

The future of the Commonwealth

Time to mention the war

What role has the British crown played in the Aboriginal experience? This essay is the first in a series of extracts from Griffith Review 59: Commonwealth Now, which provides fresh perspectives from around the world in the lead-up to Chogm and the Commonwealth Games

by Melissa Lucashenko
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In 2002, Bundjalung songman Archie Roach released *Move It On*, a jaunty 12-bar blues number about his childhood in Victoria. He sang:

Well I was born in Mooroopna, we lived by the river bend. Well I was born in Mooroopna, we lived by the river bend, Then the Queen come and visit us!

We had to move it on again.

A royal visit sounds innocuous. But Roach's song is about how, like innumerable Aboriginal clans before and since, his family were reminded the hard way that their traditional law, custom and land tenure meant nothing should the Queen visit.

"Moving it on again" is Koori shorthand for becoming a refugee in your own country. The song goes on to tell of the Roach family's displacement on to the Framlingham mission, and of Uncle Archie's subsequent forced removal from his family and Aboriginal society. This child removal, an act that Roach sings "hurts me to this very day", saw the singer slide into homelessness and alcoholism. Queen Elizabeth's 1954 visit, in short, precipitated events that badly damaged Roach's family and very nearly destroyed his life.

There is an interesting contrast between the mood of the song and its grim content. *Move It On* has terrific energy and swing, and comes complete with slide guitar and tambourine flourishes. Upbeat and even humorous, the song embodies a classic Aboriginal cultural strategy of relentlessly mocking both fate and white authority. As the old saying has it, you have to laugh, because if you start crying there's a danger you might never stop.



Queen Elizabeth II And Prince Philip in Townsville during their 1954 royal tour. Photograph: Paul Popper/Popperfoto/Popperfoto/Getty Images

Aboriginal people's experiences with the British crown predate 1954 by a long way, of course, and range from the genocidal to the mundane. On Bundjalung land in northern New South Wales, immediately south of where the 2018 Commonwealth Games will be held on the Gold Coast, a trickle of escaped convicts, sailors and cedar-cutters invaded prior to the so-called opening up of lands by government decree. These early Europeans were opportunists and sometimes killers, operating on the frontier where Aboriginal law ruled black lives and the crown still had no meaningful presence.

For all of Lieutenant Cook's 1770 declaration of British sovereignty, nobody had thought to tell Bundjalung lawmakers that their authority had summarily ceased and that they were now British subjects. Six decades later, when Europeans arrived in earnest, the Bundjalung were more than prepared to defend their territory and sovereignty. Following the Robertson Land Act of 1861, the invasion gained pace. Aboriginal land became increasingly valuable in the eyes of squatters, and the rivers of northern New South Wales ran red with native blood.

The invasion of the mid 19th century achieved its ends. Known Bundjalung massacres occurred at Wardell, at the Broadwater, at Seven Mile Beach, at Whites Beach, at Black Head, at South Ballina, at The Pass near Byron Bay, at Kingscliff, at Mount Witherin and at Mudgeeraba (which means "place of lies", following an invitation to feast on poisoned flour). There were likely other massacres that went unrecorded.

When violence wiped out initial Aboriginal resistance, a minority of surviving Bundjalung men and youths were press-ganged and used as shock troops under white

officers, killing other Aboriginal people in the service of the crown as the frontier shifted further north. Some escaped, fleeing south for months until they climbed a gum tree, saw the distinctive shape of Wollumbin (Mount Warning) and knew they were home.

