Pemulwuy

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The Aboriginal Education Consultancy Group was consulted in the preparation of this article

ONCE THIS WAS WOODLAND, hectares covered in forest that each year renewed itself, yet remained always ancient. Those years are remembered now only in story. The *gurrewe* still screech overhead, seeking food from backyards instead of from the forest's store. But there are no *ganimantj* to be hunted, and the Bidjigal — the people of this Land — no longer hunt them. Now there are shopping centres, schools and churches and, as far as can be seen by human eye or the crow's, instead of woodland and forest there are only houses.

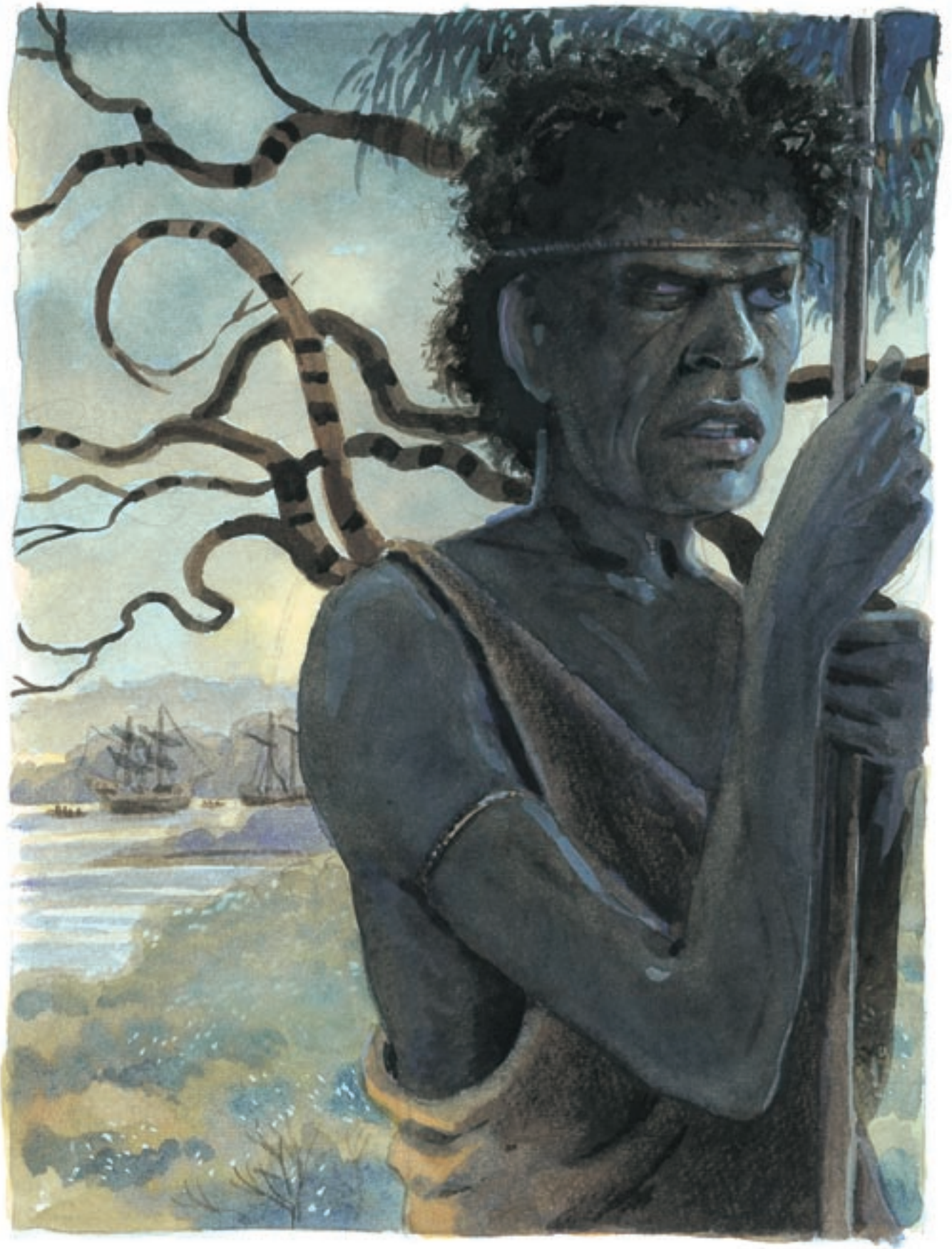
The Bidjigal are a group of the Eora people, who are the owners of the place we now call Sydney. Eora land covers about 1,800 square kilometres, from the great harbour known to its people as Tuhbowgule, to as far west as present-day Campbelltown, north to the Hawkesbury River and south to the Georges River. The Land owned by the Bidjigal people is now the Castle Hill area — west of Sydney and north of Parramatta. When this was still forest land, the Bidjigal relied for survival on the animals they could hunt and the food they could gather. More than this, the Land supplied the people with their beliefs and their stories, for the Eora live as much upon the lessons of their Dreaming as they do upon the food of their Land.

