



# ○ 'BANNELONG SAT DOWN TO DINNER WITH GOVERNOR PHILLIP, AND DRANK HIS WINE AND COFFEE AS USUAL'

## ABORIGINES AND WINE IN EARLY NEW SOUTH WALES

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There is something surprisingly contemporary – and at the same time disturbing – in Philip Gidley King's First Fleet journal entry that 'Bannelong sat down to dinner with Governor Phillip, and drank his wine and coffee as usual'. The late eighteenth-century relationship between Bannelong and British colonists which led to the Aborigine's selective acceptance of European 'civilisation' is one of the earliest documented transnational exchanges in colonial Australia. Ironically, more than two centuries later, while wine is one of the nation's most significant European-derived agricultural exports, Indigenous Australians battle debilitating alcoholism in a tragic cultural limbo. This article has been peer-reviewed.

The starting point for the research for this paper was the intersection between indigenous Australians and grape wine in the early years of European colonization, as part of a broader study of the first century of wine growing in New South Wales.<sup>1</sup> An exploration of the motives of British officers in offering Aborigines wine and the response of Aborigines to the cultural meaning of wine is significant, however, beyond the consideration that a study of wine growing would be incomplete without an interpretation of the indigenous experience.<sup>2</sup> In the same way as Ann Stoler (2001: 829–831) has shown that transnational history is enriched by 'increasing attention to intimacy in the making of empire' – such as sexual relations and child rearing – the seemingly mundane act of whites drinking wine with Indigenous Australians in Port Jackson in the late eighteenth century can be seen as a microsite of transnational exchange. While the term transnational might presuppose a 'national' component to the exchange, it is used here, as by Stoler, to mean an exchange across cultural borders or ways of life; an exchange between Australian Aborigines and the white colonists between whom the barriers included language and culture.

The subject of Aborigines and wine in early New South Wales has been touched on elsewhere, mainly as part of research on contemporary Aboriginal alcoholism (Brady 2000; Brook 2001; Dyer 2003). This work has focused largely on the negative outcome of the encounter for Aborigines. In contrast to these studies, the introduction of wine to Aborigines is treated as a novelty or point of humour in narratives such as *The Story of Wine* by British wine writer Hugh Johnson (1991). Johnson's book is a key text in the body of popular writing on wine history; such 'wine appreciation histories' offer reasonably accurate but invariably uncontextualized historical anecdote.

dotes to inform wine consumption. Johnson wrote, for example, that the colonists toasted the new British settlement at Port Jackson with the wine they had imported on their supply ships but

if this was the first toast drunk in Australia it was probably not the first wine. Lieutenant Philip Gidley King had offered some to two Aborigines who greeted their arrival. They spat it out, but there is no reason to think that the lieutenant wasted the rest of the bottle (368).

While Johnson likely intended no serious disrespect to Aborigines by presenting the anecdote from King's journal in a way that emphasized the Aborigines' perceived barbarity compared with the 'civilised' British colonists, his representation does privilege the British attitude to both wine and Aborigines over an Indigenous perspective.

The actual entry paraphrased by Johnson from King's journal read: 'I gave two of them a glass of Wine which they had no sooner tasted than they spit it out'.<sup>3</sup> The incident referred to by King occurred on 20 January 1788, two days after the advance ships of the First Fleet arrived at Botany Bay. Phillip, King and others rowed ashore to continue the Governor's appraisal of the Bay's suitability for a settlement, and to scout for fresh water. According to King, the party encountered several Aboriginal men, who accepted beads and mirrors left on the ground for them. These men continued to follow the whites as they explored the area. The offering of wine was made as the whites found they were increasingly outnumbered by the group of Aborigines, who were 'armed with lances, & short bludgeons' and seemed to want closer contact. The whites' first response was to offer more presents, but their supply of trinkets was running low. Although King does not expressly declare it, the offer of the wine came at this potential flashpoint.

If King's journal entry gives an accurate chronology of events, the offer did diffuse the seeming danger of the situation for the whites. This could have been because the Aboriginal men were distracted by the spitting of the strange tasting wine, which was probably quite humorous, and indicated that what these white men had to offer might not be all good. Or alternatively, King and his compatriots were somehow reassured that if these Aborigines spat out the wine they were not as fearsome as they looked. King reported that immediately after the spitting of the wine there was a direct communication between the Aborigines and whites, comparing the words in each language for 'a number of articles'. Then, once the Aborigines discovered the whites were men – they had signaled their curiosity, since the whites' gender was not obvious to them, and been satisfied by a crew member's removal of his pants – King believed they indicated the Aboriginal women were at their 'service'.

