

# A land CHANGED forever

By Eric Rolls

> The pines on Norfolk Island were one of several devious reasons for the establishment of Port Jackson. Forty-two metres high and with impressive girths, they were to supply sailing ships with the masts and yards in short supply the world over. Their mighty knots, however, made them unreliable: a mast must take stresses uniformly.

The trees in the immediate vicinity of the new settlement were a more serious disappointment: too crooked, too hard to work and too damaged by fire to be used to make the buildings needed so urgently. Sandstone grows a glory of shrubs, not timber.

Then red cedar (*Toona ciliata*) was discovered on the deep Hawkesbury flats - giant trees of such magnificence that the government claimed title and sent gangs of convicts to cut them down. Gangs moved up and down the coast, the men working off their sentences, then cutting for themselves. Free settlers joined the ticket-of-leave men; there was money to be made. And to avoid high licence fees, the cutters, like the squatters, kept as far ahead of the law as was practicable.

They worked the rivers one by one: the Manning, Hastings, Macleay, the Clarence by 1835. Only 'handy' timber could be taken at first - the trees growing near enough to rivers and creeks to be levered into the water and floated down to waiting ships in immense rafts of logs tied together. Beginning with 60 logs off the

> Australia was once home to some of the finest timber the world has known. That all changed when white settlers scrambled ashore <



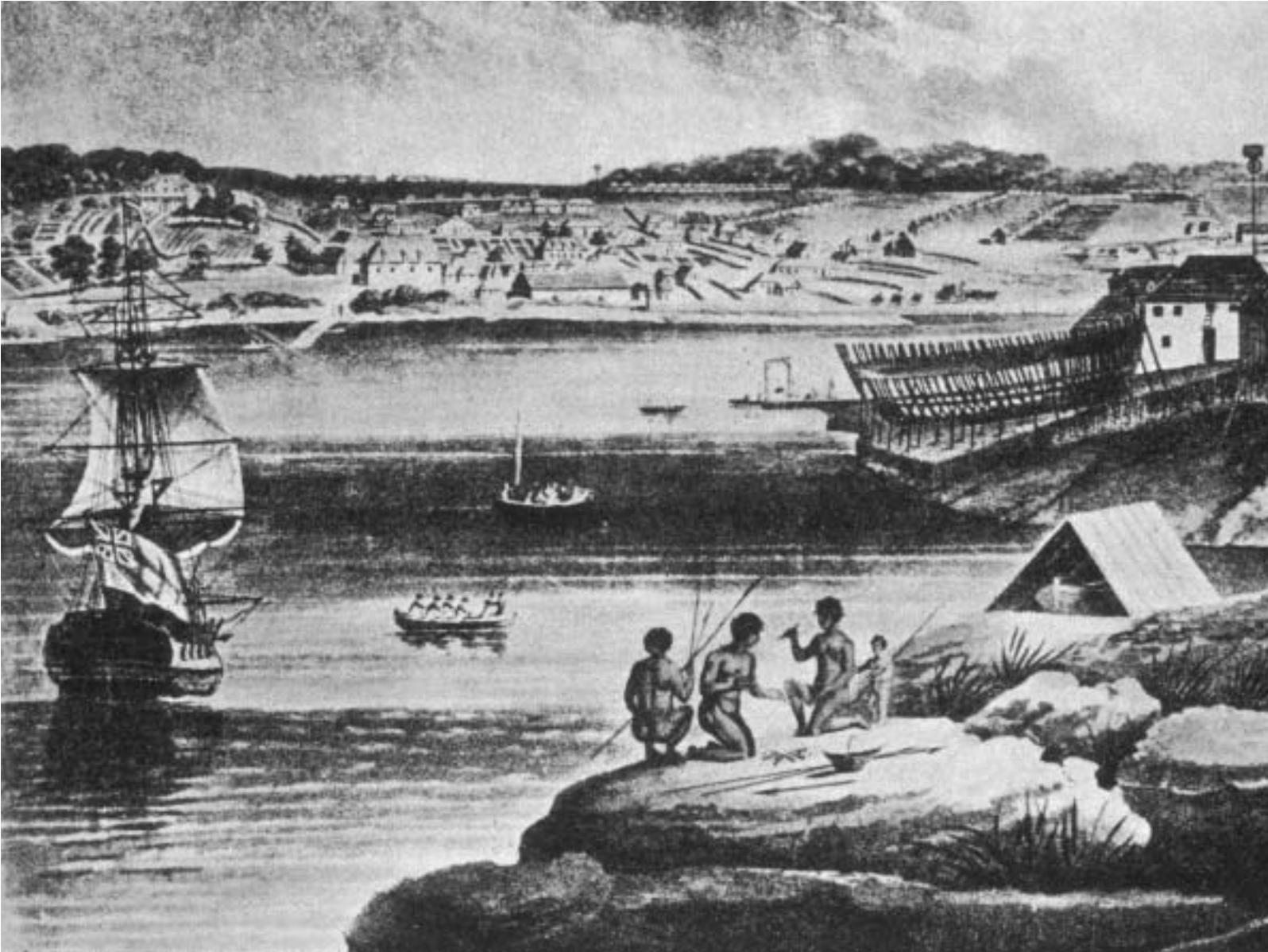
Hawkesbury sent to India in 1795, loads of cedar were sent to England, China, New Zealand, South Africa and L'Île de France (Mauritius). In Australia, it built houses and hotels, made rough bush furniture and the finest furniture that the cabinetmakers of the day could produce. It built pigsties, cow sheds and paling fences, and packing cases by the thousand. Its use was profligate until the gold rush in the late 1850s and early 1860s, when the price quadrupled and the great timber earned respect.

