Our relationship with the eucalypt has had a profound impact on Australian art and literature. However, Drusilla Modjeska writes, sometimes we can't see the trees for the forest.

It's the gum trees' country. They had it 300 years ago. We'll have it again when we're gone.

Douglas Stuart

The noise of land that forms one side of Parramore, pushing into Sydney Harbour between the Opera House and Garden Island, was once covered in red forest gums, Eucalyptus tereticornis. There are red gums there still, but hardly a forest. The grass grows lushly inside the loops of road that run past the Art Gallery of NSW to Mrs Macquarie's Chair; wedding cars and tour buses snake their way to the end to photograph or be photographed. It's one of Sydney's premium sites. When Mrs Macquarie waited there for the ships that would bring news of England, Sydney Town's forest gums were already being cut down — you can see the devastation in early paintings — though from the vantage point of the Pinchgut prisoners out in the harbour on their island prison, there must have seemed a lot of trees between them and any hope of inland escape.

The gum tree. Our history began with an uneasy relationship to it. Our literature and art is full of it. It's almost a matter of legend that our first artists, struggling to find a form for the liqueurish trees that made them uneasy, hid their gawky branches under the shapes of European trees. Follow the art market of the 20th century and see the shift from the money going to the painters who made gum trees look like gum trees to the moderns who caught the light to give the impression and feel of the trees.

In novels, babies and wives and mates have been buried under eucalyptus; women and girls have had their backs broken by falling branches; love affairs, adulteries and elopements have been conducted beneath the trees. When there were strikes by loggers and timber workers in our literary past, sympathy was rarely with the trees. The bush hero became a dodo of nationalistic rhetoric until Patrick White wrote The Tree of Man and gave us the more difficult idea that our relationship with the trees might have more to do with poetry, even the sacred, than with our own identity.

In June last year a sculpture — if that’s the word for it — entitled Veil of Trees, created by Janet Laurence and Usuk Han, went up in the first of those grassy loops on the road down to Mrs Macquarie’s Chair. A hundred red forest gums have been planted and among them glass panels rise, tall and thin, as elegant as trees. The glass is smoky black in places, speckled with ash, traces of minerals and indigenous seeds. Lines of Australian poetry, a few of few pieces, are inscribed into the glass. Les Murray and Judith Wright are there, of course, as well as many others going back right back to Henry Kendall and Charles Harpur. Some panels simply list the names of trees: Eucalyptus argyrophylla, Eucalyptus intermedia, Eucalyptus microcarpa, Acacia confertiflora, Casuarina phasiana — it is your land of similes,” a quotation from James Macauley reads, “the wattle roasts its pith on the glowing heart.”

This sculpture — “this passage of reflection where memory is gathered” — is very beautiful. It has a modest calm, a meditative quality that, like the trees, does nothing to vie for our attention. Janet Laurence and Fiona Foley’s Edge of the Trees, in the forecourt of the Museum of Sydney, has a similar calm.

It is that there is too much guilt for us to want to stand among the trees and reflect? For this sculpture — this work of art — seems to ask us to reconsider our relationship to the eucalypt and a past that is entangled with it.

The optimistic view would be to say that after 300 years in the country we are finally understanding the value of the environment we have crushed into; there are signs of ecological consciousness all around us. The gloomy view would be to say that the ecological consciousness doesn’t extend far if there’s a conflict over profit or our comfort. We might argue over it, but still feel the forests and pulp the trees.

Of all the fellings, perhaps the most contentious has been that of the river red gum (Kunanyi -kwambalakwa). If the red forest gum is the most productive of the eucalypts growing along the length of coastal eastern Australia, the river red gum is the essential tree of the arid south and centre.

And it is the river red gum that is the subject of Kerrin Milburn’s, an exhibition, curated by Vivienne Twamble, which opened a month ago at Adelaide’s ArtSpace as part of the arts festival. Kerrin is the name given by the Kaurna people of the Adelaide plains.

It once grew all along the Torrens; it grew in the Adelaide Botanical Gardens, where there is still a “remnant tree,” it grew in north Adelaide, where the smart shops are; it grew where the golf course is. It grows along rivers and taps into underground water systems so successfully that the early explorers travelling inland to the centre rejoiced to see it. It was common that we hacked away at it for years. Its hard water-resistant wood was felled for bridges and homesteads; trees posts and railway sleepers. There was so much of this mighty tree — it could grow to a more than 30m and last half a millennium — that’s we also felled it to burn our grasses and to fuel the engines that pumped the water out of the rivers.

