Whatever else it may be, a desert landscape is a historical document preserving a complex record of the interaction of past climates, geomorphic processes and cultural systems. I like to think of these landscapes as a palimpsest of different deserts. Stratified in time, stacked one above another, each has its own climate, physical landscapes and environments; each its own social landscapes and people, places of association and belonging, territories, resources and itineraries. Some features of earlier deserts project through these layers to become part of the fabric and cultural geography of later deserts. Structural features and processes are held in common: wind and water shape landforms; the basin and range topography provides the formwork of the landscape. No one desert is erased entirely by succeeding deserts – a fact that makes archaeology possible. This monograph – the first book-length archaeological study of Australia’s deserts – is an attempt to map out these histories.

The past four decades of fieldwork in Australia’s deserts and drylands has been an intense period of discovery, and a synthetic work that brings together the results of this research is sorely needed. This period has seen the duration of human settlement extended from 10,000 years to more than 40 millennia. At the same time, there has been a quantum growth in our understanding of the Quaternary history of arid Australia, fuelled in part by the availability of new dating techniques – such as thermoluminescence (TL), optically stimulated luminescence (OSL), electron spin resonance (ESR), amino acid racemisation (AAR), and accelerator mass spectrometry radiocarbon dating methods (AMS $^{14}$C) often in conjunction with acid–base oxidation (ABOX) pretreatment. (For a description of the various dating techniques, and an explanation of terminology and abbreviations, see the Glossary.) There has also been an exponential increase in knowledge about the last 1–2 millennia of hunter-gatherer settlement and society; for the first time, this has provided a solid basis for examining the prehistory of the classic desert hunter-gatherer societies, well known in the nineteenth-century ethnographies of Baldwin Spencer and FJ Gillen.
At the outset, I should explain that this book is primarily a work of historical review and synthesis; it revisits basic questions about the deep history of Australia’s deserts, their Ice Age settlement and the development of Aboriginal societies in these regions. For me, the ‘big picture’ still has an important role in archaeological narrative. Theory and methodology are intrinsic to this book but are not my main concern here. I prefer, as historian John Ferry once said, ‘to be nudged by theory rather than dominated by it’ (1999: 14). In any case, methodological issues are more properly part of the internal dialogue of the discipline, best fought out in the journals. I draw on rangelands ecology, hunter-gatherer theory and mathematical modelling where it helps me understand archaeological data and have taken into account arguments about the structure and biases in the archaeological record, without making these discussions ends in themselves. However, a broad review – such as this – necessarily conlates vast stretches of time, unavoidably glossing over some of the procedural difficulties presented by the uncertainties of radiocarbon calibration, questions of site formation processes and issues of taphonomy. Nor have I structured this book as a catalogue of old battles about specific models and hypotheses. I think it is important (occasionally) to step back and ask how the data might fit together as a natural and cultural prehistory of Australia’s deserts. I will be delighted if this book gives impetus to fresh research. Part of its job is to frame new questions about desert prehistory that can be tested in the field, to point to frustrating gaps in basic fieldwork, to identify targets for critical application of theory or methodology and to encourage others to complete the crucial excavation and site studies that make up the building blocks of our field. I hope this book does all of these things and (after a polite interval) is dismantled by new thinking and finer-grained data.

Any review is limited by the extent of previous work. I have found that for some questions, the data simply do not exist (I would have liked, for example, to say more about the interactions between desert people and the societies surrounding the arid zone). For others, the data exist but are yet to be collated (most regions have abundant traces of late Holocene occupation, but fine-grained regional reviews are few, limiting my ability to approach the desert as a mosaic of different histories). Where it seemed that loose ends could be easily tidied up through new fieldwork or additional radiocarbon dates, I have gone and done this (for example, the potential harvest rates in the Mulligan River pituri groves and the additional radiocarbon dates for Kulpi Mara). Working through excavation reports, I have been conscious of the need to stay as close to the excavator’s interpretation of chronology, sedimentary history and stratigraphy as I dare. But where I found basic errors, I have run with my own interpretation. Some published reports do not answer basic questions about the character of an occupation, artefact assemblages and site inventories, or provide workable site chronologies. In these cases, I made my own assessment (here, I am grateful for the generosity of colleagues who
answered requests for unpublished field data). Many studies use only basic age-depth plots to establish a chronological framework for a site. I have stayed close to the published version, unless I felt the evidence contradicted it.

I need to add a word on the structure of this book. The chapters represent a chronological series, but their coverage in space and time shrinks. Late Pleistocene deserts were larger than those today – and my review follows the contracting drylands. It will be no surprise to learn that we have a much finer-grained record of the last millennium (Chapters 7–9) than we do for the immense period from 45 ka to 24 ka (Chapter 4), so later chapters necessarily deal with narrower time slices. Chapter 2 explores the various ways that the past of these desert landscapes and desert societies has been interpreted since colonial explorers and scientists first encountered them, and points to recurring themes that are picked up in later chapters. Individual chapters each explore a major issue in desert research: the changing nature of the desert environment, the timing of initial human settlement, the impact of the last glacial maximum on desert settlement, postglacial adaptations, rock art and religion, prehistoric trade and exchange and the social history of classic ethnographic societies. Each chapter opens with a key moment in desert research (such as the discovery of the Lake Callabonna Diprotodon fossils); collectively, these vignettes build to provide a pen portait of the region and its people. Each chapter also begins with a review of issues and ideas, presented as a framework for exploring the archaeological evidence.

Structure and agency are important concepts for me: throughout the book, I focus on how changes in palaeoenvironment affected the structure of the landscape in which these hunter-gatherer groups operated – and how human actions in turn modified these environments. I am drawn to the idea of *landesque capital*, proposed by economic historian HC Brookfield, because it forces us to think about long-lived economic infrastructure, in this case, the wells, soakages, plant transpositions, fire mosaics and also (in a way) rock art that improve the amenity of a hunter-gatherer landscape. One of my aims has been to explore as far as possible changes in the political and social structure of these societies – and this book goes some way towards describing a prehistory that contains more than just economy and environment. I am not blindly committed to the idea that population growth is the primary determinant of all social change, but I do find the evidence to be more consistent with the view that the structure of these hunter-gatherer societies and their capacity to mobilise resources and actors are emergent properties of their demography. In this regard, I see economy as architecture and social life as agency.

Throughout the book, I explicitly draw on ethnography, linguistics and Aboriginal history wherever they complement an ‘archaeology of place’. Prehistoric societies were not cast in an ethnographic mould, but ‘tracking back’ is one method that can help establish when they took on something approaching their classic forms. The wealth of ethnographic data deserves wider critical
attention by archaeologists, and I think this can be done without archaeol-
ogy necessarily becoming ‘ethnography with a shovel’. I deliberately thread
an Aboriginal ‘voice’ throughout the book. It is important, I think, to retain
a feeling for the contemporary cultural landscape that swirls around these
prehistoric sites.

Finally, I must say that the idea for this book began on a bush trip with
Palaeolithic Societies of Europe (1999), rolled up in my swag, I wondered then
whether something similar might yet be done in Australia.

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