

Preface: 'The gift of history'

In June 2013, at the invitation of Ann McGrath and her colleagues, I spent a week in Canberra and had a chance to attend the Deepening Histories of Place Symposium. Such opportunities to share ideas with colleagues over more than just a few days are rare and precious. For me, it was a life-changing experience, offering a chance to learn about a world of scholarship and knowledge of which I was hitherto but dimly aware. Along with the exhilaration, though, came the troubling realisation that the idea of deep history, for all its logic and for all the good it might do, contains unresolved contradictions. The problem I confronted during the symposium and in conversations with colleagues before and after is encapsulated in an anecdote related in this volume by Martin Porr. The anecdote arose from a reported exchange between an anthropologist and a group of young Indigenous men. 'The scientists said that Aborigines only arrived in Australia 50,000 years ago, but our elders have told us that we have *always been here*.' Contributions in this volume by Julia Torpey Hurst, Jeanine Leane, and others reveal a concern about the potentially disabling effects of taking a deep historical perspective on time and history. The gift of history, it seems, is not a gift that everyone is eager to receive, especially when it has negative implications for identity.

Deep history has a profound political agenda. This is not in the least surprising; as Harry Allen observes in this volume, archaeology and history are guided by a significant political task. As he suggests, the fields have not always done a good job confronting the political agendas inherited from older approaches. One of the political goals of deep history has been to join with other critical viewpoints in exposing the operation of those agendas in the histories of nations and civilisation. Viewed through the lens of this critique, these histories appear as elements in a powerful marketing campaign that emerged in Europe and elsewhere a century and more ago, at a time when history was subservient to the task of inventing nations and justifying colonialism. To treat the history of our species as *history* and not only as biology or archaeology is one way for us to provincialise both Europe and modernity.

Another and perhaps more salient goal of deep history has been to restore historicity to the peoples without history. In my own case, as a citizen of the United States, it seems patently obvious to me that 'history', as a curricular structure and a framework for organising the past, should embrace Native American and First Nation peoples by acknowledging that North America has a history that antedates 1492. This kind of deep historical move means folding archaeology, history, and all the other disciplines concerned with the human

past into a single field. In doing so, we can reduce methodology to its proper and subordinate role, that of being a tool in the service of explanation. Calling this 'history' is just a convenience, and is not meant to imply that history, as conventionally defined, is somehow sovereign in the resulting ménage.

But here is the rub, for the act of extending the embrace of history, however well intentioned, carries with it the necessity of accepting the very idea that being in history is a Good Thing. Among other things, rendering the past as history seems to demand that everyone share a similar stance toward time itself: namely, the belief that the events of the human past can be arrayed on a scaffolding of time. Not everyone sees time this way. To those who do, a long and datable history may seem to empower those who possess it. But as Ann McGrath reminds us, this works only if you accept the mode of determining power that matters to the white population.

The concern expressed here raises the legitimate question of whether time's scaffolding has an objective reality. To a geologist and an archaeologist, the answer to this may be straightforward. But other disciplines might have a different response. As Peter Riggs's contribution suggests, no physicist will accept that there is any such scaffolding, given the fact that light travels at a finite rather than an infinite speed. When archaeologists and historians suppose that we can thread a skewer between Europe and America in 1066, and claim that certain events were unfolding in Cahokia at the same time that other events were unfolding in England, we are claiming a synchronicity of timelines that could not be claimed for events unfolding in the Andromeda Galaxy and the Milky Way.

The lesson is worth pondering. If and when humans settle planets in the Andromeda Galaxy, we will be forced, once and for all, to abandon the idea that history can be written as if events everywhere unfold on a universal scaffolding of time. The likelihood of humans ever colonising planets in the Andromeda Galaxy is exceedingly remote, of course, but it is not non-existent. That being the case, perhaps now is a good time to rethink any commitments we might have to the understanding of what time is. We can allow ourselves to think of time's scaffold as an intellectual convenience or a habit of thought rather than a description of any physical reality.

The time dilation between Cahokia and Hastings being miniscule, these observations about time amount to little more than playful philosophical ruminations, and perhaps we should simply ignore the physics of time and accept the pastness of the deep past. But even if we do, there are good reasons to join with scholars of material culture in believing that the past is not only past. The past is also present with us on the 'temporal wave', the term Rob Paton uses to represent Indigenous time. Once you stop and think about it, the

point seems obvious. When I work with a medieval European manuscript, for example, I am working with something that is old. I know it is old because, like all the documents I happen to work with, it has a date, and the possibility of it being a forgery are next to nil. But although it is old, it is nonetheless *present*. Moreover, the manuscript has changed in the nearly 600 years since it was first compiled. I can barely read the words on certain areas of many of its pages for all the damage caused by damp and mould and book lice. On many pages, chemical reactions have caused the ink, once black, to turn brown. In addition to these material changes, the manuscript's purpose in life has changed dramatically from the time it was compiled to the time in which I use it. Where it was once a living thing, a register of legal contracts, it has now become a symbolic artefact.

We can push this insight further. The date found on the manuscript is an attribute that attaches to only one of the many components of the register, namely, the writing. Other components have different temporalities. The paper from which the register was made, for instance, was compiled from linen fibres that circulated in the previous generation as tablecloths, bed sheets and shifts. The oak galls from which the ink was made came from trees that were even older. Scattered through the register are fragments of DNA left by the book lice, the mould, the linen, the sheep from whose hide the cover was made, and of course all the archivists and historians who have used it. All that DNA was made following patterns that are immeasurably old. If I were a scientist sequencing the genome of the book louse rather than a historian studying medieval household inventories, I would have a very different idea about the chronological horizons of the sources for my data. The medieval register, in short, is entangled in many different chronologies. It 'punctures' the present, to use Karen Hughes's lovely term.

