Global warming, changed weather patterns, degradation of the environment, species extinction and unconstrained growth in human population have become the hallmarks of our time. The non-Indigenous peoples who now occupy south-eastern Australia have changed the biosphere in significant ways since first arriving in the 1830s. The introduction of sheep and cattle, as well as other animal and plant species used to acclimatise colonial settlers to their new world, changed the landscapes of south-eastern Australia forever. *Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge in South-eastern Australia* provides an important and timely addition to contemporary Australian discussions concerning the relationship between the biosphere and the human societies that are sustained by them.

Melbourne was conceived to mirror London in both attitude and design. Although now widely acclaimed as one of the world’s greatest cities, Melbourne is emblematic of settler-colonial efforts to insulate, protect and disengage themselves from the realities of the Australian biosphere on which they now live. Few non-Indigenous people in Melbourne and the other cities and towns that now occupy south-eastern Australia are aware of the rich and vibrant Aboriginal societies that preceded British colonialism and successfully occupied the country for millennia. If the non-Indigenous inhabitants of south-eastern Australia think about Aboriginal people at all today, it is usually with reference to the arid interior and the tropical north of the continent. These are places where Aboriginal cultural practices and traditions are imagined to have survived colonialism intact.

Ignorance of an Aboriginal past in south-eastern Australia is the outcome of what anthropologist WEH Stanner called the ‘great Australian silence,’ whereby Aboriginal peoples had by the middle decades of the 20th century become marginal, forgotten and disremembered to the ‘mainstream’ of contemporary Australian life and society. Since the 1980s, this situation has slowly but surely been changing, with academic researchers revisiting the Australian past in ways that attempt to be inclusive of Aboriginal peoples and their perspectives. In this way, we are gaining new and valuable insight into the ways that Aboriginal peoples experienced and interpreted the coming of British colonialism and the social, political and economic processes that led to their contemporary encapsulation in the settler-colonial state known as the Commonwealth of Australia.

*Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge in South-eastern Australia* continues to build on the previous work of authors Fred Cahir, Ian D. Clark and Philip A. Clarke in documenting the ways in which Aboriginal peoples lived in south-eastern Australia, and how their knowledge systems and beliefs interacted with both the historical process of a global British colonialism as well as the intimate details of how the settlers who entered into their country came to dispossess local groups. Focused on how Aboriginal peoples in this part of the continent understood the world of nature as indivisible from human society, a unity of thought that the authors describe as Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge, this book uses a detailed study of colonial writings in an attempt to reconstruct a past that no longer exists. The authors
succeed in shedding new light upon the combination of complex beliefs and practices that directed Aboriginal peoples in south-eastern Australia to manage the environment and sustained resources in ways most beneficial to the needs of the societies in which they lived.

While the colonial ethnographers whose writings underpin this book often viewed Aboriginal explanations of their interactions with the natural world as irrational and based in primitive superstition, in revisiting these materials, the analysis provided by Cahir, Clark and Clarke emphasises the inherent rationality that underpinned Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge. The chapters included in this book comprehensively detail all aspects of Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge as described by settler-colonists, who as squatters, miners, amateur ethnographers and government officials documented the lives of the Aboriginal peoples they encountered across south-eastern Australia. This book provides new insights in the totemic life of Aboriginal peoples by explaining the biocultural role that terrestrial spirit beings, water spirits, space and time played in underpinning Indigenous ways of knowing plants, animals, land, sea, country. As the authors describe Aboriginal knowledge of canoe building, housing construction and the production of clothing, the most intriguing aspect of the book emerges as it becomes clear that the exchange of biocultural knowledge from Aboriginal peoples to settler-colonists was much more important to the survival and wellbeing of non-Indigenous peoples than popular national history remembers. The trade of medicines, the usefulness of bark canoes and the significant commercial trade in possum skin cloaks suggest that, during the 19th century, at least some aspects of Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge were recognised and valued by squatters, miners, drovers and others.

This book and the details about Aboriginal biocultural understandings of south-eastern Australia that it describes builds on the work of Bill Gammage, Bruce Pascoe and many others in bringing new insight and understanding to past Aboriginal engagement with what Indigenous people today often refer to in English as Country. As noted in the subtitle, the book is based almost exclusively on settler-colonial perceptions of often bewilderingly complex Aboriginal cultural practices that were witnessed and set down in written English. Through the twin cultural lenses of British imperialism and Western science, these fragments of Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge left to us by men including Robinson, Dawson, Howitt and women like Kirkland no doubt distorted and sometimes misrepresented the things that they witnessed. It is important to recognise that the material detailed in the book as Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge is reliant not on the voices and cultural subjectivities of the various Aboriginal peoples of south-eastern Australia but those of the settler-colonists who encountered them.

While the voices of Aboriginal people are almost completely absent, this book and the painstaking research that underpins the detailed description and analysis of Aboriginal Biocultural Knowledge it contains will provide a valuable resource for contemporary Aboriginal peoples in south-eastern Australia as they seek to revise and strengthen their connection to Country in what is emerging as a period of sustained cultural renaissance. The Aboriginal peoples of south-eastern Australia said that the sky was held up from the earth by a series of great sticks. According to the Wotjobaluk of the Wimmera region of Victoria, these were placed there by the magpie and tended by an old man in the east. When the British
arrived, the sticks that held the sky in place had begun to fall into a state of disrepair. To the Aboriginal peoples of south-eastern Australia, the biocultural world as they knew it was in danger of coming to an abrupt end. Cahir, Clark and Clarke are to be congratulated for their efforts, as this book does its bit, in ways that may well be significant; shoring up those great sticks and ensuring the world persists.

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