Book reviews

*Trauma trails — recreating song lines: the transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia* by Judy Atkinson, 400pp, Spinifex Press, North Melbourne, 2002, $29.95

A reflection by the river

A man by the name of Kev works an oyster barge on the Hawkesbury River, NSW. From time to time he helps my family out, carrying stuff up the river. Kev has Aborigi­nal family lines in his life stream. He has a complex inter-woven Australian history of place and blood, like many of us. He reckons he’s a bit of a mongrel. Slow spoken in a muddy sort of way and quiet as a mangrove, Kev doesn’t make a fuss about physical or mental pain. But he did remark, the other day, that carrying cement up hill from the river was getting a bit much and he had started to do a TAFE course in social work. He had his mind on young kids in trouble. He reckoned the teacher wanted him to write an essay on the stolen generation but Kev was shy to tell her that he didn’t know much about the stolen generation idea. One thing led to another and Kev said ‘Someone said you knew about that sort of thing’. Did I have anything he could read? I said yes, and went and dug out a few things. I gave him my review copy of *Trauma trails.*

He kept the books I gave him for quite a long time. He said the *Trauma trails* one was the best, he could understand the stories in it. Especially when Lorna, Len, Mary and the others were talking about their lives (in the chapter on the *We Al-li* healing pro­gram). He knew what that was about. It was a good book and thanks. He wasn’t sure about ‘all the psychoanalysis’ though. It was a bit deep. I replied that Freud had said that a case history should read like a story and that psychoanalysis was only about lis­tening to family stories that people have forgotten and helping them to remember again. It’s about tracking the patterns that are there. It’s not that deep.

Kev said he didn’t know much about ‘transgenerational trauma history’. What did I think about the author’s idea that all this stuff might have gone back 100 years or more and people like him might still have it in their systems? I said that the family his­tory that Professor Atkinson had tracked through six generations for an eight-year-old Aboriginal boy in trouble was worth paying the $30.00 for the book, alone (p 185).

Kev was a bit quiet. I said that I thought we had forgotten a lot and that Professor Judy Atkinson’s book was about the *feelings* that had been lost or stolen away. I said his­tory wasn’t just about the facts. Kev knew a lot of stories about the Hawkesbury people and we both knew some of it was muddied up, but what affected people was not just the facts of who shot who and who burned whose house down on the Point. I said that maybe what really got in the guts of people were the *feelings* that people had about those facts. It was the emotion and attitude that went with the stories that got passed on
down to the kids' gut feelings about life and death. I said that I reckoned that Professor Atkinson and Mary's mob at We Al-li were trying to do that, they were trying to turn the facts inside out like shelling peas or gutting fish, so you could see what it felt like inside the skin of facts. Kev responded that some people said fish didn't feel pain. A bit later he added 'Some people used to reckon that blacks didn't feel pain, that blacks didn't have feelings. The people in the trauma book had feelings...'

Even Professor Atkinson had feelings.

I told Kev that some blackfellas I know reckon that whitefellas don't have feelings, but in truth the Europeans had had a lot of pain in their history too, and that a lot of it had happened around the border country of Germany and Russia and people were still hurting. And killing each other because of it. I said I reckoned the Freud mob had been trying to sort out their own trouble and history in a German/Jewish kind of way and Judy Atkinson mob were trying to do the same thing in Murri country, in a mongrel sort of way. Both Kev and I reckon that 'mongrel is good' and that's a fact of life. Black and white history is all mixed up and it's going to take some real mongrels to insist on sorting it out.

We both thought that the We Al-li healing group had done a good job to lay things out the way that they did, but Kev reckoned it might take him a couple more years to work his way through what it all meant. I said 'Too right' but I had to have the book back to write something for this review.

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This slow conversation took about an hour. I reckon if Judy Atkinson can get such a conversation going with a good man like Kev then she's done an admirable job for both of us. That's why I recommend this book to anyone who has a tough mind and is willing to engage themselves in the psychological history of this country and be cut open a bit.

The book itself

Trauma trails is a record of ground-root research activities in the psychological experience of coming into being in places of rage, violence, despair, confused thinking and 'attacks on linking'. It is about the issuing forth of traumatic memory, and about the moves made among groupings of multi-racial Australian people who are trying to think about it and find their way through to self-healing. It is a documentation of psychic pain.

The book provides:

- An eloquent introduction to the 'feeling landscape' of the project and its purpose, by way of a personal transgenerational dream.
- An exposition of the intent and method of the research, establishing the project's course as following an attitude of deep listening or dadirri. (This was perhaps first made 'famous' by Rose Ungunmerr.)

1. Petchkovsky and San Roque 2000.
psychotherapists who have also cultivated a lineage of deep listening of the kind rediscovered by Freud and developed further by Carl Jung.

- An exposition on, and demonstration of, the manner in which traumatic experience is repeated and reactivated from one generation to the next. This section develops the argument that current psychological disorders and disorders in relationship within and between families and across and between the racial borderlines can be seen as a consequence of experiences in previous generations. It affects everyone with an Indigenous history or Indigenous association. A comparison can be made to the experience of WWI and WWII and Vietnam veterans, Holocaust survivors and others who have suffered the systematic assaults of ethnic obliteration. The Australian experience can be placed, therefore, in a kinship of systems of transgenerational trauma.

- Experiential case material is frankly and unequivocally presented by selected people of multi-racial Indigenous descent who have passed through the group process facilitated by Atkinson and her project. From these histories of experience the attentive reader can draw their own conclusions on how the psychic pain of Indigenous/settler confusion has seeped into the Australian mentality and how our own culturally determined psychic defense systems have been constructed.

- Experiential record of the discoveries of how cure, self healing and restoration of self from the vices of trauma are being worked out and worked through. There are some beautiful and moving pieces, there are quotable paragraphs and there are indications and guidelines implicit for those who work in the same field. In particular, I want to emphasise the book’s acknowledgment of ‘place’ as being an essential factor in trauma reproduction and in the healing of trauma.

- The conclusion is modest, not messianic, and the bibliography of Trauma trails is wide ranging, complex and very useful for anyone wanting to study such an approach.

I assume that for Judy Atkinson and her associates this book is a kind of text or basis for a continuing program manual. But it is not a ‘colour in the dots’ manual or a ‘save yourself from your history by following my steps’ job. Professor Atkinson does not flinch from pointing out that those of us who purport to heal others need also to heal ourselves. There are some simple and eloquent discoveries recorded here as to how ‘counsellors’ discovered that they had to deal with their own business first. This of course is exactly the same ethical discovery as that made by Asklepios in the Greek healing tradition and by Freud/Jung and many subsequent practitioners: ‘Physician heal thyself’.

Anna Freud developed her understanding of the repertoire of psychological defense systems from her analysis of children during the period of the rise of the Nazi depredations in Europe of the 1930s. Melanie Klein, fierce analytic theorist raised in the same geography, was similarly investigating the roots of destructiveness, envy, hatred and reparation while the European countries were at war and Jews, Poles and gypsies were being obliterated. Sabina Spielrein, Russian Jewish student and confidante of Jung, wrote a seminal paper ‘Destruction as a cause of coming into being’ before she was shot, probably by the Germans.
These three eastern European women were exiles in their time and all three subse-
sequently have contributed enormously to the understanding of the suffering and repair
of the traumatised human psyche. It is perhaps no wonder then that in Australia, Judy
Atkinson, a woman of German and Aboriginal descent should be turning her attention
to these very same issues in her antipodean homeland. To some Judy may be driven,
vociferous and fierce. But perhaps to Anna, Melanie and Sabina she would be recog-
nised as a sister in adversity.

As a psychotherapist with much experience of Indigenous life and death I take the
position that the formation of an authentic Australian psychotherapeutic practice will
be achieved only when the psychological realities of Indigenous Australians are recog-
nised and worked into our theory and method to the benefit of all. Australian
Indigenous life, death and history, if accepted, will eventually remake our understand-
ing of our national psyche.

I recommend this complex, well-composed and emotionally satisfying book to
anyone who has an interest in improving the quality of Australian psychological work.
While it is a psychotherapist’s book, it may also add, for historians, an appreciation of
psychological history and the place of psychological experience in history.

I could also add that one purpose for Australian history is to know one’s self.

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aration and its psychiatric sequelae in Australia’s stolen generations’, Transcultural


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Rights for Aborigines by Bain Attwood, 410pp, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2003, $39.95
and Frontier conflict: the Australian experience by Bain Attwood and SG Foster (eds),
218pp, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 2003, $39.95

In Rights for Aborigines Bain Attwood has made a major contribution to the study of
Indigenous struggles for justice. Though he seeks to adopt a case study approach rather
than attempt to write ‘a comprehensive history of campaigns for rights for Aborigines
in Australia’ (p xiv), he has nevertheless produced an impressively broad-ranging anal-
ysis of the ways in which Indigenous Australians and their non-Indigenous supporters
have, since the nineteenth century, fought for justice for Indigenous people. The study
begins with the Kulin protests to remain on their land at Coranderrk near Melbourne
from the 1860s, which Attwood labels ‘the first example of sustained indigenous protest
in Australia’ (p 6, an endnote explains his reasons for not including Tasmanian protests
in this equation). Attwood describes in great detail many significant moments of Indig-
enous protest in Australia: the Day of Mourning in 1938; the background to the
Cumeroogunga walkoff in 1939; the search for equal rights nationwide in the 1950s and 1960s; the Yolngu fight for land at Yirrkala in 1963; the fight that year to gain ownership of land at Lake Tyers in Victoria; the Gurindji Wave Hill walkoff in 1966; the 1967 referendum; and the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in 1972.

