



CARVED TREES

Aboriginal cultures
of western NSW

Users are warned that there may be words and descriptions that might be culturally sensitive and not normally used in certain public or community contexts. In some circumstances, terms and annotations of the period in which a text was written may be considered inappropriate today.

A note on the text

The spelling of Aboriginal words in historical documents is inconsistent, depending on how they were heard, interpreted and recorded by Europeans. Original spelling has been retained in quoted texts, while names and placenames have been standardised.

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18 April to 26 June 2011

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9 am to 5 pm Friday, 10 am to 5 pm weekends
Macquarie Street Sydney NSW 2000
Telephone (02) 9273 1414
www.sl.nsw.gov.au

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support of the Nelson Meers Foundation in presenting
the *Heritage Collection*.

Cover image inspired by Burial tree (Wiradjuri)
two miles north-east Macquarie River on north side of
Dargindale Lagoon, Burroway Station, Narromine, 193?,
photo by Lindsay Black
PXE 1018 vol. 10



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FOREWORD

In 1978, the collections of the State Library of NSW were further enriched by receiving the Clifton Cappie Towle collection, donated by his family. This collection includes more than a thousand photographs showing Aboriginal weapons and implements, rock art, ceremonial sites, shell middens and stone arrangements from all parts of NSW, all photographed between about 1920 and 1940.

The State Library of NSW is presenting an exhibition of these works titled *Carved trees: Aboriginal cultures of western NSW*. The exhibition contains some of the most beautiful, haunting images of carved trees collected by Clifton Cappie Towle before his death in 1946.

The photos of Aboriginal trees in this collection are especially striking and have been meticulously documented. Tree carvings can be found dotted throughout Australia but they are quintessentially of NSW origin – specifically the work of Gamilaroi and Wiradjuri artists.

Clifton Cappie Towle, and other white men such as Robert Etheridge and Edmund Milne, trekked all over rural NSW documenting Aboriginal material culture. The result is a vast collection of information, images and objects that have been conserved by various cultural institutions around Australia.

I am delighted that the State Library of NSW is the first cultural institution to showcase these rare surviving images about an exquisite cultural practice that has almost been forgotten. I would like to thank curators Ronald Briggs and Melissa Jackson and contributing curators Leigh Purcell and Merv Sutherland for the work they have done to bring this exhibition to fruition.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge Samantha Meers of the Nelson Meers Foundation for her continued support and generosity in supporting the Heritage Collection in the State Library of NSW.

Rob Thomas

President, Library Council of New South Wales



NELSON MEERS FOUNDATION

The Nelson Meers Foundation is extremely proud to be supporting the *Carved Trees: Aboriginal cultures of western NSW* exhibition as part of this year's Heritage Collection.

Carved trees were cultural markers used by the Aboriginal people of NSW. Displayed as grave posts and as part of elaborate initiation ceremonies, this remarkable cultural practice was a speciality of the people of NSW. In addition to its display of skill and artistry, each carved tree design has unique significance.

This is the first time a NSW cultural institution has brought this tangible local heritage to life in an exhibition. The collection of rare and original images of the carved trees of western NSW held by the State Library of NSW is unsurpassed, and is a reminder of the rich Indigenous history of this state.

This year marks the ninth year of the Nelson Meers Foundation's support of the Heritage Collection. We are enormously proud of the many items of cultural and historical significance that have been made available to the public during this period, many for the first time. The enormous public response to the exhibition over time demonstrates the important role played by the State Library of NSW as a cultural custodian, and the way in which the Library connects with our community.

I would like to thank the many Library staff members who are involved with *Carved Trees: Aboriginal cultures of western NSW*. I continue to be inspired not only by their erudition, but by their commitment to sharing their knowledge, and the Library's treasures, with us all.

For those of you who have visited the Heritage Collection many times over the years, and for those of you who are new to it, I encourage you to enjoy the fascinating stories which form part of this year's focus on our Indigenous history.

Samantha Meers

Executive Director
Nelson Meers Foundation





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NSW PHENOMENA

It is with the greatest respect that we acknowledge the Elders of the Eora nation and other Elders of the Sydney region – where this exhibition is being displayed. We also acknowledge the Elders, past and present, of the Wiradjuri and Gamilaroi nations.

For thousands of years the Aboriginal people of central, north-western and north coast NSW have ceremoniously carved trees as a form of artistic and cultural expression. Whenever you see a picture of an Aboriginal carved tree, it's more than likely from NSW. Indeed, in 1918 anthropologist Robert Etheridge declared NSW 'The Country of Dendroglyphs' (tree carvings).

