C.W. Peck's *Australian Legends*: Aboriginal Dreaming Stories of Eastern Australia

Michael Organ

ABSTRACT: C.W. Peck's *Australian Legends*, published in two editions during 1925 and 1933, represent a rare compilation of eastern Australian Aboriginal Dreaming stories. Collected from the area initially settled by Europeans in 1788, and the first to experience widespread loss of its storytelling tradition, they are significant both in regard to the scarcity of similar published texts and the low survival rate of such narratives. Dreaming stories are important elements of Aboriginal culture and Peck's collection serves to preserve some of that heritage, though in an emasculated, anglicised and decontextualized form.

Why did the early [European] arrivals in Australia imagine that the Aborigines had no folk-lore, no legends, hardly any 'manners, habits and customs'? Is it that they really had none, or that the blacks were merely incomprehensible [to the Europeans]? I think it was the latter. (Peck, 1925)

Myths, legends, fairy tales, folklore, fantasy, Dreaming stories — oral, written, illustrated—all form important elements of culture, encapsulating lessons learnt over time, or real and imaginary events. They can transport us to worlds where innocence is applauded and evil lurks, or they can inform, entertain, and educate. Civilisations thrive on storytelling, on myth making and on the stuff of legend. The Australian Aborigines are no exception. From the *Old Testament* and *Koran*, through to the *Iliad,* the *Lord of the Rings* and the legend of the Rainbow Serpent, stories remain an important part of everyday life and can reveal to the observer and chronicler elements of individual culture and custom.

In 1925 a small book was published in Sydney by Stafford & Co., with the rather odd title *Australian Legends: Tales Handed Down from the Remotest Times by the Autocthonous Inhabitants of Our Land* (Peck 1925). The author, Charles William Peck, was a Bondi school teacher, poet, amateur anthropologist and collector of Aboriginal stories. *Australian Legends* represented the first substantial publication to concern itself solely with the Aboriginal folklore of the settled districts

of eastern New South Wales, especially the region immediately to the south and west of Sydney. Earlier works such as Mary Fitzgerald's *King Bungaree's Pyalla and other stories illustrative of manners and customs that prevailed among Australian Aborigines* and R.H. Mathews *Folklore of the Australian Aborigines* were limited by non-specificity in regards to location, and minimal information on the original storyteller (Fitzgerald 1891, Mathews 1899). They also presented a relatively small collection of stories. K. Langloh Parker's *Australian Legendary Tales* was an exceptional model for Peck, recording stories from a specific area of western New South Wales and a specific tribe (Parker 1896). It remains the best known of such collections.

Aboriginal Dreaming stories had been collected and recorded by Europeans since the earliest days of the arrival of the First Fleet at Port Jackson in January 1788, yet the Sydney region was poorly served, perhaps due to the military and convict nature of the settlement and the emphasis on scientific collection, rather than comprehensive investigation into cultural aspects of the local people. *Australian Legends* is therefore an important resource for an area of Australia where tribal and cultural links were shattered quite quickly due to the effects of colonisation, including disease, displacement and death. For example, during the compilation of this author's *Illawarra and South Coast Aborigines 1770–1850*, a thorough search was made for published or manuscript myths, legends, songs or Dreaming stories relating to the Illawarra region, located to the south of Sydney (Organ 1989). A few were found in local newspapers and published works by anthropologists such as the Reverend William Ridley, Andrew Mackenzie and R.H. Mathews (Ridley 1872 & 1875, Mackenzie 1874, Mathews 1904). Roland Robinson had also collected a number of stories from Wallaga Lake on the far south coast during the 1950s (Robinson, 1970). These represented the sum total of all that had apparently survived in print, apart from possible undiscovered works in regional newspapers and obscure serial publications. Manuscript collections such as those of R.H. Mathews and A.W. Howitt were untapped resources and presented an area for future research, as did oral history investigations within the current Illawarra Aboriginal community, where stories may have been passed down. By far the richest source of Illawarra Dreaming stories easily locatable were those published in Peck's *Australian Legends*. But who was C.W. Peck, and what brought him to collect and publish such works?

Charles William Peck 1875-1945

Charles William Peck was born at Woonona on the New South Wales south coast in 1875, the son of James and Sarah Peck. His childhood was spent at the nearby town of Thirroul, and at the age of 16 he was taken on as a Student Teacher at the local public school. Peck pursued this career for the remainder of his working life, working in schools throughout Australia. There are few details of his early experiences, though we know in 1896 he witnessed the 'coronation' of the local Aboriginal elder Mickey Johnson as 'King of Illawarra' at the Wollongong Show. This took place during the region's centenary celebrations marking the visit of European explorers Bass and Flinders in 1796. Peck had left Thirroul by 1907 and in 1910 was working as a teacher at Spencer's Gulf in South Australia. He notes that in 1911 he 'roamed over a vast tract of Australia', most likely referring to South and Central Australia, and possibly as far as Western Australia. During this period he also married.