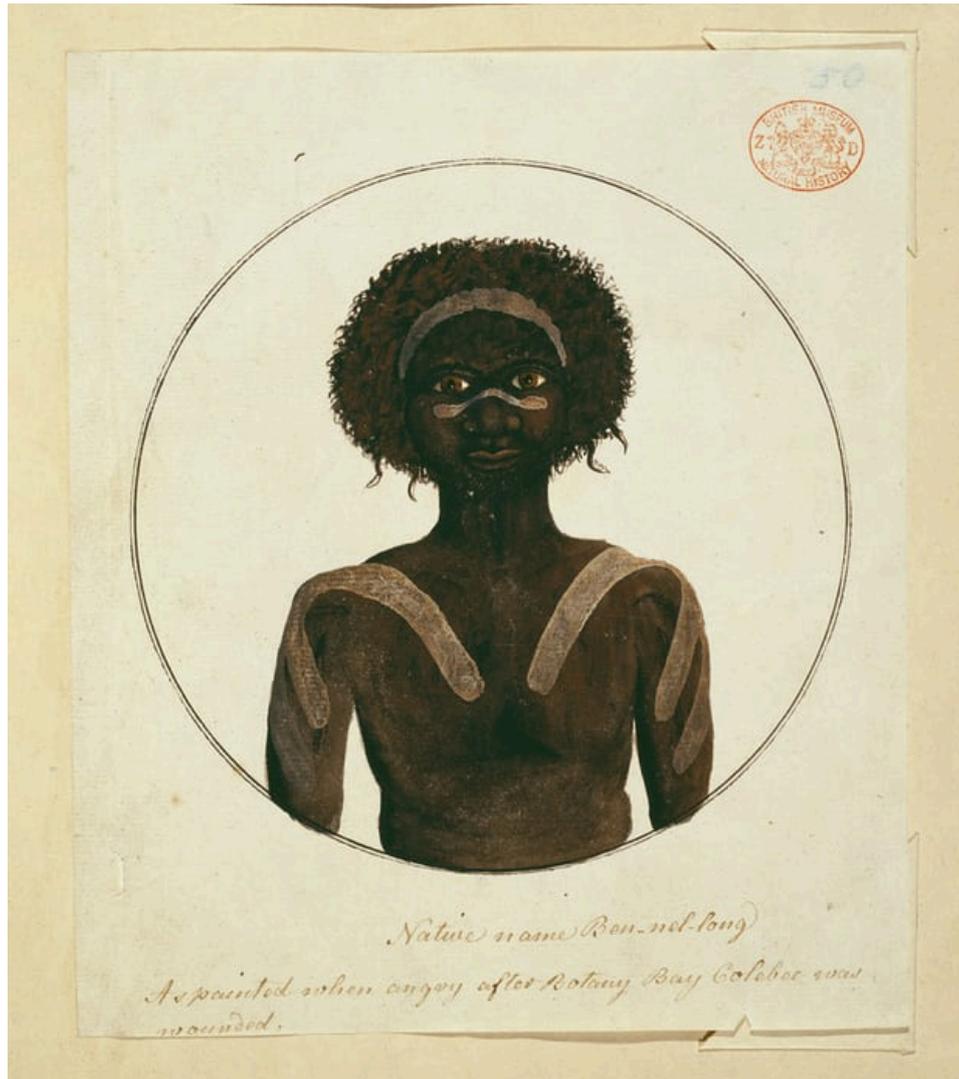
The vast majority of Bundjalung never left the “many rivers” region, though, remaining on their ancestral country, where their descendants live today. Regardless of particular family histories, the incursions under the protection of the British monarch have never been forgotten. As Aunty Lois Cook, Bundjalung elder and oral historian, says of the massacres:

Occasionally we can put up a plaque – but hardly anyone knows that they’re there, or what happened to them ... It’s like the soldiers who went to Gallipoli and perished ... those beaches are sacred ... and so should these places be to everyone. They are to us.

To non-Aboriginal people, all this might seem distant, and nothing to do with the Commonwealth. To Aboriginal people, whose oral histories are treasured, it does not. With few exceptions, events of the frontier still shape Aboriginal attitudes towards mainstream society and its institutions. History might be written by the winners, but the past is recalled and discussed and analysed by the other side too, for whom it is barely past at all.

