Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge in South-eastern Australia: Perspectives of Early Colonists

by Fred Cahir, Ian D. Clark and Philip A. Clarke

360 pp., CSIRO Publishing, 2018,
ISBN: 9781486306114 (pbk), $69.95

Australia's First Naturalists: Indigenous Peoples' Contribution to Early Zoology

by Penny Olsen and Lynette Russell

228 pp., National Library of Australia, 2019,
ISBN: 9780642279378, $44.99

Review by Kelly Wiltshire
Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

In recent years there has been a growing recognition of Aboriginal people's knowledge and management of the Australian landscape as recorded by early colonists, brought about by the popularity of Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011) and Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu* (2014). In the introduction to *Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge in South-eastern Australia: Perspectives of Early Colonists*, authors Fred Cahir, Ian D. Clark and Philip A. Clarke briefly acknowledge the contribution of these authors to themes explored in their volume, which presents Aboriginal biocultural knowledge recorded by colonists during early colonisation of south-eastern Australia. This includes accounts by well-known figures from this period including Alfred William Howitt, George French Angas and George Augustus Robinson; however, the extent to which these knowledges are drawn upon seem to vary between the authors. For example, some of the chapters also draw upon knowledges recorded by early twentieth-century researchers such as Norman B. Tindale, Peter Elkin, Ronald Berndt and Catherine Berndt. In presenting such knowledges, this book aims to include the extent to which colonists understood and used Aboriginal knowledge as well as how knowledge exchange impacted cross-cultural relationships.

In establishing a point of reference for Aboriginal biocultural knowledge, the authors draw upon the words of ethnobotanist and Mbabaram Traditional Owner Gerry Turpin to define such knowledge as 'knowledge that encompasses people, language and culture and their relationship to the environment'.[1] This is followed up with a further definition as 'the merging of the cultural and natural worlds' (Clarke, p. 46), providing a broad framework in which to present the above-mentioned colonial accounts. With this in mind, the volume commences with a collection of chapters by Philip A. Clarke discussing totems and spirits including the legendary bunyip, as well as terrestrial and marine resources with a distinct focus on knowledges relating to the Ngarrindjeri Nation. The chapters by Ian D. Clark cover themes such as water, trade and wellbeing, while chapters by Fred Cahir discuss watercraft, housing and clothing, including a chapter co-authored with Sarah McMaster on the use of fire – a standout piece that contributes a valuable perspective to existing debates by critiquing the generalised nature of historical accounts. It also highlights how Aboriginal use and management of fire influenced colonial–Aboriginal relationships, a theme that is carried through to the next chapter on watercraft, which demonstrates how essential Aboriginal people were in guiding people, livestock and goods across inland river systems. Cahir maintains these historical accounts 'are testament to how dependent many colonists were on Aboriginal skills in early period of colonisation' (p. 146).

While the volume presents a wealth of knowledge, the decision to present these chapters as thematic is a curious choice, resulting in content that is slightly disjointed and with a considerable amount of repetitive overlap, not surprising given the authors draw upon some of the same sources. Furthermore, it seems Aboriginal biocultural knowledge is used as an opportune reference point to present colonial accounts in an uncritical manner rather than an opportunity for focused discussion. In an attempt to counter this, the authors 'acknowledge and support the need for an ongoing role of Indigenous communities in maintaining the Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge of their respective countries' (p. xiv); however, as another reviewer has noted, it does not appear there was any consultation with the Aboriginal nations whose knowledge is presented.[2] This results in colonial and non-Indigenous voices being positioned as an authority on Aboriginal knowledge; an unfortunate side effect of presenting a volume that seeks to promote colonial perspectives.