On 4 April 1917, at the age of 41 and whilst employed as a teacher at Gambier, South Australia, he enlisted in the 4th Signal Troop of the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF). Following a period of training and service, in March 1918 Peck left Australia for Egypt and Palestine. Whilst with the AIF he attained the rank of 2nd lieutenant in the Education Service. Decommissioned in September 1919, he returned to New South Wales where he set up residence with his family at Bondi and returned to teaching.

Peck first drove a car in 1920 and made use of it in travelling to areas around Sydney, such as the Burragorang Valley and Blue Mountains. During this period he became secretary of the New South Wales Waratah League, an organisation whose aim was to have the waratah declared Australia's national flower. In 1925 he published *Australian Legends* and presented a number of talks to promote the book. When addressing the Helensburgh Progress Association he spoke on his experiences in the war, Aborigines, and the waratah (Anonymous 1925). In 1925-6 he also wrote a large number of region-specific poems which were printed in local newspapers and serials such as the *Bulletin*. In 1928-9 Peck published within the *Sydney Mail* a further series of Aboriginal Dreaming stories and engaged in a letters to the editor debate in the *Sydney Morning Herald* over the veracity of claims that rock carvings about Sydney were by local Aboriginal people. He was opposed in these erroneous views by noted scientist and ethnologist F.D. McCarthy of the Australian Museum.

Peck continued to work as a teacher through the 1930s and in 1933 published a second edition of *Australian Legends*. This was followed in 1934 by the novel *Sins of the Father*, and the development of a film script to accompany it (Peck 1934). During that year he also appeared on

film in one of the crowd scenes for the Roy Rene comedy *Strike Me Lucky*. In 1935 Peck was involved in another public newspaper debate, this time on the side of the waratah against the wattle as national flower. Notable correspondents included Mary Gilmore and C.E.W. Bean. At the end of 1936 and into the following year he presented a series of talks on the local ABC radio station 2BL outlining his experiences in Palestine during WWI. In 1937 Peck's portrait was entered into the Archibald Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales but did not win a prize.

By 1938 Peck and his wife were living in Hobart, though the relationship was rocky and ended in divorce shortly thereafter. He was working back in New South Wales by 1943 and subsequently sought a teacher position at a number of schools, including Shellharbour and Primbee near Wollongong, close to his home town of Thirroul. On 4 July 1945 Peck was registered as an Assistant Teacher at Mount Pritchard, though he died the following month at his Bondi residence, aged seventy. His few papers in the Mitchell Library contain a collection of published Aboriginal stories, newspaper clippings, and two books of mostly unpublished poetry. He was also the author of some short stories, possibly submitted to the *Bulletin* and *Sydney Mail*.

Editions of Australian Legends

In 1925 Peck issued the first edition of *Australian Legends*, graced with his own line drawings. It contained 25 Aboriginal Dreaming stories (Table 1), plus an account of a visit to Colong in the Burragorang Valley. Nineteen additional Aboriginal stories appeared in the *Sydney Mail* between 4 January 1928 and 23 January 1929, under the series banner 'Aboriginal Legends'. A second, slightly expanded version of *Australian Legends* was published in Melbourne in 1933, with line drawings by George Pownell. The number of Aboriginal stories therein had increased to 34 and an introduction was also included which referred to one of Peck's sources. This latter edition contained 18 stories which had appeared in the first edition, along with 8 from the *Sydney Mail* series and another 8 totally new stories, mostly relating to Illawarra and Shoalhaven. All told, between 1925 and 1933 Peck published 52 individual Aboriginal stories, or variations thereof. Forty were from the area of the Sydney Basin, with the remainder from South Australia, Victoria and one from Western Australia.

Table 1. C.W. Peck's Aboriginal Legends

Titles as given by Peck. Localities within New South Wales unless otherwise stated.

