

## *Long History, Deep Time: Deepening Histories of Place*

edited by Ann McGrath and Mary Anne Jebb

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This book raises an important issue that should be of great concern to readers of *Aboriginal History*: the relationship between the genres of historical knowledge produced by people from different disciplines and from different intellectual backgrounds. This volume does not resolve the issue, but it demonstrates that if the work is done, it will be very productive.

As McGrath outlines in her introductory paper, the three principal genres at issue are: G1, history from documents; G2, archaeohistory – the historical narrative derived from archaeological evidence; and G3, oral histories and traditions among the people who may otherwise be the objects of historical or archaeohistorical research. This review will outline the contents of the book, and end with a discussion of what has or has not been achieved in relation to the issue the book raises.

This book is an outcome of an ARC project led by Ann McGrath on 'Deepening Histories of Place' that 'attempted to address the limitations of the short time span of Australia's history'. The papers were originally presented at a symposium in Canberra in 2013. The book contains 14 chapters and two prefatory pieces, one by the godfather of 'Deep History', Daniel Smail. The contributors included nine historians (11 if you include the prefatory writers), three archaeologists, one physicist, and two non-archaeological anthropologists; four of the contributors are identified as Aboriginal. That is a good start.

The first chapter is an introduction by McGrath which outlines the intentions of the ARC project and sketches the main contributions of the other chapters. The overarching question was: is it 'possible to enlarge the scale and scope of history?' The question we might add to that is: 'in whose interests would it be to enlarge the scale and scope of history?' In addition to historical approaches to this question, several other people have been interested quite recently, either as archaeologists (e.g. Davidson 2008 – 'the stories created from the archaeological evidence – what I have called lost histories – through their newly minted memories could demonstrate the cultural heritage of continents'), or as historians (e.g. the godfather of 'Big History' – Christian 2005). Notice that with very few exceptions it is difficult to find published accounts in the third category, G3, though they probably exist but are not often acknowledged (e.g. Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corporation 2008; Ngarjino et al. 2000). G1 does have some Aboriginal authors (such as Perkins and Langton 2008); G2 has very few narratives that have been written by Aboriginal people.

One issue is the nature of Aboriginal beliefs and narratives about the past. Diana James (Chapter 2, '*Tjukurpa* Time') addresses the intersection of history, song, memory and spirituality among the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara peoples of the Western Desert. 'Their sense of history is one embedded in an intimate spiritual and physical sense of place' (p. 35), a notion illustrated by several examples of 'Dreaming' stories. One worthy outcome of research of the nature proposed by McGrath would be some unpacking of the ways in which such an Indigenous sense of history might be similar to or different from more conventional meanings of the concept.

Karen Hughes (Chapter 5, 'Arnhem Land to Adelaide') documents how Dreamings 'irrupted into' more conventional histories of the recent past and uses of the past for political purposes. The songs and stories associated with the beliefs that are lumped together as 'The Dreaming' (Wolfe 1991) can be shown to be successively revealed (e.g. Tonkinson 1974: 84–86). This process allows new circumstances to be incorporated into the spiritual understanding of the world. It is less clear that Dreamings can irrupt into any sort of history once those spiritual connections have been broken. The sorts of history discussed in Hughes's chapter are distinct from text-based history or material-based archaeohistory because they have a capacity to recover lost histories. Indeed, it is a curious convergence that by such recovery both history and archaeohistory are, like the Dreaming, successively revealed and reconsidered.

Two papers consider this sort of revelation in the context of literature. Rob Paton (Chapter 4, 'The Mutability of Time and Space ...') steps sideways and quotes Irish poet Seamus Heaney, whose view of the past is very different from that of a historian or archaeologist. But, writes Paton, Aboriginal people often show an appreciation of archaeologists' views of the past, but can 'not

understand why archaeologists did not seem to reciprocate'. The poet may be closer to the Aboriginal position; archaeologists do not usually reciprocate to poetry, either. For the other point of view, Jeanine Leane (Chapter 9, 'Historyless People') analyses parts of Alexis Wright's magnificent novel *Carpentaria* to show how the author addresses historical truth in different cultures, how the function of storytelling about the past varies between cultures, and how different constructions of pasts use different sets of assumptions about the capacity of present day knowledge to serve as a proxy of one sort or another for understanding that past.

Luke Taylor (Chapter 6, 'Categories of "Old" and "New" in Western Arnhem Land Bark Painting') considers two moments of the collection of Aboriginal bark paintings, an early one associated with the museum collection of Baldwin Spencer and a recent one resulting from the development of a market in bark paintings. In doing so he surveys some of the history of Aboriginal art being incorporated into the non-Aboriginal art market. In making this comparison, Taylor exemplifies the cultural gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities of interest, but shows the agency of the Aboriginal artists in both maintaining and crossing the gap. The question it raised, for me, was to what extent Aboriginal people want an engagement which would seek Deep History. The imaginative uses of historical knowledge described by Leane (using Wright) would certainly support such questioning: in this example, the Aboriginal people wanted limited engagement with non-Aboriginal approaches to their history, but above all wanted their own agency in the process.

