

# “The Gum Trees of Our Place”: Community Trees in Australia<sup>1</sup>

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## **Introduction**

Trees have long been special to human beings and their communities. Throughout history trees have provided material for domiciles, ship building, weaponry, furniture, and fire. While part of the environment, trees can also be imbued with characteristics to represent the human, as manifestations of particular people, gods, or spirits. Trees, when carved and shaped, scarred and marked, can become visible symbols and expressions of beliefs. As Carole M. Cusack phrases it, the tree is a “fundamental symbol” which is a reflection of “both human beings and of the physical universe.”<sup>2</sup> Trees have been used to identify important meeting places and have formed part of the religious life of societies, with rituals based around sacred trees and groves found in a multitude of the world’s cultures and civilisations. They can be an expression of community life, heritage, and culture, and can more broadly, as is the case in Australia, be symbolic of local or national concerns.<sup>3</sup> This article explores several examples of trees that have become symbolic tokens for parts of the Australian community while simultaneously binding human civilisation to nature. In this transformation of trees into something more, even something sacred, certain tensions between Australia’s ancient past, colonial history, and complex present arise.

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Janet Kahl is an independent scholar from Sydney. Please note that the copyright of all photographs in this article belongs to the author.

<sup>1</sup> This article evolved from a conversation about trees in Australia and was partly inspired by Bob Beale’s popular book *If Trees Could Speak* (2007). There may be references in this article to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who are deceased.

<sup>2</sup> Carole M. Cusack, ‘Scotland’s Sacred Tree: The Fortingall Yew’, *Journal of the Sydney Society for Scottish History*, vol, 14 (2013): p. 107.

<sup>3</sup> Laura Rival, ‘Trees, from Symbols of Life and Regeneration to Political Artefacts’, in *The Social life of Trees: Anthropological Perspectives on Tree Symbolism*, ed. Laura Rival (Oxford: Berg, 1998), pp. 1-12.

There is much that can be said about the spiritual connection Australians may feel to trees, but the focus of this article is on ‘civic religion’ or national mythology—an approach more commonly aimed at contemporary American society,<sup>4</sup> but which is also illuminating when applied to the Australian context. Utilising primary sources such as media coverage, websites of councils and government institutions, and photographs of significant trees, this article demonstrates the varied responses and treatment, on a local and national level, of trees in Australia. Significant trees may pivot between commemorating the colonisation of the country by European settlers and reinforcing the ancient bond Aboriginal Australians have with the land; they may bring together school children for celebratory events, or they may be memorials for those lost in war. As the following discussion shows, trees, and particularly Australia’s famous gum (or eucalypt) trees in their myriad forms, play a considerable role in the making and meaning of the Australia’s mythologies, political, cultural, social, and historical.

### **The Persevering Significance and Sacrality of Trees**

Trees have played a part in many cultures and communities for as long as humankind has existed. From the provision of food and firewood, to rituals associated with death, such as making coffins and being planted in churchyards and cemeteries, trees have been essential to the human lifecycle. Yew trees, for example, are often found growing on graves, while in the Celtic world fir trees were representative of eternity, fertility, and life.<sup>5</sup> Trees are also genealogical symbols of kinship lines documented and recorded via the concept of the family tree, and the figurative notion of family ‘roots’.<sup>6</sup>

Trees appear in many creation myths and their ongoing religious importance today provides evidence of the linkages between the spirituality of the pre-Christian Europe and the Christianity that would become predominant in the Western world. Trees and groves were given sacred status by the ancient Greeks, Romans, Celts, and other pagan civilisations. Pagan groups saw nature as filled with divine power while Christian communities tended to view nature, and the material world in general, as fallen and

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<sup>4</sup> Robert N. Bellah, ‘Civil Religion in America’, *Daedalus*, vol. 96 (1967), pp. 1-21.

<sup>5</sup> Miranda J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> Claire Russell, ‘The Tree as a Kinship Symbol’, *Folklore*, vol. 90, no. 2 (1979), pp. 220-222.

unredeemed.<sup>7</sup> Though sacred trees appear in the Old Testament and some Rabbinical texts (for example, the *Book of Genesis*, and the Talmudic tale of the four sages who entered the orchard of Paradise), early Christian missionaries made efforts to reduce the religious significance of trees.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, medieval and modern European Christianity is not devoid of traces of the nature worship of older religions. For example, the image of the Green Man, a pagan deity whose image incorporates leaves and flora, can be found as a decoration at a number of Christian churches in the United Kingdom with examples to be found at King’s College Cambridge and Ely Cathedral.<sup>9</sup>

Further British examples are ancient oaks, which were sacred to ancient pagans, and attract tourists in the United Kingdom. Two examples are the Knightwood Oak, situated in the New Forest and estimated to be several hundred years old and the Major Oak, one of a number of historic oaks located in Sherwood Forest near Nottingham.<sup>10</sup> The legendary Robin Hood purportedly used this tree and, although there is no evidence for it, this story nonetheless provides a background to the tree that generates its sacredness in the collective consciousness. The tree is variously estimated as being eight hundred to one thousand years old and, despite its branches being supported by poles and man-made materials, the tree’s historical importance to the community can be seen through its being “voted England’s tree of the year” in 2014.<sup>11</sup>

Traditions of sacred and culturally important trees abound across both pre-Christian and Christian European cultures and these notions arrived in Australia through the large number of European immigrants during the colonial era.<sup>12</sup> These traditions demonstrate the tensions, overlaps, and creative relationships between ancient and pagan cultures and Christian and modern cultures in the changing status of its natural environments. These

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<sup>7</sup> Fran Doel and Geoff Doel, *The Green Man in Britain* (Stroud: Tempus, 2001), pp. 26-27.

