

## *From the Kitchen*

25 January 2012



January 1788, around the 26<sup>th</sup>, is symbolic of a major shift in how many contemporary humans related to their world. It is symbolic at many levels.

Up to that day, as far as we know, the Australian Aborigines had lived for tens of thousands of years largely undisturbed by people from outside their island continent. There was some trade with peoples from the islands to the north, and there were (more recently) some random visits from hapless Europeans. The eleven sailing ships that came to the east coast changed all that. They carried thousands of people from half-way around the world and those people came with the intention of staying – if not their intention, then certainly the intention of those in power in England.

The millennia during which the Aborigines had occupied this continent had allowed them to reach an equilibrium with the land and all it offered. They had an intimate knowledge of what was beneficial and what was harmful or malevolent. While they may not have always lived in harmony with each other, they lived in harmony with Country. Most of those who came here in 1788 saw the country as alien and hostile and they set about to bend it to their will. As a consequence, they felt separate from the land and could not recognise all it had to offer, if any of it.

For the Aborigines, late January 1788 marked the beginning of a process through which they became ever more separated from their land and their culture. Most Englishmen had no notion of what the land meant to the Aborigines – how the two were one. Even if they had, they wanted the land for themselves to build settlements, grow crops and raise sheep and cattle.

Most of the white settlers also failed to recognise that the Aborigines had powerful spiritual lives, probably more powerful than those lived by the settlers. As a consequence, the clergy felt it incumbent on them to teach the Aborigines a spiritual life which was full of inconsistencies and which the settlers largely failed to live up to themselves.

For those who had sailed from England, January 1788 marked a finality – they had left everything they were familiar with (harsh as it may have been) and landed in a place as unfamiliar to them as anything could be. For many, especially the convicts who had spent years in gaols and in pestilent prison hulks on the Thames, the fresh air and open spaces may have been like entering Paradise. I assume most passengers – convicts, free settlers and soldiers alike – would have felt relieved after many months in smelly, overcrowded, heaving ships.

For many, even most, of those who arrived here for the first time, this was an opportunity to create a new life. Even though there was a tendency to recreate much of what had been left behind, change was imperative to ensure survival, although survival was never assured.

Amongst the Whites, there were all manner of responses and reactions to the Aborigines: hostility, suspicion, interest, revulsion, compassion, lust, fascination and pity. The interactions between the two cultures resulted in one losing most of what identified its

members as being who they were and in the other largely failing to learn what had allowed maybe one million humans to live off what seemed to be an unforgiving, hostile and barren land. If the wise and tolerant individuals amongst the Whites had been able to hold more sway (and if very clear instructions from London had been honoured), the Aborigines may have had a chance to keep their culture and identity intact and the Whites may have found settling a lot easier than they made it.

Over the intervening 224 years, there has been a blurring of edges, with most Aborigines joining the White settlements, whether by force or by choice. There are precious few Aborigines left who still have an unbroken connection with their roots, with Country. As *they* work hard to pass this on to their youngsters, there is a growing number of non-Aborigines (Whites, Yellows, Browns, Blacks from elsewhere) who feel an urge to learn as much as possible of and from this ancient culture which allowed its people to survive so well in this land.

There are aboriginal peoples on most continents who still have knowledge which, if we took it seriously and took it in, might help all of humanity to survive on what is fast becoming a hostile and barren planet. *Sic fiat*<sup>1</sup>.

*Goron mahan weng-nga ga-yu. Nu-naw-ma watj-ja ba-ya-nggi. Goron-binyju ga-yu weng-nga.*<sup>2</sup>

1. 'Let it be so' (Latin)
2. 'This house is empty. Everyone has gone. There's only an empty house.' ([The Wagiman Online Dictionary](#))