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Irish-Australians who are concerned about cultural preservation will find much to think about in this book. It focuses on the songlines, the Dreaming narratives of Yanyuwa people. Old Europe has its own earth-based songlines, including Ireland’s own Táin bó Cúailgne, available in the superb translation of Thomas Kinsella. Táin clearly preserves Irish oral and nomadic pre-history and cosmology. When Queen Medb ‘got her gush of blood’ (menstruation is a cool excuse for not meeting Cuchulainn in armed combat), it ‘dug three great channels, each big enough to take a household’. Such markings out of the landscape by ancestral beings have many resonances in Aboriginal Australia, as does the concern about how much culture is lost as the languages die, and how best to preserve oral cultures that are incommensurable with western media.

John Bradley’s Singing Saltwater Country tells the story of how he learned Yanyuwa Dreamings and culture. His was not a traditional anthropological trajectory. Arriving as a primary teacher in the Gulf town of Borroloola, he learnt language from the kids. He was slowly inducted over several decades into male language and the culture by countty. He was a Sephardie Jew who as a young teenager reclaimed his family’s culture, taught himself Hebrew. He is also a gifted artist. Translating songlines into visual form has been a consistent methodology, a continuing gift he brings to these Dreaming narratives. The book is preceded by an Atlas and an ongoing digital animation project. These artifacts communicate the rich cultural knowledge which songlines embody into comprehensible form for westerners and for Yanyuwa children who are no longer able to move freely move around their Country. The original drawings and maps in this book are part of its power. Maps in this edition, however, are too small, too illegible and too much detail is lost. An essential tool for understanding is compromised, but hopefully that can be remedied in subsequent editions.

This book achieves many things. First, it is a revealing insight into Yanyuwa pedagogy. How does one learn a cosmology so different from one’s own? What does it really mean to say, ‘land is life’, or ‘Aborigines belong to the land’? The words trip off the tongue easily, but what do they mean? This book takes you systematically through that process of understanding – through the pitfalls, the partial understandings which become ‘portals of discovery’ – the ‘ah-ha’ moments. It is a fascinating account of an experience-based pedagogy, not thought-down, but experience-up. Bradley was encouraged to experience Yanyuwa Country with all his senses, and then understand the sacredness of this knowledge. Like Táin bó Cúailgne, Indigenous songlines are not solemn in the ways of western epic. Bradley recollects a joyful process in which the sacred intersects with the ordinary and everyday.

Secondly, the book attempts to explain songlines. The ancient Irish, indeed the early modern Irish, were like Indigenous Australians in being small-territory-based and nomadic within a small compass. The colonists didn’t like this and changed it often brutally. We’ve lost the sense of the stories which tell us what and who we and which are tied to the soil. Explaining Dreamings as a cosmology tied to specific country is the genius of this book.

Songlines are hard to grasp and even harder to teach. There is not much available that doesn’t assimilate them to paper-based, de-centred (removed from the territory) forms of publication. So, even the best explications tend to be written in those contexts – the Berunds and their categories in The Speaking Land, A.W. Reed’s Aboriginal Myths, Legends, and Fables, T.G. H. Strehlow in Songs of Central Australia and even David Unaipon’s Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines. They are all assimilated to western models in a misguided attempt to dignify them by putting them into the familiar and European generic straightjackets (myth, legend, fable, just-so story, creation myth) into which they clearly do not fit.

This book does something radically different. It focuses on one culture, one territory, the stories that criss-cross it, and that amplify one another. It takes you on that difficult journey of entering into that different cosmology and construction of reality. The web of meaning whereby land and kin and everything observable and unobservable (e.g. weather phenomena) are related dynamically, and in a spirit of enquiry, is unfolded in this work. The story of the barge doing soundings for not meeting Cuchulainn in armed combat. The story of the barge doing soundings for Yanyuwa and westerners, which is carefully unpacked. It is potentially a story that has a genealogy that reaches back to the Ice Age – mind-blowing stuff. Ireland, the longest continuous, written European culture can boast only 1.5 millennia. Why aren’t we promoting this much more ancient Indigenous culture more strongly?

This book probably won’t save Yanyuwa language. But it builds a clearer case about what is lost when language is lost. That’s a hard story to hear, but one which must be told, and here it is told passionately. I’m a bit more hopeful than Bradley because my cultural roots are Irish and we have seen this culture retrieve its archaic traces and remake itself triumphantly in English. And Irish does still have its advocates and speakers. In the harsh daylight and reality of Borroloola’s educational disadvantage, Yanyuwa people have long said that their prospering depends on the mainstream population knowing and respecting their culture. This book will certainly help that endeavour.

Frances Devlin-Glass

Frances has worked closely with John Bradley on a number of Yanyuwa projects, including the website Divawu wurrwa (www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/divawuwwurr).
The Songlines book. Read 540 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. In this extraordinary book, Bruce Chatwin has adapted a literary form common until the eighteenth century though rare in ours; a story of ideas in which two companions, traveling and talking together, explore the hopes and dreams that animate both them and the people they encounter.