<sup>8</sup> Carole M. Cusack, *The Sacred Tree: Ancient and Medieval Manifestations* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), p. xv.

<sup>9</sup> Doel and Doel, *The Green Man in Britain*, pp. 17, 18, 131.

<sup>10</sup> ‘The Knightwood Oak’, *New Forest National Park*, at [www.new-forest-national-park.com/knightwood-oak.html](http://www.new-forest-national-park.com/knightwood-oak.html), accessed 12/12/2020.

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Barkham, ‘Major oak in Sherwood Forest voted England’s tree of the year’, *The Guardian* (14 November, 2014), at [www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/nov/14/nottinghams-major-oak-voted-englands-tree-of-the-year](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/nov/14/nottinghams-major-oak-voted-englands-tree-of-the-year), accessed 12/12/2020.

<sup>12</sup> Carole M. Cusack, ‘Special Feature Introduction: The Sacred Tree’, *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, vol. 12, no. 3 (2018), pp. 257-259.

traditions appear predominantly in the Eucalypt, colloquially referred to as the ‘gum tree’. This most iconic genus of Australia’s trees, have found their way into written works such as the poetry of Henry Lawson (1867-1922), as well as that of Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920-1993) and Judith Wright (1915-2000), both of whom were concerned about environmental degradation and wrote of the destruction of trees and forests.<sup>13</sup> The eucalypt stars in popular nursery rhymes like ‘Kookaburra Sits in the Old Gum Tree’ (written by Marion Sinclair in 1932), and ‘Home Among the Gum Trees’ (first recorded by John Williamson in 1975 and written by B. Brown and W. Johnson), and was enshrined in childhood aesthetics by the stories and illustrations of May Gibb’s bush tales of Snugglepot and Cuddlepie, two ‘gumnut babies’. Poetry based on the eucalypt through The Eucalyptus Eco-Poetry Project currently encourages school students to submit tree poems based on the tree, and the results can be found on their website.<sup>14</sup> Well-known Australian artists such as Hans Heysen (1877-1968) and Albert Namatjira (c. 1902-1959) favoured local eucalypts in their artworks while Harold Cazneaux’s (1878-1953) iconic photograph of a famous eucalypt in Wilpena Pound in South Australia has enabled the tree itself to become a tourist destination.<sup>15</sup> The gum and other native Australian trees have become an inseparable part of many aspects of Australian culture, creating links between humans and the environment, modernity and the past, whilst also highlighting the contrasts and conflicts between them.

Australian indigenous communities may view trees as sacred as they can represent an ancestor or a spirit (which could move to another tree if the original tree died), be a record of a myth or story, or form part of a tradition. Luise Hercus in ‘Trees from the Dreaming’ has documented a number of trees of importance to indigenous communities in South Australia, the Northern Territory, and Queensland.<sup>16</sup> Important indigenous trees may be identified by being carved or marked to act as markers for water, vital in an

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<sup>13</sup> John Wrigley and Murray Fagg, *Eucalypts: A Celebration* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2010), pp. 298-303; Peter Minter, ‘Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal), Judith Wright and Decolonised Transcultural Ecopoetics in Frank Heimans’ *Shadow Sister*’, *Sydney Studies in English*, vol. 41 (2013), p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> The Eucalyptus Eco-Poetry Project, ‘Poetry in Unusual Ways: Eucalyptus Eco-Poetry Project’, *Red Room Company*, at <https://redroomcompany.org/projects/eucalyptus-eco-poetry-project/>, accessed 12/12/2020.

<sup>15</sup> Wrigley and Fagg, *Eucalypts*, pp. 248-253.

<sup>16</sup> Luise Hercus, ‘Trees from the Dreaming’, *The Artefact: The Journal of the Archaeological and Anthropological Society of Victoria*, vol. 35 (2012), pp. 40-49.

arid land.<sup>17</sup> They may also signify the burial site of an important member of the community, or sites for initiation ceremonies with a number of Indigenous groups gathering for these events, the last of which occurred in New South Wales in the late nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> ‘Scarred’ trees, those that have had their bark removed for use in tool, shelter, or boat making, are indicative of the import of trees for traditional Aboriginal ways of life.<sup>19</sup> Settler colonial intervention in indigenous lifestyles has led to the loss of many traditional practices such as the making of bark canoes from the Stringybark (*eucalyptus tetrodonta*), captured in film by Rolf de Heer and David Gulpilil in *Ten Canoes* (2006) wherein the cast, all Yolngu people of Arnhem Land, had to learn the discontinued techniques of their ancestors to tell their story.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, many scarred and carved trees have been lost through colonial enthusiasm for land clearing while others have been lost through bushfires and age. Trees have also been wilfully damaged through acts of “desecration, rather than just vandalism” as happened to the Canoe Tree at Currency Creek in South Australia.<sup>21</sup> This Canoe Tree, a registered piece of Aboriginal heritage, was a gum with a large section of its bark carved out by indigenous locals for boat-making hundreds of years ago. In 1998, it was hacked into and racial slurs were carved in its trunk. A Ngarrindjeri man speaking at a ceremony held to highlight the damage to this significant tree said: “Maybe through what has happened and what is happening today this old *wuri* [red gum tree] is speaking to us. Maybe it’s telling us to come together and respect each other and respect and acknowledge each others’ cultural and spiritual beliefs.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hercus, ‘Trees from the Dreaming’, pp. 40-48.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Briggs, ‘Wiradjuri Country’, in *Carved Trees: Aboriginal Cultures of Western NSW*, ed. Helen Cumming (Sydney: State Library of New South Wales, 2011), p. 8; Leigh Purcell, ‘Gamilaroi Country’, in *Carved Trees*, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Long, *Aboriginal Scarred Trees in New South Wales: A Field Manual* (Sydney: Department of Environment and Conservation New South Wales, 2005), pp. 6-7.

