



GREENSPACE

The fifth element – seeing the trees for themselves

BY STEPHEN FORBES

English writer Roger Deakin introduces *Wildwood* by observing, "I am a woodlander. I have sap in my veins." Deakin invokes wood as the 'fifth element' – beyond fire, earth, air and water. In essence this is exactly what constitutes wood and the trees they support – the sun's fire producing the light energy that trees (and essentially all plants) miraculously combine with earth, air and water to bioengineer a biochemical library and, enduringly, wood. Deakin's observation (taken from China) then applies to all of us – the infrastructure of our Earth is essentially this miracle – and our own hearts beat with the same equation.

In *Wildwood*, published posthumously in 2007, Deakin declared a manifesto, "Mine is to promote a feeling for the importance of trees through a greater understanding of them, so that people don't just think of 'trees' as they mostly do now, but of each individual tree, and each kind of tree." He develops a thesis that the "enemies of woods are always the enemies of humanity". Deakin is (rightly) admired as an eloquent advocate for trees and 'woods'. Australian artists (and perhaps especially poets) are equally eloquent yet lack the same reach – perhaps reflecting an under-developed Australian language for trees and 'woods'.

While artists have impacted our relationship with Australia's trees, the most powerful advocacy is achieved by being in the presence of charismatic trees. An important step is the recent launch by the National Trust of South Australia of the National Trusts of Australia Register of Significant Trees [trusttrees.org.au]. The Register provides access to the significant tree registers of all states and territories, and a facility to submit new nominations. While essentially a database, with a little imagination you might view the Register as something more – a portal to, and a map of, another dimension. Forget the Middle Kingdom and Narnia – here's a portal that provides access to the living creatures that include the largest, the most miraculous and the most beautiful on Earth. While their humility and tolerance of our exploitation too often allows us to take trees for granted, the opportunity to celebrate remarkable trees is a rich gift.

The Register incorporates trees on scientific, social, historic and aesthetic



grounds and provides an online nomination process; and proposals for new candidates are welcomed by the Trust. A few examples serve to illustrate some of the riches made much more accessible through the Register.

The visible connection of Aboriginal people with country remains in trees marked by the removal of bark – most spectacularly for canoes. The *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* (river red gum) signposted near Currency Creek as an Aboriginal Canoe Tree is well-known – with a scar extending five metres. Such trees interpret a living culture as Ngarrindjeri Elder Major 'Moogy' Sumner has shown (vimeo.com/14327457). Remnant urban native trees such as the *Bursaria spinosa* (sweet bursaria) in Adelaide Botanic Gardens are also included on the Register.

European heritage includes, most famously for South Australians, the Old Gum Tree at Glenelg. The celebrated image of a hoop-shaped *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* (river red gum) under which Governor Hindmarsh proclaimed the Colony of South Australia has remained a subject of dispute. Burke's tree, the *Eucalyptus coolabah* (coolabah), where Burke's body was found by Alfred Howitt's rescue party for the Burke & Wills expedition, endures on Cooper Creek in South Australia. Trees have provided more than observer status for our heritage – the Herbig tree was home for Johann Friedrich Herbig after his arrival in South Australia from Bremen in 1855. Herbig lived here in the hollowed base of a substantial *Eucalyptus camaldulensis* at Black Springs – now Springton. European heritage also includes planted trees such as a fine South American *Phytolacca dioica* (ombú) just visible in the grounds of private residence in Prospect. This ombú, a rare planting in Australia, would have been planted by one of the previous owners – John Bagot, Walter Reynell or Professor William Mitchell – more than a century ago.

The Trust's Register isn't the only portal to the largest, most miraculous and most beautiful living creatures on Earth. The National Register of Big Trees co-ordinated by Derek McIntosh in Sydney provides another [nationalregisterofbigtrees.com.au] – this Register is catholic in terms of a tree's heritage – the focus is height, girth and tree spread. The most famous trees for Australia are of

course *Eucalyptus regnans* (mountain ash) – arguably the tallest growing tree species in the world. Historic records show that in 1880 a felled mountain ash was recorded at 114.5m in Thorpdale, 137km south-east of Melbourne, making it the tallest tree in the world at the time. At present the tallest specimen, 'Centurion' – stands at 99.6m in Tasmania's Arve Valley and lays claim to being the world's tallest flowering plant and known hardwood tree. South Australian eucalyptologist Dean Nicolle's measurements provide a solid foundation for this Register's records. Dean's self-published 2013 *Native Eucalypts of South Australia* is not only a wonderful identification guide but lists significant specimens yet to be registered on either the National Trust or the Big Tree Register.

Australia, and South Australia, has a remarkable natural and cultural tree heritage. These registers aren't yet anything like comprehensive and will only be so if individuals take up the challenge to nominate trees. The nominations and subsequent registrations from Anlaby Station owners Andrew Morphett and Peter Hayward working with horticulturist Charlie Buttigieg are outstanding in this regard and set a high standard that even botanic gardens might aspire to deliver. Regardless of the many gaps, the National Trusts of Australia's Register provides wonderful opportunities to record, access and celebrate Australia's tree heritage.

A final note: the concluding exhibition for *WOOD: art design architecture*, developed by the JamFactory and the Botanic Gardens of South Australia with support from the Commonwealth Government's Contemporary Touring Initiative and Wood Naturally Better, opened on October 17 at Object in Sydney and runs until Saturday, November 29.

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