



Reminiscences on A History of Spencer: Bumblefoot

'Through the surrounding bushland during 1824 there moved an aborigine who, like the earlier 'Branch Jack', was determined to contest the white man's intrusion at every chance' (Valerie Ross).

The year is 1824 and the story is of Devil Devil or Bumblefoot from the Mangrove area. To Aboriginal people he was known as Devil Devil and the new settlers called him Bumblefoot due to his deformed foot.ⁱ Bumblefoot staged a series of attacks against the white settlers at a time when white retaliation to the Aboriginal attempts to gain back land around the Hawkesbury was often intense and indiscriminate. Previously Macquarie instructed his soldiers: 'to take prisoner of all Aboriginal people they found, to shoot any who refused to surrender and hang them from trees'. Bumblefoot's actions against the settlers followed the pattern of Aboriginal resistance along the Hawkesbury with attacks on settlers, crops and property – partially for food but mainly as a means of economic warfare.ⁱⁱ

We have court records and newspaper articles of three of these attacks. On September 19th, 1824 Bumblefoot attacked the convict Jeremiah Buffey in Newcastle and nearly severed his head. In early October, he went to the farms of William Stubbs and Archibald Bell on the Lower Hawkesbury where he knocked down a young boy (the brother in law of Stubb's overseer) and stole his clothes and food. Bumblefoot was also held responsible for murdering a servant of Mr. Dickson of Windsor by 'severing the poor man's head from his body with a tomahawk' (Sydney Gazette, 11 November 1824). He then went to the hut of Joseph Sands and bartered a gun he had in his possession in exchange for food.

Richard Woodbury, who was then constable at Wisemans Ferry was shown the gun by local Aboriginal people and set out to capture Bumblefoot. He successfully stalked him on foot (according to Ross he didn't own a horse) and rowed him to Windsor jail. On Feb 3^d, 1825, Bumblefoot was charged with murder in the Supreme Court.

Devil Devil, alias Bumblefoot, an aboriginal black native, was next placed at the bar. Not understanding the English language, and no one being in attendance that could act as interpreter, it was found necessary to remand the prisoner. His Honor the CHIEF JUSTICE observed, that it would be difficult to try a case like the present under Lord Ellenborough's Act, but suggested the propriety of framing an information for an aggravated assault, which would be indictable at common law. The want of an interpreter is much needed, for justice cannot be said to have fair play between the European and the aborigine, till their language is comprehended.



As the article from the Sydney Gazette (3rd Feb 1825) notes, justice cannot be said to have taken place, as no interpreter was available and Bumblefoot's language could not be understood. On June 3rd, 1825 Bumblefoot was again brought before the Supreme Criminal Court – this time for the assault upon Jerimah Buffey. Threlkeld, a missionary who had been taught some Aboriginal languages was called in as witness.

According to Threlkeld's later accounts this situation distressed Bumblefoot to the point where he threatened to kill Threlkeld next time he saw him in the bush.ⁱⁱⁱ Bumblefoot was remanded and later records indicate that he spent considerable time in prison for the offence.

Supreme Criminal Court.

FRIDAY, JUNE 3, 1825.

Devil Devil, alias Bumblefoot, an aboriginal native, was indicted for a violent assault on Jeremiah Buffey, at Newcastle, on the 19th of September last. Guilty---Remanded.



During the late 1820s and early 1830s, Threlkeld was a familiar witness and interpreter in the Sydney courts. He was often accompanied by Biraban, an Aboriginal leader of the Awabakal tribe who spoke English and taught Threlkeld a number of native languages. As a non-indigenous interpreter Threlkeld argued that Aboriginal people were incapable of swearing an oath, understanding a higher being, or being converted to Christianity and so no Aboriginal testimonies could be accepted.

Birabam, drawn by Alfred Thomas Agate

In a later case in a trial of an Aboriginal for murder Judges Burton and Willis closely examined Biraban (as interpreter) and 'although his answers were satisfactory to the general questions proposed to him by the judges, yet, not understanding the nature of our oath in a court of Justice, he could not be sworn.'^{iv} Thus any communication from Aboriginal people could not be accepted as evidence by the courts.

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Bumblefoot disappeared around Kulnura around 1850. One story, recounted by Amos Douglass and in Ross is that he was killed by Aboriginal people at Bumble Hills between Mangrove and Yarramalong.^v Another local legend is that Bumble told the local people that if he died he would go away and no one would be able to find his body.

His name lives on in the naming of Bumble Hill Road at Kulnura. Bill Black outlines a story handed down about Bumble being the last resident Aboriginal person living in the area. He describes Bumble 'and his mary' as living in a cave along a track that ran off Bumble Hill that went into a gully and of him travelling between Wisemans Ferry and Kulnura.^{vi}



References

ⁱ Ross, Valerie. *A Hawkesbury Story*. Library of Australian History, 1981, P. 31

ⁱⁱ Parbury, Neil. *Survival: A History of Aboriginal Life in New South Wales*. Sydney: Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs New South Wales, 1988.

ⁱⁱⁱ Threlkeld, L. E. *Reminiscences of Birabān. A Key to the Structure of the Aboriginal Language*. . Sydney: Kemp and Fairfax, 1850.

^{iv} *Ibid*, p 88.

^v Ross, Op Cit, Pg 32

^{vi} Bottomley, Bill, and Ken West. *The Way It Was: Talking About the Past on the Mountain*. Werrimbirra Workshop, 2001, Pg 75.