

# The Cunning Dingo

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## Abstract

The Australian dingo, like the dog, descends from the wolf. However, although dogs have undergone a lengthy taming process that allows them to fit into human society, dingoes retain many wolf characteristics. Like the wolf and unlike the dog, dingoes do not bark. Dingoes howl; they come into season once a year, and they can dislocate their powerful jaws to seize prey. Since the arrival of settlers and their farming practices in Australia 200 years ago, dingoes have killed sheep, and dogs have learned to protect and control those sheep. Medieval texts admire dogs for their intelligence while denigrating wolves as “cunning”—a word defined as deceitful, crafty, and treacherous. A study of Australian colonial texts reveals a popular representation of the dingo as cowardly, promiscuous, vicious—and cunning. This study compares the representation of dingoes (who by killing sheep worked against the settlers) with the representation of dogs (who protected the farmers’ economic interests). Finally, the paper examines those colonial writers who, either deliberately or unintentionally, allowed the dingo to escape the denigrating representation of cunning.

## Keywords

Dingo, discourse, *Bulletin*, colonial, cunning, Foucault

## Introduction

By 1850, the economic farming wealth of Australia was heavily dependent on sheep, and numbers in New South Wales had increased from a small flock who arrived with the First Fleet to 7 million (Garran & White, 1985, p. 218). Dingoes followed the vulnerable flocks by day, attacked them by night, and their numbers trebled on the easy diet of mutton. Strychnine, imported in the 1850s—combined with a wire fence longer than the Great Wall of China and a bounty system—allowed the previously haphazard shooting and trapping of dingoes to be coordinated into a program of extermination: Dingoes almost disappeared from settled areas.

## History of the Colonial Dingo

### *The Cunning Dingo*

Hostile colonial representations of the dingo coincided with the growth of sheep farming in Australia. The idea of a cunning dingo was evoked in several ways, but there was a particular focus on dingo behavior. Historian Bean (1963) wrote of the dingo's habit of hiding in long grass or "flashing low like a streak of lightning through the grass" (p. 34). From the late nineteenth century through to the second World War, stories, poems, and anecdotes about the cunning dingo were published regularly in the books and memoirs of dingo trappers and in the *Bulletin*—a weekly newspaper which, according to Bean, was read and re-read in the huts of every shepherd and bush worker (p. 25). Poets and short story writers used onomatopoeic words such as "sneaking," "skulking," and "slinking" to describe the dingo. Hayward (1927) chose the words, "creeping furtive on his victims [...] is a stinking, slinking dingo" (p. 17). Falder (1905) used the cunning dingo as a metaphor for deceit and craftiness in a verbal attack on corrupt lawyers and moneylenders: "There be many sorts of dingoes, the black, the spotted, the brindle, the yellow, but all live and work the same way \—by cunning," and, "I worked for a dingo for a while. He had a brassplate up, 'J. Skinnem, Financier,' and a beautiful ad. in the papers offering to lend money without security, as he was a Christian gentleman, and didn't want any profit" (p. 35).

Many colonial texts described dingo behavior as cunning, but Bacon (1960), a New South Wales sheep farmer who spent his life trapping dingoes and wrote a book about it, believed he could actually see cunning in a dingo's ears! He states: "If you are in hiding and a pure dingo comes close you can then see the treacherous, deceitful look with the two sharp pointed ears set to catch the least sound" (p. 5).

Because dingoes killed sheep, there existed among the settler population a strong impetus to represent dingoes as cunning, treacherous, and devious rather than as quick-witted, pragmatic, and resourceful. Instead of working with humans like the willing and obedient sheep dog, dingoes worked against them, thwarting the farmers' economic interests in what seemed the most treacherous, sneaky, and deceitful manner.<sup>2</sup> The narrow line between praiseworthy intelligence and unpleasant cunning is revealed in Bacon's (1960) fluctuating use of words as he writes about two separate incidents. First he describes dingoes hunting native animals—their prey for 4,000 years before the arrival of sheep:

Generally speaking it can be said that dingoes are kings of the Australian bush. They have their means of killing all bush game, and if one or two cannot succeed they get extra mates to help. Their skill is remarkable. (p. 9).

