



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



**Interview with Bill Gammage,  
28 October 2013**

**Rowena Lennox**

*Bill Gammage is a historian and Adjunct Professor in the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University. He taught history at the University of Papua New Guinea, the University of Adelaide and the ANU. His books include *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the First World War* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1974), *Narrandera Shire* (Narrandera: Narrandera Shire Council, 1986), *The Sky Travellers: Journeys in New Guinea 1938–1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1998) and *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011).*

*I met Bill at his office at the ANU on a coolish morning in October 2013 and started our interview by describing how I had first encountered his work through his role as military advisor on the film *Gallipoli* (1981), directed by Peter Weir. I recorded our interview and the following transcript matches the recording with very little intervention. I cut some tangential asides, and Bill and I occasionally added words in square brackets to clarify the discussion where words were implied rather than said. But what follows is our conversation – unedited.*

**RL:** I came to your work, unwittingly, when I first saw the film *Gallipoli* as a teenager in 1981. It was the last film that I went to see with my boyfriend before I took up a scholarship to study in Canada for two years. In the morning before we went to see *Gallipoli* we'd been to see my boyfriend's father in hospital, where he was dying of cancer. So it was a sad day and on that first viewing I was struck by the tragedy of two young men going to war, and one being killed in a senseless attack.

A couple of years later I saw *Gallipoli* again when it was shown to us at school in Canada. The students who watched the film with me there came from all around the world. After this viewing I was much more aware of the film's national consciousness, how it defined and expressed nuances of what it meant to be Australian.

Now I've read *The Broken Years* and watched the film again, I see how much of the detail and the ethos is drawn from *The Broken Years*, which uses the diaries and letters of Australian soldiers – at Gallipoli, in Egypt and Palestine, and on the Western Front – to create an

emotional history of the First World War. The way you've organised the material so that a reader can be immersed in a soldier's world and his words in the thick of a battle, and can also see where he came from, what his occupation was, how old he was, whether he was killed in action or died of wounds or whether he made it home really brought home the tragedy. Your narrative moves readers from how people at home and soldiers felt at the beginning of the war to how their attitudes changed as the war progressed.

These three aspects – the meticulous and easily accessible historical detail of the soldier's lives, the heartbreaking freshness of their words and the strength of writing that pulls the reader through – make *The Broken Years* a very powerful book. As you say in the book, many soldiers did not talk about the experiences when they came back to Australia. My grandfather didn't. But I thought about him a lot when I was reading *The Broken Years* and I feel like I know him better now.

When you started your research for *The Broken Years*, did you realise that you would be writing about a national consciousness that shaped later generations and became a profound part of what it means to be Australian?

**BG: I don't think so. At the time I was researching *The Broken Years* people weren't much interested in the First World War. There was Anzac Day of course but by and large it was a formality. The headmaster or an RSL figure would get up and say, 'On the 25th April 1915 the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps landed on Gallipoli. Gallipoli is in Turkey and it happened at dawn,' and, apart from returned soldiers, there wasn't much interest in anything beyond that. I remember going to the Dawn Service in the War Memorial [in Canberra] in 1965 and the 'crowd' didn't stretch more than halfway down the pool of memory – perhaps a hundred people. Now the crowd can't fit in the courtyard outside, let alone the pool of memory.**

So there was no sense this was going to be the dominant commemoration that it is now. On the other hand, it was interesting exploring Anzac because it was still the most distinctive Australian holiday, not the most celebrated but the one that was most obviously Australian, comparing it with Christmas Day or Good Friday or New Years Day which quite clearly are not particularly Australian. Australia Day was in the school holidays so it didn't really count. Perhaps for want of alternatives it [Anzac Day] was the major experience in those days.

Really what I was interested in was, first of all, I thought Bean<sup>1</sup> was probably exaggerating the mythological qualities of Anzac and I thought I'd test whether he was right and in the end accepted that he was. Secondly, because these were civilians at war. I remember going to look at a war memorial in the Riverina where I come from and there were more names on the memorial than there were people, certainly men anyway, in the town. I realised this was a big effect on Australia itself rather than Australia at war.

Those two things started me out. The other thing was one of those accidents that is pretty well invariably the case. When I was at school still we visited Canberra from Wagga

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<sup>1</sup> CEW Bean, official war correspondent with the Australian Imperial Force and author/editor of *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–18* (12 vols, Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1921–43).

and the librarian at the time, Bruce Harding, was also from Wagga and Mum knew him slightly so she barged through the doors that said 'Staff only' into the library and we got talking to Bruce and he casually pulled out a First World War letter and showed it to us. I never forgot that.

**RL:** The material is so sad. There are correspondents, people like Corporal Arthur Thomas – you see him through his emotional highs and lows, you see what an intelligent, articulate correspondent he is. He's like a friend. Was it hard to write?

**BG:** It was very hard. Friends say that my personality changed as a result. I became less ebullient and so on. It's not really possible for me to assess that. But it certainly had an impact on me. It's still the case when I hear the news about some civilian tragedy in particular and how many people have been killed, one of my reactions is to think, that's not as bad as Pozières, not as bad as some battle or event in World War One. And similarly if I see the name of a town copied from France or Britain during the war I'll think, what was happening there in World War One? So it's stayed with me. I've never been able to get away from the First World War, and that's only a pale reflection of what it must have been like for the returned men themselves. What they must have gone through beggars the imagination.

