CHAPTER IV

This chapter shall be concerned specifically with the material culture of the Hunter Valley aborigines. Included are such items as canoes, clothing, dwellings, implements and weapons.

The weapons, tools and equipment of the natives, which constitute the subject of the first section of the chapter, reflect a considerable amount of skill and artistic ability. There was an abundance of material equipment, possibly attributable to the environment being so favourable for native settlement. In other areas where the equipment was less varied and often less skilfully manufactured, the environment was such that the food quest, taking many hours and involving travelling over long distances, and a lack of raw materials precluded an elaborate range of tools and implements. (1) Possibly, too, the food available being restricted to only a few types made much of the equipment required in more fertile areas unnecessary.

Because the tribal and horde territories in the Hunter region were smaller than in arid areas, the amount of nomadic wandering was less, and the distances travelled were shorter. Thus the natives were able to

(1) F.J. McCarthy loc. cit.; p98.
have more material equipment, as it did not have to be
carried about often or over very great distances.

Thus Dawson notes the variety of articles carried
by the women in nets.

'These nets are slung by a string round their
forehead, and hang down their backs and are
used like a work-bag or reticule. They contain
all the articles they carry about with them,
such as fishing-hooks... prepared bark for string,
gum for gluing different parts of their war and
fishing spears, and sometimes oysters and fish
when they move from the shore to the interior.' (2)

Then,

'With the net thus filled, and frequently a child
astride on the shoulders, they move off with the
men.' (3)

Raw material for the construction of these implements
and weapons was readily available in the Hunter Valley,
much more so than in less fertile areas. Wood suitable
for the making of shields was plentiful, particularly
the mangrove, Avicennia officinalis, which was favoured
on the coast. (4) This is in contrast with Central
Australia, for example, where trees were scarce and rarely
of a nature suitable for shield-making and where the only
alternative was to obtain shields by trade with the north. (5)
Eucalypts, which provided material for coolamons, or
containers (6), and resin or gum as an adhesive (7), were

(2) R. Dawson op. cit. p67.
See also A. Boswell op. cit: p7.
(3) R. Dawson op. cit: p67.
(4) W.J. Enright "Aborigines of North Eastern New South
Wales": p3.
(6) Mr. W.C. Green.
(7) B. McKierman loc. cit: p892.
R. Dawson loc. cit: p203.
From Enright's collection of implements. He does not specify their locality except that Figs. 16 and 17 are definitely from the Hunter.

Fig. 1. A non-returning boomerang.

Figs. 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. Returning boomerangs.

Fig. 7. A yamstick.

Fig. 8. A shield.

Fig. 9. A waddy.

Figs. 10, 11, and 12. Stone axe-heads.

Figs. 13 and 14. Hafted axes.

Fig. 15. A sharpened kangaroo bone used for combing the hair.

Fig. 16. A waddy.

Fig. 17. A bull-roarer.

Photo: W.J. Enright.
also plentiful. Inland, the opossum, from which fur was obtained for rugs (8), was easily procured. The equipment of the Hunter Valley natives also included several items, such as the womera and certain types of spears (9) which the natives in the more fertile Richmond-Tweed area did not have.

Thus a variety of factors contributed to the aborigines of the Hunter Valley having such a wide range of weapons and implements. These elements of the material culture will now be discussed in more detail, weapons first. The natives' weapons included the boomerang, spear, womera or spear-thrower, nullah-nullah or club, often called a waddy, and the elaman or shield.

The boomerang was the most spectacular of these weapons, particularly the returning variety. It was in fact used for several purposes, namely in battle, when hunting, and purely for amusement. Some were designed to return, others not. No description is given of how either was constructed or of the type of wood used. On the Clarence conveniently shaped pieces of the Tulip Tree, (10) or Mangrove tree on the Richmond and Tweed (11), were trimmed to the right shape with a shell, or glass

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(8) C. Foster.
(9) They had no multipronged, barbed, or tipped spears. S.M. Sullivan op.cit: p65.
scraper, and then the boomerang was hardened over the fire. (12) An essentially similar procedure was probably adopted on the Hunter, although McKieerman says that flint scrapers were used at Raymond Terrace (12A), and both types of tree are to be found in the area.

Apparently both kinds of boomerang were roughly similar in shape. Breton comments.

'It is always made of hard wood, is thirty or forty inches in length two and a half to three inches wide at the broadest part, and tapers away at each end nearly to a point. The concave part is from an eighth to a quarter of an inch thick, and the convex is quite sharp.' (13)

Early observers were greatly impressed by the flight of the returning boomerang. Cleveland, for example,

'It is held one end in the hand and thrown in the air with a jerk that sends it twirling with amazing rapidity and causes it to describe the most extraordinary revolutions in the air and after traversing several hundred yards return end light at the feet of the thrower, why it does so I can't imagine, it has puzzled me more than anything I ever saw.' (14)

It would appear that Cleveland may have exaggerated a little; a more moderate estimate by McCarthy of the distance travelled by a boomerang (15) is substantiated.

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(12) S.M. Sullivan _op. cit_; p75.
(12A) B. McKieerman _loc. cit_; p892.
(13) W.H. Breton _op. cit_; p237.
(14) W. Breton _op. cit_; p83.
by Breton's description:

'I have seen a native throw one so as to make it go forty or fifty yards horizontally, and not more than three or four feet from the ground; it would then suddenly dart into the air to the height of fifty or sixty yards, describe a very considerable curve, and, finally, fall at his feet.' (16)

The returning boomerang was mostly used as a toy, purely for amusement, (17) but it was also used effectively in hunting birds and small animals. (18)

In battle and in hunting larger animals the non-returning boomerang was used, with great effectiveness.

