This paper examines the use of terms for wooded land in the early days of European settlement before 1820 and argues that there was great divergence in the use of nomenclature for effectively the same areas of the land, a divergence that only slowly settled down to an agreed usage that enabled the surveyors to write reports which provided reasonably precise information to the authorities in Sydney or Hobart. For the first Europeans landing at Sydney Cove in 1788 it may be argued that there was no such thing as an Australian forest. They had no real concept of what they were seeing and the Aborigines were not able to convey to them the Aboriginal idea of the landscape. While today there is fairly general agreement that there is a hierarchy of terminology for wooded land, there was no such agreed assumption about typology amongst the Europeans who first arrived in Australia. Our present-day definitions in terms of the cover provided by the trees, the height of the trees and the layers of plant types,1 took thirty years to start appearing. There have been a number of recent studies of the nature of the land round Sydney Cove and up to the Blue Mountains and its vegetation at the time of Phillip’s arrival, especially that of Doug Benson and Jocelyn Howell.2 These give us a good basis for understanding the complex bushland types that once covered the Sydney basin but it is not possible to match their mapping of these areas to what the early European arrivals ‘saw’ or often to know where they ‘saw’ it.

Geographers and others who seek to establish what the pre-European forest was like must treat the historical records during this period with extreme caution. Close reading of well known sources during the period – such as the eleven journals and diaries that survive from the first Fleet migrants, those from the later Fleets and the formal correspondence of the government – in order to note the employment of terms relating to tree cover of various sorts is here used to illustrate the major differences in usage and indeed vagueness that make them of limited use to the forest historian seeking to recreate the pre-European forest. Few early European writers, suffering the trauma of removal from the familiar,3 show real awareness of the diverse ecology and perhaps irreplaceable role of these woodlands.

It is well known that descriptions and indeed pictures of the new land – in the early records, of course, mainly the Sydney basin and then the land around the first Van Diemen’s Land settlements – are also heavily influenced by the cultural expectations of the writers; their perceptions in turn were shaped by their occupations and by the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement, so that they wanted to see the strange and the striking, the picturesque and the imposing.4 What they hoped, perhaps expected, to see was ‘unspoilt nature’. Many, despite the acknowledged presence of Aborigines, represented the wooded parts – now estimated to be ten percent of the total but then, as their observations were restricted to the eastern coastal areas, much more – as virgin or primeval forest. Moreover, to them, imagination was a critical interpretative human function with which to see the world around them. Even those like Bruny d’Entrecasteaux, who gives a very early and precise description of the trees in the cove in Van Diemen’s Land that he calls Port du Nord, used all the terminology of the Romantic Enlightenment:

> With each step one encounters the beauties of unspoilt nature, with signs of decrepitude; trees reaching a very great height and of corresponding diameter are devoid of branches along the trunk but crowned with an everlasting great foliage. Some of these trees seem as ancient as the world...5

This description may be accurate but it is also a common romantic topos used by writers in different areas and even different countries to describe the alien and untouched. Barron Field used identical terms when describing ‘the wild forest’ and the struggles of the cedar cutters beyond Sydney in getting access to their prey.6 Alexander Harris in 1825 spoke in similar terms of the cedar gatherers at the Hawkesbury where the forests could only be opened with an axe.7 The less literary, like the convict, Thomas Watling, admitted their difficulty in interpreting the strange environment8 George Worgan, a surgeon on the First Fleet, described the land as ‘delusive’.

**European usage**

The words the first European settlers used for land were derived from a very different hierarchy of ideas from those of the surveyors. ‘Forest’ indicated a legal status that had little to do with the degree of tree cover. Wilderness was generally seen in biblical terms, mostly as an alien place to which Adam and Eve had been condemned when they were expelled from Paradise. Thus, Isaiah prophesied: ‘The Lord shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her desert like the garden of the Lord’(51:3 in the King James Version).

Worgan was not alone in seeing the land of New South Wales as a wilderness in this Biblical sense. The discovery of territory that was not paralleled by similar land in Europe or America meant that there was no agreed English term for it. The ‘logic’ of association did not apply. It is not therefore easy to determine what the first Europeans ‘saw’ when they traversed the Australian countryside.

