

## ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS ABROAD 1606-1875

### John Mulvaney

Thirteen Aboriginal cricketers disembarked at Gravesend on 13 May 1868 to commence a 47-match tour of England. In British sporting history, it probably was the first overseas team to tour England. It also constituted the largest Aboriginal group to visit nineteenth century Europe. All men returned home, except for King Cole (Brippoki), who died in London from tuberculosis.<sup>1</sup>

Coincidentally, it also was from Gravesend on 13 May 1787 that Governor Arthur Phillip's fleet sailed to occupy Australia. Upon Phillip's retirement in 1792 he took with him to England two Aborigines. Bennelong and Yemmurrawannie presumably were the first Aborigines to visit Europe. Bennelong returned to Sydney, although Yemmurrawannie died in England in 1794 of a respiratory infection.<sup>2</sup> Like the cricketers, these first Australian tourists voluntarily accompanied their patron into the unknown.

Unfortunately they were not the first Aborigines to voyage overseas, because they were preceded by the victims of kidnapping, brutally transported by European explorers. This survey attempts to draw together the fragmentary sources for this forlorn one-way traffic. At the same time, it indicates the extent to which Aboriginal people voluntarily travelled to Southeast Asia on Macassan praus. Those people who eventually returned from Indonesia must have brought an intellectual baggage of enriching cultural influences and a fund of exotic tales.

No attempt is made here to trace or assess the nineteenth-century travels of those voluntary exiles who accompanied missionaries or other patrons, although it merits investigation. Russo touched upon the saga of three boys from New Norcia taken to Rome in 1848-49 by Benedictine monks.<sup>3</sup> Others accompanied sea explorers on major voyages, as was the case with Flinders on the *Investigator*.

Luis Vaez Torres was the first maritime explorer to leave a record of blackbirding in Australian waters. He spent several worrying weeks during 1606 working his vessel through the uncharted straits which later bore his name. After a voyage which began in the Louisiade Archipelago and included landings on Torres Strait islands, Torres wrote to the Spanish king from the Philippines.

*Emeritus Professor John Mulvaney, CMG, is a Visiting Fellow in the Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University. For many years he practised Prehistory, first in the Research School of Pacific Studies and then in the Faculty of Arts. He is well known for his many publications on the prehistory of Australia.*

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1 Mulvaney and Harcourt 1988:92.

2 McBryde 1989:21-23.

3 Russo 1980:128, 136-48.

I captured in all this land twenty persons of different nations, in order with them to make a better report to Your Majesty. They give much information of other peoples, though as yet they do not make themselves well understood.<sup>4</sup>

It must be concluded that these captives included Torres Strait Islanders, particularly so if Brett Hilder was correct in claiming that Torres followed a route which took him close to Cape York and away from Papua. Spate concluded that Hilder's 'case may be taken as proven'.<sup>5</sup> That the prisoners reached Manila must be inferred from this letter by Torres. Whether they reached the Spanish court is unknown. If so, they were presented to royalty almost two centuries before Bennelong was presented to King George III. It is most unlikely, however, given the terrible seaboard mortality at that period and the length of time involved. Lines of communication with Spain then lay across the Pacific to Acapulco, and across Mexico to its Atlantic coast. In 1676 even a letter from Manila took five years to reach Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Dutch seamen had landed on a northern Cape York beach six months before Torres cautiously passed that way. Explicit evidence concerning Dutch activities is first manifest in 1623, when Jan Carstensz cruised several hundred kilometres down Cape York's western coastline. In a violent exchange north of Edward River on 18 April 1623, the crew tricked the peaceful and curious inhabitants:

... our men accordingly diverted their attention by showing them iron and beads, and espying vantage, seized one of the blacks by a string which he wore round his neck, and carried him off to the pinnace.<sup>7</sup>

At the Archer River two weeks later they repeated the same deception. An unarmed man was 'seized round the waist, while the quartermaster put a noose round his neck, by which he was dragged to the pinnace'; another man was shot. Near Mapoon on 8 May a wounded Aboriginal was captured, but he died while being rowed out to the *Pera*. Later, when Carstensz wrote his report for his Dutch East Indies Company employers in Batavia, he referred to the two Aboriginal prisoners. 'I hope that with God's help Your Worships will in time get information to whose utterances I would beg leave to refer you.'<sup>8</sup> God's chief assistance, it may be inferred, could have been in the form of a linguist.

