

The Aboriginal People of the Burratorang Valley: 'If we left the valley our hearts would break'

by Jim Smith

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'There is a part of me that still lingers along the banks of the Cox's beneath that dark and forbidding expanse of water'. These are the words of Owen Pearce, a descendent of old farming settlers in the Burratorang Valley of the Blue Mountains, a region flooded in the late 1950s to form Warragamba Dam and its catchment area and so satiate Sydney's thirst. These and the words of Gundungurra woman Ivy Brookman conclude the intriguing tapestry of people, lives and places woven in this history. 'I do not know why they had to flood our beautiful valley', Brookman's voice laments. This poignant theme of loss – loss of community, of country and of hundreds of important Aboriginal sites – runs throughout the volume.

This richly illustrated book, printed in A4 size by a local publisher, documents the lives of Aboriginal people in the Burratorang Valley from the 1830s, when the steady creep of cattlemen from the Nepean districts first began. It follows through to the well-known St Joseph's Farm of the mid-nineteenth century, and ongoing ventures to strengthen connections with country today. So Aboriginal people 'as individuals and families' are centre stage in this work. The book considers who the Aboriginal people in this valley were: what the different (or possible) Gundungurra clans were and why; the movement of surrounding groups into the valley and movement out of it; Aboriginal people's relationships with settlers, particularly the Catholic community (in work that resonates with that of eminent local historian Jim Barrett); and their marriages and enmeshed family histories into the twentieth century.

In assembling this extraordinary array of detail, *The Aboriginal People of the Burratorang Valley* has been meticulously researched, building on a large span of previous work by Jim Smith, including an earlier, smaller version of this book first

published in 1991, and, by the look of some of the maps, occasionally Smith's unpublished PhD thesis. The volume is the result of far-reaching, tenacious and impressive research in the birth, death and baptismal records and electoral rolls (which Smith argues are generally neglected), newspapers reports and privately held documents and photographs. Personal relationships have been vital as well: oral histories, private conversations and friendships are threaded throughout the work, giving the sense that this book could only have been written by a local embedded in community.

Jim Smith's knowledge of the country, and his dogged commitment to walking it, have borne tremendous fruit. He has mapped sites from Gundungurra creation stories and archaeological sites he has discovered, added in the stories of anthropologists and their relationships with their informants, and overlain post-contact histories and people in his search for relationships and meanings. Apart from the significance of hypotheses about clan grouping and the important biographical details included, some of Smith's main contributions lie in his implicit discussion of how Aboriginal people made lives in the interstitial spaces of settlements – questions probed elsewhere by Heather Goodall, Alison Cadzow and Peter Read, amongst others. In tracing the history of one of the most significant farms and schools for Aboriginal people, St Joseph's Farm, Smith also intervenes in debates about its decline and the movement of people to La Perouse, which is currently understood in terms of 'dispersal' and 'eviction'. In his lengthy consideration of this school from 1876, Smith suggests that its efficacy steadily weakened after Fr Dillon left, and that most had already moved on of their own volition long before the death-knell rang in 1924.

Scattered throughout this book are many tantalising moments, including the discussion of the Burragorang farmer who was made the custodian of Red Hands Cave, and the idea that the harvests of the 1880s were so great that Aboriginal people from the South Coast area moved into the valley. Smith's own knowledge of the country and the important sites associated with story of Gurungatch and Mirrigan, a serpent (or eel) and a quoll, has also allowed him to piece together otherwise unachievable detail: that some places could be travelled to quickly yet had few resources, and that others were resource-rich or had spiritual significances but were slower or harder travelling. The waterhole in which Gundungurra warriors bathed before setting off to enact ritual law, and the fact that placement of St Joseph's Farm was near the intersection of two sacred waterholes associated with this important Dreaming story, are just some of the precious details Smith has been able to relay.

Ideas of the adaptability of Aboriginal society also shine through in ways that resonate with recent problematising of fixed notions of ‘Songlines’:¹ Smith notes that there were and are dense webs of stories to navigate difficult terrain. Yet, it was a place of temperature extremes and floods that ‘wiped out whole river flats and relocated significant waterholes and river crossings’ – a dynamic landscape requiring dynamic stories (p. 20).

Jim Smith’s aim was to ‘produce a “living history” of the Aboriginal people of the Burratorang Valley’ and, in doing so, he has created a textured, peopled history steeped in place and local lore. Despite some dense writing and easily avoided errors in production value (occasional low-resolution images, mismatched fonts), it is an extraordinary achievement and a significant addition to Aboriginal and settler histories. From my reading, this book was written by and for the Blue Mountains community, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. I get the sense its pages, peppered with glossy photographs and detailed captions of individuals and places, will be eagerly pored over. Although many historians will question certain understandings, such as the belief that colonisation and the intermingling of black and white in the area was a peaceful process, it would be shame for historians to overlook this remarkable contribution to the scholarship on Aboriginal and settler histories in New South Wales.

Reference

Jones, Philip 2017, ‘Beyond Songlines’, ABR Patrons’ Fellowship Essay, Australian Book Review, September, www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/current-issue/4223-beyond-songlines-by-philipjones (accessed 1 September 2017).

1 For example, see Jones 2017.

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