

TIFFANY  
SHELLAM

SHAKING  
*Negotiating the Aboriginal World at King George's Sound*  
HANDS  
ON THE  
FRINGE

University of Western Australia Press



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*For Gustavo, and for Hallie.*



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One friend in particular has had unrelenting confidence in me and my

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## Prologue

The city of Albany is situated on the most southern tip of Western Australia. It is a large regional centre today, known as the 'gateway' to the Great Southern region, and hosts a population of around 25,000 people. The centre of the city lies on a slope between two rocky, granite hills, Mt Clarence and Mt Melville, and looks across at the vast, circular basin of Princess Royal Harbour. This harbour connects to King George Sound, a large open waterway which protects the town like a sentinel from the rough swells of the cold and wild Southern Ocean. A third inlet, Oyster Harbour, opens along King George Sound's northern shoreline.

I know these three harbours and the surrounding landscape intimately. My family built their 'tree house' in a small town called Denmark, 55 kilometres to the west of Albany on the top of Weedon Hill. The hill is dotted with tall, skinny, pale-grey karri trees and lumpy granite boulders. I have holidayed in Denmark and Albany since I was a child and I have strong memories of the majestic karri and jarrah forests, the wild beaches and the distant but foreboding mountain ranges to the north, the Porongurup and Stirling Range. My family are avid bushwalkers and we have spent many holidays walking along sections of the Bibbulmun Track – a track which honours the Aboriginal people of the south-west and recognises their ancient practice of walking long distances for ceremonies. The Bibbulmun icon is the head of a serpent and the track snakes its way around the southern coastal region, between Perth and Albany.

Although I have had an attachment to this place for many years, I have only recently discovered something of Albany's deeper human past. In 2003, during a rare walk through the main street (I usually stick to the beaches or

the bush) I came upon a statue in a park next to the city library. This statue was the first material contact I had with this community's past. It is a life-size bronze figure of an Aboriginal man. The figure has an athletic physique and stands tall on two granite rocks, a spear grasped with one hand. It honours an Aboriginal man called Mokaré. He is remembered here as the 'Man of Peace'. The plaque beneath it reads 'in recognition of the role that Mokaré played in the peaceful co-existence between *Nyungar* people and the first European settlers.' The date 1826 is inscribed at the figure's feet. The statue was erected in 1997 as part of a Reconciliation project by local residents of the Albany community and funded by the Aboriginal Affairs department and the Albany City Council. It was a symbolic gesture, part of a movement of positive acts by non-indigenous Australians to reconcile with Aboriginal communities across Australia.

I was fascinated by this 'man of peace' and the supposedly peaceful past he represented. The term 'peaceful' is not commonly used in narratives depicting the relationships between Aborigines and newcomers in Australia. Historian E.P. Thompson has taught me to be wary of such simple terms. In his essay on the moral economy of the English working class in the eighteenth century, he wrote about the use of the term 'riot' in relation to the so-called food riots in England. He explained how this word is too exclusive to encompass all the people and all their actions in eighteenth-century English peasant life. He accused historians who use such broad brush terms in their histories of 'reductionism, obliterating the complexities of motive, behaviour, and function.'<sup>1</sup> The term 'peaceful', like Thompson's 'riot', conceals more about this past than it reveals.

Don Watson has written that 'monuments honour deeds and end questions.'<sup>2</sup> However, after encountering the statue I was eager to uncover more about Mokaré the person and his countrymen and women who lived where Albany now stands; to discover what they made of the newcomers who came and set up a British camp on the northern shore of Princess Royal Harbour. I wanted to get to know the man who lived and experienced that long ago present rather than let the language on the statue explain away the complexity of human experiences. The telling of this history emerges from my first encounter with Mokaré's statue that day in the main street of Albany.

The British garrison settlement party arrived from New South Wales on Christmas Day in 1826. It included a troop of soldiers of the 57th Regiment of Foot and a hand-picked group of skilled crown prisoners, and was overseen

by Major Edmund Lockyer. In March 1831, the garrison was transferred from the authority of New South Wales to the colony of Western Australia, the headquarters of which was based at the Swan River settlement, the modern site of Perth. The date inscribed at the foot of Mokaré's statue, 1826, denotes the beginning of this British world, referred to as 'King George's Sound' by the newcomers.<sup>3</sup> The act of marking the statue '1826' instantly incorporates Mokaré into the British foundational narrative. This rendering of an Aboriginal man and his world into a British one recurs in Australian historiography and public histories around the country, and it serves to cloak the ways in which Aboriginal people like Mokaré also appropriated and understood the British within their own worlds and narratives.

This history depicts a series of events during the first few years of the British settlement at King George's Sound, from when it was established as a military garrison in 1826 until after its conversion to a free settlement within the colony of Western Australia. Several narrative episodes focus on the relationships between the Aborigines who lived beyond the shores of King George's Sound and the newcomers who stepped ashore and stayed. Some of these relationships confounded my expectations of nineteenth-century British military men and illuminated strategic Aboriginal behaviour. My intention is to offer explanations for these relationships and the behaviour of these people by scrutinising what their decisions to act might have actually meant to them; to understand their motivations and intentions as best I can in their own cultural contexts. In particular I want to investigate how individuals like Mokaré understood and used the British presence. This book is also an attempt to unravel the varied processes of world-rendering that the statue and other histories have forged. Several key episodes have been selected as entry points into the world at King George's Sound between 1826 and the early 1830s. They are stories which provide a context for interpreting the actions and motivations of the people who experienced them. This structure has drawbacks that I am aware of. I have not covered everything that happened in those years (which is impossible to achieve in any structure), focusing instead on a solid and close reading of particular episodes. The episodes have smaller reflections which explain some of the decisions of my narrative and offer a deeper analysis, separate from the tension of the narrative episodes.

