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Six Peaks Speak: Unsettling in southern Dja Dja Wurrung Country

For my 2023 State Library Victoria Creative Fellowship, I am researching and writing a book, *Six Peaks Speak: Unsettling in Southern Dja Dja Wurrung Country*. It explores the many unsettling changes to the people and traditional lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung Nation, pre- and post-contact. This is the Country I have called home for much of my life, north of the Great Dividing Range in central Victoria.

My particular interest is how geology affects landscape and people, as well as how resistance to change has shaped the destiny of the six peaks visible from where I live in Kingston. The peaks are Mount Kooroocheang near Kingston, Mount Beckworth near Clunes, Mount Greenock near Talbot, Mount Tarrengower near Maldon, Mount Alexander near Castlemaine and Mount Franklin near Daylesford.

The six peaks

Kooroocheang, Greenock and Franklin are relatively young scoria cones situated on expansive and fertile volcanic plains. As it was before it began to be unsettled in 1838, this is particularly rich, productive and relatively densely populated Country. Beckworth and Alexander are ancient, formerly forested granite ranges. Tarrengower is hard metamorphic rock, known as hornfels, evident in the map shown here as the ‘puckered’, resistant edge around the massive granite batholith. The rest of the landscape is eroding, ancient, tightly

folded, sedimentary basement rock, quite recently mined for gold.

The local and regional geology has been the main influence on the settling and unsettling processes on and around each peak. My project takes a deliberately broad and multidisciplinary perspective, looking for peak-specific themes that allow each peak to tell its own unique story. My project tells rarely heard, place-based stories from the ground up, including First Peoples' perspectives.

Each peak is unique. One mountain is privately owned but surrounded by clusters of Dja Dja Wurrung oven mounds perhaps thousands of years old. All the other peaks are in public or joint First Nations-public management. Each of the present-day public reserves were goldfields-era town or farmers' commons, later timber reserves or reserved forest, and more recently state parks or scenic reserves managed today by Parks Victoria.

All public reserves lost most of their tree cover during the protracted era of gold mining from the 1850s, leaving a mixed historical and environmental legacy. Most peaks and their flanks have lost species and ecosystem diversity and are still damaged and recovering.

All the mountains have deep and ancient First Nations connections. There is evidence of semi-permanent settlement for millennia in ecotonal situations (places where two different ecosystems meet) where a range of environments and food sources were accessible. The most fertile country was unsettled first from 1838, typically accompanied by squatter violence and exclusion of Dja Dja Wurrung people from Country. With each change, there was First Nations resistance.

Two of the mountains are close to sites where Aboriginal protectorates operated during the 1840s, whose stories are included in my research and writing. Alexander was later comprehensively mined for granite, Tarrengower for gold and Beckworth for granite sands. All were stripped of trees to support gold mining enterprises and communities during the late 1800s.

An unsettled landscape

I am looking at change through the lens of 'unsettling'. In the broadest sense of the word, used as a verb, the term *unsettling* means upsetting, disturbing or discomposing. Unsettling underpins my book's title, themes, methods and purpose of inquiry. I also use *unsettlers* to describe those directly involved in the unsettling project.

I am not the first to go down this unsettling path. Lars Jensen's *Unsettling Australia* in 2005¹ was perhaps the earliest book taking up unsettling as an underpinning theme. More recently, David Denborough's book, *Unsettling*