On the broader question of King's motivation in offering wine, it needs to be said that the lieutenant had already adopted a patronizing tone in his representation of the Aborigines in his journal, based primarily on assumptions he made from observing that the Aborigines wore no clothes, and possibly from accounts from the *Endeavour* journey of James Cook, eighteen years earlier. It should also be remembered that Phillip's orders with respect to the Aborigines – in keeping with the humane aspects of British Enlightenment thinking – were to use 'every possible means to open intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all our subjects to live in amity and kindness with them'.<sup>4</sup> Phillip was at pains to fulfil this duty, and the offer of wine by King was in keeping with the Governor's orders. More speculatively, one

can follow the arguments of Charles Ludington (2003) and suggest that King intended the offer of wine as a test for the Aboriginal men, particularly in this exchange, with regard to both their masculinity and their potential to be 'civilised'. This will be discussed shortly.

First, however, the point needs to be made that historians have not gone out of their way to research the Australian wine industry. While the late twentieth century boom in the Australian wine export industry has led to wine overtaking wool as an export earner, it has been largely ignored in the national historical record.<sup>5</sup> W.P. Driscoll (1969) published a short monograph on wine growing in the Hunter Valley to 1850, and David Dunstan's history of wine in Victoria (Dunstan 1994) does offer some contextualization of the early New South Wales industry as an introduction to the development of the Victorian industry, but there are no other overviews of New South Wales winemaking from historians. The main work is *Vineyards of Sydney* by medical doctor and wine enthusiast Phillip Norrie (1990). Norrie has given a good chronological and statistical account but does not investigate the economic, cultural and social effects of the industry, nor consider the aspects of class, gender and ethnicity. The defining 'wine appreciation histories' are *The Australian Wine Compendium* by James Halliday (1985), *Australia and New Zealand Complete Book of Wine* by Len Evans (1973), and *A Concise History of Australian Wine* by John Beeston (1994). It is not the business of these books to situate the wine industry within the broader historical narrative of the rise of British 'civilisation' in Australia, nor to explore the accompanying effects on early colonial or indigenous culture.

So, what imperial ideologies underpinned the seemingly mundane act of sharing wine with the 'natives'? What did wine drinking and wine growing mean in late eighteenth century Britain, among the officers, marines and convicts who would be the first Europeans to have any sustained contact with Aboriginal Australians? Within the Graeco-Roman cultural tradition wine was understood as a civilising agent, a belief turning on the success with which wine grapes grew on the overly-cultivated soils of long-inhabited areas of Ancient Greece, then Rome; on the deeply-held belief about the Greek and Roman Empires as embodiments of civilisation in the development of agriculture and government; and on the role of wine as a source of commercial wealth in both of these empires. The British inherited this understanding of wine as a cultural artefact along with the message in the Old Testament of the Bible that wine was a staple commodity. More mystically, in the New Testament, wine was a component of miracles.<sup>6</sup> Out of both the Judaeo-Christian and Graeco-Roman cultural traditions also comes the understanding that, as a potentially mind-altering substance, wine has what Louis Grivetti called 'two faces' (Grivetti 1996: 9); it can be a blessing when consumed moderately or medicinally, and an 'uncivilising' evil when consumed to excess. Indigenous Australians had no access to this understanding and the way it provided at least a context for wine drinking for Europeans, and to some extent, guidance on habits and quantities of consumption.

In late eighteenth century England – when the First Fleet was setting sail – wine consumption was also a marker of class and gender. It was drunk by wealthy men as a traditional part of social gatherings for celebration, bereavement or companionship. Wealthy women would often have wine with dinner but would not take place in the rituals of 'utter intoxication', leaving the room before excessive consumption began. It was also customary at the tables of army officers, sea captains, and 'well-appointed clerics' (Ludington 2003: 413, 431–432, 438–439, 453; Rodger 1986: 72). Men and women of the lower classes would encounter wine only while waiting on

gentlemen's tables. While perhaps only a couple of hundred thousand Britons consumed wine in the last years of the eighteenth century, they drank considerable amounts of it and 'excess was not considered disgraceful: on the contrary it was manly and convivial, an aid to wit, good humour and fellowship' (Burnett 1999: 145–146).

