

## DAVID THOMAS HENRY WRIGHT

### *'The Gigantic Snake with Varicoloured Scales'*

The passengers on board the *Taronga Zoo Ferry* were the first to spot the serpent undulating through Sydney Harbour. As the creature moved through the ferry's wake, perpendicular to the Circular Quay-bound route, it displayed no bother. It swam with surety, even politeness, which made the passengers relatively unfazed by the fact that a giant serpent was passing them by, let alone that it existed at all. A few shrieked and pointed, others recorded footage with their mobile phones, but as an eight-year old resumed shrieking demands for 'hot chips' most aboard the ferry allowed their attention to drift elsewhere.

A pair of Chinese tourists peering down from the Harbor Bridge noticed the serpent pass underneath, but its lack of splash and mild swells were unintimidating. Beneath the water's shimmering surface it seemed not so large, no cause for concern. It moved like it belonged, with decisive, hypnotising twists. At a Cockle Bay jetty that harboured only a two-seater speedboat it slithered up the ramp and out onto the passenger-expressway upon which, given the lateness of the Sunday afternoon, there were few pedestrians. An elderly couple out for an autumn stroll noticed the gigantic serpent and became entranced by the opal-like sparkle of the water dripping from its bright pastel-pink face. Its scales transitioned to deep blood-orange, to sandy red, to yolk-yellow, to glimmering green... its body continued to emerge from the water, seemingly endlessly, its enormous muscles lifting and moving with mysterious ripples. The couple did not act hysterically, but merely looked at the serpent with stunned wonder, and then to one another in silent disbelief. A pony-tailed jogger did not even remove her earphones. It was only when she noticed the serpent's body – its girth as tall as she – that she paused. She was so exhausted she treated it simply as one would a closed road that had not been appropriately indicated. With a huff and flick of her hair, she turned around and jogged away in the direction from which she came without increasing her pace. The emergence of the serpent soon slowed to accommodate its increasing width, which almost tripled, bulging to the size of a modest Australian home. The bulge then tapered to the serpent's initial size, after which it took almost a whole minute for the rest of its body to lift out, concluding with a sapphire tip and a delicate splash.

The serpent progressed beneath underpasses and through Sydney's city streets. Cars honked and screeched to a halt. Drivers were more angry than fearful. A few collided, scraping car-door paint as they swerved to avoid the serpent's enormous body, but there were no major injuries. One truck-driver, who swore and then, bizarrely, accused the serpent of being a 'bloody Chinese driver', bumped his head on his dashboard, but he received only a bruise that swelled to the size of a small chicken egg.

The serpent slithered quickly, seemingly with purpose, through Quay Street to wrap itself around the base of The Peak residential skyscraper. It tightened its body around the building, blocking all entrances and exits to Market City at the base of the tower. As it constricted, some of the concrete cracked and the tiling loosened, but the building held its foundations (years later, the architects and engineers responsible would be commended for the sturdy resilience of the building). The serpent then, it appeared, went to sleep. Despite shrieks, yells, flashes of cameras, and prods from more daring pedestrians, it began its hibernation.

It was only in retrospect that Sydney, that the Australian population, and to some extent the global population acknowledged just how peculiar the appearance of this enormous serpent was. The immediate response, however, was surprisingly orderly. Guarded roadblocks were respected. One teenager jumped a partition and attempted to approach the serpent, but he was quickly tackled and handcuffed by a security officer before he got within twenty metres. After that there were few attempts to break the roadblocks.

Those trapped inside the Peak residential building were informed to head to the roof. From there, a police helicopter transported all forty-two occupants to a safe distance. It took six separate flights. Everyone was safe and calm. Throughout the entirety of the evacuation, the serpent remained dormant, its body tightly curled, its eyes not twitching, its golden tongue with translucent veins flickering only once every ninety minutes according to one of the keen observers who took part in the overnight vigil, during which people of various ethnicities chanted Aboriginal songs accompanied by didgeridoos and clapsticks.