**RL:** Yes. I agree. One of the reasons *The Broken Years* is such an interesting book, I think, is because it is a great action story, you write about the battles and the courage and what was happening, and the mud, and it is also an intimate account of perceptions. I'm interested in how perception works in your writing. What drew you to writing about the soldiers' perceptions apart from that first letter Bruce Harding showed to you in Canberra?

**BG:** I don't think I could have consciously put it this way at the time, but I certainly think it strongly now and have for a long while: the first task of historical research is to understand. Not to praise or to condemn but to understand, to get inside the head of the subjects that you're writing about, in this case the First World War soldiers. So I tried to really understand how they thought and that meant doing probably a lot more research than was necessary until I got to the stage where I thought if somebody asked me something I could say, 'I don't know but I think probably this is what it was.' In other words I was thinking what ought to have happened – can be dangerous, I know – but if you get to that level of understanding and then write you really are empathetic with your subject. You can praise or condemn then but it means that you do offer a lot from the perspective of the soldiers and of course that's reinforced if you're talking about private diaries and letters, it's their perspective that is going to come through. The other thing is those words are so powerful that the soldiers wrote that just letting them run, all I did was tack them together. They're terrific.

**RL:** They are, aren't they. And the interrelation with the sources – there are passages where it's your voice then a soldier's voice, how they run together that makes it ...

**BG:** There's only one part that's not narrative, I think. There's a small passage there where I discuss discipline. I get into a short argument with historians and others who have spoken

**about discipline in the AIF but otherwise it's a narrative. My rule is, 'Tell a story!' And actually [with] *The Broken Years* I think the model is a Greek tragedy because they don't know what's going to happen to them. They're really confident and think they're in charge, defying fate. But we know. We know what's going to happen to them and we know what an awful fall they're going to have.**

RL: So are you the chorus?

**BG: I don't know about that. I spose I'm the playwright! (Laughs) The chorus doesn't really come in and warn. There is a bit of warning later in the war. But really it comes upon them unexpectedly. It's not as though they're heedless of the warnings. They live in a world where those warnings aren't really strong.**

RL: You describe it so well. Towards the end of the war they know how permeable the line [between life and death] is, that fate is going to catch up with them at some stage but there are other qualities that keep them going: how they'll be remembered, how they behave towards their mates.

**BG: Towards the end of the war they think they know again. They think they're going to die, the war's going to go on forever. And again they get caught. When the war finishes they're surprised. Hardly any of them react. Fate never lets go of them.**

RL: *The Sky Travellers*, as well, is a great action story, as well as being an account of perceptions. In that book you tell about the different parties involved in the Hagen-Sepik patrol in New Guinea in 1938-39. There were the Europeans, the New Guinean police, the New Guinean carriers and the local people they encountered. At some points you create a feeling that you, the narrator, have simply stepped out of the way. There's a transparency in your writing, when you describe, say, how a couple of locals react to the patrol. Here's an extract:

Near Tagibou on 4 or 5 May a boy, Idava Mai, and a young man, Kabu Pare, heard that sky people [the patrol] were coming and hid in a cemetery. After the strangers passed they strolled out, laughingly boasting that they could have gone with them but decided not to. Suddenly police [accompanying the patrol] leapt from hiding. Everyone ran frantically. Idava collided with boys in front and was caught. He wet himself, but was given shell to be a guide. Paralysed with fear, he was taken to Jim's [Jim Taylor, Australian leader of the patrol] tent, a terrifying cavern. He hid his face, too frightened to look at the fearsome being within. Police gave him food but he could not touch it. He knew who the creatures were. One day, tradition declared, devils would come, eat the people, and destroy the world. That day had come. The spirits had started eating the pigs and soon would eat him. He crouched in terror. Kabu was less fearful. When Idava was captured he went to the sky people's camp and stayed overnight, and next day the two guided the patrol. Kabu left, and that night Idava escaped. He gave his shell to relatives, but unlike him they thought it special and kept it for years. Idava stayed well clear of the line [the patrol], but years later

was badly wounded by an arrow in the stomach, and reflected that perhaps he should have gone with the spirits – he might have become a policeman or something. (75)

It seems like we're right in the thick of the scene, in the fear of that young boy. What technical aspects of writing go through your mind when you create a passage like this?

**BG:** That was a story those two told me, one after another – or they might have been together. Anyway they told me that story. So I suppose a lot of the aspects were what I asked them in the first place. The key thing there is to get detail. Everything you read out there except the idea of the 'terrifying cavern', which I put in, was stuff they told me in answer to questions. New Guineans are very good narrators anyway. People who can't write tell stories better than people who can, and they remember better. They have to remember better. So they're very good storytellers. When they realise that you know a bit already and they realise they can go into detail, they go into very great detail. Of course they're not only talking to me. I'm asking the questions but there's a great crowd of grandchildren and other relatives around who are picking up this story, so each interview is a performance as well, a village performance. That gives you all that detail, then it's just a matter of writing it down in the sequence.

