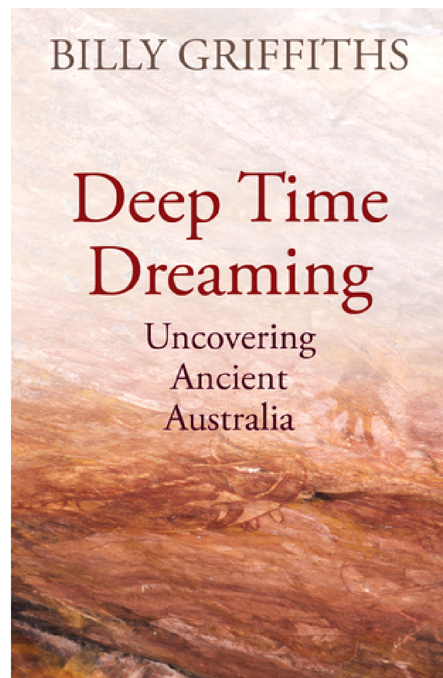

Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia

Billy Griffiths

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Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia Billy Griffiths
Soon after Billy Griffiths joins his first archaeological dig as camp manager and cook, he is hooked. Equipped with a historian's inquiring mind, he embarks on a journey through time, seeking to understand the extraordinary deep history of the Australian continent.

Deep Time Dreaming is the passionate product of that journey. In this original, important book, Griffiths investigates a twin revolution: the reassertion of Aboriginal identity in the second half of the twentieth century, and the simultaneous uncovering of the traces of ancient Australia by pioneering archaeologists.

Deep Time Dreaming is about a slow shift in national consciousness. It explores what it means to live in a place of great antiquity, with its complex questions of ownership and identity. It brings to life the deep time dreaming that has changed the way many Australians relate to their continent and its enduring, dynamic human history.

When John Mulvaney began his fieldwork in January 1956, it was widely believed that the first Australians had arrived on this continent only a few thousand years earlier. In the decades since, Australian history has been pushed back into the dizzying expanse of deep time. The human presence here has been revealed to be more ancient than that of Europe, and the Australian landscape, far from being terra nullius, is now recognised to be cultural as much as natural, imprinted with stories and law and shaped by the hands and firesticks of thousands of generations of Indigenous men and women. The New World has become the Old ...

Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia Details

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From Reader Review Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia for online ebook

Paleoanthro says

A remarkable book that is a detailed, absorbing, and reflective history of Australian archaeology. Through the lens of key sites and archaeologists, we become enthralled with the history of archaeological research in Australia; the impact of the research, researchers, and the Aboriginal identity of country and time. A thrilling history of how and what archaeological research is and its unique engagement with the culture and politics of first Australians.

Olwen says

This is a more academic tome about archaeology.

PattyMacDotComma says

5★
"British archaeologist Christopher Chippindale reflected, *'Does the history of humans in Australia . . . belong to the ethnic descendants of those first inhabitants? . . . Or is there some wider claim, of science and common human concern, to rights of access to relics of the past??'*"

Fantastic resource! Science, history, anecdotes, politics – and at the base of it all is the world's oldest continuing culture. Exactly how old keeps changing. I think we're up to 65,000 years now for Australia's Indigenous people. There was so much work done in the last 50 years that it's hard to keep track, but the author does a great job of keeping us both informed and interested.

And guess what?
". . . axes in Europe dated to about 8000 years ago."

What? 8000 years? That's not an old axe. THIS is an old axe.

"In 2017, another team pushed the date back . . . publishing the discovery of ground-edge axes in the lowest levels of a 65,000-year-old site at Madjedbebe."

So who's primitive now, eh? Old, yes. Primitive, well, yes, but more sophisticated than Europeans of the same era.

I arrived in Australia in 1968, and at that time, the 1967 referendum had only just been passed in an historic landslide YES vote with over 90% turnout:

"Do you approve the proposed law for the alteration of the Constitution entitled 'An Act to alter the Constitution so as to omit certain words relating to the people of the Aboriginal race in any state so that Aboriginals are to be counted in reckoning the population'?

Resoundingly **YES!**

Earlier, Griffiths tells us

“. . . anthropologist WEH Stanner described in 1938 . . .*’a mass of solid indifference’* in Australian culture to Indigenous Australia. . . he coined the phrase *‘the great Australian silence.’*”

Griffiths includes some politics, of course, and references to social history, but the main story is archaeological and cultural, which is what would have prompted the question at the beginning: Who owns the history?