In particular, while Benson and Howell confidently divide the land into such areas as Blue Gum High Forest, Turpentine-Ironbark Forest, Cumberland Plain Woodlands, without bothering to define how a forest may be distinguished from a wood, so obvious does it seem to them, virtually none of the first Fleet
journals defined what they saw in terms of the dominant species and few gave much idea of the distance between the trees. The most they do is employ terms such as 'thick' or 'thin'. When later writers start to show some real appreciation of the complexity of the land cover there is little agreement about what it should be called. At first, however, the people could not even agree on basic facts. As Watkin Tench commented:

'Some saw a rich and beautiful country; and others were so unfortunate as to discover little else than large tracts of low land, covered with reeds, and rank with the inundations of the stream'. Such indeed was Phillip's own impression. 

Arthur Bowen Smyth also gives us a pessimistic view of the land - romantic at first sight but useless, the trees, though very large, in general hollow, fit only for the fire. 

The term deceitful was common. 

First images: 1788-1789

It is with Banks, thirty years earlier, that the examination of the strange new land of Australia - 'all new and wonderful to the botanist' - is usually begun. Joseph Banks, probably the best known and certainly the earliest of the English botanists to set foot in Australia, exemplifies the botanist's approach to what they saw and the need to see it in relationship to what they already know. Banks's eyes were northern hemisphere eyes as were those of his successors. A devotee of Linnaeus, his enthusiasm for discovery turned largely on disproving 'that which only exists in the opinions of theoretical writers'.

He wrote in his journal of 'the infinite variety of Creation and ... the infinite care with which providence has multiplied his productions, suiting them no doubt to the various climates for which they were designed'. 

Banks was delighted to find five or six hundred new species and had an eye out for the useful - doubtless already aware that economic promise was what would keep such expensive voyages going. On the other hand the furthest he went inland from the beach was a few miles and his vision of the vast interior was not based on information. His journals and those of Cook speak of shoreline features but do little to establish a detailed ecology. The art of Cook's voyages give modified and romantic images. 

Early writers in the colony attempted to identify the trees they saw around them from the records of Banks's specimens but there were many that Banks had not seen. When New South Wales was established Phillip was able to send him boxes of seeds and plants in return for food trees and plants from Europe, but complained that he himself had no botanical knowledge and that he was without 'one botanist, or even an intelligent gardener'.

The daily struggle to survive left little time for exploration. Before 1800, the main people from whom we can get some idea of their first image of the interior, a description of the land and the wooded areas, are mainly military government men who were not botanists. Men like William Bradley were not concerned to define woodland types. They were initially concerned only to plant the food crops they had brought with them and to avoid starvation. Promising, well-watered land was the object of their exploration. Bradley wrote for instance on Friday 18 April 1788 of the governor tracing the run of water that debouched into Middle Harbour and finding 'the country in general rocks and woods.' Later he described North Head as covered with 'a variety of brush wood and shrubs some of which have very pretty blossoms'. 

Phillip in his first report of the land between Sydney Cove and Botany Bay wrote of woods around the settlement one and a half to three miles across and then of 'a poor sandy heath full of swamps' while to the west they saw one continuous forest. 

John White on 15 April 1788 wrote of a place possibly near Dee Why as 'an immense wood'. Later that year, in writing of an expedition from Parramatta, Phillip described the trees as 20 to 40 foot apart which would suggest about 49 trees an acre or over a hundred a hectare. They described the land only to start modify the vegetation. This happened very quickly. In May 1788 Richard Johnson was planting orange trees from Brazilian seeds and in August the botanists on William Bligh's ship en route for Tahiti planted apple trees and potatoes in Van Diemen's Land. Surveyor Harris records by 1804 that flower seeds were sent from England, including fruits such as gooseberries and raspberries, currants and plums and cherry stones, acorns and 'all manner of familiar things'. 

Nostalgia for the land they had left was paramount. There was no regard for the native flora. It was for the most part regarded as neither useful nor picturesque although Bradley reports favourably on the 'pines' at Norfolk Island.