Similar thoughts arise from the papers by Peter Read (Chapter 7, 'Dispossession is a Legitimate Experience') and Julia Torpey Hurst (Chapter 8, 'Lingering Inheritance'), which both discuss the situation of the Darug Aboriginal people around Sydney. Read, tellingly defined the 'historian's task, which is to contextualise and explain the social context of any period under discussion, upon which basis non-specialists may then form their own judgments' (p. 121). In both of these studies there is a significant point about the visibility of Aboriginal histories, as a result of Aboriginal negotiation of identity in settler society and the identification of disciplinary contexts for framing it. What, in the end, is an acceptable narrative of the history of Aboriginal groups when their identity is so often represented by historians primarily in opposition to the settler society, and place is so contested by that society? Hurst produced the sentence of the book in which she said that 'The people ... have often been walking across the land silently, between the loud voices and larger shadows and, for many, their history and identity has been unspoken, has tried to be forgotten, or does not fit nicely into what is imagined to be Australian Aboriginal history' (p. 140). The 'loud voices and larger shadows', of course, are mostly not of Aboriginal people.

There follow three chapters by archaeologists and one that sounds like archaeological history by Bruce Pascoe (Chapter 10, 'Panara'). Pascoe covers some of the same ground as historian Bill Gammage (2011) in looking at early settler texts that described the state of the environment that was new to their eyes in terms that would be sufficiently familiar to their readers. Both authors concluded that the land was managed and Pascoe has gone further to be explicit about widespread Aboriginal practice of agriculture. While Pascoe's account is less critical than some, it does make important points about how food was extracted from the environment, and how the texts of early non-Aboriginal settlers were blind to the implications of what they saw and the way they described it. At the same time, Pascoe's approach invites readers to question what is meant by the concept 'agriculture'. Harry Allen's chapter addresses some of the reasons both for this blindness (the philosophical discussion about the stages of human 'development' beginning long before Darwin and before the European settlement of Australia) and some of the argument in the archaeological literature about what he calls 'The Neolithic problem' (Chapter 11, 'The Past in the Present'). Allen gives a straightforward account of how archaeologists have approached their evidence to produce a quasi-historical narrative of archaeohistory. I think both Pascoe and Allen underestimate the extent to which the agenda for Australian archaeohistory has been distorted by European preconceptions of what the narrative of human achievement should be.

Martin Porr, from the generation of European archaeologists imbued with late twentieth-century philosophical ideas, considers issues of the Dreaming, and the progressive nature of archaeological interpretation (Chapter 12, 'Lives and Lines'). He is optimistic that by deconstructing some of the traditional approaches of the 'current scientific narrative of human origins' it should be 'possible to integrate so-called scientific and Indigenous knowledge' (p. 206). Bruno David (2002) pioneered the attempt to use archaeology to inform on the emergence of the Dreaming, so others have thought along similar lines. It is a pity Porr did not refer to this work.

Nicola Stern describes recent archaeology under her leadership at the most famous of Australian archaeological sites, Lake Mungo (Chapter 13, 'The Archaeology of the Willandra'). The complexities of the site and the evidence found there go some way to explain why, in McGrath's words (p. 2) 'archaeologists have tended to publish their findings as scientific reportage around distinctive sites rather than as peopled, connected histories in a contextualised landscape'. Stern correctly points to the potential for conflict between writing a narrative of the archaeohistory and the need for empirical validation of the elements of that history. It is this empirical validation that presents the greatest challenge if historians seek to approach a Deep History without appropriate experience in the many disciplines of archaeology.

The book concludes with a chapter by McGrath written with Malcolm Allbrook (Chapter 14, 'Collaborative Histories of the Willandra Lakes'). The chapter sets out the purpose for historians to engage with the past as constructed by other people. The discussion highlights the cultural differences between disciplines: archaeologists, historians and Aboriginal people all have self-consistent accounts of the past. The really important challenge is for the practitioners in all of these cultures to engage cooperatively with the cultural values of the others (rather as Porr seems to be implying) – to mutual benefit.