<sup>20</sup> Therese Davis, ‘Working Together: Two Cultures, One Film, Many Canoes’, *Senses of Cinema*, vol. 41 (2006), p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Tree Attack Outrage’, *Times Victoria Harbour* (31 December, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Diane Bell, ‘Tom Trevorrow: A Ngarrindjeri Man of High Degree’, *Transnational Literature*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2013), p. 7.



Figure 1. Cazneaux's Tree.



Figure 2. Yurabirong, Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney.

In the early twentieth century, many scarred trees found their way into museum collections.<sup>23</sup> However, recently Aboriginal tree relics have been returned to their communities. A carved tree was returned to the Gamilaroi community in Baradine while the Australian Museum has undertaken to return trees and carvings to the Wiradjuri people in Dubbo.<sup>24</sup> The return of such tree relics to their traditional owners is part of a more recent recognition of their sacred, historical, and communal importance and acknowledgment that they should be held by indigenous custodians for future generations to enable the teaching of indigenous traditions and not be on display to the general public.

The tradition of carved trees has, however, continued. A remnant tree can be found in the Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney, which represents the forest red gums that grew in the area during pre-colonial days. Although this

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<sup>23</sup> Purcell, 'Gamilaroi Country', p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Merv Sutherland, 'Return of the Trees', in *Carved Trees*, p. 14; Dale Drinkwater, 'Australian Museum to return sacred tree carvings back to Wiradjuri country in Dubbo', *ABC News* (26 October, 2020), at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-26/spiritual-carvings-to-return-home-to-wiradjuri-country/12769148>, accessed 12/12/2020.

tree died in approximately the year 2000, it now displays carvings created by a Bidjigal artist in the traditional style of the indigenous peoples of the state of New South Wales. The carvings are designed to represent “different tribal groups across central, western and north-western NSW” and the plaque at the base of the tree names the site as Yurabirong, meaning “people of this place.”<sup>25</sup> While technically no longer a living memorial, it continues to be representative of the spirit of the land and history.

Trees have also acted as living memorials to the people and stories of colonised Australia and the modern nation-state. The use of trees as living memorials can be seen in the form of ‘Avenues of Honour’ created to mark Australia’s involvement in war.<sup>26</sup> The trees have been planted as a remembrance of those who have sacrificed their lives for the freedom and democratic rights of the country. These avenues utilise native trees, such as flowering gums, but most frequently imported trees such as the oak and cypress. The interstate ‘Remembrance Driveway’ between Sydney and Canberra and the tree-lined Western Highway in Ballarat in Victoria are examples of such living memorials with roadside plantings of native trees and shrubs dedicated to the memory of the battles and the fallen.

Joining the eucalypt as an Australian icon is the wattle tree, whose blossom became the Australian national floral symbol in 1988. Wattle Day had its beginnings in Adelaide’s Wattle Blossom League in 1889 and was particularly used for raising funds during World War I through the sale of pieces of wattle blossom.<sup>27</sup> From 1910 a number of Australian states commemorated Wattle, and was used as a way to promote the native as desirable for Australian gardens.<sup>28</sup> A large specimen of Wattle Day tree planting maybe found in Creswell Gardens, adjacent to Adelaide Oval in

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<sup>25</sup> Aaron Cook, ‘Ancient red gum’s new lease on life’, *Sydney Morning Herald* (22 November, 2011), at [www.smh.com.au/environment/conservation/ancient-red-gums-new-lease-on-life-20101121-182mv.html](http://www.smh.com.au/environment/conservation/ancient-red-gums-new-lease-on-life-20101121-182mv.html), accessed 12/12/2020.

<sup>26</sup> John Stephens, ‘Remembrance and Commemoration through Honour Avenues and Groves in Western Australia’, *Landscape Research*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2009), pp. 125-6.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Before and after Federation in 1901: Wattle Day History’, *Wattle Day Association Inc.*, at [www.wattleday.asn.au/about-wattle-day/australias-wattle-day-history-1st-september/after-federation](http://www.wattleday.asn.au/about-wattle-day/australias-wattle-day-history-1st-september/after-federation), accessed 12/12/2020.

<sup>28</sup> Courtenay Rule, ‘On This Day: Centenary of Wattle Day’, *Australian Geographic* (1 September, 2010), at [www.australiangeographic.com.au/blogs/on=this=day/2010/09/on-this-day-centenary-of-wattle-day/](http://www.australiangeographic.com.au/blogs/on=this=day/2010/09/on-this-day-centenary-of-wattle-day/), accessed 12/12/2020; Katie Holmes, Susan K. Martin, and Kylie Mirmohamadi, *Reading the Garden: The Settlement of Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008), p. 99.

