

# DHARAWAL, WODI WODI & GERRINGONG – WHAT DO THEY MEAN?

By Tony Butz, for Gerringong & District Historical Society, 2016

## *Preface*

*My interest in this topic comes from three sources – Linguistics, History and Aboriginal Culture. I studied linguistics and phonetics for three years under Prof. Arthur Delbridge at Macquarie University in the late 1960's, training there as a history teacher at the same time, while recording in my spare time Aboriginal rock engravings from the northern side of Sydney to the Hawkesbury River, with the hope of having them preserved from the encroachment of housing and highways. For half a century, I have continued to be intrigued by topics where these areas overlap, and where, often, a lot of information is either missing or conflicting. Such is the nature of the pre-history and early history of this area: What was Dharawal? Who were the Wodi Wodi? What does the name Gerringong mean? The following is the culmination of the last eight years of researching this topic. It is not definitive, but is a progressive record of current research. –T.B.*

## **The Problems**

The first problem is a linguistic one, or, rather, a series of linguistic problems. The biggest problem in studying any Aboriginal language is that **none of our indigenous peoples had any writing** to record the sounds, vocabulary and structures of their languages before European settlement. Early Europeans assumed there was just *one* Aboriginal language right across Australia, or at least across New South Wales. It took several years to realise this was incorrect, and even longer to formally transcribe the languages encountered by explorers, settlers and government officials as colonisation expanded further from Sydney.

The second linguistic problem is that **the sounds (phonemes) used in English are not the same as those used in indigenous languages**. English uses 26 letters to represent the 44 different sounds that make up the more than one million English words in use today. This means that combinations of letters are needed to record all the phonemes, and (as anyone from a non-European background can attest) there is very little consistency in English between how a word is spelled and how it sounds. In fact, we would need over 465 rules to cover most of our spellings! The reason for this is historical: English has developed from many different languages which use our (Roman) alphabet in different ways, so that combinations of letters can provide a variety of pronunciations, even within English itself. Consider “gh”. It can sound like “f” (as in “cough”), be silent (as in “through”), or have a hard “g” sound as in (“ghost”). Vowels create even more problems for those trying to learn English, as our 5 vowels are used to make 20 different phonemes. Meanwhile, indigenous languages have sounds that we don't have in English at all, and for which we can only make an approximation in transcribing them.

The third linguistic problem is that **even speakers of English pronounce English words very differently**. Consider the American variations (such as the intrusive “r” in “force”; the hardening of middle “t” to a “d”, so that “battle” to us sounds like “baddle”; or the dropping of an internal single “t” altogether, so that “interaction” sounds like “inner action”). Then dialects also come into play: a Scot, a Welshman, an upper class Londoner and a Cockney have so many differences in their speech (pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar) that they represent separate dialects – 56 in the UK, 44 American and even 9 Australian. This means that we hear words differently and thus transcribe them differently. So, the early recorders of indigenous languages had little in common with each other as they transcribed what they heard. There was no auditory way of recording the phonemes. There was also no International Phonetic Alphabet back then, such as we could use today to

transcribe a language we had not heard before, so recorders used letter combinations common in their own language patterns to transcribe the new ones. Only occasionally do we find in early records the background of the recorder, and even more rarely is any attention given to intonations, inflexions, nasality or syllable stresses; but, when we do have this information, it can be very helpful. For example, the word “boomerang”: does it have a first vowel sound like (intermediate) “oo” in “look”, or like (long) “oo” in “room”? Fortunately, we know that a French-speaking member of the New South Wales Corps, Ensign Francois Barrallier, in 1802, witnessed a boomerang in flight on the border of Dharawal and Dharug territories, and described it in his *Journal*. It created interest back in Sydney, was described in detail in the *Sydney Gazette* in 1803, and again in 1822 when it was actually named. It was broken up into syllables, and recorded as “**bou-mar-rang**”, the “ou” in French being used as in the French word, “bouquet”. Bungaree, a well-known Aborigine from the Sydney area, used as a go-between by the colonial government in its dealings with Aborigines, accompanied Barrallier on several of his expeditions, and is believed to have brought the boomerang (and its name) to Sydney, where it became incorporated into both Dharug and Eora language groups. From here, Europeans generalised the term, “boomerang”, (incorrectly) to refer to any thrown wooden implement, despite the fact that even the Sydney Aborigines had eight different words for their different throwing implements.

A fourth linguistic problem is that there were **few systematic written recordings of indigenous languages before the 1860's** – over 80 years after European settlement began. By this time, there was a lot of mixing of languages as Aborigines travelled with Europeans on their modes of transport, much further from their traditional territories than in the past, resulting in the misrepresenting of languages that had become creolised. In addition, those clans living at the extremities of their language areas also had to be adept at nearby languages, for the purposes of trade and other matters, resulting in mixtures of languages, even before European settlement, not unlike polyglots in Europe today. It is likely that Dharug and Dharawal speakers had about 40% of words in common.

