

Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia by Billy Griffiths

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Adelaide, 1980. Reverberations of electrified reggae rock shake the concrete pillars supporting the Port Adelaide Town Hall. The iconoclastic Aboriginal Australian band—No Fixed Address—are performing their powerful, politically charged anthem *We Have Survived*, bringing Aboriginal political issues, literally, to the centre stage. Inspired by the black-celebration messages of Bob Marley’s 1979 Australian tour, No Fixed Address offered one of the first *overt* politicisations of Aboriginal rock music. By performing a song that unreservedly dealt with Aboriginal dispossession and survival, No Fixed Address were protesting the deeply held belief that European colonisation had destroyed thousands of years of Indigenous knowledge and culture:

You can’t change the rhythm of my soul,
you can’t tell me just what to do.
You can’t break my bones by putting me down,
or taking the things that belong to me.

We have survived the white man’s world
and the horror and the torment of it all.
We have survived the white man’s world
and you know you can’t change that.

It was an anthem about cultural survival and continuity—No Fixed Address were celebrating an ancient, lived tradition.

As understanding began circulating throughout the Town Hall that night, sharp whistling noises resounded through the room. Police stormed the stage, batons raised. The message triumphed by No Fixed Address was

discomforting and polarising, and on that night at least, it was too radical an idea that Indigenous Australia had survived violent dispossession. So the police went about shutting the performance down.

The violent disruption by the South Australian Police at No Fixed Address' gig in 1980 was a small but symbolic demonstration of two very different narratives about Australia's past. The underlying tensions that surfaced during the gig revealed that Australia remained a nation grappling with competing understandings of its own past. The stark contrast between these perspectives of Australian history highlighted some of the many complex questions—regarding belonging and collective identity—that emerge in settler societies forged through Indigenous dispossession.

In his captivating book, *Deep Time Dreaming*, Billy Griffiths directly explores such questions. By examining the history of Australian archaeology, he considers what it means to exist on, and belong to, a land with an ancient history.

Griffiths reflects on how Australians have come to relate to their precolonial past by exploring a number of archaeological discoveries that have excavated something of Australia's deep history. His journey includes travelling from the remarkable unearthing of Mungo Man and Mungo Lady to the discoveries at Madjedbebe, which pushed back the date of Aboriginal presence in Australia to approximately 60,000 years before colonisation. Beyond this, Griffiths describes how some of the most eminent archaeologists, historians, ethnographers and anthropologists in recent memory helped uncover the ancient history of these sites. Throughout the journey, he confronts many of the enduring questions that have continued to challenge historians of Aboriginal history. In what ways has the nature of archaeological practice changed over time? How can we write a history of place? How did the intimate yet tumultuous connection between archaeology and environmentalism develop? Can linear and non-linear understandings of time be reconciled?

One especially illuminating theme in Griffiths' book relates to the relationship—or lack thereof—between archaeology and Aboriginal activism. In particular, *Deep Time Dreaming* focuses on the tension between the roles and responsibilities of these two professions, devoting considerable attention to the more noble contributions archaeology has made to Aboriginal activism. Griffiths shows how the discipline has helped complicate and expand existing historical narratives of Aboriginal

societies. As he makes clear, it is common parlance to refer to Indigenous Australia as the ‘oldest continuing culture on earth’—a view that has sometimes been misunderstood to suggest that Aboriginal societies are antiquated, homogenous and unchanging; that they exist merely as ossified chapters in human history.

Yet *Deep Time Dreaming* shows how archaeological discoveries have helped recast this orthodox view. They have gradually contributed to developing a deeper appreciation of Aboriginal societies as dynamic, lived and resilient rather than unchanging and static. Over time, many Australians have acknowledged that Aboriginal peoples were not merely nomadic tribes of hunters and gatherers. Archaeological research has shown they strategically harnessed fire, practised agriculture, purposefully adapted to unprecedented flooding, endured the extreme aridity of the Australian desert, acclimatised to the ever-changing landscape and have continued to survive the ongoing process of colonialism. And still, all such discoveries have regional and local dimensions of their own. It was common among Aboriginal communities for internal social change to alter economic politics and agricultural practices, but each individual society also adjusted their internal affairs in response to particular social, climatic, environmental and ecological circumstances. They transformed in unique ways.