(*Australian Legends*, 1925)

	Title	*Location*
1	The First Waratah	Burragorang Valley
2	The First Gymea or Gigantic Lily	Campbelltown area
3	How the Waratah got its Honey	Burragorang Valley
4	How the White Waratah became Red	Sherbrooke
5	How the Sky was Lifted Up	Murrumbidgee River
6	The First Kangaroo	South-east Australia
7	The Struggle for Supremacy between Birds and Animals	Megalong Valley
8	How the Pistels of the Waratah became Firm	Burragorang Valley
9	Why the Waratah is Firm	George's River
10	The First Bush Fire	Hunter River
11	The First Kangaroo	Yerranderie
12	The Bubbling Springs	South Australia
13	The Salt Lakes	Burragorang Valley
14	Shooting Stars	'Basalt country'
15	Why the Petiole of the Waratah Grew Long	Mount Wilson
16	The First Crayfish	Shoalhaven
17	The Clinging Koala (and Bunyip)	Wollondilly River
18	The White Man's Boots	Nattai/Wollondilly
19	The Hand that tried to draw a Waratah	Burragorang Valley
20	Why Trees Have Bark	Eastern Australia
21	The Legend of the Pheasant and the Jackass	Illawarra
22	The Blood of the Bloodwood tree...	Burragorang Valley
23	The Blowing Down of the Mountains to the West	Eastern Australia
24	The Fight of the Ants for a Waratah	Australia
25	When the Tables were Turned	Lachlan River

(*Sydney Mail* 1928-9)

26	The Dianella Berry	East Coast
27	The Smilax	Tuggerah Lakes
28	The Story of the Pichi	Darling River
29	The Epacris	Australia
30	A Star Legend	North Coast
31	A Bird Legend	Illawarra
32	The Erring Maidens	Lake Illawarra
33	A Waratah Legend	Burragorang Valley
34	A Waratah Legend	Western Australia
35	Mist and a Fringed Flower	Appin
36	Stone Throwers	Georges River
37	A Sanctuary Legend	Australia
38	What the Moon is	Murray River
39	Umbels and Stamens of the Eucalyptus Blossom	Australia
40	Vicious Birds	Shoalhaven River
41	The Tail-less Tortoise	Illawarra
42	A Legend of Mists	Murray River
43	The Legend of the Shadow	South Australia
44	Winged Lomatia Seeds	Nepean River

(*Australian Legends*, 1933)

45	The Flood	South-east Australia
46	Why the Sun Sets	Murrumbidgee River
47	What Makes the Waves	Coalcliff/Stanwell Park
48	Why Leaves Fall	Riverina
49	At Low Tide (The Coming of White Man)	South Coast / Bellambi
50	Another Legend	Burragorang /Illawarra
51	Mulgani	Twofold Bay & Illawarra
52	The Black Satin	South Coast

Covers of two printings of C.W. Peck's Australian Legends

Origins

An Aboriginal story loses a great deal through translation and interpretation outside of community. Witness any number of the many compilations of Aboriginal myths and legends on the market which present such stories in an Anglicised, edited form (Mountford 1969, Robinson 1970). Few refer to the original narrator, the history behind the gathering of the story, or the manner if their presentation. A special feature of Peck's *Australian Legends* is the identification of specific localities within individual stories, similar to K. Langloh Parker's work. Peck is usually ambiguous about the original narrator (though not locality), however he does provide clues and two are clearly identified.

Within the 1925 edition he refers to a certain 'Mr Murdoch' as a correspondent. Blue Mountains historian Jim Smith points out that 'many of [Peck's] legends had been gathered from Burragorang Valley Aboriginals of the Ganndangarra tribe by a Mr Murdoch, of whom little is known, who told them to his son, who told them to Peck' (Smith, 1990). In regards to one of his 1925 stories, Peck informs us that it was originally related to Mr Murdoch at Taralga sometime around 1865 by a

native 'whom they called Griffiths, when his real name was Coomer-gudgkala.' Taralga is located south-west of Sydney, on the edge of the Burragorang Valley. During the introduction to a following story, Peck refers again to Mr Murdoch ('He wrote nothing; he said but little') and his son Alex. This Alex appears to have been one of Peck's main sources for the first edition of *Australian Legends*.

Peck's second major informant, used from midway through his *Sydney Mail* stories of 1928-9 and within the 1933 edition of *Australian Legends*, was an elderly Aboriginal woman simply cited as 'Ellen'. In the prelude to that second edition Peck paints an affectionate picture of Ellen, referring to her as 'the last full-blooded person of the Cammary Tribe .... she finds pleasure in the thoughts she has of her earliest childhood, and the knowledge she has of the real South Coast Aborigine. She is a princess, and she is also sister-in-law of the man who was the last king of the group.' This use of the word *Cammary* is most likely one of Peck's interpretations of the Aboriginal *Kamilaroi*, the native name allocated to the region of northern New South Wales around the Namoi River. The Ellen he refers to is Ellen Anderson. She uses Cammary in reference to the original tribes of Illawarra, and also speaks of a man from northern Illawarra as *of the Kamilaroi*. In most other published accounts these terms are not used for this region of New South Wales, located south of Sydney. Whether the confusion was originally on Ellen Anderson's part (most likely not) or due to Peck's interpretation is unclear.