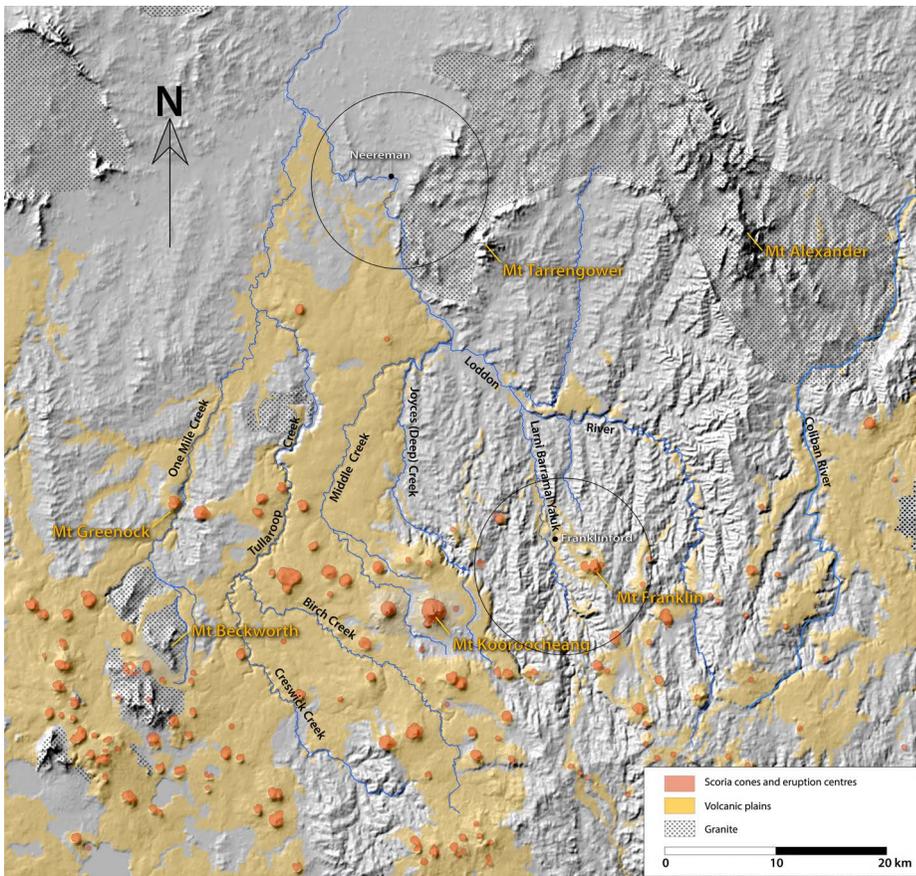


A massive granite boulder on the flanks of Mount Beckworth. The orchid-rich flanks of this mountain were mined for sand despite decades of protest by local field naturalists and bird observers. The mining stopped not because of the protests, but when floods in 1990 destroyed the access bridge to the sand aprons. Pine trees, several copses of Cork oaks and the local Farmers' Common also feature in the Mount Beckworth story.
Photo by Barry Golding.

*Australian histories*² used the concept in 2020. Also, the Australian Museum's 2021 *Unsettling* exhibition adopted the theme in order to tell stories about:

... the seizure of land from First Nations peoples, denial of Indigenous sovereignty, devastating frontier wars, and separation from families and homelands. We live in the legacy of this history. This has privileged many but has left others disadvantaged. Recognising and understanding this shared past is an important step on our journey towards a better shared future.³

So many of the assumptions and attitudes expressed in historic sources are deeply upsetting, disturbing and discomposing. It is not only the facts about



The six peaks on a Digital Elevation Model (“bare earth”) map with several geological features added. The brown is basalt, the orange peaks are scoria cones, the shaded area is granite. The two circles represent the approximate boundaries of Aboriginal Protectorates which operated adjacent to two of the peaks: first at Neereman in 1840–41, relocated to Franklinford from 1841–49. Map by Clive Willman.

what happened that are disturbing. It is also the unsettling language invariably used to describe both First Peoples and the settlers. Thus, in my writing, I systematically critique those sources’ notions of ‘exploration’, ‘pioneering’ and ‘settlement’ in a landscape that was already settled, named and cultured.

The history of post-contact land management remains unsettled for each of the peaks, as well as for people who live in the landscape around them today. For example, how should we manage ancient oven mounds on the totally privately owned Mount Kooroocheang if the broader community does not know they are there? How should we address the seriously degraded and grazed flanks of the Mount Greenock Geological Reserve? What should we do to address the highly compromised ecology and First Nations status of Mount Franklin, today clothed in pine plantations? Each of these questions are unsettled and unsettling.

