

10. Panara

The grain growers of Australia¹

Bruce Pascoe

In 1844 Charles Sturt's party was dying in what was to become known as Sturt's Stony Desert. One of them, Poole, was so badly afflicted by scurvy that he had been sent back to the base camp. But he died on the way. Most of the others were not much better off and the horses could barely walk.

The men climbed countless sand hills and on reaching the summit of another they were hailed by a party of Aboriginal people. Sturt estimated that there were almost 300 people and they seemed to be welcoming them. As Sturt recorded, if they had been in any way aggressive his group could not have defended themselves as the men were too ill and the horses so weak they could only stumble forward to the bottom of the hill, but there the Aborigines approached them with coolamons of well water.

After the 'explorers' had drunk their fill, the Aborigines, who had never seen a horse, held out the coolamons so that the animals could drink. Sturt remarked on their courage in doing so. Sturt's party were fed on roast duck and cake, and Sturt, who was to eat similar cakes over the next few months, referred to them as the best he had ever eaten. The Europeans were then offered the pick of the houses in a new estate built on the bank of the Warburton River. The privations of 'explorers' in the Australian desert can never be overestimated: sweet well water, roast duck, fine cakes and a new house.

In the nights to follow, it was Sturt's delight to listen to the singing and laughter as the town prepared its meals. The whispering of whirring grain mills made a captivating sound in the twilight, but around 10 o'clock the town fell silent as it prepared for sleep. Sturt remarks on the modest civility of the people of this town.

The Warburton River people referred to themselves as the Panara or grain people. They were probably a clan of the Arrernte but their reference to Panara was to associate themselves with all the other groups within what Norman Tindale referred to as the Aboriginal grain belt, an area more than twice the size of the

¹ Based on Pascoe 2014.

current Australian wheat belt.² The languages of these inland people have over a dozen words based on the word *panara*, and all of them have both a spiritual and practical connotation. The importance of agriculture to the Aboriginal economy is demonstrated by language.

In 1839 Lt Grey was thwarted in his attempt to cross some land near Hutt River, Western Australia.³ The ground had been so thoroughly cultivated it was impossible to walk across and it reached as far as the eye could see. Grey attempted to skirt the area, but on ascending a small rise came across another area of the same size and the same degree of cultivation. On the next day another and then another. The scale of the operation was massive.

Grey remarked on the housing, the wells and the beaten roads, which provided access to the cultivated area where the Nhanda had been growing 'warran' or yam. Some historians and agriculturalists wonder if the remnants of the Batavia mutiny may have been responsible, but that seems unlikely given the existence of more or less identical yam production in most suitable Australian climate zones. Colonists reported on the vast yam terraces close to Melbourne where the soil was so deeply cultivated that it 'ran through the fingers like ashes'. Explorers in all corners found either grain fields or tons of stored grain and flour or massive yam pastures and stored starch and preserved dough cakes.

Peter Beveridge and Thomas Kirby were the first to 'settle' the area near Swan Hill on a station they called Tyntynder.⁴ They were astounded by the huge steaming mounds found right through the district. It took them weeks to discover that this industry was to cook cumbungi prior to the removal of the starch and other processes in the plant's utilisation.⁵

One morning, Kirby came across a man reclining on one of the miles of earthen weirs that the local Aboriginal people had erected everywhere on the river system. Tons of earth were required for every barrier. The Aboriginal man was using a machine to catch fish. In the wall of this dam, several fish apertures had been built. In them a noose had been placed, and this was attached to a long sling tied under tension to a pole, which was anchored to the river bottom and fixed in place with a peg.

When a fish swam through the gate and into the noose, it was caught around the gills and this action caused the peg to release, which in turn allowed the tension of the pole to swing the fish from the bottom of the river onto the wall beside

2 Tindale 1974.

3 Grey 1841.

4 Beveridge 1889.

5 Cumbungi is a kind of bulrush and the base was cooked and eaten.

the Aboriginal, who flung the fish into a basket. You'll have to agree this is insouciance. The man was studiously refusing to acknowledge Kirby's existence but made sure he was aware of his prowess.

