

Kim Sterelny review of Billy Griffiths, *Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia*

(Carlton, Vic.: Black Inc., 2018), 376 pp., PB \$34.99, ISBN 9781760640446

Billy Griffiths begins this thoughtful, nuanced and beautifully written work with an admission: it is written by an outsider. The book is a reflection on the archaeology of Australia and its significance, but it is the product of a fringe-dwelling onlooker; a historian. In a similar spirit of full disclosure, I should warn the reader that I too am an outsider; neither historian nor archaeologist, but a philosopher of science. Worse still, an unreconstructed and unapologetic positivist. That is relevant, for Griffiths thinks of archaeology as having aspects of both a science and a humanity. Moreover, without quite saying so explicitly, it is clear that he thinks both intellectual traditions are of equal standing. Both essential; neither privileged. In contrast, in the project of uncovering and understanding Australia's deep past—human, biological, geological, climatic—I think science, fallible though it is, is privileged. More on that shortly.

As noted above, this work is a reflection on the archaeology and archaeologists of Australia rather than a systematic history of its coming of age as a discipline over the last 60 years or so. Rather, as his analysis develops, chapter by chapter, three primary themes emerge. A fourth, usually in the background, is the growing technical sophistication of archaeological practice. Initially, that was largely due to the influence of the Cambridge school of archaeology and its emphasis on system, detail and documentation (let no shard or scrap of bone escape the sieve or the notebook). Thereafter, the growth was fuelled by the cross-pollination of archaeology, geography, geochemistry and palaeobiology. Thus the reliability of the deep Pleistocene dates of Indigenous Australia depends both on rigorous and scrupulous field methods (to ensure that samples are not accidentally contaminated from either older or younger layers) and extraordinarily refined geochemical and geophysical methods. For example, the current deepest dates (at about 65,000 years BP) depend in part on being able to tell when a grain of sand was last exposed to sunlight. But you have to make sure the right grain of sand is sampled; not one moved up or down through the layered deposits. This growing repertoire of technique is always in the matrix of Griffiths's narratives, but it is rarely its central focus.

One theme that is a central focus, the first to emerge, the most persistent, and perhaps the most important, is the slow realisation of the great temporal depth of Indigenous Australia's history. The book begins with John Mulvaney and his excavations in rock shelters near the Murray River and the Kenniff Cave in Queensland. He began excavating Kenniff Cave at the beginning of the 1960s, and those deposits proved

to date from the Pleistocene. At that stage it was supposed that Australia had no human history that deep (the Pleistocene epoch closed about 12,000 years ago). So this was the first clear signal of Pleistocene Australians. The final substantive chapter of the book walks us through the ups and downs of the search for the oldest Australian sites of human occupation—a tale including a spectacular overcall in the Kimberley, with a Holocene site initially dated (at one extreme of the error bars) to 176,000 years. The current oldest site—Madjedbebe—is reckoned at about 65,000 years (plus or minus about 5,000). This site is dated by a range of techniques, and so this estimate is probably reliable. The age itself is very striking: our species would not reach Western Europe for another 20,000 years and more. But so too are the artefacts found at the base of the dig. These include stone axes with the edges ground rather than flaked: a technique for stone tool working once thought to have originated with the Neolithic and the origins of agriculture, in the Levant more than 50,000 years later. Through a series of studies, mostly explored with biographic sketches of the key agents, Griffiths peels the onion of Pleistocene Australia, taking us deeper in time on the Murray, in Tasmania, in the desert country rock shelter of Puritjarra, but deepest of all in and near Arnhem Land. I should note that through this exploration of time's deeps, New Guinea barely gets a mention. While it is not part of Australia now, through the Pleistocene glaciations we were both part of the great continent of Sahul, and one possible migration route from Island South-East Asia was via New Guinea.

A second theme revolves around the idea of Indigenous Australia as a single sociocultural entity. As Griffiths sees it, early in the understanding of the deep history of Indigenous Australia, it was quickly realised that these Australians did indeed have a history. There was change over time in their material record, and in the lives recorded. But the initial attempts to understand that history took the form of continent-wide narratives. In exploring the archaeology of cave art, for example, in chapter 7, Griffiths describes Lesley Maynard's pioneering three-stage model in which an ancient deep cave art is succeeded by Panaramitee engravings, which in turn is succeeded by somewhat more regionally varied forms of figurative art. Similarly, in his discussion of the Holocene, Harry Lourandos proposed a general model of intensification. Lourandos excavated eel traps at Mount William (Victoria), where local people had built an extensive network of trenches, extending and stabilising natural wetlands, and providing habitat in which the eels could both grow and be reliably harvested. Lourandos took this to be a signal of a more general shift to more extensive environmental engineering, and of the exploitation of a greater range of resources. A less brutal climate both allowed populations to expand, but required them to work harder for a living. Very reasonably, Griffiths sees these continental narratives as productive initial guides to research, but as knowledge accumulates, we repeatedly see them break down, as the importance of regional differences emerges. The trajectory of changes in artefacts, in material symbols, in the extent and nature of environmental engineering vary in important ways region by region.

