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## Beginnings, c. 50,000 years before the present—c. 1600

How and when did Australia begin? One version of the country's origins – a version taught to generations of school children and set down in literature and art, memorials and anniversaries – would have it that Australian history commenced at the end of the eighteenth century. In 1770, after several centuries of European voyaging in the southern oceans, the English naval lieutenant James Cook sailed the length of the continent fringed by the Pacific, named it New South Wales, and claimed possession in the name of his monarch. Within twenty years the British government dispatched an expedition to settle New South Wales. On 26 January 1788 its commander, Arthur Phillip, assumed government over the eastern half of the country. The thirteen hundred officers, troops, civilian officials and convicted felons who came ashore from the eleven vessels of the First Fleet at anchor in Sydney Harbour prepared the way for later immigrants, bond and free, who spread out over the continent, explored and settled, possessed and subdued it.

This is a story of a sleeping land brought to life by *Endeavour*, the name given to Cook's sturdy ship and the spirit attributed to those who followed him. The chroniclers of the First Fleet related how a landing party unloaded the stores, cleared a space on the wooded slopes of Sydney Cove and erected their first habitations. They were recording the advent of civilisation. The sound of an axe on wood, English steel on antipodean eucalypt, broke the silence of a primeval wilderness.

The newcomers brought with them livestock, plants and tools. They also brought a mental toolkit fashioned from the objective rationality of the Enlightenment, the moral certainty and stern duty of evangelical Christianity, and the acquisitive itch of the market. Those ways of thinking and acting made possible the establishment of European dominion over the rest of the world. That accomplishment in turn shaped the understanding of economics, resources, navigation, trade, botany, zoology, anthropology – and history. History served the drive to control and order the natural world, to understand and even direct events. A new awareness of geography and chronology, of space and time as fixed and measurable, encouraged an understanding of history as a branch of knowledge independent of the standpoint of the observer, while at the same time it disclosed an insistent process of improvement and progress that legitimated the replacement of the old by the new. Seen thus, the history of Australia formed a late chapter in British, European and world history.

This version of Australia's beginning emphasised its strangeness. The plants and animals, even the human inhabitants, confounded existing taxonomies; they were both old and new. The monotremes and marsupials, warm-blooded animals that reproduced by egg or carried their offspring in a pouch, seemed to be primitive forerunners of the placental mammal, and at the same time a bizarre inversion of nature. Hence the puzzlement of the early New South Wales judge and rhymester, Barron Field:

Kangaroo, Kangaroo!  
Thou Spirit of Australia!  
That redeems from utter failure,  
From perfect desolation,  
And warrants the creation  
Of this fifth part of the Earth  
Which would seem an after-birth . . .

In this version of Australian history, the novelty of the place – it was New Holland before it became New South Wales – was softened by attaching its destiny to imperial origins. Colonial history took British and European achievement as its point of departure. Behind the rude improvisation on the furthest frontier of settlement of the British Empire was the inheritance of institutions, customs and expectations.

A naval officer who in 1803 watched a team of convicts yoked to a cart that was sunk up to its axles in the unpromising sand hills of a southern bay comforted himself with the vision of ‘a second Rome, rising from a coalition of Banditti . . . superlative in arms and arts’.

That settlement was abandoned, and the officer returned eventually to England, but others stayed and reworked his anticipation. The subsequent visionaries thought of Australia not as mere imitation but as striking out anew. They believed that the unbroken horizons of this vast island-continent offered the opportunity to escape the Old World evils of poverty, privilege and rancour. With the transition in the middle of the nineteenth century from penal settlements to free and self-governing communities, the emphasis shifted from colonial improvement to national experimentation. With the gold rush, agricultural settlement and urban growth, minds turned from dependency to self-sufficiency, and from a history that worked out the imperial legacy to one of self-discovery.

During the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, the sentiment of colonial nationalism served the desire to mark Australia off from Britain and Europe. Then, as the last imperial ties were severed, even that way of distinguishing the child from the parent lost meaning. In its place arose the idea of Australia as a destination for all-comers from every part of the world, which served the multicultural attitudes that formed in the closing decades of the twentieth century and further undermined the foundational significance of 1788. The blurring of origins turned Australian history into a story of journeys and arrivals, shared by all and continuing right up to the present. But such smudging was too convenient. It failed to satisfy the need for emotional attachment and it left unappeased the pricking of conscience. The desire for a binding national past that would connect the people to place was frustrated by a feeling of rootlessness, of novelty without depth. The longing for an indigenous culture was denied by the original usurpation. A history of colonisation yielded to a realisation of invasion.