Out down, the river red gum could no longer play its part in the regulation of the water table. With water taken out of the rivers to irrigate shallow-rooted crops, the 300 years built and river banks eroded where trees once stood, the water table has changed; the land is growing sunny water with it. The states along the Murray-Darling system, where the karras was once supreme, argue over how much water can be pumped out, how many more trees cut. The NSW rice and cotton growers and their communities depend on the water. There’s no federal law to stop logging on freehold land even as land management schemes begin to replant. Some estimates say that 30 per cent more trees are needed. Adelaide depends on water that reaches down to the roots of this great waterway. If it turns to salt, what happens to the city and its parks and gardens? You can’t boil the salt out of the water that got into Sydney’s water supply.

Sydneysiders might be too busy to stand among young trees and reflect, but perhaps the citizens of Adelaide’s will be more inclined to visit an exhibition given to a single eucalypt. It might draw their attention to the river red gums that are still standing in their city, some of which are old and marked with unobtrusive plaques.

“The new out of the old” is the theme for this year’s Adelaide Festival. Passions about the tree — its history and its redeeming potential — Thales park along each road and each exhibition is a step to a performance space that “would say what a poem or a song might say.”

The artist spent a year researching the karras, collecting bark, visiting the sites where the tree still stands, trackin records, reading pioneer diaries and letters, looking at paintings, drawings and photos, learning its ecology. The result will be at ArtSpace in the Playhouse until April 20 “a repository for memory and history” and a prayer for the future.

“Over time,” Murray Ball writes, “the Red Gum has become a barnacle with legends. This is only to be expected. By sheer numbers there’s always a bully Red Gum here or somewhere else in the wide world, muscling into the eye, as it were; and by following the course of rivers in our particular continent they don’t merely imprint their fuzzy shape but actually warm their way greenly into the mind, giving some hope against the collective crow-croaking dryness.

And if that’s not enough, the massive individual equanimity of these trees, ancient, stunted and wary, has a grand-fatherly aspect; that is, a long life of incidents, accidents, stories...”

This quotation from Eucalyptus stands, with Les Murray’s The Gum Forest, as a kind of prelude to Kerrin’s Continued Page 4
From Page 3
catalogue of four essays. Words are as much a part of this exhibition as images and paintings.

Botanist Martin O’Leary tells a story worthy of Ball, but it comes from a Eucalyptus published in 1895. Drawing 19th-century America’s attention to the magnificent clumps of the gum, the author, Abbot Kinney, reported a widespread Spanish belief that the eucalyptus had healing properties. Proprietary conditions are as diverse as typhoid, incontinence, gangrene and gonorrhoea. "In Cordova the young eucalyptus is said to be stripped of its bark and guards had to be posted to protect the trees." In other Spanish towns, "permits were issued for the picking of leaves. If evidence of medicinal need could be shown". Kinney also reported that "an Aboriginal man whose intestines were hanging out of a wound made a complete recovery with no inflammation after E. camaldulensis leaves were used as a dressing".

E. camaldulensis is a remarkable tree. O’Leary tells of its capacities to endure fire and flood, and to grow out its limbs and even its trunk in order to take advantage of the droppings of the birds and animals that live in its canopy and even its trunk in order to take advantage of the droppings of the birds and animals that live in its canopy and even its trunk. It is an adaptation in "nutrient-poor environments", he says that “as the trees get older about 150 years or more”, "no wonder the willows are weeping", goes a line from Nelson Van der Velden’s song for the River Red Gum that is also part of the exhibition, “they weep for those old gum trees”.

