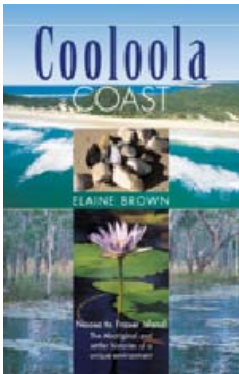


Cooloola Coast: Noosa to Fraser Island: The Aboriginal and settler histories of a unique environment by Elaine Brown. St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2000, pp. 224, A\$40.00, ISBN: 0-7022-3129-0.



The subtitle of *Cooloola Coast* encompasses the whole of Elaine Brown's interests: 'The Aboriginal and settler histories of a unique environment'. Dividing her text into two parts – 'The Colooloa Aborigine' and 'The Europeans arrive' – Brown presents the human history of this narrow swatch of coastal land north of Brisbane in ten chapters, from 'Glimpses of a lost society', focused on the pre-modern Aboriginal world through to 'A land of plenty?', a survey of failed twentieth century efforts to make the Cooloola land commercially productive. Inserted throughout are descriptions and historical accounts of the natural environment such as: 'Coloured sands', 'Fire', 'Endangered species'. Brown includes appropriate drawings, photographs and maps. The result is a comprehensive historical portrait of a specific area of the Pacific coast; in that portrait readers can find the national story of Australia played out at a local level.

Cooloola Coast allots considerable space to the Eliza Fraser story. As the site of the 1836 shipwreck of the *Stirling Castle*, the Cooloola Coast connects with one of Australia's great historical myths. The story of the notorious wreck survivor, who lived among Aborigines for several months before being rescued and who then was both championed as victim and reviled as exploiter, continues to fascinate and Brown ably shows why. The competing accounts of the shipwreck and rescue, the pervasive fears of Aborigines and the bush generally, Mrs Fraser's own silence on the events – all contribute to a story that hovers mysteriously above Australian history and culture.

The surer human history comes next in Brown's retelling. Nineteenth and twentieth century efforts to turn the coastal area into profitable farmland or a centre for logging and fishing interests are presented as a record of names and dates and in a style that flattens the incidents or personalities involved. An academic historian would likely yearn for a more detailed presentation of the material; a more general reader would resist the dry approach.

Far more engaging are the short passages informing readers of the natural life and history of the region. These passages identify aspects of the natural environment – the Australian bass that fill the river or the nearly three hundred species of birds which are 'the most visible creatures in Cooloola'. Brown employs these sections to confirm her theme of change and loss, as many species of plants, birds and fish have vanished, like the Aboriginal groups, or will soon do so.

As a call to conserve and preserve, *Cooloola Coast* succeeds. The 'Postscript' identifies various recent efforts to counter the story of decline and loss that emerges as the chief narrative strand in Brown's history. Although she often fails at enlivening her story, Elaine Brown shows how a small patch of land on a larger continent is rife with incident and interest.

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