The other thing there is the style. A lot of short sentences, no complicating words, no words that are going to interrupt the flow – they're all, as I say, short sentences, small words. That way you keep the story zooming along. If you want to slow it down you do it in other ways.

**RL:** Are you conscious of that when you write – this is action, this is drama, I'm going to keep this part moving?

**BG:** Oh yes. Most of *The Sky Travellers*, in fact most of my books, are fast moving, although not *The Biggest Estate*, and that's deliberate. Another thing to do, more in discussion, to slow the narrative down, I put in a lot of commas and so on and then have a short sentence, which is in effect the king hit. They're different techniques like that.

**RL:** In *The Sky Travellers* you've got these different players and at different points you describe their outlook. You keep a handle on them all through the adventure. How hard is it to keep a handle on them?

**BG:** I'm a very slow writer. It takes me a long while to write. I spose I wrote *Narrandera* quicker than any of the others but it's always slow. Once you've got your objective, once you've understood what the book is about, I think it then becomes easier because you can constantly remind yourself. The subtitle of *The Sky Travellers* is 'Journeys in New Guinea' and the journeys are both physical and mental so I had the chronology of the physical things and that parallels the mental changes because they too happened in sequence. People learn as they go along. Therefore it's not a matter of constructing an argument where you have to go back and forth in time as I did with *The Biggest Estate* sometimes. You just follow the

physical narrative and for the mental narrative you've just got to keep reminding people as you go along.

RL: It's a very complex physical journey as well, it's a circuitous route and they split up ...

**BG: Yes, I think it would be a great Hollywood film.**

RL: It'd be fantastic. I know very little about New Guinea and it struck me when I was reading *The Sky Travellers* – I didn't know, I just didn't know. When people read my book about East Timor they'd say to me, 'We didn't know. We just didn't know.' How do you address how much people don't know when you are writing history?

**BG: It's a problem and it actually is a problem for *The Sky Travellers*. The people who have enjoyed that most are people who have been in New Guinea. The people who have never been there are stopped by the number of New Guinean names. A name comes up and they think, now who the heck's that? They've got to try and go to the back and look it up or just take a punt. And that is very hard. On the other hand, a reviewer who had lived in New Guinea said that this book had more New Guinean names in it than any other and I was pleased that he'd noticed that.**

RL: It's very important, isn't it, that the names are there?

**BG: Yes, I think so. Another reason, nobody else is going to write a book on that patrol. That's all that's going to be written because that's its significance – one book's enough. And so it's got to be a kind of reference as well for the descendants of the New Guineans who were on the patrol. So if I could put somebody's name in, I would.**

RL: How do you work out what to leave out?

**BG: *The Sky Travellers* is full of a lot of detail. What pushes the key story along is the main thing and that's the journey, the physical and mental journey. So the kinds of things you might leave out are the everyday things such as, 'wrote a letter home last night' or 'I had a sore foot', something like that, and the more mundane details. But anything that pushes the story you try and leave in.**

RL: As you say, the details, what the plane dropped, that somebody still had their axe thirty years later – these things are very powerful.

**BG: In that book pretty well as much as I had is in it. Whereas for *The Broken Years* I probably could have written it using entirely different quotes from the ones I used. There's so much stuff. So there it was a matter of choosing the wording or the economy of the words or something like that. Similarly for a lot of *Narrandera Shire* and similarly for *The Biggest Estate*. *The Sky Travellers* is unusual in that it has such a high proportion of what I found out in it.**

**RL:** I also am fascinated in all these different books by the movement and stasis. Say in *The Sky Travellers* the narrator's always there even though there's an illusion at times that the narrator's stepped out of the way, you're always there controlling the material and offering insights. At one point you give an account of the journey of the patrol and what it meant for the patrol and you say the patrol 'was making the unknown known' but for the local people the patrol encountered the patrol 'made the known unknown' (78).

As you've already said, *The Biggest Estate on Earth* is a very different book. The sense of narrative movement is so different. To my mind it's more of a still book, it's a picture more than a story, even though it has many pictures within it and many stories within it. What do you think?

**BG:** I agree with you entirely. The three other books, *Narrandera*, *Sky Travellers* and *Broken Years*, are all narratives and that is the most sophisticated form of historical writing. I say to students, by all means have a theory, you're going to have it, but it's an obstruction to exploring your evidence and finding out what actually matters about it. Whereas *The Biggest Estate* is an argument. There isn't a chronology, there are aspects of an argument about fire and about religion and various other aspects. So it's more or less accumulating shafts of evidence that come towards a conclusion – which I put in the front of the book! So people can read the first three chapters and go home or they can persist with the greater detail. They're very different. I regret that *The Biggest Estate* isn't more of a narrative because that is the best form of history. Until it was written I would have thought the narrative is the one that would attract the biggest audience but now I realise that the subject actually determines the size of your audience.

**RL:** With what you say about putting aside the theory if you can to get the evidence and to try and work out what's going on and to try and understand, I'm sure each book is different and each subject is different, but is there a stage in your research where you know what your argument's going to be? Does it come unconsciously? Does it come consciously?

**BG:** There is. And that stage varies. I try to defer it as long as possible. I think for the three narrative books I succeeded in that. I do a lot of research without knowing what I'm going to say, and deliberately not knowing what I was going to say because that makes you pre-empt your evidence. You start to look for things that you've already decided are accurate. Now to an extent everyone does that and it's unavoidable but I tried to defer the moment when I'd made up my mind about things.

