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Book Review: *Indigenous Australia for Dummies*

By Professor Larissa Behrendt, Wiley Publishing, PLACE: 2010;
448 pages (paperback), AUD \$39.95. ISBN 9781742169637

reviewed by Dr Asmi Wood, Australian National University, Canberra

It is unfortunate that people often do judge books by their covers (and in this case, title). What this book represents, however, is not content that is 'dumbed down' but reflects an elegantly simple overview of a complex subject that is often treated as a 'deep dark secret' and is reflective of the authors profound knowledge and intuitive understanding of a wide range of Indigenous cultures and peoples that make up this continent. It makes a great introduction for the many people who share the continent with its Indigenous inhabitants but know very little about its first peoples. In the past this ignorance was possibly linked to neglect, but today often what is worse is that what non-Indigenous people 'know' in this regard can be more accurately characterised as misinformation or reductionist stereotypes that are often 'way off' the mark. The *Mythbusters* in the book are therefore a crucial contribution that will help to dispel many of these false notions. Other strategically placed icons also help the reader to identify and navigate both the contents of the book and Indigenous history and cultural protocols. The book contains useful tips, technical legal information, and areas in which the reader is also given an opportunity to acquire a deeper level of knowledge.

The book is conveniently divided into six fairly even parts. The first five parts cover the history of Indigenous custodianship of the continent. Part I abstracts the central cultural essence of the first sixty millennia of Indigenous custodianship of the continent. Part II examines the period from the first contact with the English. Part III examines Indigenous reaction to colonisation. Part IV examines the evolution and development of Indigenous cultures, concentrating on the positive and avoiding the story of suppression and brutalisation of Indigenous cultures. Part V examines the key contemporary issues facing the community.

Part VI is a very useful summary of a series of Aboriginal related 'must know' facts and situations. It identifies ten crucial cultural sites that every Australian should have on their 'must visit' list. This part also enumerates a list of Indigenous 'firsts', in which Indigenous people paved the way. It provides mythbusting facts to help dispel the most popular misconceptions. Finally, the book identifies some key legal decisions that have both helped to explain Indigenous dispossession and to belatedly help to alleviate Indigenous suffering. The examples and illustrations in the book are judiciously chosen. As can be imagined, it is no mean feat to condense 60,000 years of dynamic history into 427 pages. Yet while not everyone is likely to agree with the specific illustrative examples the author has selected, she presents the material a manner that will give the intelligent layperson every opportunity to come to grips with, or at least not to feel lost in, this sea of knowledge.

This book skilfully avoids the generally disingenuous charge that Indigenous people are taking a 'black armband' view of history, but faithfully re-tells Indigenous history from other than a victor's perspective, while potentially avoiding yet another

ambit charge that the book is about raising white guilt. The book speaks truth to power but it is done by a woman who is powerful in her own culture and society, and is simultaneously equally comfortably with mainstream culture and society through her mastery of Anglo-Australian law language.

The book addresses some important areas which confound people. It clearly and simply addresses the content and legal differences between native title and the land rights regimes and explains the ongoing complexities of trying to understand these differences within Australian law, as well as the difficulties Aboriginal people faced when they had their dealings with Anglo-English land law: something that was as alien to Aboriginal people as were their customs and laws to the white people. The tension created in the insatiable desire for land by the colonialists, and the consequent abuse of Aboriginal hospitality and the spread of disease which led to Aboriginal resistance, is carefully re-told from an Aboriginal perspective. A reproduction of 'Governor Davey's Proclamation to the Aborigines in 1816' is a useful reminder of what the British envisaged for Aboriginal people and shows how it had very little to do with the preservation of the celebration of Aboriginal cultures or values. In this context the author also explores John Batman dishonest dealings with the Kulin nation in Melbourne and how this might have been representative of the manner in which Aboriginal rights and interests we set at nought.

In her discussion on the gradual dispossession through the misappropriation of Aboriginal land the author provides a simplified account of land law in a manner that is beneficial to the layperson. Professor Behrendt is a specialist in property law and used to teach the subject at the Australian National University: her ability to simplify complex legal principles and notions is a boon to the non-technical reader. The book is not purely historical, but also examines some of the most intractable legal and governance issues of the day. Professor Behrendt's analysis and descriptions of the events surrounding the 1967 referendum is a very useful aspect of the book as many Australians have a superficial and flawed understanding of these events simply believing in many cases that 'Aborigines were given equal rights in 1967'. The book briefly but pithily discusses the unintended consequences of the referendum.

The author also provides an insightful and informative discussion on the stolen generations, an issue that non-Indigenous people find difficult to understand and come to terms with and therefore tend to ignore or diminish its impact on Indigenous peoples or on the psyche of nation as a whole. These are central issues with which the nation as a whole must come terms if it is to find closure in what Justice Deane described as the 'darkest periods of our history'. A failure to do this will result in continuing misunderstanding between the groups and hence prolong the time that it will take to help the nation to heal from the trauma of this dark history.

It is Professor Behrendt's deep and profound depth of subject knowledge, plus her consummate legal and language skill, that enables her to deliver the most complex ideas, convoluted histories, and indifferent treatment by the parliament and laws of this nation, in such an elegantly simple manner. The mark of a person who has truly mastered her craft and profession both as a lawyer and as a writer. I can strongly commend this book to those who would like to get to know Indigenous Australia but were perplexed even as to where to begin. For the intelligent reader who would like to know more about this most misunderstood of peoples and cultures that make up the most ancient continuous civilisation on this planet, this is your single most accessible gateway to its vast knowledges.