

Local Studies Factsheet # 003

The Explorers' Tree

Did Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth really carve their names into the tree at Pulpit Hill?

The Explorers' Tree at Katoomba, through its perceived association with the expedition of Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth in 1813, has achieved the status of a national symbol. For many it stands as one of the few surviving tangible links to the early period of Blue Mountains exploration and, in particular, to the first major triumph of land exploration in Australia.

Periodically, however, its authenticity is questioned and lively debate erupts in the correspondence columns of the press. Strong feelings are aroused. This occurred, for example, in August / September 1905 in The Sydney Morning Herald and, more recently, in The Blue Mountains Echo in June 1983 when it was suggested that the marked tree was a deliberate fabrication of the early tourist operators.

It is somewhat uncertain when the tree first came to public notice as an historical site. There is no mention of it in the journals of Blaxland, Lawson or Wentworth although they, like George Evans after them, blazed many trees to mark their route. Evans, it is interesting to note, found that most of the blazes he made on his outward journey had been destroyed by bushfires on his return. Neither he nor William Cox, the roadmaker, mention the tree and Governor Lachlan Macquarie, when he

travelled to Bathurst over the new road in 1815, makes no mention of any marked tree even though he describes and names Pulpit Hill.



The Explorers Tree aka The Marked Tree Circa 1883

For many years after the Western Road was opened in 1815 Pulpit Hill was reserved as a resting place for travellers and stock. An inn was in the vicinity from the early 1830s and a police lock-up was erected nearby in the 1860s. By 1867, when the railway was being built, thousands had passed the spot pursuing their dreams of land or gold in the west or returning to the busy metropolis on the coast. Yet no written record of the marked tree has survived from this period.

In 1905, in a letter to The Sydney Morning Herald, George Michael said that, while carrying out large railway contracts on the Mountains during 1865-6, he had regularly ridden, walked and camped in the area but had never seen the marked tree. Another correspondent, however, Herman Selfe, claimed to remember the tree in the 1860s: "I feel quite certain the three letters, W, B and L, were on the tree when I first saw it."



Marked Tree 1905

The earliest recorded reference to the marked tree appeared in a letter from the botanist the Rev. William Wools to The Sydney Morning Herald on 26 August 1867. Speaking about eucalypts he said: "To show how little some of the trees alter in the course of half a century, I may mention that the blackbut on which the late Mr W Lawson cut his initials with a tomahawk in 1813 still presents the letters as legible as ever."

In the early 1870s Eccleston Du Faur, a frequent visitor to the Mountains in the late 1860s and 1870s, was told by his friend William Piddington of the existence of an old tree marked by Lawson in 1813. "Returning on foot from Mount Victoria", Du Faur remembered in 1905, "I found the L tree, and spent an hour or so in heaping all available stones as a cairn round its base. Subsequently I showed it to many fellow travellers, and reported the circumstances in my then office (Occupation of Lands). I feel certain that there was only the one letter; the tree was then almost, if not quite dead, with no bark to conceal other letters ...". In an addendum to this reminiscence Du Faur suggested that it was possible that the initial 'L' was not the work of Lawson but rather that of

James Larmer, one of Thomas Mitchell's surveyors who worked in the area in the 1830s.

In 1884 a wall and fence were erected around the tree on the authority of James S Farnell, Minister of Lands. Later John Kirkpatrick, the architect of The Carrington Hotel, claimed that it was on his recommendation that this occurred. Kirkpatrick said that, while he and some friends (including the Carrington's owner Harry Rowell) were out for a Sunday walk sometime during 1880-1882, "the tree was discovered with the distinct initials WL, GB, WCW." What are we to make of this increase in initials, especially when, a few years later in 1887, Cassell's Picturesque Australasia stated that "the letters W and L are still visible, though time has obliterated the B altogether"?

Other descriptions of the tree confuse the issue even further by pointing out the presence also of "many uninteresting carvings of modern date". In 1895 the 'Globe Trotter', in his little book Australian Gossip and Story, remarked that: "It rises white and ghostly for about 50 feet, and then a few branches, still decked with leaves, mark the fact that the tree is living, and that it is a gum tree. We look aloft at the skeleton arms of the weary-looking old tree; we think of the kingly explorers, and then we look at the names of the unknown herd which are carved, in every style, on the sacred tree itself, and on the rail that surrounds it."

By 1903 all three initials appear to have disappeared if we accept the word of a souvenir booklet published by the Carrington Hotel which stated baldly that "the letters notched on that great day are not now traceable, save by a pre-conceived imagination".

Notwithstanding these reports, within two years the letters miraculously reappeared. The Katoomba & Leura Tourist Association's official guidebook published in 1905 announced that "... some years ago the dead trunk became dangerous, and it was sawn through about 10 feet from the ground. The stump, now denuded of

bark, still shows the axe marks of the initials of the explorers, W B above and L below and beneath the W." The amputated upper portion of the tree was taken to the Hydro Majestic Hotel at Medlow Bath where it remained for many years before being destroyed by fire.

What are we to make of the considerable variation in detail that characterises these accounts of the marked tree? Does it arise from genuine human error (lapse of memory) or deliberate fabrication? Perhaps there was more than one tree? Such questions are difficult, if not impossible, to answer and the debate is sure to continue for many years. Whatever conclusion we come to about the tree's links to Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth, the fact remain that its symbolic association with the period of exploration is well established. The quaint little wayside shrine that it has become is, nonetheless, one of the most powerful icons of Blue Mountains folklore.

An interpretative display was built near the tree at Pulpit Hill in 2018, explaining the devastating impact of colonialism on the Gundungurra people and their Dharug and Wiradjuri neighbours.

In February 2021, fears that the Explorers' Tree in Katoomba could come crashing down in forecast weekend rain on the highway prompted its urgent removal.

When Council engineers inspected the tree, they alerted Transport for NSW that collapse was imminent. Inspectors arrived and immediately scheduled removal. The highway was closed and the stump, fence and the degraded platform taken away.

The mayor, Mark Greenhill, said he was enormously relieved that the tree had been removed.

The remnants of the tree - much of which had concrete poured into it over the years in a failed effort to protect it - were taken to a works depot in Lawson.

The tree will be included in the cultural interpretation strategy for the highway upgrade but at least one councillor remarked that no further money should be spent on it, saying:

"Not one cent of public money should be spent on preserving or displaying a shard of the dead wood, concrete or rubble."

This former cultural icon finally came to an inglorious end.



1950s Postcard

Local Studies Librarian

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Both letters are quoted in "The Marked Tree: Some Interesting Correspondence", The Mountaineer, 22 September 1905.

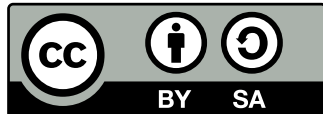
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Local Studies Librarian. (2024). The Explorers' Tree [Fact sheet].

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