

# REVISITING INSCRIPTIONS ON THE INVESTIGATOR TREE ON SWEERS ISLAND, GULF OF CARPENTARIA

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The Investigator Tree, so named after Matthew Flinders' ship HMS *Investigator*, is an inscribed tree currently on display in the Queensland Museum. Before being accessioned into the Queensland Museum's collection in 1889, the Investigator Tree grew on the western shore of Sweers Island in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria. The tree's "Investigator" inscription, attributed to Flinders (1802), provided the catalyst for future and varied forms of European inscription making on Sweers Island, including a contentious additional "Investigator" inscription on the Investigator Tree carved by Thomas Baines in 1856. Previous researchers have speculated that Baines' second "Investigator" inscription has caused the faded original "Investigator" inscription to be misinterpreted as either a Chinese or Dutch inscription predating Flinders' visit to Sweers Island.

For the first time, this study undertakes a physical examination of all markings on the Investigator Tree, including a second portion of the tree located at the Queensland Museum since 2009. In combination with a review of the archival and historical record, findings provide alternative interpretations regarding the (28) inscriptions to address outstanding questions. Archival documents demonstrate that there were at least three inscribed trees on Sweers Island. This paper also revisits the possibility of there once being pre-Flinders inscriptions on the Investigator Tree.

Keywords: Investigator Tree, inscriptions, graffiti, Matthew Flinders, Sweers Island, HMS *Beagle*

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## INTRODUCTION

Australian inscription studies highlight the diversity of inscription making in different temporal and spatial settings across various social, cultural and historical contexts (Frederick & Clarke, 2014, p. 55). Much of the recent literature is situated within institutional settings such as schools/orphanages (Jones, 2018), quarantine stations (e.g. Clarke et al., 2010; Clarke & Frederick, 2012, 2016; Bashford et al., 2016), prisons (e.g. Agutter, 2014; Romano, 2015), sites associated with convict incarceration and transportation (e.g. Casella, 2014), or contemporary graffiti found in urban (e.g. Frederick, 2009; Crisp et al., 2014), semi-urban (Frederick, 2014) or Aboriginal community settings (e.g. Ralph, 2012; Ralph & Smith, 2014). Remote settings also provide locations for graffiti/inscription making (e.g. Delaney, 1990; Winchester et al., 1996; Lowe, 1998; Ralph, 2012; Brady et al., 2013; Fyfe & Brady, 2014; Lewis, 2014). In addition, there is growing scholarship in inscription studies relating to

maritime activity in Australia (Delaney, 1990; Clarke et al., 2010; Taçon & Kay, 2013; Van Duivenvoorde et al., 2013; Fyfe & Brady, 2014).

In the maritime exploration setting, inscriptions can act as "postal messages" (Van Duivenvoorde et al., 2013, p. 57). Inscriptions can be analogous to an inscriber marking human presence; or, in the context of maritime exploration, literal markers in the landscape when placed on prominent trees, stone pillars or wooden crosses. As literal markers, they act as communication devices messaging safe passage and represent a ritual activity of the ship/crew collective (Wickens & Lowe, 2008, p. 7; Fyfe & Brady, 2014, p. 66; see also Mostert, 1986; Schoonees, 1991). Leaving markers in the landscape was a centuries-old practice begun by Portuguese sailors (Wickens & Lowe, 2008, pp. 6, 31; Van Duivenvoorde et al., 2013, p. 57) to assert their nation's territorial claims (Van Duivenvoorde et al., 2013, p. 57). This practice of leaving a marker in the landscape was continued

by the early British maritime explorers and settlers of northern Australia, as evidenced by the Investigator Tree discussed here, as well as the Mermaid Tree (Wickens & Lowe, 2008, pp. 41–42), the Gregory Trees (Martin, 2013; Lewis, 2014), the Leichardt Tree (Martin, 2013), the Landsborough Tree (Martin, 2013) and other inscribed trees across northern Australia.

The Investigator Tree, so named because of its “Investigator” inscription, was originally referred to as “Flinders’ Tree” by early observers, because of its association with the navigator Matthew Flinders (Baines, 1857, p. 15). Commander John Lort Stokes first recorded the Flinders-related inscription during his visit to Sweers Island in 1841 aboard HMS *Beagle* (1846, pp. 270–271). The Investigator Tree’s many subsequent inscriptions chronicle visits to Sweers Island by nineteenth-century maritime and land explorers from 1802–1866, with its “Investigator” inscription representing one of the earliest European maritime inscriptions in Australia. As an archaeological artefact, the Investigator Tree is a rare survivor of the harsh tropical environment of northern Australia, and a testament to the relatively sparse early European engagements in the region.

Modern scholarship on the Investigator Tree and its inscriptions is represented by contributions by Saenger & Stubbs (1994) and Stubbs & Saenger (1996), who contextualised the tree and presented a range of archival evidence regarding contemporary reports of inscriptions on the tree and their interpretation of these reports. In their second paper they test claims of the presence of pre-Flinders inscriptions on the Investigator Tree. Both papers argue that the original, “barely legible”, “Investigator” inscription, when compared to Thomas Baines’ later second “Investigator” inscription, led to the misinterpretation of the original inscription by nineteenth-century observers as either Chinese writing (Saenger & Stubbs, 1994, pp. 68, 75; Stubbs & Saenger, 1996, pp. 94, 102, 105) or as a Dutch inscription (Saenger & Stubbs, 1994, p. 76; Stubbs & Saenger, 1996, pp. 94, 101, 102, 105).

Our approach to examining the inscriptions attributed to the Investigator Tree includes a comprehensive review of the archival record, as well as a physical inspection, making a detailed recording of the inscriptions and historical alterations made to two extant portions of the Investigator Tree now located at the Queensland Museum (Portion 1 and Portion 2). Detailed physical recording of the two extant portions of the Investigator Tree has not previously been undertaken. By undertaking this

exercise, we demonstrate how the artefactual record informs the historical archive and vice versa. We also acknowledge the power of association that instigated repeated inscribing over time. Subsequent inscription makers left marks of self-expression to assert their presence, identity or survival, in deference to Flinders’ “Investigator” inscription. By doing so, they cemented their historical present into the fabric of the Investigator Tree, while also writing themselves into the future.

#### SITE DESCRIPTION AND SETTING

Sweers Island is the second largest and easternmost of the South Wellesley Islands in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria; it is approximately 8 km long and up to 2 km wide (Figure 1). It is one of several islands in the archipelago comprising the landscapes and seascapes of the Kaiadilt people. Archaeological research establishes Kaiadilt occupation in the South Wellesleys from at least 3500 years ago (Memmott et al., 2016, p. 110).

The exact original location of the Investigator Tree on Sweers Island is uncertain. However, John Lort Stokes named the point on the western side of Sweers Island “Point Inscription” because of its proximity to the Investigator Tree (Stokes, 1846, p. 270). Furthermore, Stokes (1846, p. 270) and Baines (1856–1857) record the Investigator Tree being near a well that was dug at the time of Flinders’ visit to Sweers Island in 1802, which was situated about half a mile (1.6 km) east of the point. Thus, the Investigator Tree and Flinders’ well were situated near the main entry/exit point to Sweers Island. This entry/exit point was facilitated by the deep anchorage of Investigator Road between Bentinck Island and Sweers Island. In 1867, Benjamin J. Gulliver recorded that the Investigator Tree “stood near the beach, and leaning towards the sea, so close in fact that at high tide a boat could be made fast to it in the ordinary manner” (Anon., 1889e).

George Phillips’ 1866 surveys of Point Inscription (Figure 2) and the township of Carnarvon on Sweers Island (Figure 3) document the Investigator Tree’s original location (Phillips, 1866–1868; Survey Plan C1351, Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy, Queensland). In 1988, as part of Australia’s bicentennial celebrations, a memorial stone and a new tree were placed to commemorate the position of the original Investigator Tree on Sweers Island; however, some commentators question the accuracy of their placement (T. Battle, pers. comm., 2017).

FIGURE 1. The South Wellesley Islands, Gulf of Carpentaria (after Ulm et al., 2010, p. 40).

