



Keynote address / Rachel Perkins

I thought I would talk today about a project called *First Australians*, which is a documentary project. We are still in the midst of it. When I talk to people about it, like taxi drivers, they ask "What do you do?" and I say I make films. They say, "What are you working on?" and I say, "I'm working on this documentary series called *First Australians*" and they go "Oh great, it is about the migrant community coming to Australia" and I say, "No, no! It is actually about the *first* Australians, Indigenous Australians. So, we are still grappling with the title and whether it is going to be too confusing for people to grasp. But the name *First Australians* sort of makes the point of it trying to claim the space as Australia's first people. If anyone has any better suggestions, come up to me at the end of the session!

First Australians. It is probably the most challenging project that I've worked on to date. It is the largest documentary series to be undertaken in Australia. It is being made by a group of Indigenous Australians under the umbrella of Blackfella Films, which is our company. It has a national perspective and it is really the history of colonisation, which is a big part of our story. It charts the period from the 1780s through to 1993.

It began in 2002 when Nigel Milan, who was the then General Manager of SBS, approached me. They had shown a series on SBS called *500 Nations*, which is a series on Native American people. At the time, SBS had a big audience response which asked; "Why don't we have an equivalent series here?"

The more important factor in Nigel resolving that this was what SBS would do, was that he shared a Board [position] with Gordon Briscoe. When Nigel was searching for what his contribution could be to Indigenous Australia, he asked Gordon and Gordon said, "Give my people back their history. Give Indigenous Australians their history because that has been taken from them. And that's something you can do."

So from these two starting points Nigel approached me and said, "Make a series on Indigenous Australia." He gave us quite a whack of money and we were suddenly overwhelmed with how we would approach it. We had a pivotal meeting with an American filmmaker called Ken Burns, who had made the Civil War Series which also screened on SBS - a beautiful series of black and white photographs and diary accounts of people charting the American Civil War. He said to us that he thought the most compelling way to make a series, such as the one we were doing, was through individuals. It is through the individual experiences that the history becomes alive because you get the emotion of their experience. We agreed with that. He also suggested that we take a chronological approach because it was a natural way of story telling. Rather than getting too tricky with ourselves - just tell it as one event after the other. It seems like a basic piece of advice, but it really galvanised our direction.

A quick run down of the content of the series as it currently stands; at the moment the series begins by introducing the continent of Australia and our longevity of occupation here, then focuses on Sydney or what was known as Warrane. This episode explores the relationships between Phillip, Bennelong and Pemulwuy. In the second episode we go west into Darug country and across the Mountains into Wiradjuri Country focussing on Windradyne. In the third we go down to Tasmania, follow Truganini and Wooraddy and Manarlagenna and Robinson. Then ep four crosses the Bass Strait to Victoria where we focus on Coranderrk and people like William Barak and Derrimut and Simon Wonga. In episode five we go over to Central Australia where we focus on people like Moses Tjalkabota and Willshire and Spencer and Gillen. In episode six we go over to WA and focus on Moolaboola and Moore River and Neville and William Harris; and then we come back to NSW in episode seven - William

Cooper and Jack Patton and the Day of Mourning and the Torres Strait Islander fisherman strike; and finally we follow Eddie Mabo and the Queensland civil rights movement.

So it is a big swathe of history and it's completely terrifying to try and do it. When we were grappling with how, we turned to the libraries of Australia. That began, to my great shame, my first real engagement with the historical record and with people like yourselves who we have met through the process over the last 4 or 5 years.

One of the greatest challenges we came across was finding Indigenous individuals who were documented in some kind of dimension in the records. Mostly we are known as natives, blacks, savages and at best Aboriginals or Islanders. Because of our oral tradition, Aboriginal people didn't really start writing until the 1940's. The bulk of the written record is therefore from non-Indigenous Australians. So of course whatever snippets of evidence there is or reporting of voices is skewed through a certain view.

Our challenge is to use the records but to bring a contemporary Indigenous interpretation to those records. Much of this is probably well known to you, working in the field. But to filmmakers and to the general public, it is not a known thing. The fragments of voices we have found we have sort of strung together with archival drawings, going to the Mitchell Library for the records and AIATSIS and Public Record Office of Victoria and the Museum of Victoria and many other collecting institutions.

I want to read to you some of the voices we have found, because hearing them come out of the archives, (and we have actors such as Kelton Pell, Ernie Dingo and Ursula Yovich bringing those voices to life) it is wonderful hearing them come out of the archives and come alive.

