

## **A Brief History of the Eden Area.**

(Well, as brief as we can manage it, anyhow.)

### **“The oldest people in the oldest land.”**

It is estimated that Kooris have lived in Australia for 50 to 60,000 years; which would make them the oldest people in the oldest land in the world. For at least 6,000 years the Eden area was occupied by the Katungal (‘sea coast people’) group of the Thawa tribe within the Yuin (Murring) nation, who spoke the Thurgal language. There were two main Thawa groups: Katungal, who occupied the coastal areas from north of Merimbula down to Green Cape (and may have been further divided into the Weecoon (‘Snug Cove’) and Nullica groups); and Baianbal (or Paienbara) ‘tomahawk people’, who lived in the forests bounded by the mountains to the west. An early writer described these Twofold Bay people as more diminutive in stature than inland aborigines. The Thawa people also had close associations with the Bemerigal (or ‘mountain people’) of the Ngarigo nation from the Monaro area around Cooma and a major trading route followed the Towamba River, which was then a deep, fast-flowing stream (agricultural land clearing has since filled it in with run-off soil and sand).

Surviving, and even flourishing, through countless centuries in Australia’s unforgiving environment and unvarying natural cycles, the Kooris developed a deep respect and love for their land. Their mythology was equally as rich in explaining the unknowable as any other early culture on Earth and their spirituality, beliefs, customs and laws linked past, present and future and rooted them to a land from which they only took what was needed to survive, and never enough to deplete its reserves. Sustainability was their watchword for thousands of years before that word first passed a modern politician’s lips. In retrospect, it is interesting to ponder what these people made of the early settler’s rapacious use of the area’s land and sea resources and what advice they may have given had they been asked.

Of special significance to our later history is the Thawa belief that Killer Whales (“Beowas”, as they called them) were reincarnated tribal warriors reborn to the sea from the Dreamtime. The Orcas tactic of herding seals, whales and other sea creatures into the shallows and thus making these prey accessible to Katungal spears no doubt reinforced this belief. The Thawa revered and would not harm these behemoths of the sea, calling to them with chants, water slapping and offerings of food. Thus between man and these highly intelligent mammals a co-operative bond grew, on which the shore-based whalers of Twofold Bay later capitalised.

Also of special significance to this area is ‘Naa-chi’ (now Nadgee Nature Reserve), on the southern side of Wonboyn Lake, which is considered to be the spiritual resting place of the Rainbow Serpent, a major totem for most Koori people. The Rainbow Serpent’s mythology is closely linked to land, water, life,

social relationships and fertility. There are many names and stories associated with this serpent which point to its significance and power within Koori traditions.

Since the coast offered plentiful food supplies, the Thawa groups occupied fairly small homelands, were relatively less mobile than others from inland areas and led a peaceful existence. They built folded bark canoes in which they ventured out to sea and their huts were trigonal bark shelters. Kooris of that time were generally healthier than westerners are today. Living in the open in a relatively mild climate and in a land largely free from disease, they benefited from a better diet, more exercise, less stress, a supportive society and a harmonious world view. Their major health concern was injury rather than disease which they counteracted with a range of traditional remedies, including wild herbs, animal products, steam baths, clay pits, charcoal and mud, massages, string amulets and secret chants. It is clear from the accounts of early colonists that these remedies did work. Unfortunately, very few native remedies have since been tested systematically.

### **Early European Contact.**

Twofold Bay and its safe harbour, Snug Cove (“Weecoon” to the Thawa), was named and mapped by George Bass early in 1798 during his initial voyage of discovery. During Bass and Flinders later voyage to establish a route to Van Diemen’s Land, they sought shelter in Twofold Bay during adverse winds in September, 1798 and took the opportunity to survey the area.

