

# *A few words from William Dawes and George Bass*



Keith Vincent Smith explores the role of Dawes and Bass in the recording of early Sydney's Indigenous language

Records of the original language of the Sydney area, collected from Aboriginal informants by English marine officer William Dawes (1762–1836), are a rich linguistic, ethnographic and historical resource. They help to preserve the words spoken 200 years ago by the coastal clans who called themselves the Eora ('People').

Dawes had a classical education and was a skilled surveyor, engineer, mapmaker, amateur astronomer and botanist. He set up a tent observatory at the western headland of Sydney Cove (now Dawes Point) to watch for a comet due to appear in the southern skies during 1788. 'He is so much engaged with the stars,' wrote Elizabeth Macarthur

in March 1791, 'that to mortal eyes he is not always visible'. Mrs Macarthur also noted that Dawes had studied the local Aboriginal 'language and jargon a good deal'.

It was believed, as I wrote in an earlier issue of *National Library of Australia News* ('Words are Clues', February 2004), that Dawes's two small language notebooks of words and phrases, and a longer, semi-official vocabulary, had been 'rediscovered' in 1972 by Phyllis Mander-Jones at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London.

This was not strictly correct however, because extracts from Dawes's notebooks had in fact been earlier printed in the *Miscellaneous Works of William Marsden* (published in London for the author by Parbury, Allen, and Co.) in 1834, when Dawes was a missionary in Antigua in the West Indies. (He died there in 1836.)

William Marsden (1754–1836), linguist, naturalist and numismatist, had served

Robert Russell (1808–1900)  
*Dawes' Battery, Dawes' Point*  
(Sydney: J.G. Austin, 1836)  
handcoloured lithograph  
25.4 x 3.6 cm  
Pictures Collection  
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wrote, in *A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson* (London, 1793): 'Of the language of New South Wales I once hoped to have subjoined to this work such an exposition as should have attracted public notice, and have excited public esteem.' However, Dawes's abrupt departure from London for the African colony of Sierra Leone had prevented this, Tench noted, adding that Dawes had 'advanced his researches beyond the reach of competition'. (Dawes was three times governor of Sierra Leone, the African colony formed by liberated slaves, serving from 1792 to 1796.)

There is also a language contribution from the surgeon-explorer George Bass, who was likewise known to William Marsden. Bass, with Matthew Flinders, had circumnavigated Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) in the sloop *Norfolk* in 1798–99. Marsden's *Miscellaneous Works* throws new light on the activities of Bass, who disappeared on a voyage from Sydney to Peru on the trading brig *Venus* in 1803. In a section on comparative vocabularies, Marsden includes 'Sydney or Port Jackson'—with the sources given as 'G. Bass, Dawes, King Etc.'

We know that Sir Joseph Banks had given Philip Gidley King's Sydney Language vocabulary to William Marsden in December 1790. Unfortunately, Bass did not provide any unknown Port Jackson words, only variations in their written transcription. Marsden, however, prints a few Indigenous words which Bass had obtained at Broken Bay, Hunter's River (Newcastle) and Port Stephens, and also from 'Cowagary', which by comparison with

known vocabularies also appears to come from somewhere to the north of Sydney.

Marsden credits P.G. King for six Aboriginal words collected at Macquarie Harbour, Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), though as King never visited Tasmania, these were probably actually obtained by his son, Phillip Parker King, commander of HMS *Mermaid*, while at Macquarie Harbour on 12 January 1819. Also included is a Nyungar wordlist, recorded by Surgeon Isaac Scott Nind at King George's Sound (Albany, Western Australia), which had been published in the *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* in London in 1831.