One of the first voices recorded which I found really interesting was when the boats were first coming into Sydney Harbour, that is Warrane, in 1788 on the 26th January. The Gadigal people were standing on the cliffs looking out at the ships and it must have been an extraordinary sight. They were yelling out "Warra warra" which means "go away" and the whites were saying "oh look they are saying "hello!" And they're calling back "Hello! Hello!" and the blackfellas are yelling "Warra warra" and it is one of the first bits of confusing communication.

There is also a wonderful conversation between Williams Dawes, who is a marine on the first fleet, and a young woman called Petyegarang, who is a Kamerigal we think, a teenager, and these two are having a conversation. A lot of these conversations are the basis of the Sydney language that has been recorded and revitalised. William Dawes asks her, "Why are the black men angry?" And they are speaking in her language that she has taught him and he is teaching her English in return. And Petyegarang says "Because the white men are settled here." And Dawes says "Why are the Kamerigal's afraid?" and she says, "Gunnin", because of the guns.

20 years later a Gadigal man, Maroot, is speaking to a government enquiry and his community has been reduced by 90% by the small pox. There are only 3 of his people left. He says, "This is all my country. It is a nice country. My father chief a long time ago. Now I chief. When I little fella, plenty black fella, plenty gin, plenty piccaninny, great corroboree. All gone now, all gone. Only me left to walkabout."

So there is a common thread that runs through the voices. In the early period, there are only a few voices and then we get more and more. The common threads are loss of people, loss of land and more frequently, as the grip of the government administration tightens around the people, we hear about their call for independence and their statement of independence. In Tasmania in 1847, something Henry Reynolds writes about is a petition that they write to the queen. They say:

"Humble petition of the free inhabitants of Van Diemen's Land now living on Flinders Island. We are free children. We were not taken prisoners but freely gave up our country to Governor Arthur, then the Governor, after defending ourselves. Your petitioners humbly state to Your Majesty that Mr Robinson make for us with Colonel Arthur an agreement which we have not lost from our minds since. And we made good our part of it."

In Victoria as well, there is a conversation with Derrimut, who is a clan head of the Bunurong people of Melbourne, and he says to a white man related to an enquiry:

“All this time, all along here Derrimut’s once. No matter now, me soon tumble down”.

And the white man asks him, not knowing that both his wives have been stolen by sealers, most of his children have died of small pox and his third wife has died from influenza, he says, “Have you no children?”

And Derrimut, he says, flew into a passion and says, “Why me have wife, why me have children, you have all this place. No good have children. No good have wife. Me tumble down and die very soon.” Which he did after the last of the Bunurong land was taken in 1868.

There were many voices that emerged out of Victoria. We focused on Coranderrk in our series. They wrote many letters to the papers about their struggle for land justice and independence. One of the letters they wrote in 1882:

“Sir we beg you to put a little column in your valuable paper please. We have seen and heard that all the managers of the stations and the central board have had a meeting about what is to be done. We have heard that there are going to be very strict rules on the station. It seems we are all going to be treated like slaves as far as we heard of it. We wish to ask those managers on the station, did we steal anything out of the colony or murder anyone? Or are we prisoners or convict? We should think we are all free as any white man.” William Barak, Robert Wandin, Thomas Donnelly, Thomas Banfield and others, 31st August 1882.

Coranderrk went on and on. It was a struggle. It began in 1865 and went through until the 1920s. It was a long struggle for land and in 1920, this letter was written to the paper. It says:

“We are very much in sad distress thinking of how the members of the board are breaking up our home at Coranderrk and trying to transfer us against our wish. We wish to be here with our old people and near our loved ones in the cemetery. This is an estate given to us as a home for the natives. Remember, we are no more slaves because we are coloured. We are under the British Flag too. They might just as well shoot us as shift us against our will. Will someone fight for us?”

Coranderrk was of course sold but subsequently bought back in 2003 by the Wurundjeri Community.

These are some of the letters used in our Series. They have come from libraries and archives across the country. They ask for children to be returned, for stolen wages, for land, for simple things like bicycles and clothing. We finish our series, I think fittingly, focusing on Eddy Koiki Mabo, who records from his death bed in Townsville General Hospital his hopes after his 10 year legal battle. In 1992 the court is out and he is waiting for their decision. He writes in his diary:

“I thought about the struggles I’ve been through over the past years since 1963 to the beginning of 1992 while the rest of Black Australia waits with me for the High Court decision to be brought down at any time. Or would it be in time for me to receive it? If I’m not around, I want my children to work closely with my lawyers. I also thought about my wife, the most important person in my life. She has stuck to me over the hardships and hurdles in life, but somehow we have made it. To me, my wife has been the most adorable person. A friend closest in my life and we have loved every minute of our lives together. I just loved it, every minute of it.”