Ellen Anderson was the sister of Rosie Russell (also known as Queen Rosie of Illawarra) who was the wife of the last 'King' of Illawarra, Mickey Johnson. Peck's use of the terms king, queen and princess throughout *Australian Legends* is unfortunate as they have no equivalent in traditional Aboriginal cultures. Ellen was the wife of Hughie Anderson and according to her obituary notice she died at the Aboriginal camp at Salt Pan, Peakhurst, on 14 May 1931, aged 85 (Anonymous 1931). She is therein cited as having being born at Wollongong around 1846. Mickey Johnson is well-known to Illawarra historians. He was brought to the district as a young man in the 1860s from Port Stephens by a Mr Weston, and later joined the remnants of the local tribes in the fringe camps south of Wollongong. Mickey was crowned king of the Illawarra tribe at Wollongong Show on 30 January 1896, wherein he was presented with an inscribed breastplate by Archibald Campbell, M.P. Peck was a witness to the ceremony. Mickey died near Kiama during November 1906 at the age of 72, and his descendants still live in the district.

Peck notes in his prelude Ellen's proud statement that 'My father came from the North and my mother from the South. His language was not the same as my mother's. I speak between the two. My words are

both his and hers. Yours are neither. You speak like the people of far, far away. I do not understand you. But I know your words are of my country.' Ellen called her language 'Nungurra ilukka.' She also appears to be referring to aspects of the South Australian and Central Australian languages uttered by Peck in conversation. Ellen was a fine storyteller, able to relate some of the stories of her youth. Of her narrative skills Peck comments 'She knew many beautiful legends. But they had nearly all gone from her, for she never told them. She heard them and forgets nearly all. She hears no more, for they are seldom spoken of by the remnant of her race. Time was when the story-teller was an honoured man, when he dressed for his part, when the young people were educated in the lore of the land and the law of the land, by means of legend. But there is so much white blood in the people that practically none wish to hear the stories of the 'Alcheringa', and so the stories have faded...' The failure by Aboriginal elders to pass on stories during this period, in part for fear of the young people being discriminated against because of their knowledge of, and practice in, traditional custom, is common. This salvage operation aspect of the collecting work of Peck is evident after 1880, when it was widely held that the Australian Aborigines were a dying race (MacGregor, 1993).

Content

The Aboriginal stories collected by C.W. Peck contain a variety of subjects, involving humankind, flora, fauna, physical features of the earthly landscape and heavens above, and death—in other words, the complete gamut of the physical and spiritual environment. As a result of Peck's wide travels throughout Australian and specifically New South Wales (evident from his surviving collection of unpublished poems), and use of at least two sources—Alex Murdoch and Ellen Anderson—his Aboriginal stories present a wide variety of perspectives. Some are feminine, whilst other are sex neutral; many refer to aspects of occultism, the spirit world, and life after death. Others reveal the strong links between humankind and the plants and animals of the immediate locality. Peck's Aboriginal stories are typical of those collected from other parts of Australia (c.f. Isaacs 1980). Within them people are often represented totemically as animals, birds, fish, constellations or even plants, and narrators such as Ellen Anderson have shown how such tales played an important part in explaining an individual's association with a specific totem. She was herself a black snake woman.

The vast majority are descriptive moral or totemic tales involving relationships between beings and/or nature, e.g. 'The Struggle for Supremacy between Birds and Animals', 'The First Kangaroo', 'The Pheasant and the Jackass', 'What the Moon Is'. Twelve of the stories deal with the creation and evolution of the waratah—how it got its

colours (red and white), its uses and significance. A number of stories have historical elements, such as 'The White Man's Boots', 'At Low Tide', 'Mulgani', and 'What Makes the Waves'. References to the unnamed 'Great Spirit'—called by some Aboriginal groups Biamie or Daramulun, and by Europeans God—are common throughout, as they are to other semi-religious and occult themes. There is also frequent reference to the existence of supernatural beings on the earth similar to the European goblin and Australian bunyip, viz. 'A Legend of Mists', 'Stone Throwers', 'The Bubbling Springs' and 'The Clinging Koala'. As an example, Peck's story 'Stone Throwers' tells the tale of the small, long-haired hairy men of eastern Australia who live in trees or caves and torment passers-by. His Stone Throwers are similar to, though more dangerous than, the Gollum of Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Their local Aboriginal name (according to Peck) was *Douligah* or *Wullindigong*, and they may be directly compared to similar beasts described with some horror by a Shoalhaven Aborigine Buthong in the 1890s using the name *Wallthegang* or *Wallanthagang*. Anthropologist R.H. Mathews had also mentioned a larger mythical beast of eastern Australia known as the *Yaroma* (Mathews 1904, Organ 1989).