'I am told they could throw it so as to cut a man in halves, and after seeing what I have seen of it I could believe anything related of it.' (19)

These boomerangs were thrown in a different manner, being

'designed for throwing straight, and at the legs of the enemy, in which case they are made to go either horizontally or hoop fashion - that is to say the points or extremities alternately strike the ground.' (20)

Both types of boomerang were impressive in flight.

'In all cases, no matter how thrown, the boomerang keeps turning with great rapidity, like a piece of wood revolving on a pivot, and with a whizzing noise.' (21)

(17) Ibid: p238.
(18) R. Miller loc.cit: p352.
(19) W. Cleveland op.cit: p85.
(20) W.H. Breton op.cit: p237.
Also Lang Papers, op.cit: pp61-62.
(21) W.H. Breton op.cit: p237.
The spear was also a very lethal weapon; one early writer described it as

'The most deadly of their instruments of war.' (22)

Estimates of the length of the spear vary considerably. Barrallier was impressed by their length, which he judged to be from eighteen to twenty-two feet long and concluded that as they were so much longer than those about Port Jackson, the Newcastle natives have been more robust than their Port Jackson counterparts, to be able to throw them. (23)

However, as Barrallier admits that he was never able to get close to the natives, and as others judged the spears to be much shorter, Barrallier's estimate may be regarded as extreme. According to Breton the spear was nine or ten feet in length, and about as thick as a finger. (24) Dawson describes a spear he saw as being

'at least about eight feet long.' (25)

McKieman, on the other hand, says that the spear was about six feet long and three inches in diameter, with an iron bark spear head almost two feet long attached to one end. (26)

It is possible that the size of the spear varied with its function, but there is no evidence concerning

(22) Lang Papers op.cit: p62
(23) F. Barrallier loc.cit: p81.
(24) W.H. Breton op.cit: p235.
(26) E. McKieman loc.cit: p892.
this. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that
the standard length of a spear was from eight to ten
feet, with the diameter being anything up to three inches
according to the taste and intention of its maker.

The type of point on the spears varied also, no
doubt in part at least according to the purpose of the
spear, but there seems also to have been some regional
variation. Reference has already been made to McKieinan's
description of a white ironbark, (27) twenty-two-inch-long
spear head. (28) Enright wrote that the spears

'were sometimes barbed with wood or bone, but
never, in my experience, with stone.' (29)

This lack of stone spear heads may have been restricted
to that coastal region with which Enright was familiar.
Mr. Green describes spear heads as being

'laboriously fashioned from stone'
in the Upper Hunter area.

Dawson witnessed an old aborigine treating the
point of a plain spear.

'I... watched his movements, and observed that he
scraped the point of his spear... with a broken
shell, and put it in the fire to harden. Having
done this, he drew the spear over the blaze of the
fire repeatedly, and then placed it between his
teeth, in which position he applied both his hands
to straighten it, examining it afterwards with one
eye closed, as a carpenter would do his planed
work.' (30)

(27) Probably Eucalyptus paniculata. W.J. Enright "Botany
of the Lower Hunter River District", Pan-Pacific
Science Congress, Australia, vol II; 1923: p9.
(28) See above, this chapter.
(29) W.J. Enright "Aborigines of North Eastern New South
Wales": p4.
A description of the construction of a headed spear is provided by McKierman.

'The method of manufacturing spears was the following: a branch of grass-tree was fashioned out about six feet in length and about three 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.' (31)

The grass-tree referred to was probably Xanthorrhoea arborea. (32)

The force and accuracy of the spear was greatly increased by the use of the womera, (33) so that it could be thrown

'with considerable exactness to a distance of more than sixty yards.' (34)

The womera was usually about three feet in length (35), and

'three inches broad at one end, ... going off to a point at the other, to which a sort of hook is fastened. This hook being inserted into a small hole at the extremity of the spear, and the wommore grasped close to the broad part of it, the spear itself is brought beneath the middle finger. The wommore acting like a sling, or rather upon the same principle, it may easily be conceived that a powerful man will cause a good spear to travel an astonishing distance.' (36)

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(31) B. McKierman loc. cit: p392.
J.R. Maiden loc. cit: p233. It was used for gum, also.
(33) W.H. Breton loc. cit: p236.
(34) W.H. Breton loc. cit: p236.
(35) F. Barrallier loc. cit: p81.
W.H. Breton loc. cit: p236.
(36) G. Barrington loc. cit: p23.
From Enright's collection of implements. He does not say specifically that they are from the Hunter. Fig. 20 is from north-western New South Wales.

Figs. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. Boomerangs of the returning variety.

Fig. 7. Fishing spear.

Fig. 8. Womera or spear-thrower.

Fig. 9. Bull-roarer.

Fig. 10. Spear.

Figs. 11 and 12. Basaltic axe-heads.

Fig. 13. An axe which was used without a handle.

Fig. 14. Whet stone used for sharpening shell fish hooks.

Fig. 15. Shield of mangrove wood.

Figs. 16 and 17. Waddies.

Fig. 18. Coolamon.

Fig. 19. Weapon used for warding off spears.

Fig. 20. A fighting boomerang from north-western New South Wales.

