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The First Boat People

The First Boat People concerns how people travelled across the world to Australia in the Pleistocene. It traces movement from Africa to Australia offering a new view of population growth at that time, challenging current ideas and underscoring problems with the 'Out of Africa' theory of how modern humans emerged. The variety of routes, strategies and opportunities that could have been used by those first migrants is proposed against the very different regional geography that existed at that time. Steve Webb shows the impact of human entry into Australia on the megafauna using fresh evidence from his work in Central Australia, including a description of palaeoenvironmental conditions existing there during the last two glaciations. He argues for an early human arrival and describes in detail the skeletal evidence for the first Australians. This is a stimulating account for students and researchers in biological anthropology, human evolution and archaeology.

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This book is dedicated to the memories of Rhys Jones and Peter Clark, two great friends who were immersed in the story of Australia's human beginnings.

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Preface

This book arose out of pure curiosity of where it might take me. I also wanted to write down a number of ideas that I have been thinking about for many years as well as some more recent ones. The bottom line of the ideas focuses on the origin and timing of the first people to enter Australia. The subject now, however, is infinitely more complex than it used to be because it seems the more we learn about the process the less we know. The subject leads into the origin of modern humans; what happened to more archaic humans in our region, the abilities of early humans like *Homo erectus* and how large the world's population was by the late Pleistocene. Indeed, how did humanity grow, where were the main growth centres and what were the characteristics and outcome of that growth? I have come to accept, however, that in this business for every question answered two more appear.

There are some accepted norms regarding Pleistocene palaeodemography that require challenge. So I have tried to challenge them and put forward some conclusions that to some may seem eccentric. The main object is to open all doors; put up the challenges, have a fresh look at the evidence before us and propose some what ifs. Perhaps the most interesting thing about archaeology is that it constantly surprises. Our ideas about the past are constantly challenged or turned on their heads. New discoveries alter paradigms and philosophy regarding our ancestors and their story. Just as we think we know what that story is, it changes sometimes 180 degrees.

The ideas presented here have emerged as an attempt to answer the many questions that surround Pleistocene palaeodemography and migration and how these contrived to place people in Australia. They also attempt to answer some fundamental question that always pop up during any discussion of this topic. Some of these include:

1. Who were the first people to arrive in Australia?
2. What did they look like?
3. Where did they come from?
4. Why did they come here and when did they arrive?
5. Was there more than one migration?
6. How many of them were there on that first landing?

7. Where did they land?
8. How long did it take them to get here?
9. Where did they go after they arrived?
10. What effect did they have on the Australian megafauna?

The list goes on but answers to all these lie in knowing something of world population growth and human migration patterns over the hundreds of thousands of years prior to the arrival of the first Australians.

Was there a natural curiosity among people that made them just explore, or were there more fundamental reasons such as population pressure or invasion of their lands by others? Perhaps a natural catastrophe made them move! To me all these are intriguing questions and, although some may have been asked before, answers continue to elude us. Some researchers regard them as too difficult to tackle and they should be avoided at all cost. It has been expressed to me that only the eccentric or foolhardy would tackle questions in prehistory that are almost impossible to answer. I do not believe it is eccentric or foolhardy to discuss mysteries of the past and try and apply our data, albeit very scrappy at times, in an effort to provide answers or avenues forward. This book does not hide from hard questions nor does it shirk from trying to provide answers, albeit that some might think some of the propositions I have made constitute a one-way ticket off the planet. The subject matter is difficult and will always be so, but that is no reason to ignore it. Questions arising are likewise difficult to provide answers to and this book does not provide definitive answers to them either and I doubt whether any single book ever will. Instead it takes a look at the broad perspective and tries to offer solutions using logical possibilities as well as the available data. My belief is that only by discussing the questions will we ever come close to solving them. I also believe that discussing seemingly unsolvable issues lacking data does not necessarily make one odd – just curious.

When I began writing, it seemed that I continually came back to one fundamental question and that was: How big was the world's population at the time the first people entered Australia? After all, why would people move here if someone were not behind them? Surely, nobody would want to be out there on their own? We know the world's population must have grown over the last million years to produce us and those that entered Australia. So, my curiosity moved along a chain of events back into the past to consider world population growth. That process inevitably required that I try and produce some idea of how many people lived on the planet at the beginning of the whole process – at least one million years ago. So I found myself beginning the process of trying to find out how many people may have been around at the time of the *Homo erectus* diaspora from Africa and what the growth of

Pleistocene populations might have looked like, particularly in southeast Asia. To do this I used some basic principles of palaeodemography and a detailed but parsimonious description of world population in the Lower Pleistocene. Without knowing something of these issues together with an assessment of glacial and interglacial environmental and sea level changes, later human migrations into Australia and the megafaunal extinctions that followed do not make much sense. I propose how these events might have taken place and their timing. I assess options available to people when they arrived in Australia and discuss early Australian demographics as well as colonisation tactics and options using results of my own research in Central Australia. Finally, I present a description of the best fossil evidence for the earliest Australian people also using my own recent research and from this I offer some thoughts on the origin of the first Australians and their culture.

The few attempts to answer these questions reflect, perhaps, a well-advised caution many have towards a ‘theoretical’ approach to prehistory and that is natural enough. Most attempts at modelling Australia’s regional palaeodemography were written some time ago. They are limited in their scope and mainly concentrate on the progress of people moving into Australia under present environmental circumstances. Recent research I have carried out with others has begun to shed much light on the environmental conditions prevailing when people entered the continent, from the penultimate glaciation through to the last interglacial. It is hoped that this book brings together these new data in a synthesis that makes better sense of Australia’s formative palaeodemography. No doubt the book will soon be superseded. I look forward to that because it will mean that fresh data will have been found that helps us on our way to understanding the first chapter in the human story of this continent. Although answers to many of the above questions still elude us, I hope that this book may make answering at least some a little easier, or make the reader think a little harder about them. Many may not agree with what I say, others may quote that now famous Australian riposte ‘he’s dreaming’. But ‘dreaming’ is something the first Australians believe tells them how they began; perhaps it’s time to join them in this.