However, when dingoes use their skills to kill or injure sheep, Bacon (1960) describes, “a notorious dingo that raided sheep for many years” as “extra cunning and savage” (p. 5). The dingo’s hunting techniques stay the same; however, as the prey changes from native animals—who have no economic value—to sheep—who are extremely valuable—Bacon’s discourse undergoes the necessary changes or “transformations” (Foucault, 1980, p. 211), enabling new judgments to be made.

### *A Lean and Hungry Wolf*

Representations of dingoes as cunning drew on their many similarities to the wolf. Although living in different parts of the world, both animals were the bane of sheep farmers, and both became burdened with denigrating descriptions. In 1699, when William Dampier’s sailors saw their first dingoes, they identified them as starving wolves. Dampier wrote in his diary (published in 1981): “My Men saw two or three Beasts like hungry Wolves, lean like so many Skeletons, being nothing but Skin and Bones” (p. 12).

As Ryan (1996) states in his study of Australian explorers, “Almost everything seen for the first time has already been in some way, anticipated” (p. 10). When the first European explorers saw the dingo, they had no experience of Australian animals and could only describe what they saw in European terms. Later, when dingoes had grown fat and sleek on an easy diet of mutton, they were often called native dogs (Wright, 1968).<sup>3</sup>

### *The Cunning Wolf—and the Clever Dog*

The medieval text describes a wolf’s visit to a sheep fold and confirms that, in that age, the wolf was condemned for the treachery and deceit of a cunning mind rather than praised for the resourcefulness of an intelligent one: “So great is her cunning that [...] she goes like a tame dog to the fold, at a foot’s pace and lest the sheepdog should notice the smell of her breath or the shepherds wake up, she goes ‘upwind’” (White 1954, p. 57). The wolf is depicted as deceiving the shepherds and their dogs. The word “cunning” is used alongside other denigrating descriptions of the wolf who is in “a fury of greediness”, like “a rapacious beast” and “hankering for gore” (White, p. 56).

In contrast, White (1954) gives a more flattering description of the cerebral powers of the dog, although his wisdom is acknowledged partly because he has the good sense to flatter his master and affirm his position of mate: “Now none is more sagacious than Dog, for he has more perception than other animals and he alone recognizes his own name. He esteems his master highly” (pp. 61, 62).<sup>4</sup> An animal who will, “weep for his master’s woe with a piteous howl” (p. 66) and

who “cannot live without men” (p. 62) sounds astute enough to have convinced men of his exceptional cleverness! In addition, White claims complex intellectual powers of reasoning and deduction for the clever dog. When a dog comes across,

[...] the branching of the trail, or the criss-cross of the trail because it has split into more parts, then the dog puzzles silently with himself. [...] He shows his sagacity in following the scent, as if enunciating a syllogism. “Either it has gone this way,” says he to himself, “or that way, or indeed, it may have turned twisting in that other direction. But as it has neither entered into this road, nor that road, obviously it must have taken the third one!” (p. 64).

And so, by rejecting error, Dog finds the truth. It seems that Dog can do no wrong, and his blatant fawning upon his master is not construed as crafty and cunning behavior. The following story shows how the dingo also possesses complex powers of reasoning but, like the wolf, uses them in less praiseworthy situations. Sorenson (1908) wrote the story—told to him by a boundary rider in 1896. It describes two wild dingoes, “big fellow” and “Brindle,” who had rounded up a flock of sheep.

They’d lifted about 200 ewes an’ were joggin’ along all serene, though a bit short-handed. The big fellow seemed to be the boss. [...] “Hang it all, Brindle,” he’d growl, “chuck yerself round a bit, or we’ll be here all day.” (p. 40)