South Australia. Here the War Memorial Oak was planted on Wattle Day on 29 August 1914 by the Governor, Sir Henry Galway, “in a purely patriotic spirit to commemorate the greatest year in the history of the world, and a year that would probably be the most epoch making” thus combining the sacrifice of war with a living memorial which still stands.<sup>29</sup>



Figure 3. The War Memorial Oak, Adelaide.

Another form of living memorial are the pines that commemorate the Australian and New Zealand (ANZAC) soldiers of WWII. Known as Lone Pine trees, they have a sacred background because they are sourced from a tree at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra. These trees are significant as they grew from seeds of a pine tree in Gallipoli which were sent by a soldier fighting on the peninsula to his mother in Australia. An example of a Lone Pine memorial tree can be found in Glebe, Sydney which was planted by the Lord Mayor of Sydney, Clover Moore, in 2015 to commemorate the centenary of the Australian Gallipoli campaign by Australia.<sup>30</sup> With this planting the Lone Pine’s “symbolic importance as a representation of our nation’s tenacity and fortitude remains.”<sup>31</sup> Nearby this Lone Pine Tree is one

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<sup>29</sup> ‘The Oak and the Wattle’, *Daily Herald Adelaide* (31 August, 1913), p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Lone Pine at Foley Park: Anzac centenary marked in Glebe’, *City of Sydney* (28 May, 2015), at [www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/sydneys-history/anzac-centenary/lone-pine-at-foley-park](http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/learn/sydneys-history/anzac-centenary/lone-pine-at-foley-park), accessed 12/12/2020.

of the reputedly oldest trees in the Sydney community. This remnant ironbark tree (*eucalyptus paniculata*) is thought to have been part of a forest “cleared for timber production, agriculture and later urban development.”<sup>32</sup> The enduring age of the tree provides to the community a sense of sacredness as it is a remnant of a pre-Christian and pre-colonisation period in Australian history.

Trees in Australia have also come to commemorate the building of communities founded on shared beliefs.<sup>33</sup> For example, in 1891 shearers who were on strike purportedly met beneath a ghost gum tree known as the Tree of Knowledge at Barcaldine in Queensland. Although the strike was broken this action is said to have resulted in the formation of The Australian Labor Party. In early 2006 the Tree of Knowledge was entered onto the National Heritage List; however later that year it was poisoned and subsequently died. It remains unknown whether this was a deliberate act or accidental; however, the remains of the tree have been left in situ in the form of a wooden memorial “incorporating the remnants of the old tree.”<sup>34</sup>

This memorial which opened in May 2009 has had mixed reviews; however Bob Beale, the author of *If Trees Could Speak* (2007), considers that leaving the part of the tree in situ enables visitors “to stand in the shade of the self-same tree that marks the scene of a historic event ... it’s also a reminder of the great longevity of trees.”<sup>35</sup> It may be a myth that this is the actual tree; however, as the Barcaldine Mayor, Rob Chandler, stated in 2009, this “doesn’t change anything, it is still the site of the Tree of Knowledge ... and it will always be a special place.”<sup>36</sup> Its legend lives on as an important part of Australia’s political history, to the Australian Labor Party and to the

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<sup>31</sup> Aaron Smith, ‘Lone Pine: seeds grown into a living memorial’, *Australian Geographic* (11 October, 2011), at <http://www.australiangeographic.com.au/topics/history-culture/2011/10/lone-pine-seeds-grown-into-a-living-memorial/>, accessed 12/12/2020.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Scheduled Significant Trees: St Johns Anglican Church, Glebe Point Road, Glebe’, *City of Sydney* (28 January, 2014), at <http://trees.cityofsydney.nsw.au/location/st-johns-anglican-church/>, accessed 12/12/2020.

<sup>33</sup> Cusack, *The Sacred Tree*, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> John Taylor, ‘Tree of Knowledge claim to fame’, *The 7.30 Report* (30 April, 2009), at [www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2009/52557519.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2009/52557519.htm), accessed 12/12/2020; Australian Government, *Australia’s National Heritage: Tree of Knowledge Queensland* (Canberra: Department of the Environment and Energy, 2006), p. 23.

<sup>35</sup> Bob Beale, *If Trees Could Speak: Stories of Australia’s Greatest Trees* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2007), p. 95.

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, ‘Tree of Knowledge claim to fame’.

community of Barcaldine. Barcaldine continues to hold the Tree of Knowledge Festival as part of May Day commemorations, with its traditions based on workers' rights, and community events.<sup>37</sup>



Figure 4. The Lone Pine Tree with the remnant ironbark tree at Glebe, Sydney.

### **The Local and National Conservation of Trees in Australia**

In an attempt to preserve trees deemed to be significant to specific communities and their histories, trees may be nominated for inclusion on the Australian Government's National Heritage List or for inclusion on the National Trust Register of Significant Trees.<sup>38</sup> Councils, such as the City of Sydney, also keep registers of trees nominated to be significant by the community and this includes street trees and park trees which represent the history of Sydney.<sup>39</sup> Greg Moore and Sue Hughes concluded in their study that the National Trust tree register creates an awareness of significant trees that may go some way toward preserving them but "there is no legal

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<sup>37</sup> 'History', *The Tree of Knowledge Festival*, at [www.treeofknowledge.com.au/history.htm](http://www.treeofknowledge.com.au/history.htm), accessed 12/12/2020.

