# THE TIMELESS LAND

*by*

ELEANOR DARK

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FOR MY SON
MICHAEL DARK

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My main sources of information have been the published journals of members of the First Fleet, and the historical records of N.S.W. For my descriptions of aboriginal life and customs I have found material in the works of Professor A. P. Elkin, Dr. Phyllis Kaberry, Dame Mary Gilmore, Dr. Herbert Basedow, Mrs. Daisy Bates, C.B.E., and others. My grateful acknowledgments are also due to the Trustees of the Mitchell Library, Sydney, for permission to quote from the journal of Lieut. Ralph Clark, and from a letter of the Rev. Richard Johnson.

## PREFACE

My aim has been to give a picture of the first settlement of Sydney, which is always true in broad outline, and often in detail, but I make no claim to strict historical accuracy either in my dealings with the white men or the black. With regard to the latter, strict accuracy would be hardly possible. There are many accounts of these people in the journals of those who came to Australia with the First Fleet; but as was inevitable between races unacquainted with each other's languages, and unfitted to appreciate the significance of each other's customs, there were constant misunderstandings, and in the light of research which has been made in more recent years, one is bound to regard some of their statements with suspicion. That they recorded faithfully what they saw cannot be questioned; that they placed the correct interpretation upon it is not so certain. The aborigines, too, have a strongly developed sense of humour, and one cannot help suspecting that the early colonists had their legs frequently and diligently pulled.

Of the tribes which lived on the shores of Port Jackson at the time of the white men's arrival, less is known than of almost any other tribes, for the obvious reason that, being the first to mingle with the invaders, they were the first to disintegrate, and die out. Therefore, where I have wanted to introduce songs, words, legends, customs, for which I have been able to find no record for these particular groups, I have borrowed shamelessly from other tribes, often far distant. The result, from an ethnologist's point of view, must be quite horrible; but I am not really very repentant. These people were all of one race, and it is the quality of the race which I have tried to suggest, without regard to minor tribal differences. The important thing has seemed to me to be that these were the *kind* of songs they sang, the *kind* of legends they loved, the *kind* of customs and beliefs by which they ordered their lives.

A great deal of research has been done among them, and many books have been written to describe their way of life. What I have read has only served to make me increasingly conscious of my abysmal ignorance, and I must emphatically insist that my portrayal is not intended to be taken too literally. Many intensely important aspects of tribal life have been touched upon lightly, or left out altogether. The question of native "religion," in particular, has been here enormously over-simplified; to treat it fully (even if I felt myself qualified to do so) would have left no room in the book for anything else. The belief in the existence of a Supreme Being is vouched for by many authorities, as is also

the belief that after death the spirit passes to the sky—but these are mere fragments of a huge and complicated structure of spiritual belief, embracing the mythology which is, in a sense, the history-book of the aborigine, keeping him in touch with the "eternal dream-time," the unseen world from which he came, and to which he hopes to return.

Certain mistakes made by the colonists when they were first learning the meanings of aboriginal words have been ignored, as they would only be confusing here. In some cases I have deliberately used an incorrect word simply because it has become the familiar one—as, for instance, "birrahlee," and "kangaroo." Kangaroo was a word quite unknown to the Port Jackson natives, being one which Captain Cook had learned from the Queensland tribes, and they naturally assumed it was a white man's word. Indeed, Tench records that one of them, upon first seeing cattle, inquired whether these were kangaroos?

The beautiful lament which I have borrowed for the occasion of Barangaroo's death belongs by right, I believe, to a Western Australian tribe.

Among the native characters many are historical, Bennilong being, of course, the best known of them; the eastern point of Sydney Cove, upon which Governor Phillip built him his hut in 1790, is still called Bennilong Point. It will be obvious that my account of his life before the arrival of the First Fleet must be purely imaginary; after its arrival I have stuck to facts, but interpreted them freely. Booron, Nanbarree, Colbee, Caruey, Arabanoo, Barangaroo, Ballederry, Gooroobarooboolo, and several others are historical figures. Tirrawuul, Wunbula, and Cunnembeillee are imaginary.

