

# THE SYDNEY LANGUAGE: WILLIAM DAWES IN AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

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█ Familiar images of Sydney, displaying its sparkling harbour, opera house and bridge, belie the darkness of its short history. For Delia Falconer, in her recent ‘biography’ of Sydney, the city’s ‘fundamental temperament is melancholy’ (2). Over two hundred years of European settlement have brought countless tales of grim encounters in quiet alleys, graves found in the bush, bodies bobbing to the surface of rivers. And there is an older shock, hidden in the landscape, the sudden, calamitous arrival of an alien civilisation.

Falconer tells us that her ‘own Sydney, like everyone’s, is partly imaginary’ (9). The city we imagine is imbued with memory, our own lived experience of a place. As well, for many, the marks laid on this place are literary, written there by the writers of this city. What we have read about Sydney works its way into the layers of experience and imagination laid onto the city and landscape. Recent literature has made attempts to see its way back to the start, to the moment when everything changed here, through imagining the arrival in Sydney of William Dawes, astronomer, surveyor and amateur linguist with the First Fleet. This scientist and marine, so vital to the colonial project of measuring, navigating, pinning things down, developed an intimacy with a culture whose way of being in the world had little in common with his own.

Several writers have recently explored Dawes’ experience in the colony of New South Wales. Fictional accounts include Ashley Hay’s *Body in the Clouds* (2010) and British writer Jane Rogers’ *Promised Lands* (1995), while recent narrative histories include sections of Inga Clendinnen’s *Dancing with Strangers* (2003) and Tim Flannery’s *The Birth of Sydney* (1999). Here I have chosen to focus upon Ross Gibson’s recent speculative account of Dawes: *26 Views of the Starburst World* (2012), and Kate Grenville’s *The Lieutenant* (2008). These texts provide a dialogue on questions of narrative form, bound up with debates about telling and understanding history. Grenville’s earlier colonial novel, *The Secret River* (2005), attracted

criticism from historians; because Grenville, discussing her book with Ramona Koval, suggested that ‘empathising and imaginative understanding’ are what novelists bring to the understanding of history. Several historians, notably Clendinnen in her essay ‘The History Question,’ took issue with the claim that such an act is part of historical enquiry. In Grenville’s subsequent novel, *The Lieutenant*, she once again uses a formally traditional novel to evoke empathy for people of the past, here applying her techniques to the actual historical figure of Dawes. Gibson’s account of Dawes presents a challenge to this way of approaching a historical figure—implicitly, through its fragmented structure, and explicitly, in its introductory comments. While both texts extrapolate from the notebooks, Grenville’s novel erases the departures of the imagination from historical record, while *26 Views* might be called a description of these departures, a careful record of supposition and extrapolation.

How might we go about the task of going back to first meetings, to erasing imaginatively all that has come since? What does it mean to imagine oneself back to the beginning of an encounter that benefited one culture at such detriment to another? Why Dawes? Why now? And how do we tell that particular story? Through an examination of Gibson and Grenville’s imaginative explorations of Dawes’ time in New South Wales, which share many key moments of the Dawes biography but differ in form and emphasis, I aim to unpack the recent fascination with this figure, the ways in which he seems emblematic of painful missteps in Australian history that might be seen as anything but inevitable, and to pick a way through some of the arguments about form and genre.

The historical record gives us a reasonable quantity of information on Dawes, given that he was a key figure in many events of the period. *The Australian Dictionary of Biography* notes the following. He came to New South Wales as a marine, and on the recommendation of the Astronomer Royal, was charged with observing the southern skies for a comet. He was also employed as an engineer and surveyor and was a key figure in the laying out and construction of the settlement at Sydney Cove, in navigating expeditions and in map making. He wished to stay in the colony, and although his ongoing position as engineer was approved, Governor Arthur Phillip required an apology for two misdemeanours: buying flour rations from a convict, and declaring publicly his opposition to a revenge raid on local people after the killing of Phillip’s gamekeeper. Refusing to apologise, he was sent home in 1791 with the rest of the marines. He had connections with William Wilberforce and went on to be governor of Sierra Leone, spending his last twenty-three years in Antigua where he worked for the anti-slavery cause, dying in 1836 (Mander-Jones). Contemporary accounts are generally sympathetic to the image of Dawes left by the record. For example, Flannery writes in *Birth of Sydney* that he ‘spent a lifetime trying to build links between black and white’ and that his move to the West Indies was part of his work as a ‘tireless campaigner against slavery’ (26–27).

