

# HISTORY IN THE SHADOW OF THE MOUNTAINS

## A journey through the history of the Sapphire Coast

### Part 2 – The Indigenous People



The Indigenous people of the region

Between 20 and 28 April 1770, Captain James Cook sailed north in the ship *Endeavour* along this part of the coast towards the place he named Botany Bay, arriving there on 29 April.



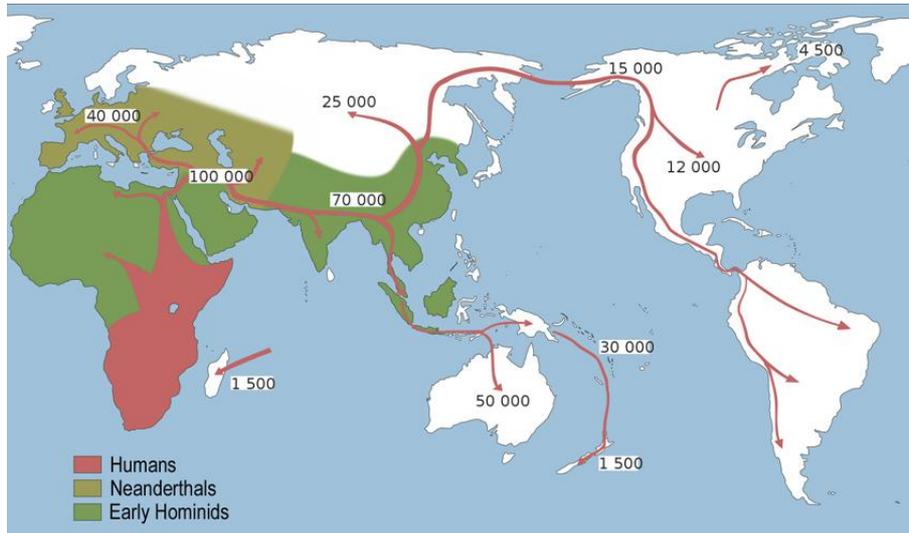
The journals and diaries of James Cook, the botanist Joseph Banks and numerous members of the crew all record seeing the Indigenous people of the region. Most reported seeing smoke from several fires, while some individuals were observed on beaches near the mountain Cook named Mount Dromedary on 22 April.

First occupation of the land

It is beyond the scope of this narrative to give proper respect to and describe the complex and sophisticated Aboriginal religious and creation stories. It may be sufficient to say that a common thread among the different cultural groups is a creation story woven into the landscape that records certain totemic animals and dramatic events involving ancestral beings. These are recorded today in sites, plants, behaviour of specific animals and celestial and landscape features. Whilst the stories relate to distant creation times, the religious significance of these manifestations of creation is very much alive today, reinforced by stories, rituals, taboos, intermarriage, initiations and dance.

Scientific studies interpret the initial occupation of the Australian landmass by Aboriginal people as the result of migration out of Africa. This migration was part of the great intercontinental

migration of modern humans in the Upper Palaeolithic period. Current scientific discussion suggests an arrival date on this continent about 50,000 years ago, during the last Ice Age. One definite date of occupation is the 42,000 year-old ritual burial sites at Lake Mungo in southwest New South Wales. These are deemed to be of world significance and accordingly are inscribed on the World Heritage List.



Upper Palaeolithic migration routes out of Africa (Wikipedia)

For over 85% of the period of Aboriginal occupation of this region, the coastline was up to 20km east of the current shoreline due to much lower sea level. Sea level has been at its current level for the last 6000 years. Hence, most of the archaeological material, such as campfire charcoal and shell middens, that would provide evidence for that long history of occupation, is now under water. The coastal shell middens that can be seen today are dated at around 3000 years, in line with post-ice age sea levels.