The Australian Aborigine had great virtues; in a fairly extensive reading I have been able to discover no vices save those which they learned from the white invaders of their land. Some of their customs seem cruel to us. Some of ours, such as flogging, horrified them. The race is nearly gone, and with it will go something which the "civilised" world has scorned too easily. I do not want to be taken for a "back-to-nature" advocate, nor for one who, in these disillusioned times, regards our own civilisation as inevitably doomed; but I do believe that we, nine-tenths of whose "progress" has been a mere elaboration and improvement of the technique, as opposed to the art of living, might have learned much from a people who, whatever they may have lacked in technique, had developed that art to a very high degree. "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"—to us a wistful phrase, describing a far-away goal—sums up what was, to them, a taken-for-granted condition of their existence.

With regard to the white men and their doings there has been little need to embroider. The difficulty has been, rather, to choose and eliminate from the *embarras de richesse* which is available



in the early records of the colony. The characters of many of the officers are to be discovered between the lines of their journals and letters; I have tried to portray them as I found them there, realising that another student of those same documents might find quite different men. It is not easy to catch more than a glimpse here and there of Arthur Phillip the man in the voluminous dispatches and correspondence of Arthur Phillip the Governor. The comments of his contemporaries shed a little light—his actions and the results of his actions more still. Certain qualities appear too obviously to be questioned—physical courage and endurance, moral fortitude, a struggling humanitarianism, and a streak of illogical faith. Upon these qualities I have built what must be regarded merely as my own conception of the founder of Australia.

Where letters have been used they are quotations from genuine documents. The Prentice family and the Mannion family are entirely imaginary.

ELEANOR DARK.

Katoomba,
*July 29th, 1940.*

## GLOSSARY OF ABORIGINAL WORDS AND PHRASES

| | |
|---|---|
| *Bado* | Water. |
| *Be-anga* | Father: also leader or responsible person. |
| *Bereewolgal* | Name given by the natives to the white men. Lit. "men come from afar." |
| *Ben-ga-dee* | Ornament. |
| *Bee-all* | No. |
| *Berai-berai* | Orion. |
| *Biningung bado* | Give me some water. |
| *Birrahlee* | Child. |
| *Birrong* | Star. |
| *Bo-ee* | Dead. |
| *Boodjerree* | Good. |
| *Bulla murrai dyin* | Two big women. |
| *Burul winungailun miai-miai* | Much desirous of young women. |
| *Cardalung* | Hot. |
| *Coo-ee!* | Come here! Come to me! |
| *Coolamon* | Wooden vessel for drinking, or for carrying food or water. |
| *Corroboree* | A dramatic dance, performed with appropriate words. |
| *Duggeri-gai* | White men. |
| *Dulka* | The sky. |
| *Dyin* | Woman. |
| *Ela-beara!* | Exclamation of wonder or astonishment. |
| *Gan-to bon bunkulla tetti kulwun?* | Who killed him? |
| *Gan-umba noa unni yinal?* | Whose son is this? |
| *Gatoa bon tura* | It is I who speared him. |
| *Gooroobeera* | Musket. Lit. "stick of fire." |
| *Gourgourgahgah* | The kookaburra. |
| *Guioa!* | Goodbye! |
| *Gwee-un* | Fire. |
| *Kabo bag kanun England-ka* | Soon I shall be at England. |
| *Kai kai karakai!* | Come, make haste! |
| *Kamai* | A spear. |
| *Keawaran wal bi uwa-nun!* | You shall not go! |
| *Kia?* | What do you say? |
| *Kuji* | The bee. |
| *Kurru* | Clouds. |
| *Kuurang* | The tiger snake. |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Magra* | Fish. |
| *Mia-mia* | A bark shelter. |
| *Mirrabooka* | The Southern Cross. |
| *Morungle* | Thunder. |
| *Moo-la-ly* | Ill, indisposed. |
| *Murrai* | Big. |
| *Murri* | The men. |
| *Murruwulung* | Small. |
| *Naa-moro* | Compass. Lit. "to see the way." |
| *Na-lau-ra* | Sit down, as a guest. |
| *N'ga!* | Here! |
| *Ngai-ri!* | Bring it here! |
| *N'gai n'gai pindwagung bado* | I will bring you some water. |
| *Ngindignidoer* | Venus. Lit. "you are laughing." |
| *Nowee* | Boat. |
| *Parrebuga* | To-morrow. |
| *Teeri-yeetchbeem* | Red-headed one. |
| *Thirringnunna* | Hide-and-seek. Lit. "where are we?" |
| *Towri* | Tribal territory. |
| *Unijerunbi minku?* | What do you want? |
| *Waita koa bag; mimai yikora!* | I must go; do not detain me. |
| *Waw . . . ?* | Where is . . . ? |
| *Weeree* | Bad, or wrong. |
| *Werowey* | Girl. |
| *Whurra, whurra!* | Begone, begone! |
| *Wi! Wi!* | Exclamation of aversion. |
| *Wirri* | The sun. |
| *Wongerra* | Boy. |
| *Wommerah* | Throwing-stick for spear; also used for other purposes as implement. |
| *Woram-woram buna; worambil moium* | Go to sleep, sleepy little one. |
| *Wutta?* | Where to? |
| *Yagoona* | To-day. |
| *Yapallun!* | Alas! |
| *Yen-ou?* | Shall I go? |
| *Youara-gurrugin* | Maker of corroboree songs. |
| *Yuroo* | Hungry. |
| *"Dinga dinga burula, Murringa dibura!"* | "Plenty of wild dogs. The black men are spearing them!" |
| *"Burran, burin, bilar bundi, Mirala berar karni!"* | "Shield of buree, spear and club, Throwing-stick of berar bring!" |

