# TRUTH TELLING

ROBERT HILL

## THE LAST OF
## THE GADIGAL

# THE LAST OF THE GADIGAL

A Short work on early Sydney and the myth of invasion

Robert Hill

**EXPLANATORY NOTE**

This work is not written as an academic paper and does not adopt the conventions of scholarly citation. It is a historical polemic intended for a general readership, grounded in primary colonial records, published histories, government documents, and contemporaneous accounts that are widely available in the public domain. Sources have been consulted rigorously, but they are integrated into the narrative rather than presented as formal references, in order to preserve clarity, momentum, and readability. The absence of footnotes should not be mistaken for a lack of factual discipline; it reflects a deliberate choice of form. Where interpretations are offered, they are advanced openly and are intended to be assessed against the historical record itself.

**COVER IMAGE**

View of the Settlement on Sydney Cove, Port Jackson, 20th August 1788 — Edward Dayes (after a sketch by Captain John Hunter), published by John Stockdale (1792/1793). Public domain.

First published 2026

## Contents

*"Their wants are few, and their possessions so trifling that they scarcely seem to value them."*
**— Joseph Banks, *naturalist with Captain Cook's first voyage*, Endeavour Journal 1770**

*"The natives appear to live in the most miserable state of want, and were far from showing any disposition to quarrel with us."*
**— Governor Arthur Phillip, dispatches, 1788**

*"These people appeared to live in a state of perpetual want, and were totally unacquainted with any form of government beyond that of the family."*
**— Watkin Tench, *A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay* (1789)**

## Introduction: Against the Destruction of History

History is an account of what actually happened, constrained by numbers, capacity, logistics, and human organisation. When those constraints are discarded, history is not re-interpreted; it is fabricated.

For more than half a century, one of Australia's most prominent historians, Keith Windschuttle demonstrated how large parts of Australian historiography abandoned evidence in favour of politically useful invention. He showed, repeatedly and meticulously, that once facts become inconvenient, they are quietly replaced with conjecture, inflation, and narrative assertion. The result is not a difference of emphasis, but the construction of an entirely fictitious past — one that collapses under even minimal scrutiny.

The modern claim that Australia was "invaded" in 1788 is one such fabrication. It survives only by emptying the word *invasion* of all meaning. An invasion presupposes organised defenders, opposing forces, surplus military power, and the violent seizure and holding of territory. None of these conditions existed at Sydney Cove.

This book examines the peoples who lived around Sydney Cove prior to 1788 and the conditions that governed life there. The local population consisted of small, dispersed family kin groups without political unity, military organisation, or any capacity for territorial defence. It considers the arrival of the British as what it was: a fragile penal camp, outnumbered by its own prisoners, lacking reinforcements, reserves, or secure supply, and barely capable of maintaining internal order. Against this background, the book addresses the reality that ended the original inhabitants of the area, not invasion, but collapse: ecological disruption, demographic fragility, and the catastrophic impact of disease.

To sustain the invasion narrative, these realities must be suppressed rather than answered. Demography is minimised or ignored. Military ratios disappear from view. Aboriginal social organisation is retrospectively inflated into political forms it never possessed. Settlement is re-described as conquest not because the evidence supports that characterisation, but because the moral conclusion has been fixed in advance. This is not historical interpretation. It is the deliberate manufacture of meaning through omission.

Such practices are not merely erroneous; they are ethically indefensible. To moralise by falsifying history is itself immoral and offensive. It treats truth as an inconvenience to be managed rather than a constraint to be respected. What results is not a deeper understanding of the past, but a ritualised distortion of it, repeated until assertion displaces evidence.

The consequences are corrosive. A society that teaches its children that arithmetic, logistics, and institutional reality may be overridden by a fabricated narrative instructs them that truth is conditional, valid only when it serves approved conclusions. Once that

lesson is absorbed, history ceases to be a discipline and becomes an instrument of advocacy rather than a record of events.

This book does not deny suffering, loss, or human tragedy. It denies only the right to falsify the past in order to sanctify the present. Tragedy does not require invention; indeed, it is diminished by it. The insistence that history obey reality is not conservative or radical, it is foundational. Without that discipline, history collapses into activism with dates attached.

What follows is defence of history itself. It restores proportion to language, meaning to concepts, and limits to interpretation. In an age that increasingly rewards emotional certainty over factual coherence, that defence has become necessary again.

This book advances a simple but unfashionable proposition: that the collapse of the Gadigal people was not the result of invasion, conquest, or the overthrow of a sovereign society, but of ecological constraint, epidemic disease, and the structural fragility of small kin-based groups operating without institutional authority. The modern language of invasion, sovereignty, and resistance is not merely exaggerated; it is historically incoherent when applied to the Sydney Basin in 1788. What is presented today as dispossession by force was, in reality, demographic extinction followed by permanent settlement in the absence of any surviving polity capable of continuity.

The chapters that follow examine these claims in the only order that makes sense: first the conditions that existed before contact, then the realities of contact itself, and finally the consequences that followed.

# 1. From Landing Day to "Invasion Day": The Invention of a Narrative

The beginning of modern Australia is directly and explicitly tied to January and February 1788. On 26 January 1788, the First Fleet landed at Sydney Cove and the British flag was raised, marking the physical establishment of settlement and the assertion of British presence. Lawful British civil authority followed on 7 February 1788, when Governor Arthur Phillip's commissions were read and the colony of New South Wales was formally constituted under British law. It was this act, not any act of conquest, that constituted New South Wales as a governed colony under British law.



Later artistic representation of the proclamation of British civil authority at Sydney Cove (7 February 1788), when Governor Arthur Phillip's commissions were read and the colony of New South Wales was formally constituted.  E. Allen Kelly, 1895.

Historically, an invasion has a settled meaning. It denotes the forcible entry of one organised polity into the territory of another, resisted by opposing forces capable of collective defence. Such events are marked by battles, campaigns, and decisive engagements: the Norman conquest of England following the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the Spanish overthrow of the Aztec Empire in the sixteenth century, or the Japanese invasions of Korea in the Imjin War. In each case, organised societies confronted one another through force of arms, and sovereignty changed hands as a result of violence. Nothing of this kind occurred at Sydney Cove.

The landing at Sydney Cove therefore represents settlement followed by the proclamation of civil authority, not the defeat of a defending polity. The sequence matters. Presence preceded government; government followed law; and neither was achieved through war.

In the early years, the date was observed informally as "Foundation Day" or "Anniversary Day," marking the establishment of lawful government rather than any military victory or act of conquest.

By the early nineteenth century, 26 January was being publicly commemorated by free settlers and emancipists alike, often with dinners, regattas, and civic gatherings. In 1818, Governor Lachlan Macquarie formally marked the thirtieth anniversary of the colony with

official celebrations, establishing a precedent for public observance. Throughout the nineteenth century, the date was widely recognised across New South Wales as the anniversary of settlement, and by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it had become increasingly associated with Australian identity rather than imperial administration.

For most of Australia's history there was no single, nationally shared "founding day," and still less any date understood as marking an invasion. Each colony marked its own establishment through locally specific commemorations tied to administrative creation rather than conquest. In New South Wales, 26 January was observed from the early nineteenth century as *Foundation Day* or *Anniversary Day*, marking the establishment of civil government at Sydney Cove in 1788. Victoria did not regard 26 January as foundational at all, instead celebrating *Separation Day* on 1 July 1851, commemorating its legal separation from New South Wales. Queensland likewise marked its creation through *Separation Day* on 10 December 1859. South Australia, founded as a planned free settlement, commemorated *Proclamation Day* on 28 December 1836, a date that continues to be observed. Western Australia celebrated *Foundation Day*—later *WA Day*—commemorating the establishment of the Swan River Colony in 1829, traditionally observed on the first Monday in June. Tasmania, whose colonial development began separately after 1803, did not treat 1788 as a foundational date and instead observed a variety of civic occasions unrelated to the Sydney settlement.

The gradual emergence of the term Australia Day in the early twentieth century, its formal adoption by the Commonwealth in 1946, and the eventual uniform observance of 26 January across all states only in 1994, underscore the point: the date acquired national symbolic meaning very late and at no stage prior to the late twentieth century was it described, commemorated, or contested as an "invasion."

A further symbolic consolidation of 26 January's national significance occurred only in the mid-twentieth century, when Australian citizenship itself was created by the commencement of the *Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948* (Cth) on 26 January 1949, ending Australians' exclusive classification as British subjects.

The modern re-labelling of 26 January as "Invasion Day" therefore represents not the recovery of a suppressed historical meaning, but the retrospective imposition of a singular narrative onto a date that historically carried diverse, limited, and administrative significance.

The rebranding of 26 January as "Invasion Day" is not the recovery of a suppressed historical truth, but a late-twentieth-century ideological construction that has gained prominence only in recent decades. It is a retrospective overlay imposed upon the past, not a finding derived from historical evidence. By collapsing a complex, incremental, and well-documented process of settlement into a single emotive accusation, the modern narrative abolishes chronology, agency, and causation. It treats outcome as intention, substitutes symbolism for history, and assertion for analysis.

To say Australia was "invaded" because British ships landed at Sydney Cove is to collapse distance, scale, and political reality into a slogan. It is akin, from a pan-European continental perspective, to claiming that France, Portugal, and Denmark were all invaded simultaneously because a single European vessel came ashore in Greece. A localised

landing does not constitute the invasion of an entire continent, particularly where there was no relationship with, and no knowledge of, the vast majority of that continent. What existed in 1788 was a fragile British settlement established in one isolated harbour on the edge of a vast and largely unoccupied landmass, not the overthrow of a continental political order.

To extend that moment into an "invasion" of the continent as a whole requires an additional and untenable assumption: that a local landing at Sydney Cove somehow amounted to a coordinated assault on more than 6,000 unrelated micro-societies comprising an estimated 300,000 people dispersed across a landmass roughly twice the size of Western Europe. At the time, the British possessed no knowledge of the continent's interior and no conception that regions later known as South Australia, the Northern Territory, or Western Australia even existed, let alone formed part of any territorial or political ambit. To characterise this as an invasion is not historical analysis but a category error—one that substitutes geographic scale and political imagination for evidence.

Taking the historical distortion to absurdity, Australia Day no longer describes an event; it hosts a competition of abstractions. Invasion Day, Survival Day, Day of Mourning — each renaming widens the moral claim while narrowing the history. The specific fate of the Gadigal is no longer examined but symbolised, their world dissolved into an ever-renewing language of activism. As names multiply, meaning thins, and historical fact is ignored.

This book proceeds from a simple observation: a history composed of thousands of separate first contacts, unfolding over more than a century, cannot coherently be reduced to a single national moment of invasion. What follows is an examination of how scale, social organisation, and lived experience have been collapsed into myth—and what is lost when history is forced to conform to a slogan.

This is not historical correction but historical capture. A single slogan is used to ransom the past, stripping it of context and complexity in order to conscript it into contemporary politics. The effect is not illumination but erasure: evidence is flattened, contingency is denied, and the past is forced to speak a language it never possessed. What is shouted through the megaphone of modern activism is not history reclaimed, but history coerced.

That this distortion has been tolerated and at times endorsed by governments, cultural institutions, and public broadcasters represents not neutrality but abdication. The refusal to distinguish between historical inquiry and ideological assertion has allowed a polemical fiction to displace documented fact. In this sense, "Invasion Day" is not merely a misdescription of 26 January; it is an assertion of interpretive power over the past itself, enforced by repetition rather than proof.

## 2.     Before Contact

### 2.1     Social Scale, Identity, and the Absence of Polity

Before contact, the people living along the southern shores of what is now Port Jackson existed in small, family-based groups organised around kinship, bestowal, and immediate subsistence.

These family groups lived in isolation for much of the time but were periodically linked to other spatially proximate families through what may be described as kin association. Such associations arose primarily through the bestowal of women, initiation rites, and the recurrent fissioning of groups as initiated males separated from their natal families to form new household units through marriage allocation or, at times, the seizure of women from outside the immediate group. Bestowal created recognised relational ties and reciprocal expectations between families, while initiation marked the point at which males exited childhood dependency and entered new, situational social alignments. Over time, these processes produced a loose, intermittent, and fluctuating web of interconnected family groups bound by personal relationships and ritual recognition.

