

Mungo Man imagined: writing the ultimate historical novel

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Abstract

On writing a historical novel about a man who died 42,000 years ago. This is an address given at the annual dinner of the Royal Society of New South Wales on May 18, 2018, by the recently elected Distinguished Fellow, noted novelist and historian, Tom Keneally.

Your Excellency, Governor General Hurley, and Mrs Hurley, Fellows, Members, and Guests, I have a mutual friend who works for the Hurleys, and while working for someone you generally see all their flaws. This woman, however, is unstoppable on their virtues and the way they have continued the heritage of Dame Marie Bashir and engagement with the Australian public. And if we have people like them serving the community, all an old republican like myself can say is “God save the Queen.”

And I see with awe a list of Distinguished Fellows, including some that I know by sight, like Professor Peter Baume, and some I’ve read of, such as Dr. Michelle Simmons, quantum lady, Australian of the Year. These are names which would adorn any learned society anywhere on Earth. So, I’m very sensible of the honour of being given this from a high hand, and being amongst the Fellowship. I think I can genuinely claim to be the most poorly educated of all the Distinguished Fellows.

I would like to dedicate this little speech appropriately to the late Tommy Lewis, the Aboriginal actor whom Fred Schepisi, the Australian director, saw in an airport and asked to audition for the 1978 film. Traditional people in Australia, I’ve noticed, can all dance, can all sing, can all act, and as Tommy Lewis said to me once, “The Elders

don’t care whether you’re in a picture or not, they think any idiot can do that, they only care about whether you’ve done your ceremony.” Well, Tommy is now gone to join his ceremony: he died about ten days ago, and it’s appropriate to dedicate this to him, as a fully initiated Roper River man.

My favourite place of pilgrimage in Australia is not Uluru or the Great Barrier Reef, but the dry lake bed named Mungo, awash with semi-desert plants like saltbush and cottonbush, where in 1974, Professor James Bowler discovered the largely intact and ritually buried skeleton of Mungo Man, who we now know to have lived at least 42,000 years in the past. It bears repeating. Mungo Man’s DNA was laid down at least 42,000 years ago in the womb of a far-dispersed daughter of Mitochondrial Eve. His flesh expired at least 42,000 years ago. Some early estimates put his height at 5 foot 7 — which I think is a perfectly acceptable height — or 170 centimetres, but later modelling has suggested a height of over six feet and as high as 196 centimetres. He had in any case a robust frame except for osteoarthritis of the shoulder, possibly from hunting, but I think also possibly from knapping stone. They needed to knap a lot of stone out there and that had to have affected his shoulder. Significantly, he was missing two lower canines, which some propose indicated a ceremonial extrac-

tion early in his life. And he was buried by cooperative effort, involving a sacramental fire and encrustation with red ochre acquired by trade with a society of humans from two hundred kilometres away, beyond the present Darling River. His eloquently disposed bones speak to us of the reverent intervention of fellow members of our species, *Homo sapiens*, over a bridge of 42,000 (and some say many more) years.

I am often accused of being a “historical novelist”. It is not an insult to be so called. But when I had an impulse to write imaginatively about the man found at Lake Mungo, our fellow Australian removed from us by those millennia, I did think, “I’ll give ’em historical novelist. Is 42,000 years ago historical enough for you?”

I call Lake Mungo “Lake Learned” in the novel I’m writing, due to appear in Australia later this year. I call Jim Bowler Peter Jorgensen in the novel, and give him a Scandinavian blonde rather than Celtic ginger complexion. I write about fictional Learned Man, who is really Mungo Man, and fictional Peter Jorgensen, who is really a version of the very scholarly and very amiable Jim Bowler. This is an edited, penultimate version of the discovery, which is very like the real discovery by Professor Bowler. So, this is what I wrote in the novel, which is based very much on what Jim Bowler himself told me of the discovery:

At the time of the discovery of astonishingly ancient Learned Man, some decades back, my friend Peter Jorgensen, whom I nicknamed the Viking, was testing dried lake basins and their sediments for records of ancient climatic oscillations. Ironically, modern heavy rain had kept him bound to the homestead of the old Lake Learned Station, where he had a bed in the shearers’

quarters. This area had been in modern times marginal country in terms of rainfall. The Willandra Lakes are lakes in a different sense than European lakes. The European eye would facilely expect them to contain water from season to season — that is part of the northern hemisphere definition of a lake: lakes that assert their lake-ness by brimming and thus accommodating the eye. The Lake did hold water in the Old Man’s day, and accommodated his eye. But now the average of ten inches a year did not fall predictably in all years, and did not come at all in some, although the saltbush of the basin made grazing sheep for wool viable ...