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# Part I

## 1770 - 1788

# 1770 - 1788

BENNILONG and his father had come down to the cliffs again, alone. It was quite a long way from the place where the tribe was camped, and they had set out early in the morning when the heat of the midsummer day was only a threat, and the spider-webs across their path were still glimmering with dew. Now it was after noon, and though Bennilong was six, and expected to bear himself like a man, he was tired and sleepy and a little cross, and he sat in the shade of a rock with his copper-coloured legs thrust out in front of him, and his fingers idly making curly marks in the thin, hot sand. His head was bent, his lower lip protruded, his dark, liquid eyes were sulky. And yet, although his sleepiness, his crossness lay upon his spirit like a weight, he had a sense, too, of a larger contentment which included it, and made it trivial. He was conscious of the world, and conscious of himself as a part of it, fitting into it, belonging to it, drawing strength and joy and existence from it, like a bee in the frothing yellow opulence of the wattle. He was conscious of an order which had never failed him, of an environment which had never startled or betrayed him, of noises such as the chorus of cicadas, less a sound than a vibration on his ear-drums, of scents which he had drawn into his nostrils with his first breath, and of the familiar, scratchy touch against his bare skin of sand and twig, pebble and armoured leaf. So that his sulkiness remained isolated in a mind abandoned to sensation—something which, for the present, would go no further than the outthrust lip and the liquid darkness of the eye, while he absorbed, in absent-minded voluptuousness, his secure and all-sufficient world.

The sky was very blue; there was not a cloud in it. The sea joined it in a silver line, incredibly far away, and there was the noise of surf breaking on the rocks at the foot of the cliff. But these were not things to be thought about, or even to be noticed very much. They were so, they were eternal, unquestionable, like the tribe, like the moon, like Gnambucootchaly the evil spirit. An ant dragging a dead fly laboured tremendously, backward, up the smooth curve of Bennilong's leg. He watched it solemnly, finding that by contracting his muscles he could impede its progress; and then suddenly he became aware that it tickled him, and killed it fiercely with a blow of his palm. The smell of it, hot and pungent, reached his nostrils, and he held his hand before his nose, sniffing, until he decided that he did not like it, and

the small flicker of sensuous revulsion released his mood, and filled him with the formless resentment of over-wearied childhood. A tear overflowed and slid down his cheek. He knew that if his mother had been there she would have understood that he was tired. She would have gathered him against her breast, scolding and soothing him with familiar words. "Woram-woram buna," she would have said, "worambil moium." But his father did not notice. Bennilong, from beneath his lashes, stole an upward glance at the motionless figure standing upon the rock in whose shade he rested, looking at the long, tireless legs, the broad chest, the upflung head with its matted hair and beard; the muscles standing out along the arm which held the shield and spear; and for a moment his gaze was held and his eyes dried, studying the grace and the strength and the pride of a man who had never known physical or spiritual humiliation.