The most famous of the Bidjigal people is the greatest warrior the country now known as Australia has ever seen. He was Pemulwuy, a warrior who fought to defend his land and his people against the invasion that white history calls the British colonisation of New South Wales.

In the year known as 1788, the total number of the Eora was about 1,500. In January that year, British ships arrived at Kamay (Botany Bay), bringing the first convicts and their guards, soldiers and government representatives.

Those British ships brought just a few hundred less people than the entire Eora population. For tens of thousands of years, the number of Eora people had never been more than could be fed by the animals and plants of the land. This balance was destroyed as soon as the British ships arrived. The British took over the best land, which contained the Eora's water supplies and hunting grounds.

gurrewe—white cockatoo *ganimantj*—kangaroo



Within two days of the ships' arrival, the bush along the shore where they landed was stripped bare. Within just six months, when winter took hold, the coastal people of the Eora were starving. Disease also came, and soon smallpox and influenza played their part in reducing the numbers and weakening the spirit of the people of the Land.

As more ships and more people arrived, the British quickly expanded west — west into Bidjigal Land. Free settlers arrived: men and women looking for new lives in this "new" country. These settlers demanded more and better farmable acreage. Bidjigal hunting grounds were taken over, fenced and farmed, and strange new animals appeared, tearing up the earth with their hard, cloven-hoofed feet. Not only were the Bidjigal's food supplies being stolen and destroyed, but their sacred places, the places of their spirit and stories and singing, were being invaded and laid waste.

History, we are told, is written by the victors, and the history of Australia was written by the men who won the war against the Eora and other Aboriginal Nations across the country. And so it is that the story of Pemulwuy has rarely been told by anyone except his own people. The British men of the time who fought against Pemulwuy and his people in a war that lasted twelve long, violent years, could not admit that this was a war. To do so would be to admit that the arrival of the British "colonies" was an invasion of the Aboriginal Nations.

Little was written down about Pemulwuy. His name appears a few times in the historical records of the period, and some of the information we do have about him comes from the impressions of the British men who wrote about the early years of white Australian history. But Pemulwuy's story was largely left to his own people to tell, handed down through the generations of those Eora left to tell the tale.

To his own people, Pemulwuy is a man to be both honoured and feared. Tall and athletic in build, Pemulwuy also had a turned eye, which gave him a fierce and even frightening appearance. His name means "earth" and his birth spirit — his *rae* — was the crow. Pemulwuy was a man of earth and sky and spirit — and rage.

In November 1790, Pemulwuy speared Governor Arthur Phillip's "gamekeeper", a convict named John McEntire, who died of his injuries a couple of months later.

Before this attack, Governor Phillip had tried very hard to maintain good relationships with the Eora and to learn about them. This was even though Phillip himself had been injured by a young Kamergal man named Willemerrin at Kayumy, or Manly Cove. Governor Phillip understood that Willemerrin was frightened that he would be kidnapped and taken from his people, as several other Eora men had been in order for Governor Phillip learn about Eora culture. So Phillip did not attempt to have Willemerrin punished.