In any case, on that historic day in 1974, as I describe in the novel, Jim Bowler, and his fictional counterpart, Peter Jorgensen, set out, as the ground dried, to the lunette at the eastern end of Mungo Lake, about 100 kilometres north of Balranald, N.S.W. He rode his motorbike off to the south of the lunette and to that big semicircle of sand dunes and hills of ancient lake sediments, which you will never forget should you see it and which will become part of the landscape of your imagination if you have been there. He abandoned the motorcycle, trudged up the hill, trudged up the layers of sediment, 70,000-year-old sediment, 60, 50, and so on, and saw a glint in the sand deposits.

In 1969 Bowler had already discovered a palaeolithic skeleton in those sand dunes: a cremated young woman who had been ritually buried with reverence but whose bones had been shattered in reverence as well, or, some would say, in fear. This was Mungo Lady, nearly two thousand years younger than Mungo Man, the man he was about to discover. But, although Jorgensen knew there must be other ancient remains, he was

not looking for them. Then he saw a glimpse of white, and it was the glint of the temple of Mungo Man's skull, exposed by rain, and this was the Old Man, Mungo Man, Learned Man of the novel, presenting his forehead. Late afternoon, and one of the Ancients had chosen to resurrect himself!

"It had the flavour of a willed meeting," I wrote. "Peter Jorgensen thought that he had found the Old Man, but he would always be mindful of what a Riverina woman elder of the Paakintji people would later tell him, 'You didn't find the Old Lady and the Old Man. They found you!'"

In his vastly popular book, *Sapiens*, the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari declares the journey of the first humans to Australia was one of the most important events in history. It was the first time, he says, that any human managed to leave the Afro-Asian ecological system, and was the first time that any large terrestrial had managed to cross that barrier, and it was the moment, when, upon entering Australia, humans became the dominant species. They were not yet dominant anywhere else on Earth.

The moment the first hunter-gatherer arrived on an Australian beach, says Harari, was the moment that *Homo sapiens* climbed to the top rung in the food chain on a particular landmass, thereby setting a pattern for all that was to happen on other continents, where our species did eventually become the dominant intelligence, and the dominant decider of what would happen to other species. Until then, humans had displayed some innovative adaptations and behaviours, but their effect upon the environment had been negligible.

The settlers of Australia did not merely adapt to the continent but, Harari argues, transformed the Australian ecosystem beyond

recognition. The attraction of Mungo Man and his society and his ancestors, who preceded him onto the shore probably at least 15,000 years before then, was that they lived amongst megafauna: 200-kilo, two-metre-high kangaroos, an enormous diprotodon of two-and-a-half tonnes, like a giant, slow wombat, and a terrifying relative of the larger koalas, the marsupial lion, the largest carnivore on the continent, *Thylacoleo carnifex*, with its terrible prehensile claw, and its terrible teeth. *Carnifex*, in Latin, means executioner, as any member of the Society learnt in kindergarten, I think, and computer modelling on intact skeletons of this extinct beast has shown that it was immensely more efficient, by slashing jugulars and severing the spine, than any present living predator. But *Carnifex* ran up against *Homo sapiens*, a cleverer beast still, with cognitive skills beyond its magnificent capacities. So, Mungo Man and his society, according to Harari, were the people who put paid to long-gestation, small-litter megafauna. The other theory is that it was climate change, but Harari argues that climate change in Australia was not significant enough to have caused the extinctions. You can read his book, *Sapiens*, and encounter his claims.

There were also enormous perenties in Mungo Man's world: *Varanus giganteus*, two metres in length, and like the other animals, protein on claws, coming to the lake to drink. In the lake itself, of course, were predecessors of the Murray cod, and visiting migrating birds, and huge supplies of thirsty meat coming to the shore. And that was the world that Mungo Man lived in, and that was the world that triggered his imagination. There were intimidating snakes, tall koalas, and huge flightless birds. The balance between species in the Australian ecosystem was dis-

rupted, Harari and others controversially argue, by Mungo Man and his people.

