Arapiles: A million mountains.

Reviewed by Glyn Thomas

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Lockwood, K. (2007). Arapiles: A million mountains: Natimuk, Victoria: Skink Press

165 pages. ISBN: 9780975805725 (hbk)

You may wonder why a review of this book would be included in an outdoor education journal. Apart from my personal biases about Mt Arapiles and the love affair I have with this place – this book is a great example of what ‘good’ outdoor environmental education might look like. Most keen climbers from other countries will have heard of Mt Arapiles and the Grampians in Australia. Most keen climbers within Australia will have made the trek to what is arguable one of the best cliffs in the world, and certainly one of the best cliffs in the world for guiding or instructing. This is why people develop such a strong ‘sense of place’ with this lump of rock in the middle of the Wimmera plains, in Western Victoria. Keith Lockwood is one such person that has developed an enduring relationship with this amazing place.

Lockwood is in every sense a local at Mt Arapiles and he was one of the climbers that participated in its development as a climbing site. His ‘local’ status is reinforced in the book by his extensive research and knowledge of the mountain’s natural history, cultural history, and art work featuring this place. What I especially liked about the book is that it is not just about climbing. In fact, only one chapter (albeit a long one) is specifically about climbing at Mt Arapiles.

The first chapter, introduces some of the natural history of the mount including a summary of how it was formed. If you are looking for a detailed geological history, then you may be disappointed. Lockwood avoids detailed and complex geological analysis and uses pictures and some user-friendly text to summarise the accepted views on how Mt Arapiles came to be. Chapter two, provides a short history of the indigenous people, the Djurid Bulag, who are understood to first inhabit the place some 5000 years ago. It is fitting that Lockwood acknowledges these first inhabitants of the mount – a fact that appeared to be lost on some of the early white settlers in the area. The history of non-indigenous settlement, which started with the mountain’s ‘discovery’ by Major Mitchell in 1836, is described in chapters three and four. Lockwood uses a range of historical documents, photos, artwork, and stories to place Mt Arapiles in a social context.

Chapter five is devoted to the non-human inhabitants of Mt Arapiles and there are some excellent photographs of the local flora and fauna. Lockwood acknowledges some of the conservation and land management issues concerning the mount as well as outlining strategies that have been used, both past and present, to protect the mount’s ecological diversity. Chapter six features input from University of Ballarat scholar Trevor Tagliabue who describes some of the artwork that has been inspired by the mount from: the rock art of the first inhabitants; landscapes in watercolour, oil, and chromolithograph; and performing arts, theatre and dance.

Chapter seven provides the reader with 61 pages of climbing history, classic photos, accounts of significant ascents, biographies of some key visiting climbers and local climbers, and descriptions of 13 classic routes across a range of grades. The eighth and final chapter encourages readers to absorb the magic, beauty and spirit that makes Mt Arapiles special.

This book can easily serve a number of purposes. It can sit on your coffee table and offer potential readers inspiration when needed. It is also a great source of information for potential visitors of all interests. Finally, it is a great textbook for instructors and outdoor leaders who want to have a fuller understanding of Mt Arapiles to share with their participants/students. I think most readers will find this tome a worthwhile addition to the bookshelf or coffee table.

About the reviewer

Glyn Thomas is a senior lecturer in the Centre for Excellence in Outdoor Environmental Education at La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia. He is an active climber and instructor over the last 17 years and has the pleasure of teaching his students to become climbing instructors at Mt Arapiles. Email: g.thomas@latrobe.edu.au