Photo: W.J. Enright.
This description is borne out in almost every detail by Barrington, who adds that the 'hook' is

'a flat shell fixed into a split in the stick, made fast with a strong gum, which, when dry, is as hard as flint.' (37)

The womera had another use besides being a spear-thrower. Dawson observed that it was used to remove from a tree the bark from which their huts were constructed, after an incision had been made with a hatchet. (38)

In Central Australia the womera or spear-thrower was a very generalized tool, being used also as a firesaw, a musical instrument, a defensive weapon to parry spears, and an adze-handle. (39) Its relatively restricted use in the Hunter Valley McCarthy would explain in terms of environment; plentiful raw materials and time, and a less nomadic life made the construction of more tools with more specialized functions possible, and rendered such generalized use of one tool unnecessary. (40)

Another weapon of the Hunter Valley natives, frequently mentioned by early settlers, (41) was the waddy. This was made of hard wood (42), probably the Mangrove,

(37) Ibid.
(38) R. Dawson op.cit: p20.
(39) F.D. McCarthy "Habitat, Economy and Equipment...": p94.
(40) Ibid: p96.
(41) Including R. Dawson op.cit: p65,
    Lang Papers op.cit: p61.
(42) Mr. W.C. Green.
Avicennia officinalis, (43) or the White ironbark, Eucalyptus paniculata. (44) Breton refers to these waddies and the slightly larger nullah-nullahs (45) with respect, as being

'...Made, as might naturally be expected, of no small solidity, as they would otherwise make but little impression on the skull of a New Hollander.' (46)

These weapons are similar to, although heavier than, the 'paddy-melon stick' of the north coast. (47) Like the 'paddy-melon stick', the waddy was used for throwing at small animals (48), as well as for tribal fights. It was also used to club cornered wallabied (49), and, according to Dawson, the men used it to maintain superiority over their wives:

'When a poor gin offends her sable lord, he taps her over the head in no very gentle manner...!' (50)

He describes the waddy as being

'...like a large kitchen poker, and nearly as heavy, only much shorter in the handle. The iron-bark wood, of which it is made, is very hard, and nearly as heavy as iron.' (51)

Both the waddy and the nullah-nullah were always used in single combat, although less frequently in a proper

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(43) W.J. Enright "Botany of the Lower Hunter River District" : p5.
Also R. Dawson op.cit: p66.
(45) Lang Papers op.cit: p61.
(46) W.H. Breton op.cit: p239.
(47) S.M. Sullivan op.cit: p78.
(49) J.W. Fawcett loc.cit: p153.
(50) R. Dawson op.cit: p66.
(51) Ibid.
battle (52); there boomerangs and spears were more usual.
One early writer draws a distinction between the uses of
the waddy and the nullah-nullah;

'The Waddy is used in Battle or in single combats
when the offence is slight and when it is not
wished that any of the parties should be killed... 
The Nullanulla is used when the offence has been
greater. Death sometimes ensues from a battle
with Nullanullas but not often.' (53)

The natives defended themselves in battle and when
being punished (54) by means of a shield, commonly called
an 'slamon'. Dawson describes one used in the latter
circumstances as being made of

'thick bark, hardened by the fire, and generally
proof against a spear.' (55)

It was roughly ellipsoidal in shape, some thirty inches
long and fifteen inches wide. Enright observed two types
of shields. They were

'broad, about a foot wide, and two or three foot
long, made of wood (Mangrove wood was a favourite
with those nearest the coast) or bark, and a
narrow one of hardwood, only about three inches
in breadth.' (56)

Two kinds of shields, were used on the Clarence (57)
and indeed in most areas of the North Coast (58).

(52) Lang Papers loc.cit: p61.
(53) Ibid.
(54) E.B. Threlkeld op.cit: 24 (85)
W. Cleveland op.cit: p89.
(55) R. Dawson op.cit: p64.
(56) W.J. Enright loc.cit: p4. Avicennia officinalis
(57) W.J. Enright "Notes on the Aborigines of the North
Coast of New South Wales" : p195.
(58) E.M. Curr vol I op.cit: p146.
Shield.

Photos: Dick Collection.

Carved trees at Port Macquarie.
A shield very similar to the second one mentioned by Enright was found some five miles from Raymond Terrace. McKiernan describes it:

'The timber of which it is made is ironbark. Its length is nineteen and a half inches and its greatest width two and a half 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 nine inches from the wide end there are two notches, one on each side through which a withe passed to form a handle.' (59)

Some aborigines whom Dawson saw prepared for battle were armed with shields which had been decorated for the occasion, not by incision; they had been

'whitened with pipe-clay and quartered with red-ochre.' (60)

The tools and implements utilized by the natives of the Hunter Valley were varied and often revealed considerable technical skill. Of their stone implements, which will be discussed first, Enright writes:

'Some were as rude as the Boliths of Kent, but the finish of others shows great care and skill.' (61)

Many of the pioneers and other early writers referred to the tomahawk or hatchet used by the natives. (62)

(59) R. McKiernan loc.cit: p892.
(60) R. Dawson op.cit: p280.
J.E. Nancarrow op.cit: p145.
Mr. W.C. Green.
Throughout the Hunter Valley they were frequently referred to as "mogos".

