Indigenous Australia

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Prof. Larissa Behrendt
Author, barrister and Director of Research at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney

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Indigenous Australia

by Larissa Behrendt

Foreword by The Rt Hon. Malcolm Fraser
Former Prime Minister of Australia
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Dedication

For my brother, Jason Behrendt, with thanks for your wisdom and heart.
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It is an unhappy fact that most Australians know far too little about the early settlement of Australia and about the relationship of those settlers with the Indigenous population.

The question of our own history ought to be a significant part of every school’s curriculum and we all need to work for a better understanding of that history. Unfortunately, in public debates there are sharply differing views. One view speaks of the reality, of the harshness, of the dispossession and alienation of many Indigenous people throughout much of Australia. The other view tries to claim that these things did not occur. Somehow this argument needs to be put to rest.

This book is an important contribution to the debate and to our understanding, in straightforward terms, of the relationship between early Australians especially and Indigenous Australians. It underlines the fact that non-Indigenous people have throughout our history made decisions of great significance for Indigenous people in different parts of the country, without taking their views adequately into account. Unfortunately, this attitude still continues.

Recent governments have failed to consult closely with Indigenous communities in various parts of Australia. Two or three years ago when I was travelling through the Kimberley, I spoke with Indigenous people and asked them how they saw this consultation. In simple terms they said, ‘Well, Canberra makes up its mind what is good for us, and consultation consists of trying to persuade us what Canberra has decided is indeed good for us.’ None of us would really call this consultation.

Above all, Australian governments must learn to treat Indigenous Australians with respect, and work on programs with Indigenous leadership in different communities so that there can be Indigenous ownership of the programs as they develop.

*Indigenous Australia For Dummies* is an important contribution to the broad debate and to a better understanding of our past history. Hopefully it will influence future events.

*The Rt Hon. Malcolm Fraser AC CH*
*Former Prime Minister of Australia*
Introduction

Understanding the history and culture of Australia is impossible without understanding the country’s Indigenous peoples. And understanding Australia’s Indigenous peoples is reliant on understanding their history, traditional and contemporary cultural values, worldviews and experiences.

*Indigenous Australia For Dummies* looks at the experiences of Indigenous people, including their political activism and aspirations, and seeks to debunk some of the myths, especially the negative stereotypes, that still exist in Australian society about Indigenous people. Indigenous history and contemporary issues are very political matters in Australia. This book often looks at these matters from an Indigenous perspective, as well as canvassing alternative views.

About This Book

*Indigenous Australia For Dummies* is a general reference book targeting audiences who don’t know much about Australia’s Indigenous peoples but are keen to know more. It looks at both historical and contemporary issues. The book is designed to give readers a good general knowledge of all the issues covered and hopefully inspire them to then read more detailed writings on what can be very complex topics. This book can be read straight through or read selectively by topic, because each chapter is self-contained.

Conventions Used in This Book

Australia’s Indigenous peoples are made up of Aboriginal people — who live all around the country — and Torres Strait Islanders, who settled the many small islands to the north of Cape York Peninsula in Queensland.

Terminology is complex when it comes to Indigenous identity in Australia. The term *Indigenous* is used in this book to describe both Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders. The term *Aboriginal* is used when referring to matters that apply only to Aboriginal people; similarly with the use of the term *Torres Strait Islanders*. The fact that some Aboriginal people don’t like to be called ‘Indigenous’ is also important to remember.
Because Indigenous languages in Australia were originally oral languages — not written — nation or clan names often have multiple spellings. Regional variations on pronunciation have also led to more than one spelling for other words. Throughout the text, when referring to specific nations or clans, I have adopted the most commonly used spelling.

**Note:** As both the author of this book and an Aboriginal person myself, if it sounds like I’m telling the story as an insider, I am.

On a different note, to help you get the information you need as fast as possible, this book uses several conventions:

- **Bold** words make the key terms and phrases in bulleted lists jump out and grab your attention.
- **Italics** signal that a word is an important defined term.
- **Monofont** is used to signal a web address.
- Sidebars, text separated from the rest of the type in grey boxes, are interesting but generally optional reading. You won’t miss anything critical if you skip the sidebars. If you choose to read the sidebars, though, you can benefit from some additional and interesting information.

**Foolish Assumptions**

This book assumes the following about you, the reader:

- That you have a rudimentary understanding of Australian history — such as that Australia was colonised by the British in 1788
- That you have a basic knowledge of Australian geography — or that at least you’re able to look up different places on a map!

**How This Book Is Organised**

This book is divided into six parts plus a glossary. You can read the book in order or you can simply go directly to a topic that interests you. You can use the table of contents and the index to find topics quickly. The glossary lets you cut to the chase on any terms you may want to clarify. Here’s a summary of what each of the parts of this book covers.
**Introduction**

**Part I: An Ancient People, Then and Now**

The chapters in Part I look at the diversity and richness of Indigenous cultures both before and after colonisation. They look at where Indigenous people live now, how they adapted to their environment in order to survive, and the cultural values and beliefs that guide Indigenous worldviews.

