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# THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF PEMULWUY

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## Introduction

One's historical outlook upon Botany Bay and the Rockdale area should not overlook the trials and tribulations that the Indigenous people of Australia have gone through in order to defend their land, resist European invasion and receive recognition in the face of white adversity. In particular, the actions and experiences of an Aboriginal warrior by the name of Pemulwuy, a key figure in the conflict between the Aboriginal people and white settlers in Botany Bay.

This report will explore the contentious history surrounding Pemulwuy, a Bidjigal warrior that has been hailed as an Aboriginal hero for being indicative of the Frontier expansionist war. Pemulwuy's life and legacy has been dictated by his ongoing role as a warrior in the conflict between Indigenous and settler populations. Thus, we can see the changing interactions between aboriginals and colonists that is epitomised in the fight that Pemulwuy's confrontation establishes. Then, we see in this report the extent to which Pemulwuy and his legacy has influenced the relationship of aboriginal and indigenous struggle for recognition of their respective histories and culture.

## The First Fleet, the Eora Nation and Bidjigal People

Prior to Captain Cook's landing on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January, 1788, the Indigenous population was estimated to be between 500,000 to 750,000 people with over 250 distinct language groups scattered across Australia, each with their own territory and cultural practices. The land that Governor Arthur Phillip and Captain Cook had claimed for the British empire through the concept of *terra nullius*, meaning 'land belonging to no-one', belonged to the Indigenous Australians. With thousands of years of building a diverse and unique culture, they were eventually ignored and wiped out by the settlers in a conflict that later became known as the 'Frontier Wars'. This claim laid by the British Empire was driven by a desire to send convicts to another place and conquer new lands to boost nationalism during the Golden Age of Discovery.

The Eora Nation is made up of approximately 29 clans of Indigenous Australians scattered along the coastal area of the Sydney Basin, united by a common tongue and strong tribal ties. Their traditional territory ranges from the Hawkesbury River to the Georges River, a total land area of 1800 square kilometres. However, the exact southern border of this peoples' land, according to a variety of sources, is unclear and currently debated. This group of Aboriginal Australians identified themselves as the Eora, which can be translated to mean "the people" or "from this place".

The Eora people and the Nation that they built within NSW was quickly wiped out through diseases and the competition that the new settlers brought to their lands. These included smallpox, tuberculosis, influenza, measles, whooping cough and the cold. Disease alone was estimate to account for more than 60% of Indigenous Australian deaths within the tribes located in the NSW region. The Indigenous people also competed with the white settlers whilst hunting and fishing as well as attempting to resist their invasion. Their resistance could be said to have started the moment Captain Cook step foot on their land, when the British were greeted with cries of "warra, warra, warra", meaning "go away".

Eora society was elaborately based on a Kinship system, a notion of reciprocity between people. A non-materialistic and egalitarian society, the Eora people had strong ties to their ancestral beings through rules for behaviour and ritual. They regarded the land as a religious phenomenon as part of the Dreaming, the basis of Eora religion. The traditional Eora people lived mainly along the coastline, and lived off food hunted or gathered from the sea. Their immediate territorial neighbours were the Tharawal and the Dharuk people, of which there was significant differentiation in culture between these societies.

As part of the Eora Nation, the Bidjigal people lived in the Castle Hill area. However, this particular tribal group, led by Pemulwuy during the late 1700's was said to have roamed over a large area spanning from Toongabbie to Botany Bay. They were also rumoured to be quite powerful in terms of local Indigenous tribal groups. Surrounding Indigenous groups included the Cadigal, Burramattagal, Wallamattagal, Toongagal, Warmuli and the Cabrogal. The natural bushland area they lived off would have provided food and materials to create shelters, canoes and tools with which they built their culture and lives.

Shown below is a map that shows the approximate area that the Bidjigal tribe was said to live and hunt in. It spans most of south-eastern Sydney.