The important role of the night sky and stars such as the Pleiades and the Milky Way in the after-life is revealed in *Australian Legends*, with the various constellations and the paths between them perceived as a reality parallel to the earthly abode. Likewise, the near environment and associated physical events such as the creation and use of fire, earthquakes, mountain-building, storms, and even the volcanic eruptions of Australia's geological past, all play an important role in these Dreaming stories.

Long Forgotten

Collections such as Peck's have been little used by anthropologists and students of Aboriginal culture and society. Many compiled during the period 1880-1940 have been ignored because of their juvenile presentation, such as Tarlton Rayment's *The Prince of the Totem: A Simple Black Tale For Clever White Children*, a lack of scientific rigour, and removal of contextual detail as in Mary Fitzgerald's *King Bungaree's Pyalla* and James Devaney's *The Vanished Tribes* (Rayment 1933, Fitzgerald 1891, Devaney 1929). Current political sensitivities have also placed these forms of emasculated stories—often promoted at the time as fairy tales or myths and legends—out of favour. Past consideration of Aboriginal Dreaming stories often took place within the context of European storytelling traditions, thereby failing to identify or acknowledge their unique elements. Aboriginal people did not necessarily condone the appropriation of their culture in this manner, and

the difficulties in presenting them to a wider audience, stripped of context outside community, remain significant.

There are few references to the work of C.W. Peck in the published literature. A number of the stories he gathered were used (modified and unattributed) in C.P. Mountford and Ainslie Roberts' various collections of Aboriginal myths and legends which appeared in the 1960s and 1970s. Marcie Muir in her *Bibliography of Australia Children's Books* cites *Australian Legends*, though goes on to comment that it is 'not specifically a children's book' (Muir 1970). Two stories are reproduced in Jennifer Isaacs' comprehensive collection *Australian Dreaming: 40,000 of Aboriginal History* (Isaac 1980). *Burnum Burnum's Aboriginal Australia: A Traveller's Guide* included some Peck stories, though they were likely acquired them from traditional sources (Stewart 1988). Mention is made of Peck's stories within John Meredith's *The Last Kooradgie*, and one is discussed in an article by Jim Smith on Lt. Barrallier's 1802 expedition through the Blue Mountains (Meredith 1989, Smith 1990).

It is only since the 1960s that the subject of Aboriginal Dreaming stories has been studied in any detail by anthropologists, ethnographers, and students of Australian literature and folklore. Many such studies fail to obtain Aboriginal input, despite a desire for such and recognition of its importance. Detailed analyses of individual stories are rare. As Graham Seal noted in his study of folklore in Australian society, 'there are a number of urgent tasks facing Australian folklorists and the community in general. In-depth studies of the folklores of ethnic and Aboriginal groups are a priority' (Seal, 1989).

Important recent assessments of Dreaming stories such as those collected by Peck include L.R. Hiatt's *Australian Aboriginal Mythology* and the continuing work of R.H. and C.M. Berndt, culminating in their collection *The Speaking Land*. (Hiatt 1972, Berndt 1989). A major catalogue and appraisal of such material on a national or State-wide basis has yet to appear. It is unfortunate that in most Australian bookshops one can still find compilations of Aboriginal 'myths and legends' presented in a sterile, anglicised, and juvenile form, stripped of context and meaning.

The degree to which C.W. Peck altered the *Australian Legends* narratives for publication is unclear, though his literary pretensions are obvious, as is his concern for enhancing the status of the waratah. He does make use of the Central Australian word 'Alcheringa' to refer to the distant past Dreamtime phase of Aboriginal history and storytelling, indicating that he had some background knowledge of the topic obtained whilst teaching in South Australia and prior to his work in eastern Australia. However the word is not indigenous to the Sydney region, and the mis-matching of terms is present in his work.

Collections such as those by A.W. Reed and the collaborations of Mountford and Roberts have long represented the public face of Aboriginal storytelling. Marji Hill & Alex Barlow's articles and commentaries within the bibliographic *Black Australia* lay the foundation for criticism of such works and brought a refreshing Aboriginal perspective to the use and study of original Dreaming stories. Appropriation of such material is slowly disappearing thanks to the efforts of Aboriginal authors such as Sally Morgan and Kath Walker. Illustrated publications such as Elsie Jones' *The Falling Star* and the various collections by Percy Trezise and Dick Roughsay present the stories from the Aboriginal point of view (Walker 1972, Trezise & Roughsey 1985, Jones 1989).