Bradley's journal shows us the settlement hemmed in by unidentified woods in which those who wandered with too few companions were likely to be ambushed and speared by the natives. Later he describes areas towards Rose Hill that have grass growing under the trees and appear to be more fertile and talks of gum trees, a kind of pine and a bastard kind of Mahogany which 'made tolerable good furniture' but uses no collective noun for it. Tench, on the other hand, wrote in his diary of roughly the same area towards Rose Hill as 'the trackless immeasurable desert, in awful silence'. He also declared 'every part of the country is a forest' but he used 'forest' as a synonym for wood. His map of the expeditions condemns most of the areas as barren. He wrote of woods without much enthusiasm for their use. He was, however, more interested in species than the others. Eucalypts he found were 'either rotten at the heart or ruined by the gum which abounds in them'. The one useful species of lightwood was scarce. He thought that the 'woods stop the warm vapours of the sea from reaching Rose Hill' and wrote of 'natives constantly setting fire to the grass and bushes'. In both his writings and those of Francis Barrallier who went towards Mittagong and Picton in 1802, the greater part of the areas close to Sydney and down the coast towards Picton was regarded as sufficiently wooded for men routinely to lose their way. Although noted as full of flowering shrubs and wild berries at the beginning they were otherwise undifferentiated but seen as dangerous and difficult, haunts of the natives. The trees under which they sheltered in rainstorms often shed rotten branches. The colonists were also surprised and disconcerted by the vast fires that broke out, although Cook and Banks had recorded them.

Early nomenclature and modification of the pre-European forest

George Worgan and other early arrivals used terms that did not become enounced in the later hierarchy of surveyor's nomenclature, such as meadowland. Talking of the first inland expedition Worgan wrote: 'to be sure in our Excursions Inland, which I believe have not exceeded 30 or 40 Miles in any Direction, we have met with a great Extent of Park-like Country, and the Trees of a moderate Size & at a moderate distance from each other, the Soil, apparently, fitted to produce any kind of Grain and clothed with extra-ordinarily luxuriant Grass'. The precise implication of the term moderate cannot be established. When he went up the harbour towards Lane Cove he repeated the image: 'the Trees are small and grow almost in
regular Rows, so that, together with the Evenness of the Land for a considerable Extent, it resembles a Beautiful Park.' Parkland, however, was not to become a standard collective noun for a type of woodland. His description of meadowland 'with trees at thirty or forty yards distant [presumably about thirty to the hectare] ... interrupted ... by a rocky or sandy or swampy surface crowded with large trees and almost impenetrable Brushwood' cannot be pinpointed to any identifiable location. 27

Trees were largely an mere impediment – in Worgan's words 'the principal Business has been the clearing of Land, cutting, grubbing and burning down Trees'. They could rarely name the species they met although Worgan does describe three or four. Bradley referred merely to 'a fruit that was acid and good for scurvy'. 28 or to 'a species of fir', to pines, or to the cabbage trees that grew in such profusion – which were so universally used for building that within 30 years they were utterly destroyed around Port Jackson. Trees whose bark was useful for spinning 'hemp' were found with the assistance of the natives but also remained unidentified. 29 One can be certain that the country was well wooded around Sydney Cove but little about the type of woodland – Worgan typically writes generically of 'the Indians going up into the woods'. Tench, describing his short exploration from Rosehill to the Nepean, describes the land without collective nouns. 'The country we had passed through we found tolerably plain, and little encumbered with underwood, except near the riverside. It is entirely covered with the same sorts of trees as grow near Sydney'. His interest in native plants was slight and trees were mere impediments to agriculture. 'Six weeks ago this was a forest. It has been cleared, and the wood nearly burnt off the ground by 500 men'. 30

