

**Admiral Arthur Phillip Birthday Commemoration
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My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to thank you for your warm welcome, the marvellous service this morning, this delicious lunch, and now this invitation to speak.

I want to begin right here at this particular place in the ceremonial process, to begin thinking about it from the ground up, as it were, from the floorboards and the piece of earth further beneath my feet, and with some strange words.

Min? Min-mah-ring unne?
minnahring kahn
Minahring unnoah?
minnahring ngahtohng

What? What is this? What is it being for? What is that? What thing is it?

These are words transcribed by Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld, being 'Specimens of a Dialect of the Aborigines of New South Wales; Being the First Attempt to Form Their Speech into a Written Language' and published in 1827. And they go some way towards making evident to us the 'brave new world' in which Arthur Phillip found himself some forty years earlier on the banks of what we now call Sydney Harbour.

For we come here today to celebrate the birthday, the life and work—and because of this place—also to mark the death of a great English sea warrior who found himself one of the first of his tribe to engage in a sustained and serious manner with the Eora peoples, men and women who occupied those seaside nations which surround those famous antipodean shores.

I couldn't be more proud to be part of any such celebration. For Phillip's varied career and personal characteristics made him an excellent governor, though he was an obscure and sometimes controversial choice for the role. Any speaker on his achievements could cite his innate sense of justice, his careful management of the sometimes-difficult personalities amongst his fellow officers, his offering hope and reformation for convicts who behaved, his establishment of agriculture, and his weathering of disastrous lacks in stores and settler skills.

Phillip's dealings with the peoples of the several nations in the Sydney area are also to be admired, though they are much more contentious, mainly because Phillip was also a man of his time. But as the late Inga Clendinnen wrote in her fascinating and highly readable account of Sydney's early years, *Dancing with Strangers* (2003), 'I have come to think him close to visionary in his obstinate dream of integrating these newly discovered people into British polity'.

Despite such large claims—and it really would be difficult to find a more universally admired figure in Australian colonial history—I think we are yet to understand in full the legacies of Admiral Arthur Phillip. For the remainder of this speech, I am about to figure him, by way of one example, as a great Australian educator: not so much for what he noisily taught, sometimes in violent circumstances, but for what he more quietly learned, when himself a subject of violence.

I am talking about the incident in September 1790 when Philip was speared at Manly Cove. I'm quoting Clendinnen now:

The spear took Phillip above the right collarbone, penetrated his body and, with the point glancing downwards, emerged lower down his back close to the backbone. Some of the [Aboriginal Australians]... decamped. Others flung spears... [Officer Waterhouse] struggled to break the long spear shaft which jammed agonisingly into the sand as Phillip tried to run.

But eventually they made it back to the boat for a 'two-hour' trip to Sydney Cove.

This is one of the most famous, much documented, but still obscure incidents of early colonial Sydney Town. The 'situation' arose during Phillip's attempt to reconnect with the most significant Eora warrior for British-Australian relations in the 1790s: Woollarawarre Bennelong.

Initial contact with the Eora and others had been fleeting but positive, leavened by gift exchanges, dancing, and the whistling of tunes. But there were also disputes over fishing rights and skirmishes occasioned by wandering convicts and others going after artefacts and women. In fact, unknown to them—other than in its registration as fear or apprehension in certain circumstances—all the British were constantly breaking laws in Eora country, like bumbling bulls in a streetscape of complex and delicate china shops. Or to use an analogy I'll follow up later, like children let loose with textas and crayons in the manuscript room at the British Library.

Even so, the Eora mostly avoided the settlement to the dissatisfaction of Phillip. For that reason he resorted to an age-old imperial strategy for winning friends and influencing people: kidnap.

Arabanoo was the first victim at the end of 1788, but he succumbed to the smallpox epidemic which had a catastrophic effect on Aboriginal populations in the late 1780s. Bennelong was his replacement, captured with another warrior, Collbee, who subsequently escaped. But Bennelong settled into Sydney Cove life, learning some English, and impressing with his strong personality, sense of humour and, some say, his vanity.

Just as things seemed to be going well—Phillip knew at least five of Bennelong's names, and Bennelong called him Be-anna, father—the young man escaped and was not seen for four months.

It was then that an unusually large gathering of Aboriginal men, women and children appeared at Manly Cove. People of several clans, they were there to make an expedient but highly structured, ritually sanctioned feast of a whale which had beached itself.