The level of detail in which these important events are retold make this book an important part of the historical record. Attwood’s research is thorough, as ever, and his writing manages to piece together the historical evidence into a very readable narrative.

As well as adding significantly to the historical record, there are two central themes that exist throughout the book that make it an important contribution to the way in which both Aboriginal history and Australian history more generally will continue to be written and conceived. The first concerns the respective role played by Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists in the search for justice for Indigenous people. The second concerns the relationship between the search for civil (or equal) rights and the search for the recognition of the more radical Indigenous rights (primarily the recognition of rights to the land).

At the outset Attwood makes clear that he believes other historians (like Heather Goodall and Peter Read) ‘have done very important work in recovering the part played by Aboriginal people but they have probably exaggerated both their autonomy and power in the Australian political domain’ (p xiii).

That non-Indigenous people played significant roles in the various protests articulated throughout the book will surprise few. More novel is Attwood’s forceful argument that ‘the rise of land rights cannot be understood in any other context than one in which relationships were forged between Aboriginal people of remote, northern Australia and white activists from settled, south-eastern Australia’ (p 260). The danger here of course, as Attwood is aware, is that the written record, on which historians are so reliant, will tend to overplay the role of non-Indigenous activists. But Attwood’s argument is carefully made and well supported.

The other significant theoretical issue engaged by this important book concerns the relationship between the search for civil rights as opposed to the search for Indigenous rights. One needs to be careful (and Attwood is) about assuming the assimilationist intent of those Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who sought equal or civil rights for Indigenous people. Although the granting of civil rights was in keeping with the official policy of assimilation, that did not mean the policy was responsible for the removal of overt racial discrimination from Australia’s laws, nor did it necessarily make assimilationists out of civil rights activists.

When people like William Cooper pushed for equal rights in the 1930s did this evidence a prioritising of this kind of right over the pursuit of Indigenous rights (as some would argue), or was it a case of Cooper formulating his claims to suit a given political environment? Attwood suggests the latter, and I would agree. The same question arises in relation to the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, and there is a temptation to view the activists here, particularly the non-Indigenous ones, as apologists for assimilation. As Attwood tells us, this assumption is often mistaken. Indigenous rights took over in the mid 1960s to become the dominant discourse in Aboriginal protest movements at the same time that pro-Aboriginal rights organisations
began to be dominated by Indigenous people (and Attwood is careful here to note that 'there was no necessary relationship between these changes', p 312).

While seeking to restore, to some extent, the role played by non-Indigenous activists in struggles for Indigenous justice, Attwood reserves special praise for those non-Indigenous people who displayed a willingness to listen to, and help bring about, the desires of Indigenous people. Here people like Donald Thomson, Anna Vroland, Stan Davey, Frank Hardy and Barrie Pittock stand out, amongst other non-Indigenous players, many of whom allowed little space for the articulation and realisation of the aspirations of urban, or at least non-remote Indigenous people. Attwood's discussions about the motivations behind a variety of non-Indigenous people's involvement in Aboriginal affairs are often enlightening, although some attempts to suggest psychological reasons for this involvement are a little overdrawn.

On a minor critical note, I found the decision sometimes not to capitalise the 'a' in the noun 'Aborigines' and adjective 'Aboriginal' to jar, even though Attwood was seeking to distinguish between the 'original inhabitant' meaning of the words, and the specific reference to Indigenous Australians. Few people actually now make that distinction, and indeed it is becoming an ever harder one to be consistent about (to illustrate this problem, on p 112 Attwood refers to 'aboriginal culture', and on the next page to 'Aboriginal culture').

But this is a small point. One of the strengths of this impressive book is the way Attwood shows that sometimes disparate sites of protest merged through a process of 'narrative accrual' (a term Attwood adopts) to form a broad political program for change. In the land rights struggles of the 1960s Attwood shows that by talking about histories, protagonists staked claims for very present political demands: 'by telling histories they eventually made history' (p 260).

The telling of contact history has, of course, in recent years itself become fraught terrain, with its own very present political implications. One might term this debate, which has been conducted to a large degree by non-Indigenous historians and writers, as a response to the question: 'what have non-Indigenous Australians got to be sorry about'? Frontier conflict: the Australian experience originated as a forum in December 2001 and was a specific response to criticisms of the National Museum of Australia after its opening that year (and in particular its 'Contested frontiers' exhibit). The forum provided the chance for many historians to respond to Keith Windschuttle's trenchant criticism not only of the Museum, but of the work of contact historians, who he argues have deliberately overstated the number of Aboriginal frontier deaths. The forum took place after the publication of a series of articles in Quadrant by Windschuttle, although it was held before publication of Windschuttle's book The fabrication of Aboriginal history, volume one. Since that time we have also seen the publication of Robert Manne's edited collection Whitewash: on Keith Windschuttle's fabrication of Aboriginal history.

Nonetheless, Frontier conflict is still an important contribution to this debate. The introduction provides a very helpful and considered overview of the ways in which Australian history writing has been reconceptualised in the past 30 years (the rise in status of oral history is particularly relevant in the context of this book), and the editors here draw out the political implications of different ways of viewing Australian history. There are 15 chapters in this attractively produced book (as well as a number of illustra-
tions) which cover the following: specific historical incidents (Lyndall Ryan, DJ Mulvaney, Jan Crichtett and Raymond Evans); historical methods (Henry Reynolds, Richard Broome, Windschuttle himself, Alan Atkinson and Deborah Bird Rose); remembering (Tom Griffiths and David Roberts); and reconstructing histories (Geoffrey Bolton, Attwood, Ann Curthoys and Graeme Davison).

The level of violence that existed on Australia’s frontier remains an important historical topic worthy of further research, but it is perhaps time, as Attwood suggests (p 182), ‘to move on’ from the heated political environment in which debates about frontier violence have recently been conducted. As Tim Rowse has said (quoted on p 23), ‘it is arguable that the current controversy about the extent and causes of frontier violence does not matter much because it is incidental to the really important story that indigenous people lost ownership and sovereignty without ever consenting to that loss’.

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*Shadow lines* by Stephen Kinnane, 414pp, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle, 2003, $29.95

Can biography give a better picture of the past than history? Perhaps on a subject like the lives of a white man married to a Miriwoong woman in interwar Perth it can. Breaking free of the frustrations of fragmented archives, and getting inside people’s heads, Stephen Kinnane is able to draw on oral history and the love and trust of family and friends to paint a satisfyingly whole picture of the multicultural, strictly controlled society that was Western Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century. The book may be called *Shadow lines*, but the experience for the reader is more akin to having the past brought into a bright, clear focus, a perspective that does much for cross-cultural understanding of an important part of our nation’s history.

Kinnane’s work contributes to the growing body of work that is unearthing and exploring cross-cultural relationships in Australia. *Shadow lines* tells the story of Kinnane’s own grandparents, Edward and Jessie, who fell in love against the unforgiving background of AO Neville’s regime of control in interwar Western Australia. Jessie was a stolen child, Edward an English migrant; their marriage was a lesson in tolerance, persistence and staying power. Kinnane’s sympathetic portraits of his grandparents’ lives offers an irresistible look into the choices, pressures and belief systems available to two very different people living in the early decades of the twentieth century.

But this book is more than just the story of one marriage, or one family. Reading *Shadow lines* is a particularly fulfilling experience for a historian, or anyone who has tried to tell the story of Aboriginal Australia from the records and files left behind by the government departments who controlled indigenous people. Such ‘double-edged’ archives, as Kinnane terms them, tell only half the story. Aboriginal perspective sometimes appears, and can always be guessed at, but is often elusive amongst the coded biases of the past. What *Shadow lines* does so well is to draw together traditional historical research, and thoughtfully, explicitly, compare it to the stories and reminiscences of
people who had personally experienced the control of the Western Australian Aborigi­
nes Department. By the end of Shadow lines, the reader feels as if they have been close to
the whole story, and it is a moving experience.

Kinnane’s meticulous research and a talent at reading between the lines of the
official records are evident from the first chapter. Using the briefest of references, he is
able to spin out the detail, to imagine the stories behind the short sentences. As he says
himself, ‘[a]lthough the sentences might be spare, reading these records is like deci­
phering a code. To be chained and dragged a hundred miles was described as being
‘escorted’. To live in a camp with your family was deemed to be ‘neglected’. To have
fairer coloured skin than your mother meant ‘suitable for removal’ (p 25). Kinnane is
also alive to the pitfalls of engaging in oral history about a contested past and, indeed,
Shadow lines is as much a story about telling controversial history as it is a family story.
Kinnane leads the reader through the many fractured perspectives he needed to navi­
gate in telling his grandparent’s story, in which he had to respect interfamily conflicts,
and the formalities engendered by his own subject position as well as the minefield of
cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Historians of Australian race relations often find themselves talking in vague
terms of ‘boundaries’ and ‘borders’. Shadow lines offers a deeper understanding of these
concepts. It shows how an Aboriginal woman’s life could be altered by random ideas of
race difference, how borders can exist both spatially and in the imagination, in the past
and in the present and of course how racial boundaries could be overcome by people’s
feelings for each other. Kinnane promises his readers early in the book a revelation of
‘the narratives of tragedy, love and friendship that manage to cut across ... dominant
boundaries, if only fleetingly’ (p 139), and this is, wonderfully, not an empty promise.

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Ngarla songs by Alexander Brown and Brian Geytenbeek, 192pp, Fremantle Arts Centre
Press, Fremantle, 2003, $24.95

Ngarla songs joins Brandenstein’s Taruru: Aboriginal song poetry from the Pilbara (1976),
Dixon and Koch’s Dyirbal song poetry (1996) and the two collections by Dixon and
Duwell (1990, 1994) as one of the few collections of Aboriginal songs readily available
to the wider public.

