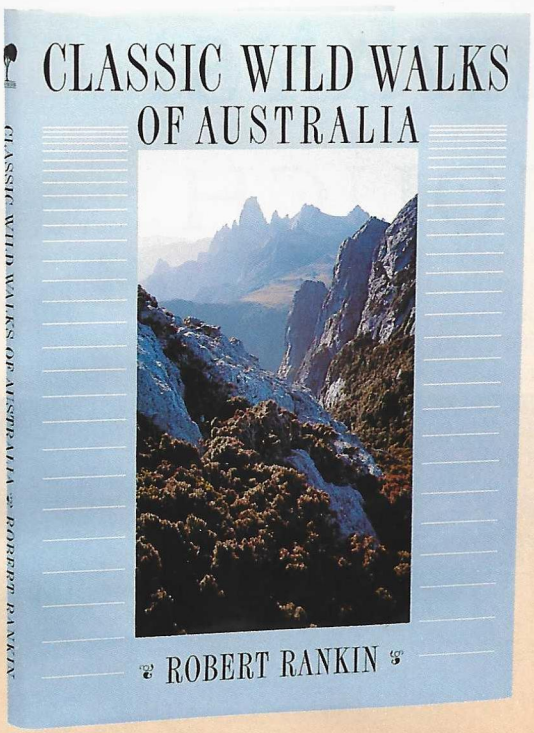


CLASSIC WILD WALKS OF AUSTRALIA

By Robert Rankin
Published by Rankin Publishers, 1989. 207 pages. $44.

WHEN I started bushwalking and mountaineering, the biggest problem was simply finding out where the walking country was, let alone how to get there and what you could do there. Maps were sketchy or non-existent, and there were no guide books. The best plan was to join a walking club, if there was one, and learn from walkers familiar with what were usually rather restricted areas. If you wanted to go bushwalking interstate, you had to repeat the whole process.

The way into bushwalking has improved marvellously since those days. The 1:25,000 maps give full and accurate coverage of most walking country, individuals and clubs have produced maps and guides, and guide books have been published for many areas. At the same time, colour photography has come of age.

Robert Rankin's latest book sets a new standard in bushwalking publications, bringing together high-class photographs, maps and concise but complete guides for a selection of the best walks in each State. An experienced bushwalker arriving for the first time in one of our major cities can, with the aid of this book, go on a first-class walk the following day. Note, however, that the bushwalker should be experienced.

The 93 large colour photographs testify to the author's dedication, flair and perfectionism in photography. Clearly the scenery is to him an overwhelmingly important aspect of bushwalking and his pictures put the point across most persuasively, making this a superb coffee-table book. But it is much more than that.

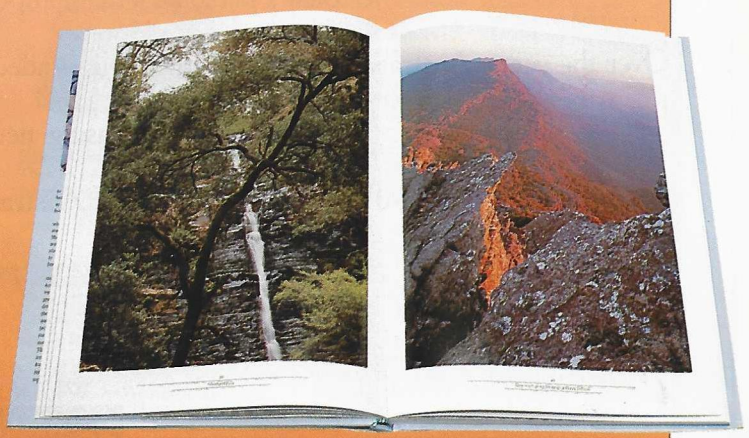
Twenty-five of Australia's best walking areas have been covered. A simple but adequate map is given for each, together with a difficulty rating, standard times for each section, reference to relevant maps and books, instructions on how to get there, detailed walking notes, information on camp sites and huts, and comprehensive descriptions of the geology, geography, botany and weather.

The scope and quality of the information is such that you can hardly go wrong. Yet despite the concentrated nature of its contents, the book makes easy and enjoyable reading. Robert Rankin's style flows smoothly and soon gets you on the track with him.

The walks he describes have been selected for their classic nature and wild surroundings. It follows that seven of the 25 areas covered are in Tasmania and two are in the mainland snow country.

The book weighs as much as two or three days' bushwalking food. Because of this, and the risk of damaging such a beautiful thing, you would not want to take it on a walk, but you might need the maps and notes in it. The author-publisher foresaw this problem and, on page 4, beneath the usual warning against unauthorised reproduction, he grants permission to photocopy maps and walking notes for personal use in the field.

There is an old tale about a man who was killed by the repeated gentle touch of many thousands of hands. Alas, this is the story of our remaining wilderness, and this book, with its detailed representation of the bush as it is today, underlines the fact. In 1953, when I instigated engineering work to halt the meandering of the Grose River and thereby protect Blue Gum Forest in NSW's Blue Mountains, it was in a near-pristine state. Section 7 of this book describes the place as it is now, with camping forbidden in order to retard environmental damage, the river and streams heavily polluted and tracks gouged deeply into the landscape.

In his preface, Robert Rankin argues that it is necessary to publicise the wilderness so that people may understand and preserve it. He is right, but this is really the lesser of two evils. Each of us who experiences wilderness detracts from it in some small way. While the excessive proliferation of people in the world – and now Australia – continues, even carefully preserved wilderness must suffer, together with the whole environment. "For each man kills the thing he loves."

Colin Putt