In the weeks that followed, media outlets frothed with opinion. Most debate revolved around whether or not the creature should be killed immediately so as to ensure civilian safety. Some aimed criticisms at the sea patrol services for not detecting the serpent's presence earlier. One independent politician claimed this illustrated both of the major parties' ineffective policies regarding border control and unwanted immigration via illegal boats, but

this was later regarded as an opportunistic and tasteless comment given the extraordinary circumstance.

The New South Wales police were advised to expand the blockade and shut down more of the surrounding streets. A traffic radius of approximately one kilometre was restricted. Businesses and residents were permitted to move in and out of these buildings, but were advised to do so only when absolutely necessary. The Australian military dispatched a Special Operations Command unit: two Bushmaster protected mobility vehicles containing ten soldiers armed with F88 Austeyrs, a Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine gun, and an M203 grenade launcher. It was the first time many citizens, even elderly citizens, had seen such powerful weapons in an Australian city. A military medical scientist and a veterinary anatomist with a research interest in herpetology were also given safety clothing and permitted to join the inspection. Overhead, two Chinooks stood ready to transport the animal.

A circus tent that had been affixed at the edges was rolled out. This was to serve as an enormous sack to be placed over the serpent's head to give the impression that it was night so it would remain still and thus could be moved. This advice was given by the veterinarian, who believed it natural to presume that this gigantic serpent's behaviour would be similar to regular snakes and pythons. All zoologists and veterinarians who were subsequently consulted reiterated this belief.

This serpent, however, reacted violently to the approaching circus-tent sack. It awoke, raised its enormous head and hissed, discharging a dark liquid. The liquid had a gel-like texture and a prismatic sheen, not unlike oil on bitumen in the rain. A glob struck the veterinarian in the eye, causing her to collapse immediately. Two soldiers carried her to the mobility vehicle, while four others aimed their rifles at the serpent's head. The serpent retracted its fangs, lowered its head, re-coiled its body, and resumed its hibernation. No weapons were discharged.

The Lieutenant General of the Australian Army informed the public, via government broadcasting (which was subsequently transmitted through all commercial networks and on-line) that unlike the residents of The Peak the Sydney inner city would not be evacuated at this time. Such an act was deemed too costly and unnecessary given the serpent's relative docility. This decision had been made in conjunction with and was supported by the Prime Minister of Australia and the Right Honourable Lord Mayor of Sydney. Later in parliament, this was approved by the majority of the major parties, and most independents. A few

maintained that a wider evacuation was necessary and that the creature should be destroyed, while one independent insisted that the creature should be provided with a more habitable environment and left in peace.

It was ultimately decided that further study of the serpent was necessary before it could be properly and safely dealt with. The radiology department of the Sydney Medical School was conscripted, as was their mobile surgical x-ray system, which was gingerly wheeled toward the sleeping serpent's bulge. The resultant x-ray revealed a bizarre collage of skeletons: cattle, giant squids, humans, smaller mammals, marsupials, and fish, plus animals whose skeletal structures seemed otherworldly. These creatures were squashed together, yet alive and well. Hearts appeared to beat; lungs appeared to respire. Nobody knew what to make of the read-out. Those professionals overlooked for this very exclusive and potentially career-defining study were quick to criticise the selected radiologists, demanding that a more sophisticated study be undertaken, preferably helmed by their more capable hands.

