

Talk to be given by John White on his monograph
Burke and Wills - The Stockade and the Tree
at the Royal Society Building, Friday, 8pm, 5 June 1992

Thanks Richard etc

First I must comment on the title of my talk as stated in the newsletter, Burke and Wills. This is rather blunt and suggests I will be attempting to cover the whole expedition. Well, please perish the thought; I cover only one episode in the expedition, and that is the DIG Tree and the stockade situated at their Camp LXV, or in Arabic numerals, Camp 65 near Cooper's Creek. I am no authority on the whole expedition, quite freely admit this, and only cover it briefly in my work.

All you people, no doubt, have a good idea of what eventuated during the developing tragedy of the Burke and Wills Expedition, so I am not going to attempt to relate the complications now and they do not feature in my material.

Brahe, was left in charge of the advance base camp 65 when Burke and his three companions set out for the Gulf of Carpentaria on 16 December 1860, Brahe left a number of markings on a tree and buried some stores in a camel chest before vacating the camp late morning 21 April 1861.

Some hours later, Burke, Wills and King, Gray having died a few days previously, staggered into the empty camp, exhausted and starving, found the buried stores, and two days later reburied the empty chest exactly as they had found it and set out to reach a possible settlement in the south. Both Burke and Wills died in the precincts of the Cooper late June/early July, and King was found, barely alive having been supported by some Aborigines, on the 15 September^{ber} by a rescue party from Melbourne led by Alfred William Howitt. This account of the climax of the tragedy is really very crude and just a reminder, for the people I have named feature in my monograph whilst the whole story of the expedition has no direct relevance except that it was the prelude to the creation of the DIG Tree.

Now to my monograph and how did I become involved in the subject?

During 1984, my wife and I did a camping tour of parts of Central Australia with the Royal Historical Society of Queensland. It was an exciting rewarding experience during which we camped close to the DIG Tree of the Burke and Wills Expedition.

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I was keeping a diary at the time and when typing it out later, I decided I should include some details about this historic episode including the tree and also the stockade which was built by Brahe.

It was then I came across so many different versions of what information was inscribed in the blazes of the tree; I really became astonished at the number of variations. I will deal with these, but first about the stockade.

The stockade was built by Brahe and his four companions soon after Burke, Wills, King and Gray set out for the Gulf on 16 December 186). Brahe said it was sized 20 feet by 18, and was erected mainly to protect their guns and ammunition from being stolen by the various parties of Aborigines which at times came close to and visited their camp site.

Neither Burke nor Wills mention the stockade in any of their papers or diaries; nor did Howitt. It could have been a verbal instruction by Burke to Brahe that he build a stockade to protect the stores. Both Brahe and King spoke about it during the Commission Enquiry set up to examine the whole expedition, mentioning the position it was placed in relation to the stores buried in the camel chest. But no person said where it was placed in relation to Cooper's Creek.

It was placed between the DIG Tree and Cooper's Creek, and this we know only through the various photos, and a drawing, which were taken many years later showing the remains of tree limbs and saplings, some standing and others lying around in disarray. The drawing by Miss De Mole in 1893, illustrating the cover, is the most complete evidence of the stockade that has come to my notice. There is no doubt the stockade stood between the DIG Tree and the Creek. When we were there in 1984, the remains of the stockade and the land where it stood had all been eroded away, no doubt by swirling floods. It will be noticed in the reproduction on the cover that Miss De Mole spelt the name Burke as B-o-u-r-k-e when she titled the drawing, and it was considered unethical to alter this spelling.

I mention some strange interludes about the stockade, such as Burke being involved with the stockade not only before he left for the Gulf but also before it had been built.

This brings me to the markings on the DIG Tree, being the camp number,

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the dates the camp commenced and was vacated, and what was in the blaze that included the word DIG?

A cairn of stones cemented together stands facing the DIG Tree from a short distance on which there is an inscripted bronze plaque with the camp number B ever LXV and also the information DIG UNDER 40FT W. This was a new figure and distance for our party, for most had read the frequently quoted DIG 3FT NW. This cairn and plaque had been erected by E.G. Conrick in 1937, the son of John Conrick who settled in the area in the early 1870s and the founder of Nappa Merrie Station, which still survives under that name but with different owners.