How did Kirby describe this remarkable process? 'I have often heard of the indolence of the blacks and soon came to the conclusion after watching a blackfellow catch fish in such a lazy way, that what I had heard was perfectly true.'⁶

What of the industry required to build those weirs throughout the entire Riverina? What of the engineering required to invent and build the automatic fishing machine?

When Beveridge and Kirby first arrived they were accosted by Aborigines yelling out to them, throwing dirt in the air and waving branches aggressively. Beveridge reports that the men nearly yelled themselves hoarse screaming 'cum-a-thunga, cum-a-thunga'. Beveridge interpreted this to mean 'you are welcome to our land'.

I have experience in language recovery myself, but after failing to find 'cum-a-thunga' in the Wati Wati dictionary that Beveridge wrote during his retirement, I wondered why he had left it out. Perhaps it showed that his desperation to claim legitimacy had been proven untenable by later knowledge. Better leave it out than have people think the Wati Wati had resisted his right to the land.

I spoke to linguists, Dr Christina Eira and Dr Stephen Morey, to try and unravel the mystery of this word. Their study of language reveals a far more plausible possibility: 'Get up and go away or we will spear you in the guts' seems the most likely meaning. Our study of this group of words requires more work, but the example shows that if you alter your view by 15 degrees to accommodate Aboriginal knowledge, your doubts would be aroused simply by the reference to the kicking up of dirt and the vigorous thrashing of branches – universal signs of Aboriginal hostility. Unless, of course, you are hoping to legitimise your occupation of another sovereign nation's land.

I used to run tours of the Cape Otway Lighthouse. The pay was lousy and the stairs were many, but you got a free ice cream at the end of every shift. I saw a lot of overseas visitors and many were fixated by the stories of migrant ships and their 15-week journey from England. One family of Vietnamese knew a lot about arrival by boat. They studied the interior plan of the convict ships and cried.

6 Beveridge 1889.

We all cried. The story they told me of their years in refugee camps sounded like a picnic compared to the eight days on the 30-foot fishing boat with 150 people on board.

I also saw a lot of French, Germans, Italians and Dutch at the lighthouse. I watched closely as they read the story of Australia's 'settlement' which the acceptable historians had prepared. They muttered amongst themselves and turned to me in disbelief. Some were direct in expressing that disbelief. They knew a lot about colonial methods and were caught between laughter and indignation at the fables that had been prepared for their edification. Some collusion between Governor LaTrobe and 'settlers' like Roadknight ensured that every Aboriginal person for 80 kilometres around the lighthouse site was attacked, killed or incarcerated in prisons or missions to guarantee the safety of the light and the keepers.

If you were in charge of that construction, you may arrive at the same conclusion. If the white community was to prosper, the black had to be eliminated. The Blacks wanted to retain their real estate: unlimited protein resources, sheltered bays and views to die for. Position, position, position. My goodness, there were some interesting conversations on those tours of the lighthouse.

Australia still has a gift for nursery rhyme. Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* is officially Australia's favourite novel. It has a black ghost which informs the Pickles family that he is glad they have come to take the land. I love Tim Winton's writing, I published one of his first stories, but I don't like myopia. It may be a novel, but it should come with a warning that it supports the great Australian fairy story of a peaceful handover from thankful Aboriginal people.

A second famous book and a text for Australian high schools and universities is Kate Grenville's *Secret River* (2005), where Aboriginal people barely speak and remain foils for the progress of the story's reconciliation of white occupation. Australians have leapt at art which legitimises occupation.

If you looked at the paintings of acclaimed nineteenth-century artist Fred Williams from an Aboriginal perspective, rather than an artistic innovation, his scenes of white pioneers in richly treed landscapes may well seem to be another form of appropriation and occupation. If you read the journals of explorers and the contemporary writing of non-Aboriginal Australian historians and alter your perspective by as little as 15 degrees toward an Aboriginal point of view, you will see some surprising things: you might see the ground Lt Grey couldn't walk across as evidence of cultivation, you might see Kirby's indolent black as a genius of design and industrial innovation, and you might see the earthen terraces around Melbourne as an intriguing social, spiritual and economic puzzle that we have steadfastly refused to contemplate.