Aboriginal thinking about the Queen and the Commonwealth today is still seen on a continuum from first contact, just as an increasing number of white Australians trace their national identity back to a battle that happened on a beach on the other side of the world in 1915. If Aboriginal Australia had a motto about our shared past it might be: Do Mention The War.

Famously, the first Aboriginal person to meet a British monarch was the Sydney man Bennelong, who was either an early Aboriginal diplomat or a lackey of governor Phillip, depending on your perspective. Other prominent Aboriginal figures across colonial Australia normally stayed home, but some allowed themselves to be incorporated into the invading society through accepting European-bestowed titles – Queen Polly, King George – and the wearing of metal breastplates denoting their status.



Bennelong was the first to meet a British monarch Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

Aboriginal governing structures are flat, not hierarchical, and it's hard to think of a more alien concept to classical Aboriginal culture than that of a monarch (although capitalist comes close). Still, in the turbulence and horror of the frontier and its aftermath, it's hard to blame anyone for wanting to safeguard their life and the lives of their countrymen by becoming a king or queen in white eyes. For many, the choice may have been that or be killed, or removed to the ignominy of a mission.

One such Aboriginal king was Bilin Bilin ("many parrots"), a Yugambeh leader from south-east Queensland. Born in the early 1800s, Bilin Bilin lived his life strategically, outwardly compliant but resistant in subtle ways. He had several names; in adulthood, Bilin Bilin wore a breastplate proclaiming him King Jackey of the Logan and Pimpama, and from all accounts believed in its message, that he had been recognised as an authority figure in his own land. He is reputed to have been a keen negotiator, who in a fascinating inversion charged the local Lutheran missionary several shillings a week to preach religion to the tribe. Wages were demanded and at times received by his clan.

The tribe cleared 10 acres (4ha) of land at the rate of £1 per acre. Surveyor Roberts had to plead for additional funding because he had to pay our people to "hump" his supplies over Tamborine Mountain.

No incarceration for Bilin Bilin then, but rather a set of difficult relationships negotiated from a position of nominal sovereignty. In truth, the relationship was far from equal. Bilin Bilin's daughter, Emily, taught school to children within the orbit of the German mission at Bethania on the northern end of the Gold Coast, but poverty and dispossession were nevertheless very real, even for Aboriginal royalty. As J Holzheimer remembered in 1922:

Although some of the more intelligent often and emphatically challenged the white man's right to encroach on their lands and destroy their forests, and with them, their means of livelihood, we were never molested by them other than by begging.

Bilin Bilin never visited King George III. Exactly like that reclusive English king, during his life he travelled no further than about 100 miles (160km) from the epicentre of his lands – but he lived long, had at least three wives and left many descendants. These descendants have written of Bilin Bilin as a man who survived the invasion and stayed relatively free, when scores of other Aboriginal people were being killed or displaced. As JG Steele puts it in *Aboriginal Pathways* (UQP, 1983):

Bilin Bilin moved about in his own country, set up strategies to protect his family, negotiated work contracts and refused to pay to travel on the new train, which by 1887 was traversing his country. He officiated at ceremonies, presided at burials and kept such 'sacred' locations a secret ... When Bilin Bilin considered that his life's work was done ... he 'sat' down at the Deebing Creek Industrial Mission with members of his extended family group ... he and his friend Billy were too old to travel and Mr Meston had at last caught them to go to Deebing.

As an old man, Bilin Bilin finally succumbed to pressure from white officialdom and went to live on the mission near Ipswich. Photographs show him with white hair, seated among a group of other Aboriginal inmates, still wearing his kingplate. Bilin Bilin died in 1901, and is buried on a mountainside in his own country – a country where Yugambah people today are once again learning to speak his tongue in the schools and homes of Logan and the Gold Coast.

Mainstream Australian attitudes to the royal family and the British monarchy have softened since the republic referendum in 1999. Australians are now about evenly divided between those who are happy to keep the Queen as head of state and those who would prefer to ditch the monarchy for an independent republic. But what about First Nations people?