My major questions while reading the British texts have focused on deducing what the Aboriginal men and women might have been up to. I wanted to understand the nature of the changes in the Aboriginal world with

the arrival of these strangers and, most importantly, how particular individuals experienced change. How were the newcomers and their material culture understood and how were they incorporated into the Aboriginal world? How did Aboriginal people use the British presence to advantage through strategic actions and how did these Aboriginal people improvise to appropriate aspects of the British world into their own? The episodes considered make up a larger story about how a functioning Aboriginal world incorporated a new presence. It was not a simple takeover. In these first few years, a fusion of cultural expectations and material culture took place, with an unexpected Aboriginal use of, and varying interests in, the activities of the British who were setting up their own world on the fringes of an Aboriginal one.

I have encountered a very different Mocaré from the bronze statue, frozen in time and spoken for by a plaque in the town of Albany today. The statue appropriates Mocaré in the colonial British and postcolonial Australian worlds but, as the following history shows, the newcomers to King George's Sound were constantly being situated in the Aboriginal world too, in a wide variety of interesting ways. This history is an attempt to go beyond that Reconciliation statue and unearth some of the stories that Mocaré and his countrymen and women told and took part in.

FINDING A VOCABULARY  
FOR ENCOUNTERS



# I

## Stepping Ashore, Stepping Aboard

*Bo-kēn-yēn-nā*: Shall I go on board?<sup>1</sup>

I begin this history with a meeting that occurred before the British settlement was established, in 1821 between Phillip Parker King of the British Royal Navy and two groups of Aborigines in Oyster Harbour at King George's Sound. King was an Australian-born maritime surveyor and son of the third Governor of New South Wales, Philip Gidley King. This meeting was jotted down by King in his log book and reworked in his published narrative.<sup>2</sup> It was his second visit to King George's Sound and its adjoining harbours. He had stepped ashore in 1818, but he had not met any local people then – he saw smoke from their fires and they probably saw him and his vessels from the bush. King's visit in 1821, when he met and exchanged with Aborigines, is a good beginning for this history. His narrative alludes to other stories of previous meetings and sightings from ashore. Through King's descriptions, it is possible to read how he and other European seafarers and particular Aborigines were reciprocally adding to their shared vocabularies for communication and extending an evolving repertoire of knowledge about each other. A close reading of the Aborigines' and strangers' employment of their own expectations in this meeting also suggests a vocabulary with which to talk about cross-cultural engagements at King George's Sound when the British newcomers set up their garrison in 1826. King's published narrative disseminated the knowledge he gained in this encounter. It formed part of the repertoire of knowledge later explorers carried back to the colony; an inventory expanded by Major Edmund Lockyer when he experienced his first encounters with this place and its people five years later. It is an episode that I will constantly return to.

It was mid-afternoon on 23 December 1821. A square-rigged vessel with two masts, weighing 170 tons, sailed from the east around Bald Head and into King George's Sound. This large schooner, the *Bathurst*, like a swan and its cygnets, carried three smaller open boats – two whaleboats and a smaller cutter called a jolly boat. On board and in charge was Captain Phillip Parker King. On his previous visit in 1818 he had anchored in Oyster Harbour, to the north of King George's Sound, but on this visit he wished to explore the area near where in 1801 Matthew Flinders had anchored his vessel, the *Investigator*, during his circumnavigation of Australia.<sup>3</sup> On his first visit King relied on Flinders's maps, charts and descriptions of King George's Sound and the surrounding area. Flinders's writing and charting gave clarity to an expectation in King's mind of what King George's Sound might have been like: the well-wooded land, the depth and shape of the waterways, the character and habits of these particular Aboriginal people.

The purpose of this visit was to replenish the brig's supplies of wood and water before undertaking an extensive voyage up the west coast. King dropped the *Bathurst's* anchor near the western shore of King George's Sound and one mile from the entrance to Princess Royal Harbour. He was eager to explore the northern shores of Princess Royal Harbour, but was unsure whether the location would be suitable for wooding and watering his brig. Suitability was determined by the proximity of the shore to where the vessel could anchor. It was a safety measure for King and his crew; his vessel was his only site of security. It also allowed King to control the space of a possible encounter with the Aborigines and he needed to hold the power in such a space. He waited until early the following morning to take a whaleboat into Princess Royal Harbour for this purpose, before the sea breeze came up.<sup>4</sup>

King, his crew and their vessels were being watched. As he was preparing one of the whaleboats to test the depth of the harbour, King heard distant shouts. He and his crew looked around the harbour and saw, perched on top of the north head, 'several Indians ... hallooing and waiving to us.' King returned their shouts but did nothing more until he had prepared the whaleboat and then he and his botanist, Allan Cunningham, pulled towards them. The communication would happen when King was ready, when he could control the space and pace of the meeting. But the encounter had already begun. From where he was, King could make out the appearances of this group of men. They were each dressed in a kangaroo skin cloak slung over the left shoulder with their left breast and arm uncovered. The whaleboat drew close to the

north shore and the group of Aborigines came down 'to receive' the strangers, as King put it. Cunningham noted that they laid aside their spears.<sup>5</sup> The gestures of these men, King thought, were an invitation to land, but after what he described as a 'little vociferation and gesture on both sides', King pulled the whaleboat back into the harbour going near to where Flinders had anchored in 1801, opposite a cleared piece of land between two hills on the northern shore. As the Aborigines followed the boat along the shore, King realised that the depth of the water close to the shore was too shallow to anchor the *Bathurst* without 'being impeded' by the group. He assumed, however, that they would be 'amicably disposed', thinking of the meeting between them and Captain Matthew Flinders.