Ice age and current sea levels (Wikipedia)

The distribution of the different Indigenous language groups was recorded by the Anthropologist and Ethnologist Norman Tindale. These are indicated on his map covering continental Australia (1974). Whilst this map is not comprehensive, it is considered a reasonable attempt to depict Aboriginal tribal distribution at the time of the first European occupation.

The extract from Tindale's map shown below relates to this region and gives a brief description of each of the groups he catalogued. It should be noted that there are many alternative names for the groupings described by Tindale, reflecting the various attempts to anglicise Indigenous languages.



### Thaua

From north of Merimbula south to Green Cape and west to the scarp of the Dividing Range. The Thaua were divided into two groups, the Katungal 'sea coast people,' and the Baianbal or Paienbara, the 'tomahawk people'.

### Djiringanj

From Cape Dromedary (Kajan) south to beyond Bega and inland to the scarp of the Dividing Range east of Nimmitabel. One observer (Howitt 1904) used the term Yuin to embrace this tribe and the Thaua.

## Walbanga

Cape Dromedary north to near Ulladulla; Moruya, Braidwood and Araluen; and inland on the Shoalhaven River.

## Bidawal

Coast between Green Cape and Cape Everard (Point Hicks); inland to Delegate, NSW; and on headwaters of the Cann and Bern rivers; chiefly in rainforest and wet sclerophyll forest country – environments that were inhospitable to others.

## Ngarigo

Monaro tableland north to Queanbeyan; Bombala River from near Delegate to Nimmitabel; and west to the crest divide of the Australian Alps. In winter these tableland people sometimes came down to coastal territories for shelter, thereby gaining a reputation for aggressiveness.

Today, Yuin is the general or generic name for all tribes from Merimbula to Port Jackson. The Yuin, (or Coast Murring), as a broad group occupied territory from Cape Howe to the Shoalhaven River and inland to the Great Dividing Range. The population pre-1788 was estimated at about 11,000 between Cape Howe and Batemans Bay, comprising two main tribes, Walbanja and Dyiringanj. As a result of battles, smallpox epidemics and other diseases, the population is believed to have reduced by 95%, leaving only 600 survivors by the mid-1800s.

This story of dramatic population decline through disease and conflict is repeated across Australia. The vulnerability of the eastern Australian Indigenous population to diseases brought by Europeans is reflected in other parts of the world. Researchers claim that 95% of the total population of the Americas died in the first 130 years after Europeans arrived and that 90% of the population of the Inca Empire died in disease epidemics. A University of California study estimated that the population in Mexico declined from 25.2 million in 1518 to 700,000 people in 1623, less than 3% of the original population.

The spread of disease was not all one way. The Black Death plague, introduced from Asia, reduced Europe's population by around 60% in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

### ***Contact with the first Europeans***

The first non-indigenous people on this part of the south coast were the trek survivors of the *Sydney Cove* shipwreck in Bass Strait in 1797, which included Europeans and Lascar seamen (probably from the Bay of Bengal area).

In the early part of 18<sup>th</sup> century, European contact with Aboriginal people in this region was generally around Twofold Bay and involved the sealing and whaling industries. The first record of conflict was in the *Sydney Gazette* of 6 April 1806. The report tells of weeks of tension ending in a confrontation between 11 sealers from the stranded whaler *George* and a tribal group which resulted in the death of nine Aboriginals. The report is silent on the cause of the tension however sealers were notorious for their treatment of Aboriginal people in Tasmania and the abduction of Aboriginal and Maori women.

The impetus for expansion of European settlement into the region was the booming colonial wool economy of the 1820s and consequently the unauthorised occupation (squatting) on potential grazing land.

The first squatters came to the area from the southern tablelands, guided by Aboriginal people. By the 1830s the best pastoral 'runs' were fully occupied. Squatting tenure was formalised in the 1836 Crown lands legislation that provided for grazing leases over the runs.

