

*Aborigines of the Hunter Valley
— A Study of Colonial Records,
by Helen Brayshaw; Scone and
Upper Hunter Historical Society*

Review by
ROLAND ROBINSON

LUXURIANT, almost impenetrable rain-forests once lined, to a depth of 4km, the middle reaches of the Hunter, Paterson and Williams Rivers of the Hunter Valley.

The forests contained stands of gigantic cedars, myrtles, figs, casuarinas and eucalypts. There were rain-forests of vine-ropes, tree-ferns, elkhorns and staghorns.

The plains of the Valley were seas of grass through which mobs of kangaroos flowed. Emus and scrub turkeys were in abundance and fish filled the creeks and rivers.

This region, in 1801, was still the 'Eden', the Dreamtime country of the Aborigines.

Following a survey of the Valley in 1822 the settlers moved in. There was a rapid and catastrophic destruction of the life-style of the Aborigines. Few Europeans took

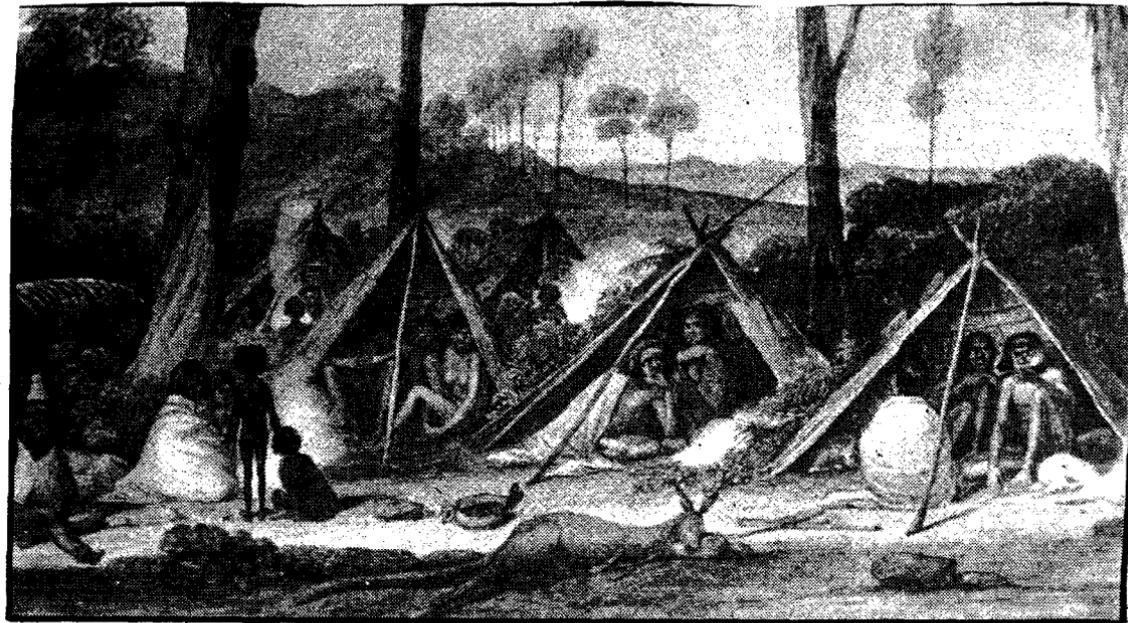
time to record anything of the Aborigines who, before 1830, had ceased effective resistance.

Like the luxuriant forests which were depleted of their cedars, the Aborigines of this area, who must have had a rich and varied culture and civilization, would appear to have melted away with not even a myth or totemic site known to commemorate them.

This most commendable study has re-created at least the life-styles of the seven tribes of the Hunter Valley. This has been accomplished by drawing on records of explorers, missionaries and settlers of the time.

Here is the Quaker missionary, James Backhouse, who 'took a walk into one of the luxuriant woods, on the side of the Hunter, such as are termed Cedar Brushes, on account of the colonial White Cedar, *Melia Azedarach*, being one of the trees which compose them. This scrub, sometimes so thick it was difficult to penetrate even a few yards, extended to the water's edge. Many of the trees were gigantic, and lichens, staghorns, elkhorns and misseltoe flourished.'

Here a Mr Dawson has interested himself in what must have been the activity of a cere-



'A Native Camp of Australian Savages near Port Stevens, New South Wales,' by Augustus Earle.

monial exchange cycle. Articles in this cycle would travel trade routes across the continent.

'I understand from our natives, that exchange of articles sometimes took place between the coast natives and those residing in the interior. Iron tomahawks, sea-shells with which they scrape and sharpen their spears and pieces of glass which they use for that purpose

whenever they can get them, are thus frequently exchanged for opossum skins...'

In 1826 Mrs Ellen Bundock recorded in her memoirs, 'We suddenly saw the whole hillside covered with blacks all armed, except the chief, Jerry, who was most amiable to us, a fine dignified type of man. He was clothed in a possum skin rug and strips of fur around his loins.'

Covering the subjects of En-

vironment, The People, Material Culture, Diet, Ritual Life, and Archaeology, this study gains in immediacy from its use of such firsthand accounts.

The book carries illustrations by early artists in the colony, reproductions of sketches of carved trees, maps of the area, tribal boundaries and a complete list of references.

This is a most useful and rewarding study.