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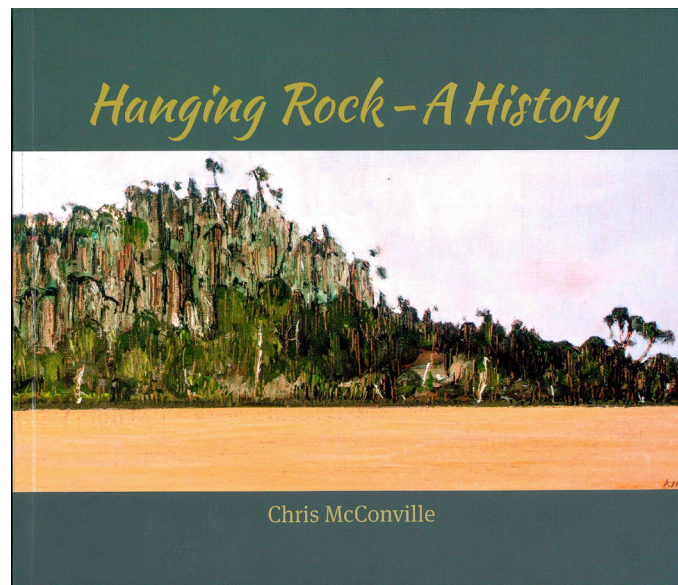


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Hanging Rock — a history

by Chris McConville

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There must be few natural features in Victoria that have the iconic status in the public imagination that attaches to Hanging Rock. Since Joan Lindsay's 1967 novel and, more particularly, Peter Weir's film adaption, Hanging Rock has exercised an attraction over an increasingly wider audience. Chris McConville's *Hanging rock — a history* sets out to show that, in fact, the mysterious and otherworldly nature of the Rock, and its power to stir human imagination, has always been a part of its being. This book grew out of a popular movement to oppose the building of a major wellness centre in the Eastern Paddock, adjacent to the monolith, in 2013. Details of both the proposal and the opposing force are spelled out in the final essay, but are hinted at near the end of the book's introductory chapter.

This history of Hanging Rock is told through

a series of nine thematic essays, each of which deals with a different facet of the Rock's past. A major theme that runs through these essays is of Hanging Rock as a locale of enduring mystery, a place that excites imagination. Since the beginnings of European exploration and settlement in the area, Hanging Rock and its immediate surrounds have been the setting for a variety of social and cultural events. These have ranged from race meetings (since the 1860s), rock music concerts (from the late 1980s) and, of course, annual picnics on New Year's Day. In the detailing of all of these events, the Rock is presented as looming large as a backdrop, and perhaps a silent participant.

Following an introductory piece, suggestively titled 'Spectre in the mist', the order of these chapters is essentially chronological, although there is much movement back and forth be-

tween some of the subject areas within the overall narrative. The initial essay, 'First people' focuses, *de rigueur*, on the role of Hanging Rock in the lives and culture of the local Indigenous groups. Here, McConville uses what little is known in relation to these matters and is at pains to show that the Rock was of great importance to the Aboriginal people of the area. He makes much of the relative proximity of the well-known Mount William greenstone quarry, although there doesn't appear to be any obvious material or cultural connection between the two sites.

The following chapter, 'Volcanic wilderness', looks at the natural history of the Rock and its surrounding area. There is some discussion regarding the vegetation and animal life, as noted by the earliest explorers and the naturalists who followed later. Perhaps fittingly, much of this essay is devoted to a discussion of the geological genesis of Hanging Rock, and related theories developed by visiting geologists in the latter half of the 19th century.

The succeeding six chapters each focus on a specific way in which the surrounding area of Hanging Rock, particularly the Reserve, has been used over the past 170-odd years. 'Around the Rock' details the spread of settlement, from the pastoralists of the 1830s, followed by more permanent farmers, through to the creation of small towns and hamlets. 'Little Flemington' is the story of Hanging Rock Racing Club, and the creation of a racecourse, with regular New Year's Day meetings. 'Carnival times' looks at the use of the Hanging Rock Reserve as a place of public relaxation and entertainment, and the management issues that ensued as visitor numbers grew. 'Vanishing heights', followed by 'Cinema place', examine Joan Lindsay's famous novel and Peter Weir's film adaptation respectively, putting each within its social context, as well as looking at the impacts each has had on public imagining of the Rock. The most recent (and still continuing) use of the Hanging Rock Reserve is detailed in 'Rock icons'. This is the staging of concerts and music festivals that have seen internationally known performers including Bruce Springsteen, Rod Stewart, and Leonard Cohen, as well as topline Australian bands, entertain audiences of tens of thousands of fans. Beginning in the early 1990s, these con-

certs aimed at raising funds for the Hanging Rock management committee, money that was badly needed to pay for the maintenance and later redevelopment of the Reserve.

The final chapter of this history, 'Red tape and renewal', is an interesting, if somewhat inconclusive, discussion of the difficulties that exist in creating an acceptable and feasible management plan for a place like Hanging Rock. In the case of Hanging Rock, the range of stakeholders and vested interests is so varied and wide as to be largely irreconcilable; and as McConville points out: 'selecting and dividing up stakeholder interests can exaggerate differences and presage indecision' (p. 235).

This book is beautifully presented and profusely illustrated, with more than 140 illustrations, comprising about 60 per cent of the volume. Many of these images cover a full page, and in a few cases spread over two adjacent pages. But where this happens, the central part of the illustration cannot be seen, because of the book's tight binding.

More rigorous editing might have saved the author putting into print some rather basic errors, such as asserting that magma and lava are different types of rock (p. 8), or referring to Robert Hoddle in the 1840s as 'the surveyor of the new British colony of Victoria' (p. 29); as well as simple typos such as 'Barker' for Parker (footnote 1, p. 48), or 'Presland, P' in the bibliography (p. 238).

It can't have been easy writing a history of an entity that literally does nothing. The 'history' of Hanging Rock surely coheres in the plethora of human actions that have occurred on or around the Rock, rather than anything done by the Rock itself. That said, it might be claimed reasonably that Hanging Rock has an attractive quality, one which draws people to its presence. McConville has done a good job of trying to adduce what that quality is, and the extent to which it has been a factor in the cultural history of Hanging Rock.

Gary Presland
School of Geography
The University of Melbourne
Parkville, Victoria 3010