

Book review

Six Peaks speak. Unsettling legacies in Southern Dja Dja Wurrung Country

Barry Golding with Clive Willman, Illinois USA, Common Ground Books, 2024, 402 pp.

Reviewed by Bill Gammage

The Six Peaks of Barry Golding's title are in southern Dja Dja Wurrung country in central Victoria. In the order that Golding discusses them, they are Mounts Kooroocheang/Gurutjanga, Beckworth/Nyaninuk, Greenock/unknown, Tarrengower/Dharrang Gauwa, Alexander/Liyanganuk, and Franklin/Lalkambuk. Each peak 'speaks' of its rocks and soils, of Dja Dja Wurrung presence before and after invasion, and of the impact of invader enterprise, exploitation, and mismanagement on the land and its people. The peaks say little of other themes well developed in this book: their plants and animals at the time Europeans came, the murderous dispossession of the Dja Dja Wurrung, the political and economic conflicts of settlement, and the question the authors choose as central: "*How can we help future generations deal with legacies of what happened around these mountains?*" (p.346, also p.10).

The mountains (Golding rarely writes “peaks”) parallel each other in addressing these themes. First, for each mountain geology and soils are described in detail unmatched in any previous local or regional history, perhaps any history. The authors argue that geology is the rock on which almost all else is built (for example pp.32-40, 198-9). Golding has a geology degree, but some text possibly, many photos, and almost all the beautifully drawn maps (worth printing on their own) are by Clive Willman. His maps speak, though some text is too small, and the captions are too faint. Where maps matter, it’s best to increase a book’s page size to suit.

Though necessarily unevenly for want of sources, Golding next traces what is known of Dja Dja Wurrung clans, each probably local to a mountain and its surrounds. He sketches their caring management, their feeling for Country and language, their shattered survival despite rapid (p.248) and genocidal (p.316) slaughter by arriving Europeans, especially on the grassy volcanic plains (p.57), and their continued presence since despite endemic discrimination. European occupation follows, a tale of public and private environmental use and misuse up to the present. Golding concludes with how each mountain might be better used and cared for, noting that each has a 2024 guide for visitors.

Golding tells his story via two key perceptions: “unsettling”, an experience common to all the mountains and their surrounds, and “legacies”, or relics of each mountain’s geology, circumstances and history. These two perceptions shape Golding’s subtitle, which he uses in striking ways to illustrate how the land and past influence the present and future.

As Golding notes (p.23), “unsettling” is a word gaining traction among historians. They take Aboriginal society on the eve of invasion as settled, with land, people and animals balanced and flourishing. This world was unsettled, upended, destroyed, when white “settlers” came, and it is still unsettled, built on greed and ignorance and menaced by environmental degradation in many forms. Golding does not overlook the ways in which a minority of people have attempted—and continue to attempt—to repair Dja Dja Wurrung land, but such respect is often overshadowed by the pioneer urge to improve, develop, and exploit. His multi-faceted account of un settlers as aliens smacks more of the Goths sacking Rome than of a civilisation in harmony with its surroundings.

“Legacies” are not necessarily gifts or inheritances, but more often consequences or vestiges. Many stem from the original or continuing unsettling of individuals or communities. The flavour of Golding’s treatment of them is seen in his comment on pioneer squatter John Hepburn, who “remains locally celebrated, while the mountain [Kooroocheang/*Gurutjanga*], the gorges, the creeks, the waterfall, every oven mound and the ceremonial earth rings are virtually unknown. All are out of bounds on private land. I contend that this area... [is] a unique cultural landscape and an outstanding part of our national heritage” (p.88, also p.210).

Other legacies tell of the Dja Dja Wurrung persistence in the face of uncaring or unthinking newcomers, the visible remnants of European pastoralism, mining and building, and little-known examples of the numerous small to medium scale activities of a new society. The book selects ceremonial rings, oven mounds/middens, quarries, mill floors, mine workings and machinery, Aboriginal Protectorate sites, Farmers’ Commons, springs, cairns, memorials, graves, tree plantings and clearings, places of too much activity and too little, snapshots of failure and success past and present.

Golding says his book “might be categorised as an environmental and cultural history. However,...” (p.379). The category is closest to his content, but that “However” matters. This is a history unlike any I have read, regional in focus but universal in argument and I hope readership. It ranges from deep geological time to calls for future repair and restoration. It argues for Dja Dja Wurrung expertise to be recognised, and for Aboriginal people everywhere to be given a fair go. It adds depth and detail to what informed locals know, is crowded with instances of past injustices and misuse, and is firm for better management of the land. Especially in a concluding chapter, it urges a need to reconnect “Peaks, People and Place”, there and everywhere. Histories are rarely so overtly crusading.

No one else could write this book. It needed locals to spend decades tramping or cycling the land, seeing and questioning as Golding and Willman have. It needed too a nose for paper sources scattered and hidden. The authors found good information in the most unlikely places, much of it not seen since contemporaries bound it with that familiar red tape. From both fieldwork and paper (p.379), things great and small

speaking. This book is solid going, but well written with few typos, and bubbling with insights and remedies. Golding and Willman enlighten not only where they live, but where you live too.