This early pastoral settlement involved considerable conflict with Aboriginal people as the following account describes:

*Dr Imlay had two Aboriginal natives on board wearing the dress of Europeans and remarkably expert as shepherds and in the management of cattle; and he told me that his whaling station at Twofold Bay was manned almost entirely and carried on with great success by labourers selected from their fellow countrymen. But he added some exciting details of the carnage and merciless predatory warfare which is constantly going on between the stockmen and the tribes*

*which hover on the outskirts of the pastoral tracts (Wakefield 1839-45).*

These conflicts are still alive in the collective memory of people in the region. One story from the 1840s describes how the manager of Nungatta Station, knowing the Aboriginal people were fond of taking milk, killed many Aboriginal people by putting strychnine in milk. Another story from the Pambula area in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century tells of flour and milk poisoning causing many deaths. Another story from the Nungatta area tells of the deaths by shooting of 'thirty or forty Aboriginals'. An eight year-old child involved in this event survived into old age to tell the story.

Around this time the Imlay brothers had 21 stations ranging across the far south coast region from Bitangabee Bay and the Towamba Valley in the south, to Cobargo in the north and Rocky Hall and Bemboka to the west. They also had land in Tasmania, Gunning further inland in NSW and the North Island of New Zealand.

Aboriginal men and women were employed on these first stations as cattle and sheep herders, for stripping bark from wattle trees, keeping birds and other animals away from crops, harvesting, shearing and sheep dipping (Returns on Aboriginal Employment 1851).

Twofold Bay shore-based whaling commenced in 1828. An 1844 account talks about Aboriginal men, women and children from Bega, Belowra, Brogo, Biamanga, Cobargo, Gulaga, Mumbulla, Murrah, Tarraganda, Wolumla and Wandella as well as those from the Twofold Bay area. By the 1840s employment in the whaling industry occurred during winter and early spring, while wattle debarking and pastoral properties work occurred in late spring and early summer. Aboriginal whalers performed all tasks including those of steersman, harpooner, lookout, oarsman, flensing and the boiling down of the blubber.



Twofold Bay whalers in 1915

### *The Katungal people and whales*

A special hunting relationship between the Katungal (sea coast people) of the Thawa group and Killer Whales (Orcas) had developed over a very long time. The Killer Whales would alert the Aboriginal hunters to the presence of larger whales and drive them inshore where hunters could spear them. Wounded animals would be prevented from escaping by the Killer Whales. The Killer Whales would be rewarded for their assistance with the lips and the tongue of the whale.

This traditional skill was utilised in the shore-based whaling industry in Twofold Bay by the early European whalers.



A remarkable photograph of a Killer Whale involved in hunting a Humpback whale

## ***The special significance of Gulaga Mountain***



Gulaga seen from near Cobargo

Historical sources support the notion of Gulaga as having a special association for Aboriginal people. Gulaga (or 'Cooliga' or 'Caluga' or 'Kolager' or 'Kolegar' as it was variously recorded last century) was recognised as “the big mountain of the blackfellow” by the editor of the *Bega Standard* in 1879.

Early European anthropological work records a 'Gulaga Creation Story' that describes how people relate to supernatural beings as well as with totemic animals:

*The Bat and the Mur-an-rai (Emu-wren) are the men's brothers and Tintegallan (the tree-creeper) is the women's sister. It is said that the Mur-an-rai first made the human sexes distinct by splitting up the then existing people and by then sewing them up again. To kill a tree-creeper would greatly offend the women and cause them to fight with the men.*

*It is said that long ago there were no men or women on the earth but only animals, birds, reptiles and so on, that there were no trees and that the earth was bare and the sky, as 'hard as a stone'. Daramulun lived on the earth with his mother Ngalal-bal. He placed trees on the earth. At this time when the earth was only inhabited by animals the land extended far out where there is now sea. The thrush (kabboka) when out hunting killed a wallaby and gave some of it to the other birds. These looking at it and smelling it said 'it is going rotten' and complained about it. The thrush being very much enraged, while the others were out hunting commenced to dance and sing the talmaru dance until he caused a furious gale of wind to arise. Whirlwinds swept leaves, sticks and dust into the air and torrents of rain fell and drowned the whole country and all the people in it except some who turned into fish and some who crawled out on the land and became men and women. Some say that only two survived, a man and a woman, who*