Unfortunately, Dawes left little in the way of personal papers. Unlike his friend Watkin Tench, he did not publish narrative accounts of life in the colony that might have given some insight into how he viewed his position. What he did leave was a pair of language notebooks, which only came to the notice of Australian researchers in 1972 (‘Notebooks of William Dawes’), recording fragments of the local indigenous language, largely from conversations with a girl called Patyegarang at his observatory and camp at what is now known as Dawes Point. These have provided beguiling and generative glimpses into the first moments of contact, and set in counterbalance with the historical record, have fuelled literary imaginations. Grenville and Gibson, exploring the resonances and tensions between what is known of him and what he personally left behind, have imagined a socially awkward man with a questing intelligence,

perched on the shore of the harbour, testing the wind and his knowledge of the stars, away from the other colonists on the point where the southern stanchions of the bridge now stand, conducting a series of conversations that opened his intelligence to distinctly un-colonial ways of being in the world.

Charged with surveying the streets of the new colony, navigating expeditions with his famously accurate method of counting steps (1788 187), even while chatting, and looking for a comet, he nevertheless found the time for friendship and exchange of knowledge with a young girl called Patyegarang. Intriguing fragments of their conversations find us here, two hundred years from the moments in which they were offered. 'Why don't you sleep?' 'Because of the candle' (qtd. in Clendinnen, *Dancing* 156).

What several writers find appealing is his shift from a focus on the measurements of empire to a sensitivity to the country and the language. In her fictionalised account, Grenville casts the above moment in this 'friendship like no other' (298) in an innocent light, with her fictionalised Lieutenant Daniel Rooke taking care of some children who sleep in his observatory. Clendinnen says that the recorded exchanges, citing this one, 'have a pleasantly domestic and sometimes an erotic flavour' (*Dancing* 156). Falconer writes of Dawes that 'he opened himself up to this landscape, let it pour in...' (*Sydney* 69). The elusive experience of Dawes suggests a possibility, poignant in its having been extinguished, of reaching towards understanding of the people and the country he encountered.

In spite of his apparent sensitivity, Dawes was central to the imperial project, a vital instrument in Watkin Tench's vision of 'confusion giving way to system' (Gibson 55). His surveying of territory, mapping of constellations and keeping of time bring 'European ways of constructing space and place' (Ashcroft 125) to a place where time and space work entirely differently. Yet he of all people immerses himself in what the language he learns suggests about the interconnectedness of people, place and time in this new world. His appeal to contemporary writers is increased by the resistance noted by Governor Phillips to a revenge raid on the local people, and his subsequent rejection of any further orders at odds with his conscience.

However, Dawes' reputation is not untarnished. A later spell as governor of Sierra Leone gave rise to a number of grim allegations, and not all contemporary critics look so kindly on his relationship with the local girl as do Grenville and Clendinnen. Cassandra Pybus is impatient with the legend of 'the saintly William Dawes' (12.1). 'In his hut at Observatory Point,' she writes, 'he installed an Aboriginal girl of about 14 or 15...His transcriptions of her words to me suggest an unmistakably sexual element in their relationship' (12.1). In Sierra Leone, where Dawes was later governor over freed and resettled slaves, he said that he believed that slavery was necessary in this settlement (12.4). As well, it was claimed at the time that he purchased African labourers, worked them without payment, hired them out, and hunted them when they escaped, referring to this system as 'apprenticeship' (12.4). It was also reported by the first Crown governor of Sierra Leone, Thomas Perret Thompson, that 'Dawes was a debaucher of local African women, as well as the wives and daughters of the black settlers. Worse yet, Thompson charged that Dawes encouraged women to kill the babies that resulted from such liaisons' (12.4). Apart from these later accusations, several sources also mention Dawes' illegal trading of rationed flour in Sydney, though Gibson at least is willing to believe that this may have been for the purposes of negotiation with the Eora (177).

