

## **The Tree and Its Voices: What the Casuarina Says**

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*On the erased hillside  
your true eyes understood the wind that was our origin.*  
Peter Boyle, *Apocrypha*

*The boughs of the She-oak began to wail as the wind was passing through the wiry  
leaves. Now the sounds seemed to come from the She-Oak...*  
David Unaipon 'Narroonderie's Wives'

When I was working on poetry written by Europeans as they encountered, named, and developed relationships with Australian land and biota, I noticed two works by the well-known nineteenth-century writer Henry Kendall that seemed highly unusual. They were poems driven by the experience of sound in the natural world — specifically the sounds made by a casuarina as the wind blows through it. Investigating the sonic qualities of the casuarina under the aegis of 'Sounding the Earth' led me from those poems to a sequence of Aboriginal adoptions of the sounds of casuarinas for story and culture. Written versions of these and Kendall's poems are the backbone of my essay. By 'listening to listening' evident in those contexts, I attempt to trace the roles of interpreting and representing the casuarina and its striking sounds in relating to place.

### **Arriving, Listening and Becoming Present**

In his brilliant essay 'Waterfalls of Song', ethnomusicologist Steven Feld asks, 'How are the perceptual engagements we call sensing critical to conceptual constructions of place? Listening as distinct from the fundamentally physical role of hearing is the act of consciously registering sound, in a state of "alertness to sonic experience".' (Feld 91) Kendall uses distinctive sounds of a specific tree, first as basis for an account of colonization, and, in a second poem, for a deeply personal engagement with its sounds – in the process creating layers of 'conceptual construction' to the scanty basis of an Australian place-knowledge.

Sensory experience and conceptualisation may not be as involuntary as is generally assumed. For example we tend to ridicule early Europeans in Australia, most notoriously Adam Lindsay Gordon, for writing of 'songless bright birds' ('A Dedication'). This reaction to the aural world seems so incredible that we view it as metropolitan prejudice, but recent research among Vietnamese refugees by Mandy Thomas showed they had a similar perception. They told Thomas that for them, in Australia, natural sound was absent or horrible, as was most sensory experience. All they heard was uncanny silence or harsh, disturbing noises (Thomas 43–61). The striking testimonies she cites from other countries consistent across ethnicity and time suggest that many travellers, colonists, settlers and immigrants alike take decades to develop a sensory relationship with a new

natural world. The questions raised by Thomas's study are partly addressed by renderings of the sounds of casuarinas.

### **Strange Poems**

Kendall was a second-generation immigrant, born on the south coast of New South Wales. He was ambitious and confident of his own talent, and, in the 1860s, the poet signed his early work 'H. Kendall, N.A.P.'—Native Australian Poet. The self-appointment signalled his first priority—to inscribe the natural world specific to Australia, with its society and culture, using classical European poetic forms and technique. 'The Wail in the Native Oak' is a lyric first published in his first volume. Though melodramatic and clumsy in language, rhyme and metre, the poem is rich in attention to sensory drives, particularly sound. Working with noises produced by the wind in the 'oak's' foliage, Kendall attempted to crack open the circle of conventional aesthetic practice and rhythm to admit the wild local world and make it morph through sound into language. (Kendall 27–28)

The casuarina is not as much the central figure as the driving force in the poem. 'Where'—the opening word—is used awkwardly as a noun to set up a space of language sufficiently defined for rhythmic vowels and consonants to gain traction. It is used immediately to create an aural space occupied by the sound of a creek running between 'twisted fern-roots' and 'dripping vine'. The voice I will call an awareness—not yet even a speaker—says 'hillside' and repeats 'Where'. This time its focus is 'gum trees ringed and ragged...' 'Staring out against the heavens'. As soon as we understand that 'ringed' refers here not to forming a circle, but to trees that have been 'ring-barked', we see them dying slowly, a band of bark having been cut round each trunk. The next line about their 'languid gaping eyes' is an image of illness with a hint of the uncanny. The doomed trees outlined against the sunset, the creek and distant hills of untouched forest, generate a Gothic atmosphere as daylight fades. Night eliminates the reassuring visual world, leaving no option but to 'go into our ears' and listen. A speaker is introduced—'There I listened'—anchoring 'Where' to a new sound: 'There I heard it'. [Kendall 27. Italics orig.] 'It' is 'wandering like a ghostly whisper' emanating from the 'mass of mournful tresses' of a solitary 'Native Oak' by the creek.