**Part II: Invasion**

Part II examines the interaction between Indigenous people and the colonists who arrived and never left. It looks at the growth of the British colonies in Australia and the impact on and reactions of Indigenous people.

**Part III: Indigenous Activism**

This part continues to look at the responses of Indigenous people to the colonisation of their lands. It looks at their political campaigns to gain the same rights as other Australian citizens, and examines attempts to change the Australian Constitution and the actions taken over the years to recover their rights to their traditional lands.

**Part IV: Contemporary Indigenous Cultures**

Indigenous cultures have a rich tradition of art, dance and music that’s as vibrant today as it was before colonisation. They also have a strong tradition of storytelling, which is explored in contemporary mediums such as film, books and broadcasting. Indigenous spiritual traditions, which are often explored, expressed and explained in Indigenous cultural practices, are also pervasive in contemporary Indigenous cultures. And Indigenous people haven’t just contributed to broader Australian cultural life through their creative arts; they have also done so with their sporting prowess. This part covers all of these avenues of cultural expression.

**Part V: Dealing With Current Issues**

The chapters in this part tackle some of the difficult issues facing Indigenous people today — such as lower literacy rates, poorer housing and higher unemployment levels — but they also examine some of the policies and programs that are working to meet these challenges.
Part VI: The Part of Tens

This part looks at some inspirational ‘firsts’ for the Indigenous community. It also identifies important cultural sites, some of the myths about Indigenous people and some important legal decisions.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout this book, the following icons are used to help you identify when you’re about to learn something special, quirky or significant.

This is important information about Indigenous cultures that allows you to better understand Indigenous people.

Many myths, misunderstandings and stereotypes about Indigenous people have become widespread since European settlement of Australia. This information straightens out a few of those things.

Information adjacent to this icon helps to give a deeper understanding of the topic being discussed.

This is specialised information, often legal in nature, that explains terms or gives the background to a topic.

This icon denotes a piece of advice about the subject matter being discussed that helps you to learn more.

Where to Go from Here

You can approach this book any way you like. You can read from start to finish — and perhaps skip some things along the way that you already know or are less interested in. Or you can go straight to the topics you’re most interested in and dive right in there. For Dummies books are meant to be fun to read as well as informative, so go ahead and enjoy!
Part I
An Ancient People: Then and Now

Glenn Lumsden

‘Nullius?!? What’s Latin for “Been here for 60 000 years”?’
Aboriginal people have been in Australia for at least 60,000 years; Torres Strait Islanders at least 2,500 years. As the Australian environment changed over that span of time, Indigenous peoples’ cultures adapted as well. By the time the British arrived in 1788 to establish their colony, Indigenous cultures were rich and diverse. They remain that way today in their contemporary forms.

This part gives you an overview of why it’s important to understand Indigenous history, cultures and values, both traditional and contemporary. Here, you get to find out about Indigenous worldviews, bush tucker and languages. This part also gives you a bit of a heads-up about protocols when addressing Indigenous people or holding an event on traditional lands.
Chapter 1

Understanding Indigenous Australia

In This Chapter

- Exploring traditions and celebrating vibrant Indigenous contemporary cultures
- Examining the effects of colonisation on Australia’s Indigenous peoples
- Looking at the struggles and successes of the Indigenous political movement
- Identifying key challenges and possible solutions to ensure a better future

The Aboriginal people of Australia are said to be the custodians of the world’s oldest living culture. Indigenous Australians — Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders — have worldviews that focus on the interconnectedness between people and their environment, and the bonds they have with each other. They are also an important part of the Australian story. Modern Australia can’t be understood without also considering the significance of its Indigenous peoples and their cultures in that story.

The colonisation of Australia devastated Indigenous people and cultures — populations were decimated, traditional lands and means of self-sufficiency were taken, and government policies aimed at assimilation legitimised the taking of Indigenous children from their families so they could grow up as ‘white’ Australians. But, although this was a difficult period, the story of how Indigenous people — and their cultures — survived is uplifting.

This chapter gives you an overview of Australia’s history through Indigenous eyes, covering how government practices were able to control the lives of Indigenous people, even up until recent times, and what they did to defend themselves, their rights and their country. It gives you a quick look at the breadth of contemporary Indigenous culture and political action that celebrates their very survival. And it also looks briefly at how Indigenous people are tackling some of the major challenges they face today — lower levels of literacy, higher levels of unemployment, higher levels of poverty and poorer health than other Australians.
Understanding these aspects of Indigenous history and cultures enables you to gain a greater insight into who Indigenous people are and what their cultures are like, what issues they face today and some of the solutions being employed to meet these challenges.

