

Book review and location visit. Philip Shields.

I can recommend adjunct professor Bill Gammage's work, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines made Australia* (Gammage, 2011).

Early European colonists and explorers were impressed by the bountiful parklands existing throughout the continent, all commented that the terrain resembled an 'English estate'. Few realised they were a human creation. Those same observers were puzzled why few trees grew on rich soils, and why belts of timber suddenly vanished where the soil was unchanged. They were viewing a grid pattern of 'cold fire' managed landscapes catering for the needs of flora and fauna as well as human hunters. Those hunters could modify their prey's behaviour using the terrain to propagate the best grasses.

The terrain remained unchanged until the expanding wave of settlement post 1788 introduced European land practices. With details of land-management strategies from around Australia, *The Biggest Estate on Earth* rewrites the history of this continent, with huge implications for us today. Once Aboriginal people were no longer able to tend their country, it became overgrown and vulnerable to the hugely damaging bushfires we now experience. What we think of as virgin bush in a national park is nothing of the kind. Fortunately, many of the 'estate' areas may still be observed albeit because of grazing.

The author mentions one such area near Mudgegonga, here in North-East Victoria. The area demonstrates the use of terrain to capture game. It is an open grassy area with a narrow creek at one end. First nations people funnelled game from the open area into a narrow creek slit, cut from rock over millennia.

I visited the area and obtained permission from the landowner. The open grassy area remains relatively unchanged due to past grazing. Following is a Google map© satellite image of the grassy area in the mountains with the creek on the left border.



The creek 'trap' remains unchanged, it can be seen on the following two images how the narrow slit and steep sides make an ideal harvesting area. The area has two following slits both with

small waterfalls. The game falls down a small waterfall in the first and those missed are caught in the second. This area must have taken an army of people to surround the boundary of the grassland and either side of the creek. Truly, it was an 'all in' effort.

The first slit.



The second slit slightly further down.



The Biggest Estate On Earth: How Aborigines made Australia is a winner of the Prize for Australian History in the Prime Minister's Literary Awards 2012; The History Book Award in the Queensland Literary Awards 2012; the Victorian Prize for Literature 2012; and the ACT Book of the Year 2012.

Critics claim that some of Gammage's discipline-specific theories may well be questionable, and the book may be repetitive. The intent of this book is not to argue over scientific perspectives, it is to provide a reading of Australian history and landscape that will change how you consider Australia.

To this end, Gammage's book has made me re-examine my own regional landscape in Northeast Victoria. I learnt how to read country in a rudimentary fashion, one that for historical changes in vegetation types, size and stands, and hill slopes once grassed, now eucalypt forest. One tell-tail sign is well spaced ancient eucalypt trees surrounded by newer and introduced growth. Previously the new growth did not exist, it was kept down by first nation's fire management.

Gammage, B. (2011). *The Biggest Estate On Earth: How Aborigines made Australia* (1st ed., 434pp). Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW.