CHAPTER V

The purpose of this chapter is to relate the aboriginal culture of the period of white contact as it is described in the literary sources to the cultures defined by archaeology for eastern New South Wales. There are obvious problems involved in such a task; not least among these is the imprecision with which the settlers described so many of the natives' artefacts. A second problem is that generally it is impossible, when considering the archaeological material, to establish what is proto-historic without reference to the settlers' records. As yet no systematic excavation has been completed and published for the Hunter Valley; all the archaeological evidence comes from surface sites where the implements of many centuries and several cultures may be present in one mixed assemblage.

Very little archaeological research has been undertaken in the Hunter Valley. In 1923 Miss Lesley D. Hall reported some flakes discovered at Horsa Point, Port Stephens (1). F.D. McCarthy and F.A. Davidson examined a surface site near Singleton between 1941 and 1943. (2)

At present stratigraphic excavation is being carried out near Singleton and at Sandy Hollow by Mr. David Moore, Curator of Anthropology at the Australian Museum, Sydney. With the exception of Mr. Moore's work, which is still in progress, the results of this research have been published in available literature, so there is no need to give a detailed description of it here.

In eastern New South Wales several excavations have been undertaken, including Lapstone Creek (3), Capertee (4), Noola (5) and Curracarrang (6). Lapstone Creek and Capertee bear a close geographical relationship to the Hunter Valley, and are therefore important in this discussion. On the basis of these excavations McCarthy has postulated an Eastern Regional Sequence. This sequence consists of three succeeding culture phases, which McCarthy calls Capertian, Bondaian, and Blouberan.

The earliest of these phases, the Capertian, is characterized by large primary flakes, pebble tools, nosed scrapers, burin-like artefacts, and a number of denticulated edge flakes or saws of various sizes. The Bondaian phase

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3. F.D. McCarthy loc. cit.: pp1-34.
is marked by large numbers of Bondi points (although a few were found in Capertee levels), microliths, fabricators, a predominance of blade over flake tools, edge-ground tools and burins. In his Lapstone Creek report McCarthy wrote that the change from the Bondaian to the succeeding Eloueran phase

'involved the entire abandonment of the Bondi point; the greater use of the Elouera edge-flake, knives and trimming flakes, and the adoption of the edge-ground axe and the Bulga knife.' (7)

Nevertheless at Capertee he found three edge-ground axes and three fragments bearing striation marks in a Bondaian level which has been dated to 915 ± 57 B.C. (8). Thus at the present stage of McCarthy's research the Eloueran phase appears to be typified by Eloueras, knives, trimming flakes and edge-ground axes, although all of these, with the possible exception of the edge-ground Bulga knife, have been found in association with other artefacts in Bondaian contexts. In the Eloueran levels at Lapstone Creek there are also implements classified as microliths, but it seems doubtful from the description that these artefacts include backed-blade geometric forms.

(7) F.D. McCarthy "The Lapstone Creek Excavation": p22.
The status of McCarty's third phase, the Elouera, which he believed also to comprise the aboriginal culture at the time of white settlement (9), has not been fully established. Mulveney (10) is of the opinion that the characteristic implements of the industry, in particular the Elouera itself, are too generalized and too often associated with Bondaian artefacts to be regarded as diagnostic. Largely on the basis of research done at Kenniff Cave in Queensland (11) he has postulated a distinction made on a technological basis, whereby prior to 3000 B.C. implements were nonhafted, and after 3000 B.C. a large proportion of implements were hafted. Regarded in this light, the Capertian phase is nonhafted, whereas the Bondaian and Elouera phases are largely hafted.

It is difficult to assess the literary evidence in archaeological terms. Archaeology is concerned with the material, particularly the stone, culture of the aborigines, and in this field the settlers lacked interest and were unable to appreciate the finer techniques involved in fashioning stone implements. An example of the imprecision with which the smaller stone artefacts was described is

(9) F.D. McCarty loc. cit. pp30-31.
Fawcett's reference to

'Knives made of flint, used for cutting up meat'. (12)

No indication is given as to the size of these knives; whether they were chipped or ground to an edge or just utilized flakes; whether they were used purely for cutting up meat, or, if a multi-purpose artefact, whether cutting up meat was a primary or secondary function.

