mallee root as metaphor

James Darling.

Mallee roots are quintessentially Australian. They speak of land, culture and genealogy. They speak of the evolution of our continent and confront our present day understanding of its history, ecology and management.

The lignotubers of the mallee gum are heavy, dense, rock-hard bulbous forms that sprout a spiky maze of long, tough roots that grip their ground with the strength, tenacity and acumen necessary for survival in hot, dry, sand-based landscapes.

Mallee is the Aboriginal name for the many-stemmed species of eucalypt which grow, generally from two to nine metres in height, across the arid regions of much of the Australian continent. The multitudinous hybrids of the mallee gum, with its umbrella-like canopy of waxy leaves reflecting both heat and light, are found in the west and southwest of NSW, northwestern Victoria, across South Australia to the Nullabor Plain and even into the Northern Territory, and throughout large areas of southern Western Australia.

Early explorers made much of the fear-inspiring, dismal nature of mallee country with its flat, sandy expanses, its repetitive and dry vegetated sand dunes, its lack of tall trees or any other distinguishing demarcations, and gave warnings to the foolhardy or the intrepid about the ease of becoming comprehensively lost and perish in such a landscape. Charles Sturt described the mallee in 1833 - 'as barren and unproductive as the worst country we have passed through'. Three years later, explorer Thomas Mitchell endorsed Sturt's view - 'Mallee is one of the most barren regions in the world…. There were tufts of prickly bush, which tortured the horses and tore to rags the men's clothes about their ankles'.

Mallee country was invariably described as miserable country, a never-ending wilderness, with no water, no grass, endless flies, vociferous ants and the sudden surprise of supple and venomous snakes. In 1902 *The Bulletin* wrote - 'Nobody knows who made the mallee, but the Devil is strongly suspected'.
The early settlers who laboured to make a living out of the fragile fertility of the mallee fared little better than the explorers. Sandy and shallow soils, the almost insurmountable difficulty of dealing with the obdurate mallee gum or the ubiquitous yakka – the phrase 'hard yakka' is a distinctly mallee contribution to the Australian vernacular – and areas which were salty or high in lime or lacking trace elements and were overlaid by fickle and intermittent rainfall, made farming the mallee a daunting task. Even with the advent of tractor and plough, the brutal hardness of the lignotubers and the sharp spikes of the roots smashed and burst the dreams of many a pioneering farming family.

The innovation of the stump-jump plough was credited to Mr R Smith of Yorke Peninsular in 1876. It was able to rise over, to 'jump' the lignotubers, cutting off the vociferous regrowth of the mallee root without damaging the plough and allowing a crop to be planted. But the virulence of the mallee gum was a persistent problem and wheat had to be developed that grew tall enough to be harvested above the mallee's annual ability to regrow. It also meant that the land had to be ploughed every cropping season with the consequence of massive losses in soil fertility due to the 'raised dust' of wind erosion.

The greatest lyric poet of settler Australia, John Shaw Neilson, an optimist farmer of mallee country whose vulnerable and painful agricultural efforts contributed to his premature death, observed with characteristic broad-brush candour in 1938 - 'The wholesale destruction of timber in the Mallee, which has brought about terrific dust storms now threatening to drive the settlers off the land, has also been the cause of the departure of many birds'.

A misunderstanding of the complex ecological biodiversity of the mallee, and especially of the role and function of the slender-stemmed mallee gum, has resulted in the mallee being the most degraded land type of the Australian continent. The wheat belt of Western Australia, with its massive groundwater rises and devastating spread of dryland salinity, is an obvious example. The dust storms that blanket the South Australian sun with the fragile fertility of the mallee country are still not a thing of the past.
I remember visiting the vast Yumberra and Yellabinna Conservation Parks northwest of Ceduna where mallee gums stood between red sand, often less than human height, their multiple trunks twisting out of an anchoring skirt of decaying berries, bark, twigs and branches. There was a modesty and a splendor about those stubborn eucalypts, eking out their livelihood in parched land, delicate and resilient and able to burst with flower and seed when brief and abrupt rainfall permitted.