In *The Life of George Bass, Surgeon and Sailor of the Establishment* (2005), Miriam Estensen says that George Bass had called on Sir Joseph Banks at 32 Soho Square, London, in May 1794, but that the great man



above:  
Augustus Earle (1793–1838)  
*Port Jackson, New South Wales*  
c.1825  
watercolour; 10.7 x 35.1 cm  
Pictures Collection  
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below:  
Unknown artist  
*Portrait of George Bass*  
(1771–1803), *Naval Surgeon and Explorer*  
b&w negative; 8.8 x 7.1 cm  
Pictures Collection  
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was away visiting his country estates. When Captain John Hunter sailed on HMS *Reliance* to take up his position as the second governor of New South Wales in 1795, George Bass and the Sydney Aboriginal man Bennelong were also on board—Bennelong having been taken to London by Governor Phillip in 1792. Bennelong (the leader of the Wangal clan, on the south shore of the Parramatta River) was ill, and Bass treated him on board, and it was probably Bennelong who provided Bass with the Port Jackson words. During the voyage, Bennelong also gave master shipwright Daniel Paine a 78-word 'Vocabulary of Part of the Language of New South Wales', now held in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, London.

With their knowledge of the Sydney Language (and some hair and beard clippings), Bass and Flinders were later able to parley with 'two natives of Botany Bay', and to extricate themselves from a tricky situation at Tom Thumb's Lagoon (Lake Illawarra) in March 1796.

In May 1799, Bass left Port Jackson for Macao in China—subsequently returning

to London via St Helena, on the East Indiaman *Woodford*, and arriving there on 4 August 1800.

Bass had previously sent a box of Australian natural history specimens and a description of the wombat to Joseph Banks. Estensen writes (p. 121): 'Comments in a letter from Banks to Governor King and a later newspaper article [not cited] suggest that [Banks and Bass] met, but no certain evidence exists.'

Bass's wordlist, however, implies that Bass *did* meet Banks, who routinely passed on vocabularies to William Marsden, his friend and colleague in the Royal Society.

KEITH VINCENT SMITH is author of *King Bungaree* (Kangaroo Press, 1992) and *Bennelong* (Kangaroo Press, 2001). He was co-curator of *Eora: Mapping Aboriginal Sydney 1770–1850*, a 2006 exhibition at the Mitchell Library Galleries, State Library of New South Wales, and will curate another exhibition there in 2009, provisionally titled *Aboriginal Voyagers*

## HARRISON BRYAN AO (1923–2008)

The National Library of Australia and wider library community were saddened to hear of the death of former National Library Director-General Harrison Bryan earlier this year.

During a career spanning 35 years, Mr Bryan served successively as Librarian of the universities of Queensland and Sydney, before becoming Director-General of the National Library of Australia in 1980. Here, for five years, Mr Bryan worked tirelessly to build the Library's reputation, not only within Australia but internationally, with particular emphasis on leadership in the Asia-Pacific region. His crowning achievement was the establishment and successful operation of the Australian Bibliographic Network (ABN), linking the country's major library collections. Though not his creation, he made the ABN a first priority for funding, and without his vigorous support, often in the face of criticism, the ABN could not have prospered.

Mr Bryan was twice President of the Library Association of Australia, and served 25 years on its General Council. He served several terms as Chairman of the Committee of Australian University Librarians, and the Australian Advisory

Council on Bibliographical Services. He served on UNESCO's Australian Advisory Committee on Libraries, was a Ford Foundation consultant on the development of libraries in Indonesia, and represented Australia on the Council of the Commonwealth Library Association. His contribution to the professional literature—more than 300 items—exceeds in number those of any other Australian librarian.

Mr Bryan was elected a Fellow of the Library Association of Australia, and received its premier professional accolade, the HCL Anderson Award. He was elected a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, and in 1984 was appointed an Officer in the Order of Australia. He also received honorary doctorates from Monash, Queensland and Sydney universities.

Harrison Bryan is survived by his wife, Florence, four children, six grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

This obituary is adapted from a longer piece written by Neil A. Radford for *The Australian*. An earlier *National Library of Australia News* story on Harrison Bryan's career ('For the Love of Libraries', March 2006) is available online, at [www.nla.gov.au/pub/nlanews/2006/mar06/article3.html](http://www.nla.gov.au/pub/nlanews/2006/mar06/article3.html)