### **Genus Casuarina**

Known by many different common names—Native Oak, She-oak, Bull-oak, Bloodwood, Beach Oak and Wild Oak, Creek Oak, Fire Oak and Belah— most of the seventeen species *Casuarina* are native to Australasia. Some are shrub-size, others grow up to 35 metres tall. The scientific name *Casuarina* is based on the Malay word for the cassowary whose fine feathers bear a similarity to the fine foliage of some species. 'The featherlike 'leaves' that have a singing quality when the wind blows through them are not true leaves. The work of foodmaking is carried out by the branchlets' [needles] while the true leaves are minute scales forming flat circles along the prolific 'needles' (Serventy 45).

Most of the seventeen species *Casuarina* are native to Australasia. Some are shrub-size,

others grow up to 35 metres tall. Their foliage is distinctive because the leaves are minute scales forming flat circles along the prolific ‘needles’.

> [Based on Casuarinaceae Wikipedia accessed 2/02/2011]

It is easy to guess that the plentiful long and scaly-edged needles act as a wind-instrument once air moves through them. As the trees often grow together in thick groves the effect of wind is intensified and the creaking of branches is added as they rub against each other.



**Fig. 1** Detail of *Casuarina Cristata* showing seed-cones and ‘needles’ encircled by minute brown leaf-scales (Source: Malcolm Carnegie at the Lake Cowal Foundation)

Celmara Pocock writes in her research on the aesthetic of the Barrier Reef:

Although they are found and are valued elsewhere in the world, she-oaks [*casuarina*] are distinctively Australian and bring with them a characteristic audible aesthetic.... In the experiences of early Reef visitors, casuarinas were not regarded as particularly beautiful to look at, but they were frequently recalled for their sound (Pocock 374). Accounts found by Pocock repeatedly go to the sonic dimension, especially when written by people who camped among ‘the sighing trees’. She quotes E.J. Banfield, (a writer publishing as ‘Beachcomber’), writing of the ‘ever-sighing beach oaks’ on Dunk Island, and a visiting natural scientist struck by an uncanniness in their presence:

The ... casuarinas at first appeared drab and even bedraggled in the daylight – their forlorn foliage hanging in shreds but at night they seemed to become imbued [sic] with some mystical spirit at first scarcely definable but as the inevitable nights followed each other, this nameless presence claimed the imagination. Mel

Ward, 'The grinding trees', *The Sunday Sun and Guardian*, 10 February 1935.  
(Pocock 376)

The tree Kendall had in mind, given where he spent his early life, was most likely *casuarina cunninghamiana*, largest of the casuarinas, a handsome species growing in narrow belts along watercourses of the south-eastern coast and ranges.



**Fig. 2**

*Casuarina Cunninghamiana* growing along a watercourse (Source: ACT. National Library of Australia)

Kendall opens his poem by establishing a speaker standing beside a creek, looking at dying trees and the sunset. Next the speaker hears a voice beside him beginning to grieve. Consistent with the ring-barked hillside, what he hears are 'hollow hopeless tones' and 'muffled sobbing'. He responds with an 'ache for something vanished' that 'filled and chilled my longing heart'. He is half-way between inferring the tree consciously relays what it has witnessed and that it is occupied by a spirit ventriloquising via the tree.

By concentrating on sounds to activate memory and association, Kendall can engage 'Fancy', a lyric-writing device roughly equivalent to imagination, in a wild ride of association into Australian Gothic territory. The sounds of grieving make him

think, first, of all the dead, then he narrows the focus to local, specifically Aboriginal, death as the likely reason for the 'phantom's' sorrow. Without naming European acts of dispossession and destruction as such, the poem says, 'Here his people may have died' or perhaps 'to distant forests all were scattered wide'. Unexpectedly, Kendall is identifying massacre and dispersal. He listens again to the tree's sighs and is decisive: 'Blood hath here been surely shed.' Europeans are not implicated exclusively: a nearby mound, cleared of grass and forest litter, might be a site of more ancient murders. Both Fancy and such speculations evaporate when an Aboriginal man comes to the creek to drink. The

speaker is certain the man will interpret the tree's sounds for him, but despite his entreaties, the man shakes his head without uttering a word and returns to the darkness.

In *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) the philosopher Kierkegaard tells us that to remain silent, as this man does, is a response that the guilty find intolerable. The failure to reconcile sound and silence, witnessing and inability to speak, reduces Kendall's narrative not just to an impasse but also to the paralysis and terror of nightmares. The distant storm moves down from the hills, and as it breaks overhead, the forest, living and dying, 'groaned and muttered like a monster'. A 'shriek rent the air/ Like the voice of some fell demon harrowed by a mad despair.' Hearing is an experience of the whole body, and the speaker's body responds as natural and supernatural energies combine and he 'swooned away in horror'.

