Living with Fire – People, Nature and History in Steels Creek,
Christine Hansen and Tom Griffiths, CSIRO publishing, 2012
ISBN 9780643104792

It was ironic that when I agreed to review this excellent publication, I had not anticipated being on holidays in coastal Victoria with the TV on in the background: with shocking accounts of the fires in Tasmania – the potential loss of life (with 100 people being unaccounted for on that day), and significant destruction of property and livestock. I had also not anticipated that my family would discuss and agree upon our “fire plan” – with bottles of water in the fridge at the ready for a “beach exit strategy”! What I had anticipated with pleasure was discussing this book with my father, Robert Vines, who for the last 25 years of his working career at CSIRO (until 1986) had carried out research into bush fires. He continued after his retirement to look at “weather pattern” correlations with fire activity, and at 92 years of age is still acutely interested and involved with his observations of fire management issues. I was not disappointed – we both enjoyed talking about the book: remarking on its well-structured contents and extending our discussion to those around us at our Anglesea holiday house (itself always under threat in dry hot summers), at a time in early January 2013 when the country as a whole then experienced one of the “hottest periods ever”.

The book, written by two historians, with financial support from a range of organisations (including the Sidney Myer Fund, the Office of Emergency Services Commissioner, the Country Fire Authority of Victoria, the artist Mandy Martin and many others), was described by the authors as being “first and foremost for the people of Steels Creek … to contribute to your understanding of the history of your valley and make sense of what happened on Black Saturday…(and) … also for other Australian communities that live with fire”.

Steels Creek is located east of Melbourne, about 7km north of Yarra Glen. On “Black Saturday”, 7 February 2009, 67 of the 95 houses in the town were burnt to the ground, and 10 people lost their lives. This event was somewhat overshadowed in the public psyche by the nearby Marysville disaster on the same day where there were 34 fatalities and all but 14 of over 400 buildings were destroyed. So it was interesting to read of a nearby, but lesser known community: and this book charts the town’s emotional response and recovery and “aims to place the experience of Black Saturday in the context of the long environmental and social history of the valley, and considers the challenge of cultural adaptation”.

The first chapter on “Community” provides a lengthy discussion on the history of the inhabitants of the area – from the original Wurundjeri people, the gold seekers, the timber getters, (there is one marvelous photo of a busy paling splitter at work who was paid 4 shillings a hundred!) to the more recent urban dwellers, who are either weekenders, retirees or the new generation, who can work at home using technology to “telecommute”.

Belonging in this community has always been important to all these inhabitants, and as more people were exposed to the “big nature” of the Yarra Ranges, more became advocates for its protection - the first forest reserve of 5590 hectares being set aside in 1928. The chapters titled “Our Place” and “Life in the Valley” provide delightful early and contemporary photos of community activities, and focus on three stories of local inhabitants and how the Black Saturday fires impacted upon them. The chapter on the “Bush” provides an interesting discussion of the thousands of years of Aboriginal forest management by burning - but once this practice ceased the bush thickened up with an infiltration of scrub. So the history of intense and uncontrolled fire is not new, and the major fires are described in detail in the chapter “Fire”. The photos of Black Saturday are chilling – with the black cover page a dramatic and ominous hint at the photos to come.

There is so much interesting reading in this beautifully-laid out book (cover and text design Andrew Weatherill) and with evocative photos by the authors or locals from Steels Creek. As an architect, I enjoyed reading the section on rebuilding or adapting new transportables – and the use of “Bushfire Art” to provide an emotional outlet, in order to help the closely knit community come to terms with what happened. But the chapter on “Remembering” was chilling – the even handed account of Government and personal responses to previous fire disasters, the contentious “stay or go” policy, the change in sentiment since the Ash Wednesday fire of 1983 which emphasised a “shared responsibility” and “community self- reliance” and finally - how do we as a community respond to the dilemma and reality of regular fires? Discussion of the Black Saturday Royal Commission is included. But the key issue of “fires of choice” (controlled burning) replacing “fires of chance” is a key issue still requiring debate. I was also surprised that, at the end of the book, there was no “Fire Ready – What You Need to Know” summary Check List, such as was helpfully provided free by the Herald Sun over this recent hot summer period. Planning ahead, preparing your property, having a ready Relocation Kit, checking fire danger ratings, and organising your exit, are all key messages that this book could have included.

