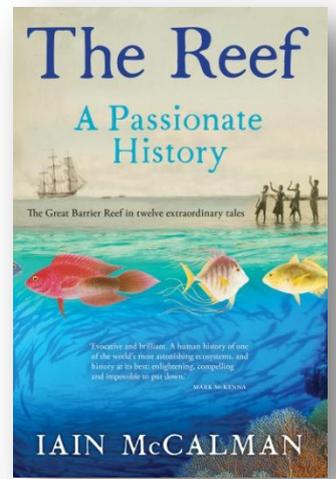


The Reef: A Passionate History

AUTHOR: IAIN MCCALMAN



Q & A WITH IAIN MCCALMAN, AUTHOR OF *THE REEF A PASSIONATE HISTORY*

Your bio states that you were born in Africa, can you shed a little light on your youth?

I was born in Zomba, Nyasaland. It was a beautiful colonial hill town, at that time the capital of the country. My father, Kenyan-born and a fluent Swahili speaker, was a District Commissioner in the British Civil Service, working in the bush at Mount Mulanje and then Kasungu, where he set up the country's first game park. He had grown up on a coffee farm in Kenya, been a gifted wildlife photographer, and had fought for the Kings African Rifles in Ethiopia, Ceylon and Burma during the Second World War, winning a Military Cross. His warm experiences working with Nyasa soldiers made him keen to move to that country after the war.

I spent my early years in a series of small, remote, African towns, where my South African-born mother, who'd been a theatre sister in Italy throughout the war, was able to nurse my sister and I through a number of dangerous tropical diseases. Because my parents were transferred around the country frequently, my sister and I went to boarding school at a young age, first in South Africa, later in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).

As a boy, my passions were swimming and sailing in Lake Nyasa, a vast, deep, freshwater lake 365 miles long, and one of the wonders of Africa, containing over two hundred species of unique, coloured cichlid fish. In retrospect, I realise that this wondrous lake prefigured my later passion for the Great Barrier Reef. I learnt to speak the Cewa language, admired the Nyassa peoples, and regarded Nyasaland as my home and heartland. It was heartbreaking to leave the country at the age of 18.

The boarding school that I attended in Zimbabwe was one of the few multi-racial schools in the country and became a target of the animosity of the Ian Smith settler government after he declared Unilateral Independence from Britain in 1965. At the conclusion of that year, having taken my English A levels, I migrated to Australia, following my parents and sister who had preceded me to Melbourne by some eighteen months. My parents loved Nyasaland but realised that the country did not belong to us. After encountering some difficult times protecting an African friend against the wrath of the dictatorial Dr Banda in 1964, they decided to migrate to Australia because my father's mother and his three Kenyan uncles had been born and raised in Adelaide and Launceston.

What influences led you to become an academic?

In my first year and afterwards at the Australian National University I experienced a succession of marvelous history lecturers, beginning with the late David Johansen, the most gifted teacher I have ever encountered. Up until that time I had intended to specialise in English literature.

I did well enough at University, but even after completing an MA in history, I continued to be nagged by doubts about my suitability for an academic career: so much so, that I deliberately went to work in what was then a two-teacher campus of the Riverina College in Albury. At the same time, with the help of some hippy friends, I built an adobe house by hand on a hillside outside Beechworth in North-East Victoria. In retrospect, I think that this might have been an act of nostalgia, an attempt to recover something like my previous life in Africa.

While working on this house, I one day received a much re-addressed letter from a famous historian in England whose work I admired. He had by chance read my MA thesis, and urged me to publish it. It was a

moment of realisation that I might have the capacity to be an academic historian. Inspired, I eventually sold the house, and undertook a late PhD at Monash University, which became the foundation stone of my subsequent academic career.

What is it about the study of history that captivates and motivates you?