Ngarla songs is a bilingual collection of yirraru song texts — public anecdotal songs
composed for pleasure — by eleven Aboriginal composers from the Pilbara area in
Western Australia. It is the result of collaboration between a Ngarla man, Alexander
Brown, the Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre and the Summer Insti­
tute of Linguistics linguist Brian Geytenbeek. The book begins with a background to the
publication and description of Ngarla country and culture. We learn about the range of
Ngarla song genres and how these fit into everyday life; however we are left wondering
whether the song genres are still performed or composed today, or whether non-trad­i
tional genres have surpassed them in popularity.
The body of the book is devoted to the 68 song texts, grouped by composer. The presentation of song texts is similar to those in von Brandenstein (1976), with their Ngarla transcription of the song text on the left hand page, and the English translation on the right hand page; yet *Ngarla songs* is much more beautifully designed, with warm black and white line drawings. Those interested in the subject matter of Aboriginal songs, or Aboriginal culture and history of the Pilbara will find this book interesting and insightful.

The song texts convey the extensive knowledge Ngarla singers and translators have of their country, and of how everyday life relates to the Dreaming. The book shows that songs are an expression of emotion; not by direct reference to words for feelings, but through reference to place names, Dreamings, people’s behaviour and historical events that are all associated with particular emotions. The authors show that Ngarla songs, like other traditional Aboriginal songs, use vocabulary from many languages, and allusive language.

Through the use of endnotes the authors make every effort to provide contextual knowledge in order for the reader to obtain the subtle meanings that the songs convey to native speakers, and more specifically, to the people who know the composers. They provide notes where the English meanings of the translated words do not give enough information to grasp the full meaning of the vernacular words in the song. For example, the authors explain that the words translated as ‘instruments’ on page 65 are ‘items in the sorcerer’s tools of trade’. The authors show how composers use language that has the ability to hint at things through ‘overtones’ — the semantic associations — of the words in the songs. Sometimes more contextual information could have been provided. For example the translated song on page 71 has the final line ‘Karnkulyypangu was the cause of this (storm)’, and the authors state that ‘Rain was Karnkulyypangu’s totem’. Yet we do not know if Karnkulyypangu is an ancestral being or a person, and if so, how (s)he relates to the composer. Numerous other language words are used in the translations with no explanation of what they refer to, or with morphological variation that is not explained (p 39). A list of vernacular language words used in the translations with explanations would have assisted in understanding the song texts. Linguists and musicologists may be disappointed to find that there is no morphological glossing, information on phonology or the spelling system used for the transcribed song texts, or musical transcriptions. Music is the defining dimension of songs. Presentation of the rhythm and melody would enable a deeper appreciation of the songs and complement the beautifully presented lyrics.

The authors pick up on a widespread feature of Aboriginal song, what they refer to as ‘staggered recycling’ in many Ngarla songs (p 9). This refers to the mismatching of metrical lines and grammatical lines, where the metrical line begins with the final section of the previous grammatical line. It would have been interesting to hear more about the differences between these two forms of the song, which they refer to as the sung verse and the written form. For example, how much of the line is carried over, and in how many songs? Many Aboriginal songs are constructed so as their text fits with particular rhythmic structures, and some songs have requirements on the number of syllables per line, and numbers of lines per song. Some song texts are set to a repeated melody, and there are regular points in the text where the melody starts and ends. Knowing about these aspects of the songs is left tantalisingly out of reach. Let us hope
that this will be the subject of further work on Ngaria songs, and that a recording will be available.

Ngaria songs is a book of Aboriginal people’s own observations of the changing world around them. There are few books that collate such personal and Aboriginal driven accounts of history.

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Dixon R and M Duwell 1994, Little Eva at Moonlight Creek and other Aboriginal song poems, Queensland University Press, St Lucia.

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Looking for Blackfellas’ Point: an Australian history of place by Mark McKenna, 269 pp, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2002, $39.95

Without beating around the bush, Looking for Blackfellas’ Point has so many facets to the narrative and moves so effectively from detailed close-ups to national perspectives that no matter what you expect to find in a history of place, your needs should be met. In 1978 when research into the impact of the timber industry on the natural, historical and Aboriginal values of the Five Forests of the south coast of New South Wales was initiated, it was manifestly apparent that there was no adequate historical account for this region. The absence of a local history made any reconstruction of the Aboriginal landscape of the Bega valley tenuous to say the least. Looking for Blackfellas’ Point: an Australian history of place by Mark McKenna is overdue and substantially fills this void.

Blackfellas’ Point is a riverside landmark on a small block of land on the fringes of the Bega Valley that the author recently acquired. Mark writes this account from the perspective of coming to historical terms with the ‘ghosts of the past’ that reside in his new locale as well as in the historiography of Australia. The local history of the Bega Valley is situated within contemporary historical discourse through a coherent discussion of the ‘black arm band’ versus ‘white-out’ perspectives of Australia’s past. The reader is comfortably introduced to the politics of reconciliation and is able to reflect upon national tensions in the light of the richness of local historical sources that are emerging. Here McKenna explores the identity of non-Aboriginal society and offers his consideration of how and why Australians are disconnected from the history of dispossession. He laments the aggressive process of colonisation that inexorably leads to a ‘sort of gradual eviction’. The author has a particularly detailed account of how contemporary historians came at last to be concerned with Indigenous issues. On p 62 McKenna pays homage to WEH Stanner and his seminal 1968 Boyer Lecture After the dreaming — the ‘great Australian silence’.
Ultimately, thinking about the way in which settlers sought to explain the dispossession of Aboriginal Australians and invent their past gives the reader a better appreciation of the gulf that separates the historical memory of one culture from another.

That the author has mined a variety of source materials is reflected in a 1988 quote from a political speech given at the small inland village of Bomballa. When addressing the gathering there was an assertion by a local politician that the tribes exterminated one another, a reflection of the still powerful 'myth of Aboriginal self-destruction', and that the colonists had little to do with the demise of Aboriginal communities! This rhetoric when placed alongside the remarkable demographic change in the local scene, with two Aboriginal families living in the small timber and fishing town of Eden in 1968 exploding to fifty in 1993, offers some indication as to why there are tensions in such a rapidly changing scene. McKenna matches the demographic information with moving personal accounts of the recent plight of small coastal communities such as Eden and the devastating blow brought on by the closing of the fish cannery. He continues with a discussion of the sense of physical isolation and economic insecurity this raises as well as the stigma of unemployment as a ‘public and social embarrassment’.

It is mandatory that the reviewer ‘discover’ some obscure point to comment on thus demonstrating their authority over the subject. It took me a long time to find one, but footnote 29 (p 236) refers to the *Carbago Chronicle* of 19 May 1933 when the old Tarlington homestead was torn down. The article states that bricks were found between the walls indicative of a defensive measure. I suggest that this represents a once relatively common form of early colonial construction, referred to as ‘cob’, where the space between the studs was filled with brick, the practice being derived from England and Ireland, where the space was filled with cobbles or a mixture of straw, clay and wicker.

Records of local court proceedings were at times placed on the front page of south coast newspapers — perhaps because little else happened locally — and feature glimpses of the mind-set of colonial society and reflect black and white interactions. For instance, in 1954 a Bega man Harry Burton was fined 10 pounds for 'having wandered in the company of an Aborigine'. Harry stated that he had been living with the woman and was astounded to find out that there was a law against it.

I found myself getting very angry as I read McKenna's book. So much of his material comes from readily available sources such as newspapers that one wonders what local historians have been doing for the last 100 years other than creating a myth of settler society. Even if you decide not to buy this book, go to a bookshop and read McKenna’s recounting of Emily's story about the homicide of an infant child of Aboriginal and settler stock in the *Bega Gazette* of 1869. No doubt, when you have finished these four pages (p79–83) your perspective on settler society will have changed and the inadequacy of traditional local histories will be manifestly apparent.

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Contested country by Patricia Crawford and Ian Crawford, 238pp, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 2003, $38.95

Before reviewing this book, I imagined it to be a study of Aboriginal/White relations in the Northcliffe area of Western Australia, rather in the style of other recent ‘belonging’ studies. Instead it is an environmental history of the once dense karri and jarrah forests of south-western Western Australia. The contestants of this country were the British, the Federal and Western Australian Governments, the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), conservationists, Group Settlers, farmers, woodchippers and greenies. The Murrum people, and, later the Nyoongah conservationist protesters from Perth, do not enter the story very much at all, and when they do the Murrum are victims rather than contestants.

The opening chapter on pre-invasion Murrum land use is written by Ian Crawford, (the rest of the book is written by Patricia). He presents a useful account of Murrum land use, which succeeds in his aim to ‘reposition Aboriginal history in the Northcliffe narrative’, but is somewhat static. On p 43, for example, he writes the not very enlightening and somewhat dated summary: ‘The Nyungah way of life had evolved over 50,000 years to reach a balance with nature’.

The account which follows, from the invasion to the present, is a sad story of state and local interest groups trying to impose their own landuse patterns on the forests, with the environment all too frequently coming a long second.

