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First Australians: An Illustrated History

Edited by Rachel Perkins and Marcia Langton

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SUPERIMPOSED on a series of lovely landscape vistas, the invocations that began each episode of the First Australians television series also open this majestic book: "Before the dreaming the Australian continent was a flat, featureless place, devoid of life. Then a myriad of beings came down from the sky..."

This, though, is a history book, history related from an Aboriginal perspective, and it forms a bitter complement to the master narrative of Australia's steady, tranquil advance.

Just as the filmic First Australians project took much of its power from the combination of archival footage with the poised reflections of today's Aboriginal Australians, so this collection of essays builds into a fragmented portrait of a modern nation, set against darker themes that lurk within its memory. One of the chief animating presences of the screen version, Marcia Langton, is central here, too, sketching the revolution in Australian history writing that has taken place in recent decades, as a "dazzling new view" of Australian life has emerged. It is a view with room for the Aboriginal perspective and is wide enough to include "thousands of indigenous people" with nuanced and intriguing personas.

Despite Australian history's long-established lean towards the colonising society's point of view, sufficient primary and secondary documents survive, Langton argues, to allow us to give due weight to the indigenous part of the story. Her opening chapter, on the first years of the British colony, makes good this claim: its great strength is its restrained tone, shot through with a horrified awareness of the imperial negotiations and transactions under way.

She questions the methods and conclusions of her predecessors in the writing of this story, she examines the detailed records of the time, she probes what we can know and understand of the thoughts and emotions of the characters on both sides of the drama as it takes its course.

Ngura Barbagai: Country Lost is the grim title given to her account of Sydney's first, faltering steps. It comes from a word list of the long-vanished local language, compiled by the inquisitive, newly arrived Lieutenant William Dawes. In these pages, Langton is seeking to capture Australia's primal scene: not just the familiar arrival of the First Fleet but the eventual misunderstandings and betrayals that led to the large-scale destruction of the indigenous population of NSW.

This is well-worn terrain treated anew, with a forensic eye. How much, though, can we

re-create? James Boyce, chronicler of Tasmania's early days, writes movingly in his chapter of the need to acknowledge what we do not and cannot know: "There is no avoiding the limitations imposed by cultural background and discipline." Consequently, many of the indigenous heroes who flit through the early pages of this history must remain shadows: Barak, leader of the Kulin nation in Victoria, who painted, at the close of his life, his precise recollections of vanished ceremonies; Windradyne, chieftain of the Wiradjuri resistance in the lands beyond the Blue Mountains; Jandamarra, the native policeman turned outlaw amid the Kimberley's high ranges and river plains.

Given the constraints of space, the bleakness of the broad pattern of events and the limitations of the records, it seems inevitable that individual lives would be singled out as vectors to illustrate the processes of settlement and assimilation.

First Australians aims at nothing less than the recalibration of an established record. History is always something possessed, owned by those who compose it. Until now, it has generally been written by the mainstream of Australian society, and that has continued, even as the nature of Australian history writing has turned, become enlightened and begun to adopt the indigenous point of view.

The new history of the past two decades or so has sketched out most of the positions adopted by the writers in First Australians and the broad arguments advanced here about the morality of the British occupation of the continent have already won the field. This was evident from the interviews in the film series, where the tonalities of the indigenous and mainstream historians tallied closely.

Yet the indigenous perspective feels different. It is immediate and connected. Its link to the events of the past two centuries is not the link of regret and half-mastered shame but one of grief and slow-won acceptance. Different variants of this narrative stance stand out here, in the pages written on the Kimberley, for instance, by researcher Steve Kinnane, of Mirriwoong descent, or by Victorian author **Bruce Pascoe**, of Boonwurrung heritage. The stories they tell vary by region and by time horizon, but in the end they are almost all the same: dispossession, marginalisation, the extinction of language, confinement and administrative management.

Even in central Australia, where the colonisation process reached its close only in living memory, the pattern holds. Dick Kimber, the sage of Alice Springs, offers a somewhat Aboriginalised mainstream voice and a mazy approach to tale-telling as he winds his way into the ranges and the sand dunes of the red heart and draws its fierce characters in forgiving light. The vain, murderous William Willshire, tortured Ted Strehlow, blind Moses Tjalkabotta, the Western Arrernte evangelist: here they all are, summoned vividly before our eyes. Kimber places them around an imaginary camp fire for a yarn.

How, though, to cover a whole universe of cultures in a finite span? Inevitably, the jigsaw of the continent-wide pacification process is given in fragmentary fashion. There is no significant account here of events in the late-19th-century Pilbara, perhaps the most grievous frontier of them all, or of the survival of traditional culture in the Top End.

The Aboriginal record of deep time is not one that submits easily to our eyes. What can be captured of millions of lives and hundreds of generations when those lives and generations were lived out in a world without written words, and when repeating ceremonial cycles fulfilled the part now played by the historical record of the past?

What can be seen of a recent time horizon that has been carefully, deliberately pulverised? Rachel Perkins, the gifted director of the film series and co-editor of this book, employs in both projects a near-constant flow of photographic imagery in order to engage her audience directly. Almost all those images, though, were taken by the surveying, studying gaze of authority.

Only in the last stages of the record does change break in: an indigenous cinematic eye begins to put together a different set of stories and an Aboriginal voice that is not reconstructed or imagined or scraped together from frail leavings appears. Langton, writing in concert with Noel Loos, an expert on far north Queensland history, gives a portrait of the Mabo case, seen through the biographic prism of Eddie Koiki Mabo, the instigator of the case that led the High Court, 16 years ago, to proclaim the doctrine of native title. His struggle, they write, "is only the most dramatic and successful example of indigenous Australians' fighting to reverse the consequences of colonial conquest and dispossession that had defined them in white law as an inferior caste".

First Australians closes on an upward swing, with indigenous voices shapers of their own drama, participants in the national project.

"Something of the vision of the men and women whose narratives run through our history has remained a part of Australian society," Langton says, in her closing, poignant words. "They are present in the pages of the records, and their imprint on our cities and landscapes can be understood when we know their stories. History helps us to hear the voices of the First Australians in each place they inhabited."

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