It was with great pleasure that we recently rediscovered more than a thousand photographs from the Clifton Cappie Towle collection. Towle (1891–1946) was a founding member of the Anthropological Society of NSW and a keen recorder of Aboriginal sites. In the early 1900s he travelled extensively throughout western NSW, photographing Aboriginal rock art, middens, carved trees, implements and ceremonial sites. He was deeply concerned about the protection and conservation of Aboriginal relics. He also acquired the photos of other collectors, like Lindsay Black of Leeton.

Towle's collection of carved-tree photographs is at the heart of this exhibition, with some additional material that helps us to understand their place in our discourse over time.

We conceived this exhibition with a young audience in mind. Here at the Mitchell Library we receive many inquiries from young people (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) who are genuinely interested in learning about and connecting with the State's Aboriginal past.

We also assist many Aboriginal communities which are keen to reinforce cultural identity through language and historical research. The State Library's archive of historical documents, books, photographs and pictures is an invaluable resource for the Aboriginal people of NSW.

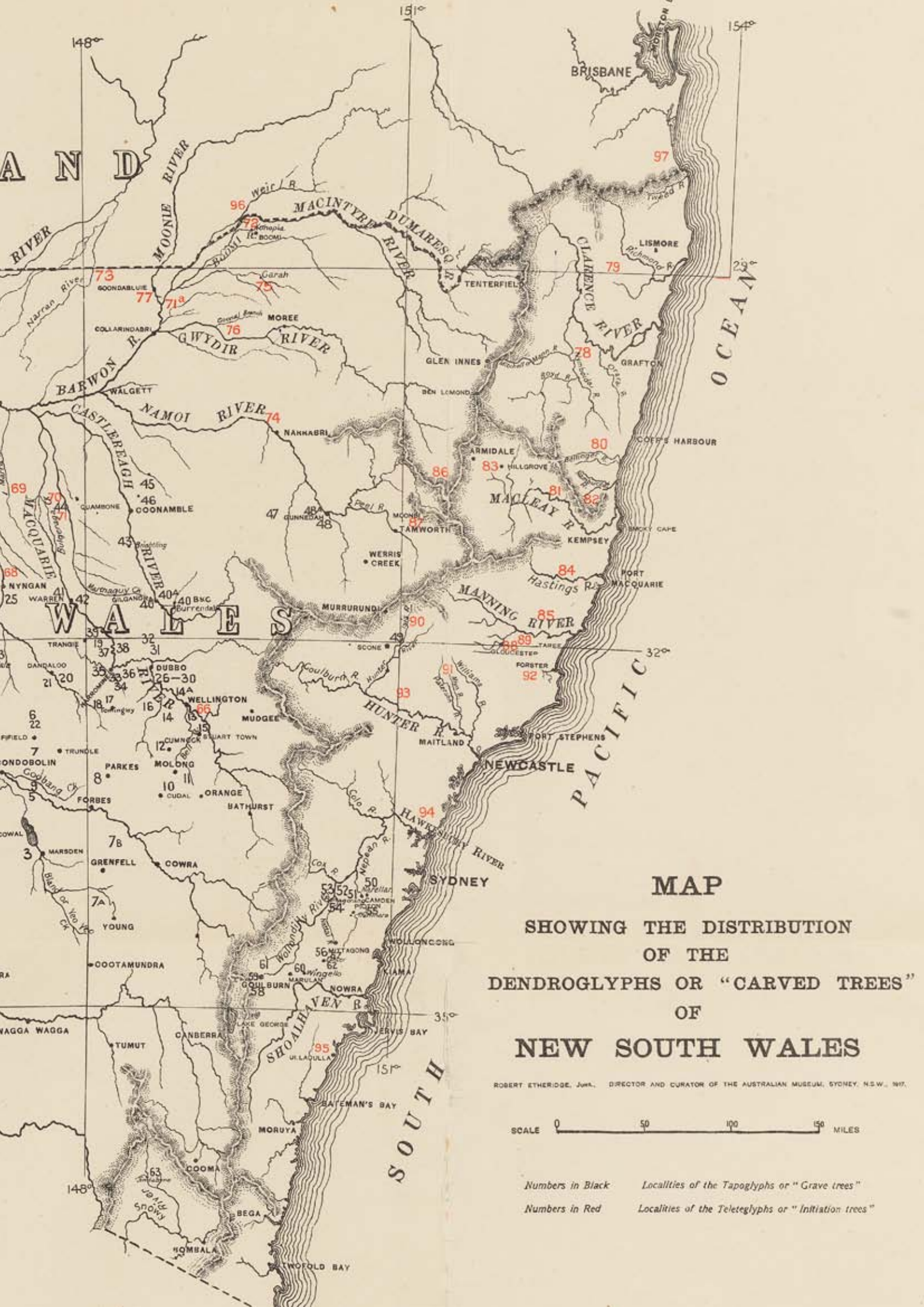
We are indebted to the hard work of dedicated people like Clifton Cappie Towle, Leigh Purcell and Merv Sutherland (from Baradine Local Aboriginal Land Council) who have helped us share the Aboriginal history of NSW through carved trees.