In pointing the finger at the forebears of modern day Aboriginals in the matter of the death of the megafauna, Harari and others argue that the Ice Age that ended perhaps forty-five thousand or fewer years ago didn't produce results catastrophic enough to render the megafauna extinct all at once. If the diprotodon alone became extinct, that would have been a fluke, but more than 90 per cent of Australia's megafauna disappeared at the same time as the diprotodon. The small-litter, long-term gestation of many of the megafauna meant that they could not recover as quickly as did smaller, more prolific animals.

Guilty or not of the death of the megafauna, these fellow children of Mitochondrial Eve lived probably a far more bountiful and comfortable life than our ancestors did, beside a fifteen-foot-deep lake which contained such plenty, and to which were drawn waterbirds and the hinterland population of fauna. In such a merry situation, Mungo Man needed to travel for only the same reasons as we do now: for pilgrimage, education, romance and trade. What a wonderful quartet of human motivations!

The Mungo People were the inheritors too of the cognitive revolution, the powers of abstraction which characterised humans from about 70,000 years ago and which endowed them with potent but intangible concepts governing religion, art, identity and a universe of laws. (Fred Hollows was always waiting for another burst of DNA which would give us the further cognitive revolution in our brains, which would make us slightly less illogical; but it never came.)

I set about to write a story of two old men and their parallel deaths, separated by 42,000

millennia. One is a contemporary Australian movie director named, in the manner of smart-alec novelists, Shelby Apples, to honour Australian optimism — once, in a Green Room of a TV show Alan Alda said to me, "Who is this guy you Australians talk about, Shelby Apples?" and I thought that one day there must be a Shelby Apples. The second man is a fictional version of Mungo. I won't speak much of Shelby's story. Indeed, the two stories have seemed to some editors ill-matched, and I am still trying to prove by re-writes that they definitely and obviously belong together, even if Learned Man is a man of law and Shelby a man of cinematography, which itself, after all, has a place in law, as evidence and witness.

The issue of cultural appropriation arises. Mungo Man and Mungo Lady are seen as relatives and forebears by the three tribes whose country meets at Lake Mungo. One is the Paakintji ("People of the River"), the Darling River people, the others the Mutthi Mutthi of the Northern Riverina, and the Ngiyaampaa of the Menindee region. Quite appropriately, the three tribes feel a primary claim on Mungo Man.

Both Professor Bowler and the palaeontologist, the late Professor Alan Thorne, founder of the controversial Parallel Continuity theory of human development, became aware that they had committed a trespass and an abduction by taking remains away without reference to the traditional owners, and both went to some trouble to appease the justly aggrieved tribal owners and thenceforth to collaborate with them in creating protocols involving the discovery of ancient remains.

The Elders' abiding concept was that Mungo Man had come again to tell Australia something of great significance, a view that

the eighty-nine-year-old Jim Bowler shares to this day. He does not believe, either, that Mungo has finished speaking yet, and he certainly does not believe that white society, often through no fault of its own, has heard Mungo resonate.

Given the claim the three tribes have on him, by what right do I presume to write of Mungo, or, as he is in the novel, Learned? I merely claim secondary ownership in him as a (shorter, it seems) member of the same species, whose own forebears once lived a more materially impoverished life than Mungo did. Primary ownership and primary decision as to what befalls Mungo Man remain with the Elders. But I felt justified in purely imaginative terms to attempt to create in narrative a sort of Ur culture, the culture in which we know our forebears too were then participating. In justifying myself, in any case, I flashed the *Homo sapiens* badge, and — I believe — validly so. But it is true that there has been an emergence of great Aboriginal writers, including Jonathan Birch of Melbourne, Ellen van Neerven of Queensland, Alexis Wright and Michael Fogarty, and Aboriginal stories should be left to them. They own Aboriginal stories, and any cultural justice would say so, and any system of fraternal, creative etiquette would say so.

I had earlier said that I could not have written *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* now, as I did in my white-man ignorance of the late 'sixties and early 'seventies. But, I felt I could claim Mungo Man, again in a secondary sense and at a prodigious distance of time, as my uncle, and my brother. And uncle and brother and fellow Australian of everyone in this room.

