Hearing the past: Sounds, Noises and Silences in Port Jackson c.1788-1792

Lachlan Dudley

Australian National University

In recent years aural history has received increasing attention from colonial scholars around the globe. Though much of this interest has manifested itself in the US and Europe, Australian colonial historians have begun to recognise that colonists in Australia placed great importance on both the acoustic, as well as the visual sense as a means of interpreting and evaluating their world. This article seeks to contribute to the growing body of acoustic colonial literature by exploring how early colonists in Australia c. 1778-1792 used sounds, noises and silences during their colonial endeavour. It argues that the aural sense was directly linked to notions of identity, class and race, and that sound and noise formed an integral part of ceremonies of possession, and operated as a powerful means of ordering society and maintaining law.

On the 22nd of August 1770 Captain James Cook and his crew lay anchored in the HMS *Endeavour* a short distance off the eastern coast of Australia. Looking to accomplish his orders to find and claim the fabled southern continent, Cook and his men filled several small boats and, after a brief period of observation, rowed ashore. Upon landing they hiked a short distance inland, raised the British standard and let loose a ritual discharge of musketry, followed by a short burst of cannon fire. With this, they effectively took possession of Australia’s east coast.1

Although Cook’s possession of Australia is well documented, acoustic historians -those who attempt to understand how the aural sense has historically helped to influence people’s understandings of their worlds - are yet to pay direct attention to the sounds and noises that were employed during this important ceremony, or in the colony’s foundation years c.1788-1792.

Such an absence represents a missed opportunity to better understand how early Australian colonists historically viewed, understood and interacted with the lands and peoples they met in Australia through the aural sense. Many international scholars, for instance, have shown just how profitable an acoustic approach to colonial history can be. Richard Cullen Rath and Peter Hoffer, have highlighted the centrality of the aural sense to the colonial project of British colonists in early America (c.1600-1800).2 Rath demonstrates that the ceremonial possession of land was intrinsically linked to the aural sense, with sounds operating as forms of imaginative and actual appropriation. By deploying a 'ritualised fanfare of trumpets'

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and 'read-aloud proclamations', Rath contends that the early British settlers were able to aurally signify and legitimate 'their claim upon the land for king and colony'. Likewise, Hoffer has shown that the Spanish process for taking control of territory was 'to read aloud a legal document announcing that the Spanish were the rightful owners of the land on which the Spanish conquerors stood'. Through such methods, colonists implemented strategies of what Hoffer refers to as 'sensory imperialism' in which European soundscapes (the sonic habitats in which individuals lived) and ways of thinking about sounds and noises were enforced upon the land at the experience of pre-existing native auditory networks.

Other authors have focused more specifically on Australia, with Diane Collins examining how early British explorers in Australia in the 1820s and 1930s used sounds and noises in a similar bid to colonise the landscape. She argues, for instance, that when early explorers like John Oxley experienced the Australian land they were to hear an auditory environment largely devoid of 'lowing cattle', the 'metallic resonance' of church bells, 'the ring of the blacksmiths anvil', and other keynote acoustic material that was indicative of a settled and 'civilised landscape'. She demonstrates how colonists, in an attempt to combat this perceived absence of purposeful acoustic perceptions, reacted loudly to the environment and its indigenous peoples with a diverse range of European sounds and noises which they hoped would aurally reaffirm their control of the land and their identity. More recently Vanessa Agnew, author of Enlightenment Orpheus, has explored the role of music and music mythology in shaping cross-cultural encounters during Captain Cook's second voyage to the Pacific (c.1772-1775). For Agnew, the Pacific operated as a new auditory arena in which Britain sought to test Enlightenment beliefs about the superiority of European music and its power to encourage progress through taming, socialising and civilising supposedly less refined peoples. Indeed, she argues that music was deployed as a type of 'ethnographic yardstick' aimed at assessing and ranking people 'according to their musical practices'. However, the unexpected complexity and sophistication of Indigenous music encountered by Cook and his men was to create difficulties in employing this mode of social and cultural assessment and challenged contemporary understandings of the civilising power of Anglo-Saxon forms of music.

Several other scholars have provided us with an auditory glimpse into the soundscape of the early colony. Inga Clendinnen's Dancing with Strangers highlights some of the key sounds associated with British possession and permanence. She

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3 Rath, p. 55.
4 Hoffer, p. 50.
5 Ibid., pp. 49-50.
7 Ibid., pp. 3-4, 5.
8 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
10 Ibid., pp. 14, 74.
11 Ibid., p. 7.
12 Ibid., p. 75.
describes how Governor Phillip commenced the beginning of the colony ‘with the reading of his commission, embellished with bands and marching…’. Manning Clark makes some references to noises that colonists would have heard when experiencing the flooding of the Hawkesbury River in 1799, noting ‘all that night nothing was to be heard but the firing of muskets and the cries of women and children, together with the noise of the torrent’, while Grace Karskens provides descriptions of the sounds and noises that were involved in the initial colonisation of the Australian land. While these works show that the soundscape of early colonial Australia was indeed noisy, such casual references to sounds and noises do not provide a deep analysis and do not engage with the broader eighteenth century modes of thought that influenced how they were subsequently employed. The journals of early explorers and colonists in Australia show us that sounds and noises feature heavily alongside visual elements at key historical events throughout this period. As we have just seen, Cook and his crew members utilised auditory aids to help legitimate their ritualistic possession of Australia’s eastern coast. Similarly, the first act of Governor Phillip upon arrival in Sydney involved the verbal reading of his commission to the colony. This was accompanied by the playing of fifes and drums, a volley of gunfire and three loud cheers, helping to create a formidable aural and visual demonstration of British imperial power and presence in this ‘newly’ settled land. However, the way these eighteenth century explorers heard these aural phenomena differs greatly to how we would hear them today. While we are equipped with the same sensory apparatus as Cook’s and Phillip’s companions, the historical meaning and context of these sounds and noises has changed so dramatically that simply hearing this very event would not allow us to experience it as they did. Indeed, perceptions of what it means to be civilized and European, and changes to the way in which we celebrate national identity now differ immensely due to changes in political, historical and social structures. Thus the sensory dimensions of historical artefacts and texts are imbued with deep and contextually specific cultural and historical meaning. By studying their social and sensory history of the past we in turn provide ourselves with an opportunity to better understand how historical perceptions of the senses have shaped our sensory outlook of the world today.

