

## Chapter 5

# ‘The evidence of our own past has been torn asunder’: Putting place back into urban Aboriginal history

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**Abstract:** *It is easy to demonstrate the lack of signage about the history of Aboriginal Sydney, but it is not all due to racism and apathy. Ignorance and forgetfulness are relevant too. Here I argue not for more signage, but, while continuing further research, to bring the information that we already have online into two- or three-dimensional forms.*

### Introduction

Dr Gordon Briscoe is an Indigenous historian, born in Central Australia. In 1942 he was removed, with his mother, from Central Australia, taken first to Balaklava near Adelaide and, at four years of age, placed in a church home in Mulgoa, western Sydney. In 2009, more than 60 years later, he revisited the site where 40 similar Northern Territory Aboriginal children had been institutionalised. Of the structures relating to the children who lived within the grounds, nothing remains in place: not a building, foundation or plaque. St Matthew’s Church remains and functions, but the rectory where the staff had their quarters has been demolished, the dormitory has been relocated and the grass where it once stood has been re-sown. Walking the grounds was a sad experience, but of all the painful memories, perhaps Gordon Briscoe’s sharpest reflection was the absence of any marker to the children’s existence. He reflected (Briscoe 2013):

When we talk about what Aboriginal people are sorry for, it’s the way they treated us and our past. One of the great things about history is that it’s used as an intellectual prop for Europeans. And here we see Aborigines grappling for a

past that's...been thrown asunder by white people, and they [have to] recapture some of that stuff by oral sources only, with nothing there to match it like the evidence of buildings. As you drive past this on the road from Blacktown to Mulgoa, Aboriginal history has been obliterated. And when we [are asked], what are we sorry for, we're sorry because white people simply discarded our past. And when we try and reconstruct it we are accused of being reconstructors of fallacy. The church had its property — and the thirty or forty children that were there, and their carers, and the structures that were there in place when they left — can simply be accused of implementing a scorched earth policy. So when we come back here and say, 'Hey! What's this? Our past is gone' — we can't claim this area as being part of our home. And can't convince our own people of our history here, living in New South Wales, under the Welfare Board...The Japanese [for causing us to be removed from northern Australia] and the Australians are culpable in the destruction of Aboriginal society. The place has gone? Not so much the place but the material evidence that we can talk about as part of our own healing has been torn asunder. The church might be sorry, but it never really asks us, 'What are you sorry about?' This evidence of our sorrow has been torn asunder.

Next day Gordon and I travelled to the inner city to investigate the sites of Aboriginal activity so familiar to him in the 1960s and 1970s, some of which he had helped to create. Towards the western end of George Street, the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in the 1960s was a major initiative by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to offer at first a refuge for Aborigines arriving from the bush, then a social club, employment agency and ideas-exchange network. Yet no plaque tells passers-by of this critical moment in Sydney Aboriginal history. Nor does any signage mark the site of the 'Big E', the Empress Hotel close to Redfern Station, popular as a meeting place even for non-drinkers, nor the site nearby in Botany Road where the Aboriginal Legal Service held its first planning meetings to answer police persecution of patrons of the 'Big E' in the 1970s, nor the first site of the Aboriginal Dance Theatre, nor the Aboriginal Medical Service, nor Murawina, the famous pre-school that provided free breakfasts for children, nor the Aboriginal Children's Service. These inner-city artistic and community services, some of which Gordon Briscoe helped to create, were the most important Indigenous initiatives in 40 years of urban radical reform. Not a single plaque records any of the events, or any of the sites. The one plaque in Redfern to mark an Aboriginal presence records not an organisation but a person, Mum Shirl (Shirley Smith). It reads, 'In celebration of the life of Shirley Smith, the black saint of Redfern. Who gave aid and comfort to all who asked.'