We appreciate greatly the support of the Baradine, Collarenebri and Moree Local Aboriginal Land Councils, and the staff of the Country, Culture & Heritage Division of the NSW Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water (DECCW).

Ronald Briggs and Melissa Jasccon
Indigenous Services Librarians



DETAIL FROM A MAP BY ROBERT ETHERIDGE JUNIOR SHOWING THE DISTRIBUTION OF ABORIGINAL CARVED TREES IN NSW IN 1918. PRODUCED TO ACCOMPANY HIS SEMINAL WORK *THE DENDROGLYPHS, OR "CARVED TREES" OF NEW SOUTH WALES*. MLQ 572.9901/E



MAP
SHOWING THE DISTRIBUTION
OF THE
DENDROGLYPHS OR "CARVED TREES"
OF
NEW SOUTH WALES

ROBERT ETHERIDGE, JUNR., DIRECTOR AND CURATOR OF THE AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM, SYDNEY, N.S.W., 1917.

SCALE 0 50 100 150 MILES

Numbers in Black *Localities of the Tapoglyphs or "Grave trees"*
Numbers in Red *Localities of the Teleteglyphs or "Initiation trees"*

GAMILAROI COUNTRY

The vast territory of Gamilaroi country extends from the Upper Hunter Valley through to the Warrumbungle Mountains in the west and up through the present-day centres of Coonabarabran, Quirindi, Tamworth, Narrabri, Walgett, Moree and Mungindi in NSW, to Nindigully in south-west Queensland.

The Gamilaroi people in the central north-west designed their tree carvings around powerful symbols used for boys being ushered into manhood at elaborate ceremonies called *bora*. When a host clan was intending to hold a *bora*, a messenger would be sent far afield to invite neighbouring clans to attend.

The ceremonies were conducted over many days and nights between two circles on the ground connected by a path. Around this path were carved trees and ground carvings, both called *yammunyamun*. Senior men led the initiates from the larger outer circle to the smaller inner circle, explaining the significance of the *yammunyamun* along the way.

Banarway *bora* ground, or Collymogle as it is also known (north-west NSW), is the site of the greatest number of surviving carved trees – some 60 – from anywhere in NSW. While most of the designs on the trees are based on circles/spirals, curvilinear lines and diamonds/chevrons, weaponry and human and animal figures were also included. The last *bora* took place there in the early 1890s.

In the late 1930s, an unknown number of trees were removed from the site and placed in the garden of Collymogle homestead. Recent research suggests that four trees from the Collymogle homestead garden were also forwarded to Queensland University but these trees have yet to be identified. These removals saw the loss of several trees through theft or other kinds of preventable loss.

In late 1949, 52 trees were removed from Collymogle. Only the carved sections of the trees were taken, both whole trunks and fragments, and then split up: 25 to the South Australian Museum, 25 to the Museum of Victoria, and two to the Anthropology Museum at the University of Queensland, where they all remain in storage.

And as for these acts of plunder, no consideration was accorded the local Aboriginal community. Correspondence between Lindsay Black and Dr Winterbotham of the Ethnological Museum, University of Queensland, reveals a lot about the attitudes of the time.

