

Chapter 7

Watkin Tench's Fieldwork: The Journal of an "Ethnographer" in Port Jackson, 1788-1791

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Whether plodding in London; reeking with human blood in Paris; or wandering amidst the solitary wilds of New South Wales – Man is ever an object of interest, curiosity, and reflection.

(Tench 1979, 274)

Today Watkin Tench belongs to the Australian pantheon as a popular historical figure of early Sydney. His narrative, republished in paperback in 1996 and 2000, is available cheaply in any bookshop in Australia (Flannery 1996, 2000). It is one of the most accessible First Fleet narratives. It can be presented easily to schoolchildren as a well-written and lively testimony of the foundational years of the nation. It has long been prized for its literary and descriptive qualities. In 1923 the historian G.A. Wood considered Tench's narrative "the most accurate, most orderly, and most valuable description of life in the colony in the first days" and wrote of his "style of generous vivacity" (Tench 1979, xxi). In 1938 it was chosen above all other First Fleet journals, some written by people historically more important than Tench – Governor Phillip, Judge-Advocate David Collins or future Governor John Hunter – to be partially republished for the 150th anniversary of British settlement in Australia (Tench 1938). It was republished in full in 1961 by the prestigious Royal Australian Historical Society, which was engaged in a program of publishing all the First Fleet narratives. Tench's editor in 1961, L.F. Fitzhardinge, stated that Tench had some claim to:

be considered the father of Australian literature, if not Australian history. ... Less detailed than Collins, less matter-of-fact than Phillip or White, Tench is the first man to mould Australian experience into a work of conscious art. ... Nor is he, for this reason, less valuable as an historian: rather does his humanity and insight enable him to see further than his fellows. If we wish to know what it was like to be in Sydney through the famine, or to get the "feel" of the primeval bush as the first explorers saw it, we turn to Tench. Not only the externals, but the very atmosphere

and moods of the settlement are reflected in his measured, smoothly flowing prose, which with its careful periods, its balanced rhythms and antitheses, and its precise choice of words might challenge comparison with Gibbon himself (Tench 1979, xxi).

Tench's narrative has been widely used by historians as one of the most informative historical sources on the early years. In her book *Dancing with Strangers* Inga Clendinnen lavished praise on it:

The best reason for reading Watkin Tench is that he reminds us of two important things surprisingly easy to forget: that the past was real, and that this likeable man whose words are on the page before us was actually there. In his writings Tench lives again, as he makes the people he sees around him live, especially the men and women rendered near-invisible or unintelligible in too many other accounts: the indigenous inhabitants of the Sydney region (Clendinnen 2003, 58).

It is because I myself have been touched by the charm and the quality of Tench's description that I feel a need to create some distance from the text and try to analyse it as an "historical source" written in a precise context by a specific person for a particular purpose and audience. I feel a need to return to what might seem a rather classical historical methodology of "internal and external critique" of the document, but I am also interested in the "source" as such – the circumstances of its making, its material forms, its history. It seems to me that this is useful, because analyses of the history of First Fleet narratives are rare. Although First Fleet narratives are widely used by historians to describe events and issues in Port Jackson, they have usually been treated as "neutral sources" – as providing the factual framework of the events (see as an example, among others, Willey 1979). Historians such as Alan Atkinson (1997) and Inga Clendinnen (2003) have used them in a more sensitive way, asking, for example: Who said what? Who saw what? In which circumstances? Clendinnen's book, in particular, offers interesting conclusions about Tench's position as an observer of Port Jackson's scene, but her analysis is incomplete, since this is not her central focus.

This chapter considers Tench as a person and as an author, and his journal as an historical construction. The idea is to evaluate the narrative precisely, particularly concerning the first inhabitants, later called Aborigines. If Tench can compete with Gibbon and those first "ethnographers" (scientists or missionaries) travelling and later settling in the Pacific, we have to take his narrative seriously and try to understand its nature as a text. I have noted that little has been written on First Fleet narratives as texts. Further, only two biographies of First Fleet officers have been written to date, one by Alan Frost on Governor Phillip, the other by John Currey on David Collins (Frost 1987; Currey 2000). Tench himself is known only through the introductions written

by the successive editors of his narrative. As Inga Clendinnen notes, "almost all we know of the man is here, in the two and a half hundred pages of his two books" (2003, 57). In fact we can add Tench's few surviving letters and a third book written while he was a prisoner in Quimper (France) during the Revolution (Edwards 2001).¹ But nothing more. No private diary or personal comments are known which might throw light on Tench's life, personality and experience.

Tench's account is the only First Fleet journal that has specifically interested literary scholars. Two articles have been published from this perspective, giving us a sense of Tench's compositional practices and the literary influences on his text (Edwards 2000; Mitchell 1994). These show that Tench had a strategy as an author and wrote for an audience at a particular time, the late eighteenth century, when the genre of "travel accounts" flourished. Yet, at that time, as studies of travel literature show, the genre was very unstable and "hybrid." According to one French specialist, it was a genre that:

knew no laws ... which allied the quest for literary perfection with the pleasures of seduction and entertainment and to which voyagers contributed in different ways depending on whether their writing lent itself to description with a generally geographical bent or to accounts potentially rich in adventure (Le Huenen 1990, 14; my translation from the French).²

Tench's narrative is highly representative of the uncertainty of the genre, written for the "amusement of the public" but also for scientific purposes. Tench aspired to be a popular author and wrote, as we shall see, a series of narratives of dramatic events and adventures. But he also claimed to be an accurate observer, describing what he saw in the manner of the prestigious navigators in the Pacific before him. Following Cook's tracks, Tench wanted, as Greg Denning (1994, 451) would put it, to be part of "the season for observing."

