

Shaping the land

Indigenous fire management in Australia

Tim Low

FIRE COUNTRY: HOW INDIGENOUS FIRE MANAGEMENT
COULD HELP SAVE AUSTRALIA

by Victor Steffensen

Hardie Grant, \$29.99 pb, 240 pp

When country needs burning, timing is everything, and the grasses, by how cool or warm they feel, tell you exactly when to light up. Victor Steffensen is a master of timing. His book about Indigenous fire management came out just weeks after Australia's unprecedented fires inspired calls for more Indigenous burning to quell the danger.

Over most of Australia, Indigenous expertise was lost generations ago when Aboriginal people were forced from their lands. This puts Steffensen in a special situation. He grew up in the northern Queensland rainforest town of Kuranda, with European forebears as well as an Indigenous grandmother who died when he was five. As a restless teenager and university drop-out he went on a fishing trip to the small town of Laura on Cape York Peninsula, and soon found himself working for the local Aboriginal corporation and lodging in the house of Tommy George (TG), one of two elderly brothers who would shape his life.

Born in the 1920s, TG and George Musgrave (Poppy) narrowly escaped becoming stolen children. The pastoralist Fred Shepard employed their parents on his Cape York station, and hid the boys in mailbags whenever the police came seeking Aboriginal kids to remove. In a matter-of-fact way, Steffensen writes about the boys seeing men and women in chains with whip marks on their bodies, walking for miles, sometimes unable to continue. Thanks to Shepard, the boys stayed on Country and learned its stories and how to manage with fire. They became stockmen and eventually acquired native title over their land.

Fire became a fascination for Steffensen in childhood when, by setting

fire to some old banana fronds, he nearly burned down his father's chicken coop. Earning the friendship of TG and Poppy, the last speakers of Awu-Laya language, he learned about fire on their hunting and fishing trips and from later work filming them. Fire country details his long and passionate quest to understand fire and, in the face of many obstacles, to teach fire management to national park rangers and Indigenous groups across eastern Australia.

His cool burns reduce the fuel available for wildfires, but his writing about fire goes well beyond logistics. 'Most of the vegetation has developed in a perfect way to encourage the right fire for the soil and country it lives on,' he says. 'It is amazing how Mother Nature has created the balance of no-fire and fire-dependent systems to provide tolerance and courtesy between them through fire ... The country loves us when we fit into the divine beauty of being a part of it. The old people would sing to the country all the time, through songlines and dances. Old TG would talk to the country and let everything know that we are about to apply the fire.'

One view held today is that national parks can't be considered natural because Aboriginal burning shaped the vegetation. In his famous book *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011). Bill Gammage goes so far as to say that 'Australia in 1788 was made, not natural'. The nature-culture dualism is a Western construction, so we shouldn't be surprised at Steffensen for depicting ecosystems (he uses this word) as systems that are natural but need input from people. They are also animated. The trees change the qualities of the soils and 'become the Elders of the

landscape, maintaining their gift of providing life and prosperity'. The water is a living thing, not a dead substance. Some places deceive. Poppy warned him about devil-devil country in which the land is 'trying to trick you' by putting trees that signify early burning on hard ground that should be burnt late.

Environmental philosopher Val Plumwood has talked of the multiple forces shaping nature that we deny if we label it a human artefact or estate. Steffensen repeatedly downplays human agency, explaining, for instance, that nature is 'arranged in such a way that it can be kept healthy by burning habitats in a sequence signalled by their readiness to burn'.

Gammage and Bruce Pascoe in *Dark Emu* (2014) have both lifted Australian awareness of Indigenous management, but both relied for information on white experts and observers. Pascoe, in his chapter on fire, calls for a shift to real knowledge coming from Aboriginal Australians. What Steffensen delivers is authentic enough, but it doesn't fit Pascoe's larger narrative about Indigenous farming. No mention is made of the Awu-Laya tilling or sowing seeds. The cool burns to protect yams and other bush foods fit the narrower notion of 'fire-stick farming' invoked by archaeologist Rhys Jones in 1969 to stress that the hunter-gathering lifestyle involved management.

Steffensen doesn't mention Pascoe, Gammage, or other writers. His focus is fixed on his vision of Australia under Indigenous fire management with Indigenous people gainfully employed as fire managers. 'We need to see three-year training courses of learning out on the country to graduate our Indigenous fire practitioners,' he says. He tells of bringing confidence to Indigenous communities in south-eastern Australia, helping them at times to direct flames against weeds such as African lovegrass and lantana. Western science tells us that fire regimes in tropical and temperate Australia are very different, but if Steffensen had any issues bringing his expertise south, we do not hear of them.

