Old carved burial tree on the west bank of the Bogan River, on Roseholm, part of the old Bulgandramine Mission Station, 13 miles from Peak Hill on the Dandaloo Road.   This and the tree shown on the right are 15 yards apart, and between them are a couple of aboriginal graves.   This carving faces north-east.

Companion tree to the one on the left; this one faces south-east. This one shows even better than the other the evidence of considerable age; since the carving was executed, the bark has grown over much of the original design, though growth varies so greatly in different trees that it would not be possible to calculate the age of the work.

Blackfellows' Burial Trees

Aboriginal Ceremonial Art in New South Wales

Photos by J. H. BENHAM

ONE of the most interesting forms of aboriginal art in Australia is the decoration of trees with carved designs, known to the scientists as dendroglyphs. Trees bearing scars from which shields, canoes, and sheets of bark for shelters and (in the case of people of special importance) burial shrouds have been cut, are not uncommon; they may be found in most parts of the continent where trees and blacks existed together. But the Dendroglyphs are confined to portions of the interior of New South Wales and southern Queensland, where the Kamilaroi and Wiradjuri tribes roamed.

Even within this area, however, the tree carvings are of two distinct types, and apparently designed for quite different purposes. In the

This tree carving, also fairly ancient, as indicated by the growth of bark round it (see preceding page), is on the east bank of the Yalga Creek, three miles north of the pair of carvings shown on the opposite page. The design is primitive, but obviously much care has gone into it.

This is a comparatively recent carving, near a row of fairly recent aboriginal graves about 500 yards north of the pair shown on the previous page. It will be noticed that the workmanship (and probably the care taken in execution) is inferior to that of the older examples. It was carved with a steel axe.

northern portion of the area the representations are of animal and human figures and totemic designs, and they were used as part of the stock-in-trade of the permanent bora-grounds — sacred places where tribal ceremonial was observed, initiations took place, and important events were celebrated with corroborees.

The other type of tree-carving, found in the southern districts of the dendroglyph area, served the dual purpose of a gravestone and a public monument. These burial trees bear carving of quite a different type, seen in the examples photographed in this and the adjacent pages. The designs on burial trees were never representations of concrete things; rather they were geometrical designs, conveying nothing to the uninitiated white man. Science knows the ceremonial trees as Teleteglyphs, and the burial trees as Taphoglyphs.

Grave trees were never placed directly over the burial-place; generally they were in threes, forming a triangle in the centre of which was the site of the grave, and the sides of the triangle might be anything from about 20 yards to 60 yards long. Edmund Milne records 79 graves, of which 43 were marked with only one tree, 18 with two, eight with three, and 10 with either four or five.

Some of these might be the original figures, but in some instances, at least, there is evidence of one or even two of the original trees from a triangle having decayed or been removed. Mr Lindsay Black, in his splendidly illustrated and informative little booklet on the subject, "Burial Trees" (reviewed in Wild Life for December, 1941) records one that was burnt for charcoal! In instances where there were more than three trees, frequently two trees were carved at the one angle of the triangle, preserving the general layout.
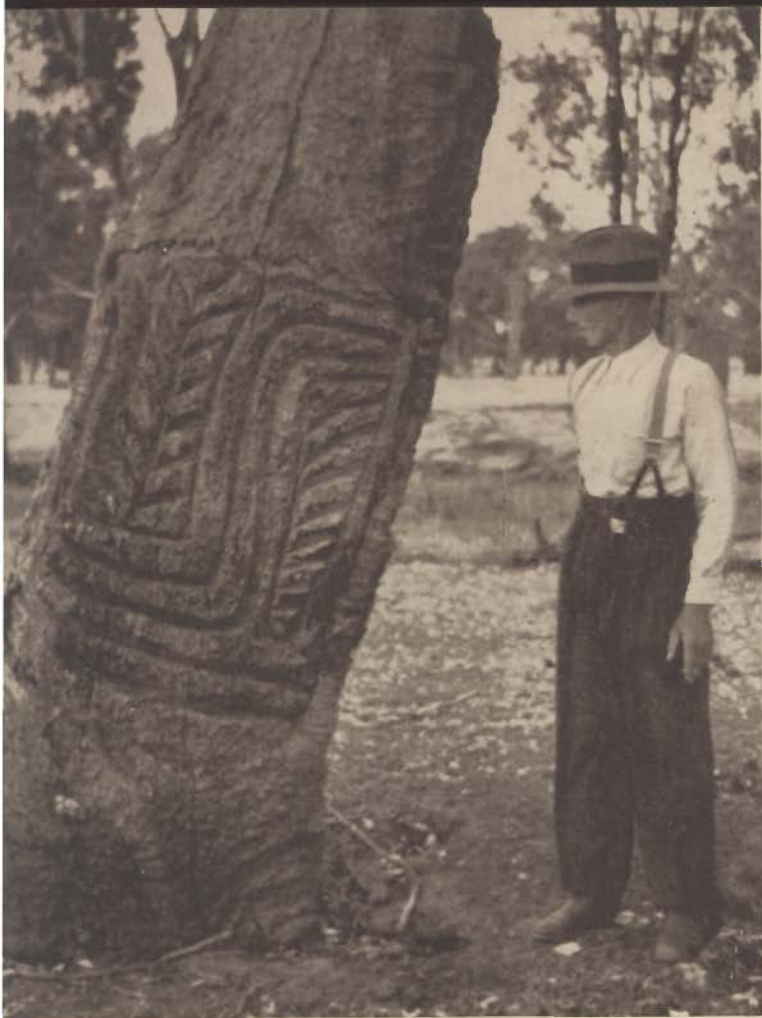
This and the companion tree on the right are about 15 yards apart on the west bank of the Yalga Creek, near the Peak Hill-Dandaloo Road. This one faces southwest. The figure gives a scale of size.

"Opposite number" to the tree on the left, ancient and weatherbeaten. Both trees have been dead for some time, so there is little overgrowth of bark. This one faces north-west.

Apparently position was what mattered more than anything else; several kinds of trees are represented among those carved, but always the grave was in the centre of the triangle formed by them, and the carvings always faced in towards the graves.

And what did the designs mean? Apparently they were something that could be read by the passing black; some say that they were the designs used by the deceased during his lifetime to decorate his shield and weapons, or the inner lining of his skin cloak, for natives in this area, as distinct from those further north, frequently wore kangaroo and other skins for clothing. These designs would probably be well known in the tribes, for the man whose grave was marked by a burial tree (only one case is known of a woman's grave so marked) was always a person of some importance, a doctor, a hunter or fighter of considerable renown, or least one of the chiefs of the tribe.

Others claim that the marks had a meaning similar to that of our own writing, for Black remarks that the designs are very similar to those found on message sticks and other articles which, he says, the blacks could certainly read.

One of the other factors about which there is not complete agreement is the age of these carvings. It has been suggested that the blacks got the original idea from the white man, and that none of the carvings is earlier in date than the white occupation of the area. The principal basis for this, however, is the fact that practically all of them have been cut with steel axes. However, Black claims that this is not admissable evidence, since the carvings were "trimmed up" at intervals, and, in later years, steel axes were used for the purpose. There is no doubt, he says, that many of them are more than 150 years old. As shown in several of the pictures now reproduced, some have been partly obscured by re-growth of bark which has obviously proceeded very slowly.