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978-0-521-44691-4 - A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being

Tony Swain

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*Towards a History of
Australian Aboriginal Being*

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[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	ix
Introduction	1
1 Worlds to endure	13
2 Songs of a wayfarer	69
3 A new sky hero from a conquered land	114
4 Our mother from northern shores	159
5 From the mother to the millennium	212
Conclusion	276
<i>Index</i>	297
Maps	
1 Cultural blocs within Aboriginal Australia	8
2 Cape York Peninsula, Gulf of Carpentaria	70
3 South-east Australia	116
4 Central-north Australia	161
5 Pastoral areas	216

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

To take a strange land
as one's home,
Is folly beyond compare.

Cao Xueqin, *Hong Lou Meng*

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for Dev and Max

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Two pieces of paper were pinned above my desk as I wrote this book.

The first was a newspaper clipping reporting that American astrophysicists had made a discovery that overturned the accepted view of the cosmos. It was a pulsar, formed by an exploding star, flashing at the unheard-of rate of 2,000 times per second. Re-evaluations were necessary, dozens of papers were written, until at last the novel phenomenon was fully embraced by theory.

Am I suggesting this work is a comparable attempt to reinterpret cosmologies so as to account for aberrant data? My answer, most certainly, is yes. But first I should finish the story of the scientists.

Those ingenious theorists were only slightly taken aback when someone amongst them observed that if the TV camera attached to their telescope was turned off, then the 'pulsar' too was gone. The event was hailed as 'an almighty cockup', but the scientists knew better. Said one of his paper: 'It's tremendously convincing. The only thing that's wrong with it is that it's wrong'. And another, even less perturbed: 'It's not a dead loss. I had a great time thinking about it'.¹

Contained in this book is without doubt a radical reinterpretation of Australian Aboriginal existence, and search as I assuredly have, to date no trace of any interfering 'bug' has been found attached to my argument (although, quite frankly, I shall not be unduly dismayed if someone else gleefully spies it out for me). I appreciate that it is currently proper for academics to seek immortality through their work, but I am content to have had some fun trying to tame wayward data.

The other piece of paper on my desk bore the words of a writer who knew all this and much more. In what must stand as the most delightful preface ever written, he said:

My friends are all broad-minded, and well educated, but we do not keep a record of our conversations. The reason for this is (1) we are too lazy, and do not aspire to fame; (2) to talk gives us pleasure, but to write would

give trouble; (3) none of us would be able to read it again after our deaths, so why worry; (4) if we wrote something this year we should probably find it all wrong the next year.²

And so, not wanting to write about those things he took even half seriously, he chose instead to produce 'a trifle', 'a hotchpotch', designed to give him pleasure whilst awaiting his friends' return.

Am I this time suggesting scholarship is to be treated as an interim plaything? My answer, once again, is most certainly yes. But before those holding tight to the earnestness of academic pursuits proclaim I have therefore succeeded, in terms of my credibility, in shooting off my own foot, let me now conclude the story of the writer of that preface.

His book was the *Shui-hu Chuan*, which came to be recognised as one of the four great classics of the most populous nation on earth, and which not only inspired millions upon millions of individual lives, but which also helped fire many anti-oppression and anti-imperialist movements, not least of them the Boxer uprising³ and the revolutions of Mao Tse Tung.⁴

History threshes human endeavours, depending upon the whim of its passing. Some, like our astrophysicists, fall like chaff. Others change the world when that was not their ambition, and even had that been a goal to which the author of the *Shui-hu* did not object, he had the good statistical sense to predict it most unlikely he would be reborn in a form capable of appreciating its realisation. If scholarly pursuits have any value that transcends time, it must therefore be as play.

For reminding me of this fact, I have happily dedicated this work to two of my most loved companions, Devlin and Dominique, who are irrepressible, outrageous and, above all, filled with life's playfulness.

A final pleasant matter to be dealt with in this preface is saying thanks to friends and colleagues who have offered their help. In return, as the author of the *Shui-hu* wrote, 'I shall be satisfied if a few of my friends will read it and be interested'. Eric Sharpe, Garry Trompf and Carole Cusack have, as always, been tireless in their support. For their critical comments on various chapters I am also grateful to John Clegg, Francesca Merlan, Peter Koeppling, David Turner and Bruce Swain. Yvonne White's superb editorial skills were invaluable. All of these people should rightly share in any merit this book might have. The influence of Dany Flint goes deeper, however, and with her I will share the blame.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xi

NOTES

1. D. Anderson, 'Literary Theory Lightly Bends the Ear', *The Sydney Morning Herald* (April 21 1990), p. 72.
2. Shih Nai-an, *Water Margin*, translated by J.H. Jackson (Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 1963), vol. 1, 'Introduction' (no pagination).
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4. e.g. see S.R. Schram, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse Tung* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 197.