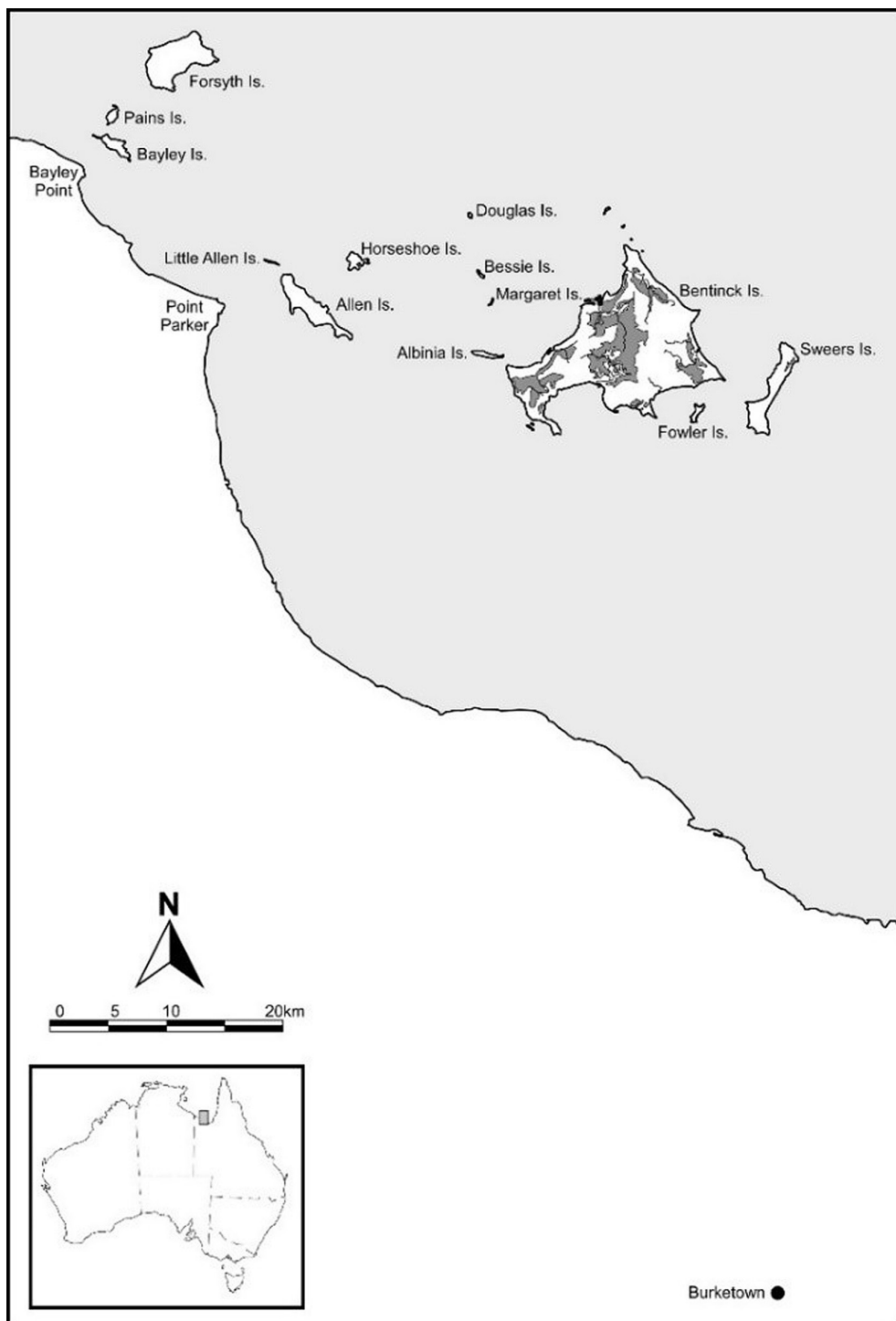


FIGURE 2. Phillips' survey of Point Inscription in 1866, showing the location of the Investigator Tree and the first government buildings on Sweers Island (Phillips, 1866–1868) (Courtesy Royal Historical Society of Queensland).

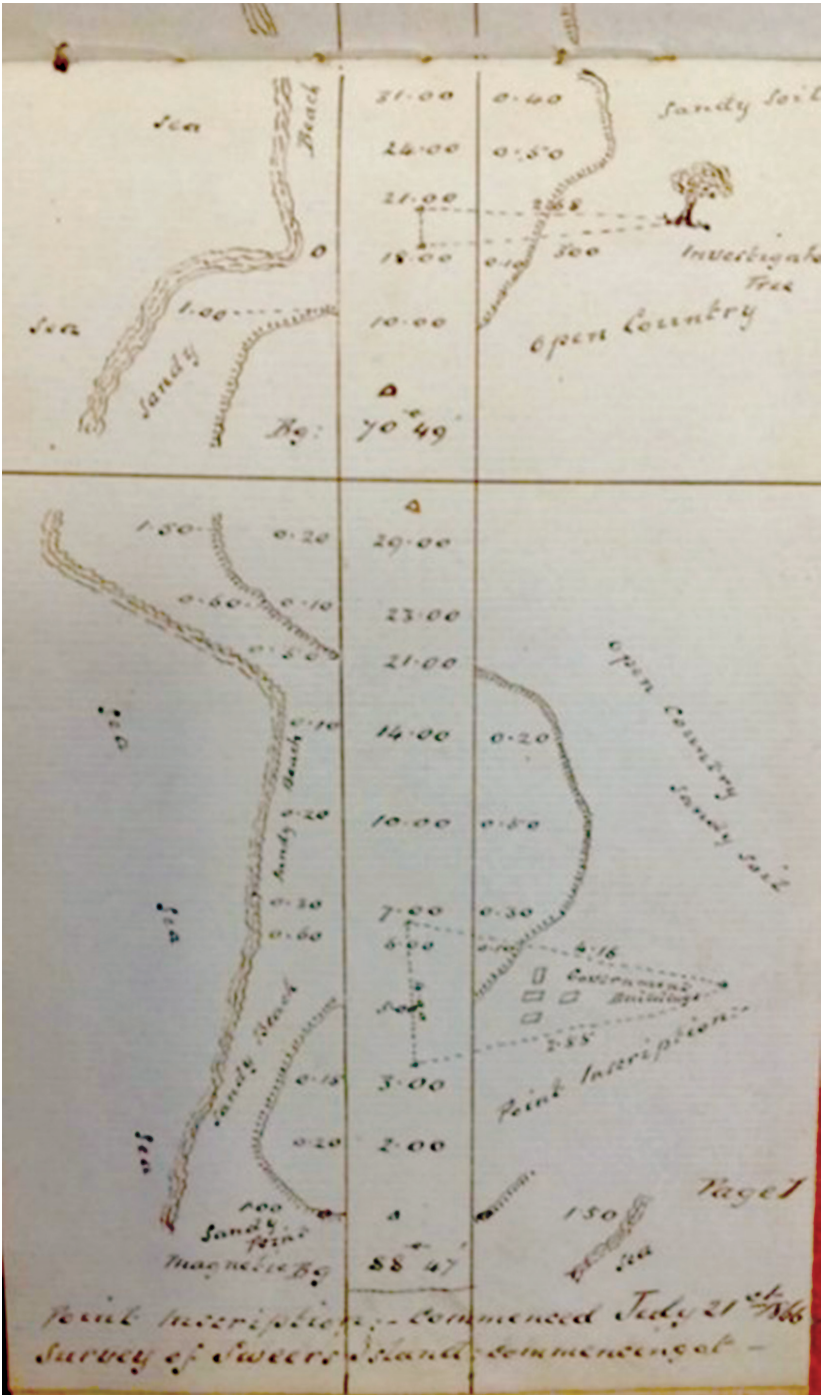




FIGURE 3. Excerpt of Phillips' 1866 map of the Carnarvon township. The space excised out of Allotment 1, Section 11 (circled), is described on the map as the area where the Investigator Tree stood (see Figure 15) (Survey Plan C1351, Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy, Queensland).



### BACKGROUND

The ancestors of the Kaiadilt people colonised the South Wellesley Islands at least several millennia before the Macassans, Dutch and British sailed into the Gulf of Carpentaria from the seventeenth century onwards. In 1802 Flinders arrived on the HMS *Investigator* as part of his hydrological survey of Australia's northern coastline and the first circumnavigation of the Australian continent. Flinders' arrival in the Gulf of Carpentaria marked the beginning of British exploration interests in the region, which continued for much of the nineteenth century. Those on board the *Investigator* are believed to have been the first Europeans to land at Sweers Island. Two weeks (17 November to 1 December 1802) were spent in the vicinity of and on Sweers Island so that urgent repairs could be made to the *Investigator* (Flinders, 1814, pp. 135–151). The "Investigator" inscription, named after Flinders' ship and believed to have been inscribed at this time, provided the catalyst for future and varied forms of European inscription making on Sweers Island by subsequent visitors, as well as settlers during the island's short-lived European

settlement period, during which the Carnarvon township was established.

### OBSERVERS AND INSCRIBERS OF THE INVESTIGATOR TREE INSCRIPTIONS – HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

The inscriptions on the Investigator Tree have been historically recorded by observers since Commander Stokes' first observation in 1841 until Dr Walter Edmund Roth's visit to Sweers Island in 1901. Inscriptions into the tree's surface were inscribed from 1802 to at least 1866. Recorded observations of Flinders' "Investigator" inscription dominate the archival record, while the inscriptions of less well-known ships, people and expeditions are less frequently cited. The declaration or otherwise of certain inscriptions in the archival record becomes a contested issue surrounding the validity of some observers' claims, in particular the claims by Palmer (1903), Pennefather (1880) and several 1889 newspaper articles that there were pre-Flinders inscriptions on the Investigator Tree. This point will be returned to below.

#### *The First Sighting of the "Investigator" Inscription by Stokes*

Flinders' sojourn at Sweers Island in late 1802 is significant because it is reputedly when the first "Investigator" inscription was carved into a tree that has since become known as the 'Investigator Tree'. "Reputedly" because the existence of the carving only enters the historical record for the first time when Commander John Lort Stokes discovers it on his arrival at Sweers Island aboard HMS *Beagle* in 1841 (Stokes, 1846, pp. 270–271), during his survey of the north Australian coast (Powell, 2010, p. 85). Flinders' journals of his 1801–1803 voyages and his later book *A Voyage to Terra Australis* (1814) are silent about an "Investigator" inscription, as are the journals of several other crew members aboard the *Investigator*: Robert Brown (Naturalist), Peter Good (Gardener) and Samuel Smith (Sailor) (Brown, 1802; Flinders, 1814; Good, 1981; Smith, 1801–1803). The absence of any mention of the "Investigator" carving by any of the journalists aboard the *Investigator* sparked debate concerning authenticity within the Queensland branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, in 1901, when Walter E. Roth unsuccessfully tried to illicit interest in a memorial to mark the Flinders centenary at Sweers Island (Roth, 1901). However, the routine practice of marking a tree may not have warranted a mention by the *Investigator* crew members.

During the *Beagle's* stay at Sweers Island, "Beagle" and "1841" were carved into the tree on the opposite side of the trunk to the "Investigator" inscription (Stokes, 1846, p. 271). Stokes (1846, pp. 270–271) recorded that: "[i]t was our good fortune to find at last some traces of the Investigator's voyage, which at once invested the place with all the charms of association, and gave it an interest in our eyes that words can ill express". This sentiment would be mirrored by subsequent inscribers keen to associate their names with the Flinders inscription.

