

SE Green Guide
HD **The story of black Australia**
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COVER STORY

The landmark documentary series *First Australians* tells a very different story of our nation. By Sacha Molitorisz.

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'BEFORE the Dreaming, the Australian continent was a flat, featureless place, devoid of life,' says a woman's ethereal voice, over shots of red desert and rugged coastline. 'Then giant beings came down from the sky, came from across the sea and emerged from within the Earth. With their arrival the Dreaming began and life was born... (and) in everything they touched they left their essence, making the lands sacred to those who honour the Dreaming - the first Australians.'

So begins one of the most significant documentary series in the history of Australian television. For the first time, the story of Aboriginal Australia has been condensed into a coherent narrative that begins with the mythological birth of humanity on this continent - the Dreaming that historian Inga Clendinnen calls "that web of stories which holds this great recalcitrant continent within the net of human intelligence" - and ends in the aftermath of Eddie Mabo's landmark native title victory. In seven episodes, it's a series that explores, in the words of award-winning filmmaker Rachel Perkins, what happens when the oldest living culture in the world is overrun by the world's greatest empire.

"I don't think there's been anything of this scope and breadth done before," says Darren Dale, who co-produced the series for SBS. "It assembles 80 interviews - and there will be an extra seven hours of unseen content online, and a book to accompany the series. This is vast."

"Some of these stories have never been told on television before," says Perkins, who co-produced with Dale, and wrote and directed four episodes. "All of them have been written by a small clutch of indigenous historians, but they've never been seen by the public in a mainstream way."

"New Zealand has done this sort of history, and America is constantly doing its history - the story of the wild west is such a part of the American imagination. This is that same story of a moving frontier, with all the same sort of treachery and love and betrayal and all these bigger-than-life characters."

"I would have hoped this series had been done 40 or 60 years ago, but really indigenous filmmakers have only been making films for the last 20 years or so, so it's taken a while to build up the critical mass of talent. It always takes individuals to make this sort of change, and finally SBS really decided to get behind it."

Better late than never - and First Australians is worth the wait. Six years in the making, it's an examination of Aboriginal history that is measured, thorough and poetic. The focus, predictably, is on the turbulent 220 years since the First Fleet landed in Botany Bay.

Episode one, They Have Come To Stay, begins with a brief overview of the 80,000 years - or 40,000, or 60,000, depending on who's counting - leading up to 1788, when Aborigines had the island largely to themselves. On the driest continent, 250 tribes flourished, each with their own territories and laws. By one estimate, the continent had sustained 1.6 billion lives by the time the First Fleet arrived with its cargo of soldiers, convicts and rats. So much for terra nullius, the fiction on which the British colony was founded.

"It's the longest-living civilisation on Earth," says author **Bruce Pascoe**, a member of the Boonwurrung clan, in episode one. "And if you can't learn something from a people that successful, then you're defying your own intelligence."

The first instalment tells of Governor Arthur Phillip, and of English encounters with Aborigines including Pemulwuy, Windradyne and Bennelong, the peacemaker and leader who flirted with Western ways on a trip to London. Ultimately, he rejected "civilised" life, and the colonisers never forgave him. As Clendinnen says: "He died and was given an epitaph of being an irreconcilable savage - that man of so much political skill and resilience."

Episode one is directed by Perkins; as is episode three, Freedom for our Lifetime. Examining Victoria from 1860 to 1890, it tells the story of Wurundjeri clan leader Simon Wonga and his cousin William Barak, who defy the Victorian government by setting up a reserve for their people 50 kilometres north of Melbourne.

"We chose to focus on individuals who changed history," says Perkins. "And I wasn't familiar with several of them, including Barak. I came across that story when I went to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and said, 'Give me all the photos you've got from before 1901'. And looking through those I kept coming across extraordinary images of this man called Barak. I thought, 'There's got to be a story here'. And when I dug deeper I found a fantastic book, and I was moved by his story and the sense that he didn't get justice in his lifetime."

"It's amazing, he saw the first white man arrive, and by the time he was a grown man the entire state was occupied by a million people. In 30 years, it went from no white people to a million. And he set up a place where his people could just live and be at Coranderrk - but the obstacles he had to cross were so huge it wasn't going to be possible."

Dale says: "I thought I was a well-informed Aboriginal person, but that story in episode three was totally unknown to me."

