

IN PRAISE OF ANCIENT TREES

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The Southern Highlands has some of the oldest, biggest and most important trees in Australia, and yet most of us tend to take them pretty much for granted. Some of our trees are so old they transcend human memory. They've always been there; they always will be there, won't they? It's an attitude that might be very different if only the trees could talk. And in a sense they can. In the first of a series of features, BRUCE STANNARD goes in search of the forest giants, listening carefully as each tells its own unique story. Here he contemplates Moss Vale's magnificent pine.

the jeffrey pine

WHEN THE EARL OF JERSEY PLANTED a tiny seedling pine to mark the opening of Moss Vale's Leighton Gardens on December 7, 1905, he probably had not the slightest inkling that in a little over a century it would grow into a giant that would make Lilliputians of us all. Over the past 103 years the enormous pine has developed into a huge multi-tiered pagoda, throwing out massive limbs and pendulous branches bearing its distinctive needle-shaped, grey-green leaves. It now has a girth of seven metres and soars to an impressive 39 metres above the gardens on Argyle St. It is easily one of the biggest and most noble trees in the Highlands. The good news is that it is still growing and may, in the fullness of time, reach the colossal 53 metre mark attained by some of its Californian cousins.

Why Lord Jersey, an Englishman and a former Governor of New South Wales (1891-1893), should have chosen this particular North American native for an Australian garden remains a mystery, but we should all be very glad indeed that he did so. *Pinus jeffreyi*, a native of California's precipitous Sierra Nevada Mountains, is now officially on the Red List as one of the world's endangered species. In North America, where the tree ranges from Oregon all the way down the spine of California to Baja California in northern Mexico, it was the subject of ruthless logging in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Its magnificent trunk, soaring straight and true for up to that 53 metre mark, made it especially desirable for building and vast stands in northern California were chopped down and snigged out of the forests where they were milled into baulks and shipped all over the world.

But the Jeffrey Pine held a special secret, one which was to prove fatal for at least some of those who mistook it for the yellow Ponderosa Pine. Almost all pine species contain a resin known as turpenes, which can be extracted and distilled into turpentine. *Pinus jeffreyi* is a notable exception. Instead of turpenes, it contains

aldehydes and pure n-heptane, the highly explosive compound that was used to establish the zero rating scale of petrol. Resin distillers in California are said to have "suffered a number of inexplicable explosions during distillation". It was not until 1853 that the Jeffrey Pine was recognised as a distinct species.

But how does one tell the difference? A most delightful method is to press one's nose into the deep fissures of the dark grey-brown bark and savour the heady aroma of pineapple, butterscotch, vanilla and violets. Another is to look closely at the fruit, which is deep purple in immaturity and ripening to a yellow-brown elongated cone that can be up to 30cm long. With the cones weighing anything up to a couple of kilos, one would certainly not want to be under a Jeffrey Pine in autumn when they fall from a great height.

I imagined that Wingecarribee Shire Council would send its arborists shimmying up the tree each year to head off just such disasters, but alas the council says it does not have the manpower. I once found myself hoping that a cone would fall squarely on the obviously empty skull of a schoolboy whom I saw repeatedly leaping at the tree with vicious kung-fu kicks. I was so unnerved by the boy's complete disregard for the sanctity of this venerable old tree that in a moment of madness I thought I might rush across busy Argyle St, seize him by his college blazer and march him off to his headmaster. I consoled myself instead with a blistering letter to the principal, a missive he conveniently chose to ignore.

Despite this sort of occasional idiocy the great pine has generally remained free of wanton vandalism. It's so big and yet so unobtrusive that I suspect many people whizzing past in their cars may not even be aware of its existence.

If Lord Jersey could somehow come back to Moss Vale, I wonder what he'd make of his little pine, now exceedingly tall and strikingly beautiful 103 years on. I should think his lordship would be very pleased indeed. ■

In the next issue Bruce Stannard considers Berrima's awesome English Oak planted by Sir Henry Parkes in 1890.