*The North Australia Expedition (NAE) and Search Party, 1856*

The frequency of European maritime visitors to Sweers Island increased after the *Beagle's* visit, likely due to an increase in seaborne traffic in the area that included relief ships to Port Essington, exploration parties, search parties and their support vessels. The first of these was a search party led by Lieutenant William Chimmo aboard the *Torch* tasked with searching for Gregory's North Australia Expedition (NAE) amid concerns for their safety (Chimmo, 1857). The *Torch* arrived at Sweers Island on 30 July 1856. Chimmo records:

We all assembled beneath THE TREE which still plainly bore the inscriptions of the "Investigator and Beagle;" ... The *Torch's* name was not added, for if all did the same the original would soon be obliterated, which I hold to be sacrilegious, considering that the original and the originator stand alone as long as wind and weather will permit (Chimmo, 1857, p. 320) (punctuation as in original).

Unbeknownst to Chimmo, the Gregory party had split in two a month earlier: an overland and a seaborne party. The land party, led by A. C. Gregory, left the Victoria River area bound for the Gulf of Carpentaria where they intended to meet up with the seaborne contingent, after the latter first sailed to Coepang for provisions (Baines, 1857, p. 8). At Coepang the *Tom Tough* was replaced with the *Messenger* (Baines, 1857, p. 9). On arriving at the Gulf of Carpentaria, the seaborne party, led by Thomas Baines, realised they had missed their rendezvous with Gregory at the Albert River, and so landed on Sweers Island on 18 November (Baines, 1857, p. 14).

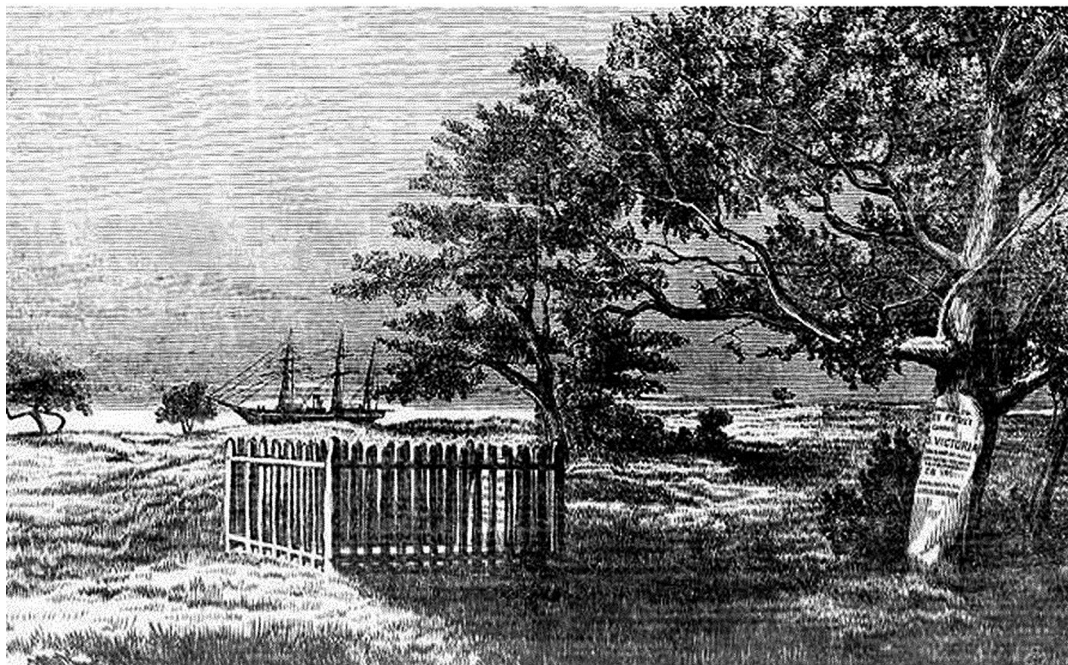
Baines (1856–1857) recorded that "nearly all the men ... carved their names on some smaller trunks of the Investigator's Tree and one invading the Main stem had made some unintelligible cuts

two or three of which came across the name of the Investigator". Because the original "Investigator" was "barely legible", and in deference to "this relic of the Adventurous old Navigator", Baines inscribed a second rendering of the word 'Investigator' below the original "Investigator" inscription (Baines, 1856–1857). Baines also inscribed the expedition's mark and date, "NAE NOV 20 1856", while the Captain of the *Messenger*, Robert Devine, inscribed his name and his ship's name (Baines, 1856–1867).

*Victoria Exploration Expedition, 1861*

The Investigator Tree was becoming a signpost to subsequent visitors of past arrivals at Sweers Island, a practice that continued with William Landsborough's Victoria Exploration Expedition in 1861 that was tasked to search for the missing explorers Burke and Wills (Laurie, 1866, p. 17). The *Firefly* and supply vessel HMCS *Victoria* transferred Landsborough's search party and ships' crews north into the Gulf of Carpentaria where two support vessels, *Native Lass* and *Gratia*, awaited them (Norman, 1861–1862, p. 14; Bourne, 1862, p. 11). A contingent of the expedition was stationed at Sweers Island staffing the stores depot for almost four months, 1861–1862 (Norman, 1861–1862). During this expedition's visit to Sweers Island, four people recorded their observations of tree inscriptions: Landsborough records "Investigator 1802" and "Messenger" (Landsborough, 1862, 1866–1871; Laurie, 1866, p. 10); Captain William Norman records "Investigator" and "Beagle" (Norman, 1862, p. 14); George Bourne records "Investigator 1802" and notes that "other names" are also inscribed (Bourne, 1862, p. 11); and, on a nearby tree, Diedrich Henne records witnessing the recently inscribed funerary text of James Frost, the *Victoria's* Gunner, who died from an accidental self-inflicted gunshot wound (Henne, 1861–1862) (Figure 4). The Frost funerary text inscription can thus be ascribed to another tree, not the Investigator Tree, and was a repeat of Frost's gravestone inscription (Henne, 1861–1862). Frost accidentally shot himself while reaching for a loaded gun on 26 December 1861 (Henne, 1861–1862; Norman, 1861–1862, p. 7; Bourne, 1862; Landsborough, 1862). Frost died and was buried on 31 December 1861 – the first recorded European death and burial on Sweers Island (Henne, 1861–1862). A gravestone marks his grave (still *in situ*); however, the inscribed tree recording his funerary text no longer exists.

FIGURE 4. George Gordon McCrae's engraving, after F. O. Handfield's (mate aboard *Victoria*) sketch, of James Frost's grave with the *Victoria* in the background and the funerary text on a nearby tree, as described by eyewitness Diedrich Henne in his 1861–1862 diary (Anon., 1862).



#### *Evacuation from Burketown to Sweers Island, 1866*

Historically, Burketown and Sweers Island became inextricably linked when a severe outbreak of Gulf Fever occurred at Burketown in 1866. In the same year, Landsborough returned to the Gulf of Carpentaria as the newly appointed Police Magistrate for the District of Burke. As the most senior Queensland Government representative in the area, Landsborough evaluated the extent of the Gulf Fever outbreak at Burketown and decided to evacuate Burketown's residents to Sweers Island (Landsborough, 1866–1871). This emergency relocation was the founding moment of the Carnarvon township on Sweers Island. Two members of the evacuation party recorded their observations of inscriptions on the Investigator Tree: Landsborough, who also added the “W. Landsborough 1866” inscription (Landsborough, 1866–1871), and John Graham MacDonald who provides the first substantial list of inscriptions: “Investigator 1802”, “Beagle 1841”, “NAE November 20<sup>TH</sup> 1856”, “The Expedition 1861”, “Karl Teats 1856”, “L.H.XXS. 1861”, “W. Solby”, “J. Martin” and “J. Austin” (Anon., 1907). MacDonald's list of inscriptions and his sketch of the Investigator Tree (Figure 5) are said to have

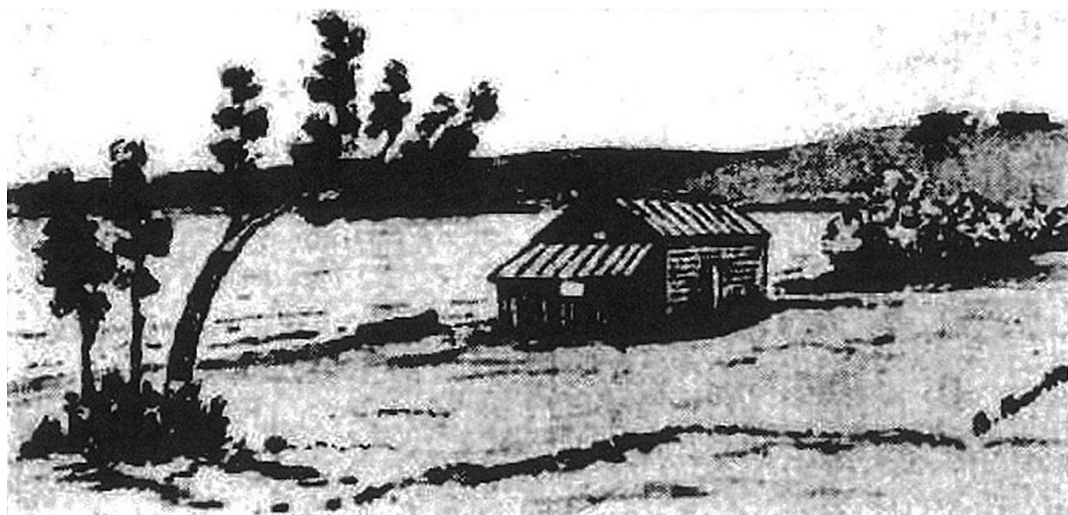
originally come from MacDonald's 1866 sketch book (Anon., 1907).