The use of wine at social gatherings where large quantities of it – and some other forms of alcohol – were consumed as part of an ongoing round of toasts had by this point in history taken on a deeply ritualistic aspect. It had become an established convention of behaviour that was conducted with considerable zeal by the participants. Toasts usually began after a meal but were also celebrated at events such as the raising of the Union Jack at Sydney Cove in late January 1788. The practice may have originated in the toasting and pledging of allegiances of the English Civil War and Jacobite resistance. Once the toasting began each toast was responded to by all; 'with twelve people present, at least twelve more full glasses were imbibed' (Ludington 2003: 447). There was a clear sense of being contracted in some way to fellow drinkers taking part in a toast; a contract or communion of sorts with echoes of Holy Communion in the Catholic and High Anglican mass.

Ludington has argued that the large quantity of wine consumed by British men, from officer class to King George III, in the late eighteenth century was related to a need to express their masculinity at a time when the British elite felt emasculated by the loss of its colonies in mainland North America. Wine consumption was seen as 'heroic'; both a battle with the bottle and a test to match the drinking feats of other wine drinkers. Wine was a sign of wealth and power, and to be able to drink at least three bottles in an evening sitting was applauded as powerful behaviour. The battle with the bottle could also involve 'drinking *against* someone' (405, 437–8, 448). Within this paradigm, when Philip Gidley King offered wine to the two unidentified Aboriginal men – as described earlier – he was issuing a test of masculinity which would have made no sense to the Aboriginal men, but which would have allowed King to draw conclusions about their potential vulnerability at a time when the whites were physically outnumbered by an otherwise unmeasurable enemy.

The introduction of colonised peoples to alcohol was an entrenched imperial practice (Brady 2000: 3). Christopher Columbus apparently carried wine grape cuttings from the Canary Islands on his first Transatlantic voyage, possibly after purchasing wine there (Hobhouse 2003: 101). Hernan Cortes took the vine to Mexico in the 1520s; it is thought that Pizarro had vine cuttings with him when he sacked the Incan Empire (Unwin 1991: 216–8). Wine was used by the English in early diplomatic exchanges with Indigenous Americans. Richard Hakluyt wrote of these attempts to communicate with the Native Americans that 'after two or three days the king's brother came aboard the ships and drank wine, and eat of our meat and of our bread, and liked exceedingly thereof'.<sup>7</sup> While colonists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did not automatically perceive themselves as more civilised in racial terms than the non-European peoples they colonized (Adas 1989: 22), the distinction between savagery and civilisation had become entrenched by 1788, certainly among the British colonists migrating to Botany Bay.<sup>8</sup> Grape wine was an integral part of the cargo of 'civilisation' entering 'savage' realms.

As a point of interest: the specific types of wine carried on the First Fleet into the 'savage' realms were: fortified 'Canary' from Tenerife in the Canary Islands, 'port' which was produced in Portugal and purchased from the Portuguese colony of Rio de Janeiro, and a variety – probably

fortified 'Constantia' – bought at the Cape of Good Hope's Dutch victualling station.<sup>9</sup> The most 'civilised' wines in the world at the time were fine wines from France, but these were too expensive for the British Government to provide to Governor Phillip and his fellow officers.

The journal writers among these officers – Philip Gidley King, Watkin Tench, David Collins, John Hunter, and others – documented the process of what Tench referred to as 'accelerating the progress of improvement',<sup>10</sup> or 'civilising' both the land and the indigenous peoples of the new colony. The Aborigines' reactions to what the British perceived as artefacts of civilisation such as European tools, clothes, food and beverages were carefully observed and recorded. This implementation of the 'progress of improvement' was to be accelerated in keeping with the Enlightenment view of the 'course of empire' (Dixon, 1996): a prescribed development of human societies from hunting and gathering through to mercantilism. This philosophy came to be perceived as a natural order; being 'civilised' was to strive for individual and, therefore, national wealth. It meant overcoming a perceived state of barbarism or savagery and advancing towards a liberal democratic constitutional monarchy and the British-style rule of law. It involved domesticating plants and animals, cultivating the soil, harnessing nature for material gain then protecting the property used for wealth creation – and the resulting income and possessions – with strict laws of ownership.

