

The Charmed Circle

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Inga Clendinnen
DANCING WITH STRANGERS
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ANYONE WHO HEARD Inga Clendinnen's 1999 Boyer Lectures or who has listened to her in any other way will hear her voice clearly in this book: contemplative, reflective, warm, gently paced. *Dancing with Strangers* seems to have been written as if it were meant to be read aloud. It reaches out to its listeners, drawing them within the world of the settlement at Port Jackson during its first dozen years, from 1778 to 1800. The two leading figures are Governor Arthur Phillip (who departed in 1792) and Bennelong.

Clendinnen's method is ethnographic history. This offers a way into the past that, in good hands, is full of brilliant possibilities. The trick lies in choosing a period that is richly documented, fastening on the minutiae of behaviour and building up, step by step, the image of a mental universe — another world, vividly patterned and inevitably different from the here and now. Indeed, the reader is invited to move into another here and now.

A great deal depends on the way in which the writer issues that invitation. Ethnographic history, once an exciting aspect of Australian scholarship (especially in Melbourne), has fallen under a shadow lately, and part of the reason lies in the difficulty of persuading readers to take the kind of journey it involves. Questions of identity and ethnicity, leading historical issues since the 1990s, complicate the invitation too much. Readers nowadays don't leave behind their own here and now, their own identity and ethnicity, as easily as they used to do. History tries to say at least a little about what readers might be themselves, as much as about past Others.

Clendinnen aims to stretch the imagination as ethnographic historians have always done. But she also wants to reassure by using the language of identity, including national identity. She wants to tell a story for the present. She wants to ride two horses at once. Does she succeed?

Much in the book turns on the use of the pronoun 'we'. It is a favourite word throughout, which explains the curiously inclusive tone. When Clendinnen says 'we', she usually means herself and her readers, and it is clear that of these readers she

has certain expectations. It is possible to guess who 'we' are by dwelling on a few quotations. '[John] Hunter's easy exactitude,' she says, 'reminds us of something we landlubbers forget.' Hunter shows contempt for the Aborigines: 'Were this all we knew of him, we would not like him.' 'Thinking of Sydney Harbour we think of sharks.' '[Watkin] Tench's ... [moral] sensibility' is different from 'ours'. And then, 'We have all felt the exhaustion ... [which comes from] living among foreigners.' Readers also learn of 'our white forefathers' and 'our British informants'. 'We' are Australians, it seems, probably of British descent, but not British ourselves, well informed, well travelled and with a distinctive moral attitude. 'We' are probably not admirers of *Quadrant*.

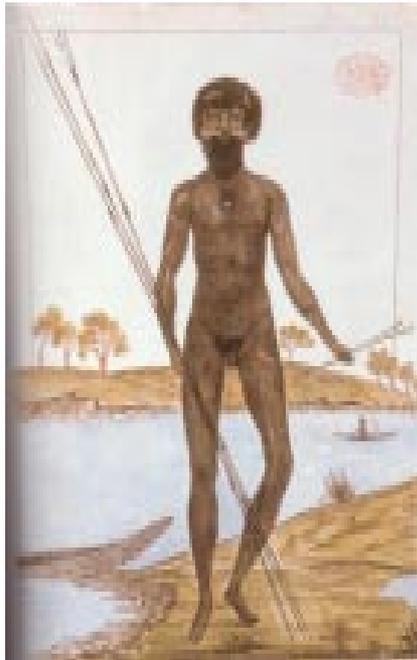
There is, however, another, more ephemeral 'we'. The officers of the British navy and marines, on whose writing Clendinnen depends, also spoke of 'we'. In their mouths, the sense of community summed up by 'we' is, of course, very different from the one just described. When these people said 'we', they meant a body of people cut off from everything familiar, at risk of starvation and for whom survival itself might depend on solidarity. The 'we' in this case is more fragile and anxious, more fraught with matters of life and death.

Finally, there is another party altogether. These are not 'we' at all, and yet it is they who are supposed to qualify best as Australians. These are the Aborigines. Clendinnen refers to them throughout as 'the Australians', because, she says (and the explanation is much too vague), that 'is what they undoubtedly were'. She had also thought of giving another name to the British, 'but', she says, 'I could find no better alternative'. In the same spirit, Bennelong becomes 'Baneelon' (a spelling sometimes used in his own time), and the reason given in this last case might in fact be taken to justify the others. Clendinnen speaks of 'the freight of banalities time

has placed on the word "Bennelong"'. The name she has fixed on, she says, is a constant reminder of 'what was so casually swept away'.