Crucially, however, kin association did not constitute a fixed or enforceable system of obligation. The relational ties created by bestowal and initiation were situational and contingent, and could be weakened, disregarded, or dissolved in response to conflict, injury, resource scarcity, or opportunity. There existed no supra-familial authority capable of compelling compliance, resolving disputes, or maintaining cohesion beyond the immediate parties involved. As a result, kin association functioned as a flexible social understanding rather than a binding institutional framework.

It is this limited and fluid network of relationships that later observers sometimes misconstrued as evidence of a wider social or territorial unit. In contemporary vernacular, such relationships are often retrospectively described using terms such as "aunty" or "uncle," but these expressions denote relational familiarity rather than collective identity, political authority, or territorial sovereignty. Beyond the narrow circle of kin-linked families, no enduring social, political, or juridical association existed.

What later ethnography labels the "Gadigal" did not therefore constitute a people, nation, or polity in any political or territorial sense. At most, the population comprised approximately fifty to eighty individuals, distributed across several closely related family groups whose movements were concentrated along the harbour foreshores and the immediate freshwater catchments of Sydney Cove. Social cohesion did not extend beyond kin-associated families, and there existed no mechanism by which unrelated groups could be bound into a larger corporate entity capable of exercising collective authority or territorial control.

Although later reconstructions often depict a broad "Gadigal territory" extending well inland and southward, there is no evidence of regular occupation, habitual subsistence, or defended use of those areas. Movement patterns were tightly constrained by access

to permanent freshwater and reliable food sources, which in the Sydney Basin were concentrated along the harbour foreshores and the immediate catchments of Sydney Cove. Inland areas to the south, lacking dependable water and offering limited subsistence return, were not subject to sustained use and could not support regular occupation by small kin-based family groups.

Occasional passage through, episodic visitation, or knowledge of surrounding landscapes does not constitute possession or territorial control. In the absence of regular use, exclusionary capacity, or defence, such areas cannot properly be characterised as occupied territory. The effective range of Gadigal activity was therefore narrow, localised, and ecologically determined, rather than expansive or bounded in the manner implied by later territorial maps.

At this scale, the number of adult males capable of sustained physical defence would necessarily have been extremely limited. A population of approximately fifty to eighty individuals, organised into extended family units governed by bestowal and polygyny, would likely have comprised no more than eight to twelve such units in total. In each, a single senior male typically held primary authority and access to women, with other males either uninitiated, ritually constrained, or socially subordinate.

Even on the most generous reconstruction, this implies that the total number of adult males capable of coordinated defence at any given time would have been in the order of a dozen or fewer. This is not a rhetorical claim but a demographic consequence of the social structure described. This assessment accords with Governor Phillip's own early observations. Writing to Lord Sydney less than three weeks after settlement, Phillip noted:

> "…The number of the Natives in the Country we have yet discovered does not appear very great…" — Phillip to Lord Sydney, 17 February 1788 (HRNSW I, 178)

Although recorded immediately after British arrival, these observations are probative of pre-contact social organisation, as they describe population scale, mobility, and aggregation patterns that could not plausibly have been altered within days or weeks of first contact.

A population of this size could not sustain institutional authority, permanent territorial defence, or collective political identity. The fundamental social unit was the extended family rather than any enduring collective or institutionalised society. There was no overarching authority, no council, no chief, and no structure capable of binding multiple families into a single political body.

Governor Phillip did not observe aggregation at scale. On the contrary, he recorded that Aboriginal people were:

> *"...generally in small parties, rarely exceeding ten or twelve together..."*
> — Phillip to Lord Sydney, 17 February 1788 (HRNSW, Vol I, p. 179)

Left: John Hunter / William Blake, A Family of New South Wales, c. 1793–1797.
Right: Baudin expedition artist, Aboriginal Family Group, New Holland, early nineteenth century.
Independent British and French observers depict the same social reality: Aboriginal life organised around small, mobile family units rather than tribes, nations, or militarised populations.

There is no evidence that the people later described as the "Gadigal" understood themselves as a named people in any collective or political sense. Nor is there evidence of a self-applied language name operating as a marker of people-level group identity. Identity was relational rather than categorical: individuals were known through kinship, immediate association, and place, not as members of a bounded ethnic or linguistic group. The names later recorded by British observers were introduced as classificatory devices, used to simplify and organise clusters of people encountered at particular locations for purposes of description, record-keeping, and administration. They do not demonstrate the existence of a pre-contact people-level identity, linguistic polity, or collective self-conception. This absence is not a defect in the record. It is the expected outcome of social organisation at this scale.

Anthropologists writing before the politicisation of Aboriginal history cautioned explicitly against projecting modern historical consciousness onto societies organised at this scale. Building on the work of W. E. H. Stanner, Geoffrey Partington observed that many small hunter-gatherer societies did not conceptualise time, ancestry, or collective experience as cumulative history. Social continuity was not maintained through the preservation of ancestral deeds, people-level memory, or long-term grievance, but through the repetitive cycling of seasons, ritual obligation, and subsistence practice aimed at preserving an immediate equilibrium. This orientation is not a cultural deficiency; it is a structural consequence of life at minimal scale. But it is fatal to later claims that imagine enduring political identity, inherited sovereignty, or continuous territorial authority transmitted intact across generations. To impose such concepts retrospectively is not interpretation but categorical distortion.

Knowledge of country at this scale was necessarily localised. Individuals possessed detailed familiarity with the immediate environments they regularly occupied, foreshores, tidal zones, freshwater soaks, and nearby resource patches but there is no evidence of systematic knowledge extending beyond those habitual ranges. Information about more distant areas, where it existed at all, was fragmentary, episodic, and personal

rather than cumulative or institutionalised. In the absence of mapped routes, fixed meeting places, or enduring inter-group coordination, geographic knowledge did not aggregate into a broader topographic understanding. What lay beyond familiar ground was not known as country in any juridical or territorial sense, but encountered contingently, through movement, avoidance, or conflict.

The spatial footprint of these groups was correspondingly limited. Occupation was coastal and water-bound, confined to narrow strips of foreshore, tidal inlets, and estuarine margins where food and fresh water could be accessed reliably. Inland movement was constrained not by abstract boundaries but by ecological reality. In the immediate Sydney Cove area, freshwater sources were scarce and seasonal, with the Tank Stream constituting the only dependable year-round supply near the harbour. Habitation therefore clustered around this source because it had to.

This pattern of mobility, rather than settlement, was again noted by Governor Phillip almost immediately. Writing to Lord Sydney on 17 February 1788, he observed:

> "I cannot yet learn that they have any settled place of residence..."
> — Arthur Phillip to Lord Sydney, 17 February 1788 (HRNSW, Vol I, p. 179)

Claims that small, dispersed family groups maintained complex, cumulative systems of law or scientific knowledge cannot be reconciled with the absence of sustained aggregation, institutional continuity, or mechanisms for correction and standardisation. Whatever symbolic narratives or customary practices existed were necessarily local, variable, and dependent on individual memory. They could not function as durable systems capable of binding multiple groups or surviving demographic collapse

Movement followed a simple ecological logic. Families ranged most frequently within a primary habitation zone extending no more than approximately two kilometres from the Tank Stream, encompassing the harbour foreshores and adjacent catchments where daily access to water could be assured. Beyond this lay a secondary ranging zone, extending perhaps two to five kilometres, which was visited intermittently for foraging or opportunistic use but not occupied regularly. This pattern of use produced repeated visitation rather than occupation. No permanent dwellings marked ownership, no boundaries were enforced, and no infrastructure existed to secure exclusive control over land or sea. Critically, neither zone functioned as defended territory. There is no evidence that entry by others was monitored, resisted, or even consistently known. Where reliable water was absent, sustained occupation was impossible, and where occupation was impossible, possession and defence did not arise.

The principal archaeological indicators of pre-contact of use the Sydney harbour are shell middens, scattered hearth remains, and limited surviving rock art. These materials demonstrate occupation only in the generic sense. They show that people were present at particular locations at particular times, but they do not identify who those people were, how long they remained, or whether the same groups returned over extended periods.

Shell middens in particular indicate consumption, not settlement. They may represent use by different groups at different moments and do not establish exclusive use, defended territory, or continuous occupation by any identifiable horde or family group. Rock art, where it survives, cannot be reliably dated to specific centuries without wide margins of error and cannot be attributed to particular social groups. It provides evidence of symbolic activity, not of enduring territorial control.

There is no archaeological evidence demonstrating continuous occupation of any specific horde, family group, or defined social unit over periods of hundreds of years, let alone thousands. Claims of uninterrupted occupation over millennia rest on inference and retrospective attribution, not on demonstrable material continuity tied to identifiable groups.

Before contact there was no collective ownership of land, no defended territorial boundaries, no unified political identity, and no enduring authority over people or place. What existed instead was a thinly spread, kin-based population living close to subsistence limits, constrained by ecology rather than law, and by immediacy rather than institution.

## 2.2    The Rhythm of Life: Kinship, Subsistence, Fear, and Fragmentation

Life was governed not only by kinship and subsistence, but by a dense web of obligation, ritual fear, and taboo. The world was understood as animated by unseen forces. Misfortune, illness, and death were rarely accepted as natural events. They were attributed instead to spiritual transgression, sorcery, or hostile action by others. Belief shaped conduct at every level. Ritual observance was compulsory. Food taboos governed who could eat what, when, and with whom, often determined by age, sex, or status. Breach was believed to invite sickness or death, not merely social sanction.

The operative social unit was the extended family. Cooperation occurred where kinship existed or where circumstance required it. Beyond that, obligation thinned rapidly. Kinship defined interaction. Close relatives shared food, shelter, and labour. Beyond familiar networks there was no presumption of shared identity. Movement into unfamiliar areas required caution. Avoidance, not unity, was the norm.

Bestowal was central to this system. What Europeans later described as "marriage" did not exist in any conventional sense. Sexual and reproductive relations were governed instead by the allocation of girls by older male relatives to men, often well in advance of puberty. Bestowal was not a personal choice nor a mutual union between families. It was a mechanism for managing alliances, obligations, and access to resources between small kin groups.

Bestowal could occur in infancy or early childhood, with the intended husband identified long before the girl reached maturity. The arrangement was binding and enforced by ritual obligation and the authority of senior men. Individual preference played no role. Once bestowal took effect and the girl was transferred, she was removed from her natal family.

Her primary loyalties, obligations, and identity shifted entirely to the man and group to whom she had been assigned. Kinship was reassigned rather than extended.

Measured against any modern legal or moral standard, this arrangement constitutes chattel ownership. It involved the permanent transfer of control over one human being to another; it denied personal autonomy; it extinguished consent; and it vested senior males with enforceable rights over the sexual, reproductive, and domestic labour of girls and women. The girl was not a party to the arrangement but its object. Her status was determined by allocation, not choice.

This is not a rhetorical characterisation. Under contemporary definitions of slavery and servitude, including those reflected in international law, bestowal satisfies the core elements of ownership: control, transferability, and the right of use exercised by another. The authority of elders was not symbolic but coercive, and the obligations imposed were not reciprocal but absolute.

Bestowal regulated movement between groups, access to food and shelter, and the fragile web of obligations that allowed neighbouring families to interact without constant conflict. But it did so by entrenching hierarchy, dependency, and domination. It did not produce broad, stable kin networks capable of sustaining large collective identities. Instead, it reinforced fragmentation, senior male control, and the subordination of women as instruments of alliance and survival.

Ritual life was ordinarily inward-facing and horde-bound. What early observers loosely termed a *corroboree* referred not to a calendrical or collective institution, but to situational ritual activity arising in response to immediate events—death, initiation, or bestowal—among those already present. In the absence of a calendar, fixed meeting places, or knowledge of where others were located, such ceremonies ordinarily involved only a single family group or a small number of neighbouring groups encountered opportunistically. Larger gatherings, where they occurred at all, were temporary and unplanned, dissolving as quickly as they formed. Ritual briefly interrupted isolation before separation resumed.