Tench's account raises questions concerning his identity, the context of his writing, the choices he made in describing the world of Port Jackson, and the composition of his two Australian volumes, particularly the modalities of their description, writing and publication. Such simple questions as who he was, how he wrote and published, in what circumstances, for what audience and with what editorial changes (as was then common) are not simple to answer. Tench's description itself and what it tells us of what happened in Port Jackson also needs to be interrogated. This chapter is a work in progress and it raises more questions than it answers. As a first exploration, I focus on Tench's description of the Aboriginal world, an important part of his account and his main interest in Port Jackson. I will suggest that the "past" Tench describes is greatly influenced by his construction of it, so much so that his text cannot simply be regarded as an empirical account.

Watkin Tench and his “Journal”

Tench’s account was based on his “regular journal” and diverse notes that no longer exist. He wrote the first part of his narrative “on the spot,” during his first six months in Port Jackson, between January and July 1788, and quickly sent it back to England on the transports returning to Europe. It was published as *A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay* in London in 1789, by John Debrett of Piccadilly. According to Tim Flannery, before they left, Tench and surgeon John White were contracted by this publisher to write “an interim report on the state of the colony” (Flannery 1996, 2). Other First Fleet officers were similarly approached by London publishers before their departure: Arthur Phillip and John Hunter by John Stockdale publisher, and David Collins by Cadell R. Davies. Unlike previous scientific expeditions to the Pacific, no demand for publication was made from the naval authorities. The demand came from publishers who anticipated that books on Botany Bay would be popular with a British audience.

In 1789 *The Voyage of Governor Phillip* (a compilation of Phillip’s notes) and Tench’s *A Narrative* became the first two accounts published on Botany Bay. The manuscript Tench sent to Debrett apparently no longer exists. This bars discussing possible editorial changes to the manuscript – a pity, because the scandal created by Hawkesworth’s 1773 revision of Cook’s *First Voyage* was still in people’s minds, yet it remained common for an editor to revise manuscripts of travel like Tench’s first volume.³ However, the success of *A Narrative* was immediate, with three English editions, an Irish edition, a translation in Dutch, two in French, two in German and a number of book reviews during 1789. It was translated even more quickly than Phillip’s work, which itself received great attention. Tench’s second volume was published in London in 1793 under the title *A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson* by G. Nicol, the editor who likely also published Cook’s *Third Voyage* in 1785 (Cook and King 1785). Tench reached home in July 1792, so had less than a year to complete his second volume. He was able to read John White’s journal, published in 1790, and extracts from Governor Phillip’s letters, published by Debrett in 1791 and 1792. His own account was published at the same time as John Hunter’s journal, and received less attention than his first narrative. The interest aroused by the novelty of the subject had died away. No second edition was published,⁴ but it was translated into German in the following year and into Swedish in 1797.

Tench was twenty-nine years of age when in May 1787 he joined the fleet, anchored in Portsmouth, which was going to ship the first British convicts to Australia. He was an officer of the Marine Corps, and knew only military life. Recruited at eighteen years of age in 1776, he was sent to fight the rebellious American colonies. That war ended in 1783 and Tench was placed on half-pay in 1786. In this context he decided to sign on for a three-year tour of duty to Botany Bay. As he wrote in the introduction to the first part of his account, he

knew that he was getting involved in an expedition "which has excited much curiosity, and given birth to many speculations, respecting the consequences to arise from it" (Tench 1789, xxvi).

The expedition was much publicised for two main reasons. First, its aim was to establish on the far side of the world a penal colony in an unknown territory inhabited only by "savages." This was an extraordinary project, which provoked intense debate among specialists of penology and criminal affairs in Europe. Second, the expedition was to settle these convicts in Australia, the main land of the South Seas, visited by James Cook twenty-eight years earlier. We know how famous Cook was at that time in Britain, and how successful the publications written by members of his prestigious scientific expeditions had been. The publicity the expedition to Botany Bay attracted in 1787 placed Tench and his companions in a particular situation. As Marines, they were sent to Botany Bay "for the protection of the settlement intended to be made there, as well as for preserving good order and regularity among the convicts" (Tench 1789, xvi). But, as earlier noted, they were also contacted by London publishers eager to publish travel accounts of this extraordinary expedition.

Tench, then, signing for three years' service in Botany Bay, was offered an improbable opportunity in a soldier's life: to write for the public. In introducing his first volume he wrote:

In offering this little tract to the public, it is equally the writer's wish to conduce to their amusement and information. ... An unpractised writer is generally anxious to bespeak public attention, and to solicit public indulgence. Except on professional subjects, military men are, perhaps too fearful of critical censure. For the present narrative no other apology is attempted, than the intention of its author who has endeavoured not only to satisfy present curiosity, but to point out to future adventurers the favourable, as well as adverse circumstances which will attend their settling here (Tench 1789, 5-6).

