

Ross Brownscombe ed, *On Suspect Terrain: Journals of Exploration in the Blue Mountains 1795-1820*, Forever Wild Press, 2004, reviewed by Robert Willson.

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George Caley, self-taught naturalist and eccentric explorer of the Blue Mountains, seems to have had an ability to annoy his superiors. Sir Joseph Banks in London wrote to Governor King in NSW that, had Caley been born a gentleman, he would have been shot long ago in a duel.

Caley is just one of the fascinating but forgotten personalities of early colonial exploration in Ross Brownscombe's impressive study of the journals of those who explored the Blue Mountains two centuries ago.

It was an epic era of exploration. In the years 1804 -1806 Lewis and Clark were making their famous journey across what became the United States. In those same years, the little British colony around Sydney was struggling to probe the sandstone ramparts of the Blue Mountains and to reach the rich plains beyond.

Every schoolboy hears about Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth but people like the French surveyor Francis Barrallier, or the convict Matthew Everingham, or the eccentric botanical collector Caley, are virtually ignored or forgotten. Perhaps they were not of the correct social class to be honoured as heroes of exploration and empire-building.

Brownscombe has collected and edited the journal records of 10 European expeditions into the mountains from Sydney. Most of these records have never been generally available before and one is filled with admiration for the research involved in making them available. They are primary sources for the first European encounters with the Australian inland.

The author emphasises that all exploration of the Blue Mountains was done by the original Australians long before Europeans set foot there. However, as they left no record that we can now decipher, we are left only with those of the white men. The editor is careful to avoid paternalistic nomenclature such as "Aboriginals" or "natives" and simply refers to them as Australians.

He also points out that the European explorers owed much to the knowledge and skill of the local tribes, and some might have died without their help.

The story of Caley makes very entertaining reading. His birthday, June 10, 1770, in Yorkshire was a notable day in Australian exploration because it was the day that the *Endeavour* crashed on a coral reef in the Great Barrier Reef, nearly ending the careers of both James Cook and Banks. Caley was the son of a horse-dealer and enjoyed only very limited formal education. What he lacked in this area he made up for in enthusiasm, impudence and cheek.

He studied botany and began to pester Banks who was by now the recognised authority on all matters to do with the colony of NSW. Caley practically demanded that Banks arrange for him to go to the colony as a botanical collector. Banks had planned to send the famous African explorer Mungo Park but, when he dropped out, Banks finally sent Caley, perhaps to get him out of his hair. Caley arrived in Sydney in 1800 and was to spend nearly a decade here.

In the next eight years Caley devoted himself in the colony to assiduous botanical collecting for Banks. He also engaged in a series of exploration ventures into the Blue Mountains in various directions.

He defined the limits of the Cowpastures, which he tried to have renamed the “Vaccary Forest”, a name that did not stick. In 1804 he attempted to cross the Blue Mountains in an expedition that ended in a place he named Mount Banks, overlooking the Grose Valley.

On each of his excursions he kept detailed journals and he was very energetic in collecting botanical items to be regularly sent home to Banks.

Caley tells us that he believed in small expeditions, in contrast to Barrallier who tended to take large numbers of people with him. Apparently the two explorers did not see eye-to-eye. Caley was notable in his efforts to cultivate good relations with members of the tribes he met.

His efforts gave him a very detailed and comprehensive knowledge of local conditions and his specimens greatly enriched scientific knowledge of the colony. He returned to England homesick in 1808 but he deserves to be much better known in Australia. Tourists take photographs of a cairn of stones called “Caley’s Repulse” which apparently was erected by Bass and wrongly named by Macquarie, and has nothing to do with Caley anyway.

Max Harris once remarked that one of the characteristic forms of Australian literature is the explorer’s journal. Some readers dismiss them as dull — but read these pages with a little imagination and some knowledge of the local terrain and they become a dramatic and absorbing story. Brownscombe has completed a notable piece of research in the literature of exploration.