He introduces us to many scientists, working at different times in different parts of the continent, but arriving at some similar conclusions. Indigenous Australians have been here for a long time, they lived in different nations, and they maintained networks between communities and nations for trade and commerce.

Isabel McBryde is arguably the mother of Australian archaeology. She began her work in 1960 in the New England region of NSW, thinking she’d be looking at only old relics, but **“started seeing it as a living heritage, maintained through powerful connections to country, *‘preserved faithfully by a small community’* and *‘now the focus of a revival of interest in traditional culture and values.’*”**

Griffiths says her studies show **“. . . a clear distinction between the societies that lived in the coastal river valleys and those the roamed the tablelands . . .over the last 9000 years. . . while Australia may be a continent, it is made up of many countries.”**

So, then. Who does own the history? Who gives permission? Imagine a group of “foreigners” wandering into cathedrals and mosques and temples with their picks and trowels to unearth tombs and take the bones away in bags. Not likely.

In Arnhem Land, South African-born Carmel Schrire was helped in her digs by local people, but they gradually grew angry with her disturbing some sacred things. She wrote **“Colonialism is a chronicle of betrayals.”**

It sure is.

“. . . a film unit recorded a range of ethnographic activities in the Western and Central Deserts from 1964-1969, including stone knapping, burning regimes and restricted men’s business . . . with the firm assurance that the images would not return to the community. Gould made a similar verbal contract with the Ngaanyatjarra people.”

But Gould wrote a book and included 52 photos, assuming nobody in this remote community would ever see it.

Oops! Griffiths says he has condensed and simplified the story.

“On 16 May 1971 a Ngaanyatjarra schoolgirl returned to her home in Laverton with a copy of *‘Yiwara’*. She had bought the book on a recent trip to Perth after recognising the woman on the front cover as a close relative. She showed the book to many women, but when her father saw it he became very angry. The book revealed information that was restricted to initiated men. By having it in her possession, there was concern the schoolgirl had breached customary law, and that she would be

ritually speared for the transgression.”

I’m not sure what happened to her, but we know what other religions have done to transgressors, so we shouldn’t be surprised.

There’s far too much in this meaty book for me to discuss, but a few of the topics include uranium mining in the Northern Territory, the Franklin River campaign, the misrepresentation of Tasmanian Aborigines as “extinct” (or as Mark Twain once famously said, “Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.”). In the case of Tasmania, by saying they are gone is to deny the current descendants their rights to native title and land claims.

I’ve not even touched the highlights of this important addition to the growing body of work about Australia’s geological and cultural history. You’d think there’d be more available, considering how many years we’ve had to look at it.

For academics, it's extremely thoroughly footnoted and referenced and has an index. Too easy!

Illustration of an Aboriginal Language map. (No two maps seem to spell the names the same, but all agree it's a big and varied continent.)

Tim Neale says

Full disclosure: Billy is a colleague, and because of this I got my hands on an advance copy. I think this is an outstanding book that should find a broad readership. The book builds up an argument about how archaeology has come to understand and discuss the deep history of the Australian continent by sticking to narratives of the people who've been engaged in that work, their lives, their ideals, and their mistakes. In the process, he outlines some of the big controversies of the field, how its institutions and politics have changed over time, and gives great insight into ongoing conflicts around who gets to tell the story of 'deep time' here and how. If you're interested in books about Australia, in the slightest, I recommend it.

Alison says

A book on this topic feels like it should have been written years ago, although I doubt it would have been as good if it had. Griffiths does a great job of telling the history of Australian archeology - interspersing explanations of changing techniques and learnings with personality sketches that always stay respectful and affectionate. As an amateur who tries to keep up with developments in archeology, this was a relief to read, putting many jigsaw pieces together and spelling out some of the main differences in the field.
It is inevitably a white Australian view of the topic. Griffiths succeeds at showing how the field got going (keeping with the upbeat tone, Griffiths eschews discussing the intense theft period of 'archeology') with total disregard for seeking permission from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for work on their land, with their sacred and other sites, and grew into a modern discipline with more respectful protocols, discussing the debates along the way. He covers some of the worst behaviour of archeologists with sensitivity, and a capacity to understand the complexity of ways that ignorance can play out, while not minimising the impact.