#### *S.S. Eagle, 1867*

The following year, S.S. *Eagle*, captained by Francis Cadell en route to the Northern Territory, arrived at Sweers Island (Robison, 1867–1868; Anon., 1889e). Aboard the *Eagle* were Francis Napier and Benjamin J. Gulliver, who recorded their observations of the Investigator Tree inscriptions. Napier records seeing “Investigator 1802” and “Stokes”, as well as the names of “other explorers” (Napier, 1876, pp. 62–63). However, Gulliver, aboard the *Eagle* as Botanical Collector by arrangement of the director of the Melbourne Botanic Gardens, Baron von Mueller, provides a more substantial list of inscriptions that were “distinctly visible” (Anon., 1889e). Gulliver's list of inscriptions on what he terms the “Explorer's Tree” includes: “Flinders Investigator 1802”, “Beagle 1841”, “NAE Nov 20 1856”, “The Expedition 1861”, “Karl Teats 1856”, “W. Landsborough 1866”, “L. H. \*\*\*S. 1861”, “W. Solby (with two triangles)”, “W. J. Hay”, “W. C. A. Miles”, “W. S. Howell”, “A. H. T. 1866”, “D. C. Clouston 1866”, “J. Martin 1861” and



FIGURE 5. Mr B. Barker's reproduction of John G. MacDonald's original 1866 sketch of the Investigator Tree. Barker has added Carnarvon resident George Longstaff's house to the image (Anon., 1907).



"A. Austin 1861" (Anon., 1889e). Gulliver is uniquely placed amongst observers of the Investigator Tree because he not only records his observations of the tree while it was at Sweers Island, but he also records his observations of the tree when he visits it at the Brisbane Museum (now Queensland Museum) in October 1889 (Anon., 1889e). Although Napier's list of inscriptions is much shorter than Gulliver's, he is the only one of the two to mention a Stokes inscription. This anomaly could indicate that the Stokes inscription was on a different tree.

The difference in the degree of detail between Napier's and Gulliver's observations is representative of similar recording disparities between the observers of the Investigator Tree inscriptions throughout the archival record. It is also interesting to note that many key figures in the Sweers Island story of the nineteenth century omit mentioning the Investigator Tree inscriptions altogether. For instance, George Phillips (1918–1921) and Ernest Henry (1857–1884) both provide eyewitness accounts of the evacuation period from Burketown to Sweers Island in 1866 when they both relocated to Sweers Island, but they do not mention the Investigator Tree's inscriptions; nor do S.S. *Eagle*'s Captain Francis Cadell or carpenter Dugal Robison in 1867. Given Phillips' extended periods of time on Sweers Island during 1866–1867 while surveying the Carnarvon Township, it is curious that Phillips does not list the Investigator Tree's inscriptions. However, Phillips does mark the position of

the Investigator Tree on his surveys of Sweers Island (Phillips, 1866–1868; Survey Plan C1351, Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy, Queensland) (see Figures 2, 3, 15).

From the archival records, it appears that no additional inscriptions were made to the Investigator Tree after 1866. However, archival documents reveal further observers and recorders of the Investigator Tree inscriptions following the S.S. *Eagle*'s visit in 1867: Captain Charles Pennefather, aboard the *Pearl* in 1880; B. J. Gulliver, in an article in *The Brisbane Courier* (Anon., 1889e), which describes seeing the relocated Investigator Tree at the Brisbane Museum; several 1889 newspaper articles that document the removal of the Investigator Tree from Sweers Island to Brisbane; J. J. Knight (1895), who observed the inscriptions once the Investigator Tree was on display in a museum setting; Dr Walter Edmund Roth, Northern Protector of Aborigines aboard the *Melbidir*, who records the inscriptions remaining on the Investigator Tree stump during his 1901 visit to Sweers Island; and Edward Palmer in his posthumous publication *Early Days in North Queensland* (1903).

Pennefather (1880, p. 1) is the first observer to suggest not only a Dutch inscription on the Investigator Tree, but by implication an inscription predating the Investigator inscription associated with Flinders. He records the inscription "H.M.S. Investigator 1802", "and a still earlier date, supposed to have been carved by the Dutch". In October 1889, Gulliver recalls

visiting the “very old, shrunken, beheaded, [and] curtailed” Investigator Tree in its museum setting where the “Flinders Investigator 1802” and “Beagle 1841” inscriptions were still visible, but the other inscriptions he had previously recorded at Sweers Island in 1867 were “now so far overgrown as to be illegible” (Anon., 1889e). In early 1889 a number of newspaper articles appeared announcing the arrival of the Investigator Tree in Brisbane (e.g. *The Daily Northern Argus* (Anon., 1889c); *The Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser* (Anon., 1889f); *The Morning Bulletin* (Anon., 1889a); *The Queenslander* (Anon., 1889b)). These newspaper articles include a list of the inscriptions to be found on the tree: “1871 Lowy”, “1798 and some Chinese characters”, “1802 Investigator”, “Robert Devine”, “1841 Stokes”, “1856 Chimmo” and “Norman” (Anon., 1889c). Four of these seven inscriptions are reported by the 1889 newspapers for the first time: “1856 Chimmo”, “Norman”, “1871 Lowry” and “1798 and some Chinese characters”. The originator of this oft-repeated inscription list can be traced to Captain Jones, the Gulf Pilot instrumental in the relocation of the Investigator Tree from Sweers Island to Brisbane (Anon., 1907). It is important to note that this list of inscriptions is the same as Palmer’s (1903, p. 26) list published 14 years later, which is significant because until now previous research has attributed the creation of the list to Palmer rather than Jones.

Knight (1895, pp. 5–7) makes his observations once the Investigator Tree is relocated to Brisbane. Knight (1895, 5, 7) records: “Investig”, “Investigator”, “Beagle 1841” and “T. Devine” (the “T” of the “T. Devine” inscription is the last letter of “Robert” in the “Robert Devine” inscription that Baines (1856–1857) records being inscribed by Captain Robert Devine). However, Knight’s (1895, pp. 5, 7) published account of the Investigator Tree and his list of inscriptions is an almost verbatim retelling of an article published in *The Brisbane Courier* (Anon., 1889d). Knight’s reliance on *The Brisbane Courier* article for his information possibly explains why, apart from Baines, Knight (1895, pp. 5, 7) and several 1889 newspaper articles (e.g. Anon., 1889d) are the only sources that itemise both “Investigator” inscriptions. Roth’s (1901) observations provide the only recording of remaining *in situ* inscriptions of the Investigator Tree. Roth (1901) recorded the “more legible incisions” remaining on the stump of the Investigator Tree: “[o]n the eastern aspect of the butt appears EXPEDITION and 1861 while above it is J. SWAN; along the western

side is to be seen P.W. ARMSTRONG, DEC., 1855: upon the main branch is BN within a square border” (Roth, 1901). Roth (1901, p. 1) records Inscription 12 (Table 1) as “P W Armstrong, Dec, 1855”. This date has possibly been misread. Instead it should probably be read as “1866”, to correlate with the historical record, when Armstrong was a resident and later landowner at Carnarvon township.

Of all the recorders of inscriptions, Palmer appears to be the only one who was not an eyewitness. Historical research cannot place him on Sweers Island, but Palmer did become acquainted with Landsborough and Phillips in April 1866 during one of Palmer’s regular visits to Burketown as owner of Canobie Station (Landsborough, 1866–1871). Palmer’s list includes: “Lowy 1781”, “1798 with some Chinese characters”, “Investigator 1802”, “Stokes 1841”, “Robert Devine”, “Chimmo 1856” and “Norman” (Palmer, 1903, p. 26). As stated earlier, Palmer’s (1903, p. 26) list is a repetition of a list of inscriptions found in several 1889 newspaper articles (e.g. *The Daily Northern Argus* (Anon., 1889c); *The Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser* (Anon., 1889f)). The same inscription list also appears in *The Morning Bulletin* (Anon., 1889a) and *The Queenslander* (Anon., 1889b) except that these latter two papers do not mention the “Robert Devine” inscription. However, the above-listed newspapers all itemise the “1771 Lowry” and “1798 and some Chinese characters” as inscriptions found on the Investigator Tree, thus providing the first recorded mention of Chinese inscriptions on the Investigator Tree. Therefore, contrary to the finding of Saenger & Stubbs (1994) and Stubbs & Saenger (1996), we propose that Edward Palmer was not the source of the suggestions of Chinese inscriptions existing on the Investigator Tree.

#### INVESTIGATOR TREE – OBSERVATIONS FROM HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS

As detailed above, the primary historical accounts that cite first-hand observations of inscriptions on trees at Sweers Island and which are mostly attributed to the Investigator Tree include: Baines (1856–1857, 1857), Bourne (1862), Chimmo (1857), Gulliver (1889, see Anon., 1889e), Henne (1861–1862), Landsborough (1862), Landsborough (1866–1871), MacDonald (1866, see Anon., 1933), Napier (1876), Norman (1861–1862), Pennefather (1880), Phillips (1866–1868), Roth (1901) and Stokes (1846). Secondary



historical sources include several newspaper articles; some of these contain information furnished by Captain Jones, e.g. *The Brisbane Courier* (Anon., 1889d), *The Daily Northern Argus* (Anon., 1889c), *The Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser* (Anon., 1889f), *The Morning Bulletin* (Anon., 1889a), *The Queenslander* (Anon., 1889b), *The Queenslander* (Anon., 1907), *The Queenslander* (Anon., 1933), J. J. Knight (1895) and Palmer (1903, p. 26). Collectively these documents list 28 different inscriptions, all by eyewitness observers, on at least three different trees that were recorded between 1841 and 1901 (Table 1).

Inscriptions 27 and 28 (see Table 1) are attributed to two trees besides the Investigator Tree, meaning a total of three trees had inscriptions. Inscription 27, Frost's funerary text, was carved into a tree near his grave (Henne, 1861–1862). McCrae's engraving, after Handfield's sketch, confirms Henne's observation of a tree inscribed with Frost's funerary text (Figure 4). This tree was approximately 1 km from the Investigator Tree. For listing purposes (see Table 1), it should be noted that Frost's funerary text has been counted as one inscription, but it contains 45 inscriptions (separate words and numerical characters):

In memory of Mr James Frost. V.N. Gunner of H.M.C.S. Victoria who was killed near this spot by the accidental discharge of a gun the 31st day of December 1861. Age 28 yr. For ten years a faithful Servant of his Queen and Country RESURGAM.