By the end of the twentieth century it was no longer possible to maintain the fiction of Australia as *terra nullius*, a land that until its settlement in 1788 lacked human habitation, law, government or history. An alternative beginning was apparent. Australia – or, rather, the earlier landmass of Sahul, a larger island-continent that

extended northwards into Papua New Guinea and embraced the present island of Tasmania – was the site of an ancient way of life that had evolved over many millennia. The growing recognition of this vastly extended Australian history spoke to late-twentieth-century sensibility. It revealed social organisation, ecological practices, languages, art forms and spiritual beliefs of great antiquity and richness. By embracing the Aboriginal past, non-Aboriginal Australians attached themselves to their country.

They did so, however, not simply out of a desire for reconciliation and harmony but because they were challenged by the Aboriginal presence. The rediscovery of the longer history occurred alongside the revival of Indigenous organisation and culture, the one process feeding into the other and yet each possessing its own dynamic. For the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the European invasion was a traumatic event with lasting consequences for their mode of life, health, welfare and very identity. But theirs was also a story of survival – the survival of their customs and practices and of the stories and songs through which they were maintained. The second version of Australian history, the one that begins not at 1788 in the Western calendar but 50,000 years or more before the present, is at once more controversial, more rapidly changing and more compelling.

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The island-continent of Australia, so the scientists tell us, formed as the great supercontinent of Pangea broke up in the remote past. First Laurasia in the north separated from Gondwana in the south. Then what would become India, Africa, South America and New Zealand broke free from Gondwana and drifted north, and later still – perhaps 50 million years ago – Australia and New Guinea did the same, until finally they stopped short of the island chain that extends from Indochina down to Timor. Although the oceans rose and fell with periods of warmth and cold, this vast land-raft was always surrounded by water. The deep channel that today separates South-East Asia from the northwest coast of Australia narrowed at times to as little as 100 kilometres, but it never closed. The sea always separated Sahul, the continental shelf that encompassed

Australia, Tasmania and New Guinea, from Sunda, the archipelago that took in Malaya, Sumatra, Borneo and Java. The separation came to be known as the Wallace Line, after the nineteenth-century scientist who showed that it was a permanent zoological divide that demarcated Eurasian species from those of Australia and New Guinea.

Australia was thus isolated. It was also remarkably geologically stable. There was little of the buckling and folding of the earth's crust that elsewhere produced high mountain ranges or deep rifts. Together with the relative absence of glaciation and the infrequency of volcanic activity, this left an older, flatter landmass, rich in mineral deposits but shallow in soil covering. Weathering and erosion leached the soil of nutrients. The remarkable diversity of plants and animals that evolved and flourished in this environment had to adapt to major climatic changes. Rainforests expanded and contracted, inland lakes filled and emptied, carnivores were less durable than herbivores.

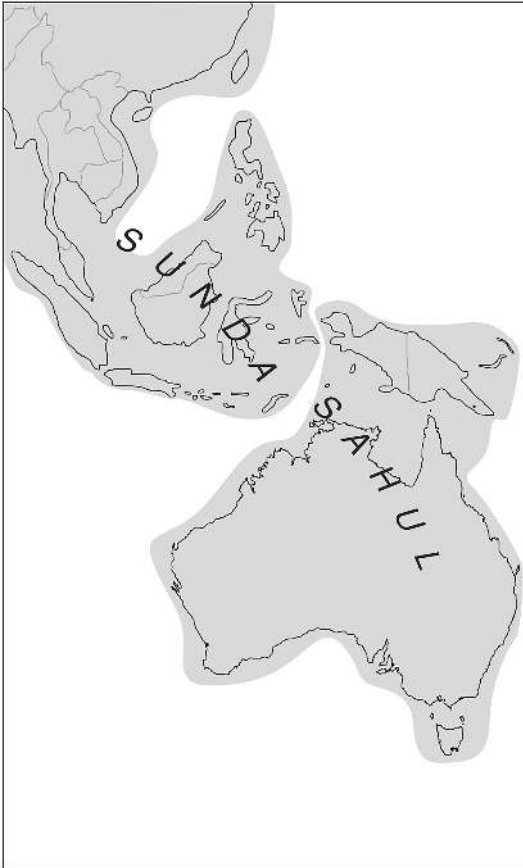
When the last ice age ended some 10,000 years ago and the present shoreline formed, Australia extended 3700 kilometres from the northern tropics to the southern latitudes, and 4400 kilometres from east to west. Much was arid plain, and much of the rain that fell on the line of mountains running down the eastern seaboard flowed into the Pacific Ocean. More than any other landmass, this one was marked by the infrequency and unreliability of rain. Its erratic climate is the outcome of interplay between warm influences from the north and cool systems from the south. In addition, variations in atmospheric pressure across the vast oceans that surround the island-continent cause periodic swings in weather patterns. Twentieth-century scientists created the El Niño Oscillation Index to measure a climatic phenomenon that occurs when the trade winds that blow from the east across the Pacific Ocean fail. With that failure, warm water accumulates off the South American coast and brings fierce storms to the Americas; conversely, the colder water on this side of the Pacific reduces evaporation and cloud formation, and thus causes prolonged drought in eastern Australia. Sometimes El Niño gives way to La Niña, when the trade winds blow strongly and warm air on this side of the Pacific brings cyclones and floods. Such changes occur unpredictably every three

