

a curious history

of the Southern Cross and red cedar

BY DAVID AND RENIA FERGUSON

The Southern Cross is a powerful patriotic symbol among Australians. In modern Australia its symbology is almost inescapable, appearing as tattoos, bumper stickers and business trademarks just to name a few, as well as of course adorning past and present versions of official and unofficial Australian flags.

In early exploration times the Southern Cross was a navigational aid, instilling confidence in sailors while they traversed the vast southern oceans. Its position, near the rotation point of the apex of the South Pole, indicates the position of the South Pole with the use of the pointer stars.

Australia in the 18th and early 19th centuries had a harsh brutality and was unforgiving by nature, yet offered a bounty of potential opportunities, being richly textured with strange and somewhat weird animals and plants. Red cedar was one of these opportunities. Discovered soon after settlement in a patch of temperate rain-forest on the Hawkesbury River, it was also found along the Nepean River.¹ Shipments of pit-sawn cedar planks were sent to Joseph Banks in 1791, followed by additional shipments soon after.² Back in London, cedar was considered suitable for quality furniture construction, having similar characteristics to Honduras mahogany. The Admiralty subsequently requested as much cedar as possible to be stowed in returning convict ships.³

In 1795, due to the rapid decline of standing red cedar along the

Hawkesbury and Nepean Rivers, concerns were felt by the governing administration and it applied restrictions.⁴

These restrictions forced further exploration north of Sydney with the discovery of cedar along the Hunter River.⁴ In 1802 additional restrictions were applied to these particular stands of red cedar, with a declaration that all red cedar was the property of the Crown.⁵ These laws were the first environmental protection orders created to protect an indigenous Australian species of plant.

In 1805, a survey party exploring south of Sydney in an the area around the Shoalhaven

River located additional stands of cedar.⁶ This area was opened to the cedar getters, with the first cargo of red cedar being delivered to Sydney in 1811.⁷

The fifth Governor to New South Wales, Major General Lachlan Macquarie - who administered between the years 1810 to 1822 - displayed a distinctively zealous pride about all things Australian, sending a steady stream of gifts from the natural world such as timber samples, living animals and plants. These certainly would have surprised patrons and peers in distant lands.⁸ The collective pride in the Southern Cross was graphically realised

with its depiction in Australia's first 'National Colonial Flag', designed in 1823.⁹

Pictured is a curious early 19th century of wine table of English manufacture, with a base of pigmented birch wood and a red cedar top that displays a curious arrangement of naturally formed timber knots, reflecting the configuration of the



Southern Cross, which was probably why it was souvenired.¹⁰ It is likely that the Southern Cross was being seen as an identifying symbol at a very early period of the first settlement.

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David and Renia Ferguson run Objective fine vintage design at The Burley Griffin Antiques Centre in Kingston, ACT. They can be contacted on 0411 481 394 or email sales@finevintagedesign.com www.finevintagedesign.com



NOTES

1 John Vander, *Red Cedar: the Tree of Australia's History*.

Reed Books Pty Ltd, 1987, p. 21

2 *ibid* p. 21

3 *ibid* p. 21

4 *ibid* p. 27

5 *ibid* p.27

6 *ibid* p. 35

7 *ibid* p. 35

8 Elizabeth Ellis, *Rare & Curious - the Secret History of Governor Macquaries Collectors' Chest*. Miegunyah Press, 2010, p.103

9 Geoff Hocking, *Australian Flag: The First 100 Years*. The Five Mile Press Pty Ltd, 2002. p. 6

10 When the table is tilted, the Southern Cross appears as it is at midnight in the summer months above the horizon. The base is made of northern hemisphere birch with a reddish pigmented finish, with parts of the tilt mechanism being of both northern hemisphere beech and oak. Underside of the top is in an undisturbed condition with all its components contemporaneous to the time of manufacture.