The lack of notoriety of Peck's *Australian Legends* may also lie with the mis-titling of the two editions of the book and their limited distribution, not forgetting the ephemeral nature of all newspaper articles into which group his *Sydney Mail* stories can be placed. The title 'Australian Legends' was especially ambiguous at a time when the works of Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson were in vogue. 'Legend' was not a word normally associated with Australia or Australian literature in 1925, having mostly European connotations, though the Aboriginal legend of the Bunyip was widely known. Furthermore, with no specific reference to Aborigines contained in the main title, Peck's book has been omitted from bibliographic listings of Aboriginal literature and related material.

A second failing was the distorted presentation of the stories, with their emphasis (reflecting Peck's personal bias) on things botanical. Due to his being the champion of the waratah and an amateur botanist and natural historian, many of Peck's stories (or rather, his re-telling of the stories) at every opportunity make forced reference to the waratah, with 12 specific waratah legends amongst the total 52 stories published, and many more including references to that plant. As secretary of the Waratah League this is understandable, but lamentable. Such is Peck's overwhelming interest in the subject that the first edition of *Australian Legends* is primarily an argument for the waratah to be designated the national flower, against claims by those promoting the wattle. His efforts in that direction often overwhelm the Aboriginal stories, further corrupting them from the original version given him by the narrator. Whether the waratah was so revered by the Aborigines of south-eastern Australia prior to the coming of European settlers is unclear, though it is obviously a totemic plant.

These faults (miss-titling of the book, a botanical emphasis within individual stories, and editorialising) exist alongside the normal problems associated with Aboriginal stories recorded by non-Aborigines prior to the 1960s, most notable amongst these being anglicisation, mis-translation, simplification, dislocation, distortion, reformatting and the

lack of supplementary contextual information. Such mistreatment of Dreaming stories occurred (and still occurs) due to a lack of understanding of the complexities of traditional Aboriginal culture and spirituality by non-Aboriginal investigators. They fail to recognise the intimate relationship these stories bore with religious, ceremonial and everyday life. It is therefore rare to find a Dreaming story published prior to the 1960s which is presented within a traditional contextual framework and describes precisely when and where it was used; to whom it was told; and what relation it bore to the tribe's total catalogue of such stories. Even rarer is a transcription in the original language.

The work of anthropologist Andrew McKenzie in the 1870s is an exception, as on occasion he recorded Aboriginal song and story in the native tongue. In some instances he published this without translation, and as such they remain largely inaccessible to this day, though recent work is enabling a reading of so-called 'lost' Aboriginal languages (Illert 2003; 2013). Few compilers of Aboriginal stories during Peck's era were trained anthropologists or linguists, therefore distortion and error in transcription was common. Peck himself was a school teacher, perhaps more interested in the narrative elements rather than ethnographic attributes of Aboriginal stories. The most extreme examples of this distortion are where Dreaming stories have been translated from the indigenous language into rhyming verse, where there was no original rhyme (Cornwallis 1856, Harney & Elkin 1968, Robinson 1970). The comments of modern compiler/publisher A.W. Reed in this regard are telling: *Every writer who ventures to retell Aboriginal myths, legends or fables must adopt his own style and presentation* (Reed 1982). Such an attitude is no longer considered acceptable and efforts are made to record such stories in a form as near to the original narration as possible, with additional contextual detail an important requisite.

Apparently unbeknownst to collectors such as C.W. Peck and Mrs K. Langloh Parker, many of the Dreaming stories they recorded possessed a spiritual dimension equivalent to western Bible stories and parables. The widespread belief among non-Aboriginal Australia from the time of the First Fleet that the local Aborigines had no religion, gave rise to a subsequent disregard for their rich oral traditions. It was a simple follow-on that their Dreaming stories should be viewed as merely juvenile amusement, with no divine or moral dimension (Charlesworth, 1989). First Fleet journalist David Collins, who in 1798 and 1802 included a detailed appendix on the custom and culture of the Sydney Aborigines in his *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales*, did not bother to record this aspect. He came to the rather surprising conclusion in regards to the religion and stories of the local people, after a decade living amongst them:

> no country has yet been discovered where no trace of religion was not to be found .... I can safely pronounce them an exception to this opinion. I am certain they do not worship either sun, moon, or star ... neither have they respect for any particular beast, bird, or fish (Collins 1798).

