



Kate Fullagar goes back in time

Bennelong & Phillip: A History Unravelling, by Kate Fullagar, Cammeray, NSW, Scribner, 2023, xvii + 298 pp., \$AU55.00, ISBN 9781761108174 (hardback), 9781761108181 (ebook), Publisher's website: <https://www.simonandschuster.com.au/p/scribner-australia>

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BOOK REVIEW

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Kate Fullagar's striking new book is guaranteed to jump right off the shelf at any Australian historian happily meandering their way around the bookshop. Appearing under Simon & Schuster's very appealing literary non-fiction imprint Scribner Australia, it grapples with one of Australia's foundational narratives, the relationship between the first British governor, Arthur Phillip, and the First Nations leader Bennelong. The names of these men have been long etched into the national consciousness. Yet, as Fullagar explains, despite the many works of history and art dealing with their lives and doings, nobody has attempted to bring their 'entangled lives' together in one historical study – until this book.

Fullagar's previous work on Indigenous travellers in the eighteenth century has been acclaimed for its originality and sophistication. *Bennelong & Phillip* represents Fullagar's mastery of an ethnohistorical approach that uses close and 'thick description' to analyse relationships between individual British and Indigenous men. The book also showcases the depth of her knowledge of Indigenous encounters. Fullagar's emphasis is always to draw out the agency and perspective of Indigenous historical actors in the British imperial project, and the relationship between these two key leaders – as she convincingly asserts it to be – provides a richly textured canvas to do just that.

In the opening section of the book, Fullagar gives a succinct yet thorough overview of the many works that have covered Bennelong and Phillip. Throughout the book, she evaluates and assesses the historical claims and arguments about the men, and carefully records her judgments. Her erudite and lucid engagement with the field will interest Australian historians of this period, as will the sense throughout the book that she is often writing back, critically, against the work that has come before. Fullagar also asks her readers to contemplate the wealth of cultural artefacts (including literary and artistic material) we have relating to both men, and especially on Bennelong, whose longstanding characterisation as a tragic figure 'lost between two worlds' was revived in the twenty-first-century Bangarra dance theatre performance. As Fullagar comments, it is an 'indictment of settler audiences that an Aboriginal arts group in 2017 found more purchase in repeating a story of Indigenous ruination than in exploring the idea that Bennelong might have had a better fate than is usually assumed' (15). It is a mark of her maturity as a historian, however, that her historiography never overwhelms the historical narrative.

What has caused the most commentary among readers is, nevertheless, a historiographic question. Fullagar's approach to revisiting this historical narrative by the explicit device of reversing the 'temporal script' requires the author to articulate the cogs and wheels behind the curtain used to construct the historical narrative. Fullagar's stated aim is to contest the 'modern historical mode' that structures a chronological 'imaginary of progress' and tends to justify empire as a means to an (ever-improving) end. As she puts it,

'Bennelong & Phillip is an experiment in trying to move beyond the limitations of typical Western ways of writing about the past':

This book does not claim to embody how someone like Bennelong would have approached the past ... but it does at least mean that his and Phillip's histories now share an equally unfamiliar framing. The European character is no longer favoured over the non-European by the very way their stories are told (8).

The book works backwards from the present, structurally, setting the reader on a journey back in time from 1823 (when the remains of Phillip's second wife were buried with her former husband), step by step back to the time of their respective births. This is a provocative, and brave, experiment. It is demanding of the scholarly reader, provoking a range of intellectual questions about timelines and teleology in our work. *Does* reversing a timeline counteract the notion of a seamless unfolding of destiny? How do we understand change over time working backwards? What would a truly non-linear, non-western, decolonising historical narrative look like? I suspect the general reader might more easily digest it.

In contrast to the reversed timeline, the biographical, individual life narrative is a tried-and-true method of reaching wider audiences. One of the major problems with this approach for the academically trained historian is how to find evidence of the inner feelings and thoughts of those being written about. As Bennelong and Phillip were both reserved when it came to recording their personal perspectives, Fullagar is obliged to speculate in her interpretation of the recorded events of the two men's lives and their interactions with each other. Her central argument is that Bennelong and Phillip were mutually influential upon each other. This is not to say that their lives revolved around this relationship. Rather, Fullagar imaginatively traces the changing nature of their interactions with each other as they learned to negotiate their very different world-views and experiences. To do so by working backwards through the narration of their lives is a complicated exercise, but one that Fullagar handles with impressive dexterity.

There's no doubt that Fullagar has set up a new direction for thinking about the ways we structure our histories. She has achieved her aim of bringing together a disparate and rich body of historical knowledge and imagination about the two men, and she has been able to very elegantly disentangle, and demystify, the stories of these men and their relationship for the last two centuries.

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