

“The Biggest Estate on Earth: how Aborigines made Australia”

by Bill Gammage, 2011

A Blue Mountains critique

by Andy Macqueen

IN HIS BOOK “The Biggest Estate on Earth”, Bill Gammage seeks to demonstrate, particularly through historical artworks and writings, that virtually every inch of Australia was managed by Aboriginal people by the systematic and scientific use of fire.

He discounts the role of natural wildfire arising from lightning ignitions. (Gammage 2011) Whether or not all aspects of his thesis are beyond challenge, his book is important in highlighting the significance of the traditional Aboriginal custodial role.

Gammage draws from a number of the journals of early Blue Mountains explorers and surveyors, using them to provide examples of the sorts of landscape management in which the traditional custodians engaged.

As a person familiar with the early journals and the country they concern, the writer was naturally interested to examine the references which Gammage relies on. These are all addressed below:

Firstly, on pages 72, 188 and 207 Gammage refers to two locations mentioned in the journal of Surveyor George Evans on November 30 and December 17, 1813, to support ideas concerning manufactured clearings in the Blue Mountains.

Unfortunately, neither location is in the Blue Mountains. The former date relates to the Fish River country, as Evans observed it from the Great Dividing Range near Cheetham, while the latter relates to a place on the Macquarie River 30 kilometres north-west of Bathurst. Both are today represented by farmlands. (Weatherburn 1966)

Secondly, on page 7 Gammage points out Surveyor William

Govett’s observation that the mountain summits were “clothed with grass, which circumstance, considering the barrenness and excessive sterility which pervades all the connecting ridges, and that region of the mountains, is certainly very extraordinary ... In general ... the ranges are covered with short timber and scrub.” (Govett 1977, pp3,4) Govett was referring to the basalt-capped Mounts Hay, Banks and Tomah.

However, he was working in the area in 1831, by which time there had been European impacts.

As Govett himself explains in the same piece, the top of Mount Hay had been totally cleared of all but one tree for survey purposes (Figure 1), while the eastern side of Mount Tomah “has been cleared and cultivated, and a large house and buildings have been erected”.

Govett describes the vegetation elsewhere on Tomah in similar terms to George Caley, who back in 1804 wrote that “The brush seems to occupy the whole of the summit, as well as most of the other parts ...

The part which was void of brush was thickly covered with timber”. (Andrews 1984, pp61-2)

Thirdly, on page 207 Gammage cites the “small piece of ground, which was destitute of trees, and no herbaceous brush” mentioned by George Caley, as evidence of a clearing created by Aboriginal people. (Andrews 1984, p71)

The place concerned is not really “above the Grose Valley”, as Gammage suggests, but on the west flank of Mount Tomah South, traversed by Caley on November 13, 1804.

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Figure 1: William Govett’s “View of the gullies of the Grose River from a cataract named Govett’s Leap” (National Library n/a-pic-an3364840_v). The mountain on the right is the basalt-capped Mount Hay, one of Govett’s “extraordinary” features. As shown by the drawing, it had been cleared of all but one tree for survey purposes.

The hardest day of Caley's remarkable expedition

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That day was one of the hardest of Caley's remarkable expedition, involving scrub so thick that in places they could "scarce force a passage".

His reason for remarking on this spot was that it offered respite from the scrub and a view of the terrain ahead, including Mount Bell.

His precise route is impossible to determine, but there is no doubt that for a time he sidled above the sandstone rim of the mountain (below the basalt) and in doing so would have encountered some of the natural swamps and small bare rock areas to be found there today.

There is a bare rock area some 15 metres across about 850 metres south-west of Tomah South Trig which appears to fit all the necessary requirements with regards to Caley's account, and there are probably others.

Fourthly, on page 207 Gammage mentions the "about two thousand acres of land Clear of trees" described by Blaxland (and others) in 1813, as further evidence of

Aboriginal clearing. (Richards 1979, p71)

Again the location is wrong: the place is not "north of Katoomba".

It is the northern part of Kings Tableland, a windswept place with shallow sandstone and stony soil, typical of many natural heaths on the plateau of the upper Blue Mountains. (Figure 2)

Today it is mostly characterised by heath species of banksia and casuarina, whereas the early descriptions indicate a predominance of "coarse grass".

It is therefore apparent that the area had been subjected to more fire in the years prior to 1813 than it has been today.

To that extent, it may be relevant to Gammage's thesis, though it should be understood that today's low fire frequency is largely due to the fact that authorities actively prevent fire there. Baker (1997, p67) has suggested that "it is possible that this heath was kept in a low state by fire management perhaps to partly allow for ease of movement through the area which is known for its Aboriginal occupation and industrial sites".

That hypothesis relies on an assumption, perhaps not an unreasonable one given the place's accessibility and views, that the sites at Kings Tableland were more

significant than the hundreds of other known sites, many of which are situated in shelters in scrubby, wooded areas.