Food distribution within kin groups was **hierarchical rather than egalitarian**. Access to meat and valued resources was controlled by senior males, with allocation governed by status, age, and ritual standing rather than by any principle of universal sharing. What later writers sometimes described as "generosity" was in practice **commanded redistribution**, enforced through authority and threat rather than voluntary reciprocity. Refusal to comply did not violate a norm of sharing so much as it challenged rank. Hoarding was dangerous not because accumulation was condemned, but because it provoked retaliation from those entitled to take.

Death had a profound social effect. It demanded explanation. Suspicion followed loss, and blame was often directed outward. Mourning was intense and prolonged. Grief required response. Disputes over women, access to food, ritual breaches, or suspected sorcery frequently escalated into violence. Beyond immediate kin networks, trust was thin. Inter-group conflict was endemic rather than exceptional. There is no evidence of

peace enforced by higher authority. Order was local and temporary. Movement, separation, and fragmentation were adaptive responses to a world understood as spiritually dangerous and socially volatile.

Subsistence was immediate. The coast provided food, not territory. Families gathered shellfish, speared fish, and foraged along beaches, rock platforms, and estuaries. Consumption was rapid. There was no storage, no surplus, and no infrastructure designed to secure long-term control over places. Fishing methods were simple and local: hand-gathering in tidal zones, spearing from shore or canoe, and short lines fashioned from plant fibre or hair. There is no evidence of large-scale nets, traps, or systems intended to dominate or enclose marine resources.

Life followed a rhythm of use, movement, and return. When a local area was exhausted or conditions changed, families moved on. When resources replenished naturally, they returned. The traces left behind—hearths, ash, scattered bone, shell middens, mark repeated visitation, not possession. The same places could be used by different families at different times. Familiarity did not amount to ownership. Use did not imply control.

They were not sovereign over land. They were dependent upon it. Their relationship to place was immediate and fragile, governed by access rather than authority, familiarity rather than law. They lived as families, not as a people. They moved as necessity required, not as territory demanded. They used places; they did not possess them.

## 2.3    Violence, Retaliation, and the Absence of Enforced Peace

In the Port Jackson region, as was later observed across the continent, conflict between individuals and between family groups was a routine feature of life. Disputes arose from accusations of injury, competition over women, perceived sorcery, or resource pressure. Such conflicts were addressed through retaliation, avoidance, withdrawal, or temporary flight, rather than through any institutional mechanism of resolution.

Violence was neither exceptional nor disruptive of an otherwise stable equilibrium. It formed part of the ordinary means by which grievances were pursued and boundaries asserted in the absence of durable alliances or collective enforcement. There existed no higher authority capable of restraining cycles of reprisal or imposing lasting peace across multiple family groups.

The consequences were demographic instability and continual social fluidity. Weaker or depleted family groups could be displaced, absorbed into neighbouring kin networks, or disappear altogether. Population contraction, replacement, and reconfiguration were endemic features of the social landscape rather than extraordinary events.

Peace, where it existed, was local, temporary, and contingent. Beyond immediate kin networks, violence and displacement remained persistent structural possibilities rather than aberrations.

## 2.4    Daily Subsistence and Seasonal Hardship

Before contact, daily life revolved around immediate subsistence. Families foraged continuously to meet basic needs, moving within narrow coastal ranges in response to food availability. The bulk of daily sustenance came not from large animals, but from shellfish, small fish, crustaceans, and opportunistic foraging along beaches, estuaries, and rock platforms. Food was gathered, prepared, and eaten the same day. There was no storage, no accumulation, and no surplus. Each morning began again with the same task: finding enough to eat.

As with authority and violence,, food distribution was governed by custom and ritual rather than equality. Senior and initiated men were commonly prioritised in the allocation of valued food, reflecting their status and ritual authority. Initiation marked a shift in entitlement, expanding access to foods previously restricted. Women and children often ate later or received less desirable portions, particularly in times of scarcity, although women retained control over food they gathered themselves. These practices reinforced hierarchy and obligation within the group. Sharing mitigated starvation but did not eliminate inequality; scarcity was distributed according to status.

Large terrestrial animals such as kangaroo were rarely taken in the coastal Sydney region. They were scarce, difficult to hunt with available technology, and yielded uncertain returns for significant effort. They were not a reliable food source and could not support regular consumption. Daily survival depended instead on smaller, more predictable resources that required constant labour and were easily depleted in any one place.

Plant foods supplemented this diet but did not provide security. Edible plants were limited in variety, highly seasonal, and often low in caloric density. Small native fruits, berries, seeds, roots, and tubers were gathered when available, but their appearance depended on short seasonal windows and local conditions. Many required detailed knowledge to locate and prepare, and yields were modest. Once consumed in a particular area, they were quickly exhausted. There was no cultivation, no replanting, and no deliberate management capable of increasing yield. Plant foods eased pressure briefly, but they could not replace protein or stabilise subsistence.

Crucially, plant foods could not be stored in meaningful quantities. Without preservation techniques or durable containers, any surplus spoiled quickly. Gathering therefore remained a daily necessity rather than a means of building reserves. In winter, plant foods were at their scarcest. Reduced growth, colder temperatures, and heavy rain limited access just as need increased. Wet conditions made digging difficult, spoiled gathered food, and prevented the fires required for preparation.

This subsistence system functioned only so long as conditions remained favourable. It had no buffer. When fishing was disrupted by rough seas, cold water, or wind, alternatives were limited. Shellfish could compensate only briefly before local stocks were exhausted. Terrestrial protein could not fill the gap. The margin was thin even in good conditions.

Winter exposed this fragility. Colder water, shorter daylight, and rougher seas reduced access to marine food just as caloric needs increased. Extended rain was particularly

punishing. Shelters of bark and foliage offered little protection once soaked. Fires were difficult to keep alight, cooking became unreliable, and cold exposure increased, especially among children and the elderly. Movement was restricted at the very moment when families needed to relocate to new food sources. Illness followed quickly. A few days of sustained rain could unravel weeks of precarious balance.

There was no system of cooperation beyond immediate kin to absorb these shocks. Each group faced the same conditions independently. There were no shared reserves, no obligation of redistribution across distance, and no coordinated response to scarcity. Knowledge of food sources was local, not collective. When hardship struck, it struck everywhere at once, and each family bore its consequences alone.

In this environment, survival was not secured by cooperation at scale, but by constant effort, enforced sharing within families, and continual movement in the hope that conditions would improve before exhaustion set in. Hardship did not produce unity. It reinforced separation.

Interaction occurred intermittently, through ritual, exchange, avoidance, or conflict but there was no enduring aggregation, no standing alliance, and no overarching identity binding these groups together. Separation was the default condition; contact was contingent. This rhythm of dispersion, brief encounter, and withdrawal defined life. It was this fragmented landscape of survival, not a territorially bound people, that the British first encountered.

What can be said of belief before contact must be stated with care. These people left no written record, and what is known comes only from what early British observers were able to see, hear, or imperfectly elicit at the moment of encounter. Even so, the record is telling. The British did not document a coherent, unified cosmology, a system of ancestral law, or anything resembling the later concept of a continent-wide "Dreaming." What they encountered instead were localised stories, spiritual fears, and mythic explanations tied to immediate experience, death, illness, place, and misfortune, fragmented across small groups and inconsistently expressed. Belief existed, but it did not operate as a system of governance, territorial law, or collective identity. This absence is not a product of later disruption; it is part of the pre-contact reality as it appeared at the point of first observation.

## 2.4    Retrospective Identity, Ethnographic Reconstruction, and the Ritualisation of Continuity

As established earlier, Aboriginal people lived in the Sydney Cove region prior to 1788. What did not exist, however, were the collective identities now described as "Gadigal" or "Eora" as peoples, nations, or polities. These terms functioned as retrospective classificatory descriptors introduced by British observers to organise clusters of related families and linguistic similarities for purposes of description. They were not identities formed or recognised by the people themselves, nor did they denote bounded political

communities capable of exercising authority or acting as enduring subjects of law, diplomacy, or war.

The persistence of these labels in modern discourse obscures the scale and structure of the societies to which they are now retroactively attached.

The modern systematisation of these labels owes much to later ethnographic reconstruction rather than to contemporaneous political reality. **Norman Tindale**'s influential *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia* (1974) attempted to map tribal boundaries using fragmented colonial observations, linguistic groupings, and later anthropological inference. While Tindale did not invent the term "Gadigal," his work contributed to the consolidation of such descriptors into seemingly fixed territorial units within broader language blocs often retrospectively described as the "Eora." This exercise was classificatory, not documentary. It imposed coherence where none had existed and translated fluid, localised kin affiliations into cartographic forms that suggested political stability and continuity unsupported by the historical record.

Contemporary ceremonial practices, including acknowledgements or welcomes to country invoking ongoing Gadigal land ownership or the authority of "elders past and present," draw directly upon these reconstructed classifications. Such rituals presuppose the survival of an enduring corporate identity capable of transmitting authority across generations. Whatever their present cultural or symbolic significance, they do not themselves constitute evidence of historical continuity. Modern Aboriginal identity is being reconstructed by scholars and institutions using categories, labels, and repeated cultural performances, rather than being grounded in continuous, functioning political authority or legal systems that have endured over time.

# 3.    First Contact

## 3.1    What Actually Happened in January 1788

> *"The natives did not appear disposed to quarrel with us, nor did they offer any interruption to our landing."* — David Collins, Judge Advocate of New South Wales, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales* (1798)

First contact, strictly speaking, occurred earlier at Botany Bay on 18 January 1788, where Aboriginal people were observed on shore watching the ships. These brief encounters involved different local groups, occurred during reconnaissance rather than settlement, and had no bearing on the later establishment of the colony at Sydney Cove. They did not involve occupation, territorial assertion, or any sustained attempt to prevent British movement, and are therefore irrelevant to claims of invasion or defence in the Sydney Cove context.

The encounter recorded by Lieutenant Philip Gidley King, a senior officer of the First Fleet who would later become Governor of New South Wales in 1800, at Botany Bay in January 1788 is sometimes cited as evidence of Aboriginal resistance at first contact. It does not bear that weight.
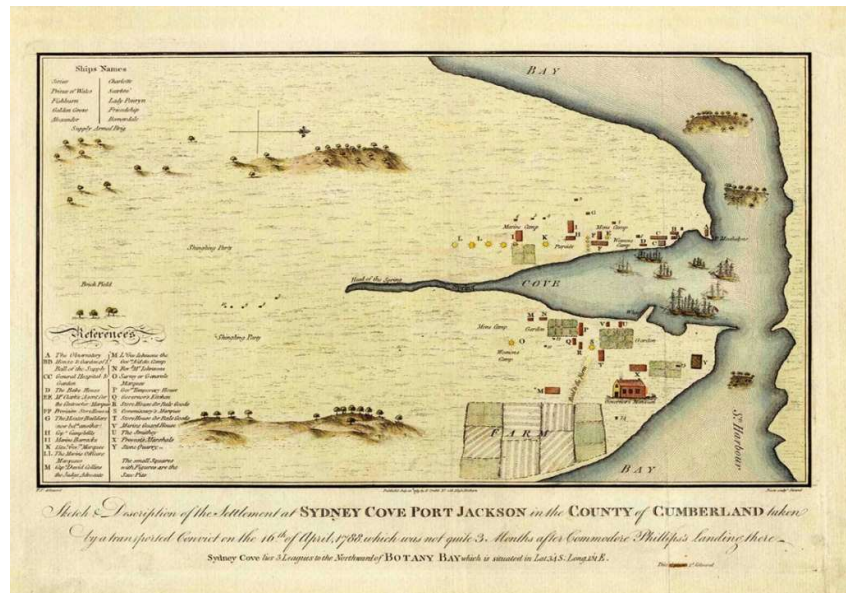
In January 1788, while the First Fleet was anchored at Botany Bay, Lieutenant Philip Gidley King went ashore with a small party during reconnaissance. Upon landing, they encountered a small group of local Aboriginal men who shouted, gestured aggressively, and threw or prepared to throw spears in an apparent attempt to deter the landing at that spot. King and his party did not pursue the encounter and withdrew to their boat without attempting to occupy the area. No further confrontation followed, and the incident was not repeated. The episode occurred several days before settlement, involved local groups outside Port Jackson, and had no bearing on the subsequent establishment of the colony at Sydney Cove. Properly understood, it reflects a moment of localised first-contact warning rather than organised defence, territorial control, or an assertion of sovereignty.

