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What is 'Deep History'?

Archaeology of Ancient Australia and
the Importance of the Dark Emu Debate

Thinking Archaeologically About
Australia's Deep Time History

Engaging Students in First Nations History

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WARNING

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that the first article, 'What is 'Deep History'?', contains an image of a deceased person.

WHAT IS 'DEEP HISTORY'?

Professor Ann McGrath, School of History, Australian National University

Deep history aims to address the long time span of human history that extends beyond the modern, the pre-modern, the medieval and the ancient – or at least that which is usually defined as such. This makes deep history especially important for any study of Australian history; a story that cannot be fully told without expanding our thinking about history's periodisation. This new 'historical turn' reflects an effort to shift the discipline's framings.

Deep history encompasses a kind of history that is more inclusive of epochs of time, of places, people and perspectives. As an evolving field, historians are exploring ways to engage with new kinds of historical evidence, and above all, with multiple perspectives on what history is, and what it might be. At least this is how we practice deep history in our Centre for Deep History at the Australian National University. In the Australian context, we see it as an essentially collaborative practice with Indigenous scholars and knowledge holders.¹ One of the key questions that deep history addresses is the question of why Indigenous people have so long been perceived as history's outsiders, as not being players in global history, and as somehow not having a history of their own.

In the late 1960s, prominent Australian archaeologist John Mulvaney tried to do something about this, entitling his book *The Prehistory of Australia*.² He intended the term 'prehistory' to gesture towards inclusion – for Indigenous Australians to be thought of as having 'history', but over a span of human time prior to the advent of writing. Unfortunately, the term only reinforced the notion of the 'pre', as if implying that history proper had not yet begun. An alternative

term was required. The concept of 'deep history' can actively deconstruct the framing of history as one that essentially took place only after European arrival.

Various fields of study have specialised in the study of deep time. Archaeologists meticulously unearth ancient occupation sites, developing expertise in the analysis of various kinds of material evidence. They frequently work in collaborative teams with geological, genomic, chemical, and other scientists to determine dates, theories of origin, migration patterns, diet and more. Around the world, Indigenous peoples now play key roles in this research process, although their perspectives are not necessarily included in published outcomes. Studies by climate scientists, geographers, geomorphologists, astrophysicists, and other scientists also provide significant insights into vast climatic and ecological change and astronomical events that affected human history. So, one might ask, why is this any different to what historians of deep history might do? The main difference is that much of the work of these scholars remains inside the realm of 'science', appearing in specialist journals which deploy technical language and tabulate results with parameters that, in the name of 'data objectivity', often exclude cross-cultural perspectives. These journals certainly publish crucial findings of important factual information, but theirs is a different enterprise to that of the historian – their aim is not necessarily to narrate stories of living, breathing people.

Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argued that the discipline of history should develop an expanded framework that takes geological time into account – a shift he saw as necessary to understanding the Anthropocene era

of human-induced climate change.³ Environmental historians and others now promote an analysis that widens the sphere of historical agency; they consider animals, plants, and things as ‘actants’ of history, thereby challenging the centrality of human action.⁴

In their book *Deep Histories: The architecture of the past and present*, medievalist Daniel Smail and anthropologist Andrew Shyrock argued that scholars and teachers need to work closely with biological and other scientists to understand the long history of hominids, which includes our genus of humans, *Homo sapiens*, but is not exclusive to them.⁵ This is a brilliant book, but it did not seek to take Indigenous or multiple cultural perspectives into account, and it did not pause to consider the unique history that took place on the Australian continent throughout the Holocene and the Pleistocene.⁶

Nonetheless, theirs was a radical move, for the great span of human history beyond about 4000 years has rarely been included in historical accounts, being considered the realm of evolutionary scientists and archaeologists. Sure, life was certainly different than today, but people shared many of the same kinds of experiences.

People who lived long ago still had bodies like ours, and this necessitated their lives being experienced along similar pathways of people today. Let us think about this: they enjoyed food, got hungry and thirsty, they made things, they shared knowledge, they drank, had sex, loved, gave birth to children, nurtured and taught them, enjoyed companionship, interacted with their environment, with animals and plants, and practised art, song, dance and storytelling. Their lives were lived through history; they invented things, they created knowledge and arts, and they made history too. And they were interested in how things came to be as they are. This shared humanity, in my view, is one of the most telling arguments for the study of deep history.

Yet, in the Australian case, even after the great surge in Aboriginal history writing since the 1980s, the key dates of history still feature 1770 and 1788.⁷ Even studies of ‘Aboriginal history’ only commenced their accounts after the arrival of European colonisers. It was as if Europeans had to be on the scene, on the continent of Australia, before Aboriginal Australians could be ‘*in History*’.

