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Lost story of early sailors' first contact with Aboriginal people 'up there with Burke and Wills' says historian

ABC South East NSW By [Bill Brown](#)

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VIDEO: [Mark McKenna tells the story of shipwrecked survivors helped by Aboriginal people in 1797](#) (ABC News)

In 1797 the first Europeans to make contact with the Aboriginal people of south-east Australia were shipwrecked sailors.

Historian and writer Professor Mark McKenna of the University of Sydney has researched their encounters with the local Indigenous people whose lands they passed through on their epic walk of 700 kilometres along the coast.

"It's one of Australia's greatest survival stories. It's also one of Australia's greatest cross-cultural stories," he said.

The ship Sydney Cove was on a trade mission from India to the new colony at Port Jackson when it was shipwrecked on Preservation Island off the north-east coast of Tasmania.

Longboat into the unknown

Leaving behind the rest of the crew, 17 men comprising five Europeans and 12 Bengali sailors tried to sail a longboat up the coast to Sydney.

After crossing Bass Strait they sailed into a severe overnight storm and were shipwrecked again on Ninety Mile Beach near Lakes Entrance.

They had no choice but to walk up the coast through unexplored land.

"The real heart of this story is the ongoing encounter that these people walking have with Aboriginal people as they walk north," Dr McKenna said.

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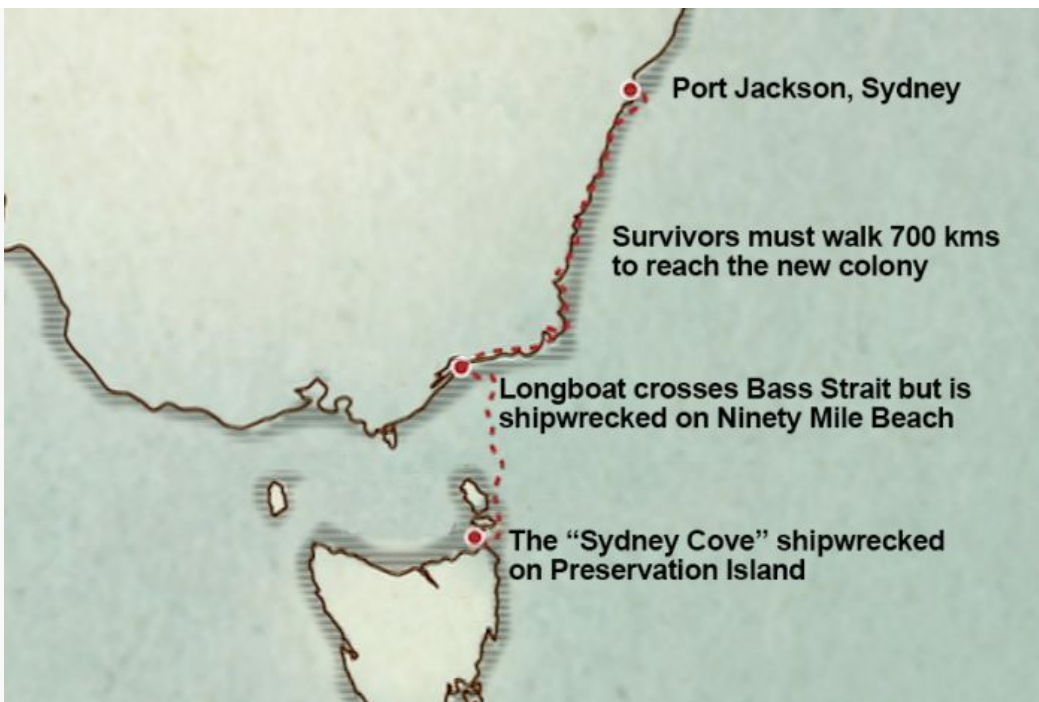


PHOTO: Map of the journey by shipwrecked sailors along the south-east coast of Australia in 1797 (ABC South East NSW: Bill Brown)

The sailors had washed ashore in Kurnai country from where they began their walk on March 15, 1797.