There are no available statistics on Aboriginal attitudes to either the Commonwealth or to First Nations sovereignty. The Aboriginal response to the Recognise campaign to include Aboriginal people in the Australian constitution – lukewarm, for the most part – gives some indication of likely attitudes. The Aboriginal social media site IndigenousX polled readers in 2017 and discovered that more than half were hostile to constitutional inclusion. The Uluru statement from the heart on Aboriginal affairs was issued by a majority of 250 Aboriginal delegates later the same year, and argued for a two-pronged approach – an Indigenous voice or advisory body enshrined in the

Australian constitution and a treaty commission to look at agreement-making between Indigenous people and the Australian government.

Both these suggestions imply that Aboriginal people see themselves as not only effectively distinct from the Australian populace, but also ill-served by its mainstream institutions. The most cursory glance at Indigenous health, housing, education or incarceration statistics tells us that both of these things are true. Yet seeking a voice in the Australian parliament surely implies some acceptance of Australian, not Aboriginal, sovereignty, while treaty-making, at least to lay people, implies the opposite. (As prime minister John Howard argued in the 90s, a nation can't make a treaty with itself). What's going on?

In the century following Bennelong and Bilin Bilin, Aboriginal responses to the British empire, the Commonwealth and our own sovereignty have been complicated by the processes of forced assimilation and accommodation. There is no "one" Aboriginal response to anything, far less to an institution that represents the dispossession which began in 1770 and is still not settled. Given the brutality of contact history, though, and the myriad injustices that followed, it's fair to say that Aboriginal fans of the Commonwealth are not thick on the ground.

It's widely seen as a given among First Nations that only the most brazen of hypocrites would invade someone else's country, exterminate a lot of the inhabitants, try to culturally annihilate the rest and then extend the hand of "friendship" in the form of political inclusion. Opinion divides, though, on how much responsibility the crown should bear, and how much lies with the colonial society that did the invading and exterminating.

A straw poll of Aboriginal friends and family revealed general scepticism about the concept of Commonwealth. Some replies were unprintable and some hostile – "Liars" – but just as many were indifferent. "I don't think about the Commonwealth at all." Or: "It's irrelevant."

In mid September 2017, the Brisbane Aboriginal radio station 98.9 FM's afternoon news bulletin reported a proposed state memorial for the late Aboriginal musician, Dr G Yunupingu. The Queen, announced the young Aboriginal presenter, had sent official condolences upon hearing of the death of Dr Yunupingu. The royal message, the reporter went on to say with no apparent irony, had been sent from "Birmingham Palace".

Despite the general hostility or indifference, though, some Aboriginal people alive today do "like the Queen". Some have even sipped tea with her. At 90, Pat O'Connor, who refuses the Aboriginal honorific "Aunty", still lives at home in a modest timber house set back from the road on a couple of quiet Brisbane acres. Driving in, I discover a large flag adorning the porch – but it is the Australian flag on display, not the red, black and yellow you might expect an Aboriginal elder to fly. This is only the second Aboriginal home where I've seen the Australian flag so prominent.



The Aboriginal flag flies over the federal parliament Photograph: Mike Bowers for the Guardian

Over coffee I probe Pat – small and frail, but bright with energy despite her great age – about her views on the Commonwealth. She is uniquely placed to answer: Pat is one of two Gold Coast Aboriginal elders who recently flew to Buckingham Palace to meet the monarch in the lead-up to the 2018 Commonwealth Games. She and Uncle Ted Williams, a relative, took with them an artefact carved by a Mununjali Yugambeh artist, symbolic of welcome to the other indigenous people of the Commonwealth to her Yugambeh country and to the Games themselves. It was a visit interpreted by some in the Brisbane Aboriginal community as a meeting between sovereigns, though it seems doubtful that the elders themselves viewed it that way. (Ted Williams describes himself as “a very proud member of the Commonwealth family” and speaks of “reconciliation being seen to be done”.)