Collins has totally missed the significant role totems played in Aboriginal society, and though it is true Aborigines did not 'worship' objects in the European Christian sense, the local stories and songs were full of references to all the items he referred to, with Peck's Australian legends reinforcing this fact. For example, the coastal Aborigines of New South Wales had a great deal of respect for, and even reverence of, animals such as the whale and porpoise. They saw them, along with white Europeans, as the reincarnation of their ancestors. Every individual Aborigine also possessed a totem based on an item of local flora or fauna such as a waratah, kookaburra, or black snake. There are also numerous sun, moon and star stories amongst Peck's compilation. Such a narrow view of Aboriginal culture and storytelling on the part of the British who claimed Australia in 1788 was based on ignorance and arrogance. Collins and his associates were unable to see the richness of the civilisation before them. They simply, and erroneously, cast it off as primitive, juvenile, or non-existent. Not only were such stories meant to inform, entertain and educate, but also to record historical events, maintain social custom and enforce moral, social, and religious laws. Jennifer Isaacs' *Aboriginal Dreaming* compilation is a worthy attempt at combining all these elements in a single volume, presenting not only a history of the Australian continent, but also a summation of Aboriginal custom and tradition. It is an important step in bringing this aspect of Aboriginal culture to the attention of the wider community.

Story as History

If we approach the subject of Aboriginal Dreaming stories from an historical and regional perspective, there was much of value to be gleaned from C.W. Peck's *Australian Legends*. They are largely moral and totemic tales and whilst they have no academic pretensions and have suffered much distortion, they nevertheless go beyond being mere juvenile tales. For example, one of the stories from the 1925 edition—'The White Man's Boots'—is a unique account from the Aboriginal perspective of a meeting with the explorer Barrallier in the Blue Mountains during 1802. It is an important addition to the historic record. The survival of such a story over more than a century brings into question the commonly held belief that Australian Aborigines had no interest in recording events of the immediate past, and therefore possessed no sense of history (Partington, 1985). There are many instances where this anti-history thesis can be refuted. For example,

when the Reverend W.B. Clarke in January 1840 witnessed a corroboree at Wollongong which was attended by tribes from Sydney, Newcastle, Brisbane Waters, Liverpool, Wollongong and Kiama, he was moved to ask one of the participants the meaning of the new song being presented that evening. He recorded the following answer in his diary, with comment:

> On enquiry I find the burden of the song to be: 'that the white man came to Sydney and landed horses in the saltwater.' It is of such ridiculous subjects that the Blacks of New Holland make their songs—and any trifling event is celebrated by song (Clarke 1839).

Whilst the Reverend Clarke may have considered the European invasion half a century earlier a 'ridiculous' subject and 'trifling event', the local people were fully aware of its historic significance, and expressed such feeling in story, song and dance. There are also documented examples of historical events at Illawarra—such as the murder of a white cedar cutter by local Aborigines during the 1820s—being incorporated into the traditional storytelling and mythology of that region. Apart from specific historic elements, many of Peck's stories also explain the totemic associations adopted by the Aboriginal people of coastal New South Wales, adding to the anthropological record compiled by workers such as R.H. Mathews and A.W. Howitt.

Conclusion

C.W. Peck's *Australian Legends* represent a significant collection of Dreaming stories from eastern New South Wales. Like many such stories from other parts of Australia they reveal the intimate associations the local people shared with their natural environment, and are an important resource in understanding the indigenous cultures which once existed in the immediate environs of Sydney. The existence of little known works such as *Australian Legends* would indicate that assessment of the mythological and folkloric heritage of Aboriginal Australia need to consider this, and similar material. Aboriginal creation myths and death/rebirth stories are often viewed in the context of traditional Western mythology, however as Peck's legends reveal, Aboriginal storytelling—whether it be called myth, legend, folk tale, ghost story or presented in the form of narrative or song—possesses a uniqueness in its all-encompassing nature with regards to the natural and metaphysical environment. It is a large body of material dating back thousands of years, and an important part of 'this speaking land'.