Where *Aboriginal Knowledge in South-eastern Australia* fails, *Australia's First Naturalists* flourishes by seeking to highlight the often marginalised Aboriginal individuals and knowledges in the development of zoology within Australia. In doing so, authors Penny Olsen and Lynette Russell present a thoroughly researched historical account that draws on an extensive range of archival sources. The book is

1 Turpin in Ens et al., 'Indigenous Biocultural Knowledge', 135.
2 Bradley, 'Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge', 553.

organised periodically, focusing on a 50-year period between 1788 and 1939, with each chapter providing an overview of this period followed by detailed accounts of the relationships that developed between early zoological collectors and various Aboriginal people. In presenting these relationships, some Aboriginal individuals are named but many are not, reflecting the biases of the original collectors. There are some exceptions including Kuringgai man Bungaree, who has recently come into public prominence as the first Aboriginal man to circumnavigate Australia with Matthew Flinders on board the HMS *Investigator*. Prior to this, however, Bungaree and his family assisted Russian Captain Fabian Bellingshausen to collect animals in 1820. Reading against the grain of the available literature, authors Olsen and Russell maintain the likelihood Bungaree assisted collectors on the *Investigator*, which 'collected 23 mammals, 217 birds, 39 fish, 33 reptiles and amphibians and some invertebrates, including several species new to science' (p. 48); however, when Bungaree's death was announced in 1830, 'his involvement in significant voyages of exploration and other achievements as guide, interpreter and occasional natural history collector went unmentioned' (p. 51).

In addition to the lack of acknowledgement Aboriginal people received in assisting various collectors obtain specimens, Aboriginal knowledge and/or names for animals were also rarely used in their scientific description. For the most part, new species were named after prominent men who had sponsored the expeditions. In one rather humorous example, authors Olsen and Russell describe the exploits of William Blandowski who collected specimens in southern and central Victoria for the newly founded Museum of Natural History (now Museums Victoria) and is credited by the authors as 'perhaps the first European to employ whole Indigenous Australian tribes, purely as collectors of animals' (p. 132). To his credit Blandowski enthusiastically acknowledged his debt to Aboriginal people for their contribution to the information and discoveries he recorded, with his list of Aboriginal names for fauna considered the most comprehensive of any part of Australia; however, his work was marred by poor relationships with museum trustees and the emerging scientific establishment of Melbourne, who refused to publish his expedition report in which he named a number of new fish species after key institute members. In particular, Blandowski described these fish as 'big-bellied', 'flat-headed' and 'slimy', ridiculing their namesakes in the process. Despite the humorous nature of this account, it underlies the fact that many Aboriginal people's contribution and knowledge were not afforded the recognition they deserved during this period of colonial 'discovery'.

By the turn of the century, however, there was a willingness to acknowledge the important contribution of Aboriginal people in obtaining zoological specimens; specifically demonstrated by the lamenting of various collectors during this period who failed to obtain specimens due to the disinterest and/or refusal of Aboriginal people to assist their expeditions. In particular, during the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia, zoologist Walter Baldwin Spencer described the

army of Aboriginal women and children who assisted him in the collection of various burrowing mammals and reptiles. Once again, however, many of these contributors remain nameless; but, by detailing the various museum collectors and scientists who employed Aboriginal people as collectors, Olsen and Russell demonstrate the agency of these Aboriginal people who have mostly been marginalised in the development of the discipline of zoology in Australia.

Australia's First Naturalists concludes by the discussing the ways in which Aboriginal ecological knowledges are being used today in the ongoing management of areas such as national parks, providing the contemporary context that *Aboriginal Knowledge in South-eastern Australia* lacked. In short, *Australia's First Naturalists* presents an accessible and richly illustrated historical narrative, which contrasts with the academic and at times dry content of *Aboriginal Knowledge in South-eastern Australia*. Despite this, both books present a wealth of knowledge that at the very least should increase broader appreciation of Aboriginal people's deep knowledge and vast contribution in better understanding this continent we call Australia.

References

Bradley, J. 'Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge in South-eastern Australia: Perspectives of Early Colonists (book review)'. *Australian Historical Studies* 49, no. 4 (2018): 552–53.

Ens, E. J., P. Pert, P. A. Clarke, M. Budden, L. Clubb, B. Doran, C. Douras, J. Gaikwad, B. Gott, S. Leonard, J. Locke, J. Packer, G. Turpin and S. Wason. 'Indigenous Biocultural Knowledge in Ecosystem Science and Management: Review and Insight from Australia'. *Biological Conservation* 181 (2015): 133–49.

This text is taken from *Aboriginal History, Volume 43, 2019*,
edited by Ingereth Macfarlane, published 2020 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.