Lieutenant Watkin Tench presents himself as an unskilled author and asks "the candid to overlook the inaccuracies of this imperfect sketch, drawn amidst the complicated duties of the service in which the Author is engaged" (Tench 1789, 5-6). Writing was for Tench a new and unusual task, but he obviously had some initial skills. Born in Chester in 1758, Watkin Tench's father was a master of dance and director of a boarding school, an educated man and a protégé of a great landed family in north Wales, the Williams-Wynn family. Apparently he gave his son a sound schooling, to judge by the quotations Tench used. Tench was obviously a reader and was fond of English literature, quoting by heart such authors as Shakespeare, Milton and Goldsmith. He had also read the philosophers of the time, including Hobbes, Rousseau and Voltaire – these three names appear in the general comments he made on Aboriginal society. He knew

Latin and spoke French. In his edition of Tench's narrative, Fitzhardinge described Tench as "the most cultivated mind in the young settlement on Sydney Cove" (Tench 1979, xv), although his young friend Dawes was more scientifically oriented. Despite his sound education, Tench was far from being able to compete with the *savants voyageurs* of his time, such as Humboldt, Volney and Potocki, who all belonged to the privileged classes, had been through the best universities in Europe and could travel at their own expense.

Both Tench's narratives are written "as if" they were journals. They are divided into chronological episodes, organised in narrative chapters describing a series of events, followed by summing-up chapters taking stock of the characteristics of the country, the progress of the settlement, and the convicts or the natives. According to Gavin Edwards (2000, 2), Samuel Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775) or Caesar's commentaries on the Gallic Wars (58–51 BC) could have been Tench's models. Another name is evoked throughout Tench's narrative: James Cook. Like his fellow officers, Tench had read Hawkesworth's description of Cook's first voyage. He repeated many descriptions given by the great navigator "as a pair," sometimes with some annoyance, as when he got stuck in "a rotten spungy bog," which Cook had described as "some of the finest meadows in the world" (Tench 1793, 215). "It has often fallen to my lot to traverse these fabled plains and many a bitter execration have I heard poured on those travellers, who could so faithlessly relate what they saw" (215).⁵ Tench undoubtedly wished to be part of the making of a scientific knowledge of the Pacific. The words "observers" and "observations" occur more than ninety-two times in his account. His introduction clearly reveals his intent:

As this publication enters the world with the name of the author, candour will, he trusts, induce its readers to believe, that no consideration could weigh with him in an endeavour to mislead them. Facts are related simply as they happened, and when opinions are hazarded, they are such as, he hopes, patient inquiry, and deliberate decision, will be found to have authorised. For the most part he has spoken from actual observation; and in those places where the relations of others have been unavoidably adopted, he has been careful to search for the truth, and repress that spirit of exaggeration which is almost ever the effect of novelty on ignorance (Tench 1979, 5).

We can see in this preoccupation with truth and this principle of direct observation the imprint of the Enlightenment, a philosophy based on the requirement of Reason, which influenced the travel accounts of Tench's predecessors in the Pacific. After Wallis, Bougainville, Cook, Banks and the Forsters, Tench wrote in Port Jackson along the same lines – a chronicle of events carefully reported. In conformity with the inventory model adopted by the

savants voyageurs of his time, he wished to conduct an exhaustive investigation, describing all he could see: fauna, flora, landscapes, climate, "Indians"⁶ (as Aborigines were then called) and, because of the singularity of this British expedition, the convicts and the state of the colony.

But beyond these scientific interests Tench was also writing "a work of conscious art" for "the amusement of the public." Mainly interested in man and context, his narrative can be read as a book in two parts, a part for adventures (the chronicle) and a part for scientific description and philosophical debate. It can be read as two stories in one, each separate from the other and each with its own tempo and suspense. On the one hand, he described the difficulties of survival, the imposition of public order, the conditions of control and repression of the penal population, the corrosive effect of the long and anxious wait for British news and supplies. On the other, he described new animals, plants and new people, telling of contact with the "Indians" and the very slow process by which the British tried to establish regular contact with these "Others."

Chronicles of the Encounters between British and Aborigines

In his first volume, this story of discovery and contact starts in January 1788 with a description of a "first contact" episode, followed (from Tench's point of view) by the sudden and incomprehensible disappearance of the "Indians," who then stayed aloof and later attacked unarmed convicts on the fringe of the settlement. The general conclusion of *A Narrative*, written after six months of "petty war" and little contact with the "Indians," reflected the uncertainties of the situation, the impossibility of Tench conducting a "patient inquiry," the increasing tension, and the deterioration of his own judgments of "Indians." His observations reflect the great gulf existing between the British and the Aborigines. His description is limited to aspects of material culture or to behaviour observed from afar. Tench's views were fuelled by his prejudices, but he also recognised the limits to his knowledge and his lack of comprehension.

The second volume starts with "a retrospect," probably written in 1792 in London, which admitted a "reversal of opinion":

With the natives we were very little more acquainted than on our arrival in the country. Our intercourse with them was neither frequent or cordial. They seemed studiously to avoid us, either from fear, jealousy, or hatred. When they met with unarmed stragglers, they sometimes killed, and sometimes wounded them. I confess that, in common with many others, I was inclined to attribute this conduct, to a spirit of malignant levity. But a farther acquaintance with them, founded on several instances of their humanity and generosity, which shall be noticed in their proper places, has entirely reversed my opinion (Tench 1793, 135).

