

[Mari Nawi - Aboriginal Odysseys.]

[Views of a windy, deserted beach.]

[MAN]

0:05 – 0:16 I'm a native of New Holland, near Botany Bay. My native name is Budgerygoory, alias William. I was young when I left my tribe. I'm now about 25 years old.

[A wooden-hulled boat, viewed from underwater.]

[MAN]

0:17 – 0:25 I had been employed on a whaling ship. After some time, I joined a sealing vessel out of Sydney and remained sealing about five years.

[Melissa Jackson, Indigenous Services Librarian, State Library of NSW.]

[MELISSA JACKSON]

0:25 – 0:31 You have to remember that the Indigenous world view, before Europeans arrived, was as far as the eye could see.

[Keith Vincent Smith, curator and historian.]

[KEITH VINCENT SMITH]

0:31 – 0:44 The Eora lived between the salt water and the sky. They lived entirely, for generations, on fish, and their most precious possession was what they called a nawi, a stringybark canoe.

[A nawi in a museum. Early European illustrations of Indigenous people near the colony.]

[MELISSA JACKSON]

0:45 – 0:51 The Indigenous people of Sydney used the rivers and the tributaries as their highways and their supermarkets.

[KEITH VINCENT SMITH]

0:53 – 0:57 Mari Nawi Aboriginal Odysseys is the exhibition at the State Library of New South Wales.

[Views of the Mari Nawi Aboriginal Odysseys exhibition.]

[KEITH VINCENT SMITH]

0:57 – 1:04 It tells the story of 35 Aboriginal people who took part in Australia's early maritime history.

[Sketches of an Aboriginal man and two women.]

[KEITH VINCENT SMITH]

1:04 – 1:20 They actually went to sea from Port Jackson in English sailing ships and this has been unknown, really, until now because the sources are spread so wide - letters, official documents, journals, from the Mitchell Library's vast repository.

[MELISSA JACKSON]

1:20 – 1:37 Of course, history is written by the victors. What we're doing is re-examining those documents to put Indigenous people into the shared history of Australia. They didn't fade away, they didn't die out, they became part of colonial Sydney.

[KEITH VINCENT SMITH]

1:37 – 1:47 The centrepiece of the exhibition is a full-scale replica nawi, built for the first time since about the 1830s, when canoes disappeared from Sydney Harbour.

[MELISSA JACKSON]

1:48 – 1:59 I've been anticipating the canoe arriving for a long time so I was standing out the front of the library and here's this canoe, barrelling around the corner. It was quite exciting.

[The nawi arrives at the Mitchell Library on the back of a ute, then is carried upstairs by library staff, installed in the exhibition and wrapped in plastic.]

[MELISSA JACKSON]

2:00 – 2:10 It was put in an oxygen-deprived environment so none of the bugs from the bush could come into the collection, and it now has pride of place in the exhibition.

[A tall ship under full sail, and then with sails furled.]

[MELISSA JACKSON]

2:13 – 2:23 When the tall ships arrived, the Sydney clans were all very scared and they imagined that the people on the ships were either ghosts or possums.

[Animation of the arrival of the First Fleet.]

[KEITH VINCENT SMITH]

2:24 – 2:46 The 11 ships of the First Fleet came in in January 1788. Aboriginal people were shocked, they were scared, and they thought these ships were giant birds or even floating islands and they thought the people climbing up the masts were possums because the English sailors had their hair braided behind them as they scampered up and down the mast.

[Crewmembers climb the tall ship's rigging to work aloft.]

[KEITH VINCENT SMITH]

2:47 – 3:12 But these same ships that they'd feared were to be the salvation of all of those people who went to sea. It gave them a way of fitting into colonial life. These people were physically adapted to a life at sea. They had good eyesight, they could throw a spear, they could catch fish, they could find water. But beyond that they had something in them, they had a resilience, they had a determination to survive.

[Melissa Jackson walks through the exhibition, examining a model of a First Fleet vessel.]

[MELISSA JACKSON]

3:13 – 3:27 I'm actually in awe of the men, women and children of the Sydney clan who decided to travel because for them to hop on these big canoes, these mari nawis, and sail off the edge of the earth, it was a very brave thing for them to do.

[KEITH VINCENT SMITH]

3:28 – 3:49 In my research, I suddenly discovered a song and the music for it that was sung in 1793 by Aboriginal men - Bennelong and Yemmerrawanne - in Mayfair, in London. The words are very hard to decipher. Songs were ancient, songs travelled, in Aboriginal society but the first two words we can probably make out.

[Keith sings from sheet music.]

[KEITH VINCENT SMITH]

3:50 – 4:35 Barrabu-la barra ma, mangine wey en-gu-na / Barrabu-la barra ma / Mangine wey en-gu-na. 'Bula' in Sydney language is 'two' and 'barra' can mean 'kangaroo'. Bennelong sailed home in HMS 'Reliance'. He'd spent three years on ships. As he approached Sydney in the 'Reliance' he was delirious with joy at again being in his home country and seeing his kin people. He said, "I'll never leave my country again." Our traditional history, our received history, has been one of convicts, explorers. This is a hidden history. Sydney Aboriginal people can push our history right back to the depths of time. We've been in the Sydney area for at least 40,000 years.

[MELISSA JACKSON]

4:36 – 4:46 The documents we've found from all different places have been brought together to show that Indigenous people were part of the growing colony of Sydney.

[KEITH VINCENT SMITH]

4:46 – 5:06 In this exhibition, we get the answer partly to what happened to Aboriginal people after those big mari nawi, the sailing ships, came into Sydney Harbour in 1788, how they rebuilt their lives, went to sea through the Sydney Heads and sailed beyond the horizon, thus setting a pattern that lasted for generations.

[VOICEOVER]

5:09 – 5:16 Mari Nawi Aboriginal Odysseys, a free exhibition at the State Library of New South Wales, until December 12.