

# Foreword

For all the methodological innovations that the discipline of academic history has seen since its birth in Europe in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, historians have on the whole, in deciding what constitutes historical evidence, clung to the idea of the primacy of the written word, of textual sources, and have been satisfied to leave the business of dating and interpreting ancient artefacts and material remains of human civilisations to prehistorians and archaeologists. While it has to be granted that these boundaries have occasionally been breached in some areas, such as in ancient Roman or Greek histories or in art history, debates in the historical profession over issues raised by the evidence of memory, personal experience, and legends and myths, have once again highlighted the 'value' of written sources. True, historians now acknowledge that history is only one way among many of telling the past, but the idea of the archive – a repository of written sources – is still central to how historians think of what constitutes the activity called 'research'. We imagine prehistorians and archaeologists as people who go digging around, literally, in unfamiliar places to find their treasure-troves of evidence; when we speak of historians, we still think of a group of people prepared to suffer the consequences of prolonged exposure to the dust that usually collects over 'old' documents. The French once used to say, 'no documents, no history'; the moral rule among historians still seems to be: 'no sniffles and sneezes, no history!'

This present collection is evidence of how this presumed primacy of the written, textual evidence that historians have for generations taken for granted is now coming to be challenged. The sources of this challenge are multiple: clearly, indigenous histories, long narrated in stories and storied performances, have been troubled by this question for some decades now. Another source of this challenge has been the realisation on the part of some gifted scholars that graduate training of future historians – thanks to the relative abundance of written sources for the last hundred years or so – has often come to focus on ever shorter periods of time, and that even the tendency to go 'global' in world history has not been able to rectify this tendency sufficiently. History has remained, for the purpose of graduate training at least, a discipline parcelled up into regions and periods. It is out of this sense of profound dissatisfaction that arguments have arisen for 'big' and 'deep' histories, accounts of human pasts that go far, far beyond the few hundred years – or even the few millennia – that historians of globalisation or world history deal with. Some 'big' historians seek to incorporate human history into the history of the universe – and see this as the new 'creation myth' that an increasingly connected and globalised humanity needs – while other 'deep' historians want to go at least as far back

as the time when humans developed the 'modern', big brain that enabled them to create symbolic systems and thus cooperate in the interests of abstract and larger identities such as the group or the nation, or even 'humanity' itself.

The current planetary environmental crisis that often goes by the name of climate change has made us only more aware that humans exist and work today, not only as differentiated members of rich and poor classes and societies, but also as a species, united by their shared dreams of development and prosperity that end up making increasing demands on what the planet and its biosphere produce. Whatever may be the sides that historians choose to pick in debates to do with climate change and the growing human consumption of energy, no one can neglect the fact that the perennial question of the place of humans in the natural order of things has emerged as one of the most urgent and insistent questions of our time, especially for scholars in the humanities. It is important therefore that historians who work on relatively short and more recent periods of human history speak to scholars and scholarship in the historically minded fields of archaeology, prehistory and evolutionary biology. *Long History, Deep Time* is precisely a step in this direction. It does not devalue the work that historians do in the archive; but it equally values historians who have long attempted to supplement the written word with the materials furnished by memory and oral history; and it now seeks to extend the conversation by including in it the work of those who deal with deep time, the time of prehistory and human evolution. Australia, with its rich tradition of Indigenous pasts and distinctive history of human occupation of the continent, provides an excellent site for the staging of this conversation that is of undeniable global importance today.

Needless to say, it is still early days for such conversation to happen across the disciplines represented in this collection. This book remains an experiment. But it is a timely experiment that needs to be welcomed. One just hopes that many other and similar conversations will follow. I, for one, feel particularly pleased that the conversation has now begun in real earnest, and congratulate the editor and the contributors to this volume for what they have collectively achieved.

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