### **Download Supplementary Audio file mp3 from Contents Page**

'Sounds of Wind in Desert Oaks', recorded near Alice Springs by Anthony Magen

Melodramatic as the closing scene is, it allows the poem to finish in the opposite state to its floating opening — now bodily located, static, and acknowledging what difficult history is embedded in place. Kendall uses the tree sounds to come very close to articulating the unbearable and contradictory truth of the Native Australian Poet: that he is part of a process not only of violence against human beings but also of destruction of the very things required by his Romantic values — a healthy, authentic natural world including a human community respected for living in harmony with it.

In the decade after the first Speaking Tree / Native Oak poem appeared, life was an increasing struggle for Kendall. He failed to make a living as a writer, and his family life imploded through poverty and alcoholism. In and out of Gladesville Mental Asylum, Kendall began to return to normality only when, famously, a family of timber merchants got him on his feet and sent him back up the north coast of New South Wales to work. He was thus living deep in the forests when he wrote his second casuarina poem, 'The Voice in the Native Pine', supposedly addressing the same tree (Kendall 170–2). This time, the sounds made by the tree are heard to merge with, separate from, blend, and separate again from the narrator's voice. As in the earlier poem, casuarina sounds are heard as intrinsically mournful and death-related. Both Kendall's poems develop from a template of tree, sorrow and storm provided by his predecessor, Charles Harpur in 'The Voice of the Swamp Oak':

Who hath lain him underneath  
A lone Oak by a lonely stream,  
He hath heard an utterance breathe  
Sadder than aught else may seem.  
... some weird Spirit of the air,  
Hath made those boughs the lute of themes  
Wilder, darker than despair ... (Harpur)

Kendall's tree is elaborated as 'Dark widowed sister of the grove', 'Niobe of the trees' as it sends out a '... more than deep autumnal rhyme'. The sounds are called 'high authentic syllables', which only a poet could transcribe but Kendall has lost confidence in his own vocation:

... I can never write that whole  
Pure, perfect speech of thine.  
Some lord of words august, supreme,  
The grave grand melody demands.

Kendall pushes the identification of tree-sound and poetic voice further: they share both a single voice and imprisonment in the tree itself. This time it is the speaker himself who is the 'Dream-haunted spirit', 'crampt in bands of bark', and when the storms hit, it is his 'maledictions' that the tree 'shrills and shrieks':

As if a frightful memory whipped  
Thy soul for some infernal crime. (Kendall 172)

In the calmer weather in the following stanza, the tree sounds like a 'grass-hopper' squeaking. It is the poet's own affect-less voice. (Australian grasshoppers do not squeak, but the poet wants to identify with the pathetic voice of Tithonus, turned into a grasshopper and shut in a tree by his goddess-wife Eos.) Respite comes only when the winds drop at the end of August, an accurate detail more typical of Kendall. The cost is that the tree falls silent when the Fancy- and crisis-bringing wind stops blowing and the speaker walks out of the bush and the poem as an ordinary citizen, saying again that it is a future speaker of 'the speech divine' who will channel the tree's sounds into language, to 'give ... Its sense in faultless words'. (172) In both Kendall's poems, speaker, tree and reader are individual and alone. By contrast connections with casuarina sounds in Aboriginal uses, even in English, encompass a whole ecological and social presence. Instead of a poem's speaker representing a tree's sound as the difficult language spoken by higher beings, the tree is heard to say what people make it say.

### **Bad Girls Can Make A Casuarina Talk**

Across Australia the casuarina—including its sounds and other characteristics—appears significant in Aboriginal traditional beliefs, stories and explanations of belonging. In Aboriginal tellings of the legend, no single sense is privileged though listening is integral to explaining and maintaining the casuarina. My first and most detailed example is from southern South Australia, in a story written by David Unaipon and learned from his own people, the Ngarrindjeri. The casuarina, here called she-oak, is given a particular role in the doings of Ancestors, accounting for species, land formations and codes of conduct, and endowing the tree with ongoing spiritual significance. The narration assumes a state of what Feld calls the 'bodily unity of environment, senses and arts' (p. 98) but Unaipon's tone reflects also a didacticism perhaps more consistent with his reading in European literature.

Narroonderie is the name of one of the many good men that were sent among the various tribes of the Australian Aborigines:

This messenger and teacher, after coming from the northern part of Australia down into various parts of NSW and Victoria, found his way into South Australia, dwelling mostly in and around the shores of Lakes Alexandrina and Albert....