Inscription 28, "Messenger", is a second "Messenger" inscription recorded by Landsborough as being on another tree that was not the Investigator Tree (Landsborough, 1866–1871). Therefore, two "Messenger" inscriptions were observed (Inscriptions 9 and 28). Chimmo (1857, p. 362) noted that the *Torch's* name was not added to the Investigator Tree because it would be "sacrilegious" to the memory of Flinders and the *Investigator*. This suggests that the "Chimmo" inscription (Inscription 10) was also inscribed on another tree: not the Investigator Tree. Therefore, the historical documents reveal that there were other trees, including some close to the Investigator Tree, that were also inscribed.

#### EXTANT PORTIONS OF THE INVESTIGATOR TREE

The Investigator Tree transitioned from a maritime marker in the Sweers Island landscape to a curated

artefact relocated to Brisbane in late 1888. The inscribed tree was removed from Sweers Island by Captain J. W. Jones, the Gulf of Carpentaria Pilot, who "decided to cut it down and have it preserved" (Anon., 1907) because of its damaged state following a cyclone in March 1887 that "so injured the tree that it began to decay and was generally falling" (Anon., 1889d; Knight, 1895, p. 7). However, The Captain Thomson Catalogue (1986) states that the removal of the Investigator Tree to Brisbane was made at Captain William Campbell Thomson's suggestion. Thomson was a sea captain and keen collector and creator of natural and cultural curios (Captain Thomson Catalogue, 1986). Removal of the Investigator Tree, first to Normanton with Captain Jones aboard the S.S. *Vigilant*, and then on to Brisbane by coastal steamer, possibly with Captain Thomson, meant the translocation of most, but not all, of the Investigator Tree's inscriptions (Anon., 1889c). For instance, Roth (1901) recorded five of the more legible inscriptions on the remaining tree "butt", during his 1901 visit to Sweers Island.

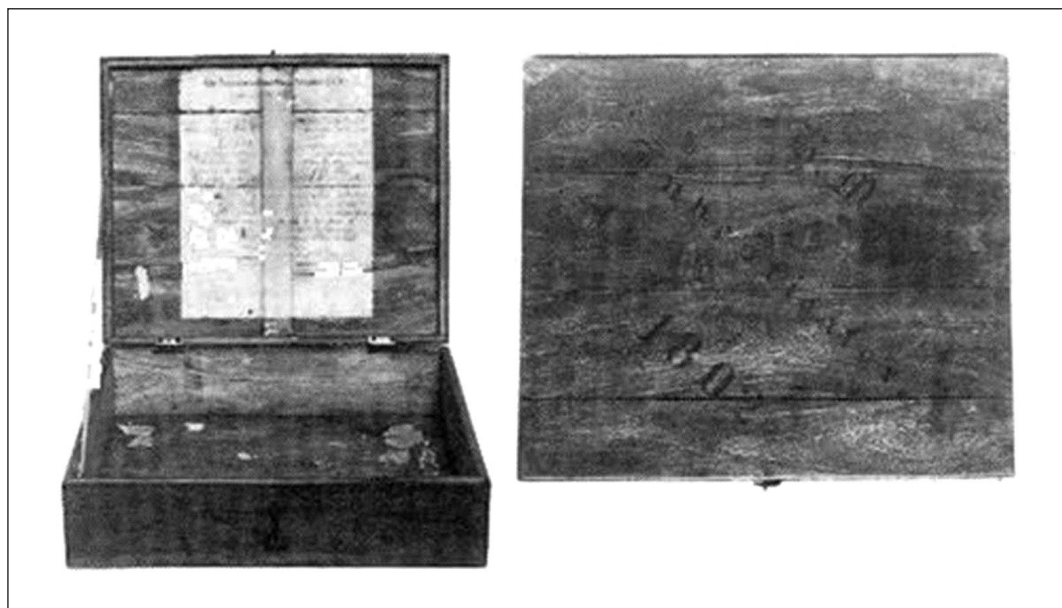
The part of the Investigator Tree removed in 1888 was cut in two, becoming Portion 1 (with inscriptions) and Portion 2 (without inscriptions), either at Sweers Island, to facilitate transportation to Brisbane, or once the tree arrived in Brisbane. Once in Brisbane, Portion 1 (Queensland Museum Registration No. H43029.1) first went to the Brisbane Port Master, Captain G. P. Heath R.N., before it was donated to the Brisbane Museum (now the Queensland Museum) under the Curator/Directorship of Charles de Vis (Anon., 1889d; Knight, 1895, p. 7; Queensland Museum, 2017). The Queensland Museum donor register records Portion 1's arrival at the Museum on 13 February 1889 (Queensland Museum, 2017).

Portion 2, together with branches of the Investigator Tree, became the property of Captain Thomson, who fashioned an oval space on Portion 2 of the Investigator Tree for the insertion of a painting/drawing. Thomson also constructed a box from the Investigator Tree's branches (Captain Thomson Catalogue, 1986) (Figure 6). Portion 2 was only reunited with Portion 1 in 2009 when it was donated to the Queensland Museum (acquisition date 17 July 2009) (Queensland Museum Registration No. H43029.2) by Mrs D. M. Thomson whose late husband was the grandson of Captain Thomson. Only Portion 1 is on public display at the Queensland Museum.

TABLE 1. Historically recorded Investigator Tree inscriptions. Inscriptions 27 and 28 are recorded as appearing on trees other than the tree inscribed with “Investigator”. **Bold** denotes extant inscriptions observable on Portion 1 of the Investigator Tree held by the Queensland Museum. Note that capitalisation mirrors that adopted in the inscription.

Number	Inscription	Refers to
1	LOWY 1781	Supposed Dutch ship
2	1798 “with some Chinese characters”	Chinese characters with date
3	<b>INVESTIGATOR</b>	Name of Flinders’ ship (original inscription)
4	<b>INVESTIGATOR</b> 1802	Name of Flinders’ ship (carved by Baines, 1856)
5	<b>BEAGLE 1841</b>	Name of Stokes’ ship and the date it was at Sweers Island
6	STOKES 1841	Commander John Lort Stokes of the <i>Beagle</i>
7	NAE NOV 20 1856	North Australia Expedition date on Sweers Island
8	<b>ROBERT DEVINE</b>	Captain of <i>Messenger</i> , 1856
9	<b>Messenger</b>	Ship that replaced the <i>Tom Tough</i> on the NAE expedition
10	CHIMMO 1856	Commander of <i>Torch</i> – Lieutenant William Chimmo
11	J. SWAN	Carnarvon resident, Sweers Island
12	P. W. ARMSTRONG, DEC, 1855	Carnarvon landowner (the 1855 date could be a misreading of “1866”)
13	BN	
14	W. S. HOWELL	Misreading of “W. SHOWELL” aboard <i>Messenger</i> , 1856
15	KARL TEATS 1856	Possible crew member aboard <i>Torch</i> or <i>Messenger</i>
16	W. SOLBY	Misreading of “W. Selby” aboard <i>Messenger</i>
17	THE EXPEDITION 1861	Landsborough’s search party for Burke and Wills, 1861
18	NORMAN	Captain of <i>Victoria</i> , 1861
19	J. Martin 1861	Possibly Mr Martin aboard <i>Firefly</i> , son of the owner of <i>Firefly</i>
20	L. H. x.x.S. 1861	
21	J. AUSTIN	Also recorded as “A. Austin” with 1861 date
22	W. LANDBOROUGH 1866	William Landsborough with date he became Carnarvon resident
23	W. J. HAY	
24	W .C. A. MILES	
25	A.H.T. 1866	Possible misreading of “A.B.T. 1866” – Carnarvon landowner A. B. Thomas
26	D. C. CLOUSTON 1866	
27	Funerary text of James Frost	Gunner aboard <i>Victoria</i> , 1861, and fatally shot
28	MESSINGER	Ship that replaced the <i>Tom Tough</i> on the NAE expedition

FIGURE 6. Box made by Captain Thomson from branches of the Investigator Tree. "H.M.S. Investigator 1802" is written on the lid (dimensions 29 cm × 34.4 cm, depth 10.6 cm) (Captain Thomson Catalogue, 1986).



### APPROACH

Our comprehensive review of primary and secondary sources informs and supports our physical inspection of Portions 1 and 2 of the Investigator Tree. Quantitative and qualitative methods were employed to identify, and in some cases translate, potential inscriptions and other features. Measurements of both portions of the Investigator Tree were recorded (length and circumference). Inscriptions were identified and the possible words transcribed, and inscription measurements were recorded: total inscription length and height, word and/or word and date length and height,

and individual letter or number length and height. The depth of inscriptions was also recorded, where possible. Location identifiers were assigned to areas of Portion 1 only and named Panels 1–5 which identify five horizontal planes of the cylindrical tree trunk (see Table 2). Panel 5 is in immediate contact with the surface the trunk lies on, so no observations could be made of Panel 5, as turning the Investigator Tree was not permitted. Photographs of both portions of the Investigator Tree's inscriptions/features were taken, for recording purposes.

TABLE 2. Investigator Tree's extant inscriptions according to their panel position, and their designated number for recording purposes. Note that capitalisation mirrors that adopted in the inscription.

Panel	Number	Extant inscriptions	Comment
1	1	BEAGLE 1841	
2	2 3	INVESTIGATOR Indecipherable	Cut by Baines, 1856
3	4 5 6 7	\ V \ INVESTIGATOR Messenger	Attributed to Flinders, 1802
4	8	ROBERT . DEVINE	
5		Unknown	Not inspected

### INSCRIPTIONS

Of the 28 inscriptions identified from the archival records and attributed to trees on Sweers Island in the nineteenth century, two of the inscriptions can be definitively attributed to trees other than the Investigator Tree. The remaining 26 inscriptions have been historically attributed to the Investigator Tree. Examination of extant Portion 1 of the Investigator Tree reveals eight inscriptions/markings which suggests, given the surface area they cover, that the remaining 26 inscriptions were likely never all inscribed on extant Portion 1 of the Investigator Tree. Our analysis of the artefactual remains supports our contention that the term ‘Investigator Tree’ was a collective term used to describe multiple inscribed trees.