History is such a capacious field; it encompasses all of past life and its relation to the present. Potentially nothing is excluded. Moreover, history shapes us all: without it, humans are rudderless. I love what it reveals about the diversity and complexity of the human condition, about the role of chance and contingency in life, about the multiple challenges that disadvantaged people undergo and often overcome to make their way in the world.

I am a storyteller by inclination, who believes that history is an art within the broad realm of the humanities, and that stories are the fundamental building blocks of all human communication. My aim is to research and write books and/or films that engage with a broad range of readers, and with issues pertinent to the past, present and future.

What was the biggest challenge writing the book?

The biggest challenge was the range of disciplinary fields that I had to engage with in order to tell a broadly representative story of the Reef, which is both a physical wonder of nature and an ancient sea country in which a variety of humans have lived, struggled, and died for centuries.

It is simultaneously a massive and intricate product of nature and a fluidly changing creature of our imaginations. The experiences of an Aborigine living on and managing the coastlands, a Romantic European artist celebrating an island, a scuba-diving coral reef scientist, a sailor-navigator, or a young Scottish women castaway are all so incommensurable. It was difficult to research these multiple lives and to bring them into a unified historical narrative. Doing justice to the complexity of the science and finding a tone that alerted people to the acute danger of the Reef's extinction without causing despair were two other challenges that tested me deeply.

You really immersed yourself in researching *The Reef*, how did your experience aboard the replica *Endeavour* influence this book?

My experience undertaking a BBC and Discovery TV re-enactment of Cook's voyage through the Reef under simulated eighteenth-century conditions was frightening, exhausting, infuriating and, despite itself, inspiring because of the utter beauty of sailing among the reefs, cays and islands of the one of the most ravishingly beautiful marine environments on our planet. It was also my first extended opportunity to get to know and understand members of the Indigenous clans that had managed the surrounding lands and seas centuries before we Europeans tried to take them over.

Was it scary being on board a ship like this, working in the rigging etc.?

Scary is an understatement. Balancing by one's stomach on a small creaking length of wood (the yardarm), trying to handle a thrashing canvas sail while the deck swirls and sways 170 odd feet below you is not something I would recommend. Worse, we were often wet and numb with exhaustion from lack of sleep, and, as twentieth-century moderns, found the lack of personal privacy and the arbitrary discipline extremely testing. The salt-saturated meat made us retch, the narrow hammocks were asphyxiating, and the lack of opportunity to read was strangely disorienting.

Of the twelve episodes in your book *The Reef*, which one was your favourite to write and research and why?

My equal favourites were the chapters on the castaway lives among Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander clans of Barbara Thompson (Giom), Narcisse Pelletier (Anco) and Jem Morrill (Karkynjib).

I was fascinated by the opportunity to glimpse the rich cultural and social lifestyles of Indigenous peoples who managed different Reef 'countries' and 'heartlands' on the cusp of European contact and invasion. I felt as if I got to know something of the characters of Indigenous individuals in all their human complexity and nuance. Two out of three of these castaway lives also symbolised the tragedy of lost possibilities when Europeans who'd had come to know the values, cultures and languages of Indigenous Australian clans were, on returning to their home 'civilisations', met with indifference, or with outright prejudice and brutality.

You must have enjoyed the experience of writing about such an iconic part of Australia, what is your favourite place on the Great Barrier Reef and why?

My favorite place on the Great Barrier Reef is actually Cooktown on the Endeavour River. I have visited there four times and each time I've become more aware of how it is a dynamic, evolving town and region, where many Europeans and Indigenous peoples are slowly learning to understand and value each other. This is the Reef's Ur or foundational place of modern European-Australian and Aboriginal meeting, engagement and struggle. As such, it carries both tragic and hopeful traces of the past, which are being actively rethought in the present by Guugu Yimithir and Guugu Yalanji leaders like the late Eric Deeral and his historian niece, Alberta Hornsby. The surrounding countryside is austere and tough but achingly beautiful; it stands on a type of borderland between the temperate south and the tropical north. For me it thus represents both our past tragedy and our future possibility.