In the catalogue, linguist Rob Armer traces its history in language and Stephanie Radok its history in image and art. The Kurnan took the wood of the knot and its leaves in their containered artefacts, weapons, canoes and music sticks, its richness spreading into their language and into their world when the bark containers were named coonoon. Colonial artist, H.J. Johnstone painted River Red Gums in 1880; Jimmy Pike, who accompanied ethnographers Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen on an expedition through Central Australia in 1925, drew it. His Aranda name was Erlikillaikirra, "the subdued". Fred Williams painted the Murray and its trees in the early 1930s, his guisees and figurations of the river, the bark, the leaf, the coonoon permanently displayed in the foyer of the Adelaide Festival Theatre. The Murray had been both an exhibition and an eerie silence of the 80s. An etching by Chris de Rose overlays an excerpt from a 1988 exhibition that showed two women from Adelaide in 1839 to her brother in England — on a detail of a coonoon scar in the trunk of a river red gum. Works by all of them are reproduced in the catalogue. So are Gilbert and Debrah's precise and exquisite botanical paintings. But for me the great surprise of this exhibition is Kathleen, Petyarre's vivid Dusk in Thorny Devil Lizard Country (watercolour, ochre, sand, 1997), painted last year on Belgian linen. It is large and mysterious and powerful, a centrepiece among the paintings, a unique collaboration, an invitation to a different way of mapping, and seeing, and feeling, the country. It tells us of the nature of the country as if it were a living character, a grand and noble being. He invites us to consider the living it has given us, its aboriginal culture and its written and post texts — and he tells the life it has given to the creatures of the bush, the ducks and parrots and owls and possums and kangaroos, and the entire Aboriginal groups. There's one text as visible in the Adelaide Botanical Gardens. When hollow branches were hauled out of the river, Murray cod that once roamed two kilometres of water from their former logs, lost their habitat and began to die. The river red gum is host to mammals, birds, fish, bees, fungus, grubs and parasites. It can feed and (and can heal). On top of that, it helps regulate the water table. And we burn it for firewood. When Douglas Stewart says, "It's the gum trees' country. They had it before we came. They'll have it when we're gone", I hope he's right. "The most terrible invention of our industrial civilization." Gary Catalano said back in 1985, "has not been the bomb but the idea that the self exists as something apart for earth." He is quoted in the catalogue.

WE ARE RUINED BY THE THINGS WE KILL," Judith Wright says in Somatics. Brandy quotes her in a recent essay on Wright and the poetics of ecology. The point Brandy and Wright both make is that we are heading to a land of being in the world that allows truths and perspectives other than our industrial culture. It's hard to say for this, for our forms of writing are themselves touched by the kind of separation between self and other, self and earth — that Wright wishes to dispense. Perhaps poetry, with its reliance on perception and image, can best do it.

We use our quick dividing eyes, measure, distinguish and are gone. The forest burns, the tree dies fast, one is all and all are one.

That's Wright again. "Often our imagination cannot afford the truth of a city or of a land." Simon Leys writes in his celebrated essay on Lawrence of Arabia, "unlike a poet first invented it for us.

When Stan Parker's grandson walks among the trees at the end of the Tree of Man down in the gully where there are still a few standing — a "tree trunk" — it is poetry he feels growing in him. Even as a scrawny boy he understands that poetry is as much a part of their heritage. Outlaws both, their faltering progress towards connectedness is a kind of metaphor, or blueprint, for the most important possible routes between heritage and economics, bush and town, city and country.

One of the best of these is Ivan Craven's The Best Australian Essays (Bookman, 1999) was, I thought, Gillian Mears's novel The Dry Country and Elizabethan Sadness. Mears has lived for many years outside Grafton beside the Clarence River. At its headwaters I'm told the Timbarra Lake and plateau. A Brisbane-based company is mining for gold there, despite dolley efforts on the part of the local landowners to extend the plateau. I have to be irrigated with a solution of sodium cyanide. About 2 tonnes are used each against the creek. The diggers have to be run-off as the gold is washed through the heap of ore. Cyanide eventually degrades to cyanogen, but a spill into the creeks that feed the Clarence can have lasting toxic effects on everything that drinks from the river. Why is the plateau and its forest is also inhabited by the eco-camps.

Mears writes of journeying there to confront the complex interactions of the combatants, the moral cross-currents. Further on, in his essay called "Soothing the Damned", he writes: "It's not hard to maintain the rage against mining company officials when you know what the landscape and the flora and fauna are like. Why is it that we are doing an "amazing job". But still the trees come down and the water is poisoned, the negotiations go on, and the land is not ready to say on some meditation mat? What can a writer do?"

With all this commitment, this passionate, polemical essay is as good as it gets. In writing such as this, or in those few essays that come from a place and a point of view. "It's a long way from Marcus Clarke's early encounter with the "weird melancholy" of the bush, but for each of us the connection remains unbroken. It makes the wild country — something of the mysteriousness of the bush remains. While that's the case, perhaps Australia can still be said to be the "gum tree's country". New trees step out of old: lemon and ocher. Sitting out of grey everywhere, in the gum forest.

These lines from Les Murray's The Gum forest, which reminds us how much we know and respect the gum forest, and the Veil of Trees and in Karra. As are these: Sky sitting, and always a hint of smoke in the light. Exhaling out of the heart of the gum forest.

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