It is a history of archeology, not of Australian deep time. Griffiths covers the main consensus and debates, but relatively briefly and as part of the other story. Nevertheless, it is the most readable summary available in book form, and provides a basis to understand science reporting on the topic much better. He has an easy conversational style that is pleasant without being too cute.
My biggest beef with the book was the scant coverage - two sentences - given to genetic evidence for age of arrival of peoples. Fairly enough, part of Griffiths intent is to draw attention to the richness beyond a number - that Australian art of 10,000 years ago is spectacular in its sophistication, and more then three times older than the pyramids or Stonehenge - and refocus on debates such as how much, when and how, cultures changed. Nevertheless, it is one of the biggest cross-disciplinary schisms that historical geneticists mostly argue for a pre-50,000 arrival date for Aboriginal peoples, based on clock timing of Denisovan DNA, while archeologists support a 65,000 year date based on rock dated settlement signs. Both groups argue - correctly - that there are unreliabilities in the others' dating, and acknowledging and discussing the issue would have been worthwhile.
Otherwise, however, this is a great primer on how Europeans came to appreciate that our continent is home to the oldest culture outside of Africa - possibly anywhere - which is also unusually interconnected by trade and culture. The world has a lot to learn about the relative peace of the Australian continent over many millennia, and the evidence for longstanding interaction without colonisation. I would like more books like this!

Lachlan says

This was an interesting book. No doubt it’s content - a charting of Australian archaeological discoveries coupled with a reflection of the flow-on effect in politics and identity - is important to contemporary debate.

There is much value on understanding how archeology from the 50s and 60s strengthened the growing Indigenous Peoples rights movement. The narratives are not so simple: those early research projects often ignored issues of land rights and community engagement. They caused a lot of pain, and a fair share of controversy. But, many archeologists acknowledged their mistakes, and worked to create more inclusive and respectful institutions and processes. It seems they’ve been reasonably successful.

The overarching narrative of Deep Time Dreaming is the slow growing respect of settler institutions of Australia’s indigenous past - which, in turn, sharpens questions about the present and the future.

The book, I must say, is not flawless. Some of the archeologist profiles are accounts are a bit dry. The more lively prose comes from Billy Griffiths’ accounts of being out in the field, absorbing country and thinking about deep time - but these passages are few and far between. The balance feels a little off; perhaps is an over reliance on the ‘scientific story’ to open up a conversation about indigenous identity, culture and politics. Given our current political climate (and Griffith’s short career) I can understand the approach, but it feels there is a more masterful execution lurking in the brain of some other writer in this country.

In summary: excellent, relevant content. Decent execution.

Jan says

Billy Griffith's account of the history of Australian archeology and of its intersection with Australia's

Aboriginal peoples is easy to read though scholarly and detailed. The 60,000 year deep time of Australia's human history has been revealed in the western sense by archeologists. The Aboriginal people whose history this is and their relationship with the western 'discovery' of that 60,000 is told mostly chronologically starting in 1957 with John Mulvaney. I appreciated Billy's coverage of the women who have added to the archeological record, though they were rarely the 'cowboys' who garnered headlines. I also appreciated his coverage of the, at times, uneasy relationship between archeologists and Aboriginal people of today whose heritage is the subject being studied. But most impactful or all, was the steadily increasing appreciation of just what deep time is in terms of the amazing past of Australia's many Aboriginal cultures.
His book complements that written by his father Tom Griffiths "The art of time travel: historians and their craft". That book seemed to miss some of the western players that Billy covers well.
I do hope Billy writes many more books, fronts TV series, or does whatever it takes to communicate his message more widely.

Astrid Edwards says

What is the common heritage of mankind? And who are the gatekeepers of that knowledge? These are the questions *Deep Time Dreaming* forces us to consider. There are no easy answers, particularly as the early decades of archaeology in Australia are rife with questionable practices and methodologies that leave their mark on the discipline – and the physical sites – to this day.

As Griffiths quotes (on page 128), ‘Australia – virtually ignored by prehistorians until the 1960s as a tedious archaeological backwater – is now the focus of the quest to unravel the prehistory of mankind’. Griffiths explores the growing recognition of Australia’s deep past, once considered an empty continent and now proven to be home to the oldest continuing cultures in human history.

The book follows the careers of the most prominent archaeologists working in Australia in the 20th century. This chronological approach highlights the extraordinary development of the discipline – begun by 20th century museum curators literally digging up whatever they found to 21st century researchers rewriting the timeline of humanity itself.

At times, this means *Deep Time Dreaming* reads as the narrative of inadequately trained white men (many who were not even born in Australia) plundering a past they did not understand. It is mind boggling to consider, but in the early years most of the motley museum curators, historians and want-to-be Indiana Joneses who dug up the deep past had never even met – or tried to meet – an Aboriginal person.