*crawled into Mt Dromedary [Gulaga] and then escaped and that's how all the Murring are descended.*

*Daramulun all this time lived up in the sky with his wife and his mother Ngal-al-bal went up into the sky where he now is. It was Daramulun – the Biambun (Headman - ruler) who taught the Murring and instituted the Bunan and its ceremonies and gave his laws to old people who first lived and who handed it down from father to son to these times.*

A 1970s account of the cultural significance of Gulaga comes from Guboo Ted Thomas, the acknowledged spiritual leader of the Wallaga Lake Aboriginal Community, who recounts the 'Legend of Gulaga':

*To the Yuin people, Gulaga is the Mother Mountain. One day her young son came to her and asked if he could leave home, Gulaga let him so he moved far out to sea. On seeing that his big brother had left, Gulaga's baby son wanted to leave too. Because he was so young she permitted him to move only a short distance away where she could keep an eye on him. Gulaga is the Yuin name of Mt Dromedary, her baby is Nudgenooka and her other son is Barangooba.*

Another story tells:

*Many, many years ago a tribe of Aboriginals lived on top of Gulaga Mountain. A lovely young girl was pregnant and her husband went hunting to get her a beautiful white fur. While he was away, a young man came to her camp and killed her. When her husband returned carrying the beautiful white fur, he found her dead, so he wrapped the fur around her. To punish the young man, the elders of the tribe told him he had to go away, so he went and lived by himself.*

*Then a great earthquake came and divided the mountain, so they never saw the young man again. They called the little mountain, Najanara, after the young man. So that is why we have Gulaga, Najanara, and Montague which came up out of the sea.*

*To this very day when you look up at the mountain, on the very top you will see a pregnant woman lying down. Sometimes you will see a cloud around the top of the mountain. The people say to one another, "Well, today she is wearing her white fur".*

## ***Mumbulla Mountain***



Mumbulla Mountain from the Princes Highway

In the mid-1970s logging operations were extending to the state forests of the Mumbulla Mountain area. As a consequence of increasing public debate about logging impacts, the NSW State Government established an Advisory Committee on South Coast Wood Chipping. This coincided with a Parliamentary Select Committee visit to the Aboriginal Community at Wallaga Lake in February 1979.

Guboo Ted Thomas, who led the protest against the desecration of Mumbulla Mountain, addressed the Committee in the following terms:

*Why we are interested in this land here, the Mumbulla Mountain and Mt Dromedary, is that they are sacred sites, they are part of us. You have your cathedrals in Sydney where you worship. It is the same for the Aboriginal people... We do not want to lose our culture. We are trying to restore all our sacred sites. We want to retain where we worship. This is what we are looking at. That mountain up there is a powerful mountain because it draws the people back.*

He asserted that the mountain was a highly significant landscape as it was not only the 'dreaming place' of the elder Jack Mumbler (Biamanga), but it also was a place where sacred and secret initiation ceremonies were held.

The battle to save the mountain from logging stimulated wide community interest in the sacredness of the mountain and the knowledge held by a few senior people. This interest found expression in a ceremony involving Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

people before dawn on the first day of spring in 1980 on the mountaintop.