With *The Biggest Estate* it's something I've been interested in for decades. That period we're talking about [deferring the argument] happened at the beginning, which was in the 1960s sometime but by the time I'd come to write I had the bones of what I wanted to say. So it became a different process. It became a matter of getting evidence which supported or altered my views on particular aspects of Aboriginal land management. Originally I came to the subject via the plants, not the Aborigines. Why were the plants behaving as they did? Especially the trees. And so I was looking at factors in the landscape like the sort of soil, the aspect (in other words facing the sun), whether there's salt in the soil and so on. It was only

after some time, still before I started to actually spend a lot of time on the book, that I concluded that it was Aborigines that were doing it.

RL: So it was a revelation?

BG: Well, it was a slow dawning. Took me a long time to wake up to myself. It was a slow realisation. And once I'd realised, then a gathering realisation of the complexity and extent and skill of Aboriginal land management. But that took a long while. I was well into writing to the book before I came to thinking of things like 'the Biggest Estate on Earth', because that implies a comprehensiveness that I didn't know was there when I started.

RL: Before you formulate this argument, are you writing? Or are you just reading, looking, listening?

BG: I usually write last. I do a lot of research, not making up my mind. When I've pretty well finished the research, then I start writing. Of course you're then obliged to go and check some things that you should have looked at earlier and didn't, but by and large that's the last thing I do.

With *The Biggest Estate* there are little passages that I wrote as I was researching because I could see that these were narrative slots. [For example] the story of Mannalargenna, the north-east Tasmanian leader,<sup>2</sup> I wrote that as a little grab while I was still researching. But basically [with the other books] I deferred it [writing the text]. You can see with a narrative why that has to be so. You've really got to know what the story is before you start to write it and you've got to know how much to intervene in it. You spoke earlier of the fact that I stepped aside. That's generally true because you want people to have the sense that they're there, but to be fair, every now and then I remind them that this is a shaped story so I'll make a comment. 'A bright sun cast dark shadows.' (*The Sky Travellers*, 139) Nobody told me that. I put it in. And there it is, the contemporary observer warning you that this is a historian writing.

RL: Yes, I've come across it in *The Sky Travellers* where Babinip [a Telefol woman who has become John Black's, one of the Australian leaders of the patrol, lover] is pleading with John to stay, making suggestions and demands in a big quote from John's journal, then you say, 'Babinip was treating John as her man' (175) – stepping back from [the lovers'] involvement. And there's another one: 'Inequality corrupts' (187). You make that comment after Serak, one of the New Guinean police, has been talking to John about the corruption that's been going on and [the discussion is of] John's not knowing and then this two-word sentence down here at the bottom of the paragraph.

BG: Those short sentences are quite often meant to be comments which are beyond that subject. 'Inequality corrupts' could be about the French Revolution.

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<sup>2</sup> The Biggest Estate 137–8



**RL:** Yes, was it Lord Acton who said 'Power corrupts'?

**BG:** Yes, it's a refinement of that. Inequality is one kind of power, isn't it.

**RL:** It's nuancing it, if that's a word, bringing out some of the nuances of why, I think. I love that style. It takes you there and gives you perspective as well.

**BG:** And it's saying, here you are, following the story, wait a minute, this matters. This matters about people.

**RL:** Because it could just be a conversation, couldn't it, it could just be one private love affair.

**BG:** Yes. 'Don't let this go through to the keeper, there's more to this.'

**RL:** Talking about sources, the writing interrelates with the sources, but also, say for a book like *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, the sources are so different from the usual historical sources. As you say, you came from the plants, [then there are] the pictures, the land itself. I can't help thinking how important and distinctive your source material is and how your books do justice to their source material – the diaries and letters in *The Broken Years* and the interviews and journals in *The Sky Travellers*. You've talked about this a bit already but how much is reading and listening and looking part of writing?

**BG:** It must vary from subject to subject but I think I've benefited from a country upbringing. A lot of people who grow up in the country get to the city as quick as they can so mentally they're not really country people. But I do think country people are better observers and it's easy to say that in particular about landscape and about plants. To give an example, I go across the Hay plain and I'm seeing all sorts of different things going on. Most people who go from Sydney to Adelaide or Canberra to Adelaide go across the Hay plain and find it dead boring. That's a way of closing your mind to what might be there. At the end of it you mightn't find anything much but it's much better to keep your mind open and look around, to actually look, and see what you can see. You learn a lot that way. I think country people are more likely to do that than city people.

**RL:** Because they have some knowledge to begin with? Of land and grass?

**BG:** Spot on. We all build on what we know. We all respond better to furthering what we know than to embarking on new things. Embarking on new things is very difficult, very difficult. You can see I've tried it a few times. (Laughs)

**RL:** That leads me to this other question of demystification. *The Broken Years*, even though it made clear how hellish the First World War was, the soldiers' words, day by day and battle by battle, really brought the war up close and demystified it as well. At the moment in this bushfire season, on the way to Canberra from Sydney, I went through part of the country near Bargo that had been burnt right across the highway and of course I thought about *The Biggest Estate* and how Aboriginal people would have burnt this land with several smaller cooler fires if

they'd been managing it [as they were] before European settlement. So that notion of embarking on a new subject, as you've done many times, and demystifying something, this viewing of the Australian landscape, that slowly you came to this awareness of how it had been managed and then this book demystifies it for people.

