

Collaborating with Sylvia

Lois Tilbrook*

Mount Lawley College of Advanced Education.

Take the belief that we share a common humanity which has been forged of our evolutionary past, plus our aeons of cultural and social experience. Because we have always lived as social beings, our cultural meanings have been woven into infinitely variable patterns drawn from a common set of central experiences revolving around our natural life-cycle and our sexual identity. Sylvia would add a Divine Spark as the celebration of our unique place in the universe.

Sylvia's approach to life epitomises two particularly human, if all too rare, qualities. First, that of 'not knowing it all' and of being ever ready to entertain new ideas, fresh perspectives and different viewpoints. Second, a sense of fun and a delight at being extended, surprised or jolted out of accustomed ways of thinking, and of being challenged to take on board opposing viewpoints. She does this through a sharp intellect capable of critically dissecting and sifting through argument and data in relentless analysis towards an integrated understanding. This she couples with a deep feeling for aesthetic balance. The result is an impressive contribution to her academic field, and beyond.

I didn't know any of this about Sylvia when I first met her in 1972, in Fairway where Archaeology, Linguistics and Anthropology were housed in a row of rambling houses surrounded by spectacular gums. Engrossed in my own research into contemporary urban Aboriginal life, I was largely unaware of her seminal ground-breaking archaeological research into occupation and land use by the pre-historic ancestors of the people I was doing fieldwork with.

At that point, neither of us imagined that we would come to have a 10 year collaboration at an intersection of our two disciplines, historically located at the time when Perth area Aborigines first encountered the colonial settlers who formed the Swan River Colony, 1829-1840. But a decade later we did, and this resulted in a compilation of Aboriginal biographies incorporating information on Aboriginal social and cultural contact with the new settlers, Aboriginal society and land usage, and source material on the tragedy of indigenous and colonial encounter. This was published as the Aboriginal Volume 8 of the *Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australians*.

Over that 10 year period, our lives carried on in other spheres unaffected by our efforts at deciphering the facts, let alone the deeper meanings, of this encounter and clash of cultures which was often only obliquely revealed in official documents and published journals. Events ran their course, indifferent as we struggled with diverse spellings, confused identities, unclear accounts, indecipherable writing, muddle-headed diary and journal entries, and our own differences of viewpoint and occasionally opposing opinions. Sylvia developed a passion for real estate, although she might always have harboured it because of her deep interest in 'land use', in this instance revealed in the spatial arrangements of people's homes. She moved her own house and home, her fire and hearth, several times over this period as her children grew up, her teaching and other research continued and her rank and involvement in the university increased. As always, her interests were broad-ranging and diverse.

Perhaps it will suffice to say that I regard myself privileged for having become a long-term friend and for having been a colleague and collaborator in one corner of her academic and intellectual career. Best of all, my admiration continues to grow for her breadth of intellect, depth of understanding, and her achievements, often in the face of adversity.

Others are much better placed and equipped than I, to list and praise Sylvia's contribution to Australian archaeology, and earlier her fenland work in Norfolk and East Anglia. It was a rare and satisfying moment when Sylvia visited Cambridge in 2003 to collect her Doctorate from the University of Cambridge, awarded on the strength of this latter research. We drove together through the Fens where she had done her early archaeological fieldwork. Sylvia kept up a continual stream of explanation and explication, flushed with remembrance of her student days many of which she shared with her future husband Herbert. Sadly, I have failed to retain most of this, perhaps because the dykes were high, some of the ways impassable and I was the driver.

What I can write on with more authority, is Sylvia's contribution to the history of the Aborigines of South-Western Australia. Our source material was mostly the records of the Colonial Secretary's Office, often scanty, frequently incomplete and generally frustrating. We also used the *Perth Gazette*,

* Deceased December 2006

not so incomplete in what it did contain but often fascinating for what it didn't. We supplemented these sources with published diaries, notably by the Attorney General George Fletcher Moore, and George Grey. The overall bias in these early records was towards law infringement and violence. In part this was countered by the interesting and rounded account of Aboriginal life by the Native Protector, Armstrong, in the ethnographic style of the day.