Here we had two different distances, 3FT and 40FT; only one could be correct, but which? So I went searching for more information, and will now show you some interesting results; some are, I suppose, fantastic, and most have contents which do not seem feasible. By that I mean, whole words and full stops and commas which one can really doubt would ever be carved by a knife or a tomahawk into such a limited space.

We must remember here, and details will be related later, that Brahe supervised the carving of three different inscriptions on the coolibah tree, and not one as the following quotations would suggest: for instance.

- 2 — Alan Moorehead
- 3 — Ian McLaren
- 4 — Manning Clark
- 5 — Manning Clark
- 6 — C.E.W.Bean
- 7 — John McKellar
- 8 — Gary Hogg
- 9 — The Rev Michael Watson
- 10 — Andrew Jackson

There are plenty of other examples, if one wanted to extend the research, but I have, I think, presented enough evidence for you to appreciate why I scratched my head and wondered what the hell was going on. One can certainly say they cannot all be correct, but which quotation was correct? those mixing the word DIG with dates were certainly incorrect, but was it possible they all could be incorrect? I did not know but was sufficiently intrigued to do some

more investigation, and then followed some hundreds of hours research spread over four to five years involving correspondence with a number of libraries and institutions, covering all three inscriptions.

I will discuss the camp number blaze first!

The camp at Cooper's Creek was number 65 in sequence since the Expedition left Melbourne, and the south side of the Coolibah DIG Tree was numbered accordingly. I could not find any instructions from anyone as to how they were to be numbered whether with Arabic numerals which we ordinarily use, or Roman, but I think we can say with certainty that the explorers always used Roman numerals when numbering the camp sites, so the 65 was carved into the tree as LXV. Roman numerals are severely straight or square and do not have the curves common to Arabic numerals, so are less difficult to carve with a knife into the trunk of a tree.

That the explorers used Roman numerals can be substantiated by an incident involving Wills. He always headed his Field Books with the camp numbers included in the text, such as LXXII (72) to LXXVII (78). When he came to head his Field Book No.6, he originally used Arabic numerals, 98 to 105, but he then realized he had made a mistake so he crossed them out and wrote above them LXXXXII to CV. Of course, the LXXXXII should have been XCVII, which were the numerals he wrote in the previous Field Book No.5. And of course, the letter B for Burke was always inscribed above the camp number, respecting his position as leader of the Expedition.

The B over LVX can still be seen on the DIG Tree on the south side facing Cooper's Creek because the healing regrowth of the bark over the wound has been cut back so the inscription will not be covered. But this has not happened with the dates and DIG blazes and they are now completely covered with the new growth.

Now to the dates blaze. This was carved in a side branch, pointing in an easterly direction, of the coolibah tree containing the dates blaze. In this blaze, Brahe carved the date the camp was set up, that is December 6 1860, and the date he left the camp, April 21 1861. These dates were reduced in the blaze to DEC 6 60 above or over APR 21 61. King in his evidence twice mentions April 21 but never mentions a December date. Brahe, at the Commission Enquiry,

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said he marked a tree with the date 21st April and also 16th December 1860. It would seem Brahe was getting his dates mixed up for the 16th December was the date that Burke left Camp LXV for the Gulf, although I quote two other writers who also wrote 16 December being in the dates blaze.

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 But these people are wrong. John Conrick, who settled near the DIG Tree in the early 1870s, said in a letter published in the Melbourne Argus during 1908, that the dates inscription read DEC 6 60 (over) April 21 61, and these two dates have been substantiated in a number of photographs from various sources, one of which is included in my book. The drawing by Miss DeMole on the cover also clearly shows DEC 6 60.

It is interesting to recollect now how those authors I quoted previously linked part of the dates blaze with the word DIG from another blaze, and all suggesting they were stating a single marking, the DIG marking in the DIG blaze.

So let us now investigate the DIG blaze, to find out exactly what information Brahe cut in this blaze to support the word DIG, and that word is asserted by all as a certainty.

