



ISSN 2754-5547

<https://doi.org/10.52230/CDZS3895>

‘Annemarie McLaren, Aboriginal-Colonial Exchanges in New South Wales 1800—1835: When the Strangers Came to Stay’

Ann Curthoys

To cite this book review: Ann Curthoys, ‘Annemarie McLaren, Aboriginal-Colonial Exchanges in New South Wales 1800—1835: When the Strangers Came to Stay’, *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 6 (September 2026): 198-199, <https://doi.org/10.52230/LZGK3179>

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Annemarie McLaren, *Aboriginal-Colonial Exchanges in New South Wales, 1800-1835* (Oxford University Press, 2025), 275pp. Hardback. £99. ISBN: 978-0-1989-4342-6.

This book explores the interactions between Aboriginal people and colonists in New South Wales from 1800 to 1835. While colonisation was changing Aboriginal people's lives and society in a myriad of ways, these three and a half decades are seen as a period of close interaction, or entanglement, between locals and newcomers. People knew each other by name, were interested in some of each other's material goods and forms of knowledge and developed a degree of reliance on each other. While each adapted to the other, most of the adaptation was on the Indigenous side, whether adopting clothing, wearing breastplates, or relying on blankets. The strongest co-reliance was on expeditions where colonists came to value the services of Indigenous guides, and Indigenous people sought guiding for payment and new experiences. While the book notices the violence accompanying colonisation, especially in the context of discussing negotiations being held to avoid further violence, that is not its focus; instead, the reader learns the intricacies, the protocols, and the day-to-day character of Indigenous-coloniser exchanges.

The detailed discussion of these interactions is truly impressive. There are separate chapters on governor-supplied annual goodwill feasts, clothing, breastplates, skin cloaks and blankets, Indigenous guides, plus a chapter on an Indigenous man named Goggey and one on settler Alexander Berry at Cullunghutti, which became known as Coolangatta. The emphasis throughout is on Indigenous agency in a shifting world, on Indigenous people's choices, skills, and negotiating capacities. McLaren draws on the already rich Australian scholarship on these interactions and consults histories of colonial North America and New Zealand to help her interpret what she finds in New South Wales. To this broad scholarship she adds a depth of new research, using methods that are both archival and object based. From this mix we gain a grounded sense of people who left so few written records of their own. Take this description, for instance, of what Wangal man, Bennelong, took with him on his journey to Norfolk Island: 'He had a neatly gummed fishing-gig with three prongs, animal bone from which he could fashion spear-points, a bundle of spears, as well as a stone hatchet – all the essential tools of an Aboriginal man of the Sydney region' (p. 187).

The result of this rich detail, beautifully told and thoughtfully analysed, is a valuable work that, alongside the historiography on which it builds, helps to reshape our understanding of early Aboriginal-colonial relationships. It gives us glimpses of everyday lives in a time and place of extraordinary and rapid social, economic, political, and cultural change.

Towards the end of the book, McLaren reiterates that she does not wish to sidestep the realities and the violence of colonisation; rather, her aim is to 'shed light on a range of other dynamics as well as trace change over time' (p. 234). While *Aboriginal-Colonial Exchanges in New South Wales* does indeed illuminate the dynamics of intercultural exchange in a British colony, and does it remarkably well, I think to some extent it does sidestep the harsher realities of colonisation. It gives us only a weak sense of the sheer destruction – of individuals, families, gender relationships, communities, and ecologies – that was happening all along. I came away thinking that for historians, and indeed for settler societies at large, we are still learning how to appreciate Indigenous agency, skills, and adaptability while retaining

full awareness of colonialism's larger destructive processes of invasion, land taking, displacement, disruption, and exploitation.

Ann Curthoys, University of Sydney