He began turning the whaleboat around to head back to the *Bathurst* and sail into Oyster Harbour where he had anchored in 1818, knowing that he would be able to control the space on the shores of that harbour with the brig at a secure distance. But before the whaleboat had pulled away, the group of Aboriginal men (Cunningham said there were nine) who had followed and watched the strangers' every move were already wading out through the water towards the boat which was sitting in the shallows. King did not wish to engage with them intimately at this stage fearing that if he did they would want some sort of gift or trinket, remembering his previous encounters with Indigenous people around the continent. King had nothing with him in the whaleboat to give them besides a few scraps of ships' biscuit, which Cunningham threw to them as King pulled off into deeper water so he could hold a conversation with them without physical contact. He was doing what he could to engage in the encounter on his terms.<sup>6</sup>

Despite, or perhaps because, of the distance and deep water between them, these strangers and Aborigines managed to 'parley'. According to King, it went like this:

Upon making signs for fresh water, which they instantly understood, they called out to us – 'ba-doo, ba-doo', and pointed to a part of the bay where Captain Flinders had marked a rivulet. Ba-doo, in the Port Jackson language, means water; it was therefore thought probable that they must have obtained it from some late visitors; and in this opinion we were confirmed, for the word kangaroo was also familiar to them.<sup>7</sup>

This first conversation that King had with this group of Aborigines hints at and was shaped by previous encounters. After their conversation about fresh

water, King turned back towards the anchorage of the *Bathurst*. Every time King and his crew changed direction, the Aborigines mirrored them from shore. When he reached the *Bathurst* near the harbour's entrance, the men who had followed the boat went to the north head again, and stood in the position where they had first made themselves known to King and his crew. King pulled up the anchor and the *Bathurst*, with its smaller vessels tacked towards Oyster Harbour, to the north of King George's Sound.

The mouth of Oyster Harbour was very narrow with sections of sand flats and dips of deep water. King knew this from his previous visit and so he took his time in mastering the entrance. As soon as the *Bathurst* had navigated successfully through the sandbar King noticed the appearance of three new Aborigines on the eastern side of Oyster Harbour, opposite to the other group whom he had conversed with, and retreated from, in Princess Royal Harbour. This was a secure space for King; he sent a whaleboat to the eastern shore to lay out the *Bathurst's* kedges for anchor. When the boat reached the shallows the three new Aborigines 'took their seats in it as unceremoniously as a passenger would in a ferry-boat', as King put it.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps they had done this before. The whaleboat with its Aboriginal passengers went back to the brig and the three men went aboard the *Bathurst* for the afternoon. King recorded that these men were 'totally free from timidity or distrust', and so too was King who now felt he was able to control the theatrics of this meeting.

On board the three Aboriginal men shed their cloaks of kangaroo skin and donned clothes that were given to them by the strangers. King was prepared now with gifts. Throughout this exchange they were being watched by the men on the opposite shore with whom King had conversed earlier. King was sensitive to competition and favour, noting that the Aborigines on the western shore, 'seeing that their companions were admitted [on board], were loudly vociferous in their request to be sent for also ...' But the western group was on the lee shore – the wind was blowing towards them – and King could not get a boat to that side, nor did he want too many visitors on the deck at once. Again, his decisions were based on securing his control over the encounter. When King had stabilised the anchor of the *Bathurst*, two of the three Aborigines who had been on board went back ashore, King believing that they were 'evidently charged with some message from the other' man who voluntarily remained on board.

King and his crew also went ashore on the eastern side and began digging

wells for water. After a while the two Aborigines who had been on board the ship earlier returned to where the strangers were on the shore. Tellingly, King now calls them 'our friends'. This small comment sheds light on how King is framing this encounter in his narrative. Friends can betray and be betrayed, strangers cannot. These two 'friends' had taken their time to prepare themselves properly for their return. King wrote that they had evidently been at their 'toilette'. They had smeared their faces with red ochre and replaced the strangers' gifts with their old kangaroo skin cloaks. They also carried a lighted fire stick which King supposed was intended for kindling a fire, so that they might spend the night close to the vessel, in order to watch these visitors' movements and work out their intentions. King and his crew returned to the brig, persuading the man who had stayed on board all day to leave. He left 'reluctantly'. While this man had been on board he had participated in an intimate exchange. He was amply fed by the crew: biscuit, yams, pudding, tea and grog were handed around. There was skin contact too, for his beard had been shaved, while his nudity – confronting to such strangers – was remedied, he swapped his cloak for a pair of trousers. He was 'christened' Jack by the men, a name to which, King wrote, 'he readily answered'.<sup>9</sup> This naming, shaving and clothing of an Aboriginal man was a way for King and his crew to transform this man in his mind and his narrative from 'native' to 'friend'. Jack went ashore after this personal and multi-sensory engagement on board, pleased with his new acquisitions. His freshly painted countrymen came to meet him on the beach, but King reported that 'without deigning to reply to their questions' he detached himself from them, watched the strangers in their ship 'in silence for some time' and then walked 'quietly and slowly' away. The others followed him at a distance. King assumed that it was the grog which had made Jack act in this alienated manner.