I am not a genius or morally superior. I came by my opinions as an 18-year-old after a very similar education and socialisation to many, but when my uncle told me about our Aboriginal family history and insisted I sit down in fishing boats and kitchens with Aboriginal relatives and elders, I saw the history of the country I loved in a harsh new light and I was ashamed – ashamed at believing a history an intelligent 13-year-old would scorn if she were given the encouragement to explore and question.

The facts don't change, but if we look at those facts with a tiny bit of compassion and scepticism, we might alter what we think of the history accepted by most Australians.

When you study the 450 Aboriginal languages of Australia, will you approach them as the blinkered horse approaches the race track or will you be wondering about Aboriginal opinion then and now? How is it possible to conduct national affairs for 60,000 years without territorial war? Look at the languages and how they reflect not just age but single location. Which languages talk about volcanism, which describe mangroves, which talk sea level rise, desertification or the appearance of strange wooden objects on the shore?

The languages by and large develop and remain in a single location. Recently, language scientists were talking about a north to south thrust of language 5,000 years ago as if driven by Asian invasion, but the latest essays throw doubt on the theory and suggest instead a spiritual and social language trajectory with the people remaining where they were.

There will be many theories posited and argued, but my interest is in how such a large number of languages could co-exist in such unparalleled harmony. The world has never known a civilisation to last so long. Do you wonder about the basis of that government? Bill Gammage in *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011) speculates on the diplomacy required to organise environmental burns across the continent. Don't burn my crops, cemetery, sacred trees, ceremonial idylls. That diplomacy must have engaged thousands of people for thousands of hours over thousands of years.

The Brewarrina fish traps are thought to be the oldest human structure on earth, and yet they have had very little research interest and are not part of any school curriculum. Does this omission reflect a desire to hide the wonders of Aboriginal Australia?

Imagine if a Texan was in possession of such an artefact. Planes, bus fleets, health spas and snake oil salesmen would descend on the place. It would become the tourist hub of Australia and every child in Year 5 would build fish trap replicas.

Stonehenge, Angkor Wat, the Mayan cities, we all know them, but who has heard of Brewarrina? I searched high and low for the proof for the claim that they were the oldest structures on earth but could only find one brief analysis of the stone bedding technique, which is where the figure of 40,000 years came from. This is Australia's contribution to the birth of engineering. It's not just the labour or the engineering wizardry that is important; it's the spiritual and social ethic to which we have devoted almost none of our attention.

The scientists who have examined the structure are still not sure how the locking principle works. How come the stones don't wash away in a flood? They know it has something to do with the node on the keystones but are not sure on which element of physics it relies. We know a lot about the design of Greek and Roman columns, we can all recall Ionic if needed for a crossword puzzle, but in 2013 we don't know the science of the Brewarrina fish traps.

Even more incredibly, the structures were designed so that any trapping ensured that people upstream and down from any site would retain access to fish.

Within months of European arrival, however, the traps were breached to provide sail boat, and later, steam boat access. Two types of fish, which the earliest photographs record in the hands of Brewarrina fisher-people, become extinct within one season of the destruction of the traps.

When Sir Thomas Mitchell rode through the area in 1831 he passed large villages, many with populations he estimated at over 1,000. He envies the comfort of the homes and the pleasing aesthetic of the construction and location. These people are sustained by a multifarious economy for, as Mitchell notes, he also rode through one field of harvested grain for 9 miles and the hayricks reminded his men of home. The fish capturing system was an important, but not the only, method of production. As Veronica Frail told me during my visit to Brewarrina, her ancestors weren't hunters and gatherers they were Festival Caterers. And they weren't catering just for their own selfish needs, they designed a system that would allow the satisfaction of needs of people they would never see.

