

John Staer (1850–1933): the patronym behind *Eucalyptus staeri*, the Albany Blackbutt

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ABSTRACT

Millennia of evolutionary ecology have seen Australia become one of the driest and flattest continents on Earth—and in the process, home to more than 700 species of *Eucalyptus*. Colonial scientists named them using a binomial system, thereby overwriting local vernaculars that had persisted for tens of thousands of years. This paper traces the man commemorated in the Albany Blackbutt, *Eucalyptus staeri*, a tree unique to the Great Southern region of Western Australia, traditionally the land of the Menang Noongar people. Using a biographical lens, the paper examines the intersection of Western science and commerce in plant collection and naming, and the ways in which these processes exclude or discount Indigenous knowledge. The paper argues that a more holistic and inclusive historical interpretation of herbarium specimens of *E. staeri* is achieved by correcting and re-analysing information about the German settler after whom it is named, John Staer, while at the same time acknowledging the Noongar people's deep knowledge (*kartijin*) of plants that has been passed down over many thousands of years.

Keywords: botany, colonial Australia, *Eucalyptus*, Great Southern, Indigenous history, Menang, Noongar.

Introduction

As Australia evolved to become one of the driest and flattest continents on this planet, it became home to more than 700 species of *Eucalyptus*—considered ‘the iconic plant genus of the Australian continent’.¹ Their gradual discovery and naming by colonists, visiting scientists, migrants and commercial operators, using the binomial naming system popularised by Carl Linnaeus by 1753,² saw a multitude of European surnames eponymised in botanical nomenclature in the antipodes as elsewhere. Linnaeus, who systematised botanical naming conventions for the learned community, did so, in part, to safeguard classification and nomenclature against the ‘invasion’ of ‘vast hordes’ of foreign plants and their ‘barbarous’ names,³ as well as to facilitate communication between biologists.

This article focuses on the Albany Blackbutt, *Eucalyptus staeri*, named after German settler John Staer (Fig. 1), a tree unique to the Great Southern region of Western Australia, traditionally the land of the Menang Noongar people. Using a biographical lens, the article examines the intersection of science and commerce in plant collection and naming, and also the ways in which these processes exclude or discount Indigenous knowledge. The article retraces the life of John Staer and the changing practices of colonial scientists and commercial operators in regard to finding and naming plants. It juxtaposes this information with insights gleaned from Indigenous sources to construct a

¹Fensham (2022) p. 23.

²Schiebinger (2004) p. 199. ‘Binomial nomenclature refers to that system of naming whereby a species of plant is designated by a two-word name, consisting of a generic name followed by a one-word specific epithet, as in *Homo sapiens*, *Notropis cornutus*, or *Poinciana pulcherrima*. A plant is considered fully named when it is furnished with a generic and a specific name.’

³Linnaeus cited in Schiebinger (2004) p. 194. Schiebinger (2004) p. 200. Already in his 1737 *Critica botanica*, Linnaeus urged for a strict and standardised ‘science of names’.



Fig. 1. John Staer, botanical collector and nurseryman. Sourced from Australian National Herbarium (2021). Source: <https://www.anbg.gov.au/biography/staer-john.html>.

more holistic picture of the naming conventions of Australian flora. The research also uncovers a series of factual errors in auxiliary material about Staer that have crept in over the last 175 years, and argues that the need to correct the public record about his life as a botanical collector, sits alongside a larger need to Indigenise and decolonise herbarium specimens the world over, echoing the sentiments of recent scholarship advocating for a review of biological nomenclature.⁴

John Staer's early years

The man immortalised in the name of *Eucalyptus staeri* is John Staer. Born on 25 November 1850 in the agricultural town of Crossen, he was baptised Johann Ernst Ferdinand Stähr. Crossen was in a German-speaking area in Prussia referred to as *Preußens Kornkammer* (Prussia's granary, wheatbelt or corn chamber). Both his family name and his place of origin in Central Europe have been given in several iterations, leading to some confusion and mistakes in secondary literature.

Staer's surname has been recorded with and without an umlaut 'ä', with its substitute longform 'ae', or just spelled with a simple 'a', given its pronunciation in English (such as in 'hat', 'that' or 'mat') is equivalent to the German 'ä'. Likewise,

⁴Compare Guedes and others (2023).

⁵The information provided by Ancestry.com that refers to Crossen Mittweida Sachsen as his place of birth therefore needs to be viewed critically.

⁶Koruhn (2022).

⁷Reich (1995) p. 85.

⁸Reich (1995) p. 91.

the silent 'h', which merely indicates the stress on, and length of, the preceding vowel, has been dropped in its anglicised form. Today the spelling Staer is predominantly used.

