Before writing this book I'd never thought much about Pygmies. The only time they really crossed my mind was when some scandal involving them erupted – like the *Tintin in the Congo* controversy of 2007, when several book chains junked the venerable Hergé story because of racist references to Pygmies, or the time a Congolese government delegation created a storm by housing Pygmy musicians in a German zoo. Above all, like most people, I thought of them as African – so African they almost seemed to be emblems of that vast and riotous continent. I had no idea that scattered groups of Pygmies actually live all around the world: in Asia, in Papua New Guinea, on islands in the Indian Ocean, and in other places too. And, since I didn't know, it never occurred to me to wonder how they'd got there and what significance their presence in those places had.

But that all changed in early 2007. I learned then, to my amazement, that some of these people had once lived – in fact, probably still *did* live – in my home state, in my home country: Queensland, Australia. The news hit me the same way the Cottingley fairy photos struck the elderly Sir Arthur Conan Doyle – like a thunderbolt. I'd never heard, or read, anything about Pygmies living in Australia before. But unlike the snaps that so bewitched Holmes's creator, these were no faked fantasy figures, but living, breathing *people*, and scientifically verified ones at that. I read about them in the
dusty pages of a respectable, peer-reviewed archaeological science journal, a reliable source if ever there was one.

Just like Conan Doyle, however, it was the photo that really struck me. It showed the early 20th century Harvard anthropologist Joseph Birdsell with a 24-year-old Aboriginal man from the Kungkandji tribe near Cairns, now a tourist mecca on Queensland’s north-eastern coast. The Aboriginal man was 140 centimetres, or four feet eight inches, tall — Pygmy-sized in anybody’s language. I knew from the Archaeology PhD I was researching (in between books) that Birdsell was a real, and eminently respectable, anthropologist. I also knew that he had done work with the Indigenous people in that area. There was no doubt about it: the photo was not faked. These remarkable people were real.

I read through to the article’s end, fascinated. It described Birdsell’s 1938 discovery, in conjunction with the great Australian anthropologist Norman Tindale, of tribal people of very small stature living in the Cairns tropical rainforests. The people bore a striking resemblance to other Pygmies living in South-East Asia — this was news to me also — often called Negritos. Besides their small stature, they were lighter-skinned than their Aboriginal neighbours. Their hair was tightly curled, almost frizzy, in the Melanesian style. Tindale and Birdsell christened them ‘Barrineans’ from the nearby beautiful crater lake, Lake Barrine, ironically an evil (and avoided) place in local tribal lore.

The sheer existence of such people was interesting enough, but the two anthropologists pointed out that it also implied a deeper mystery. How had the Barrinean people ended up so far down the globe, on the east coast of northern Australia? The nearest South-East Asian Pygmies, the Pygmy peoples of the New Guinean Highlands, are almost a thousand kilometres away across the Torres Strait, with hundreds of tribes of non-Pygmy peoples in between. And though some of the coastal Barrineans were expert fishermen,
their crude outrigger canoes wouldn’t seem to have allowed migration over such distances. Birdsell proposed, instead, that the Barrineans were the remnants of an original Pygmy population who’d walked in and settled Australia tens of thousands of years before, when land bridges connected the countries, but who’d then been displaced by later, taller invaders.

The article left me seething with questions. Were the people Birdsell and Tindale had found really Pygmies? Were there really other Pygmies living just to Australia’s north, in Papua New Guinea and Asia? And, if so, what relation did they all have to the African Pygmies I’d always assumed were the only ones in existence? More importantly, given their local connection, what had happened to Birdsell and Tindale’s Barrineans? The article gave the impression they were extinct, but how could that be, since the two anthropologists had apparently found 600 surviving Barrineans alive just two generations ago? I resolved to try to answer those questions, first chance I got.

By happy accident, that chance arose a mere five weeks later.

