

BIG TREES! TALL TALES?

L. Talbot

During the last century, explorers of the South-West often recorded their impressions of dense stands of large trees and described individual trees of giant proportions.

In 1831 Capt. J. Bannister recorded a large karri tree near the Frankland River. He claimed this "bluegum of prodigious height diameter" had a breast height girth of 13 m and was 43 to 46 m to the first limb.

A.C. Gregory claimed several of the karri he saw along the Donnelly in 1852 were 43 m to the first limb.

Western Australia's first Conservator of Forests, J. Ednie Brown, recorded the following measurements of a karri felled for M.C. Davies' mill at Karridale in about 1896.

"34 feet [10 m] circumference 3 feet [1 m] from the ground.
160 feet [49 m] to first limb.
14 feet [4 m] circumference at first limb.
Extreme height over 200 feet [61 m]."

He wrote, "From these figures it will be seen that the bole of this tree from the bottom to the first limb contains nearly 6 000 cubic feet [170m³] of timber. This means that it has a weight of over 40 tons [41 t] in all [170m³ of green karri would weigh 196 t!]; that it would take one of our ordinary mills at least four days to convert it into sawn stuff, and that it would form about a quarter of the loading capacity of one of the ships which form the fleet of our present export timber trade".

Governor Stirling, describing the jarrah forest he passed through between the McAlinden River and Bunbury (1837), claimed that the huge jarrah trees with clean boles to 15 m were only 1 to 2 m apart.

In the 1870's Baron Ferdinand von Mueller was brought to W.A. by the Colonial Government to examine and report on the Colony's forest resources. In his report he said that the Muir brothers had told him of a karri tree 91 m to the first limb and he said that he had himself seen trees which he considered must have been 122 m high.

In 1876, in a lecture he gave in Victoria, von Mueller gave accounts of some of the largest trees measured or known of up to that time. He said, "- the highest tree previously known was a karri (Eucalyptus colosseae), measured by Mr Pemberton Walcott, in one of the delightful glens of the Warren River of Western Australia, where it rises to approximately four hundred feet [122 m] high. Into the hollow trunk of this karri three riders, with an additional pack horse, could enter and turn in it without dismounting". (It was von Mueller who named karri E. diversicolor).

However, the Baron went on to tell of some Victorian trees which dwarfed this W.A. giant. At his request a Mr D. Boyle had measured a fallen tree (probably E. regnans F. Muell.) in the Dandenongs. It measured 128m, and near Healseville a Mr Klein measured a eucalypt which it was claimed measured 146 m. This in turn was dwarfed by another which a Mr George Robinson found in the ranges near Bewick. Robinson claimed for his tree a girth of 25 m, 1 m from the ground, and he supposed that this species (E. regnans) reached a height of "half a thousand feet [152 m] towards the sources of the Yarra and Latrobe Rivers".

So it would seem that Victoria grew bigger trees, or story tellers, than Western Australia, but perhaps that isn't really the case; Jesse Hammond has given us a tale about a big tree to match the best of Victoria's.

In "Winjans People" Hammond told how in the 1890's he was with a party kangarooing about 161 km east of Northam. They had with them an old aboriginal man who was born in the Kellerberrin district. One night as they sat talking around their fire the old native told them of a big tree that once grew in that region. In this tree the eagles built their nests and sometimes they took picaninnies to feed the young eagles. The natives could not throw their spears or koilees as high as the nest and neither could they climb the tree, so they decided to burn it down. All the natives from near and far gathered to do this and they carted all the wood within one kilometre of the tree, but still it took several months to burn down. The next day the old native took the white men to where the tree had stood, about 16 km from the previous night's camp.

According to Hammond there was an outline on the ground that seemed to suggest that a huge tree had been burnt there and, judging by this outline, the tree would have been over 152 m

long and 5 m in diameter, while the width across its limbs would have been 21 m. No vegetation at all grew on the outline and the old black fellow told them that no grass or scrub would ever grow on that spot again and that the black people would not stand on the cleared spot for fear that the "Jingee" (devil) might come. He said that no one could say when it was done, only that it was done.

The information for this article was obtained from original material held in the Battye Library, as was that used in my previous article "Wild Men of the Wild Country". (Forest Notes, Volume 11 Number 3).