Therefore, it can be seen that the Bidjigal people led by Pemulwuy were quite influential over the area that Captain Cook, and later, Governor Arthur Phillip established the new colonies on behalf of the British Empire. The Bidjigal and Pemulwuy as their leader, were but simply one of the countless victims of British settlement, but would become considered as an Indigenous resistance hero over time.

Note: some books may get the two tribes "Bidjigal" and the "Bediagal" tribes mixed up, because of their similar spelling, however it is important to recognise that they are two separate local tribes, both of the Eora Nation.

## Early Life and Background

Pemulwuy's early life and background shows his influences and thus his subsequent characterisation in later life.

Born circa 1750 on the northern side of the Georges River, near what was later named Botany Bay, Pemulwuy belonged to the Australian Indigenous tribe of the area, the Bidjigal people. His name, also spelt as 'Pemulwhy', 'Pemulwoy', 'Bimblewove', 'Bumbleway', 'Pimblooy', was derived from the Darug word, *pemul*, meaning "Earth".

Pemulwuy was born with a medical condition known in a modern day context as "strabismus" in his left eye. "Strabismus", an ailment where one eye is abnormally aligned is a physical deformity that influences sight. Most children born with this physical deformity, as noted by Indigenous scholar, Eric Willmot, would have been given back to the land, in order to be reborn again, according to the beliefs of the Australian Indigenous culture in the locality. Subsequently, Pemulwuy's existence consequently carried far more weight within the Aboriginal community.

Despite his impediment, Pemulwuy became superior in several aspects of his daily life, eventually becoming a *carradhy*, commonly known as a "clever man" within Indigenous Australian culture. This is noted by Colebe, an Indigenous mediator between Governor Phillip and the local tribes, who observed Pemulwuy's left foot, which had been bruised and dislocated by a club, which indicated his status within the tribe. Pemulwuy can thus be seen to have been an important member within his tribe who could dispense justice at will.

Because of his physical deformities, it was also believed that he was a *kurdaitcha*, meaning that his position empowered him to dispense justice to whomever threatened the welfare of the tribe in the form of ritual execution. He also hunted meat and provided it to the newly established white colony in exchange for goods. Upon reaching adulthood, he earned the name of *Bembul Wuyan*, meaning "the Earth and the Crow". Another commonly used name was *Butu Wargun*, meaning "Crow". This later came into full effect when it was believed that he had the spiritual ability to transform into a crow in a particular incident later in his life where he was locked up and was able to escape.

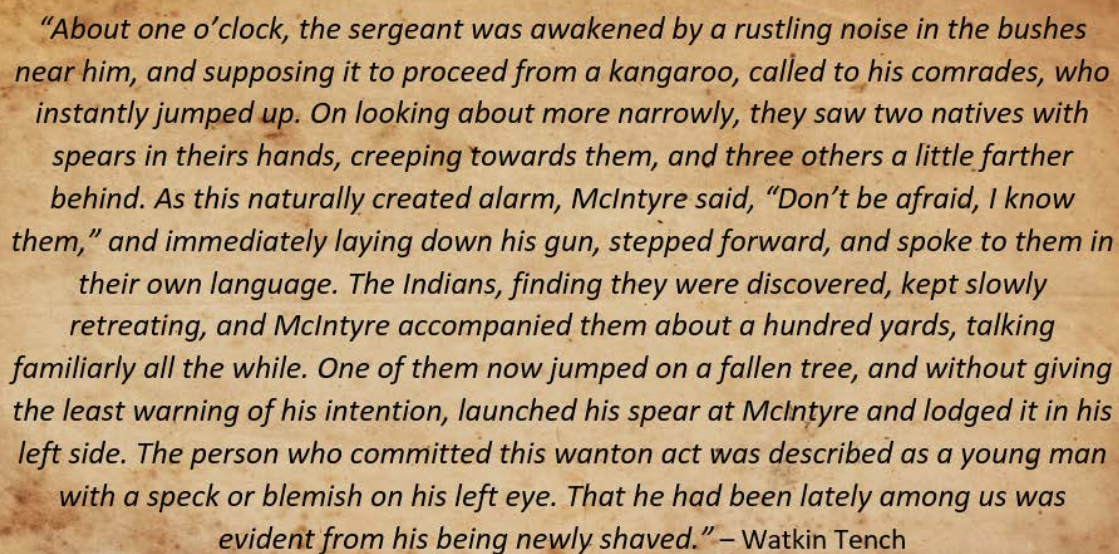
Thus it can be seen that Pemulwuy's background, whilst being insubstantial in some areas, did prove his enduring facets that helped him shape the changing landscape between Indigenous and settler communities.