When the First Fleet arrived at Sydney Cove on 26 January 1788, it did not encounter a defended shoreline or an organised political authority asserting sovereignty. There was no coordinated opposition, no sustained confrontation, and no attempt to prevent landing or occupation. Aboriginal people were observed at a distance and generally avoided direct engagement rather than confronting the settlement.

In these circumstances, caution and withdrawal are unsurprising. On any plausible reconstruction, the local population comprised only a small number of family groups, with perhaps no more than a dozen adult males capable of coordinated action at any one time. Against the sudden arrival of more than a thousand unfamiliar people, vessels, animals, and materials, the balance of numbers alone would have made resistance futile and risk catastrophic. Withdrawal, observation, and avoidance were rational responses to uncertainty rather than evidence of consent, submission, or organised defence.

The British raised the flag, read commissions, and commenced clearing ground, all without opposition. David Collins, writing with the precision of a lawyer rather than the romance of a later historian, recorded the moment plainly: "The natives did not appear disposed to quarrel with us, nor did they offer any interruption to our landing." He later added, without embellishment: "No opposition whatever was made to our taking possession of the country."

This is not the language of conquest resisted. It is the language of settlement observed.



Anonymous convict draftsman, 1788, Port Jackson (Sydney Cove), New South Wales; contemporary plan of the first British settlement prepared shortly after establishment.

The most careful eyewitness, Captain-Lieutenant of Marines Watkin Tench, was equally explicit. In his Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay, Tench noted that Aboriginal people "retired at our approach, and always avoided coming near us," and that the settlers had "not the smallest reason to apprehend hostility from the natives." These are not ambiguous descriptions. They describe avoidance, not defence; curiosity, not conflict.

Indeed, the direction of movement matters. The modern assumption is that the British pushed outward while Aboriginal people were driven back. The contemporary record shows the opposite. The British remained clustered around Sydney Cove, struggling to survive. It was Aboriginal men who later entered the settlement, cautiously and voluntarily, examining huts, tools, and supplies. Tench observed that "their confidence and curiosity gradually overcame their apprehensions." First contact did not expand through British advance, but through Aboriginal approach.

Governor Arthur Phillip understood the fragility of the situation and issued strict instructions. Aboriginal people were to be protected, not harmed, and any settler who injured them would be punished. Writing to Lord Sydney in 1789, Phillip reported: "I have

every reason to believe that the natives do not wish to molest the settlers." This was not naïveté; it was observation. Phillip's policy was restraint, conciliation, and avoidance of conflict, a policy he considered necessary precisely because there was no organised hostility to defeat.

Other officers corroborated the same pattern. John Hunter noted that Aboriginal people "appeared shy, and cautiously kept at a distance," later approaching "without any show of hostility." Lieutenant Philip Gidley King likewise recorded that Aboriginal people were frequently seen near the cove but "always retired on our approach." Across multiple observers, ranks, and journals, the story does not change.

Just as telling is what never occurred. No Aboriginal leader came forward to negotiate. No council assembled. No boundary was asserted. No demand was made that the British leave. As established earlier, this was not a failure of reason or will, but a consequence of social organisation: small, kin-based groups lacking any unified authority capable of treaty, surrender, or war. There was, quite literally, no one to defeat.

Conflict came later, following the smallpox epidemic of 1789 which decimated the population of the Sydney basin, and later still, as settlement expanded beyond Sydney Cove, through violence often arising from disputes over livestock and theft. But to project that later conflict backward onto January 1788 is to falsify the record. At first contact there was no invasion in the military sense, because there was nothing to invade. There was settlement under imperial law, proclaimed in the absence of opposition, and initially sustained not by force, but by Aboriginal forbearance and British restraint.

Those who insist that the founding moment of Australia was an act of armed dispossession do not rely on the words of those who were there. They rely on a retrospective moral narrative imposed on events that contemporaries described very differently. The men who landed at Sydney Cove did not record a clash of nations. They recorded something far quieter, far stranger, and far more inconvenient to modern slogans: a small colonial outpost established while the original inhabitants watched, withdrew, and only gradually, cautiously, chose to step inside.

## 3.2 Early Contact Without War: Military Posture and the Spearing of Governor Phillip (1788–1790)

Crucially, during the landing, establishment, and initial consolidation of the settlement at Sydney Cove, including the first two years of its existence, there was no armed conflict with the local Aboriginal population. No shots were fired at the point of landing, no defensive positions were established against Aboriginal attack, and there is no evidence of sentries being posted in anticipation of organised hostility. The marines present were employed almost entirely in guarding convicts, protecting stores, and maintaining internal order, not in preparing for external war.

The absence of military precautions is not an omission in the record; it reflects the expectations of those on the ground. The officers of the First Fleet did not behave as men entering hostile territory defended by an opposing force. They behaved as administrators

establishing a precarious penal encampment, concerned above all with survival, supply, and internal order.

That fragility is underscored by the pattern of convict escapes, which began almost immediately. Absconding occurred within weeks of the First Fleet's arrival, with the earliest recorded attempts dating to February and March 1788. These were not organised breakouts but acts of desperation by men who believed, often absurdly, that China or other distant settlements might be reached on foot. Almost all such attempts failed. The overwhelming majority of escapees returned voluntarily, starving and exhausted; died from thirst, exposure, or injury; or were recovered close to the settlement. There was no successful long-distance escape during this initial period.

Critically, these failures were not the result of patrols, pursuit, or territorial control, but of ecological reality and ignorance of the country. An administration unable to prevent its own prisoners from walking away and equally unable to pursue them, was not exercising territorial control, let alone prosecuting an invasion.

The most revealing test of British intent occurred not at the moment of landing, but two years later. In September 1790, Governor Arthur Phillip was speared in the shoulder at Manly Cove during an encounter with local Aboriginal men. The incident was isolated, involved no coordinated group action, and was not followed by any attempt at further attack.

Phillip ordered no retaliation. No punitive expedition was authorised. No collective punishment followed. This restraint was not imposed by weakness. The settlement possessed firearms, marines, and the capacity to respond violently had it chosen to do so. The refusal to retaliate was a conscious policy decision, consistent with the absence of any conception of war or enemy polity.

The incident most frequently cited as evidence of early "conflict", the fatal spearing of John McEntire, Governor Phillip's gamekeeper, in December 1790. It took place at Botany Bay and involved an isolated attack on an individual, not an assault on a settlement. McEntire was hunting alone when he was speared. This detail matters. It demonstrates that neither he nor the settlement regarded the surrounding country as hostile or contested. In a genuine conflict zone, such conduct would have been irrational. Phillip's response, though unusually firm by his standards, consisted of limited punitive detachments intended to apprehend those responsible. These expeditions were small, short-lived, and largely ineffective. They were policing measures, not war.

In any genuine invasion scenario, the wounding of a commander would trigger immediate military response. That no such response occurred here is decisive. It confirms that the British did not understand themselves to be engaged in a war of conquest, nor did they treat Aboriginal people as an enemy polity to be subdued. Violence was met with restraint, not escalation — a pattern incompatible with conquest.

## 3.3 Absence of Sovereignty, Political Authority, and Rulership in the Sydney Basin

Governor Arthur Phillip, charged with administering the new colony and seeking figures with whom he might negotiate, discipline, or make agreements, repeatedly recorded his inability to identify any Aboriginal leader exercising enduring authority. He wrote plainly that he could find "no one person who can be considered as having authority over the rest" (Phillip, Letter to Lord Sydney, 1789). Influence, where it existed, was fleeting and situational: "Their obedience to any one among them appears to depend upon personal character only and lasts no longer than the immediate occasion" (Phillip, Correspondence, 1789). Phillip further noted that "no one among them has authority sufficient to be depended upon" (Phillip, Official Despatches, 1789), and that "they acknowledge no subordination, nor does any one appear to assume command" (Phillip, Report on the Natives of New South Wales, 1789).

These observations were not idiosyncratic, nor the product of misunderstanding. They were independently confirmed by other officers who had no reason to echo Phillip's conclusions. Watkin Tench, a First Fleet officer and careful observer of Aboriginal social life, remarked that "although there be men among them who are distinguished by superior prowess, none appear to exercise authority or command" (Tench, *A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*, 1793). He emphasised the absence of hierarchy, noting that "each man seems to act for himself, without acknowledging subordination to any other" (Tench, *Complete Account*, 1793). Even in conflict, Tench observed no leadership structure: "Their contests are conducted without leaders, and terminate without submission" (Tench, *Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay*, 1789). Elsewhere he concluded bluntly that "no man among them appeared to possess the power of enforcing obedience" (Tench, *Complete Account*, 1793).

David Collins, the colony's Judge Advocate and the officer most concerned with law, punishment, and responsibility, reached the same conclusion. He recorded that "no one person appeared to have authority over the rest, nor was any mark of distinction observable by which superiority could be known" (Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, 1798). Collins described Aboriginal society as existing "without any regular government" (Collins, *English Colony*, 1798). Where punishment occurred, it did not arise from any recognised office or institutional authority: "Punishment, when inflicted, was not by any constituted authority, but by individuals acting upon impulse" (Collins, *English Colony*, 1798). Crucially, from a legal standpoint, Collins noted that "no person was found who could answer for the conduct of others" (Collins, *English Colony*, 1798).

This assessment did not change with time or familiarity. John Hunter, who later succeeded Phillip as Governor, confirmed that the same conditions persisted. He observed that "their government seems to be without coercive power" (Hunter, *An Historical Journal of the Transactions at Port Jackson*, 1793). Any influence that did exist was strictly limited: "Any influence one man may possess extends no further than his own family or immediate connections" (Hunter, *Historical Journal*, 1793). Hunter identified no

offices, ranks, or chains of command, writing that "they have no officers, nor any form of subordination" and concluding that "no general authority was observable among them" (Hunter, *Historical Journal*, 1793).

Taken together, these observations form a consistent and overwhelming record. They were made by different men, in different roles, at different times, yet all reached the same conclusion: influence was personal, authority was temporary, and no individual or group exercised enduring, coercive, or representative power. Phillip and his officers were not denying social organisation or customary practice. They were recording the absence of institutional authority — no chiefs, no councils, no offices, and no persons capable of binding others or answering for a collective. In legal and political terms, they encountered kin-based groups governed by custom and personal influence, not sovereign polities capable of territorial command or collective obligation.

## 3.4   Ecological Abandonment of Sydney Cove and the Dissolution of the Gadigal Estate

The continued presence of the Gadigal people in the vicinity of Sydney Cove after January 1788 is best explained not by political accommodation or coercive restraint, but by a single overriding ecological constraint: access to fresh water.

The settlement was anchored to the Tank Stream, which constituted the only reliable year-round freshwater source immediately adjacent to the harbour. That stream had sustained Aboriginal occupation prior to contact and, for the first year of the colony, sustained both Aboriginal and British populations simultaneously. In this initial period, neither party could abandon the site without forfeiting access to potable water, and coexistence was therefore imposed by environmental necessity rather than choice.

This constraint also illuminates the limits of Aboriginal agency. The Gadigal were not confronting a single foreign presence with alternative refuges available elsewhere. Their movements were tightly bounded by water availability and by the presence of neighbouring kin groups occupying surrounding catchments. Withdrawal inland or along the coast risked immediate conflict with adjacent groups whose own access to water and resources was equally constrained. In that context, the risks posed by proximity to a large foreign settlement were not necessarily greater than the risks posed by displacement into contested territory.

This equilibrium proved short-lived. By late 1789, the Tank Stream had been irreversibly fouled. Contemporary colonial records attest to pollution caused by human waste, livestock runoff, erosion following land clearing, and the absence of any sanitation infrastructure. The degradation was such that even British officials complained of declining water quality and were compelled to seek alternative sources through wells, dams, and engineered supply. For a population dependent upon natural watercourses, however, the fouling of the Tank Stream rendered Sydney Cove uninhabitable.