Although the Aborigine known to history as Bennelong<sup>11</sup> – and the few other Indigenous Australians named in First Fleet journals in relation to wine – have no clear voice in the accounts, their response to wine can be read through the British records. As Henry Reynolds concluded about the Aboriginal reactions to other artefacts of the 'invaders', the attitude to wine was not homogenous but varied, individual and one of curiosity and creativity (Reynolds 1981: 2). This was particularly the case for Bennelong. The rich description given by the colonists of his use of wine makes it possible to demonstrate how he came to understand and exploit the class status implicitly conferred on him through his relationship with the colonial officials who offered him wine.

Aborigines possessed their own sophisticated cultural meanings for food use and intoxicants derived from regional flora and fauna but had no fermented liquid intoxicant, such as wine or spirits, because of the lack of suitable plants and vessels for fermentation and storage (Dunstan 1994: 3; Brady 2000: 3). They did not have the specific cultural hierarchy of alcohol consumption that existed in class-based British society, but were expected to automatically conform to this complex pattern of behaviour. It was not communicated to indigenous Australians that Europeans believed it was disgraceful to drink wine to excess and then demonstrate 'uncivilised' behaviour – such as being drunk in public – unless this was done within the protection of social status, or within the practice of ritualistic consumption.

It is ironic that there was nothing civilised about the method by which Arthur Phillip brought the first Aborigines to his table to try wine. Once it became clear to the Governor that he wasn't making progress in communicating with the natives of Port Jackson, in December 1788 he sent out a party of marines to capture Aboriginal men. The first Indigenous Australian taken by force into the British settlement was Arabanoo. When Phillip first showed Arabanoo what he considered his best courtesy by including him among his dinner guests and offering him wine, Arabanoo refused to try it. Watkin Tench wrote that the Aboriginal man

dined at a side-table at the governor's and ate heartily of fish and ducks, which he first cooled. Bread and salt meat he smelled at, but would not taste: all our liquors he treated in the same manner, and could drink nothing but water.<sup>12</sup>

Just over a month later, Tench recorded that Arabanoo began to like eating bread, very much enjoyed drinking tea but would not drink strong liquors, 'turning from them with disgust and abhorrence'.<sup>13</sup> But Arabanoo was not long in captivity, he died of small pox in May 1789. Phillip then sent out further kidnapping missions, which at first failed, but in November 1789 netted two men, Colbee and Bennelong.

When Phillip's dinner-table diplomacy was practiced on the two new captives, Colbee's first response to wine was similar to Arabanoo. Colbee also showed little desire to help the colonists' observations of his people, and soon escaped. Bennelong, on the other hand, was more receptive to wine and European ways because of his curiosity and a creative diplomacy of his own, in which he anticipated benefits for himself. Tench's reading of Bennelong's behaviour was to infer that the Wanghal man was all the more 'civilised' for not escaping, and for being willing to share wine with his captors. Tench wrote that Bennelong

although haughty, knew how to temporize. He quickly threw off all reserve; and pretended, nay, at particular moments perhaps felt satisfaction at his new state. Unlike poor Arabanoo, he became at once fond of our viands, and would drink the strongest liquors, not simply without reluctance, but with eager marks of delight and enjoyment. He was the only native we ever knew who immediately shewed a fondness for spirits: Colbee would not at first touch them. Nor was the effect of wine or brandy on him more perceptible than an equal quantity would have produced upon one of us, although fermented liquor was new to him.<sup>14</sup>

The extended version of this passage is important because of the hierarchy of information: it begins with Bennelong's willingness to drink alcohol, continues with a description of his eating as likewise compliant with European expectations, and describes him as an intelligent and quick learner of European ways. Not only did Tench observe that Bennelong picked up English faster than Arabanoo, but he was an entertaining story-teller. Note also that Bennelong possessed the true attribute of a gentleman – he could hold his liquor as well as anyone. Tench represented Bennelong – as distinct from Arabanoo and Colbee – as a worthy object of cultural exchange.