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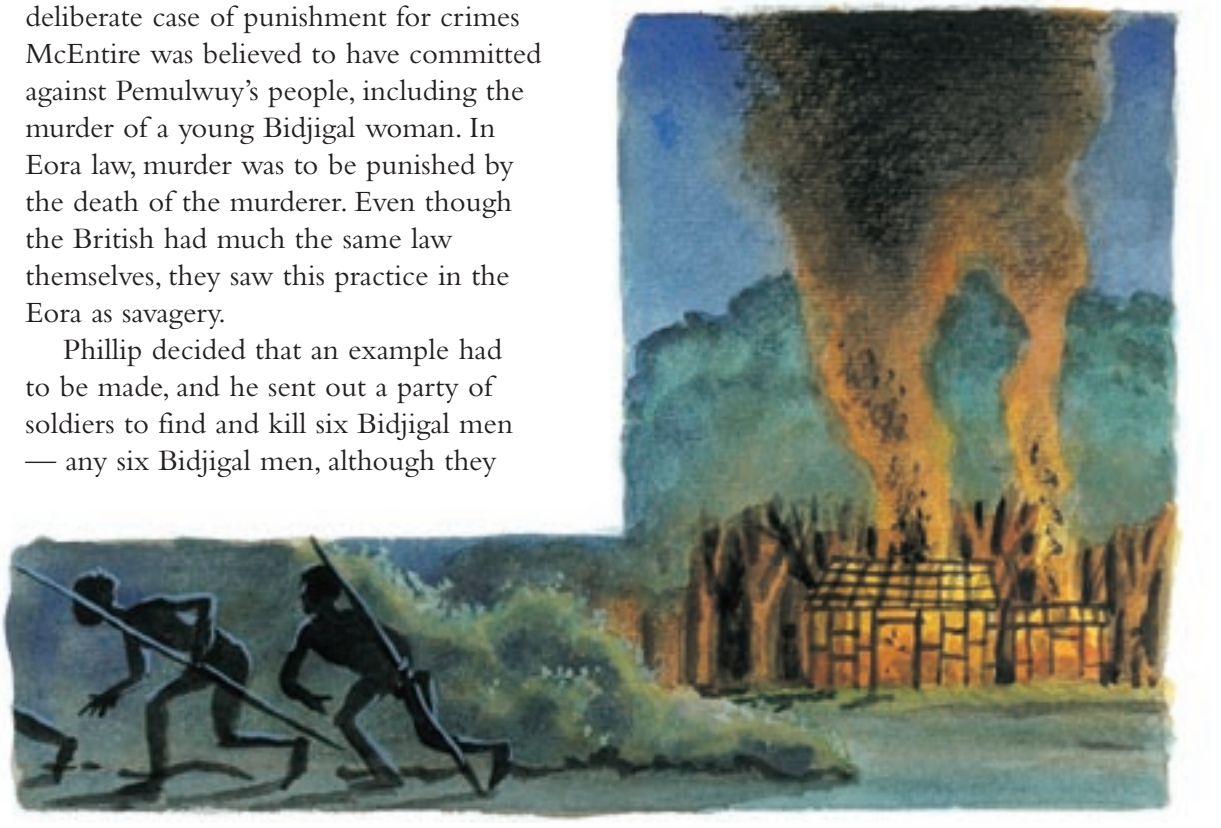
Pemulwuy's attack on McEntire, however, was something different. It was a deliberate case of punishment for crimes McEntire was believed to have committed against Pemulwuy's people, including the murder of a young Bidjigal woman. In Eora law, murder was to be punished by the death of the murderer. Even though the British had much the same law themselves, they saw this practice in the Eora as savagery.

Phillip decided that an example had to be made, and he sent out a party of soldiers to find and kill six Bidjigal men — any six Bidjigal men, although they hoped to kill Pemulwuy himself — and to bring their heads back to Sydney as a warning. Two parties attempted to do this and failed. The British had little hope of tracking down the Eora in their own Land.

From this time on, white history records many years of attacks by Eora upon white settlements and townships. Pemulwuy had great influence over Eora from groups other than the Bidjigal, and his influence became stronger and more widespread as more and more Eora died from disease or hunger, or were murdered.

At first, Pemulwuy's attacks were largely against soldiers. However, his attacks were increasingly turned against the settlers. The settlers were a more effective target, because they had more to lose — their families and property were more important to them than duty was to the soldiers.