* *

References

Anonymous, 'Helensburgh Progress Association', *Illawarra Mercury*, 10 July 1925, p. 3.
——, 'Ellen Anderson' [obituary], *The Hurstville Propeller*, 15 May 1931.
Australian Aboriginal Mythology, ed. by L.R. Hiatt (Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1975).
Berndt, R.H. and C.M., *The Speaking Land* (Melbourne, Vic: Penguin, 1989).
Religion in Aboriginal Australia. An Anthology, ed. by Max Charlesworth, Howard Morphy, Dianne Bell and Kenneth Maddock (St. Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 1989).
Clarke, Reverend W.B., Diary, 1839-40, Mitchell Library MSS139.
Collins, David, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales* (Sydney, NSW: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1975, [1798 & 1802]).
Cornwallis, Kinahan, *Yarra Yarra, or the Wandering Aborigine. A Poetical Narrative in Thirteen Books* (London: Ward and Lock, 1856).
Devaney, James, *The Vanished Tribes*, (Sydney, NSW: Cornstalk Publishing).
Fitzgerald, Mary, *King Bungaree's Pyalla and other stories illustrative of manners and customs that prevailed among Australian Aborigines* (Sydney, 1891).
Harney, W.E., and A.P. Elkin, *Songs of the Songmen. Aboriginal Myths Retold* (Adelaide, SA: 1968).
Hill, Marj, and Alex Barlow, *Black Australia: An Annotated Bibliography and Teacher's Guide to Resources on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders* (Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1978).
Illert, C.R., 'Lexigenesis in Ancestral South-East-Australian Aboriginal Language', *Journal of Applied Statistics*, 30.2 (2003), 113-143.
——, 'The Original Australian Aboriginal language' (unpublished PhD. thesis, School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Western Sydney, 2013).
Isaacs, Jennifer, *Australian Dreaming: 40,000 of Aboriginal History* (Sydney, NSW: Lansdowne, 1980).
Jones, Elsie, *The Story of the Falling Star* (Canberra, ACT: Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1989.
MacGregor, Russell, 'The Doomed Race: A Scientific Axiom of the Late Nineteenth Century', *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, 39.1 (1993), 14-22.
MacKenzie, Andrew, `Specimens of Native Australian Languages', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, London, 3.2 (1874), 248-57.
Mathews, R.H., *Folklore of the Australian Aborigines* (Sydney, NSW: Hennessy, Harper, 1899).
——, `Ethnological Notes on the Aboriginal Tribes of New South Wales and Victoria', *Journal of the Royal Society of New South Wales*, (1904).
Meredith, J., *The Last Kooradgie: Moyengully, Chief Man of the Gundungurra People* (Sydney, NSW: Kangaroo Press, 1989).
Mountford, C.P., *The Dawn of Time. Australian Aboriginal Myths in Paintings by Ainslie Roberts* (Adelaide, SA: Rigby, 1969).

Muir, Marcie, *Bibliography of Australia Children's Books* (London: Grafton Books, 1970).
Organ, M.K., *Illawarra and South Coast Aborigines 1770–1850* (Wollongong, NSW: Aboriginal Education Unit, University of Wollongong, 1990).
Parker, K. Langloh, *Australian Legendary Tales. Folklore of the Noonaburrahs as told to the Piccaninnies* (Melbourne, Vic: Melville, Mullen & Slade, 1896).
Partington, Geoffrey, `The Australian Aborigines and the Human Past', *Mankind*, 15.1 (1985), 26-40.
Peck, C.W., *Australian Legends. Tales Handed Down from the Remotest Times by the Autocthonous Inhabitants of Our Land* (Sydney, NSW: Stafford, 1925); 2nd edn, Melbourne, Vic: Lothian, 1933). The text of the second edition has been digitized and is available at the *Sacred Texts* website here: http://sacred-texts.com/aus/peck/index.htm
——, *Sins of the Fathers* (Sydney, NSW: NSW Bookstall, 1934).
Rayment, Tarlton, *The Prince of the Totem: A Simple Black Tale for Clever White Children* (Melbourne, Vic: 1933).
Reed, A.W., *Aboriginal Myths, Legends and Fables* (Sydney, NSW: Reed, 1982).
Ridley, Rev. William, `Australian Languages and Traditions', *Journal of the Anthropological Institute* [London], 2.2 (1872), 257-91.
——, *Kamilaroi, and other Australian Languages* (Sydney, NSW: 1875).
Robinson, Roland, *Altjeringa, and other Aboriginal poems* (Sydney, NSW: A.H. and A.W. Reed, 1970).
Seal, Graham, *The Hidden Culture: Folklore in Australian Society* (Melbourne, Vic: Oxford University Press, 1989.
Smith, Jim, Barrallier and other French Contacts with the Aborigines of the Blue Mountains, in *Australian Aborigines and the French*, ed. by M. Blackman (Kensington, NSW: The French-Australian Research Centre, Occasional Monograph No 3, University of New South Wales, 1990), pp. 47-59.
Stewart, D., *Burnum Burnum's Aboriginal Australia* (Sydney, NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1988).
Trezise, Percy and Doug Roughsey, *The Flying Fox Warriors* (Sydney, NSW: Collins, 1985).
Walker, Kath, *Stradbroke Dreamtime* (Sydney, NSW: Angus and Robertson, 1972).

* * *