Early in the book, TG grumbles about some careless burning: 'Those bloody national park rangers, they should be

learning from us.' Steffensen conveys the impression that even today, no worthwhile burning happens in national parks, which is not true. Some is practised for endangered species such as orange-bellied parrots and northern bettongs. Most of this tries to match Indigenous burning, but the measure of success is different. Steffensen rejects this approach: 'Managing the country

wholistically for all the animals is how we must look after those animals that seem to be the most endangered of all. If we make the land healthy, then we look after all of them.'

That assurance might sound convincing, but it is not supported by examples, and that will leave managers uneasy. Lore that has worked for thousands of years might need adjusting for

a world in which, for example, cats now prowls after fires.

Steffensen is a good storyteller with a passion for his vision. Australia should be doing more to integrate Indigenous and Western fire skills, and he is well placed to help with that. ■

Tim Low's books include *Where Song Began* (2014). ❖

Surging into the spotlight

Writing trans and gender-diverse lives

Yves Rees

Six years after the 'transgender tipping point' proclaimed by *Time* magazine in 2014, the trans and gender-diverse (TGD) community continues to surge into the spotlight. From Netflix and *Neighbours* to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (which named 'they' its 2019 word of the year), transgender experience is enjoying well-deserved recognition and representation. Visibility, however, is not without its problems. Internationally, growing awareness has triggered an anti-trans backlash, with the TGD community becoming a conservative scapegoat *du jour*. The United States is experiencing a spate of anti-trans violence, while 'bathroom bills' proliferate in red states. In Australia, the 2016 moral panic over Safe Schools was followed in 2019 by *The Australian's* anti-trans campaign (with sixty-eight articles, ninety-two per cent of them negative, published in six months), as well as the transphobic fearmongering of TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) over Victoria's birth certificate reforms – not to mention Prime Minister Scott Morrison's attacks on 'gender whisperers'.

There are still reasons to celebrate trans visibility, not least of which is the prospect of TGD people telling their own stories. Although memoir has long been a staple of trans culture – dating back to Lili Elbe's *Man into Woman* (1933) – since 2014 trans life writing

has entered the literary mainstream. Today, some of the world's leading publishers are giving TGD writers a platform to counterbalance cultural scripts that dismiss trans people as freaks or victims. Few of these trans books are, as yet, notable for their literary quality, but almost all merit reading for their insights into a misunderstood and often sensationalised identity.

Among the most successful of this new crop is Jonathan Van Ness's *Over the Top: A raw journey to self-love* (Simon & Schuster, \$32.99 pb, 273 pp). A hairdresser, podcaster, and social-media dynamo, Van Ness is best known as one of the 'Fab Five' of Netflix's rebooted *Queer Eye*, in which he won hearts as an ebullient grooming expert with a full beard, lustrous mane, and penchant for stiletto heels. In 2019, Van Ness came out as genderqueer and non-binary, joining pop stars Sam Smith and Janelle Monáe in the small but growing club of gender-diverse celebrities.

Over the Top, which follows the author from childhood to the present, introduces readers to a darker Van Ness than the glittering queen of *Queer Eye*. An effeminate child whose gender-nonconforming proclivities were far from welcome in Quincy, Illinois, he was bullied and ostracised from earliest childhood. Alongside these gender struggles, Van Ness was also a victim of childhood sexual abuse, a trauma that launched

him into a troubled adolescence and early adulthood marked by PTSD, depression, sex work, disordered eating, drug addiction, rehab, and relapse. Rock bottom came as a grief-fuelled meth bender, followed by a HIV diagnosis.

From there, Van Ness's story launches into a quintessentially American narrative of triumphant self-actualisation. Thanks to yoga, therapy, and a solid dose of Brené Brown, Van Ness shook off his self-destructive habits and became the out-and-proud gender-bender we know and love today. The takeaway is clear: self-love and self-acceptance are the cure. Is it saccharine? At times, yes. Platitudinous? Undoubtedly. But the book is redeemed by Van Ness's signature cocktail of Midwestern sincerity and high-camp patois. Especially charming are the Russian pseudonyms employed for side characters, inspired by Van Ness's passion for the Romanovs. The prose is also enlivened by his trademark verbal tics, including feminisation of inanimate nouns. 'I loved the newsroom. She was hustle. She was bustle,' he writes. Presented with such flair and fortitude, we can't help but love Van Ness in turn.

Since publishing *Over the Top*, Van Ness has emerged as a formidable advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. For a primer on this new line of work, he might turn to Rebekah Robertson's *About a Girl: A mother's powerful story of raising her transgender child* (Viking, \$34.99 pb, 344 pp), a memoir that chronicles the Australian battle to remove the Family Court's jurisdiction over medical treatment for trans youth. Robertson is the mother of Georgie Stone, a trans woman whose story