

INTRODUCTION.

This essay describes the living conditions of the Worimi Aborigines of Port Stephens before and after the appearance of the Europeans. Their tale is a sad one, as is the tale of countless tribes or nurras or tribal groups throughout Australia. All of the references consulted during the compilation of this essay point to the Worimi as being of a peaceful disposition and perhaps this trait led to their ready assimilation to the culture of the white man. Today, the number of descendants of the Worimi may never be known. Some live at Port Stephens and there may be a few at Karuah and still some at Tarce on the reserves. On good authority, it seems that the only true Worimi would be of the Ridgeway family or close relatives of that family. If we could only gather these members together and.....

THE WORIMI.

At present, the Aboriginal race is thought to have occupied Australia for at least 50,000 years but as the technology of dating bones, shells and artefacts becomes more sophisticated, we may find that their tenure may have been for anything up to 120,000 years.¹ By foot and by water these early migrants reached our northern coast bringing with them their dogs (dingoes) which are not indigenous.² A gradual migration southwards began with some tribes moving into the hinterland by the way of lakes and rivers and other tribes settling near the coast. This occurred over a very long period of time.³

The Worimi became one of the coastal dwelling tribes but the actual area they occupied has given rise to some confusion. H.K. Garland and Joy Wheeler describe the Worimi's tribal ground as ... "the coast from the Hunter River in the south to Forster in the north, thence across to Gloucester in the north-west and down to Maitland in the south-west."⁴ Boris Sokoloff states that "centred on Port Stephens were the Worimi." He also goes on to say "the extent of their territory was from the Myall lakes in the north, to Barrington Tops in the west, and the Hunter River in the south."⁵ William Scott however describes the "Port Stephens tribe as the Gringai tribe, a sub-branch of numerous native people that once inhabited the lower portions of the Hunter and Karuah River valleys."⁶ Because of the lack of Aboriginal records as to tribes, hordes or nurras and tribal grounds it is accepted that the Worimi did indeed settle at Port Stephens, based on three sources. They are, conversations with Ms. Carol Bissett the great, great grand daughter of King Billy Ridgeway, a Worimi from Port Stephens, another is the work of Boris Sokoloff who specialised in the research of the Worimi.⁷ Lastly, are the references made about King Billy and his people by the Aborigines Inland Mission magazines "Our Aim!"⁸

Because the Worimi were hunter-gatherers, the weapons, implements and utensils used were of prime importance to their survival. Natural materials such as stone, wood, skins, bone and shell to name a few, were used to fashion these important tools of subsistence.⁹ Their weapons included spears, woomeras, clubs and throwing sticks, boomerangs and axes.¹⁰ There were several types of spears, the manufacture of which varied according to their intended use. Hunting or fighting spears had a single point where a fishing spear would have four prongs. They were made from either a hardwood, preferably ironbark or from the stem of the grass tree (*Xanthorrea hastilis* or *X. arborea*).¹¹ The ironbark spear would be soaked in water for three or four weeks and then the tip would be hardened in the fire or else a tip would be fixed made from stone, carved wooden barbs or shaped bone from animals or fish.¹² The fishing spear's construction is described in detail by Scott.

"The fish spear was made in three distinct parts. The main shaft was the dried stem of the gigantic lily (pooloongearn), and into this was fitted a second portion, a part of the dried flower stem of the grass tree (pummirri). The head was of four prongs made of ironbark and hardened by fire..... When the prongs were properly fashioned and barbed, the head would be fitted to the shaft with fibre cord and gum from the grass tree."¹³

The length of these hunting or war spears ranged from 2.4 - 3.4 metres (8-11 feet).¹⁴

The axe heads were made from pieces of rock which had been broken down to size and fashioned into shape by constant rubbing against another rock. When the desired shape was attained, fibre string and gum were used to secure the head to its wooden handle.¹⁵

Boomerangs, of which there were two types used by the Worimi, were made from wild myrtle wood. One style had a slight curve for use in hunting while the other was more sharply curved and would return to the thrower.¹⁶

Both were chipped and shaved with stone implements and finished off with shell scrapers. As with all weapons, they were hardened in the fire.¹⁷

The diet of the Worimi included plenty of seafood as is witnessed by Scott. "What huge quantities of fish these blacks could eat! They never seemed to tire of the diet...."¹⁸ The canoes they made for fishing were constructed from a single sheet of bark from a stringy-bark tree. This was then passed over a fire which would help in the shaping of it. Vines or fibre string made by the women would secure the ends which would then be packed with clay to render them watertight.¹⁹ These canoes would carry a fire on board built upon a mound of clay at the stern. Scott can never remember anyone setting out without a fire burning.²⁰ The fire was there to cook the catch on the spot.