Cedar did not grow thickly. A good stand averaged one to the hectare over numerous hectares of dense rainforest; then the cedar spread out to one to five hectares, then one to 10. For years, wondrous timbers such as rosewood (*Dysoxylum fraserianum*) and hoop pine (*Araucaria cunninghamia*) were overlooked in the rainforests, as were the many eucalypts in sclerophyll forests.

Between 1855 and 1886, there were international exhibitions of timber in Paris, Melbourne, London, Sydney and New Zealand. The judges sawed the samples, planed them, nailed them and tested them for strength. Australian timbers met high praise. Yet even today, they are seldom treated with the respect due to them.

## Biography

Author Eric Rolls, AM, wrote the 1981 book *A Million Wild Acres*, which won *The Age Book of the Year*, the *C.J. Dennis Prize* and the *Talking Book of the Year*.



Step back in time ... logs, far left, travel to Humula Saw Mill in 1959, Gaylard and Co's water-powered sawmill, Tumbarumba. Photos courtesy of the Tumbarumba Historical Society. An artist's impression, above, of ship-building work in the new colony.

It must be remembered that Australia was a land of grass in open woodland. Two hundred years ago, forest covered no more than 1.3 per cent of the entire continent. Our timber was precious not only for its beauty but for its scarcity.

Mining saw a gross assault on eucalypts. For various reasons, goldminers chopped down almost every tree around them. In the colonies of New South Wales and Victoria, the huge amount of timber used in mining initially put forestry matters in the hands of the Department of Mines. Australia benefited socially and materially from this use of timber - gold established the country's

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security. Worried members of parliament, however, thought it time to begin saving the trees. The first reserves were designated in 1871, 'to protect some of the magnificent forests of brush and hardwood in the Clarence Pastoral Districts, and the flooded red gum forests on the Murray River'.

Sadly, the Clarence declaration did not save the Big Scrub on the north bank of the Richmond River, on the north coast of NSW. It contained 50,000 hectares or more of some of the finest timber the world has known, but clearing with axe, saw and scrub-hook began seriously in the 1880s. By 1900, it was gone.

River red gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) suffered when the paddle-wheel steamers began plying the rivers in the 1850s. The boilers required wood to fire them. For some 30 busy years, 100 or so steamers plied 6,500 km of the Murray-Darling rivers, and enormous quantities of timber were burned to power them. Trees of several species, green and dead, disappeared for kilometres out from the banks. Most of what was cut was river red gum, because it was the nearest and the most plentiful. As river traffic gave way to railways, irrigation began. From Blanchetown to the border in South Australia and along the Murray to Mildura and beyond,



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scores of steam engines set down on the banks to drive big centrifugal pumps with long crossed-leather belts. Each engine used more than 30 tonnes of wood a day. Stockpiles of several thousand tonnes each maintained the supply.

River red gum was used to make sleepers - millions of them. It was used in barges, bridges and wharves because it lasts in water and, because it polishes beautifully, it made superb tables and counter tops. But it mostly supplied strong timber for rough jobs.

According to counts done in the 1870s in the great Pilliga forests of northern NSW, white cypress pine (*Callitris hugelii*) grew as mature old greys spaced at four to the hectare, with 30-odd young pines coming on to replace them. After drought and the churning of cloven hooves that followed heavy rains, pine seedlings came up as thick as a crop of wheat over big areas. Squatters mustered what stock survived and moved on, leaving a valuable self-regenerating pine and narrow-leaved ironbark (*Eucalyptus crebra*) forest.