This article explores Australia’s early colonisation (prior to 1800) to demonstrate the importance that the aural sense held for eighteenth century British colonists during this period. It shows that aurality, that is, ways of hearing and interpreting sounds and noises, supplemented eighteenth century visual forms of understanding and controlling peoples and lands. To address this objective, a brief
definition of sound and noise is first provided. Next, the role of the acoustic, in conjunction with the visual sense, is shown to have been an integral part of British rituals of possession and colonisation. These ceremonies greatly aided Governor Phillip and his fellow colonists in their attempts to conquer and control the vast landscape of Australia and its Aboriginal inhabitants. It then moves to discuss the colonists’ use of aurality to assist in ordering their daily lives and demonstrates that sounds and noises were invaluable mechanisms for maintaining authority, power and control in a distant land. Finally, the link between aurality and Enlightenment theories of human progress is highlighted, and it is seen that colonists utilised the sounds and noises associated with language and music in their attempts to categorise themselves as refined and superior to the lower classes of Britons and the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. By focusing on the period of 1788-1792 we will gain a better understanding of the main tasks Britons’ put the acoustic sense to in a period that has as yet been unexplored from an acoustic perspective. I should emphasise that this is not an extensive study of sound in relation to cross cultural interaction. Rather, it is an analysis of how the British understood and engaged with the Aboriginal Australian peoples and environments through the aural sense. I do not attempt to understand Aboriginal reactions to these colonists and explorers, nor do I discuss how Aboriginal peoples may have used the aural sense to construct and interpret their world.

As noted by Peter Bailey, definitions of sounds and noises are highly subjective. What sounds harmonious to one person may sound unpleasant or unsettling to another. In general, noises are considered as being chaotic – they interrupt and interfere and are characterised by a lack of clearly defined pitch or tone. Noise is thus arbitrary in nature as it is devoid of an easily perceivable structure.\(^\text{18}\) Sound, however, is identified by its intentional and coherent order. It is the antithesis to noise in that it is considered as being intelligible, articulate and often sonically pleasing.\(^\text{19}\) For the purpose of this article sounds are defined as any acoustic content perceived by the British explorers or colonists as being sonically pleasant, understandable and desirable. Noises are those acoustic perceptions described as unpleasant, unwanted and without clear purpose. As we will see, both sounds and noises had the ability to transmit meaning and to elicit a response from their receiver. Importantly, this article endeavours to avoid the normative assumption of sound’s inherent superiority over noise and, instead, discusses the full spectrum of acoustic experience recorded by the *Endeavour* explorers and early colonists, regardless of whether these sounds and noises were intentional, ambient, aesthetic or incidental.

Here we paused, surveying “the wild abyss; pondering our voyage.” Before us lay the trackless immeasurable desert, in awful silence. ... We continued to march all day through a country untrodden before by an European foot. Save that a melancholy crow now and then flew


\(^{19}\) Ibid.
croaking overhead, or a kangaroo was seen to bound at a distance, the picture of solitude was complete and undisturbed.

On reaching the foothills of the previously unexplored Carmarthen Hills (now known as the Blue Mountains) Watkin Tench was afforded a view that overwhelmed and profoundly disturbed him. Stretching out before his eyes lay an unending panorama of tightly interwoven trees, their green leaves lining the rim and covering the base of a deep and expansive gorge. It was not, however, simply the visual dimensions of this view that most unsettled him. The sound, or, more precisely, the ‘awful silence’ of this landscape, also struck him as he gazed out across this lonely canyon.

Tench’s adverse reaction to the ‘silent’ auditory landscape of New South Wales was certainly not unusual. In fact, contemporary aesthetic theory concerning the sublime in nature dictated that this was an appropriate response to a vast, overwhelming and often harsh environment, and helps to explain the frequency with which recordings of ‘silence’ appear as a source of anxiety throughout the journals of several early colonists. One of the most influential aesthetic theories, for example, was Edmond Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* - a text which examined, among other things, emotional and psychological responses to a range of sensory experiences. In his treatise, Burke argued that the loudness, suddenness and intermittency of sounds and noises could induce feelings of ‘terror and greatness’ in the mind. Similarly, silences held the ability to awe and to inspire, creating a mixture of pleasure and fear in the recipient’s mind. However, this does not fully explain why British colonists heard the Australian environment as predominantly devoid of sounds and noises and, more importantly, why this unnerved them to the extent that it did.

Peter Denney and Nathaniel Woloch provide insightful explanations for these complicated questions. Denney highlights that eighteenth century colonial perceptions of Australia’s natural environment were informed by a British discourse of landscape aesthetics. Firmly established within this discourse were criteria for what visually and sonically constituted a picturesque landscape. Variety in the type of trees and plants and a sharp distinctiveness of form were necessary, for example, to create a visually pleasing sight. Similarly, the ‘gurgling of a river, the gentle whirring of the wind, the distant lowing of cattle and the singing of birds’ were considered to be key sounds of an acoustically satisfying and properly domesticated environment.

