



## The Fence

### Burra matta- Parramatta

By Leanne Tobin and Bonney Djuric

**Leanne:** This place is where the river meets the saltwater. It's a place where the adult eels following their age-old cycle, lying down in wait for the full moon, fat and ready for their epic journey up to the Coral Sea to spawn. Their young then return eventually back to the rivers of their forebears to continue the circle of life. For the people living around the banks of the river it was a time of great feasting and clans traveled from far away to share the eels. Corroborees and song of the different clans celebrating together could be heard along the sandy river banks.

The traditional clans of this area are the Burramattagal, as in 'burra' the eel (Parramatta area) and the Wallumattagal (Ryde area) as in 'wallumai' the snapper fish of the Dharug language group. Wallumattagal and Burramattagal are the Saltwater people who make up the clans at Parramatta. Wallumattagal territory followed the north bank of the Parramatta River up to Turrumburra (Lane Cove River) in the east. Burramatta territory was located from the head of the river to the west.

**Bonney:** *In April 1788 an expedition headed by Captain Arthur Phillip reached a location on the Parramatta river bridged by series of broad flat stones where a freshwater stream flowed into the tidal waters. Further along a crescent shape had been carved into the bank by the river's action. Making his way to a nearby rise he later described the area as a vast undulating grassland interspersed with magnificent trees – a place ideal for a gaol town and farm.*

*Exploring the area the party was surprised to see traces of the Dharug people, and noted that the local people spoke the coastal dialect. Little did they know that the Burra-matta-gal lands were a meeting point where for thousands of years the inland and coastal people fought ceremonial battles and held corroborees.*

**Leanne:** Initially systems of barter began, with the Dharug exchanging fish for salt beef and bread. Their lives changed forever the following year when armed marines built an earthwork fort at Parramatta and prevented the local people from moving through their country. The new farms being built were destroying the local yam beds and food sources along the river. As the local people were denied access and their traditional land farmed, they replaced the dwindling food sources with the corn growing in their place, resulting in retaliative action from the farmers and troops.

**Bonney:** *Parramatta soon became a flourishing settlement with the township's first gaol built in 1796 on the north bank of the river near the south boundary of the present Prince Alfred Park. Destroyed by fire in 1799 it was rebuilt using ashlar sandstone in 1802 together with a gaol bridge crossing the river at the northern end of Church Street. The gaol precinct was divided into two sections with the main building at its centre and the upper floor and northern yard the domain of female convicts - known as the Factory Above The Gaol. For women the gaol afforded asylum from an otherwise vicarious existence where all too often they were forced to prostitute themselves in order to obtain food and shelter.*

*By the mid 1840s the gaol was derelict and soon abandoned for a new site further up river. The gaol common was leveled and reserved for public recreation, however because of its 'tainted past' was mainly used as a dumping ground until 1874 when it was gazetted as Alfred Square.*

*Over time the track leading from the Gaol Bridge (Lennox Bridge) to the Governor's Domain was formed into what is now Market Street and between here and the river Parramatta's first public swimming baths – known as the Corporation Baths were built in 1888. At its entrance was a Penny Arcade where people could be amused and entertained by the phantasmorgoria of peepshows and the novelty of the new. Popular culture had arrived and in the case its survival depended on fashion and on funds, then came the depression and by the late 1920s the arcade shops and baths were no longer in use. Around 60 years later the Riverside Theatres were built on this site.*

**Leanne:** The curves of the fast moving tidal river was once scattered with sandy beaches littered with midden piles; the leftover shells from the oysters and shellfish the Dharug fished from the river. The settlers later used this as a source of lime for their building mortar. Many of my mum's family, who were living at Harris Park and later Parramatta in the 1930's, remember a crescent-shaped beach on the Parramatta River known as 'Little Coogee' (known in colonial times as the Crescent). It was where the eels congregated and was known as a great place for camping and eating. My uncles, as young boys, regularly caught eels from the river in a canoe they fashioned out of bitumen and corrugated iron and would take them home to Nan who would cook them up for dinner.

Many stone tools have been found around here; spear points, axes, anvils and grinding stones. These were used to crush grass seeds to make flour for johnny cakes. Larger stones were also used in the camp fires to retain the heat for warmth and cooking. These rounded stones were not from here but were valued trade items brought in by the Hawkesbury and Grose River clans.

The Burramattagal had special sites set up along this river. Some were marked as women's places and further away, hidden from camp, men's ceremonies would be carried out. On the north bank of the river is where the female convict factory and later the institutions for girls were built. Before the construction of the institutions, this place was said to be used as a site for women's ceremony. It is where the saltwater from the harbour meets with the freshwater of the river.

