

WHAT THE EARLY EXPLORERS SAW

Although all Australians now know that our continent was not Terra Nullius, we are still influenced by the assumptions embedded in our written history. Early explorers frequently marvelled at the ordered beauty of the landscape before them, but automatically assumed it was a pristine, natural environment. For instance way back in 1642 Abel Tasman described the vista of Tasmania's south coast near present day Hobart as:

'...pretty generally covered with trees standing so far apart that they allow a passage everywhere...unhindered by dense shrubbery or underwood.'

This spacing between trees and absence of undergrowth is not what we see today. When colonisation began, regular firing of the environment by Aboriginal people was prevented. Forest areas and dense undergrowth therefore inexorably grew back to provided fuel for our regular devastating bushfires. Abel Tasman's observations were later echoed by James Cook in April 1770 who noted:

'The woods are free from under wood of any kind and the trees are at such a distance from one another that the whole country ...might be cultivated without being obliged to cut down a single tree'.

When the First Fleet finally arrived in 1788, Captain Watkin Tench noted that:

'...the face of the country is such as to promote success whenever it shall be cultivated, the trees being at a considerable distance from each other and the intermediate space filled, not with underwood, but a thick rich grass growing in the utmost luxuriance.'

Many other settlers and explorers similarly commented that: *'In parts it resembles the park of a county seat in England, the trees standing in picturesque groups to ornament the landscape'.*

When the colony in Tasmania was established in 1803, settlers moving into the hinterland often recounted how they emerged from forest areas into lightly treed pastures of great beauty. They gave these places names like 'Eden' 'Paradise' and 'Promised Land', presuming it was a pristine environment put there by God.

Similarly, when John Batman first arrived in Port Phillip in May 1835 he incredulously noted

'...as rich land as I ever saw with scarce a tree upon it, the grass above our ankles...Most of the high hills were covered with grass to the summit, and not a tree...The whole appeared like land laid out in farms for some hundred years back, and every tree transplanted. I was never so astonished in my life'

Notice how there is a pattern in the observations? Grassy hilltops, picturesque copses, and open sparsely treed areas? Because we have been so indoctrinated with the idea of Terra Nullius, these words usually go straight through to the keeper. However Aboriginal oral history can in fact often help provide a deeper understanding.

For instance the grassy hilltops were explained to me by the iconic Gunditjmarra Elder Banjo Clarke some forty years ago. He said that these hilltops were in fact grass seed or grain farms. Banjo explained that clans routinely cleared the hilltops of trees then contour ploughed or ringed them with stone terraces. This meant that the rain did not readily run off, thereby helping the growth and continual self-sowing of grain grasses. Kangaroos and emus would not go up to the hilltops because there was no shade or protection there.

When ripe in summer, grain was harvested from the hilltop farms, threshed and stored in kangaroo skin bags for later use. These bags would often weigh as much as 50 kilograms. Explorers like Charles Sturt for instance found storage wells and hollow trees holding bags that totalled literally tons of seed. When the grain was later required, particularly at times of large inter-clan gatherings, the grain seeds were used to grind into flour and make damper.

The more thickly wooded areas, noted by Tasman, Cook, Batman and many others, varied in size. This might be from a hundred metres to a couple of kilometres in width, and these copses were always surrounded by a curtilage of open ground. As possums do not like crossing open ground, these separated copses were protected habitats that were in reality possum farms.

The more open areas where the trees were a regular twenty-five to fifty metres apart were in fact kangaroo and emu farms. The trees provided sufficient shelter for early morning and late afternoon grazing and also provided a strategic stalking distance for Aboriginal hunters. But there were more than just possum farms and kangaroo farms. Like on the hilltops, flatter areas would be cleared of all trees to form grain farms and myrnong farms. Grasses preferred by kangaroos would then be encouraged adjacent to the grain farms, so as to form grazing borders to the kangaroos.

Gullies and creek valleys were also subject to annual firing so as to promote the growth of myrnong, the native yam. Each spring these myrnong farms would be a blaze of yellow with the flowering of the yam daisy. Cultivation and harvesting techniques employed by the women ensured constant regeneration and proliferation of the yams in designated areas.

To ensure that creeks did not run dry during the summer, dams and chains of ponds would be created. When required, yabbies, fish and mussels would be carried in coolamons to stock the ponds. these protected breeding grounds then became a series of yabbie and mussel farms up the creek valley, and were often flanked by myrnong farms. In reality Australia was a series of 'farms without fences' and Aboriginal people 'permaculture farmers'.