Moreover, by coincidence, there were at least four German townships with the name of Crossen in an area of around 300 km² that John Stähr could have been linked to. This explains why some genealogists have wrongly placed him at three of them (all small towns further west in Saxony, Thuringia and Brandenburg that were named Crossen, Crossen and Krosser, respectively) and added incorrect details to shipping records, botanical reference material, ancestry websites and family trees (wrongly referring, for example, to Mittweida in Saxony, instead of Crossen on the River Oder further east).⁵

John Staer's parents arrived in Australia on separate ships and identified different former places of residence: his father listed the closest administrative town, Crossen, while his mother named the village Skyren (Fig. 2). As such, the most probable place of Staer's residency in Europe would have been either in, or somewhere near, Skyren, about twelve km north-west of Crossen. In 1937, Skyren was renamed and was temporarily referred to as the village of Teichwalde,⁶ which added further confusion in the records. Nowadays it is in Poland and is called Skórzyn.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Skyren was a small village of around 400 residents. The villagers mainly lived in the vicinity of, and were indentured to, the landed gentry at the nearby Rittergut, a castle-like manor with generous landholdings that employed farmers, foresters, gardeners and other service personnel. There were also some textile manufacturing enterprises in this region east of Berlin, explaining the presence of tailors.⁷

The social and political situation for rural workers in Prussia in the 1840s and 1850s was difficult. Following the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15) and the destruction they caused, Prussia reasserted itself as a power and introduced a number of special executive measures that centralised power in the hands of the king. The votes of big landowners counted more than the votes of peasants, urban workers or the middle-class and thus entrenched conservative and authoritarian structures. This was one of several factors that saw emigration from Europe to overseas destinations rise to record levels in the middle of the nineteenth century, with North America and South Australia proving popular. As to the ultimate choice of destination, there is substantial evidence that this 'was mainly influenced by the preceding Old Lutheran emigration',⁸ that is, prior waves of refugees seeking religious freedom. A group from the district of Crossen had gone to South Australia around 1838, among them at least two persons with the same surname, Staer,



Fig. 2. Drawing of the Gutsschloss in Skyren around 1937. Koruhn (2022). Source: http://www.heimatkreis-crossen-oder.de/HK_Skyren.html.

who were followed by a further eight persons named Stähr in May 1858 in the sailing ship *Susanne*,⁹ which might suggest an example of chain migration.¹⁰ However, in contrast to many other emigrants from Crossen, no religious motive can be established for the emigration of John Staer's family. Like many others, they were more likely motivated by the favourable reports sent in letters back to family and friends in Prussia by emigres who had made the journey to try their luck, than they were by religious ideology.¹¹

Overseas emigration from Eastern Prussia to both North America and South Australia peaked in 1857/58.¹² John Staer and his father were part of this wave of migrants. Together with at least sixty other passengers, John Staer arrived with his father Johann Christlieb Staehr/Stahr/Stähr (~1821–26 December 1897) in South Australia aboard the barque *Helene*. The ship, under Captain J. T. S. Hansen,¹³ left Hamburg on 22 October 1858 and sailed into Port Adelaide, the land of the Kurna people, on 26 January 1859. The passenger manifest gave John Staer's age as eight. A transcript of the ship's manifest lists his father as

a tailor, while eight-year-old John is listed as 'painter' and provides the incorrect year of birth (1851 instead of 1850), raising doubts about the accuracy of information in the public realm that has been compiled by genealogists.¹⁴

STAEHR/STÄHR/STÄHR (later STAER in SA). Died Stepney SA. From Skyren, Kreis Crossen, Brandenburg, Prussia. Tailor; Adelaide (North Tce), Stepney. Lutheran.

STAEHR/STÄHR/STÄHR (later STAER in SA), Johann Ferdinand (John in SA) (born 1851) Painter; Stepney.

The entry for John Staer in the biographical notes of the Australian National Herbarium claims: 'His mother and five younger brothers and sisters arrived two years later'.¹⁵ Again this is incorrect. John only had one younger brother and one younger sister, and both of them arrived—aged six and two—together with his mother on 15 February 1861 from Hamburg with Captain J. Oesau aboard *Sophie & Friedericke*.¹⁶ Their arrival is confirmed in an excerpt from

⁹Staehr—Hamburg Passenger Lists, 1850-1934 (n.d.).

¹⁰Iwan (1943). This volume for 1835–54 indicates at least two people by the name of Staer migrating as Old Lutherans to South Australia. Lutheran Church of Australia (1970) image 48. Entries in this 1970 Lutheran yearbook indicate that earlier groups to Adelaide from Crossen were 'old Lutheran'. Lutheran Church of Australia (1970) image 46. Entry for Altman, an Old Lutheran elder who promoted emigration from the Crossen area.

¹¹Iwan (1995) pp. 23–57.

¹²Reich (1995) p. 86.

¹³Butler (n.d.). Janmaat (2011).

¹⁴Butler (n.d.).

¹⁵Australian National Herbarium (2021).

¹⁶Janmaat (2012).

a German newspaper in Adelaide—the *Adelaiders Deutsche Zeitung*—22 February 1861, which refers to Dorothea, Christlieb and Maria Stähr from Skyren.¹⁷

STAEHR/STAHR/STÄHR (later STAER in SA), Mrs JC nee Anna Dorothea (//c1829-2/4/1905). Died Adelaide SA. From Skyren, Kreis Crossen, Brandenburg, Prussia. Midwife; Adelaide, Stepney.

STAEHR/STAHR/STÄHR (later STAER in SA), Friedrich Christlieb (23/4/1854-14/12/1925).

STAEHR/STAHR/STÄHR (later STAER in SA), Marie [whose name was anglicised to Mary] (//c1858-7/4/1934).¹⁸

Mary's age may explain why the parents had to travel separately. Her birth would have fallen around the time of the father's ship sailing and may have prevented the mother from migrating together with him in 1858.