Scholars are indebted to R.M. Wiltgen for rescuing from obscurity a significant reference to Aborigines abroad.<sup>9</sup> In 1676 a Dominican priest, Victorio Riccio, wrote from Manila to the Cardinals of what is known today as the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelisation of Nations. Riccio (1621-85) had arrived in the Philippines in 1648, and by 1652 reported his expectation to voyage to 'Terra Australis which they call Unknown'. Instead, his superiors sent him to Amoy and Formosa. He travelled widely in that region on Dutch ships and returned to Manila in 1666 on a Dutch vessel. His contacts with Dutch seamen must have informed him about recent Australian discoveries. They were a topical subject, as Tasman had skirted around the northern coastline in 1644, while the wreck of

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4 Stevens 1930:231; Sharp 1963:25.

5 Hilder 1980:87ff.; Spate 1979:139.

6 Wiltgen 1981:35.

7 Heeres 1899:36.

8 Ibid:39-40.

9 Wiltgen 1981:35.

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the *Vergulden Draak* in 1656 prompted six voyages to Western Australian shores over the two following years, in a vain attempt to rescue the crew.<sup>10</sup>

On 4 June 1676 Riccio wrote to Rome. He attached a map which he drew of Terra Australis. The original of this map was displayed in the Vatican pavilion at the 1988 Brisbane Expo. The second half of the second paragraph of his letter, written in Spanish, is translated as follows:

...At present I am making many concrete preparations to launch a rare mission, one that will make Your Eminences rejoice very much. I have in mind to discover and enter Terra Australis, which they call the unknown and which is the fifth part of the world, a land containing innumerable kingdoms and peoples. With this letter I am sending a rough sketch of it. And since there is no place in the world subject to the Catholic faith from which one could launch the said mission with greater facility or with less difficulty than from here, as is evident from my map, I therefore wish to go to these kingdoms in order to inform them that God exists. It is a pity that in such a vast part of the world no one up to now has heard the most holy name of God mentioned. Here in Manila there are some men, natives from the first shores of the said Terra Australis, taken captive by the Dutch who discovered a part of the said land. They are adust in colour, some are black, and they are men of courage and strength. And they say that inside the land one can walk for more than two years without seeing the sea, and that there are peoples who are white and blond like us. And this is credible because they being in that southern part [of the hemisphere] are at the same latitude in relation to the Antarctic Pole as we are to the Arctic Pole.<sup>11</sup>

Riccio's request to missionise Australia took five years to reach Rome. If any response resulted, it may have reached Manila only after Riccio's death in 1685. More relevant in this context is Riccio's reference to the Dutch being responsible for the men from Terra Australis. It may be accepted that at least some of these 'natives' were Aboriginal Australians. How and when did they reach Manila? Possibly they were kidnapped during Tasman's 1644 expedition with three ships, but unfortunately no journals survive. Alternatively, perhaps they were captured on the Western Australian coast during the series of 1656-58 voyages, but details of those voyages are sketchy.

Almost a century elapsed before there is further reference to Aborigines in Southeast Asia. Lieutenant J.E. Gonzal visited western Cape York in 1756 on the *de Rijder*. When he landed on a beach north of Weipa friendly Aboriginal men led his crew to fresh water. In what the Aborigines would have interpreted as a reciprocal gesture, they were 'treated to some arrack with sugar, they began to make merry and even struck up a kind of chant'. After establishing such good relations, Gonzal resorted to treachery. 'Our men went ashore again for the purpose of attempting to get hold of one or two natives'. The opportunity arose two days later, when the trusting men set aside their weapons and drank more arrack.

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<sup>10</sup> Sharp 1963:91-6.

<sup>11</sup> I acknowledge the co-operation of Reverend Dr Ralph M. Wiltgen, SVD, Collegio del Verbo Divino, Rome, who sent me his translation of the Italian version of the letter, on 27 October 1981. The source: Archives of the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelisation of Nations (Rome) *Scritture originali riferite nelle Congregazioni Generali* vol.493 (1681), fol.235v-236r.