Philip Gidley King gave a similar assessment of Bennelong's worthiness in terms of his ability to learn European ways – and wine featured in that account as well. King wrote that Bennelong

may be called a polite man, as he performs every action of bowing, drinking healths, returning thanks, &c. with the most scrupulous attention. He is very fond of wine, but cannot bear the smell of spirits, although they have often tried to deceive him, by mixing very weak rum or brandy and water, instead of wine and water; but he would instantly find out the deception, and on these occasions he was angry.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly his hosts were enjoying playing tricks on Bennelong, but it was an interesting test to be conducting. If what King wrote is true, that Bennelong drank only wine at first, this sends a specific message in a European cultural context about the Aborigine's potential for abandoning his previous state of 'savagery' and becoming 'civilised', as the colonists hoped. Bennelong had passed both a test and an initiation which he may have detected, but the whole significance of which he was unaware. Bennelong may well have observed that wine, rather than spirits, was the preferred drink of those few white men in positions of power and prestige in the colony of prisoners. He learnt quickly to enter into the ritual of 'bowing, drinking healths, returning thanks, &c.'. But he could not know that from the whites' perspective, he was entering into a contract to behave as an initiated member of European society both in the company of whites and among his own people; and further that any power he had within his people was now in some way contracted to his fellow drinkers. And it was an unequal trade. Although he appeared to be initiated into the small power elite of the British colony Phillip and his men were offering Bennelong a flimsy sort of European selfhood, without any real means of bestowing the accumulated cultural practices – let alone the skin colour and language – that actually defined that identity.

Despite Phillip's hopes of keeping Bennelong in civilising captivity, the Wanghal man fled back to his own people; he refused to unproblematically embrace European-ness. The next time the two men met was some months later, the day the Governor was speared by another Aborigine at Manly Cove in September 1790. Inga Clendinnen has offered a fresh and persuasive reading of the spearing from the Aboriginal perspective, in which the event can be seen as a planned and ritualized punishment of Phillip for 'his and his people's many offences', allowing a new détente between the Wanghal and the newcomers (Clendinnen 2003: 124).

Prior to the spearing, the Governor was eager to speak with Bennelong when he sighted him among a group of Aborigines feasting on a dead whale carcass at the Cove. When the Governor's row boat reached the shore, according to Watkin Tench,

the natives were found still busily employed around the whale. As they expressed not any consternation on seeing us row to the beach, governor Phillip stepped out unarmed, and attended by one seaman only, and called for Baneelon, who appeared, but notwithstanding his former eagerness, would not suffer to approach him for several minutes. Gradually, however, he warmed into friendship and frankness, and presently after Colbee came up. They discoursed for some time, Baneelon expressing pleasure to see his old acquaintance, and inquiring by name for every person whom he could recollect at Sydney...Baneelon's love of wine has been mentioned; and the governor, to try whether it still subsisted, uncorked a bottle, and poured out a glass of it, which the other drank off with his former marks of relish and good humour, giving for a toast, as he had been taught, *'the King'*.<sup>16</sup>

Two other key First Fleet journal writers also mention this incident and incorporate the anecdote about wine. John Hunter wrote that

having shook hands in a friendly manner, the governor returned to the boat, and desired one of the men to bring up some wine, beef, bread, and a jacket or two, which had been brought on purpose, and went back with those articles

to them: on his holding up a bottle, one of them called out wine, and repeated several English words; two of the natives came forward and received things, and one drank a little wine, they had likewise received from the governor a few knives.<sup>17</sup>

Phillip Gidley King gave a more colourful description, resembling Tench's in its detail, and perhaps suggesting some editorial licence when the journals were prepared for publication.<sup>18</sup> It began with Governor Phillip calling out to Bennelong, and

after calling repeatedly on his old acquaintance by all his names, he was answered by a native who appeared with several others at a distance, and as he increased his distance from the boat, the native approached nearer, and took a number of little presents, on their being laid down at the distance of a few paces; but he would not come near the governor, although in answer to the question – 'where was Bennelong?' he repeatedly said he was the man; this however, could not be believed, as he was so much altered: at length a bottle was held up, and on his being asked, what it was in his own language, he answered, '*the King*;' for as he had always heard his Majesty's health drank in the first glass after dinner at the governor's table, and had been made to repeat the word before he drank his own glass of wine, he supposed the liquor was named '*the King*'; and though he afterwards knew it was called wine, yet he would frequently call it King. This convinced the governor that it could be no other than Bennelong.<sup>19</sup>

Wine in each case is seen as a test of identity, a means for Phillip to reconnect with Bennelong and to re-establish Bennelong's potential for being 'civilised'. Whites carried wine to accompany food on walking tours, but it is possible that this was intended as a gift. Hunter's reference to 'some wine, beef, bread, and a jacket or two, which had been brought on purpose' may refer not only to the jackets but to the food and wine as well. The reference to wine as '*the King*' has been quoted in work referring to Aboriginal alcoholism, but little historical interpretation is offered.<sup>20</sup> It is possible that Bennelong saw the opportunity to manipulate the status that he gained from sharing wine with the Governor. Bennelong may not have imagined '*the King*' as George III, but he clearly did not mistake the power of meaning, certainty of purpose and congratulatory tone inherent in declaring '*the king*' with a hearty lift of the arm during a toast.

