



SYDNEY
ELDERS

CONTINUING ABORIGINAL STORIES

WITH UNCLE DENNIS FOLEY, AUNTY SANDRA LEE,
UNCLE CHICKA MADDEN AND AUNTY ESME TIMBERY

This publication accompanies the State Library of NSW's exhibition *Sydney Elders: Continuing Aboriginal Stories*.

The State Library's exhibitions onsite, online and on tour aim to connect audiences across NSW and beyond to our collections and the stories they tell.

www.sl.nsw.gov.au/galleries

Sydney Elders: Continuing Aboriginal Stories is a free exhibition at the State Library of NSW from 4 October 2018 to 13 October 2019.

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Members of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are respectfully advised that this exhibition and related materials contain the names, words and images of people who have passed away. They are included with the permission of family and/or elders.

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Front cover: Assan Timbery, boomerang maker
La Perouse (detail), 1959, APA 06889

Back cover: Redfern and Eveleigh workshops
(detail), c 1940-55, PXA 675/138

SYDNEY ELDERS

CONTINUING ABORIGINAL STORIES



**'I use those local rock carvings
on a lot of my ceramics.'**
— Uncle Chicka Madden

Drawing of Aboriginal carvings
at Middle Head, 1839-71
A 610/209

Q&A WITH CURATOR JONATHAN JONES

What was the main idea for the exhibition?

Sydney Elders tells the story of four Aboriginal elders who are traditional owners of the region we know today as Sydney. The project emerged as a way of telling Sydney's most important story — its Aboriginal story. Yet, like most Sydneysiders, I'm not from here. My family comes from over the mountains, in freshwater country, so I can't speak for or tell the story of Sydney. Like everyone else who has come to Sydney, it's my cultural responsibility to support our local traditional owners. In my role as curator I can only help to create a platform for others to tell this story, the people who truly call Sydney home.

The story of Sydney, the epicentre of colonisation, is not an easy one to tell. As much as we would like our history to be clean and sit within a single frame, it isn't and it doesn't. As Sydney has grown, it has continued to colonise Aboriginal lands, people and knowledge. Today, multiple Aboriginal nations, clans and languages sit within Sydney's boundaries, affecting people in different ways.

Every Sydney Aboriginal family has had their own way of dealing with colonisation, their own story of resistance and methods of survival. These stories form a beautifully complex web that knits Sydney's landscapes together. In order to tell these stories with authority we have turned to four traditional owners and elders from the Sydney region. This exhibition is an opportunity for audiences to hear their important stories. Some stories will be familiar, others unknown. Some stories echo each other, while others don't occur in a straight line. But they are the lived experiences of Sydney's elders. Our elders.



Uncle Dennis Foley



Aunty Sandra Lee



Uncle Chicka Madden



Aunty Esme Timbery

Portrait photos by Joy Lai, State Library of NSW

'We've always lived in the Blacktown area. We used to live on Sunnyholt Road and we all went to school at Blacktown North.'

— Aunty Sandra Lee

How did you decide on the exhibition's approach?

I wanted, in many ways, to build on the strengths of the Library's 2006 exhibition *Eora: Mapping Aboriginal Sydney 1770-1850*, curated by Keith Vincent Smith and Anthony Bourke. A key feature of that exhibition was representing Sydney via the points of the compass: north, south, east and west. Although a Western construct, these directions help us understand Sydney, and its distinctive Aboriginal communities to the north, south, east and west.

These communities have grown and developed in very different ways, and arguably have informed how Sydney itself has developed. So the *Sydney Elders* project invited four elders to represent these regions: Uncle Dennis Foley from the north, Aunty Esme Timbery from the south, Uncle Charles 'Chicka' Madden from the east, and Aunty Sandra Lee from the west. Together they guide us through Sydney.

Tell us about the four elders

Each elder represents the different nations, clans and groups that have survived in Sydney; each has continued their ancestors' legacy by actively contributing to their community. In their own ways, these elders have continued the stories and actions of their ancestors to grow and develop Sydney.

Uncle Dennis Foley is a Gai-mariagal man from northern Sydney. He spent much of his early years growing up on his grandmother's country on the northern beaches. Uncle Dennis has worked in education and has published a book on his country, *Repossession of Our Spirit: Traditional Owners of Northern Sydney*.

Aunty Sandra Lee is a Dharug elder from Blacktown, where she is an active member of the western Sydney Aboriginal community. Her family is descended from Maria Locke, the first Aboriginal person to marry a European and own property. Aunty Sandra has been involved in many organisations and sits on several boards, constantly pushing for recognition of Dharug people.