As a reader, this made for a tough few chapters. However, *Deep Time Dreaming* is worth pursuing. The structure serves to highlight a key point: archaeology in Australia was a white man’s playground for decades. The mistakes made – as much as the discoveries found – leave their mark on the discipline today. My interest as a reader increased as female archaeologists began to make their presence felt, especially Isabel McBryde, who was one of the first archaeologists to connect with the traditional owners on whose land she worked.

There are fewer Indigenous voices in this narrative than I expected. Noel Pearson’s 2004 *Quarterly Essay* is quoted, as is Stan Grant’s 2016 memoir. However the Indigenous archaeologists trained by McBryde and specifically mentioned by Griffiths as representing her major contribution to the field don’t have a voice.

Deep Time Dreaming was an education for me, highlighting how archaeology and the uncovering of

Australia's deep past has influenced (and been influenced in turn) by politics. Most profoundly, the development of the discipline has gone hand in hand with Aboriginal politics and the changing meaning of identify in Australia. The most moving example is, of course, that of Mungo Lady. She was found and excavated almost by accident in 1968, at the beginning of the Aboriginal rights movement when notions of consent and ownership began to change. Mungo Lady was eventually returned in 1992 in a symbolic act: her remains were reburied in a 'keeping place' locked with two keys, one held by the community and one by scientists.

Archaeology is not a static discipline. It is unfolding around us, and as recently as 2017 archaeological research in Australia is pushing back the date of humanity's past to 65,000 years. These new discoveries in our own backyard force us to reevaluate the tensions between science and culture. Does the deep time record belong to humanity, to the distant descendants inhabiting the same land, or to both? Who should make decisions about access and methodology? And how should we, as Australians, understand and share the history of our continent?

Deep Time Dreaming leaves me with questions, as a work of this import should.

This review was first published on The Garret (www.thegarretpodcast.com) in February 2018.

Louise says

One of the most remarkable aspects of Billy Griffith's ***Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia*** is the revelation that a science as young as Australian archeology (Griffiths contends that not until 1956 did the modern era of archeological investigation begin in Australia, Loc 448) has from that time been a driving force in determining the history of one of the world's most ancient people, a history believed to be longer than 60,000 years.(Loc 74) The book gave me a greater understanding of many aspects of the culture of Indigenous Australians and the ways in which Aboriginal spirituality has thankfully been allowed to figure more prominently when political, social or economic policies are under consideration and/or implementation by Australian governments. ***Deep Time Dreaming: Uncovering Ancient Australia*** is an engrossing, enlightening, important book for our times.

Eli says

This is a wonderful book about the extraordinary history of humans in Australia.

Most Australians would have no idea that Indigenous Australians have been living on this continent for over 65,000 years. That number is hard to fathom, but it takes us back well into the middle of the last ice age, when Tasmania was still connected to the mainland. One of my favourite bloggers Tim Urban puts in into nice perspective with colourful charts here (https://waitbutwhy.com/2013/08/puttin...).

The book uncovers the amazing story of how Indigenous communities across the continent managed to sustain communities through dramatic environmental changes that occurred over that period.

The story is told in a really compelling and accessible way through mini-biographies of archaeologists who worked to reveal the 'deep time' history of Australia over the last century. It gives me a whole new

perspective on the land on which I live.

Stella Budrikis says

Mark McKenna wrote "'Once every generation a book comes along that marks the emergence of a powerful new literary voice and shifts our understanding of the nation's past. Deep Time Dreaming is one such book. Read it: it will change the way you see Australian history.'
That sums it up really. Billy Griffiths' book charts the gradual change in perception of Australia's archaeological past, from the days of "Australia has no archaeology to speak of" to the more recent acceptance that people have been living on this continent continuously for at least 45,000, maybe 60,000 years. The dates are mind-boggling when you start to compare them to, say, Stonehenge, or ancient Greece. But the author goes beyond just describing the details of the archaeological discoveries, to explore the many fascinating personalities involved over the years (many of them women). He also traces the gradual shift in attitude away from seeing Aboriginal people as subjects to be studied, to involving them, and then to acknowledging their right to be consulted in archaeological discoveries. The politics of archaeology, and the impact of archaeology on the wider political scene are also described and discussed.
Griffiths writes well, and the book is both easy to read and yet satisfying. He makes a strong plea for seeing the past 200 years as "a shallow stratum in a richly layered Indigenous place." Not as a means of questioning the legitimacy of the present society, but as a way of taking a long view of the natural and cultural history of Australia. Aboriginal societies have survived periods of massive climate change in the distant past, as well as the impact of cultural change in the more recent past. We all have much to gain by learning more about the deep history of the land in which we live.