In mid-July of 2007, an international scientific conference took me to Cairns, the scene of Birdsell and Tindale’s discovery. So I grabbed the opportunity, when a hole in the schedule presented itself, to rent a car and drive south to the Aboriginal township of Yarrabah. Yarrabah was where most of Birdsell and Tindale’s Barrinean people – those who hadn’t been shipped off to the Aboriginal gulag at nearby Palm Island – ended up after being driven from their tribal lands in the late 19th century. Now a self-governing Aboriginal community of around 3000 people, it was originally founded as an Anglican mission by the mercurial Reverend ERB Gribble and his father in 1892, to proselytise the ‘myalls’, as those Aboriginals who still lived a traditional lifestyle were known. It was there that Tindale and Birdsell found those Pygmy refugees and their descendants in 1938.
Driving south from Cairns to Yarrabah is like watching a socio-economic slideshow. The city itself, thanks to its idyllic location sandwiched between the Great Barrier Reef and the rainforested highlands of the Atherton Tablelands, is a sweltering tourist metropolis. Its skyline is a Mayan temple complex of towering luxury resorts, its streets thronged by well-heeled vacationers in self-conscious pastels and sun-kissed backpackers on rented mopeds. Yet a mere 5 kilometres south of town a different world unfolds. There the road led me through lush but dirt-poor sugar farmers’ canefields, where raptors lazily patrolled the cane trash for exposed prey, then around the azure mouth of the Trinity Inlet with its lonely scatter of modest shacks hugging the beach. Then, as the beachcombers’ haunts petered out into rainforest, I started the winding climb up the Murray Prior Range, which divides the Yarrabah Peninsula from Trinity Bay and Cairns itself. It was at the crest of the ridge that the truly different world I was about to enter was unveiled.

The contrast was surreal. As you perch on that peak, Cairns is just across the bay on your left – a glitzy, touristic ziggurat erupting from the rainforest. Yet down ahead, just as close, is Yarrabah – a sleepy string of houses dozing beside Mission Bay, with Aboriginal flags flying from every second window and cheerfully mongrel dogs gambolling through deserted streets. (The Indigenous love of dogs is so legendary that the early anthropologists used to measure how close to traditional an Aboriginal elder was by how many dogs he or she kept.) Geography creates this paradox, since the 50-kilometre drive from Cairns merely skirts the Trinity Inlet and doubles back to disgorge you just 5 kilometres, but a world away, from your starting point.

As you drive into Yarrabah, signs of its missionary past are visible everywhere. Rising out of Mission Bay, just off Yarrabah, is Rocky Island, the craggy purgatory to which the Reverend Gribble
apparently banished pregnant but sinfully unwed Aboriginal girls (so many distressed mothers gathered on the headland opposite to wave that it acquired the name 'Mothers' Point'). The imposing A-frame stone and timber Anglican church – actually a 1960s rebuild from the chapel of Gribble's day – looms proudly over the gaggle of shops on Yarrabah's main road, one whole wall emblazoned with a huge timber cross.

I wondered if Tindale and Birdsell had taken similar impressions of contrast from their pioneering 1938 field trip. They'd travelled by boat, of course, since the dirt track to Yarrabah was only cut in the 1960s, but Cairns was a boom city even in the 1930s, driven by gold and sugar, while Yarrabah was even smaller than today. I was momentarily abashed at comparing my expedition to that of those two greats (the 'Daytrippers Budget Special' tag on the car mirror was especially deflating) but in fact there were parallels. Both journeys had had similar beginnings. Birdsell and Tindale’s trip had been sparked by a photograph, just as mine had. In their case the photo had featured not just Pygmies, but also – of all things – a banana leaf.

Tindale was employed as senior anthropologist at the South Australian Museum in 1938 when a photograph, supposedly of Australian Aborigines from the Gibson Desert, reached him. The label was clearly wrong, as the camp showed a tropical jungle setting. But the vegetation held an even more intriguing secret. Tindale was also a keen biologist, and he immediately recognised the fronds lining the humpy, or hut, in the photo as wild banana leaves. But how could that be? If the leaves were wild banana the people must be tiny – probably less than five feet tall. He also noticed the people’s unusual physical features: so different from those of the Aboriginal people he generally worked with. Who could they be? And, more importantly, where were they?

Tindale quickly discovered that the last remaining stands of wild
banana in Australia were in the Cairns rainforests; it was there he’d have to go to unravel the mystery. So when Harvard University and the South Australian Museum approved his epic project to document Australia’s surviving tribal people that year, Tindale set off hurriedly, with Birdsell in tow, for Cairns and its nearby Tablelands.

