

## ***Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia***

by Billy Griffiths

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The opening of *Deep Time Dreaming* takes us to the Blue Mountains in 1957 where Professor Vere Gordon Childe was making his way towards a cliff edge. Later that day he would leap to his death. Childe had only recently returned to his native country. In the 36 years he lived in Britain he became known as the doyen of prehistory, publishing canonical texts such as *The Dawn of European Civilization* and *Man Makes Himself*. While the coroner returned an open finding on the circumstances of his death, a letter from Childe, posted to a colleague in London and kept secret for many years, leaves no doubt that his fall was a meticulously planned suicide.

The drama of Childe's passing has tended to obscure his efforts in his final months to encourage archaeological investigation in Australia. John Mulvaney and Laila Haglund were among the young scholars who benefited from his encouragement. As an exemplar of the old paradigm where history happened elsewhere and where one had to leave Australia to 'make it' as an intellectual, Childe stands as something of a talisman in Billy Griffiths' account of the new archaeology that emerged in Australia after the Second World War. Like Childe, who owed his stature as an archaeologist not to his excavations but to his mastery of the literature, Griffiths is an accomplished synthesiser who weaves a compelling narrative from a highly diverse range of sources, spanning more than 50 years.

The place of Childe in this book is interesting, for his oeuvre shows barely the slightest interest in the Aboriginal past. Yet there are clues in his final letters that he sensed that the discipline itself was destined for a remake. Radiocarbon dating,

a by-product of the Manhattan Project, would play havoc with the old chronologies. The big-picture narrative of humanity's emergence and migration would be recast and rewritten in the years ahead, giving rise to an account in which the first inhabitants of Australia are foot soldiers, not footnotes.

Griffiths' study is concerned with this 'deepening' perception of the extent of human presence on the island continent. The intellectual transformation it chronicles is profound. For much of the twentieth century the length of habitation was reckoned at a few thousand years. Such was the power of this orthodoxy that John Mulvaney, when he received radiocarbon dating of 12,300 years for Kenniff Cave, a site he was studying in Queensland, first thought that a zero had been accidentally added to the result. Within decades, such figures would seem almost modest. Occupation has now been pushed back some 65,000 years. Griffiths' book is, in a way, an intellectual history, albeit one that is highly personable. Structured as a collective biography, it is told from the points of view of key archaeologists. Mulvaney, Rhys Jones, Isabel McBryde, Carmel Schrire, Jim Bowler, Richard and Betsy Gould and Betty Meehan are all major players.

*Deep Time Dreaming* extends an avenue of inquiry initiated by Billy's father, Tom Griffiths, in his 1996 study *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*. The intergenerational synergies are evident in the style and approach. *Hunters and Collectors* oscillates between marvel and critique as it describes the passion of the collectors and dilettantes who made the first fumbling attempts at archaeology in Australia. Billy investigates an archaeological scene that is newly professionalised, although driven by similar energy and curiosity.

A notable achievement of *Deep Time Dreaming* is its evocation of vast temporal sequences. The ways in which Aboriginal societies have responded to geology, changing sea levels and climate, and a medley of other environmental transformations are skilfully painted. The peopling of the continent, the changes in technology, art and fire-making, are communicated through case studies that start with the macro and extend outwards.

The book reveals a keen understanding of what happened in archaeology during a period when the profession evolved rapidly, both methodologically and institutionally. This is the era when departments of archaeology and prehistory were introduced to Australian universities. The science and technology were very much in flux. New dating techniques were only one face of it. Chemical analysis greatly widened the data that could be extracted from artefacts and organic material. Interpretive models were also on the move, informed to varying degrees by developments in parallel disciplines. The burgeoning literature in Aboriginal studies – anthropology, linguistics and of course the emerging field of Aboriginal history – could potentially inform one's reading of the archaeological record.

Inevitably, this is a story in which research and politics are intertwined. Indigenous people were becoming much more vocal about the way they and their forebears were being investigated. A broad sweep of interventions would challenge the salvage mentality of many researchers, still so prevalent in 1964 that the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (as it was then) could be launched as a grand national project despite a complete lack of consultation with Aboriginal people. As the decade progressed, and as activists felt newly empowered by the 1967 referendum, archaeologists and other non-Aboriginal experts were being reminded whose story they were telling.

The groundbreaking excavations from Willandra Lakes of the skeletons dubbed 'Mungo Lady' (1968) and 'Mungo Man' (1974) are key examples of the conflicting values and mores at work. The ochred bones of Mungo Man had archaeologists reeling, for they backdated the origins of death rites by tens of thousands of years. Meanwhile, a less jubilant Alice Kelly, an esteemed Mutthi Mutthi elder from the area, courteously queried the absence of consultation. Far less polite was the controversy aroused by *The Last Tasmanian*, a 1978 film project involving Rhys Jones. The imputation that Truganini's death marked the end of her people was angrily denounced by the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, by this time asserting their presence after decades of invisibility in the public domain. Griffiths' account handles these controversies with nuanced understanding. He details some shocking cases of archaeologists ignoring or infringing upon the rights of Aboriginal people, just as he reminds us that the story is complex; that benefits flowed in multiple directions. Politically and culturally, Aboriginal people profited from many aspects of archaeological enquiry, especially the extended chronology of occupation. Hence the persuasiveness of '40,000 years' as a slogan for land rights.

*Deep Time Dreaming* seems destined to enjoy a 'deep' shelf life. A winner of major book awards, it comes emblazoned with lavish endorsements from senior historians. Mark McKenna describes it as a once-in-a-generation book that 'shifts our understanding of the nation's past'. I see it as an important and powerful book, but in some ways a concerning one. The lack of Aboriginal voices can be felt throughout. Apart from a few bursts of travelogue describing excursions to digs, there is no real encounter with an Aboriginal person. Completely lacking is any sort of extended discussion or interview with any of the many who represent the black skin in the archaeological game.

So pronounced an absence in a book that is being upheld as a national history raises concerns about what sort of national future we are heading towards. The author's reluctance to shift into a more dialogic mode left me wondering at the direction in which this dig through archaeological history was headed. The driving motivation *is* in fact stated, but you have to wait until the last paragraph to find it. There, in rhapsodic mode, Griffiths yearns for a moment when:

we can appreciate the ancient voyages of the first Australians as the opening chapters of Australian history, and the songs, paintings and traditions of their descendants as the classical culture of this continent.

It would take a longer review than this to unpack who the 'we' refers to in that utterance. But I am confident that the European notion of a 'classical culture', which is always a culture stripped of the ownership of its original guardians, is not the sort of import that could ever take root in a country that is truly postcolonial.

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