It is useful to keep all this in mind, before discussing the specifics of our local situation, but it is also valuable to understand a few other aspects of Aboriginal languages, that have been neatly summarised by the compilers and editors of a comprehensive and authoritative collection of words from 17 indigenous languages, *Macquarie Aboriginal Words* (1994 & 1995) – over 700 pages of information. The Introduction to the book makes the following valuable points:

- Before 1788, Aboriginal people spoke about 250 different languages, and maybe 600 dialects.
- These languages can be divided into around 26 different family-like groups, within which the languages can most likely be traced back to a common ancestor language. One of these families, the Pama-Nyungan, covers about 90% of the continent.
- Since 1788, most of these languages have lost their speakers, so that today there are only about 20 viable languages existing, and most of these are in northern and central Australia. Of the extinct languages, all that remain are transcripts of word lists, and a few audio tapes of those still spoken into the twentieth century.
- “Widely available wordlists such as Endacott (1924/1990) and Reed and Reed (1965/1974) help perpetuate erroneous beliefs about Australian languages by listing together words from various parts of the continent, and from very different languages”.
- Where a language was lost, it was often replaced by a pidgin language, a simplified form of English, and this, in turn often became the mother tongue of a large area, a creole, especially in

northern Australia. Creoles are not dialects of English, and cannot be understood by English speakers without learning them like any other language. In southern Australia, most Aboriginal people speak Aboriginal English, which is a dialect of English, but which differs in major respects from Standard Australian English.

- Aboriginal groups do not, and did not, have chiefs or kings; and there was no class-based division of labour. It is, therefore, incorrect to speak of the language groups as “tribes”, but we lack a suitable alternative word in English, as there were many groups and sub-groups within the language groups, mostly based on a complex system of kinship. Aboriginal people, themselves, today prefer to talk of groups as “mobs” and “skins”.
- “Australian languages have extensive vocabularies with words for whatever the speakers need to talk about... It seems reasonable to assume that an average Australian language would contain something like 10 000 words – approximately the number of words the average speaker of a European language would be familiar with and actually use themselves”.
- While, in English, we have a single word for a kangaroo (derived from the Guugu Yimidhirr word, *gangurru*, for the large grey kangaroo), Aboriginal languages had separate words for each species, for males and females, for females with or without joeys, and for joeys of different ages. The same applied to weapons and tools, trees, parts of the body, types of rock and earth, natural features, etc. Once Europeans generalised a word (such as “boomerang” for any wooden object that is thrown), the generic term spread with colonisation and often became a pidgin word in its own right, adopted by both other Aboriginal languages and by Europeans generally.
- Placenames can refer to something that happened in the Dreamtime, to what the area is used for, for something that happened there, or have no particular meaning at all. Europeans are fond of naming places after prominent people, and to give (for example) a very long river just one name; not so in Aboriginal traditions, which can give many names to different waterholes in one river system.
- Because of English’s notoriously difficult sound/spelling correlations, it was difficult to transcribe Aboriginal words exactly, so that a reader could say the word as the writer heard it. Thus, the following consonant sounds are often interchanged: b/p; ch/dj/j/tj; d/t; dh/th; g/k. In addition, sounds (phonemes) in Aboriginal languages, that have no equivalents in English, have had to be transcribed as: lh; ly; nh; rd; rt; rl; rn; rr; yh and ‘.
- Most Aboriginal languages have only three distinct vowel sounds (compared with the 20 in English). Today, these are written as *a* (for the sound in *mat*), *i* (for the sound in *bit*) and *u* (for the sound in *put*); the last vowel phoneme is sometimes written *oo*, if it is a slightly longer sound. Other longer vowel sounds are indicated by doubling the letter; so *aa* is used (for the vowel sound in *calm*); and *ii* (for the sound in *bean*). Only a few languages have a sound like *e* in *met*, or *o* in *nod*.
- A general rule for pronouncing most Aboriginal polysyllabic words is to put the stress on the first syllable, and also to say it louder, to give it prominence.

With all this in mind, we can now turn to answering questions about Dharawal, Wodi Wodi and Gerringong – a language, a people and a place name.