For the next few years, the Staers' lives remain undocumented, with no records relating to John Staer's childhood and youth to be found. His wedding is the next event that made the news. In a ceremony on 13 February 1873 at Norwood Chapel, 22-year-old John Staer married Alice Charlotte Tucker (who was a year younger, born in 1851 in England) and he ultimately had four children with her, two daughters and two sons. He tried his luck initially as a saddler, but was soon insolvent.¹⁹ Thereafter he briefly worked as a painter—but again without long-lasting success. In February 1878, at 26 years, John Staer declared bankruptcy and the local papers reported on his financial affairs: 'John Staer—painter—insolvent 1878 in South Australia'.²⁰ He seems to have relocated as well, as his place of residency was referred to as 'late of Parkside';²¹ today this is an area also referred to as Parakylia, a variation of the Aboriginal word *parakilia*, which is applied to several species of Indigenous succulent annual portulacaceous plants of the genus *Calandrina* found there.²² His next professional decision was to work as a builder, although this was also not destined to last.²³

John Staer's botanical career

Following his failed start as a professional saddler, painter and then builder, John Staer went into the nursery business, and was able to establish successful local, national and international ventures over the coming decades. In 1899, he was listed as a member of the Horticultural Association in the Hornsby Shire, New South Wales, traditionally the land of the Darug and Kurrungai people.²⁴ This is also the area from where Staer traded, firstly under his own name, before taking on his sons, Ernest Ferdinand and Frank, as nurserymen and renaming his venture 'John Staer and Sons'. The business was listed in Hornsby, outer Sydney, from 1901 until 1915 and seems to have been doing well until the outbreak of World War 1. For nearly two decades the family attracted frequent mentions in the social pages of their local newspapers and understood how to mix social life and business to their advantage with, for example, appearances at flower and horticultural shows. Around the turn of the century, Mrs and Mr Staer were particularly high-profile, with John regularly winning prizes for cut flowers and best breeds of roses,²⁵ while Alice repeatedly received prizes for chutney,²⁶ and is praised for her exquisite catering.²⁷ By early 1914, the next generation, in the Staers' case especially their son Ernest Ferdinand, had started to take over the responsibility for exhibition entries.²⁸

John Staer's interest in seed collection from native flora is documented from the time he worked and lived in Hornsby. As his interest in collecting grew, he requested permission in 1906 to collect seeds from some native trees in Sydney's Hyde Park.²⁹ As was typical for the time, the names of these trees were not recorded in the local Gadigal language, and such omissions may have contributed to the loss of valuable Indigenous cultural knowledge.

John Staer also traded as a seedman and nurseryman intermittently in co-partnership with others and there is plenty of evidence that this was the case in relation to many seeds and samples distributed world-wide from Sydney, but which had been collected further afield. It seems likely that he had a considerable network of local

¹⁷Anonymous (1861).

¹⁸Staatsarchiv Hamburg (n.d.). Ancestry.com Australia (n.d.a, n.d.b).

¹⁹State Records of South Australia (n.d.a, n.d.b). Ancestry.com Australia (n.d.c). It appears Staer was briefly arrested twice, first after he went insolvent as a saddler in 1874 (Imprisonment Place: South Australia, Australia; Jail: Adelaide; Sentencing Date: 27 January 1874; Admission Date: 27 January 1874; Discharge Date: 6 February 1874) and again after his ventures as a painter failed (Admission Date: 24 January 1878; Discharge Date: 4 February 1878).

²⁰Anonymous (1878a).

²¹Anonymous (1878b).

²²Compare The Manning Index of South Australian History (n.d.).

²³Anonymous (1883).

²⁴Anonymous (1899c).

²⁵Anonymous (1898).

²⁶Anonymous (1899a, 1899b).

²⁷Anonymous (1900a, 1900b).

²⁸Anonymous (1914, 1915).

²⁹City of Sydney Archives & History Resources (n.d.).

collectors working for him, among them William Vincent Fitzgerald in Western Australia. Fitzgerald (1867–1929), a geologist and botanist, was ‘a silent partner of Staer’s nursery and seed business’.³⁰ He sold Staer many specimens that came from his extensive collecting trips but that nowadays bear the names of other people.³¹ This indicates the ways in which eponymy in scientific binomials highlights the contributions of one individual while others who were involved in the ‘discovery’ and collecting of specimens are overlooked.

Ever since white settlement in Australia, it was a well-established practice for botanists to use local—sometimes Indigenous—collectors and informants whose names customarily failed to be recorded (as well as Indigenous names for plants). This was the case in Western Australia’s Great Southern region, the biodiversity hotspot that forms Menang Noongar country. As far back as the early 1820s, that is, prior to permanent white settlement, Indigenous collectors assisted in botanical collecting there.

[Captain Phillip P.] King noted that when the expedition was at King George Sound in the southwest of Western Australia in 1821, a local Aboriginal man whom the expeditioners named Jack ‘frequently accompanied Mr. [Allan] Cunningham on his walks, and not only assisted him in carrying his plants, but occasionally added to the specimens he was collecting’.³²

Cunningham’s own notes concerning one of his earlier expeditions to King George Sound in 1818 revealed his annoyance with the Aboriginal practice of burning the bush when ‘he reported in his journal on 24 January 1818 that he was “avoiding a tract of brushwood on the skirts of the harbour which had been fired by the natives and hence could afford me nothing”’.³³ This comment revealed his ignorance about the vital role of fire in the germination of certain Australian plant species, and also belittles the role Aboriginal plant collectors played in helping recent European arrivals to store and preserve seeds and specimens; indeed, as Clarke points out, ‘their participation greatly enhanced the success of many plant collecting field trips’.³⁴

