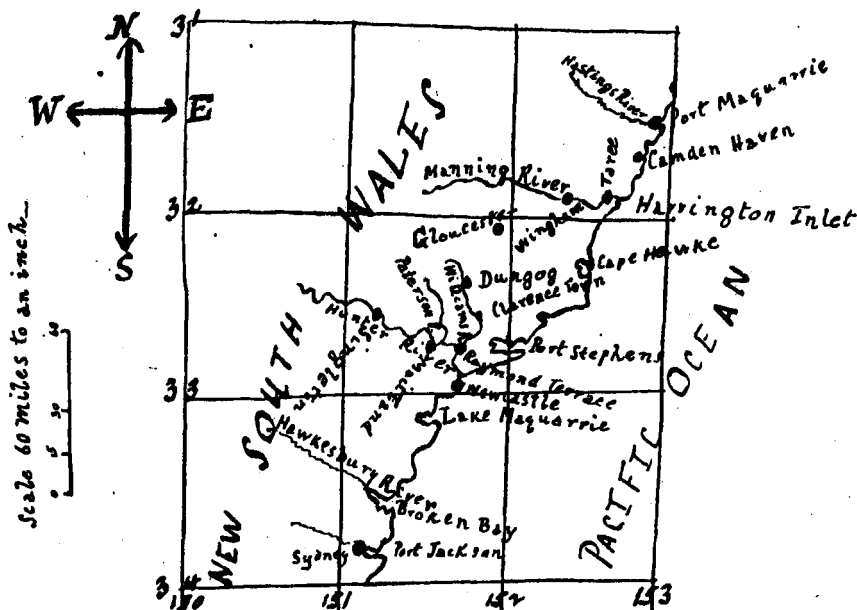


Some notes on the Aborigines of the Lower Hunter River, New South Wales.

By BERNARD MCKIERNAN, Raymond Terrace, New South Wales.



The extent of Country to which these notes refer may be roughly set down as a circle ten miles in diameter, with the site of the present township of Raymond Terrace, on the lower Hunter River, as centre. At the time of the first white settlement here, the fertile alluvial flats of the Hunter and Williams Rivers supported a fairly numerous aboriginal population. Unfortunately the tribe had become extinct before any steps were taken to study scientifically their organization and customs; and these stray notes have been compiled from information obtained from some of the old settlers of the district — one of them is now over 92 years of age and came to reside in the district in 1838 when there was only one house where the township of Raymond Terrace now stands. As far as the information goes, I can confidently say that the statements of my informants appear to be true as far as they knew. I have checked the statements one with the other, and only set down without note particulars in which I found them to differ in no essential. The information was collected not with the intention of publication, but through curiosity and for my own private information. It was only when, owing to the discovery of some aboriginal weapons some few miles from here, I was induced to give a description of them, that I thought a few particulars of the original possessors would not be out of place.

I. Childhood.

Up to the age of puberty the children of both sexes remained under the charge of their mothers, assisting her in the procuring of vegetable food, if able to do so. As soon as they were capable of instruction, the boys were taught the use of weapons, especially the boomerang and throwing-stick. They also received instruction on the making of these weapons and were well up in all the arts of the craft before their reception into the ranks of the men. The girls were taught the use of the digging-stick.

The septum of a boy's nose was bored when quite young, for the use of the nose-peg when grown up. The nose-peg was considered a great ornament and in the early days no man would think of speaking to a stranger of importance without this decoration.

II. Clothing and Ornaments.

In the warm weather scarcely any clothing was worn, though they provided themselves with fur-cloaks for the cold or wet weather. These cloaks were worn about the shoulders by both men and women. They were made of the skins of animals. The women continually wore a kind of shell necklace and this constituted their only adornments. The nose-peg as an ornament has been referred to above. The only other article of clothing worn was the loin-cloth of the men. This was not worn by women or children but was assumed by the young boys when they were taken from the supervision of their mothers and constituted their badge of manhood.

The tribesmen made elaborate preparations for corroborees, which usually took place on the occasion of a visit from a distinguished guest from one of the surrounding tribes. The men spared no trouble on their *toilette* and succeeded in making themselves look as hideous as possible; still to their friends they were no doubt the essence of perfection.

III. Government.

The tribe was divided into a number of local groups, living apart from each other in camps, scattered over the whole tribal territory. The members of each group were under the control of a kind of headman, or chief as the early settlers were accustomed to call him; but, except in the matter of the disposal of widows, which was merely the enforcement of the customary law of the tribe, and the leading of the various expeditions or the performance of other similar duties, his position was a mere honorary one. He had no power to settle disputes, not even local ones, or enter into agreements binding the other members of the group.