Nor does signage record post-invasion Indigenous living areas. In the inner city, until at least 1830, Aborigines congregated at Kirribilli, Lavender Bay, Woolloomooloo, Berry's Bay and Circular Quay. Further from the Central Business District (CBD), Aboriginal people by 1900 were living in hundreds of sites at Middle Harbour,

Annandale, Blackwattle Bay and Balmain, and along the Parramatta, Nepean, Hawkesbury, Lane Cove and Georges rivers. An attempt to mark the significance of these sites might perhaps begin at Saltpan Creek, a tributary of the Georges, some ten kilometres up river from Botany Bay. Here many people from southern Sydney escaped the restrictions of the heavy-handed managers of La Perouse and planned political activity. Equally significant was a farm on the other side of the river managed by the Dharawal woman Biddy Lewis, the daughter of Bungaree's wife Matora. North of the harbour one might mark the grave on Bar Island of Biddy Lewis. At the Field of Mars Reserve on the Lane Cove River, some 20 people were still living in seclusion until at least 1900, while on the Wakehurst Parkway between Oxford Falls and Narrabeen another 20 or 30 people struggled on until their camp was destroyed in the late 1950s. Major sites of Aboriginal occupation, some of which were official reserves, deserve recognition. These include the Blacktown Institution, founded by Macquarie and moved from Parramatta to this site in 1823, the land grant to Colebee in Liverpool (Tait 2003), the Sackville Reserve on the Hawkesbury River, and a farm at Rooty Hill where many western Sydney Koories gathered on weekends (Gordon Morton, interview with author, 2010). A rarity can be seen near the Hawkesbury Regional Gallery at Windsor, which commemorates the spot where Yarramundi — one of the best known early Indigenous leaders (who has many descendants today) — met Arthur Phillip. Modern places involving Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people together that deserve recognition include the University of Sydney, from where the Freedom Ride bus departed in 1965, and the starting place of the walk across the Sydney Harbour Bridge as the Reconciliation Council presented its Blueprint for the Future in May 2000.

Why are so few of these sites, so important in the history of Aboriginal Sydney, not recognised? A major reason is that even within the CBD, Sydney is not well endowed with historical signage of any kind, especially after the period of the 'pioneers'. In 1988 the Royal Australian Historical Society erected 101 plaques to celebrate historical places, people and events — only one was dedicated to an Aboriginal (Bennelong). Of the three dozen commemorative discs embedded in the Opera House walkway, only one refers to an Aboriginal person — Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), who was a Brisbane Murri. In 2004 some 40, mostly twentieth century, sites were marked on each side of Darlinghurst Road, Kings Cross, but none referred to an Aboriginal presence. A plaque to the memory of Aboriginal people who found their way to Kings Cross (who were often members of the Stolen Generations) would be an appropriate addition to the existing plaque that marks the site of the Arabian cafe, Darlinghurst Road, where many of them used to gather. Joy Janaka Williams, a Wiradjuri woman who unsuccessfully sued the New South Wales Government, was one of them. Although the Australian Hall, in which the 1938 Day of Mourning took place, is preserved and marked, no signage exists at the former homes or workplaces of Sydney identities of the CBD — Charles Perkins, Bennelong, Colebee, Barangaroo,

Matora, Patyegeerang, Queen Gooseberry, Ken Brindle, Roy Carroll, Chicka Dickson, Muriel Merritt or Louisa Ingram. We can conclude this short and dismal survey by noting the lack of acknowledgment that Aboriginal people were everywhere present throughout the CBD since 1788, not only in their own society but participating in much of the life of the community — in the Wayside Chapel, in the 1970s Green Bans, as watermen, longshoremen, factory workers, sex workers, entertainers and domestic servants. It is true that in 1988 some local councils tried to make amends. The North Sydney Council lists five plaques associated with Aboriginal people, but all relate to pre-invasion times and mostly make the same point about the generalised existence rather than actual locations of the Cammeraygal (Gai-Mariagal) living areas. Other councils have perhaps felt ambiguous about commemorating town camps destroyed by their own officials, such as the Gully in Katoomba, destroyed in the mid-1950s, which was declared an Aboriginal Place in November 2002 (Johnson 2007). Recently installed plaques often carry the implication that the Indigenous presence ceased in 1788. Yet no obvious reason explains why the site of Bungaree's farm in Mosman, presented to him by Macquarie, and whose general location has never been lost, remained unmarked for 150 years. Apparently nobody thought it worth the trouble to mark.