**BG: It's nice of you to say that.**

**RL:** What's history's role in this demystifying process?

**BG:** What I said earlier about the importance of understanding, I suppose other people would say, 'thinking you understand'. But trying to get inside heads means that you avoid the gloss that distance enables. A lot of the romanticism about Anzac now is possible because there are no First World War soldiers still alive. If they were alive people wouldn't be rabbiting on the way they are now. The government might be spending a lot of money and so on but they wouldn't be talking about Anzac in the way they are. So reality's a great check and one of the reasons for getting all the evidence that you can before you start is to get through that mythological component, and also to see clearly what it actually means.

In relation to *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, there was a bloke called Rhys Jones who wrote an article about firestick farming.<sup>3</sup> Rhys Jones was a great man. He was a terrific man and the firestick farming article was only one of the many creative things that he wrote. And people have accepted that slowly. He was criticised at the time but since 1968 people have accepted it and so did I. But when you go into it you realise that firestick farming is only one of the many different kinds of fire that Aboriginal people had. Had I stopped at an earlier point I would have been describing all fire as firestick farming. As you put it, to demystify that, I had to learn much more about the different kinds of fire and the different purposes and the different vegetation so on. So that's really part of the research process to get to where you're no longer seeing through a glass darkly. When you're seeing clearly or at least you think you are.

**RL:** Do you know when you've come through the glass?

**BG:** I think so. I said earlier if somebody asks you something you don't know and you say, 'Well, I don't know but I think it was probably this,' and then you go and check and find that you're right and if that happens often then I think you're as close as a historian can get, which is never all the way of course. *The Broken Years* never describes what it's like to see mangled human bodies or shoot your brother because he's mortally wounded. There's always a gap but you try and narrow the gap as much as possible.

**RL:** It's so interesting what you say about *The Biggest Estate*, that it's not a narrative. What would you describe it as?

**BG: It's an argument.**

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<sup>3</sup> Rhys Jones 'Fire-stick farming,' *Australian Natural History* 16 (1969) 224–8

**RL:** So my perception of it as a picture?

**BG:** Well, it's a portrayal of what Australia was like, that's true. But that is an argument because some people disagree with it. Firstly it never occurred to some people, and some people disagree with it, hence the appendix at the back of the book. A lot of that basic argument is in *Narrandera Shire* but what I found when I was giving talks toward the end of my research was that some ecologist would say, 'You've proved your point about this place, but what about that place or that place?' So I was led to putting in more and more dots that I could join up. Other ecologists would say, 'You've only got historical sources and they're "impressionistic".'

**RL:** That's an interesting word, isn't it. What does that mean?

**BG:** It means that they're not reliable.

**RL:** That they're someone's perceptions?

**BG:** They're someone's perceptions or someone's impressions and they can't be treated seriously. To really say whether something's valid or not you have to conduct a scientific test. As I say in that appendix, those scientists think they don't have assumptions, that they're being objective whereas of course all research is based on subjective assumptions and so on.

**RL:** I can see how painstakingly you've gone around to get the evidence to show these landscapes have been managed. I think that's part of its strength – you were going to prove it.

**BG:** I've got plenty more evidence, mind you, I didn't put it all in! And if I didn't [have so much evidence] you'd have to question the validity of my argument. I put in so much to try and cover the various kinds of vegetation and associations that ecologists might want to challenge.

**RL:** Was that who you were writing it to, the ecologists?

**BG:** No. You'll see other aspects. I'm telling people about Aboriginal skills and abilities and also writing for Aboriginal people. That was also reflected in my discussion with the publisher for this book, and *The Sky Travellers*, to make it as cheap as possible so local people could buy it. So I had in mind ecologists in the detail but in the basic message I think Aboriginal people, lay Australians, that's why the style's tried to be as simple as possible, but also firefighters, pastoralists.

**RL:** It's rewritten my perceptions of the Australian landscape. I have only a little knowledge but I'm looking at different things now when I'm looking at trees and ridges and grass and so on. This rewriting of someone's perceptions, did you set out to do that?

**BG:** Yes. Well, I suppose more accurately it was a consequence. If you try and base yourself on the evidence those things are pushed into the background. The reason that it's an argument

is because I didn't push it entirely into the background in relation to the number of instances I gave. But in relation to Aboriginal people and Australians who are not historians or specialists you ask yourself before you start writing, what will they need? And generally for all my books they all need the same things: clarity, economy of language – despite the length of that book, readability – in other words it flows quite easily: especially if it's a long book, the quicker you let people get to the far end of it the better. So you use the active voice, you cut out adjectives – I read through to cut out adjectives or adverbs – short sentences, small words.

**RL:** There is tragedy in *The Biggest Estate*, talking about Mannalargenna in Tasmania burning land, but some of the saddest sentences for me were at the beginning of chapter 3: 'The earth has changed. Topsoil blows away, hills slip, gullies scour, silt chokes, salt spreads, soil compacts. The last is least noticed. Much of 1788's soil was soft enough to push a finger into – "naturally soft", Thomas Mitchell called it' (103). I stopped reading there and just ...