Lieutenant Matthew Flinders is the first to record an encounter with the local natives. Although the 3 women with children who were initially sighted ran off, they were then approached by an unarmed man “seemingly with careless indifference” who accepted a biscuit from them and offered a piece of whale fat in return. Lieutenant Flinders noted in his journal that while he tried to find a surreptitious moment to spit out the whale blubber, he perceived the native “doing precisely the same thing with our biscuit, whose taste was probably no more agreeable to him than his whale was to me.” Further cordial encounters followed with natives “who were better made and cleaner in their person than the natives of Port Jackson”. Given that it was the Koori custom to send an unarmed man to beg permission before venturing outside their territory (or ‘taurai’) and to greet unannounced incursions with hostility, this encounter attests to the natural friendliness of the Thawa.

Thereafter, many ships, sealers and whalers sought similar shelter here without adverse incident until 1806 when the sealer ‘George’ was holed by rocks in Twofold Bay and sent a small boat on to Sydney for help. This ship had a bad reputation with natives and the stranded crew members clashed with them, killed several and hung their bodies in trees ‘as a warning’. One crew member was captured during the melee and held captive by the Thawa for several years, but

was otherwise well treated (which begs comparison of the relative humanitarianism of the two sides).

### **Decline and Fall of the Traditional Thawa Way of Life.**

From the first days of the colonisation of New South Wales, a gamut of introduced diseases spread before white exploration to which the Koori population had no natural resistance and against which their traditional remedies were ineffective. Horrific smallpox plagues swept through, carrying off as many as half their population. We do not know how they responded to these plagues since they preceded settlement by many years. We do know that early explorers had met Kooris disfigured by smallpox scars who told stories of horrific, mass deaths. Smallpox was followed closely by influenza, tuberculosis, syphilis and other horrors. The early encounters between Europeans and our Thawa people undoubtedly bore similar results. So, by the beginning of the white settlement of this area they would already have been devastated by many of these 'foreign invader' diseases.

The agricultural era of the 1820's brought cattlemen and their stock into this area and white settlement increased throughout the 1830's and 1840's. The settlers took over the best land for agriculture as well as the best fishing spots, which further disrupted the peaceful, coastal life of the Katungal people and inevitably led to violent altercation. The settler's stock and introduced grasses destroyed much of the native food plants and the settlers slaughtered the native animals because they competed for grass and water. When the hungry natives began spearing their stock, they received similar treatment and were either shot or driven from their lands to be met with the active hostility of neighbouring tribes when they uninvitedly trespassed. Since the Katungal were largely unable to work their traditional resources in their traditional way, by the 1840's many of the survivors had turned to employment with the new settlers, with men performing such tasks as sheep washing or farm labour while women worked as domestic servants.

The pastoral industry developed slowly due to infrequent communication with the colony in Sydney. During the 1830's a significant whaling industry developed in Twofold Bay which continued through to the 1920's and the local aborigines formed a large proportion of the labour force that sustained it. Many of the whaleboats were crewed by natives, who were renowned as better rowers and more often than not reached the beleaguered whale first. However, they had played a much more significant role beforehand, since shore-based whaling was only successful because of the active assistance of a large pod of killer whales, who not only alerted the whalers to the presence of the larger whales, but drove them inshore and, once harpooned, prevented the whales from sounding and thus escaping before they could be 'lanced' and killed (whale guns were rarely used because they frightened off the killer whales). For this service the Orcas received the tongue and lips of the whale before its carcass was hauled ashore.

This is one of the best known examples of inter-species co-operation for which the killer whales had undoubtedly been groomed by their earlier co-operation with the Katungal. Coincidentally, the traditional practice of 'Singing to the Whales' was revived in December, 2008 at Bundeena (just south of Sydney) where senior knowledge-holders of the D'harawal people passed on their ancient knowledge of this ceremony.

In a report on the area from the 1840's the 'Gazeteer of the Australian Colonies' makes note of the Thawa as "an active and intelligent race, and in their useful labours" ... "certainly contradict the hasty conclusions which so many superficial writers have drawn ...". But life as the peaceful Katungal people of Twofold Bay had known it for so long had by then altered beyond recognition. Their numbers dwindled rapidly and their tribal structures and way of life has now largely passed into antiquity.