## Conflict between settlers and Pemulwuy

The conflict between Pemulwuy and white settlers, best encompassed in what was known as Pemulwuy's War, in which he led members of the Eora, Dharug and Tharawal people in an attack to counter British occupation in the Botany Bay area. However, other significant events such as the Spearing of McIntyre are also worthy of note.

The Spearing of McIntyre in December, 1790, is perhaps one of the most publicised attacks by Pemulwuy. According to the books written by Watkin Tench, a British Marine officer at the time, describing Pemulwuy's attack:



*"About one o'clock, the sergeant was awakened by a rustling noise in the bushes near him, and supposing it to proceed from a kangaroo, called to his comrades, who instantly jumped up. On looking about more narrowly, they saw two natives with spears in their hands, creeping towards them, and three others a little farther behind. As this naturally created alarm, McIntyre said, "Don't be afraid, I know them," and immediately laying down his gun, stepped forward, and spoke to them in their own language. The Indians, finding they were discovered, kept slowly retreating, and McIntyre accompanied them about a hundred yards, talking familiarly all the while. One of them now jumped on a fallen tree, and without giving the least warning of his intention, launched his spear at McIntyre and lodged it in his left side. The person who committed this wanton act was described as a young man with a speck or blemish on his left eye. That he had been lately among us was evident from his being newly shaved." – Watkin Tench*

John McIntyre, also known as McEntire in various historical sources, was well known for his recurrent wounding and killing of Indigenous Australians in the past whilst competing with them for food. He also frequently shot and ate totem animals revered as spirit ancestors, when trespassing on tribal land, which was forbidden by the Governor at the time. It was believed that Pemulwuy's act had been committed out of revenge against McIntyre's actions. This was quite evident in the fear and hatred that Indigenous people displayed towards him. McIntyre, Governor Phillip's gamekeeper at the time died of his wounds, including a perforated lung and several broken bones, in early January the next year. The spear that Pemulwuy had thrown at McIntyre was barbed with small pieces of red stone, silcrete flakes, a signature mark that confirmed that Pemulwuy belonged to one of the tribes in the area.

Convinced that the action had been unprovoked considering that McIntyre was unarmed at the time, Governor Arthur Phillip retaliated by ordering a punitive expedition with 50 soldiers led by Tench. Their attempt to capture and execute Pemulwuy along with six other

men in his clan was a complete failure, with the soldiers' inaptitude at navigating through the bush the main contributing factor.

In a series of assaults against the British imperial colonisation, Pemulwuy coordinated what would be known in history as Pemulwuy's War. Over the next five years, from 1790- 1795, Pemulwuy coordinated a series of attacks against the settlers' various farms and crop fields, in an attempt to weaken the newly established colony who were almost entirely dependent on crops of maize and wheat as well as their limited precious livestock. With the main method of assault primarily guerrilla warfare achieved through hit-and-run tactics, the settlers' supplies and stores diminished at the hands of the Bidjigal people. Controversially, some historians claim that this was not Pemulwuy's way of resisting the settlers- on the contrary, he wanted to maintain a good relationship with the colony's governor, but instead an Indigenous method of dispensing justice for breaching Bidjigal law.