## DHARAWAL

Dharawal is a language that was spoken from Port Hacking, down the coast to the Shoalhaven River, and inland almost to the Blue Mountains and Southern Highlands, in other words, from Botany Bay to Jervis Bay. This spelling is more modern. It was previously recorded as: Turuwul, Turawal, Thurawal, Tharawal, Darawal and Dharrawal, according to how it was heard and how it was attempted to be represented phonetically. The name means “cabbage tree palm”, an object of totemic significance to the speakers of Dharawal, and the town name of Thirroul comes from this word. Aboriginal people immediately to the north of Port Hacking spoke what is called the Sydney language (which was not given a name by its speakers, but was called Eora, Iyora or Yora by Europeans in the twentieth century); those to the west spoke Dharug (Daruk, Darruk, Dharruck) – also a European name for a nameless language that was a variant of the Sydney language; those to the south-west spoke Dhurga and Yuin; and those to the south spoke Birdhawal.

Dharawal is no longer a spoken language, and only records of word lists (mostly from after 1860) remain. The transcriptions of these words are plagued with problems, for the reasons already mentioned. The meanings are also often in doubt (e.g. translations of words as “squirrel”, “monkey” and “porcupine” when these animals don’t exist in this country; did they refer to glider possums, tree kangaroos and echidnas?) Not only were many assumptions made about what they were referring to (as already discussed in reference to the Dharawal word, “boomerang”), but many words were already pidginised or creolised, after more than 70 years of European influence.

For example, a major source of Dharawal words was Queen Rosie (Rosannah Russell), wife of King Mickey Johnston (also Johnson) (also Mickie Weston), who lived in a camp at Minnamurra. It seems that she was, in her own words, “born on the shore of Lake Illawarra”, and was a speaker of Dharawal as her first language. But her 113 words were not recorded until 1890 (by Capell). King Mickey (a name he gave himself) was brought here as a boy (known as Tiger) from around the Clarence River region, by Major E.H. Weston, to Albion Park in 1865. After about ten years, he and Rosie moved to Kangaroo Valley, then to Windang, then to Minnamurra. King Mickey would have spoken the languages of the Birpai, Ngamba and Ngaku people before being exposed to Dharawal, so it is likely that he and Rosie spoke a creolised language. It is also known that there is a mixture of Dhurga and Yuin in the Dharawal recorded in the south, and a lot of Dharug in the words recorded in the north-west of the Dharawal boundary. Even Barrallier’s Aboriginal words, from his 1802 expedition, include Eora, Dharug, Dharawal and Gundungurra words, with the assumption they are from “*the Aboriginal language*”.

Nevertheless, a Dharawal dictionary has been started from the resources available, and is being expanded as more information comes to light. It will be immediately apparent that there is great difficulty in separating Dharawal and Dhurga words from each other, due to their sharing a common border area and an intermingling of peoples. [See, for example: Jutta Besold, *Language Recovery of the NSW South Coast Aboriginal Languages, Part A - Analysis and Philology*, Jan. 2012, revised 2013; the *Australian Dictionaries Project*; Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies; Jakelin Troy, *The Sydney Language*, 1993; D.K. Eades, *The Dharawal and Dhurga Languages of N.S.W. South Coast*, 1976 ].

## WODI WODI

Ridley (1875) assumed that Wodi Wodi was a language rather than a name for some of the people who spoke it, based on information from an Aboriginal woman in the Nowra area, Mrs Lizzie Malone. She was his source for both “languages”, and a comparison of the word lists shows more differences than similarities. It is, therefore quite understandable that Ridley would have thought they were separate and distinct languages. Here, we are also likely to have the problem of cross-integration of languages, as Ridley describes his source as “a half-caste” who learnt the words from “her husband, John Malone, a half-caste, whose mother was of that [Illawarra] tribe”. More recent research by ethnologists and linguists, however, suggests that the Wodi Wodi spoke a dialect of Dharawal, different in some respects from what Ridley had observed further north. The Wodi Wodi (meaning uncertain) were the middle group of several who spoke Dharawal. To the north of them (around Kurnell), Dharawal speakers called themselves Bidjigal; and to the south (around Shoalhaven Heads and Jervis Bay) they called themselves Gurrangadda.

The Wodi Wodi around Gerringong appear to have always been a small group, probably just one “clan” (an extended family of around 25-30 people). In an attempt to better look after Aboriginal people in NSW, the colonial government began issuing blankets to them, and records were kept of blanket distribution in each area. This gives us some guide as to numbers, but not all Aborigines availed themselves of the blanket offer, and sometimes only adult males were recorded. Alexander Berry was responsible for the “Gerongong” group (amongst others) and his records show a population of 11 in 1834; David Berry noted a blanket return for the same area of 21 in 1837, and Plunkett recorded 30 Aborigines receiving blankets in Gerongong in 1840.