In view of its general nature, the settler evidence must be treated with considerable caution. McCarth 
appears to be guilty of an uncritical use of written records when, quoting references to hard, sharp stones fixed in gum to a haft or onto the end of the spear-thrower, he concludes, on the basis of his research in the area, that

'The only implement to which the statements... could refer is the elouera.' (13)

Another problem concerns the archaeological material itself. With the exception of the work currently being carried out by Mr. Moore, there has been no stratified site excavated in the Hunter Valley. Isolated surface finds have been made, discoveries at Anna Bay and Mona Point have been reported in detail, and McCarth and Davidson have collected 2,451 implements from three sites, com- prising the 'Elouera industry of Singleton', but none of

F.D. McCarth loc.cit: p31.
this has produced any definite chronological information. Surface sites may comprise mixed assemblages of implements manufactured over a long period of time, and often the only way to establish the age of artefacts is by reference to the settler material. This precludes an independent assessment of settler and archaeological evidence which would reveal discrepancies as well as corroboration.

The type-implement of the Singleton industry, the Elouera, McCarthy first defined as a scraper-knife (14), but has since chosen to regard it as an adze-flake, used on the end of the womera or hafted to a stick with gum cement (15). As a scraper-knife it is conceivable that the Elouera could have been used to incise patterns onto weapons as Enright suggested (16), or onto skin rugs. Such a function might explain the fact that some Eloueras showed use-polish along the untrimmed thin edge. However McCarthy also suggests that the Elouera was used to sharpen spears (17), and this would produce step-flaking rather than use-polish. Moreover, it is unlikely that hafting would have improved the Elouera's suitability for delicate incision work. It seems probable that the Elouera had

(15) F.D. McCarthy "The Lapstone Creek Excavation": p31.
several functions. (18)

The only reference by the settlers to spear sharpening comes from Dawson, who observed a Port Stephens native using a piece of broken shell. (19)

This use of shell scrapers appears to have been a recent development in Australian prehistory and is widespread. Two sites where it is apparent are Glen Aire in Victoria (20) and Fromm's Landing in South Australia (21). It is conceivable that stone was used in inland areas where shell was not available. McKiernan refers to a very small stone axe:

'which was held in the hand and used for dressing spear handles and boomerangs.' (22)

Unhafted Eloueras may have been used for this purpose.

There is no certain evidence amongst the settlers' reports of what was used to tip the womera or spear-thrower. McKiernan gives the impression that it was a separate piece of wood (23), but shell was used in the Port Jackson district, (24) and this may have been the case in the coastal area of the Hunter Valley. Inland, where shell was not available, stone may have been used, and there is

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(18) This suggestion is also made by B. Alchin "Australian Stone Industries, Past and Present", Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, vol 97, pt 1, 1997: p120.

(19) A. Dawson op.cit: pp16-17.


(22) B. McKiernan loc.cit: p890.

(23) Ibid.

(24) G. Harrington op.cit: p63.
Ground-edged pebble axe.                  Scraper.
Both found near Gundy. (Nat. size).

Photo: U.N.E. Photographic Department.

Eloueras from Newcastle.                  Photo: W.W. Thorpe.
no evidence to discount McCarthy's claim that the Emusara functioned in this capacity.

Dawson and Scott both observed that scrapers made of glass were highly prized by the aborigines. (25) Finds made by McCarthy and Davidson substantiate this.

'A large series of glass implements was collected at Singleton, the glass varying from 0.5 to 1 cm in thickness.' (26)

They suggest that many side scrapers and others showing no signs of use served as knives. (27) Stone scrapers, mentioned by Enright and Mr. Green, were in abundance at Singleton, numbering over five hundred.