Neither Burke nor Wills mention any of the blazes in their writings after they returned from the Gulf; Howitt, who rescued King and buried the remains of Burke and Wills, does not mention any blazes in his diaries and field books, but in two lectures (detailed in my book), he joins the parade of mixing them up by stating, in one instance (quote) 'bore only the words 'Dig. April 21', and the other, 'cut out the words and figures 'DIG 21 April, 1861'. For a man who was so meticulous in his writings and maps, these two bald statements are an astonishing revelation.

Brahe, in a Report he had to prepare, wrote, after listing the rations prepared for the camel box, 'buried near the stockade at the foot of a large tree, and marked the word DIG on the tree.' Then, at the Commission Enquiry, he said the camel chest was 3 by 3 feet in dimensions and was buried close by a tree which was marked DIG. No other information came from Brahe about the DIG blaze, and yet he either did the carving or would have supervised what went into it.

King, in his Narrative to Howitt soon after he was found alive, said, 'found the tree with 'DIG.AP.21'....and found the plant of stores.' Then, at

It was this reply by King that started the legend, yes, it is part of our folklore now, that the DIG inscription included the information 3feet or 3FT.

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 Frank Clune also added to this legend when he wrote his quite famous book, DIG, published in 1937. When he came to writing about the DIG tree and its inscriptions, he quoted King's reply, 'Then Mr Wills saw a mark on the tree 'Dig three feet north-west or north-east', and wondered what to say was correct. So, he admits in his book, he tossed a coin and it came ^{down} north-west, so he wrote the DIG inscription ^{to} read DIG above or over 3FT NW, and many historians and writers, although not quite all as we have noticed previously, have repeated the same inscription.

To the best of my researchings, King was the only person who mentions the distance 3FT being in the blaze, and remember, he did not say that he saw this figure but Mr Wills saw it and made the remark. Brahe mentioned the word DIG but gave no distance, likewise Howitt, who did not mention ~~the~~ any of the blazes in his diaries, ^{and} mentioned only the word DIG in the two lectures I referred to previously.

Apart from King, who was quoting ~~Mr~~ Wills, only two people have come to my notice stating on paper they had actually seen the DIG blaze containing not only the word DIG but also additional markings, and they are two members of the Conrick family, John, the founder of Nappa Merrie Station, and his son, E.G., who died in the middle 1960s. Neither Conrick mentions the figure 3 nor directions NW or NE. I will quote the son, E.G., first, without going into unnecessary details.

E.G. Conrick wrote two letters which have come to my notice; one to the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch, dated 14 April 1945, and the other to the Royal Historical Society of Queensland. I will not detail them now but in both he said that the DIG inscription read DIG (over) under (in small letters) (over) 40FT W. This is the same inscription he placed on the plaque he erected at the DIG Tree camp site in 1937, except on the plaque the word under is **u** in capital letters.

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I will deal with the figure 40 first. If this figure 40 is meant to be the distance between the DIG Tree and the buried camel chest, it cannot be correct, for in his evidence at the Commission Enquiry, King related that when he returned to this camp site with Burek Burke and Wills, they found a rake (quote) '...and laid it against the tree which was marked' (end quote) which would be the tree with the DIG inscription. To this statement we can add part of what Brahe said at the Commission Enquiry when questioned about his return to Camp LXV ~~with~~ on the 8th May after Burke Wills and King had been and departed; talking about the rake, he said, (quote) I believe I placed it on the cache, leaning against a tree, and I found it there when I returned (end quote). Summing up those two statements arrives at a solution that the rake was placed on top of the buried camel chest ~~and~~ to lean against the DIG Tree.

This conclusion means that if E.G. Conrick did see the figures 40 carved in the tree, and I think we should believe he did, it was not ~~placed~~ placed there by any of the explorers for no rake in the widest imagination could lean 40 feet.

This conclusion ^{also} gives credence to ~~what~~ King when he said Mr Wills said 3 feet, that the camel chest was close to the DIG Tree.