Group Settlement (in which gangs of British migrant workmen would work collectively under a foreman to clear the land before settling on their own blocks) began in the 1920s, out of the British Government’s desire to settle its excess population in what it clearly still thought of as the colonies. Very foolish Western Australian optimism encouraged British planning. The scheme, as is familiar to historians of Australian immigration, and well told here, failed abjectly. While 400 to 800 healthy Murrum people lived in the Northcliffe area in the 1820s, one hundred years later the same area could scarcely support 400 malnourished Group Settlers, and this after a huge expenditure of resources and energy. Many of them wanted to leave, which the Murrum did not. Millions of pounds had been spent turning good karri forests and productive Aboriginal country into bad dairy farms. Even after the folly of clearing the forests became apparent, money was still thrown into the scheme. Between the World Wars, fifteen million pounds was spent on Group Settlement, only five million of reafforestation. Nothing illustrates more clearly the ill-founded optimism of Western Australians that the forests would last forever, nor the British Government’s attitude to Australia as an expendable back paddock, assessments which successive state governments seemed all too ready to accept. Both the account of, and the research in the written records, for these dismal proceedings is first rate.

Unfortunately the evidence used by the authors for the venture is mostly in written form. Crawford relies on some oral history (she cites seven formal interviews, a workshop and a number of personal communications) but these do not count for much before the combined weight of seventeen pages of citations from manuscript collec-

tions, films, fictional writing, theses, government records and a huge collection of sources primary and secondary. That's a pity because at least two gaps in our historical knowledge are not filled by this account. The first are post 1960s loggers and foresters in comparison to the much more articulate greenies, 'ferals' and conservationists opposed to them, who are well represented in the book. An extensive consultation with some of the former would have rectified this.

The other serious gap is the information about the Murrum people themselves. Certainly they appear in this post-invasion narrative much more frequently than in most local, and some environmental histories, but often only to vanish again. Crawford notes that 'It is likely that Aboriginal people were involved in droving throughout the south west in the late 19th and 20th centuries, though they are mentioned only casually in the [written] sources' (p 57). Indeed. On page 87 she notes that there probably were Aboriginal people in the Northcliffe area when the groupies arrived, 'but their presence was only rarely mentioned'. Exactly. She then writes 'In the south-west the plight of Aboriginal people during the Depression was far worse than that of the group settlers, although it has received little attention' (p 116). In connection with the 1950s, she notes that 'from the drovers we know that a few Aboriginal people were still around the area' (p 115). This is what oral history can reveal, and much more. Some detailed and useful references are drawn from Anna Haebich's massively researched For their own good, but in short, those wishing to know more about the Murrum in the south-west should not begin with this book. That's a pity because so much not only remains to be found out, but can still be found out, and of course, amongst living Murrum it is well known already. In many other parts of Australia, a huge amount of what we know about Aboriginal working conditions, living areas and institutional life, for example, has been drawn not only from oral interviews per se, but by piecing together fragments of many dozens of interviews, in the same way that historians of print sources piece together many pieces and fragments to compose as complete a story as they can. It's there to be discovered and disseminated: that's a fundamental point of Mark McKenna's prize-winning 2002 Looking for Blackfellas' Point. Who would have imagined, in 1970, what rich and detailed records of nineteenth century Aboriginal Sydney would emerge, of the Dharuk, Gundangara and Eora peoples whose histories remained in the memories, stories, artefacts, photographs and personal collections of their descendants? The disseminated post-invasion history of Indigenous Sydney began to emerge as soon as White and Aboriginal historians began to seek out these stories and to publish them, generally collaboratively. It's still happening: only very recently has a Ku-Ring-Gai Land (northern Sydney) Council been established in an area where most Whites imagined that the Indigenous people had left no descendants for a hundred years.

On page 7 Patricia Crawford writes,

What was the relationship of Aboriginal people to the south-west environment? Although Murrum people no longer lived there, what could be learned from Nyoongah traditions and the historical records relating to the land between the Warren and Gardner Rivers?

I doubt if in fact it can be assumed that Murrum people left the area. It is much more likely that some part-descent Murrum people live there still, some identifying openly, some identifying only to immediate family, and some not identifying at all — but they carry their history still and, we hope, one day they will allow others to share it.

The authors may reply: but this is an environmental history, the Murrum people and later the Nyoongah people who came from Perth to protest about the destruction of the forests played only a small role in that history. Perhaps. That’s what historians used to say about women’s role in Australian history generally until women spoke up for themselves to demand their rightful place, and before historians embarked on formal programs to fill the gaps.

This is a sympathetic, though somewhat saddening, study of the destruction of the south-west forests and the fight for control over them, not least because so little was achieved in the place of the mighty forests. The authors are compassionate to all the protagonists, not only to the environmentalists. The Murrum too receive both consideration and sympathy, but they remain shadowy. A further study will need to correct this, it is certain that the information is there.

References

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Aboriginal stars of the turf by John Maynard, 144 pp, Aboriginal Studies Press for Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra, revised edition 2003, $21.95

When I came across this title, I wondered who would be featured. Darby McCarthy, who was well known in the 1960s, was the only Aboriginal jockey I could think of. In fact Maynard writes about 25 Aboriginal jockeys, including two women. The book is dedicated to one of these women, Leigh-Anne Goodwin who died as a result of a race fall at Roma in 1998.

When one considers the prominence of Aborigines in the cattle industry, it is surprising that more have not become jockeys. Twenty five is a surprisingly small number compared to the number of Aboriginal boxers and footballers. The training and riding of racehorses has usually been carried on by people with few qualifications who were often exploited, another reason why one might have expected more Aborigines to have
been employed in that area. It does not come out in the book, but I wonder how many Aboriginal people were employed as strappers, an underpaid and non-unionised form of employment until a generation ago.

The main point to come out of the book is that until Darby McCarthy, jockeys of Aboriginal descent did not admit to being Aboriginal if they could get away with it. As Maynard puts it (p 24):

The result of this intensive assault on Aboriginal culture and identity was responsible for why many Aboriginal people felt ashamed of the colour of their skin. To be identified as Aboriginal was to leave oneself open to persecution, denigration and prejudice.

The first Aboriginal rider to find fame was Peter St Albans who rode Briseis to victory in the 1876 Melbourne Cup at the age of 13. The first to gain a national and indeed an international reputation was Rae ‘Togo’ Johnstone. He rose to prominence as a leading rider in Sydney in the 1920s and was frequently suspended for various offences including not allowing his mount to run on its merits, and betting. Jockeys are not allowed to bet. After the 1929 AJC Derby he was suspended for using his mount as a pacemaker to help the chances of the favourite, which he had backed. Since the favourite was Phar Lap, Johnstone needn’t have bothered to help. Johnstone went overseas, but was refused a licence in England. He was granted a licence in France and he won the French jockey’s championship in 1933. He spent the war years in Vichy France and Monte Carlo. At one stage he was imprisoned by the Italian authorities, and later he was imprisoned by the Gestapo but escaped. After the war he continued riding with great success including winning three English Derbies.

The most famous Australian jockey of the thirties and forties was David Hugh Munro, better known as Darby Munro. Like Johnstone he was frequently in trouble with the stewards, and like Johnstone he was not referred to officially as Aboriginal or part-Aboriginal. However, given his swarthy appearance, he was ‘a black bastard’ and ‘a black bludger’ when he was beaten on a favourite (p 54).

The author devotes a chapter to his own father, Merv Maynard, who rose to success in New South Wales in the 1950s. Remarkably he rode until he was 62. In 1952 with the death of King George VI, the King’s Cup, a race that rotated annually among the major clubs, became the Queen’s Cup and Maynard rode the winner. As the winning jockey, Maynard had expected to meet Princess Elizabeth, but she was detained in England. Forty years later when Queen Elizabeth was coming to Australia, Buckingham Palace rang to say that the Queen wanted to meet the rider who had ridden the winner of the inaugural Queen’s Cup and in February 1992, 40 years later, Maynard got to meet her.

Darby McCarthy rose to fame in the 1960s winning big races in Brisbane. His real name was Richard Lawrence McCarthy but he was nicknamed ‘Darby’ after Darby Munro. After a period riding overseas, he returned to Australia in 1968 and rode with great success in Sydney. I remember seeing him win both the AJC Derby and Epsom at Randwick on the one day in the spring of 1969. Unfortunately, after that his career went downhill. The nadir was a disqualification for allegedly being involved in stopping the favourite in a race at Hamilton. After several appeals the disqualification was reduced and finally expunged from his record, but the period of enforced inactivity and the
damage to his reputation spelled the end of his successful career. He also had problems with alcohol and drugs prescribed to keep his weight down. However, he remains the first top jockey to be recognized as Aboriginal and proud to be Aboriginal.

There was one other prominent Aboriginal jockey of the 1960s and 1970s and that was Frank Reys who was numbered in the top half dozen riders in Melbourne during that period. He is best remembered for winning the Melbourne Cup on Gala Supreme in 1973. In the press he was always referred to as Filipino. He came from around Cairns and he appears to have had both Filipino and Aboriginal ancestors.

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In this work, Hayes-Gilpin makes a plea for analyses of rock art and of gender, both often treated as marginal, to be incorporated centrally into archaeological studies. She provides a number of case studies taken from various regions of the world to demonstrate how new insights on the past may be gained by integrating rock art — indeed many of the studies provided prioritise the evidence of rock art — and examining social practice in relation to its production and use from a gendered perspective.

In her introduction the author emphasises the distinction between the social construct of gender and the biological category of sex. While in human societies both frequently coincide, in many cultures gender is also assigned to non-biological aspects of the environment — landscape, objects, natural phenomena etc. Her case studies show that such gendered ascription does not necessarily imbue these with actual sexual connotations, nor do they necessarily relate in any obvious way to gendered divisions or usage within human societies. In fact gender inversions may occur as among some peoples of south-western North America, where powerful female localities are foci for male shamanic practice, and boys initiation required the production of symbols of feminine power, while female ritual involved the invocation and painting of a powerful male spiritual symbol (p 123).

