

Seeing the trees and the wood

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ABSTRACT: In my work as a radio documentary producer in Social History I have recorded first hand memories of both the working life and the attitudes of forest workers and residents towards the environment from which they drew – in many cases more than just a living. They include the memories of men and women who grew up in or worked in the great forests of South-Western Australia. They recall bush schools, lonely bush camps, horse and bullock teams, work in the timber mills or the railways that fed logs to the mill in the years before mechanization altered forestry forever. Their memories also reflect a deep aesthetic and social attachment to the forest in which they lived and worked.

Hardwood forests were also cut extensively in the Eastern goldfields of Western Australia, their timber axed by migrant workers in the first half of the twentieth century, mostly to fuel the gold-smelting furnaces of Kalgoorlie. As with the Karri and jarrah workers of the South West, the goldfields immigrants also reflect the experience of living and working in a remarkable hardwood forest and, given that such wholesale clearing in an arid environment would never be allowed today, provide comment on an unintentional ecological experiment.

More recently I have taken a contemporary look at ways in which small scale timber craftsmen can and do use forest product with minimum wastage and express aesthetic as well as material views about the forest and forest life.

‘Seeing the Trees and the Wood’ implies, I hope, a distinct perspective but in this case it is not necessarily ecological or even political. Rather, it is the perspective of people who lived within two forest regions and drew sustenance from the forest in many different ways: materially, socially, aesthetically and often with sensitivity to their physical environment.

The two regions are, firstly, the WA Eastern goldfields, where hardwood forest was harvested by timber cutters along ‘the woodline’, as it was known. In the absence of other suitable fuel, wood was cut here to serve a variety of gold-mining needs. The other is the South-West, home of the jarrah and karri – the source of much of the state’s timber supplies and, in the early days, exported to Britain. The extracts you’ll hear are taken from two Radio National history features, ‘Something unique something magestic: Karri & Jarrah forests’, which I produced in 1986, and ‘Timber for gold: The Kalgoorlie Woodlines’, which I recorded in 1996.

It is difficult now to recall a time when the south-west forest industry was not mechanised. Chain saws, bulldozers and prime movers have long displaced the bullocks, horses and axe-men of the 1920s and 1930s. Forestry then moved at a slower pace, more in tune with the rhythms of rural life, a pace that allowed for re-growth and for selective felling, an era vividly captured in

'Bullocky' by the West Australian novelist Katherine Susannah Prichard. In 1986 I'd set out to re-capture aspects of that now vanished era. There were still foresters around who could recall that largely pre-mechanical time. The major exception was steam power – used in both the town mills and the bush railways which brought in the timber. Roy Kelly was a bush engine- driver in the pre- and post-war era. The bush railways were very temporary, as he recalls:

Wherever the timber was the line went. If you had the main line you had so many spur lines and it never made any difference how steep it was. You had to get the timber out!
I think few people would believe the conditions under which bush railways worked at that time. To ride on the train. It's difficult to describe. It's like riding a bucking horse. You had to hang on to it and the ride was pretty rough. I would say, without fear of contradiction, that there were no lines anywhere rougher than what there was on log-hauling on the bush tracks. You completely ignored all regulations. But they knew you were doing that. But you had to get the logs in otherwise the mills stopped.

However, the bush railways have lived on in the folklore. Roy Kelly had a theory about their effect on the timber-town populations:

They reckoned that these locos were responsible for the high birth rate in the mill towns. The engines leaving in the morning, about 5.30, used to blow the whistle just to let the manager know they were heading for the bush. And that used to wake everybody up. And the mill never used to start until eight o' clock. And the story was it was too early to get up and too late to go back to sleep.

But in the 1920s and 1930s and even beyond, the only way timber reached the railway siding was through animal power and a whim, a two-wheeled vehicle with a long pole stretching behind the axle. Horses or bullocks were then attached on either side and pulled their load through the forest.

Opinion varied as to which animal was more efficient but long- time foresters Jack Thompson and Ron Meldrum recall how hard it was on horses.