19th July, 1949, Dear Mr. Black ... Those carved trees. I am very anxious to secure at least two for the University museum ... had an interview yesterday with the Vice-Chancellor ... who is entirely sympathetic but says 'How much?' ... (Dr. Winterbotham)

8th August, 1949, Dear Dr., I have now heard from Mr. Prescott and the Adelaide and Melbourne people ... we will be at the ceremonial ground on September 23rd. If you can make the trip let me know ... I will also let you know about trees for you later. I will then give you an estimate for the cost of getting your trees to rail. It is possible the best way would be just put them on the rail at nearest station our carriers pass ... Anyhow 20 pounds at most should land the trees for you in Brisbane ... Yours sincerely, Lindsay Black

11th August, 1949, Dear Mr. Black, It is jolly good of you to take so much trouble over my attempt to secure two trees for our University. (Dr Winterbotham)

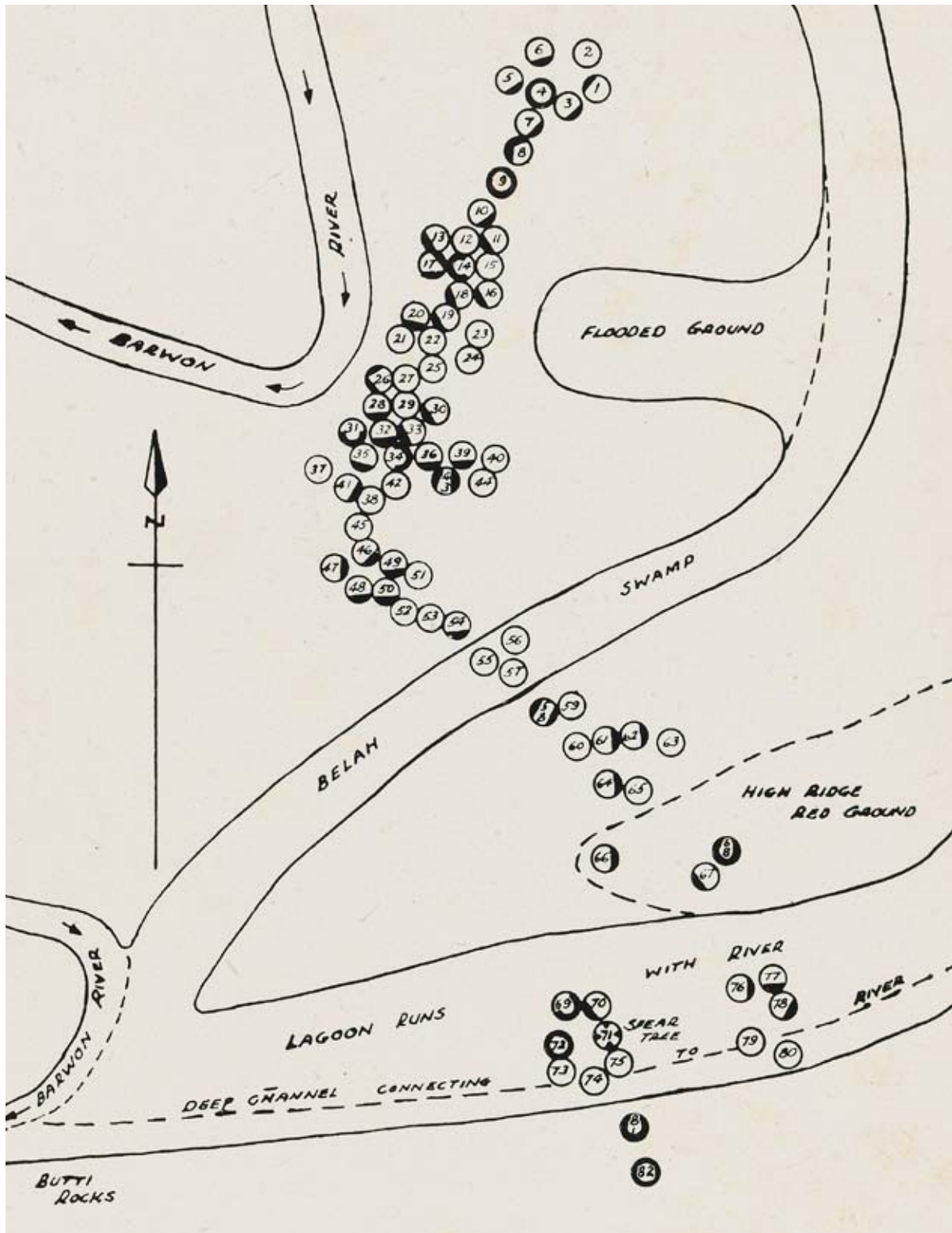
2nd October 1949, Dear Mr. Black ... Please send the trees to me ... Professor Wilkinson and myself are fighting a rather lone fight and I visualize those trees in ... the University Tower suitably inscribed; a real treasure ... Yours sincerely, Dr. Winterbotham.