*Times gone by ... Hussell's Mill at Tumbarumba in 1919, above left, was the first water-powered mill; above right, a team leaves the Laurel Hill Boat Oar Mill;*

*below, family members gather outside the Hussell and Gaylard Mill at Tumbarumba; below right, Walter and Charlie Gaylard doctor a saw blade.*

Down the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee rivers, pine scrub had come up earlier, thicker and more extensively than in the Pilliga. By 1875, G.F. Bolton, the district surveyor at Wagga Wagga, was reporting 'extensive tracts of country, which 15 years ago were beautifully



grassed, open downs, are now so overgrown with young pines that sheep can hardly make their way through them, while the original grasses have almost entirely disappeared'. Hours of debate in parliament considered measures to destroy the pine.

By the time the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Forestry was convened in 1908, however, opinions had changed radically. All timber was in short supply and pine was especially valuable. John MacPherson, manager of the Deepwater station near Wagga Wagga, was asked for an estimate of the value of the pine destroyed during the past decade. 'Perhaps thousands of pounds' worth ... it seems criminal to destroy it as has been done ... but under the conditions of our lease, we were compelled to do it', he said.

A huge demand for timber in all states followed the building boom after the end of World War II. Despite the dedication of new areas of forest, it became obvious that big areas of quick-growing trees were needed. So the planting of exotic softwoods began and the harvesting of native forests was planned on a sustainable basis.

Since the 1980s, forestry has been regulated by a complicated series of acts and policies, among them environmental impact statements, comprehensive regional assessments, regional forest agreements, and consideration of clean water, threatened species and Aboriginal values. Some areas of forest have also been locked up in national parks and reserves.

These actions have caused valuable changes in the management of timber. All over NSW, quotas to mills have been halved but mill owners have to extract the same amount of sawn timber to stay afloat. Instead of ordering logs 40cm in diameter and free of bark, they now handle logs down to 15 cm. A lot of material that was previously classed as salvage and of little use is now cut to make fence posts, sleepers, pallets and battens, which were previously cut from top-quality logs.

Another major change in NSW is that Forests NSW no longer sells at the stump. It employs contractors, who cut the logs and deliver them. They can now cut in the low-yielding areas unprofitable to millers because their high-yielding areas cover any losses.

Victoria has handled its forests in much the same way as New South Wales. In 2005, it raised the price of its timber, a move that will allow NSW to follow suit.

South Australia, the state with the least timber, quickly harvested the messmate stringybark (*Eucalyptus obliqua*) in the Mount Lofty ranges. The state began planting eucalypts in 1870. In 1882, the government created the Woods and Forest Department, probably the first forestry department in the British Commonwealth. Today, South Australia depends on huge plantings of exotic softwoods, especially *Pinus radiata*. So does the Australian Capital Territory.

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South Australia was in charge of the Northern Territory when Chinese businessmen cut huge quantities of the beautiful northern cypress pine (*Callitris intratropica*) for export. Under the Europeans' poor fire regime, these wonderful trees almost died out. Now the Territory government plants 400 hectares of them a year for both the timber and the oil, which is used in cosmetics. In 2005, it was also discussing planting big areas of African mahogany. Tiwi Islanders began planting exotic pine species in the 1960s.

Queensland's first big timber venture, on the other hand, was cutting sandalwood (*Santalum lanceolatum*) for export to China. Its strategy for the harvesting of eucalypts used to be little more than a 'cut out and get out' approach. Now that eucalypts in native forests are in short supply, the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries is promoting farm forestry with great success. An agency working under the department's control is developing tropical and sub-tropical forests in the state's north.

In Western Australia, sandalwood has been harvested profitably since the early 1840s. Strict quotas ensured a constant supply. Most of South Africa's long railway lines were laid on jarrah sleepers from the great forests in the south-west of Western Australia. As with narrow-leaved ironbark and river red gum in NSW, too much of this beautiful timber has been used for rough jobs. The WA Government has since locked up much of its jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*) and karri (*Eucalyptus diversicolor*) forests, and it is importing timber from NSW.

With 64 per cent of its area covered by forest a century ago, Tasmania had the second most-timbered countryside in the world, after British Columbia. Timber-getters exploited the wondrous Huon pine (*Lagostrobos franklinii*) as lavishly as NSW exploited its red cedar. These days, every tree cut down in Tasmania elicits criticism from somebody.

The one thing that is often forgotten in the never-ending arguments about the value of forests is that under Aboriginal management, no square metre of soil in the country was left to care for itself. For thousands of years, Australia was intensively managed by people who knew what they were doing for the land and for themselves. To lock up a forest is to confine it in an unnatural state.

