

B BOOKS ABOUT US

'The Aboriginal People of the Burraborang Valley': Jim Smith
Blue Mountain Education and Research Trust, 332 pages

'If we left the Valley our hearts would break'

And yet they did leave the valley, every family but one and at a time of their own choosing. The Rileys were the only family forced to leave by the Water Board. The Burraborang Valley had been marked out long before to serve as the site for the building of Sydney's great new reservoir at Warragamba which was opened in 1960.

Historian Jim Smith says he has walked the Gundungura landscape for 50 years but it was in 1988 that he first learned how to recognise Aboriginal tools. 'I then began to walk with a growing consciousness of the original inhabitants of the land. The physical signs of the Aboriginal way of life were so abundant I wondered how they had seen and used the landscapes I walked through.'

The Aboriginal People of the Burraborang Valley is an extraordinary feat of research even by Smith's own exacting standards. He says: 'Whenever incidents involving Gundungurra people were discovered in my research, I tried to locate, as accurately as possible, where these events had occurred. I began mapping together the many sites mentioned in Creation stories, pre-contact sites discovered on my own journeys, the original place names, and the locations of post-contact living places and historical events involving Gundungurra people. Such multi-layered maps have the potential to show the relationships between traditional and post-contact ways of living in a way that has not been done before. My aim has been to produce a 'living history' of the Aboriginal people of the Burraborang Valley, one that is 'crowded' with individual people and centred on particular places.'

Only about 100 kms from Sydney, the Aboriginal people of the Burraborang Valley remained unaware of the arrival of

The Aboriginal People of the Burraborang Valley

"If we left the Valley our hearts would break"

By JIM SMITH



the first Europeans in Sydney for some years. In spite of this apparent isolation, in later years Aboriginal people of the Burraborang would be the first in Australia to enrol to vote and among the first to make land claims.

Taylor Clarke is one of the youngest descendants of the Riley clan of the Burraborang Valley—the clan referred to above as having been forced by the Water Board to leave—and she and artist Robyn Collier joined in the last visits to the Valley with Jim Smith.

Taylor's *Foreword* to Jim Smith's book describes a shared experience: 'My family has travelled with Jim to places of great cultural significance; we have visited the sites of the Riley family homes, carving and painting sites and gravesites. He has helped to preserve and pass on the stories so that our culture can stay alive.'

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Taylor Clarke', is located at the bottom right of the page.

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'My experiences of walking on Country in the Valley have been some of the most incredible I have had. Sitting in the bush with the breeze blowing through the trees overhead, a creek bubbling nearby and the sounds of animals and insects going about their day around me — it's a connection to my ancestors that I cannot feel so strongly anywhere else. The energy of the Valley is so strong, a place where the ancestors walk beside us. It's the most beautiful place on this earth and it's where we feel most at peace.

'Burratorang Valley is unlike any other place in Australia. Every part of Aboriginal land was touched by invasion, and Gundungurra Country was no different. Some areas experienced violent conflict, or were almost immediately wiped out by sicknesses that native immune systems could not cope with. Some communities were flushed out by sending Aboriginal people to missions and alternate settlements to make way for 'progress' and 'colonisation'. Burratorang was different, and this is what made the Valley so special. The black and white people lived together in relative harmony. The patchwork of my heritage is one of many colours, and I am proud of each and every black and white relative who lived and worked in the Valley.'

Birth, death and marriage certificates, baptism records and newspaper stories as well as family history research and stories and anecdotes related by relatives have all fed into this history. It includes a detailed study of the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in a geographically isolated valley, with each of the documents including the names of witnesses. Hundreds of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal midwives, godparents and witnesses to weddings, deaths and burials have been in close relationships with the Aboriginal people of the Burratorang Valley. Documenting this web of 'witnessing' of the stages of Aboriginal lives has provided a deeper insight into a community where settlers developed respectful relationships with their Aboriginal neighbours.