11th October, 1949, Dear Mr. Black, You have gone to a lot of trouble on my behalf in securing those trees and I am very grateful ... Regarding the 20 pounds ... The Vice-Chancellor ... and the finance committee made a special grant for us ... and it was rather a triumph for us to get [it] ... (Dr Winterbotham).

The Indigenous history of Australia is one of dispossession, dislocation, loss and survival and the fate of the carved trees from Collymogle mirrors this. One day the *yammunyamun* will be appreciated for their peerless worth as national treasures, brought back together and repatriated. But that part of their story has yet to be written.

Leigh Purcell
Contributing Curator





ABOVE: MAP DIAGRAM OF THE COLLYMONGLE BORA GROUND DRAWN BY LINDSAY AND RUSSELL BLACK IN 1944. THE CIRCLES REPRESENT THE EXACT POSITION OF CARVED TREES WITHIN THE SITE. ML 572.991/B

RIGHT: FOUR OF THE TREES PHOTOGRAPHED AT COLLYMONGLE IN THE EARLY 1940S BY RUSSELL BLACK SHOWING THE REMARKABLE DIVERSITY OF CARVING STYLES. PXE 1018 VOL. 5



WIRADJURI COUNTRY

Of all the Aboriginal groups in NSW, the Wiradjuri occupy the largest geographic area. Wiradjuri country is bordered by the Lachlan (*Kalari*), Macquarie (*Wambool*) and Murrumbidgee (*Murrumbidjeri*) rivers in central NSW. The name Wiradjuri means ‘people of the three rivers’ and traditionally these rivers were the primary source of food for the Wiradjuri people.

The Wiradjuri people of central NSW carved complex designs into trees to mark the burial site of a celebrated man whose passing had a devastating effect on the community. It has been suggested that the carvings were associated with the culture heroes admired by the man in life and were thought to provide a pathway for his spirit to return to the sky world.

Traditionally, the preparation of the burial site, the carving of trees and internment was done by initiated men. Often, a special seating area was created for the women’s comfort during mourning.

In 1836 assistant-surveyor William Romaine Govett described the scene at an Aboriginal funeral near Goulburn, NSW:

... I was struck with the peculiarity of the noise ... I soon perceived before me three native black women, and rode up to them. They were sitting around a mound of earth, with their heads depressed and nearly touching one another ... I waited some time in astonishment observing their actions, and listening to their horrid lamentable yells. They were each of them striking their heads with a tomahawk, holding the instrument in the right hand, and wounding particularly the upper part of the back of the head ... They weep this way, wailing and cutting their heads, until they become perfectly exhausted, and can shed tears no longer ... The trees all round the tomb were marked in various peculiar ways, some with zigzags and stripes, and pieces of bark otherwise cut ...

Usually, only one tree was carved at each burial site, but as many as five have been recorded. The design always faces the grave, serving as a warning to passers-by of the spiritual significance of the area.

The trees were usually located near riverbanks and flats where the excavation of soil was easier. Shallow graves were dug and a high mound of earth and foliage was built up over the body, creating a bare, rounded strip of soil around the grave.

The carvings display great strength, skill and artistry. A large section of bark was first removed and the design cut into the sapwood and heartwood at varying depths. Traditionally, they were carved using stone tools. However, after colonisation, metal tools were preferred, allowing for noticeably more elaborate designs. Unfortunately, it is not known when the last tree was carved in the traditional way for burial.

Each tree is unique but the majority of them are geometric in shape and feature chevrons, curvilinear lines, scrolls and concentric circles, quite distinct from the ‘dot’ styles used in central and western Australia.

Ronald Briggs

Indigenous Services Librarian

RIGHT: TAPHOGLYPH (ABORIGINAL CARVED TREE) NEAR DUBBO, NSW [191?], PHOTO BY HENRY KING, SPF/1153





Yuranigh's grave

Yuranigh was a Wiradjuri man and a member of the expedition team of Sir Thomas Mitchell in 1846 to the tropical interior of Australia.

Yuranigh died in 1850 and was given a traditional burial within a circle of carved trees. Four of these trees can still be seen in Molong today.



AMATEUR ANTHROPOLOGIST EDMUND MILNE AND A PARTY OF FRIENDS VISITED YURANIGH'S GRAVE SITE IN 1912. MILNE WAS AN AVID COLLECTOR OF ABORIGINAL ARTEFACTS AND, ALTHOUGH HE WIELDS AN AXE IN THESE PHOTOS, NONE OF THE TREES WERE CHOPPED INTO OR REMOVED.
SPF/1149 (ABOVE), SPF/1150 (LEFT)



EUROPEAN DISCOVERY

European contact with Aboriginal people has had a troubled past. Colonisation caused the alienation of Aboriginal people from their traditional lands and cultural practices, including tree-carving.