... he chose two bald hills, which were free from trees, with only low shrubs and grass trees growing, as his last home on earth, the surrounding country being dense growth of Mallee and Pine, Honeysuckle and She-Oak and a few species of Gum-tree and other shrubs...

On one of his fishing expeditions, he was passing on his way to Lake Albert when he saw in his path two grass trees young and tender, swaying so gracefully in the Kolkamia (south wind) and his attention was so arrested that he stood for a moment looking upon the two stems of grass trees, and then from the She-Oak's bough came the weird note of song – not of pleasure or joy or happiness, but of sadness. The song was that of the two women bound up in the stem of the Grass Tree. The Selfish Spirit of the Grass Tree kept these two maidens bound thus because they were so sweet, and he delighted to invite Nature – the Bees, Ants, and Honey-birds, to come and dine with him. And Narroonderie's heart was moved by their pitiful cry.

Now, these two maidens have captivated many, many good men who, on their way to the Spirit Land, have fallen victims to their wonderful charms. These two maidens had been passed on from stage to stage, sometimes into the form of a butterfly with beautiful colours, sometimes found or imprisoned in the Karldookie, (flower-tops of reeds). Various trees, shrubs, and plants have gone forth with the endeavour to keep these two maidens prisoner because their chief delight was to captivate all the great men. So it was at this time an effort of the Grass Tree to keep them bound up; it was the last of the Vegetable Kingdom and all were wondering whether it would succeed.

... on this move they were sure he would set them free. They were conscious the Grass tree was not a good medium through which they could send their message on to Narroonderie. So when the Kolkamia (south wind), breathing upon all Nature, caused their sorrowful cry of distress, as if some loved one had died and they were mourning, then Narroonderie stood, and being a Great Man, heard the cry of the two maidens and said 'Yaka yakatummburra (Oh I pity! Oh I pity you both)! Mackaunda ngool pure (Why do you both so weep ...?)'

'Menpeel nullum. They have placed us into the Grass Tree and our flesh with its sense of taste, smell, hearing and touch is dead, and only this subconscious state which is still alive makes us accept this prison home. Our bodily form and human flesh have become the form of vegetable flesh. Oh Great One, take pity upon us and release us and we shall become your servants.'

... the boughs of the She-oak began to wail as the wind was passing through the wiry leaves. Now the sounds seemed to come from the She-Oak, but were coming from the Grass Tree. (Unaipon 121–2)

This narrative, like Kendall's, represents the casuarina's sound as mournful, but the emotion asked of the listener is not raw grief – the women might be troubled but they are

not too distressed to think up a stratagem to get themselves out of justifiable imprisonment by using the ‘voice’ of the casuarina to spark the Narroonderie’s sympathy. The ethnographer Diane Bell published a book written with and about the same Ngarrindjeri people. As an anthropologist, she is also listening to listening, and she describes how this same local tree, *casuarina stricta*, remains sacred for them. The sounds made by the tree are understood to combine voice, language and the uncanny. Adding the evidence of Tindale, a nineteenth-century proto-anthropologist, to contemporary Ngarrindjeri knowledge, Bell writes that traditional doctors, that is ‘wise people’ or tendi, communicate with each other through the casuarina:

Through the sacred tree [‘tungi’: ‘imbued with spirits’] native doctors could convey messages to each other (tungari) and ‘their communications were audible when branches chafe together’. This tungari is a secret language spoken at a distance... At Katal, meaning ‘talking tree at the southernmost-named Tangani place’, there is just such a sacred tree. (Bell 72).

Here it is sounds made by the branches, not the needles, that communicate. Bell reports that casuarina needle and branch sounds still feature in stories ‘which are not discussed openly, about the Ancestor Ngurunderi’s creative acts in the Lower Murray’ (72).

Moving north-east from South Australia, we find another species, the beautiful inland casuarina called the Belah (*casuarina cristata*), on sandy red earths, sandplains, floodplains and foothills of the western region of New South Wales and neighbouring semi-arid areas. It grows either as scattered individuals or dense stands with other tree



and shrub species. In the area of undulating or hilly landscapes between Cobar and Bourke, Belah trees grow between bimple box, white cypress, mulga, red box and mallee. Here they are called Pilaaar by the Ngiyampaa people, and define the Pilaarkiyalu or ‘belah tree people’ for whom they are ‘a symbol of who the people are, and it represents their kinship with their ngurrampaa or camp-world’ (Main 22).