Uncle Charles 'Chicka' Madden is from Gadigal country and is a recognised member of the Redfern and inner-city community. Uncle Chicka worked in the construction industry for most of his life, and has been involved in many organisations including the Aboriginal Medical Service and the Redfern All Blacks.

Aunty Esme Timbery is a celebrated Bidjigal artist and elder from the Aboriginal mission community of La Perouse on the shores of Botany Bay. Aunty Esme comes from a long line of Timberys and, like her ancestors, is a renowned shellwork artist whose work has been widely collected.

How did you work with the elders to tell their stories?

The process of working with the elders has centred on long interviews, charting the elders' family stories, their own personal stories and their connections to Sydney. The interviews happened initially at their homes, on their country. We then trawled through the State Library's collection, searching high and low for any material that connected with the elders and the stories they shared with us.



'My Aunty May reared me up.
I remember that fur coat,
that's her all over.'
— Aunty Esme Timbery

May Simms, c 1940s
PXE 1368/5

After pulling together as much material as we could find, the elders visited the Library and we interviewed them as they looked through the material. They provided much-needed knowledge and stories regarding objects in the collection. In this way, the project brings into view the Aboriginal knowledges, histories and voices that are locked away in collections.

The stories the elders generously shared with us have been the driving force behind the project. Collection items have been carefully brought together to help tell these stories. This combination of story and object has really determined the way the exhibition has been planned and displayed. Prioritising the elders' voices and presence is the real focus. That's why we have screened their interviews in portrait format so they appear life-sized; the viewer can feel as if they are taken inside the elders' homes, sharing a cup of tea and having a yarn. My role as curator could easily be challenged, which I think is good, as I see the elders driving the context of the project. They are the curators.

As you supported the elders through this process, what were some of the highlights or surprises?

Although I've known some of these elders for a while now, sitting down with them and recording their stories, then connecting those stories with material in the Library collection, was enormously insightful. Stories, some of which I'd heard before, took on a new meaning when illustrated in pictures or filmed on location. Objects woke up some old memories, and the elders really enjoyed connecting with some of the material in the Library's collection — which could be a photo of their family, or country they remember before it was developed. Aunty Esme, for instance, was overwhelmed when she found a photo of her Aunty May in the collection, whereas Aunty Sandra was not surprised that there was such limited material in the collection on Dharug and western Sydney.

A key moment in the research happened when I was trawling through the collection looking for pictures of the Gladesville, Tarban Creek and Roseville bridges, all of which Uncle Chicka helped construct. As a Library staff member handed me the box of images, she remarked that I must have filled in the wrong number on the request slip as I was curating an 'Aboriginal' project and this box was just of Sydney bridges and roadways — implying, I guess, that Sydney's built environment is not an Aboriginal story. The staff member was shocked, and happy, to hear that I had the right box and that Aboriginal people like Uncle Chicka have been involved in making many of Sydney's buildings, roadways and tunnels.

It was a sharp reminder of where Sydney's Aboriginal history exists in people's imaginations. Aboriginal presence doesn't just reside in Sydney's pre- or early colonial history, and then conveniently disappear with the arrival of Cook. The truth is that Aboriginal people are everywhere, in every town, in every walk of life. Sydney's Aboriginality is deeply embedded in every element of the city. It was at this moment that I realised the project was on the right track. This exhibition clearly shows the ongoing relationship of community to their homelands and the way they have sculpted their country.

'You can see how isolated the northern beaches were. That's why Aboriginal people survived here in such numbers up until the 1950s.'

— Uncle Dennis Foley

What were the challenges or problems in curating the exhibition?

As the project involved stepping out of the familiar subject areas of most researchers — looking at Sydney's contemporary Aboriginal stories — there was a lot of catching up to do. This process saw me filtering through countless boxes of material, much of which hadn't been looked at for a very long time, writing hundreds of requests slips and exhausting the staff. I'm sure we haven't found everything relating to the elders' stories; we simply found things based on keyword searches, and I hope the elders will forgive me when more material comes to light.

Another key issue was physically accessing the Library and making sure the elders felt welcome and comfortable in the space. Historically, Aboriginal people have not been welcomed by state institutions, especially ones as intimidating as the State Library, residing next to other colonial institutions of power on Macquarie Street. As a result, many elders hadn't been to the Library before, and needed some encouragement. There were also wheelchair access issues — the elders had to arrive unglamorously through the backend of the building, and then work through a maze of tunnels and corridors. How people feel within our public institutions is important; institutions need to be welcoming and inviting, and I think this project exposed some ways in which the Library could be improved.