Jack Thompson:

When they were towing a large log for instance, often a horse got speared in the belly with a green stick that had broken off a limb. The horse in front of him steps on it, lifts it up and it runs into his belly.

Ron Meldrum:

Oh, I don't think anybody regrets the passing of the bullock teams and the horse teams because of the terrific cruelty they suffered in that time. And not only from the nature of the work they had to do - the bullocks working in deep bog and in the summertime working in dust, breathing and sucking in dust, particularly the horse teams. Many horses have died, their lungs have been cut out by dust. And by inefficient and uncaring operators who fitted them with bad harness and didn't feed them and so forth. No, I don't think anybody could be sorry to see the passing of bullocks and horses.

Forest life was hard too on the fallers and, as Jack Thompson and Charlie Tozer recall, the work demanded both skill and alertness.

Jack Thompson:

You just couldn't tear in and fell a tree anywhere. A tree-marker had to be an experienced faller himself and he would carefully note where the tree's natural lean was, but if he decided, no, it can't go out there, where it would naturally go, but I can swing it into that opening there, he'd mark it there. The faller'd have to go to a bit more trouble to lift it and throw it over in that direction, so that there'd be minimum damage to the remaining stand of timber.

Charlie Tozer:

Well, you never learnt felling unless you got with an experienced man. And that was the set-up. If anybody got killed or left, well then you was taken out of the gang, if you had your name down for a job falling, and you took his place.

Today many of the mill-towns have disappeared. Places like Shannon are simply a sign on the road with nothing to indicate that these were once thriving communities. But even more remote and now virtually untraceable were the bush camps where fallers spent their working week or more.

Jack Thompson and Ron Meldrum both lived that life:

For the most part you'd be camped out some miles from the towns, in a tent, and you worked no particular hours. You found your own way out to the work-place. And you found your own way home, and probably carried food supplies for the week in some cases.

Jack Thompson:

I remember once, the first camp I went on. We were camped on the Wilgarup-Balingup road, on the Balingup Brook and we couldn't find a place to cross this brook, it was in flood, y'know, I suppose about thirty feet across and waist deep. And every morning (most of our work was on the other side) we had to lift up our... every man cut his own crib, you had your own crib rolled up in a bit of news-paper and put in a handkerchief and you hung it on the back of your belt, with a jam-tin billycan, tea and sugar.

So we'd lift this up and just wade through this icy-cold water up to your waist. But after you'd walked for about half a mile you'd walked yourself warm again. You took that all in your stride!

The mill towns themselves however provided a very different environment for bush camp workers like Jack Thompson:

You got pretty lonely out there, y' know with the same old faces and you got sick of reading the labels on the jam tins. It was a real treat to go into a house where there was a woman, and y'know the homely, womanly atmosphere, and a little child.

Bush dances helped.

It was a marvellous experience - the dancing. Everybody brought their kids. There'd be babies and grandmothers and grandfathers there. And the old people generally sat down and talked. And they all brought blankets and things for the kids and plenty of food. They slept there and the band'd be going - or the old accordion.

Almost all the people I spoke to when recording the original feature felt strongly about the environment they lived in.

The feature's title describing her feelings about the forest: 'Something unique something majestic' was suggested by Olive Robinson, a long term resident of Manjimp and I think this collage of voices will give you some idea of their reflections on forest life as it was before clear-felling, wood-chipping; before chain saws and prime movers changed their way of life.

Forester Ron Meldrum:

The big trees, as we know them, six, seven, eight feet in diameter. We will never see them milled again, after the next few years, because it takes too long to produce them.

Charlie Tozer, after a lifetime of cutting timber:

I like tall trees but they're like anything else. They reach their maturity. We're the same and over we go! No, I love the trees, love the forest, but, as I say, they're put on the earth for a use and if we don't use them they're just going to fall down and rot! If you'd seen the timber I've seen in the bush, wasted, just blown over and left there.