**BG:** Yes. It shows how much has changed. But also that sentence illustrates what I mean about active voice and economy of words. You could start off writing a paragraph about each of those, salt spreads, soil compacts and so on. But I tried to condense it down into that.

**RL:** When I'm reading your books I find I can read them and learn a lot and then I go back and I can read them again and learn more. There's so much compressed into a sentence like that or this amazing chapter, 'Heaven on Earth'. I could read this many times and learn things from it each time.

**BG:** That is a very condensed chapter. First of all to try and make it clear even though it's such a complex subject and so remote from the understanding of most of us. Secondly so as not to get bogged down with side issues. There's a lot about totems that have nothing to do with land. They derive from ecology but they regulate marriage and so on and they describe kin. So you've got to make sure to leave all that out to get the main story across. It's quite tricky.

**RL:** Yes. Do you go to many drafts?

**BG:** Yes, not that chapter in particular. I go over and over and over. In fact, I sent it off as a draft. I'd sent it to a couple of friends and I thought the publishers would send it out to readers and they would give me another three months to polish it. And they said, 'Send what the readers you sent it to said.' That was what my friends and acquaintances said. And they [the publishers] said, 'That'll do.' And I didn't really have a chance to go over the final polish. On the other hand, I'd given public lectures and people were borrowing my ideas without acknowledging them. I said to the publishers, 'I think it's quite urgent to get this out.' So I didn't complain, nor should I, when they responded so handsomely. But I regard it as a sort of second-last draft.

**RL:** How would you change it?

**BG:** It would be polished. That would mean going over the words and perhaps shifting some of the quotes about, checking some facts perhaps, that kind of thing.

**RL:** Was the editing process for *The Biggest Estate* all like that?

**BG:** That chapter [4] was of a par with the rest. Start at the beginning and go to the end.

**RL:** It just went through?

**BG:** That's right.

**RL:** Has editing always been like that?

**BG:** Yes. Because I got in that habit with narrative and naturally you start at the beginning with a narrative. As you're going along there might be some places that you think are not well written and you spend more time on them. But once you've done the separate chapters and gone over the separate chapters and so on, to get a sense of the whole thing is really crucial, I think. So, what might happen? I might have a throw back or a throw forward, a hidden signal. It's not very obvious but I might put a few of those in at that last stage.

**RL:** To refer readers to other parts of the discussion?

**BG:** Yes. Usually by an echo of words or the same idea coming up in slightly different wording. They're not easy to pick up. Or puns. I use puns a lot.

**RL:** I'll have to read them again!

**BG:** They're very hard to pick up. One in *The Broken Years*, I'm talking about the shelling at Pozières and I talk about 'The merciless shells rained' but it could be 'reigned'.

**RL:** I like that.

In an interview in the *Sydney Morning Herald* you said: 'In the end, the author doesn't matter – it's what you're writing about that matters. The whole point is to represent it properly.'<sup>4</sup> You've talked about some of the decisions you make when you're representing something properly. Is there more you could add to that about what sort of decisions you make in order to represent something properly?

**BG:** The key is to decide: what this is about and why does it matter. They're before you start writing, while you're researching. That's a constant question you always ask. 'What it's about' means doing the research until you can understand that. So you just keep beavering and beavering and beavering. It's one of the reasons why you don't make decisions too early. You've got to keep finding out more. You might say, 'This looks [like] what it's about,' then discover that's not the key thing, it's something more fundamental than that. *Narrandera*

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<sup>4</sup> John Mangan, 'Six burning questions for Bill Gammage,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 November 2012.

*Shire* is about the conflict between liberty and equality and that's not apparent, but that's what I finally came to in what I chose to write and that selects the things you emphasise.

'Why does it matter' may be something you come to yourself rather than comes from your evidence and in part that's to do with the present rather than the past that you're writing about. In other words, it's to do with the future in a way all history's about the future. And so why does it matter with *The Biggest Estate* is because we have citizens being burnt to death every summer and no country ought to tolerate that or imagine that they understand their country if they're letting that go on. Secondly species are becoming extinct. And thirdly Aboriginal people deserve much more respect than they're commonly given. So all those reasons are addressed in how I arrange the material in *The Biggest Estate*. That story about Mannalargenna doesn't tell you anything about land management beyond the commitment to keep managing land but it also makes Mannalargenna a very human, brave man, a courageous leader and so on.

RL: Yes, because that story also stops. You don't go past him burning that land and the risk it meant to him and those 69 other people that were with him. You don't detail what happened to him, where he was taken. It was just, this is the job.

BG: This is the independent man before he becomes a prisoner.

Jimmy's another one. At Bontharambo. The bloke who burnt his country to attract a white settler at the beginning of chapter 11. The same sort of function. Here are skilled, clever men trying to keep things going and they just get steamrollered by ignorant Europeans.

RL: It's astonishing, isn't it, that in those early accounts they noticed the land was burning, over and over again, but nobody thought there was any knowledge behind it.

BG: Still happens in the north now. Aboriginal people burning and people just say, 'Blackfellas can't help it.'