What makes a collection like the Library's important for Aboriginal people?

This is a great question, and it goes to the very heart of the project. The Library's collection is, in fact, not that critical to Aboriginal people. It holds important material and early notes and documents constructed from other people's ideas about Aboriginality, but our knowledge is in our families, in our communities and in our elders. The question should really be: why is community so important to collections?

And the answer is: without our knowledge holders, without our storytellers and without our elders, the Library is just a cold archive full of bits of paper with little correlation to Aboriginal people. Founded as edifices of imperial power, institutions like the Library need to be decolonised and become places of community engagement and conversation. We are enormously privileged that these elders have offered us their stories — they show us that decolonising spaces can be both challenging and rewarding.

How does this project connect to your broader practice as an artist, a curator and a researcher?

Like many other projects I've worked on, *Sydney Elders* looks at understanding place, and showing respect to the traditional owners of that place. In Wiradjuri language this is part of the concept of yindyamarra, or respect for the country and the people. Yindyamarra plants a firm foothold and creates a real understanding of where we are. I've worked with many of these elders for a long time, and they have helped me understand their homelands of Sydney and, more importantly, how I can be a responsible citizen in their country. Yindyamarra might take the form of acknowledging country in our institutions, such as schools and libraries, or it might be as simple as caring for country and picking up our rubbish.



Jonathan Jones with
Uncle Chicka Madden, 2018

Photo by Joy Lai,
State Library of NSW

In what ways is this project different from other exhibitions?

I didn't want this project to follow the standard format of an exhibition. It's something in-between an installation and an exhibition, a collaboration and a curation. It's working to disrupt the way we understand collections and exhibitions. In my experience, audiences are hungry for a challenge and something new.

In many ways the project is critical of the way knowledge and power are experienced in places like the Library. For Aboriginal people, colonial institutions have been constructed to cause harm. Most of the material relating to Aboriginal people in the Library's collection was not made by Aboriginal people, particularly the material from NSW. The authoritative voice for Aboriginal knowledge comes from squatters, missionaries, amateur anthropologists and colonial government authorities such as the police or church, while Aboriginal voices — such as the oral histories of our elders — have long been discounted and excluded.

In the exhibition space, the tension between the institution and Aboriginal communities gives rise to panel walls that congregate, lean and rest on the institution's walls. Aboriginal stories are sadly not the pillars of our institutions. Our narratives, much like our communities, are fringe camps residing in the forgotten corners. This idea is reflected in exhibition panels that create their own space. They play on the relationship between Aboriginal people and the knowledge housed and displayed within Western institutions. But they also celebrate the alternative ways Aboriginal people live and engage with space. Gently leaning and creating new places to inhabit, the construction of this space recognises the way individuals rest on each other and generate communities and collective knowledge.

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About Jonathan Jones

Sydney-based artist and independent curator Jonathan Jones is a member of the Wiradjuri and Kamilaroi nations of south-east Australia. Well known for his site-specific installations that explore Indigenous practices, histories, relationships and ideas, he began his curatorial practice at Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative Ltd in Sydney. He has since researched and curated for various institutions and organisations, often in collaboration with community groups and elders. He is currently a senior researcher at Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research, University of Technology Sydney.



Sunny Holt Road, Blacktown, 1931-49, GPO1 - 03492



Narrabeen Lagoon, 1900-10, PXE 711/488

LIST OF WORKS



'I remember vividly my uncles catching fish at Collins Beach.'
— Uncle Dennis Foley

Collins Beach, Manly, 1971
PXA 587/916

UNCLE DENNIS FOLEY

Collins Beach, Manly, 1971

photo by EC O'Neill
presented 1993, PXA 587/916

Views, Narrabeen Lakes, 1900–10

photos by Star Photo Co
presented 1935, PXE 711/486–488

Narrabeen Lagoon (detail), 1890

silkscreen with drawing by
CS Wheeler, bequeathed by
Sir William Dixson, 1952
DL PF 107

Views of Collaroy, Long Reef and Narrabeen, 1920s–30s

watercolours by John Cosh
presented by Miss J Cosh, 1982
PX*D 639/27, 37, 39, 50, 148, 181

Narrabeen Lagoon looking westwards (detail), c 1950s

photo by NSW Department
of Education, Resource Services
presented 1990
PXE 731/327