Fifthly, on page 159, Gammage quotes selectively from Evan's account of a fire on the Blue Mountains in January 1814, concluding that it was an example of a cool summer burn by Aboriginal people because Evans "walked close behind the flames.

He could not have done so behind any of Australia's recent big fires". This interpretation does not stand scrutiny, and it is worthwhile to reproduce Evans' complete description:

3 Jan [near Katoomba]: The mountains have been fired; had we been on them we could not have escaped; the Flames rage with violence through thick underwood, which they are covered with. Bad travelling the stick of the Bushes here are worse than if their leaves had not been consumed; they catch my Chain which makes the measuring very fatiguing; also tears our clothes to pieces, and makes us appear as Natives from black dust off them. The Marks in the Trees are burnt out; therefore am obliged to go over them again; Our Horses now want Grass; the herbage in this spacious Valley [Jamison Creek] is destroyed; we cut some sweet Rushes for them that grow on the edge of a stream of Water which runs through it. distance, 4 Miles.

4 Jan: The Mountains are as yesterday; fired in all directions; at 11 o'Clock I was upon the high hill: all objects Eastward are obscured by thick smoke; We stopped where there was feed for the Horses and Water. [Lawson vicinity] distance, 5¼ Miles

5 Jan: Still in thick Brush; the leaves of it are burnt. The weather is disagreeably warm and boisterous, which has been the case for the last 3 days. ... distance, 4½ Miles [stopping in Linden vicinity] Continued page 19



Figure 2: The open heath country of Kings Tableland is extensive but not unique. It is associated with exposed and shallow rock, as is this open area on the Mount Hay Range. The grooves prove that the people clearly lingered there, but whether they fire-managed the place comprehensively is speculative. A. Macqueen 1996.

6 Jan: *The fires have been in my favour, otherwise it would be impossible to measure; the flames have consumed the foliage from the highest Trees. The Ridges continue as usual until the latter part of my journey which is Forest Land [Springwood] for ½ a Mile; the timber on it is chiefly lofty stringy Bark and Oaks; there are small patches of grass left that the fire missed. ... distance, 5¼ Miles*

7 Jan: *The Forest land continues a Mile farther; afterwards the brushy Ridge commences again, the thickest of it consumed, which I consider fortunate, had it not I should be obliged to have given off measuring; at the end of today's Journey is a Lagoon of good Water, with tolerable grass round the edge of it. [Glenbrook Lagoon] distance, 5¾ Miles. (Mackaness 1965, pp30-31)*

This was an extensive fire, ranging at least 36 kilometres in a west-east line and apparently well to the south and north.

It occurred in the heat of summer, and burnt through the thick scrub of which Evans, and Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth, had previously complained.

On December 29, when still in the Hartley Valley, Evans had commented that "The Natives seem to be numerous; there are fires in many parts not far from us".

This statement, together with his opening words on January 3, seems to imply that he thought Aboriginal people were responsible for the fire.

However, it is not clear whether he thought they did it deliberately, and he makes no comment on why they might have lit it or whether they were managing it in any way.

His description of the fire seems quite consistent with what one might expect from an uncontrolled summer wildfire sweeping across the Blue Mountains today: shrubbery reduced to blackened sticks, with the leaves on the highest trees being consumed in places.

Given the extensive thick scrub which Blaxland and Evans previously reported, and the "warm and boisterous" weather, it is hard to imagine that the fire could have been anything other than intense.

Gammage proposes it was a cool fire because Evans was able to walk close behind it.

However, Evans does not say that he walked close behind it. He may have been several days behind the flames.

Perhaps Gammage interprets the present-tense clause "the Flames rage with violence through thick underwood" to mean that Evans was witnessing those flames, whereas Evans may only have been making a general statement about the character of fire in scrub.

Incidentally, Evans' "forest land" with its "small patches of grass that the fire has missed", was situated on the rich Wianamatta Shale around Springwood and Faulconbridge—an area noted by Blaxland for its open grassy nature.

That is the only part of the entire Blue Mountains Ridge between Lapstone and Mount York not characterised by soils derived from the sandstones and interbedded claystones of the Triassic series.

Baker (1997, pp67-68) noted the evidence for Aboriginal burning in that vicinity and along the associated Hawkesbury Ridge. (Figure 3)

The large summer fire that Evans encountered was not unique in early accounts.

Caley's men accidentally started a November bushfire when lighting their campfire during his 1804 expedition.

He described the subsequent inferno which raged across the hills, causing trees to fall with the sound of gunfire. (Did not Aboriginal campfires ever similarly escape?)

Francis Barrallier observed what appeared to be a large wildfire in the southern Blue Mountains in December 1802, while William Parr encountered an enormous fire in the Wollemi in November 1817.

These are discussed in Macqueen (2004, ch4).

Sixthly, and finally, on page 197 Gammage raises matters from John Wilson's 1798 expeditions.

These were not in the Blue Mountains as we now generally understand them, but as he traversed rugged country of similar
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Figure 3: John Lewin's depiction of Macquarie's 1815 party at Springwood (NSW State Library). This was the grassy forest land which Evans (and Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth before him) remarked on. It corresponds to the rich shale-derived soils of the area which contrast with those of the surrounding sandstone country.