Do you wonder at a people who could design an economic system based on care for the economies of clans unknown to each other except in dream and story? Might that egalitarian diplomacy be a handy tool in the modern world? What about the restraint imposed on territorial aggression? Syria? Gaza? The Amazon? Korea? This is a society with skills we need today.

Those ideas are in the language too; they are in the words for earth and people, and they are in the names of the plants and animals that sustained life. They are in the concepts which expressed the fastidious responsibility and care for the land.

Even in the area of linguistics, a battle still rages over the ownership of Aboriginal languages. Some professional linguists continue to take possession of the words while presenting themselves as saviours of dying languages. One instance involves an Aboriginal clan led by a man who has devoted his entire life to this recovery. You will not find a man of greater grit or generosity. He is old now. A few weeks ago he had to hold up his chin in order to turn around, but his wicked sense of humour lit up his face when he told his latest joke.

He is the language champion. He sent his daughter across two states to make sure I corrected an error I'd made in translation. Another of his countrywomen recovered from a substance dependency and, despite being a single mother of three primary school aged children, introduced language teaching into two schools. This process led to the recovery of a mountain of words and grammar as she drew in old Aboriginal people, some of whom had not spoken a word of their language in 50 years. It was she, in between making school lunches and coaching the hockey team, who saved that language. We must break our necks to ensure women like that are not marginalised by those with a far bigger ego, massive professional ambition and a gift of the gab. That woman and her sisters were mistreated and insulted by every linguist that descended on her town.

I'm hopeful that Aboriginal languages will be respected as the words of other people are and not just grist for the academic mill. This will require management protocols to ensure Aboriginal language organisations are supported and our young Aboriginal people nurtured into language positions. Is this impossible; is it too difficult to have a person of low initial educational attainment on university staff?

One of our language workers never finished school, and when her community begged her to help recover their language she could neither speak a word of it nor had a clue what syntax, morphology or suffix meant. That woman drove herself to learn – because it was her language. Generous linguists supported her, but she did it out of the fierce will of her bones. It was an astonishing achievement.

When an Aboriginal person graduates, they are hunted by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations. There are too few for the positions we need to fill. We acknowledge that training and retaining Aboriginal graduates is difficult, but in a world where Canadians sing David Bowie songs in space, it should not be impossible.

When I visited the University of Jayewardene in India to talk with students about my fiction, I was called to a secret meeting of Dalit students. They were afraid to meet with me in front of university authorities. Even though the course had been established to 'study their culture', they feared that the government's interest in their world was in order to consume and assimilate it. They'd seen it happen all too often. A bit dramatic? They cited instance after instance of

villages following the old cultural ways which, after accepting government money for schools and health, had seen their culture stripped of all sovereignty and turned into a dozen artefacts in a museum.

This is the history of colonial interaction with subjugated cultures. Fortunately, Charles Darwin wasn't entirely right. The weak don't meekly give way to the strong on every occasion because sometimes the strong discover that their ethos and civility is not indestructible. Think Atlantis, Persepolis, Machu Picchu, Petra, Palmyra and Perth.

Jared Diamond believes the collapse of civilisations can be predicted by their level of waste. In our case, think the Murray Basin, Mallee soil, Burrup Peninsula, Tasmanian rainforests and bi-lingual Aboriginal schools. The model we are following so slavishly has every chance of being a laughable indulgence within the century. We may not survive our excess.

Consider instead the economic and philosophical culture of the world's oldest civilisation. The tools used to create that egalitarian longevity are far better tested than those of Keynes, Machiavelli, Churchill and Lincoln. They have kept a people together and the continent healthy and deserve respect even if just for their liberal-conservative philosophy. The benefits derived from the concepts of diplomacy, sustainability and love are treasures and once mined would naturally be shared with the inventors, the Aboriginal people. Wouldn't they?

Australia will discover those treasures, but hopefully it will insist they remain Aboriginal property.

If this is a moral country.

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