



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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## BOOK REVIEW

Peter Dargin : *Aboriginal Fisheries of the Darling-Barwon Rivers*.  
Brewarrina Historical Society, Brewarrina, New South Wales.

\*B.H. Watts

There are singularly few opportunities for Aboriginal people today to read the history of their own area and of their own forebears. Some local histories do indeed exist; some few take the form of a recapitulation of the traditional Aboriginal past. A greater number record a history which, in non-Aboriginal perspective, begins to trace its course from white arrival and settlement and which describes in full depth and detail the whites, their characters and concerns and their achievements. In accounts such as these, Aborigines rarely emerge as human beings contributing in diverse ways to the shaping of the historical past and the emergence of the present.

*Aboriginal Fisheries of the Darling-Barwon Rivers* is a different type of history. Aboriginal readers will find a picture of their past which skilfully weaves Aboriginal legends, explorers' comments, scientific records and the recollections of their older relatives into a convincing portrayal of human lives, drawing sustenance from their ancestors and demonstrating their technical competence in their own environment. Mythology and legend explain the arrival of the Aborigines, the movement of the people inland and their separation into tribes, each with its own hunting grounds, the particular topography of the local district. Ancestral legends describe the origin of the whale's spout, the appropriateness of nomenclature of the black bream or grunter, Aboriginal man's development of a tremendously diverse and ingenious set of ways of catching fish, birds and animals; it was from a pelican that the local people learnt the art of making fish nets - nets judged by non-Aboriginal observers to be in quality the equal of those made in Europe.

The central theme of the book is concentrated on the Brewarrina fisheries, a one-time major enterprise of the area, with all that the word "enterprise" connotes - planning to ensure supply, the devising, maintenance and repair of equipment, variation in procedures to meet changing circumstances. But valuable though the documentation of the

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establishment and decline of the Brewarrina fisheries is in itself, the history reveals far more than this.

The Aboriginal people who are described live - they pass on their legends; they plan and preserve a delicate and effective ecological balance with their natural environment; they demonstrate man's ingenuity and creativity; they vie with each other in sports and competitions; they are harassed by inhospitable climate and conditions and learn to cope with these.

But they are less successful in coping with the white man. The history of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal contact is the one with which all readers of this book have become familiar but here, more clearly than in many other accounts, there is portrayed the conflict of needs for unhindered navigation of the streams to support the developing industries: needs for pasture for introduced animals versus needs for ecological balance between Aboriginal man and the accustomed fauna. Thus the Aboriginal Brewarrina fisheries were dismantled almost stone by stone to help build river crossings and to clear fords suitable for bullock drays. Acts such as these are shown to be not only appropriation of Aboriginal property but also of their sacred ground. The introduction of rats (via the river barges), rabbits and foxes led to the gradual extermination of the smaller ground animals and bird life and lessened the ability of lands in the surrounding area to support the dwindling numbers of Aboriginal people, leading them ever more compellingly into dependence on assistance from and protection by the relative newcomers.

The book is published at a time when many Aboriginal people are seeking to rediscover their own history, to redefine their present and their identity. But as Dargin says -

The Death Bird calls and the language men  
and women, those expert in the crafts and  
the old story tellers are going.

Publications such as this mitigate to some extent the call of the Death Bird and increase the numbers in the present generation informed about their own past and strengthened through this knowledge and appreciation.

The book fulfils - or may fulfil - another purpose. Its audience will hopefully include non-Aboriginals as well as Aboriginals.

Many of the former have come to believe that although Aboriginal traditional society had complex religious and social systems it was essentially pre-technological and primitive. This book will give such readers pause for thought - the many concrete details on the making of implements and clothing, the conservation programs, the appreciation of ecological balance, the construction of fish weirs, the diversity of styles of canoe conceptualised and created, argue most convincingly and compellingly the competence of Aboriginal man in his own environment.

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