Others suggested that Indigenous culture held the answer to the purpose or, at the very least, a better understanding of the serpent's appearance. Indeed, several news outlets interviewed various Aboriginal elders and Indigenous studies academics. Interpretations of the rainbow serpent myth differed dramatically amongst the various tribal histories. Some associated it with monsoons and waterholes. Some claimed it was associated with mineral erosion and quartz crystal. Some depicted it as a maternal figure. Some claimed it was androgynous. Some claimed it was 'everything'. Some said it was just one story of many. Different names were also attributed: borlung, kunmanggur, ngalyod, taipan, tulloun, wagyl, witiij, etc. This lack of consistency confused people and confirmed the media's and the majority of the populace's decision to neglect Indigenous opinion on this matter. These interviews also did not rate particularly well. None of the Indigenous interviewees seemed to speak with much authority and the serpent's appearance was such a circumfluent scoop that no outlet, not even state broadcast services that had Indigenous material quotas to fill, could justify devoting much research or air-time to this perspective, especially when every single major politician, cultural commentator, and overseas-based celebrity wanted to contribute their two cents. This attitude so frustrated one particular Indigenous scholar that she eventually quit academia and moved to Ireland, believing that if her doctorate (*Indigenous Mythology and Symbolism in Pre-Colonial Australia*) held no application here, then her entire professional output had surely been a complete waste of time.

Further study on the serpent stalled. The owners of The Peak skyscraper's luxurious apartments had been quick to act. Amongst the apartment owners were not one, but three retired SCs. Having had their claims rejected by their respective property insurance policies (this was done on the basis that no actual damage had been done to the property itself, it was merely access to the building that had been compromised, in which instance they should take it up with the City Council), and been told to wait by the Sydney City offices, they took their case to the High Court of Australia, claiming that if indeed the threat of the serpent was so minimal that evacuation of the city was deemed unnecessary by the Australian Defence Force, then they were entitled to compensation in the form of typical rent for such a property, as well as any diminished property value that occurred as a result of the blockade. In the case of *The Queen Vs The Peak Property Owners [collective]*, the latter were successful and the government of Australia was required to pay up. This was not an insignificant amount and compromised the City Council budget, which was already under scrutiny before the arrival of the serpent.

A controversial proposal was made to utilise the serpent's presence as a source of income and an opportunity to boost national tourism, which with the downturn in the Japanese economy had been waning for some time. This decision was met with fierce opposition both in and out of local and Federal government, but given the flood of tourists to glimpse the sleeping serpent, most finally relented, agreeing that if the people of Sydney were to endure such inconvenience the majority may as well benefit by charging stickybeaks a fee.

Construction of a fortified enclosure was swiftly put into production by *Schilling Ltd.*, a Nickel and Coal mining and prospecting company that had successfully bid for the promotion rights and construction business. Despite jack hammering and the assembly of scaffolding, the serpent remained asleep throughout, unperturbed. The same could not be said for proximate Sydney citizens, many of whom had abandoned their apartments, putting them up for short-term rentals to accommodate the influx of tourists. Within eight months the enclosure was up and ready. It provided a circular viewing walkway around and over the serpent. On the Peak ground floor there was also information about the serpent, an exhibit on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and mythology, a small zoo with Australian wildlife (wallabies, blue-tongue lizards, baby crocodiles, etc.) constructed in conjunction with *Taronga Zoo*, and a myriad of restaurants, snack bars, and gift shops hawking key-chains, T-shirts, rainbow-coloured lollies, and other overpriced unnecessarys. While there were those (Animals Rights groups, environment-based political parties, certain Indigenous

communities, etc.) that maintained their distaste of the exhibit, the attraction was highly successful. The slumbering serpent was deemed a national treasure, received UNESCO status, and soon became the unofficial national icon. Despite remaining a Constitutional Monarchy, the Queen's head on Australian money was gradually replaced with a double S-shaped squiggle: the iconic depiction of the serpent.

