26 VIEWS OF THE STARBURST WORLD

WILLIAM DAWES AT SYDNEY COVE 1788–91

ROSS GIBSON
William Dawes, in Notebooks B, musing about a good expression to illustrate the utterance ‘ngi’a’, meaning ‘for you’.

This book offers a set of refracting views into the contentious time when the English astronomer William Dawes laboured under the southern stars, sharing intimacies and ideas with a small group of Indigenous people from all around Sydney Harbour. Dawes called his collaborators ‘Eora’. This was the right expression for ‘people’, the locals said, and it might have been the first thing they watched him write down. So this odd ritual began to tie them together: the Eora would utter skeins of sound; in response Dawes would hunch to scratch raveled stains on a notebook he carried.

These were the years – January 1788 until December 1791 – when Britain seized the Eora country, leading eventually to the establishment of the modern nation of Australia. It was a dramatic time, a tragic time, all at once a time of ingenuity, imbecility and injustice. In the pages ahead, we will look into the brief interlude when Dawes was at Sydney Cove. Responding to the paradoxes he
embodied, we will generate several interpenetrating views of what was learned and what was ignored and lost in the establishment of the garrison-society.

During these years, the world of the Eora changed catastrophically, and Dawes delved into it. Extracurricular to his mission as a Lieutenant with the Royal Marines who were occupying the Cove, he gathered a good sliver of the local language. So here is the first of many paradoxes about him: the language exchange was a visionary project which Dawes instigated even as he took part in the cultural and military assaults that hushed Eora language almost to silence during the next decade or two. Hushed almost to silence.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the globe, scientific discoveries and political upheavals were transforming Europe in astonishing ways. Ambitious and inventive, Dawes kept track of these innovations. This was typical of him, for he was never far from flummoxing change. For example, in every theatre of war and colonialism where he served – not only at Sydney Cove but also in Africa and the Caribbean, as well as North America, where he had already been posted – mayhem always seemed to be abroad. More than once, he saw entire cultures dismantled as others were invented. While he was never a definitive cause, he was always close by the tumult. From inside the strife, he measured his volatile era. In each context where he placed himself so calculatingly, everyday existence seemed to be exploding and realigning, as if in a starburst.

The surviving information about Dawes is meagre and fragmented, and because he was a paradoxical character immersed in bafflement, my account of him is deliberately multi-faceted and contentious. While aiming to be lucid and persuasive throughout, I also want to treasure the speculation and inconclusiveness that Dawes represents. I have responded to the ambiguities in his character and to all the missing notes in his story by offering a variously
textured set of vignettes, some of them more imaginative than historical, each of them its own literary exercise or view. Together all the views comprise a purposefully fractal account of the man and his ventures: who he was, what he thought, the places he knew, the times and intellectual changes he lived through, the people he met, how the world marked him and how he marked it.

The formal strategy for this book became clear to me while I was enjoying a re-run of Francois Girard’s documentary *Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*, an exemplar of the fractal approach. I now recall that my little epiphany came not long after I had been appreciating, for the hundredth time, a cherished library-copy of Katsushika Hokusai’s *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*. So this process, whereby lateral connections generate provocative new perspectives, and vice versa, is an organising principle in *26 Views of the Starburst World*. It is a compositional approach that I have explored previously, in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, a book responding to a landscape that is comprised of paradoxes and absences. Now I have refined and extended the ‘versioning’ method with this kaleidoscopic study of Dawes.

But *The Starburst World* is not only a set of biographical speculations. It is also an examination of the philosophical issues poised within a pair of ‘language notebooks’ that Dawes compiled while he was with the Eora. These notebooks are startling objects containing several different modes of writing, indexing and mapping.

Guided by the way Dawes worked pen-in-hand with the Eora, the organisational form of my book responds to the variegated quality of his notebooks. While *The Starburst World* offers an account that you can follow straight through from start to finish, it also encourages you to work backwards and forwards across its several views. It is a kind of montage-system, designed so you can flit through the various portions, putting sequences and propositions together in conjunctions that provoke new insights, enigmas and
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debates about the overall interpretation of the man and the bursting worlds that he encountered and impelled.