#### *Investigator Tree – Portion 1*

The Investigator Tree is a *Celtis paniculata* (native hackberry or silky celtis) (Queensland Museum, 2017). The differences between the two surviving portions of the Investigator Tree are acute, both in size and the number of inscribed areas (Table 1). Portion 1 is a cylindrically hollow trunk, while Portion 2 is laterally truncated. Portions 1 and 2 clearly belong to the same trunk. Knight’s (1895, p. 7) measurements, together with physical inspection of Portions 1 and 2, indicate that the two portions can join. Knight’s (1895, p. 7) measurements originally came from *The Brisbane Courier* (Anon., 1889d) which stated that they were recorded while the tree was still at the Brisbane Post Office in 1889 (Queensland Museum, 2017) (Table 3).

On Portion 1 there are eight inscribed areas (see Table 4) that have been numbered and assigned to Panels 1–4 (Table 2). All the inscriptions have been cut lengthways on the trunk and would have been most easily read by walking anticlockwise around the tree. For recording purposes, the inscriptions were numbered according to the order they appear while hypothetically traversing anticlockwise around a hypothetically upright trunk and reading from top to bottom. There is a general consistency to each inscription’s letter/number height (Table 5).

Five of the eight extant inscriptions are decipherable and include two inscriptions that read “Investigator” (Tables 2, 4). The original “Investigator” inscription (Inscription 6) (Tables 2, 4; Figure 7), attributed to Flinders (1802), is finer and not as deeply inscribed as the second “Investigator” inscription (Inscription 2) (Tables 2, 4; Figures 7–8), carved by Thomas Baines in 1856. Some letters are only partially visible on the original “Investigator” inscription and so are hard to identify (e.g. “G”, “A”, “O”, “R”). The second “T” cannot be seen at all. Nevertheless, the examination of

the two “Investigator” inscriptions clearly shows that even today both inscriptions are clearly legible and can be read as “Investigator”. Two other decipherable inscriptions are “Beagle 1841” (Inscription 1) (Figure 8; Table 4) and “Robert Devine” (Inscription 8) (Table 4). The “Rober” letters are less defined than the “T” of “Robert”, which explains the misrepresentation of this inscription in the archives as “T Devine” (e.g. Anon., 1889d; Knight, 1895, p. 7). Inspection of the “Robert Devine” inscription dispels Saenger & Stubbs’ (1994, p. 70) view that the “Rober” letters of “Robert Devine” must have remained on the butt portion of the Investigator Tree that remained on Sweers Island. Inscription 7, “Messenger”, is harder to recognise (Table 4), its inscribed double “s” and Baines’ sketch (Figure 14) confirming its presence. The “Messenger” inscription is the only inscription written in lower case roman letters after its capital “M”. All the other extant inscriptions are written in upper case roman letters.

#### *Investigator Tree – Portion 2*

There are no inscriptions on Portion 2 (Figures 9–10). However, there is an oval area, 215 mm × 135 mm, that has been cut into the trunk’s surface: at its deepest it measures 30 mm (Figure 9). An oval timber sheet, which is held in place by four copper screws, has been inserted into this space. Two fine tacks 1 mm wide have been nailed into the oval timber sheet, middle top and middle bottom of the oval, and both protrude from the surface. An auction catalogue of Captain Thomson’s collection revealed that this oval space once housed a drawing of the Investigator Tree (Figure 11) (Captain Thomson Catalogue, 1986). It is assumed that Portion 2 remained unsold after the 1986 Pickles auction, because it was still in the Thomson family when it was donated to the Queensland Museum in 2009. The whereabouts of the inserted drawing (Figure 11) is unknown.



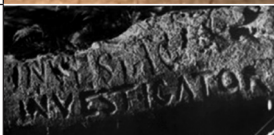


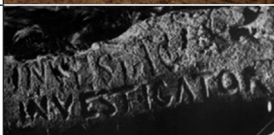

#### *Investigator Tree – Evidence from Artistic Interpretations*

The first artistic rendering of the Investigator Tree is found in Stokes’ 1846 publication *Discoveries in Australia* (Figure 12). It shows the curve of a coastal bay in the background, the “Investigator” inscription on a tree, an armed figure standing in proximity to the tree to give a sense of proportion, and three trees close to the inscribed Investigator Tree. The scale of the “Investigator” inscription is exaggerated. The second drawing of the Investigator Tree is attributed to Chimmo (1857) (Figure 13). The rendering of the tree, the “Investigator” inscription and the background are reminiscent of Stokes’ drawing. However, Chimmo’s drawing focuses on the tree only, and it is the first to represent the Investigator Tree as a stand-alone tree.

TABLE 3. Length and circumference of Investigator Tree. Note that Knight's (1895) imperial measurements have been converted to metric.

Portion	Length (mm)	Circumference (mm) (2017)	Diameter (mm) (Knight, 1895, p. 7)
1	2770	1650 (base of trunk)	790 (2 ft 7 in. – base of trunk)
		1120 (at “B” of Beagle)	
		No top measurement	380 (1 ft 3 in. – top of trunk)
2	615	380	

TABLE 4. Extant Investigator Tree inscriptions (Photographs: Sarah Collins, 2017, except Inscriptions 2 and 6, State Library of Queensland, Negative No. 18926). Note that capitalisation mirrors that adopted in the inscription.

Panel	Number	Inscription	Photograph	Length (mm)	Height (mm)
1	1	BEAGLE		820	210–250
1	1	1841		495	210–250
2	2	INVESTIGATOR (Baines below)		1020	95–115
2	3	Indecipherable	No Image		
3	4	\ V Indecipherable		1210	
3	5	\		130	
3	6	INVESTIGATOR (original above)		1150	120–180
3	7	Messenger		510	50–95





Panel	Number	Inscription	Photograph	Length (mm)	Height (mm)
4	8	ROBERT .		510	70–132
4	8	DEVINE		570	90–115

TABLE 5. Letter height, height variation and maximum inscription depth of the Investigator Tree inscriptions. Note that capitalisation mirrors that adopted in the inscription.

Number	Inscription	Letter height (mm)	Height variation (mm)	Inscription depth (mm)
1	BEAGLE	210–250	40	Not recorded
1	1841	210–250	40	20–65
2	INVESTIGATOR	95–115	20	10–20
6	INVESTIGATOR	120–180	60	NA
7	Messenger	50–95	45	Not recorded
8	ROBERT	70–132	62	5–10
8	DEVINE	90–115	25	5–15

FIGURE 7. The “Investigator” inscriptions on the Investigator Tree: Panel 3, Inscription 6 attributed to Matthew Flinders (above); and Panel 2, Inscription 2 carved by Thomas Baines (below) (State Library of Queensland, Negative No. 18926).



FIGURE 8. Panel 1, Inscription 1, “Beagle 1841”, attributed to Stokes (below); and Panel 2, Inscription 2, “Investigator”, carved by Thomas Baines (above) (Queensland Museum, H43029).



FIGURE 9. Investigator Tree, front of Portion 2 (Photograph: Queensland Museum, 2019).



FIGURE 10. Investigator Tree, back of Portion 2 (Photograph: Queensland Museum, 2019).





FIGURE 11. Portion 2 of the Investigator Tree as it appeared at the Pickles auction, Sydney, 1986, in the Pickles Auction Catalogue of the Thomson Collection (Captain Thomson Catalogue, 1986).



FIGURE 12. The first artistic portrayal of the Investigator Tree, Sweers Island (Stokes, 1846, p. 270).



FIGURE 13. The Investigator Tree (Chimmo, ca 1857) (State Library of Queensland, Negative No. 1089502).



The third drawing of the Investigator Tree was by Thomas Baines in 1856 (Braddon, 1986, p. 138) (Figure 14). Baines' depiction shows three of the tree's inscriptions: the original "Investigator" inscription, the "Investigator" inscription carved by Baines, and part of the "Messenger" inscription. Baines' sketch confirmed the extant "Messenger" inscription on Portion 1. Baines' sketch includes five seated figures, members of the NAE party, and the other nearby trees. Perhaps Baines' (1856–1857) reference to "smaller trunks" when he records "nearly all the men ... carved their names on some smaller trunks of the Investigator's tree" refers to the smaller nearby trees depicted by Stokes and Baines in their drawings (Figures 12 and 14). Baines' sketch with its accompanying caption (partly quoted above) strongly implies that several trees/tree trunks were inscribed by at least 18 men (based on the size of Baines' seaborne party) (see Appendix A). From Baines' sketch, one can make out where the lower cut to the tree occurred

and imagine the remaining "butt" on which Roth records seeing inscriptions in 1901. The fourth representation is Phillips' (1866–1868) drawing of the Investigator Tree which appears on his survey of Point Inscription to indicate the location of the tree in the landscape (Figure 2). Phillips' later survey of Sweers Island and the township of Carnarvon does not illustrate the tree. Instead he uses text to describe where the tree is positioned: "Note. The space reserved out of Allotment 1 of Sec:11 contains the Tree, marked by Flinders in 1802 with the name of his vessel, the 'Investigator'" (Survey Plan C1351, Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy, Queensland) (Figure 15 referencing Figure 3). The fifth drawing is Mr B. Barker's reproduction of MacDonald's original pocketbook sketch of a stand of trees that includes the Investigator Tree, from when MacDonald was on Sweers Island in 1866 (Figure 5). The cottage erected by Carnarvon landowner Mr Longstaff is an addition to the sketch by Barker. The sixth image is



attributed to Knight (1895, p. 6) and is the first image of the Investigator Tree in a museum setting and the only one to show Stokes' "Beagle 1841" inscription (Figure 16). It also exaggerates the size of the tree in relation to the two Victorian figures pictured admiring it, possibly an artistic device used to accentuate the tree's importance.