FILM STILLs:*

Manly harbour & seaside holiday
resort, Ramsay Photo Works,
1950s, PXA 1949/3; Manly NSW,
Ramsay Photo Works, 1950s,
PXA 1949/3/70; Narrabeen Lagoon
looking westwards, c 1950s, PXA
731/327; Narrabeen Lagoon, NSW,
Hall & Co, 1900–30s, Home and
Away - 34703; Views, Narrabeen
Lakes, Star Photo Co, 1900–10,
PXE 711/488, 486; Queenscliff
Lagoon, c 1940–55,
R Cameron, PXA 675/697

AUNTY SANDRA LEE

Silent Pool, Cattai Creek (detail), c 1890s

from an album owned by
Mrs A Bennett
PXA 2144/27/92

Prospect Creek, 1940–55

photos by H Cameron for RM
Phillips Photography, PXA 675/283,
284

Blacktown district, 1949

photos by NSW Department
of Main Roads, GPO1 - 45509, 46737,
46782, 46738, 45517, 46766, 46740,
46759, 46788

'Names of children received into the Native Institution' (detail), 1814–20

Bonwick transcripts
BT 1-88/Series 1/50/p480

Instructions relating to the Native Institution at Parramatta, 1814

written by Governor Lachlan
Macquarie, bequeathed by
Sir William Dixson 1952, DLADD 340

Native Institute site, c 1978

photographer unrecorded
donated by Mrs H Fry, 1979,
PXA 1287

Ceramic plate, showing the former Blacktown Native Institute site, c 2000, handpainted by

Aunty Sandra Lee, lent by
Aunty Sandra Lee

Leslie John (Jack) Locke, c 1918

photographer unrecorded
P1/Locke, Leslie John

South Creek, near Liverpool (detail), 1800s

drawing with sepia wash by
Samuel Thomas Gill
DG SV*/SpColl/Gill/1

FILM STILLs:*

Blacktown street views, 1931–49,
GPO1 - 03492, 46756, 46737; Prospect
Creek, 1950s, H Cameron for RM
Phillips Photography, PXA 675/283;
Blacktown street view, 1949, GPO1
- 42444; *A View in Parramatta
NS Wales Looking East, 1825–28*,
Augustus Earle, PXD 265; 'Names
of children received into the
Native Institution', 1814–20,
Bonwick transcripts, BT 1-88/Series
1/50/p480; *Petition from Maria
Lock re land grant, 1831*, courtesy
State Archives & Records NSW,
NRS907 (2/7908); *Aunty Mavis
Halvorson, 1992*, family collection,
courtesy Aunty Sandra Lee

UNCLE CHICKA MADDEN

The Knockout, Henson Park, Marrickville, 1992

photos by Ellen Comiskey
presented by Ellen Comiskey
c 1997
ON 441

Qantas House during construction, Sydney (detail), 1957

photo by Max Dupain &
Associates
purchased 2007
PXD 1013/88

Aboriginal carvings at Middle Head, South Head and Point Piper, 1839–71

pencil and watercolour drawings
by WA Miles
bequeathed by DS Mitchell, 1907
A 610/197, 199, 201, 203, 205, 209

Ceramic fish, c 2010

made by Uncle Chicka Madden
lent by Uncle Chicka Madden

Redfern & Eveleigh workshops (detail), c 1940–55

photo by H Cameron, RM Phillips
Photography
presented 1966
PXA 675/138

Tarban Creek and Gladesville bridges under construction, c 1964

photos by Bernard Heckford
presented by Joy Heckford, 1975
PXA 1499

Eastern Suburbs railway construction (detail), 1974

photo by EC O'Neill
presented 1993
PXA 587/760

FILM STILLs:*

Public School, Redfern, Sydney,
c 1880–1900, Henry King,
Tyrrell Collection, Museum of
Applied Arts and Sciences, gift
of Australian Consolidated Press
under the Taxation Incentives for
the Arts Scheme 1985, 85/1285-
656; *Thomas William Madden and
Gerry Madden, c 1945*, family
collection, courtesy Uncle Chicka
Madden; *Greek migrants arriving
at the Overseas Passenger
Terminal, Sydney, 1961*, Don
McPhedran, APA - 09774; *Riley
Street, Woolloomooloo, 1968*,
Frank Plicka, PXA 937/3; *Nicolo
Manna, Eveleigh Rail Yards,
1992*, Scott Wajon, PXE 905/15;
*Redfern and Eveleigh workshops,
c 1940–55*, H Cameron & RM
Phillips PXE 675/138, 137; *Tarban
Creek and Gladesville bridges*