To say that the manuscript is coeval with me is not to deny that the date it carries is both real and interesting to historians like me. Similarly, I do not doubt that Mungo Lady lived around 42,000 years ago. Nor do I have any doubt that the archaeological traces found in the central Mungo lunette can be used to provide a framework for writing an account of human settlement in the Willandra Lakes area, even if, as Nicola Stern's contribution shows, erosion and other processes render the landscape a palimpsest that is hard to read. The potential power of such dates is revealed in Bruce Pascoe's choice to emphasise the antiquity of the Brewarrina fish traps, a choice that springs from justified pride. The fact that it is possible to date the events of the past is one of the lessons of physics. By way of another philosophical excursus, imagine that intelligent beings in the galaxy of Andromeda have invented a telescope with infinite resolution. Imagine that the telescope is trained on the Willandra Lakes area. Several million years from now, by our time line, the photons recording the events of Mungo Lady's life and death will arrive in the field of that telescope.

Dates, in short, do have a kind of objective reality. They become problematic, in history and archaeology, only when they become attached so firmly to events that they 'lock' those events in time. Objects and artefacts are native time travellers, carried along on the face of the temporal wave. Objects have some of the same qualities of *Tjukurpa* as described by Diana James, having existence at every moment of their biographies. This observation holds even more forcefully for practices or behaviours. There is no such thing as 'medieval' acts of violence, let alone a 'palaeodiet', unless we also admit that these habits are simultaneously modern.

To say that the first Australians arrived on the continent 45,000 to 60,000 years ago, then, is not to say that the defining feature of Indigenous culture is that it is really, really old. Whatever the culture of the Indigenous Australians may be, it is present in the here and now. The amazing archaeological evidence of Australia that has accumulated in the last half century, surveyed here by Allen and others, shows that Indigenous culture has moved in the currents of change. This being so, it makes little sense to speak of anything we might be tempted to call 'tradition'. In this volume, Luke Taylor explains very clearly why we should not accept the idea that some artefacts represent a timeless tradition while others have been contaminated by the cultural decline of the present day. The point has been made before, but Taylor adds a delicious irony in pointing out how Baldwin Spencer suppressed certain bark paintings that engaged enthusiastically with the present day. As we know, and as Peter Read reminds us, the concept of tradition becomes especially problematic when it is tied to identity. Once the two are linked, losing the one means losing the other.

In this sense, we can choose to think with dates as long as we do not think of them as anchors that prevent things from travelling in time. But this does not yet respond to the question of whether the elders were telling the truth about 'always being here'. I was intrigued by Porr's creative solution to this thorny problem. Trends sweeping through the biological sciences these days now point to the idea that there is no such thing as an organism without a niche. An organism makes a niche and in turn is continually shaped by the niche it inhabits. In a sense, the object of inquiry can never be singular. We need to think instead about a composite meshwork, where the organism-and-niche is simply one of those meshworks. Alongside this is the idea, now emerging in the field of microbiomics, which proposes that your body, however much it may seem to be a product of your DNA, is in fact a coral reef composed of many different life forms, ranging from mitochondria to gut bacteria. We have never been individuals. As evolutionary theorists compile what is known as the 'Extended Evolutionary Synthesis', they have challenged the idea that the identity of any organism lies solely in its genome. In place of this, they propose giving pride of place to the gene regulatory networks, some of which reside in the niche that

controls gene expression. Translated into the realm of history and culture, what this means is that we cannot leave Australia, the place, out of any definition of the people. Indigenous Australians have always been there, perhaps, because they were not Australian before arriving in Sahul. The Indigenous peoples made Australia, and Australia, returning the favour, made them.

This is an idea that is good to think with. Whether it is acceptable to indigenous peoples all over the world is not for me to decide. Here, all I would observe is that it does not violate any commitments that are characteristic of a scientific approach to understanding the past. Yet there remains an obstacle to the prospect of thinking about Australia in the light of deep history. The very wording of the expression sets up an apparent contrast between a deep history and a thin or shallow history, thereby inadvertently creating two time-spaces for peoples old and new. It may be that Indigenous Australians are able to cross this conceptual gap with ease, as Malcolm Allbrook and McGrath suggest in their conclusion. But Leane's contribution points in a different direction, for she implies that we ought to be careful about deploying any language of gaps or, for that matter, deep and shallow time spaces. Perhaps above all, we ought to think carefully about whether these spaces are *time* spaces.

Herein lies the unresolved and perhaps unresolvable tension that ran through the symposium and runs through these contributions. Despite what I once thought, the gift of deep history is not necessarily an appropriate solution to the politically disempowering state of being 'historyless'. Faced with this paradox, what shall we do with the very idea of deep history? Though I have no persuasive solutions to the conundrum, I would begin facing up to it by observing that whatever the problems with the formulation of 'history', people like me, and the cultures we inhabit, are stuck with it. If history is about meaning-making, then I will stick by my claim that the truncated history we retail in classrooms in the United States and elsewhere offers our children a thin and insubstantial understanding of what it means to be human. As a cultural actor, I am free to think with deep history, and I can choose to make meaning with all that we have learned and are learning about the long-ago from fields such as archaeology. To this extent, the most important thing to emerge from the Deepening Histories of Place Symposium, and the extraordinary volume that has emerged from it, is not that people like me should query our commitments to deep history. The lesson, instead, is that we should always be careful about making gifts.

Daniel Lord Smail
Harvard University
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