'I have seen various "mogos", some clumsily formed, and others that would penetrate any tree with the sap in it... I am now living in the Upper Hunter, and the axes here are of a heavy black stone, which takes an edge so sharp that you could cut your fingers with one that I have seen. I am informed that they were used with green withes as a handle, one turn being taken round the axe, and that very effective work could be done with them.' (63)

Generally the cutting edge on the hatchet was ground: (64) thus the 'mogo' was

'Made of a rudely sharpened stone of a hard dark colour, which was first chipped out and then ground to an edge, and fitted to a handle.' (65)

Another description comes from Dawson.

'Before we became acquainted with them they used stone hatchets which were sharpened by other stones to a pretty fine edge. These had a groove worked near the head, around which they twisted a stick, to serve as a handle, similar to those which the blacksmiths use for their chisels. They were closely fastened round the head by a very adhesive gum, resembling pitch, taken from a plant called the grass-tree.' (66)

Dawson's is the only reference to axe-heads being grooved, but his description has been substantiated by archaeological evidence. (This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter).

(63) Letter to the Maitland Mercury, 23 October, 1877;
(64) R. Miller loc. cit: p353.
(65) W. J. Enright loc. cit: p3.
These hatchets had a variety of uses, such as cutting toe-holds to aid tree-climbing, (67) removing bark from trees for huts (68) and canoes (69), cutting 'possums out of hollow trees, and removing bandicoots or kangaroo rats from hollow logs. (70)

The natives appreciated the superiority of the iron tomahawk in comparison with their stone ones, and were eager to acquire an iron hatchet. (71) However, the European-made tomahawk did require some alterations before the natives were satisfied with it. According to Scott,

'The first thing a blackfellow did when he received a tomahawk, was to substitute for the white man's handle, one of his own make - flat and narrow to a point. This was placed loosely into the eye of the tomahawk and fastened firmly by a wedge driven in on the side. The reason for this change was that the thin handle could be easily pushed under the waist belt, leaving the hands free when climbing a tree, and at the same time keeping the implement handy when wanted. The thin handle also lent more weight to the head.' (72)

An indication of the rapidity with which the iron replaced the stone tomahawk is given by the fact of there being no stone ones in the Port Stephens district after the mid-eighteen-forties. At least Scott never saw one. (73)

(68) A.A. Boswell op.cit: p6.
(70) B.J. Eyre op.cit: pp50-51.
(71) W. Scott op.cit: p40.
(72) R. Dawson op.cit: p135.
(73) W. Scott op.cit: p40.
Of the stone axes used in the Hunter Valley region, not all were hafted, some being held in the hand. (74) Fitzpatrick, writing of the Gloucester district, describes the latter type.

'Oblong in shape, and round in face, they were chipped to the requisite size and shape, and ground to an even edge, apparently being used without a handle.' (75)

There is no written evidence of the exact nature of the smaller implements used by the natives. As a rule quite unspectacular, they were usually ignored altogether by the early settlers, who were unaware of the skill involved in their construction.

According to Enright the stone implements included, besides hatchets and hand-axes,

'hammers, wedges, gouges, knives and scrapers.' (76) However, even he provides no details as to their construction, and some are quite specialized tools. Fawcett refers to 'chips of flint' which were sometimes used to skin animals, and knives which were made of flint (77), but whether they were edge ground or Bulga knives (78) it is impossible to say in view of the paucity of evidence. Some knives and scrapers are mentioned by Mr. Green, who also refers to stone spear heads.

(74) Mr. W.C. Green confirmed this.
(75) F.A. Fitzpatrick op.cit: p139.
(76) W.J. Enright loc.cit: p3.
Scrapers were made from shell as well as stone, and soon after its introduction by Europeans glass came to be preferred above both of these materials. (79) R.L. Dawson observed that this was the case on the Clarence River also. (80) These scrapers, according to Dawson, were used primarily for sharpening spears. (81) Enright says they were used to carve designs onto weapons (82), but this may only indicate that his description was generalized, for incision of this nature is not usually the function of a scraper.

A number of aboriginal artefacts were made of bone. Certain types of spears were sometimes barbed with bone, for example the heavy single-pronged weapon used to capture Jewfish. (83) Bone needles or 'sewing awls' were used to join the opossum skins together in the manufacture of cloaks or rugs. (84) Also, several of the natives' ornaments were made of bone. A bone-nose-peg was often worn by initiated men of the tribe, (85) as was a small object used as a comb and worn in the hair just above the ear. (86) Young girls were also adorned with various bone ornaments. (87).

W. Scott op.cit: pp44.
(82) W.J. Enright loc.cit: p3.
(85) B. McKie man loc.cit: p836.
Fishing hooks were made from oyster shells (86), but no indication is given as to how they were fixed to the lines.

The fishing spear was generally distinct from that used in battle or to hunt animals (89). The latter had only one point, which may or may not have been barbed, but the former often had three (90) or four (91) wooden prongs. Scott describes its construction in some detail.

"The mooting or fish spear consisted of three parts - Four prongs of iron bark, the main shaft made from the dead stem of the gigantic lily (92), and a third piece, of the inner stem of the flower of the grass tree... The wood for the prongs was first of all shaped in the rough and then allowed to lie in some salt water pool for a time, to get rid of the sap and toughen it - and at the same time make it easier to scrape down to the required thickness." (93)

Scott does not say so, but probably the sections were bound together with bark fibres. Pieces of wood were inserted between the prongs to keep them apart. (94)

The weight and strength of the spear were regulated according to the purpose for which the spear was intended. The heaviest spears were used to catch the big sea mullet.