How are such difficulties dealt with in the contemporary accounts? Though far less hostile than Pybus, Gibson begins his study of Dawes with his appearance before the slavery committee in London after his trouble-riven stint as governor of Sierra Leone (7). Beginning in this way, Gibson deliberately presents us with a complex figure, all the better perhaps to wonder at the range of readings he offers of what emerges from the language notebooks. He pays illuminative attention to the glimpses of potential he sees in Dawes' time at Sydney Cove. At the heart of the book is a spark of encounter. The meeting of a knowledge system in which 'all beings might be interdependently cognate...seems to have worked into him a revelatory shimmer that was almost mystical' (11). The experience of reading this book is suffused with that feeling of encounter, of reaching towards a kind of knowledge that is located just at the tips of one's fingers, or perhaps slightly beyond. Falconer, in her review of his book, writes that Gibson 'meets the novelist Gail Jones, who borrows the almost fervent precision of fictocriticism so successfully in her fiction, coming in the opposite direction' ('History Catches Up'). The revelatory shimmer that Gibson finds in the language notebooks, and that many find in Jones' fiction, emanates too from this unusual account of a historical figure.

It is worth looking in some detail at what Gibson says about the design of his book, because he is asking a question that seems to lie at the heart of recent debates about telling stories of the past. What do the elements of the story require? How best to reach across the distance that divides us from that time and those people, with all we know about what came afterwards? How do we tell this story? Judging from the number of writers who have lately tried to answer this question in relation to Dawes, the question is an important one'

engendering empathy blocks aspects of existence 'such as conundrum and incomprehensibility as well as character-traits such as indeterminacy, multiplicity and mutability' (17). Grenville's novel, *The Lieutenant*, is 'well made' but it is a nineteenth century form. Gibson writes:

Dawes encountered something stranger and stronger than the individualism that was being ratified in the bourgeois revolutions of Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, when the literary form of the novel was rising to prominence and serving that sensibility. (18)

There are other forms that might do justice to the meeting of two ways of being, and the spark across the gap that Dawes suggests to contemporary writers.

Later in the book, describing the way in which Dawes tries to understand the language and the system of living that has given rise to it, Gibson says that 'Dawes seeks a system of small stories' or 'scribbled miniatures' in which he senses a 'vast and complex world.' Gibson contrasts this with Tench's pre-shaping of his narrative, 'having "methodised" it already by predetermining the form he can impose on the narrative' (193). This seems to echo the tension

between the form Gibson seeks and those he calls ‘nineteenth-century novels’. Little, illuminative scenes that suggest the vastness of mystery tell us more than a satisfyingly shaped novel, built to serve the bourgeois image of progress. Gibson talks of the ‘generative incompleteness’ of Zen temples and gardens as a model here, and the haiku, a form that reveals the “forensic” potency in fragment-systems and scenarios’ (194–5), going on to offer a dazzling analysis of the shifts of scale, sensory experience and movement in haikus by Seishi and Robert Gray.

In an earlier essay on Dawes entitled ‘Event-grammar’, Gibson focused in this minute and particular way on the scenes conjured in the Eora language notebooks and what it might be possible to conjecture about them now. This is his ‘event-grammar’ in action; a system of miniatures that resist full interpretation, that generate sparks of knowledge amid constellations of mystery. In this way, Gibson ‘works with rather than works away the estrangement that the notebooks show not only between two cultures but also between the present and the past’ (17). He strives to avoid the ‘the lures of fellow feeling’ that novelists like Grenville evoke so powerfully, because ‘some aspects of consciousness and the cosmos—many of which Dawes witnessed—are not susceptible to representation through novelistic empathy and narrative conclusiveness’ (17–18).