Venturing further, Griffiths illustrates how these archaeological discoveries helped facilitate new forms of Aboriginal activism. In the first half of the twentieth century, activists usually couched their claims about Aboriginal rights in terms of civil equality. They emphasised that Aboriginal peoples and white Australians had equal status under the British Crown. However, in the latter half of the century, Aboriginal people began emphasising that their special connection to the land entitled them to distinct land rights. Aboriginality held *unique status*. Griffiths identifies how the expansion of archaeological knowledge empowered this reassertion of Aboriginal identity. One of the most profound examples is the unearthing of Mungo Man and Mungo Lady. This discovery, Griffiths highlights, allowed Aboriginal Australians to communicate their unique historical connection to the land in terms accessible to non-Indigenous Australians. Archaeology became an instrument of Aboriginal activism.

Griffiths is also conscious of how archaeology has clashed with Aboriginal activism. In fact, devotion to certain kinds of academic inquiry has actually harmed Aboriginal peoples. This tension is encapsulated in the

fraught relationship between Richard Gould and the Ngaanyatjarra people. In Gould's popular account of his field trip at Pututjarpa—*Yiwara: Foragers of the Australian Desert*—he did not recognise the sacredness of local knowledge and customs, which resulted in an Aboriginal schoolgirl viewing material restricted for initiated men. This caused profound turmoil within Ngaanyatjarra communities. Such examples allow Griffiths to capture how imprudent archaeological inquiry has sometimes generated significant anxiety and animosity between researchers and Aboriginal peoples, exacerbating existing distrust between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Even as archaeological research has facilitated new and more complex understandings of Aboriginal history, it has also inflicted deep and irreversible pain.

Optimistically, Griffiths praises the increasingly collaborative relationship between archaeologists and Aboriginal peoples. It is now common for Indigenous Australians to be granted ultimate control over all projects occurring on their land. He celebrates, as well, the increasing number of Aboriginal archaeologists, although much work remains to be done to ensure that such numbers continue to grow.

It also seems that one particular tension between activism and archaeology remains relatively unexplored: is the current practice of archaeology compatible with more radical, burgeoning strands of Aboriginal activism?

One notable response to this question comes from the anti-colonial metal band Dispossessed. In March 2018, Dispossessed endorsed the view that non-Indigenous people 'do not get to be experts' in Indigenous history. Since academic institutions have been largely responsible for shaping 'the popular narrative of cultures around the world', any expertise must come from Indigenous peoples *alone*. Mere partnership does not go far enough in disrupting profoundly unequal power relations. The only role for non-Indigenous Australians is to *listen*. Griffiths gestures towards these kinds of views when discussing whether it is possible for one group to rightfully lay claim to sole ownership of the past. But perhaps such tensions deserve greater consideration than *Deep Time Dreaming* provides. Indeed, the views of Dispossessed are a response to a long legacy of abuse and exploitation where science has deceived and stolen from Aboriginal peoples in the 'pursuit of knowledge'. The damage done, particularly by a number of 1930s anthropologists and 1960s archaeologists, will take many lifetimes to overcome—if ever.

Of course, the views of Dispossessed are not representative of the entire spectrum of Aboriginal activism. One Aboriginal voice, Marcia Langton, refuted the belief that 'Aboriginal people will make "better" representations of [Aboriginal people], simply because being Aboriginal gives "greater" understanding'.¹ Importantly, though, Dispossessed's endorsement suggests that such debates are part of a larger public discussion that is finding expression outside of the academy.

And yet, the great strength of *Deep Time Dreaming* is that the book itself is a potent form of public activism. By expressing the complexity of Aboriginal societies in delicate and vivid prose, Griffiths powerfully demonstrates how archaeology has helped contribute to understanding the history of Ancient Australia. He advances the project of extending the rich history of Aboriginal Australia into the public domain.

Just as No Fixed Address once shook the pillars of Port Adelaide Town Hall, Griffiths has produced a historical portrait with the potential to destabilise existing understandings of the national past. Readers who immerse themselves in *Deep Time Dreaming* feel as though they are traversing an ancient land, being plunged into the abyss of deep time, perhaps beginning to truly comprehend the profound complexity of Ancient Australia. The immense beauty of Aboriginal history comes within the reach of all.

1 Marcia Langton, 'Well, I Heard it on the Radio and I Saw it on the Television: An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and about Aboriginal People and Things' (Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993), 27.

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