The collapse of the local ecology coincided with, and was compounded by, the smallpox epidemic that began circulating through the Sydney region by mid-1789. Mortality among

the harbour clans was catastrophic. Estimates vary, but most contemporary observers and later historians place fatalities in the range of approximately fifty to ninety per cent of the local Aboriginal population within a short period.

Even at the midpoint of that range, the implications for a population the size of the Gadigal are stark. From an estimated population of no more than seventy to eighty individuals, the loss of fifty or more would likely have entailed the effective destruction of multiple family units, either through complete extinction or through reduction to non-functional remnants incapable of independent social reproduction. The combined effect of demographic collapse and environmental failure destroyed the conditions necessary for the continued Gadigal way of life, and with it any capacity for sustained occupation of the Gadigal estate.

In The Original Australians, Josephine Flood documents an epidemic, almost certainly smallpox, that swept through the Sydney region in May 1789 with devastating effect. Mortality reached as high as ninety-five per cent in some groups. Of the Gadigal, Flood records that only three individuals are known to have survived from a population of around fifty. Contemporary accounts indicate that two of these survivors came into contact with the British and were taken into care; one subsequently died, while the other recovered and returned to the bush. The third survivor disappears from the record. These interactions—limited, non-coercive, and occurring in the aftermath of demographic collapse—are not consistent with the conduct of an invading force exercising conquest or removal, but with ad hoc humanitarian contact in the wake of catastrophe.

Entire family groups disappeared within a single generation. This was an extinction-level demographic event. The question that follows is not whether devastation occurred, but how it occurred and whether catastrophe alone can be equated with invasion.

There is no evidence of any collective decision to depart, nor of organised relocation. Rather, the population fragmented. Survivors attached themselves to kin networks in neighbouring districts with cleaner water systems, moved inland along river corridors, or succumbed to disease.

By the early 1790s, Sydney Cove had ceased to function as a viable Aboriginal living area. The fouled stream could no longer sustain daily subsistence; fish stocks in the immediate harbour declined under intensified exploitation and maritime traffic; and the surrounding vegetation, essential for shelter, tools, and fuel, was stripped. In contrast, the British settlement endured because it adapted through technological substitution: wells, reservoirs, imported provisions, and later, formal water engineering. The ability to replace a natural water source with artificial systems marked the decisive asymmetry between the two societies.

## 3.5   Sydney Cove 1788: Demography and the Absence of a Defending Force

At the time of British arrival in January 1788, the population occupying Sydney Cove itself numbered no more than eighty people. Even at that upper bound, this constituted a small

harbour-side kin group with no more than a dozen adults capable of sustained physical defence. The demographic imbalance alone renders the notion of an immediate defensive response to the landing functionally impossible.

When the frame is widened to include the broader Eora language group, the conclusion does not materially change. Estimates for the total Eora population at first contact generally range between 1,200 and 1,500 people, dispersed across multiple coastal, harbour, and riverine clans extending from Botany Bay to Broken Bay and inland along the Parramatta River. These groups occupied distinct local territories and lacked any centralised authority, standing force, or unified command structure. Only a fraction lived in proximity to Sydney Cove at the moment of landing, and there is no evidence of rapid mobilisation or coordinated response across clan boundaries.

Even if one assumes, unrealistically, that multiple clans who spoke Eora could have acted in concert, the logistical and strategic barriers to confrontation remain decisive. There is no evidence of supra-clan military organisation, no capacity for sustained combat, and no means of provisioning or coordinating a large fighting force. Conflict in the region was episodic and small-scale, characterised by ambush, ritualised violence, and payback killings rather than massed assaults or territorial defence against fortified positions. Nothing in the historical or ethnographic record suggests either the capacity or the intention to mount a frontal confrontation against a settled encampment controlling firearms, stores, boats, and defensible ground.

The absence of conflict at the point of landing is therefore not evidence of suppression by force, but of asymmetry, avoidance, and the non-existence of a defending military or political unit. Eighty Gadigal people were not defending Sydney Cove against over one thousand arrivals. Nor did the wider Eora population mobilise to do so. Invasion narratives that presuppose a defending population capable of resisting conquest collapse at this threshold.

## 3.6   Sydney Cove 1788: Absence of Invasion Capacity

If the invasion thesis fails because there was no defending population capable of resistance, it fails equally because the British lacked the force required to invade.

The First Fleet landed with approximately 1,030 persons in total, of whom 736 were convicts and only around 211 were marines. Of those marines, a materially smaller number would have been fit for continuous duty at any given time, given illness, fatigue, and the competing demands of guarding prisoners, stores, and officers. The settlement therefore began life without reserve capacity, reinforcements, or a secure supply line, and with an armed force insufficient even to guarantee its own internal security.

This numerical reality is decisive. An invasion, in any ordinary military or legal sense, presupposes a surplus of force sufficient not only to defeat an external adversary but to secure the invader's own position against internal threat. The Sydney Cove landing force lacked both. Authority was maintained not by dominance but by fragility: discipline enforced through ration control, punishment, and the simple fact that rebellion would

have been irrational rather than impossible. The marines could not have survived a coordinated uprising by the convicts, nor could they have projected power beyond the immediate encampment. There was no capacity to seize territory by arms, no ability to hold land against resistance, and no mechanism for sustained coercive expansion.

The contrast with genuine British invasions elsewhere in the same imperial period is stark. In Bengal, British power followed decisive military engagements supported by thousands of trained troops, artillery, and secure supply chains. At the Cape Colony, Britain deployed a conventional expeditionary force capable of defeating defenders and holding territory against counterattack. In New Zealand, where organised Māori polities and armed resistance existed, Britain relied on treaties backed by substantial military presence and, when conflict arose, sustained campaigns involving regular regiments. None of these hallmarks of invasion, overwhelming force, defeat of an external enemy, territorial seizure, and the capacity to hold land by arms, were present at Sydney Cove in 1788.

Properly understood, the events of January 1788 are consistent with settlement in the eighteenth-century legal sense: the establishment of a governed community under Crown authority, not the forcible subjugation of an existing polity by superior arms. An invasion does not arrive without reserves, without territorial control, and without the capacity even to secure its own survival. The lack of sufficient force for self-preservation is fatal to the invasion thesis and compels a more accurate characterisation of the founding of New South Wales as a fragile, provisional extension of British jurisdiction rather than a military act of conquest.

This absence of invasion capacity is not a matter of interpretation; it is a material fact that frames everything that follows.

## 3.7    Reinforcement Without Invasion: Population Growth and Administrative Expansion, 1788–1792

With the absence of invasion capacity established, the question becomes how the colony nevertheless expanded. The answer lies not in force of arms, but in demographic reinforcement and administrative necessity.

The initial landing force consisted overwhelmingly of convicts, with only a small and overtasked armed detachment responsible for guarding prisoners, stores, and officers. That force lacked reserves, artillery, or logistical depth. It was insufficient for invasion in any conventional sense and barely adequate to secure the settlement's own survival.

Reinforcement came not through military deployment but through transport fleets.

The Second Fleet, arriving between June and July 1790, brought approximately 1,000 additional convicts, together with a modest number of guards and crew. The fleet is notorious not for military effect but for catastrophic mortality: hundreds of convicts died during the voyage, and many more arrived gravely ill. These were not soldiers capable of conquest; they were emaciated prisoners requiring immediate care. Their arrival further strained the colony's resources and reinforced its fragility rather than its coercive power.

The Third Fleet, arriving between July and October 1791, delivered a further 2,000 convicts, along with some supplies and a limited military presence. By this point, the European population of the colony exceeded 3,000, but the character of that population remained overwhelmingly civilian and dependent. Marines were increasingly replaced by the New South Wales Corps, whose primary function was internal order, ration control, and administration rather than territorial warfare.

By the early 1790s, the numerical imbalance between convicts and armed authority had worsened dramatically. Convicts outnumbered soldiers and guards by well over ten to one, and at times by an even greater margin. The withdrawal of the Royal Marines and their replacement by the New South Wales Corps did not increase invasion capacity; it reflected the colony's overriding need for internal control. The NSW Corps was raised not as an expeditionary force but as a custodial and administrative unit, tasked with guarding prisoners, distributing rations, and enforcing discipline. The settlement's principal security concern was not external resistance but the constant risk of disorder, mutiny, and collapse from within. A society in which armed authority is outnumbered by its own prisoners cannot plausibly be described as an invading force capable of territorial conquest.

## 3.8    Parramatta 1788: Inland Settlement Without Conquest

It was only after gradual demographic accumulation, not after any military victory, that the colony expanded inland. The establishment of Parramatta (Rose Hill) in November 1788 remains one of the most consequential yet least examined moments in early Australian history. Less than ten months after the First Fleet's arrival, Governor Arthur Phillip ordered an inland move not in response to conflict or resistance, but because Sydney Cove could not feed itself. The decision was driven by agricultural necessity alone: poor coastal soils, the need for arable land, and reliable freshwater along the Parramatta River. Its significance lies not merely in its timing, but in its complete absence of military character.



Early view of Parramatta (Rose Hill), c. 1790s.

Contemporary or near-contemporary depiction of the inland agricultural settlement established in November 1788 along the Parramatta River. The image shows dispersed huts, cleared ground, and cultivation without fortifications or military layout.

It is essential to distinguish between the harbour-edge groups associated with Sydney Cove and the inland groups of the Cumberland Plain. The Gadigal were a small coastal kin group later classified under the language label "Eora," while the Burramattagal and related bands along the Parramatta River formed part of the Dharug-speaking continuum. These groups occupied different ecological zones and had no territorial overlap. Linguistic proximity did not imply political unity, alliance, or mutual defence. Language did not constitute a polity, nor did it generate obligations of collective resistance.

The absence of any coordinated response to the establishment of Rose Hill is therefore unsurprising. The Burramattagal confronted permanent agriculture as a small local kin group, not as part of any wider alliance. The historical record contains no evidence of mobilisation, coalition, or collective opposition linking Sydney Cove to Parramatta. Linguistic similarity without political organisation produced no territorial defence— because it could not.

The initial inland settlement involved approximately one hundred to one hundred and twenty people. Of these, roughly seventy to eighty were convicts assigned as agricultural labourers. The military presence was minimal: around twenty to thirty marines with a handful of officers and overseers. It was a lightly guarded farming party, transported upriver and set down on open river flats without fortifications, perimeter defences, or expectation of armed confrontation. Had there existed a defending polity or any mechanism for organised resistance, the settlement would have been acutely vulnerable.

## 3.9    Chronology of Settlement and Violence at Parramatta

The sequence of events in the Sydney basin is critical to understanding what did, and did not, occur at Parramatta. The inland settlement at Rose Hill was established in November 1788 without any recorded violence. In the months immediately following its foundation, there are no accounts of spearings, shootings, ambushes, or attacks directed at the settlement. Contact between settlers and local Dharug-speaking groups was immediate and continuous, involving observation, cautious approach, movement through cleared land, and the provision or exchange of food.

The first recorded acts of violence in the wider Sydney basin occurred only later, during 1789, after inland farming was already underway. These incidents consisted of isolated spearings of individual convicts, typically men working alone or at the margins of settlement, followed in some cases by retaliatory shootings. Such encounters were sporadic, localised, and personal in character. They did not involve attacks on Parramatta itself, nor did they amount to any coordinated effort to disrupt cultivation or expel settlers from the river flats. This period coincided both with increasing tension as

agriculture reduced access to land and with the destabilising effects of the smallpox epidemic, which further fragmented already small kin groups.

By 1791 and 1792, as Parramatta's population grew into the hundreds and then approached a thousand, recorded violence in the immediate vicinity of the settlement diminished rather than intensified. Aboriginal presence near the farms declined as permanent cultivation expanded, but there is no evidence at any stage of a massed attack, an attempt to destroy crops, a night assault on huts, or a coordinated effort to reclaim the land. This absence is decisive. If a system of territorial defence or collective authority had existed, the lightly defended early years of Parramatta would have been the moment of confrontation. No such confrontation occurred.