Changing perceptions

By 1800 perceptions were beginning to change. Francis Barrallier is one of the first to give us a glimpse of the forest ecology in the course of describing the habitats of the animals the natives hunted such as bandicoots, lizards, snakes and kangaroo rats. 31 G. P. Harris, an early surveyor in Tasmania, also gives some idea of the woodland ecology, including the animals and birds to be found, naming a number of species, primarily blue gum, and stringy bark; a few red wood trees also describing 'immense fallen trees... and thick brushwood' and the incredible size of the trees. 32 Captain Woodriff in 1803-4 wrote of the timber around Port Phillip as blue gum, honeysuckle and beefwood and said the blue gum was 'formed for compass timber, for knees, floors, futtocks, breast hooks, fashion pieces... but not one in twenty is found sound when cut down'. 33 Later, after experimentation, some trees in fact proved suitable for various building and naval purposes and prices of labour per acre included felling forest timber. 34 The popular account written by David Collins, the Judge Advocate of New South Wales and the man later chosen to guide both to the way in which trees were gradually differentiated and the countryside defined because he saw all the reports that were made and included summaries of many of them, like that of George Bass. 35 Collins's accounts, however, are not necessarily reliable. In 1804 he moved the proposed Port Phillip settlement to Hobart on the grounds that there was no available fresh water supply in Port Phillip although some of those who went with him claimed that there was plenty of water. 36 He shows remarkably little personal interest in the botany of the explored areas of New South Wales, although he refers to one or two species cut for building purposes. There are many unspecified references to woods close to if not still part of the settlement and there were frequent notes of those 'lost in the woods' (often in search of vegetables). Getting lost was not confined to the lower orders. Macquarie gives us a merry incident when, journeying out on horseback before breakfast in the area near Cooks River, he and his companions got totally lost within a mile or two of his host's house. Some who got lost, were rescued by the natives, who guided them back for a small consideration. Clearly the plains around the first settlement were fairly heavily wooded at the time. By 1800 they were described as 'bush'.

European expectations, enshrined in early instructions from the home government, were modified, although only slowly. British instructions led to obvious problems: the disadvantages of making land grants with spaces between them as the instructions from Britain demanded, as in the Rose Hill district where those intervening areas were thick woods of 30 acres and more, the governor and his staff trying to reconcile their orders with the state of the land. One early government reference to forest in the vicinity of Rose Hill describes 'thick and almost impenetrable brushes' as part of 'the forests of an unsettled country', suggesting that firm distinctions between types of woodland are not yet established. The earliest distinctions grew up between 'forest land' and 'bush' or 'bush'. On one of the early inland exploring trips Collins also refers to 'an almost impenetrable wilderness' and observed 'a country most amply clothed with timber, but in general free from underwood' or elsewhere to 'a thick bushy wood'. Clearly, definitions of different habitats are being constructed but the early comments rarely refer to dominant species or discuss the soil in any detail. Collins was enough of a romantic on this early trip to speak of the party as 'taking possession of Nature... in her simplest, purest garb'. Later, his descriptions become more nuanced. Areas, distinguished by the type of wood or of brush, or thinly timbered pasture lacking undergrowth, are identified. 37

The botanists' view

Banks's botanical successors, amongst whom one may include George Bass and Matthew Flinders, provide a different perspective and more information about species although this information was not necessarily linked to the geology of the area in which the species were found. After Banks the most significant botanist was undoubtedly Robert Brown who was praised for his 'extraordinary collection' which was claimed to be the main foundation of western knowledge of Australian vegetation 'as showing vegetation at a time when there were very few introduced plants even at Port Jackson'. 38 After collecting a large number of specimens as the naturalist on the Investigator expedition he published Prodromus Florae Novae Hollandiae in 1810. Brown had briefly commented on the peculiar character of the Australian forests 'because the levels were vertical and let the sun through' but he generally restricted his observations to species, 39 and the surviving early specimens in the herbaria at Kew and the Natural History museum do not give precise locations for where they were found. He was followed by a steady trickle of other botanists, all with northern hemisphere preconceptions of taxonomy. 40 Many came from limited educational backgrounds, like Archibald Menzies or George Caley. In their early reports they
confine themselves mainly to the species found, and give little impression of the wider ecological setting. The naval officers, mapping the coast, more commonly use general terms such as ‘large timber and brushwood’, ‘thin wood’, ‘lightly wooded’.

Flinders rarely categorises the different types of tree cover more specifically than ‘covered with brushy trees’, ‘mangrove flats’, or ‘thick brush’ although he occasionally provides detailed descriptions of trees like the palm nut tree, or one at Glass Mountain he had never seen at Port Jackson which provided deep shade. So for instance at Cape Hawke he wrote: ‘the country looked pleasant enough from the sea, but the trees appeared small and mixed with brushwood’.