Most local historians will be able to name half-a-dozen sites of post-invasion Indigenous interest, but their presence vanishes after the first chapter of many older local histories, sometimes even after the introduction. Inertia, ignorance and contempt for the Aboriginal past are factors in the vanishing Indigenous urban past.

It is certainly true that a great deal of information is still being unearthed week by week. The authors of *Aboriginal Sydney: A guide to important places of the past and present* (Hinkson and Harris 2000) did not have access to new information on many of the sites listed here, or of others such as Bungaree's 1801 town camp in Kirribilli. Both Aboriginal descendants and scholars have learned much in the past decade on northside sites at Beauty Point, Anderson Park, Manly or Brookvale. We will never have a complete list of significant community sites, such as annual gatherings of extended families to the 1970s on the Cattai Creek or Patonga, or smaller semi-permanent sites where half-a-dozen people were living until moved on, at White Bay, Phillip Bay or Cockle Creek, Asquith. The Australian Hall in Elizabeth Street needs formal recognition (Hinkson and Harris 2000:22), as does Rehoboth, the first home of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (Maynard 2008:46), and St David's Church Hall, Surry Hills, site of the first Australian Aboriginal Civil Rights Convention (Maynard 2008:53). Gandangara community members using an echo sounder have located the original Burragorang waterhole connected to the Giant Kangaroo Dreaming, and hence several of the now-submerged government reserves that once occupied some of the Burragorang Valley floor (*Blue Mountains Gazette*, 27 May 2009).

## Online recognition of historic sites

Considering the past disinterest of many councils and the lengthy research, bureaucratic processes and the expense of installing site markers, the World Wide Web would seem a logical alternative location for site-specific information. Yet a search of Sydney clan and community sites reveals some surprising lacunae. The ‘Darug Country’ web page of the Darug Tribal Aboriginal Corporation (2006a) lists equivalent modern and Aboriginal names. Another page states that ‘The Darug Language’ (rather than site identification) ‘is the defining reference for the Darug people’, and hence identification of the Darug Country ‘is defined by the language usage of the people who lived in the Sydney Basin, likewise other tribal groups are identified by their language usage’ (Darug Tribal Aboriginal Corporation 2006b). A third page of the Darug website invites attention to 11 aspects of Darug life, most of which concern pre-invasion culture, but none is place specific. The ‘Welcome to Barani’ website deals with the history of the Eora people and investigates issues concerning First Contact, government policy, organisations, events, people, church, employment and Western science — but makes no close identification with many of the known post-invasion sites, even of the harbour, such as Rose Bay or Woolloomooloo ([www.sydneymarani.com.au](http://www.sydneymarani.com.au)). The Cadigal Wangal website lists half-a-dozen places of significance, but only some are pre-invasion sites (<http://cadigalwangal.org.au/clientsite>). Such a lack of information is perplexing. There seems little reason to suppose that communities want to keep secret formerly well-known and well-publicised locations such as the Sackville Reserve on the Hawkesbury River (Brook 1994).

The absence of specific information about what happened and exactly where it happened — whether recognised by a physical place marker or by an online site sponsored by local council or a land council — involves more than inattention or deliberate exclusion. It involves more than the difficulty and cost of creating and maintaining websites. Somehow much information has been lost. Much information was lost carelessly: until at least 1927 local residents were pretty certain where Bennelong was buried in James Squires’ farm in modern Putney (Duff 2011). And the reasons are clear enough. The disruption of families by the Protection and Welfare Boards, town camp destruction and child removals, the denial or obscuring of Aboriginal descent within families, and the determined destruction of sites by shire and parish councils have consigned very much place-specific information to oblivion. Yet as we have discovered in the University of Sydney project ‘A History of Aboriginal Sydney’, an enormous amount of information remains to be rediscovered in parish maps, Aboriginal oral histories, family photographs, local historical societies, private letters and the reminiscences of older residents. The historical research of Jim Smith (2008), Jack Brook (1994), Jim Kohen (2006), Keith Vincent Smith (1999) and Heather Goodall (Goodall and Cadzow 2009) indicates just how much site-specific information is recoverable.