There was no chief or principal headman of the whole tribe.

The governing authority was vested in the assembly of the old men of the local groups who met periodically and discussed matters both national and international. No secrecy was observed about these meetings. A decision once arrived at was binding on every member of the tribe and would be enforced regardless of consequences. While members of the different groups might now and again become embroiled in personal disputes and would on such occa-

sions have recourse to the use of club and shield for the settlement of differences, a general fight was never known to take place between members of the different groups of the tribe. Should any danger of the dispute extending appear, the matter was decided by the assembly of elders and generally resulted in the punishment of one or other of the disputants. The condemned man had a certain number of boomerangs or throwing-striks thrown at him or had sometimes to defend himself as best he could with his shield from the onslaught of his opponent, who was armed with a heavy club. Should the culprit be killed, which, generally speaking, would be unlikely, no further action was taken.

Such a thing as suspecting one of their own members of causing the death of a tribal brother was unheard of, though they were not slow to lay the blame at the door of some member of one of the neighbouring tribes; and when an opportunity occurred, summary punishment was inflicted on the accused or one of his tribal brothers.

IV. Organization of tribe.

All the members of the tribe were apparently related to each other in some way, and called each other by terms of relationship denoting brothers, sisters, mothers, or fathers. What individuals were thus styled or whether all the members of the tribe came under one or other of these titles, my informants are unable to say for certainty. The terms were certainly wider than ours, as others were called fathers besides the real father, and so with the other terms. Whether any blood relationship existed between those so styled there is no information, as already remarked. Other distinctions, with the exception of those denoting wife and husband, they cannot remember.

Marriage was not permitted among the local groups. Wives were obtained from the tribes at Port Stephens and Patterson River, either by elopement or capture. It frequently happened that the delinquent and his companions were overtaken on the return journey by the pirate warriors of the woman's tribe, and a fight took place between the parties. Should the abductor's party be successful in the encounter, he retained the prize, while if the woman's kinsmen were victorious, she had to return to her tribe. The prize went to the victors in either case. Often it happened that the abducting party succeeded in returning to their own camping grounds in safety, then the young woman was given in charge to the old women at the camp and the young men of the camp betook themselves to other parts for a few days. When they returned, they found things as they left them, then the pair settled down in the old aboriginal way, but if an invading party of the woman's tribe had appeared during their absence, then the young Romeo had to await a more favourable opportunity of taking his Juliet. During the absence of the young men the old men remained behind at the camp with the women, so would therefore appear that they were not liable to punishment for the offences of the young men, in this respect at least.

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monies to be referred to hereafter. The women of the local tribe were either abducted by or eloped with the young men of the surrounding tribes.

Whether monogamy prevailed in the wide sense of the term, my informants are not agreed. Some affirm and some deny. Probably both are right, for this form of marriage may have been the general rule but there were exceptions.

Wives were treated considerately, even kindly. The country being very productive, there was not that continual fight for existence which was the lot of the Blacks in other places, and so in the abundance of provisions there was little necessity for that slave-driving which was such a marked feature of other tribes.

V. Descent.

No information is available as to the rule of descent in this tribe. The males simply inherited the hunting grounds of their fathers, while the women went to "make homes" in the neighbouring tribes.

VI. Totems.

The members of the tribe looked with respect — even with a kind of reverence — on certain animals and birds; and would under no circumstances either kill such themselves or countenance the killing of them by others. I cannot obtain a complete list of these animals with certainty (and in matters of such importance we must give guesswork the "go by"). My informants are agreed that the opossum and a kind of parrot were two. It is equally uncertain how these animals or birds were distributed among the members of the tribe. Some of my informants assert that they were common to the whole tribe while others say that some belonged to the men and others to the women. The only thing certain is that such sacred animals and birds existed.

VII. Ceremonies.

About July or August each year the local Blacks were accustomed to make an excursion to meet the neighbouring tribes — those from the Manning River, Port Macquarie, Port Stephens, Gloucester, probably Wungog and the surrounding districts, ostensibly for the purpose of having a fight — this was the story told the white settlers. It is more than likely that this meeting was for the purpose of holding the *kabbarah* or initiation ceremonies of these tribes.

These ceremonies have been described by Dr. HOWITT¹. Other writers have given very detailed and "spicy" particulars of them, but these accounts were only collected after the organisation of the tribes had completely broken down through intercourse with the whites, and then only from the degraded remnants of the race. Hence the earlier accounts would undoubtedly be the more reliable. On some days before the departure of the tribe strange Blacks might be seen at the camps, and the greatest secrecy, as to the real object of the outing, was observed.