<sup>38</sup> Australian Government, 'Australia's National Heritage List', *Department of the Environment and Energy*, at <http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/places/national-heritage-list>, accessed 12/12/2020.

<sup>39</sup> 'Significant Trees Register', *City of Sydney*, at <https://trees.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/>, accessed 12/12/2020.

protection afforded by the tree being classified.”<sup>40</sup> To the contrary, as Suzi Hutchings found, public opinion regarding trees deemed to be significant was often ignored by government and that plans for development were prioritised.<sup>41</sup> Still, significant trees have remained sites of environmental action and focus.

In New South Wales in the 1970s, the community and environmental groups fought developers and the government in order to retain green space, parks, and trees. This led to the commencement of a protest action known as ‘Green Bans’. Here the New South Wales Builders Labourers’ Federation (NSWBLF) by the use of strike action by members to assist communities in their efforts to prevent environmental destruction and over-development. The use of Green Bans was successful in conserving the natural environment in New South Wales, most notably at Kelly’s Bush, Hunters Hill; the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney; and Centennial Park and Moore Park, Sydney.<sup>42</sup>

From 1976 to 1983 another important Australian protest, involved large-scale occupation to prevent the construction of the Franklin Dam on the Gordon River in Tasmania. In more recent years, a stand of some of the world’s tallest trees, the *eucalyptus regnans* trees, also known as the mountain ash or swamp gum were discovered in the Styx Valley, approximately 100 kilometres north of Hobart.<sup>43</sup> A photographic project with the “ultimate aim ... to elevate these giants into the cultural consciousness of all Australians” was featured in *Australian Geographic* and showcased the spectacular giant eucalypts in Tasmania.<sup>44</sup> Herrmann describes the felling and death of such trees as a loss of the memory of the trees and suggests that it may be better to have tourists as pilgrims to these icons than for them to

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<sup>40</sup> Greg Moore and Sue Hughes, ‘The National Trust of Australia (Victoria), Register of Significant Trees: Now protecting community assets and heritage with smartphone technology’, *Arboricultural Journal: The International Journal of Urban Forestry*, vol. 36, no. 1 (2014), p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> Suzi Hutchings, ‘Significant Tree Legislation in South Australia: Reflecting Aboriginal and colonial relationships to the environment’, *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, vol. 10, no. 5 (2014), p. 527.

<sup>42</sup> Meredith Burgmann and Verity Burgmann, *Green Bans Red Union: Environmental Activism and the NSW Builders Labourers’ Federation* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1998), pp. 169-193.

<sup>43</sup> Walter Herrmann, ‘Vulnerability of Tasmanian giant trees’, *Australian Forestry*, vol. 69, no. 4 (2006): pp. 285-298.

<sup>44</sup> Tasmanian Tree Project Team, ‘Land of the Giants’, *Australian Geographic* (January-February 2017), p. 53.

be logged.<sup>45</sup> As Beale has noted there is a “need to conserve and reclaim ... lost natural heritage” and indeed once destruction has occurred it’s lost forever, as unionist, green ban and NSWBLF union leader Jack Munday commented, “you cannot hold post-mortems. It’s too late.”<sup>46</sup>

In order to engender a “sense of proprietorship by emphasising the settler/owner’s responsibility to preserve and protect the natural resources,” the Australian government began observing Arbor Day holidays in 1889.<sup>47</sup> Taking its lead from United States in 1872, the first Australian Arbor Day was held in Adelaide, South Australia with the *South Australian Register* extolling the virtues of tree planting.<sup>48</sup> This event comprised a parade, bands, and several hundred school children. A number of trees were planted, many of which were eucalypts. Unfortunately, some of the trees planted at the first Arbor Day in South Australia were either stolen or vandalised.<sup>49</sup> Over a period of some years, other Australian States adopted Arbor Day and tree planting became an event on the calendars of schools.<sup>50</sup> Environmental groups in Australia continue the traditions of Arbor Day. Planet Ark holds both a Schools Tree Day and a National Tree Day. More recently, commencing on 23 March 2014, a National Eucalypt Day has been held and the public has been able to participate in activities including bush walks and building bark huts to “raise awareness of eucalypts and celebrate the important place they hold in the hearts and lives of Australians.”<sup>51</sup>

### **Trees and Australia’s Civil Mythology**

Though Australia is commonly considered a fairly secular country, with national census data indicating the increasing affiliation of citizens with ‘no religion’, its people do not lack an attachment to the concept of the sacred.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Hermann, ‘Vulnerability of Tasmanian giant trees’, p. 296.

<sup>46</sup> Beale, *If Trees Could Speak*, p. 121; Burgmann and Burgmann, *Green Bans Red Union*, p. 277.

<sup>47</sup> Holmes, Martin and Mirmohamadi, *Reading the Garden*, p. 114.

<sup>48</sup> David Jones, “‘Plant trees’: The foundations of Arbor Day in Australia”, *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2010), p. 78; ‘Our First Arbor Day’, *South Australia Register* (20 June 1889), p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Jones, “‘Plant trees’: The foundations of Arbor Day in Australia”, pp. 84-85.

<sup>50</sup> Libby Robin, ‘Nationalising nature: Wattle days in Australia’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 73 (2002), p. 14; E.M. Nall, ‘Australia as the Flowery Land’, *Longman’s Magazine*, vol. 42, no. 250 (1903), p. 325.

