

THE ABORIGINAL SENSE OF HUMOUR

The Aboriginal sense of humour was on display right from the time of British colonisation in 1788, but the story actually began with Captain Cook's landing at present day Cooktown in 1770. Aboriginal people came down to the beach to investigate the reports of dead people wandering around.

Skin pigment disappears when you die and the arriving people were the colour of death. The locals also couldn't tell if they were men or women, because they had no beards and wore clothes.

Captain Cook's artist was sketching the animals, including a huge hopping animal, so Cook signalled toward the animal and asked the locals what they called it. The response was duly given '*Gangaroo*'. The artist then duly inscribed the word '*Cangaroo*' under his drawing. When Cook arrived back in England the stories and drawings of the Australian birds and animals were the sensation of the day.

When the First Fleet finally arrived eighteen years later, the only Aboriginal word that the colonists knew was '*Kangaroo*'. When Aboriginal people arrived to find out what was going on, the colonists pointed at the nearby hopping animals called Patagorang in the Sydney language and said '*Kangaroo*'. Unbeknown to the colonists, this meant '*I don't understand*' in the local language. So it was of course seen as quite reasonable that they didn't understand the animal, because they had only just arrived.

A Marine officer, Captain Watkin Tench, then saw two of the natives looking at some sheep in a pen. The natives were laughing, pointing, and saying '*Kangaroo*'. Tench then showed them some horses and cows. The natives again laughed and exclaimed '*Kangaroo*' and wandered off killing themselves laughing. Tench duly noted in his diary 'I think Kangaroo must mean any large animal'.

The colonists quickly became a source of great amusement to the local Aboriginals, who enjoyed copying their plethora of different accents. The lilting Irish, the Scottish burr, the pirate sounding Cornish, the broad Cockney and the upper-class English accents were all quickly mastered.

This was a considerable feat, because the strangers used a number of sounds that were not in Australian languages. The 'H' sound for instance had to be practiced as if you were short of breath, as did the 'S'. It was also difficult to tell the difference between 'B' and 'P' and between 'C' and 'G'. So practicing these strange sounds and copying the stiff body language and strange manners of the colonists, became a new performance art by Aboriginal campfires at night.

Everybody is well aware from countless tales by early settlers just how amazing Aboriginal people were at mimicking the sounds of various animals, but it is not an innate ability. It comes from a lifetime of trained observation and constantly practiced replication. In tribal

times some of the very best mimics maintained a life role as stand-up comedians. They travelled on schedule from camp to camp with comedic hairdos to give their hilarious impressions to sell-out crowds.

Locally, Simon Wonga was in his youth lauded for his comedic impressions, sometimes at the expense of the Aboriginal Protector, William Thomas. On one occasion in 1840 Thomas recorded that he and Wonga had camped for the night at Bolin-Bolin in Bulleen. At about 11pm, Wonga asked Thomas if he wanted to hear him wake up all the roosters of the nearby settlers. Wonga then began crowing like a rooster at dawn. Within minutes the entire district was reverberating with an extremely early dawn chorus. Thomas laughed so much he had trouble getting to sleep.

I could regale you with many stories of joke names Aboriginal people have given to various places when asked by settlers, but many of them are not really suitable for a family newspaper. So I will content myself with telling how the Moomba Festival of Melbourne got its name. This was told to me by Eric Onus, the brother of Bill Onus, who gave the festival its name. So it is in effect straight from the horse's mouth.

Bill was a highly respected Elder who had a souvenir shop in the Dandenongs. In the early 1950's he was invited by the Lord Mayor onto a committee to plan a new festival for Melbourne. At the start of the meeting Bill was told that they wanted to have an Aboriginal name that meant something like 'Let's get together and have fun'.

Bill then put to them that instead of just having an Aboriginal name, why not make the whole festival a celebration of our unique Aboriginal culture? The answer then came back, *'No, we want it to be like Mardi Gras in Rio de Janeiro'*.

Bill in disgust muttered 'Moomba' and was greeted with the happy response that it sounded like a great name. They assumed it meant having fun together, but '*moom*' is your backside and '*moomba*' means you are talking out of it.