

# 4

## Borderlands of Aboriginal writing

Western understandings of the development of writing and literacy have long been dominated by a narrative of evolutionary progress. This narrative locates the primitive beginnings of writing in a pictographic stage, which advances to an ideographic stage before crossing the final threshold into ‘writing proper’, epitomised by the alphabet, a phonographic script or code for spoken words. Different cultures were thought to be located at different stages in a universal human journey towards ‘writing proper’. While Indigenous peoples were said to be fixed at the primitive pictographic stage, and oriental cultures at the ideographic stage, Europeans were supposed to have led the way forward by inventing the alphabet. As Rousseau put it in his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*:

These three ways of writing correspond almost exactly to three different stages according to which one can consider men gathered into a nation. The depicting of objects is appropriate to a savage people; signs of words and of propositions, to a barbaric people; and the alphabet to civilized people.<sup>1</sup>

In recent times this model has attracted criticism from several quarters.<sup>2</sup> Critics have pointed to its Eurocentricity, its failure to appreciate that ‘writing is not adequately thought of as the transcription of speech’.<sup>3</sup> In several disciplines there is growing interest in forms of ‘writing before the letter’ and modes of ‘non-literate’ reading. Concepts of writing and reading are now being expanded to accommodate non-Western, non-phonographic modes of graphic communication and decipherment.

At the same time, the Eurocentric evolutionary narrative continues to dominate popular concepts of writing, and has been rearticulated by Walter

J Ong and others, who privilege the alphabet as writing proper because 'it is a representation of utterance'.<sup>4</sup> While stressing the sophistication and functionality of what he calls oral societies, Ong has drawn a sharp line between phonographic scripts epitomised by the alphabet, and non-phonographic 'quasi-writings' such as ideographs and pictographs. By using a system of visible marks that represent words as sounds, the writer of text in alphabetic script can determine 'the exact words that the reader would generate from the text'.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, ideographs and pictographs can be translated only loosely and indirectly into spoken words. How they are verbalised depends on who is reading them, and under what circumstances. Consequently, according to Ong, these non-alphabetic signifying systems only function efficiently if the communicating parties are both immersed in the same life-world, dealing in stable cultural settings with restricted subjects in a limited range of circumstances that determine in advance what the symbols might 'say'.<sup>6</sup> While recognising that many words are not spelled phonetically, and that even the tightest contextual controls can never entirely expunge ambiguity from written texts, Ong wants to retain the categorical distinction between 'writing proper', which functions as a visual code for sounded utterance, and other visual sign systems which have no necessary relation to sound.

My concern here is not to side with Ong or his opponents, but to point to a type of essentialism that enters both sides of the debate whenever any sign system is seen to have any intrinsic, fixed way of working. The problem is not so much that non-phonographic scripts are excluded from the realm of writing, although such exclusions have been a pernicious component of European ethnocentrism, as we saw earlier when authorities such as EB Tylor and Baldwin Spencer classified Indigenous Australians as primitive on the grounds that they lacked recognisable forms of writing. Such exclusions are based on a more fundamental conceptual error: the assumption that any sign system is itself *inherently* phonographic, ideographic or pictographic. This assumption leaves out of account the fact that reading practices are neither automatically activated by scripts themselves, nor determined for all time by conventions prevailing in a script's original cultural context. Visual sign systems have no intrinsic means by which they mean: all are potentially subject to multiple, mutable, contextually determined modes of reading. It is this ideological and cultural clothing that determines whether, in any given context, a sign will operate phonographically, pictographically or ideographically.

This dynamic potential is perhaps most fully realised when signs move across borders between cultures, or move between disparate intracultural contexts of reading. By examining the changing ways in which scripts work as they move between different cultures, it becomes possible to observe that the defining characteristic of any script — its capacity to ‘be’ phonographic, ideographic or pictographic — is not intrinsic to it, but held in place by culturally and historically specific conventions of reading. The difference between categories of scripts, or between what Ong would call ‘writing’ and ‘non-writing’, depends on who is reading, and according to what conventions. Whether a given set of graphic signs functions as a code for spoken words, or as a picture or a concept, depends on what readers ‘make’ of that sign. That is to say, writing is as reading does.