Throughout this time, Pemulwuy had also been allying himself with several surrounding tribes, including the Eora, Dharug and Tharawal people, in order to create a collaborative force. He also accepted escaped convicts into his force, including Convicts William Knight and Thomas Thrush. It soon became known as the "Native resistance". This amalgamation of various groups was united against one common adversary- the white settlers. In December 1795, Pemulwuy and a band of warriors attacked a work-party at Botany Bay, including the first Australian bushranger, an African ex-convict by the name of John Caesar, commonly nicknamed as "Black Caesar". Caesar was one of the 12 prisoners of African origin within the first fleet. Caesar managed to crack Pemulwuy's skull during the fight, which led the colony to believe that he was dead, however Pemulwuy managed to survive and escape with a critical injury.

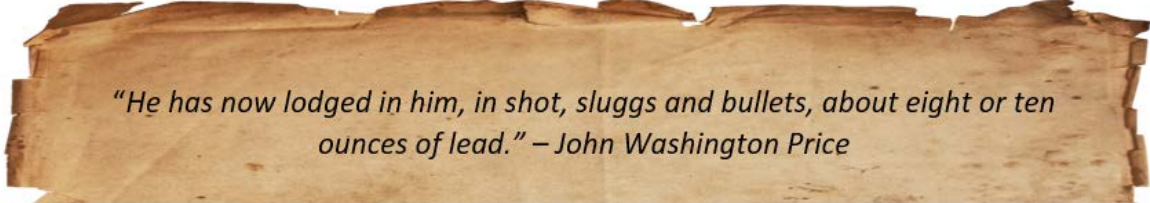
Two years later, in 1797, he led a frontal attack against the government settlement located at Toongabbie. This group of attackers were made up of several Indigenous tribes in the area, who were brought together under the leadership of Pemulwuy. Settlers tracked him to the outskirts of Parramatta, where he was heavily injured, receiving seven pieces of buckshot in his head and body. Extremely wounded, he was taken to a prison hospital nearby. Here, he stayed for a few days in a state of unconsciousness. One night, he escaped, despite being chained to the bed by leg irons. This led to the ideology that Pemulwuy could not be killed by the white people's bullets and weapons, as well as that he could transform into a crow, which led to his escape into the night, whilst still wearing the leg chains.

As such, it can be seen that in the spirit of traditional Frontier War, Pemulwuy was at odds with his European counterparts and led his fellow Indigenous tribesmen into battle to defend what was considered Indigenous territory. In doing so, he has sparked an ongoing debate over the extent of Aboriginal and Indigenous influence and culture in popular society.

## His Death

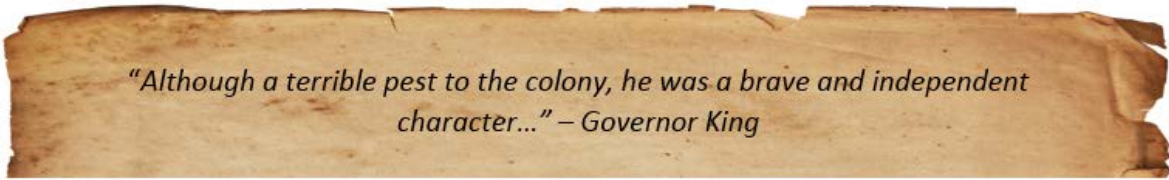
In 1801, Governor Phillip King issued an order for bringing in Pemulwuy, with an associated reward. The reward offered was 20 gallons of spirits or a free pardon for his capture, dead or alive. The reward was a high incentive for convicts as well as freed-men to attempt to shoot and catch Pemulwuy on sight.