The women too had their roles to play in the manufacture of items necessary in daily life. Fishing lines and string for binding tools and weapons and making dilly-bags were the sole responsibility of the Worimi women. The inner bark of the kurrajong tree was soaked and scraped to leave a white flax-like fibre and this was rolled between the palm and thigh to form the string. Hot ashes were applied to the thigh skin to harden it for this task.²¹

Dilly-bags of various sizes were woven by the women to carry articles whilst they were on the move. Some were large enough to carry a child.

Fish hooks were made from oyster or pearl shell, rock oyster, turban shell, the large earshell, and oyster or pipi. A hole would be punched in the shell and filed to the desired crescent shape and then a vertical break in the shell would be made to produce the formed hook. Pieces of fine sandstone, shale or quartzite were used for the filing process.²²

One of the containers made by the Worimi was canoe-shaped and it was formed from the bark of the tea-tree. It was used for collecting roots, honeycomb and other types of food. "They were also used as drinking vessels."²³

Port Stephens was abundant with food supplies for the Worimi providing kangaroos, emus, wallabies, snakes, kangaroo rats, opossums and other small animals. Seafood was also plentiful and fishing was the main responsibility of the women although the men joined in when the great runs of mullet occurred.²⁴ Mrs. Marr related to life in 1862:

"When I was a young girl, I used to go out to the Port Stephens Heads and watch while my mother dived for lobsters. The water is very deep and there were a lot of sharks about, so I used to give her the signal when I saw any come along. She would dive to the bottom and come up with two lobsters in each hand [sic], lay them on the bank, and after a spell go down again. Mother and my aunts used to go out in bark canoes to a place called Broughton Islands, which is outside the heads and spear fish. This is a very common way of fishing among native women. They caught tailor fish with a hook and no bait. They tied the hook on a stick, and, throwing it in, hooked them."²⁵

That description shows a difference between the traditional gathering role of the Aboriginal women of other tribes to the women of the Worimi who also carried out the gathering of roots, fruits, yams, berries and shellfish from the water's edge.²⁶ It seems to be such a great work load for them.

The men, of course looked after the hunting of animals, especially the kangaroo which, almost extinct around Port Stephens these days, was found in great numbers in the mid-1800's.²⁷ "These marsupials ran in large mobs easily driven by the nimble natives to a point where waiting groups could spear them with ease. It was a very simple process for the tribe to kill all they needed."²⁸ Because Scott lived with the people he called "The Port Stephens Blacks", that last sentence verifies the Aborigines' attitude to the supply

of flora and fauna used for food. They would take only what was needed to feed their group. Scott goes on to relate what occurred after a successful hunt:

"It was no pleasant sight to witness the banquet that invariably followed a kangaroo hunt. The men, exultant over the result of their prowess and urged by that extraordinary instinct that seems to impel an Aboriginal [sic] to feed when and where he can, would immediately proceed to make a fire. Whatever number of animals were required for the feast would be selected and opened. Before tasting the flesh there were other parts that furnished rare delicacies to the primitive huntsmen. The paunch would be ripped open and its contents of undigested grass devoured with the greatest relish. If it chanced that the marsupial was infested with the long white worms commonly found in bush animals, these repulsive parasites would be swallowed with rare gusto as the greatest delicacy of all." ²⁹

After these treats were enjoyed, the carcass would be thrown into the fire and left to cook. The odours of the roasting meat would sometimes be too much for those watching and they would tuck-in before the beast was properly cooked. They apparently had remarkable appetites.³⁰ Sokoloff agrees with Scott as far as appetites are concerned but he adds that the kangaroo heads and entrails were half-done in the fire, divided up and eaten as a sort of entree.³¹ As with other tribes, carcasses to be carried back to camp would be stiffened in the fire for ease of carrying.

All of the flesh foods were eaten after being roasted in the fire, even oysters. So too were some of the tubers and the stalks of the Gigantic Lily, the latter having to be soaked first to remove the toxins.³² Fruit which was still green was treated in the same way while ripe fruit and insect larvae was eaten raw.