Wunbula stood quite still. A darkly shining silhouette against the blue sky, nothing moved but his hair and his beard, blowing in the sharp sea-wind. The light struck downward on to his forehead and his cheek-bones, making them gleam softly like unpolished bronze, and his eyes, narrowed to slits in the dark caverns beneath his brows, gazed out over the glare of the ocean, searching the horizon.

Thus reminded of the object of their journey, Bennilong's gusty sense of grievance faded once again before more absorbing thoughts. His father had not noticed that he was tired. His father had forgotten him. His father was watching for the boat with wings.

For long ago—a whole season ago, when the days were growing shorter, and one crept close to the fire at night, and left the 'possum rugs reluctantly in the morning—a strange thing had happened. Wunbula had gone with other warriors of the tribe to attend a ceremony in the towri of the Gweagal, who dwelt on the southern shore of another great harbour a little farther down the coast. It was an important ceremony, whose attendant celebrations would last for several days, and at all important ceremonies the presence of Wunbula was held to be indispensable. For he was not only justly famed as a warrior and a hunter, but he was also acknowledged to be the greatest youara-gurrugin of his own and any other neighbouring tribe. Not even the Cammeraygal, proud and haughty and numerous as they were, could boast a maker of corroborees to vie with Wunbula.

Sometimes when the mood for making a song came upon him, he would go away by himself, or sit apart, silent and brooding, and Bennilong knew better than to tease him at such times for stories, or to be tossed in the air by his strong arms. And then suddenly words would come from his lips—wonderful words of celebration, battle, or death; words filled with the gaiety of feasts,



or the wild triumph of victory, or the long wailing for the dead. Or with another element, dimly sad and yet compelling, stirring the heart, but whether with pride or sorrow his hearers hardly knew.

So Wunbula had gone to the towri of the Gweagal, and joined in their dances and songs, and made an entirely new and very magnificent corroboree for the occasion. But one morning when he had set out with his hosts upon a kangaroo-hunt, he had realised that the mood for hunting was not upon him, and he had left the others and gone alone to the sea cliffs. His companions had watched him go, nodding their approval, for they understood that the words of a great youara-gurrugin come to him most easily in solitude.

But after all no words had come to Wunbula that day. For he had been only a few moments on the cliffs when he had seen something which made his heart leap in his chest, and his pulses hammer with excitement. It was a magic boat. At first only a drift of white to his far-sighted eyes, he saw it come out of the south, and he was afraid, believing it to be a spirit sent by Turong, who rules the water; and he had crouched behind a rock watching it come nearer and nearer until he saw that it was in the likeness of a boat, but that it had great white wings which bore it along over the ocean like a bird. Fear was still strong in him, but stronger still was that quality which had made him a maker of songs, and he had felt himself shaken and enraptured by the beauty of this marvel, by the grace of its movement, and the billowy curves of its wings. He had stared and stared hungrily while it passed, and then, fearful of losing sight of it for ever, he had leapt to his feet and hurried along the cliffs. But gullies and indentations had so delayed him that it was soon out of sight, vanished around a headland. Presently he had fallen in with the hunting party, and he had told them, wild-eyed, what he had seen. At first they had stared—then laughed—then stared again, but finally they followed him, and when they reached the camp they had found it seething with excitement. For the magic boat had flown into their harbour, and, folding its wings like a seagull, had come to rest.

There it was. There for many days it had remained, and from it had come, in a smaller boat, mysterious beings with faces pale as bones, who spoke an incomprehensible language, and wore coverings not only all over their bodies, but even upon their heads and feet.

All this Bennilong knew because it was all in the corroboree which his father had made to tell of it—the famous Corroboree of the Bereewolgal—which had been several times performed since by his own and other tribes.

And then, as suddenly as they had come, the strangers had departed. One morning quite early, when the creamy film of fog

was just lifting from the bay, their boat had spread its wings again, and made for the open sea. Wunbula was home again in his own towri by that time, but it had so happened that about midday, standing upon these same rocks where he stood now, he had seen it pass, making northward up the coast, and he had stood straining his eyes after it until it vanished.