under construction, c 1963, Bernard Heckford, PXA 1499; **Gladesville Bridge during construction, 1964**, Barry Newberry, APA - 12763; **Workers shovelling concrete, Gladesville Bridge, 1964**, courtesy Roads & Maritime Services NSW, 18086; **Aerial view of Gladesville bridges, surrounding suburbs and Parramatta River, 1978**, Ray Sharpe, APA-40557; Qantas House Sydney during construction, 1957, Max Dupain, PXA 1013 /88; **Aerial view of Eastern Suburbs Railway, c 1979**, PXA 2144/122/179; **The Knockout, Henson Park, Marrickville, 1992**, Ellen Cominsky, ON 441; **Uncle Chicka Madden at the Koori Knockout, Leichhardt, 2016**, Barbara McGrady, A74F8092

AUNTY ESME TIMBERY

La Perouse (detail), c 1953

photo by Max Dupain & Associates
purchased 2010–12
ON 559/1/262

Assan Timbery, 1959

photos by Don McPhedran
for the Australian
Photographic Agency
presented 1988
APA - 06888, 06889, 06892, 06893

Boys fishing off the rocks near Bunnerong Power House (detail), 1934

photo by Sam Hood
purchased from Gladys Hood,
1972
Home and Away - 408

May Simms, c 1940s

photographer unrecorded
presented by Randwick and
District Historical Society, 1985,
PXE 1368/5

Aboriginal Reserve before demolition, La Perouse, 1971

photographer unrecorded
GPO - 46267

La Perouse tram (detail), c 1950

photo by Len A Clark
presented by Hilda Clark, 2006
PXA 1250/255

Christian Endeavourers group leaving for Sydney Town Hall, 1961

photo by Alma Smith & Alva Atkins
presented by Adrian Atkins, 2010
PXA 1303/1/8

Shell church, 2018

made by Aunty Esme Timbery
lent by Aunty Esme Timbery

FILM STILLS:*

Happy Valley, La Perouse, c 1930s, NSW Police Dept, NSW Police Forensic Photography Archive, courtesy Sydney Living Museums, 31189; **Happy Valley, La Perouse, c 1953**, Max Dupain & Associates, ON 559/1/262; **La Perouse, South End of Aboriginal Reserve, 1957**, courtesy Randwick & District Historical Society; **Christian Endeavourers group leaving for Sydney Town Hall, 1961**, PXA 1303/1/8; **UAM Church at La Perouse, 1966**, Alma Smith & Alva Atkins, PXA 1303/1/12; **Botany Bay NSW, from album of views in Australia ...** Joseph Lycett, 1825, SAFE/ F82/16; **La Perouse, 1937**, Sam Hood, Hood_14639; **Mullet catch at Yarra Bay, c 1930s**, courtesy Randwick City Library; **La Perouse tram, 1961**, PXA 1250/255; **Assan Timbery, Aboriginal boomerang maker, La Perouse, 1959**, Don McPhedran, APA 06887, 06892; **La Perouse residences, c 1930s**, PXA 2144/74/2; **Boatsheds at Frenchmans Bay, La Perouse, c 1920s**, GPO1 - 17078; **Ferry wharf, La Perouse, c 1953**, ON 559/1; **John Timbery and Rosina Cavanagh at the RAS (Easter) Show, 1963**, GPO2 - 21042, 21044; **Emma Timbery, shellworker, Queen of La Perouse, 1895**, P1/1784

* Film stills are State Library of NSW collection, unless credited otherwise.

AFTERWORD

Jonathan Jones' work as a curator and installation artist is transforming the ways in which Australians think about their living history. His 2016 exhibition in the Royal Botanic Garden, *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, moved many of us deeply. Jones has a rare capacity to set before us the rich, complex, difficult and — ultimately — hugely rewarding obligation all Australians must face if we are to understand our past. *Sydney Elders*, as he says, is more than just an exhibition.

There's an ancient saying: 'If you don't know what happened before you were born, you will never grow up.' Yet our national anthem tells us that 'we are young and free'. In truth, we are not young. We are — thanks to the presence in our midst of the living cultures of Aboriginal Australia — perhaps the oldest on the planet. Jonathan Jones' *Sydney Elders* installation is part of a series at the Library this year aimed at turning our institution inside out, telling us about who we are and where we have come from.

DR JOHN VALLANCE

State Librarian