I had hoped a copy of this historic photo might be in the Menmumy Museum, Yarrabah’s historical repository and goal of my visit. Sadly, it wasn’t. The Menmumy Museum is a squat, white-brick building surrounded by green fields and lush forest (I drove up to find a horse grazing under the goalposts of the adjoining football field, untroubled by the NO GRAZING! signs). The entrance features a statue of Menmumy himself, the tribal warrior who assured the mission’s success by ‘coming in’ out of gratitude to Gribble for saving Menmumy’s daughter’s life, though sadly his fibreglass humpy has been reduced to an iron skeleton. Inside, the museum is simply a large hall lined with artifact displays and photos from the mission’s history. It was these I scanned, unsuccessfully, for the photo that had so intrigued Tindale.

Or, in fact, any photos of Barrinean Pygmies.

When an hour had gone by with no trace of them I began to feel a little foolish. It must have shown, because the curator — a silver-headed Aboriginal man in khaki uniform shorts who had the loose legs and rolling gait of a man who’s either ridden horses or done hard, physical work all his life — wandered over. He introduced himself as George and asked what I was looking for.

I told him I was curious about the Barrinean Pygmy peoples who’d lived here last century.

George was only vaguely aware of them. ‘Oh, you mean... what’s his name... Birdsell’s work?’ he said. We searched the photo displays again together — rows of sepia plates ranging from spear-carrying tribesmen of the early days through to the uniformed Aboriginal boys of the Church Lads’ Brigade decades later. George
knew the displays well, since he'd arranged them, but even with his help I couldn't find any photographic evidence of Birdsell's people.

Or so I thought.

'What do you want with those fellas, anyway?' George asked, when our final, frustrating search turned up nothing.

I told him I was just interested, since I'd never known there were Pygmies in Australia, but if I could track down enough information I might even write a book about them.

George was a bit leery at that—understandably so, considering whitefellas have been telling blackfellas' stories for them for the best part of two hundred years. But we shortly got to chatting about sports, that universal lubricant of Australian male relationships, and the frostiness quickly thawed. I mentioned I'd seen in the Cairns Post that morning that the Yarrabah Seahawks, the community footy team, were on a run of nine straight victories in the Cairns District Rugby League competition.

'That's right,' George said, grinning broadly. 'They'll make the five this year too, if they hold off the Gladiators tonight.' It was the Mareeba Gladiators he was talking about—the team from the old tobacco town up on the Tablelands. Apparently they'd swept the competition that year, until Yarrabah got onto its streak. We talked rugby league a while, and I mentioned an archaeology lecturer I knew who'd briefly played for Souths, a major Sydney team. Whether that broke the ice further, or the sporting talk just turned George to thinking, he now came out with several curious comments that made me think my trip hadn't been wasted after all.

'You know, it's funny,' George said, as he led me onto the museum's boardwalk. This walk—a kilometre or two of creosoted woodwork traversing first a lagoon and then the swampy, pristine rainforest behind the museum—is one of Yarrabah's premier tourist attractions. 'I didn't think about it until you mentioned all this Pygmy stuff. But I was at a sports carnival in Cairns a few weeks
back and I was looking at all the Cairns kids and thinking — geez our Yarrabah kids are short.*

It was just a throwaway comment, but it left me wondering. Did George’s comment point to some genetic trace of Birdsell and Tindale’s Barrineans, the first I’d found on an otherwise spectacularly unsuccessful day? But how could that be? At that stage I didn’t know much about growth and genetic inheritance in Pygmy peoples (that was soon to change) and I wondered if it could possibly be as simple as that. Did children of unions between Pygmy and larger parents really just ‘split the difference’ and grow up as shortish adults?

Then, while watching some of George’s home movies a little later, he said something similar.