Episode two, Save My People, reveals that Truganini was not the last Tasmanian Aborigine. Episode four, Strength To Stand A Long Time, exposes homicidal cop Constable Willshire, who terrorised the Arrernte nation of central Australia in the late 19th century. Episode five, His Warm Tears, examines hybrid lives, half-castes and the forcible removal of children from their parents in the early 20th century. Episode six, A Fair Deal for a Black Race, explores the fallout from nuclear testing at Maralinga and culminates with the 1967 referendum that led to Aborigines finally being recognised as Australian citizens. The final instalment, We Are No Longer Shadows, investigates land rights and Eddie Mabo.

To tell these stories, Perkins, Dale and their many collaborators - including director Beck Cole, series producer Helen Panckhurst, writer Louis Nowra, cinematographers Kim Batterham and Warwick Thornton and consultants/interviewees Professor Marcia Langton and Dr Gordon Briscoe - faced several confounding challenges.

"Documentary is a hard medium," Perkins says. "You have to deal with the realities of life - you can't just make stuff up. And with this series we had the extra challenge that we were relying on European records to tell indigenous history, so we're relying on newspapers, diaries, letters, court records, and so on. And it's that old saying: the victors write the history."

"Often indigenous people weren't written about at all. Or there would just be little snippets. Even with Truganini, there were only two paragraphs of her words recorded. It's hard to find those indigenous voices in the records. So that's where historians come in, they interpret the events, and why people reacted the way they did. They illuminate the scanty record."

"We had a responsibility to get it right," says Dale. "And about a year into the project, Marcia Langton said to Rachel and me that if we deny all the knowledge of historians, then we will be doing the same thing as denying Aboriginal history, which has been done in schools. This is the story of black and white, and it should be told from both sides."

Even if the series is long overdue, it taps into the prevailing zeitgeist of atonement and reconciliation. Last year Kevin Rudd made indigenous issues a priority when he delivered an apology aiming "to remove a great stain from the nation's soul".

Perkins says that another challenge was not to focus on the negative.

"It is such a brutal and devastating history in lots of ways," says Perkins, who hails from the Arrernte and Kalkadoon nations of central Australia and admits that making First Australians was an intensely emotional experience. "When you look at the population lost in such a short time and the terrible conditions and treatment of people, and look at some of the horrific happenings, that's hard.

"Sometimes the history is too macabre, and you think, 'That's too much for people'. I mean, you could line up a litany of horror and show it to people, full of massacres and brutality, with lists of crimes that go on and on and on and on, but you need salvation and hope in there, because you need to be effectively telling stories. And the great thing is that you're telling this story. That's fantastic."

And fortunately, First Australians does a great job of condensing a disparate, disturbing history into a fascinating series. It eschews re-enactments in favour of interviews with experts, lingering shots of old photos and paintings and stunning footage of the beaches, bays and bush where key events took place.

While putting it all together, the filmmakers had to respect the wishes of all the people whose stories are told in the series. Dale estimates that between 200 and 300 people were contacted for permission.

"There were very delicate negotiations," says Perkins. "A lot of institutions were very reluctant to provide material, too, because some of it was sacred or secret."

Was there a problem with the depiction of dead people?

"That tradition is a very old tradition," Perkins says. "That happened right across Australia, and it was based on the law that you couldn't say a dead person's name, because by saying their name you recall and disturb their spirit. And that has been adapted to images, too. But that tradition is changing, and is generally not followed in areas where colonisation first happened, in the southern part of Australia and on the east coast. But in the north, where traditional Aboriginal communities have been left more intact, that tradition still applies.

"And because the cultures are changing, some people are happy for their image to be shown even when they die. One old man requested that his image be shown if he dies. Even though he's very traditional, he wants to get that story out. So it is changing and loosening up. But we cleared all those restrictions.

"That was a huge amount of work. But it's been one of the most enriching parts of the process. A lot of filmmakers just scan a picture from a book. We went to the relevant community. There's a huge authenticity behind this, and we hope that authenticity shows.

"And I think its real legacy will be in schools, where students will have an opportunity I never had at school. At primary school and high school, our indigenous studies consisted of one scratchy black-and-white film of a fly-covered black person eating witchetty grubs."

"We're saying this is our shared history as Australians," says Dale. "Hopefully this series can help bridge the divide between indigenous and non-indigenous."

First Australians begins on SBS on Sunday at 8.30pm, then continues on Tuesday and Sunday nights.

Critic's View, page 38.

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