More significantly, Hayes-Gilpin argues, by engendering our stories of the past we are led to problematise their subliminal masculinity, and enrich — not necessarily replace — our central (white middle class male) positioning by the inclusion of female and other marginal perspectives. Even the structuralist studies of Leroi-Gourhan and Laming who interpreted palaeolithic cave art in terms of male and female principles merely seek to elucidate symbolism encoded in the imagery but could not, within the structuralist framework, consider its implication to the gendered nature of palaeolithic society.

The sequence of chapters is essentially thematic discussing aspects such as the identification of gender in imagery, who made the art, its social or ritual context, the sacred and engendered landscape. Australian examples do not feature despite the highly gendered nature of much Australian Aboriginal social and ritual practice. This absence clearly reflects the paucity of gendered studies in Australian rock art analyses.
It is now widely recognised that material culture, including art, does not merely depict or evoke concepts, but is an active component, which both expresses and mediates cultural values and practice. This view pervades much of the book, and particularly informs Hayes-Gilpin's discussion of south-western Pueblo rock art in which she presents much of her own research on imagery relating to girls' initiation ceremonies i.e. the overt expression of the transformation of individuals from childhood to gendered adult (and also from one age category into another). The status of 'maiden' can be identified in the rock art from a very distinctive hairstyle adopted during this stage. Hayes-Gilpin shows how through myth and art its overarching symbolic importance serves to engender many other aspects of the south-western Pueblo world, well beyond the immediacy of a 'maiden's' gendered social role.

Most of the analyses discussed in the book rely on ethnographic information to arrive at considerations of gender relations as expressed and mediated through the art, and it is questionable how far this approach can be extended into deep prehistory. The antiquity of the 'maiden' image, for instance, may be inferred from other factors such as the antiquity of the rock art and related motifs on pottery. On such evidence Hayes-Gilpin postulates that the overall symbolism of 'maiden' has significant antiquity, but she also warns against too easy an assumption of the continuity of meanings in imagery, particularly when other archaeological data indicate significant cultural transformations such as in subsistence, settlement etc.

The only social and gendered study of fully prehistoric rock art presented is Esther Jacobsen's very detailed analysis of Siberian rock art and archaeology. This work is not widely known in Australia, and Hayes-Gilpin's précis offers an interesting insight into Jacobsen's analysis of the developments in the iconography and location of rock art through a series of major cultural changes as evidenced from other archaeological data. Jacobsen's analysis leads her to presents a history of the — gendered — conceptual transformations that accompanied the more usually recognised changes in subsistence, settlement and social hierarchy. In this admittedly very condensed rendition of Jacobsen's analysis many statements are inevitably qualified with 'probably', 'perhaps', etc. Ultimately, the interpretations presented still depend on ethnographic data of recent shamanic societies, and of some of the underlying beliefs and practices that persist from earlier periods.

With the examples presented in this book, Hayes-Gilpin has demonstrated that considerations of rock art from a perspective of social praxis may enrich archaeological interpretations and lead to greater insights on a range of cultural constructs beyond the symbolism of the imagery itself. However, the extension of perceptual interpretations into deep prehistory remains problematical even where continuities of material evidence obtain. In its wide ranging selection of case studies the book introduces the reader not only to a variety of rock art manifestations and contexts, but also to aspects of gendered rock art studies that may inspire the search for new developments in local rock art research.

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This well written book is an insider’s account of the Aboriginal condition in Australia over the first four decades of the twentieth century. Its author, Gordon Briscoe, was the first Aboriginal person to earn a PhD in history in Australia, from the Australian National University where he now researches in the Indigenous History Program, Research School of Social Sciences. His life stretches back to the period under study, and his youthful experiences, especially adolescence in an institution for ‘half-castes’, gives him the necessary insight into the Aboriginal situation then and since. His personal knowledge of many of the actors in this story is supplemented by thorough archival research. Given the history of Aboriginal counting and health, the book is surprisingly good tempered, often leaning over backwards to be fair.

The book’s central focus is on Aboriginal health, a subject which should remain one of this country’s major concerns. Much of the approach is demographic and hence stresses the need for counting. Counting means identification, which requires some agreement on identity. That agreement was often a shifting one, especially as, during this period, the identity decided whether a person was part of the official population of Australia or not. Those with more than half Aboriginal ancestry were until the 1971 census excluded as being non-Australian. Nevertheless, as a result separate counts were made, and this book could not have been written without them. The search for a statistical identity is also related to the even more important issue of grasping the meaning of ‘Aboriginality’. The choice of the author to restrict his study to Western Australia and Queensland is fair enough. Confining attention to two sets of continuing archives allowed depth to be achieved. Such archival continuity did not exist in the Northern Territory where the administration changed from that of South Australia to the Commonwealth during the period.

Briscoe’s major theme is the survival of the Aboriginal population, which he argues — and can prove statistically — was assured by the beginning of the twentieth century. This is at odds with, for instance, Len Smith’s conclusion that numerical decline came to a halt only in the 1930s. Although Briscoe cites Daisy Bates copiously, he finds it hard to forgive her for calling her 1938 book The passing of the Aborigines, and referring to them as ‘a vanishing race’. He believes that even in 1788 at least some of the Aboriginal people were resistant to smallpox and that general resistance to disease was probably sufficiently great to avoid decimation of the population. Thus he seems to be more on the side of Radcliffe-Brown’s 1930 estimate of pre-contact numbers than Butlin’s 1983 radical multiplication of that number, paralleling the new and much higher estimates of the indigenous pre-contact population of the Americas. Thus, Briscoe argues that the European invasion of Australia spelt disaster but not a Holocaust. The case for nineteenth century populations being higher depends on overestimates of the uncounted ‘outback’ populations in such areas as Cape York, the hinterland of the Gulf of Carpentaria, Arnhem Land, and the Kimberly.

The book’s analysis brings out the relative scarcity of females in Western Australian birth cohorts born before 1900, and in Queensland those born before 1880. The author attributes this to the more severe impact of colonisation on females than on
males, but the mechanics of this are not spelt out. The cause may be the relative under-counting of women or their disappearance on marriage into the wider society, or it may be explained by the nature of pre-contact society.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Aboriginal people died of diseases of poverty, displacement and inadequate treatment: tuberculosis, pneumonia and sexually transmitted diseases (bravely called ‘venereal disease’ by Briscoe who refuses to follow the pedants to STDs and then STIs). Hookworm affected one-fifth of the population. In remote areas the providers of modern medicine were faced with the situation that their theories of disease causation and cure were quite different from those of their patients. In the late nineteenth century an awful but slow-killing disease, leprosy, arrived, with either Chinese or Macassan origins. The photographs of its victims in the book are horrifying. So were the reactions of governments, fuelled by the fact of its rapid spread among the Aboriginal population and the fears of the outback white population that it would spread to them. Lock-up, prison-like hospitals, usually on off-shore islands, were established. Daisy Bates was rightfully shocked to meet a group of sick lepers, manacled and chained together, limping as prisoners to the coast for shipment to the islands.

Slowly, leprosy, hookworm and venereal disease were brought under control. Life expectancy rose so that later in the twentieth century the cause of death would come to be dominated by degenerative diseases, striking often at frighteningly young ages. We are now willing to spend more on Aboriginal health, but this may be due less to enlightenment than the fact that between 1913 and 1998 the Australian real per capita income quadrupled and our real national income multiplied by sixteen. In the latter part of the period being surveyed the Depression of the 1930s struck. This meant widespread loss of Aboriginal employment, especially in the pastoral industry, with resultant movement to mission stations, government settlements, and makeshift camps on the fringes of towns. Briscoe, with reason, regards the last as the most socially degrading, but whether health was better or worse there is not certain.

The book is beautifully produced by the Aboriginal Studies Press. Lena Campbell from central Australia has created for the cover a marvellous painting, ‘Honey Ants’. The photographs bring home the grim story of Aboriginal health. Nothing, however, is perfect. Although the bibliography is in alphabetical order by surname, the printing of first names and initials before the surname, renders it confusing.

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_Dancing with strangers_ by Inga Clendinnen, 324 pp, Text Publishing, Melbourne Australia, 2003, $45.00

Inga Clendinnen, like Greg Dening, belongs to that generation of ethno-historians who had a major impact in the field of history in the 1970s and 1980s, especially with respect to Pacific and American studies. A well-known specialist of the Spanish conquest in Central America, Clendinnen established her reputation with two important books:
Ambivalent conquest: Maya and Spaniards in Yucatan, 1517-1570 (1987) and Aztec: An Interpretation (1991). The first was a thorough study of the 'conquest moment' and its effects on both conqueror and conquered; the second focussed on the pre-conquest Aztec world with an aim 'to discover something of the distinctive tonalities of life as it was experienced in the city of Tenochtitlan in the early sixteenth century, on the eve of the Spanish conquest'.

Clendinnen says she came to the field of Australian history 'late in life and fortuitously' (p 3). In approaching it she adopts a comparable perspective, focussing on the very first moments of the Australian colony with the aim of recovering something of the life of those she calls 'the Australians', that is, the Aboriginal people. Read in the light of her previous studies, Clendinnen's Dancing with strangers provides evidence of her continuing interest in the study of early confrontations between Europe and the societies of the just discovered New World. In transferring her historical competency from the study of the Spanish conquest in sixteenth century Central America to the study of the British conquest in eighteenth century Australia, she attempts to understand the actions, reactions and thinking of those 'newly discovered'.

Right from the introduction of Dancing with strangers, however, she underlines the limits of studying the Australian case:

Working on the Mexico of five hundred years ago, I was able to retrieve something of the Indians' thinking as to what was happening in their sacred unseen worlds from the elaborate descriptions of ritual life collected from native lords, and detailed Spanish reports of the transformations in Indian ceremonial life over the first fifty years of colonisation. That kind of reconstruction is impossible for my own country, where contact began a mere two hundred years ago, not least because after the first few years the Australians ceased to be of much interest to the British, while in Mexico the friars remained committed to the pursuit of souls (p 4).

