A tree marked B

In the once-remote and inhospitable environs of Nambung National Park a giant tuart tree bearing the mark 'B' has puzzled generations of people intrigued by its history.

by John Hunter

Tuart trees (*Eucalyptus gomphocephala*) are found only in the coastal regions of Western Australia from about Cervantes to Busselton and are one of the toughest trees on the planet, known both for their survival in harsh terrain and their steel-like wood. One such eucalypt is a historically famous west coast landmark which, on survey maps, is simply referred to as 'Tree marked B'. Little more was known of its exact location and history. But detective work over the past 40 years has resulted in various ideas for the tree's origin being put forward and accepted until, each time, new evidence came to light forcing a rethink of its history. Adding to the puzzle was the fact that the river on which the tree occurred changed name three times, and landholders who may have been responsible for the carving each had the same initial—B. Just how long had the tree been blazed, interested people asked, who had marked it, and when did they leave their initial?

Opening new ground

In the early days of the colony of Perth, drovers, troopers, explorers and prospective landowners forged north in an effort to discover new agricultural land, or were simply carrying out their allotted work duties. Within some 150 kilometres, however, they encountered a most inhospitable and waterless terrain that seemed to go on forever, defeating many aspirations and, in a few cases, ending in disaster and death.

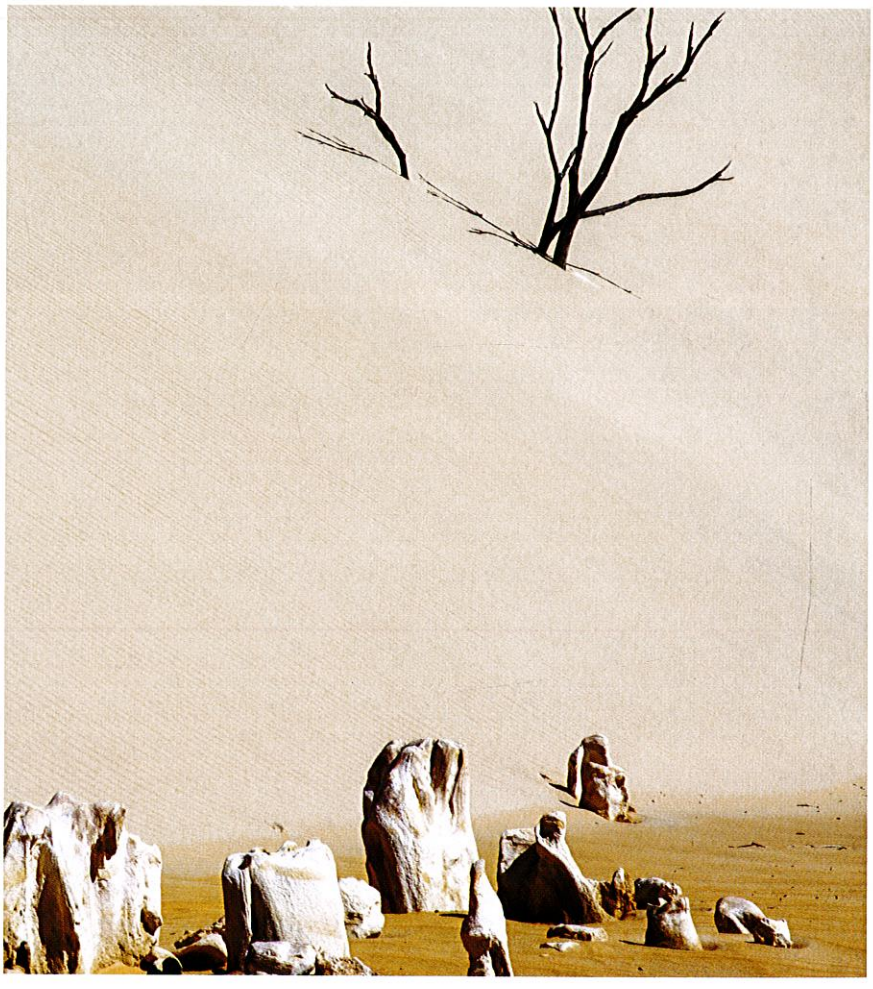
Today, the Mid West coast near the town of Cervantes incorporates Nambung National Park, abutted on the north and south by large tracts of flora-rich nature reserves. While Nambung is well known for its Pinnacles Desert, the surrounding area contains a rich biodiversity of caves, extensive heath lands, scattered banksias, stunted gums, tuart forest and, in spring, myriads of wildflowers. However, to the early colonists, this passage to the north of the state was a most unwelcoming place, especially during the warmer months.

