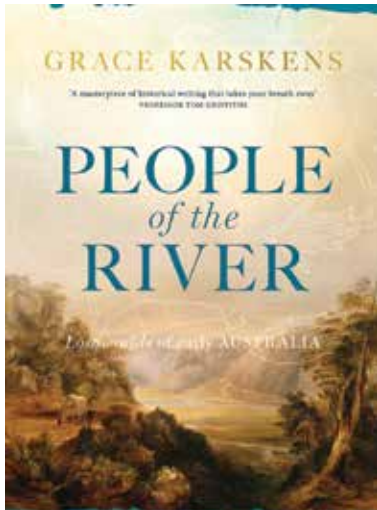


# Kritikos

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## People of the River

By **Grace Karskens**

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Grace Karskens is known for her colonial histories of place. Her latest study is situated on the Dyarubbin (the Hawkesbury-Nepean river system). This holistic exploration of the environment, the peoples and the places where the two interconnect covers a vast period of time, from the origins of the river on the supercontinent Gondwana to a 50,000-year-old chopping tool and up until today.

Karskens divides her study into four parts, beginning with the deep history of the river using archaeological evidence to illuminate life on the Dyarubbin pre-contact. The second part turns to the histories of the Aboriginal peoples and settlers, seeking to uncover 'worlds lost to history and public understandings'. Karskens then explores how early settlers interacted with the environment before turning to the spiritual, cultural and family lives of the people of the river. This edition also contains numerous illustrations supplementing the text, including maps, photographs, paintings of the environment and archaeological evidence.

Karskens enriches our understanding of Aboriginal life and early contact on the Hawkesbury-Nepean, providing important insights into how Europeans and Aboriginal peoples lived side-by-side. This focus enables her to intertwine archaeological evidence, oral histories, settler

accounts and environmental data. Through an in-depth exploration of this place, Karskens not only details the complexities and uniqueness of the Aboriginal peoples, but also the settlers. She argues that the two had more in common than our conception of European settlers would suggest. Moreover, this method highlights the continuing connection of the Aboriginal peoples to the river and the unbroken traditions practised and observed up until today.

This text is comprehensive and therefore relatively inaccessible for even advanced students. While it is purposefully specific to the context of the river, it also dispels some stereotypes that students may have about early settlement in general.

The richness of sources about life on the river could be used in an Australian History unit. These sources could also be valuable for the environmental focus of the revised Study Design for VCE Australian History, specifically regarding the use of land and perspectives on the environment by Aboriginal peoples and colonisers.

But it is also valuable to consider how Karskens' approach could inform an approach to Aboriginal histories: first by locating your inquiry in the local community, and second by using a broad sweep of time to highlight continuities in the use of place and the practice of culture.