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ualor y fuerzas y dicen que tierra adentro se fue  
 de caminada mas de dos dias sin ver la mar y  
 que las montañas blancas y rubias conio nos otras  
 y es creible, porq. están por esta parte del Sur  
 en a tierra grande hasta el Polo Antártico. y  
 en correspondencia del Cono de los nevados, que es  
 el Antártico.

Luego como se ponga en expedición es necesario la Au-  
 toridad de esta Reg. Cont. y que solicite al Rey la or-  
 den para que el Governador de esta Isla no lo  
 embaraque sino en resaca ayuden y fomenten. y  
 asi se le pague bien a don Juan de S. J. me espere  
 por la parte de esta resaca y unq. me muera en  
 ella, morare en una acción muy del serui. de Dios.

La Prefectura Apost. ha de venir de firme y que la pue-  
 da sustituir en caso de muerte, o de en-  
 fermedad grave, y representen las facultades  
 de que se goza en la Prefectura que me uirare  
 la Isla hermosa no espere para que se le  
 conceda, ni en otro papel a parte. El señor  
 don Juan ha movido con efraimense el corazón de  
 Dios para que se cumpla (si con breue) mis deseos.

Ahora me halla en mi tierra porq. me dende-  
 nen en esta metropoli de Philipinas trahela por  
 el Sr. don Juan de S. Domingo: mientras que se des-  
 ponga las cosas y viene la Reg. i. acordos me  
 espere con q. estoy libre, y unq. tengo 58 años  
 de edad conq. se Dios me dora fuerzas y uida  
 para conseguir esta Empresa, porq. toda la de-  
 fensa está en abrir la tierra abierta. y sal-  
 para quien salire por ella. La Religión del P. S.  
 Juan me ha prometido acompañarme, si queda  
 este negocio. El Sr. Com. J. Juan, esta todo

Page of Riccio's letter to Rome, 1676.  
 SOCG vol.493 (1681) f.236r.

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One of them was seized and taken to the ship. South of Weipa some days after this episode they also captured a youth. Both captives evidently reached Batavia.<sup>12</sup>

Both unfortunates may have survived in Batavia as curiosities. Lord Monboddo [James Burnet] published the first volume of his *Of the origin and progress of language* in 1774. In order to prove his eccentric notions concerning linguistic origins and the low intellect of people living 'in the lowest state of barbarity', he cited the following: 'And I know a gentleman who saw in Batavia two savages brought from New Holland, that appeared to him to be perfectly stupid and idiotical...'<sup>13</sup>

### Willing Passengers

From around this date a trickle of adventurous Aboriginal people visited eastern Indonesia, mainly Macassar, on a voluntary basis. Probably they found it easier to travel there as crewmen on Macassan trepanging praus, however, than to make the return voyage. The following is not claimed to be a comprehensive record, and for its repercussions on Aboriginal society consult Macknight<sup>14</sup> and R.M. and C.H. Berndt<sup>15</sup>

Macknight cites a Dutch source which establishes an Aboriginal presence in Macassar by 1824. Their physical identity is obvious in the observation of the visiting Dutch governor-general: 'they are very black, tall in stature, with curly hair, not frizzy like that of the Papuan peoples, long thin legs, thick lips and, in general, are quite well built'. Half a century later, in 1876, there were said to be seventeen Aborigines in Macassar.<sup>16</sup>

The British settlements at Raffles Bay (1827-29) and Port Essington (1838-49) provide documentary evidence for the extent of Aboriginal voyaging to Indonesia. The unpublished diary of Captain Collet Barker, commandant at Raffles Bay from September 1828 to its abandonment in August 1829, offers significant comment. On 2 April 1829 when a prau entered harbour Barker questioned its captain. He was told that they were returning to Macassar from further east. Barker noted the following information:

Described a very good run of blacks (in the Gulf of Carpentaria as well as I could make out) who wore clothes spoke a little Malay drank arrack never stole from them and made themselves useful in various ways helping them to get wood water turtle etc. These people would come on board men women and children before they came to anchor. Several had been at Macassar probably 100 of them, some were there now. They were useful sailors. These good blacks described the blacks here as very bad. The parts they inhabited was from two to four days sail about as far as from Port Essington to Timor...<sup>17</sup>

On 7 May 1829 six praus appeared. 'In the last prau,' Barker recorded, 'I understood there were four of the good blacks who were going to Macassar.' On the following day they came ashore and Barker met them. Evidently they later stole two Macassan dugout

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12 Heeres 1899:94, 97.