I strongly recommend this publication – it’s great to look at, to browse through, or read in detail, and it inspires very topical and relevant discussion for all Australians.

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The Value of Water in a drying climate


This book and its theme are timely. Despite some 230 years of colonisation, we are just beginning to grapple with realities of water scarcity and abundance (by turn) in this, the globe’s driest continent. While coastal NSW & Queensland’s coasts have had two wet winters and the wettest & hottest summer on record, much of Australia remains in drought or water stress. Parts of WA, SA and eastern Tasmania have had 10-15 years of it.

Sydney’s Warragamba dam is overflowing for only the second time in 20 years (the first was in 2012). Politicians toss up on raising its wall, or providing incentives to get people living on the plain below to move above-flood level. After multiple Queensland cities and towns’ floods, this looks set to remain a live issue affecting our planning, governance and insurance premiums.

Political and social ‘heat’ over water in the Murray-Darling Basin (our largest and most populated) suggests we need better methods of sharing. It is conceivable that international wars will be fought in future over water – just think of candidates: the Tigris, Euphrates (running through very turbulent ‘neighbourhoods’), Danube, Mekong, Indus, Congo, Nile and Amazon. Great civilisations have always centred on rivers and deltas – some disappeared due to their over-use.
or pollution – a warning, were anyone observing or learning. Dams and pollution upstream lead to tensions down-stream. One fascinating chapter gives an overview of major river basins of the world, their peoples, productivity, issues and outlooks.

Our mindsets need shifting: past visions of an ‘inland sea’, bores pumping the great artesian basin to tame the desert. This is not a land of green and plenty (beyond the short-term) like many our migrants left behind. Advanced technology (dams, weirs, pipes, desalination and recycled water plants) will not ‘save us’ with unlimited water supply, forever. We have to learn to live with less, recycle more, and understand the cycle – it interconnectedness. Or perish. To quote from the book a delicious synopsis: we tend to expect too much rationality from humans!

To use water wisely we first need to know how much we have, how much we use and what contribution each use makes to the environment and economy. No mean feat! The contributors (including the editors, Amy White, Peter Daniels, John Gibson, Barry Gallagher, Jeff Ross and Michelle Wenner from the Universities of Tasmania, Queensland, Bond & Griffith, and the Victorian Department of Primary Industries/Fisheries) discuss traditional economics and accounting systems. A chapter outlines principles of economics and of sustainability: true, long-term sustainability: not the political football or ‘sound bite’.

The book sets out an alternative model of water accounting and management more attuned to nature: based on the unit of a catchment (the area within ridgelines or ranges where one ‘basin’ of rainwater collects and drains). The book’s premise is that sensible, sustainable water management should be based not on non-natural state or territory borders, local government or regional bodies ‘spheres of interest’ but on natural boundaries. Australia’s Catchment Management Authorities share this focus, but sadly sectoral politics and interests undermine this approach. If only we applied logic and reason.

The authors profile the great rivers of the world, identifying for each a range of issues with water management, population and politics. They set out systems of valuing and accounting for the real cost and value of water, explaining how it underpins every aspect of our lives: food, fibre production, and much else. Several chapters describe the regional economy and environment of a micro case study: the Little Swanport catchment in mid-Eastern Tasmania. This is patiently explained – its intricate layers of settlement over time, industries, inhabitants and their many ways of using its water resources on and off land – e.g. aquaculture of oysters and fishing. Changing economics and shifting balances of cropping, balance of farmed, cleared land, forestry and today’s more-mobile residents, who may well work outside the catchment.

I found its themes and approach easy to follow. I found some of the scientific rigour of the approach can get detailed and a bit drawn out and parts of the writing technique annoyingly repetitive (perhaps deliberate, for specialists trying to broaden their reach?).