The Worimi shared a sweet tooth and had a yen for honey. As Mrs. Marr describes:

"We went sometimes to search for honey. The men would climb up the tree by cutting steps in it with an axe, and limb [sic] it and smoke the bees out, and take the honey away in tins, or in bark canoes, which were made of a sheet of bark, tied each end. These canoes hold the honey quite well." ³³

From the previous descriptions of the manufacture of weapons, canoes and the preparation of food, it can be seen that the fire was the most important tool of the Worimi. They used it for heat and light, warmth, manufacture of weapons and utensils but perhaps almost as importantly, they used fire to control their environment. Sokoloff states,

"there is evidence that the vegetation structure in the Hunter Valley, as with other parts of Australia, had been modified before the advent of European settlement in ways which favoured grazing by kangaroos and wallabies. This was partly the result of deliberate burning of the natural vegetation....for pasture improvement or hunting." ³⁴

Plants are affected by fire in different ways - most of the trees and shrubs with good root systems would survive and regenerate. Some plants would be stimulated to release their fruit sooner than normal while the grass trees were prompted to send up their flowering stems which the Worimi used for material purposes as already described. The grasses recovered quickly after a burning-off, presenting young succulent shoots to tempt the marsupials, kangaroos included, and this in turn presented the Worimi with a continuing food supply. This practice of setting fire to the vegetation for the purpose of controlling plant growth and for the maintenance of favourable conditions to ensure the availability of a constant food supply has been termed, most aptly, fire-stick farming. ³⁵

The making of fires was carried out in the following manner:

"The fire-maker would squat himself on the ground, the soles of his feet on the larger length of wood to hold it firm, the thinner section between the palms of his hands, its tapered point on the exposed pith of the under piece. Rubbing the palms together he would cause the upright stick he held to revolve rapidly, the point gradually boring its way through the pith beneath. When nearly through, smoke would begin to rise, whereupon the efforts of the operator would be re-doubled. Whirling the sticks with amazing speed, its hardened point would emerge from the pith, spilling a fiery dust that dropped on a little heap of soft, fine bark placed to catch it. The sparks would be gently blown upon until a flame appeared, when thereafter it was no trouble to build up a roaring fire." ³⁶

Naturally, they avoided as much as possible the necessity of going through this process. "Once a fire was made it was kept burning as long as could be contrived, and even in their bark canoes they maintained a small fire on a mould of clay so that cooking operations could be begun ashore whenever necessary."³⁷ When moving from one location to another, fire-sticks (or brands) were carried and carefully kept alight so that campfires could be lit at their new campsite. The number of fires at a campsite varied as the seasons changed and the following description of an Aboriginal camp at Port Stephens at night in 1826 must surely have been made in winter. "You are encompassed by twenty or thirty fires, each of which is attended by four or more Natives, according to the number of the family."³⁸ Sokoloff verifies this when he states, "in colder weather fires were used for warmth, especially in the inland areas, when the natives slept beside their fires."³⁹

The construction of the Worimi's shelters obviously depended upon the weather as well. They have been reported as being made out of "...a few sheets of bark placed alongside a convenient log, or bushes placed alongside some forest giant."⁴⁰ Scott describes them as "a few sheets of bark, leaning on a pole against a tree, served his [sic] as shelter..."⁴¹ while in Sir Edward Parry's diary we find "...their huts being formed of two pieces of bark placed upright against each other."⁴² The most complex style is described by Dawson of the Australian Agricultural Company,

"....a small hut which are [sic] supported by three forked sticks, about three feet long, brought together at the top in a triangular form: the two sides towards the wind are covered by long sheets of bark, the third is always open. In winter each family has its own fire in front of the hut. When the wind shifts, the gunyer is shifted also.... In dry summer weather they do not feel it necessary to provide themselves with any shelter at all."⁴³

The social organization of the Worimi, in common with other tribal groups of Australian Aborigines, lived under a system which had a spiritual as well as social significance, The rules and traditions of which enabled them to live in harmony with their environment.⁴⁴ There was no leader of the tribe as such, the power and decision being shared among a number of the tribe's oldest and wisest men. They held the responsibility of preserving the rules, rituals and mythology of the Worimi.⁴⁵ The family unit was of utmost importance within the tribe and monogamy was the rule. "Once a couple became man and wife they were singularly faithful to each other...."⁴⁶ These matrimonial unions took several forms, on one hand there was the negotiated settlement between the elders of different nurras or tribal groups, when a bride would be promised to a particular male. On some occasions the bride would be a mere child.⁴⁷ On the other hand, the stealing of a bride would take place and should the female raise objection, she would be silenced by "a severe blow on the head with his waddy while he is carrying her off."⁴⁸ "The elopement of a pair of lovers"⁴⁹ also took place but the reference to it by Garland and Wheeler stops short of an explanation.