to seven years, and climatologists have detected them in records going back to the early nineteenth century. Along with a similar phenomenon in the Indian Ocean, they appear to have operated for much longer and shaped the Australian environment.

The natural historians who marvel at the rich diversity of this singular environment find in it an ingenious anthropomorphism. The plants best suited to such circumstances sent down deep roots to search for moisture, used narrow leaves and tough bark to minimise evaporation and loss of vital fluid, and scattered seeds capable of regeneration after lying for long periods on the dry earth. They were frugal in their eking out of nutrients and prodigal in their reproduction. Some of them, such as the stands of eucalypts that spread a blue haze under the hot sun, actively enlisted the assistance of the conditions by strewing the ground with incendiary material to burn off competitors and stimulate their own regeneration. In the pyrohistory of Australia, the vast and sleeping continent is reconfigured as an arena in which the gum trees triumphed by kindling a fiery vortex.

Such fires would have been ignited periodically by lightning strikes or other natural causes, but by this time there was another incendiary agent – humans. The acquisition of control over fire by *Homo sapiens* provided protection, heat, light and power: the domestic hearth became the site and symbol of human society. It might well have been the sight of columns of smoke rising on the northwest shore of Sahul that attracted people on island extremities of Sunda to cross the intervening sea. We do not know when this passage occurred, why, or even how. It was undertaken by enterprising boat people, possibly as the result of population pressure, at a time when the oceans were low. The most recent low-point, 150 metres below present sea level, occurred during the last ice age about 20,000 years ago, but the evidence of occupation before then is clear. The same low-point occurred during the previous glacial period some 130,000 years ago, too early. In between these two approximate dates, the sea was some 75 metres lower about 50,000 years ago.

No part of Australian history has undergone greater change than the first chapter of its human occupation. It used to be thought this lasted no more than 10,000 years; then excavation of a cave in



Map 1.2 Sunda and Sahul

western Queensland in 1962 yielded samples of material 19,000 years old, and within a decade further discoveries pushed that baseline back to 40,000 years. Since then there have been claims of sites in northern Australia going back 65,000 years and more, though these press up against the limits of reliable dating methods. The argument is clouded by the publicity that new findings attract. When John Mulvaney, Australia's first trained archaeologist, made his discovery in 1962, he was told that it was of no interest to the public, whereas stories of sites going back 100,000 years and more make front-page news long before they are submitted to

expert appraisal. Meanwhile our knowledge of the movement of *Homo sapiens* out of Africa into Eurasia, and interaction with earlier humans, is under revision as the result of new archaeology and DNA analysis.

Although further research might well extend the human occupation of Australia, the notion that older is better does a disservice to this remarkable achievement. Since the place of first occupation on the expanded coastline of Sahul is now submerged, we cannot be sure when or where it occurred. It might have been off the present coast of West Papua or that of northern Western Australia, and it is likely to have been around 50,000 years ago. Wherever or whenever it happened, it was an event of world significance – the first maritime migration beyond the contiguous continents of Africa and Eurasia to a new land. This feat required the voyagers to cross open water on a journey that would have taken at least two to three days with the assistance of paddle or sail, and involved the carriage of food, water and tools. The peopling of Sahul attests to a capacity for planning, information sharing and co-operative endeavour. That it was purposeful is demonstrated by the need for multiple, coordinated voyages to build a demographically viable founder population of at least a thousand – a similar number as landed in Sydney in 1788.