There are echoes of Clendinnen here. Writing on Grenville’s *The Secret River* and her subsequent interviews, Clendinnen expressed her wariness of what she calls ‘Applied Empathy’ (‘History Question’ 20), seeing it as a sort of trick. It is ‘the peculiar talent of the novelist to penetrate other minds through exercising her imagination upon fragmentary, ambiguous, sometimes contradictory evidence’ (20). When Grenville asks ‘*What would I have done in that situation, and what sort of person would that make me?*’ [italics in original] it is a flawed question, according to Clendinnen, because ‘Grenville would not have been Grenville in “that situation”’ (20). There is no use in Grenville trying to see this situation from the inside of her character William Thornhill’s mind, the argument goes, because the self she is taking in there is too alien to make an assumption of such close understanding.

At the heart of Gibson’s exploration of the fitness or otherwise of certain literary forms is a debate about otherness. How knowable to us now are people from other times? Clendinnen emphasises the limitations of our imagination, while Grenville suggests that we can in a sense know those people, from that other time. Further, that there is value and serious purpose in doing so. Gibson does not couch his argument in terms of Clendinnen’s ‘ravine’ (‘History Question’ 30) separating the novelists and historians. He writes of a spectrum that ranges from historical fiction to fictional history and along which ‘useful, responsible speculation can range’ (26 *Views* 135). Nevertheless, he makes a claim for form which defines itself against what Grenville is doing in *The Lieutenant*.

On rereading the novel after Gibson’s *26 Views*, it is notable how often these two writers focus on similar aspects of Dawes’ character and experience. This might be expected to some extent, because of the paucity of the material he left behind, and because of how emblematic

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the surviving scraps are of what seems a rare intimacy and curiosity between beings from different worlds. However, given the emphasis that Gibson places on form, the books have more in common than might be expected. For example, central to *The Lieutenant* is a shift in thinking that suggests a shift in being; a rearrangement of the self. Grenville's Lieutenant Daniel Rooke sees early on that languages are 'machines for thinking' (10). By the moment he defies the governor, he 'seemed to have been replaced, syllable by syllable, by some other man' (280). Part of his awareness of having encountered something deeply different in New South Wales from previous experience is his response to the stories of Captain Talbot Silk—Grenville's stand-in for Watkin Tench—in a manner that echoes the tensions over form that Gibson outlines. 'Silk's impulse was to make the strange familiar, to transfer it into well-shaped smooth phrases. His own was to enter the strangeness and lose himself in it' (139). Embedded within Grenville's own 'smooth' narrative is this debate over how the story of 'strange' encounters should be told. The novel, while not experimental or defamiliarising in structure, nevertheless acknowledges the tensions implicit in telling such a story in such a form.

This is not to underplay the importance of form and its effect on the reader. Grenville gives us a traditional trajectory; the awkward, lonely boy becomes a man whose peculiarities place him perfectly to deal with the unique adventure presented to him. The form is designed to engender the fellow feeling that Gibson is careful to avoid. It is difficult to resist affection and sympathy for a person when their story is told in this way. We feel that we understand him because we have seen him grow. The end of the novel, and Rooke's friendship with Tagaran, is moving, graceful and satisfying:

As the wind filled the sails and Gorgon picked up speed down the harbour, he waved, and she answered straight away, her arm drawing one large shape through the air. Between them across the water a long thread stretched out, spinning out longer and longer as their figures grew small.

