

## Lydia Allison Fucsko review of David Horton, *Hammering on the Mind's Door*

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David Horton, born in 1945 in Perth, Western Australia, is an unusually multifaceted figure in Australian intellectual and cultural life. His career spans an extraordinary breadth of fields—zoology, archaeology, evolutionary biology, Indigenous studies, publishing, environmental politics and, now, memoir. *Hammering on the Mind's Door*, published in 2023 by Ginninderra Press, is a literary and reflective account of this trajectory. The memoir offers more than personal reminiscence: it provides a unique perspective on the institutions and ideologies that have shaped academic and public life in Australia over the past half-century.

Horton's academic journey began with early distinction. He completed a bachelor of science with honours in zoology at the University of Western Australia in 1965 at the age of 20. After beginning a master of science at the University of Melbourne, he spent six formative years at the University of New England (UNE), where he also completed a bachelor of arts in 1972. Horton went on to receive two doctorates from UNE: a PhD in 1973 and a doctor of letters in 1997. During this period, he also undertook postdoctoral research at the University of York in the United Kingdom, engaging with international debates in biogeography and landscape ecology. His scholarly publications during these decades—over 80 in number—ranged from herpetology to fire ecology, archaeozoology and Indigenous land use, reflecting a mind trained in both scientific precision and cultural complexity.

In 1974, Horton joined the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies [AIATSIS]), where he would work for 24 years. Initially appointed as an osteologist (later changed to palaeoecologist), he contributed to excavations and environmental research across the continent, from Cape York to south-west Tasmania. His interdisciplinary approach, drawing on ecology, archaeology and evolutionary theory, made significant contributions to understandings of Pleistocene extinctions, Aboriginal prehistory and the ecological shaping of human settlement.

Horton's most celebrated contribution, however, came during his tenure as director of publications for Aboriginal Studies Press. There, he conceived, edited and compiled *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, published in 1994 in two volumes. It remains a landmark in Australian scholarship—an expansive and authoritative reference that brought together Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices, disciplines and histories.

The work won numerous accolades, including the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award (book of the year and a special award) in 1995. It continues to serve as a foundational resource in Indigenous studies, education and public discourse.

Closely associated with this achievement is another significant legacy: the *Map of Aboriginal Australia* (1996), widely referred to as the 'Horton map'. This visual representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language groups provided a political and cultural counter-narrative to the cartographic conventions of colonial Australia. It remains widely reproduced in classrooms, institutions and public exhibitions, offering a persistent visual reminder of Indigenous presence and complexity across the continent.

Horton left AIATSIS in 1998, having completed the last *Encyclopaedia* element (the electronic Windows version), his position having been abolished. Yet his public intellectual engagement continued unabated. His book *The Pure State of Nature: Sacred Cows, Destructive Myths and the Environment* (2000) critiqued environmental romanticism and challenged prevailing narratives of wilderness and conservation. Drawing on both science and history, Horton argued that natural fire (largely the result of lightning strikes) had played a significant ecological role in Australia for millions of years, and that Indigenous and forestry use of fire in 'prescribed burning' programs must reflect ecological realities. His critique not only highlighted the use of fire as a vital shaping force in Australian ecosystems but also pointed out that Indigenous land management practices must be re-centred in contemporary ecological policy.

Outside academia, Horton was also a stud sheep breeder and a political candidate, running for federal office in 2004. In retirement, he has remained intellectually active, contributing essays to the ABC and *HuffPost* on topics ranging from climate science to secularism and political ethics.

It is within this context of eclectic and sustained intellectual engagement that *Hammering on the Mind's Door* must be read. The memoir is not simply an autobiographical document—it is a deeply literary meditation on memory, illness, identity and intellectual perseverance. Horton reflects on his childhood in Perth, academic life, institutional politics, and on his numerous health battles—including lymphoma, a heart attack, stroke and open-heart surgery—with a tone that is at once unsentimental and moving.

What distinguishes the memoir is not only the breadth of life experience it recounts, but also the stylistic quality of its prose. Horton's writing is spare, precise and emotionally resonant. Rather than following a linear chronology, the narrative structure echoes the workings of memory—layered, recursive and textured by recurring themes. This gives it a literary sensibility that sets it apart from conventional academic autobiography.

Particularly compelling are Horton's insights into the workings of institutions like AIATSIS. His critique is not mean-spirited, but measured and instructive, shedding light on the bureaucratic and ideological tensions that shape cultural and scientific work in Australia. These reflections are valuable for scholars working in public-facing roles, as well as for those invested in the intersections of Indigenous knowledge, publishing and politics.

Ultimately, *Hammering on the Mind's Door* is a worthy addition to Horton's already substantial body of work. It adds a dimension of vulnerability and personal reflection to a career otherwise marked by analytical detachment and scientific method. For readers interested in Australian intellectual life, Indigenous history, the politics of cultural institutions or the memoir form itself, this book offers both insight and inspiration.

In the final assessment, David Horton emerges as a polymath whose influence has been quietly but profoundly felt across multiple fields. His *Encyclopaedia*, the Horton map, his scientific papers and now this memoir form a coherent legacy—one defined by a fierce independence of mind, an unwavering commitment to evidence and a willingness to ask difficult questions. *Hammering on the Mind's Door* is not only a reflection on one life, but also a sustained inquiry into the nature of intellectual labour, the construction and fragility of memory, and the cognitive and emotional resilience demanded by a life committed to critical thought.

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