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(86) R. Dawson op.cit: p67.
(91) W.J. Enright loc.cit: p4.
(93) W. Scott op.cit: pp43-44.
(94) W.J. Enright loc.cit: p4.
which appeared in schools at certain times of the year. (95) A spear with only one prong, barbed with wood or bone (96) was used in capturing Jewfish.

The only evidence as to what sort of spears were used for river or fresh water fishing, if any at all, is Fawcett's saying that eels were caught with 'nets and three pronged spears.' (97)

The implication is that these were river eels, as spears and nets would be more appropriate under river conditions than in the sea.

One item which was indispensable to spear-making, and which was kept nearby at all times, was gum. It was used in the manufacture of hatchets and other hafted implements (98), and possibly sometimes to secure the barbs on the spears, although Scott suggests that bark fibre was used for this purpose (99). The gum was taken from a plant called the Native Grass Tree, probably Xanthorrhoea arbores. (100)

To quote Dawson,

'This gum undergoes some refinement before it is used, and forms a part of the stock which the gins carry in their nets. It easily melts on the fire, but does not, like pitch, appear to be softened by the heat of the sun.' (101)

(95) W. Scott op.cit: pp43-44.
(96) W.J. Enright loc.cit: p4.
(99) W. Scott op.cit: p4.
(100) J.H. Maiden op.cit: p233.
(101) R. Dawson op.cit: p203.
He does not enlarge upon this refining process, nor does he say how the gum was collected.

Fishing lines and string for other purposes were sometimes made from the bark of the Cabbage Tree (102), *Livistona australis* (103), but more usually the Kurrajong Tree (104), including, according to Paterson, *Hibiscus Heterophyllus, Sterculia diversifolia* and *Trena aspera* (105).

Dawson was impressed by the quality of this string.

'They make string out of bark with astonishing facility, and as good as you can get in England, by twisting and rolling it in a curious manner with the palm of the hand on the thigh.' (106)

Scott describes how fishing lines were made -

'from the inner bark of the kurrajong (sic) tree - the bark when stripped, was allowed to soak in water until the outer portion could be easily scraped away, leaving a white flax like material, very tough and strong. This was twisted by the women to the required thickness and length by rolling it on the front portion of their thighs on a part prepared for the work, by the application of hot ashes which destroyed the skin and left when healed a smooth hard patch free of surface hair - the lines when finished were extremely strong, and durable.' (107)

This string was often used instead of gum to fasten bone tips to the prongs of the fishing spears. (108)

(102) J.H. Nancarrow *op.cit.* p12.
(103) J.H. Maiden *op.cit.* p763.
(104) W. Scott *op.cit.* p43.
(107) F. Barrallier *loc.cit.* p82 - observed the same method of rolling the string.
(108) W. Scott *loc.cit.* p40
(109) Ibid.
The string and netting of the Hunter Valley natives was highly developed, sufficiently so for Barrallier to remark

'The natives are not more advanced in art than those of Sydney, unless it is in making lines to fish, and sacks three feet circumference and one deep netted, of a new species of Coregusa (sic) which they prepare by soaking the bark and afterwards beating it with a wooden mallet.' (109)

Dawson observed an interesting fact about the nets made by the aboriginal women.

'The meshes are almost as small as for a purse, but there is not, I believe, a knot in them anywhere, except at the beginning and finishing.' (110)

This is in accordance with D.S. Davidson's theory that knotless netting was to be found throughout the eastern half of Australia, (111) but there is no indication as to whether the technique was the simple loop type or the 'Loop and Twist'. Probably it was of the latter type.

These nets had many uses, such as in fishing and hunting, (112) a receptacle for in which women carried many small items (113) and as a hammock for small children.

'Often times when asleep they were placed in a large netted bag and hung up in the hut.' (114)

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(109) F. Barrallier loc. cit: p82.
(110) R. Dawson op. cit: p87.
(112) See above, Chapter III.
(113) See above, this chapter.
Some of the baskets or 'dilly bags' were made of
plaited swamp grass (115), Typha species. (116) Dawson
records that some small baskets were made from the bark
of the tea-tree—possibly Helalouca leucadendron (117)—

'but they use it by folding and tying it in a
peculiar manner for drinking vessels more
frequently than for anything else. (118)

Other vessels mentioned by the early settlers were
the calabash and the coolamon. Threlkeld is the only
person who mentions the calabash, and only to say that it
was wooden and held water. (119) The coolamon is referred
to more often. According to Miller it too was wooden, and
about two or three feet long; (120) Mr. Green adds that
sometimes it was made by

'carefully removing the bark from the large rounded
protruberances often found upon gumtrees.'

These coolamons were used for a variety of purposes.
Besides holding water, they served as vessels to hold
seeds and grubs; basins in which to mix the ground seeds
with water before cooking them; and also, receptacles in
which to cradle very young infants. (121)

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(115) Ibid.
Mr. W.C. Green.
(117) Ibid: p293.
J.R. Maiden op.cit: pp569-570.
(118) R. Dawson op.cit: p250.
Also W. Scott op.cit: p37.
(119) L.B. Threlkeld op.cit: p7. This was probably just
another name for the same type of vessel.
(120) R. Miller loc.cit: p353.
(121) Mr. W.C. Green.
Another very important piece of wooden equipment was the digging stick used by the women. The sources available are silent concerning the size, shape and construction of the yam stick. Mr. Green says that they were made of the same hard wood as the men's waddies, and apart from a brief reference by Scott (122), that is all we are told. On the Richmond and Tweed Rivers the yam stick was six or seven feet long, resembling the spear, but thinner and pointed at both ends. It was specially hardened by being placed on the fire. (123) As amongst the North coast tribes, according to Mathews the yam stick was sometimes used by the Darbinung women as a weapon. (124)

Also made of wood was the pin which was used to fasten the cloaks on the shoulder. (125)

The aborigines manufactured some clothing and ornaments, although as a rule they wore few clothes. C. Foster wrote

'Tribes of blacks roamed about of both sexes in a nude state - the gins having opossum rugs.' (126)

Enright:

'Clothing, when worn...' (127)

and Mr. Green:

'Their clothing, if any....'