At daylight the following morning, the two Aboriginal groups were again assembled on the opposite shores of Oyster Harbour. The distance over the water which separated the groups was relatively small; their words easily travelled and were received across the gap. The group on the western shore had now also covered themselves in the red ochreous earth that the other men had applied the day before.

King and his crew rowed to the eastern shore to examine the wells they had dug the previous day. As soon as the jolly boat had touched the sand and the crew stepped out, Jack climbed in and was rowed back to the brig again. The Aborigines on the western shore were loudly vocal, King believing

that they also wanted to go on board the brig. Their interest was held with Jack and the brig for a while before two of the group on the western shore began fishing. They saw a small seal that had been beached by the outgoing tide. A spear was fixed in a throwing stick and thrown at the animal, hitting it neatly in the neck. The other man ran up and finished it off, piercing it again with his spear and hitting it about the head with a small hammer. The whole group then assembled around the seal and carried it to their nearby fire, eating part of it before it was dead. King and Cunningham were interested in this 'barbarous feast' and landed the jolly boat on the shore to get a closer look. Their curiosity must have been stronger than the wind, allowing them to go to the western shore for the first time since their arrival. Seeing the boat approaching their shore, the Aborigines – who had added seal oil to their body ochre – 'sprang up' from the seal, threw their spears into the bushes and had boarded the boat before it had properly landed. King believed they wished to be rowed out to the brig where Jack was, but he made them wait while he and Cunningham went to observe the animal. The feast was near finished as the Aborigines had all stepped aboard except for one old man and a boy who had not run to the boat. They were seated over the carcass eating the remains. King and Cunningham returned to the boat and ferried the group who had been waiting in the boat out to the *Bathurst*.

It was soon time for breakfast and so the visitors were put ashore by King. The Aborigines were never allowed to be on board while the strangers were eating their breakfast. King knew that they would want food; perhaps he was concerned about his crew's rations and these men seemed to only eat once a day. Three 'new faces' appeared on the eastern side and were brought on board after breakfast, staying the whole day. In the afternoon the expedition's surgeon, Andrew Montgomery took a boat out to Green Island, a small island lying in the deep water of Oyster Harbour. He shot some parakeets and water fowl that were nesting on the island, some of which he gave to the Aborigines, although King does not record which group was given the birds. After Montgomery explained to them, through both body and voice, how the birds had been killed, they produced what King described as a 'great applause.'<sup>10</sup> And that evening before sunset, the group from the opposite shore was admitted on board the *Bathurst*.

With groups from each shore given successive turns to go on board the *Bathurst*, this encounter had become something of a power play between them. While one group was on board, the other was standing on shore watching or

conversing with those aboard. Jack was the only one who was allowed to stay on board the whole time.



Throughout King's visit, both Aboriginal groups 'assisted' these strangers with whatever activities they were engaged in, mostly 'wooding' and 'watering' the vessels and each day new black faces showed up that they had not seen before. King wrote: 'They were not permitted to come on board until four o'clock in the afternoon, excepting Jack, who came and went as he pleased.'<sup>11</sup> King did not believe there was any jealousy over Jack's being allowed on board, while others had to wait their turn. This suited King well. He wanted to 'detain' Jack as a 'hostage' for the safety of Cunningham who was collecting botanical specimens for his collections close to the vessel. But King wrote that Jack was not kept 'by force'. His status as hostage allowed Jack to accompany Cunningham on a few of his botanical searches, not only assisting in carrying Cunningham's plants, but also adding 'to the specimens he was collecting.'<sup>12</sup> Like King, Cunningham was using the knowledge and experience of previous visitors to these shores, examining botanists' sketches and descriptions of the natural world to guide him towards particular species. He was principally concerned in finding the species that Robert Brown had discovered at King George's Sound in 1801 when he accompanied Flinders.<sup>13</sup>

During his time on board the *Bathurst* Jack showed off his tree-climbing skills to the strangers, who had brought two trees with them in their vessel: he climbed the rigging as 'high as the topmast-head'. Jack's performance caused enough of a stir for King to write that this dexterous Aborigine amused his companions on shore as well as mortifying Bundell of King's own crew, who had never dared to climb as high as Jack. This performance of skill, or statement of masculinity, was possibly as much of a show for the two Aboriginal groups on shore as it was for the strangers on board. Bundell was an Aboriginal man from Port Jackson. He had replaced King's previous 'native aid' Bungaree, always called 'Boongaree' by King, whom he had joined after having accompanied Flinders on several voyages around the Australian coast. Bundell, too, had become something of a voyager – travelling to Norfolk Island in 1791 and participating in other colonial, sealing and fishing voyages. He wore a shirt and trousers with pride, just like Jack, and he stood out physically: one eye had been lost to a spear wound.<sup>14</sup> King failed to note in his narrative the possible power play that Jack engaged in with Bundell. King did not even record that Bundell was also Aboriginal. To King, Bundell was a

crew member who happened to be Aboriginal; he was a friend like Jack, not a 'native'.

