

***From the Edge: Australia's Lost Histories.*** By Mark McKenna. Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2016. Pp. 251. A\$34.99 paper.

How much of Australian history remains quietly embedded in the places it played out? Stories of colonisation, contact, exploration and contest have been amassed in public and private archives around the country (and the former British Empire). But what of those histories is located in place itself? This new collection from Mark McKenna recovers four histories of place as case studies of remembering and national recognition. This act of *unearthing* the past through place, as it were, seeks to interrupt historical knowledge of Australia's beginnings, as well as its collective historical consciousness.

To do so, McKenna, 'uncovers the places and histories that Australians so often fail to see'. Exploring four sites on Australia's oceanic edge, he attempts to uncover and read Australia's forgotten histories through the material and environmental traces (in the archives of place) they left behind. The stories include an extraordinary journey of survival by five British sailors and twelve Bengali seamen who sailed, swam and trekked from Bass Strait to Sydney in 1797 after their merchant ship was wrecked; the rise and fall of Port Essington, once touted as Australia's 'future Singapore'; the ancient engravings and dislocation of the Yaburara people on the Burrup Peninsula in Western Australia's Pilbara; and the cross-cultural interaction in the weeks after Captain James Cook's *Endeavour* foundered on the Great Barrier Reef in 1770 and was beached for repairs.

In many ways, McKenna's history confounds conventional narrative: after two centuries of imperial and national historiography, these accounts reframe the inevitability of Australia's historical chronology. Who *were* the nomads, the sojourners, the landless? In the case of the shipwrecked seamen who trekked up the east coast, it certainly wasn't the Aboriginal owners who 'occupied one territory after the next, each with its own language, system of law, songlines and unique cultural protocols' (31). For whom was the moment of colonisation most precarious? In Port Essington, his narrative reveals hopelessly inadequate colonial housing, terrifying weather events, voracious white-ants, the constant loss of inhabitants to death and disease, and a colony clinging to the sporadic lines of communication across the seas back to Sydney, in contrast to the intricate web of Aboriginal songlines that snaked *into* the Country.

Such histories demonstrate the precariousness of colonisation. Notwithstanding the bravado of many of its colonisers, like George Augustus Earl (draughtsman and linguist in Port Essington, who wrote boldly about being 'the first occupants of a new country' [77]), McKenna looks across the ruins of Port Essington and sees a rather less certain colonial enterprise. That country, as other colonists came to understand, had been mapped, theorised and theologised for millennia, confirming the uncertainty of the colonial project for many of its actors. While the contents pages of textbooks suggest the inevitability of a democratic, industrialised modern Australia, the continent, according to McKenna, was actually 'possessed in an ad hoc, piecemeal fashion' (67).

McKenna generates this unpredictability of narrative by inhabiting the places in which these histories are located. He walks around them like a historical pilgrim, soaking up each site with both critical distance and historical curiosity and empathy.

Like Grace Karskens' memorable and evocative history of early Sydney, and Tom Griffiths' environmental histories and historiography, *The Edge* is a volume of great natural beauty and historical significance. Indeed, McKenna argues, these places reveal great omissions in the historical understanding of non-Indigenous Australia, where that initial and halting precariousness of the colony has been forgotten, as has its violence, its desperation, and (most critically) recognition of the vast knowledge of its Indigenous peoples.

Peering up at the etched engravings of Yaburara on the large boulders surrounded by mining industry, McKenna reaches both into the past, and into the nation's collective historical consciousness: 'To stand surrounded by art that stretched far into antiquity, inscribed with a cultural significance that would forever remain obscure, was to be reminded of how little Europeans understood of Australia's deep past.' (150) That rock art, including images of violence and dispossession, is the Yaburara's 'history book', McKenna writes. 'They can never forget' (109).

These site-based narratives demonstrate how histories of place present an opportunity to redress the imbalance of the historical archive—Australian colonial historiography is still overwhelmingly dependent on historical sources with a non-Indigenous providence. And Australians' 'failure to "see" is rooted in the long history of prejudice that we have yet to fully overcome', McKenna contends (162). Yet this collection also raises important questions about site-based 'ways of seeing' and its possible limitations: while *The Edge* provides a powerful method of place for telling histories of contact and colonisation, for places that have been irreparably altered, like the suburbs of Brisbane or Perth, or bulldozed savannahs of central Queensland, place becomes a rather more murky concept. How do we tell these histories when place is a palimpsest?

Given that a second volume of this work is due to appear (which will extend the diversity of places examined), however, it seems slightly premature to be critiquing McKenna's place-based method. And despite those caveats, this first foray is indeed impressive: as McKenna concludes, 'It now seems impossible to separate the landscape from the stories that inhabit it.' (212) Australian historians cannot ignore the power of place as a vital component of its national archive.