Such an achievement so long ago strains our comprehension. It falls within the span of what used to be called prehistory, which understood ancient history to have commenced some 10,000 years before the present with agriculture and permanent settlement, then script and the beginning of recorded history. A rich and complex Aboriginal society was established so long before those ancient civilisations as to turn world history on its head. Such is the longevity of this one that argument over precisely when it began risks confusing the detail with the substance.

Besides, the quest to establish when human habitation began in Australia has to be reconciled with the conviction of the country's custodians that they have always been here. The first professional archaeologists who excavated sites in remote regions had little understanding of what that custodianship involved. In publishing their findings, they unwittingly disclosed places, objects and activities in violation of customary law. In 1968 and 1974 they took



possession of the remains of Mungo Lady and Mungo Man, named after a degraded pastoral station in western New South Wales, who had lain there for 40,000 years on the shores of what was then an inland lake system. One who was involved in the discovery of Mungo Man recalled that it did not occur to him or his colleagues that the traditional owners might object to the rediscovery of their past. But they did object and archaeologists accepted an obligation to obtain permission for fieldwork; it now requires extensive consultation with the owners, who contribute their own knowledge as partners in the enterprise. Mungo Lady was repatriated to the custodianship of the traditional owners in 1992, Mungo Man not until 2015. Many custodians have come to accommodate archaeological investigation, though scepticism remains about the knowledge it produces. Lottie Williams, one of the elders who received the remains of Mungo Man at a ceremony at the Australian National University, was happy to take him back to where he belonged but still unconvinced by the story scientists working there had pieced together: ‘me and the rest of us know we were here all the time, so that wasn’t news to us’.

The truth is, of course, that my own people, the Riratjungi, are descended from the great Djankawa who came from the island of Baralku, far across the sea. Our spirits return to Baralku when we die. Djankawa came in his canoe with his two sisters, following the morning star which guided them to the shores of Yelangbara on the eastern coast of Arnhem Land. They walked far across the country following the rain clouds. When they wanted water they plunged their digging stick into the ground and fresh water followed. From them we learnt the names of all the creatures on the land and they taught us all our Law.

The Djankawa story told by Wandjuk Marika is only one of many Aboriginal stories. Others tell of different origins, of ancestors coming from the land or from the sky, and of the mutability of humans with other life forms. This story is of origins that begin with a journey, of the signs that led the ancestors to their destination, and of the bounty of the land that sustained them.

Such creation stories are to be found for other peoples, as with the books of Genesis and Exodus in the Old Testament, but they bear lightly on the consciousness of those who now read these ancient scriptures. Ancestral events, as recorded in stories, songs and rituals,

have a marked significance in Aboriginal lives, for they express a particularly close relationship to the land. The events that occurred during what is commonly called the Dreamtime or the Dreaming – both English terms are used as inexact translations of that used by the Arrernte people of Central Australia: *altyerre* – created the hills and creeks, plants and animals, and imprinted their spirit on the place.

The preservation and practice of this knowledge thus affirms the custodianship of country. Here is how a Northern Territory artist, Paddy Japaljarri Stewart, explains its importance:

My father's grandfather taught me the first, and after a while my father taught me the same way as his father told jukurrpa [Dreaming], and then my father is telling the same story about what his father told him, and now he's teaching me how to live on the same kind of jukurrpa and follow the way what my grandfather did, and then teach what my father did, and then I'm going to teach my grandchildren the same way as my father taught me.

When my father was alive this is what he taught me. He had taught me traditional ways like traditional designs in body or head of kangaroo Dreaming (that's what we call marlu Dreaming) and eagle Dreaming. He taught me how to sing song for the big ceremonies. People who are related to us in a close family, they have to have the same sort of jukurrpa Dreaming, and to sing songs in the same way as we do our actions like dancing, and paintings on our body or shields or things, and this is what my father taught me. My Dreaming is the kangaroo Dreaming, the eagle Dreaming and budgerigar Dreaming, so I have three kinds of Dreaming in my jukurrpa and I have to hang onto it. This is what my father taught me, and this is what I have to teach my sons, and my son has to teach his sons the same way as my father taught me, and that's way it will go on from grandparents to sons, and follow that jukurrpa. No-one knows when it will end.

Paddy Japaljarri Stewart recorded this testimony, by tape-recorder, in his own language in 1991. He evokes the continuity of Dreaming from grandfather and father to son and grandson, down the generations and across the passage of time; yet the insistence on the obligation to preserve and transmit his three jukurrpas attests to the corrosive possibilities of secular change. He goes on to aver that the maintenance of the Dreaming has to be 'really strict', so that his family will not 'lose it like a paper, or throw it away or give it away to other families'. The overlay of new technology on customary