So this book is meant to help you knock your analytical thinking against your intuitive rumination. Chasing the fascinations that thrilled the Lieutenant during his disorienting time in Eora country, the book tries to catch the wonder that shone for him and rearranged him at Sydney Cove. And it wants to show how Dawes was amplified and illuminated when he was with the Eora, even as he succumbed in time to anguish, out there on his observatory bluff, weather-beaten and engulfed by language, stars and country.
Vocabulary of the language of N.S. Wales, in the neighbourhood of Sydney. (Native & English), by - Dawes.
Muriel — Sand, Dust, or Dry Earth.
Mulama — To sharpen a knife
Müebeya — To open it
Muremhudjøa — Possessed with difficulty
Mereadjøme. Merene — You [drink tea/face] before
This was told to me by Matya when I was drinking
tea the 2nd time to please them.
Mikoarbi — His foot slipped.
Munye — To start, as frightened
Munyeähljøa — I started.
Munyeähljøadyêmîna — You made me start
Mapiadyêmîna — You speak an unknown language
Kanamâral hariadyêmî. Bal Bjarabúnu
wine, Kanamâral kariyî
Munyu — Another name for Reas or ice
Mekoaomadjøêmîna — You winked at me
Mâluy, Darfi Malûmen, Once. If D. nefo
Mutêng — Cold, or cool, pleasantly as.
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Wingara or To Think

Present
I think
Those were I am
They

Past
I did think or was thinking
Those were they

Future
I
Those were they

will think
1799. The month of June brought a cozy summer to London. Townsfolk were stepping out again, released from the gloomy skies at last. Abroad, the French Republic and the American colonies were still shuddering with their Revolutions. But England seemed less tumultuous. Here the century was waning more meekly. A sense of *status quo* locked the calendar. In Westminster, the politicians kept plodding through the same old protracted disquisitions. The Committee of Inquiry examining British involvement in the global slave trade, for example, had just huffed into its ninth year.

As you would expect, nobody in workaday England seemed much interested in the fact that a former Marine Lieutenant named William Dawes had been ordered to appear before the Slavery Committee. Even so, something roused the Lords when Dawes turned up. Such a hubbub was unusual. If you flick back through the Parliamentary Journals for the 1790s, you see dozens of terse
notes about various unremembered citizens, and a few famous ones, spending a quick snippet of a morning or afternoon presenting to the Committee. But with Dawes it was different. He was interrogated for three days.

What did the Lords ask him? And what did he say that caused these old campaigners to tarry and chew at him when they could just as easily have called time on the pre-holiday sessions and gone out to the pleasures of the town?

The point is we do not know exactly. The Parliamentary Journals for 1799 tell us only that the Committee called and recalled Dawes and then called him again. Three full days with these picky aristocrats; so much time focused on this one uncelebrated commoner! Something must have lured the inquisition along, some niggle or possible controversy. True, there were religious quarrels to exploit: Methodists were riling other Protestants and Dawes was certainly sectarian in his own way. With his personal style, or maybe with his stubbornness, Dawes must have struck an argumentative flint.

But we have no details.

We will scratch over this kind of sketchiness again and again with Dawes. We will see how close he came to the world’s engines of influence, and how often. We will see how full and famous his life should have been but how riddled his legacy is, how he is defined mostly by what is absent from his records and by all the big chances that he had within reach but contrived to miss or mangle. We will see how, in a life spanning from 1762 till 1836, Dawes moved through many of the most compelling and complex portions of the fast-burgeoning British Empire, repeatedly coming close to major impact. But the traces he left are meagre. His encounter with the Lords is a good example: nearby power, but on the wrong side of it; ineffective despite enviable opportunity.
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A broader view is easier to sketch. For one thing, the general context around Dawes and the slave trade is clear enough. The House of Lords Inquiry was like most parliamentary organs: it was factional and driven by ideologues and business groups. There were some agitators sincerely concerned about the brutal conditions and the moral affront of the trade. Others worried about the rise of competitive new national economies built around slave labour. A different faction of testifiers were attracted to the immense personal fortunes that suckled off plantation commerce and the new opportunities for merchant navy enterprises. Religion was part of the quarrel too, with different sects espousing different methods for saving the valuable Africans, their bodies and souls.

Dawes was called by the Committee because he was part of a messy counter-economy of slavery. He had spent portions of the early 1790s enduring two different terms as the Chief Administrator in Sierra Leone. This West African territory was a new kind of ‘company nation’ that had been set up by a Governing Board of Englishmen determined to create a second-chance society for relocated and ostensibly liberated slaves and descendants who had been shipped back to Africa, often landing nowhere near the homelands where they or their forbears had originally been stolen. There were former mercenary black soldiers among them too, adrift after the American wars. They all had political opinions and no ready sense of trust. Such volatile happenstance.