Now, the spearing was interpreted by the British as yet more evidence of First Nations people's infantile habits, lawlessness and unpredictability. But using multiple accounts of the incident, Inga Clendinnen has recovered quite another story.

Phillip, rushing from nearby South Head with gifts to appease his former favourite (and, admittedly, an armed guard), had got out of his boat, laid down his arms, and approached Bennelong, who was surrounded by many other warriors.

There followed some mysterious manoeuvres. Bennelong, having identified himself, shaken Phillip's hand, taken gifts, quaffed a drink, and toasted the King, laid a spear—the spear which would soon enter Phillip's body—on the ground, drawing attention to it, but refusing Phillip's request that it be made a gift (a different spear was gifted). Bennelong also displayed some new scars from other spearings, and appealed at times to witnesses among his fellow countrymen.

It was as Phillip went to leave that another man rushed forward and speared him. The rest, as they say, is history. Or rather, the lethal and 'weird' story of the entanglement of many nations in the space we call Australia.

For Phillip ordered no recriminations. And after further gift exchanges, contact with Bennelong was restored. And indeed Eora people now began, for the first time, to frequent the settlement voluntarily.

Clendinnen interprets the event as follows:

– That Bennelong's authority had waned during his capture, as evinced in

the loss of one of his wives to Collbee, and the new scars.

- That Bennelong saw the opportunity of Phillip’s appearance to take charge of relations between the British and his people, and he could do so by stage-managing a ritual spearing of Phillip.
- The latter was ‘payback’ for the wrong Phillip had done the warrior.

The brilliance of this reading rests in its turning the tables on British accounts of the Eora. They—the British—are now the ‘children’, as Clendinnen writes, ‘like infants squinting through the keyhole’ at complex Eora law and sociability in action, but hearing only ‘unintelligible babble’.

But let me take us in a slightly different direction, by focusing momentarily not on the spear, but on the whale. And by returning to my initial questions: [indicate the room] ‘What? What is this? What is it being for? What is that? What thing is it?’

For I am looking out at a gathering of British men and women, people of several clans, here to make an expedient but highly structured, ritually sanctioned feast. And, by standing up to speak with an inscription—Dr—not on my skin but in front of my name, we have communally turned this into a site of learning.

I trust we can readily see that we are all of us legatees of the curious amalgam of enlightenment and Christian values and methodologies that governed learning both for Phillip—at an early stage of the enlightenment revolution—and ourselves, at a much later stage in its course.

And our collective schooling has instilled in us some interesting assumptions about knowledge, its recording, storage and dissemination. For one thing, if we were pressed to picture learning, it would come in the form of light, the sun rising, hitting, for example, the statue of Apollo as he faces East on the front of Australia House in London; a sight I never tire of seeing. Wisdom would beam into our heads from on high: or glow like a lightbulb above an upturned brow.

We also practise turning up on time: I know Keith Newton gave you very precise instructions for when and where to be today. I gave a talk, once, on ways of approaching Australian First Nations Knowledge at a school last year and was wonderstruck anew by the quiet, almost military-style filing into the hall of the excellent students, something that is so familiar a part of our schooling as to be invisible.

We do this so that the most students can access at once the expertise of the amazing teacher—that’s me—who has travelled up from London. And it adds to the intensity, the hothouse element, of the nature of our education,

which tests you on your knowledge also in intense, timetabled situations. (There'll be a pop quiz after this talk!).

What extraordinary things this teaching and learning method has achieved. Everything I am about to describe that contrasts it, is not by any means to denigrate or to take away from those achievements. Rather I want to highlight the fundamental differences of content and method which had sustained the Eora in their cultures of learning over 60, 000 years: and to delineate just what a difficult 'problem of mind' human encounter in Australia represents; to suggest we need not solve but rather embrace and learn from that 'problem'; and to underscore the significance of Phillip's spearing in that story.

What if knowledge is not understood as light entering our heads, but earth whose interface is our feet? And what if knowledge is not something you put on, but something that grows into your whole self as from the inside out. We can all picture something of First Nations Australian body paint: think not of it being put 'on' the skin, but revealing the contours of country that is always already there under it.

For a period of five hundred years or so, until very recently, we ourselves stored knowledge by printing it on pages and binding those pages as books, making them increasingly available to an increasing market of readers. In the potential face of natural disaster, our habit is to take the books and bury them, in the vaults, say, of the British Library, securing continuity of culture and learning.