Another implement referred to by McCarthy is the Bulga knife (28). He has no first-hand evidence as to its use, but believes it was a skin-dresser. The name of the implement is derived from a locality on Cockfighter Creek, south west of Singleton, where many examples have been found. Boswell refers to flint knives being used in the treatment of opossum skins (29), so there is a possibility that this implement was in use at the time of white settlement.

V. Scott op.cit: p144.
(28) P.D. McCarthy "The Stone Implements of Australia": p56.
(29) A. Boswell op.cit: p6.
In the Upper Hunter Region spears were barbed with stone (30). In the coastal district, however, Enright observed that the spears were barbed with wood or bone,

'but never, in my experience, with stone'. (31) McCarthy and Davidson were unable to find settle evidence of stone being used (32), and although it may have been the practice further north, where the Kamilaroi influence was strongest, it appears that elsewhere in the Valley stone was not used. Evidence suggests that Bondi points and geometric microliths functioned primarily as spear harps (33) and at Singleton these implements numbered 524 and 245 respectively.

It seems unlikely that the Upper Hunter natives would have come to Singleton to manufacture these artefacts when the chart of which most of them were made was readily available in their own district. (34) In excavations conducted by Mr. Moore the upper levels have been Bondaiam rather than Elouera (35), and Miss Isabel McEryde has found Bondi points dated at approximately 1600 A.D. in

(30) W.J. Enright loc.cit: p3.
(31) W.J. Enright loc.cit: p3.
(33) F.D. McCarthy loc.cit: pp34, 43.
(35) Personal communication.
the New England area (36). This suggests that in the north at least, elements of the Bondaian culture may still have been in use when the Valley was first settled by Europeans.

McCarthy and Davidson, however, postulate that the industry at Singleton was an old one reflecting a slight cultural change in which implements such as Bondi points and geometric microliths had ceased to be made. (37) This is based on the fact that neither of these implements made in glass was found, although their manufacture in this material involves no technical difficulties. Archeological research is needed, particularly in the Upper Hunter, before anything definite can be known of the chronology and associations of these industries.

Many of the early settlers refer to the edge-ground axe, amongst them McKerrow (38), Miller (39), Nancarrow (40), and Dawson (41). Only one was found by McCarthy and Davidson at Singleton, but specimens have been collected from a number of sites throughout the Valley. These sites

(36) I. McCryde "Radiocarbon Dates for Northern New South Wales". Antiquity XL. (Forthcoming).
(38) B. McKerrow loc.cit: p390.
(39) R. Miller loc.cit: p393.
(40) J.H. Nancarrow loc.cit: p393.
include Bunnah (42), Bulga (43), Milbrodale (44), Belford (45), Maitland (46), Hexham (47), Gloucester (48), Scone (49), and Gundy (50). In addition to this many axe-grinding sites have been reported, including, amongst others, those at Rawdon Vale (51), Greenwattle Creek (52), Greta (53), and two on the Paterson River, one being at Stradbroke (54). There are also several sites immediately over the Liverpool Range, in the Quirindi district. (55)

Edge-ground axes at Capertee were found in Bondean levels, one of which was dated to 915 ± 77 B.C., so that the edge-ground axe, even though found on the surface in most cases, cannot be proven archaeologically to have been in use at the time of European settlement. Nevertheless, the fact that so many settlers commented on the axes and

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(42) W.J. Enright "Notes on the Aborigines of the North Coast of New South Wales": p91.
(43) F.D. McCarthy and F.A. Davidson loc.cit: p228.
(44) Ibid.
(45) Ibid.
(46) Ibid.
(49) In the possession of Mr. W. Dalton, Scone.
(50) One hammer-dressed end grooved.
(51) F.A. Fitzpatrick op.cit: p139.
(52) W.J. Enright "Aboriginal Axe Factory", Hancock, vol 2, No. 1, 1936: p23.
(53) Ibid.
(55) Information provided by the Quirindi Historical Society.
Above—One of a number of axe-grinding rocks at Stradbroke, Paterson River, N.S.W. The axe-head is from Gloucester and was placed in a groove to indicate one way in which the blades were ground.

