

2. TIMBER AND GRASS

- 2.0 Introduction
- 2.1 Bark
- 2.2 Logs
- 2.3 Splitting Timber
- 2.4 Slabs
- 2.5 Shingles
- 2.6 Thatch

This chapter and the next are to a large extent a revision and updating of my *Victorian Primitive*, published in 1977.¹ That work concentrated on Victoria, though it included substantial references to other colonies, and this revision has entailed some attempt to deal with Australia more generally, necessarily drawing heavily upon my interstate colleagues. However, the conclusions are not essentially different. The origins of the bark roof have become somewhat clearer, both in relation to the Aboriginal contribution of the the idea and means of cutting bark, and to the somewhat analagous timber overstructure of Sumatra.

The possible transference of Aboriginal technology is a fascinating question, but not one to be answered rashly. European illustrations of Aboriginal dwellings, by definition, post-date European contact, and some care must be exercised in deciding which may be evidence of an existing building tradition. There is no doubt that the Aboriginals in different parts of the continent used a wide range of building materials, amongst which bark figures prominently, but very few of their structures were at all permanent,² and it is likely that the more elaborate and sizeable ones which figure in later nineteenth century illustrations are attributable to European influence. Watkin Tench describes the dwellings seen around Sydney Cove:³

... they are seen shivering, and huddling themselves up in heaps in their huts, or the caverns of the rocks, until a fire can be kindled.

Than these huts nothing more rude in construction, or deficient in conveniency, can be imagined. They consist only of pieces of bark laid together in the form of an oven, open at one end, and very low, though long enough for a man to lie at full length in. There is reason, however,

¹ Miles Lewis, *Victorian Primitive* (Melbourne 1977).

² An exception was the stone architecture of western Victoria, and in Northern Queensland quite substantial structures were built of timber and other vegetable materials: Peter Bell, *Timber and Iron* (St Lucia [Queensland] 1984), p 14, cites 'Native Huts on the Sachs River, North Queensland', *Illustrated Sydney News*, 26 May 1877, pp 8-10, and H C Brayshaw, 'Aboriginal Material Culture' in the Herbert / Burdekin District North Queensland' (PhD, James Cook University, 1977), pp 60-61.

³ L F Fitzhardinge [ed], *Sydney's First Four Years* (North Sydney 1979 [1961], being an edition of Watkin Tench's *Narrative*, of 1789, and *Complete Account*, of 1793), pp 47-8.

to believe, that they depend less on them for shelter, than on the caverns with which the rocks abound.

Looking at other parts of Australia means considering vernacular buildings of far more recent dates than are usual on the east coast, but the question of Aboriginal sources remains relevant. In Central Australia the use of walls made of brushwood between horizontal strands of fencing wire, and later on of chicken wire, must be quite a modern practice. It is certainly post-industrial in its reliance upon modern forms of wire, but it is nevertheless a part of the vernacular tradition. Howard Pearce argues that it is probably derived from the bough shelters of the Aboriginal tribes in the Stony Desert,⁴ but evidence will be adduced here to suggest that it derives from a very early tradition in Adelaide and that in its turn may well relate to the Maori *raupo* buildings of New Zealand.

A form of construction that does not fit properly into any category is mallee root (or more correctly mallee stump) walling, for it is a case of timber being used in the manner of rubble masonry. What European precedent there might be is unclear, and though root fences were used in Ontario⁵ these are entirely different in character because the root crown is a conventional straggly object rather than the knobbly lump of the mallee scrub. A shed built of mallee root is displayed at the Pioneer Settlement, Swan Hill, though it is unclear what evidence there is for such buildings, and it was used for fencing in Victoria not only in the Mallee proper, but as far to the south as Inglewood. Both buildings and fences of mallee roots are found in South Australia, especially on the Eyre Peninsula,⁶ and there was something of a revival of mallee root construction in the Depression of the 1920s-30s.⁷ Mallee root fences are said to have been used in Western Australia near Pinjarra,⁸ and at Hydn there is a mallee root shed dating from as late as the 1940s.

⁴ Howard Pearce, *Homesteads of the Stony Desert* (Adelaide 1978), p 20.

⁵ Eric Arthur & Dudley Witney, *The Barn* (New York 1988 [1972]), p 13.

⁶ A mallee root building near the Venus Bay Conservation Park, District of Elliston; a fenced yard at Kimba (attributed to the period 1914-27) and a fence at 'Tivleen' or 'Tiverleen', District of Murat Bay (attributed to 1927-45; all in Danvers Architects, *Heritage of the Eyre Peninsula* [South Australian Department of Environment and Planning] (no place, 1987), pp 159; 210 & 213; 263. A mallee root fenced enclosure north-east of Dutton, in the District of Truro, is cited in John Dallwitz & Susan Marsden, *Heritage of Lower North* [South Australian Department of Environment and Planning] (no place, 1983), p 306.

⁷ *Pinnaroo. Miracle of the Mallee* (Pinnaroo [South Australia] 1983), p 446, quoted in Bridget Jolly, 'Solomit in Australia and its European Context' (PhD, University of South Australia, 1998), p 8.

⁸ Information from Ian Molyneux of Fremantle, 1990. However I have also been informed by Charles Staples of Perth, 1991, of fences at Pinjarra made of sections of blackboy (or grass tree), and I am uncertain whether Molyneux was in fact referring to these.

Even further outside the realm of conventional building construction is the hollow tree. On Commissary Hall's property at O'Brien's Bridge near Hobart was a tree standing over ninety metres tall, even after about fifteen metres was blown off the top. Within it fourteen men on horseback were able to squeeze themselves, and on one occasion in 1854 (presumably after the horsemen had vacated) dinner was served within the trunk to the Governor, Sir William Denison, and seventy-eight members of the Legislative Assembly and their friends. This latter feat may have been achieved by using more than one level, as was sometimes done in such trees in Gippsland, Victoria. There the upper tree might either be sawn off or left intact, but two or three levels would be built inside the trunk 'with little windows cut out here and there.'⁹

⁹ E S Sorenson, *Life in the Australian Backblocks* (London 1911), p 24.