

Negotiating Survival: Aborigines, settlers and environmental knowledge on Sydney's Botany Bay and Georges River

Heather Goodall

School of Communications, Faculty of Arts and Social Science, University of Technology Sydney
P.O. Box 123 Broadway, NSW, 2007.

Email: heather.goodall@uts.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that it was environmental knowledge, which Aboriginal people held and traded, that formed the basis of the slender chances they had for survival in the changed circumstances of British settlement in Sydney. The case study is centred on the life and work of William Rowley, about whom the little evidence which exists revolves around his use of and trade in his knowledge of the resources of Botany Bay, notably oysters and mangroves. Reference is also made to Biddy Giles, who used her knowledge to act as guide and cultural interpreter but also traded in native flowers. Rowley's life is less well known but focused on the capture of and trade in food resources. This included his employment by Thomas Holt in the series of attempts to establish oyster culture on the shore of land purchased originally as for pastoral enterprise.

Key words: William Rowley, Salt Pan Creek, La Perouse, oysters, knowledge

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The early years of settlement around Sydney have often been depicted as ones of conflict between settlers and Aboriginal people, epitomised by the well-documented military and verbal challenges made by the local Aboriginal spokesman, Pemulwuy to Governor Phillip (Willmot 1987; Kohen 2005; Smith 2010). Such rising conflict was then punctuated by the tragedy of the smallpox epidemic, which decimated the Aboriginal population around Port Jackson. (Attenbrow 2002, 2010; Karskens 2009). There is little room in this story for any ongoing presence of Aboriginal people in what rapidly became the urban space of Sydney. Aborigines mostly disappear in local histories in Sydney after the first chapter. The stories of conflict, massacre and epidemic are disturbing, but they also conveniently suggest that there was no future for Aboriginal people, which leaves a narrative space into which settlers could inscribe their own histories of nation-building.

If we consider food and eating, it is possible to see a different story, which allows more insight into the interactions between people of the two societies as the possibilities for eating animals or using other biological resources were taught and learnt. The interchanges which occurred around finding foods to eat and endemic resources to use for building the new colony – all survival necessities for the settlers – were also essential to the chances for survival of local Aboriginal peoples. This paper argues that eating animals was central to interactions between Aboriginal people and settlers, but that even beyond the animals which were exchanged or traded, it was the knowledge which Aboriginal people held about local places and species which was the basis of the slender chances for their continued presence.

Although there are few ethnographic records, and the smallpox epidemic of 1789 tragically decimated Aboriginal populations and disrupted normal life, the archeological record demonstrates that, prior to settlement, the Aboriginal people of Sydney lived well on the game and fish in the estuarine area. (Attenbrow 2002, 2010). There were heaped piles of oyster shells in what are known as middens on the sandy shores of the rivers, along with lesser amounts of fish and animal bones. These middens do not tell us exactly what people ate – some remains like fish bones decay more quickly than do oyster shells, so bones may be less abundant than shells because of that process. Nevertheless, the enormous numbers of shells, from oysters which Aboriginal people had gathered from the rocky shores or the trunks or aerial roots of mangroves, suggest that eating was a social time, with many people participating together, in places to which they returned frequently. The middens had been built up over decades, if not centuries, showing not only a continuity of residence and collective gatherings, but that the shorelines of the rivers and bays were rich sources of the foods being eaten. Without doubt, local people enjoyed oysters frequently but drew also on a wide range of fish and other marine food as well as land animals and birds (Attenbrow 2002, 2010, 2012).

Considering eating and trading of all these foods after British settlers arrived allows a recognition that Aboriginal people had a future in Sydney, even while it was becoming urban space. This makes them not 'outsiders' but continuing residents. The stories of the animals eaten by humans are more than the stories of the animals themselves, important though these are

for understanding the changing ecology of the area. Nor are they only the stories of how these animals were caught, traded and consumed. Instead, the stories allow insights into the interactions between people – both collective and individual. We only have glimpses from occasional references in missionary diaries, government reports or reminiscences, but we can piece together something of these interactions. This is particularly so with two Dharawal people, whose country stretched along the southern shores of Botany Bay and the lower Georges River. One was Biddy Giles, living in the mid-nineteenth century and other was William Rowley, who lived from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

There has been some analysis of the lives of these two people already. For example, in *Rivers and Resilience* (Goodall and Cadzow 2009), the author explored the life of Biddy Giles, as a guide for travelling settlers, and that of her daughter, Ellen Anderson, who lived at Salt Pan Creek and sold wildflowers to settlers living along the river (Goodall and Cadzow 2009: 80-108, 135-164). This paper, however, focuses more actively on William Rowley's life and economic activities as a fisherman, although the sources, indicated in footnotes through the text, are even more fragmentary. The paper argues however that considering Biddy Giles in parallel with William Rowley highlights the way that both were negotiating their economic survival not so much by trading directly in native foods but instead by mobilizing their environmental knowledge.