George’s home movies — ‘Oh, I’ve been pointing a camera at things since I was a kid, don’t you worry about that’ — were amazing. Played in all their grainy, Super 8 glory on the computer screen of the museum’s receptionist, with seven or eight of us crowding around, they showed the 1972 celebrations for ‘Foundation Day’, 18 June, the date of the original mission’s establishment in 1892. These featured wonderfully rough-and-ready games and competitions: spear throwing (for both distance and accuracy), boomerang throwing, and even dancing — ‘shake-a-leg’ — contests. There was a joyous authenticity about the footage, with all participants dressed in everyday clothing (collared rayon frocks for the women and stovepipe polyester slacks for the men) rather than the self-consciously tribal dress of modern, staged performances, and lolling about on the bonnet of the occasional 1950s vintage utility or FB Holden sedan. It was while we were watching the spears thunk into a wooden target fashioned from a door that George pointed to the screen and dropped another aside.

‘Yeah, that man, the one who won the spear throwing, he was just a little tiny fella too, from up on the Tablelands.’
George pulled me over to a photo display of the celebrations, searching for a photo of the man. We found it, but it turned out to be simply a portrait shot, showing nothing of the champion spearman's stature. I wondered if this too really indicated the lingering genetic presence of Tindale and Birdsell's Barrineans. It seemed a slender lead, though for what it was worth I was aware that these Pygmy tribes had extended up onto the Tablelands in pre-colonial days.

We talked for a while about the other photos in the display, all pictures George had taken at a Foundation Day celebration just a couple of years back - 'I want the kids to see a bit of today's history here in the museum too.' But a sudden squeal from the girls at reception dragged us back.

'Look at that!' they cried. 'That boomerang just ploughed fair into all those old fellas!' On-screen, a crowd of elderly Yarrabah people were running, helter-skelter, in every direction.

George gave a low chuckle. 'Don't worry about that,' he grinned. 'Those old people there, they used to love that. Those boomerangs would come shooting down into 'em and they'd just scatter! They thought it was great fun.' Sure enough, excited laughs and shrieks could be heard on the tinny soundtrack.

Seconds later, the boomerang throwing gave way to another competition, which featured a row of men sitting on the ground twirling sticks. It was obviously a fire-starting contest using the fire-drill method once common throughout coastal Australia, where a stick is twirled between the palms so that its point abrades a pile of red-hot ember dust from a softwood stick underneath. I was puzzled, however, to see the men bend down to the embers as their tinder began to smoke, light... something, and then spring up and run full pelt towards a waiting judge. I asked George what they were doing.

'Bh? Oh, lighting a fag with the embers and running it up to the
judge,' he said. He grinned apologetically. 'Those were the days, eh? Nobody worried too much about lung cancer or emphysema back then!'

'They oughta start them games up again, you know,' the receptionist, a plump, smiling girl in her late twenties, interrupted. 'They're deadly, eh?' (For the uninitiated, this is a universal Aboriginal word meaning anything from 'passable' to 'excellent'.)

That prompted an intense discussion among the Indigenous people present, with opinions raging pro and con. It seemed a good time for me to leave, so I bade George goodbye and thanked him for his help, even though we'd had little luck.

Then, almost as an afterthought, I asked him idly who his people were.

'Oh, I'm an Indindji man,' he answered. 'Some Chinese and European ancestry too, truth be told, but Indindji are my tribal people. Sorry we couldn't help you more, eh? Good luck finding out about those Pygmy fellas. What did you call them? Barrineans?'

George’s tribal name meant nothing to me at the time. It was only later, when I’d researched the tribes of Birdsell and Tindale’s Barrineans, that I understood the exquisite irony of his parting comment.

The Indindji were the Barrineans Birdsell and Tindale had discovered! They, along with the Kongkandji, were two of the most prominent tribes of the Australian Pygmy peoples.

This put my failure to find any photos of Pygmy people in George’s displays in the shade. (I later discovered, in fact, that nearly all the pictures I’d seen had been of Kongkandji and Indindji Pygmies; it was simply the lack of anything to measure scale against which led me to miss their small stature – Menmuny included.) Here I’d been, speaking to a descendant of Birdsell’s Pygmy peoples, and neither he nor I had known it!

But how could that be? George was almost the same height as
me, a not-very-impressive 180 centimetres, and certainly not of Pygmy dimensions (though, come to think of it, exactly what were those dimensions, anyway?). Why was his stature indistinguishable from mine, despite his ancestral genetics? And how could he not even know he'd had such unusual ancestors?

