

Wayfaring in Wollemi: stories of people in wilderness

by Andy Macqueen

352 pages, hard cover, 140 maps and images

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Available post-free from the [Colong Shop](#) or the author direct at andymacqueen@gmail.com

Contrary to the arguments thrown up by its detractors, wilderness does not deny human presence, either past, present or future. What it denies are modern infrastructure and developments.

In his latest book, Blue Mountains bushwalking historian Andy Macqueen celebrates human presence in the Wollemi, the largest protected wilderness in NSW, by presenting the stories of around twenty-eight individuals. These include a number of surveyors, ranging from those who were driven to drink or suicide, to the irrepressible bush-loving Major Clews; various cattlemen who took up holdings in the remote volcanic oases, clearly not for any great profit but rather because they loved the place; the first bushwalkers and canoeists who ventured out there without the benefit of good maps; a government geologist who mapped much of the volcanics, perhaps because he liked being out there more than because he was required to do so; men obsessed with schemes for railways and dams; and conservationists who saved or protected the place.

Perhaps most likeable, there's a wandering phrenologist who preached a conservation message that is still meaningful today, over a century later.

In researching each of his subjects Macqueen has followed their footsteps in the wilderness. Each chapter comprises a series of his personal diary entries, each made at a relevant location, in which he describes his subjects' undertakings and contemplates their relationship with the wilderness environment. In doing so, he weaves in a great deal of Wollemi history not specifically related to his subjects, and also much of his personal story, acknowledging the events in his life that have brought him there.

Those who are looking for a Wollemi guide-book may be disappointed. While the book contains a wealth of stories and information that will inspire the bushwalking adventurer, Macqueen does not often describe his own walking routes, and avoids giving too much away when it comes to special places.

This is not just to protect such places, but to protect the sense of mystery that he sees as a crucial value of wilderness. As he says in the introduction, "I'm sure if you're a keen explorer you'll figure things out for yourself. Feel free to do so: on the way you'll no doubt make your own discoveries, and you'll find your own way to connect with the country. Perhaps you'll keep your discoveries under your hat, so generations of future explorers can make those discoveries for themselves. And make their own connections."

Macqueen also frequently refers to the timelessness of wilderness, contrasting it with "the wasteland of transient modern society". One of his subjects, Sue Morrison, tells him at Gospers Mountain that "I'm just this tiny blip like one of these ants crawling around. I never did look at the bush in the same way after that, you know. I just had that real sense of— eternity."

The traditional Aboriginal people are acknowledged frequently in the book, but their particular stories are missing. As Macqueen says, their world was lost when they were invaded and the surveyors and the place-namers took possession. In the final chapter Macqueen recounts some of his own experience in assisting with surveys of Wollemi rock art. It is in this chapter that his thoughts about the original owners—and mystery of the Wollemi—come together in a moving and positive conclusion.

This book will appeal to historians, bushwalkers and wilderness advocates alike. It is beautifully written and presented, and highly recommended.