Starting with this positive statement, the second volume recounts a series of episodes *chosen* by Tench as “significant events” in the “politics” of British relations with Aborigines. He thought these “events” important to narrate, even though he was not present at most of them.

(1) The kidnapping and first meeting with Arabanoo, Baneelon and Colbee. Tench related by hearsay the kidnapping of these people but was present when they first came in the camp.

(2) The famous scene of meeting Aborigines around a dead whale, the spearing of Governor Phillip and the ensuing interaction between British and Aborigines. Tench detailed all these events, including dialogue. But he was not there.

(3) The spearing of the gamekeeper McIntyre. Again, Tench was not a witness.

(4) The punitive expedition in retaliation. Tench *was* there, in charge of this very first punitive expedition against Aboriginal people. The expedition was a failure and Tench described it as a farce.

(5) The vignette of the Aboriginal potato thieves and the British attack against their Aboriginal campsite. The discovery of an Aboriginal victim who was obviously an important person. Tench acquired all this information by hearsay.

(6) The description of an inland expedition based on a journal chosen “among my numerous travelling journals into the interior” (Tench, 1793, 223). Tench made this choice to conclude his chronicle concerning Aboriginal people: “I select the following, to present to the reader, as equally important in their object, and more amusing in their detail than any other” (223).

It is useful to note that Tench used the singular form “*I*” when he was a direct witness, and “*we, us*” or another plural form when he was not present. But that apart, he did not clearly state whether or not he was a participant. He could have organised his narrative concerning Aboriginal people differently, keeping to his own observations and experiences—for example, to his conversations with Arabanoo, Colbee, Baneelon and others. But like most of his fellow officers he chose to relate this particular series of “events,” which became, in the course of the consolidation of Australian history, “historical events.” It is useful to note that these successive episodes give the story a rhythm, with a slow increasing tension. Power and potential violence is at the heart of the story, especially with the attack on Phillip, the killing of the gamekeeper and the consequent retaliation against the Aboriginal campsite. The punitive expedition Tench led could have been presented as a moment of high tension. Instead Tench described it as a farce. For Clendinnen, Tench’s choice is explained by the fact that the governor was organising only a “theatrical statement about the new order” (Clendinnen, 2003, 180) and did not himself believe in the efficacy of this military action. Tench pointed out the complete inadequacy of the British military response: soldiers heavily armed and lost in the bush going after Aborigines running fast

and light. But what would have happened had Tench and his company seized some Aborigines? The expedition could then no longer have been merely "a theatrical statement about the new order" (180). Whatever the significance of the "event" for the actors of the time, the fact remains that Tench describes it as farce in a highly amusing scene, and this releases the narrative from the tension previously described. It is as if Tench did not want to pursue the theme of violence and preferred to privilege "the amusement of the public." In the following chapter he describes the attack on the Aboriginal campsite, but concludes these "events" by taking the reader on a safe "ethnographic" inland expedition for the "amusement of the public." This reveals an ambivalence between Tench the observer and Tench the author. It also reveals in Tench an ambivalence toward violence and the consequences of colonisation for the Aboriginal world: ambivalence between the soldier upholding the colonial order, and the "enlightened" person attached to Aborigines by true feelings of friendship.

Tench's Ambivalence: General Considerations on Aboriginal Society

As Bernard Smith observed, Tench's account encapsulates the ambivalence of his time toward "the state of nature of primitive societies" (Smith 1984, 175–8). On the one hand, the state of nature was valorised as a happy stage of humanity following Bougainville's famous *Voyage autour du monde* and Rousseau's thesis; on the other, it was condemned as a state of backward heathen savagery by evangelical groups and defenders of progress and civilisation. For Smith, Tench's account reflected the cross-currents of the time. It is important to know that Tench, writing his conclusions in 1792 on the basis of his experience of Port Jackson, was not a Rousseauist. On the respective natural physical strength of the British and the Aborigines, Tench quoted Rousseau: "Give to civilised man all his machines, and he is superior to the savage; but without these how inferior is he found on opposition, even more so than the savage in the first instance" (Tench 1793, 274), but Tench immediately added, "These are the words of Rousseau; and like many more of his positions, must be received with limitations" (274).

Tench's anti-Rousseauist position was made even more clear later, when he mocked,

those European philosophers, whose closet speculations exalt a state of nature above a state of civilisation ... [If they] could survey the phantom, which their heated imaginations have raised: possibly they might then learn, that a state of nature is, of all others, least adapted to promote the happiness of a being, capable of sublime research, and unending ratiocination: that a savage roaming for prey amidst his native deserts, is a creature deformed by all those passions, which afflict and degrade

our nature, unsoftened by the influence of religion, philosophy, and legal restriction: and that the more men unite their talents, the more closely the bands of society are drawn; and civilisation advanced, inasmuch is human felicity augmented, and man fitted for his unalienable station in the universe (Tench 1793, 291).

These words are written just after an evocation of the violence and ill treatment exerted against women in Aboriginal society. This will become a “marker” for Europeans in the nineteenth century of the “rank” of a primitive society. But Tench referred also to the “vicissitudes of their climate, the lack of clothes, the precariousness of supply, the sharpness of hunger, their ignorance of cultivating the earth” (Tench, 1793, 281). In a way, increasingly common in the nineteenth century, he underlined “the lack of” (habitat, tools, agriculture, clothes) to describe the backwardness of the people on a scale of technical advancement. “If they be considered as a nation, whose general advancement and acquisitions are to be weighed, they certainly rank very low, even in the scales of the savages” (281). But this backwardness is mainly due to the context, and not to a supposed deficiency of *nature* in the Aborigines themselves.