(122) W. Scott op.cit: p41.
(123) S.L. Sullivan op.cit: p79.
(125) A. Buswell op.cit: p7.
(126) C. Foster.
Generally the men wore a girdle or belt of opossum skin (128), or spun hair (129), sometimes with bunches of tags of the same material dangling from it. (130) Opossum cloaks were worn by the women (131) and the men in winter-time. (132)

The cloak was their most elaborate piece of clothing, and it was also used as a covering at night. (132A) As a rule these cloaks were worn

'under the left arm and fastened on the right shoulder with a wooden pin' (133)

reaching sometimes below the knees. (134)

None of the early settlers describe in any detail how these rugs were made in the Hunter Valley, although Fawcett does mention young girls learning how

'to sew skins together for rugs, using a bone needle and kangaroo sinews for thread.' (135)

Mr. Green also refers to 'sewing awls' which presumably were used for this purpose. There is no evidence to support Tindale's suggestion that Bondi points were used to pierce holes in the skins. (136)

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(128) Ibid.
(129) R. Dawson op. cit: p115. Usually 5 or 6 yards long, and bound around the loins.
   Also J.W. Fawcett loc. cit: p160.
(130) A. Boswell op. cit: p79.
(131) R. Miller loc. cit: p352.
(132) B. McKiean loc. cit: p236.
(133) A. Boswell op. cit: p7.
(134) E. Caswell.
A series of hocker stylizations of the human figure, in black outlined with white (Howe's Valley, New South Wales).

Photo: Author.

F.D. McCarthy.

A man (in the "lizard" stylization) spearing a kangaroo; two fish or tadpoles below; all in red outlined with white (Wollombi, New South Wales).

Photo: Author.

F.D. McCarthy.

Fig. 2. Aboriginal skin rug from Hunter River, eastern New South Wales. C.P. Mountford.
Boswell tells how the oppossum rugs were made by the Bathurst natives, with whom those of the Hunter Valley were in quite close contact. (137)

'Each skin as it was taken off was pegged out tightly and carefully, with the raw side out on a small sheet of bark, which was then set up before the fire but not too near, and rubbed from time to time with firewood ashes, and the skin left on the bark till it was quite dry. When they had collected a good number of skins, they trimmed the edges, but did not make them all exactly the same size, then commenced what I think the most curious part of the work, marking the skins with patterns so as to make them quite soft and pliable. These marks are ornamental and of various designs, and form a pleasing whole. The skins, though by no means uniform in size, arc made to fit together. As these patterns are formed by doubling the skins and scraping them with glass or flint, there can be no great variety. When sufficiently marked they are rubbed with grease and sewn together carefully by piercing holes with a finely pointed bone and immediately passing a thread of lint, or of oppossum wool... It takes from thirty or forty skins to make a good sized cloak or rug.' (138)

Mountford describes a skin rug from the Hunter River which consisted of twenty-two skins and measured five feet by four feet. (139)

The white men found these cloaks suffered from one serious disadvantage - they were permanently imbued with 'a most offensive smell of combined grease and woodsmoke.' (140)

(137) See above, Chapter I.
(138) A.A. Boswell op. cit. p6.
(140) A.A. Boswell op. cit. p6.
Dawson noted that the superior numbers of opossums inland, particularly in the Upper Hunter region, led to trade between that area and the coast. Among the items obtained by the coastal natives were

'opossum skins, and sometimes... the belts of yarn ready manufactured, as well as a small opossum band of net-work, which they wear on their forehead when in full dress.' (141)

There is no record of the fact, but it seems reasonable to assume that with the issue of government blankets, (142) the Hunter aborigines ceased to make their own. This effect was observed in other areas, for example the Richmond-Tweed. (143)

The aborigines wore few ornaments. As a rule the only decoration worn by the women was a 'kind of shell necklace' (144) or

'a nautilus shell cut into an oval shape and suspended from the neck by a string.' (145)

Young girls often supplemented this with flowers and bone or reed ornaments. (146)

Dawson provides a description of typical male attire.

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(141) R. Dawson op.cit: p135.
(142) Issue of these is recorded by L.E. Threlkeld op.cit: 24 (103) in the years 1835, 1836, and 1837.
(143) S.M. Sullivan op.cit: pp112-113.
(144) B. McKean op.cit: p586.
'His native costume consisted of a belt of opossum fur, spun or twisted like coarse yarn, into skeins to the length of five or six yards, which was bound round his loins; his waddy... was stuck in one side of his belt, and his tomahawk in the other. His long hair was turned up and bound about the head with opossum yarn, having a tuft of grass in the centre sufficiently long to be seen above the hair so as to present at a short distance the appearance of a plume. In the hair, a little above the ear, was placed a small sharp pointed bone, from the leg of the kangaroo; this was used as a comb, or rather to unravel the hair with, when upon particular occasions it was turned down like a common mop.' (147)

A bone nose-peg was also often part of a man's adornment. (148)

Decorations performed for special occasions, such as the initiation ceremony, will be discussed in a later chapter.