Explorer John Oxley gave the first European account of carved trees in 1817, when he encountered a Wiradjuri burial site on the Lachlan River.

He described two nearby trees with:

... curious characters deeply cut upon them, in a manner which, considering the tools they possess, must have been a work of great labour and time ...

During the early 1900s a few white men became passionate about documenting and collecting the relics of what they believed to be a dying race. Men like Robert Etheridge, Edmund Milne, Lindsay Black and Clifton Cappie Towle trekked all over rural NSW photographing and describing whatever they could find that related to Aboriginal material culture.

Some expeditions led to trees being cut down for preservation purposes. However, correspondence between Lindsay Black and Dr Winterbotham of the University of Queensland details the lack of consultation with the local Aboriginal community.

14th September, 1949, Dear Dr ... [we will] arrive at the ceremonial ground Friday 23rd ... early afternoon ... The party will be N. Tindale, Ethnologist, Adelaide Museum, Tugby, Ethnologist Melbourne museum, Mr. T.M. Prescott, Director, Melbourne Museum, Mr. Hitchcock, Ornithologist, Melbourne Museum, Mr. Bailey, Leader of an American party, H.R. Balfour, Retired Pastoralist from Albury now Melbourne. Wish you are with us from the start. Yours sincerely, Lindsay Black

Europeans also removed trees for less altruistic reasons. Because many white landowners feared losing their land, they cut down and destroyed carved trees on their properties, thereby removing the evidence of previous Aboriginal occupation. Of course, some landowners cleared their land of carved trees in ignorance of their sacredness or significance to the local Aboriginal community.

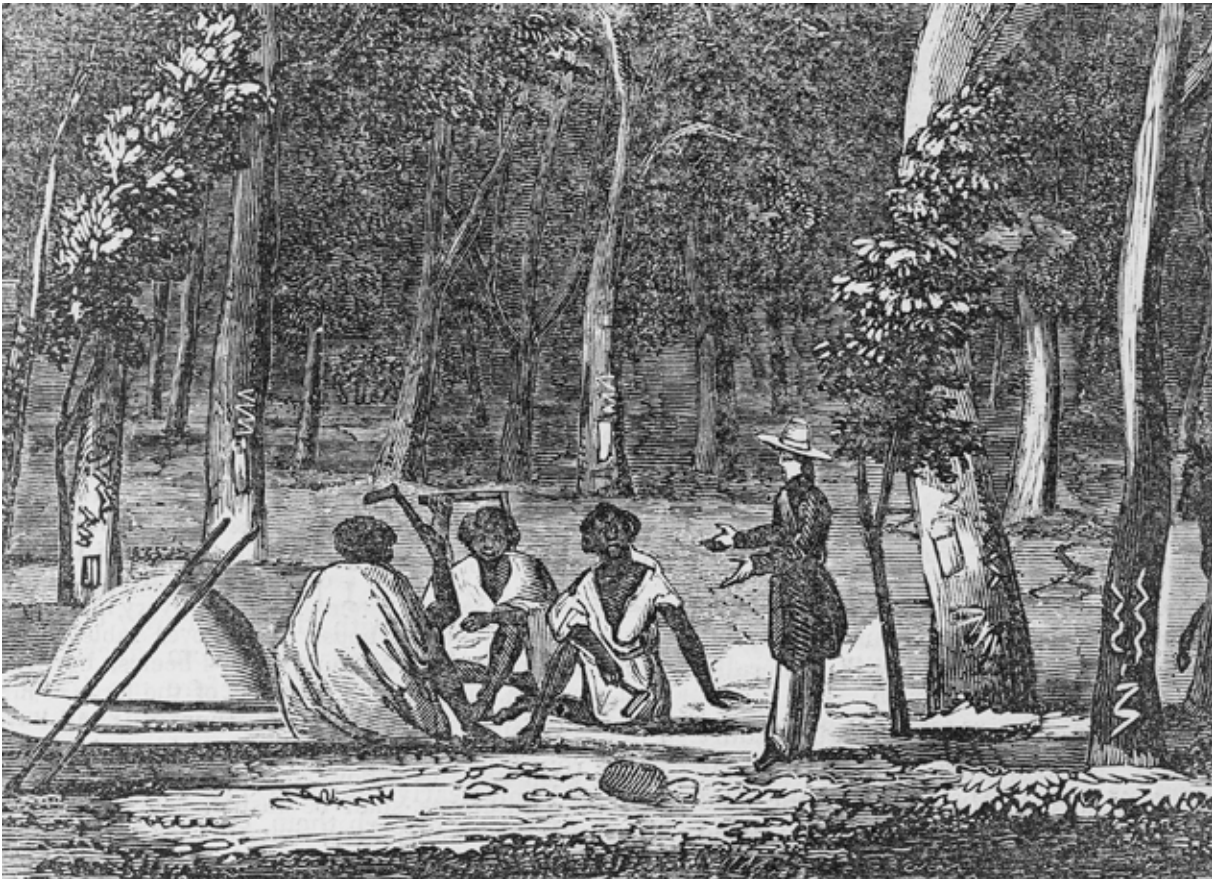
In 1928, the Anthropological Society of NSW was established to promote the identification and preservation of Aboriginal material culture. More than 7,500 Aboriginal modified tree sites have been recorded in NSW: however, fewer than 100 carved trees remain standing in their original locations.