13 Burnet 1774:201.

14 Macknight 1976.

15 Berndt and Berndt 1954:49-90.

16 Macknight 1976:86.

17 Collet Barker, journal at Raffles Bay, NSW Archives, 9/2747 reel 2654. In collaboration with Neville Green and Bob Reece, I hope to publish an edited transcript of this and its companion journal, King George Sound, 1830-31.

canoes, however, and headed back home. This is the same incident reported by Dr Thomas Braidwood Wilson, who arrived at the settlement in June.<sup>18</sup>

As naval survey vessels were based at Port Essington, several publications by officers refer to Macassan trepanning activities and Aboriginal seafaring. John Lort Stokes, captain of HMS *Beagle*, applied his Port Essington knowledge in an unusual manner. In discussing George Grey's Kimberley exploration and the origin of what we now term Wandjina paintings, Stokes assumed Asian influences. 'We know,' he observed, 'that the Australian not infrequently abandons his country, and his mode of life, to visit the Indian Archipelago', on Macassan praus.<sup>19</sup> J.B. Jukes was aboard HMS *Fly* in 1845 when a prau disembarked a local Aboriginal who had sailed for Macassar the previous year. 'This we are told was not an uncommon occurrence, as the natives of Port Essington are very fond of going abroad to see the world...'<sup>20</sup>

Ludwig Leichhardt also arrived at Port Essington in 1845. He observed, of Aborigines, that the trepanners 'frequently take some of them to the islands'.<sup>21</sup> In using such information a caution seems necessary. In such a small, closed community there are strong possibilities that a recycling factor operated. That is, an observed example by one author became accepted common knowledge. A further problem arises with the evidence of John Sweatman, on HMS *Bramble*. His ship and the *Fly* were associated. Allen and Corris, in their edition of Sweatman's journal, emphasise that he had access to the journal of Jukes and frequently plagiarised it.<sup>22</sup> Compare the statement quoted from Jukes, above, with Sweatman's record that Aborigines 'are fond of travelling about and frequently go in the Bughese prahus to Macassar'.<sup>23</sup>

In that same passage, however, Sweatman added information about Aborigines crewing on European ships. 'Several', he reported, had visited Sydney on merchant vessels; there were five Aborigines in the crew of the *Heroine* when it was wrecked in 1846. When the *Bramble* sailed to the Kai Islands that year for provisions, Jim Crow, a boy about nine years of age, 'came for the fun of the thing'.<sup>24</sup>

Probably the most travelled Port Essington man was the literate Neimnal, who served for a period as assistant to J. MacGillivray, a naturalist on HMS *Rattlesnake*. He first visited New Guinea and later he voyaged to Java and Singapore, sailing the southern route around Australia to Sydney, before returning home on HMS *Bramble* via Torres Strait.<sup>25</sup> Much travelled Aborigines might be met in unexpected places. A prospecting party working in inland eastern Arnhem Land during 1875 met a man who had visited Macassar and Singapore; he spoke some Malay and English.<sup>26</sup>

Aboriginal Australia has suffered from ill-conceived notions about its past. One has been the total isolation of this continent from outside ideas; another is its failure to escape local territorial confines. Recent decades have witnessed the documentation of complex and

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18 Wilson 1835:80.

19 Stokes 1846:I, 211.

20 Jukes 1847:I, 359.

21 Webster 1986:24.

22 Allen and Corris 1977:xxii.

23 Ibid:144.

24 Ibid:118, 148.

25 MacGillivray 1852:I, 154-7; Allen and Corris 1977:144.

26 Macknight 1976:85.

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far-flung ceremonial exchange cycles and Dreaming pathways within the continent. The documentation reviewed above hints at contacts beyond Australia's shores which may have played an exciting and innovative role. The evidence from the seventeenth century also establishes that the sad pattern of gross violation of human rights has a history extending back far beyond the British colonisation of this continent.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Some aspects of this article are amplified in my book *Encounters in place: outsiders and Aboriginal Australians 1606-1985*. St Lucia, 1989.

