

P O S T S C R I P T TO 'BURKE AND WILLS - THE
STOCKADE AND THE TREE'

by
John White.

During later 1992, a Mr David Corke published privately a small publication titled Report on "DIG Tree" Site, being a response to my earlier publication, Burke and Wills - The Stockade and the Tree. In itself, as a publication, it is a very consummate piece of work, with clear photographs and drawings supported with a distinctively defined text and supporting notes.

Mr Corke casts some reflective doubts on some of my findings and proceeds to disclose his own conclusions, particularly on the many-disputed beliefs as to the markings on the DIG Tree and where the cache of food, left behind by Brahe and party, was buried.

Originally, I had no intention of responding to Mr Corke's narrative but then considered that some people reading his opinions might come to a conclusion that my findings on the markings on the DIG Tree and the resting place of the cache were incorrect. As I do not think them incorrect, I felt I should produce a postscript^{reflections} reply, to his more important, in this reprint of my monograph.

Mr Corke's remarks and estimations are quite interesting and can add to the DIG Tree legend. To fully discuss his contribution would require more space and words than is necessary for this postscript, but two or three comments by him could receive some consideration. For instance:

"For various reasons, John White believes that the arrow was carved (ie., in the DIG blaze on the DIG Tree) by Alfred Howitt during his search for Burke and Wills in 1861 - to indicate the way he was going down Cooper Creek. But why Howitt would place the arrow in such a confusing position is difficult to understand..."(end quote).

Could be! Mr Corke is quite right, I did have various reasons. The actuality was that Howitt did also carve his initials in the same, possibly extended, blaze, and this does not receive a mention by Mr Corke. Howitt said he always marked his camp with his initials and a direction arrow. It can be said that both Brahe and King were rather ambiguous in some of their statements, but it also can be said, neither ever mentioned that an arrow was carved into a blaze.

"Although the conclusions seem plausible, it is based mainly on circumstantial evidence - some of which is ambiguous and can be disputed."(end quote). Fancy that, I thought there could be some disputation, but "circumstantial" and "ambiguous", that certainly is a bit flattening for I thought I was always attempting otherwise.

"If we ignore all anecdotes and secondary evidence from travellers and station owners, the only primary evidence comes from the interrogation of Brahe and King at the 1861 Commission of Enquiry."(end quote).

Indeed! this is a rather sweeping statement. I cannot remember including "any anecdotes" and one of his main contentions is based on an "if". Can I say, if the Conricks and EVAT are included in the "travellers and station owners", I leave their contributions to my text to satisfy their relevance as "secondary evidence". And how about the Brahe Report and the King Narrative? And isn't Alfred Howitt, whose party found and rescued King, worth a mention?

"The tree known as the "Dig Tree" has no branch to which horses could have been tied-up", then goes on to state "The only place suitable for tethering horses in 1861 is a tree SSW of the "Dig Tree". This 'other' tree has a thick low branch..." (end of quote).

I do not know how high or low a branch has to be to which a horse can be "tied-up"? I should imagine, if a person could stand firmly on the ground for some time whilst patiently carving a large blaze in a side branch of a tree, and then carefully incising into this blaze the information "DEC 6-60 (over) APR 21-51", this side branch could also accept quite swiftly a rope tossed around it to which was tethered a horse. Unless, of course, the carving was incised whilst sitting on a horse or camel, which action does not seem very feasible.

This 'other' tree features in Mr Corke's discourse, and is discussed as possibly the tree at the base of which the cache was buried. Mr Corke possibly relates this 'other' tree to the remarks by Brahe, at the Commission of Enquiry, when he said after marking a tree with DIG, he "marked another tree with a single "B" and the number of the camp; and the other side I marked "16th December, 1860" and "21st April, 1861". This was,

ostensibly, bringing a second tree into the controversy.

I noted Brahe's remarks in my monograph and pointed out he was wrong about the "16th", that it was actually the "6th", and accepted this difference in dates was possibly a result of lapse of memory.

I did not comment on his statement "marked another tree", when I possibly should have in continuation of my in-depth researchings. I guess I was convinced, as I am still convinced, it was another lapse of memory by Brahe, on which condition I did comment being possibly a reaction to stress at the time. I was convinced then, and am still convinced, that Brahe and his party marked only one tree, one tree only, with camp and cache information.

Mr Corke writes two more old blazes can be seen on the 'other' tree and proceeds to fill them with markings, the lower with an arrow pointing SSW, and the one above with the word DIG. He thus ^{creates} two marked trees on the camp site, one tree with DIG(over)under(over)an arrow pointing east, and the second('other') tree with DIG(over)an arrow pointing SSE, at the base of which he speculates the cache was buried.

May I comment. First of all, the explorers at times marked two trees where they camped, so these blazes on the second tree, if such they be, could be the remains of such markings; secondly, with four men lounging around getting more bored day by day during a period of four months wondering what to do to fill in time, who could say they did not use their knives and axes at odd time, not wilfully, to make a few markings on the trees around them.

And finally! apart from what I believe was a lapse of memory by Brahe when he referred to "another tree", ie., a second tree, being marked, King and Brahe, in all their reports and commission discussions, never referred to trees in plural, ie., a second tree being involved, and also, definitely, never referred to the word DIG being carved into more than one tree.

This is what King said or wrote, "...found the tree with 'DIG.AP.21'."; "Then Mr Wills saw a mark on the tree 'Dig three feet north-west or north-east..."; referring to a rake "...laid it against the tree which was marked."; "...laid it against the tree."

Apart from his "another tree", this is what Brahe said or wrote, "...and marked the word "DIG" on the tree."; "Yes, we marked it "DIG"; "I left a

rake, I believe, against the tree and I found it there when I returned with Mr Wright still against the tree"; referring to the rake "I believe I placed it on the cache, leaning against a tree...".

It must be remembered that the information that Brahe said he carved into "another tree" had already been carved into a tree marked DIG, and he did not say it was a second carving.

I am not certain whether Mr Corke considered "secondary evidence" the information that came from Alfred Howitt, but, either way, Howitt said, "The tree under which Brahe had buried the stores, & with which Burke's documents were cached, bore only the words, "Dig. April 21", cut upon it by Brahe;". In other words, he was saying the instructions, the dates, and the cache, were all involved with only one tree.

All these comments plus other references included in the text of the monograph, in my estimation, confirm my conviction that only one tree was involved with markings and the cache was buried at its base.

There are a few other reflections in Mr Corke's work which could enthuse comment, but enough is enough; the reflections on the markings and the burial of the cache were the most relevant.

Mr Corke has introduced, in his work, some closely researched material into the Burke and Wills saga, seriously considered and immaculately presented, he is to be congratulated. I have been led to believe a copy of this work has been donated to the Royal Historical Society of Victoria.

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