This book rests on three facts about 1788:

1. Unlike the Britain of most early observers, about 70 per cent of Australia’s plants need or tolerate fire. Knowing which plants welcome fire, and when and how much, was critical to managing land. Plants could then be burnt and not burnt in patterns, so that post-fire regeneration could situate and move grazing animals predictably by selectively locating the feed and shelter they prefer.

2. Grazing animals could be shepherded in this way because apart from humans they had no serious predators. Only in Australia was this so.

3. There was no wilderness. The Law - an ecological philosophy enforced by religious sanction - compelled people to care for all their country. People lived and died to ensure this.

The law prescribed that people leave the world as they found it. 1788 practice was therefore conservative, but this did not impose static means. [...] Management was active not passive, alert to season and circumstance, committed to a balance of life.

[...] Today almost everyone accepts that in 1788 people burnt random patches to hunt or lure game. In fact this was no haphazard mosaic making, but a planned, precise, fine-grained local caring [...] how a pattern was made varied according to terrain and climate: heath, rainforest and Spinifex each require different fire. Yet in each the several purposes of fire remained essentially the same. A plant
needs fire to seed, an animal likes a forest edge, a man wants to make a clearing. Means were local, ends were universal. […] 

Where possible people worked with the country, emphasising or mitigating its character. Sometimes this was all they could do. Mountains, rocks, rivers and most swamps were there to stay. Yet even in these places people might change the country. They damned rivers and swamps. They cut channels through watersheds. They used fire to replace on plant community with another.

What plants and animals flourished where related to their management. As in Europe land was managed at a local level. Detailed local knowledge was crucial. Each family cared for its own ground, and knew not merely which species fire or no fire might affect, but which individual plant and animal and their totem and Dreaming links. They knew every yard intimately, and knew well the ground of neighbours and clansmen, sharing larger scale management or assuming responsibility for nearby ground if circumstance required.

They first managed country for plants. They knew which grew where, and which they must tend or transplant. Then they managed for animals. Knowing which plants animals prefer let them burn to associate the sweetest feed, the best shelter, the safest scrub. They established a circuit of such places, activating the next as they last was exhausted or its animals fled. In this way they could predict where animals would be. They travelled to known resources, and mand them not merely sustainable, but abundant, convenient and predictable.