The seventh and final drawing of the Investigator Tree is the one that was inserted into the oval space on Portion 2 of the Investigator Tree (Figures 11, 17). Its provenance suggests that Captain Thomson commissioned an artist to create this representation. This drawing's strong similarity to the drawings of Stokes (1846) and Chimmo (1857) suggests the artist may have used either of these drawings to guide their work. This is the first and only depiction of the Investigator Tree with Indigenous figures, one seated and the other standing holding a spear. The addition of Indigenous figures may have been deliberately made to appeal

to nineteenth-century Aboriginal artefact collectors. However, the Flinders association is also reinforced in the text accompanying the drawing, which reads: "[s]ite of Investigator Tree from Sweers Island inscribed by Lieut. Flinders 1802" (Captain Thomson Catalogue, 1986). The insertion of this drawing into the oval space on Portion 2 of the Investigator Tree transformed Portion 2 into a cultural curiosity, and is one of several Investigator Tree memorabilia either manufactured or commissioned by Captain Thomson to appeal to nineteenth-century collectors of cultural curios. Another is a box made from smaller branches of the Investigator Tree (Captain Thomson Catalogue, 1986) (Figure 6). The only known, *in situ*, photograph of the Investigator Tree completes the visual/artistic interpretations of the Investigator Tree (Figure 18). This photograph confirms that the Investigator Tree shown on the right of a clump of trees was not an isolated tree.

FIGURE 14. Baines' sketch of the Investigator Tree, 1856. Baines' text accompanying this drawing reads: "Tree near Flinders' Well on Sweers Island Gulf of Carpentaria with the names of the Investigator and the Beagle carved on it – the uppermost is the original name carved by Flinders crew, the lower and more distinct was cut by myself to mark the spot visited by the old navigator when his own might be effaced. The Messengers name is below" (Braddon, 1986, p. 138).





FIGURE 15. Phillips' reference to the Investigator Tree on his 1866 Sweers Island/Carnarvon map (Survey Plan C1351, Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Energy, Queensland).

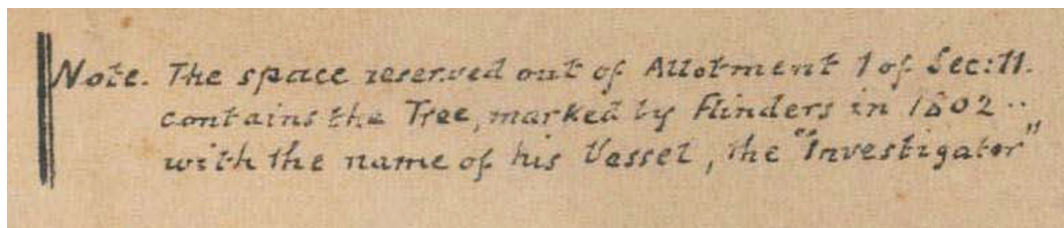


FIGURE 16. The Investigator Tree (Knight, 1895, p. 6).

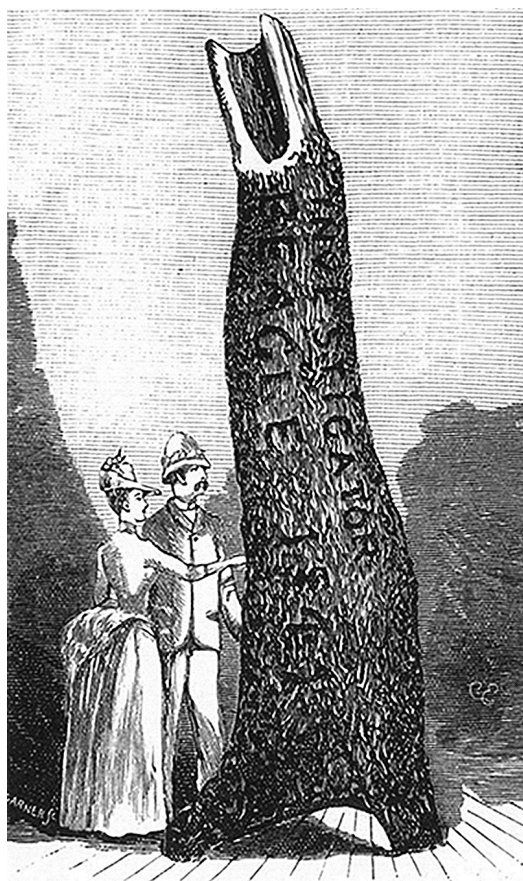
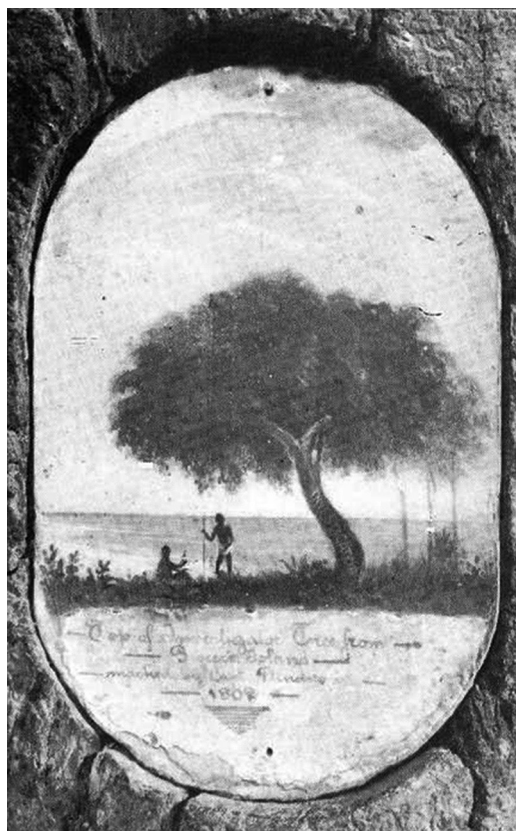


FIGURE 17. Oval space on Portion 2 of the Investigator Tree with a drawing inserted (Captain Thomson Catalogue, 1986).



#### ONE OR MANY INVESTIGATOR TREE/S?

An unexpected outcome of the detailed review of archival sources has been the clear finding that there were at least three inscribed trees on Sweers Island and that they were not confined to one location. They include the tree with "Investigator" carved into it twice, the tree with Frost's funerary text near his grave,

and the tree noted specifically by Landsborough as also having "Messenger" inscribed on it. The "Chimmo" inscription could have been on the same tree as the second "Messenger" inscription or on a fourth tree. Therefore, the number of inscriptions cited in the historical records suggests the likelihood that more than three trees were inscribed. Furthermore, it appears

that the term ‘Investigator Tree’, used by observers of the inscriptions, was not necessarily singling out one tree, but rather it may have become a descriptive term for inscribed trees on Sweers Island generally. Drawings and one nineteenth-century photograph confirm that the Investigator Tree was one of several trees growing together, while the written records of some observers refer to the Investigator Tree as a tree with many trunks. Nevertheless, Diedrich Henne and William Landsborough are the only two observers of the tree inscriptions to explicitly state they observed inscriptions on trees that were not the tree with “Investigator” inscribed on it.

Of the eight extant Investigator Tree inscriptions, five can be identified and correlated to the 28 Investigator Tree inscriptions recorded in the historical records. Of the remaining three extant inscriptions, two cannot be identified because of significant deterioration in the inscriptions, and one is a mark that does not appear to have been previously recorded (Inscription 5,

Panel 3). The most detailed lists of inscriptions attributed to the Investigator Tree are by MacDonald in 1866 (Anon., 1933) who lists nine inscriptions; B. J. Gulliver in 1867 (Anon., 1889e) who lists 15 inscriptions; and the seven inscriptions listed by the 1889 newspapers (e.g. *The Daily Northern Argus* (Anon., 1889c)) which are repeated by Palmer (1903, p. 26). Other observers tend to only mention the “Investigator” inscription with possibly one or two other inscriptions, which suggests the importance felt by the observers for the Flinders-related inscription. By 1901 when Roth visited Sweers Island, the Investigator Tree was no longer *in situ*; only an inscribed tree stump remained, which helps explain why three (Inscriptions 11, 12, 13; see Table 1) of the five inscriptions he recorded are not listed by anyone else. Before the tree’s removal they were three inscriptions among many, but following the tree’s removal they became more noteworthy because they were three of only five legible inscriptions remaining on a tree stump.

FIGURE 18. Photograph of a group of people on Sweers Island positioned in front of the Investigator Tree [centre], ca 1870 (State of Library Queensland, Negative No. 90903).



The difference between the number of historically observed inscriptions (28) and the extant inscriptions (8) (of which 5 are legible) means that about 20 inscriptions are physically unaccounted for. If the two inscriptions attributed to other trees (Inscriptions 27 and 28) and the five inscriptions noted by Roth in 1901 on the remaining stump of the Investigator Tree are further subtracted, that leaves 13 inscriptions physically unaccounted for that one would expect to find on Portion 1. That any of these missing inscriptions remain unobserved on Panel 5 of Portion 1 of the extant Investigator Tree is doubtful. As stated earlier, Panel 5 could not be inspected; however, the cylindrical nature of the trunk meant that it was not a large area that remained unobserved. Therefore, the 13 unaccounted-for inscriptions support the multi-tree finding. Put another way, if four-fifths (4 out of 5 panels) of the Investigator Tree have eight inscriptions, it seems improbable to find 13 further inscriptions on one-fifth of the trunk. Even if the number of 13 is reduced to 9 to accommodate the inscriptions only cited by the 1889 newspapers and Palmer (Inscriptions 1, 2, 10, 18; see Table 1), the probability is still low.