Dawes’ stints in charge of Sierra Leone had not gone smoothly. The new settlement was underfunded, over-theorised and feverish. Nobody had an easy time. Everybody was displaced and driven. If you were in Sierra Leone, you might have been driven there by recent trauma, or by fealty to particular evangelical doctrines, or by ideals that were sometimes humanitarian, sometimes messianic. Dawes felt all these drives. And he was meant to govern them, first in himself and then in a new society. Furthermore he knew already that these nation-planting ventures are never simply righteous. He knew that
Sierra Leone was grafted on top of at least one indigenous community, a faction that was ostensibly represented at the time by the local ‘King’ Naimbanna who claimed that his people had long tended the riverine jungles and coastal hinterlands. From his own recent history, Dawes was aware of how colonial grafting can turn poisonous.

To get by in Sierra Leone, no matter how high or low you were in the recently installed hierarchy, you had to make and break alliances. Beset with bouts of sickness and administrative tedium that veered often to grievance, Dawes fell out with a faction who were in high dudgeon over the neglect of their particular strain of Christianity. The malcontents spent and stoked much energy recruiting the most recent immigrants. Among these new conscripts were descendants of slaves, as well as more recent black runaways and soldiers who had shipped over from the chilly coasts of Nova Scotia where many had been sent after fighting for the British in the last, losing battles of the American War of Independence. The squabbles in Sierra Leone worsened with the arrival in 1792 of the first of two great influxes of Nova Scotians. By the time Dawes was in charge, the collective dissatisfactions in the colony had been brewing for some time and they were boosted by his own prickly insistence about the best way to govern. He had developed a fixation about the need for more fortifications, and he was less than sympathetic to the land claims of many of the longer-term settlers. Then the prevailing rancour was amplified when an English settler called Anna Maria Falconbridge, wife of an ambitious Company factotum, privately published and fervently distributed a hefty book about her disgruntlement concerning the Company generally and Dawes particularly.¹

If you create a nation from an idea and then plant it on some plot of land that you’d like to think is a fresh field, the fortified hamlet you construct will most likely seem the full world. From his previous experience in the southern hemisphere, Dawes already knew about these Genesis-scaled dramas. He already knew how petty disputes
can swell and fill every thought. In Sierra Leone there was a gang of a dozen or so folks who were rallied by the Falconbridges. This faction stoked a hatred of Dawes (true, he had some lamentable traits) and they tried to remake their village-sized world by taking their outrage all the way back to the full Council of the Sierra Leone Company in London. But to no avail. Deciding that the insurgents were delinquent, the Council deported most of the main agitators from the colony. Even so, a taint of scandal lingered around the governance of Sierra Leone, and half a decade later the Parliamentary Committee was still raking through the old grievances. Moreover there were a couple of Lords who were keen to harass the Abolitionist cabal who seemed to run the Company. As is usual with these parliamentary committees, the ire of one or two inquisitors kept the proceedings in motion.

By the time Dawes was summoned to Westminster, he was back in the Home Counties, down on his luck, watching his wife Judith ailing mortally, grubbing some teaching work at one of the Hospital Schools. In short, he was impecunious, resentful and struggling for reputation at age thirty-seven.

Granted, whenever we zoom in close to this historically minor man, we miss the details we want, but as he enters the House of Lords we can at least see how he was no longer the worthy prodigy auditioning for the great prizes of Empire. He was perplexed and peevish by now and wondering what to try next. He was probably enraged too—there is no doubt he had a temper and could keep a long grudge—enraged by the way the world had turned and rolled over him.

Zooming back out to the global scale as Dawes measured his paces into the Chambers, we can note that several transnational calamities had begun to shake the larger slave economy and that the Sierra Leone Company was already a case study in what not to do with plantations, what not to do with good wishes and political theory, with brutalised people and the future. So the Lords were
calling in every pertinent person they could find within a coach ride of Westminster, summoning all the locals who had been involved in the African experiment. Which brought Dawes into the Parliament, in a role far less auspicious than he would once have expected, considering what a prodigy he had seemed when he was first noticed, during the mid-1780s, by star-makers such as Joseph Banks and Nevil Maskelyne, the Astronomer Royal.