RL: In *The Biggest Estate* you outline [Aboriginal] people looking at country [that hasn't been burnt] going, 'It's all messy now' (184). And I really like that part where somebody talks about [how] they picture what the fire's going to do, they picture where it's going to go.

BG: You see in your mind where the fire's going and only then do you light it.<sup>5</sup> You've got to know a lot before you can get to that. In a way I thought that's a parallel to the book. You see in your mind where the book's going and only then do you write it.

RL: Or an interview!

BG: (laughing) I haven't seen that yet.

RL: (laughing) No ...

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<sup>5</sup> See *The Biggest Estate* 161. See also Dean Yirbarbuk's comments, *The Biggest Estate* 184.

Maybe we won't live in ignorance forever.

Which one did you enjoy writing the most? Or the least?

**BG:** I find writing very hard. I'm a slow writer. I've got to spend a long time at it. So I enjoy research much more than writing. I suppose the hardest was *The Biggest Estate* because there are so many aspects that you had to clarify and then demonstrate and then arrange. Some of those quotes, the original source is not obliged to stick to one point so you could have three or four points, really, in one quote and if it's really important then that quote, and therefore the part you're using it for, has to come after the bits where the quote might also apply, so there's a retrospective impact that's summarising a whole lot beforehand. That's very difficult. Then, how do you arrange? Does religion come before fire? Where does the chapter on Country (chapter 5) fit, before or after religion or before or after fire?

So that was the hardest, but that doesn't mean to say it's not enjoyable. It was exhausting. I'm pleased if I think things are going well. But I've always thought, I should have done a bit more about this and I should have done a bit more about that. I'm one of those people who finds it hard to let go. So I think all I can say in summary is the research is much more enjoyable than the writing. And I think that's generally true. The research is like being a detective. The writing is like writing up a court case afterwards. Very different.

**RL:** Is there any kind of sense of relief or release? It's out there, I've shaped it?

**BG:** I think there is. It's finally done. And it's going to have a life of its own. That's true. But still I think, should have done a bit more, should have done a bit more. (Laughing)

**RL:** You mentioned how growing up in Wagga has given you the powers of observation. Has it influenced you as a writer in other ways?

**BG:** Yes, I'm sure my language is more direct and more colloquial than it might have been. It's not so much Wagga as working on farms out of Wagga. One of the things that I learnt then is, I worked with other farm labourers wheat lumping and doing things like that and there's some very smart fellas out there. That sort of ability shouldn't be confused with education. There are more people to talk to and more people to learn from [than educated people]. But the way to do it is not to speak in an academic way but to speak in their language. I mean if you're talking to academics you speak their language too, by and large. But having that, I think, ability to speak to different groups – Aboriginal people, Papua New Guineans, rural farm labourers and so on – I think that came from being in the country where you're constantly changing between groups of people.

**RL:** Because the groups are smaller?

**BG:** They're smaller and they're closer together. I know of people who live in cities who don't know the most basic things about the landscape. I'm not making jokes of kids who think milk comes out of milk cartons but some aren't far removed from that kind of thing. When they look at bush they see green. It's easy to stereotype that but I do think that a rural upbringing

**gave me choices in language and approach and simplicity. Simplicity, economy are really key components. You get so economical that people miss some of what you're saying but that's how it goes. They'll see one half of a loaded sentence and not the other half. So be it. I'm sure I miss it in other people's writing too.**

**RL: What writers have influenced you?**

**BG: Let me preface that by saying observation and so on has been as important as previous writers. On economy, Eric Fry taught me British history and in those days you had to get your essays back from your lecturer and discuss them. This was an essay on the Industrial Revolution and I was going to keep in mind what the Industrial Revolution was about and I went in and saw Dr Fry and he said, 'I notice you use a colon a lot, Mr Gammage. Do you think a full stop would do as well?' So I learnt from that. I've never forgotten that.**

**But the writers I admire – I admire Manning Clark because he talks about why it matters. He's got built into his writing why he thinks it matters, what this says, or as he puts it, what this says about the human condition. Ken Inglis. Geoffrey Blainey. Henry Reynolds. I like Thomas Carlyle on the French Revolution because of his evocation of people's feelings and so on. Many writers. Hank Nelson's another country boy and he was a great mate of mine and we were very much on the same wave length. He wrote not using the same words but the same approach – simplicity, economy, directness, language that country people would recognise.**

**RL: I think of it as language that doesn't waste people's time.**

**BG: Yes. And expanding the audience. Hank was one of those people whose audience was much bigger outside universities than within. And a lot of academics write just for their colleagues, known and unknown, whereas I think academics ought to write for as wide an audience as possible.**

**RL: Have you had trouble doing that, combining that [writing] with an academic career?**

**BG: No, people have been very tolerant that way. Even my thesis, which was on *The Broken Years*, the book is really my thesis less a couple of chapters, the book is shorter than my thesis. The main body of the chapters wasn't changed from my thesis.**

**RL: So you didn't have to adapt it a great deal?**

**BG: No. I found a couple of things that were wrong in the thesis and I dropped the first and the last chapters, effectively. But otherwise it's the thesis. There's a fair degree of tolerance at universities to let you do that.**

**RL: Do you read any fiction for pleasure?**

**BG: Most of my reading is on what I'm working on because that's all that I have time to do. These days I'm trying to read a bit more fiction. I've been reading a bit of Dickens which I**



hadn't read much of before. But I really don't get time. I'm still working on land management.