Jack Thomson:

The karri tree and the karri forest, it's one of the most beautiful trees in the world, and the forest itself, particularly the primeval forest, what we call the virgin forest, it had a cathedral-like structure, somewhere where you feel entirely relaxed and the kind of place you would always want to come back to. That's the way it affects me.

Kathleen Foulkes, a long-time mill town resident:

You feel that it's a living thing that has gone. You felt something was dying every time you saw a tree fall.

And Ron Meldrum, a veteran tree-faller:

You get in the middle, deep in the forest. And you look around you and you just can't imagine how the rest of the world can behave as it does.

Ten years later in 1996, I made another radio feature, 'Timber for gold', in a quite different region of Western Australia, the Eastern Goldfields, comprising Kalgoorlie, Coolgardie, Leonora, Laver-ton and Menzies. Here too another hardwood forest had flourished but came under immense pressure as the search for gold grew. The gold industry demanded fuel to roast the ore, pump and condense water, and provide firewood. By 1900, in the absence of suitable local coal, the mines alone were using twelve hundred tonnes of wood a day. Salmon gums, Gimlet gums, Merritt, Boongul, Blackbutt, Ti Tree and Mulga were all fed into one furnace or another. Between 1900 and 1950 an elaborate improvised network of railways was to bring home this fuel, later known as the woodline – in fact a collective term for many woodlines which snaked in all directions through the gold-fields. Like the bush railways of the South-West they were temporary – more temporary in fact as the timber camps rapidly cut out sections of timber and moved on. The workers who cut and carted the timber were mostly from Italy and what until fairly recently was Yugoslavia. Luigi Cappa from Italy describes how the work was allocated:

Everyone got his own block with forty-five yard frontage and one mile long. That 's your block, you start cutting at the bottom and come up. When you finish your cut, well, every fortnight or so the company sent a dray with horses to load up the wood and take it to the railway line. The wood was weighed and then went to Lakewood. I don't know they did with it. We

were paid so much a ton for the wood. When I started here it was eight shillings and six pence, then it went to ten and then twelve and when we finished up it was twenty-two and six.

By way of interest – not financial interest – Luigi soon learnt one way to remember how his work was rewarded.

When you are chopping with the axe that axe goes Pound! Pound Pound! Cross cut saw goes Shilling! Shilling! Shilling! But when you get to the hammer to split a log, that goes Penny! Penny! Penny! You're not making any money at all. The axe is your most fast, the cross-cut saw is not so bad, you can make a few shillings, but the hammer for splitting, maybe you get low wages.

For many migrant women however, the woodline existence in the isolated West Australian gold-fields could be a lot less strenuous than life and work in their original homeland. In Dalmatia, in the early 1930s, women worked as hard as the men. In rural families they not only did the cooking, and washing but they often helped their husbands dig or rake stony fields. So in Australia, while life on the woodline was very hard for the men, for women, life was a comparative respite from back-breaking rural toil. With no soil to till they often enjoyed a pleasant social life with friends. There were still homes to run but the life was much more nomadic. As each section was cut out the camp moved on by rail. Olga Bondi's family lived in the spur camps at the head of the line. For a child, each move was a great adventure.

Moving camp or shifting, as we used to call it, is vivid in my memory because all the huts had to go on to the railway wagons to be moved and, with the families, whoever moved first, the family staying behind would cook their breakfast on the morning they left.

So when you came to the new camp they cooked your breakfast when you arrived the next time. That's the way we handled it because we had to break down the fireplaces before we could shift.

Olga Bibich felt that coming to terms with her new home her immigrant mother had been more fortunate than most in having brothers already here when she arrived. Her comments are coupled with those of a male counterpart, Mario Battaglia.

Olga Bibich:

I think the friendships the women had were wonderful because they were all on their own during the day. The men were away working and I guess it was survival. There were no doctors there and they all helped each other.