Photo: F.D. McCarthy
end were aware that they were ground, suggests strongly that they were,

Dawson's description of the stone axes is unique.

'These had a grove worked near the head, around which they twisted a stick, to serve as a handle (56)

For a long time this description was unsubstantiated by material evidence, and Mulvaney was of the opinion that,

'In the face of the negative evidence to the contrary, it is difficult to take this general statement as proof that the technique was current during European times.' (57)

However, a grooved, hammer-dressed axe-head has been found in circumstances which indicate that it was in use very recently, although it may have been manufactured some years earlier. The artefact was discovered, by an elderly gentleman still resident in Gundy (near Scone), about two miles north of the village near the foot of Willis's Hill. Prior to 1867 the local aborigines used to camp on a site on which the original St. Matthew's Church of England was later erected. In that year, when construction was to begin, the aborigines were induced to move to a new camp higher up the Page River, and this was near Willis's Hill, where the axe was found. (55)

(56) R. Dawson op. cit: pp202-203.
Grooved Hammer-dressed Axes.

Plates 1 and 3 from Gundj (actual size 4.8 inches long).

Plate 2 from Quirindi-Nundle (actual size 4.2 inches long).

Photos: U.M.E. Photographic Department.
Another grooved hammer-dressed axe was discovered this year in a ploughed paddock approximately ten miles east of the New England Highway along the Mundle road. (59)

The Cundy find, together with the axe near Mundle, suggest that Dawson’s observation may have been correct. If this is so, additional evidence has been provided for McCarthy’s theory that the grooving technique was the most recent development in axe manufacture. Further surface finds of grooved axes have been recorded in Miss I. McEryde’s survey of North-Eastern New South Wales from Karamgi (Coff’s Harbour), Blaxland’s Flat, and Kempsey, the last-mentioned axe being hammer-dressed. This constitutes additional evidence of the grooved axe in north eastern New South Wales. McCarthy based his theory of the modernity of this type of axe on its geographical distribution being limited to the east coast; and the evidence cited here tends to support the theory.

So little archaeological research has been conducted in the Hunter Valley that it is difficult to determine the aboriginal culture of the time of white settlement. It appears that some elements of the Bendana culture may

(59) The approximate provenance of the axe was on the northern side of Middlebrook Creek 100 yards from a point midway between the western-most of the three bridges. The axe was found in association with two other types of axe, several cores, a Bondi point, and other artefacts.
still have been current in the Upper Hunter, together
with other implements which could be regarded as typical
of an Elouera assemblage. There is no evidence of
these Bondaian elements in the centre of the Valley,
however, and there the prevailing culture appears to
have been Elouera. Particularly on the coast, although
some elements of the Elouera culture were present, others
seem to have given way to less specialized techniques,
such as the use of shell scrapers.

This conclusion concurs with that drawn on the
basis of the literary evidence alone. Doubtless such
agreement is facilitated by the dearth of archaeological
evidence and the general nature of the early settlers' descriptions of particular aspects of aboriginal life.
Nevertheless, in defence of the early settlers and the concurrence reached here, it must be pointed out that
their generalized descriptions may not be the result purely of their own inadequacies but possibly reflect also an
actual decline in aboriginal stone culture.
Some Collections of Aboriginal Artefacts from the Hunter Valley

1. Horne Point and Anna Bay.
   Collection housed in the Australian Museum, Sydney.

2. Newcastle-Lake Macquarie District.
   Collection housed in the Australian Museum, Sydney.
   W.W. Thorpe "Ethnological Notes, No. 1". Records of the Australian Museum, vol xvi: 241-253, pls xix-xxxi

3. Newcastle.
   Collection housed in Britain, probably at the British Museum.

   Collection housed in the United States National Museum.
   C. Wilkes "Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842", vol II.

5. Singleton.
   Collection housed in the Australian Museum, Sydney.