This pattern has to do with evolution of the history discipline itself, which tends to rely upon the recording of events in written form. Academic history has been a text-based discipline which has its roots in German, British and other European universities. Its early scholars practised philology, or the study of texts and scripts. Although visual and other kinds of historical evidence are increasingly recognised as valuable, historians continue to be trained primarily as experts in critiquing

various kinds of text-based documents. Consequently, historical accounts have focused on people who practice writing, people with literacy embodied in their cultural traditions. With necessary exceptions, of course. Scholars of what has traditionally been called ancient history had less text-based evidence available, so they learnt to analyse not only symbolic forms of written expression but also a wider variety of material culture including art and sculpture.

In the case of writing Australian history, historians had easy access to the logbooks of Captain Cook, and to the journals of the First Fleet writers (albeit readers should note that they were not necessarily the ‘first fleet’ to the continent). Their accounts were rapidly published, and via the official archives, historians could later access the letters by governors, early colonial elites, and convict surveillance records.

Another factor that led to the exclusion of global Indigenous peoples from history was the naivety of European race assumptions. Their civilisations were under-estimated, as if they awaited the coming of Europeans before they could ‘make history’ and approach modernity.

The concept of ‘deep time’ attempts to actively deconstruct the framing of history as ‘before or after European arrival.’ We may not know exact dates for Indigenous occupation in North America or Australia, but we know that they predate European occupation by many thousands of years. How could their lives be lived entirely ‘outside History’?

Additionally, due to the locale of many key centres of western learning, the whole southern hemisphere has been somewhat neglected in the writing of world history. Global histories have emphasised the northern hemisphere/European perspectives, with ‘ancient history’ assumed to have taken place primarily in Egypt, Greece and Rome – some sites being associated with defining moments in the evolving history of so-called ‘western civilisation’. Where the ‘west’ begins and ends is an issue in itself, as Greece, for example, might have viewed itself as culturally and geographically ‘eastern’. Scholars today speak of the ‘global south’ to mean the less wealthy countries. Yet here we are, Australia, a nation that happens to be in the southern hemisphere but which is one of the wealthiest in the world.

We need to escape history’s northern hemisphere lens. This includes the thinking that ‘Australia’, and its peoples, were not ‘discovered’ until Europeans arrived. We need to overturn the whole concept of ‘discovery’ – whether in ocean navigation or science – as exclusively European.



Figure 1. The now dry Pleistocene lake system of the Willandra Lakes World Heritage area continues to reveal vital information about Australia's deep history. Ancient fireplaces, clay ovens and stone tools frequently appear. The local people are very protective of their ancestors' human remains, and consequently many object to interfering with these remains or reproducing photographic images of them.

Photo: Ann McGrath.



Figure 2. Daniel Kelly (left) and the late Mary Pappin (right) inspecting the Mungo map of family connection to their Country, including Lake Mungo. Photo: Ann McGrath.



Figure 3. Tanya Charles, a Mutthi Mutthi knowledge holder, has worked as a Discovery Ranger leading cultural tours of Lake Mungo. Photo: Ann McGrath.

The Australian continent has long been the land of hundreds of Indigenous nations. At Lake Mungo in south-western New South Wales, communities of people lived and died alongside a large lake system. The Mutthi Mutthi, Nyaampa and Barkintji peoples are custodians of these sites, where there is verifiable scientific evidence from human remains – the most famous of these being, arguably, the world's earliest known cremation. Today known as Mungo Lady, she lived 40,000 years ago. Around the same time, people undertook a ritual burial of Mungo Man, which included the application of red ochre on his remains. At Madjebébe in the Northern Territory, people camped and met, a story that goes back at least 60,000 years ago. And some people still visit there today, continuing this astonishing connection to Country. Footprints of people who chased kangaroos and of children perambulating around a drying lake provide evocative clues to everyday life. In the Willandra Lakes of the Pleistocene era, around 18,000 years ago, people left footprints as they squelched in the mud. Adults were chasing a kangaroo, children were perambulating, a one-legged man was running at speed with the aid of a stick, and one mother carrying a baby moved it from one hip to the other. Given the usual span of ‘ancient history’ going back to the Pyramids, or only as far back as 10,000 years, these Australian dates are remarkable. Remarkable humanising ‘evidence’ creates a sense of immediacy, almost making dates seem irrelevant.