<sup>51</sup> ‘National Eucalypt Day, Strategic Statement 2016-2020: Our Values and Priorities’, *Eucalypt Australia*, at [www.eucalyptaustralia.org.au](http://www.eucalyptaustralia.org.au), accessed 12/12/2020.

The ritual, communal, and political significance of certain trees can provide insight into the operation of the secular-sacred dialectic, perhaps better thought of as a conversation, in the Australian context. Many states and cities in Australia possess trees that are important to local groups, the area’s political establishment or their foundation.<sup>53</sup> However, with some of these ties being seen as celebrations of settler conquest over indigenous land and the tragic fallout of colonisation for the colonised, significant trees have come to occupy a fraught space in Australia’s current social and political climate.

There are a number of trees to be found within Australia that mark colonial settlement. Three trees found in Sydney’s Hyde Park, for example, were planted in 1963 on the occasion of the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the settlement of Sydney, New South Wales. In Melbourne, Victoria, a tree that is important to the city’s foundation is known as the Separation Tree. The State of Victoria was officially made a separate state from New South Wales on 1 August, 1850. On 15 November 1850, beneath a river red gum tree (*eucalyptus camaldulensis*) situated in the Melbourne Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne marked this occasion with a plaque. A number of celebrations ensued including fireworks, the lighting of beacons, and the declaration of holidays. Later, on 1 July 1851, self-government officially commenced in Victoria and this occasion, known as Victoria Day, is celebrated annually during which many events are held, including a reading of the separation declaration which is attended by people dressing in colonial attire.<sup>54</sup>

The reasons why this Victorian tree was chosen for the commemorative plaque are unknown, but Peter Fagg has suggested that it may have been because the Separation Tree, estimated in 1982 as being 400 years old, “had significance to the local Aboriginal tribe, and thus already was a well-known landmark and meeting point.”<sup>55</sup> Despite its historical and cultural value, this pre-colonial tree has suffered a number of attacks by unknown vandals and was ring-barked in 2010. The Separation Tree, along

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<sup>52</sup> Carole M. Cusack, ‘Religion in Australian Society: A Place for Everything and Everything and Its Place’, *Modern Greek Studies*, vol. 13 (2012), p. 28.

<sup>53</sup> Beale, *If Trees Could Speak*; Wrigley and Fagg, *Eucalypts*.

<sup>54</sup> ‘History: Victoria Settlement and Foundation’, *Victoria Day Council*, at [www.victoriaday.org.au/history.htm](http://www.victoriaday.org.au/history.htm), accessed 12/12/2020.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Fagg, ‘The ‘Separation Tree’: Past, present and possible future’, *The Victorian Naturalist*, vol. 129, no. 4 (2012), pp. 147-148.

with other trees including one that was planted in 1954 by Queen Elizabeth II, was again vandalised in 2013 leading the director of the Botanic Gardens, Tim Entwistle, to share his dismay at the treatment of these “really important, significant heritage trees” with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.<sup>56</sup> Despite attempts by the Garden staff to save the Separation Tree, it finally succumbed and all that remains is a trunk and a few branches. Currently, the Separation Tree remains in situ as a community marker and a reminder of Australia’s ancient landscape.<sup>57</sup> However, it is possible that the tree’s commemorative connection to colonialism may have marked it as a signifier of the settle oppression of Australia’s native people and it may be for this reason that it became a target for vandalism.

In contrast, colonists in Perth, Western Australia commenced the Swan River Colony with “the cutting down of a sheoak” in 1829.<sup>58</sup> Later, in 1890 when Western Australia transitioned from a colony to a self-governing state, the Governor, Sir William Robinson, journeyed to Fremantle and planted a Moreton Bay fig tree on 21 October 1890 as part of the celebrations. This tree became known as the Proclamation Tree, sometimes also known as the Constitution Tree and was entered on Western Australia’s Heritage Places in 1993, remaining as a memorial of these events.<sup>59</sup>

Another proclamation tree is situated in Adelaide in South Australia which provides an especially interesting window into the connection between trees, Australia’s civic myths, the reality of its colonial heritage and the subsequent scars the country bears. On 28 December 1836, on the afternoon of his arrival in Adelaide by ship from England, the newly appointed Governor Hindmarsh read a statement of proclamation. This statement was in three parts announced the establishment of the colony, that the colonists were to abide by the law and declared “the Aborigines to have

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<sup>56</sup> ‘Vandals attack historic trees at Melbourne’s Royal Botanic Gardens’, *ABC News* (21 July, 2013), at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-07-21/vandals-attack-historic-trees-at-melbourne-botanic-gardens/4833430>, accessed 12/12/2020.

<sup>57</sup> Natalie McGregor, ‘Separation Tree in Melbourne’s Botanic Gardens unlikely to survive’, *ABC News* (6 January, 2015), at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-01-06/separation-tree-in-melbourne-botanic-gardens-unlikely-to-survive/6001782>, accessed 12/12/2020.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Proclaiming the News’, *The Constitutional Centre of Western Australia*, at [www.constitutionalcentre.wa.gov.au/ExhibitionsOnline/ProclaimingTheNews.aspx](http://www.constitutionalcentre.wa.gov.au/ExhibitionsOnline/ProclaimingTheNews.aspx), accessed 12/12/2020.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Proclaiming the News’, *The Constitutional Centre of Western Australia*; ‘Proclamation Tree’, *Heritage Council State Heritage Office*, at <http://inherit.stateheritage.wa.gov.au/Public/Inventory/Details/57d5aa92-9420-4b54-bd88-41d3517e5aef>, accessed 12/12/2020.

equal rights and an equal claim with the white man upon the protection of the Government.”<sup>60</sup> The proclamation was read twice, once in the tent of the Colonial Secretary, Robert Gouger, and again outside the tent while a group of approximately 200 of the first colonists to South Australia gathered around.<sup>61</sup> This gathering was purported to have taken place under a gum tree now known as ‘The Old Gum Tree’. The history, authenticity, and meaning of this tree has been the subject of some debate.