The book is a treasure trove and it is clear that Jim Smith has been unable to omit any even miniscule fact or record or reference, cutting or photograph—all is brought together here, a goldmine for future researchers and all those interested in this extraordinary history.

What would greatly benefit the book would be an index to assist readers in unravelling the complexities of this history..

Blue Mountain Education and Research Trust are gaining a reputation for producing some excellent publications recording the history—indigenous and European—and wilderness and archaeological research of this fascinating world-renowned region, thanks largely to the interests and oversight of its founder archaeologist Father Eugene Stockton. It is hoped that any reprints of these excellent publications will also include an index, making them even more valuable and accessible to future researchers.

There are so many evocative stories in this fascinating history but because of the Rileys' long association and the fact that they were the last to leave and that their descendant Taylor is the one who went back with Jim Smith and Robyn Collier, while delving into this book I have been drawn to their story in particular. Smith's insights into the Riley family are interesting: 'The Rileys had strong links with the settler community, through their involvement in the Catholic Church, which included a large number of godparent-godchild relationships, through the respect they gained through their hard work, honesty and sobriety and through the marriages they had with settler families. The Rileys were also leaders in their Aboriginal community, with George and John being prominent in the struggle for Aboriginal 'land rights' and holding on to their language and cultural traditions... An interesting feature of the Riley family history is the pattern of their marriages to non-Aboriginal people. John Joseph Riley started this trend by marrying a white woman. His daughters married non-Aboriginal men. His sons Alfred Ernest and William George married Aboriginal women from outside the Valley, but all of their children chose non-aboriginal partners. Only one of George Riley's descendants, his son Walter Thomas, married another Gundungurra person.'

In his *Preface*, Eugene Stockton offers another important reason why the Burratorang experience was different from that of many other groups in colonial times. 'A catalyst for the good relations in the Valley was Saint Joseph's Mission which was unique in the history of Catholic missions in Australia... Generally, a mission was established by a religious order imposing itself on the local community, channelling goods and services of an outside entity (both Church and State) and managing affairs of the community and individuals. In the Burratorang Valley the initiative came from a 'maverick' Catholic priest, Father Dillon, and the local laity. Most of the farmers were Irish Catholics



Taylor Clarke gives her wordless 'welcome to country' in the Upper Burratorang Valley

who made it their business to encourage Aboriginal families to have their children baptised and instructed in the faith. Jim Smith highlights the key role played by black and white people entering into godparent/godchild relationships, with the responsibilities that flowed therefrom. The Catholic hierarchy and local laity clubbed together to raise finance to set aside a property at Pocket Creek which became Saint Joseph's Farm, a base for Aboriginal residence, education and the learning of agricultural know-how'... and (Father Dillon) 'did press the authorities to set up schools in the Valley, for the benefit of black and white children attending alongside one another.'

While it may be some small comfort to a non-indigenous reader to note the 'relative harmony' of this community which runs as a theme throughout the book, this must of course be judged in the context of the times. And while the Catholic church and Catholic laity are recorded as largely a force for good in the community, that too should not be accepted completely uncritically.

Jim Smith gives the last words in his *Epilogue* to Ivy Brookman, née Riley, the last living person of an Aboriginal descent who lived on an Aboriginal reserve in the Burratorang. She described her feelings: 'I do not know why they had to flood our beautiful valley. We loved the Burratorang Valley, and now it's gone. 'The best years and the happiest years of my life were in that beautiful valley Burratorang. It's a shame it was flooded, but then again maybe it was for the best. It will always remain with its beauty untouched by houses every 50m apart. That's how it would have been if the whites got hold of the Burratorang Valley. No whites ever touched the soil on Gungarlook (the Riley farm). The peaks of Burratorang Valley all tell the story of the beauty of this wonder valley. There is lots of virgin soil that will never be touched by mankind.'

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John Joseph Riley and Margaret Riley (née O'Brien) seated with their daughters Emma Louisa Riley and Mabel Florence Riley (photo courtesy Ivy Brookman)

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