Mario Battaglia:

Some decided to bring their families over and I can remember a couple of families when they arrived, the women, they thought it was the end of the world when they hit the woodline, but when they made friends here, they were quite happy after that. They used to cry a lot at first, one particular lady, she used to bawl her eyes out. She said "Where the hell's he brought me to now."

For some, despite the isolation, the bush and the woodline lifestyle had their own appeal. Mavis McDonald, now retired in Perth, felt that she could easily return:

I'd love to go back. It was a special place. There were stands of gimlet trees. You'd think someone'd been polishing them all day. It was special. I'll never forget it. I suppose it was the

lovely free and easy life, you didn't have to worry about a thing, no mortgages, no overheads. Your house was given to you. Your water and wood they were all provided.

Life for single men however, in isolated conditions, could be far less pleasant. Their AWU representative in the 1930s, Charlie Oliver, described their working life as monotonous; "*so monotonous that some were known to put their hat on a stump and talk to it*".

People also had more day to day concerns created by isolation. If you fell sick you were only likely to see the doctor once a week, and that was if he could travel down the line to see you at your spur camp. Accidents or illness were not infrequent, partly due to the nature of work with axes. There was the occasional railway accident and, with little or no refrigeration, food sent down the line sometimes went bad. Jack Sonsee, who worked on the woodline as an accountant, witnessed the effect on families:

They saw life in the raw out there, those people, tragedies, people dying, babies dying on the way into hospital, a hundred miles to go and you've got a sick baby. The mother is the only one that can go in with the child. And she sits on the open quad, (a little motorised rail unit,) and she sits there, nursing her baby and by the time they get in, it's no good going to a doctor, that baby's dead. Very sad. And those things happen many times.

Technology changed the woodline eventually as better roads and trucks replaced the old bush railway. Fuel supplies changed too- as diesel replaced timber in power generation. Cutting the woodline came to an end in 1965 but it had made a major impact on the physical environment. At its peak, the company had generated half a million tonnes a year and from the turn of the century right through to 1965 thirty thousand square kilometres of woodland had been felled and thirty million tons of firewood burned. One early environmentalist, a forester, George Brockway, had been well aware of the risk of cutting out such huge amounts of timber. From 1926 to 1949 he was responsible for a large area of southern WA and was openly critical of the policy of clearing woodlands in the wheatbelt, west of the goldfields. In Kalgoorlie itself he alleviated the frequent dust storms that plagued the city, dust-storms caused largely by early 20th century miners. They would frequently blow up tree stumps to light their fires. George Brockway's response was to plant out Kalgoorlie's streets and surrounding areas with attractive trees indigenous to the region to filter the effects.

CALM Officer Ian Kealley, with whom I walked part of the woodline, believes that ecologists and foresters have learned a great deal from the woodcutting industry's sixty-six year unintentional experiment.

Nearly all cut areas have regenerated prolifically. The goldfields eucalypts are a remarkable adaptation in that they carry large crops of seed nearly all the time and they are dependent on disturbance ecology for regeneration, The falling was the disturbance and the result we have is this magnificent regrowth woodland. The main change is a structural change to the woodlands. They started out as mature or over-mature stands of trees. Now what we have is a vigorous regrowth. In other areas you have fires or massive storms. The woodline cutting was quite unnatural but it had the same effect as a devastating fire or clear-felling associated with a violent storm.

Arguments about biodiversity loss and other factors undoubtedly still persist but in the 21st century we can only speculate now how the woodline country would have fared if woodcutting operations had started fifty years later, in our era of fast-felling with chain-saws and heavy equipment, compressing the ground, replacing diversity with monoculture and making ecological recovery harder. The same argument of course applies to both the forests I've described, though in the case of the South-West, the effects have been more marked, as others more expert in this area than I, can testify.

REFERENCES

All quotations shown above are from two Radio features:

Bunbury, Bill (producer/presenter). 1986. *Something unique something majestic*. ABC Radio National.

Bunbury, Bill (producer/presenter). 1996. *Timber for gold*. ABC Radio National.