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21 Ibid.
24 Ibid., pp. 128-131.
landscape.26 Such sounds were thus identified with rural English landscapes in which the land had been properly cultivated and in which the sounds of human mastery prevailed. As noted by Wolloch, the ability to control and manipulate the landscape was intrinsically linked to an eighteenth century understanding of the civilising process.27 This, so eighteenth century philosophers argued, was because humanity had purportedly emerged from its savage beginnings and arrived at a civilised state (presumed to be embodied in the eighteenth century European) by cultivating and manipulating the land.28 In turn, the cultivation of land sustained a more sedentary lifestyle and freed human beings to pursue more intellectually stimulating pursuits, thereby resulting in the cultural, mental and social progression that ‘civilised’ European states now purportedly exhibited.29 Without this mastery philosophical explanations for the superiority of European cultural and political life could not be reaffirmed, essentially undermining the theories of progress that inspired and justified British imperialism throughout the eighteenth century. Indeed, it was believed by Enlightenment philosophers that ‘the most essential precondition of the sustained progress of civilization, and the most enduring foundational achievement of human civilization in general, is the degree to which the control of nature, through cultivation, has been achieved’.30 A civilisation’s progress could, for instance, be undermined by neglecting this agricultural mastery.31

It was not, then, simply the unfamiliarity of the environment’s ‘silent’ acoustic qualities that unsettled colonists. Rather, it was what this silent soundscape symbolically represented; an inability of civilised Europeans to pacify and manipulate the land. The importance to colonists of recreating settled, agricultural and therefore civilised soundscapes makes sense in light of this relationship between mastery and progress. The journal of David Collins, the colony’s first Deputy Judge Advocate, for example, reflects this need to transform the ‘silent’ landscape of Australia through the imposition of European sounds.32 Upon landing on the coast of New South Wales, he observed that the site chosen for settlement lay ‘at the head of the cove, near the run of fresh water, which stole silently along through a very thick wood’.33 However, the ‘stillness and tranquillity’ of this area were ‘from this day to give place to the voice of labour, the confusion of camps and towns, and the busy hum of its new possessors’.34 Through ‘the rude sound of the labourer’s axe’, he noted, the colonists would take ‘possession of nature’ and introduce ‘the soft harmonising arts of peace and civilisation’.35

26 Denney, pp. 86, 88.
27 Wolloch, pp. vii, 82-83,93-94
28 Ibid., pp. 92-94
29 Ibid., pp. 95-96
30 Ibid., p. vii
31 Ibid., p. 83
32 D. Collins, and P. King, An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales [from its first settlement in January 1788, to August 1801]: with remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, &c. of the Native Inhabitants of that Country. To Which are added, some particulars of New Zealand, Adelaide, Libraries Board of South Australia, 1971.
33 Ibid., p. 5
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
However, the thought of bringing agrarian change and progress by fixing ‘a settlement of civilized peoples... upon a newly discovered or savage coast’ excited no one more than Governor Phillip. 36 One of his first journal entries in Australia enthusiastically describes how the ‘The wild appearance of land entirely untouched by cultivation’ and ‘the close and perplexed growing of trees’ were soon to be replaced by the delightful sounds of the ‘irregular placing of the first tents’ along with the ‘bustle of various hands busily employed in a number of the most incongruous works’. 37

The sonic references contained within the above passages amount to more than descriptive prose. Whether on a conscious or unconscious level, Collins and Phillip were employing a deeply ingrained understanding of European sound as a means of acoustically affirming the successful appropriation, colonisation and transformation of the Australian environment from a ‘savage’ and ‘silent’ wasteland to a ‘civilized’ and appropriately noisy continent of labour and progress. In this way, Collins, Phillip and their fellow colonists were attempting to sonically reinforce the mastery and cultivation of land that was so essential to European notions of civilisation and savagery and their position within this theoretical dichotomy.

It is during the colonist’s inaugural ceremony, though, that sound begins to feature heavily as a central component in establishing and legitimating the colony. First, a small space of ground was cleared and the military and convicts assembled. 38 This process, notes Arthur Bowes Smyth, was accompanied by the ‘flying of colours & [sic] a band of music’; the soldiers marching and ‘playing drums & [sic] fifes’ as they formed a circle around the convict men and women. 39 At this point, The Royal Commission was read by Judge Advocate - David Collins, officially appointing Phillip as the Captain General and Governor and Chief of New South Wales. 40 Next, the Act of Parliament establishing the jurisdiction of the courts and the patents empowering the relevant peoples were read aloud. To conclude the ceremony, three volleys were fired, during which the band played the first part of God Save the King, before three loud cheers were let loose and answered in kind by those aboard the Supply. 41

From the passages above it is clear that this ceremony was constructed, to a large degree, as an acoustic as well as a visual event designed to symbolise and consolidate authority, legal order and social hierarchy within the colony. These colonists were not simply making sounds, but were enacting and participating in an age old colonial tradition of possession intrinsically tied to the use of sound. Indeed, striking similarities can be drawn between this ceremony and a ceremony conducted by British colonists in America nearly two hundred years earlier. Just as Thomas Gates, the seventeenth century Governor of the Jamestown Colony, relied on the sound of musketry, bells and drums to assemble his colonists in Virginia, so too did

36 Phillip, p. 69.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., p. 34.
39 Smyth, pp. 67-68
40 Phillip, p. 34.
Governor Phillip in his inaugural ceremony.42 Similarly, Gates only officially became governor of his colony after the public reading of his commission, just as Phillip became governor by ‘the ceremony of reading these public instruments’.43 As noted by Patricia Seed, the use of sounds in such acts of possession dates back to the fifteenth century.44 These acoustic emissions, she argues, were important indicators of authority and were deeply rooted in symbolic, often religious, meaning for Europeans. For example, a typical seventeenth century French act of possession involved the cutting of trees to make a cross while the colony chanted religious hymns and prayers.45 After this, guns would be fired and, if present, cannons discharged. Such acts were manifestations of celebration and symbolised the joy that the Christian nation was experiencing in bringing religion to a ‘heathen land’. In an effort to re-emphasize their military and political might, tambours and trumpets would then play traditional military music after the Indigenous peoples had agreed to live under French rule.46