With this idea in mind, it becomes obvious that when signs move back and forth between different cultures the ways in which they are read may change radically. In cross-cultural transactions between ‘non-literate’ and ‘literate’ societies, alphabetic characters may function in ways that have nothing to do with the sound-values ascribed to the letters by Europeans. Alphabetic characters can be read as non-phonographic signs. A given combination of letters may move in and out of a phonographic phase, or operate simultaneously as an ideograph, a pictograph and/or a phonograph. Conversely, it is theoretically possible that a mark which begins its life as an ideograph or pictograph may, in certain contexts, be read as a word or a name, as though it were an alphabetically written word, despite the fact that the mark contains nothing that can be recognised as an alphabetic character. No visual signifying system is inherently or inevitably phonographic, ideographic or pictographic. The way an alphabetic character (or any other kind of a sign) is made meaningful depends usually — but not *necessarily* — on the rules set down by the elites in its culture of origin.

This chapter focuses on a three frontier cultures of literacy, three spaces of exchange, entanglement, and transformation between Aboriginal and European signifying practices. In these borderland zones it becomes possible to see writing in the process of being re-clothed or cross-dressed. The nature and function of visual signs are altered, along with the technologies and media through which they are transmitted. In this frontier zone, writing can precede literacy, and the line between what Ong would call writing and non-writing becomes overtly contingent and unstable. On the borderland between cultures, it becomes obvious that Aboriginal uses of alphabetic script do not begin only after they have been formally schooled into using

the alphabet in the conventional European mode as a phonemic script for spoken words. What I want to suggest instead is that, in frontier settings, Aboriginal involvement in the making of European-style documents and the use of alphabetic script begins, in a sense, *before* literacy, in a double movement in which, on one side, traditional Aboriginal ideographs are transcribed onto European documents and made to serve as signatures, while on the other side, Aboriginal people appropriate alphabetic and numerical characters and put them to work in ways that have little to do with European conventions of phonographic writing and reading. Both these movements occur prior to formal schooling in European reading and writing practices. To illustrate this double movement, I'll attempt a provisional reading of two clubs carved in the 1860s in Wiradjuri country, then discuss Charlie Flannigan's prison-cell 'drawings of writing' in the early 1890s, and finally revisit the 'signing' of the Batman treaty in the Port Phillip District in 1835.

### **Writing before literacy: Wiradjuri clubs**

Some Indigenous Australians didn't wait to be taught how to write. Instead, they appropriated alphabetic characters by carving them into wooden objects such as clubs, boomerangs, spear-throwers and shields. It is difficult to know how widespread this practice was during the 19th century. Very few alphabetically inscribed objects from that period have been preserved in museums because most collectors of Indigenous artefacts were trying to preserve what they thought were pure, uncontaminated 'primitive cultures'.

To understand how Aboriginal people used alphabetic characters non-phonographically, it's necessary to keep in mind the *materiality* of writing — its manifestation in the form of objects — and undo some of the highly abstract ways of thinking about the alphabet that, for most people in modern Western societies, begins when their kindergarten teacher writes up the letters of the alphabet on the blackboard, and coaxes the class to recite 'A is for apple, B is for ball, C is for cat...' Beyond the frontier of white occupation, Aboriginal people would not have encountered alphabetic writing in the abstract, nor seen alphabetic characters physically sequestered on specially prepared surfaces such as blackboards or paper. Nor would their seeing of alphabetic characters have been mediated by known phonemic principles that tied particular sounds to particular letters. Instead, in frontier settings, and even more so beyond the frontier, they would have encountered writing

primarily as 'stuff', not separated from the objects that carried it. Before attending schools or engaging with the principles of European literacy, Aboriginal people would have seen alphabetic writing at large, out in the world, doing its work alongside numerical and other symbols, in a range of different graphic styles and notational systems. This variety of graphic styles reflected both the diversity of European technologies in use at that time, and the practice of branding merchandise with distinctive lettering on labels and signs. Indigenous Australians would have seen alphabetic characters stencilled, chiselled, stamped, printed or handwritten (in the foreign language of English), on objects such as coins, ships, milestones, rifles, metal tools, packing crates, flour bags, barrels, china, pocket watches, wool bales and signs, as well as in newspapers, books, handbills and handwritten documents. Sometimes interspersed with numerals, they were always on tangible objects that formed part of the alien material culture of the settler society. Together with traditional Indigenous oral and scriptorial practices, these objects and the distinctive lettering styles used on them would have shaped Aboriginal people's understandings of the nature and functions of alphabetic script. It's necessary to keep this material aspect of writing in mind when trying to attribute meaning to the inscriptions on the two Wiradjuri clubs made near Wagga Wagga in the 1860s.