Some of the Noongar names of plants from Western Australia’s south-west were recorded by early botanists, who at times also made mention of the various uses of plants by the local Indigenous people. In their books on *Noongar*

Bush Medicine and *Noongar Bush Tucker*, Vivienne Hansen and John Horsfall refer to several different Noongar names for white-flowering Blackbutt and *Eucalyptus* of the Albany region (albeit not for *staeri*) and reference their culinary and everyday uses. For example, nectar/ngonyang was sucked directly from the flower or soaked to make sweet water,³⁵ leaves were crushed and the young fruit harvested and dried for making flour; and the bigger nuts were used in campfires. *Eucalyptus* plants were also valued for their medicinal purposes and as a soft and fragrant base for bedding:

The leaves of all Eucalypts in the south-west of Western Australia were used crushed as antibacterial poultices for healing wounds. They were also used in steam pits and held, crushed, under the nose to relieve congestion due to cold and flu. The gum was ground and used as ointment for sores. It was also eaten to relieve dysentery.³⁶

Ergo, the anti-inflammatory, antifungal and antibacterial properties of *Eucalyptus* species were recognised by Aboriginal People, even if not in those exact terms.

The first wave of botanists and collectors in the service of colonial governments, who accompanied explorers, surveyors and other pioneers was followed by so-called ‘amateur collectors’.³⁷ They were often acting on the instructions of Europe-based botanists, who relied on local networks to advance their collections. From the 1830s onwards, there is evidence of such ‘citizen scientists’ throughout Australia:

Plant collecting offered a release from the boredom of frontier life, and was a pursuit that fitted in much better with other activities than zoological collecting. Both involved making precise notes about where, when and how, but the preparation of plant specimens required only pressing and drying To further guide their activities, botanists often rewarded their colonial collectors for their services with gifts of botanical publications.³⁸

The Melbourne-based botanist Ferdinand von Mueller identified a number of plants in the Albany region (also known as Kinjarling). He was not the physical collector of these specimens although he had made two trips to Western Australia and had seen the richness of the vegetation for himself. Records refer to local collectors, many of them female, such as Kate Taylor (1839–1913), a collector in

³⁰City of Sydney Archives & History Resources (n.d.).

³¹Australian National Herbarium (2021). Swinburne University of Technology (2018). Fitzgerald also collected for Maiden, who named one species after Staer.

³²King quoted in Clarke (2008) p. 74. See also King (1827).

³³Cunningham quoted in Clarke (2008) p. 77.

³⁴Clarke (2008) p. 80.

³⁵Hansen and Horsfall (2019) pp. 147–148.

³⁶Hansen and Horsfall (2016) p. 24.

³⁷McAleer (2022) pp. 82–83.

³⁸Clarke (2008) p. 81.

Albany, Western Australia, who informed Mueller in 1880, 'I can only get those [wild flowers] that grow within a short riding distance from town'.³⁹

Many of these collecting tasks were performed by women on an honorary basis rather than for an honorarium. Payments are only occasionally mentioned in Mueller's records—more often his gratitude was expressed through gifts, as it would have been culturally inappropriate in those times to offer a middle-class woman payment for her labour:

In 1880, Kate Taylor, who lived with her mother in Albany, Western Australia, thanked Mueller for a present of bulbs that she had planted in her garden, and were growing 'beautifully'. 'My dear Mother', Taylor told Mueller, 'is now able to walk into the garden with my help, to see their progress each day, which is a great pleasure to us both'.⁴⁰

Often collectors were part of a chain of labourers with varying levels of authority and oversight. For example George Maxwell (1804–79) and the colony's chief botanist, James Drummond (1787–1863), were prominent collectors for Mueller in the Albany region,⁴¹ but local Aboriginal people did much of the actual work of finding specimens.⁴² In most instances this contribution not specifically rewarded or credited. Mueller might have been nowhere near the collection site when identifying and naming the plant. For instance, *Eucalyptus nutans* F. Muell from near Albany was from a specimen collected by Maxwell in 1862 and he is credited as the collector, but there is no reference to the contributions of Indigenous assistants. According to scientific convention, the author of the species is the individual who first publishes a valid description—in this case Mueller.⁴³

Eucalyptus nutans was described by Ferdinand von Mueller (in 1863) from material collected by George Maxwell near Bremer Bay in southern Western Australia.⁴⁴ Indeed, Maxwell may have suspected that the specimen represented a new species, but only a taxonomist such as Mueller, with access to literature and other herbarium specimens, could confirm whether or not the species had already been named. It is access to scholarly resources and an ability to interpret them that gives authority to taxonomists and thus attests to the power differentials as European trained

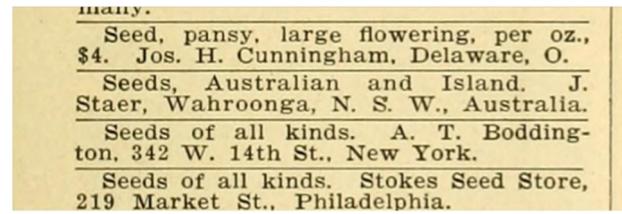


Fig. 3. Advertisement placed by Staer in *The American Florist*, a weekly trade journal. Anonymous (1906). Source: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uma.ark:/113960/t56d6bb9d&view=1up&seq=265&q|=staer>, p. 255.

scientists interacted with colonial and commercial collectors as well as Indigenous informants and collectors.⁴⁵

In the early twentieth century, Staer was listed in international seed distributor catalogues as a seller for plants from all over Australia,⁴⁶ although Staer rarely left greater Sydney.

