



Yarnuping I – The First Pandemic

I have been listening to the news and hear people saying again and again that this is the first major pandemic Australia has faced. Why does history and health in Australia so often take a non-Aboriginal perspective and ignore Aboriginal peoples' 60,000 years of custodianship and experience?

The first pandemic in Australia was the one that principally affected the Aboriginal population, decimating communities in the Sydney area. It was a name that brought fear across the world until only recently. Smallpox. Many Indigenous people elsewhere had been killed by this contagion: as well as in the so-called civilised parts of the world. It came to this continent at the time of the arrival of the First Fleet on the in January 1788. Soon after the French ships, Le Geographe and Le Naturaliste landed at Botany Bay also with their cargo of officers, a merchant navy and intimate connection with the diseases of the world.

Was the small-pox deliberately distributed. This is still a matter of conjecture among many.

History of Small- Pox and its Spread in Indigenous Cultures

"It reached Europe no later than the 6th century, ... By that time, the contagious disease, caused by the variola virus, had spread all across Africa and Asia as well, prompting some cultures to worship special smallpox deities."

In the Old World, the most common form of smallpox killed perhaps 30 percent of its victims while blinding and disfiguring many others. But the effects were even worse in the Americas, which had no exposure to the virus prior to the arrival of Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors. Tearing through the Incas before Francisco Pizarro even got there, it made the empire unstable and ripe for conquest. It also devastated the Aztecs, killing, among others, the second-to-last of their rulers. In fact, historians believe that smallpox and other European diseases reduced the Indigenous population of North and South America by up to 90 percent, a blow far greater than any defeat in battle. Recognizing its potency as a biological weapon, Lord Jeffrey Amherst, the commander-in-chief of British forces in North America during the French and Indian War, even advocated handing out smallpox-infected blankets to his Native American foes in 1763."

Smallpox continued affecting princes and paupers alike. In the 17th and 18th centuries, it killed several reigning European monarchs, affected Queen Elizabeth 1 and Abraham Lincoln and an estimated 400,000 commoners died annually in Europe.

(1.)

Lying dead on the beaches

The evidence of small- pox and other diseases is written about widely in the First Fleet Texts.

"Every boat that went down the harbour found them lying dead on the beaches and in the caverns of the rocks...

They were generally found with the remains of a small fire on each side of them and some water left within their reach."

Lieutenant Fowell 1790

(2.)

"The venereal disease also has got among them, but I fear our people have to answer for that, for though I believe none of our women had connection with them, yet there is no doubt that several of the Black women had not scrupled to connect themselves with the white men. Of the certainty of this extraordinary instance occurred. A native woman had a child by one of our people. On its coming into the world she perceived a difference in its colour, for which not knowing how to account, she endeavoured to supply by art what she found deficient in nature, and actually held the poor babe, repeatedly over the smoke of her fire, and rubbed its little body with ashes and dirt, to restore it to the hue with which her other children has been born. Her husband appeared as fond of it as if it had borne the undoubted sign of being his own, at least as far as complexion could ascertain to whom it belonged..."

It was by no means ascertained whether the lues Venerea had been among them before they knew us, or whether our people had to answer for having introduced that devouring plague. Thus far is certain, however, that they gave it a name, Goo-bah-rong.....*

David Collins 1789

(3.)

* **lues venerea** - a common venereal disease; symptoms change through progressive stages; can be congenital (transmitted through the placenta) **lues**, pox, syph, syphilis.

Left the dead to bury the dead

Some of the descriptions are heart-breaking. Perhaps now with our own families and communities facing the fear of this pandemic can we gain more of an appreciation of what people were experiencing as their lives were torn apart.

"In 1789 they were visited by a disorder that raged among them with all the appearance and virulence of the small-pox. The number that it swept off, by their own accounts, was incredible. At that time a native was living with us; and on our taking him down to the harbor to look for his former companions, those who witnessed his expression and agony can never forget either. He looked anxiously around him in the different coves we visited; not a vestige on the sand was to be found of human foot; the excavations in the rocks were filled with the putrefying bodies of those who had fallen victims to the disorder; not a living person was any where to be met with. It seemed as if, flying from the contagion, they had left the dead to bury the dead. He lifted up his hands and eyes in silent agony for some time; at last*

he exclaimed, 'All dead! All dead!' and then hung his head in mournful silence, which he preserved during the remainder of our excursion."

