

‘The carved trees have a spirit’: Kamilaroi fight to repatriate sacred 800-year-old trunks

Students from Collarenebri in north-west NSW mount global effort to track down sacred carved trees sawed off in the 1940s



In 1949, centuries-old trees covered in First Nations carvings were hacked into with circular saws, removed from Kamilaroi land and distributed around the world.

Kelly Burke
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In early 2020, the academic, artist and artistic director Brook Andrew travelled to the small town of Collarenebri in north-west [New South Wales](#) to show the local Kamilaroi community some shocking footage he'd found that he wanted to feature as part of the 2020 Sydney Biennale.

Shot in 1949, it showed wealthy Adelaide collector and businessman Harry Balfour supervising a team of timber workers as they felled dozens of trees.

The trees – some possibly as old as 800 years – were covered in detailed carvings and sacred to the Kamilaroi First Nations people. Using circular saws to separate the large carved sections from the trunks, they were loaded on to trucks, transported by rail and stacked on to ships for distribution around the globe.

The carved trees of the Banarway Bora had played a central role in Aboriginal knowledge systems for centuries yet only a handful remained on country in Collarenebri, 75km north-east of Walgett. More than 50 had been removed in the

1940s and are now housed in public museums and private collections around the world.

Most of the town's 650 residents gathered to watch the footage.

"People were crying, others were shocked. Only a few people knew about the existence of these trees," Andrew recalls. "There were a lot of people who were pretty upset."



A still from the documentary Gaaguwiya Dhawunga (Bring Back Home) shows one of the sacred carved trees being removed in 1949.

Now, in a bid to bring the trees home, students at Collarenebri Central School have become global advocates, presenting a short but moving documentary called Gaaguwiya Dhawunga (Bring Back Home), which premiered at an international conference at the Ethnography Museum of Geneva late last month and has since been posted on YouTube.

Somewhat paradoxically, two of the carved trees have been traced to the collection of the Geneva museum.

Another tree has been located in the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University, while the Melbourne Museum was already known to be in possession of two. The community wants them back.

Andrew, a descendent of the Wiradjuri people of central NSW, uncovered the 1949 footage in 2019 while conducting research with fellow Monash University academic Brian Martin into artefacts made from south-eastern Australian trees.

The project has so far uncovered tens of thousands of artefacts spread across more than 200 Australian and overseas museums, with more than 30,000 objects tracked down in British institutions alone.

‘There is a lot of healing still to be done’

Kamilaroi elder Ros McGregor has been bringing First Nations cultural knowledge to the students of Collarenebri for the past 15 years, including knowledge about the trees of the Banarway Bora that are still on country.

Four years ago McGregor and Sydney artists Sam Newstead and Liz O’Reilly supervised the students in creating a mural celebrating the trees that was painted on the exterior of the school’s community hall. McGregor explains the return of the trees is vital to the healing and teaching of local Kamilaroi culture.



A school mural paying homage to the carved trees of the Kamilaroi.

“The carved trees have a spirit that is past, present and future,” she says. “The return of the others will give us connection to our own knowledge system and an opportunity to continue learning lessons from the very first Bora.

“We can never go back to the times and way of life we had when the trees were carved, but the images and patterns on the trees speak directly to us as Kamilaroi people.”

McGregor says the brutality of the footage Andrew showed was deeply disturbing.

“The size of that saw ... what they were doing to our living trees that our people took so long to create. There is a lot of healing still to be done.”



One of the sacred carved trees.

The Kamilaroi people and Monash University are now in advanced negotiations with [Museums Victoria](#) to have the trees repatriated.

A museum spokesperson said in a statement: “Museums Victoria’s First Peoples strategy is committed to bringing collections to Country, giving self-determination for material in our care to First Peoples and building ethical and reciprocal partnerships between Museums Victoria and communities.

“Museums Victoria are committed to repatriating the carved trees to the traditional owners and working with the community which these trees are from.”

Brian Martin, who is a descendant of the Muruwari, Bundjalung and Kamilaroi peoples from northern NSW and southern Queensland and the Monash University Art Design & Architecture’s associate dean Indigenous, says the tone of the negotiations between the museum and the people of Collarenebri was what decolonising was all about.

“It’s about this idea that taking them was a violent act but we don’t react in a violent way by just demanding them back,” he says.

“Of course it’s very important to get them back. But we also want to do it through a healing process, and do it in a way that is beneficial for us, but beneficial for the institution as well.”