work and read this chapter closely. It summarises well the Indigenous struggle through to the time of publication.

Botany Bay is an iconic symbol for Australia. It was the European gateway to the continent and still remains a site of cross-cultural relations. Nugent has included multiple streams of interconnecting life into this history of place. Her history will be one with which many groups will identify: the descendants of the Sydney clans, the other clans who now reside there and the multitude of Anglo and non-British European families who lived there during the Great Depression or during the post-World War II period. Nugent has allowed the Indigenous voice to be a part of this history. The "Blacks camp" at "Larpa" during the turn of the twentieth century was a site of defiance for Sydney and south coast Kooris. Although for a time it was a mission and a segregation camp, and even a leprosarium, above all it was a refuge for Australians who did not have a place in wider Australian society. Indigenous people were always made welcome at "Larpa" and they got by. This history of survival is a credit to the tenacity of Indigenous Australians. Maria Nugent provides the reader with an insight into this world. Her work is inspirational for some readers for it promotes an intense desire to undertake further research into the ongoing history of Indigenous people of Sydney, to retell the stories of families in other Aboriginal camps. Nugent's work is also important to non-Indigenous Australia for its cross-cultural interwoven stories. The Bay will never look the same again, for it seems a richer place after reading Nugent's text.

BALANDA: MY YEAR IN ARNHAM LAND

Mary Ellen Jordan

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Balanda not only brings back memories of when I first went to Arnhem Land, but still years later the searching conversations I still have with myself, trying to make sense of the world, or rather another cultural galaxy far removed from my own.

This book is a diary, recording the author's observations, impressions and conversations in one of the Northern Territory's largest Indigenous towns, Maningrida. True to the diary genre, these accounts are personal and compelling, written with sincerity and urgency. While *Balanda* describes the author's daily experiences it also contains simplistic explanations that can distract and cloud the minds of readers from grasping deeper complexities at work in

the daily interaction and lives of the Aboriginal and Balanda (Europeans) residents. This misrecognition is particularly problematic in Indigenous settlements like Maningrida, formed by government policies determined to centralise peoples from multiple Indigenous cultural backgrounds and estates, into bureaucratically-convenient locations.

Like the many Balanda who arrive to take up positions in the schools, clinics and other designated areas of bureaucracy, the author was fortunate to be in a position demanding personal contact with members of different clans, including not only artists and art centre workers, but also those living on their ancestral homelands (outstations). On her arrival Jordan was confronted by the harsh living conditions and feelings of isolation and separation from her own culture. There were other Balanda, but none with whom she could really empathise. She describes her contact with other Balanda as often uneasy and strained, interactions leaving questions about their motives for living at Maningrida. She arrived with "good intentions" to work with Aboriginal people, but finds herself trying to understand her Indigenous co-workers through her Western eyes, ending up with countless contradictions and dilemmas. As complex as life can be in these towns, there are choices to be made. Readers will share Jordan's despair, and the decisions she has made to live and work in Maningrida. Anxious to build new friendships, she encounters Balanda with seemingly no intention of mixing with the Aboriginal residents, and whose sole intention is to save dollars. Where does she go for advice, and how is she to develop meaningful relationships with local families from both cultures? While few Balanda stay for more than a year or two, and even fewer spend leisure time with the Aboriginal residents, there are others who live, leisure and stay for decades. The seeds are sown when newcomers are readily accepted into the complex Aboriginal kinship system of the area. Whether the plant grows to produce meaningful friendships depends on the determination and sincerity of all parties, but particularly the new arrival.

The author observes that government funding controlled by Balanda and "bureaucrats who speak the language of bureaucracy" can work against the active involvement of the local Aboriginal peoples, however, it must not be assumed that this is always the case. Good people, both black and white spend decades of their lives working collaboratively in situations of extreme social complexity – working under conditions where government policies are in a state of constant change, cumbersome and unresponsive to local conditions.

While Jordan superficially describes local Aboriginal control over ceremonies and cultural knowledges, she observes that even here Western academics are encroaching on Indigenous knowledges, when they receive research grants to document cultural practices. She describes how Balanda take, and continue to