### **White Settlement, Whaling and Empire Building.**

In 1828 Captain Thomas Raine, then a Sydney merchant and whaler, put 25 men ashore in Snug Cove under the command of John Irvine to begin a shore-based whaling operation preying on the shore-hugging Southern Right and Humpback whales, copying similar operations in Van Diemen's Land. They built huts, a small pier and try-works (for boiling down the blubber) while Raine put to sea to pursue Sperm whales. It is uncertain how long the Raine operation continued from Snug Cove but at least two other whalers also tried their hand here for a season or two during the early 1830's. In 1832 Peter Imlay en route from Launceston to Sydney in his chartered schooner 'Elizabeth', stopped in Twofold Bay in order to investigate the extraordinary rumours of wild killer whales assisting whalers. He immediately saw the potential of the wide bay with its safe harbours as a port for the rich pastoral areas beyond and decided to settle here and begin a whaling, agricultural and grazing venture. His two brothers, Dr. Alexander Imlay and Dr. George Imlay later relinquished their military posts in Sydney in order to join him here. They acquired huge tracts of land and built a large and varied pastoral and whaling enterprise using Twofold Bay as their home port.

The initial attempt to survey a Township on Twofold Bay in 1834 was not completed despite the increasing popularity of the port. It was not until 1843 when the newly arrived Scottish entrepreneur Benjamin Boyd proposed to base his Steamship Company at Twofold Bay that the survey was completed by the Government Surveyor, Mr. Thomas Townsend, who named the new town laid out around Snug Cove as Eden after the family name of Baron Auckland, the Secretary for the Colonies. Land sales were then authorised.

As well as extensive holdings in the 'Government' town of Eden, Benjamin Boyd purchased a large section of land in the southern portion of the bay where he began to build Boydtown and East Boyd in 1843 commencing with the 'Seahorse

Inn' (now restored as a boutique hotel) and later that year the area's first Post Office. In a census of 1849 only 49 people were listed as living in Eden whereas over 200 resided in Boydtown. Boyd appointed Oswald Brierly as his Whaling Master and had a house "Merton Cottage" built for him at Boydtown. Brierly was also an artist who was later knighted and appointed as Queen Victoria's Marine Artist. Many of his paintings of Twofold Bay and whaling activities therein can be viewed in public galleries across Australia. Boyd himself spent little time at Boydtown, preferring to operate from his property in Neutral Bay, Sydney.

Benjamin Boyd was a controversial figure in Australian history. He soon became one of the largest landholders in Australia with more than 2,000,000 acres (810,000 hectares) as well as interests in whaling, shipping, export, banking and finance. He was also elected to the NSW Legislative Assembly. He instigated many grandiose schemes but his financial empire was plagued by shipping losses, labour disputes (which he unsuccessfully tried to solve initially by "blackbirding" or importing islanders under virtual slave conditions, and then by importing indentured labour from England) and financial mismanagement until he was declared bankrupt in 1848 and departed for the Californian goldfields in 1849 to attempt to recoup his fortunes. In 1851 he disappeared in the Solomon Islands when he went ashore to hunt ducks. His body was never recovered, despite searches initiated by his creditors. By this time, Boydtown had become a virtual ghost town with its church roofed but otherwise unfinished, as it remains today.

The Imlay brothers had acquired approximately 1,000,000 acres but were hard hit by both ill health and the recession of 1843/44. George and Alexander died within a few months of each other in 1846 and Peter sold off both his land and whaling interests and moved on to New Zealand. In contrast to Boyd, who had made many attempts to cut costs by exploiting his workers, the Imlay Brothers treated the 100 or so Koori and white employees in their various enterprises well and paid a fair wage irrespective of race. Theirs was a sad loss to the area.