The mallee roots that my partner Lesley Forwood and I have used for art materials for installation sculpture were conserved 30 years ago during our enforced land clearing at Duck Island, our property midway between Keith and the Coorong in the upper southeast of South Australia. Duck Island is made up of wide watercourse flats interspersed with ribbons of sand hills. The mallee gums grew across the sand hills, most dense in competition with understorey and pink gums on the contour a metre or two above the flats.

In the land-clearing process, once ripping, scarifying and harrowing had brought the roots of yakkas, banksias, mallee, stringybark, pink gum or other plant material to the surface, we made the decision, thinking of the fragility of the hills, to pick and sort by hand. Initially we sorted the mallee roots off the trailer into two piles in the middle of a swamp - the roots that would go through a 25cm hoop and could be sold to wood yards - and those that wouldn't. The rest of the unwanted timber was burnt.

In the tradition of farmers during the Depression, who were the first to sell mallee roots to the fireplaces of the city, we were convinced that mallee roots, as long as their preservation did not encourage rabbits, were not to be derided as worse than useless but possessed innate, intrinsic value. Mallee roots are the best burning wood in the world. They make strong, stable fires that give off a quiet, fierce and long-lasting heat, with no sparks, and burn to nothing.

Meanwhile, the mallee root piles kept growing. It became impossible to drive close to a pile without constructing a wall of roots and throwing them over. Then it became necessary to build edges, sides and corners. And then, to keep point and purpose to what seemed like an endless task, we designed piles that were enlivened by specific shapes and names. This was our beginning of the exploration of the building properties of mallee roots and the genesis of installation art works across Australia and round the world.

But before mallee roots can be employed in the pristine space of an art gallery they need to be cleaned down to the bare hard wood. They need about 15 years out of the ground before their bark can be removed with a high-powered water jet. Often roots will require scraping with a wire brush and then the last remaining nooks and crevasses dug out by a long, thin screwdriver before the final shape of the root is revealed. Immediately after losing its protective skin, the root shines with a lacquer as if varnished - until time inevitably dulls its lustre.

In 1994, in an exhibition entitled *Define the Country* at the Riddoch Art Gallery, Mt.Gambier, Lesley and I built three mallee root installations, including the first in a series of life-size malleefowl mounds which were each based on the observation of a precise moment in the annual cycle of a particular mound in the Duck Island bush. Malleefowl are the only mound-building bird in arid land on the planet, an unsung icon of our world. These megapods are ingenious builders, makers of compost and solar architects whose acuteness and industry speaks across boundaries and nationalities with consequential awe and marvel.

Our first international exhibition, entitled *Empathy - Beyond the Horizon,* was in Finland. There were 16 artists from around the world - many of the exhibits being digital, new media or conceptual art. We built a malleefowl mound open like a volcanic crater as the birds dug down to the egg-laying chamber in preparation for the new season. It was the most obviously organic work in the whole show. Paradoxically, with the textures and angles of sand, the mallee roots anchored the exhibition. Wood has national importance to the Finns. Their wood products are renowned for their smooth surfaces and refined design. Luckily for us, the Finns responded with an uninhibited pleasure to the roughly abrasive and random unpredictability of the mallee roots.

Wherever we make an installation, no matter what our intention and meaning might be for a particular work, mallee roots speak with simplicity and eloquence. They speak of growth and of time. They speak of terrain that, for most people, is as unexperienced as it is foreign and unimaginable. They speak of an unaccustomed beauty that has been maligned by ignorance and demeaned through the lack of insight and understanding.

Pioneering farmers may have derided mallee roots as an obstacle to be overcome, dealt with, eradicated - and echoes of that legacy continue to reverberate to this day. But elemental to an appreciation of art and environment is a credible valuation of what may seem at first sight to be ordinary, unimpressive, problematic and disposable. Just as each mallee gum has its place within the complex biodiversity of its habitat, so each root must be employed to its maximum purpose and value in an installation sculpture. As I wrote of our mallee root installation,

The elemental fact is that no two roots are the same and that no shape is predictable. The dense chaos of spikes and knots and gnarls are welcome, indeed essential. These random, organic forms speak of the endurance and tenacity of mallee roots and make a metaphor for the future of the globe, this planet we inhabit.