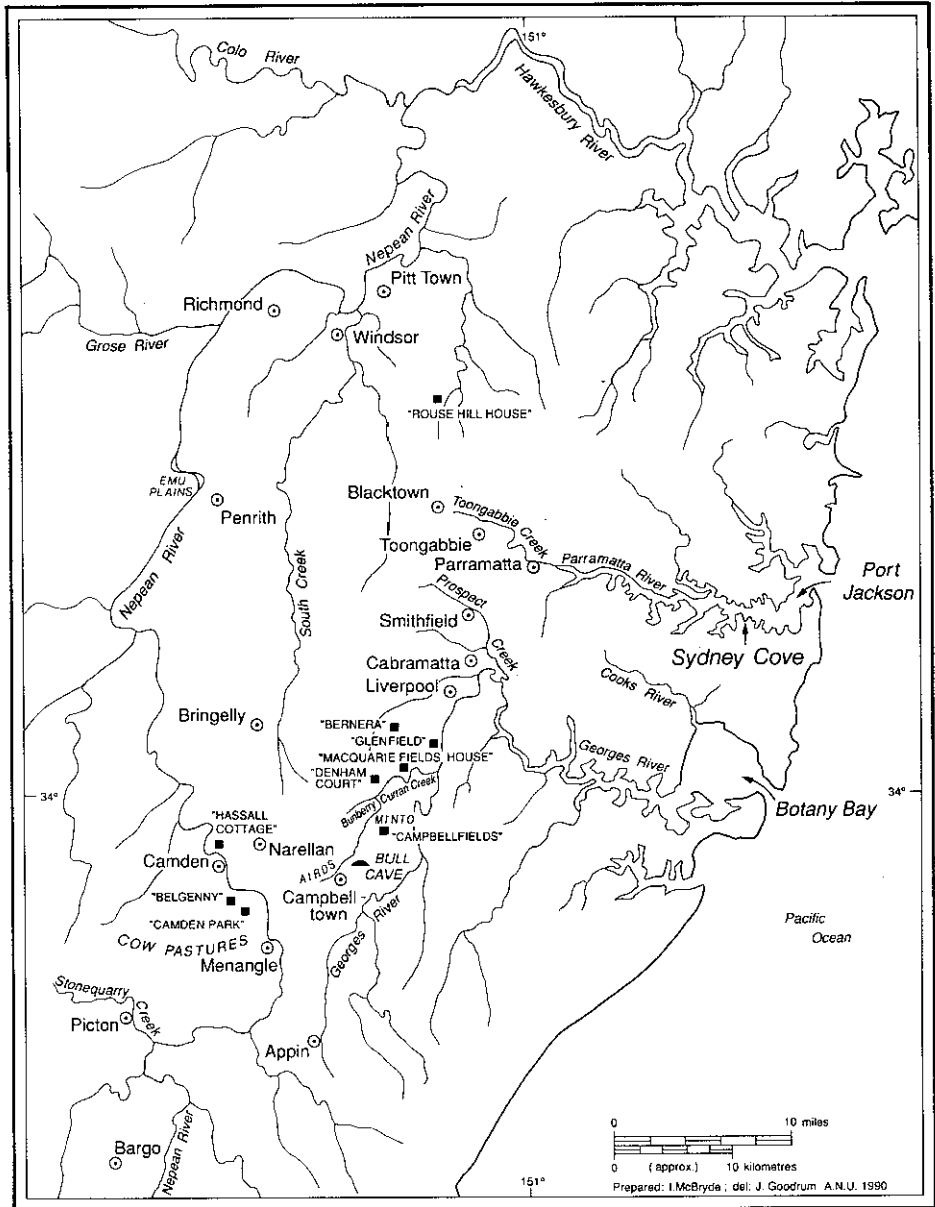


Figure 1. The Hawkesbury, Campbelltown and Appin districts in the early nineteenth century.