In 1984 the NSW Government declared the area to be protected as an Aboriginal Place under National Parks legislation. The site description includes:

*Biamanga (Mumbulla Mountain) is the central feature of Biamanga Aboriginal Place, which is part of a large ceremonial and cultural pathway on the south coast that includes Gulaga (Mt Dromedary), Umbarra (Merriman Island), Barungba (Montague Island), and Dithol (Pigeon House Mountain). Biamanga can be seen from across all of the Bega Valley and draws Aboriginal people back to the area. The highest peak on Biamanga is the Dreaming place of the Yuin leader King Jack Mumbulla. He used to sit and meditate on the top of the mountain and send smoke signals to his people in the valley below.*

*The Yuin people of the south coast held initiation ceremonies at a number of sacred sites on the mountain. The last initiation ceremony was held there in 1918. Some Yuin people remember tribal Elders who were initiated on the mountain, and who passed traditional information about the mountain's sacred sites on to them. Initiated men would go to sacred sites on the mountain to meditate and communicate with the spirits.*

*The battle to protect sacred sites from logging revitalised cultural knowledge in the local Aboriginal community. The Yuin Tribal Council chose to name the place after the deceased elder, Jack Mumbler whose 'tribal' name was Biamanga.*

*Biamanga National Park, which includes Biamanga Aboriginal Place, was given back to the Yuin people in May 2006. Today the Aboriginal community plays an important role in looking after Biamanga Aboriginal Place. The area is managed jointly by the Aboriginal owners and the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.*



Biamanga, also known as Jack Mumbler, Merriman, an unknown man and Neddy with Biamanga's breast plate at Wallaga Lake, ca. 1900

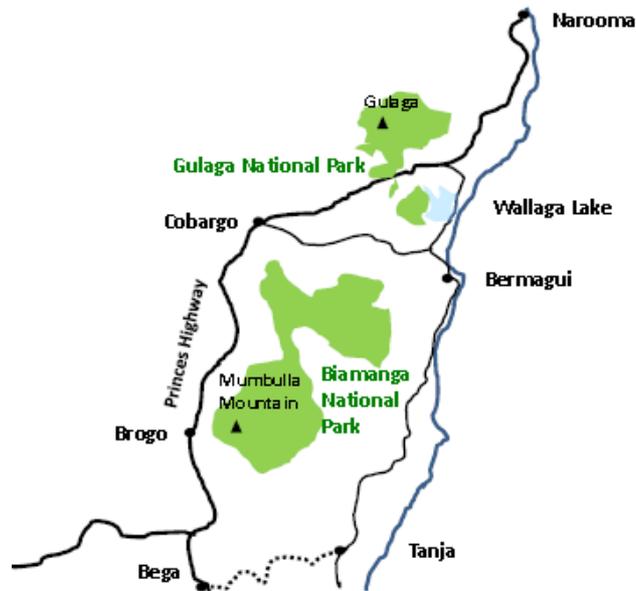
### ***Joint management of Gulaga and Biamanga National Parks***

Although they are separate national parks, Biamanga and Gulaga form part of one continuous 'cultural landscape'. Inalienable freehold title to those places was given to the Yuin people in 2006. With the vesting of title, the parks were re-dedicated back to the Government for the purposes of national parks under 30 year leases.

The leases provide Aboriginal owners with financial benefits in the form of rent, as well as increased involvement in land and cultural heritage management.

The care, control and management of each park are vested in a Board of Management. A meeting quorum can only be reached if the majority of members present are Aboriginal owner members.

A Board must spend rental monies for park management purposes of 'Community Development' or acquisition of land for addition to the park.



Gulaga and Biamanga national parks



The photo captures the celebration on 6 May 2006 to mark the return of Biamanga and Gulaga national parks to their Aboriginal owners, the Yuin people, by the Minister for Environment. These parks were the third and fourth parks to be returned to Aboriginal ownership in NSW and the first on the eastern seaboard. Mary Duroux and Lionel Montga hold up the declarations.

## ***Aboriginal Places***

An Aboriginal Place is defined in NSW national parks legislation as a place that “is or was of special significance with respect to Aboriginal culture”. This gives protection to the intangible, social and spiritual heritage of Aboriginal people in NSW. Places that do not contain archaeological remains, but are culturally and socially important to Aboriginal people are also protected under the legislation. These include sacred sites as well as fringe camps and Aboriginal reserves from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.