Diversity being strength – diversity within the whole. The structural strength of a mallee root installation is delivered by the weight of abrasion and difference and an interlocking unity of purpose. The cycle of nature and the circle of the world within the interplanetary song and dance of the universe. The poetic concentration we mean. The power of simple statement.

All photographs taken by James Darling

All mallee root installations made by James Darling & Lesley Forwood.

After Rain After Fire: Mallee Regrowth, Duck Island Keith, SA. Jan. 07.

Detail Everyone Lives Downstream 2, "Wonderful World", Samstag Museum of Art, Adelaide, SA. Sept. 07.

Circle 1 – Roots across the World, 2006 Paris Summer Festival, La Defense, Paris, France. Aug. 06.

Everyone Lives Downstream 1, Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide, SA. Nov 04.

Malleefowl nest 3: Winter, Penola Arts Festival, Penola, SA. May 96.

english oak *Quercus robus*

Richard Heathcote

A humble acorn from english oak (*Quercus robus*) graces the Plant Families display in the Museum of Economic Botany. The giant oak tree is at the heart of English traditions - whether as the timber used to build its naval forces from Tudor times or as the main component for buildings of all kinds. Probably its most iconic use was in the creation of English oak furniture and panelling. For the Haywards of Carrick Hill, this was the symbol of Empire and 'home'. This is their story of hearts of oak or a tale of a staircase in search of a house.

It was not a ship with hull of English oak that transported Ursula and Edward Hayward's oak doors, wainscoting and staircase to Adelaide in 1935. This was architectural salvage from Beaudesert Hall, the demolished country seat of the sixth Marquis of Anglesey in Staffordshire. The Haywards had purchased it whilst on their honeymoon in Britain. The Paget family received Beaudesert after William Paget was raised to the peerage in 1549 for services rendered as one of Henry VIII's 'new men'. This estate, once the hunting lodge for the Bishops of Lichfield, was located on the edge of Cannock Chase where the Pagets had an interest in ironmaking. They felled many an oak tree from the ancient forest for smelting the ore into metal.

The so-called 'Waterloo staircase' at Beaudesert Hall was installed by the first Marquis who was the Duke of Wellington's cavalry commander at the battle of Waterloo in 1815. The soon-to-be Marquis had lost his leg at the battle when blown away by a canon ball - he had it buried with full military honours. Later he installed a new grand staircase at Beaudesert, named after the battle. It was constructed of oak and based on the staircase of Herstmonceux Castle in Sussex.

With its close grain and durability, oak was the preferred timber for chests, seats or tables for six centuries. It was not until 1721, with the passing of an Act removing the heavy duty on imported timbers, that mahogany from the West Indies began to usurp oak's place, together with walnut, in English furniture-making.

Sir Edward Hayward was knighted in 1963 and when applying for his arms from the College of Heralds he included an oak leaf as a symbol of his patriotism. Both he and Ursula were British Australians and saw South Australia as an extension of the Empire with Britain as 'home'. Two large oak trees grow on the property, dating from the Hayward's era from 1935 to 1983, but inside Carrick Hill is the permanent home to the oldest house interior in Australia with its Jacobean wainscoting, outstanding oak furniture collection and famous staircase standing as symbol of victory, crafted from the king of trees – *Quercus robur* the english oak.

For the Haywards it was a stairway to a dream, for British Australians a symbol of triumph over tyrannical Napoleonic ambitions, but for witty wireless broadcasters and architectural historians - it's merely a staircase in search of a house!

references

The Marquis of Anglesey, *One-leg The Life and Letters of Henry William Paget, the first Marquis of Anglesey KG. 1768-1854,* Jonathan Cape 1961

John Harris, *Moving Rooms* Yale 2007

Molly Harrison Benn, *People and Furniture*

Peter Goers, broadcaster 891 ABC Adelaide Australian Open Garden Scheme *'The Great lemon Tree Debate'* 25 August 2007

captions

English oak (*Quercus robus*) sample MEB collection, photo Grant Hancock

Oak baluster column used to hold up sloping banister of the Waterloo staircase at Beaudesert Hall and Carrick Hill, English oak, Carrick Hill collection