Sounds, then, were strongly embedded in the European psyche as being part of the natural process of possession. They helped, alongside the presence of visual cues (the erection of flags for example) to register feelings of control, mastery, progress and civilisation. It was certainly no accident that upon arrival the first three actions of the colonists involved the deployment of sounds - the use of drums and fifes to round up the convicts, the reading of Phillip’s commission and the Act of Parliament, followed by a military salute of gunfire. These sonic devices helped to ritually reconstruct, redefine and re-situate the colonists in relation to the ‘colony, to the wilderness and to England’, just as Rath has argued that they did for Gates and his followers nearly two hundred years earlier.47

Maintaining strict obedience to the laws was of great importance to the small and fragile colony of New South Wales. Located far from the power of the British crown and cut off from a steady flow of supplies, the colony would quickly succumb to theft, vice and starvation without an established and respected order. It is perhaps for these reasons that the marine officer, Watkin Tench, chose to record at length the rules and regulations that governed the newly formed settlement. Standing out from his account of the New South Wales legal system is an emphasis on sounds to enforce discipline and to order and structure the social and communal activities of the colony, tasks that often went hand in hand.

The working day, for example, began with the sounding of a tattoo. We are not told precisely how this was performed, except that the drum beat for labour each morning at sunrise.48 Likewise, the end of the working day was signalled by another tattoo, known as a retreat, after which all soldiers and seamen were required to return to their designated posts or sleeping facilities. For others, these sounds held

42 Rath, p. 53.
43 Ibid., p. 41.
44 Ibid., pp. 44-45.
45 Rath, p. 53.
46 Collins, An Account of the English Colony, p. 324.
different meanings. The night’s watch would head out to the town as soon as the evening tattoo ceased beating.⁴⁹ These individuals worked throughout the night to apprehend misbehaving convicts and marines (they were rarely short of work) and would return to their huts when the working drum beat in the morning.⁵⁰

As we have seen, the sounds emitted from these acoustic tools were deeply tied to militaristic and nationalistic understandings of what it meant to be British, a people who viewed themselves as being situated at the pinnacle of civilised life. In a strange and desolate country that was devoid (as Collins and other colonists felt) of coherent, understandable or meaningful sounds and noises, these acoustic emissions, along with the sawing and hacking of wood, the groaning of trees as they gave way to the axe, the hammering of nails to construct houses, and the erection of flag posts and fences - all of which were clear signs of property ownership and progress - would have served not only to create a sense of practical order amongst the physical landscape, but would operate to actively fight back against the vast acoustic emptiness that pressed in around them with a symphony of understandable and meaningful sounds. In this sense, while the physical landscape could be easily ‘conquered’ through the imposition of structures, it was the sound of British labour and order and the meanings attached to these sounds that offered an added and powerful means of transferring the British identity to this new continent.

Of all the sounds employed by British peoples, the bell, long a symbol of religious power and secular authority, remained one of the loudest and most powerful acoustic aids used to provide structure and meaning within European society. Bells were designed to amplify and reverberate sound for maximum acoustic coverage, with their heavy iron cast or copper frames emitting one of the loudest human made sounds in the eighteenth century.⁵¹ Aside from cannon fire or thunder, there was little that could compare. Importantly, eighteenth century Europeans drew strong associations between bell ringing, Christianity and worship. As Alain Corbin has shown, churches were regarded as sacred areas that were usually situated in the centre of a town.⁵² Here, silence prevailed and was enforced vigorously, helping to provide a stark contrast with the bells that rang out to call worshipers to prayer or to commence particular religious events. In this way, Christian identity was deeply tied up with the physical and acoustic properties of bells. Their importance to the early colony is thus all too obvious when one considers that this was a community that was desperate to assert their identity over a new land and redeem a hardened population of convicts through honest work and religious observance. But colonists in Australia had to make do without this foundational symbol of European civilisation and might. The only bells in their possession were the comparatively small bells located on the ships that transported them to Australia. In what way, then, could they make up for this crucial lack in their acoustic ability to sonically proclaim their religion - their very identity? Colonists appeared to find the answer to this pressing issue in the form of cannons and gunfire, these being auditory tools that

⁴⁹ Tench, 1788, Text Classics p. 115.
⁵⁰ Ibid.
⁵² Ibid.
they often reserved for important tasks and events and, as the journal of the colonists show, were already closely associated with celebration, hierarchy and Christian worship. Indeed, while in transit to the colony, John White and several fellow companions took the opportunity to explore the island of Tenerife and the port town of Rio De Janeiro, both common ports of call for European maritime explorers. Upon entering Rio, the Sirius and one of the commanding forts each fired twenty-one gun royal salutes, a clear sign of respect and acknowledgement of the military rank of Arthur Phillip and the position of the Portuguese Governor as a representative of his King. While exploring Tenerife, John White encountered a religious ceremonial procession, an event that he noted was ‘announced by the ringing of bells and firing of guns’.53

In the colony, nearly all celebrations, ranging from the King’s birthday, to the formal inaugural ceremony of the colony, to the arrival and departure of special guests or marines returning home, to the jubilant celebration that accompanied the arrival of the aptly named Supply, a ship bringing life saving stocks of food and water to a starving population, were accompanied by the firing of cannon and muskets.54 As colonists noted, these tools provided them with one of the only ways to testify ‘demonstrations of joy as could be shown in this country’.55 In this early period of the colonies life, guns and cannons ultimately adopted many of the roles that bells had previously provided back in England. Meanings and value were shifted to these auditory tools out of necessity in a make-shift attempt to recreate the soundscape of England - the soundscape of a civilised and progressive nation that was justified in bringing the benefits of a superior culture to a less fortunate land and peoples.

To this degree, the colony was governed by an auditory network where sounds operated as clear and powerful indicators of daily tasks and as symbolic proclamations of British culture and life. Just as Britons employed an acoustic system at home to disseminate news and to help people locate themselves within an auditory community, so too did the early colonists.56

Attached to these sounds and silences was the knowledge of potential punishment. Anyone absent from their work after the drum beat for labour was liable to lose their right to free time. Second offences were severely punished.57 This punishment usually manifested itself in the form of whipping. The whip itself was, in part, an aural form of punishment, with its cracking sounds and the accompanying screams, or silences, of its victim creating a terrifying aural deterrent.