The pattern is therefore unmistakable. Violence followed settlement; it did not enable it. The incidents that did occur were episodic, retaliatory, and personal, not strategic or collective. Parramatta expanded not because it defeated a defending population, but because no territorial force existed capable of contesting permanent agricultural occupation. In doctrinal terms, inland settlement proceeded through demographic and economic replacement rather than conquest by arms.

Crucially, this movement occurred more than five months before the 1789 smallpox epidemic. It cannot be attributed to opportunistic occupation of a depopulated landscape. Aboriginal people were present on the Cumberland Plain at the time, but their presence did not manifest as territorial defence. Contemporary accounts describe small, mobile kin groups whose land use was seasonal and non-exclusive. Population units numbered in dozens, not hundreds; occupation took the form of movement corridors and temporary camps, not fixed estates. There is no evidence of fortifications, exclusive territorial control, or organised defence at the site selected for settlement.

What followed is one of the most striking features of the record. Aboriginal people observed the settlement, engaged cautiously and intermittently, withdrew, and later returned. There was no ambush, no battle, no siege, and no attempt to prevent clearing, planting, or permanent occupation. This absence of conflict is not a gap in the sources; it is the sources.

Parramatta grew not through conquest but through demographic accumulation. As cultivation succeeded, additional convicts were sent upriver incrementally. By late 1789 the population had risen into the hundreds; by 1790 it approached one thousand. At no stage was this growth preceded or accompanied by military campaigns or the defeat of a defending force. There was no moment of "taking" land by arms, because there was no land held in a manner capable of being taken that way.

The contrast between British and Aboriginal modes of land use is legally decisive. The settlers were fixed, concentrated, and permanently transforming the landscape through agriculture. The Aboriginal groups of the Cumberland Plain were small, kin-based, mobile, and seasonally dispersed, with no supra-family authority, no fortifications, and no capacity to sustain losses in armed conflict. Under such conditions, resistance was

not merely absent; it was structurally impossible. Avoidance was the rational response to a demographic and logistical mismatch, not evidence of defeat.

This episode is more damaging to the modern conquest narrative than the events at Sydney Cove itself. Parramatta was an inland agricultural settlement, established early, lightly defended, pre-dating epidemic disease, and expanding without violence into an area where Aboriginal people were present but not territorially organised. It demonstrates with exceptional clarity that British inland expansion did not require military victory because there was no opposing polity to defeat.

In doctrinal terms, Parramatta exposes the foundational weakness in claims that early settlement involved dispossession by force of land held under exclusive territorial control. The facts show replacement, not conquest; demographic supersession, not defeat; occupation by cultivation, not seizure by arms. Expansion followed subsistence pressure and population growth, not military success. Within four years, the colony grew from a precarious encampment into a dispersed agricultural settlement numbering several thousand—without invasion, without battles, and without the defeat of any defending authority. The absence of war is not an omission in the record. It is the record.

## 3.10  Collapse, Not Invasion: The Epidemiological Core

Once invasion capacity and organised resistance are set aside, the early Sydney record resolves into a clearer pattern. What followed was not conquest by force, but rapid collapse triggered by biological shock, demographic fragility, and the disintegration of customary authority. This is not a dispute about terminology, but about causation. When invasion is removed as an explanatory framework, the mechanisms shaping early Sydney can be examined directly rather than moralised retrospectively.

The contemporary record does not support a war narrative. What it documents instead are epidemics, uncertainty, attempts at conciliation, sporadic confrontations, and repeated orders for restraint. Violence occurred, but it was limited, reactive, and localised. There is no evidence of sustained hostilities, organised campaigns, or efforts to defeat a defending population.

Disease was overwhelmingly decisive. The smallpox epidemic of 1789 devastated harbour populations before sustained conflict could develop. For societies organised at minimal scale, such mortality was fatal. Crucially, disease did not operate in isolation. Pre-existing biological pressures had already weakened reproductive capacity and social resilience, ensuring that populations did not recover even where some individuals survived.

Social collapse preceded dispossession. Law and authority disintegrated as populations fell and pairing systems broke down. Territorial control, dependent on immediate presence and the capacity to exclude others, could not be sustained by small, weakened groups. Land was not seized from a functioning society; it became unpossessable because the society that had occupied it could no longer reproduce itself or enforce norms.

Oppression implies intent and system. What the early Sydney record shows instead is shock, asymmetry, opportunism by individuals, and overwhelming unintended biological consequences. The dominant mechanisms were epidemiological and social, not military. To describe early Sydney as an invasion is therefore to project later frontier violence backward and to mistake collapse for conquest.

The central question is not how land was taken, but why demographic recovery never occurred once sustained contact had been made.

## 3.11 Sexual Contact, Venereal Disease, and Demographic Non-Recovery at Sydney Cove

Contemporary records from the first year of settlement at Sydney Cove establish that sexual contact between convict men and Aboriginal women commenced almost immediately following British arrival and was recognised by colonial officers as socially corrosive and biologically destructive. These interactions were not described by contemporaries as courtship, marriage, or assimilation, but as opportunistic and transactional exchanges arising from acute subsistence dependency within an already marginal population.

The clearest account is provided by Watkin Tench, whose observations were recorded contemporaneously and published within a year of settlement. Writing in *A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay* (1789), Tench noted with stark clarity that food scarcity rapidly transformed sexual relations into a form of exchange, observing that "the women, finding that bread was to be obtained for their persons, soon overcame every sense of shame, and bartered their favours for this most necessary article." This statement is unambiguous. It describes neither mutual union nor cultural accommodation, but the commodification of sex under conditions of dependency, where access to food supplanted all customary restraint.

Tench further recorded that the biological consequences of such intercourse were immediate and severe. In the same work, he observed that "that dreadful disorder, which is the usual consequence of such connections, soon showed itself among them." The language admits of no uncertainty. Venereal disease was not conjectured, retrospectively inferred, or morally embellished; it was directly observed and causally attributed to sexual contact between convicts and Aboriginal women within months of first settlement. This places the emergence of infertility-inducing disease firmly before the catastrophic smallpox epidemic of 1789 and demonstrates that demographic vulnerability pre-dated mass mortality.

Arthur Phillip likewise recognised the destructive nature of these relations, though his language was characteristically administrative rather than moral. In official correspondence during the 1788–1789 period, Phillip warned that "the intercourse between the convicts and the natives, particularly the women, has been productive of the most fatal consequences, and every effort has been made to prevent it." Elsewhere, he cautioned that such connections exposed Aboriginal people to "those disorders which

must in time prove destructive." These statements confirm official awareness that sexual contact was not benign, that it carried grave biological risks, and that attempts—ultimately ineffective—were made to restrain it.

Importantly, neither Tench nor Phillip described these encounters as part of any organised policy of sexual violence or systematic rape. However, the absence of such terminology should not be mistaken for the absence of coercion. The sources attest to extreme power imbalance, dependency-driven consent, and exploitation operating within a population estimated at no more than fifty to one hundred and fifty individuals in the immediate Sydney Cove area. In such a demographic context, even limited infertility and disruption of the female reproductive cohort would have had disproportionate, compounding, and irreversible consequences.

Taken together, these accounts establish venereal disease as an early, real demographic collapse. The 1789 smallpox epidemic was the overwhelming principal cause of rapid depopulation but it is important to note that venereal diseases create an explanatory link in understanding why recovery did not occur thereafter. Disease-induced infertility, compounded by ecological disruption and the breakdown of subsistence autonomy, rendered the small harbour-side population biologically incapable of regeneration. The collapse, therefore, was not the product of conquest by arms, but of stacked vulnerabilities arising from contact, dependency, and disease—observed, recorded, and lamented by contemporaries themselves.

## 3.12  Rations, Assistance, and the Reality of Early Sydney

From 1788 onward, the colonial government adopted a policy of conciliation and assistance toward local Aboriginal people, providing food rations, clothing, and protection for nearly two decades. This was not episodic charity but sustained government practice.

Food rations were distributed at Sydney Cove and later at Parramatta and other government sites. The policy reflected practical objectives rather than ideology: the maintenance of peace, the mitigation of suffering caused by disease and food disruption, and the hope that support would stabilise relations between the settlement and local people. Orders discouraging violence against Aboriginal people accompanied these measures. This record predates and contradicts the notion of immediate conquest.

The consequences of rationing were complex. While rations kept people alive during periods of acute vulnerability, they also produced dependency and accelerated social change. Traditional subsistence systems weakened as food increasingly came from government stores rather than customary practice. Congregation around settlements intensified disease transmission, facilitated access to alcohol, and exposed women to sexual exploitation. Authority shifted away from elders as the source of sustenance moved beyond customary law.

Assistance continued, in various forms, through the late 1780s and into the early nineteenth century. By the 1810s and 1820s, however, the circumstances had changed.

The original harbour populations had been devastated by epidemic disease, reproductive collapse, and social disintegration. Survivors were absorbed into neighbouring groups or into the settler community. The colony expanded inland, and there was no longer a distinct local society to support in the manner originally envisaged.

The decline of rationing did not mark a turn to cruelty or expulsion. It reflected demographic reality. What ended was not assistance but the existence of a functioning harbour society capable of receiving it. Later frontier violence and protection regimes, which occurred in different regions and under different conditions, are often projected backwards onto early Sydney. That projection distorts causation.

Taken together, the evidence replaces a narrative of invasion with one of contact-induced collapse. Disease, sexual exploitation, infertility, and cultural disintegration preceded and enabled the loss of land-use capacity. Assistance did not prevent collapse, but it contradicts claims of deliberate starvation or systematic oppression. Early Sydney was not a theatre of war but a human catastrophe shaped by biology, asymmetry, and unintended consequences.

This reframing does not deny suffering or excuse exploitation. It restores historical proportion. For nearly twenty years, the colonial government fed and assisted local Aboriginal people. The tragedy that followed arose not from a policy of conquest, but from forces that overwhelmed a small society and extinguished its continuity.

# 4.    The End of the Gadigal

## 4.1    Individuals, Absorption, and Extinction

The disappearance of the Gadigal from the historical record was not rhetorical or symbolic; it was demographic and structural. By the early 1790s, the Gadigal no longer existed as a functioning estate group exercising authority over land, law, or kin. What remained were individualsl, briefly visible in the colonial record until they also disappeared.

Three figures are commonly invoked in modern narratives to suggest Gadigal survival: Arabanoo, Bennelong, and Nanbaree. Properly understood, all three demonstrate the opposite.

**Arabanoo** was a Gadigal man taken by the British in late 1788 during an early attempt at communication. He acted briefly as an intermediary between the settlement and local Aboriginal people but died in April 1789 during the smallpox epidemic that devastated the harbour population. Arabanoo left no descendants and exercised no enduring authority. His death coincided with the broader collapse of the Gadigal and marks not continuity, but extinction in progress.

**Bennelong** is frequently, and incorrectly, treated as evidence of Gadigal persistence. Bennelong was not Gadigal. He belonged to the Wangal clan, whose country lay west of Sydney Cove along the southern banks of the Parramatta River. Bennelong's prominence reflects his individual adaptability and the survival of neighbouring groups beyond the immediate harbour zone, not the endurance of the Gadigal estate. By the time Bennelong became a central figure in colonial Sydney, the Gadigal had already ceased to exist as a functioning social unit.

The only individual who can plausibly be identified as a surviving Gadigal after 1789 is **Nanbaree**. Nanbaree was a child at the time of contact and survived the epidemic that destroyed the harbour clans. He was taken in by British officers, educated in English, and raised largely within colonial society. Nanbaree did not inherit or transmit Gadigal law, did not exercise authority over land or people, and left no known descendants capable of carrying forward a Gadigal identity. His survival illustrates absorption and removal, not continuity.

These cases are decisive. Arabanoo died. Bennelong was Wangal. Nanbaree survived only as an individual detached from traditional structures. No Gadigal elder survived to transmit law. No kin network remained intact. No authority persisted. No estate group continued to function.

The failure of continuity was structural, not incidental. The 1789 smallpox epidemic did not merely reduce population size; it destroyed the social architecture that constituted the group itself. Kin networks, marriage obligations, ritual authority, and lines of succession were shattered beyond recovery. In societies organised around immediate

kinship rather than corporate tribal institutions, the survival of isolated individuals does not amount to the survival of the society from which they came.