Of the material equipment of the aboriginal inhabitants of the Hunter Valley, there remain to be discussed dwellings and canoes, both of which were made of bark.

The canoes were very simple affairs. To quote Miller,

'The canoes were sheets of bark, cut from suitable trees in such a manner as to give a little elevation to the sides and ends.' (149)

Enright considered them to be incapable of holding more than three persons, (150) and from subsequent descriptions it would certainly appear that no more could travel in them with safety, although Eyre would disagree -

(147) A. Dawson loc. cit.: pp. 47-472.
(148) B. McKiehan loc. cit.: p386.
(149) A. Miller loc. cit.: p354.
(150) W.J. Enright loc. cit.: p4.
Aboriginal climbing a tree, chopping toe holds.

Photos: Dick Collection.

Removing bark from a tree to make a canoe.
'I have often seen canoes made of a single piece of bark capable of holding six or eight people.' (151)

He describes in great detail the manner in which the bark was removed from the tree.

'The bark was cut from trees by the Blacks who are very skilful and expeditious in doing it. Having selected a suitable tree the blackfellow begins by cutting a ring round the tree through the bark to the wood, just where the lower end of the sheet of bark is intended to be - he next cuts with his tomahawk little steps in the bark about half an inch deep about two feet apart alternately on the right and left into which he puts his great toe as he mounts... Having ascended to the requisite height he again cuts a ring round the tree where the top of the sheet of bark is to be and then gradually descending he makes a perpendicular or longitudinal cut straight down from the upper ring to the lower one. With small pointed sticks he again mounts and inserting them on each side of the perpendicular cut between the bark and the wood he gradually loosens the former from the latter until at last he gets it stripped off in one unbroken piece... Generally these were cut from large river gum trees (eucalyptus),' (152)

and also the kurrajong, which was a light buoyant wood. (153)

Dawson observed that in some cases, instead of climbing the tree,

'The natives placed a forked stick slanting from the ground to the tree, (with the fork resting against the body of the tree,) eight or ten feet from the earth, while the other end was stuck in the ground. Upon the forked part of the pole they mounted, and performed their work.' (154)

(151) E.J. Eyre _op. cit._ p.510. He spent some months on a station near Singleton in 1833, and the observations quoted apply to this area.

(152) E.J. Eyre _op. cit._ pp50–51.


(154) R. Dawson _op. cit._ p19.
Canoe made by a Port Stephens aboriginal, in the Australian Museum, Sydney. Photo: Australian Museum
Nancarrow describes the actual construction of the canoe, as seen in the illustration:

"The bark is then stripped off, and tied up at each end to a point; a place of stick is put at one-third of the distance from each end, and a string secures the sides to the sticks so that it shall not separate." (155)

A similar method of construction at Port Macquarie is depicted by Boswell. (156)

The canoes were propelled by at least two different means. Barrallier saw natives

"navigate their skiffs along the river by a long pole." (157)

Dawson, on the other hand, observed them managing their canoes

"with a paddle... They place themselves on their knees on a kind of bark cushion, at the bottom of the canoe, and steer and propel their little bark, first pulling on one side, then on the other, with great dexterity and rapidity." (158)

No further reference is made to the shape or construction of the paddles.

Thus the aborigines of this area, particularly about the coast, by their skilful manufacture and use of canoes showed themselves to be well adapted to life in a region where water transport could be so important.

(155) J.H. Nancarrow op.cit. p11.
(156) A. Boswell op.cit. p9
(157) F. Barrallier loc.cit. p81.
(158) H. Dawson op.cit. p79.
Bark canoes, with a fire in the centre. Photos: Dick Collection.
Removing bark from the Mangrove tree to make a shield.
The dwellings of the natives were also well adapted to the environment. Of the building materials used, box tree bark and stringy bark were the most common. Two types of dwellings were constructed.

Fawcett describes how the first type of shelter was built - it was not very substantial.

"Their huts were exceedingly primitive ones of crude architecture and few materials. A couple, or three, forked sticks, a few straight ones, and some sheets of bark, stripped from trees growing near by, supplied the requisites for the construction of their home. The forked sticks were thrust into the ground and the straight ones placed horizontally in the forks. The sheets of bark were then set up against the horizontal poles in a slanting position, the bark of the structure being towards the windy point of the compass. The sides were frequently enclosed for further shelter, but the front was generally open. Before each one was a small fire, which was seldom allowed to go out, and which was used for warmth, or to cook by." (159)

Byre observed that the bark, when it was stretched out flat, formed

"a sheet from six to twelve feet square according to the size of the tree." (160)

He continues:

"To prevent the bark from cracking when being thus stretched out it is heated inside with fire just as a cooper heats a cask to make the staves bend as he wishes... When dry these sheets of bark retain their flat shape - are from an inch to an inch and a half thick - quite impervious to any rain and of course most useful in the construction of temporary dwellings." (161)

(159) J.W. Fawcett, loc. cit.; p. 52.
(160) E.J. Byre, loc. cit.; p. 52.
(161) Ibid.
The bark used was generally that of the White

Stringy Bark (162) - Eucalyptus engleriana (163) and

the Box Tree (164) - either Eucalyptus milligore (165)
or E. hemigloia (166). It was well suited for dwellings -

'a single sheet properly stretched out and propped

up with sticks forms an admirable shelter for the

night from any rain.' (167)

Similar dwellings were constructed in the Bathurst district.