The book could have benefitted from closer sub-editing – a number of spelling errors shows a lack of focus on details. Most of these are trivial – some easy to get right: Echuca; sought (not sort-) after; pastoralists has no ‘u’; Furneaux has an ‘x’; Laycock has two ‘c’s; etc.

Its core message is our future – if we cannot calmly and logically work out how we balance our resource use and conservation – we won’t have a future – anywhere. Neighbours Mars and Venus lack water!

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Australia’s Fossil Heritage: A Catalogue of Important Australian Fossil Sites

ISBN 9780643101777

From its earliest days, when it was the Australian Heritage Commission, the Commonwealth body responsible for protecting our heritage has always ensured our geological heritage, including fossil sites, has been part of our national estate. The publication by the Australian Heritage Council continues this tradition.

The back cover provides some background for the publication. The first paragraph states that one aspect of natural heritage that has been little explored is Australia’s wealth of exceptional fossil sites. I disagree. Since the 1970s many reports, some funded through the National Estate Grants Program, have been published on our geological heritage which included fossil sites. Funding was usually through the State and Territory branches of the Geological Society of Australia. The back cover also states that “The Australian Heritage Council engaged palaeontologists from state museums and the Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery to compile lists of outstanding fossil sites...” My initial reaction (being from Canberra) was why the ACT wasn’t included? This was quickly followed by why weren’t all palaeontologists included? There are many palaeontologists in museums (although this number is declining) but for an accurate or more inclusive list, other palaeontologists from universities, Commonwealth, State and Territory geological organisations, the Geological Society of Australia and any number of retired palaeontologists could all have made worthwhile contributions.

It is also unclear which sites are to be considered. The back cover states that sites on the National Heritage or World Heritage Lists were not included with the focus on lesser known but still important sites. However, one of the sites I know best, Riversleigh in Queensland, is included despite it being inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1994.

Given these reservations, I opened the publication with trepidation. The Foreword was fine especially the paragraph about how the information provided helps us piece together a national story about how Australia’s plants, animals and environments have transformed over time. This is precisely what this publication should do, much like the recent excellent ABC television series Australia – A Time Travellers Guide. Charting the evolution of Australia through time through the fossil sites. A chapter at the beginning of the publication on this topic would put sites in context.

The Introduction also provided background on the way the catalogue was compiled. One paragraph stated it was compiled in 2006-07 and reflects knowledge at that time. Yet in the same paragraph there are references to publications in 2010 and the catalogue was not published until mid-2012. I also wondered why each State and the Northern Territory was limited to 10 sites with another 3 from around Australia chosen for comparative analysis. Why not compile a list of all important sites then edit out duplicates, ones that don’t meet certain criteria and make sure it is current?

There is usually some order in a catalogue – by theme, by time or even alphabetical. However, this publication just clumps sites together by State and the Northern Territory. This arrangement makes it difficult to follow a particular theme e.g. evolution of plant fossils, or by time. While there was a lot of information, there was considerable repetition and meaningless comparisons with other sites, which was exacerbated by parochialism between the various States as well as bias from the contributors. The layout was less than ideal with individual entries often starting and finishing mid page. In any compilation, there will be favourites and entries that get overlooked, although this could have been minimised by having more contributors. However, I was astounded that the Murgon site in Queensland was omitted. This site was included in the 1993 World Heritage nomination for the evolution of Australia’s mammals. This site has our oldest marsupial fossils, a placental mammal fossil, one of the world’s oldest birds and the world’s oldest songbird making Murgon the home of the world’s first tweet.

There is an Appendix which lists the sites by type, which would have been better at the beginning. There is an excellent Glossary and References and a Geological timeline although
this is spoilt by having the Silurian dates reversed – not a major error but one that should have been corrected in editing.

In summary, very disappointing. It could have been an excellent publication if more thought had been given to the approach, the compilation and the editing. It is impossible to piece together the national story promised in the Foreword, which also stated the hope that the publication will serve as a useful resource for students and scientists. Sadly, I think it will do neither. It is too long and disjointed for your average student and knowledgeable palaeontologists are unlikely to be impressed with an outdated publication that is inconsistent and inaccurate. This begs the question – who will read it and who will use it? I wish I knew the answer.