Joseph Holt, a suspected plotter in an Irish uprising, recorded one such instance of a


54 Phillip, p. 35.

55 White, p. 194.


flogging of a fellow conspirator only eight years after the departure of Governor Phillip. ‘The two man killers’ – as Holt referred to the floggers, administered to the victim ‘one hundred on the back and you cud[sic] see his back bone between his shoulder blades, then the doctor order him to be flog on the calves of his legs’. In a combination of what we can only imagine was both admiration and amazement, Holt noted that this poor man took this treatment in silence, never uttering ‘so much as a whimper’.

Other punishments for serious crimes involved a more direct use of sound. Military personnel, for instance, would be drummed out of the corps for failing in their duties. This ceremony usually involved marching the offender past his comrades with his hands tied behind his back and his jacket turned inside out, as the band played the ‘Rogue’s March’. Here, sound was used in conjunction with the visual sense to humiliate the offender.

Sounds and noises, then, were not simply by-products of visual and physical forms of punishments. They were orchestrated to function directly alongside, and in the case of ‘drumming out’, instead of, visual forms of deterrents as a powerful tactic for ensuring social control and for achieving subordination and commitment to the settlement’s laws and principles by instilling listeners with fear, shame or feelings of pride. The importance of this function does not need to be stressed when one considers the necessity of maintaining obedience in a recently settled colony that was separated from the outside world and any support by an immense distance both physically and temporally.

But to achieve power one did not necessarily have to rely on sound. The imposition of silence was frequently employed by colonists in their efforts to control. By designating who could speak and when, colonists maintained the ability to emphasize their authority whilst reducing the agency of those who were deemed a threat. For instance, convicts were obliged to attend church under penalty of having a part of their allowance of provisions stopped. These individuals had to ‘conduct themselves in general with the respect and attention due to the occasion on which they were assembled’, with the convicts listening to the ‘prayers of the church of England’ which were read with ‘all due solemnity every Sunday’. Even the Aboriginal members who frequented the church observed profound silence during the ceremony. The imposition of silence as a form of control is certainly not surprising considering the military background of many colonists, where sounds were utilized to order and control the large majority of their lives. Eighteenth century military men, for example, were expected to assemble, march and parade silently to the sounds of bugles and brass bands. Colonists even used silence on rare occasions to pacify and control troublesome Aboriginal peoples. Governor Phillip, while on expedition, encountered a group of noisy Aboriginal people who formed

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59 Smyth, p. 70.
60 Tench, 1788: Text Classics, p. 218.
61 Phillip, p. 39.
62 Tench, 1788, Text Classics, p. 337.
around the Europeans to watch them prepare dinner. After growing tired of their behaviour, Phillip decided to have a circle drawn around his party and ordered the Aboriginal peoples to sit quietly outside. This was done ‘without much difficulty’ and the Aboriginals ‘sat down in perfect quietness’.64

However, most colonists were not so passive in their attempts to subdue the Aboriginal peoples. One of the first recorded moments of cross-cultural interaction between the British and Aboriginal Australians involved John White, the colony’s Surgeon-General, blasting a hole through an Aboriginal shield with his pistol.65 Alarm erupted both at the sight and the sound, though the Aboriginal witnesses soon regained their composure. Such a display, though not entirely successful, was obviously intended to be a formidable visual and aural demonstration of European military superiority. In another instance, George Worgan, a Naval Surgeon, recounted discharging his musket above the heads of a group of Aboriginals in an effort to scare them away and prevent further spears from being flung at his British convoy.66 Thus, in this far flung colony, the use of sound achieved a number of aims. It ordered and structured the life of the colony, while simultaneously allowing colonists a means of controlling Aboriginal peoples and maintaining discipline and British commitment to authority.

Life for eighteenth century Britons was dominated by hierarchy. Rarely was any aspect of social, cultural, religious, political or military life left untouched by the rigorously defined codes of etiquette and conduct that structured European society.67 The early penal colony of Australia was certainly no exception. Here, in the first years of this small and strictly governed community, hierarchy operated to delineate and affirm the social and racial order of the settlement and the position of particular individuals within it. Sounds and noises were deeply tied to this system of classification, with convicts, marines and Aboriginal peoples being defined and identified by the sounds and noises they made.

Early colonists in Australia certainly took an interest in the noises and sounds that their fellow inhabitants emitted. The speech of convicts, for instance, was regularly monitored for signs of rebellion and dissent. Journals of early colonists make this abundantly clear, with unwanted ‘murmurings’ appearing of great concern to many colonists. Convicts had much to complain about. Periodic reductions in food and salt rations, coupled with poor living and working conditions were often met with discontent, referred to explicitly in several colonists’ journals as ‘murmurings’.68 Punishment for this behaviour often resulted in the offender being placed in irons.69 Even the Governor himself was at times forced to quell the noise of convict dissent with the threat of punishment.70

Though it may seem that the apprehension and harsh responses that met convict murmurings was largely due to the content and ideas that were associated

64 Phillip, p. 26.
65 White, pp. 117-118.
66 Worgan, p. 5.
68 Hunter, p. 214.
69 Clark, p. 221.
with these voicings of disapproval, it is important to remember that the acoustic parameters of words, (that is the tone, volume, cadence and pitch), as well as the non-linguistic vocalisations of language (such as mutterings, groans, howls, sighs, and roars) were seen as being imbued with particular meaning. This had long been the case in earlier colonial ventures, as Rath has shown with reference to early America. In the late seventeenth century, for example, insubordination was commonly regarded as manifesting itself in non-verbal vocalisations, referred to in contemporary literature as ‘whispers’, ‘clamours’ and ‘murmurs’.\textsuperscript{71} However, discourse and speech, a civil and rational form of communication practiced out loud and in the open, was thought to be governed by social parameters and was characterised by an easily perceivable and ‘orderly succession of linguistic sounds’.\textsuperscript{72}

