

Cox's Road Dreaming: guide book

Review

“You are about to embark on a momentous and privileged journey, travelling along Cox’s original line of road from the Flag Staff at Bathurst on the Macquarie River to Emu Ford on the Nepean River at Emu Plains.” This is the bold claim that David Goldney makes at the outset of his remarkable guide book.

I suspect few will ever make that whole journey. To do so would involve visiting 116 sites from Bathurst to Prospect Hill, and engaging with a vast assemblage of knowledge, ideas, and searching questions. Nor is it a journey to be made in the armchair, though I admit that a perusal of the wonderful collection of historic paintings and maps contained within is indeed irresistible in itself—not to forget the eight marvelous printed maps that go with it.

It is not, of course, necessary to visit all 116 sites. As the book states, one might select sites based, for instance, on particular themes. Or sites where some walking is involved. Fear not, however. Despite the subtitle “History With Your Boots On”, little serious walking is called for: rather, it’s simply an exhortation to “get out there”.

Years ago when I taught local history and other interpretive subjects to guiding students at Blue Mountains TAFE, I devised a series of minibus tours from Parramatta to the Great Dividing Range. We stopped at selected sites of interest to explore various cultural themes. The students lapped it up. It was a way of bringing some reality and coherence to all those accounts and myths that they’d come across. I lament that no similar course survives at the TAFE today. When I visit Blue Mountains lookouts and tracks and eavesdrop on the conversations of tourists and their guides I’m often appalled at the disconnect between people’s understanding and the realities before them. Something must be done.

Goldney has done it—with the assistance of an impressive line-up of editorial assistants. He has provided a unique medium for the thinking person to truly get to grips with the fascinating cultural and ecological landscape not only along the alignment of the original Cox’s Road, but also at countless associated points to the side.

Be warned, this is not like any guide book you’ve seen before. It makes demands of its user. Aside from the information and ideas presented at each site, there is in every case a “Key question for reflection”. Many of these are quite challenging, and I’m sure would be the basis for a healthy discussion amongst a visiting group, be they a party of friends, a historical society party or a university class. Try this for size: after appreciating Charles Darwin’s doings at Wallerawang, we are asked “Is it possible that Aboriginal Creation stories, the Judeo-Christian Creation story of Genesis 1, and Darwin’s and Wallace’s theory of evolution play complementary roles in helping us to understand the meaning and explanation of the origin of species?”

To make the most of the book some homework will be necessary. Those without a sound grounding in colonial history, for instance, should do some background reading on the people or topics raised at any given site before setting out. Fortunately this has been made easy—or, at least, Goldney promises that will be the case. The associated website will contain a glossary with definitions or background information on a host

of people and topics highlighted in bold in the text. At the time of writing those references have not yet been posted: I hope when they are, they will be as rigorously researched as the material in the book itself. In relation to vegetation and geology, I understand the reader will be referred to comprehensive reviewed papers that were commissioned for the purpose. In the case of historical figures the glossary will generally link to entries in the Dictionary of Australian Biography. There is a danger here: by the admission of the DAB's current editors many of the entries need serious updating. For instance, an unqualified link to the DAB's entry on Francis Barrallier would be unfortunate, given the wrong information contained.

The website will also, we are assured by the book, provide the necessary comprehensive background references for those wishing to do further serious reading.

Given the complexity and scope of this work, it is hardly surprising that I have a few reservations. At the outset, I was a little concerned that while there are magnanimous welcomes to country by Wiradyuri and Darug people, there is no welcome from the Gundungurra. I am pleased to say, however, that the Gundungurra attract their deserved attention throughout the book.

I have noticed a few factual errors ("Caley remained in England"), though none of real import. There are also some historical interpretations that will raise eyebrows if not arguments amongst historians. The significant failings of surveyor Govett are not mentioned, and the myth of the Archibald Bell's reliance on a Darug woman is retold without the critical analysis applied by at least one recent author. There may be some missed opportunities too. Perhaps I am biased, but the discussion at Perry's Lookdown or Govetts Leap Lookout could have explored the cultural mythology surrounding Blue Gum Forest.

I also have a concern that the book has no index or other means of easily discovering which topics are covered at which sites. That means it could be quite difficult to plan a tour of sites dealing with a particular theme or person. That could of course be rectified within the website, and perhaps it will be.

In the scheme of things my reservations are minor. Goldney's self-confessed "long love affair with all things Cox's Road" and his deep concern with the European interaction with the original inhabitants has produced a very special outcome. Cox's Road Dreaming offers a magnificent resource for intelligent tourists, guides, locals, teachers and students alike. I hope it is used extensively for its own sake, but more particularly for the sake of the wonderful country it journeys through, and all its people past and present.

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conservationist and former hydrologist*

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