He exported to Europe as well as the United States with business booming around 1910.⁴⁷ Indeed, specimens from the Staer nursery made it into shops and herbaria the world over, as can be seen from the listing in a popular American trade journal (Fig. 3), thanks to efficient shipping and mailing services.

The exact working relationship between Fitzgerald and Staer has proven difficult to pin down; Fitzgerald was certainly a prolific collector and highly mobile, but he seemed to pay little attention to documenting his journeys and discoveries. While he published many references to botanical findings from expeditions through northern Western Australia in the *Western Mail* in 1906, some of the information he provided had inadequate descriptions or did not follow established nomenclature. Therefore, Fitzgerald was subject to some criticism. In the following years, he seems to have sold much of his collection to John Staer,⁴⁸ although Staer had been made aware of some supposed improper dealings of Fitzgerald by a mutual acquaintance, Alfred James Ewart. Ewart (1872–1937), then Victoria's Government Botanist and Professor of Botany at the University of Melbourne, wrote to Staer in 1909 that 'enquiries made through the police elicited some facts that several things had happened in W. Australia seriously to his [Fitzgerald's] detriment—his name was accordingly placed on the Botanical Black list as regard herbarium exchanges'.⁴⁹ As such, Staer would have been encouraged to avoid giving any credit to his West Australian collector when selling the seeds

³⁹Taylor quoted in Maroske (2014) p. 79.

⁴⁰Maroske (2014) p. 88.

⁴¹Compare Drummond (1840).

⁴²Muir (1912).

⁴³The abbreviated name following the Latin binomial indicates who first scientifically described the plant, that is, the 'authority' who published it in scientific literature, rather than who collected it.

⁴⁴McQuoid and Hopper (2007) p. 41.

⁴⁵This power differential has also been explored in relation to Australia's fauna. Compare Minard (2018) p. 91–102.

⁴⁶Anonymous (1906) p. 253.

⁴⁷Anonymous (1910b, 1911).

⁴⁸Short (1990) p. 5.

⁴⁹Ewart in a letter to Staer from 1909 quoted in Short (1990) p. 5.

and specimen of Australia's natural wonders to scientists, fellow nurserymen or gardeners around the world.

It should be noted that Fitzgerald's implied misdemeanours were not in relation to him entering the lands of the Noongar, Yamatji, Wankai or Wongi peoples or of the diverse groups at home in the vast Kimberley region without permission or consent, or to the fact that any help he received in turn was not officially acknowledged, although this is a criticism that has emerged about the practices of colonial collectors in more recent scholarship.⁵⁰ Colonial collectors and later settlers, migrants and visiting traders did not show any evidence that they recognised a need to seek permission to enter First Nations lands or to collect specimens there. The importance placed on contemporary welcome to country ceremonies and permission protocols are indicative of the sensitivities surrounding land and land rights, connection to country and custodianship that have remained unchanged for centuries. The criticism seems to refer to Fitzgerald's at-times 'unscientific' conduct—bemoaned not least by Joseph Maiden⁵¹—and possibly also to his exploitative and racist nature.⁵²

In the following year, Staer and Fitzgerald had a very public falling out, which may also explain why Fitzgerald is referred to as a silent partner of Staer and why Staer did not acknowledge him as a collector. In early 1910, Fitzgerald was bankrupt and received a certificate to trade out; nevertheless, he took Staer to court over Staer supposedly withholding money owed to him from their co-partnership, a claim that Staer denied. The trial was abandoned, but the judge instructed Staer to repay five pounds into their joint business account, giving Fitzgerald a financial lifeline.⁵³ Their partnership may have ceased at this time, and this might explain why Staer travelled to Western Australia himself for seed collection the following year.

John Staer's travels

The Australian National Herbarium website states of John Staer:

A reference to residence in W.A. is rather vague but there is no doubt that he visited that State for seed collection. He collected the type of *E. marginata* var. *staeri* [now *Eucalyptus staeri*] on King River Road, near Albany, in

August 1911. This variety was subsequently raised to species rank by Kessell and Gardner in 1924.⁵⁴

There is information, however, that suggests a more likely collection date of the specimen. In contemporary crew and passenger lists, the following information can be found for Staer:

Arrival Date: 26 Mar 1911 Arrival Port: Fremantle
Departure Date: 1911 Departure Port: Albany Vessel Name: *Riverina*.⁵⁵

This indicates that Staer was in Western Australia between late March 1911 and late June 1911,⁵⁶ when *Riverina* departed again. *Riverina* left Albany in early July 1911 and again on 21 August 1911. As we know that Staer was in Sydney on 21 August, signing and submitting his naturalisation application (Fig. 4),⁵⁷ it is likely he sailed from Albany to Sydney in early July, having already collected the specimen of *Eucalyptus*. The date for the specimen collection is thus earlier than August 1911 and herbarium record information needs to be amended. It is also notable that Staer refers to himself as a 'botanist' in his naturalisation certificate, rather than, as in other sources, a 'nurseryman'.