Clendinnen is referring to the diversity of sources available on the Indian world to the historian working on the period of the Spanish conquest: the codices transmitted to the Spaniards, pre-colonial paintings and objects left intact despite many being destroyed during the period, transcripts of songs, myths and stories written by Indian scribes after the conquest, or inquiries led by friars with the collaboration of noble Indians, of which one of the most famous resulted in the publication of the General history of the things of New Spain, written between 1577 and 1580 by the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún. Nothing of that sort existed in Port Jackson. Aboriginal societies were non-literate, their sacred world 'stored in landscape, artefact, dance and story' as Clendinnen notes. No inquiry conducted later under English missionaries' initiative resulted in the equivalent of the Florentin codex in Mexico, or Malo's Haleoles or Kamakau's books on ancient Hawaii traditions. 'In my view the sacred world of the Australians in 1788 — world of mind and spirit ... — is closed to us outsiders. My interest therefore focuses on the Australian's secular life'.

Because of the lack of sources, Clendinnen could not apply to the Port Jackson material the same type of 'cultural analysis' she formerly used on Indian pre-conquest society when recovering ancient beliefs, representations, cosmogonies and hierarchies. In the light of the main sources available on the Port Jackson case, she decided to focus on the narratives written by those she called 'the informants'. These are British officers
of the First Fleet, among them the ‘big five’; Captain Arthur Phillip, Captain John Hunter, Captain-Lieutenant Watkin Tench, Captain David Collins and Surgeon-General John White. This meant that she had to work within the limits of what these men could actually observe or understand about the Aboriginal world: material culture, men’s and women’s physical appearance, aspects of social practices, interactions with the newcomers and only a very limited number of elements regarding religious beliefs and practices.

Clinging exclusively to these written sources, Clendinnen curiously ignores the contributions from other disciplines, such as modern archaeology or linguistics, to be found in the work of Jim Kohen and Ron Lambert, Isabel McBryde, Anne Ross, Val Attenbrow and Arthur Capell. She also makes no reference to the ethnographical information accumulated throughout the nineteenth century from various parts of eastern New South Wales; material that could have been useful for the understanding of the groups at Port Jackson.

Clendinnen limits the scope of her inquiry to the written sources of the first nine years of the British presence, but adds two final chapters covering the period 1795-1840 based on the journal of Mrs Charles Meredith. She looks at what happened through the eyes of officers fascinated by their encounter with the ‘other’, the ‘Indian’, the ‘savage’, the ‘native’. The ‘other’ was not yet called ‘an Aboriginal’ and was never then called ‘an Australian’. The word ‘Australian’ was used from the 1820s onwards and was reserved for locally-bred whites, as Mrs Meredith wrote in her journal (quoted by Clendinnen p 281). However, to escape the stereotypes associated with the word ‘Aboriginal’ Clendinnen chooses to use ‘Australian’ instead, considering that it ‘is what they undoubtedly were’ (p 4). This, however, is misleading for the word ‘Australian’, just like ‘Aboriginal’, is a colonial construct and historically inappropriate for first inhabitants. Clendinnen could easily have used local Indigenous names of groups instead, but she deliberately preferred to establish a distance from common usages by introducing a confusion into the naming.

_Dancing with strangers_ is about Aboriginal people’s contact with members of the First Fleet. The aim of the study is to reconstitute the different acts and scenes of early Port Jackson by way of a thorough analysis of British/Aboriginal interactions. There is also a desire to retrieve Aboriginal agency and meaning. Several books have been published or republished over the past few years on this topic and with the same objective. _Tales from Sydney Cove_ by Kate Challis, written in 1951, was republished in 2000. _When the sky fell down_ by Keith Willey was published in 1979. Peter Turbet’s book, _The Aborigines of the Sydney District before 1788_, first published in 1989, was re-edited in 2001, and _Bennelong_ by Keith Vincent Smith, was also published in 2001. The topic is, therefore, not new. Clendinnen’s book has nevertheless received the warmest praise, winning the NSW Premiers’ prize for non-fiction for 2004. Among the many compliments for Clendinnen’s prose, commentators stressed the novelty of the approach taken. This needs some analysis.

One of the strengths of Clendinnen’s narrative is without doubt its capacity to make the society of Port Jackson live again through a detailed and dynamic description of events and actors. According to the principle of a ‘travel account’, it follows the course of the local history and precisely describes the different phases of British-Abo-
rigical relations. Clendinnen endeavours to interpret thoroughly the meaning behind actions and behaviours. She revives in her narrative central Aboriginal actors, such as Arabanoo, Baneelon, Barangaroo, and Colbee. They appear as the main characters of the scenario, progressively discovered by the reader in all their complexity. Clendinnen’s main effort consists in recovering their agency and motivations in the complex and tragic situations they confront: the intrusion of newcomers, the outbreak of smallpox, the drying up of local resources and, finally, the profound disruption of their world. Far from being passive victims, these men and women act and react to the British presence with a political and personal agenda. Much like Keith Vincent Smith in his book *Bennelong*, Clendinnen describes Baneelon as an essential ‘go-between’ who acts as a political leader, attempting to take advantage of his privileged relations with the British in general, and Governor Phillip in particular, in order to impose negotiated relations and compensations. Much like Smith again, she interprets the famous scene of ‘spearing the Governor’ as a ritual payback fortuitously and quickly organised by Baneelon as reparation for past wrongdoings by the intruders, opening the opportunity for new alliances. The idea of Baneelon organising a ritual ‘fortuitously and in two hours time’ on a territory (Manly) that was not his own (Baneelon was a Wangal from Parramatta), with only one spear-throw by another ‘stranger’, is an interpretation that could be seriously discussed and challenged.

In general, however, Clendinnen’s interpretation of Baneelon’s role as a negotiator trying to establish a new balance of power between local groups and intruders is interesting and convincing. Baneelon is portrayed as attempting to uplift his position in his own world, within the limits imposed by others, in particular by elders whose presence can only be guessed at. Interpretation of the Aboriginal power game is a central issue in Clendinnen’s narrative, but other domains of action, such as gender relations, are illuminated as well. From Clendinnen’s description emerge powerful feminine figures such as Barangaroo, and fresh insights into what is called ‘Australian sexual politics’.

To retrieve from British descriptions clues as to Aboriginal ‘autonomous actions’, Clendinnen ‘cultivates’ what she calls ‘deliberate double vision’ (p 119) which consists in distancing herself from the ‘natural’ meaning of actions as given by the observers. (This is close to what the field of subaltern studies calls ‘reading against the grain’.) Cross-checking information provided by several officers’ accounts, the author carefully investigates facts, chronology and actors’ actions.

Clendinnen develops a particular focus on historical sources: the context of their production, the status and point of view of their authors. Most of the First Fleet officers’ journals have been too often used by historians as neutral sources, when working on the early years of the colony. Clendinnen, on the other hand, pays special attention to each narrative and narrator: who saw what, and in what circumstances? She is one of the few to notice, for instance, that Watkin Tench, considered one of the finest and most reliable observers of Port Jackson, described events he had not actually seen, but only obtained through hearsay (p 114). One particular case concerns the spearing of the Governor where, as she notes, most historians have used Tench’s narrative as the main source of information for the scene. Her special attention to the historical sources explains why Clendinnen chooses to start her story with chapters devoted to the ‘big five’, in order to provide the reader with some insight into their personality, position
and opinion. She takes into serious consideration the fact that the First Fleet journals were written by different people, each with their own personal character, points of view, intentions and motivations. This may appear obvious, but First Fleet journals have far too often been treated as ‘equal and interchangeable’, regardless of the particularities of their authors, as Clendinnen points out.

This methodological perspective leads Clendinnen to pay equally close attention to the British and to the ‘Australians’ in Port Jackson; including an anthropological concern for a better understanding of the meaning of acts, actions and reactions. One of the originalities of her book resides precisely in this effort of grasping both sides of the story, both societies present at that time. Chapters on ‘discipline’ and ‘sexual politics’, which put into perspective British and Aboriginal conceptions of justice, punishment, women and violence are among the most stimulating ones. Clendinnen does not consider each side en bloc, but mentions the complexities due to internal divisions and unequal positions. Port Jackson’s world cannot be reduced to a confrontation between British and ‘Australians’, but must be seen as a complex social place made of officers, sailors, soldiers, convicts and Aboriginal people from different groups and with different personalities, each one with his or her own cultural and social references, and all of them interacting. Clendinnen’s perspective reminds us of the beautiful work of Greg Dening in the field of Pacific history. In both cases, the novelty of the analysis does not reside in what is said about the ‘other’, but in the investigation of the encounter as such, the mutual understandings and misunderstandings and the peculiarities of the Europeans of the time.

On several occasions Clendinnen exposes her difficulty in apprehending Port Jackson’s culture and society. About ‘British sexual politics’, she writes: ‘I confess I find the early colony’s smooth techniques of managing sexual matters among its elite at least as opaque as the Australians’ (p 154). About flogging ‘It seems that what is judged reprehensible violence is a cultural matter. We are disconcerted that men like Watkin Tench or John White — men we judge to be kind, men we have come to like, men who in some sense we think of as forebears — could watch those hangings and floggings unmoved. Australians were horrified too’ (p 190). Convict society ‘on the whole is not a society we will easily understand’ (p 185). However, to attempt to do so Clendinnen uses several major references on eighteenth century British history, Pacific history and Australian penal history, such as the works of Greg Dening, Douglas Hay, John Hirst, Alan Atkinson, John Currey, NAM Rodger, Ann Salmond and of course EP Thompson.