Both Watkin Tench and Philip Gidley King show that after the spearing incident Bennelong readily resumed drinking wine. In the first of two wine-related anecdotes offered by Tench, a group of colonists encountered Bennelong and several other Aborigines on 15 September 1790, and friendly overtures were made.

Several little presents, which had been purposely brought, were distributed among them; and to Baneelon were given a hatchet and fish. At a distance stood some children, who, though at first timorous and unwilling to approach, were soon persuaded to advance, and join the men. A bottle of wine was produced, and Baneelon immediately prepared for the charge. Bread and beef he called loudly for, which were given to him, and he began to eat, offering a part of his



fare to his countrymen, two of whom tasted the beef, but none of them would touch the bread.<sup>21</sup>

King wrote that later in September 1790

as a party were going to visit Bannelong, some fish were sent him, which he received, and appeared free from any apprehensions; and the same afternoon, the commissary and Governor Phillip's orderly sergeant, for whom he had always shewed a great friendship, went with an additional supply: they found him on the rocks with his wife, who was fishing, and though on their first approach he ran into the woods, yet as soon as he knew them he returned, and joined them when they landed, bringing down his wife, as he had done to those who visited him before, and on these occasions, he shewed that he was still fond of a glass of wine.<sup>22</sup>

This account closely resembles the second incident described by Tench, again raising questions of editorial licence in the published work, though Tench's description of the meeting with Bannelong and his wife was more detailed. He explained that the whites were delivering items that Bannelong claimed had been taken from him and that, in exchange for his fishing equipment and spears, Bannelong promised to return a missing dirk, or dagger, to the Governor.

We carried on shore with us the remaining part of the fish-gigs and spears which had been stolen, and restored them to Baneelon...Baneelon inquired, with solicitude, about the state of the governor's wound [from the spearing]; but he made no offer of returning the dirk; and when he was asked for it, he pretended to know nothing of it, changing the conversation with great art, and asking for wine, which was given to him.<sup>23</sup>

In the reading preferred by Clendinnen (2003: 178) the 'wily Baneelon' was testing his influence by requesting that the whites return the things stolen from him, and may not have intended to return the dagger at all.

It was after this meeting that a more formal reconciliation with Phillip was organized at a time and place set by Bannelong.<sup>24</sup> The subsequent 'coming in' saw some Aborigines move closer to white settlement and more readily incorporate the colonists' distribution of food, housing and other items into their habits – essentially on the basis of their own egalitarian economic practices, rather than British-style ownership of goods as property – though they continued to decline to be used as cheap labour, or to wear clothes (Reece 1974: 6; Reynolds 1981: 151–153). Alan Atkinson has shown, too, that Bannelong's agency in the relationship with Phillip included moves to bind the Governor into a relationship of responsibility by incorporating him into Aboriginal rituals, such as the burial of Bannelong's dead baby (Atkinson 1997:157).

By October 1790, King reported that, at a meeting after the 'coming in',

Bannelong appeared very much at his ease, and not under the least apprehension of being detained; promising, when he went away, to bring his wife over, which he did two days afterwards: his sister and two men came likewise, and a third soon followed: blankets, and some cloathing were given them, and each had a

belly-full of fish; Bannelong sat down to dinner with Governor Phillip, and drank his wine and coffee as usual.<sup>25</sup>

And later, in May 1791, King added that:

Bannelong and Colebe with their wives, dined at the governor's on the 8th of May, and came in as usual, to have a glass of wine and a dish of coffee; after which they left the house to go and sleep at Bannelong's hut on the point.<sup>26</sup>

This suggests Colbee had been converted to wine drinking. Whether, however, this 'usual' habit was shared by other Aborigines – particularly Aboriginal women – is not clear. It is possible that Aboriginal women drank wine when offered it from Governor Phillip's table.