I decided that, as a token reparation for all the fractured English attributed to indige-

nous people in white writers' books, I would give my fictional Mungo an august voice, and set out to do so. But not only a kind of sticky white sentimentality reigned here, but something that has struck all observers of pre-literate societies. Culture does not cease for lack of literacy. In fact, as the Cambridge anthropologist Jack Goody says, instead of individual glories such as attach to Dickens and Dostoyevsky, Shakespeare and Shaw, rather, "one of the features of oral communication in pre-literate societies lies in its capacity to swallow up and to incorporate in a body of custom" the stories and images of any individual, and to compose them into a body of culture. The pre-literate man and woman speak richly — commentators would have us believe — from the implanted oral anthologies of their culture. The playwright of the Irish revival, J. M. Synge, in *The Playboy of the Western World*, presents us with a world where pre-literate Aran Islanders create the vividness of poetry in their daily speech. If all this is true, Mungo Man spoke in vivid tropes, not in grunts.

It is easy enough to begin in a voice for Learned Man, as I do:

O my Hero, I devote this account of my latter days to you — he's addressing his hero in the sky, his ancestor — so that you understand how well I love you and love the Earth, and know my duty to them, to all the Heroes, to all the beasts and to all the people. I am thinking pleasantly of the wrestling that comes at the start of the cold season, when we occupy equal days of moon and sun, the days when the half of everything yearns for the half of everything else, when ice sings to light, and when there should be efforts made at wholeness. So we come to the equal day-night wrestling, and to its banquet.

We know about the antiquity of wrestling, and it is fair game as a novelist if not as a scholar to recruit it for a narrative of the palaeolithic world. We know about feasts, for there are areas out on the Lake Mungo lunette part glazed over by 31,000 years, till the end of the last ice age, of great traditional fireplaces. Here, at ceremonial times, haunches of megafauna were baked on radiant mulga coals in coatings of aromatic bark.

But we come to guesswork very quickly. If palaeolithic humans had the equivalent of cardinal points, what did they call them? How did they convey what we mean by, say, northwest? How did they count? There are some anthropological and paleontological hints in that area, but also contradictions of opinion. What did they make of seasons and how did they name them? Did they, like traditional Aboriginals, believe in journeys to the sky during sleep, and encounters there with the revelations and wishes of hero-ancestors? How did they manage society? Did they possess a system of moiety, clan, skin laws of the kind Aboriginal culture still lived by in the age of anthropology?

I was helped by my own inherent animism, my own unscientific sense that antediluvian presences, precedent and challenging, but not hostile, to my soul, inhabit the Australian landscape. I would assert, on the basis of personal mytho-poetic (forgive the pretension) experience, that animism and ancestor-worship are the two natural religions of humanity, or at least of myself and many other humans. And the connection between geology and zoology — the outcrop that transmutes to the marsupial lion — there are places in Australia where that happens on some level of our imaginations, and the world puts us in our place. As well

as that I believe, utterly unscientifically, that the terrors and exultations and imageries and awes of all our forebears have left their traces in our imaginations.

And what was vegetation like in Ice Age Australia? There is a handy consensus for the idea that during ice ages savannah grasslands were more extensive in the interior, and forest not as common as since the last ice age.

As I wrote, Mungo Man induced in me an urgency, as he had in others, to make his presence amongst us more widely known. He is far more important than any novel, and so in 2016 I wrote to Malcolm Turnbull, putting to him that this was a chance to undertake a work of nation-building, requiring both Federal and State ministers:

October 13, 2016

The Hon. Malcolm Turnbull

Prime Minister

AUSTRALIA

Re: The Willandra Lakes World Heritage

Site: The Chance for a Great World Heritage Site.

Dear Prime Minister,

I recently had a chance to speak on a Heritage issue with the amiable Minister of Environment and Heritage, Mr Mark Speakman. I have also spoken on this matter to my local member, Premier the Hon. Mike Baird. I feel though that the unique project I outlined to him and am now outlining to you will require national vision on the part of a Prime Minister, a Premier, and the commitment of both governments.

Mungo Man, a set of bones waiting on a bench at an Australia Museum depository for disposal and return to his native Willandra Lakes area north of Balranald, is 42,000 years old. Mungo Lady is a set of remains nearly as old. They represent the two oldest

human ritual burials we possess evidence of on Earth. These enormously ancient members of the species *Homo sapiens*, our species, were also members of a community which inhabited the lunette of Lake Mungo between 60,000 years Before the Present Era and the end of the last Ice Age. The remains of that community and of the environment it lived in are pervasive throughout the Willandra Lakes area in New South Wales. That community and its remains are nothing less than a world treasure. Most of Australia is, through no fault of its own, ignorant of it. May I suggest that this represents an oblivion which a visionary leader could put paid to, and all to massive Australian heritage, economic and social benefit.