By his death, Pemulwuy's "Rasputin"- like reputation for being invincible created an unrivalled aura around him that bullets could not harm him, and chains could no longer keep him tied down. Colonists and Indigenous Australians alike began believing these rumours. As stated by John Washington Price:



*"He has now lodged in him, in shot, slugs and bullets, about eight or ten ounces of lead." – John Washington Price*

Pemulwuy was finally killed by settlers in June 1802 around the age of 52. Whilst who actually killed Pemulwuy remains a controversy, most primary sources at the time point to Henry Hacking, the first mate and game master of the Lady Nelson. His head, which was cut off and preserved in alcohol, was sent to Sir Joseph Banks for research and display in England. Indigenous skulls were very highly prized for research in England, where scientists took samples and attempted to test them. It was accompanied by a letter by the Governor at the time, Lieutenant Philip King, stating the following:



*"Although a terrible pest to the colony, he was a brave and independent character..." – Governor King*

Currently, the location of Pemulwuy's skull is unknown, however Prince William pledged in 2008 to help Bidjigal elders return Pemulwuy's remains. Federal Minister of Defence Christopher Pyne is also campaigning for the return of his skull.

## How he has changed the perspective around Indigenous Australians and settlers in a modern day context.

Pemulwuy's impact on the settlers of Australia back then and on the young people of today is evident through his changing legacy and his influence on the perspective of Indigenous resistance during the Frontier Wars. His legacy as a great warrior has sparked contention



over the nature and morality of frontier conflict and the validity of the Black Armband/White Blindfold debate in creating a substantial 'truth' in history. Due to the tendentious perspective that is geared primarily around the 'white' image of Australia, it can be seen that the influence of Pemulwuy in creating historical truth is substantial in discussing Indigenous history.

Pemulwuy's, at times, ambiguous relationship with the white colonies demonstrates the many complexities that the First Fleet and Australian colonisation had both for white settlers and Indigenous Australians alike.

Pemulwuy's legacy has changed the perspective around Indigenous and settler relations that continues into the present day. In a push to rewrite history, a group of Kooris have evoked Pemulwuy's spirit in an attempt to reflect a more accurate historical Indigenous past in the wake of the 'white invasion' and hope that his thirteen-year campaign of resistance can inspire more acceptance of Indigenous culture. Pemulwuy's feats have encouraged many to follow his lead in acknowledging indigenous history as part of achieving a holistic Australian history. As such, Pemulwuy's legacy has changed the perspective around Indigenous and settler relationships in modern day society by exposing their tenuous relationship to a significant extent.

## Modern-day Representation

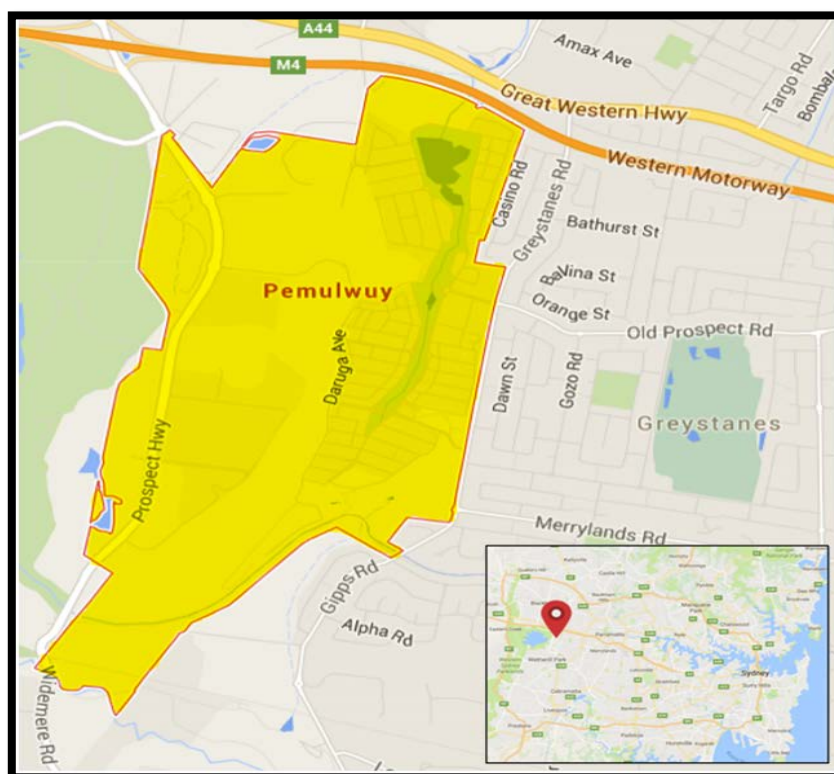
Today, Pemulwuy is often depicted as an Aboriginal "Ned Kelly"- in his defiance against the authorities. He has appeared in several fictional novels as a resistance hero, most prominently in Eric Willmot's novelistic biography *Pemulwuy: The Rainbow Warrior*. His portrayal as a resistance hero has been key to his depiction as a positive role model in resisting British Occupation. However, his modern-day representations are perhaps best noted through his enduring legacy, more substantially outlined in the next section, due to the lack of representation in modern society. He has been dubbed the "Rainbow Warrior" in an attempt to signify the magnitude of tribes he represented in his resistance.