There is certainly one case in which wine was offered to an Aboriginal woman, but the situation seems differently charged from any offer to a man. Ann McGrath has used the example of Bannelong's wife Barangaroo (also known as Daringa) refusing wine when offered it by Tench during an encounter in which white men were attempting to dress her in European clothes. There was an element of sexual advance in that offer that points to wine – and other alcohol – being used in the negotiation of sexual relations between white men and Aboriginal women. In any case it is unlikely that Barangaroo would have been invited to join the ritual of wine consumption, any more than would a white woman. As McGrath has argued, whites assumed Aboriginal men to be the 'powerbrokers' and did not meet with women on diplomatic grounds. Further to this, in the same way as Aboriginal men were expected to have an intuitive understanding of the significance of European cultural practices such as wine drinking, Aboriginal women were expected to understand the unspoken language of chivalry and seduction (McGrath 1990: 193, 199, 200).

In terms of the practical scope of the project of 'civilising' the Aborigines by exposing them to 'civilised' British culture it is significant that only the Aborigines who had particular acquaintance with the Governor and other officials took part in dining rituals at which wine was served. These Indigenous Australians were shaped as an elite, reflecting the exclusiveness of the white elite. In assembling this intimate company Phillip and his men developed affection for the Aborigines they knew, but did not attempt to draw any others into the close circle of British authority in the colony.

Two years after King's final reference to wine and Aborigines, Bannelong sailed to England with Arthur Phillip, along with another young Aborigine, Yemmerrawannie, who died there (Brook 2001: 36). Bannelong returned to Sydney in 1795. By that time individual Aborigines were not accorded the same courtesies nor direct contact with 'civilised' whites as before, and the absence of Phillip, Bannelong's particular patron, left him in a cultural confusion that effectively marginalised him from both Aboriginal and colonial society. This was a tragic pattern that was to be repeated for many Aborigines initially embraced by influential whites, then left without patronage.

The social connections of Sydney Aborigines were increasingly limited to the poorer sections of white society, and the use of alcohol they saw there did nothing to 'civilise'. From the first years of colonization, journal accounts such as judge-advocate David Collins' are rife with evidence of the alcoholic binges among convicts and poor settlers.<sup>27</sup> By the late 1820s New South Wales colonists were drinking very little beer but consumed four times more spirits per capita

than homeland Britons. While the number of wine drinkers in New South Wales was significantly lower than spirit drinkers, the level of consumption per head of population was again higher than in Britain (Dingle 1980: 241). By the 1830s the behaviour of urban Aborigines was represented by white officials as worse than that of the lowly-ranked colonists and convicts, who drank and behaved drunkenly in the streets, while those high-ranking officials who drank to excess kept it private, and – they thought – ‘civilised’. Out of this came a cultural expectation that Aborigines were ‘disgraceful’ drinkers, a perception that would be used cruelly against the Indigenous Australians.

Journal accounts of French explorers who visited Sydney in the first decades of the nineteenth century described degrading alcoholism among urban Aborigines. In the following example, the British cultural order of wine consumption is seen to be corrupted in that wine is used to incite violence as entertainment.

Some of the English seemed to believe the indigenous people could be a source of amusement. One evening [one of the French explorers] Arago, witnessed in the ‘court’ of an elegant home, some indigenous men being encouraged – not without the assistance of ‘*a few glasses of wine*’ – to fight one another. ‘These fortunate men,’ he wrote, ‘struck each other repeated blows; two of them were stretched on the ground, dangerously wounded, and a third received a mortal blow. This scene took place in the midst of a civilised city; the spectators were respectable merchants, and elegant and accomplished young ladies’ (Dyer 2003: 7).<sup>28</sup>

Bennelong may himself have witnessed or taken part in an event such as this described by Arago.

An anonymous London newspaper report on Bennelong in 1805, ten years after his departure from England, alleged that he

is still so addicted to drinking, that he would never be sober if he could obtain liquor; and, when intoxicated, he is intolerably mischievous. He is, in truth, a savage, beyond all hopes of amelioration by culture, and was, at the time of our sailing, sent to Coventry, as incorrigible.<sup>29</sup>

Yet Bennelong’s ‘savagery’ can be traced back to initial efforts to ‘civilise’ him. It could be said that, in the end, Bennelong imbibed too much of ‘civilisation’. He died in 1813, aged about fifty years. Nearly two centuries later his drinking remained a prominent feature of the way he was portrayed, even in sympathetic accounts. Jack Brook wrote that Bennelong was not only ‘arguably the best-known Aborigine in the history of white Australia’ but also had the complex distinction of being ‘the first Aboriginal alcoholic’ (Brook 2001: 1, 9).