¹ A. W. HOWITT: "The Native Tribes of South-East Australia", London 1904, pp. 576—578

Apparently with the exception of the boring of the septum of the nose no other mutilations were inflicted on the males. Whether any period of probation was imposed on the initiates, nothing was known.

VIII. Death and Burial.

When a death occurred at the camp, the body was wrapped, some hours after death, in a bark winding-sheet and carried by means of a sappling some distance from the camp, where it was buried full length in a shallow grave. Green boughs were strewn in the grave before the body was lowered, and boughs were also placed over the rude coffin, after which the weapons of the deceased were thrown into the grave; over that were placed a few branches of trees and then the grave was filled up with earth. Some logs were then placed on top of the grave and the ceremony was complete.

The lubras and the male portion of the tribe wept bitterly during the final proceedings; but there was no infliction of wounds or shedding of blood, as in other tribes. The widow of the deceased, if he had one, mourned her loss for some time; after which she was given over by the headman of the group, of which her husband was a member, to one of the unmarried males of the local group or tribe.

In the case of the deaths of women or children there were no special mourners and no time was set apart for mourning.

After a death occurred the camp was shifted a short distance away.

Whether the name of deceased was tabooed or not there is no information.

IX. Medicine men.

Certain old men of the tribe were supposed to possess the power of curing diseases. How the operation was carried out I do not know.

Whether witchcraft was practised by the local "doctors" on the local members of the tribe, I have not been able to find out; but from what has been said above, it would appear that this power was attributed to the men of other tribes (s. III) and would likely be attributed by the local Blacks to their own "medicine men" with regard to outsiders. Their powers were exercised beneficently towards their own people. It was thought that every death was caused by the evil influence of a member of some other tribe (excepting only those deaths due to old age or violence).

The medicine men also possessed and carried about with them certain magical objects among which none were more revered than the quartz crystals; these were held to possess the most marvellous powers. These amulets were carried about in a skin pouch and were carefully kept from the eyes of the women and children. The penalties, if any, for infringement of this secrecy are not known.

XI. Religion.

The aborigines, as far as is known, when the first white settlers came among them, had no idea of a supreme Being, though they were in continual fear of some unknown evil influence or power which might be utilised by

their enemies, to do them harm. Sickness was supposed to be the outcome of the exercise of such powers. They believed in spirits and thought they were frequently visited by them.

They had no idea of a future state; they thought the spirits of the deceased "knocked around" their former abodes for some time, and now and again appeared to their friends. There does not appear to have been much fear of those spirits but rather a kind of reverential awe. After some time the spirit ceased to frequent its original haunts and was heard of no more; where it had gone to or what had become of it, they knew not.

Many myths were current and stories were often told of the ancestors of the race and their great achievements; but the early settlers were never looked upon as initiated men and knowledge of the beings, if any, whose histories would be told only to the initiated, was never divulged.

XII. Weapons and utensils.

The weapons and domestic utensils were of the ordinary kind. They used a kind of small stone-axe as an adze; and they had a still smaller one, which was held in the hand and used for dressing spea rhandles and boomerangs. The large axes were beautifully ground and polished and an amount of trouble was taken in fixing handles to them. Years were often spent in grinding and polishing them and otherwise preparing them for use. I have not seen any of the stone-knives, but I am informed that they were brought to a great state of perfection. The uses to which these knives might be turned were very varied. The women used a kind of boat-shaped utensil made of the bark of some tree, with the ends sewed with string made from bark also, for the purpose of carrying roots or other articles for the culinary department.