They are however beginning to distinguish terms such as ‘bush’ and ‘brush’ for scrub-like ground cover.

The description of inland explorers of New South Wales after 1800

Slowly, at the beginning of the new century, the inland explorers start to use collective nouns as descriptions and even more slowly they become standardized and the precise location identified. Caley in 1804 because of the ‘dreary appearance, abruptness, and [the] intricate and dangerous route experienced at this place’ called one area in the Blue Mountains ‘the Devil’s Wilderness’ and another, the summit of Fern Tree Hill, as brush, mostly ‘a glaucous leaved Senecio and a white flowered species of Smilax, which retarded progress very much, and nettles which grew very high and stung vehemently.’ The part that ‘was void of bush was thickly covered with timber and a species of fern which as it increases in age forms a tree.’ By 1810 the plains at the foot of the Blue Mountains were routinely categorised as forest with good grass like the area around Sydney, but ‘larger and better timbered’.

Terms were not yet closely defined, however.

Gregory Blaxland used the word forest as a term of approbation as he thought it was suitable for feeding the stock of the colony. On his journey across the Blue Mountains he used the following terms: ‘the land was covered with scrubby brushwood, very thick in places, with some trees of ordinary timber, which much incommoded the horses’; and ‘a large tract of forest land, rather hilly, the grass and timber tolerably good’.

George Evans, dispatched by Macquarie in 1813, used much the same terms.

Governor Macquarie used the term forest whenever he was writing of woodland, although he rarely mentions species. In his instructions to William Cox 14 July 1814, however, he distinguishes between forestland and brush and uses the term open forest. In his letter of June 10 1815 he writes: ‘from Emu Plains...to...Springwood, ...was through a very handsome open forest of lofty trees.’ By 1814 there was an agreed distinction between forest and bush. Cox wrote: ‘Sent ... to mark the road from the depot through the bush to the next forest ground’. Later he wrote of ‘a good-sized piece of forest land, with good water, to the right of an intended road’. Further on he noted; ‘there is some good stringy bark timber in this forest ground’. He also uses the term scrub and writes of ‘fine, dry, healthy hills, gravelly soil, and good grass, and so thinly timbered, that it resembled parks in England rather than a forest’.

The better educated botanists, like Alan Cunningham and his brother Richard, as they accompanied journeys of exploration remained principally concerned to identify and classify the plants, although Alan Cunningham identified ecological settings using something equivalent to Cox’s terminology. Exploring to the North West of Sydney he identifies some of the trees as he goes and describes the terrain as ‘thiny wooded forest land’, ‘tracts of forest country’, ‘rising open forest and close lightly timbered forest’.

Later in describing ‘Cunningham’s Gap’ he writes of scrub and jungle. Cunningham also starts to define what trees and plants grew in different environments, such as forestland, confined wooded land and the like.

A typology starts to emerge

While by 1816 a typology is starting to develop it is nevertheless not entirely fixed. On March 4 1817 Cunningham wrote of the dry forestland by the Bay [Botany] that earlier writers like Phillip had described as heath. The road to the ferry at Nepean he describes as passing through ‘open forest land’, and he compares its species with the ‘open woods near Botany Bay.’ This leaves the distinction between open wood and open forest unclear. Travelling the Mountains he called Emu Plains ‘open wooded flats’, said Kings Table Land had ‘thick brushes of underwood’ and (at the 33rd mile) wrote of the country around as ‘thicky wooded with brush and small diminutive timber of Eucalypti.’ After Cox’s Pass ‘Clarence’s Hilly Range, [was] generally open forest land and tolerably good for grazing.’ On another expedition he wrote of ‘thiny wooded forest land’ and ‘rising open forest’ and ‘a close, lightly timbered forest’.

His map of the land between Bathurst and Liverpool Plains shows the areas to which he applied these terms and occasionally mentions the dominant species.