Clendinnen provides us with a dynamic description of social relations in Port Jackson, including details on interactions among the convicts, between convicts and Aborigines, between convict women and officers. But her main focus remains British officers’ interactions with Aborigines in general, and with those later called the ‘come in’ Sydney people in particular.

Governor Phillip is on centre stage, described as a remarkable political tactician, patient and curious towards the ‘natives’. He was ready to put an enormous amount of time and energy into his relations with his Aboriginal acquaintances, although he was simultaneously struggling with his task as Governor in charge of a starving and isolated community of convicts and soldiers. His home, the Governor’s house, open to his ‘native friends’, became a central place for conversations and exchanges that are vividly
described by Clendinnen. But Phillip was also stuck in the contradictions inherent in his role and mission, having to maintain friendly relations with local people on the one hand, and develop British occupation and settlement the other. Competition and violence were soon at the heart of the story.

Clendinnen starts her epilogue as follows: ‘During an early and relatively benign phase of their imperial adventure the British — or rather the selection of them we have just met — chanced to encounter in Australia one of the few hunter-gatherer societies left on earth’ (p 285). By using words such as ‘benign’ and ‘chance’ she characterises the peculiarity of the period and context of the First Fleet meetings with Aboriginal local groups of Port Jackson. It was a period and context still deeply influenced by the previous experiences of James Cook’s circumnavigations and discoveries. In many ways the First Fleet officers were acting in Port Jackson towards Aboriginal people as scrupulous ‘observers’, willing to participate in the building of a scientific knowledge and concerned by the survival and the protection of the ‘primitive society’ they met. As members of an educated elite, they tended to transfer to convicts the whole responsibility for wrongdoings carried out against local people. Some of them understood the relationship between the brutal intrusion of 1000 newcomers and their effects on local resources and Aboriginal way of life, but all were obviously deeply convinced of the legitimacy of their imperial mission.

Throughout her book, Clendinnen shows a profound admiration, affection and even love for the officers of the First Fleet, Watkin Tench in particular. But she fails to describe in detail the world they belonged to as soldiers and members of a British elite. Their background, previous experiences, knowledge and intellectual references, political ideas and so on remain in the shadow. The author uses instead a surprisingly sentimental approach that does not, I think, help the reader to understand these men, their actions and attitude with respect to their role in Port Jackson and their implication in an ineluctable logic of colonisation. During this ‘relatively benign phase of imperial adventure’, as Clendinnen notices, Aboriginal people in Port Jackson experienced a tragedy not so much because of a direct military violence exerted on them, but because of the situation itself, the massive intrusion, the disruption of their way of life, the break out of smallpox, the high mortality and famine. Colbee, Baneelon, Barengaroo and the others were the surviving members of dismantled groups. Substantial aspects of their experience are very difficult to analyse, because these experiences remained ‘unseen’ and untold by the ‘British informants’. However, most of these officers having experienced other colonial situations, especially in America, knew the effects of European colonial power on small and vulnerable communities and they could perhaps have anticipated the consequences of their imperial mission and presence in Port Jackson. But apart from the young astronomer Dawes who resisted participation in any punitive expedition, the others stayed faithfully attached to their duty.

With a good deal of sensitivity, Clendinnen concludes that ‘Fast evolving colonial situations demand swift responses. Our two main protagonists, Phillip and Baneelon, were given no space for reflection, revision or even explanation of their positions. Both of them failed, hence engendering their personal and their own people’s suffering; a suffering that is still of actuality today. They cannot be blamed for that failure’ (p 286). What defeated them, in the end was ‘the depth of cultural divisions’. More than that,
however, they were defeated by a whole system of power and domination from which Baneelon as victim and Phillip as agent could not escape.

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Blood, sweat and welfare: a history of white bosses and Aboriginal pastoral workers by Mary Anne Jebb, 364pp, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 2002, $34.95

Mary Anne Jebb's Blood, sweat and welfare is an exploration of the evolving relationships between Aboriginal people in the northern Kimberley and the non-Indigenous people who settled in their country. Her work focuses on people who 'mostly spoke the Ngarninyin language', since they also 'spoke or understood neighbouring languages' (p 6). The events that Jebb refers to in this work are mainly focussed on those that occurred in the country of these Ngarninyin speakers, 'the central and northern ranges area north of Derby' (p 6). As Jebb shows, European pastoral settlement in this region was underpinned by both informal and formal kinds of governmental support, frequently to the detriment of local Aboriginal people.

Jebb begins her account with the beginnings of pastoral settlement in the area, occurring from 1903 onwards, and chronicles the climate of fear produced among Aboriginal people in the early days of pastoral settlement. Jebb traces the structural conditions underlying much of the early frontier violence towards Aborigines, through to the era in which the pastoral frontier 'settled down' and Aboriginal men and women in this region became workers on pastoral stations. Here, Jebb produces substantial evidence to support the view that the pastoral industry in the north Kimberleys was substantially reliant on Aboriginal labour. Jebb then looks at the effects of the introduction of welfare payments for Kimberley Aborigines with respect to both their 'employment' in the pastoral industry and the viability of that industry itself, once 'bosses' were required to pay equal wages to Aboriginal workers. These themes are the blood, sweat and welfare of the title, and provide much of the structure of the work.

In exploring her themes, Jebb draws on historical and archival sources as well as oral accounts of these periods provided by a number of Kimberley Aboriginal people. In relation to the 'early days' of gardia ('whitefella') arrival in this part of the Kimberley, many of the Aboriginal people who relayed their experiences of this era of history to her experienced it directly, or were closely related to those who experienced this period directly. The incorporation of their versions of history, and indeed their voices in the text, gives this material immediacy and impact that an analysis of historical records alone could not possibly produce. In addition, it is evident that much of the direction and focus of Jebb's archival research has emerged through the oral narratives she has been entrusted with by her Indigenous informants.
This work makes manifest the hidden histories that reveal the complexity of interactions among and between Aborigines and Europeans, extending from the early days of pastoral settlement in this region, and stamping their presence on contemporary relations. These are not relations that can be described in simple dichotomous terms, as Jebb's work clearly shows, and she seeks to 'avoid oppositional modelling of contact relations which relegates Indigenous people to either victim or resistance status' (p 13). She is, I think, successful in achieving this aim, illustrating the relational dialectic between Aborigines and non-Aborigines that shape, transform and inform the ongoing dialectic. In this, she is also successful in drawing together the major themes of this work, ultimately showing that welfare in this region can be seen 'as an extension of a colonial relationship in which Aboriginal people are active and interested but less powerful' (p 13).

This is a scholarly and accessible work that has been finely researched and crafted; it details an important history that is deserving of such a fine-grained treatment. It contains many nuggets that will attract the attention of different readers, and I have not attempted to detail those that caught my own eye here. It will appeal especially to those interested in Australian Aboriginal history, and makes a significant contribution to a deeper understanding of Indigenous people in the north of Australia today, especially of Aborigines whose historical experiences were those of a 'station mob'.

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This book tries to make sense of the place where legal tradition and legal practice meet the academy, under the complex and fraught operating conditions of contesting native title. The authors speak from their experience of what happens when cultural, historical and anthropological studies meet the positivism of the law in the Federal Court. Judges require that expert witnesses be independent and apolitical, while at university the humanities and social sciences have for decades been moving towards accepting the subjectivities associated in the construction of knowledge, that one can never truly be objective in research.

In native title courts, anthropologists, historians and other professionals have to establish an authority that is independent from the native title claimants, so they do not leave themselves open to the charge that they are acting as advocates. Lawyers, on the other hand, operating legitimately as advocates for the claimants, engage the services of experts to write reports. If the report is not in the best interest of the client, it can be suppressed through legal privilege.

Confused? Consider the position that native title law has placed native title claimants in: they have to prove to the courts a continuing connection by a particular people to a particular place through the practice of traditional laws and customs since before colonisation. Linguist Patrick McConvell in his chapter explores the complex shifts,
changes and consistencies in language and place and law which native title claimants have to explain to the courts.

The book is based on papers given at the two-day national conference Crossing boundaries: anthropology, linguistics, history and law in native title held at the University of Western Australia in 2000. In Justice Robert French’s chapter on evolving native title law he includes the 2002 Miriuwung Gajerrong and Yorta Yorta judgements. There is also an Afterword which includes, briefly, the implications of the 2002 judgements.

In its structure this book is explicitly a cross-disciplinary exercise. The nineteen contributors are primarily anthropologists and lawyers and are joined by a few historians, and the Federal Court judge and linguist already mentioned. Veronica Strang writes about representations of identity that are required of Aboriginal people by the legislature. David Trigger discusses the positioning of anthropologists in the courts. There are issues of confidentiality when fieldwork notebooks are subpoenaed (Jan Anderson, Carolyn Tan); the cultural mindset of judges and the use of cultural stereotypes in courts (Wendy Asche); and, three chapters about working on the Miriuwung Gajerrong native title claim written separately from the perspective of a lawyer (Michael Barker), an anthropologist (Will Christensen) and a historian (Christine Choo).

At the heart of the book is the legitimacy of knowledge. David Ritter and Francis Flanagan give a quick introduction to critical legal theory which challenges the legal norms and institutions everyone is contorting themselves to be relevant to. The validity of oral knowledge compared to written historical records comes up, as do other different cultural norms and systems of thought. Native title is an imperfect system. If you want to know more about how it is for professionals working in native title practice, this book provides an excellent range of readings.