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Marine food was expected by the British settlers – not only had they undergone a long sea journey to get to Australia, but many had lived near the coast or on rivers in Ireland, Scotland, Wales or England. The rivers in Australia looked and acted very differently from those of their homelands, but they nevertheless must have assumed they would get some foods from these new waters. The colony was expected, however, to build its economy on crops and in this the settlers were badly disappointed. The soils and the seasons around Sydney Cove did not nurture what they planted and before long they faced crop failure and famine. They took far longer than they had hoped to learn how to fish the waters of the estuaries and coast, while it took longer again to reach the inland freshwater rivers.

There has already been important writing about how it was the fish caught by Aboriginal people that allowed the survival of the early settlers. Most recently, historian Grace Karskens has reviewed the evidence which showed that the early settlers would have starved had it not been for the fish which Aboriginal people were prepared to trade – or gift – to them (Karskens 2010).¹ The settlers

may not have realized it, but what kept them alive was not only food, but the environmental knowledge of the fishers – mainly women – who had line caught the fish they ate (Attenbrow 2002, 2010).²

A great deal of learning was also involved in hunting land animals for food. As indigenous peoples had done in other imperial settings, Aboriginal people around Sydney acted as guides for settlers in the initial stages of the colony. As smaller satellite colonies like Wollongong were founded from boats sent out from the main settlement, the land routes were established as Aboriginal people were called on to be guides not only for directions but for hunting and fishing on the way. Biddy Giles, born around 1810 along the southern shores of Botany Bay, was one such guide. She had married Paddy Burragalang and lived on his southern Dharawal country, the Five Islands near Wollongong, with their two daughters for some years. In the 1850s, she left Paddy to live with an Englishman, Billy Giles, back on the Georges River near her own country in what is now the Sutherland Shire (Goodall and Cadzow 2009:94-108). By the 1860s, Biddy was guiding many of the settlers who were interested in fishing and hunting as they journeyed between Sydney and Wollongong, using her knowledge of the country and waters between the Georges River and the Five Islands. The reminiscences of those travellers give us an insight into Biddy's life.³ She and Billy lived on a small farm on Mill Creek, flowing from the south into the Georges River. Although it was poor sandy country,⁴ they shared food with the travellers: native honey and oysters gathered by Biddy, quinces they grew on the property and cheese from the cows they kept there. But the food the travellers all enthused about were the fish, which Biddy invariably found and showed them how to catch (although frustratingly none of these reminiscences name the species) and the game animals she tracked for them with her trained, silent hunting dogs, commanded by her hand signals alone.⁵

These accounts focus on Biddy's knowledge and skill, but perhaps even more important today are that the reminiscences show that there were many other Aboriginal people living along the river. We learn little about them from these memoirs, usually not even their names, just that they were there. Some of them were in single family groups

¹ Karskens focusses on the written historical material left by early settlers and other European observers but also assesses the historical implications of recent archeology.

² Attenbrow discusses extensively the role of women as line fishers of most of the fish species traded to and consumed by early settlers. Aboriginal men's technologies for fishing focused on spears and other forms of hunting.

³ These guiding expeditions were in 1866, 1867 and 1868 and were recorded by three authors, although they published their memories many years after the events. St George Call, 14 May 1904, p1; 17 Aug 1907, p3; 6 Apr 1907, p3; 8 Apr 1911, p6.

⁴ The farm site was identified on a field visit by Dr Robert Haworth, a geographer from UNE, and two historians, Dr Peter Read and the author. Sea level rises over the last 150 years have been minor, but are demonstrated in the shifting presence of sheoaks and mangroves. The rise in salinity has been enough to poison the fig and other fruit trees which Billy and Biddy had grown although the stumps are visible.