The humor of the account springs from the apparent incongruity of wild dingoes behaving like experienced drovers. However, dingoes have always possessed the skills to manipulate prey. Biologist Corbett (1995) has studied their traditional hunting techniques and describes their communal use of relay and ambush techniques to overpower large prey such as kangaroos. Corbett describes how the dingo has transferred these skills to the droving of sheep and cattle. Sorenson’s (1908) account conveys the strangeness of a dingo droving without human supervision or consent and perceives it as a perverted version of the farmer and his sheep dog. Hidden within the humor is the threat of the dingo’s brainpower, which seems formed to outwit humans and subvert their economy. The act of droving is much admired in sheep dogs and seen as evidence of their loyalty and intelligence. The dog works for the farmer, protecting his property and serving his economic interests; however, the dingo, as unauthorized drover of stock, treacherously usurps the dog’s position. The dingo mimics the loyalty and usefulness of the dog in a parody that betrays the farmer and kills his sheep. As a result, dogs are praised for their intelligence; colonial dingoes in sheep farming areas are condemned as cunning.

Shaw (1934) underlines the changes—or transformation—of words and meaning that occur when dog and dingo are placed in situations that call upon them to use their powers of reasoning. Different words are chosen to praise the actions of the dog and condemn the dingo's behavior. The story tells of a wild dingo, "one of those slinking outlaws" (pp. 41, 42) and Bluey, the dog who is described in similar terms to those found in White (1954).

The text centers around four rabbit traps, wired together and baited by a dead sheep, that a rouseabout sets to catch a dingo. Instead, the traps catch the homeless Bluey, a cattle-dog with black spots, "deserted by an owner who had indulged in a drinking bout and disappeared" (p. 41). Bluey is caught in three of the traps and must lie, "on his side in the dust, panting and helpless and in great fear" (p. 41). After hours of Bluey's suffering, a dingo arrives and prepares to attack Bluey in—according to Shaw (1934)—the cunning and treacherous manner of all dingoes: "...the dingo gave a fiercer snarl and, all its sneaking killer instincts stirred by the helplessness of the enemy, began to advance again, horrid purpose in its evil, slinking bearing" (p. 42). At this stage in the story, the difference between the calculated reasoning that supposedly distinguishes the dog's intelligence and the alleged sneaking cunning of the dingo becomes apparent as Bluey works out a use for the fourth trap:

These hard-fanged things had been placed in the ground to catch such as the dingo. Then it was almost certain that there were more of them in the ground about him. If he could entice the dingo into them..." (p. 42).

Shaw (1934) is describing more than the simple struggle of dog and dingo. He chooses his words to describe a battle contained within the binary opposites of savage and civilized, cunning and clever, dingo (it) and dog (he). Bluey is the locus of all the settler's aspirations. Shaw describes the dog as both a help to the farmer and a source of emotional support:

...he lay, exhausted and covered with dust, in a semi-stupor. At times his body twitched, and once his ears pricked and his tail wagged as he dreamed that he was heeling a mob across a ford while a well-known voice issued commands. (p. 41)

Bluey's suffering throughout the night is similar to colonial descriptions of lost children who dream their mothers are calling them. In fact, Bluey, as the farmer's mate, is represented as human.

Marcus (1989), an anthropologist, writes, "...the dog becomes almost human and acts as a site for the development of human passions and potentialities" (p. 17). The dingo however, is considered to have no such capacity for human suffering and receives no sympathy from Shaw (1934). When finally caught in

the fourth trap, "the dingo flailed and threshed [...] its cowardice now asserting itself in short howls of pain and panic" (p. 42). No room is given in the text for the dingo to suffer. In Shaw's story, the dingo does not take his punishment "like a man"—or even like a dog—but like a lowly and inferior dingo. Bluey's stoic suffering, his reasoned logic that enables him to entice the dingo into the fourth trap, along with his devotion to humans, combine to make him the ideal proxy for man's "superior" nature. In the battle of the fourth trap, the dingo is the loser.

### *The Dingo Bites Back!*

Though the dingo loses in Shaw's (1934) story, dingoes were not always portrayed so harshly in colonial texts. Some writers opened up a small gap in the fence and allowed the dingo to escape representations of cunning. There are several ways for the dingo to squeeze through holes in the fence of denigration. Sorenson's (1908) light-hearted treatment of a serious subject—dingoes droving (and then, presumably, killing) sheep—subverts the usual disapproval contained in stories about dingoes and sheep. Sorenson continues to treat the dingo light-heartedly: "'Twas pretty sultry weather just then, an' I think Brindle, bein' the rouseabout, had done most o' the roundin'-up an' steadyin' at the start, an' was too tired to care if he got the sack" (p. 40). Although Sorenson's choice of words and his humor are deliberate, other texts inadvertently encourage the dingo to slip through the gaps of the clever/cunning discourse.