**Indigenous Cultures: Then and Now**

More than 500 different Aboriginal nations existed at the time the British colonised Australia — possibly up to one million people in total. They had developed over 60,000 years, adjusting to changes in the environment and landscape. The arrival of the British in 1788, however, had a fundamental impact on Indigenous cultures. Over the next century, as colonies spread far and wide, people were separated from their traditional lands, affecting their ability to practise traditional ceremonies. But Indigenous cultures were resilient and, even in the face of such overwhelming change, they still adapted.

Today, Indigenous people live across Australia in communities in urban, rural and remote areas. Although they were once considered to be a dying, inferior race, their increasing populations and continuing cultural practices show that contemporary Indigenous cultures are vibrant and still very much alive. Chapter 2 outlines the initial decline and later growth of the Indigenous population since colonisation, as well as the cultural protocols of how to address Indigenous people in different areas of Australia.

**Ancient traditions**

Indigenous cultures across Australia had strong connections to their traditional land. They relied on it to provide them with everything they needed to survive — food, shelter, tools and medicine. And they needed each other as well. Nations were divided into *clans*, which were large extended families, perhaps as small as 30 people in some cases. In such small groups, everyone had to pitch in and people were very reliant on each other.

These circumstances gave rise to cultural values that focused on this interconnectedness. Through complex totemic systems, Indigenous people were reminded of their connection with nature, each other and their ancestors. They also believed in respect and responsibility for country, and respect for the wisdom and authority of Elders. Chapter 4 delves into traditional practices and beliefs, and Chapter 23 describes some of the cultural sites that are still important for Indigenous peoples today.
Chapter 1: Understanding Indigenous Australia

Diversity, diversity and more diversity

Although Indigenous cultures around Australia shared many values and had similar worldviews, great diversity was also present, explained to a large extent by the vastly different environments and climates across Australia. Indigenous communities living by the ocean had different ways of life, different technologies and different practices from Indigenous communities living in the middle of Australia in arid desert areas. However, across the country, large gatherings of several clans took place for ceremonial purposes, and trading routes spread across the continent. See Chapter 3 for more on cultural diversity, in both traditional and contemporary contexts.

Indigenous cultures have remained strong and vibrant across Australia. Even in contemporary forms — using new technology or incorporating aspects of other cultures — they maintain a strong connection to traditional practices. Chapter 25 examines, and debunks, some of the myths that have developed over the years about Indigenous people.

Contemporary painting, singing and dancing

Art, song and dance were key aspects of traditional cultural practice, mostly engaged in for ceremonial purposes, and retain a strong position in contemporary cultures.

Indigenous art has become a worldwide sensation, with some pieces attracting prices in the tens, even hundreds, of thousands of dollars. This industry hasn’t, however, translated into wealth for the artists. Chapter 16 looks in detail at some of the successes in the Indigenous art world.

Indigenous songs were one of the most fragile parts of Indigenous cultures, being some of the first things that were lost with colonisation. Today, however, Indigenous people are strongly engaged with music — particularly country and western music! Younger Indigenous people have also embraced hip-hop music as a way of expressing their views and aspirations. Indigenous dance has emerged as a leading contemporary Indigenous artform, blending traditional dancing with more modern styles. Indigenous dance companies have flourished around Australia. See Chapter 17 for some of the best of Indigenous Australia’s musicians and dancers.
Old and new ways of storytelling

Indigenous cultures have a storytelling tradition and Indigenous people have embraced new ways of getting their message across. Indigenous playwrights, theatre directors and film directors have also employed Indigenous actors to tell Indigenous stories. Indigenous people have also set up their own national radio service and television service, both complementing the many regional radio and television services set up by Indigenous communities. See Chapter 19 for more on the development of these media, as well as the establishment of the National Black Theatre, one of Australia's first political theatres.

Although Indigenous cultures originally had an oral tradition with no written languages, Indigenous storytellers have now turned their hand to the written word. For a long time, Indigenous people had stories written about them by white anthropologists, linguists, historians and writers but, since the 1970s, Indigenous people have had an increasing desire to tell their own stories themselves. Since then, Indigenous writing has crossed over into many genres, including crime novels and women's popular fiction. Chapter 18 covers Indigenous writing and publishing in detail.

And they can kick a ball!

Australia's Indigenous peoples lived hunter-gatherer lifestyles. This meant they spent a lot of time moving and had a nutritious diet. It was a way of life that kept people strong and healthy. Perhaps because of this traditional way of life, Indigenous people have excelled as athletes. Across many sports — but especially football and athletics — Indigenous people have made a sizeable contribution to Australia's sporting prowess. Sportspeople are good role models for Indigenous young people and often work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as mentors, assisting with building confidence and self-esteem, and encouraging young people to be active, fit and healthy. You can find more information on leading Indigenous sportspeople and the work they do in Chapter 20.

There Goes the Neighbourhood

Understanding contemporary Indigenous cultures and worldviews is largely reliant on understanding how Australia's Indigenous peoples have been treated during the country's comparatively brief European history.

Lieutenant James Cook (later Captain) claimed the eastern coast of Australia for the British in 1770. At the time, the agreement among the large, powerful colonising countries such as Britain, Spain and France was that lands like