In its hey-day the whalers launched up to 30 boats from various parts of Twofold Bay. Both the Imlay Brothers and Boyd's whaling operations continued in other hands until in 1857 the most notable whaling family of the area, who persevered with dwindling catches well into the 1920's, set up the Davidson Whaling Station at Kiah Inlet by using the timber from an abandoned wreck to build their house and try-works. Alexander Walker Davidson had originally worked as a carpenter at Boydtown and then as the licensee at "The Squatters Arms Hotel". Four generations of the Davidson family continued whaling until just before the last and most famous of the pod of killer whales, "Old Tom", died in September, 1930. The grandson of Alexander Davidson (George, 'Master Whaler'), undertook the task of rescuing the body of 'his old friend' (who had guarded him against potential shark attack on at least one occasion when thrown overboard during a hunt) and preserving the skeleton, which can still be viewed today at the Eden Killer Whale Museum along with many other interesting relics of this time.

The Davidson Whaling Station has also been preserved as an historic site that is administered by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Among the many interesting anecdotes from Eden's whaling days is the occasion when George Davidson and his Thawa crew were rowing out to tow home a dead whale (after lancing they were left until they refloated from natural gas production) and watched as one of their pod of Killer Whales, 'Jackson', chased a Risso's Dolphin (or 'fat fish') at such speed that both became stranded in shallows at the end of Aslings Beach. They immediately changed course and the crew pulled heartily in order to help their beloved 'spirit brother' only to see a man wading out from the beach presumably also to help. This man was a newcomer to the area and thought that the whaleboat was hunting the stranded animals and so he claimed the 'kill' for himself by lancing both helpless animals with a large knife. The crew were livid and the harpooner even futilely threw his weapon toward the man. Fearing their reprisals, George wisely steered the boat out into the harbour. Feeling built among whalers of all races over this senseless slaughter to the extent that the local constable 'had a quiet word' and the man hastily left that night, never to return.

### **“Gold! Gold!”**

The Kiandra Gold Rush ('up Kosciusko way') of 1859/60 brought an overnight boom to the port and township of Eden and its population swelled to around 4,000 as the many fortune-seekers arrived and were equipped here. The winter of 1860 was severe and at that high elevation the Kiandra miners nearly froze to death. By March, 1861 a huge exodus was reported for fear of the approaching winter with 'no more than 200 diggers left' in Kiandra. Some of the returning diggers then bought land in this area from the Crown 'at £1 Sterling per acre' (less than \$5 per hectare).

There were a few later flirtations with 'gold fever' when it was discovered north of here in the Yowaka River in 1888 and Pambula briefly became a boom town. Around the turn of the century operations to reef mine gold and silver began south-west of Eden at Yambulla but it too was played out by 1917. Wolumla also became a gold town around that time and mining continued there until 1950.

### **Historic Buildings.**

By the end of 1861 Eden's town population declined to 265 permanent residents with a floating population of sheltering mariners and these were mostly housed in bark or slab walled huts as well as wattle and daub constructions, as was the way in most frontier towns of the era. Of course, none of these survive today. The few more substantial buildings of stone, rubble or brick were mostly hotels. The 'Eden Hotel' (now the 'Great Southern Hotel') is the only survivor, built in 1847 as a combined hotel and grocery store. In 1850 the two-storied 'Half House' (nick-named because its planned extension onto the gabled roof at one end was

never completed) and the 'Crown and Anchor Hotel' next door were erected diagonally opposite the now Eden Killer Whale Museum. 'Half House' was subsequently used as a Post Office and then the Government Savings Bank. Both buildings are private residences today after restoration and replacement of their original slate roofs with corrugated iron. Nearby is the Eden Court House built in 1857 and now substantially altered (some would say 'ruined') from its original sandstone design with the old Eden Police Station behind (now a bed and breakfast establishment called "Cocora Cottage"). The Eden Public School at the other end of the shopping centre was also completed in 1857. In 1866 the St. Georges Presbyterian Church was opened (with services previously held in the Court House) and survives today as St George's Uniting Church in Australia in Chandos Street across from the Great Southern Hotel behind the old Bank of New South Wales branch built on that corner in 1903.