What if, instead, knowledge is stored in narratives of ancestral beings which are recorded instead in the contours of the surrounding earth? Big hills and the minute shape of leaves, or the squiggly footsteps of a tiny insect, become legible, and sustainable as storehouses of knowledge over vast tracts of time. If you have ever witnessed an elder in country, you may be struck with his concentration, her stillness, their silence. They are absorbing and thinking with vast quantities of information. For too long we've neglected to value what and how they are processing it. But it's like looking over at a reader in the British Library Reading Room. And equally it is a method and an application that can be brought into whole new other contexts.

The rights to know those stories are not so universally accessible as our own have become in the last one hundred years. But that is to protect the interests of those who will come to know, such that they are ready for the responsibilities that accompany knowing.

By contrast we test for knowledge at a particular time, whether or not you are ready to know it. So a major lesson children learn in schools is a method of data entry. Learn this thing now, and you will be tested on it then. The

moment when the penny really drops, when the ‘meaning’ of numbers or poetry, parabolas or physics, really comes home to a cellular level where it pervades ones whole body, that might be years away.

What we gain is access and breadth of knowledge, and, ideally, a life-long capacity to turn what one learned before to great and later effect. What we risk is alienation from the information at the moment it is provided, and a life-long turning away from the recognition of our own intellectual lives.

Traditional and ritualised moments of learning among First Nations peoples may seem chaotic and ad hoc by contrast. People may or may not gather at the right time, sometimes only a beached whale is enough to guarantee a certain presence, and it may or may not turn into a site of learning... and only for some of those present, only if they are deemed ready by those in the know. But if it does happen, it won’t be data entry. It will go straight into the body: to the point that knowledge feels like ‘country’ that was always already there.

As a direct consequence of Phillip’s spearing, the Eora peoples came into the Sydney settlement and began to engage with the settlers. They understood the lesson of the spear to have helped forge in him a map of their social and intellectual terrain.

In one sense, it did: he ordered no recriminations for his spearing, from which he soon healed. In another a whole new set of misunderstandings was about to begin.

But Phillip’s spearing has been very much on my mind lately as, with others at King’s College London, I attempt to create an international platform for Indigenous Australian expertise at one of the world’s great centres of learning.

This is made possible by a number of historical developments: the often painful working through undertaken in Australia of its colonial past over the last few decades; the developing relationships between communities and government which have tried to communicate—still sometimes across difficult terrain—best ways of understanding needs and knowledge; the self-evident recognition among Indigenous Australian elders that more of their knowledge of country needs to be shared in modern technological contexts for it to survive; research that has revealed the extent of Indigenous interventions in the landscape to sustain livelihoods and lines of inquiry; the energy, media savvy, and technological competence of young First Nations Australians; and the recognition across Australian universities of the significance of engaging with local communities.

But just as significant are developments in our own intellectual traditions. The abrupt recognition that some aspects of our education habits—so

effective in the past—are occasioning mental illness where they used to bring enlightenment. And the new understanding that no longer can we simply be custodians of our own, extraordinary, culture—holders in many of your cases of ‘British Knowledge’—but that we must learn ways of engaging across cultures to make the innovations which we are going to need as a species to stay on this earth at least another 60,000 years.

This involves taking some spearing of our own. Risking tradition, confronting and recognising where our own assumptions, perhaps even arrogance, have in fact occasioned, suddenly, without warning, and where they never have before, self injury.

All this is not some snow-flakey gesture built around half-formed notions of social justice. It’s part of the cutting edge of how universities are confronting the new world of knowledge development, storage and transfer, the generation of innovation. It’s part of the same process which makes them reach out to business and government, and wider communities, a new recognition of an old principle: that our trust, as centres of learning, is the ubiquitous intellectual work of every single human being: and that we are going to need the entirety of this original world wide web of knowledge to solve the very evident problems which confront us in the 21st century.

Intellectual diversity will be as necessary as biodiversity to sustaining life on this planet, which was our first, and is possibly our only, fleet for taking us into the future. But that story starts where the parable of Phillip’s spearing ends, in recognition that to reach out to another culture is to come to understand one’s own.

Min-mah-ring unne? What is this?

It is a site of learning.

What was Phillip when pierced with a pay-back spear? A model, an avatar, Admiral as admirable sign, of what it was for him, and what it will be, for us, to learn.