Before a male could take a wife he would have had to undergo an initiation ceremony to prove his manhood. This ceremony introduced him to the secret life and the mythology of sacred rites and objects and gave him his place in society and nature.⁵⁰ There are various descriptions of such ceremonies but they all agree that for the initiate, it was a period of learning and severe hardship. The initiation ceremony was a men only affair, the women being forbidden to watch any of the proceedings.⁵¹ Another ceremony held by the Worimi was the corroboree in which the women participated. There would be singing, dancing, ornately painted bodies, percussion sounds and even the traditional sustained monotonous. The themes for

these events of celebration would be linked to recent or historic incidents, sometimes to give thanks for abundant food supplies such as the mullet run or a fruitful kangaroo hunt.⁵²

This was the lifestyle of the Worimi before the coming of the European settlers. Their first recorded meeting was the arrival of five escaped convicts from Sydney. It is interesting to note that the four surviving convicts, in 1795, when Captain Robert Broughton took them back into custody, reported, "in high terms of the pacific disposition and gentle manners of the natives."⁵³ The cedar-getters were the next to move into the Worimi lands. After exhausting the supplies of cedar around Sydney, the Hawkesbury River and the Hunter River, they gained permission to begin cutting at Port Stephens in 1821.⁵⁴ The cedar-getters were men of violence and murdered the Worimi when they could. This is illustrated by the conversation of one of them who, when pointed out as having killed ten Aborigines, said "he would kill them whenever he could."⁵⁵

The next European invasion began in 1826 when the Australian Agricultural Company took a 1,000,000 acre grant which encompassed most of the Worimi's tribal grounds.⁵⁶ It must be emphasised that two persons of the company were most sympathetic towards the Aborigines' plight. They were Robert Dawson, chief agent of the company who took a humane approach towards them⁵⁷ and Henry Dangar the surveyor, who "was shaken by the news of the massacre on his Myall Creek station of a peaceful tribe of Aborigines"^{*} in June of 1838. Rightly or wrongly, these two people helped to introduce the Worimi to labour in the European fashion. With the introduction of sheep and cattle to the Worimi lands, their natural habitat had been so disturbed that they drifted into the white camps anyway for handouts. After 1840, the

Australian Agricultural Company "used Aborigines as stockmen, sailors, oarsmen, constables, nightwatchmen, domestics and prostitutes."⁵⁸ The latter group were not listed as employees but the company ensured that adequate compensation was paid to their tribal husbands.⁵⁹ This arrangement apparently suited both races.

Not all of the company's employees showed the same benevolent attitude towards the Aborigines. In Sir Edward Parry's diary of the 20th of April, 1830 he wrote, "understanding that it has been the practice, especially at Stroud, to send the blacks out with guns for game on Sundays, I gave the order to discontinue this practice." He emphasised his disgust of such occurrences.⁶⁰

The drifting of the tribe towards the European settlements exposed them to the white man's diseases such as influenza, whooping cough, smallpox and the inevitable venereal diseases. "The role of European diseases, particularly smallpox and venereal diseases, had a critical effect on the Aboriginal population."⁶¹ Dawson commented in 1830 that, "catarrhs and the consequences which frequently follow the neglect of them - such a inflammation of the lungs and pleura, and bilious colics, which frequently carry them off."⁶²

History has again sealed the fate of the Aborigines as it did to many, many tribes throughout Australia. Perhaps an apt conclusion to this essay is a passage from a local newspaper which states.

"We have not only taken possession of the lands of the aboriginal [sic] tribes of this colony, and driven them from their territories, but we have also kept up unrelenting hostility towards them, as if they were not worthy of being classed with human beings, but simply regarded as inferior to some of the lower animals of creation..."

They are also industrious and have completely shaken off the indolent habits in which they were wont to indulge in their uncivilised days...

In New South Wales scarcely anything has ever been done to ameliorate the condition of the aborigines [sic].

They are left in their primeval wretchedness, neither the Government nor the people caring for them. Once a year they are scantily supplied with blankets and no-one thinks more about them...

We believe this matter has never been brought before Parliament, but we are decidedly of the opinion it ought to have been; nay, we affirm that the Government is imperatively called upon to do something for the aborigines [sic] We also maintain that the public, but more especially the Christian community, are called upon to aid the "sable sons of the soil" from the state of degradation into which they have been permitted to sink." 63

That came from the editorial of the "Newcastle Chronicle" dated Thursday, November 18, 1869 and it is a shame that the sentiments contained therein were not implemented sooner throughout Australia.