## Exploring urban identities and histories

Here are some examples of historical information relating to particular sites, from the History of Aboriginal Sydney website:

- Using records held in local libraries (History of Aboriginal Sydney 2013a)  
Cremorne point...  
At Christmas time Aboriginal people come in large numbers to camp at Cremorne Reserve in Cameragal country. They receive the annual gift of a blanket each, given by the government. Traces of Christmas feasts have been found in the shell middens around the caves (Bennett 1960, Manuscript, Local History section, North Sydney Library).
- Using non-Aboriginal oral history (History of Aboriginal Sydney 2013b)  
[A resident at Pymble recalled that Robert Pymble the elder] related that members of a Koori clan periodically travelled from Lane Cove River at a point near Burns Bay on the way to Cowan, 'by way of what is now known [as] Cowan Road. They always break the journey and camp on Wright's Hill, near the present reservoir at Pymble...' He continued that the hill beyond the present situation is called by those campers 'Turramurra' or 'Turraburra' the word meant 'big hill'. ('Reminiscences of JG Edwards 1843-1927', Evening News, July 1921)
- Using parish maps  
Cuthill Farm Maps of Holsworthy parish of 1913 and pre-1899 in Sydney pinpoint the land grant on Mill Creek referred to above (Goodall and Kadzow 2009).
- Using Aboriginal oral history (History of Aboriginal Sydney 2013c)  
Rooty Hill Farm, Oral testimony by Gordon Morton, a resident in the 1940s-50s, has revealed the precise location of the estate and buildings mentioned above, much frequented by Darug people until the early 1960s.

Granted that these historic places exist, can be located and are desired to be recognised by Indigenous communities or families, as well as by many non-Indigenous people, how can this information be deployed most usefully to repatriate Aboriginal knowledge to the families and to educate the general community?

## The History of Aboriginal Sydney website

This project, which in 2010 focused on the northern coastal region, will ultimately present a history of all of Indigenous Sydney. The website locates key and minor events on an interactive timeline and links them to themes such as 'routes and

pathways', 'community leaders', and 'families and children'. The most useful theme in terms of linking an event to a person is through location. This is achieved via an interactive map of Sydney, with global positioning system (GPS) locations of significant sites, a process which seemed the most logical and accessible method of sharing Aboriginal history where site-specificity is the first requirement. Thus at location 13, Biddy Lewis' farm on Marramarra Creek, Hawkesbury River is the entry (History of Aboriginal Sydney 2013d):

A land grant of about one hectare on Marramarra Creek was the first permanent home of Biddy Lewis (also known as Sarah Wallace). Title to the land was granted to her in 1835, though Biddy and her husband John Lewis (also known as John Ferdinand) may have lived on the site for some years previously.

Biddy was the daughter of Matora, wife of the Sydney Aboriginal identity Bungaree. In the absence of clear genealogy, it is also held by some of her descendants that Biddy Lewis was Matora's grand-daughter.

Biddy Lewis was born in about 1803. Her death certificate names her father as 'Richard Wallace, Aboriginal', but some of her descendants believe that he may have been British. It is said that the couple met while Lewis, a convict, was working at the farm granted to Bungaree by Macquarie in 1815 at Georges Head, and while Biddy was living there.

Biddy Lewis died in 1880 and was buried on Bar Island, at the mouth of Marramarra Creek. Her grave has not been located.

From the rich river flats on Marramarra Creek the family produced shingles for roofing, cabbage-tree grass for thatching, lime for mortar, fish and oysters. Biddy bore seven surviving children, mostly born on this site, some of whom took up land further down Marramarra creek. Elizabeth, for example, lived with her husband Israel Rose at Doughboy Beach further down the creek. Another child, Catherine, married Joseph Benns and lived on Scotland Island.

The site today can be visited by water during very high tides, or by the Marramarra Ridge walking track. The cleared spaces of the farm, and those of other land grants nearby, are easily discernable [sic] today. An adjoining grant, was probably abandoned in the 1950s, still has an orange orchard.

There is an identical entry in the online Dictionary of Sydney (Read 2011a).

Such information needed intensive research, community and family consultation, a site visit, and terrestrial and aerial photography, as well as the technical work to design and upload the information.

