**Book Reviews**

**The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia**

Bill Gammage, Allen & Unwin, 2011. $49.99 hardback

ISBN 978 1 74237 748 3

This profoundly scholarly and eminently readable work is a timely and what is surely destined to be an acclaimed addition to the burgeoning international literature on the deep relationship between Indigenous peoples and the landscapes (or country, in the case of Australian Aborigines) they have deliberately and consciously shaped and created. It is particularly notable as the focus is at a continental scale: the making of the Australian landscape by its original inhabitants, the oldest living culture on earth, through the medium of fire.

The idea that Australian Aborigines were responsible for creating the park-like landscape noted with approbation by early British explorers and settlers has long been accepted by many historians, cultural geographers, anthropologists, archaeologists et al. There are, after all, scores of early colonial accounts of Aboriginal burning – what Rhys Jones (1969) termed ‘fire-stick farming’. Bill Gammage takes this intriguing story deeper and further. He shows through his meticulous and keen-eyed reference to colonial picturesque landscape paintings and descriptions of the landscape how different regimes of burning created engineered patterns – or what Gammage neatly calls ‘templates’ – in the landscape throughout and across the continent. We see regimes that were attuned to different climatic zones, to different plant communities and for different reasons: encouraging new grass growth to attract kangaroos and other game to be hunted, or to allow particular food-source plants to grow, or to clean up the landscape. Here was selectively controlled plant growth on an immense scale. Introducing the notion of ‘templates’, Gammage perceptively says ‘People today think of what animals need. In 1788 people thought of what animals prefer. What animals prefer always attracts them [...] Possums prefer fresh tips [...] Most animals prefer the result was a fecund and productive landscape scattered with trees, rich with an under-storey of grass, interspersed with extensive grassy areas through which game and people could pass, treed areas where game could hide, and tracts of land farmed to raise crops such as yam vines through careful predetermined control of fire. As Bill Gammage so ably demonstrates, the landscape patterns created by Aboriginal people were the result of varied burning regimes that in the case, for example, of the park-like landscape with scattered trees spanned up to 300–500 years of conscious management. Gammage’s approach is a compellingly convincing reading of the landscape in the vein of the English historian W.G. Hoskins (1955: 15) with his prescient words that the ‘landscape itself to those who know how to read it aight is the richest historical record we possess’.

The extensive park-like landscape – in effect an Aboriginal cultural landscape – engaged the imagination of early settlers with repeated delighted references to it resembling the grounds of eighteenth century English estates. Sydney Parkinson, Banks’ draughtsman, thought ‘The country looked very pleasant and fertile; and the trees, quite free from undergrowth, appeared like the plantations in a gentleman’s park’ (p. 5). Many such observations, which are myriad, may have given little heed to why the country looked like this. However, the association between Aborigines and their country and the way it was managed did not escape some of the more astute early observers. In January 1847 the explorer Thomas Mitchell observed:

> Fire, grass, kangaroos, and human inhabitants, seem all dependent on each other for existence in Australia; for any one of these being wanting, the others could no longer continue. Fire is necessary to burn the grass, and form these open forests [...] But for this simple process, the Australian woods had probably continued as thick as those of New Zealand or America.

That there will be deniers to the thesis that Aboriginal people shaped the pre-1788 Australian landscape is acknowledged by Gammage (p. xv). He points to the fact that there are still people who refuse to accept historical evidence of people deliberately shaping the Australian landscape through thousands of years of what, in effect, was dedicated stewardship and deep relationship with country. These are reminiscent, regrettably, of nineteenth century ideas of environmental determinism, of G. P. Marsh’s (1864) comment that ‘purely untutored humanity interferes comparatively little with the arrangements of nature’. Whether ‘the sheer volume and detail of evidence [...] that the 1788 landscape was made’ (p. xv) does persuade the deniers to think again remains to be seen. Gammage in his Appendices marshals sufficient evidence to refute a myriad of Doubting Thomases. But the myths of the existence of wilderness and that fire damages the landscape may linger. Wilderness did not exist in 1788 Australia – people cared for country, a lesson with which Gammage proposes we need to re-engage: ‘If we are to survive, let alone feel at home, we must begin to understand our country. If we succeed we may one day become Australian’.

