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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 Cuailgne, 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 Cúchulainn 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
language dies, and how best to preserve oral
cultures that are incomparable 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
a community that had its own plans for
him. He also worked for the Sacred Sites
Authority, and on a series of Yanyuwa
land-claims, before becoming Deputy
Director of the Centre for Australian
Indigenous Studies at Monash.

What is fascinating about this book
is that it might not have happened if the
writer had not already been bi-cultural
and had seriously good linguistic skills
(his a Sephardic Jew who as a young
teenager claimed 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 ongo-
ing digital animation project. These
artefacts 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 cosmo-
logy 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 sys-
tematically through that process of under-
standing – through the pitfalls, the partial
understandings which become ‘portals
discovery’ – the ‘aha’ 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 Cuailgne, Indigenous songlines are
not solemn in the ways of western epic.
Bradley recollects a joyful process in
which the sacred intersects with the ordi-
mary 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 are and which are tied to the soil.
Explaining Dreamings as a cosmology
that is 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 Bemudts 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 Aus-
tralian Aborigines. They are all assim-
ilated 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 phenom-
enas) are related dynamically, and in a
spirit of enquiry, is unfolded in this work.
The story of the barge doing soundings
of the hole under the McArthur River,
where the blue-ringed octopus with its
link to the constellation of the seven
sisters is set down in the Dreaming nar-
rative, has a whole different set of mean-
ings 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, writ-
ten 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 clear
argument 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
retieve its archaic traces and remake
itself triumphantly in English. And Irish
does still have its advocates and speak-
ers. 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 Diwurr-
rurruru (www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/
diwurruru.ruu).