Deep history prompts us to think of the nature and meanings of the term ‘evidence’. There are many other examples of history in our midst. There is rock

art, painted and engraved. There are living histories, ancient memory narratives and art traditions that tell the story of Country forming, epic narratives with parallel evocative power to that of the Greek myths. Aboriginal elders often describe ‘Country’ itself as an archive or as a history book. Works by the Gay’Wu group of women and Yornadaiyn Woolagoodja of Broome and many others provide first person insights.⁸

Deep history must engage with different kinds of history telling and consider distinctive ways of thinking about time or temporality. Many Indigenous cultures do not give primacy to notions of linear time. We should be aware that counting the years as we do today has its own history. Our ‘2022’ is based upon the Gregorian calendar after Pope Gregory, with this way of measuring time itself borrowed from Roman societies via the Julian calendar. ‘Time’ as we measure it today only became uniform in recent centuries. In contrast, Aboriginal Australians have often thought about time as a multi-layered present, a kind of non-linear ‘everywhen’ with things happening on Country. The challenge of deep history is to develop methodologies that use different kinds of clues and different approaches to historical evidence and its periodisations.

Deep history can extend ‘the time of history’, but it might also challenge the emphasis on one of the history discipline’s defining features – western notions of time and chronological thinking in historical storytelling. Deep history offers, potentially globally, to be more inclusive of all the peoples and the places in the world.

Tips for approaching and writing about deep history

- *Respect different historical and narrative traditions.* These require consideration in their own right; they may reveal something of what happened in the past but are especially valuable in revealing how people *think* about the past. How does the past explain the present? And has the past really passed at all?
- *Listen to diverse Indigenous voices, through their earlier records and their recent writings.* History does not have to be a story told only through the eyes of European discoverers or researchers.
- *Explore a wide array of evidence.* Rock art, song cycles, ancient narratives, multi-sensory performances of historical stories. Reflect upon how many Indigenous people may not see their Country as holding ‘evidence’ but rather as offering revelations: the past can ‘break through’ into the present, carefully showing itself to its current-day people.
- *The significance of stories of continuity and the everyday.* Dates, dating and the practice of history as a study of change and turning points may be important, but students also need to understand how people also lived their everyday lives in patterns of continuity.
- *Avoid passive voice and passive depictions.* In sites where deep history took place, you will often hear of how something was ‘discovered’, dated or chemically analysed. Think about the people who wielded the brushes in rock art. Think about the people who did things, of actors and agency.

Endnotes

- ¹ See the website ‘Re. Research Centre for Deep History’, Australian National University, <https://re.anu.edu.au>
- ² John Mulvaney, *The Prehistory of Australia* (New York: Praeger, 1969).
- ³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 3 (2009): 197–222.
- ⁴ Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). For earlier Australian-based discussions, see Deborah Bird Rose, *Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press for AIATSIS, 2002); Deborah Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture* (Oakleigh, Vic.: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- ⁵ Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail, *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
- ⁶ When scholars speak of deep time, it is often divided into climatic geological time periods. These run through the Holocene climatic period, which stretches back to about 11,000 years. It includes the histories of people around the globe who lived during the cooler Pleistocene epoch – which extends far, far longer.
- ⁷ In Australia, since the 1970s, research in the field of ‘Aboriginal history’ was an overdue development. Until this date, much Australian history writing had been about the formation of a European-style nation, about the coming of European discoverers – the navigators and explorers – the structures of government and rule, the ruling classes and then the convicts. Studies of land distribution were about which government legislation applied and whether it was equitable for European settlers. With the influence of civil rights activism in Australia and the United States, this changed dramatically, and historians wanted to write a people’s history – one that included all the people involved in living pasts, including women, Aboriginal people and diverse groups. Social and cultural history became inclusive; history became contested. The history of frontier violence, of Aboriginal dispossession, of intrusive government policies highlighted another kind of Australian history story.
- ⁸ Gay’Wu Group of Women, *Song spirals: sharing women’s wisdom of Country through songlines* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2019); Yornadaiyn Woolagoodja, *Yornadaiyn Woolagoodja* (Broome, W.A.: Magabala 2020).

- *Think about gender.* Due to the longevity of stone tools and the historical nature of the academy, hunting economies are often assumed to be male domains – sites of ‘man the hunter’. Think beyond these assumptions to consider how people negotiated gender roles and identities to create sustainable, flexible societies.

Further Reading – works by the author and team

McGrath, Ann, Rademaker, Laura and Silverstein, Ben. ‘Deep history and deep listening: Indigenous knowledges and the narration of deep pasts’, *Rethinking History* 25, no. 3 (2021): 307–326; DOI: 10.1080/13642529.2021.1966201

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