There has recently been a push for more films and documentaries to be created regarding his life and Pemulwuy's significance in the Frontier Wars, considering the fact that information about Pemulwuy is scarce and difficult to locate when he should be promoted as a hero in his actions and the legacy that he has left behind.

## His Legacy

After his death, he became known as the “Rainbow Warrior”, most likely because of his ability to unite tribes in the face of adversity. Pemulwuy had a son, Tedbury, who continued on his father’s war against the white settlers. Tedbury also had quite and ambiguous relationship with the white colonialists, whilst making trouble for some settlers, he was on friendly terms with others. The most prevalent of these was his relationship with John MacArthur, an ex-soldier and very powerful pastoralist. He was imprisoned in 1805 and killed after a number of years in 1810.

Red Gum, an Australian band sang about his patriotism in the late 1980’s in a song called *Water and Stone*. In 2006, Australian composer Paul Jarman composed a choral work titled *Pemulwuy*. In 2008, Aboriginal activist and singer, Marlene Cummins released a song about Pemulwuy that was presented to Prince William with the petition to bring Pemulwuy’s remains back to his people. Irishman Peter Baxter also wrote a *Ballad of Pemulwuy* released in 2010. Pemulwuy, an Australian suburb located in Western NSW as well as Pemulwuy Park, in Redfern are named after him. (As seen below.)



The National Museum of Australia has also installed a plaque honouring his legacy and role in shaping Australian history in the 2015 Defining Moments project. A housing project based in Redfern specifically for assisting Aboriginal Australians has also been named after him, to signify the struggles that Indigenous Australians may still face even today.

Pemulwuy's legacy also plays a large role in shaping many Indigenous communities and Indigenous political organisations today. It is also noted that many Indigenous peoples today evoke his spirit when claiming land rights and similar various other movements of resistance. This was first seen in 2013 after Kevin Rudd's famous apology speech, when a group of young Kooris attempted to encourage historians to rewrite history that reflected Indigenous history more accurately. Their sovereignty campaigner, Jenny Monroe, also believes that any real reconciliation should begin with an acceptance of facts.

Despite his large role in the first settlement at Botany Bay, there is only one known depiction of him: this carving engraved by Samuel John Neeles of "Pimblo: Native of New Holland in a Canoe of That Country.", which was gifted to James Grant, the captain of the sloop Lady Nelson. As seen below.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, Pemulwuy's life and legacy, determined by the significant events in his life, can be seen to have a profound impact on relationships between indigenous culture and 'white' Australians to a significant extent even to the present. His enduring effect, pronounced in this report, adds to the many battles for a holistic and all-encompassing Australian historical truth that we are in so dire need for. In particular, his legacy as the 'Rainbow Warrior' and the effect that he had on the changing atmosphere surrounding the Frontier battles had encouraged further native resistance that is ongoing today and is

teleological in nature. As such, it can be concluded that Pemulwuy's life and legacy has, to a significant extent, shaped Australian national identity.

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