⁵ St George Call, 8 Apr 1911, p6

and others in small communities; some were married to settlers – including escaped convicts – while others were living in small communities of Aboriginal kinsfolk. Biddy visited them as she guided the travellers from one hunting or fishing site to another. She would call in to learn from each of them about local conditions – which fish were biting where and what game tracks they might have seen – as well as to share news and pick up messages to take along the river and down into Botany Bay. News and food – fish and game – were passed along on these visits, given out or gathered up to be dropped off at the next stop. All the people visited were living from eating the fish they caught as well as selling their fish and other goods. So, the accounts of these travellers, although revolving around Biddy, sketch a network of local knowledge, based on Aboriginal people but also sometimes the settlers living with them. This network of people was not only connected by Biddy's travels but was composed of people who were all mobile themselves on the waters: they had translated what Keith Vincent Smith has so aptly described as the 'canoe culture' of pre-settlement days into the new settler technology of rowboats, which all of them were using as they went about their days of fishing or simply moving about (Smith 2010).

The final glimpse we have from these traveler-reminiscences is that Biddy was not only teaching about the fish and game of the river, but was trying to pass on the Law ('Dreaming') stories of each of the places they visited. Only some of these stories were remembered by the travellers long enough to be written down – such stories are, not surprisingly, the more spectacular stories like those about rock falls and deaths – but it is clear that Biddy saw her guiding as being a way to do more than teach about how to harvest her country's living resources, but as a way for her to introduce the meanings her country held. Her teaching to these travellers about the Law of the country was entwined with her stories about recent events and the background of the people they were visiting.⁶ Biddy was introducing the travellers 'to a peopled landscape' which needed both recent human history and age-old stories to be understood (Goodall and Cadzow 2009:97).

One of Biddy's daughters, Ellen, came up from the Five Islands and lived with Biddy for some time in the 1870s, then settled with other Aboriginal people at a fishing camp on the northern shore of the Bay, known as the Botany Camp. One of the fishermen who called in there was another Dharawal man William Rowley, who had been born around 1851 at Pelican Point on a promontory on the southern side of Botany Bay.⁷

In 1862, when Rowley was still a child, this land at Pelican Point became legally the property of Thomas Holt, a Yorkshire man who had made a fortune through pastoral runs on the Castlereagh River. These runs drew on labour from north western Aboriginal people but

also attracted some from the Georges River up to the Castlereagh runs to work for him, including a friend of Biddy's, Jimmy Lowndes, a Gandangara man born to the south west of what had become Liverpool (Liston 1988:49-59; Kohen 1985). When Holt bought up all the land along the southern shore of the lower Georges River and Botany Bay to the coast, he hoped to start a new pastoral empire on this Sydney estate. He brought a number of western plains Aboriginal people who had worked on his runs on the Castlereagh, as well as bringing back some of the Georges River people like Lowndes who had earlier gone to the Castlereagh.

The Holt purchase may initially have made little difference to the Rowley family, who stayed living around Pelican Point until William was a young man. His family suffered two drowning tragedies in the waters around there – first his mother and, some years later, his older brother. Nevertheless, William Rowley became a fisherman, making his livelihood from the waters of the river, bay and sea. He travelled freely from the lower reaches of the Georges River, on the western side of Pelican Point, across Botany Bay to the settlement of La Perouse on its eastern shores of Botany Bay, and sometimes beyond, out of the heads to fish off the coast. The school teacher at Sandringham near Kogarah (on the western edge of the Bay) knew Rowley well as a part of the wider Botany Bay fishing community. Rowley made a fair living selling his fish to settlers, who visited La Perouse as a curiosity. He sold other sea products as well, like the cuttlebone, the internal shell of the cuttlefish (*Sepia spp.*) which provided the live animal's buoyancy but which, after its death, was much in demand as a soft, carvable material to make jewellery moulds. He became an active member of the La Perouse community, marrying and beginning a family there. A photograph of a group of smartly dressed La Perouse residents, taken apparently in the 1870s, shows Rowley there as a young man, with his wife holding their child.⁸

When the government appointed George Thornton as Aborigines Protector in 1881, one of his first actions was to 'clean up' Botany Bay by forcing the residents of the many camps around its shores to move away to distant 'missions' managed by the new Protection Board. Ellen Burragalang, Biddy's daughter, was one of the many who were swept up in this move which in her case took her to Maloga Mission on the Murray River (Goodall and Cadzow 2009:112-114).