Let those who have been born in more favoured lands, and who have profited by more enlightened systems, compassionate, but not despise, their destitute and obscure situation. Children of the same omniscient paternal care, let them recollect, that by the fortuitous advantage of birth alone, they possess superiority, that untaught, unaccommodated man, is the same in Pall Mall, as in the wilderness of New South Wales (1793, 293).

If Aborigines are backward because of the unfortunate context in which they live, they are by no means the “miserablest People in the World ... setting aside their Human Shape ... [who] differ but little from Brutes,” as the navigator Dampier put it at the end of the seventeenth century (1998 [1697], 218). On the contrary, Tench affirmed that “the Natives of New South Wales possess a considerable portion of that acumen, or sharpness of intellect, which bespeaks genius” (1793, 281). And “if they resist knowledge, and the adoption of manners and customs, differing from their own, it is because the progress of reason is not only slow, but mechanical” (281): “Of all the lessons peculiar to man, that which he learns the latest, and with the most difficulty, is reason itself” (281).⁷

Tench defended the *quality* of Aboriginal people – their intelligence, comprehension, ingenuity and celerity, courage and honesty, freedom of judgement. According to the categories used by the philosophers to describe society, he also defended Aboriginal societies as organised, testified to by the fact that they had principles of government based on equality (he recognised that he knew little about their law), religious beliefs, sophisticated language (he worked with Dawes on a dictionary but never finished it). The people were

"divided in tribes" (Tench 1793, 285), but Tench gave little information on their names or location. Cameragal is one of the few tribal names in his account. Interestingly, he made no reference at all to property or its lack. The only "possession" he mentioned was a "fishing ground." On the whole Tench's observations on Aboriginal social organisation are vague. He kept, rather, to what he could easily describe – the material culture, the physical appearance, the dances and so on – then made general remarks which slotted readily into the European debate on "primitive societies." From his experience in Port Jackson, he arrived at another set of considerations, referring mainly to the discovery of *individuals*, men and women with whom "he cannot but feel some share of affection" and proven to belong to humanity with all the qualities required: civility, feelings, intelligence (293).

To appreciate their general powers of mind is difficult ... if from a general view we descend to particular inspection and examine individually the persons who compose this community, they will certainly rise in estimation. ... In the narrative part of this work, I have endeavoured rather to detail information, than to deduce conclusions; leaving to the reader the exercise of his own judgement. The behaviour of Arabanoo, of Baneelon, of Colbee, and many others, is copiously described and assuredly he who shall make just allowance for uninstructed nature, will hardly accuse any of those persons of stupidity, or deficiency of apprehension (Tench 1793, 281).

Encounters with "People": The Fieldwork of Watkin Tench

First Contacts

Tench sailed on the *Charlotte*, which reached Botany Bay two days after Phillip in the *Supply*. Describing "on inquiry" – by hearsay – the first sighting between Aborigines and British, Tench reported "not less than forty persons, shouting and making many uncouth signs and gestures" (Tench 1789, 35) and noted the prudence of the governor in landing on the opposite shore, "in order to take possession of his new territory, and bring about an intercourse between its old and new masters" (35). Tench does not question this immediate act of appropriation. The only problem at stake is the "delicacy" requisite on the British side "as on the event of this meeting might depend so much of our future tranquility" (35). The description is extremely short and the conclusion is quick – "both parties pleased each other." He also alludes to the gift of a looking glass, some beads and other toys (35).

Tench describes in much more detail his own "first contact," made on a beach three days later, as he was walking with a boy and a few soldiers. They sighted twelve "Indians." After careful approaches from each side, an old man came close. What does this beautifully described scene tell us, and what does it not?

Tench described how the old man and his comrades were struck by the skin colour of the intruders, the absence of beards and so their indefinite sex, the strange nature of the clothes (which might have been confused with skin). This description gives few clues as to what these Aborigines thought. Did they see the intruders as ghosts, ancestors, deities, monsters, or what? Tench does not contemplate this, and the context (contrary to the arrival of Cook in Hawai`i) does not help him. He noted the gentleness of the old man toward the boy, the reluctance of the Aborigines to exchange goods and their lack of interest in British toys.

Tench later reported various “interviews,” again insisting on the need to make the “Indians” understand the new order of things: “Our first object was to win their affections, and our next to convince them of the superiority we possessed: for without the latter, the former we know would be of little importance” (Tench 1789, 37). Superiority meant muskets and their display, but to calm “fears and jealousy,” an officer whistled *Malbrooke*, “which they appeared highly charmed with, and imitated with equal pleasure and readiness” (37).

In describing “first contacts” Tench showed how pragmatic he was. His interpretation of “events” is strongly influenced by awareness of the power game at stake and the necessity for the British to show their force, their superiority of arms, the fact that they are the new masters. However, he also revealed his empathy with the feelings and capacities of Aboriginal people: the gentleness of the old “Indian” toward the boy, their “fear and jealousy” when muskets are fired, their capacity to appreciate a song and their talent in mimicry. Tench was ready to see in those “savages” men with human qualities, and his first contacts confirmed his opinion. But his description provides little interpretation of “what the natives thought” or saw or understood.

