

Launch of **Sacred Waters** by Prof. Larissa Behrendt.

Acknowledgement of country.

It is a great pleasure to join with you to celebrate the launch of **Sacred Waters: The Story of the Blue Mountains Gully Traditional Owners**.

Many of you will have had the same experience that I had when I was in history class at school. The story told about the “settlement” of Australia often used the Blue Mountains as a symbol of the first impediment of barrier to the spread of white civilisation. Much was made of “explorers” and those who “discovered” parts of this ancient country. And special mention was made of the “first men to cross the Blue Mountains”. I remember when the story of Wentworth, Lawson and Blaxland was told in my history class I asked cheekily if they let the aborigines know what they had found.

And of course we can laugh now. And we also now say that Wentworth, Lawson and Blaxland were the first white people to make that crossing.

I was reminded of this perception about the Blue Mountains as a barrier to civilisation and the teaching of the sanitised history of the area when reading **Sacred Waters**. It documents important elements of Blue Mountains Indigenous history for the first time, tracing the lives of the Gully people and their ancestors in this area. It has involved a great deal of work – both archival research and oral history and shows so much more than an academics curiosity about its topic.

The genesis for the book was Di’s involvement in the nomination of The Gully as an Aboriginal Place under the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974 by Gundungurra Elder the late Aunty Dawn Colless.

With Dawn’s assistance, Di prepared an extensive report in support of the successful nomination. In 2002 the then responsible Minister, Bob Debus, declared The Gully to be an Aboriginal Place, to ensure its future protection under the relevant legislation. It is the largest Aboriginal Place in NSW.

After that Di began a long journey of discovery that took her to the Megalong and Burratorang Valleys, to the Hawkesbury-Nepean River system and to the Wollondilly area, to name but a few places in the story. She traced the history of communities living in the Burratorang prior to its inundation to form Warragamba Dam. The ancient pathways between the Burratorang, the Megalong and The Gully proved important links in these stories.

The theme of water pervades the account. Katoomba Falls Creek that flows from its headwaters in The Gully into the tributaries that find their way to Lake Burratorang, Sydney’s water supply behind Warragamba Dam. There is also a fascinating account of the journey made by eels from the lake to their breeding grounds in the warmer waters of the Coral Sea and their amazing return. It is not surprising that the Sydney Catchment Authority generously supported research for this book.

What emerges is an account of the remarkable resilience of the Gully Traditional Owners, despite numerous setbacks, and their quiet pride. This book reclaimed their story, a story that deserves to be more widely known. It has been a collaborative process with many of the descendants of the Gundungurra and Darug Nations. It honours those people, many of whom are with us today. This is a powerful story of resilience and survival, one that celebrates the tenacity and spirit of a people while at no time downplaying the very real and painful struggles that they have faced. It is hard not to be moved by what people have endured and to also marvel at their strength.

In fact, their stories are a powerful reminder of how in many places, particularly the populous and popular parts of the north-east of Australia, too many Australians choose not to see the Aboriginal Nations with whom they share their land. This blindness allows governments and policy makers to continue to work against the interests of Aboriginal people in the south-east in favour of their counterparts in the north. We see arts funding, housing and infrastructure funding and welfare programs being moved from this part of the country to the places where non-Aboriginal people think the “real Aborigines” live.

**Sacred Waters** is a very important reminder that the “real Aborigines” are everywhere – they have survived in even the most populated areas despite the most tenacious applications of colonial laws and policies. The people within the pages of this book, through their stories, illustrate the case that Aboriginal cultures remain strong. It also celebrates the pride that remains amongst Aboriginal people about our cultural heritage. One exchange I found resonated with me is taken from an exchange between Gundungurra descendants Robert Graham when he told Elder Mary Cooper-King, “I feel so privileged to have this Aboriginal ancestry from the Burratorang Valley. Mary gently took his hand and replied, “It’s something that money can’t buy.”

Though it is a scholarly work, it is lucid, accessible and enjoyable. It uses the words of the people who make the story, allowing them to drive the narrative. It is accompanied by stunning photos of this beautiful country and of the communities that have flourished and survived there. The end product is a stunning, high-quality production. The story flows so fluidly because the detailed notes and references are placed at the back of the book, unobtrusively.

Di Johnson is an anthropologist who has lived and worked in the Blue Mountains for almost 20 years. She has taught, researched and written widely on Indigenous issues in recent years, including books on mandatory sentencing, reconciliation and Aboriginal astronomies. Her recent books include “Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia”, “Mandatory Injustice: Compulsory Imprisonment in the Northern Territory” and “Lighting the Way: Reconciliation Stories.”

This is Di’s latest contribution to public conversations about these issues that are close to her heart and she has produced a work that will be a landmark in the understanding of the cultural heritage of the Blue Mountains. I have such great pleasure in launching **Sacred Waters: The Story of the Blue Mountains Gully Traditional Owners**.