This way of thinking about the acoustic emissions of language continued to remain present in western discourse well into the twentieth century. Foucault, for instance, argued that, while noises and sounds were derived from the same root, they continued to maintain a sharp and fundamental division between each other.\textsuperscript{73} For Foucault, noise was characterised as being non-individualised, indistinguishable sound. It was the irrational communication medium of the anonymous, something that was generated and used by crowds or multitudes of peoples. The murmurs, grumbles, chatter, howls and whispers that were uttered and yelled amongst the masses lacked an easily identifiable subject or central agent and did not form part of a coherent system of language capable of transmitting rational and complex meaning.\textsuperscript{74} Conversely, sound was considered by Foucault to be a planned intervention into the acoustic world. It was exercised by an easily traceable source and was employed to harness and develop the acoustic into an understandable and functional form by attaching to it particular values and meanings. To Foucault, noises were the antithesis of regulated sound, operating in what Foucault argued was a direct challenge to sound’s articulate and coherent agenda\textsuperscript{75}. Indeed, as he notes, non-individualised noise was the preferred medium of the ‘blasphemous’ and the ‘subversive’.\textsuperscript{76} Foucault accordingly concluded that signification (i.e. sound and language) was directly related to reason, just as non-signification (random noise) indicated and led to disorder.\textsuperscript{77}

It is understandable then that the marines, officers and gentlemen of the early colony punished and tried to avoid repeated noisy murmuring or engaging in suspiciously quiet discussions. When conversing, members of these more respectable classes are often recorded as participating in public forms of ‘discourse’. For instance, private discussions with convicts are rarely recorded in the journals of early colonists. Of the few interactions that we see between important figures and convicts, \begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Rath} Rath, p. 122.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid., p. 121.
\bibitem{Ibid} Ibid., pp. 36, 37.
\bibitem{Ibid2} Ibid., pp. 40-41.
\bibitem{Siisiainen3} Siisiainen, \textit{Foucault and the Politics of Hearing}, p. 40
\end{thebibliography}
these nearly always take the form of public addresses conducted in an open area with members of all classes present (note the public address Philip gave to the convicts during his inaugural ceremony, or the ‘discourse’ the reverend would give when preaching to convicts and marines at the weekly Sunday church service).

Murmurings were not the only acoustically distinctive and concerning noises made by convicts. Of all the colonists, Watkin Tench, widely renowned for his inquisitive nature and keen eye, recorded one of the earliest accounts of convict slang. He noted that the phonology of this dialect was, to the ‘civilised’ classes at least, so incomprehensible that many had great difficulty in understanding it.

A leading distinction, which marked the convicts on the outset in the colony, was an use of what is called the ‘flash’, or ‘kiddy’ language. In some of our early courts of justice an interpreter was frequently necessary to translate the deposition of the witness and the defence of the prisoner. This language has many dialects. The sly dexterity of the pickpocket, the brutal ferocity of the footpad, the more elevated career of the highwayman and the deadly purpose of the midnight ruffian is each strictly appropriate in the terms which distinguish and characterize it. I have ever been of opinion that an abolition of this unnatural jargon would open the path to reformation.  

Hence, the aural dimensions of speech were not only indicative of a person’s class but also held important meanings for the inhabitants of Australia’s early colonial settlement. On a structural level they helped colonists to define and navigate the intricate class structure of the colony. For example, the sounds and noises of different types of speech operated as an audible map of civil society and helped to locate the position of an individual within it based on their respective sonic profile. On a more practical level, they functioned to warn colonists of potential discontent. More importantly, however, was their ability to operate as a way of controlling social privilege and enforcing hierarchical subordination. For instance, a number of other noises also helped to distinguish the lower classes from the respected members of this society, though these noises resulted from activities that all men and women engaged in, genteel or otherwise. Rather, it was the context that these noises occurred in that shaped the particular meanings colonists attached to them. Officers, marines, sailors, convicts, and even Governor Phillip himself are recorded as singing, dancing, cheering and saluting. Individuals from these different ranks of society quarrelled, fought, got drunk, uttered foul oaths and in general made noise. For instance, one lieutenant tells us that during the journey to New South Wales, he and several officers passed the night by singing and drinking until two o’clock in the morning.  

Similarly, on Saint Patrick’s Day, the majority of sailors passed it in –what one colonist referred to as- ‘the usual way’. By this he was referring to song making and

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79 Clark, p. 46.
fighting.\textsuperscript{80} Convicts also cursed, sung, huzzahed and were, in general, rather noisy. However, their noises were met with suspicion and punishment.\textsuperscript{81}

Why, then, were similar noises made by both convicts and freemen met with such different reactions? As noted by Robert Malcolmson, the eighteenth century was a period in Britain in which religious and elite perceptions of popular forms of recreation were undergoing drastic reform.\textsuperscript{82} During this time a revival in Protestant and evangelical strains of religion had resulted in a movement to suppress noisy celebrations, especially those involving drinking or violent sports.\textsuperscript{83} Religious reformers argued that such activities distracted men from quiet and reflective spiritual observance and encouraged a tendency towards idleness and sinful behaviour.\textsuperscript{84} Such thinking was deeply embedded in contemporary British penal philosophy. The notion that silence would allow for greater spiritual reflection while reducing the ability for protest was most famously captured in Jeremy Bentham’s prison design, the Panopticon. Bentham concluded that inmates should be housed separately and monitored constantly to prevent conversation. Such a system meant that noise was ‘the only offence’ that ‘troublesome’ inmates could resort to, an act that could be ‘easily subdued by gagging’.\textsuperscript{85} However, a large number of peoples of questionable or ‘moderate moral outlook’ – a class that many middle and lower class peoples were drawn from, including convicts, - were accepting of such established behaviours and continued to engage in these festivities.\textsuperscript{86} The noises associated with rowdy, public forms of recreation thereby became associated with certain ‘common’ peoples and, in many cases, were utilised by the lower classes as a form of vocal protest against figures of authority.\textsuperscript{87} It is unsurprising that genteel and aristocratic members of society accordingly viewed such festivities and their resulting acoustic emissions as distasteful and as signs of potentially underlying subversive behaviour and a breakdown of order and authority.