That same afternoon, Bennilong remembered, when his father had left the camp, he had followed at a respectful distance, for he had guessed that Wunbula was going to the flat rock to make images, and he dearly loved to watch this work, though he knew that he was not welcome at such times unless he sat very still and asked but few questions. So he had crept up to find his father already arrived at the great stretch of smooth, flat sandstone, half covered with the things he had made—a huge fish, an emu, very fine and tall, many shields and boomerangs; but best of all, the whole story of a hunt, showing the two kangaroos with the spears of the hunters in their sides, and the hunters themselves with their arms upflung in triumph.

Wunbula, squatting on his haunches with his bit of sharp flint in his hand, was so still that if Bennilong had not been able to see the bright eyes, fixed and intent beneath their frowning brows, he might have thought him dozing. After a time he began to work, and the sound of the flint, chip, chip, chip on the rock was so monotonous that Bennilong had fallen asleep, and had not awakened until the shadows were long, and he was beginning to feel cold. Wunbula was still there, but now his head was bent and his hands hung idly, and he looked so full of sorrow that Bennilong sidled up to him curiously and looked over his shoulder. There was the winged boat. Wunbula had made it quite large—larger than anything he had ever made before, except the whale-feast which had covered the whole of a big rock. It was indeed a very strange-looking boat, Bennilong thought, for it had no paddles, and no men were to be seen in it. He breathed admiringly: "How fine it is!" But Wunbula only shook his head.

That was long ago. The tribe did not bother about the magic boat now. Except when the Corroboree of the Bereewolgal was performed they never thought about it. It was gone. It had never been important to them in any case; it had not touched their lives for more than a few days, nor disturbed the centuries-old rhythm of their existence. Only Wunbula remembered it, and so often now that he had lost count, Bennilong had come with him to the high cliffs of Burrawarra to watch for it. Between them there was a faith unspoken; the winged boat would return.

Yet Bennilong's thoughts of it were different from his father's thoughts. He had not seen it, as Wunbula had, swinging and lifting gallantly over the long swell of the sea, with its wings painted golden by the sunlight, and the little plume of spray at its bows.



His thought was that if these beings, these Bereewolgal, could make such a boat, could not he, Bennilong, when he was older, do the same, and so journey across the water out of sight of his own land, as (until this thing had happened) he had believed that no man could go, and live.

For of course every child in the tribe knew the tale of how long, long ago, in Wunbula's father's boyhood, three men had built a very large strong bark canoe, and they had put out in it between Burrawarra and Boree, the gateways, leaving the sheltered water, and all the tribe had watched from these very cliffs, the women wailing with fear because now the canoe looked so small, and seemed to be from time to time engulfed, disappearing from their sight behind the wall of a great, lifting swell. But the men had paddled on and on until their canoe was only a speck, and then not even a speck, but lost, vanished in the great waste of shining water. And when several nights had come and gone, one of the women, walking on the cliffs farther south, saw the tiny boat almost below her, tossed in the surf, and in it the prone bodies of two men, not three. So she had summoned the tribe, and the men had climbed down to the rocks; and some, by feats of strength and courage still celebrated in corroboree, had dragged one of the men from the pounding surf when the canoe at last smashed to pieces on the rocks. He was very nearly dead; his bones almost pierced his skin, his blackened tongue was pushed between his lips, and only the whites of his eyes showed. But he had recovered at last, and all had waited about him to learn what lay beyond the horizon, for here was a man—the only man—who had crossed the water out of sight, to the place where the sun dwelt. But when he was strong enough to speak he had declared that there was nothing beyond, only the endless water, so that when their eyes had lost the comfort of their own land there was no other, and they had grown afraid, knowing that now indeed they had delivered themselves into the hands of Turong. And Turong had been angered, and had sent sharks to pursue them, and had cast a spell upon one of them so that he stretched himself in the bottom of the canoe and died, and his companions had thrown his body to the sharks, to appease them and their master, Turong. Then they had taken their paddles and paddled desperately towards the declining sun, where their home lay; and in the dawn of the next day they had seen it like a shadow on the horizon, but they were too weak to paddle longer. And the one man who remained had known no more until Turong cast him into the arms of his comrades, that he might warn them of the unending water. . . .

Bennilong stared at it. The unending water. He looked up at his father's lean figure, still motionless, still watching for the boat with wings, and there was born in him a conviction which all through his boyhood was to tease him now and then—that the water was not really unending after all; that somewhere, far, far