Tench as an Ethnographer?

Tench met “Indians” again a year later, when Phillip decided to try to facilitate interaction with the Aborigines by kidnapping one of them to act as a “go-between.” Using hearsay again, Tench evoked the kidnapping scene in a lively style and reported the “most piercing and lamentable cries of distress” (Tench 1793, 139) of the prisoner. “I went with every other person [in Sydney] to see him” (139). He described the man, his physical appearance, “his manliness and sensibility, his curiosity and observation despite the situation, his astonishment at the novelty” (139–40). The tone is positive, the account very detailed, with sustained attention to the feelings of the man and his reactions to this new world; the food, the houses, the bath, images of animals and a print of the Duchess of Cumberland. Among several pictures of people which he recognised as human beings, he identified a large print of a portrait of the Duchess of Cumberland as “woman” (the English word that he had learnt to call

the female convicts). He pointed to and spoke about several plates of birds and animals but they must not have been only ones he was familiar with since this included an elephant and a rhinoceros (140). The first Aboriginal words pronounced appear in the text – *Ben-gà-dee* for "ornament", *Weè-rong* for "Sydney". Tench's description then turned to Phillip's expedition, which intended to show the Aboriginal man to his compatriots in order to "open an intercourse" (140). It did not work.

The man was Arabanoo. Tench gives no indication of his origins. How close Tench was to him we do not know. Tench merely reports Arabanoo's close relations with Phillip and he observes his reactions to British habits and practices (e.g. flogging) and to his own people (e.g. their behaviour toward smallpox victims) as well as his *qualities*: "a portion of gravity and steadiness, a thoughtful countenance," "fidelity and gratitude," "gentle and placable temper" (Tench 1793, 150). Tench underlined his independence of mind, his humour, the fact that he allowed no superiority.

Tench paid attention to Arabanoo but ignored the two young orphan children adopted by the British who would become the real go-betweens: Nanbaree and Abaroo. They were too young to be of interest to him. He paid attention to some new prisoners, kidnapped six months after Arabanoo died of smallpox. Again, his description of the kidnapping is brief; Tench emphasised the physical aspects of the men and their behaviour. He wrote nothing about their origins or their group affiliations. This must be found, rather, in Collins' or Phillip's journals. After Colbee's escape, Tench took great pleasure in describing Baneelon's very strong character: a hot Latin lover, who loved wine, food and women, was very bright and cunning, remarkable for his talent for mimicry and sense of humour, but violent and capable of a terrible temper. Tench tells us that Baneelon was a precious informant: "He willingly communicated information; sang danced and capered: told us all the customs of his country, and all the details of his family economy" (Tench 1793, 160). But Tench did not elaborate on any of these matters. We know that Baneelon had a special relationship with Phillip, but Tench says nothing of his own relationship with him. Was he an informant? A friend? Tench offers fragments of linguistic and ethnographic knowledge. We can guess that he accumulated notes and observations, which finally, he did not use. Perhaps he did know a great deal about Aboriginal society. But he did not report it. Presenting empirical material was not, in fact, his principal aim in writing his text.

Discrepancies of Description: Phillip's Spearing

In an illuminating chapter, Clendinnen reconstitutes Aboriginal agency through a reading of the first narratives of Botany Bay. She observes:

Historians of the episode [of Phillip's spearing] have usually chosen to select one of the accounts – often that of Watkin Tench, who wasn't there but who reads beautifully – to rely on, or have cobbled together bits from several mildly conflicting versions to construct a sufficiently coherent narrative (Clendinnen 2003, 114–5).

But, as she adds, “the difficulty is that while the discrepancies may be trivial, they may not be. Discrepancies need not be sinister. Even honest witnesses can disagree as to actions and sequences, as any traffic cop will tell you. But only the reconstruction of actual action-sequences can bring us closer to Australian intentions” (Clendinnen 2003, 115). Thus, Clendinnen chooses to use Tench's account in a second step, preferring instead to primarily rely on Phillip's and Waterhouse's narratives, since they were both witnesses to the scene. Waterhouse seems very reliable to her: “[He] was there, he had no investment in what happened, as a junior officer he was used to watching closely and getting orders straight, and (unlike Collins) he was not already antagonistic to Phillip's conciliatory enterprise” (118).

We know how important the scene of “Spearing the Governor” (Clendinnen 2003, 110ff.) is in the Australian historical narratives of the foundation years. Many historians have interpreted this event as “an accident” mainly due to the irrational behaviour of an Aboriginal man described in officers' accounts as a “stranger” panicking at Phillip's approach. Similar to Keith Vincent Smith in his book *Bennelong* (2001), Clendinnen proposes another interpretation of the whole scene. She views it as a ritual payback “swiftly organised over a couple of hours and with representatives from the local tribes already fortuitously gathered, where Phillip would face a single spear-throw in penance for his and his people's many offences” (Clendinnen 2003, 124). Baneelon is depicted as the “master of ceremony.” He is described as an essential “go-between” acting as a political leader, attempting to take advantage of his privileged relations with the British in general and with Governor Phillip in particular, in order to impose negotiated relations and compensations. The hypothesis of a “ritual payback” would explain Baneelon's attitude: first, the deliberate aloofness of a man with a formal role to perform, and second, the prolonged acting-out of the intimacies he enjoyed with the British intruders. In showing off his familiarity with the whites and his capacity of claiming gifts, he was trying to elevate his position within his own world. In organising a “ritual payback,” he was attempting to create a new political arrangement. This is why he refused to give “the special spear” to Phillip, throwing it to a “stranger,” apparently in charge of the single spear-throw. To Phillip he gave a throwing-stick instead, and a club to defend himself as required in Aboriginal payback ceremonies. Phillip, however, did not defend himself and instead arrived at the “stranger,” his empty hands spread

out. The warrior gave signs of agitation and then threw his spear, waited to see it touching its goal, and disappeared in the bush.

