

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

Bill Gammage,  
Allen & Unwin, 2011.  
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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 termed ‘firestick 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. In introducing the notion of templates (Ch 8, p.211) 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 ... In the Centre native bees prefer Desert Bloodwood ... Most animals prefer shelter: euros rocky hills, koalas tall eucalypts, scrub wallabies thick growth.’ He explains how pre-1788 Aboriginal people catered for these preferences, for example, by coupling ‘preferred feed and shelter by refining grass, forests, belts, clumps and clearings into templates: unlike plant communities [that were] associated, distributed and maintained for decades or centuries to prepare country for day-to-day working. Templates set land and life patterns for generations of people.’ This management system led to a continent-wide system of farmed land without fences: there was no need for fences physically or in the mind. We see how ‘[T]he Dreaming taught why the world must be maintained; the land taught how ... [O]ne was spiritual and universal, the other practical and local.’ (p.139, Ch.5 ‘Country’). Here was a rich symbiotic relationship making people part of the land, their country.

The result was a fecund and productive landscape scattered with

trees, rich with an understorey 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 with his prescient words that ‘the ... landscape itself to those who know how to read it aright is the richest historical record we possess.’<sup>1</sup>

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 comment in 1864 that ‘Purely untutored humanity interferes comparatively little with the arrangements of nature.’<sup>2</sup> 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 understorey, 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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#### Endnotes

- 1 Hoskins, W. G. (1955), *The Making of the English Landscape*, London: Hodder & Stoughton.; p.15.
- 2 Marsh G P (1864), *Man and Nature*, New York: Charles Scribner.

## Museum Educator's Handbook

Graeme K. Tallboys

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What makes a good museum educator? Each museum, collecting or heritage agencies will have their own biases for what they are looking for in a museum educator. Working in a small national capital, Canberra, Australia, with over fourteen national cultural institutions related to the museum world, it is possible to view the mobility of museum educators and the skills and prerequisites that are required to work as a museum educator. From observation, I have found that not all museum educators need to have a specific teacher training degree. It comes with practiced skill; often personality can help; as well as an understanding of the discipline related to each museum, such as history, archeology or science. Experience in drama can also add to the skills list. All these combined with learning theories can make great museum educators. In reviewing Graeme Tallboy's *Museum Educator's Handbook*, he would no doubt add good administration knowledge as well.

It is easy to see why this book is in its third edition since its original publication in 2000. It is a very practical book that leads the novice museum educator step-by-step through the processes of both as museum educator or for someone setting up a museum education unit within a museum. Although it presumes that the reader is already employed in a museum, rather than for a student who is encountering museum studies or education for the first time, Tallboys acknowledges that museum educators come from a very broad and varied career pathway. He paints a picture of the lie of the land, how museums operate generally world-wide and the context in which they are required to operate.

The handbook is very organisation oriented, and gives a clear picture of bureaucratic processes that a museum educator may have to encounter and sets up the museum educator to deal with the business side of museums. One section that stands out in particular is the chapter or section on producing policy (Chapter 6). This chapter builds on Chapter 4 ('Setting up – background research') which encourages the reader to do a good deal of gathering of information. Rather than initially considering the existing museum's audience, Tallboys suggests first profiling the general population within the local and regional geography of the museum, then secondly looking at the Museum's characteristics, that is, aspects such as the existing collection, the specialisation, the physical space, staffing structures, policies, protocols and the lines of communication. By indicating how this information can be used, he encourages the museum educator to think of new and potential audiences. This paradigm seems to be a more creative approach. It encourages lateral thinking about not only physical resources but also about using external professionals and skilled people who are potential contributors to museum education programs.

Tallboys encourages the reader to record quite a bit of basic information through observations, formal and informal evaluations as well as 'grey' matter that exists within the museum itself. Initially I thought this gathering of vast material was a little over the top, but in Chapter 6, he illustrates how the information can be used, preparing the educator to be ready to work with administrators and bureaucrats, thus giving control with the power of such knowledge. He also shows how this can be used in thinking about writing policies that are dynamic and reasonably forward thinking.

I found that there is not a lot of signposting or references, although a good bibliography is present. It is clear that it is a handbook and not a theoretical textbook. However, in discussing User Groups (Chapter 7) there are very short accounts of various audiences that a museum may attract. Tallboys does mention that there are three basic categories of learning theory: behaviourist, cognitive and constructivist approaches but without indicating key authors (present in the bibliography) that may take the reader to the next level. For example, two pages are devoted to the five- to sixteen-year olds in state-funded education systems without any mention of key theorists. It is a very general account of what is often the largest audience for museums. He writes 'this [theoretical approaches] may seem high flown for a museum educator ...' I would have thought it essential to bone up on learning theories.

By the same token, Tallboys does consider that there is variety within the broad student groups such as those educated at home, privately educated students, non-formal groups (such as Scouts/Guides, Sunday School groups, 'Young Archeologists' and so on), various tertiary groups of students as well as in-service teacher training groups.

The strength of this handbook is the logistics of working as a museum educator. The next edition would necessarily really engage with the major changes that online social media has brought to the world of museums.

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Aboriginal people spent far less time and effort than Europeans in securing food and shelter, and this book reveals how. Once Aboriginal people were no longer able to tend their country, it became overgrown and vulnerable to the hugely damaging bushfires Australians now experience.Â Reveals the complex, country-wide systems of land management used by Aboriginal people in presettlement Australia Across Australia, early Europeans commented again and again that the land looked like a park, with extensive grassy patches and pathways, open woodlands, and abundant wildlife. Bill Gammage has discovered this was because Aboriginal people managed the land in a far more systematic and scientific fashion than most people have ever realized. The Biggest Estate tells a fascinating story of how thousands of generations of the First Australians shaped our land. Now in just five or six generations of white settlement, we have damaged it, hopefully not irretrievably. My first doubts about the vandalism of settlement came after my mother retired to Alice Springs in the centre of Australia.Â Some time in the future we must redevelop these skills and make Australia truly beautiful again. I bought "The Biggest Estate" as a Kindle but have bought two copies of the print edition for my older children for Christmas. The print edition is a treasure. It will be the responsibility of them and their children to carry out this mission. Across Australia, early Europeans commented again and again that the land looked like a park, with extensive grassy patches and pathways, open woodlands, and abundant wildlife. Bill Gammage has discovered this was because Aboriginal people managed the land. la Reveals the complex, country-wide systems of land management used by Aboriginal people in presettlement Australia.Â Probably the best part of the book is the chapter "Heaven on Earth" which explains how this system of land management and farming of animals and plants fitted with indigenous cosmology, especially the idea of an eternal and ever-existent "dreaming" and the process of on-going, ever-existent creation.