In my attempts to read these clubs, I am in a similar position to Aboriginal people when they were initially faced with alphabetic script without having been formally schooled. Looking at 'Club A' from bottom to top (see p. 77), we see what Paul Taçon interprets as traditional clan-markings at the narrow end.<sup>7</sup> Above these markings is a blank space, above which is a traditional, deeply incised, relatively regular cross-hatch pattern. At a certain point, however, the regularity of the cross-hatch pattern begins to break up, leaving gaps and lines of irregular length but consistent diagonal directionality. There is no clear demarcation dividing the regular pattern from the disrupted pattern. The former seems rather to merge into the latter. In the disrupted section, zigzag lines and marks resembling Xs and Vs progressively confuse the basic cross-hatch pattern, as though the carver had begun to notice the similarity between the traditional cross-hatch marks and some of the symbols inscribed on the goods and chattels of the white man. At the top of the transitional section is a deeply carved line, and above that the carver begins experimentally to reproduce shapes that are recognisable as alphabetic characters. Above those letters, dividing them off from the head of the club, is another deeply carved line. Read from bottom to top,

the club can be understood as a record of a transition from traditional to non-traditional practice.

Three features of the alphabetic characters on Club A warrant close attention. First, all the letters are configurations of straight diagonal lines. There are no curved letters, and no non-diagonal straight lines. Every one of the alphabetic characters is congruent with the straight-line diagonals the carver was using to produce the traditional cross-hatching on the lower section of the club. It was perhaps this coincidental congruence that inspired or licensed the carver to begin experimentally reproducing selected alphabetic characters.

The second thing to notice on Club A is that all the letters, with the possible exception of the 'N', are also Roman numerals. The symbol next to the 'X' is as likely to be an upside down V as an incomplete capital A, given that the Aboriginal carver may not have been familiar with Western conventions of letter-orientation. The 'N' may be an inaccurate reproduction of M, the Roman numeral for 1000.<sup>8</sup> The carver has reproduced only those Roman numerals that are congruent with the traditional diagonal straight-line pattern on the lower section of the club. The Roman numerals with curves or non-diagonal straight lines, such as C, D, and L, have not been reproduced on the club, perhaps because they are not congruent with the traditional cross-hatch pattern. Aboriginal people may have seen Roman numerals on round objects such as pocket watches and clocks, and this might explain the inconsistent orientation of many Aboriginal inscriptions. If Aboriginal carvers were copying symbols arranged around the rim of a watch-face or a coin, it would have been difficult to know which way was up. The possibility that the 'V', 'M' and 'X' on this club are imitating Roman numerals serves as a reminder of those sites in Western manuscript and print cultures where alphabetic characters function ideographically as symbols conveying a concept, rather than phonographically as elements in a visual code for sounded words.

The third important feature of the characters on Club A is that they all have serifs, as Roman numerals almost invariably do, or did at that time. The prevalence of serifs suggests that the letters were copied from carved, stamped, stencilled or printed inscriptions of the kind found on milestones, coins, pocket watches, crates or merchandise. Serifs are little things, but their significance is potentially great. When Europeans copy by hand a quote from a printed source, they do not normally try to imitate the printed typeface. Under ordinary circumstances, the typeface is irrelevant; all that



*Wiradjuri clubs as sketched by the author. 'Club A' on left and 'Club B' right. The original artefacts are in the collection of the Australian Museum, Sydney.*

counts is the phonemic value of the letters. Yet when Aboriginal people initially encountered alphabetic characters, they would have had no way of knowing which features of the characters 'carried' meaning (in the eyes of literate Europeans), and which did not. Indigenous Australians in frontier settings are unlikely to have known, for instance, whether M, W, V, N, and Z had to have a specific orientation and a specific number of zigs and zags, or whether these letters were simply bits of zigzag pattern of arbitrary length and orientation. Nor would they have known whether or not a given letter in two different typefaces, or in upper and lower case, amounted to two different letters or two ways of writing the same letter. Even if they knew that literate Europeans assigned particular sounds to particular characters, they would have had no principle upon which to distinguish the sounded parts of letters from the incidental, non-phonemic elements such as serifs. If the first typeface an Aboriginal person had ever encountered happened to be Roman type, they might reasonably deduce that serifs were a crucial, indispensable feature of the white man's signs.