The issue, in the end, is about the purposes of histories. Allbrook and McGrath (p. 243) write about 'the need for a continental and an inclusive history of nation [sic] which should not ignore the much deeper human histories of Australia'. There is an awkward contrast in this paragraph between the 'unchanging and undocumented prehistory' and the 'well-documented "history" ... based on written, textual sources' undervaluing (perhaps by incautious phrasing) the painstaking documentation of change during archaeohistory (as exemplified by Stern) and the problematic nature of some textual interpretation. This goes to the importance of primary sources in the work that all sorts of scholars do. Archaeologists have the task of turning material remains from the past that have survived to the present into intelligible data about the past, and then turning that intelligence into a narrative. Historians have other primary data, mostly written texts derived, ultimately from some version of oral testimony or intangible memory (as discussed, for example, by Atkinson 2002). Aboriginal people have songs and stories of the Dreaming, once interpreted in some ways or other by non-Aboriginal non-archaeological anthropologists (there is a discussion of the ways such anthropologists turn their understandings into knowledge for a public in Davidson 1995), but now, finally, being interpreted to non-Aboriginal people by the knowledge holders themselves. (Leaving aside the fact that most such anthropologists have historically depended on the genius of their Aboriginal informants to interpret their own knowledge to the anthropologists (Sutton 2009).)

It is worth noting, here, that for 80 per cent of the time concerned with human occupation, Australia was part of a single continent of Sahul which included New Guinea as well as Tasmania, such that it would be appropriate to consider the oral histories and traditions of the peoples of New Guinea too (e.g. Wiessner and Tumu 1998) and how they connect not only to the archaeohistory and history of New Guinea, but to the summed accounts of the past of the rest of Sahul (there is some discussion in Davidson 2014a, 2014b; Davidson 2013). As the papers show, there is currently very little connect between these three genres of historical knowledge and these three cultural approaches to the past. This is not unique to the study of Australian (or Sahulian) pasts given that, for example,

there is a longstanding disconnect between the interpretation of Pleistocene archaeohistory as primarily ecological and Holocene archaeohistory as primarily social (e.g. Davidson 1981: 28).

So, my conclusion is that this is quite a good start but there are some disturbing questions about appropriate ways of doing history. Smail invokes the phrase 'people without history' without acknowledging the irony implicit in social anthropologist Eric Wolf's use of the phrase in his title (Wolf 1982). In his text, Wolf referred to 'the active histories of "primitives", peasantries, laborers, immigrant, and besieged minorities'. Is it necessary for people to write texts about their past for them to have history? Should we discount oral traditions and other sources of history including archaeology?

What would be needed to go further? I think that what we need to define is not 'need', so much as 'purpose'. What is history (I know the question has been asked before) and what is it for? In the darkest days of World War Two, the most celebrated Australian archaeohistorian, Gordon Childe, saw that there was a political purpose to writing about 'What happened in history' in terms of 'the main stream of human progress' (Childe 1964), as Allen discusses in his chapter. Grahame Clark wrote in the foreword of the book that Childe 'showed how by using the data won by archaeologists and natural scientists it was possible to gain a new view of what constituted human history'. Such Whiggish narratives may have been appropriate in the face of fascist and racist triumph in a vicious war, but they would be inappropriate both in the modern world and specifically in the context of seeking collaboratively to integrate the different genres of history associated with colonised and settler cultures.

The word 'history' has many meanings – at least four – which are not quite disentangled in this volume. It refers generally to 1) a time period in the past; 2) events or acts in that time period; 3) the interpretation of those events or acts in terms of the actions of people and the institutions they constitute; and 4) the uses of such interpretations. Given the three different genres of historical interpretation that I have outlined here, it is really important to isolate the methods and theories by which the four meanings of history can be addressed in each of them. This will involve dealing with the question of time and how it is measured (Peter Riggs, physicist, has a chapter (Chapter 3, 'Contemporary Concepts of Time ...') in the volume on how a physicist conceptualises time), as well as making decisions about whether the narrative is about people, places or time periods.

It will also involve questions about how to deal with disparate sources of primary evidence and whether, for example, the G2 archaeological report becomes a primary text for G1 historians who, in other contexts, deal with the textual product of memory and oral history. And it will have to deal with questions of scale and context and the politics of interpretation. Most importantly, it will have

to address questions of agency, where text-based historians deal with events or acts as the product of the behaviour of human agents, while G2 archaeohistorians generally have no such agents to write about. In many places around the world those involved with G3 oral histories very often address big questions about the processes that formed their social and geographical contexts by creating mythical agents of the changes that created the society of those modern people (e.g. Minc 1986). Reconciling the oral and mythological with other sorts of history will be full of politics and those of us who are not from the culture of the oral historians need to tread very carefully so as not to appear to appropriate the oral past by claiming our version of 'truth' is superior to all others. In many ways Leane's chapter is the most perceptive in the book because it seems to recognise that stories explain the past and that there are different types of stories for different types of explanation. Reconciling those differences is a big task, and incorporating them into different genres of history will serve different interests.

The advertising for the book says: 'Long histories that incorporate humanities, science and Indigenous knowledge may produce deeper meanings of the worlds in which we live.' It is difficult to disagree with that. This book is a step in the right direction: it should be possible to enlarge the scope of historical inquiry, provided the interests of all historical stakeholders are respected.

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