Endnotes

1. Broome, R. Aboriginal Australians, Sydney, 1982, p. 10
2. Elkin, A.P. The Australian Aborigines, Sydney, (4th), 1964, p. 7
3. Broome Aboriginal, ... p 10
4. Garland, H.K. & Wheeler, J. Myall Lakes - Creation to Controversy. Pacific Palms, 1982, p. 37
5. Sokoloff, B. "The Worimi: Hunter-Gatherers at Port Stephens" in Hunter Natural History, Vol. 6 Issue 23, p. 166
6. Scott, W The Port Stephens Blacks, Newcastle, (2nd) 1982, p. 1
7. Sokoloff, H.N.H. Vol. 6, Issue 23, p 166
8. Aborigines Inland Mission magazines photo-copies supplied by Ms Carol Bissett
9. Sokoloff. H.N.H. Vol. 7, Issue 27, p 182
10. Garland & Wheeler. Myall Lakes... pp 38-39
11. Sokoloff. H.N.H. Vol. 7, Issue 27, p 182
12. Ibid. p 183
13. Scott. The Port... p 18

14. Sokoloff. H.N.H....Vol. 7, Issue 27, p 183
15. Garland & Wheeler. Myall Lakes... p 39
16. Scott. The Port... p 39
17. Sokoloff. H.N.H.... Vol. 9, Issue 35, p 151
18. Scott. The Port... p 19
19. Garland & Wheeler. Myall Lakes... p 38
20. Scott. The Port... p 39
21. Garland & Wheeler. Myall Lakes... p 39
22. Sokoloff. H.N.H.... Vol. 7, Issue 28, p 231
23. Ibid, p 233
24. Marr, Mrs Our AIM., April 1912, p 4
25. Ibid.
26. Garland & Wheeler. Myall Lakes... p. 39
27. Scott. The Port... p 20
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid. pp 20-21

30. Ibid. p 21
31. Sokoloff. H.N.H. Vol. 7, Issue 26, p 113
32. Ibid
33. Marr, Mrs. Our A.I.M. April 1912, p 4
34. Sokoloff. H.N.H. Vol. 10, Issue 40, p 192
35. Ibid. p 195
36. Scott. The Port... p. 26
37. Ibid.
38. Brayshaw, H. Aborigines of the Hunter Valley
Scone and Upper Historical Society
1986, p 46
39. Sokoloff. H.N.H. Vol. 7, Issue 26, p 113
40. Sokoloff. H.N.H. Vol. 8, Issue 29, p 32
41. Ibid.
42. Sir Edward Parry. Early Days of Port Stephens
Dungog, n.d. p 13.
43. Sokoloff. H.N.H. Vol. 8, Issue 29, p 31
44. Ibid Vol. 8, Issue 30, p 100

45. Garland & Wheeler. Myall Lakes... p. 37
46. Scott. The Port... p16
47. Garland & Wheeler. Myall Lakes... p,44
48. Sokoloff. H.N.H. Vol. 8, Issue 30, p102
49. Garland & Wheeler. Myall Lakes... p.44
50. Sokoloff. H.N.H. Vol. 8, Issue 31, p. 199
51. Scott. The Port... p 29
52. Sokoloff. H.N.H. Vol. 8, Issue 31, p. 198
53. Newcastle Morning Herald. 5th September 1947, p5
54. Berzins, B. The Coming of Strangers,
Sydney, 1988, p 57
55. Sokoloff. H.N.H. Vol. 10, Issue 37, p 18
56. Atchison J. &
Gray N. Henry Dangar Surveyor and Explorer,
Scone, 1974, p. 18
57. Garland & Wheeler. Myall Lakes... p 51
58. Franklin, M. A. Black and White Australians,
Melbourne, 1976, p.35
59. Ibid.

60. Sir Edward Parry

Early Days... p 21

61. Berzins

The Coming... p 49

62. Ibid

63. The Newcastle Chronicle

18th November 1869, p 2

*. Atchison & Gray

Henry Dangar... p. 21

Bibliography.

- Atchison, J. & Gray, N. Henry Dangar Surveyor and Explorer
Scone, 1974
- Berzins, B. The Coming of Strangers
Sydney, 1988
- Brayshaw, H. Aborigines of the Hunter Valley.
Scone, 1986
- Broome, R. Aboriginal Australians
Sydney, 1982
- Elkin, A.P. The Australian Aborigines
Sydney, 1964
- Franklin, M.A. Black and White Australians
Melbourne, 1976
- Garland H.K &
Wheeler, J. Myall Lakes Creation to Controversy
Pacific Palms, 1982
- Marr, Mrs. Aborigines Inland Mission
1912
- Parry, Sir Edward. Early Days of Port Stephens
Dungog, n.d.
- Scott, W. The Port Stephens Blacks
Newcastle, 1982

Sokoloff, B.

"The Worimi Hunters and Gatherers
at Port Stephens" in Hunter
Natural History Vols. 1-10

The Newcastle Chronicle, 1869

The Newcastle Morning Herald, 1947