*"Some days later he learned that the few of his companions who survived had fled up the harbour to avoid the pestilence that so dreadfully raged. His fate has been already mentioned.** He fell a victim to his own humanity when Boo-rong, Nan-bar-ray, and others were brought into town covered with the eruptions of the disorder. On visiting Broken Bay, we found that it had not confined its effects to Port Jackson, for in many places our path was covered with skeletons, and the same spectacles were to be met with the hollows of most rocks of the harbour.*

Notwithstanding the town of Sydney was at this time filled with children, many of whom visited the natives that were ill of this disorder, not one of them caught it, though a North - American Indian, a Sailor belonging to Captain Ball's vessel, the Supply, sickened of it and died.*

To this disorder they also gave a name, Gal-ga-la; and that it was the small-pox there was scarcely a doubt; for the persons seized with it was affected exactly as Europeans are who have that disorder; and on many that had recovered from it we saw traces, in the ravages of it on the face.

As a proof of the numbers of these miserable people who were carried off by this disorder, Bennilong told us, that his friend Cole-bes tribe being reduced by its effects to three persons, Cole-be Nan-bar-ray, and someone else, they found themselves compelled to unite with some other tribe, not only for their personal protection, but to prevent the extinction of their tribe. Whether this incorporation ever took place I cannot say; I only know the natives themselves, when distinguishing between this man and another of the same name at Botany Bay, always styled him Cadi Cole-be; Cadi being the name of his district; and Colebe, when he came into the field some time after, appeared to be attended by several fine boys who kept close by his side, and were of his party.

(3.)

David Collins 1789

* Arabanoo

** Died from the small – pox while caring for his people

*** Here we can see the effects of pandemics on Indigenous peoples

Sydney clans not alone

We should not assume the only victims of smallpox and other diseases were only in the Sydney area. Watkin Tench, a military officer with the First Fleet, hints at its rapid spread in Australia and through Country.

"...a native, from his canoe, entered into conversation with us, and immediately after paddling to us with a frankness and confidence which surprised everyone. He was a man of middle age, with an open cheerful countenance, marked with the smallpox, and distinguished by a nose of uncommon magnitude and dignity".

(4)

Watkin Tench 1788

This is a revealing statement by Tench. It suggests that smallpox and other diseases had penetrated the interior and killed part of the population before the English had even set eyes on the Country.

This also suggests that Country, kinship and other social ties would have been severely affected, before the English ever penetrated the interior.



Truganini at the age of sixty-five. By the age of seventeen, she had been raped, seen her mother stabbed, her uncle shot, her stepmother kidnapped, her sisters captured and kidnapped, and her betrothed murdered.

There is also evidence of Aboriginal communities elsewhere along the Australian coast, particularly in the Southern Ocean, where whalers and sealers were passing on diseases, kidnapping women and even keeping women as sex slaves on isolated islands.

Something to Consider

Many historians consider it was introduced disease rather than violence, which had the most destructive impact on Aboriginal people and their cultures throughout Australia. This is not true. Disease did affect communities and we cannot fully gauge the impacts to the social and economic structures of traditional communities. But violence had a different level of impact that was commonly drawn out over generations, from the violence of frontier to the violence and brutality of incarceration and the mission/reserve/children's homes system. Intergenerational trauma is being increasingly acknowledged. The United Nations has recognized that the practice of systematic genocide was also occurring.

Quarantine Station and Diseases that Entered Australia



Photo Credit: John Lee

In 2017 I was involved with an exhibition called 'North Head Project'. The exhibition left me deeply affected by the stories the eight artists told on the various uses of the North Head site. Nathalie Hartog-Gautier left me spell bound with her research and artistic impression of disease. She says

"I have created a set of plates telling the story of the viruses. Their images as well as the drawings of the animals responsible for carrying those particular viruses.." She has allowed me to use photos of some of her works to demonstrate the diseases that have come to Australia. Many in 1788, with the merchant seaman and the convicts and marines themselves.

(5.)

All in this together

As we distance ourselves from our community and ponder our fate, let us also take this opportunity to consider the lives of so many other Australians who have faced similar and worse situations. Those who spent so long locked away at the Quarantine Station at North Head suffered in isolation, and those who survived and would become part of the new nation would never forget it. But for Aboriginal Australia, particularly the First Australians of this area, their stories have been too easily forgotten. Yet the ripples of their experiences remain. We should open our hearts and remember them.



Photo Credit: John Lee

1. <https://www.history.com/news/the-rise-and-fall-of-smallpox>
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3. An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, Volume 2, David Collins
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4. 1788 Watkin Tench, Book 1, A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay, Pages 192 /193
5. <https://www.nathaliehartog.com.au/>
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