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2nd Edition

Indigenous Australia

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of Indigenous knowledge

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modern Indigenous communities

Recognise important milestones
in Indigenous rights

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Author, filmmaker, Distinguished Professor
and Associate Dean (Indigenous Research)
at the University of Technology, Sydney

Foreword by Stan Grant



Indigenous Australia

2nd Edition

by Larissa Behrendt
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**for
dummies**
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PEOPLE WHO ARE DECEASED.

Indigenous Australia For Dummies®

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Foreword by Stan Grant

There is a place where Australia disappears. It is a holy place and an ancient place. It is a place where once people lived and laughed and loved; where they traded and danced. It is a place where a boy was born who would grow to be a powerful man; a leader of his people. When he died this man was given a ceremonial burial. His body was smeared in ochre and his arms folded gently across his chest and he was lowered into the ground. Forty thousand years later he would be 'discovered' and given a name. He is Mungo Man and he is our connection to a time before time that today lives in time. He is a connection to what the famed anthropologist William H Stanner once called 'the Everywhen'. We might call it the Dreaming. Mungo Man is the oldest human remains ever found on our continent.

I go there sometimes, to the dried-up shores of Lake Mungo. I have been there with old men who keep old stories. I have slept under the magical sky alongside my cousins and we have carved sacred totems into the ground. It is not my traditional country but my great-grandfather had kinship ties here and he spoke the languages of the Muthi Muthi and the Barkandji as well as his own Wiradjuri. It is a special place; not a place of bones and stones as scientists might see it but a living, breathing place. Away from the roads and the power lines and fences, where there is just openness and timelessness, I know there is something that beats eternal; that is older than any nation. No flag or border or anthem can capture what exists here; it is for us to feel and to know and to respect. It is for us to belong.

How many of us can say we truly belong in our country? Can we say we know our country? Are we alive to the

stories and rhythms and the sounds of this place we now call Australia? We live in a land where the true stories have been silenced. We live in a land where old voices speaking old tongues have vanished. What does it do to a place to lose its sound; to lose its people? There is sadness here, deep sadness. But there is life too if we care to listen and feel.

There are places like Lake Mungo everywhere; 'Everyplaces' for the 'Everywhen'. You can find them by our riverbanks, under the stars, in our rocks and fields. Larissa Behrendt invites you to take that journey. She will take you into an Australia we think we know but remain so ignorant of, and we are poorer for that. Who are these First People of our land? How many languages were spoken here? What is their art and politics and music and ceremony? Larissa will open up a new country for you. And you will find that there is a place here more magical than you could know. But it demands something of you. Are you ready to face our history? Do you know what really happened when the British came? Are you ready to learn about invasion and colonisation and what it does to a people to lose their place in their own country?

Australia is a hard place. It is a place still seeking peace with itself. The journey for justice is a road half travelled. 'Sorry' isn't enough when the First People of this land die younger and suffer more than any other Australians. Reconciliation and recognition and Treaty are the business we have not finished. But, oh how my people sing. And how we play. We are the living story of this land and it is a story just waiting for you.

The bones of our ancestors are buried in this soil, but they rest uneasy. It is for us to bring this land peace. That work starts here with this book. Larissa Behrendt

calls it Indigenous Australia For Dummies - yep that's about right; we are still just learning. But read this and be smarter.

Stan Grant

Television news and political journalist, television presenter,

filmmaker and bestselling author

November 2020

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 relevant issues 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.

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. Increasingly, the preferred term is *First Nations*. Others prefer to be referred to through their nation or clan affiliation.

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 quickly 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!

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.



**CULTURAL
PROTOCOLS**

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



**MYTH
BUSTER**

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.



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



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



TIP 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 an overview of the diversity and richness of Indigenous cultures both before and after colonisation, for example, head to [Chapters 1 to 4](#).

[Chapters 5 to 9](#) look at the growth of the British colonies in Australia and the impact on and reactions of Indigenous people. The chapters in [Part 3](#) are all about Indigenous activism, while [Chapters 16 to 20](#) highlight the rich tradition of art, storytelling, dance and music that's as vibrant today as it was before colonisation.

And if it's the current issues you'd like to jump in and tackle, head to [Chapters 21](#) and [22](#).

You can use the table of contents to find topics quickly. The glossary lets you cut to the chase on any terms you may want to clarify.

For Dummies books are meant to be fun to read as well as informative, so go ahead and enjoy!

Part 1

An Ancient People: Then and Now

IN THIS PART ...

Understand the extensive history of Indigenous peoples, going back over 65,000 years.

Work out why it's important to understand rich and diverse Indigenous history, cultures and values, both traditional and contemporary.

Find out about Indigenous worldviews, bush tucker and languages.

Get to know 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 inspiring.

In this chapter, I provide 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. This chapter 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 lived on this land for over 65,000 years, adjusting to dramatic 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, Aboriginal people were separated from their traditional lands, affecting their ability to care for their country, support themselves and their families and

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 by non-Indigenous Australians 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 remain important for Indigenous peoples today.

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.



REMEMBER 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 they retain a central 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 and rap as a way of expressing their views and aspirations. Indigenous dance has emerged as a leading contemporary Indigenous art form, 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 filmmakers 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, balanced 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