In his book on the Australian dingo, Bacon (1960) looked back on a lifetime of dingo trapping that began in the late nineteenth century. His story would be expected to show the superior intelligence of humans but somehow fails to do so. Bacon is keen: "I paid men to do the work of improving our property whilst I hunted and studied the habits of dingoes" (p. 10), and he seems knowledgeable: "I have decided to write a book on the Australian Dingo in the hope that it will assist land and stock men in their endeavors to rid the country of these terrible pests" (p. 5.). The dingo runs rings around him! When Bacon arranges dingo drives, "the dingoes are cunning enough to double back without giving the shooters a chance" (pp. 26, 27); when he puts bells on his sheep, the dingoes "kill the bell wether first" (p. 13). He builds a fence, but wombats, "dig big holes under netting fences" (p. 8), and the dingoes run through. He charges the top wires with electricity, but, "the batteries kept running down"; the dingoes "went along the fence until they found a suitable place to cross" (Suppl. 2). He builds the fence higher but can only take a "photo of a dingo jumping over a 12-foot high fence" (p. 4). He dare not allow his dogs to attack trapped dingoes: "I had two or three good dogs bitten on the legs and partly crippled" (p. 13). My favorite example of dingo supremacy, as they slip through the gaps, concerns an

acquaintance of Bacon's: "...a cattle-man imported a big type of deer-hound to destroy the dingoes, but they crossed with the dingoes and produced a large, powerful type of progeny, worse killers than the native dog" (Suppl. 2). Bacon used an armory of weapons in his lifetime of killing: "52 big double spring dingo traps, three rifles, two guns, one revolver and adequate poison (only the best)" (p. 18). Yet, in this battle of wits, the dingo has the last laugh!

Bacon owned his own farm and killed dingoes for a variety of reasons, one of which may have been vanity. He was very proud of the trophy he received in 1916 for trapping a dingo with a record price on his head. At the front of Bacon (1960) is a photograph with the caption:

The author, Mr. J. S. Bacon, with the skin of a notorious dingo that raided sheep for many years. When alive the dingo measured six feet from tip to tip and was both extra cunning and savage. It took eight weeks to tan his thick hide, which shrank nearly one-quarter its size in the process. (p. v)

The *Bulletin* published many poems and stories about the traps that men—I found no mention of women trappers<sup>5</sup>—set for dingoes. In these examples, the discourse of cunning still reflects the perception that—by killing sheep—dingoes performed a treacherous and subversive thwarting of human economy; now, however—in the battle of the traps—the more cunning the dingo, the more prestige bestowed on the successful trapper. Rolls (1993) states that the most cunning dingoes, those with high bounties, became a source of esteem for those men who were "clever" enough to kill them. Each had his own secret mixture of dog's urine or semen to smear near the trap; every piece of dirt, sticks, and grass was put back in place over the buried trap, but many dingoes still circumvented them. One female dingo, "seemed to make a point of finding it" (pp. 50-51) and pushed her front paws carefully through the sand until she located the metal of the hidden trap.

Colonial representations of the cunning dingo were distorted by those writers who allowed the dingo to slip through the gaps in the literary fence and by the trappers who relied on the "extra cunning" of dingoes for their own prestige. Boundaries blurred between men and dingoes: Dingoes are cunning; however, presumably, trappers who set traps under water or who entice dingoes by imitating their howl are cunning and treacherous too. More "transformations" occurred; even the cattle-dog, a recognized breed since 1890, is part dingo (Holden, 1991, p. 21).