There,

'In wet or stormy weather they stripped off sheets

of bark from the tall gum trees or stringy bark

trees, and sticking two forked posts into the

earth about eight feet apart, put a ridge pole

across between them. Against this rested the

bark slanting, and under this poor shelter they

slept contentedly, always keeping a good fire in

front.' (168)

The second type of dwelling was of a conical shape,

similar to the "wigwam" of the North American Indians, and

called a "gunyer" by Dawson. (169) It is not known whether

the term applied specifically to this mode of construction,

but it was referred to as "gunyer" by the aborigines. (170)

(164) E.J. Byre op.cit: p56.
(166) Ibid.
E.J. Byre op.cit: p51.
(168) A. Boswell op.cit: p7.
(169) R. Dawson op.cit: p171.
(170) Ibid.
Dawson describes these small huts as being

'supported by three forked sticks (about three feet long) brought together at the tops in a triangular form; the two sides towards the wind are covered by long sheets of bark, the third is always left open... When the wind shifts, the gunya is shifted also, and this operation takes them only about ten minutes to perform.' (171)

In winter each family had its own fire in front of the hut. (172) Probably Emily Gaswell was referring to this type of hut when she wrote

'They live in Camps made by sticking three sticks stuck in the ground and covering them with bark.' (sic) (173)

According to Dawson, in summer

'They sleep before their fires frequently in a circle, with their heads upon each other's hips, without any covering.' (174)

That they slept in the open in fine, warm weather is substantiated by Threlkeld. (175)

Some care was taken in the selection of a suitable site before camp was made.

'In choosing the site, proximity to fresh water was one essential, some food supply a second, whilst a vantage ground in case of attack from an enemy was a third important item.' (176)

The huts were usually in groups; in the Williams Valley Howitt records that these groups consisted of from

(171) R. Dawson op.cit. p171.
(172) Ibid.
(173) E. Gaswell.
(174) R. Dawson op.cit. p56.
(175) L.P. Threlkeld op.cit. 24 (65).
(176) J.W. Pawlett loc.cit. p152.
six to nine huts (177): Mitchell observed a group of
seven huts in the vicinity of the Gwydir and Barwon
Rivers. (178)

The huts were not intended to endure for any length
of time; they were all insubstantial constructions and
could be abandoned 'without regrets' when the tribe moved
on. (179) This is in spite of the fact that in the
course of their itinerant existence they made use
periodically of the same camping grounds,
generation after generation, unless some special
cause operated to induce them to abandon them. (180)

The material culture of the Hunter Valley aborigines
was rich and varied. In part this was due to the favourable
environment; food was plentiful and raw materials for
weapons and implements was easily obtained. McCarthy is
of the opinion that a second factor was involved. He
claims that advanced techniques in the manufacture of
fish hooks, spears, fishing and game nets, and several
types of netted containers, reflect the influence of
contact with the Papuan culture (181). This may or may
not be so; it is certainly true that intertribal contact
throughout the eastern coast of Australia was facilitated.

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(177) A.Y. Howitt: On cit. p63.
(178) T.L. Mitchell op cit. pp76-77, 121.
(179) H.G. Green.
(180) J.J. Fewcott loc. cit. p152.
(181) F.D. McCarthy "Habitat, Economy and Equipment of
the Australian Aborigines": p95.
by the density of population and the restricted size of the tribal territories.

On the basis of excavations conducted at Lapstone Creek (182) and Capertee Valley, (183) McCarthy has postulated that the aboriginal culture at the time of white settlement was the last of three succeeding culture phases, the Blouera, typified by the adze and the edge-ground axe. Early settler reports provide substantial evidence that the edge-ground axe was in use at that time. The adze, or more specifically the Blouera, McCarthy says was often used to sharpen spears and as the point on the end of the spear-thrower. (184) The only evidence with regard to the latter is that womeras in the Hunter Valley had wooden points (185). Shell appears to have been preferred in the coastal areas for sharpening spears (186), but there is one reference to flint knives being used to fashion boomerangs and spears (187), and probably McCarthy would regard these as Bloueras.

Edge-ground axes and other implements which would probably qualify as Blouera were present in the Upper

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(184) P.D. McCarthy "The Lapstone Creek Excavation": p31.
(185) B. McKiernan loc.cit: p890.
(186) For example, R. Dawson op.cit: pp16-17.
(187) B. McKiernan loc.cit: p890.
Hunter region, but it is possible that at least one
implement of Bondaian characteristics was in use there at
the time of white settlement. Spears in this area were
herbed with stone (188), and these could have been Bondi
points or geometric microliths. (189) So that as it may,
the settler material suggests that at the time of European
occupation shell and wooden implements occurred more
frequently then stone near the coast. It also suggests
that in the centre of the Valley the stone implements used
were typical of the Blouaan industry. At the same time,
in the extreme north and west of the Valley, these areas
most subject to the influence of inland tribes, there is
a possibility that together with the adze and the edge-
ground axe some Bondaian implements remained in use.

(188) Mr. W.C. Green.
(189) Although they may merely have been small primary
fishes, as in Victoria - D.J. Mulvaney "Archaeological
Excavations on the Aire River, Otway Peninsula,
Victoria", Proceedings, Royal Society of Victoria, vol. 75,