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ENGLISH HERITAGE PRACTICAL BUILDING CONSERVATION: TIMBER

Eds Iain McCaig and Brian Ridout
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The first series of Practical Building Conservation (J and N Ashurst, Gower, 1988) gave sound practical lessons and became a more or less essential part of the toolkit at a time when useful textbooks for building conservation were few. Compact and well illustrated, with tough bindings and wide margins for scribblings, the 5-volume series was a boon in the days when building conservation was more an act of faith than the sophisticated industry it has since become.

That series was a synthesis of the technical advice coming out of the UK Department of Environment Directorate of Ancient Monuments & Historic Buildings. Inevitably there were shortcomings. Most of the former Ministry of Works sites that were the mainstay of government heritage casework in the 1980s were masonry structures, not wooden ones, so the 29 pages on wood offered not much more than a sketchy overview of methods for repairing timber beams and trusses. Each of the original five volumes was dedicated to a specific material (stone, metals, etc.): aside from the problem of breaking down building defects by material (distorting the interconnected dynamics of building behaviour and pathology), this meant that for publishing reasons wood was lumped together as Volume 5 with glass and resins.

Increasingly the “Ashurst books” came to be judged by the perception that much more needed to be said about everything in them. Discussions began a decade ago among the experts at English Heritage on revising and expanding the Technical Handbooks to distill the advice and wisdom accrued, through research, grant-aided heritage projects on the national estate, and regional casework to listed buildings and monuments, since 1988. As one of the dozens who had a hand in this epic project, I am pleased with the first five ‘new’ volumes - Timber, Stone, Mortars & Renders, Metals and Glass & Glazing. But the series is, in effect, a totally different animal.

Timber starts with the obvious question: what is wood? Or more strictly, what is the relationship between the biology of wood and its durability in buildings? A section entitled “Building with Timber” runs through technology and design in wood from the mortise-and-tenon to the grid-shell, including not just structural frames but also doors, windows, staircases and joinery, as well as the generally overlooked glues, nails and ironmongery. There follow chapters on Deterioration and Damage, Assessment, and Repair.
The illustrations in this volume are copious and of extremely high quality (mostly by the contributors themselves). Fungi, for instance, are captured in terrifying technicolor. The visuals provide a superb parallel commentary on the text. I am a fan of hand-drawn technical details, which remind us how we understand and visualise materials and systems by drawing them; Ashurst’s drawing (though not a major feature of the old *Wood, Glass and Resins* book) had a style all of its own. By comparison, Iain McCaig’s exploded isometrics and sections for the new book lack warmth, but they are slick and informative (there is a satisfying continuity in the fact that Iain did the technical drawing in the first series too). They range from 18th-century panelling to examples of scarf joints to methods of reinforcement of beams and joists. This is a book to feast your eyes on.

With hindsight, though, the series title seems anachronistic. At 500 pages, the book hardly seems like a practical manual. The sparseness and looseness of the original series came to be seen as defects, but they were the essence of its utility. In the digital age, we want our books to do a different job: we expect technical manuals to be encyclopedic, as we expect all those .html links, glossaries, bullet-lists and visual cues to help us hold down the ever-expanding universe of information we need at our fingertips. But it was Socrates who said that if you put everything down in a book people stop going out and learning it for themselves.

Given what I have just said, I can hardly criticise the book for its (very few) omissions. Bark shingles, log-and-pug, and other un-English techniques are not to be found in this volume, obviously enough. More surprisingly, weatherboard, which has dozens of variations in Southern and Eastern England, is also missing. Coatings and decorative finishes get short shrift (two pages on traditional coatings and two more on decorative finishes).

But don’t mistake this as criticism. There’s no doubt this book, like others in the series, is a fitting tribute to John Ashurst’s pioneering work as an architect and educator. Elegant, comprehensive and authoritative, it is the crowning achievement of his successors at English Heritage. With that organisation’s shift away from providing technical advice, and the relentless stripping out of centralised professional services that began over a decade ago, the new series of *Practical Building Conservation* may well come to be seen as a swan song.

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