

Review

Catherine Potter, Sarah Moles, Libby Connors and Pam Postle, eds.
Conversations on the Condamine: An Oral History from the Murray Darling Basin. Annandale NSW: Envirobook, 2002. 128 + vii pp. \$19.95.

Conversations on the Condamine is an eclectic book representing the work of four editors, several authors and one main interviewer; incorporating diverse disciplinary perspectives including social history and riparian ecology; and diverse institutional support. This hybridity is both the project's strength and its weakness.

The written publication, with its accompanying CD-ROM, is the outcome of a project initiated by the Condamine Catchment Management Association in 1997, with primary funding from the Commonwealth Government's Natural Heritage Trust and additional institutional support from the University of Southern Queensland's Faculty of Arts and the Toowoomba and Region Environment Council. At a time when problems in the management of the Murray Darling basin and the rate of land clearing in Queensland are such critical issues, a project such as this one is potentially important.

The book consists of eight chapters. Environmental historian Libby Connors has written the introduction, which sets up the overall approach to oral history, and the final chapter, which usefully places the oral histories into a historical policy context. Chapters 1 to 6 are written by Glen Ross, and are organized spatially and sequentially, following the main channel of the Condamine from its headwaters below Warwick to the lowest reach of the Condamine at Riverlea, where it becomes the Balonne River. With twelve key interviewees in the overall project, each chapter revolves primarily around the recollections of one or two rural landowners whose lives have been played out beside the Condamine. Perspectives beyond those of the key interviewees - snippets of biology, ecology and history - are incorporated graphically in grey boxes on either side of the main text. Three maps provide an effective visual context to the stories, locating the Condamine within the larger Murray Darling water system, and giving information as to the practices of the traditional custodians of the land and water.

An associated CD-ROM, provided in an envelope in the back of the book, is structured around theme rather than space: seven sections of between one and eight minutes take up topics such as 'recreation', 'fish' and 'water quality', using

a combination of professional voiceover narration and excerpts of the oral histories. Each track of the CD is accompanied throughout by a different piece of library music, whose overall style is redolent of a 1960s Disney family television feature. At times the interaction of music and oral history can be quite dissonant, as when interviewees are describing serious environmental degradation against the backdrop of somewhat saccharine music. Unfortunately too, individual interviewees are not identified on the CD, making it hard to develop either an overall historical chronology or a sense of individual story arcs within the material.

This reviewer found the book and CD package a classic curate's egg: alternately a model of what could be possible when oral history is used as a tool of environmental ecologists and historians, and an example of what happens when a publication has so many 'voices' that the overall impression is somewhat 'noisy'. Perhaps at the heart of my frustration was uncertainty as to whose book this really was. Two of the four editors (Catherine Potter and Pam Postle) have apparently contributed nothing to its writing. Glen Ross, who undertook all but one of the interviews and wrote or co-wrote six of the eight chapters, is thanked in the introduction but holds no copyright and seems to have been curiously denied formal authorship.

Working out how to edit and present a diverse collection of oral histories is always challenging. Following the river down from its headwaters in the book, and dividing by theme in the CD were potentially exciting ways to structure the material, but somehow it seemed that the distinct voices of the project's participants were lost in an overly expository style of presentation. The book included substantial material on indigenous land and water use, and in the introductory chapter Libby Connors tells us that 'indigenous oral history of the river continues to this day', yet contemporary indigenous voices were curiously absent. Whilst the foreword states that 'it is ...the period from about the 1930's to the present that is the focus of this oral history', often it is the much older historical accounts that seemed more vivid and left more lasting impressions.

If anything then, this project is one of tantalizing possibility, not fully realised. I am reminded of the old adage that 'a camel is a committee made horse'. I would, however, recommend the book to others who are interested in exploring the range of ways that oral history might be deployed and its potential to intersect with other disciplinary projects. I would also imagine that for a local audience that knows at least some of the characters interviewed, and much of the environment being described, this could also be a valuable addition to a library.

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