Dingoes with high bounties on their heads were given names. The cunning dingo became the "extra cunning" subject of boasting yarns and stories. They ceased to be objects and were instead identified as individuals, turning around to stare at the trapper. Many writers have commented on the moment when an

animal returns their gaze. Bacon (1960), an obsessive killer of dingoes, just saw it as an opportunity to take good aim: "...he stopped and watched, thus giving me a chance to move around to within rifle range of him" (pp. 13, 14). However, Berger (1980) found eye contact and its accompanying revelations—which Noske (1997) names as, "the animal's self and integrity" (p. 62)—disturbing and confronting. Masson and McCarthy (1994) conclude the study of the emotions of animals with an alarming suggestion: "Imagine what would happen if [...] as a hunter looked into the eyes of a deer, it suddenly broke into speech: 'I want to live, please don't shoot'" (p. 217). A similar situation occurs when the trapper approaches a dingo held in the grasp of the trap. Eye contact is made, and the trapper raises a stick or a gun. If the trapper looks into the eyes of a trapped dingo, his awareness of "the animal's self and integrity" should include an awareness of the dingo's intelligence and need to survive. To have this knowledge and then to shoot dingoes or club them to death would be, to say the least, a difficult task. The dog, our non-threatening mate, is allowed intelligence and, as Marcus (1989) asks: "Who, other than a monster, could kill the old family dog without intense emotional distress?" (p. 17).

An examination of colonial dingo discourse forces us to confront our own flawed selves. It explains our willingness to judge animals, not on their natural abilities but on how they serve us. The dog, loyal and helpful toward humans, is intelligent; the sheep-killing dingo of colonial texts is cunning. This study of dingo cunning has provided a liminal space for the dingo or, perhaps, a hole in the textual fence. Interventions in the text, whether deliberate or inadvertent, provide a space in which representations of the dingo can change, enabling contemporary Australians to re-interpret dingo discourse and to acknowledge the treacherous human betrayal of an intelligent animal keen to survive.

The dingo, pushing her paws through the sand to locate the trap, wants to live. The trapper, however, noticing that she usually followed the left-hand track of his four-wheel drive, sets a trap there and etches a tire pattern over it with a stick (Rolls, 1993). Without the barrier of a denigrating discourse, it would be hard to look a trapped dingo in the eye.

## Notes

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2. A similar change in the meaning of words occurs for humans when their lives and economy are threatened. In *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land* (1987, p. 101), Reynolds describes "the skill and determination which underpinned Aboriginal resistance" during confrontations with settlers in Tasmania. However the settlers themselves describe the Aboriginal fighters as "cunning," thoroughly cunning" and evincing "a degree of craft and cunning."



3. Despite looking more like dogs, dingoes have retained their wildness. Meggitt (1965, p. 23) describes the "quasi domestication" of dingoes in traditional Aboriginal society. Dingo pups were taken from their nests each year and used to hunt small prey, and more usefully, to serve as "blankets" on cold nights. However, as Meggitt states, individual training of randomly acquired individuals occurred, rather than the domestication of a whole species, and it was necessary to break the dingo's forelegs to prevent them from returning to the wild.

4. *The Book of Beasts* describes a deceitful female wolf and a faithful, and intelligent male dog. There are several colonial stories about promiscuous female dingoes seducing and then betraying "decent" male, domestic dogs. Such stories place blame firmly onto the female dingo and exonerate the male dog. For example, G. Wright's *Delilah of the Paper Bark Swamp*, published in 1916, tells of the seduction, degradation, and—finally—the death of Prince, a "civilized dog" with "an assured position" in the regard and home of his master". Prince runs off with a sexually promiscuous female dingo called Delilah, an "outlaw" who invades the dog's privileged domestic space. My research into representations of the dingo as promiscuous suggests that such stories act as an attempt to explain, justify, and give voice to the human stories being played out during the same period between Aboriginal women and colonial men.

5. However, there were a few women writers. In the 1940s, the *Bulletin* published a short story and a poem about dingoes written by women. In 1940, Edith McKay, hiding her gender under the pseudonym E. Dithmack, wrote *The Decoy*, which sympathetically describes an old dingo mother whose pups are killed by two bounty hunters. Judith Wright, the Australian poet, wrote *Trapped Dingo*, which describes the smell of death and fear surrounding a dingo crushed in a steel trap. The poem was written in 1927 but was not published in the *Bulletin* until 1944.

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