Humans divide up into those who notice trees and those who don’t. I have often been surprised to find that most members of a writing workshop can’t tell one species of tree from another. It seems that many want nothing more than to write about their throbbing hearts. People who can’t notice things are unlikely to write well; they should be trained to use their eyes and ears.

Again, there are those in Australia who recognise eucalypts (‘drab green and desolate grey’) only to condemn them for having brittle boughs or for dropping their leaves onto the garden: neglecting the fact that exotic European trees choke the gutters in late autumn with their sudden draught of litter. Nobody is going to win this aesthetic debate, I’m afraid, but it’s always alive in the suburbs, like book groups.

At primary school, however, most of us were regaled with tales about the mountain ash (Eucalyptus regnans), turning on its noble height. The element of international competitiveness in this generated a battle for the tallest tree in the world between the mountain ash and the Californian redwood (Sequoia sempervirens), which we were only likely to have seen in the Botanical Gardens. Alas, the redwood had the edge for certified height, but there were folk tales of yet grander trees in Victoria that had been topped or felled by lightning. And huge fallen boles served as tourist spots in the forest: we gazed at them in momentary wonder: they were epiphanies in that lofty, dank forest.

Size is value, excitement, meaning: a human preoccupation sent up by the old joke about the tallest dwarf in the world. Who would want to buy a tall bonsai pine?

Tom Griffiths, one of our most stylish and imaginative historians, has now produced a loving book about the mountain ash. These great Victorian forests are read under a number of rubrics, linking the natural environment with history and culture in twelve narratives or inquiries. Although its cover depicts fog, not smoke, blurring treetops, the book is framed by the great fires of ‘Black Friday’, 1939. And its title incorporates a grim pun, the two kinds of ‘ash’ being etymologically unrelated, in fact.

That fire, like the recent ‘Ash Wednesday’ and the kindred great fires of 1851 and 1898, lives in our folk memory, lurking like a fairy-tale wolf. Fires, though, have seldom been memorialised by our artists: I can think only of Longstaff’s powerful painting of the Gippsland fire and a recent complete exhibition by Lily Hibberd.

But the book is not a pyromaniac’s jamboree. It moves from its opening account of the tall forests north-east of Melbourne to the ironical ‘improvements’ brought by white settlement, including the quaint Acclimatisation Society of Victoria, on to the histories of gold-mining and, later, tourism in the mountains. Occasionally, a wicked wit peeps through, as in Griffiths’s remark: ‘Many guesthouses were mysteriously burnt during the depression of the 1930s when expensive holidaying was curtailed.’ Always, the text feels imbued with that marvellous wilderness.

A deeply moving chapter along the way is ‘Crossing the Blacks’ Spur’. It tells of the systematic dispossession of the Kulin peoples from Jackson’s Track and even from Coranderrk, their community near Healesville. The former settlement was bulldozed by the Drouin Council as recently as 1962, while, in 1991, after many decades, a small slice of Coranderrk was restored to the Wurundjeri by the Kirner Government. (Yes, I did say only a fragment of what they had been given back in the 1860s.) This story distresses the reader like a miniature version of Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee. It is steeped in loss.

Griffiths’s major chapters are augmented by a dozen inset pieces by particular experts, mainly scientists. Thus we have pieces on the hairstreak butterfly, the shortfin eel and lyrebird...
tourism. Such collage is another aspect of modern, polyvalent history-writing. And one emerges from a reading of this fine book chock-a-block with information: at home in the hills. A much-expanded version of the author’s earlier study, Secrets of the Forest, this turns out to be a profoundly enjoyable work, illustrated both in colour and in black and white (neither of which is any kind of pun).

Another book with its roots in the Australian landscape is Words for Country, co-edited by Griffiths and by the art historian Tim Bonyhady. This work is more of a mélange or gallimaufry, assembling essays that deal with the historicity — even the provisionality — of place names. The chapters are decorated with playful, almost comic, maps of the areas under discussion, the tacit point being that maps like other texts can never be definitive: most of us grew up with sturdy Mercator and had to be disabused of his absolute truths much later on.

Still, these maps are a bit odd, suggesting a ludic dimension to space that is not apparent in the texts, although Paul Sinclair’s chapter on ‘Blackfellow Oven Roads’ is nicely personalised and Rebe Taylor offers a subjective approach to Lubra Creek, at the eastern end of Kangaroo Island, only to conclude: ‘The self-reflective and personal style of this chapter surprised me until I realised I was responding to questions asked by myself, as much as by others, as to why I wanted to reveal this history and why my rôle seemed so interventionist.’

The border between intervention and playfulness is an interesting line to brood over. Writing about Uluru, Michael Cathcart is frankly interventionist in seeing his own nationalism as a resistance to ‘the homogenizing drive of globalization’.

The very chapter titles in Words for Country emphasise the play and power of language itself. Hence they draw upon speech: for example the poet P.R. Hay recalling Queenstown as ‘These Blarsted Hills’, or Heather Goodall quoting ‘The River Runs Backwards’ to characterise the dilemma of water levels on the Darling flood plain. At some points, language is the problem, at others just a gate that needs to be opened. But, at every point, we are looking at how names bear down on the places which they flag.

The roots of names are intriguing. I wonder how many people, like myself, enjoy the habit of travelling by train and trying to identify, station by station, cultural sources for the names of the suburbs passed through. Naming generates power, as well as lapsing into the various nostalgias: hence one underlying theme of this essay collection is the throbbing interaction between Aboriginal and English names for places in different corners of this continent. There is also a tangential essay on ‘our’ Antarctica.

Finally, these two books, taken together, illustrate the sturdy current marriage of geography and history.