In 1839, just 10 years after the settlement of Perth, British explorer Lieutenant George Grey and a party passed through the area after becoming shipwrecked and being forced to walk from near modern-day Kalbarri back to Fremantle. During this arduous walk of some 700 kilometres, the party lost Fredrick Cook Smith, an eighteen-year-old who had arrived from England expressly to join Grey's exploration party. Smith expired on the beach south of what is now Nambung National Park and, in his admiration of the lad's courage, Grey named a nearby creek the 'Frederick Smith River'.

A landmark found

Later, during the mid 1800s, some sections of fertile land in the area that is now national park were opened up for lease as agricultural grants and a stock route for cattle. And there began the 'Tree marked B' puzzle taken up and investigated about a century later.

In 1968 Nambung National Park was officially named and acquired its first full-time ranger, Alf Passfield. He soon became very interested in a point marked on the then Lands and Surveys Department plans of a section of the Nambung River in the park. The point was designated as 'Tree marked B' but, although Passfield and others tried for years to find that tree, it remained lost—probably destroyed



Previous page
Main Shifting dunes in Nambung National Park.

Above A dead tuart protrudes from a sand dune in Nambung National Park.
Photos – Janine Guenther

Above The Pinnacles of Nambung National Park.
Photo – Len Stewart/Lochman Transparencies

Left Tuart flower.
Photo – Janine Guenther

by bushfires they thought. Even so, the tree remained on every local pastoral map since 1921. What was its history? What was its fate?

The maps of government surveyor E Manning, who surveyed the area in 1921, clearly showed the tree's location relative to his survey pegs, but those wooden pegs were burnt by bushfire soon after placement.

Then, in May 1968 when private property inside the new park's boundaries was resurveyed, the burnt and rotted stumps of Manning's 47-year-old pegs were found. This enabled ranger Passfield to get out into the scrub and start searching again.

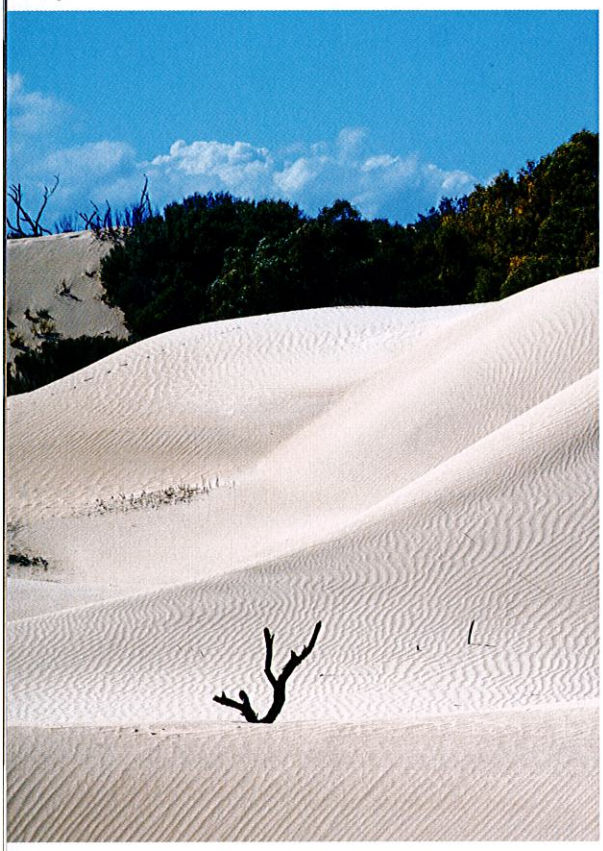
In November 1971, with his hand compass for direction and his pace for distance measurement, Passfield set out to re-plot Manning's survey lines. His reckoning eventually bought him face to trunk with what he thought was the biggest tuart tree in the whole park, right on the bank of the Nambung River where the elusive marker 'B' should be. Despite its potential as a marker, he could find no letter 'B' on the tree at all, the only unusual feature being a large termite nest up one side of the trunk. Was there anything under the nest?

Passfield was soon back with an axe and, as the nest fell, he could see that the bark of the tree was cut away in the shape of a large shield. After a few minutes of careful scraping he found a deeply carved letter 'B' in the wood, still in perfect condition. The rock-like nest had effectively hidden it from searchers and had given amazingly good protection to the carving for, while termites prefer to build their nests against a tuart, the wood itself is immune to their attack.