Each afternoon when King was ready, the Aboriginal groups were admitted, in turns, on board the *Bathurst*. The numbers in the two groups increased a little each day. There were about forty in total, all male and ten of them boys, gathering on opposite sides of the harbour. Some of the people they had first met had only come once or twice and had been replaced with new people. It was not just 'curiosity' and 'excitement' that was the impetus to step aboard the *Bathurst*. Every time that the Aborigines visited these strangers they received a gift of some kind and King tells us that they considered a ship's biscuit to be the most valuable; each person was 'always presented one' on leaving the vessel.<sup>15</sup>

King observed that many of the men who came to visit him from the eastern side had been on the western shore earlier, but how they crossed over from one side to the other was a mystery to him. He commented in his journal that they were not a 'navigating tribe', as he saw no canoes, and nor did he observe 'any trees in the woods with the bark stripped, of which material they are usually made'. King also noticed that the Aborigines approached the water in a 'timid manner', concluding that they were not even 'accustomed to swimming'.<sup>16</sup> It did not occur to King that his presence with the brig had created the shifting groupings of these people – the presence of the brig on the water created a mirage of a division in the local populace.

King's arrival at King George's Sound, in the brig and with his two boats, had also encouraged the local inhabitants to enter into a vigorous program of trade with the visitors. Spears, knives, and hammers were bartered each time they went aboard, or when King's crew stepped ashore. And in the morning the Aboriginal men came at first light with a fresh supply of weapons to trade, suggesting that they were manufacturing almost the whole time that they were not engaged in trading. King believed that it was their women who were busy between the hours of trade, manufacturing the weapons. He could only assume that this was the women's job because he never saw them.



On the evening of 29 December 1821, King and his crew were visited by twenty-four men, from both shores, including their 'friend', Jack. According to King, the Aborigines soon realised that he was preparing to depart Oyster Harbour. They 'expressed great sorrow' at this, especially Jack who kept 'as he always did' at a distance from his countrymen and treated them 'with the greatest disdain'. When it was time to send them back on shore that evening,

after a jovial barter, Jack avoided his countrymen and 'as usual' was the last to leave the vessel. Rather than getting into the smaller whaleboat that they all sat in to be ferried back to shore, Jack hopped into the other whaleboat on the opposite side of the brig that was preparing to get fresh water from the wells, 'evidently expecting', King wrote, 'to be allowed to return in her.' King had become attached to this 'friendly Indian' who was 'allowed' to visit King 'whenever he chose and to do as he pleased; he always wore the shirt that had been given to him on the first day, and endeavoured to imitate everything' that King and his crew were doing, particularly mimicking the sail maker and the carpenter at their work.<sup>17</sup> King seemed pleased to believe that Jack was becoming civilised. He was also the only Aborigine that King met at Oyster Harbour who did not make spears for exchange, laughing heartily whenever a 'carelessly-made spear was offered' to the strangers for 'salé.' King also wrote that he and Jack were becoming more and more intelligible to each other every day and King considered him to be 'certainly' the most intelligent 'native of the whole tribe.'<sup>18</sup> King judged Aboriginal intelligence in egocentric and ethnocentric terms: on the basis of assumed communication, his belief in his own ability to understand particular Aboriginal interlocutors or what he characterised as 'friendly' behaviour.

On 30 December, the anchors of the *Bathurst* were weighed and King and his crew prepared to depart, taking their time in getting out of the shallows and eventually mooring in the stream of the tide to wait for it to come in and lift them off the bottom of the harbour. At 8 am the Aboriginal groups visited them, as usual, but were 'disappointed' to see the brig had moved locations. King sent the jolly boat for one last barter. He and his crew had also enjoyed the exchanges and engagements aboard and ashore. The jolly boat was sent to the eastern shore. When the boat came back to the *Bathurst*, Jack had come too and was brought on board. King thought that he appeared 'attached' to them and he talked with his crew about Jack coming with them for their voyage up the west coast, if Jack was inclined to go. With communication between them not an issue for King, he wrote that 'there was not much difficulty in making him understand by signs that he might go with us, to which he appeared to assent.'<sup>19</sup> To make absolutely certain that Jack did want to leave King thought it wise that Jack tell his companions on shore about his voyaging plans. So it was not certain that they had understood each other all that clearly after all. King had one of his men, Bedwell, put Jack back ashore presumably to talk to his countrymen about his imminent departure with the strangers.

His friends seemed so involved in the barter which had started again when the boat touched the shore that they did not seem to care, King thought, about Jack leaving. Jack was talking to his countrymen and pointing to the sea, perhaps to show where he was going. King thought that his countrymen showed 'careless indifference' at the news of their friend, their attention 'being entirely engrossed with the barter that was going on.'<sup>20</sup> Suddenly, Jack revealed a throwing stick which he had previously hidden behind a bush, trading it with Bedwell for a biscuit before he got back into the boat. This was the first time during King's visit that Jack had bartered. And then he staged a grand performance: as he was being rowed back out to the *Bathurst*, Jack threw the biscuit – the spoils of his barter – to his countrymen on shore. In bestowing a biscuit, perhaps Jack was acting in the ways of these strangers, adopting their currency as well as their ship. King read Jack's drama as 'proof' of the sincerity of his intentions to travel with them.