These were not in the Blue Mountains

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geology, and because the accounts are some of the earliest of any value, it is relevant to consider the matters raised. Gammage states that on his first expedition Wilson

reached the Wingecarribee-Wollondilly junction northwest of Berrima. In what is now mostly dense forest, they crossed "fine open country, but very mountainous", grass meadows, thinly timbered plains. And scrub and vine brushes, including Bargo Brush, soon notorious for poor soil, stringybark, and tangles of scrub and fallen timber.

This interpretation relies on Cambage (1920) and Chisholm (1955).

Subsequent analyses by Andrews (1990) and Brownscombe (2004), and also by the writer (unpublished), discount that view.

The terminus of the first expedition was almost certainly in the Berrima-Bong Bong area, which now features open farming country.

The particular "fine open country, but very mountainous" country mentioned in the above quote was actually encountered on January 27, 1798 when the party appears to have been travelling up the long ramp which forms the watershed between the Bargo River and the Nepean system.

The surface geology for much of the way consists of Wianamatta Shales and would, if burnt frequently, have produced open grassy forest (as at Springwood).

Much of the area, such as around Yerrinbool, is now occupied by small farms, not scrub.

Gammage further states (still page 197):

In March 1798 Wilson led another party to Mt Towrang east of Goulburn... He found



Figure 4: Rural scene near Berrima. This is the country crossed by John Wilson on March 19, 1798, which Gammage states is "thick of timber" today. A. Macqueen 2011

"a most beautiful country, being nothing but fine large meadows with pools of water in them; fine green hills, but very thin of timber." They are thick of timber now.

The "most beautiful country, being nothing but fine large meadows ..." was nowhere near the party's Mount Towrang terminus.

It was reported by the diarist on March 19, 1798 just south of Berrima, in today's aforementioned open farmlands. It is certainly not "thick of timber" today. (Figure 4)

To conclude. The archaeological record tells us that the sandstone terrain of the Blue Mountains was of great cultural significance to the traditional owners.

However, the pattern, frequency and purpose of their occupation or visits is not well understood. (Attenbrow 2009)

Nor is the nature of their burning practices.

However, it can be said with reasonable certainty, based on the early historical accounts and on the botanical evidence, that most of the sandstone country was covered in the scrubby vegetation that we still see today, rather than the open grassy woodlands that many imagine. (Macqueen 2004, ch4; Benson & Redpath 1997)

This is not inconsistent with Gammage's thesis. He acknowledges that "people burnt the most useful land most and the most sterile or sensitive land perhaps not for generations", and that they might only have burnt dry ridges "every 15-25 years". (Gammage, pp162, 165)

However, if dry ridge country of the Blue Mountains were left alone for such periods one would expect that fire from lightning ignitions, accidental ignitions, or escaped fires, would attain more significance.

This would be consistent with palaeoenvironmental research which suggests that the frequency and intensity of fire on the Blue Mountains mainly reflected the climate. (Mooney & Martin 2009)

Setting those questions aside, it is unfortunate that Gammage's above acknowledgement is relatively hidden in the book.

By the manner in which he presents examples from the Blue Mountains historical record, he implicitly invites the reader to think that attention would have been given to all the mountains on a detailed and frequent basis.

However, from the above discussion one is entitled to conclude that the pieces of evidence cited have not been properly examined with respect to their context or relevance.

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‘...systematic and scientific use of fire...’

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In terms of their usefulness in supporting Gammage's thesis that all of the country was managed by the systematic and scientific use of fire, they are variously not applicable to the Mountains, misleading or doubtful.

While the cited evidence suggests that part of Kings Tableland and places on the Nepean Ramp may have been burnt frequently to promote open landscape, such practice can simply be associated with the particular geological environments to be found there, in the same way that frequent burning may have been applied to the Wianamatta Shale country at Springwood, the alluvial flats of the Burratorang and other large incised valleys, the alluvial flats of Putty and Mellong, the volcanic diatremes and the upland swamps. (Figure 5)

Those examples say nothing about traditional management on the vast area of rugged sandstone country with its scrubby woodland.

It is not intended to deny that the traditional owners managed their country throughout the Blue Mountains.

However, the evidence educed by Gammage is unhelpful in understanding the nature of that management.

The writer

Andy Macqueen has spent many years analysing Blue Mountains explorers' accounts and following in their footsteps.

He has also been closely involved in the survey of remote Aboriginal cultural sites.

His knowledge of fire in the mountains derives from observations as a bushwalker, and wide reading and briefings in the course of his 18 years on the NPWS Regional Advisory Committee.

He is not a fire ecologist, but neither is Bill Gammage.



Figure 5: The explorers came across many natural clearings associated with swamps, such as this one (Burralow Swamp) encountered by Caley in 1804. Elsewhere on his journey Caley described the same scrubby vegetation that we see today.
A. Macqueen 1996

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