As for John Staer's time in Western Australia, no records relating to his local travels and lodgings have been found. Due to the local weather conditions in autumn in the south-west and its impact on plant lifecycles, he would have encountered few flowering gums but plenty of gum nuts and other fruits and seeds ready for harvest. Consequently, Staer would indeed have been able to collect extensively himself while in the west. In addition to the *Eucalyptus* now bearing his name, he collected another specimen from Middleton Beach in Albany that is lodged at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew,⁵⁸ a 'nerve centre' and 'oasis of collecting, classifying, storing, propagating and dispersing exotic and useful plants' as Haebich has fittingly described it.⁵⁹

There are also three further mentions of 'Staer' in the herbarium at Kew Gardens, all referring to dried plant specimens collected in South Australia in 1913/14 by a 'Miss Staer' from Oodnadatta, a town named after the local Aboriginal word for 'blossom of the mulga,' in

⁵⁰For example, Haebich (2020) p. 100. She refers to the taking of Indigenous plant material and knowledge without consent as 'bio-piracy'.

⁵¹Fitzgerald (1918) p. 4. Maiden comments: 'In a few cases Mr. Fitzgerald has not given specific localities.'

⁵²Anonymous (1908), p. 9. This report from 1908 on the Kimberley paints Fitzgerald as extremely exploitative of Indigenous people, supporting forced labour and use of prisoners while deeming education wasted on them supposedly due to 'the fact that the full-grown native though physically an Adult is mentally a child, and such being the case he is incapable of absorbing more than the bare rudiments of secular knowledge, whilst the subtleties of creed are [...] beyond his comprehension'. Anonymous (1929). Fitzgerald's obituary reflects the same sentiment.

⁵³Anonymous (1910a).

⁵⁴Australian National Herbarium (2021).

⁵⁵State Records Office of Western Australia (n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.c).

⁵⁶Warner (2018).

⁵⁷National Archives of Australia (n.d.).

⁵⁸Barker (1996) p. 182. Reference to a 1911 sample from Middleton Beach, Albany.

⁵⁹Haebich (2020) p. 96.

FORM A.


COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA.
 NATURALIZATION ACT 1903.

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
 14475
 1911
 12/21656
 No. of Cert. 12316
 When Posted 26/9/11

APPLICATION FOR CERTIFICATE OF NATURALIZATION.

TO HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL.

1. Name in full. I, Johann Ernst Ferdinand, Staer

2. Address and occupation. of Pennant Hills Road, Wairoonga N.S.W. Botanist

hereby apply for a Certificate of Naturalization under the Naturalization Act 1903.

3. State "German subject" or "French citizen," &c., as case requires. 2. I am by birth a German subject

3. I arrived in Australia from Brossen on the 26th day of January in the year 1860 per the Helene and disembarked at the port of Hamburg Port Adelaide

4. Country of previous residence. 4. Since my arrival in Australia I have resided at Adelaide 27 years

5. Name of ship. Melbourne 4 years

6. State places and periods in each. New South Wales 19 years

5. I have resided in Australia continuously for a period of two years immediately preceding the date of this Application.

6. I forward herewith a Statutory Declaration, setting forth the particulars required by Section 6, Sub-section (1), paragraph (a) of the said Act.

7. State whether married or unmarried, and residence of wife. 7. I am Married wife living with me at above address

8. State number, and where resident. 8. I have 4 children 2 sons & two daughters Ernest Ferdinand, & Frank both of Wairoonga Zola Gurney (married) Hamaby, Florence Ringdahl Normanshurst Hamaby

9. I am not a naturalized subject or citizen of any other country.

NOTE.—If the Applicant has taken out Naturalization Papers in any other country, this statement should be amended accordingly.

10. State the name of the person, and whether he is a Justice of the Peace, Postmaster, Teacher of State School, or Officer of Police. 10. I forward also a certificate signed by William Thomas Wait Justice of the Peace to the effect that I am known to him, and am a person of good repute.

11. Signature of applicant. J. Staer

Dated at Wairoonga the 21st August 1911

C.8809

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National Archives of Australia

Fig. 4. John Staer's application in 1911 for Certificate of Naturalization. National Archives of Australia (n.d.).

reference to a local species of acacia tree.⁶⁰ This is where John Staer's younger brother Friedrich Christlieb Staer lived with his family. By then he called himself Frederick and had become a much-loved publican in Oodnadatta, noted for his charitable nature and community mindedness.⁶¹ His oldest daughter, Mary Ethelberg Staer (1877–1958), who was known as Ethel, was the collector of the three plant specimens at Kew Gardens credited to 'Miss Staer',⁶² perhaps inspired by her uncle and cousins' business. While neither the first name nor any other details are mentioned (even when cited in academic texts, it is always just 'Miss Staer'),⁶³ this was consistent with naming conventions of the time. If a single female was the oldest unmarried daughter she was called 'Miss Surname' if she had an older unmarried sister she was called 'Miss Initial Surname'. Therefore, 'Miss Staer' must be Ethel Staer.

In contrast to 'Miss Staer',⁶⁴ John Staer was commemorated in *Eucalyptus staeri* or Albany Blackbutt, named in his honour by Joseph Henry Maiden (1859–1925),⁶⁵ then Director of the Botanic Gardens in Sydney and Government Botanist of New South Wales. Maiden formally described the plant in the *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Society of New South Wales* in 1914 and gave it the name *Eucalyptus marginata* var. *staeri*. A decade later, in 1924, Stephen Lackey Kessel and Charles Gardner raised the variety to species status as *Eucalyptus staeri*.⁶⁶

The image of the holotype for *Eucalyptus staeri*, the single physical piece of the organism on which the new species is based, is held at the National Herbarium of New South Wales, Royal Botanic Garden Sydney (Fig. 5). The accompanying specimen label has many annotations in different hands which sets a precedent for adding the kind of information uncovered in this research. It gives the collecting date as 8/1911, however, the '8' looks to be written over a different number – perhaps a '7' or a '3'—corroborating the findings that the date was disputed and that many people were involved in the process since it was taken from the lands of the Menang Noongar people.