The difference in reaction to convict noise can be made sense of in the light of this contextual background. Convict noise, though similar to noises made by marines or officers, would not have been seen as the natural result of placing a large number of individuals in a confined space. Instead, it was viewed as a threatening protest against the authority and legitimacy of those who held power and privilege within the social hierarchy (as is shown by the gagging of convicts during floggings and the punishment of those who made prohibited murmurings and other noises). However, convicts were provided with opportunities to make sounds without the fear of repercussions, so long as these sounds operated to reaffirm and reinforce the correct structure of authority within the colony. As we have seen, on important days, the King’s Birthday for example, the entire colony would erupt in jubilant and noisy

\textsuperscript{80} Smyth, p. 144.
\textsuperscript{81} Clark, pp. 27, 203.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., p. 8.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., p. 6.
\textsuperscript{86} Malcolmson, p. 13.
celebration. George Worgan recorded that on this day ‘the Convicts assembled, singing and Huzzaing; on the Governor’s Approach,[sic] they all drew up on the opposite Side,[sic], and gave three Huzza’s[sic], after this salutation, A Party[sic] of them joined in singing God Save the King’.88

By defining what types of noises could be made by whom, and by controlling the occasions on which particular individuals could make them, marines, officers and non-convict peoples were provided with a mechanism for prohibiting, or at least reducing, avenues of communal protest.

The journals of colonists are similarly littered with descriptions of Aboriginal noise, predominantly language and music making. While many of these observations appear anecdotal, when placed within the progressive mode of thinking that dominated 18th century European thinking, these comments begin to take on a deeper meaning. Colonists were not simply reporting what they heard from these strange new peoples but, instead, were deliberately trying to make sense of these peoples, and themselves, within the dominant framework of ‘progress’, ‘civilisation’, and savagery that was prevalent at the time. As we have seen, understandings of humanity’s development from ‘savagery’ to ‘civilisation’ were deeply engrained in the minds of Europeans by the time of their arrival in Sydney. Indeed, it was during the 1750’s that speculation upon the lineal progression of mankind had produced a complex account of historical progress detailing how humanity had progressed through a number of distinct stages.89 In each stage, society was governed by a particular mode of economic subsistence and was characterised by certain governmental arrangements.90 For instance, in the earliest and most ‘savage’ stages of life, humans grouped together into small hunting and gathering groups.91 It was argued that these societies were the rudest of all nations as they were nomadic and were thus devoid of private property and the systematic forms of government, law and polished manners that were thought to result from owning and properly cultivating land.92 Conversely, ‘barbarians’ were thought to be sedentary or at least semi-sedentary pastoralists living in rudimentary communities. These peoples were more advanced than their ‘savage’ counterparts as they had developed firm social structures, a strong sense of communal attachment, and a basic system of governance and law to protect tribal property.93 Situated at the apex of this conceptual scheme of progress was commercial society, in which commerce acted as the predominant structural force.94 In this stage, clearly defined laws, detailed rules of etiquette and complex bodies of government functioned to protect individual rights.95

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88 Worgan, p. 54.
90 Ibid., pp. 28, 29.
91 Ibid., p. 28.
92 Ibid., pp. 28, 29, 30.
93 Ibid.
95 Buchan, pp. 28, 29, 30.
The sounds and noises of language were closely intertwined with this notion of progress. As noted by Hugh Blair (c.1708-1800), an eminent eighteenth century author on written discourse, the sounds and noises associated with language developed as a particular society progressed into more ‘civilised’ modes of life.96 For example, Blair argued that in the earliest stages ‘men could have no other method of communicating to each other what they felt, [other] than by cries of passion, accompanied with such motions and gestures as were farther expressive’.97 He noted that dangers and other necessities could only be expressed by:

... uttering those cries, and making those gestures, which are the signs of fear; just as two men, at this day, would endeavour to make themselves be understood by each other, who should be thrown together on a desolate island, ignorant of each other’s language.98

Thus, eighteenth century scholars argued that ‘exclamations’, ‘harsh dissonant cries’ and tonal yelps that were ‘uttered in a strong and passionate manner, were, beyond doubt, the first elements or beginnings of speech’ exhibited by ‘primitive’ and ‘savage’ nations.99 Importantly, language was believed to grow less passionate and more monotonous as society developed writing and complex systems of grammar to express sophisticated ideas.100 In civilised nations, for example, speech became distanced from the emotions. Here, content rather than tone functioned to express human needs in a rational and articulate manner, resulting in a language that was ‘more simple and plain, such as we now find it; without that enthusiastic mixture of tones and gestures which distinguish the ancient nations’.101

Notions of civility and savagery were also deeply attached to understandings of music. Contemporary eighteenth century musical discourse stipulated that music helped to initiate a process of societal and cultural development in ‘savage’ nations by exerting a civilising and socialising influence upon them.102 However, the music of ‘savage’ and ‘barbarian’ peoples was thought to sound basic, consisting of a limited range and number of harsh notes, narrow tones and monophonic rhythmic qualities.103 This, so it was argued, was a result of the savage’s limited mental capacity, a deficiency which prevented them from constructing or appreciating sophisticated pieces of music.104 Thus ‘uncivilised’ forms of music were comprised of simple and repetitive rhythms.105