All of these attitudes and questions remain unsettled with First Nations people generally and, in the context of the landscape and community of this book, with Dja Dja Wurrung people in particular. The *Dja Dja Wurrung Country Plan 2014–2034*, written by Dja Dja Wurrung people,

... re-affirm[s] our aspirations and describ[es] the future of our people, the Traditional Owners of Dja Dja Wurrung Country. It recognises the importance of our cultural heritage – our significant places and landscapes, our stories and language, our customs and practices and our responsibilities for looking after Country. It describes the pathway our community has determined it needs to take to rebuild and prosper.⁴

This same plan presupposes that it will be local First Nations peoples who develop and implement ‘a strategy for healing our Country that specifically addresses remediation and restoration, in partnership with other land managers’.⁵

To know what might need remediation and restoration on the five Crown reserves in particular, there is a need to chronicle and understand how things ‘on the ground’ actually got to be like this, and why they remain so unsettled. This could also apply to every other place in Australia, all with First Nations connections and similarly unsettling histories and legacies.

My book’s premise is that it is important to document what was, what has changed, what is missing or absent as well as what still exists that is worth retaining and enhancing for future generations. When local people take informed control, rather than relying on governments to ‘do the right thing’, landscapes and ecosystems thrive under the close attention and care of the people who know them best. Successive governments have instigated or enabled unsettling processes such as mining and plantation forestry. Trusting governments has not always worked in the past for each of these peaks.

Researching and writing the six peaks

My research is grounded in a respectful relationship with local First Nations people, organisations and sources, in particular with DJAARA, the Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation and Dja Dja Wurrung Elder Uncle Ricky Nelson.

I am using a wide range of sources, including original documents and maps, to explore change over time. Original sources have been accessed on site and online at State Library Victoria and the Public Records Office Victoria (PROV), as well as on Trove (the National Library of Australia’s vast database of digitised historical records). Having ready access to a wide range of State



One of dozens of oven mounds now mapped in a cluster on the privately owned plains around Mount Kooroocheang. This one, burrowed into by rabbits, was rediscovered in 2019 in an ancient red gum swamp using clues left by Chief Aboriginal Protector George Robinson's diary from February 1840. In 1840 it was surrounded by semi-permanent shelters, where dozens of Dja Dja Wurrung women collected murrnong on the plains. Photo by Barry Golding.

Library records, particularly rare books and original documents, and mentor support to access them, has been invaluable.

Living beyond Melbourne, having access to an onsite office for the year under the Dome at the Library has been a huge privilege. Information has generously been made available by local historical societies, park rangers and special interest groups as well as via Crown Files for reserves held by current land managers.

Actually going on Country and undertaking field work to join all these dots has been the highlight of the fellowship. Much valuable information is located in place and on site. My field methodologies include extensive walking and cycling, photography, the use of the PeakFinder app and a remote sensing technique called LiDAR.

My writing methodology is autoethnographic, 'an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple levels of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural.'⁶ Given my personal experience on Country and connection to these places, as well as what I know and have learnt about the peaks, autoethnography has several attractions.



The ruins of the Victorian Ladies Sericulture initiative attempted on the flanks of Mount Alexander in the mid-1870s. Few people know about this initiative by women to plant mulberry trees and set up a silk industry, strongly resisted by the men on the Mount Alexander Farmers' Common. Photo by Barry Golding.

As Tessa Muncey puts it in her enlightening *Creating Autoethnographies*, autoethnography requires strategies that use descriptive and evocative detail.⁷ Her work suggests that the question of what counts as legitimate knowledge when it comes to managing these peaks and their contested histories and legacies is not what is true or not true, but how decisions are (and were) made about these peaks, and who made or should make them in the future.⁸

Tantalisingly, many places associated with these peaks have seldom-told stories and are today not what they seem. The aim of my fellowship project is to create a resource that tells the story of how these peaks came to be, to empower and enthuse others to visit and, importantly, to assist local communities to manage the sites, collaborate and learn from Traditional Owners and responsibly take charge.

State Library Victoria's fellowship program is open for applications each year. Visit slv.vic.gov.au/fellowships to meet the 2023 fellows and be the first to know about the 2024 fellowships.