A glance at a map of Aboriginal peoples and languages shows there were two distinct groups calling themselves Wadi Wadi – one around Gerringong, the other in the Murray River area. Recently (in the last decade) there has been a move to spell the Illawarra (Gerringong) people as Wodi Wodi, and the Riverina group as Wadi Wadi. This not only makes it clearer which group is being referred to, it also indicates (probably quite correctly) that the Gerringong group pronounced their name as “Woodi Woodi” (similar to the first “o” in Wollongong, and the second “o” in Woonona), while the Riverina mob called themselves “Wahdi Wahdi”. This is backed up by the NSW group also having been spelled “Wudi Wudi” in some early records (where “u” was the usual way of recording the phoneme as in “put”). There appears to be no other connection between the two groups, and no meaning given to their names. Like many other people names (both here and in North America) a name often meant no more than “humans” or “people”.

It is generally believed that there are no Wodi Wodi alive today, most having succumbed to European diseases over the early decades of colonisation. Those who survived were largely killed off by the flu epidemics of 1890 and 1919. There has recently been a group of Illawarra Aborigines claiming descent from the early Wodi Wodi, but the claim remains somewhat contentious, even within Aboriginal circles.

## GERRINGONG

It is commonly known that Gerringong is an Aboriginal name for this area, but there is no certainty about what the name means. We also know that Gerringong has undergone various spellings over the decades, and this is part of the naming problem.

Originally just part of the District of Five Islands – or Illawarra – the first land grant (to William Smith) was made by Governor Sir Thomas Brisbane on 19 April, 1825. It was in an area called Jaron Gong, supposedly with “gong” being a Dharawal suffix word for a “swamp”, which would seem appropriate, given the area known as Miller’s Flats (or Swamp), Smith’s Swamp and the marshy Ooaree Creek. But what does “Jaron” refer to? There is some suggestion that the Dharawal word for the Illawarra Black Apple (or Black Plum) – *Podocarpus elatus* (or *Planchonella australis*) - was “Jaron” . If this is the case, then Jaron Gong may well have meant “**a swampy place for black plum fruit**”. Given that many Aboriginal place names refer to a food source, and not just in Dharawal, this is a strong contender for the meaning of “Gerringong”. One problem, however, is that, as a suffix, “gong” can also mean “hill”, or can even indicate a personal name.

Other suggestions have been: a dolphin; a small walker; and a place of fear. **Dolphin** is an unlikely possibility, because *gerringong* is nothing like *baruwaluwu*, the Dharawal word for dolphin. **A small walker** doesn’t seem likely as there is no obvious reason for it. The suggestion came from Queen Rosie, in 1857, but, as we have seen, she spoke a mix of languages, and may or may not have been using Dharawal as a basis for this suggestion. Also, she appears to have called it Gerronong (without a hard “g” in the middle). **A place of fear** is highly unlikely, for three reasons. First, it was allegedly a reference to the first sighting of Cook’s *Endeavour* in 1770; but Cook didn’t land here or have any encounter with indigenous people here, so there is no connection with that event. Second, the place would have had a name *before* European arrival, and if that was “Gerringong”, or Jaron Gong, then it *wasn’t* about fearing white people. Third, A.W. Reed’s *Aboriginal Place Names* (full of errors) says Jerrungarugh was what Gerringong used to be called, but the Jerrungarugh were a clan (living around Shell Cove) and their name did refer to fear (said to mean “fearful noises on the beach”), because it was an area (today Killalea) where Aboriginal groups often fought each other, with many deaths and serious injuries occurring. It seems that someone could have transferred this meaning to Gerringong, quite incorrectly, both linguistically and historically.

On 1st June, 1829, the Jaron Gong area was officially gazetted, for the first time as “Geringong”; but by 1846 it was “Jeringong” in Government Notices; and, by 1850, “Jerringong”. Other spellings, in various printed notices, were: Gerronogong, Gerrigong, Gerongong, Gerringong, Jerrangong, Jarrengong, Jerrengong and Jerrygong. A *Town Plan for the Village of Geringong* was drawn up in 1853 and submitted to Governor Fitz Roy on 9<sup>th</sup> January, 1854. It was not until a Post Office was gazetted for the town, on 30<sup>th</sup> March, 1857, that the current spelling (and pronunciation) became official in the post mark of Gerringong Post Office. The spelling was now fixed, but the meaning still uncertain. To complicate matters further, there was also a Wodi Wodi Aborigine by the name of Jerrengong (identified in the 1834 blanket records) who may have lent his name to the locality, just as Tullimbar did, near Albion Park.

## **CONCLUSION**

The terms “tribe” and “chief” were a European imposition on Aboriginal peoples and should not be used in reference to indigenous groups. They lived in small groups within a common language population, ruled by a council of elders. The Illawarra Aborigines called themselves Wodi Wodi (pronounced “Woodi Woodi”) and spoke Dharawal, which refers to the totemic cabbage tree palm. The name “Gerringong” was likely to have originally been pronounced “Jar-un-goong” and probably refers to a swampy area where Wodi Wodi could get the Illawarra plum.

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