The idea of Baneelon organising a "ritual" "fortuitously and in two hours time" on a territory (Manly) that is not his own (Baneelon was a Wangal from Parramatta), with only one spear-throw by another "stranger," could be seriously discussed and possibly challenged. But this is not the purpose here. What is rather interesting here is to analyse Tench's own "reading" of the scene.

Tench wrote this part of his account in 1792 when he was in London. He had his own journal to rely on, and possibly notes by fellow officers and memories of conversations with them.⁸ Tench had talked first to the surgeon John White, who first encountered the Aboriginal party in September 1790 on the beach, feasting on a dead whale. White was accompanied by Nanbaree, one of the Aboriginal children adopted eighteen months earlier, serving as translator. For the first time, dialogues are included in Tench's account. This was a common practice in travel accounts of the time, to increase *l'effet de reel* – "reality effects" – by the inclusion of "reconstituted" dialogues. In Tench's narratives, this occurs when a translator (like Nanbaree) enabled a better understanding of Aboriginal words transmitted to Tench by hearsay. These words articulated by Baneelon contained a demand for hatchets.

To know the second part of the story, the "spearing," Tench had to talk to Phillip, Waterhouse, Collins and a seaman, these men being the only participants on the British side. And he was able to recreate, by hearsay, a complex set of interactions in great detail. This reveals his capacity of investigation among his main informants – his fellow officers – and his ability to reconstitute facts and events. Nevertheless, and curiously enough, Tench omitted all details that could shed light on Baneelon's agency and responsibility. He did not link the "stranger" to Baneelon and Colbee and ignored the fact that it was Baneelon who threw the "very special spear" in the direction of "this" stranger. Phillip's narrative questioned Baneelon's attitude – "the behaviour of Baneelon on this occasion is not so easily to be accounted for; he never attempted to interfere when the man took the spear up, or said a single word to prevent him from throwing it" – but to immediately excuse him, "he possibly did not think the spear would be thrown, and the whole was but the business of a moment" (Hunter 1968, 463–4). But Tench ignored the entire matter.

A week later he related another scene in which two "Indians" revealed the name of the culprit: Wil-ee-ma-rin. However, according to Phillip and Collins, it was Baneelon who divulged the name of the culprit (Hunter 1968, 466; Collins 1975, 113), but Tench omitted this detail. (Baneelon added that he had severely beaten the man for the aggression.) Instead, Tench, provides other information:

These two people inquired kindly how his excellency did, and seemed pleased to hear that he was likely to recover. They said they were

inhabitants of Rose Hill and expressed great dissatisfaction at the number of white men who had settled in their former territories. In consequence of which declaration, the detachment at that post was reinforced on the following day (Tench 1793, 181).

By contrast, Phillip and Collins made no allusion whatsoever to such words critiquing the colonial context. They only considered the individual responsibility of an “irrational savage” (Hunter 1793, 463; Collins 1975, 111).

Why did Tench introduce in the conclusion of the description he gave of “spearing the governor” a sudden allusion to colonial violence? Who reported to him those Aboriginal words expressing anger against the whites? Was it his friend Dawes, the young astronomer of the First Fleet, the most sympathetic to the Aborigines, who refused in December 1790 to participate in the first punitive expedition set up under the command of Tench? According to Tench, Dawes was with the chaplain and Abaroo on a boat when they talked to the two “Indians” on 14 September 1790. But why wasn’t there any allusion made to this in Phillip’s journal when military measures were said to be taken? Why, in relating the whole scene of “spearing the governor,” did Tench refuse to consider the meaning of Aboriginal actions and, in particular, the possible responsibility of Baneelon? All these questions remain open and reveal how difficult it is to understand Watkin Tench and his narrative.

Clendinnen, reflecting a common approach in Australian scholarship, remarks:

What made Tench incomparable among good observers is that he treated each encounter with the strangers as a detective story: “This is what they did. What might they have meant by doing that?” This glinting curiosity is uniquely his. (Compare him with John Hunter, who also watches keenly, but at a condescending distance: the squire watching his beagles.) Tench always saw the Australians as fellow humans (Clendinnen 2003, 59).

Like many historians, Clendinnen uses a surprisingly sentimental approach toward Tench. Depicted as a “likeable” man,” she praises him for his human qualities, which supposedly provided him with the capacity for a better understanding of the “other,” the Aborigines (Clendinnen 2003, 58). But as we have seen, this explanation is far too simple. Tench, in fact, is an ambivalent person – at least, ambivalence emerges as a central feature in my analysis of his narrative.

Ambivalence saturates the form of description itself. Tench wants to observe and to relate facts “simply as they happened.” He also wants to write “for the amusement of the public.” To do that he must make choices, he needs to construct his narrative so that it reaches the audience. Tench’s alternatives are not “science” or “fiction,” but rather the question of the mode and purpose of his descriptions.