Detective work

The question still remained as to the 'B's origin. The Lands and Surveys Department could only find it as early as Manning's maps of 1921, although they found cancelled maps showing the tree was marked before 1913. Still no one knew when the tree was marked, or by whom.

Ian Elliott of the Lands and Surveys Department's Geographical Names



Above left The northern end of the Pinnacles Desert where the white sand dunes meet thick tuart forests.
Photo – Janine Guenther

Above The famous tuart tree bearing the carving 'B'.
Photo – Steve Taylor

Register then became interested in the riddle and after many hours of research in the department's records and the Western Australian State Archives, he uncovered a pastoral lease map of the area—the old cancelled 'Melbourne 4' District Public Plan of 1898 which showed a lease in the area taken out by a HA Bower. Although no marked tree was shown on the lease application, it may have been Bower who carved the tree with his initial to mark his western boundary, a common practice at the time. As seen on the application, at this time, the Nambung River was known as Namban River (thought to be a mispronunciation for the Nyoongar word nambung which means 'crooked' or 'winding').

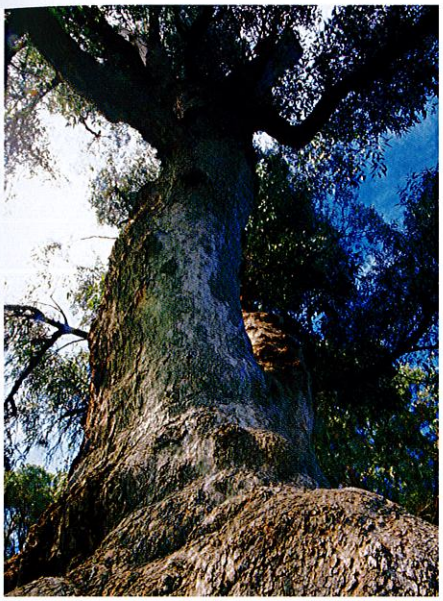
A little more detective work back in the archives uncovered two previous applications made by LC Burges for renewal of a lease over the same land in the area. These applications in 1887 and 1873 both featured 'Tree marked B' on the Namban River as the sole reference point from which the boundaries of the lease were drawn. Then Elliott discovered a copy of 'Melbourne plan 8' drawn by surveyor EC Dean in 1868 naming Nambung River as Smith River (Grey's tribute to his deceased colleague) and, on its course, the tree now mapped as 'Tuart marked B'. The tree was also the primary reference for the surrounding lease belonging to LC Burges. And this was the first reference which revealed the tree's species type—confirmation of Alf Passfield's find. This earlier document now meant a change in the theory—perhaps it was Burges who carved the 'B' instead of Bower.

Lockier Clare Burges Esq. was from a wealthy and influential family and held leases over many areas along the western coastline of the Swan River Colony. He also often set out to explore new regions. He is probably the only man in Australia's history to be convicted of manslaughter, serve his sentence and later become a Justice of the Peace. In 1872 he was convicted of shooting an Aboriginal man who was escaping after capture for stealing one of Burges' saddles. His sentence of five years penal servitude was later reduced to one year and, in 1877, his appointment to Justice of the Peace was announced in the *Government Gazette*. With such a background, Burges may well have kept a diary, so the hunt was on again to find confirmation of the origins and age of that carving on what was now known as the 'Burges Tree'.

Meanwhile, back to Alf Passfield's time. After a year without the protection of the termites, the carving on the tuart was weathering rapidly.

But those tenacious builders were making a comeback and, by mid 1973, the shield was practically covered once more affording it protection against rain, sun and fire.

The search for Burges' diary continued until June 1973 when Ian Elliot again uncovered more information that turned the whole story back even further. An entry in the *Government Gazette* dated 20 May 1862 referred to a proposal for a road from Perth to Geraldton, and a portion of that read: "... crossing the Smith River near the east boundary of Mr R Brockman's lease 588, where a tuart tree is marked with the letter 'B' ...".



Above One of the larger tuarts of the river valley.
Photo – Jiri Lochman

A further check found that lease Number 588 was taken up by WL Brockman on 16 March 1855 and transferred to Robert Brockman on 3 November. The original lease application for 1,000 acres read: "Bounded on the east by a line extending 120 chains north and 197 chains south from the centre of a tuart tree marked 'B' and situated on the right bank of the Frederick Smith River, about 16 miles in a north-westerly direction from Dandaraga Spring and on the north and south by west lines of 315 and a half chains each and on the west by a north and south line of 317 chains. All bearings and boundaries true."