*Bonney: In 1821 the convict women were relocated to the Female **Factory** a short distance up river from the gaol and 20 years later Australia's first Catholic orphanage was built beside the Factory, the orphanage later became Parramatta Girl's Home – a place where once all I knew of Parramatta were its enclosed sandstone walls.*

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*On a rise overlooking the river where salt and freshwaters blend beyond the horticultural grounds an allotment of land was set aside in 1827 for a Roman Catholic Chapel for the mostly irish convicts and their families. Here was to be Australia's earliest Catholic Parish School, the earliest mortuary Chapel, and the first convent (Sisters of Charity). Dedicated to St Patrick by Bishop Polding in 1836 the original building was replaced with a Gothic style structure in 1854 but was badly damaged by fire in 1996. Rebuilt from the ashes St Patricks was once again consecrated in 2003.*

*Not to be outdone the protestant ruling class determined to build a school and chapel between the Catholics and the river and so rose an imposing edifice- a **King's School** for the sons of families in the middle and higher ranks of life. Ambitious in intent but plain in appearance the King's School contained schoolrooms, dormitories and staff quarters with later additions including a Chapel (1887), dining hall, dormitories, domestic's quarters and a three storey armoury (1900-10). In 1964 the King's School was relocated to Gowan Brae North Parramatta and the site was purchased by the State Government.*

*Leanne:* Further along the Parramatta River site, a permanent Grey-headed Flying-fox camp site is located in the north eastern section of Parramatta Park along the banks of the Parramatta River, on the Female

Factory precinct.

Before the destruction of their habitat, flying foxes gathered in the skies in the warmer months as they returned regularly to nest and give birth in the heavy tall stands of apple gums and other eucalyptus. These giant trees once sprawled across the undulating green parklands, that had been shaped by the regular 'firestick farming' the local clan used to hunt live game and encourage new growth. Carved trees signifying special burial sites or scars from the extraction of coolamon and shields, were once numerous along the banks here.

Today the flying foxes still return but the trees are fewer and the giant trees that once stood here are now gone; sacrificed in the building of the new settlement

*Bonney: In 1968 the former King's School opened as the Marsden Rehabilitation Centre and was administered by the NSW Health Department. This decision was driven by concerns arising from the Royal Commission into Callan Park 1961 which found that people with an intellectual disability were among the most neglected and victimised in the State mental health system. Marsden was established as a residential unit where intellectually handicapped children were to be cared for, trained and rehabilitated. Among them was my younger brother who for six years of his life surrendered his will to the rule of others.*

**Leanne:** April 1789 saw a smallpox epidemic break out and sweep through the country devastating the clans around Parramatta and wider regions. More than two thirds of the Indigenous population died and the river was soon a place of great sorrow; the dead too numerous to bury with proper ceremony and the land no longer accessible to the local people.

Around this time not far from here Pemulwuy, a 'Bidjigal' man from the woodland clans west of Sydney, took up arms against the British who had begun their occupation of his clan country shortly after their arrival with the First Fleet in 1788.

The spearing of Phillip's gamekeeper by Pemulwuy in 1790 made him an outlaw in the eyes of the English authorities. Detachments of Redcoats (English Marines) were sent to capture him dead or alive and for six Bidjigal heads to be brought back as a warning to others.

In 1801 Governor King gave orders instructing Settlers to drive Aboriginal People away from the settlements by firing on them. More killings ensued, and Pemulwuy lead further daring raids on the frontier settlements.

After being pursued for several hours by armed settlers in the February of 1797, Pemulwuy entered Parramatta and challenged the men. Spears were thrown, and the soldiers stationed there responded with a volley of firepower into the Aboriginal party that stood with Pemulwuy.

For twelve years he conducted a 'guerrilla-type' of war against the invaders, often seen at the head of the raiding parties.

In 1802 however he was reportedly ambushed in the woods by settlers and shot; his head cut off and sent to England. It has yet to be returned.

*Bonney: In 1983 the Richmond Report recommended a shift from that of large mental health facilities to community care and by 1988 the residential facility at Marsden closed. All those once institutionalised 'for their own protection and care' were cast out into the community, many ended up on the streets, victimised and abused many have 'asylum' as prison inmates.*

*In 2001 the buildings were transferred to the Heritage Office with the main building and the headmaster's cottage conserved and adapted for reuse as office space. In 2003 the Heritage Office and the Heritage Council of NSW took occupation of the renovated buildings leaving the remaining boarded up to stand like ghosts from the past staring out over the once undulating grasslands of the Parramatta river.*

Leanne: The sandstone buildings and walls that stand along the river were quarried from the land that stands beneath them. The story of the local Indigenous people is still here today; it can be felt in the walls and halls of the institutions and beneath the culverts and streets of Parramatta. 'Allowan'...'we live, we remain'.

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Leanne Tobin is descended from the Boorooberongal (Richmond area) & Weymali (Prospect area) clans of the language group the Dharug, the traditional Aboriginal people of Great Western Sydney. She is committed through her work in visual and performing arts to conveying the stories and intrinsic connections the original people have had and continue to have with the land; that which is often today hidden beneath concrete and tar.

Bonney Djuric is a Sydney based artist and activist and the founder of the Parramatta Female Factory Precinct Inc (Parragirls). Adviser to playwright Alana Valentine on the development of plays, *Parramatta Girls* and *Eyes to the Floor*. Bonney has also published *14 Years of Hell and Abandon All Hope* and produced a number of short films including *Asylum*, *ILWA* and *Journey to Hay*. In 2008 she launched the Parramatta Female Factory Precinct Living Memorial campaign seeking the dedication of the Precinct to Women and the Forgotten Australians.