After an hour on board, King was preparing for departure. The 'breeze freshened' making the water swell and the brig gently sway. King thought that that was enough for Jack, who walked up to King touching his tongue with his fingers and pointing to the shore. King believed that this gesture meant that he was sick and wanted to talk to his friends. Jack was immediately landed; since the whaleboat's position offered a further opportunity for bartering, the Aborigines rushed up to it. When the whaleboat was ready to row back to the brig, Jack 'shook his head and hung back,' King wrote, and was left on shore with his countrymen. The boat went back to the brig and the Aborigines 'dispersed' from the beach, but Jack remained separate from his group and 'walked away without exchanging a word with them.'<sup>21</sup>

Unfavourable weather detained the *Bathurst* at anchor in Oyster Harbour for three days and King spent four more days after that around King George's Sound, on Seal Island and near Bald Head before his boats – big and small – sailed out of the Sound on 6 January 1822.

I have spent time in retelling this encounter in order to draw out some specifics of the interactions between King and his crew and the Aboriginal people living around King George's Sound in 1821. The episode discloses several repertoires of encounter that recur throughout this history. To understand how these repertoires emerge and how these encounters were experienced by those involved, historians need to focus on the minutiae of action and context in each description.

King was not the first stranger to step ashore at King George's Sound. This is implied through his descriptions and his reliance on previous explorers' journals, narratives and maps. The way he constructed his descriptions is evidence of a knowledge bank of interaction and expectation that both he and his crew had of meetings with Indigenous people before this encounter in 1821 began. It is impossible to know what the prior knowledge and expectation of his crew were; it is unlikely they had read previous explorers' journals, and it can be assumed that their knowledge and assumptions were being reinforced and challenged during their expedition with King. Bundell probably travelled with other bases of knowledge and expectation and also, no doubt, contributed to those of King and his crew.

King's narrative reveals too that the Aborigines he met with also had a growing reservoir of knowledge about strangers who came to their shores. It hints at previous visitors: references to Flinders and the names that King used for the harbours and surrounding land disclose that this was a place where European visitors had previously spent time. King's stay at the harbour in turn added significantly to the store of knowledge available to subsequent visitors, his narrative significantly informing Lockyer's knowledge and expectation of Aboriginal behaviour.

The first conversation that King held with the group on the northern shore of Princess Royal Harbour reveals a developing storehouse of Aboriginal knowledge to which strangers like King were adding and reinforcing. The Indigenous men's response to King's gesture for fresh water with the words *badoo, badoo* is a telling point. King recognised that *badoo* was the Port Jackson Aboriginal word for water. This word was offered by the inhabitants before King had spoken: it was not mimicry. Not only did the Aborigines on shore understand what King's gestures meant, they knew what language to speak to him in. They had been eyeing off these strangers and the size and shape of their vessels, and were drawing on their previous experiences with similar vessels – and the visitors they housed – to know which language to use. We can assume that many of the strangers they previously conversed with would have come from Port Jackson first and picked up some local vocabulary, passing it on to the King George's Sound people through gesture and reference. Water was the first need of every seafarer.

This episode suggests the negotiation and education of both Aborigines and Europeans. They were learning how to communicate. Not only did King take home hundreds of Aborigines' tools and weapons from King George's

Sound, but during a subsequent visit in January 1822 he collected items of vocabulary. Reading through the words he translated, it seems likely that he learned and collected the words during the exchanges: items that were bartered are listed and decoded. Tellingly, the only phrase he collected was *bo-ken-yen-na* meaning ‘Shall I go on board?’ This question referenced the incessant requests by the local men to be taken on board the *Bathurst* and engage in trade.

Why were vocabularies collected, compared and published in traveller’s accounts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? A vocabulary list, like the weapons that King received, was a treasure to collect – a prize to take home. It was necessary knowledge and proof of the success of the voyage and of cross-cultural encountering.<sup>22</sup> It also represented the Aboriginal speakers as intelligent. Moreover, desire to learn the alien language was not limited to Europeans. The inhabitants of King George’s Sound were collecting King’s language too. King wrote in his journal: “The words “by and by” were so often used by us in answer to their cau-wah, or “come here,” that their meaning was perfectly understood.”<sup>23</sup> Both groups were learning on their feet how to communicate more effectively.

Jack, and other Aboriginal people represented as similar in personality and motivation to Jack, keeps re-emerging in the history that follows. His naming and the description of his actions epitomise European hopes and expectations of ‘friendly’ native behaviour. However, he acted in a very idiosyncratic way, dissimilar to the actions of his countrymen. Local loyalties did not always control human actions. Jack’s likely political motivations and strategies will be considered in more depth later on.

King’s narrative, and the fragmentary traces of Aboriginal actions inscribed within it, are also useful in explaining how I have found my own vocabulary with which to write and think about cross-cultural encounters like this. By the time the British established a garrison in 1826, the inhabitants of King George’s Sound had developed a store of information about what to expect from strangers in different sized vessels who came to their shores. Knowledge of strangers began accruing before actual encounters happened. I shall return to Phillip Parker King and Jack. However, in order to understand how the Aborigines were developing a reservoir of knowledge about strangers and creating a common vocabulary for communicating with them, and how Europeans were accumulating knowledge about the Aborigines and their language, it is necessary to explain who the previous visitors were.