Figure 5. Settlement Trees, Hyde Park Sydney.



Figure 6. The Separation Tree, Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne.

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<sup>60</sup> J. S. Rees, *“The Old Gum Tree” Glenelg: is it the proclamation tree? The case for “yes,” the case for “no”:* findings of the special committee appointed by the SA Branch for the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, Incorp (Adelaide: Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, 1949).

<sup>61</sup> Rees, *“The Old Gum Tree” Glenelg.*



Figure 7. The Old Gum Tree, Glenelg.



Figure 8. The Plaque at the Old Gum Tree



Figure 9. Protestors at the Old Gum Tree, Glenelg.

The reading of the proclamation, whether this tree was the actual tree under which it was read, or whether it may have occurred beneath another nearby tree, has long been a topic of dissent, myth, and legend. This is evidenced by reports and reviews to establish whether the ceremony was, in fact, a proclamation and whether the tree was “the tree.”<sup>62</sup> A review of the

State’s archival material in 1949 by J. S. Rees which included artwork, extracts from diaries, journals and newspapers found that as early as 1858 there was some doubt that this was, in fact, the tree. The *Adelaide Observer* in 1858 recorded that “there were warm disputes going on as to whether this was the real patriarch under which the proclamation was read.”<sup>63</sup> In 1865 the seemingly outraged ‘A Colonist’ wrote to the *South Australia Register* saying:

Surely the colonists of the present day must imagine those of early times to have been greatly deficient both in taste and discretion who could select an old decayed trunk, without branches and scarcely any foliage, for such a purpose, when they were surrounded by hundreds of trees in full vigour, the shade and shelter of which were eagerly sought for by many settlers ... and the magnificent gum-tree under which the proclamation actually took place ... furnished a natural canopy.<sup>64</sup>

As early as 1884, the tree was already considered to be in a dilapidated shape.<sup>65</sup> By 1950, the tree had to be supported by a plinth as it “was getting a bit shaky.”<sup>66</sup> A plaque from the 1988 Australian bicentennial year marks the current “protective canopy” which has been built over the tree.

The Old Gum Tree is situated within a park which was a parcel of land given to the local Glenelg Council by the owner, John Hector, on the occasion of the twenty-first anniversary of the Proclamation in 1857 and a plaque can be found commemorating the donation of the land upon which the gum tree stands. In 1858, a large plaque was attached to the tree which the *Adelaide Observer* considered to be “tasteless and unsuitable.”<sup>67</sup> It is now attached to the plinth which has been installed to support one end of the tree.

Annually, on 28 December, the South Australian community gathers around the Old Gum Tree and the ceremony that is attended by the Governor, members of the Kaurna Indigenous community, members of the armed forces, representatives from emergency services and descendants of pioneers. Some participants wear historical dress, including colonial uniforms. The twenty-first anniversary in 1857, according to newspaper

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<sup>62</sup> F. L. Parker and J. D. Somerville, *Naming the 28<sup>th</sup> December* (Adelaide: Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, 1938); Rees, “The Old Gum Tree” Glenelg.

<sup>63</sup> ‘The Commemoration Festival’, *Adelaide Observer* (27 February, 1858), p. 1; Rees, “The Old Gum Tree” Glenelg.

<sup>64</sup> Rees, “The Old Gum Tree” Glenelg, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Commemoration Day at Glenelg’, *South Australian Register* (30 December, 1884), p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Old Gum Tree “Shaky”,’ *The Advertiser* (23 August, 1950), p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> ‘The Commemoration Festival’, *Adelaide Observer*, p. 1.

accounts, attracted large crowds with many “festivities.”<sup>68</sup> Now there are generally only a few hundred people who attend the ceremony and *The Adelaide Advertiser*, when annually reporting on the activities generally laments that many South Australians do not know anything about Proclamation Day, the reason for the public holiday or the existence of the Old Gum Tree.<sup>69</sup>

In his consideration of the Proclamation of South Australia and interracial relations, Robert Foster has provided important contextualisation of this arrangement. The statements made and set out in the proclamation were a requirement of the Colonial Office in Britain as an attempt to prevent some of the violence and difficulties that had occurred between settlers and Aboriginal people in other Australian settlement colonies. However, the result of the settlement of lands was a disruption to the Aboriginal community and it was inevitable clashes and violence would occur.<sup>70</sup> Foster, in his review of early speeches made at the Old Gum Tree, notes the situation of the Aborigines was “rarely mentioned.”<sup>71</sup> It was not until 2008 that the Proclamation Day ceremonies included for the first time the participation of, and a welcome to the country by, the local Indigenous Kurna people.<sup>72</sup> At the 2016 ceremony the Premier, Jay Wetherill drew attention to this oversight saying “South Australians should be mindful of the balance between commemoration of the first landings and Indigenous history.”<sup>73</sup>

Nonetheless, Proclamation Day in South Australia continues to create divisions within the community. It was reported that in 1986 one eminent indigenous man “threatened to burn down the Old Gum Tree” in protest that “S.A.’s Aboriginal population had little to celebrate.”<sup>74</sup> A number of Indigenous groups annually gather outside the site of the Old Gum Tree in a peaceful protest which highlights the need for greater indigenous inclusion. However, an Aboriginal spokesperson commented in 2011 that “the day

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<sup>68</sup> ‘Majority of the Colony’, *South Australia Register* (5 January, 1858), p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Why the Day Off’, *The Advertiser* (28 December 2015), p. 16.