In my research I was seeking to connect historical past with ethnographic present. While Sylvia became increasingly interested in this, she had first turned to these same records as a potential source linking the early 19th century with the pre-historic past. She also saw the value of surviving oral tradition as a potential source of information which may contain traces of information about events that had taken place in the archaeological past. In this respect, her interest in ethnography extended from the earliest Australian Aboriginal settlement right up to the present moment.

This conviction that surviving oral tradition could throw light on the prehistoric past was shared independently by fellow anthropologist, archaeologist and colleague, the late Patricia Vinnicombe. This led to many a fascinating discussion on how the embers of the dying campfires of today might still reflect the fading fires of creative intelligence which had warmed the hearths of earlier humankind. This, in turn, might throw some shadowy light on the meaning of human endeavour in the areas of art, ritual and other areas of life that pragmatic economic explanation does not satisfy.

Sylvia had already made the possibility of connection between the archaeological and the written, that is, the archaeology of the western littoral and the early records of European settlement. She had scoured the documentary sources for evidence of population, land usage, and the impact of both of these on the natural environment particularly through the use of fire. This work resulted in her ground-breaking *Fire and Hearth*. I had become interested in this same body of historical records through an oral history and ethno-historical anthropological study of South-Western Aboriginal genealogies. Both living memory and record extended into the later 19th century and linked individuals with ancestors across four or five generations. The possibility of extending this further back, specifically to some of the Aborigines recorded as present in the early 19th century, was tantalising to both of us.

Together we spent many hours poring over the vicissitudes of this source material in all its transcription imperfections, partial accounts, hints and omissions at times redolent with possibilities of what might really have happened, but so often frustratingly elusive. Sylvia took to pronouncing aloud how she thought the names of Swan River Colony Aborigines might have been heard by their colonial scribes, in an attempt to establish connections between various spellings of what might have been the same name and hence

quite likely the same individual. At times she sounded like a strange calling bird, and it is this sort of memory which is a legacy of the joyous fun of working with Sylvia. Moreover, Sylvia's efforts were often vindicated when we were able to make an indisputable connection between various idiosyncratic spellings. Take for instance Yallowgonga, whose name appears with 12 variant spellings plus a possible four alternative names. On this same topic, that one person could be known to the authorities by a series of 'names', turned our record-churning into real-time detective work.

To my mind, the significant contribution that Sylvia has made to South-Western Aboriginal history is in linking, without doubt and in a very tangible way, the living people of today and their descendants to a social and cultural as well as geographic past that extends significantly back through time and indisputably establishes them in 'Place'. Even though as far as we know, no actual ancestor of any living person was turned up by our endeavours, this neither rules out speculation nor asserts impossibility. A significant proportion of the Aborigines listed in the volume, if not all of them, must be a relative of one sort or another of the living. That is to say, they can legitimately be claimed as an ancestor by the living whose families are from the South-West. Never mind that the actual link is obscured. This is because the Aboriginal population was small and, as our work shows, people's ties extended widely and connected area to area through intricate matrilineal and patrilineal rights. With European settlement Aboriginal geographical boundaries were quickly extended and re-defined by impelled or forced population movement.

This reality is very significant for a people who after the initial decade of the 1830s remained largely invisible in administrative accounts. This persisted well into the 20th century over which time their land was consistently regarded as uninhabited, in rich denial of actual experience. These were people who were deemed too uninteresting or irrelevant to take much note of and so who, at the government level, were barely nodded to or acknowledged. It was often a different story at the private level although generally this was not written about. The introduction of the 1905 *Aborigines Act* exposed the extent to which this was true, as many more people living in the South-West than had ever been envisaged became implicated in the administration of the Act.

To make the link with the long and heroic past of mankind is significant indeed for the living. Sylvia's interest in the fundamentals of human existence, the management of plant and animal natural resources including the use of fire, and the ebb and flow of groups living social and cultural lives, opened my eyes to the possibilities of humanising the past, bringing it to life, and appreciating its significance for understanding human needs now. Perhaps this has been the case for others too, and will continue to be so.