Meanwhile, the old buildings at Boydtown continued deteriorating until 1936 when a family of builders from Lakes Entrance, Mr. R.B. Whiter and his two sons, bought and restored Boyd's 'Seahorse Inn'. The building has changed hands a number of times since and is now a picturesque, boutique hotel. Boydtown's church lost its roof in 1926 in one of the many bushfires which have periodically devastated this area and which have also destroyed many other historic, wooden buildings, but its walls still stand today. Being constructed of stone rather than wood, Boyd's Tower is the only surviving whale-spotting tower and now 'stands like a grey sentinel of other days'. The 1883 Green Cape Lighthouse (the second tallest in NSW) and outbuildings are also well worth seeing but the earlier, wooden lighthouse on Lookout Point constructed in 1860 and which was the first in the colony can now only be seen in drawings.

In 1913 John Logan, a tireless activist against governmental neglect of this area, built a remarkable home called 'Edrom Lodge' in East Boyd (near where the chip mill now is) and in 1936 had Eden's 'Log Cabin' constructed which he then donated to the Girl Guides where his daughter, Margaret, was First Lieutenant. This building later became Eden's library for a time.

### **“Such a magnificent port capable of taking the largest ships”**

Perhaps the defining moment for Eden as it is today came in 1871 when the mainland colony was split into two States (Victoria and New South Wales) and the border was drawn just to the south at Cape Howe. Despite having the third deepest natural harbour in the world and providing a natural gateway to the rich, agricultural areas of the Monaro, Riverina, Wimmera and Eastern Victoria, it appears that each of the two now separate administrations were fearful of diminution of their domains should the area be developed and a third 'state' thus mooted. It would seem that Sir Henry Parkes may have had his fingers crossed behind his back when he informed the NSW Parliament in 1881 that “when the district is opened up by railway construction” ... “Eden, which is a very fine

harbour, will become the site of a very important, maritime city". The rail link he spoke of is only one of a long line of such proposals, none ever acted upon.

Around the time of Federation, Eden was proposed as our future federal capital. In 1900 the Land's Appeal Court, tasked with choosing among competing interests, favoured a Southern Monaro site with Twofold Bay as its port. The Governor General at the time, Lord Hopetoun, even went so far as to build a house in Eden in 1901 (still standing today at 5 Bass Street) when he and the then Leader of the Federal Opposition, George Reed, advocated Eden and its "wonderful harbour" as the capital. However, yet another proposed rail link and major port upgrade were denied by the NSW parliament with the predominating, centralist view that a rival port would "interfere with the trade of Sydney". Many of us living here today are pleased by the relative peace and isolation thus willed on this region, but it is interesting to ponder whether the historical impediment of Australia's 'tyranny of distance' may have been partially alleviated had vision rather than self-interest prevailed.

### **Shipwrecks.**

Many vessels have been driven ashore and lost in or near Twofold Bay and Green Cape but the most famous was probably the "Ly-ee-moon" (Flying Fish) which began life in 1859 as a sister ship to the Royal Yacht "Victoria and Albert" but by 1886 (after many refits) was plying passengers between Melbourne and Sydney. After rounding Cape Howe on May 29 in a strong on-shore wind she drifted from her due North course and around 9 p.m. struck the rocks below the Green Cape Lighthouse. Despite heroic rescue attempts, only 5 of the 45 passengers and 10 of the 41 crew survived and only 24 bodies were subsequently recovered from the sea. Among the bodies was that of Mrs Flora McKillop, the mother of Mary, Sister of St. Joseph, the foundress of the Order of St. Joseph of North Sydney who may become Australia's first saint. Sister Mary established the Convent of St. Joseph here in 1888 as a means of showing her appreciation for the rescue attempts, recovery of her mother's body and subsequent kindness displayed by the residents of Eden in her distress. The captain of the "Ly-ee-moon" was later found guilty of gross neglect, but to his credit spent the remainder of his life assisting the Royal Shipwreck Society.