Ronald Briggs

Indigenous Services Librarian

ABOVE RIGHT: *THE GRAVE OF A NATIVE OF AUSTRALIA* DRAWN BY GE EVANS AND PUBLISHED IN JOHN OXLEY'S JOURNALS OF TWO EXPEDITIONS INTO THE INTERIOR OF NEW SOUTH WALES ... IN 1820.

RIGHT: NATIVE WOMEN WEEPING OVER A GRAVE AT MOUNT WAYO, NEAR GOULBURN NSW. WHEN WILLIAM ROMAINE GOVETT TOURED THE AREA IN 1836 HE SKETCHED AND DESCRIBED A WIRADJURI FUNERAL: 'THEY WEEP IN THIS WAY, WAILING AND CUTTING THEIR HEADS, UNTIL THEY BECOME PERFECTLY EXHAUSTED, AND CAN SHED TEARS NO LONGER'. SKETCHES OF NEW SOUTH WALES, 1836-1837 DL Q83/68



RETURN OF THE TREES

When a haze of smoke and eucalyptus permeated the main street of the small township of Baradine in north-west NSW, it was a sign that an expressive ritual reinforcing Aboriginal spiritual connection to the land was underway. After 89 years, a sacred carved tree belonging to us, the Gamilaroi people, was coming home.

Originally discovered in 1917, this tree spent the last nine decades under the custodianship of the Australian Museum and then Museum Victoria as part of their dendroglyph collection. But on 16 April 2010, amid excitement and high emotion, we held a traditional smoking ceremony to celebrate the homecoming of our sacred object.

This was the final stage in a long journey for the Baradine tree: a cypress pine carved in 1876 to mark the site of a traditional Aboriginal burial ground. As the last known carved tree in existence from our area, we are very grateful that it has been protected from certain destruction by the natural elements or land clearing.

We invited the whole community to witness this historic event and the forming of long-lasting relationships with both museums. We are forever grateful for the role museums play in protecting and preserving such items and are very pleased that museums are now working with Aboriginal communities to repatriate secret sacred objects.

The repatriation process took several years and it was during this time I became aware of what repatriation truly means. It is the bringing together of the past and the present – a direct link to our rich cultural heritage.

Once a sacred burial ground marker, this carved tree is now a marker of reconciliation, standing proud in the Local Aboriginal Land Council's Keeping Place in Baradine: home of the Gamilaroi.

Merv Sutherland

Aboriginal Heritage Conservation Officer
Department of Environment, Climate Change
and Water, NSW



PHOTOS OF THE CARVED TREE AT BARADINE IN SITU IN ABOUT 1917, TAKEN BY GORDON BURROW, DISTRICT FORESTER FOR THE NARRABRI AREA.
ML Q581.991/M VOL. 8, PART 1

ITEM LIST

All items are held in the collections of the State Library of New South Wales, unless otherwise indicated. Images on this page are a selection from the exhibition.