The following entries by Maiden made in relation to the specimens received from Staer reveal much about the lengthy journey of a new species from its home in nature, through many hands, to the stages of documentation and

ultimately to exhibition or storage sites, and also about the omission of information about Indigenous knowledge or involvement (Fig. 6):

In relation to *Eucalyptus staeri*, John Staer was indeed a collector of the specimen for which he was eponymised by Maiden, but the identity of possible co-collectors in the Albany area as well as the exact journey from collection locality to New South Wales can only be an educated guess. The same goes for prior names and established uses. The specimen came from the land of the Menang people, and their practices and beliefs and their understanding of what has come to be referred to as Albany Blackbutt are also a part of its history. However, despite several attempts, I have not been able to find a person identifying as a Menang Noongar and with the knowledge/*kartijin* of this plant able to tell me more about this species in the context of their Indigenous culture beyond general insights about local *Eucalyptus* trees of the creamy-white flowering varieties. It is not clear, therefore, whether the Albany Blackbutt was recognised as a distinct kind of tree by Menang Noongar, its Menang Noongar name, or its place in their system of plant classification.

Stephen Hopper, a conservation biologist, who trained and widely published in evolution, ecology and taxonomy, works closely with the local Indigenous people. Over the past decade of oral history interviews with Albany Noongars, he has not found evidence of them distinguishing *E. staeri* from *E. marginata* (jarrah or jerril).⁶⁷ In her Indigenous storywork, Merningar Bardok Elder teacher Lynette Knapp tells of Jarrah in general being used for shelters (big strips of bark) and providing an important food source for red-tailed black cockatoos that consume green nuts for developing seeds. It also has important burning qualities and splits finely as a wood.⁶⁸ During a site visit in April 2023, Goreng Elder Aden Eades identified *E. staeri* at Wellstead simply by the name of 'Jereel' and added younger branches, the bark and the wood were used by his family. Lynette added: 'The bark would have been used for shields or carrying things or shelter. Take it off on one side and take it as a square. ...] I remember when Auntie Gail's mob came down from the [western] desert we were up on Bluff Knoll [in the Stirling Range] and there's a tree there that got them. All the women jumped out pulling all the

⁶⁰Britannica (2019).

⁶¹Anonymous (1925).

⁶²Kew Royal Botanic Gardens (n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.c).

⁶³For example, Conn (1995) p. 81.

⁶⁴Some female collectors had species named after them.

⁶⁵EUCLID (n.d.). See also Spooner (2007). Maiden (1913) p. 230. Maiden received a sample from Staer; however, it does not say Staer collected it. Kessel and Gardner (1924). Though Maiden originally named *staeri* as a variety of jarrah in 1913, Kessel and Gardner identified and named it as a separate species in 1924. Schiebinger (2004) p. 194. 'Stability in nomenclature today is generally fixed by historical priority; he (or she) who first publishes a name—accompanied by an exact description of the plant—is considered to have named that plant for all time. A botanical description (whose function it is to distinguish a particular plant from all other plants) is often guaranteed by a recognized herbarium specimen that 'typifies' the plant. Once recognized, a generic plant name can be changed only if the plant is reclassified, that is moved from one genus to another.'

⁶⁶Maiden (1913) p. 230.

⁶⁷S. Hopper (pers. comm., 13 April 2023).

⁶⁸Knapp quoted in Hopper (pers. comm., 13 April 2023).



Fig. 5. *Eucalyptus staeri* (Maiden) Kessell & C.A.Gardner, NSW354469, National Herbarium of New South Wales (courtesy of the Atlas of Living Australia).

XXI. *E. marginata* Sm.

See Part VIII, p. 241 (1907).

THE following additional statement was published by me in *Journ. W.A. Nat. Hist. Soc.*, vol. iii, January, 1911 :—

These notes are based on field observations made by me in Western Australia from September to December, 1909, but I have taken the opportunity of incorporating a few notes from other sources.

Mr. William Dunn, a native of Albany, over 60 years of age, says that Mahogany is the name given by the old settlers to the timber later on known as Jarrah; that he does not remember the name Jarrah ever having been employed until the introduction of saw-milling machinery; he has sawn timber from boyhood.

In bark, and somewhat in general appearance, the Jarrah resembles the *E. resinifera* of coastal New South Wales and Queensland. It flowers as a shrub.

Following is a description of the juvenile leaves. They were received from Mr. Max Koch, and have not been previously described :—

Lanceolate, sharply acuminate, slightly oblique, rounded at the base, petiolate; thin in texture, pale on the underside, glabrous on both sides; margin thickened and slightly recurved, the intra-marginal vein distinctly removed from the edge; midrib distinct, lateral veins fairly distinct, pinnate, at an approximate angle of 45 degrees with the midrib, smaller veins anastomosing and obvious; oil-dots not obvious.

The irregularly striate appearance sometimes seen in fruits of this species and in a few others, e.g., *E. diversicolor*, is the result of the contraction of subsucculent vascular tissue over longitudinal bands of fibro-vascular tissue.