How Dawes fared in front of the Lords, we know just a little because of Zachary Macaulay, who was also summoned to the Inquiry in June 1799. Unlike Dawes, Macaulay has been well remembered by history. Extensive records were kept about him and thick biographies written. In a deft life which produced prosperity and progeny (one of whom in fact became a Lord of the Realm), he was accorded Fellowship in the Royal Society, memorialised in Westminster Abbey and celebrated ever after as William Wilberforce’s visionary fellow traveller within the Slavery Abolition movement. While a young man in Sierra Leone, Macaulay had been an ally, indeed an admirer of Dawes. So closely allied were they that immediately after the power struggles with the Falconbridge putsch, Macaulay twice stepped into the role of Governor of the colony in 1794 and 1796, when Dawes fell seriously ill and had to recuperate in England, marking ends to the first and second of his three Governorships.

The two men had contrived to stay firm friends throughout the mendacity and suffering in Sierra Leone. So in June 1799 Macaulay came to the Parliament a week earlier than his subpoena required, to brace himself for his own ordeal and to learn from what Dawes endured. On 20 June, after watching the performance, he sent an apprehensive letter to his fiancé:

My examination comes on Monday; and I can perceive from the mode of proceeding with respect to Dawes that the Duke of Clarence is disposed to make it as harassing as he can. Dawes’
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examination occupied three days, and his extreme want of recollection gave our opponents some advantage over him. But his simplicity, integrity and coolness were very striking and I think must have impressed the House as forming a strong contrast to the loose, rash, hasty manner in which the witnesses on the other side delivered themselves. It seems to be a main object ... to prove us visionaries, Dissenters, and Democrats.²

Macaulay’s report has a few clues about Dawes. Between the lines, we can discern some qualities and foibles of the ex-marine:

his coolness (which combines with a tendency toward ‘unbending principles’, a quality that Macaulay noted elsewhere³);

his extreme focus on details in the present moment and his habitual self-absorption, both of which could skew his memory when reporting later to an inquest;

his tenacity, of a kind that would only have strengthened and become more rigid over three days of interrogation;

his vagueness or complete lack of concern around issues that do not fall within his own definition of things worth considering;

his inability to read the politics of a situation and to finesse the complexities for his own quick benefit.

Here Dawes can be construed as the exact opposite to Macaulay, who would stride into the Chamber on 20 June to parry his interrogators without any drawn-out hostility. Macaulay always managed to turn a squabble to his own benefit, whereas Dawes shot his chances, lost his allies and grew old and cranky watching several acquaintances rise to eminence, acquaintances like Macaulay and many of his old military confreres who possessed fewer rations of brilliance than he did, but more doses of savvy.
What we do not see in the vignette from Macaulay is the brilliance of his misfit mentor. We do not see how, if just a few motivations had run differently, Dawes might have become renowned as one of the great minds of early modernity, how he saw into several mysteries but lost his grasp on the pragmatic world, how he stretched his mind to know about subtle complexities as vast as language, erotics, the stars and the weather, but he could not grasp the more vulgar mechanics of state power and close personal persuasion. Nor does Macaulay’s vignette help us see the systematic acuity of Dawes, how he could gather the most arcane but germane details of worldly experience and experiment with their relational dynamics and intricacies till a brilliant new insight flared for his avid mentality.

A full comprehension of Dawes needs flaws in it, and layers. Even though he was exceptional, perhaps a genius, he would repeatedly miss his best chances to exert influence near and far around him, till he faded from view and retreated all the way out to the edge of the world, on the waterless Caribbean rock called Antigua, where he finished his days surrounded by his notes, journals and correspondence, which blew to disintegration in the notorious hurricane of 1871. This erasure happened three decades after his death. It expunged him almost completely from historical memory. Almost. A full century later, a few skerricks turned up in London, just enough to start us imagining the insights he grasped on his best days and the wonders he could have told to the future.

To understand who he was and what he might mean for us now, we need to scan back to Sydney Cove, between January 1788 and December 1791, back to the complex inception of the British colony that grew into present-day Australia. We need to imagine what was driving Dawes during those years when he was still regarded as a bright star ascendant, the kind of figure whom Macaulay once boosted as ‘one of the excellent of the earth’.4