### **Industry and Exports from Twofold Bay.**

From the beginning of white settlement whale products, wattle bark, farm produce and livestock were exported from Twofold Bay. From a holding pen in an inlet called Cattle Bay steers were pulled by their horns into the sea to swim out to the sides of ships before being hoisted aboard by a sling. The tannin extracted from wattle bark was used to tan leather. Whale oil was a major source of illumination, lubrication and soap manufacture through the 19<sup>th</sup> century before the development of petroleum, and from the baleen with which whales filter krill (small crustaceans which are their main food source) the corsetry popular until

World War II was manufactured. In 1900 an industry was established at Eden to extract the tannin from wattle bark, rather than exporting the bulkier raw product before that export declined because other countries nearer to Europe began growing and harvesting Australian wattle trees.

A boat building industry in the sheltered waters of the Kiah Inlet prospered for a period, mainly during the long whaling 'off-season'. Sleeper cutting to service the dramatic expansion of the world's railways in the early 1900's became a major source of income in the area for a time and our fishing industry also began in earnest around the turn of the century, initially by line and net then progressing to 'beam trawling' by 1914. After salmon fishing began in 1920 a smoke house was started in Quarantine Bay and then a small cannery operated on the shores of Lake Curalo which in 1940 was moved to Cattle Bay. The expanding Eden trawler fleet was commandeered for the war effort during World War II and local boat building to expand the fishing fleet prospered thereafter until steel trawlers were introduced around 1960. During this period tuna had become the main catch and the cannery at Cattle Bay expanded and produced the Greenseas label products. Spotter planes were introduced in 1961 to more quickly locate the tuna schools. By 1970 Eden had become the largest supplier of fresh fish to the markets of both Sydney and Melbourne. By 1984, due to over-fishing, the tuna boats were ranging more than 200 miles to fill their holds and government restrictions were imposed. The cannery was finally closed in 1999 due to lack of profitability and one in eight workers from Eden then lost their jobs, with many later moving to the Bega Cheese Factory. Although trawler numbers have significantly reduced, Eden remains the largest fishing port in NSW today but boats now range as far as South Australian to drop their nets.

Timber has always been an important industry for Eden. Railway sleepers and telegraph poles are now made from other materials but hardwood from local forests is readily used in the building industry and Eden today is a principal export point for timber and timber products. The Harris Daishowa woodchip mill at East Boyd was constructed in 1971 and each year around 800,000 tonnes of woodchips are exported to south-east Asia together with more than 60,000 tonnes of softwood sent mainly to Japan and Korea.

### **Bibliography:**

McKenzie, JAS, *The Twofold Bay Story*, Eden Killer Whale Museum, Eden, 1992

Davidson, R, *Whalemen of Twofold Bay*, self published, Eden, 1988

Tindale, N, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1974

Heritage Office and Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, *Regional Histories of New South Wales*, Sydney, 1996.

(Website:) *Traditional Aboriginal Bush Medicine*,  
[www.aboriginalartonline.com/culture/medicine.php](http://www.aboriginalartonline.com/culture/medicine.php) (collected 15/4/2009)

(Website:) *Traditional Singing of the Whales (Guwarra) - 7/12/08*,  
[www.wollondilly.nsw.gov.au/events/](http://www.wollondilly.nsw.gov.au/events/) (collected 16/4/2009)

(Website:) *Eden and Twofold Bay, Afloat Magazine, November, 2008*,  
[www.afloat.com.au/afloat-magazine/](http://www.afloat.com.au/afloat-magazine/) (collected 13/5/2009)