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96 H, Blair, Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, London, Cadell and Davies, 1812.
97 Ibid., p. 116.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid., pp. 116, 122, 125.
101 Blair, p. 127.
102 Agnew, p. 6.
103 Ibid., pp. 82, 88, 94.
105 Agnew, pp. 88, 94.
Conversely, European concert music was deemed to be an embodiment of all that was ‘putatively civilized about European culture’. As opposed to apparently less refined forms of music (this included European rhythmic folk forms), it followed a teleological order, in which a musical piece would build in tension, before leading to a final conclusion and satisfying release. Martin Munro notes that by the eighteenth century this hierarchical ordering of sounds in music was considered a foundational aspect of what made western music more ‘civilized’ than other ‘primitive’ musical structures. This was because it exhibited an ability to postpone immediate satisfaction in order to achieve greater fulfilment in the future, something ‘simple’ minded and irrational ‘savages’ were considered incapable of doing. In this way, particular musical structures and their resulting sounds were linked to certain levels of civility, with European music representing the pinnacle of refined and cultured taste, and Indigenous music often illustrating a state of cognitive underdevelopment.

It is unsurprising that colonists spent much time recording the acoustic emissions of Aboriginal people. Worgan, for instance, characterised the language ‘of this rude race of creatures’ as being little more than noisy ‘inarticulate, unintelligible Jargon’. Similarly, Smyth noted that it was ‘excessively loud and harsh’, with the men and women howling and using ‘loud exclamations & grotesque gestures’ to communicate their ideas. Even the more liberal Watkin Tench, though he felt that many Aboriginal people were smart and inquisitive, and that after a time their frequently ‘harsh’ and ‘barbarous’ sounding language could be considered sometimes sonorous, lamented that Bennelong, the famous Aboriginal captive and intermediary, had forgotten to speak in the sophisticated British way after he had re-established contact with his fellow Aboriginal companions. To the disappointment of the British, ‘it was observed, that a soft gentle tone of voice, which we had taught him to use, was forgotten, and his native vociferation returned in full force’. Though not explicitly stated, the perceived Aboriginal tendency to communicate in this ‘basic’ sounding manner would likely have contributed to Tench’s overall assessment that Aboriginal peoples ultimately ranked ‘very low, even in the scale of savages’. Likewise, Aboriginal music and dance, noted the famous ex-convict George Barrington, was ‘truly wild and savage’, in which the performers would ‘sing out in a loud voice’. Collins thought their music vociferous, while Tench noted that their songs were monotonous and ‘disagreeable’, and were full of ‘the wildest and most uncouth noises and gestures’. Such acoustic

107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid., p. 8.
111 Tench, 1778: Comprising a Narrative, p. 265.
112 Ibid., p. 149.
113 Ibid., p. 116.
evidence would have operated to exemplify the ‘savagery’ of Aboriginal Australians. As noted by Wolloch, by the late eighteenth century, scholars firmly believed that supposedly less refined societies could accelerate their transition from ‘savagery’ and ‘barbarism’ into more ‘civilized’ states of life through influential contact with more ‘sophisticated’ European nations.\textsuperscript{116} This belief became part of a self-justification for colonialism and helped to provide a moral foundation for European colonial pursuits based on the civilizing of less fortunate peoples.\textsuperscript{117} This helps to explain why numerous attempts were made to impress upon Aboriginal peoples not only the benefit of European material possessions and cultural values but also the superiority of European music and ways of speaking.

One such attempt to impress Manly, a captured Koori man, with the sophistication of European music ended abysmally. Tench commented that during a dinner at which Manly was present, ‘a band of music played in an adjoining apartment; and after the cloth was removed, one of the company sang in a very soft and superior style’. To the dismay of Tench and his compatriots, ‘the powers of melody were lost on Manly and putting his hat under his head, he fell asleep’.\textsuperscript{118}

Other Aboriginal peoples showed similar disinterest in the fifes and drums carried by the British. Often times British musicians could only manage to maintain the interest of Aboriginal peoples for two or three minutes.\textsuperscript{119} This indifference towards music, as well as other forms of art valued by Europeans, was often taken as evidence of Aboriginal simplicity and stupidity.\textsuperscript{120} Evidently colonists not only perceived European music as superior, but also viewed Aboriginal forms of music making as an example of their inferior intellectual ability and lack of civility.

The world for early colonists in New South Wales was certainly one that was as much heard as it was seen. Acoustic ways of knowing and interpreting worked in an attempt to uphold contemporary notions of progress and, with it, the British right to impose a new political, legal and sensory order. Forms of auditory control were certainly present in nearly every aspect of colonial life. They featured heavily as a vocal indicator of British civility and superiority in the ceremonies of possession that were enacted in an attempt to legitimise European rule. Drums, trumpets, bugles and gunfire accompanied visual displays of humiliation to punish and reassert authority, while bells and the ringing out of tattoos helped to provide a sense of place, space and order. Even speech, or the discordant attempts convicts and indigenous peoples made to communicate, were deliberately monitored in order to define, locate and to subjugate individuals within a European oriented social and racial hierarchy, one which positioned (certain) Europeans at the pinnacle of human achievement, and indigenous peoples as exemplars of primitive and primal culture. In this way, the acoustic played a pivotal role in helping Europeans to make sense of notions of self, superiority and otherness and, in doing so, helped to justify the imperial, yet benevolent, endeavour to colonise Australia.

\textsuperscript{116} Wolloch, p. 251.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118} Tench, \textit{Comprising a Narrative}, p. 98.
\textsuperscript{119} Worgan, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{120} Tench, 1788: Text Classics, p. 340.
It is pleasing to see an increasing number of studies attempting to allocate sufficient weight to the historical soundscapes of colonial Australia. By doing so, the historical narrative becomes more complex, detailed and nuanced. And therein lies the true value of such an analytical framework. As noted by the sensory historian Mark Smith, the purpose of sensory history is to ‘elucidate by reference to both visual and non-visual senses something that makes little or less sense if understood simply as a scopic phenomenon’.\textsuperscript{121}

\textsuperscript{121} Smith, \textit{Producing Sense}, p. 842.