It is not clear, however, that his definitions were always similar to ours. His meaning of open forest is unlike ours. On Wednesday 23rd on the western side of Mount Molle, Cunningham writes about Warwick Plains: ‘crossing the creek we resumed our journey up a fine open forest, very little encumbered with timber, of a reddish loamy rich soil, and thickly clothed with grass. This has been termed Warwick Plains.’ This suggests that open forest did not in his view have to be wooded – the English legal definition of forest does not need woodland. Elsewhere he writes of ‘rich forest country abounding in grass’ or ‘he observed westerly, on some elevated grounds a brushwood ... the timber is closer, and the view much circumscribed’. Woody lands can be described as ‘alternately grassy and bushy, with slight inundations’ or ‘broken bad country of low scrubby aspect, having hollows filled with putrid water’ and brush was often described as sterile. The term closed forest had not yet appeared.

Oxley, who led the 1817 expedition, thought it unlikely that civilised man would ever venture into the area again and that Cunningham’s planting the seeds of quinces, as well as the stoness of peach and apricot trees was unprofitable. His descriptions are depressing: and ambiguous. What he presents is simply inaccessible territory. ‘June 8th The whole country in these directions, as far as the eye could reach, was one continued thicket of eucalyptus scrub. It was physically impossible to proceed that way.’ Later he wrote ‘There is a uniformity in the barren desolateness of this country which wearies one more than I am able to express. One tree, one soil, one water and one description of bird, fish, or animal prevail alike for ten miles and for one hundred. A variety of wretchedness is at all times preferable to one unvarying cause of pain or distress’. It is important to note, however, that the modification of the species has begun.
Evans, Cunningham and Oxley’s journals begin to give us a more graded view of the woods and the trees growing in the different parts and may make assigning modern identification of forest types more possible although still stochastic. By this time there were some agreed local definitions. Brush meant dank, impenetrable thicket consisting of plants and herbaceous shrubs, and vegetable mould. Scrub meant shrubs of low growth, soil of bad quality with small iron gravelly stones. On the seacoast it was often void of trees. Forestland was said to abound in grass and to be only ground which is fit to graze; grass is its defining character and not trees.

W. C. Wentworth’s Description of the Colony of NSW published in 1819 is probably the earliest printed work that gives a coherent image of the various types of country and its geological underpinning. He sees the coastal strip as a barren waste but then:

Full sized gums and iron barks, along side of which the loftiest trees in this country [that is Britain] would appear as pygmies, with the beefwood tree or as it is generally termed the forest oak… the usual timber. The forest is extremely thick but there is little or no underwood.

He goes on to explain that this description of country, with a few exceptions, formed another girdle of about ten miles in breadth:

… the colony for about sixteen miles into the interior may be said to possess a soil which has naturally no claim to fertility… the trees in general are of another description; the iron barks, yellow gums and forest oaks disappearing, and the string barks, blue gums and box trees, generally usurping their stead.

Wentworth was a less lyrical observer than Barron Field, who wrote shortly after him

all [the trees are] as unpicturesque as the shrubs and flowers are beautiful: – the various, justly called proteaceous, banksias, and the hesperidean mimosa, the exquisite epacris, the curious grevillea, xanthorrhoea, the scepter of Flora, telopea the magnificent, and thysanotus the lovely. New South Wales is a perpetual flower garden.

Beginning of agreement on terminology after 1820

The surveyors had evidently settled on their terminology by the 1820s but by this time Europeans had already modified the forests even in areas not yet formally settled and allocated. The assistant surveyors, identifying land suitable for agricultural purposes, used terms such as forestland and underbrush consistently. Hoddle for example reported in 1824 that Nerriga contained about 3000 acres of forestland fit for a cattle run and quite incapable of cultivation. Usually the typical trees in the area were listed. William Romaine Govett provided a brief account for his British readers:

The land is commonly called…’Bush’ from the circumstances of the country being so entirely covered with wood…open forest land would indicate good pasture and where the trees are apart from one another a park-like appearance… The Blue gum and the blackbutt are the most valuable trees for their timber of the eucalyptus species… but grow in inaccessible situations.