#### THE QUESTION OF PRE-FINDERS INSCRIPTIONS

Past studies have been particularly critical of Palmer's list of Investigator Tree inscriptions (e.g. Saenger & Stubbs, 1994; Stubbs & Saenger, 1996) which, since its publication in 1903, became an often-cited source for subsequent newspaper articles on the Investigator Tree. However, this paper establishes that Palmer's list was an exact copy of an earlier list first published in 1889 and probably attributable to Captain Jones. This shift in the Palmer (1903, p. 26) list's provenance has two key implications. First, it means that Palmer was not "the originator of the Chinese inscription myth" (contra Stubbs & Saenger, 1996, p. 95). Second, all criticism of the seven listed inscriptions must shift to Captain Jones, the probable author of the inscription list published in several 1889 newspaper articles. This criticism aimed hitherto at Palmer has centred on some historical inaccuracies accompanying the listed inscriptions and the fact that four of the inscriptions – "Lowy 1781", "1798 with some Chinese characters", "Chimmo 1856" and "Norman" – are not recorded by other observers.

Of these, the first two appear to cause the most controversy for their pre-*Investigator* dates and for the implication that Dutch and Chinese ships had arrived at Sweers Island. The Dutch ship *Lowy* with the date

1781 has not been identified in the historical record, while the assertion that it was commanded by Captain Tasman (Anon., 1889c; Palmer 1903, p. 26) is impossible. Tasman's activity in the Gulf of Carpentaria was more than a century earlier. This error, along with the incorrect assertion that Robert Devine was a first lieutenant aboard the *Investigator*, has diminished the list's credibility for some researchers. However, there is conclusive evidence of pre-1802 visits to Sweers Island. Flinders noted finding human remains on Sweers Island, as well as a piece of timber from a ship and evidence of trees that had been cut with axes on neighbouring Bentinck Island, during his stay on Sweers Island in 1802. Flinders concluded that perhaps an East India ship had been shipwrecked there (Flinders, 1814, p. 147). Oertle et al. (2014, p. 65) documented Macassan ceramics and tamarind trees on neighbouring Bentinck and Fowler Islands, which they associated with seasonal bêche-de-mer fishing activities of Macassans. Pre-Flinders non-Indigenous activity in the Sweers Island area is confirmed. Furthermore, Baines (1856–1857) notes in 1856 that while walking along the beach at Sweers Island he came across "the bowsprit of a Chinese junk". Also, Captain Jones states in his letter to Captain Heath dated 10 November 1888 that as well as the Investigator Tree he was sending him "the butt end of a mast of a Chinese junk which was wrecked on Sweer's Island in 1798" (Anon., 1889d).

Stubbs & Saenger (1996, pp. 102, 105) argue that the so-called Dutch and Chinese inscriptions, posited by Pennefather in 1880 and by Palmer in 1903, were an "invention" perpetuated by twentieth-century writers. They further assert that the so-called Chinese inscriptions, posited by Palmer (1903), were a possible misreading of the faded original "Investigator" inscription (Saenger & Stubbs, 1994, p. 68; Stubbs & Saenger, 1996), a misunderstanding perhaps compounded by there being two "Investigator" inscriptions on the Investigator Tree. While this is a possible explanation, as previously stated, both "Investigator" inscriptions can be clearly read and understood, even today.

This paper contends that the possibility of Chinese characters inscribed on a tree at Sweers Island should be left open for three reasons. First, given that several trees on Sweers Island are now known to have been inscribed, a tree with Chinese characters cannot be so easily discounted. Second, the script of the Macassans, who are known to have been visitors to the South Wellesley Islands before and after Flinders' arrival, may have been carved on a Sweers Island tree



and misinterpreted as Chinese characters. Finally, when Palmer was believed to be “the originator of the Chinese inscription myth” (Stubbs & Saenger, 1996, p. 95), a contributing factor in arguing against Palmer’s list and its contentious inscriptions was that Palmer was not an eyewitness to the Investigator Tree and its inscriptions. However, now that the Palmer list’s origin can be traced to 14 years earlier and Captain Jones, an eyewitness to the Investigator Tree and its inscriptions, the list becomes more credible. Yet, while the newly reported available evidence lists pre-Flinders inscriptions once being on the Investigator Tree, conclusive evidence remains elusive.

“Chimmo 1856” and “Norman” are the other two Jones-related inscriptions not mentioned by other observers. The “Chimmo 1856” inscription referring to Captain Chimmo of the *Torch* is questioned by Saenger & Stubbs (1994, p. 69) and Stubbs & Saenger (1996, p. 103) because of its contradiction with Chimmo’s statement that the *Torch*’s name was not added to the inscriptions on the Investigator Tree as it would be “sacrilegious” to do so. Chimmo’s terminology speaks to the veneration held for Flinders. However, this should not mean that the *Torch*’s or Chimmo’s name was not inscribed onto a different tree. For instance, Chimmo (1857, p. 366) notes that the ship’s name (*Torch*) and date were cut in large letters on a tree at the Albert River as a message for Gregory’s party, which was sighted by the Gregory party’s seaborne contingent led by Baines (Baines, 1856–1857). Baines (1856–1857) also notes finding a plank inscribed with “Torch” at Beagle’s well, near Point Inscription on Sweers Island. Therefore, given that there was a precedent to inscribe, the claim that there was a “Chimmo 1856” inscription should not be dismissed. Questioning the veracity of an observed inscription based on the infrequency it is recorded is history by selectivity that fails to consider the artefact’s changing physical appearance over time, as well as the personal predilection of observers to record some inscriptions while ignoring others. As noted earlier, most of the observers of the Investigator Tree inscriptions mention the “Investigator” inscription due to its association with the illustrious Matthew Flinders but do not elaborate beyond that in their accounts. Instead we must make do with “other names are also inscribed” (Bourne 1862, p. 11). This raises the question of how many other inscriptions may never have

been recorded and/or have deteriorated over time. A case in point is Dugal Robison’s (1867–1868, p. 88) claim that it was commonplace, throughout their journeying, for the crew of S.S. *Eagle* to mark trees with the “Captain’s initials F C [Francis Cadell] and the number of the camp”. The initials “F C” are found at Wirrikiwirriki Cave on the north-eastern coast of Sweers Island, but not among the recorded observations of Investigator Tree inscriptions (Collins, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

The Investigator Tree/trees and associated inscriptions are historically significant not only as a record of the early maritime exploration and colonial settlement of northern Australia in the nineteenth century, but also as a rare preserved artefact representative of the European practice of inscribing trees in Australia. This paper’s comparative analysis, for the first time, of the 28 inscriptions historically observed and attributed to the Investigator Tree with the eight extant inscriptions/markings on Portion 1 of the Investigator Tree demonstrates how the artefactual record informs the historical archive and vice versa. In doing so, this research reveals that there were at least three inscribed trees on Sweers Island during the nineteenth century, which leads to our conclusion that the term ‘Investigator Tree’ may have become a collective term to describe inscribed trees on Sweers Island generally. The question of earlier pre-Flinders inscriptions of Dutch or Chinese origin is controversial and, despite the efforts of this paper’s research, remains circumstantial. However, although a definitive answer is not forthcoming, the Gulf of Carpentaria’s history of Dutch and Macassan visitation to the area predating Flinders is factual which, in the context of multiple inscribed trees on Sweers Island, means Dutch and Chinese inscriptions on the Investigator Tree/trees becomes a possibility. This paper also records Portion 2 of the Investigator Tree for the first time. Together, these two portions of a once unified whole are testament to the power of association with the venerated Matthew Flinders. Subsequent inscription makers left marks of self-expression to assert their presence, identity or survival, in deference to Flinders’ “Investigator” inscription. By doing so, they cemented their historical present into the fabric of the Investigator Tree, while also writing themselves into the future.

## APPENDIX A

People on the North Australia Expedition (NAE), 1855–1856, and ships *Tom Tough* and *Messenger* (incomplete)

*Note:* Not all went to Sweers Island. **Bold** denotes five of the seven NAE party members who overlanded from Victoria River to the Gulf of Carpentaria; they never visited Sweers Island. The others travelled by sea and arrived at Sweers Island (November 1856) either aboard the *Messenger* or with Baines in the longboat (Baines, 1857, pp. 14, 15).

	Name	Position/Title	Source
1	<b>Augustus C. Gregory</b>	Commander	Baines, 1857, p. 5
2	<b>Henry C. Gregory</b>	Assistant Commander	Baines, 1857, p. 5
3	<b>Ferdinand von Mueller</b>	Dr/Baron, Botanist	Baines, 1857, p. 5
4	<b>J. R. Elsey</b>	Doctor & Naturalist	Baines, 1857, p. 5
5	Mr Gourlay	Captain	Baines, 1857, p. 5
6	Thomas Baines	Artist & Storekeeper	Baines, 1857, p. 3
7	W. Showell	Stockman	Baines, 1856–1857
8	J. S. Wilson	Geologist	Baines, 1857, p. 5; Baines, 1856–1857
9	Mr Flood	Collector & Preserver	Baines, 1857, p. 5; Baines, 1856–1857
10	<b>Robert Bowman</b>	Stockman	Baines, 1856–1857, p. 137
11	Charles Dean	Stockman	Baines, 1857, p. 7; Baines, 1856–1857
12	J. Fahey	Stockman	Baines, 1857, p. 7; Baines, 1856–1857
13	W. Dawson	Stockman	Baines, 1856–1857, p. 137
14	S. MacDonald	Stockman	Baines, 1856–1857, p. 137
15	Mr Humphreys	Second Overseer	Baines, 1857, p. 8
16	Mr W. Graham		Baines, 1857, p. 10
17	Mr G. Phibbs	Overseer	Baines, 1857, p. 10; Baines, 1856–1857
18	J. Melville	Stockman	Baines, 1856–1857
19	Mr Adams	Sailor	Baines, 1857, p. 8
20	Robert Devine	Captain of <i>Messenger</i>	Baines, 1857, p. 10
21	Mr Harris		Baines, 1856–1857
22	Mr W. Selby		Baines, 1856–1857
23	Mr John Smith	Sailor	Baines, 1856–1857



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