Where individuals survived, they did so only through **absorption**, and absorption was neither symbolic nor partial. A person who attached themselves to the Cammeraygal, Wangal, Wallumedegal, Burramattagal, or Dharawal did not remain a vestige of a former group. Their identity, obligations, and rights were recalibrated entirely through their new kin network. Marriage rules, food-sharing entitlements, ritual participation, and social standing derived from the absorbing group alone. Children born thereafter inherited this new identity, not the name or customs of an extinct and leaderless band.

Aboriginal social organisation does not recognise the persistence of identity after the collapse of the normative society that gives it meaning. There is no concept of a dormant, residual, or "ghost" group sustained by memory or distant descent once the living network of obligations has dissolved. Identity exists only where law, kinship, and authority are actively enacted. When those structures disintegrate — through epidemic, warfare, famine, or demographic collapse — the group ceases to exist as a group, even if certain biological descendants remain alive.

Unlike other regions of the continent where the extinction or dispersal of a kin group could be followed by reoccupation or incorporation of territory by neighbouring Aboriginal groups, Sydney Cove did not remain an Aboriginal domain after 1788. It became, within weeks, a site of permanent British settlement and continuous colonial presence. There was no interval in which a neighbouring group could establish normative authority over the area, nor any mechanism by which such authority could have been exercised. The land did not pass to another Aboriginal polity; it passed out of the Aboriginal normative system altogether.

From that point onward, Sydney Cove existed under British jurisdiction, sustained by continuous occupation, administration, and law. Whatever Aboriginal use of the area occurred thereafter was episodic, individual, and contingent, not proprietary or authoritative. There was no surviving Aboriginal law governing the land because there was no surviving Aboriginal society capable of enforcing one.

The consequences are evidentiary as well as historical. There is no living person who can demonstrate continuity from a Gadigal society as it existed in 1788, because no such society survived long enough to transmit law, authority, or estate-based identity across generations. Contemporary identification may be sincere, but sincerity is not continuity. In the absence of a surviving normative society, continuity cannot be presumed; it must be proven. Here, it cannot be.

This is not a moral judgement. It is a historical conclusion.

## 4.2   The Invention of the 'Sydney Wars'

Once early Sydney is recast as a site of "war," the absence of commanders, victories, treaties, or political institutions creates a narrative vacuum that must be filled by substitution.

Recent works describing early Sydney as a site of sustained "war" exemplify a broader methodological failure in modern Australian historiography. By redefining war to encompass sporadic encounters, intimidation, or the mere possibility of violence, these accounts abandon eighteenth-century understandings of warfare and substitute modern moral categories in their place.

Incidents are aggregated across decades and regions, distinct peoples are collapsed into a single undifferentiated population, and later frontier violence is projected backwards onto the harbour population. The result is a reversal of causation: demographic collapse driven by disease, infertility, and social disintegration is recast as the consequence of conquest. Violence occurred, but it was episodic and reactive; collapse was primary. To conflate the two is not to clarify history, but to replace evidence with symbolism.

In the absence of recognised leaders, formal authority, diplomatic engagement, or military success, modern activist narratives are left with a profound evidentiary deficit - an absence that reflects the underlying social reality of early Sydney rather than any gap in the record. There are no treaties to cite, no victories to commemorate, no councils to reference, and no figures who exercised sustained political or territorial command.

It is within this vacuum that figures such as Pemulwuy are elevated beyond their historical scale. Individual acts of violence or banditry are retrospectively reclassified as "resistance," and personal notoriety is transmuted into political leadership. This process does not arise from new evidence but from necessity. Where no chiefs, generals, or statesmen exist, the only available candidates for heroic narration are those who defied authority episodically and outside any recognised structure.

The transformation of an outlaw into a resistance hero is therefore not proof of organised opposition, but proof of its absence. Sustained resistance requires coordination, continuity, and collective authority. Isolated violence does not. To mistake the latter for the former is to collapse the distinction between polity and disruption, between leadership and notoriety, and between war and crime.

This explains the modern emphasis on singular, often violent figures in place of institutions or outcomes. Heroic narratives are constructed not because they accurately describe the past, but because they are the only narratives available once sovereignty, collective organisation, and territorial control are found to be absent. In this sense, the elevation of such figures is less a testament to enduring resistance than an artefact of historical scarcity, a retrospective attempt to supply heroes where the record provides none.

## 4.3    Anthropology, Scale And The Structural Limits Of Continuity

From a doctrinal perspective, this means that there is no continuous "Gadigal society" capable of transmitting traditional laws and customs into the present. The identity did not survive the epidemic; the land did not remain occupied; and the laws that might ground a modern claim were extinguished when the last functioning with the dissolution of the last functioning network of custodians.

To speak of "Gadigal people" today is not to point to a surviving polity but to invoke a reconstructed identity created long after the original group vanished. The continuity requirement inherent in Aboriginal lore and later articulated in Australian jurisprudence in *Mabo* and sharpened in *Yorta Yorta,* cannot be satisfied by an identity that ceased to exist as a normative society by the early 1790s.

The correct conclusion, historically and doctrinally, is therefore clear: the Gadigal were extinguished as a functioning group by the smallpox epidemic, their survivors were absorbed into neighbouring societies and thereby ceased to be Gadigal, and their former territory was naturally and inevitably repopulated by others. The modern invocation of "Gadigal" is an artefact of contemporary cultural reconstruction, not the continuation of a traditional law-bearing society.

It is very important to understand that the conditions observed in the Sydney Basin were not anomalous. They were representative. Across the Australian continent, ecological conditions produced regional variation in subsistence strategies and movement patterns, no Aboriginal society developed durable institutions of surplus, territorial administration, supra-kin authority, or mechanisms capable of transmitting law and identity across large populations or extended timeframes. Sydney Cove was not exceptional; it was simply the first place where sustained contact exposed a continent-wide structural reality.

When societies are compared anthropologically, the relevant inquiry is not moral worth or intelligence, but sociological scale and institutional capacity. Anthropologists look to the size of stable social units, the existence of authority beyond immediate kin, the ability to aggregate into larger groups, the presence of surplus, storage, or redistribution mechanisms, the administration and defence of territory, and the durability of law and identity across generations. On these measures, the Aboriginal groups encountered at the point of sustained British contact occupied an extreme position at the lowest documented tier of sociological organisation.

This conclusion becomes clear only when comparison is made with other societies commonly described as "primitive." Even the San peoples of southern Africa, often invoked as archetypal hunter-gatherers, exhibited social capacities absent in the Sydney Basin. San bands possessed recognised membership, regular aggregation around waterholes, exchange networks extending across large distances, and marriage systems that linked multiple bands into durable relational networks. Authority was limited, but social integration extended beyond the nuclear or extended family. The Inuit, living in one of the harshest environments on earth, nonetheless formed large seasonal settlements,

coordinated complex collective hunts, developed specialised tools, and maintained territorial use zones recognised across generations. Their survival depended on cooperation at scale, and their social organisation reflected that necessity.

Even societies historically regarded as exceptionally marginal, such as the Andaman Islanders or the Fuegians of Tierra del Fuego, exceeded the Sydney Basin groups in sociological terms. Both maintained stable group identities, recognised territorial ranges, shared mythological systems, and norms governing inter-group relations. They aggregated periodically, transmitted law and belief beyond immediate kin, and preserved continuity despite environmental hardship

By contrast, Aboriginal societies across Australia operated almost entirely at the level of the extended family. Population units were exceptionally small; authority rarely extended beyond a single senior male; aggregation was episodic and contingent rather than institutionalised; and there were no mechanisms for surplus, storage, or redistribution. Identity was relational and fragile, dissolving rapidly under demographic stress. Once elders died or families were absorbed elsewhere, the group itself ceased to exist as a normative society. This pattern was not confined to the Sydney Basin but replicated, with local variation, across the continent.

In comparative terms, therefore, pre-contact Aboriginal society in the Sydney Basin occupied the lowest documented tier of sociological organisation at the point of sustained external contact. Few, if any, human societies can be shown to have operated with less institutional depth, weaker aggregation capacity, or lower durability of collective identity. This is not a judgement of intelligence, humanity, or moral worth. It is a structural description of social scale and capacity and it is this reality, rather than any ideological intention, that explains why Australia was settled without treaty, without war, and through the repeated replication of the Sydney Cove pattern across thousands of local encounters.

That structural reality has direct historical consequences. It explains not only the collapse of continuity, but the form that British expansion necessarily took. Where organised societies existed—capable of aggregating authority, sustaining population density, administering territory, and mounting coordinated defence—British power encountered constraint. Where such societies did not exist, settlement proceeded. Australia was not unique in its foundations; it was orthodox. What is unique is the modern attempt to erase this structural history and replace it with a narrative that treats settlement as invasion even where invasion was neither required nor attempted.

British settlement did not interrupt a condition of peace; it entered a landscape in which violence, retaliation, and demographic replacement were already the governing facts of social order.

## 4.4 Comparative Constraint: Settlement, Invasion, and the Limits of British Power

When assessed comparatively, the decisive factor in determining whether British expansion took the form of settlement, treaty, or negotiated cession was not race, technology, or moral inclination, but sociological scale and institutional capacity. Where organised societies existed—capable of aggregating authority, sustaining population density, administering territory, and mounting coordinated defence—British power encountered constraint. Where such societies did not exist, settlement proceeded.

This distinction is made clear by comparison with societies operating on land areas far smaller than the Sydney Basin but sustaining vastly larger, denser, and more organised populations. The Kingdom of Tonga, occupying less than one-tenth the area of Greater Sydney, supported a population numbering in the tens of thousands and maintained a centralised monarchy, stratified nobility, a standing warrior class, and inter-island naval capacity. There was no opportunity for European settlement without invasion, and invasion would have required sustained warfare and the wholesale destruction of organised resistance. British expansion therefore proceeded through treaty and diplomatic recognition rather than settlement, not as an act of restraint, but because settlement without war was structurally impossible.

Fiji presents a similar contrast. Despite an archipelago smaller than many Australian regions, Fiji sustained hundreds of thousands of people organised into fortified chiefdoms with recognised territorial boundaries, standing forces, and a tradition of organised warfare. British sovereignty was asserted not by settlement but by the Deed of Cession of 1874, negotiated with acknowledged leaders capable of binding their societies. Here again, treaty was not benevolence; it was necessity. Settlement without invasion would have required mass killing and prolonged conflict, and it was not attempted.

The same pattern appears in Samoa, with its matai system of titled chiefs, village councils, permanent settlements, and dense population distribution, and in smaller island societies such as Tuvalu, where village organisation, communal land tenure, and stable political authority left no unoccupied or undefended space into which settlers could simply insert themselves. Across Polynesia, population density, village life, surplus production, and institutional authority foreclosed the possibility of settlement without invasion. Where Europeans wished to control territory, they were required to negotiate, dominate diplomatically, or, in some cases, overthrow existing regimes outright.

In these societies there was no opportunity for settlement without invasion, and invasion would have required the deliberate destruction of organised resistance, including the large-scale killing of adult males capable of coordinated defence. British expansion did not take this form in the Pacific precisely because such an outcome would have required sustained warfare and mass violence. It was avoided not out of sentiment, but because the cost, scale, and political consequences were prohibitive.

The contrast with the Aboriginal groups of the Sydney Basin could not be sharper. Operating at the level of small, kin-based family units, without villages, surplus, standing forces, or supra-family political authority, they presented no polity with which treaty was possible and no organised force against which invasion could meaningfully occur. Settlement did not replace invasion; invasion was structurally unnecessary. Where invasion would have been required, it did not occur. Where settlement occurred, it did so because organised resistance did not exist to be destroyed.

Sydney Cove was not unique in these respects; it was illustrative. While ecological conditions, timing, and intensity of contact varied across the continent, the underlying sociological configuration: small, kin-based groups lacking surplus, institutional authority, and defensive capacity was widespread. What differed was pace and local expression, not structural vulnerability.

