

Book Reviews

Sydney's Aboriginal Past: Investigating the archaeological and historical records.

Val Attenbrow, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2002.

by Dr Susan McIntyre-Tamwoy¹

I was very pleased to be given the opportunity by the AACAI to review this book as I have already had many occasions to refer to it for contextual material in my day-to-day work as a consultant in Sydney. In this volume Attenbrow has successfully produced a book that has the capacity to engage the public as well as provide an excellent regional overview for students and professionals engaged in archaeological and heritage work in the Sydney area. Interstate visitors to our household have been quick to borrow it to take advantage of the places to visit in the back of the book. These places consist of easily accessible Aboriginal sites around the Sydney area that are open to the public and which for the most part have at least some on-site interpretation.

For those of us working in the Sydney area the book provides an overview of useful regional statistics such as site types, range and number of excavated sites and dated sites. It also provides a brief overview of the pre- and post-contact history of the Sydney area, with ample reference to primary sources. The notes and reference list will provide a great starting point for people who need to delve deeper into specific aspects and areas. This was an ambitious project and at times there is some disjunction between the levels of information as it slips from the very specific to the general, but this is more an artefact of the available primary information than any real lapse on the author's part.

Students of archaeology and Aboriginal studies based in the Sydney region will find this book extremely useful. The information is largely descriptive providing a useful source of information, although with little analysis of the

historic record. It would have been good to see Attenbrow explore the role of key Aboriginal figures such as Colbee, Bungaree and Pemulway in terms of Aboriginal resistance and responses to European invasion. Whereas Pemulway adopted a strategy of open resistance, there is evidence to suggest that Colbee chose a strategy based on the style of Philip himself – that of the charming double agent. When it comes to the archaeological record Attenbrow is on more comfortable ground and presents debated interpretations objectively, while clearly stating her own opinion – for instance in the case of the conflicting claims for tribal and language boundaries around the Sydney area and particularly the area between Port Jackson and Broken Bay.

At the end one is left with the impression that the story of Sydney's Aboriginal Past is now complete and all that can be known about the archaeology and the people of the Sydney region is enclosed within the books covers. I was slightly disappointed that Attenbrow did not go one step further and identify the gaps in research and knowledge and perhaps outline her views on the strategic research needed to fill them. Perhaps this is the step-off point for a sequel!

Sydney's Aboriginal Past is an excellent example of the synthesis of many years of archaeological work within the region to produce a coherent story. It demonstrates that it is possible to draw together the various archaeological and historic sources from both research and contract work and weave them into an important resource document. Now all we need is a similar book on the Hunter, the Illawarra and about half a dozen regions where similar amounts of data exist. It seems Val Attenbrow has taken up the challenge of producing a regional synthesis of archaeological and historic data. Will anyone else follow suit?

Endnotes

1. Heritage Consultant, Sydney