At this stage I would like to combine further extracts from the letters by E.G. Conrick into the following information, and I quote, 'I have heard said that Brahe had DIG UNDER on tree without any other message...the under was in script letters I can remember this inscription well as I often saw it as a boy although it has all eroded with the weather now' end quote.

This repeating of the word 'under' in small letters being included in the DIG blaze, was confirmed many years earlier by his father, John, when he said

in the Argus letter published in 1908 and mentioned previously, that 'on the butt of the tree is....DIG under....' (end quote) He was commenting on all the markings on the DIG Tree and did not mention any distances of 3FT or 40FT.

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A further support for the 'DIG under' being inscribed in the blaze is contained in a photo which appeared in a former weekly companion to the Sydney Morning Herald, titled Sydney Mail, which appeared during the years 1860 to 1938.

In an issue dated 11 October 1911, a photo appeared of the 'DIG Tree' which is reproduced in my monograph. This photo distinctly shows the remains of two small words being IG over nder, the rest of the lettering having been covered with new growth covering up the wound.

The letters nder are not heavily incised so obviously they have not been carved over an earlier inscription, and the aging appearance

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of the combination of letters matches the aging appearance of the IG above, I have come to the conclusion, and I do not think it can be doubted, that the information that Brahe carved into the DIG blaze was Dig over nder. Complete. No more. No less.

You may well ask, what about Mr Wills and his three feet. I have thought about this, also, and what I wrote was "If we accept that the blaze contained only DIG (over) under, then, when the explorers arrived back at Camp LXV and immediately realized it was deserted, they would have read that vague instruction and begun to shuffle the earth aside with their weary feet, searching for whatever was hidden; in these circumstances, isn't it possible that what King actually heard Wills exclaim was, 'Here it is...it is only three feet from the tree!' That seems logical to me!

I have been talking for a long while, possibly too long, but I can state that there is other investigative material in my writings supporting this conclusion which I do not have time to mention now

But before I conclude I would like to mention another 'finding' I disclose in my small book, and that is that Alfred William Howitt also left his markings in the same blaze, the DIG blaze.

am
I shall endeavour to be brief and certainly cutting down the investigative searchings I relate in the book.

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A photograph reproduced in the book, from the National Library, Canberra, includes the DIG Tree and the DIG blaze, with the markings apparently lined with a white chalk to make them stand out. It is not

a very clear photo , possibly taken during the early 1900s, and there is a marking of what appears to be an AH combined and lower down an arrow pointing west.

During the Commission Enquiry, Alfred William Howitt gave evidence during which he had the following exchange, ¹⁾ Did ~~x~~ you leave any marks? Yes, the camps were marked with ~~my~~ initials and the broad arrow pointing the direction I had gone. ¹⁾

The AH combined and the arrow, which he used as his insignia, can be distinctly seen in a well-known photo of a tree near the site where he found and buried the remains of Burke. The AH combined in both photos has the same carved appearance.

Also, John Conrick in his letter in the Argus of 1908 wrote that John Conrick also has a comment. His complete comments on the DIG blaze in his letter of 1908 was, (quote) And on the butt of the tree is a AH (AH combined), "DIG" under and a broad arrow. The AH and the arrow were put on by Howitt, the arrow pointing down the Cooper denoting the direction of travel'(end quote).

Some writers have written that the arrow was put in the blaze by Brahe pointing to where the camel chest was buried, but this ~~is~~ is completely wrong if for no other reason than the fact that the chest was buried at the base of the tree.

In his diaries, Howitt does not mention marking the DIG Tree, but I think it can be accepted the AH and the arrow were his markings for he visited the camp site more than once. He must have cut ~~xxx~~ out of the tree the bark above the word DIG to include his AH, and the bark below the word under to include his arrow.

There is a deeper analysis of this development in ~~my~~ the book, but I conclude that ~~the~~ towards the end of 1862 when Howitt left the centre and Northern Territory after concluding his researchings and explorations, the the DIG blaze would have contained AH over DIG over under over an arrow pointing west.

Now I conclude. I am sorry if I have taken too long , no doubt many of you could be more concise, and I hope to next time. Thanks!

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