**Fig. 3** Belah, *Casuarina Cristata* (Source: Malcolm Carnegie, at the Lake Cowal Foundation)

In the mid-twentieth century, the Irish-Australian poet Roland Robinson travelled in the Belah territory, listening and collecting Aboriginal people’s songs and stories. He wrote some as lyrics, preserving what he understood to be the core of the story and essence of the natural phenomena referred to. Scrupulous and



respectful, he acknowledges Fred Biggs, ‘living near Menindee NSW’, as the source of ‘Poem 16’ in *Deep Well*:

Go out and camp somewhere. You’re lying down.  
A wind comes, and you hear this “Ma-poor-am”.  
“What’s that?” you say. Why, that’s a Ma-poor-am.  
You go and find that tree rubbing itself.

It makes all sorts of noises in the wind.

...

A Wirreengun, a clever-feller, sings  
that tree. He hums a song, a Ma-poor-am:  
a song to bring things out, or close things up,  
a song to bring a girl, a woman from the tree.  
She’s got long hair, it falls right down her back.  
He’s got her for himself. He’ll keep her now.

...

“Ma-poor-am. Ma-poor-am”. “What’s that?” you say.  
Why, that’s two tree-boughs rubbing in the wind. (Robinson 63)

I omit a section in which the tree-bark that the woman is stripping pulls her up into the tree and both go up into the sky, so she is lost to the Wirreengun. The poem is an act of double ventriloquism, channelling both Aboriginal voice and tree sound via accepted lyric form. Frustratingly, we have only Robinson’s use of Fred Biggs’s story for his own aesthetic purposes but as it stands, talk is put into the tree by someone with special powers to cause sounds intelligible only to another person equally educated in the hidden language. A woman can be released from the tree by a specific song but the scraping branches only permit non-initiates to recognise the situation and name the tree. In *Ngilyambaa*, the language of the Pilaar, *Wirringan* means ‘clever man’, (Main 23). The similarity to the Lower Murray representations of the casuarina, as both related to a woman’s imprisonment and having a secret language spoken by ‘wise people’, strongly suggests Robinson’s tree is the casuarina *Belah*, and that the story is a variant that links Unaipon’s version with the secret language ‘residing’ in the casuarina.

### **‘Histories of listening’**

The story relating to the casuarina on the lower Murray was transcribed by Tindale in the nineteenth century and known to both Unaipon in the early 1900s, and Ngarrindjeri people interviewed recently by Diane Bell. In his ‘Wail in the Native Oak’, Kendall ascribes special ability to transmit grief to the casuarina. Kendall channelled the sounds of the casuarina into communication via the tree in both ‘The Wail in the Native Oak’ and ‘The Voice in the Wild Oak’. Both reflect a Romantic cultural alertness to natural sounds, while his second lyric has a woman locked in the ‘native oak’, as he rather messily applied the European myths of Niobe and Tythonus. Combining the sounds from the casuarinas and the English lyric form, he wrote no other poems like these. It seems very possible the casuarina songline stretching from South Australia informs both works. In her elegy ‘The Death of Henry Kendall’ published soon after he died, Kendall’s mother wrote of his youth:

The despised aborigines loved him;  
They partook of his dry crust of bread;  
And he followed wherever they led him,  
Without fear of peril or dread. (Melinda Kendall 1884.)

Sceptical about the ‘love’ as we may be, there was no reason for her to invent this connection with the Aboriginal people of the South Coast. In the mid-nineteenth century such experience was unlikely to be publicly acknowledged or valued. Unaipon, himself Aboriginal, took the European narrative form and fitted part of the sequence of an ancestral hero’s actions to it, including a wealth of sensory detail specific to the places formed by the casuarina’s presence. The Europeans who wrote of the Barrier Reef casuarinas in the 1930s saw themselves as reporting objectively, empirically, what they heard as they camped among the trees. Fred Biggs told Roland Robinson a story that also seems to be part of the Ngurunderi cycle, which Robinson, like Kendall, detached from its specific species and country and formed into the mid-twentieth century lyric.

Aboriginal understanding of the sound of the casuarina linked it to exclusive knowledge, which does not stop the tree from both creating particular place, as with the tree Diane Bell was told of, and of all casuarinas creating meaning through their sound. In this way, sound has high social significance innately relating with place in all its manifestations. Consciousness of the powerful sonic presence of the casuarina builds through multiple representations into a deepening experience of emplacement. To conclude, the uncanny is consistently associated with casuarinas by Aborigines and Europeans alike, highlighting their potency as a cultural catalyst of the sort Taussig identifies: ‘*wherein the representation shares in or takes power from the represented*’ (my italics; Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, Feld 93).

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