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, well-meaning colonists – devoted still to improving or ‘civilising’ the Aborigines – advocated removing the Aborigines from the influence of those considered to be ‘uncivilised’ whites (Reece 1974: 7–11, 62–63). During the 1960s, when Australian state laws restricting Aboriginal access to alcohol were repealed, patronising protectionism was still in play. One of the first applications for a licence to sell alcohol to Aborigines under the new legal framework claimed that such a move would help teach them to ‘drink in a ‘civilised’ manner’ (Brady 2000: 5). Another forty years on, David McKnight demonstrates that in the

context of the cultural confusion created by European colonisation the licenced canteen on Mornington Island has proved to be the source of the single most serious threat to the preservation of Aboriginal culture (McKnight 2002: 16). Wine, like other forms of alcohol, was not a 'civiliser' but a cause of cultural fragmentation for Indigenous Australians. A notable exception is Murrin Bridge Wines near Lake Cargelligo in south-western New South Wales. This company grew out of a Community Development and Employment Program project of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 1999 and is Australia's first Aboriginal-owned and managed vineyard and winery.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the "Mateship: Trust & Exclusion" Conference hosted by Monash University's History department in February 2006. Many thanks to Marian Quartly and Richard Waterhouse for their expert suggestions on draft versions. Thanks also to Heather Goodall for directing me to [www.murrinbridgewines.com.au](http://www.murrinbridgewines.com.au), and Agnieszka Sobocinska and Annette Falahey for discussions contributing to the final argument. The quotation from King's diary is to be found in Hunter (1793): 471.
- <sup>2</sup> This paper does not attempt to explore Aboriginal encounters with rum or other forms of alcohol.
- <sup>3</sup> Fidlon and Ryan (1980): 34.
- <sup>4</sup> *Historical Records of Australia*, Series I, vol 1 (1914): 13.
- <sup>5</sup> The point is emphasized by the lack of a reference to wine in *The Oxford Companion to Australian History* (Davison et al. 2001).
- <sup>6</sup> See for example John 4:46, *Holy Bible*.
- <sup>7</sup> Hakluyt, Richard. 'The first English voyage made to the coasts of America (1598)', in Key and Bucholz (c. 2004): 89.
- <sup>8</sup> Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, (1971): xxxix; Tench, *Sydney's First Four Years*, (1961): 28.
- <sup>9</sup> *Historical Records of New South Wales*, (1892): 108, 111; Easty, *A First Fleet Journal*, (1965): 49.
- <sup>10</sup> Tench (1961): 174.
- <sup>11</sup> Bennelong is also known in the First Fleet journals as Baneelon; he introduced himself to the colonists with several names, see for example Collins (1971): 560.
- <sup>12</sup> Tench (1961): 140. Liquor here can be understood to include tea, coffee, wine and spirits.
- <sup>13</sup> Tench (1961): 143.
- <sup>14</sup> Tench (1961): 140. Despite Tench's comment a later reference indicated Bennelong was strictly a wine drinker at first.
- <sup>15</sup> King in Hunter (1793): 405.
- <sup>16</sup> Tench (1961): 178-9.
- <sup>17</sup> Hunter (1793): 207.
- <sup>18</sup> Dixon (1996: 8) offers a very useful explanation of the problem of determining true authorship of the First Fleet accounts, due to editing, with particular reference to Arthur Phillip's published account of the colonization of New South Wales.
- <sup>19</sup> King in Hunter (1793): 460.
- <sup>20</sup> See for example, Hiatt (2004).

- 21 Tench (1961): 183.  
 22 King in Hunter (1793): 467.  
 23 Tench (1961): 186–7.  
 24 Tench (1961): 187.  
 25 King in Hunter (1793): 471.  
 26 King in Hunter (1793): 527.  
 27 There are five specific cases in Collins (1971: 277–309).  
 28 The emphasis in this quote is mine.  
 29 Cited in Hiatt (2004): 87.

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