At her kitchen table, Pat tells me that being in the presence of the Queen “felt like meeting an old friend, or maybe my older sister”. What would her elders have thought of this event?

My aunt would have been thrilled, she would have told me to curtsy! Granny though – well, let’s say Granny would have been respectful of the Queen. We lived very different lives to the people on the missions. Granny got the old age pension, and mayor Joe Proud used to send a car to pick her up to vote in the 1930s. Mind you, Granny certainly wasn’t too impressed with all these white people turning up and taking all the best land.

Old friend or not, the royal encounter was a very formal occasion:

We had three minutes for this, 90 seconds for that. And you're told not to engage in much conversation, it's all very strictly controlled. We had a cup of tea first, [Gold Coast Commonwealth Games chairman] Peter Beattie was there and Prince Philip. We chatted about the artefact. Then the Queen came in and Ted had 90 seconds to say what he had to say. I was told I couldn't talk too much. My older sister used to do that, too, tell me to be quiet.

I ask Pat what she would have said, growing up in Southport, if someone had told her she would one day meet the Queen in London. Pat laughs at me. Royalty was only dreamed about in an era when England was six weeks away by boat. A journey then between the Gold Coast hinterland towns of Beaudesert and Boonah – half an hour by car today – meant leaving in a buggy while the roosters were crowing and arriving as night fell. England was as far away as Mars.

There was discrimination in her childhood – “ropes in the cinemas at Beaudesert and Southport, separating us from the white people”. Her older, darker sister wasn't allowed to swim in the public pool at Mount Gravatt. And at a time when all Queensland Aborigines were technically state wards:

We were aware of the risks of being taken. We'd see the cops driving down the street and Mum was always worrying. 'I wish Theresa would send those kids to school.' At that time lot of white professionals from Brisbane had holiday houses on the coast. They'd turn up for a weekend and have an Aboriginal servant with them, you know, a girl from Cherbourg or somewhere, and so of course they'd come to our house and just dump the Aboriginal girl with us to mind. No asking, they'd just arrive. Mum got quite fed up with that.

Nevertheless, her Aboriginal family felt very much a part of the wider community:

But Cyril Williams would coach sport, you know, and my parents would do volunteer work. We felt very Australian. And everything at that time turned back to England. As kids, England was where the King lived, there were connections with the war, with loyalty. We saw ourselves as British citizens, oh yes.

Probed about Aboriginal sovereignty and the historic theft of land, Pat reflects that “we had a very elementary view of history, growing up”, and that her family always saw governor Arthur Phillip, not the King, as responsible for the ills of history. They grew up regarding the royal family as “figureheads, not the real power”.

Like some other Yugambah people involved in the Commonwealth Games preparations, Pat sees herself as a willing host to the 71 nations that will visit her ancestral lands. Her job as a responsible elder is to welcome the visitors and ensure their safety while on her country.

Not everyone welcomes the Queen and her envoys though. There will be protests against the games, I remind her, by more radical Aboriginal groups who have sought formal permission from the Yugambah traditional owners to proceed, offering red ochre as a sign of good faith. Some of those intending to protest have burned the very same flag that hangs so prominently outside her front door. Pat tells me that she worries about young people who believe they have to seek vengeance for past wrongs.

I remind her of the Walmajarri artist Uncle Jimmy Pike, who also went to Buckingham Palace, and of his ultimate conclusion. “As long as she gives us our country, we can keep the Queen.” Pat pauses, before reflecting:

Somebody took a group of us elders on a cruise not long ago, a boat cruise on the canals recently down the coast there, and you know, it wasn't enjoyable in the end. It was so sad, really. All those big houses, Stefan [a celebrity hairdresser] and the rest, you know, built on the riverbanks where we grew up and played and fished. But what can you do? You can't look back.

“We have to look forward. We need to see ourselves as the equals of white people in society, or if not as equals,” urges this great-great-granddaughter of the king, Bilin Bilin, “then we have to lead.”