

Massacre of aborigines

By DOUGLAS RYE

A TRIBE of aborigines was massacred in the Gloucester district in 1835.

It was in revenge for the murder of five convict shepherds on the property of Robert Ramsay McKenzie at Wattenbakh on the western bank of the Barrington River, two miles from Rawdon Vale.

There were other tragic happenings on the properties of the A.A. Company and other early settlers in the Gloucester and Upper Manning area, and a number of holdings in isolated localities were abandoned owing to the depredations of the blacks and the fear by settlers for the lives of their families.

ROBERT DAWSON, the first Chief Agent of the A.A. Company, who explored the hinterland between the Hunter and Manning Rivers in 1826, established good relations with the aborigines and was interested in their welfare. In his book published in 1831 (with the somewhat ambiguous title of "The Present State of Australia") he devoted considerable space to the subject of their customs.

With the actual occupation of the land by the A.A. Company and other white settlers the troubles with the aborigines apparently began. Besides resenting the intrusion of the whites into their traditional hunting and fishing grounds Binghi soon learned that the introduced sheep and cattle provided an easily obtained meat supply, and also developed a palate for white men's tucker, which he stole from the shepherds and settlers' huts. This pilfering triggered one of the early tragedies in the area.

Early in the 1830's the A.A. Company established a heifer station at Belbora, between Gloucester and Wingham. The blacks in due course gave considerable trouble in the way of stealing from the huts.

To teach them a lesson the company's servants went to the extreme of leaving damper poisoned with arsenic in the huts, with the result that a number of the aborigines perished.

THE massacre of Wattenbakh took place in 1835, following the spearing of five of McKenzie's convict shepherds by the blacks. After this outrage the natives divided, one body moving south-west towards the source of the Gloucester River and the other section going North-west, towards the Upper Arundel.

Swiftly punitive bands were organised to hunt the offending aborigines down. The settlers of Port Stephens, reinforced by the small body of time-expired soldiers retained by the A.A. Company went to the scene.

When within six miles of the station, at Pumpkin Creek, the soldiers refused to proceed further, fearing an ambush. Meanwhile a strong body of settlers from the Williams and Allyn Rivers struck out to the North-west, ascending the Williams and Chichester Rivers. They climbed the lofty McKenzie Tableland, and located the first band of fugitives camped on the northern face of the mountain, on a narrow shelf above a granite cliff—which overhung a tangled mass of bush and vines.

Silently and surely the white men laid their plans and long ere the dawn of the day the "sleeping camp" was encircled from cliff edge to cliff edge. Day broke, and the sleeping blacks awakened and arose.

Maddened with fear under the gunfire which followed, they broke hither and thither in vain attempts to escape with their lives. Ultimately, they turned to the cliff edge and sprang into space, and so perished.

On a small plain a mile west of the present Cobark Station the Port Stephens men came in contact with the remaining body of natives, but the fugitives broke and fled northward to a little flat on the Bowman River.

Here a stand was made by the blacks, but in vain. Years afterwards their unburied skeletons dotted the landscape thereabouts.

The law claimed another

victim—a native was captured and executed at Dungog, near where the present courthouse stands.

ROBERT Ramsay McKenzie relinquished his lease at Wattenbakh shortly after the murder of his shepherds. A younger brother of the Baronet of Coul, Ross Shire, Scotland, McKenzie was a colourful character. After severe reverses in the pastoral industry in 1840 he recovered and went to Queensland to live and later entered into the political life of the new State. Eventually he returned to Scotland, succeeding to the Barony of Coul. Yard and hut posts of the old McKenzie homestead were still visible till 1895, when they were destroyed by fire. The lease of 8500 acres at Wattenbakh (or Cobark) was taken up by Hooke and Mackay in 1850 after Lord and McKenzie's lease had been abandoned.

The bodies of the murdered shepherds were buried on a little flat below the present Rawdon Vale post-office. This would be on the grant to the Florence family, made in 1829, and would seem to indicate that it was then occupied.

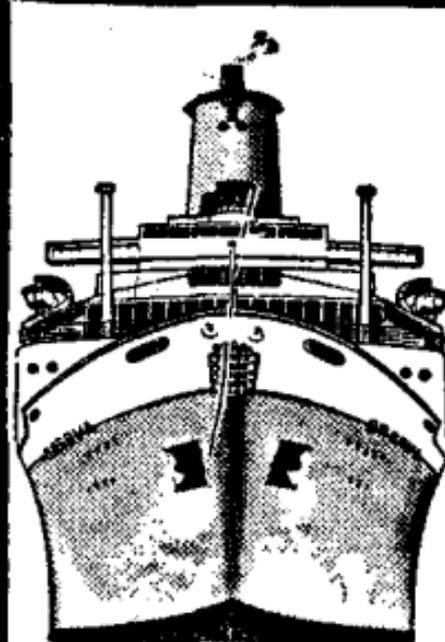
(The writer is indebted to Mr. Isaac Moore, of Barrington, for assistance with historical details in the story.)

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