What has been swept away? Not only an Aboriginal way of life but also, perhaps, the way of life of her eighteenth-century white men and women. In short, Clendinnen provides unfamiliar names as she conducts her readers into this strange and isolated world with the deliberate aim of breaking the spell that ties those readers to the present.

This is, then, unorthodox history, even unorthodox ethnographic history. To talk of a 'freight of banalities' is not very complimentary to the numerous other scholars who have tried to make sense of Bennelong's character and experience. Would the 'freight of banalities' attached, say, to the name



Cameragal warrior
(Port Jackson Painter)

'Alexander the Great' justify the use of another name in a book about him? Are Australian historians to be so easily dismissed as Clendinnen seems to imply?

For the sake of this exercise, Clendinnen does not make herself part of any community of scholarship: her 'we' is otherwise. She describes characters who are to be known afresh. And yet this is not, as she says herself, her own area of expertise — not 'my own territory'. Her life's work has been sixteenth-century Mexico. She has also, though she doesn't mention it, written brilliantly about the Nazi death camps, in *Reading the Holocaust* (1998). It is strange, then, that she has made such a small effort to master this newer field. Even her bibliography lists very few works on Aboriginal life and culture. W.E.H. Stanner, also a Boyer lecturer, has been much used, but he is a relatively lonely example.

As a result, she sometimes treads on thin ice. Her suggestion that Aborigines' skill as mimics was a result of them having to 'fake polite fluency in the tongues of neighbouring language groups' is unconvincing. And she is wrong to doubt what she calls 'the popular "ghosts returned" hypothesis'. By this she means the understanding that, on first contact, Aborigines often thought Europeans were kinsmen come back to life. This is not just 'popular' and not just hypothesis. The evidence, from all over the continent, makes it fact. Tony Swain has some useful things to say about it in his book *A Place for Strangers* (1993). Swain (not in Clendinnen's bibliography) is an authority on Aboriginal spiritual life, a subject that is left to one side in this book — a pity, given its overarching purpose.

With all its flaws, this remains an important and masterly work. It is possible to feel impatient, even annoyed, in reading it. It makes a deep impact, nevertheless. It stands as a good example of the way a first-class historian might make numerous small mistakes and still add substantially to historical knowledge and to hard-cutting wisdom.

Clendinnen's great achievement is to set out in a sweeping and powerful way the pattern of relations between black and white at the beginning. Arthur Phillip is vital to the argument, because it was he, above all, who wanted to establish permanent friendship with the Aborigines. It was his aim, Clendinnen says, to form 'a unitary commonwealth of whites and blacks living peaceably under British law'. But was this purpose balanced, or cancelled, by the Aboriginal aim of bringing the British within their own scheme of things?

In her pursuit of this latter point, Clendinnen sometimes falters, partly because of her failure to think about the sacred and partly because she isn't equipped to say much about Aboriginal habits of thought. And yet she sets out a telling hypothesis as to what the invasion might have meant from the Aboriginal perspective, and about Aboriginal expectations. The power of her story lies, as I say, in its sweep and also in its imaginative daring. The reader emerges with a patterned sense of Aboriginal hopes. If there is something painfully disappointing about Phillip's failure, there is something just as moving about the way in which the host people ceased

to think of themselves as hosts, losing patience at last with the newcomers.

The liveliness of the book depends on its portraits. Some are better than others. In a few cases, the impact is lost because Clendinnen becomes too warm with her reader, too talkative altogether. For instance, Barangaroo, Bennelong's wife, has a chapter of her own. The image is intriguing. How wonderful to learn of such a vivid character and to feel in the reading that it is only by a merest freak that she left any mark at all on the written record. But then the impact is partly lost by Clendinnen's final words — freighted indeed with banality: 'Barangaroo always remained her own woman.'

Bennelong is well drawn too, but maybe there is little improvement here on previous portraits. On the other hand, Clendinnen shows how much more there is to be learnt about Phillip by concentrating on his dealings with the Aborigines. It is surprising, too, to see what imaginative scholarship can still do for John Hunter and Watkin Tench. The personality of David Collins unfolds beautifully. As Clendinnen says, Collins had an ethnographic caste of mind. She focuses on his ideas about the Aborigines, but in fact the same point emerges from Collins's remarks on the convicts.

Clendinnen's argument works in the shadow of the present. At the end, she says, 'I think we are all Australians now.' So she seems to draw the Aborigines into the charmed circle of herself and her readership. Or are 'we', by this final stroke, absorbed among the first inhabitants? Indeed, what would either event imply? If this is a dance with strangers, it is an open-ended one and, as in the beginning, it might be hard to say who is leading the steps.