<sup>70</sup> Robert Foster, “‘His Majesty’s most gracious and benevolent intentions’: South Australia’s Foundation, the Idea of “Difference,” and Aboriginal rights”, *Journal of Australian Colonial History* vol. 15 (2013), pp. 107-109.

<sup>71</sup> Foster, “‘His Majesty’s most gracious and benevolent intentions,’” p. 113.

<sup>72</sup> Tory Shepherd, ‘Call for equity as we toast 172 years’, *The Advertiser* (29 December, 2008), p. 14.

<sup>73</sup> Richard Evans, ‘Old tree’s still standing like state and its people’, *The Advertiser* (29 December, 2016), p. 16.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Firebrand fought for Aboriginal rights’, *The Advertiser* (21 June, 2014), p. 74.

should instead be used as an opportunity for healing ... as a nation [we] have got to think what [was] done to the first people and learn to live ... and give a day for recognising what it was.”<sup>75</sup>



Figure 10. The Old Gum Tree, Glenelg.

Despite the discussion of whether the tree is in fact the tree where the proclamation was read in 1836, it can be argued, as it can be for many items of both religious and secular importance, that it does not matter that it is not the real tree but, rather, what it has become. The tree is now primarily cement so it has essentially become a sculptured relic. This idea was reinforced in a letter to the editor of the *Adelaide Observer* in 1877 in which the writer stated that they had “hoarded with veneration a piece of the ‘old gum tree’.”<sup>76</sup> Rees concluded in his 1949 review that the tree used for commemorative purposes is unlikely to have been ‘the tree’; however he notes that his “regard, respect and reverence for the Old Gum is none the less, in fact more so, with the knowledge that it is beyond dispute the sole relic of the pioneer encampment, and was so close to the actual site as to warrant its preservation for so long as that is actually possible.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> ‘Proclamation Day legacy questioned’, *ABC News* (28 December, 2011), at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-12-28/proclamation-day-indigenous-perspective/3750076>, accessed 12/12/2020.

<sup>76</sup> ‘The Old Gum-Tree’, *Adelaide Observer* (9 June, 1877), at <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article159449702>, accessed 12/12/2020; Rees, “*The Old Gum Tree*” *Glenelg*.

<sup>77</sup> Rees, “*The Old Gum Tree*” *Glenelg*.

## **Conclusion**

This article has documented a range of phenomena showing the important contribution that trees make to the identity of Australia as a nation and to particular groups of Australians, both indigenous and non-indigenous, in local communities. It is undeniable that the political, cultural, social, and historical significance of native trees has enshrined them as objects of key importance to Australian myths, both pre- and post- colonisation. Here, the contribution of trees to Australian civil religion as memorials to times, events, and persons passed, interpreted positively and negatively by different groups, has been emphasised. While meanings invested in these trees may be of strong personal and communal significance for Australians, it is interesting to note that some of them have been the subject of vandalism and destruction, including the Separation Tree discussed above. While attitudes to meanings may shift or clash and others have become lost or forgotten Australians can still be seen to be enthusiastic in their support of recording trees for historical and heritage purposes, saving trees through environmental protests and green bans, as well as engaging in planting programs for the future.

There is great potential for significant trees to foster collaboration and reconciliation amongst diverse Australians. As an example we look not to the iconic gum that has featured so heavily in this discussion, but to green and gold of the wattle tree. Since its inauguration in 1889, Wattle Day has gradually become relatively unknown to the Australian public.<sup>78</sup> This changed in 1992 when 1 September was officially declared to be National Wattle Day and the wattle tree once more came to the fore as an Australian symbol.<sup>79</sup> A number of species of wattle grows throughout Australia and the diversity of wattle can, therefore, be viewed as widely representative of an equally diverse Australian community. Currently, Australia is experiencing a heated debate over the meaning of Australia Day, held annually on 26 January in commemoration of the landing of First Fleet in 1788 as this national holiday can be seen as celebrating foreign invasion, colonial settlement, and the displacement of the indigenous custodians of the land. Given this controversy in relation to Australia Day the President of the Wattle Day Association suggested in 2015 that perhaps Wattle Day would be a better time to celebrate the binding quality of Australianness:

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<sup>78</sup> Robin, 'Nationalising Nature', p. 24.

<sup>79</sup> Rule, 'On This Day'.

*“The Gum Trees of Our Place”*

Wattle is primarily a symbol of celebration of our land and its people and the efforts of all Australians to build a sustainable and sharing society.

Wattle is a meaningful symbol that on National Wattle Day unites all Australians across all parts of the country.

It has witnessed our past. It can guide our future<sup>80</sup>

This final example is indicative of the creative possibilities presented by Australia’s native trees as reminders not only of our relations to the land and peoples of the past, but to one another.

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<sup>80</sup> Terry Fewtrell, ‘Should national Wattle Day be our new Australia Day?’, *The Standard* (2 September, 2015).