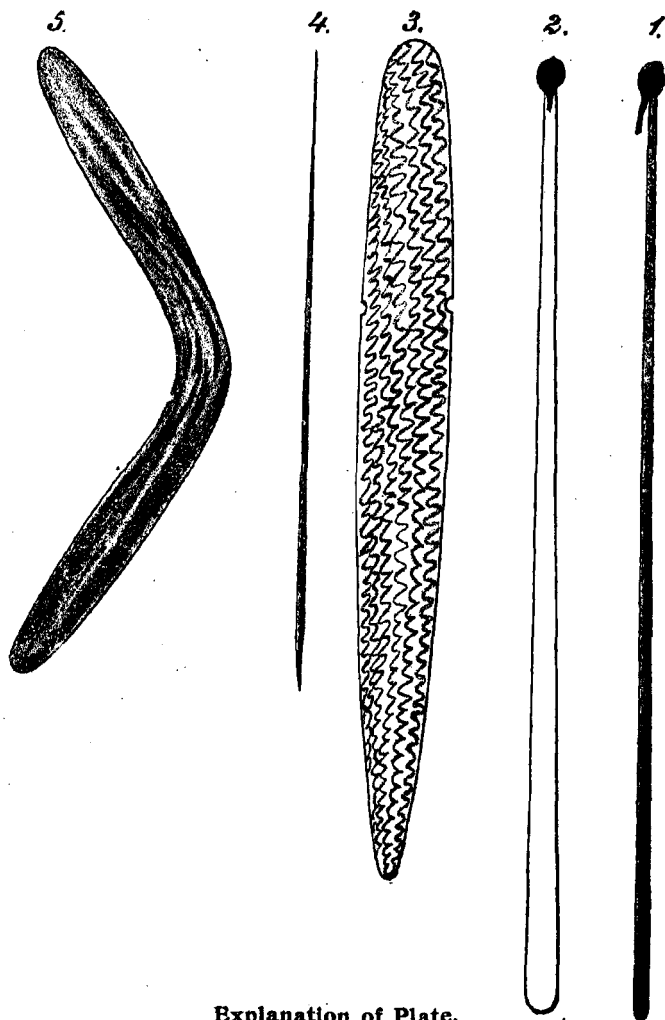
It does not appear as if human hair was used by this tribe for any purpose. The strings were made either from the fur of animals or the bark of a tree.

XIII. Recently discovered weapons of the Extinct Raymond Terrace tribe.

Some time ago when engaged in digging a drain through a swamp about five miles from the town of Raymond Terrace, the workmen discovered some aboriginal weapons which must have been lost by their owners many years ago. The weapons consisted of a *whommerah*, two spear-heads and a shield. These are now in my possession and a short description of them is appended.

The *whommerah* is $39\frac{3}{4}$ inches long and $1\frac{3}{8}$ inches greatest width. The wood of which it is made is what is popularly known as "headle wood". This wood does not grow locally and must have been imported from some other part of the state. This, however, was not a matter of much difficulty as the tribes were continually bartering weapons and other commodities with one another. The point of the *whommerah* is a distinct piece and was attached to the handle by some kind of native gum as shown in the drawing. When

found the implement was fresh as when in use, gum and point in place, but, after exposure to the air for some time, the gum began to crumble away, and some preservative was necessary to keep it from dissolving. The wood is in



Explanation of Plate.

Fig. 1. The *whommerah* shown from the side. The point was kept in position by the ball of gum shown in the figure. This implement belonging to this tribe is extremely rare. — Fig. 2. Front view of *whommerah* showing shape of handle. — Fig. 3. The shield; showing shape of weapon and irregular incised design. The notches in the side are also shown. — Fig. 4. Spear-head. As both were almost identical only one is shown in the drawing. The shape of the tongue is shown which fitted into the groove in the handle or arm. — Fig. 5. The shape of the boomerang is shown. The peculiar twist of the weapon at the elbow cannot be shown in the drawing.

a perfect state of preservation and does not appear much the worse for its lengthened immersion.

Two spear-heads were found at the same time, both of same length. The wood is very heavy, some kind of ironbark. Some local experts say it is white

ironbark. Length 22 inches. The method of manufacturing spears was the following: a branch of grass-tree was fashioned out about 6 feet in length and about 3 inches in diameter, a groove was made in one end to receive the tongue of the end of the spear-head, native gum was then placed around the place of contact in such a manner as to reduce the resistance that might be offered by an object to a minimum. A notch was cut in the end of the spear arm to fit the point of the *whommerah*, and the weapon was then propelled in the ordinary way. The spear heads are in a perfect state of preservation, but the arms of soft grass-tree have rotted away.

A shield was also unearthed at the same time and though not so well preserved as the other implements is still in very fair condition. The timber of which it is made is ironbark. Its length is $19\frac{1}{2}$ inches and its greatest width $2\frac{1}{4}$ inches. An irregular pattern of serpentine design is incised on both sides, apparently by means of some sharp instrument. The shield is rounded on one side while the other is almost flat. About 9 inches from the wide end there are two notches; one on each side, through which a withe passed to form a handle. The implement is somewhat charned on both sides, whether by accident or design is impossible to say.

I also possess a boomerang of the returning variety made by the aborigines of this place before the white man's cuttlery was known, as is evident from the marks of the flint knives on the surface of the weapon. Its length is $28\frac{3}{4}$ inches from tip to tip. The weapon is made from the root of the white ironbark. It was given to me by one of the old residents of the town.

The stone implements used by the Blacks are common enough. They are mostly made of flint, but some have been found made of basalt, the stone evidently having been brought here from the Blue Mountains. Some of them are beautifully polished and show very skilful manipulation.