Soon Tagaran became indistinguishable from the rocks around her, the rocks indistinguishable from the headland, the headland nothing more than a distant part of the landscape. Tagaran was invisible now, but she was a part of everything he could see, like the faintest, most distant star, sending its steady light out towards him across space. (Grenville 302)

To relate this to personal experience, when I take the Manly ferry now this beautiful, sad image of a thread spinning out between the bays of the long harbour is often present to me, beyond what can be seen, infusing the loveliness of the setting with a kind of mournfulness. Such responses, particularly to a novelist with the skill of Grenville, are just the problem, perhaps. Stella Clarke wrote in *The Australian* that '*The Lieutenant* is harder to defend than *The Secret River* against McKenna's accusation that novelists slip too readily towards "comfort history".' Having lived through the emotions, readers feel perhaps that they have done their work. It is possible though to see the process that Grenville enacts in these novels of colonial beginnings not as solace, but as a reminder of what is missing from this place, as the deliberate placing of a layer of a certain kind of knowledge across the landscape. Her novels are only a part of the conversation in which she participates. One of the reasons that she draws fire is that she is willing to articulate her motivations and processes to an unusual extent. In an essay entitled 'Unsettling the Settler,' she wrote that 'The journey of writing involved me in a profound re-examination and re-experiencing of what it might mean to be an Australian.' She talks of a feeling of intimacy with the bush that she had as she was growing up, even a sense that she 'could live a little the way the Aboriginal people had...It was as if I was saying "they are gone, but I am their rightful heir because of my deep bond with the place".' The implications of this

attitude are that ‘there’s nothing to be “sorry” for.’ What has happened is that ‘we’ve denied the idea of ourselves as the “other” here.’ We’ve ‘taken a short cut to “belonging” by appropriating the belonging of the people who really do belong here.’ Grenville’s recent novels play a central role in the project of a ‘settler’ questioning her sense of belonging and place, feelings that have relied on the erasure of the people who were here first. There is an ethically motivated impulse at work in this project that need not be at odds with historical enquiry.

Grenville writes memory back into the landscape, to suggest a new version of the world to replace the one she understood herself to occupy. She writes in her memoir *Searching for the Secret River* of a realisation of ‘once-fullness’ of the bush, that it is ‘empty the way a room was when the people had that minute walked out of it’ (139). How the place we live in is conceptualised, or imagined, is at the heart of postcolonial experience. Grenville is working through how settlers might more fully regard their connection to it. Bill Ashcroft writes that ‘[a]ll constructions and disruptions of place hinge on the question: “Where do I belong?”’ (125) and writes of ‘spatial histories’ that examine ‘place as a palimpsest on which the traces of successive inscriptions form the complex experience’ of such places (155). Sydney is inscribed, literally, in the art and marks of living left by its first people, and by the writers who imagine back to the start. Grenville’s novels, to use Stella Clarke’s words, ‘help keep the past open, its atmosphere breathable.’ The layers of Sydney, the sense of the change that came with the British, are part of an imaginary city that helps us to hold in mind the difficulties of belonging.

To return to the idea of form and its relationship to an ethical examination of the past, the novelist James Bradley, responding to Clendinnen’s essay, wrote of the apparent gulf between history and literature, and argued that as these disciplines examine the silent spaces of the Australian past they are actually ‘complementary, one a mapping of the real, of what was, the other a mapping of the subconscious, of the way we understand the real, and of the way we understand ourselves’ (76). This formulation acknowledges that there are different tasks to be tackled, elements of the same quest. It can also be extended to a consideration of the way we understand our city. Falconer claims that Sydney’s fundamental mood is melancholy; this is because of what is not seen: ‘Something is missing, even, or perhaps particularly, when the city is at its most soft-aired and shiny’ (*Sydney* 10). She gives the primary reason for this as ‘the destruction of the language and culture of the Eora before the loss could even be grasped’ (10). However, the connection that Falconer makes between this mood and the devastation of the local people on contact with the British is not automatic or explicit, at least for Europeans and other relative newcomers. Recent writing about Lieutenant William Dawes of the First Fleet brings home the loss, writing back into the landscape a sense of who was here before.

With its invitation to imagine the ‘once fullness’ of this place, via the form of a novel that presents its central relationship with care and sympathy, *The Lieutenant* helps us to lay a ‘mapping of the subconscious’ across the familiar features of the harbour and the city. Grenville has infused the landscape with melancholy, a sense that beneath the layers of the city, of our daily lived lives amid its extraordinary beauty, lies something else: a memory, a loss.

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