

SALTWATER PEOPLE OF THE BROKEN BAYS

Foreword

Who are the Saltwater People? For tens of thousands of years, longer than anyone really knows, the clans of the *Eora* have been the Traditional Owners and Custodians of this glorious coastal land.

Their name, derived from *Ee* (yes) and *ora* (here or this place) conveys the complex animist connection, the sense that they are *of this land*.

Before Sydney Harbour existed it was a river valley and the ancient coastline was much further towards the sunrise. The Saltwater People fished from canoes and hunted on land that is now deep beneath the sea.

At the end of the last Ice Age the ocean left the Barrenjoey Headland only thinly connected to one of the most dramatic peninsulas on earth.

Wander the bushland, the mangrove creeks and tidal lagoons, along the sandstone cliffs and rock platforms, sit and listen to the sea in the hidden coves, on the sandy dunes or high on the rocky headlands covered with grass trees, angophoras and wind blown scrub, and this country will speak to you.

All of us who love this meeting place of land and sea are aware that we walk in the footsteps of the Ancestors. Around Broken Bay and much of the Sydney basin are hundreds of Australia's most stunning galleries of rock art. Aboriginal people will tell you the stories in oral history fashion and the totemic figures carved into the sandstone will detail the lizards, birds, kangaroos, echidnas, sharks, fish and whales that are part of this natural world.

After you look out at Lion Island and the sweeping beauty from West Head, study closely the engravings of the mythic sky heroes and other symbols on the thousand year old rock galleries in the Ku-ring-gai National Park. Astronomers and Aboriginal people say that here is further indication that the sophisticated Indigenous knowledge system included an awareness of the planets and an ability to use the stars for navigation.

John Romer, one of the greatest archaeologists of our age, warns us to focus on what we do know about the past and admit what is uncertain or has been erased. The impact of invasion, dispossession, violence and disease, most certainly obliterated so much life and Culture here.

The foundational work of Aboriginal historians, such as Professor Dennis Foley's book, *Repossession of our Spirit*, with its striking photographs by Ricky Maynard, gives us a new way of seeing the *Eora*, far more expansive than the colonial views of naturalists, amateur botanists, sailors and new settlers.

The late Burnum Burnum's *Aboriginal Australia* explains how Aboriginal art and storytelling has many layers of knowledge and deeper levels of meaning, sometimes veiled, but always expressing the connectedness to the land and the life force.

John Ogden has a particular gift to enrich the story of *what we do know* about the Saltwater People of the Broken Bays.

More than two decades spent photographing Aboriginal life has given him a wonderful appreciation of the *Eora* way of seeing. His archival research in completing his landmark photographic book, *Portraits from a Land Without People*, opened up a treasure trove of knowledge.

Living on this coastline he has experienced the way the environment calls and shapes us all, the Aborigines, the artists, the architects inspired by the drama of the natural beauty and the surfers entranced by the endless waves.

My son, Will, who was born here has a particular way of expressing the gleam of the water on a day when all of life seems in balance. "These are the dolphin days."

When the humpbacks are passing on their migrations and sometimes breach in extraordinary shows of their majesty and power we are all reminded of our place in the eternal scheme of Nature.

This book reminds us of our responsibility.

The most important word missing today from the Australian Constitution is *Custodianship*. It is a word of strength and beauty that can unite us and bind us to the ideal of what it means to be Australian.

Custodianship is a central concept of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and gives every one who lives in this land a responsibility to contribute to the balance of life. Custodians will look after this land and all its people for generations to come. This valuing of life, respect for all creatures, connects past, present and future. It unifies the descendants of the world's oldest continuous Cultures with the newer arrivals from more than 230 other places. The land owns us all. Australia is our home.

Jeff McMullen
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