Others, like William Rowley, were forced to locate themselves more regularly at La Perouse, the one settlement which the government decided should be allowed to remain, as it was not only already a tourist attraction, but was considered to be very far distant from

⁶ *St George Call*, 18 May, 1907, p3; 27 Apr 1907, p3.

⁷ *The Propeller*, 31 Jan 1935, p7.

⁸ NSW Department of Public Instruction, School Records 1876-1979, Sandringham School, Admin File 1884-1898, SRNSW, NRS 3829, 5/17590.3; Photograph from the personal collection of Shayne Williams, AIM Collection, Mitchell Library, SLNSW.

the settlers' town centre at Sydney Cove. To some extent it suited fishermen like Rowley who could still fish the Bay and access the coast through the heads not far to the south. He became so accepted at La Perouse that in 1883 that he was one of five signatories of fishermen from La Perouse who petitioned the government, successfully, for boats to further their livelihood (Goodall and Cadzow 2009:70; Nugent 2005:47-9).

The other people from the many small camps around the Bay seemed to have disappeared – but they had simply moved out of the sight of the settlement's government officers – further upstream to the west to places along the Georges River and therefore further away from any recognized reserve or supervised camp. They were not, of course, invisible to the Aboriginal people like Biddy and William Rowley who lived so much of their lives in boats moving up and down the river and Bay. If anything, the western move by the people from the camps around Botany Bay consolidated the knowledge they – and the mobile boat people like Biddy and William – had of the river and its banks.

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If fish were a product that settlers had difficulty in learning how to catch for themselves, there were other marine foods that the settlers recognised immediately and which they fell upon – oysters! The Sydney rock oyster (*Saccostrea glomerata*) was fine eating – and the settlers devoured it. It must have made many coastal people from the British Isles feel like they were not so far from home. But at the same time as enjoying this familiar food, the settlers were also trying to build practical shelter for themselves. The shells of oysters could be burnt to provide the lime needed for mortar for that building work, and the massive middens which lay along the estuarine area provided an obvious source. There are only fragmentary records of the language of Sydney's Aboriginal people – unfamiliarity and suspicion undermined the instruction from the governor that settlers should try to learn as much as they could about local customs. So rather than place names in Sydney being recorded in local languages, as was to happen later in the rest of NSW, the names of the sites around the new settlement are those of the work the settlers did there – so we have 'Salt Pan Creek', 'Mill Creek' and – in memory of the many thousands of oyster shells burnt there – 'Lime Kiln Bay'.

The pressure of these two settler desires - to taste home on their lips by eating oysters and to build homes over their heads with lime made from oyster shells – led to the decimation of the local stock of Sydney oysters. The Aboriginal middens had been rapidly consumed in the fires for lime, but it was soon decided that burning live oysters gave far superior building lime. Legislation was passed in the NSW Parliament as early as 1868 to try to sustain oyster numbers by prohibiting the burning of living oysters for lime, but there continued to be

demand for oysters for shell as well as for eating. By 1870, Sydney's oyster beds had been largely destroyed (Stasko 2000:60-64).

Thomas Holt could see a commercial opportunity in the ban on taking natural live oysters for lime. He set out in 1872 to use the French method for cultivating oysters in *claires* or ponds – building an extensive system of canals in Gwawley Bay to allow the oysters to grow. Although this method worked well in France, it failed in Botany Bay – the canals silted up and the temperature in the shallow waters in summer became far too high for the oysters to survive. Holt's enterprise was failing even before the impact of the shell-boring mud worm in 1888, invading from New Zealand, which devastated the remaining oyster beds.

Holt was not slow to find another way to make a profit from the lucrative oyster market (Stasko 2000:66-67; Geeves 1972). Within only a few years, he had taken up raising oysters in a new part of his estate to feed the desires of the settlers. The focus of this new oyster farming became the promontory from the southern shore into Botany Bay. Shaped like an arrow-head pointing into the centre of the Bay, this whole promontory became known by the name of its northern tip, Towra Point. This included, however, the western corner of the arrow-head, named Pelican Point, which was William Rowley's birthplace. The promontory enfolded a large shallow central bay, known as Weeney Bay, which looked like a bite taken out of the arrow-head from the east. The new cultivation method involved setting up a dense upright stand of stakes of wood which would catch the natural spatfall. The abundant, free-floating oyster larvae would attach themselves to the stakes, which interrupted their onward movement and allowed them to be later collected into trays for intertidal cultivation (Stasko 2000:83).