I read this in the National Library last week and it is just amazing to read these incredible testimonials and of course hear their oral histories. It’s fantastic that the National Library have archived and catalogued that collection of papers so beautifully so that now, people like me can look on line and find everything we need to. Of course, Koiki died before the verdict acknowledging his native title was handed down in his favour. His last words as he died in his wife Bonita’s arms were, “Land claim”.

These voices have always been here, but they have been ignored by the bulk of our leading historians. Interestingly enough, when we were talking to Ken Burns about his series, he said to us, "Well, 10,000 books have been written about the civil war in the US."

I said, "Maybe 100 have been written nationally about Indigenous Australian experience." We sort of have a long way to go I think, even though we have made a good start in the last 30 years.

It was a revelation to me – we know that we have been left out of the records and we know that Australia has a Black history - but when you get into the primary sources, you really get to understand that Indigenous people were there at every turning point of Australian history. We guided and saved explorers, we looked after and we also killed their sheep, we slept with them, we fenced their properties, we led them to gold, we worked on their ships, our wages financed their hospitals and roads, we lived in their houses, we fought against them, we fought side by side with them in the wars. Yet, we have been erased from the story of contemporary Australia and certainly from the building of Australia, as we know it today.

Interestingly enough, the history wars are not just being fought in the academic world and in the papers. They are also being fought on the landscape across Australia, which is something we discovered when we went to film at many of the sites around the countryside.

For instance, Bull Cave in Camden, down in Dharawal Country. We went to film there because that was where the First Fleet's cattle escaped and they wandered down South and they went into Dharawal Country and the Dharawal people painted this extraordinary image of this massive bull on the cave wall. It is one of the first pieces of contact art, a really important site. We went down there to film and of course, someone has spray painted across it in red letters: "This is bullshit" and painted a big penis across it, so of course we can't film there.

These sites go on and on. The Barak Monument was once in Healesville and this huge marble monument was somehow pushed over in the street so it had to be removed and taken back to Coranderrk. Red Hand Cave in the Blue Mountains has been completely covered by perspex and bars so that people can't access it, yet people still dig underneath the bars to graffiti it. Bunjil Cave in Garriwerd - the Grampians has a metal cage around it because it has been graffitied so many times. Carved trees of the Wiradjuri and Gamillaroi have been chopped down and removed and burnt. There's very few now that we can still film. Caterpillar dreaming sites in Alice Springs - blown up by the town council. Eddy Mabo's tomb stone – his face taken off it, swastikas painted across it, so it has had to be moved to the Torres Strait. Rock engravings in Darkinjung National Park, just the other day, we were going to some rock engravings and the local traditional owner said to us, "Oh over there, some guy brought a semi trailer full of wet cement and unloaded it onto a huge rock engraving site."

The lengths that people will go to are just extraordinary - to destroy the historical record or the landscape, of our occupation. It's just amazing. And the fact that it is done everywhere is just extraordinary - I don't know how they coordinate themselves these people.

It is even hard talking to National Parks because we want a list of sites and they say "Well we can't give them to you." We say, "Why not?" and they say, "Because if we make them public or if people find out where they are they will be destroyed". So sites aren't advertised or marked. It's a very bizarre situation we have in this country where people feel the need to do destroy and deny the Indigenous record.

But it's not all bad. The other day we were filming up on the Central Coast and we were shooting at a big rock escarpment and we had been up since 4am because we wanted to get the dawn shots and I was trekking up the hill with a huge tripod on my shoulder and bags and it was raining and just on sunset and I was thinking, "I don't know if this is really worth and it and I must be mad doing this!" Feeling sorry for myself. We finally scrambled up this hill to this big rock escarpment and on this rock area, some blackfella had gotten up there and scratched a huge Aboriginal flag across the stone. I thought, "Isn't that fantastic! We are getting our own back! We are still there and we are still identifying ourselves on this contemporary landscape."

Before I started this series, I really didn't have a knowledge of the libraries and collecting institutions who are our memory in this country. I really have so much admiration for the

people who work in those institutions because, as you know, Howard, and all those people who are destroying sites and trying to remove those memories – you guys are building upon them and making them accessible to people like me. By making them accessible to people like me, we hope to take the work that you have done and continue to do, to the lounge rooms of people across the country. Through this series we will have a DVD and a book and a website. We will take it into every school in Australia and we think we will get it as compulsory curriculum and we hope to change a new generation of Australians thinking so they grasp a further dimension to the history of this country and hopefully embrace Indigenous history as part of their own culture as Australians.