Amongst the evidence Gammage puts forward for his thesis is the way in which the landscape changed quickly and dramatically after 1788: scrub invaded the open park-like
landscape and the regime of wild bushfires started – a destructive killing menace that is still with us, haunting our memories. He delves into asking and answering such questions as why did plant species with different requirements co-exist close together. Why did extensive grassy areas occupy valley bottoms and flats, why did the surrounding slopes and hills support an open park-like treed landscape with grassy under-storey, why did plants with different fire regime needs coexist close to each other? Why has most of this changed? Why are many scenes in the book’s early colonial painting illustrations now more densely treed? The answer cannot and does not lie in the facile reason often given by the deniers, that of soil type or it’s natural.

The Biggest Estate on Earth is a significant contribution to our understanding of the complex relationship between people and their landscape and intangible human values with associated sense of identity this engenders. It is a book that will resonate not just in Australian scholarship, but internationally. For anyone interested in the relationship between people and place it is a must read. That apart, it is a cracking good read.

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References

A Didactic Case Study of Jarash Archaeological Site, Jordan: Stakeholders and Heritage Values in Site Management

2 volumes, includes teaching materials
ISBN: 978 0 9827668 7 3

This publication presents an attempt to develop a Management Plan for the Jarash Archaeological Site as a case study for teaching purposes. Jarash (Roman Gerasa) is a large site considered significant for its intact Roman city plan with key features of later empires. Almost half the total site as delineated by the line of the Roman and later city walls is covered by the modern town that developed as a result of re-settlement of a Circassian community by the Ottomans in the late-nineteenth century. The other (Western) half was designated as a protected antiquities site in 1939.

Intended to show how stakeholder interests can be balanced in the interests of identifying and sustaining the heritage values of the site, the book references international charters including the Venice and Burra Charters and the ‘Guidelines to the Burra Charter’ (1988) to reasonable effect. The focus is on ‘values-based management’ and notes that at the archaeological site of Jarash the scientific and aesthetic values are protected by the Jordanian Antiquities Law. However in also noting that the values of Jarash might be social, scientific, spiritual, aesthetic or economic, the study departs somewhat from the concept underlying the Burra Charter (1999) which includes aesthetic, historic, scientific, social and spiritual but not economic values. The concept as outlined in the study is further clouded by the use of a sample ‘Statement of Values’ for Petra Archaeological Park as guidance, which gives ‘Identity Values’, ‘Scientific and Historical Values’, ‘Rarity Values’, ‘Aesthetic Values’ and ‘Contemporary Socio-economic Values’ as those relating to Petra.

Comprising two volumes, the first introduces the project, gives a short summary of Jarash’s history up to the present, sets out the management context of legal framework, governing authorities and stakeholders and then describes four activities for identifying and dealing with stakeholders. Appendices include the Jordanian Law of Antiquities, recommended readings, a description of the preparatory research method, a list of the people who were contacted during the development of the case study, a list of those involved in testing the case study and the steering committee for the project. There is also a glossary, bibliography and notes about the authors. Missing are the results of the testing – it would be useful to know how the testers found the whole process.

The second volume consists of the teaching materials for each of the four activities: identifying the values and writing a Statement of Significance, identifying stakeholders and their values and interests, interviewing stakeholders to further understand their interests and positions, and developing recommendations for a Management Plan. Each includes a teaching note for instructors, worksheets and sample answers, de-briefing questions and follow-up. The stakeholder interviewing activity is confined to three stakeholders – a representative each for the Department of Antiquities, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities representative, and for one of the archaeological missions working at the site (of which there are several). Confidential instructions for the instructor are provided for this activity, setting out a compilation of the interests and positions of the relevant stakeholders derived from the preliminary research for the project. Multiple worksheets can be printed from an attached CD, which also has a presentation of images of the site and two short videos including of a regular chariot race gladiator fight re-enactment performance in the hippodrome.

The aim of the project is stated as ‘to serve as a teaching resource for heritage educators that will help site managers to identify, understand and respond to a wide range of values for the sustainable management of cultural heritage values’ for archaeological sites generally, noting that ‘heritage conservation and management university courses traditionally have not offered instruction in how to deal with stakeholders’.

The issues that arose from the research carried out in 2007 in order to develop the case study illuminate the situation at Jarash at that time, which was also described in a World Bank report of the same year quoted in the study. They largely relate to the lack of involvement of the local community and residents of the modern town in the benefits to be gained from tourism at the site. According to the study, the Jordanian Government has made two unsuccessful attempts for World Heritage listing of the site. In 1964 the nomination was deferred due to lack of a clear boundary for the nominated area, lack of a Management Plan and uncertainty as to the standard of the restoration at the site. In 1996 reasons for deferral included lack of an adequate buffer zone within which no construction would be allowed and the need for co-ordination of all
stakeholders in the management of the site. While the case study has not addressed all these issues, which may be common to many similar sites, it does make a valuable contribution to the Management Planning process.