He could have described what he saw or what he learned from the society he confronted, but he chose rather to shed light on "the colonial encounter" as such, and more precisely on "specific events," which he and his fellow officers considered unavoidable in a narrative of Port Jackson's first years, even though he was not there when most of these "events" took place. The best quality of Tench as an informant is his capacity for enquiring among his fellow officers about interactions they had with Aboriginal people. This necessitated a kind of collective detective work. His narrative, being one of the first to be published in London with Hunter's account, gave, through the description of "important events," the impression of an "official history" of the foundational years. In that sense, as Fitzhardinge stresses, Tench can be considered the first Australian historian. But his aim was different. Tench wanted to be recognised as an author, and his narrative epitomises the typical ambivalence of the travel account of the time – between the will for observation and the desire for adventure.

Tench's ambivalence is also perceptible in his view of Aboriginal society. As an anti-Rousseauist, he refused to defend the state of nature as an enviable state and denounced the misery of the Aboriginal way of life. Aboriginal society was, according to him, low on the scale of humanity. The cause lay not in the nature of the people, but in the context in which they lived (cf. Douglas this volume). As with many philosophers of his time, Tench explains the "primitive state of nature" by external and contingent causes: climate, natural environment and local history, and refuses to see in the Aborigines only brutes and savages. Part of a common humanity, these societies like any others could be improved through the triumph of civilisation, good order and the Christian message.

Tench obviously had a strong sympathy toward individuals such as Arabanoo, Baneelon, Colbee and some unnamed women. He was keen to defend the human qualities of his friends, courage, honesty, pride, intelligence, skill and so on. He was obviously also fascinated by their culture, their beliefs and their practices. The effects of smallpox horrified him. He condemned convicts' wrongdoings and felt unease with military violence. But he was also a soldier proud of his duty and convinced of the necessity of colonisation. All these contradictions are encapsulated in his narrative. In Tench's account, colonial violence erupts on the surface at several occasions, but the author refuses to speculate on its meaning. He refuses to consider the possible role of Baneelon in the "spearing of the governor." He transforms the punitive expedition he leads into a farce. By the end of his narrative, after an allusion made to the first blind military retaliation following a potato theft, he takes the readers to a safer subject, an expedition in the search of a river south of Rose Hill (Parramatta) and the description of Aboriginals providing help to soldiers and sailors (Tench 1793, ch. 15). He concludes with some general reflections on the "Indians" and on "primitive societies." In using such a narrative strategy, Tench carefully avoids exposing the effects of colonisation on Aboriginal people, even though he seems

to be conscious of what is going on. In the first place, he wants to become a popular author and write a travel account “for the amusement of the public.”

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Notes

¹ A few short letters are on microfilm in the Mitchell Library, Sydney.

² The original French reads: "*sans loi ... qui allie à la finalité documentaire la séduction du plaisir et du divertissement, et à laquelle les voyageurs apportent des réponses diversement dosées selon qu'ils privilégient, dans leurs écrits, tantôt la description généralement tournée vers l'information géographique, tantôt le récit potentiellement riche en aventure*" (Le Huenen 1990, 14). Literary studies of voyaging accounts have expanded considerably in number over the last twenty years. Notable works consulted for this study include: Viviers (1999); Weil (1984); and Linon-Chipon et. al. (1998).

³ This question is still open and needs further investigation. Fitzhardinge argued that "in the absence of manuscripts, the establishment of the text presents no problems. As all the editions of the *Narrative* appeared before Tench's return, they cannot have been revised by him, though some additional matter was included in the third" (Tench 1979, xxvi).

⁴ It was reprinted in 1824 and again in 1954 by Angus and Robertson.

⁵ See Paul Carter's discussion about Tench's attitude towards Cook (1988, 36–9). Carter argues that Tench, in his successive judgements, "hardly proceeds empirically. He defines and redefines his position dialectically – in terms of and against Cook's earlier descriptions" (37). "His outbursts are increasingly theatrical. [...] For all this, though, Tench's aim is clear. It is to dethrone Cook and substitute his own experience as authoritative" (38). Nevertheless, two things should be pointed out. On the one hand, Tench has practical experience of the field in Botany Bay, especially when he and his party find themselves in serious danger, trapped in the mud while running after Aborigines. Fear or anger could also explain Tench's outbursts against Cook's inadequate descriptions. On the other hand, Tench allowed himself to be increasingly critical of Cook precisely because he acquired a better and practical knowledge of the field in the area of Botany Bay. He progressively lost the respect he had when he was first assigned to read the already famous navigator. But I am not sure we can assert that he could really pretend to "dethrone" Cook and substitute his own experience as authoritative as he was only a simple mariner and he knew that his narrative could not compete with Cook's prestigious and official one.

⁶ The term "*Indians*", derived from the experience of the Americas, was more generally applied to indigenous people in this period.

⁷ In French in the original text: "*De toutes les instructions propres à l'homme, celle qu'il acquiert le plus tard, et le plus difficilement, est la raison même*" (original source of quotation unknown).

⁸ No narrative on the Botany Bay experience had been published in 1792 since Tench's first volume and Phillip's account. Hunter was preparing the publication of his own journal with compilation of Phillip's official papers.