Pemulwuy's tactics were those of guerrilla warfare. He and his warriors would strike patrols of soldiers, travelling settlers, individual farms and even townships such as Toongabbie and Parramatta in "hit and run" attacks with spears and fire. These attacks were well planned. Frequently Pemulwuy would make several attacks in one night — the first, small ones being to distract the soldiers and the "wheat protection squads", while larger and more destructive attacks were then carried out elsewhere.

Pemulwuy was injured several times in battle, and on 16 March 1797 he was severely wounded — one report said he had seven musket-shot injuries. He was brought in chains, near death, to Sydney Town, where he was kept in a locked prison cell under guard, with manacles on his feet.

Pemulwuy escaped.

Now the British began to believe what the Eora had long known about Pemulwuy — that The Crow was no ordinary man. Perhaps Pemulwuy could not be killed by muskets, these weapons from another land, and perhaps he could not be kept in chains by his enemy. This clever man could change shape, it was said, turn into a crow, and simply fly away . . .

Some escaped convicts joined Pemulwuy in the war. The stories tell us that Pemulwuy quickly learned to speak English, and startled the British with his command of their language. While Pemulwuy may have learned about British battle tactics from these convicts, he continued to fight on his own terms. His weapons came from the earth — *duwal* (spears), throwing sticks and fire. He would not use muskets: they were not his way, and to use them would make him reliant upon his enemy for gunpowder.

Fire was Pemulwuy's particular weapon. The Bidjigal had long used fire to burn down undergrowth in their forests — this was not only effective in controlling bushfire, but it also encouraged the growth of long grasses, which in turn attracted the animals the Bidjigal hunted. Now this same firing technique was used to destroy the homes and crops of the British — crops essential to the long-term success of the settlement, as well as the short-term need for food. The leaders of the British "colony" acknowledged that some of the white settlers deserved these attacks, as they had treated the Eora in terrible ways. However, many of Pemulwuy's attacks were also simple acts of warfare, regardless of the "innocence" or otherwise of the white people attacked. To Pemulwuy, all the British were his enemies, for all were responsible for the theft of his people's Land.

Not all of the Eora agreed with Pemulwuy's war and tactics. Many Eora were killed in the war, and it was particularly tragic for the Eora if a warrior died away from his own Land — for, say, a Kamergal man to die on Bidjigal Land. And many Eora were punished and killed by whites in retaliation for Pemulwuy's actions. Some Eora, such as Bennelong and others who had greater contact with the British in Sydney, could see benefits for their people from contact with the British, and did not wish the war to proceed. The British, too, were weary of the war, and began to look for ways of ending the violence while still keeping hold of the Land they had taken. The British proposed that certain areas of Land be fenced off, or "partitioned", for the Eora to live upon.

Pemulwuy's war lasted for twelve years. In that time, more and more people arrived from Britain. Time and again, Pemulwuy's battle tactics and sheer courage and determination defeated the soldiers and settlers, and his war did prevent the settlement from expanding as far and as fast as the British government had planned. Food supplies were also affected by the relentless burning of crops — just as the Eora's food supplies had been destroyed by the theft of their Land. But in the battle of numbers, the Eora could not win. Britain had an endless supply of convicts and free settlers to send deeper and deeper into the Land of the First Australians.

In 1802, Pemulwuy ended the war in the only way possible. While he lived, the war must continue, for Pemulwuy could never surrender his Land and his people to the invaders. And so, it seems, he let himself be killed in an ambush that a much less experienced warrior could easily have avoided.

Even in death, the British feared that The Crow might still fly away, and so they cut off his head and sent it to England, the trophy of a war they could not admit had even taken place. Pemulwuy's son Tedbury fought on for a few years more, but in 1805 he too was captured, and the war of resistance to the invasion of Eora Land was over.

A generation after Pemulwuy's death, the forests of his Land were gone — the trees of Bidjigal Land felled to build towns over the people's Dreaming places. Many of the people are gone, too, the Bidjigal and Kamergal, the people of the sea and the people of the forest. But the Dreaming has not gone, for the crow still flies and the Land still lies, deep under the city of Sydney.