RL: Why did you choose history?

BG: No good at anything else. Simple. (Laughing) It's the subject I liked most.

RL: So you studied that as an undergraduate and just kept going?

BG: At school and as an undergraduate and kept going. I was very fortunate to be able to keep going in it.

RL: At school what appealed to you? What sort of history did you learn at school?

BG: A great variety. I did ancient history and modern history for the Leaving Certificate as it was then. And Thucydides is still one of my favourite authors – *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. It was writing about people. And therefore you could relate it to ideas. It's a description of quite fundamental things. And as you can see from the variety of my books, it can cover so much. You're not getting down an ever-narrower tunnel as it were into specialism. Of course specialisms are valuable, we need to make use of them, but other people can do them because I'd much rather relate, rather than isolating yourself from the common understanding of humanity, you're still relating to it and history is ideal for that.

RL: What do you hope readers will take from your work?

BG: From each of my separate books?

RL: Yes.

BG: Obviously I hope they'd pay attention to the basic messages.

In relation to *The Biggest Estate*, for example, they'll think more about whether to burn and where and when and how to burn using Aboriginal expertise, being conscious that you have to burn to protect species, it's not just a matter of reducing fuel. Those kinds of messages. Giving Aboriginal people policy positions in national parks and in fire management and land management for pastoral stations and mining companies. In other words respecting their expertise. Whatever gaps there are in it [their expertise] are fewer than almost all European gaps that whitefellas have.

*The Broken Years*, at the time it was saying to people, these are Australian citizens. This is what happens to a generation that gets caught up in a war. Don't dismiss them. That message is no longer necessary, actually. The First World War soldiers were not dismissed within 20 or 30 years of that book coming out. Now I think Anzac's gone too far the other way. You've got all these, you know, bells and whistles.

*The Sky Travellers*, that was saying, look, Europeans are only one side of the story. It's much more complicated whenever there's cultural contact. You've got to try and understand things from all the different people making journeys. I could do that because in New Guinea

you could still talk to all sides of a first contact. But you'd hope that people who read that would try and see the other side of contacts where it's no longer possible. In other words, say, the European version is not history, it's just one piece of evidence.

Similarly in *Narrandera Shire* it was the relations between Sydney and the bush, and liberty and equality, how those values are in constant tension in Australia.

So those kinds of messages you hope people think about.

**RL:** There are very strong messages about farming, the difficulty of farming, in *Narrandera*, and ecological messages, too, about pest control, native species.

**BG:** And they're important for people now.

**RL:** Nothing's changed. 1986 [that *Narrandera Shire* was published].

**BG:** Why is it that country towns are having such trouble? And the process of Sydney versus the bush is part of that. What can they do about it? It's a very tough problem. Aborigines have faced the same sort of problem being squeezed by a larger entity. And the liberty and equality business, all right, the squatters say they risked so much to build up their empires and why should they be taken from them by the government. The equality is, the government says, land should be open to everyone so you get land selection. The same sort of thing going on in towns – who should vote, who can stand to be elected, who controls country towns, and so we go on.

*We talked a little longer about Australia's tradition of citizen-soldiers and Anzac Day and dingoes and New Guinea singing dogs. I was conscious that Bill needed to go to a meeting. After our interview Bill walked with me to the car park and named some of the native grasses growing along the path: soft-looking tussock and kangaroo grass, which in *The Biggest Estate* he describes as a summer-flourishing perennial that in 1788 gave Australia its distinctive tan colour.*

*Since our interview I've been thinking about several things: Bill's patience and generosity with my questions. His own important questions: what is it? and why does it matter? His commitment and focus – reading and speaking about land management allows little time for reading for pleasure. His sense of timing – his slow speaking voice, his emphasis of certain words, his method of doing as much research as you possibly can, more research than you possibly can, in order to find out what your subject really is. In these days when some people seem to pour out words at any opportunity, it's a refreshing idea to defer – to watch, to read, to listen, to think, to watch some more before coming to conclusions.*

*I read *The Biggest Estate* for the first time in summer. While bushfires burned I looked at the nineteenth-century pictures of the Australian landscape reproduced in the book and read about the patterns, or 'templates', of grassland, bush and trees with no under-storey that existed when European settlers, or 'newcomers', first clapped eyes on this continent. These landscapes were created by Aborigines, or 'people', as Bill calls them. These word changes may*

*not appear be momentous but to me they are revolutionary, as is the effect of The Biggest Estate.*

*After our interview I realise that I didn't talk to Bill about the use of words in The Biggest Estate that shifts the discussion in such an innovative way: 'people' to mean Aboriginal people and 'newcomers' to mean post-1788 settlers. In that book he uses the date 1788 in a way that makes clear that this year, which in some contexts may have been a year just like any other, in Australia had cataclysmic consequences. So simple, so economical and with such far-reaching impact.*

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<http://dspace.flinders.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2328/15114/1/Coming%20full%20circle.pdf>.

She is writing a book about dingoes.