While the exhibit proved to be very lucrative, further study produced only further confusion. Subsequent x-rays of the bulge, which had begun to shrivel, showed the same bizarre collage of cattle, giant squids, and other strange beasts. The veterinarian who had fainted after being sprayed by the serpent suffered fierce neurodegenerative damage, displaying brain abnormalities not unlike those caused by bovine spongiform encephalopathy. In addition, she developed a scale-like rash on her inner thighs, menstruated varicoloured blood despite having already undergone menopause, and lost all muscular control of her tongue. She died within the year. Samples of the serpent's venom were swabbed from its lifted lips and distributed to various laboratories across the world for research. What scientists observed through the microscope was unlike anything anyone had ever seen. Some claimed the venom contained an unidentified prion disease. Others maintained it contained wholly unique viral structures. Others suggested that what they were presented with was so alien that new terminology was needed. And indeed new terms were proposed, debated over, and rejected. Opinions varied dramatically, much more so than the interpretations of the Rainbow Serpent myth proposed by various Indigenous cultures so many centuries earlier. A Chinese research group claimed that they had managed to synthesise the sample to genetically develop a creature, which they claimed was 'dragon-like', and would be available for viewing in a larger and more impressive zoological facility within three to five years. While the Chinese produced no image, the suggestion of alternative creatures certainly shook the monopoly that the serpent's attraction had on the public's imagination regarding wild and dangerous creatures. Worse still, the serpent, after performing a dramatic yawn (perhaps the greatest photo opportunity in three years), had moved its head underneath one of its own coils, restricting it from view. Despite gentle and then fierce prods, its face did not reappear. This caused enormous frustration to the visiting tourists. Complaints were lodged in record numbers. What had once been a dramatic slumbering creature of wonder and mythology was now just a faded coil that once every hour inflated only slightly. Over time its colour had withered. Tourism similarly withered. Despite an expensive tourism push (not only for the serpent, but for Australia's other attractions) and the passing of looser

gambling laws to draw out wealthy Chinese, the serpent as attraction began to produce diminishing returns. It soon became clear that it was unable to sustain the worth of the property it occupied, the central Sydney district being some of the most valued (in many people's view overvalued) property in the world.

*Schilling Ltd.* received little opposition to its decision to construct around the existing building by creating a series of tunnels that would enclose the serpent. Zoologists agreed that since snakes preferred small, dark spaces, especially during hibernation, such a structure would likely be suitable. Fortified pipes were built. These were strong enough to withhold even the fiercest of seismic activity. A small sense detector and video-uplink was provided, but few viewed it. As a biological or even cultural study, the enormous serpent had become a dead end. In all disciplines of research it was an aberration so inexplicable that it had a tendency to void, or at least stall, any advancement theories. At symposiums and conferences any reference to 'the Australian snake-like creature' was accompanied by groans. To bury it and forget it seemed not only the easiest solution, but also the wisest.

It was shocking how quickly the serpent fell out of popular discourse. In many ways, it had been forgotten long before the new sewers and elevated roadways were laid over it. Subsequent generations often did not believe the stories their parents told them about the giant snake. But when the inevitable excursion to the renovated Peak building occurred and they saw the faded scales through the dim monitor, any initial excitement soon dissolved. A child taken to see the serpent quickly became bored. Dinosaur skeletons at the museum were a far better holiday activity for young boys and girls.

No one was watching when it slithered out of the restored Peak building's foundations and back into the harbor. People who later watched the security footage noticed that its bulge had barely been able to squeeze through the pipes' circumference. It had slunk back into the water carefully, producing almost no splash, and left behind a skin that shone like thin caramel. The material left by the serpent is believed to be incredibly valuable, a material as hard as diamond but more pliable. The skin and its subsequent research remains the property of *Schilling Ltd.* Many believe that the company has utilised the skin to develop new drilling and mining machinery, but there is no way to conclusively prove this.

Three days following the serpent's departure, Sydney Harbor turned a sickly green. It became riddled with algae. The following day, the bloated corpses of a menagerie of strange, unidentified beasts floated to the surface, producing the most horrid, inescapable stench. The

smell was so caustic that babies were inconsolable. Even grown men with head colds wept from the potency of the stench. Despite a full and thorough clean-up of the harbor (pushed by a reinvigorated *Clean-Up Australia* campaign), the stench never quite left the Sydney CBD. No matter how many times the citizens bleached their sheets and curtains, no matter how many times they repainted their walls, no matter how many times they scrubbed their layers of skin with soap, no matter how many times they knocked down their skyscrapers and rebuilt new ones in their place the stench never quite left their bodies and homes.