

Ross Brownscombe ed, *On Suspect Terrain: Journals of Exploration in the Blue Mountains 1795-1820*, **Forever Wild Press**, 2004, reviewed by Paul Genoni, Curtin University of Technology.

Of all Australia's significant geographical features, it is likely that the Blue Mountains come second only to Sydney Harbour in terms of their attractiveness to locals and visitors alike. And the two are of course united by geography and history. From the time the fledgling colony sprung up on the shores of Sydney Harbour, the tantalising blue barrier to the west stood between the settlers and ... well... Australia.

It is little wonder that in a continent so devoid of mountainous features that the Blue Mountains have exerted an ongoing fascination. Generations of Australian school children were fed a diet of imperial history which stressed the importance of the rugged barrier as a deterrent to both escape and exploration, and that it was only with the 'dauntless three' — Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson — that the mountains were finally breached a quarter of a century after settlement.

The fascination with the Blue Mountains has led to a cottage industry in Australian publishing — books dealing with personal tales of encountering or crossing the Blue Mountains. George Mackaness edited *Fourteen Journeys Over the Blue Mountains of New South Wales, 1813-1841* (1978), which followed the imperial line by taking the journal of Gregory Blaxland as its starting point. Chris Cunningham's *The Blue Mountains Rediscovered: Beyond the Myths of Early Australian Exploration* (1996) provided a somewhat different history by recovering the stories of a series of expeditions which preceded the 1813 'first crossing'. Cunningham provided sound evidence to support the claim that John Wilson had found a passage to the west of the mountains as early as 1798. The 1997 collection *Crossing the Blue Mountains: Journeys Through Two Centuries* (no editor attributed) commenced with the 1802 expedition of Frenchman Francis Barrallier and focused mainly on nineteenth century accounts. The book also served to extend the canon of 'crossing' literature to include travellers as well as explorers. And 2004 gave us Andy Macqueen's *Somewhat Perilous: The Journeys of Singleton, Parr, Howe, Myles and Blaxland in the Northern Blue Mountains*, which collected accounts of a series of explorations which followed the years immediately after 1813.

Of these previous publications, *On Suspect Terrain* has most in common with *The Blue Mountains Rediscovered* in its desire to extend the knowledge of Blue Mountains exploration prior to that of Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson. Indeed the two books understandably feature many of the same explorers, notably Mathew Everingham, John Price, John Wilson, Francis Barrallier and George Caley. What distinguishes *On Suspect Terrain*, however, is that whereas *The Blue Mountains Rediscovered* relied on a telling of the stories of these various journeys, Brownscombe has gone back to the original sources and reprinted in full the journals left by the explorers. Sensibly, he has done so with all original errors of spelling, punctuation and grammar intact.

Much of the manuscript material reproduced in *On Suspect Terrain* is extremely difficult to obtain or previously unpublished and Brownscombe has done future researchers a great service by bringing it together in one place. Of similar value are Brownscombe's extensive editorial notes, by which the journeys are contextualised according to our current knowledge and understanding of the terrain they traversed. Not surprisingly the original journals are riddled with inaccuracies in terms of the estimates of distance travelled and vagueness as to the nature and identity of geographic features encountered. Brownscombe's substantial annotations are therefore required to record the exact routes (where possible), update place names, add conjecture about gaps in the journals, and provide some background information about the explorers and the historical moment in which their journeys were conducted. The maps which are ubiquitous to exploration literature are also provided, detailing as nearly as possible the routes taken by the explorers. There is a great deal of painstaking

and valuable scholarship in evidence in Brownscombe's annotations which will make *On Suspect Terrain* a seminal reference for later researchers interested in early inland exploration.

The other important element of this book is the substantial introduction which Brownscombe uses to critique some of the recent analyses of explorer journals. In particular he is keen to redress the work of commentators, notably Paul Carter, who have emphasised the role of exploration and explorers' journals in furthering the commercial interests of the empire. By doing so Brownscombe provides a timely reminder that the motives behind these explorations were often far from clear, and historians run the risk of reducing 'the Explorers' to an undifferentiated mass driven by a single motive.

Brownscombe also criticises Carter, and other commentators such as Robert Dixon and Simon Ryan, for overlooking the importance of these earliest explorers' journals in favour of the far more widely read later accounts left by Sturt, Mitchell, Eyre and others. Brownscombe is certainly correct in stressing the importance of these journals as the earliest accounts of European contact with the interior. Just as certainly, however, he overstates his case. The later and better-known journals exert their greater influence for several good reasons. Not the least of these is the enhanced narrative impact of journals which recorded the progress of expeditions that pushed ever further into the least hospitable reaches of the continent, and endured far greater hardships and dangers. And secondly the later explorers had become a conscious part of a literary tradition. Their journals were carefully prepared — often with editorial assistance — for publication, and were shaped in order to meet the expectations of an audience eager for tales of adventure as the empire battled to exert itself in this last of lands.

The journals reproduced in *On Suspect Terrain* are clearly of a different order. They were intended to be read only by a small audience of intimates and perhaps a few government officials. In particular, this means that the more elaborate descriptive and contemplative passages found in the later journals are all but missing. There is little attempt to recount the sense of 'occasion' that armchair readers of the twenty-first century feel must have gone with the privilege of the being the first Europeans to walk these marvellous and wondrous landscapes. As Brownscombe rightly asks 'What combination of enthusiasm, curiosity and duty drove these people into remote places? What were they looking for?' (9) Unfortunately there is very little in these journals that addresses such questions which are bound to be of central interest to a modern audience.

On Suspect Terrain is, however, a marvellous collection of important documents. One can only hope that it is widely purchased by libraries as well as individual readers, as these journals rightly deserve to be readily accessible to modern readers and scholars.

Finally, it should be pointed out what an excellent job has been done with the design of this book. At times, as with Barrallier's journal, there are up to three narratives included on the one page. These consist of the original journal, the footnotes which appear in the journal and may have been added later, and the editor's own contemporary account of the journey. These various texts are handled in such a way, however, that they are easy to follow and relate to each other with minimal page turning, and yet the layout is attractive on the page and easy to read. For a small press this is a big achievement, and Forever Wild is to be highly commended.