Across the continent, the decisive forces driving Aboriginal population collapse after contact were not military conquest but biological and social shock. Mortality arose from exposure to novel disease vectors, disruption of subsistence autonomy, and the rapid breakdown of kin-based social systems that had no institutional capacity to absorb sustained external pressure. Collapse preceded dispossession. Violence occurred, but it was secondary to these processes.

Epidemic disease operated through multiple pathways. In some regions, most notably coastal New South Wales, smallpox produced catastrophic early mortality. In others, including Tasmania, where smallpox did not occur, respiratory disease proved decisive. Lifelong exposure to campfire smoke, common across small foraging societies, is associated with chronic pulmonary irritation and reduced respiratory resilience. In pre-contact conditions, this exposure was episodic and mitigated by mobility, low population density, and clean air environments. Following contact, however, Aboriginal people were increasingly drawn into crowded, sedentary settings near settlements, refuse zones, and polluted water sources. In these conditions, newly introduced respiratory pathogens, pneumonia, influenza, pleurisy, and later tuberculosis spread rapidly and lethally. The interaction between pre-existing pulmonary vulnerability and novel disease produced mortality rates far exceeding those seen in European populations.

These mortality shocks were compounded by mechanisms that prevented recovery. Venereal disease, introduced early in many regions, undermined fertility and disrupted the reproductive cohort, particularly in already diminished populations. As traditional authority weakened and subsistence autonomy collapsed, sexual exchange under conditions of extreme asymmetry intensified infertility and social dislocation. Where alcohol was later introduced, it accelerated breakdown further.

These processes are neither speculative nor unique to Australia. They are consistently documented wherever small, kin-based societies encountered large, technologically complex populations without institutional buffers. To describe their effects as "invasion" is to misidentify cause, substitute morality for mechanism, and obscure the actual history of contact.

The absence of treaties in Australia is therefore not an historical anomaly, nor evidence of exceptional injustice. It is the predictable outcome of sociological reality. Where

societies could resist, Britain negotiated or withdrew. Where they could not, settlement followed. Australia was not unique in its foundations; it was orthodox. What is unique is the modern attempt to erase this structural history and replace it with a narrative that treats settlement as invasion even where invasion was neither required nor attempted.

## 4.5    Conflict, Displacement, and the Force-Based Reality of Pre-Contact Landholding

Pre-contact Aboriginal landholding operated within a social order in which violence, retaliation, and demographic attrition were normal mechanisms of regulation rather than exceptional events. In the absence of supra-kin institutions, neutral adjudication, or enduring political authority, disputes were resolved through retaliation, and control of land endured only so long as it could be physically enforced.

This was not a regional anomaly confined to the Sydney Basin. It was a structural feature of Aboriginal society across the continent, arising from small population size, kin-based organisation, fragile reproduction, and the absence of institutions capable of enforcing peace or preserving territory independently of force. The Sydney region matters not because it was unique, but because it was observed first, recorded earliest, and documented in unusual detail. What appears there earliest appears elsewhere later, not as an exception, but as a pattern.  Land changed hands through violence, attrition, and replacement long before 1788. There is no evidence of a continent-wide norm of peaceful coexistence or of territorial boundaries respected independently of force.

Early colonial observers were explicit on this point. Watkin Tench recorded that Aboriginal life was marked by continual hostility between groups, observing that "the tribes are in a state of perpetual warfare with each other," and that injuries were "never forgotten, nor forgiven, until blood had been shed in return." David Collins similarly noted that retaliation was not discretionary but obligatory, writing that "their idea of justice is strictly retaliatory; blood must answer blood." These accounts do not describe aberrant conduct, but the ordinary operation of social regulation in small, kin-based societies lacking institutional authority.

Violence operated not only between groups but within them. Accusations of sorcery, ritual breach, or perceived responsibility for illness and death frequently resulted in execution or expulsion. Howitt observed that suspicion following death "almost invariably led to vengeance," often directed at individuals only tenuously connected to the alleged cause. In populations numbering only dozens, such losses were not absorbable. The death or expulsion of even one or two adult males could decisively weaken a group's capacity to defend itself, sustain subsistence, or reproduce.

Territory, in this context, was not held as an abstract or inalienable right, but as a contingent fact. Possession depended on continued presence and force. Where a group was reduced below demographic replacement, through killing, female capture, infertility, or sustained conflict, its estate was abandoned or absorbed by others. Curr was explicit on this point, recording that when a family group was "broken up by death or war," its

country was "taken possession of by others, without ceremony." Land did not endure independently of the people capable of enforcing it.

The capture of women formed a recognised feature of inter-group conflict and a direct vector of demographic collapse. Curr noted that women were "frequently stolen," and that such acts were among the most common causes of retaliatory violence. The loss of women of reproductive age had compounding effects: it weakened immediate subsistence capacity, reduced future population, and accelerated absorption into neighbouring groups. In societies already operating at subsistence margins, such losses were often terminal.

Anthropological records compiled prior to the politicisation of Aboriginal history document numerous cases of displaced or extinct groups whose disappearance pre-dated sustained European settlement. These extinctions were not the product of conquest by organised states, but of demographic attrition within a system governed by force, retaliation, and fragile reproduction. As Radcliffe-Brown later observed, in such societies "the social unit is small, and its survival precarious; extinction is a constant possibility."

Early observers recorded that lethal encounters often culminated in deliberate bodily desecration. These acts were not incidental injuries sustained in struggle, but intentional mutilations inflicted at or after death. Accounts include the removal of eyes, genital mutilation, dismemberment, and the extraction of body fat, particularly kidney fat, which was consumed or retained. Thigh bones were sometimes removed, whether for practical, symbolic, or ritual purposes. Such practices were not presented as aberrations, but as recognised consequences of violent conflict.

These acts served clear functions in societies without institutional enforcement. Where no court, council, or binding authority existed, violence operated as punishment, deterrent, and message simultaneously. Mutilation rendered the victim permanently incapable of retaliation and conveyed a warning to others. In this sense, extreme violence did not reflect excess but structural necessity. It substituted for law where law could not exist.

Crucially, this violence was not governed by proportionality or regulated response. Injury did not trigger adjudication, compensation, or reconciliation. It produced flight, reprisal, or annihilation. In populations of minimal size, the consequences were magnified: the death or maiming of a single adult male could collapse an entire family unit, eliminate its defensive capacity, or force its absorption into another group.

Nor do these practices indicate the presence of cohesive or enduring legal systems. Their variability across encounters points instead to situational responses, dependent on individuals rather than institutions. Violence was enacted by persons, not offices; remembered personally, not juridically. There is no evidence of codified rules governing when mutilation was permitted or prohibited, nor of any mechanism by which excess could be restrained or sanctioned.

That this pattern was recognised by colonial authorities is evident from the priorities of early Protectors and officials. A significant portion of their recorded efforts was directed

not toward suppressing conflict between settlers and Aboriginal people, but toward attempting to curb inter-group Aboriginal violence, retaliatory killings, and the abduction of women. Protector correspondence and reports repeatedly express concern at the inability of colonial authority to restrain cycles of payback between kin groups, particularly where violence occurred beyond the immediate reach of settlement. These efforts were largely unsuccessful, not because such violence was ignored, but because it was embedded in social systems lacking central authority and resistant to external adjudication.

This context is decisive for understanding early Sydney. The collapse of the Gadigal following contact did not represent a novel outcome introduced by Europeans. It followed a familiar trajectory observed repeatedly in pre-contact Australia once the fragile conditions sustaining a small kin group failed. Disease, infertility, and ecological disruption replaced spear and club as the immediate causes, but the structural result was the same: demographic failure and the dissolution of territorial control.

British settlement did not introduce force-based possession; it terminated it. Whatever its later failings elsewhere, the imposition of British jurisdiction in the Sydney Basin progressively suppressed payback killings, inter-group extermination, and the violent reallocation of women and land. The transition was not benevolent, but it was transformative. A system in which land was held only while it could be defended by force was replaced by one in which title endured independently of immediate physical domination.

Recognising this reality does not deny suffering. It restores proportion. Pre-contact Australia was not a static world of timeless harmony disrupted by European violence, but a dynamic landscape in which land, people, and groups were continually made and unmade through force. Any account of early settlement that omits this fact misconstrues both what existed before 1788 and what, precisely, came to an end thereafter.

## 5.     History Without Fabrication

Even when the lens is widened beyond Sydney Cove to the full 112 years between 1788 and Federation, the conclusion does not change. By any comparative historical standard, the level of organised conflict was minimal. There was no continental war, no sustained campaign of conquest, no mobilisation of armies, and no policy of extermination. What occurred instead was a prolonged, uneven, and often clumsy attempt to incorporate an exceptionally simple, kin-based society into a vastly more complex civilisational order. That effort involved protection, rationing, mission life, schooling, employment, intermarriage, and gradual legal inclusion. It was frequently misguided and sometimes cruel, but it was not a project of conquest by arms. The rarity of large-scale violence over more than a century is not an embarrassment to be explained away; it is a historical fact.

An additional reality now largely excluded from public history is that much Aboriginal movement toward the settlement was voluntary. From the earliest years, Aboriginal people came into Sydney Cove and its environs seeking food, security, employment, clothing, and social access. Young men, in particular, detached themselves from

customary life in growing numbers, drawn by material opportunity and the breakdown of elder authority following epidemic collapse. Women likewise sought refuge within the settlement, where the power of senior men over marriage and sexual access was diminished.

These movements were not incidental, nor were they invisible to contemporaries or later scholars. They were repeatedly observed by colonial officials and later acknowledged by anthropologists working well before the crystallisation of the modern invasion framework. W. E. H. Stanner, writing from direct field experience and comparative analysis, cautioned against portraying contact as a one-sided process of force alone. He observed that for every Aboriginal person upon whom Europeans were "thrust," at least one other actively sought them out. Settlements, stations, and camps exerted what he described as a powerful gravitational pull, offering food, work, protection, and strategic advantage and Aboriginal movement toward these sites spread rapidly through kinship and information networks. To acknowledge attraction, choice, and constrained agency in this process is not to deny suffering, but it is to undermine the premise that contact consisted solely of coercion

The erasure of this reality distorts history in a fundamental way. It transforms complex human behaviour into a single moral script and replaces explanation with accusation. What is lost is not sympathy for Aboriginal suffering, but the capacity to understand how and why societies actually change under contact.

These facts are now systematically erased. In their place is substituted an **immoral narrative built on falsehood**, in which sporadic violence is inflated into war, demographic collapse is reclassified as invasion, and assimilation is retrospectively redescribed as domination. Chronology is collapsed, causation is inverted, and outcome is treated as intent. What is presented as historical conscience is, in reality, historical falsification.

The immorality of this project lies not in the emotions it invokes but in the lies it requires. History is deliberately simplified, evidence is selectively discarded, and complexity is suppressed in order to manufacture a politically useful past. This is not interpretation but fabrication; not memory but coercion. Once truth is subordinated to narrative utility, history ceases to be inquiry and becomes an instrument of power.

This book rejects that substitution. It insists that history is not a vehicle for ideological instruction but a discipline bound by evidence, proportion, and structure. Suffering does not require invention to be real, and truth does not become false because it is unfashionable. To recover the historical record as it was is not denial, apology, or provocation. It is an obligation.

This reality is incompatible with later portrayals of a stable, law-governed society exercising collective authority over territory. Societies capable of sustaining enduring land tenure, sovereignty, or law necessarily regulate violence, distinguish punishment from revenge, and bind individuals to outcomes beyond the moment. Nothing in the early record of the Port Jackson population suggests the existence of such structures. Violence functioned not as the enforcement arm of law, but as a replacement for law.

Seen in this light, the brutality recorded by early observers is neither an embarrassment to be minimised nor a spectacle to be sensationalised. It is evidence of scale. It reflects

life organised at the smallest viable human unit, where survival depended on immediacy, dominance, and the elimination of threat rather than on institution, continuity, or collective governance. To ignore or sanitise this violence is not to show respect to the past, but to distort it.

Australia was not founded on invasion because there was no sovereign society to overthrow, no territory held by force, and no polity capable of continuity; what followed was settlement after collapse, not conquest after war.