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Pictures of Time Beneath: Science, Heritage and the Uses of the Deep Past
ISBN: 9780643097049 $89.95 paperback

This is a very ambitious and complex book for its relatively modest size. It spans geology, geography, social history, and several other natural sciences, including paleontology, as well as more controversial subjects such as heritage rights and ownership. The book consists of three sections (which are termed Parts I, II and III), each with two to four chapters. Part I deals with Hallett Cove (south of Adelaide in South Australia), Part II with Lake Calabonna (in north-eastern South Australia), and Part III with Lake Mungo (in south-western New South Wales).

Many glowing reviews are featured on the book’s website. For example, Ruth Morgan (2011) reviewed the book, and wrote:

Douglas successfully overcomes the disciplinary divide of science and the humanities. The result is an excellent history of the development and professionalisation of the historical sciences in Australia, and the influence of the Australian continent’s geology on shaping international debates on geological change and human antiquity. But her narrative is so much more than a history of science because it reveals through these sites of geological heritage the many and diverse ways that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have forged a ‘sense of place’ on this continent.

Am I reading three heritage landscape case studies or a study of historical controversies in Australia? I personally found an overall argument difficult to find. The aims of the writer were not clear to me. If I could summarise, the book appears to discuss notions of geology and geography. The aims of the writer were not clear to me. If I could summarise, the book appears to discuss notions of geology and geography. The aims of the writer were not clear to me. If I could summarise, the book appears to discuss notions of geology and geography. The aims of the writer were not clear to me. If I could summarise, the book appears to discuss notions of geology and geography.

So it should be no surprise to the reader that the book’s structure also confused me, this confusion is probably compounded by the vast and fleeting sweep over the many different topics. As there are three major areas discussed, but only 171 pages (including the Afterword), I wonder if there should have just been sections rather than sections and chapters. Due to the quick pace of the text, and the way in which the author races through discussing various subjects, locations and eras, it is very difficult for the reader to visualise and capture some of the actual places. A glossary of specific terms and coinages would have helped.

Who is the audience? Not me, I would venture. Speaking at the launch of Douglas’ book, Tom Griffiths (2010) wrote:

Her book is remarkable, and her vision highly original. She brings together geology, glaciology, biology, palaeontology, climatology, archaeology, anthropology, geography, cultural history, heritage studies, politics, museology, environmental history, local history, national history, world history, philosophy, literature, poetry and, and… I could go on! It is an astonishing synthesis.

Yet despite this profuse quote from Tom Griffiths, I am not sure who the audience is. Can geologists, paleontologists, historians, and heritage experts be entertained over 175 pages? I am no expert in geology, but I personally thought the geological content and comments were the most interesting as, although they were scant, the author seems to have some expertise in that field and gave me an interesting angle into the different ways geologists ‘read’ landscape and consider time itself.

I suspect the book was written more for historians rather than for say, philosophers. Terms seemed to be used interchangeably, such as ‘deep past’ or ‘deep history’, and I often had trouble understanding which person was behind a certain opinion. Quotes are also sometimes referenced without explaining the background content or the actual significance to the discussion. As such, I was left with many questions. For example, does Australia always have clearly distinguishing land features? What determines a ‘precious’ cave? On p. 64 it is mentioned that Hallet Cove’s glacial features are the ‘best in the world’. What does ‘best in the world’ mean? Is it defined in the original nomination document? Could the author tell us what ‘best’ means here, or does she mean to imply that the description cannot be proven? What are the ‘foundation myths’ (mentioned p. 84) of vertebrate paleontology?

More images would have helped, especially considering the title. For example, additional illustrations and cross-sections would have helped explain geological processes. Some figures are also unclear (such as Figure 7 – white on grey is harder to read for older eyes). That said, the quality of the book is very good; it may flex and bend a tad over some years and heavy use.

I suspect postgraduate students who are interested in one or more of the three areas mentioned might find certain chapters relevant; there are many references, and the writer does appear to have done an exhaustive literature review of both published and unpublished sources. I would personally have found the book much easier to read if the structure and aims of the overall argument had been made more explicit, but I congratulate the author for the attempt.

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References