Yet this kind of precise location finding, interesting though it is, has limitations. So a progression from the two-dimensional actuality of the website GPS reference to a three-dimensional historical reconstruction was planned. For instance, the current

reference to the town camp at which Aboriginal people were living on Narrabeen Lagoon is as follows (History of Aboriginal Sydney 2013e):

Sydney Academy of Sport

The site was the last community Aboriginal town camp to survive in the northern Sydney suburbs. Probably, before the British invasion, Narrabeen Lagoon was one of the many coastal occupation sites offering seasonal shelter, fish and wetland resources. Until perhaps 1850, the western end of the Lake was a community and secular living area standing in relation to the higher country of the Collaroy plateau above. This higher and less accessible country was used for ceremonial and educational purposes by the Gai-Mariagal. Dennis Foley, a Gai-mariagal (Camaragal) descendant, describes the area as ‘the heart of our world’.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries most of the other northern town camp sites were resumed for housing or recreation by state and shire governments. Similar sites at Quakers Hat Bay, Mosman and Brookvale were probably gone by 1930. The Narrabeen site survived longer because of its inaccessibility, and was not seriously threatened until the opening of the Wakehurst Parkway in 1946.

By the end of the Second World War the Narrabeen Lagoon town camp had become a more or less permanent refuge for Koori people having kin connections throughout the north-coastal areas, as well [as] along the Hawkesbury River. Dennis Foley, a Gai-mariagal, remembers visiting the site with his uncles or mother in the 1950s, by which time perhaps fewer than twenty people were in permanent residence. Often his mother brought a bag of flour or a cake.

During the 1950s a thirty hectare site was developed at the National Fitness Centre, including several ovals and accommodation for more than fifty people. The town camp was seen as having no value, and in keeping with the assimilationist thrust of the day, the humpies were destroyed and the people forcibly trucked to the western suburbs.

No signage today records the presence of the camp within what is now the Sydney Academy of Sport.

A Google Earth reference pinpoints the site in relation to the lagoon. (See also, on the website, two videos of Professor Dennis Foley explaining his personal connection with the Narrabeen town camp (Foley 2012a, 2012b), and the entry in the online Dictionary of Sydney (Read 2011b)). How, though, did the site *function*? The aerial photograph that can be found on the grid-reference in Google Earth does not, and cannot, depict *relationships* to the Narrabeen/Collaroy suburban people who purchased the community’s marine produce and supplied its physical wants. Nor is an economic relationship easily demonstrated on a map. Neither photograph nor map can reflect meaningfully the ongoing relationship between members of the community and ceremonial, spiritual and educational country that lay in the plateau country to the

east. Nor can it show the relationships between the community members or towards nearby Aboriginal non-residents, nor to the white community generally. Nor can it demonstrate when and why a seasonal resource site had become a permanent town camp, nor where the people had come from, nor where, after the camp was destroyed in 1959, where they were taken. We hope, then, in further development of Sydney Aboriginal history, to create a three-dimensional modelling of the Narrabeen camp to demonstrate these relationships — through eye-level views towards and away from the camp, taking into account the 1950s dredging of the lake, sand-mining, the post-war upgrading of the Wakehurst Parkway, the changing local economy, the changing environment on the lagoon and the increasing non-Aboriginal population (see also Read 2010).

Gordon Briscoe may never be able to persuade the parishioners of St Matthew's, nor the Penrith councillors, to erect a plaque in memory of the Mulgoa children. But an online interactive map pinpointing the site and its buildings, built on oral histories, official and newspaper discussions, period photographs, and videoed interviews with Briscoe and other former inmates, would surely help to replace the lost history he feels so sharply. A three-dimensional reconstruction of the Mulgoa institution as it was in 1945 would help to explain why the site has been destroyed so completely.

And when we try and reconstruct it we are accused of being reconstructors of fallacy. The church...can simply be accused of implementing a scorched earth policy. So when we come back here and say, Hey! What's this? Our past is gone — we can't claim this area as being part of our home. And can't convince our own people of our history here, living in [New South Wales], under the Welfare Board...The material evidence that we can talk about as part of our own healing has been torn asunder...This evidence of our sorrow has been torn asunder. (Briscoe 2013)

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