So the blaze was there even before Burges held the lease which suggests it was in fact WL Brockman who performed the handiwork in carving his initial. At last the mystery of this historic survey point and giant sentinal of the old Perth to Geraldton stock route had been solved.

Today in the wilderness area of Nambung National Park stands the fire-scarred tuart of some 200 years of age bearing the blaze and a somewhat indecipherable 'B'. The record has been put straight but, like all living things, the tree will not last forever.

Mystery in a moonscape

The mystery and intrigue of this semi-arid piece of Mid West coastline goes back even further than the 1600s when first observed from the passing Dutch and French sailing ships blown close to shore, and sometimes wrecked, by the vicious sea winds. The onshore desert dune systems with their pinnacle stone monuments would have appeared to the merchant mariners as a distant fortress and perhaps not a good place to just 'drop in'. Little did they realise that nomadic Aboriginal people had visited the area for thousands of years.

The Pinnacle Desert, however, harboured an even older secret—one of an extraterrestrial nature.

In 1964, Messrs RL Devitt and JH Turner were wandering through the area admiring the sand drifts and calcium spires when they noticed a strange boulder lying on the barren sandy surface among the pinnacles. Noting the boulder's foreign appearance to the surrounding geology, its flaky coating of 'iron-shale' and a patch of fusion crust at one end, the men were suspicious of its earthly origin. The object was rightly delivered to the Western Australian Museum and the task of identification began.

As thought by the finders, the boulder was verified as a deeply weathered 'olivine-bronzite chondrite'—in other words a meteoritic stone of bronzed iron and magnesium with a core of other minerals and iridescent glass particles. The crudely pear-shaped and slightly flattened object some 26 centimetres long by 20 centimetres wide tapering to 12 centimetres, weighed about nine kilograms, which gave some indication that the meteor would not have been transported by Aboriginal people who frequented the area.

Several questions then came to mind. How old was this visitor from out of space? Where was the crater that it made on landing? Why was the atmospheric explosion and resulting light trail not seen or reported?

One can only surmise the meteorite's weathered condition was exacerbated due to the marine atmosphere, making an estimate of the landing date impossible. It is thought to have landed anytime from recently to thousands of years ago.

But what of the crater meteorites normally leave? By examining the solidified spatter on the object's fusion crust, you can surmise that it was reaching its final deceleration where all cosmic velocity is lost and it simply had a 'soft' landing. Where else could that be better achieved than in the loose quartz of the desert dunes?

And what of the lack of sightings? That's simple—this object also had one of the most isolated and least inhabited parts of the globe on which to land.

It is ironic that, like the nearby 'Tree marked B', after the meteorite was collected and documented and a tablet of stone set to record the site in 1965, it was for all intents and purposes forgotten, until recent times. While looking for a lost tourist last year, ranger Paul Robb climbed a small butte in Nambung National Park dunes and, there on the rocky crest, out of sight and mind, were the details of the discovery from some 50 years ago on a man-made stone plaque.

One question remains—what else may be found in the shifting, whispering sands of the Pinnacles Desert?

John Hunter is a Department of Environment and Conservation public affairs officer and long-time contributor to *LANDSCOPE* magazine. He can be contacted on (08) 9389 4016 or by email (john.hunter@dec.wa.gov.au).

The author would like to thank Ian Elliott, and acknowledge the content of unsigned notes discovered in an old government desk many years ago.

Volume 28 Number 4 WINTER 2013

contents

Regulars

Publishing credits

Executive editor Madeleine Clews.

Editors Samille Mitchell, Joanna Moore.

Scientific/technical advice Kevin Thiele, Lachie McCaw, Keith Morris, Shaun Wilson.

Design and production Lynne Whittle, Gooitzen van der Meer, Peter Nicholas.

Illustration Gooitzen van der Meer.

Cartography Promaco Geodraft.

Marketing Cathy Birch.
Phone (08) 9334 0296 or *fax* (08) 9334 0432.

Subscription enquiries
Phone (08) 9219 8000.

Prepress and printing Advance Press, Western Australia.

ISSN 0815-4465

Please do not send unsolicited material, but feel free to contact the editors.

Published by the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), 17 Dick Perry Avenue, Kensington, Western Australia.

Visit DEC online at www.dec.wa.gov.au to search the *LANDSCOPE* catalogue.

Department of
Environment and Conservation