In the seventeenth century, Dutch voyagers en route to the East Indies made frequent sightings of and contact with the coast of what they called New Holland. Blown off course by blustery winds, Dutch vessels sometimes traversed further south than intended. Aborigines living around the harbours of what would later be named King George's Sound might have seen the Dutch ship *Gulden Zeepardt* sail past in 1627. Peter Nuyts who was on board surveyed the coast around King George's Sound, but it is not clear whether he entered the harbours.<sup>24</sup>

The first recorded strangers to disembark in the area were Captain George Vancouver and his crew in 1791. They were in the early stages of a long voyage of 'discovery' (1791–1795) which had the mission of surveying and seizing territories for Britain before they were possessed by their Spanish rivals. Vancouver, who had twice sailed round the world as a midshipman with James Cook, was particularly interested in Nootka Sound and the north-west coast of America, but he also aimed to visit "The South West part of New Holland, and endeavour to acquire some information of that unknown, though interesting country".<sup>25</sup> He was aiming for what was called on the map, *Land Van de Leeuwin*, a Dutch name denoting the south-west extremity of the continent.

On 28 September 1791, aboard HM sloop *Chatham* and accompanied by the armed tender *Discovery*, Vancouver sailed through the heads of the vast bay he would name 'King George III's Sound'. During his two-week visit, Vancouver was kept busy mapping and naming much of this place: the harbours, islands and headlands. His crew went ashore on a western beach. Close to the shore and near a small cluster of trees they found 'the most miserable human habitation' they had ever seen. This Aboriginal site had not been vacated for long. Vancouver saw a freshly skinned fish on top of one hut and fresh 'excrement' from a native dog near it. He was unimpressed. 'The reflections which naturally arose,' Vancouver wrote, 'were humiliating in the highest degree.' This 'miserable' hut, he thought, was evidence of the 'lowly condition of some of our fellow creatures, rendered yet more pitiable by the apparent solitude and the melancholy aspect of the surrounding country' which 'presented little less than famine and distress'.<sup>26</sup> The strangers walked along the beach, climbing a high rocky point which Vancouver named Point Possession. This summit gave them a commanding view of the three harbours and surrounding land. While there, Vancouver hoisted the British colours,

drank to His Majesty's health, and took possession for Britain of the land around him, including 'north-westward of Cape Chatham, so far as we might explore its coasts.' This ritual was 'accompanied by the usual formalities on such occasions' which were so 'usual' that he did not further describe them.

Vancouver's naming principles combined description, commemoration and tribute. 'Seal Island' was thus called because of its inhabitants; 'Bald Head' from its smooth appearance and absence of verdure. He sowed some seeds on an island in Oyster Harbour and optimistically named it 'Green'. He set aside the most majestic places for the greatest naming honours: contemporary royalty and high-ranking naval figures. The grandest harbour was named after the reigning King of England, George III. In fact, Vancouver and subsequent visitors referred to the whole area, including the adjacent land, as 'King George's Sound', not just the vast harbour. The southern adjacent harbour was named in honour of King George's daughter, Princess Charlotte, whose birthday it was.<sup>27</sup> The ceremony of taking possession being over, Vancouver and his crew went towards the north-eastern harbour. They discovered the narrow entrance that King would cross several decades later, the immense sand bars and sections of shallow water. On the way out of this harbour the boat grounded itself on a sandbank which was covered with oysters 'of a most delicious flavour' on which the visitors 'sumptuously regaled'. They celebrated the find by naming the harbour 'Oyster'.<sup>28</sup>

Before he departed King George's Sound Vancouver returned to the Aboriginal site he had seen when he was collecting water and (in an act of conscience?) decided to leave beads, knives, looking glasses and 'other trinkets', as a 'compensation' to the huts' 'solitary owner' for the wood he had cut down from their land. Vancouver did not meet any Aborigines during his visit, but it is important to note that encounters may happen even when actual *meetings* do not. The local inhabitants were presumably watching, studying and discussing the strangers.

To commemorate his visit and as proof of his act of possession, Vancouver erected a cairn of stones at a tree stump, 'for the purpose of attracting the attention of any European' passing through, and a glass bottle was sealed with a parchment inside describing the act of possession and the people and ships involved.<sup>29</sup> This act of possession, however, was not recognised seriously by the British government, as there was no crew member left behind to 'occupy' and hold the claim of land.<sup>30</sup> Vancouver's visit of over two weeks to King George's Sound had a larger importance. In his log books, he often mentioned seals

and whales 'playing about the ship' while he was in the southern region. Rod Dickson has noted that, even though Vancouver's six-volume chronicle of his voyage was not published until 1798, the information and knowledge it would contain about King George's Sound, together with Vancouver's detailed sailing coordinates, maps and charts, became known to ship owners and seafarers who had a commercial interest in his discoveries, well before the journals were made public.<sup>31</sup> In London, Daniel Bennett, a merchant who owned ships engaged in the South Seas whaling trade, 'made it his business', Dickson wrote, 'to acquaint himself with any reports, personal accounts, log books and diaries of persons travelling through the South Seas to discover new grounds for his fleet of whalers to exploit.'<sup>32</sup> Sealing and whaling expeditions were already working the coast around Van Diemen's Land and Vancouver gave them an incentive to travel further to the south-west to King George's Sound. They were regular visitors. When Vancouver's journals were published, they were also read by British and French explorers and scientific naturalists who were excited by his descriptions of these large harbours and of the natives whose encampments he had seen.