William Rowley was also able to make a place for himself at Towra Point. By 1891 he was living at Weeney Bay, where there were only a handful of people and one hut.⁹ By 1893, Rowley was being paid as the caretaker of all of Holt's oyster farming, and was authorized to stop any person from coming onto the area and from taking either the oysters or any other material there.¹⁰

This should be seen as a strategic exchange on Rowley's part, revolving around the living things there. Certainly, Rowley was being paid, but what he was providing was not only his presence to protect the oyster beds nor even his authority as a respected member of the Botany Bay Aboriginal community. Rather he was offering his environmental knowledge – but not only of the oysters but of the mangrove stands which provided the best wood for the oyster stakes because mangrove wood did not warp or rot. The mobility of Aboriginal people whose lives were lived on water, like the fisherman William

⁹ Census of Aborigines, 1891

¹⁰ J. Murphy, Manager, to W. Rowley, November 1893, Holt Family Papers, ML, SRNSW

Rowley or the guide Biddy Giles, added to what they had been taught through their family and community culture. So they knew all the people camped along the length of the river, knew the landscapes and waterscapes, and knew who to ask about what.

The knowledge of mangroves had become important before it was being used in commercial oyster farming from 1888. La Perouse people were already making a cash income from selling the souvenir boomerangs they carved - and these were best made, just like weapons in the past, from mangrove wood for the same reasons: the wood did not warp or rot. Men from La Perouse were still regular visitors in the 1930s to the communities of their countrymen along the river, like the families living at Salt Pan Creek, to seek advice about the best places to get mangroves.¹¹ William Rowley's own income was not dependent on carving, but he knew the La Perouse people well who did sell their carved boomerangs to tourists and so he knew the people and places along the river to go to for the wood.

Rowley's knowledge was important to Holt to contribute to the new methods of the oyster farming industry, but Rowley had a reason for offering it to Holt in exchange for a caretaker's job at Weeney Bay. In the immediate aftermath of the government intervention of 1885 which had forced so many Botany Bay people away from their camps, there were few safe places to live any more around Botany Bay other than at La Perouse, on the eastern edge of the Bay. But by taking work with Holt, Rowley was ensuring he was securely able to live close to his own country at Pelican Point.

In the many different types of interactions which Biddy Giles and William Rowley had with settlers, the common

point might at first seem to have been food – the fish and game that they traded or taught about – but in fact it was their environmental knowledge which was the point of engagement. Not only did the settlers continue to need to learn from the pre-invasion knowledge of local Aboriginal people, but both Biddy Giles and William Rowley were able to adapt to the changing economy, technologies and environment over this long period of time. Eating animals was a pathway to strategic negotiations in which these Aboriginal people used their environmental knowledge to gain some of their own goals as well as satisfying the new needs of settlers.

William Rowley seems to have stayed at Weeney Bay over the next 20 years, with a continuing relation to La Perouse. In the 1910s, he moved to the west, upstream along the Georges River, where he purchased a block of land at the top of a steep bank which dropped down to Salt Pan Creek, near what is now Charm Place. Rowley purchased his land next to a block bought by Ellen, Biddy's daughter, who had brought her husband, Hughie Anderson and their family back to the Georges River from the Murray. These two blocks became an important refuge for many Aboriginal people during the Depression: as privately owned land, the Aboriginal people camping there at Salt Pan Creek were safe from Protection Board interference. Jacko Campbell and Ted Thomas, who both lived there at times in the 1930s, remembered fishing and gathering oysters in the Creek to be a regular part of daily life. Directly below the steep bank behind the Salt Pan Creek blocks, there is still the glistening remains of the broken shells of what must once have been a large midden, spread along the shore. Whether or not this midden was still being used when William Rowley and Ellen Anderson lived at the Salt Pan Creek camp, it reminds us that the food of the estuary remained a central part of the lives of all of the people living around it.

¹¹ Jacko Campbell, interview with and recorded by the author; 24 Sept 1980, Glebe. (Identified as T51)

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