There have been plans for a Keeping Place of some kind for Mungo Man and Lady, plans involving input from interested parties and especially, and above all, from traditional owners, the three tribes, Mutthi Mutthi, Ngiyaampaa, and Paakintji, whose traditional territory all converges on Lake Mungo. But these plans have lacked direction and intent from the highest level of government.

You will see that in raising with you this huge national opportunity, I am influenced by the urgency of two noble men even older than me; firstly, Dr James Bowler, discoverer of Mungo Man and Mungo Lady and, secondly, the father of Australian palaeontology, the great scholar and author Dr John Mulvaney, who died last week. I attach to this letter their rather despairing letter to UNESCO about Australian inaction.

Like many Australians, I feel that if the appropriate disposal of Mungo Man's remains is made, the result will be a shrine not only for Australians, black and white, but for anyone interested in the history of

Homo sapiens. Mungo Man is, in an extended sense, the heritage of all members of our species. He sheds light on what it is to be human, Aboriginal, and Australian in equal measure and in such a graphic way. For one thing, he represents a society that had language, religion and technology all that time ago. It is one of the oldest human communities we have ever had a glimmering into — and we have more than a glimmering into it, out there in Mungo — a community so old that it reflects on scientific issues such as when we left Africa, and when we began to speak.

It would be sad if Mungo Man were allowed to remain indefinitely in storage, or if, for lack of interest by government, the traditional owners are left with no option but to dispose privately of this incalculable treasure.

Apart from potential world interest in Mungo Man and the other remains, and the community and landscape they lived in, there is the consideration that a Keeping Place, organised according to the wishes of the traditional owners, could also provide great infrastructure and employment benefits for the region. It could also be a centre for learning for all young Australians, and of scholarship and education for the rest of us in general. It could also stand as our ultimate site of national reconciliation.

I have taken the liberty of including some notes on three World Heritage sites of the kind that benefit other modern nations at the same time as celebrating the ancient communities that occupied the sites. I see the Willandra Lakes people of 40,000 to 60,000 BPE as being potentially as engaging and intriguing to the world as are the remains of the Anasazi Pueblo dwelling areas at Mesa Verde National Park in Colorado; as

the ruins of Petra in Jordan; and as the great Heritage Centre at Ceide Fields in County Mayo. All these are national treasures in their countries and attract world attention and international visitors. And yet, just as Mungo Man himself is at least fifteen times older than Tutankhamen and the society of the New Empire of Egypt, so the Willandra Lakes story is over twenty times older than that of Petra, nearly ten times older than Ceide Fields, and forty times older than the cliff houses of Mesa Verde.

I hope it is not too crass of me to suggest that it would be a wonderful thing if your government, at a time when we are considering a respectful constitutional recognition of indigenous stewardship and occupation of Australia, were responsible for combining with traditional owners to move this treasure from the shadows to a place where it could occupy its proper place in the geography and imaginations of our people.

As ever, my warmest wishes,
Thomas Keneally

Malcolm Turnbull's reply was amiable, urbane and non-conclusive, but he hadn't caught the bug, sadly.

As you may know, last year, after his sojourn at the A. N. U. and on a shelf in a Museum of Australia repository, Mungo Man was returned to his country by important men and women of the three tribes and a number of others, including the Yorta Yorta. Jim Bowler was there, following the Elders, to see Mungo's casket laid in an underground safe. But not a single cabinet minister, state or federal, not a single member of parliament, state or federal, appeared to witness the passage of this exceptional, ancient Australian, the Australian not of one year, but of millennia upon millennia. His movement could have shaken the earth not only for

indigenes but also for us, who in these matters so badly need enlightenment. One wonders if there are forces that do not want to join Mungo's story to the story told in two recent revolutionary books about who Aborigines were, and how they lived: Canberra historian Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth* and Victorian Aboriginal Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu*.

All I can say to my uncle and Elder, Mungo Man, is: "Keep talking!" But the idea that Mungo has finished speaking to us is not yet true, because we do not know of him generally, because he is a minority sport who deserves to be a major one. He will, along with Bill Gammage's *The Biggest Estate on Earth* and Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu*, bring us a new version of Australian history. One which will legitimise both races, and one which will unify us in the future.

So all I can say to my uncle and Elder, Mungo Man, is "Keep talking!" for though my book will probably go straight through to the keeper, Mungo Man is the one who without ball tampering will in the end take the most difficult cosmic wicket — and that is the wicket of our popularly accepted, non-sense version of pre-history.

Thank you.

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