One of the leaders, William Clark, kept a journal in which he recorded that on the third day they: "fell in with a party of natives, about 14, all of them entirely naked".

The Kurnai men: "were very anxious to explore every part of our clothes and body... they considered our clothes and bodies as inseparably joined".

Dr McKenna said the walkers had set out with a great fear of encountering what they referred to as "hostile savages".

Instead, he said, the Kurnai just wanted to work out if the strangers were human.

"The first moment of contact is one of wonder, of awe, of curiosity," Dr McKenna said.

The men made slow progress as the many rivers required they build a raft each time to enable a crossing.

After nearly two weeks they had reached the Nadgee River, in Thaua territory.

"This is where they really made what Clark calls 'friends'," Dr McKenna said.

"They walked with them all the way to Pambula, and showed them the way, and fed them, and really gained their trust."

The Thaua also helped with building the rafts, saving the walkers much time.

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PHOTO: Mark McKenna at Pambula beach - one of the places on the epic 700 kilometre trek by the survivors of the "Sydney Cove" in 1797 (ABC South East NSW: Bill Brown)

Aboriginal people helped stranded sailors

Over the next couple of weeks the men ran out of their supply of rice, and relied on trading strips of cloth with the Aboriginal people for food, and also catching fish.

Another group of Aboriginal people invited them to stay at their camp and share their food.

Yet another group ferried them over rivers in their canoes, which Clark described as precarious vessels about 2.5 metres long and half a metre wide, made of bark that was "tied at both end with twigs".

The survivors frequently fell off, while Clark described the Aboriginal men as paddling about with great ability and serenity.

But after sailing around the world, nearly sinking in the Southern Ocean, then being twice shipwrecked, and now having walked for four weeks, the men were weakening.

Twelve of the men, all Bengali, were left behind at Moruya.

"We still don't know what happened to those people — whether they were adopted into Aboriginal cultures or not, we don't know," Dr McKenna said.

The group, now reduced to only four Europeans and one Bengali, were near what is now called Sussex Inlet when they were confronted by around 100 aggressive Aboriginal men threatening them with spears.

Dr McKenna believes the walkers had unintentionally not followed cultural protocols, and were ritually punished.

He said the Aboriginal people could have easily killed the men but instead they were only wounded.

"William Clark raises his hands... and he's speared through both palms," Dr McKenna said.

After the confrontation, the walkers were invited to camp overnight with the Aboriginal group and then allowed on their way in the morning.

Only three men reach Sydney

Several days later two more men had to be left behind — the ship's first mate and its carpenter.

Clark recorded the carpenter as a troublemaker who did not trust the Aboriginal people and who was aggressive to them and demanding of them.

"There was was an ongoing struggle between the carpenter and Clark ... about how the party should actually deal with and relate with Aboriginal people," Dr McKenna said.

"Some of their arguments are, among non-Indigenous people, still being threshed out today."

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After walking for nearly two months Clark, with one European sailor and one Bengali, was close to reaching Sydney when the group were spotted crawling along a beach by a fishing boat and taken the last 40 kilometres.

"They were the talk of the town. Noone in Sydney at that time had explored far beyond the confines of the settlement itself," Dr McKenna said.

Governor Hunter changes story

Clarke reported to then-governor John Hunter that the group only survived because of the help of the Aboriginal people they met along the way.

But Dr McKenna said Hunter changed the story, alleging "the reverse" and writing that the Aboriginal people had been hostile, had hindered their journey and failed to provide food and assistance.

Dr McKenna said documentary evidence clearly supports Clark's view that the men only survived because of the assistance of Aboriginal people.

"You could say that they were accompanied in their journey by a succession of guardian angels," Dr McKenna said.

The story is the first of four "lost histories" Dr McKenna just published in From the Edge.

"I find it pretty astonishing really that this story has sat there, largely untold, for 200 years and hasn't ever really occupied a central place in our historical consciousness," he said.

"It should be up there with Burke and Wills."

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