

A BIG TREE ON THE BANKS OF THE SWAN RIVER IN 1697

In 1696-97, an expedition was sent from Holland to the west coast of the land we now call Australia. Three ships, under the command of Willem de Vlamingh, were to explore and chart the coast, as well as to search for exploitable wealth and for wrecked Dutch ships.

The task was meticulously performed, and an excellent chart produced, from Rottneest (called after the large 'rats' they saw there) to the Exmouth Gulf. While principally charting the coast, they did occasionally explore inland, but they found dense scrub, little fresh water and no wealth. All they saw of the Aboriginal inhabitants were footprints, campfire smoke and the remains of huts.

Their journals record little detail, apart from matters concerning marine navigation. However, on 5th January 1697, a party explored the Swan River (where they commented on the abundant



black swans) and had reached, probably, around Freshwater Bay. The account continues: "Marched into the country along the river which flows inland, came to a bluff, could not walk the beach any longer, ascended a height where we took a rest, saw there a big tree, three fathoms in thickness and full of notches by which people could ascend till the top of the tree".

An English fathom is six feet in length, presumably the Dutch

measurement is similar. That would make the tree 18 feet (± 6 metres) across! Wow! There are three species it could have been, tuart, jarrah or perhaps marri. Probably, since they were not far from the coast, it was a tuart. A tree that old would have had generations of Aboriginal people climbing it to harvest possums or eggs from the various birds that would have used the hollows for nesting – hence the notches.

The explorers were not at all impressed by what they saw in WA, and left on 21st Feb 1697, firing three shots "as a signal of farewell to the miserable South-land". De Vlamingh's superiors in Batavia were not impressed either, accusing him of failing to explore properly. Surely no part of the world could be so barren and inhospitable and so devoid of the means to acquire riches?

Sketch: F. Valentijn, 1726