Bermagui Waterhole boardwalk

### ***Bermagui Waterhole Aboriginal Place***

The local Yuin people camped at Bermagui Waterhole long before European settlement and continued to camp there regularly until the 1920s. In an interview in 1981, the Guboo Ted Thomas, respected Elder and knowledge-holder of the Yuin people, recalled camping at Bermagui Waterhole, and that “my grandfather, grandmother, and all the people from Wallaga Lake used to come down here”. Bermagui Waterhole was a popular camping spot because it was a permanent source of fresh water and there were plenty of fish and shellfish nearby. Although the waterhole is on Yuin traditional land, many other Aboriginal groups also used it as a camping place. They would camp for a few weeks and then move on making sure they left behind enough food for others.

Bermagui Waterhole is also part of a traditional walking track along the coast and to Yuin ceremonial and spiritual sites. Aboriginal people stopped off at Bermagui Waterhole as they followed the track to Biamanga (Mumbulla Mountain), a sacred site to the south, or to Gulaga (Mt. Dromedary), a ceremonial site to the

north. This was part of the ceremonial and initiation circuit of the Yuin people.

The Bermagui Waterhole is a significant wetland, particularly for water birds. The site is the end of a spectacular coastal walk that starts next to Wallaga Lake and is highly recommended for visitors to the area. Visitors will find access to the boardwalk from the Wallaga Lake Road coming in to Bermagui town from the north.

## ***Merriman Island Aboriginal Place***



Wallaga Lake with Merriman Island in the upper centre

Merriman Island, shaped like a duck, is called Umbarra the black duck by the Yuin people for whom it is a totem. King Merriman, a Yuin Elder who died in 1904, had a special relationship with the black duck, which would warn him of danger by flapping its wings, diving down into the water and splashing.

During a battle with a tribe from the south (from what is now the State of Victoria), King Merriman saw the black duck on the lake flapping its wings wildly - this was a warning that the tribe from Victoria was coming closer. This warning gave Merriman time to go across to the island and direct the battle from there. The Yuin people won the battle. The island was later named after King Merriman, and will always be associated with the story of this battle.

Merriman Island was the first Aboriginal Place to be gazetted. Access to the island is restricted because of it is a sacred site of the Yuin Aboriginal people.



King Merriman

The distribution of Aboriginal Places is not comprehensive and does not represent all of the important sites of Aboriginal history and culture. With over 1000 generations of continuous occupation of the land, there is likely to be a wealth of undiscovered archaeological material and cultural stories associated with those sites. Much of this evidence of occupation is now drowned by sea level rise over a period of 20,000 years. Some will come to light in the archaeological surveys that are now part of NSW development planning and approval processes.

## ***Indigenous Heritage Tourism***

### ***Bundian Way***

The Bundian Way is a 265 km ancient Aboriginal route linking the Australian Alps to the coast. It connects Targangal (Mt Kosciuszko) to the Bilgarera coastal site (Fisheries Beach) on Tullenmullerer (Twofold Bay). The Bundian Way is of outstanding heritage significance as it represents the key traditional walking pathways that connected Aboriginal people to the land for trade, inter-tribal relationships and ceremonial events. This route was used later by the Europeans, mostly guided by Aboriginal people, to explore and settle new areas.

Planning is currently underway to provide an Indigenous heritage tourism experience associated with the Bundian Way. It is envisaged that this will give visitors a range of different experiences that reflect different aspects of the landscape and the stories. The gateway to the route is the Monaroo-Bobberer-Gudu Keeping Place at Jigamy, next to Pambula Lake.

When finalised, information about this outstanding heritage tourism experience will be posted on the websites of Australia's Coastal Wilderness and Sapphire Coast Tourism.



Mt Kosciuszko



Byadbo Wilderness



Twofold Bay



The Bundian Way (Victoria-NSW border area)