

Individual character profiles

Barangaroo

Barangaroo was a Cammeraygal woman of the Eora language group who became an important and powerful figure in the early interactions between the colonisers and the Aboriginal people of the area now known as Sydney. She was likely born around 1750, as she was described in 1790 as being in her early 40s, worldly, wise and freer of spirit than the colonisers expected of a woman.

Barangaroo had a husband and two children, all of whom perished in the disastrous smallpox epidemic that devastated the Aboriginal population around Sydney in the earliest years of the colony, killing up to half of the Aboriginal people of the region, particularly women and elders. Barangaroo later married an Aboriginal man of the Wangal people, Bennelong, who was to become one of the most prominent Aboriginal people of early colonial times.

Prior to first contact, Barangaroo was already a highly skilled fisherwoman. Eora fisherwomen were responsible for providing fish, the staple food, for their people, and they navigated the harbour in bark canoes in which they nurtured fires for warmth and cooking as well as their infants, in seas that were often challenging, while they sang their people's songs. Eora women's skills on and in the water – swimming, diving, fishing and canoeing – were highly developed and greatly admired by the newcomers.

Barangaroo had considerable influence over Bennelong, himself a strong character, and

remonstrated with him for consorting with the colonisers, to the extent of breaking his fishing spear in anger. At times she refused to accompany him to visit the British, refused him permission to accompany them on expeditions, and was seen to hit him back when he hit her. All this was a great surprise to the newcomers. She is known to have intervened when a convict was being flogged for stealing Aboriginal fishing gear – in her law, a disproportionate punishment – and consistently refused food and drink from the British, as well as refusing to wear European clothes. She was only ever described as wearing a slim bone through a nose piercing.

Most likely, the impressive status Barangaroo enjoyed was closely linked to her leadership and efficacy as a provider for her people. She was deeply troubled and angered by an event in November 1790 in which the colonisers took hundreds of kilograms of fish from the harbour in fishing nets, sending almost a hundred kilograms as a gift to her and her clan. This was far more than could possibly be needed, a wasteful gift that undermined the role and stewardship of the Eora women.

Barangaroo gave birth to a baby girl in 1791. Although Bennelong tried to persuade her to give birth at the first Government House, she refused and found a suitable place in the bush to welcome her daughter according to tradition. Not long afterwards, for reasons not known, Barangaroo passed away. She was cremated with her fishing gear beside her and was buried by Bennelong in the grounds of the first Government House.

YOU ARE...

You are Barangaroo, one of the most important and well-known Aboriginal women of the Sydney region at the time of colonisation.

YOU DID...

You held important knowledge of laws, teachings and women's rituals. You were the foremost of the impressive Eora fisherwomen who provided the staple food source of your people, fish. You were considered striking and somewhat frightening; you engaged with the colonisers, but always on your own terms, holding your culture and traditions strongly.

YOU WANT...

You want your people and their way of life to survive and thrive on Country, and for those who come to your Country to show respect for culture, laws and traditions.