Unsurprisingly, given its size and variability, deep history is a mosaic. That matters to Griffiths. *Deep Time Dreaming* is written in a generous spirit: he writes with insight and affection on all of his protagonists. But while this is not a book with villains, Griffiths clearly has a special sympathy for Isabel McBryde and Sylvia Hallam, two archaeologists with a special interest in understanding regions rather than sites.

A third theme is the most fraught: Indigenous Australians' bid for an increasing control over their own history. At the beginning of this narrative, they are nowhere to be seen: Mulvaney digs; Bowler collects human remains from Lake Mungo without reference to the traditional owners. But early in the narrative, with Rhys Jones in Tasmania (especially Kutina), and in the making of *The Last Tasmanian*, and with Richard Gould in the western desert, the issue explodes. Traditional owners demand, and in the end are granted, full control over access to sites. This issue of the ownership of history has two aspects (at least). One is material. Who controls access to, and the use of, sites. Given the long and appalling history of dispossession, it is hard to resist the moral case for full local control, even when it seems to have been used arbitrarily, as seems to have happened in Tasmania (p. 230). However, there is a second issue lurking in the background. Who has authority over the narratives built from the excavations that do proceed? To what extent should we treat local cultural traditions as disguised but largely accurate histories? In a forthcoming essay in *Religion, Brain and Behavior*, Peter Hiscock develops a nuanced but sceptical view of the idea that Indigenous Australian mythology gives us and them access to the deep past: the past of the Pleistocene and the earlier Holocene. I share that scepticism. To think otherwise, we have to believe that narratives are transmitted more faithfully, by far, than the languages themselves. Moreover, in cultures with such rich oral traditions, it will always be possible to cherry-pick stories with a rough resemblance to independently attested events.

This issue is on the back-burner so long as the narrative from the archaeological sciences is congruent with the cultural self-image and interests of the traditional owners. Indigenous Australians can happily embrace evidence of an increasingly deep occupation; evidence of their central role in the formation of Australian landscapes; evidence increasingly sceptical of overkill models of the extinction of the Australian megafauna. Evidence, that is, of responsible Indigenous stewardship of country. These all support a positive cultural identity and give weight to native title claims and to an active role in land management. But there are potential fracture points. Consider, for example, a recent genetic study that suggests that genetic regionalisation established rapidly soon after colonisation. According to this study, local groups largely stayed in place, though with some intermarriage, for tens of thousands of years after initial arrival and spread. What could be better for native title? But there are reasons to be sceptical of this study. For one, it is based on a geographically limited range of samples. For another, it seems difficult to reconcile with the spread of the Pama-Nyungan language family over much of Australia,

apparently in the second half of the Holocene. Could language transformation really have taken place with so little movement of the peoples themselves? Third, where did those displaced by the rising sea levels that drowned much of Sahul go? As Griffiths notes (p. 287), close to 3 million square kilometres were flooded. Sea levels stabilised about 6,000 years ago, so surely many Indigenous Australians have their deep time ancestral lands under water. As a matter of law and logic, surely an occupation span of 500 years is long enough to establish connection to country? But 50,000 years certainly sounds better. So news, if it were to come, of a much more mobile and dynamic population history is unlikely to be welcome to Indigenous Australia.

Griffiths is sensitive to all these issues of ownership and of the status of the Indigenous narrative, but tiptoes around them. With the caution of youth, he makes no judgements, leaving these debates in the mouths of his protagonists. We often get an archaeologist's judgement on the dates of a site interleaved with an Indigenous response, but with no further comment. He thus sits on the fence a little more than I would like. Moreover, I must, of course, leave it to those who were there to determine the extent to which he captured the temper of those exciting times. But for those of us—overwhelmingly most of us—who were not at Fromm's Landing, Kenniff Cave, Rocky Point, Lake Mungo or Puritjarra, this work conveys a vivid sense of a new vision of Australia and its past unfolding. Moreover, *Deep Time Dreaming* is animated by the view that history matters: both real history—what happened and why—and our fallible but improving attempts to recover and understand that history. There is no fence-sitting on that issue. Minor reservations aside, this is a fine book, and one I read with great pleasure. I would expect it to grip anyone with an interest in our deep past and the lives of those who have studied it.

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