Vancouver introduced King George's Sound and the surrounding region to the map of the world. But, importantly, it was also added to the mind maps of British and French imperialists. Napoleon Bonaparte, the first consul of France, who was already showing signs of a considerable appetite for territorial conquest, agreed to despatch a scientific voyage of discovery to New Holland and surrounding waters in competition with Britain whose convict settlement at Port Jackson provided a tenuous toehold on a very large and hardly defensible continent.

In October 1800 and July 1801, respectively, the French expedition under Nicolas Baudin and a rival English enterprise under Matthew Flinders set sail from Europe for New Holland. Both, following Vancouver's lead, would anchor in King George's Sound for about three weeks. Flinders did so in December 1801 and January 1802, making King George's Sound the first landing place in his circumnavigation of the continent after a rapid passage from England. In contrast, Baudin did not land there until February 1803 and made King George's Sound almost his final anchorage in New Holland waters. Flinders used Vancouver's map and log books to select King George's Sound as the 'proper place in which to prepare ourselves for examination of the south coast of Terra Australis.'<sup>33</sup> Flinders discovered there had been a visit of a sealing crew in the vessel *Elligood* since Vancouver's visit. The sealers had

cut down trees with an axe and saw and removed Vancouver's bottle with his statement of possession and sailing coordinates.

Flinders mapped the coast in great detail and ventured a short way inland, meeting several times with Aboriginal people. The first meeting – which was the first recorded encounter between Aborigines and Europeans in the region – included the botanist Robert Brown and several crew members. Seeing smoke at the head of the harbour, they walked towards it where they met several men 'who were shy but not afraid', Flinders reported. One of these men was admired for his 'manly behaviour' and given a freshly shot bird and a pocket handkerchief by the strangers.<sup>34</sup> Flinders believed that these Aborigines did not want to communicate with him and his crew, as they made signs which Flinders interpreted to mean to 'return from whence [we] came.'<sup>35</sup> On 30 December, Flinders ordered his marines onto the beach to be 'exercised' in the presence of a group of Aboriginal men who had become constant visitors 'and friends,' at the tents of the strangers. Flinders noted the 'red coats and white crossed belts were greatly admired' by the men as he believed they resembled 'their own manner of ornamenting themselves.'<sup>36</sup> Several of the Aboriginal men 'moved their hands, involuntarily, according to the motions; and the old man, who had been admired for his manliness earlier, 'placed himself at the end of the rank, with a short staff in his hand, which he shouldered, presented, grounded, as did the marines with [their] musket ...'<sup>37</sup> Isobel White has discovered that a hundred years later anthropologist Daisy Bates interviewed an old Aboriginal man who claimed to be the grandson of the old 'manly' Aboriginal man who met Flinders. He explained to Bates how the military drill subsequently became part of an Aboriginal dance ceremony at King George's Sound.<sup>38</sup>

Flinders' encounters with the local inhabitants during his visit to King George's Sound were amicable and intimate enough for his surgeon, Mr Hugh Bell to measure the height and anatomy of one man and Flinders' was enabled to collect a small vocabulary list from the men he engaged with.<sup>39</sup> He concluded, however, that the area was unfit for a British settlement.

During Baudin's visit in early 1803, his crew members had only one brief meeting with the local inhabitants. François Péron's narrative of the expedition, tellingly, makes constant reference to Vancouver, but he ignored Flinders' visit and wrongly claimed that one of his own colleagues, Jacques-Joseph Ransonnet, was the first European to 'approach the native people of this region.'<sup>40</sup> Ransonnet went to examine the coast between Mt Gardner and

Bald Island to the east of King George's Sound. He sailed into a 'pretty bay' where 'to his great astonishment' he saw a ship at anchor. It was the Anglo-American brig *Union*, captained by James Pendleton from New York. His mission was to procure seal skins and sell them to China. Ransonnet named this bay 'Two People's' to commemorate this meeting. After leaving the American brig he engaged in a 'long and peaceful' meeting with a group of local Aborigines. A brief exchange took place and Ransonnet noted that the Aboriginal men discarded their French gifts, leaving them on nearby rocks.<sup>41</sup> No other members of Baudin's expedition engaged with local inhabitants, although they had seen 'two or three individuals' who fled 'headlong into the woods'.<sup>42</sup>

Another French expedition, led by the navigata-naturalist Jules-Sebastien-Cesar Dumont d'Urville visited the harbours in October 1826. Several members of his crew spent an intimate night on shore camping next to a group of the King George's Sound men, including the artist Louis Auguste de Sainson who provided the only known sketches of Mokaré and his family. d'Urville's visit will be explored in more detail later. These French and English visits – fuelled by the strong desire for exploration, discovery and possession of land, the collection of natural knowledge and history and encounters with Indigenous inhabitants – had important human contacts that had considerable local impact. They contributed significantly to the growing and varied experiences of interactions with different kinds of strangers being accumulated by local Aboriginal people decades before Lockyer's settlement party arrived on Christmas day in 1826.<sup>43</sup>