Agreement on terminology was set back whenever a new set of European eyes arrived, however. Sir Thomas Livingston Mitchell, soon after his arrival in 1827, wrote of the country as, ‘still covered with primeval forests’. He was slow to be convinced of the differences between the Australian landscape and that with which he was familiar, writing on one occasion that he could not believe his guide when told a hill was on the other side of Whingeecarahe – until, that is, they came to the ravine. Wooded land of any sort was an impediment to survey especially a trigonometrical survey. Mitchell, defending his practices in 1855, claimed that often a survey was made through thick woods so that there was a great danger of error. As a result, his practice was to find a high peak and then to clear the hill of timber leaving only a single tree to distinguish the reference point – hence One Tree Hill in Mount Victoria, New South Wales and elsewhere. They also cut ‘avenues’ through the forests to get to survey points. In his book of instructions he also recommended climbing lofty trees.

Conclusion: the enduring image

By the 1820s there was amongst professional surveyors in NSW, Victoria and Van Diemens Land at least, an agreed terminology for forests, woods, bush and scrub but it was one that applied to land much of which was already affected by European intervention. A surveyor like Robert Campbell in the 1860s was well aware that he was reporting on a modified forest environment. The utility of their descriptions for a reconstruction of the pre-European forests is limited. By the time Victoria was separated from NSW and Frederick Von Mueller had started his botanical work, gold miners and flock owners had done their worst and reconstruction of the pre-European scene was hard. In the inland areas not initially settled by Europeans surveyors’ terminology may be more useful in reconstruction. Later, historical photos could be used to compare survey terminology with image but this is not possible before the second half of the century. It could not truly be said that the literary descriptions of the forests reliably describe pre-European forests in Australia. Europeans for much of the early nineteenth century continued to claim that the country was undisturbed forest. Oxley in 1817, for example, described one part as ‘a truly primeval forest’. Darwin in 1836 thought that the greater part of the plains at the foot of the mountains ‘yet remains as when first discovered.’ He went on to comment on the ’extreme uniformity of the vegetation…everywhere we have an open woodland; the ground being partially covered with a very thin pasture. The trees nearly all belong to one family; and mostly have the surface of their leaves placed in a vertical, instead of as in Europe, a nearly horizontal position’. He thought that the way the bark fell made the woods appear ‘desolate and untidy’. In 1839 Mitchell wrote in the introduction to his account of his journeys: ‘the author was led cheerfully on by an eager curiosity to examine a country, which is yet in the same state as when it was formed by its maker.’ In reality, he knew better. He was aware of the role the Aborigines had played in the pre-European forest. In 1847 he commented on the way in which the grass in the undergrowth of the open forests lands near Sydney was being choked by the growth of young saplings because there was no burning and that therefore there were no kangaroos. If, half a century after European settlement, writers are consciously maintaining an image of a ‘foreign’ and an untamed land it is for personal or political reasons. The pattern by which terminology developed was not unique to Australia. In neighbouring New Zealand similar problems arose at a time when Australian nomenclature was fairly precise.
Terms did not readily translate from one country to another. The distortions produced by the use of literary topoi remain to mislead the unwary reader. The use of language to attract settlers, however, was intended to mislead. It was all part of the process by which Terra Australis became Australia. It had to appear an El Dorado.

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1 Where 81-100% of the land is shaded, it is called a closed forest, usually a rainforest or mangrove; where the shade is 51-81% it is an open forest, sclerophyll, dry or wet; where the cover is 20-50% the term used is woodland, while more loosely, scrub may be used for a closed forest and bush for an open forest or woodland.

2 Benson and Howell 1990.

3 For this trauma see Egan 1990.


5 Duyker and Duyker 2001: 32.

6 Field 1825: 421-2, 462.

7 Martin 1993: 39.

8 Watling 1794: 9.


11 For example, Hunter, Journal.


14 Hooker 1896: 227.

15 Smith and Rüdiger 1995-87.


17 Bradley, Voyage, 16 and 20 April.

18 HRA s.1, vol. I: 23


22 Bradley, Voyage, 26 August 26 1788.

23 Bradley, Voyage, 27 July 1788.


27 Worgan, Journal.

28 Bradley 20 June 1788.


30 Tench, 26 June 1789; 2 December 1791.

31 Duffy and Foster 1997: 36.