E. marginata is termed "Mahogany" or "Jarrah" (can it be a misprint or an early spelling of Jarrah?) ("Discoveries in Australia," J. Lort Stokes, ii, 132, 1835).

Variety.

E. marginata Sm., var. *Staeri*, Maiden in *Journ. Roy. Soc. N.S.W.*, xvii, 230 (1913).

King River road, near Albany, Western Australia (J. Staer, August, 1911).

The fruits of the normal species, as figured by Mueller in the "Eucalyptographia" are depicted as 1.5–2 cm. long and 1.7 cm. broad, and tapering somewhat into a thickened pedicel. I have received from Mr. J. Staer, specimens of *E. marginata* with fruits in the well-dried state rather more than 2 cm. long and broad, and not tapering into the pedicel. Some of the fruits have a well-defined rim. The foliage is

coarser than that of the type, and this handsome, large fruited form is evidently a product of special environment.

In the same Journal, liii, 70 (1919) I published the following additional note concerning this variety :—

Dr. F. Stoward, under No. 111, April, May, 1917, sends this form with the following note—"Stunted Blackbutt," tree 30–35 feet, up to 2 feet in diameter. Grows in the Albany and Denmark districts in large and sandy flats, and is of a stunted nature.

Mr. C. E. Lane Poole points out the similarity of the fruits to those of *E. Todtiana*, but the anthers and the timbers sharply separate the two species. The relation of this proposed variety to the normal form (the Jarrah, *E. marginata*) is worthy of local inquiry.

Fig. 6. Excerpt from Maiden's critical revision of the genus *Eucalyptus*. University of Sydney Library (2002). Source: <https://adc.library.usyd.edu.au/data-2/p00109v6.pdf>.⁶⁹

branches off them and put them in the bus. I think they were after these [pointing to clustered fruits of the blackbutt].⁷⁰

In scientific records dating back to just a few years after the naming of *Eucalyptus staeri*, a German biodiversity index credited both Fitzgerald and Staer in an entry that refers to a specimen of a different plant that, as part of John Staer's herbarium, ended up in Edinburgh.⁷¹ As such, Fitzgerald's

name entered the history books, albeit with some misgivings, whereas references to Miss Staer and her efforts in collecting specimens remain elusive and never even mention her full name. Names of Indigenous collectors and informants or their own names for the collected flora likewise failed to be recognised in most cases, thus attesting to the very real power differentials between European trained scientists and commercial traders, and between men and women collectors as well as Indigenous experts.

Concluding comments

The fate of the European men associated with *Eucalyptus staeri* has been documented—albeit with some inaccuracies—from cradle to grave. Fitzgerald left Australia for active service in April 1916 and returned wounded, a shadow of his former self. He endeavoured to systematise his remaining collection in the inter-war years. As for Staer, sometime during World War 1 he moved away from Sydney and it seems he only re-established himself as a business operator post-war for a few years, when a 'Staer' was listed as nurseryman of Blackheath in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney from 1921 to 1926.⁷² He died at the State Hospital and Home in Lidcombe, Sydney, New South Wales on 25 July 1933.

Miss Staer's fate is far less well documented, as she remained unmarried, childless and thus without lasting personal and scientific backing. She is present by her last name only as a collector and becomes visible only once meta-data in Herbaria is accessed. This is, however, more than is recorded about the Indigenous naming conventions and other insights relating to *Eucalyptus staeri*. Even with the assistance of Indigenous storywork, which has been successfully employed as a methodology in many other contexts,⁷³ it will be a challenge to slowly uncover insights that will help to decolonise specimens of *E. staeri*.

As the example of *E. staeri* shows, the naming practice for Australia's immense biodiversity bears the stamp of colonialism. The European convention, which had been firmly established in the eighteenth century, was exported to every corner of the world over the following decades, displacing local languages and knowledge. Indeed, it led to prominent European scientists—in the main white men—inscribing the names of European collectors—mostly other white men—and European ways of knowing on plants well-known to local Indigenous populations in their vernacular.

⁶⁹Maiden, J. H. (Joseph Henry) (1859–1925), Critical revision of the genus eucalyptus, Volume 6: Parts 51–60, compiled at University of Sydney Library, Sydney 2002, <http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/pubotbin/sup2pdfall?id=p00109v>.

⁷⁰Hopper (field notes, 20 April 2023).

⁷¹Benl (1958) pp.402–3.

⁷²The author investigated the possibilities that Staer was interned during World War 1, or in prison, but no evidence was found to support these contentions.

⁷³Compare Archibald and others (2019) p. 1. Archibald developed 'an Indigenous theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical framework comprising seven principles: respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy', as a way through storytelling to decolonising research and better 'meaning-making'.

When records are amended—if only as in the case of Staer to correct factual mistakes—it provides a welcome opportunity to reconsider the long-established Western hegemonial stronghold in botany by finally inserting whatever knowledge can be gleaned from our Indigenous brothers and sisters about their nature appreciation. Both Hopper and Haebich communicated an awareness of the Great Southern region's biodiversity and share a sense of awe about the Noongar people's 'deep knowledge (*kartijin*) of their country that enabled them to live well off the diversity of plant foods they cultivated and nurtured with practices they adapted to the environment and passed down over many thousands of years'.⁷⁴

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Data availability. The article is fully referenced and all data are publicly available for scrutiny to support transparency and reproducibility of research. Therefore, data sharing as such is not applicable as no new data were generated or analysed during this study.

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