Jazzy Lemon says

An informative book about the archeology and archeologists of 20th c. Australian Aboriginals.

Janine says

This book is not a history of Australia, but is instead a history of the archaeology discipline as practised in Australia, written from an outsider's perspective, "from the fringes, steeped in the neighbouring discipline of history".(p.4) Moving chronologically, each chapter is devoted to a particular archaeologist (Mulvaney, Bowler, Rhys Jones), or an archaeological dig that moved out of academe into the wider politics of Australia (e.g. the Franklin River, Lake Mungo). The book documents the recognition of an ever increasing span of indigenous habitation in Australia, from 5000 years to 40,000 and now pushing 60,000. It reflects the interest in 'deep time', and the question of human activity in a starkly changing climate.
...This is a beautifully written book. Each chapter starts with an engaging anecdote, making you feel as if you're starting with a clean slate each time, although the connections soon become apparent. The narrative is broken up with three 'interludes' that place archaeology within the broader political and professional context. At heart, his argument is that archaeology is a human endeavour, and this humanity shines through. It's an excellent and important book.

For my complete review, see
https://residentjudge.com/2018/10/03/...

James Whitmore says

I found this a stimulating and thorough guide to the recent study of Australia's past. It is a history of the discipline of archaeology in Australia, with the aim of continuing the work of undoing the 'great Australian silence': the lack of knowledge and curiosity about the first Australians. As the anthropologist WEH Stanner described when he coined that phrase in 1968, it is not so much that Australian history has been filled with lies, but is 'a view from a window that has been very carefully placed' to tell us what we'd rather hear.

Each chapter loosely discusses one archaeologist and one major site. They are arranged mostly chronologically from Australia's first trained archaeologist John Mulvaney's work at Fromm's Landing on the Murray River (which was dated to 5,000 years ago) in 1956 to the most recent work (from 2017) in Arnhem Land pushing Aboriginal inhabitation back to 65,000 years ago.

A number of striking threads emerge. The young age that many of the archaeologists made their names - often in their early 20s! - seemed to me to be overacheiving. Griffiths also teases out gender biases within the field - from the 'cowboy' archaeologists obsessed with the oldest and biggest, to the women who were perceived to have taken a 'softer' approach (that often turned out to be more thorough. I want to learn more about Isabel McBryde, Josephine Flood, and Sylvia Hallam)

The story of Australian archaeology is also partly a story of the Aboriginal rights movement, particularly around land. It has been an often tense relationship. While archaeology has sometimes validated the claims of Aboriginal people, it has equally often bulldozed through cultural sensitivities. These issues come to a head in a striking and compelling chapter around the Franklin dam campaign in Tasmania around 1983 and the ice age cave at its heart. Celebrated as a win for 'wilderness', the discovery of artefacts 20,000 years old completely turned on its head the idea that south west Tasmania was never inhabited by people. It is a history underecognised still today.

The writing is clear and very thoroughly referenced (many books I'd now like to read!), with a dispassionate tone that allows its characters to succeed or fall through their own words. There is rather less than I expected about the people who are the subject of these archaeological studies, but I came to think that this is a respectful and accurate impression of how little we know, and of what is possible to know using western methods. Nonetheless there are tantalising glimpses of the extraordinary world that the first Australians lived in - a world with ice caps and sea level hundreds of metres lower than today, and the incredible environmental and social changes that people lived through. I found it a little heavy-going at times, with some bureaucratic and technical detail perhaps aimed at someone with a more specific interest in the topic. But overall a very stimulating book that forced me to question what we think we know about Aboriginal history and how we know it.

Andrew Carr says

Excellent. Beautifully written history of modern archaeology in Australia, as it relates to the study of Aboriginal Australia. A fascinating look at how we know what we know and how indigenous culture, techniques and tools changed as their natural and social environment did (such as building major huts, farming crops, fish and eels, managing land via fire etc) as well as debates over the date of their arrival

(around 60'000 years at best estimate) and much more.

The book also gives personality sketches of some of the major figures in archaeology in Australia, how they thought about their methods and discipline, and the creative tension that emerges from their relationship with indigenous Australians. Both the role some took as advocates of more rights, recognition and respect for the Aborigines, but also how the late 20th century re-assertion of aboriginal culture and identity has sometimes worked at cross-purposes to those of scientific study.

Recommended.