Clearly, I needed to know more. So over the next weeks and months, I read everything I could find about Pygmies. I learned some truly amazing facts, such as that many Pygmy peoples, no matter how genetically distinct, seem to share a mutation inhibiting their body's response to Insulin-like Growth Factor-1, a hormone important for human growth. And that the beautiful ritual dances of the Congo Forest Pygmies are recorded in Egyptian tomb inscriptions dating back over 5000 years, and had possibly been performed, unchanged, for thousands of years before that. And that those same Congo Pygmies hunt forest antelope using an ancient, barkless, hunting dog, the Basenji, several specimens of which were first exhibited at the Cruft's Dog Show in London in 1895 under the name of 'Congo Terriers'.

I also discovered, to my amazement, that Birdsell and Tindale were correct: there are Pygmy, or Negrito, peoples scattered throughout South-East Asia too. They form small groups in remnant areas, usually forests or highlands, in many countries in the region. In the forests of Luzon in the Philippines, for example, live the Aeta – tiny tribal people famous for permanently blackening their teeth with the juice of the miaomiao vine, apparently to prevent dental decay. In the dense rainforests of Malaysia live the similarly small Semang, so called by their larger neighbours to draw an insulting comparison to the local black gibbons, or Siamangs. Even the forest fastnesses of the New Guinean Highlands are home to the mountain Pygmy peoples mentioned earlier, warriors a mere 146 centimetres in average height, but ferocious enough to have once held their taller neighbours in a state of perpetual terror by their predatory cannibal raids.
In addition to their short stature, these people often display very different physical features to the people who surround them. The South-East Asian Pygmies, for example, are much darker than other Asian people—a fact that accounts for the name Negritos, or 'Little Blacks'. (This seems paradoxical, since Birdsell and Tindale described the Barrinean Pygmies as light skinned, but both descriptions are actually only relative, since the Negritos live among much lighter-skinned Asian people than the darker Aboriginal people who surrounded the Barrineans.) Almost all South-East Asian Pygmies also share some intriguing physical characteristics, such as the tightly curled, or 'peppercorn', hair noted by Birdsell and Tindale.

I wondered if these similarities had prompted Birdsell’s theory that all the South-East Asian Pygmies, the Barrineans included, were related. As I delved further into the research, however, I discovered that the mystery went even deeper than that. In fact, Birdsell’s theory of a Pygmy population in South-East Asia and Australia was only part of a general belief among scientists during the late 19th and early 20th centuries that a race of Pygmies had once, back in the deepest mists of history, populated much of the world. According to this theory, most of the entire Old World had at one time been a massive territory of Pygmy peoples, which I call Pygmonia—a Greek term meaning the 'land of the Pygmies'. These first peoples had since been overrun by later arrivals such as us. By the time of the modern era they were sadly reduced to remnant groups in inaccessible refuges like forests and mountains.

Apparently I’d stumbled headlong into a mystery that stretched far beyond the tropical coasts of northern Australia. Why did scientists once believe that Pygmonia—the land of the Pygmies—had covered much of the entire world? Was it because enclaves of Pygmies live across the rest of the world too—on islands in the Indian Ocean, and even, by some reports, in several Middle Eastern countries? The idea conjured, for me, all the romance and
tragedy that had so animated the early days of anthropology. The mystery of unsuspected civilisations, traceable now from just a few scattered clues. The lure of the exotic and the suggestion that evolution could take many more turns than we had ever believed. The compelling tragedy of remnant peoples lingering in the twilight of their former glory. There was, as well, the mystery of why scientists had now seemingly turned against the theory, when it had ruled as a scientific article of faith for the best part of the early 20th century. A major allegation of the article I'd read was that political interests had conspired to airbrush the Australian Pygmies from memory; had something similar happened to the theory of Pygmonia?

To find out I would have to go back to the very beginning. I would start my search among the whispers of myth and the first stirrings of recorded history, seeking signs of a people then already incomparably ancient. And I would begin on a continent where there probably never were any Pygmy people, but where first the legend, and then the scientific theory of Pygmonia were conceived. Europe.