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Les jardins du nomade: cosmologie, territoire et personne dans le desert occidental australien by Sylvie Poirier, 291 pp, Lit Verlag, Germany 1996, approx. $55.00

University of Toronto Press will publish an English edition of Les jardins du nomade sometime this year under the title *A world of relationships: itineraries, dreams and events in the Australian Western Desert*. The original title translates as The nomad’s gardens, a metaphor that aims to invoke the images of cultivation and creation. The nomad’s gardens are the ancestral itineraries, their named sites and associated ceremonies: complex networks of social, ritual and territorial affiliation and responsibility that define the poetics and the politics of local knowledge. By means of a process of reinterpretation and reinscription, these gardens are cultivated, renewed, enriched or left fallow. The metaphor captures one of Poirier’s key images: that the Kukatja are active agents, gardeners, in and of the *tjukurrpa*, or the Dreaming.

The book is the result of three years among Kukatja and other Western Desert people at Balgo and surrounding outstations in northeast Western Australia.1 Poirier returned to the Balgo area three times between 1980 and 1994. She began as chef in the kitchen that serviced the white community staff, but already she collected ethnographic material that was used by the anthropologist Fred Myers in a land claim. Later she returned as an anthropologist, carrying out fieldwork in her own right. While she initially came to Balgo a single woman, on her return she was married with a child. This breadth of interactions within the community would have led to a wide variety of experiences that, together with her intimate and warm association with the people and her apparent facility with the Kukatja language, are tangible in her writing. This intimacy, however, in no way detracts from her anthropological task as she applies lucid and insightful etic analysis to some of the most fundamental emic concepts of her hosts.

Poirier discusses many aspects of Kukatja society and ritual. Ethnographic insights are found on almost every page. Among Western Desert ethnographies she mainly refers to the classic study by Myers,2 whose Pintubi informants have close ties to Balgo. In building on his and other work, Poirier regularly highlights differences or adds depth. She discusses classic ethnographic topics, such as the kinship system and the composition and role of local groups, as well as issues of more contemporary relevance, such as the process by which ‘fallow’ land is taken over, the outstation movement and cases of people re-establishing their association with country after a 30-year absence.

While the book’s scope is wide, its central concern is change, transformation and continuity of the *tjukurrpa* and its ceremonial sphere among the Kukatja, of course largely from the women’s perspective. Poirier seeks to penetrate the social dogma of the *tjukurrpa* as being immutable, to demonstrate its dimension of openness. She argues that Myers was wrong to suggest that Western Desert people are less innovative than other Aboriginal societies. They simply deny innovation more vehemently than others. The emic discourse of permanence has hidden change from view.

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1. The two main groups at Balgo are Kukatja and Walmatjarri, but other people living there identify as Mandiljarra, Ngarti, Pintupi, Tjaru and Wangkatjunga. Like Poirier, I will use Kukatja here for the sake of simplicity.
The foundation for that discussion are the dreams or, as Poirier calls it, the oneiric experiences of the Kukatja people. Her collection and careful contextual placement of approximately 30 oneiric accounts is a remarkable ethnographic contribution in itself. It addresses a gap identified by another scholar of the Kukatja, Peile, who felt that in Aboriginal studies generally 'little attention has been paid to what may be called the “ordinary” dreams of men and women'.\(^3\) Poirier’s analysis focuses on the cultural context, meaning and pragmatic social application of dreams, called *kapukurri* by the Kukatja.

Dreams are actively sought and used by Kukatja for many purposes:

- they are a source of knowledge of future events, such as the arrival of relatives or the location of game the next day;
- they are used to cause, diagnose and heal illness, and discover the source of other mishaps;
- they are used to visit distant sites or people;
- they are the space where offences against ancestral laws are punished by the appropriate ancestors;
- they can provide the opportunity for people to meet or conduct ceremonies in their *collective* dream; and, Poirier argues,
- they are most valued as a way of receiving new mythic-ritual elements from the ancestors, both mythological and human.

In this last capacity, *kapukurri* are fundamentally channels of revelation and tools of transformation. All transformation of the forms of permanence, i.e. of the *tjukurrpa* and its ceremonial reflections, is essentially validated through dreams as the transmitters of the ancestral word.

Dreams are the time-space of encounter between humans and *tjukurrpa* beings, and between humans and deceased ancestors. From these encounters flows creativity, as dreamers are taught new songs or dances and are informed of changes to the Dreaming tracks. A new site may be added, for example, following a dream where the relevant *tjukurrpa* being was engaged in previously unknown acts at the site.

The individual dreamer’s role is only passing. Poirier describes, by way of specific examples, the processes that newly dreamed segments go through to become part of the accepted body of ‘Law’. It is clear that as part of that process the dreamer and the oneiric event itself are rapidly removed from the social consciousness. This process is facilitated by a number of factors, such as the merging of elders with *tjukurrpa* beings in general discourse and the shallowness of historical and genealogical information. These factors hinder any serious inquiry into ‘what was’, and make it impossible to assess the duration of any given *tjukurrpa* track.

By contrast, Poirier is able to document changes to women’s ritual, because her data was obtained over several years. From one visit to the next, a certain ceremony had

\(^3\) Peile 1997: 115. Peile’s work was published after Lesjardins, but he himself had died some time before. When acknowledging Peile, Poirier expresses the hope to see his extensive manuscripts in print soon. His descriptions of dream experiences and related concepts among the Kukatja substantiate Poirier’s observations, but they form only a small part of his seminal work.
gained new sections and lost others that she had previously recorded. Poirier also describes the process of ceremonial transmission, from generation to generation and from community to community. The ceremonies she observed are part of a ceremonial exchange network connecting Balgo to far-flung places. They contribute to the supra-regional identity of the Western Desert.

The Kukatja, Poirier argues, do not draw the same distinctions between dream, waking state and mythological narrative as Europeans. At times, it can be difficult to distinguish whether a person is recounting a dream, a personal experience or a tjukurrpa segment, especially among the elders.

In the Western Desert, she argues, prevails a vision of being in the world where all that is perceived, dreamed, experienced and imagined inserts itself into a supple and open reality. The desire for social cohesion and avoiding conflict and mutual embarrassment is so strong that people do not challenge each other’s accounts of events; every idiosyncratic version of an experience is no more or less true than another. Equally, when people discuss tjukurrpa stories they apparently do not seek in any way to gauge the element of ‘redescription’ or personal fantasy of the narrator.

Although illustrated by detailed examples, this account is not easily reconciled with another image of Western Desert society, where contestation of tjukurrpa accounts is part of public discourse and group politics. It is most certainly not intended, but it would be possible to read Poirier’s account as if the Kukatja lived in an entirely relativistic world, with no concept of delusion and mistake, or right and wrong. When applied back to the major discussion on changes to tjukurrpa tracks and rituals one can quickly see how this line of reasoning could confirm some of the worst European suspicions, which assert that Aboriginal claims about the significance of sites are merely opportunistic reactions to areas of land becoming commercially valuable.

Of course, this is not what Poirier is saying. She is at pains to point out that innovations cannot be gratuitous or individualised, but must be based on the logic of the tjukurrpa and be affirmed through collective processes. From the emic perspective, changes to stories or ritual are not seen as human creations at all, but rather as pre-existing tjukurrpa realities that simply had not been discovered by humans before.

There is, however, a certain tension in Poirier’s dealing with this topic, which arises from the intrinsic conflict between her European sense of history and that of the Kukatja. While for the Kukatja changes to the tjukurrpa are the result of ‘revelation’, for Poirier they are examples of ‘innovation’, often based on socio-political reasons. Thus, numerous tjukurrpa tracks have been ‘re-routed’ as people left the desert and settled at mission and pastoral stations. According to Poirier, such ‘innovation’ is traditional, for it is precisely that openness and inherent creativity, which permits the dynamic reproduction of traditions and ancestral responsibilities.

Throughout her work, Poirier writes ‘innovation/revelation’, presumably to show that the two are the same thing regarded from two different cultural vantage points. The substantial discrepancy between ‘innovation’ and ‘revelation’ however, is not that easily overcome. The problem is that Poirier ultimately applies no theoretical frame-
work by which to explain the key element in change: the oneiric experience. In her most detailed discussion of the topic she expresses the view that innovative dreams, kapukurri, involve creative actions by individuals during states of half-sleep or, in the inverse, half-waking.

The Kukatja by contrast, and like most other Indigenous people, consider kapukurri to be the result of a person’s spirit leaving the body and having diverse experiences in that liberated state. In their view, the environment where kapukurri take place is objective and inhabited by deceased ancestors and tjukurrpa beings. There are numerous examples of the objective nature of that experiential dimension, most strikingly the cases of two or more people meeting in their dreams and engaging in collective activities. Poirier points out that these shared and communicative dreams do not fit with the European idea of the impermeable individual and the dream as something that comes from the individual alone. However, they correspond logically with the Western Desert view of the human being as part of a larger whole (waltja). While this explanation makes sociological sense, it does not shed any light on the empirical question: how do the dreamers meet and share the same dream content? It seems impossible to fully comprehend the innovating oneiric experiences of the Kukatja as long as that question cannot be answered.

Poirier amply demonstrates that there are complex social processes involved in turning an individual’s dream into social reality. The antiquity of these processes cannot be doubted and thus the innovation of the kind shown by Poirier is clearly part of the traditional make up of the Western Desert society. With that comprehensively and eloquently demonstrated, the precise workings of the oneiric experience are, for the time being, perhaps secondary.

References


Myers, Fred 1986, Pintupi country, Pintupi self: sentiment, place and politics among Western Desert Aborigines, Smithsonian Institute Press, Washington, DC.


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5. That this is the principal way in which Indigenous people explain dreams was shown by Bourguignon 1972.