GAMILAROI COUNTRY



Russell Black
Album 05: Bora Ground at Banaway [Collymongle], near Mogil Mogil, NSW, c. 1930s-1941
CC Towle Collection
PXE 1018 / vol. 5

WIRADJURI COUNTRY



CC (Clifton Cappie) Towle
Album 11: Photographs of Aboriginal rock art and stencil art, stone tools and landscapes, c. 1925-1944
PXE 1018 / vol. 11



CC (Clifton Cappie) Towle
Album 10: Photographs of carved trees, Aboriginal art, middens, fish traps and landscapes in New South Wales, c. 1925-1944
PXE 1018 / vol. 10

Two photographs of Edmund Milne standing next to Aboriginal Arborglyphs [carved trees], Gamboola, near Molong, 1912
SPF / 1149 & SPF / 1150

EUROPEAN DISCOVERY

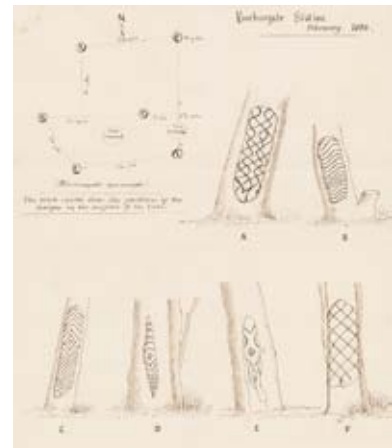
William Romaine Govett
Native women weeping over a grave at Mount Wayo, near Goulburn, NSW Sketches of New South Wales: written and illustrated for the *Saturday Magazine* in 1836-37, London: John W Parker, 1836-1837
DL Q83/68

John Oxley
Journals of two expeditions into the interior of New South Wales, undertaken by order of the British government in the years 1817-18, London: John Murray, 1820
DL Q82/74

Robert Etheridge Junior
The Dendroglyphs or "Carved Trees" of New South Wales
Sydney: Dept. of Mines, 1918 (Sydney: William Applegate Gullick, Government Printer)
DL Q91/59

Lindsay Black
Burial trees: being the first of a series on the Aboriginal customs of the Darling Valley and Central New South Wales, Melbourne: Robertson & Mullens, 1941
ML 305.89915/332

Freda Young
'Scientists save sacred trees ...'
The Australian Women's Weekly, 12 November 1949, page 21
ML F/243



Matthew Thomson
Letter, dated 5 February 1894, detailing Aboriginal carved trees at Burburgate Station, near Gunnedah, NSW, including pen and ink sketches of six trees and a diagrammatic map of the site
From the papers of Alan Carroll, c. 1823-1902
ML MSS 2137

Aboriginal Markings at Moonbi
The Town and Country Journal, 19 September 1896, page 29
TN 83

Margaret Preston (1875-1963)
Rifle Birds
The Home: The Australian Journal of Quality, vol. 9. No. 7, 2 July 1928, cover
Safe/Cupboard 62

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SYDNEY'S ABORIGINAL PAST: INVESTIGATING THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL RECORDS, 2ND EDN

Val Attenbrow
\$59.95

Sydney's Aboriginal Past draws on the latest historical, archaeological, geological, environmental and linguistic research, as well as oral evidence of present-day Aboriginal people, to reveal the diversity of Aboriginal life in the Sydney region before and during the first thirty years of British settlement.

Val Attenbrow describes:

- the different Aboriginal groups and how they lived
- the resources available
- the foods they ate and their means of obtaining them
- their tools, weapons and equipment, and how they were made
- where they camped
- their shelters, clothing and personal adornment
- their beliefs, ceremonial life and rituals
- their designs and images.

This wonderful second edition is worth buying for the sites-to-visit supplement alone.



THE DENDROGLYPHS, OR "CARVED TREES" OF NEW SOUTH WALES

R. Etheridge, Junr.
\$40



ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS: A HISTORY SINCE 1788

Richard Broome
\$35

EVENTS

POETRY

Thursday 2 June
5.30 for 6 pm
Galleries and Dixson Room, Mitchell Library
\$10, bookings essential

Listen to Indigenous poets read works responding to evocative images from the exhibition and then be involved in a lively discussion moderated by Johanna Featherstone from The Red Room Company.

GALLERY WALKS

Wednesdays 11 May and 15 June
12.30 pm
Meet in the Macquarie St foyer 10 minutes before the tour
\$15, bookings essential

Join curators Melissa Jackson and Ronald Briggs for a highlights tour of the exhibition.

Bookings essential

Telephone: (02) 9273 1770
Email: bookings@sl.nsw.gov.au
www.sl.nsw.gov.au/events/bookings

‘The arboglyphs as seen to-day indicate skill, industry, and artistic design of exceptional quality; many of them may be described as elegant, and all represent strenuous mental and physical efforts.’

EDMUND MILNE, 1914